

la petite mort

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la petite mort

by [whichlights](#)

Summary

:: the little death that comes before complete obliteration

or:

How Clownpierce dies. Events may be edited to make him seem braver than he was in the face of his own destruction.

Notes

clownpierce is an unreliable narrator. nothing he says should be taken at face value, because he is either wrong, lying, or being deeply unwell.

sorry to bitches who clicked on this bc of the clownzy tag, you dont get them in chapter 1 except for them snipping at each other because they didn't get to sniff each other through the door first.

warnings apply full force in chapter 2.

three card monte

He's settled nicely into a corner of the square, a wall to his back and a view of the bustling foot traffic in front of him. He shuffles his card deck absently, analyzing to see if anyone close looks particularly free with their wallet. He's got two hundred and thirty seven dollars in his pockets, and the heart shaped tip plate has at least another fifty. It's definitely been a good day for the Clownpierce Popup Casino.

He sets down his cards and takes a drink from the whiskey glass sitting next to him with a bit of a flourish, giving a wide grin at the passersby who have turned to glance at him. "Do you like card tricks, kid?"

A young boy tugs on his mother's arm, pointing at the ornately dressed jester sitting on a patched up rug in the corner. She allows him to pull her over, and Clown gives his best grin in return. "Hello there. What brings you here?" He gives a theatrical shuffle of his cards, tossing them from one hand to the next.

"Errands," the boy replies dutifully, staring in wonder at the flying cards. "You're a clown?"

"That's what they call me." He grins. "Clownpierce is the name. Do you want to play a game?"

The mother looks uncertain, but the boy looks ecstatic. "Sure!" He says.

Clown fans out his deck, face up, to the kid. He has a bit of a crowd forming- excellent. "Pick a card, any card."

The kid points to the five of spades, and Clown carefully slips it into his glove as he leans back and shuffles the rest of the deck. Eventually, he offers up the deck to the child. "Pull off the top one," he suggests.

The kid does, and frowns, disappointed to find the two of hearts. "That's not it."

Clown gives an exaggerated frown. "Huh. It must have gotten lost in the shuffle. Try the next one?"

He does, and gets even more disappointed at the jack of diamonds. Clown taps his chin a few times, eyes narrowed under his mask. "That can't be right. Hold on a second, what's that?"

He reaches behind the kid's ear, and with a flick of his wrist, the five of spades appears in his hand. He laughs a little, and gives the kid a small shake of his head. "You were trying to hide it from me, huh?"

The kid laughs, eyes bright and faith restored. "Can you do other tricks?"

"I can do all sorts of things. Do you want to play a quick card game before you head on your way?"

"We really shouldn't-" the mother says, but Clown is already setting up the game.

"There are three cards," he says, putting aside his trick deck and pulling out the smaller, bent deck he keeps on hand for the game. He flips them over, and taps the one in the middle. "This is my queen of hearts. Keep your eyes on her, and when I stop shuffling, try to figure out where I put her. If you guess right-"

Clown pulls out a dollar from his pocket- a calculated risk to him, and a small fortune for this child. The kid nods enthusiastically, eyes glittering, and Clown gets to work, keeping the shuffle fast enough to be impressive, but slow enough that the kid won't lose track, his head swiveling to keep up with the queen.

After a moment, he takes his hands away. "Where's the queen?"

The kid frowns for a second, and points to the leftmost card. Clown turns it over, revealing the red queen in all her glory, and the kid beams. "Good job." He offers a high five, and the kid obliges.

The mother takes the kid away after that, dollar clutched possessively in his hands, and the crowd gives small claps. A few people toss in a dollar to the tip tray as he resumes shuffling his normal deck. After the rest of the crowd has dispersed, a man sits down in front of him, white hair sticking up in every which way, eyes wide and a little purple on the edges, hands fidgeting absently with the fabric of his shirt.

He looks like a wonderful mark.

"Welcome to the game," Clown says, shuffling his card deck in one hand and swirling his drink with the other. "Want to play?"

"Seems easy enough." His mark is grinning, which is always a good sign.

"Stake?" Clown sets out the Monte cards, looking his player up and down. He doesn't seem to know what he's doing, and he doesn't look wary. He looks cocky, overly confident, and, with a little prodding, loose with his money.

"I thought if I win, you gave me a dollar."

Adorable. He really doesn't know the scam. "That's kid rules. For a real game, put in a stake. If you win, I double your money. If you don't, I get to keep it. Simple enough."

His mark frowns a little bit, and digs for his wallet. He sets five dollars down in front of the tented cards. Clown smiles softly, and starts to shuffle, cards flying from his hand.

"That's too fast," his mark complains.

Clown laughs a little bit, and holds up his hands, the red palms of his black gloves making him look just as guilty as he is. "Not my fault you based your assumptions on how I play with eight year olds."

His mark grumbles, and Clown watches him play *eeniemeenieminimoe* under his breath to pick a card. He never had a chance, obviously.

Clown pockets five dollars.

"I'm ready for real this time," the mark insists, eyes bright. Clown is pleasantly surprised he doesn't have to needle him to go again. He puts another rumpled five dollar bill on the ground. "Again."

There's far fewer bystanders now, but a few people pause in their walk to glance as Clown shuffles the cards around. His mark's eyes are much brighter this time, much less confused, and he confidently points to the middle card.

Clown pockets five dollars.

“How is that possible?” He looks like he has some gears turning somewhere, but he doesn’t look suspicious, not quite yet. He places down another five, and nods.

Clown shuffles the cards again, and the mark’s eyes go a little wide this time. Clown just barely resists his smile, but the mark helplessly points to the middle card, already knowing she’s not there.

Clown pockets five dollars.

“I’ve got it this time,” his mark mumbles, putting down yet another five. “Do it again.”

Clown preps and shuffles the cards, slipping them in and out of his gloves, and his mark’s eyes light up as he stops shuffling. He slams his hand down on Clown’s, pinning his wrist to the floor.

“Your glove,” he says confidently. “The queen is in your glove.”

“Right,” Clown says.

“I *knew* it-”

“No, flip over the right card.”

His mark frowns, lets go, and flips the right card. The queen of hearts stares back at him. “But- but I *saw* you-”

“You saw what I wanted you to see. Nothing more, nothing less.” Clown gives another grin, and downs the rest of his drink, pocketing five more dollars. “Care to play again?”

His mark storms off.

-

He returns home soon after that. Clown’s never one to turn down a bit of fun, but he finds it best to vacate the area after making someone upset. So he returns to the motel he’s staying at, setting down his mask on the dirty bedside table as he walks in with a sigh. The room doesn’t smell any better than when he left, but he refuses to try opening a window for fresh air.

He sits down on the thin bed and starts to count out his money, slipping bills out of the hiding places of his outfit. He sets aside the first hundred for the motel fund, and then starts to sort out the rest. The biggest bill he has is a twenty, courtesy of a nice woman who had assumed he was homeless and told him to have a good day. The smallest he has are coins, spare change that people toss haphazardly into his tray. He isn’t in a position to refuse pennies because of his ego, so he pours all of his coins into a plastic jar.

The majority of his wealth is in fives and ones, stacked high as he sorts and counts them methodically. He ends the day with four hundred and sixteen dollars- one hundred and fifty from the job he’d completed earlier that day, paid out in three stacks of ones, and the rest from being a lying, cheating bastard.

He stashes the cash methodically around the room- he doesn’t keep more than one hundred and sixty three dollars in one hiding place at a time, in case of a break in. It’s worked before- people find an odd number in a strange place, and assume it’s all there is to find. For a single, brief moment, he considers using his accumulated cash to get a night in a nice hotel.

Clown dismisses the thought the second it appears- it’s hard enough to find motels that take cash,

nowadays, much less anywhere upstanding enough to be worth it. Burning a hole in his pocket wasn't worth it just to spend one night in a soft bed. With free wi-fi. And a continental breakfast. And a hot tub, or at the very least a hot shower.

Speaking of showering. He grimaces at the idea of facing the motel's shower- it always feels like it has slime on the floor, the water never cold or hot and often a strange color, but he feels grimy and sweaty from sitting outside all day, and there's crunchy blood patches on his clothes he doesn't want to stay in a moment longer.

Showering doesn't feel refreshing, but laying in bed with clean clothes certainly does. He can mostly ignore the mattress springs digging into his back after a large amount of familiarity with them.

He should try the park tomorrow, he thinks. Weekends are always good for the park, and he could use the change in scenery after staying in the financial district all week.

His phone buzzes from where he's left it on the ever crowded bedside table. He groans, throwing his arm over his face, and considers his options. He could just ignore it, but it might be important. If it's important, he'll wish he had ignored it. In the end, he reaches over to fumble for his phone blindly.

"Please be a job," he whispers to the air. "And let it be extremely braindead easy."

It's the second best thing to an easy job- Zam texted. It's simple, all caps, and punctuated with a smile: *GET TOGETHER TMRRW NIGHT CAN YOU COME :)*

Clown smiles. *sure*, he sends back. It feels like forever since the last time he dropped by one of Zam's parties, always busy and never quite stable, but he's had a good day, he got a good job out of it, and he misses his friends. He makes a mental pencil note to nick a case of beer, if he can.

He attempts briefly to let his phone suck him into a spiral of mindless activity, but his senses fail him. He has enough of himself to plug in his phone before he tries to catch a few hours of sleep.

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Much to his annoyance, he doesn't end up going to the park- a call wakes him up at two a.m., and he spends the day trawling through alleyways and the city sewers until he has the perfect opportunity to complete a quick and dirty job. At least it pays well- two hundred cash, and he takes the opportunity to actually buy a case of beer instead of stealing one.

He has just enough time to get cleaned up before he goes over to Zam's, and he had the foresight to not bring his good boots out on the job. So he shows up on time, clean, nicely dressed, and bringing alcohol- definitely a good introduction back after being unavailable for so long. He knocks on the door of Zam's apartment, and waits.

It's Redd who opens the door, giving a grin. "Hey, Clownpierce! Good to see you after all this time- ooh, I'll take that." He grabs the sixpack out of Clown's hands, and he doesn't argue with it at all. "Come on in."

"Didn't know this was your place," he quips, but he enters all the same.

Zam and Leo are lounging on the couch, chatting aimlessly it seems. Vitalasy and Subz are drinking at the table, dealing out a game of Uno that Redd quickly joins. Clown stretches out on the carpet in front of the host, giving a small grin. "Long time no see."

“Glad you could make it.” Zam smiles wide, holding out a half empty glass of, amusingly, milk.
“How’s life been treating you?”

He shrugs. “Well enough.” Zam knows how he lives, so he doesn’t bore him with the details.

Parrot comes a bit late, and comes to sit next to Zam while Leo gets himself dealt into the Uno game, which at some point seems to have turned into Blackjack with Uno cards. Clown stays laying down on the floor, occasionally tossing a stray comment to the conversationalists, but he’s content to lay down and half-doze, keeping the goings on only in the very back of his mind. Parrot kicks his ribs a little bit, and Clown, without opening his eyes, threatens to break his ankle. Parrot stops kicking his ribs.

Rek is the last to arrive, giving his hellos and apologies, but there’s a second shadow following him. Clown opens one eye to look, and sits up, a grin spreading over his face.

