

MEET THE CHAMPIONS

Champions of Kamigawa



Eight and a Half Tales

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The blood was still heavy in the air. It choked the kitsune's sensitive senses, practically congealing in his throat. He resisted the urge to cough.

Eight-and-a-Half Tails had not stepped outside Susuki Village, let alone traveled this far away from it, for longer than he cared to remember. In that time, the horrors of the kami had faded in his mind, like a painting left out in the sun for too long. But it took just one drop of crimson to bring the colors flooding back.

The kitsune elder's staff tapped the ground, the rings threaded through its head chiming together in a pleasing tone that seemed out of place in the carnage around him. The wreckage of several wooden carts scattered about the road told him that it was a trade caravan, and it was obvious that its ronin bodyguards did little good. Bales of cloth snaked across the grass, its lush green spotted with ugly blotches of red. As Eight-and-a-Half Tails passed, he noted one merchant's robe torn apart, but not by kami. Obviously scavengers, human or otherwise, had already passed by.



The fields of waving grass before him whispered quietly, calmly. But here and there on the road in front were little signs: very large patches of trampled or burnt grass, an odd tree whose upper branches were snapped, a rock half-trampled into the hard soil. The road was also a path of kami destruction; who knew what else lay further down the trail?

Eight-and-a-Half Tails closed his pale blue eyes, gently bringing his spirit back to calm. The Sozenkan Mountains were still two days' journey away — three if he took this kami-trampled path. He thought of his journey, of the contents of the simple woven-grass basket slung on his back. He thought of his people, back in Susuki, who doubtless knew by now that he had gone.

He thought of Hagi Village, and the little black pock-marks that dotted the body of almost every inhabitant. The plague had swept in like a summer squall, smelling of filth. Lord Konda ordered the village quarantined, but quietly allowed no more than five healers to deal with the victims, who lay moaning in the streets, without the strength to even tend to their own festering wounds.

He had gone in not even thinking of the possibility that he could be infected. He didn't remember sleeping once in the next five days; every memory he had was of faces twisted with pain and fever, arms choked with ugly sores, children crying, poultices, herbs, potions, remedies, prayers.

They lost a quarter of the village, but saved three times more. When he woke up from his exhausted slumber two days later, he found he had his sixth tail.



It used to be a farm – that much was obvious. But like the caravan on the road behind him, this too had been laid waste. The small house was folded in on itself, as if some force had sucked the walls in from within. What used to be a small stable, more a shack than anything, smoldered nearby, as a crushed cart creaked in the wind. Only the pathetically small rice paddy was untouched, its proud stalks waiting for a harvest that would never come.

Eight-and-a-Half Tails realized that it was on a farm no bigger than this that he himself had grown up. His father was no lord or mighty warrior, but a simple fox, making the best living he knew how. Yet even this humble one was, in the eyes of a young kit, a font of knowledge, teaching his son about the legendary ways of kami, of honor and strength, of the kitsune race itself, and how each fox grew new tails each time he did or learned something of great importance — how the nine-tailed foxes were the wisest of all. He remembered, as a youth, wondering why this obviously wonderful father of his didn't have nine tails, and becoming determined to do it himself.

But here, now, the only laughter or eager chatter sounded in his memories. There was no sign of whoever once lived here. He called out, but only the rustling rice plants answered. He turned to leave when a soft sniffing met his sharp, pointed ears. Gripping the rings of his staff so they wouldn't chime, he softly made his way around the cart. There, a human girl, her face smeared with dirt, clutched her ragged kimono tighter around her, shaking in some unnamable fear. She was very young...

... Around the same age that he had been when he heard that a friend of his, son of a prominent priest, had been kidnapped by a group of human ronin samurai seeking ransom. Without telling his father, the young kitsune managed to track down the kidnappers all by himself, but knew that he could not defeat them all in combat. Going back to the village for help would take too much time; the kidnappers' deadline was near. Escape would also be impossible, unless...

He quietly crept about the cabin, among the sleeping samurai, tying bootlaces together, slipping a laxative herb into their jars of sake, and "redistributing" gold from one samurai to another. The next morning, by the time the chaos, accusations, and fighting died down, all the kidnappers were dead or incapacitated, and the two kitsune were on their way home, one with his newly grown second tail.

