

So I took this job working security for this underground mall just outside of downtown. They'd been hit with half a dozen robberies in the last month and local police have (apparently) got more important things to do, so they contacted my agency. My name's Rhest. I'm a mercenary.

It was a pretty cushy gig, really. The robberies had been really low-skill smash-and-grab jobs and everybody at the mall was convinced it was the same people. A few days in, I told them otherwise, but who are you going to believe? A professional, or store owners who swear they know better.

Anyway, my job was to basically hang out at night in this underground mall. See, there are two types of buildings downtown: big corporate towers that are like little self-contained cities all unto themselves, and municipal buildings. They're giant too but they're more like whole neighborhoods in one giant structure. You've got residential living in the upper floors and businesses and stuff on the lower floors. Usually they have parking down underneath but a few of them just outside of downtown have this network of shops that form this bazaar/mall/shopping center. It's kind of like this big underground space that's full of tiny little shops that are usually super-niche. They don't sell shoes; they sell this one type of shoe that this one dude down on the wharf makes out of plastic bottles. They don't sell electronics; they sell bootleg cartridges for video game systems nobody sells anymore. That'll be important in a little bit.

So I got picked up making twenty bucks an hour, basically just pacing through the shopping center from an hour before close until it opens the next morning. The first couple of nights, the shop keepers were all wary of me, but now a lot of them are leaving out little scraps of food and stuff. Seems cheap but these people are living hand-to-mouth. And hey, if they want to show their gratitude by leaving out a slightly stale cinnamon roll or some not-too-bruised apples, hell, I'll take it.

So it's like eleven o'clock or something. The shops are all closed. I'm there, completely by myself. The place has been closed for an hour now, so I've already made my first sweep through. The place is big and tiny at the same time. There are lots of little halls and routes that wind underneath the streets between three different buildings, but it's also super-dense. The builders really tried to cram as many stores as possible into this space because there's not a lot of room to move. Even though I'm not the biggest guy in the world, there's not even a foot between me and either wall, nor is there between my hair and the ceiling.

So I went to the milliner's shop (hat store) and I'm trying on stuff, because they have bowler hats. Yes, I know it clashes with my body armor/combat harness but it's a bowler hat. Anyone who passes up the chance to try on a bowler hat hasn't lived.

I'm there, trying on the greatest headgear since the Viking horned helmet, checking my dashing good looks (shut up) in the mirror when I hear a scraping sound come from outside. I put back the hat and I slip out into the halls of the shopping center. The lights overhead, which are usually four humming tubes are down to one every other panel during the night. You'd think that would make the place silent but those sporadic lighting tubes just create this wave of white noise that drowns out everything. Makes that I heard some scraping all the more suspicious.

I hadn't drawn a weapon at this point, mostly because it's likely nothing. You hear weird stuff all the time in places like that. Heat differential, groaning of support structures, and sometimes just sheer paranoia, it's usually nothing. But sometimes it's a bunch of guys breaking into a mall by way of the floorboards.

I show up just in time to see the floor tile lift up, then slip back down. At first I think they spotted me and they're running, but then I see the tile come up again. A little bigger than a sheet of paper, several tiles start to come up and I move around behind the opening. I hear complaining and then some shushes so I know what caliber of criminal mastermind I'm dealing with here. I draw Respect.

Respect is one of my primary weapons. A pistol of monumental power, it's for shock and awe. It's pretty good-sized, too, so just aiming it usually gets people's attention. I draw it, check to make sure the safety is off, confirm it's fully loaded with a full magazine and one in the chamber, then wait. These guys are taking their sweet time moving the tiles. I start to suspect they're spending more time arguing than breaking and entering. I honestly start to get a little bored.

Out slip three teens who look way too well-fed for this to be a crime of necessity. Two girls and a boy, they pull themselves out of the hole and look out at the shopping center like they've hit the jackpot, apparently thoroughly unaware that a street merc is right behind them. "Alright," says the blonde Latina in the center. "Let's get to the kiosk."

"Screw that," says the guy. "Let's get some food." His stomach growls like a horny tiger.

"We're here for something specific, Drake," Seniorita Bossy tells him. She sighs with pride and says "Let's go."

These idiots still haven't looked behind them.

They leave the tiles out and start walking and, dammit, I follow them. I'm tempted to start timing to see how long it takes these morons to notice me.

"It's spooky," says the brunette, bringing up the rear (not including me).

"Yeah, any place looks spooky with the lights off," says Bossy.

