

PW Presents
Downloadable preview
PW Presents.co.uk
Patreon.com/PWPresents

THE PHASEWALKER

by

Philip Whitby

Journal of Marcus Travis Blake,

The sky rumbled over my head like an endless crescendo of drums and symbols, the rain pouring over the concrete streets rattling into the distance. The darkness overlay the decrepit neighbourhood while the brightly lit commercial buildings rose over the horizon. The road I walked down was far in the outskirts, a forgotten part of the world that used to be just as successful as the rest of the city until business ran out in favour of the chain companies now occupying the city centre drawing the tourists.

I've walked streets like these for decades, watching small companies and family homes die out only to leave ghostly empty shells of a life left behind. After all this time it just blends into the fabric of this universe, one long grey landscape irrelevant to the real horrors lurking behind the veil.

These mortals have no idea how dangerous their world really is.

The rain beat down on my shoulders as I strode down the dark unlit street, the empty buildings slumped around me in eternal despair. I could feel hundreds of unseen eyes on me as I walked past, scanning the hollow windows seeking those nobody else can glimpse. Just because nothing is there doesn't mean nobody is watching. I paid them no heed as I combed my thinning grey hair back, water dripping from my beard onto the thick leather trench coat wrapped around me. I always liked that trench coat. It saw me though my entire career as a detective and beyond after I "retired".

I found the place I was looking for easy enough. It was the only thing on this street that still resembled its former life as a local pub. The boards nailed across the windows were still fresh, neglecting the rot eating away at the other buildings. The old sign hung over the door

naming the establishment “The White Stallion”. Rather ironic and on the nose considering the reputation this building had back in the 50s when it was owned by the resident racist of the neighbourhood.

In nineteen forty nine, The White Stallion was bought by a man named Albert Tate, a white supremacist with strong ties to a global hate group known as the Ku Klux Klan. He established the place as haven for the local populace with one unspoken rule; no darks. The condition wasn't made publicly, it's not like he put a sign up stating WHITES ONLY, because the shift in public opinion was beginning to turn in favour of diversity and acceptance. But, of course, not everyone fell on board and Tate was no exception. But this meant in order to stay in business he had to give the illusion that his establishment welcomed all.

That illusion broke the first time a man of colour stepped foot inside his pub with his lady friend. He was just a kid, no older than twenty years old, his girlfriend a year or two younger. But when Tate saw them enter, all he saw was the enemy. He wanted to step out from around his bar and throw them out right there and then. But, as I said, public opinion was against him and none of his patrons kicked up a fuss. So instead he bit his tongue as they approached the bar. Instead of refusing to serve them, he offered them a seat in the back. Not an eyebrow was raised, as he had been refurbishing the place all week to install a pool table and more seating space. So the kid followed willingly as Tate brought them around back to showcase the room.

They never came back out.

It would be three months before their bodies were discovered by police under the building when a search warrant revealed he was responsible for over thirteen missing persons cases, all people of colour who'd disappeared since The White Stallion was bought by Tate. He became a person of interest when a brave young man came forward following an appeal for information on the whereabouts of a young fourteen year old girl. He recounted the events of

that evening the first two young people vanished, explaining how Tate returned back around the bar claiming the two kids just left and returned to serving drinks. Apparently nobody said anything because they all witnessed the sight of him cleaning his hands with a damp cloth, all noticing the blood on his knuckles. With one look he quelled them to silence and the night was never spoken off again. Not until the young man cautiously walked into the police station and exposed Tate. They raided the pub and discovered the bodies. All twenty four of them, both missing persons and unreported murders. All people of colour of various ages and sexes.

The youngest body was eight years old.

Tate was arrested that night. Twelve weeks later he was sentenced to life in prison. His last statement in court was that “trash like that shouldn’t be allowed to live!” He was killed two weeks into his sentence. Most people would’ve turned a blind eye to the murder of a few dozen black folks, but even rapists and serial killers have a low opinion of child killers. The White Stallion was closed down a few weeks earlier. Nobody wanted any part of the place since.

Even as I stood outside its doors in the pouring rain, I heard the screams of the dead trapped inside. When people dismiss the notion of places like this being haunted, they fail to realise true evil leaves a scar that never heals. Ghosts are the least of your problems should the right entities cross that threshold. One such entity had taken up residence in this very building a few decades ago, one who dealt in souls.

