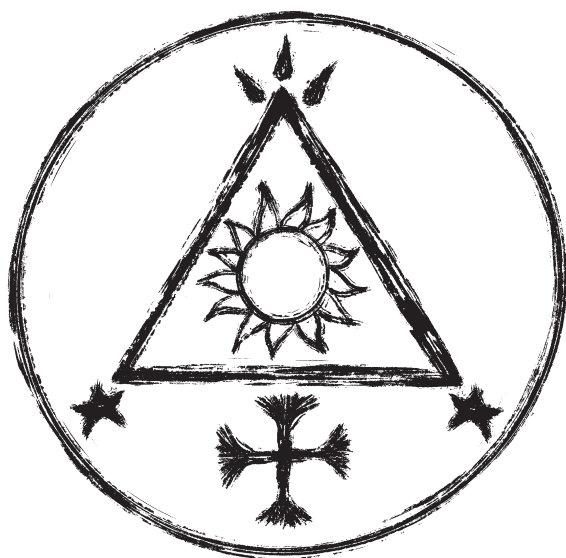


BRYONY PEARCE

RAISING HELL



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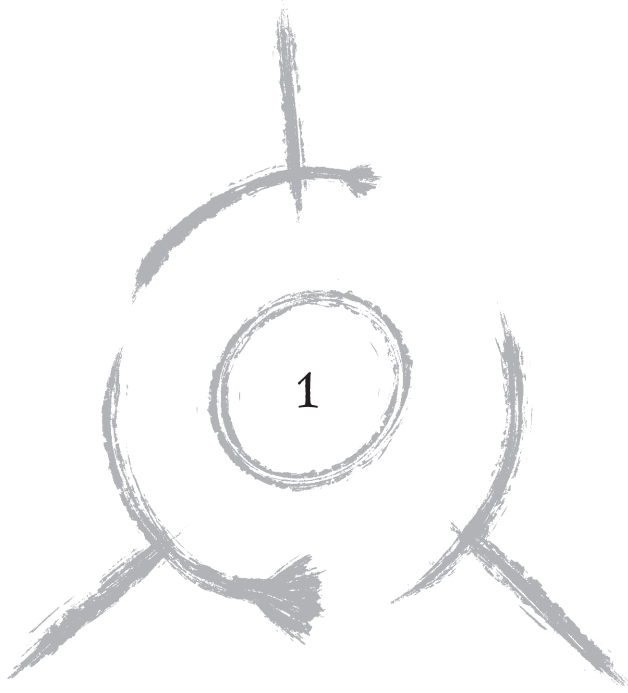
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*To the class of 2020
At least there weren't zombies . . .*



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.’

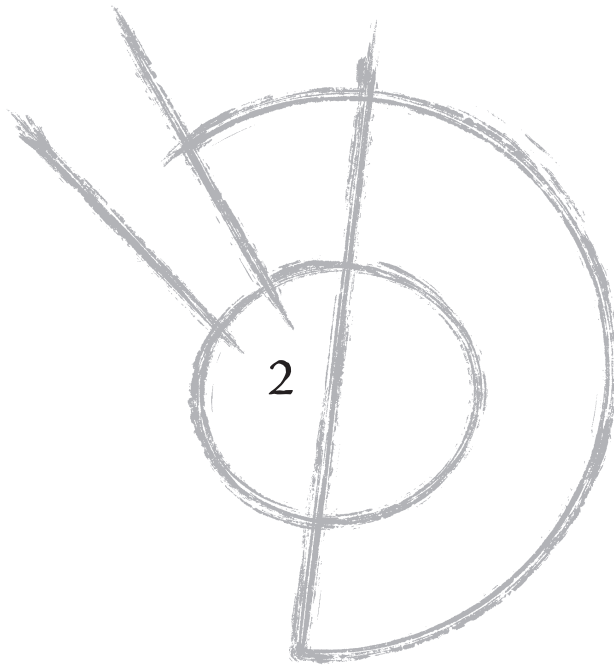
She held her breath as I opened the bag again and lifted out the library books. Two gothic horrors – surprise, surprise. One book

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.



TERRIFIED SCREAMING MADE me drop the book. It was with only slight satisfaction that I saw the gothed-out boy shrieking wildly and retreating up the hallway.

I glared at Norah. 'I'll deal with you *after*.'

The tome lay on the tiled floor, pages flipping as if in a heavy breeze.

I had no time to secure it. As Norah reached down, I kicked the book out of her reach, and it spun towards Charlie. 'Don't let her get hold of it,' I yelled.

