WarZone Entertainment presents

DAWN OF WAR

 By Jonathan Gutheinz





First Printing: USA 7/15/2013

Chapter 1

 The suburbs are never the place that comes to mind when you think of something extraordinary happening. Hindrance Lane was no exception. The residences there are the type of people who look down on anything they deem unnatural. As with most communities, over time myths and legends start to spring up, and the most prominent of these is number 3855, for the mystery inside that house has haunted the community for nearly 15 years. Ever since ‘that man’ moved in weird things have started to happen, things that no one could explain. Weird noises, people in cloaks, one kid even swore he saw a man tossed out the window and catch on fire, but by time he could alert anyone, there was nothing there. Once or twice neighbors have even reported howling coming from the home. Everyone on Hindrance Lane knew well enough to stay far away from ‘that man from 3855’. Legends say that a detective entered the house once to ask ‘that man’ some questions and he was never seen or heard from again. No one on the street has even tried to talk to him in over a decade, which isn’t a hard feat due to the fact that he is hardly ever home.

 Some people have even started to believe the house deserted, for it has been well over two years since anyone has set foot in or near the home. Every once in a while, sounds can be heard coming from within, but everyone knows that that isn’t possible, for they would have heard his 1978 Pontiac Trans Am. It was easily the loudest car in the neighborhood and had been missing from the street for the past two years, and it was good riddance as far as the rest of the community was concerned. For the car was yet another reminder of how odd ‘that man’ was. While the rest of the community had the newest, flashiest cars, he drove around in a beat up classic. They see it as his attempt to stand out and be different and that was something that the residents of Hindrance Lane couldn’t abide. But if they thought that his normal means of transportation was extreme and out of the ordinary, than they would have a fit if they were to look out their windows and see how he was traveling home tonight.

 The street in front of 3855 Hindrance Lane was deserted, as any street in a self-respecting neighborhood should be at two-thirty in the morning. One second all was still and peaceful upon the street and the next there was a loud bang and a blinding white flash. When the blinding light vanishes ‘that man’ was left standing there. He was a tall good-looking man, or at least he should be. He had dirty blond hair and a face that had strong features but at the moment it was covered in scars, his clothes were torn and have burn marks across the lower portion of his shirt. The left sleeve is torn right off; on his wrist was a metal bracelet. It was a weird contraption that houses what looked to be a blade. It was as if he had just walked off a battlefield. For that is what he had done, his name was Mario Russo and he had just returned home from the greatest battle of his life. He takes in the neighborhood, looking around his home, for it has been too long since he had been here. He had missed it terribly, but it had been too dangerous for him to return with all that had been going on. Mario had not had an easy or relaxed life, but it had been an exciting one.

 He took a step toward his house and fell to his knees. He was too weak from his battle to even make it home, but Mario had never been one to lie down and die. He stood back up and walked towards the house, it was the hardest journey of his life, and he had been through some incredible ones in his day. Each step towards the door brought unbearable pain, but Mario had made a living working through pain. He came to a stop in front of the door and braced himself against it to keep upright.

 “At last” he whispered to himself, pain seeping in each word. He reaches into his pocket for his keys, pockets that no longer exist. “You gotta be kidding me!” he screamed outs. He quickly patted himself down feeling for the keys, hoping against hope that he still had them, but no such luck. Mario let out a sigh of annoyance and waved the door open. Nothing happened, Mario couldn’t understand, his magic had never failed him before, he waved it open again, but still nothing happened. Frustration began to grow in Mario, after all he had just been through he didn’t need his magic going faulty on top of it all.

 “Aperi” he said as he once more waved his hand at the door in anger. It has been a lifetime since he had had to use spoken magic. But desperate times called for desperate measures, and right now all he could think about was his comfy bed upstairs. It had been ages since he had slept upon it, but he still remembered it as the most comfortable bed he had ever laid in. He expected the door to open up, but it seemed his powers were even more on the fritz than he thought, for the door flew off the hinges and crashed into the wall on the far side of the room. Dust and debris flew everywhere. Mario felt completely drained; he struggled to stay on his feet. “Damn, I lose more doors that way” he shook his head and walked inside.

 The house was beautifully decorated, with relics of lost civilizations and painting all over. Everything within sight was covered with dust, it was clear that no one had sent foot in here for years. Over the fire place sat an incredibly tacky portrait of Mario. It was his pride and joy, a lover of his painted it for him, for his 26th birthday. He truly loved her and had never gotten over her death at the hands of his deadliest foe. As he looked at it, he couldn’t help but think of all the loved ones that had died over the years. There had been far too many, death seemed to follow him around, no matter how far he ran he couldn’t escape it. Mario couldn’t help but ponder if the only way he would ever escape death was by dying himself. And the thought that scared him the most was that maybe after all he had been through, death would be a welcoming break.

 He was 56 years old and was in amazing shape. Healthier and more fit than most men in their 20’s but with the weathered look of someone who had lived a long and hard life. He would never want to admit it, but he was tired and worn out. The past 40 years had been an amazing adventure that he wouldn’t trade one second of, but he would be lying if he said it hadn’t taken its toll. Death had been his constant companion and he couldn’t help but wonder when he would get to meet him face to face.

 He forced these dark thoughts out of his head; he hadn’t survived this long by fantasizing about death. Death was something to be overcome, not embraced. These thoughts were nothing more than a side effect of all he had gone through the past few years. And he wouldn’t let them consume him.

 He made his way up the stairs and passed by pictures of himself with other people. Memories of good times, long since passed. Friends, who had long since left this world. These pictures were all that remained of the man he used to be. Starting at the foot of the stairs with a picture of himself as a teenager with his best friend, Ralph. As he walked upward, he ages through the pictures until he stopped at the top of the stairs and looked at a picture. He took it off of the wall and wiped away the dust.

 It was a picture of him and one of his best friends, Joseph, A good looking English man, with dark black hair and eyes that tell stories in and of themselves. This was clearly a man who had lived through some amazing things, and today, today was the day he died. The memory of Joseph, one of the strongest, greatest men that he had ever known taking his last breath was burned into Mario’s brain. The sight of which was not something that he would soon forget.

 “I’ll miss you, old friend” he said as he tried to put the picture back on the wall as he turned to walk away, tears slowly forming in his eyes, but he missed the nail and the picture fell to the floor, the glass shatters. He stopped and turned to look at it, letting a sigh escape. He waved his hand at the fallen picture for it to return to its spot on the wall, unsurprisingly nothing happened. “Instauraretis” he shouted at the picture, it had no effect. “Whatever, I’ll fix it in the morning” he mumbled to himself as he kept walking down the hall. On a table against the wall was a knife with a symbol in what could only be a demonic language. He opened the last door on the left and entered it to find a room, almost empty but for a bed and a dresser. He fell onto the bed not even bothering to get undressed and was asleep within seconds.

 It was a troubled sleep, the death of Joseph on constant replay in his mind. No matter how hard he tried to shut out the thoughts of one of his best friends dying in his hands he couldn’t. He was standing in the middle of a small town in Europe, buildings all around were leveled and Mario was standing in the middle of the debris radiating power. His eyes blood red, his clothes on fire, blood pouring out of the dozens of cuts on his face. Dead bodies lay scattered all over from both sides of the battle. Mario had never had to tap into his power like this before, he could feel everything in earth flow through him. He was one with everything, and he loved it. He was warned many years ago from the great Merlin himself, that magic could have a corrupting influence on people but he never believed it until now.

 Joseph laid on the floor in front of him, the life bleeding out of him. He looked up at Mario with pain in his eyes. “I guess it’s all over” Joseph said through gritted teeth as he bled out in front of him. Mario let the power go out of him. He may have liked all the power flowing through him, but he knew it lead down a path of destruction and chaos. It was not a path he wanted to travel down. He looked down at Joseph.

 “I guess it is, I’m jus. . .” he started to say when a loud ringing sound filled the very air itself. Mario looked around for the source of the sound. “What is that sound?” he slowly started to wake up from his slumber. His phone on the bedside table continued to go off. He reached for it, without looking up and knocked the phone off the table. “lo?” he said more to his pillow than anything else.

 “Mario? Mario are you there?” a soft voice said from the dropped phone.

 “God damnnit! I’m trying to sleep” he said as he leaned over the side of the bed to pick up the receiver. “Hello?”

 “Mario! Finally! I’ve been calling you on your cell for hours.” the voice belonged to Henry, an old friend who Mario hadn’t seen or heard from in years. He was a man obsessed with the past and had a tendency to dig up powerful objects that Mario wasn’t too fond of.

 “Sorry I dropped it, look I don’t mean to be rude but I’ve had a bad day and just want to go to sleep, so can I just call you back later?” Mario asked. He started to hang up the phone, not even waiting for a reply as his head fell back toward the welcoming embrace of his pillow.

 “No! Don’t hang up! Damnnit Mario I need to talk to you, it’s important!” Henry shouted through the phone. Mario let out a grunt as he put the phone back to his ear.

 “What is it Henry? What’s so damn important?” Mario asked, annoyed. He rolled over and slowly sat up, his whole-body aching from the pain of the previous days battles. He couldn’t remember the last time he was in so much pain.

 “Well, you made me promise to call you right away if I ever found out what Gambit was looking for in Greece, I think I discovered it, see um, well you know the legend of Pandora right?” Henry asked. Mario always hated the awkward way Henry talked. He knew he had a hard childhood and was prone to fits of nervousness, but it made getting information out of him a pain. But he was usually spot on with his information and if he knew what Gambit was after than Mario didn’t have time to waste.

 Mario jumped out of bed and started pacing back and forth. At last he was going to find out what Gambit was after. The biggest mystery of his life and he was seconds away from uncovering it and stopping Gambit once and for all. If only Henry would spit it out and stop talking in riddles

 “What?” Mario asked hurriedly. The anticipation was killing him! Gambit was the deadliest foe Mario had ever faced. He met him when he was a teenager and thought him nothing more than a normal vampire, but he was far more cunning than anyone Mario had ever met. The two of them have been at each other’s throats for decades and at long last Mario might have a shot at beating him to this mysterious prize!

 “What about Pandora? You mean her box? Gambits after uh” Mario tried to recall the legend, Pandora was given a gift from Hephaestus, a box that contained all the evil in the world inside it and she was warned never to open it, only she did, and all the evil of the world was released. She tried to close the box and fix what she had done, but all she caught was hope and it left mankind without it. “The box that evil was contained in?”

 “Not quite. See, well, the legend is just that, a legend. And as you well know legends have some bases in truth but are altered over time. It would be like the telephone game you Yankees play.” Henry started to say. Mario began to grow impatient. Why couldn’t Henry stop beating around the bush and just come out with it. What the hell was Gambit after?

 “What then? What is he after? And what does it have to do with Pandora?” Mario screamed into the phone. It was times like this he wished he could just reach through the phone and strangle Henry.

 “Well, I’m trying to get to that, you see Mario, Pandora was a young woman who met and fell in love with Hephaestus. And well, this was a problem, for humans were seen as nothing more than servants to the Olympians. The great Zeus did not like that one of his kin fell in love with someone beneath them.” Mario couldn’t believe what he was hearing, he always knew that Henry had some weird beliefs, but this was crazy. Olympians, Greek gods? Surely Henry couldn’t really believe this.

 “What do you mean Olympian?” Mario demanded. Henry paused, Mario knew that once you interrupt him it was hard for him to get back on track with what he was saying, but curiosity got the better of him.

 “You know of the age of demons right?” Henry asked nervously. Mario sighs; he didn’t have time for another one of Henry’s history lessons.

 “Enough about it, why?” he asked, fearing how long an answer he was going to get. Henry let out the annoyed sigh he got when people didn’t know the complete history of mankind. He seemed to think everyone should spend all their time studying it as he did.

 “Well, uh, ok where to start” Henry said more to himself than to Mario. Mario felt his anger start to rise. He didn’t have time for any of this.

 “How about with what Gambit is after?” Mario said annoyed.

 “Well, uh you see, without the back story you won’t understand what you are after” he told Mario, uncertain of whether to keep talking or not.

 “Very well, go on Henry” Mario said, as he sat down on his bed. Bracing himself for another long history lesson.

 “Well during the age of Olympians, humans, as I said were nothing more than servants. Zeus found out about Hephaestus and Pandora and forbid them to see each other. Legend has it that Hephaestus ran away from his kind to live with Pandora. He taught her everything he knew and after the Olympians vanished, Pandora tried to continue on with his work. When the second age of demons started up Pandora locked away all knowledge inside her box. That is the truth behind the legend of Pandora’s Box. She then reportedly hid the box so Lucifer and his kind could never find it. Lucifer found out and had her captured and brought to him. He tortured her for many years. Even granted her eternal life so he could spend all of time torturing her for information on the box. She never broke, no matter what was done to her, she stayed silent about the location. It is said that when the Dreamer ran the demons off of Earth, he saved Pandora and retrieved the box, opening it and returning mankind to an age of enlightenment. Well, see this led to the age of man, demons were mostly gone from this world, but then, somehow, vampires were created. And the Dreamer asked Pandora for a box to lock away the vampire’s greatest powers. She did so gladly but it seems the vampires found out and killed her. This is the story of Pandora. And well, I think the box is what Gambit is after.” Henry said. Mario shook his head in disbelief. He sat through that whole story just to find out Gambit was after a box. He already knew that, but at least now he knew what was in the box. The greatest powers of the vampires. Whatever that was.

 “Ok, first of all, who is the Dreamer and where is this box?” Mario asked, excitement filling him up at the thought of getting the best of Gambit.

 “The Dreamer is a human who was born” Henry started, but Mario cut him off. He didn’t have time for this.

 “Tell me later. The box, where is it?” he asked Henry. “I need to know now!”

 “Well, uh, I don’t know. See I spent the past two years translating the scrolls you brought me and this is all I’ve got so far. There is more to translate, but well I thought you would want to know what I have so far.” Henry told him in a voice of shame. Mario knew how much it must be killing him to have not finished translating the scrolls, even after two years. “I can fax you what I have so far, if you want?”

 “No, I’ll come to you, just keep translating.” Mario told him. He hung up the phone and started to pack. With his powers acting up this was going to be a long trip. He was going to have to travel like a normal person. If only he had his prized car here. But it was at his warehouse. No matter, he was going to have to go there first anyways.

Chapter 2

 It didn’t take long for Mario to pack. He wasn’t going to need much, at least not a whole lot from the house. Most of the stuff that he would need to help him on the quest resided in his personal museum. It was really just an old warehouse he bought back when he first transitioned from demon hunter to relic hunter. Most of his prized possessions were housed inside and if he was to best Gambit on this quest he would need more than a few.

