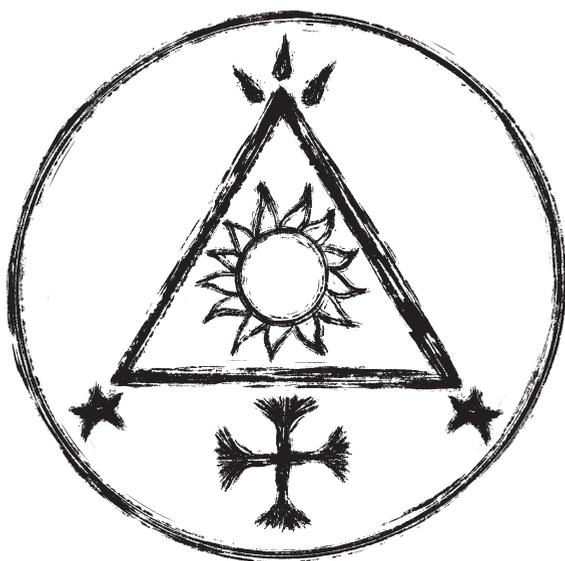


BRYONY PEARCE

RAISING HELL



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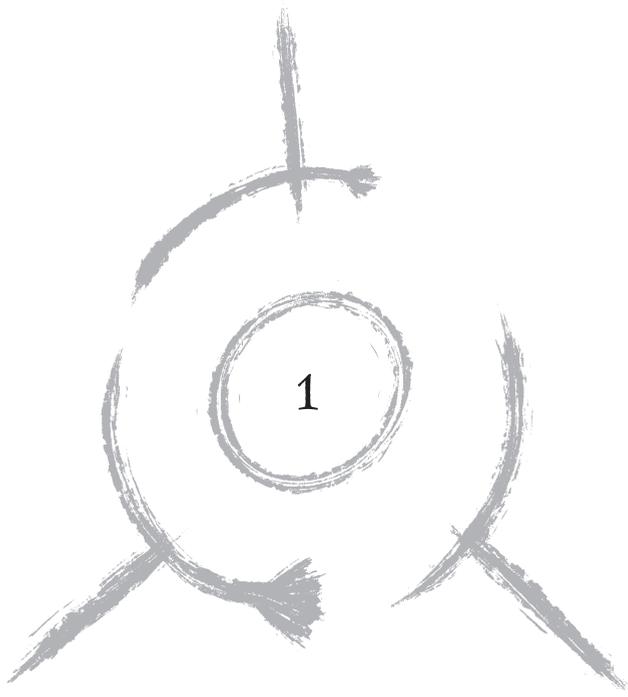
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*To the class of 2020
At least there weren't zombies . . .*



IT WAS THE goths you had to watch out for. Not that they were any more likely to snap than anyone else, at least in my experience. In fact, they seemed to have a healthy outlet for all that angst, but *they* tended to hide among the goths; in plain sight.

I stopped checking out the noticeboard (someone was selling what looked like a decent second-hand laptop) and turned my attention towards the little group walking through the metal detector. What should a group of goths be called? A flock? A herd? I remembered the old joke about a murder of crows. A murder of goths? No, not right. A slaughter perhaps. A slaughter of goths.

I shifted Matilda on my hip. I hated having to carry a huge machete, especially in my old school. Every morning when I

approached the entrance, I was reminded of simpler times – when a low grade or a surprise test seemed the worst things that could happen. Then I'd reach the new security measures and tell myself only a fool dealt with goths without being fully armed.

First through was a boy. Black hair, obviously; pale make-up and bruised-looking eyes that remained dull as he looked me over. Even though I'd only been in the job a couple of months, I had already become part of the scenery. He sloped past, following the preppy-looking trio that had preceded him, bag dangling from one shoulder like an overripe fruit. He wore an earbud and nodded along to a tune only he could hear. A slight smile raised the corners of my lips. I knew him, although he wouldn't remember me. I'd been in the same class as his older brother a few years ago.

Behind him, a pair of overweight girls, new to the look; make-up too carefully applied, hair recently dyed and inexpertly – like they'd used boot polish on it. Black jeans not yet frayed, layered tops, grateful to slink into the colour. They giggled; hadn't yet got the style of careless rebellion.

I nodded at the closer of the two as she looked me over, nervous eyes going first to Matilda, then to the mirror, flare, Bible, lighter and canister of holy water that were tucked into my flak vest. As I shifted my stance, the little bell on the other side of my belt jingled. I sighed at the Christmassy sound but fortunately, in this case, size genuinely didn't matter.

