

**THE BLACK BULL: EXPLORING CELTIC MYTHOLOGY  
AND ROMANCE FICTION TROPES THROUGH A  
HISTORICAL FANTASY NOVELLA**

**Honors Thesis**

**Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in English**

In the School of English  
at Salem State University

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Commonwealth Honors Program  
Salem State University  
2019

## ABSTRACT

“The Black Bull” is a historical fantasy novella set in late eighteenth-century Ireland. It explores traditional Irish folklore and a common romance fiction trope through a feminist lens. Claire Featherfew, a sensible young woman not quite young enough to be unmarried, works as a book-binder for the taciturn Mr. Collins for the better part of a year before he proposes to her. She accepts and continues restoring his large collection of fairy-tales and books of folklore. Mr. Collins is secretive about the great black bull that has long been regarded as the pride of Collins Manor. Claire’s curiosity gets the better of her, and she uncovers a secret about Mr. Collins and the bull. She makes a difficult choice, and finds herself contending with wild, perilous creatures she thought only existed in the pages of her fiancé’s books.

“The Black Bull” addresses a common trope in both classic and contemporary fiction: the aloof but handsome bachelor whose prickly (and frequently abusive) behavior the heroine endures before redeeming him with her love. Most of the time, these stories also have a significant power imbalance between the brooding male love interest and the heroine. From Hades and Persephone and *Jane Eyre*’s Mr. Rochester to modern Byronic heroes like *Uprooted*’s Sarkan (not to mention the endless adaptations of *Beauty and the Beast*), it is clear that this trope continues to fascinate and entertain readers. “The Black Bull” simultaneously embraces and subverts this trope.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There are several people who I need to thank for their involvement in this project, and the first and foremost is my advisor, Dr. Michael Jaros. He worked with me over two semesters to give me thoughtful, valuable feedback in a compassionate and constructive way. He offered suggestions and thorough commentary over several drafts of the project, even while adjusting to the exhausting but infinitely rewarding reality of welcoming his first child into his family. Dr. Jaros' knowledge of Irish culture and folklore and his expertise at analyzing narratives and dialogue were an invaluable resource to me.

Next, I need to thank my husband Paul Hennigan for his unwavering support and faith in me as a writer. He also provided me with honest feedback and suggestions. I would not have been able to complete this project without his support.

I am also grateful for the other people who provided support and/or feedback throughout this process, including J.D. Scrimgeour, Scott Nowka, Emma Liddle, and Christopher Welling.

The authors whose work inspired mine include J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Susanna Clarke, Neil Gaiman, Charlotte Brontë, and Naomi Novik.

## REFLECTIVE ESSAY

When I set out to write my protagonist, Claire, I had to be cognizant of incorporating my own feminist sensibilities while still having Claire be a plausible character in Ireland in the eighteenth century. Mr. Collins was challenging as well—I had to walk a fine line between making him Byronic or villainous while also trying to keep the reader guessing as to his true motives. Since my thesis started out as a short story, I had to change many elements that no longer worked in a longer piece. You might be able to get away with throwaway characters that only get mentioned once in a 5,000 word short story, but not in a 16,000 word novella.

Another aspect of my thesis is the exploration of Irish folklore—I have found the idea of the *sidhe*, or fairies, enthralling since I first read about them. In Irish folklore, the *sidhe* are neither good nor bad—they are capricious, powerful, and bound to different rules and customs. If you are polite to a fairy, they might reward you, but if you are rude to one, you may find your harvest spoiled or your children missing. In “The Black Bull” Claire interacts with many books of fairy-tales and folklore about the *sidhe*, and she has a few personal encounters with a shapeshifting trickster.

In addition to the supernatural elements in “The Black Bull”, historical accuracy was an important factor in the creation of this novella. I was amazed at the amount of research it took to be able to keep even the most basic elements of the story accurate—for instance, in much of 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe a woman couldn’t ride anywhere on horseback without the assistance of 2 men. One man needed to hold the reins of the horse, and the other had to help the woman up into the saddle. This is because it was considered obscene for a woman to sit astride a horse—a woman could only ride sidesaddle, which

was not particularly safe or comfortable. On the slide behind me, you can see a drawing of what a side-saddle actually looked like—this particular example is from the Victorian era, which is after the setting of my story, so the saddle Claire would have used would be even more old-fashioned than this one.

Another historical element I had to research was my protagonist's profession—first, I had to make sure that women were even allowed to be bookbinders. It turns out that they were, and in fact many women were employed in this field. At the end of the eighteenth century, bookbinding was becoming more industrialized, but in the 1750s-1780s, which is when “The Black Bull” is set, many smaller businesses were still sewing the bindings by hand. Gold tooling, which is made by first gouging or pressing the leather and then applying gold leaf and an adhering agent, was a common way to decorate book covers. Many books were bound with leather, but others were bound with cloth, which would be embroidered instead of tooled.

Working on this thesis made me appreciate the efforts that authors of historical fiction have to go through in order to maintain historical accuracy and realism. When I set out to write this story, I had no idea how much time I would have to spend reading about the grain trade in eighteenth century Ireland to determine exactly how profitable Collins Manor would be, or how long it took to figure out how and how often people bathed back then.

### **PLANS FOR EXPANSION**

While I am finished with my novella for the purposes of this thesis, I plan to revise and expand it further and attempt to get it published through traditional means. There are several areas that I believe need to be expanded—for one, there needs to be more lead-up before Claire and Mr. Collins get engaged. I also believe there needs to be more focus on the books of fairy-stories that Claire restores; they are an integral part of the story and need more development. Another thing that needs to be addressed is the fact that Mr. Collins is supposed to be teaching Claire to ride a horse—this is brought up once about halfway through the novella, but it ought to have been introduced and built up. The novella is currently 15,287 words, and I expect that when it is truly finished it will be around 18,000-19,000 words.

## THE BLACK BULL

Of all the young women in the town of Aidhne who might have been asked to work at Collins Manor, Claire Featherfew was the most sensible. She had never done anything wild or out of turn, nor was she given to flights of fancy or romantic notions. While her younger sisters sewed elaborate dresses and plaited ribbons into their long, bright hair, Claire sewed the bindings on their father's manuscripts and essays on anatomy and physiology. When her younger sisters married, one by one, to young men as jovial and handsome as they were, Claire smiled and wept and blessed them, and only a small part of her heart panged with envy. And so, when the reclusive lord of Collins Manor sent for the physician's eldest daughter, Claire went without hesitation, and with no small amount of curiosity.

Claire stepped into the open carriage that Mr. Collins had sent for her and sat down, arranging her skirts around herself. The bench faced away from the dapple grey horse and put Claire's back to the driver, so she turned and nodded at him. He clucked to the horse and it leaned into the harness, and the cart lurched into motion. Claire watched her house get smaller and smaller as they drove through the sprawling green fields dotted with sheep and wildflowers. It was nearly four hours before Collins Manor rose into view--the house stood on a slight hill, with newly-planted fields and budding orchards behind it.

The large, intricately carved doors of the manor swung open to admit her, and Claire felt out of place at once in her plain grey dress. The dark wooden hall seemed to continue interminably, and the draped scarlet tapestries that hung from the ceiling gave her the impression that she was walking into the gullet of a beast that meant to swallow

her whole. But then, the footman knocked softly on the dark wood of a door--Claire did not hear an answer, but the servant opened it after a moment anyway.

“Miss Featherfew, sir,” the footman said with a dip of his head to the man standing rigidly in front of a bookshelf which sagged under the weight of the greatest number of books Claire had ever seen. She was so enamoured with the wealth of texts that she nearly forgot the lean, dark figure that stood before them and took a half-step forward before she caught herself.

“Mr. Collins,” she said, with a practised curtsy. She straightened, and raised her eyes from his black, polished shoes to his face. She had heard the rumors about the lord of Collins Manor since she was a young girl--he was a devilish handsome man who seduced young ladies, or he was a hideously deformed man whose sins were manifested in his twisted visage. He was an old man who employed fairy magic to preserve his youth, or else, he was a young man who never grew old. He had one blue eye and one brown, or one of his eyes had been gouged out by the monstrous bull that toiled in his fields.

Claire was almost disappointed to find an ordinary man standing in front of her. His face was neither cruel nor kind; it was instead calculating--and it was her he was taking stock of. His eyes were not mismatched, nor missing, but they were cold and dark and scrutinizing. He was handsome, but not devilishly so, and he was hardly the face of unending youth--if Claire had to guess, she would have said he might be forty or perhaps forty-five.

John Collins nodded at her, and gestured almost impatiently at a small table to his left, where a tattered book stood open with a spool of thread and a needle next to it. There

were fresh sheets of parchment too, and a neatly folded square of soft leather. Claire sat down and threaded the needle, and glanced up at the man as he hovered nearby.

“I will return in three hours’ time,” he said. His voice was sonorous, but with a rough edge as if he was unaccustomed to using it. “Your father speaks highly of your skills, but sentiment can cloud the judgment of even an eminent and learned physician.” Without another glance at her, he was gone.

