WarZone Entertainment presents

Mario Chronicles #3

Car Wreck

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Chapter One

The back seat of a car was never where Carl would have thought he would lose his virginity. He always thought it would be in his bed or Veronica's bed. Instead he was in the back seat of Samantha's car, with Samantha.

He used to love Sam, back when they were dating a little over a year ago. She was his first girlfriend and he was heartbroken when she left him for Kyle Jones. The captain of the football team. Carl heard around the school that Sam had had sex with Kyle and it killed him inside but what could he have done? She left him.

It took him a long time to come to grip with the fact that she moved on and he was alone. That was when he met Veronica in his Math class. She was so beautiful and sweet. It wasn't long before they were dating and spending all of their time together. He was sure that she would be his first and he couldn't think of anyone else he would have wanted.

Cut to today when out of nowhere Sam showed up at his house crying. He couldn't believe she was there standing in front of him, it took him a full minute to release that she was even crying. He asked her what was wrong, and she threw herself into a hug.

He couldn't make out what she was saying through the tears. He asked her to come inside and she pulled back saying she didn't want to see his family. They ended up getting in the car and drove to their old spot deep in the woods.

They talked for hours about how Kyle had cheated on her with damn near half the cheerleader squad. She was heartbroken, and Carl hated to see her like this. He did his best to comfort her. It never once crossed his mind that anything would happen between the two of them. So how he ended up here, with her naked on top of him nibbling down on his ear, he had no idea.

It was amazing, everything he ever thought it would be, even if it was a little quick. It was over almost as quickly as it started. She seemed happy enough, but he felt sick to his stomach. He couldn't figure out why he felt so ill. He could feel his dinner coming back up on him, was sex supposed to make you sick?

He pushed open the door and rushed out behind a tree and started to throw up. Sam called out to him asking if he was ok. He was standing outside in nothing but his boxers in the freezing cold. He was anything but okay. He was a scumbag. Veronica's face flashed through his mind. He cheated on the best girlfriend he had ever had, for the worst. What was wrong with him? How could he be such an asshole?

He could hear someone walking up from behind him. He let out a low sigh, he knew that he shouldn't blame Sam for what just happened. He made the choice with her to have sex, but it was the wrong one. He loved Veronica and she deserved better than him. Better than this.

The footsteps behind him moved closer and closer. He wished she would just turn around and go back to the car. He didn't want to deal with her right now. God was he one of those guys? The type of guys that had sex with a girl and then ran off. He laughed to himself picturing a guy having sex and running off into the woods in nothing but a pair of boxers. Now that was a sight to see.

The footsteps were right behind him now. Carl couldn't help but think to himself that they seemed a bit loud for Sam. He turned around and stopped cold. He couldn't believe what he saw there, not that he had a lot of time to think about it before a pair of razor sharp claws slashed through his face.

Chapter Two

The hallways of Eblis High were full of students running to and from all corners of the school. All trying to be less late then they already were. Ralph was next to Mario trying to hurry them along as Mario took his sweet time. What did he have to be on time for? The world was full of things that his teachers had never even heard of, what were they going to teach him? Math. No thank you, he could do without that. He wanted to know what else was out there and that wasn't something he was going to learn here.

“I can't believe you think school is useless.” Ralph said with a shake of his head. Ralph wasn't a nerd by any means. He barely did better than Mario in school, but his family drilled into him how important it was. Ralph took it halfway to heart. He would almost always go to class, but that was it. No doing homework or even paying attention in class. It was enough for Ralph to go. But even that was starting to be too much for him.

“I'm not saying it's useless. I'm saying that it isn't helpful for me.” He told Ralph and almost instantly regretted it. The look on Ralph's face told him all he needed to know. “Look, all I want is to find out more about what is out there, and this place isn't going to help me with that.”

“How do you know that? Last week everyone was affected by that spell. I doubt that happens most other places.” Ralph said, proud of himself for thinking of that comeback. The two of them turned the corner and were face to face with Tommy V. and his crew. Sal was right next to him with Al and Mike behind them. It was the first time Mario had seen them since the night of the spell. Things would have gone a lot worse if it wasn't for Tommy V. and Sal but it didn't make this any less awkward. He locked eyes with Tommy V. for a long moment before he walked past him with barely a nod.

Mario didn't know how to feel about that. Tommy V. had been trying for a while to get him to join up with him and his crew, but Mario had no interest. It seemed at last that was over and despite himself he missed it a bit. It was nice to know that people, people in power no less had his back. It seemed now he was on his own. He looked back at Ralph.

“I caused that to happen by reading the spell. I hardly say that counts.” Ralph nodded at Mario's words. Neither one of them had really talked about how Mario had caused all of the problems from last week. His need to prove that the supernatural existed had nearly killed the whole town. It had nearly cost him everything, yet here he was telling Ralph that he wanted to learn more. Showing his best friend who he nearly killed due to his recklessness that he had learned nothing. Ralph must hate him, but if he did he hid it well.

“Let's just go to class Mario.” Ralph said, choosing not to address what Mario just said. Mario couldn't appreciate his friend more if he tried.

“Fine, Let’s go to class.” Mario caved in. He followed Ralph into English class. It was already in session. Mr. Needs shot them a disappointed look. It sent shivers down his spine. It still weirded him out seeing Mr. Needs. Ever since he saw him dead while he was affected by the Ka'Lee demon. He tried to shake it off and apologized for being late as he took his seat next to Ralph.