Carefully, he kneeled beside the girl, who peeked around the other side of the cart to see if he was still there. "Hello," he said in a near whisper.

But even that small sound made the child jump. She tried to scoot away, but her flailing legs did not take her far at all. "Please," the kitsune continued gently, "I'm here to help you." He carefully passed a claw over an angry red welt on the child's forehead. Murmuring some ancient words in a high-pitched fox tongue, he jangled his staff and prayed to the forces of creation to give relief. The girl's eyes widened in surprise as the wound vanished. "Do you feel better?" The child nodded firmly. "Good. Are you alone?"

She swallowed, hard. "Mommy and Daddy are gone," she replied in a thirst-rasped voice. It didn't take much thought to determine what she meant.

"Is there anyone else here?" A shake of the head answered him. Eight-and-a-Half Tails nodded, taking off the straps that held his basket to his back. "Come. I'll take you to find other people." There was a moment of hesitation, then a small bundle scrambled onto his back, hugging his neck tightly. The fox carefully rose, and the two left the now-abandoned farm alone to its fate.

The next sign of human habitation was a medium-sized merchant town that Eight-and-a-Half Tails knew as Kofu. The little girl watched in wonder as they passed wagons filled with polished lumber, street vendors loudly announced the presence of freshly cooked chicken kabobs, and women in flowing gowns chattered and laughed, barely paying any attention to the rather odd sight that slouched by.

As expected, there was a guard station set up by Eiganjo near the end of the main street. Such outposts were supposed to maintain order in Konda's lands, as well as serve as first defense and warning should kami attack. More often than not, though, the samurai were much more successful at the second than the first. The young, bored looking samurai on watch raised an eyebrow in surprise when the two arrived.

"You are a long way from home, kitsune," he said casually, his fingers barely brushing against his katana hilt. "Is there trouble coming?"

"None at all, it seems," Eight-and-a-Half Tails replied, turning to observe the bustle around him. "There were signs of kami attack about two miles down the road. It seems that you, and this town, were lucky."

The samurai's face paled noticeably. "So it seems," he said, regaining his composure in admirable time. "And who is that?" He nodded towards the girl, who dropped to the ground and stepped to Eight-and-a-Half Tails' side, clutching at his kimono.

"She somehow survived a kami attack on her home. She has no family."

The samurai stared down into the girl's blank, tear-streaked face with a look that almost drowned the kitsune in its depth. "The orphanage is full. The kami have hit this region hard of late. I don't know if..."

"I know you will do the right thing," the kitsune replied, gently nudging the girl towards the samurai. "I trust you."

... Just as he decided to trust Iron-Claw, one of his most promising students. The young kitsune had taken to the spiritual realm faster than any student before him, his talent in the healing arts second only to Eight-and-a-Half Tails (then called Wise-Muzzle) himself. Iron-Claw was thoughtful, wise, and eager to both teach and discuss philosophy, history, and spirit. Eight-and-a-Half Tails envisioned a bright future for him – perhaps he would even become the elder's protégé, taking over his position of leadership one day...

Until the day Iron-Claw came to Eight-and-a-Half Tails in his chambers, his head bowed. "Sensei..." The one word was full of such emotion that the elder immediately took notice. "I wish to become a samurai."

Eight-and-a-Half Tails' heart froze. He knew that the boy was as skilled with a blade as he was with magic. He knew that Iron-Claw had often discussed the use of direct warfare as a tool for peace, that he came from a long line of kitsune warriors. But this...

"I have come to the conclusion that there's simply too much darkness in the world for me not to take direct action. I feel that I could do so much more good that way. Besides, I've heard rumors that..." He paused, and shook his head. "That doesn't matter. My parents and elder sister are already fighting the fight. Two have already perished doing their duty. I don't want to abandon the priesthood, but lately, in my meditations, I've just had the feeling that I belong on the battlefield." He looked his sensei square in the eye, a directness that Eight-and-a-Half Tails had long since learned to appreciate. "I haven't come to ask for your approval, because I've already made up my mind. But I owed you an explanation."

