Story Three

The Tale of the Radiant Tear

*Stories are instinct,*

*Stories are wisdom,*

*Stories are survival.*

-Motto of the Storytellers

 Brenna’s den was a crude dwelling, a simple tunnel at the base of a young sugar maple. It led downwards to a hollow that had preemptively been made spacious to accommodate the growing bodies of six kits. Grass and leaves lay at the far end from the entrance, arranged into a cozy sleeping pile or *sindvisik[[1]](#footnote-1)*. Near it was another hole that led to two branching tunnels –one leading upwards to a secret escape in case of emergencies, and the other leading down to a meager food cache. Despite its simplicity, the den served as a peaceful refuge from the summer heat for kits arriving back from their first solo hunt.

 Once at the end of the entrance tunnel, Rikki leapt, and his four paws landed on the cool, dirt. Looking around the den, he flicked an ear in frustration upon noticing he was by himself. Normally, he, Nova, and Rio would wrestle in their mother’s brief absence, and he’d hoped to catch one of them with a surprise pounce. This time, however, he found his pretend adversaries gathered near the *sindvisik* along with the rest of his siblings. He sneezed dust from his nose as he trotted over, grateful that his brothers hadn’t seen his failed attack.

 Nova and Rio sat beside Twila. The three kits looked with rapt attention at Bright and Codi facing each other across from them. As usual, El kept himself a good distance from whatever activity was taking place. He lay on his stomach with forepaws out in front of him, looking –to Rikki‑ like a lazy, old, grandpa fox.

 “What’s Bright doing with Quiver-Whiskers?” Rikki whispered to Rio.

 “He’s teaching Codi how to play the pinning game,” his brother answered.

 Bright adopted a playing position, his front half low to the ground, his hind end and tail in the air. Codi nervously attempted to mimic the pose, but ended up looking more like a half-flattened squirrel.

 Nova scoffed at the awkward stance. “Hey, Rikki. Bet you the belly of Mom’s catch that Codi’s landing flat on his back.”

 It was Rikki’s turn to scoff. “Ha, more like he’ll turn tail as soon as the game starts.”

 “No way,” Nova answered back. “Codi can’t be *that* snowy-tailed.”

 Before the two could speak further, Bright leapt from his stance. He dashed back and forth, nimble paws making him appear almost as a blur of yellow-orange fur. Codi turned his head this way and that, each time managing to just barely face his opponent before he escaped from view. Then, Bright made his move, leaping and stretching his front paws out in an attempt to tackle his friend.

 With a panicked yip, Codi scrambled backwards. A trickling sound filled the den, and the runt looked down in shame at the newly-made puddle beneath him.

 Rikki burst into a high-pitched giggle. “*Hee hee ha ha*! Thanks Codi, you helped me win our contest. Sweeps, I knew you’d runt out, but I didn’t expect you to make it rain underground.”

 Codi crouched on his belly, nosing the dirt with his muzzle as if attempting to burrow like a worm. His sister came to his defense, nuzzling him with her nose while taking care not to put her paws on the dampened earth.

 Twila gave Rikki an icy look. “Knock it off, Rikki, why do you always have to tease Codi.”

 “Aw, he’s fine,” Rikki said. “Can’t get your Golden Eyes without a few scares to put white on your tail. Besides, Codi, now Nova won’t have to yell at you for making a mess of the *sindvisik* during nap time.”

 “Rikki!” Twila shouted.

 Rikki glanced at Codi –who now lay with his muzzle buried between his forelegs. “Oh, come on. The longer we keep it a secret, the longer he won’t do anything to keep himself dry. Besides, if I didn’t say anything, that blabbermouth Rio would have dropped the apple instead.”

 El stood up, positioning himself between Twila and Rikki. Neither his face nor voice bore frustration, only that constantly calm demeanor that so irritated Rikki. “Enough, Rikki. You need to stop scratching off blame and take responsibility for your actions. Now, apologize to Codi.”

Rikki rolled his eyes. “Sweeps! Why the *scuzz* do you have to stick your acorn-head into everything?”

El’s expression didn’t even flinch at his brother’s foul speech. “I warn you, Rikki. If you talk that way again, I will inform Mother, and you will not get any blueberries from the blueberry bush. Again.”

Rikki put his muzzle in El’s face. “Oh, is that what you’ll do? That’ll make you a blabbermouth just like me.” His lips formed a smug smile. “Didn’t think of that did you, Acorn-Head?”

“*He* might not tell your mother, but *I* just might.”

Rikki’s smile vanished faster than a snake catches a rat. He turned to face Holly’s honeyed eyes, and tucked his tail upon seeing the hard look on the kitsitter’s normally-gentle features. He gave a nervous laugh as he turned to the cowering Codi.

