

Trouble

The Changeling and the Phooka

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The cold rain fell steadily. It ran down Edmund's neck... and he was grateful for it.

It was all he had to hide in.

Red-coated soldiers were sweeping the stony field, bayonets fixed. He knew they'd kill him without pause or question if they caught him here. The British were nervous, here in the Wicklow Mountains. General Holt and the United Irishmen had made them so.

The message he had inside his shirt would get him executed even if they didn't kill him out of hand, Edmund knew. And there were more lives riding on this than his. Right now all he cared about was his survival.

And then, through the rain, came the sound of an old woman's cracked and tuneless singing. Edmund could not quite hear the words of the song but he heard a soldier shouting at her. „What are you doing here, you old besom?“

She answered in the same sing-song lilt... in English, which was surprising in itself. „I'm pickin' nettles, boy.“

„Well, go pick your nettles elsewhere,“ said the soldier crossly. „We're searching for a fugitive. Get along with you.“

„It could be a clever disguise, Sergeant,“ said another voice.

„Not unless he's shrunk,“ said the first. „She's not even five foot tall. What's in the basket, old woman?“

„Now why would I be after telling you, you red-coated rogue?“ she answered crossly. „Pestering old Annis, when all I am after is some greens to fill my stomach.“

„Better search it,“ said the sergeant.

„Ill fortune will come to you,“ said the old woman. „Ill fortune. You was warned, boy. Search old Annis's basket, indeed.“

There was the sound of a blow... and Edmund realized that luck had favored him... if not the old woman. He began creeping slowly towards the soldiers' voices—if he could get past them while they were busy...

He froze at the sound of a sharp intake of breath, followed by a curse.

„I told you I was a-picking young nettles, boy,“ said the old woman, with a cackle of glee. „And you didn't listen.“ Edmund crept on. He could see them vaguely through the grey mist of rain. All he needed was a few more yards to be past them.

„Tip them out,“ said the sergeant.

„Me food in the mud! You're a cruel, hard man, soldier. Ill fortune will be comin' your way.“

There was a thump. „There was something in there! Ouch. It's a damned hedgehog.“

„A stickly-pig I caught for my dinner,“ said the old woman. „Let go o' me. I needs to bag it again before it gets away.“

Edmund crept on. With any luck he could be through their cordon now, thanks to the old woman, her nettles and hedgehog, and the noise she was making about it. He reached the dry-stone wall bordering the field. On the other side of that was the pike road, and eventually Dublin, and a house he had to reach.

He gathered himself to climb over it... to freeze for the sound of near-tuneless humming. Coming closer, obviously someone walking down the roadway.

The unseen person stopped next to his hiding place. „You can come out now, Princeling. They'll not be coming back down here,“ said the old woman. „Feeling in Black Annis's basket,“ she chuckled darkly. „It's lucky they'll be not to find their own bones in it.“

Edmund didn't move. And, next thing, she vaulted over the top of the wall, as spry as a goat, to land next to him, in a flurry of black petticoats. Edmund found himself being stared at by black eyes, set in face full of wrinkles surrounded by

wild grey hair. She smiled at him. It was not a kind or nice smile, but full of snagged teeth. „Well, Princeling? Are you going to lie here and shiver all day? They'll get over the mazing I've laid on them.“

„Who are you? What do you want?“ asked Edmund, warily.

„I'm Black Annis, Princeling, and I was sent to find you. Sent to give you your birthright. So you can go home to the shoulder mounds, Princeling.“

„I'm not going home. You can tell my mother...“ He should have guessed who she was from by the „Princeling“. His nursery-maid had called him that. It was better than „Changeling“, that the other servants and, yes, even his mother had called him, sometimes. He couldn't help being dark when she and his father were both blond.

Black Annis sniggered. „Not that woman, Princeling. I was sent by your father.“

„He's dead, old woman,“ said Edmund. Remembering still hurt, terribly. They'd made him watch while they half-hanged his father. He'd been ten years old, then. His father had been a man of strong principles, but those hadn't kept him alive.

She positively cackled at that. „You could say so, Princeling. You could say so. But he sent this to you.“ And she drew with a wrinkled old hand—with long black nails, he noticed—a jewel from her bosom.