The last time I came here I was hunting a fugitive. A dangerous being responsible for murdering at least three innocent people upon his escape to this realm. I followed a lead to an old acquaintance right here, the doors bolted and windows barred locking down the whole place tight. Fortunately, I never needed doors as I entered the premises and found the doorman within behind the decrepit bar. He was shocked to see me, rushing around the bar to object to

my intrusion. When I asked about his boss he claimed the place was empty. He quickly changed his mind about lying when he was held three feet in the air with my hand around his throat.

I threw him down the stairs into the basement to announce my arrival, following purposely down after him to find the ragtag band of figures hiding in the shadows. A single lightbulb illuminated the dust covered floor in the centre of the room, a cone of light that I stepped inside to scan the silhouetted creatures scowling in my direction.

“You should have told me you were coming” a gravelly voice boomed from the darkness, drawing my gaze to the back of the basement. “I would’ve told my man upstairs to simply let you in, save the damage to his spine.”

The owner of the voice sat on a self-imposed throne of barrels and boxes surrounded by pizza boxes. It was clear the soul merchant didn’t like to leave the building too often. Even through the darkness I could see the pale skin and thin malnourished frame. His sharp business suit hung over his shoulders open across the front revealing a large pot belly, his bare feet tapping casually on the concrete floor turning black with soot and dust. Around him, various other creatures and figures of different shapes and sizes surrounded me, creatures that didn’t matter to me. I wasn’t here for them.

“I thought we had a deal Nazim” I addressed the demon, my eyes glancing down to his pot belly where all the trapped and warped souls he traded like currency resided. Even after all this time in service to the Well of Souls, it still astounded me how blatantly demons exchange the souls of the unfortunate fools who sold themselves for personal gain. Nazim was a trader, a broker, the middleman between the various powerful deities who would fight for the highest bid. “We agreed you could set up shop in this universe provided you offer me a steady stream of information on your employers and clients” I reminded him.

He gave me a flabbergasted look using his ink black hollow eyes, the empty sockets contrasting the pale white skin. “And haven’t I fulfilled my end of the bargain? Scores of furious demon lords and kings have been hounding me from the fire pits. They suspect I have something to do with your previous efforts to dismantle their operations. I’ve had to hide out in this dirty small basement just to keep off their radar. Now what do you want Reaper?”

Nazim was always more cocky than clever, missing the serious nature of our conversation that would one day get him killed. “I need information” I told him.

“Don’t you always?” he sighed waving his hand. “Which one of my angry customers do you want to piss off now?”

“Not them” I clarified. That got his attention. Previously I’d only seek him out to discuss the dwellings of Hell. This time was different. “I’m on the hunt for a fugitive. A dangerous being escaped from the entry level of Hell and fled across Limbo, killing a few of our wraiths in the process. My comrade isn’t pleased about losing some of his best men and I’m determined to bring him back to face justice.”

“Why come to me?” he replied acting innocent. But even then I could smell the deception. “I trade in living souls. Offer deals to foolhardy mortals in exchange for wealth, fame, a cure for disease, etc., etc... It’s amazing how many young people will willingly sell their own soul for personal gain after all these centuries. What business do I have with the dead?”

“You mean apart from your side-business?” I saw the hair on the back of his neck stand up when I brought that up. “You didn’t think I wouldn’t find out about you moonlighting as a black market smuggler did you? Shuffling souls and demons across the realms bringing them back to the land of the living? I’m the gatekeeper of the afterlife. Watching the borders is my job and you are sloppy at yours.”

Seeing the look of shock and horror and fear contort over his face was one of the few joys I have left in this life. I've known about his moonlighting for a while, leaving it alone for a time because until now he only allowed minor ghosts and demons to cross over. All of which offered little danger to the living world as I swiftly cut them down moments after they arrived. The most shocking part was how easy Nazim made my job by doing this. That changed when this demon got loose. This one was dangerous and letting it get unleashed in the mortal world would prove disastrous.

As predicted, this cocky trader failed to see that. "I don't know anything about this fugitive" he lied.

I was losing patience by now and reminded him about how dangerous it would be to cross the champion of a celestial entity, even directing him to the many clients he'd betrayed to appease our deal and what happened because of it. "If you want your betrayal to remain between us, you will turn the fugitive over to me. I will not ask again."

Nazim took a moment to consider his options. The audience around us shuffled awkwardly as they watched in fear. I scanned the crowd waiting for a response. I was ready to hear more lies as the trader attempted to talk his way out. But to my surprise he glanced over his shoulder.

"NO!" the fugitive cried dashing out of the shadows from behind him. He was shoved to the ground as the hulking creature barrelled in my direction screaming "YOU WILL NOT SEND ME BACK!" I had to appreciate the being's determination, allowing a slight smile before reaching into my trench coat.

