

## **The Young Prince Who Looked Like an Old Man** **by Judit Ágnes Kiss**

### The Witch of the Forest Crossroads

The travelers set out towards the inner depths of the dryland. As they climbed out onto the steep shore, they saw a forest in the distance. They began scrambling forward ever faster.

Darkness and mist descended all around them as they wandered into the thick of the forest. They were marching quietly through the undergrowth when suddenly they heard a voice.

"Stop! This is my territory. Do not be so foolhardy as to take another step without my permission!"

The light of a flickering flame shimmered in the darkness, and in its glow, they saw a withered old woman who was little more than wrinkles. Her eyes had a scarlet gleam, and her long nose bent down over her lips. She was holding a knotted staff in one hand which had a blue flame dancing from its tip.

"We mean you no harm," Aldo said, but the old woman interrupted him.

"I am Azuya, the witch of the forest crossroads. And who, pray tell, are you?"

"My name is Aldo."

"Aldo? That is but a name," the old woman said. "Tell me who you are!"

"I am prince Aevus."

"Prince? That is but a rank," the witch croaked. "Prince today, but tomorrow a commoner. Tell me, who are you?"

"I am a boy who has the body of an old man because of my father's magic!" Aldo yelled. His voice was trembling with despair.

Salvia's blood ran cold. At first, she could hardly grasp what she had just heard. Then, she just stood motionless, and she could not fathom why she had not realized this sooner. For if King Erigon had used his magic to make time flow backwards so that he would be younger and younger, then perhaps the years were running the wrong way for the young prince too. She had been sad not to be able to meet the prince in person, and she had been trying to figure out who this Aldo was, and yet the explanation was right in front of her!

Her thoughts were interrupted by the witch's voice.

"And that is also not who you are. That is merely what has befallen you. Who are you?"

Aldo said nothing.

"You see? You have no idea!" the witch said, pursing her lips. "And where are you going?"

"I need to find the Time Dragon."

"And where is the Time Dragon?"

"I have no idea," Aldo whispered.

"Now you see!" the witch cackled triumphantly. "You don't even know who you are, you don't even know where you are going. And you?"

"Do you mean me?" Salvia asked, confused.

"Indeed I do. Who are you, and where are you going?"

"I don't know," Salvia replied with tears in her eyes.

"Of course you don't know" the witch said smugly. "But I can help you. Come closer! Take this."

She offered the flame flickering at the end of her staff to Aldo.

As Aldo took it, another flame started flickering at the end of the staff, and the witch offered it to Salvia.

"Take it, my girl," the witch said. "Now go, both of you. Walk through the forest and search for yourselves! You may find yourself in a stone, you may find yourself in a leaf. If you have found yourself, bring yourself here! If you have chosen well, you may go onward."

"And what about them?" Aldo asked, nodding towards the winged horse and the unicorn.

"Efirfira and Deinon will remain here with me," the witch said with an unexpected smile. "They have been carrying you for some time now. Let them rest. And Tinea knows exactly who he is and what he wants."

Salvia watched in amazement as the unicorn and the winged horse crouched at the old witch's feet like obedient dogs. Then she set off with the small blue-green flame in the palm of her hand. How would she find herself? How would she know if she were making the right choice? Why would she be a little twig or a blade of grass? At a complete loss as to what exactly to do next, she searched the ground and looked at the trees by the light of the little flame when suddenly something fell on her head. She reached out with one arm and found herself holding a tiny pinecone, and it seemed almost as if the pinecone were whispering something to her.

"I am you!" it was saying.

Salvia held it firmly in her grasp and scampered back to the witch. Aldo had already beaten her back. He was holding something with his thumb and his index finger, almost as if he were disgusted by it.

"What have you found, my boy?" the witch asked. "Do you know who you are yet?"

"A half-rotten plum!" Aldo spluttered angrily.

"You have chosen well," Azuya replied in a soothing tone, "You see that you have fallen from the tree, that you are half-rotten and are lying on the ground. All that is true. But you must also know that in this half-rotten plum there is a seed which will dig into the ground with its pointed end, and from it will sprout a whole plum tree!"

Aldo stared at the witch with his mouth agape, but she had already turned to Salvia.

"And what have you found?"

Salvia held out the little pinecone without saying a word. Azuya bent over and studied it, and then she reached out and, with her curly-fingered hand, she stroked the top of Salvia's head.

"You too have chosen well, Salvia. You are but a small thing for now, but when you ripen, the wind will carry your seeds thousands of miles."

"She knows my name," Salvia thought in amazement. "And yet I never told her!"

Azuya touched both the plum and the pinecone with the end of her staff, and then she continued.

"Take them with you, together with the flames! They will show you the way. I know you seek the Mountain of the Three Moons. I have healed Efirfira's wing, but you must cross the forest on foot. When you reach the far side of the wood, fly in the direction your compass points. If you must separate, do not be afraid, you shall find each other when you need each other. Do not rest until the light of the sun begins to blind you. Then land, and you shall find your next guide. Fear not! You are not far from your goal!"

Salvia felt the pinecone getting hot in her hand. The witch lifted her staff, and the blue flame showed them which way to go.

Efirfira got up and put her head on the witch's shoulder, and then she set off in the direction the flame had indicated. Deinon also leapt to his feet, walked over to the witch, heaved a sigh through his huge nostrils, and then followed Efirfira. Salvia watched them as they trundled off. Then, she turned back to thank Azuya, but the witch had vanished without a trace. Only her voice could be heard. She was singing.