At least, he thought it must be a jewel. It sparkled and shimmered oddly, as if it had a light within it, changing color like no precious stone he'd ever seen. It was attached to a sinuous silver chain, the links of which were so fine they seemed to flow as she picked it up and held it out to him. „Take it, son of King Finnvarra. Take your key and go home.“

It drew him. There was something terribly compelling about its shimmer. And something utterly terrifying. He reached for it, and then pulled his hand back. It was hard to say, but he said it. „Sorry. It's not me you're looking for.“ His father had been a solidly Anglo-Irish Baronet, a man who died for his belief in an Irish Union, not „Finvarra“ whoever that was. It was tempting just to take the jewel, but he could not. It would be a betrayal. He had no idea what the jewel was worth, but it looked as if it would buy a lot of muskets. The rebels could use those. They could use just about everything.

„Oh, it's you all right, Princeling. Your phooka-servant, lazy thing that he is, led me to you, straight and true.“ She tipped her basket and a black hedgehog rolled out with a bump, and landed against his foot.

It uncurled slowly and looked at him. It had odd eyes...

She kicked it and it curled up again. „And ill luck the phooka will bring you, if you use it for your own ends. That's the curse a changeling wears.“ She was clearly mad, Edmund realized. Suddenly, she thrust the jewel into his hand. „Take it to Cnoc Meadha, changeling. Your father waits... And I do not.“

And before he could hand it back, she was gone. He looked around frantically. But the only sign of her having been there was the jewel, and the small black hedgehog, nuzzling at his foot. He drew breath to call out, to say he couldn't take it, and then realized that he was still very close to British soldiers, searching for a rebel. She must have jumped the wall again. So he scrambled over the wet rock himself, and into the lane.

But there was nothing to be seen there, just grey curtains of rain. Edmund stood for a moment in indecision, and then heard a soldier swear—in English, so it had to be a soldier somewhere in the field. Panicking, he ran.

After a half a mile he was completely blown, but he felt safe enough to take shelter under a roadside blackthorn hedge and pant. There'd be other checkpoints, but he was safely past that one now. He looked down. He still had the jewel clutched tight in his hand. It was on a chain, he could put it around his neck... but something about it made him reluctant to do so. He decided it would be safe enough in the pocket of his coat.

He stuck his hand into the pocket of his overcoat, and pulled it out in a hurry. „Ouch!“

He had thrust his hand onto a hedgehog, which had somehow, mysteriously, got into his pocket. A pink-grey nose whiffled at him. „How did you get in there?“ Edmund exclaimed.

„It seemed easier than to be running after you,“ answered the hedgehog in a burring gravelly voice.

Edmund sat down, hard, in the mud in the shallow ditch, trying to get away from his own pocket. His life had made some kind of sense up to this point. Maybe what had happened to him had been horrible and harsh, but it made sense. This did not.

The hedgehog obliged him by wriggling its way out of his pocket. It had very strange eyes for hedgehog, and it was more black than grey. But it was a hedgehog.

„What are you?“ asked Edmund, nervously. „I... I thought I heard you speak.“

„I only speak when spoken to,“ said the hedgehog. „I am your phooka. I am bidden to serve you, Prince.“

„Look, there is some mistake. I need to return this thing. It's not me you're looking for. I'm just...“ he hesitated. No point in telling even this... hedgehog his name. „Edmund.“

„It's not by your name I know you, Prince, but your blood. I could find you were you buried under one of a thousand haystacks, master. Your blood draws me.“

Edmund wondered if the creature planned to get it out of his veins. It was no hedgehog, of that he was sure. He needed to get away from here, away from it. He had a task to do. They needed relief. They needed arms and they needed money. „It's this jewel, isn't it? I don't think I want anything to do with it. Or you.“

„I don't either, Prince. But you are my geas. And thus I am bound to serve you. I'd rather be out and about, causing trouble,“ said the phooka.

Edmund remembered, finally, what a phooka was, from the stories that the housemaids had told him as a child. They'd believe anything and had expected him to, too. It was a fairy, and a shape-changer, but always black. Well, that fitted. If he remembered it right... not actively malevolent, but fond of practical jokes, quite nasty ones. Appearing as swaybacked old ponies and offering the unsuspecting a ride... and after a wild ride which had the victim clinging on for dear life, flinging them into a bog or lake.

This was all beginning to feel like one of those jokes, especially the nasty part. Lately it seemed his life had all been that. He'd left his home and mother with a lot of dreams. Nightmares, they'd turned out to be. He could never forget his father,

or the reprisals at Scullabogue barn. „Do you want this thing?“ he asked suddenly, of the black hedgehog that was watching him with un-hedgehog-like eyes.

