

The Eighth Tail

Story by Andrew Frutkin

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 Jumbie, a forest fox spirit destined to gain 9 tails for learning important lessons.

Each lesson I'd learned had made me more and more human. I'd learned to look like them, speak like them, and to go about my life 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 came near-grown up. Most had children and families of their own, so I spent my days walking the forest, visiting upon humans when I could, often farmers and fishermen, so I could practice being human.

Tales marked a special event in the villages, a summer festival. Everyone would wear special robes and dresses, and many lanterns would be lit. Drapers would be sold, 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 gathered from townfolk.

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 it had flowers in my hair as well. It'd been managed to make my own sash for the outfit. Girls of the forest 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 in a stream 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 visiting 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 crowd.

People in a rainbow of robes and dresses lined the streets. The streets were mostly packed dirt, but the sidewalks were cobble with large flat stones. Along these cobble 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, leaping up and down the streets with a freedom that I envied. I had not felt that type of freedom since I was a young fox kit running in the woods.