

FREE SAMPLE

Waycaller

By D. J. McPhee

Chapter 1: Autumn Dark

Cairnbawn, Scottish Highlands

Jack ducked just in time to avoid getting smacked in the head by a rogue ball, kicked in his direction by a group of first-graders playing a wild game of football by the gate to the schoolyard.

The girl he'd been kissing just moments before—Carlie or Kaelie or whatever her name was—saw the ball coming. She put her hands over her face, in terror for her near-perfect nose, and shrieked, nearly bursting Jack's eardrums. He spun her behind him to protect her from the ball, her blonde hair flying like a silk banner, and then faced the first-graders.

“Hey, midgets, clear off!” he yelled, before glancing back over his shoulder at Carlie (or was it Kaelie?) to make sure she was alright. He wished he could remember her name, but as hard as he tried, he couldn’t. He’d been so dazzled by her crystalline eyes when she’d come up to him, smiling and batting her eyelids, that he hadn’t heard her properly when she introduced herself. She cowered behind him now, her hands still clamped tightly over her nose, her trance-inducing eyes wide with alarm, but unharmed.

“You clear off, *psycho!*” one of the first-graders shouted back, sounding like a rabid leprechaun. “We can play here if we want!” The kid grabbed the ball and stuck his tongue out at Jack and ran off to resume the game with his friends, half of whom were wagging their tongues at Jack as well and yelling: *Psycho, psycho, psycho.*

He didn’t bother telling them off for calling him “psycho”. What was the point? Everyone in the village called him that. They all thought he was like his mother. She’d believed in crazy things, things like monsters and elves and trolls.

Jack turned back to Carlie or Kaelie and smiled, taking her in his arms again, glad that she was new to the village and hadn’t heard any of the whispers yet. She dropped her hands from her nose and looked up into his eyes. He leant in towards her, planning to kiss her some more.

“Is it true?” she asked, pulling away from him a little, her eyes fixed on his.

“Is what true?” he asked, his stomach tightening and his skin prickling. Did she know? Had she found out already?

“Is it true that you live at Cairnbawn House, the children’s home, because your mother was, you know —”

“Insane?” He looked into her eyes. They had a familiar look, a kind of dark fascination that made her eyes seem as hard as glass. He’d seen that look in the eyes of girls before. Girls who were a bit dark, who liked the idea that he was kind of dangerous.

“My mum heard it from the neighbour ladies. They said your mother lost her mind.”

“Yeah, they all like to whisper about how Eloise Gordon lost her mind. They love a good horror story around here.”

“So, it’s true? It’s true that—”

“That when I was six years old my mother killed my father by breaking his neck with her bare hands and then drowned herself in the loch? That they never found her body, just her coat and shoes on the shore? Yeah, it’s true. All true.”

He didn’t want to look into her eyes again. He didn’t want to see that hard glint there that proved that she saw him the way everyone

else in the village did – a reminder of his mother, the lunatic who'd killed her husband and then herself, abandoning her two children.

“I'm not like her.” His voice cracked. “I don't believe in elves or dragons. I don't keep a sharpened dagger under my bed to fight off monsters.” He looked off into the distance. Anything to avoid seeing her looking at him like he was a zoo animal, interesting only because it was wild, dangerous.

He zipped up his leather jacket and put his hands in the pockets, realising as he did so that his black clothes, messy hair and taste for punk music didn't help his argument any. In the Highlands anyone who looked different was automatically dubbed a lunatic.

He turned back to Carlie or Kaelie and smiled. She wasn't from Cairnbawn, maybe she would understand. He leant in to kiss her. She looked up into his face, the hard, fascinated look in her eyes growing even stronger. He turned away again, gazing at the ground.

“What's wrong?” she asked, tugging on his jacket sleeve, trying to turn him back towards her.

“Nothing,” he said. “My little sister will be out of class soon.” It wasn't a lie, but not entirely why he'd lost interest in kissing her. He couldn't tell her the truth; that she'd killed the mood by making him think of his lunatic, murderess mother.

“We could go down behind the ruined tower,” she whispered, pouting her pink lips. “No-one ever goes down there.”

He imagined the two of them alone in the ruins of the tower, on the shore of the loch, his fingers tangled in her hair, her body pressed against his. He was about to agree when the school bell rang. Moments later a door opened in the schoolhouse and a stream of kids came running out. “Sorry,” he said, “I can’t, Harrie will be here any minute.”

