

## a waltz of tragedies in one, two, three

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/47597335) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/47597335>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Mature</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Lifesteal SMP</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">ItzSubz/Vitalasy (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Branzy/Clownpierce</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Vitalasy (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Branzy (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Pangi (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">PrinceZam (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">TheTerrain (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Character Study</a> , <a href="#">Developing Relationship</a> , <a href="#">Established Relationship</a> , <a href="#">Unrequited Crush</a> , <a href="#">Pining</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Creatures &amp; Monsters</a> , <a href="#">hozier new album hitting me hard</a> , <a href="#">Blood and Injury</a> , <a href="#">Mild Gore</a> , <a href="#">Unhealthy Relationships</a> , <a href="#">Power Dynamics</a> , <a href="#">Horror</a> , <a href="#">Body Horror</a> , <a href="#">Graphic Descriptions of Dissections</a> , <a href="#">Heavy Gore in part 3</a> , <a href="#">Inaccurate Human Anatomy</a>
Language:	English
Series:	Part 7 of <a href="#">completely normal things happening in nevada</a>
Collections:	<a href="#">Anonymous</a>
Stats:	Published: 2023-06-02 Completed: 2023-10-26 Words: 21,752 Chapters: 3/3

## a waltz of tragedies in one, two, three

by Anonymous

### Summary

tragedy

1. an event causing great suffering, destruction, and distress, such as a serious accident, crime, or natural catastrophe.
2. a play dealing with tragic events and having an unhappy ending, especially one concerning the downfall of the main character.
3. the status quo

### Notes

CLAWING AT THE WALLS OF MY OWN ENCLOSURE. IM SUPPOSED TO BE WRITING MY BACHELOR'S THESIS BUT I CAN'T HOLD THESE WORDS IN.  
AAAAAAAAAAAA

anyway. first chapter focuses on vitalasy, second on branzy, third on pangi. this is gonna be short sweet and messy

messy as in we're finding out what happened to vitalasy,

trigger warnings for mild gore, werewolf like monsters, blood

Chapter Notes

i rewrote parts of this as of october 11th

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

Born on a hot summer day in the middle of August, Vitalasy knew his life was a tragedy before he learned the meaning of the word. A melancholy sadness followed him despite his horoscope assuring him that he was a radiant leader and that he should be proud of that. This was, of course, at a point that Vitalasy couldn't yet read, so he couldn't turn to the secrets of the stars written in the magazines. He could only stare at the strange shapes printed on the glossy paper of a magazine someone had left at the bus stop, as he and his mother waited, and waited, and waited.

That was all he remembered of California.

He didn't know why his mother had picked Nevada, why she'd picked the small town instead of anything with a bigger economy. Vitalasy never even found out, too afraid to ask, too afraid to make the wrong step, and be the cause of a breakdown. His mother had always felt like such a fragile person. He couldn't fault her for it, not really, he was much the same. But where he was made of glass his mother was made of fine porcelain, completely opaque, even the chips in the pottery revealing nothing.

His father was an asshole, that much he understood. He understood it in the way that his mother didn't rush with a replacement, but gladly accepted it when one presented itself. Vitalasy's step-father was someone he admired - tall and intimidating and who didn't let him have candy past 7 pm. His step-father was a detective, whereas his real father was non-existent, only there in the way his mother flinched when the door slammed too hard, or frowned more and more as Vitalasy grew up.

And despite this turbulent childhood, despite growing more and more into the very same man his mother ran away from, Vitalasy did his best to become someone his mother could be proud of. Someone who didn't remind her of his father. He made himself happy, he made himself friendly, he worked hard and made plans but it never seemed to be enough.

He made it to high school. He got himself a girlfriend. He was there for her, kind to her, gentle and soft. Softer than she wanted him to be at times, so he tried to mold himself into the perfect boyfriend too. Someone worthy of his girlfriend's affection, the crush he knew she had on him before he'd even asked her out. Someone worthy of love.

His girlfriend wasn't happy. His mother wasn't happy either.

His step-father was trying, Vitalasy knew, but even his love was fickle at best.

Vitalasy spent years of his life pruning his own branches, bending and twisting his bones into shape so that people would like him. So that they'd be proud of him. He was top of his class, he was captain of the basketball team, he was the student favorite of the council, always putting the needs of students first. He was trying so hard, desperate to make them see, to make *anyone* see.

The student counselor recommended a theater class. Vitalasy was desperate. He sat in the back next to a girl with long brown hair, who was insistent the main characters of the play were in love.

“The focal point of the play is the parallel between Beatrice and the Harlequin. Although they never *speak* to each other, their stories are mirrored in the play,” emphasized their teacher, but all the girl did was lean in to whisper in his ear.

“I think the play would be more romantic if they fell in love,” she insisted.

“I don’t know if they’re going for romance,” he argued back.

They performed Shakespeare, of course. Because they were underfunded and what the people *wanted* to see wasn’t necessarily what they could perform best. Take Vitalasy, for example, who was stuck doing the lights because of course he knew how to do that (and didn’t spend hours upon hours the night before studying the lamps intently). His voice was too soft, and he simply didn’t have enough time to learn the lines with his workload. It didn’t at all have anything to do with the fact that the teacher had insisted that he play Benvolio.

*‘Forget to think of her. Be ruled by me.’*

He just couldn’t get the line right, always getting it out of order. He wasn’t asking a friend to follow his advice, he was begging the person he loved to see him. It overwhelmed him, the idea, of asking so boldly and brashly to be loved *instead* of someone, when he had trouble just asking to be loved. So Vitalasy stayed far from the stage, and yet still made sure it was illuminated. He looked for a certain pair of eyes in the crowds, in the actors, but he knew they weren’t there.

Another thing he knew was that if he really wanted something, he had to chase it.

He’d carved himself into something popular, into someone people couldn’t help but notice, but there was only one pair of eyes that weighed heavily on him. Only one that he wanted.

It was hopeless, Subz was so antisocial it made Vitalasy want to swear out loud, but he pinned him down by requesting him as his partner for a biology project. It was the one thing he couldn’t brute force himself into learning, and how he thought that might get better by being paired up with the guy he thought was cute since freshman year he didn’t know. It was a dumb idea, he just wanted to be close to him.

He wanted to be friends with him.

He gave him his favorite hoodie because he wanted Subz to wear it. And he died right then and there seeing him in it.

For a split second it allowed him to forget, and then his girlfriend dragged him away into the empty band practice room after class. She was annoyed, yet understanding. She gave him a kick in the shin and told him he could kiss Subz all he wanted, but he had to be her date for prom.

"You don't want to break up?" He asked, and she sighed and put her hands on her hips.

"Break up? We've only been dating 'cause it was convenient, breaking up would just fuel their rumors," she said, and the words stung. It hadn't been true for him. He had liked her! He did! It was true, if only for a brief period of time, that he liked her and wanted to date her. She flipped back her long brown hair. "Let's just stick it out till graduation," she stuck out her hand for him to shake and he had no other choice but to agree.

Subz' hair was short and soft underneath his fingers, even though his only excuse to touch it was

when he managed to get him in a headlock. Subz liked him enough to stay friends, liked him enough to let Vi get close to him. Liked him enough that he didn't seem to mind the weak excuses Vi found to put his hands on him, to hug him, to smile at him.

It made him want to work harder, be better. He knew what schools Subz applied to because they'd talked about future plans and what do you know it, all those schools had programs Vi liked too. He looked into housing, apartments and dorms, not caring about what his mother and step-dad might think. The latter was too absorbed in his work to care, chasing after the notorious Clown Pierce, and the former...

Vitalasy had come to accept the fact that his mother didn't love him. That she couldn't love him. That he had the face of the man she despised and that the best she could offer him was a few bits of jewelry so he wouldn't starve. There was no helping it, years of his life wasted dedicated to becoming someone his mother could love, when Vitalasy could never be that person. And he would rather be himself.

And so he clung to Subz. Because he was safety, he was security. He was his friend, his heart's desire, and Vi would follow him to the ends of the Earth if he had to. If he could. If Subz would let him. That was the plan.

He'd stay up late at night studying for finals and the only thing on his mind would be how badly he wanted to hold Subz' hand. His mother just a body sleeping in the master bedroom of their house.

He'd arrive at prom night, his girlfriend clinging to his arm smelling like vanilla and coconuts and smearing lipstick on the collar of his shirt when he spun her too fast because they were supposed to be in love. They were supposed to be perfect. And the only thing on his mind would be how badly he wanted to hold Subz. His eyes would only be for Subz. His hands would let his girlfriend go, let her dance with her friends, and his legs would carry him to Subz because they knew better than anyone where Subz would be.

And he wouldn't think. Wouldn't speak anything of any real importance or meaning. He would just be near him, because it was prom night. They would sit hip to hip and knee to knee and Subz would laugh, actually laugh at something Vi said and he wouldn't be able to help himself.

This wasn't part of the plan.

He kissed him, and it was the sweetest, softest kiss he ever had. He didn't keep track of who pulled who and whose arms were where until Subz was in his lap, and Vi's hands were pulling at Subz' jacket, and they stopped. Because this wasn't part of the plan.

"You have a girlfriend," Subz said. Right. Of course. Until graduation. And then Vi would tell him. About all the feelings that had never been part of the plan. He'd work up the courage. They'd leave together.

He didn't say anything, was too busy cataloging the blush on Subz' face into his memory, as he left. It would have to last him.

Right, tragedy.

He was six years old and his father was a monster. He was seventeen and his mother didn't love him. He was nineteen, and instead of celebrating his freedom a noose was being tied around his neck, burning and burning.

There they were, Subz and Vitalasy, Vitalasy and Subz, watching what once used to be his home

burn away, the fires too destructive to even try and save it. And he was cold. The Nevada sun crawling injured behind the mountains, the night coming in hesitant, residue warmth blowing in from the desert, stoking the flames as the firefighters shouted desperately. And Vitalasy was cold.

Subz took his hand.

No one dared to say it out loud, but all of town understood the message - try to put down Clown Pierce and get burned in return.

Neither of them said it out loud, but the town still looked and saw the pair of hands holding each other. During the fire, during the funeral, as Vi's mother left and what was left of his house collapsed in on itself.

Vitalasy waited, and waited, for Subz to leave him. To pick up his admission letter and drive off. But he stayed, refusing to let go of his hand. It was perhaps the first time in his life that he'd felt loved, and he'd do anything to keep it.

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It didn't mean he was alright. He spent a year trying to recover from his step-father's death, all the while his mother had left him. Saying he'd be fine, he had friends he could stay with, right? And she'd be back to pick him up anyhow, soon. He couldn't even bring himself to be mad at her. Because in a twisted way she was right, he had a friend. His best friend, his only true friend, really, when things came down to it. His girlfriend broke up with him and he couldn't even be bothered to say goodbye, but Subz stayed. Despite Vi urging him to leave, telling him not to abandon his plans for him.

"It's a gap- year-" Subz would answer, gritting his teeth as they carried in the couch to their new apartment. They placed it in the living room where Vi would sleep, where Vi *should* sleep, but they both later argued that the king sized bed in Subz' room was ridiculously comfortable and it didn't make sense for Vi to sleep on the couch where his back would hurt every morning. That's what they said, that's what they'd agreed on, and Vi would smile and Subz would tell him to fuck off while barely being able to keep the grin off his own face.

"But your plans-" he'd start, and Subz would hug him. This was new, too, Subz initiating any kind of contact.

"We'll make new ones," he said, simply. Because with Subz things were always so simple. The solutions always so clear. And he was right. The heat haze passed, he found a job, a college program that easily fit them both. He soothed Subz through his nightmares, the coyotes he said were chasing him. Vitalasy heard them too, sometimes, when he was near him. But it had never affected him as badly as it did Subz, or it simply wasn't as bad as it was for Subz, he didn't know.

He didn't know why he felt cold even when the A/C was broken and nothing could keep out the heat. He didn't know why the only thing that warmed him up was a hug, Subz' laughter coming from their living room. The ice in his veins made him shiver, it made his heart plummet and made him feel like dying. And just when he felt like he was a goner Subz was there, grounding him as the panic attack worked its way out his body.

And slowly they got better. Small steps, promises. The push and pull and compromise. It was easy

to know, it was harder to ask, but the answer was always so rewarding.

Subz asked if he could kiss him and Vi said, ' *Please.*'

Vi asked if he could call him boyfriend and Subz said, ' *Sure.*'

*'Are you sure? Because there's other ones if you prefer and maybe if you-'* Subz splashed him with soapy water, arms wet from where they'd been submerged in the sink mere seconds ago.

*'Dear boyfriend,'* Subz emphasized the word and it did a little thing to Vi's heart that he was still scared to admit fully. *'Vitalasy. You're going to call me boyfriend until I find a ring because I do not trust your taste in jewelry-hmpf.'*

*It was a sweet kiss, all things considered.*

There was a plan for a ring but they decided that could wait until after college, after they leave. There was no talk of a couch because anytime Subz got upset he saw no reason to not just talk it through with him, and Vitalasy appreciated it after having lived his life with stonewalls and silent treatments. It was good, they were *good*. The years passed.

