



"WAKE ME UP INSIDE
CALL MY NAME AND SAVE ME FROM THE DARK"
EVANESCENCE - BRING ME TO LIFE

Riley and Rowan turned twelve on their third birthday. It was a festive occasion, with all of the family gathered at the Brennan farm in Ireland. It was so strange to see Siofra's girls who would turn three the following month, then look at my twins and see twelve year olds. A part of me ached for their lost childhood, but I knew there was no help for it.

Aside from the cake and presents, I noticed that everyone was watching the children as if they were expected to change the instant they turned twelve. They didn't. They enjoyed their birthday, and their presents as if they had no destiny waiting in the shadows to claim them. I think I was the only one glad that they didn't come into their power.

The next day Mac and I decided to take the kids to a winter carnival a few towns over. We thought it would help them to relax, and take them away from the well meaning family who watched them like bugs under a microscope.

We had fun that day, walking through the streets full of lights and games and rides. It felt good to forget everything that had come before, to pretend that we were a normal family with normal kids and just *be*.

After dinner in a warm restaurant, we walked toward a park where a concert had just begun. There were booths and games along the edge of the park, and the kids got it in their heads that they wanted to see what was inside the freak tent, so Mac paid for us all to go in.

The tent seemed larger once we got inside. There were many twists and turns on the path through, with many displays both strange and awful. Some were bogus, I'm sure, but others looked real enough.

Although the kids had stayed close to us all day, something about the freak tent excited them to the point where they got a bit too far ahead for us to see them. Mac and I hurried after them, wanting to keep them in sight just in case. In case of what? Well, in case fate wanted to play a heavy hand.

We could still hear the kids talking and giggling to each other, and at Mac's request Gwrhyr jogged ahead to the next corner. After telling us they were looking at the two headed cow fetus, he began a lecture about Chernobyl and the mutations that grew out of that nuclear accident. I tuned him out, more interested in finding the kids than a science lesson.

And speaking of the fates, one stepped out of the darkness as we began following the wolf. She was about my height, and looked to be close to twenty, although Mac and I both knew it was an illusion. She was wearing jeans and a wool jacket, beneath which I could see lettering on a tee shirt.

"Cormacalister," the girl drawled with a heavy English accent. "Elizabethprudence. Fancy meetin' the two of you here."

"Hardly," Mac replied in a dry voice. "What're you doing skulking in the shadows?"

The fate almost managed to look offended. "Skulking? I found you here, remember? Are you sulking?"

"There's no doubt in my mind, lass, that you were waiting fer us," he told her, waving a hand dismissively. "What does bring you out tonight?"

She tilted her head and smiled at him. "You, of course. Or rather, your family. You didn't think we'd miss this, did you?"

"Miss what?"

She shook her head as if Mac had disappointed her. "You're not still fighting us, are you?"

"No."

Mac looked toward Gwrhyr and his eyes narrowed. When Gwrhyr looked toward where he had just seen the children, I realized that I couldn't hear them any more. "She's trying to distract us," I said in a hard voice as I let go of Mac's hand and sprinted toward the wolf.

"Where did you send them?" Mac asked of the fate.

"To meet their destiny," she replied softly.

I reached Gwrhyr's side and couldn't stop the panic that rocked through me when I couldn't see the kids anywhere. "Mac, they're gone."

The wolf looked up at me. "I said so, didn't I?"

Mac gave Caitlin a demanding look. "Take us to them."

She shook her head. "It's not your destiny, it's theirs. They must face it alone."

I walked quickly back to my husband's side. For real now, I was willing to bet she'd tell us where the kids were if I hit her, but that wasn't the way to deal with Fate. I bit my tongue as Mac took my hand and let him handle the confrontation. For now.

"You would deny us even to see them come into their power?" he demanded angrily. "I have given you all three of my children's youth. Is that not enough?! We won't interfere, you can hide us from their sight, but for the love of the old gods, allow us to see them."

For a long moment she looked first at Mac, then at me. About the time I was ready to take matters in to my own hands, she nodded. A split second later we were no longer standing in the freak show tent.

The floor beneath us was stone, and to one side a rough stone wall arched toward a ceiling that was too far away for us to see in the dim light that seemed to come from nowhere. Caitlin stood on the other side of a low, wide basin of water that seemed to shimmer.

"Where are they?" I demanded.

She waved her hand over the water and it began to move. The water flowed upward, changing until it formed miniature figures of our children. They were standing in what looked like the same

cave we were in, holding hands and looking more frightened than I liked. Amazingly enough they were still standing next to the pedestal holding the two headed cow fetus.

