

digital in reciprocation

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digital in reciprocation

by Anonymous

Summary

In Branzys mind, there's that image again: Rasplin, engulfed in flames, still as if watching, and the burn scar in the linoleum floor he skirted around for days.

Parrot's fist, about to make contact with his face.

The red ink on the double doors.

But Clown just laughs, in that same hollow way he had talked about vengeance and justice.

"Oh Branzys, you don't have a choice in this!"

Notes

please heed the tags!

this chapter contains graphic description of a suicide attempt (not any of the main characters), bullying and some minor violence, as well as attempts at blackmail and manipulation.

if any of this is potentially triggering to you, do NOT read this fic!

(quick disclaimer bc this fic gets a bit dark: this is not rpf! this is about the silly little mc characters and NOT the real people! if you happen to be a cc reading this: don't! pretend you never saw this at all please.)

- Inspired by [Firewall](#) by Erin Jade Lange

gambler's fallacy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The day Rasplin set himself on fire in the school cafeteria, Branzy was almost too late to see it happen.

It was the Tuesday just before summer break, and Branzy had overslept because he'd spent the entire night on his PC, trying to get his newest coding project to work.

Had he come just a few minutes earlier or later, he would've missed it entirely; but as it was, Branzy was late and Rasplin, doused in gasoline, lit the match just the second Branzy burst through the large double doors of the cafeteria.

There was a moment of stunned silence before a teacher doused Rasplin in the white foam of a fire extinguisher and an ambulance was pulling into the crowded parking lot.

To this day, Branzy thinks that it wasn't the smell that was the worst, nor the sight – though he was lucky to still be standing at the far end of the cafeteria.

No, the worst thing was how still Rasplin had been. He hadn't even screamed.

He had just stood there, calmly, engulfed by flames, watching them all.

Rasplin had not looked like a desperate kid trying to kill himself; he had looked like an angry god. Like a vision of revenge.

Two weeks later, his parents told the hospital to take him off of life support.

Afterwards, the entire school pretended to be very shocked that something so horrible could ever happen in their idyllic little town, and everyone acted as if they could not see the black spot burned into the linoleum floor in the cafeteria.

But for weeks after, everytime Branzy closed his eyes all he could see was Rasplin, silent and burning in the centre of the cafeteria, his eyes searing into everyone of them. Laying blame onto each of them.

Everytime Branzy closed his eyes he felt the heat of that fire, and wondered who the next Rasplin would be.



When school starts again in autumn, the cafeteria floor has been replaced and every wall is adorned with the same poster, telling students to *Stand Up Against Bullying!*

It's somehow very ironic that on the first day of school in September, Branzy is being pressed against a wall with exactly such a poster hung up.

Parrot has his arm digging into Branzy's throat, and his other balled into a tight fist.

"You didn't hear anything!" Parrot hisses, and the funny thing is Branzy really did not hear anything at all, but he doesn't think Parrot would be very convinced if he told him so.

Instead, Branzy just nods; or tries to, because Parrot's arm pressing into his Adam's apple makes it very hard to move his head at all.

"Good."

Branzy is suddenly dropped, taking the poster with him. He gasps for breath on the cold tiles of the bathroom, lungs empty and aching.

Later, Branzy will wonder if this moment was truly so pivotal for what was to come, or if his memory was merely conflating it – but fact is, there are few seconds in which Parrot merely regards him, and they seem to stretch on infinitely as Branzy watches his jaw twitch and fist curl up tighter.

He knows, logically, that Parrot is going to hit him.

Still, Branzy waits with bated breath, expecting his fate and yet almost curious in the face of it, imagining what it was going to feel like, and his stomach ties itself into knots.

Then, pain explodes from his left eye and Branzy is sent sprawling onto the ground even more thoroughly. He'd almost feel relieved it's over, if that weren't so pathetic.

"I hope I made myself clear. If you tell anyone, you're dead." Parrot spits, and strides out of the bathroom.

Branzy gets up shakily, staring at his reflection in the mirror. It's... unpleasant.

There are already bruises forming on his throat, though they are not as pronounced as the swollen and slightly red area around his left eye. A bit of blood is drying on his lip.

Paired with the white hair and pale skin, he looks dead.

Branzy just sighs in defeat; he really liked how he had looked this morning.

But sometimes you don't have a choice if you don't want to be forced to talk to the school counselor – Branzy slips on his spare hoodie, and slides the hood over his eyes in a last ditch attempt to look more sleep-deprived and less like... Well.

The teachers are paranoid enough already.

On his way out, Branzy tapes the pathetically crumpled poster to the wall again.

It's the thought that counts, right?

(What Branzy doesn't notice is the figure emerging from one of the stalls just as the door falls shut behind him. They scowl at the little droplets of blood on the floor, and tear the poster from the wall. If they step on it before they throw it away, there's no one there to see.)



Rek, once Branzy joins him in the cafeteria, is immediately brimming with concern.

"Dude, what happened to you?"

Branzy shrugs lamely, pushing his fork into the potatoes on his tray. He should talk to Rek about this, he knows, but he's also a bit worried that even his best friend would think him an absolute weakling.

He doesn't want Rek trying to pick fights on his behalf.

On the other hand, he has to tell someone, or he'll probably go insane.

"Rek, man, you won't believe this but Parrot totally punched me in the face this morning." Branzy murmurs, trying not to draw the attention of any of the nearby tables.

Rek, apparently, is not thinking about that at all.

"Parrot?!" he all but shouts, and some of the girls at one of the nearby tables give them a curious look.

Branzy just pulls Rek's head down and presses a finger against his lips. That, at least, Rek seems to understand.

"Yeah, Parrot. I don't even know what was going on! I was just trying to wash my hands and the next second he tells me I 'didn't hear anything'. Man, I think he punched me just to prove a point."

"*Did* you hear anything?" Rek asks, now more curious than concerned. What truly great friends

Branzy has.

Well, friend. The plural is a bit excessive, considering Rek is the only person in school actually willingly talking to him.

"No, well, I mean not really? He said something about... deleting something? Like a video or a picture, I guess. Dunno why that's so important though. Or why he would monologue to himself about it in the first floor bathroom."

Rek snorts at that, but his expression clears swiftly. He frowns a bit, before giving Branzy an odd look.

"You're right, Parrot wouldn't talk to himself like that. You sure there wasn't anyone else there?"

Now that Rek mentions it, Branzy is definitely not sure about that. There could've been another person, just hiding in plain sight. Someone who could threaten even Parrot.... Branzy shakes his head.

He has absolutely no clue.

"No idea, man. But they must have balls of steel, trying to threaten Parrot like that. I don't know anyone who would dare."

Rek gives him a kick under the table.

"Well well Branzy, just watch out that they don't have the 'balls of steel' to report you to Miss Brown and make you the next victim of weekly counselling! Who knows, she might even print more posters..."

And just like that they're laughing again, and if it weren't for the pulsating pain in his skull, Branzy would've forgotten all about the incident already.



Branzy manages to navigate the rest of his day without drawing too much attention to himself – even if he had to feign being asleep a few times in his classes.

No one normally pays him much mind even on a good day, but somehow his German teacher

seemed to think he had some sort of hidden talent for the language, so she had taken to calling on him frequently.

It was not only wholly uncalled for, but also severely embarrassing as Branzy did not, in fact, have any sort of intrinsic talent.

And he sure as hell wasn't going to study for a useless subject.

It was an all around shitty day, even without Branzy having to play the most elaborate game of hide and seek with Parrot in the halls.

The guy seemed to think Branzy needs another punch in the face for some reason.

He pauses by his locker, watching students filter out of the building hastily – it's still very warm, and most students were set on enjoying the last few days of the summer heat. It was likely going to be a cold winter.

Branzy has other plans, though. And it suits him just fine that he will have to go home alone today since Rek is signing up for the chess club once again – an activity Branzy finds to be so mind-numbingly boring that he still wonders how Rek could've ever teased him for his interest in coding.

If Rek were to walk home with him today, he'd just try to convince Branzy to either also join that boring chess club or get him to go to one of the thousand parties happening at the beginning of every school year.

Branzy is interested in neither.

Sighing, Branzy opens his locker to fish out his keys and haphazardly shove a few textbooks into the tiny space when suddenly, there comes a shriek from outside.

Branzy, having been lost in thoughts, didn't notice that the steady stream of people leaving the school had stopped almost entirely in a few seconds.

An uneasy murmur rose from the crowd gathered around the glass doors, students shifting and looking at each other in worry and confusion.

Branzy pushes through the crowd, already terrified of what he was about to see. But unfortunately, in situations where fear and curiosity clashed, it was often the latter that dominated his thoughts.

So, almost half a year after Branzy had barged into the cafeteria to witness the suicide of a boy he'd never really known, he comes face to face with an accusation in the form of the school entrance.

There, someone has sprayed the word '*murderers*' on the big glass doors leading into the school in huge, bloody red letters.



Scrolling through Rasplin's Instagram account does not reveal anything at all.

There are just two pictures – one showing a truly impressive gaming setup, and the other a nondescript shot of one of the nearby hiking trails.

Branzy feels frustrated, itchy with disappointment, and he has to physically stop himself from trying to somehow get into the account by force.

There has to be *something* there, private messages or archived posts, something revealing who exactly would go to such lengths to avenge Rasplin.

Someone who cared enough about him to vandalize public property.

(But also didn't care enough to speak at his funeral, or the numerous memorials? Nothing adds up.)

Branzy's fingers twitch.

No, he really can't! What sort of scumbag hacks into the account of a dead kid?

Sighing in defeat, Branzy slaps his phone on the table and turns his PC off. Maybe doing some school work would actually do him good for now.

The thing is, Branzy has never been good at distracting himself.

The darkness of his eyelids brings the image of Rasplin in flames, red dripping paint, Parrot's clenched jaw, and rows upon rows of posters in an endless loop.

He bangs his head against the table.

His phone beeps once, but Branzy doesn't feel inclined to pick it up. It's probably just Rek messaging him in one last desperate attempt to get Branzy to join the chess club, and he can always let his friend down a little later in the evening.

He should really continue with his homework....

Then, his phone beeps again. And again. And again.

Branzy counts twenty messages in total, all sent in a total of three minutes – that has got to be a new record for him, which is exactly what makes it so unsettling.

With shaking hands, Branzy unlocks his phone, staring in disbelief at the twenty-one messages sent to him on every single one of his social media accounts.

They all read the same:

Hello, Branzy. Remember Chief?

710 Jacobs Ports

Camronview, FL 86351?

Branzy blinks. Once, twice, but the message does not change.

Of course he remembers Chief.

He's the sole reason Branzy basically gave up on hacking.

It had been 2018, and Branzy was just some dumb kid with too much time on his hands, and too much skill to know what to do with.

He had gotten into a fight with Chief in some forum or other, about something so inconsequential that he can't even quite remember – it might've had to do with a game or a sports team?

What mattered was that Branzy had ended up posting Chief's full name and address on some rather unsavoury sites and forums as retaliation, and in the process had almost gotten Chief killed.

As it turned out, the man had had dealings in darker parts of the web, with shady people he apparently owed money to.

It was pure luck the man had not been in his house when it was shot up.

Chief had agreed not to press charges, partly because of his own less than clean track record, but also because Branzy had only barely been a teenager and he had not wanted to ruin his life.

On that day, Branzy had vowed to never hack ever again. That had been his promise to Chief.

How anyone could know of this was beyond Branzy, though.

As far as he knew, he had wiped every trace of his blunder off the Internet, and since there had never been an official police report or court case, there was no evidence anything had ever happened at all.

Branzy shivers. Whatever this person wants, he's in deep shit.

Hands still shaking, he types out his response.

who r you????

But there is no reply.

The accounts are all obviously burners, created just minutes before the messages have been sent, no profile pictures or posts to speak of.

He could always try to trace back their IP address, but somehow he doubts that would lead him anywhere at all.

what do youb want???

Meet me at school later.

Midnight.

I'll be waiting by the main entrance.

Branzy lets out a shaky sigh, raking a hand through his hair.

Well, it could be worse, right? As long as they actually want something from him, they might choose to not make their findings public just yet! Probably. Hopefully.

One quick glance at the clock revealed that Branzy still has three more hours to kill.

Just great. This is already shaping up to be a fantastic school year.



By the time the clock strikes midnight, Branzy is nervously pacing in front of the school's main entrance.

In the dark, the remnants of the red spray paint still splattered on the ground look oddly like old blood, all rusty and discoloured.

The word 'murderers' bounces through his brain sporadically.

By the time it's five past, Branzy has half made his mind up to just leave, when a figure suddenly emerges from the nearby treeline.

As they come closer, Branzy somehow manages to not have his third meltdown of the day as he realizes that he actually recognizes the guy.

That's Clown. Holy shit, that's actually Clown.

As in, won a fight against five guys all on his own Clown. As in avoided suspension by *intimidating the principal* Clown.

Yeah. That guy.

And he's looking Branzy right in the face.

Branzy squirms a bit, shuffling backwards to put some more distance between them and raising his arms almost instinctively.

"Heyyy.... Clown..." he draws out anxiously.

Clown looks at this phone, then up at Branzy. He mumbles something that Branzy can't quite catch over the sound of his heart beating out of his chest.

"What?"

Clown clears his throat, and if Branzy didn't know better, he'd have called the motion of it almost... awkward?

"You're Branzy, right?"

Branzy nods mutely. Oh god, maybe he is freaking out right now actually. Oh god.

"Great. I want your help with something."

"I- uhm. Sorry. Huh?" Branzy stammers. It feels like his brain has totally deserted him. Just what could he ever do for Clown, of all people?

Clown gives him one long, hard look. If Branzy hadn't already been shaking he sure would have started now! God, this guy is intimidating.

"I need your help with something. You can code, right? I want you to help me set up a website."

Once again, Branzy's brain stutters. A... website? That's it?

"Uhm. Yeah, I mean. I can do that...? But why couldn't you just..." ask me like a normal person, Branzy wants to say. He cuts himself off just in time to avoid getting his second beating of the day. He's not very keen on having both sides of his skull ache.

Clown just chuckles, all deep and low in his throat.

"Branzy, Branzy... it's not just a normal website. It's vengeance."

Branzy has to stop himself from cowering even further as Clown crowds him against one of the glass doors.

He leans in close, the material of his black face mask almost brushing against Branzy's mouth.

"Doesn't that sound nice, Branzy? Vengeance. Doesn't this school make you sick, too?"

Clown's voice is quiet, barely a whisper, caught inbetween menacing and sickly sweet.

Inclined to agree just to be able to breathe again, Branzy squeezes his eyes shut and nods weakly. Hopefully Clown will take that as enough of an answer.

"Great! So you'll help me?" Clown asks, suddenly very much jovial and finally a proper distance away from Branzy too.

"Wait– wait. What does that mean, vengeance?"

There's a sudden darkness in Clown's eyes, like someone closed the blinds and turned off the lights. He takes a step towards Branzy again, slow and predatory.

"You were there, that day. I saw you. Really unfortunate timing you had, but at least you were quite far away.

Did you know Rasplin's eyes were melting right out of his skull? I saw that. I saw it all. Don't you think he deserves some justice? Don't you think these *murderers* should feel the anguish he felt, even for just a second? We'll upturn this whole school, expose all their dirty little secrets. See how they like the goddamn gossip. We'll destroy them, Branzy, that's vengeance."

Clown is standing right in front of him again, and he's gripping Branzy's chin in his left hand, forcing him to look in the other's eyes.

There's a hollowness to them, an emptiness that even the vitriol and hate of Clown's words don't quite manage to extinguish.

In Branzy's mind, there's that image again: Rasplin, engulfed in flames, still as if watching, and the burn scar in the linoleum floor he skirted around for days.

Parrot's fist, about to make contact with his face.

The red ink on the double doors.

"I– I don't think that's right. Uhm. Your plan, I mean. Not that Rasplin doesn't deserve... justice." Branzy stubbornly elects to ignore how much he's stumbling over his words. Maybe if he just

pretends to be confident, Clown will think him less of an easy target?

But Clown just laughs, in that same hollow way he had talked about Rasplin's death.

"Oh Branzly, you don't have a choice in this! It's either you help me get revenge, or your little dabbling in cybercrime is reported to the police!"

Branzly shivers again. He forgot all about that, and suddenly it's all coming back to him – Clown's face in front of him starts blurring, and he sees Rasplin and his eyes are melting, and then there's Parrot and that exploding pain in his skull and Chief in his house of bullet holes.

His breath is coming very quickly.

He has to get out of here.

Okay. Deep breaths.

He stares at Clown, who in turn is staring at him, standing almost abnormally still.

His mask makes the lower half of his face fade into the night, until all that's left is the piercing grey of his eyes.

Branzly sighs, and with the red paint burning like a brand into his back, makes a decision.

Internally, he apologizes to Chief.

"Alright", he says, "I'll help you."

Chapter End Notes

hello & welcome to the clownzy highschool au (with a silly little twist) :D
please don't be too harsh w/ this, i normally only write introspection type stuff and nothing with like. Action & Plot so this was kinda hard,,,
it's also a different writing style than what i'd usually go for!

some characters r going to look very evil rn. sorry parrot i love u but i need a bad guy for now!

also sorry for killing off rasplin but bc this is an au that's heavily inspired by a book i read, i needed someone to die at the very beginning & i didn't want it to be just some Random Guy sooo. rip?

(also pls don't expect too much accuracy with the coding/hacking stuff i have no idea how any of that works lol)

we got [art!!](#) tysm to the super talented crimsonmoonn who drew this awesome piece
<33

marked cards

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

When Branzy finally comes back home it's half past two in the morning, and he's still shaking so badly that he fails to unlock the door for a good few minutes.

Once inside, he slides down the door until he can rest his head on his knees. He feels pathetic.

Dear god. What has he just agreed to?

Why would Clown know about *him* of all people?

There have to be better people for this job. Hell, Branzy basically stopped programming entirely years ago!

And his little side projects did not even come close to the scale Clown had in mind for his weird revenge website!

Okay. He will not freak out about this again. If there's one thing Branzy can do, it's code; and if all Clown wants is some measly website in exchange for keeping Branzy's secret, then that's a good deal!

His hands still shake when he unlocks his phone.

There is in fact one message from Rek, simply reading *hey!!*

Branzy wants to tell him everything desperately, from the red stained doors to Clown's terrifying hollow eyes, but should he really? Maybe Clown would already see that as a transgression, and leak all the info he had on Branzy?

Branzy shakes his head in a desperate attempt to clear it, and presses the call button.

The phone rings five times before Rek picks up.

"Hey Branzy, my dude! What's up?"

Embarrassingly, just hearing his best friend's voice makes Branzy almost tear up. God, he is so done.

"Rek, uhm, hey! Why'd you text me earlier? Sorry I didn't see, I was... busy." Branzy cringes. That sounded so blatantly like a lie he didn't even manage to convince himself.

"Huh, oh yeah! I wanted to ask if you were interested in going to this party, but uhh... I'm kind of already there now? Sorry!"

Branzy smiles. It's just like Rek to apologize for having a bit of fun without his friend, even though Branzy would probably have declined anyway.

But now that he knows, he can faintly hear music coming from Rek's end, and the low murmuring of people mixing in with the white noise of the call.

It's calming, in an odd way, to know that everyone's lives are just going on as always.

"Dude, it's fine! I probably wouldn't have gone anyway, you know how I get!" Branzy replies, and his chuckle sounds so painfully fake he contemplates just ending the call right then and there. This is more than just embarrassing. "Who's party is it?"

"Oh, just some girl's. She's also in the chess club! Misty, I think?"

Branzy can't help but laugh at that.

"The chess club is throwing parties now? I thought you guys were a bunch of nerds!", he teases, and just like that the awkward tension is gone and they're both laughing.

When Branzy ends the call to let Rek get back to his party, he has finally stopped shaking.



At six the next morning, Branzy feels about as well rested as someone who just got run over by a delivery truck.

One look in the mirror reveals that he looks just as horrific as he feels; the dark shadows under his eyes almost directly fade into the black bruise left behind by Parrot's fist, and his skin looks even more sickly and pale than it usually does. Dear god, he's so tired.

He absolutely cannot go to school like this.

Not if he wants to avoid Mrs. Brown and her impromptu therapy.

But even after showering and doing his hair, Branzy still looks like he's already halfway to being dead.

In one last act of desperation, he digs through the bathroom cabinets in search of his old stage make-up, from back when he was still in the theatre club.

The thing is already expired by two years, but it's not like he has any other choice but to use it, so on his face it goes!

When he's done the bruise is only still slightly visible and Branzy's a shade paler than before – that's fine, though.

He'd rather be pale than visibly beaten up.

Still, he opts to slide the hood of his sweatshirt over his eyes. Just to be safe.



Rek is already waiting by Branzy's locker when he arrives, drumming a beat into the metal door.

Branzy gives him a quick smile, hesitant to raise his head. He knows that he must look ridiculous.

"Dude, what are you supposed to be? A vampire?", Rek laughs, lightly punching Branzy's shoulder.

Branzy just glares at him.

"Don't laugh! I had to cover those bruises somehow!"

But Rek continues giggling whenever he catches a glimpse of Branzy's face well beyond the point where any normal person would find the situation funny.

Branzy, clearly annoyed, knows only one way to get Rek to stop – make him start talking about something *he* cares about.

"So, how was chess club yesterday? You mentioned some new members, I think? Like the girl that threw the party.", Branzy asks innocently.

Almost immediately, Rek stops laughing and gives Branzy such an honest smile that he almost feels bad for trying to trick his friend.

"Oh man, it was great!", Rek says, "There were a bunch of new members, and they're all super nice! You won't believe..."

At this point, Branzy just starts tuning him out as they walk to their first class of the day – history. Not a subject Branzy particularly cares for, but it's interesting enough.

And since he has it with Rek, it's certainly up there in his favourites.

"... and we saw Clown, too! It was crazy, man, that guy is so scary....", Rek is still gesticulating wildly while telling his story. He doesn't even seem to have noticed that Branzy isn't really paying attention.

"Wait, wait. Uh, what did you say? Sorry, I kinda... lost you there.", Branzy says. There's a tightness in his chest that wasn't there before.

Branzy feels a sudden panic rise in the back of his throat. Clown was at the party...? What if he— Oh God, what if he told someone? What if he had tricked Branzy into the meeting just to expose him later?

"Dude, Branzy you good? I just said that Clown was at the party, too. You know, the guy who always wears that weird face mask? Beats people up? Yeah, I don't know what he was doing there, either. He sure as hell wasn't invited! He really didn't do much, honestly. Just stood in the corner, watching people, pretty weird stuff. But no one had the guts to kick him out.", Rek shrugs noncommittally.

"Yeah yeah I'm fine...", Branzy replies lamely, despite the sudden chill in his bones, "That's pretty... weird. Even for Clown."

He thinks, suddenly, of his own encounter with the boy. His strange, inhuman eyes, shiny like brass in the darkness. His hollow voice. The brush of his face mask against Branzy's nose, the heat of his body, too close for comfort.

Branzy's promise.

Rek watches him with something oddly like concern shining in his eyes, before quietly shaking his head.

"Anyways, I wanted to ask if you want to come over later today? I have this new game we should definitely try out!"

Branzy agrees easily, glad to have found a distraction from the imminent panic attack that awaits him in his empty house. If he just sticks really close to Rek, nothing bad could happen, right?

(He's very wrong, and he realizes when his phone chimes in class. Despite his teacher's dirty looks, he checks the message. It's from Clown, and honestly, with the way Branzy's hands start shaking at the realization, he thinks this deal may well put him in an early grave. The message simply reads: *I'm coming by your house after school. We have things to discuss.*

Branzy has to tell himself to keep breathing. It's only one slightly ominous message. This is a beneficial deal for both of them, so Clown won't hurt him, right? Right?

But just when he's navigated the way out of his spiral, he's immediately thrown into the next at the thought that he never actually gave Clown his address.)



Telling Rek that he actually *can't* come over later is uncomfortable, since Branzy has to make up a lame excuse of having a doctor's appointment he forgot about that sounds fake even to himself, but what's even more uncomfortable is Parrot's eyes burning into the back of his head for the entirety of lunch.

Branzy starts getting so antsy with it that he tells Rek he has to go to the bathroom and makes his way out of the cafeteria.

He skirts around the spot where the burnt linoleum used to be on pure instinct alone.

Parrot follows him out not two minutes later.

They stare at each other for a second – Parrot with barely concealed rage in his eyes, and Branzy trying and failing to look him in the eyes without raising his head too much.

Parrot's fist is tight by his side.

"Still keeping your mouth shut?", he hisses, all low and in the back of his throat.

