The Last Tail
Story By: Andrew Frinkle

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.
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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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