

A Tale of the Apprentice
By Tredain

The little fennec sat at the lip of the cave with his legs crossed and his staff laid across his lap. He drew in a deep breath and let it out in a long, low sigh as he watched the rain pour down over the rolling plains that stretched on for miles and miles into the distance, only the odd tree dotting the landscape. Rain was ever present on the plain and carved the hills with dozens of small rivers.

His full name was Redondor Percividius III, though everyone used Red for short.

"I thought I'd find you out here," the white wolf said as he stepped up behind the fox. Red didn't move, but let out another low sigh and closed his eyes.

"It relaxes me," he answered after a few moments passed. He opened his eyes and looked out over the wet plains. The gray sky stretched on as the rain fell in sheets against the drenched grass hills. "My mother and I used to watch the rain come down."

Arcadus leaned against the cave wall and watched the rain. A smile tugged at the corner of his muzzle as he looked down at the fennec.

"It is rather pretty, in a way. Doesn't look like it'd be much fun to trudge through."

Red gave a slight shrug.

"That's what we've got portals for. Anyway, you must have come to fetch me for some reason. What is it?" The fennec turned and looked up at the wolf with a raised brow. Arcadus' smile grew wider and his tail flicked once against the cave wall.

"I am Master of Apprentices, it is my responsibility to check on the health and welfare of all my charges," he recited, a favorite line of his. Red's brow furrowed and he turned back to the rain. Red was, technically, an apprentice. The oldest, most experienced apprentice of the Tower due to some arcane rules and a mishap with his former Master. Arcadus seemed to enjoy teasing him about it.

"And the real reason?" Red asked. The wolf's tail flicked about idly and his smile widened.

"Always see right through me. We've been given a petition. There's a merchant caravan that needs an escort, I thought you'd be very capable."

The fennec scowled. As Master of Apprentices, Arcadus was in charge of dealing with petitions to the tower for help and sending apprentices to take care of them. In turn, the petitioners paid into the Tower's coffers. Though he did enjoy teasing the fennec about being in charge of him, he was not one to torture him with seemingly menial tasks like simple escorts.

"What aren't you telling me then?" Red climbed up to his feet and gently brushed the front of his brown robe. The wolf smiled, then carefully rapped his knuckles against the cave wall. Seconds later, a mote of light formed against the wet rock before it expanded into a glowing doorway, the Tower portal room just beyond.

"The route the caravan is taking will pass near the shadowlands. They requested a few of us, but I think you can handle it by yourself," the wolf explained as he motioned with an arm toward the portal and gave an exaggerated bow. The fennec rolled his eyes but smiled a little as he passed the wolf and stepped into the portal, his staff clicking against the clean cut stone of the portal room.

The room was simple and box shaped, several raised platforms lined the walls with only a single large doorway on the north end. To the untrained eye, it was a very plain room with a few attendants and the occasional sparkle as a portal opened. To any with magical sight, however, the room was reinforced with dozens of wards written into the very stones and the iron wrought doors had powerful seals so if it came to it the room could be locked down, for centuries if need be.

Red hopped down from the platform with the white wolf right behind him as the portal to the plains winked out of existence. Arcadus pointed to a portal already open on the opposite wall.

"It's ready, if you are. The petitioner says he has supplies for you."

Red grimaced a little. "Hard tack and water, I'm sure. And how long is this expected to be?" he asked as he walked across the portal room.

"Shy of a week, they estimated. If you do run into troubles, you know to just send word," the wolf continued pace with the fox. The fox smiled inwardly, the wolf was in his 'mother hen' mode. Arcadus did truly care about his charges, he knew, though Red could have done without the personal touch the wolf seemed so committed to when it came to the one apprentice who didn't actually need it.

"Of course. I'll be fine." The fennec paused, considering if he needed any supplies of his own. His staff should be enough, he thought, and a caravan was a terrible place to bring his grimoire. Little security and many prying eyes. No need to tell anyone where he'd be with Arcadus to pass that along. He was ready.

"Alright, see you in a week," he offered before he started to step through the glowing portal.