Mario pulled out the English book everyone was reading from. Ralph quickly tried to catch up to everyone else. He leaned over to Mario who had already started to read.

“What page?” He whispered frantically. Mario turned his book away from Ralph a bit. Trying to hide what page he was on.

“No clue, I'm just trying to fake it.” he said only half true. Ralph let out a sigh and started flipping through his book trying to figure out where he was supposed to be reading from.

Mario on the other hand was reading newspaper clippings about the sheriff. Cole Simon, the last person who saw Alyssa alive. Mario's prime suspect in her murder. A murder that happened 10 years ago, when Mario was only 6. Why was he working so hard to figure all this out?

The only reason he could think of was that he loved the girl in white. Meeting Alyssa, even if only for a few minutes, was all it took to sweep him off of his feet. She was all he could think about. It wasn't fair that she was stolen from this world so soon. He barely met her, and she was already gone.

That wasn't true. He never met her. She died ten years before he met her. Which is in itself insane. But he did meet her, and he had to help her. It was his sole purpose. He couldn't let her death go unpunished. Although he couldn't help but feel glad that she died. He knew that sounded horrible, but if she didn't die he wouldn't have met her and he couldn't imagine not knowing her. Maybe that was why he wanted to solve her murder and help her find peace. So that he could escape this guilt he felt for being glad she was murdered.

Ralph let out a low grunt as he continued to search for the correct page. Great, more guilt. How could he feel guilty about feeling glad some girl he never really met died when he should feel guilty about putting his best friend in danger. Who knows what fears that Ralph, Tommy V and everyone else went through? All of that rested solely on Mario's shoulders. Not to mention the girl who almost died because of him.

Amy had survived but it was a close call and she was still in the hospital. Mario wasn't sure if she has woken up yet, but he heard that Sal had been there every moment he wasn't at school. Mario felt sick thinking about it.

Great, so now he felt guilty about being glad Alyssa died, he felt guilty for what he did to the town, more so for what he did to his friends, for what happened to Amy, that he didn't feel more guilty for what he did and that he felt guilty at all for Alyssa. Mario couldn't imagine anyone being as messed up as he was right now.

“Mr. Russo!” His name being shouted pulled him out of his self-pity. He looked up from the newspaper clipping that he hadn't really read any of, to find the whole class looking at him. “Aw we finally have your attention. I don't think I have ever seen someone so invested in the material. Care to give us your take on the topic at hand?”

Time seemed to stand still for him. His opinion on the topic at hand? What the hell was the topic at hand? He looked over at Ralph for help who just shrugged towards his book. Seemed he was just as lost as Mario was. There was only one thing he could do.

“Well uh, if you ask me.” he started, buying for time.

“I am.” Mr. Needs said with a knowing smile. Mario nodded, Mr. Needs knew he was stalling. He had to stop and come out with whatever he was trying to say.

“The point of the reading is that if you stop and really think about what the writer is trying to make you understand than you can come to grips with what the writer is trying to make you think about, but I feel you have to look deeper to what the writer really means so that uh, so uh, so that you can truly understand the writers deeper understanding of the topic at hand and thus know hi. . .their true intentions.” Mario finished not having a clue as to what he just said. The look of utter confusion on Ralph's face and the sounds of his classmates laughing told him that he was not alone in his lack of understanding. Mr. Needs chuckled and nodded his head.

“You got all of that?” Mr. Needs asked, giving Mario an out. One that he didn't take.

“Yes sir.” He said as confidently as he could. In the blink of an eye Mr. Needs snatched up Mario's book, with the news clippings right along with it.

“Well let's see how you came to that conclusion.” he said with a laugh. Mr. Needs took a minute to look at the news clippings. “Well I don't remember these being part of the book.” He put the book down in front of Mario and looked at them for a minute. He nodded and walked towards his desk.

“The sheriff, Mario?” He placed the news clippings on his table. “Well as glad as I am to see you taking an interest in local politics, that is not this class. This class is English, and I would thank you to follow along.” Mr. Needs didn't raise his voice, but he made it firm. A clear sign that he was disappointed in Mario. It made Mario just wish that he would scream at him. His disappointment crushed him far more than his anger. Mario lowered his head slowly.

“Sorry sir.” Mario said feeling even worse than he did a few minutes prior. Ralph shot him a knowing look. He still didn't buy into Mario's idea that the sheriff killed Alyssa when they were in high school. No matter what evidence Mario threw forward it wasn't enough. Part of Mario thought that the problem was that Ralph was just scared of going against the sheriff’s department. If he ever got brought home by the police his parents would kill him. To be fair Mario's parents wouldn't be too excited by it either.

“I thought you were letting this go Mario.” Ralph whispered. His voice steaming with suppressed rage. As much as Ralph insisted that he was over what happened last week Mario knew he wasn't. How could he be? Mario still wasn't over what he saw when he was affected by the demon.

When he closed his eyes, he could still see all of his loved one’s dead bodies limping towards him, telling him over and over how he failed them. He could feel his body start to shake uncontrollably in his chair.

He kept trying to stop himself from shaking but he couldn't manage it. The bell rang, and Mario shot to his feet, rushing out of the door. He made it to the restroom just as people started to leave their classrooms. The hard, cold wall was his friend, almost as much as the colder, harder floor that he slid onto. The shaking was getting worse and worse. He couldn't catch his breath. Every second it seemed harder and harder to breath. His vision started to get blurry.

