



## With the wind of destruction, with the song.

Shuga was looking down at Balsa as she pinned Tanda's unmoving body, when he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He turned to face it.

He opened his eyes wide. Yugno, who had previously dropped to his knees on the bank of the lake, was now falling forwards.

"Mr Yugno!" Shuga's voice overlapped with Yun's shout. "Your Highness? Your Highness! Is everything alright?"

Shuga turned around in a panic. Chagum, leaning on Yun, was desperately trying to wake his body up. Eventually he could support himself no longer and fell into Yun's arms as if he were severely inebriated.

Shuga realised that he could hear someone's voice, but it sounded strangely far away. When he tried running to Chagum's side he moved as if in a dream, never truly advancing.

Balsa raised her head upon hearing the shouts. She noticed that her surroundings were bizarrely distorted.

The wind, flowing and swirling towards the moon reflected in the lake, swallowed them all up.

Strangely, this wind was visible to the naked eye. And that wasn't all. Balsa could clearly see light swelling out from Yugno's and Chagum's foreheads, as if their souls were trying to escape. Also, a number of threads, similar to the one emanating from Torogai's forehead, were stretched out across the sky towards the palace in the lake. These were the threads that connected the souls of the people trapped by the Flower to the lives that still remained in their bodies.

Balsa placed both of her hands on her knees and mustered all her strength to stand up.

Perhaps it was because of the countless times she had faced such knife-edge danger that, at times like these, Balsa's heart remained calm and collected. "Shuga! Yun! Shake Chagum! Don't let him fall asleep no matter what!"

Having shouted her orders she headed for Yugno, defying the swirling wind to help him when no one else would. She had to put all her strength into her legs with each step to reach his prone form. He was lying face down in the grass. Once there, she propped up his body with one arm.

Yugno's head lolled from side to side like that of a corpse. The thread extending from his forehead was rapidly becoming brighter, as if struggling to escape to the outside.

For the first time, Balsa regretted having no knowledge of magic weaving. All she could do was to ask the people she imagined in her mind what to do. *Tanda, how can I get him to wake up?*

She suddenly raised her head. A thought had flashed through her brain. She looked around and shouted loudly. "Li! Echoes! Your loved one is about to be taken away!"

This place, beside the water in the middle of the mountains, was exactly the kind of place the echoes lived in. Even if they were invisible, they were surely here...

"Don't let him be taken, please! Li!"

Yugno was drawn to the nostalgic voice of his mother and tried to go to its source. The rich green garden his soul was born in, his tall father... The scenery he could see deep in the lake was unbearably nostalgic.

"Come quickly." A pleasant voice was calling. Yugno started struggling to float upwards.

Suddenly, something grabbed him tightly. Countless small hands were clinging onto him and holding him in place. As soon as those hands were on him, he remembered the song of the Li, the one that he had first heard as a child, with unbelievable clarity.

He didn't need anything else, as long as his songs could move people's souls... He sang a song for the Li on that lake's bank fully aware of their curse. The feverish feelings he felt back then welled up in his heart and revived that song. His skin broke out into goosebumps, and he remembered the heat he once felt.

At that moment, the power of the voice urging him to his death, which had been disguising itself as his mother's voice, was suddenly interrupted.

Yugno smiled at the Li, which were still clinging to him.

*It's ok. I'm not going anywhere.* Yugno felt his soul return to his body with a whoosh.

"Yugno." He heard Balsa speak. Just like the Li, she was holding onto his arm tightly. "Wake up, Yugno." He could feel the warmth of her hand with his eyes still closed. He could feel a prayer in the tremble of that gripping hand. Yugno felt something stir deep in his heart.

He started hearing the muffled voices of men calling Chagum's name from afar. The repeated calls and Balsa's trembling hand gradually overlapped inside Yugno and resonated until they became a strong pulse that swayed him. A call to life, made of all the sensations in his body, started in the pit of his stomach.

The Li, who were still holding onto Yugno, began to murmur in resonance with the men's voices; the reverberations of their voices shaking him. As they grew in strength, they pleasantly jolted his heart.

Grass, trees, bugs, birds, beasts, fish, stones, water. A quiet and bubbly quivering, released by all that existed by the bank of the mountain lake, was felt.

Yugno opened his eyes and slowly stood up, smiling. *Keep trembling.*

Yugno giggled. A ticklish joy bubbled within him. *Well then, let's shake, let's tickle, tremble and burst.*

Suddenly, a sound started spilling out of Yugno's throat. A high pitched singing, that harmonised with one's body, lifting it up.

The Li happily joined into the harmonies, making the reeds tremble, until the whole earth and heaven trembled too.

The singing became an unbearable joy and crossed the lake, rocking it.

The threads connecting the many lives and souls were rocked by the song as they disappeared into the lake. They started to pulsate and shimmer. The song became the wind, and the voice of heaven and earth.

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The world of the Flower was fading quickly. The palace made of white wood was also disappearing like sand blown by the wind.

A strange wind, different to any so far, started blowing within that world.

Tanda, who had been trapped in a sandstorm permeated with heavy malice, felt a strong and peaceful joy, akin to the rays of the morning sun caressing his face, as the refreshing wind blew the storm away.

