

## The Casque

“Ach, lad! Are ye ready t’be off?”

Reilly turned around fast. “Granda, ye scairt me!” He gasped. His hands clutched at the smooth box he had been polishing. It evaded his grasp and tumbled to the floor with a sullen *thump*. He stooped down to pick it up and dusted off the worn surface, face flaming like a sudden sunset.

“Reilly! ‘Ow many times ‘ave I told ye to watch what yer doing?” Murdoch shouted, grabbing the trinket from his hands. With trembling, arthritic fingers he caressed the dark surface. “I’ll not be lettin ye fool with this anymore.” His old face suddenly crinkled into a rare smile. “Now come on, tis almost time.”

Reilly cocked his head to one side as the old man left, his mind returning to the silken feel of the box in his hands. *Faerie box*, he thought with disgust as he grabbed the broom. *I’ll bet. If that thing can catch a faerie, I’ll eat my hat.* The straw broom swished over the bare planks. *It’s strange, though. That box has a – a feel about it. Almost like – like I never wanted to let it go.* He laid the broom by the wall and shook his head. That was a bit silly, wasn’t it? An enchanted box! *Maybe made by faeries after all*, he thought dryly as he turned to leave. The room looked back at him, bare and silent and smelling of wood chips. Nothing enchanted here. *Faerie box*, he thought again. *Right.*

Murdoch was a fousty old man, and a bit of a miser. Age had stooped his back and twisted his fingers into gnarled claws. He had a skin of iron, thick and unpenetrable, and a mind like a steel trap. Murdoch thought of Reilly as clay – tough, but just soft enough to squeeze around the edges and shape into something that would harden and last. That was the way Murdoch liked it.

He laid the box on the table as he packed his rucksack. The box smelled faintly of thyme and old wood, an odor that matched the generations it had spent traveling from one corner of Ireland to another. “Passed down from the Sheoques,” Murdoch was fond of telling visitors. “It’s a Faery Casque, you know.” And they would smile and nod and waggle their fingers in goodbye as they hurried out the door. Murdoch had that effect on people.

Riley’s footsteps sounded from outside the door and a moment later he was inside, out of breath and carrying an armful of pure white roses.

“Where’s the thyme?” Murdoch growled.

“I di’nt have enough arms,” he panted, laying the roses gently next to the wooden box. “I’m right on it.” And he dashed outside again, opening his pocketknife as he went.

Murdoch eyed the roses. Absently he counted them, picking off thorns as he went – three, four, all the way to nine. Nine perfect white roses. He sat down at the table and began removing the petals, laying them in a neat pile by the box.

Reilly's pale face appeared a few minutes later. He carried a sprig of thyme in one hand and held a swelling thumb to his mouth. "Prickt it on a thorn," he mumbled as he laid the thyme on the woodblock table. Crushed rose petals littered the wooden surface and the box was half-full of them. Reilly watched curiously but didn't speak.

Murdoch finished grinding the rose petals and set to work on the thyme, tearing it to slivers with practiced fingers. The arthritis seemed to have disappeared. Reilly watched with cautious amazement as the old man sliced the thyme into small pieces and placed it gently – *lovingly*, he thought – into the wooden box. It took the boy a minute to realize that Murdoch was humming under his breath. Reilly sat down across the table and cocked his head.

"What ye doin all that fer?"

"Tha's secret," he answered gruffly, placing the lid on the box and dusting off his hands. "Is yer bag ready or do I 'ave to do that fer ye, too?"

"No! Tha's done," the boy answered quickly. "Want me t'get it?"

"If ye wants t'be goin with me then I think ye better," Murdoch replied. A twinkle of excitement glittered in his eye. "An' be quick with it!"

So he was.

The heather waved in the wind as they tramped across the lonely field. Murdoch carried the wooden box in a pouch by his side. Reilly carried both of the rucksacks, draped like corpses over his young back. He clutched a walking-stick in one hand. "In case ye gets tired," Murdoch had told him. But Reilly suspected that there was something a bit odd about Murdoch's reasoning. The telltale glint in his foggy eye gave it away.

The field was barren, edged on the west with thick firs and spruce, countered on the east with a meandering brook. The sky overhead was the thick grey of pea soup and a shivering wind knifed through the barrens. They had been walking for two days now, traveling steadily north, leaving County Meath without even a backward glance. Reilly's back ached from toting the rucksacks over hill and field. Finally, Murdoch indicated that they had reached their destination.

A gnarled oak overhung a grassy knoll, an island amidst the sea of waving heather. Murdoch laid his walking stick by the tree and instructed the boy to do the same. With a grunt, he collapsed next to the old man and threw the packs to the ground.

“Tis a’most time,” Murdoch said, looking out over the moor. “We wait now till nigh’fall. And then...” he trailed off.

“And then?”

“Then ye’ll see.”