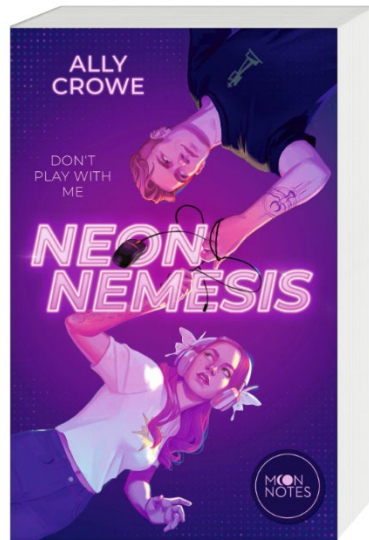




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Neon Nemesis. Don't play with me

Neon Nemesis

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Rivals in the arena, old feelings off the screen – at the world's biggest gaming tournament, the stakes are sky-high for Maeve and Hunter

You're playing with the wrong one, Hunter. E-sports player Maeve is part of the elite in the first-person fantasy shooter NEON NEMESIS. When she is not training with her team, she streams her games. During these, she unfortunately encounters her rival Hunter all too often – the bad boy of the scene. They exchange fiery verbal sparring matches that the community loves to watch. But no one suspects what lies behind their animosity. At the world's biggest tournament, Game ON, the two meet at the luxury hotel for participants. What follows involves serious prize money, hardcore fans, dangerous schemes and pure adrenaline – as well as old feelings that cause Maeve trouble far beyond the arena.

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Playlist Cold – Alfie Castley
 FANTASY – April Jai
 I Wanna Be Yours – Arctic Monkeys
 Bones – Issermann
 Three Steps Ahead – Jared Benjamin
 Lipstick – jordn day
 Love Is A Weapon – Letdown.
 Let Me Let You Go – ONE OK ROCK
 Worship – Oscene
 Fire On Fire – Sam Smith
 12 to 12 – Sombr
 At Second Thought – VOILÀ
 Figure You Out – VOILÀ
 Voodoo – VOILÀ

Chapter 1

Maeve

I'm as good as dead.

I sprint through the corridors of the Sanctum of Dawn, moonlight pouring in through its high stone walls. I'd almost managed to destroy the last Neon Core at the top of the tallest tower before the enemy Reaper sent me straight back down to the godforsaken courtyard with one well-aimed swing of his broadsword.

What an absolute disaster. I almost had him. One more hit with my Tenebrae's claw and the Neon Core would have been gone. So would the enemy team. But I was too greedy, too careless, too slow. And this while my health bar creeps closer to zero with every second and the dark shadow border on my monitor bleeds wider, shrinking my field of vision further. I should be used to it by now – for my playstyle in this line-up it's practically a permanent state. The difference is that Hana is usually right beside me. But she's already dead, and without her as our Alchemist, I have no way of healing myself.

So if I don't manage to destroy the enemy team's last Core in the next fifteen seconds, it's over for me.

It's over for the whole match.

"Come on, Mae," I hear Brie in my headset as my hand cramps around the mouse. She too – our Guardian and team captain – is already dead. "You've got this."

My hands feel clammy and cold at the same time while my heart bounces around my chest like a hyperactive rubber ball. I throw myself over the crumbled wall of the citadel and try once more to reach the top of the tower.

Eight seconds left. On their side only the Reaper is still alive, who'll be somewhere near the Core. Unlike me, he's not in his shadow monster form, which means his health isn't continuously draining either. The price you pay for more damage. And it would have been worth it if I hadn't missed him so badly.

"Fuck," I breathe out, my fingers hitting the keys so fast they stiffen with the strain. They're starting to ache, but I have no time to relax them. Instead I climb the tower again, using the broken window

ledges. Three seconds left. But I can see the Core. And the enemy Reaper. I dodge him quickly, and instead of finishing him off I aim for the Core and swing.

Zero.