"See you soon. Be safe, please," the wolf said, standing at the base of the platform. The fennec paused, halfway through the portal, and glanced back. Arcadus looked genuinely concerned. Always such a curious wolf, they were just about the same age and Red was more experienced and powerful than some of the senior staff. He offered a small smile.

"I'll be fine, Master of Apprentices," he reassured with a little tease all his own, then stepped through the portal. The dull gray of the portal room was replaced with a bright blue sky and several lush green trees surrounding a few buildings with thatched roofs. The Tower always tried to place portals in innocuous spots to avoid attention and any who might try to pass through unwarranted. It winked shut behind him, leaving him beside a squat building that, from the smell wafting out the chimney, seemed to be the village baker. His nose and tail twitched at the scent of fresh baked bread. He came around the building to find a bustling town square, villagers of all shapes and sizes going about their day as they went between shops or went about with daily work, chores, and errands. It was all a bit noisy for the fennec.

The caravan was spotted easily enough, several wagons sat end to end near the edge of the village. As Red approached, he guessed the caravan master to be the large tabby barking orders at several workers scrambling to load the wagons. The mage walked up and waited as the cat continued to harangue a very cowed looking beaver.

"We should have had this loaded at dawn! We are already behind schedule and those layabouts at the Tower haven't even responded to my.." Red chose that moment to make a very loud cough into his fist. The cat paused, turned to him with brow raised, then gave him the usual look. Red was used to a certain look from people, being a fennec most confused him for a child at first, then they noticed his dull robes and plain staff and jumped to conclusions usually made worse once they learned about his title.

"Oh." The cat said after a long pause. "And... you are what the Tower sent?"

Red tapped his staff into the packed dirt and gave a semi-formal bow.

"Apprentice Redondor Percivindus the Third, as requested."

The orange tabby scowled.

"I requested several wizards and they send me a single apprentice? You know we're traveling near the shadowlands, don't you? They did tell you about this request? Big monsters, teeth, tentacles, that sort of thing? My precious cargo and my workers are at risk. And they expect a single neophyte to protect all of this?" the cat waved his paw at the caravan as the last crates appeared to be loaded up. Red drew in a breath and let it out in a soft sigh.

"I assure you Master..." he let the question of the name hang in the air. The cat seemed to ignore it so the fennec pressed on "I have experience dealing with the shadowed beasts. None of you will come to harm while I am with you."

The cat's brow remained raised as he gave the fox a hard look. Finally he sighed and rolled his eyes.

"I suppose I don't have much choice, do I? Well any losses I incur will be charged directly to you stuffy white beards, do you understand, apprentice?" the cat bit into the last word in a way Red had heard a hundred times before. Nothing ever mattered to types like him once they knew his title. The fox

merely shrugged, which prompted another sigh. With one paw rubbing at his temples, the cat waved him away with his free paw.

“Do whatever it is you need to do then. You may walk and camp with the guards. We have enough rations for you, the quarter master will see to anything else you need. Try not to bother me unless it's important, will you?” Before the mage could even give an affirmative the fat cat turned from him and made his way to the covered wagon at the head of the caravan, shouting orders with every step. The porters and guards all fell in line, some on the wagons and some to either side of them. Red sighed and made a mental note to thank Arcadus for this wonderful assignment. He picked one of the back wagons and began to march alongside as the caravan lurched forward.

The first couple days passed with little trouble. Red spent the time placing wards upon each wagon and instructing the guards what to look for. The shadowlands themselves were several days from the road they traveled but the creatures that called it home had been ranging further and further out to prey on villages and even some cities. Many of the creatures merely used shadows as a means of camouflage or travel, others were living shadows that could infect the minds or souls of their victims. All of them were dangerous. The guards and porters, at least, listened attentively as they had all heard stories of the horrific beasts and their twisted homeland. Many carried holy symbols or good luck charms with them, some even asking for the mage to cast additional protective spells on them.

It was on the third day the caravan stopped to take freshwater from a small river. The wagons slowed to a stop on the worn road while several porters loaded themselves with water-skins and made their way down to the river's edge. Red wasn't paying much attention as he crunched into a piece of hardtack he could have confused for a piece of shale, until he noticed several guards gathered by a wagon already getting into a game of dice. He spotted the others as they walked down the bank.