“Oh, hey, Clown!” Rek grins and waves a bit. “You haven’t been around in a while, this is Branzy.”

“Oh, we’ve met, actually,” he says.

“Really?” Rek tilts his head to the side.

Branzy, with violet eyes that Clown can already tell are thin colored contacts, now that he really looks, and a puff of white-blonde hair too light to be natural, stops gawking to splutter. “You owe me twenty dollars!”

Zam laughs a little bit. “Yeah, they’ve met alright.”

“It’s not my fault you don’t know Three Card Monte,” Clown says, shrugging along with his movement to stand up. His back pops nicely, and he feels relaxed, even as Branzy stares at him with disbelief.

“You cheated!”

“Well, yeah, obviously.” Clown huffs.

The Uno crowd looks over. “Oh, Branzy,” Vitalasy says, gentle and patronizing. “You didn’t try to beat Clown at cards, did you?”

“He- I saw him- I saw you put something in your glove.”

“He does that sometimes,” Zam says, which Clown thinks is helpful, and Branzy obviously disagrees with.

Leo crosses his arms. “You never let *me* see you put something in your glove.”

“It would give you too much satisfaction to see it happen,” he says. “Branzy, right? I already told you, you saw exactly what I wanted you to see.”

“But you *were* putting the queen in your glove those other times, right?”

“Maybe.”

“*Maybe* -”

“Guys,” Redd interrupts, holding out two cans of beer that Clown ignores and Branzy stares at like

it confuses him. "It's a party. Relax, have a drink, play some cards. Well, maybe we'll ban Clown from the cards, to keep the peace."

"I was fine on the floor," Clown says happily, already starting to lay back down. Branzly steps around him carefully, eyes narrowed, but doesn't seem keen to start a fight. He wonders how long Branzly has been coming to these informal parties, and what he specializes in to qualify if he can't even recognize a Three Card Monte scam.

Rek sits down on the floor next to him, and he and Zam start up a conversation about one of Zam's normal-people cases. It's vaguely interesting, so Clown pays attention as Zam bemoans the awkward hours that a cheating spouse keeps to slip away. Rek suggests killing him to make his job easier, and Clown laughs.

Zam nudges his ribs gently with the side of his foot upon proof of consciousness. "Clown, get up."

"No," he hums, eyes still closed.

"I'll play Monte with you."

Clown sits up, eyes snapping open as he looks at Zam. "You can't beat me," he says.

"I know," Zam says happily.

Zam's attempt to get him to stop laying on the ground is completely transparent, but Clown likes him and likes his games, so he allows himself to fall for it. He knows where Zam keeps his playing cards, so he drags himself up to standing and grabs them, and starts shuffling through, looking for the tented cards he always uses for this game.

Zam sits on the floor in front of him, and Rek hurriedly steals his spot on the couch. Clown flicks out the cards, showing Zam their placements before shuffling. Since he doesn't have his gloves on, he resorts to the usual trick instead of his improved version. "Alright. Where's the queen?"

Zam guesses wrong five times before he gets bored and goes back to the couch. Clown keeps playing with the cards, the repetitive movement and the sound of the cardstock itching something deep in his brain.

It surprises him when it's Branzly who sits down in front of him, something like determination set in his jaw. "I'm going to beat you at something," he says. "Do you know how to play Blackjack?"

Clown laughs a little. "Of course I know how to play Blackjack."

"I want someone else to deal. Fair game."

Already, Clown can hear groans from the table, and he smiles a bit, feeling a little bit sorry for the guy.

"I'll deal," Rek offers, taking and shuffling the cards. Zam grabs a handful of glass stones from a fake plant and sets them down in front of the two, splitting them evenly as chips.

"First to go bankrupt loses?" Clown asks, sorting out his pile of glass chips in a crisp line in front of him.

"Deal," Branzly says, eyes on the cards.

Too many people believe that card games are a test of luck- Clown knows better. He watches

Rek's careful shuffling, and he can't see a hint of the card faces, but he doesn't need to. Clown puts forth his bet of glass pieces, two out of his ten, and watches.

Branzy is smart, and seems to have some kind of strategy, but he's down to six pieces by eight draws, and within sixteen he's at two. Clown lines up his little glass rocks in his line, smiling pleasantly to himself.

"I cannot be this unlucky," Branzy mutters to himself, staring at his deck.

"You're not," Clown assures him. "I'm just better."

"Cheating, you mean?"

"Clown doesn't have to cheat at Blackjack," Rek says with a shrug. "He can count cards."

Branzy's eye twitches. "He *what* ? That's cheating!"

"Actually," Clown says, stretching out languidly. "Card counting is entirely legal as long as you don't use a machine or outside influence to do it. Which I don't. And multiple laws protect casinos from kicking out skilled players who simply know how to keep track of the deck. Nice try, though."

"I think I hate you," Branzy says, shoving forward the rest of his pieces.

"Everyone does, Branzy," he says with a grin. "Everyone does."

-

Usually, Clown takes the day off of hustles and jobs on Sunday, citing religious observations if pressed. It's complete bullshit, of course, but it gives him a chance to catch up on sleep.

However, his phone won't stop ringing, and it keeps interrupting his nap. Annoyed, deeply, he picks it up and answers, not quite opening his eyes to put it on speaker.

"What?" He snaps, fighting back a yawn.

"I have a job for you," the woman on the phone says.

"It's Sunday."

"Mhm. You sure do sound like you were at church."

"I have a lot of repentance to do, you know. A guy like me has to worry about his immortal soul now and again." He sits up, rubbing his eyes. "So, sorry, but it's my day off."

"Could you be inclined to make an exception for five hundred dollars?"

Suddenly, he is wide awake. "Spill."

The woman on the line laughs. "Some associates of mine are hosting a dinner party on Friday night. I hear you're very good at roulette?"

Clown gets out of bed, starting to pace around his motel room. "I am," he says cautiously.

"I would like you to attend in my stead."

“Of course you would.” He sighs and leans against the wall. “Part of my terms is that you arrange a second for me.”

“Acceptable.”

“Payment up front.”

“How do I know you won’t take the money and run?”

“If you don’t pay me beforehand, I might not be around to collect it afterwards,” he says, finally looking to see if he has this woman’s contact information. It’s not an unknown number, which means he’s done business with her before. The moniker *Cello* glares back at him from his screen. “You called me. You know how I work.”

She sighs. “Very well.”

“I only take cash.”

“I am aware, Clownpierce,” she says, a little impatient. “Your second will contact you with the location. Ask the host for your payment. Don’t call me.”

She hangs up.

“Well, I hope you have a good day, too,” he drawls to nothingness.

Another hour of nothing from his phone and he puts the damn thing on airplane mode, and goes back to sleep.

-

By Monday, he’s fed up. He goes to the fucking park. It’s sunny, and he sets up shop under a tree to shade himself. No one approaches him, really, which would usually bother him, but he’s having a pleasant time dozing and playing with his cards by himself.

It’s around midday when the first customer approaches, and he barely resists a laugh. “Hello, Branky.”

“What are you doing here?” He’s dressed differently than the last two times Clown saw him—instead of pinstripe slacks and a purple vest with matching contacts, he’s in dark scrubs, and his eyes are a pale blue, black glasses perched on his nose.

“Working,” he says.

“Scamming people, you mean.” Branky huffs, and sits down in front of him anyways.

Clown continues to play with his cards, shuffling them hand to hand. “If it makes you feel better, it’s been a slow day. What are you doing out here dressed like that?”

“I’m on my lunch break. And what do you mean dressed ‘like that?’”

Clown lets the gears turn, and suddenly it all makes sense. “You’re a doctor?”

“Well, a nurse, technically. I work at the ER down the block.” He points, but Clown knows where he’s talking about. “I just wanted to sit down and eat, but then you’re here.”

Clown glances at the sandwich bag in Branky’s hands before shrugging. “You’re the one who

stopped by. Care for a game?”

“Oh, no. I’m not getting scammed again.” Branzy huffs, then pauses. “Could you show me how you shuffle, though? It’s- it’s really cool.”

“Only if you tip me.” Clown is already obliging, though, pulling out every fancy party trick he knows. Branzy eats his sandwich as he watches, and Clown feels a deep sense of contentment wash over him. Life is simple, at the moment- show off card tricks, antagonize the new guy, and lay down and rest under the sunlight.

“How do you *do* that,” Branzy mumbles, watching as Clown shuffles with one hand as he stretches out the other.

“I’m good with my hands,” Clown says with a shrug, and Branzy laughs. It’s a light laugh, with no horror or sarcasm to it. It adds to the contentment- life is simple, and life is *good*.

The moment doesn’t last long. Branzy finishes his sandwich eventually, puts ten dollars in Clown’s tip plate, and stands up. “I have to get going. But, hey, I mean. Cool seeing you again.”

“I thought you hated me.”

“Only a little.”

Branzy leaves, and Clown smiles a bit, realizing this is how he makes friends.

-

“Why’d you bring a medic?” Clown asks on Tuesday. He’s out to lunch with Rek, Rek agreeing to pay if it means Clown will take the time out of his day. He’s had questions since he realized, but hadn’t wanted to ask over the phone, so he takes his opportunity.

Rek looks up from his barbeque with a frown. He has a smudge of sauce on his nose, but Clown doesn’t mention it. “What do you mean?”

“Branzy. That’s why you’re trying to bring him into the fold, right? Why do you think we need a doctor?”

“First of all.” Rek holds up one finger, finally setting down his ribs. “Why do you blame me for getting him in?”

“Because he was following you in like a lost puppy on Saturday. Even if he’s getting to know the others, *you’re* his link.” The restaurant has a triangular peg game that he’s been playing with the whole time. He resets it, and starts hopping the little tees again. “Ask me another stupid question.”

Rek huffs. “Fine, okay, you got me. Branzy and I go way back. He moved back here about a month and a half ago, and we’ve been reconnecting. I thought he would be a good addition to the gang, once he warmed up to them a little, you know? He’s a civ, but he’s a good guy.”

“Why do you think we need a medic?” Clown asks again, turning the little wooden triangle in his hands. “We have Ash.”

“Ash,” Rek says slowly. “Hijacked some Zoom calls of doctors studying for their boards. Ash is not a medical professional.”

“He’s always been good enough.”

“He won’t be, one day.” Rek crosses his arms and tries to look intimidating. It wouldn’t have worked anyways, but it looks laughable with a smear of sauce across his nose. “And on that day that we need someone who *actually* knows what they’re doing, you’ll be thanking me.”

“I doubt it,” Clown huffs, resetting the peg game yet again.

“By the way,” he says, taking away Clown’s game. He looks up with a frown. “I’m your second on Friday.”

Clown blinks a few times. “Interesting.”

“You don’t have to sound so disappointed about it.”

“I’m not. It’s just interesting.”

Rek huffs, and Clown takes the game back. If Rek doesn’t believe him, that’s his problem.

He changes the subject quickly, because he knows if Clown doesn’t elaborate, Clown *won’t* elaborate. He gestures to the game in Clown’s hands. “Aren’t you bored of that thing? You’ve solved it, like, twelve times by now.”

Clown hops another peg. “That makes thirteen, actually.”

“You are unwell, man.”

