WarZone Entertainment presents

Mario Chronicles # 2

Ghost Stories

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Chapter 1

Halts Glee was a quiet town, where not much happened. The people who lived there tended to spend their whole lives there, taking over whatever job their parents left them. It was a rare occurrence when a new family moved to town, in the past thirty years only two families had moved in. One was the Veneruzzo’s, it took a while, but they had become accepted by polite society. The second family, a much more recent addition to the town was the Russo family.

The Russo’s were not well liked in town, the parents owned a small shop near the outskirts of town. It sold mostly antiques and wasn’t frequented by the townsfolk all too often. More often than not people would go in there as a joke, pretend to be interested in artifacts and get the owners all excited like they had a sell and then just leave, sometimes people would even vandalize the store.

Mr. Russo tried not to let his family know about the problems at the store, he didn’t want them to worry but things were starting to get bad. The settlement he won from his old job was quickly disappearing into the sinkhole that was his shop. If he didn’t do something and fast they would be out on the streets before too long.

Deep down he wished there was another way to solve his problems, that maybe they would just work themselves out, but he knew they never would. This town had gone out of its way to show him and his family that they were not welcome and that wasn’t likely to change anytime soon.

This offer was the only hope he had of keeping a roof over his family and the lights on in this failed experiment he called a store. He only prayed that his choice would never come back to haunt his family, or even worse, that his family would find out about it. He didn’t think he could live with that. All he really cared about was his family.

He closed up the cash register for the night. It was another slow day. He looked around his shop, all the amazing trinkets he had found over the years and no one wanted any of them. He had a shop full of treasures and he just wished people could see that.

He had to get across town to his meeting, a meeting that he would do anything to avoid, but it was his family’s only hope. He grabbed his overcoat off of the coat rack next to the door and cut the lights. He turned and took one last look around the shop. He was doing the right thing. He just needed to keep reminding himself of that. He locked up the shop and was on his way. This was for his family and he would never do anything to let his family down.

It was a cool summer night; the stars were shinning bright as the full moon graced the sky. Mario laid back on his blanket with Alyssa cuddled up next to him. It was the perfect night, they were alone in the field just the two of them. Mario honestly couldn’t remember the last time he was this happy. He kissed her gently on the forehead. She looked up at him with her bright brown eyes, so full of love.

“I’m so happy.” She said, her voice was so soft and full of caring. Mario couldn’t help but smile as he brushed her hair out of her face. Her skin was so smooth, he had never felt this way about another soul before. This was the happiest night of his life.

“I’ve never been happier. I’m so glad I found you.” He meant every word of it. Who would have thought that someone getting rejected in front of a party full of people would lead to something so wonderful happening? He locked eyes with her, it was so easy to get lost in them, his eyes move slowly downward. He had never seen someone so beautiful before. Her lips were so full, her bright red lipstick looked so inviting, he couldn’t help himself as he leaned forward and kissed her.

He had spent his whole life wanting to find someone he clicked with, someone who he could love and who could love him and here she was. He had never been this happy before. Nothing could ruin this moment for him. Nothing.

“Mario! Mario!.” Ralph’s voice came from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. He pulled away from Alyssa, it was the last thing he wanted to do but he had to find out where the voice was coming from. He looked around the empty field, there was no one there. Alyssa looked at him and shook his arm.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, her voice welcoming him back to her embrace. He smiled at her and started to move back in for another kiss.

“Wake up!” the voice rang out again. Mario stopped short of kissing her, her lips pulling him in but the bodiless voice was distracting him.

“You don’t hear that?” he asked her as he looked back at her. The confusion showed clear as day on her face. Her expression turned to concern.

“Hear what?” she asked gently. No hint of sarcasm or even mockery. It was a simple question, she didn’t hear the voice, than why did he?

“Mario!” the voice thundered in his ear, it was deafening. The field rapidly disappeared into complete blackness. Mario’s heart started to race faster than it ever had before. He didn’t know what to do or how to react. He grabbed hold of Alyssa even harder than before as the darkness spread to her. Please don’t let it take her, anything but her. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing her to this strange darkness that was becoming his whole world.

“I know you can hear me.” Mario’s eyes snapped open as the darkness consumed her. His vision was blurry as it adjusted to his new environment. It took a few minutes for his eyes to fully adjust. “Finally, you must have been having some dream.” Slowly Ralph started to come into focus, it was his voice that pulled Mario out of his peaceful sleep. His enchanting dream. He knew it wasn’t Ralph’s fault but that didn’t stop him from being angry. The library started to come into clear focus as well. It wasn’t much of a library, but it was the best that Halts Glee had to offer. Being such a small town it didn’t feel the need to put a great deal of money into this facility but it more or less did the trick when looking for books to do homework assignments on. However for Mario’s needs it seems to be lacking.

He had spent the past month diving into every book he could find. Whenever he had a free moment he was here, trying to find some clue no matter how small that might revile to him what happened that night, when he met Alyssa. He had a feeling she was a ghost, it was the only thing that made sense, but Ralph was quick to point out that ghosts weren’t real. Mario knew he was right but nothing else seemed to make any sense.

“You have no idea. What time is it?” he asked Ralph. The only reason Ralph would be here was if it was time to go to school or really late at night and his parents had sent him to find him. The one good thing about this town’s library was that it was open 24/7. It was the only place in town that was. Before that fateful night Mario had never set foot in this building now he basically lived here.

“It’s still early. But I figured you could use some fresh air.” Ralph said as he helped Mario to his feet. He could feel the fatigue kicking in, it would seem he hadn’t woken up from his slumber all the way just yet. It was just as well, he needed to stay here and keep looking. He didn’t have time to go have fun.

“I need to stay here, I’m really busy.” He told Ralph as he tried to pull free. Ralph only grabbed onto him harder and lifted him up.

“No, you need a break from whatever this is. I mean look at you. You can’t even stay awake.” Ralph pointed out. He had a point. Mario couldn’t remember the last time he did anything fun, hell he couldn’t remember the last time he slept either. This was quickly becoming his life.

“I can take a break later, I haven’t found what I’m looking for yet.” It was the truth, Mario knew Ralph wouldn’t understand but that wasn’t his problem. He needed to find out all he could about Alyssa. It wasn’t easy, but he was starting to make head way. He had already found out she died 10 years ago. She went out on a date with her boyfriend and never made it home. He told the sheriff department that they got into a fight and she stormed off and that was the last he saw of her. They searched high and low for her before finding her body on the side of the mountain, stuck between two trees. It seemed that she had tripped and fell down the hill, snapping her neck as she hit the tree. But that wouldn’t explain why she came back as a ghost. From everything he could tell ghosts were created by people with unfinished business, and mostly only those who died violent deaths. There was a brief murder investigation, but it was ruled out rather quickly. Mario figured that he should check out the boyfriend, but it had been ten years since the murder. This wasn’t something that was going to be easy for a sixteen-year-old boy to do quickly or easily. Which meant Mario needed more facts before confronting him.

“And what are you looking for Mario? This ghost girl of yours?” Ralph said a bit more bitterly than he meant to. Mario hated that he couldn’t make Ralph understand, he wanted his friend to be a part of this, but Ralph didn’t seem to want any part of it.

“Yeah, I’m close.” He knew that Ralph didn’t want to hear this but too bad, he should learn not to ask questions he didn’t want to hear the answers of. “I think I know who killed her.” Ralph’s face said it all. He just shook his head.

“And who would that be?” Mario shallowed hard, he wasn’t ready to tell Ralph who he was going up against, but now seemed as good a time as any. At least Ralph was listening for a change.

“Cole Simon,” *here it comes,* he thought to himself and sure enough the second he said the name Ralph’s face dropped. His eyes went wide, and he looked around to make sure no one overheard them.

“The Sheriff?” Ralph said in an almost whisper. Mario just nodded.

“Yeah.”

“No, Mario no! Don’t start with this. Please, I get the whole thing with this girl is weird and all but there is a perfectly reasonable explanation and it isn’t a ghost. Don’t go picking a fight with the sheriff over something you made up in your head.” Ralph pleaded with him.

“I won’t.”

“Thank god. Can we go now?” Ralph asked.

“Not until I know more.” Mario said as he sat back down.

“Mario, you’re starting to scare me.” Ralph told him, he kneeled next to Mario. Mario could see the fear on his best friend’s face, and it tore him up inside.

“Ralph, I know what I’m doing. He killed his girlfriend and I can prove it.” He just wasn’t sure how yet. Ralph didn’t seem convinced. “Let me show you.”

“Show me?” Ralph got to his feet, the prospect of being shown seemed to scare him a bit. “Show me how? I’m not messing with the police, I go out of my way to avoid them.”

“Not what I meant.” Mario stood back up, Ralph looked at him uncertain.

“Than what?” Ralph asked, he didn’t want an answer. He took a few steps back. Mario dug through the books he had been reading and found the one he was looking for. He showed it to Ralph,

“I can show you a ghost, than you will know I’m telling the truth.” Mario put the book under his arm. He didn’t know how to read the reaction on Ralph’s face. He seemed terrified and unbelieving. Mario didn’t know what scared Ralph more, the thought of really summoning a ghost or the thought that Mario was crazy enough to think that he could summon one.

“Are you out of your fucking mind!?” Ralph screamed out. This was not the reaction that Mario was hoping to hear. Mario scanned the library only to find all eyes on them.

“Ralph.” He whispered to his friend, “please don’t draw attention to us.”

“Don’t Ralph me! What is wrong with you?” The librarian stormed over to them. This was the last thing Mario needed. If the librarian saw the books Mario had been reading he was likely to get kicked out of here. Most of them came from a section of the library that was closed off to the general public. He needed to deal with this situation and fast. He took a step forward and put his hand on Ralph’s shoulder. Making sure not to drop the book he was holding under his arm.

