

take my hand and pray my teeth don't find your throat

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by [pine_storm_season](#)

Summary

When trust gets you killed, you avoid it. Of course, that's when it just creeps in anyways.

Or: on fear, attraction, and the blend of them that so often prevails.

Notes

this is a fic that involves...some rather fucked up power dynamics. that doesn't last throughout the whole fic, but still heads up.

also: the reason clown threatens branzy is bc he likes the thrill it gives him. clown that's weird

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

“Do you have a death wish?”

Branzy tripped over his own feet, thoughts skidding to a halt. The low-level fear that constantly hummed in the back of his mind when he was near Clown rose to a buzz.

“Um, what?” He laughed, nerves making his hands shake on his pick. “I—what do you mean?”

Clown laughed, a low rumble that sent ice up Branzzy's spine. He tilted his head at the lava lake far below, and at the netherrack that jutted out above it.

"Go stand there."

Branzzy's heart jumped to his throat. He eyed the ledge with trepidation, but he began moving toward it anyway. You don't disobey Clown, not if you want to live. He knew that like he knew his own name.

Clown followed at a leisurely distance, fingers tapping at the grip of his scythe. Branzzy stopped a good few feet from the edge, pick hanging slack at his side, and he knew he was practically broadcasting his fear.

Somewhere in the distance, a ghost warbled a thin sound. Branzzy startled so hard that he nearly fell off the ledge.

Clown didn't stop until he was right in front of Branzzy, looming in a way that made him take a step back. In a contest between Clown and a death to lava, he's not sure he wouldn't pick the lava.

Clown leaned forward, until his mask was right in front of Branzzy's face. Branzzy couldn't help the way he leaned back. He couldn't see the scythe anymore, and he had a suspicion that it was behind him.

"This is what I mean," Clown breathed. He touched the spot where Branzzy's throat met the underside of his jaw, and Branzzy couldn't breathe. He was certain Clown could feel how hard he was trembling.

Suddenly, Clown stepped back. He tilted his head in a way Branzzy recognized as his stand-in for a smile, and beckoned. He chuckled softly at the way Branzzy stumbled in his haste to obey.

"I—what—what was—"

Clown laughed, a warmer sound now that he'd sufficiently terrified Branzzy.

"Most players," he said lightly, "would not stand over lava because I told them to."

"No, they—they would." Branzzy's words caught in his throat as Clown turned over his shoulder and *looked* at him. "Do you know how, how *terrifying* you are?"

"I have an idea."

Branzzy laughed, his voice high and shaky. "You, you clearly know how to use it to its full potential."

"Of course I do," Clown said, amusement clear, "when I have someone as expressive as you to practice on."

"...Happy to help?"

Clown just laughed, and directed him to a new vein of quartz.

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"You know, for someone who's the self-proclaimed weakest on the server, you sure don't have a problem with putting your back to me," Clown said from somewhere behind him. Branzzy was pretty sure he could hear a lever flicking over and over.

Branzy shrugged, trying to wedge the piston into place. “I figure that if you want to kill me, it doesn't matter if I see it coming or not. You're *you*. Of course you're gonna win.”

“That's an interesting statement from someone who was so scared of me he nearly stepped off a cliff,” Clown said. Casual, light. A sated predator.

“Come on, there's no way you'd just let someone *not* do what you say.”

Clown laughed, a lightly mocking sound that made Branzy shiver. “And you didn't step away from me at all, hm.”

“You're scary with that scythe! I thought you were going to kill me!”

He was starting to learn Clown's moods, and this one was a safe one. As safe as being around Clown at all could be, anyway. Content, not set on playing games with Branzy like a cat with a mouse.

“And burning alive was so much better?”

Branzy didn't have an answer for that.

The silence rested, for a minute. Branzy finally got the piston in place, and started working on the next one.

And then some prey-animal instinct told him that something *exceedingly dangerous* was right behind him.

“Hello, Branzy,” Clown murmured. His voice was right beside Branzy's ear, and he didn't dare move. A shiver ran down his spine. “For all your talk of accepting your death, you sure seem scared to die right now.”

One long-fingered, silken-gloved hand came to rest on the place his shoulder met his neck. Branzy thought he could feel his heart racing, and he swallowed. All words had deserted him, and he was left with only primal terror and the wild urge to lean back into him.

“Stay sharp, Branzy,” Clown murmured. “This game isn't over yet.”

And the hand released him, and the overwhelming presence retreated, and Branzy's legs almost gave out under him. He grabbed the piston for support, taking a couple shaky breaths.

A breathless laugh escaped him, the kind that betrayed just how rattled he was. “You really know how to keep a guy on his toes, huh?”

Clown laughed, and his amusement only grew even Branzy shifted so that he was in sight. He was still working on the redstone, yes, but some part of his brain was watching Clown watch him.

Neither of them mentioned how Branzy fumbled the redstone more than he had previously.

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“I'm running low on strength potions,” Clown remarked casually, as Branzy flipped the lever back and forth a couple of times to check that everything worked.

“It works,” Branzy told him needlessly. Some part of him was grasping desperately at a semblance of *normal*.

“Great,” Clown said. He started walking, not bothering to make sure Branzy was following him. “Potion time.”

Branzy hurried to catch up, falling into place half a step behind Clown. He had to skip every few steps to keep up, and not once did Clown check that he was actually following. His confidence was stunning.

Clown’s house was only a short distance away, and if Branzy wasn’t painfully aware that Clown could kill him without effort, he’d be surprised at the trust. As it was, he just hoped that Clown took more enjoyment from scaring him than actually hurting him.

He definitely wasn’t hurting for hearts, that was for sure. Despite Branzy being an easy target, Clown hadn’t once killed him. And he couldn’t see the heart counter that wrapped around Clown’s wrist and flowed up his arm, but he knew that it was a high number. Maybe it just wasn’t as fun if it wasn’t a real fight?

Clown stepped through the doors of his house, but Branzy hesitated. There was a chance, a high one, that it was trapped—

—but there had been easier chances to kill him. More personal ones.

And so Branzy followed Clown in after only a moment’s hesitation.

Clown was filling a couple of bottles of water, and he put them in the brewing stand to heat up. The scythe stood, leaning against the wall, and Branzy had a wild moment of thinking to grab it. But that would get him killed for sure, and he was just starting to trust this tentative peace.

“Hey, can you hand me that nether wart?”

He turned, and crossed the room to grab the spongy plant. He heard a bottle be uncorked, and the sound of someone drinking—

And when he spun around, adrenaline flooding him, it was just Clown drinking water with his face half turned away so Branzy couldn’t see.

Not a potion. Not a threat.

He held out the nether wart in a hand that refused to stay steady, and Clown took it. Clown’s cool, gloved hand brushed against his palm as he did so, and Branzy shivered.

The nether wart was crushed and sprinkled into each potion bottle, and then blaze powder followed it.

Branzy wondered what was wrong with him that he was helping the strongest fighter on the server make strength potions. And let’s be real! The thought scared him. But—Clown wouldn’t waste a strength potion on Branzy.

Small comfort, but comfort nonetheless.

He hadn’t realized he was staring off into the distance until Clown nudged him. He startled, and Clown laughed, but it wasn’t a cruel laugh.

“Can I see your hearts?”

Branzy hesitated. This time, it wasn’t an order. But honestly? It didn’t really matter if Clown knew

exactly how many he was on, because it's not like that would make a difference if Clown went to kill him.

“Sure,” he said. The confidence he meant to put in his voice was gone, and it came out quiet and almost fragile.

Clown reached for his arm, and he allowed it. He allowed his sleeve to be pushed up a little bit, feeling exposed under Clown’s gaze.

Eight hearts. A sign of weakness, just a little bit; a sign that he’d had that much life ripped from him.

Branzy shivered as Clown traced a finger gently over one of the hearts. The touch was slow, gentle, and some jittery, hunted part of Branzy wanted to jerk back and yank his sleeve down, hide his own weakness. Without meaning to, he twitched in Clown’s grasp.

And nearly immediately, he was released. He stumbled a step back, waiting with the certainty of a prey creature for Clown to follow the movement, but instead he turned to the potions and lifted them out of the brewing stand.

“Here,” Clown said, “keep this on you.” He held out one of the potions, and when Branzy took it, it was warm against his hand.