Their undoing comes, as it always does, near the end. Vi had maybe an essay or two due before he'd be ready to graduate, and this seminar would've been his last. He kissed Subz' hands and watched him drive off, waving all the while. He got himself prepared, polished all his notes. By the time Wednesday came he was more ready than ever. He sent Subz a good luck text and got a drive safe in return and his heart was full, he was so happy. The sun warmed his skin, the ice in his veins fully melted. He got in the car and as promised didn't do anything reckless, kept to the speed limit.

It is why, when he saw the coyote, he slowed down gently.

It was a pale spot in the middle of the dark asphalt, and at first Vitalasy had thought the creature was still alive. He'd stopped his car on the side of the road and brought out a bottle of water as an offering, only to see that the animal was very much dead. No rise and fall of the chest, the snout was shut, teeth poking out from the soft fur. One glossy eye stared back up at him, and Vitalasy looked away. A wariness settled over him, the aftereffect of years calming down Subz' panic attacks and nightmares when the howling of coyotes got a little too close to their home, but so did pity. He couldn't simply leave it there.

He tossed the water bottle back into his car and popped open the truck, taking out the shovel there that was left after he did some gardening errands for the mayor. After all these years he'd still been trying to win the love of his community, although the cash certainly didn't hurt. He sighed, feeling oddly nostalgic. The sun was starting to set though, so he hurried over to the side of the road, shovel hitting rock hard dirt. He had a soft spot for animals, sue him. His heart couldn't stand the idea of a vulture eating away at the creature. Logically he knew even the vulture was just an animal, looking for food, wanting to eat. But his heart had decided that was a cruel fate, and it was difficult to change his mind once it was set.

Once he was satisfied with the makeshift grave, he turned back to the road to gently pick up the dead coyote, until he noticed something staring at him.

At first he thought it was just another animal - a coyote come to mourn its fallen brother - before he realized it was too big. He'd never seen a wolf but he bet it was larger than that, too. Slowly, trying his best not to alert the creature to his actions, he shuffled to his car. If he could only get in he could run away with his life. This animal, this... *thing*, he understood very well that it meant him

harm from the way it was looking at him.

As if sensing his intention, it ran at him. Before he could even try to jump to his car the creature was already on him, pushing him back into the empty grave he'd only just dug. His back hit the hard dirt and he cried out, the shovel falling out of his hands. It was growling this terrible, monstrous noise, as if it had three throats instead of one, the sounds overlapping. He reached for the shovel but he'd dropped it *just* out of reach when it had pinned him down, and now the creature lowered its jaw to his throat, exposing its row of ugly yellow teeth.

Vitalasy was shaking, desperately trying to do anything to get free, but the monster's claws dug into his shoulder, its weight keeping him pinned in place.

And then, as suddenly as it had attacked, it stopped. It was still pushing him down, blood trickling down where the monster's claws had ripped into his skin, but then it... In a very normal, very animal way, *sniffed* him.

His mind, extremely helpful, provided nothing but a string of "*What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.*" As the creature stood up.

In a move that didn't help his panicked brain whatsoever, the creature opened its mouth and spoke: "Wrong one," it said. And Vitalasy couldn't help the quiet word that tumbled past his lips.

"What?" he said, and immediately regretted it.

"You wear his clothes, but you're the wrong one," the blood in his veins instantly turned to ice as Vitalasy realized it was Subz' shirt he was wearing, and this *monster* was talking about Subz.

"What do you want?!" the fear for Subz overwrote any concern he had for his own life. The monster climbed off of him and stood up on its hind legs to its full height, looking down at him as he sat in that shallow grave.

"I want what everyone wants. To eat. I want to sate my hunger. Not a man's hunger, not a beast's hunger, but a monster's. And for that, only a human heart will do."

The creature looked at him, its jaw twisted in a perverse smile, drool glistening on the edges of its mouth, eyes a terrifying bloody red. His eyes betrayed nothing.

"You can go off, run. Try to warn him even, it will only make the chase more delicious," the monster said, licking its own teeth. Vitalasy's stomach twisted in disgust.

The creature turned around, dropping back to all fours getting ready to run, and before he could think about it Vitalasy grabbed the shovel and with all his strength, hit the monster on its head.

It collapsed.

Vitalasy, nerves still shot through with adrenaline, hit it again for good measure, the horrible crunching of bones as the skull shattered echoing through the desert.

The road was still empty.

He shoved the creature into the pit using the shovel, watching as it unceremoniously fell in. He felt no pity, no grief. He covered it hastily with dirt, not bothering to leave a marker, hoping the creature rotted away unknown, before he drove off.

His hands were shaking as he gripped the steering wheel, and his heart wouldn't calm down. A

monster. He'd just killed and buried a monster. The coyote that Subz had been haunted by his entire life and Vitalasy had killed it. It had hunted him down, thinking it was Subz, probably planted that roadkill too just to make sure he would stop. Lay down the trap. He couldn't fathom it, that it had intelligence, and desire, that it was a *hunter*. He took deep breaths, trying to steady himself, but his stomach was still twisting in disgust.

He stopped at the first gas station, rushing to the bathroom to empty the contents of his stomach, but only making it to the door. He felt awful for making a mess and he felt awful for puking and he felt awful for *the monster* he'd just killed.

But, Vitalasy was surprised at himself that he was hungry.

Fortunately they had something there he could buy and eat. Chips and chocolate bars and any random junk he could buy that the gas station attendant was lightly judging him for. But when he made it to his car and stuffed his mouth the food tasted like ash on his tongue. It was all wrong. He blamed it on the shock. He blamed it on the expiration dates on the candy wrappers now littering his passenger seat. His hands still wouldn't stop shaking, and his stomach hurt from how hungry he was. He should've gone home, he realized his mistake. He thought he could still make it to college, maybe try and seek out Subz if he was lucky. But no, he should've just gone home.

His phone flashed a low battery warning, but he opened the map app nonetheless and tried to find a way back that didn't include the one he'd just come from. He'd warn Subz about it as soon as he had signal again.

One arm wrapped around his stomach, he started his slow drive home, taking back roads and ones that were all but covered with desert sand, until he couldn't take it anymore. He stopped his car, groaning in pain as his stomach twisted itself in hunger.

The creature's words echoed in his mind.

*"I want to sate my hunger."*

His phone flashed once before turning off, and the light was blurry through the tears gathering in his eyes. It hurt so much, he was *so hungry*. It was such a sharp and terrible hunger it threatened to cut him open.

He doubled over in pain, gripping the door handle until it fell open and he tumbled over the car, dying on the unforgiving desert sand.

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When he woke up it was in flashes - moments when he could recognize himself and moments he couldn't. He knew that to sate his hunger he would have to hunt, use his new claws and bones and teeth. He was aware of the things watching him. There were more coyotes - smaller, not as threatening as the first one, but he hunted them down anyway. It didn't satisfy him though, they were more shadow than flesh, not fully alive yet. He stomped them out. Even now he was aware of a something, *someone*, he had to protect. There was a man, ink threaded in his skin, that wanted to study him. That wanted him to follow. He refused. And when the man brought a weapon he broke it in half, sinking his teeth into the man's legs as a first and final warning. But even that memory was obstructed by shadow, foggy.

He didn't know how long it took him to fully come awake, the trail of gore in his wake managing to sate his hunger if only a little bit, but it seemed to be in the nick of time.

There was another one. It claimed the town as its hunting grounds, Vitalasy could smell its claim in blood everywhere. But he couldn't allow it. Something precious to him lived there.

Claws dragged across the pavement.

*Subz* lived there.

The name was like a bucket of ice being dropped over his head. He woke up, and he was a monster. He didn't need a mirror to know - it was in his bones. But he wasn't the only one. There was a monster with bright white eyes, and for some reason he didn't understand, it wanted *Subz*. He realized with a start that he was only a few blocks away from their apartment, and he could sense the other monster's presence, just like how he could sense *Subz* chasing it. *Why was Subz chasing it?*

He would think about it later, if he ever woke up like this again, but for now he gave chase. He avoided the brightly lit streets, realizing with a start that the monster was leading *Subz* to the place where *Vi* had died.

The night was unforgiving, unyielding. *Subz* stopped just before the road ended, where *Vi*'s car had been sat collecting sand and misery. Vitalasy saw where the monster was crouched, just waiting to pounce on a *Subz* that was way too focused on the abandoned car to notice the danger he was in, surrounded in shadow.

Fortunately, the monster was too focused on its prey to notice Vitalasy, which is exactly why he didn't hesitate. His mouth was clamping down on the monster's throat before it even realized what was happening. Vitalasy had been so quick, so precise, that it barely managed a howl as he ripped its throat out, blood guzzling down his throat. But he'd been distracted. He sensed another presence with them and was about to turn to investigate when the monster used the last of its strength to slash at his chest.

He kicked it in retaliation, which seemed to finish it off, but he *hurt*. He clamped down his maw as to not alert *Subz*, but he was quickly losing control again.

His vision blurred, and for the second time, the unforgiving desert sand welcomed Vitalasy's death.

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He woke up, delirious and in pain, blood starting to spread on the nice shirt he'd borrowed from *Subz* before he left for his trip. He pushed himself up, teeth gritting through the pain, to realize the sun was setting once more. The monster's corpse has disappeared, just like the other ones, and he pushed himself to get into the car. He contemplated going to the hospital, but there was only one person he trusted enough, only one person he wanted to see.

Painfully slow, Vitalasy made his way home.

## Chapter End Notes

the coyotes marked subz for themselves ever since he was a kid, tragically, there's no deeper explanation to it than that. there's monsters in the desert and sometimes they lay claim to humans and come back to eat them in 20 years. rip .

## two

### Chapter Summary

The Quite Normal Life of Mr. Branzy. (A tragedy in three acts.)

### Chapter Notes

remember when i said this was gonna be short sweet and messy? this chapter is 10.7k words long.

trigger warnings for unhealthy relationships, unreliable narrator, lighters, burning hair, threats, strange power dynamics, indentured servitude, mentions of murder, murder (stage instruction), haunting guys it's clownzy. CLOWNZY. they called it indentured servitude not me.

if i dare be so bold as to quote aeschylus' oresteia, trans. anne carson:

ORESTES: This was always going to happen.  
She's been dead since the beginning.

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

## Prologos

"I keep seeing stars in your eyes, Branzy."

It always starts like this. Painfully romantic, Clown's mouth on his skin, his breath fanning down his sensitive throat. Branzy wants it, he craves it, tangles his hand in Clown's black hair to urge him closer.

*'Be with me ,'* he wants to say. *'Stay with me forever and go with me everywhere. Stick by my side.'* Were it anyone else in his situation he'd call them pathetic. Lovesick. But his heart's been crying over Clown for weeks now and it's becoming harder and harder to pretend. He's afraid it's Stockholm syndrome, he's afraid it's love. He's hungry for the words 'Where is it you want to go?' to follow Clown's statement.

But if Clown were that type of guy, Branzy wouldn't be here.

If Clown were that type of guy, half of his hair wouldn't be singed.

"I want to snuff them out."

## Parodos

Branzy's life worked in cycles.

He just couldn't keep his hands to himself, couldn't keep his tongue in his mouth. He always had to be touching something, kissing someone. It worked out well enough for him in Vegas. It worked out better in smaller towns, but it always ended the same. Bruised eye, his face on a blacklist, and just a little more money in his pocket than what he started off with. He had a track record for running away from his problems, and he wasn't about to stop.

He didn't mean to break that cycle.

It's just that the small town he found himself in didn't have a casino, and Branzy had crawled through many a rat alley in his life but underground dwellings weren't his forte. He liked his skin on himself, thank you very much. He only trusted Russian roulette when he was the one loading the gun. He was alive, he intended to keep it that way. So he found himself wearing bartender's clothes and doing fortune telling on the side, in the corner of the bar. Some of his patrons liked the flash and flair of shuffling cards and dramatic fortunes being told as the whisky ran hot, leaning over the bar, hungry for more. And some liked the dark corner, the table covered in old costume scraps and the heavy purple curtain that gave it all an air of mystery - of magic. Regardless of preference all of them left with hearts full of false hope and thinner wallets.

Branzy may have been a psychic once - had had a real knack at drawing out the truth from his tarot deck - but truth didn't sell. Drama did! Love did! What he couldn't hide from his patrons he misinterpreted, twisted future visions into something more favorable, and yet still true, to keep them coming. What was certain death he turned into a success - what was fire and destruction he twisted into passion. All types of men and women wandered into the bar, asked about his tattoo, joked about fortune telling and witches. Branzy wasn't one to try and convince them either way, far be it from Branzy to make people believe in gods, they were all dead to him anyway.

So he shuffled and shuffled and shuffled, keeping one card tucked into his breast pocket to keep it from spilling out, keep it from revealing too many secrets, when he felt those eyes on him.

Branzy would know something about traps. He was always so good at escaping them.

He finished the reading. Five of wands. Three of wands. Two of cups.