“Ralph,” he hit him in the gut hard, Ralph bends over but Mario caught him. “Shut up.” He started to carry him away from all his stuff towards the librarian. She stormed over to him, Mario had always been a bit intimidated by her. She was tall with dark black hair and giant glasses that made her eyes look giant on her face. A long sharp nose that her glasses hung on. A sense of authority hung on her tightly. She wasn’t someone to cross.

“What is going on here?” she demanded. Mario tried his best to smile.

“So sorry Madam Horn, my friend here is having an asthma attack, he was screaming for help. He needs some air so I’m going to take him outside.” He told her calmly. Hoping she didn’t look at the book that he was hiding between their bodies. She looked over their heads at the table, littered with books that he shouldn’t have. Hopefully she couldn’t tell what the books were from this distance. “Don’t worry about my mess, I’ll put everything back once he is better.” He added quickly so she wouldn’t go over there. She didn’t seem happy but nodded slowly.

“See that you do.” She turned to look at Ralph. “And you, young man. I don’t care if you are dying, I don’t ever want to hear you scream in my library again” with that she spun around and stormed away. Other people in the library went back to doing whatever they were doing before. Mario had a few minutes to get Ralph under control. He started walking again, glancing a look at Ralph who didn’t seem happy at all.

“What the hell was that?” he demanded as he pushed away from Mario. He couldn’t let this spiral out of control again, his little trick wouldn’t work a second time.

“You were going to get us in trouble. I had to think fast, sorry I hit you but just trust me. This will change everything!” Mario pleaded with Ralph, as quietly as he can. Ralph didn’t seem happy, and Mario really couldn’t blame him. He would have been pissed if Ralph had hit him.

“Make this quick.”

“Thank you!” Mario couldn’t believe the luck! Ralph was going to let him show him the truth. He was going to have to lead him somewhere private. Ralph grabbed his arm and turned him back around to face him.

“But when this doesn’t work, and it won’t. You forget all this nonsense and we go to this party that Cindy is throwing.” Ralph said, Mario wasn’t sure he was willing to make this deal, but he had to try.

“Deal.” Mario said as they started to walk again.

“Good, so let’s hurry this along and get to this party.” Ralph said, Mario couldn’t help but laugh.

“So, who is she?” Mario asked, he had a feeling that Ralph had a new crush. Ralph smiled and looked away.

“Just this girl in my English class. Lily, I’ve been trying to ask her out for a while, but it never seems to go anywhere.” Ralph said a bit defeated. Mario hated seeing him like this. If anyone understood girl problems, it was him. Seeing as the love of his life was a ghost girl he spent one night with.

“Does she at least know you like her?” Mario asked as they entered the stairs.

“Know? As in know? No. Not so much, but I have strong reason to suspect that she might suspect. Or so I suspect.” Ralph said, he tended to ramble when he was nervous. It always cracked Mario up.

“You are something else my friend.” Mario said with a laugh. Ralph nodded.

“So I’ve been told.” Things always seemed to be better when Ralph was by his side. These past few weeks had not been fun being on his own. He knew if he could just convince him that this stuff was real than the two of them could figure it all out a lot easier. No more late nights *alone.* He would finally have someone to help him make sense of all this.

They made it to the top of the stairs in the back of the library. Mario had been spending almost all of his time in this building and whenever reading became too much for him he would wonder around and explore. It was a few days before he found this sealed off room and thought it was the perfect place to try a summoning. Finding something to summon was another matter altogether. He had no intention of bringing some evil creature into this world, he just wanted to prove to himself that he wasn’t crazy. That what he saw that night was real.

“I’ve never seen this part of the library before.” Ralph said as Mario opened the door to the darkened room. Ralph was oozing off unease. Mario couldn’t help but smile to himself, he had always been the more reckless of the two, dragging Ralph into crazy situations. Ralph would always come along but was never happy about it, Mario couldn’t help but miss those days. Ever since they started high school they more or less cleaned up their act. It wasn’t intentional, just one of the draw backs of growing up.

“You’ve never even been in a library before.” Mario said with a laugh. Ralph shot him an evil look. It was so easy to get under his skin.

“Fuck you! I can read.” Ralph said with a laugh. “So, what are we doing in here?” he looked around the room trying to get a bearing on where they were or why they would be there.

“I’m going to prove once and for all what I’ve been telling you.” Mario said as he pointed to his little surprise in the back of the room. He had been working on it for the past few days, making sure he got it just right. He knew even before opening his mouth that Ralph would react badly, but his reaction was priceless.

Ralph followed Mario’s line of sight and was shocked to see a pentagram painted in bright red on the floor, candles lined around the outer circle. Ralph let out a scream and stumbled backward, knocking over a shelf of books as he fell to the ground.

“Shut up before someone hears you!” Mario snapped, he looked quickly to the door, praying that no one came up to investigate. He had been working towards this for too long for Ralph to mess it all up now.

“What is that?” Ralph demanded, not even trying to stand up.

“It’s a pentagram.” Mario shrugged.

“What the hell do you have a pentagram painted on the floor for?” Ralph demanded getting to his feet.

“I didn’t paint it, it came with the library. Lucky break for us.” Mario said as he helped his friend to his feet. Ralph did not seem amused.

“Don’t bullshit.” Ralph demanded.

“Stop yelling?! Okay fine, I painted it but that doesn’t matter. I’m going to summon a small demon called a. . .”

He pulled out the book he brought up with them and tried to read it, he had never been good with other languages. Maybe he should have thought this plan through a little more. If he got even a word wrong who knew what kind of damage he could do. He looked down at the book he snuck up here, it was a spell in Latin to summon a Ca’lee demon. A small spirit demon that couldn’t live in this world for more than five minutes. Mario’s plan was to summon the demon, show it to Ralph and then watch the demon die. It was a pure simple plan that Mario had completely in hand. “Calee? Kaalee? I don’t know how to say it.”

“You want to summon a demon?!” He all but yelled at Mario. On his face was a look of terror that scared Mario to his core. It was almost enough to make him question his plan. Almost. He had come too far, just a quick spell and a small little demon would show up and die in front of the two of them. Then Ralph would see what Mario had been telling him all along.

“It’s not a big one.”

“Well that makes it ok then!” Sarcasm, that was Mario’s job. It didn’t fit well coming from Ralph.

“It can’t live in this world. As soon as it shows up it will start to die. It’ll be here just long enough to prove that there is a world beyond our own. Then, then you can believe me about Alyssa.” Mario hated the way his voice sounded. He didn’t want to beg, but it was more important than Mario would have wanted to admit.

“I don’t like this Mario. Even if you’re right and this, this spell? Even if it works, I don’t think we should summon a demon. That’s not good. I mean its evil. As in evil, evil.” As much as Mario hated to admit to himself Ralph had a point. Maybe he shouldn’t do this. Maybe they should just leave and go to the damn party. It couldn’t be any worse than the last one. *No! I need to do this!*

“Look, Ralph, I want you to be here. It means a lot to me that you believe me. But if you aren’t comfortable than you can leave. But I need to do this.” Mario told him and made his way over to the circle. He steadied himself for the sound of Ralph leaving. It never came. Ralph took a step closer to him as he bent over and started to light the candles.

“I’m not going to abandon you, no matter how stupid you are.” Ralph said as he took a place near the edge of the circle. “Do you need me to do anything?” he swallowed hard as he said it. Mario couldn’t help but flash him his trademark grin. Ralph wanted nothing to do with any of this, but he was too good a friend not to stay.

“Just keep an eye out.” Mario said as he finished lighting the candle and took a seat in the middle of the circle. He just hoped he could say the words right, Latin was not his best subject.

Ralph watched on as Mario read from his book. The only thought going through his mind was about how wrong this was. He knew Mario had been having this weird ghost obsession these past few days but that was no reason to be messing with the devil and his minions. Ralph may not have been the best Catholic, but his mom would beat the life out of him if she ever found out that he was sitting here watching his friend summon a demon.

He looked around the dark room, he desperately wanted to run for it. On the way up here he didn’t believe for a second that anything would happen, but now that he was here and he was watching Mario chanting in Latin his heart sank. He had never been so scared in his life. Mario promised him that he was only summoning a small demon who couldn’t live in this world as a way of proving to the both of them that the supernatural exists. Ralph couldn’t help thinking that this might be too high a cost for proof.

No matter how hard he tried he couldn’t understand a word of what Mario was saying. He couldn’t help hoping that Mario got the words wrong and nothing happened. It didn’t matter if the demon was only here for a few minutes or here for keeps. Nothing good could come from summoning demons, that Ralph knew for sure.

Mario finished talking and looked around confused, maybe it didn’t work. Ralph let out a sigh of relief. Mario seemed flustered and started to read again, Ralph recognized the words Mario was saying. He was starting again from the beginning. *Why can’t he just leave well enough alone?*

After three tries Mario finally had had enough. He threw the book down on the ground and got to his feet. He spotted the look of relief on Ralph’s face. It was always a great feeling when your friends were happy to see you fail.

“We done yet?” Mario could hear the hope in Ralph’s voice. He didn’t want to be here, and he had been a good sport, waiting here and watching Mario make an ass of himself. Mario let out a sigh and got to his feet.

“I guess.” The disappointment that escaped through his voice was nothing next to the disappointment eating away at his insides. Ralph hit him on the arm, a smile coming on his face now that they were so close to leaving.

“So, can we get going? I really want to check out this party.” Ralph said, excitement raising in his voice. All the time and energy he had put into planning this out, all for nothing, He just wanted to prove to himself that he was right, that ghosts lived and that there was more to this world than meets the eyes. Today was a letdown and going to a party full of people he hated was not going to help any.

