

THE SEARCH FOR TZANATA
EXCERPT
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The moon was rising and the stars were wheeling overhead as Rom became aware of a change in the boy. He no longer lay shivering in his arms. His forehead was cool to the touch.

‘Yldich,’ he whispered, and motioned for him to come closer. ‘Look.’ Yldich bowed over Áyra and studied his face in the light of the fire. The constant shivering had stopped; his skin had taken on a slight greyish hue.

‘He—he seems a little calmer, doesn’t he?’ Rom said. ‘And his temperature has dropped...’

‘This is not the calm of health.’ Yldich’s voice was grave. ‘He’s slipping away. He’s dying.’

‘What?’ Rom turned back to Áyra. The boy’s cheeks were hollowed out, his pale skin stretched taut over the delicate bones of his face until Rom could imagine the little skull beneath. A dark sense of sadness rose from someplace deep within him and scathed his heart with fear. He turned to Yldich.

‘Make him come back.’ His voice was sharp.

‘What?’

‘You drew me back from death when I was nearly gone. I know you can do it. Make him come back.’ Yldich sighed and shook his head.

‘He may not want to, Rom.’ Rom’s eyes darkened.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Remember how I told you a *Yaever* can only help those who want to be helped. This boy has nothing left in the world. He lost everyone who was dear to him. Maybe he doesn’t want to come back.’ His voice was gentle. ‘It may be the kindest thing to let him go.’ Rom’s eyes went black.

‘No!’ He turned to Áyra. ‘*Áyra, eleárnaz éo e cãldira! Éo!*’ He grabbed the boy’s hands and felt a thread unroll from his heart. Yldich sprang up.

‘Rom, don’t!’ He was too late. Rom followed out the thread and hurled himself into the darkness. His hand linked firmly into the boy’s, he slumped to the ground. Eald came running to the fire in alarm.

‘What’s going on? What’s he doing?’ Yldich made a grumbling sound at the back of his throat.

‘The boy’s dying. And now he’s gone after him.’

He wasn’t afraid. There was no pain. There wasn’t much of anything, but a thick, swirling fog that obscured the source of the light until it seemed to come from all around him. Áyra gingerly felt his way through the fog, moving foot by foot until he came to a place where it seemed to abate a little. He still could not see where the light was coming from. It wasn’t the brilliant glare of the sun, nor was it the cool sheen of the moon.

There were shapes in the fog. The boy could just make them out; flowing, graceful shapes that were only a little too slender to seem truly human. The greatest of them stepped forward until Áyra could see the swirling hem of a bejewelled cloak, the graceful line of a many-ringed hand. Eyes like stars, or shining gems fixed on his face. They seemed to have many colours, and none at the same time. The figure towered above him. If anything, it resembled a tall, gracefully built man. His hair was like the morning fog. His gentle mouth pulled into a smile. He spread his arms. His voice was like velvet.

‘Welcome,’ he said, ‘to the realm of the Woodland King.’

‘What should we do?’ Eldairc stood looking down at the two figures lying still side by side. Yldich pulled a blanket over Rom’s legs.

‘The best we can do is watch over them. And see to it we aren’t raided by robbers during the night. The woods don’t seem to be as peaceful as they once were.’ Eald smirked.

‘Like the time when they were still haunted by ancient *Einache* warriors, you mean.’ Yldich grinned.

'I'd prefer a disgruntled ghost to a robber with a poisoned blade any day.' Rom moaned softly, his hands twitching. Eldairc stood watching it with a worried frown.

'Shouldn't you try and get him back?' Yldich shook his head.

'It might make matters worse, not better,' he said. 'Besides, he's no skinny lad anymore. He might actually know what he's doing.'

Áyra looked up at the Woodland King. His cloak was woven of leaves of many hues; from the dark blood red of autumn leaves to the fresh green of spring saplings. But when Áyra blinked his eyes, and looked again, it was of rich blue velvet, studded with star-like gems. He sighed with surprise.