„What would I be doing with such a thing, Prince? I am a part of the company of air and darkness, whether I like it or not. It's of no value to me.“

„Is it valuable?“ asked Edmund. It looked it.

The phooka gave a sardonic little chuckle. „More so than any other jewel above the hollow lands. A Prince's ransom, you might say. Some would say that it was still not worth having.“

Edmund bit his lip. „So could I sell it?“ It would be for a good cause, at least.

The phooka gave a little snort. „It's a key. There are always those that search for that door.“

Something about that tone made Edmund wary, but not as wary as the sound of horses' hooves coming down the lane—riders at a brisk trot. The thick blackthorn hedge on either side of the lane offered no hiding place and no way through into the field. The ditch was too shallow to offer cover. „Oh help! I need to get out of here.“

„Is it of me that you're asking, or the blackthorn?“ asked the phooka.

Edmund was too busy scrambling to his feet, trying to decide whether to try clambering over the high thorn hedge or to take to his heels, to reply.

„Likely the blackthorn then, son of Finvarra. A mistake, if you ask me,“ said the phooka. „Bloody war, strife and death in the blackthorn. Well, by oak, ash and thorn, so be it.“

The little woven gate in the dense hedge swung open and Edmund didn't think twice about what the hedgehog-phooka had said. He just bolted through it and pulled it closed behind him.

It led him into... not the field beyond, but into a space inside the thorny branches, a sort of bower. Not a very large bower—a thorn scratched a bleeding gash on his hand as he reached back to free his overcoat from a thorny branch. It seemed to be closing in on him.

„You have your blood-payment, Luantishee,“ said the phooka's gravelly voice.

„There's more in him,“ someone answered.

Edmund turned...and scratched himself again, and looked into the beautiful face of a black-haired girl, a quarter his size, but with a maturity in her sloe-dark eyes that did not go with her size.

„But it is given to me to serve him, Luantishee,“ said the phooka. „And fire and mischief are in my gift.“

„And if you scratch me again,“ said Edmund, „I'll take out my knife and start scratching back.“

She gave a sour grunt, but held off from stabbing Edmund with the bloody black thorn in her hand. Instead she looked at him with narrowed eyes. Not knowing quite what else to do Edmund stared back. Eventually she said: „What do you want, changeling? It's too late to burn the blackthorn twigs on your father's mound. The child you were changed for is dead, for you to be called home. Humans love faerie, but do not thrive there.“

„Um. I just wanted to hide. It must be a patrol. There's supposed to be a curfew.“

„Oh yes, child of Finvarra. They hunt you.“ She drew a pattern with the bloody thorn in the dirt, four stripes with one crossing them. „Straif,“ she said pointing at the symbol with her thorn. „Hear me. There will be bloody havoc, war and wounding across the land. Division and death. A hundred years of it.“ There was dark glee in her voice.

„Luantishee. Morrigan’s children. They’re always a bundle of joy,“ said the Phooka, kicking the symbol and grinding it out. „I’ll leave you to your thorns and happiness, Luantishee.“ He looked up at Edmund. „The soldiers have gone. She’s had her blood payment, invoked her magic, and had her fun. Let’s go, Prince.“

„Uh, how?“ The way he’d come in had vanished. And she would get her wish and bleed him to death if he tried to push his way out. At the very least he’d rip his clothes apart.

„Oh, just show her your blade. She has no liking for cold steel, and doesn’t want her trees cut or burned,“ said the phooka.

The sloe-dark eyes of the Launtishee were angry, but she had retreated back among the thorny branches. They bent away from her, and Edmund hastily followed, before they bent back.

„Leave me alone, changeling child,“ she snapped.

„Happily. Just let me out.“

She made a growling noise in her throat, but the branches parted, and Edmund rushed past her. He didn’t quite know what had happened to his life, but he didn’t want any more strangeness. Reality had been hard enough to cope with.

And a few moments later he realized that life hadn’t got any easier. She hadn’t put him out into the lane, but into the field beyond. There was a withy gate, of course. But there was a large flock of white geese between him and it. They were already waddling toward him, honking and hissing, necks outstretched in outrage.

„She’s always a vindictive old crone,“ said the phooka... who abruptly was no longer a hedgehog, but a swaybacked old pony. Black, of course, and still with the strange eyes. „You could ride on me. You’d be safe.“

Edmund was off-balance from the happenings of the last little while, but not that off-balance. „No fear. I know your reputation. Just stop pestering me.“

But he was too busy fending off the attacking geese to see if the phooka-pony had listened.