The fugitive was once a mortal man, but after judgement was sent to one of the fire realms to be turned into a hulking fat monster with a massive mouth filling his face, the rest of his identity lost in the thick flesh nearly rendering him blind. Large stump legs thudded over the concrete struggling to hold up his overweight body, tiny arms flailing around his sides. The

man's sin was laziness. The punishment inflicted upon him matched the final judgement for his life choices. He wasn't pleased with his new eternal death and ran. Now he was cornered.

It didn't take long. My arm swung out as the monster stumbled past me, the scythe in my hand cutting through his flesh like butter slicing him in half. The fugitive collapsed gurgling onto the floor colliding with the stairs, the flesh melting as it screamed in agony cast back to where it belonged.

The crowd stared at the melted pool of remains as I stood silently, looking back at the soul trader with a dark gaze that made his blood run cold. "You should be careful who you choose to let out Nazim" I warned him, retuning my faithful weapon to within the coat, brushing off the sludge from my sleeve.

"If you want me to stop smuggling, fine" he replied fearfully, reminded of how dangerous I was. "I don't need the hassle or the attention."

"No" I told him, deciding he'd be better continuing his work. "I want you to advertise for more clients. Make it your main business. But instead of sending any of them across the barriers you will inform me. You're going to help earn your keep by locking down the easiest way out of Hell."

"You're crazy" he said defiantly. "I can't be a trap for these beings. Word will spread and I'll be hunted down. If my clients find out I've been working for you, I'm dead."

"Then don't get caught" I told him, already making my exit towards the stairs. Before I left I glanced over my shoulder giving him a familiar glare, reminding him who I was. And more importantly, that he doesn't get a choice in the matter. That was the last time I ventured into the pub and the last time I heard from Nazim. I briefly wondered why he never got in touch. But I chose to assume he found a better offer when a group of powerful hell-riders ambushed me. They didn't last long either.

Fond memories.

Standing inside the threshold of the pub, I got a sense of de ja vu. Like before I didn't use the door. I didn't need to. I simply stepped inside to the dark interior, greeting the empty space with a calm indifferent demeanour. All these years later, nothing had changed. The little details hidden within the pitch black shadows that I could see clearly. The dust covered floor. The cracks in the walls. The dirty old bar and empty bottles. The rotting tables and chairs and scattered rat droppings. There was a faint breeze leaking through the cracks wafting my coat around my legs. I could feel the echoes of the past inhabitants, hear their voices in the air and the rafters.

I couldn't help but smile as I lit myself a cigarette. The orange flame of the lighter ignited the room in an intense glow before vanishing to be followed by a puff of smoke from my chapped lips. There was something comforting standing amidst the ghosts in silence. It felt peaceful.

Which was probably why I didn't hear the footsteps until they were right behind me.

I was too slow to react, my weapon flying out from under my coat to my hand just a fraction of a second too late, leaving me open for the intense pain ripping through my back. I screamed in agony as something sharp punctured my body, red blood spraying out over the floor as my spine arched into the blade extruding from my chest. I felt blood fill my throat as I looked down at the bloody blade sticking out, the glistening metal reflecting my shocked face back at me before it retracted back leaving me to fall forwards, collapsing onto the floor.

Chairs toppled and broke apart as I reached out and tried to catch my fall, my hands slipping on the blood sending me face first to the ground. The scythe flew from my grasp sliding out of reach, unresponsive to my call as I held out my hand for it. All I felt was pain. Pain unlike anything I'd experienced before. The sight of my own blood scared me more however. I had never been wounded enough to bleed for a long time. It felt like my insides were on fire.

It felt like I was dying again.

Out of the dark I heard a sickly piercing voice speak to me, gravely telling me “It’s nothing personal, detective. But mother demands your sacrifice.” Even now, I have no idea who or what that voice was talking about or who it belonged to or what manner of weapon he used upon me. As I attempted to turn my head and see the being who attacked me, all I was met with was darkness.

As I lay bleeding on the floor of the pub, for the first time in so many centuries, I felt a terrifying wave of fear. I was afraid to die a second time. I was afraid to leave my work unfinished. I was afraid to leave my young ward behind. I was afraid I’d spent so much time focused on the job I didn’t take the time to prepare for the future. For my retirement. In a moment of weakness I hadn’t allowed myself to suffer for centuries, I called through the Well, shouting for help while coughing up my own blood. In the final moments before I passed out I witnessed the many colours of the bridge opening around me, bringing me home.

I came to the realisation I was going to die.