'John Wick' stared at me, then at the thing in the hall. He was pale as milk, trembling and reaching for his gun.

'The *book*, Charlie!' I screamed. I had no time to baby the man through this; any moment now, kids were going to start dying.

I pulled my machete and leapt over the table. Goth-bitch was trying for the book again, so I elbowed her to the floor as I sprinted past. She cried out as she landed hard on hands and knees and I smiled grimly.

‘*Char—lie!*’ I howled. He blinked as if waking from a dream and I saw him bend down. Good, I could give my full attention to the slaughter.

Goth boy was already at my side, grabbing my arm, gabbling incomprehensibly. Automatically I checked him over, no blood, no gore – no problem. I shoved him out of my way, and he flew towards Norah. Let her deal with him.

Now my view down the corridor was unobstructed, I paled.

I still ran forward though. The two overweight goths were pinned against a wall, too terrified to make a sound. Silent tears were streaming down their faces, leaving pink tracks in their make-up.

Whistling through my teeth, I slowed. I wanted to run back the way I had come, but it wasn’t as though I had a choice. The thing stalking the girls was the size of a bear, and black in a way that sucked at the light. It seemed darker in the hallway where it stood. Its eyes were holes, with single glowing pinpoints deep in the pit of them. It started snarling, and there was the colour; yellow fangs the size of pencils, ridged pink gums, scarlet tongue. Saliva pooled on the floor.

Behind it, the shadows were gathering into the form of a second beast. Thankfully it wasn’t yet solid, but it would materialise on to this plane soon enough. I had to move fast.

I glanced back. ‘How did you raise *two* hounds?’ I yelled. Norah was staring past me, her mouth open, her eyes wide and shocked.

I mean the sheer power that was needed to raise just one hound . . . I'd never even seen a fully corporeal one in real life before.

Students were no longer trying to get through the metal detector, instead they were jammed in the doorway battling to get out. Charlie was finally waking up. He held the book in one hand and his gun in the other.

'Stay back,' I cried, but he had John Wick on the brain and was swaggering towards me, his jaw set.

'Shit,' I muttered. I took a deep breath, forced a sprint and, just as the first hound bunched its hindquarters to bound at the girls, I leapt, with my machete held high.

I didn't cry out as I attacked, hoping the hound would keep its attention on the girls, but as my feet left the ground it sensed me coming and turned. Its eyes bored into mine.

For a heartbeat I was falling into a pit of darkness – all around me were howls and wails, as I waded through blood and excrement and . . .

Sneaky. Note to self: do not make eye contact with a hell hound.

I returned to my body in time to slam on to the hound's back with my legs on either side of it, as if I was sitting on a horse. Hair like barbed wire bit through my jeans as I drove the machete between its shoulder blades. The beast's low growl turned into a whine as the blade stuck and it snapped at my hands, vicious in its pain. It couldn't reach me, and it spun, crazed with rage. I risked a glance at the second hound. It was more solid, its eyes now glowed from the shadows, but it was not yet ready to attack.

The girls hadn't moved.

'Run!' I yelled, and finally they grabbed one another and escaped sideways.

It was like holding on to the world's most brutal rodeo bull. I gripped Matilda's handle with one hand and the hound's mane with the other, ignoring the way its pelt sliced my fingers, as the hound bucked and twisted. Then I was slammed into the wall, the air rushing out of me, as it tried to scrape me off. Which wasn't a huge problem, I mean, I wanted to get off but I had to do it safely.

Suddenly a building collapsed on my leg. A gunshot echoed from concrete to tell me what had happened.

'You moron, Charlie! You shot me . . .' My bloodied hands slid from the machete handle and I thudded to the ground, back first, struggling to get my breath. Then the hound was on me.

More gunshots. I rolled into a ball, hands behind my neck, trying to protect my softer parts. I was all too aware that my leg was pouring blood and driving the hound into a frenzy. Its roar was more lion-esque than dog-like and I felt the first bite as its razor teeth sank into my arm and it shook me, trying to get to my guts. I curled up more tightly as I was dragged around the floor, like a bloody balloon leaving trails of gore. Its saliva sped into my veins, burning as if it had injected acid.

More gunshots.

'You're just making it angry!' I choked, but I knew Charlie couldn't hear me.

There was screaming all around me now; kids watching me get mauled, running footsteps.

'Give me the book!' It was Norah, trying to get to Charlie. I didn't dare look. Did he have the tome secured? If she got hold of it . . .

The girl was sobbing, sounding genuinely upset. Ha! 'I have to—'

The bell on my belt jingled as the dog hurled me into a wall and something in my arm tore.