And then it got worse. The owner of the geese, a stout farmer with a blackthorn shillelagh came at a panting run to see what had upset his geese. „You thieving young rogue,“ he yelled, not waiting for any explanation, but joining his geese in the attack.

Edmund had no choice but to run, the geese and fat farmer after him. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the sway-backed pony whickering with wicked laughter.

While they were chasing him, the phooka kicked open the gate, and the geese lost interest in chasing Edmund and streamed towards the gate—the farmer in hot pursuit, swearing and yelling. The phooka was actually rolling—as a pony might, but making noises which sounded more like it was choking. Edmund didn’t wait to find out—he ran out of the gate too, into the lane, in opposite direction to the geese and the farmer.

Fortunately, that was the direction he needed to go. Once he was around the bend, he stopped running and tried to compose himself, walking. At least the rain had eased up for a bit.

He still had the jewel, clutched in his fist. So he put it in his overcoat pocket and tried to think what to do next. The original plan of passing as a young Anglo-Irish gentleman—which was what he had been, before he'd joined in the rebellion—and catching the mail coach to Dublin hadn't involved getting grass-stains on his knees and rips in his overcoat, to say nothing of the mud and blood.

Besides, it seemed that they were looking for him. Informers and traitors were everywhere. He was tired, damp, and evening was coming on. It wasn't winter yet, but some of the leaves were starting to turn. Shelter, a chance to clean up, and to decide on what course he should follow was what he needed now. He just didn't have very much money. A cottage, a bit of water... well, the best he could see was a stone byre with a turf roof. Perhaps there'd be a cottage beyond. He'd no sooner stepped inside the gate than he heard the thudding of hooves again. It could be the phooka... but he didn't want it either, so he stepped inside the empty byre.

It had a small gap between the stones where the moss-chinking had fallen out that he could peer out of. It wasn't much of a view but it did allow him to see the white-over-red horse-hair plumes of the Fifth Dragoon Guards—and hear what they said. „That fat old fool farmer said he'd run this way, but there's no sign of him, Jim.“

„Ach, it's another quarter mile to the cross. He'd have to have run like the wind to get there, but we'd better check. Then we'll come back and search. The rest of boys will walk up, and we'll have him between us.“

They rode on, and Edmund hastily began to look for escape, or a hiding place. But there was nothing. Beyond the byre was open commonage, and not even a nearby copse to hide in. On the far side of the byre there was a narrow gap into which some fence-hurdles had been thrust to keep them from the weather. There might be space for him there.

As he tried to push into it a sleepy gravelly phooka voice from his pocket said: „Have a care, Prince. You nearly squashed me.“

Unwarily he put his hand to the pocket, and got his fingers prickled again. „You! What are you doing here?“

„Resting. Using my magics even on the minds of geese is hard work in full daylight. Do you need help, Prince?“

„Every time you *help* things gets worse. The farmer told the soldiers,“ said Edmund, torn between anger and fear.

„Ah, that is the curse of being half-human, Prince,“ said the phooka. „The price of your soul. Magic for yourself will be turned against you. It is the way of faerie magics and humans. By the way, I pushed the key down into the lining of your coat. It'll be safer there, and it was uncomfortable for me to lie against.“

„I don't care about your comfort! They'll kill me if they catch me. Or torture me.“

„Now a bit of comfort would be a generous reward for a servant who has worked so hard to help you,“ said the phooka. „Not as much as fine ale or strong poteen, but surely deserved, for the hard work of misleading the farmer and his geese.“

Suddenly suspicious, despite the situation, but noticing the change in his tone and remembering the gleeful rolling phooka, Edmund said: „You liar. You enjoyed that.“

„Tis a truth. I did,“ admitted the phooka. „Not that I enjoyed the Luantishee, mind. She was dangerous. And I broke her binding of you. That was some of your blood she used in the ogham. A black curse indeed that would have been. She wanted you for her tool in this bloody war.“

„What?“

„Straif. The ogham. The symbol she drew. It’s a kenning for blood. And a kenning for the Blackthorn. Dark magic, Prince. Dark fortellings. The banshee foretells death, the Luantishee, strife, damage and pain. You got out lightly. And now I hear the dragoons a-coming.“

„I have to hide!“ Edmund pushed at the gap—but there was no way he’d fit into it.

„They’ll see your track on the grass, anyway, Prince,“ said the phooka, who had by now ambled out of his pocket, a black hedgehog looking at his efforts, with unholy amusement.