I am dying and there is nobody to take my place.

ONE

FOUR WEEKS LATER...

The ground was cold as Jackson White's eyes fluttered open. The dusty air stung his eyes making him blink painfully, instinctively reaching up to his face to find his glasses were missing. The pain gave way for a dull throb in his skull as he groaned awake.

Ow, what hit me?

With his ears ringing, Jack pushed himself up, wincing in pain when white hot electricity shot through his chest. He pressed his hand upon his torso, only to feel a sticky substance coating his fingers. Once the stars dancing across his vision vanished he looked down to find his hand covered in in oily dark red blood.

What the hell?

He checked himself over, finding everything roughly as it was meant to be. He was dressed in faded blue jeans, black trainers, a grey shirt and a dark coloured jacket. He briefly looked around for his fedora but couldn't find it anywhere, neither could he find his glasses resulting in his vision being slightly out of focus. He turned his attention back to the blood on his hand, finding the source from the three inch long open wound across his chest directly over his heart. Pressing his palm to the opening he found it was still bleeding, but the pain was reduced to a dull ache.

What happened? Was I stabbed? I should be dead.

Jack heard a faint rustling from further down the alleyway, drawing his attention back to his surroundings. He was in the same alley he had been when he... *Did I pass out? I wasn't that dehydrated was I?* He racked his brain trying to recall what happened as he scanned the dull colourless walls and floor, the dusty air covering everything in a grainy sheen. It was like

all colour was muted, the sky outside the opening behind him a faint pale hue offering the only source of light.

He heard the rustling again, drawing his weary gaze to the pitch black darkness in front of him leading deeper into the alley. Though he couldn't see that far any longer, Jack could sense someone was watching him, peering out of the blackness. "Hello?" he called out, his voice croaking like he hadn't used it in days. "Is anyone there?"

Silence filled the void, but the presence remained. Jack pushed himself up to his feet, the blood still dripping from his chest. *I definitely should be dead*, he thought, astonished he could stand while losing so much blood. He felt fine as he stood up straight, rolling his shoulders and stretching his aching limbs. *What happened to me?* The last thing Jack recalled was walking down the street towards the bus station after leaving...

Kassie!

Panic overcame Jack's impulses as he reached for his phone, only to find it missing along with the rest of his belongings. *I've been mugged! They must've knocked me out. Kassie, she could be...* Then he remembered leaving her at home. He was alone but she was safe. *Thank god! So what did happen to me?*

His thoughts were interrupted by a faint sound coming from the darkness, like a whisper on the wind. Except there was no wind. Jack looked back into the void, peering closer trying to focus his vision. After a minute he saw something in the darkness, an outline of something drifting towards him. "Hello?" he called out, cautiously stepping closer.

The outline stared back at him silently, its gaze piercing into Jackson sending a shiver down his spine. Something isn't right.

All of a sudden, the shape lunged forward, shooting through the air flying in his direction. The moment it broke away from the black void Jack recoiled in shock seeing the ghostly face

staring back at him. A face without a body, or a head, shrouded in a billowing white cloud as empty hollow eyes burned into Jack's soul, the howling mouth wide as it cut through the air towards him.

“What the hell?” Jack cried, scrambling backwards trying to get away from the floating face in a blind panic. He stumbled out of the alley into the desolate street, turning back in time to see the face overtaking him. With a scream Jack raised his arms trying to protect himself, only for the ghostly face to pass through his body with a sharp chill. It flew away into the air, leaving a baffled Jackson White alone in the street stumbling backwards only to find the road abruptly ending beneath his feet.

He froze in place as his heel found the edge of a great chasm, flailing his arms in circles trying to hold his balance before he toppled over the side. As he hovered precariously over the cliff, he looked down to see the chasm had no bottom, the cliff giving way to an endless void of space as loose peddles fell for all eternity. Pulling himself back to solid land Jack spun around and stared down over the edge, following the cliff to see the chasm extended for over a mile, cutting buildings in half and vanishing into the foggy horizon. Looking up he saw where the rest of the streets had floated off to, blocks of rock and city blocks drifting aimlessly in the void, all on different axis as if gravity didn't have a place here.

“What the hell is this?” Jack gasped, staring at the bizarre and frightening landscape stretching before him.

“Hell is the least of your worries at this time.”

He spun around startled at the sound of the gravelly voice. For a moment he'd thought he was still all alone and had imagined it, but then the cloaked figure stepped out of the fog to reveal himself to the scared young man. “Who are you?” Jack asked him, frantically scanning the rest of the empty street wondering who else was hiding in the nooks and crannies.