The patron smiled, delighted, but Branzy knew that the cards were for him. He undercharged on accident but didn't bother correcting as he hastily gathered his cards back into the deck and put them in his pocket.

He dipped under the bar and crawled until he was inside the small room that passed for a kitchen when the original owner still had hopes for opening an honest restaurant. ' *Which was stupid,*' he thought to himself as he got up and sprinted out, down the hallway past the office and through the back door. Rats startled away as he gently pushed the door open, but that was par for the course, wasn't it? No one was going to notice a few scuttling rats in the evening-

Pain exploded like fireworks from the back of his head down his back to where he was thrown against the wall. He only managed to gasp before an arm was pressing against his throat, keeping him in place, as his eyes met the dark and unblinking ones of Clown's mask.

"Hello Branzy," were the first words he said to him, slipping out behind that mask and down

Branzy's throat, seizing his heart. Clown shouldn't have known his name, no one should know his name, he'd been working with nicknames and fake names since he was 15 years old. He wondered for a moment if he even heard right, with the throbbing pain in his head. He desperately tried to gather himself, but he couldn't get a thought past that terrifying painted smile. He knew the mask wasn't on in the bar, but he can't think about that fact for too long, can't wonder about how long Clown Pierce has been stalking him when the man's a hair's breadth away from him, pressing him against a wall and holding what is likely a very, very dangerous weapon to his abdomen.

"Why h-hello there!" He stuttered, no time to think, and tried to hold out his hand but found himself paralyzed in fear. "Always a pleasure meeting a local," he tried a smile but his facade was pointless, any mask he tried to wear would shatter when faced with Clown's. He's talked himself out of problems as often as he's talked himself *into* them.

"A pleasure?" Clown wondered for a brief moment, and then that thing moved, Clown bringing it up so Branzy could see it. It was a lighter, bright red. The sight of it almost made him burst into hysterics- he thought it was a knife. "It must be," Clown said and Branzy could have sworn he heard the hint of a smile as Clown flicked the lighter open and flames caught the edges of his hair, the strands charring and curling away from the heat. His stomach lurched as the smell of burning hair filled the air.

Branzy gulped, twisting his head so his face was as far away from the fire as possible, but that was hard to do with Clown's arm against his throat.. "Uh-uhm, so- Uh- To what do I *owe* the pleasure?"

Clown hummed, tilting his head to appraise the damage he did to Branzy's hair. "I've been watching you. The way you shuffle your cards."

"O-oh well if you want a tarot reading it's on the house. My treat," he tried a smile, the mask remained a mask.

"A tarot reading? From you? Well let's see what your previous clients' reviews say," Clown hummed in contemplation, flicking his lighter open and closed. "You told Mrs. Spiel her business venture would go swimmingly after you pulled the five of pentacles for her- nice one, I'm really excited to see how it plays out. I consider myself an entrepreneur as well," he grinned, Branzy stammered to explain himself when the lighter clicked open again. He shut his mouth. "You told Detective *Fox-Head* that the Tower reversed meant triumph and victory, that one made me laugh. Victory! For him? You're forcing my hand here Branzy, now I *have* to burn his house down. I just have to. See what you do Branzy? You make more work for me! All while sitting comfortably behind the bar and shuffling your tarot deck the way they do cards in Vegas. Tell me, did they teach you how to lie and smile like that there too, or did you pick it up on the way?"

Branzy stayed quiet, his ears ringing and his mind screaming at him to *do* something. But like a wild animal caught in headlights, he could only stare. He felt the prison bars closing in on him as Clown leaned back, closing his lighter with a click. Branzy felt it the moment it happened, like any good pickpocket would, but it still came as a surprise when Clown held up the card between two fingers and turned it, showing the number fifteen.

"Now, I don't know why you keep my business associate in your pocket and I won't ask, that's between you two," Branzy thought surely Clown could feel the way his heart beat against his chest as he slipped the card back in, and the Devil made his way back into Branzy's breast pocket. "But I do want you to work for me. Swing by tomorrow at eight, at the old sandwich shop your friend used to work at." He said casually, as if Branzy had any choice in the matter. To seal the deal Clown leaned back in, flicking his lighter open and the flame springing to life. "And Branzy? Don't be late," This time Branzy's hair did catch fire, but Clown snuffed it out between his fingers before

it could hurt him. He tugged on the darkened strand. "All better."

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### **Scene 0**

*A bar at night. The tables are half occupied with patrons wearing black robes and plain masks. Standing out from them is the person tending the bar, dressed in purple finery and a cat-like mask. Her name is BEATRICE. Occasionally a patron will walk up to her and flirt, to which she'll take out cards out of her dress pocket and shuffle in front of them, which will scare the patron off. ENTER FLAVIO, maskless, and the HARLEQUIN.*

**Flavio** . What a fine maiden!

**Harlequin** . Indeed! Indeed!

**Flavio** . One like her I'd like to wed!

**Harlequin** . Knowing the master's habits, I'd assume her you'd only like for your bed

**Flavio** . Nay, she seems to me virtuous and fair! Why would you assume such rakish behavior of your master?

**Harlequin** . Because the lady is a witch!

**Flavio** . Aye, for her beauty hath bewitched me-

**Harlequin** . No, no. The lady is a sorceress.

**Flavio** . Indeed! For her manner hath ensorcelled me-

**Harlequin** . No, sir! The lady is an enchantress-

*FLAVIO slams his cane on the stage floor, this startles everyone but the HARLEQUIN.*

**Flavio** . The lady has enchanted me! I must have her at once!

*Despite his proclamation, FLAVIO gets in line like everyone else awaiting a moment with the bartender. The HARLEQUIN merrily skips after him, bells ringing as he does so. All of this attracts the attention from the rest of the patrons, who slowly gather behind BEATRICE. For all of this display, she seems unbothered, and smiles at FLAVIO the same way she smiles at the rest of the patrons.*

**Beatrice** . What kind of reading would the sir enjoy?

**Flavio** . Ah, what I enjoy is of less importance than that of your enjoyment. Tell me, what kind of reading does the lady recommend?

**Beatrice** . For such a fine gentleman I recommend one in business, for a man of your stature must keep his financials and manners of estate close to your heart!

**Flavio** . And so it shall be a business reading!

*BEATRICE shuffles her cards and places three on the bar, facing down. She picks one card up and flips it.*

**Patrons** . Four of pentacles! Meaning: Greed, stinginess, insecurity!

*FLAVIO cannot hear the patrons whispering amongst themselves as they closely watch the meeting because he is too focused on BEATRICE, who also pays the patrons no heed. BEATRICE flips the second card.*

**Patrons.** Chariot reversed! Meaning: Lack of control, powerlessness, major obstacles!

*BEATRICE looks confused and worried, FLAVIO is none the wiser. She flips the final card.*

**Patrons.** Five of pentacles! Meaning: poverty.

**Beatrice.** So! It seems to me here, that you have done your best to secure your wealth, and that you will manage to keep your pennies during difficult times.

*BEATRICE smiles nervously, the patrons hover ominously, FLAVIO is still staring at her with a lovestruck impression. The HARLEQUIN begins to laugh, wordlessly, the only sound he makes is the jingle of the bells on his clothing as he shakes his head.*

**Flavio.** Glorious! Marvelous! May I request another?

**Beatrice.** Why, of course. Gentlemen typically inquire about their health next.

**Flavio.** Then a health reading it shall be!

*She hurriedly shuffles the cards, as if by speeding through the process the result would change. FLAVIO lets out sounds of amazement as she places all three cards on the bar and flips them in quick succession.*

**Patrons.** The Sun reversed, the happiness is blocked, the light will shine on this man no more.

**Patrons.** The Three of cups? Now that is perplexing. But remember! Sometimes the bartender lays out a card for one patron that was meant for another.

*One of the patrons attempts to reach for the card, but BEATRICE swats their hand away. The HARLEQUIN gives a wave to the audience. One of the patrons holds out a card he stole from BEATRICE'S sleeve.*

**Patrons.** Is that Death? That *is* Death! Now what card do you think she swapped it with? The seven of swords for poor Flavio's future health- will it be his liver that betrays him? His heart? Or Beatrice's meddling! Or perhaps the Death card was in the middle, in his present - but *where* -

**Beatrice.** If you've been worried about your health- the cards advise that you are all good. But if you do feel under the weather, consulting a physician would be wise.

*FLAVIO looks contemplative, as if he is taking the words to heart, the HARLEQUIN shakes harder with laughter, falling to the floor. FLAVIO takes BEATRICE's hand in his, but she looks hesitant.*

**Flavio.** Your honeyed words are music to my ears, they soothe me, my dear. Would you do me the honors and tell me what love has in store for me?

*BEATRICE steps minutely backwards, taking her hand away from FLAVIO's. She shuffles, careful and contemplative this time. She flips one card.*

**Patrons.** The Devil. Obsession, lust! A doomed romance.

*She flips another card.*

**Patrons.** The Devil! Wait-

**Beatrice.** What?!

**Flavio.** Is something the matter, dear?

**Beatrice.** Ah, no, just-

*She flips the final card, it's the DEVIL once more. The HARLEQUIN has stopped laughing.*

**Beatrice.** Just a moment, I will shuffle again.

*She produces another deck of cards and shuffles them, placing three cards on the bar again. By now the HARLEQUIN has gotten up off the floor, and is standing behind his master. She flips the cards.*

**Patrons.** Unbelievable! The Devil again, the chances of that-

**Beatrice.** That's impossible-

*She flips the second card to reveal another DEVIL. The HARLEQUIN produces a knife out of his clothes. FLAVIO still doesn't pay him any heed, because he is foolish and in love, because the HARLEQUIN is just a servant to him, just a clown.*

**Beatrice.** These cannot be my cards, I-

*She flips the third card, it is the DEVIL once again. The HARLEQUIN slits his master's throat, and FLAVIO falls out of the bar chair. The patrons all spook and take a step back, the light is on the HARLEQUIN and BEATRICE facing each other, as FLAVIO drags out red ribbons from his shirt to cover his maskless face. The HARLEQUIN slowly begins to clap as the patrons shrink away and exit stage left, and BEATRICE remains frozen in fear. The curtain falls on the stage.*

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Branzy wasn't stupid enough to think that working with Clown Pierce would mean he was safe, but he did get... comfortable. What Clown had wanted in the end was a card dealer, and Branzy was terrified enough of him that Clown could reasonably rely on him to not fuck things up. Make sure the patrons of Clown's underground casino had an enjoyable time, while still ensuring that the house always won. He was the hand of Lady Luck, making sure her will was enacted.

Which is why he fucked up, you see, because he was not supposed to be *her* hand, he was supposed to be *Clown's*. And when a handsome young man dressed in all red threw in the keys of the expensive car he'd arrived in, Branzy was supposed to bring those keys to Clown on a silver platter.

Instead he brought in what amounted to pennies.

Sometimes he wished Clown smoked cigars, or drank, or did anything that could make him easier to paint as a caricature that Branzy could hate. Unfortunately for him, when he found himself in Clown's office, scared for his life while Clown nonchalantly flicked his lighter open and closed, he couldn't find it in himself to hate him.

"I wanted that car, Branzy," Click. The lighter was closed, Branzy didn't dare look up at him.

Click. The havoc came before the flame, Clown lifting Branzy's head up with a touch that was too gentle. He let go of his chin to grab a strand of hair, tugging it in front of Branzy's face and lighting it on fire. Branzy flinched away from it but that only led to sharp pain in his scalp before Clown snuffed out the flame and let go.

"But you can earn it back for me, can't you? I mean, what's 500 000 dollars to a guy like you?"

Click. He closed the lighter.

“I, I can get you a different car- an even better one, if you would just-” Click.

“Hold still Branzy,” Clown said in the endearing tones of an exasperated lover. His hair was on fire again, the heat caressing his cheek. Branzy could only let out a small, sharp gasp, as Clown let it burn to his desired length and snuffed it out.

“No, no. See, I’m over the car now.”

“You are?” Branzy couldn’t hide his surprise, it was a mistake.

“Yeah,” he could hear the smile on Clown’s face as he grabbed his face and dragged his thumb across Branzy’s cheekbone, staining it with the unmistakable smell of burning hair. “See I’ll make it easy for you, you don’t even need to get me a car! I just want the money.”

An incredulous laugh tore itself out of his lungs despite himself. “Just the money,” he said, and Clown laughed with him.

Click. The lighter opened.

“You’ll get it back, or I’ll have your name and face plastered on every casino’s black list across the country,” He tugged on the strand tighter, watching Branzy’s once beautiful silver hair curl and crackle in the fire.

Click. The lighter closed. And Clown left him sitting there, wondering how he ever thought he was going to survive this.

## **Epeisodion**

Despite what he’d believed to be a certain death sentence, Clown didn’t make any further threats towards their deal. Branzy gave all his profits to Clown, put in the extra work, but Clown never made a comment about whether or not he made a dent on his massive debt. Because working for a dangerous criminal wasn’t enough, Branzy had managed to get himself entangled into indentured servitude. He didn’t know how Clown was doing the math - if there was *any*. Branzy still worked at the bar sometimes, offering tarot readings less and less, but he was breaking his back trying to earn money at the casino and yet keep it running in such a small town. Branzy doubted all of their patrons were locals - especially the ladies and gentlemen that came in showing off expensive watches, jewels, and car keys - but Branzy couldn’t care less either way, he just wanted *out*.