“I—I'm not sure I follow? I mean, I'm glad to have it, don't get me wrong, but like—”

“Just take it. I won't have you dying because you can't defend yourself.”

Branzy thought of all the times Clown had scared him for no reason other than he could. But none of those times had ended in his death, or even with him getting hurt.

Some confused part of him wondered if it was an act. What it could be hiding, he didn't know, but it didn't make sense otherwise.

Branzy took the potion.

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The fire crackled, and Branzy couldn't see beyond the ring of light it cast. His nearness to ClownPierce almost guaranteed his safety, but he still jumped at every sound. Clown, on the other hand, seemed very content.

The cold of the night was starting to set in, and Branzy shivered. Usually, he had somewhere to hole up for the night, his thin jacket doing nothing to keep out the wind, but he didn't dare leave Clown for fear that he'd find the point of that scythe buried in his back.

“Are we, um, are we going to set a watch?”

Clown nodded, poking at the fire. “I'll take first watch, you take second?”

“Okay,” Branzy said, “sure.”

He didn't say that he was—quite reasonably, to be fair—scared of sleeping under the watch of someone who could kill him so easily. He didn't say that he was shocked that Clown was allowing him the same trust.

He just watched the fire, listening to Clown poke it with a stick, and shivered in the cold.

“How do you usually get through the night?” Clown asked. He didn't sound like he was trying to mock Branzy, which came as a bit of a surprise. “You're already shivering and it's only just gotten to be proper dark, and you'd die before you even woke up if someone came at you.”

Branzy shrugged, picking at his nails to avoid looking Clown in the face. “I just, I get by, I guess. Here and there. Usually in a hidey-hole that no one thinks to look in.”

Clown sighed. “Right, you're going to stop doing that. If we're allied, now, I can't have you freezing your ass off and hoping to not get found. Besides, this way I have someone watching my back as well.”

Branzy startled at the beginning of that sentence, and now he was looking Clown in the eyes (or, well, as close as he could get to it with the mask in the way). He wasn't sure he heard that right.

“...You'd trust me to watch your back while you slept? *Me*, the infamous server traitor? *Hello?*”

“You let me nearly crowd you off a cliff into a lava lake, you took off your armor when I asked, you let me drop you into random holes even though you thought there was a trap. Nah, you're too scared of me to try to kill me in my sleep.”

Clown, unfortunately, had a very good point.

The wind picked up, and the fire guttered. Branzy hugged himself for warmth, shivering, ducking his head to try to keep the wind off his face. It would be cold tonight.

“Come here.”

Branzy startled, his head jerking up in confusion.

“What?”

Clown sighed. “You're going to fucking freeze to death, Branzy. Come over here.”

Cautiously, ready to flinch back if Clown lunged, Branzy crept over. He wasn't wearing his armor, the metal too cold to touch, and if Clown wanted to kill him, it would barely take two blows.

When he was maybe an arm's length away, Clown reached out to grab his hand. He froze, but the movement was slow enough that he didn't register as an attack, and he allowed Clown to pull him close.

He didn't expect, however, that Clown would wrap his arms around him and pull him back until he was leaning against his chest.

“Um—”

He was sure his face was turning red, but Clown was warm behind him, and there was something soothing about the solid presence of someone at his back.

“I don't want you to make yourself sick because you're scared of me,” Clown told him. “The last thing I need is for you to be rendered helpless because it's *cold*.”

And Branzy had to admit, Clown had a point. That didn't make him any less—jittery? It wasn't quite the same fear that had stuck to him earlier, though. And when Clown touched his hand—gentle, terrifyingly gentle—

Branzy found himself relaxing.

And it didn't make sense. Clown was terrifying, and dangerous, and seemed to enjoy giving Branzy heart attacks. But all the same, here he was, holding Branzy in the cold and offering to protect him through the night.

The wind gusted again, but it didn't chill his very bones this time. And he was tired. And he felt unreasonably safe, like this.

And without his permission, his head tipped back to lean on Clown's shoulder. And careful to avoid whacking him with the edge of the mask, Clown's chin came down to rest on the top of his head.

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Branzy woke slowly and confused. Someone was shaking him, and he lashed out with sleep-clumsy limbs. His hand connected with a smooth mask with teeth carved in it, and suddenly he was very awake.

"Shit—Clown, I didn't mean to punch you—"

Clown laughed softly. "It's fine. It barely even hurt."

"Oh," Branzy said, sitting up. "Okay."

"Your turn on watch," Clown said, settling down beside Branzy. He seemed to not care about being vulnerable, because after a few moments, Branzy heard his breaths go slow and deep.

Branzy wrapped the cloak tighter around himself, and resisted his tired body's desire to go back to sleep. But Clown had kept watch for him, and even if Branzy's presence did nothing to deter any attackers, he could at least make sure they saw it coming.

Besides, he didn't quite dare go against Clown's decision.

And he had to admit, the thought that someone was keeping watch when he was vulnerable was comforting. Even if that someone was Clown.

Idly, he wondered if Clown usually slept with his mask on, or if that was a new development now that Branzy was here. He wondered if Clown would rather sleep on his own, in his house or wherever he usually slept instead of out in the wilds.

The moon cast silver light on them both, and even though Clown was hard to read at the best of times, he looked peaceful. Calm. Less like a killer, less like someone who played with other people's lives like cards. More just like someone who found himself in a death game and came out on top.

Branzy wondered what Clown was getting out of this partnership. *He* was getting protection, a barrier between himself and being killed over and over for hearts; but as far as he knew, Clown was just tying himself to a weakling. It didn't make sense.

He didn't make sense. Just earlier today he was ordering Branzy to take off his armor and circling him as he didn't dare breathe, and then a few scant hours later and he was—*holding* Branzy for no other reason than that he'd been shivering.

Not that he was complaining! Branzy would very much take being scared over being spawnkilled! But he was pretty sure he was going to get whiplash, the way Clown shifted between being gentle with him and threatening a painful death in everything but words.

The way Clown had touched his hearts like something fragile, something precious, and the way he'd nearly knocked Branzy into lava for no reason other than that it seemed to amuse him.

He was struck by the urge to trace the thin line of exposed skin between his glove and his sleeve, the only part of him that wasn't covered by fabric or wood. Branzy held on hard to the edges of the cloak to avoid acting on the urge.

Clown seemed like someone who'd kill first, ask questions later. Branzy was pretty sure that if he startled Clown awake, he'd end up with the blade of that scythe in his throat, and he didn't want to lose Clown's protection for something so stupid.

But all the same, the urge was there.

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"I don't think I have to tell you how stupid that was," Clown told him, sponging blood off his face with a damp cloth.

Branzy ducked his head. "I know."

Clown caught his chin and lifted his head back up. "Stay still, I don't want to get blood in your eye."

The cool, wet cloth felt good on the burns, and Branzy felt a sigh catch in his throat. Clown didn't seem to notice, continuing to gently wipe the blood away from the cuts and explosion-burns.

Branzy wasn't expecting him to be quite this gentle. Clown could have been a lot rougher without aggravating the wounds, but instead he was so gentle that Branzy almost wanted to get chased into a trap again, just to have Clown touch him again like this.

"Who did this, again?"

"I—I'm not sure, they were invis. But every time I tried to get away, someone was there, Clown they were herding me like hunting dogs. It was scary as shit."

"I don't doubt it," Clown said, smearing aloe on the burns. "I'm just glad you respawned here."

"Yeah, me too," Branzy said quietly.

He was down to seven hearts, now. With every death, he was becoming more and more of a weakness.

"Where else were you hurt?"

"Just my hands. I tripped as the trap went off, and it got me right in the face."

Clown winced in sympathy, hissing out a low breath.

"Hold out your hands?"

He obeyed, sighing as the burns on his hands were soothed by the aloe. Clown's fingers were cool on his, and the gentleness nearly made him tear up.

"No fighting for you until those have healed," Clown told him. It wasn't necessary; Branzy would die even faster if he tried to fight instead of running.

There was a reason he was the weak link on any team he was in.

“You're down a heart, now.” It was an observation, not an accusation, but Branzy felt the urge to duck his head in shame. Clown still hadn't let go of his hands.

“Yeah,” he said quietly. “Not sure who got it, but someone did.”

They were both silent for a moment. And then—

“I'll give you one back.”