“Who I was no longer matters” the figure replied flatly, his face hidden underneath the massive hood of the pale cloak draped over his shoulders falling to the ground around his feet. “I am to be your guide across this realm as you pass onto the next stage of your journey” he told him.

Jack wasn't really listening, his heart still pounding in his chest. *I still have a heart then*, he mused, quickly checking that the wound was still bleeding. “Where am I?” he asked.

“You know where you are, Mr. White.”

He shook his head. “No I don't. This looks somewhat like Derby, but last I checked the roads don't float. And what was that thing? That...face! It was screaming but I couldn't hear it. And why am I bleeding? What's happening to me?”

“It is not what is happening” the figure told him calmly. “It is what has already happened.”

“Oh for crying out loud, stop speaking in code!” Jack shouted in frustration. “Who are you? How do you know my name?”

“I am your guide” he repeated.

“That's not an answer” Jack growled.

“You are distressed and that is understandable. But if you would simply calm down, we can begin our journey where all your questions will be answered.”

“You want me to calm down?” Jack fired back. “Then take off the hood!”

The figure hesitated as it stared silently back at the young man. “I do not believe that would be such a good idea. I would not wish to distress you any further.”

“You want me to trust you?” Jack countered with determination. “Show me who you are and start talking.”

The two men stood their ground staring at the other, the tension building until finally the hooded figure relented. With a weary sigh his hands parted the cloak to reveal they wore

chainmail gloves, the tattered remains of a knight's armour glinting beneath the fabric as he took hold of the hood and pulled it back over his head. Jack saw the face underneath and suddenly wished he hadn't asked. Beneath the hood, the disfigured face of an older man stared back at him, skin peeling off his skull with one side melted and scarred. Tufts of grey hair hung from his scalp in patches revealing the glistening white bone beneath. The most horrifying part was the eyes, hollowed out dark circles with blazing blue orbs hovering inside the sockets like two flickering embers.

Jack immediately spun on his heel and vomited over the side of the road. "What the hell are you" he muttered wiping his mouth, still retching the final remains of his stomach.

"Many in these lands call be a wraith" the figure said calmly, devoid of any emotion. "I'm a warrior tasked with guiding souls like you onwards on their journey and serving the Angel of Death."

Angel of Death?

Jack didn't know what he was talking about, but those three words seemed to strike a chord in the boy. "Where am I?" he asked again, hoping to get a straight answer this time.

Alas, the man didn't oblige. "You know where you are" he repeated.

"No, I don't!"

"Think, Mr. White" he insisted. "What is the last memory you have?"

Jack heaved with his hands on his knees, racking his brain trying to piece the fractured puzzle together. As he strained, the clearest image he got was of a young woman followed suddenly by a sharp pain in his chest. He looked down at the open wound, suddenly recalling he was stabbed. He looked around towards the alley he stumbled out of, retracing his steps mentally until it hit him. "I was attacked in that alley. I got stabbed. How... How did I survive?"

He looked up at the wraith where he found an expression of pity on the disfigured face. “You didn’t” he told him.

Jack stared up at the man, narrowing his eyes in confusion. But then it was like a curtain had been pulled across his mind and he saw it all flash before him. He remembered everything. He remembered walking into the alley. He remembered the stabbing pain in his chest. He remembered falling to the floor. He remembered bleeding out on the ground. “No” he stammered, refusing to accept the truth, realizing where he was. He knew what had happened, but he couldn’t bring himself to say it. He fell to his knees with tears in his eyes, the urge to vomit returning but there was nothing left to throw up.

The wraith stood respectfully back, answering his question with as much sympathy as he could manage. “I’m sorry Mr. White, but you died.”

TWO

A FEW HOURS EARLIER...

It didn't take much for Jack to lose himself inside his own thoughts, especially while he was drawing. The pencil ran along the paper effortlessly, tracing lines and shading in the tones and highlights as if from memory. He wasn't even looking at his work as it took shape, and yet it became an almost flawless representation of the image in his head. An image he conjured to counter the overwhelming void that crept around his psyche.

"Earth to Jackson! You still present?" Ajay's voice broke him out of his daydream. He woke up blinking, turning to face the young man dressed in a green sweater and grey jeans sitting two seats away at the table. Next to him was another man with a bushy but neatly trimmed auburn beard and Afro hairstyle, his narrow eyes looking across at him with amusement. "You looked like you were miles away" he said cocking an eyebrow. "Where were you?"