“Mario!” He could hear Ralph shaking him as he tried to steady Mario. “Breath Mario! Breath!” as if it was that easy. Ralph had no idea how hard the simple task of breathing was. “Slow steady breaths. You're having a panic attack”

Mario tried to heed his friend’s advice. It wasn't easy but slowly it started to work. His body stopped shaking and he could feel air entering his lungs once more. His vision cleared up, Ralph was right in front of him.

“You okay?” The worry in his friend’s voice made Mario feel a bit better. It was good to know that even when Ralph was mad he still cared. Nothing would ever come between them.

“I'm fine. Just got overwhelmed.” Mario said as he got to his feet. Ralph handed him his backpack and the newspaper clippings.

“It's because of this.” Mario took the newspaper clippings as he slid his backpack onto his back. “You can't do all this alone Mario. You're going to get in trouble. Or killed.” Ralph meant well. He did. Mario knew he did but it didn't matter. Mario needed to save Alyssa. It was all he could think about.

“I don't have a choice Ralph. I have to save her.” He pushed his way out into the hallway. “I have to save her.” He was so lost in thought about finding out more about the sheriff that he ran right into a girl from their grade. She had long brown hair and beautiful green eyes.

“Hey!” She snapped at him. Mario jumped to his feet and helped her up.

“Sorry, I didn't see you.” Mario said. The girl dusted herself off and shot him an evil look.

“It's fine.” She stormed off down the hall. It wasn't like Mario meant to hit her. He turned to Ralph who was staring down the hall after her as if in a daze.

Mario smiled to himself. Maybe now Ralph would understand his feelings for Alyssa.

Chapter Three

There was a cool breeze that sent shivers down Mario spine as he crouched down low on the rooftop of the local grocery store. Mario couldn't figure out if the shivers were from the cool night breeze or from his nerves. He was across the street from the sheriff's station.

He wasn't sure how long he had been out here staring at Sheriff Simon's office waiting for something/anything to happen. He wasn’t sure what he was hoping to find when he first managed to get onto the roof, which in and of itself was no easy feat. There was a ladder attached to the building, but it was too high up. He had to run and jump just to get a hold of the bottom ring and pull himself up. It took all his strength to pull himself up. After all that he made it to the roof and rushed to the side of the sheriff's office and the window was wide open. It was all he could hope for. Made all the better by the fact that Cole Simon was sitting at his desk.

That was hours ago, and he was still sitting at his desk. Not doing a damn thing. Truth be told it was dreadfully boring and the only thing keeping him awake was his fear that he would get caught or worse that the second he looked away he would miss what he was looking for. He only wished that he knew what he was looking for. He was so gung ho to come and scope Sheriff Simon out that he never once stopped to think about what he was really looking for.

By now hours had to have passed and he was no closer to proving that the Sheriff had anything to do with Alyssa's murder than he was before coming up here. Maybe it was time to head home. With any luck his parents hadn't noticed him missing yet and he could just sneak in.

He made his way off of the roof and found himself in the back alley feeling pretty low. He spent all night out in the cold and it was all for nothing. He was no better off than he was before.

The alleyway was a great deal darker than the rooftop and it took a few minutes for his eyes to adjust. There wasn't much back here but for trash and empty crates.

“Hey!” a lone voice screamed out at him. Mario turned to look, it was the same homeless man that had been shooting up when Mario had first passed through here. At first Mario thought the man was talking to him, he was about to say something but stopped short when he noticed someone moving towards the man. He couldn't make out who the guy was, he almost seemed to be cloaked in shadows.

“Stay away from me!!” The man's scream was deafening, Mario stumbled back, terrified to continue watching but unable to look away. The creature, because there was no way that thing was human, of that Mario was sure, closed in on the homeless man.

In the blink of an eye the homeless man's blood was everywhere. Mario wanted to scream but was far too scared. He fell backwards, the fall shook him out of his daze. He crawled backwards, jumped up to his feet and ran. He never looked back.

He was nearly home before he even slowed down to catch his breath. His heart was beating so fast that he thought it would break right out of his chest.

When he finally made it home the house was silent. His parents seemed to still be asleep. It was a lucky break, the last thing Mario needed on top of everything else was to get in trouble.

Sleep did not come easy for Mario that night. He laid up in his bed staring at the ceiling, images of the homeless man's last moments flashing before him.

Morning came far too soon for Mario's comfort. His first couple of classes were a blur. All he could think about was the night before and the man's death. It wasn't till 3rd period, when Ralph finally had class with him, that he started to get out of his daze.

“Someone just killed him right across the street from the police station?” Ralph said a little too loudly. A few people turned to look at them.

“Can you maybe not talk so loud!” Mario hissed at him. Having everyone in class know about Mario's late-night adventure wasn't going to help anything.

“Sorry.” Ralph looked around to make sure that no one was listening in. It seemed as if the coast was clear. “Did you see a face?”

“That's the thing Ralph,” Mario said, not sure if he could say out loud what he wanted to say. Ralph knew that things went bump in the night, but that didn't mean that it was something he wanted to know. But Mario had to tell someone. “I don't think it was human.”

The words took the toll on Ralph that Mario knew they would. The look of horror on his best friend’s face was clear as day. Ralph wanted no part of this world and he hated that Mario kept dragging him into it more and more each day.

“It was a ghost?” Ralph asked, his voice shaking. “They can kill people now?” Mario had never seen him that scared before.