Branzy startled, pulling his hands out of Clown's without thinking. “You'll *what?*”

“The weaker you are, the worse it is for both of us. You shouldn't be low, not when you're a target.”

And that made sense, but it also didn't.

Clown. Was going to give him. A heart.

Branzy breathed out slowly. Clown turned away, and by the sound of fabric rustling, he was pulling up his sleeve. A few seconds later he hissed through his teeth, and pulled down his sleeve as he turned back to Branzy.

In his hand was a purplish-white light, sticking to his fingertips.

A heart, voluntarily given.

Clown took Branzy's left hand in his, and turned his hand over so the underside of his wrist was facing up. Clown pressed the light to space where the hearts started, and it sparked through him like a shock.

Clown had given him a heart, and he was still holding Branzy's hand in his own.

“...Huh,” Branzy said. His voice came out weak and high. “That. Um. Thank you?”

Clown laughed, a soft, low sound that was oddly comforting. “Don't mention it. We don't want them getting ideas.”

Clown's bare hand was still holding his. Branzy wasn't sure he was firing on all cylinders, but he wasn't going to pull away.

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“If you think you're going to hurt him, you are *very much mistaken*, Vitalasy.”

Branzy registered the words through a thick fog of tiredness. He opened his eyes just a crack, and saw two figures standing a few feet away. His eyes slipped closed again.

Something indistinct.

Clown's voice, low and threatening. “Do you seriously blame him for putting his life above yours?”

Branzy caught the word “selfish” in Vitalasy's next sentence. Clown made a sound that would have terrified Branzy if he were more awake.

“Don't you dare finish that sentence.”

Branzy fought his way into consciousness as Vitalasy responded.

“That little traitor would do anything to save his own skin, Clown. Just fucking *wait*, just you wait until someone offers him a better—”

A choked sound. The clink of a weapon tapping against armor.

“You're going to shut the fuck up, and you're going to leave. This is your last warning before I put this scythe through your throat.”

“Mark my fucking words,” Vitalasy spat, and gravel crunched.

The sound of metal driven into flesh, and a choked-off cry. Something heavy hit the ground.

Clown sighed. Branzy heard soft footsteps approach, and stop at his side. Then fabric rustled, and armor clinked, and he thought Clown might be sitting at his side.

He kept his breathing slow and deep, pretending to not have woken up.

“I've put a target on your back in trying to protect you, huh,” Clown murmured. “It's just us, now.”

A gloved hand smoothed hair back from his face, and then stilled.

“I hope you know that I won't let you die,” Clown murmured. His hand was still in Branzy's hair. “Not if there's air in my lungs.”

Another sigh. When he spoke again, his voice was even quieter.

“You look so peaceful, right now. Not like when you're awake. Then you're, you're in survival mode. Thinking and adapting and evading.”

The hand left his hair, and Branzy almost wanted to turn his head to follow it.

“You're beautiful in the moonlight,” Clown whispered.

Then the sound of movement, of fabric rustling and metal clinking. Clown resumed his watch.

And Branzy drifted into sleep.

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“Aren't you too hot, like this?” Branzy asked as they edged around a lava pool. He flinched every time it spat molten rock up into the air.

Clown made a “hm” sound, not looking back. He sunk his pickaxe into the diamonds in the ceiling, catching them easily as they fell. Branzy was pretty sure that if he tried that, both he and the diamonds would tumble into the lava.

“This is enough for another set of backup gear,” Clown said, tucking the diamonds away. “And to answer your question, yes. I'm not sure if you noticed this, but lava is *liquid rock*, Branzy.”

He didn't say it particularly meanly, but all the same Branzy flushed. Something about Clown made comments like that bite much harder.

“Well—why do you wear it then?”

“Come here,” Clown said instead of answering. He hadn’t bothered to move away from the lava pool, and something about that made Branzy uneasy.

But he obeyed, because of course he did. Clown faced the lava pool even after Branzy came to stand next to him, and something jittery and anxious fluttered in his gut.

“Do you trust me?”

“I—yes? Uh—”

“Good,” Clown said, and Branzy could hear the grin in his voice.

He dug his pick into the ceiling, and then grabbed Branzy’s wrist and tugged him in front of him. As in, so his back was to the lava.

Clown hooked an arm around Branzy’s waist, and *leaned*—

And Branzy dropped his pickaxe as he grabbed at Clown’s shirt, listening to it sizzle into the lava, a sound embarrassingly like a squeak escaping him—

“This is a lot scarier than if you could see my face, isn’t it?” Clown murmured, so close that Branzy’s nose almost touched the smooth wood of the mask.

“Yes,” Branzy yelped, his voice high and thin. “It is! Clown—”

And then Clown pulled him back with ease, letting Branzy sag against him. He couldn’t stop trembling, couldn’t let go of Clown’s shirt. His whole body seemed sure he was still over the lava.

“Breathe,” Clown said quietly. “I wasn’t going to drop you. I promise.”

Branzy let out a shaky laugh, face still pressed into Clown’s shoulder. “Clown,” he breathed, “please. Don’t—don’t do that. *Fuck*. That was *terrifying*.”

Clown’s hand was warm and steady, on his back. It was oddly soothing.

“You’re alright,” Clown told him, but made no move to force Branzy to let go. He was pretty sure he was still shaking. “You’re alright, Branzy.”

Clown started walking backwards, pulling Branzy with him. And he probably should be scared, but he was still so flooded with relief that he couldn’t feel anything else.

“Let’s sit down,” Clown said quietly, and settled them both against the wall of the cave.

“That was so scary,” Branzy managed, his voice barely over a breath. He sounded like a broken record, but he didn’t have the brainpower to say anything else. “Fuck, Clown, I—I thought you were going to drop me.”

“I wouldn’t have,” Clown told him, voice low and soothing. “I wouldn’t do that. It’s alright, Branzy. I wouldn’t keep you alive this long only to kill you now.”

“I—” Branzy managed, a high breathless sound, before just hiding his face against Clown’s shoulder again.

It shouldn’t be as comforting as it was. But Clown was murmuring to him, and there was a hand on

his back keeping him steady, and for some reason—despite what had just happened—he was starting to be able to breathe again.

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Branzy groaned, leaning back and dropping the helmet.

“I *swear* this is rigged somehow, what are the *odds*?” He put his face in his hands. “Blast protection one. And unbreaking three. This *sucks*.”

Clown laughed quietly, hands still working on a pair of boots. “How could you *rig* an enchantment table?”

“I don't know!” Branzy picked up the helmet and put it back on the table. “Why won't it just give me *protection already*.”

Clown fumbled the lapis and almost dropped it, cursing. Then he looked up at Branzy and burst out laughing.

“What?”

“You have lapis *all over* your face, Branzy, oh my god. You look like a squid inked on you but blue.”

Some instinct got Branzy to put out his hand like he was going to wipe the remaining lapis on Clown's mask, listening before his common sense kicked in.

Clown jerked back, making an indignant sound. “*Branzy!*”

Laughter bubbled up and spilled over, Branzy giggling as Clown tried to smear lapis on him. He was a little more successful, with his longer arms (unfair advantage, Branzy thought), and managed to get one blue-dusted hand into his hair.

“Betrayal!” Branzy cried, flipping Clown off as he tried to stand up. He fell out of his chair instead, landing heavily on the wooden floors.

A moment of uncertain silence.

“Ow,” Branzy said, and sat up. “That wasn't on my list of things to do today.”

Clown snorted. “Really? A surprise.”

“Fuck off,” Branzy told him, rare confidence thrumming through him. Usually he'd be too scared of ClownPierce to even dare.

Clown went back to enchanting, sighing in a way that seemed almost affectionate. And that—that tripped Branzy up a bit, to be honest, but not more than anything else that had happened in the past few days.

What a weird few days it had been. From the multiple terrifying encounters to shocking softness and a fierce loyalty that seemed...almost ironic, considering Branzy's history. As Vitalasy had said, he wasn't exactly known for being loyal.

He'd spent a good few moments in his thoughts, and now Clown was looking at him, head tilted.

“Are you gonna come back up and enchant, or...”

“Nah,” Branzy said, offering him a cocky grin. “It’s comfortable down here.”

Clown snorted, turning back to his enchanting. After a moment, Branzy followed him, settling back in his chair and picking up the helmet.

