



the
Shack

HAUNTINGS

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CHAPTER 1

Lucas: Gaming

A voice in my ear says, “Are you OK, Grimwest?”

I lean forward in the darkness. There’s no point in answering. I spin in the air, attacking ghouls with my sword. In the game *Hollow Voyage*, I’m wearing the powerful cloak of the highest clan leader. It cost me 1,000 gold pieces, but that barely dented my wealth. I often play for other people all over the world, and they donate gold pieces to my account. Some even pay cash if I play for them. Real cash. I look at the screen and catch my breath.

Standing in an open field, I am suddenly in grave danger. Even though I’ve killed the ghouls, I see shadows flickering across the ground. They

belong to invisible zombies who want to steal my soul. The only way I can see them is by opening my cloak and shining a light. But if I shine the light from my cloak to reveal them, I also become a target. I check my notebook of tips. Then I move and click quickly, shooting out sparks from my sword. It makes me feel good to destroy the undead.

“Good one!” someone shouts in my headset.

I hear a scream from a wounded zombie. The scream suddenly brings the nightmare back. I had it again last night. It’s the same every time. I’m in the desert, near the shack. The ghost enters my body. I can see through the ghost’s eyes. I see the killer approaching. I know he’s a killer because the ghost says, “Here he is again. Here is our doom.” A gun fires and pain shoots through my body. I collapse and put my hand to my chest.

It's wet. I scream and scream.

The nightmare ended like it always does. My screaming woke me up. As always, I checked my chest—but there was no blood on me.

Even now the ghost's fear seems to flow through me like electricity. I want to quit playing *Hollow Voyage*, but I can't. My clan is counting on me.

"Hey, Grimwest, help me!" someone says. I see he's wounded, with only two lives left. In the mirror on my wall, I catch sight of myself in my cluttered bedroom. I have my headset on, and I'm barking out orders to my soldiers. I'm only a sophomore in high school, but most of them don't know that. Since I have the most power, they respect me.

Onscreen, my blade reflects the sky. I whip it down to defeat my enemies, slicing through three blood-sucking ghouls at a time. They are part of the league of the undead. I need to defeat

them to capture more gold. I know where to find it. I mapped it out after I woke from my nightmare.

It's better to be in this game than asleep.

More ghouls charge at me from behind ruined stone walls and from the tops of trees. Suddenly the roar of flames fills the screen. From nowhere, a ghoul's fire ignites my body and I die. I look at the screen in disbelief. I see that I have only one extra life left. I take off my headset in disgust.

Someone knocks on the door urgently. I shut my eyes against the one thing that frightens me: my real life, the life beyond this videogame, beyond this room.

"Just a second!" I yell.

At the side of the screen, my mailbox is filling up with messages from my clan. I have to return to the game to aid them. I have the weapons and the know-how to succeed, because I've put

so many hours into strategizing.

At this moment, my clan needs me more than my dad does.

“Lucas!” my dad says and walks in. I turn around with a scowl on my face.

“What?” I ask coldly. My mind is still in the game. I’m still in charge.

“Don’t use that tone with me,” he says. He speaks to me in Spanish.

Our conversations always seem like this lately. It doesn’t take much for us to get on each other’s nerves.

I take a deep breath. “*Lo siento,*” I say. I actually *am* sorry. He and I are a family, just the two of us.

“Do you want some ice cream?” he asks, handing me a bowl.

“Yes, thanks,” I say.

I glance back at the screen. It’s 10 p.m., and my dad goes to sleep around 11. I should spend some time with him. Quickly I type that I will be back online in an hour, and I sign off. I can see my reflection in the mirror. I frown. I’m tall

and skinny. I have a big nose, and my hair is dark and stringy. I'm no great catch for the girls.

Not that I'm interested. That's what I tell myself, anyway. I prefer to stay here in my cave, where no one can hurt me . . . no one outside my computer game, that is.



The next morning, I drag myself out of bed to have breakfast with my dad. I slouch in my chair at the kitchen table. My dad looks at my computer geek T-shirt. It says "Keep out of direct sunlight" on it. I thought it was funny when I bought it, but my dad doesn't get it.

My dad wishes I were like him when he was my age. He was popular. In Spanish, he asks, "Do you want a ride to see a movie with a friend?"

"Dad, I have no friends," I say.

He asks me about some friends I had

in elementary school. I stir my cereal. I hate to tell him, but those friends are popular now. They wouldn't be caught dead with me. "They're busy," I say. "They're *always* busy."

Carrying my half-empty bowl to the sink, I salute my dad to make him smile. Then I slink back into my room ... It's been fifteen minutes since I've logged on ... that's ages.

