



9 Tails, 2 Hands, 1 Smile

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Magic, Mythology, Romance

“Run! Save yourself!”

“Remember that we love you very much!”

“Please Taka, you need to live!”

He vowed never to forget their voices. It was the last memory that he ever had of his family. He did as he was told, he ran and never looked back. Even if the violent flames stung him, even if the ground vibrated as the Horde’s cavalry chased after him, even if he heard the horrified wails of the massacred behind him, he never stopped running.

Just run!

Just keep running!

He was an obedient boy. He ran and never looked back.

He ran for hours across the barren countryside. The scenery around him changed from devastated ruins, to scorched farmlands, and to deserted houses reeking with the smell of death. A blanket of tears covered his eyes. He was lost, broken, and devastated.

His legs finally gave in and he collapsed face down on a muggy pile of earth. He ended up in a dark forest with trees taller than windmills and the air as fresh as a new morning. The earth below the boy’s face got soaked

with his own tears.

Where am I? How did I get here?

Papa

Mama

Kumi

Why?

Taka pounded the ground with his fist. He needed to replace the despair with anything. He pushed himself away from the ground and pounded it with his knuckles even more. The anger, the sadness, the hopelessness, replace them with anything. Replace them with pain.

“I’ll kill all of you! I’ll kill all of you for taking my family.”

But they never went away. The anger, the sadness, the hopelessness, they just stayed. The pain just nudged deep into his broken heart, claiming a place of its own.

He soon felt pain gnawing at his knuckles. Blood trickled and seeped between the ridges of his small fingers caked in dirt.

Somewhere in the forest, a young girl looks up into the trees as if it brought her disquieting news.

“Someone is in my forest. Who could he be?”

She took a sniff at the air and caught the faint scent of blood. She then closed her eyes and inhaled the scent deeply. She drew a long satisfying breath afterward. “A human!” She opened her eyes and exclaimed. She went down on all fours and bolted out of the clearing where she stood.

“Finally! A human liver to eat,” she snickered with excitement. She moved like the wind, blurring past the tall grasses and cedar tree branches.

Taka propped himself against a tree and surveyed his surroundings. He could tell that it was daytime but the

leaves on the trees were so dense that it allowed only dots of sunlight to enter. His vision was dimming and his strength was starting to fade. He almost gave in to sleep when the random sound of rustling leaves from one of the trees startled him.

A pair of red slits appeared from within the trees. It emerged from the leaves and revealed a beautiful yet feral face, framed with full locks of silver hair. The face had dainty ears jutting out from the top of its head, flicking and twitching rapidly like butterfly wings. It bared canine fangs as white as ivory, growling and sneering as it came into full view. A lithe female body slinked down the tall cedar tree and dropped before him on all fours. She wore a white gossamer dress which hugged her body every time she moved. Behind her were nine tails that spread majestically like a fan. They had the same shine and fullness as her silver hair and they moved as if they were submerged underwater.

A Gumiho! This is bad!

Taka trembled as the Gumiho approached him like a predator, ready to pounce at him anytime. He had heard the stories about the Gumiho, on how they killed men who wandered into the forests to eat their hearts and lives. His family died by the hands of the Horde. And now he will die by a Gumiho's fangs. What terrible luck.

I...I don't care anymore. Just let me die. The young man realized that it was futile to oppose fate. He missed his family. He wanted to see them soon.

Mama. Papa. Kumi. Wait for me.

The Gumiho hovered before Taka's tired face and sniffed him. She then sat with crossed legs and gazed at him with an inquisitive face. "You look pretty scrawny for a human," she said to him. The young man's arms went limp and his body fell on its side. With eyes closed and labored breaths, the color of life seemed to drain away from his skin.

"Drats!" the Gumiho cursed under her breath. "I can't eat from a corpse. I'll be tainted." She grew desperate as she watched the young man slowly die before her. She had no choice. She had to save the boy's life if she wanted to feast.

