9 Tales of 9 Tails

A set of stories about the Asian folk tale creature: the 9-tailed fox.

SUMMARY:

Each story is part of an ongoing story of self-discovery and growth of a 9-tailed fox. Traditionally considered an evil fairytale creature, like Europe’s Big Bad Wolf, this is a lighter take on the creature’s folklore. The fox grows, learns, and tries to become human girl as each story progresses. Will she finally change her nature and become a human girl after all?

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The First Tail

I was born as a fox with no tail...

This is not a normal situation for foxes. Foxes are supposed to have long bushy tails, but I had only a stub where a long tails should have been. I did not know it at the time, but it was because I was special. My mother, who was a smart fox, could not explain it to me either, because foxes can’t talk.

Just how can I talk then? Well, I’m not really, completely a fox. I’m not a person either. I’m something in-between, something called a Gumiho. You see, this nub of a tail was just the beginning of a collection of tails that I would have to grow, but I don’t want to get ahead of myself. Let me tell you how I got my first tail.

I later learned that my mother had once been caught in a snare trap. When the hunter came and saw her stuck there, he decided he could not keep her for her furs. It was too cruel of a fate. No, he decided that he should let her go. Of course, my mother was a wild fox, and she was already in pain from having a snare cutting into her foot, so she was not ready to trust any human.

When the hunter reached for the snare to set her free, she snapped and snarled at him. He backed away and put on gloves. Then he reached to set her free again. This time she bit down and pierced his skin, even through the gloves! She drew a drop of blood as he unhooked her foot, and that drop of blood is part of what made me a Gumiho, instead of a young fox kit like the rest of my littermates.

In that one instant, her fox eyes meeting his human ones, a flicker of understanding passed between the two. She was changed forever. He rubbed some salve on her wounded leg, and then let her go. She retreated into the woods, but they watched each other for a long while before they finally turned to leave. After that, my mother was smarter, different from the other foxes in the woods.

When I was born, I had five brothers and sisters, my littermates. I alone of the six fox kits inherited her intelligence, but a little something else came with it, or didn’t come with it, I should say, and that was my missing tail. As a Gumiho, I had to earn the right to a tail that all other foxes would have been born with. My siblings and I watched my mother and learned
from her. She taught us what it was to be a fox: how to survive and how to live. She could cleverly catch bugs, frogs, moles, mice, and all manners of food. She knew how to hide from humans and the forest’s predators. She knew where the best places to slake her thirst were and how to build a den. She knew how to care for young and how to mark her territory.

I learned all of the ways of the fox, mastering all of the skills that my mother could teach me. I was her best student. My intelligence, strength, and speed made me quickly surpass even my mother’s skills, and when I had learned my lessons well enough, I fell asleep one night, on the night of a full moon, feeling more tired than I could ever remember.

I awoke with a terrible pain in my chest. The pain ran down my spine to my missing tail, which throbbed with the most horrible sensation. Then, before my eyes, the tail appeared, silvery and ghost-like at first, but growing more solid with time. By morning, the pain was gone, and I had my first tail.

My five littermates were all nearly grown, ready to leave and seek out lives of their own, but I was beyond them. I was the fastest, smartest, and most daring of the six, and it was I who left first. I remember meeting my mother’s eyes for the last time as I left the den. She knew I was different. She knew there would be more for me.

Part of her looked sad, because she could not share in what I would learn and see, despite being more than just a common fox. She was not Gumiho, and she could not grow beyond what she was. She would always be just a fox, but I would have the chance to become more than just a fox with each new lesson learned.

But first I had 8 more tails to grow, and each one would mean learning a difficult lesson. Each one would mean unbearable pain on a full moon, until one day, when I had to make the most difficult choice of all... but that was another story.
The First Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What is the name given to this type of fox creature?
   A. Werewolf
   B. Gumiho
   C. Vampire
   D. Monster

2. How many littermates did the fox have?
   A. 3
   B. 4
   C. 5
   D. 6

3. How many tails was the Gumiho born with?
   A. only a stub tail
   B. 1
   C. 2
   D. 9

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox had to learn to be a fox before she got her first tail.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox was different because her mother had once been a pet of a human.
   A. True
   B. False
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The Second Tail

I was a fox with one tail. This was normal, right? Well, considering I had been born without a tail, having a tail was a great improvement. Little did I know at the time that I was working on my second tail!

Growing my first tail had required me to learn a lesson: how to be a fox. As a Gumiho, a fox spirit, I was working on a collection of tails that would ultimately lead me to a very important choice, but I won’t get into that too much right now. I had one tail, and I didn’t know what lesson was required to get my second. There wasn’t a manual for these things, and I was a fox, after all, so it wasn’t like there was a book I could read or someone to talk to about what I was going through.

I had been born with 5 sibling fox kits, all of whom I’d surpassed in terms of hunting skills, hiding, speed, intelligence, and pretty much every imaginable way. Because of this, I’d left my mother’s den first, heading out into the world to make my way. I really hadn’t expected much more at the time, figuring I’d just eat, sleep, hide, and eventually die like every other fox. Little did I know what destiny had in store for me!

One day I was playing along a creek that ran through the woods I lived in. I was eating crayfish, bugs, and other creatures that lived along the river. It was a lazy, sunny day, so I was having a great time of it, sitting upon a rock in the sun. It was as close to perfect as a day can get, and that meant the peace had to be broken somehow or maybe by someone, right?