But Clown was intent on keeping him. He was spending more time with Branzy - or, making Branzy spend more time with him. Branzy was the dealer at Clown’s table, burning under the man’s full attention and yet trying not to show it, struggling to keep his composure. He was standing behind Clown’s chair at meetings, keeping his face impassive as persons filed in and out, begging him to lessen their debt. One particular time Clown had been smoking, and once the man had been near tears from pleading Clown had handed Branzy the cigarette, and told Branzy to find a place to put it out.

He’d like to lie and say he hesitated. He wanted to deny the twisted pleasure he felt as he grabbed the man and pressed the lit cigarette into the soft skin of his arm. But he couldn’t wipe away his smile on time, and he knew that Clown saw.

Branzy would have all but believed their deal was moving to something more akin to a partnership, until he came into work one day to find his vest missing and a frilly purple thing in its place.

“What’s this?” he asked, and as if in answer a sticky note fluttered off the fabric and onto the floor. On it was written a simple yet threatening “ *New uniform* ” in Clown’s distinctive handwriting.

He shook out the fabric until it finally unfolded and he realized it was a dress - the kind waitresses and casino girls wore. The kind that exposed more skin than it covered, frilly and ridiculous and absolutely gaudy. He looked at it in confusion - he felt no disgust or discomfort, he was no stranger to drag. *But his patrons are. Maybe.*

Was that Clown’s goal, his grand plan? To ruin his image? He could have laughed. He didn’t know what was stupider - the fact that Clown, for all his perceived evil genius, could only think of a dress as punishment, or that it might work. In this corner of Nevada, in the desert that no one visits, would people even care? Would they care about a man in a dress, or a man that kisses men, or the fact that Clown was the man Branzy wanted to kiss. He thought that maybe that’s what would get people’s blood boiling most, *not* the frilly skirt and makeup.

He grabbed the hair curler, careful around the darkened tips. He’d show that clown, he’d show them all.

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He could feel Clown’s eyes following him, the distinct weight of his gaze, a promise unfulfilled. It made him smile brighter, ignoring the waver in his voice as he dealt the cards and charmed their patrons. They loved it, they loved him. They laughed and they smiled and he couldn’t hide from the hunger in their eyes so he ate it instead, fed himself on it, until his ego was big enough to bear the weight of it all.

He would become this casino’s darling, damn them all to hell, this was not going to be the thing that kills him. Branzy had lived through worse. And when the weight of that gaze became unbearable he looked up, his eyes meeting a painted face. Still the mask, Clown insisted, Branzy had never seen him on the casino floor without it, especially during work hours. He sat now at a table with some of their more distinguished clientele, and Branzy could only imagine the shine of car keys and watches that were all going to end up in Clown’s pocket at the end of the night.

Branzy still didn’t quite understand how he managed it, where the people came from. Surely they weren’t locals, the town was barely standing on its legs as is, there were no jobs that could rake in that kind of cash.

He realized he was staring when a patron brushed their hand on his thigh to get his attention. Playfully he swatted it away, and they laughed. In any other town he would have let them keep their hand there, he would have sat in their lap and won them the round, won himself their hotel key. In any other town he would have robbed them blind and ran off somewhere else, but he’d broken that cycle, he thought. Branzy thought he was free.

One of his colleagues told him to take five, and his eyes immediately snapped to Clown’s table. He was missing. Branzy gulped, but cheerfully promised his table that he’d be back soon as someone else took his place. They boo’ed and sighed, one of them whistling as he walked away, and all he could do was laugh, pushing down panic.

He pushed open the heavy door, cool air greeting him immediately, making him realize how sweltering it was inside. It fell closed behind him, sealing away the noise and leaving him alone. The silence made him anxious, Branzy wasn't the type to enjoy it. It's why he almost felt relieved at the sound of footsteps, before he realized what they meant. He turned towards them and was met with the most beautiful pair of eyes he'd ever seen in his life. They were dark enough to make the night envious, the emptiness in between stars, absolute decimation. And it struck him that he'd never seen Clown completely without his mask. He'd caught glimpses before - the sharp edges of his jaw, the way his smiles cut into his cheeks, the shape of his lips as he took a sip from his drink-

With a start, he realized he was staring, and that Clown was much closer to him than he thought.

His hand hovered above his jaw as if asking permission, wordlessly, he put his own hand over it, not caring how the callouses on Clown's hand would scrub away the makeup he'd painstakingly put on. Clown smiled, finally, and it was cutting. The opposite of what a smile should be - cold and cruel, almost sardonic, but that's what Branzy loved about that smile.

"Have you considered the possibility that it wasn't me who approached you? That it was a random stranger pinning you to the wall right now," Clown said, and Branzy chuckled, leaning against the wall like Clown wanted him to.

Clown took another step closer, almost pressing their bodies together but not quite, much to Branzy's exasperation.

"You have a very distinctive presence, Clown," Branzy said, daring to reach out and wrap Clown's tie around his fist, pulling him closer. "And also, you wear a very unique tie," he added, and Clown laughed. He laughed and Branzy could have gotten drunk at the sound, and he didn't know who kissed who first but he knew the moment their lips crashed it felt like a fuse was lit. Not fireworks, no, there was nothing beautiful about the desire burned between them. Just fire and powder, just violence - no delight nor end in sight.

## **Stasimon**

"I keep seeing stars in your eyes, Branzy."

Which brought him back to here, to now, to Clown's hand pressed to his face and no makeup in sight to hide the lovestruck expression that was doubtlessly written all over his face.

"I want to snuff them out."

The words were awful, and they were Clown's, but Branzy wanted all of it anyway. He didn't see it creeping up on him until it had overcome him - the desire for both love and violence. Branzy had always chased after things that were going to end up in flames, but never let himself admit it until Clown had caught him and put a lighter to his hair, his mouth, his hands.

He was on fire and he loved it.

The stars above Nevada couldn't compare to the light from the fire inside him, and Clown still promised to snuff it out, his eyes swallowing all the light that reached them. It wasn't fair, it wasn't balanced, it was the closest thing to love either of them had ever felt.

They kissed, and Branzzy forgot himself, forgot the town and the desert and their surroundings. His points of focus became Clown's lips on his, his fingers tangled in Branzzy's hair, his hand on his hip, pushing where Branzzy pulled.

The scene played out behind his eyes now in clear focus, the shifting sand beneath them, his shirt falling open, the cold air against his exposed skin, Clown's teeth against his collarbone, when a loud noise had startled them both. The shock and surprise on Clown's face, and absolutely nothing in the dark when they looked.

Regardless, Clown wanted to investigate, to make sure it was just a wild animal and not a jilted lover or some other person that one of them wronged. He had kissed Branzzy one more time, playfully ordering him to stay, to wait for him, as if Branzzy had been planning on moving. As if Branzzy would have gone anywhere without Clown at that point.

It was only when Clown failed to come back that Branzzy realized how dangerous all of it was.

His phone screen burned his eyes in the darkness of the night - it was 1 AM and he had no service. Clown had left the keys in the car, but Branzzy still wasn't sure he knew how to get home. He wasn't exactly paying attention to the road when Clown had one hand on his thigh the entire time. He was defenseless, too. Which was stupid - because his thing with Clown wasn't something people knew, it wasn't something he could utilize as a shield. The most people knew was that he worked for Clown, but that could be said about half the town. It didn't mean anything. He should've at least had some kind of knife on him, but he'd stupidly assumed that since he was with Clown he'd be safe. That since Clown had taken him somewhere, it would be remote, far away from those who wanted to hurt him.

The darkness felt palatable around him. It ate away any light the moon had kindly offered, swallowed up every star. He buttoned his shirt back up again, managed to find his vest discarded somewhere on the sand. He turned on his phone's torch but it yielded very little, despite the fact that there shouldn't have been possible for Clown to hide anywhere from him, there was nothing.

Quietly, he climbed into the car. A part of him screamed that he should call out for Clown. That he needed to look for him. He was burning with desire and he loved him, he loved him, he *did*.

He turned the key, the motor roared to life.

He could hear the spin of the roulette wheel, the sound of cards being shuffled, Lady Luck come to whisper in his ear at his time of need. But her words were not kind. She sounded like his parents, his friends, his lovers.

*Put your head through the wall Branzzy and you still won't break the cycle. Clown's the worst and best thing that's happened to you and you know too well what happens next. You've been both actor and audience, producer and playwright. Clown puts his hand over your mouth. You've never had the teeth to bite but oh how slick is your tongue. You slide and slither and sneak your way into his heart until you're his everything. But Clown doesn't play nice with his toys and you know it. You've always known it. It didn't stop you from falling for him like a love sick teenager. And now here you are, alone in a car, and the most beautiful boy you've ever seen in your life has disappeared past what the headlights can reach.*

And without hearing a scream, without seeing a drop of blood, Branzzy turned tail and ran.

---

He came back when it was light out. In the same car, in the same vest. He hadn't had a moment of rest, guilt chewing away at his insides until they were nothing but pathetic mush. During the day the desert refused to give up any of its secrets, not that they were hers to tell anyway. There was only the incessant dry heat, weeds and shrubs that had spent millenia evolving to adapt to the temperature, and Branzy.

He despaired. He didn't know what to do. He thought he would have felt Clown by now, or felt he was dead, or something. But no matter what he told himself he couldn't deny the truth. Clown was gone. Just gone. The dark had come and swallowed him without a word, and now Branzy was left alone.

This wasn't how it was supposed to go. Branzy grabbed at his hair, now cut short, there was just enough to pull on.

"Fuck!!" He yelled, but the desert swallowed that up too. He sounded so small, so insignificant, and he'd felt so powerful just last night. "*Fuck!*" he yelled again, but he was just human, living his tiny pathetic cycle of passion and ashes.

It wasn't *fair*. Clown had never even hurt him, not really, not truly. Clown could have burned off all the hair on his scalp and it wouldn't have hurt him. There was no true hate there. Branzy could handle a knife to his throat, but he could have never handled Clown hating him. And he didn't have to. Because Clown loved him.

Branzy didn't want it to end, this wasn't how it was meant to end. *Branzy* was the one who was supposed to end up hurt, *Branzy* was the one who was supposed to disappear, unmissed. Because he always popped up in a different town under the name *Brian*, or *Brennan*, or *Brandy*, or-

The cycle was incomplete. Where was the pain, the blood, the bruise? All Branzy had was a feeling of emptiness where his love had been, where Clown was torn away from him. Was it just that the world wouldn't let him have love? The lovers card, reversed and cut in half, one half burnt and one half missing. That's what he got, that's what he deserved.

Another cry tore itself from his throat, unintelligible to his mind, now drowning in self-pity.

What was he supposed to do now?

---

Despite Branzy's better judgment, he found himself at the town's police station. He expected to feel more nervous once he entered, that he'd feel their eyes judging him much like he once felt Clown's eyes wanting him, but there was nothing. He recognized the two officers at the water cooler but they paid him no mind, he was just another civilian to them, unimportant. The lack of attention made him feel as if he were floating as he approached the front desk.

"Hello, I'd like to report a missing person," he said, and the lady at the front desk furrowed her brows in worry and immediately started clicking away at her computer. Still the officers chatted idly, the detective's office closed with the blinds drawn.

"Who is it, hon?" she asked, a certain warmth in her voice that Branzy found was unique to the residents of desert towns.

“It’s Clown Pierce,” he said, and she stopped, the radio failed to fill the silence as she stared at him in confusion.

“What- Could you repeat that hon? Cause for a second there I thought-”

“No- Uh, you’re right,” he cut her off, now he finally felt eyes on him again. He didn’t have to look in the direction of the water cooler to know that they were paying attention now, the name Clown Pierce like thunder heralding an incoming storm. He heard the door of the detective’s office open. “Clown Pierce is missing.”

---

Unsurprisingly he found himself in an interrogation room, despite the fact that he was only there to file a missing’s person report. He had no delusions of the police actually *helping* to find him, he just wanted to tell it to *someone*. Someone who would at least somewhat believe him, or *want* to believe him. Clown Pierce had killed their best detective some years ago now in an arson attack they’d never been able to pin on him, the town’s police department *desperately* wanted him gone. They’d at least look into it, so that Branzy wouldn’t have to.

The officer – detective? – sitting across from him lazily scribbled something on his clipboard and gave him a onceover. His relaxed demeanor still made Branzy uneasy, he’d die if the officer wanted him to maintain eye contact.

“So what was your relationship with Mr. Prince?” The cop still hadn’t looked up at him, focused on something on the paper in front of him. Branzy was half convinced it was printed out fan fiction rather than any report or document.

