

# THE FIRE KEEPER'S APPRENTICE

By Rick Runningbear

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The apprentice left his lodge just as the sun was rising from the Eastern horizon. He faced the rising sun as he uttered his morning prayers. It was a new beginning. Not only a new day, but a new beginning and a new pathway for him. Only yesterday he had given a carefully wrapped packet of tobacco to the Fire Keeper. With a sense of trepidation he had asked if the Fire Keeper would accept him as his apprentice. The Fire Keeper took the tobacco in his hand and hesitated as if in deep thought. He looked up at the sun and then right into the eyes of the young aspiring man. "Has The Great One called you to walk this path?" he asked. - "I am sure of it, Honored One, I have felt this yearning and have often dreamt of it. I want to someday make the Sacred Fire for the people as you now do", answered the petitioner.

After a long pause, the Fire Keeper spoke again: "If you are sure you are called, I will accept you as my apprentice. You must begin to draw into your heart the fire that will always remain in your heart so that whenever you make the Sacred Fire, you will impart the fire from your heart into it. If you follow my teaching faithfully, after 13 moons have passed, you will be a Fire Keeper and I will proclaim it before the people. It is a high calling that you seek to follow and you must always be mindful of that and always honor the Sacred Fire."

With that, the Fire Keeper gave the apprentice his first task. The next day he was to go out into the meadowlands, the fields and forests and seek out and gather in various kinds of tinder. The tinder was to be the natural material provided by Earth Mother, that would readily ignite and burn whenever sparks were cast up it. The sparks would be cast off of the striking of flint rock against another hard substance.

And today, as the apprentice set off on his walk towards the byways and meadowlands, he secured three empty containers in which he would be depositing the various kinds of tinder, according to the Fire Keeper's instructions. The Fire Keeper had told him to seek out three classifications of tinder. The first kind he called "light tinder". It was a natural material that would ignite quickly when the sparks hit it but would burn only for a couple of seconds. The second kind of tinder he called "medium tinder". This natural material did not ignite by itself from sparks alone, but needed the light tinder to provide the fire and heat for a few seconds until it too was burning. This medium tinder would burn for a longer time than the light tinder. The third kind was called "heavy tinder". This material took a little longer to ignite and burn but once burning it would send out a sustained hot fire that in turn would ignite the ceremonial wood used in the Sacred Fire.

The sun rose higher in the sky as the apprentice walked in the rural area away from any people. Soon he came upon a thistle plant. He found it in good state in which it was starting to put forth its seeds. The purple flowers at the top had now turned into a white fluff. They were starting to expand and get ready to fluff out even more to where the wind would eventually carry them away on their circular light fluffy "balloons" to wherever they would eventually alight upon Mother Earth and burrow into the ground to eventually form a new thistle plant. The apprentice saw a whole cluster of thistle plants with white fluffs on the top. These, he knew, were an excellent type of the light tinder he would need to make Sacred Fires. When dry, these thistle fluffs will ignite instantly when sparks alighted on them and would burn a hot fire for a few seconds thus helping to ignite the slower burning tinders. The apprentice harvested most of the thistle down he found on the plants, making sure to keep about one 7<sup>th</sup> untouched in order that the thistle plants would still have some seeds left to propagate its own kind.

Traveling to the edge of a woodland, the apprentice saw some tall Cottonwood trees. As he approached them he noticed a white fluffy material lying on the ground just down wind of the Cottonwood trees.

He immediately recognized this as the "fluff" or "cotton" of the Cottonwood trees, which also contained the seeds of the trees. He carefully gathered up several handfuls of the Cottonwood fluff and put it in the container containing the thistle down. Cottonwood fluff, he knew, when completely dried, would also ignite readily when sparks cast from his flint. As he traveled he discovered other plants that had small amounts of fluff on them and he gathered some of them always leaving some for the plant to propagate a portion of its seeds.

In the woodland was a large stand of Pine trees. As the apprentice walked under these trees he discovered a thick mat of recently fallen brown pine needles. This was the "Pine Straw" that he knew was an excellent source of "medium tinder". He gathered up enough of this to fill one of his containers, making sure to gather only the driest pine straw and not to pack it too tightly or compress it too much in his container. In his mind's eye he could picture these dry Pine needles igniting from the hot fire produce from the burning fluff he had already gathered.

"Ah" said the apprentice. "I have light tinder and medium tinder".

Soon the apprentice saw many pine cones lying on the ground under the Pine trees. "Yes! this is the heavy tinder I need!" The Pine cones had lain on the ground for several days without any rain. They were dry and fully opened. Quickly the apprentice gathered up the pine cones until they filled his 3<sup>rd</sup> container. With that he returned to from where he commenced his journey. It was now mid-day.



Not far from the lodge of the apprentice was the abode of the Fire Keeper himself. That evening the apprentice approached the dwelling of the Fire Keeper. The Master Fire Keeper was outside the entry of his dwelling attending to a pot of Venison stew that was cooking over a common fire. As soon as the Fire Keeper spotted the apprentice approaching, toting his three containers, he motioned with his hand to invite his protégé to come near.

"Teacher, I have found the three kinds of tinder...come see what I have gathered according to your instructions!" The Fire Keeper looked over the three kinds of tinder that his apprentice had gathered. At last he seemed satisfied. "You have done well with your task, and now, you must accomplish another task", said the Fire Keeper, as the evening breezes tussled his white hair which streamed down the back of his neck.

"Tomorrow you must go to the woodlands and learn the different kinds of trees. Some of them will speak to you. There are 7 sacred trees, even 8, that pertain to the 7 clans of our people...and one that is sacred to all the people. Go find and gather these...when you have accomplished this, you will have done well and will be further along the sacred path you have chosen". # # # (to be continued)