I don't have much room in my cave for anything but piles of computer game magazines, clean and dirty clothes, a few schoolbooks, and my computer desk. On it, I have three monitors: one for whatever game I'm playing, one for trading game prizes, and one for music videos or streaming movies.

I slip on my headset so I can talk to my waiting clan. Since last night, I've gotten five extra lives again, I've advanced a level, and I've earned about 75 bucks in real money. I would've

earned more, but I fell asleep for a few hours in my chair.

“Dude!” I say into the headset. “Watch it with the mace!” The player, a regular who logs in from Australia, is acting like we’re all his enemies. He swings the mace around like it doesn’t matter if we lose an arm or a leg. Fortunately, I have a potion that heals wounds, even amputations. But most in my clan don’t have it. Some are walking around without hands. I can hear them complaining, and from the yellowish-gray cloud rising from the east, I can tell the enemy has found us.

All of a sudden, I hear a girl yelling. I ignore the voice. It’s from the real world, so who cares?

“Dude,” someone in the game says. “Who’s yelling?” Startled, I realize the yelling is so loud it can be heard through my headset microphone. That’s embarrassing. Annoyed, I put down my headset and walk to the

window. I pull the dark curtains open, getting ready to tell the person to go away.

I know that girl. She's from next door! Niesha. She just moved here. Her hair is in tight braids with beads at the ends. She's wearing a cut-off T-shirt with fringe and shorts, and she's sweating. Her expression is fierce. She's yelling at me. Bang! Her fist is hitting the window so hard she could break it.

CHAPTER 2

Niesha: Heat

I can't believe my bad luck. I want to blow up with rage, but who would hear me? Who would care? I wipe the sweat off my forehead. It's baking outside in this West Texas wasteland. We live at the end of a dead-end street, with only a few other one-story houses around. They're all cooled by big swamp coolers outside the houses that buzz endlessly. There are hardly any trees. No shade. I've sweated through a couple of shirts already today.

My mom's off at her job at Fort Bliss. *Bliss?* Ha. It's anything *but*. Everything's brown and dusty here. The only green plants that grow have spikes on them: cacti and stubby

bushes. I hate them. Even the buildings are mostly brown. I kick the side of the house. All I did was take a box of junk to the curb, and the door slammed behind me. I can't call Mom! My stupid phone was stolen back in Detroit, and Mom said I couldn't get another one until I earned the money myself.

I'm locked out of Grandpa's house, which is more like a thrift store than a house. It gives me the creeps, it's so full of junk. He died and left us his mess to clean up. I walk up to the screen door, open it, and kick the front door so hard I stub my toe. What am I going to do? Mom won't be home until 6 p.m. That's hours from now. I have no phone, no money, no food, no water, no nothing. I look down the road. Back in Detroit, I could always bum money or whatever I needed from my friends. I have no friends here. I don't even have enemies.

I shut my eyes and wince, picturing the enemies I had in Detroit. Why think about them now? But they appear in my brain. They would laugh at me if they knew. They hated me, and I hated them back. I have the scars to prove it. They slashed me with a knife one time after school. But I left my mark on them, too—my fingernails are long and sharp for a reason, and I know how to use my keys as a weapon. If anyone tries to jump me, they'll remember *me* forever.

I miss my hometown—the tall buildings, the park around the corner where we played basketball. At night, at least there was a breeze off the lake to cool folks off, and we could open the fire hydrants for instant fountains. I choke back a sob. It's the heat, I think. Otherwise I wouldn't cry. I wipe the tears off my face.

I look down. There, on my arm, is my worst scar. It's from a bullet that

grazed me but killed my best friend. It wasn't personal, we were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's why Mom decided we had to move.

All the cars on the street are gone except for the one next door. I don't want to knock on a stranger's door. Who knows what weirdo might live inside? My grandpa's house is bad enough: piles and piles of old magazines, endless boxes of recyclable cans and bottles, rusty tools, and shelves of creepy porcelain dolls in dusty, old-fashioned dresses. My grandma owned the dolls and sewed dresses for them as if they were her daughters. I swear they WATCH me while I'm cleaning out the junk. I don't believe in ghosts, but being trapped in the house is the worst.

I guess I have to try the house next door. Even if I have to deal with a weirdo, it's better than dying of starvation or fainting from the heat. I

curse the jerk who stole my phone.

I see flickering light behind curtains in one of the windows. Someone's in there, probably watching TV. I'm short, but I can reach up and bang on the window. I start yelling. I know how to make myself heard. But why won't anyone answer?

"Hey! Open the window! I know you're in there. What is your problem?!" I yell. "Open the curtain! You can't hide in there! I need help!"