“Stop!” he shouted and sprayed crumbs everywhere. He sprinted over the crest and down the bank, hopping over rocks and scrub brush. Most of the workers paused, turning to look up toward the mage, while one lynx was busy kneeling to dip his first water-skin.

Red nearly dove for the cat, grabbing the back his shirt and yanking him from the water's edge with as much strength as he could muster. Not a moment later, a black tentacle burst from the rushing water and smacked at the mud where they'd been standing. Red shoved the fellow aside and drove his staff into the soft loam of the bank. One shouted arcane word and his staff crackled to life with a bright light that quickly grew to a wide shield of energy cutting the tentacle off from the workers. The water thrashed and churned as more tentacles thrust from below to smack against the shield. The porters cried out and stumbled back before they turned and scrambled back up the river bank.

“BACK!” Red shouted as he drove the end of his staff into the water again. Power crackled in blue sparks from his paws and danced along the plain wood before a pulse shot through the water. A scream of rage and pain pierced up from the roiling water before something pulled itself up onto the opposite shore, a shadowed mass of tentacles that writhed angrily before climbing up the bank and disappearing into the thick underbrush.

Red stood panting with his paws gripped tightly to his staff. The bright shield flickered and faded from sight before he pulled himself from the mud of the bank, the end of his robe soaked through and his feet caked in loam.

“Is... is it gone?” the lynx, still halfway up the bank, asked as he trembled.

“For now. Don't wander from the wagons without myself or a guard. The water should be safe to collect now, I'll stand watch,” Red explained and gestured for the porters to come back down. The others looked at each other, before the caravan master barked from the ridge for them to 'well get on with it!' and they all climbed back down. They hesitated as they stood by the water until Red gave a little nod and raised his staff for them to proceed. Even as they dipped the water-skins into the rushing water they kept stealing glances at both the wizard and the opposite shore, some of them gripping tightly at their charms. Nothing more came from the water so the workers filled the bags and all of

them returned to the wagons.

The next couple days passed slowly but without incident. Everyone was on guard watching every shadow and staying in pairs as much as they could. The food improved slightly for Red as well, the lynx he saved was the quartermaster's son so his daily rations began to include some dried meats and even a small loaf of real bread. The guards and porters as well spoke more openly to him, though the caravan master still referred to him as 'apprentice', he seemed to be too busy to say much to the mage.

The caravan pressed harder than planned and toward the end of the fifth day they reached the small town wedged against a growing line of mountains. A wooden palisade stretched across the mouth of the pass, broken in the middle by a large gate. It looked to be the only way past the mountains for miles in either direction. A guard atop the gate shouted and signaled to the caravan as it approached and the gates began to open inward for them. Another guard escorted them in and lead the caravan to a wide yard so they could unhitch the beasts and get them food while the porters unloaded the wagons. Red followed along quietly and approached the caravan master as he talked with an iguana from the village.

"Everything should be in order. Once we have everything unloaded to the warehouse we can begin..." he turned to consider the fennec. "Ah, apprentice. Thank you for the service, I'll be sure to recommend others to petition the Tower."

Red waited to see if the cat would say anything more but the tabby turned back to the lizard and continued to talk business. Inwardly, the fennec let out a sigh of relief. He turned away from the cat and began to walk out of the yard, offering a small wave to some of the guards and workers who noticed his exit.

The rest of the village bustled with activity even as the sun dipped toward the horizon. It was a fair size, dozens of buildings scattered around with even a small bell tower in the center of town square. At the other end of the village was another palisade stretched between the mountains, making the town the only gateway through. Between the fortifications and guards, Red guessed they were harassed by creatures from the shadowlands more often than where they'd come from. Bandits were known to roam the mountains to pick off merchants and other travelers as well.

The fox stretched his arms up and let out a happy grunt when his back popped. His feet ached and much of him was sore from the long march. Even with frequent breaks riding a wagon it had still been tiring. He had a few coins on him, he thought as he eyed an inn near the front gate. It could be more comfortable than his room at the Tower and a nice hot meal did sound good. Then again, he considered, it would be good to see Arcadus and share a drink in the common hall. His bed at the tower wasn't too uncomfortable and there was no chance of bugs.