Claire flipped through the book, checking for cracked or torn pages--when she found one, she removed it and carefully copied the text onto a blank sheet of paper. She cut and peeled off the old leather binding, which was so worn the title could not even be read. After an hour or so of hammering and pressing the pages, all that was left to do was sew the binding back on. It was a book about wildflowers and their medicinal uses, so Claire heated up the small metal gouge and carved a simple daisy into the center of front cover before she began to sew.

Mr. Collins returned half an hour before her allotted time was up, and watched her silently while she worked. He was never still for more than a moment. Claire wanted to see where he was going, what he was doing, but she conquered the urge to stare and focused on the last few stitches.

“I cannot tolerate idleness, Ms. Featherfew,” Mr. Collins said. He paced slowly from one bookcase to another, stopping occasionally to touch the spine of a book. “You will come to know this once you have been in my employ for a time.”

Claire paused as she pulled the last thread through recessed cord of the leather binding. “Mr. Collins, do you intend to retain my services further?” She hoped she did not sound as surprised as she felt--he hadn’t even checked her work yet. She turned to

him and watched as he delicately touched a crumbling volume from the shelf nearest the fireplace. Her fingers resumed their work, tying the fine thread into a knot and snipping the excess.

“Indeed I do, Ms. Featherfew. As you can see, I have a great many volumes which could use your attention.” He gestured to the shelf in front of him, where books ranging from old to ancient rested--many of them were missing covers or bindings, and seemed to stay together only by the weight of their fellows on either side. After a moment, he walked back to the table where she sat.

Mr. Collins took the repaired book from Claire and inspected her work. He fanned the pages with his thumb, and when they flowed smoothly he gave her an approving nod. He ran his forefinger over her neat, floral tooling on the cover. “This is excellent work. I have hesitated to allow the book-binders in Limerick to handle the more decrepit volumes, but I can see that you have the dexterity to be trusted with such a task.”

“Thank you, Mr. Collins.” Claire felt herself flush at his praise, and she felt a thrill at the prospect of earning a proper wage. Her father did his best, but with her sisters’ three dowries paid in installments and her mother’s delicate health, any coin she could earn would be welcome in their house. Mr. Collins’ presence interrupted her brief reverie--he was standing closer to her, an unreadable expression upon his face. She reached for another book resting on the table to assess its condition and opened it.

“Ms. Featherfew, if you are to work for me, I must have one assurance from you,” Mr. Collins said. “I must ask that you keep your curiosity in check.” Claire opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off. “No, Ms. Featherfew, I will hear no denials. I see that

infernal spark in your eye as clearly as I see the talent in your clever fingers. You cannot hide it from me.”

He sent her to the housekeeper, Ms. Sullivan, to discuss her wages and arrange her lodging. Ms. Sullivan explained that it would be far more frugal for Mr. Collins to rent a room at the inn for Claire than to pay for a cart each way. Claire’s heart dropped at the idea of leaving her parents, but she knew that, in truth, her family would benefit more from her wage than her daily presence.

Claire hurried home, too excited to tell her parents about her employment to fret over Mr. Collins’ queer warning. Her father kissed her forehead, and her mother smiled softly and embraced her. Her mother always smelled faintly of myrtle and peppermint because of the healing balms Claire’s father made. It was a bittersweet smell to Claire--warm and pleasant, but an unavoidable reminder of her mother’s perennial illness.

For the first several weeks of her employment at Collins Manor, Claire saw very little of the master of the house. He would appear occasionally to refill the stack of books for her to repair and rebind, or to flip through her work, but he seldom spoke to her unless he needed to. That changed on a Monday afternoon, when he burst into the library and stormed over to the desk. Claire paused her work and watched as he set down a large parcel and wasted no time tearing it open.

“Fools,” he said, as he removed the delicate books from their haphazard packaging. “I paid twice what I needed to on the condition that they would be treated with care, and the courier may as well have run his horses over them.” There was a quiet rage in his voice, and he seemed to almost swell with it.

She didn't quite know what to say, so she said nothing. Even in his anger his face was pleasing, and Claire allowed her gaze to run along his cheekbones and his clenched jaw. Mr. Collins stared down at the damaged books in his hands, and they trembled as he held them. Claire rose and went to him, and after a moment she took a slim grey volume from the top of the package. Its cover was split down the spine, and a faded carving of some rearing animal was splayed across its front. Mr. Collins frowned at her as she experimentally lifted the peeling cover and surveyed the condition of the pages within.

“Well?” he demanded.

“It will be a simple enough repair, sir,” she said, “the contents are quite intact. I simply need to strip and rebind it, and it will be perfectly legible.” She tried to keep her voice light and conversational.

The man deflated next to her like a cockerel in the rain. He inhaled and slowly released a breath, and then opened his eyes and regarded Claire. His face was difficult to read, but at least he looked less furious. He reached to take the shabby book from her, and Claire felt his thumb brush along hers as she carefully placed it in his hands. Color rose faintly to her cheeks as she turned back to her work. The room was quiet for a moment, and then she heard footsteps and the soft thump of the heavy wooden door closing behind him.

After that day in the library, Claire saw Mr. Collins more frequently as he came in to take away whatever book she had just finished restoring. Once or twice he even gave her a word of praise for her efforts before he spirited the volume away. The books that came to her to be repaired had begun to vary in subject matter--there were volumes of history, poetry, and even the occasional religious sermon, but now she was finding fairy-

tales among them. Claire wondered what use a man like Mr. Collins could possibly have for fairy-tales and folk stories.

When June announced her arrival with ripe strawberries and the rich scent of wild gorse, Mr. Collins asked Claire into his private library at the back of the drawing room. Claire surveyed the small room--the dark wood and heavy curtains seemed to isolate it from the rest of the house. She expected him to ask her to sit, but instead he approached her. "Mr. Collins?" she said, hoping she had not done anything to upset him--his face was utterly unreadable.

"Ms. Featherfew," he said, his dark eyes boring into her. "As I am sure you have noticed, I am not much for sentiment, nor do I entertain many guests at my home." Claire nodded. "It is therefore, I imagine, not a surprise to you that I am unmarried."

It was true--in spite of his wealth, the fact that he was a bachelor did not surprise her, but she was quite taken aback that he had raised the topic. She looked away from him toward the large wooden desk, not sure what to say.

"I have long known that I am in need of a wife, but your presence in my home these past months has brought that fact to the forefront of my attention." Claire stiffened, and her eyes raised to his face once more. "I have already spoken to your father and secured his consent."

"I--I," Claire stuttered, unable to stop opening and closing her mouth even though she was keenly aware of how foolish she must look. Shock had straightened her spine and stiffened her limbs, and she couldn't decide whether to be indignant that he had approached her parents without even a word to her or flattered that she seemed to have managed to slip between some crack in the barrier he held against the world.

He reached out and touched her face--he ran his thumb down the apple of her cheek and cupped her soft, round chin in his fingers. Claire felt herself flush, and he released her after a long moment.

“Yes,” she said.

One late summer morning Claire walked to the Collins Manor, as she had done nearly every day for the past two months. Most mornings she could see the black bull hitched to the mill-post, walking in circles to grind the grain. The bull was of exceptionally fine stock, and it could plow acres of land and pull the horse-mill for hours without tiring. Claire always felt a pang of sympathy for the animal, especially on those long summer days when most men let their working beasts rest during the midday heat. Invariably, the black bull would be working just the same—his sides heaving and mouth foaming as he wore his endless path ever deeper into the earth.

This morning, however, the horse-mill was quiet. The wooden post had been splintered and warped, and the great animal stood in the pasture very near to the stone fence. Claire's heart beat faster—she had never seen the animal so close. The bull raised his head and fixed her with a stare, golden eyes glittering and large horns towering over his head. He lashed his magnificent tail, which had long black hair sprouting from the end. He wore the same harness that he did every day, but Claire could now see that the rope bit into the great animal's flesh. He was tied to an enormous tree, and did not have enough slack to reach the water trough. “You poor beast,” she said, and the bull groaned, as if in agreement. Before she realized what she was doing, Claire had stepped through the field hand's gap in the stone fence and filled a metal pail with water. She gingerly placed it down in front of the animal, who proceeded to noisily drink like he had not

tasted water for days. She worked her hands under the harness and gave him a good scratch, and he started, tipping the water pail over and nearly crushing Claire's foot. She froze, but the bull snorted and leaned into her hands, begging for scratches like her father's old hound. She let out a gasp of laughter—when was the last time she had laughed?

“Claire!” said a sharp voice, like the crack of a whip. “Get away from there!”

Mr. Collins dismounted and strode over to her, a red spot burning in each of his fine-boned cheeks. His two men followed, leaving their cargo on the wagon. Feeling color rise to her own face, Claire began to answer, but the black bull stirred beside her. He bellowed, and the deafening sound made Claire jump and Mr. Collins stopped mid-stride. The bull lowered his head, and for a moment, everything was quiet. The very air felt thick, and a faint coppery smell stung Claire's nose—it smelled like lightning, or blood. She felt the hair on her arms and the back of her neck prickle into gooseflesh, and the bull tensed, ready to charge. Suddenly, the bull faltered; his posture relaxed into submission. The tension drained from the air, and the strange smell dissipated, replaced by the summer scents of wildflowers and freshly rolled hay.