 Once outside Mario looked around, how was he to get to his warehouse? He could call a cab but that would take too long, besides he didn’t want anyone to know where the warehouse was at. That was his secret and he would take it to his grave, well he did have some ideas about giving the location to his son, but at the same time he didn’t want him to have the same life that he had. The life of a hunter, ether demon or relic, was not an easy life. It was full of danger and heartache. And that was not something he wanted for his son. It was bad enough that he had to grow up without a father.

 Mario made his way out of the house, back to the street of Hindrance Lane. What was the best way to get to England fast? A plane would have to be taken once he got his stuff from the warehouse, but that too would be a problem. He would have to find a way to get his weapons on a plane and that was not an easy feat. But he would have to worry about that later. Right now, the more pressing concern was how to get to the warehouse. He looked around the street, maybe if he could just take a second to gather his thoughts an idea would come to him.

 Looking around the deserted street all he saw were cars parked in front of every house. He hated to do it, but what other choices did he have? He knew what he was about to do was wrong, but at the same time this was too important. Beating Gambit to this mystery box was one of the main reasons he switched to hunting relics. His hatred for Gambit went back a long way. Like all great rivalries it all started with a woman, and despite the many decades since, he had never gotten over it. In the end, it would be Gambit or him dead. There wasn’t another way for this to end. Mario had tried in the past to walk away from this feud but was always dragged back in, and if stealing a car was the only way to accomplish this, than well that is what he is going to have to do.

 He made his way to the nearest car, it was a beat up old volts wagon, he kneeled down in front of the car and pulled out his skeleton key to unlock the car, he was so thankful he kept one of them at the house now that he had lost his keys somewhere in the battlefield. He stood and opened the car door just as he noticed the neighbor had a brand-new corvette in their parking lot. If you had to resort to stealing, why not at least steal something nice? He closed the volts wagon’s door and headed over to the corvette.

 It wasn’t long before he was speeding down the highway on the way to the warehouse, he couldn’t remember the last time he was in a car that drove this fast. He could just imagine driving it on the autobahn. Although truthfully, he was already going way over a 100. It was a small miracle that on this short drive no cops tried to pull him over. He started to slow down as he neared the warehouse district. He then proceeded to drive past it. He came up the pier and drove the car right onto it. Luckily at this hour no one was around. He got out and forced a rock onto the gas pedal and watched as the beautiful sleek black corvette drove right off the pier and into the crisp blue ocean.

 The walk back to the warehouse district was not a short one, but it was worth it. A car that nice more than likely had a low jack on it and it wouldn’t do to let them trace it to his warehouse. If they ever found it, it would be at the bottom of the ocean and look like a joy ride gone wrong.

 At long last he made it to the string of warehouses, and there waiting for him was his baby, he remembered when he first got her. It was back in 77’ and he and Ralph had just saved a powerful warlock from a biker gang made up of newly turned werewolves of all things. Mario had to admit that that gang had style and skill, it’s the rare Lycan that could control the wolf part of themselves, and here was a gang where every member could. As a reward for fending off the biker gang, the warlock rewarded them with anything they wanted and since Ralph had wrecked Mario’s car while chasing after his girlfriend’s murderer, they picked a new car. They got a brand new 1978 Pontiac Trans Am. It was a beautiful car that Mario fell in love with it at first sight. So much so that he still drove it after all these years.

 He walked up and ran his hand over the hood of his car, it was far dirtier than he would have liked but to be fair it had just been sitting in this parking lot for two years. Lucky most of the warehouses in this area were vacant so no one really noticed the car sitting here for so long. As soon as he got home he was going to wash her and fix her up. He hated seeing her so neglected. He would soon rectify that.

 What would Ralph say if he knew that he let the car go two years without being driven, it would have drove him mad. Ralph loved the car, almost as much as Mario himself. He remembered how Ralph use to just sit outside for hours working on the car, even when there was nothing to work on. Reminiscing about Ralph always brought a smile to Mario’s face. He was Mario’s best friend, the closest he ever had to a brother. His death was something that still eats away at Mario’s soul. Yet another loved one that Mario had to watch die. They say death is the great equalizer; it comes for everyone in the end, no matter who you are. Even if that was true, did it mean that Mario had to stand by and watch everyone he cared for meet their end. He was tired of death; there was just one more death he had to witness before he could try retirement out once more. Gambits!

 His personal warehouse was stationed near the back of a long row of them. He pulled out his skeleton key and unlocked the rusted looked door; it opened slowly with a loud screeching sound. Clearly this door hadn’t had much use in some time. The inside of the room was pitch black, he felt along the left side of the wall for the light switch, at last he found it and turned it on.

 As the light turned on the warehouse came into view. It was a beautiful sight, more artifacts and relics from long lost civilizations. This room, more than anything else in the world represented Mario’s legacy. It is a shrine to the many accomplishments he has achieved over the years. Almost every artifact he had found has ended up here. This is where he will find what he needed for the coming quest.

 He was going to have to be very picky with what he brought with him. He was traveling via plane for once, and as such he would have to be careful. He walked to the center of the warehouse, past hundreds of weapons dating back millennia and came to a stop in front of a shrine of crossed arms.

 Mario let out a sigh, this was the part he had been dreading, he slowly unfastened the metal bracelet from his uncovered arm. He then fastened it to the shrine in front of him. As he did so he felt a bit of a hollowness creep inside of him. He rolled up the tattered remains of his other sleeve and did the same thing with that bracelet.

 Once he was done placing them on the shrine, he looked up at it with dread. He couldn’t remember the last time he had gone anywhere without them. They had become a part of him, a part of who he was. But there was no way to get them past the metal detectors at the airport, at least not without his magic. He had spent countless hours fantasizing about which of the many ways he would use the weapons to kill Gambit, and now it looked as if he would have to find yet another way altogether. No matter, Gambit was going to die, and die by his hands by time this quest is over. Of that, Mario was sure.

 Now that the hard part was over, what was he going to need on this quest? The two things he had become dependent on over the years were his bracelets and his magic, and it seemed that he was without both this time around. If his own magic didn’t want to work, than maybe the books of Merlin could come in handy. After all the only reason his powers were on the outs was because of the strain he had put on them the past few weeks. His body was tired and needed time to recover, time that it seemed he didn’t have at the moment. But some spoken magic still worked for him and maybe aided with the power from Merlin’s books he would still be able to use some magic.

 He walked down a long hallway of shelves that were filled with books, books of all different languages. It was his own personal library and one he was quite proud of. It rivaled that of Alexandra itself, at least in the mind of Mario. He came to a section that was incased in glass, but not just any glass, it was cursed glass. Mario designed it himself, if anyone but him, or possibly a blood relation, were to reach inside they would be cursed with blindness and all knowledge of themselves would be lost forever, they would be nothing more than a shell.

 It was a fit punishment for thieves. If there was one thing Mario couldn’t abide it was thieves, which was something that even Mario himself found ironic. He spent his life raiding old tomes for artifacts that were better off left unfound and stealing them from their resting place to put in his own personal museum and yet the thought of anyone coming to take his treasures was the greatest crime he could imagine.

 He reached inside and took out the books, hand written by the great Merlin himself, and stuffed them inside his bag. He then made his way down yet another hallway. This one filled with relics used to find things. Mario spent a great deal of time organizing this place so that he always knew where everything was.

 He came down this row for two things, the first, his prized compass that always pointed you in the direction you needed to go. You might not end up where you were trying to get, but you always made it to where you needed to be. It had kept Mario alive many times in the past. The second object was a map. He took it out of its case and unrolled it, the map was blank. He smiled and rolled it back up and placed it in the bag. The map was one of the greatest tools he had. All you had to do was unroll the map and say the name of what you were looking for and the map would show you the way. For now at least the map was useless seeing as Mario didn’t know the name of the box, but once Henry was done translating, it would prove most valuable.

 Now to get to the airport and head back to Europe. He had just made it back to America and he was already leaving. Traveling wasn’t too bad, in fact it was one of the many reasons he loved his job, but the planes, that was something he had never been able to get use too. It was the reason that he teleported everywhere, but you have to do what you have to do. It was a hard lesson that it took him far too long to figure out, but he eventually did.

 At least one good thing will come from this. He exited the warehouse and locked it behind him before heading back to the parking lot. There sat his beautiful baby, even despite the dirt, she was a sight to behold. He tossed his bag in the trunk and turned her on, only she didn’t want to start.

 “Come on baby, just start! I know you can do it!” he pleaded with the car as he patted the dashboard. He attempted and failed to start it again. All that happened when he attempted to turn it on, was the car would start to rev up and then shut back off. It had to be the battery. He didn’t know why he didn’t think this would happen. He hasn’t drove the car in two years, how did he expect the car to still be working. He slammed his head against the steering wheel, what artifacts did he have that could jump start a car?

 He had half a dozen artifacts that might do the trick but most of them would more than likely mess up or destroy the car in the process. There was one option, but he knew it most likely wouldn’t work. “Lorem ipsum dolor” he yelled at the car, the motor jumped to life with a thunderous roar. It worked! Seems he still had some tricks up his sleeve.

 He started to make his way to the airport. He forgot how amazing it felt to be driving his car again. Two years was far too long to be away from something you truly love. The drive to the airport went by far too quickly. He got out of the car, grabbed his bag and made his way inside. Like most airports this one was busy, people from all over the world passing through. As Mario entered the lobby he spotted a family, it was a small traditional family, a husband, wife and teenage son. He stopped for a moment to watch them pass, every second he watched them tore at his heart. He can’t help but think about how his life would have turned out if he stayed with Jess and helped to raise his son.

 He had lived his life with one simple rule, no regrets. You might mess up in life, hell you will mess up in life but that was part of growing, part of learning. Messing up and learning from it, just made you a better person, so no matter what mistakes he had made in his life he had always embraced them. The only thing he truly wished that he had done differently was leaving his wife and their baby.

 He gave it all up for them once, even went and got himself a 9-5 job for the first time in his life and then news reached him that Gambit was searching for him. It seemed he was on the outs with Kerrigan, queen of the vampires, and he blamed Mario. He was hunting down everyone Mario loved in order to lure him out.

 Mario was outraged as news of his friends deaths reached him, but Jess begged him to stay with them. She was scared that if he left, he would die or that Gambit would come for his wife and son. He reluctantly agreed to stay with his new life. Jessica’s happiness and peace of mind meant more to him than anything. Even the life of his friends, but when news reached him that Gambit was headed to Denver, Mario could no longer sit back. Ralph was there and he had to protect him. Jess wasn’t happy with his choice but she understood and accepted it. He promised her that he would return as fast as he could.

 He made it to his childhood home just in time to witness Gambit killing Ralph. Mario fought him head on and almost had him but Gambit escaped and Mario knew he couldn’t go home. Not while Gambit was alive and on the loose. That was 15 years ago. Mario moved to Hindrance Lane not long after, due to the fact that it was close enough to watch his family from afar without them knowing he was there.

 He forced himself to look away from the family. The pain was too much for him, all the what ifs that played in his mind’s eye as he thought of the family he deserted. It was too much to bear. He just needed to finish this quest, kill Gambit and then make things right with Jessica and his son.

 The lines for tickets were a lot longer than Mario had thought they would be this early in the morning. He couldn’t help but hope the line moved faster than they looked, he is on a schedule after all. The line moved at a snail’s pace. The couple in front of him look as if they haven’t slept in weeks and their baby wouldn’t stop crying. It was enough to drive anyone up the wall. Behind Mario in line was a big burly looking man who had the air about him of someone who doesn’t handle annoyance well.

 “Shut up that damn baby!” the burly man shouted, clearly fed up with the noise. Mario couldn’t blame him for snapping. The sound of the baby was driving him crazy as well. The parents seem mortified by the man’s sharpness.

 “Shhhh, sweetie please be quiet.” the mother pleaded with her child. The father turned to look at the man.

 “Sorry sir, he’s just grumpy. Not use to traveling I’m afraid. But we will try to keep him quiet.” he said as politely as he could. Mario couldn’t help but feel a bit sorry for the man. His kid was being annoying but wasn’t really hurting anyone and you could tell the parents were just as annoyed and bothered by it.

 “See that you do!” the burly man grunts. Mario had the feeling that this was going to be a very long day.

 The line went faster than he had expected but not by much. He was rapidly growing impatient. He could tell the burly man behind him in line was feeling much the same way. Finally it was his turn. The cashier he was going to be dealing with was a cute brunette in her early twenties who looked as if she didn’t want to be there.

 “Next!” she called out lazily and Mario made his way over to her.

 “Hello, I need to get to London, as fast as possible.” he told her quickly.

 “Kay” she started typing on the computer looking for his tickets. She was chewing gum and smacking her lips as she did so. Mario began to get very irritated with her. She finally looked up. “I have one ticket left for an 11:10 am flight to London.”

 Mario checked the clock on the wall behind her, it was 10 am now. That would be perfect. “What time will I get there?” he asked.

 “Let’s see” she started typing again. “12:10 tomorrow. You have stops over in Chicago and Zurich.” she told him. He was going to lose a day in travel time alone. This wasn’t good. He couldn’t afford to waste time and give Gambit an even bigger head start.

 “Is there anything sooner?” he asked. She let out an annoyed sigh.

 “Let me see” she said in a tone that suggests she was mad he was wasting her time. “For an extra $200 I can get you there an hour earlier.” she said. An hour difference for $200 seems a bit steep but still an hour was an hour.

 “Fine, book it” Mario told her. He reached for his wallet.

 “Two thousand seven hundred eighty-seven dollars.” she read off the computer. Mario soon found that his wallet was missing. Seems he lost it along with his keys.

 “What’s the hold up here?” the burly man shouted out. Mario’s face flushed red.

 “Um, I seem to have forgotten my wallet.” he said highly embarrassed. She shook her head in disbelieve.

 “How did you expect to get a flight with no money?” she asked in a superior tone she seemed to have adopted out of nowhere.

 “I had it on me, but it seems I misplaced it. I didn’t notice till just now” he said, his embarrassment turning to annoyance at her rudeness.

 “Hurry the hell up and stop wasting our time!” the burly man yelled out.

 “I’m done! Stop your whining” Mario yelled back as he picked up his bag and started to walk off. The burly man stepped in front of him.

 “What did you say to me old man!?” he said as he got right in Mario’s face. The parents of the baby look over with disgust at the burly man.

 “Does picking on an old man make you feel strong fella?” the father called out. People walking past stopped to look. Mario had a shrinking feeling that things here were going to escalate fast.

 “Stay out of this or I’ll shut you and your annoying baby up!” he yelled at the father then turned to Mario. “Now what did you tell me old timer?” Mario took a deep breath to help himself relax before speaking.