A hunter happened through the woods. Most hunters preferred to use snares, foothold traps, or cage live traps to catch animals for furs. Foxes have luxurious and beautiful furs, so we are often hunted for them. This particular hunter was armed with a bow and arrow, which meant he was generally looking for boars or deer, but he didn’t seem to mind going after a fox. I was just resting in the sun on a warm rock when he stumbled across the creek and saw me.

Immediately, my head shot up. I was angry at myself for being so careless. My mother had taught me better! I darted to the side, making it into the bushes as an arrow pierced the air where I’d just been. The human had seemed as surprised as me to come across a fox, but he had wasted no time shooting arrows at me!
I waited while he nocked another arrow. Then, I rustled the bushes to make it look like I was going to run left, when in actuality I planned on running right! An arrow thudded into the dirt beside the bush and I darted to the right. I ran like my life depended on it, because it really did!

I heard the clumsy snapping of branches and stomping of feet behind me as the hunter gave chase. I was fast, like I mentioned before, so he had a hard time keeping up with me. He was above average for a human, I suppose, because he was smart about following me. He nearly had me cornered once more, and an arrow stuck into a tree near my tail!

I flashed my teeth at him and led him into a trap. It was fitting, I suppose, but he stumbled across a human snare and got his foot stuck. A trap that would have snagged my leg and trapped me for him to catch me had meant my escape! If foxes could have laughed, I would have right then. It was terribly ironic.

As he freed himself and tried to catch sight of me again, I slipped into the bushes and hid. Even free, he could not see me in my hiding spot. He was frustrated at losing his payday, but he could do nothing about it. I’d had to learn to outsmart a man. This was my second lesson. Each of my 9 tails would come with a price and a lesson that had to be learned.

That night was a full moon once more, and I woke with a terrible pain in my chest. The pain spread down my back as it had only once before, but I was only a fox, and I did not understand what was happening. When the moon finally set in the sky, the pain was gone, and in its place was a second tail.

I was a Gumiho, a fox spirit, and now I had two tails. I was a fox that was becoming something more! I felt smarter. I knew more. I understood now what I was. I was more aware of what I was becoming, and I knew to keep my eyes out for chances to learn new lessons and to collect more tails. Someday, I would get all 9 tails. Then I would have to make the biggest choice of my life.

That, though, is another story!
The Second Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. How many tails does the Gumiho have at the beginning of the story?
   A. 1
   B. 2
   C. 3
   D. 4

2. Who comes across the fox by the creek?
   A. her mother fox
   B. a hunter
   C. a fisherman
   D. a hiker

3. What does the hunter try to use to catch the fox?
   A. a snare trap
   B. a leg trap
   C. a live trap cage
   D. a bow and arrow

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox had to learn to outsmart a dog to earn her second tail.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho grows a second tail at the end of the story.
   A. True
   B. False
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   B. False
The Third Tail

I am Gumiho. If you’ve never heard of that, it is a fox spirit. Much like wolves are blamed for mischief and evil in many folk tales, in Asia it is the foxes that cause the trouble! A Gumiho is not just any old fox, though. It is a fox with 9 tails, one with many special powers. I only had two tails though, so I wasn’t that much trouble… yet!

My first tail had grown after I learned what it meant to be a fox. Born with just a stub of a tail, the whole thing had grown one full moon after I’d mastered all that my mother fox could teach me. The second tail had come when I was on my own and learned to escape from a human hunter. I had to outsmart a human, and after that I got my second tail.

Two tails made me smarter and faster than any normal fox. I could jump higher, run faster, and hide better than any other fox. I could also hide very well! These don’t seem like amazing powers yet, but they were growing with each tail, and I was smart enough now to look for chances to learn, because I knew that two tails was just the beginning. There was an emptiness in me, and I longed to be complete. I knew now that I needed more tails to be what I was meant to be.

What I found I was most curious about was: humans. A human had made my mother special, and she had passed that on to me. A human had helped me, unwittingly, get my second tail. Maybe humans would help me get more! It was not a normal thing for foxes to think. We normally like to run and hide at the sight or smell of a human, but I was drawn to them, and one night I snuck into one of their villages.

Humans are odd creatures. We foxes prefer to dig dens. They’re natural, cozy, and can be lined with leaves and other soft things. They smell of earth and comfort. Humans, on the other hand, build these unnatural square boxes to live in. They clear the land around their homes, too, because they fear what lurks in the forest. Their homes are dead things, made of rocks and wood they cut and shape. Our dens are alive, with tree roots and bugs and worms. They are very comfortable and natural.

Humans also gather animals and put them in pens and cages. I saw chickens, which I have quite a taste for, but I also saw larger animals, like cows, goats, sheep, and even horses. These are large animals, and I do not much care for them, even if they are not predators for me to...
watch out for. Dogs, on the other hand, I care very little for. Dogs and foxes are old enemies, perhaps because we are so similar.

Dogs could smell me coming. Dogs could see me at night. Dogs could chase me, and while one could never hope to catch me, they might be able to in teams. So, when I went into their village, which smelled of livestock, people, and wood fires, I was most careful of dogs. This settlement had dogs, and I could smell them, so I approached from downwind. I did not want my scent carrying to them.