“I don't know. It was more shadows than anything else.” Mario said. He knew that he had just as much fear in his voice, but his was mixed with just a bit of excitement. He got off on the supernatural of it all in a way that Ralph never would.

“Did you do this?” Ralph asked. Mario couldn't believe that he would even ask that. How could Ralph even think that Mario could be responsible for something like this? Just because he messed up last week didn't mean that every bad thing that happened in town was his fault.

“No! I was just there. . .”

“Spying on the sheriff, I know. So much better.” Ralph cut him off. He had a point. Maybe spying on someone who could throw you in jail wasn't a great idea, but it was the only way that Mario could figure out anything about Alyssa.

“What do you want from me Ralph?” Mario asked. Just then the bell rang, and Ralph got to his feet.

“To let all this go.” Ralph said. He scooped up his backpack. “But we both know you won't do that. So please just don't get us killed.” Ralph spun and exited the room.

Chapter Four

Mario didn't bother going to class the next day. His mind was too busy racing with too many thoughts. As much as Mario hated to admit it, Ralph was right. There was no way that Mario could let this go. He just had to find out what it was he saw that night.

It didn't take him long to find out that the homeless man he saw murdered was Kevin Simmons. He walked out on his family two years back while he was off chasing that needle. He fell heavily into drug use while he was in college but kicked the habit and got married. His wife lost their second child during child birth and he fell back on old habits to help him cope. Walking out on his family and never looking back. As Mario read through the police report that he got by pretending to be the man's son he couldn't help but feel as if the shadow creature had done the world a favor by ridding it of this sorry excuse of a man.

It was almost enough for Mario to grant Ralph's wish and let it all go. That was till he saw something in the report that made him rethink everything. It turned out that there were a few other deaths that seemed to have happened in the same way. A wild animal clawing at the neck. How a wild animal could get at these people's neck Mario had no idea. He could only guess the ‘hard-working’ Sheriff department was just too lazy to actually investigate.

The first murder was some kid named Carl. Mario had seen him around school once or twice but never really knew him. He had been out in the woods with his ex-girlfriend when something attacked him. His current girlfriend said in the local paper that she couldn't believe he had died while cheating on her. That it made the whole thing all the more heartbreaking for her.

The second murder took place two days later, two days before the homeless man was murdered before Mario's eyes. He was an accountant who was on trial for embezzlement. Turned out the guy had been stealing money from the company he worked for for years. The worst part of it all was that the company was owned by his parents and it went under thanks to his actions. The man was a real winner.

All three victims were people guilty of horrible crimes. Cheating on a girlfriend, stealing from family, walking out on his family. Was that the common denominator? Was the next victim going to be someone else who screwed over his family? Or was it something else? Mario wished he knew because if the pattern held than that meant that the next murder would happen tonight.

It was time for Mario to decide what he wanted to do. This time it wasn't his fault. He had no responsibility to step in and try to help. He could ignore what he found like Ralph had asked him to and go back to his investigation of the Sheriff. Or he could figure out who was the next victim and find a way to save them. It sure would help a lot if he knew what the shadow creature was but so far he was coming up empty. The local library didn't bring up any results.

By time he left the library the sun had already set, and the day was all but gone. He didn't have a lot of time left to figure everything out and he knew that he would never be able to live with himself if someone else died when he could have done something about it.

-MC-

The cool night air washed over Sal as he took a hit of his cigarette. Hospitals had never agreed with him, going all the way back to when his mother died. It was a cold night much like this one, he was at home with his parents watching TV when his mother fainted. At first he didn't know what happened. After all he was only 7 and what do 7-year-old's know about the real world? His dad rushed them to the hospital, he had never seen his father look so stressed out before. Sal remembered how his dad had always been the life of the party. Any room that he walked into he was loved almost instantly.

All that energy and life seemed to just drain out of him as they waited in the waiting room for news on Sal's mother. It wasn't long before they received world that she didn't make it. Sal didn't know it at the moment but that was the day he lost both of his parents. His mother was dead, and his father was a hollow shell of his former self. From then on he was closed off and short with everyone. Sal most of all. It wasn't till some time later that Sal put together that it was because he reminded his father of his mother, but it wasn't fair to blame a little kid for looking like his mom.

Sal flicked his cigarette out and headed back inside. He felt his whole-body shiver as he pushed through the double doors. He had avoided hospitals as much as he could since then. Just as his dad blamed him for his mother's death, he blamed the hospital.

If it wasn't for Amy being here he would still be avoiding the hospital altogether. He tried a few times to talk to her, but she wouldn't ever say anything more than a few words to him. It was almost as if she blamed him for everything and who could blame her? Sal was there when she was hurt, true he helped fix everything, but it wasn't like she knew that. All she knew was that her greatest fears had come to life and almost killed her. More importantly Sal was there when it happened. He wasn't sure if she remembered him being there or not but either way she was really upset. He would have given anything to help her feel better, he just didn't know how.

His greatest fear was that she might remember him being there that night. When she fell and hit her head he could have caught her, but he didn't. He stood by and let it happen. Truth was he wanted to help, he did, but he knew that if he touched her he would have been infected by the same thing she was. Who knew what he would have saw, they could have both ended up dead. Or was that just what he told himself so that he could sleep at night?

Not that he was sleeping much anyway. The past few nights he had sat in the waiting room watching the other patients waiting their turn to see the doctors. The hard chairs in the waiting room weren't the ideal place to fall asleep. Part of him wondered if his father had even noticed he wasn't coming home at night. He still made it to school, mostly because he didn't want Tommy V. to know how much he was beating himself up over what happened to Amy. It wasn't good for his image.