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She carried the unconscious Taka to the nearest river to douse and cleanse his wounds. She expected him to

flinch as the water stung his wounds but he didn't, instead, she felt his warmth slowly seeping away. "I must hurry!" she thought as she left him by the river bank. She ran on all fours back into the forest, flitting between the trees and bushes, and then came back with a handful of mugwort leaves. She took a piece from each, rolled them together into a ball and chewed them, grinding them into a mushy paste which she then placed on the boy's wounds. She then tore several layers from the bottom of her dress to use as bandages to keep the herbs in place.

The forest has donned its nightly robe by the time the Gumiho was done. She laid beside Taka with her head propped on her hand and her body turned to face him. "What am I going to do with you?" the Gumiho contemplated. She did what she can to heal her wounds but she was uncertain if she was able to save him. She waited patiently under the collective starlight, staring at the boy's peaceful face that glowed under the light of the fireflies.

"He's alive!" the Gumiho exclaimed when she saw that the young man finally regained consciousness. "Mama....Papa....Kumi....," he mumbled out of delirium while shivering from the cold night. The Gumiho inched closer and spread her 9 nine tails underneath him, swaddling him in a tight embrace to keep him warm. Taka stopped trembling and the pain slowly melted away from his face. The Gumiho found herself strangely relieved. She has never been physically close to a human before unless she was tearing their flesh with her teeth and devouring their innards. She felt the young man's feverish warmth, a sensation that was completely foreign to her. In that fleeting moment, she was at peace.

The boy turned to his side and wrapped his arms around the Gumiho. She was left stunned in the boy's unconscious embrace. She wanted to push him away but she couldn't. She didn't want to. The boy's warm breath brushed against the Gumiho's cheek and it made her blush. With Taka's face a mere inch away from hers, the Gumiho almost got lost staring at his lips. She dared to nudge closer until the lips moved.

"Mama, Papa, Kumi. I'm scared to be alone," Taka whispered. The Gumiho watched as a tear streaked across Taka's cheek and into his upper lip. Curiosity overwhelmed the Gumiho afterward. She needed to find out what happened to the young man.

She inched closer until their foreheads touched. She let Taka's memories flow through her. What she saw next left her devastated.

She saw Taka's father skewered with spears, his mother gurgling with blood from her throat, and her sister in torn clothes with a soldier on top of her. She saw the burning village, the devastated farmlands, and the ominous march of the Horde. She felt Taka's fear and anger as he ran away. She felt his deepest heartache, his crippling despair.

The Gumiho's cheeks were damp when she opened her eyes. This boy. He had seen horror. He had seen hell. She felt the same ache engulf her heart. For the first time, the Gumiho was gripped with an overwhelming emotion. She felt compassion.

She moved her nine tails to embrace Taka closer unto her. "There, there. You'll be safe with me," she whispered while she caressed Taka's unkempt hair. His lips slowly curved into a smile as if he was savoring a joyous dream. Throughout the night, they slept in each other's embrace, basking in each other's warmth.

Taka woke up the next morning with a Gumiho gawking at him. They sat across each other in an awkward silence until the Gumiho stood up with arms akimbo.

"Little human! You shall stay here in the forest until the next time the moon smiles, understand?" The Gumiho pointed at Taka with an imperiousness that startled him.

Until the next time the moon smiles. She means until the next crescent moon.

Taka agreed. He saw no benefit in angering the mistress of the forest. And besides, he owed him a debt of gratitude for keeping him alive. Surprisingly, the Gumiho gave a rather odd request afterward.

"I want you to give me a name," she demanded. "I want to learn the ways of the humans. So I want a human name, Taka."

"What name do I give you?" Taka was befuddled.

"I want the name Kumi!" the Gumiho declared with a hearty smile.

“What?! No! Anything but my sister’s name!” Taka burst out in anger. Who does she think she is? No one can replace my sister.

“Please, Taka. I’m not replacing your sister. I want a human name so that you don’t treat me as your captor,” the Gumiho pleaded. Taka felt his heart drop at what the Gumiho said. He couldn’t fathom why she would care so much for him. At a time when he felt unloved, this Gumiho saved him.

“Fine. I shall name you Kumi.” He agreed reluctantly.

