

Turning 632

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Chapter 632

In the village, the child was known as 'Little Kitchi.' Much smaller and weaker than his peers, frequent illnesses had sharpened his temperament, making it hard for him to blend in with other children. However, he often played with Mikey, finding solace in his company.

According to Marin's recollection, 'Little Kitchi' was a child brought back to the village by a resident who worked far away. He had no mother from the start, only a father, a situation not unusual in the village, so people didn't question it much.

Marin remembered 'Little Kitchi' as the neighbor's child who, like a boss, led his bigger and taller younger brother around, roaming the hills. Despite his size, Mikey, known for his good nature, always played happily with Kitchi, regardless of the circumstances.

Thanks to this, 'Little Kitchi,' usually as tight-lipped as a clam in front of others, gradually opened up to Mikey, sharing his secretive stories.

"Sister, to dye hair black, should I use Kubal grass instead of Nubil grass?"

"Yes, but why ask? Dyeing herbs are harsh, and kids shouldn't touch them."

"I'm not dyeing my hair. But Kitchi said there's a cheaper herb for dyeing than buying dye, and I got curious."

"The neighbor kid? Wasn't his hair always black?"

"Ah..."

Startled, the younger brother glanced around nervously. Marin, playfully pressing him for information, learned that the neighbor's black hair was the result of diligent monthly dyeing, a fact unknown to anyone else in the village.

"Don't tell anyone what I said, sister. If Kitchi finds out, he'll be mad."

"How silly. Why be scared of one little bratty kid getting angry?"

"Oh, sister..."

Amused by her brother's flustered demeanor, Marin decided to keep the newfound secret to herself.

"Enough with the herbs and stop teaching the neighbor kid useless things. Remember the trouble you caused with the Dudureli mushrooms? If it happens again, both of you are in trouble."

"But... Alright. I'll be quiet."

Over time, Marin learned more about the boy next door.

Little Kitchi, it turned out, originally had golden hair, and his mother was still alive. A remarkable woman, too busy to care for her child, had entrusted him to his father.

As Mikey realized his sister kept his secrets, he occasionally shared stories about his friend. To Marin, five years their senior, these tales seemed frivolous and fanciful.

"Kitchi says when he's grown, his mother from the East will come to get him. Isn't that amazing?"

"Sure, very impressive."

"His real name isn't Little Kitchi, you know. That's just a nickname from his father. Kitchi doesn't like it; he prefers the name his mother gave him."

"Well, having 'Little Kitchi' as a name is a bit odd. It means 'little bird,' right? So, what's the great kid's real name?"

"Katchian."

"Hmm."

Marin, quick-witted since childhood and skilled at catering to tourists, knew more than most her age.

If these grandiose claims were true, she concluded there was only one possibility.

The bratty neighbor kid was likely of noble blood. But not all those of noble blood were necessarily noble in stature.

If the boy truly were of noble birth, his father wouldn't have come to this remote mountain village to struggle alone raising him. The monthly hair dyeing must have been to conceal the boy's lineage, for it was said that true nobles could be recognized by their hair and eye color. Little Kitchi's eyes, black but appearing red in bright light, already made him stand out.

The boy seemed to genuinely believe that his mother would one day come to take him away from this impoverished village. But could such a thing really happen?

"He's probably clinging to that belief to feel like he's noble. Let's leave him be. When he grows up, he'll understand the value of his life and keep quiet."

Marin had thought so and paid it no further mind.

The memory resurfaced years later when unfamiliar nobles visited the village to spend the summer.

"These people were different from the start. While I guided them, they showed little interest in anything but the villagers, especially the children."

It seemed they found young Marin easier to deal with than adults, bombarding her with questions. Quickly sensing their motives, Marin played the fool, feigning forgetfulness each time they handed her money. Appearing thrilled with a few silver coins, she groveled, and the nobles let down their guard.

"We're curious. Is there a blond-haired child in this village? Even a passing glimpse would be helpful."

Based on their subtle inquiries, Marin quickly pieced together their objective.

They were searching for a blond boy not born in this village. Though they didn't elaborate, it was clear they didn't intend to treat the boy as a mere plaything.

Pretending not to understand their conversations, Marin caught a few key words. A noble was searching for a lost young boy, planning to adopt him if found. They were certain the boy would have blond hair...

Nobility. Blond hair. Lost child. Adoption.

Then, Marin remembered a story her brother had told her long ago. It seemed unlikely, but if Little Kitchi was the one they were seeking, it would be nothing short of the miracle he had hoped for.

Marin wrestled with whether to inform Kitchi. Eventually, realizing the choice wasn't hers to make, she casually mentioned it to her brother Mikey.

If Mikey relayed the message correctly, Little Kitchi would soon realize the visiting nobles might be looking for him.

Days passed.

The nobles, who had planned to stay until summer's end, suddenly packed up and left. They departed with satisfied smiles, and behind them stood Little Kitchi, newly employed as their errand boy. They praised his appearance and manners, announcing plans to take him for further training.

Kitchi, despite his temper, was undeniably handsome, so everyone accepted their explanation. Though still young, he had landed a position in a fine place – it seemed his fortune had turned.

However, Marin remembered the muffled arguments from the neighboring house over the past few days. On the day the boy's father, who had raised him so preciously, saw his son leave with the nobles, he didn't even come out to bid farewell.

Despite the situation, the boy's expression showed no sign of disappointment or regret. With firmly pressed red lips and squared shoulders, he ignored Mikey, who came running late with a flower for him, and descended the mountain without a backward glance.

"Kitchi! Kitchi! Wait!"

...

"Kitchi!"

The way he acted, as if he couldn't wait to leave this place, was cold and cruel, especially after having spent so long there.

Thus, Kitchi left the village. His father, left to live alone, soon moved down the mountain, where he drowned his sorrows in alcohol every day until he disappeared. People thought he went to meet his son. Marin thought so too.

As time passed, the villagers soon forgot about Little Kitchi and his father.

Marin, having lost both parents to illness, now solely responsible for her younger brother, also ceased to actively recall them. That was, until this very moment.

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After Marin finished her brief narrative, a cold silence filled the small house. Still covering her face with her hands, she continued speaking.

"Mikey always enjoyed identifying the properties of insignificant herbs and mushrooms. Kitchi... Katchian, preferred to play tricks with them. I remember when they were young, they ground up Dudureli mushrooms and mixed it into the village's communal water supply as a prank. It almost caused serious harm to an elderly man. It was a dangerously reckless incident."

The mushroom wasn't originally that potent, but Mikey had discovered a more advanced way of processing it beyond its traditional use. This incident had caught the attention of the village herbalists, leading Mikey into a life of herbalism, a memory that Marin still retained.

"I thought Katchian had become the adopted son of some noble family, never to contact us again. But if he had ever reached out to Mikey, wanting Dudureli mushrooms refined like they did back then... Mikey would definitely have helped him."