His mind made up, Red wandered the streets for a few moments to look for a quiet corner to cast the portal spell so he could slip away. He quickly found a small alley to duck into and clutched his staff in both paws. The portal in the cave had been active, an already established link, that Arcadus only had to nudge it open with his own power. Making a new link was a little more involved and took a little more strength. Red drew in a deep breath before he began to chant.

But no more than three words left his muzzle before his ears perked. Someone was shouting. Followed by other people. Red let the energies he'd gathered dissipate and peeked his head around the corner he heard the commotion from.

A small crowd had gathered near the back gate. Someone seemed to be having an argument with one of the guards. Not an attack, at least. Red momentarily considered going back to casting his portal but something held him there.

"I tell you, I am no mad-beast! I need passage through or someone may die!" he heard a booming voice growl over the small crowd. Curiosity piqued, the fennec ventured closer.

"No sane beast walks the day as naked as he was born! You're either mad or drunk!" the guard shouted back. Red pushed his way through a few bodies and, indeed, there stood a very large and very naked brown bear arguing with a very agitated lemur guard brandishing a spear in his face.

The fox stared. First, for the absurd spectacle of it all like the others in the crowd, but second, because something stirred inside him. Red's heartbeat began to thump a steady, fast rhythm until he could feel it in his ears as a rush of blood made them feel like they were glowing. It was hard to swallow and his grip tightened a bit more on his staff.

The bear was imposing. He was tall and wide and every inch of him was either round or thick, obvious muscle hiding under the honey pelt and slight jiggle of his gut and arms. Red had not only never seen such a big male but never seen such a large one naked either. And large he was, even between his legs, as a soft club of flesh hung over a round pair of brown balls the size of a pair of plums.

Then something glittered over parts of his fur. The mage squinted and drew on his mystical sense to really Look at the strange beast. Sigils danced across the bear's fur, over his arms and chest and along his muzzle. The runes glowed with a golden light and crawled across his large body, sometimes even forming shapes like long dragons or flowers. But the touch felt different, it was not a spell upon his body but more like a blessing, as far as the fennec could guess. He was not mad from magic manipulating him.

"Neither mad nor drunk! But I must pass!" the bear growled at the lemur. "Someone's life is at stake!"

"Yes, yours! If you do not leave immediately!" the lemur snarled back.

"What is going on here?" Red barked, stepping away from the crowd and approaching the two of them. As one they looked down at the mage, the bear a look of shock and the lemur a look of annoyance.

"Go home kit, this is none of your business," the lemur snapped and stamped the butt of his spear into the earth. Red's eyes narrowed and he snorted softly. The bear noticed with a little smirk.

"I'm not a kit. I am Redondor Percividius III, a mage of the Tower here on official business and you are both making a ruckus. What is the problem?" he answered back in his most commanding voice, making sure that little motes of light sparkled over his paws and staff. The lemur's golden eyes went wide and his fist tightened around his spear.

"I, er, Sir, I apologize. I... I was told not to let strangers into the pass without good reason and this mad-beast wandered in naked as a suckling and demanded passage! You can see he is unhinged!"

Red turned from the lemur to the bear and made an effort to not look down. This was easier as the bear towered over him so his head only reached the bear's chest. The little smirk grew a little wider as the bear's big brown eyes met his.

"And you? What's your side, er, and your name?" he asked, aware of the pounding of his heart in his ears. The bear smiled widely to him and gave a low bow with a little flourish.

"Esteemed mage, I am Brother Krayvik, a druid of the Brotherhood of the Bough and I am on a quest. I was asked to help a young wolf who had fallen ill. But no earthly disease held him, a darkness on his soul gripped him and is even now consuming him."

Red's ears perked high.

"You mean he was attacked by a shadowbeast," he said. A grave nod from the druid.

"I do. The wolf was a guard on one of the caravans through the area, no more than a week gone. I've tracked the monster here and just beyond, in the valley through the pass. If I do not slay it soon, the wolf will die."

Red turned back to the lemur and raised a brow, waiting for his answer.

"I... he did not say that...exactly..." he said, unable to meet the fennec's gaze. Red's brow furrowed.