“Lead the way.” the words weren’t even out of his mouth before Ralph started to lead him out of the deserted room. Mario reluctantly followed him. Before exiting the room, he took one more look back, the dark room sat silently, nothing but the red markings on the floor. He didn’t understand what he did wrong. He turned back and started out of the room.

A loud crack sounded off from inside the room. He hurried back only to find the room just as still and empty as before. For a half a second Mario thought he saw a flash of light crack in the center of the room but it must have been his imagination. There was nothing there.

“Are you coming or what?” Ralph’s asked from behind him. Mario took one last look into the room, he was going to have to come back and clean this up after the party. He didn’t need for the librarian to find out what he had been up to up here and ban him.

Chapter 2

The party was in full swing by the time Mario and Ralph pulled up. Ralph was radiating excitement at the prospect of talking to this Lily girl. Mario had been racking his brain on the ride over trying to recall what Lily looked like. He knew that he recognized that name he just couldn’t place her face.

The house was overrun with teenagers, most of which were drunk. Mario remembered his first drink at the party last week, it was not something he wanted to repeat but at the same time he didn’t want to give people yet another reason to think he was weird. He would have a few beers and call it a night. Hopefully by then Ralph would be off talking to his new girl and wouldn’t notice his escape.

“So, any idea where this Lily is?” Mario asked, noticing that the dirty looks had already started before they even entered the house.

“No clue. Let’s just act natural and when I see her I’ll go work my way over.” Ralph said.

“Work your way over?” disbelief washed over Mario as it hit him that Ralph wasn’t meeting this girl here. He was just hoping to run into her.

“Yeah. That’s the plan.” He avoided looking at Mario as he spoke, taking in the party as they went.

“She doesn’t know you’re coming, does she?” Mario asked.

“Not as such. But she will know when I talk to her.” Ralph posted up against the wall as his eyes scanned around the room. He was clearly a man with a mission. Mario shook his head and leaned on the wall next to him.

“Ok, now you already said she doesn’t know you like her. Does she at least know that you exist?” Mario asked, he knew the question was a bit harsh, but he was doing important work at the library before Ralph made him leave. Ralph’s face went a bright shade of red, a color normally saved for Mario’s own face when he was embarrassed. Great, he hurt Ralph’s feelings. Not what he had set out to do.

“Yes, she does! Unlike you, I actually get to know people before throwing myself at them like an ass at some party.” He let the words sink in for a minute before storming off. The words hit Mario like a ton of bricks. It was true, Mario didn’t really know Cynthia that well, he had always just liked her from afar. But it was still a low blow for Ralph to say that. He was over her, more or less, but the way people looked at him still haunted his dreams. His words must have really hurt Ralph for him to storm off like that. He was normally the most easy-going person in the world. It took a lot to piss him off.

Anger was bubbling up inside of Ralph as he stormed away from Mario. He spent so much of his time, his energy on taking care of Mario. He risked his immortal soul not an hour ago while he tried to summon some kind of demon, just so he could feel better about getting rejected by some girl he didn’t even know. He got that Mario was hurting, he really liked Cynthia and she did him dirty the other night so he latched onto the next girl he met. But come on, if her mom tells you she had been dead for ten years, then she must have really not liked you. That’s a horrible way to get shot down, but he was just going to have to accept it and move on. He shouldn’t be taking it out on Ralph. Not after everything they had been through together.

“What’s up Ralph?” the sound of his name startled him out of his thoughts. He looked up to find his classmate Joe making drinks for some girls from their English class. Joe was a cool guy, not someone Ralph spent a lot of time hanging out with, but that was mostly because all of his free time was spent with Mario. He looked back and spotted Mario still leaning against the wall, trying to act like he wasn’t looking over at them.

“Not much man, how are you guys doing?” he asked as he walked over to them.

“Want a drink?” Joe asked.

“Sure, that sounds good.” He said as he thought back to his first beer the other day, he really didn’t like it, but it might help him relax a bit.

“What’s your poison?” Joe asked, the girls lined up their shots and took them. Ralph tried to pull their names from his memory, he knew they were in his class, but he just couldn’t think of it.

“Whatever you know how to make.” He said jokingly.

“So… Vodka straight?” Ralph’s face fell flat, he had to be joking. He couldn’t drink it straight, that would kill him! Joe seemed to notice the scared look on his face, he hit him on the arm playfully. “I’m kidding man. I got you.” The girls started laughing at him too. Ralph felt a little flustered, it was bad enough that Mario made him the bud of jokes, he didn’t need to put up with it from other people.

“Here you go man.” Joe handed Ralph his mix drink, he looked down at it, he had no clue what it was, only a strong feeling that he wasn’t going to like it.

“Drink up.” The cute brunette girl said to him with a smile. He really wished he could recall her name, she was really pretty. Not as beautiful as Lily but a close second. Ralph smiled at her and took a sip. No sooner did he start to drink than he spit it out, coughing. *How do people drink this?* He tried to regain his composer.

“You alright?” Joe asked. The girls were cracking up at his expense. He really wanted to just sink away but he had a feeling that would just make matters worse. The red head patted him on the back gently.

“Are you ok?” Ralph just nodded his head and wiped his face clean. “Was that your first drink?”

“Don’t be ridicules Jaina, that wasn’t his first drink. He’s 16.” She said it like 16 was old and everyone should already have been getting drunk for a while. What was with these people? The only good thing to come from this was that he at least now knew the red heads name.

“I know Sam but look at him. It’s okay Ralph. I think it’s cute that you’re all innocent.” Jaina said to him with a smile. Now he knew the other girls name. Mario always used to joke around with him that if you didn’t know someone’s name just wait and listen and you would figure it out without ever having to ask.

“Well as long as I’m cute.” He said with a grin, this could be fun, it wasn’t what he planned but to be fair he had yet to see Lily at the party.

Ralph was taking shots with Joe, Jaina and Sam. Why did Mario even come? Didn’t Ralph beg him to come so that he could have a wing-man while trying to talk to Lily, yet he was over in the kitchen drinking with people he didn’t even talk to. Last week Ralph couldn’t even finish a beer and now he was taking shots, meanwhile Lily was on the other side of the house dancing.

It didn’t matter. If Ralph wanted to act like that then that was on him. Mario had better things to do, he could be back at the library figuring out what went wrong with the summoning. He had spent so much time researching it, to make sure it went off without a glitch and when he finally tried it, nothing happened. Nothing! He must have missed something, he just didn’t know what.

Ralph’s laugh carried throughout the house, Mario couldn’t help but feel annoyed. He came here to help him out and this was how he repaid him, by just ditching him to hang out with other people. Forget him! Mario got off the wall and made for the door. Bypassing a few friends from school who tried to bring him into conversations, but he sidestepped them as best as he could.

He was so close to his goal when the last two people he would have wanted to see spotted him and headed over. Tommy V and Sal. Sal had a look of disdain on his face as he looked at Mario, the feeling was mutual. Tommy V on the other hand had a giant smile on his face.

“Mario, my man.” He patted Mario on the back as he pulled him into an awkward hug. “Me and Sal here were hoping we would run into you soon. We haven’t seen you around school the past few days.” Sal let out a grunt. Mario doubted that Sal had been looking for him. He was sure if Sal had his way they would never cross paths again, and Mario couldn’t help feeling the same way.

“Yeah, I’ve been busy. Lot’s going on.” He said quickly, trying to step around them but Tommy V moved to block his path.

“Well we would hate to keep you.” Sal said, spitting venom as he spoke. Tommy V shot him a look telling him to shut up.

“I’m sure you have a few minutes for some friends. We have an opportunity we would like to bring you in on.” Tommy V said with a grin that Mario was sure was meant to be reassuring, but all it did was fill Mario with dread. What kind of opportunity would Tommy V be involved in? Whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

“Really?” Mario asked, Sal let out a grunt.

“He’s not interested.” Sal said.

“He is.” Tommy V shot back.

“I’m not, sorry, I’m just really busy tonight. I only came to help out Ralph. So yeah.” Mario said. Sal looked over at Ralph in the kitchen drinking with the girls.

“Looks like he doesn’t need you.” Sal pointed out. Mario looked back*, great Ralph, live it up and get me stuck in this shit.* Tommy V motioned for Sal to relax.

“Relax Sal. I applaud Mario, that’s loyalty. That’s the reason why we need him with us.” He turned back to face Mario. “Do what you got to do my friend. The jobs not tonight, go help out your boy. We’ll be in touch.” Tommy V started to walk off. “Come on Sal.” Sal bumped into Mario as he stormed past him following Tommy V. The two of them went and met up with their two lackeys that they were always hanging out with. Mario had no idea what “opportunity” they were offering him, and he really didn’t want to find out.

But that was a problem for another day, today’s problem was figuring out what went wrong at the library. He wished he took his own car so that he could drive back, but it was still at the library. This was going to be a long walk. For the life of him he couldn’t understand why Tommy V was so eager to be friends with him. Was it really so rare for someone to stand up to him? The only reason Mario even did that was because his mind was so preoccupied with thoughts of Alyssa. Now he was stuck in this power play between Tommy V and Sal. That was somewhere he really didn’t want to be.

Or could it really be that he liked that Mario was loyal? What was Tommy V doing that needed loyalty? It had to be something bad, something that Mario didn’t want to be involved in. Although, having someone like Tommy V in your corner could come in handy. It was something to think about. All he really knew was that no matter what happened, his first loyalty was to Ralph.

He stopped at the edge of the street. Damn loyalty. If he was really loyal to his best friend, he couldn’t leave. Ralph asked him for help and even if he was pissed off at him, he couldn’t just abandon him. Ralph didn’t abandon him when he was failing to summon a demon. Mario looked back at the house, new party goers were still heading inside. Mario let out a sigh.