Branzy blinks. Just a few days ago, Parrot had terrified him – he's strong, and popular, and his opinion of you matters more than it probably should.

But now, with Clown's threats and hollow, empty eyes still burning in his memory, Parrot looks like nothing to be afraid of at all.

"Uh, yeah, sure.", Branzy answers casually. He sort of just wants to get back to Rek now.

It's Parrot's turn to be confused; the boy who had been quivering under his fist just mere days ago was now facing him head on, unafraid.

He squints, suspicious.

"Just remember: A single word of this to *anyone* and you're dead meat.", Parrot threatens, and with one last glare and a hard shove that leaves Branzy reeling, he stalks back into the cafeteria.

Branzy waits outside for a bit, aimlessly staring at the wall.

There's something oddly ecstatic thrumming under his skin, joyful and wicked with the thought of not having been a coward, of standing his ground.

For the first time in a long while, Branzy feels like back then, like being thirteen and drunk on his skills, stupid but confident.

He doesn't know if that's a good thing.

Of course, there's still the looming threat of Clown and his impossible knowledge.

The mental image of him at that party, cold and watchful in a corner, makes Branzy shiver involuntarily – if Parrot's eyes had been burning into his skull just a few minutes before, Clown's presence felt constant even though he is not there, pins and needles tearing into his skin.

It's not hard to admit he's scared of Clown; Branzy's used to being scared, to fearing what other, stronger people might do to him. He's never been much of a fighter.

What's hard to admit is that this fear somehow has changed him, that one simple encounter with Clown has altered Branzy in a way he could never have known.

Just a few weeks ago, he'd been terrified of Parrot, and his throat and eye still ache at the thought of him, but that fear is dulled now – it's as if all his terror was projected in one place, and for all that Branzy was prone to anxiety, he can't help but feel like his fear of Clown is more than just warranted.

One wrong step, and his entire life is on the line.

The feeling of ecstasy turns rotten in his veins.

It's like someone poured ice cold water over his head – it's true. His life *is* on the line here.

All Branzy can hope is that Clown will be reasonably impressed with his work later.

With shaking legs, Branzy turns to walk back into the cafeteria.

If Rek notices his shaking hands or pale face, he doesn't mention it.



The last class of the day is German again, and Branzy's less than enthused about it.

It's one of these classes where he really doesn't know anyone, and has to do most group projects by himself by virtue of being too disinterested to talk to anyone.

It's boring and way too complicated, but the teacher gives out good grades like candy so Branzy'll take it.

In lieu of doing the actual assigned work, Branzy starts sketching out a rough draft of the website's interface – he's thinking of keeping it mostly monochrome, but that just seems boring somehow.

After all, he's not designing it for a corporation.

Clown hadn't told him much about the website's purpose yet, but it seemed too dramatic for a simple black and white design; something about a casino?

Something about students gambling away their very lives?

Branzy shakes his head.

This isn't helping at all! He can't even properly remember the sparse information Clown *did* give him, and he'd rather not disappoint with his blueprints and risk being at the wrong end of Clown's anger.

Frustrated, he scribbles over his design.

Someone behind him whistles.

"Damn, is it that hard?"

Branzy jumps, and turns around quickly, trying to cover the paper with his body.

He comes face to face with another boy who grins at him mischievously; he wears a hood with... cat ears sewn on top?

Branzy blinks. Nope, those are definitely cat ears.

The boy does not seem perturbed by Branzy's shocked silence.

"I'm Vitalasy, by the way! Nice to meet you... Branzy, right? Subz told me about you.", Vitalasy holds out his hand, as if wanting for Branzy to shake it.

Branzy just nods. Between the cat ears, the boy knowing his name and being approached in German class, of all places, he's still slightly shocked.

Vitalasy drops his hand with an awkward smile.

"Well... Wanna do the exercises with me? My partner ditched and it looks like you need some help! Don't worry, I'm like, super good at this stuff.", he asks, all awkwardness seemingly discarded in a second.

That's met with much more enthusiasm from Branzly, who hasn't even looked at the exercises yet and could really use some help with this class in general. His German still sucks, but Vitalasy proves to be a very patient teacher.

The whole thing doesn't stop feeling weird the entire time, though. Vitalasy keeps mentioning his friend Subz, as if Branzly were already familiar with him in some way.

The name doesn't ring any bells.

It's surprisingly easy to discard his worries and just talk to Vitalasy, anyway.

They soon find that they have a mutual interest in programming, and troubleshoot their latest projects with each other.

Vitalasy tells him about his plan of developing a new game, and Branzly talks about his renewed interest in making chat bots.

By the end of the lesson, they've exchanged numbers and both confess that they've never had that much fun in class before while actually working on the exercises.

Branzly feels much lighter after leaving that classroom.

It's been a long time since he's made a friend that easily.

But that feeling doesn't last long after he's waved Vitalasy goodbye – it's finally time to go home and face Clown.



Branzly arrives at his place feeling twitchy, anxious in a way that he can't wholly place, but there's no sign of Clown yet.

For a single, terrifying second Branzly entertains the thought of him having broken in, but that'd be ridiculous.

Even for a guy like Clown.

So Branzly unlocks the door, kicks his backpack into the nearest corner, and waits.

And then twenty minutes pass by, and Branzly starts pacing nervously.

Clown *did* say they were meeting at Branzly's place, right?

Should he have waited for him at school?

No, that's stupid. Like, really stupid, because it would blow their whole operation in seconds, wouldn't it?

Someone like Clown wouldn't hang out with someone like Branzly just like that!

Still, time continues to pass and Clown does not arrive.

Branzy takes a few deep breaths and tries to keep his legs from shaking.

His mind is whirring and he has to wipe his sweaty hands on his pants every few seconds, and though he has checked his phone at least a hundred times, Clown has not texted or called.

It's only when he's contemplating asking Rek if he actually *can* come over today that the doorbell rings.

Branzy jumps at the sound, suddenly very aware of his flaky make-up and the wreath of bruises around his throat, his ratty old hoodie and messy hair, and he curses himself for not looking more put together.

So much for looking competent.

It's not like he can wear his hood up in his own house without looking weird, and there's no quick fix for the bruises either way – Branzy gives himself one last shaky smile in the mirror, and moves to open the door.

Clown looks even more intimidating in the bright daylight, somehow.

His eyes, grey like the steel of a container ship, look striking in the light, gleaming in a way that disguises that emptiness Branzy has become so familiar with – he looks alive, real in a way Branzy somehow had never considered him to be.

He looks like a highschool student, normal despite every rumour and legend clamouring for attention in Branzy's mind.

But now, without the cover of darkness, he recognizes something else in the depths of his eyes, something far more dangerous – Clown is looking at him as if he were a prey animal that had somehow wandered into the lion's den.

Branzy suddenly feels very cold.

He spots a thin, white scar over Clown's left eyebrow and wonders, just briefly, how he could've gotten it.

And then Clown clears his throat, and Branzy is suddenly thrown back into reality.

Oh dear god. He just totally stared at Clown for like, a full minute.

Oh no.

Branzy offers the other boy an awkward wave, and opens the door a little wider, managing to squeeze out a quick "Come on in!"

It still sort of feels like Branzy's dreaming, when he's watching Clown politely toe off his shoes after he's stepped inside.

There's something very controlled about his movements, like every twitch of his fingers has a purpose and every action is planned out in his mind, but he still looks terribly awkward, standing in Branzy's living room.

They're both silent for a short while.

"Right, uhm... Do you wanna sit down?", Branzy asks, already fidgeting again.

Clown gives him a slight nod, and they find themselves sitting at the kitchen table soon enough.

Branzy at least had the foresight to get some pens and paper as well as his laptop already set up on the table.

He thinks about his scratched out designs from German class, and sort of wishes he'd have kept them, just so there would be something to show to Clown.

Clown who is... staring at him very intently. Alright.

Trying very desperately to think of something to say, Branzy doesn't notice Clown taking out his own notepad and sliding it across the table towards him.

"This is what I want it to look like. Can you do that? Please be honest."

Branzy blinks, surprised.

Clown's design is much more complex and well thought out than he'd expected, though still very odd in nature.

It's dominated mostly by three colours – red, black and purple, spiraling into each other in increasingly intricate patterns.

The effect is disorienting, and Branzy is reminded of a carnival's funhouse, all blinding colours and clever distractions from the actual machinations happening inside.

Branzy's pretty confident that he could pull off an effect like that, even if it would be a bit of a challenge – it's been a while since he tried his hands on anything more advanced.

Clown's notes are pretty much incomprehensible, though.

"Uh... I mean. I think I can make this? But I... can't quite make out your notes.", Branzy stammers awkwardly.

Hopefully that won't offend Clown?

But Clown just sighs, sounding oddly defeated.

"Right... This is supposed to be a casino, so the people would have to be able to bet. The catch is that there's only two options – *guilty* or *innocent*. Whoever's playing has to enter the name of a

person, and then select if they think they're innocent or guilty. And then...", Clown pauses dramatically, "We dig up anything we can find on them."

Branzy's mind is already in overdrive, thinking about anonymous submissions and some sort of interactive aspect to make the gambling feel more real, and....

"Wait, wait. What do you mean, 'dig up anything we can find'. Where would we even get the info on them?"

Clown leans forward slightly, looking Branzy right in the eyes.

"That's where you come in. I'm sure you could get people to spill something, and if not... well, you do have certain skills that could help you.", he answers, and there's a maniacal glint in his eye, schadenfreude mixed with something deeper, something more personal.

Branzy swallows dryly.

Somehow Clown had lulled him into a false sense of security, with his awkward mannerisms and quiet voice, and he hadn't expected to have to do anything illegal.

But it's either this, or immediately be reported to the police.

What's a few more cybercrimes, right?

Branzy chuckles nervously, hands starting to shake again.

There are a few more moments of tense silence, before Branzy announces that he's going to get started immediately.

He's hoping Clown will deem watching him code too boring to stay around for and leave, but half an hour in, they're both still quietly sitting at the kitchen table. 1

Clown is watching him intently, taking in Branzy's fingers ghosting over the keyboard of his laptop, eyebrows furrowed in concentration; he sees the bruises on his throat, dark blue and terrible on Branzy's pale skin, and he does not say anything.

(Branzy doesn't notice, of course, but his hands clench into fists under the table.)

It takes just about two hours for Branzy to be finished with some sort of prototype.

He beckons Clown over, tilting his screen so the other boy could see, very aware of where he's standing, of his own unguarded back.

But nothing happens at all.

Clown just watches the colours swirl on the screen, purple and black and red flowing and twisting,

the light of the screen reflecting sharply in his eyes.

In the middle of the screen, there's only one sentence, still in the mass of shifting colour.

place your bets.

Clicking on it reveals a much more toned down version of the homepage, a simple purple and black spiral.

There, a simple slot machine slowly fades into view.

Instead of the usual five fields, there are only two – one displaying a red heart, and the other showing a white skull. *Innocent* and *Guilty* is written underneath them in a cursive script.

After selecting either, two boxes pop up: One asking for a name, and the other giving the option to submit proof themselves.

Clown looks reasonably impressed, Branzy thinks, though at this point he's also tired enough to just pass out himself and he can't read Clown right, what with the face mask and all.

Still, he's still alive and breathing, relatively unharmed, so he's probably done *something* right.

"Is it ready to go online?", Clown asks, and he sounds so breathless, so awed that Branzy nods his head vigorously.

"Yeah, yeah it's all ready, we just need a url and we can set it up."

"It's the Casino of Hearts. That's the name."

And Branzy's just a little too tired, just a little too euphoric to have impressed Clown that he doesn't question how easy the name had come to the other at all.

He keeps blinking very quickly to try and stay awake, but the world is already sort of blurry at the edges to the point where Branzy could've sworn Clown just... smiled at him?

With his eyes crinkled up like that, he really doesn't look as intimidating.

"You should sleep, Branzy.", Clown says, voice thick with humor, "That was really good work you did today."

And it's embarrassing, but Branzy feels something unfurl in his chest at the words, something

warm and entirely made of light, and for one glorious second he's not scared anymore. It's just him and Clown, and he's never been less scared in his life.

His sleep-deprived brain does not notice Clown's expression shift as he turns to leave, and Branzzy cannot see his eyes turn cold again nor his hands tighten into fists.

Clown leaves with the surety of not having shown all his cards yet, determined to win a gamble Branzzy wasn't even aware he had taken.

(But then again, Branzzy has not told Clown everything either. In his code, hidden away beyond the reach of anyone, sits a ticking bomb.

And if for whatever reason Branzzy were ever to regret his actions, the site would go down with him.)

Chapter End Notes

and that's chapter two!

honestly, i'm not too happy with this chapter since it's just more exposition but next chapter the plot should finally start picking up!

(i am on vacation rn so idk when chapter three will be out,,, it's maybe a third of the way to being done atp?)

also, welcome our newest member of the cast: vitalasy!

i haven't watched him much i gotta admit so if anyone wants to rant about him to me please do so i need to know more :o

if y'all want to know the real canonical reason for why clown was late: he did not in fact know branzzy's address! and he didn't want to ask for it lmao

counter gambit

Chapter Summary

Branzy reads the words empire, rebuild and decimation before he knows that this is a manifesto, and whatever he has stumbled in on is much bigger than his own feud with Parrot.

Chapter Notes

trigger warning for a panic attack & alcohol consumption!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The video is grainy, barely focused on its subjects and so clearly recorded from behind a wall that it would almost be ridiculous in its secrecy, were it not for its content.

It shows the old gym locker room, the one that's no longer being used because the heating stopped working years ago, and there, standing tall between the cobwebs, is Parrot.

He's angry, pacing and baring his teeth, eyes wild and hands clenched tight.

"-can't do that!" his raised voice echoes in the empty room, just loud enough to be caught by the camera.

"It doesn't have to be serious. Just, y'know, bad enough that he won't be able to play."

The video cuts out shortly, as if the person recording wasn't aware there was someone else in the room and momentarily lost their courage.

When they continue recording, their hands are noticeably shaking.

*"No, **you** don't understand! It's not that easy!" Parrot says, having moved slightly out of frame, to where the other person must be standing. Presumably trying to crowd them into the wall.*

*"Drop the act, Parrot. You promised you would help, and it's not like you **haven't** done something like this before."*

Another calm reply, laced with something like amusement.

Parrot swallows thickly, averting his eyes.

"Alright. I'll do it, but don't expect too much. It'll put him out of commission for this one game only."

There's something defeated in the way Parrot agrees, like he already knows he's lost the fight; like he knows this won't be the last time.

A pale hand reaches out to clap Parrot on the back in a twisted show of camaraderie.

*"See? I knew you would come around! Just remember, it **has** to look like an accident."*

The end of the video shows one still image, shaky and taken from behind a bush, blurry with leaves: Parrot helping up Roshambo after he twisted his ankle and couldn't play in the next big football game.

Branzy blinks.

His throat aches, and his swollen eye twinges.

It feels like there's a headache building up between his eyes.

Well, somehow the thought that Parrot is also just a victim in someone else's scheme doesn't really comfort him. It just makes the whole thing more depressing, like Branzy shouldn't even really be allowed to feel angry anymore.

On his phone, the purple and black spiral coils ever tighter into itself, and the white, cursive font glows eerily in the darkness.

It's their first bet, and Parrot has been deemed guilty.

Across from him, Clown is leaning against the door of the bathroom stall, still brandishing his phone like a trophy.

Faintly, Branzy thinks he can hear the video start playing again, Parrot's voice pouring out of the speaker all tinny and strained.

Clown makes no move to turn it off.

"Uh, I don't know, actually. That video... makes Parrot look like a victim somehow? Shouldn't we find something more incriminating?" Branzy asks meekly.

Being in a confined space with Clown still makes his knees shake and palms sweat, and though Branzy's a self admitted coward, after working with the guy for a few days the paranoia should've faded.

Somehow, it doesn't.

So when Clown moves towards him, just one small step in the cramped bathroom stall, Branzy flinches almost instinctively.

Clown has never hurt him before, but there's an intent in his eyes now, one that Branzy can't quite place, and his twitching fingers and rigid posture show the boiling anger his cold eyes conceal.

Before Branzy can even blink, Clown has his hands on Branzy's throat and is digging his fingers into the bruises there.

"A victim? Are you fucking serious, Branzy? Do you not see what he did to you? What he did to Roshambo?" Clown seethes, and the warmth of his hands burns like hot iron on Branzy's neck.

Branzy tastes copper on his tongue, and wonders if it's a warning.

But it's Clown that draws back again, all on his own, looking faintly chastised. He rubs his hand absentmindedly, looking for a moment almost as if he wants to apologize.

But it passes, and no one says anything.

Branzy draws in a few shaky breaths and leans back against the wall, feeling suddenly very exhausted.

"Alright, how about this: I'll try to find some more info, and if I don't, we'll just post that video and be done with it. Okay?"

Clown gives him an odd look, one that's halfway to being confused but also sort of impressed, and Branzy doesn't even have the energy to pretend he's not happy to have impressed him.

The truth is, Clown terrifies Branzy, but he also intrigues him.

Sometimes, he'll get that odd look in his eyes, like somehow he's gotten so much more vibrant and alive, and he'll tilt his head and laugh and look at Branzy like he's somehow very important.

And in the next second, he'll threaten Branzy like he never cared at all.

It's confusing, and emotionally taxing, and he just wants to go back to the time were all he knew of Clown was the stupid rumors, the useless gossip.

"Sure, if that's what you want." Clown says easily, stepping out of the bathroom stall without as much as a goodbye.

Branzy just laughs bitterly.

When has this ever been about what *he* wants?



Finding out anything about Parrot is surprisingly hard.

For a guy whose whole pride and joy is his popularity, there isn't much to find on him anywhere – his Instagram is full of pretentious pictures, sure, house parties and expensive holidays, but almost

nothing that would amount to personal information.

His following is much more interesting, because where almost the entire school seems to be following him, there are only around one hundred people Parrot actually followed back.

It's the usual suspects for a little while, Zam and Red and some of the cheerleader girls, but then it finally gets interesting.

Parrot follows some guy named *Spoke* that Branzly has never heard of but that evidently must go to their school, seeing as he's wearing one of their football jackets in his profile picture.

That's... something, at least. Parrot hanging out with some nobody?

Branzy's fingers twitch.

But it's not quite the time to bring out the big guns just yet – he still has to dig further into Parrot's instagram account itself.

A few celebrities and brands later, Branzly makes another interesting discovery: Parrot follows some kickboxing school from California that advertises itself as teaching the 'deadliest style possible'.

And if that's not terrifying enough, Parrot appears in some of their posts as an actual award winning athlete.

Well, at least Branzly feels less like a loser for his still aching bruises now.

But other than that, Parrot's social media is empty, carefully curated images of a perfect life, hollow of all reality, devoid of personality.

There's nothing unique to it, nothing distinctive, like Parrot is desperately trying to fade into the background, to fit into a crowd he doesn't quite understand.

Branzy feels sorry for him in a way he can't comprehend.

I'm probably reading too much into this anyway, Branzly thinks cynically, *and Parrot is just another popular douchebag.*

But at least Parrot *has* social media, and it feels like Branzly has learned something about him. Even if it's superficial.

Spoke has no social media to speak of – his Instagram account is not even privated, there's just nothing there. A name and profile picture, and then emptiness.

It's like Spoke is a ghost; a phantom of the modern age, and his haunting ground is the Internet, the empty webpage burning into Branzly's eyelids.

It's like he's not even really there.

Branzy shakes his head, trying to dispel his darkening thoughts. Spoke is just another face, just another kid he's never met – there are thousands like that, students he ignores in the halls, doesn't try to distinguish the faces of.

Spoke is not the anomaly.

Not something to freak out about.

But somehow, Branzy thinks Spoke is the key to unlocking Parrot, to seeing behind the facade of his artificial life, to find *something*, anything to appease Clown.

Anything at all.

Now, he just has to find Spoke, and be as inconspicuous as possible about it.

The problem?

Branzy is an awful liar.



Vitalasy gives him an odd look when Branzy approaches him in the cafeteria.

They've grown closer over the past few days, now firmly seated next to each other in German class and occasionally spending their breaks together, but they've never sat together at lunch.

Branzy has turned Vitalasy's invitation down multiple times, because lunch is time he just has to spend with Rek – especially now, with Branzy busy all the time, sleepless and weary because of the work he has to do for the website.

Truth is, Branzy may have been exaggerating when he told Clown it was ready to go online right away.

It had taken him almost a week to iron out all the little bugs and mistakes in his code, as well as establish a new feature; a sort of dashboard, where anyone could what people were betting as well as the proof of their claims.

It was a passion project now, a proof of skill to see if Branzy could still confidently call himself *good*. And he was going to pass it, no matter what it takes.

So now, a week later and many sleepless nights filled with anxiety left behind, the website is online.

And nothing has happened.

No one has bet anything, probably because no one knows the thing actually exists, and Branzy can't very well go around advertising it, can he?

In the end it was Clown's idea to make the first bet themselves.

Back then, staring at the spinning slot machine and the haunting glow of the white words, Branzy had felt powerful for the first time in his life.

It was a thrilling, electric thing; a sharp joy only amplified by Clown's low chuckle, harsh and solid

and tingling along Branzzy's spine – Clown's eyes on the back of his head like the golden touches of divinity.

Then, he had felt important.

Now, looking into Vitalasy's eyes, Branzzy just feels kind of like an asshole.

"Branzy..?" Vitalasy says slowly, like he can't quite believe what he's seeing.

"Hey, Vitalasy!" Branzzy smiles and sits down, hoping it looks just a bit more nonchalant than he feels. His hands shake underneath the table.

For one long second, they just stare at each other. Branzzy's smile turns strained with nervousness.

Then, Vitalasy just gives him a small grin and leans back in his chair.

"So... What's up, man?"

Branzy sighs, and suddenly feels much lighter. This, he can do.

"I was wondering if you knew a guy! Spoke, I think that's his name?"

Vitalasy tilts his head, curiosity alight in his eyes like a burning match. A sly grin curls his lips upwards.

"And why should I tell you?" he teases, voice airy.

Branzy opens his mouth to make his case when Vitalasy just laughs, breathless and loud and uncaring about the looks he receives.

"Dude, no! We're friends, of course I'll tell you, that's not top secret info or anything!" Vitalasy giggles, "Yeah, Spoke? Dark hair, wears that weird rainbow bandana? I have maths with him, nice guy but really quiet. What do you even want from him?"

That makes Branzzy pause. There is no real reason for him to be asking around about Spoke – for

all anyone knows, they don't even know of each other's existence.

If he lies here and Vitalasy notices, Branzy has failed; himself, Clown, hell, maybe even Roshambo. Maybe even Rasplin.

The thought makes Branzy shiver involuntarily; in the darkness behind his eyelids, Rasplin's eyes gleam at Branzy through layers of smoke and ash, and everything is tinged the glowing red of flames.

He thinks about what Clown said – *his eyes were melting right out of his skull* – and wonders, isn't justice meant to be blind?

He has to get to the bottom of this.

For Rasplin, maybe, or for everyone else in this school that has dreamed of a similar end; for every kid that hides bruises under old make-up and lies.

For himself. For Clown, in a way.

Justice, vengeance.

The words are starting to blur.

"Uh, no particular reason? I just... saw some people were following him on Insta and I wondered if he's like popular or something." Branzy lies, and it slides out more smoothly than he expected.

Vitalasy seems to take his words at face value and just shrugs lightly.

Looking across the cafeteria, Branzy can see Rek making his way to their usual table – he feels something like guilt well up in his chest, rising into his fingertips.

He hasn't been talking to Rek much lately.

Every evening Rek had called him about some party or just to hang out at his place and Branzy, shaky with sleep deprivation and caffeine, had declined.

The glow of his screen was his closest friend, eyes burning and body heavy, and though Rek tried to talk to Branzy at school, there was nothing Branzy had to say.

His friend's worry didn't reach him.

"Sorry, but I gotta go! See you later!" Branzy says quickly and with as much cheer as he can manage, eyes already set on Rek.

"Wait, hold on!"

Vitalasy grabs Branzzy's arm, and when he turns around to look back, Vitalasy has a sheepish look on his face.

Branzy thinks he looks a little scared, wide-eyed and alone in the big cafeteria.

"Could I maybe... come with you? Subz is sick today, and I don't really have anyone to sit with..."

Subconsciously, Branzzy's eyes drift to the floor in the middle of the cafeteria – but there's nothing there, all smooth linoleum, shiny and reflective in the light.

He nods at Vitalasy, and hopes his smile reaches his eyes.



Rek and Vitalasy get along weirdly well.

Branzy had at first been scared of how Rek would react – almost a week of radio silence and now he's bringing someone else to lunch?