'Come,' the King said. 'Tell me your name.' Áyra stepped forward and took a deep breath.

'I am the son of the *Náeria*,' he said in his clear voice. '*Elemni Áyra*.'

'An artist!' the King exclaimed. There was an awed sigh from his retinue. Áyra could see them more clearly now: white-haired lords and ladies, dressed in flowing dresses of morning mist and necklaces of dewdrop gems, tunics of rich moss-green and swords of lightning. 'Come to my banquet Hall,' the King said, and held out his hand. Áyra laid his small hand in the strong, slender hand of the King. 'You shall play for us,' the King said, and his many-coloured eyes glittered. 'And if you play well, I shall give you a Gift.'

A thought flitted through the boy's head like a ghost.

And if I don't?

Rom felt his way through the mist, his hands outstretched before him. There were no landmarks, no visible sources of light, there was nothing but the swirling white clouds. There was something odd about them. Where the light hit them they glimmered with the sheen of mother-of-pearl.

'Áyra!' he cried. There was no answer. The only thing that could guide him was the string that rolled out from his heart.

The mist parted before him. Two large shapes moved into view. They wore mail as delicate as the silvery scales of fish, and flowing cloaks of watery mist. They wielded double-handed swords of lightning. They crossed their swords and barred the way ahead.

'You cannot pass.'

'Come, sit with me,' said the Woodland King, and led Áyra through a doorway of ferns and trailing branches. Behind it was a great hall made from the living boughs of trees. At its corners stood four mighty oaks, whose age far outstretched the span of mortal men. In the middle was a long table set with delicate glass. The full moon shone on cutlery of finely wrought silver. Áyra faintly wondered about its shape. The moon had been a modest sliver of its mature self only the night before.

As Áyra sat down beside the King, a glass goblet was set before him by a maiden as slender as a young birch. She smiled mutely at him and disappeared in a trail of watery mist. The King raised his glass, and the proud lords dressed in their mail, and the slender ladies in their silks did the same.

'A toast, to our honoured young artist, that he may grace us with his company for a long time to come.'

'To the artist,' the others said, and drained their glasses. Laughter like little chimes rang through the air. Áyra eyed his goblet with his head held to one side. The liquid that swirled within had the greenish glow of swamps and mires.

'Drink,' the King said, and his eyes turned to glowing emeralds.

Áyra drank.

Rom stared at the pale knights who barred the way before him. Although they seemed hardly corporeal, they were tall and their ragged swords looked real and sharp.

'Let me go through,' he said. 'I have to find Áyra. He's just a little boy. He's sick. I know he passed this way.'

'Only children can go freely into the realm of the Woodland King,' the knight on Rom's left hand spoke. 'You cannot pass.' Rom's eyes turned to obsidian.

'I will find him,' he said in a low voice. His sword rang like a bell being struck as it was freed from the sheath. Somehow he wasn't surprised he had it with him. The knights drew up their brows.

‘Do you truly mean to fight us?’

‘Let me pass. Or I’ll have to.’ Rom took a step towards them.

There was a blinding flash of light. The light swirled around him as one of the knights raised his sword and struck the air above. The earth rumbled, and the ground under Rom’s feet started to shake. He looked down in surprise as tiny shoots appeared under his feet. A little sapling burst its way through moss and earth and grew at a rapid rate until it reached to the crown of Rom’s head. He stared at it in amazement as it sprouted branches, leaves, and more branches. He turned back to the elven knights.

‘Is that all?’ He moved forward. A sharp pain shot through his arms and back. Slender branches grew at a rapid pace and sheared through his cloak, his tunic, they scratched his skin and pierced his flesh. He cried out in pain as he was lifted up by the many-armed tree that shot up behind him. He tried to hew the branches down with his sword, but it fell from his hand as a slender bough took hold of his wrist. He struggled helplessly, like a moth caught in a web, imprisoned in the arms of the tree.

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Out this winter!