I snuck along fencerows, carefully watching for people or dogs. In the moonlight, I marveled at the strangeness of the human settlement. Everything was divided into little fields, little pens, and little areas. Each thing had its spot. Nature was not like that. Nature grew on top of and over itself. Here, they tried so hard to put everything in straight little lines, although their roads and paths sometimes turned this way and that, at least whenever nature made it too difficult to keep things straight.

I saw manners of tools that I had seen farmers work in fields with. There were the sharp blades for cutting dirt or even trees. There were bows, arrows, and traps for hunting. I stayed very clear of these! They smelled of sorrow and pain anyway. I found a chicken coop and dined on an egg or two, leaving the hens for later, if I so desired. It was too hard to resist nice eggs.

I tiptoed along a fence then, getting closer to a square hole in the side of a human’s den. Light poured out of the hole, and, as I drew closer, I could see a male and a female human, along with two of their young. Perhaps, I thought, they are not so different from foxes after all.

The male had a furry face of red hair, which reminded me of foxes. The young cavorted and played like I had with my siblings, my littermates. The woman had chestnut brown hair, which reminded me of one of my brothers. They way they ate, sharing food, and spoke, it was so much like my own fox family, and yet different.

Then I saw that there was an older female sitting in a chair that I had not noticed before. She had a white streak in her hair that reminded me of my mother’s tail. She stared out the window and smiled at me. Perhaps the light had caught my eyes, but I knew it was time to go. I had been seen.

Later that night, having realized that humans are more like me than I had thought, my third tail began to grow. I felt a pain in my heart again, which spread down my back to my two tails. In the moonlight, the third one grew, glowing silver and then fading to red to match my others. I had learned another lesson, but there were still more to learn. I wondered what the next would be...
The Third Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. How many tails does the Gumiho have at the beginning of the story?
   A. 1
   B. 2
   C. 3
   D. 4

2. Where does the Gumiho fox decide to go?
   A. over the mountains
   B. into the woods
   C. down by the river
   D. into a village

3. What is the fox curious about?
   A. humans
   B. little kids
   C. fishing
   D. chickens

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox was nearly caught by a couple dogs.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho grows her third tail because she learns that humans are strange.
   A. True
   B. False
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The Fourth Tail

I am a three-tailed fox, a Gumiho. I didn’t always have three tails. I was born without any tail whatsoever, but with each lesson I’ve learned, I’ve grown a new tail.

The first lesson was to be a fox. That allowed me to grow a tail that made me better than other foxes in all respects. The second lesson was to outsmart a human. This made me smarter, cleverer than before. My third lesson was to go among humans and learn that they are not that much different than foxes. I wasn’t sure what this had gained me, not yet anyway, but I knew it had changed me somehow. I also knew that I had to learn more!

I was minding my business one day, watching the humans, hunting, and going about my day. A wagon was rolling down the road, with a farmer in it, and he had a nice big dog with a sharp nose, the kind that foxes aren’t terribly fond of. The dog happened to see me though, and this was a problem, because he leapt down from the wagon and started chasing me, despite his master’s frantic calls.

That dog was definitely a farm dog, and was not meant for the forest. He smashed through bushes and underbrush like you would not believe. I darted, wove, and dodged as best I could, but that dog was ON my trail. He sniffed and smelled and nothing I could do seemed to throw him off.

In that moment, I really wished I was not a fox. It was the first time I ever thought that. I mean, being a fox was great. I could go where I wanted, do what I wanted, and generally live a free life. I loved to hunt, play, and explore the woods. I’d never before thought about what it would mean to be something different, and when I did, something odd occurred: the dog suddenly stopped.

One moment he had been chasing me like his life depended upon it and the next he was frozen in place, sniffing the air and trying to catch my scent. Now I never really worried about him catching me, because I could go places he could not, but he had been surprisingly good at chasing me, and he was making me work. That kind of made me feel ashamed, because he was just a farm dog, and I was the fastest, smartest, and best of the foxes in the whole forest!
Now, though, he suddenly could not detect me. It was as if his nose had betrayed him, but I knew that could not be so. So what had changed? I realized that I had changed, and not the dog. I had learned to mask my scent and become invisible to animals that might otherwise hunt me. I learned the importance of scents, and I knew then that if I ever wanted to go among humans, my scent would betray me if I did not learn to hide it well.

The farmer eventually collected his poor, confused dog, but the dog had done me a great favor. I had learned a new, valuable lesson, and the full moon brought me my fourth tail. It hurt, as always, but I was growing stronger. I was becoming more than I had been, but I still couldn’t see what I was meant to be.

Where would I end up? What would I need to learn next? Where was all of this going? Only the ninth tail would tell, so I would have to keep looking for more lessons to learn.
The Fourth Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. Which of these was NOT a lesson that the fox had learned at the beginning of the story?
   A. Foxes are better than dogs.
   B. How to be a fox.
   C. How to outsmart a human.
   D. How foxes and people are similar.