But Rek is delighted instead, glowing with some sort of odd pride that Branzzy has found another friend; his smile softens everytime he thinks Branzzy isn't looking.

The sharp relief in his face speaks volumes about his worry.

Branzy himself feels so guilty it makes him jittery.

But Vitalasy is great, and he keeps making jokes and laughing nonetheless, and Rek brightens up significantly with each second.

It feels odd, watching his two friends laugh and be happy, like it's an illusion that will soon shatter; a soap bubble you can never quite hold in your hands without breaking it.

There's a finality to the moment – it might be the last time in a long while they're all going to be so happy, so carefree, and it will all be Branzzy's fault.

He's standing on the precipice, one foot already in the open air, but if he dares to take a step back there's just another freefall awaiting him.

Is there even a right choice anymore?

He watches Rek's eyes, crinkled with joy, and the red, torn apart posters, the linoleum floor that used to be marred with a black scar and knows that there's no turning back anymore.

"So, are you guys coming?" Vitalasy asks, voice high with excitement.

Branzy blinks a few times, confused.

It's scary, how much his thoughts consume him nowadays – a whole conversation had just passed him by, and that feeling of finality turns to lead in his stomach.

Not talking to anyone for days messes you up, he supposes.

Rek, who must have noticed Branzy spacing out, offers a quick explanation; Vitalasy is throwing a party tonight, and they're invited!

His expectant smile makes Branzy squirm.

"You know... I don't really think I should—" he stammers quickly.

"And what if I told you Spoke will be there too?" Vitalasy asks, throwing Branzy a conspiratorial grin.

That makes Branzy pause. What better opportunity to get Spoke talking than a house party? Lots of alcohol, an environment where talking to strangers is normal...

He spares no thought to his eroding morals.

Vitalasy draws his own conclusions from Branzy's silence, smile turning sly. He gasps, all theatrical and filled with mock offense.

"Branzy! You should've just told me you like him!"

Let them think what they want, Branzy thinks, as long as it distracts them from the truth.

The shaky video loops in his brain, Parrot's raised voice and Spoke's empty account like cobwebs sticking to his mind.



The thing about house parties is that Branzy's never been to one.

He's not too fond of the idea of them, people packed into tight spaces, hot air and warm alcohol and nowhere to run.

Nowhere to run at all.

Rek's stories are embellished, he knows, to make him more susceptible to the idea – he says nothing about the fights Branzy knows broke out at Red's party this Saturday, but spins some tale about them playing Uno in the basement.

He doesn't mention that the police was called.

He does say that Branzy doesn't have to drink if he really doesn't want to.

Logically, Branzy knows Rek's just about as paranoid as he is; he has this weird tendency of checking every room, scouting out the fastest escape route, and for all that he goes to these parties, Branzy has never seen him drunk.

(Rek says he does it because he's watched too many spy movies. Branzy knows he's lying, but doesn't say anything.)

So, well, Branzy's knows Rek is scared of *something* too, but he at least has the courage to still go.

Branzy feels like more of a coward every second.

Rek's walking him home today, and though he's glad for the company, Branzy sort of wishes they'd talk about something else; but Rek is still regaling him with stories of what seems to be every party he's ever been to.

They all just make Branzy feel more queasy.

The worst thing is, he doesn't even know what exactly he's scared of – the people, the promise of alcohol, or just the fact that he knows that after today, he truly cannot go back anymore.

Whatever is going to happen today with Spoke, it's going to set something loose that Branzy won't be able to pull back in.

It feels like he's stumbling on every step that should be familiar on his way home, but Rek doesn't mention it.

Branzy knows he's watching him though, vigilant for a reason he can't decipher.

Desperate to break the tension, Branzy clears his throat.

"What *do* you even wear to a party?"

Rek tilts his head, considering.

"Nothing too over the top, it's not a night club. Just pick out a nice shirt, something that matches your eyes or whatever, put it on a pair of jeans and you're good."

A nice shirt. Branzy doesn't think he has anything that would qualify for that term.

Should he ask Rek...?

"Dude, don't worry. I'll drop off a shirt for you later. *I know* what your wardrobe looks like." Rek shudders at the memory, clearly deeply traumatised by having had to witness what Branzy calls decent clothes.

Branzy shoots him a grateful smile nonetheless. He wonders if after all this is over, Rek will still be able to call him his best friend.



Staring into the beast's maw, Branzy feels strangely calm.

There's light pouring out of the windows of Vitalasy's house, dividing his yarn into neat geometric shapes, and he feels the music more than he can hear it; and yet his legs do not shake as he makes his way towards the front door.

There's that saying about gift horses, and for the first time in his life Branzy feels inclined to believe it.

He's wearing one of Rek's shirts, a pretty lavender in colour, and a pair of black jeans with rips at the knees Branzy hopes he can pass off as intentional.

It's nothing special, which is exactly what he wanted.

Inside, the mass of people turns into gnashing teeth, little flecks of light like spit flying from an open mouth and Branzy, illuminated in all its fearsome glory, somehow doesn't hesitate to step inside.

He repeats *nothing special* in his mind until the words turn into quiet calmness.

The thing about house parties is that Branzy's never been to one, but he still had held certain expectations about what it was going to be like when he eventually *would* go.

This is not it.

It's unbearably warm with the heat of far too many kids in a far too small space, sweaty and reeking of alcohol, but it's almost quiet.

Not really, of course, because Branzy still has to steady himself against a wall and just let the beat rattle in his chest, but it's calm, quiet in atmosphere – most people are just standing around, talking, taking little sips of their drink.

He thinks about the principal's speech on responsibility after the last party that had gone awry, and the poor freshman with his broken nose.

Maybe appearances are deceitful.

Someone must take notice of his lost expression, because suddenly there's a drink in his hands – served in a red solo cup and all.

And Branzy thinks, well, he's probably going to need all the courage he can get, so he takes a steadying breath and downs the cup in one go.

Just to almost spit it out again immediately.

God that is *disgusting*, all sharp and burning in his throat; bizarrely, Branzy thinks of motor oil – thick and slimy and burning, always burning.

(Gasoline, a match, a pyre and ash. Over and over, the same dream. Glinting eyes in the darkness.)

His eyes are not reflected by the bottom of his glass because it's plastic, but his hands look clawed and dirty in the strange twilight, gripping his cup all white-knuckled and tight. It looks like there's soot under his nails, caked into his skin.

Somehow that feels like an admission of something Branzy cannot name.

Suddenly someone claps him on the back and Branzy whirls around, somehow convinced he would see–

Well. It's just Vitalasy, grinning cheekily.

"That's not your shirt." he says in lieu of a greeting.

"Wha– Huh? No, it's not...?" Branzy stammers, confused.

Vitalasy nods sagely, like that made total sense. His eyes glimmer in the light, mischievous, alive. Branzy swallows dryly.

"Right, come on! We're gonna play beer pong!"

Branzy doesn't get out another word before Vitalasy starts dragging him through the house, a labyrinth of colours and sounds – he catches parts of conversations, meaningless chatter, loud laughter, the steady rhythm of the song pulsating in his chest and feels *good*.

The realization almost knocks Branzy off his feet.

He feels good. He feels like he fits in.

Smiling at Vitalasy's back, Branzy lets himself be lead.

The basement is less crowded, but it's still just as hot.

Faintly, Branzy thinks his shirt must be sticking to his chest by now and self-consciously tugs at it a bit.

"Branzy!" someone cheers from across the room.

He raises his head and spots Rek, waving.

Branzy feels oddly relieved to see the same clear alertness in his eyes he always carries, the same tense posture.

There's comfort in knowing someone else is being watchful, is still staying rigid.

So with one last deep breath, Branzy lets himself go.

Vitalasy pushes him towards the table until Branzy can see there's someone else there, partially hidden behind Rek – a pair of dark, brown eyes meet his and Branzy knows, before anyone says anything at all, that that's Spoke.

All air leaves his lungs abruptly.

Branzy gasps into the sudden silence, looking at a boy he had to convince himself was real just a few hours before, into a pair of deep, glimmering, *alive* eyes and suddenly realizes he doesn't know what to do at all.

Any feeling of levity is long gone, and watching Spoke's chest rise and fall with each breath, Branzy's knees turn weak.

He's seriously about to do... *something* to an actual real person. Suddenly there's more to this boy than an empty Instagram page and some vague connection to Parrot; there's a whole layer of depth in the fact that Branzy has now met him outside of an online space.

"I'm Spoke." the boy says, voice quiet but meeting Branzy's gaze head-on, unafraid and stubborn.

I already knew that, Branzy thinks but fortunately still possess the mental capacity to not say out loud.

"Name's Branzy! Nice to meet you."

Vitalasy winks at him like he's in on a secret nobody else knows.

Branzy wonders if he would've still led Spoke here if he knew what Branzy was *really* up to.

They eventually split into two teams – Rek and Branzy versus Spoke and Vitalasy.

All Branzy can hope now is that Spoke is both a very bad shot and an enormous lightweight.

An opening presents itself after round four.

Branzy almost wants to sigh in relief – Spoke, it seems, is an outstanding shot, and at this point in the game he can pretty confidently say that *none* of them are lightweights.

Still, as Vitalasy is arranging the cups again Spoke stumbles away from the table, muttering something about having to lie down.

And then, Branzy watches Spoke's phone fall out of his pocket. Time almost seems to slow down.

This is his chance.

"I'm gonna go check on him!" Branzy calls.

Alright. Kneeling down in front of the couch, Branzy grabs the phone as quickly as possible and shoves it into his back pocket. He takes a swift look around, but no one is watching.

To his credit, he actually does check on Spoke, but the boy seems to be fine; a little drunk, but responsive enough for Branzy to feel he'll be okay after some rest and a glass of water.

With two phones in his pocket, Branzy makes his way to the bathroom.



One of the last things Branzy ever coded before he quit was a simple trojan.

Back then, he hadn't even really known why he'd done it – it was a challenge, a feat for coders much older and experienced than him, but he had done it.

It was disguised as a simple YouTube link, and if actually clicked granted complete access to the victim's phone or computer; there's no more reliable way into the safe of someone's data.

But back then, Branzy had never used it; whether out of fear or respect, his creation laid dormant in some folder on his PC, dangerous yet docile.

Today, it will be coaxed out of its cage for the first time.

The disguised link sits in his e-mail, inconspicuous and harmless yet.

Still, Branzy's hands shake as he copies it and opens Instagram.

His plan is faulty at best, but this might be his only chance to find out some sort of truth – about Spoke and Parrot, or himself.

If he ever could've called himself a good person, he would chicken out now, let Clown post the video they already had and be done with it.

But Branzy has to know. He has to.

So he sends a message to Spoke's account from one of his countless burners, containing only the link.

A second passes, and he watches the other phone light up at the message. Branzy resolutely does not think about Chief at all.

He *doesn't* .

Spoke's phone isn't even password protected, which sort of makes Branzy feel less terrible about the whole thing – the guy is really making this horribly easy for him.

Parrot's actually online when Branzy's finally logged in to Spoke's account.

He doesn't know if that's a good thing, though. Less opportunity to pull back.

But it's too late for that already, isn't it?

Branzy thinks of Clown's unwavering gaze, the way his fingers had tightened on Branzy's throat, and smells ash.

He knows it's too late for doubts now.

He's known for the past week already.

That doesn't make it better.

Before he can make up his mind otherwise, he copies his own message and sends it to Parrot.

Then, for good measure, he clicks on the link on Spoke's account too.

Who knows, maybe next week someone will want him knocked down a peg and it'll prove useful to have access to his phone.

Branzy feels vaguely sick at the thought. He'll have to do this again and again, until either Clown's satisfied or he cracks, and sure, it's fine now because he doesn't like Parrot, but what if tomorrow he'll wake up and see Rek on his list of targets?

If it comes down to it, will he protect his friends or himself?

The worst part is that Branzy cannot answer that question.

It dimly registers in his mind that Parrot has read the message and probably clicked the link already.

Quickly, he gets to work deleting the chatlogs between his burner and Spoke's account, as well as the message he sent to Parrot. It's not his best work, but he can always tidy it up later.

For now, it just has to *look* like nothing happened. He'll get to erasing the actual data once he's back on his computer.

On his way down to the basement, Branzy sort of feels like a trojan himself; an invader, unwanted and unknown, hidden by his own deceitfully harmless appearance.

He feels dirty.



No one makes much of a fuss when Branzy says he's going to leave.

Saying he feels sick is not even really a lie, because there's bile rising high in his throat and an ache in his bones, deep and intrinsic.

Vitalasy says that he probably had too much to drink.

Branzy nods along but knows, deep down, that it's the guilt making him shiver and retch. He knows he probably deserves it, too.

Rek offers to walk him home, but Branzy declines and doesn't even really know *why* .

Whatever.

Spoke's phone is deposited back into his lap on the way out, and if Branzy stumbles into the door frame, well, doesn't that make his whole act more believable?

(It is an act. Branzy's a liar, and he's just acting. The world spins around him, and everything is like chalk in the rain, but it's not real. The vertigo of a free fall taunts from the back of his mind.)

He just has to make it home.

He just has to make it home and get on his computer, and then he'll feel better.

Somehow, he doesn't stumble once on his way home.

(It feels like his fate has been cemented.)

Booting up his computer feels like a homecoming, sweet and simple, and all the terror of the real world falls away to the simplicity of the digital space Branzy knows so well.

He feels safe.

It doesn't take much time until he's faced with Parrot's desktop – a simple thing, default background and sparse information.

Parrot plays some video games, apparently, and he's saved some photos on his desktop, of himself and Spoke and some other friends, of family trips and anything else one could think of.

His two most visited sites are YouTube and Twitter.

Superficially, it seems ordinary, but Branzy has learned to never trust anything that seems normal, so he begins to sift through Parrot's other folders.

He snickers quietly. Parrot has an honest to god *homework* folder.

Branzy clicks on it, still giggling. Oh, this is going to *be* so good.

Or not? There are five word documents in there, all looking like they might be actual homework – Branzy clicks on one titled '*English essay ver 2*' and thinks, worst case scenario, he's gonna see an actual essay and be bored to death.

What he actually sees is much worse.

The document loads in slowly, and the blindingly white screen clears like a foggy mirror to show a list of names.

Some are crossed out already – Branzy recognizes Roshambo as one of them dimly before the panic sets in.

This is a hit list. Parrot has made an actual hit list.

His eyes fly over the names, desperate, recognizing Rek and Vitalasy and Clown, Red and Ash and Spoke, hundreds of names and thousands of possibilities, each one of them more and more brutal.

Branzy thinks of Roshambo's twisted ankle and wonders, is Parrot going to stop there?

He needs to know more.

The next document, titled *Geography assignment volcanoes* is a mammoth in length, ten pages of text without any paragraph breaks.

Branzy reads the words *empire*, *rebuild* and *decimation* before he knows that this is a manifesto, and whatever he has stumbled in on is much bigger than his own feud with Parrot.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Branzy registers that he's shaking.

There's something horrible at work here, something threatening to hurt his friends, to hurt Clown in a way Branzy can't quite understand but everytime he tries to continue reading the words swim in front of his eyes.

For the first time in forever, Branzy feels powerless in front of his computer screen.

He's scared. God, he's scared, Rek's in danger and he can't even fucking read the goddamn thing, can't even warn him without upsetting Clown and whatever fragile trust they have.

It's all bullshit. Branzy feels tears well up in his eyes.

He can't save Rek. He can't save Vitalasy.

But Clown, he could–

Before Branzy's even finished the thought, he has fished his phone out of his pocket and dialed Clown's number.

As it rings, Branzy notices his breath coming shorter, mind racing and palms sweating.

He tries to tell himself that he's just had too much to drink.

When Clown picks up, Branzy pushes out a breath, and it comes out as a high whine.

" *Branzy?* " Clown's voice crackles through the speaker, incredulous.

"Clown," he gasps, "Clown I— it's Parrot, he—"

But what is he going to say?

It's a weak point, a goddamn weak point, something Branzy never knew he even *had* , but he cannot push Rek into the spotlight, he can't make Clown focus on him.

It's Rek, his best friend, and he's already so scared of something Branzy doesn't know, he simply cannot do that to him.

He *can't* .

But this, whatever this is, goes deeper than Branzy or Rek or Clown, deeper than the burn scars etched into everyone's mind, and Branzy is—

Fuck, he's terrified.

He's terrified of Clown and Parrot, or Zam, or whoever is planning this, he's—

He can't breathe.

There's tears in his eyes and he's shaking and he can't breathe and Clown's saying something, but it doesn't come through and Branzy wants to—

" *Branzy. Where are you?* " Clown's voice is harsh and loud through the speaker, ruthless.

Branzy thinks of flames, flames and flames and a fire so high it consumes the world and Clown's grey eyes, like soot in the darkness, and he thinks he must be choking on the ash still, on the smoke and smell of burnt flesh.

" *Branzy!* " Clown hisses.

"At home, I'm at home..." Branzy chokes, on spit or tears or bile, and he rests his head on his knees and pretends like he isn't suffocating.

Clown doesn't say anything for a long while, but he also doesn't hang up.

Branzy doesn't know what to make of it, because he's still crying and his breath hitches and he's shaking, shaking until it feels like his skin will come off and Clown's just silent down the line,

breath even.

He only realizes what's going on when someone rings on the doorbell.

When Branzy opens the door and sees Clown, he feels so relieved his knees give out.

Clown catches him and they sink to the ground; Branzy just leans forward until his forehead is resting on Clown's shoulder, and feels so tired his entire body aches.

He can't stop shaking. Clown's here, and Branzy can't stop shaking and he's still crying and Clown must know, he must know by now that Branzy's trying to hide something from him and–

"Branzy. You need to breathe, alright? Take a few deep breaths and tell me what's going on," his voice is quiet, barely above a whisper and his breath ghosts over the top of Branzy's head, warm and comforting.

Branzy does as he's told and tries to take deep breaths. They rattle in his chest, and he coughs.

"It's–," Branzy starts, suddenly unsure. He can't tell Clown everything. He can't tell him about Rek or Vitalasy or that fear in his chest, primal and terrific. "Parrot. It's Parrot, I found something. Clown, fuck, there's so much more to this, he has this list of names and this goddamn... *manifesto* and– Clown, you're on it. They're planning something and they're out to get you."

Something in Clown's eyes darkens, and he tightens his hold on Branzy's shoulder.

His touch burns on Branzy's skin.

"Good," he says quietly, and then again louder. "Good. Let them come. Let them *try*. They're gonna fucking regret it."

Branzy tries to bite back tears, but it just won't work and he feels pathetic, crying on Clown's shoulder like some sort of... frail idiot who can't even take some stupid highschool drama!

But Clown just holds him a little tighter, and there's something in it, something unspoken, but Branzy does not notice, and Clown says nothing of it.

"Just post the stupid video," Branzy whispers into Clown's shoulder when he's stopped shaking, face red with embarrassment, "So we can be done with this."

"Sure," Clown replies, "If that's what you want."

But Branzzy can only wonder if what he wants actually still matters.



Their website blows up over night, and the next day it seems like the whole school has seen the video.

People talk about it in the halls, on social media; their website is flooded with bets and posts, and Branzzy feels, alternating, like a new god and like a traitor.

He doesn't know which scares him more; that tearing someone else down has somehow made him stronger, or that he's ruined Parrot's life for also just being a victim.

In the end he's saved himself, like he has always done, and assures himself Parrot can take it.

But then, two days after the post, Parrot stops coming to school

Chapter End Notes

branzzy in the bathroom at a party... /ref

but. Here's chapter three! (finally!)

i wrote this exclusively while on vacation which is why this chapter took a lot of revision – the og draft was full of ocean metaphors. They were Everywhere. i had to write them all out. It was Horrific.

also the house party scene was supposed to go so much differently but i didn't want it to be too dramatic,, have u guys ever been to a house party? the way i described it here is my experience w/ them but,, maybe it's different in the us idk...

but there's a new character too!! welcome spoke :D

btw guys parrot is getting the absolute favoritism treatment rn bc his vids were the last i watched before going on vacation where i had no wifi so.... i was rotating him in my mind....

felt like things were moving a bit fast between branzzy and clown too but then i blamed branzzy's actions on the alcohol and thought. Fuck It.

stalemate

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

This is a dream.

Branzy knows, because he's dreamt it before.

He's standing on a beach, white and blurry with unrealness, and the world is shimmering and bright.

Branzy is alone.

Branzy is alone, and the waves pull apart at his feet, one singular spot of dry earth, and he stares into the waves, white peaks and shiny sapphire blue, content in a way he never quite remembers by the end of it.

The ocean pulls back all at once, hundreds of meters of sand laid bare and out in the distance, a wave starts towering ever higher.

Most people wake up when their dreams turn to visions of death.

Branzy does not.

He remembers the pull of the ocean, how the tide drags him out and down, water in his lungs and agony.

(But for a single second, sinking below the waves, the light catches on top of them just so, and he feels calm again.

That he never remembers.)



Branzy gasps awake, still trying to spit out the water from his lungs.

For a second he's blinded by a glowing white light, and then the world goes into focus again, and he realizes he's staring at his computer screen.

He fell asleep at his desk again.

This is just as familiar as that dream, in a way that makes Branzy feel weary; working on the website is a full time job at this point, and okay, maybe he's not as good at coding websites as he thought, but at some point the thing should've started running itself, right?

The thing is, Branzy hadn't expected it to blow up quite that quickly, and the website absolutely could not handle the traction it is getting.

It was laggy, crashed so often it almost made Branzy cry and was generally... lacking.

If Clown notices, he doesn't mention it.

And nevertheless, people keep using it.

Sometimes, though he never says it to the other's face, Branzy wonders if this is truly what Clown wanted when he approached him that day in front of the school – because for all his talk of justice, the website seems to have become the exact opposite.

It's an extension of highschool drama, a way for people to tear each other apart for the most petty reasons, to pick on anyone they don't like without repercussions.

It has, in a way, become the very thing Branzy had sworn to fight against, that day it was first brought into being.

But it's too late to leave now, isn't it?

So Branzy spends his evenings and nights moderating the website, deleting posts that are just plain bullying, looking if there's anything at all relevant in the masses of junk.

(He doesn't even know if he does it for his own sense of morality, or to leave Clown in the illusion that their plan is working. As if the guy needs to be shielded. Hah.)

And that's how Branzy comes face to face with his two next targets; there's two bets placed only minutes apart, both deemed guilty.

The names *Ash* and *Red* float on the screen, weightless in nonexistence.



Clown comes by a lot, nowadays.

Branzy has the feeling he actually really scared him, in some way, with that phone call.

He doesn't want to think about who it might've reminded Clown of.

Once upon a time, Branzy would've called these visits awkward, but somehow, they're decidedly not.

Even when they don't talk, there's an easy companionship there, something light and sweet in not having to be alone, in the presence of someone else in a place that is largely empty.

Branzy learns a lot about Clown during these days. Most of it inconsequential, but some of it devastating in a way he could've never expected; who knew one day Branzy would sit at his kitchen table, pitying a boy he had spent years being afraid of?

Clown is very alone, is the thing.

One some level Branzy already knew that. But facing the reality of it every other day makes it

different, somehow.

Like he has only just realized that Clown maybe didn't choose to be by himself all the time, and his truly impressive reputation was more at fault – everyone's afraid of him, in some way, and the rumors that creates must be isolating.

Are isolating.

Which is why Clown sits on Branzzy's couch every other day, mostly doing nothing, sometimes watching Branzzy do his homework or fiddling around with his phone.

He's actually very quiet.

So quiet, in fact, that on one memorable occasion Branzzy forgot he was there at all, and got his insightful monologue about how stupid math homework is interrupted by Clown laughing. It was the first time he had heard Clown laugh like that, open and without reservation, somehow so very vulnerable in that moment, looking at Branzzy with such unbridled joy.

(And somehow, Branzzy could tell that he was smiling under his mask too, long after the moment had passed, bright and happy.)

So. Calling them friends might be a little presumptuous, but Clown is there for him in a way Rek can't be, because Rek doesn't know.

Clown makes him feel like they're doing the right thing, still.

Branzy recognizes that's dangerous, the enabling or whatever, but is it bad to want someone to be there for you, to tell you that this is the right decision to make?

There's a line in the sand neither of them dare to cross, but since that night, Branzzy's head on Clown's shoulder, since then Branzzy has felt strange. Uprooted, in a way he can't describe, like something in him has changed that cannot be reversed.

Like he's a different person than he was before.

And yet he still wants Clown to stay.

So when Branzzy finally gathers enough courage to ask, Clown is sitting at the kitchen table, one leg up against it and the other bouncing underneath it, watching Branzzy struggle with an English essay.

"What do you know about Red?" he blurts out, still staring very intently at the page in front of him. It's entirely empty. Maybe if Branzzy keeps staring the words will just appear?