Time's up. And I'm dead.

We've lost. Because I was one second too slow. I stare blankly at the monitor in front of me, as though it might show me something to prove I'm wrong. Something to show me I didn't just completely throw this round. But the final score of the best-of-three – one to two for team Octorockys – is clear. Losing eleven to thirteen on a map I normally enjoy hurts like hell too.

We were so close.

"I'm sorry," I manage, everything inside me tightening into a knot. I stare stubbornly at the monitor, because I know I'll start crying if I look at any of my teammates. Just as I know they won't blame me, even though it's undeniably my fault.

They never do. None of us do. And still the shame burns through my whole body. I hate failing. I hate it even more when everyone is counting on me.

"Look on the bright side," Brie says after a moment of silence, and I feel a warm hand on my back, her touch pressing gently through the pale fabric of our white team shirts. She rubs my shoulder softly. "We've just made the grand final that much more exciting, and people are getting their money's worth."

The frustration, the anger, the disappointment are all lodged in my throat, so I just nod, because I can't get a single word out right now.

By Nyx, I need to get a grip. But it's a little hard when I can see out of the corner of my eye that Octorockys are celebrating like they've won the entire tournament. It's one all between our teams now, which means there's a deciding match tomorrow.

Brie's hand disappears from my shoulder as she stands. Her short red hair is a beacon of colour, making it easier to block out the audience applauding our opponents.

It would feel less awful if we'd lost because they simply played better. Instead we lost because I didn't do my job as Reaper. Because I got too comfortable.

"Thanks," I reply flatly, feeling the corners of my mouth curl slightly as I look up at her. There's no disappointment in her eyes. No – there's fire. The kind that's itching to show Octorockys what's what tomorrow.

"I'm completely with Brie. Look at them." At Hana's words I glance back at our opponents, who are throwing high fives in every direction while the occasional mocking look lands on us. "Now imagine how gutted they'll be tomorrow when we destroy them right before the finish line."

She lets out a diabolical cackle and rubs her hands together. I can see it in her eyes. She genuinely believes those four guys will be sitting at their computers tomorrow in stunned disbelief.

I wish I could believe it too. But my stomach knots at the thought that we won't make it. That I'll let them down again. And it's not just about them. It's not just about winning some tournament.

It's about so much more.

"Let's get out of here, order a bathtub full of sushi, and barricade ourselves in the hotel room with trashy movies. Maybe we'll raid the mini fridge too, just to annoy Stella." Pen's voice comes from behind me, and finally I stand up. I'm grateful for her words – especially knowing how much she hates trashy movies – but I can't respond to them. Not when I have the feeling that every pair of eyes in the audience is fixed on me and my reaction. So I make the effort not to look at anyone and put a smile on my face. That I can do. That I'm very good at.

We step down from the stage and Stella is at our side. Our manager looks us over for a moment, then runs a hand through her light blonde bob and fixes Octorockys with a cool gaze. In her dark blue trouser suit she looks like a Jane Bond. Or the head of the Mafia. The connection isn't entirely out of the question – after all, she spent more than half her life in Italy and only came to Chicago about ten years ago to work for Arcadia Gaming Industries. The people who sign our paycheques.

"Everything is still open," she says in her pragmatic way, but her tone is softer than usual. Which can only mean my smile looks anything but convincing.

A bitter snort works its way up my throat, one I just barely manage to swallow back down, where it mixes with the rest of the chaos in my stomach. Instead I just repeat the words I've been telling myself on repeat. "I know."

Sure, this kind of thing happens to everyone eventually. No matter how good you are, no matter how many times we've clawed our way back from the hardest situations – these things happen.

The difference is that right now I'm not in a position where I can afford it.

Chapter 2

Maeve

After Sharknado (a classic), Attack of the Killer Tomatoes (also a classic), and roughly a tonne of sushi, I say goodnight to the others while Hana stays in Pen and Brie's room to watch something at least halfway normal – whatever that means.