"Well, and we're trying to find a ghost," says Drake.

Wait, what?

Apparently, I say that out loud because all three kids shriek, jump in shock, and practically slam into one another in response. The two girls huddle together and Drake halfway hides behind them. "Yeah, hey, sorry," I tell them. "What ghost?"

"None of your damn business!" Drake squeals with a cracking voice. He comes around the girls and draws a snub-nosed revolver that I swear he got out of a cereal box. Captain Gansta even holds it sideways at me.

I just sigh tiredly and shake my head. "Drake, buddy..." I say as I gently push the gun in a safe direction. "What the hell are you kids doing here?"

"We're ghostbustin'," Senorita Bossy snaps at me. "What are YOU doing here?" she asks, like I'm the one out of place.

"At the moment, stopping you," I tell her. I put away Respect rather demonstratively, making clear that I don't to plan to shoot them and that it's in their best interest to not make me change my mind.

"So are you gonna call the cops?" asks the brunette, like she'd rather that than I call their parents.

I'm a little hesitant to answer. Unless Drake does something stupid with that gun, or Bossy el Patron does something stupid in general, I'm pretty well resolved to just kick them out with a stern 'and next time, I'll shoot you'. Given the murder rate in this city, it's kind of hard to take 'breaking and entering while young and dumb' all that seriously. But I want to make sure this is the last time I see them.

"You guys said something about a ghost. What's that all about?" I'm thinking that if I get them to walk me through their dastardly crime, maybe I can dissuade them from doing it. As a street merc, I know more about crime than most criminals and I can unequivocally say it doesn't work. I mean, sure I know a few cat burglars who specialize in stealing high priced art and stuff, but that's not a crime. That's a chess game with legal ramifications, one played between criminals and stupidly rich people who don't understand the value of things. Stealing from small-time shops is real crime and it leaves everybody hungry and penniless, even the criminals. But enough dime-store sociology.

The three teens hem and haw, like they're trying to muster up the courage not to tell me, but also weigh whether or not one of the others is going to tell me, so that they can beat their friends to it and get those precious honesty points. "So, like, there's this game..." Drake starts.

Bossy hits his arm. "Shut up!"

He sucks his teeth at her and keeps going. "So I found this game that's got like this dude's ghost or something in it and this website said that if we can make the ghost appear...or, no, wait, if we can make the ghost appear than we can sell the video of it and stuff and make like some money or stuff."

"A game?" I ask, already pondering a million things I could be doing now. "Like...like a game?"

Bossy shoves Drake aside. "Two halls over, there's a video game kiosk that sells old video games," she tells me, more like she's irritated at how wrong Drake's version was. "They got, like, an original version of this old game called Starlight. And, like, the game has some dude's soul inside the game and if you go into this secret room, you can talk to him."

There's a pain spreading between my ears. It gets worse every time she talks.

I turn to the brunette. "Okay, they both had a try; your turn."

She digs her thumb into her palm and does about half a dozen different noncommittal moves at once. "Starlight was made by X-Realm Gaming Studios, which never actually existed. X-Realm is a pseudonym that indie gaming studios used when they were developing titles outside their usual niche." She checks to see if I'm going to shoot her or, worse, call her parents. I gesture for her to keep going.

"Okay, so in this one game...see, studios don't want the bad press of developers or coders dying while a game is being made," she tells me. "But because many studios make their developers work sixteen, eighteen, even twenty hours a day while a game is in pre-release, it happens. And it happens a lot more than you think. So when a developer dies, their name is removed but the staff sneak in the pseudonym that usually corresponds to the developer's cause of death."

"Wow," I say. I had no idea game development was that rough.

"Yeah," Bossy tells me, betraying the first sign of sympathy and human emotion beyond bitchiness.

"So, like, Starlight," Drake continues. "It's this game that's got like this hidden room. And there are these videos online of a few people finding ROMs and finding the hidden room and the game always crashes. But

there's this one dude that says that it's because the actual-actual game has a ghost in the programming and if you go into the room, you can talk to the ghost."

I nod. "And you believed this?"

He shrugs. "I saw it." He points down the darkened hallway towards the gaming kiosk. "I played the game. I straight-up found the room and the dude freaked me the hell out. Man, I just walked. But I was like, if we can post like a genuine, real video of us talking to a ghost? That'd be worth a couple of dollars."

I scratch my head. "I've heard worse ways to make a buck," says the guy who probably hasn't gone a week since puberty that he didn't shoot someone. "So why break in at night? Why not come during the day?"