Branzy tried again, hoping for something even *slightly* better on the helmet.

“Here, like this,” Clown said, and leaned over. He demonstrated how to get more lapis in the runes for better enchantments.

Branzy could hardly pay attention, the several points of contract burning holes in his mind. All along his side, where their knees touched, where Clown had put his hands over his.

He nodded anyway, a strange disappointment settling in him when Clown shifted away. They were still close enough for their knees to touch, but other than that, they were working on completely separate things.

He could still feel the phantom touch of Clown’s hands over his.

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Clown limped back just after noon, mask nearly cut open. He was using his scythe as a crutch, a long, bloody gash down one leg, and his armor was dented and scratched.

Branzy was up before he even registered that he was moving, stopping a few steps away from Clown. His hands hovered in the air, not quite brave enough to touch. The armor they enchanted yesterday was ruined, edges digging sharp metal into Clown’s limbs.

“Don't touch me,” Clown managed. His voice was raw. “I’ll be okay.”

“You're hurt,” Branzy said stupidly. “Who did that?”

“Zam and Leo,” Clown answered, gritting his teeth as he tried to collect potions and bandages without putting weight on his bad leg. “Must’ve—must’ve wanted revenge for the funhouse, or something.”

Branzy moved forward, and Clown flinched. They both hesitated.

“I can carry those for you,” Branzy said, finding his words after a moment.

Clown held out the handful of potions and bandages, and Branzy took them without managing to drop anything on the ground. He followed Clown to a corner back behind a wall, out of sight of everything else.

He was reminded of a wounded wolf retreating to its den, all sharp teeth and pained ferocity.

Clown settled onto the ground with a grunt, letting his scythe rest against the wall. He reached up for the meager medical supplies they had, and Branzy handed them over without a word.

“Go on,” Clown said, jerking his head at the passage back to the main room. “I can't do anything if you're here.”

Branzy obeyed, stumbling back before turning and leaving. He heard Clown begin to wrestle with his armor, and some part of him desperately wanted to turn back and help, but Clown had told him to leave. So that was what he was going to do.

Even though the sound of Clown treating his wounds alone made something ache in his chest.

Branzy, as it turned out, was not very brave. And that came as a surprise to no one, and it made this partnership worth very little in terms of *equality*. He was not very good at fighting, or tactics, or being diplomatic.

But all the same, some wild, feral urge made him want to hunt down Leo and Zam.

It wasn't fair that they could just *do* that, that they could make *Clown* limp back to the circus like a dog with his tail between his legs, and it wasn't fair that Branzy would only be dead weight in a fight. And he knew all too well that this server *wasn't* fair, that any server where the rules were few and far between would end up with those on top and those they controlled with force, but it still made him want to hit something.

He heard Clown let out a hiss of pain, and he dug his nails into his palms. Clown had told him not to go back there and he was going to listen. He was *going to listen*.

<you whisper to ClownPierce> im watching the entrance for if anyone comes

He didn't get a response, but he didn't really expect one.

Branzy sighed, putting his face in his hands. Something about seeing Clown hurt like that unsettled him, threw off some deep part of him that thought it knew how things worked, and he found himself wishing that he could return the favor. Clown had been gentle when he handled Branzy's wounds, after the explosion trap, and now he wasn't even allowed to see what Leo and Zam had done beyond the chasm in Clown's mask and the half-dried blood on his leg.

/msg PrinceZam you won't get off lightly

He stared at the message, then erased it. Chances were, Clown was hurt too badly to be able to take revenge, and Branzy knew painfully well that all he'd end up doing is losing a heart if he tried to get revenge in Clown's place.

A shuffling noise made Branzy jump, but it was just Clown limping back out into the open. It didn't look as bad, anymore, but the axe-dent in the mask made Clown look strangely shaken. He didn't even look at Branzy, instead heading straight for the chests that lay in one corner.

He knelt down with a sharp breath and started digging through the junk that lay in there. Branzy couldn't help but watch him as he searched, methodical and slow, until he found a mask just like the one that had been broken.

"Watch the entrance," Clown said, his voice low and raspy. Branzy heard what he didn't say; *don't look at me*.

He obeyed, turning his back on Clown and waiting for him to swap out the ruined mask for the backup one. He wondered why Clown avoided, so fiercely, the chance that anyone would see his face.

"Okay," Clown gritted out, closing the chest with a thump. Branzy turned to see him pull himself up using the scythe, before limping over to sit next to him.

Not quite sure what he was doing, he put his hand palm-up between them. A few seconds, and then Clown put his hand over Branzy's and held on.

"How much did that heal?" Branzy asked. He didn't quite dare look at Clown, not right now.

A “so-so” sort of noise. “A broken rib, I think. It healed the cut across my face and scabbed the leg wound. It didn't do anything for the bruises that'll doubtless be there later, but that's to be expected. It fixed a couple of smaller wounds, too.”

“Did you give them something to remember you by?”

Clown laughed, soft and dark. “I almost got Leo in the eye, and I think I broke Zam's arm with one strike. No one won that fight.”

“That's good,” Branzly said quietly, “that's good.”

Neither of them had moved their hands away.

Slowly, almost as though he was scared he'd startle Branzly away, Clown leaned into him. He was trembling, a little bit, and Branzly stayed very still.

“Did you know,” Clown said, very quietly. “Did you know, that swords are really quite sharp?”

Branzly couldn't help the laugh that tried to escape him. “Yeah. Yeah, I did.”

“I think that slash hit bone.”

He squeezed Clown's hand without meaning to, and then went very still, but Clown didn't seem to react.

“I—I don't know why this is affecting me so badly,” Clown admitted. “I've lost fights before.”

“But not usually, though,” Branzly said. “Like, I would die all the time if I wasn't really good at running away, and it *still* gets to me, and you're like—*known* for winning fights! One on one, you could kill everyone else here.”

Clown threw his hands up, wincing as his wounds protested. “If fights always affected me like this I'd be dead now!”

Some instinct that he didn't quite understand drew Branzly to wrap an arm around Clown, the same way Clown had held him the other day when they were mining. Clown leaned into him, sagging as though defeated.

“You're, you're still human, Clown,” Branzly said quietly. “You still have to process things, like, that dripstone trap messed me *up*. I'm pretty sure I was checking I didn't still have jagged bits of stone in me for like, over an hour.”

“I—”

Clown cut himself off almost immediately, straightening and holding himself steadier. Almost like he was saying without words, *I'm vicious and don't forget it*.

Branzly was strangely touched to not be included in those that Clown had to be unflinching and unwavering around. Strangely touched to be allowed to hold Clown's hand when he had just come limping home, to be trusted to guard him while he treated his wounds.

“You're not a warrior,” Clown told him quietly. He wasn't looking Branzly in the eyes, but he made no move to pull away from the arm Branzly had around him. “You're—you don't have to rely on being untouchable, you can be blindsided or shaken by things and it doesn't put you in any more danger than you were already. I—do you know how many people want to kill me? If they saw a

chance they'd take it!"

And Branzy—Branzy was impulsive, and he was clever but he wasn't all that rational, and he wasn't used to being trusted like this. He wasn't used to being trusted at all, really. He was used to slinking around his own team, the weak link that was only there to be a meat shield if it came to blows.

"If someone tries to kill you," Branzy answered, just as quiet, "I'll help you spawntrap them. Send a message to everyone else. I can't fight, but I can do that, at least."

Clown shuddered, a full-body movement that must have hurt, but he didn't make a sound. He stayed very still, and Branzy stayed still too, instinctively trying not to scare him away.

"I'm not, I'm not leaving." Branzy gently touched his head to Clown's shoulder. "No one else would take me, for one. And second, I'm not just—I wouldn't—you look out for me. All the time. So I'll look out for you."

He was filled with the urge to pull away after that, the same need to project resilience that drove Clown washing through him, but he resisted it.

A few moments of silence.

And then Clown twisted and buried his face in Branzy's shoulder. His breath came alongside a thin, high whine, and Branzy didn't comment on it. He just held on, steady as Clown trembled against him.

-

Neither of them spoke of it, after. Clown was carving a new backup mask as Branzy sketched trap ideas, and they didn't speak. It was a comfortable silence, which Branzy hadn't thought could happen around Clown, and despite the desire to go curl up next to Clown, he was making progress.