I star-fished as I hit an art display, and the dog moved like lightning. Its teeth sliced into my flak vest, just above my kidneys. Then it whined and pulled back. Smoke billowed from its mouth and its gums bubbled. Stuck to its upper fangs was my two-inch-thick King James Bible.

'Serves you right,' I gasped. Wasting no time, I rolled between its feet and scrambled towards Charlie on one hand and one elbow, ignoring the blood that dripped from my, now useless, arm and the red handprints I was leaving on the floor.

Norah was wrestling with the security guard, trying to pull the book from his hand.

The hound shook its head to dislodge the Bible and when I felt something hit my skull, I knew it had succeeded. Slipping in my own blood, I rolled and put a boot in the air, knowing the hound would be coming after me.

I managed to kick it in the muzzle and knock it sideways.

Another gunshot and the beast started to retreat. Charlie was finally having an effect.

There was a yell of female triumph behind me. I didn't dare look, but I knew what had happened.

I grabbed the bell from my belt and shook it hard. The jangly sound shouldn't have been audible above the hound's snarls, the screaming of the students and now Norah's chanting (the cow)! Yet it was. The hound shook its head as though a bee had flown into its ear.

My left hand wasn't working, I put the crown of the bell between my teeth and shook my head, keeping the sound coming. Then

I yanked the flare from my vest before the beast could recover. I popped it with my thumb, and it sparked into life.

The chanting behind me was horrible. What was Norah trying to achieve? One thing at a time. I forced the flare into my lifeless hand, wrapping my own nerveless fingers around it and hoping they would hold. Then I took the bell out of my mouth. The Bible was lying open between my legs, at Leviticus. There was a smoking hole clear through the centre and I smelt burning paper.

‘Bell,’ I cried and shook it again, hard. ‘Book.’ I nudged the Bible. ‘Candle.’ I couldn’t raise the flare, but I held it and that’s what mattered. Then I started the incantation, raising my voice to try and drown out Norah’s garbled intonations.

‘In the name of God, the All-powerful, Father, Son and Holy Ghost, of the Blessed Peter, Prince of the Apostles, and of all the saints, in virtue of the power which has been given us of binding and loosing in Heaven and on Earth, I exclude you from the bosom of Earth, declare you anathematised and judge you condemned to eternal fire. I deliver you to Satan.’

With that, I rang the bell one last time and dropped the flare on the floor where it sputtered out.

There was an odd quiet. The students who remained in the building had fallen silent and were watching with wide eyes and pale faces. Charlie was standing, legs spread, his gun held in both hands, trained on the beast. The only sounds were the dripping of my blood and the drone of Norah’s voice as she chanted in the background.

The hound snarled, low in its throat; its muscles bunched and strained, but it couldn’t move. I used the wall to get to my feet. I noticed, worriedly, that I couldn’t feel my right leg.

I lurched drunkenly towards the hound, one arm hanging loosely at my side. Its eyes, those holes into hell, followed me – red pits glowing with banked fury. I reached out and wrapped my hand around Matilda. I pulled and the hound growled, making all the hairs on my neck stand up.

‘I need her back,’ I said, almost conversationally. The machete was jammed into bone and there was no moving it.

‘Charlie, help!’ I turned to see the security guard, shaking his head, a frantic no. ‘Charlie, you shot me. Get over here!’

A more definite no, this time.

I groaned and put my leg on the wall, leaning back as I yanked at the blade. Female whimpers behind me. As if they were suddenly all worried about the doggy.

It was like pulling the sword from the stone, but Matilda finally came free with a crunch of bone and an arc of crimson blood. The hound quivered but couldn’t move. I’d made sure of that.

I tucked Matilda back in her holster and started to back away again, towards the Bible.

‘It’s nothing personal,’ I said, ‘But you’re going back to hell.’ I kicked the Bible shut with one foot.

The hound popped out of existence with an anguished howl that tolled down the hall, reverberating like the aftermath of an explosion.

One down. I leant on the wall between the noticeboard and the Year Eight field trip display, and stared at the second hound. It was starting to growl, but I could still see the doors to the new science block through its flank. I had a moment. I was bone-tired – exhaustion was a weight on every limb, but I unsheathed Matilda and raised her in a shaking hand. I was going to be

right there, ready to start hacking as soon as it was solid enough to cut.

But the chanting was getting louder.

Suddenly Norah pushed in front of me. She was holding the book out in front of her like a shield. I wobbled. There *was* one way to stop the second hound from attacking. One way to end it all right now.

I lined the blade up with the base of her neck.