"I will vouch for the druid. I can sense he speaks truly and so I will accompany him on this quest. If he is lying and has some other motive, I will turn him to ash where he stands and you will see neither of us again. Is that acceptable?" The both of them looked stunned at his words. Then the bear let out a loud guffaw.

"Ha! I like you little mage. I would be glad for your aid," he said and clapped a paw down on the fox's back which, if it weren't for his staff helping hold him up, would have sent Red sprawling into the dirt. Instead, he merely grunted and held very still.

"That... that is acceptable. You two may pass," the lemur granted, sounding more glad to be rid of them both. He turned and clapped his paws, signaling for the gate to be opened. The great wooden doors pulled open and the two of them walked through onto the mountain pass. As soon as they were through the doors swung back until they slammed close.

"That was very kind of you, little mage. Thank you," the druid offered as they stood there. Red's heart was still beating in his ears, something about the druid tickled a feeling deep down in the fox.

"Your intentions are noble, even if your..." he trailed off, his eyes glancing over the broad naked body "Appearance is uhm, not."

The bear laughed again.

"My order believes in the beauty of nature, to include ourselves. I admit, of course, others do not always see it that way which causes some... complications at times," he chuckled and patted his belly as they began to walk the worn path.

"So, this shadowbeast, what can you tell me about it?" the mage asked. The bear's smile turned to a serious grimace.

"Truth told, I have not seen it yet. I only know its essence from what I could cleanse from its victim. It lives in the valley ahead, but it hunts far and wide." Red's ears perked.

"One attacked our caravan not three days back, it could be the same creature."

Krayvik's brow rose, then he growled and nodded.

"The wolf I am trying to save, he was a guard for one. It attacked him as he stood a night watch. By the time they drove it off he had already fallen into a sleep they could not wake him from."

That could have been the lynx, Red thought. They walked for several minutes through the rocky path as the sun continued its dip toward the horizon.

"Can you sense it now? Is it in its lair?" he asked as they crested a rise and the valley opened up before them, narrow and dense with trees and underbrush. Krayvik closed his eyes and for a moment the mage could see the crawling sigils over his fur, twisting and writhing in a kind of dance along the bear's body. It was beautiful, in a way, and the fox didn't mind taking another look over the bear.

"It is. If we push, we may make it by nightfall," he glanced to the horizon, the sun was a fiery red as it started to just touch the mountains. Though the creatures were things of shadow, day or night made little difference to their habits or powers, only that they were harder to see at night to the naked eye. The two made their way down the path, more rocks and brush littering the earth until it started to grow dense. Not many made their way through the pass from the valley, Red presumed, so the walls were more likely to keep creatures out. He climbed over a rock, then slid down its side as the bear leapt a fallen log easily.

"This may be more slow going," Red said as they passed a few trees and found even more undergrowth, if there had been a walking path it had long been grown over. "And I'm no good with flight spells, I'm sad to say."

The bear chuckled a little but smiled and patted the fox on his back.

"None to worry little mage. Actually, I am very accustomed to traveling through the woods. If you do not feel it beneath you, you could hang on to me..." Krayvik let the question linger a moment. Red tried to hide the shock that crossed his mind. Not at the idea of being carried by the bear but rather, getting to be so close and even touch him. He swallowed hard and tried to form words.

"Er, well. No. Er, I mean that is to say, it isn't beneath me. If you could carry my staff?" he offered the plain length of wood. Krayvik smiled widely, accepted it with an 'of course, friend' then knelt down and offered his back to the mage. Red paused only a moment, the broad furry back and round bear butt before him. The bear guided him to slip his arms round his neck and with his paws clasped together, Krayvik stood as easily as if the fox weren't hanging from him at all.

"Hang tight now." Red hugged himself against the druid's back and closed his eyes, his face and ears flush with heat. Then they moved. The fennec yelped at the sudden burst of speed as the druid took one big rock in a quick leap, then hopped to another, over a fallen tangle of branches, then barreled right through a thicket of bushes. Had he not buried his head against the bear's back and squeezed his eyes shut the fox was certain the sudden motion might make him sick. But that too had its faults, as he couldn't help himself from feeling just how warm and soft Krayvik's fur was.