Idly, he thought that maybe it was a good thing that Clown hadn't taken his mask off around Branzy, because the urge to kiss him was stronger than it should be. It wouldn't even *work*, really, with the mask on; but still, the thought was taking up valuable trap-planning space.

"Shit," Clown hissed, letting the mask fall as Branzy immediately turned to look at him. He held up a hand, a thin line of blood welling up on the side of his first finger.

And Branzy definitely needed more sleep than he was getting, because his first thought should *not* have been the urge to kiss the cut. Really, that shouldn't even have been up there.

Clown was looking at him weirdly. Quickly, he looked away.

"Are you staring?"

Branzy cringed. "Uh—...maybe?"

Clown laughed. "I got a broken rib and a cut down to bone just a few hours ago, Branzy. A tiny cut isn't gonna kill me."

Branzy decided to pretend that worry was the only reason he was staring.

"Cat got your tongue, Branzy?" Clown's tone was light. "Do you need to come kiss it better?"

He choked, flushing. "No!" he yelped, but even he knew it just incriminated him further. He

ducked his head, as though that would protect him from Clown's steady gaze.

"Are you *sure*? I wouldn't judge, you know."

"Holy shit, Clown," Branzy managed, "can't a guy just be worried in peace?"

"No," Clown answered, a grin clear in his voice, "you should know this already. You came for protection, stayed 'cause I'm just that hot."

Branzy buried his face in his hands. "*Clown.*"

A grunt, and then an uneven limping gait. Branzy looked up to see Clown in front of him, still using his scythe to keep the weight off his bad leg.

Clown leaned forward, taking Branzy's face in his hand and tilting it up. One finger rested along his jaw, another curled below it, and Clown's thumb was at the corner of his mouth. He was sure his face must be as red as a poppy, especially when Clown moved close enough that the cool wood of the mask brushed the tip of his nose.

"Or," Clown murmured, "is this just a bonus?"

Branzy wasn't sure he could move even if he wanted to.

"You too stunned to say anything, huh?"

Branzy made a sound that was embarrassingly like a squeak. Apparently, the answer was yes.

And then Clown let go of his face and stepped back, and Branzy felt like all his bones had been turned into jelly. He was pretty sure Clown could ask him to do anything and he would obey.

The bastard went back to his mask carving, after that, as though he hadn't utterly *broken* all of Branzy's thought-forming power. If his mind wasn't sludge, he would probably curse Clown out for it.

-

Branzy couldn't stop looking at his hearts. He had *sixteen*, wrapping around his wrist and trailing up his arm, and Clown had twenty. Even with the blunder—and that made him cringe, the way he'd almost lost his easily-ripped-away hearts—it was enough that he almost felt *safe*, for once.

It was a shield between him and true death, only taken down by the inevitability of being a weakling when you need to fight. Hell, he felt almost invincible!

A giggle escaped him, and he couldn't stop smiling. This is the most hearts he'd had in—*forever!*

Clown slung an arm around him, and Branzy could tell without seeing his face that he was grinning too.

"This *has* to be some sort of record," Clown said, triumph soaking into every word. "*Fourteen hearts, Branzy!*"

"I know!"

He had the urge to kiss Clown. Instead, he settled for wrapping his arms around Clown and hugging him tightly. Branzy's head fit neatly into the crook between his head and shoulder.

“Fourteen hearts,” Clown said again, almost sounding awed. “What are you on, fifteen?”

“Sixteen,” Branzy told him, pulling away to show his heart counter. The middle ones, the nine and ten and eight markers, they were smudged with lost and regained hearts. But the higher ones, twelve and fourteen and sixteen, they were clean and clear.

Clown touched the hearts, so light it almost tickled. If it had been anyone else, Branzy was pretty sure he would have jerked back. But for some reason, with Clown, he didn't mind.

“You're at sixteen,” Clown said needlessly. There was something in his voice that Branzy couldn't identify, something soft and relieved. “That's—”

“I know,” he said, grabbing Clown's hands and holding on tight. “I, I feel *invincible!*”

“Don't get cocky,” Clown told him, laughing.

Branzy made an exaggerated hurt face, struggling to keep it from melting into a grin. “You think so little of me,” he whined.

Clown snorted. “Branzy, you can't possibly actually think that.”

Instead of answering, Branzy jabbed him in the ribs and then stepped back quickly.

Clown fixed him with a look that Branzy could tell was a mock-glare. “I can't exactly *chase you,*” he deadpanned.

“I know!” Branzy answered brightly.

Clown sighed, grabbing his scythe and stepping away from the wall. His limp was getting better, but Branzy knew it had still been hard for him during the casino's open hours. He refused to show any sign of weakness, which meant that he had to walk without limping, only able to lean on Branzy when they were both still and he could pass it off as a cocky, in-charge sort of movement.

If Branzy let himself acknowledge it, he was worried. The way to let something heal is definitely not use it like nothing happened. But he knew Clown was stubborn, and distrusting (for good reason), and all he could do is position himself next to Clown whenever they had stopped.

“Goddamn it, Leo,” Clown said through gritted teeth as he slowly made his way over to the other side of the room. He sat down with a grunt and began sorting through the prizes they had left.

Leo's sword was particularly awful to get cut with. The edges were prickly like holly leaves, and the blade was long and curved. It wasn't a surprise that the wound was still giving Clown trouble, especially with how taxing healing potions are on the body.

“I almost wish someone had gotten this one,” Branzy said, plopping himself down next to Clown and indicating a trident. “The thing's almost broken, and mending books are more useful on armor or weapons than a very large sea fork.”

A choked laugh escaped Clown, and Branzy internally celebrated. He was making it his personal mission to keep Clown's spirits up, and it was working.

Close enough that their legs were touching, they sorted through what was left over. Clown was warm and comforting beside him.

Vitalasy seemed nervous. Which was understandable, considering that they were gathered deep below the ground to discuss betrayal, but some bitter-sharp part of Branzy was glad.

He threw an invisibility potion onto the table, the glass evaporating as they both shimmered out of sight. It made Branzy uneasy, some instinct telling him that a fight was near.

“So Clown can't see us,” Vitalasy explained, like it should be obvious. And maybe to him, it was. “So! Branzy. What's your relationship with Clown?”

Branzy hesitated, invisible fingers twisting around each other. “Um,” he said eloquently. “I, um.”

Clown was very careful to appear nothing more than casual allies around the others, and Branzy needed to play into it. He knew how paranoid Clown was when it came to appearing weak.

“Indentured servitude?” Branzy said, and it came out like a question. “I think that's the term?”

Vitalasy tilted his head, and the glimmering metal of his diamond armor made Branzy anxious. Despite the invisibility, he could *feel* Vitalasy watching him like his very soul was bare through his armor.

“Would you like to be freed?”

Vitalasy's tone was careful, cautious; testing the waters. Ready to bail.

Branzy hesitated. He should learn the plan, if Vitalasy was going to be working against them.

A pang of guilt washed through him, and he was glad for the invisibility as his face scrunched up against his will. He remembered when Vitalasy was truly on his side, or rather, when Branzy was on *his*. He mourned for what had been shattered in the funhouse.

“Yes,” he told Vitalasy.

“Cool,” Vitalasy answered. “Clown would come to your rescue if you were in danger, wouldn't he?”

Another test question. He'd seen Clown come to Branzy's defense like it was his own life on the line.

“Yeah,” Branzy said. Guilt twisted in his gut and closed up his throat.

“Then if, say, you were in a box,” Vitalasy said slowly, “spawntrapped, he would come rescue you, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“Especially,” he added, “if he was told you'd be killed for every minute he didn't give my people hearts.”

Oh, fuck, Branzy thought.

“Yeah,” Branzy said aloud, “that'd work. But like, what's in it for me?”

Vitalasy made an incredulous noise. “I'm freeing you, Branzy! What more do you need!”

“Four hearts,” Branzy answered easily, mind spinning and scheming. If they were both on twenty hearts, it maximized their chances. Because for all that Clown was incredible, he was still only one

person.

Vitalasy made a sound that said *I can't believe you, Branzy*. He sighed, arm coming up to rub at his face.

“Fine. Do we have a deal?”

Branzy steeled himself. “We have a deal.”