"Nowhere" Jackson White dismissed, looking down at his sketchbook finally seeing the picture he'd drawn. A stunning, beautiful face of a young woman with long hair and a broad smile, her amazing eyes sparkling upon the page. It was like looking at the real thing, the resemblance so uncanny he hurried to close the sketchbook before either of the others could see it. He felt the heat rush to his face, but he'd gotten quite adept at hiding what he was feeling these last few months.

Ajay and Daniel were both students from the illustration course at the University of Derby, currently chilling now that the last of the lectures were done for the day. Two years into a three year course, they were in in the final week before deadline when they would finish the semester and await the results before going back in September. Jackson was in the

same boat except he was in a separate course, Animation. Despite the difference, the two courses overlapped alongside a third, Graphic Design, when it came to lectures and guest speakers so all the students got to know one another frequently. It's how he got to be friends with these boys and the rest of the group they were currently waiting on.

"Anyway, as I was saying" Ajay continued, turning back to Daniel returning to his conversation. "With Kory's folks out of town for the weekend I thought I'd invite her over to mine. You know, so she doesn't feel so lonely in that big house."

"Uh huh" he nodded, raising a cursory eyebrow. "And do your own folks know about this romantic little ploy of yours?"

"I'm sure they won't mind" he said ignoring the subtle insinuations. He looked back at the quiet animator who was hurriedly hiding his sketchbook back in his bag. Unbeknownst to him, Ajay had already seen the picture he was drawing. "So Jackson, you have any plans for the weekend?"

"Wrapping up my final brief" he answered immediately, anticipating the question. Not many people realize how adept he'd gotten at multitasking, appearing distracted and busy in his own world but still able to listen to most of the conversations going on around him. A skill he'd built up over the years hoping one of those conversations that never included him might turn in his direction. *What's the point of being invisible if you can't make the most of it,* he'd tell himself.

"Work? That's it?" Ajay asked in response, doubt clear in his tone. "With just a few days to deadline? I swear you animators end up with more work than the rest of us."

"Well, we have to come up with something more than just a handful of still images" Jack argued trying to keep a cheerful overtone to his voice. The truth was he'd finished his project

a week ago and was merely tidying up a few loose ends between being distracted by other things and fighting back the darkness following him around like a cloud.

“I wish that’s all we did” Daniel chuckled, watching the exchange quietly from the sidelines.

“There has to be more” Ajay persisted. “Come on, how is life? There has to be more than university. You must have plans for the weekend. Don’t tell me you’d rather be watching Netflix all alone.”

Jack looked up from his bag to glance back in his direction. “Was that some kind of invitation?” he asked.

“He’s asking if you have a girlfriend, again” Daniel clarified, slapping Ajay on the arm. “When are you going to lay of the boy’s private life? You ask him the same question every week.”

“And every week he dodges the question” he protested. “I can’t help it. I see a good looking guy who spends most of his time with his own company, I have to ask what’s wrong with this picture.”

Jack rolled his eyes as Ajay continued to illustrate how important this crusade is to him. The reality was Jackson never had time to consider finding a girlfriend. He wanted to sort out the mess of his own life before he would think about sharing it with someone else. True, that left him rather lonely most nights sitting in his room minding his own business, but he didn’t believe he had what it takes to pull off the alternative.

What he couldn’t admit to either of his friends was there was already someone on his mind. But the situation was complicated.

Fortunately, conversation switched quickly away from the topic of his love life as two out of the three missing party members arrived to join them. They walked casually into the

study space out of the main corridor to greet the seated young men with a pair of friendly smiles. The young man wearing a blue and white jacket and matching red/white cap led the way, his brown backpack hoisted over his shoulders comfortably. His pointed childlike face lit up beneath the spiky jet black hair as he saw his mates waiting for him. Jack politely smiled back. He remembered noting how Kadin liked to copy the look of Ash from Pokémon often when he wasn't cosplaying on the weekends. Final Fantasy seemed to be his go to preference according to his Instagram posts.

Close beside him was a smaller young woman named Danielle. An intelligent international student from Greece who was easily the smartest person out of any group she sits with. She adjusted the shoulder bag across her left arm, dressed in a simple grey top and black skirt, matching tights and polished shoes completing the professional "school-girl" attire she wore proudly. Her dark brown hair fell across her shoulders as she scanned the room with big dark eyes that gave away a tiny hint of uncertainty. Jack liked Dani, how despite her self-conscious nature she could still stand tall and confident with who she is and what she's about. He envied that confidence. In another lifetime he might've considered asking her out, but she'd shoot him down faster than a rocket. She was way out of his league.