“Uh...” he struggled, he was tired, he was exhausted. Branzy forgot who he was meant to be. “It was... complicated?” he winced at his own tone. The air conditioning in the interrogation room was broken, and Branzy was slowly dying inside. He couldn’t tell this man, this *cop*, what his relationship to Clown Pierce was. He was here, in a police station, in normal shorts and a normal t-shirt, the singed edges of his hair cut off in a hastily done haircut that was *just* shy of a buzz cut. So he could look normal.

The cop finally looked up from his notes at him and Branzy felt himself stand up straighter.

“I occasionally worked for him, as a card dealer, private games,” he tacked on, as if it mattered. The man across from him wouldn’t look twice at illegal card games. They all knew they happened, they’d all invested too much money into them to just bust the operation all open like that.

“I don’t see how that’s complicated,” he was still scribbling at those notes, and it made Branzy want to snatch that clipboard out of his hands and smash it over the cop’s head. “Unless you handled something other than his cards,” he added, laughing hard at his own joke as Branzy sat there, helpless to do anything other than join in with a nervous chuckle.

The man didn’t know, he didn’t suspect – and even if he did, it didn’t really matter. Branzy was there to bring them the good news, Clown Pierce was gone, what did it matter that he was in a sort-of relationship with a man. *Had been* in a sort-of relationship with a man. Clown was gone, he hadn’t taken Branzy with him. For better or for worse.

Branzy sighed. “Look, I really don’t know. He was supposed to show up to a game and then he

didn't, I went to go look for him and he was gone.”

“Good,” he said, and the word was like lightning down Branzzy’s spine. Poison down his throat. Even the officer seemed to realize what he’d said and cleared his throat, trying for professionalism. “I mean, good, thank you, we’ll look into it, Brian. Don’t worry.”

Seemingly satisfied, the officer collected his notes and let him go, leaving Branzzy to stand in front of the police station alone, defeated. He was an idiot for ever thinking he would achieve anything like this.

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## Scene 6

*Town square during the day. Citizens in variously colored cloaks and masks are walking around, chatting, laughing. BEATRICE enters stage left, her once fine purple dress torn and in disarray, she is wearing a mouse mask.*

**Citizens** . Lady Beatrice, what a surprise! We have not seen you in the square in a while.

**Beatrice** . Help! Help! He is gone!

**Citizens** . Slow down, child. Who do you speak of? Who is gone?

**Beatrice** . The Harlequin has disappeared!

**Citizens** . The murderer? The liar? The thief?

**Beatrice** . The very same.

**Citizens** . The clown who murdered the duke Flavio in a fit of jealousy? The clown who burned down the Prince’s own home?

**Beatrice** . Aye, it is this Harlequin that has disappeared

**Citizens** . Ha! Fetch the wine and musicians! The town terror is gone

**Beatrice** . You mean to celebrate a man's disappearance?

**Citizens** . When his presence was a pest, then yes.

**Beatrice** . You rejoice in his suffering?

**Citizens** . When his occupation was malice, then of course

**Beatrice** . A man is dead.

**Citizens** . A monster is gone.

**Beatrice** . A man is gone.

**Citizens** . Can a man not a monster be, when his monstrous actions a monster's trace leave?

**Beatrice** . He is a man, flesh and blood.

**Citizens** . We celebrate a monster's death.

**Beatrice** . He is a man, brother to you and a mother's dear son

**Citizens** . That babe, dare I say, was eaten by the devil and replaced by a monster that ate its own mother. do you not know, Beatrice? that that monster is the reason a child is an orphan

**Beatrice** . You speak of the constable, the man who was as much of a pest, only dressed in finer clothing.

**Citizens** . No, although i will have you mind how you speak of the deceased.

**Beatrice** . Why-

**Citizens** . That monster killed his own mother, his father probably too. It was clear and obvious from the look in his eyes, ever since he was a child.

**Beatrice** . And what evidence of this?

**Citizens** . The look in his eyes. his natural tendency to violence.

**Beatrice** . No weapon? no witness?

**Citizens** . Nay.

**Beatrice** . You accused a child of killing its own mother?

**Citizens** . Not a child, a monster. Beatrice, you would do well to remember this

**Beatrice** . He was a child, born flesh and blood of a mother, and then as an orphan trusted to this civil town's care, and you treat him as a monster? You call him monster even now, that he is a man that only follows the course you've set for him, and has disappeared without a trace. A man is gone, not dead, but disappeared to a danger in your own desert, and you would drink wine and celebrate rather than help? Than try and save him? You would call musicians rather than take heed?

**Citizens** . Silence. We will not listen to more of this buffoonery. You outsider, stranger, know nothing about us and the terror he has caused us, yet would judge our town

**Beatrice** . I speak only what I've seen. I echo only what you've told me.

**Citizens** . Go mourn him elsewhere, lest your wails summon the monster's specter.

**Beatrice** . Better the man's ghost than your living company.

**Citizens** . We have suffered your presence for long enough. No more!

*The citizens lunge for BEATRICE, tearing apart her dress and shoving her to the floor. Her mask falls off.*

**Citizens.** Be gone from our town!

*The citizens back away, leaving BRANZY laying face down in the middle of the stage. He is wearing a purple shirt and trousers, dressed like a bartender in the 21st century. Branzzy stands up and looks at the audience.*

*Exit Branzzy.*

## **Exodos**

He didn't notice it at first, had chalked it up to anxiety and grief and whatever else was wrong with him. But as minutes turned to hours turned to days, he couldn't ignore it. The acute feeling of being haunted that had followed him ever since he left the police station. He was convinced it was just the cops at first, that they were keeping an eye on him. That they'd figured out the full extent of his and Clown's... connection, and that they were just waiting.

But that wasn't it.

Branzy tried his best to at least play at normalcy. He woke up, he walked, he bought groceries, he worked at the bar. He stayed glued to his window, watching, waiting, trying to catch a cop or someone stalking him. No one was there. No one watched him back.

And still all of that left too much time in his day. He hadn't realized how much of his life Clown had taken up until he was gone.

He tried not to think too much about the town itself, but he couldn't help it.

The town he found himself in had a curse, one card it couldn't get away from, one card that was its past and present and future. Branzzy had now witnessed it with his own eyes, when the town's best

and brightest was snuffed out in the middle of the night. Despite the fact that he was awful, a true nightmare, despite the fact that he'd killed a man and burned down his home, Clown had been on his way to actually breathing life into the town again.

It would have been awful, but a renaissance took time to be beautiful.

At least that's what Branzy had been telling himself as he stood and watched Clown's reign of terror. Maybe there was something wrong with him, but he couldn't bring himself to care.

Clown was gone now. It was over. He'd done all he could to help him. Branzy had to leave, now.

Or at least that's what all his tarot readings were telling him.

Like any good magician he had a velvet satchel he kept his cards in. It was purple, of course, and had a hidden pocket to keep certain cards separate. Branzy had special decks for special occasions, ones consisting solely of good cards and ones solely of bad ones, ones with markings only decipherable to him, telling him which card was which. But his own deck he kept in the red satchel, with the devil card separate, it didn't have to worm its way into every reading concerning the town, Branzy already knew. Still, that day the satchel was completely empty, his cards scattered in a pattern on the table that only made sense to him. He was staring at it the when the knock came, the cards and their meaning seared in his eyes as he rushed towards the door, throwing it open without thinking.

But instead of the terrible mask, instead of those eyes like the void between the stars, a stranger greeted him.

"Hello?" he asked dumbly, because there was no way to save this situation now, he'd swung open the door and the boy waiting in front of it wasn't ready for him. While Branzy stared, he realized the boy looked familiar. The hair was too light and the eyes, although they were a deep brown, were a far cry from the hardened look that Clown had. And yet, the curve of his jaw, the line of his nose, even the-

"Hi," the boy started, his voice full of the awkward twang of youth. "You may not know me but I'm Clown's brother and-"

"Come inside," Branzy said, grabbing the boy's arm and pulling him in, slamming the door closed. He knew, deep inside, that he was acting like a completely insane person right now, but that knowledge was completely overshadowed by the dread and haunted feeling threatening to suffocate him. He stared at the boy, trying to discern whether he was the cause or just a very unfortunate bystander.

"So, um, you reported him missing-" It was obvious he was trying to get something out of Branzy, a confession, a lead, reassurance.

"I don't know anything." He tried to deadpan, but it was hard trying to be calm and rational in his current state.

"But-"

"You're not with the cops right?" He furrowed his eyebrows. The boy looked about twenty years old? If Branzy had to guess?

"I- What? *No!*" The fierce denial of the accusation relieved Branzy. The boy looked like Clown, the family resemblance was clear, although their demeanor was world's apart. Clown had seemed dangerous, sharp, a person to keep a wide berth from. Clown was a product of his environment,

tempered steel. His brother on the other hand was soft like 24k gold.

“Good, good. Come inside, take a seat, I was just in the middle of-”

“Whoa are those tarot cards?” His sudden shift in tone made Branzzy almost wince. He didn’t spend a lot of time around young people, and even though he was only thirty himself Clown’s brother seemed so *young*, so fragile. He scratched at his head, he was probably being patronizing.

“Yeah, I can do a reading for you if you like, while we talk about your brother.”

“I thought you just said you didn’t know anything.” The boy said, looking out of place in Branzzy’s living room. His apartment had the aesthetic of a casino and a witch’s den plastered on landlord white. His black couch, his checkered carpet, the light bulbs he didn’t screw in completely. There was a dartboard behind the sofa and three darts on the glass coffee table, weights keeping Branzzy’s altar cloth in place. He’d be lying if he said he also didn’t use the cloth specifically made for tarot readings as a tablecloth, but he was lazy, and fairly sure he was an agnostic, and never in his apartment for long enough to care. There was candle wax on that table and he did *not* feel like cleaning it up, so altar/tarot/tablecloth it was. He’d even made altar candles once, partially for protection and to see if some god maybe tried contacting him, just in case. But he’d made the mistake of leaving them on his window in the Nevada sun, and all of the herbs and crystals he’d painstakingly set in the wax had sunk down, along with the wick, as the candle melted inside its container.

The boy looked like that same Nevada sun, with his bleached hair and sun warmed skin, a far cry from his now missing brother.

“I thought you said you weren’t a cop.” Branzzy joked, but the boy just looked at him, confused. Branzzy sighed and leveled him with a look that hopefully said ‘sit down and *shut up*’. He sat down and shut up.

“I just- I haven’t seen him. He barely answers my texts so I didn’t even, I didn’t-” he seemed the type of guy to randomly send cat gifs and other nonsense, Branzzy decided. Still, Branzzy had only been vaguely aware that Clown maybe, possibly, had some family in town. He was *from* the town, that would mean that he had at least had parents here, maybe.

“Hey slow down, take a deep breath, you want some chocolate?” He tried being nice, but the last time he had to be comforting was about four years ago when he’d accidentally gotten himself into babysitting for an extremely rich client. He’d been as helpless with a baby as he was now, with a twenty-something. But chocolate was all he had.

“You’re literally a stranger offering me candy.” he answered with a not quite smile.

“You found my address!” Branzzy argued indignantly.

“Because Min- I mean, Clown’s *friend* told me I’d most likely find him here!”

“Well. I’m Branzzy, I know- *knew* your brother.” he internally cursed Minute for ratting him out to Clown’s little brother. “Will you take some chocolate now?”

“Ugh, fine, since you insist old man,” Branzzy faked a noise of outrage at that, and quickly grabbed the chocolate from his fridge before the boy could mess with the things around his living room. He handed it to him, which the boy accepted politely, and then despite his manners scarfed down the entire thing in seconds. A part of Branzzy worried, the small, tiny, insignificant part of him that still managed to have a bit of a parental instinct. He dismissed it.

Instead of dwelling on it he grabbed another chocolate bar and handed it to his guest. Branzy sat down in the armchair across from the sofa, before shuffling his cards and laying out three on the table. He stared at them. Despite the fact that he only wanted to do a three card reading - past, present, future - the cards didn't feel right. He picked up the first one and flipped it - it was The Lovers, meant to be in the boy's past, but that didn't quite feel right.

"Oo, does that say lovers? Do I get them both?" the boy grinned, and Branzy was still deep in thought that he missed the joke and simply asked.

"What?"

"Do I get both of them? I mean, I swing both ways," he wiggled his eyebrows at Branzy.

"Are you- Are you *flirting with me*?" He asked, completely taken aback, the boy immediately mirror his expression.

"What?! No! *Gross* dude, you could- you could be my *dad*," he said and laughed, and Branzy could have sighed in relief except he was too busy laughing. The boy had an infectious laughter, despite his insistence at calling Branzy old - he was no older than the boy's own brother - Branzy couldn't help but laugh. He picked up the second card and turned it, debating whether to move it to the past or future. Either way its meaning wasn't good, a person stuck blindfolded in a circle of eight swords. Branzy put it behind the lovers, so they were firmly in the future, just so he could try and make sense of it later.

The Devil smiled at him as he flipped the last card.

"I need to reshuffle, this is weird," he said, collecting all three cards before the boy could take a good look at them.

"What do they mean?" he asked through a mouthful of chocolate.

"Nah man my cards are weird, those didn't make any sense," Branzy explained as he shuffled, setting three cards on the table again, this time firmly stating which one meant what.