A million arguments rang through the elder's mind: reasons of safety, philosophy, judgment. At least take a few days to think about it, in case the deaths of your family are clouding your outlook! But all Eight-and-a-Half Tails said was, "I wish you great luck in your training. Know that you will always find a home here."

The young kitsune blinked in surprise. Then, his entire face began to beam. "Thank you, sensei. I promise that once my duty to Kamigawa has been fulfilled, I'll return."

"I will pray for that day." Long after Iron-Claw had departed for Eiganjo, Eight-and-a-Half Tails wondered what he would have said, could have said, had he not seen the determination and certainty that he had in the younger kitsune's heart. It was only a week later, during the first training session he'd had in years without Iron-Claw's presence, that he noticed that he now had his eighth tail.

There was a long silence. Finally, the young man nodded. "I know the people who run the orphanage. I'll speak with them, and take care of her myself in the meantime."

"Thank you."

The samurai dropped to one knee in front of the girl and smiled. "Come here, little one." She paused, and looked up questioningly at Eight-and-a-Half Tails.

"Go ahead." Finally, she approached. The samurai swept her up in his arms and stood.

"If I could ask a question?" the samurai said.

"Of course."

"I don't often see your kind in this region, apart from armies of Lord Konda passing through. Where are you going?"

"Into Sozenkan, near the central reaches."

The samurai frowned. "What is there?"

"My penance. I hope." Without another word, the elder kitsune departed. He found out later that the girl still lived in the orphanage. She was slowly opening up to the other children, but the supervisors held little hope that she, or any child, would be adopted until after the Kami War was over.

Sunset was hours ago, but Eight-and-a-Half Tails walked without fear. The head of his staff cast a soft, warm glow on the road in front of him. He could still travel much ground before camping for the night, and the more time saved, the better.

Already the land was starting to show signs of the sharp mountains it would soon become. The path was flat and hard, with boulders jutting from the ground seemingly at random. The vegetation was sparse, and dust clouded with each step. In the days before the kami rage, this was a road well traveled by merchants and travelers taking Ganzan Pass. Of course, that meant that it was also a prime spot for...

Eight-and-a-Half tails stopped, his ears perked. He sniffed the dry air, and his eyes darted back and forth. He gripped his cane tightly.

"Bandits."

In an instant, they were everywhere: scabbling over rocks, popping up from camouflaged ditches, dropping from outcroppings. Seven or eight nezumi, their fur matted with grime and dressed in patchwork leather armor, waved their spears and daggers as they appeared. It seemed that nezumi mercenaries and thieves infested all of Kamigawa.

"A defenseless fox, all alone," one mocked in a high, chittering voice.

"I could hear your bones creak from miles away!" mocked another.

A third swung his polearm through the air, its whistle low and steady. "Not even a samurai, yet! A priest!" The others, coming together in an increasingly tight circle, laughed. Eight-and-a-Half Tails backed slowly towards a towering boulder, and the huge shadow it cast in the moonlight. His wary gaze turned first towards the nezumi, then towards the shadow. His grip on his staff tightened.

"What do you have for us, kitsune?"

"Your staff looks valuable. Maybe your tails will fetch a nice price."

Eight-and-a-Half Tails felt a low growl deep in his throat. "You are barring my path."

The nezumi laughter rang in echoes. "Of course we're in your way! How else are we gonna kill and rob you?"

"I would advise you leave now." The kitsune raised his staff, setting the nezumi's teeth on edge. "For your own safety."

"Making empty threats, elderly fox? You must either be senile or suicidal. What do you possibly think you can do to all of us?"



"It is not me you should be worried about." With that, the light emanating from the staff flared, and he swung it violently towards the large shadow. Before any of the nezumi could blink the flash from their eyes, their ears filled with a hideous scream. A misshapen blob of pure night darted out of the shadow. It was a roiling living pile of goo whose darkness seemed to feed on moonlight, surrounded by small spheres of the same substance that orbited the main body like flies around rotting meat. The thing reared up and shrieked, a grating sound that was a weird cross between a gurgle, a long cricket chirp, and the harsh squeak of metal rubbing against metal. His muzzle moving in a rapid chant, Eight-and-a-Half Tails shook his staff violently, the jangling rings increasing its magical glow. The blob

reacted by firing spear-like projections out of its own body, its gooey substance taking on razor sharpness.