To their credit, neither of them panicked, not even when the light above the fetus began to fade. Gradually the light around them got a little brighter, showing the stone floor at their feet, but nothing else anywhere close to them.

I wondered if we were in the same cave, and how close they were. I knew better than to interfere with the fates, but I also knew I wouldn't be able to stand there and do nothing if my children were in danger.

We watched as the figures standing on the surface of the water looked around. Somehow it gave the illusion of the light above the fetus jar fading, and even as the jar darkened, it began to fade away.

From the scale of things the light around the children reached for about twenty feet in all directions. There was no sign of any walls or ceiling, and the only sound other than their footsteps was the drip of water in the distance.

"Do you feel that?" Riley asked. "Something shinning?"

"Yeah," Rowan replied, pointing. "They're that way."

Almost as one they pulled the knives Mac and I had given them for Yule and began walking cautiously across the stone floor.

"We're in some kind of cave," Riley told his sister, "not that far from the carnival."

"Maybe we can find a way out," she replied softly. "Mom and Dad are probably freaking."

"Mom, anyway," he said with a small smile. "Dad doesn't freak so easy."

Something swooped out of the darkness, crossing in front of the kids and disappearing into the darkness behind them. It didn't look like a person, really, more like some kind of animal and it made me shiver, remembering the spirits that had once cured me of a curse. They exchanged confused glances and continued walking, glancing behind them every once in a while to make sure the creature didn't come back.

"Do you feel that?" Rowan asked after a few minutes.

"It's dark," Riley replied in a low voice. "And full of power, like the other one."

We watched them walk for several minutes, alert for movement all around them. Abruptly they stopped as one and prepared to fight whatever it was coming at them. Riley tried to put Rowan behind him, but she didn't let him, standing between him and whatever it was they felt coming.

A figure appeared at the edge of their circle of light, but it was shaded in darkness, and the closer it came to them, the smaller their area of light became.

"Why do you fear me?" a deep gravelly male voice asked. It sounded like a man, but there was no way to tell in the dimness.

"Who says I'm afraid?" Rowan demanded.

At the same time, Riley asked, "What is it you want?"

"I can smell the fear," the man answered. "I have done nothing to harm you. Why do you fear me?"

"We don't know what you are," Rowan said simply.

"And knowledge is power," Riley added.

By my side, I could see Mac give a small nod.

"I know what you are," the man said confidently.

"I know what you are," a woman's voice said at the same time, pleasant and warm.

Again the children moved as one, jumping to one side so that they wouldn't be flanked by the unseen enemy. While I was happy to see that the lessons we'd given them had been driven home, I wanted to be there with them, to protect them so they wouldn't have to protect themselves, or each other.

A figure in a white robe appeared in the direction the children had been walking. She moved closer at the same pace as the dark figure, and the light continued to shrink, keeping the figures veiled in darkness.

"We are not here to harm you," the woman said kindly.

"You do not need to fear us," the man added.

"Who are you?" Rowan demanded, at the same time that Riley asked, "What are you?"

"I am a guide," the woman replied at the same moment the man replied, "I am Pollux."

"What?" the twins asked the man in unison.

"She asked who I was," he replied reasonably as he stopped about five feet from them and the light stopped shrinking. "I am Pollux."

Riley seemed to understand. "What are you?" he asked of the man, before turning to the woman and saying, "Who are you?"

"I am a guide," the man replied.

"I am Castor," the woman answered.

Rowan looked at the light figure and said, "Castor." Then she turned to the dark figure. "Pollux." Looking between them, she asked, "And you're both guides?"

"Here," he began.

"Tonight," she continued.

"We are your guides," they finished together.

If the situation wasn't so serious, I might have laughed at Rowan's twelve-year-old attitude. "And just what are you supposed to guide us to?" she demanded.

The guides spoke as one. "Your Destiny."

There was a moment of dramatic silence, but it didn't last long. Rowan began to giggle, then outright laugh. Her brother joined in, but somehow managed to speak. "Is that all? Jeeze you had us scared there for a minute." When the guides simply looked at the children, he prompted, "Well? C'mon! Let's go!"

Together the robed figures threw back their hoods, but as they did we could see the figures beneath the fabric shift and change, so that when the cloaks were brushed back they revealed two huge wolves. Pollux was jet black, and Castor pure white. They moved closer and began circling the children.

Rowan made an effort to catch her breath. "Give a sec."

It took a moment, but they managed to pull themselves together for the most part. Finally Riley looked at the wolves and said, "Okay, go."

They were still chuckling as the scenery around them shifted and changed. When it stopped they were standing in an alley littered with trash and broken bottles. They seemed to be standing at a bend in the alley, to their left was a dead end, and to their right was a street. Buildings rose up on either side of them, and one faint light bulb lit the area they were standing in. We could hear the faint sound of cars coming from a nearby street.

