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THE PHASEWALKER: TOME OF SALEM

by

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ONE

Deep in the centre of the multiverse sat the swirling cosmic maelstrom that all the souls who pass through the Nexus into the afterlife are funnelled into. This ethereal vortex was the conduit between death and rebirth, the cosmic balance of creation situated between Heaven and Hell. Floating around this vortex, overlooking the sea of universes and realms, the large obsidian fortress drifted lazily through space, its black walls sparkling from the millions of stars around it, cliffs crumbling away as if it had broken away from something larger. Inside its walls the interchanging labyrinth hummed quietly, its corridors stretching for miles across over thirty floors, hundreds of chambers of different sizes scattered everywhere. Huge chambers like the Court of Judges and the stables and the dungeons were a hive of activity while the rest of the fortress was ghostly silent, it's only three inhabitants all quietly performing their own tasks at different ends of the building. Azrael, the Angel of Death, sat at his post in the Observation Deck monitoring the barriers between universes. Across the empty hallways sat a four storey library, thousands of bookcases stretching from one wall to the next rising to the ceiling, it's shelves stocked full of scrolls and binders and tomes and boxes all packed with information gathered across millennia from across the multiverse. Anything you could ever need to know about creation was somewhere in this chamber.

Sitting within this library, surrounded by piles of books pulled from various categories, Jackson White slumped over a desk flicking through the pages of a reference binder, his tired eyes scanning the images one after the other. He was wearing a black t-shirt, the grey jacket hanging over the back of his chair, his bare forearms resting under his chin supporting his head. The black and red hiking boot tapped lazily against the chair leg, his grey jeans chaffing slightly from the hours he'd spent sitting here. His chest rose and fell with every slow breath he took through his nose as he turned the page. His eye lids were getting heavy as he reached the end of the binder, unable to find the image he was looking for, one that matched the rough sketch

that sat next to the pile of research. The drawing was of a rectangular object with a scream face upon its front. Apart from that there was little detail to work with, which made looking for its reference marker impossible. As a result Jack had to manually search through dozens of books in the hopes he might stumble upon what he was looking for. But it was like looking for a needle in a field of haystacks and he didn't even know what needle he was looking for.

Meanwhile, Freya was sitting by another table, a thick book opened up in front of her as she focused on the ball of yellow liquid energy floating in her hands. She was concentrating really hard as the ball morphed and shifted between her fingers, trying to make it change out of its blobby shape. But every time it stretched and pulled the energy flickered and sparked, her face twitching from excursion as beads of sweat formed on her forehead. After a few tiring minutes the ball evaporated as she threw her hands down in frustration. "Damnit!" she snapped, slumping back into her seat frustrated.

"Having trouble?" Jack asked her, leaning back in his chair to look over his shoulder.

She sat right behind him on the mirroring table, nursing her temples as her wings folded behind her back, the feathers shuffling with irritation. "I swear this was easier when I was younger" she complained. "I've been at this for three hours but I can't manipulate this energy to do what I want. It won't stay stable."

"You'll get it" he said softly. "Just try to relax. Maybe don't force it" he suggested. Not that he knew what he was doing. Most of the magic he could perform involved summoning balls of flame.

"It's not that different really" Marcus commented. *"You should really try harnessing the magic potential you have now."*

Maybe some other time he mumbled to him. Marcus had been rather dormant in his head since he started his research. He said it was to give Jackson space to think, but he suspected he was avoiding giving him a hand.

“Please don’t tell Azrael I’m struggling” she suddenly asked, turning around to beg properly. “If he finds out I can’t complete this section on my own he’ll be tutoring me for days over it. I didn’t think I can handle him looking over my shoulder anymore.”

He chuckled, spinning in his seat to face her with an amused grin. “Your secret is safe with me” he promised. “I’d give you a hand myself, but I’m pretty wiped from all this myself.”

She looked across at the researched stacked all over his table and on the floor beside him. “How’s it going? Did you find what you were looking for?” she asked, looking for a distraction.

He groaned looking at the piles of books. “I don’t even know what I’m looking for” he whined. “I’ve been at this for over an hour and got nothing. It’s all just gibberish and scribbles to me. I even tried dropping this image into google to see what that could get. 12 trillion web results, most of them on *Edvard Munch’s the Scream*.”

“Right now I’d rather be researching with you rather than losing my mind to this” Freya grumbled.

Jack was sharing her frustration. This image was the only thing connecting all the monsters he’d been fighting over the summer. Whatever it was created a self-replicating army of hounds, a giant blob monster and inadvertently turned Joseph’s dad Stoke into an Onryo, a vengeful spirit who massacred over a dozen policemen. And there was no way to tell if they were the only monsters out there so he needed to find the source of this craziness before it caused more chaos. But so far everything he tried lead to a dead end. “Remind me again why I took this job” he said allowed.

“You were chosen” Freya answered bluntly. She basically confirmed Jackson didn’t have a choice and couldn’t change his mind anymore. It was a thought that constantly bugged at him, a desire to return to normal. She was aware of those thoughts and found herself continually reminding him he was meant to be here, that it wasn’t a mistake. “Don’t worry, you’ll get the hang of it” she said assuredly. “Marcus hated research too.”

"I prefer boots on the ground" Marcus concurred.

Jack looked at the books, dreading the point when he would have to get back to work when he suddenly realised he and Marcus had that in common. *That's not a bad idea* he thought, standing up from the seat putting his jacket back on. "I need to step out for a while, try something new" he said, turning to address the young angel. "There is one other lead I can try. The hounds were originally a dog belonging to my old friend Karl. According to the memories I watched, he brought it back to life and then tried to kill it when he realised what he'd done."

"Frankenstein and his monster" Freya muttered. "That story always gave me the creeps" she said.

"If I can't find what I need here, then maybe I can find out how Karl resurrected his dog" he continued. "Assuming he'll talk to me. We were never really close."

"I'm sure you'll figure it out" she smiled, turning back to her own studies. "I'd better get back to this, before Azrael comes to check on me." She sounded despondent, but she was determined to finish the current task now.

Jack paused before he went to leave, making sure he had his sword holstered at his hip. "You okay with your parlour tricks?" he asked jokingly.

"I'll be fine, but ask me in another three hours" she replied.

Jack left her in the library as she summoned the ball of yellow energy once more, stepping out into the dark hallways to find his way through the eternally shifting maze towards the soul-bridge. *"So what's the plan kid?"* Marcus asked him. *"What if this Karl Winters doesn't talk to you?"*

"I have an idea who he might talk to" Jack offered as he strode forward confidently. It was time to enlist help from his best friend.