Clown stops fidgeting entirely at once.

Branzy's eyes immediately snap up, some primal instinct to the alarm bells ringing in his head, to every cell screaming *danger!*

Clown's eyes, dark and heavy like a storm cloud are fixed on Branzy, too, and though his face is still obscured by his mask, Branzy can tell he isn't happy.

"What do you want with him?"

Friends, Branzy tells himself, *We're friends*. And even though Clown's eyes are sharp and his voice low and threatening, he wills himself not to falter.

"It's— uhm. A bet. Red and Ash. I figured I'd ask you before, y'know..." Branzy trails off awkwardly, still caught in the strange tension, in Clown's dark gaze.

There are a few moments of silence.

Then Clown averts his eyes and just shrugs, a little helplessly.

Somehow he still manages to look so very lost in Branzy's kitchen, much smaller and contained than in school; like a lion behind bars at a zoo, dangerous and deadly but domesticated, or a thunderstorm miles away, rain and thunder without lightning.

Like he doesn't quite belong there.

Branzy pushes that thought away very quickly.

"I don't like him," Clown replies darkly, "And I don't know anything about him."

Who would've thought! Branzy thinks to himself quietly, *After that reaction I was sure you guys were best friends!*

But he doesn't say anything, aimlessly scribbling on the paper before him, watching Clown on the other side of the table, deadly still like a predator lying in wait.

He relaxes a fraction after a few minutes of silence, shoulders dropping and leg starting to bounce again – Branzy, oddly, feels marginally better then, too. There's something *off* about seeing Clown so still, statuesque and frozen in place, like he always should be moving in some way.

Clown eyes the table.

And if Branzy didn't know better, he'd say Clown almost looked remorseful then, hunched and eyes downcast, guilty of something Branzy doesn't understand. Or maybe just embarrassed about his outburst?

But at this point, Branzy knows better.

So he doesn't say anything, either.



(Rek does not wait for Branzly by his locker anymore.

Branzly pretends he doesn't notice, but his absence aches like an old wound.

Something is wrong.)



Red is kind of an asshole.

That's probably the general consensus for anyone that insists on wearing a suit to school, but Red wears his paired with sunglasses of all things. It's not even ironic.

If he weren't insanely rich, Branzly thinks, Red would've been bullied to hell and back for it, but as it stands, Red's the most wealthy kid in school.

Old money, apparently.

A few years back there was a rumor that he was related to some royal family from Europe – it was never disproven, but generally disregarded due to its ridiculousness.

The more popular explanation for his seemingly unending wealth was some sort of family connection to the mafia.

Red never bothered to discredit that rumor either.

So people keep talking, keep speculating, keep pushing Red into the spotlight of their own little stories, make him something larger than life – everyone knows of him, but nobody *knows* him, really.

It's a genius strategy.

He's popular not by virtue of anything he did, but because of the mystery of his life.

He has no image to uphold. He doesn't even have to do anything.

The people just keep talking, and Red keeps smiling mysteriously from under his sunglasses when the rumors get especially strange, only one corner of his mouth quirked up in a way that could signify agreement or derision, and no one can quite figure out which.

There's only one crack in the perfect facade of mystery.

Ash.

Nobody knows anything about Ash, except for the fact that Red can't stand him.

Nobody knows *why* exactly that is, either.

Because Ash is completely ordinary in a way that's sort of unsettling.

He passes all of his classes, neither particularly good nor bad, participates in no clubs and as far as anyone can tell, doesn't have any real friends.

He goes to school and then he leaves again, day in and day out, and there's nothing special about him.

Except for his truly spectacular fights with Red, of course.

Calling them fights might just not give them enough credit, either.

It's pure warfare.

At the height of it, Ash managed to steal all of Red's school supplies and set them on fire in the school's parking lot.

In return, Red gifted Ash exact replicas of everything that was burned. Twice.

And so it went on and on, and the whole school was caught in the crossfire.

At some point nobody knew if they truly hated each other or if that was just a convoluted way of showing their friendship.

They're a package deal, either way.

Approaching Red is, of course, out of the question. His only hope is Ash, and that guy is sort of... notoriously hard to find.

He can't ask Vitalasy again.

(He can't ask Rek, either.)

Imagine his surprise that it is Ash who approaches him first.



It's become a habit to keep his hood up in the halls these days.

A change has taken root there too, parasitic and horrible, the sort that will kill the host inevitably; it's very quiet, now.

People are afraid to talk or even show their faces, really, because someone will always have their

phone in hand, ready to destroy whoever's life they see fit with one simple click of the button.

Branzy's wonderful, horrific creation tears through the school like wet paper.

But if he keeps watching his feet while walking through the halls, he can almost pretend nothing's changed at all.

He likes the quiet anyway.

And though he hasn't seen Rek in a good few days, he still keeps careful track of all the things he wants to tell him.

Starting, maybe, with *I'm sorry* and ending with *Be careful, please* – Branzy is not above pleading to get his best friend back, and he's tired of pretending he doesn't notice the empty space next to him.

He's tired of pretending he doesn't know Rek's avoiding him.

So when a pair of light footsteps start to fall in with his own, the apology almost reflexively slips out, stillborn in the emptiness of the halls.

But it's not Rek at all.

"Hello, Branzy."

Branzy's eyes snap up.

Next to him, grinning broadly, is Ash.

"I'm– Ash? What?"

Ash just grins a little wider, his wide eyes glinting oddly under the fluorescent lights; for a second, he looks like he's not really there at all, just a smear of colour in the grey hallway, and then Branzy blinks and the illusion shatters.

"You were looking for me. Isn't that right?" Ash asks, with the confidence of someone who *knows* they're right.

Branzy has half a mind to say no, but Ash gives him a sharp look.

"Do you think I'm stupid, Branzy?" Ash mutters, stepping ever so slightly closer, "Do you think I don't know what you're up to?"

"Uhm. What *am* I up to?" Branzy stammers, quickly trying to take another step back but his back hits someone's locker way too soon, and Ash is still grinning.

His teeth look yellow in the light.

"Do you think you have any power here?"

Some dark, twisted part of Branzy wants to say *yes, yes* like a chant of victory, yes, he finally has power, he remade the very essence of this school, harold of an age of fear – he remembers the first few days after posting the video, the awed hush that had befallen the school, how it had felt to know that this all was his doing, like liquid lightning in his veins.

And then reality comes back to him, and it is quiet.

He hasn't seen Rek in five days.

No one has seen Parrot for almost two weeks.

(And it's all Branzy's fault.)

"No," he answers meekly, "No I don't."

If possible, the glint in Ash's eyes gets even more predatory.

"That's right!" he drawls, "You don't. So let me tell you something, Branzy. Word of advice."

He steps even closer. Branzy can see little flecks of gold in Ash's dark eyes, alight with some wicked joy.

"I know what you're doing with that website," he stage whispers, "And you have no clue what you just stumbled in on. This is bigger than you could ever imagine, and if you want to make it through, keep your head down. You don't *want* to play this game."

Branzy squeezes his eyes shut, hit with a sudden nausea.

If Ash has him figured out then this whole thing is over, and Clown won't need him anymore and he knows excruciatingly well what that means.

"How– uh, I mean, how did you know it was me...?"

Ash grins a little wider, all sharp teeth and empty eyes.

"I didn't, but you just confirmed it for me! It was honestly just a hunch. A well educated one, of course. I have my sources," he says, spreading his arms, a gesture of sharp grandeur, "I placed those two bets, Red and Ash. You know how it is! I wanted to see how long it would take. And here you are, barely a day later, looking for me!"

Branzy swallows dryly.

His breathing is starting to pick up again, and he starts counting in his head, trying to drown out the staccato beat of his heart in his throat.

Ash must notice, because he takes a step back and raises his hands, like he's trying to calm a frightened animal.

"Relax, man! This stays between us. I have a feeling we'll find ourselves on the same side in the end, anyway."

Branzy gathers the last of his courage and wills his legs to stop shaking.

"And... Red? Does he also..." Branzy swallows, "Does he also know?"

Ash just cackles incredulously.

"Red? Are you serious? Red doesn't know *shit*. Hell, I'll take you to go talk to him if that's what you want, but don't expect much from *that* conversation." Ash rolls his eyes, but he's still smiling slightly, like he's telling a joke Branzy just doesn't understand.

And at this point, Branzy sure he doesn't understand anything.

But what does he have to lose either way? Ash already knows, and someone else must too, if his mysterious sources are actually real, so Branzy squares his shoulders and follows Ash, like a lamb led to slaughter.



Branzy has gone to this school since he was twelve years old, and yet the hallways Ash leads him down do not look familiar.

Maybe it's just the emptiness that makes them strange, the remnants of torn up posters on the wall and the echoing of their footsteps, like drumming coming from the earth.

Anyone could hear them coming, Branzy thinks inanely, and no one would be there to see what would happen.

He doesn't know what he's scared of.

(And he thinks of Rek, checking the exits of any room, flighty and without trust. And he thinks that maybe, Rek has a point.)

Ash suddenly stops.

He rattles the doorknob of a classroom, but it's locked.

He sighs deeply, banging on the door twice.

"Red! Open up!"

A chair scrapes against the floor inside, and light footsteps make their way towards the door. With a *thump!* the person leans against it.

"And what do I get out of it?" Red asks, muffled through the door.

Ash snarls, and slams himself against the door. It rattles on its hinges, but doesn't open.

Branzy thinks he can hear Red laughing inside, low and muffled but clearly amused by Ash's peril.

He *is* kind of an asshole.

"Open the damn door!" Ash yells. Red just starts laughing louder.

Ash shrugs, a motion that seems entirely too joyful for the situation, like he was looking forward to this outcome.

He fishes something out of his pocket and jams it into the lock, fiddling around with it for a few

minutes; Branzy tries to get closer and get a good look, but Ash just glares at him until he backs off.

And then the door cracks open.

Red sighs, like a mother who caught her kid with their hands in the cookie jar, and opens it a little wider.

Ash saunters inside, vaguely motioning for Branzy to follow.

What greets him is an empty classroom, all the tables moved into the middle of it, creating a platform with one chair at the head – someone has thrown their jacket over it, but otherwise the room is entirely empty.

Lifeless.

Red doesn't even glance at Branzy once.

As soon as Ash is inside, he turns back towards the whiteboard on the wall, scribbling something unintelligible.

Ash throws a pen at his head.

When he whirls around, Ash gives him a toothy grin, and just points at Branzy.

"I brought you something! He wanted to talk to you."

Red spins around to look at Branzy for the first time.

His shades are coal black in the light, and Branzy cannot even catch a glimpse of his eyes.

And now, face to face with Red, Branzy doesn't even know what to make of him.

Every single rumour he's ever heard is clamouring for attention, telling him to watch out for something he doesn't even truly know, and he wishes, just for a second, that Clown were here.

And then Branzy pretends to never have thought that at all.

But Red's so different from the image formed in Branzy's mind; he's tall, for one, towering over Branzy with his unreadable face, shades and dark red streaks in his otherwise brown hair, and he carries himself with such casual arrogance that Branzy almost lowers his eyes on instinct.

That guy's definitely an asshole.

The silence carries on for much too long.

Red raises one eyebrow over the rim of his sunglasses.

"I- Uhm. I wanted to ask-" Branzzy starts, but Red shushes him quickly.

"You're not gettin' my number, kid."

Branzy just gapes at him for a second, stunned.

"That's not at all what I was going to ask about!" he yells, suddenly feeling very offended.

Why does everyone think of Branzzy as some swooning maiden? This is serious, damnit!

"Alright, relax. What do you wanna know?"

Branzy pauses, suddenly thrown off.

He can't very well ask Red about Ash or himself without arousing suspicion, and at this point he doesn't even think he'll try and look into them much anyway, now that it's clear it was Ash himself that placed those bets.

To lead Branzzy here.

This is a one time chance, and Branzzy doesn't know what to ask.

"What happened to Parrot? After the... video was posted, I mean." Branzzy adds quickly.

Ash and Red share a silent glance, communicating something Branzzy's not privy to, a fight without words, a war without weapons.

It's over in a second.

"Dunno, man. I heard somethin' about a police investigation? Might not be the truth, though." Red says, glancing back at his whiteboard quickly, "Hey, d'you wanna do me a favour?"

A police investigation?

Branzy shudders, suddenly feeling much too cold for a late September day, as if all the warmth had left the room with Red's words, swallowed into nothingness.

If they checked his computer carefully enough, they'd find evidence of Branzzy's operation, wouldn't they?

He really doesn't want to go to juvie.

Branzy thinks of Parrot, facing assault charges for a crime he may not even have wanted to commit, and he knows it'll be all his fault, ruining someone's life for no other reason than to save his own.

It's disgusting, how much he had felt like he was doing the right thing, on some messed up power trip that only led to more ruin.

All for Clown. All for a vision of fire.

All to save his own skin.

This is the same.

He agrees to do Red a favour, all because he's scared of what will happen if he doesn't.

Ash is right. He doesn't have power, and he probably never will, regardless of the website or Clown or anyone else.

Branzy's doomed himself to only be powerful in front of a screen, and that will be the end of him.

Red digs through his pockets for a while, before handing Branzy a crumpled five hundred dollar bill.

"Great, man, thanks! Just head to the vending machine in the cafeteria and buy everythin'. Bring it back here when you're done, and keep the change, it's whatever."

And that's when Branzy catches a glimpse of the words on the whiteboard for the first time since he entered the room.

It's a list of prices, ranging from snacks to drinks to... toys?

He reads *Snickers (small)* 3,50\$ before Red pushes him out of the door, back into the hallway.

(Branzy does as he's told. He finds a bitter irony in it. Clown's words, *If that's what you want*, ring in his head like a haunting chorus. What does he *want*?)

He does eventually make it back to the classroom, pockets and backpack stuffed with candy and still some money left over.

Honestly, Branzy's hoping Red was serious about him keeping the change, because it's sort of a lot.

Red opens the door for him with a previously unknown enthusiasm – Branzy thinks that if he weren't wearing shades, he'd be able to see Red's eyes lighting up.

The candy he empties out all over the table seems to increase the excitement even more.

Red claps him on the back, appreciative.

"You're a good kid, Brams!"

"His name's Branzy," Ash calls from his chair, feet on the table and scrolling on his phone.

Red just makes a vague gesture with his hand, something that Branzy translates to *what does it matter?* in his mind.

"You're a good kid *Branzy*. Y'know what, take this," Red fishes something else out of his pocket, "Ash and I were gonna go but then he threw a pencil at my head, and I just don't think he deserves the privilege anymore."

Red hands him two tickets, slightly crumpled from being kept in his pocket for too long, for a concert Branzy didn't even know was scheduled to happen.

It's *VIP*, of course.

Once again, he wonders what kind of person Red could be, to give something like this away without a thought.

He wants to thank him, but Red has already begun sorting through the candy, organizing it into neat little stacks.

"I told you to not expect too much from this conversation, didn't I?" Ash asks, suddenly right behind Branzy.

It's through sheer will and exposure to Clown that Branzy doesn't flinch.

"Well. I mean yeah but... I learned that you and Red are working together on... whatever this is, I guess." Branzy answers quietly, hoping Red won't hear.

"What?" Ash laughs, "Me and Red? Working together? Are you *crazy*? Do you know why his little operation has to relocate every two days? It's cuz I keep reporting Red to the headmaster. In fact, in about five minutes, the teachers should be here. Start running!"

And with that Ash is off, and Branzy just cannot stop himself.

He starts laughing, sort of breathlessly, because this has to be the most ridiculous day of his life!

He just got threatened, subsequently roped into an elaborate scam, almost got caught and still didn't figure out anything useful.

The sharp, clacking footsteps of someone out in the hallway interrupt him, and Branzy remembers Ash's warning. He doesn't stick around to see if Red tries to get away too.

Instead, he just starts running, and fights to keep a smile off his face.



hey

u free friday night?

Why?

got tickets 2 a concert

wanna come?

u have to drive though

Sure.



The old concert venue is about an hour drive away, somewhere in the forested area between their little town and the next big city, situated by one of the many lakes left over by the gravel mining of past years.

It's supposed to be a beautiful spot.

Branzy's never been, but he can picture it easily in his mind, lights and fireworks reflected on the calm waters of the pond, an impressionistic painting in the calm waves; the music fading out into the open air, drifting off into the dark night sky like smoke.

He knows he's romanticizing it, probably, but it's just so *easy*, because for the first time in weeks, it feels like he's normal.

Like he's an ordinary teenager, looking forward to a concert, a nervous buzz not caused by guilt or fear or anything else, but sheer excitement.

Branzy just wants to pretend for a little while that everything's okay.

(Ash's words, *This is bigger than you could ever imagine*, taunt him from every shadow, every moment of silence, a constant reminder that normality is yet so very far away.)

Branzy's relieved to see Clown's car turn into his street, then.

It's much easier to think when it's quiet, and for now, Branzy just wants to go on pretending.

He tells Clown to turn up the radio and screams along to every song he recognizes on the way.

Clown doesn't quite join in, but sometimes Branzy thinks he can hear him humming under his breath, and that makes him ecstatic in a way he can't place, feather light and warm.

They make it to the venue just as the sun starts setting, all red and golden on the horizon, the water of the lake like fire caught in a mirror, mesmerising but harmless, leaves gilded like a picture frame.

Because Red is a rich asshole, they get to stand in the front row – Branzy thinks he hears a girl call it the *golden square*, and just wants to laugh.

Clown doesn't really say anything, just little replies to Branzy's quips, but he stands very close and bumps their shoulders sometimes, and Branzy feels... well, maybe not happy, but content.

He's here, right now, and he doesn't have to think about anything but *this*, this moment, the rest of the world fading away into the darkness of the forest.

When it's finally fully dark and all Branzy can see of Clown is the white of his eyes, the vague shape of his body like a mirage, wavering and shapeless, the band finally gets on stage.

And then the world explodes into colour.

It's light, light everywhere, a million colours and fractals and all of it shifting across faces and bodies and trees, creating shadows like deep ravines across the field, and Branzy has never seen anything quite this beautiful.

The venue comes alive with such sudden ferocity; a crash of voices and music and brightness, like the was world unmade and reborn in them, hands raised towards the sky, catching light.

He cannot see the stars anymore, but that's fine.

Because Branzy can see a thousand faces lit with the same wonder as his own, unified in their excitement, in chanting the same words, moving to the same rhythm.

His eyes drift to Clown almost reflexively.

And then it's like the world stops turning again, like the sharp intake of breath before pushing your

head underwater, like the moment before a confession.

Everything is like a dream but in sharp focus, and Branzy wishes he'd never have to leave this moment, Clown beside him and a crowd of people unified in flashing technicolor.

He feels so full of something he cannot name, a contentment running so deep even his bones feel warm, a serendipity found somewhere he could've never expected.

The lights glow in Clown's eyes, a microcosm of colour and brilliance, the entire light show somehow captured in their darkness, flashing and bright and so very alive – *radiance* comes to mind, a word like a feeling of warmth, an infinity in itself, and for a second, Branzy wants to reach out and–

There is no use in lying to himself anymore, is there?

September is coming to a close and Branzy's lived through the most confusing weeks of his life, and all that fear and hurt has come back around and made a home in his chest, and his heart knows what it's longing for.

Branzy wants to reach out and kiss Clown very desperately.

Instead, he just rests his forehead on Clown's shoulder like back then, on the floor of his house, full of desperation and longing and confusion.

Branzy repeats the words *I think I'm in love with you* in his mind until they ingrain themselves into his very soul.

He does not say anything, and the music washes over them like a towering wave, and Clown is still throughout it all, and Branzy clings onto him, every one of his thoughts like fireworks, all manic brightness, all rabid and quick.

Branzy can't sing along because he doesn't even know the band, but sometimes he catches Clown mutter a few lines of text, and feels stupidly light headed.

Watching Clown, dark hair catching the edges of light and eyes open so wide in wonder, Branzy feels weightless, floating, like suddenly all can be okay again.

God, he's in love.

And maybe it's stupid, but sometimes Branzy thinks he catches Clown looking at him too, and it all seems a little brighter, then.

It's over far quicker than Branzy would've liked, and Clown pushes him through the crowd, back towards the exit.

They wait for a while, watching people filter out, all still a little starry-eyed and breathless, all carrying a bit of light in their chest.

Branzy wonders how he must look, cheeks flushed and confetti in his hair, and he wonders if Clown can tell that some of the breathlessness stems from him, and not just the atmosphere.

The forest has gotten very quiet again.

Branzy makes a move to leave, but Clown grabs his wrist.

Lightly, this time, and Branzy thinks he could break free if he tried – somehow, that changes a lot.

Clown looks faintly embarrassed, something Branzy hadn't been able to tell just a few weeks ago.

He stops, and turns to face Clown again.

"I just need you to know," Clown starts, and his voice is much softer than Branzy's ever heard it be, "That I appreciate what you're doing for me. I mean– Yeah. Thank you."

And Branzy thinks *oh*, like a puzzle piece slotting into place, and he knows he shouldn't feel so thrilled because truly, Clown does not know what he's lost for his project, but the sky is so bright with stars and Clown looks so vulnerable in the darkness, so different from the boy he had met that day in front of the school, that Branzy wonders just who Clown really is.

Because there's still that divide in his mind, between Clown, who had held him and told him everything was going to be alright, and Clown who had dug his fingers into Branzy's bruises as a sharp reminder of his duty.

But well, things are changing so fast and maybe it isn't the best idea to trust your emotions when they switch so rapidly, but Clown has done a lot for him, and he's still a scary guy, but Branzy has seen what he looks like half asleep on the couch or laughing so hard it leaves him breathless.

He's leaned on him and felt so *safe*.

Everything Branzy thought he knew has collapsed in on itself, like the very fundament of the earth was shaken but maybe there *are* some things he could let go of, here in the rubble of his reality, and maybe Clown is less of a threat and more of a pillar to build on.

Maybe being in love with him is okay.

Maybe, just this once, falling won't be that scary.

There's someone to catch him, after all.

And with Clown's eyes on him, so endlessly soft in the darkness, Branzy knows that something must've changed for him too these past few weeks, and Branzy wonders if it's the same for him, that feeling of weightlessness in his chest, of a creeping lack of air.

In the end, Branzy doesn't say anything.

He just smiles, and steps a little closer to Clown, and if their hands brush while they walk back to the car, neither of them mentions it.

It's enough, for now.



The drive back is much quieter.

Branzy's tired, too many emotions crammed into his chest, and Clown's focused on the road.

But when they pull into Branzy's street, he's immediately alert again.

There, on his front porch, is a person.

Clown slows, giving Branzy an odd look; concerned if he's being benign, undoubtedly a bit freaked out.

In quick succession, Branzy thinks of the hit list, Parrot, Ash and his manic eyes, Rek who he hasn't seen in days.

He doesn't know who he'd rather face right now.

"Wait here, okay?" Branzy says, quickly unbuckling his seatbelt and jumping out of the car. He doesn't bother to shut the door.

The closer he gets, the more apparent it becomes just who is waiting for him, a body forming out of the shapeless darkness.

"Vitalasy?"

Vitalasy raises his head, and Branzy stops dead in his tracks.

He looks horrible.

There's something wrong with his eyes, Branzy thinks, something missing; they look dull, like muddy water or a dusty mirror, some glint absent, something like liveliness lost.

There's blood running from his nose onto his lips, from his hairline over his right eye.

Branzy thinks he can see bruises forming on his arms, red and horrible in the darkness.

"Vitalasy, what happened?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that!" Vitalasy yells, but his voice is hoarse, and it comes out pained and wrong.

He shuts his eyes for a second, teeth bared, biting down the pain. "Why are you hanging out with

Clown , Branzzy?!"

Branzy glances back to the car, Clown's expression shuttered, concern shining through only in the way his hands tighten on the wheel.

He bits back a frustrated scream.

There's nothing he can tell Vitalasy without endangering their operation, without endangering Clown's idea of vengeance.

And fuck, maybe he's in love, but he doesn't know what he means to Clown yet, and his past mistakes hang over his head like a sword on a string.

"I *can't* tell you!" Branzzy says, and his voice wavers like thin metal.

For a second, Vitalasy's expression drops, flickering between angry and sad, despaired and bloodied.

" *Branzy* ! I was jumped! And the only reason I can think of is that I'm associated with Clown because of *you* !"

For a second, Branzzy thinks of when he had met Vitalasy, his mischievous smirk, the way he had offered his help without expecting anything in return.

His smile, open and vivacious, the fact that he'd called Branzzy his friend so openly, without any care.

There's something significant about that.

"I *can't* !" Branzzy's voice breaks on the last syllable, and he feels shattered himself, a broken vase no one dares to pick up in fear of getting cut.