One blinding swing of the staff deflected one of the shots. A jump against the boulder, then a push against it to hurtle through the air, dodged two more. With a graceful flip, the kitsune landed firmly on his feet, raising his staff just in time to smack away another spear. He shouted three ancient words that hurt the nezumi's ears, and a warm light washed over the blob.

He'd developed this particular trick, unique among all kitsune, during his initial training as a cleric. Clerics were not trained as intensely in combat skills as the samurai, of course, but, as his teachers often said, if the enemy cannot harm you, there is less need for offense. His trick, created after months of study in the Turning Principle, allowed the user to learn but one form of mystic protection, and attune his opponent to that form, creating a perfect defense against any foe with minimal effort. His masters were amazed, and he himself was amazed that it actually worked. His fifth tail appeared soon after.

It fired off another spear of goo, but this time, it sloughed right off of the kitsune's skin. The tables turned, Eight-and-a-Half Tails leaped directly at his foe. Squelching two more attacks as he flew through the air, he sounded a long, harsh cry as the head of the staff slammed into the dark, inky thing. Quietly, surprisingly quietly, the blob withered and vanished.

The nezumi stared in shock.

"That was a..."

"Kami of shadows."

"It would have killed us all in a moment."

"The kitsune destroyed it..."

"Effortlessly."

The group of rats looked at each other, and then at Eight-and-a-Half Tails, who still stood amongst them, calmly brushing dirt off his kimono.

"You're very lucky, kitsune!" one of the bandits shouted, a little louder than necessary. "We're letting you live!"

"You probably don't have anything worth our time and trouble anyway."

"Just don't forget us!"

"Yeah, we won't spare you the next time we meet!"

Within seconds, all the nezumi had scurried away into the darkness, leaving Eight-and-a-Half Tails alone once more on the trail. His breath not even quickened from his encounter, he bowed his head, murmuring a short, gentle prayer, apologizing to the kami for angering it, and for being forced to destroy it. He looked sorrowfully upon the spot where the kami once stood...

Remembering the first kami he had ever spoken to directly. He was deep in spiritual repose in his personal sanctuary, reaching out to the kakuriyo in his prayers. Then, a light appeared – not any physical light, however. This glow existed only in his mind's eye, and it was softer, warmer, and more comforting than any he had ever known. The kami spoke to him, not with words, but with impressions, feelings, and fleeting images. Even then, the message was obtuse and complex, leaving his mind whirling with shreds of thought and emotion that he hardly knew where to even start interpreting. But even with this gulf between them, the kitsune felt full of hope, comforted by the kami's words, even if he couldn't comprehend them.

He would speak with the kami many more times before the war began, and would start understanding bits and snatches of what they said in his dreams. Not long after that first fateful encounter, he gained his seventh tail.

"None of this has been your doing," he whispered, still staring at where the kami had once been. "You are doing what you must. And I am doing what I must." Pushing away the riot of thoughts trying to crowd into his mind, he turned and continued on the path up the mountain.

Now wrapped tightly in the fur cloak he'd kept in the basket on his back, Eight-and-a-Half Tails made his way through the biting cold. As he clambered over teetering rocks and sparse scrub, he heard nothing, save his own harsh breath, and the occasional echo. These echoes were sometimes roars, sometimes high-pitched giggling. Kami and akki goblins were scattered all over Sozenkan, and Eight-and-a-Half Tails was thankful that Shinka Keep, lair of the outcast ogres, was far away. Already, he'd been forced into a long, precarious climb over an almost sheer cliff side, to avoid a strong kami presence he'd sensed. Even now, he had to keep an eye out for snares and traps, the dangerous sort of prank the akki were fond of peppering all over their territory.

He'd first heard of such a prank in his childhood. Still a young kitsune, Eight-and-a-Half Tails (though he was not named such then) had heard from the other children that a human samurai was brought to town. He had never seen a human before, so, curious, he snuck to the temple and snooped around. He found out that the samurai had staggered, badly injured, into the nearby woods, and collapsed. The human lay there for who knew how long, until a farmer found him and brought him to the temple for aid. The samurai's armor was scorched, his face and hands burnt so badly, it churned Eight-and-a-Half Tails' young stomach to see it. Worse, the man regained consciousness, and he could see the agony in the human's eyes.