“It’s only four streets to your place, why can’t she walk home by herself?” she said, running her finger up Jack’s arm.

Jack pointed at the first graders. “She’s afraid of *them*, worried they’ll attack her if she walks home alone.”

“They are a bit scary. But why would they attack her?”

“They don’t like her.”

“Why?”

“She’s a Gordon. They dislike all Gordons on principle, but they dislike her especially. Mostly because she’s smarter than the lot of them put together and she’s a bit of a loudmouth.”

“I’m sure they wouldn’t really hurt her. Let her walk home by herself, just this once.” She pouted her pretty, rose-coloured lips and looked up into his eyes. Jack’s stomach fluttered with the urge to put his arms around her and do whatever she asked. He looked off towards

the tower, and then back at the stream of kids coming out of the school house.

“I can’t, she’s expecting me.”

She moved a strand of blonde hair away from where it had stuck to her lips, then stretched a trembling hand to the front of his shirt, pressing it flat against his chest.

“Your heart’s pounding,” she whispered, looking at him sideways for a moment before looking down again. The weight of her hand against Jack’s skin made him sigh and reach out for her. She took her hand away and smiled coyly. “You can’t tell me you don’t like me,” she whispered, as if to reassure herself.

“It’s not that I don’t like you,” Jack said, “it’s just that I can’t hang out with you right now. I’m sorry, Carlie.” He knew as soon as the name left his mouth that he’d gotten it wrong. Her face went suddenly tight, her eyes narrowing and her forehead creasing with a frown.

“Sorry, sorry, I know your name’s not Carlie,” he said quickly.

“What is it then?” she demanded. She wasn’t running her finger up his arm now. She was looking at him as though he were something awful she’d stepped in.

“Kaelie?” He knew straight away that was wrong too. Her eyes narrowed even further. “Cassi?” he added weakly, hoping he’d finally got it right.

“My name is Tricia,” she said through clenched teeth, before spinning on her heels and stalking away, her silky blonde hair swinging like the tail of an angry cat. Jack pushed his jet-black hair out of his eyes and sighed, now annoyed more than ever that he had to walk his sister home, made all the more tiresome because Harriett was always late out of class.

Five, then ten minutes passed and there was still no sign of her. Although Jack was used to her constant lateness, this time it was getting on his nerves. It had cost him a pleasant hour or two all alone with Tricia down behind the old tower. With each passing moment he grew more irritated.

He settled in to wait for Harriett to turn up, leaning against the low wall that separated the schoolyard from the street. A moment later, he thought he sensed a reduction in light, as if a darker cloud had passed in front of an already clouded sun. He looked up for a brief moment, then out of nowhere he felt a strange stinging sensation in his left ear.

“What the hell,” he mumbled, rubbing his ear, thinking maybe he’d been stung by a wasp. Though what a wasp was doing in his ear he had no idea. He stuck his finger in his ear and rubbed more vigorously,

then stopped, startled, when he heard a barely audible hiss. He shook his head. Was he imagining things? He resumed rubbing his ear. This time heard a very faint voice whisper: *Jack*. He looked around. No-one was there. He rubbed at his ear again. Just as quickly as it had started, the stinging stopped.

“That was weird,” he said to himself. Two ten year old girls walking past just at that moment overheard him and sped up, walking away from him as fast as they could. They glanced over their shoulders to make sure he wasn’t about to lunge after them. One of them whispered to the other: “Talking to himself, what a total nutcase.”

Just then Jack felt a small, warm hand slip into his own. He started with fright, shaking the hand away before looking down. It was Harriett, standing beside him, clutching a book in her free hand, her backpack slung loosely over one shoulder. Everyone said she and Jack shared a lot of the same genes. Harriett was thin, with lanky arms and legs, and had the same dark hair and sapphire blue eyes. Her skin was as milky-pale as his. But unlike Jack who, much to his embarrassment, got a lot of attention for his looks, Harriett was gangly, uncoordinated and scruffy looking. Jack often teased her that she looked like an eleven year old scarecrow.

“About time, Harrie, I’ve been waiting ages.” Harriett didn’t respond, simply looked up at him with those big, cold blue eyes of hers. “Why are you always late?” he asked, frowning.

“I don’t mean to be late.” She shrugged. “It just always works out that I am. But this time I have a good reason. I had to ask the teacher about this book.” She showed him the book in her hand, a small, beaten up hardback that looked a hundred years old at least.