"About time" Ajay rejoiced, throwing his hands in the air as they approached the table. "What the hell kept you guys? You weren't snogging in the toilet cubicles were you?"

"No, of course not!" Dani recoiled, glancing apologetically to Kadin who just shook his head. The two of them had been best friends virtually from the word go and Ajay loved toying with the idea of the pair of them hooking up, ignoring the little fact that Kadin was already happily in a serious relationship.

"Because it'd be cool if you were" Ajay teased, enjoying how much it embarrassed the Greek girl. "You two make an adorable couple."

“We’re just friends” Kadin told him, hoping to cement the answer and save him having to give it once again. “Besides, she’s not really my type.”

“I thought everyone was your type? That’s what being bisexual means, right?”

“Careful there Ajay” Daniel warned, quietly noting the waters the comedian was drifting towards.

“It’s fine” Kadin smiled as he plopped down into his seat between them. He understood his mate didn’t mean any potential offense in any joke he was driving towards. He never does. In fact, Ajay was one of the most open minded people he’d ever met alongside everyone else at the university over his sexuality. They had nothing but respect for him and he was perfectly fine with the occasional light teasing. “He’s just jealous” he said jokingly.

Ajay didn’t miss a beat as he fell to his knees in front of Kadin. “Of course. You are the only one for me, my darling. Come and we will make beautiful babies together.”

“Gross” Dani cringed from across the table.

“Which part?” Daniel chuckled. “The two of them having sex or the thought of Ajay spawning children?”

“Either image makes my spine shiver” Jack quipped quietly as he finished gathering up his stuff. He ignored the mocking looks he got from the young man on his knees as he shouldered his bag and reached over to grab his leather fedora from the table, giving them a parting smile. “Now if you’ll excuse me, I need a drink. So I’ll meet you guys downstairs.” He shot a glance at Ajay, quietly adding “if you can keep your hands to yourselves.”

“I can’t make any promises” he replied.

“Bite me” Kadin scoffed, making the others chuckle as Jackson left them to it walking out of the studio into the main hallway.

The university was sprawling with students as he strolled casually down the stairs towards the onsite cafeteria, passing the tiny convenience shop at the bottom of the stairs brimming with stationary and snacks to keep weary travellers fuelled and prepared for a week of lectures, tutorials and other surprises the high roller university life could throw at them. The cafeteria was an open seating space with a single counter where, instead of cold drinks and crisps, such adventurers could purchase hot meals and instant coffee (or opt for the more drinkable beverages at a steeper price). Jackson fell into the que effortlessly, scanning the room as men and women sat or walked glued to their smartphones and tablets chattering mindlessly all over the same topic. The final hand-in was in a week and most were busy trying to finish what they'd been putting off for days. Jack admittedly was also guilty of procrastinating, but had the foresight of ploughing through the main project the previous few nights so he could relatively chill for the remaining four to six days, save a few rewrites.

As he surveyed the people, his eye caught the sight of the hooded young man in front of him carrying a few dozen books in his arms. He found it odd as most would've dumped the lot into their bags. But this man seemed to have already stuffed his backpack full leaving little room for them. "Bit late to be hitting the books isn't it?" Jackson joked drawing the boy's attention. The pale faced student looked behind him at the animator in a hat and scowled before walking away without a word. "Have a nice day" he replied with a scowl of his own. *And I thought I was the antisocial one*, he thought to himself as he ordered his drink.

He leant against the counter and watched the young man vanish into the crowd. He was dressed all in black with jet black hair, the definition of what a "goth" would look like. However, Jackson never got the impression Zachery Helmsley was putting on the act. The Graphic Designer never talked to anyone. He didn't like to socialize and always gave people a creepy vibe whenever he walked by them in a hurry. His most distinguishing feature

(besides the pale skin and black hoodie) was the clouded right eye. Jackson recalled how a few people had asked him about it, a year ago both his eyes were normal, but he just shrugged them off and sometimes just snapped at them. Eventually people just averted their gaze and left him alone. But Jackson had a constant urge to at least try and talk to him. Seeing how he just walked through his life all alone struck an alarming cord within him. He saw himself in Zac.

He was lost in thought by the time his drink arrived, the attendant prodding his arm to inform him how much he owed. He'd just finished paying when a familiar voice chirped up at the counter next to him. "Just a tea with two sugars please."