As the days went by, the Gumiho taught Taka the ways of the forest. She taught him how to command fireflies to light his way, how to weave impervious cloth from spider and caterpillar silk, how to tell which plants were edible, poisonous, and served medicinal properties, and how to draw energy from the spirit of the trees and the moon. In return, Taka taught the Gumiho the ways of the humans. He taught her how to count and read symbols which he drew on the ground, how to catch fish so that she would never kill humans again, and her favorite, how to dance. During days when the moon’s glow was at its brightest, they would dance with the fireflies encircling them. Together, they made the forest a paradise just for the two of them.

Until one day, the moon didn’t shine as bright as it used to be. When Taka looked up, he saw the slender crescent moon. Finally, it was time for him to leave.

“Kumi, fulfill your promise! Lead me out of the forest!” Taka demanded.

“I beg you, Taka. Please stay. If you leave the forest, I’ll have to erase your memory. No one will bother us here. Let’s be happy in here together.” Kumi said while on the verge of tears.

“Kumi, you will never forget me right?” Taka drew closer and held Kumi’s hand. “Even if I forget your face, I promise to never forget your warmth. I’ll remember the warmth of your hands, Kumi,” he said while wiping a tear that ran down the Gumiho’s cheek. “Kumi, the last thing I want to see before I leave the forest is your smile. I don’t care if my mind forgets. My heart will always remember. Will you do that for me?”

“Yes, Taka. I’ll show you the way,” Kumi replied and gave Taka the most beautiful smile she could ever muster.

They walked through the forest hand in hand, remembering each other’s touch and warmth. Taka’s eyes

wandered as fireflies emerged from the trees and bushes to illuminate the way, painting the forest in a golden glow. A breeze gusted through the wall of trees that lined their path. It made the leaves and branches sway rhythmically like hands bidding goodbye to Taka.

They reached a part of the forest where a thick wall of vines covered the side of an immense cliff. Taka watched silently as the vines slithered and moved, revealing a gateway to the outside world. Kumi, on the other hand, averted her gaze and kept her head low. She couldn't fathom the ache that was forming in her heart.

As Taka stared at the gateway that will lead him home, he wondered if he still had a home to go back to. The winds of Fate might have been cruel to take everything away from him in just one night, but it also stoked a fire that raged in the pit of his soul. The onslaught of the Horde must stop. He vowed to bring them to justice by his own hand so that no one else needed to suffer.

Taka turned to Kumi and clasped her hand. "I'll miss the days we've spent together Kumi. I was fortunate to have met you. I owe you my life," he said while beholding into Kumi's silver eyes which have turned glassy from her tears. "Promise me that you will never forget me. As long as you remember me, I'll..."

Kumi couldn't resist the invisible force that compelled her to move towards Taka. She closed her eyes and drew closer until their lips touched. The notion of human love was completely distant to Kumi, but in that transient moment, she thanked Fate for the pure joy that this precious human has given her.

"And promise, I shall," whispered Kumi as she let go of the kiss, their breaths melding together in the cold night. "Until Fate brings us together once again, I shall wait for you. My heart will lead you back to me." She placed her hands on Taka's chest and felt his robust heartbeat, amazed that it was beating in time with hers.

Taka pressed Kumi's hand against his chest one last time and then turned towards the exit. Their hands lingered in each other's touch until Taka had to let go. He fought the desire to look back at Kumi, he never wanted to show his tears, and instead fixed his gaze at the ethereal gateway.

Kumi averted her gaze as she couldn't bear the pain of watching Taka walk away. For a moment, however, she wanted to claim that last memory of Taka leaving through the gateway.

“Taka....”

She raised her head and stared at the gateway. She couldn't see Taka. Her vision was marred by her own tears. She wanted to see him, even his silhouette would have been enough for her.

“TAKA!”

She ran towards the gateway. She was ready to abandon anything. She wanted to be outside with Taka. As the vines slithered around to conceal the exit, she caught a glimpse of Taka turning around to face her.

“TAAAAAKAAAAA!!!”

Taka turned behind him and saw an empty forest. He remembered his deceased loved ones, his devastated land, and his burning desire to avenge his misfortunes brought by the Horde. However, he couldn't explain the suspicion that something, or someone, is missing in his memories.

“Strange,” he mused. “I could've sworn that I heard someone call my name.”

THE END

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