

Excerpt from the Novella “Freshman Hunt: A Nightmare Academy
Novella”



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Prelude: A Brush with Death

The faintest tinge of light began to creep over the cloudy skies above Raven. It was a brisk October morning, (Halloween to be exact), and the 50 year old woman stepped out of the diner where she worked as a chef with a smile on her face. She didn't know why she was smiling. It had been a typical night, cooking hot and greasy meals for hungry travelers and truck drivers as they drove along the coast.

Robin "Raven" Barber lived in a small apartment in Ocean Park, CA, near her favorite place in the world, Santa Monica. She'd been working at Al's 24-hour diner for four years, although she'd spent over twenty years working as a chef. She'd spent years cooking and serving all sorts of customers, and whenever she worked these late nights, she was used to dealing with the occasional asshole who claimed their food was overcooked or not cooked enough. This night was no different, and yet she was happy.

As she breathed in the cool morning air, she thought about the day ahead of her. Although she'd lived alone for the last six years in her small apartment near the beach, (with the exception of her two cats, Carrie and Harrison), she had two beautifully grown children who were set to visit her for her birthday today. Her son, Charles Barber, was a twenty-two year old photographer living in Los Angeles, while her daughter, Alicia Barber, was a 19 year old woman working as a waitress while working her way through school, studying to become a full-time makeup artist. It had been four weeks since she'd last seen her children, and as a working single mother, her favorite days had always revolved around seeing them.

As she walked to her car, the early morning sunshine catching in her purple tinged hair, she thought of her coming day and felt a smile tug on her lips again. Raven spent most of her time working, and the rest of her time dedicated to her love of the Wiccan culture. A practicing Wiccan herself, she loved the approach to magic that the Wiccan culture taught, viewing magic as a law of nature that is not yet understood by modern science. She hoped to one day see magic materialize before her eyes, proving to herself once and for all her beliefs were valid. She could deal with the occasional naysayer who called her "eccentric" for her beliefs, but she could not tolerate her own self-doubt, and so she pursued her beliefs with a passionate zeal.

As these thoughts rushed through her mind, a chill began to run down her spine, and she began to rub the intricate patterns of her tattoo on the base of her neck, which depicted the beautiful Moon Goddess draped across the moon's surface, watching over the world. She did this without thinking, as this was usually a habit she had whenever something stressful or bad entered her life. She shook her head and continued towards her small blue Mini Cooper.

Suddenly, a howl rose through the early morning air. Raven tensed and scanned the parking lot, which was mostly empty except for the cars of the morning shift employees who had

arrived a half hour earlier. She looked around, feeling as if she were being watched, and was shocked to see a pair of red eyes staring at her from some nearby bushes. Her breath caught in her throat, and her mind screamed for her to run, but her legs wouldn't comply. She stared in amazement and horror at the piercing red eyes, but soon the growling began to emerge from the bushes, and she knew what was about to happen.

Finally snapping out of her shocked state, Raven turned and ran to her car, pulling out her car keys as fast as she could. She heard the sharp bark of an animal behind her, followed by the scurrying feet scuttling across the gravel parking lot. Just as she reached her car, a powerful mass of muscles smashed into her back, sending her flying into her car door and her keys flying from her hands. Sharp claws dug into her back, and she tried to scream in pain, but the breath had been knocked out of her. She was sure she was going to die, and so she said one last prayer of sorts to the Moon Goddess, asking for her protection for her children now that she would no longer be there.

Before she could finish her thoughts however, another powerful shock hit the animal attacking her, and she found herself free from its death grip. She rolled over onto her back, wincing at the bloody tears in her back, and looked in terror as she watched a beautiful teenage girl tearing into a shaggy black mass. The animal in the girl's grasp yelped in pain, and then fell silent and unmoving in the young woman's arms. The girl dropped the animal, which looked like a giant ball of black fur, to the gravel, and looked up at Raven.

The girl's eyes were the loveliest shade of emerald green Raven had ever seen, and her beauty was evident, but Raven looked on in horror as she saw the girl wipe a smear of black blood from her mouth, spitting out large gobs of the blood onto the ground.

"Are you ok?" the girl asked, wiping her hands and face with a cloth that she pulled out of her jean pockets.

"What....what..." Raven stammered, staring up in horror at this strange woman.

"She's in shock," a voice spoke up behind Raven. She turned to see the strangest sight yet, a handsome young man with skin the color of the ocean and swirling lights surrounding him.

"I can tell. She was attacked by a hellhound. This is definitely the place it's going to happen," the girl remarked to the man. Raven thought she detected a hint of tension between the newcomers, but the pain was becoming overwhelming and delirium threatened to slide between the cracks in her mind. She walked over to Raven and in one swift motion picked Raven up off the ground, as if she weighed nothing. "Can you fix her up Jasper?"

"Sure can, Francesca. It'll just take a second," the man replied. Before Raven could speak, she felt a warm and pleasant tingling sensation run down her back, and soon she felt her back was whole again. "There you go my dear, your injuries should be healed, as will your amazing t-shirt. I felt a strong magic in you. Are you a Wiccan by any chance?"

"I'm...yes, I'm a Wiccan. I've...I've been searching for proof of magic for years, and you've given it to me. Thank...thank you both for saving me."

"You are most welcome my dear, but we must take your memories of this event. This area is going to be a dangerous place to be for the next twenty-four hours, and we can't have anyone remembering seeing us here," the man, (Jasper was what the girl, Francesca, called him, Raven thought to herself), replied.

"Oh please, I can't forget this. This is what I've searched for. You are the answer I've always sought."

"I'm sorry my dear, but you can't remember us. However, maybe we can leave you with a little token of magic," Jasper replied. He waved his hand in front of Raven's face, and her mind went blank. Francesca guided the woman into her car, sitting her in the driver's seat and putting her keys in the ignition. When she came to, Raven would only remember falling asleep in her car, and nothing more. Jasper smiled as he left a little box inside the car with Raven. Then they shut the door, and walked back into the forest near the diner, off to their adventure.

Raven woke several minutes later, and laughed as she remembered falling asleep. She shook her head, smacked her cheeks to wake herself up, and then started the car. Before she left the parking lot however, she spotted a small box sitting on her dashboard. She picked it up, and saw a note, which simply read, "Never Stop Believing, J." She shook her head in amazement, not sure who J was, but when she opened the box, she saw a small piece of paper inside. The paper seemed to have some sort of incantation written on it, and laughing to herself, she playfully spoke the words aloud.

"Ignitus Minimus!"

As she finished the incantation, a small light emerged from the box, and a miniature firework show played before Raven's eyes. She stared in wonder as the spell played out, and she felt a tear of joy spilling down her cheek. From the woods, Francesca and Jasper watched the woman smile, and Francesca turned to Jasper with an equally big smile on her face.

"What?" Jasper asked.

"That was a wonderful thing you did for her," Francesca remarked. She knew they had to seek shelter from the sun soon, but she wrapped her arms around Jasper and enjoyed this small moment with him. The tension between them vanished, and they found themselves lost in the moment.

"With all the horror coming our way tonight, I think we both needed that as much as she did. The smallest glimmer of hope can turn the worst of tides," Jasper replied. She smiled, and hoped he was right. The things that they would have to face that night would be horrible indeed, and all they had going for them was hope. She only hoped that hope would be enough.