He spotted the back of the Devil without even having to turn the card - it was more worn, and had a spot of soot on it after Clown had played with it once that Branzy could never get off. He picked up that card again and reshuffled.

"That's cheating!" the boy joked, but Branzy couldn't laugh, not with that haunted feeling sitting on his shoulders.

"Fine, fine, I'll shuffle *again*," he said, but he wasn't really annoyed, dealing cards was his job after all. He found a certain calm in the smooth slide of card against card, the repetition. He set the deck on the table before dragging it across, so that a bit of each card peaked out. "You pick this time," he said, because maybe it was him, maybe the card was for him and had nothing to do with his guest.

He moved forward, excited, wiping his chocolate stained hands on his jeans before reaching out and picking three cards. *Six of cups reversed*, alright, Branzy could work with that. *Three of cups*, merriment and joy, which made sense.

The boy flipped the last card, and there was the Devil once again, back to ruin Branzy's day. The boy chuckled to himself.

"Looks like Clown," he said, and that snapped something in Branzy. The card *didn't* look at all like

Clown.

“He’s gone,” he said quietly, the answering silence told him that the boy heard him loud and clear. “He’s not coming back.” Branzy looked at the boy, truly looked, and pitied him. His hands were smeared with chocolate the same shade as his beautiful doe eyes, now lined with tears.

“Why-”

“Listen to me. Because I’m only going to say this once,” Branzy took a deep breath, ignoring the boy’s trembling lip and pale face. “Your brother is gone. Stop looking for him.”

The room seemed devoid of air suddenly, a complete vacuum where sound didn’t travel. Branzy breathed lead instead of air, his heart struggling against his chest. The boy seemed devastated, grief painted on his sunshine face.

All of a sudden he got up. “Thanks for the reading,” he said, not looking at Branzy, not looking at anything at all, and left. Branzy sat on the armchair, melting into the cushions. The air slowly returned to the room and he breathed in slowly as he heard the front door slam shut.

He sat there for who knows how long until the feeling of being haunted returned tenfold. Finally, after all his waiting, he felt Clown’s eyes on him again. He felt Clown’s presence like he always did - prey animal instincts - but it didn’t make any sense. Branzy was alone. The boy had gone hours before, the Sun had set.

He sighed and picked the cards back up, pointedly ignoring the one that talked about the boy’s future. He wrapped them in the altar cloth and slipped them back into their satchel, glancing at the mirror he had in his living room, only to see Clown right behind him.

Branzy whipped his head so fast he felt he pulled a muscle in his neck on accident, but the space behind him was empty, vacant. He could feel his heart jackhammering in his chest - what was wrong with him? Was he dreaming? Branzy pinched himself and counted his finger tips for good measure, but he was awake.

The undeniable sound of Clown’s laughter echoed in his apartment, and Branzy followed it to his bathroom. A part of him was angry already - this was *so* typical of Clown. The moment Branzy developed a hidden desire for normalcy, for devotion and commitment, he would disappear for weeks and come back as a horror movie monster. He had half a mind to start cursing as he ran into the bathroom, but as he pressed the light switch he found it empty.

Branzy glanced at the mirror above the sink, catching the sight of Clown standing in the hallway outside. He was wearing his mask, which confused Branzy, since he couldn’t remember the last time Clown had had the mask on when it was just the two of them. Branzy turned around to face him, but where Clown had been standing just moments before was now empty.

He walked out of the bathroom and back into the hallway, where he spied his bedroom door was open. Branzy didn’t know what urged him on to go in, what it was that he was looking for. He just wanted Clown to be real again, he just wanted him back. Clown had always scared him, that had never gone away, but Branzy had loved him.

The door of his bedroom creaked open. It was dark, and empty. Branzy fumbled with the light switch, desperate for something, some kind of closure, and as light flooded he looked into the mirror again, finding Clown behind him, his mask as terrifying as it was that very first day they met.

“Are you here?” he whispered, but Clown didn’t answer. Instead, Branzy turned, only to find his apartment space empty again. He didn’t know if it was fear he felt, or grief.

He clutched at his chest, trying to soothe his heartache, and dragged his feet back into the living room. Branzy fell onto the sofa, his head held in his hands, trying to keep himself together. His heart ached for something that was gone and his head hurt from his paranoia.

He blinked his eyes open, only to see Clown’s reflection in his glass coffee table, as if the man was hovering above him. He held a lighter in one hand and pressed a finger to his mask, as if shushing him. Branzy watched the lighter, the source of his horror, as Clown flicked it open and the flames came to life. Only there was no light coming from the lighter, only heat. Clown reached for him, and for once, Branzy screamed.

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## Scene 15

*The HARLEQUIN stands in the middle of the stage.*

**Harlequin** . A town enshrouded in violence. When dawn comes she will be soaked in blood, the day will be a throbbing vein, and evening will be a bruise. But now, it is night.

*BRANZY appears on the stage and lies down, staring at the sky.*

**Harlequin** . A stranger enters. His name is Branzy, or Brian, or Brennan. What he is is an Ouroboros, a snake, a cycle. What he is is the closest thing to a confidant, a right hand man, a friend that Clown Pierce will ever have.

*The HARLEQUIN takes off his mask, CLOWN PIERCE faces the audience.*

**Clown** . I never expected to fall for him, I never wanted to *want* him. I would be a liar if I said I didn’t find him attractive. See now the arm he points at the sky, the snake tattoo curling along his forearm, I am a monster but I am a man. I am a man so I am weak. He was handsome and clever, and he lost me so much money, but I loved him. He was my stability, my anchor. I’d always thought I only needed my brother in this world, but it was Branzy who taught me what it meant to love, to hold someone close. My own brother I’d always held at arm’s length, fearing I would hurt him, but that only showed me how much I’d hurt myself. How much I had hurt *him* instead. When all I had wanted, since the moment I was born, was love. Love. Love softens you. Love sharpens you. Love robs you blind and leaves you for dead in the middle of the night. Love will smother the *You* you've built from your own fractured bones and blood to make space for another. You want to run? You want to flee? You want freedom? Love will be your prison and you will *kiss* the bars in gratitude.

*CLOWN PIERCE looks at the mask in his hands.*

**Clown** . Clown, Pierce, the unpaid price, the uncrowned prince. When the horrors of love come knocking, who will pay? Whose wallet will you steal from, whose watch will you give? Or will you finally answer the call. Will you finally open the door?

*Dancers in fancy clothing and monster masks enter stage left, CLOWN PIERCE hurriedly puts his*

*mask back on. Branzy's hand falls down and he falls asleep.*

**Harlequin** . A man dreams a dream he will never remember in the waking world. Pairs gather in their silk and finery, match for match, hand in hand. Rain drops make the rhythm of the waltz. One-two-three, one-two-three. The knives appear in between steps, teeth sharpen, the hands once soft turn into claws. The music, naturally, is violence.

*The dancers dance around the stage, avoiding BRANZY sleeping in the middle, and the HARLEQUIN who stands at the edge of the stage, facing the audience.*

**Harlequin** . Once a duke, now a coyote, tears into the shoulder of his partner. Once a lady, now a lioness, goes directly for the throat. Round and around and around, still keeping in time with the rain, kicking up the dust of the desert sand, the pairs dance away the night. Until the blood and rain and sand have soaked into their shoes, until they have no hands to hold with, until they have no mouths to kiss. The rain and the blood all wash away, and he forgets all of this. A man dreams the same dream. And another. And another. And the dream will keep repeating because this violence comes from a nightmare, and it takes hold where it can, and never stays for long. The music of a nightmare. The waltz of tragedies. One-two-three, one-two-three.

*The dancers stop, BRANZY is gone from the middle, the HARLEQUIN turns to face the dancers.*

**Harlequin** . I know you, all of you. The coyote who hunts and the hunter who sees and the seer that prays, preys on the innocent. I know you, because you have made me, you have made this town and its people and you will make countless others. Other coyotes and seers, other towns even, maybe. Do you know they call us monsters? Terrifying beasts? I disagree. We are their prodigal sons and daughters, we are their future, their children, the horrifying monsters clawing at their graves. Their harpy soaring high in the air, their serpent holding them close. Ghosts, shadows, smoke. We are the violence, the consequence.

*Coyote, hunter, harpy, exit stage left. Seer, shadows, smoke, serpent, exit stage right. The rest of the choir follows. Once alone, the HARLEQUIN takes off his mask.*

**Clown** . When I was young, my father killed my mother. My younger brother was still a newborn, a loud, wailing baby, and I was so afraid my father would kill him too. So I killed him instead. I was thirteen years old, it is the worst thing I've ever done, and I don't regret it.

*A dancer appears in the middle of the stage, shocked, CLOWN PIERCE turns to him.*

**Clown** . So now you have seen my face, are you satisfied?

**Dancer** . ...

**Clown** . You have heard my confession, do you feel your hatred justified? Your accusations proved?

**Dancer** . ...

**Clown** . Speak to me, or can you not? Are you a monster? What violence made you?

**Dancer** . ...

*CLOWN PIERCE walks forward and takes off the dancer's mask, the dancer's cloak falls to the floor like a ghost and they disappear. CLOWN PIERCE is standing on the stage alone.*

*Unbeknownst to the audience, that was the only dancer/citizen/patron/choir member without a speaking line.*

Curtain fall.

## Chapter End Notes

if i started talking about everything that happened between this chapter and the last i would end up a screenshot on one of those ao3 author accounts. but hey, im not pregnant at least,

This is a PSA. don't fuck your boss . don't be branzy. he's not the most reliable narrator

also lowkey fucked up that i made branzy a woman during the theatre play bits and will never elaborate on my choices. is he trans? if so which way? who's to say

## three

### Chapter Summary

Pangi takes care of his best friend. That is all.

### Chapter Notes

Hiiiiiiiiiii I rewrote part one of this , I also upped the rating of this fic to Mature, but I think that for this part "explicit" would fit better, considering how graphic the descriptions of gore, internal organs, and medical procedures are. Speaking of

Trigger warnings for: graphic descriptions of gore, graphic descriptions of medical procedures, inaccurate medical procedures, codependency, fear of dark, breaking and entering, monster's only visible in reflections,

If any of these are a problem, I'll still have a summary of what happens in the End Notes, in case you'd like to keep following the story. This part is important to the plot. What plot you might ask?

[Here you can read the first part of the series](#)

[And here you can meet Walter, Zam's pet dog](#)

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

Pangi was a devout catholic in a town that God had abandoned. Of course Pangi didn't know that, he was used to the silence. Nor did the priest know that, although Father Terry's ignorance might be written off as a fault of his age. Pangi didn't mind his age, in fact a part of him relished having someone young that he could better relate his problems to. Pangi had never been to a therapist, spilling out all his problems and grievances and 'sins' in confession like a good boy. His faith more akin to a dog than to a man.

There was no proper priest to tell him that. There was no one to bring Pangi onto the right path, whatever that path might've been for him, whatever that would have meant for him. So he remained in church, long past mass, long past hours that would've seemed appropriate, the flickering candles his only companions. He had nowhere else to go.

There were only so many extra shifts he could pick up at the clinic before his body gave out, and he was more trouble than he was worth, even if their small health center was understaffed. And Pangi didn't want to go home. Despite all the space she afforded him, it didn't change the fact that Pangi still lived with his *mother* .

So he went to church. He was pleasant to the staff, and to the chronically understaffed businesses of his town, they loved to have him there. Pangi did most of the cleaning, and once the floors and pews and offices were spotless, he found other rooms to clean. Hallways that were forgotten and the basement that hadn't seen use in *years*. He'd been given a key because Father Terry couldn't stay as long as Pangi did, sleep and other responsibilities calling him. Thus Pangi, with no work and no desire to stay at home or go out in a town where he didn't have any friends, found himself in church.

Pangi hadn't always been this religious, his mother never put that pressure on him, and his father, may he rest in peace, never cared much for religion. It was during highschool that he truly started going to church, feeling peace among the pews, acceptance. He found constant prayer to be soothing, losing himself in repetition until he forgot all about his worries. About school, about love, his fear for the future. It had waned slightly in college, but returned tenfold once he found himself in his hometown again, desperate to find solace in anything.

Most nights, he was alone. Sometimes Father Terry joined him, either in silent prayer or discussion of the bible that always ended up one-sided, Pangi lost in thought over one passage or the other as the priest rambled along. But sometimes, he would sit next to Pangi, and stare into the candles in silence. Pangi just watched him then, not saying a word, transfixed by the reflection of the flames in the priest's eyes.

There was one more place Pangi could go to. Although he did not like it.

His best friend's house had become something like a church to him, but a wariness he couldn't place made him a lot more hesitant to spend pray there. He went there, twice a day every day, ever since he had disappeared, to walk and feed the dog. Pangi watered the plants, cleaned up the mess left by Walter around his water and food bowl, took out anything expired out the fridge, and left. The fridge was almost empty now, not that his friend had ever been good at keeping it well stocked, and Pangi had had to buy dog food since he'd ran out. He had a key - of course he had a key - Pangi was his *best friend*. But Pangi knew he wasn't the only person with a key, he knew he wasn't the only one coming in to check on Walter. He had hoped the other people would reach out to him, work out some kind of schedule, but in their defense Pangi hadn't really reached out to them either.