-

Subz held the blade of an axe against Branzy's throat, meeting his eyes. They were waiting for Vitalasy's signal, waiting for the moment to start the slaughter.

Branzy was so nervous he felt like he was going to throw up, even though he knew the plan. Both plans, theirs and then his and Clown's plan.

“Okay,” Vitalasy said over the comms, “we've got Branzy in a box. Every thirty seconds you don't give us eleven hearts, we will kill him.”

“Branzy?” And even though he knew it was an act, the worry in Clown's voice made something twist in his chest. “Where are you?”

Subz let him pull away from the axe enough to talk. “I'm in a box! I'm in a box, they spawntrapped me!”

“Where are you Branzy, where?”

Subz gave him an approving nod as he opened his mouth to speak again. “I don't know! I don't know, Clown! I'm trapped!”

The panic wasn't hard to draw on, given that the razor-sharp blade of Subz's axe was so close that if he tripped, he'd cut himself open on it.

“No, I won't. Branzy, where are you?”

He heard the sound of a sword slamming against armor, and Subz met his eyes.

Then he drew the axe back and swung, and Branzy's whole world became pain and the cold blade in his throat. His body crumpled to the floor as Subz released his shoulder and pulled the blade away, and the axe came down again on the back of his head.

And then the world twisted and he was on a bed, shaking like a leaf, only barely registering Clown's voice. Subz lifted him to his feet, supporting him with an arm around him as his trembling limbs tried to collapse under him.

“Do another kill!” Vitalasy barked.

Branzy's terror was very real as he cried out, his voice raw and scratchy. “Don't do another kill! Don't do another kill! We can talk about this—”

“Don't do another kill,” Clown ordered, low and dark, and Branzy wished he'd never taken the deal.

The axe went through his skull, this time, across one eye and he thought he might be screaming. He wasn't entirely sure. He couldn't hold onto anything, couldn't register anything but the all-

consuming agony as his body tried to give out.

Another blow, and he respawned again. This time, when Subz approached him, Branzy clumsily pressed himself back against the wall, shaking his head desperately.

“Please,” he whispered, rasping and raw. “*Please.*”

Subz hesitated. Then he pealed out of the box, leaving Branzy shaking on a shitty bed in a cold obsidian box. He curled into himself, clutching his comm like it was a totem, drinking in Clown’s voice like a desert plant soaking up rain.

Branzy kept touching his throat, touching his face, as though one of the wounds could have somehow reappeared. His skin felt too hot and too cold, the new scars rough and jagged on his throat and his face, and he couldn't stop shaking.

He couldn't stop shaking.

He knew Clown was fighting, knew Clown was toughing out the pain of his wounded leg as he fought two people at once, and Branzy—a survivor, scrappy and solitary—wished he could feel anything at the thought. But the only thing left in his body was cold, congealing terror and breathless relief, and he knew Clown wasn't going to win this one.

All he could do was huddle into himself and hope they would both be okay, somehow.

(He knew that for them, that here? It wasn't even a possibility.)

-

It wasn't safe to act like this, and Branzy knew it. He knew that if someone saw them, it would put a target on their backs. It would paint their world in weakness that they wouldn't be able to shake.

But neither of them cared about that enough to move. They were in a box they'd blocked themselves in, neither of them put together enough to leave an entrance, and they had collapsed onto each other almost as soon as they had been hidden.

They were practically tangled together, Clown’s head buried in his shoulder and Branzy leaning his head on Clown’s. Clown was holding onto him like he was the anchor keeping him from falling off the edge of the earth, and Branzy couldn't judge because he was doing the same thing.

“That was a bad idea,” Clown mumbled, his voice muffled by his mask and Branzy’s shoulder. “Fuck.”

“Yeah,” Branzy agreed, voice still raw. “That *sucked.*”

A bitter laugh. Branzy wanted to curl around him at that sound, that broken pained sound that was deeply *wrong* coming from Clown. He wanted to shield Clown from the world with an intensity that scared him.

“That's an understatement,” Clown said, low and flat. “*Fuck.* It—Branzy it scared me so bad to hear you getting killed, even though I knew it was going to happen, it—fuck.”

Clown held onto him tighter, as though thinking the same thing. One, or possibly both of them, were shaking.

“Fuck,” Branzy echoed, speaking the words into the side of Clown’s head. “Let's never do that

again.”

A laugh without amusement. “You don't have to tell me.”

“I hate this server,” Clown said, barely audible. “It—we kill each other and backstab each other and die for *what?*”

Branzy wanted to crawl inside Clown's skin and heal whatever was bleeding, whatever had been festering only to come pouring out his mouth right now. That probably wasn't a very normal thing to think.

“Why did you have to die *twice*? For a betrayal? Why did I have to fucking—fight on this lame-ass leg that won't fucking hold my weight, why is it always *traps* and *distrust* and *pain* and—fuck, Branzy, I hate this.”

His voice dissolved into a thin, high thread of a sound, and his next breath shook. His body shuddered, and he pressed himself harder against Branzy in a rare show of vulnerability.

Branzy felt himself start to fall apart as well. His eyes welled up with tears, the forced survivability that he always wore shattering like glass. A half-stifled sob escaped him.

And somehow, he felt safe to break like this, in Clown's arms.

-

Branzy was watching the woods when Clown made a *sound* and his heart twisted. It sounded like pure helpless misery, and he spun to look at him, but as far as Branzy could tell he was still asleep. One hand curled into a claw, and he muttered something indistinct.

Branzy hesitated. Instinct urging him to try to soothe Clown, to hold his hand and talk to him softly, versus the knowledge that Clown would wake up swinging.

“Don't,” Clown mumbled, sounding desperate, and he grabbed onto the cloak he was using as a blanket in a vice grip. “*Don't.*”

Branzy knew, with absolute certainty, that Clown would hate knowing that anyone was seeing him like this. And if anyone came out of the woods, they'd be fucked.

“Clown,” Branzy said softly. The urge to curl around him, to shield him with his body despite the pain coming from inside, nearly won out. “Clown. Wake up.”

“*Branzy,*” Clown said desperately, the word barely audible.

“Clown, you gotta wake up. Clown!”

And Clown flinched like he'd been shocked, a ragged gasp escaping him. He sat up, still clutching the cloak like it was the only thing keeping him together. Branzy wanted to lean against him.

“Fuck,” Clown breathed. “*Fuck.*”

“Clown?” Branzy asked hesitantly. “What—”

“Don't,” he said sharply. His voice sounded a heartbeat from shattering like glass. “Don't—don't get any closer. Not safe.”

If he listened hard, he thought he could hear Clown echoing *not safe* under his breath.

And Branzy didn't know how to help when Clown was so obviously hurting. He didn't dare come closer, not when Clown had told him not to, not when he was still gripping the cloak like it was his tether to the world.

“It's okay?” he tried.

Clown shook his head violently. “It's *not* okay, it's not, this fucking server—nothing is *safe*, nothing is *okay*—”

“Okay but—we're safe right now, no one knows where we are—”

“*But we're not always here,*” Clown said, voice ragged and raw. “*I'm* not always here. You can't fucking—you can't *fight*, you're a target for anyone who wants a fucking free heart and I can't *do anything about it.*”

Branzy, quite frankly, did not expect this. Clown, this distressed over...the thought of him being killed, apparently. It was hitting as a bit of a surprise.

“Clown,” he said softly, not sure what else to say.

“Branzy,” Clown answered, his voice barely a breath. “Why do we have so many goddamn enemies.”

And Branzy didn't have an answer for that.

-

Did they really need more blaze rods? No, they didn't. But the nether was large and they're thousands of blocks out, and it felt less like hiding if they're killing blazes too.

Branzy managed to convince Clown to sit on the ground and pack up the blade rods instead of killing them, and it took a surprising amount of effort to get someone whose leg wants to give out off his feet. Even now, he could hear Clown startle up every time he took damage.

“Can't believe you convinced me to do this,” Clown grumbled. “I could do it with way less burns.”

“Fuck off,” Branzy told him, dodging a flaming swipe aimed for his face. “You need to stop standing on that goddamn leg wound before it ends up like that permanently.”

“You're so rude,” Clown told him. “I can't believe I teamed up with you.”

A clatter of bones made Branzy spin, and Clown cried out. A wither skeleton had its sword deep in Clown's back, and a second was approaching.