“Fuck.” Mario said to himself as he headed back to the party. Finding out what went wrong would have to wait, for now he had to go play Cupid.

Chapter 3

Mario’s thoughts were waging war with themselves. Ever since he had met Alyssa and found out that she was dead all he cared about was finding out how she came back. Why she had come back. It was an obsession of his and the more he looked up and read into it the more confused he became. It seemed, according to his research, that there was so much more going on in this world than ghosts. He didn’t know how to explain it, but this was his future. Something in his gut was telling him that this was going to be his life.

Little things like this party were nothing but a distraction. He knew it in his soul and he didn’t want to be bothered by it. He had been reading about places all over the world that were rich in the supernatural. That was where he needed to be going. Not to a high school party.

He made his way across the front yard of the house. A plan forming in his mind as he walked. He went for the straight forward approach with Cynthia and that blew up in his face, so he should probably think of another way for Ralph to get Lily’s attention. Maybe if he could just get them alone, then nature could take its course. That thought didn’t last long. Ralph wasn’t a manly man. He had a tendency to just let life happen, as long as Mario had known him, he had never once fought for something he wanted.

No sooner did Mario reach for the door then it flew open and a crowd of people came running out, screaming. Mario fell flat on his ass as people stormed past. He tried to make out what they were saying but it didn’t make any sense. He caught words like, spiders, clowns, dogs. It was all just so random. The only thing everyone had in common was a look of intense fair. As the rushing crowd passed, Mario finally got up. He wiped the dirt off of his clothes. He watched the panicked crowds scatter as they made their way to the street. Maybe he wouldn’t have to go as far as he thought to find something supernatural.

He entered the house slowly, cautiously. Looking around for the source of all the fear that was radiating off of people as they fled the house. Once inside he found a few people scattered around the house crying to themselves, a few people were even screaming out in pain. The first thing that came to his mind when he saw his classmates living in their own private hells was the old trap house that he used to live next door to when he was a child. He was playing catch with some friends when the ball crashed through the living room window. The whole time he had lived there, he had never once met his neighbors. He had always wondered about them, they would get random visitors at all hours, sometimes police officers would even come bringing gifts. He always tried to get his parents to take him over there, hoping that he could maybe get some of the gifts, but they never allowed him. They always yelled at him whenever he would ask the question,

He never understood why his parents were so against having anything to do with the neighbors. He was too afraid of getting yelled at again to ever ask. But this was the perfect opportunity. He told his friends that he would go and get the ball back. They were more than happy to leave it to him. Most of them had suggested just writing the ball off and going to get a new one. But that was stupid, why give up something that belongs to you? It made no sense.

He slowly made his way up to the front door, the long steep steps leading up to the door seemed to go on forever. The fear that he mocked his friends for was slowly starting to catch up to him. He found himself surprised by it. He was never one to let fear get the best of him, it was almost a foreign notion to him. Fear was something to be conquered, not listened to. Even at his young age he knew that to be true. He stopped in front of the door and looked up. It was old, really old. The paint was chipping from the door and small pieces of it were even missing. He took a deep steadying breath to calm his nerves. He knocked on the door, he tried to put a little force into it to make himself feel more powerful. It didn’t work. As the knock echoed through the house in front of him, it started to dawn on him that he was only a six-year-old kid, knocking on a door of a house that even adults were afraid of.

Time seemed to drag on and on as he waited for someone to answer the door. After what felt like an eternity he lifted his hand up once more, this time it started to tremble as he started to knock again. This time he knocked harder and harder as the door slowly creaked open, he jumped back a few feet. Sweat starting to poor down his face, he blinked away the sweat and waited. The door opened about half way and then stopped. Mario leaned forward, his feet planted firmly in place, as he tried to peer inside the house. All he saw was darkness, as far as Mario could tell there were no lights on inside the house.

“Hello?” he was surprised to hear how silent his voice was when he spoke. He didn’t realize how scared he had become. He could hear his friends behind him yelling. He wasn’t sure what they were saying, and it didn’t really matter anymore. He had come this far, he couldn’t let himself turn back now. He would never live it down. He took another slow breath and nodded to himself. He pushed the door open the rest of the way only to find that no one was there. The door must have opened from his knock. He forced himself to walk forwarded. His body screaming at him to turn back but he ignored it and forced himself forward.

The house was covered in darkness as he made his way through it, he could hear people inside some of the rooms, but he was far too scared to take a look. He shook his head and turned to the right, he just needed to get the ball and leave as quickly as possible. He slowly pushed open the door and walked inside. What he saw scared the hell out of him. Even to this day he shuddered at the memory of what he saw.

In the middle of his room the ball was just sitting there, a trail of broken glass leading back to the window that it broke through. Underneath the window a man who had to be in his twenties was sitting there with a rope tied around his upper arm and a needle sticking out of it, his eyes were opened wide and he seemed to be foaming in the mouth. Mario had never seen anything like it in his life. If he didn’t know better, he would have thought he had rabies. It took a few minutes for him to notice that other people were in the room.

There were three other people in the room, two men and a woman. They were there but didn’t seem to be there at the same time. One of the guys was mumbling to himself, Mario didn’t understand what he was saying. He was just looking at the roof having a conversation with himself. His eyes had a weird hollowness to them, but he seemed to be happy. It unnerved Mario more than he could ever say. These people were spending their lives living in a fantasy world. Why would anyone want that?

He couldn’t remember how long he stood there watching the people before an older man wondered into the room and screamed at him. Mario was so startled he just ran from the room, the ball laid forgotten on the floor where it landed. Once outside among his friends they all pestered him with questions that he avoided answering at all costs. He never told his parents what he saw in there. He wasn’t even sure what he saw, all he knew was that he never wanted to see it again.

Now ten years later and states away he was in another house witnessing the same thing. He wasn’t gone for that long, how did this happen? He needed to find Ralph and get him out of there quickly. He scanned the room quickly taking mental stock of what was around him. Everyone Mario spotted seemed to be living in their own hell. Joe, the man who was drinking with Ralph last time Mario saw them, seemed to be fighting with some figment of his imagination. He was swinging and yelling at a phantom. It was unsettling to watch.

“Stay back!” he kept yelling at whatever he was swinging at. Mario slowly made his way towards him, looking for any clue as to what or who Joe thought he was fighting. No matter how hard Mario looked there was nothing there. He made his way behind Joe, careful to avoid the man’s swings. He slowly reaches up to tap him on the shoulder.

“Don’t!” the yell was so loud and sudden that Mario couldn’t help but stumble back. He looked over at the source of the scream to find Tommy V and Sal running towards him. A fear he had never seen before on both of their faces. For the first time Sal didn’t seem to be plotting Mario’s down fall. “Don’t touch him!” Mario backed away from Joe with his hands up in the air. He couldn’t help but marvel at how all this yelling did nothing to distract Joe from fighting his invisible ghost.

“Why not?” the question just hanged there for a few seconds while Tommy V and Sal looked around the room. Everywhere they looked people seem to be dealing in different ways with unseen threats.

“Do you want to end up like them?” Sal snapped.

“What is wrong with them?” Mario demanded! He was only gone from the party for about ten minutes. How did so much happen in so little time?

“I’m not sure. After we talked to you, we went outside for a smoke. It wasn’t long before we started noticing people acting weird. Almost as if they were terrified. It was like they were seeing things.” Tommy V told him quickly, looking around the whole time, as if he thought someone was after him as well. Were they infected? Was it really spread through touch?

“What caused it?” Mario asked, Tommy V led them out of the room. They entered the kitchen, which was empty with the exception of Sara who was sitting on the kitchen island screaming and begging to be helped down. Every bit of Mario wanted to help her down but the warning Tommy V gave him was still fresh in his mind.

“We don’t know. Al just started yelling at me and calling me dad.” Tommy V started to tell him. Al was another one of their lackeys. He was in the restroom whenever Mario had made such a great impression on Tommy V. He had never really talked to the guy before, but he knew of him.

“It was unsettling at first. I thought he was hitting on him.” Sal said, fear entering his voice as he spoke.

“But then he fell to the floor crying, begging not to be hit. I always knew his dad beat him, but it,” his whole body shuddered as he thought about it. “Was unsettling to see.” Tommy V finished lamely.

“That’s an understatement.” Sal said, and Mario could tell that he was truly afraid.

“Whatever caused it spread as Mike tried to help him up. It was crazy, Mike took his hand and tried to pull him up, then just threw him down and started screaming about death coming and took off running.” Tommy V told him, his voice low and hollow. It wasn’t easy talking about his friends going off the deep end. Mike was the other lackey that always followed these two around.

“And that’s what happened to everyone at this party?” Mario asked, afraid that he already knew the answer. Sal just nodded, the fact that he did so without any sarcasm or venom in his voice made Mario feel even more unnerved.

“Did you see what happened to Ralph?” it was the question that was eating away at him, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to know the answer.

“No, sorry. We went to get help and started to notice it happened all over the back yard. We just came inside when we saw you about to touch Joe.” Tommy V said looking back out into the living room.

“We need to get out of here fast!” Sal said, for once including Mario in his plans. Tommy V shook his head.

“We need to figure out how to help Al and Mike. We can’t leave them here.” Tommy V wasn’t playing when he talked about loyalty. It seemed to be important to him.

“I need to find Ralph.” Mario added.

“He’s most likely infected already. We have to save ourselves!” Sal demanded, the words hit Mario like a ton of bricks. He didn’t know what he would do if he lost Ralph. It would kill him to know that it happened right after he ditched him at this party.

“No! We stick together. Let’s go find his friend then find a way to help them. Something had to cause this, and we have to be able to undo this.” Tommy V said, Mario nodded, he really hoped that he was right.