Still, I'm pretty glad to have the next two hours to myself. As much as I love my team, the performance pressure and the fact that we are genuinely in each other's pockets around the clock sometimes makes me feel like the walls are closing in. But we almost never get individual rooms, unlike some of the other Arcadia esports teams. We're not profitable enough for that yet – though winning this tournament would give us a pretty good shot at finally getting there.

I shuffle one door down, kick off my shoes, and fall face-first onto my side of the made-up bed.

"Don't let it get to you. These things happen to everyone."

Stella's voice repeats on a loop in my head. Frustrated, I reach for the slim white pillow and press it over my ears, but even then she doesn't stop.

We have to win this tournament. At all costs. Not only because I need the thirty thousand dollars paid out for first place. But because first place is our ticket to the biggest Neon Nemesis tournament that has ever existed.

Game ON hosts countless tournaments across all kinds of games, and the fact that Neon Nemesis has finally made the cut is a pretty big deal for the community. This game was a niche title for a long time – at least compared to the tournament scene around Call of Duty, League of Legends, Dota 2, and World of Warcraft.

Winning a tournament of this scale would wipe out pretty much all my problems in one go. Or at least bring me closer to the point where I can actually solve them.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. Maybe it's Hana checking if I'm okay. Or Mom, wanting to know how the tournament is going, even though she has absolutely no idea what I actually do.

I peel my fingers off the pillow, push myself up on my palms and lever myself upright. The remnants of my black mascara have left marks on the pillowcase, so I just flip it over. In two days we'll be out of here anyway, whether we win or lose.

I awkwardly fish out my phone, and my already-heavy heart gains another ten tonnes as I see the automated email.

Payment reminder. I lock the screen. Not now.

With a hollow feeling in my stomach I climb off the bed, pull my laptop, headset and mouse out of my backpack and head for the small desk in the corner of the room. I drop into the painfully unergonomic chair with the frustrated snort I'd been holding back in front of the others – the chair gives a concerning creak in response.

The laptop starts up with a quiet hum and I type in the password – SailorLunar07. Was there a time in my life when Sailor Moon made up roughly half my personality? Possibly. Is that time still ongoing, given that it's the username for my private Steam account? Also possibly. As much as I love my community, I'm still a professional esports player. And I would sooner bury myself alive than let anyone find out how many hours I've sunk into Hatoful Boyfriend and Boyfriend Dungeon. Not to mention my collection of questionable one-dollar purchases.

Spotify opens immediately on the desktop, and I'm one click away from drowning my worries in a mix of BTS, Blackpink, and Stray Kids.

And even if that might help chase them away for a moment, it wouldn't make me feel any better afterwards. It would just leave me feeling like I'd wasted time. No – what I need is a win. Something positive to hold onto so I can go into tomorrow's match in the right headspace.

I click the glowing lilac-pink icon with the two interlocking Ns and the familiar, haunting piano intro plays immediately. I pull on my signature headset – the one with the pale green moth wings – and connect the mouse.

I navigate through the menus until I can select my favourite character. Nyx, with her white hair, dark skin and heterochromatic eyes – one white, one black. She's a Reaper from the Children of the Night faction and wears a kind of coat that shifts from white to black depending on her health points. In the story mode, the Children of the Night are the faction that doesn't demonise the Umbra – the shadows that have consumed the earth – but instead embraces the darkness as a gift and learns to use it. That's why all their abilities are built around exploiting Umbra-infected zones or transforming into a Tenebrae, a shadow monster. I've been playing Nyx since I properly got into Neon Nemesis, and even though new characters have been added over the years, she's still my favourite. Even though you're not really supposed to have favourites among your Survivors. Flexibility – mastering multiple Survivors – is what makes a good esports player, after all.

I still always pick her first, so that's exactly what I do, and I land in the lobby.

Please don't let him be online.