The two of them sped through the valley's small, dense woods, little chance for talk as the druid focused intently on their quarry. The dense canopy overhead blocked the light save for a few stray red beams but otherwise it felt as if night had already fallen for them. It all blurred by for Red as he hung on as well as he could to the bear's back.

After a long time Red felt them stop moving and when he opened his eyes they stood before a wide cave. Krayvik knelt down and let the fennec slip from his back before passing him his staff. The cave yawned wide before them, no plant life growing within yards of it and the rocks had been brushed away from something crawling back and forth over it.

"I will go in first," the bear said.

"Are you sure? You're still uh, naked," the fox batted one ear without realizing it. Why on earth did the naked bear make him feel so awkward, he wondered. Krayvik let out another belly laugh.

"I know you can see the blessing on me. Or were you looking at more than my god's touch upon me?" the bear grinned widely and winked, which made the fox's heart skip once again. If the light weren't already faded Red would have believed his face was itself a bright red.

"Very... very well, brother. I will watch your re...I will follow you," the fox stopped himself, but too late as the bear caught the word all too well.

"I'm sure you will, little mage. Be ready. Light would be good, if you can."

Red muttered a small cantrip and snapped his fingers, summoning up a small ball of light that hovered just over his shoulder. This too amused the druid.

The two of them stepped cautiously into the cave. It was wide with a high ceiling and scattered with boulders, the light orb casting distorted shadows against the walls. It wasn't long before the bear raised a paw for him to hold.

"It's here," he whispered while his eyes scanned the wall. From the shadow of one broken rock a tentacle shot outward, grabbing the bear around the ankle.

"KRAYVIK!" Red shouted, but it was too late as the shadow yanked the bear up, more tentacles slipping from the dark to grab the bear's limbs. The thing screamed and the bear growled, while the mage's hands and staff crackled with power. The druid flailed and struggled in the air, twisting and turning, the sigils on his fur flaring brightly against the monster's writhing limbs. Red tried to think of a spell he could throw that would hurt the creature but not the druid, which ruled out his usual lightning and fire. The bear's big body went one way through the air, then the other, the thing thrashing him about without hitting him against the walls or boulders. After a moment, Red paused.

"Is it... it's not trying to..." he gasped as he realized the thing wasn't trying to attack him, not directly per se.

"I think so! Please kill it! I do not think my blessing is going to keep up for long!" the bear shouted, still struggling to break free as more tentacles wrapped his body. Everything about the druid had to be awkward, the mage thought with an inner scowl. Thinking quickly, Red tossed the light orb so it hovered toward the ceiling to cast its light over everything. Then, with both paws gripping his staff, he charged at the shadows where the tentacles were emerging from. Power crackled from his small form and traveled along his staff until he thrust it forward at the thick tangle of writhing shadows. The shadowbeast screamed, a loud piercing cry as the end of the staff stabbed into its body. Forcing every mote of power through the wood Red let out a guttural cry and burned the thing to its core, the tentacles cracking with flame until the whole creature tore apart with a loud crack.

Krayvik's body crashed to the cave floor with a hard thud. A deep groan rumbled out of the bear

before Red had a moment to panic. He sat up, then climbed to his feet while brushing small rocks out of his fur. His sigils still glowed faintly over his round body.

"So, did it really just try to..." Red asked as he watched the last scraps of the thing curl into ash on the cave floor. The bear actually looked a little bashful for once, then let out another chuckle.

"Yes. The Twilight Stag, my order's god, his blessing is a... unique form of protection. Violence and anger are easier to turn to other ends, if only temporarily."

"So, everything wants to fuck you, before it fights you," the fox blurted out. This set the bear laughing.

"Oh, everything, you think?" the bear grinned down to him. Red's mouth clapped shut, aware again of that rush of heat to his face and ears. Krayvik chuckled and patted his paw against the fox's shoulder. "I only tease my friend. My blessing has no effect on your type."

This did little to put Red at ease, more so as the bear snickered and began to walk out of the cave. He followed behind, his heart still racing for more than a couple reasons by then.

"Do you plan to head back through the town? The guards will probably be none too glad to see us so soon," he asked as they left the cave and stepped back into the tree line. Krayvik shook his head.