“Thanks,” he says with a grin, and starts another game.

russian roulette

Chapter Notes

violence warning in full effect this chapter.

Clown sets up again in the park on Wednesday, and Branzy comes by on his break again. They don't speak to each other. Clown plays Monte with his marks, and Branzy sits next to him and lets him. He has to consider this a truce, at least, if not an outright declaration of acceptance. Maybe someone told him that Clown would be upset if Branzy screwed with his most legal source of income, not in as many words.

Thursday, he does a hit. It's quick, cheap, and nasty, and it nets him enough money to rent his motel room for another two weeks. It does, however, leave him with a giant rip through his shirt, which means he has to *fix* his shirt. He spends the rest of the day arguing with a sewing needle, patching up as seamlessly as he could.

Friday is when things really start to go wrong, because as he's getting dressed for his job, trying to triple check his shirt isn't visibly ripped, he gets a call from Rek.

"Make it quick," Clown says, fastening a heart shaped cufflink onto the sleeve of a dark red suit jacket.

"Something came up, man, I'm sorry. I can't make it."

Clown stares at the wall for a moment. "Shit," he says finally.

"I've got someone else for you, promise," Rek says quickly. "Just go forward with the plan as normal, he'll meet you there."

"You vouch for this guy?"

"Wholeheartedly," Rek says solemnly. "Look, I gotta go. Sorry, Clown."

Clown hangs up before Rek can. It's a little petty, but he's miffed. He hates last minute changes to his schedule. There's nothing to be done about it, though, so he finishes getting ready- mask over his eyes, hair slicked back, dressed in black and red from head to toe. He clicks the toe of one steel-tipped boot to the platform heel of the other with a sharp grin.

He takes the bus to the casino. He'll have to arrange alternative travel home, because he hates taking public transportation back from jobs, but it works fine on the way there. He gets a few glances at his getup, but a smile and a "clubbing" wards off those who won't stop staring.

The location is a casino in the center of Sixth Street, gleaming and brilliant. Looking at it makes Clown *hungry*, and he thinks about how much cash he has saved in his shit motel room.

One day, he promises himself. *One day*.

The casino is owned by the local mob, and is a choice location for the sort of business deals that Clownpierce gets invited to. Rek at least had the decency to give him his proper instructions from

his employer before bailing. He strides up, and then he sees who's standing outside, a little awkwardly, a little out of place.

"Oh, hey, Clown!" Branzy waves to him. His contacts are back and his glasses are gone, and he's back in his vest. "Rek said to meet him here, I didn't know you'd be here."

"I'm gonna kill him," Clown mutters.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," Clown says, louder, smoother, approaching at his own pace. He's in control of the situation, no matter what. "Did Rek tell you why-?"

"Uh, just that he had a business meeting that he wanted me to come to?"

Clown grits his teeth behind his smile. "Really."

Branzy doesn't appear to be stupid, so he frowns. "Clown? What's going on?"

"Rek and I are attending the same business meeting," he says, trying to ease Branzy in as painlessly as possible. "Can you come with me as backup? It's not really the kind of meeting you come to alone."

Branzy nods. "I mean, sure, but what about Rek?"

"Rek," he says slowly, "is representing a different entity than I am."

Clown wonders how much Rek got paid to set him up- for Rek's sake, he hopes it was a lot. He grabs Branzy's sleeve, a little rougher than necessary, but he allows himself that because the alternative is he finds Rek and smashes his head in. "Come on," he says, trying to project a layer of normalcy for Branzy's sake.

The casino interior is intoxicating, and Clown wants to bask in it. The colored lights grow dimmer the further inside one walks, he can hear the soft *clack* of slot machines and roulette tables under the hum of music, chatting, and people losing. It's the greatest scam, really, and *one day*, he promises himself.

For now, he draws back into himself and approaches the front desk. The host looks up at him with a small, empty hospitality smile.

"Private party," Clown says without preamble. "I'm here representing The Lady Ivory. This is my second."

He gestures at Branzy, who is fully lost in the casino atmosphere already. Clown will really have to pull him together before the meeting starts, or he's going to get them both killed.

The host nods. "Of course, sir. You'll be in party room three."

"My pay?" He prompts.

"Oh, you work here?" Branzy asks, like he's looking for anything that makes sense.

"No," Clown says as the host hands him a discrete brown paper bundle. He peels open the corner and counts quickly- five hundred dollars in twenties. He slips the money down his shirt. "Thank you. Come on."

He grabs Branzy's sleeve again, making the note to be gentler this time, and leads him towards the private rooms in the back. "I need you to be quiet, okay?" He mumbles, just barely audible over the chaos of the machines. "This is... a very important meeting, and it isn't fair that Rek brought you in when you don't know what's happening. However, unfortunately, I need you. Just stick to me, don't talk to anyone, and try to have a good time."

"It's a business meeting in a casino," Branzy says carefully. "How dangerous can it be?"

Clown doesn't laugh. They approach the back hall for private rooms, a security guard that only appears unarmed standing in front of the entrance. "Names," he grunts, looking them both up and down.

"Clownpierce," he says easily. "Representing the Lady Ivory. This is my second."

"Branzy," Branzy offers, holding out his hand.

The guard stares at him in bewilderment. Clown resists the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose, and slowly guides Branzy's hand back down to his side. "He's new," he deadpans.

He drags Branzy past the bouncer when he steps to the side, not caring that his nails are digging into Branzy's wrist. "You don't listen very well," he grumbles.

"Well-"

"Shut up."

Private room three is in full swing by the time they show up. Clown does a quick headcount, and the bitter taste in his mouth grows stronger.

Aside from the casino staff, decked in black glittering attire to blend into the shadows, there are two factions present. One is The Corvid, dark dress against light brown skin, brown and red hair pulled into a bun. Her second stands slightly behind her, a clean cropped beard and a long red jacket that denotes his rank as Captain. The other is Andor, and standing beside him is Rek.

Clown slaps Branzy's hand before he can wave. "Miss Corvid," he says quickly. "Lord Andor. Apologies for the delay."

"Never an issue with you, Clownpierce." The Corvid smiles at him, all teeth. Andor says nothing. He immediately knows who he's going to kill tonight.

Clown keeps a tight grip on Branzy and takes him to the bar. Quietly, to make sure no one can hear them, he says, "Branzy, Rek is not our friend right now. He is representing the enemy of my employer."

"What is going on?" Branzy asks, eyes darting to the side. "Are you with the mob or something?"

"No," Clown says immediately. "Well, yes. Sort of."

"*Sort of?*"

"The important thing," Clown says, not letting Branzy get in another word. "Is that you need to stay very, *very* quiet, and very, *very* still. Can you do that?"

Branzy opens his mouth to speak, but then nods. Clown forces his shoulders to relax. "Alright. Bartender, two waters. One in a whiskey glass, and- what do you want?"

Branzy blinks once, then hesitantly speaks. “Water?”

Clown smiles a little. “Never hustle while intoxicated.”

“That drink you always have...”

“Fake,” Clown confirms. “Food coloring. Which we are going to do now. People relax around you if they think you’re drinking.”

“Uh- I guess I’ll take a whiskey glass, too? With ice?”

“On the rocks,” Clown corrects.

The bartender complies with their request, and Clown pulls out a small vial of food coloring from a hidden slit in his belt. He shakes a few drops into each drink, and slips the dye back before anyone else can see. He raises his glass to Branzy with a smile. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” Branzy echoes, eyes a bit lost.

“Clownpierce,” Andor calls. “If you’re *quite* done fraternizing, we’re drawing lots on who starts the game.”

Clown sighs and stretches out lazily. “Can’t a man get a drink in peace anymore?”

“It’s an important night,” The Corvid says.

He walks over, taking a dramatic swig of his drink, and Branzy follows without a word. He joins them by the roulette table, watching it roll and tumble. “How are we drawing?”

“Correct color, tiebreaker is the higher number.” Andor holds up a ball. “Red.” He spins the wheel and drops the ball. It clatters into black, and he scowls.

The Corvid calls for red, and gets a red fourteen. She nods, contented, and passes the ball to Clown.

He weighs it in his hand, and watches the wheel spin for a turn and a half. “Black,” he calls, and drops the ball. It clatters into black twenty two, and he gives a satisfied grin.

The gun is already sitting on the table. It’s already loaded, he knows. Clown sits down at the table, and positions Branzy to his right. The Corvid’s Captain settles to his left, with the Corvid next to him, then Rek, then Andor. Clown takes the gun, and spins the barrel.

He lets it click a few times, listening intently. Finally, he hears the clink he was waiting for, and he sticks the barrel into his mouth.

Branzy tenses besides him, already poised to spring, but Clown has already pulled the trigger and passed the gun to the Captain. He nudges his knee against Branzy’s thigh, trying to get him to relax. It doesn’t work, he can tell.

The gun goes around the circle in silence. When Rek passes the gun to Andor, Clown leans in to murmur in Branzy’s ear. “Don’t scream.”

Andor pulls the trigger, and there’s a little more than an empty click. Blood spurts out from the back of his head, and his hand goes tight around the offending weapon as he falls out of his chair and to the floor. Branzy, to his credit, doesn’t scream, which Clown is thankful for, but he looks as if he’s going to be ill. He takes a shaky drink of his fake alcohol.

The Corvid stands up once his body has lain on the floor for fifteen seconds. “I’ll let the Lady know that I’d love to do business with her.”

“Of course, Miss.” Clown inclines his head to her.

“Come on, Jordan.” She leaves, her second following behind her. Clown could take his cue to leave- his part of the deal is over with, after all -but he has business to deal with with Rek.

Rek stays to do his job as a second- if not to be an extra body, to provide clean up. He doesn’t start yet, but he stands when Clown does, staring him down.

“Rek,” he says, dangerously quiet. The gun is on the floor, still. He wonders how long it would take to reload it. “You better have gotten me a shit second because you knew I was good at this game, and not because you were trying to get me killed. Right, Rek?”

Rek gives a helpless little shrug. “I might have gotten paid to set you up?”

“You shouldn’t come to Zam’s party next week,” he suggests.

“Will you forgive me faster if I lose a few rounds of Three Card Monte in the streets?”

He thinks about it. “Only if you’re a good skill.”

“Excuse me,” Branzly interrupts, voice shaking and teeth chattering. Clown turns to look at him, slightly interested in how quickly he broke out of the stunned horror of staring at Andor’s body. “What is *happening* ?”

“Not to mention you traumatized the civ,” Clown continues, waving a hand at where Branzly is still sitting. “Honestly, Rek, new low.”

“Did you just call me a slur?” Branzly demands.

“Civilian,” Clown says slowly. “Rek shouldn’t have let you come. Civilians get easily scared at these kinds of parties.”

“You put a *gun* in your *mouth* !”

“It wasn’t like it was going to kill me.”

“It killed him!” Branzly yells, pointing at the still bleeding body on the floor. “What- what was that!”

“Russian Roulette. Obviously.” Rek finally chirps in. “Clown is good at it. You were never in any danger.”

“The- the game where you *shoot people* ?” Branzly turns to stare at Clown in horror. “How-”

“You listen for the bullet,” he says. “It makes a different sound depending on where it lands in the chamber. You can then aim where you want to kill, if you have the first shot.”