Bossy snorts at me. "And share the money with that cranky-ass Korean dude who owns the kiosk? Thank you, no." She says that with a rotation of her head that all Latinas and only Latinas seem capable of. I find myself slightly mesmerized by the sheer fluid impossibility of the movement. "We were gonna buy it, but the dude wants like a hundred bucks for it and, pssssh, we ain't got that kinda cash."

I look at the three kids for a moment, trying to decide if they're really that dumb or if I am. Nobody can believe a stupid urban legend like this. And yet, as I look at these kids, I can't deny that there's an earnestness in their eyes, especially Drake. He straight-up believes he talked to a ghost in a video game.

I check the time on my phone and wonder if this is a diversion from the real robbers. "Okay, show me," I tell them.

Bossy gives a little squeal and for a second I wonder if maybe she's not old enough to be a high school student. She practically skips away from us, heading towards the kiosk. Drake and Brunette are a little hesitant but they go after her and I follow. I keep my hand on Respect, though. Drake seems like a good kid but he's still got a gun.

There's really no open space at all in this mall, but there's an area where several hallways converge and so there's a bit of space that's a little less cramped than the rest of this claustrophobe's nightmare. There are a bunch of vents too, so it can either be the coolest place or the warmest place, depending on the season. There are two permanent kiosks (two to four others run in this area, but they're little more than wheelbarrows that the owners roll out from one of the storage closets).

The gaming kiosk is like this inside-out little shack. It's this little hut made of junk and scrap that almost looks quaint. It's loaded with shelves that include TVs and gaming consoles, all of which are under locked cases.

There are games too, in neatly stacked groupings near the consoles in question. I stay back a step or two from the kiosk and let the kids search it.

"Here it is," Drake exclaims, pointing at the case near the front of the kiosk. I come around and see the case with a variety of game cartridges. I see the cartridge for 'Starlight' and it's got a little spaceship on the front. I don't remember ever playing this game, or even hearing about it. Then again, this is for a console that's before my time.

"Get it out," Bossy urges me.

I glower at her, then go back to the game that has all four of us staring at it. I can't deny I'm curious. Who wouldn't be? The lock on the glass case is a joke and it wouldn't be anything but a thing to just pop it in, turn the power on to the kiosk, and find out. "Alright, let's do it," I say, swearing we're going to play the game and then put it all right back. "But if we're going to do this, we're going to do it right." I give Brunette some bills and order, "I want an orange soda and some potato chips. Just straight salt, none of that cheddar stuff." Drake immediately digs into his pocket to place an order to the confused white girl. She wonders in a daze towards the nearby vending machines as I start to pick the lock.

Locks on kiosks like this aren't meant to be secure, just obvious. They don't really need to keep you out, just delay you from getting in so you can't do it all sly-like. But since the only guard is me and I'm the one picking the lock, it hardly matters. I keep lockpicks on me in my harness anyway, so I'm in and out in a heartbeat. I open the case and very gently remove the cartridge. "Alright, buddy, let's see this ghost," I say, passing the game over to Drake.

Drake takes the game over to its console while I turn on the power. The bright lights on the frame of the kiosk are nearly blinding in the relative darkness of the low ceilings and dim lights. The TVs all come on, but only the one we're focusing on shows anything. Drake hits power and we get a blue screen. He hits power again and the screen starts to roll. "Give it, dummy," Bossy chides him as she yanks the cartridge out of the console. She blows in it, sweeping down then up, then she sticks it back in. When Drake hits power again, we get the loading screen.

"Oh, hey, do you know the code for infinite lives?" I ask, giggling. I haven't played one of these games in years.

"Yeah, but I don't need it," Drake brags as he starts the game.

Starlight is a shooter, which is a game where you play a tiny little ship that sits on one edge of the screen and everything comes at you from the other side. Enemies, obstacles, bosses, power-ups, they all scroll towards you, in this case from the right side of the screen towards the left side where you reside. The goal is to maneuver around the things flying at you (slowly

at first, but quicker at higher levels). Avoid the obstacles, shoot the enemies, get the power-ups. It's pretty standard fare. Most games of this ilk from this era are very predictable because all it takes is rote memorization. You memorize where the enemies come from and you move to that part of the screen. These days, random enemy and stage generators are too common; there's no memorization element, which is both good and bad. But I digress.