Looking back Edmund could see the truth of this—his muddy tracks on the wet grass were painfully obvious.

„I need to get clear. I have a message to deliver to Dublin.“

„So it is for others that you need to do this?“ asked the phooka.

„Well, they’ll kill me. And take your precious jewel,“ said Edmund, incurably truthful, looking around for any way to escape. Perhaps he could jump into the lane while they looked in the byre?

The phooka blurred and grew. And became the little shaggy black swaybacked pony with phooka eyes. „You could ride. It’s not easy to be catching the phooka.“

„I heard a voice,“ said someone in the lane.

Edmund had no time for second thoughts and scrambled hurriedly onto the phooka’s back. Of course he could ride, but bareback, with no stirrups or reins?

He didn’t need them. He could have used a saddle to cling to, instead of the Phooka’s mane. It wasn’t a horse, no matter what it looked like.

It just stood there, waiting, as Edmund dug his heels in and yelled at it to run. The first Dragoon came through the gate, the man stared, and started laughing at them.

That, plainly, had been what the Phooka had been waiting for. It jumped like a scalded cat, from a standing start, onto the sod roof, leaped across that and between two more Dragoons. And then the chase was on.

The Phooka was definitely the least comfortable thing Edmund had ever ridden. It was more like bestriding a drop of water on a hot oiled griddle than riding. All he could do was cling on for grim death.

It was also, plainly, teasing the dragoons. It would let them almost catch up, before leaping sideways over a stone wall—and then slowing to an amble while the Dragoons found a gate. Then it lead them at a breakneck gallop down the field, letting them almost catch up before skittering sideways in a way that no polo-pony could, let alone a heavy cavalry horse. The phooka had one soldier fall at the next fence. Edmund felt it was nearly him off too, but he seemed stuck to the phooka’s back. They careered wildly through the slashing bushes and trees of a small wood.

One of the Dragoons managed a shot at them, but it was hopelessly wild, even if it made Edmund hunch down desperately. That was just as well, because the phooka had led them into a boggy, reedy, swampland, and was lofting hoof-loads of mud at the Dragoons. With a whicker of derisive phooka laughter, it let them nearly catch up, before leaping prodigiously into a swaying thicket of reed, higher than Edmund's head. There were a couple of wild shots again, but plainly the Dragoons had no idea what they were shooting at, seeing as Edmund could see their backs as they struggled on. There were two now. The Phooka had circled around them, and was waiting again. „Go. Let's just get away,“ begged Edmund.

„Best if we leave them down and their horses scattered,“ said the phooka. „Besides, black mud goes well on their uniforms.“

And he seemed to make sure that they were covered in it.

Eventually, when the last man had fallen into a stream, and the phooka had chased his tired horse off, Edmund expected the phooka to stop.

It just kept going into the dusk, not by lanes or the coach-road, but by jumping hedges and walls, through fields of grain, bogs, rough grazing. It was seemingly tireless.

„When are we going to stop?“ gasped Edmund through rattling teeth.

„It's Dublin you wanted to reach, and now in the twilight and nightfall, 'tis easiest for me.“

„That's... impossible.“

„Not for the phooka.“

Edmund might have argued, but he was hard pressed to breathe, let alone talk.

It ended, much, much later, as riding a phooka always did, in the mud. By then Edmund was almost too exhausted to care, and actually quite grateful to have a soft landing. He just lay still for a while. Eventually, he pulled himself up. The sky was paling and the phooka was standing, patiently, looking at him. „Why did you do this to me?“ Edmund asked, plaintively. Every bit of him hurt.

„You asked to me to bring you to Dublin. We are less than a mile from the city's outskirts,“ said the phooka. Even in the dim light Edmund could see it that was grinning, a very un-horse-like grin.

„Yes, but you didn't have to throw me into the mud!“

„It is traditional. And how else would a human—even a half-human alight?“

„You enjoyed that. You could have just stopped.“

The phooka shook its shaggy head. „I am your servant, by the geas laid on me by your father, King Finvarra. But I remain a phooka. It is my nature. I'd say the king bore a grudge against your mother. She was a human, but very wild. The king philanders, but does not tolerate it in his lovers.“

„Look, this is all a terrible mistake. I know who my father was. I miss him... terribly.“ It hurt enough to crack his voice, still.

„Do you share the visage of this man?“ asked the Phooka, his gravelly voice strangely gentle.