 “I said I was leaving, and you need to stop whining. Now kindly step aside and apologize to the nice man and we can go our separate ways.” Mario told him as calmly as he could. This seemed to only anger the man more. His face burned red with rage as he looked at the old man barking orders at him.

 “Who do you think you are to tell me what to do?” he demanded of Mario. Mario leaned in close to the burly man’s ear.

 “You have two seconds to step aside before I hurt you.” he whispered in his ear and then took a step back.

 “You think I’m” the burly man started to say, but before he could finish Mario hit him in his gut and stepped aside as the burly man fell to the floor.

 “Two” he said simply as he walked away from the gathering crowd. People all around cheered him on as he heard security and the police arrive on the scene. Not much can happen at an airport now a days without it being taken extremely serious.

 He wasn’t too worried about them catching up to him, he still had some connections down at the station that could get him out of any hot water and that was if it even went that far. He didn’t have much faith in people anymore, but he still had enough to be sure most the people there would tell the police what happened and found it unlikely that they would give him away. At least not fast enough for anyone to catch up with him as he left the airport.

 He was in a pickle now. He had to get to London and he had to do it fast. A day was pushing it as it was, but now what? No magic and no money were going to make this an arduous task to accomplish. He made his way back to his car and tossed the bag into the seat next to him. He knew just what he needed. He pulled out his trusty compass. He knew it would come in handy, just didn’t think it would be this soon.

Chapter 3

 The compass was one of Mario’s most useful and extraordinary artifacts. It also had a tendency to be quite useless or counterproductive at times. He had spent the past two hours following the compass and he ended up off of Balboa Avenue. The Stratton apartments of all places, home of his wife and son.

 He sat in his car watching his son Jon and three of his friends. Jon was 16, the same age Mario was all those years ago when he met a beautiful ghost and his whole life changed. He couldn’t help but wonder if his son was anything like he was when he was that age. Introverted and girl crazy, a weird combination that wasn’t helped in the least by the fact that he was a hopeless romantic. Jon was a lot taller than Mario was at that age, with his dirty blond hair and lopsided grin he always seems to reserve for his close friends, or again if he is anything like Mario, cute girls. He was sitting with three friends, one was short and a bit chunky, he was playing on his phone with a bored look on his face, like he would rather be anywhere else but at the same time just glad to fit in with his friends. If Mario remembers right his name was Jax.

 Mario spent some time researching his son and his friends. He knows it’s a bit odd but it’s his son and he couldn’t help but care. That was after all the only reason he left. To protect him. The one sitting next to Jon on the short wall was named Will; Mario met him days before chasing after Gambit. Jon and Will had been friends since they were babies. He was a lot taller than Jon and was a good-looking guy who oozes charm and he radiates the confidence of someone who knows it. The last guy also had dirty blond hair and is standing in the middle of the group talking. Clearly, he was the leader of the group. His name was Tommy, but he went by something else, Mario couldn’t remember what. He had the trait of a good leader, he talks, and everyone listens. He was the rare individual that inspires people and demands respect without trying.

 Mario couldn’t figure out why the compass took him here of all places. He needed to beat Gambit, he didn’t need or have the time to look in at what he was missing out on. Seeing his son sitting there happy with his friends, almost a man now filled him with pride, but crushed his soul at the same time. He had no part in that. He should have taught him to be a man like he always wanted his father too. He knew what it was like to be without a father and he had sentenced his son to the same curse. It wasn’t that his father wasn’t around, he was just so consumed with his failing store that he never had time for Mario. His wasn’t a happy home and he would give anything to have been able to give Jon one, and he will. Once he slayed Gambit he would set everything right!

 He knew deep down he should just leave now, he was on a time table and had no idea how to get to London, so he didn’t have the luxury to sit here watching him. But he couldn’t take his eyes off of him. The compass didn’t always take you where you wanted to go, but it always took you where you needed to go. He needed to be here, he just didn’t know why.

 And then it happened, walking up the stairs was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Jessica. Mario’s one true love, the mother of his child. He would sacrifice everything he was and everything he had for just one more day with her. She made his heart feel as if it was going to burst out of his chest. It had been 15 years since he had talked to her and he still couldn’t get her out of his mind. It’s the story of his life. Love had always been something he couldn’t achieve. Every time he came close it was snatched away from him, one way or another. His luck with women was legendary for its horrible track record.

 She was right there, not twenty feet from him. All he had to do was get out of his car and go talk to her. He knew he should get out of the car and talk to her. That’s what he was going to do. He reached for the door handle and then it hit him. He was right on the other side of the street from Jess, sitting in his Trans Am. There was no way she wouldn’t recognize this car if she saw it. She was going to think he was stalking her. Or that he had come home at last. But he hadn’t, not yet, not till Gambit was dust.

 He hit the pedal and was gone from there as fast as his beloved car would take him. “Please god, don’t let her have seen me.” he pleaded of the heavens above.

 He pocketed the compass, now what was he to do? This detour had been useless. If only he knew someone with their own airplane. Wait! He did! He couldn’t believe he didn’t think of it sooner, Sal Gregory! He still owed Mario for retrieving the Golden Fleece for him. It allowed him to save his wife and he promised he would repay the favor one day. Well looks like it’s time for Mario to cash it in.

 Mario quickly made his way towards Sal’s house. He hated seeing Sal; he was a rich man who felt the whole world should bow at his feet. Mario always loved knowing that Sal was in his debt, he knew it ate away at him and he hated to give that up. But he had no other options left open to him. The time had finally come to call in that marker. Hopefully Sal didn’t make it too painful.

 He pulled up to the gate of the biggest house he had ever seen. He would give anything to be able to turn around now and find another way, but there was no other way. At least not one he could think of. He pushed the call button as much as it pained him to do so. It wasn’t long before a voice answered.

 “Who’s there?” said a voice Mario didn’t recognize. It must have been one of Sal’s many servants.

 “I’m Mario, I need to speak with Mr. Gregory” Mario said in his most professional voice. Hopefully he sounded important enough for this guy to go and fetch his boss.

 “I apologize sir, but Master Gregory is indisposed of at the moment.” the voice said sharply.

 “Tell him Mario Russo is here to collect on a debt! And I expect it to be paid immediately.” Mario demanded of the man. There was a long pause and then the gate swings open.

 “Master Russo please come in. Master Gregory will join you in the house proper.” the voice told him. Mario didn’t bother to respond. He just drove right up to the house. He drove along past small forests on both sides of him. He made his way down the long-twisted road as he pulled in front of the house and parked.

 “Here goes nothing” he told himself as he got out of the car and headed to the front door. The doors were made of the finest oak, or at least that is what Sal always told Mario. He couldn’t deny that the doors did look amazing, although the handles being made out of gold did seem to be a bit much. He knocked on the door and it opened all on its own. He walked inside. “Sal?” he called out.

 There was no response, so he continued into the house. It was lucky he had been here once or twice and remembered where things were. He headed back to the study, if he knew Sal that is where he would be. Every time he had come here there was new art on the walls. The most beautiful and unique paintings you could ever find. He made it to the study and opened the door as silently as possible.

 He glanced inside the room before entering. He quickly spotted Sal sitting at his desk typing away on the computer while yelling on the phone. “What do you mean I can’t get it today? If I ask for it today then I better damn well have it by time I wake up. See to it that I have it by tonight if you want to live to see tomorrow.” he then slams the phone down. Mario threw open the door and walked inside.

 “Hello Sal, busy?” Mario asked already knowing the answer. The trick to getting to Sal was to always act as if you had the upper hand. It drove him crazy and made him strive to prove himself. Mario took a seat across from Sal and threw his feet up on the table making himself at home. He knew instantly that it had the desired effect when Sal’s face blushed red with anger.

 “Never too busy for old friends” Sal said trying to play it off like he didn’t have a care in the world. Mario nodded and picked up a stapler off of Sal’s desk and started to fiddle with it. He didn’t even have to look up to feel the irritation radiate off of Sal.

 “Good, glad to hear it, cause I’m in need of a favor. And if memory serves, you owe me one” Mario said putting down the stapler and turning to face Sal. Sal looks down, clearly trying to collect his thoughts. Sal got up and started to walk towards his bookshelf on the wall.

 “Now isn’t the best time for me Mario. What exactly do you need?” Sal asked purposely not facing Mario. “Because I can’t promise I can deliver.”

 “A ride, that’s all. Get me to London and we’re good.” Mario told him. Sal turned back to look at Mario confused.

 “A ride? You’re one of the most powerful sorcerers in the world, why would you need a ride? Just teleport there, it would be a great deal faster.” Sal said walking back to the desk and sitting down. He had no idea what Mario was playing at, but he knew there was more to it than a simple ride.

 “First of all, I am the most powerful sorcerer. My only equal died yesterday. But that is not a conversation I wish to have. I’m in a hurry and my powers are weakened. I don’t have time to wait around and recover.” Mario told him as simply as he could. He tried to keep thoughts about Joseph and his death out of his mind as he spoke.

 “I’m sorry to hear about your friend. If really all you need is a ride than of course my private jet is available to you.” Sal said. Mario nodded and got up to shake Sal’s hand.

 “Thank you” Mario turned to walk away when he felt the compass spinning in his pocket again. He stopped and turned back to face Sal. “Actually, there is one more favor I need to ask”

Chapter 4

 The ride to the private airport wasn’t too bad. As Mario entered the airport he couldn’t help but wonder how nice it must be to have a private airport not 20 minutes from your home. Talking to Sal wasn’t nearly as torturous as Mario thought it was going to be, only thing that didn’t go according to plan was that he now owed Sal a favor. But it’s no matter, he was just glad he agreed to help Mario out.

 He parked inside the parking garage, the nicest one he had ever seen. Cars of all different eras rest here, more as a decoration than anything else. The kind of money Sal had bought very odd hobbies. Mario walked across the parking garage to the door leading out towards the airport. The length of the garage was longer than Mario’s own house. He had never been a man to want a lot out of life, but even still, knowing that an arrogant prick like Sal had a garage twice as wide as his house did hurt his pride a bit.

 Mario walked out into the open runway. The sun was high in the sky now, time was wasting, who knew where Gambit was or if Henry had translated anymore of the scroll. He spotted the plane not too far away, it had a very sleek look to it. His heart filled with dread as he walked to the foot of the airplane. He hated flying more than anything, always had. He took a deep breath and forced himself to walk up the stairs.

 “Please let me just get there in one piece.” he asked the lord above as he walked into the plane proper. A beautiful brunette walked towards him, *she must be the flight attendant,* Mario thought to himself.

 “Hello sir, if you will just follow me I’ll lead you to your seat.” she told him in what had to be a put on voice. No one could be that happy while at work.

 “Thank you, lead on” he told her in his most cheerful voice. He even flashed her his signature grin that he reserved only for the most beautiful of woman. She smiled and turned to walk down the row of chairs. The plane was incredibly nice; the seats were made out of leather and had cup holders in the arm rests. Even had some HD TVs in the back of each one. As much as Mario hated flying he could get use to traveling like this.

 “So, London? It’s so nice there, I just love it” The Flight attendant told him.

 “You spent time there?” he asked her.

 “When I finished high school, I backpacked through Europe and lived there for a summer as well. I just loved it. Never wanted to come back to the states.” she told him as they arrived at a back compartment that was set up like an executive’s office. Mario couldn’t remember ever being in a room this fancy before. “You can sit anywhere you like. If you need anything please feel free to ask but I trust this room has been set up with all your needs.”

 “Thank you beautiful. The only thing I could think of asking for is company. Yours.” he motioned for her to sit in the chair next to him. “I’d love to hear about your stay in London, and why on Earth you would come back if you loved it so.” She smiled brightly at his words but didn’t sit.

 “I’d love to join you. Let me just run up to the front to tell the captain we are ready for take-off and then I’ll tell you all about it.” she told him excitedly.

 “Can’t wait, if you could bring me a scotch on the way back, it would be much appreciated.” He told her as he took in the settings.

 “I’ll be back in just a few minutes” she said as she walked out of the room. Mario watched her go with a grin on his face. Maybe this flight wouldn’t be as bad as he thought.

 He entertained himself by looking around the office space he was left in. It had lazy boy chairs and a TV that took up almost the entire wall. A mini bar was built into the side of the room and a laptop was latched to the table. Sal certainly liked to travel in style. It wasn’t long before the flight attendant returned with his scotch.

 “Your drink” she said as she handed it to him.

 “Thank you dear.” he replied as he took a sip. She took the seat next to him and strapped in.

 “The captain says we will be taking off momentarily.” she said.

 “Glad to hear, I have quite a lot of work to get done in London, but all things in their time. And now my sweet, is time for me to hear all about your adventures in London.” he leaned back and took a sip of his drink as she started to tell him all about her summer across the pond. Mario found his mind drifting off more than once as she spoke, but he played the part of an interested companion. After all it was a very long flight and he had nothing better to do.

 “So then I had nowhere to go and had to move back home with my parents.” she finished and Mario realized he missed almost everything she had told him about her time in London. He started racking his brain thinking of something to say so that it looked like he was paying attention.

 “Riveting my dear. You have lead quite the life haven’t you?” he said simply.

 “I don’t know about all that.” she said with a smile. The rest of the trip past much the same, small talk with a pretty girl who was little more than looks. Mario grew quickly bored with it. But there was no escape, so he made do. The whole time he distracted himself with trying to make objects float. It was a simple spell, even when done without words. For most of the journey he didn’t have any luck but near the end he started to manage it for short times. Although he would quickly become worn out. He had never been this beat before, he knew a few days rest would allow him to recover and be back at full strength but he didn’t have time for that. As it was this plane ride was almost a full day wasted. The plane started to lower; finally this ride was at an end.

 “Awe I can’t believe we are already landing. I was having fun” she said him with a smile.

 “As was I, maybe I’ll be blessed with seeing you on my return voyage.” he told her as he kissed her hand. She flushed and got up.

 “I have to go up front, but I’ll be back” she told him as she hurried off.

 “I’ll count the seconds” he told her with fake enthusiasm. He then used the planes phone to call and check that his ride was waiting for him. He didn’t want to waste any more time. He only hoped that Henry had it all figured out by time he got there.

 Sal was kind enough to have a driver waiting for Mario once he got off the plane. It wasn’t long before he was pulling up to Henry’s driveway. Mario smiled to himself as he spotted the familiar house. At last this quest can finally get started.

 It took a long time for Henry to finally answer the door and when he did he looked beat. His clothes were all ragged and his hair unkempt. The bags under his eyes were enormous. It was clear to Mario that Henry hasn’t had a decent night’s sleep in some time.