So Drake's playing. The first stage is laughably easy because they always are. Games do that just to introduce you to the gameplay and mechanics. Stage two is usually not too bad, but at three, the learning curve always starts to go up. For Starlight, the learning curve goes up pretty pronounced. It's like watching a football game, and then the fans rush the field. Kinda crazy. Still, Drake clearly knows what he's doing and he gets to stage four in no time and without too much trouble. Just as the stage is really getting underway, he sweeps the little ship straight up. Normally, you reach the edge of the screen and stop. Drake does, stopping just beneath the score at the center of the very top of the screen. As enemies fly beneath him, he starts to repeatedly dip just a bit and then fly back to the numbers. I'm just about to ask what he's doing when the little ship flies up through the numbers and disappears off the screen.

Already the hairs are standing up on the back of my neck. I reach for Respect but I don't draw.

Video games have pretty defined boundaries and you don't just slip off the screen like that. Seeing it happen is some kind of weird 'uncanny valley' sort of moment. The screen freezes for a second and then catches up with the ship and its continuing to rise through the background starfield, but now its devoid of any of the obstacles or enemies or anything. Also, the music has changed. It sounds like one of the earlier stages' music, but it's got a different beat or something.

Another ship flies onto the screen. It looks like the character Drake's controlling but with different colors. Letters fade into view at the top of the screen, asking, "How did you find me?"

"This is when I wiggled out," Drake whispers. He's still holding the controller but his shaking hands are causing the controller wire to tap against the kiosk wall.

The letters fade and then reappear, asking, "How did you find me?!" more forcibly now.

"How do we answer?" asks the brunette.

"HOW DID YOU FIND ME?!" All caps. That's never good.

"Answer him!" Bossy yells at Drake.

"How?!" Drake panics.

The question comes again. "HOW DID YOU FIND ME?!" Over and over, it becomes a flashing barrage that assaults us like a strobe light.

Then the screen goes dark. Starfield, characters, all gone. Only letters appear, asking, "Where am I?"

It's then that I realized it wasn't just the screen that had gone dark but the entire mall had gone dark as well. The lights overhead, the handful of lights from other stores, all dark. The only light as far as we could see was the ramshackle little kiosk. And as I noticed that, the lights start to flicker and fade.

As Brunette, Bossy, and Drake all jump, I draw Respect. I check the screen again and see the letters say, "Oh...there I am." In the reflection of the screen, I see there are five people facing it.

I turn and shoot. Respect has a built-in suppressor so its not as loud as most gunshots, but it's still louder than a roll of thunder. The shot tears through the darkness and shatters the nearest storefront. I hear collateral damage but I don't process it because I see there's nothing around. Whatever I saw in the reflection isn't there.

"What'd you see?" Bossy asks, the three teens cowering behind me.

"Stay behind me," I tell them, trying to keep calm. I just saw a ghost, shot at the ghost, and missed the ghost. 'Calm' is just a frosty exterior. I've seen movies; I know how this is going to go down.

I wait for a moment for some sign of movement but the darkness is just too thick. That's part of the problem with building a mall underground. If the lights go out, there's no ambient light to filter in. It's not dark; it's black. The light from the kiosk is almost making it worse, like its illuminating the darkness, not driving it back.

I fish into my harness and take out a flashlight, then clip it onto my harness so I can keep my hands clear. Getting the idea, the three behind me take out their cell phones and turn on the flashlight features. Even with the brightness, we haven't pushed back the dark so much as make clear what little space we have and how far we can't see. Better than nothing, though.

"What do we do?" asks Brunette.

"We're going to stay calm," I tell her. "We have no reason to think this ghost is dangerous." I'm immediately yanked off my feet.

I wasn't picked up and thrown. I wasn't suddenly propelled. It's like gravity instantly torqued ninety degrees and I 'fell' into the wall. When you

hop down a dozen feet or something, you're able to land okay because you're orientated for it and because you expect it. But when you're slammed into a wall at the same speed you'd have falling, and you're effectively supine? Yeah. It hurt.

I collapse onto the ground from the small crater I left in the cheap construction. With all my cybernetics, I weigh a lot more than I look. I kind of wish those cybernetics would come in useful right about now but how the hell do you deal with a ghost?

I glance up as the three kids come over. I don't know if they're coming to help me, or if they're just moving to where their cover went, but when I look up, I see a fourth figure. Despite standing close enough to the kiosk that it should be illuminated, it's just a shadow. No features whatsoever. Just a standing, three-dimensional shadow. About the time I process three-dimensional, though, my finger processes that it's around a trigger.