“What did you need to ask about that old book that was more important than being on time?”

“Well, I asked if the teacher had heard of it because I wanted to know if it was a series, you know, to find out if there was a sequel—”

“Just look it up on the net—”

“I did, but there wasn’t anything. I’ve never done a search and had nothing come up, like nothing at all.”

“It’s probably just so old that nobody remembers it. What is it, some geeky fantasy novel?”

“No, it is not.” She rolled her eyes. “Well, actually, it is a fantasy thing, but it’s not geeky. It’s kind of cool.”

“Hate to break it to you, Harrie, but smelly old books aren’t cool. Where’d you get it anyway?”

“Out of that box of old stuff.”

“What box of stuff?”

“That box of stuff, you know—”

Jack stopped, facing her.

“Mum’s old stuff?” he asked.

“Yes—”

“I’ve told you not to mess around with mum’s stuff!”

Harrie fired up immediately. “That stuff’s just as much mine as yours Jack!” she shouted. “I can read this book if I want to!”

Jack glared back at her a moment then just shook his head. He walked away. She was right, it was her stuff as much as his. He just didn’t like anyone touching it because when someone touched it, he had to think about it, had to think about his mother. How she killed their father and herself and abandoned them.

He turned the corner and headed down the street towards Cairnbawn House. It was the last place he wanted to be right now. It reminded him day in and day out that he and Harriett were alone, but he had nowhere else to go. Harriett skipped forward and caught up with him, saying “Don’t be mad at me, Jack.” She tried to take his hand again. She was nothing if not determined.

“Don’t do that Harrie! I’ve told you, you’re too old for holding hands!” Jack said through gritted teeth, checking the street to make sure no-one was watching.

“I’m sick of you always pushing me away, Jack!” she shrieked. “If you don’t hold my hand, I’ll scream!”

“You’re already screaming. Now come on, unless you want to walk home by yourself and risk being attacked by the first-graders?” Jack walked away, leaving Harriett fuming.

Jack reached the corner and rounded it, pretending to look straight ahead, but quickly casting his eyes back to check on Harriett. She stood right where he’d left her, her face screwed up in indecision, looking nervously at the first-graders playing ball down the street. He’d only gone a few more paces when he heard her taking off toward him at a run, her school shoes slapping on the wet cobblestones. He smirked, knowing she’d give in.

When Harriett finally caught up with him, Jack gave her a stern look and she fell into step beside him and sulked. He suppressed a smile. As he slowed his pace a little, enough so that Harriett’s knobbly legs could keep up, he cast his eye over the dank cobblestone street leading to the children’s home.

The cottages here were all made of stone and squeezed up against each other as if huddled against the biting wind, which blew day in and day out. The roofs were all tiled with slate. Everything in sight, every dry stone wall, every chimney stack, every front stoop, was covered in a layer of green moss.

The village sat at the head of a narrow valley containing glassy Cairnbawn loch. There were about fifty cottages in total, as well as a tiny school and a grim looking church. The sky and the loch mirrored each other, both a bitter, steel grey.

A gust of wind brought tears to Jack's eyes. He turned his head away from it, looking towards the shore of the loch, where the ruins of a narrow tower jutted into the grey sky. It stood on the shore like a broken lighthouse. He could have been down there right now with Tricia. If only she hadn't already heard all the stories about him. Whispers travel fast in Cairnbawn, especially if they're about something dark. Like the stories about the tower itself. The local children said it was haunted. Jack thought that was rubbish. The kind of rubbish his mother had believed. The same children said that a lot of strange things happened in Cairnbawn, which they blamed on the ancient circle of standing stones that sat at the heart of town, in the churchyard. The Cairnbawn circle, they said, was a gateway to another realm, the realm of magic and elves and dragons. Jack dismissed that stuff as loopy rubbish.

"Jack, it's really cold," Harriett whined. He looked down into her face. Her eyes were watering from the wind that was also buffeting her black hair.

"No, really?" he teased. "I hadn't noticed, but that does explain the icicle hanging off my nose."

“Ha ha ha. I was just saying. I’m allowed to say things you know. I have rights,” she said sharply. Harriett loved to regale Jack with her notion of human rights, which basically meant she should be allowed to do and say whatever she pleased. She’d been learning about that human rights stuff in school.