 “Good to see you, old friend” Mario said to Henry with a forced smile. Henry gave a halfhearted smile back then moved aside so that Mario could enter the house.

 “Good to see you too. Now let me show you what I found” He said as he closed the door and lead them down the hall. He had a modest home. It wasn’t large by any standards but it fit Henry’s needs. All along the wall were world maps, but with odd names over the land masses. And sometimes the shapes of the land masses were unlike any Mario had seen before. This must have been what the earth looked like during different eras. Mario had heard of the continental drift before but never knew just how much a change it made to the familiar bodies of land.

 “I think I have a location” Henry told him as he led him into his study. It was littered with open books and papers everywhere. Even the walls had writing on them. Plates of food and empty water bottles were everywhere and there even seemed to be a little corner of the room cleared away, almost as if Henry had been sleeping there.

 “That’s great! We have to beat Gambit to this, no matter what the cost” Mario exclaimed in excitement. He can just taste victory, he longed to see the look on Gambit’s face when he found out that the chest was forever out of his reach.

 “It’s hidden in the Dreamer’s birth city, just outside in fact.” Henry explained to Mario. As he started tossing aside paper work and moving books around looking for something to help finish his thoughts.

 “And who is this Dreamer again?” Mario asked as he stepped into the room being careful not to disturb anything as he did. Henry looked up in shock.

 “Surely you know?” he said in disbelieve. Mario shook his head no. The name sound vaguely familiar, but he just couldn’t place it.

 “How could you not know him?” Henry asked as he jumped up off the floor, a look of wonder entered his eyes.

 “Just tell me, Henry. I know you’re dying to” Mario said in a defeated tone. He wasn’t going to get any information out of Henry till he said his piece. Besides if there was one thing Mario had learned over the years, it was that it was always better to get all of the information you could before rushing into anything. Henry seemed overjoyed at being given a chance to share his knowledge but tried to pass it off as if he was annoyed.

 “Well, I must admit that I find it weird that you do not know who he is, but I will be more than happy to enlighten you.” Henry said as he took a seat in his chair, he then got up and cleared it of paper before sitting back down and continuing. “Well as I was telling you on the phone, the Dreamer is the human who ran demons off of this world” Henry started.

 “He didn’t do a great job. I can tell you that right now. I’ve run into more than a few demons in my travels.” Mario said thinking back to all the supernatural monsters he had fought in his day.

 “You have run into what is left of the demons, and even then, they are pale imitations of the demons who use to walk this earth. Those were true demons, even Lucifer walked among their numbers.” Henry said.

 “The devil? Here on earth?” Mario asked unsure if he really wanted to hear the answer. “I thought he was exiled from heaven into hell?”

 “Well yes actually. See it is my believe that the demon age, was actually two different eras. The first era was back in the dawn of time and during this time period Lucifer was not allowed on Earth. Then the gods came and forced them off world. I believe something happened to wipe them out and the demons returned, this time under the leadership of Lucifer himself. It was during this era that mankind was nearly wiped out. Humans were little more than cattle until a lone child rose up and lead the human race out from under the foot of demons” Henry said with a sense of pride in his voice.

 “A child?” Mario asked unsure if he heard right.

 “It is said the child was a prophet. That he had dreams that led them to victory. That is why he was given a name. Back then humans weren’t named; they were nothing but food and toys for demons amusement. It was a great honor for the Dreamer to be given a name.” Henry explained to him while reading through some of the notes he had on the table. Mario couldn’t believe a child, no matter what visions he might have had would be able to beat back the devil. That just seemed to be too much to believe.

 “That’s a lot to take in” Mario shook his head.

 “I know. But alas this is all secondary. The important thing is what the Dreamer did after he ran the demons off” Henry was starting to say when something struck Mario.

 “How did he do it?” Mario yelled out, all kinds of thoughts were starting to form in his mind’s eye. Ideas on top of ideas.

 “Sorry?” Henry asked confused. Mario let out a sigh. How could Henry not see where he was going with this?

 “He ran the demons, and powerful demons at that, off world. How did he do that? And can we repeat it? Get the rest of them off this rock ball.” Mario asked as he pounded his fist together and started pacing back and forth. He could finally save this world once and for all.

 “No idea. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be useless to you. But you have to understand that all that happened millions of years ago and information is far and few between. Most of the information I have gathered is from bits and pieces I have managed to pull together. It’s a working theory but by no mean facts” Henry told him as he scanned yet another book. “oh!” he tossed the book he was looking at down and rushed across the room to pick up another book and started flipping through it as fast as he could while still reading it.

 “Uh that’s ok. It was just an idea. But let’s get back to what’s important. This dreamer guy, you were saying on the phone, that he had Pandora lock away some kind of vampire power. What exactly did you mean?” Mario asked.

 “Yes. From what I gather he fared what would happen if the vampires were left unchecked so he had her lock away their strongest asset. Or at least that is what I have managed to translate.” Henry said. He had a sense of pride in his voice.

 “Ok, so do you know what the power was?” Mario asked feeling he already knew the answer.

 “Afraid not. But I do have a pretty good idea on the location.” Henry told him with a grin on his face. He quickly shuffled through his paper work looking for something. Mario doubted he could find it seeing as the office was filled to the brim with paper and books.

 “Looks like you’re going to need a map just to find your map.” Mario said laughing to himself as he made himself comfortable leaning against a wall. Henry pulled out a paper victoriously.

 “Ah hah! I found it!” Henry yelled out and jumped to his feet. He rushed over to the desk and knocked everything off it and placed the map on top. “Look here! You see this cave?”

 Mario walked over and looked at where Henry was pointing out. It was of a land mass that he had never seen before. It might have been Greece, but it just looked a little different than it should.

 “Is that Greece?” Mario asked as he took a closer look. The cave Henry was pointing out was near what should have been Athens.

 “Yes, plate tectonics and all that. Land masses change; this is a very old map.” Henry said his eyes had a way of glazing over when he got lost in thought. He seemed to be trying to figure something out in his head before saying it aloud.

 “Are you trying to tell me this cave might not be here anymore?” Mario said trying to reach the conclusion that Henry must be coming too. Henry looked up at him and shook his head.

 “Worse” he said simply as he fell back into his chair running his right hand through what little hair he had left. “It could have simply moved or it could be beneath the very ground. If so we have no way of reaching it.” he said in a defeated voice. This was not what he was wanting to hear. That it was so close and yet just out of reach. Henry’s head shot up.

 “Unless!” he jumped to his feet. “You can magic us in if we find this location!” Henry seemed to have a new lease on life as these thoughts came to him. Mario let out a sigh. It would be a perfect plan if his powers were not acting up so much. But maybe once they found the location, he would be recharged enough to get in. If not, well he still had the books of Merlin to help him out.

 “Yeah, I can get us in, just get us there” Mario said hoping his voice came across with confidence he didn’t have. Hearing these words seemed to take some of the air out of Henry.

 “I’ll do my best, but as I said, this map is incredibly old and outdated.” Henry said with a sense of pleading in his voice. Clearly he was hoping that Mario would have an answer for this. Mario tried not to let his uncertainty show on his face as he thought frantically for a solution. Nothing seemed to come to him.

 “Well uh” Mario said as he tried to think of a solution. Henry seemed to catch on to this.

 “You have no bloody idea how to find it do you?” Henry asked exhausted. Mario could tell being so close yet so far was killing Henry just as much as it was him. Maybe more so due to the fact that Henry had spent the past few years obsessing over the translations. Mario hated not having the answer, he had been doing this stuff for forty years, he couldn’t just let a small set back stop him.

 “Hey, I didn’t say that now did I?” Mario said defensively. “It just so happens that I know just how to find it!” he barked out. Almost as soon as the words escaped from his mouth he felt his stomach clench up. Why did he always let his pride force him into saying things he couldn’t back up. It wasn’t like he could just magically know the location of any object. Wait! He could do just that.

 “Well then?” Henry demands, clearly knowing that Mario was lying.

 “All I need is the name of an object and I can find anything. Just tell me the name of the object and I can get us there” Mario replied. His mind flashed to the map in his bag. He knew bringing it would come in handy. He was feeling really pleased with himself until he saw the look on Henry’s face. “You don’t know the name of the box, do you?” he asked.

 “No, I do not I’m afraid.” Henry answered with the sound of regret seeping in. Mario looked around at all the paper in the room.

 “Well then we will just have to figure it out. I mean in all of this, there has to be an answer.” Mario said waving his hand around pointing at all the paper and books spread across the room. Henry looked back up and smiled.

 “Perhaps we can.” Henry said excitedly. He jumped up and rushed out of the room. Mario couldn’t help but smile to himself. That guy was overly hyped up, Mario couldn’t remember ever seeing him run that fast before. It wasn’t long before he came running into the room with the scrolls and a few more books. He dropped the books into Mario’s hands. They were a bit heavier than he expected. “We just have to find it” Henry said as he found a nice corner of the room and tears open his books.

Chapter 5

 If there was one part of hunting, demons or relics, that Mario hated the most, it was the research part. There was nothing romantic about it, nothing advantageous or joyful. It was dull and irksome, but important. It was a lesson he had learned when he was a teenager, that knowledge was power and without it you were lost.

 Henry had dropped some very old books in Mario’s hands, none of which were in English. Normally he would have just used magic to translate them but his powers were still on the mend so he had to resort to some old school tactics. However he didn’t want Henry to notice his weakness so he took the books and retired to another room. Henry didn’t even notice him leave, he was so wrapped up in one of his scrolls. Mario couldn’t see how someone could devote their life to books. Mountains and mountains of them, every room that Mario had been in, had been filled with books from all different eras in dozens of languages, half of which were not even human.

 Mario found himself pacing around the room far more than he should have been. As much as he hated researching, he hated translating even more. He was useless at it. He walked around the room that he had made his own, it was a small room, most likely meant to be a bedroom but it was transformed into yet another library. There was a nice lounge chair that Mario had been sleeping in for the past few days. It was hard to believe that it had already been a week since Mario entered this house and they were still no closer to finding the name. Henry had never left the main study as far as Mario could tell, whereas Mario would go on long walks to ease his mind. He was constantly on the brink of losing it now a days. The sure taste of victory that drove him to get this far was rapidly fading as time went on and no new information was uncovered.

 The last few days he had taken up meditating and working on recovering. He hasn’t meditated like this in a long time; he forgot how relaxing it was. He just let his mind wonder and waited to see what it had to show him. Unfortunately, all it showed him were flashes from his last battle. He couldn’t keep the meditation up for more than a few minutes at a time. He had too much stuff he had to work out before his mind could truly be at peace.

 That last battle took a toll on him, not just physically but also spiritually. He crossed a line that he didn’t think he would ever have to cross. And maybe that was naive of him after all he has been through, but he couldn’t help it. Part of him was still that sixteen-year-old boy who just uncovered something that was so much bigger than him and he was just having fun getting lost in it. No matter all that he has been through, he had never taken it seriously, even when things went bad in the past, he always just tried to pass it off as a part of life. He never accepted that the choices he made, the life he has lead has affected other people in a negative way. Maybe he has saved some lives and maybe even kept the world from ending once or twice but at the end of the day, was it all worth it? For that, Mario had no answer.

 He fell back onto the floor out of his meditating stance. He had hoped that he could force his body to heal faster and regain his magic as well as gain some insight into finding this chest thru meditating, but alas all it did was make him feel more drained than before. It was his own fault, one of the first things Merlin taught him was to let go of all thoughts and emotions. To let his mind wonder on its own and answers would come to him, but he had failed to do that. His mind just had too much going thru it at the moment and he was far too close to it to let it go.

 Part of him felt guilty for even thinking about letting it go. He knew that is stupid, that in order to move on with his life he is going to have to let it go, but now was just too soon. There would be a time when he could move on but now was not that time.

 After what felt like hours just staring up at the roof lost in thought he slowly got to his feet. Maybe it was time he hit the books like a normal person and stopped trying to find short cuts. The last decade or so he had started to rely on magic like a crutch and that wasn’t healthy.

 He picked up the nearest book; the language was of demonic nature. Just his luck, he tossed it aside and found a second book. This one was at least a human language, but still one that he didn’t understand. This was going to be a lot of work. He tossed the book back down, already bored. He had never had patience for this part of his job.

 He decided to go for a walk and get some air. Hopefully Henry didn’t see him and make a big deal out of the fact that he was doing all the work. He made his way towards the kitchen, mind as well get some food while procrastinating, one of his many long-standing beliefs. He passed by the maps once again and sneaked a peek into the study, Henry was moving franticly from book to book. Clearly the stress was getting to him. Mario shook his head and continued on his way. All he cared about right now was making a ham sandwich.

 He barely started to bite into it when Henry ran into the room looking as if he hadn’t slept in days, which it was safe to assume he hadn’t.

 “I can’t find mention of this chest anywhere but in the scrolls. And even there it is only mentioned once and not by name.” Henry said in one breath. Frustration and anger flowing out of him. “I have uncovered countless secrets in my lifetime. Histories long since lost. How is it that I cannot locate a damn cave?”

 Mario didn’t know how to answer that. He couldn’t help but wonder the same thing. It was just a cave in Athens. How many of those could there be? Maybe they were going about this the wrong way. Finding a chest that seemed to be all but unknown was always going to be nearly impossible, but finding a cave in Athens? That had to be an easier task.

 “Take a break, I might have a lead so just get some sleep.” Mario said. Henry didn’t seem to buy this but accepted the offer.

 “I guess, but just hurry, please” Henry said as he exited the room. Mario made his way to the study finishing his sandwich as he went. The study was an even bigger mess than he remembered. How did Henry even think in here? No matter, all Mario needed to do was find the map and he could get out of there. He started searching thru the endless papers littered all over the floor. Once or twice he even found maps that might have been it, but he couldn’t have been sure. The only way he could know for sure was to find the one that Henry showed him.

 It took a while for Mario to realize that he was getting nowhere. He was just moving the papers around and seemed to be picking the same ones up over and over. It was pointless, if only he could sort thru them faster and organize them. Before he knew it the papers in the room started to fly off the ground and sort themselves out. It seemed that his powers were returning after all.

 The papers floated all over the room and banged into each other as they fought to make it to the right piles. One paper, an old map stopped and slid out of the way and bowed to an old book passing by. Mario couldn’t help but smile as he watched on. Magic was in the air and he couldn’t remember the last time it felt so good. Finally the papers and book all sorted themselves out. Mario made his way to the tiniest pile of papers, these were the maps that Henry brought to the room. They were maps from all over the world with little D’s marked on them. It seems Henry tried to find out as much as he could about The Dreamer and where he had gone.