He couldn't help but wince at that thought. Was he the kind of guy who cared more about what people thought about him than about the poor girl laying in a bed upstairs? He shook his head as he settled into the chair farthest away from the rest of the room.

People watching was always an interesting pass time for Sal. It was amazing how weird and different everyone was. Not two chairs away from him was an older black man in a wheelchair. He had a bottle with him, what was in the bottle he had no clue, but he had some ideas.

A nurse came out of the double doors, looking haggard. Clearly, they were as busy back there as they were packed up here. She called for some guy named Jackson and right on cue the man in the wheelchair reacted.

“How about for me?” He screamed out at the nurse. She glanced over at him but tried not to acknowledge him. “I had hip surgery two days ago and can't deal with all this waiting.” The guy whose name she called walked into the hall with the nurse, never saying a word to the man.

A deputy walked over to the man in a wheelchair, he seemed unsure of what to say. The man looked up to him with a sneer.

“I wasn't doing nothing officer.” The man spit out before the deputy could say a word. “You don't got anything to say to me sir. I'm just waiting to see the doctor. You see I got hip surgery two days ago. I need to see my doctor, but he is ignoring me.” The man blurted out far too quickly. The officer just nodded, he turned to walk away but stopped and turned back.

“I sympathize. I do, but you are starting to scare the staff.”

“I ain't mean nothing by it officer. I just need me doctor. You see I'm in so much pain. I got hip surgery two days ago.” the man said.

“Be that as it may, if you don't stop yelling at the staff I'm going to have to ask you to leave.” The deputy told the man.

“Sorry sir, yes sir.” The man said. The officer nodded his thanks and walked away. The man turned to look at the people sitting next to him. “Can you believe they are sending the police after me now? I did nothing but ask for help. You know how much it hurts when you get hip surgery? I just need my doctors, but no one will help me! I'm all alone and even the cops are trying to keep me from getting help!”

Sal had to look away to keep from laughing. The man was clearly insane. The cop was looking back at him debating if he should say something else to him or not. He thought better of it and stayed silent.

This was going to be a long night. Sal only hoped that in the morning Amy would be up to seeing visitors. He missed her more than he cared to admit. She might just be the one.

Chapter Five

The bell rang for second period right as Mario was rushing into the building. He had only a few minutes to track down Ralph before he went into class.

Sure enough by time Mario found him he was already walking into the room. Mario sped up and took Ralph by the arm and dragged him away from class.

“What are you doing?” Ralph demanded pulling free.

“I found something!” Mario said. Ralph merely rolled his eyes.

“And why are you telling me?” Ralph asked. Mario stood dumbfounded. “I knew this was going to happen. Mario when are you going to let this go?”

“Why would I? Ralph, it isn't just the one death, there are at least three!” Whatever affect Mario was hoping for it wasn't this.

“Three?” Ralph demanded. Mario nodded. “Are you kidding me? You're standing here saying that like it's more reason to investigate this shit. When any sane person would see it as a reason not to!”

“So I should just let people continue to die?” Mario demanded.

“We're kids Mario. Children! In high school. What are we supposed to do?” Ralph asked, for the first time Mario could see just how scared he was.

“Whatever we can.” The friends were at an impasse. Mario could see it all over Ralph's face. “Can we really do any less?”

“Sure. We can do nothing. We can go to class.” Ralph shot back.

“Class?” Mario couldn't believe what he was hearing.

“Yeah, you know that place you always skip. The whole reason this here building exists.” Ralph said. Mario let out a long sigh. He had to get Ralph to help him. He couldn't stop this shadow alone.

“I know what class is!” Mario snapped.

“You sure? I didn't think you've ever been.” Ralph said.

“People are dying Ralph.” Mario said defeated.

“Fine, let's go play hero.” Ralph said, resigned.

“You mean it?” Mario asked. Hopeful.

“Do I have a choice?”

“Not really no.” Mario laughed.

“So, what is it?” Ralph asked.

“It's a Ma-key demon.” Mario said. “Am I saying that right?”

“How the hell should I know. What does it do?” Ralph snapped. This whole demon thing really seemed to make him testy. Were sidekicks always such a pain in the ass? How did Batman do it with Robin.

“Well from what. . .” Mario started to say when Ralph cut him off.

“Wait did you say demon!” Ralph screamed. Mario looked around quickly, he pushed Ralph into a nearby classroom that was unoccupied.

“Can you scream any louder? I think there might be a few classes left that didn't hear you!” Mario snapped, trying to sound firm but quiet.

“I'm pretty sure we'll find out once we meet this demon of yours.” Ralph said.

“Oh goody. For a second I was worried that only half the school would hear your manly scream.” Mario said.

“What does your demon do?” Ralph asked again.

“It's not my demon!” Mario screamed at him.

“You found him, he's yours!” Ralph said. Before Mario even had a moment to respond Ralph spoke again. “What. . .Does. . .He. . .do?”

Ralph asked once more. It was time to tell him. He already agreed to help, it was time he knew what he was getting into. This was harder than Mario thought it would be. He wasn't just asking Ralph to help out because he was his best friend or because Mario was scared of going against this monster alone. The real reason was because the demon fed off of guilt.

“It's a shadow demon who feeds off of, well guilt.” Mario said. Ralph caught on to Mario's game a lot faster than Mario would have liked.