2. What does the fox come across one day that chases it?
   A. a puma
   B. a dog
   C. an eagle
   D. a wolf

3. What does the fox realize it needed to do to hide from the dog?
   A. climb a tree
   B. hide in a hole
   C. hide its scent
   D. run in circles

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox was very worried that the dog might actually catch it.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The farmer took his dog back at the end of the story
   A. True
   B. False
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The Fifth Tail

As Gumiho, it was my destiny to become more than the fox I had been born as. I was slowly collecting tails as I learned important lessons, and each one made me different and gave me more abilities. I’d already collected four, and I’d learned many important lessons along the way. So far, I’d learned to outsmart humans and dogs. I’d also learned what it was to be a fox, and how foxes are humans are sometimes similar. I had more lessons to learn and more powers to gain, but nothing prepared me for this one!

Since gaining the fourth tail, I’d begun to feel strange. I’d woken up many times from a nap or sleep to find myself with hands! Hands, I tell you, hands! I’m a fox. I’m not supposed to have hands am I? You see, I’m not just any old fox. I do have four tails after all, and I’m getting smarter by the day.

My hands came in useful sometimes. I didn’t always have them, but I found myself running around in an upright position sometimes. It felt very odd to be like the two-legged humans that prowled clumsily around the forest. Running upright began to feel normal though, and I enjoyed the use of hands, I found. I could open things. I could climb trees. I could do all manners of things I’d never thought about before, and this was important.

These new human abilities made me want to explore the nearby village again. I could remember the last time I’d gone there, how it’d help me learn that I was not so different from humans after all. I wondered what I would learn this time, but mostly I hoped they had more chickens! You see, humans and foxes alike can’t get enough chicken. The only difference is that humans like theirs cooked.

So I walked to town. Fancy that, right? I walked into town, keeping my head down beneath the hedgerows that bordered a fancier house on the edge of the village. Once there, I decided to watch it to make sure no one was around, and then I went right for the door, only stopping to make sure there were no dogs inside or out. I might be getting powers and getting smarter, but I didn’t want to play with dogs any more than I had to.

When I could hear and smell that no one was home, I walked up onto the front porch and tried the door. I smiled as my paw shifted into something resembling a hand, and I tried the doorknob. It was locked! Fortunately, the windows were not. That was foolish of them, wasn’t it?
Once inside, I spent some time familiarizing myself with human homes. I tried out their furniture, finding it comfortable. Their shoes were made of nice leather, which I longed to chew. They had delicious smells coming from the area where they kept food, too.

I found some sweet red berries in strange containers. I ate that and something I knew was called bread with it. I ate until my teeth and belly both ached from the sweetness. Then I explored more, stopping in one of the small rooms. It must have been for one of the small humans, one of their kits. Only, they don’t call human young kits, do they? Kids: that was the word I’d overheard.

The young human female had a curious thing in her sleeping area. Made of cloth stuffed with grass or cornstalks, it wore clothes like a miniature human girl. It had strange round circles with holes in them on a mock face. Strings made its hair. It was a replica of a human. What was it used for? I smelled the girl on it strongly, which meant she was near it often. A vision came to me of the girl holding the thing, talking to it. I’d seen this sort of behavior before! It was some sort of strange practice for motherhood, right? Young females played with these things, these dolls, and practiced being adult females. How odd.

I smelled her clothes, too. Humans smell so strange compared to foxes. They should wash more often. Foxes don’t wash unless we happen into a river or are caught in the rain, but our natural musky smells are pleasant and entirely unlike human smells. As I smelled her clothes, I happened to climb into a piece of clothes, and a strange sensation came over me. Suddenly, I wanted to dress like a human! I wanted to play dolls. I wanted to sit in chairs. I wanted to BE like them.

These ideas scared and excited me, so I raced from the house and ran back to the woods. I took a dress with me, carrying it in my mouth, because I’d changed back to a fox, and I ran on all fours.

That night, filled with strange ideas, I got my fifth tail. This one hurt too, but I was so very excited by the idea of being like a human. I knew that I would have to try to go among them again!
The Fifth Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What new powers does the fox discover at the beginning of the story?
   A. She can dance.
   B. She can sing.
   C. She has hands and can walk upright.
   D. She can eat human foods.

2. Where does the fox decide to go?
   A. To the mountains
   B. To the creek
   C. To the farmer’s fields
   D. To the village

3. What does the fox eat in the people’s house?
   A. jam and bread
   B. pizza
   C. pie
   D. cookies

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox stole a girl’s dress because she wanted to learn to sew.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The fox wanted to go back to the village again sometime after getting her fifth tail.
   A. True
   B. False
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   B. False
The Sixth Tail

I was a fox with five tails. They gathered behind me in an ever-growing bundle. Each one had been earned, and each one was a badge of learning and growing power. Already, I could tell I was becoming much more than a simple fox, more than even a fox with tails. I was becoming more human!

With the fifth tail, the intelligence, speed, and other things I’d learned added to a new set of powers: shape-changing. I’d already been able to grow something like hands and walk upright for a while, but now I could change my body even more! I could grow taller, resembling a young girl if I wore clothes that I took from the human villages. When I put on clothes, my luxurious red fur would fade to a skin-like color, and my face would take on more human features. Was I human? No. Could I even pass for one upon close inspection? Certainly not, but it was a start.

That was another thing, too. I realized that I wanted to be more human. I wanted to go among them to play, to eat their foods, and to do human things. I wanted the best of both worlds – the human world and the forest world of foxes.

I determined that I needed to know more about humans. That would require spending time with them, or at least their young. Their children would be safer to interact with than the adults, so I waited and watched from the forest’s edge whenever I could, looking for a lone human.