“Fine.” Sal said, his voice stating beyond a shadow of doubt that this was anything but fine. The trio slowly made their way through the house. They were careful not to touch anyone, screams and loud sobbing could be heard from all corners of the house. Mario didn’t like seeing his classmates like this. People he had grown up with crying in pain, fighting formless monsters that they had no hope of beating. He wanted to help them, he just didn’t know how. He would have to figure out what was wrong first.

They made their way up the stairs of the house, lucky for them no one was there. Unlucky for them, they had to step over the body of Cindy. She was a year older than Mario, he didn’t know her that well, but she always seemed like such a nice happy go lucky girl. Whatever fear attacked her must have knocked her down the stairs, snapping her neck as she went. Mario hoped that no one else died this night, but he knew that was an unrealistic goal.

“So where are we supposed to find this friend of yours?” Sal asked, anger in his voice. Mario couldn’t help but feel bad for dragging them into this search for someone who might not even be here anymore. For all Mario knew he could have already left.

“I don’t know” Mario hated to admit it out loud. The truth of the matter was, he had no clue what he was doing. He didn’t know what caused all these people to act so crazy. The only thing he could think of was drugs. Someone must have drugged the party.

“The far more important question is how do we fix this?” Tommy V’s voice was low as he spoke. Mario could tell he was scared and he wasn’t one used to being scared.

“We just have to figure it out.” Mario said more to himself than to the others. He just wished he believed it. The three of them stayed silent as they entered the hall at the top of the stairs. Tension was high among them when they were startled out of their own thoughts by the sound of a girl screaming, it took a few seconds for them to notice her, she was at the end of the hall waving her hands in the air, screaming about bats. She hit a table in the hall and knocked a vase off of it, it shattered as it hit the floor. The girl fell back, and the three men watched on in horror.

“We have to stop this.” Tommy V said, and Mario couldn’t agree more. This was horrible. She jumped up off the ground and ran towards the wall on the other side.

“Stop!” Sal ran to help her. Mario and Tommy V rushed after Sal trying to stop him. They couldn’t let him touch her. “Amy! Stop!” Sal yelling a name was enough to make Mario hesitate. He knew her, it made it seem all the more real. It only took a second for Mario to get his head back in the game and he was once more after Sal. Tommy V grabbed Sal and Mario got a hold of his other arm a second later, they pulled him back just as he was reaching out to catch her. Mario couldn’t tell from his angle if he touched her but the fact that she kept charging forward and Sal let out a scream as she ran head first into the closet door, told him that Sal hadn’t. The door crumbled under her weight, it folded in half right onto her, her blood came gushing out. Sal fell to the floor crying.

Tommy V and Mario stood there for a minute, letting Sal morn. Mario didn’t think she was dead but was afraid to move closer to find out.

“Help!” the yell came from inside the closet. The three of them looked up at the closet, they slowly backed up. “Someone get her off of me.” It took a second for Mario to recognize the voice. He rushed forward to make sure.

“Mario!” Tommy V called after him, he knew they were worried he would get infected, but he wouldn’t, he was too careful. He stopped in front of the closet and spotted Ralph under the door, trying as hard as he could to not touch the girl, Amy was what Sal had called her.

Ralph looked up at Mario, fear in his eyes. “Mario?” he asked, his voice uncertain. Mario smiled and helped him out, carefully making sure that neither of them touched Amy.

“I got you man.” He told his friend as he climbed out of the closet. Tommy V and Sal moved closer to him.

“Glad you showed up.” Ralph was clearly shaken from the ordeal.

“Did you touch him?” Tommy V demanded. Sal was a wrack looking down at Amy. “Did you?” Mario looked from Ralph to Tommy V. he nodded slowly.

“Yeah.” Mario told Tommy V, who turned to face Ralph.

“Did she touch you when she fell?” Tommy V brought himself up to his full height. Mario could see why everyone was so afraid of him.

“We never touched.” Ralph said, fear displayed all over his face. “I swear.”

“Let’s all just relax.” Mario said, stepping between the two.

“Can we just leave, please?” Sal asked, Mario had never heard him sound so sad. Amy must have met something to Sal. Mario looked down at the girl, a crumbled mess. He nodded his head and motioned for Ralph to follow them.

Chapter 4

The four of them made their way to one of the bedrooms, it took a while for them to find one that was empty. The first one they went into had a man that Mario didn’t know banging his head against the wall screaming about something in his head eating his brain. Mario wanted to help him but knew that it would be a mistake. They couldn’t touch him after all.

They finally settled into the empty room. Sal was shaking pretty bad; Tommy V had told Mario in confidence that Amy was his ex-girlfriend. Mario felt so bad for Sal, he didn’t know how to handle it. Ralph was shaken up as well. He had recounted to the rest of the group what he had seen when it started to break out. How people started to act strange and how they started screaming about things that weren’t there. Ralph had tears in his eyes, he was having what seemed to be a nervous breakdown.

“I don’t understand, I just don’t understand what is happening.” Sal confessed, his voice hollow. He was hurting but doing his best to hide it.

“We just need to figure out how this happened.” Mario said as he took a seat on the bed. Ralph turned to look at him, the sadness in his eyes replaced with a fury Mario had never seen before.

“How it happened? What the hell do you mean how?” he screamed at Mario. Tommy V and Sal were just as surprised as Mario by Ralph’s sudden snap. Tommy V put an arm on Ralph and told him to relax. But Ralph threw him off.

“I won’t relax! You did this Mario.” Ralph was angry and for the life of him Mario couldn’t figure out why. *How was this my fault?* Sal and Tommy V turned on Mario as well. *Great just what I need. Everyone to turn on me.*

“How is this my fault?” Mario demanded, he got up to his feet. He wasn’t going to just sit there and be accused of this madness.

“You summoned this! Whatever that spell you did at the library, it brought this here.” The truth of it sunk in as Mario thought about it. The flash of light he thought he saw back at the library, it must have summoned this thing here.

“The summoning was for a Kalee demon. They can’t live in this world. And it didn’t work.” It was a weak defense and he knew it, but he couldn’t bring himself to admitting that he was to blame.

“You summoned a demon?” Sal demanded, the sadness replaced by an anger that dwarfed even Ralph's. “This is all your fault? You killed Amy!” Tommy V moved in to stop Sal from attacking. The normal contempt that he always had for Mario wasn’t there. This was hate, pure and simple.

“Relax, this has to be a misunderstanding.” Tommy V said, there was a falter in his voice. Mario could tell he didn’t believe what he was saying.

“I just, I just had to prove to you that I wasn’t crazy.” The words sounded false to Mario even as he said them. It had nothing to do with proving anything to Ralph. He had been trying to prove to himself that he wasn’t crazy.

“That’s bullshit. You did this for you!” Ralph screamed. “You couldn’t bear the thought that this girl, this girl you hardly knew didn’t want anything to do with you! So you made up this whole story about her being a ghost! It’s bullshit and you know it. You did all of this for no reason!” Tommy V looked around the group, Mario could see his mind racing behind his eyes trying to piece all this together. Mario was seconds away from losing his only support in this group. If he lost Tommy V he lost them all and everyone would turn against them. He shook his head, he didn’t mean for this to happen. Even if it was his fault he didn’t intend for it to go this way.

“Maybe I did. But this isn’t what I wanted! I just wanted proof! And if I did cause this, if what I summoned is behind all of this, than it means I was right all along.” He regretted the words as soon as they left his lips, he regretted them even more when Sal’s fist connected with his face and he went down hard, hitting his head on the side of the bed. There was yelling and sound of people rushing around him. The pain in his head downed out all of their words, no matter how hard he tried to listen to them, he couldn’t make out who was saying what. After a while the pain seemed to stop, and the yelling quieted down some. The sounds of the room slowly started to come back into focus as the throbbing in Mario’s head slowed to a stop. He could start to make out who was who, but when he tried to open his eyes intense pain shot through his head and he stayed still for a while longer.

“So help me, if you hurt him.” Ralph voice had an edge to it that seemed really out of place. Mario loved Ralph as a brother and had never heard him raise his voice to anyone before. Let alone Sal. Sal and Tommy V’s gang ruled the school and Ralph was always the first one to run across the street to avoid them.

“You’ll do what? He caused all of this! You said so yourself.” Sal voice was icy, this was going to go bad if he didn’t put a stop to it, but he couldn’t move. There was no way he could help.

“Enough.” Tommy V’s voice was low but firm. There was a strength in his voice that Mario knew came from always being in charge. It came from having everyone always be afraid of you. He ran the world he lived in and everyone knew it. Sal and Ralph both stopped talking at Tommy V’s command. “If he caused this, he can stop it. Hitting him isn’t going to help anything.” Mario couldn’t hear the others reply but assumed they agreed because Tommy V started giving orders on how to board up the room till they could figure something out. Slowly Mario forced himself to sit up and open his eyes. The contents of the room had been pushed forward against the front door, so no one could get in.

“Look who’s up.” Sal’s voice came from behind him. He turned around to see Tommy V sitting on the window seal looking out. Ralph ran and sat next to him, putting his hand on his arm. He looked him dead in the eyes, a look of concern in his friend’s eyes. This was the Ralph that Mario knew and cared for like a brother.

“You ok?” he asked gently, Mario couldn’t bring himself to answer right away. He just nodded his head and took a few minutes to clear his head. The start of an idea was starting to form, and he wanted to make sure that he put it together in the right way.

“I can fix this.” He finally managed to say. Ralph’s expression didn’t change but Tommy V looked at him for the first time since he woke up. Sal let out a grunt. Mario knew right then that nothing he said or did would ever earn him any love from Sal. That didn’t matter right now, nothing mattered but putting an end to this madness that he created. He only hoped it wasn’t too late.