“But the first shot was luck,” Branzly argues. “You- you randomly decided it.”

“No, that was just physics. The ball weighs a certain amount, the wheel spins a certain speed- I can make it land wherever I want.”

“I don’t believe you. That’s insane.”

“You don’t have to.” Clown shrugs. “But we should really leave Rek to his business. Hey. Never double cross me on less than two hours notice again, or I’ll let the bullet hit you.”

“Understood,” Rek says, rolling his eyes.

Clown grabs Branzy’s sleeve and drags him out. Branzy follows in a daze, which gives Clown plenty of time to pull out his phone and arrange a ride home. They stand outside the casino, a bit into the shadows where no one will look.

“Who are you people?” Branzy asks, voice small.

“Not here,” Clown says quickly. “Wait until we’re in the car.”

“I want answers,” Branzy demands.

“You’ll get them,” Clown snaps, more than a little impatient. “Wait until we’re in the car.”

Branzy goes quiet, which Clown couldn’t be more thankful for. His tie feels like it’s suffocating him, and he undoes it, slings off his jacket, and rolls up his sleeves. He looks much less put together like this, but his mobility increases when he’s not caught under a stiff suit.

The car screeches up finally, and Clown rolls his eyes. Branzy is staring as the doors swing open upwards.

“My getaway driver is in a bright red Tesla,” Clown mutters, already stepping into the passenger's seat. “Hey, Ash. Branzy, back, now.”

Branzy stumbles inside the fancy car as Ash closes the doors again, turning down whatever music he’d been blaring. “Hello to you two. Have a fun night?”

“Where did you get a Tesla?” Clown demands first and foremost.

“You’re just mad I’m a better sugar baby than you could ever be.” Ash gives a deep chuckle and turns the car into drive.

“I would be an *amazing* sugar baby,” he huffs. “Hotwired it from Redd?”

“Oh, you know it.”

“Nice.” Clown tosses his jacket and tie into the back. “Go over thirty five and I’ll kill you.”

“What’s happening?” Branzy demands, shoving Clown’s jacket off of his lap. Ash pulls into the road and starts to drive properly. “I just saw a man die. Why shouldn’t I call the cops?”

“You still believe in cops?” Clown laughs. “Well, uh, aside from the obvious, Zam will just make it go away.”

“Zam’s a PI-”

“He’s on the payroll of the local mobsters,” Ash says, not taking his eyes off the road, but Clown can see his grin. “And he likes us *out* of prison.”

“Well, Rek-”

“Was there,” Clown cuts him off. “Professional bodyguard.”

“Well, I’ll report in a different city.”

“I’ll get rid of the report.” Ash raises one hand, and Clown slaps his wrist to get him to put it back on the wheel. “Hacker, baby.”

Clown glances back. Branzy is looking rather pale, which means he’ll either accept it or he’ll break. “Is everyone in this friend group a criminal?” He demands.

Clown doesn’t even try to think if anyone is innocent. “Yep.”

“What are you, then?” Branzy stares directly at him, but his voice is frail, trembling at the edges, and he’s quiet. Clown is certain he’s going to break.

“I consider myself a freelance mercenary.” He looks away and stretches. “Let’s drop off the civ, he’s had a long night.”

“No.”

Clown turns back to face him. There’s something harder in his eyes this time. “Huh?”

“No, I’m not going to let you drop me off and pretend this didn’t happen.” Branzy crosses his arms, scowling. “So- I’m staying.”

Clown rolls his eyes. “Well, how about *I’ve* had a long night, and *I* want to go home. Ash, drop me off.”

He looks away and doesn’t look back. He closes his eyes and listens to the hum of Ash’s “borrowed” Tesla, and allows himself to doze, just slightly. He’s exhausted, but he doesn’t dare pass out completely. He doesn’t think Ash or Branzy would hurt him, but he doesn’t want to lose track of the time.

It takes ten minutes to get to the apartment complex, which means Ash definitely broke some speeding laws, but Clown doesn’t have it in him tonight to be mad. He grabs his jacket from Branzy’s lap without preamble or apology, and kicks open the door. “Goodnight, Ash.”

“Wait.” Branzy stumbles out of the car after him, and Ash drives away the second the door closes, tires squealing against the asphalt. “Wait, this is- this is my place. You live here too?”

There’s hope in his eyes. Clown takes no joy in crushing it, but he’s too tired to care. “No. This is where Ash thinks I live.”

“Thinks?” Branzy blinks a few times.

“Everyone thinks I live somewhere different.” Clown shrugs on his jacket. “This is where I told Ash.”

“Where- where do you really live?”

Call it the near death experience that is playing with guns, but Clown feels honest tonight. “In a shit motel a few minutes walk away.”

“Wait- you-” Branzy blinks a few times. “Clown, are you… homeless?”

“No. I live in a motel.”

“That’s not a permanent address,” he says softly.

“Neither is an apartment, technically.” He huffs. “I’m exhausted. Goodnight, Branzy. Don’t have nightmares. Don’t tell the cops.”

He walks away, and he doesn’t look back to see how Branzy reacts.

-

He ignores all three of his alarms in the morning, and sleeps well past noon. He takes the time on the second alarm to put his phone on do not disturb, and sleeps fitfully until he finally, groggily, opens his eyes.

Someone spiked his fucking *water* .

Clown recognizes the feeling of the aftermath of a bad bender, or at least a hangover. He sits up, head pounding and feeling like his eyes are stuffed with cotton. No, definitely not a hangover. He knows what alcohol he can tolerate, and there’s no way someone snuck enough into his cup for him to not notice and to make him feel like this.

The only possible conclusion is that someone drugged him. He rules out Branzy and Rek immediately- Branzy due to incompetence and Rek due to knowing that Clown would murder him. The Captain was sitting on his side, but drugging doesn’t seem up the Corvid’s alley, and he wouldn’t betray her. That leaves Andor or the staff. Andor hadn’t gotten close enough to his drink to drug it, which leaves the staff.

Damn. He wonders if Branzy is okay.

He grabs his phone, his hands clumsy, and the light filtering in through the curtains hurts his head. Fuck. He turns his notifications back on, and holds the phone away from him to let it get all its little dings out. Then he starts to look at it.

He missed multiple calls from the same unknown number. He answers it. “Who drugged me,” he says immediately once he hears the line pick up. “And what with.”

“The nice young man who made your drink,” the voice on the end of the line says. Smooth, older man, and absolutely full of himself. “I don’t know what with. I’d say to ask him yourself, but he’s dead now.”

“No messes,” Clown murmurs.

“I’m glad you finally called. I’ve been trying to reach you all morning.”

“Well, since you arranged this situation, I’m sure you’re not surprised.” His head is pounding. He wants to lie down for a nap again.

“Of course not. So, let’s get to the chase.” There’s a small crack at the end of the line. “You killed my son.”

Clown goes down the mental list. “Yeah, that could be a lot of people.”

The man gives an angry huff. “Last night. Prince Andor.”

“Ah. Apologies, Your Majesty, if that’s even your real title.”

“Watch your tongue.” The King hisses, and Clown gets the idea that this is about a bit more than a game of roulette. “I figured I would give you prior warning. I’m sending an assassin after you. If

you live, I'll forgive you. Goodbye."

"What?" The line is already dead. "Wait, no, hold on." He calls back. The voice mailbox has not been set up yet. "Son of a *bitch* -"

He tosses his phone across the room. He winces as it falls to the floor, and thinks maybe he shouldn't have done that. He concedes to himself that he'll worry about if he broke his phone after another nap.

-

He did break his phone- a crack or fifteen split down the screen, leaving a shard of glass in his finger as he angrily swipes through his contacts. He has several calls to make, and none of them can wait any longer. He calls Rek first, and keeps calling until he gets the hint and picks up.

Rek does not sound pleased. "Clown, I am at work. You know, a real job? I know *you* don't have one of those-"

"Check on Branzy," he interrupts, not bothering to listen to Rek's complaints. "Someone drugged me last night, and he might have been affected. I don't know with what."

He hangs up before he can hear anything more than Rek whisper *oh my God* . He closes his eyes briefly, his head pounding. Water is the smart play, he knows, but he can't bring himself to drag himself out the door. He could barely make himself get out of bed.

He calls Redd. Redd, the bastard that he is, picks up immediately. It hurts to say, but he grits it out. "I need you."

"Clown, I'm kind of busy right now," Redd says, placating, but Clown can hear him shuffling and getting up.

"Ash can come too," he snaps. "I need you."

"I'm already on the way, okay? What's wrong?"

"Not over the phone." He starts to hang up, but he hesitates. "Bring water. Please."

"Ash, c'mon. Yes, *now* ." Redd hangs up after that, but Clown rests his forehead against his phone, trying to regulate his breathing.

What the *fuck* was in that glass?

He keeps going down his contact list until he gets an answer from everyone he needs one from, and he loses track of time. Panic starts to gnaw at his stomach, but he forces it down. It's just the drugs, and that means it needs to be ignored.

There's a knock on his door that forces him to stand up and open it. "How long since I called you," he asks, barely managing to open his eyes as he lets Redd in. He slams the door in Ash's face- Ash seems entirely unsurprised.

"Good to see you, too," Redd drawls. "Fifteen minutes. What's wrong?"

"I got drugged."

Redd grabs his arm immediately and drags him to the bed, forcing him to sit down. He reaches into his messenger bag and pulls out a water bottle, opening it and putting it against Clown's mouth,

despite his protests. He closes his eyes.

“Start from the beginning.” Redd’s hands are on his shoulders, thumbs rolling away some tension. Clown slaps his hands away.

“Stop that.” He takes a deep breath, and organizes the events in his brain until he’s positive he has them correct, despite tampering. “I had a job, and Rek was supposed to be my second. He betrayed me, and went to work for Andor- y’know, jackass who only goes along with what his dad wants? Andor is dead now. But *before* I killed Andor, the bartender spiked my drink. I’m thinking something with a slow release? I didn’t feel it until-” he thinks about it. “I got tired when Ash picked me up. Woke up with a headache today. I slept through the worst of it, I guess.”

“You should go to the hospital,” Redd says softly. Clown presses his forehead against Redd’s.

“No hospitals,” he says firmly. “We’re not done. This morning, I got a call from Andor’s father.”

“You got a call from His Majesty?” Redd’s eyes are narrowed, worried, and Clown agrees with him.

“Yes. He drugged me, and he sent an assassin after me. If I live the attempt, we’re all square, but-” he swallows dryly, and Redd forces more water down his throat. “I can’t figure out who it is.”

“Well, there’s only a few people who have the ability to-”

“I *know*,” he hisses, and Redd cradles the back of his head. He forces himself to relax. He should really stop indulging in this, one day, but he can’t force himself to. “I’ve called them all.”

“All?”

“If I can figure out who it is, I can figure out how to make them back off.” He grits his teeth.

“Fuck, my *head*.”

“Focus.” Redd snaps his fingers under Clown’s nose, leaving him cross eyed as he tries to focus.

“Who have you asked?”

“The Pheonix,” he replies dutifully. “Punz cares about gold more than money, and I have a fair amount laying around. He swears it’s not him, though.”

“Not Punz. Who else?”