I don't know what this thing is but it definitely doesn't like bullets because it ducks like any sane person would. Respect takes a huge chunk out of the opposite wall and the darkness fades after recoiling in fear. I stand up and laugh at it. "Ha!" I mock. "Not so tough are you? Now turn on the goddamn lights!" I sweep my gun this way and that but I don't see anything. "I said turn on the damn lights, motherf—"

I fall/am thrown again, this time into the very wall I just shot. The fall is damn near two stories but I manage to land against the wall on my feet. It hurts but I've landed worse. You have to learn to take a fall in my line of work. Mercenaries take more bumps than most pro wrestlers.

I reorientate when gravity goes normal and land on the floor and yell, "What else you got?!"

Me and my big, stupid mouth.

The lights in the entire mall turn on. All of them. Not just the ones nearby, not just the ones inbedded in the ceiling, all of them. ALL of them. In the ceiling, in the stores, everything. We go from almost complete black to blinding light in an instant. The pain makes me clamp my eyes shut and when I open them again, blackness. I start to look around, feeling for my flashlight. I hear the kids shrieking and I yell, "Guys, you okay?"

Blinding white light again as the mall illuminates. Searing pain and I close my eyes again, dropping to one knee. Suddenly there's music. The same music that was playing in that haunted room where we encountered the ghost starts playing from all around us. The mall doesn't have a sound system so I don't know where the music is coming from but it begins to warp and twist as it plays, like the speakers are going out on an old-style record player that can't maintain a consistent time.

I brave opening my eyes and I've adjusted to the bright light. I see the three kids, practically hugging each other in a mass of teenage panic. I start across the small space towards them and the lights go out again, then they're back on just as suddenly. A torrent of flashing follows as the entire mall is turned into a damn rave. Weird music, strobe lights, seeing crap you can't explain: a rave.

I shut my eyes and bring up my menu. Neither of my eyes are original. I replaced them years ago and I've got some pretty nice replacements with several different vision options. I highlight thermographic imaging and when I open my eyes again, the flashing lights are gone. I have only a light blue world with three very red and orange blobs cloistered together. I get some temperature change from the lights but it doesn't cascade down all over me. The problem with thermograph is I can't really get a good gauge of depth and range. It makes shooting hard.

It also means I don't see our ghost when the three kids all scream. They all shout various, hysterical versions of 'he's right behind you', but when I spin around, I don't see anything. I still shoot though. This is Sacramento. We don't have very reserved trigger fingers.

Three shots but I don't know if I hit anything or not because there's no temperature change. I don't even fully know if the lights are still flashing. "Where is he?" I yell.

"I don't know," calls Bossy. Terror really only affects you for, like, a minute and then you either get bored, tired, or stiff. Once the shock of the situation starts to pass, people start to think. Bossy, for all her (many) faults, is getting her mind together. She comes over towards me and I guess she's used to cybernetics (who isn't?) because she asks "What vision did you switch to?"

"Thermal. Are the lights still going?"

"No, they've stopped," says Drake.

I switch back to my normal vision and, sure enough, it's black except for the light from my flashlight and the one TV screen on the kiosk. "I couldn't see him in thermal." I look this way and that. The darkness feels like it's getting closer. "Why would he attack?"

"He's a ghost," says Bossy, also paranoidly looking around.

"I never met a ghost, but there's nothing in this world that's just naturally violent, aside from soccer fans," I insist.

"Maybe he's not attacking; maybe he's just messed up from, you know, being a ghost," Brunette suggests, clinging so hard to Drake, I suspect surgical removal is his only option. "I mean, it's an old game. He's been in there a while."

"And what if, like, his mind and stuff was broken across every copy of the game ever made, you know?" Bossy further speculates because at this point, why not? I keep sweeping this way and that, looking for something to point Respect at. Then Drake asks possibly the stupidest brilliant question I ever heard.

"Why don't we just leave?"

I sigh in frustration, but as soon as I start to answer him, I realize I have no answer. Why don't we just leave? I don't know. Why DON'T we just leave?

"Good call," I tell Drake. "Take..." And I realize I have no idea what the names are of either of these girls. "Take...them and get back to your little whole."

"Screw that noise," Bossy insists because why not? Which seems to be theme for tonight because I'm working on a Friday and nothing good ever came from working on a Friday. "I came this far, I want to see you cap a ghost."

"I'm not capping a ghost," I say as I continue to look for the ghost so I can cap it.

"Yeah," Brunette agrees. Come on, they said Drake's name. Give me a context clue? "I don't want to go back down the hole," she practically pleads. "I don't want to crawl through the sewer again."