“You don’t have to say everything that enters your head you know,” Jack said. “Especially if it’s something that obvious.”

“Don’t be so mean, or I’ll tell the welfare people that you’re messing with my human rights.”

“They couldn’t care less,” he said harshly.

“They might, they might come and lock you up.”

He snorted. “If there’s one thing I know for sure, it’s that the welfare people don’t give a damn about us.”

“You think you’re so smart, Jack,” she said, trotting after him, “but I know lots of things you don’t know!”

“Oh really,” Jack retorted disinterestedly, “do tell.”

“Well, for one thing, I know that Aggie McTavish has a crush on you.”

Jack stopped still. “Who’s Aggie McTavish?” he asked. “Is she cute?”

“Sure she’s cute,” Harriett said, “for a nine year old! She’s in the grade below me at school. She says you look like a pop star!”

Jack instantly started walking again. “Well you can tell Aggie for me that I don’t care what she thinks. Like I care what some ten year old thinks.”

“If only all the girls who think you’re so handsome and dangerous knew how you felt about them,” Harriett said in a waspish tone. “Maybe then they’d realise what a dweeb you are. Sadly, you’re the biggest teen-hottie of the moment, Jack, even though everyone thinks you’re crazy.”

“Don’t say hottie. You’re too young.”

“I’m not a baby, Jack. I’m eleven, not six! I know all about hotties, and Aggie thinks that you’re one, only she doesn’t like your hair.”

“What’s wrong with my hair?” Jack asked, his hand involuntarily going to where his hair stuck up at the crown. He worked very hard to make his hair look like he’d just climbed out of bed.

“Well,” Harriett began, clearly enjoying the fact that she had her brother’s total attention, “she thinks it’s a bit *too punky*.”

“There’s no such thing as *punky*, it’s just punk,” Jack growled.

“Don’t snarl at me, I’m not the one who said it.”

“Well, next time I see Aggie McTavish I’ll snarl at her then.”

Harriett giggled. Then the already grey street went totally black. Jack looked up, searching for the sun.

“An eclipse,” Harriett mumbled, pointing towards a patch of grey clouds where the sun should have made them lighter. Jack could barely see the pavement beneath his feet. He felt like he was floating in space. The street lights hadn’t come on. All the houses around them were lightless and eerily silent.

“It’s so dark,” Harriett said, infuriatingly stating the obvious again. Jack didn’t respond. Something stopped him before he could say anything. He heard that voice in his ear again, this time as clear as a bell. *Be calm*, the voice said. He stopped short, thinking at first that whoever said it was standing behind him. He spun around but, once again, there was nobody there. Then he heard it again: *Be calm*.

This time he recognized the voice instantly. It was *his own* voice! This hadn’t happened to him before. Sure, he often thought things to himself and talked to himself in his head, but this was different. The voice seemed to be coming out of nowhere, unrelated to what he was doing or thinking. Had his little sister finally driven him over the edge? Was something seriously wrong with him? Was he going nuts? Harriett looked up at him curiously, apparently noticing that something was not quite right. She reached out her hand and wrapped it in his. He was too distracted and worried to flick it away. He could tell by the sudden

tightening of her grip that, because he hadn't pushed her hand away, she understood that something was really wrong.

"What's the matter Jack?" she whispered, as if hushed by the extreme dark.

Jack shook his head slightly, not sure what to say, looking down the street, toward the children's home, scanning for anything that might explain what was happening. He knew that Harriett's eyes had followed his because he felt her hand clench with tension when she saw what he saw. He felt her look up to him for reassurance, but he couldn't pull his eyes away from the scene ahead of him to meet her gaze.

A police car was parked outside the stone building that was the children's home. Its emergency lights were on so that, as they flashed, they threw the end of the street into an eerie, pulsing light. The front door to the home was open. A very tall, thin constable stood on the stoop. The constable's head was hung low, his face pale and his eyes downcast. The last time Jack saw a scene like this was the night of his father's murder.

"Jack," Harriett said, her voice quiet as a mouse and her hand shaking. Perhaps she was remembering the story Jack had told her so many times about the police coming to get them in the middle of the night. Without speaking they resumed walking toward Cairnbawn House, hand in hand.

As they got nearer the building, the constable saw them approaching. He came down the front stairs and headed towards them, using his hand to shield his eyes from the flashing emergency light. He stumbled at the gate, as if blinded by the flashing light. Harriett was positively shaking now. Her hand trembled in Jack's like a frightened bird. Jack felt worried but, for some reason, strangely calm, just as the voice had commanded.