Pangi also wasn't the one putting up the missing person posters, a fact that gnawed at him. Envy and guilt slowly eating him, like two ladies with impeccable dinner table manners. It was what kept making him go back, instead of leaving Walter to the others, leaving the food to rot in the fridge and the dust to gather. It was the reason he was heading there after another long shift at the clinic, still in his nurse scrubs, the keys to two churches on his keyring.

They jingled in his pocket as he approached the house, his car parked in the driveway. He opened the door, Walter running out past him immediately. He checked and saw that the pet door was jammed, and was overcome with pity. It was a quick fix, but the dog must have been stuck inside the house since morning. With a jolt he realized that *the dog must have been stuck inside the house since morning* and ran inside, turning all the lights on, looking for any trace of the mess the dog surely must have made, but the house was clean. He walked into the kitchen, noticing that there was fresh water in the bowl, and figured out that Vitalasy or Subz must have been at the house, and taken Walter out for a walk. Pangi sighed in relief.

Everything else seemed in order, so he filled up Walter's food bowl and turned to leave when the power went out. Pangi was no stranger to power outages, having lived in the same town since birth, but this one felt... different. He leaned over towards the kitchen window and opened the blinds just an inch, checking to see if the neighbor's lights were on. The golden glow coming from the

neighbor's upstairs room unsettled him. Usually, a power outage affected the whole street, perhaps the fuse box was-

Pangi heard the front door swing open, and all thoughts escaped his mind.

He stood frozen in the kitchen. He had never had the best fear response, always freezing in place, never running. Even now his mind blanked, not caring about the kitchen window as an escape route or the knives in the knife block for defense. He stood there uselessly, hoping and praying that it was just Walter, but no footsteps followed the opened door, dog or otherwise. He became aware of his heart, going overdrive in his chest, and aware of his breathing as he tried to calm it down, silence it. His hand shook as he slowly reached for his phone, as the room seemed to get darker and darker.

"Hello, Pangi," said a voice, and Pangi screamed, dropping the phone he was just reaching for and watching it clatter against the kitchen tiles. The screen lit up, illuminating the kitchen just enough that Pangi could catch sight of the monster standing in the kitchen doorway before he fell to the floor, covering his head. He screamed again, paralyzed with fear, unable to do anything but stand there and die, a deer caught in the headlights.

"Stop," said the same voice, and Pangi made a small sound, halfway between a squeak and a sob. "I said *stop*, Pangi," it sighed in exasperation, and it sounded awfully familiar. A smooth, quiet tone, as dangerous as it was gentle-

*Oh.*

Pangi opened his mouth to scream again, his phone screen flickered off, but the voice beat him to it.

"I need you to save Zam."

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Which is how Pangi found himself in his car, the disincorporated figure of Clown only visible to him if he glanced in his rearview mirror, which he was too busy to do as he tried to figure out the directions. He could be getting murdered tonight, the thought *had* crossed his mind. But so far the monster with Clown's voice had only been giving him directions, leading him to a corner of town Pangi didn't tend to visit. Growing up, all the kids knew to avoid Clown's territory, only the truly brave and stupid daring to wander in. Of course, most of the time they came back safe and sound, it wasn't like the kids knew *exactly* where the territory started and ended. That knowledge was privy only to the Clown and his elk, and no one else.

Now Pangi was driving into the heart of it, seeing streets and corners of his town that he'd never even known existed. Although there wasn't a noticeable change in structure and style, the night still made the buildings look terrifying. As if they themselves were afraid to live there.

"Take a left," said Clown, jolting Pangi out of his thoughts. He drove into a narrow alley, wide enough for his car to pass through, but not much else.

"Stop here," Pangi stopped, looking around. There was not much to see besides trash cans and a few rats scuttling by. He dared a glance in the rearview mirror, Clown was still sitting in the backseat, looking more real than he'd been to Pangi in a while.

“Leave the truck. Walk straight ahead out of the alley and go inside the building on your right. Don’t go *anywhere* else, is that clear?” Pangi blinked, and Clown was gone before he could give an answer. A part of him wanted to stay, sit in his fear and not move a muscle. But he’d come too far now. He didn’t know what he was scared of more, what awaited him at the end if he followed the directions, or what awaited if he didn’t.

He opened the car door. Clown was scary enough when he was alive, whatever he was now, Pangi didn’t want to mess with him - *it*.

The night was quiet, not what he’d expected. There was no car engine to keep him company, even the rats had hidden behind the trash cans. He didn’t feel any eyes on him, not that he could, he was always running around anxiously. It muddled his senses.

He’d expected it to be brighter outside the alley, he’d expected street lights or windows bright with burning midnight oil, but it wasn’t. Refusing to spend more time pondering, he tried the door of the warehouse. It was unlocked, giving way with more noise than Pangi was comfortable with, but he’d come this far.

Once he entered he *felt* the world become lighter, darkness seeping away from the shadowy corners it had come from, leaving Pangi to stand in an empty warehouse.

There was a ceiling window. There had to be. Because how else could he explain the light that seeped through, gracing the body laying in the middle, wrapped up in white and yellow.

Pangi ran to him.

*Pangi ran to him, they were in elementary school and their teacher had promised that they would find the treasure in the sandbox if they just dug far enough. It was always just the two of them, looking for treasure or fighting imaginary pirates or stuffing themselves with candy until they were sick. And it was always Pangi’s mother that took care of them, Zam’s brother nowhere in sight.*

*Pangi ran to him, they were starting high school when their peers had acquired an acute taste for bullying. The one year difference between them seemed bigger than ever, and Pangi had never been good at making friends, unlike Zam. Zam befriended others, leaving Pangi in the dust to run after him, and it made him terribly jealous. Always coming in second, never the priority unlike Mapicc and Ro were. But in the end Zam came back to him, held back at the end of the year, because burning trash in the desert and looking cool for his friends wouldn’t help him on his english exam.*

*Pangi ran to him, they were in senior year and for the first time in years their P.E. teacher had called in a sick day. Nobody knew what to do, or what would happen, and their poor math teacher got called in as a substitute. Pangi had been hoping they’d be given free period, but their teacher obviously had different plans as he walked in carrying a CD player. “Today I will be teaching you how to dance a waltz, now pair up!”*

*Their class had more boys than girls and all the cute girls that they had a crush on were paired with other boys, leaving Pangi and his best friend to dance together because no one was allowed to sit out. Pangi gulped, trying to swallow his nerves as his best friend put his hand on his shoulder and Pangi gingerly put his hand on his hip. They started slow, counting their steps, trying to keep up with the rhythm but not step on their partner’s toes.*

*“One, two, three,” Pangi counted, suddenly realizing that it wasn’t he who was counting out loud but his best friend. Pangi looked up from their feet, catching a glimpse of golden brown hair, one strand already falling out of the pony tail, framing his friend’s face. What he would give to tuck it*

*behind his ear, trail his hand across his best friend's cheek, kiss-*

*“Ow-” Pangi yelled as his best friend stepped on his foot, his momentum dragging him down to the floor, his ginger hold on his friend's hip doing nothing to save him from landing on his ass. The class burst into laughter.*

*“If you kids can't make it through one song I'm making you do math homework,” scolded the teacher, and his classmates quickly shut up. Pangi looked up to see his best friend offering him his hand. Pangi took it, starstruck, and was dragged back up to stand.*

*“I lead this time,” his best friend grinned, and swept them back up into a dance.*

*Pangi ran to him. They were two hundred miles and four years apart. Pangi had in his hand an associate's degree in nursing and was registered for working but he was going for more. He was going for bachelor's and grad school and-*

*But Pangi ran to him because his best friend said he needed him. His best friend was alone, his brother gone, and he needed Pangi. So Pangi ran, and ran, and ran. Embracing the wall as he crashed into it, his best friend already having found another someone to replace Pangi with.*

Pangi ran to him. Because Clown could have picked Subz or Mapicc or Planet to save Zam but he'd chosen Pangi. He'd chosen *Pangi* . He knew Pangi was his best friend, *he* knew there was no replacing him. Pangi ran to the body and embraced it, thick blood soaking through his shirt, not a care in the world.

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Pangi was for once happy he hadn't listened to his fear. Still, it was a good guide. He knew there was something not right with the body, he could tell that from a mile away. No signs of rigor mortis or decay, yet no clear signs of life either. He couldn't take it to a hospital. He couldn't take it to his best friend's house either, or any house that was frequently visited at least. He settled on the church, it was a place he visited frequently, one that wouldn't raise any suspicions, and yet there were nooks and corners that people didn't touch at all.

He carried the body into the basement, scanning the almost bare room. There were some tables left behind from old church groups, and a sink that Pangi had previously been relieved still had hot water. But he ignored any memories of the church and the time he spent in it, instead choosing to focus on the body. He laid it on top of the sturdiest table he could find. It still wobbled a bit, but he could manage for now. They would both manage for now. Pangi didn't change out of his shirt, in truth, the thought hadn't even crossed his mind. The only thing he could think of was the body, and now that they were settled, he itched to find out what secrets it hid beneath the sheets.

For a second he hesitated, he didn't know what it was that held him back. He felt like he was on the precipice of some great discovery, like he was standing on the edge of a cliff, and once he took that step forward he would never be able to go back.

He stepped back. Clown had said he wanted Pangi to save Zam. He ran upstairs to get his medkit.

Pangi hadn't realized what he had been hoping for until he came back into the basement to find the body still there. Tools in hands, faith in his heart, he had been hoping it had been all some grand hallucination. That he would arrive in the basement and that the body wouldn't be there, or that the

body wouldn't feel as holy. He had hoped, he had *prayed*, he realized, catching himself muttering our holy father, that he would feel less reverence for that body than he did for his own faith.

But Pangi's faith was a dog, and now a piece of bloody meat was swinging right in front of his eyes and he ached to sink his teeth into it. He swallowed, ignoring his rushing heart, the redness in his cheeks and the drool that threatened to spill past his pathetic lips. Pangi walked to him, taking in every moment, basking in it like a bride on her wedding march.

He set the tools on the table, they slid but didn't fall over, and slowly, reverently, put his hands on the body. He trailed the edges of the sheet swaddling the body, trying to gauge the best way to take it off without disturbing it. When he found the corner he tugged at it, the sheet *peeling* off with a wet sound. Pangi was an operating room nurse, he was no stranger to organs and viscera, but still he looked away, trying to gather his nerves. He hadn't even completely uncovered the body yet. For now he could see the face, cuts lining the soft cheeks he'd always dreamed of kissing, eyes closed and lips shut. He could also see the arms and legs, noticing that the body's limbs had been left intact.

But it was the torso that gave him pause. From the way the body had been wrapped up, there was another side of the sheet that Pangi had to... peel off. But it was sunk into the abdomen, soaked with yellow blood, the edge of it tucked underneath the exposed ribcage.

Pangi took a deep breath, slowly lowering the sheet he had been holding so it didn't further disturb the body. He realized belatedly that he didn't have gloves on, and that his fingertips were stained with blood. It was too late now though, Pangi didn't think he could stop even if he wanted to. He picked up a pair of pincers, gently picking and prodding at where the sheet was tangled with the mesentery. He used his fingers when he realized the blood soaked sheet was too heavy to pick up like that. He peeled back the sheet, realizing alarmed that the spleen was *sticking* to it, and hurrying to push and tuck it back where it belonged. He was more careful when it came to the stomach.

He watched, entranced, the naked expanse of the stomach, the pink tinge of it not that far different from the blush in Pangi's own cheeks. Still holding the sheet, the abdomen now mostly revealed, he watched the body's mesentery crawling around the place, struggling to hide pancreas, stomach, and spleen from view. He should have been relieved, the body was doing his job for him, but he couldn't help but feel a tinge of disappointment. He reached for the mesentery, the organ slippery in his grasp, and very gently tugged on it. Covering the internal organs like children at bedtime.

Once it was in place he left that part in favor of focusing on the edge of the sheet tucked into the ribcage. He exchanged the pincers for a scalpel, tracing the lines cut into the pectoralis muscles. Part of him wondered how whoever did this managed to peel back the skin so perfectly, cut apart the muscles and expose the ribs. Even the sternum, as stubborn as it was, was perfectly sawed in half. Pangi had only intended to get the sheet out, and stitch the chest back together, but with the chest already cracked open...

He couldn't help himself. He unfolded the ribcage, exposing the malformed lungs. Pangi couldn't claim familiarity *this* intimate with the body, during the years of their friendship, he had always been shy about asking for a hug, but even *he* knew that something was wrong. The added bronchi on both the right and left wings of the lung, their length not fitting into the chest cavity – they didn't belong there. Arms soaked up to the elbows in blood, scalpel in hand, he inserted the blade gently in between the spare bronchus. Rather than being *cut* it peeled away, and Pangi took it away with his free hand, putting it away on one of the other tables. He repeated the same procedure for the other bronchus, not daring to open up the lungs, hoping that the body would cough up the spare bronchioles in due time.

