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THE PHASEWALKER: PLAYING WITH FIRE

by

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Debra White was a patient woman. People say she's a patient woman. She likes to think she's a patient woman. But the truth is, the cost of that patience is undeniable fear.

That fear was something she was familiar with. It's the fear every parent has for their children. She has three children; two boys and a girl. She was afraid for her children. She feared for them every day from the moment they were born. Every time they went out of the house, went to school, went out alone, she feared for them like every parent does. Over time, she learnt to trust them and their neighbourhood, learnt to believe that they would be alright and would come home safe. But that didn't stop her fearing for them.

Her greatest fear came to be sixteen days ago when she got a knock on her front door. Her husband was at work, having left several hours earlier. Two of her children were also in the house, one downstairs and the other still in bed. She walked through the house towards the door, expecting it to be a door-to-door salesman. But instead she was greeted by a pair of police officers dressed in high-visibility uniforms, equipment and handcuffs and walkie-talkies strapped to their vest and waist. The middle-aged mother looked up at the two of them in surprise, asking politely what brought them here. It only took them two minutes to bring her world crashing around her as they informed her of her eldest son's condition.

The weekend went by in a blur after that. First she called her husband, who got permission to leave work early to drive his family to Derby. Then she had to find her son, who was lying in a coma in a hospital ward. It was a long journey and she had almost convinced herself the police were mistaken, that it wasn't her son in that hospital bed. But the second she was inside the room, her eyes fell onto his body and her heart broke. The police told her that Jack was the victim of a mugging and was mortally wounded. The doctors told her that it was unlikely he would wake again, informing her that the only option left to her was to switch of the life-support. She didn't want to give up on her son, but her husband convinced her there wasn't any

point in waiting any longer. There was no way to save him. So, with a heavy heart, the family allowed the doctors to unplug the machines and say their goodbyes. However, that's when the heart-monitor started beeping again. His heart was beating and he was breathing on his own. He was alive. It was a miracle.

She was so happy and hopeful she didn't leave his bedside until he opened his eyes. He was so glad to see her and she was delighted so see him awake. The nightmare was over. He came home a few days later, after hours of tests and observations, he was given the all clear. However, now Debra had to fight every paternal instinct telling her to wrap him up in bubble wrap and keep him safe at home. Her eldest was twenty years old, a grown man now, meaning she couldn't expect him to stay at home all day. Which is the last thing he seems to do anymore. He leaves the house every day, either to attend therapy as recommended by the doctor or going to visit his friends, such as Troy. It pained her to hear him leave, each time terrified she'll get another knock on the door from the police, but she forced herself to remain calm. She knew her son would be careful now, he wouldn't wish to repeat the experience. And she figured it was good for him, going out on his own, proving to himself he could handle the outside world again. He proved to be very resilient during this whole ordeal. But that didn't mean she didn't set ground rules. He had to keep his phone on at all times and be home for tea every day. He was happy to submit to those terms to keep her happy, but that didn't stop him from pushing the envelope every so often.

Like today, she was in the process of dishing up dinner when she realised he hadn't come home yet. Rather than panic, she simply got her mobile phone and dialled his number. She'll be okay as long as he answered. Which, thankfully, he did. "Where are you? I'm dishing out dinner now" she said immediately, hiding the fear in her voice.

"I'm on my way back now mom" her eldest reported. He sounded short of breath over the phone. "I'm just coming across the canal now."

"Where have you been today?" she asked, knowing he didn't have an appointment with his therapist today. But if he was on the canal, then he must've been visiting Troy Anderson. They had been friends for years and he liked to pay him a visit every so often.

Sure enough, that's where he said he'd been. "Just dropped in to say hi. I couldn't stay long though, he had work to do. I won't be long, I promise."

She nodded relieved, returning to her preparations, happy that her boy was safe. "Okay" she replied smiling. "How far away are you?"

"Um...not far" he lied.

Just the opposite side of the English Channel.