“How?” the word was low and loaded. Sal’s voice was full of hate and venom, for a moment Mario thought that answering it would cause him pain. There was pure hate pouring through his words, it was enough to make Mario shake.

“If it was the summoning of Kalee that caused all this than we have to banish him.” He said simply. They didn’t understand that the Ca’lee were allergic to this world, it had to be something else. He knew this in his heart, but his friends didn’t want to hear it. He had to do something to prove his innocence. And on the off chance that he was to blame than all he had to do was the banishing spell that was in the same book that he used to summon it.

“How?” if it was possible Sal made the word sound even harsher than he had the first time he said it.

“The spell is in the book. Back at the library.” Mario answered.

“Than that’s where we need to go.” Tommy V said as he stood up. Sal didn’t seem convinced, Ralph just nodded and looked out the window into the darkness outside.

“The library is across town. It’s going to be hard getting there.” Ralph pointed, gloom entering into his voice. He was terrified and Mario couldn’t blame him. He felt the same way.

“It won’t be that bad.” Tommy V said, “All we have to do is get out of the house. The rest of the town should be normal. It’s only spread by touch after all.” he sounded so sure of himself. Mario wished more than anything that he was right.

“It’s not that simple.” Mario said. They all turned to look at him, he felt the weight of their stairs on him, but he took a deep breath and continued. “When I came back into the house, there were a few people running out into the night. They were infected.” The looks on their faces showed the defeat they felt in their hearts. Mario slowly got to his feet, “Besides, if I did cause this with the spell, than it was caused at the library. This plague could be everywhere in the town.” The words were like a dagger to the heart as he said them. He would give anything to make it not true, but the more he thought about it the more he felt the truth in it. This was his fault and he had to do something, anything to put an end to this madness.

Chapter 5

The four of them slowly made their way into the street, passing by the infected party goers. Each one living in their own private hell. The sight of each one was like a dagger in Mario’s heart, if this was all due to the stupid failed summoning spell he caused than how could he ever live with himself? This wasn’t what he wanted, this wasn’t how he meant for things to turn out. Not like this.

The air was cold, Mario couldn’t help but feel the chill as he led the way to the library. He couldn’t look back at the others. It was too much for him. But truth be told he didn’t really need to, he already knew what was going on with them. Ralph blamed him for everything, and rightly so, he didn’t want to be a part of the spell, he just wanted to have his friend come with him to this party and play wing man. Just like he did for Mario the week before. If Mario was a good friend he would have done it, no questions asked. But he wasn’t a good friend, he was selfish, so worked up in his own problems that he never stopped to think how his actions could affect others.

The other two people he wasn’t as sure about. He knew that Tommy V was freaked out by everything, just as he knew that Sal wanted to repay him for what happened to that girl back at the house. Even if he did cause all of this, he didn’t mean for anything bad to happen to people. He didn’t mean for any of this. Not that that made it any better.

“How much farther?” Sal’s voice was thin, Mario had the distinct impression that if he didn’t fix things fast than Sal would get his ‘justice’. Mario started to speed up, they were still a few miles out and had yet to see anything out of place. No more infected people out here, at least not yet.

“It’s not too much farther.” His friends behind him didn’t sound happy. He let out a sigh and picked up the pace. It wasn’t too bad making their way through the streets late at night. Mario spent most nights sneaking out of the house for long walks. It relaxed him and helped him clear his head. Ralph was breathing hard, he risked a look back and saw just how worried Ralph was. His parents were always so strict on him. It was only a few months ago that his parents even started letting him go to parties at all.

Mario fell back a step to fall in line with Ralph, he patted him on the back. “You ok?” he was concerned but the look on Ralph’s face told it all. He was too upset to care what Mario said or thought. Ralph started to speed up and lead the way. Mario let out another sigh, he hated things being like this between the two of them but until he fixed this mess there was nothing he could do about it.

“He’ll get over it, just give it time.” Tommy V said as he walked past Mario following in Ralph’s wake. Sal followed after them, almost knocking Mario to the floor, with a look that told him to fix this or die. Mario went the rest of the way in silence while the rest of them were talking nonstop. He couldn’t hear what they were saying but he knew it was about him. He could sense it and it ate him up more than anything he had ever been through before.

The library off in the distance was a sight for sore eyes. Mario had never been so happy to see anything in his whole life. He started to walk faster, wanting all of this to be over. The others kept their distance from him, he tried to hide the hurt he felt from that, but it wasn’t easy. He had no love for Tommy V or Sal, they weren’t people you wanted to be friends with, no matter how hard Tommy V had been trying of late to make a connection between the two of them. It was Ralph moving away that hurt him. All this started because he was trying to bring his friend, his only friend into his confidence and now he might have lost him, forever.

He was in such a rush to get to the library and end this night of horrors that he didn’t notice everything around him. The others weren’t so nearsighted. “God.” Was all Ralph could say, horror in his voice. Horror put there by the events he put into motion. “I can’t believe this.” Sal said uneasy. Mario wondered what they were looking at, but it didn’t take long to figure it out.

The streets were a mess, cars were wrecked all along the street, some were even flipped over. Bodies lay littering the streets, while survivors were screaming or crying. One man was scratching at his face, he had long since drawn blood and was screaming bloody murder about how *they* had made their way into his skin. Who *they* were, Mario had no idea. The sight of him pained Mario, how could he have brought this? No wonder everyone hated him.

“See what you did? Happy now?” Sal snapped at him. Tommy V hit Sal hard on the arm and told him to shut up. Sal just shot them a dirty look and kept on his way. He was thankful to Tommy V for jumping to his defense, but he couldn’t help but shake. The words hit a soft spot.

“You can fix this right?” Ralph was at his side. Mario turned to look at him, Ralph didn’t look angry, just scared and confused. Mario couldn’t fault him for that, as much as he might like to. He couldn’t expect everyone to just ignore everything that was going on. He didn’t know how to answer Ralph’s question. The truth was he wasn’t sure if he could fix it. But he knew damn well that he had to try.

The four of them made their way inside the library, the doors were strung open and inside the librarian was screaming bloody murder attacking people with brooms shouting about censorship. It didn’t seem that her fears were too far off, a man not far away was pouring gasoline onto some old books.

“He’s going to light the place on fire!” Ralph said in disbelief.

“He must have Mr. Needs for English.” Sal said causing Tommy V to laugh. Mario didn’t find it too funny, Mr. Needs was his favorite teacher.

“You need to stop him.” They all looked at him like he was crazy, he couldn’t blame them. If any of them touched one of the infected they would become infected. “If he burns the place down how am I to undo all this? I need time to find the book and do the spell.”

“Fine, but hurry.” Tommy V snapped. He ran off towards the man about to burn the books. Sal looked at Mario and Ralph, hate in his eyes.

“If anything happens to Tommy V, I’ll hurt you. Don’t for a second think I won’t.” He looked like he meant it too. Mario swallowed hard but before he could react Ralph jumped in the middle of them and pushed Sal back.

“Back off!” Ralph snapped. He looked back at Mario. “Hurry up man.” Mario nodded and then ran up the stairs, he only hoped they could stop the crazy man from burning the place down. He ran up the stairs as fast as he could, not slowing down even for a second. The sounds of people yelling were drifting up to him, he couldn’t make out if it was his friends or strangers, truth of the matter was that it no longer mattered. If he didn’t fix all of this and soon than nothing mattered.

He reached the top of the stairs, his breathing was rapid, a sharp pain stabbing his side as he tried to keep up the pace. The door to the room that he performed the spell in came into view, he couldn’t help but smile. The end of this was in sight. His foot caught on the second to last step and he went head first into the door. The world went black and all he could think of how much grace he lacked.

Ralph felt uneasy being alone with Tommy V and Sal. Truth be told they weren’t alone. Everywhere they looked there were people who were fighting who knows what inside their own heads. Ralph couldn’t help but be terrified as he looked on. He found himself spending a lot of time thinking about what he would see if he became infected. No matter how hard he tried he just couldn’t imagine what he would see, every time he would think of one horror another would pop up in his mind’s eye, each more terrifying than the last. He had never been this scared before, and he couldn’t begin to fathom what it would be like if he became infected with this. The thought alone made him shudder.

Moments after Mario headed upstairs Sal ran after Tommy V, stopping him from doing anything stupid. Now the two of them were deep in conversation about how to stop the pyromaniac without touching him. It did seem to be a problem. They couldn’t let him light the place ablaze, but they couldn’t touch him. This was going to be difficult, they knew that going in. Ralph couldn’t help thinking that the two drug dealers, because at the end of the day that’s all they really were, were just buying for time. They were hoping that Mario could undo all of this before they had to really act. For all their acts of bravery they were really nothing more than cowards.

The walk here from the party was a long one, and Mario had walked alone. The whole way here Ralph had wanted to say something to apologize for the way he snapped at him, but the words wouldn’t come. Ralph didn’t want to blame Mario for all of this, but truth be told it was all his fault and now he was baring that responsibility alone. Ralph wished he could take some of that away from him, but he didn’t know how to. What was he going to do? Tell him, *Hey Mario, don’t beat yourself up for bringing all this pain and suffering into the whole city. It’s no big deal.*

Ralph took a deep breath and watched the pyromaniac pouring the gas everywhere. It came to him in a flash, he knew what he had to do. Tommy V and Sal were going to be useless. If he was going to buy Mario the time he needed to save the day he would have to do something bold, and he was going to have to do it now. He just hoped that when Mario put all this right, if he put this all right, it would save him.

He didn’t give himself time to talk himself out of it, because he knew that giving himself even a minute than he would. He wasn’t the hero type, he was never one for the suicide play and yet. . . here he was running full on for the pyromaniac.