Innate honesty forced Edmund to say no. He hated doing so, felt it a betrayal—but it had been said, often enough. Mostly in Irish by the servants. Most of them assumed his mother had, somehow, had him from another man. „But it happens. I don't have to look like him. He was... a true father to me. I loved him. I won't believe it.“

„Believe it or no, you were changed as babe. Taken into the best house the fair folk could find, near at hand to Cnoc Meadha, the shoulder mound of the king of Faerie, of the endless green fields of Mag Mell. The one you were changed for is dead, as the Luantishee said, not to be summonsed by the rites and burning of blackthorn twigs. So now, you can return.“

A part of Edmund wanted to say that he did not believe any of this. But... he'd ridden the phooka.

„And it's further that we are now from the mound. But you have the key. Transact your business and I can transport you. I will even try just to stop, if you order it, although, yes, it was my small pleasure, my reward for the service I rendered,“ said the phooka.

Edmund sighed. „I'm so tired I can't think.“

„There is a barn you could sleep in,“ said the phooka. „It'll be some time before anyone is about, barring the watchmen.“

So Edmund followed the creature, and found some hay and lay down and slept. He had no idea for how long, but when he finally awoke a streak of dusty sunlight was coming in through a hole in the roof. So he got up. He was not surprised to find there was a lump in his overcoat. A lump that snored and had prickles. The phooka seemed to like being a hedgehog.

Dublin was busy. It was back to commerce as usual with the rebellion here, suppressed. The streets were full of everyone from lavender-sellers to coal-men—and soldiers, rather too many of them, and gentry and their children escorted by maids or governesses. Last time Edmund had been there, he'd been one of them. It all seemed quite normal, but Edmund got a constant feeling of tension. Of people watching each other. Of sidelong glances.

Getting to his destination wasn't easy either. He had only a child's knowledge of the city, and that did not include the address he sought. And people were reluctant to give him directions.

That could have been the fear. Or the mud. Edmund had done his best to clean up at the shabby inn he'd stopped at to break his fast. It had been very run-down and dirty itself, but the better one he'd tried at, earlier, had turned him away from the door.

By now he was tired and despondent, and all the noise and chaos of the busy city after the silences of the Wicklow Hills was hard. Eventually he muttered to himself. „They're all scared. They won't tell me anything.“

„Then ask those who they fear,“ said the phooka.

Thinking about it, it was a remarkably good idea, Edmund realized. The soldiery on the streets would not expect someone they were looking for to ask directions from them.

It worked, and after some more walking he found the house, a tall double-storied one on a respectable square.

The stout housemaid who answered the door said: „Get lost yer filthy bhoy.“

„I've a message for Master Colby!“

„He's not seein' anyone. Now get off me clean step before I throw you off it.“ And she slammed the door in his face.

Edmund stared at it, dejected. To have come so far, and to fail!

He must have said something about it, because the phooka said: „Give me the count of twenty, knock, and I'll give her something to chase, and you can slip inside,“ and as it said it, it slipped from his pocket. Only it wasn't a hedgehog by the time it landed on the cobbles. It was a skinny-shanked, spiky-haired, feral-looking black cat, with phooka eyes. And it ran off up the street. Edmund counted to twenty, slowly. He was so absorbed in this that he barely noticed the yowling, shouting, barking chaos in the street. He knocked. Then knocked harder. She flung the door open. „You again! Be off or...“ She never had time to finish that statement, because the phooka cat darted between her legs and down the passage—closely followed by what seemed like half the dogs in Dublin—some of them were being chased by their owners. The dogs bowled her over, and ran into the house barking furiously. The housemaid scrambled to her feet yelling and running after them. Edmund stepped inside, and edged down the passage. Now he'd probably be taken for a thief instead. He stepped inside the first door, trying to decide what to do next...

Only to be met by slight, academic looking man, with a pince-nez balanced on his long nose, who was plainly coming to see what the noise was about. To his shock Edmund realized that he recognized the man—but he'd been younger and more cheerful looking back then. „Good Lord! Young Edmund Carroll! You were in short-coats last I saw you, but I remember your face. Are they chasing you?“ He sounded very worried by that.

„Er. No sir. Some dogs and... a cat got in.“ Edmund decided that explaining a phooka was not going to help.

„Oh. That's a relief. Informers seem to be everywhere,“ he said going to the door and carefully latching it. „What brings you here, my boy? I was very distressed to hear about your father. A good man.“

Edmund swallowed, found himself unable to speak, past the lump in his throat. Eventually he managed. „Message. From General Holt.“

The man looked terrified and glanced around as if he expected to find an informer hiding under the table or listening at the window. Edmund drew the now dirty envelope out of the secret pocket in his shirt and handed it over.