Mr. Collins gestured to his men, who led the bull away to haul the new post from the wagon to the mill. He reached Claire at last, and grabbed her roughly by the arms. “What were you thinking? You could have been killed!” Claire felt his fingers dig into her flesh, and she straightened herself and stared into Mr. Collins' dark eyes. They were like the eyes of a beetle—shiny, reflecting light, and revealing nothing. She did not know what to say, for in truth, she had no idea why she had done something so foolish. Her

face burned with embarrassment, and she lowered her eyes, unable to bear the brunt of his cold fury.

“Promise me, Claire. Promise me you will not go near that beast again. I could not bear to see you hurt,” Mr. Collins said, his voice softening. He reached out and turned her face up to meet his, his thumb and forefinger firmly under her chin.

“Yes, sir,” Claire answered, her eyes meeting his gaze once more. He scrutinized her, his dark eyes searching hers as if he did not quite believe her and might find the proof there. After a moment, he pressed a chill kiss to her forehead, released her, and strode away without another word. Without thinking, Claire reached up and touched the place where his lips had brushed her skin.

“He’s only lookin’ out for ya, Miss,” the younger of the two laborers said, as he went to collect the wagon. “That damned beast has gored half a dozen men since I entered Mr. Collins’ service, and that were only four years ago.”

The older man spat on the ground and scowled at the red-haired youth. “Aye, and if ye’d been here longer, ye’d know not to be talkin’ to the master’s lady. Ye’d know that he doesn’t like people interferin’ with what’s his.” He leered at Claire and smiled unpleasantly. She brushed off the dust from her dress and felt the ache in her arms from Mr. Collins’ grip. She nodded at the younger man, ignored the older man’s stare, and continued her walk to the manor.

The day’s work passed slowly. Claire found her eyes wandering to the walls of the drawing room, where she suspected more books were hoarded than could be found in the entirety of Aidhne, and perhaps the few smaller towns that surrounded it. Despite her

profession, even her own home held few books other than her father's manuscripts and medical texts.

She finished stripping the old binding from a book of folktales, and as she worked to inspect and copy the damaged pages she read a few snippets of the stories. In one, a banshee shrieked out a warning of impending death, and in another, an unseelie spirit haunting a child was burnt and destroyed by a rod of cold iron. In yet another, a shape-shifting fairy in the form of a horse lured unsuspecting passers-by onto its back and drowned them. The stories gave her a queer sort of feeling as she transcribed them, and sometimes she felt that the words were changed if she read over them again. Claire dismissed it as the result of her perturbed state and continued working.

She took her lunch with Ms. Sullivan, as was her custom, and Claire recounted the events of the mornings. The older woman frowned into her teacup and said, "You can't blame the master for worrying about you! What were you thinking, walking into the bull paddock like that! You could've been mauled by that animal."

"He had been working all day in the heat with no water," Claire replied.

"I'm sure the animal is well cared for," Ms. Sullivan said, "Mr. Collins would hardly work the beast to death, now, would he? He's got too much business sense for that."

"I can't bear to see an animal treated cruelly, Ms. Sullivan. And I have never heard Mr. Collins speak so harshly--perhaps I have agreed to this marriage too hastily, I barely know the man," Claire said.

“Ms. Featherfew, I have worked in Collins Manor for twenty years,” Ms. Sullivan said in a placating tone. “The master is a private man, certainly, but he has always treated his staff well so long as they follow his stipulations.”

Surely it must be as Ms. Sullivan said, Claire thought; he was only worried for her, and knew her vices better than she did. He had trusted her with his library, his precious books--she must prove to him that she could be trusted in other matters as well. Claire wanted to talk to her mother about it, but she also didn't want to poison her mother against the man she was to marry, as had happened to one of her sisters.

Autumn came to Aidhne. The vibrant red wheat fields began to wither into dull brown, and the nights grew longer and colder. Claire visited her parents on her birthday, and Mr. Collins stopped by to deliver a small, neatly wrapped parcel. Claire pulled the ribbon and unfolded the paper to reveal a book of poetry. Unlike the books she usually handled, this one was smooth and shining--delicate gold tooling curled across the dark brown leather cover. “Mr. Collins,” she began, “I cannot accept such a valuable gift.” She tried to give it back to him.

“It is nothing to me,” he answered her, pushing the book back into her hands. “I thought it a cruel irony that you work so diligently on my books, yet have none of your own. When you are my wife, you will have all the books you could possibly hope to read.” A small smile lit Claire's face, like the sun shining out for a moment behind the cover of clouds. Her parents asked him to stay for supper, but he made some polite excuse and slipped back out into the rain after a few minutes of conversation.

On the first of November, Claire wrapped herself in her warmest clothes and began her walk to Collins Manor. She was not required to work on Saturdays, but she

was nearly finished with the book she was restoring and more importantly, it got her out of the tiny room Mr. Collins had rented for her from the innkeeper. She approached the grounds and was surprised to see that for the third day in a row, the black bull was not at his work—instead, a farmhand led a plump brown horse around the mill. Claire recognized the red-haired young man, with whom she had remained friendly despite the warning from his much less pleasant colleague.

“Tom!” she called, quickening her pace as she approached him. He stopped and wiped his dirty hands on his pants, taking off his cap to face her. The horse huffed, its hot breath streaming out in great clouds against the crisp morning air. “Where is the black bull?” she asked. “Why does he not pull the mill?”

“Ms. Featherfew, Mr. Collins is away on business,” Tom replied. Claire waited for him to continue, and her brow furrowed when he did not. He screwed up his face, as if thinking of how to explain the situation pained him. “Well, Miss, if Mr. Collins ain’t here, the bull don’t work.”

“What do you mean? I cannot imagine that Mr. Collins would happily use one of his fine riding horses as a beast of burden.”

“Right you are, Ms. Featherfew, but there ain’t no point in trying to force the ornery old creature to work without the master. Mr. Collins is the only man that beast is afraid of, so when he’s away, we use the horses in shifts.” Tom scratched his head—the morning’s chill had made his cheeks glow nearly the color of his hair. “Takes three horses twice as long to do it, but for my part I’m glad to be rid of the bloody brute for a week or two.”

Claire settled into her work for the afternoon--she was copying the last few pages of text that were too damaged to be restored. This volume, like many of the others, was about fairies, though it referred to them as the Good Neighbors. She copied the words one by one--in this case, instructions on how to appease the Good Neighbors with offerings of milk and cakes. It appeared that the fairies were excessively fond of baked goods and any other foods crafted by human hands. She wondered, not for the first time, why Mr. Collins was so invested in preserving these curious books of folklore. She briefly thought of asking him upon his return, but then she remembered her promise to keep her curiosity in check.

On her walk back to her small room that evening, Claire saw that the field and barn lay quiet. The farmhands had gone home. She could see her breath before her in the still night air—it seemed to lead her to the barn door. She lifted the rusty latch and slipped inside, mindful of where she stepped. The moonlight shone through the gaps in the wall and roof, and lit the barn well enough for her to see the large dark shape in front of her. She had thought her entry silent, but the bull was awake; he stared inscrutably at her. He rose slowly to his feet, shuffling and stretching as his long legs bore him up. As he drew himself to his full height, Claire quailed; the bull seemed enormous in the small space that enclosed them both. Fear spread in cold rivulets down her neck into her belly—what on earth was she doing?

The animal turned, and Claire flinched as the horns which had gored many a man moved through the air. He was scratching at himself with his horn—trying to get under the harness, which constricted his flesh and had rubbed his skin raw. A pang of pity struck her heart, and she slowly placed a hand against the animal's thickly-muscled neck.

The bull huffed, and leaned into her touch as she rubbed his dark, bristly coat. He was tethered to a thick beam of wood in the center of the barn, without any obvious source of food or water. She moved away and filled a small pail from the water barrel in the corner. She heard movement behind her, and realized that she had turned her back on the animal without thinking. As she spun back around, a tall horned shape rose higher and higher, too tall for even the great black bull. Claire staggered backwards, nearly falling in her haste to scramble away. Where the beast had been but a moment before stood a man in fine dress—a man with horns on his head. It did not appear that he would have them much longer, however; they shrank away into the wild waves of dark hair that grew at their roots. Claire’s knuckles were white as she clenched the handle of the pail in her fingers—the sharp bite of the metal was a solid anchor to reality in a world that had rather suddenly become absurd.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance,” the man began. “Claire, is it? I believe I heard that old devil bellowing something after that fashion in your direction when we first met.” The man smiled at her, and while it was a pleasant enough gesture, his lips pulled just a little too wide—Claire got the disturbing impression that there were too many teeth in his mouth, or at least, too many pointed ones. His eyes, which crinkled at the edges as he smiled, were large and wide-set and golden brown. Apart from his unsettling face, he looked like an ordinary gentleman, until Claire noticed the pair of black bull’s ears which poked out from his unruly hair.

“Who--who are you, sir?” Claire asked, her voice quavering. Her mouth felt dry from her fear.

“A proper young lady, aren’t you?” the man replied, ignoring her question. “Most people have something a bit more colorful to say when they meet me.” He clasped his hands behind his back and walked in a circle around her, his bright eyes studying her face and figure. “Polite, demure...I can see why old Collins has his sights set on you. I warn you, Claire--he is not what he seems.”