"What happened?" one of the priests gently asked.

"Patrol... Sozenkan..." His voice could barely be heard through his weakness. "We found some kind of... lava trap... laughing all around us... akki..."

Another of the priests nodded. "The akki are known for their vicious practical jokes."

"It seems that this human has been hurt for over a day. We must work quickly."

Eight-and-a-Half Tails watched in fascination as the clerics chanted and prayed and applied fragrant herbs. The human's pain tore at his heart in a way that nothing ever had. Before he realized what he was doing, he emerged from his hiding place and quietly began to assist the priests, who regarded his appearance with no surprise at all. All that day, his paws and voice worked at the human, as if his soul already knew what to do. In the end, it was in vain; the samurai died. The young kitsune stared at the corpse, sorrow flooding his mind. One of the priests touched him on the shoulder.

"You made his final hours less painful. You did well."

It was that day he decided to become a cleric. It was that day he got his third tail.

Despite the fullness of the afternoon sun, he could barely see his breath puffing out in front of him. He knew he had to be close, which was fortunate – he wasn't equipped to go any higher. A lonely cry, a crumpled mix of animal and human, rang from some distant peak. Eight-and-a-Half Tails pulled the cloak close to his fur, and hopped from boulder top to boulder top. If his map and memory served him correctly...

The plateau stretched fifty feet across, an unusually large flat respite in the otherwise jagged Sozenkan Mountains. The ground was still littered with pieces of armor and bleached white skeletons bearing the teeth marks of various predators. Eight-and-a-Half Tails picked his way through this gruesome garden, hopping gently to avoid disturbing any of these cold remains. His sharp kitsune eyes darted about, searching and wary. The bones were not just the remains of what was once one of Lord Konda's strongest samurai battalions. They were potential puppets waiting to dance to the tune of a kami of death or vengeance. His paws tightened, ready to swing his staff at the slightest twitch of an arm bone or the lowest whisper of a hollow moan from a skull.

The mountain winds howled. The chill, and the oppressive quiet and loneliness, told him all he needed to know about what this massacred battalion must have felt, dying in this desolate place. Whispering a prayer for the dead under his breath, Eight-and-a-Half Tails continued his grim search. The howl of the wind became a roar, guttural, monstrous, and closer. Mountain beast? Hungry kami? An akki patrol having some sport? It didn't matter. The pace of his search quickened.

Finally, he found what he was looking for – the katana seemed ordinary, but the scabbard next to it was unmistakable. Eight-and-a-Half Tails looked about for the remains of its owner, but none of the many nearby looked right. Shaking his head, he gently picked up the katana, replaced it in its sheath, and tucked it under his belt. His mission complete, he made his slow way back down the mountain.

This sight filled him with more dread than the nezumi, the kami, or the Sozenkan Mountains. The simple thatched hut was crushingly ordinary, but still... He knocked on the door. A young female kitsune answered, her eyes widening in surprise. "Sensei?"

He never expected to be called "sensei." How would he possibly be worthy of such a title? But his own master had little hope for the new generation. "They are aimless. They know not what they want to be, nor do they know what they wish to make of Kamigawa."

"But do you not teach that they must find their paths for themselves?" he'd asked.

"Of course. But that does not mean that they never need guidance, and I fear that good guides are ever harder to come by."

He'd thought about this, long and hard. By now, he was one of the most well-known kitsune clerics in Kamigawa. He could have his choice of temples to run; he'd even received an invitation to be personal physician to Lord Konda. But... Perhaps this was arrogance talking, but perhaps he could be the guide his master couldn't find. Perhaps he could use his position to become the light that could lead Kamigawa to where it truly wanted to go.

Many of his fellow clerics tried to talk him out of staying in the village and becoming a simple teacher. But, though none realized just how far his teaching would take him, when he got his fourth tail, he knew he'd made the right decision.

Jade-Claw sipped at her tea, staring down at the katana. "I cannot believe you traveled so far."