There was a lightness about doing that.

The man read it. Looked at him. „Do you have any idea what this says?“ he asked, peering at Edmund over top of his eye-glasses.

„No, sir. I know things are bad, sir. The English press us hard.“

The man walked over the fire-place and inserted the letter into it, and watched it burn. „The end of our hopes, boy,“ he said, sadly. „Joseph Holt asked me to see if I could get you away to France, or even America. He doesn't think they can hold much longer. Things are at a dire pass, unless someone comes to our aid.“

He sighed. „Nothing more can be expected from France, and our resources are nearly exhausted. I'll try to get you aboard the DARROWAY. She claims to be going to the Lowlands, but in truth her captain has carried others to and from France. But I fear she's being watched. I knew your father well. It's what he would have wanted for you.“

Edmund bit his lip. He'd been out there, dodging patrols, fighting the guerilla war in the mountains. He knew the desperation, and how short they were of everything. „Sir. If... if we could raise money could that help?“

„It is money that feeds those who inform against us,“ said the man, grimly. „But there is little left to us.“

Edmund took off his overcoat. He was unsurprised, by now, to find a small hedgehog had somehow ended up in the pocket. He moved it carefully, hiding it in the folds, and reached down into the lining until his hand found the odd cool of the jewel. He drew it out. „Would this help?“

The man peered at it. „How extraordinary! I’ve never seen anything quite like it. What is it?“

„I don’t know. But I have been told that it is very valuable. The most valuable stone in all Ireland, worth a prince’s ransom.“

The man blinked. Stared at it again. „It certainly looks as if it should be. I would have to ask someone... I really have to go and consult with McNally about this. In his profession he would possibly know someone who could sell it. I could take it to him.“

Edmund found himself clutching the silver chain. „Uh. No. I can’t let it go. Maybe I can take it... or you could bring someone here.“

His involuntary host nodded. „But I’d better hide you, young man. I don’t even want my people to know you’re here.“ He took Edmund to a panel on the far side of the room, and pressed a boss to the side of it. It slid open revealing a small room with a bench and little else. „I will get you some food and drink. I’m sorry it’s so Spartan.“

„It’s safe, and warm and dry,“ said Edmund gratefully.

„There is a small hole which allows you to see out. I will bring a candle. Perhaps something to read?“

Soon Edmund was left to his own devices in the secret hidey-hole—with some good beef and a mug of porter. Sitting there he felt the phooka squirm in his pocket. „I don’t suppose you’d like some beef and porter,“ he asked, more out of politeness than anything else.

„Beef, no. Porter, yes,“ said the phooka in his burring voice. „It is an appropriate reward. Pour a little out on the bench for me.“

So in the candle-light Edmund ate, and saw the Phooka snuffle up the little puddle of beer.

The warmth, the security, and the porter had him doze off, until the screaming, yelling and breaking started. Peering through the hole, Edmund saw a group of soldiers, and several rather more sinister looking men coming in through the broken-down door to the parlor. „The hiding place should be this room. He is not to be removed until we find this *vast diamond*,“ said a grim-faced officer.

Edmund felt, in horror, for his only hope, the phooka.

It wasn’t there. Neither was the candle.

As the men were feeling and tapping their way around the paneled walls, there was a sudden and terrified yell from down the hall: „Fire! FIRE!“

„See what that’s about,“ snapped the officer to the soldier at the doorway. The soldier stepped out—and came straight back in. „The place is an inferno, sir! Out, we have to get out!“

Frantically, Edmund tried to join them. Better caught than burned. But the panel refused to budge and there was no one to hear his yelling and banging.

Except the phooka, who came in as a horse in a house, and a very amused looking one at that.

„Let me out,“ yelled Edmund. „The place is on fire!“

The phooka calmly kicked the panel open. „Not to worry, Prince. It’s something of an illusion. Merely the candle-flame. We can go out of the back door.“

Edmund was too stunned—and half-terrified out of his wits—to do more than follow the phooka, as they walked out of the kitchen, and down to the little alley along the back of the square. It was already nearly dusk, out there. Once they were well clear: the phooka said: „Where now, Prince?“

It was a hard question.