“Fruit and his shadow. Trap I wouldn’t see coming, fast and quick? Not a bad way to die, if I had any intention of doing so. But Fruit swears he and Illumina have been and still are in the middle of the woods.”

“And?”

“The Blade. He said no, and I believe him.”

Redd frowns. “Maybe Harvey? He-”

“Redd,” Clown says, and he meant to snap, but it comes out so *tired*. “I called *everyone*. And I have to trust on their reputation and mine that they wouldn’t lie to me. I don’t *know*, which means I can’t see it coming, which means I-”

“And this is why he drugged you,” Redd interrupts. “To make you panic, to make you lose your game. Come on, focus. You can survive whatever, *whoever*, he throws at you. He only told you to

make you upset.”

“I know!” Clown winces. “My head-”

Redd presses a gentle kiss to the top of his hair, and Clown exhales. “Drink some more water. I’m going to turn off the lights. Ash and I will go get you some actual groceries. You live like this?”

“I don’t recall telling you where I lived,” Clown mumbles, face pressed into Redd’s shoulder.

“You didn’t,” Redd says brightly. “But I came, didn’t I?”

“What do you want, a medal?”

“I’ll take a kiss, asshole.”

“Your boyfriend is outside, dickhead.”

Redd sticks his tongue out, and stands up, laying Clown down and tossing a blanket over his face. “You need to sleep off whatever that is until you go investigating. I will tie you down if I need to, you *know* I will.”

“I hate you,” Clown growls.

“Hate you too, bestie.” The lights go dim, and the door closes.

He’s so tired.

-

The last of his headache is gone by nightfall. Redd helps him test his reflexes, and Ash gives him his medical okay. (Redd and Clown get into an argument and get into a quick spar, and Ash watches and occasionally wolf whistles.)

“I have a job tonight,” Clown says, wrapping his bruised knuckles.

Redd’s mouth, still trickling blood, twitches into a frown. “No. You’re in no condition-”

“I need to.” He stands up. “You just saw that I’m fine.”

Ash yawns. “Clown, do you ever *not* have a job?”

“I didn’t anticipate getting *drugged*, Ash, so yes, I have a job tonight.” He neatly dodges the rest of the question, fits on his jacket, and turns to leave.

Redd stands in front of the door, arms crossed. “Absolutely not. Clown, this has to end. Crash at my place if you have to, I’ll lend you whatever money you need, but you can’t just keep living shit motel to shit motel, not letting anyone know where you live-”

“How do *you* know where I live?” Clown demands.

“I put a tracker in your platforms, like, six months ago, man.” Redd waves him off. “Do you really want to be a D-list hitman with A-list success rates for the rest of your life? Don’t you want something more?”

“Yes. Obviously.” He thinks about how much money is hidden in this motel, about glittering casinos and bloody guns, and *hunger*. He never wants to be hungry again. “But until I can achieve

that, this is what I have to do. I need the money, Redd.”

“Let me spot you the cash.”

“Do you want a black eye to match the busted lip?” Clown demands.

Redd stares at him for a good long while, and then he sighs. “Ash, don’t wait up for me. Clown, I’m coming with.”

“The fuck you are not,” he protests, but Redd is already walking out the door.

-

Clown seethes silently as he leads Redd to his location- a hit, obviously. His gun is stuffed and muffled in the holster on his belt, and Clown has never known Redd to not carry, even if he can’t see it under the shiny red suit. They take the subway, and Clown refuses to talk to him, even though Redd tries a few times, about the weather, about the game, about anything normal.

The station before their stop, they’re alone in the subway car, and Redd clears his throat. “I understand you want to be self-sufficient, and I respect that. None of us want you to stop doing jobs, but- you live somewhere that’s easy to disappear, Clown.”

“That’s the point,” he says, examining his nails in the brief moment before he puts his glove back on. His knife twirls in his hand, and he uses it to clean the dirt out from under them.

“Not in a good way,” Redd amends. “Somewhere easy for- for you to turn up in an obituary and none of us would have been able to help, because you tell everyone you live in a different part of town. I mean, *Christ*, Clown, I had to put a GPS tracker in your *heels* -”

“It’s being removed after this. You don’t have to microchip me.”

“Don’t I?” Redd stares directly at him. “I’m just- what I’m trying to say is- this is an unstable job, for all of us. But you’re the only one without a civ job to fall back on. So- use mine. Or whoever you want. Just- we don’t want to have to find you dead in an alley, Clown. Okay?”

He stares at his hands. “Okay. I’ll think about it.”

Redd sighs. “Guess that’s all I can do.”

They reach their stop. Clown strides out, Redd following. “So where is this guy?” He asks as they walk through the streets.

“According to sources, he comes down this way every Saturday night.” Clown keeps a careful, watchful eye. “Act normal.”

Redd slings an arm around his shoulders, and Clown sighs. “I said normal.”

“This is normal.”

“I’m so sick of you.”

“I know.” He does not move his arm, and Clown doesn’t move it away for him.

They keep walking. Finally, he inclines his head to his target, dressed in an overlarge coat that’s obviously hiding a gun, ducking into an alley. Redd unwraps his arm from Clown’s shoulder, and frowns.

“Clown, wait-”

“No time.” He strides forward.

“No, wait, Clown, you really-”

He ignores Redd and walks into the alley, gun flicking into gloved hands. His target’s back is to him, and it’s really too easy. He cocks the hammer.

Something falls on him from above, and he crumples to the ground. Grunting, he shoves whatever it is off of him- just seems to be a collection of blankets in a garbage bag. His target has noticed him, and has a gun in hand. Clown ducks one shot, and rolls out of the way of another. This man’s aim is shaky, which shouldn’t be true.

The target runs at him, and tackles him, keeping him on the ground. Clown growls and smashes their foreheads together, and it leaves a ringing in his ears as he rolls away to stand.

The target kicks out his knees, and this is *wrong*, Clown realizes as he falls. He’s a trained martial artist, obviously, and Clown’s sources had told him he was a sniper. He wracks his brain, trying to figure out what went so obviously wrong.

He feels stupid when he realizes. This job was given to him by Dia- a known associate of the King. How long had he been planning this?

Clown’s martial arts skills are rusty, admittedly, but he was still better than the average blackbelt. He has his gun kicked away from him, and he doesn’t care- he goes for a roundhouse kick to the head, and only just barely misses when his target ducks out of the way, jabbing at his ribs. Clown twists out of the way and goes for a sweep, and his target dances away.

He blames the aftermath of the drugs for not seeing how it all clicks together. He steps backwards, and he hits something solid and warm- Redd’s body, one hand grabbing his shoulder, and the other holding out a pistol.

Two shots. One hits his target in the head, and he crumbles to the ground. For the other, Redd twists him around, presses the muzzle to Clown’s abdomen, and shoots.

Clown stumbles away with a scream. Redd’s face pales, and Clown backs himself against the wall, sliding to the ground. He grabs his knife and slices off the laces of his corset, not caring at the moment how *expensive* that was, and presses his hand to the wound. He looks up at Redd, and he can’t even force his expression to be accusatory- he knows what he looks like, because he didn’t wear his mask for this one, because it was *Redd*. He knows he looks absolutely *baffled*.

“You shot me,” Clown whispers.

“Your corset is bullet proof!” Redd screams at him, panic etched onto his face. He falls to his knees, pressing his hands against Clown’s.

“You don’t know what bullet proof means, obviously!” Clown hisses. “They weren’t made to keep out hand guns at point blank, you *idiot*.”

“Oh- oh my God.”

“It was you.” Clown fixes him with a stare. “The money, you- that was *guilt*.”

“I tried to warn you,” he says, helplessly, digging in his pocket. “Stay- stay quiet for a minute,

okay?”

“You-”

“Shut up.” Redd’s voice switches to all business, no worry in it, as he pulls out his phone and calls someone. He puts it on speaker for Clown’s benefit, and Clown wants to fucking scream at him, but he stays quiet.

“Reddoons,” the King says. “Is it done?”

“I was hired to *try*,” Redd snaps. “I fucking shot him and he just walked away. Uh uh. No way. No amount of money is worth it. He’s not *human*. I quit.”

“You-”

Redd hangs up and tosses his phone down, and his expression is back to pure terror. Clown coughs a bit. “Just walked away, huh?”

“You will,” he insists. “You *will* .”

“Yeah, well, let’s get going. Call Ash.”

“Shouldn’t we-”

“I don’t think you hit any internal organs. Incompetent.”

“Asshole.”

Clown tries to stand up, and he screams, and his legs fail him. He collapses back to sitting again, and Redd tries to steady him. “What? What-”

“Bad news, good news, more bad news,” he hisses out through grit teeth. “In that order.”

“Good news, please,” Redd begs, shedding his jacket and pressing it against the dark, bloody wound.

“You don’t actually need your spleen?”

Redd’s face is already pale, but Clown thinks truly every bit of blood has left it now. “I hit your *spleen* ?” He whispers.

“Which is basically a giant blood sack.” Clown presses his head to the wall, and laughs. “What was it you said? No one wants to find me dead in a dirty alleyway?”

“Shut up,” Redd growls. “Shut up, you’re not going to die.”

“You should call someone.” Clown cuts off his shirt, unwilling to stretch out his abdomen to take it off. When he lives through this, he’s making Redd buy him a new everything.

Redd scrambles for his phone again, looks around, and makes a call. “Hey. Hey, we’re in the area. Look, there’s no time- Clown’s been shot. Call 911 while you’re on the way. We’re between Echo and the Bank on 4th.”

Redd hangs up, and hisses, looking at where Clown has exposed the bleeding wound to the air. “Yeah, that looks bad.”

“That’s what happens when you *shoot* people, *Redd* .” He takes a deep breath. “Who’d you call?”

“Branzy. This is his neighborhood.”

“The *civ* ?” Clown groans. “This is the worst day of my life.”

“He lives three blocks down. He’ll be here.”

“No, he won’t! He’s just- he’s not like us. He’s going to see us, and he’s going to run-”

“Stop talking!” Redd closes his eyes. “Pressure. Apply pressure to the wound.”

He grabs the garbage bag of blankets and pulls one out, and shoves it hard against the wound in Clown’s side. “Hey. I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you,” Clown says immediately. “My fault for not realizing. It was a good plan.”

“I didn’t want to. I was never going to do it, Clown, I just couldn’t make an enemy-”

“Redd.” Clown reaches up clumsily, and he presses a bloody hand against Redd’s cheek. “I’m not mad at you.”

It’s true. Truthfully, he never even considered it.

Redd is crying. His stupid sunglasses fall off his face as he ducks his head, pressing his forehead to Clown’s. He’s crying. Clown doesn’t think he’s ever seen Redd cry.

“Hey!”

Clown looks up. Branzy is striding down the alleyway, in fluffy pajama pants and rabbit slippers, a coat tossed over him as if that detracts from the fact that he’s shirtless. Branzy runs over, and kneels beside Redd, setting down a white and red first aid kit.

“He thinks it hit his spleen,” Redd says immediately. “It’s my fault-”

“Don’t admit anything without a lawyer,” Clown mumbles. Black spots dance in his vision.

Branzy shoves Redd away. “Go to the nightclub’s bar. I need something- I need something long, thin, and metal, something you can sterilize. I need something to make a very focused fire *quickly* . And I need the highest proof alcohol you can find.”