Lights again, but the subtle electronic hum betrays the power, so I've got time to close my eyes. The others get flashburned but I'm not quite so messed up. The ghost is back and its approaching fast, reaching out at me from the nearer hallway. Or rather, it's hand is getting closer; it doesn't seem to be approaching.

Respect ready, I blast it in the center mass. The ghost evaporates like a cloud and the music that's playing from absolutely everywhere catches. Like a record with a scratch, the same two notes keep playing again and again and again.

"That's probably bad," I speculate, just before gravity inverts. All four of us fall upwards into the ceiling, slamming into the cheap ceiling tiles. The particle board or whatever that cheapass stuff is collapses as we slam into the steel understructure of the building above us. Just as soon as we hit the ceiling, gravity returns to normal and we fall into the floor.

I manage to land on my feet, but the kids aren't so lucky. Brunette howls in pain and balls up. I didn't see where she hit or how but she looks bad. Drake and Bossy go to her. I keep an eye out of the ghost. "Oh god, Lindsey, your leg!" Bossy says. The white girl's name is Lindsey, check. Lindsey doesn't answer; she just holds her leg and screams more.

I glance up at the ceiling and see that she hit a support beam that holds the ceiling tiles. "That could be bad," I realize. Bossy looks up and comes to the same conclusion. "We got to get her out of here."

"How?!" Bossy demands.

I sweep my gun back and forth, then yell, "Hey ghost?" I figure it's worth a try. "We got injured. You want to fight, that's fine. I'll fight, but let's get the injured off the field."

My answer is gravity shifting again and I slam into the rear wall, right past the kiosk.

And man, I hit hard. I slam flat. There's no breaking that fall, there was no rolling in the air to land on my feet, nothing. I land BOOM! Either air escapes from my lungs or I whimper, so I'm going to assume it was air escaping from my lungs. When gravity returns to normal, I fall forward onto the floor and start to wish I was somewhere else.

I hear the two kids trying to give idiot triage to Lindsey as I get to my feet. No ghost in sight, the lights are currently on, and the music is jumping over the same two or three notes like a MIDI player with Tourette's Syndrome. I draw out Reason, Respect's partner. Carrying pistols, I like to pair them off, one in each hand. Some people argue that it's less efficient and showboating but they're not here and I am so I'm taking out a second goddamn pistol. While Respect will take out a cow and leave about enough meat for a hamburger, Reason is surgical. He's precise to fault and has the penetrating power to shoot through a car, engine block and all.

Not that it really matters because the thing I want to shoot is nowhere to be found.

I come around the kiosk and kneel over Drake and Bossy trying to help Lindsey. "Who died?" I ask Drake. He does a double-take, forcing me to clarify, "In the game? Who died in the game, making it, so that his ghost is in the game?"

"What? I don't know!" he yells. "It was a made-up name in the credits!" Lindsey howls in pain.

"What was the name in the credits?" I push.

"I don't remember, Roy something?" he says and practically shoves me away. He's too worried about his friend, which is commendable but doesn't help me or her or us. I stand up and look around for options. None of this makes sense and I don't know how to stop it. I look back at the console on the video game kiosk continuing to run, wondering how a ghost could get sucked into a gaming cartridge.

...ghost in a gaming cartridge.

...in a gaming cartridge.

I'm such a moron.

I shoot that console faster than you could blink. I shoot it with Respect, which means the entire fricking kiosk blows up. The casing goes flying off the stand, the whole stand fritzes and is slammed back against the wall. There's a reason this gun is named 'Respect'.

The console shot, the music overhead dies. Just instantly, there's no sound. The lights are all off except for my one flashlight. The kiosk is completely depowered so it's not giving us anything. All we have is my one beam of light cutting through the mote-filled blackness. I listen to the abyss and I can't hear anything. The air is stagnant, being this far from the entrances. No drafts, no breezes, and no sound of the giant metropolis just over our heads. Normally, I'd joke about 'as still as a tomb' but this ghost seems lively as hell, so who knows how jumping tombs might get.

"You guys okay?" I ask the kids. I get some scared, noncommittal noises that sound like responses. I look up at the roof, at the walls, and get a brief idea of the damage done. I look at the kids and explain, "So, here's the deal: you three were taken hostage, the kidnappers brought you down here, and I—"

I'm disoriented because the kids are just yanked away. I think they're zooming away from me. I'm just starting to realize that maybe I'm the one moving when I hit the wall. Second time tonight I've just slammed hard, solid, and straight right into a wall. I slam flat and yell in pain, but I don't fall. The gravity stays constant, pinning me down like I'm on the very bottom of the ocean.