"You know, Subz told me to stay away from you," Vitalasy spits viciously, and there's blood still dripping from his nose onto his shirt, "He told me you were a liability. God, I'm so *stupid* . I should've listened."

Branzy doesn't know what to say.

Under the streetlights, Vitalasy looks pale, ghastly, as if he were already dead.

There's so much blood, and though Branzy knows he isn't responsible, it still feels like his fault.

"Subz...? What?" he mutters, and it must be his confusion that gives Vitalasy the last push.

He sneers, and there's blood in his teeth, made pink by spit.

"Fuck you! If you don't even remember, you don't *get* to know. Fuck you Branzy. I thought you were my friend!"

And with that Vitalasy stalks off, limping and clutching his left arm, and Branzy wants nothing more than to help him, but he knows he's lost that privilege.

And then Vitalasy is gone, and it's like he was never there at all.

Branzy, standing in the wreckage of something much bigger than him, something so much more important than he had known before it was over, understands, for just a second, the wish to fade out of existence entirely.

He has nothing left.

Nothing at all.

Somewhere inbetween gaining Clown as a friend and wishing for something more, he's lost Rek.

Somewhere inbetween trying to do the right thing he has lost everyone he had wanted to protect.

And so Branzy is alone.

(He thinks about how the stars are so very far away for the first time in a long while.)



Branzy gets back into the car numbly.

Clown doesn't try to start a conversation, so they don't talk.

He just keeps staring at his hands, remembering Vitalasy's face, smeared with blood and twisted with hatred, and wishes he could turn back time.

But he's here, and Clown is here too, and that simple fact means he can't quite bring himself to regret the things he did.

Rek and Vitalasy, Branzy reminds himself, they're more important than whatever he thinks he's feeling for Clown.

He has to find out the truth.

"Who is Subz?" Branzly asks, toneless.

Clown just gives him a tired look.

And then he starts explaining.



Back when they were freshmen, Branzly and Rek joined their school's programming club.

Branzly considered himself a prodigy and Rek had nothing better to do, so for a few months they just went there after school, talking and doing nothing, mostly.

It's a small club, run by some senior with too much time, and they're basically allowed to do what they want, so Branzly and Rek play video games a lot, keep to themselves.

None of them notice when another freshman called Subz joins.

But sometimes, when Rek is sick, Branzly does actual coding, little projects to keep himself occupied, rough drafts for games he never finishes, and if he's feeling entirely too confident, viruses.

Branzly, in all his self obsession, does not notice the eyes on him, Subz watching him, torn between jealousy and admiration.

He becomes so cocky that one day, he does not log out when he leaves.

Subz takes this chance.

After Branzly and Rek leave the club, they never really look back.

A few weeks later, Clown and Rasplin take their place.

It's much of a similar situation, Rasplin confident and Clown along for his friend, and Subz doesn't think much of them, at first.

But then Rasplin starts getting cocky, and Subz tells them about the boy here before them, skilled beyond his years, bragging much like Rasplin had.

Branzly becomes something superhuman in their minds, fueled by Subz's tales and their own imaginations, and because Subz managed to catch Branzly of guard and get a look at his computer

after he hadn't logged out, they regularly gather to check his social media, waiting on him to post about his projects.

They all witness Branzy making the biggest mistake of his life.

(Rasplin had smiled, upon seeing the address, something sharp and wicked and hurtful in the corners of it, too many teeth and schadenfreude.

And he had wondered how much of an impact one singular person could have.)

Clown never forgot what Subz had said then, eyes full of naive admiration and dark fear, twisting into something else entirely; *"See? Branzy could end any of our lives with the click of a button."*

And then Rasplin died, and Clown knew who he had to get on his side.



Branzy closes his eyes for a second, seeking the darkness of his eyelids, but an image of Rasplin comes to mind, a phantom once again, but this time he is smiling, a kid like Branzy, into coding and computers and bullied so severely for it that he felt he had to die.

He wonders how different things could've been, if he and Rek had stayed in the programming club.

"That's why you chose me." Branzy says weakly, "Not because of my skill, but– Fuck, because I remind you of your dead friend? Is that it?"

"Don't say that." Clown hisses sharply.

"Or what? Because I was easy to blackmail? Because you were... cyberstalking me? I– I can't... I'm not *him*, Clown!"

"I know that!" Clown yells. His hands slam against the steering wheel. "Do you think I don't know that?!"

Branzy laughs, high and cutting in the silence.

"I can't believe– I'm so *stupid* ! Fuck, you blackmail me and here I am, thinking we're– we're friends!"

He doesn't say, *Just an hour ago I was so sure I could love you* , and the memory of Clown bathed in the glow of a million spotlights burns like a brand in his mind, haunting.

"Branzy, listen to me! I don't want you to– fucking be Rasplin! I want–" Clown starts, but he cuts himself off sharply, falling silent unnaturally.

Branzy smiles, hollow. "What do you want, Clown?"

But Clown doesn't say anything, and Branzy feels bitterness creep up his spine, numbing his fingers.

"Fuck this. No, fuck this, seriously! I'll work on the website, but I'm done with whatever *this* is. I'm done with pretending that we're– that we're *friends* !" Branzy spits, and then he's gone, slamming the car door shut so hard his hand tingles.

He doesn't turn around to see if Clown's watching him still.

Chapter End Notes

i had to fight this chapter to the death seven times like a gladiator in the colosseum fighting twenty lions at once while they're actively flooding the thing too

i'm gonna be real honest both ash and red were supposed to have separate chapters but uh. Swagdoons september am i right chat?

(also i didn't have any idea for what they're thing was gonna be so i just made them scam kids)

-> i have no actual grasp on their dynamic so if this sucks feel free to digitally punch me in the face <3

tbh this is also kinda a filler chapter but the goddamn concert scene was literally the first thing i planned when i came up w/ the idea for this fic.... i hope you all enjoy it as much as i enjoyed writing it!

the fight with vitalasy was also something i wanted to happen but placing it right after The Big Moment was just an evil little spur of the moment thing lmao

poor branzy man. his emotions are like a damn rollercoaster every chapter. feeling sorry for him as if i'm not the one actively putting him in those situations 🙄

n e wayz idk how frequent uploads r gonna be when summer break's over bc i actually have A Job now

sicilian defense

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It's already dark when Vitalasy starts heading home.

Subz tells him to be careful, as he always does, leaning against the door frame, halfway to being ironic.

Vitalasy waves him off, even though it's still a little heartwarming, this little routine of theirs.

Knowing that Subz cares never fails to make him smile.

It's a dark night and Vitalasy cannot see the stars, but that's fine.

The street lights guide him more than constellations ever could, little universes of their own, orbited by moths and flies; and their glow is much more familiar to him than the coldness of the stars, child of cities and concrete streets that he is.

He kicks the bits of grass growing out of the cracks across the asphalt and keeps his mind blank.

The first hit catches him completely off guard.

The ground rushes up to meet him so suddenly that Vitalasy thinks, for just a second, that he's falling into the sky instead, mind filled with primitive wonder.

But the stars are so very far away when he hits the ground.

Someone pushes him down with their foot on his back, and Vitalasy feels himself go slack, as if playing dead, and the asphalt is cold on his cheeks.

And then they pull him upwards by his hair and shirt, and the world is all agony for a while.

They leave him like that, all three or four of them that were there, and Vitalasy finds himself staring up at the sky, tasting blood on his gums.

The sky is empty and cold, and the street is much the same, and it feels like the longer he lies still, the more warmth is pulled out of him too, drained into the darkness.

He only catches one sentence, muttered between his attackers, before they fade into the darkness.

"Clown's next, right? I'm looking forward to that."

Vitalasy thinks, in quick succession, of his friend, of Branzzy, in class or at his party, glowing with laughter, and then Clown, who he has seen walk home with Branzzy sometimes, quiet and monolithic, like a guardian.

But Vitalasy knows too much about Clown for that to be true.

His lip is split, and the blood running from his nose mixes with that dripping from his mouth, and he's so sure he knows who to blame for this, now.

His attackers with their masked faces and black attire all fall away to that image, Clown and Branzzy, together and looking so content, over and over.

Vitalasy wants to feel angry.

Instead, his limbs feel like lead, like all the blood was replaced by concrete, and he cannot bring himself to get up.

He thinks if he were to try he'd crack his head open like an eggshell.

For just one, despairing second he wants to call for Subz.

But his friend has saved him from his own stupidity one too many times, and he's too far away anyway, and Subz cannot save him now.

He tries to wipe the blood from his face with his sleeve, with his hands still shaking and so cold.

It doesn't quite work.

Vitalasy keeps lying there, watching the dark night sky, without stars and without light, body aching, and he resolves to do one thing.

Find out the truth.



Loneliness is such a small word for such a big thing.

Branzzy sits in his room, watching the days pass him by, and wonders if this is what it feels like to give up.

Any free time he has is used pouring over the website, tweaking it to perfection, monitoring the students of his highschool from the isolation of his room, like distance could give him more clarity.

Clown doesn't try to approach him anymore.

And isn't that just what Branzzy wanted, stopping their grotesque charade of not quite friendship, killing off what care remains in his heart and finally tasting freedom again?

It isn't working, is the thing.

No matter how much he tells himself he hates Clown, in his mind there's that memory of him bathed in glowing lights, looking like a teenager for once in his life, all the heaviness wiped from his face.

He thinks of his own tears staining Clown's shirt.

Well.

He's chasing shadows anyway, in the halls of school and in his own mind, tracing the footsteps of the person he used to be, the people he used to care for.

Sometimes, Branzy thinks he can spot Rek from the corner of his eyes, his appearance an accusation in itself, but it always turns out to be false in the end.

He must still be attending school, because there are no rumors, no concerned teachers. He's just avoiding Branzy.

And that's just fine, isn't it? Just fine.

Branzy feels like a ghost himself, these days, alone and haunted, thinking of fire and water and endless white beaches.

Justice.

He probably deserves this.

Branzy keeps his head down, keeps breathing, keeps walking.

No one notices him trip, or falter, or break, little by little, everyday.

There's something heavy in the air, electric and deadly, and Branzy has a million threads leading everywhere, and he cannot for the life of him figure out what is going on.

Something is wrong.

But his self-imposed exile leaves no source of information but hushed voices hiding in bathroom stalls or behind locked doors, rumors spewing from behind every crack and crevice of their school.

Hundreds upon hundreds of posts, a flood of biblical proportion.

Branzy keeps his head down and tries not to drown.

But Rek's absence and Clown's absence and Vitalasy's absence are all like rocks tied to his feet, and he's just so *alone* .

Branzy goes days without talking to anyone.

He feels like an extra in his own life.

Not drowning is much easier when there's someone else to pull you out.

Not catching fire is much easier when you never wish to.

Some understanding grows in him, terrible and dark, of Rasplin, of fire, of heat that melts until there is nothing left.

Justice.

He's not done here yet.

(Sometimes, he catches sight of Vitalasy in the halls, and his bruises are still not quite faded, and there's a look in his eyes, old and haunted.

Branzy wants to tell him something, but he's never quite sure what.

Every word tastes like ash on his tongue.)

Loneliness is a terribly small word for all it's meant to encompass.

Branzy keeps going.

The emptiness in his mind grows a little every day.

Justice. Where is the justice?



The website runs smoothly now.

Branzy stares at its swirling colours every night, until his head aches or he falls asleep, white glowing words taunting him even in his dreams, spiteful and uncaring.

He dreams of Clown a lot these days, and feels much colder for it when he wakes up.

Is there any purpose left to this at all?

But everytime Branzy's thoughts turn doubtful Clown's words come to mind, spoken so softly into the darkness, that simple *Thank you* , and even though he may have imagined Rasplin in Branzy's place, it makes Branzy not want to give up.

Not just yet.

He can still fix this, somehow.

Gain back Vitalasy and Rek, talk things out with Clown, maybe.

Have that sliver of normality back, that childish sense of not having to worry about anything.

Days bleed into nights bleed into days again.

He doesn't even bother shutting his computer off anymore.

So one morning, Branzy wakes up with his face pushed into his keyboard, the words *Zam* and *Guilty* on the screen in blinding white, and feels the most purpose he has in weeks.



For almost three years, Zam was called the prince of highschool, and he had everything.

And then Rasplin died, and his empire collapsed under everyone's heavy stares, the accusations of bullying, the memory of ashes and fire.

And Zam, prince only in memory, was dethroned.

Branzy could never bring himself to feel sorry for Zam, not when his friends left him and not when he was alone, too.

Because in his mind, that last clarity still clings on – it was Zam that caused Rasplin's death, and there is no repentance, no suffering great enough to undo that.

Branzy tries to remind himself of that feeling, that ruthlessness that had taken hold of his heart back then, a memory of great hatred, and feels it run through his fingers like smooth silk, like clean water.

Things have not been easy or familiar for a while now.

He cannot bring himself to channel an emotion that should come easily.

He'll tear Zam apart regardless.

Whatever it takes to be done with it all, to bring about Clown's vision of vengeance and crawl back to normality on his hands and knees, begging to be taken back in.

But for now, Branzy cracks his knuckles and sits up straighter at his desk, hands already on the keyboard, feeling the rapid flow of electricity like a warm embrace.

It's time to do what he does best.

His mind races with possibilities before he even types a single letter.

There are multiple ways to go about this.

All Branzy really needs is access to Zam's accounts, as many of them as possible, and though he could brute force his way through guesswork, he could be done with this much quicker.

Cold and efficient.

He just has to play a little game of luck, take his chances – what better place for this, what better person to place a wager than the creator of the casino itself?

Branzy won't be playing normally, though.

Because just like counting cards gets you banned because it's too efficient, knowing just who will win before placing a bet is a cheat that seems impossible, but is truly easy if you know your facts.

And Branzy does.

Each year, there are thousands of data leaks.

Passwords, account names, all of it leaked like oil into water, sold off to the highest bidder or floating through the nothingness of the endless cyberspace, a landmine, dangerous and yet forgotten.

Most highschoolers do not check regularly to see if their data's been compromised.

Option two, betting on black, Branzy takes his chances, once again, sure of luck on his side.

(There's no one else there, anyhow.)

More than eighty percent of users utilize the same password for multiple services.

It's so easy to get out his old tools, settle into the familiarity of neon glow and brightness – credential stuffing is not something Branzy used to do much, but the first bot he finds is easily improved, and there's nothing stopping him from cracking open Zam's social media accounts like a breakfast egg.

(If Zam were to check, it'd look like the attack were coming from hundreds of different devices, all across the world, set to devour what little of his privacy was still left. He doesn't check, of course. And so the beast devours him in his sleep.)

Turns out Zam uses the same password, or variations of it for more than five accounts.

For just a second, Branzy revels in the fact that he could ruin Zam's life right now, so simply; but that's not what he's here for.

He turns to chat logs instead.

Scanning through the hundreds of thousand messages either sent to or from Zam, it feels strangely like he's starting to get to know him, in a way.

Sometimes Branzy has to remind himself that Zam is not a good person.

Still, these messages are mostly meaningless, useless trifle Branzy doesn't know what to do with; until he stumbles across a link that opens a familiar document.

It's almost funny now, to see it again – the manifesto on his screen has not changed, but everything else has, and Branzy's alone, now, so there's no one to call about his rapid breathing, his heartbeat a quick rhythm in his chest.

There's no one at all.

Branzy rubs his eyes, and reads the thing.

And then it all makes so much more sense; an empire to rebuild, that was not ever Parrot's plan, and whoever else could it be than 'prince' Zam?

A prince without his kingdom is a nobody.

A prince that rebuilds his kingdom from the ashes is a hero.

But how does one rebuild, if all that's left of the past is a hollow carcass, the bones of something beloved?

Burn everyone else to the ground too, Zam writes, vindictive and hateful, And the plating field will be leveled. The only true equality is death. The only one we can achieve is pain. If no one's powerful, then everyone is. That is decimation. That is our only way to rebuild what was lost.

(And for just one horrifying second, Branzy thinks that he's right.)

But he remembers Vitalasy, his blood so surreal in the dim light, and wonders what power he could have that would be threatening to Zam, to his accomplices.

The answer is none, of course, because they are not sticking to their morals.

And equality is just another pretty word.

Afterwards every text message turns suspicious, turns to some hidden code Branzy just cannot decipher, and all innocence that had seemed so near vanishes like it was never there at all.

Zam is guilty, and Branzy is judge, jury and executioner.

meet me after school i'll be done with it then , Zam's last message reads, sent to two people whose numbers he hadn't bothered to save – whether out of indifference or caution, it seems much too calculated.

Whatever *it* is, Branzy's going to find out.

(Branzy ignores that he's shaking, ignores the feeling of unease sitting thick in his throat, ignores the fear turning his bones to lead. He can do this. He *has* to do this. Because if he can't–

There's no use in thinking about it.

He *can* .)



Branzy keeps his head down.

That way, he won't have to look at Vitalasy or the empty spot where Rek should be.

It's better like this.

It *is* .



Everything in school feels just slightly off, tilted to the left of reality like a kaleidoscope; the colours are the same, but the shapes keep changing.

Dreamlike.

Branzy guesses he's probably at least slightly insane by now, with only himself to talk to, confined in his own mind by chains he created all alone.

He feels like the figurehead of a ship, alone in the open ocean, tasting only salt and cold winds, seeing only endless waves and darkness.

The fluorescent lights reflected on the linoleum floor are like little pieces of stars, and Branzy steps on each little fragment with something like hate.

It's not quite there, the emotion, muddled and see through and already halfway to being lost, drowned by much more profound feelings; but Branzy revels in it, for a second. It makes the world sharper.

It makes him able to pretend his heart isn't still aching, a dull rhythmic longing in his chest, for Clown and his eyes of steel and starlight, for his voice turned gentle with care; for Vitalasy, who never quite manages to ignore him in the halls.

Well.

He has work to do.

Branzy doesn't quite know how to approach it, though, because finding Zam hasn't been easy for a while, now.

Not since the accusations started and his friends left him in the wreckage of their lives, their empire.

Zam's social circle is much more confined now, and Branzy couldn't name a single person in it if he tried.

There is of course the most important clue, that message – today, after school, Zam will meet two people, co-conspirators or friends, and Branzy will be a witness to their plans, unseen and alone.

There's still a lot of time left till then, though, and Branzy does not know anything about Zam yet that could help him.

He sighs.

Maybe it's time for a more thorough check of his socials, without the focus on suspicious activity.

Branzy fishes his phone out of his pocket and heads to the bathroom.

He catches Rek just outside of it, like he was never gone at all, like nothing had happened; he's leaning against the wall, and though he looks tired, there's nothing outwardly wrong with him.

Not like Branzy had expected, anyway.

He blinks. Tries to make himself believe this is not a dream.

"Rek?" Branzy finally whispers, not even trying to hide his crumbling voice.

Rek turns to face him, and his expression falls like a house of cards, fragile and nervous.

"Branzy...?"

They both look at each other, two respective phantoms, two haunted boys, and neither can quite blame the other.

Neither should.

"You shouldn't be seen with me." Rek finally says, but it lacks any conviction – a deep sorrow burns in his eyes like a blue flame.

Branzy shakes his head, despaired, the blunt edge of his nails digging bloody red trenches into his arm, a war he isn't yet fighting.

"Rek– You– You can't just leave me again!"

But Rek just looks at Branzy, in that caged, sort of haunted way of his, eyes full of an unknown longing, and for a while he doesn't respond.

Then, he grips Branzy's shoulders, a touch so light it could be imaginary, and asks, quietly, "Is there anything you'd like to tell me, Branzy?"

And for a second Branzy feels the words on his tongue, feels them push against his teeth tentatively, as though asking for permission.

He sees Zam, the manifesto, a hit list with Rek's name on it, a bright flame, himself in the darkness alone, Vitalasy's empty eyes and bloody nose and he–

He doesn't say anything.

Rek drops his hands, and it's a loss so profound that Branzy almost chases them with his body.

"Come and talk to me when you're ready to tell the truth, Branzy." Rek mutters, and with one last glance at the clock he walks away, fading into the mass of people making their way to their classes.

Branzy does not manage to spot him in the crowd again.



Branzy falls into the bathroom stall, his whole body wracked with shivers, and he just so manages to lock the door before the tears start falling.

Rek's *here* . He's alive and well, and—

He's still avoiding Branzy.

His best friend left him just like that, all alone again, with nothing but the memory of his tired eyes to hold on to, and it feels like *shit* .

It feels like someone burned a hole in his chest and the flames are consuming him even now, and it feels like an emptiness, like a lack of anything at all, and yet he's just so *glad* Rek is okay.

That doesn't make any sense.

Branzy bites his fingers to try and muffle the noise, big, ugly sobs trying to shake out of him, and nothing makes any sense.

He needs to—

Branzy needs to stop Zam, whatever he's planning, and then he'll finally be able to talk to Rek, to tell him everything and it will all be okay again.

He presses his face into the crook of his arm, a poor imitation of comfort, and wills himself to stop crying.

His eyes keep blurring over with tears, hiding away the world behind a grey curtain, sorrow and shame mixed, and Branzy fumbles with the buttons on his phone for much longer than usual.

He keeps going anyway.

There has to be something he missed.

His fingers brush against his keyboard, nervous energy like little currents of electricity, and then the world falls away again, replaced by the unnatural glow of his phone, black words on a white canvas.

Zam's text messages remain lofty, uncaring; he doesn't use names often, and though there is an underlying current of something, some danger Branzy hasn't quite grasped, they never lose their weird jovial tone.

Branzy imagines Zam smiling while typing out that manifesto, while preparing whatever it is that is going to happen today, and shudders.

Then, finally, a name.

meeting up with pangi l8er , Zam had written almost two months ago, to no visible reaction from the recipient.

Pangi. The name sounds familiar, but Branzy can't quite explain why.

He clenches his teeth in frustration, willing himself to remember anything at all but comes up empty, and the frustration bleeds away like fog lifting, like a stain washing out, as if it had never been there at all.

There's no time for any of this.

Branzy filters the messages for any containing the name 'Pangi' and finds a few, none of them helpful despite cementing the fact that he must be a friend of Zam's, in some way.

It hits him just as he reads the last message.

Physics. He has physics with a kid called Pangi!

Branzy never noticed him much, because he's rather quiet and unassuming, but his hair was the sort of flaming red colour that never quite passes as natural, and once Branzy had thought that there was something *off* about his eyes, something shrouded and hidden away in his laugh.

Like he was hiding some terrible secret.

So, he knows Pangi. This should be easier than expected.

Branzy's eyes drift to the clock on his phone, and he jumps, panicked.

Physics , he thinks, suddenly frantic, *I'm actually skipping physics right now*.

He grabs his backpack from the floor and races out of the stall, desperately pouring water on his face at a wash basin to try and scrub the red tear tracks from his face, admissions of defeat that they are.

He doesn't quite succeed, but there's no time to linger on it and Branzy's racing out of the bathroom before his mind properly catches up with him.

(For just a second, looking in that dirty mirror, Branzy could not recognize his face, the lines of it so wholly unfamiliar, the dips and curves somehow wrong, like he's not himself at all, anymore. He resolves not to think about it, but the image remains, buried in the tomb of his mind. The image remains.)

Branzy comes up with some half-baked excuse in the face of his physics teacher; he doesn't even really have to try all that hard, because his eyes are still a little red around the edges, and he snuffles at least once while talking, so all she gives him is a worried glance and a hurried *please sit down* ,

and it's fine.

Branzy spots Pangi from his seat almost immediately, and from then on it's just a waiting game.

When the bell rings and Branzy's out of his seat so quick he forgets to think of something to say, and he catches Pangi just outside the door.

They look at each other.

"You okay?"

Branzy blinks. Rubs his eyes again.

Pangi's hair looks like fire up close, a pyre of messy red flames, and Branzy doesn't know what to make of that.

He opens his mouth and finds no words to say.

"Hi?" he eventually offers, tentatively.

Pangi makes a disbelieving face at him, but quickly schools his expression back into careful indifference.

"C'mon dude, what do you want?" Pangi sighs, defeated.

Branzy opens and closes his mouth very quickly. He looks like a fish out of water, and it's kind of how he feels, too, with this being his first genuine conversation in—

Best not to think about that.

"Could you," he starts, "Could you maybe... tell me where I can find Zam? Possibly? If it's not too much trouble?"

Pangi just gives him a wry smile.

"Well, you're not exactly his type, so... I think I better not. Just to save you the embarrassment."

Branzy has to take a very deep breath to stop himself from screaming. Why does this happen every time?

But then Pangi steps a little closer, and Branzy catches his eyes, who so long ago he had felt were off in some strange way, and he can finally put a name to it – in less than a second, all mirth has been wiped from his face, all humor gone from the twist of his lips.