There was, however, the matter of their size. There was a discoloration on the lower parts of the lungs, the pale gold that replaced what would have been a pinkish tinge from iron-rich blood gave way to completely grey ends. Pangi didn't need to be a doctor to recognize the signs of rejection, and set about making things right by dragging the scalpel across and cutting away the excess. The scalpel slipped through with no trouble, not much in the lungs to give the sharp blade pause. The grey bits of lung Pangi discarded just like he did the bronchi, and then watched in marvel as the healthy bits of lung stitched themselves together. He dragged his fingers around the bottom of the healed lungs, the pleural sac seamless. A miracle.

Pangi was fond of those.

But he couldn't stay sentimental for long. He had to see the heart. Pangi had to make sure it was alright, he had to make sure it had enough space to contract, and expand, and flutter. Gingerly he picked up the lungs he had just seen heal themselves. He rested them on the open spans of the ribcage, like jewels on a red cushion. Once he saw what rested underneath, Pangi's own heart stopped.

It was four hearts, nestled onto each other, pressing onto each other, with no space to move. Each of them yellow, like a prized golden goose egg from a fairy tale. Pangi was overwhelmed with emotion. He reached for them, at the same time angry that Zam had *four* hearts but couldn't even spare him just one, as well as pity for the boy with so much love in his chest he could barely breathe. He wrapped his fingers around one of the hearts, suddenly overcome with the memory of holding Zam's hand in middle school, aching with the thought. Pangi held the hand, the heart, lifting it closer to himself, wanting to hold it against his chest. Wanting to press it there, against his own heart, ease some of Zam's burden. In both his hands the heart felt small, yet divine. Suddenly Pangi understood completely the temptation, the forbidden fruit. He didn't know how Adam in the garden resisted the call, the perfection of it.

Slowly, the heart in his hands began to beat.

It pushed against the skin of his palm, the softest pressure, before it contracted again. Warm blood filled his cupped hands, seeping through the cracks of his hold, overflowing and trickling down his wrists, arms, until the bend of his elbows where it dripped to the floor. Pangi, so lost in the beauty he was witnessing, didn't notice the strain of the blood vessels, and gasped in surprise as they snapped. Blood from the veins splattered across his face, and he rushed to put the heart to the side and stop the bleeding. His hands fumbled around the overfilled chest cavity, the mess of entangled hearts and arteries, but just like the lungs and mesentery before them, the body parts started to heal on their own.

To his horror, the arteries and veins that had held the heart just moments before now writhed wildly, despite that they seemed to not be leaking any more blood. Pangi didn't know what to do - so far, despite the fact that it was torn apart, the body was still human. Yellow blood and all. But Pangi had never heard of a human with a multiple heart condition - let alone *four* fully developed ones. He tried grabbing one of the coronary arteries, but they slipped out of his grasp, one of them ending up tangled along its mirror counterpart by one of the other hearts. Distracted by this fusion, he lost his chance at taking hold of any of the other blood vessels.

He didn't know what to expect - in retrospect he wondered if maybe loose vessels ought to have reached for the discarded heart, like a drowning man for his savior. Instead they had a mind of their own, and the left coronary artery along with the major veins all *split* into two. They reached for one another, like hands, like fingers, before tangling into two knots. They twisted like worms right before his eyes, over and under, growing ever longer and longer until the arteries and veins started to pull back, and impossibly, turned into *two* hearts.

Pangi couldn't tell if it was tears or blood running down his face. The two new hearts were smaller, each missing a major coronary artery, the aorta barely even there. He supposed Zam's chest was running out of space for all the love that he held. With no space for the hearts to move, to beat, what hope did he have of ever waking up? Tearfully, he folded back the lungs and ribs. He watched the lungs settle in, the sternum mold itself back together, the yellow blood like veins of gold through the cracked bone. Until even the cracks disappeared, and it was perfectly whole. Lovingly, he pushed the skin back into place, never reaching for a needle. Before long he was looking at a whole torso, the only sign that it had ever been cut apart the palm prints on the skin.

A shudder passed through him, making him suddenly aware of how cold it was in the basement. Pangi looked at the body again, looking small on the table, naked and covered in yellow blood drying ochre in places. He breathed. There was blood on the floor, the sheet, his hands- there was blood everywhere. And yet the body did not look paler, or in any sense worse than when he'd brought it there. He tried to even his breaths, he was failing. His mind helpfully supplied him with the fact that the body on the table was his best friend. Not an acquaintance or patient that he could be impartial towards, not a stranger, but his *best friend*.

He didn't even notice his bloody hands were shaking until he reached up to wipe the tears running down his face. Pangi was trying so hard not to panic, he ran to the sink where he caught a glimpse of himself for the first time in a while. The panicked look in his eyes was familiar, thick eyebrows that he had barely grown into, his hair a haggard mess. It was brown, but had that distinct shade that only came with prolonged exposure to the harsh Nevada sun. And just like the rays of the sun that had left him sepia toned and freckled, golden blood dripped down his cheek. Quietly, unaware he was even doing it, he started praying.

Pangi's voice reached his own ears, disjointed, like it wasn't coming from his own mouth, but he was used to that. It was rarely this bad, but he was familiar with the detachment, if he just continued praying, the mantra and rhythm would bring him back. The repetition would bring him back. The words would make sense and fill his mind and banish all unholy and impure thoughts of his best friend from Pangi's head.

He tore his gaze from the mirror and down at his hands, likewise gilded in his best friend's blood. It had been so long since Pangi had taken the sacrament-

*"Let us pray. O God, Who under a wonderful Sacrament hast left us a memorial of Thy Passion."* The words were not his, and yet Pangi was the only one in the room who could speak. This was not the prayer he said to make the world go quiet, this was not the prayer he said when he was overwhelmed with nerves and anxiety. He could not remember where this prayer came from, he only tasted the sourness of communion wine in the back of his throat.

*"Grant us, we beseech Thee, so to venerate the sacred mysteries of Thy Body and Blood,"* Pangi's eyes glazed over, and he brought his hand to his mouth.

*"That we may ever feel within ourselves the fruit of Thy redemption."* His fingers were cold and wet against his own lips, and it was this that shook him out of his trance. Pangi hit his hand against the faucet and hot water came spewing out. He screamed when he shoved his hands under the water, but didn't dare to take them out as washed the blood off of his hands, rinsing the gold and leaving only red, scalded skin. He took his clean, shaking hands out of the water, and once he glanced at the mirror again he slapped them against his cheeks, wiping the blood from there too.

Hands and face clean of blood, Pangi turned to look at Zam again. He knew his best friend was dead. Despite what the body desperately fought against, this was not something he could come back from. Pangi, who had weeks since accepted that the chances of his best friend coming back

alive were almost nonexistent, didn't know how to feel. He had grieved him, still grieves him even now. What had he been doing if not preparing a body for its funeral?

He walked towards it, he still wasn't done, he still had to-

Pangi slipped on the blood that had pooled on the floor, and landed on his knees in front of the table, face inches from his best friend's hand. His legs screamed in pain as he collected himself, trying to catch his breath.

His hands were dirty again, yellow against red. He wiped them off on his pants, there was no way Pangi could stay clean from this.

He stood up, breathing heavily, anger rising in him. He was always stuck doing his best friend's dirty work. Even when Zam didn't want him to, even when Zam ignored him, Pangi was always taking care of him. Pangi was the one making the hard decisions, doing the hard work. He was the one making sure Zam passed his classes after he'd failed a year and ended up in the same classes as Pangi. He was the one running to Clown when Zam had found himself in trouble, either too proud or too scared to ask for his big brother's help.

Zam didn't get to stay clean. Pangi reached for Zam's face with his dirty hands.

Pangi touches the face and tilts it up to the light, getting blood on the cheeks, but it's like by touching it he reminded the face it needed to heal. He pushed at the skin, and watched the long cuts along the cheeks knitting themselves back together. With a refreshed focus he tugged at the chin, focused on the lips as they parted and revealed a row of white teeth.

He knew this mouth, how it smiled and how it laughed. He knew those teeth because they used to get in scraps as kids where Zam would bite him. His canine is still chipped, his wisdom teeth haven't grown back in. Pangi wasn't familiar with the mouth, he wasn't a dentist, but as he opens it wide he noticed something in the back of Zam's throat. He reached for it and struggled to grasp it at first, his index and thumb slipping around the smooth object. Once he finally took it out he... didn't recognize it at first.

He leaned in a little closer, turning the oddly shaped pale object this way and that, and was surprised to smell the faintest scent of... apple? It struck him as odd, not that it was an apple slice- although that itself brought on a myriad of questions pouring in his head. It was that he detected the smell at all, which is when he realized that despite being soaked in blood there was no irony tang, no coppery scent, no *hint* that it was blood. It didn't smell like blood.

And then, the body began to breathe.

It was there. The faintest hint of a breath, so light, Pangi couldn't even feel it when he put his hand to the body's nose. But it was there.

Finally, fear overtook him, and Pangi could only stare as the chest rose, and fell. Rose, and fell.

Rose.

And fell.

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Pangi still attended church.

More fervently than ever. He prayed in the morning, at mass, in the evening. But there was no getting the body out of his head. There was no replacing his best friend with prayer.

No one had been to the basement.

Pangi knew this, because after he had gone home that first night and washed himself and his clothes of all evidence, he had come back, and it was untouched. He had scrubbed all the yellow blood from the floor, burned the sheet the body had been soaked in and returned with clothes. He hadn't taken any from his best friend's house- he was afraid Vitalasy or Subz would notice- so he took the last bits of clothing that he'd kept of his best friend's. Things that were of no importance to him - spare socks, a t-shirt, old shorts- but that had meant *everything* to Pangi. He had cleaned the body, he couldn't look at it with the blood stains all over it, and dressed him.

There was no question about ever going to any authority. Pangi was many things but he wasn't an idiot. Clown had told him to save Zam, not give him up to a hospital where he could be sold to the highest bidding pharmaceutical company that could use him to figure out a way to immortality. Because the body was anything *but* alive. Sure, it was breathing, it had continued to breathe ever since that moment Pangi had stitched him back up and removed that apple slice that may or may not have been choking him. But his best friend still wasn't awake. He wasn't back.

He visited the basement, every night, and tried to pray. Words failed him, when he stared at the body. There was no holiness that could compare. If Pangi stared at his own hands for long enough, he could still see the gold in the lines of his palms, under his fingernails. He could almost taste the blood on his lips.

Pangi had never-

He was clean. He was *clean*. He'd washed his hands and his face and his clothes. He'd washed the body and the sheets and the floor. *He was clean*.

But every night he came to visit the body, and every night he refused to bury it.

Every night he told himself different. That he would call someone, try to find someone. If not a doctor then maybe Subz, maybe Vitalasy. Pangi had never liked them. He had never approved of the two weird guys that had stolen his best friend away from him, but even he could admit that his best friend was happy with them. Because no matter how selfish Pangi felt, all he'd ever wanted was for his best friend to be happy. Pangi kept telling himself that he needed to try and find help, to do this for Zam. And yet selfishly, every night, he turned off the light and locked up the church.

Who is to say how long Pangi would have done this- remained in this cycle of lying to himself and keeping his best friend's body locked up in a church basement. Fortunately, he didn't have to find out the answer himself, because one day Pangi opened that basement door, and the room was empty.

Quietly, he'd stepped back, and locked the door. He drove back home, parked his car. He greeted his mother and walked upstairs to his room. Pangi wasn't even shaking as he rummaged through his closet, finally finding the box buried beneath all his clothes. He took the lid off and sighed in relief, hugging the box close to his chest. It was there. It was real.

But someone had found the body and taken it.

Pangi shut the closet door. He clutched the heart close to his chest and laid down in the darkness

on a pile of clothing. Tomorrow, he would pack his things. Tomorrow, the fear would ease up enough so that he could move. Tomorrow, he would leave, and not look back.

## Chapter End Notes

it took me so long to finish this three part fic that the start notes of part 1 dont even apply to me anymore. i graduated college. i have a job now. also i remembered that i set myself on fire on accident (gas grill, dont ask) and part of that inspired the branzzy story. im fine, it was just some hair on my arm, but still man. lmao. anyway.

Summary for my friends who don't like guts:

Pangi's catholic, he's been taking care of Zam's dog while Zam is missing. It's revealed they had a weird codependent friendship, and that Pangi abandoned his pursuit of gradschool/further education when Zam called him for help after Clown disappeared. Clown, in monster form, appears at Zam's house and tells Pangi to 'save Zam'. Pangi finds Zam's body and hides it in the church basement. Being that he is an operating room nurse, Pangi has enough experience that he manages to piece and stitch together Zam's body, but not before he fucks up and Zam's body ends up regenerating another extra heart, leaving the total count to 5 at this point. Pangi feels like he's going mad, where praying helped him chase out thoughts of Zam before nothing helps anymore. He keeps returning to check on the body every day. One day, the body disappears. Pangi, as relieved as he is afraid, runs away, and escapes town. The end.

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