“Branzy—”

Clown was sitting down, and he couldn't get up without making the wound much, much worse. He couldn't turn and hit the thing, either, and Branzy was moving before he even registered giving the order.

A sweep of his sword took the skeleton's head clean off its shoulders, and he crouched to pull the sword out as its body toppled. Clown made a ragged, raw sound of pain, and Branzy grabbed him and tried to pull him up.

Blazes whirred behind them as Branzy swung at the second skeleton, putting himself between it and Clown without even thinking. He raised a shield as they shot flaming chunks of rock-sludge at

him and Clown, and they stumbled down the hallway.

Clown, when Branzy looked over his shoulder, was leaning nearly all his weight on the scythe. He was bleeding, droplets of blood stained dark with wither trickling from the wound.

The second skeleton was hit by a blaze, and the two began fighting, allowing Branzy and Clown to get farther away. Clown stumbled and nearly fell, and Branzy sunk his pickaxe into the wall and tore out chunks of the soft rock.

Clown was swaying on his feet, and Branzy was getting really quite worried. As soon as the hole was big enough to fit them both, he ducked into it, pulling Clown with him. He blocked it up behind them, leaving them pressed together in the stuffy darkness.

“We should have been looking behind us,” Clown mumbled, voice low and flat. “*Fuck.*”

“How bad is it?” Branzy asked, trying to ignore the way Clown sounded so defeated. “The wound, I need to know if you need a health potion.”

“I’m fine,” he gritted out, gasping sharply when Branzy accidentally touched it. “It’ll—I’ll be fine.”

The blood was sticky and warm on his fingers, and he wished he could do anything more than sit there and hold onto Clown. He was shivering, breaths coming quick and harsh, and Branzy found himself holding onto Clown like he was something fragile.

“It hurts,” Clown said tightly. “Branzy, I—”

I’ve got you, Branzy found himself thinking, *I’ve got you*. He leaned the side of his head against Clown’s, trying to be comforting.

Clown moved, hissing from the pain as his shaking hands came up his face. Branzy could hear him fumbling with cloth and wood and whatever held the mask on his face, and then it came off and his breaths were suddenly very loud.

“Couldn’t breathe in that,” Clown managed, grabbing onto Branzy’s shoulders like it was his only tether to the world. “I—it’s dark, it’s fine. *Fuck*, I’m—”

Some instinct drove Branzy to bring his hand up to touch Clown’s face, and he stiffened. Branzy was pretty sure Clown had stopped breathing.

Slowly, carefully, almost like trying to pet a wild wolf, Branzy wiped tears away from his eyes. Clown shuddered, letting out a long breath.

“Branzy,” Clown whispered, sounding almost *desperate*. He tilted his head forward, into the touch, and Branzy let his hand come to rest on Clown’s cheek. They were both trembling.

“Clown,” Branzy whispered back, an echo and an answer. Clown’s breath was warm on his face, and Branzy shivered.

“It hurts.”

The words were barely more than a breath, spoken into the safety of the dark.

“You did get stabbed,” Branzy answered. His voice was at a murmur, scared to break the spell by speaking louder.

“I’d be dead if you weren’t there,” he whispered. “Branzy. You—I would’ve been dead.”

“But you’re not,” Branzy said softly. He leaned forward, and their foreheads touched. Gently, he threaded his fingers into Clown’s hair. “You saved me, I had to return the favor.”

A choked laugh. Clown’s breath rasped, a scratchy, worrying sound.

His fingers tightened on Branzy’s shoulders, digging in tight enough to hurt.

“If you tell anyone about this,” Clown managed to say, his voice tight and thin, “I’ll kill you. I’ll—I’ll kill you, I will. Slow.”

And Branzy wasn’t quite sure why, but it didn’t carry the same weight as earlier threats. This felt like—a desperate, cornered-animal attempt to appear strong.

“I won’t,” Branzy promised. He pressed his head against Clown’s, eyes closing. “I won’t tell anyone.”

A shuddering exhale. “Good.”

“How’s the wound?” Branzy asked after a moment, and Clown stiffened under his hands.

“Better,” he answered tightly. “It’s—it’s closing, I think, the wither’s gone.”

“Ready to head back?”

Clown took in one long, shaky breath. “Guess so.”

-

Parrot stood in front of the portal, yellow eyes glinting in the nether-light. Talon-tipped fingers gripped the hilt of a sword, and his steady gaze met both of theirs.

Clown had straightened up, trying to lean on the scythe as subtly as possible, but Branzy had a feeling he hadn’t been fast enough. The way Parrot was eyeing them, almost like a predator that just saw its prey stumble, was unnerving.

“Are you going to let us through, or...”

Clown’s voice was light, casual, the strain of exertion and pain barely noticeable. Branzy hoped Parrot wouldn’t be able to tell.

Parrot shrugged, feathers rustling. “Depends,” he said, just as lightly. His head tilted, just a little bit.

Out of the corner of his eye, Branzy thought he could see Clown mimic the movement.

“On what?”

Branzy resisted the urge to reach for Clown. They needed to appear strong, especially now that Parrot could sense some sort of weakness and refused to step aside.

“On what you have to give me.”

Branzy stiffened. Oh, they were *fucked*. His mind flickered through possibilities, none of them good.

Give Parrot gear, he knows he can push us around. Refuse, but we can't handle a fight. Run, but

then it seems we're scared of him.

Clown laughed darkly, and it sent a shiver down Branzy's spine. "Oh, *Parrot*, I think you've misunderstood how this works."

"Oh?" Parrot said, unfazed. "Explain, then."

Fourth option, apparently; bluff.

"You don't order us around," he continued. Branzy could hear the open threat in Clown's voice, and Parrot must have been able to as well, but he didn't flinch. "You don't order *me* around. Because, Parrot."

His fingers tapped the handle of his scythe in a silent promise, and he tilted his head in a grin.

"Because I will kill you," he murmured, taking a step forward, "and when you respawn Branzy will be there with a trap to pick up the pieces."

Parrot laughed, although there was a note of strain in his voice. His expression hardened, a moment later.

"Nice bluff, Clown," Parrot said. "But I saw you leaning on Branzy and that oversized wheat-cutter you call a weapon just a moment ago, and I have a *sneaking suspicion* that you can't handle a fight."

Oh *fuck*. Oh, they were so, so fucked.

Run; he'll chase. Fight; we'll die. Give him items—maybe? Play weak, maybe he'll be satisfied.

It was the only real option left.

Branzy took a couple steps forward, turning for a moment to blink hard at Clown. *I know what I'm doing*, he tried to convey.

"I, uh," Branzy said, fumbling with his inventory, "I don't wanna get targeted in a fight so—here's, um, here's a few gapples?"

Please play along, please play along—

"Branzy," Clown said sharply, "what are you doing?"

He held them out to Parrot, who took them.

"And?"

Clown grabbed Branzy's shoulder, giving it a brief squeeze. "*Branzy*," he said, "that's *ours*, what the fuck?"

"I don't want to get killed!" he yelped, offering Parrot a totem as well.

Something shifted in Clown's voice when he spoke again. "Don't give him a *totem*, oh my fucking god Branzy I *will* leave you to him."

Parrot had already taken the totem, though, and Branzy stepped backwards once. His back was pressed against Clown's, and Parrot hesitated. Branzy prayed that would be enough.

“Fine,” he said dismissively, after a moment. Branzy sagged in relief. “See you around.”

And he twisted, throwing a pearl into the distance, and then vanishing after it.

Clown let out a sigh of relief, immediately leaning much more of his weight on Branzy.

“I don't know how you did that,” he said, his voice half a breath, “but well done.”

“I don't know how it *worked*,” Branzy answered, a stressed laugh escaping him. “Let's go home before he comes back for more.”

“Yeah,” Clown agreed, something odd in his voice. “Let's go home.”

-

Clown shuddered, hands curled into fists so tight Branzy was surprised blood didn't bead up on his gloves, holding himself as still as possible. Branzy was trying his best to be gentle, but still the wound was angry and red and rough.

The bandage had spots of dried blood from where Clown had aggravated it, and the skin around the scab was hot to the touch.

“Oh, Clown,” Branzy said under his breath, struggling with the cap of a regen potion. “How did you fight people on this?”