 Well if he needed to find the Dreamer this would be a great help. But whoever he was was of no concern to Mario. Maybe once upon a time he really was the greatest of human heroes, freeing mankind from the demon rulers but now he was just a distant memory. Down near the bottom of the stack he finally found the map that Henry had shown him.

 With this and a little time spent on Google he should have the location in no time. He searched through the whole house, not wanting to wake and stress Henry out even farther, on his own and finally found a computer. It was in the basement, dark and dimly lit. Clearly Henry did not spend a great deal of time down here. As Mario made his way through the basement he found all kinds of boxes filled with more books and some artifacts.

 Mario was almost positive that you could spend your whole life reading just the books in the basement and still not be close to finishing them all. Let alone start on all the books he has upstairs. It was insane how many books this man owned. The computer was in the far corner of the room packed away in a molding box. Mario only found it by luck. He was going thru the old boxes when he dropped yet another box full of books and uncovered the wires sticking out of this box.

 He unpacked it to find a computer from the mid 90’s. It was old but it would do the trick. He quickly unpacked it and set it up in his small bedroom/office. He chanced a bit of magic to connect it to the internet and surprisingly it worked. It seemed his hocus pocus was starting to be up to par.

 It wasn’t long before he was surfing the web looking thru pictures of caves in and near the city of Athens trying to match one to the picture on the map. Who knew Athens had so many caves. Hours wasted looking at pictures, getting no closer to his end goal. He could hear Henry moving around the house once more. It seemed his nap had come to an end. He wasn’t going to be pleased that Mario reorganized his whole room, unless he had something to distract him with, such as the location to the cave.

 “Have you found out where the cave that the Dreamer hid out in is at yet?” Henry called out from whatever room he was in. Mario couldn’t help but sigh; he had been at this for hours and had had no luck. He hit the mouse for the next picture to come up even as he stood and got ready to go confess he was no closer than they were when Henry turned in. That was when the picture on the screen caught his attention. It was an almost identical match to the cave on the map. Slight differences between the two showed up and the cave on the computer had what looked to be a military style steel door attached to the front of it.

 “Well?” Henry yelled out again. Mario ignored him as he sat back down and attempted to find out more about this cave. It is called Davelis Cave. Mario quickly scanned thru the information presented here about the cave. It seemed that once upon a time it housed a Robin Hood type crook named Davelis for who the cave was named. It had tunnels leading everywhere even to old palaces. It was also home to many monks and refugees throughout the ages.

 “Mario?! Are you still here?” Henry yelled out, it sounded as if he was getting closer. Mario scrolled down a bit. It seemed there was a cave-in a few years ago, it was even caught on television. Well if it was easy to get through the cave then it wouldn’t be a good hiding place for a chest this powerful. He kept scanning, he needed a location. There it was;

 South-western slopes of Mount Pendeli

Northern Athens, Greece

Location: 38 04’ 14.80” N, 23 52’ 37.11” E

 You had to love the internet. If you knew what you wanted and were willing to look hard enough than you could find almost anything. Mario copied down the location on a notepad and stoods up.

 “I’m over here Henry” he yelled out just as he heard Henry let out a scream.

 “What did you do to my room?” He yelled, his voice filled with panic. Mario raced to the study to find Henry standing there in shock looking at the neatly separated piles. “You messed everything up.”

 “I organized it so that it would be easier to locate what we need.” Mario said simply.

 “Did I ask you too? Maybe I had it organize how I needed it to be!” Henry screamed. Mario rolled his eyes. He didn’t need this right now. He had a location for the cave that the chest was supposed to be.

 “Look, I’m sorry Henry; I didn’t think that it would bother you so much.” Mario started to say but Henry cut him off before he could finish.

 “No you didn’t think! That’s the problem. You’re so concerned with your goal that you didn’t mind messing with my property.” Henry said annoyed, he started trying to sort the papers out the way he had them set up.

 “I didn’t think it would bug you so much. I’m sorry Henry, but if it helps any, I found the cave.” He told Henry, whose eyes light up at these words.

 “What are we waiting for?” Henry asked with a smile. The research part of this quest was finally at an end. Mario couldn’t wait to get his hands on the chest.

 “You’re coming with?” Mario asked. Henry seemed taken aback.

 “I did most of the work; of course I am coming with. You think I would just sit this out?” Henry asked, confused. He seemed overjoyed at the prospect of going on an adventure.

 “It’s fine with me. If you want to come, pack what you need. We leave in an hour.” Mario told him. Henry scurried off towards his room to start packing. Mario started packing himself. He was one step closer to getting the chest and beating Gambit once and for all.

 The next few hours dragged by as far as Mario was concerned. He was anxious to be on his way already. He only had one bag, filled with the objects he took from his warehouse so he had nothing to pack. Henry on the other hand was acting as if he had never left the house before. He had far too many bags and was filling them with all kinds of junk that he would never need.

 “For what reason could you possibly need all of that?” Mario asked Henry, not for the first time. Henry didn’t respond, he just kept stuffing things into his bag. This had been going on for a couple hours now. Mario was getting to the point where he was just going to get up and leave without him. He didn’t have time to wait on Henry.

 Mario had retired to the sofa downstairs. It was a beat up old sofa that had much of the stuffing beat out of it but enough still inside that it made it oddly the most comfortable sofa Mario had ever sat on. He couldn’t help but doze off as he sat there. Gambit’s laughing smirk rose up in his mind’s eye, as it always did when Mario fell asleep. Sometimes like this night Mario fought Gambit and staked him thru the heart and laughed as Gambit burst into flames. Other nights Mario would fight Gambit to a standstill until Gambit’s underhanded tactics would give him the upper hand. He would snap Mario’s neck and laugh until the life flooded out of him. Mario hated nights like those, but that version of the dream hadn’t popped up in a while.

 “I’m ready!” Henry said with joy as he walked out into the living room. He had just one small bag. Mario couldn’t believe this, what the hell had he been doing all this time if he only had the one bag.

 “What the hell? You had so many bags packed when I went up there.” Mario said in disbelief. Henry looked down at the one bag he had beside him.

 “I decided that I had packed too much stuff, so I repacked just want I needed mate. I figured it would help with making our journey less stressful.” Henry said cheerfully. Mario couldn’t believe they wasted so many hours for no reason. He rose out of his chair and started towards the door grabbing his bag as he went. Henry hurried after him.

 Mario purchased the tickets for their flight on the way to the airport. He was sure that his powers had returned enough to teleport himself to Greece but he wasn’t sure if he could port Henry along with him. Thus making plane travel a safer bet. The airport wasn’t too far from Henry’s house and the flight would enable Mario to plan out what to do once he arrived.

Chapter 6

 The flight wasn’t nearly as nice as the flight to England was. For starters he was no longer on a private jet, but rather in coach on a packed flight. He was stuck in the middle of Henry who was fast asleep against the window and a heavy set man next to him who kept making weird sounds. It was a bit unnerving for Mario who rarely, if ever traveled this way.

 He tried to keep his attention focused by reading out of the books of Merlin. Something he hadn’t done in years. He memorized all of the important spells a long time ago and created his own so he had no need for it. But these books had always held more than just spells, it held the wisdom of Merlin. Merlin was easily the wisest man that Mario had ever met. He still counted himself blessed that he had spent five years of his life training under him.

 Mario felt the heavy-set man’s head fall on to his shoulder. Mario tried to shake him off, but he couldn’t seem to get the man to sit up. Just great, the trip wasn’t even close to being over and it had already become unbearable for him. He had devoted much of his life to helping people and yet he tried to avoid them as much as possible. By and large he had found himself lose touch with normal people. They were sheep, who just went thru life day by day blind to what was in front of them. They refused to see the world for what it really was, even when it was right in front of them.

 Mario looked over at Henry, he was fast asleep. It must have been nice to just sleep away the long journeys and be well rested for the exciting parts. Mario turned back to the book he was reading. This particular book wasn’t so much a spell book as it was a book detailing a part of Merlin’s life. In particular the part of his life where he first met Morgana. It was so hard to believe that once upon a time she was a sweet innocent girl. Mario had had a few run ins with her. Both in the time of Merlin and not too long ago. She was truly a great sorceress, maybe she still was, after all Mario never saw a body but it was hard to believe anyone could have survived. But she was evil to the core.

 Memories of her stirred around in his mind, she may have been evil, but she was beautiful and vibrant. Mario still remembered his time with her fondly despite how it all turned out in the end. Out of all of Merlin’s books he had picked this one to read. What were the odds? The Morgana in this book was the woman he had fallen in love with. It was kind of comforting to know that this woman really existed and wasn’t always the black hearted woman who nearly destroyed everything more times than he could remember.

 He found his mind drifting along to the dark magic she had taught him. The many spells and curses that he hadn’t used in what felt like a life time. He found himself wondering if he could still perform them. Maybe he could test them out on Gambit after getting the chest. The thought of this brought a smile to his face. He knew it was wrong to imagine hurting someone, but he couldn’t help it. Not after everything Gambit had done to him.

 He hated how everything always came back to Gambit. He was just one vampire, not even the head vampire. He was nothing more than Kerrigan’s lackey and yet he was the one person on this earth that Mario would have given anything to destroy. It was the one goal he had never managed to achieve, but he swore to himself that he would achieve it or die trying.

 The flight was far too long for Mario’s comfort. He was extremely happy when the plane landed in Athens. He had no intention of getting on another one for quite some time. This might upset Henry some, when he learned that he would be flying back alone but that wasn’t Mario’s concern.

 “So where is this cave?” Henry asked him as they made their way through the airport. The airport was full of people rushing all around. Sometimes Mario couldn’t help but watch people and be amazed by the way they lived their lives. He watched as a father rushed his family towards the boarding gate, it brought his own family to the forefront of his mind. His one big regret, abandoning his family.

 “Do you even know?” Henry asked again. His words snapping Mario out of his thoughts.

 “What? Oh uh yeah, it’s in Northern Athens. I have it written down.” Mario said as he led Henry out of the airport. They had no problem getting to the cliffs that the caves were housed in. They exited out of the taxi as they came close. The taxi driver seemed extremely uninterested in everything around him but he seemed to know his stuff. He got them as close to Davelis cave as he could get and did it in a hurry as well. Once they left the taxi Henry finally started to talk again.

 “You didn’t tell me it was the Davelis cave that we are looking for.” Henry said. He seemed far more excited about it than Mario would have thought he would be. It seemed these caves were not as unknown as he thought.

 “You’ve heard of them?” Mario asked as they started along what appeared to be a hardly used path. Henry struggled to catch up, still dragging along his luggage.

 “Have I heard of them? Are you serious mate?” Henry yelled out while his face lit up at the thought of this cave. Seemed it was of some importance. Mario waited a few beats as they continued along for Henry to go on, but he didn’t. He seemed to be fighting with the uneven ground to keep a hold of his belongings.

 “Well?” Mario asked with impatience. Henry let out a grunt as he pulled the luggage over a stone stuck in the ground.

 “Sorry, uh it’s reported to have been the final hiding place for a bandit called Davelis’s stolen treasure. He used to steal from the royal family, so there could be untold treasure in there. We could uncover the most amazing find in history. And even be a part of history!” Henry said. The tone of his voice was one that Mario had never heard before. This could turn out troublesome.

 “We didn’t come here for treasure; we just came for the chest. We don’t have time to go looking for rumors and the like. Besides I always thought you didn’t want to be a part of history, just study it from afar.” Mario asked. They made it to what appeared to be a steel door.

 “I never have before, but Davelis is something of an interest of mine. My great grandfather’s surname was Natsios. So I believe we may be related and if so I would love nothing more than finding his legacy.” Henry said with a sense of pride. Mario shook his head as he looked around for a natural entrance to the cave. He never understood people who took pride in stuff their ancestors did. That was them, it was what they did and had nothing to do with you.

 “So I take it Davelis last name was Natsios?” Mario asked to make conversation as he found the real entrance. It was not far removed from the steel doors put in place by the military, who knew how long ago. There didn’t seem to have been anyone in here for a while, so he was sure that they would be fine as they made their way inside the cave.

 “Davelis is a name that he went by, his real name was Christos Natsios. My father use to tell me tales about him and his adventures. He was a bit of a robin hood. In all honestly, he is one of the main reasons that I started to study the past, just to learn more.” Henry said. His voice was filled to the brim with passion. Mario had never heard him so excited and full of life before.

 “That’s great, so this cave should be easy for you to navigate.” Mario told him as they entered the cave. Henry looked around glazing lovingly at the stone walls; he slid his hands on the rocks as they entered deeper into the entrance of the cave. He tore his eyes away to glance a look at Mario.

 “Well actually, I’ve never been here before.” Henry said with a bit of sourness in his voice. “I’ve always wanted to, but never had the chance. I’ve spent too long in my library.”

 “Even still, this was the first place you researched. I’m sure you must know every inch of it by heart.” Mario pointed out, after all it made sense, Henry knew just about everything about everything. If this was what started his obsession with the past than he must be an even bigger expert on this than he was on everything else.

 “Well to an extent. The only documents I could dig up on this place only go so far in, or are second hand reports. The one time cameras were in this cave it caused a cave in. I’m afraid after a ways, we are forging ahead into unknown territory.” Henry admitted. Excitement filled his voice. His annoying accent was even more pronounced than usual.

 The tunnel they were in took a turn to the left ever so slightly. “Well, how far in do you know?” Mario asked. Henry looked around the cave.

 “I believe in another 20 feet is where the cave in happened.” Henry said. Cave in? Mario forgot all about that. If there was a cave in how were they supposed to get past it?

 “Do you know a way past the cave in?” Mario asked Henry, afraid of what the answer was going to be. Henry nodded his head and Mario relaxed a bit. Ok everything was still on schedule.

 “You blast the rocks away with your hocus pocus.” Henry said flatly, Mario tried to hide his discomfort. His powers had started to recover but he wasn’t ready to start using them for mundane tasks.

 “So I just have to do everything around here?” Mario asked simply. Henry shrugged.

 “You do this for a living, I figured you know all of the tricks.” Henry told him sounding confused at Mario’s reaction. Great, just great, he was going to have to risk it. Hopefully it didn’t tax his still recovering powers.

 They walked for what felt like an eternity until they came across piles and piles of rocks, blocking the tunnel. The whole trip Henry seemed to take in all of the sights in amazement. It was almost like he was reliving his childhood or fulfilling a lifelong dream. Which Mario supposed he was. Closest thing that Mario could relate it to was when he finally found out who the ghost girl really was. There was nothing quite like finding closure to the thing that drove you to do what you do, but there was a downside to it as well. One that Mario remembered far too clearly, he lost his drive, his focus for a while. He almost walked away from this life. Who knows, maybe when all this was said and done Henry might actually do what Mario couldn’t and leave all of this to rest.