I found one on a sunny afternoon, fishing by a nearby lake. I put on the dress I’d stolen from a human house, but it was hard to cover up five tails with a little girl’s dress. Little girls don’t have tails, and there is not space provided in a dress for five fluffy fox tails. It would have to work, because I did not have any other clothes. I made the best human hands and feet that I could, which took some concentration, but was possible now with my new powers.

I approached the boy with the sun behind me, so that he could not make out my features too clearly. He was watching his fishing line with its hook and worm as I walked up to him. He glanced over at me in surprise as I leaned over to look at his creel, which was a woven fish basket. He had a couple decent-sized fish in there, and it was hard to not just pluck one out of there and start eating.

I think my stomach rumbled, because he laughed. “Those are my fish. Catch your own.”
I liked my chops and sighed.  
“What’s your name anyway? I haven’t seen you around before, have I?” He asked.  
I didn’t answer. I couldn’t! I’d never learned how to talk. For that matter, I didn’t have a name. Foxes don’t require names. We just know who we are without putting sounds to it. When I didn’t answer, he mumbled something and went back to fishing.  
Finally, I could resist no longer. I reached into his creel and took one of the fish. It was drying in the sun and flies had begun to buzz around, but I paid no mind. I sank my teeth into it and savored the sweet white flesh.  
“Gross!” The boy yelled, scrambling away from me.  
I realized my mistake then. I should have shared. I offered him a bite.  
“No!” He shouted, slapping it away.  
I hissed at him, only then remembering that humans cook their food. I guess that had been my mistake. “Sorry.” I mumbled, surprising myself with the sudden ability to speak.  
He started to say something, but stopped to stare at the ears that poked out of my hair and the tails that came out from beneath the hem of my dress. Moments later, he ran away screaming something about red tails and flashing teeth. He left his fishing pole and his basket behind in his hurry to get away from me.  
That made me sad, because I’d wanted to learn more, but at least he’d left dinner. I felt bad, though, and decided to try my hand at fishing. I usually caught small fish with my paws and teeth, but the fishing pole seemed like fun. I caught one after several efforts, and I put it in his basket to replace the one I’d taken. With that done, I returned to the safety of the trees to become a fox again.  
I watched him come back with two adults later, only to find his basket as full of fish as he’d left it. There was no sign of me, as if he’d imagined the whole thing. I chuckled to myself, and I think they overheard. They took his fishing gear and retreated to their homes, casting worried glances over their shoulders at the forest that hid me.  
I’d learned several lessons, and when the moon came out, I felt the familiar pain of a sixth tail growing. I knew I only had three more to go, and I knew that I was becoming more and more like a human girl with each new tail. What would that mean when the final tail grew?  
I’d have to wait and see.
The Sixth Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What new powers does the fox discover at the beginning of the story?
   A. She can shape-change.
   B. She can sing.
   C. She can become completely human.
   D. She can eat human foods.

2. What does the fox decide to do?
   A. Meet with an old man.
   B. Return the dress she stole.
   C. Go spend time with young humans.
   D. Try to convince a family that she is a real human.

3. Where does she meet a boy?
   A. on the roadside
   B. in the fields
   C. in the forest
   D. by a lake

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho fox really convinced the boy that she was a human girl.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The fox left lots of evidence that she had interrupted the boy’s fishing.
   A. True
   B. False
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   A. True
   B. False
The Seventh Tail

I am a Gumiho, which is a forest fox spirit. I was born without a tail, but through experiences and lessons learned, I have grown sixth of them! With each new tail I’ve grown, I have found I have new powers. I have started to become more human, and I am ever more curious about them.

I recently learned I had a voice. I said something for the first time to a young boy who was fishing. When I stole his fish, I said, “Sorry.” This might not seem that important, but I was learning that I could look more and more human, and that I could think more and more like a human, and now I could TALK like a human.

I practiced speaking, copying the sounds that humans made. Some were strange and hard to make, partly because my mouth was shaped differently. I had to shape-change into an almost human form if I wanted to speak. A fox’s mouth is not made for speaking English, you see. I spent long hours each day speaking to myself, singing, and walking about as a human.

In my time doing this, I also learned to make my own clothes from the forest. I fashioned dresses of grasses and wove garlands of flowers for my hair, which I’d learned to grow long like a human girl. I could still not pass as a human upon close inspection, but in the moonlight, when my powers were strongest, I could come close.

Speaking, I found, was a sort of magic in and of itself. I’d learned to associate meanings with sounds. Each sound painted a mental picture, and I learned what each set of sounds meant, especially when they were put together. I learned that actions had words, too. I quickly learned words like: run, go, eat, and climb. Much of this I learned by waiting in trees over the roads, so I could listen to conversations as people passed, or by hiding in the hedgerows or along the rice fields to overhear the chatter of farmers. Still, I longed to know more. I had a thirst for knowledge that was seemingly unquenchable.

If I loved speaking, I loved singing even more. Sometimes I sang just to hear my own voice. My voice changed depending on how human or how fox-like I was. My vulpine nature lent a certain wildness to my songs, throaty and full of barks and howls. My human side gave my songs a softer, more lilting quality, and I found that I loved to sing like a human more and more with each passing day. In fact, it was when I was singing that I had my next chance to speak to a human!