“That's the ticket. You can't fight it because you still feel guilty for seeking that demon on everyone last week.” Ralph said cutting to the heart of the matter.

“I didn't seek that demon on anyone! I only summoned it to prove to you that demons exist!” Mario said defensively.

“Which then went on and almost killed everyone.” Ralph said, not relenting.

“Okay, okay, are we going to stand around talking about ancient history or are we going to figure out what to do about this new threat?” Mario asked. “Which by the way I am not at all responsible for!”

“Ancient history? It was last week!” Ralph pointed out. Mario was not amused. Bad things happened, and people moved on. Why couldn't Ralph just understand that.

“Fine, maybe I want help with this one because I'm worried it will attack me. Maybe I do feel guilty. Happy?” Mario admitted.

“Yeah, yeah I am.” Ralph said. “So, what do I do?”

“No idea.” Mario said.

-MC-

“So, what now?” Ralph asked as they made yet another pass around town. Ralph had never really been out this late before. The moon was high overhead, what time that was, Ralph had no clue. Ralph had talked Mario into finishing the day in school before taking off in search of the shadow demon.

Mario wasn't happy with it, but he sat through class, eyeing the clock like it was handing out wishes. The second the end of day bell rang Mario was out the door with Ralph in tow.

Since then the two friends had been around town over and over looking for who knows what. Ralph had no clue what this shadow demon of Mario's looked like or where they would find it.

“I'm not entirely sure. I was kind of just hoping it would come after me.” Mario said. “You know, since I'm such a horrible person.” He added for good measure.

“I'm starting to think that you don't even feel guilty.” Ralph snapped. Mario said that he felt guilty about what happened the week before, but he wasn't acting like someone who felt bad. He acted as if nothing happened.

“I do.” Mario said. He started walking faster, Ralph had to jog just to keep up. “It's just, well maybe I feel guilty that I feel more guilty about feeling guilty for not feeling more guilty than I do for what happened last week.” Ralph nodded his head as Mario spoke. Getting more and more lost in Mario's words as he went on. Ralph needed a road map just to keep up with him.

“Run that by me one more time.” Ralph said confused. Mario looked over at him.

“I don't really feel guilty for what happened. It was an accident, and no one was hurt. But I do feel guilty that I don't feel guilty.” Mario clarified.

“What about that Amy girl?” Ralph asked, speaking about the girl who was hurt in the hallway. Sal seemed to have some feelings for the girl and was hit hard when she was hurt.

“Okay, point. She was hurt.” Mario said. Ralph could tell that Mario hadn't really spent a lot of time thinking about what happened. Maybe that's how he dealt with what happened. Maybe that was why he didn't feel guilty. He never let himself dwell on it.

“Have you been to see her yet?” Ralph asked already knowing the answer. He had been to see her a few days after she was hurt. She had no clue who he was and didn't seem to care one way or the other that he came by, but it made Ralph feel better. The look on Mario's face told him that there was no way he went yet.

“Not yet.” Mario said confirming what Ralph already knew. The streets were deserted in this part of town. It had been a few hours since Ralph had seen anyone else, if the demon wasn't going to attempt to feed on Mario they weren't likely to find it at all.

“We should go see her.” Ralph said. As much as Ralph hated hospitals it would be a nice improvement to the dark empty streets they were on now.

-MC-

The hospital was largely empty tonight. Sal made his way through the almost empty waiting room, his mind racing. He couldn't stop replaying the night that Amy got hurt over and over again. He felt like a failure that he just stood by and watched it happen. To be fair if he had tried to help her he would have just been infected right along with her. It wouldn't have helped anyone.

That thought didn't make him feel better or make Amy's coldness towards him any less hurtful. He couldn't blame her. Tommy V and Mario saw the big picture, but Sal didn't care. He hated them all for saving him. He would have gladly taken the pain she was feeling now onto himself.

He pushed open the hospital doors and made his way outside into the cold night air. Even the parking lot was largely empty. Well at least people didn't seem to be as sick tonight as they normally were.

The wind was blowing a little more than normal, making it hard for Sal's lighter to click right. It was never harder to light a cigarette than when you needed one the most. The lighter clicked on and he moved it to his cigarette, only for it to blow out before it lit. He tried again and once more it blew out too soon.

“Fuck!” Sal cursed under his breath as he tried a third time. This time it blew out the second the fire caught. “What is going on?” he asked himself as he made his way closer towards the hospital. Maybe if he got close enough to the wall he could use it to block out the wind and light this damn cigarette.

He put his shoulder to the wall to try and block out any wind and pulled the lighter back out. Suddenly the wind picked up speed. Sal couldn't remember ever being this cold in his life. It got so bad that he dropped the lighter.

“Dammit!” He bent down to pick it up when he heard something moving towards him from behind. It was getting closer and closer. “I'm not in the mood.”

He turned around ready to confront whoever was charging at him. It wasn't a person. At least not at first. Sal almost lost his footing falling back as he took in what could only be described as a shadow with form. What that form was, Sal wasn't sure. It was wide, encompassing all of Sal's vision but it was slowly changing, becoming more and more formed. More solid. Sal had never seen anything like it in his life.

