

The Third Tail

Story By: Andrew Frinkle

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. The 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...

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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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