“Sorry, Codi,” he said hastily. “Sorry, Ms. Holly,” he added before dashing onto the *sindvisik*.

The kitsitter’s giggle sounded as sweet blackberries, but also burned Rikki’s ears like the sting of a hornet. “Don’t worry, Rikki. I will keep it a secret from your mother. Just be sure to thank the Great Light that it was your first hunt today. Otherwise I might not be so generous.”

Rikki’s ears grew hot, and he strained to keep them from flattening. “Yes, Ms. Holly,”

The sound of Nova, Rio, and Twila’s giggling pricked his ears. He scowled at them, and the three kits immediately cut their laughter short with looks of innocence.

Holly turned her attention to her son, and her gentle and playful demeanor instantly returned. “And look at you, you tireless troublemaker. What do you think you’re doing getting these little ones all worked up just before naptime?”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Bright said. “I wanted to give Codi a quick lesson on how to play our game.”

The vixen began prodding Bright towards the grass. “There will be plenty of time to play later. Now, go join Rikki on the *sindvisik*. That goes for all of you too. Go on.”

The kits obeyed, dashing over to the pile as Brenna emerged from the tunnel. The sight of their mother resulted in most of the just-settled foxes scrambling upright and stepping in place with tails swishing rapidly.

Holly shook her head, giving Brenna a mock look of defeat. “Oh dear, did you have to come and rile them up right after I settled them down. What kept you?”

Brenna sat with her back hunched over and attempted to speak through her slight pant. “I… I just… just had some trouble with the… tunnel.”

From the *sindvisik*, Rikki cocked his head. His mother’s condition did not go unnoticed. She *did* look a bit ragged, even he could see that much. He glanced at El. He wondered if there was any truth to what his brother had said, but as El turned to meet his gaze, he quickly looked away with a huff. His mother must just not be used to doing so much. After all, she’d said so herself, and she couldn’t have lied, could she? She had always said that lying makes your tail fall off, but hers was clearly still attached.

*Reoourr*!

Brenna’s sharp bark broke Rikki out of his thoughts, and he, along with his siblings, sat up straight in attention.

 “Alright, little ones,” Brenna said sweetly. “Mom is going hunting. If you can behave yourselves until I get back, you’ll all get to go to the blueberry bush. After your meal of course.”

 A chorus of cheers sounded through the den as tapered tails wagged and the attached bodies bounced up and down.

 “Oh dear,” Holly said, laughing. “Maybe you should’ve waited until you returned to say that. How am I ever going to get them to sleep now?”

“You’ll think of something, Holly” Brenna said.

“You must be glad you don’t have to deal with these little terrors right now.”

“You don’t know how much I wish I could.” Brenna sighed. She gave a strained grunt upon standing to go over to her six kits, nuzzling their fur with her muzzle and giving each of their faces a couple of tender licks. “I’ll see you when you wake, little ones. Promise that you won’t run Ms. Holly up a tree now.”

Six voices responded, most of them in the sing-song manner that kits give after enough routine recitations. “*Weee prooo-miiise*.”

Brenna licked each kit one final time and bade Holly goodbye before entering the tunnel to the outside. Now alone with seven small foxes, Holly joined them on the grass, sitting down as the group of kits clustered around her to form a crude claw-moon shape.

“Now then, you blue-eyed brush-biters,” she said sweetly. “What do you say to a story to settle yourselves before your naps?”

Yips of eager agreement came from the kits, with the exceptions of El –who simply nodded his head once‑ and Codi –who was quick to voice his apprehension.

“Y-yes, but p-please, no sc-sc-scary stories. No ‘G-g-g-ghost P-p-pack’, ‘C-crow-Pecked’, T-two-Legs or any m-m-m-monsters.”

“What? No way, I *want* a scary story.” Rikki argued. “What about ‘Old Tod’?”

Holly cleared her throat, commanding the kit’s attention. She let out a nervous chuckle. “Er… Le-let’s try to pick a story everyfox will like, shall we? How-how about a nice story about every kit’s favorite fox, Bright Ryn?”

Wagging his tail, Bright gave an excited yip. However, Nova was quick to voice his displeasure with a sigh.

“Mom told us Bright Ryn stories for the past three nights.”

Holly blinked in silence as Bright’s tail drooped. “Oh dear, what are we going to do about this?” She scratched her ear in thought. “Ah, I’ve got one. First, I assume your mother has already told you ‘The Story of our Golden Eyes?”

All of Brenna’ kits nodded in unison.

“Well,” Ms. Holly continued, leaning in close. “Has she ever told you of what happened next?”

The kitsitter smiled as six heads shook from side to side “Ah, I thought not. It’s not a story most foxes are familiar with these days.”