„I can take you to Cnoc Meadha,“ suggested the phooka. „To your father, the king.“

Edmund bit his lip. Shook his head. It might be true by blood, but he knew who his father was, and it was not this King of Faerie. It seemed important, now to do what his real father had wanted, as best as possible. „I need to get onto a ship down at the docks. She may be watched. In France... well, I can try to sell this jewel and try to support the dream of my father... the man who loved me and raised me, not Finvarra.“

„Your wish,“ said the phooka, „is of course my command.“ But he seemed pleased about this and did not try to talk Edmund out of it.

In the dusk they arrived at the quayside, the darkening sky pricked with masts and spars. Somehow the phooka had become a pocket-dwelling hedgehog again. The lamp-lighters were busy, and stevedores and draymen were too, finishing up their day. One of them told Edmund where to find the DARROWAY. „There she is. That two-masted packet.“ The stevedore took a quick glance around, „But you’d want to be careful son. She’s bein’ watched.“ And he walked off, hastily in the opposite direction.

So Edmund approached the little ship very cautiously. He spotted one man, sitting in the shadows on some crates. But there might be others. He found himself a spot between some empty salt-fish barrels and settled to watch.

The phooka inevitably asked what he was doing. „Waiting for a chance to sneak onto that ship.“

„A ship that will take you away from the green lands. I have never been on one of those,“ said the phooka, curiously. „What are they like?“

„I don’t know. I’ve never been on one either.“

„I will go and see how it might be done,“ said the phooka, slipping out of his pocket.

„Not a lot of hedgehogs around here,“ commented Edmund.

„I shall choose a suitable form.“

But it was as a hedgehog that he returned, nuzzling at Edmund’s foot. „The ships are watched. But if you’d put me in your pocket and go to the boozing ken up yonder alley, it can be arranged. Just buy the men there some rum and take a hot glass with them in return. They’ll be willing to help.“

That would be easier than sitting in cold. And he still had some money which he’d not spent on the mail coach, thought Edmund.

It was dirty little place, smelling of rum, urine and unwashed sailors. The men were a rough looking trio too. But they were willing to let him buy them a drink.

* * * * *

And that was the last he remembered, until he woke and muzzily said: „Where am I?“

„You said you wanted to be on board the ship,“ said the almost entirely black cat, bar the white blaze on its chest. A cat with the odd eyes of the phooka. They seemed more natural on a cat, than they had on a hedgehog or a horse.

„Yes,“ said Edmund, with a groan. „Oh, my head. How did I get here?“

„I'd believe that the right description is that you've been pressed.“

„Pressed?“ asked Edmund.

„Into service, as they say,“ said the phooka.

„You mean... I am part of the crew?“

„Yes. They thought you were older and larger than you are. A small glamor.“

„I think I am going to die,“ he said, as floor he was lying on rolled beneath him.

„Indeed, it's what the men in chains below are saying too,“ said the phooka, unsympathetically. „But the sailors seem happy enough.“

„There are men in chains below?“

„Yes, they're throwing up,“ said the phooka, with cheerful unconcern. „I recognized one of the prisoners as being from the house in Dublin.“

Edmund pinched his eyes shut. It made no sense and the ship still rolled. „When do we expect to get to France?“ he asked hoping that that would at least mean the movement would stop.

„I wouldn't know. One of the sailors said we lie in the Biscay. What does that mean?“

Edmund scrambled to his feet and up the companionway, and out into the fresh salt-laden air. This was a bigger vessel than the little packet he'd hoped to board without being spotted. And... that flag. It was the white ensign.

„This is the wrong ship!“ he said savagely.

The phooka gave a very feline shrug. „A ship is a ship. You wanted to go away from the green lands.“

It all became horrifyingly clear to Edmund now. Biscay. The flag. The prisoners below. To the phooka there was no real difference between places across the sea from Ireland. France was as foreign as where the ship was taking the rebels below.

The prisoners were being transported... to Australia.

And so was he, with the jewel-key to Faerie lands still in the lining of his coat. The desperate United Irish rebels were being rounded up or killed in the Wicklow Hills, just as the blackthorn people foretold, with blood and havoc, and a hatred that would run deep for generations.

He'd been delivered into the hand of his foes, and sent into exile.

But it felt like freedom, right now.

As for faerie... Finvarra had never been his father. His father lay dead at the hands of Loyalist Militia.

„You're awake, are you?“ commented a boy not much older than Edmund, coming up from behind. „Hello, where did the cat come from?“

„It's my p... cat,“ answered Edmund.

„Good. The last one died. We need one to keep the mice down. What's its name?“

Edmund knew the answer to that one. „Trouble,“ he said.