Redd stands up and runs, and Clown tries to focus on Branzy. “Why do you wear those contacts?” He asks, staring into Branzy’s eyes. They’re blue right now, with glasses over them.

“I like- I don’t know. I feel like people underestimate me in glasses. The contacts are- well, they’re supposed to make my eyes look red. I thought it would make me look cool, but it ended up purple. It’s, well.”

“I like it.” Clown looks down at his abdomen, concealed by a blanket that seems to be gathering blood a lot quicker than he’d like it to. “The bullet is still in there.”

Branzy reaches for the first aid kit, and when his hands leave the blanket, it falls, and a rush of blood falls. Clown groans, hands shaking. “Sorry,” Branzy says. “Look- I don’t have any painkillers. Can you take it?”

“I have to,” he says. Branzy pulls out a pair of tweezers, and Clown closes his eyes.

Branzy's hands are so steady, and they don't waver once. Clown holds as still as he can, and he resists the urge to laugh. "It's like- like that board game. Operation."

"Just like that. Don't hit the walls." Branzy's voice is quiet, serious. Clown cracks his eyes open to look at his expression- it's practically blank. He screams when Branzy takes out the bullet, feeling every nerve in his body light on fire. He bangs his fist against the wall every time Branzy loses his grip on it with those stupid fucking tweezers, and thinks it might be crawling towards his heart.

Redd returns when Branzy has finally tossed the offending piece of lead into a small white cloth to be put in the first aid kit. He sits down next to Branzy. He's stopped crying, at least. "Drink stirrer, Everclear vodka, and a blowtorch. Will this work?"

"Perfect." Branzy dumps the expensive booze directly onto Clown's wound, and he screams as Branzy picks out spare clothing fibers and washes away dirt.

"Stop that!" Clown screams. "That fucking *hurts* !"

"Do you want to die here?" Branzy demands, staring at Clown.

Clown finally realizes that Branzy will not break.

"No," he whispers.

Branzy dips the drink stirrer into the vodka, and passes the blowtorch to Redd. "Hold this on."

"What?" Clown watches as Branzy heats up the small stick of metal. His heartbeat is rabbit fast in his throat, and he can barely feel it. He feels- disconnected, from something important to him.

"You're going to bleed out internally," Branzy says evenly. "We need to cauterize the wound."

"The- the wound *inside* of me?" He can barely manage to speak through the failure to breathe. In and out, unable to keep anything straight, inhaling and exhaling getting mixed up in his head.

"Redd, hold him down." Branzy approaches him.

Clown hisses, holding his hand over his wound. "Don't put that in me!" Redd grabs his hand and yanks it away. "No, no, wait-"

He screams. He thrashes, he kicks, and he screams, and Redd doesn't let him move an inch as Branzy stuffs white-hot metal into his body. He curses, he threatens, and the black spots on his vision grow darker, and larger.

He's crying, he realizes. He didn't know he could still do that. He's crying, and he can barely hear what he's saying. "I don't want to die, I don't want to die, please, please-"

He closes his eyes when the burning is gone, breath shaky. A clammy hand holds two fingers to his neck. "He's going into hemorrhagic shock. Clown? Clown, can you hear me?"

He thinks he speaks, but he can't hear the words.

"Clown!"

He forces his eyes open. Branzy is crying, too, tears spilling over from honest blue eyes. I like the blue, he says. I like the glasses. He doesn't make a sound.

There's a dull ringing in the back of his ears, and he can't focus. Everything is- he's going to die

here. He's going to die here.

“Clown, look at me.” Branzy's mouth is moving, but the words hit in different times than they should. “Do not close your eyes. Do *not* -”

The last thing Clown remembers is watching red and blue lights reflect off of the tear caught in midair as it falls down Branzy's jaw, a shrill piercing in his ears. After that, it's all black.

queen's gambit

Chapter Notes

heavy warning for medical procedures and mentions, especially in regards to medical usage of opioids.

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

Redd at least has the presence of mind to throw a blanket over the actually dead body before the EMTs show up. The worst thing has already happened tonight- the second worst thing would be if he went to jail.

Branzy talks fast to the arriving medical professionals, collected in a way that Redd can't truly manage at the moment, not pausing for a moment as he describes impromptu surgery and Clown's sudden blackout. Redd watches EMTs pick up Clown's limp, bloodied body, put him on a stretcher, and he follows for lack of anything else to do. The EMTs don't try to stop him as he climbs into the back of the ambulance along with his friend. Redd can't stop staring as they start hooking him up to *things*, and Clown, who hates hospitals more than anyone Redd has ever met, is still and impassive the whole time. He watches the shallow rise and fall of Clown's blood splattered rib cage and tries to match it. He feels like he's going to have a panic attack with its rapid pace.

Branzy is the last one in the ambulance, slamming the door shut behind him, and Redd grabs the wall with a yelp as it starts to move, and he *stares* at Clown. His only reaction is a small maybe-twitch of a frown. Snot and tears are still smeared down his face. Redd knows, for the rest of his life, he is never going to forget what Clown looked like, pale and shaking, a sob in his voice, when he whispers, betrayal and terror etched onto his face like a horrifying mosaic. *You shot me*.

He had looked so *small* suddenly, reminding Redd that his imposing height came from his platform boots as he slid down the wall of the alley, hands shaking as he tried to undo his corset with a small knife from his belt. Redd had to take the knife away since his hands were so unstable that he was worried he'd cut himself.

It wasn't his intention when he woke up today to shoot Clownpierce, which was actually a rare state to wake up in. He tightens his grip on his bloodied black slacks as he thinks about it. No, he doesn't think he'll ever joke about wanting to kill Clown for some small slight ever again.

Still he- he thinks it through, as the ambulance keeps going, half watching someone treat Clown's wound with actual antiseptic, someone putting a mask of some sort over his mouth. Redd woke up with a gun to his face at God-knew what hour of the morning, staring down a barrel with nowhere to go, and he can only imagine what would have happened if Ash had stayed the night like Redd had begged him to...

Someone is yelling some sort of medical code and it makes it hard to think. He woke up with a gun to his face, His Majesty the King on speaker on his goon's burner, and a briefcase of five thousand cash dropped into his lap. Somehow, that hadn't been enough to make him feel better about the situation. It was really an easy deal, after all, because all deals are easy staring down a barrel. Try to kill Clownpierce. It was okay if he failed as long as he tried, but there was a fifty thousand dollar prize for succeeding. He would never have taken that bounty, but he was a coward at heart so he

agreed to whatever would make that goon put away that gun. He was given the plan.

Clown is thrashing. That's a good thing, right? Redd watches him unblinkingly. His movements are just as janky and uncoordinated as earlier, when Clown had insisted he was okay when he wasn't- he can never admit when he's in no shape to work, but he'll wear himself to the bone anyways. He had been in no shape to go out tonight and he'd walked right into a trap, and Redd had-

What, let him? Walked him right to an execution? Why the gut? Why had Redd shot him in the gut, not the shoulder or the leg? Why had Redd shot him at *all* ?

Branzy stood in front of him suddenly, eyes narrowed, all focus and confidence, and draped something over his shoulders. Redd touched it hesitantly, frowning. "What is this?"

"Shock blanket," Branzy says softly.

He scoffs. "I'm not-"

There's a sharp sound. It's shrill, piercing, ringing in Redd's skull, and it takes him just a little too long to realize what it is, because his first thought is *Clown doesn't like loud noises* . One of the EMTs is yelling, but Redd can't conceptualize words, every sound in the world dull in comparison to the horrifying flatline of a heart monitor.

Flatline?

"Clear!" One of the EMTs yells, and what's left of Clown's shirt had been discarded long ago and Redd hadn't noticed, which was unlike him. They place something on Clown's chest, and he jerks like a puppet, and Redd pushes the blanket off of his shoulders in a daze as he realizes what's happening. It's a scene that shows up a dozen times in all those shitty doctor dramas that Ash insists are *basically the same as medical school* .

"No," he whispers. It registers, finally, maybe, what has *actually* happened. That when he shot Clown, there was really no coming back.

The flatline keeps ringing, and there's another shock, Clown jerking again violently but completely lifeless. Redd reaches out without thinking about it, and Branzy grabs his wrist, pulling his hand back. "No, please," he tries, pushing forwards. Branzy is stronger than he looks, because he forces Redd back.

One last shock, and the flatline is replaced with the steady, if soft, if rapid, pulse of a heart monitor. Redd doesn't breathe until he sees Clown's chest rise and fall. He matches the rhythm and feels panic set in.

Branzy puts the blanket around his shoulders again, and Redd doesn't fight it this time. He puts his face in his hands and finally allows himself to sob.

-

He doesn't remember how he got here. He's staring down at a clipboard full of forms, because someone needs to do the paperwork while Clown is in surgery, but he can't remember how he got here. Assumably, the ambulance had pulled up to the hospital, and, presumably, he'd gotten out to sit in this lobby, but he can't really remember. That feels like something he should remember.

Redd taps the corner of the paper with his borrowed pen, leaving little black dots up by the legal disclaimers. He *knows* Clown's information, some of it even with Clown's permission, but he can't

summon any of it to mind. All he can do is stare at the words without reading them. There's still blood on his hands.

"Hey."

The word draws Redd back to himself. He blinks a few times, and looks up at Branzy. He stands up. "How is-

"I don't know," Branzy says hurriedly. He's no longer dressed in sleep clothes, instead in dull grey scrubs that looked like they fit. "It's been ten minutes, Redd, surgery takes longer than that."

"Ten minutes?" It had to have been at least an hour. Maybe two.

Branzy just frowns, and pulls on the clipboard. "You don't have to fill these out if you can't."

"I can," Redd insists, clinging to the paperwork. "I'm- I'm his medical power of attorney. Or something. We set that up for each other years ago, in case something- something happened."

Branzy pulls on the clipboard again, and successfully removes it from Redd's shaking hands this time. "It can wait until later."

Redd nods slightly because it feels like the right thing to do. "I'm gonna- I'm gonna call Ash."

Branzy pats him on the shoulder. "You do that. I'll call Rek."

Branzy wanders away and Redd fumbles in his pocket for his phone. The time glares back judgmentally on the screen, but he's never known Ash to not answer his phone, even at two in the morning, so he calls anyway.

Ash picks up on the third ring. "Redd? What's up, man, I haven't heard from either of you."

"Ash," he says, and he hates how his voice rasps, still heavy with tears. "I need you to come to the hospital."

"What?" Muffled through the speaker, he can hear the sound of Ash getting up and moving around. "Are you hurt?"

"No, no." Redd stares at his bloody hand. He should really clean that off. "It's Clown. He-"

Clown's twitchy, nervous movements as Redd tried to staunch the bleeding.

"I'm on my way," Ash says quickly. "Five minutes."

"You can't get here that fast," he tries.

"I'll break some speeding laws. Five minutes. Don't hang up." There's the slam of a car door and the soft purr of an ignition.

"Alright," he mumbles.

Ash doesn't talk while he drives, so Redd doesn't talk either. He listens as indignant honks and shrill tire squeals turn tinny through his phone's speaker, and he waits.

Four minutes later, the car stops, and Ash speaks again. "Here. Where are you?"

"Lobby," he says.