The lights come up and there's the ghost. All black and its shambling towards me. It looks twisted and misshapen, like no limb is the proper length, much less the same length as its partner. It looks like the shadow of some horrid monster as it draws near. It's void, formless black face gets near me. "...I...didn't..." The head slowly turns in jerky, uneven movements. It looks at the three kids and then just fades away.

Gravity releases me and I drop to my hands and knees. My back is killing me, but at least the lights are on. I stand up and pop my shoulders. "Where'd it go?" I ask, looking down the halls. The lights overhead are on, but not the ones in the stores. The mall looks close to how it should look, minus the tremendous damage done by my shooting, plus me and the kids getting thrown all about.

Bossy and Drake stand as well, helping Lindsey up to her feet. "Is it gone?" Bossy asks.

"It's got to be," says Drake.

"Until you hit the double-tap, don't ever assume your target is down for good," I practically quote to him. "Lindsey, how are you—" As soon as I see her eyes as all black, I yell "What the hell?!" I step back and put Respect between her and me. The slightly timid white girl tilts her head at my gun like she isn't quite sure what it is, or why I'm doing this. Drake and Bossy freak out and hide behind me. "Let her go," I order the ghost. **START HERE**

"No," she says. Her voice sounds like hers but it's got a weird quality to it, like she's talking over an old-style telephone landline. "I gave everything..." she says hauntingly, her black eyes drifting off. "All I wanted was..." She seems confused and disoriented. She steps towards the kiosk, now rendered mostly trash and rubble. She kneels down like a woman of far greater class than this school girl, and picks up a piece of the very console the ghost had been played upon. "All a...a dream..." She drops the trash and turns back to me like a corpse remembering how to dance. "I want some...thing...something in return...return..."

I double-down and point Reason at the ghost now as well, but I can feel without seeing the two kids behind me tensing up as I aim a second gun at the head of their friend. "Vacate the girl or there will be trouble."

The ghost in the girl just shakes her head slowly, those black eyes staring back at me. "I gave...all. I want something...in return..."

"You're not getting it with her," I tell her. Lindsey takes an awkward step, more like she's spasming forward rather than walking. I move to get between her and the exit she's after.

"I...want..." she says in that distant digital recreation of her own voice.

"You aren't leaving!" I yell, Respect and Reason aimed right into those mirror black pools that are her eyes. "So help me, I will kill her to kill you, but you are not leaving."

The eyes fixate on the guns, staring into the dark barrels like she sees a kindred spirit in their emptiness. She looks down the gun barrels at me and tilts her head. "I'm leaving," she informs me with a voice like a four-channel recording played down a pipe.

I'm stuck. I don't know what to do. I really don't want to kill this girl, but I can't let a...a ghost? I can't let a ghost leave this place. That's dangerous...I mean, I'm sure it is. And it's not like Lindsey's thrilled to be hijacked by a ghost. But I also don't know what to do. I didn't think exorcisms were real...much less ghosts, so I don't even know who to call.

Lindsey keeps going forward and I back up, trying to think of something to do. We back into one of the narrow hallways and I finally catch a break. We walk between two stores with glass fronts that have

managed to survive tonight's shooting gallery antics. Lindsey glances at one window but doesn't see herself. I glance too and I'm stunned.

Standing in the reflection is an older woman. She looks like a soccer mom, dressed in a suit of mismatched reds, a middle-aged face, and puffy hair from too much product. Her looks and her style are from a bygone era, except for her eyes. Those eyes are empty black pools; not black eyes, an absence in the space where there should be eyes. Lindsey screams and it's the first real sound I've heard the possessed girl make. Her jaw practically unhinges as she roars in utter agony at the sight of her reflection.

I put away Reason and grab Lindsey by the back of the head. The ghost inside her screams louder as I shove her face-first into her own reflection. The window shakes as she screams into it, and then she suddenly goes limp. Lindsey collapses to the ground while I'm left holding a spectral blackness by the hair. The darkness evaporates from me, reappearing back in the small alcove by the destroyed kiosk.