Still, perhaps I should invest in something that rang lower down the tonal scale.

Wannabe-goth-girl lowered her gaze and clutched her friend's arm. They whispered, both stared at me and then at the floor – then they were gone.

What had scared them the most, I wondered? Was it the equipment that reminded them of my job, or was it that I looked like Nancy Drew on a bad hair day: slight frame, big brown eyes. I appeared more curious than uncompromising and was no one's idea of an ass-kicker.

Perhaps they were worried that I wouldn't be able to protect them when the time came. Not *if... when*. I had no illusions about my role here – it was to put my body between kids not that much younger than I was, and the inevitable.

Worse, I had a feeling I'd be earning the 'danger money' part of my wage sooner than I'd hoped. There had been a rash of in-school attacks with worrying similarities recently, and they seemed to be building up to something. I'd always been good at spotting patterns, and the stories that had made the news were raising my hackles. Someone was using disaffected kids to cast offensive spells, if only I could work out what they were using them *for*.

The last through was another girl. Long black hair, as per the uniform, but this time it had the sheen of a natural colour or at least a professional dye job – it fell around her thin shoulders as though oiled. Pale make-up, but her eyes, beneath the painted-on rings, were sharp and clear. They said, *'I'm better than you and I know it'*. I straightened.

'You.' I pointed.

She froze, looked at me. 'Me?'

'Bag check.'

Arched eyebrows came together. 'I've done nothing wrong.' Her accent was upper class with cut-glass syllables. Offended.

'It's random. Your number came up,' I lied, and gestured to the table beside me. 'You can unload here.'

'I'd rather not, thank you.' The girl turned and began to walk away. She looked as if she'd snap in a high wind.

I stepped into her path, two long strides, and unclipped the machete with one hand. 'I'm afraid this isn't optional.'

Two groups were gathering – the boy and two girls who had been with my target had stopped to wait. Behind her, a line of students shuffled with increasing impatience towards the detector.

'Get out of the way!' A stocky lad, rugby ball under one arm.

'Just doing my job,' I snapped, without even looking at him.

The girl's eyes met mine; they said 'asshole' and I felt a flicker of mutual understanding. Then she spoke in a lowered tone. 'I've got *personal* items in here. I'm sure you understand.' She smiled, so charming. 'I don't want guys like *that* to see, you know.'

'It's your time of the month?' I spoke in a normal volume and watched to see her reaction.

She bit back the comment she wanted to make. I watched her swallow the words like bitter sweets. Such self-control – very *un*-teenaged. 'Yes,' she said eventually. 'Yes, exactly.' She moved to go past again.

'Sorry.' I stepped once more into her path and pointed at the table. 'Bag check.' I enunciated very clearly.

'You're kidding me?'

I shook my head.

'I have rights.' The girl gripped her bag like it contained her grandmother's tiara.

'Sorry, but you don't. Not here. Not now.' I let her look at Matilda again, still in her holster, but no longer clipped in place, and I took the girl's elbow to guide her towards the table. Her bones were

sharp, almost protruding. ‘What does it matter if *I* get a look at your *personal items*?’ I kept my voice calm but sensed it wouldn’t do any good. This girl wasn’t worried about a few tampons and a packet of Nurofen. Not this one.

My instincts were good, and they were standing up and screaming.

‘Norah, what’s the haps?’ The boy called out, his tone tired, like he could barely be bothered.

‘Go on without me.’ She didn’t even look back.

I held her eyes – establish dominance, that was the first thing. Make her *believe* she had to do as I said, even though I was only three or four years older than she was. The hairs on my arms were standing up, and goosebumps stippled my chest. It wasn’t cold, but I was chilled. The noises of the hall fell away. It was only me and the girl.

‘Name?’ I asked as I took her bag from her. She tried to hold on to it for a moment longer then finally allowed me to take it, her long fingers twitching as if she wanted to snatch it back.

‘Norah Ortega.’ She tossed her hair. She was going to try and brazen it out. ‘*I don’t know what they are.*’ ‘*How did they get in there?*’ or even, ‘*They’re for a history project.*’ Honestly, I’d heard it all.

I licked the dying felt tip I’d been issued and made a note on my list: *06.01.2025, 0837, Norah Ortega, bag check*. She was the first of the day, tenth on the paper. The ink almost ran out when it reached her name, rendering it ghost-like on the form. I shook the pen, licked it again and finished.

‘Ortega?’ There was something about that name. I’d heard it before.