With that, Ms. Holly got on her belly, bringing herself to eye level with the young ones and began her story.

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 “In the Before Times –after the foxes lost their light due to that fiendish fox, Zaru– Falpa and the Great Light spent their days living in the center of the forest. Now, even though the Great Light ensured that his denmate lacked nothing, Falpa wasn’t content. She couldn’t bear living in comfort and safety while the rest of her kind struggled to survive. She tried many times to convince her denmate to return their light, but –just as the heat doesn’t waver in summer‑ the Great Light refused to change his decision. He reminded her that the foxes would only regain their light if they could make the remaining ember inside grow bright once again. But Falpa never heard the Great Light say that they were to regain their Golden Eyes all alone, so she took on the task of helping her kind find their light. She helped them to, once again, be strong and brave in order to protect each other from danger. She taught them clever tricks as well as when to run fast and when be slow and sneaky. Each time she helped a fox get their Golden Eyes she would tell them to go and do the same for another fox, and another, and another. She did this all throughout her life, even after her pelt started to turn silver.

“But, sadly, Falpa’s light wasn’t as ever-glowing as her denmate’s. One morning, the Great Light rose to find that she had already left her pelt behind and departed to the Everwinter. He was overcome with such sadness that he could no longer to shine, and the forest was covered in a great darkness.”

“Aww, that’s so sad.” Twila said, sniffling.

“Yes, but that’s just the way The Cycle goes,” Holly said, comforting the cherry-colored kit with a lick on the forehead. “We don’t know why spring’s flowers must be covered by winter’s snow; it’s a mystery that foxes just learn to accept. But doing so is so difficult that even the Great Light couldn’t do it right away. His sorrowful darkness concerned the foxes, causing them to gather at the hill. ‘Oh Great Light, What have we done that you refuse to shine?’ they said, for they recalled what happened with Zaru and thought the Great Light was angry once again.

“‘My light has been torn away from me,’ the Great Light said. ‘My beloved Falpa has departed to the Everwinter.’

“This news brought sorrow to the foxes’ hearts, for they remembered how Falpa helped them to get their Golden Eyes, even after the passing cycles had begun sinking their teeth into her bones and muscle. The entire hill echoed with whimpers and whines as they grieved for the loss of such a bright vixen. It appeared as if neither joy nor day would return to the forest ever again. But then, like a flower among the frost, a tiny yip was heard. It was a little kit, the granddaughter of one of Falpa’s own children. The Great Light was aghast that one would yip or bark in such a sad time as this, so he confronted the kit with as much anger as his grief would allow. He demanded that she explain herself. Did she not respect her Eldermother to mourn for her? But the kit, unafraid, simply wagged her tail.

“‘Oh, Great Light, of course I mourn,’ she said. ‘But I remember how my Eldermother helped so many of us, and I feel more joy than sorrow. I thought that my happy yip might help you get your light back like she help us get ours.’

 “The Great Light thought about what the kit said. As he remembered his denmate’s life —the work she did, and how that had rubbed off on this little kit— mourning and happiness mixed into a single golden tear. It fell from the sky and onto the crest of the hill, where it grew into a beautiful yellow flower. It blossomed and shone with the full light of day, returning the Great Light to his full radiant glow.

“The foxes clustered around the strange new flower, taking turns sniffing at it and cocking their heads in awe. The petals were as bright and golden as the Great Light himself and were arranged in a shape not unlike the rays bursting from his body.

“With his light restored, the Great Light cast a glow of warmth upon the little kit. ‘Little one,’ he said. ‘While my Falpa may be in the Everwinter, I can see that part of her still remains among foxkind.’

“And so, the Great Light named the new flower the Radiant Tear, declaring that it would serve as a reminder of Falpa to any fox who came across it. The foxes then held a special remembrance ceremony, sharing stories with one another of Falpa’s life and their time spent with her. In fact, there were so many foxes wanting to speak that it lasted well after the Great Light had set.

“Time passed, and cycles came and went, but the Great Light never forgot his denmate, even though many foxes did as they set out for new forests as territory became sparser. But even though the ceremony on the hill that day had brought his light back and eased his grief, the Great Light still could not help shedding a tear as he remembered the life he had shared with Falpa. And so, each time he thought of her as he set behind the hill with their old den, a new golden flower would grow amid the reddening sky.”

The kitsitter stopped her story amid more sniffles from Twila and outright sobs from Rio, who stuck his teary face into Nova’s tiny, fuzzy tail.

“Ack! Hey, get your own tail wet, runny-whiskers!” Nova shouted, yanking his tail away.

“B-bu-but it was such a puh-pretty stor-hor-ry!” Rio said, falling over onto his side.