Jackson White knew he was on the clock the moment his mother called. He'd agreed to the unofficial curfew to put her mind at ease. He knew she was still shaken from his near-death experience. He couldn't imagine how she was holding it together. But he knew if she learnt the real reason he went out every day, she might literally lock him in his room. Not that being locked up would make a difference.

The bright yellow light of the sun beat down on the white buildings as Jack sprinted across them, hopping from one roof to the next following the path of chaos charging through the streets below. People scattered and screamed in French as the creature barged between them, knocking them into market stalls and shop windows, roaring angrily as the reaper chased it from above.

"Okay, I'll be back soon" he said calmly into his phone, leaping over a balcony and phasing into the building, landing awkwardly in the lower floors to intercept the beast. "I love you" he added breathlessly.

"I love you too" the voice on the phone replied before he hung up. He slid his mobile into his jean pocket and picked up the pace. He had to catch this demon fast.

Following the creature's path, Jack ran perpendicular to it through walls and windows, phasing in and out of limbo to avoid obstacles and keep a straight line. He was getting the hang of his phasing powers, now able to slide through solid matter like he was intangible, finding the middle point between dimensions without crossing over. Prolonged use made him lightheaded, but the method helped him keep pace with the demon.

The creature itself was supposed to be a run of the mill demon hunt. It was one of the leftovers from when Marcus was attacked. Dozens of entities and creatures slipped out into the mortal realm while the reaper was on his death-bed. Azrael and his wraiths were able to mop up most, but a few were still at large. This demon had been stalking the farmland several miles east of here, only now it's entered the city. Fortunately, it was an herbivore. Rare for a spawn of hell, but it wouldn't hesitate to rip into anyone it thought was a threat. Jack had floated the option of leaving it in the fields to gaze in peace, but Azrael noted humanity's obsession with hunting mythical creatures. Sooner or later it would start killing again. (Also, there was the principle of leaving a demon roaming the mortal world.)

Approaching the corner, Jack sprung in front of the demon skidding to a stop in its path.

This demon resembled a wild boar but was three times as big with four massive tusks and six eyes, all trained on him. It squawked loudly, charging forward to trample the young man.

Jack didn't flinch. Since making his first appointment with the therapist for real, he had learnt how to control his fight and flight responses. Now, while he was still terrified of being killed, he was able to hide it. He didn't freeze any longer.

Whipping out his sword, he sidestepped the demon stabbing the blade into the top of its skull killing it instantly. Seconds later, the beast collapsed into a puddle as its skin began melting into sludge. That sludge then evaporated into gas that lifted into the sky and blew away in the wind. The monster was gone, sent back to Hell where it belonged.

Hunting those demons were getting easier with each mission. Jack barely broke a sweat chasing this one as he sheathed his sword. The civilians all looked at him in fear, but they couldn't see his face beneath the wide brim of the hat he was wearing, the collar of his jacket pulled up to obscure his features. Not the most convincing disguise, but it wasn't like anyone in this city would recognise him. He gazed down the street, blissfully taking in the iconic view of the Eiffel Tower hovering over the city like a beacon, enjoying the scenery for a moment longer. Then, with a tip of his hat, he stepped into Limbo and left the people in peace.

Moments later, there was a boom as Jack catapulted out of the soul-bridge and landed in the grey landscape of Limbo, walking forward to phase into the alleyway leading to his back gate. He stepped through it and quickly brushed the ash and dust off his clothes, removing his hat to greet his mom in the kitchen where she had just finished putting the food out. The rest of the family joined them. "There you are!" Debra called embracing him. "You were cutting it close today" she remarked.

"I know" he apologised. "I lost track of time."

"How was Troy?" his brother asked him. "If that's really where you went."

Jack ignored the remark and sat down, relaxing his shoulders as he settled in for a nice family meal. "He's fine" he lied, feeling rather guilty for having to hide what he was really up to. "Everything's fine" he added, choosing to finish the day with at least one truthful thing to say.



THE SAGA BEGINS!



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