She shrugged. I looked down at the rucksack I had won.

Purple, not black, but marked all over with indigo sharpie. I peered closer. Signs and sigils.

I sighed. 'Do you know what these are?' I recognised them of course: Protection, Security, Distraction. Anyone else would have had their attention diverted if they'd considered opening the bag. The girl watched to see what I'd do. I reached for the zip and she tensed. Her wards hadn't worked, not on me. It was the main reason a nineteen-year-old had been given the security job in the first place.

I looked at her again and her sharp dark eyes blazed. She wanted to know who I was, *what* I was, but she daren't ask.

'Do you know what these are?' I repeated.

She shrugged. 'Copied them from a book. They seemed cool. You know, the whole *look*. Obviously, they don't *do* anything.' She was pissed off.

'Yeah.'

It *was* possible. I'd recently been in a firefight where it *had* been a genuine accident. Some teens from my building copied a bunch of hieroglyphs from the internet, thinking it was hilarious. It's all fun and games till somebody gets eaten.

I pulled open the bag expecting to see the usual: a witch's pouch, a sack of herbs. Perhaps a voodoo doll or a pentagram made from twisted yew twigs, that kind of thing. There was nothing. I skipped over the books: text-books, library books. I rifled through the pencil case: pens and pencils, a sharpener, rubber, set square, protractor, not even a compass for me to comment on. I frowned. A small make-up bag in a side pocket. I checked it. Dark grey eye shadow, pale powder, purple lipstick. I put it back. There was a lunchbox and a bottle at the bottom. I popped it open.

Two sandwiches, a bag of crisps, an apple, a chocolate chip cookie. I sniffed the bottle.

‘Water?’

‘It’s healthy.’ The girl reached for her things. Smug. ‘Can I go to class now?’

‘Wait.’ I caught her wrist and stared at the open bag. My gut was tight now, a knot of balled pain. I was missing something. I put my hand right down and felt for lumps, hidden pockets. Perhaps it was something tiny: an artefact, a ring, a locket.

Still nothing.

What hadn’t I seen?

I looked at the girl again. She had all the signs. All my experience told me I was right. Maybe it was *on* her?

‘Empty your pockets.’ I folded my arms.

The girl sighed, but this time she wore an air of satisfaction. I’d missed it – whatever *it* was. I watched with a sinking heart as she emptied detritus on to my table. A phone, a handful of loose change, a tissue, a small wallet which, when opened, proved to contain only a credit card, a bus pass and a real photograph of a younger girl whose dark brown hair was in lopsided bunches. Finally, she produced an orange plastic hair clip that didn’t match her outfit and a wrapped sweet stuck to a business card.

‘What’s this?’ I picked it up and turned it over. There was just a single word: *Emporium*.

‘Nothing important.’ The girl had hesitated so I knew she was lying.

I slipped the card into my flak vest.

The girl scowled and started to repack her bag.

‘Yo, Ivy. Can I get this line moving now?’ It was the guard at

the metal detector. Bristling moustache and floppy dark hair. Thought of himself as the John Wick of the school corridors – fingers always twitching over his gun stock.

I itched all over. What was I missing?

‘Yeah, I suppose.’ The girl had beaten me. I could hardly strip search her. Wait – jewellery could be worn.

‘Let me see your fingers.’ I caught her hands. They were cold in mine and her fingers were bare. I turned them over – her nails were filthy.

I pulled her nearer and looked at her throat. No necklace. No rings.

We both knew this was a game and I had lost. My throat felt scratchy as failure burned all the way down. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. It was possible she was only hiding a love spell, or a beauty charm. Perhaps *this* failure wouldn’t mean some innocent died. I almost choked on my own delusion.

She smiled. She’d been hiding in plain sight and she’d got away with it . . .

My brain finally made connections. Hiding in plain sight. As she tossed her pack over her shoulder, I grabbed the dangling strap and pulled her back.

‘Let me just see something.’

‘Ivy, come *on*, already. Let her go.’

‘One more minute, Charlie.’

The girl’s smile faltered. ‘You’ve seen everything. This is harassment.’

‘Just a last quick check, then you can go.’

She held her breath as I opened the bag again and lifted out the library books. Two gothic horrors – surprise, surprise. One book

on genus and species and a thin, but heavy tome titled *The Rise of the Samurai in Feudal Japan*.

Odd. With trembling fingers, I pulled off the dust jacket. Underneath, the title was something very different.

'Bloody hellfire.' I reached for my machete.

I was too late.