 “So you want to blast our way past?” Henry asked Mario. Mario looked over at him and nodded. He took a deep breath and mentally told himself that he could do this. He put his right hand forward with his fist clenched tightly, he forced his hand open pouring his magic into the motion to blast the rocks from his path. He watched with waited breath to see the results, but he was let down when only a few rocks were thrown from the path in front of them. “Is that it? I thought you were one of the most bloody powerfully warlocks in the known world?” Henry said with a sneer.

 Mario shook his head trying to drown Henry out. Ok let’s try this, he performed the hand gestures again but this time he spoke as well “Purgare Semita” the effects were seen within seconds, the rocks in front of him moved quickly and gracefully out of the way clearing a path for the two of them.

 “Never heard you use spoken magic before, you have something you want to tell me?” Henry asked. Mario glanced over at Henry then shook his head no and moved forward.

 “Shut up, just shut up and let’s go.” Mario walked down the path as Henry followed him into the darker and darker cave. “Lux” Mario said with his hand open and his palm facing up. A ball of pure light appeared in his hand and then floated above them. “So we just walking blind now?” Mario looked back at Henry and asked.

 “I have a few clues, but mostly towards the location of Davelis treasure, which I guess isn’t of much use” Henry said, Mario could already tell this was going to end up being a problem. Henry didn’t come along to help him find the chest. He must have figured out where it was hidden and tagged along to find his families lost treasure. Well as long as Mario got the chest it wouldn’t hurt to help Henry find it.

 “Well after we find the chest we can go and look around for it, as long as we don’t run into trouble.” Mario told Henry.

 “What kind of trouble?” Henry asked suddenly worried.

 “You forget this chest is what Gambit has been after for as long as I can remember. There is every chance in the world that we will run into him in this cave.” Mario pointed out. Henry seemed relieved almost by these words.

 “Oh yes, silly me I had forgot all about the vampire.” He stated simply. How could Henry forget? The first thing he told Mario when he called him the other day was that he found what Gambit was after. Something fishy was going on, but that would just have to wait. The chest was all that mattered right now.

 “It isn’t safe to underestimate him, trust me on that. But right now let’s just worry about finding this chest.” Mario told Henry hoping that it would help him focus enough to be of us. He didn’t need him leading them down the wrong path just to get his treasure. That could wait; right now the chest was key.

 The cave tunnel seemed to be getting smaller and smaller as they followed it down its ever-sloping path. Henry’s breathing was getting heavier as the walls got tighter together. It seemed he was a bit claustrophobic, this could prove to be a problem as they got deeper inside the cave.

 It wasn’t long before they came to a fork in the tunnel. “Well any ideas on which way we should go?” Mario asked Henry. Henry shook his head.

 “No clue, should we split up?” Henry asked. Splitting up might work, but Mario didn’t trust Henry to really look and even if he did and he found the chest first there was no telling what he would do with it. If only there was some way to tell which direction was the right one?

 “No, I don’t think that would be wise, in case Gambit is close by.” he told Henry. Think! There had to be some way to know. . . The map! The thought came to him out of nowhere. How could he have been so stupid to have forgotten that? He pulled it out of his back pocket. “The map should be able to tell us.”

 He unfolded the map and looked at the blank paper in front of him. Henry moved forward to look at it, confused by it more than anything else. “The Dreamers chest.” Mario said, hoping that the map recognized the name. It worked; slowly the map was filled out with ink.

 The map showed them the entirety of the cave. They seemed to be about a quarter mile underground. Not even close to the center of the cave let alone the chest. The chest was in a small room that didn’t seem to have any tunnels leading to it. This was going to be tricky, there had to be some way in, otherwise how did the Dreamer get the box there in the first place?

 “So? What’s it say?” Henry asked. Mario looked up at him, then back at the map. It looked as if a water way came up into the room, maybe he could swim into the tunnel. It was the only option presenting itself at the moment and it was at least worth a try.

 “We go this way.” He told Henry as if he knew where he is going as he led him down the right fork in the tunnel. Mario noticed that the farther in they got the thinner the air got, this was not going to sit well with Henry.

 “How much farther?” Henry asked, his voice breathy as if it pained him to speak. Mario looked back and spotted Henry trying very hard to keep his composer.

 “Not far, you can wait here if you want.” Mario offered Henry thinking that it might not be good to let him go much farther in, due to the state that he was in. Henry shook his head and charged forward. Mario had to give him credit, he was putting on his game face. He must be as determined as Mario himself to see this to the end.

 The tunnel got thinner and then out of nowhere it opened up to a wide cavern. It branched off into many different side tunnels. Henry seemed relieved and leaned against the wall and slid down it taking deep breaths. Mario didn’t really understand Henry’s happiness; the air wasn’t much thicker in this cavern than it was in the tunnels. The only explanation that Mario could come up with was that it’s all in Henry’s head.

 “You want to stay here?” Mario asked Henry as he sat against the wall talking in deep breaths. Henry shook his head no and stood up trying to give off the air of confidence that he clearly didn’t have.

 “No, I was just a bit winded, but we Brits are not quitters.” Henry said with a sense of great pride that was normally reserved only for his work.

 “Glad to hear it,” Mario said as he patted Henry on the back and started to study the map to see which tunnel led to the closest lake. “This way.” he said as he walked towards the tunnel on the far right. He heard Henry follow him. The path they took was not nearly as confined as the last one. Mario couldn’t help but wonder what powers could be locked away in this chest, but he knew those were dangerous thoughts. It didn’t matter what powers were inside, all that mattered was keeping them away from Gambit.

 “These markings look familiar.” Henry said out loud to himself. Mario looked back and spotted weird looking symbols marked into the cave walls. Mario had never seen writing like that before.

 “What does it mean?” Mario asked

 “It’s Davelis mark. It means his treasure is somewhere down this path.” Henry said. His eyes lit up at the thought of finding the treasure at last. Mario couldn’t help but hope that bringing Henry along didn’t cause problems for him.

 “Well that can wait, we need to find the chest first!” Mario said forcefully. Henry just nodded but stayed silent as he followed him down the path. Every few feet Mario checked the map again to make sure they were going in the right direction. It wasn’t long before they came across the lake. Henry looked around confused.

 “Should we have taken one of the tunnels that split off from here? The last split had the mark of Davelis on it, maybe he hid his treasure with the chest?” Henry said in a forced causal tone that Mario knew only too well was put on.

 “No this is where we need to be.” Mario said as he scanned the map, he checked to make sure this water way led to the room with the chest. It looked as if it did. “We have to go for a swim.”

 “I uh, never learned how.” Henry stated in a matter of fact tone mixed with a hint of embarrassment. Well Mario would just have to go it alone after all.

 “Ok well, I’ll go and retrieve it. Stay here.” Mario said, as he took off his socks and shoes as well as his coat. Henry spared a glance back, Mario shook his head. Henry was going to run off to find the treasure the second Mario jumped into the water.

 “Ok, I’ll wait for you here.” Henry said with no conviction in his voice what-so-ever. But it didn’t matter, Mario didn’t have time to worry about what trouble Henry was going to get into. He was a grown man and could make his own choices and deal with the fall out.

 “Good.” Mario said as he folded the map up and placed it in a Ziploc bag he bought back in town and tucked it away inside his pocket, he took a deep breath and dived into the water.

Chapter 7

 The water was ice cold; it hit Mario like a ton of bricks as he submerged. The shock of the cold was almost enough to knock the air out of him, but he forced himself to ignore the coldness as he swam farther and farther down into the water. The deeper he went the more pressure started to grow and build up around his head. Mario had never been much of a swimmer, much less this deep and this far. On one breathe no less.

 *Keep swimming, just keep moving forward.* Those were the only thoughts that Mario could focus on at the moment. He was determined to get to the chest. His eyes started to sting from the water, but he forced himself to keep them open, his arms grew tired, but he kept moving forward. No power on this earth was going to stop him.

 After swimming for what felt like an eternity, he spotted a split in front of him. It seemed this water way split off in two directions. He didn’t notice that on the map. He felt the panic start to rise up inside him, but he tried to push it down. Right or left, those were his choices and he didn’t have time to debate it. He attempted to calm his mind and think of a spell to tell him the way, but it would require a non-verbal one and he couldn’t seem to be able to concentrate enough to even think of a spell much less enact it. The split came closer and closer, the time to decide was rapidly approaching.

 The moment of truth came, and he shifted to the right. He prayed he made the right choice, who knew where the wrong path led, if anywhere at all. He was in his 50’s; he didn’t live this long just to die under water in some cave. He always wanted to die one of two ways; in his sleep or in a blaze of glory. And truth be told, there was no glory in this death. So that just meant he was going to have to live thru it. Or at least that’s what he tried to convince himself.

 It wasn’t long before he couldn’t hold his breath any longer. He needed air and he needed it now, he felt himself growing faint. He could no longer push down the panic as it rose to the surface within his mind. He just kept thinking that it couldn’t end like this, he started pouring on as much speed as he could until he was no longer swimming but was instead just flopping around under water desperate for air. *It won’t end like this! It can’t!* He told himself as he finally broke the surface of the water.

 He made it! His breathing was in short rapid, sharp breaths. Even as thin as the air was in this room, it was a wondrous feeling to him. He paddled over to the side of the water and pulled himself out, laying back on the ground trying to steady his breathing. That was by far the longest swim of his life; he wasn’t looking forward to the return trip. He started to get up when it hit him; he barely made it here without the chest how could he make it back with the chest?

 No matter, that was a problem to worry about once he found the chest. He glanced around the room he was in. It was large and seemed to extend forever upwards. It also seemed to be far too wide to be able to fit in the cave itself. The ground was littered with what looked to be skeletons and the charred remains of everyone who had ever made it this far.

 Mario had a feeling he wasn’t going to like what he found waiting for him up ahead. He looked around to see if anything in the room was moving. As far as his eyes could see, there were only bodies, not a one of them still among the living. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Ziploc bag holding his map. He unfolded the map and looked for the chest, it seemed like it was in the dead center of this room. He couldn’t help but grin to himself, he had made the right choice in the heat of the moment.

 He started forward being as careful as he could, just in case something alive popped out at him. The room seemed to be hotter than the rest of the cave, he started to sweat and summoned a cooling spell around himself. It worked nicely, the air around him suddenly dropped to a comfortable degree.

 The hairs on the back of his neck were standing on end. He could feel it in the air, something bad was about to happen. He just didn’t know what, and then he felt it. The ground started to shake so violently and uncontrollably that he was forced to his knees. He used his left hand for balance while he scanned the room. On the far-left side of the cavern he saw it, never in his life would he have believed his eyes. This couldn’t be real. The 16-year-old kid rose up inside him with awe.

 A real-life dragon made its way towards him. His head alone was twice the size of Mario. His body was the most massive thing Mario had ever seen outside of a building. It was blood red and it had wings the size of a small airplane each. This just got tricky. The only good part was that Mario seemed to have finally recovered use of his powers, and not a moment too soon. He charged energy up in his right hand as the dragon lifted its head up high. Mario threw the energy ball at the dragon and rolled away as fire blew right where Mario was kneeling a second before.

 Fighting a dragon was one thing Mario never thought he would do in this life. Turned out that if you stuck around long enough you got to do just about everything. After all Mario had led a life that changed paths so often that he never knew what he was going to do next and now it seemed that before he could get the chest and rob Gambit of his goal, he would have to slay a dragon. He could live with that.

 The dragons head snapped around towards the direction Mario was now crouching in. It let out a loud roar and smoke shot out of its nostrils. Mario swallowed hard, ok maybe this wasn’t going to be as fun as he thought. The dragon turned to face Mario and started sprinting towards him. Mario took a calming breath and summoned as much energy as he could and fired the most powerful energy attack he could at the oncoming dragon. It drained him more then he would have expected, he must not be as recovered as he thought.

 The energy ball hit the dragon head on, but the dragon just shook it off and kept coming. Mario had no time to catch his breath as the dragon charged right at him; he jumped and rolled to the left as the dragon came rushing past. The dragon’s weight was too massive and it couldn’t stop itself as it ran head long into the cave wall with such force the whole cavern shook. The dragon collapsed to the floor, Mario knew the dragon wasn’t going to stay down for long. He hurried and pulled the map out to figure out how close he was to the chest. It still showed the chest as being in the middle of the room.

 Mario hurried to the exact spot on the map. He looked up from the map only to find that nothing was there. He checked again but this was the spot, only the chest was missing. How could this be? The map had never been wrong before.

 The dragon started to stir behind him. His time was running short, he had to find the chest and get out of there fast. A sharp pain in his side stabbed at him. He was getting too old for all of this. He looked up, on the off chance the chest was floating above him, but alas no such luck.

 The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as the room got unbelievably hot. He jumped to the ground as fire shot above him. Always trust your instincts, a lesson he learned the hard way. He rolled over onto his back as the dragon walked towards him. Mario racked his brain for any information he had on dragons, but nothing jumped out at him.

 What, was he supposed to play knight now? Go and slay the dragon, win the girl and live happily ever after. At this thought, Jessica popped into his head. Her beautiful face, her goofy laugh, the sparkle in her eyes. She was his princess, always had been. Slay the dragon, win the chest, slay the demon and win the girl.

 He jumped to his feet and clenched his fist as he moved his arm outward as if he had a sword. Nothing happened. He left his wrist blades in his warehouse, okay so no sword. What other way was there to slay a dragon? He threw energy, fire, ice, even lightning at the dragon but it had no effect other than to make him angry. He charged at Mario once more using his wings to move himself faster. This fight was not at all going how he would have hoped. The dragon spit fire at him once more and Mario barely had time to jump out of the way, this was getting tiring, run and jump, run and jump. It was getting him nowhere he needed a plan. He got up onto one knee to catch his breath for a second before trying another energy attack but before he could charge one the dragon whipped its tail at Mario and hit him square in the chest. He flew back and hit his head on the cave wall.

 He was only out for a few minutes, but it was long enough to trigger a memory long forgotten. Once when he was a protégé of the great Merlin, he heard stories about the great dragon war, the war that all but wiped out the great race. Merlin didn’t like to speak about them too often, as he lost a great deal of friends in the war, but he did make mention that a dragon’s weak spot was the under carriage.

 He slowly opened his eyes and almost at once wished he hadn’t. The dragon’s mouth was open wide, not two inches from his face, his razor sharp teeth about to pierce his skin. The horrible stench coming from his breath was almost enough to knock Mario out once more. He lowed himself down out of reach of the dragons mouth and quickly made his way underneath the dragon. The dragon’s mouth bit down on solid rock. The dragon let out a loud roar that shook the cavern with a fury that Mario had never seen before. Mario’s head was rattling at the sound but he didn’t let that stop him. He summoned as much energy as he could into his fist and rammed it into the dragon’s gut.