The constable reached them and immediately took hold of Harriett's arm. He steered them toward the car. Normally something like this would make Jack panic. But he wasn't panicking at all. His mind was calm and clear.

"What's going on?" he asked. "Where are you taking us?"

The policeman glared at Jack before answering. "I'm not at liberty to tell you that, laddie. Just come with me and you'll soon find out."

"We want to go home," Harriett said.

The constable manoeuvred between the two of them and grabbed hold of Jack's arm as well. He increased his pace, practically dragging them toward the car. As they neared the vehicle, its emergency lights flashed in quick succession. The constable released them as his hands shot to his face to protect his eyes. As he jerked away from the light, Jack thought he heard the constable hiss, like some kind of animal.

Then the voice in Jack's ear, his own voice, came back again. This time it said: *Run!*

Jack felt a strong impulse to take Harriett by the arm and bolt. But he didn't. He resisted the urge. Why should he run? The children's home might not be much but he still wanted to know why they were being taken away from the only home they had. *Run!* the voice hissed again, this time more urgent. Again, Jack felt an overwhelming impulse to flee. He felt very confused. He didn't know what was going on.

He looked to the constable, to ask him again what was happening, just as the thin man shied away from another flash of light. For a split second, Jack saw a look of sheer malevolent hatred in the constable's eyes. The voice yelled once more: *Run! Run now!*

This time Jack couldn't resist. He grabbed Harriett by the arm and ran. Harriett resisted at first, but Jack pulled her with such force that she was dragged along after him, her gangly legs working overtime.

"Jack, what are you doing?!" she screeched. "Where are we going?"

Jack didn't have time to answer before the constable surged after them. He just missed catching hold of Harriet's schoolbag. Jack hurled his own bag at him, urging Harriett to run even faster. Jack's school bag didn't slow the constable down for long. He was soon pounding the pavement close behind them.

“Harriett, drop your bag!” Jack yelled.

“Are you crazy, Jack? My schoolbooks are in there!”

“Drop it. Harriett! Otherwise he’s going to catch us!”

They rounded a corner into a small lane. As they did so, Jack glanced back at their pursuer. He was very close behind them. Now the hateful gleam in the constable’s eyes was unmasked and full-blown. What was worse, his eyes had turned an awful murky green, like something rotten at the bottom of a swamp. Harriett looked back then too. She shed her schoolbag without a second thought. She put everything she had into spurring her legs to run faster, clutching their mother’s old book to her chest with her free hand.

A few moments later they heard a skidding sound followed by a thump and then the clanging of rubbish tin lids. Jack looked back again and saw the constable sprawled on the ground. The shoulder-strap of Harriett’s bag was tangled around both his ankles. He was maniacally trying to clear himself from the debris of a couple of toppled rubbish tins. The constable looked up and, staring straight into Jack’s eyes, growled. It was a growl like a wild animal that had something snake-like about it. Without a word, Jack and Harriett pelted down the lane as fast as they could.

The end of the lane opened onto another street directly across from the churchyard and the ancient ring of standing stones that

encircled the cemetery. The place where their father had died. Darker shadows looming out of the gloom showed where the stones stood, tall and imposing. Jack bolted toward the gate to the churchyard, dragging Harriett behind him. He was headed toward a clump of trees backing onto the graveyard where he hoped they could hide.

“Jack! I’m not going in that graveyard!”

“It’s either go in there or let that freak catch us!” He dragged her through the gate, heading to the back of the cemetery where a stand of trees and the shadow of the church offered some protection. Once there, the voice rang out in Jack’s ear again. *To the oak! The Oak!*

“Harriett, which of these trees is an oak?” Jack asked, panting, his voice sounding as desperate as he felt. “I can’t tell one from the other.”

“Are you flipping mad Jack? This isn’t the time for botany!”

“Which one Harriett, I don’t know why it’s important, but it is!”

Harriett peered at the trees through the darkness, feeling the trunks to see which one was an oak.

“This one, its bark is all rough. I think this is an oak.” She patted the trunk of an ancient looking tree just inside the outer circle of stones.

“Are you sure, Harrie?” Jack asked.

“Feel around on the ground! Oaks drop acorns!” They both went down to their knees. Soon enough Jack’s fingers closed on the familiar shape of an acorn, old and covered in muck but an acorn nevertheless.