“Forgive me, sir, but you are hardly one to talk about misleading appearances,” Claire retorted, her eyes narrowing. The slight against her intended had made her bold--made her drop, for a moment, the politeness which she wore like armour. “I ask you again--who are you?”

“Oh, I have been called by many names by many different people. Shape-shifter, Trickster, Fairy, Devil, *sídhe*...please, take your pick. I could go on.”

Claire considered for a moment. “What do you call yourself, sir?”

The man seemed exceedingly pleased by the question. “*púca* is what my people call me, but I have not met another of my kind for a very long time.”

“Well, Mr. *Púca*--”

The man snorted. “Oh no, my dear. *púca* is not a name, it is what I am. You may call me *púca*, but it is not my name.”

“Very well, *púca*.” Claire could see that she wouldn’t get much further on the topic. The man bowed with a flourish of his hand, as if he were greeting her for a dance at some grand party. “How did you come to be in Mr. Collins’ service?” Claire asked. As the man took another step closer, she noted with distaste that while the his clothes looked fine indeed, they were shockingly dirty.

“A most interesting question, Claire,” he replied, noticing her glance at his attire and making a half-hearted effort to brush off some of the dirt and dust. When his efforts appeared to simply smudge the dirt into his once-white shirt even more, he gave up with a look of resigned dismay.

“I met John Collins when he was a lad of twenty-three. He was struggling to make the farmland profitable--he had paid no attention to matters of finance in his youth, but his father died rather suddenly and left the manor to his only son. He had but a few farmhands, and one old nag barely fit to ride, let alone plow.” The man was pacing, his hands again clasped behind his black waistcoat. “In his desperation, he prayed for aid. I do not think his god heard him, but I did.” Claire felt a cold sensation in her belly at his words. The *púca* paused, and gave her a charming smile.

“I offered him a deal,” the man continued. “I would work for him for five years, plowing his fields, grinding his grain, making the land fertile by my craft. After the period of labor was over, he would give me what he promised me.”

“And what did he promise you?” Claire asked.

“Oh, I only asked for a little thing. A trifle, really.” The man’s lips flicked upward at one corner, as if he had remembered some jest that was amusing only to him. He turned to Claire, and his manner grew serious; the moonlight illuminated half of his face. “I asked for a name.”

Claire furrowed her brow. “But you said--”

“Yes, I have a birth-name, but I can hardly go around handing such a thing to any old mortal or fairy. We keep our names close--there is great power in a name,” the *púca* explained.

“What I wanted from Collins was a Christian name. There is a different sort of power in such a name, and it was a fair bargain. But he deceived me!” the *púca* cried, and his face twisted with anger. He grew more bestial, and Claire felt the air in the dark barn become charged, like the moment before a lightning strike. “John Collins has enslaved me these twenty-two years!”

Claire stared at the *púca*--the silence in the barn after his outburst weighed on them both. “Sir,” she began, “I do not understand. I have felt your power; I felt it that day in the field and I felt it just now. How can he possibly hold you? Why do you not simply reveal yourself to others, like you have revealed yourself to me?”

The *púca* looked at her for a long moment--his bull’s ears flicked back and forth, and then drooped suddenly, giving him the air of a forlorn dog. “The harness,” he said flatly. “It is woven with hair cut from my tail. While I wear it, I must stay in the shape of a bull.”

“But I do not understand, sir. Are you not wearing the harness now? How is it that you have appeared to me as a gentleman?”

“Do you know what day it is, Claire?” he asked, his bright eyes flicking to hers.

“November the first, sir,” Claire replied, her brows furrowed.

“Indeed. The day after Samhain—they call it the Púca’s Day,” he replied and took a step closer to her. Claire took half a step back. “On this day, the walls between the worlds—between your world and Faerie—grow thin. I am able to slip my bonds for a few moments. With considerable effort on my part,” he added. He gave her another smile, but his expression grew serious after a moment.

“I need your help, Claire. This harness stands between me and my freedom. It damns me to a lifetime of slavery. And when Collins finds a way, he will end me.” His golden eyes sought hers, and he started to reach a hand towards her, then dropped it and folded it behind his back. He looked out the barn window, where the moonlight spilled in. “I fear he has already begun. My strength ebbs by the day. Perhaps his years of collecting every scrap of information on my kind has finally paid off.”

Claire regarded him silently--she did not know what to say. Unease coiled in her stomach and her face grew pale--the fairy-stories she had been restoring and transcribing for Mr. Collins suddenly held a much more sinister meaning. She felt trapped; if the creature was telling the truth, it meant that Mr. Collins was a cruel and deceitful man. If the *púca* was lying, she could hardly free a monstrous trickster who would undoubtedly seek revenge against her future husband. Panic bloomed in her chest, and she fought to keep it from rising to her face. Mr. Collins was employing her to restore the fairy-tales--would the *púca* blame her if it knew? Tom the farmhand's words returned to her--this creature had killed many men while in Mr. Collins' service. Why had she meddled in this foolish affair?

“You are afraid, Claire,” the *púca* observed. He drew closer to her, and Claire took a step backward. “You are right to be afraid. You are, perhaps, thinking of the men I have slain. They were not the first of your kind I have killed, and I daresay they shall not be the last. Not while John Collins yet lives.” One corner of his mouth quirked upwards, a decidedly wicked look settling upon his features.

“What will you do if I free you, sir?” Claire asked in a small voice. She tried to take another step backwards, but her heel thumped against the wall of the barn.

“I will take my revenge, of course,” the *púca* said, as if he were surprised that Claire had even asked. He was close now, and his golden-brown eyes bored into hers.

“The more interesting question, my dear, is what *you* will do.”

Claire blanched. The fear had finally overtaken her, and she slumped against the barn wall as her legs grew weak. Her blood pounded in her ears and her heart raced. The *púca* reached out to her, and steadied her trembling hands. His touch was gentle, though his skin was unusually cool.

“I will not harm you, Claire. You were the first person to show me any kindness in many years, and I have not forgotten it.” His hands still held hers, and Claire felt some part of herself soften toward him, despite her fear. He stiffened abruptly and stepped away from her, and she took the opportunity to slip outside as the shadow of the bull rose on the wall.

Claire hurried home and bolted the door of her small room. Her heart was pounding furiously, although whether it was from the events of the evening or her hasty retreat, she could not say. She tried to sleep that night, but could not--her mind raced with the possibilities of her next course of action. Mr. Collins was due to return tomorrow; she would have to make a decision, and soon.

The next evening, Claire entered the drawing room of Mr. Collins’ estate. The high ceilings and lavish furnishings, which she had always found lovely, left her feeling cold in spite of the fire that danced in the hearth. She wrung her hands as she waited for Mr. Collins to enter. She knew he would be furious with her, and she deserved his anger. If only she had heeded his warning!

Mr. Collins entered the room and wordlessly gestured for Claire to take a seat. She sat on the edge of the armchair, and he sat in its twin opposite from her. She did not speak right away--her voice seemed to have disappeared and her mouth was dry. His dark eyes bored into her.

“What has happened, Claire?” he said, not unkindly. She relaxed slightly at his tone, and released the white-knuckled grip she had on the fabric of her skirt.

She told him everything--it spilled out of her like water, first a faltering trickle and then a stream. She told him about the barn, about the *púca*, about his request for aid. She told him about the *púca*'s accusations against him. During all of this, Mr. Collins remained silent, his hands steepled in his lap. When Claire stopped, there was no sound for a long beat.

“I warned you, Claire, did I not? I warned you not to go near the beast.” His voice was cold, but there was anger underneath the chill.

Claire's heart sank at his words--she could not deny them, so she did not attempt to. She felt the faint sting of tears, and closed her eyes forcefully to will them away. There was a brief rustling sound, and when she opened her eyes Mr. Collins was on one knee in front of her chair. He pulled Claire's hands into his own and held them stiffly, as if he was unused to touching another person.

“I must make answer to these charges. Not for the beast's sake, but for yours. It is true that I have kept it captive for many years, but the truth is that it gave me no choice.” His eyes were far away as he spoke. “I was a young man, a foolish man, when I entered into this accursed bargain. The creature, a notorious trickster even among its degenerate race, tried to kill me as soon as I let my guard down. I decided to be merciful, and I

chose to harness it rather than kill it.” His voice sounded steady, deep, and decidedly practised. Claire felt immediately that he was not being entirely truthful--if there was one word that she felt no one would attribute to Mr. Collins, it would be merciful. Yet, here he was, showing her mercy instead of shouting at her and throwing her out of his house. She did not know what to think.

“I am sorry, sir,” she finally forced out. “I broke my promise to you that I made on the first day you employed me. I am not suitable to work for you, let alone be your wife.” Claire rose to her feet, tears running down her cheeks, and she wanted to leave before she made an even greater fool of herself. Mr. Collins caught her by the shoulders and halted her escape, and before she could speak another word he pressed his mouth over hers. She stiffened, frozen in place in shock. He moved his lips against hers, and after a few moments she began to respond in kind. She could taste the salt of her own tears, but there was something else that could only be him. Claire knew that it was inappropriate to continue, but when the tip of his tongue brushed against her lips, embers of heat began to coil low in her belly. She felt his hands tangle in her hair, and each strand that his fingers gently tugged sent a shiver down her back. They broke apart to breathe, and Claire flushed scarlet and hurriedly smoothed her hair back into place. Mr. Collins stared at her, expressionless, but more disheveled than she had ever seen him look. He pulled her close and held her, and she leaned her cheek against the smooth black fabric of his coat.