"With the creature dead, I can take my time and travel over the mountains. The wolf I spoke of should already be recovering. And you have a portal to take, don't you?" the bear smiled down to him.

"I could, but it has been a very long journey and I think a night's rest would do me good." The bear's smile grew wider still.

"I agree, little mage," he answered and the two of them pushed back into the valley's wood. It did not take them long to find clearing, the fox's light orb still giving them enough to see by. Soft grass cushioned their paws and they gathered a few stones and twigs for a fire. Red sank to his knees, then sat down, the little light orb gliding down onto the stack of tinder. A whispered word and another snap of his fingers made the orb pop, a little spark of power that caught the wood on fire. Krayvik smiled as he settled down onto a log.

"Magic comes naturally to you, doesn't it? You treat it as easily as one breathes or blinks," the bear said. Red's ears perked, then one twitched. He wasn't used to being complimented.

"Er, yes. I suppose it does. I've been at the Tower for a long time. No one understands why I still carry the title of apprentice, they merely assume I'm still learning."

The bear crooked a brow.

"Why are you still an apprentice then? If I may ask, little mage."

The fox smiled a little and looked down to the fire. Krayvik took a stick and gently prodded the burning wood around so it might collapse on itself easier.

"When I began at the Tower, each apprentice was bonded to a single master, a senior wizard to teach and train them until they performed the rite to become a full fledged wizard. My master happened to be one of the most powerful of the Tower. Unfortunately, he was also one of the oldest. He... died before we could complete my ritual." It was not a story he told often, usually because no one bothered to ask.

"What did he die of?" the bear leaned in with his curiosity. Red scowled.

"Old age." The bear guffawed, but quickly turned it into a cough. The fox chuckled.

"No, you're right. Wizards generally don't simply die like that. They have spells, wards, they take potions. They do almost anything in their power to extend their life. But my Master must have forgotten something because he just... died. In his sleep. The other wizards of the tower were aghast. It simply hadn't occurred to them it could happen to one of their own like that. So from then on, one young wizard was appointed as a Master of Apprentices to help train the new acolytes to the Tower, making sure they were learning from the senior staff and using them for petitions. Unfortunately for me, I was still bound using the old ritual. My master is the only one that can complete it with me. So, I am forever Red the Apprentice."

Krayvik listened intently, nodding along as the fox explained. He smiled.

"I did not know Wizards were so bound to ritual and tradition. It is much the same as with gods and spirits. They can be quite a pain in the ass," the bear chuckled, though the fox believed he was being literal. "You, though, little mage. Something about you. Your fire is not like others."

Red glanced at the campfire and raised a brow.

"What do you mean?" he asked. The bear laughed.

"Ah, I am sorry. No, not this fire. Your inner fire. My brothers and I, we can see into a person. Some of us call it a person's light, their life essence, or their inner fire. It is a sort of glow, it varies from person to person. Some, theirs is as bright as a star, others flicker like a guttering candle. But yours. Yours is different from most I have seen."

Red glanced down at himself.

"What do you see then?"

"Grey. Solid grey" The fox's ears fell. The bear laughed again. "No no, it is not bad. You are.. you are completely sure of yourself. You know who you are more than any other person I have met, even so briefly. You are full of surprises to me, little mage. I quite like surprises."

Red felt the heat in his face again. He liked to surprise the druid too. So, he leaned over and kissed him on the lips. Krayvik jerked a moment, indeed surprised, but quickly pressed into the kiss with a happy 'mmm'. The fennec drew in a shaky breath, his heart beating in his ears, then leaned against the naked druid.

They broke the kiss looking into each others eyes. Red flicked one big ear. He reached up and stroked a paw across the bear's chest.

"You've been with another male before?" the bear asked while he slipped an arm around the fox's shoulder and drew him closer. Red smirked and tapped his tail against the grass.