Above a certain rank the pool of potential teammates and opponents gets smaller and smaller, which means I often end up playing with familiar faces. Some of them are great, others less so. Over the years I've been playing Neon, one thing has become abundantly clear to me: the worst players are also the ones with the most misogynistic comments. As depressing as that is, it makes complete sense. Those guys have to compensate for their skill issues somehow. Since I've been playing at pro level it still happens – misogynistic assholes exist everywhere – but mostly it's just my abilities getting criticised. Fair enough. Today would be a day when that's completely justified.

Which means I'm all the more hopeful that of all people, he hasn't seen exactly how spectacularly I threw that match. I could check whether he's streaming right now, but I know I'd snap the laptop shut the moment I found out he was. Especially right now, I'm not in the mood to deal with him and his commentary. So I hope for the best.

My eyes stay glued to the search window, and one by one the three empty slots beside my character fill up with other figures. At least he's not on my team. haXXer is, though – he and h3x_UniT have already qualified for Game ON. His chosen Survivor is Flux, a mildly megalomaniacal mechanic who fights with a remote-controlled mecha-raven. I know her well because Pen plays her in one of our line-ups too. Otherwise haXXer is genuinely fine. Which is probably because he just doesn't talk much. More guys could take a leaf out of his book.

Then my eyes land on the name list for my opponents, and for one tiny moment I'm tempted to fake connection issues. Or a sudden kidnapping. Or claim my laptop spontaneously combusted.

Because Hunter is actually online. I should have seen that coming. On days like this everything just piles on at once. I clench my jaw, waiting for a sharp comment, a cutting remark that lets me know he saw exactly what happened today. But the voice chat is silent.

Unusual. Normally you'd need to staple Hunter's mouth shut to get him to stop talking. But I'll take it.

His team selects the map – Sanctum of Dawn, of all places – which is his way of subtly flipping me off. He definitely watched the match today.

I return the favour by going after his character, Hellion Dusk, in my Tenebrae form. Not even that can get a word out of him as he retreats like a coward into the ruins of the citadel.

This match goes the way it's supposed to. We manage to dodge the traps Hunter placed beforehand, overwhelm their Guardian, and finally reach the first Neon Core, which supplies the enemy territory with light. In a world swallowed by darkness, Neon is the most vital resource – the only way to generate light.

We reach the other two Cores with almost no trouble either. At least until I spot Hunter in the adjacent shadow zone thanks to Nyx's special ability, which lets her detect enemies from an extended range – which means his attack barely surprises me. My fingers move almost automatically as I dodge and take him out with a precise Umbral Strike.

We win the round. We win the whole match – with one of the best Hellions in the world on the opposing team. So why didn't it work like this in the arena today?

I let out a frustrated snort.

"I let you win, Siren," I suddenly hear Hunter's low voice in my ear – the first time all evening. "I didn't want to kill your motivation before tomorrow's match."

Heat flushes through me, half anger, half embarrassment. I stretch my cramped fingers to loosen them, even though I'd much rather wrap them around his neck.

"Right, because you're so well known for your compassion," I shoot back.

He laughs, amused. "Don't confuse that with compassion. I just want to humiliate you on the big stage."

I roll my eyes, even though I know he can't see it. But he knows I'm doing it – I'm sure of that. He knows me that well. Unfortunately. "I look forward to whatever excuse you come up with when we're waving at you from first place. Oh, I know." I leave a small, dramatic pause and drop my voice lower: "It was my teammates' fault."

"Good thing you never pursued a career in acting," he replies drily, and I hate that I can practically picture the twitch of his mouth.

"Good thing you never pursued a career that involves directly interacting with people."

"We happen to be in the same career. Aren't you insulting yourself right now?"

"God, your bickering is doing my head in."

It's only when I hear my teammate's blunt voice that I realise Hunter and I are not alone in the voice chat. Six other people have been listening to us argue. Possibly more – just because I'm not streaming right now doesn't mean one of the others isn't. Blood rushes to my cheeks, and I'm glad no one can see me.

