

RUADHÁN OF THE HEATH

By a simple act of kindness, a pixie, tormented by her own kind, disregarded by magic folk of greater stature, comes to possess a coveted treasure.

Ruadhán stepped softly in the purple light from one clump of gorse bush to another. She lifted the pointed tip of her nose, whuffling slightly. Her kind tasted the air. Horses. Confirmation in the bluebell stems above her, all trampled. She'd come to the edge of a gallitrap. There were others, no doubt, strung like pearls along the forest's edge.

The fairies would have placed their own enchantments, given the occasion. But these "fairy rings" were not true fairy work. They were the work of her own kind, marauding pixies riding stolen horses in circles in the moonlight, returning them frothy and spent at daybreak. Step one foot in a fairy ring and the pixies will show themselves. Both feet, and you're trapped forever. Not technically true, of course, but they did delay one considerably.

Ruadhán fingered the torn seam of her satchel, now restitched, where the others had recently relieved her of its contents. Gold calendula petal salves, purple coneflower tea, stinging nettle tonic, dried bee balm. It had taken her a full week to replenish her stores. Their taunts still rang in her ears, and she rubbed the spot where the largest of them had pressed his foot to her head, grinding her face in the dust. She'd done them no wrong she could fathom. But Ruadhán was a healer, not a trickster, and they could not forgive her for her solemnity.

This night, the rings were pixie traps set to trap a pixie. They were meant, out of plain spite, to keep her from The Conflagration. But they would not keep her.

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Ruadhán crept into the clearing, late but unnoticed. Already the wood sprites had lit the towering pyre and the grounds were teeming, not just with moorland folk, but with creatures, large and small, from the far corners of the world: writhing basilisks, harpies, Russian firebirds, merfolk and selkies lounging in murky basins, troops of elves and dwarves.

Darting all among them were the fairies. From time before reckoning, The Conflagration was entrusted to them. Their call, sounded with a clatter of river stones against the granite hills, was amplified and repeated by all who heard it, drawing the world's magic to the clearing.

What little modesty the fairies possessed was abandoned tonight. They had donned the wings of exotic butterflies, in plush blue, dusky purple, mint green, and phosphorescent yellow. Ruadhán winced, thinking of the former owners, stunned with charms and pinioned as those prizes were wrested loose. Flouncing in their stolen finery, the fairies ordered the lesser dryads and nymphs to and fro across the clearing, as all prepared to make their exchange.

They queued wordlessly and shuffled forward, one by one, in hierarchies set down millennia ago. Each bore a token. Something rare to be cast in the fire, for the change the enchanted flames would work on the giver. Some brought relics of extinctions or ordinary things, made special by their provenance. Others, artifacts from the Age of Man: gold and silver coins, pages from books. In exchange, they sought beauty, power, sweeter songs, bolder colors, more impressive weapons, more deadly poisons.

Ruadhán enjoyed the guesswork. Which was the rarest token, the grandest prize? But she came to minister, not to barter with the flickering flames. By night's end she was tired, had applied salves and poultices, stitched torn wings, offered tonics and teas. Her last patient, a water nymph, had a large sliver in her thigh. Ruadhán had just the thing: a slender trowel, wrought from metal in the shape of a heart, which she used to push the sliver out.

"Curious!" the nymph sighed. And it was. It had been a gift from a human, led astray by pixies on a stormy night. Ruadhán had guided him from their traps to shelter, but he was old and frail, had pressed the heart to her hands as he lay dying. Now, suddenly, the thing sprang in two. In one half lay the likeness of a human baby, in the other, a curl of copper hair.

The nymph stared, agape. "Ruadh!" she breathed. A redheaded one, born of man by chance, without tricks or magic. How many

centuries, since a true ruadh lived? As the tribe of man spread far, and the coiled secrets within him underwent their great mixing, the trait of flame-colored hair had faltered. The red locks of pixies and dwarves, to which Ruadhán owed her own name, were nothing in comparison.

"What will you take for it, Ruadhán of the Heath?" the nymph asked, slyly, but Ruadhán clutched the curl to her chest. "You have sense, I see. But my dear"—she glanced from side to side—"they will never let you keep it."

Ruadhán looked up. It was true. Whispers of "ruadh," "ruadh," rippled already through the crowd. "You must exchange it as your token!" The nymph pulled Ruadhán up and pushed her toward the fire. "But hurry." A single glowing ember remained, and when the fire died, The Conflagration ended. Putting one foot before the other Ruadhán reached out with her offering. The ember sputtered, popped, and all was dark. "Did it work?" "Stupid girl, she's wasted it!"

But there came another glow. At the center of the clearing, Ruadhán, back arched, face upturned to the night, grew, her dirty little toes stretching, lithe and fine, into supple rose-petal slippers, her patched tunic shaking loose layers of snowy dandelion down, overlain with poppy petals, black at their tips. And from her back, her stunted green pixie wings already crumbling, burst forth soaring tufted frontwings and trailing

swallowtail hindwings of deep scarlet, traced in black, their frilled edges dotted with white spots.

A chill went through the clearing, and Ruadhán shivered, her new wings opening wide and snapping shut. She faltered, unused to her new height, fingered her skirts, and looked around at the now-hushed crowd. One by one, the guests fell on bended knee and bowed their heads to Ruadhán of the Heath.