“Do not worry,” he said, his voice low. “I will deal with the creature, Claire. I believe I have found a way to strike a new bargain--a bargain it cannot refuse. It claims to want freedom, and I will release it on the condition that it never troubles me or mine

again.” Claire sagged against him and nodded, her head still spinning from the kiss. She had been wrong to doubt him.

Claire did not approach the bull again, and when she walked by the fields she kept her gaze on the road in front of her. Sometimes she felt as though she was being watched, but did not give in to the temptation to look. It grew colder by the day, and soon she was wrapping herself in her thick red winter cloak every time she left her small room.

When she visited her family for Christmas, Claire basked in the warmth and comfort of her parents and sisters. Her mother fretted over her and pinched her wrists and cheeks, and demanded to know if Mr. Collins was giving her enough to eat. Her father beamed at her and made no secret of the fact that he enjoyed telling his colleagues that his daughter was the only person that the rich Mr. Collins trusted with his books. Her sisters, two of whom were great with child, smiled at her, but their faces were a little sad as well. The youngest took her hands and asked if Mr. Collins was treating her well, and why she did not come to visit more often. Claire reassured them and made her excuses, but in truth she missed her family more than she could bear.

Claire slept uneasily that night, as she had several times the previous week. She drifted in and out of sleep, hardly aware of which state she was in when she was awakened by a cry; it had come from her own mouth. She lit a candle and moved to her looking-glass; a thin sheen of sweat on her face reflected the dim light. Claire splashed her face with water from the basin, and though she expected the water to be cold, she hardly felt it at all. She dried her face, and as she lowered the cloth and looked into the mirror, she froze. A pair of glittering eyes shone in the window behind her, and she spun

about to find that they were gone. Something moved in the darkness outside, and while her heart raced, she did not feel as afraid as she supposed she ought to be.

Claire dressed quickly, wrapping herself in her cloak and placing the candle into a covered lantern. The light diffused and made shadows dance and circle on the walls, and as she stepped outside the shadows followed. A great dark shape, shaggy and lean, pawed at the earth where it stood at the end of the lane. Entranced, Claire took a few faltering steps toward it, but it turned and began to walk away. It was a curious creature—Claire could not be sure whether it had four legs or two, whether it walked upright or skulked low to the ground, but one thing was apparent. It moved with a lumbering, awkward gait, as if it were very tired.

As she followed the mysterious creature, her breath preceded her in thin white clouds. It left no footprints in the light dusting of snow that had fallen during the night, and when she turned to look behind her, she found that she left none either. They had walked for nearly an hour when the creature suddenly stumbled and fell. It made a single attempt to rise, and then it lay quite still. Claire caught up to it in a few minutes, and realized it was much smaller than it had appeared. It was a diminutive animal, and when she scooped it up in her arms she guessed it was either a cat or a rabbit. It weighed almost nothing, and made no protest as she wrapped it in her cloak against the cold. She continued in the direction the creature had been walking, but paused when the heading would have taken them off the road and into a small path in the brush. She stood still for a moment, deliberating, when the creature in her arms began to struggle. Claire put it down, and it dragged itself onto the path in the brush until it could move no more. She picked it up again and carried it down the way where it so clearly wanted to go.

She walked for several minutes, the chill of the air keeping her pace brisk. The brambles and brush tore at her skirts and cloak, and she had to stop to disentangle herself on a few occasions. The trees arched over the path before her, creating a long hall of living wood. The shadowy creature in her arms was now limp, limbs dangling and swaying with Claire's movements. She felt an overwhelming sense of loneliness and despair; she swaddled the little thing in her cloak once more, keeping it close to her chest even as it seemed to grow smaller and smaller.

She reached the end of the path and gazed at the ruins below her--a large ring of flat stones stacked as neatly as firewood encircled a great pit. She stared for a moment, and then she took slow, deliberate steps down into the large depression in the ground. She looked downward as she walked and noted with mild interest that there was nothing under her feet, but she did not fall. She walked down in a lazy spiral until she stood upon the ground of the hollowed, ancient fort. A small opening in stones of the north wall drew her eye, and she crouched in front of it and held her lantern to the iron bars which were fitted across it. Claire gazed into the chamber and saw the great black bull, lying on his side. The bull opened one golden eye and held her in his terrible gaze. The large, bright eye blinked, and she clutched the creature in her arms tighter, only to find that it was gone--her pulse quickened and her heart beat furiously against the cage of her ribs, and—

Claire awoke with a start, clutching the blankets which were wrapped tightly about her chest. She peeled them back, half struggling to free herself and half looking for the small creature that she felt should still be there. She was alone--and so, she felt now, was the *púca*. Anger rose up from deep in her belly, chasing away the isolation and hopelessness her dream had been drenched in. Had Mr. Collins lied about the *púca*? Her

stomach churned at the memory of refusing to help the creature--had her inaction led to this unhappy end?

As she worked later that day, Claire tried to put the dream out of her mind. She sorted through Mr. Collins' latest acquisition--a crate of books in various states of disrepair. She stacked the largest ones, which were the most intact, to her left, and rather more gently laid out the smaller ones which were missing covers. A few were completely unbound, and as she picked up one of these unfortunate volumes, a smaller book slipped out from between the loose pages and hit the table with a dull thud. An embroidered silver horse reared rampant on the grey cloth cover above large, slim letters that spelled out "THE PUCA and Other Fairy Stories." Her heart nearly skipped a beat, and she snatched up the small book and opened it, searching the index for the story. She opened the book to the fourteenth page, but instead of "The Púca," it was a story about a changeling. It was a fairy-tale, much like the others she had been restoring for Mr. Collins--this one was a cautionary tale for children. A wayward, disobedient child had been stolen by the fairies, and a changeling was left in his place. But the fairies had been cruel to the bereft mother; instead of a fairy-child, which she could at least care for, the *sidhe* had left a stock. It was made of blackthorn branches, tied with meadowsweet and a single drop of the stolen child's blood. The moment the child's blood touched the stock, it transformed into a perfect likeness of him--but because it was only wood and flowers and blood, it appeared to sicken as the enchantment wore thin. The changeling died, and the mother never knew that her own child still lived with the *sidhe*; no one would ever go looking for the lost boy.

Claire frowned. She had not intended to read the changeling story, yet she had done so without thinking. She flipped through the book, and could not find the *púca*'s story. In fact, there seemed to be some mistake--every story was simply a repetition of "The Changeling." As she turned the pages, her distress grew--now she could not even find the full story. The fourteenth page simply repeated the three ingredients for a stock: blackthorn branches, meadowsweet, and a drop of the subject's blood. Every page in the book was now identical. Claire slammed the book shut and buried her face in her hands. It could be nothing except for magic--the *púca* was trying to tell her something, just as he had in the dream. There was now little room for doubt.

Claire picked up the slim volume and tucked it into her notebook—the motion was quick and fluid, though her hands shook after. She tossed her cloak around her shoulders and pulled up her hood, clutching the notebook to her chest as she nodded at the servant in the doorway. The rain pattered against the cobblestones as Claire hurried to the coach. The driver helped her up the steps and she ducked inside, wrapping herself even more snugly in the heavy cloth of her cloak. The coach rumbled into motion, and through the small window she saw that the gardens had given up the reds and golds of autumn; in their stead a thin grey mist had descended upon the hills.

She did not ease her grip on the notebook until she was inside her small room at the lodging house, and even then her fingers were reluctant to loosen. When she had lit the fireplace and the pleasant scent of burning turf had begun to fill the room, Claire tucked the stolen book under her thin mattress.

It was a cold morning in February, and the view from the library window was so grey that Claire could not tell where the ground ended and the sky began. She sank the

thick needle into the cloth binding of the book and pulled it through; her fingers worked deftly as she sewed down the spine, back and forth, back and forth. The door to the library swung open and she knew by the firm, measured footfalls that it was Mr. Collins. She gave him a small smile, and he caught one of her hands and dragged it to his mouth to kiss.

“Claire,” he began, “I am going to Limerick for the rest of the week—I have been told that there is a gentleman from London who is very interested in purchasing large stores of grain.” Claire nodded at him; this was hardly unusual news, but a mote of excitement stirred in her. He had not been gone for more than a day or two of late, and this could be her opportunity. Her heart dropped at his next words.

“I wish for you to accompany me. In a few months, you will be my wife, and you must get accustomed to travel and to matters of business. We will leave at eight o’clock tomorrow morning.” For a moment, Claire panicked, trying to maintain a calm demeanor, but then she allowed her brow to furrow and a frown to pull down the corners of her mouth.

“Mr. Collins,” she said, “it is a sensible proposal, but I do not think it appropriate for an unmarried woman to accompany a gentleman on such a venture. I have no wish to bring scandal upon you, or myself.” She watched as he raised his hand to his chin and frowned above it. “Would it not be wiser to wait until we are married? You will find me a quick study, I assure you,” she finished with what she hoped was a confident smile.

