

~ Kites ~

*from: Big-Stamp Two-Toes the Barefoot Giant
Complete chapter 8 – the illustrations are not included*

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(This tale is told by Farmer John to his children, Tom Nutcracker and June Berry, as a bedtime story. They are sitting together on the sofa in their living room.)

Once, a river ran down from the mountains. It flowed in a silver thread through fields of snow and rocky alpine meadows. Then it ran into a dark green forest and out into the valley.

On its way it passed a farm. The farm had a house and a barn made of stone and wood. A child lived there whose name was Kenji. Whenever Kenji followed the river with his eyes he saw it disappear into the forest – then it reappeared, glimmering and glinting in the sunlight above the tree line. The last thing he saw was the waterfall that fell in a long white ribbon down the face of a cliff. After that he couldn't see the river any more. In his dreams Kenji saw the river guiding him down from the sky towards his father's farm. Then his mother opened her arms and wrapped them tightly around him. He felt warm and safe.

"That river sounds like Running River," said June Berry. "It flows down from a mountain too."

"What kind of name is Kenji?" asked Tom.

"It's Japanese," said Farmer John.

The children looked at the pictures in the book for a while. Then Farmer John turned the page and continued reading.

One day Kenji looked towards the village. Bright birds fluttered in the air. They swooped to the left and to the right, and their long tails made snake shapes in the wind.

"What kind of birds are those?" he asked his father.

"Those are kites," his father replied.

Kenji walked to the village. As he got closer he saw strings holding the kites. His eyes followed the strings until they came to a small crowd of people gaily dressed. Some were holding the kite strings, while others watched with their heads turned upwards, their hands shading their eyes.

Kenji watched too. He stood apart and off to one side. He was shy around strangers, and these people he had never seen before.

A voice beside him said: "My name's Masako. What's yours?"

Kenji turned. He saw a young girl of about his own age. She looked at him with deep brown eyes.

Kenji hesitated. The fine fabric she wore told him she was not someone from a farming village.

"My name's Kenji," he answered.

The girl smiled. Then her head turned quickly to one side and her smile vanished. A large hand struck Kenji's head forcefully and he fell to the ground.

"What happened?" asked Tom Nutcracker, shocked.

"I don't know," replied Farmer John, "we'll have to see," and he turned the page.

Kenji opened his eyes. Everything had changed. He sat inside a cage on a swaying wagon. His head hurt, and his lips and eyes were swollen. He looked around wildly.

The driver of the wagon heard him move and turned around on his seat. He spat on the ground. "What do you expect?" he growled in a coarse voice. "You can't just talk to a princess whenever you please – not without permission!"

"What are they going to do with me?" he asked, but the driver had already turned his back and didn't reply.

"He's mean," said June Berry.

Tom Nutcracker nodded agreement. "Go on," he said to Farmer John.

That evening the wagoner halted the horses. Kenji heard merry voices in the distance. He saw tents being pitched in a field and fires started. The wagoner had left and hadn't come back. Kenji was hungry. He felt like an animal locked in a cage.

A cloaked figure approached softly in the fading light. It was Masako. She stopped by the wagon.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I didn't mean for this to happen," and handed him some food. It was rice and fish wrapped in a bamboo leaf. Then she hesitated and looked around. Seeing no one, she reached over and pulled the long iron pin that locked the cage. It scraped loudly in the silence.

"Run, Kenji," she whispered. "Run and don't look back!"

Kenji ran. He ran into the forest. He stopped and glanced back. The girl was gone and the cage door stood wide open.

Kenji returned to his village. For a while his father hid him in the mountains, but no one ever came looking for him.

Years passed. Kenji's mother and father died, and he tilled the fields and tended the cattle as his parents had done.

Kenji never married, and preferred to be alone. The village folk called him Shizukana Kenji – which means, Kenji the Silent.

One morning, when Kenji was an old man, he couldn't get out of bed. He died looking out the window at the river flowing down the mountain. His soul grew wings as he looked back upon his life. Then he turned and began the long journey.

"Is that the end of the story?" asked Tom Nutcracker.

"No," replied Farmer John. "It goes on," and he continued reading.

A thousand earth years passed. Kenji looked down upon the earth with spirit eyes. He was searching for his parents. He found them living beside a lake. A river ran into the lake and Kenji followed the river. It was morning. Mist was rising from the still water as his mother walked beside the shore. She felt the mist envelop her, and she knew a child had come.

Months passed. Her belly grew big and round. It was hard to get out of bed and her husband had to tie her shoelaces. Late one night he drove her to the hospital and her child was born.

"Have you chosen a name?" asked the doctor.

"Yes," they answered. "We're calling her Sienna."

Sienna often sat by the lake after school and watched the water lapping against the shore. Swans swam on the lake, but never came close. They were wild. When they flew up into the air she thought of her father. He was a pilot and flew round the world.

One day she looked out her bedroom window. She saw kites flying over the lake. Sienna ran to watch.

Boys stood on the shore, and each held a nylon string. The multicolored kites swung back and forth, their long tails writhing in the wind. Sienna stopped before she reached them and stood a little apart. She was shy around strangers.

The boys noticed her and turned around. One was taller than the rest and held himself proudly.

"Go away!" said a small, dark haired boy, spitting on the grass.

Sienna blushed, but held her ground. This part of the shore belonged to her family.

The tallest boy turned to his companion and frowned. He walked over to Sienna.

"I'm Raphael," he said, smiling. "What's your name?"

Sienna hesitated, then she returned his smile. He had kind, dark brown eyes.

Raphael held out his kite string.

"Want to fly a kite with me?" he asked.

Farmer John turned the page – but that was the end of the story.

"I wonder what happened then?" asked June Berry.

"I bet they were happy," said Tom Nutcracker.

"I think so too," agreed June Berry.

"And me three," said Farmer John, closing the book. "Brush your teeth – its time for bed," and off the children scampered.