“It’s an oak!” he said, and then they huddled up behind it, right beside an ancient tombstone marked with a skull and crossbones. Jack shuffled slightly away from the gravesite towards the very edge of the stone circle, thinking it bad luck to step on the dead. The voice hissed inside his head: *Stay well inside the circle, beneath the branches of the oak!* Jack shifted back, making sure that Harriett did too.

They crouched as low as they could behind the tombstone, looking back in the direction of the lane for their pursuer. Within seconds the constable emerged into the street fronting the churchyard. His face had transformed, his eyes were now a very dark fleshy green, with no whites or pupil at all. His lips were pulled back, revealing a mouth of drooling fangs. His face had changed to a rank grey. His constable’s cap had fallen off, revealing a bald and mottled head covered with bruises. Jack thought he looked like a corpse, a corpse that was puffing and out of breath. But corpses couldn’t run around, and they didn’t get short of breath. Jack wondered if he’d finally gone the way of his mother. Was he mad now?

The constable stopped for a moment, listening. Then he extended a long, forked tongue, like a snake’s, and lapped at the air with it, sending streaks of spittle everywhere. Jack thought of a mad dog he

saw on the nature channel once, with a mouth full of fangs and froth and filth. But this was worse because the constable was searching for them with his tongue, the way a snake senses its prey on the air. Harriett gasped at the sight of him, waving the old hardcover book in front of Jack. Her hand shook so much that Jack thought the cover might fall right off.

“Jack,” she said trembling all over, “that thing is exactly like the monsters in this book!”

The constable heard her. He looked right in their direction. *Skinwearer!* The voice in Jack’s ear hissed. Then the monstrous policeman ran toward them at full pelt, eyes fixed right on the spot where they were hiding.

“Oh no,” Jack moaned, “I think he’s going to get us.”

The policeman reached the churchyard gate, pausing just for a second as if afraid, before entering the graveyard at a loping run. *It acts against the power of the stones!* spat the voice in Jack’s ear. Jack had no idea what that meant. He didn’t know anything about these stones, or skinwearers for that matter. He didn’t understand how he could be having these thoughts, how these words could be in his mind. But he didn’t have time to ponder any deeper because the constable, the skinwearer, was bearing down on them.

“Should we run, Jack?” Harriett asked, her voice shaking. Jack listened. No voice.

“No, we stay.”

“Jack, he’s coming!”

“Stay put. I think we’re safe here.”

The skinwearer reached just a few feet away from them and stopped still, just outside the circle, growling and spitting. *Stay inside the circle, beneath the oak! Wait for the light to return!* Urged the voice in Jack’s ear. “Don’t move Harriett!” Jack said, holding tightly onto his sister. The skinwearer prowled left and right, apparently trying to find a way around some invisible barrier. He circled around behind them and then came crashing toward them through the trees, his feet crushing fallen leaves and snapping twigs. But then, just as before, he stopped just a few feet away, just outside the circle of stones and the shadow of the oak.

They could hardly see him now. He was hidden in the full shade of the trees. They could only make out his silhouette as he paced to and fro, like a caged animal. Suddenly, he hurled himself forward, yowling at the top of his voice. In terror, Harriett and Jack pressed back hard against the tombstone at the base of the oak, but the constable stopped just as suddenly as he started, growling, frothing and spitting.

“Something is keeping him away from this oak,” Jack said, almost to himself.

“What?” asked Harriett.

“I don’t know, but while we’re here I’m pretty sure he can’t get us.”

“I hope somebody will hear him and come and find us soon.”

“Don’t hope that!”

“Why?”

“Because whoever comes will be attacked!”

“Oh, no! But what are we going to do? We can’t stay here forever.”

“We don’t have to. I think he hates light. As soon as the eclipse is over, I think he’ll go.”

“I will have you yet, little things,” a terrible voice growled from amongst the shadows. “Don’t you worry your little skins.” His voice was a raspy lisp, hindered by the forked tongue. “The night comes before the eclipse is done, and I will wear down this enchantment.” He spat on the ground. The spit sent up steam like water thrown on a skillet. “And then I will have your pretty skins to myself. No longer will they be yours!”

“You know what, Jack, that zombie thing is *really* scary,” Harriett said matter-of-factly. Jack shook his head.

“You’re unbelievable!”

“What? He *is* scary.”