He just looks grim, now, like a darkness had descended on him, and his hair burns all the brighter for it; a flame that melts away until nothing is left, Branzy thinks, and tries not to choke on the memory of ash and soot.

"Listen to me, alright? If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from Zam. *Far* away. It's best if he doesn't know who you are."

And then Pangi walks off and Branzy's left reeling, trying to pull himself back together, reminding himself to breathe.

Something is definitely wrong.



There's a sudden unreality to it, Zam's hair glowing almost golden in the sun, looking all at once plated, a fool's halo.

Branzy presses himself very close to the wall and tries to hold his breath.

Zam's pacing, tossing something in the air every few seconds; it crashes down like a shooting star into his hands again every time.

Branzy thinks it's a key, maybe, or a usb drive?

If Zam were to only drop it once he could probably get it and run quickly enough that Zam wouldn't be able to follow, but he doesn't, and so Branzy keeps waiting.

There is one moment where Branzy almost steps out of his hiding place, where Zam fumbles with the key and it almost falls, but he has just enough time to fade back into the shadows as two people step out towards Zam.

Their names come to Branzy almost immediately.

Mapicc and Leo.

There's a story that Rek told him once, about Leo and Mapicc, that really only boiled down to *stay away from these guys, they're more cunning than they look*; and back then, Branzy had not cared

for it.

Now, he traces their forms from the shadows and wonders if he can read intent in their straight backed posture alone.

"Is it done?" Mapicc asks, sounding bored with the words before he even finishes his sentence.

Leo, next to him, does not say anything at all. He just keeps watching Zam, silent, waiting.

His shadow throws a curtain of darkness over Zam's features, shrouds them in mystery.

Zam nods. "Yeah, yeah, like I said. It's done. Just follow me."

There's no hesitation at all, and though they make an odd procession, there's a certain trust in that; a belief that no harm will come to them here, which Branzly finds simultaneously admirable and a little stupid.

Leo and Mapicc do not even seem to be thinking about what could go wrong.

And Zam just keeps leading them.

Branzy only sneaks after them when he's sure they won't turn around.

"Have any of you seen Parrot lately?" Zam asks, eyes still fixed forward.

Mapicc shrugs noncommittally. "Nah, not after the... thing with Vitalasy. He's still gonna be there for the Cleansing though, right?"

Leo snickers. "If he knows what's good for him, sure. I think we made ourselves very clear on what happens if he doesn't."

Zam suddenly stops, beckons them closer.

They're a good few feet away from school now, out where there was once a plan to build a second gym building; all that ever really happened was that the trees were torn down, though, leaving an open field.

And right towards the end of it is a shoddy little supply closet, one of the properly old ones that instead of being inside a building are built downwards into the earth instead, halfway to being a

cellar.

The wood looks moldy and crumbling, but Zam still seems very proud of himself.

"How *did* you get these keys, man?" Leo asks, suddenly a little bit awed.

Zam grimaces. "Don't even ask."

Mapicc leans down a little closer to look at the thing. "You sure this is the right call? I mean, Clown's a strong guy, he could probably break out."

But Zam just waves him off, the very picture of confidence. "It'll be fine, dude. He won't even have to be down there long, just an hour or so. Y'know, get him anxious. Decrease his fighting spirit. If we can beat him, we can beat anyone."

Leo seems convinced, but Mapicc keeps eyeing the dark wood, the moss growing half over it, with eyes that seem much too alert for Branzzy's liking.

"I'd just rather have him on our side. What if we let him out of there and he... stops us?" Mapicc asks.

"We can't pull back now, Mapicc. If you're scared you're free to go running to Clown! It's all going down way too soon." Zam hisses.

Mapicc raises his hands in mock surrender. "Alright, jeez! At least let me have a look at this thing, yeah? So we can make sure Clown won't get out."

Zam fiddles with the lock for a while, but it isn't long before Mapicc descends into the darkness.

Branzy covers his mouth with his hands, feeling his breath ghost against his palm, grounding and airy.

This is it.

These are the people he's been chasing inadvertently since the inception of his website, the very students Clown wanted to bring his bloody justice to, and they're planning a trap to get him off the

playing field.

But Branzy stumbled right into it, like a good little servant.

For a second he wants to call Clown and tell him to come, but... they haven't talked in a while now, and their last conversation still makes Branzy's head spin with something sour and entirely too sharp.

If he can make himself useful, figure out this trap or whatever, then he can go talk to Clown.

(Beg him for forgiveness that should be Branzy's to give, maybe.)

Zam, Leo and Mapicc leave, eventually, and Branzy makes his way over to the little hatch.

They left it unlocked, which seems awfully convenient, but Branzy isn't about to question his luck.

He steps inside carefully, complete darkness and the smell of damp earth an all surrounding thing.

It's only when the latch above him falls shut that Branzy realizes he's fucked.



Branzy's first thought is to start taking shallow breaths.

He read about it once, being buried alive, how the chances of survival were so low they were basically impossible, but maybe, if you kept your breaths shallow and don't panic, you'll live for a little while longer.

It is a tiny space, to be fair, a coffin like any other; Branzy cannot stretch out his arms or stand up straight, and no matter how much he tries the latch it will not open.

He's buried.

There's no saying dark enough for the smell of damp earth and salt in a shallow grave.

There is no saying dark enough for knowing there will be no one saving him.

Branzy sits down, and he has to tuck his knees under his chin for it to work, but it's better than standing with his back bent and staring at the dirt under his feet.

Well, the dirt is still under his feet and under his nails, somehow, and he keeps staring at it too, but at least there's a vague comfort in at least knowing the bounds of himself, in holding himself close.

Otherwise it feels like the darkness will take even that away, so complete and whole that it could almost be a person itself.

There is of course still his phone.

It's odd to hold it in his hand, all smooth and sleek, otherworldly in the roughness of stone and mud.

The battery is almost drained and the signal sucks but it's a life line, for now, something to cradle in his hands, a reminder that he's not dead yet.

Not yet.

Branzy's never been claustrophobic, but there's something horrible in small and dark spaces, in the prolonged silence of being underground; like the earth will never let him go again, and each exhale feels like the last.

Darkness and loneliness and fear.

It's easy being afraid or alone, so easy feeling bitter, here in a trap carved out for someone else, easy to wonder if this is even fair at all.

It's not easy to swallow it all down, righteous indignation and all, to tell himself that there's a way out of this.

It won't be easy either.

Swallowed by darkness and drenched in a fear so ice cold it locks his limbs in place, Branzy dials Clown's number with the last of his battery; desperation so heavy it makes the air seem stale.

Only Clown doesn't answer.

Branzy's running out of time, his battery on two percent, and he types out a message, barely coherent, a plea for help that gets swallowed by the darkness.

His phone dies before Branzy can even see if it was actually sent.

Branzy's not claustrophobic.

He reminds himself every few seconds, when the air seems to grow thinner and the walls a little closer, he's not claustrophobic, just a little scared, because there's no real way to tell the time, and the rays of light that fall through the gaps in the wood have long since grown dim and weak.

Branzy's not claustrophobic. He's *not*.

But fear grips his heart and courses through his blood like poison, and the darkness conjures up images of death, his own private mausoleum.

Catacombs of smiling skulls in the back of his mind, every pebble digging into his hands like a gravestone.

A tomb with no name engraved. A funeral attended by none.

He keeps his arms wrapped around his legs, tracing shapes into the rough fabric of his pants, so inexplicably scared of losing a part of himself to the darkness that he can't let go.

His hands shake in their own grasp, holding on to each other.

The silence rings in Branzzy's ears, church bells and prayers and hymns, and there's really no telling if they're ringing out deaths or births or something like hope, because it's just silence in the end.

The pause between one word and the next stretched on indefinitely.

For a little while Branzzy imagines kicking Zam's face in.

For a little while Branzzy imagines Clown down here instead, but the image won't settle in his mind, like seeing Clown brought to his knees is something so very blasphemous that even in fantasy he cannot entertain the thought of it.

He can't imagine Clown trapped. In his little fantasy, Clown breaks apart the wood in seconds, and then the sun is on his face again, and the darkness that has become a living, breathing thing vanishes like smoke.

Clown stands victorious over it in the end. Always.

But Branzzy doesn't.

He tries not to imagine being saved and fails, which really only makes it worse.

Seconds bleed into minutes bleed into hours, and the cramps in his legs drive tears into Branzzy's eyes.

It's very cold.

And though he tries to escape into fantasy again, his mind won't let him; Branzzy stares at the dirt under his feet, the pebbles he so desperately digs his hands into to assure himself that *this* is real, the bloody wound on his palm staining his sleeves from trying to tear the wood apart.

His breathing cuts apart the silence harshly.

He's very cold.

Desperation fades to resignation.

Fear makes a home in the back of his mind, razor sharp and cutting.

Branzzy keeps taking shallow breaths.

He imagines being saved.

It's only when someone calls out his name that Branzzy realizes that his fantasy has slipped from his mind out into the world, somehow.

Clown breaks the wood apart in less than a minute, and then, for the first time in days, Branzzy and Clown are face to face.

Even backlit by the strange semi-darkness just after a sun set Branzy can see Clown's eyes, open wide in something like concern, all glossy and strange.

He attempts to smile, but it mustn't be very reassuring, because Clown's eyebrows draw tighter together, and he simply reaches out a hand down into the darkness.

Branzy takes it.

(An olive branch, in that moment, their hands locked like a promise – never again, Branzy thinks, and sees the same sentiment echoed in Clown's strong grip.)

Branzy's knees give out the second his feet hit the grass, but Clown is there to catch him, once again, an echo of a different time.

For a second, Branzy just stares up at the sky in wonder, the barely there light of the moon rising almost like salvation.

He must've been down in the darkness for hours.

Some sound escapes him, caught between a laugh and a sob; he tries to wrap his arms around his legs again but Clown is already pulling him upright.

If Branzy were to name the emotion caught on his face, it would have to be sorrow. He doesn't know what to make of that.

"What happened?" Clown whispers, his gaze intent and full of grief, and Branzy wants to bury his head in in Clown's chest and never speak a word again.

Simultaneously he wants to tell him of every second he'd spent alone, an agony like fire burning in his chest, and he wants to know why Clown came to help him still.

His face, caught in the car window, hurt and split open to show such rare vulnerability comes to mind. Branzy feels sick.

He has never hated himself as much as in that moment, knowing his words were enough to tear open a closed wound, sharp and vicious as they were.

But this is not that moment, and Clown is still gripping Branzy's hand in his.

"I'm sorry," Branzy croaks, voice rough and throat parched. "Clown, I'm so sorry."

Clown's expression falls.

"I shouldn't have– The things I said were horrible. I'm sorry, Clown, I know you're not– Fuck,

you're not trying to replace Rasplin with me but... you don't tell me anything, and Vitalasy said some things—" Branzy wipes at his eyes, silently chastises himself for crying, "I didn't mean it, is what I want to say. I still *want* to be your friend."

Clown's eyes find Branzy's again, and though there is a depth to them, a sudden darkness Branzy cannot decipher, his grip on Branzy's hand doesn't weaken.

"You shouldn't have to apologise," Clown says, and it sounds like he means it. "You were angry and you had every right to be. If I— This could've been avoided if I just told you everything. You were never a... *replacement* to me. I'm... sorry, too."

Branzy leans forward until his head is resting on Clown's chest, listening for the familiar rhythm of his heartbeat, the antithesis of silence, of the tomb Branzy thought he had found himself in.

Life persists, and Clown is here.

Forgiveness is such a small word for all it's meant to encompass.

But here, with Clown by his side and the night sky so full of stars, Branzy knows they've achieved it. Their soft breaths mingle together in the air like woven string.

"You still need to tell me who did this to you," Clown says, but at Branzy's silence adds a much softer, "Let's get you home first, though."

Home. Branzy holds on to Clown, and feels something in himself snap back into place, like a puzzle piece with bent edges straightened out again.

They're going home.



So it's them in Branzy's house, another mausoleum, quiet with emptiness, and fear is so familiar now, all at home in his bones; it's only Clown's easy breathing that breaks the illusion, somewhat.

But he can feel the walls still, against his back and feet and hands, damp earth and mossy stone, like freedom is the trap instead.

Desperation tastes rotten and wrong on his tongue.

"It wasn't meant for me." Branzy eventually says. His voice is barely above a whisper.

Clown's hold on Branzzy's hand tightens, a silent invitation to continue.

"It's—" he takes a deep breath, willing himself to continue, "It was meant for you. I heard them talking – Zam, Mapicc and Leo, and I thought I could investigate it, warn you, but– Clown, I was so *scared* . And it's not just you either! They... they want to get the whole school. A Cleansing, Zam said."

"Of course it's Zam." Clown spits, disdain visible in his voice in a way that seems entirely foreign. There's something grim in the set of his jaw.

Oblivion blooms in the quiet, a flower never to be picked, and Branzzy says nothing at all, even though he feels he should ask.

Out of one trap and stumbling right into the next, ensnared by his own heart, Branzzy wants, for just a second, to ignore everything and lean onto Clown a little more.

Let the world be buried in the feeling of warmth in his chest, blooming brighter with every time Clown's thumb brushes over his knuckles.

But Branzzy's not a coward. Not anymore.

Before he can even ask, Clown shifts so they're a little closer, knees brushing, and gives him a searching look.

"I think you should know the truth," he admits, all quiet, "But promise to hear me out, alright?"

Branzzy nods, suddenly breathless. Dry tongue and heavy heart. Love and despair, mixed into one.

Clown rakes his hands through his hair.

"You remember when– No, that's stupid. Of course you remember. What I'm trying to say is, back when Rasplin– *died* ... Everyone blamed Zam, right? That's the whole reason why he is the way he is now.

And it wasn't exactly wrong to blame him, but... I don't know, there was more to it. Rasplin was not exactly *innocent* , either."

If Clown notices Branzzy's confusion, he doesn't acknowledge it.

"Zam did some horrible things, sure, but he wasn't more at fault than any other student that spit at Rasplin in the halls, or, I don't know, sent hate messages, shoved him around. He was fixated on Zam though, in some weird way. We both were. I fought with Zam a lot, you know, tried to get him to leave Rasplin alone. It never quite worked."

"But Rasplin, he had his own plan. I don't know *how* he did it, but he got some sort of leverage, and when Zam messed with us again, he leaked it. Funny, I don't even remember what it was. Made Zam real mad, though. I think it got worse after that.

His empire was all Zam really ever cared about, but... I never thought he'd go this far to rebuild, or whatever he thinks he's doing."

"Level the playing field," Branzy mutters, an echo of the words Zam had written, "He wants to... send some sort of message, I think? Something about how easy it is to become powerless? I don't know..."

"He doesn't know what it feels like to be powerless!" Clown seethes, hands twitching at his sides.

Branzy thinks of that day in the cafeteria, Clown close enough to look his friend in the eyes as he burned, and feel so full of vicious hatred for anyone who had let it come this far.

"We have to stop them."

Clown deflates, suddenly looking so very tired. He rests his forehead against Branzy's, the edge of his mask brushing against Branzy's lips, and sighs.

"I know, I know. But how, Branzy? We're alone. We don't have allies."

Branzy closes his eyes. Clown's right, even though his mere presence still makes Branzy feel like they could do anything at all.

As if on cue, the room lights up with a message on Branzy's computer screen, a familiar glowing white font, and an even more familiar name.

"I think I know someone we could ask." Branzly says. Maybe it's finally time to tell the truth.

The name *Rek* glows on the screen, a reminder, ethereal and otherworldly.

Chapter End Notes

ok! i actually got this done on time!

this chapter was a Struggle man i honestly started despising this fic everytime i opened google docs but after working through the stages of grief i think it's okay again!

and then i read the newest chapter of the house always wins and thought. Damn. this looks like i plagiarized literally half of this chapter ermm...

i promise that's not what happened?

anyways things r starting to come together! next chapter will be big on the Revelations that much i can already tell you lmao

sorry to zam for being the new Evil Guy but by virtue of being a cleanser it kinda had to happen :[

i'll start work on wednesday so i can't promise that i'll be able to keep up with my weekly schedule,,,

there are only about two chapters of this fic left anyway! i could also probably make that one very long chapter but idk yet? which would u guys prefer?

shoutout to the lifesteal discord for the help w/ this chapter love u <3

requiem

Chapter Summary

"The only place that Heathers and Marthas can get along is in Heaven!"

Chapter Notes

this chapter gets dark, please check the tags again before reading!
so before we get into it i'm just gonna say it again: this is not rpf!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Panic is a familiar thing, in the too quick beating of a heart, the steady metronome of seconds passing by all drawn out and unsteady; panic is a constant companion, almost muscle memory.

Rek knows panic. The murky water it makes out of his thoughts, the distant beating of his heart like a bell in his chest, and all of it rings out a warning.

It just wouldn't do to not stay vigilant.

Vigilance is what keeps him alive.

There's that familiar accusation of paranoia, of course, that always comes back to haunt him; no one else fears locked doors and empty rooms like he does, and normality to them will always be a threat to Rek.

Just because he knows what could happen.

Rek stays vigilant, and his reward is nothing but stories, glimpses into different lives. Constant reminders to never let his guard down.

He hears about many things, and only truly realizes he knows too much when someone comes looking for him.

Well.

Here's vigilance and here's paranoia, and Rek is somewhere caught in the middle of it, strung along to a tune he can never quite follow, information he can never quite parse, and now he's been deemed a threat.

Someone's coming for him.



Clown's face is nearly unreadable in the darkness of Branzy's room, all dark and heavy with intent, and Branzy does not know what he's afraid of, anymore.

It's an odd thing to realize.

Clown has saved him far too many times now, and yet the sword still hangs heavy above his head, a thread Clown is not willing to cut; whether out of indifference or malice, and Branzy's never been one to gamble on losing odds.

Things change, it seems.

Because Clown's face, lit by manic white light and digital unrealness, hyperrealistic at the edges of Branzy's vision, is so very comforting that it's so easy to disregard everything else.

Who cares about the sword if the string holds true?

This is much bigger than them, now.

"Rek..." Clown mumbles, fingers drumming a quick rhythm on his thigh, "You sure about this, Branzy?"

Branzy nods. "Yes! I mean Rek's—" *my best friend*, he doesn't say, words sticking to the roof of his mouth, tasting ashen. Something fundamental to the world falls away at the realization that he's not sure of that, anymore. "Rek's a trustworthy guy! So nice it actually makes me angry sometimes."

He pushes through the choked feeling in his chest until it becomes buried in the nauseating mix of dread and guilt too.

He'll deal with it later.

Clown doesn't say anything, but there's still a restlessness to him, fingers dancing across his thigh, not wholly convinced.

He gives Branzy a searching look. Branzy can't tell if what he finds is satisfactory.

"One person won't be enough. We don't even know what exactly we're up against, we— We need to plan this properly." Clown breathes, frantic despite himself.

Branzy just nods, mind whirring.

"Right, right, of course... I'm sure there are more people who want to stop this 'Cleansing'. We can... I don't know, try and rally them?"

(Ash's words, *I have a feeling we'll find ourselves on the same side in the end, anyway*, ring in the silent rift between them, an unspoken agreement.)

Clown's eyes narrow slightly. "And how would we do that? If the entire plan is just public it won't work anyway."

"I don't know!" Branzy says, "Which is why we need to talk to Rek! One more guy is better than nothing."

A sigh escapes Clown, but it's halfway around to being fond, so Branzy knows he's won.

Silence hangs heavy between them for just a moment.

The thing is, it's easy to decide to forgive someone, but to go on like nothing happened is too much of a pipe dream, even for Branzy. There is no normal between them anymore.

And though Branzy keeps trying to reach for levity, it slips through his fingers without a care.

Clown is statuesque next to him.

"If we're going to do this," he starts, quiet, "I need you to trust me."

Branzy thinks, a little hysterically, that he really does.

And isn't that just so stupid? Clown has torn all Branzy ever was apart and revealed something much bigger underneath it, and he has unmade everything Branzy has ever built with his deft fingers, and still, still Branzy trusts him with all that's left of him.

The crumbling pieces of him only ever laid to rest with Clown's hand in his.

There's something so comforting in knowing, ultimately, what will end him.

What is their relationship if not a death trap?

But here's fear and here's love, and somehow they are not so different, and somehow Clown makes him want to bare his heart and let it be torn out.

Branzy has known pain, and desperation, and fear, and they all have come around to make him love Clown more, and isn't that so much more scary than everything else?

Trust. Such a strange, unknowable thing.

And yet Branzy trusts Clown.

(With all he ever was and will be, every version of himself, his beating heart a bloody gift in his

teeth. The ugly reality of love is that it hurts.)

Clown looks at Branzy like he knows all of it, a deep understanding etched into the tired lines of his face. He takes Branzy's shaking hand into his.

"I need you to know that I never would've done it. Report you to the police, I mean. I never would've done it."

Oh.

There's a heavy desperation to Clown's tone, to his wide eyes, begging Branzy to understand, to forgive and, well, Branzy already has, hasn't he?

He wants his world to shatter at the words, and he wants the glass to cut away all that's left of him, and he wants to feel used, or manipulated, or even just a little less in love.

Instead, he finds that deep down, he has known for a long time.

Branzy doesn't say I love you, just swallows the words like he's always done, a sharp hurt in his chest and tears in his eyes, and he looks at Clown, at the dark circles under his eyes and the ashen whiteness of his face.

And he says, "Thank you."

Clown closes his eyes, breathes out deeply. Something heavy seems lifted from him, some terrible darkness hidden away again, and Branzy wants to tear open his rib cage and slip inside, rip the darkness out.

"Okay," Clown breathes, "Okay, we're talking to Rek, then."

Branzy smiles a little. "I'm talking to Rek. It might be kind of a lot to have you there, too."

Clown grip on Branzy's hand turns white-knuckled.

"I'm not letting you go alone." Don't you remember what happened last time, he doesn't say.

Branzy cringes. "Yeah, no, you're right. But maybe just... don't go inside with me? I just think Rek wouldn't appreciate you being there? If anything happens, you'll know."

Clown relaxes a fraction. "I'll see you on the other side."

And Branzy nods, but deep down he isn't sure if there will be anything to return to, after this.

But Clown has already turned away again, and the Cleansing is in full swing.

No time for doubts now.



Staring at Rek's house, unchanged even after a little over a decade of friendship, Branzy realizes that he's changed.

It's not a shocking realization, but it creeps up on him so unexpectedly Branzy's still breathless for a second.

Because, well, there's the old rusty swing in the backyard and the ivy climbing up the side of Rek's house, the little rocky pathway and the door with its paint flaking off, all of it unchanged, and then there's Branzy; feeling much older, a perpetual ache in his heart, guilt filling his lungs like water.

It takes Rek's house and a childhood left behind to make Branzy realize that he's choking.

There's nowhere to go but inside, though.

Clown's waiting a little further down the street, and time is like sand running through their hands, grain by grain, dark clouds in the distance calling out a disaster soon to come.

Branzy rings the doorbell, and tries to remember the boy he used to be.

Rek takes a while to open the door. Branzy images him on his toes, looking through the peephole and smiles faintly.

Still paranoid as ever, probably.

Now Branzy knows that he has every right to be, though, and that makes it much more sad than funny.

And when Rek finally does open the door, it only takes one look at his face to make Branzy fall apart.

"I need to tell you something!" Branzy rushes out, voice high with an undefined emotion. Fear and guilt and hope mixed.

Rek doesn't say anything, but he opens the door a little wider, and that's all the invitation Branzy needs.

There's still the old leather couch in the corner, and Branzy finds some diluted comfort in the way it still groans under his weight; and though he can feel Rek's expectant gaze on him, he doesn't quite know how to do this.

It feels like confession, except there is no church or priest, and divine judgement lay only in the eyes of his best friend.

It feels impossible to walk out of this still intact.

Branzy swallows. His breath catches in his throat.

Rek sighs. "Branzy, you know you can tell me anything, right? I won't be mad. I promise!"

He reaches out, but stops himself short, as if unsure if he could still touch Branzy; his hand hangs in the air for just a second, frozen, before Rek pulls it back.

He clears his throat, so painfully awkward it just comes around to being wholly Rek again.

Branzy really wishes Rek would've done it, though, pulled him in for a hug or just rested his hand on his shoulder, and though the action may have shattered what little was left of Branzy's ability to hold himself together, it would've been endlessly comforting in tearing him apart.

The truth. It's time for the truth.

"It—" Branzy starts, ignoring his trembling voice, "It was me! The website, it was me, I made it!"

All the air in his lungs is abruptly gone.

Branzy feels, just for a second, a strange weightlessness, like floating in space; a sudden lack of anything at all, whether guilt or relief.