I'd made a firm decision not to let him get to me so easily anymore. But every single time we meet online, the rational part of my brain goes into standby. And leaves me alone with the quarrelsome revenge demon lurking somewhere in the depths of my subconscious. What's it going to be like when we're facing each other at the tournament? I'm the last person who can afford to be distracted imagining how satisfying it would be to wring his neck.

Maybe I could get Hana to slip some gochugaru paste into his food. The first time she cooked for our team flat, one tiny bite was enough to bring tears to everyone's eyes. My tongue still felt numb days later, and that was apparently with barely any paste in it, according to her.

But ... if we win the tournament, I want us to have beaten Hunter and his Masters team on the way there. That's hard to pull off if Hana puts him in hospital first. Tempting as the thought is.

"Right, next round," I say, irritated, and do what I should have done from the start – I mute Hunter.

Without his chatter my head works better. I play two more rounds, which we win two to one in best-of-three format. But instead of being genuinely happy about it, I slam the laptop shut like it's somehow the laptop's fault I ended up in a lobby with Hunter.

Today is really not my day.

"Rough match, Shrimp?" a voice comes from behind me and I jump. Hana, her black hair up in a bun, is lying on her side of the bed by the window, feet in the air, phone in hand. On the screen I can vaguely make out a woman with pink hair who's ... sewing a dress together? Definitely CosplayTok. Her coping mechanism for having to go without the cosplays she normally wears in her streams at tournament time.

"How long have you been back?" I ask, once my heart has settled back into something resembling a normal rhythm, and I uncurl myself from the hunched Shrimp position I have my flattering nickname to thank for. My shoulders ache, but one stretch and it's fine again. I silently thank Stella's hardcore fitness programme, which is the only reason I can afford to sit like that.

She turns her head toward the screen to check the time. "About ten minutes?"

I have no idea how much I was swearing roughly ten minutes ago, but it was definitely enough to fill Mom's swear jar – the one that's supposed to remind me not to curse in front of my younger siblings. Even though they'll be in high school in a few months and will hear far worse there. It should probably concern me that I didn't even notice she came back.

"How are you feeling?" She lets the phone drop onto the duvet and sits up while I untangle my legs from their pretzel position on the chair and stand.

"Good," I say, a little breathlessly. Now that the adrenaline is gone, I just feel drained and tired. But my thoughts have stopped doom-spiralling, which I count as a win. "Got to take my frustration out on Hunter."

Hana tucks a strand of hair behind her ear with a grin. "If you made it through his trash talk, tomorrow's match will be easy."

"I'll just imagine it's Masters we're up against," I reply, and let myself fall down beside her. The mattress bounces pleasantly, and for a moment I'm tempted to just lie there and stare at the white ceiling. I've completely lost track of time, but at the very least I need to drag myself to the bathroom. Even if I really don't want to.

My phone buzzes from the nightstand, and I use it as an excuse to sit up again and grab the thing. It's just after nine – much earlier than I'd expected. I check the notification. A message on Instagram. From Hunter. I let out a loud groan and turn the screen off again. Without paying attention to Hana's irritated look, I slip into the bathroom, get ready for bed, then throw myself back down beside her in my galaxy pyjamas. I love them not only because every planet and every star has adorable big cartoon eyes, but because my siblings gave them to me after our first official tournament win. My violet-red hair I've pulled into a long plait so I don't look like I've been fighting a pillow tomorrow.

Hana, already with her make-up off, is now in a black top and black shorts. Outside of her cosplay, three quarters of her wardrobe is black. Different shades of black, as she always insists. Midnight black, charcoal black, lunar eclipse black ... To me it's all just black.