Tommy V and Sal started yelling at him to stop but he ignored them. He kept moving forward and slammed full force into the man just as he was pulling out the matches. It proved to him in the last second before they touched that he made the right call, if he didn’t do this than he would have started the fire and Tommy V and Sal would still be sitting there debating what to do. They were useless. He looked over at them as he fell to the floor with the pyromaniac, the two of them were just standing there looking at him with dumbfound expression on their face. Some thugs they turned out to be.

Time seemed to stretch on and on as he waited for something, anything to happen. He just laid there on the floor, the pyromaniac was crying on the floor next to him screaming about something or other. The words didn’t make sense to Ralph, he was so focused on looking for anything scary that was going to jump out at him. Nothing happened, he couldn’t understand it. Everyone else who was touched started to witness their greatest fear brought to life, why wasn’t he seeing anything? Tommy V and Sal walked over to him slowly, not sure of what to make with him. Clearly scared of being infected themselves.

“Ralph?” Sal said as he bent over Ralph, Ralph slowly sat up, still waiting for something, anything to happen.

“What do you see?” Tommy V asked slowly, it was clear from his voice that he was scared of the answer. Ralph couldn’t blame him, he was scared of the answer as well.

“Just you two standing around like a couple of buffoons.” He said a little more hostel than he had meant to. He didn’t notice just how on edge he was till just now. Everywhere he looked all he could see was possible terrors that would jump out at him, but nothing did. At least not yet, something had to happen eventually. He was infected after all. He knew that any second now his worst fear would come to pass. He just prayed it happened soon because he didn’t know how much longer he could take this suspense. It was killing him.

The world slowly came back into focus. The door to the spell room was right in front of him, all he had to do was stand up and walk inside. He moved to get up, but the pain was incredible. His head felt like a jackhammer went to town on it. He looked down at the stairs he was laying on and was taken aback to notice the blood stained on the steps.

“Wha. . . what’s this red stuff?” he felt his head, rubbing his hand over the source of the pain. It felt wet and sticky, that wasn’t a good sign. He slowly moved his hand away and looked at it. He felt as if he was going to be sick, looking at his hand that was bright red. This wasn’t right! You couldn’t have head injuries like this, they could only lead to death. Right?

He tried to force himself to stand up, it was not easy going but he managed it, with great difficulty. He had to lean against the wall to hold himself up. Taking a few deep breaths, he finally managed to get his breathing under control. He didn’t know how long he was out, hopefully his friends were still ok. The building hadn’t burned down yet so that was a good sign.

He slowly made his way forward when the door flew open, hitting him hard and knocking him backward. He rolled down the stairs, trying as hard as he could to brace himself and stop his descent, to no avail. Each step hitting him everywhere, his head, his back, his arms, his legs. By time he made it to the bottom he was spread out eagle style, not an inch of him free from pain. Tears filled his eyes as he tried to keep from screaming out in pain.

He could hear the girl running down the stairs. Mario tried and failed to lift his head to see her, he tried to force himself to move out of the way so she wouldn’t trample him. It was pain inducing work, but he managed it. He leaned himself up against the wall. He couldn’t let this setback stop him. He still had to save his friends, no matter what.

The girl, a pretty blonde with thick glasses stopped in front of him. She was sweating hard from running down the stairs and her eyes had a look of dread in them. She looked down at him as she was breathing hard.

“What are you doing here?” she leaned over him and grabbed his face, forcing him to look her in the eyes. “We have to go now! Daddy is coming, and he has the belt. He’s going to hurt us like he hurt mommy.” She started crying as she ran away from him. He watched her go, his heart filling with dread. She was infected and touched him. That was the ballgame. He had failed, he made this mess and now everything was going to crash down around him, and it was all his fault. *No! I can’t let this stand, I have to fix this. No matter what!!*

He forced himself to stand up, despite the pain that would not subside. Leaning against the wall he slowly made his way up the stairs. Each step was more work than anything he had ever endured before. He didn’t know how long this infection took to take effect, but he had to act fast if he was going to fix it. Moving was chore enough but he started to speed up, he had to work fast after all.

“Mario, sweetie. Where are you going?” the voice came from behind him, but it couldn’t be her. Why was she here when she should be at home? He didn’t want to look back. It wasn’t her, it was just some trick that’s all. He kept going forward, trying as hard as he could to move faster, it was as if someone stabbed him and twisted the blade with each step. But that wouldn’t stop him. Nothing would! He would finish what he set out to do, even if it killed him. “Mario, honey. Look at me when I talk to you. I raised you better than that. His heart jumped up to his throat. He choked on it. As much as he wanted to, he couldn’t go forward. He just had to know. He turned around and standing there was his mother and father. Only it wasn’t. His father was holding his own head in his hands. Blood stained his clothes and his eyes were blood shot. His mother had what looked to be a red smile across her neck, her skin was light blue in color and her eyes lacked the normal warmth that they always held for him.

He didn’t remember falling to the floor, one moment he was standing, the next he was on the floor shaking. His overzealous actions caused the death of his parents, how could he let this happen? How could he have messed up so badly?

“Because you’re always letting us down.” Mario looked behind him. Ralph was hanging from the ceiling fan with a noose around his neck. His body hung limp underneath him while his head hung at an odd angle. “I told you to just forget all this, but you couldn’t. You just had to prove you were right.” Mario couldn’t keep the tears out of his eyes. It was all too much for him. “Are you happy now? Look at what you did. Look at all the people you killed!”

No sooner were the words out of his mouth, then doors that Mario had never seen before started to open. His friends and family started coming out of each one. All of them ghosts of their formal selves. Each one of them wearing their cause of death clear as day. For the life of him, Mario didn’t know what emotion he felt stronger. Dread or terror. The sight of so many loved one’s mutilated corpses reanimated and coming at him was something he would never forget. He looked around at the walking dead, over to the left was his grandfather, a hole missing from his torso, almost as if a cannon ball had been shot through it. His favorite teacher, Mr. Needs, was limping at him from the right. He was holding his own left arm in his ghost white hand. Half of his head was missing, and he was trying to mumble about some book or another. Over all the voices shouting at him, blaming him for all of their deaths it was hard to make out what any of them were saying, let alone Mr. Needs.

Coming from somewhere in the back of the room he spotted Cynthia walking towards him. She had the heel of one of her high heels stabbed through her eye, a trail of blood pouring down her face. Mario backed up against the side of the stairs. He was trapped, below him his parents were slowly making their way towards him. Above him the rest of the town awaited him. He didn’t know what to do, which way to go. He failed, he was so close and yet he let them down. He let them all down.

Chapter 6

Sal kept eyeing Ralph with an uncertain look. Tommy V kept as far away from him as he could without making it obvious. Truth be told Ralph couldn’t blame them, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. They didn’t know what it was like for him. Just knowing that any second your worst fear was going to come alive and attack you. Ralph shuttered just thinking about it. Why was it taking so long? Did that mean that whatever his fear was, it was so bad that it took even longer to kick in?

He couldn’t think about that just now, they had to find Mario and make sure that no one stopped him. The pyromaniac was still knocked out from Ralph’s attack and they took all of the matches he had on him and locked him in one of the closets near the back of the library. Hopefully once all of this was cleared up someone would find him.

He could hear Tommy V and Sal talking behind him, but he didn’t really care about what they were saying. That didn’t matter to him, right now all that matters was keeping an eye out for whatever was after him. It was getting closer and closer. With every step he took he could feel the shadows pressing in around him. The hair on the back of his neck was standing on end, his breathing was getting harder and harder as the world started to blur. It took him a few seconds to realize what was happening, he was having a panic attack. His dad had one a few months ago, something to do with work. He remembered hearing all about it. Ralph tried to recall what his dad told him to do, it had something to do with breathing deeply and trying to clear his mind. It wasn’t working. His knees started to buckle under his weight as he fell to the floor, the room spinning faster and faster. He felt like he was going to be sick, was this the result of the infection? Death by panic attack? What a sad way to go. There had to be a way to pull himself out of this, but he didn’t know what it was.

Behind him he could hear Tommy V and Sal trying to figure out what to do for him, they didn’t seem to be coming up with anything. He wished they would hurry and think of something, because nothing was coming to him. What was he going to do? *Oh God, what if this isn’t it? What if my deepest fear attacks me while I’m having this panic attack? What then?*

A hand grabbed him from behind and pulled him up, the world came into focus as he saw Tommy V yelling at him. He was shaking him, Ralph tried to focus on his voice. It helped, his breathing clamed and the world stopped spinning. His heart started to slow down, his fear hadn’t caught up to him yet, maybe he could still escape it. He just had to find Mario and help him fix this.

“I’m ok.” He spit out, the words were hard to get out. Tommy V seemed relieved, but it didn’t last long. One second he was holding Ralph, trying to calm him down and the next he was throwing him to the floor and running from them, he made it two steps and tripped down the stairs. Ralph watched him roll down the stairs, his heart skipping a beat. Sal’s eyes went wide, and he rushed to save his friend. That settled it, he must be infected, he just infected Tommy V. and just like that his heart started racing again and once more the room started to spin around like a Ferris wheel gone mad.

The room was dark and cramped. Mario could still hear all the people he failed just outside the closet closing in on him. He held the door shut as tight as he could. He just kept praying for safety. He didn’t know if God was listening or even cared about his problems. He could only hope. But if he was being honest with himself, why would God help him? After all he got all these people killed. It was his fault, all of it and he would never forgive himself. So why should he expect anyone else to forgive him?