It's silent, in the wake of his confession.

But is it truly so terrible to believe that all can be forgiven?

Is it terrible to believe in the absolution of sin through a simple confession?

Branzy doesn't know, but with the leather of Rek's couch under him, much softer than the wooden churches pews, and a confession hanging in the air, he feels much cleaner than before, like the words freshly fallen from his mouth had been tainting him, and only exposure to clean air could

make them disappear.

Rek still hasn't said anything, and he may yet hate Branzzy for it, but at least he'll know the truth, and that will be enough.

It will.

Rek moves to sit a little closer to Branzzy, and this time he does put his hand on Branzzy's shoulder, a solid, comforting weight.

"Okay," he says, "Okay, don't freak out but I sort of kinda knew that already...?"

Branzy snaps his head up. "What?!"

Now that he's actually looking at Rek, he can see the sheepish smile in his face, diluted with some deeper sorrow in the depths of it.

"It wasn't that hard to figure out! You're the only guy I know who could do something like that, and then you started acting all strange..."

This feels much more like a freefall, the ground rushing up to meet him, and God, really, it was all so obvious, wasn't it?

He can't believe he ever thought this would work out – the entire pipe dream of revenge, Clown's ideas of rewriting their school.

What stupid, hopeless, childish thoughts.

"That's– That's not all, though." Branzzy stammers, convinced that if he doesn't speak now, he'll hold his silence forever.

Rek just gives him an encouraging nod.

And then the words start tumbling out of his mouths, poisonous and sharp, about Clown and a vision of violence in the darkness, red paint and words like a declaration of war; about a website crafted to enact justice, and the discovery of a ploy so much larger than what Branzzy could deal with; about trying and failing to stop it, Vitalasy's dark eyes and the blood in his teeth; about the darkness of damp earth and an empire's collapse; about Clown, about Clown and guilt and fear,

and The Cleansing, a dark shape on the horizon, and when it's all done, Branzy has to take a few deep breaths to remind himself he's still alive.

He's still breathing, here, not buried or lost in the pixels shaping up to his own demise.

Rek just holds him for a few minutes.

"The Cleansing, huh..." He finally mumbles, "So that's what they're calling it..."

Branzy gives him a despairing look.

All this time spent trying to shield Rek, to save him from some grand unknown danger, and he had known all along, had in fact tried to do the same – kept his distance so as to not make Branzy a target.

It still doesn't quite add up, though.

"I can see you still have questions." Rek says, almost a little tiredly. "And I swear they'll be answered in just a moment! But first... How are you, man? Is everything... alright?"

And there's that concern, that awful pitying glint in Rek's eyes, like he shouldn't hate Branzy for all he did, for abandoning Rek during a time where he needed a friend above all, for leaving him in the warzone that their school had become.

And though they're still friends, the rift between them feels as still and deadly as their own no man's land.

"I am fine!" Branzy hisses, suddenly oddly defensive.

Rek gives him a hard look, caught between concerned and oddly angry, eyes alight in that moment, bright with an emotion Branzy cannot quite read anymore.

"Are you, though? I know how you get, Branzy! You don't take care of yourself! You—" Rek makes a sharp motion with his hands, cutting himself off. He takes a few seconds to breathe, and his voice is much softer when he continues. "Did Clown, y'know... treat you alright? He didn't—"

Branzy scoffs. "He didn't do anything. Rek, we don't have the time for this! I'm literally fine!"

Rek raises his eyebrows. "Sure you are, dude."

But he concedes, and silently gets off the couch, holding a hand out to Branzy.

"C'mon then. I've got something to show you."

Rek has a guest room, somewhere on the second floor, and Branzy's never seen it used before, but it's that door he's being lead to.

Later, Branzy will think that nothing could've prepared him for what he'd see inside, dramatic as it sounds.

But when Rek opens the door and Branzy catches a glimpse of Parrot, he feels as though his heart stops beating.

The phantom pain of long faded bruises creeps into his awareness, warning.

Here it is then, full circle, beginning and end just on the edge of meeting again, ouroboros, eternity.

Parrot and Branzy, once again face to face, once again a secret to hide – but Rek's here too, and he gently pushes Branzy inside.

The tension snaps like a rubber band pulled taut.

Parrot visibly deflates, tearing his eyes away from Branzy and sitting back down onto the bed.

"So..." Rek trails off expectantly.

Both Rek and Parrot shoot him an incredulous look.

"Right. Right! This is a bit of a long story, though. Maybe you should sit down, Branzy...?"

Branzy eyes the bed, the indent of Parrot on the far left side seeming all at once far too dangerous, and shakes his head.

Rek's smile turns a little strained.

"Okay, that's... fine, I guess. But I really do think this is *your* story to tell, Parrot. Branzy should know everything."

Parrot exhales softly. And now that Branzys really looking at him, he does look kind of horrible – hunched shoulders and dark bruises under his eyes, very small on the bed, all alone.

This is your fault, some part of Branzys mind whispers, halfway to being horrified, halfway to being proud.

He ignores it.

"First of all, sorry about... all that," Parrot starts, waving his hand in the general direction of Branzys face, "I wasn't thinking straight, y'know with Zam–"

Rek groans. "Start at the beginning, you're just making this more confusing!"

Parrot pinches the bridge of his nose. "Right. So... Long story short, Zam and some of his, uh, I guess you could call them friends? Want to like, tear down the entire social hierarchy? Thing is, at this point, they're just attacking everyone to prove... some sort of point? I don't know, it's fucked."

He takes another deep breath.

"Zam is... I don't want to think he's a bad person, but... I have this friend, right, Spoke? Rek mentioned that you met him. One of Zam's friends figured out that we're pretty close, and because they *really* lacked manpower, they– Fuck, they threatened me to join them. If I didn't, they'd hurt Spoke. If I failed to get someone, or refused, they'd hunt him down. You don't know Spoke, he's– Well, that's besides the point.

That day in the bathroom... We were laying down the terms of our agreement. When I saw you, I thought... Well, you can probably guess. But you got your revenge for it in the end, right, cuz here I am! I can't go home, or to school or anywhere really, because either Zam finds me or someone finally does call the cops and I get arrested for aggravated assault!"

Parrot laughs cynically, in that hollow, quiet way. Not once does he look Branzys in the eyes. He continues, though much quieter.

"Rek took me in, but I still don't quite get *why*. I was coming here to beat him up, after all. But he... well, he knew I was coming. He knew a lot of things. We got talking, laid low. And now you're here."

Branzy feels, suddenly and ferociously, a kinship to Parrot – threatened and without options, a cornered animal, ultimately only a pawn in the hands of others, a little wheel in a grand machine.

There's no question if he would've done the same; he has, in some way, done worse to protect Rek.

Hunter and hunted, Parrot and Branzy, in the end condemned to the same fate, motivated by the same ideals – any fear bleeds away to sharp understanding.

Branzy sits down on the bed next to him, and hopes it's enough of an olive branch.

His mind is spinning, every thought of being abandoned now turned to lead with guilt, every ounce of hatred for Parrot he'd clung to like tiny paper cuts all over his body.

How could Branzy ever have thought he knew anything at all?

"It was Clown's idea," Branzy breathes, "The website. He wanted vengeance for Rasplin, and he held this mistake I made over my head. I was trapped, and I couldn't do anything about it. He had me do all his dirty work, and I was really scared for so long that... I don't know, he was just waiting for the right moment to sell me out. I– I'm sorry, Rek, I should've talked to you, but I was just so *scared*."

Rek kneels down in front of Branzy, and takes his hands into his own.

"Branzy. You're my best friend. I knew you wouldn't just stop talking to me for no good reason. I basically went into hiding myself! I'm just glad you trust me enough to tell me everything now. We'll figure this out, alright?"

And even Parrot, who so clearly looks overwhelmed with his own problems, nods once, resolute.

"Okay," Branzy says, and then again, evening out his voice, "Okay. Clown and I want to rally everyone that wants to fight against the Cleansing and we'll– I don't know, talk battle strategies?"

Rek doesn't look too pleased about having to work together with Clown, but he does eventually agree, and at that point Parrot's on board too.

Branzy leaves Rek's house, still a different person in an unchanging environment, but somehow content with the change at the assurance that Rek is still Branzy's best friend, despite it all.

No matter what.



Clown calls it a war council.

In the dim lightning everyone looks grim, faces cut into harsh caricatures by the darkness, and the name feels more fitting every second they spend gathered around Branzzy's kitchen table, silent.

Parrot and Rek came, along with some kid named Woogie that Branzzy had never seen before; it's a depressing turnout, all things considered.

The five of them against an unknown number of enemies, still unsure about what exactly they will be up against, if it can be fought at all.

Clown keeps tapping his fingers on the table, a steady metronome, a singular crack in the heavy silence.

"Uhm," Branzzy says lamely, "So... Does anyone know when the Cleansing could take place, maybe? That'd be helpful to know, right...?"

Parrot shrugs. Rek shakes his head. Clown keeps tapping his fingers on the table.

There's a hopelessness to it, a sinking realization about the true depths of their despairing situation; some sort of horrible feeling that maybe, the fight has already been lost.

A war with too many casualties and no opposing force.

It was hope that had brought them this far, Branzzy out of his shallow grave and Rek out of hiding, that maybe they still stood a chance to save someone else. That maybe, even though it was too late for them, it wouldn't have to be for so many others.

But here they are, drowning in their own lack of knowledge, and all of it was just a mirage, a man in a desert dreaming of water.

Suddenly, Woogie perks up. "The autumn ball!"

Clown turns to face him, face swallowed by shadows. "What?"

Woogie gulps and Branzzy has to bite back a smile. He's glad he's not the only one who was terrified of Clown at first.

"The autumn ball...? It's organised by a bunch of seniors, but literally everyone's going, apparently. There'll be almost no teachers present, so I guess it'd be the perfect event to... crash? Is that the right word?" Woogie explains, pulling up something on his phone.

He pushes it into the middle of the table.

Branzy leans forward a little, tilting the screen to himself.

It's an Instagram post; a picture of a flyer with the words *Autumn Ball* written across the top in a neat, cursive font.

There's a date and a time, as well as a dress code and a location written in the same font across the page; a few red leaves decorate the edges of it.

Branzy quickly scans the page.

"What?! It's this Saturday?"

Woogie nods.

"That's in three days..." Rek says, suddenly sounding very tired. "No way we can come up with a sound plan in *three days*."

"What would you have us do then? Give up?" Clown shoots back. There's a quiet anger in his dark tone, a burning fire in his eyes.

Tension sits in the air, heavy and dangerous like gas, and the fire is already starting to spread.

Branzy can almost image them all going up in flames.

"Calm down." He says, willing his voice to remain steady and calm, "We can come up with something. Did you all forget why we're here? There's literally no use in infighting!"

Clown mutters something under his breath, and Branzy thinks it sounds a little like *sorry*, so he sits back down, too.

"So. Any ideas?"

Woogie just shrugs. "We should try to confirm if they're actually planning to do the Cleansing on Saturday. Every other plan'll be useless if they're gonna do it some other time."

"Right," Branzy mutters, "If we're lucky, I might still have access to Zam's chat logs. I'll check, alright? We could still try to come up with some basic outlines, though."

Parrot scoffs. "Why wait till Saturday? We could bring the fight to *them*. Finding Zam can't be that hard. Let's give them a taste of their own medicine!"

Branzy tunes them out at that point, attention focused on the screen of his laptop.

His fingers on the keyboard feel clammy, and his reflection on the screen, pixelated and not quite human, stares back at him with empty eyes. *One last time*, Branzy assures himself. Just one last time.

And then he's gone, caught somewhere between the digital void and the edge of reality.

It doesn't take long to figure out that Zam has actually changed his password. Something must've set him off. But there's really nothing he can do, is there, against Branzy – before he's even properly thought about it, Branzy has booted up the bot. Ready to strike.

"I lost access, but don't worry, I'll get us back in." He says quickly, eyes still on the screen. Branzy can do this. Here, he stands undefeated.

He jumps when Clown puts a hand on his shoulder, so unaware of his real body with his conscience firmly in the digital that he didn't see his surroundings at all.

"No." He says in that firm, quiet way of his, voice tinged with an odd kindness.

Branzy blinks. His eyelids reflect the glowing white screen of his laptop back at him.

"No...?" He asks, confused.

Clown pushes Branzy's laptop shut, all casual and nonchalant. "No! I think you've done enough, Branzy. Really. We'll figure this out some other way."

Then, he turns back to the rest of the table.

"Listen, I think Parrot's right. We'll bring the fight to them! Tomorrow, I'll go find Zam. Let's see what he's willing to tell us."

There's that glint in Clown's eyes again, the dangerous look of a predator which was promised a hunt, all sharp teeth and deadly intent.

Branzy pictures him with Zam, violence for violence, and thinks that that cannot be their plan.

"I'm coming with you!" He rushes out before he's even properly thought about it. As soon as the words have left his mouth though, he knows he meant it.

Clown looks at him, grey eyes almost pleading, but Branzy won't back down. Not this time.

And that's how they get their plan.



There is a moment, Zam's back turned once again, hair golden, an illusion of a crown, where Branzy doesn't know if Clown'll actually do it.

Clown is leaning against the same wall as Branzy, tense with something that's not quite anticipation, unmoving like a statue.

A few times Branzy thinks he's even stopped breathing.

He doesn't know what they're waiting for.

Zam is alone, the hallway is empty, and their breathing feels disruptive in an odd way, like breaking the silence of a graveyard.

This is their vigil then, one held for an enemy not even defeated yet.

Still. The silence is like that of a grave, an empty coffin.

The moment passes.

Clown pushes himself away from the wall.

His footsteps are eerily quiet, and Branzy closes his eyes, bracing himself.

When he opens them again everything happens way too fast.

Clown grabs Zam by the back of his shirt, spins him around and punches him square in the face; the force of it knocks Zam right down on the ground. His head bangs against the tiles.

Clown doesn't give him the time to regain his bearings.

In a flash, he's kneeling next to Zam, using one of his hands to push him further to the ground by his throat.

There's something to it Branzy can't quite place, something artful in the violence, a song older than time in strength and blood.

Branzy thinks he should be disturbed. Instead, he finds himself listening to the sharp crack of Zam's head against the floor and almost smiling, a dark thrill like ecstasy in his veins, and can't quite bring himself to hate it.

It's oddly joyous, this display of strength, so wholly of this world that Branzy never thought he could have it.

But still, an eye for an eye only leaves the world blinded, doesn't it? And no matter how much the dark song of vengeance is an alluring one, it is not the purpose of this.

Branzy has had quite enough of delusions of strength.

Slowly, Branzy walks up to Clown.

He looks down at Zam, hair splayed out around his head like a bastardized halo, blood in his teeth, caged in like a wild animal, and doesn't feel sorry.

The last time he saw Zam was just moments before he himself was trapped.

But Zam smiles up at him, too many teeth and a mania in his eyes, bright and burning with some unknown flame.

He doesn't even struggle.

"So," Branzy drawls, "You wanna lay down the terms of our agreement here, Clown?"

Clown's hand on Zam's throat tightens almost imperceptibly. Branzy still notices, of course.

"Tell us everything you know about the Cleansing, and you get to walk away still... relatively unscathed."

Zam laughs, half a cough, all rough and scratchy from the pressure to his throat.

His crooked smile shows his bleeding gums.

"Fuck you."

Branzy holds his breath as Clown slams his fist into Zam's face again.

Blood runs from his nose down his chin, and Zam's lips are still pulled back into that wide smile, taunting and cheery, like he cannot feel the pain at all.

"Talk." Clown spits.

Zam tries to move his head, but Clown doesn't allow him.

So when Zam starts talking, his empty eyes stare up at the ceiling aimlessly. He looks dead, there on the floor, blood all over his face, expression frozen in place.

"What—" he gags a bit on his own blood, and Clown eases his grip slightly, "What did he tell you, *Branzy*? That this is justice? That you're doing the right thing?"

Branzy freezes. Another broken laugh tears itself from Zam's throat.

"Oh, and you actually believed him! He's a dirty fucking *liar*! He didn't tell you shit, did he? Here's the simple truth *Branzy*: This is all *his fault*. It's his fault that—"

Clown is on him in a second, and it's all so terribly calculated that Branzy doesn't even have it in himself to flinch as he hears Zam's nose break with a sickening crack.

But Zam keeps speaking through it all.

"It's his fault that— *Fuck*— It's his fault that, *ow*, Rasplin died, didn't he tell you?"

Blood roars in Branzy's ears. *No*, he thinks sort of hopelessly, *no, that can't be right*.

But Clown is frozen too, caught right in the motion of doling out another punch.

For a second, it feels like the entire world collapses into itself; everything that Branzy believed, every little conversation about grief, every bit of understanding falls away suddenly.

Zam's voice turns mocking. "Oh no, he *really* didn't tell you that? Well, it's true! Ask him. Go on, ask him!"

"Clown..." Branzy says, but his voice is barely above a broken whisper.

Clown does not reply.

"You poor, poor thing, Branzy. You were tricked! Manipulated! Don't worry, it's not too late to do the right thing. Leave him, and join us. You know where to find me."

It's easy for Zam to wiggle out of Clown's grasp, now that Clown is frozen in place above him, eyes very distant.

He spares them one last glance before he walks away.

"You know, you really proved my point with this."

And then Zam is gone, and it's just Clown and Branzy in the empty hallway, alone and silent.

"Clown," Branzy says again, hopeless and shaking.

Very faintly, he hears Clown breathe, all shaky and shuddering. Still, he does not reply.

Branzy takes another small step forward. Clown's back is still turned to him, and he is trembling soundlessly.

"Why can't you just tell me the truth...?" Branzy asks. His voice is much more hollow than he intends it to be.

"Don't—" Clown says, voice all high with some unknown emotion, "Don't say that."

What else can I say, Branzy thinks, not without desperation, what else would you have me say?

All he wants is honesty, just this once, a sliver of truth, a glimpse of reality, nothing more. But Clown's back is still turned, and he cannot see anything at all.

Truth or lie.

Caught somewhere between emptiness and grief, Branzy reaches out feebly.

He doesn't quite touch Clown, but his hand hovers in the air, and no one is there to see.

"Please!" He says, and his voice breaks on the last syllable.

Clown doesn't turn to face him, but his fists clench uselessly at his side.

"Fine!" Clown shouts, and it echoes through the emptiness around them, "I fucking killed my best friend, Is that what you want to hear?!"

Branzy feels his knees give out under him, and there's no one to catch him now; just the emptiness that rushes up to meet him, surrounds him and consumes him, making a home in his chest.

He thinks about how Clown had called their school rotten, how he had called for bloody vengeance, the word '*murderers*' sprayed on the school's entrance, and can only try to keep breathing.

It's a lie, like everything else; an entire relationship built on nothing but fear and lies and manipulation.

With the last of his strength, Branzy asks one last question.

"What happened?"

Clown hugs himself, a bastardized gesture of comfort, and keeps trembling.

There's silence for a little while.

"We had a fight. Rasplin told me I had to stop fighting his battles for him and I— I *couldn't*, Branzy, I just couldn't. He told me he had a plan, something big to get revenge and I just knew it would ruin him. Or his future, I don't know. I told him he shouldn't do it, to just let me protect him. It— It... escalated. At some point we were just... screaming at each other."

Clown takes a deep breath.

"He said I should just leave him alone, that he could fend for himself. I said— I said that if he's so

eager to die, he should just— kill himself and get it over with already. The next day he did."

Branzy thinks he can feel his heart crack right down the middle. It's not quite pity he feels, but a deep rooted sadness, an understanding much deeper than sympathy, because it all makes so much more sense.

This was never about vengeance or justice, it was about trying to make something up, to redeem himself, rid himself of the guilt; it was always about forgiveness, in the end.

Even though no one knew.

"Oh, *Clown*." Branzy whispers.

He shuffles forward on his knees until they are face to face.

Clown has his head bowed, hair covering his eyes and trembles still running up his body periodically, like glitches, mistakes in some invisible code.

Branzy thinks he's never seen him so lost, so defeated; looking, all at once, much more like a kid, so very vulnerable and young.

He tilts Clown's chin up with his hands, an achingly gentle grip, and only realizes Clown's been crying when he sees his red eyes, glossy and wide.

He doesn't even think about it, just cradles Clown's face in his hands, and looks at him, truly, past all the masks and defenses.

"It's not your fault," Branzy says, "Clown, it's not your fault. You couldn't have known. You couldn't have. It's alright. You still have me. You will always have me."

He scoots a little closer, puts his head on Clown's shoulder and his arms around the other's shaking body.

They keep breathing, together.



(Their war council keeps preparing, galloping towards an uncertain fate; doomsday is coming, and there's no time to rest.

Still. For all their worries, they do not know anything. For all their suspicions the truth is still shrouded.

Time catches up to them faster than they'd like.)



The day of the Cleansing, Branzy wakes up screaming.

It's that familiar dream again, of crashing waves and suffocation, only this time he is not alone; there is someone there drowning with him, and he is watching them sink as he has watched himself a thousand times before.

It's a little more tragic, this way.

The name catches on his tongue, and their face is blurry under the waves and yet Branzy knows that he has doomed them; hand in hand, sinking and choking.

He wakes up screaming, and chokes even on that.

The sun outside beats down on the world like a steel sword, and there is no warmth to it anymore, no comfort – this is doomsday, and this is the last judgement, and all of them are sinners.

His entire body shakes as he gets ready.

The dress code dictates formal clothing, but Branzy doesn't own a suit, so the best he can do is black jeans and a white button up. Both don't quite fit him anymore either.

And then it's waiting time. The rhythmic motion of clothing himself was calming, and now that there's nothing left to do, all the thoughts come rushing back in, and the raft that was supposed to carry him back to shore has deserted him in the waves.

Is there still hope? Can he still believe in being saved at the end of all this?

Each version of this story ends with Branzy slaughtered, because fate has staked its claim and the ending is already written.

Maybe it's time to stop being delusional.

Maybe it's time to accept hopelessness.

And yet, something about it all makes Branzy want to keep fighting; even if just for that dream of justice, for himself and his convictions, for the breathless feeling of an easy happiness.

Something about the swirling, nauseating colours on his computer screen make him want to keep struggling against the heavy pull of resignation. That website, that senseless destruction, cannot be his legacy; today, Branzy will either rewrite his history or become a victim to it, and either would make a fitting end.

As long as he changes anything at all.

As long as he tries.

Clown comes to pick him up, like that evening back then, but there is no joy in the dark sky, and neither of them quite know what to say.

In the face of the end, the horrifying drop after the endless build-up, words are of no comfort. Tense silence reigns true.

Still, there's a little familiarity in Clown's hands on the steering wheel, the familiar rhythm of his fingers tapping, Branzy's breath clouding up the window.

There's familiarity in the sudden warmth of it, one last reminder of all there is to lose.

(Somehow, Branzy's eyes keep catching on Clown, his suit and his hair and that severe look in his eyes, apologies hanging heavy between them, and all he knows about Clown feels secondary in comparison to the enormity of his love.

It threatens to consume him even now, half-remembered, a story yet untold, flaming and tinted red, only the shadow of the cross. Love is absence and love is consumption and love is so painful it makes a fool out of Branzy yet.

It is a reason to keep fighting, despite it all.)

Clown only says one word as they're pulling into the parking lot. It's muffled by his face mask, half whispered and thrown haphazardly into the silence.

"Ready?"

All Branzy can do is nod, and then Clown is pulling open the door and taking his hand.

They walk towards their doom hand in hand, like children who just don't know any better.

It's beautiful. Horrifyingly, the entire thing is beautiful.

Branzy smells candle wax and pumpkin spice, the entire world tinted red and orange and yellow, girls in long dresses and boys in suits, and everything is so perfect it feels artificial.

The gym has transformed into something entirely magical, and Branzy tries to ignore the taste of blood in his mouth, omen of darkness that it is; he tries not to see death in every corner, horrible violence behind every giggling mouth painted a striking red, but there is blood in his mouth and some dark knowledge in his mind, and it does not feel like they can win this.

Clown grips his hand a little tighter as they move through the crowd, smiling faces all turned mocking with paranoia clouding their visions, and Branzy does not dare to raise his head.

He stares at his scuffed shoes, the spots of overhead light that sometimes throw shiny squares on the floor, and the music drowns out everything else.

Clown keeps pulling him forward.

Sometimes, Branzly thinks he catches a hint of a familiar face in the gloomy light, but no matter how hard he searches the crowd he can never quite tell if Vitalasy is actually here or not.

Nevertheless, Branzly wants to tell him to run. To save his friend just this once, like he had failed to do before, and wash his hands clean off the blood, adorn himself with innocence like a laurel wreath.