The wolves were smaller now than they had been in the cave, but they continued circling the children as they got their bearings.

"This is bad," Riley whispered to Rowan after a moment. "Terrible things have happened here, really horrible. People have died."

"Let's be sure not to join them, okay?" she whispered back.

"We're a long way from the carnival," he told her. "A long way from home."

Their words seemed to signal the wolves, and the black one, Pollux, began leading them away from the dead end. As they moved, the image in water moved, showing us enough of their surroundings for me to recognize them.

My heart froze when I realized where they were. Years ago, in another lifetime, I'd been in that very same alley, with Mac. I'd faced a stranger there, a woman who considered me a monster, and I hadn't been able to force myself to hurt her. If Mac had hesitated even a moment I would have died in that alley. I knew he recognized the place too when he stiffened beside me.

They had reached nearly the exact spot that I remembered when a ghostly figure rose up from the alley floor to hover in front of them, between the kids and Pollux. It was a woman, a very bloody, very transparent woman. It was hard to tell, but I was betting it was the woman Mac had killed to save me.

"This way lies death," she hissed urgently. "Go back."

Neither of them seemed too flustered as they continued after the wolf. The woman moved back as if something was forcing her away from the twins, and while she didn't look happy about it, there seemed nothing she could do.

The wolf looked back to make sure they were coming. The kids hurried to catch up, and they stood at the mouth of the alley with the wolves on either side of them. They paused for a long moment, looking across the street and into the alley on the other side.

"What's going on?" I asked Caitlyn.

"Their guides cannot help them, or tell them what to do," she explained in a kind voice. "They can only show them where they must go."

"In the alley?" Rowan asked suddenly. She looked at her brother. "C'mon."

Together they crossed the road and entered the other alley. It was much like the one they'd left, with lots of trash and little light.

"This is as bad as the other one," Riley muttered.

Rowan took a deep breath through her nose and made a yuk face. "It stinks," she agreed. Her face hardened into an expression of loathing that I'd never seen before, not on her innocent face. I clenched Mac's hand tighter, wishing again that I could stop this, knowing there was no way I could.

As they walked down the alley three figures moved into our view. To one side stood a heavy set man with greasy blond hair that hung past his shoulders. He was standing near one of the alley walls, holding something down close to his leg and watching the other two people.

The second man stood with his back to the twins, struggling with a boy that looked not much older than Riley. The man was tall, with short cropped dark hair and wearing a trench coat that concealed most of his victim from the children, at first. The boy had dark hair like Riley. He was wearing jeans and a t-shirt despite the cold, and a panicked expression. We could hear the boy pleading urgently in German, but the man who held him only laughed, turning the boy so that the kids could see him struggling helplessly.

The man opened his mouth revealing long fangs. The boy screamed and tried harder to get away, but the vampire was too strong. He grabbed a handful of dark hair and yanked the boy's head back to bare his neck. The man standing against the wall looked like he was getting off on the show, and it made me want to kill him myself.

It was strange, having murderous thoughts after all this time, but the boy reminded me so much of Riley, I couldn't stop it. There was also the fact that my children were in the alley with the vampire and his peanut gallery, in serious danger of meeting the same fate as the boy.

My thoughts cut off as Rowan began to change. The sight was not an unfamiliar one, but still it was unsettling to watch our daughter shift and grow until she was over six feet tall, covered with golden hair and the facial features of a wolf. Her clothes fell away, and claws sprouted from her hands.

Riley seemed to be the only one in the alley to notice her change, and while he seemed startled, he was far from surprised. He turned the knife in his hand and threw it as his sister launched herself at the vampire. The boy saw her coming and started screaming again, although his terror could have been from the fangs of the vampire sinking into his neck.

Rowan became a blur of motion, with teeth and claws digging into the vampire, tearing him away from the boy, who fell to the ground and curled into a ball. The vampire tried to fight back, but he didn't have a chance.

I turned and buried my face against Mac's chest as the vampire crumbled to dust. The last time I'd seen a vampire destroyed, Mac had crumbled away in front of me. I couldn't stop the tears from falling any more than I could stop myself from looking again to see what was happening.

Riley had reversed his hold on the knife in his hand and was throwing it toward the heavier man. His aim was true and the blade buried itself in the man's neck to the hilt. The man dropped his gun and fell to his knees clutching at the knife, but he didn't seem to have the strength to pull it out.

Yet it seemed that something inside of him did have strength. A spirit rose from the man's chest, looking nothing like the body it had come from. It didn't look happy. Riley held up his hand and the spirit stopped several feet away as if it had come up against a wall.