I sang as I ate, as I often did. I was working my way through a berry patch. Foxes are omnivorous, and if we like fish, chicken, and eggs, we also love nuts, seeds, and fruits. Berries are a sweet treat, and they are very seasonal, so when they are abundant, we eat a lot of them. Sometimes we have to compete with bears or other animals, but most animals in the forest left me alone – they sensed something different and human about me.
I was eating raspberries and singing to myself when I heard a male voice singing back to me. I stopped singing and sat very still. I was wearing my dress of grass and my flower garlands, and I looked as human as I could manage, but it was daytime! I worried about discovery, but I also felt so terribly curious, so I sang back.

Moments later, I heard his voice again, singing in response. There were no words to our song, just random noises set to a pleasant tune. We were like birds singing to one another from across the treetops. As he sang, he grew nearer, using the sound of my voice to tell him where I was. I saw him before he could see me, because my fox eyes are very sharp, even when in a human form.

He looked to be an adolescent, perhaps 10-12 years of age, as humans went. After spending so much time studying them, I was becoming a decent judge of human ages. It was strange how long humans took to become adults. Forest animals don’t have the luxury of nearly 20 years before we are grown up; that is an entire lifetime for many creatures!

I sat still and watched him approach. He was collecting fruits and nuts, too. He had a pack on his back and pouches on his belt that he was filling with all manners of forest foods. I could smell them on him as he came nearer. It was interesting to see what types of foods humans collected! I let myself be known to him, so he could come closer, because I wanted to learn more about his business in my part of the woods.

Standing up suddenly, I said, “Hello.” It was the standard greeting among humans, along with a hand raised and an open palm shown to illustrate that I was not dangerous. Couldn’t I just be holding a weapon in my other hand? I think this was called waving. It is an odd custom to say the least.

“Hi.” He said, surprised by my sudden appearance. He recovered after a moment. “I’m John. Who are you?”

“I have no name.” I made certain that I’d hidden my tails and offered a smile, forgetting that my teeth were smaller and sharper than they should have been. Humans often use smiles to make each other feel more comfortable.

He regarded me strangely, probably noticing the not-quite-human parts of my appearance. He smiled back weakly. “I’ve been foraging. It looks like you’ve been eating berries?”

“Berries.” I nodded, absently wiping at my mouth. I found that I had seeds stuck between my teeth and smeared around my mouth.

He moved closer and looked at the bushes. “Do you mind if I pick some? These look nice and ripe.”

“You have some.” I nodded.

For a time, he was quiet, humming to himself and picking fruit. I was careful not to turn my back on him, and I hummed too, as I continued to eat. After some time, we were both humming together and laughing as we picked and ate. I don’t know what was funny, but there was something amusing about the situation.
I sniffed at his belt pouches and backpack. He noticed me looking, and opened them for me. He had collected a wealth of nuts, mushrooms, berries, leaves, and roots. Most I recognized, but some I did not.

He named each one for me, and then explained its use. It seemed that he collected things for his family. They made medicines from most of them, but he also collected a few for food. Some roots and leaves were good for cuts and scrapes. Others healed aches of the stomach or body. It was very interesting.

“Well, it is getting dark.” He announced at last. The sun was setting overhead, although it was hard to tell through the trees. “I need to go home.”

I felt my heart lurch in my chest. He’d spoken so nicely to me. He’d been so kind. I felt I finally knew what it meant to have a friend. Humans speak so much about friendship, and I’d never understood until now. Foxes are fairly solitary creatures, you see, other than when young kits live with their mothers in a den, learning to fend for themselves.

“Goodbye?” I muttered sadly.

He looked at my sad expression and smiled. “I will come see you again...” He searched for a name. “Ffion.” He suggested the name.

“What is that?”

“It’s your name. You said you didn’t have one, so I made one up for you.”

“What is it?” I wondered what it meant.

He pointed to a purple flower I had in my hair. “Ffion.” I smiled, liking the idea of the name. “Goodbye, John.”

“Bye, Ffion.” He waved as he left. “Be careful of the woods at night.” He called in warning over his shoulder.

I laughed. He really hadn’t realized what I was if he thought I needed to worry about things at night. That night, I felt the strange sensation as my new tail grew. I tried to figure out what had caused it. My seventh tail had come, but what lesson had I learned? It seemed like I had learned so many things.

I’d learned the importance of names. I’d learned about friendship, too. Maybe the two things were related in that they were both part of being human, of interacting. I wondered what new lessons would come with my last two tails.
The Seventh Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What does the Gumiho girl find she likes to do?
   A. dance
   B. sing and talk
   C. sleep
   D. eat

2. What is the fox girl doing when someone finds her?
   A. fishing by the river
   B. dancing in the grass
   C. whistling in the meadow
   D. singing and eating berries

3. Who does she meet?
   A. a boy
   B. a girl
   C. an old man
   D. an old lady

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho really had a secret name that she didn’t want to share with a human boy.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The fox girl learned about friendship.
   A. True
   B. False
The Seventh Tail

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   B. **False**

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   B. False
The Eighth Tail

I was near to completing myself. I had gained seven of my nine tails, and soon I would be far more than the fox I had been born as. Of course, even as a young fox kit, I had been more than just a fox. I was a Gumiho, a forest fox spirit destined to gain 9 tails by learning important lessons.