He could hear the hallway outside the door fill with more and more people. His heart started to pound harder and harder. *They are going to find me and punish me for getting them all killed. And I deserve it. Whatever they do to me, I have it coming.* His hands slipped from the door handle as he fell back against the back of the closet, his eyes filling with tears. He had never been more scared in his entire life and the fear only intensified as he realized that he didn’t fall back against the wall like he expected too. The room was only a few feet long and yet he kept falling backwards, end over end. He was spinning in circles as he fell through the air. He soon lost all sense of direction. It was all too much for him.

After what felt like an eternity he landed hard on his back. The air was knocked out of his lungs as his back cracked. The pain shot up his spine like lightning. He tried to yell out, but he couldn’t get enough air in his lungs to make a sound. The darkness in the room was absolute, to the point where he couldn’t even see his hands in front of his face. It made him want to cry out even more, it made him think back to a book he read in class once. One of the few times he actually stayed awake in class. The book was about a kid who got lost on an island and went blind and he said that even in absolute darkness you could still see your hands in front of your face. Mario had always wanted to test that theory but never got around to it. Now it seemed that it had been tested for him and who knows how long it would be until he got his answer?

He kept waiting for the air to come back to him, but it never seemed to. It seemed that as the room darkened the air thinned out. Panic started to set in as he laid there all alone in the dark room. All the feeling in his body started to follow the air out of the room. He could feel the numbness starting to flow through him, once more he tried and failed to cry out. As everything else ran from the room at a million miles an hour, terror stormed in with an unrelenting army at its back. Mario felt the pressure of it crushing him to the ground. He tried to move but found that beyond his abilities.

For the life of him he couldn’t tell how much time passed. Time seemed to stretch on and on as he laid there. No light, no air, no feelings, no sound. Mario was completely alone in his dark world and the silence was deafening. Part of him was glad that he escaped the reanimated corpses of his loved ones but another part of him wished they would find him. Even death was preferable to this hell he now found himself in. He found himself wishing for death, he soon got to the point where he would have taken his own life if he could.

Out of the darkness a blinding white light flashed into existence. Its rays of light brought new life into the dark realm that was Mario’s home. It took all his remaining energy to turn his head towards the light. He had to squint to even make anything out. Out of the light came a slender figure. It was hard to make anything out but the rough shape of a small girl. She was as pitch black as the rest of the room, made even darker by the blinding white light that surrounded her. Mario’s eyes started to adjust as she came closer and closer, he began to make her out. She wasn’t as small as he had first thought, she was closer to his age. He was taken away by how pretty she was. If he wasn’t laying helpless on the floor and responsible for killing everyone he had ever known he might have tried to pick this girl up. *Like I’d have a shot with her.* He thought bitterly to himself.

“Look at you Mario.” That voice! It suddenly hit Mario who he was seeing. It was Alyssa, the girl in white. The girl of his dreams, the girl that he spent all night long talking to. The reason for all of this. Wanting to know more about her caused all of this! His friends and family are dead due to her! *This isn’t my fault! It’s hers!*

“Alyssa?” he called out weakly. He was surprised by his own voice. Suddenly he felt stronger, feeling was rushing back into his body, air was filling his lungs to the brim. He slowly forced himself to sit up as she came to a stop in front of him, a sad pitying look on her face.

“I came to you for help. I thought you could save me, but you didn’t. All you did was bring pain to my mom, reopen old wounds. What kind of monster goes to an old woman’s house and mocks her by talking about her dead daughter?” the words were like daggers to his heart. She was right! The pain he must have brought her, how could he have done that to the poor woman? No parent should ever outlive their child, and then for some teenage brat to come to the door and throw it in her face, there was nothing worse than that.

The warmth that had started to spread through Mario started to slip away. Just as suddenly as the air came back to him it left him. He gasped for air but couldn’t find it. His eyes started to water as he fell back to the floor. Alyssa kneeled down next to him, he tried to look away from her, but he couldn’t. His eyes were locked onto hers. They were such pretty eyes. He could just get lost in them. As he got lost in them he felt his strength return to him. She was telling him how much she hated him for hurting her mom, but he forced himself to tune her out. He wouldn’t let himself be affected by her negativity. He forced himself to think about the night they spent together talking. He started to imagine himself kissing her, those soft lips of hers looked so inviting. The more he thought about it the stronger he became. It started to dawn on him that guilt caused him to feel weak, happy thoughts made him stronger.

He forced himself to stand up and face her. He was taller than she was, and the blinding white light had faded to a dull gray. The pitch blackness was brighter than he had ever seen it before. “It wasn’t my fault Alyssa. I didn’t know you were dead. And I didn’t kill everyone! I didn’t do anything wrong and I won’t accept responsibility for it any more. You’re a ghost, I just found out about a whole new world. Of course I wanted to find out more. Who wouldn’t? That doesn’t make me a bad guy. So, if you and everyone else wants to blame me, than go ahead. Hell kill me. I’m done running, I’m done. I’m a man damnit! And I’m going to fix my mistake.” The words flowed out of him, he never meant to say any of that, he just couldn’t stop himself.

Alyssa recoiled at Mario’s words, it was as if he had slapped her. Every instinct Mario had screamed at him to apologize, to make things right with her but before he could so much as open his mouth, the room of darkness vanished. He was back in the closet crawled up in a ball, leaning against the back wall. He took a few calming breaths and tried to get his bearings. He leaned forward and tried to listen at the door for any sound from outside the door for sounds of the zombies. There was nothing there, it was silent.

He got slowly up to his feet and opened the door. It was dark and empty. Sounds of people yelling and screaming were coming up from the floor below. There was still no smoke, so far it seemed Ralph and the others were keeping things in check.

He couldn’t help finding the walk to the back of the room a little spooky. He could hear the shouts from beneath them and he couldn’t help but worry that his friends were in trouble or that the fighting would spill up here before he had time to undo this. The pentagram was right where he left it, the half-burnt candles, with their melted wax lining the outside of the circle. The scene was exactly how he had left it when he ran out of here with Ralph to go to the party a few hours earlier, with one major exception. The book was nowhere to be seen. Panic sunk in as he started to tear the room apart to try and find the book. There were rows and rows of books on this floor, not to mention piles of books in the re-shelf cart. How was he going to find the damn book in the mist of all these other books? And that was only if it was still here and someone else didn’t take the book home with them.

“Aw, little Mario did you lose your friends?” the voice sent chills down his spine. It was high pitched and shrill. He was petrified to turn around and look at its source. “You know it’s all your fault. All of them died because of you.” It wasn’t true, Mario knew it wasn’t. He knew that seeing everyone dead was part of the infection. Whoever the voice was, he was just trying to get into his head and mess with him. Mario wasn’t going to let that happen. He spun around to face him and instantly wished he hadn’t. Mario had never seen anything like it before. It was some kind of creature, short and ugly. He had a wrinkly face with tiny little horns on its largely over-sized head. His arms were tiny but oddly muscular, he had tiny tannish blue fur that made him look like a deformed version of the X-Men’s Nightcrawler. He even had a tail, it was as pointy and sharp as any sword he had ever seen.

In the book next to the spell there was a crude drawing of the Ca’lee demon, but it was nowhere near as ugly as the real thing. Mario took a few involuntary steps back in fright of this creature. “Wha. . .Wha. . .What do you want?” he couldn’t keep his voice from cracking as he talked. He tried to act like he wasn’t afraid of this demon, but he couldn’t hide it. The demon’s smile told him that he wasn’t fooled in the least. He made his way towards Mario, Mario backed up into the wall behind him. The little demon stumbled towards him on his miss shaped legs, his bitty red eyes locked onto Mario’s. Fear sunk in, it was almost as intense as seeing all of his loved ones as reanimated corpses. As his back pressed against the wall the demon came to a stop a few feet in front of him. The smell off of the creature was enough to gag him. He couldn’t stop himself from coughing, he wished he was anywhere but here.

“You know what I want little Mario.” his voice was made even creepier by the way he sang the words.

“What?” Mario asked, afraid of the answer.

“To thank you for freeing me. For giving me free. . .cough . . . cough” the demon fell to his knees coughing. Mario wasn’t sure what was going on. The demon looked up at him as its eyes grew wide and exploded out. Blood and eye juices spayed Mario all over his clothes, the demon’s head started to swell up and expand. Mario knew what was going to happen a moment before it did. He jumped out of the way as the demon exploded, his only thoughts as he landed hard on the ruff ground was that it took longer than five minutes.

The next few hours were a blur to Mario, he knew that at some point he found Sal and Ralph helping Tommy V, who had fallen down the stairs at some point. He seemed to be ok, he could walk under his own power at least. Tommy V was distant towards Mario for a change. It was what he had been wanting, to get the dealer out of his hair, but he had to admit it wasn’t a good feeling. He was getting used to having them looking out for him. He walked home with Ralph, they took most of the walk in silence. He kept trying to figure out what to say to his friend but kept coming up blank. This couldn’t be the end of their friendship. It just couldn’t.

They were a few blocks from Ralph’s house and still not a word had been said between the friends. Mario was about to turn towards his house when Ralph finally spoke. “Tonight was intense.”

“That’s a word for it.” Mario said, he looked at his best friend, he was avoiding looking back at him.

“I guess you were right.” Ralph said.

“I could have found a better way to prove it.” he admitted, his eyes on his feet. Ralph turned to face him. The expression on his face was unreadable. For a moment Mario thought it was anger, but it quickly became clear it was something else. It was hopelessness. It was fear.

“I’m terrified Mario. The world is full of things like that. What are we supposed to do?” It was a good question. One that Mario should have asked himself before now. He had been so hung up on finding out the truth about Alyssa that he never once thought about what it would mean beyond that. She was just one ghost, an innocent one at that, but this just proved that there were other, darker more violent monsters that went bump in the night. Monsters that only he and Ralph knew about.

“We end them.” Mario said, not knowing what else to say.

THE END