But Clown keeps pulling him forward, and Vitalasy is nothing but a distant phantom.

They find Parrot and Rek in a corner just left of the bar.

There's a severity to them, a heaviness that only muted resignation can bring: All of them know that their lives will never be the same again after this.

None of them know what will happen.

Rek says something, but the words don't quite register in Branzly's mind, all jumbled with the music and the distant sound of laughter.

Logically he knows he's panicking, but there's a deep calmness within in him yet, and he Clown is still holding his hand, so the panic is nothing but dark spots in his visions, haunting but too far away to reach.

And then the light bulb directly above them bursts.

With a high whine, every single light in the room begins to flicker and shut off, and the crackles of electricity sound like a siren, a warning, run now or die, and Branzly is frozen to the spot.

The music has stopped. The music has stopped, and everything has fallen silent, all Branzly can hear is his own breathing, the soft whispering of confused students around him.

Rubber soles scuffing against the floor as people try to navigate their way around the darkness.

Clown is entirely still beside him.

Something is wrong.

One of the speakers comes to life with a sharp crack, entirely deafening in the silence.

Laughter spills out into the darkness in little ribbons of sound, malicious and happy and victorious, and everyone is holding their breath. Something is wrong.

With mirth still in their voice, the person on the speakers begins to talk.

"So sorry to interrupt your little... party down there, but we have an *announcement* to make. One you've all been waiting for, I assume!"

They giggle lightly, and their breath ghosts over the microphone.

"There's quite a number of you here, I'm actually kind of surprised! So— welcome, everyone, to the Cleansing! This will be your, hm, how do I put this... *liberation*."

An uneasy murmur rises, people shuffling around aimlessly. Branzzy tries to look at Clown, but it's so dark, and he cannot see anything at all.

"Here's the thing! You can all point fingers and call us the bad guys, but are we? Are we, really?" The voice continues, taunting, "Here's the thing, we only did what everyone else has done here for years! Violence for violence, isn't that right? And you all only started caring when it was your poor, golden kids that got knocked around."

"Is that fair? Is that fucking fair?" The voice asks, "No! Of course it isn't! See how easy it was for us to hurt you? See how powerless you feel when someone does the shit you do to *you*?"

"Nobody here fucking cares unless it's about them! Listen, we don't think we're heroes. But don't delude yourself into thinking we're the bad guys. We gave you all a taste of your own medicine. And now, in the ashes of the social hierarchy, now that everyone is a victim, we can finally— fucking finally— *move on!*"

"That was the whole point! We can all move on.

If everyone is powerless, then everyone is powerful. If—"

And that's when the first explosion rattles the building.

The speakers fizzle out, high and screeching, the pained noise of a dying animal and someone is screaming, and everyone is frozen in place.

Branzzy blinks, and the world turns into high focus, sharp and adrenaline quick; bits of paint rain from the ceiling like powdered snow in slow motion.

"– isn't us! I repeat, this– us!" Someone yells over the speakers before it sparks and dies, one last desperate burst of electricity, and then all hell breaks loose.

The mass of people turns vicious, cornered animals striking out in desperation; someone is screaming and everyone is running, trampling on their fancy dresses and suits, all running, all saving only themselves.

They were right. Horribly, they were right.

This is the Cleansing.

And they cannot leave.



Somehow they end up in some hallway, Branzly half deaf with his ears ringing, and the entire world feels fuzzy with unreality.

Clown has not let go of his hand yet.

Rek is jittery beside him, standing on the edge of his feet like he's trying to run but can't, and the helpless look he throws at Branzly feels like a punch in the gut.

Even Parrot seems scared, somehow, eyes wide in the semi darkness, and they're all a little clueless, lost in a labyrinth they've never seen as one before.

Out of sight, hallways stretch in either direction.

It's deceptively silent, but the memory of shaking ground and bits of the ceiling raining down keep them alert, adrenaline and fear and some horrible anticipation mixed into one, and every piece of rubble is a monument to Branzly's failures.

"Keep moving!" Rek hisses, "We can't just stay here!"

Clown scoffs. "And where would we go?"

Rek's eyes dart around wildly, and Branzly knows instinctively what he's searching for; easy exits, a way out of a situation they cannot escape, and he hates himself for dooming his friend to the same fate as himself – trapped in some other labyrinth, slaughtered on the altar of fear for redemption. And for all the Cleanser's talk of justice, this does not seem fair at all.

"I know a place," Parrot says, "C'mon, follow me— It's safer than this stupid hallway."

Branzy stumbles, and Clown's grip on his hand tightens. *I'm here to catch you*, Branzy reads in the ridges of his hands, a safety net of warmth, and he follows Parrot into the darkness, not quite fearless but not quite afraid.

They move through empty hallways, heads ducked and halfway to crouching, while faraway explosions rattle the lockers in a discordant tune. Clown stops them at each intersection of hallways to check the area but there's never anything there.

It's just them in the wreckage of it all, just them on the roof of the palace that had watched Rome burn, and each breath feels heavy with finality in Branzy's chest.

But Parrot keeps walking and so they keep following, another labyrinth, another crossroads.

Endless and infinite.

It's only when Clown abruptly halts that Branzy realizes where they're going.

"You lead us back to the gym?" He asks, voice that faux calm of gentle waves before a raging storm, and his eyes cut through the darkness like two blazing fires.

Rek takes a cautious step back. Fight or flight, and Branzy knows Rek will only ever run.

Parrot turns around to face them.

Behind him, the open gym doors reveal a wreck of decorations and food, and all the chaos strikes a fear into Branzy he hadn't allowed himself to feel until now; complete and all-encompassing, frozen to the spot by his own fright.

"Yeah," Parrot replies, "Yeah, I did. We're going to the old locker room, alright? It's relatively safe because no one would think to go in there. You *have* to trust me."

Trust. Branzy looks at Parrot, the boy who had hurt and threatened him, that had wrought pain upon their school, and yet had also just been used and threatened, had lashed out to protect someone else; fragile understanding rears its head once again. He doesn't really trust Parrot, but he understands him. And that's all it takes.

Branzy is the first to take another step forward, to keep moving where Parrot wants them to go, but Clown follows soon after.

Rek pushes out a breath, but despite his trembling legs, he goes too.

The old locker room is located in a little sectioned off part of the hallway, behind a gate that's supposed to be locked but Parrot just pushes open casually.

It creaks loudly as it swings open, and they collectively flinch.

And then it's just a few feet between them and the door, between them and relative safety.

Parrot gestures for them to get behind him, and they creep towards the room single file, like soldiers, like kids; trying not to breathe.

Parrot turns the doorknob agonisingly slowly.

And then the door swings open, and someone punches Parrot straight in the face.

Someone inside yelps in surprise.

"Is that Parrot?!"

Branzy risks a glance at the door and comes face to face with Mapicc, wide-eyed and hand still raised, ready to strike again.

Mapicc blinks rapidly, a distant, shocked expression trickling slowly into his face – he throws a glance behind himself, and then steps aside to let them enter.

The door falls shut behind them, harsh and sure like a cannon call.

What remains of the Cleanser is spread throughout the room, hopeless and torn apart, driftwood in a sea storm. They look hopeless.

It is here, dust in his lungs and fear in his heart, that Branzy understands no one has won, today. A fruitless battle, a war over ideals that can never be won, and here they all are just another casualty – crosses, row on row, mark their place.

Zam looks the worst out of all of them – someone's laid him down on one of the small wooden benches and put a jacket under his head, and blood has matted his hair to his skin, a sickly mix of copper and blonde and skin that looks far too white.

His eyes are closed.

Leo is squatting by his side, hand on his throat to check his pulse, and Branzy does not know him well but there's a grim set to his face, a little blood smeared on his cheek.

There's no victory to celebrate for them either.

Branzy tries to move closer, but Mapicc steps in front of Zam quickly. Like it's second thought, almost instinct – he has wiped the shock clean off his face and replaced it with thick disdain, a mask that cannot quite hide the fear dormant just underneath it. A cracked porcelain mask, and the shards only dig into the wearer's skin.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Mapicc asks, accusatory, and though it's a question for all of them, his eyes never quite leave Parrot's face.

"We could ask you the same thing!" Clown interjects smoothly, "Aren't you supposed to be out there, hm, '*cleansing*'? Your plan worked perfectly, I don't see why you're hiding out here?"

Mapicc's expression cracks right down the middle. He turns, as if waiting for Leo to say something, but the other is still focused on Zam.

"Didn't you hear what we said on the speakers?" He says quietly, "This isn't us. We're– This isn't part of our plan, we... We only had the speech, and then it was supposed to be over!"

"What do you mean this isn't you?!" Branzy hears himself ask, and his voice has gone shrill with fear.

"I know it doesn't sound believable." Leo sighs, "But– Look at Zam. He got hit by some debris on the way here, and now he's... Why would we do that to ourselves?"

And horribly, it's true. Leo and Mapicc look horrible, bruised and tired and defeated, with the blood of their friend on their shirts and hands, with bits of wall paint and soot streaked through their hair; phantom explosions still rattling their teeth.

This is not their doing.

And that realization makes the urgency set in, a heavy, lead weight in Branzy's stomach.

"We have to leave." He states simply.

This is not the Cleansers doing, which means there's a third party, more dangerous than any of them, a wildcard only now revealing the ace up their sleeve – and all of them have willingly trapped themselves.

Leo points to Zam. "He can't walk. I need someone to help me carry him."

It's Clown that moves over to pull Zam up, to Branzly's surprise. It makes something like hope settle in his weary bones, something light and entirely warm, because there is still humanity here, despite it all; empathy that breaks down walls of hatred and viciousness that stood indomitable for centuries.

They leave that room together, not Cleansers and their enemies, only a group of boys, scared and bruised but still alive, still going, still able to move on.

What could be more human than that?

What could prove the Cleansers right more?

(There's no such thing as a social hierarchy anymore. Branzly holds doors open for boys who just days ago wouldn't have hesitated to kick his teeth in, and it doesn't even feel disingenuous.)

The entrance is already in sight when a locker right next to him suddenly gets pushed over by the force of an explosion.

Branzly's ears ring so violently he has to clench his teeth through the aftershocks of it, and Zam, halfway to being awake, flinches so hard Leo almost drops him.

In the second it takes them to regain their bearings all goes to hell.

"Hello, gentlemen."

Parrot's eyes widen. "... Spoke?"

Spoke's gaze trails over their group and catches on Parrot, for just a second, before he continues, less smooth.

Something changes in his face, desperate.

"Did... you do this?" Parrot whispers.

Branzly feels his breath catch in his throat, a sudden fear like ice in his veins, and Clown feels so far away, and Rek is just as frozen as he is.

Spoke laughs, a horrible, hopeless noise, defeated and echoing in the emptiness.

"Yes!" He shouts, "Yes, yes, I did! Parrot, you have to understand, this'll all be finally over!"

Parrot shakes his head slowly.

"Spoke– What?"

"Parrot. This school cannot be saved! No matter what... fucking Zam says. This school can't be saved, and he proved it! The Cleansing was never anything but a selfish charade. It was all for personal gain! D'you think he really cares about that shit he preaches about? He threatened you, Parrot! Don't look so shocked, of course I figured it out. I saw that video. And now you're standing here, with the guys that hurt you, and that's why we're *hopeless*."

"Please..." Parrot croaks out, "Please, Spoke. *Don't*– Don't do this. If we leave now, no one ever has to know you did this–"

But Spoke is no longer listening. He takes another step towards Zam.

"Zam." He says, grave, "You're so damn annoying, do you know that? Why can't you just give up?"

Zam just groans. A bit of blood trickles down his forehead.

Spoke comes even closer. He kneels down in front of Zam, some strange curiosity in his empty eyes.

"Zam. Look at me. *Look* at me."

Zam raises his head, such defiance shining in his eyes that Branzly almost, almost admires him for it.

Spoke grins.

"This is it, Zam! There will be no empire, not ever again. I made sure of that. Because that's what this is all about right? Your petty revenge for being kicked off the throne? You don't *care* about the weak. You don't care! They're all just faceless nobodies to you. Come on, admit it!"

Zam's face tightens. He spits blood on the white floor and looks almost accomplished.

"You don't get it, Spoke, do you? You want me to give up? Fine. Here I am! This is hopeless! But don't tell me what *my* intentions were. I wanted a restart, a blank slate, and I wanted everyone to understand what it feels like to be helpless. I wanted to build a better future, and not decimate the last of our hope for one!"

Zam is breathing heavily, blood falling from his nose, and Spoke's eyes still carry that strange curiosity, that glint of morbid fascination; he glances at Parrot one last time before his hand wraps around something in his pocket.

"Decimation? You haven't seen shit yet! *This* is what decimation feels like!"

He presses something, and the world shatters.

Everything shakes, a terrible rumbling coming from deep within the earth, and Spoke is laughing, high pitched and terrible, and Branzy suddenly understands that there is a thing truer than words, more ancient than talk, and it is destruction.

The walls start crumbling, bit by bit, and dust clogs up his nose and eyes as he blindly tries to get Zam up, to push Rek towards the exit – the ceiling caves, and Branzy knows they're done for.

"Run!" He shouts desperately and hopes he's being heard despite the terrible groan of a collapsing building.

Branzy's almost out the door when he hears someone cry out behind him.

It's Clown, of course it's Clown, and Branzy watches him fall in slow motion, struck by something falling from above, and he does not even think about it – one second Branzy tastes freedom and life like honey on his tongue, and the next he rejects it all for the pipe dream of saving Clown.

He pulls him up, tries to ignore the blood running down the side of Clown's face, and pulls them towards the exit.

Clown keeps stumbling, blindly reaching out for something to support himself, but there's only Branzy here, and he is refusing to die.

With the last of his strength, he pushes Clown out the door, and closes his eyes.

But Clown is not letting go of his hand, and they stumble out together as the hallway collapses

behind him.

Branzy breathes clean air, feels Clown's hand in his and knows he's alive long before he dares to open his eyes again.

Clown's knees give out under him, and they end up on the cold ground, glad for the coarse dirt, a reminder that they made it out alive.

It's over.

It's actually over, Branzy thinks deliriously, feeling like he'll float away, uprooted and entirely filled with helium, but Clown hasn't let go of his hand, and Branzy does not want him to.

It doesn't feel wrong to admit it anymore.

Colours flash behind his eyes, blue and red, blue and red, over and over, and it's only then that Branzy hears the sirens, the hushed whispers of horrified onlookers.

Someone is trying to talk to him, a hand gently put on his shoulder, but Branzy hears nothing at all.

They wrap him in a shock blanket.

Someone kneels down next to Clown to check on his head wound.

Branzy drifts, aimlessly, through the seconds, Clown's hand in his. He watches the lights reflected on the rubble of school, the long shadows – Parrot and Rek, their mouths moving soundlessly as they talk to the police, Spoke and Zam in the back of the police car.

It's all completely silent, but Branzy finds he doesn't mind. Somehow, he can still hear Clown's soft breathing, laboured as it is, and his fingers find Clown's pulse on his wrist.

Blue and red, smoke rising into the air, the warmth of Clown's body; all sensations wane and fade like the tides, and Branzy feels so very tired.

Still, deep in his stomach, a little bit of a thing like love or hope blooms into something gorgeous, because it's over, they've done it – the Cleansing is over, Spoke is done, they've made it to the end of all things, and this is the first day of the rest of their lives.

Peace, Branzy finds, is nothing but the steady beat of Clown's pulse against his fingers. Peace is nothing but the presence of Clown next to him.

The stars are drowned out by the smoke, but in Branzy's mind the night is still gorgeous, and that's all that counts.

Clown taps him on the shoulder eventually, and Branzy turns to face him.

He can tell Clown is talking by the way his mask moves, but it's soundless still, so instead he traces the trail of blood that runs from Clown's temple down to his cheek, the soft curve of the area just

underneath his eyes, the dimple on his exposed throat.

Clown taps him on the shoulder again, but Branzy just shrugs apologetically.

A hopeless giggle escapes him as he watches Clown's eyebrows furrow in frustration.

"I can't hear you." Branzy mouths, and laughs more at Clown's incredulous look.

He takes their locked hands and scoots a little closer to Clown, pulls him into a weird half hug that makes Branzy forget where he stops and Clown starts.

Blue and red.

Clown turns Branzy to face him again.

He says something, very insistent, but Branzy is too preoccupied watching his hair get tousled by the wind to pay attention.

"I think— If you took the mask off, I could read your lips? Maybe?"

Clown shudders, a full body tremor that makes Branzy want to wrap him up a little tighter, make the world disappear.

Instead, he just waits patiently.

So, the first time Branzy sees Clown's face goes a little like this: Clown pushes their heads very close together, and he tugs off his mask.

There's a jagged scar over his mouth, raised and old. Branzy wants to trace it very desperately.

Clown mouths something.

Branzy's eyes go wide, two pools of darkness in the fire hot brightness of his body, and he can't stop smiling as his ears finally pop, and the noise crashes back into his brain.

"Can you repeat that?" He asks, punched out, a little breathless.

And Clown, with blood running down his face and eyes so wide they swallow all the light, that reflect a thousand galaxies back at Branzy, whispers "*I love you*" like he's confessing to a murder.

Clown ends up in the hospital for a week.

Both him and Branzy are questioned by the police, but because Spoke had admitted to building and placing what was apparently pipe bombs all around school, neither of them are suspects for a meaningful amount of time.

School, of course, cannot resume as usual.

Two hallways ended up collapsing, and the entire building now sported cracked walls and chipped paint – during the ongoing renovations students would have to relocate to the bigger highschool in the next town over.

Branzy tries talking to Vitalasy when it's all over, and it's an okay conversation despite it all, but Branzy cannot help the feeling that they'll never be as close as they were.

Burned bridges and all that.

Rek comes by at least once every other day to check on Branzy, and they eat lunch together with Parrot sometimes.

Life is not back to normal, but a routine starts creeping in with the change, and Branzy finds he doesn't mind.

Occasionally, bets still roll in on their website, and Branzy tries to ignore them, but each of them feels like a stone in his stomach, and Branzy does not want to be drowning anymore.

Remnants of war that they are, landmines are still dangerous when the battle is over, and there is only one person that can diffuse them, now.

The day Clown's scheduled to be released from the hospital, Branzy goes to pick him up.

The walk up to his room is familiar now, and still Branzy's breath catches in his throat as he slips into the room to see Clown sprawled out on the bed, face soft and vulnerable with sleep, and his heart seizes fiercely in his chest.

It's almost evening, and the sky is gorgeous out of the window, and the room is painted golden and red, and Branzy's in love.

Isn't that terrible? Isn't that wonderful?

Clown mumbles something in his sleep, and Branzy has never felt this complete in his life.

He quickly stuffs the rest of Clown's clothes into the half packed backpack on the floor, and softly brushes the hair out of Clown's face.

It has grown long over the past few weeks, and Branzy adores it, the softness it gives Clown, like

some severity is cut away by the messy locks.

He isn't wearing his mask anymore either, and Branzy traces the scar over Clown's lips lightly.

It's painful to look at, a reminder of some terrible injustice done to Clown, but it is so proof that he has prevailed so far, that he has braved the world and came out on top, and there's something so beautiful about reminders of a life lived, even if they are cruel.

Clown has told him about what happened, during one of the many hours Branzy had spent sitting by his bedside, eyes drooping and voice low – it was a fight, apparently, about something inconsequential, but it ended with a broken bottle and glass splinters all over Clown's face.

He hates the scar, but Branzy finds an odd beauty in it, the washed out pink skin and sharp edges of it.

It's a reminder of who Clown was, who he can be, and Branzy loves him, every version, so the scar is just a part of that.

It's getting late, so Branzy gently shakes Clown's shoulder.

"C'mon, you gotta get up!" Branzy laughs quietly.

Clown grumbles, but there's a smile playing on his lips as he opens his eyes.

"Hi." He whispers.

"Hi to you too." Branzy whispers back, and then he's giggling so much that he has to bury his head in Clown's chest.

He can feel the laughter rumbling in Clown's chest as well, and they both giggle breathlessly, overjoyed.

"You ready to go?" Branzy asks, face smushed into Clown's shirt.

Clown giggles a little more. "Dude– Branzy– I can't understand a single thing you're saying!"

Branzy just playfully pushes his head against Clown's chin. You know exactly what I'm saying, he thinks, and let's Clown run a hand through his hair.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm ready to go... Actually, wait, I think I forgot to put my hoodie in my backpack. Let me just—"

"Don't get up!" Branzy pleads, "I put all your stuff in the backpack already! We still have some time."

Clown giggles again, lightly tracing Branzy's spine through his hoodie, featherlight touches like electricity sparking along his back. Branzy sighs, content.

They sit in silence for a few seconds, comfortable.

Then, Clown starts shifting, fidgeting.

"Dude, what's up?" Branzy sighs.

"There's one thing I think we should do. Uhm, now, preferably. If that's possible."

Branzy shifts so he can rest his chin on Clown's chest and look him in the eyes.

"What is it?"

Clown's eyes are averted. Branzy feels a trickle of apprehension seep in.

"It's... about the website?"

Branzy swallows dryly, a silence inviting Clown to continue.

"I've been thinking. Well, I think we should... turn it off? That period of our lives is over, right? And... as much as I want to honor Rasplin's memory, I don't think I can do that by living in the past? I don't know, the entire thing about revenge, and vengeance was... important to me, then. But now? I think I want to move on— God, that sounds horrible... But, yeah, I want to live in the present! With you! And not in the past with all my ghosts."

Branzy shifts his weight onto his elbows.

"Really? I mean— That's great! That's awesome, yeah! I also don't want to... Do the thing with the website anymore. We're past that, I guess! I can... shut it off. Uhm, whenever."

Clown leans forward until their foreheads meet. His breath ghosts over Branzy's lips.

"How about right now?"

Branzy's sure all his brainpower has just deserted him, but he nods anyway.

It takes much more fumbling than usual to pull out his phone.

He logs in to their website, and tilts the phone so Clown can see.

"Okay," Branzy says, "Okay, see that little square here? If I click on it, it leads me to this error screen— Yeah, yeah, don't laugh— But now, if you press the bottom left corner, it gives you the option to enter a command. And— here we go. That should work... Ah, there we go!"

A timer starts, counting down from ten seconds. Branzy watches Clown's face, the way his lips are parted in shock, and feels so deliriously happy it threatens to make him explode.

They count down from five out loud together, and cheer when the timer hits zero.

And then it's gone.

Their website wiped from existence, all remnants of a failure larger than life and a vengeance paid in blood wiped from the Internet without a trace.

Freedom tastes like Clown's favourite lipstick, like crisp autumn air and a hint of cinnamon.

Freedom tastes like antiseptic and Clown's expensive shampoo, and Branzy feels the cage crumble beneath his fingers, and he is free.

"How long has that been there?" Clown asks, a little awed.

"Since the day I coded the website." Branzy replies, all cheeky smiles and giddiness.

And Clown punches him in the arm lightly, but there's a warm fondness in his gaze that speaks of love.

"Ready to go now?" Branzly asks lightly.

Clown nods, and that's that.

The sky outside is still beautiful and bright, a painting of fire and gold, and Clown's hand rests heavy and warm in Branzly's, a constant reminder; we lived, we persevered, and sometimes that's all it takes.

They step out into the light together.



Chapter End Notes

and that's it!

i can't believe i finished this, actually.... so sorry for the long wait btw! a lot of things happened 🥲

first of all just having a job is exhausting, but then it was also my birthday! (i also got sick and addicted to valorant but that's a different story)

but now here we are, and it's done!

looking back on this, there are several plot holes i just. Couldn't fill,,,, i hope you enjoyed it anyway <3

(ash was supposed to appear in this chapter but uhm... yeah i kinda couldn't fit him in. oops)

(also sorry to the cleansers and esp zam for being the most incongruous characters Ever... idk man 🥲🥲)

(also sorry 2 spoke but the season two finally has changed me forever so i had to put that in)

you may have noticed that this work is part of a series now! as a little treat, i thought i'd compile all of my lifesteal works, so people who want more of my writing can easily find it!

also, i saw someone on twitter made a playlist for this fic, so i thought why not put out my own with some of the songs that actually inspired this fic?

here's the [official playlist](#) for this fic !!

lastly, someone made a [song](#) for this fic! i actually love it so much, please go show the video some love!!

i've been debating if i actually want to do this since i'm actually kinda embarrassed that i wrote shipping fics but,,,, i wanna talk to u guys more!
so i'll link my socials below, pls come talk to me :D

and then it's goodbye for now! thank you so so much to everyone who read this fic, left kudos or comments or just enjoyed it, i'm really happy i was able to write something for this fandom <33

[twitter!!](#) | [tumblr!!](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!