"It was the least I could do for your brother. I could not find his remains, but this is almost as important."

"His katana..." She picked it up and turned it over in her paws. "I remember how proud he was of this. It used to be our mother's, you know. He was so sure it would bring him the skill and luck he needed..."

"The kami are harsh opponents," Eight-and-a-Half Tails said quietly.

"He spoke highly of you, up until the very end. He felt he owed everything to you."

"It is I who owe him."

Jade-Claw cocked her head. "I don't understand."

"It's all right." He stood. "I must go now. I've been away from my temple too long."

"Wait." She held the katana out to him. "I know he'd want you to have this."

"But I don't deserve..."

"I can't think of anyone better to carry Iron-Claw's spirit and memory than you. Please." Her eyes were wide and insistent. After a long moment, he relented.

"I only hope that I'm worthy of carrying this one day." He turned to go; as he did, he heard her gasp. He winced; he was wondering when someone would notice.

"Sensei Nine Tails! What... what happened to your...?"

He left without answering.

Why hadn't I refused? The question pounded through his mind all the way back home, and even now, in his simple quarters. He should've refused the katana. He had every reason to. So why did he take it?

It was a reminder. A reminder of his failure, and his need for penance.

He frowned. "This is most unusual."

"But they are Lord Konda's wishes," Lady Pearl-Ear replied. "He has the utmost confidence in you and your clerics. In fact, he said that you were the only one in all Kamigawa who had the ability to complete this task."

"I thank him for his confidence, but I'm not quite sure exactly what he's after. He requests a very complex meditation into the nature and spiritual energies of the kami. I don't see how it all comes together."

"Lord Konda wishes that to remain a secret for now. He knows that you will respect that."

"Of course." And he did; for three weeks, thoughts of the purpose of the work never entered his mind. Then, three days before he was to give Konda the fruits of his labors, he had a disturbing realization. These rituals, wards, chants, and spells he discovered or created could all manipulate the barrier between the material and spirit worlds, breach the reikai and meddle with the energies on the other side. A shadow of concern went through his mind, a shadow he quickly and forcefully banished. What business was it of his? Only a madman would attempt to abuse these magics, and Lord Konda was certainly no madman. Besides, there were other ways the information could be used, even if he couldn't think of any at the moment...

No, better to finish the work and turn it over. Konda had to have information and intentions that he couldn't share, and hadn't he earned the kitsune's trust and loyalty...?

"I'm sorry," Eight-and-a-Half Tails whispered to the katana in his paws. "I am the one who killed you. If only I'd known what Konda..." He shook his head, and opened a large shrine built into one of the walls of his room.

Inside was a small tuft of white fur, tied at both ends with string.

Kitsune elder Nine Tails gripped the ceremonial knife tightly. Only a few years ago, he'd gained his ninth tail when he became spiritual leader of all kitsune. Once it had been an honor. Now it was a mark of shame.

"I don't deserve this," he whispered. "Not while my actions continue to slaughter innocents." He could almost hear the Kami War being fought outside, being fought in his head. He still reeled from the enormity

of his realizations about what his actions meant for the war. Not that he knew for sure whether his work had anything to do with it, but the stirrings deep in his heart insisted that he knew full well what the truth was.

He had to close his eyes as the knife bit into his tail fur.

He would never be able to tell anyone why he cut off part of his tail – not while the Kami War was going on, and perhaps not ever. It would either be treason, or admitting responsibility for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of deaths. This was but a small part of the price of his blindness. This was but a small piece of his penance.

Strangely, the bit of fur reminded him of something his father once said. When Eight-and-a-Half Tails was born, his tail, completely white on most newborn kitsune, had a black streak in it. That, his father claimed, was a sign, an omen that his son had a great destiny, that he would grow up to change the world.

Eight-and-a-Half Tails snorted. He had indeed changed the world.

He placed the katana within the shrine, next to the bit of his tail. Maybe someday he would have a fraction of the honor the blade's original owner had. Maybe someday he would be worthy of the rest of his tail. Maybe someday his tireless quest for redemption would finally bring him the peace he longed for, for Kamigawa and for himself.

But not today.



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