“Yeah. It’s just a shame that the foxes who left don’t remember her.” Twila said.

Rikki couldn’t help but roll his eyes at the pitiful displays of his two siblings. Ms. Holly’s story was so boring. Where was the excitement, the adventure, heroic dogs and magical vixens battling uncountable mysterious horrors? If this story was meant to put him to sleep, it was sure doing a good job of it.

 “Oh, don’t worry Twila,” Holly said, touching her muzzle tenderly to Twila’s cheek. “There’s still a bit more to the story. You see, the reason the Great Light moves across the sky during the day in these times is because he is searching for other forests to set in at night. He does this because, during one cycle long ago, he began its travels across the sky for he wanted to set and grow a new flower in different forests each night so his denmate won’t be forgotten. The Great Light hoped that any fox, no matter how far they were from Falpa’s Woods would be able to come across one of these Radiant Tears and remember the old stories.

“But that’s not all the Great Light set out to do. You see, the story goes that the Radiant Tear has the power to restore a fox’s light that has faded due ailment or old age. It is through this that the Great Light hopes to hold onto her memory by living as she had lived.”

Brenna’s kits looked at Holly with intrigue and wonder shining in their eyes. Even Rikki managed to be entranced by his kitsitter’s claim. His brother, Rio wagged his tail to and fro and let out a bark of excitement.

“Wowie! A magic flower!” He said. “I wanna see that, Ms. Holly. Can we go an’ see it? Can we? Can we? Can we?”

“Calm down, Rio,” Bright said. “You know it is only a story right? The flower does not really exist. Right, Mother?”

Holly chuckled, her eyes akin to the kind a kit has when bragging about a secret she refuses to tell even the most pleading of foxes. “Well, I would say that, Bright. If your Eldermother didn’t come across a Radiant Tear herself.”

A chorus of shocked exclamations erupted among the *sindvisik* and the kitsitter took in the eager blue eyes of her audience before continuing.

“Yes, yes, it’s true. My grandmother found the flower when my mother was a kit. Her dog, my grandfather, suddenly began to lose his sight. One morning he could see her and my mother clearly, and the next, they started to look like they were covered in a light mist. Each day, the mist grew worse and worse, until my grandfather’s Golden Eyes became clouded, and he couldn’t see past his own paws. Not knowing what else to do, my grandmother remembered the story of the Radiant Tear that her parents told her when she was a kit. ‘The flower grows were a tear falls, so follow the Great Light as he sets,’ her father would say. So that is what she did, and soon, she found it –a flower as golden and radiant as the one in the stories. She took the flower back to her den and gave it to my grandfather to eat, and when he woke the next morning, he could see her as clearly as the day they first met.”

The kits stared speechless at Holly, who still had a sly kit’s smirk stuck on her face. Even Bright and El looked to be –at-least-somewhat‑ amazed at her tale. The vixen looked into the kit’s sky-colored eyes with her own honey-colored ones and gave a big, exaggerated yawn, causing the little ones to mimic her against their will.

“Alright, you blue-eyed bunch,” she said. “I believe it’s time for your naps. Come on, I was a nice kitsitter and gave you two stories, so it’s only fair you got to sleep twice as fast.”

As Holly curled up, the seven young foxes bunched around her, all huddled in sleepy warmth. Bright snuggled up against his mother while Twila soothed Codi with tender licks on his ears. Rio cuddled up close to Nova, though the need for sleep seemed not to deter him from vocally expressing his wonder from Holly’s story.

“Wowie, can you believe it Nova? The magic flower *does* exist. What do you think it would be like to see it? I bet it’s the most wonderful, beautiful, amazing, most incredible–“

“Rio, can’t you just pick one word to call something?” Nova said, not bothering to reopen his eyes.

Rikki stood up from his sleeping position, a bold yet proud fire burning in his eyes. “Well, Rio, *I’m* going to be the one to find it. Yeah, I’m going to find it and bring it back here, and then it will give us all our Golden Eyes. Even you and Codi.”

“Not until you take your nap you’re not.” Holly interrupted, shooing him back into his place with her tail. “There’ll be plenty of time to play adventurer later, Rikki.”

Rikki laid back down on the soft, warm grass. He squirmed inside the cluster of kits, trying to put as much space between himself and El as possible. Once he got himself as comfortable as he was able, he gave a little sneeze from Holly’s tail tickling his nose.

“It’s not playing if I actually do it.” He muttered softly before closing his eyes and allowing himself to drift off into slumber.

1. *Sindvisik-* Meaning “Slumber things” refer to a collection of miscellaneous objects, such as grass or leaves, arranged into a pile to make sleep more comfortable. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)