Each lesson so far had made me more and more human. I’d learned to look like them, speak like them, and to an extent even think like them. Of course, my disguises were not perfect, and it had taken me years of practice to get to where I was. I’d made a few friends along the way, but these last few lessons had taken me a great deal of time to figure out, and the children I had known in the human villages the forest were now grown up. Most had children and families of their own, so I spent my days walking the forest, coming upon humans when I could, often hunters and fishermen, so I could practice being human.

Today marked a special event in the villages, a summer festival. Everyone would wear special robes and dresses, and many lanterns would be lit. Prayers would be said, and bells would ring at midnight. It was one of the biggest festivals of the year, and I’d been preparing myself for it. I’d even assembled a summer dress of my own from scraps and pieces of cloth that I’d pilfered from townsfolk.

My dress was white, with patches of red I’d cut to look like cherry blossoms. I had a matching red belt tied around my waist, and I had flowers in my hair as well. I’d even managed to make my own sandals for the outfit. Girls of the town also used makeup to color their faces, which I found odd, but I felt it would better hide my true nature, so I tried it as well. Of course, I did not have the powders and paints they had for their faces, so I had to make do with berries to stain my lips and flowers to color my cheeks and eyelids. I had to say that when I looked into my own reflection on a sliver of a mirror I had found and kept, I did not recognize myself.

I made my way into town as the sun began to set. People from surrounding farms and smaller communities were riding horses, carriages, and wagons to come visit the larger town. One kind old man and his elderly wife even offered me a ride, seeing how I was walking alone along the road. We made conversation as we went, and I was very careful about what I said. My communication skills were rusty from disuse, but I think I managed to convince them that I was a young woman who lived in the next valley, and that I was meeting some cousins in town.

In town, I climbed down from the wagon and offered my thanks with a deep bow, a gesture I’d learned from watching humans. They smiled and wished me luck in finding my cousins, and waved as I melted into the crowds.

People in a rainbow of robes and dresses lined the streets. The streets were mostly packed dirt, but the sidewalks were cobbled with large flat stones. Along these cobbled walks, vendors had set up to sell treats and sweets. Others had set up silly games of chance, where one might win a hair ribbon or even a goldfish. Children ran about, tearing up and down the streets with a freeness that I envied. I had not felt that type of freedom since I was a young fox kit running in the woods.
I had some money with me, which I stored in a small red pouch about my waist. I'd found lost coins here and there, and on occasion I'd even learned to trade some rare roots and plants with families that dealt in such commodities, mostly for making medicines and healthful teas. Money was of little use for me in the forest, but I'd saved my coins for quite some time to buy the needles I'd needed to make my dress and for tonight. You see, I'd watched this festival for five years, learning its customs, researching it so that I could be believable in my performance tonight.

I stopped and sampled some savory cooked meat on a skewer. It cost only a small copper coin, and I was terribly hungry. Maybe it was the nerves, or maybe it was the effort of putting up a disguise for so long. The gentleman selling the barbecued meat complemented my hair and dress and asked where I was from. I smiled shyly and told him I was from the next valley—it was my standard excuse. I found that if I practiced a lie enough, it became easier to be convincing about it.

In that moment, I felt a strange sadness come upon me. Why should I have to lie? What was so wrong with me? I had never hurt anyone, unless taking a few odds and ends left outside of a few homes was terrible. It made me terribly sad to think that I had to hide my true self from all of these people, and why? Would they hate me? Would they fear me?

I almost left right then, but I wanted to stay the night. I tried a few games, but my heart was not in it. I was good at games of chance and skill, because my reflexes were very quick, and, even as a human, my hands were very deft. I won a paper lantern from a game of throwing darts. Men were lined up to try the game, but most could not win. I won with the first toss of a dart through a narrow ring. I chose one with a candle inside it and a black print of a fox on the panels. It seemed fitting.

“Hey, how did you win that?” One man asked me, wondering if there was any trick to it.

I smiled. “I threw the dart through the ring. The game is simple.”

“It’s harder than it looks.” He grumbled. He looked like he wanted to ask me more questions, probably where I was from or what my name was, but I melted into the crowd once more.

I took my lantern then and walked to the center of town, where a square shrine had been set up. It had a square roof that rose to a point in the middle and curved at the corners. It was painted red, for good luck. People crowded all around, waiting for their turns to toss coins into the spring-fed well that was inside of it. I understood that they made wishes as they tossed their coins, but I didn’t know what my wish would be until I walked up and took my turn.

As I stared into the cool water, listening to the plunk plunk sounds of other people’s coin wishes, I decided what it was that I really wanted: I wanted to be able to live without hiding what I was.

After that, I slipped through the crowds, taking my lantern with me as I left the town and made my way back home. I heard the bells ring at midnight, but I was too busy dealing with the pain of my eighth tail growing. I’d learned something important that night, and that was that I could never truly be what I wasn’t. I might look like a human, but I was a Gumiho. I wasn’t even a fox anymore. I was trapped between two worlds, and I knew that a time would come when I’d have to choose.
The Eighth Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What festival does the Gumiho fox girl want to go to?
   A. Harvest Festival
   B. Summer Festival
   C. Winter’s End Festival
   D. Planting Festival

2. Who gives the girl a ride to town?
   A. two old farmer gentlemen
   B. and old man and his son
   C. and old man and his elderly wife
   D. two kind old ladies

3. What game does she win at the festival?
   A. a coin toss game
   B. a juggling game
   C. a ring toss game
   D. a dart game

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho stayed for the entire festival, leaving only the next morning.
   A. True
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The girl learned that she could not be something she was not, and that she would have a big choice ahead of her.
   A. True
   B. False
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5. TRUE OR FALSE: The girl learned that she could not be something she was not, and that she would have a big choice ahead of her.
   - A. True
   - B. False
The Last Tail

I was a Gumiho with eight tails. I had been born as a fox with no tail, but through learning many important lessons, my magical nature had allowed me to grow eight tails. With each tail had come new powers, and these powers made me more and more human.