As promised, within five minutes Ash is with him. He pries the phone from Redd's bloody hands and hangs up for him, and Redd tears up again as he presses a kiss to his palm. "Hey."

"Ash." He barely manages the word before the tears start again, and he buries his face in Ash's shoulder. "Ash, I shot him."

"Let's get you cleaned up, yeah?" Ash forces him to stand up, and Redd follows for lack of anything better to do. He takes Redd to the single stall bathroom to the side of the waiting room, lathering soap on his hands and letting the water run. "Slow down. What happened?"

"I got blackmailed," he manages, staring at the red sliding down into the sink. "I- I shot Clown. He's in surgery right now, apparently. He needs- blood transfusions, and the bullet hit his spleen and- Branzzy and I tried to cauterize it, but-"

Ash runs water up his arms to get the blood splattered there. "Redd. Hey, breathe for me, okay?"

"His heart stopped beating," he whispers. The shrill, horrible noise of a flatline, too cartoonish to be real. "For fifty two seconds, his heart stopped and he wasn't breathing. I did that."

"It was an accident." Ash's hands are firm where they grip Redd's wrists. "And he's going to be fine. He's *Clownpierce*."

"That's his blood in the sink."

Ash glances at the stain on the porcelain, and the hard set of his eyes falters. "Yeah, it is."

-

By the time Ash can convince Redd that hiding in the bathroom to have a mental breakdown makeout session is *not* a good idea, there's a veritable gathering in the lobby. Someone brought cards, and Leo and Mid are playing what looks like some mutated form of poker while Parrot deals. Zam is dozing on a stretch of chairs, tucked under the arm rests. Rek and Branzzy are gathered over the clipboard of paperwork, discussing softly. Redd makes his way over to where Subz and Vitalasy have set up a cooler of some kind.

"Did you bring *booze* to the *ER*?" He demands, lowkey hoping the answer is yes. He opens up the cooler, and to his disappointment (but probably benefit), there's only sandwiches in baggies and canned sodas.

"Don't be crass," Vitalasy sniffs.

"I can get booze if you want booze," Subz offers. Ash glares at him hard enough that he mutters something about it being a joke.

Redd takes a seat on the floor next to the snacks, taking a sandwich labeled turkey and cheese that looks like it has the fewest number of vegetables. He only intends to nibble, but one bite in, and he realizes he's *hungry*. He scarfs down two sandwiches before he comes up for air.

"Are the front desk aware we've set up camp in the lobby?" Ash sits down next to Redd, leaning his head on his shoulder. Redd automatically pulls Ash into his side, letting the steady rhythm of his breathing calm him.

"They haven't stopped us." Subz shrugs. "As long as we stay out of the way of any patients or anything, I don't think they mind us hanging out."

“Including bringing our own food.” He digs in the ice chest for a drink, and settles on nothing. The last thing he needs right now is caffeine- the resulting jitters will probably land him in the hospital, too.

Vitalasy just shrugs. “Well, someone’s gotta feed you criminals.”

“Vi, *you’re* a criminal.”

“I need food, too!” He brandishes his Sierra Mist. “Just- hey, man. It’s not your fault.”

Redd’s laugh is hollow. “Alright.” Ash presses closer to him, elbow jabbed into his ribs, and Redd grunts. “Sure. Thanks.”

Redd tries to stand, but Ash flops onto his lap to keep him sitting. Redd glares down at him, but Ash just gives a lazy, catlike smile. He sighs, threads his hand through Ash’s hair, and leans back against the chairs to his back. Vitalasy and Subz go through their rounds in the lobby, passing out sandwiches and soda to anyone who will take one.

“Do you think Clown will believe it?” Redd mumbles, eyes half closed. “Motherfucker was probably half convinced I’d leave him.”

“Go to sleep, Redd,” Ash insists. “It’s been a long night.”

Redd tries to protest, but he ends up laying down on the floor next to Ash, his face tucked into Ash’s neck, and with a few rabbit twitches, he ends up falling asleep despite himself.

-

A long night turns into a longer morning- Redd wakes up just after sunrise with a clipboard shoved in his face, and Rek apologetically saying that no one else knows Clown’s social security number or legal name. Redd writes them down automatically, glances over the rest of the missing information- he corrects where Leo had written no allergies, inserting Clown’s mild aversion to strawberries and bactrim.

“Here.” He hands the clipboard back. “That’s all correct.”

He tries to lay down and go back to sleep, but unfortunately, Zam decides it's his turn to bother him. He’d managed to squeeze himself out of where he’d squeezed himself into the chair, and he sits in front of Redd with a deeply upset expression on his face.

“Is there news?” Redd tries to keep the fear out of his voice.

“Uh- not really. Apparently the first surgery went fine and he’s- getting blood transfusions, or something, before the second. Nothing bad. Nothing great.” Zam’s hands wind together. “I just thought you- ought to know. In case- something happens.”

In case he doesn’t make it . “Lay it on me.”

Zam pulls out his phone, and puts it in front of Redd’s face. Redd scans it- email from some law firm. “What’s this?”

“Look at the attachment.”

Redd tries. His stomach revulses at the words. “I can’t read that,” he insists, shoving Zam’s phone back. “That- how did you get Clown’s *will* ?”

“Connections,” Zam says vaguely, which means only mostly legally. “You- you *really* should read it.”

“I can’t,” he says again. “Why should I read it?”

“He- he left everything to you.” Zam scans through the document. “I mean, it’s not a lot- roughly five thousand in cash, spread through his motel room, his work phone and password, and any personal items you deem worth keeping. Anything you don’t want to keep, you’re supposed to burn.”

“I’m gonna be sick,” Redd says, closing his eyes again.

Zam pats him awkwardly on the shoulder. “It- probably won’t come to that.”

“Yeah,” he says, not managing the energy to keep his voice from sounding dull. “Probably not. Thanks, Zam.”

Redd does not go back to sleep. He stares up at the ceiling, listening to the humm of Ash’s snores, wondering what he could have done differently. He catches himself- that’s a horrifyingly Clown-like way of thinking, and that leaves bile in his throat. What’s done is done, and there’s nothing to be learned from this except not to fucking shoot things you don’t want shot.

Ash turns, and his breath is warm on Redd’s neck. Redd takes a deep breath and wraps his arm around his boyfriend’s shoulder, holding him as close as he can. He breathes in time with Ash, forcing himself to calm down. By some miracle, it works.

He lies like that until he notes that everyone else has moved to an isolated corner of the lobby- probably to prepare for the day of people filtering in and out with their own problems. Redd sits up with a grunt, and hesitates only a moment before picking up Ash to carry him over to the group. Ash doesn’t wake up, and Redd resists the urge to laugh.

He sits against the wall, putting Ash’s head in his lap, and when Parrot offers to deal him into a game of Blackjack, Redd thinks of who taught them all to cheat, and says, “sure.”

(He cheats. It’s what Clown would have wanted.)

Ash wakes up by game six, and Branzly is jogging over by game fifty two. His eyes are wide, and he kneels next to the rest of them, still bouncing slightly where he sits on his feet. “Good news.”

Ash’s head moves up fast enough to smack Redd in the jaw. Parrot drops the cards he was shuffling. Leo chokes on his sandwich, and Zam has to hit his back. “Well?” Redd demands.

Branzy blushes at the attention, readjusting his glasses. “He- alright, I need you to understand that I’m not *his* doctor, I don’t know everything-”

“Spill,” Ash demands.

“Good news,” Branzly repeats, like he’s starting all over from the beginning. “Surgeries were a success. The blood transfusion seems to have gone well, he’s under surveillance to make sure his body doesn’t reject it. He’s stable now, just- not conscious.”

“Will he wake up?” Redd rasps, his nails digging into his palms.

“That remains to be seen.” Redd really wants to fucking hit Branzly, but he restrains himself. “He’s- he’s not out of the woods yet, but- the worst part is over. He’s probably going to be okay.”

Redd takes a moment to process that while the rest of the group seems to breathe a deep sigh of relief. Subz has stood up and is asking about drink orders, which Redd is *pretty sure* the ever graceful front desk people would take issue with. Leo is on the phone with Mid, who apparently left at some point for a job, while Zam is calling Rek, who left for similar reasons.

Ash nudges his shoulder. “Hey,” he mumbles.

“Hey.” Redd turns to face him, and allows himself to smile.

Ash loops his arms around Redd’s neck, face pressed into his chest. “More sleep.”

“You’re still tired?” Redd laughs, but he’s laying down anyways, using Ash as a very unwieldy weighted blanket.

“Being concerned is exhausting,” Ash snips, eyes already closed. “You better sleep, too.”

“I’m being threatened.” Redd closes his eyes, and breathing is easy again, at least. “Thank you,” he whispers.

Ash kisses his cheek, and Redd isn’t sure if he truly falls asleep or just dozes, but it’s peaceful nonetheless.

-

He wakes up slowly, wincing at the fluorescent lighting above his face. His least favorite feature of hospitals has to be the smell- it’s always stale, with antiseptic and cheap air freshener hanging in the air like a heavy cloud. He winces as he tries to sit up, vision swimming in light and streaks of darkness.

He blinks a few times, taking note of his surroundings as calmly as he can. The first thing he notices is the IV in his arm- he doesn’t rip it out, even though the urge is there. He narrows his eyes at the bags going into his veins. One seems to be a saline flush, and another bag, dripping slowly down a tube, reads *MORPHINE* .

Clown drags the back of his hand across his face with a groan. No wonder his head feels fuzzy. His movements are noticeably stuttered, and he frowns at his hand, trying to bend his fingers into fine motor movements, but can’t manage it the way he wants to. There’s something wrong- some stiffness or some delay.

He hums, chalks it up to being on opioids, and leans back in his bed.

When did he get into a bed?

He sits up again, wincing as he shifts his abdomen- he looks down, pushing aside the thin sheets and blue hospital gown covering him. There’s a thick bandage on his abdomen, clean, but clearly blocking something awful. Clown frowns at it and moves to remove it, but his vision catches on the dark bruise on his un-tubed arm. He frowns at that instead, where the deep purple is embedded in the pit of his elbow.

Clown shuffles back into his bed, staring at the fluorescent lights. He remembers, but he stays calm through the haze of drugs. He doesn’t feel pain- that must also be due to the drugs, he supposes. He remembers seeing Redd’s face, hazy through tears, and remembers Branzzy’s begging. He rubs at his face clumsily, rubbing off dried tear tracks.

“Hello?” Clown calls, wincing at the crack in his own voice. He tries to search his surroundings

for any of his belongings- his phone, his clothes, anything. All he finds is a small remote that, upon clicking, sends a rush of fuzz through his brain.

He doesn't quite drift off, but his eyes flutter slightly at the new rush of morphine. Any lingering pain in his body is immediately silenced, and the lights above him wobble.

There is a clock in this room, next to an unpowered TV. There is no window light, but it's a clean, well lit room. Clown narrows his eyes and tries to focus on the clock. He can make out hands, but the lengths are warped in his haze. He gives up trying to read it. He waits in silence, humming to himself through dry vocal cords.

He loses track of time at some point, but eventually, a nurse comes in, short hair clipped back. He stares at her uncomprehendingly as she smiles pleasantly.

"Hello," she says brightly. "Good to see you awake."