“You are right, of course,” he stated. “I had hoped for the pleasure of your company,” and as he spoke he tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, “but I am getting ahead of myself. I will see you next week, my dear.” He punctuated his goodbye

with a kiss upon her cheek, and took his leave. Claire sat still for a long moment—he had been excessively affectionate of late, and it both grated upon her and guilted her. ‘He is only like this because he believes himself free of the *púca*,’ she told herself, and at the thought of the creature her dream returned to her. For a brief moment, she felt an echo of the despair the *púca* had been emanating.

The next morning, she went to the old woman who sold herbs and flowers in the market square. At Claire’s request, the woman produced a small, dried bunch of meadowsweet—the last of her stock, as it had stopped blooming in early autumn. She paid nearly triple what she should have, but she could not bring herself to waste time haggling. She walked to Collins Manor and went down to the stables, which stood adjacent to a stately coach house. As she had hoped, Tom was at work feeding and watering the horses; he set down the handles of his wheelbarrow and took off his cap when she approached.

“Morning, Miss,” said Tom, his freckled face wrinkling to see against the midday sun. “I’m sorry, but the master is away on business. Won’t be back until next week, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, thank you, Tom,” she began. “Mr. Collins and I spoke before he left—he wishes me to continue learning to ride in his absence. He said that as long as I stay within a few minutes’ ride of the estate, I should be safe enough.” Her cheeks flushed a bit at the boldness of the lie, but she held the man’s gaze steadily. Her fingers, white-knuckled and clenching, were buried in the thick fabric of her riding coat.

Tom frowned and scratched his head. “Well, Miss, I know the master has let you ride the estate before on your own, but he ain’t here to look after you. Supposing your horse spooks, supposing you get hurt--”

“I’ll be careful, Tom, I promise. It is just that I should hate to be idle in my learning because Mr. Collins is not here. He told me once that the one thing he cannot abide is idleness.”

Tom let out a grin and replied, “Indeed, you are too right, Miss. It’s well enough I know the master’s opinion upon that subject.” He appeared to deliberate another moment or two before his posture relaxed and he put his cap back on. “I suppose if you’re careful, you can ride for a little while. Wait here, Miss, and I’ll saddle Sable for you.”

After several minutes, Tom led the dun mare out from the stables and helped Claire mount. She hooked her knee around the pommel and slipped her foot into the stirrup, adjusting her weight to sit as straight as she could manage. She still felt uncomfortable on horseback, but Sable at least appeared to be getting more comfortable with her--the mare stood motionless as Tom handed Claire the reins. As the man stepped back, Claire nodded at him and spurred the mare into a walk, heading down the path into the fields of the estate. She rode for a half hour or so within Tom’s line of sight, and then went around the orchard. Once the barren trees were between her and the stablehand, she rode east to meet the road leading out of Aidhne.

She followed the dirt road for several kilometers until she saw a blackthorn thicket; she slowed Sable with a gentle tug of the reins and stopped her next to a low stone wall. Claire looped the reins around a tree branch and after a few false starts managed to climb down, using the wall as a makeshift mounting block. She pulled a

small knife from her bag and cut several switches of the dry, brittle blackthorn wood, though not without pricking her fingers. She mounted again, rather clumsily, and with a few murmured words of thanks to the patient mare she continued down the lane.

Claire rode for half an hour or so, scanning the trees for any sign of a gap where a path might lay. She rounded a corner and as the mare turned to follow the road, Claire pulled her to a stop. It was the path from the dream--it was overgrown with brambles and brush, but she could see where branches and twigs had been trampled. She urged Sable forward again and slowly rode through the underbrush, the brambles tearing at her skirts. The mare took no notice of the thorns, but did stop to grab several mouthfuls of the long grass that grew along the path. After a few minutes, the path opened up to a great pit of stone and earth, surrounded by green hills and fields. The mare stopped, and Claire tied the reins to a low branch and slid off onto a fallen log. Her boot slipped for a moment, but she steadied herself against Sable, who was reaching for the grass once more.

Claire gazed down into the ringfort, and saw the iron bars over the low stone opening in the ground. She dug in her rucksack and removed a coil of sturdy rope--this she laid over the mare's back, and, producing a lump of sugar from her pocket, led Sable down the circular dirt path into the pit. When they reached the bottom, Claire walked over to the iron bars on the north wall and bent down to look into the chamber. There was just enough daylight spilling in to reveal the large shape of the bull, lying on the damp earth of the floor. He did not move when she called to him, so she began weaving the rope in and around the bars. She secured the rest of the rope's length to Sable, and with the promise of another lump of sugar persuaded the horse to begin hauling on the iron bars. After a few moments, there was a creak and a loud bang as one corner of the fitted

bars sprang free--Sable started and rushed away from the noise, tearing free the rest of the bars before pulling up short at the other end of the ringfort's high walls. Claire gentled the horse and gave her the sugar, and when the horse shook herself and began grazing, Claire approached the opening in the floor of the pit.

She looked down, and was not entirely certain that she would be able to climb back out once she went in. She craned in further, and saw a few loose stones in the wall that would make suitable footholds. She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart and climbed down into the dim earthen chamber. The bull had not moved, even with the commotion of the prior few minutes, and Claire was chewing her lip with worry as she knelt beside him. The *púca* was thin--thinner than Claire had ever seen a living animal. His sides moved in and out shallowly, and his eyes were closed. She opened a canteen of water and splashed some around the bull's mouth; he did not respond immediately, but after a few moments the black lips and tongue began to move. She gave him the water a little at a time, until the canteen was nearly empty. She touched his once-powerful neck, and with her other hand drew out her small knife and began to cut the harness that now hung loosely over his wasted frame. The harness fell to the floor, and Claire pulled the blackthorn branches and the meadowsweet out of her bag.

Claire tied the branches into a bundle with the meadowsweet, and laid them upon the earth. She turned back to the bull--his eyes had opened a crack, but he made no effort to move. She brandished the knife and pricked the *púca*'s drooping ear; great dark drops of blood welled up, and these Claire caught in her hand and smeared upon the fragrant bundle of wood and herbs. She gasped as she felt the stock lurch in her hands, and she dropped it and let it roll away. It grew bigger, and the bull seemed to grow smaller--in a

moment, a black bull lay where the blackthorn bundle had fallen, and a man lay prone in the damp dirt.

The blackthorn-bull did not move as Claire approached it and tossed the harness over its body--she did her best to make it look intact, at least on the side that faced the opening in the ceiling. She rushed to the man and rolled him over, sitting him up to pour water from the canteen into his mouth. He swallowed and stirred, and his eyes flickered open; instead of vibrant gold, they were a dull brown. A trickle of blood ran down the side of his sunken face, and Claire grabbed her handkerchief and pressed it to tip of his long black ear.

“*Púca*,” she said, “I have come to get you out, but you must help me. I cannot carry you out of this tomb, nor can I ride back to the manor with a strange man slung over my horse. I know you are very tired, and weak, but can you be...smaller?”

The *púca* stared at her, and when he made no answer Claire was afraid he was too far gone. But then his brow furrowed and his back arched, and with great effort he grew smaller and patches of black fur erupted over his face. In a moment, Claire held a small black rabbit. Without a moment’s hesitation, Claire tucked the rabbit into her cloak and climbed out of the chamber.

After leading Sable over and dragging the iron bars back over the opening in the ground, Claire walked the horse up and out of the ringfort and back to the fallen log. She rinsed the blood from her hands with the last of the water. After several attempts to mount without dropping the *púca*, she finally settled her weight into the saddle and spurred Sable on. The sun was still high in the sky, so she hoped she had not been so long that Tom would question her.

Claire grew more and more anxious as she rode back, but she steeled herself as she rode through the fallow fields and approached the stables. Tom was still mucking the stalls out--she must not have been gone for as long as she had feared. He waved to her, and leaned his rake up against the wall.

“How was your ride, Miss?” he asked as he helped her dismount.

Claire brushed off her skirts and smoothed her hair, giving Tom a smile that she hoped did not betray her nerves. “Productive, Tom. I think I shall be able to keep up with Mr. Collins soon.” She felt the rabbit shiver under her cloak, and drew the red cloth tighter around herself. “I must get home though. Thank you for your help.”

Tom doffed his cap and told her she was very welcome, and Claire set off at a brisk pace. When she walked into her room and locked the door, the rush of excitement and fear that had driven her began to drain away. Her hands shook as she loosened her cloak and gingerly laid the rabbit on her bed. He opened an eye for a moment, and his nose and long black ears twitched. Claire removed her cloak and riding coat, and started a fire in the hearth. After she put a kettle of water on, she glanced back at the *púca* and started when she saw that he was once more in a man’s shape.

“*Púca!*” she hissed, striding over to the bed and drawing the curtains shut, “I cannot keep you here like this, you must stay as a rabbit if I am to be able to hide you!” But the *púca* did not respond, even when she took him by the shoulder and shook him.

Claire stared at the *púca*, who was sprawled haphazardly across her bed in dirty clothes. Pushing decorum and etiquette to the wayside, she stripped him of his outer layer of clothing and tossed the soiled jacket and breeches in a pile on the floor. Her nose wrinkled at the scent of blood and stale sweat emanating from his prone form--she

supposed it had been months since he had the strength or occasion to clean himself. She pulled the kettle off the fire before it boiled and poured the warm water in a bowl which she placed on her bedside table.