Clown shrugged, his voice tight. “Had to. So I did.”

Branzy didn't have a response to that. He held out the potion instead of speaking, and Clown took it. He turned and stared at a wall as he listened to the sound of Clown fumbling with his mask and then drinking the liquid health.

“Okay,” Clown said, a few moments later. He sounded slightly breathless. “You can—you can turn around now.”

The potion bottle lay abandoned, empty and on its side on the ground. Clown was watching as the leg wound's angry red faded, and when Branzy—slowly, careful not to startle him—went to touch it, it felt cooler.

“Your hands are cold,” Clown said. Branzy went to move away, and Clown grabbed his wrist. “I didn't say you had to stop.”

Branzy snorted. “Pushy bastard.”

Clown tilted his head in a grin. “Since when has that been an issue?”

“You're lucky you're good at fighting,” Branzy retorted, joking—but they both went quiet as it sunk in that right now, Clown *couldn't* fight.

Right now, it was up to Branzy to protect them both. And he was a *terrible* protector.

Clown's grip went slack, as if realizing the same thing, and following some instinct that Branzy didn't understand—

He reached up and put his hand on Clown's face, the wood of the mask smooth and cool against his palm, and he thought he could hear Clown let out a shuddering breath.

“Your mask is in the way,” Branzy said, pushing—just a little bit, just a little bit, the same way Clown had pushed him—and Clown breathed in sharply.

“Unfortunate, isn't it,” Clown said, voice barely over a breath. “I'd—rather not—”

And Branzy pulled away, sensing the edge of his limits, and smiled at him. “Fair,” he said, “we are pretty exposed.”

“Yeah,” Clown said, and they both pretended that was the only reason.

His feet were stuck in cobwebs, and he couldn't move. He held up his shield, whole body shuddering under the blows that rained down, and he jerked back when Parrot caught his shield with an axe and ripped it away. A sword glanced off his chestplate, the sound of metal clashing ringing in his ears, and he fell backwards.

Branzy landed hard, an axe coming down with terrifying force and splintering his shield. Parrot laughed, a shrill sound, and desperately Branzy hooked a leg around Parrot's ankle and brought him down.

He scrambled up, chest heaving for breath, and an arrow buried itself in the back of his knee. He collapsed into the bloodied dirt with a ragged cry, knowing he was dead.

“Leave him,” Clown growled, and he sobbed in relief.

A few blows were exchanged, then a screech of pain, and Clown knelt down beside him.

“Clown,” Branzy breathed, a choked sob catching in his throat. “You—he was going to kill me, oh my god—”

A gentle hand rested on the side of his face, tilting his head up to look at Clown. He shuddered, eyes closing.

“Eyes open, Branzy,” Clown said lightly, and something sharp and cold touched his throat.

He froze. No. *No*. There was no way.

He obeyed, terror stilling his limbs, and Clown laughed softly.

“Oh, Branzy,” Clown purred, “lesson one: never let down your guard.” And the blade pierced his throat—

—and Branzy cried out—

—and silken-gloved hands grabbed his, and Branzy's eyes flew open. Clown was right in front of him, and Branzy sobbed, clumsily jerking back. He couldn't think. He couldn't think, he should be dead, maybe he was dead. Maybe he was dead and Clown was here to kill him again.

“*Branzy*,” Clown said, sharp enough that some cowardly instinct in him forced him still. “I need you to breathe.”

And he *tried*, he did, but panic made his breaths come rabbit-quick and he couldn't *think*.

“Look at me,” Clown ordered, and Branzy didn't think he could disobey if he tried. His eyes caught on the pitch-dark eyes of the mask, untouched by moonlight. “You're safe. *We're* safe.”

A choked sound escaped him, and dimly he realized he was shaking his head. He was dizzy.

“Am I wearing any armor?”

Branzy squeezed his eyes shut with a sob.

“Branzy! Look at me. Am I wearing armor?”

He forced himself to look at Clown, mind stuttering for a few moments.

“...No,” he managed, his voice scratchy and small. He still couldn't breathe.

“That's right,” Clown said, gentler. “Would I be wearing armor if it was dangerous?”

“...Yeah,” Branzy said, voice raw. “You would be.”

“I would be,” Clown confirmed. “So we're safe, aren't we?”

Branzy hesitated.

Clown squeezed his hands. “We are. We're safe, Branzy.”

“Safe,” he echoed. He wasn't sure he believed it, but—

Clown would be wearing his armor if a fight was happening—

And Branzy pitched forward with a thin cry, burying his face against Clown's chest. His body heaved with sobs, and Clown was murmuring something, stroking his hair.

Safe. A broken laugh escaped Branzy. What the fuck was *safe*, anyway?”

“I've got you,” Clown told him, firm and gentle. “You're okay, Branzy. You're okay.”

Clown was warm and steady against him, and as the panic of the nightmare seeped away, it began to provide him with a bit of comfort.

“I thought you killed me,” Branzy rasped, shuddering. “I thought—I thought you, I was fighting Parrot and then you chased him off and then you killed me—”

“Oh, Branzy,” Clown murmured. “I could never betray you. Never. I promise.”

Slowly, his sobs stopped pouring out of him like rain. Clown's hand was steady on his back, and he was still stroking Branzy's hair. His heartbeat was slow and strong.

“I hate this server,” Branzy whispered, like a secret. “It's—you can't fucking trust people. It's so scary.”

“Yeah,” Clown said softly. “I get it.”

“I can't even fight,” he breathed. “I can't fight, no one trusts me, I—”

“I trust you,” Clown said. “I trust you.”

And Branzy nearly started crying again at that, but he managed to avoid it.

“I trust you,” Clown said, for a third time. It sounded almost like he was trying to convince himself. “So it shouldn't be an issue to—”

Branzy froze, but Clown just reached up for his mask. He fumbled with the clasp for a few moments, and then it came away, and he let the mask fall.

And Clown was tense against him, just as still.

Clown's eyes were grey, almost silver in the moonlight. They were cast to the side, almost like he was afraid to look at Branzy.

He was beautiful.

Something black and smudgy rested on his throat and disappeared under the fabric of his clothes. It had speckled, splattered edges, and when Branzy went to touch it, Clown flinched. He froze.

"It's fine," Clown said, voice tight. "Just—startled me."

Gently, Branzy brushed his fingertips against the marking. He had an odd feeling like it would tear under his touch, if he wasn't gentle enough.

Clown swallowed, his throat bobbing under Branzy's fingers. He pulled back.

"Where did it come from?"

Clown looked away. "I—uh—made a deal. With something very powerful. I needed to be very good, very fast."

"Who?" Branzy's voice was barely over a whisper.

He hesitated. Then he took a breath, like he was steeling himself. "Death herself."

Branzy startled, shock forcing his eyes wide open. "You made a deal with—"

"I had to!" Clown exclaimed. He let out a long, slow breath. "If—if you get thrown into the belly of the beast you either die or come out on top, y'know?"

Branzy didn't know, but he nodded anyway. He had a feeling Clown had been holding onto these words for a very long time.

"It—I—every time I kill, it gets bigger. Only a little bit, but—it used to be a tiny black patch over my heart, and now it's—*this*."

Many kills indeed, if it had crept up his chest and onto his throat. Something in Branzy's chest twisted, and he didn't quite understand why.

"Clown," he said softly. He wasn't sure how to react. He wasn't sure how Clown wanted him to react.

"Branzy," Clown answered quietly, a tiny sound. He sounded horribly fragile.

Slowly, like an echo of the time in the nether—but this time the moon was shining bright, this time neither of them were injured—Branzy leaned forward. Clown mimicked the motion, and he didn't dare breathe.

Their lips touched, and they both startled back. They laughed, a little bit awkward, and then Branzy leaned forward again. A silent question.

And they were kissing, properly this time, and Clown's hands on his sides were shaking and his

lips were dry and his hair was soft under Branzzy's hands.

And Branzzy found that with Clown, despite the efficient cruelty he showed so often, he hadn't been truly scared in a long time.

End Notes

hiii come join my lifesteal discord :D

[here it is](#)

Works inspired by this ~~one~~ [take my hand and never let go](#) by [GhostWithAScythe](#), [\[Podfic\] take my hand and pray my teeth don't find your throat](#) by [CrimsonMoonn](#)

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