The man Riley had stabbed fell to his side, his hand creeping toward the gun but falling short as his life bled away. The boy was still in a fetal position on the ground, shaking as the spirit screamed its frustration. It tried to get around Riley, but he moved to protect both the boy on the ground and his sister.

When Rowan spoke her voice was deep and rough and barely understandable. "Who? What?"

"Damn you," the spirit shrieked, obviously pissed off that he couldn't get to his victim. "The boy is mine!"

"Why do you want him?" she demanded in that guttural voice.

"He is mine," it screamed, trying to get closer, but held back by Riley's will. "He belongs to me! Victor paid good money for a taste, you've destroyed my client!"

Riley kept his hand up and started whispering, chanting really. I didn't understand what he was doing, but Mac seemed pleased. After a moment he barked a quick "Now" to his sister, and she attacked, striking the spirit with her claws and sending it reeling backward, screaming.

Now Riley raised his hands and called upon ancient warriors to aide them. Chills raced down my spine as his voice rang out through the dark alley.

"I call upon Cormac MacArt to stand before me and bring his wisdom to us," he said clearly. I found it fitting that he called upon a hero that shared his father's name. "I call upon Fionn MacCumhal to stand on my right and fight in our stead. I call upon Guaire to stand behind me and protect us here within this circle. I call upon Laeg to stand on my left and guide this spirit into the other world. About me stand the heroes of legend, the warriors and guides of old!"

There was something moving at the edges of the scene we were seeing, something that almost looked human, and yet didn't. Fionn MacCumhal caught the spirit by the throat as he tried to escape and while Cormac MacArt looked at my son.

"What would you have us do with this creature?" he asked.

"Banish it," Riley instructed.

Four voices raised in unison, speaking in Gaelic while the spirit screamed to be released. The wind began to rise in the alley, whipping their hair about but not touching the legendary figures that stood upon the quarters of the circle. After a few minutes a shadow Fionn threw the spirit at Laeg, who caught him easily even as the spirit fought to escape. A shadow rose from the ground at Laeg's feet, rising up to encircle the spirit, pulling it, dragging it down until nothing was left but its screams echoing away into the night.

Cormac looked once more to my son. "What would you ask of us now?"

Riley's words made him seem much older than he was, older even than he appeared to be. "With our gratitude, go in peace." With a smile and a whirl of wind around the circle, the heroes left, returning to wherever he had called them from.

Rowan slowly shifted back to human form, and Riley handed her his coat to cover her nakedness. Together they calmed the boy while the wolves circled around them, watching. Rowan was able to heal the vampire bite on his throat with a simple touch. The boy spoke in German, and although they couldn't understand his words, his heartfelt thanks were clear enough.

Not long after, the wolves moved in closer. The children said their goodbyes to the boy they'd saved, and turned to go. With their next step the images on the surface of the water disappeared and I bit my lip to stop from crying out.

"Are they coming back here?" Mac demanded.

"Dad!" Riley called from the darkness around us.

"They approach even now," Caitlin replied.

We heard footsteps running quickly toward us and I dashed my tears away before rushing to meet them, catching them both in my arms and trying to make sure they were all right. Mac caught up but a moment later, laying his coat around Riley's thin shoulders and taking us all into his arms. I hid my tears of relief in Rowan's hair and thanked all of the gods I had never believed in that my children were safe.

"You did well, Rileyjames, son of Cormacalister," Caitlyn's voice rang out strong through the cave, echoing from the distant walls. "You did well, Rowankaylee, daughter of Elizabethprudence."

We turned to face her with the children between us. "What happens now?" Riley asked, glancing between Mac and the fate.

"Now, you go home. Enjoy what's left of your childhood. You have much to learn." She smiled and the darkness started closing in on us, leaving us in a pool of light. "As it was for your parents, so shall it be for you," she said as she faded into the darkness. "Remember that your love will be a light to guide you when all seems lost."

A moment later we were standing in the freak tent once more, looking at the two headed cow fetus. The excitement of the fair seemed stale compared to the adventure the children had just gone through, and we drove back to the farm to share the news of their awakening.

The next week was spent at the farm finishing out our Christmas vacation. It was an exciting week for the kids as they spent time with various members of the family. Riley was often with his grandfather at the point or just walking the property. Other times he sat with his grandmother and Corrine in front of the fireplace studying. Rowan ran free across the land, exploring her new forms and playing tag with Angus and Cara. Stephen took her into the umbra so they could speak with spirits. Their preoccupation left Mac and I with alone time to relax, enjoying Ireland in the winter, and each other.