"Grab something reflective!" I yell at Drake and Bossy. Leaving Lindsey on the floor, I quickly find a mirrored supterine from one of the faux-antique shops. I run into the alcove as the darkness is beginning to move. Bossy shows up with a makeup mirror and Drake is holding his phone. I begin to question if that will work when the darkness throws us back. We three are sent sailing into the opposite walls. Drake and Bossy hit the walls themselves, but I'm thrown through a damn storefront and crash through a wall of glass. I get up and count my blessings that I don't feel cut. I don't think, though, and run back for the blackness. She's starting to walk again and I shove the soupterine right in her face. She howls again, screaming as she recoils from her black reflection and tries to duck away.

Thank god for Latina tenacity, Bossy is right there with her mirror. She puts the reflection in the ghost's face like she's used to showing people how ugly they are. The ghost howls and turns again and there's Drake, with his phone...that does nothing. Apparently ghosts are only repelled by their real reflection; a digital recreation of their image doesn't seem to matter. We know this because Drake goes bye-bye when he's telekinetically thrown into the wall.

I slip into the gap left by Drake and put my soupterine in the ghost's face. She howls again and turns and Bossy is there with her mirror. The black, featureless form shrieks and turns, rinse and repeat until we back her into the wall. The ghost is howling monstrously now, covering her eyes (or where her eyes would be) as she screams like a dial tone being warped by a nearby magnet.

The scream grows in intensity as the darkness claws in on itself. The whole place begins to shake, little bits of debris falling around us, tiny motes

filling the air like snow in an updraft. The black shape that had once been humanoid begins to morph into just a giant ball. Soon we're standing over a featureless sphere from which emanates this god-awful, unearthly howl.

The lights flicker, just once, and the sphere is just gone. Disappeared in the blink of an eye. The noise is gone too. There's an overwhelming sense of emptiness now in the edge of the mall. The air feels light. The crowded sense, the claustrophobia isn't so bad.

When I step back, the crunch beneath my boot of detritus particles from the roof sounds loud. There's ringing in my ears, but I'm also hyper-aware of every little noise against the throbbing, oppressive silence. I put away Respect and go to Drake. He's starting to come around but he's banged up pretty bad. He's got a contusion on the back of his head that a doctor is going to need to look at. He's bleeding too, but not too-too bad. We're all dripping a little.

Lindsey isn't so fortunate. When I go over to her, she's still motionless. I kneel down and check for a pulse, finding only a weak imitation. I give her a quick inspection for wounds, but I don't see anything beyond scrapes and bruises. I roll her onto her back as Drake and Bossy chance drawing closer to the motionless body of their friend. I take off a glove and confirm she's breathing with the palm of my hand.

"Is she okay?" Drake asks, his hands on Bossy's shoulders, both to support her and to practically hide from the genuine reality they're facing.

I shake my head. "I don't know." I scoff at the sheer idea but admit, "I don't know what to do for post-possession medical care."

"Get a priest?" Bossy proposes desperately.

"You know where there's a church?" I retort before I look over Lindsey some more. I glance back down the hall to where the ghost disappeared and I get an idea. Not a good idea, one of my crazy ideas. "Hell, I heard of stranger," I assure myself before I grab the mirror out of Bossy's hand. I look into the mirror, as though I'm making sure it's clear, then I turn the mirror towards. "Hey, wake up," I say a little roughly as I position the tiny makeup mirror over her. I repeat it over and over again. "Wake up. Lindsey, wake up."

Nothing happens. To be fair, I'm not sure what I expected.

"Lindsey," I tell her, putting the mirror over her face directly. I push open her eye and hold the mirror right over the iris. "Come on, wake up."

"What are you doing?" Drake asks while Bossy looks like she's going to collapse with worry and pangs of guilt.

"I don't know," I say certainly. I lay down on the floor next to Lindsey and whisper right into her ear, "The ghost is gone. Look."

My head jerks up because I can swear I saw movement. I look between the narrow space between her eye and the mirror, down into the distant mess that was the gaming kiosk. I don't see anything straight on, but movement catches my attention again. I look into the mirror and see Lindsey's pupil spread open. I look opposite the reflection and watch her eye blink. "Lindsey?" I exclaim with a laugh.

She coughs suddenly and Bossy nearly loses it. She dives down onto her friend, hugging her tight as Lindsey keeps coughing. I stand up and roll my head back. Drake kneels down with his two friends and they have a hug of relief.

Me? I just look at the destroyed mall and grudgingly accept that most of the damage was caused by me (either by my guns or me being thrown around like a damn ragdoll). I solemnly vow that the next time I come across a bunch of kids breaking into a mall afterhours to see if they can catch a ghost on video, I'm kicking them out.

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