Although she told herself it should be no different than when she had bathed her mother during her fevers, her cheeks flushed faintly as she removed the rest of the *púca*'s clothing and washed him. He did not stir, which she was grateful for--she did not know if she could look him in the eye.

When she was finished, she pulled the blankets over him and watched him for a moment. The *púca* was so still that if it were not for the shallow rise and fall of the blanket, Claire would have thought him dead. She tried once more to wake him and give him water, but the most she got was a brief flutter of his dark eyelashes.

After she finished her supper, she sat at her small table, unsure of what to do now that her bed was occupied. She laid her spare blankets out on the floor and threw more peat on the fire before removing her outer garments and curling up in her makeshift bed. She glanced toward the *púca* once more, but he lay still. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, despite the anxiety slowly gaining ground in her breast.

She woke the next morning and immediately turned her gaze to the bed. The *púca* lay in much the same position as she had left him last night, though he had pushed the blankets down to free his shoulders. She could see him shivering, and she added more turf to the smoldering remains of the fire. Claire walked over to the sleeping creature and watched the rapid, shallow movement of his chest as he breathed. Cold sweat plastered his dark curls to his forehead, and she brushed them out of his face with her fingers. She set a pot over the fire and dressed herself before walking next door to the inn's tavern,

where she purchased a small bottle of milk. She made a simple porridge in the pot and left it to cook.

She sat at her table and stared at the man in her bed. What was she going to do with him? He stirred briefly, and then lay still once more. She ladled out some porridge into a bowl and poured a glass of milk; she brought these to the bed and gently touched his shoulder to wake him. His sunken eyes opened slowly, and he flinched when he saw her looming over him. "It is alright," she said, "you are safe. Please, try to drink something." She held the glass of milk to his lips, and he tried to raise his arm to grasp it but could not muster the strength. He drank slowly, cautiously, and then closed his eyes again. Already Claire liked his colour a bit better--he was still pale, but not the deathly white he had been yesterday.

Claire frowned at the state of his matted, damp hair, and after she heated some water she leaned him back over her small basin and washed it for him. He shivered despite the warmth of the water, and once it was clean she gently combed out the tangles. She coaxed him into eating a few bites of the porridge, and let him sleep once more.

She made a stew of potatoes and herbs for supper, and woke him. This time, with her help he was able to sit upright against the pillows and he ate two bowls of stew. As she moved to take the dirty bowl away, the *púca* touched her forearm in a weak gesture.

"Thank you," he said, his voice a scant echo of its usual bold, smooth tones. Claire gave him a small smile in answer, and set about washing his clothes while he dozed off once more. The next morning, Claire was making breakfast when a loud knock sounded on her door. She nearly dropped the bottle of milk in horror--she could hear her mother and father talking outside. The *púca* bolted upright in her bed, and if she hadn't

been so panicked Claire would have burst out laughing. Not only did she have a man in her house, he was naked in her bed, and his only clothes were hanging on the line outside. The *púca* stared at her in alarm, ears back.

“Stay in here!” she said, and put on a smile for her parents and opened the door. Her mother and father kissed and hugged her, and explained that they came to visit her because she could rarely get away to visit them. Her youngest niece and nephew jumped up and down and greeted her. Claire stepped outside and pulled the door behind her, but before she could close it the entire way her nephew ran into her room.

Claire froze in horror, and her heart sank when the little boy yelled, “Nana! Come see!”

Feeling she had no choice, Claire opened the door fully and stepped into her room, not wanting to even look. Her nephew held a sleek black rabbit against his chest, its long legs dangling in the air. Claire nearly wept with relief.

“Where did you get him, Auntie?” her niece asked, rushing to stroke the rabbit’s head and long silky ears.

“I found him in a trap off the north road,” she said, and the *púca* cocked his head and stared at her with one golden eye. “Be gentle with him,” she told her nephew, “he’s still hurt.” The boy gingerly put the rabbit down, and the *púca*, playing along, feigned a limp on his rear leg. While the children gentled and stroked the rabbit, Claire talked with her parents, and after a few minutes they all went down to the pub for lunch.

When Claire came home a few hours later, the *púca* was still a rabbit curled up on her bed. She set down the clothes and started to run her hand from the base of his head down the soft fur of his back, then abruptly pulled her hand away. He seemed weak and

helpless, especially like this, and it was too easy to forget that this was an ancient, wild creature. She had grown familiar with him, but he had made it very clear at their first meeting that he had killed humans before. Claire felt incredibly foolish--what if he had hurt her family? Her little niece and nephews? Her knees gave out and she sat down hard on the bed, and the *púca* woke. His bright eyes scanned the room and when he saw that they were alone, he released his hold on the rabbit's shape and after a moment he was a man again. His long, pale limbs trembled as Claire handed him his clothes and turned away to allow him to dress. Her face felt hot as she waited, and she heard occasional curses, some she recognized and others in a tongue she did not know.

"I need help," he said, and when Claire turned she was relieved to see that it was just the buttons on his shirt that he could not manage. His hands shook violently, and Claire gently pushed them down and perched on the bed next to him. She was keenly aware of their proximity as she did one button after the other, and her eyes flicked to the hollow of his throat as her fingers deftly finished the top buttons. She felt warm--too warm, so she got up and made the *púca* some food. After he ate, he lay still and closed his eyes.

"Thank you," Claire said softly. The *púca* regarded her, his golden-brown eyes curious. "Thank you changing your shape today, even though you were so weak. I think my mother would have died of shock if she walked in and found you as you are now." Claire shook her head and smiled, the relief still palpable. She walked over to the bed and set a cup of water on the nightstand.

"You are welcome, Claire," the *púca* said, watching her. "Though I must say, I felt it was hardly in my own best interest to be caught naked in the bed of a pretty young

woman by her parents.” He gave her a weak grin, and she smiled back at him, pleased to see that he was regaining some of his spirit. He closed his eyes again, and without thinking Claire reached out to brush a stray curl out of his face. She caught herself before she got close and dropped her hand back to her side--she had grown too familiar with him.

The next morning, the *púca* was gone.

Claire went to Collins Manor the next morning and did her best to act like it was any ordinary Monday. She sat at her little table and stripped the cover off of the next book in the pile--a collection of folk wards against fairies. She finished freeing the pages from the damaged cover, and began to measure the book.

The door opened suddenly, and Mr. Collins strode in. He was still dressed in his riding clothes, and his face was flushed from the cold. He tossed a small linen bundle on the table. He did not speak to her as he removed his black hat, and poured himself a glass of brandy. He drained it in one motion, and poured himself another, setting the decanter down sharply. He threw himself into the scarlet armchair and watched her, brooding.

“Open it,” he said, nodding towards the bundle of linen on the table between them. Claire hesitated for a moment, and then lifted the corner of the fabric. She felt as if a great fist had seized her heart in its grip--a dried slip of meadowsweet, still fragrant, lay on the linen.

“Did you not think that I would return to the ruin? I have spent every waking moment of the last twenty-two years looking over my shoulder, expecting to see that damned creature finally catching me unawares. I have spent years studying ways to free myself from this curse--did you really think that I would not be vigilant til the end?”

Claire's face was hot with shame--she had hoped that the stock would fool him if he did not get too close, but of course he would not leave anything to chance. But then again, she thought, taking a little courage, the *púca* was free because of her.

"This is my fault. I knew you were clever, and curious--I should have known you would not be able to mind your own business, or have the sense to do as you were told." He took another long gulp of brandy, and fixed her with his dispassionate stare. "That's why I asked you to marry me--I grew tired of the giggling, wanton girls I spent my youth dallying with. You--you are something different. I wanted you."

Claire watched him as he spoke, and hot tears stung her eyes. A part of her wanted to believe him--to believe that he had seen her, truly seen her, and wanted her for his own. But he had lied to her with no hesitation before, so the words rang hollow.

"Come here, Claire. I must tell you something," Mr. Collins said, his voice low and aching. He held out his hand to her, and the memory of his lips on hers, of his fingers tangled in her hair made her rise from her seat and go to him. Dread filled her as she approached--he was going to tell her to leave. To leave, and never return. She did not know whether she truly wanted to marry him after what he had done, but the idea of being sent away terrified her. He took her hand in his own, and Claire trembled at its warmth. He looked at her, his eyes dark and distant, and then slammed her against the wall.

His hand wrapped around her throat with a crushing strength, and she instinctively clawed at his grip. Her face began to redden as she gasped for air, and her feet scrambled for purchase as he raised her from the floor.

“You have left me no choice, Claire,” he said darkly, his nostrils flaring with his efforts. “You have very nearly cost me everything I have worked for. The creature is unshackled, but the bargain still stands, unfulfilled. I will return him to his bonds, but you? I cannot allow you to remain.”

Claire tried to speak, but darkness lapped at the edges of her vision. She went limp as she swam in and out of consciousness, and Mr. Collins released her. She collapsed, drawing rapid, rattling breaths that echoed in her ears. Mr. Collins sat on his heels in front of her, holding her jaw roughly. She tried to speak, but she could only make a small, choked sound.