"I have. Wizards don't always spend their times with their noses in books." So he demonstrated by planting his nose into the bear's lap. Krayvik smiled, leaning back while he settled a paw to the back of the fennec's head and gently rubbed it. The cool nose poked at his rousing cock, meeting it as it rose up and swelled. One paw cradled it gently, giving it a squeeze before he gave the wide tip a gentle licking. Krayvik sighed happily. He set his paws against the log to watch the fox work over his erection. Red's free paw dipped lower and cradled the bear's big balls, rolling them around in his palm as he kissed and licked over the shaft.

"You have a talented mouth, little mage," Krayvik sighed contently as his cock grew fully hard and began to drool pre-cum. He reached a paw down to carefully cup the fox's bottom through his robe. "But I think I have a hunger that your mouth will not satisfy."

Red sat up. It had been a while since he had taken anything like that. The bear's paw felt so good gripping him though. And he was taking a portal home at day break so he wouldn't need to walk all that much, he considered.

"Ah, if you wish," he managed to say. He sat up further to tug his robe up over his head. The bear smiled widely as he saw the wizard wore nothing else under it. Red's own erection sprang into the open air. As the fox considered what they could use for lube, the bear climbed off the log and got down to all fours, presenting his round brown ass.

"Oh," Red squeaked. The druid grinned back over his shoulder.

"Oh? Did you think I meant to mount you? Hmmm, a temptation, indeed, but..." Krayvik sank his chest to the cool grass and spread his legs, leaving his butt raised up in the air "I need this more tonight."

Red smiled. He liked the way the druid surprised him too. One paw settled on the round, brown butt to give it a squeeze, feeling the warm flesh and the soft fur covering it. His thumb traced up and down the warm crack then teased against the little nub tail above.

"You can mount me without worry, little mage. Another of the Twilight Stag's blessings," the druid said as the fox felt over his ass. Red set both paws to the broad butt and slowly spread the wide cheeks apart. Krayvik let out a happy little sigh as the cool air touched his hole, then moaned when the

fox's hard cock pressed in to meet it. The druid was right. The tight hole was warm and snug, but slick. His cock slid in easily and the two of them let out soft groans as the fennec pressed in to the hilt. Red's paws roamed over the big furry cheeks as he held his crotch flush against them.

How long had it been, he wondered. Too long, clearly. He drew his hips back, then pressed in again, starting to pump at the druid's ass. Krayvik made low, pleased grunts each time the mage's cock hilted inside. With one paw he reached down and began to stroke himself as the fox continued to hump.

"Mmm, that's it, yes, you can go harder," the bear prompted him, then groaned as Red complied, quickening his thrusts until his crotch began to audibly slap at the bear's cheeks. Krayvik's toes curled and he spread his legs wider, then braced his knees into the earth and pressed into the mage's thrusting.

"Ah, ah, ahhhh," the fox hissed as he thrust in to the hilt again and felt the familiar fire shoot from down in his groin all the way up his spine. The bear likewise let out a heady, rumbling growl and began to spurt into the grass in long sticky ropes as the fox unloaded inside him. The both of them trembled hard while the fox hunched over the bear's back.

"Ahhhh," Krayvik let out a loud, satisfied sigh after a moment's silence. Red laid against his back while still buried inside him. Slowly the wizard pulled himself up and extracted himself, his fox cock still hard and throbbing. He smiled at the stickiness already leaking from the bear's open hole.

"Thank you," Red said. The bear rolled onto his side, smiled up to him and lifted an arm as an invitation. The little wizard sank forward to meet him and the two curled up beside the fallen log as their fire began to smolder.

"Should I set up a ward?" Red asked and rested his head against the bear's chest. Krayvik curled his arm around the fennec to pull him close.

"Ah, wherever I make love becomes sanctified by the Twilight Stag. We will be safe as we sleep, little mage." Red just nodded. The fennec closed his eyes and listened to the bear's steady heartbeat. When they woke, he would open his portal back to the Tower and the druid would leave him to wander again. He didn't want to think about it, but instead of putting it off, he asked.

"Will we see each other again?"

Krayvik's paw brushed along the fox's back until it trailed up the back of his neck and let a claw trace over one of his big ears.

"In dreams, if nothing else. The Stag favors those who bond with his chosen." The bear leaned his head down and kissed Red between the eyes. "But I can say, we will see each other again, little mage. I am sure of it."

Satisfied enough with that, Red let himself drift to sleep.