The moment his ears heard the girl's voice it sounded like he was listening to an orchestra in his head, the melody slowing down time until motion came to a crawl around him. His heartbeat fluttered as his lungs momentarily forgot how to function, his senses turning up to eleven as if his fight or flight response had engaged. Forcing himself to remain calm, he turned his head to look over in her direction, his hazel eyes briefly glazing over filtering his vision until all he saw through them was her.

Every time he heard or saw her, he reacted exactly like this. And each time it was followed with a single thought: *Amazing!*

Kassie L'amahle was one of the brightest Illustration students in the course. Naturally gifted at art and also a member of the circle of friends Jackson was lucky to be a part of. Like Dani, she was an international student, from South Africa, light skinned and grew up studying at British schools (meaning her English is better than his, as he'd always joke). She was blonde and incredibly charming. Today she wore a speckled grey and white dress with a faded blue sleeveless jacket and brown shoes. Her favourite silver cross hung proudly around

her neck. As she waited she adjusted her simple compact shoulder bag, quietly humming to herself, her voice like an angel.

In short, she was the most beautiful girl Jackson White had ever met.

Jackson stood motionless as he stared at her, mesmerized by the radiant glow she somehow always managed to project whenever she entered a room. After what felt like a lifetime, her head turned and she looked in his direction, her sparkling grey eyes finding him as she broke into a welcoming smile that could melt even the coldest of hearts. “Hi” she said, her greeting soft like a cloud as it drifted over him.

“Wow” he whispered under his breath, his heart pounding in his ears.

She stared back at him still smiling, her eyes narrowing briefly as she asked him “Are you okay?”

The question triggered Jack’s survival impulse finally, reality snapping back to normal breaking him out of his trance. He blinked rapidly, stuttering out a response trying to catch up with his brain. “Yeah, I’m fine” he said quickly clearing his throat. “Sorry, I was... I was miles away.”

Kassie nodded, believing his hasty answer as they both turned away to retrieve their drinks. Jackson took a deep breath as he got his nerves back under control, the red hot flush burning at his ears with veiled embarrassment. He may have gotten good at hiding his feelings, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t easy controlling them. “So” he said cautiously, not trusting his own voice to keep what he was bottling up a secret. “How are you today?”

“I’m good. Thanks for asking” she answered warmly as they slowly made their way across the cafeteria. “I just got given a lot of pointers for my final project. Things to add and improve my assignment before the hand in next week.”

“I thought that was as good as finished?”

“So did I” she sighed. “But I have a lot to get done before then. It’s tiring. How about you? Is your project doing okay?”

He nodded. “Just adding the finishing touches but it’s just about there.” He saw an opening and decided to take his chances. “Which leaves me a bit of free time to lend a hand if you need it?” Even as he said it, he heard the little voice in his head whisper *wait for it*.

“Oh, that’s sweet” she replied with an affectionate smile. “Thanks, but I think I’ll be fine.”

There it is.

Jackson shrugged. “If you change your mind you can always call” he offered while his inner voice cackled with an annoying trombone. Yeah, he might have predicted the response to his query but he had to at least ask. He wanted to be a good friend, even if he couldn’t be more than her friend.

So, dismissing the mental hazing, he followed Kassie to the stairs where she turned and asked “Are we still going to the food court this afternoon?”

“Yeah” he nodded pointing upstairs. “Everyone else is waiting upstairs. Ajay is being his usual comic self, so be warned.”

“Oh dear” she chuckled, making her way up the steps. Jackson found himself hanging back, watching her ascend until she glanced back down to him. “Aren’t you coming?”

He took a breath to think about it before deciding not to. “Actually, I need to make a quick phone call. So, if it’s okay, I’ll just wait down here.”

“Okay. See you in a minute” she said, giving him a small wave before she continued up the stairs.

He stood at the bottom of the steps watching her silently, a familiar ache rising in his chest as he watched her leave. He wanted to follow her up there, follow her everywhere, but

he forced himself to disconnect. And every time, no matter how brief their parting was, it always hurt. *How long are you going to keep doing this?* He asked himself.

“Kassie!” he called up to her. She paused at the top of the stairs to turn and face him, standing patiently to see what the matter was. He stared up at her, seeing how beautiful she looked under the Florissant lights above her, his heart pounding against his ribcage. “I...” he started, his mind going blank. He saw the words he wanted to say, heard them in his own ears, but his mouth refused to speak them. Fear gripped his throat silencing him, choking back the confession he couldn’t bring himself to admit. “I... I just wanted to say you look amazing” he said regrettably, his heart clenching in shame.

Kassie smiled, mildly blushing at the compliment as she walked away in the direction of the rest of their friends. Leaving Jackson White alone to scold himself for his cowardice.