“Yes, Harrie, I had noticed that.”

The skinwearer circled to the side of them, in-between them and the church, still searching for a way to get to them, a weak spot in the invisible barrier that was protecting them. After a moment of hissing and growling, he went down on his hands and knees and started to dig. As he dug, he howled and giggled. The deeper he dug, the more he spat, growled and giggled.

“That doesn’t sound good,” Jack said. “He sounds happy about something.”

“I will have your little skins very soon little things,” the skinwearer cackled.

The voice in Jack’s head came back, more urgent than ever: *The bough above has withered. The roots below are weak. The Skinwearer may break the shield! You must open a Way!*

The voice made him feel like a split personality, inside his own head and sounding like him yet speaking as if someone else. Open a way? He had no idea what that meant. Could it mean a way to escape?

But how? What was he to do? As if in answer, the voice in his ear shouted: *Call! Call for a Way to open! Do it now!*

Once again, the internal voice took on a tone that forced him to act. He couldn't resist. Even though he didn't know what any of it meant, he knew he had to do what the voice said. So he opened his mouth and just called out: "Please, please, open a way for us to escape!"

Harriett jumped with fright. She looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. Maybe he had. He didn't know who he was calling to, or what he was asking, but he put his whole being into it and called again. "Please, open a way for us to escape this place!"

The skinwearer growled, spitting a huge glob of drool in their direction. The spit hit a tombstone just inches away with a steaming sizzle.

"No! *My* little skins! Mine!" he growled.

Harriett screamed and got up to run. Jack grabbed her by her jacket and pulled her back to him. In that moment, every part of him just wanted his little sister to be safe. He couldn't bear it if anything happened to her, not after losing their parents. A sudden surge of determination filled him and he called out again: "Open a way! Open a way!"

The skinwearer resumed digging at a furious pace. Then, somehow, the sky grew slightly lighter. The skinwearer howled in a mad

frenzy and, to Jack's horror, transformed before their eyes. His whole body grew larger as his arms thickened and elongated, much longer than his legs. His feet changed into paws and sprouted long claws. As he continued to change and grow, splotchy fur like a hyena's sprouted all over his body, his mouth turned into a maw full of razor-sharp teeth and his ears grew longer and pointier, like a jackal's. His spine—no *its* spine, for it was no longer human at all—stretched and widened until it could no longer stand upright but had to rest on all fours. Then its nose became a snotty muzzle and its hands turned to paws as well, with long razor-sharp claws.

Once it had finished transforming, it was a beast about the size of a bull, greatly resembling a monstrous hyena, only with a snake-like tongue. It laughed a hideous, reverberating hyena cackle and bared its teeth at them. Then it growled, its hackles raised on end. It could no longer speak but Jack got the message. It wanted to tear them apart. Harriett screamed again. Jack felt his heart stop for a moment in terror, then reluctantly start up again. Then he heard a small crack. It came from the headstone at the base of the oak. He looked at it in the shadows, thinking it must have cracked from their weight. But what he saw could not have been caused by their pressure on the stone, or by anything natural at all.

At the top of the headstone, right in the mouth of the skull and crossbones, a shaft of light was emanating from a tiny opening. With

another crack, accompanied by a frenzied howl by the now much more horrifying skinwearer, the light grew larger.

The monstrous thing was now shrieking non-stop, its head thrashing and arms flailing. It howled and growled and spat as it abandoned its digging and hurled itself toward them over and over, only to be stopped again and again by the invisible barrier.

As Jack and Harriett watched, the light emanating from the tombstone formed a small ball. Then, with another crack, a small silver branch appeared amidst the light. It was almost like a miniature tree. It flashed and tripled in dimension so that it was about the size of a small umbrella. It hovered before them, glowing brilliantly silver for just a moment before the voice at Jack's ear commanded: *Take hold of the Silver Bough and the Way will be opened.* Without question or pause, Jack took Harriett's hand and stretched it out, with his, toward the bough of light.

"Jack, what's happening?" Harriett whispered.

"I don't know, but I just feel this is right."

Jack took hold of the Silver Bough. A wave of overwhelming pleasure rolled up his arm and spread through his entire body. Glittering silver light surrounded them, blocking all view of the cemetery and enfolding them in utter silence. The pleasure mounted as the glittering light increased. Jack closed his eyes to enjoy it and felt

himself being forcefully pulled away, hurtling through the silver light to another place.

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