“What the hell?” He said, trying to sound tough. But he wasn't, he was a weak scared child watching his father beat his mother. Every part of his mind screaming at him to help her. To say something to his father, to get in the way. To do anything but stand around like the scared little child he was. “Mom?” he blurted out as he fell to his knees. The shadow was that of his father. The one person in the world who Sal was truly afraid of. No one had ever hurt him as badly as his father had. He was the reason that he hardly ever went home anymore. Even when he wasn't spending the night in the hospital waiting room, he would find other places to sleep. Mostly at Tommy V's house.

His dad's shadow moved closer and closer to him, the dread in his heart growing stronger and stronger as his father tossed his dead mother's body at his feet. How could she be dead? He just saw her last week when he went home to pick up some stuff. She was fine, well as fine as she ever was. Now she was laying in front of him dead. He never even got to tell her he loved her. Tell her that he was sorry for not helping her out.

“What did I ever do for you to abandon me? You were my little Sally and you just left me to this monster. Left me to die!” The shadow of his mother's dead body spoke to him. His father's shadow dissipated as the hurt in his dead mother's eyes drilled into Sal's soul.

“Mom. . .mother, I'm sorry.” He stuttered. His heart was breaking. He could feel it. The weight of his guilt for abandoning his mother to that horrible home, to his evil father, was almost too much for him.

“You never loved me! If you did, you never would have left me!” His mother's shadow cried out. From behind her he could just make out Amy's shadow forming up where his father was just standing.

“Face it, you can't love anyone Sal. You left me to die. You were standing right there and did nothing for me! Why are you even here now?” Amy's shadow yelled at him. He buckled under the weight of their hatred. “To alleviate your guilt? Well it won't work!”

-MC-

The closer they got to the hospital the colder it seemed to get. Every step ate away at Mario. It wasn't that he was afraid to see the girl that he got hurt, because he knew that it was his fault. He knew that he should be feeling guilty, but the truth was he was just disappointed that they were taking a detour from hunting this new shadow demon. This Ma-Key demon. That was all he could think about and yet here he was visiting a reminder of a problem he already solved.

He didn't know what was wrong with him. He should be feeling guiltier. What kind of human being almost kills someone and didn't even care about it? He hated it and wished that he did care more. He just wanted to find this demon and stop it from hurting anyone else.

Only that wasn't true was it? He wanted to feel the excitement of the hunt again. Feel the rush that came from facing something that could kill him without even breaking a sweat. It was the greatest high Mario had ever felt. Not that he had much experience getting high.

“What if the demon kills someone while we are here?” Mario asked, feeling like an asshole as he did so.

“We have no idea where this monkey demon is, besides, you need to go and see what harm you did.” Ralph said, trying to point out to Mario what was right and wrong.

“Ma-Key.” Mario said, pointing out the only part of what Ralph said that he could correct. Ralph was right about everything. Mario was a horrible person for not caring more. Maybe part of the problem was that this girl was friends, or maybe even something more of Sal's. The one guy who always hated Mario. Who went out of his way to make Mario feel like a pathetic loser. Even when Tommy V was trying to be all buddy buddy with Mario, Sal just worked harder to put Mario in his place.

It wasn't this girl's fault that Sal was such an ass, but Mario was blaming her for it. He was enjoying the fact that her being hurt was hurting Sal. That thought made Mario shudder. How could he be so heartless? For the first time since all this happened he started to feel guilty for what he did.

“Uh Mario?” Ralph's voice pulled Mario out of his thoughts.

“What?” He asked uneasy, he felt like a horrible monster and the truth was he'd rather keep feeling like that than be distracted by anything.

“Is that the shadow thing?” His voice was shaking as he pointed it out. Mario looked over and sure enough the shadow demon was moving towards some guy on the ground.

“That's it.” Mario said as he started moving closer to the demon, he was moving as fast as he could without running.

“I told you going to the hospital was a smart idea!” Ralph said as he rushed to catch up to him. Mario could finally make out the man on the ground being killed by the shadow.

“Is that Sal?” Mario asked, afraid of the answer. He was just wishing that something bad would happen to Sal and now here he was about to be killed by the demon that Mario had been hunting. This too was his fault.

The shadow shifted in the air, almost as if it was attaining a form. The air started getting colder and colder, thinner and thinner. The shadow seemed to shift and look more and more like Sal. It was a crazy experience, seeing Sal on the ground shaking and crying while another Sal was gliding towards Mario.

“You wanted this to happen? Didn't you!” The shadow Sal asked him. Already knowing the answer. “You've been praying for me to die, for me to be tortured and killed by something dark and evil. Are you happy now? You have your wish!”

Out of the back of the shadow Sal another shadow person emerged. It was the girl from the party. The person that Mario came here to apologize to.

“You didn't come here to apologize to me!” Shadow Amy told Mario, as if she could read his mind. “You came here to get Ralph off of your back.”

“Mario, what's wrong?” Ralph said, his voice was fading out as the air thinned out and the coldness overtook Mario. All he could see and hear was the shadow moving towards him.

Another shadow split off from the other two. This one taking the form of his father. A look of deep disgust on his face.

“You selfish little brat. All me and your mother have done for you and what do we get in return? You know how much we are struggling at the shop and yet what are you doing? You run around the streets doing nothing! Wasting time chasing some ghost girl. All your mother has ever wanted was grandchildren. How are you going to give her grandchildren if you marry a ghost?” His father's shadow asked him. Looking down at him much the way his father did when he was mad.

Ralph stood at his side, looking at him with pure hatred. Mario had never seen his best friend look at him like that before. Not even at the party last week when he thought their friendship was over for good.

