

Darkroom

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“Heads up, nerd!” someone calls behind me. Just before a football whizzes past my ear.

I jerk away so fast I nearly crash into a passing junior. She pushes me away with barely a side glance. It’s been a month of sophomore year at Montrose High, and I’m still not given more than a glance by anyone.

The hall is packed with my classmates. Everyone talking and laughing, making plans for the weekend even though Friday’s only just begun. I overhear the football jocks (the same ones who nearly beamed me with a football) talking about the big game coming up and wonder if it’s *actually* a big game or if they just say that about every game because they’re on a losing streak. Other kids are talking about parties or gossiping about classmates and teachers. No one talks to me as I pack up my books and homework.

It’s fine. I’m used to it.

I just don’t *want* to be used to it.

“Hey, Beatrice” comes a familiar voice. I close my locker to see my only real friend, Rochelle. She has her flute case clutched to her chest and a grin on her face. “Still on for tonight?”

Instantly, the frustration fades. Rochelle and I have been friends since fourth grade. She’s a little shorter than me, with big dimples and purple-and-rose ribbons woven through her braids, and big, kind eyes. She looks like a Black anime character, especially with her glittery burgundy eye shadow and bright purple lipstick. Even her nails match the color scheme. She’s in band and also somehow kinda popular with the cool kids. She works on the school newspaper and volunteers at an animal shelter on the weekends. She’s basically Wonder Woman.

She’s also a complete game nerd, just like me.

“Heck yeah,” I say. “What are we streaming tonight?”

For the last few months, she and I have been trying to build up a following by streaming games online. We only have a few subscribers so far—and they’re mostly people we know from various MMOs—and we haven’t gotten any donations yet, but the goal is to do it full-time someday. We’re definitely good enough, and funny enough. We call ourselves the Ghastly Girls, and we specialize in playing horror games. The scarier, the better.

“Well,” she says, leaning against the locker, “I was thinking we could pick up the new *Zombie Rebellion* game? I’ve got some store credits and I’ve heard it’s really good.”

I groan. “Zombies again? The few followers we have will leave if we do another zombie game. We’ve already streamed, like, four in the last two months. Heck, *I’m* going to leave the channel if we do another one.”

Rochelle rolls her eyes. “Do you have any other ideas?”

I don’t. I’ve been trying to think of something—anything—to make us stand out from the pack since we started, and so far I haven’t found it. There has to be the perfect game out there—something that hasn’t been overdone, and is so scary it will instantly bring in followers. That’s part of the trouble with getting subscribers: Some people still think that girl gamers are too weak or squeamish to play really scary horror games. We not only have to find a way to stand out, we have to find a way to prove everyone wrong.

“Maybe we can find an indie,” I suggest. “Something no one’s heard of before.”

“Because *that* will bring them in,” Rochelle mumbles. “No one’s going to search for a game they haven’t heard of.”

“Not true. If we market it right, a small indie game can draw a crowd as well as mainstream,” I reply.

She looks like she’s about to argue, but she either sees my point or hasn’t had enough caffeine yet to put up a fight.

“Okayyyy,” she relents. “But if we’re playing an indie, you’re in charge of finding a good one. *And* you’re buying the pizza. Just in case the game isn’t any good—I want to get something out of my Friday night.”

“I always buy the pizza!”

She just laughs as the bell rings. “What can I say? I like free pizza. See you in English?”

I nod, and she makes her way through the crowd of kids toward her first class.

I grab my own books and head to biology. Even though we have a quiz on plant anatomy, all I can think of is what game we’re going to play. I just hope I can find something scary enough to shock even me.

If we’re going to do this, I want the screams to be real.



I spend every free moment of the day scrolling through game sites and forums. I bump into at least three different people in the hall and nearly drop my phone every time, but I don’t stop. I have to find something

by tonight. The trouble is, everything's already been *done*.

Zombie games? Overplayed.

Slashers? Overhyped.

Haunted house games? Completely dull unless they're VR, but I don't have that kind of equipment.

Every time I think I've found something cool, a quick search shows that at least a dozen other streamers have already done it—and some of them have racked up millions of views. I know that it's inevitable, but I don't want to do something someone else has already made famous. I don't want to be a follower. I want to stand out. I want to be known.

"Find anything yet?" Rochelle asks me at lunch.

I jolt and look up.

"How long have you been there?" I ask.

She grins over her tray of food. Now that I'm focused on something other than my phone, I'm back in the loud drone of the cafeteria, my tray of lasagna uneaten and Rochelle looking at me like I've lost it.

"Let's just say your cookies were stale."

I look to my tray. Sure enough, she stole both of my chocolate chip cookies, and I didn't even notice.

"Hey!" I yelp.

"What?" she asks with a giggle. "*You* weren't eating them." Her expression goes serious. "You didn't

answer my question: Have you found anything yet? The clock is ticking and *Zombie Rebellion* is only on sale for another two hours.”

“Not yet,” I say. “But I’m not ready to admit defeat. I will persevere!”

“You are *such* a nerd,” she replies.

“Yeah, and you’re friends with me, so what does that say about you?”

“That I have really bad taste in friends,” she replies without missing a beat. But she’s smiling as she says it.

“How about this?” I say. “I’ve got gym next period. If I don’t find anything by the end of it, I’ll text you and you can get *Zombie Rebellion*.”

I make sure to twist the name of the game, so she gets the full impact of my spite.

“Deal,” she says. “But you’re still buying me pizza.”

“That’s not fair. You already stole my cookies.”

“And you’re making me wait. The anticipation is killing me.”

“Then stop interrupting me,” I reply.

“Good luck, Sherlock. Don’t let me interfere.” She grabs my garlic bread, takes a bite, and tosses it back on my tray. “The clock is ticking . . .”