 The reaction was almost instantaneous, Mario’s hand forced its way through the dragons rock hard skin and guts and blood rained down on Mario. Till he was covered in it, then there was a blinding white flash and the dragon was gone. Mario spit out the blood and rolled over trying to get to his feet. He fell back down to his knees. He wiped as much of the blood off of his face as he could. He blinked his eyes a few times trying to clear his vision, he couldn’t stop seeing spots. He rubbed his eyes trying to clear them.

 “Merlin never mentioned anything about exploding after killing them.” He said to himself. He walked over to where he dropped the map and then he spotted it, two feet away was an extremely old looking chest, with markings that Mario had never seen before. It could only be the Dreamer’s chest. He walked over to it and picked it up. It was heavy but not nearly as heavy as he thought it was going to be. It seemed to have a hard lock made out of a small skull with fangs in the mouth. It could only be the skull of a vampire. Mario didn’t know it was possible to get a vampire skull, every vampire he had every killed had turned to dust.

 Mario cleared the map and put it back in the Ziploc bag and then replaced it in his shorts. He took the chest and walked over to the water; this wasn’t going to be easy. He barely made it to this room the first time and that was when he was in tip top shape, not bleeding out of his chest and head, not to mention tired as could be. But it was no matter, he needed to get out of this room and fast. He took the chest and took a deep breath before diving into the water.

 He swam as fast he could back the way he came. It was hard going as he made his way, it was getting harder and harder to hold his breath. He passed thru the side entrance he took to get to the room he left. He was almost to the surface. Just a few more feet, his face started to flush from the lack of oxygen. The chest was getting heavier and heavier. Air! He needed air and he needed it now. He tried desperately to keep from gasping for breath, but it wasn’t easy.

 The water started to get darker and darker. The whole world started to get darker and darker. It started to dawn on Mario that the world wasn’t getting darker, his vision was. If he didn’t make it to the surface and fast, then he would never make it. He tried to swim faster but the surface just seemed to be getting farther away.

Chapter 8

 “Mario! Mario are you ok mate?” Henry’s voice seemed faint, as if it was far away. Mario started to stir, his mind was fuzzy. It took a few seconds for him to remember he was swimming to the surface while carrying the Dreamer’s chest. His back was aching with pain as if he had been dragged across rocks. “Please wake up Mario!”

 Mario rolled onto his side and coughed up some water. He slowly opened his eyes and found himself just outside the water. It looked as if Henry had dragged him out of the water. “What happened?” Mario asked.

 “I saw you swimming slowly towards the surface, and then you suddenly dropped the chest and started panicking. I had to dive in and pull you out.” Henry told him. Mario slowly sat up. “And that was no easy feat. Seeing as I have never learned how to swim.” Henry said. Mario just nodded and tried to get to his feet. He coughed and fell to his hands and knees.

 “Don’t try and stand up.” Henry ordered him. Mario nodded as he ran his hands thru his hair.

 “Where is the chest?” Mario asked looking around and starting to feel his panic rise as he noticed that it was missing. Henry looked uncomfortable.

 “I couldn’t get you and the chest. As it is, it was hard enough to get you. I have never learned to swim, remember?” Henry said annoyed.

 “Fine, give me a minute to catch my breath and I’ll go back for it.” Mario said with forced determination.

 “You can’t be serious. You barely made it. . . No scratch that, you didn’t make it the first time. How do you expect to do it this time?” Henry asked him. “I won’t dive in to save you a second time.”

 “Well, I will just have to, won’t I? I am not about to leave here empty handed.” Mario told Henry.

 “You won’t be leaving empty handed. I found it!” Henry said excitedly.

 “Found what?” Mario asked, thinking that he might already know the answer.

 “Davelis treasure. It’s in a side cavern just back that way.” He pointed behind him towards a side tunnel Mario hadn’t noticed before.

 “I’m happy you found it, old friend. But I didn’t come for that. I came for the chest, and I will not leave without it.” Mario told him. He stood up, his breath still short and raspy.

 “You can hardly breath, how do you expect to just swim to the bottom get the chest and bring it back?” Henry asked. Mario shrugged.

 “I’ll figure it out.” Mario told him as he got ready to jump in.

 “Please just leave it!” Henry asked in a pleading voice.

 “Afraid I can’t.” Mario said, turning back towards the water. “I’ll be back.” he said just before he dived into the water. He swam as fast as he could to the bottom, his eyes stung as he opened them looking for the chest. It took a while for him to make it all the way to the ground beneath the water. All he saw were rocks and a few dead bodies, but the chest wasn’t anywhere to be found. He could already feel his chest start to tighten. He needed to hurry and find it or go back up for more air before coming back. He took one more pass along the bottom before starting back up just as he spotted it not far away.

 He drove back down to get the chest. He pulled at the handle, but it wouldn’t move. It seemed to be stuck in the sand. He pulled and pulled as hard as he could and couldn’t seem to get it out. He used his feet as leverage to pull the chest out of the ground. The force of pulling it free sent him hurling back but he regained his balance just in time to use his feet and free hand to brace himself as he hit the wall. He then used his feet to fling himself upward towards the surface.

 It wasn’t long before he made it to the surface of the water. As his head breached the surface of the water he looked around for Henry but couldn’t seem to find him. It was no matter, he could find him later. He pulled the chest out of the water and then pulled himself out as well. “siccare” he said loudly. The spell only took about a second to work as Mario felt his body heat up suddenly. One quick dry spell and he was ready to pull his clothes back on and picked up his bag.

 He looked around and saw no sign of Henry anywhere. Seemed he ran off the second Mario jumped back in. It made no sense, Henry knew why the two of them came to this cave and yet he seemed so against the idea of Mario going back for it. Mario couldn’t understand it.

 “Henry! You still in here?” He called out in the off chance that Henry could hear him. There was no reply, no matter. Mario picked up the chest and started making his way out of the cave. “Henry!” he yelled out again.

 “In here.” Henry called back from the next room. He must have been in the side cave that housed Davelis treasure. Mario walked into the room, but it was empty but for Henry who was standing toward the far wall looking very uncomfortable. Almost as if he would rather have been anywhere else, doing anything else.

 “Where is the treasure?” Mario asked. He was sure the Henry would have been with the treasure he was so keen on finding. Henry swallowed hard and refused to look up from the ground. He seemed to be very uneasy.

 “It’s in the truck.” he replied simply. Truck? They took a cab to this region. Where did Henry get a truck?

 “What truck?” Mario asked, confused about what was going on. Henry didn’t want to answer. He backed up towards the wall. And just shook his head. “Henry, what truck?”

 “The truck we brought here for him.” A voice said from out of the shadows. It was a voice that Mario knew only too well. A voice that haunted Mario’s every dream. The owner of the voice stepped forward into the light. “Hello Mario.” Gambit said now standing in the little bit of light shining thru the cave. Other vampires stepped out from the shadows as well. It seemed Mario was surrounded.

 “I was wondering when you would show up, Gambit.” Mario said trying to sound braver than he felt. He put the chest on the floor and placed his bag on top of it. “I take it Henry here sold me out?” Mario asked, fearing he already knew the answer.

 “I’m so sorry Mario. I didn’t” Henry started to say but Mario couldn’t be bothered to listen to the Judas.

 “Save it Henry. I’m sure you did what was best for you. Frankly I don’t care. Just stay out of the way.” Mario snapped at him. Gambit grinned at him.

 “Don’t be too hard on the boy Mario. He wouldn’t have even found this cave if it wasn’t for me.” Gambit said with his normal sneer. If Gambit already knew where the cave was then why this whole show of having Henry help Mario find it? Why didn’t he just come for it himself? “How was the dragon?” Gambit taunted him almost as if reading the questions running through Mario’s mind.

 He was too scared to face the guard dragon on his own, so he had set Mario up to face it for him. “It was fun. I’m sure you would have enjoyed slaying it yourself. If you weren’t such a busy man.” Mario said with venom in his voice. Gambit merely nodded.

 “I thought about facing it myself, but I didn’t want to rob you of the chance. Figured you might enjoy playing the role of knight.” Gambit said. Mario hated Gambit with every fiber of his being. If only he had some kind of weapon.

 Wait, he was one of the strongest sorcerers in the world. What did he need with weapons? “Well this has been fun, but I have more pressing concerns. If you don’t mind.” Mario said as if they were having a polite business conversation. Gambit seemed put back by this and in that same second Mario dropped to his knees and shot fireballs out of both hands at the vampires on either side of himself. They let out screams of pain as they burst into flames.

 The other vampires scattered in shock at seeing two of their own gunned down like that. Gambit forced Henry in front of him in one swift move. The biggest of the vampires on the left side of Mario jumped at Mario. Mario rolled onto his side and caught the vampire with his feet and kicked him back. The vampire flew back and knocked over two of his friends.

 Mario jumped up onto his feet. It has been a while since he found himself facing off against a nest of vampires. This could be fun; he could already feel his blood pumping. He summoned more fire into the palms of his hands. The fire lit up the cave and illuminated Gambit, Henry and the four vampires in front of him, the massive one included. Which meant there was most likely 5 more behind him. He pulled his right hand back to toss the first fire ball when a vampire grabbed him from behind the neck and began to choke him. He felt the fire leave his hands; he tossed the remains of one at the nearest vampire and watched as he struggled to put it out as he burned. He managed to stop the fire from consuming him at the cost of his left arm.

 Mario felt the air leave his lungs as the vampire tightened his grip. His vision started to fade. “Not doing so well, are you little buddy?” Gambit sneered at Mario, tossing Henry onto the floor, no longer feeling the need to hide behind him now that Mario was on the floor. It couldn’t end like this! Not when he was so close. Mario started pulling on the vampires arms trying to get him off of him, but it was no use. The vampire was far too strong. Gambit started to walk towards the chest laying on the floor. “Seems at long last the chest is mine.”

 He looked down at the chest and knocks Mario’s bag off of the top of it. He seemed to be studying the chest. Mario’s vision started to dim. “Kerrigan is going to be pleased. Finally get that bitch off my back.”

 “Monsieur Gambit, it isn’t polite to speak of Madam Kerrigan in such a fashion. She would not be amused were she to hear of this.” an annoying French vampire told Gambit. He had been grinding on Gambit’s nerves since he was forced on him by Kerrigan herself. He was nothing but a spy, and Gambit didn’t take kindly to spies.

 “Well I wouldn’t want her to be unhappy. Now would we boys?” Gambit asked and the other vampires murmur in agreement. Mario tried to get to his feet to give himself leverage to get up, but the vampire tightened his grip and Mario started to black out. With his vision starting to fade he saw Gambit moved his hand behind his back and pulled out a stake. “It’s such a crying shame that Mario staked you before we subdued him.”

 “What are you talking about?” The French vampire started to ask as Gambit threw the stake, it hit its mark right in the vampire’s heart. “Wha. . .” his words were cut short as he bursts into flames and his dust flew off into the wind.

 “Now where were we Mario?” Gambit asked as he walked over to him. Mario tried to summon more energy to himself, but his lack of oxygen was making that all but impossible. Gambit looked him in the eyes. “Ah, don’t tell me that you are dying already?” Gambit said as he turned away from Mario. “I was hoping to drag this out a bit longer. Oh well, snap his neck.”

 Mario felt the vampire brace his arms to follow the orders, it was now or never. Mario elbowed the vampire and threw himself backward knocking the vampire off of him. He kicked up the stake that Gambit used to slay the French vampire and caught it in his hand. He rammed the stake thru the vampire holding him. He landed softly on the pile of dust left behind. In the blink of an eye two more vampires started rushing towards Mario. Mario rolled out of the way and summoned more fire and blasted both of them.

 Gambit turned back to see what all the noise was. His face went from joyful to anger in an instant. “Kill him! Now!” Gambit yelled in blind fury. Mario sprung forward picking up his bag and grabbed hold of the chest. “Stop him! Don’t let him get away.” Gambit yelled as he rushes towards Mario. But it was too late, the teleportation was already in effect.

 Mario saw Henry back away as if to run. Gambit rounded on him and pulled him forward, “Oh no you don’t. You did this! This is your fault.” Gambit roared at Mario’s old friend. Mario didn’t see what happened next, but he heard Henry’s neck snap and the sound of his body falling to the floor as he reappeared back in San Diego. Hindrance Lane to be specific. He fell to the ground, panting for breath. But he forced himself up, he didn’t have much time before Gambit figured out what happened and came looking. He was going to have to get this stuff back to the warehouse and do so quickly. It would have been easier to teleport right there, but he was in a panic and couldn’t think of anything but getting home. He dragged his stuff inside, at least this time he wouldn’t have to work so hard to get where he needed to go. Just had to make a quick call to Sal to have him bring him his beloved car and he could finish up this quest once and for all.

 He put the chest and bag down on the floor and fell back onto the couch. His whole body aching with pain. He let out a sigh as he reached for the phone. It took him a few minutes to remember Sal’s number but before long he had the phone ringing.

 “Hello?” it was the butler’s voice. Great getting Sal on the phone was going to take longer then he thought. He had the most useless butler ever.

 “This is Mario; I need to speak with Mr. Gregory.” Mario told him promptly. There was a pause before the butler replied.

 “I will go get him for you. One second sir.” With that the butler put the phone down. Mario was surprised, that went a lot easier then he thought it was going to be. He didn’t have to wait long before Sal finally came to the phone.

 “Mario?” Sal sounded almost surprised to hear from Mario.

 “Yeah, it’s me.” Mario replied.

 “Good to hear from you. After your last request I have to admit, I didn’t think I was going to be hearing from you again.” Sal said. Mario could see how his last request would have come across as a goodbye. Truth be told he had a bad feeling at the start of all this.

 “Truth be told, I didn’t think I would be coming back. I’m glad I was wrong.” He told Sal.

 “As am I. So I take it that you are calling for your compass back?” Sal asked in a tone suggesting that he already knew this to be the case. Mario had forgotten all about giving Sal the compass, so much had happened since.

 “I’ll come for that soon, but honestly I was calling to ask a favor.” Mario told him.

 “Another one?” Sal asked in a tone that mixed annoyance and amusement together.

 “Another one. I’m at home, and I still have a great deal to do today, but I would much prefer to travel in a more . . . Pedestrian method. Could you per chance have my car brought to me from your airport?” he asked Sal with bated breath.

 “Not a problem. I thought you were going to ask me for something more demanding. I’ll send someone with the car, would an hour work?” Sal said lightheartedly. Mario was pleasantly surprised. He had never heard Sal be so kind. Normally he was only out for himself.