“You see what you did Mario? You messed everything up! This town was great until you came around.” Ralph told him. His every word making Mario feel sicker and sicker. It was getting to the point where he couldn't even stand anymore. He couldn't see, he couldn't hear.

The Ma-Key demon's only weakness was silver. He had a silver knife in his pocket. He just had to pull it out and cut through the shadow. He could do it. He just had to pull it out.

“You never will. This is the end of the line son. You are going to die today and break your mother's heart. You know that don't you?” His father's shadow said. Mario was fighting for every breath. He was a horrible son. When he first saw the notices from the bank he wanted to talk to his father. To try and help out but he was so worked up about the party and seeing Cynthia. Nothing else really mattered to him, till he met Alyssa later that night. Since then he hadn't been the same and truth be told he hadn't given his father a second thought. “I begged her to have an abortion when we found out she was pregnant. You've been nothing but a waste of space since you were born!”

He never knew his father felt that way about him. He always had a bit of a strained relationship with his father, but they were always friendly. Now his father was telling him he wanted him dead. How could a father say that to his son?

“How can a friend send a fear demon to kill their best friend?” Ralph's shadow asked, once more giving Mario the feeling that the shadow demon could read minds.

“How could any self-respecting human being wish harm to another?” Sal's shadow asked him. The shadows were now standing over Mario like giant sentries. He could feel the weight of their judgments baring down on him.

“How could anyone with a soul rejoice at someone else’s misfortune just because it causes another’s pain?” Amy's shadow shouted at him. Her words like daggers to his heart. He could feel his heart tightening up. Breathing was becoming more and more a chore with each breath.

He tried to pull the knife out of his pocket, but everything was getting too dark, too cold, too much for him to handle. He might have made some mistakes in his life but that didn't mean he deserved this. He knew that he could have been a better son, a better friend and yes even a better person but he wasn't evil. He was a teenager who was interested in a girl. That shouldn't mean that he had to be put to death for it.

*Does it?* He thought to himself as everything went black. . .

**Chapter Six**

The world slowly came into focus as Mario managed to open his eyes. His head was pounding worse than he could ever remember. Ralph and Sal were standing above him, looking down at him.

“He's waking up.” Sal said, for once he seemed genuinely concerned with Mario's wellbeing.

“Wha. . .what happened?” Mario asked, struggling just to talk. Every word hurt him. Everything was such a blur. Last thing he remembered was charging at the shadow demon that was trying to kill Sal. The shadow turned on him and became his father and Sal and Ralph. . . “Don't hurt me.” Mario squeaked out. Both friends shared a confused look.

“Hurt you?” Ralph asked. “Mario it's us.”

“I want to thank you.” Sal said, holding out his hand as Mario sat up. Mario looked at the hand uncertain before taking it.

“Thank me? The demon attacked me, I didn't do anything.” Mario told them. The truth sinking in. He was so gung ho in tracking down this demon with nothing but a silver knife in his pocket.

“Well whatever you didn't do, it worked.” Sal said. Ralph nodded.

“It was moving in on you, you kept calling out to Sal.” Ralph was saying before Sal interrupted him.

“It was unsettling.” Sal said with a weak grin.

“Then, for no reason that we could tell, the shadow screamed and dissolved.” Ralph told him. His voice shaky. He was scared by what he saw. Mario couldn't blame him. It seemed unsettling and he didn't even remember any of it.

“It just screamed?” Mario asked. Confused as to what could have happened. Ralph nodded.

“I know we never really got along man, but. . .but it means a lot to me that when you thought you were going to die, you were only thinking about saving me.” Sal said, it was clearly hard for him to say aloud. Mario wanted to save that moment in his memory forever. His greatest foe at school and now here he was telling Mario he appreciated him. That's why when he started laughing he felt so bad. Sal was not happy. “What's so funny?”

“It's not, it's just, I wasn't saying Sal. I was trying to say silver.” Mario said. Sal rolled his eyes. “But I was trying to save you.” He pulled out his silver knife, holding it up for them. “I was telling Ralph to use this to save us both.” This time it was Mario's turn to feel stupid as Ralph and Sal laughed. “What?”

Ralph took the knife from him looking it over before handing it to Sal who laughed even harder, before tossing it aside.

“Only you Mario.” Ralph said with a laugh.

“What?” Mario asked, starting to get annoyed as he watched his weapon fly free.

“That's stainless steel. As in steel, not silver.” Sal said looking at Mario with his normal disgust. “I'm going to check on Amy.” He said as he headed inside the hospital. Ralph shook his head and patted Mario on the back.

“You still want to go see her?” Ralph asked him. Mario looked up at the hospital and back at Ralph.

“Not today.”

“Fair enough.” Ralph said, he led Mario away from the hospital. “So, what happened?” That was a fair question. Memories of what happened were starting to come back to Mario, but he still wasn't sure what happened. He thought he was going to die. The demon was all but on top of him. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. He was dying and there was nothing he could do about it, until he wasn't. What changed?

“I accepted my guilt.” Mario said, saying it out loud almost before he even figured it out himself. “Once I owned what I felt guilty about and forgave myself that must have been what stopped him.”

“I don't get it.” Ralph said as they walked through the town heading home.

“It must have created a feedback. He fed on forgiveness, acceptance, instead of guilt. I guess it was like poison.” Mario said, it had a ring of truth to it. The books he found on the Ma-Key demon said that it couldn't feed on people who were at peace with themselves. That must have been what saved Mario. He found peace.

The End!