Clown tries to sit up to appear at least slightly more dignified. "Where-" he breaks off with a cough, and the nurse rushes to his side.

"Easy, easy," she says gently. "You've been out for a bit. Do you want some water?"

Water sounds good. He nods, and the nurse rushes back out of his room. She returns a few minutes later with a small glass of water, and angles his bed to an upright position to help him drink it. "There we go," she says gently.

Clown tries to focus on her nametag, but his brain is still fuzzy at the edges. He can't make out if it says *Shelby* or *Shubble*. Both? He clears his throat, soothed by actual drink and not just an IV fluid. "Where am I?" He asks.

"You're in the emergency ward," the nurse says gently. "I've already told the doctor you're awake. You were a bit touch and go for a bit, but all your friends will be happy to know you're stable."

He frowns. "Friends?"

"There were the two young men who came here with you-"

"Redd. Branzzy." Clown tries to sit up. "I want to see them."

"We can try to arrange that once the doctor has a chance to look you over," the nurse promises. "But they've got a little bit of a... gathering, of sorts, in the lobby."

Clown frowns at that image, but it feels warm, somehow. "Tell- tell them. Tell them I'm alright."

"As soon as the doctor is here." The nurse goes about arranging things. "Is there anything you can think of that you'd like?"

"Food," he grunts.

She laughs a bit, and takes the remote connected to the morphine from Clown's hand, placing it on the table.

There's a knock at the door. The nurse opens the door, and a woman in a white coat walks in. Her hair is dark, with red at the tips, and she nods to the nurse. "Thanks, Shelby." She stands in front of Clown, her eyes dark and calculating past her small smile. "I'm Dr. Kara Corvus."

"Corvid-" Clown tries, but she hushes him quickly as the nurse leaves the room. She waits for the

door to be closed.

“You have been in better shape, Clownpierce.” The Corvid- Kara -taps her nails at the end of his bed.

“What are you doing here?” He tries to reach for his knives, but of course, there is not one waiting.

“Is a crime boss not allowed to have a day job? I have a masters in biology.” She has a clipboard, and starts checking the monitors hooked up to him. “You’re lucky, you know. You had to be resuscitated in the ambulance.”

It takes him a second to remember what that word means, and his stomach feels like a cold pit had formed. “I died.”

“Hm. Medically, technically, no. But your heart stopped beating and you stopped breathing, and without intervention you would not be here.” Kara jots something down on her notepad. “You’re welcome.”

Clown stares at his hands. Kara hums. “You don’t have to look so upset. You’re making a remarkable recovery so far. Though I wouldn’t recommend sticking anymore- what was it, a heated bar stirrer? -into your gut again.”

He winces at the memory, the dullness in his senses not quite preventing the memory of that *burn* . “How-”

“You had a good team of surgeons.” Kara finishes writing in her notes, setting the clipboard on the table. “You’re going to be out of commission for a while. I recommend lots of rest- we’ll get you on the schedule for physical therapy, if need be. Take it easy, Clown. Not a lot of people survive a point blank gunshot wound, and I’m looking forward to doing business with you.”

Clown tries to summon as much composure as he can to stare the Corvid down. She just smiles, and he slouches after a moment. “I want to see my associates.”

She rolls her eyes. “Two at a time, and after that, I’m getting them kicked out of the lobby. You’re staying for another night of observation, and then you can have someone take you home.”

Clown closes his eyes, smiling a bit despite it all. He blames the drugs. He opens his eyes and nods to her. “If that’s all, doctor.”

Kara leaves the room with her clipboard, and the nurse- *Shelby* - comes back in. Following her is Redd, who immediately shoves in front to rush to Clown’s side.

“Hey,” he manages, lifting up his bruised arm. Redd clasps his hand in his, eyes wide. His face looks fuzzy at the edges, and Clown blinks out his tears.

“Hey,” Redd whispers. Behind him is Ash, leaning against the wall. He gives Clown a short nod, and Clown nods back before turning his attention back to Redd. “I’m sorry. I’m *so* sorry-”

“Don’t be.” Clown presses his forehead to Redd’s knuckles. “Never fucking do that again.”

“I won’t. I won’t.” Redd gives a small sob. “You- fifty two seconds. In the ambulance-”

“The doctor told me,” he mutters. “I don’t blame you. Idiot.”

“You’re a shit liar.”

“I’m on too much morphine to be a liar today.” Clown exhales, leaning back. “Apparently, I’m lucky to be alive. It’s like- *la petite mort*, as the French say. The little death.”

“I’ll petite your fucking mort, motherfucker.” Redd kisses the palm of his hand. “I- everyone we could get is waiting for you in the lobby. Mid and Rek had to go, and I think Zam had real shit to do, but-”

“Redd.”

He stops his ramble, looking at Clown with huge eyes. “Yeah?”

“You’re my best friend,” he says, too tired to hide. “You’re more than that. We’re not- we’re never going to be- normal. You have Ash. But you- this is- this lasts. This stays. Despite it all.”

Redd smiles. “Despite it all.”

Ash waves from the back. “I care about you, too, you know. Just saying. I’d care if you died.”

“I know, Ash.” Clown smiles at him. “Thanks for sharing your boyfriend.”

“What did you do to Clownpierce?” Redd asks with a laugh.

“You shot him and he died.” Clown leans his head against their joined hands. “Obviously.”

Redd’s laugh is a bit softer, but he’s leaning his head in too. “Obviously.”

“We should let the others have a turn,” Ash points out. Redd looks like Ash just told him to kick a puppy.

Clown holds on tighter. “Stay.”

Ash moves over to press a kiss to the top of Redd’s head. “I’ll wait for you.” He pats Clown’s shoulder. “Good to see you back, man.”

“Who else would you show your sunglasses dog gifs to?”

Ash laughs and leaves the room. Once he leaves, there’s another knock at the door.

Clown loses track, slightly, of the amount of people filtering into his room. Most are crying. Clown thinks he’s crying, too. Redd is silent, staying at his side and holding his hand. Leo calls in a message from Mid, who is crying in the middle of her job, and Parrot delivers that Zam wanted to hug him, and then Parrot attempts to hug him.

Branzy comes in last, nervously fiddling with his hands. Clown fights through the haze of drugs to focus on him. He is small again, and Clown doesn’t like it.

“Where is your confidence?” He asks, leaning forward as much as he can. “I liked you better the other night. You saved my life, but this- this isn’t you.”

“I- what?” Whatever Branzy was planning to say is obviously backtracked. “I mean- the doctors saved your life-”

“You did,” Clown insists. “You’re one of us. Don’t look so out of place. It doesn’t suit you.”

Branzy blinks a few times, but he stands up a bit straighter. “Since when am I *one of you*?” He asks, one eyebrow quirked up.

“Since you took a bullet out of me.” Clown tilts his head back to stare at the ceiling and the fluorescent lights. “I had the wrong idea about you. You’re tougher than I gave you credit for.”

“Are you alright?” Branzy tilts his head to the side. “This is- I think more words than I’ve heard you say, ever.”

“I am on *so* much morphine,” Clown hums. “Let’s hope that won’t last. Now leave me be.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see that Branzy is smiling. Redd lets go of his hand, finally, and leaves the room. Branzy stays for just a moment. “I’m glad you made it,” he says softly.

Clown blinks at him slowly. “Me too.”

Branzy leaves, then, and Clown reaches for his little remote. His abdomen aches, and he allows himself to stop thinking about it.

-

Ash and Branzy come to get him, when he’s discharged with serious instructions on how to care for the wound in his gut. He’s briefly confused by the lack of Redd, until Ash starts talking about how Redd drunk himself into a stupor last night and wouldn’t wake up when prompted. That sounded about right.

Branzy lets him lean on him as he walks out, giving Clown a second earful of instructions on how to take care of himself. Clown had tuned him out about the second time he heard the word “elevation.”

Branzy sits next to him in the back of Ash’s borrowed-stolen Tesla, and Clown props his head onto his shoulder. “And remember to take your medication,” Branzy says, apparently not having stopped. “Do you need painkillers?”

“Branzy, shut up. Ash, take me home.” Clown closes his eyes.

“Oh, hell no.” Ash snorts, turning on the car. “That dirty ass motel? No. You’ll get an infection, and then I’ll have to pay your hospital bill again.”

Clown frowns, forcing himself to sit up. “What?”

“You’re staying at Branzy’s,” Ash says, without argument. “We voted, and it was unanimous. In case of an emergency, you need to be closer to the medical personnel.”

“This is ridiculous.”

“Okay. Don’t get shot next time.” Ash starts to drive, and Clown huffs, leaning his head back on Branzy’s shoulder.

Reddoons is in fact asleep on the couch when they go into Branzy’s apartment, which is thankfully on ground level- Clown thinks he might have passed out if he had to walk up stairs. Clown laughs at him, and Redd twitches a little in his sleep. It’s a nice enough apartment, but he’s... tired. He blames the drugs.

“Bed,” he mumbles, still leaning on Branzy.

“Yeah, of course,” Branzy says gently. “Uh, my room is down here, since the couch is occupied, if you want a nap.”

Clown tightens his grip on Branzy’s wrist and drags him off. Branzy looks between him and Ash. “I- oh, I’m coming with, okay!”

Ash laughs and drapes a coat over Redd.

Branzy’s room is nice. It’s mostly in white and purple, with tools and items strewn across every surface, including the full sized bed tucked into the corner. Clown flops down into it without a second thought, staring at the ceiling, where small star stickers have been placed.

Branzy sits down next to him, brushing springs and screwdrivers out of the way. “You good?”

“I want to see.” Clown pulls up the hem of the shirt Ash brought for him, his own clothes bloody and torn beyond comfortable use. He stares at the plastic and gauze draped over his abdomen. “Take it off.”

Branzy frowns, placing one hand on top of Clown’s. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He can feel the ache of it every time his pain killers start to fade, but he doesn’t know what it looks like. He needs to see it. He needs to analyze the damage, even impaired as he is. Besides, Branzy is a medical professional- he can just redress it.

Branzy undoes the bandages deftly, tucking them off to the side. Clown frowns when he looks at it- there are thick, ugly stitches at the site, the skin puckered and raw. He goes to touch it, but Branzy guides his hand away.

“This nearly killed me?” He asks, and it comes out far quieter than he meant it to.

“Yeah.” Branzy’s grip tightens on his hand. “Since you’ve already taken that off, why don’t we clean that out and rebandage it? Then you can sleep if you want.”

Clown looks away from the stitches. “What do we rebandage it with?”

Branzy stares at him. “You really didn’t pay attention to a single word I said in the car, huh?”

“Not a single one,” he agrees.

Branzy, apparently, has a bag that contains his medications, materials to redress the wound, and a list of written instructions for how to care for it. Clown allows him to gently clean off the wound, lecturing him the entire time, but he doesn’t listen. Branzy binds him up again, and Clown closes his eyes.

“Stay,” he says.

Branzy pauses, then curls up next to him. Clown takes a deep breath, and allows himself to lean his head against Branzy’s chest. Branzy’s hand threads through his hair hesitantly, and it feels pleasant.

He blames the drugs for making him soft, but maybe he should start blaming the bullet.

la petite mort was a sex joke the whole time lmao

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