I was nearing my choice, the choice that would change me forever. All I needed was one more tail, and that meant one more lesson to learn. I both looked forward to it and dreaded it. What would I choose? I knew I would have to choose to become human or something else. What would that something else be? Would I become a simple fox? I didn’t want that. Would I just stay as a Gumiho, a fox spirit forever trapped between the lives of humans and animals? I wasn’t sure I wanted that, either, but what would it mean to be human?

I imagined having a regular human name and life. I imagined living in a small wooden house, sleeping at night and being afraid of the things beyond the village. I saw how humans lived, with sickness and suspicion. I also saw how great they could be. Nothing was as wonderful as their children. They were so alive and hopeful. Life was toil and difficult for adult humans though.

Getting old was scary, too. Would I age like a human if I became one? I’d already lived far beyond the lifespan of a fox. My own mother fox and my littermates, my fox siblings, were long gone. Over years I’d grown beyond being a simple fox to being this creature that sat and watched humans, growing similar but never becoming human enough. I’d watched and learned, hardly aging. I didn’t even feel older, just wiser.

It was strange, but it came upon me in the daytime. In thinking about my nature and my future, in trying to decide what I was, my ninth and final tail grew. It startled me, because it is a painful process by moonlight usually, and yet this one grew without pain and it was midday. It was under the noon sun that this final tail grew.

And with the ninth tail, I felt much changed. I felt like a different being. I glowed with inner light. The last tail was different. Where the previous ones were silvery and glowed with the moon’s energies, this one was bright and yellow gold. It was hard to look at it. It presented a choice. I had to choose my nature, and my choices were three-fold: be a fox, be a Gumiho, or be a human. I had until sunset to choose my answer, or it would be made for me.

I took the first part of the afternoon to be a fox. I ran among the trees. I hunted voles and caught fish. I reveled in the freedom of running and hunting. I lazed in the sun and enjoyed the breeze across my fur. The second part of the afternoon I spent as a Gumiho.
Dressed in human clothes, I sat beside the road and greeted strangers that drove by in the carts and wagons. I spoke to them, but they always regarded me with suspicion. Who was I? Why was I alone? Where did I come from? It was a sad and lonely existence, and yet I could do things they could not. I could change the color of my hair. I could leap up trees. I could run across a river, skipping on stones that would cause most humans to slip and fall. I was more than a simple human and yet less.

As the sun began to set, I tried very hard to decide what it was I needed. It was an impossible choice, I thought. How much simpler life would be if I could just be a fox? I’d live a short lifespan of hunting and hiding. I might have a litter of my own kits to teach my skills and talents to, but it would be over. No, I couldn’t do that. I’d been born special for a reason.

That left me with two choices: Gumiho or human. Humans, too, had short lives. They were happy, and they were tragic. They could do amazing things, learn of many wonders, and do acts of great kindness. This was a terribly hard choice.

The last of the sun was vanishing from the sky, and I knew I had to make a decision soon. My golden tail glowed and flickered with the fading sun, and I knew what choice I had to make. Sadly, yet calmly, I watched the golden light fade from my tail. I had chosen to remain as a Gumiho.

As a Gumiho, I could still live and learn. I was proud of what and who I was. I might even find others like myself someday. So, I put the thoughts of being human behind me, and I left the comfort of my forest. I went beyond it and into the next valley for the first time in my life.

I’d learned a valuable lesson: not to be ashamed of what you are. I was unique and happy as I was. Trying to be something I was not had made me deeply unhappy, and a weight I’d not even known was there had been lifted from my shoulders.

I’m not saying that there is something wrong with trying to be better or more than you are. That is a great endeavor. But trying to blindly change what you are while ignoring your own gifts and abilities is foolish.

I figured I’d learn more lessons as I traveled, now that the whole world had opened up to me. I would live in it as a fox and as a human, for that is what it means to be a Gumiho.
The Last Tail

Use the information in the story to answer the questions below.

1. What surprising time of day does the last tail arrive?
   A. Sunrise  
   B. Sunset  
   C. Noon  
   D. Midnight

2. Which of these is NOT a choice the Gumiho has?
   A. become human  
   B. stay as a Gumiho  
   C. become a cat  
   D. become a fox

3. What does the Gumiho do to help herself make her choice?
   A. She spends part of the afternoon as a fox and then in human form.  
   B. She goes somewhere quiet to think.  
   C. She plays all day to avoid the decision.  
   D. She doesn’t try to think about it.

4. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho felt a weight lifted from her shoulders after making her decision.
   A. True  
   B. False

5. TRUE OR FALSE: The Gumiho felt like she had no more lessons to learn at the end of the story.
   A. True  
   B. False
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