“I know what you are trying to say, so do not waste your breath. You will say that you promise not to tell anyone of what you have learned, that you will go away and never trouble me again.” Claire nodded furiously, her grey eyes bloodshot and pleading. “But I know you, Claire. I know that you will not be able to help yourself, just as you were unable to listen to my commands.”

Claire mouthed the word ‘no’, but Mr. Collins reached behind him and seized the fire iron in his hand. It was long and straight, made of dark iron with a wicked point on the end. “It will be the easiest thing in the world, you know,” he told her. “Multiple people have witnessed me warn you not to go near the bull, and yet you did not listen. The bull has killed before; no one will doubt me when I say that it gored my bride-to-be.” He gripped her neck once more and placed the fire iron at her belly.

A deafening crash filled the air as the wall of the drawing room exploded. Splinters of wood flew in every direction, and great hooves clattered upon the floor. The black bull bellowed, and the terrible roar echoed off the high ceilings, filling the room

with sound. In an instant Mr. Collins released Claire and turned towards the sound. The *púca*, who was turning back into a man, leered at Mr. Collins, all of his pointed teeth bared in a wild grin.

“John Collins! I have come to collect on our bargain!” the *púca* cried in a high, dreadful voice; the bull’s roar lingered underneath it in a low echo. The air reeked of blood and thunder--Claire’s eyes burned and watered from the overpowering smell. Mr. Collins stood motionless, his knuckles white upon his makeshift weapon.

“Our bargain is not yet ended, beast,” Mr. Collins ground out between clenched teeth. “I have not given you what you asked, nor will I ever. What use could a creature like you have for a Christian name?”

The *púca* hissed and his black ears pointed backwards, giving him the air of an angry cat.

“It does not matter what use I have for it--what matters is that it was promised to me, and I shall have it!” The *púca* dashed across the room and grappled with the other man. Mr. Collins struck the *púca* about the head with the fire iron, and Claire saw the creature’s skin blacken and begin to smoke where the iron had touched it. Undeterred, the *púca* wrapped his long fingers around Mr. Collins’ throat and tossed him across the room, where he struck the wall and crumpled like a rag doll.

“You think mere iron will be enough to stop me, John Collins? I am old, older than even you know. Did you read that I could be slain by iron in one of your fairy-tale books?” The *púca* gestured dismissively to the heavy tomes that lined the bookshelves.

Mr. Collins was coming to, and he shook his head to clear the ringing in his ears. The *púca* was on him in an instant, and he effortlessly dragged Mr. Collins back to his

feet. Claire was struck by how similar the men looked--two tall, lean figures in dark clothes with unruly brown hair. The *púca* began to *pull* at Mr. Collins; he seemed to be intent on tearing him into two pieces. Mr. Collins screamed.

Claire spoke in choked, croaking voice, "*Púca!*"

The creature paused for a moment, his ears flicking backwards to where Claire sat. She struggled to her feet. "*Púca*, if you stop--if you stop this folly, I will give you what you are owed. I will give you a name."

The *púca* turned to her, his bright eyes regarding her with interest. "You wish me to spare this man? He appeared to be in the process of murdering you when I arrived."

"Yes, I wish--I wish you to spare him. Not for his sake, but for mine. Please do not make me watch you kill a man." Claire was struggling to breathe--the effort of speaking was too much. The *púca* approached her, and squatted in front of her. He reached out and traced the livid marks on her neck with a long finger--his touch was blessedly cool against her burning throat.

"What name will you give me, Claire Featherfew?" His voice was soft, his golden brown eyes wide and curious.

Claire drew several breaths that hitched in her chest--her shoulders heaved with the effort.

"John," she gasped out. "John Collins."

Mr. Collins, who was slumped against the opposite wall, looked startled at her words. The *púca* smiled widely, his eyes crinkling at the corners, evidently delighted by her choice.

“A fine name, my dear Claire, but there is a problem with it. Surely there cannot be two men named John Collins in Aidhne.” The *púca* rounded on Mr. Collins, and took a few threatening steps towards him.

“No--no, there cannot be,” Claire agreed, drawing in air through her nose and releasing it in pained bursts of speech. “But--but Collins Manor surely needs a beast of burden to plow and--and draw the mill.” Her grey eyes fixed on her former betrothed, and Mr. Collins gave her a stricken look.

Unadulterated glee rolled off the *púca* in waves. He strode over to John Collins, and touched him once upon the forehead. Long white horns burst from the man’s head, and he bent double as his fingers fused into hooves. His moans of “no” turned into the lowing of a bull. In a few moments, all that was left of Mr. John Collins was a black bull, who looked about dumbly and swished his tail. The *púca* turned to Claire with a self-satisfied smile. He picked up the black hat from the hat-stand, and placed it upon his head--it covered the bull’s ears and he looked like a perfectly ordinary gentleman.

The *púca* noticed Claire watching the bull warily, and said, “Oh, do not worry about him—I am able to keep my mind while in a beast’s shape, but a man’s sensibilities are overshadowed by the animal. He will not recall his grudge.” The bull huffed, and lashed its tail back and forth. “I think,” the *púca* amended hastily.

“Mr. Collins?” a bewildered voice called from outside. A freckled face with a shock of red hair above it peered into the room through the enormous hole in the wall. Tom looked about at the destruction, his jaw slack and mouth open.

“Tom, my dear lad!” the *púca* cried, “We’ve had some trouble with the bull, as you might have gathered. He’s given my lady quite a fright!”

Tom looked from the *púca* to the bull, and then to Claire, whose labored breathing and white face certainly supported this version of events.

“Please take him to the barn, Tom. We’ve had quite enough excitement for one day, I think.” The *púca* walked over and clapped Tom on the shoulder. The lad looked at the bull with apprehension, but the *púca* smiled encouragingly. “I believe you will find him a changed animal! Perhaps charging through the wall knocked some sense into him.”

Tom stared at this strange man who looked like his master, but did not speak like him at all. He opened his mouth, but the *púca* cut him off. “Tom, my lad, I have decided to make you the stable master. I’ve seen you with the horses, not to mention the bull. You’ve risked life and limb working with such an ill-tempered beast, and must be compensated accordingly.” Tom was so delighted by this that, stammering his thanks, he doffed his shabby hat several times and led the bull out through the hole in the wall without much difficulty.

“What will you do now, *pu*--Mr. Collins?” Claire asked. She regarded the *púca* as he walked about the drawing room, looking at his newly acquired possessions with great interest.

“Oh, my dear Claire, I think I shall travel. See the world. I have had my fill of Collins Manor for a long time.” He paused his pacing in front of her, his bright eyes studying her face.

Claire furrowed her brows. “But who will manage the estate?”

“I was hoping that you might, Claire. You are so very clever and capable, after all.” The *púca* searched her face, watching for her reaction. She eyed him shrewdly, mulling the idea over.

“I could, but an unmarried woman would hardly be permitted to live at a gentleman’s estate and manage his affairs,” she said, frowning. “Perhaps...perhaps I should still marry Mr. Collins in the spring.” Claire glanced at the *púca*—his face remained blank for a moment, and then he quirked an eyebrow at her, a smile tugging at his lips. “It needn’t be anything more than a marriage in name only, of course...” she clarified. Claire felt color rise in her cheeks at her boldness, but she held his gaze, determined.

The *púca* beamed at her, and took her hand and kissed it.

“Claire, I would be delighted to marry you.”

He stepped closer, watching her with his bright eyes; after another moment, he leaned towards her and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of her mouth. His lips were cool on her flushed skin, and as he pulled away Claire turned and caught his mouth with her own. The *púca* made a soft noise of surprise and stilled for a moment, and then she felt his lips move against hers, reciprocating. Her heart pounded in her chest, and the faint taste of cinnamon and clove and wildness made her feel distinctly alive, and glad to be so. She did not know how long they were locked together, except to say that when they separated, the golden-brown of his eyes was nearly swallowed by the black pupils and his lips were flushed and a little swollen.

Claire leaned up toward him and rested her head against his. “I am afraid I must alter the terms of this marriage,” she murmured.

The *púca* wrapped one lean arm around her back and held her against him. “Oh? And what terms would you alter?” The words sent shivers down into Claire’s belly as his lips brushed against her ear.

“I no longer think a marriage in name only will be satisfactory.” The *púca* smiled and expressed his agreement with his lips along a particularly ticklish part of her neck. Claire let out a soft peal of breathless laughter and steadied herself with a hand on his chest.

“Please tell the servants that I have left on business once more and shall not return until the spring for our wedding. Until then, I leave the estate in your capable hands,” the *púca* said. She kissed him again, chastely, and then the *púca* strode out of the hole in the wall, saddled the finest horse in the manor, and rode out from Aidhne.

Claire collapsed into the scarlet armchair, exhaustion finally overtaking her. Her throat ached and burned, and she felt a severe headache coming on. Yet she could not help the smile that played at the corners of her mouth, and she looked around at all the fine possessions and books that were now, in essence, hers. Claire knew there were affairs to settle, messages to be relayed, not to mention a large hole in the wall of the room she was currently resting in. Instead, she reached out and pulled a thick tome from the shelf, and split it open, running her fingers along the lovely illustrations and letters. She leaned back into the chair and settled down to read, the warmth of the fire wrapping around her in a comforting embrace.