 “That would be great. Thank you.” Mario said. He started to hang up the phone when he heard Sal start speaking again.

 “Mario!” Sal called out. Mario put the phone back to his ear.

 “Yeah?” Mario asked.

 “I’m glad you’re alive.” Sal said simply.

 “Thanks, I’m glad I’m alive too.” Mario said with a chuckle.

 “Be sure to stop by, sometime soon.” Sal said.

 “I have to! You still got my compass.” Mario tossed back quickly. He never would have thought Sal to be one for a sensitive side.

 “See you soon, bye” Sal said as he hung up the phone.

 “Bye.” Mario said as he put the phone down.

Chapter 9

 Sal came thru even better than he promised. Mario’s pride and joy arrived at his house within twenty minutes. He threw the bag holding the books of Merlin and the map inside the trunk under the false bed. The chest was placed on top of the false bed because it was far too large to place under it.

 His destination when he turned the car on was his warehouse, but along the way he had a gut feeling that going to the warehouse would be a mistake. If there was one thing that Merlin taught him was when you have a gut feeling, when your intuition tells you something, you listen because otherwise things *will* go bad.

 He made a quick stop at an old abandoned cave and hid the chest inside it. The cave was owned by a warlock trained by Morgana herself. The cave was enchanted to be unplottable, so no one could find the chest until he came back for it in the morning. He didn’t know why he felt the need to hide the chest here, but he did, and he always followed his gut, it hadn’t led him wrong so far.

 After dropping off the chest he wasn’t sure what to do next. It didn’t make sense to him to go back to the warehouse to drop off the books and map if he was just going to go back tomorrow with the chest and the compass as well. Maybe the best thing to do would be to just go home and sleep. Sleep seemed like a foreign notion to him but a nice one.

 As he sped down the freeway, he spotted the exit leading to his son’s apartment. He didn’t know what drove him to do it, but he cut across the lane and exited towards the apartments his kid lived in. He parked a few blocks away from his son’s apartments. He wanted to get some air as well as seeing his son even if he knew he couldn’t go talk to him. At least not while Gambit yet drew breath, or well whatever it was vampires did.

 Walking was a lot harder than he would have cared to admit. It seemed that the beating he took back in Greece was a lot worse than he originally thought. But he had been thru worse and most likely will be again in the future. His mind kept flashing back to the sound of Henry’s neck snapping. Yet another friend who was taken from this world far too soon.

 Once more Mario’s mind went to the morbid thoughts of death. He couldn’t help but wonder when it was his time to go, it seemed everyone around him was dropping like flies. He couldn’t be far behind, not with the life he had lived. The things he did on the daily basis.

 He wished he could have done something to save him. He knew that he should be glad that Henry was dead after the way he betrayed him, but he couldn’t help but feel bad for him. The two of them had been friends for many years and one moment of weakness wasn’t enough to wash all of that away. At least not in Mario’s book.

 This thought accompanied Mario as he walked towards his son’s apartments. He didn’t even notice how far or how fast he was walking. He spotted his son walking and joking around with his three friends from earlier. A 16 year old kid just having fun with his peers, not a care in the world. How Mario would have given anything to go back to those days, when he and Ralph had crazy adventures and not a care in the world.

 Seeing his son playing around and joking with his friends filled him with pride. He was young healthy and surrounded by people who cared about him. Maybe he didn’t have a father around him, but he was still doing fine. Still making his way in this world and Mario couldn’t be happier.

 “I’m proud of you son.” Mario said under his breath.

 “You! Have a son? Now this is just amazing information, how could I have not known this?” at these words Mario felt his heart drop. A dark sense of dread filled him up. He couldn’t be here, there was no way that he could have traveled from Greece to here in such a short time. He spun around, and sure enough Gambit was standing in front of him. “Miss me?”

 “How did you get here?” Mario demanded. Fear filling him up and making him freeze. He couldn’t be here. Not so close to his son.

 “You don’t work for Morgana and not pick up a few tricks.” Gambit said as he pulled out a talisman. He flipped it into the air as if it was a quarter. Mario’s mind was racing a million miles a second. Did he follow him to the chests hiding spot? Did he now know where Mario lived? Did he see which one of the kids was Jon?

 “So that let you travel here? Impressive. How did you know I would be here?” Mario tried to ask sounding unconcerned. His voice faltered a bit but hopefully Gambit didn’t pick up on it.

 “This little toy here does more than just teleport me across the world. It tracks magic, I would have been here sooner but I had to tuck away my little Easter egg.” Gambit said with a grin.

 “You didn’t have to kill Henry.” Mario said with disgust.

 “Don’t feel too bad for him, after all he did sell you out.” Gambit pointed out.

 “He made a mistake, we all do and he did try and warn me.” Mario said. He wasn’t sure why it was so important for him to defend the memory of Henry, but it was. Maybe it was because he had lost far too many friends and would rather remember him as a friend than an enemy.

 “He was a fool, that’s why he had to die. Simple as that.” Gambit said the smile gone from his lips. Mario felt his anger start to rise. This was it, the end of his rivalry with Gambit. He started to channel his energy into heat, one quick fire ball and Gambit was dust. The fire started to form in his hand.

 “Well, he will be avenged.” Mario said as he got ready to toss the fire ball, but Gambit let out a laugh and shook his head as he spun the talisman.

 “Don’t think so.” he said simply as the fire disappeared from Mario’s hand. Mario looked at his empty hand in shock.

 “What the hell?” the words escaped him before he could stop himself. It brought a big grin to Gambit’s face.

 “Not only does it track power and bring me too it, but it also blocks said power. You my friend are powerless. How can the all-powerful Mario deal with that?” Gambit said. Mario’s heart sunk. He was sore and weak from the lack of sleep and the beating he took from both the dragon and Gambit’s men. Without his powers this was not going to be an easy fight.

 “I can still take you, blood sucker.” Mario said braver than he felt.

 “You can’t. I’m going to kill you and then, I’m going to hunt down your son and kill him slowly. Make him beg for death.” Gambit taunted him. The dread that Mario had been feeling changed to anger. His blood started to boil.

 “You won’t get the chance.” He yelled as he ran and tackled Gambit to the floor and started hitting him in the face as hard as he could. He could feel his knuckles start to bleed as he drew blood from Gambit’s face. Gambit kneed him in the gut and threw him off with such force that Mario flew across the street and hit the wall of an apartment building hard. He dropped to the ground his whole body shaking with the impact. He tried to stand but fell to his knees and coughed up blood.

 It couldn’t end like this. Not when he was so close to having his family back. He wouldn’t let it end like this. He forced himself to stand and face Gambit who was walking towards him. A grim look on his face as he wiped away the blood from the cut on his cheek that Mario gave him.

 “You ready to die old friend?” Gambit asked in a tone suggesting mercy. Mario took a step towards Gambit and held his head up high.

 “Not quite yet. I still got some fight left in me.” Mario said honestly. Gambit’s trademark smirk returned to his face.

 “Glad to hear it.” Gambit said as he hit Mario in the gut. Mario couldn’t move fast enough to avoid it. He fell back to his knees holding his stomach.

 “You know damn well that nothing short of death will keep me down.” Mario said defiantly as he got to his feet.

 “I was hoping you would say that.” Gambit said as he hit Mario in the stomach with two quick left jabs and hard right upper cut to Mario’s jaw that sent him flying backward and landing hard on the ground twenty feet away. People started coming out of their homes to watch.

 Mario started to sit up, trying to regain his breath but Gambit was on top of him in moments, his fangs baring. “Hey yo! Leave that old man alone” a tall well-built man yelled walking towards the two of them. Gambit head snapped around to look at the man coming and let out a growl. Before Mario even knew what was happening Gambit had jumped up and snapped the man’s neck.

 It was all the time Mario needed to regain himself. People were panicking now as the man’s body hit the ground. Mario was upon Gambit in seconds, hitting him hard with a left, right, left, and another right. Knocking Gambit back, farther and farther, he hit him with his right knee then turns it into a back kick. Gambit fell to the ground. Mario was panting hard as Gambit fell back.

 “I’ve had enough of you! This ends now.” Mario said as he broke off a branch from a tree. Ready-made stake just dying to pierce Gambit’s heart. Gambit jumped onto his feet.

 “I won’t be slayed that easy old timer.” Gambit spit out.

 “Old timer?” Mario said as he spun the stake in his hand. “I’m younger than you. By a lot.” Mario said feeling insulted.

 “Don’t look it. I still got my good looks. You, not so much.” Gambit said. The words were out of his mouth seconds before he jumped into the air and kneed Mario in the face and then came down on him with a hit to the side of the head. Mario spit out blood as he fell to the floor. “This ends now!” Gambit said as he picked Mario up and bit his neck.

 This wasn’t the first time that Mario had felt the numbing sensation that came along with being bit. It gave off a feeling of being high; making it all but impossible for the victim to resist. Mario had only managed to fight it off once. And he wasn’t as old or weak as he was now. But he couldn’t let Gambit win, not now.

 It took everything he had to hit Gambit as hard as he could and force him off of him. Blood came flying out of the bite marks and Mario fell back to the ground trying to catch his breath. This wasn’t going as planned. He had to do something and quick in order to turn things around. His neck was throbbing with pain. He picked the stake back up as he walked towards Gambit who was back on his feet within seconds. The crowd that had gathered around was getting larger and larger.

 Gambit moved with speed that surprised even Mario, who had fought him time and time again. He came in with a blow to the right that Mario managed to block, then a blow to the left, blocked yet again. Mario hit low and knocked Gambit back a few feet giving himself some breathing room. He followed up with a quick left jab and a hard right hook knocking Gambit back. Gambit let out a howl and rammed Mario hard in the gut and then head butted him knocking Mario to the floor yet again.

 Mario landed hard on the ground slamming his head hard on the sidewalk causing it to crack from the force of it. Mario slowly opened his eyes, everything was blurry. His vision seemed to have been effected by the blow. People in the crowd are yelling and Gambit seems to be just enjoying every second of it.

 “I can’t believe after all this time you were this easy to beat.” Gambit said as he flipped the talisman into the air again. “I hope your son puts up more of a fight than this.” those words seemed to focus Mario’s mind. He couldn’t let Gambit hurt Jon. He knew it was already too late for himself, he could feel death approaching, but he had to save his son before he went. No matter the cost.

 He rolled onto his side, trying to keep his head clear. Not an easy task as the pain threatened to overwhelm him. He spotted a baseball sized rock not far from his left side. Gambit walked towards him slowly, still talking and gloating. Mario could no longer make out what he was saying, but he did notice the talisman flipping thru the air. He had an idea, but he would only get one chance and succeed or fail it will be the last thing he ever did. He knew it deep inside his bones.

 He waited until Gambit was just the right distance from him and he made his move. He threw himself sideways, picked up the rock and tossed it in the blink of an eye. Even Gambit, with his vampire speed and reflexes was caught off guard as the rock flew through the air and hit the talisman smashing it to pieces.

 Mario felt the effects instantly. His powers came rushing back into him, it was almost too much for him to bear, but he had a goal. There was still one more thing he needed to do before he died. He concentrated as hard as he could. Clearing his mind of everything around him until his mind was blank but for one thought. He was dimly aware of Gambit’s movements close by, but he paid it no mind. He was a man on a mission and he would be damned if he let anything stop him when he was so close.

 He was adrift, slowly gliding away from his body. It was a surreal experience, one that Mario had dealt with many times before. But never like this, he saw his body, bloodily beaten, he could see himself slipping into death. It was something that Mario never thought he would see. Gambit had his game face on, vampires look normal, nothing about them screams undead monster until they wish to feed. Then the fangs come out, their eyes darken to red or yellow depending on the vampire, Gambit’s eyes were yellow, their faces became more animal like. Almost like a human version of a bat. Mario’s heart dropped, Gambit was going to finish him off and do it quickly. It seemed their game is finally coming to an end. Mario wished he could have returned to his body and got a few more licks in before it all ended. But he had places to be.

 Mario flew across the air like a rocket. Never before had he traveled this fast in his astral form before. He could sense his target; he only hope was that he could make it there before Gambit finished him off for good. The taunts that Gambit must even now be throwing at him ate away at Mario. He never fathomed that it would end this way. He always figured that he would be the one to kill Gambit.

 He felt a sharp pain shoot thru his neck and a sense of peace flow thru him for the second time this day. Gambit was feeding off of him. His astral form started to falter, he forced himself to clear his head and focused on the task at hand. Death can come later, right now he had one final goal to achieve.

 He felt his target right below him. He looked down at the house beneath him. At first glance there didn’t seem to be anything special about this particular house but then he noticed all the people. He had found himself drifting above a high school pool party. He moved in for a closer look, he spotted one of Jon’s friends, the one named Jax walking into the shed with a few other kids. But Jon didn’t seem to be with them. He veered off in search of his son once more.

 He spotted Lex hit a guy across the face and knocking him into the pool. The girl standing with them screamed, slapping Lex and then dived into the pool after her man. His day didn’t seem to be going good ether. Mario kept looking around and finally found his target. Jon and Will were sitting next to the pool in lounge chairs deep in conversation. Will’s eyes kept darting to all the girls in bikinis walking past while Jon was trying incredibly hard not to be noticed watching some girl in a black bikini in the pool swimming.

 Mario floated down next to Jon, his time was growing short. His energy was depleting rapidly. It seemed Gambit was going to be finished draining him in no time at all. Mario looked on at his son with pride. His greatest regret in life was that he didn’t play a part in raising him.

 Mario’s astral form start flickering out. He was dead; it was just a matter of time until it caught up with him. He had only moments to do what he came to do. He unloaded all of his memories about the location of the chest and where it was, as well as a warning of how dangerous Gambit was into his son’s head. The process wasn’t easy, and it was a very slow one. It took an unbelievable amount of energy and concentration to do it right. It was a race against time and his time was running out fast.

 Before he got a chance to finish, he found himself being pulled back into his body. He couldn’t be sure how much, if anything got inside Jon’s brain. He could only hope that he pulled it off. Gambit was standing above him and was wiping Mario’s blood off of his face as he returned to human form. He had his trademark smirk glued onto his face as he looked down on an all but dead Mario.

 “Well that was worth the wait.” Gambit said with a sense of victory. Those were the last words Mario ever heard as he looked upon his hated foe, Gambit’s face was the last thing he saw as the rest of his life left him. The world faded to black all around him and Mario died with only the thought of his son at a party trying to get the courage up to talk to a girl as comfort. It brought it all back to how this started for him all those years ago up in the mountains.

The end

To be continued in WarZone #1

Find out more about Mario in Mario Chronicles #1