"Jal-ja," Hana murmurs before switching off her lamp and pulling her sleep mask over her eyes, even though the room is already dark enough that you can barely see your hand in front of your face. I can't, anyway – but then again, I can sleep more or less anywhere, no matter how loud or bright it is. Something I'm pretty grateful for, since it at least got me through break times at my old side jobs or the waiting around when I picked up Livie or Conrad. Even if there are definitely better places to sleep than a reclined car seat. Less because of the seat itself, more because of the creepy people who occasionally stared at me through the window.

"Sleep well," I reply with a smile and reach for my phone against my better judgement, once she's rolled over to the other side.

What the hell does Hunter want? He rarely if ever messages me directly, because everything he has to say to me he does in front of his audience.

I stare at the screen uncertainly, reading just two words that make no sense to me out of context. But they're enough to hook my curiosity.

See you in L.A.

I stare at the line, baffled, because I was sure he'd write something else. Something that didn't imply he thought we were going to win tomorrow. I close the app without replying, quickly check my four alarms, then turn the screen off and stare back up at the ceiling I can no longer see.

We are going to win tomorrow. We're going to take first place and earn ourselves a spot at Game ON. And then we'll finally face each other. After all these years.

Chapter 3

Hunter

"You've played better," Xavier remarks from the computer directly to my left instead of any of the other eight. Unfortunately. The light from his monitor – showing nothing but the lock screen – reflects in his glasses. I have no idea how long he's been sitting there, but his smug grin is already getting on my nerves. The way he stares at me over the rim of his silver frames has the energy of a teacher who thinks he's caught a student doing something wrong. Me, playing like absolute garbage in his eyes. We've only been on a team for six months and I already knew at our first meeting that he's a snake. Someone who's just waiting for the right moment to bite. I have no idea what he did to get Luis to sponsor him, because his talent for Neon Nemesis surely can't be it.

"What?" I ask, even though I'm not interested in the answer. But the way he's sitting here, he's clearly been waiting for me to finish my match. Which also means he's not just going to disappear.

"Had another fight with your girlfriend?"

"That wasn't a fight," I reply, bored, and reach for the phone lying beside the keyboard. At least not from my side.

"Hmm," he says, while I open Instagram. Right now I'd watch reels of paint drying, because literally anything is more appealing than dealing with Xavier. There's only so much room on a team for massive egos. And I already fill that quota pretty well. But instead of watching reels, I tap on my chat with Mae. Maeve has read my last message by now, but I'm not delusional enough to think she'll reply. Simply because the message is so different from what we normally throw at each other. Honestly, I'm still surprised she hasn't blocked me yet. It's pretty thin ice I'm treading, but it's better than nothing.

"Cole wants to see us."

"Now?" I say, genuinely surprised, and look at Xavier again. He spins back and forth on the chair completely unbothered, as though it were a fairground ride. "I thought he was with his daughter tonight?"

His mouth quirks mockingly. "His girlfriend cancelled on him."

I don't point out that she's barely in her early twenties – younger than both of us – while our manager is nearly twice our age. He knows that. We all know that. Which doesn't stop me from making comments about it every now and then. Because I still find it fucking weird.

"Wonderful." Which means Cole is bored and has decided to make his problem our problem. Not only that – he'll be in a foul mood with it. I'd been hoping he'd at least leave us alone until our next

practice match. The scrim is scheduled for next week, against Override – third in the world rankings, just below us. They've had a new Guardian for a few months now, which makes playing them interesting. And since Xavier especially could use every bit of training he can get, it's going to mean a lot of preparation if we don't want to embarrass ourselves. As if we didn't have enough to do already.

[...]

Ally Crowe studied business informatics and loves the creative variety that writing brings to her IT-oriented workday. She draws inspiration from everything around her. No matter whether it's a conversation, a movie or a song, a notebook must always be at hand. She reads across all genres, but prefers to write romance and fantasy. While she is creating worlds and characters, she can't do without large amounts of coffee and music. She also has a soft spot for video games, triangles and foreign words.

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