He felt like Balsa was telling him to not give up. "Yeah." He murmured. "I won't."

Strength returned to his body, filling it like water. Light also appeared in Kaya's eyes.

"This wind smells nice. It reminds me of rice fields. Actually, maybe a stronger smell. Like grass in the summer."

Two winds swayed the world. One smelled like death, the other like a field of grass in high summer; a mysterious smell of life. The two winds interweaved like twisted threads and whirled around each other while groaning.

The surroundings changed appearance to that of a grassland swaying in a strong wind.

Tanda stood up slowly. The people who fell into the inner garden shivered slightly in the blowing wind as they got up. They started walking with uncertainty. Their legs felt unreliable at first, but one by one they began to skip, while indescribable smiles brightened their faces.

Kaya and Tanda were standing in an endless grassland at the height of summer. As they watched the windswept grass, excitement bubbled up from deep inside them and they suddenly wanted to run. They looked up at each other and when their eyes met they both burst into a sprint. The longer they ran for, the farther they wanted to go.

Kaya noticed that the thread extending from her forehead was glowing. From it, warmth pulsed down into her entire body.

*I want to go back.* She felt a cold, numbing pain in the back of her nose.

The smell of dew that accompanied every morning's trip to get water from the lake. The cold grass pressing against the sole of her bare foot. The chirping of birds. The faces of her family members. The faces of her friends. Those were all of the things that appeared in her mind's eye, one after another.

Eventually, she could make out the full moon in the depths of the blue darkness far above her. Many threads were stretching towards it.

"Fly!" When Kaya heard Tanda's voice she started floating, as if she were being pulled in by her thread.

The whirling wind tossed her this way and that as she ascended towards the full moon. Eventually, her whole body was completely covered in shining threads.

Tanda patiently watched over the dreaming souls as one by one they became jewels, shining with the faint light of fireflies, and were pulled up by their life threads.

There was no thread to pull him up.

*That's it for me then.*

As soon as he thought that, he remembered Master Torogai. He definitely saw her before this wind started blowing. Before everything was swallowed by the sand storm. Was that an illusion shown to him by the Flower?

With the first step he took to look for Master Torogai, he felt something tightly wrap around his legs. A blackened root.

"I won't let *you* go. You will dream with me for all eternity."

The root quickly wrapped itself around Tanda like a snake and started squeezing him with tremendous power. From it a loneliness and sadness akin to falling into an endless black hole seeped into him.

"Don't go..."

Tanda felt desperate arms clinging onto him. The sadness in that grasp deeply shook his heart.

*You were this lonely...*

As his mental strength and ability to resist waned, Tanda briefly relaxed; only for an intense yell to shock him into alertness.

"What are you doing, you shitty student!" Torogai briskly walked up to the entangled Tanda and stood in front of him. "You idiot! Why are you getting attached to your enemy? You're a magic weaver aren't you? Why are you letting yourself resonate with a soul in despair?"

"If you think your enemy is pitiful, then how about you do everything you can to save them instead, hmm? You can start by shredding those flimsy roots to pieces."

Tanda smiled wryly as feelings of embarrassment and relief hit him at once.

He closed his eyes and ignored his bindings. He let his whole body transform into water and easily slipped through the embrace of the roots.

A sad scream rose up with the remaining roots, before they changed shape to that of the Flower's Keeper.

Torogai approached the Flower's Keeper and stretched out her arm to grasp his shoulder. "Stop hiding in the shadows of other people and show yourself, First Queen."

The face of the Flower's Keeper distorted and flickered between shapes before the bitter visage of a woman emerged from the distortion. The First Queen shrieked. "Get your filthy hands off me, you vulgar commoner!"

Torogai did not let go. "If I were still Tomca, I would have surely let go and covered my eyes by now. But you know what, Your Highness? I'm the magic weaver Torogai. I am one who exists between this world and the other, transcending your definition of status." She continued in a quieter tone of voice. "Your Highness, what is your name?"

The First Queen's white face trembled. "Riano."

"Well then, Riano. I came here to call back your soul."

The haughtiness and pride of the First Queen faded from the woman's face when she was called by her name. What surfaced in its place was an expression so pale and fragile, it looked as if it would break with a touch.

"I do not intend to go back." Riano whispered. The vague shape of her son, Sagum, was visible in her arms. "I do not intend to return to a world where Crown Prince Sagum no longer exists."



Torogai strongly gripped Riano's shoulder. "You don't think he is here either, do you? Why else would you still look so unhappy? Why else would you have surrounded the Flower with this curse"

"The sadness of losing a child isn't gonna go away whatever you do. It's been fifty years since I lost mine, but there is still a sadness in my heart that hurts every time it's touched. But why do you think we still keep on living even when it hurts so much?"

"People are far tougher creatures than they themselves think." Torogai answered her own question with an expression that spoke of both sadness and joy. "Now, stop crying for the sake of crying like a spoiled brat and let go of your hatred. I know what you're going through. Your hatred is slowly being exposed for the flimsy, pale thing that it is. There is no shame in that."

Riano lifted her face and looked at Torogai for the first time. "I feel like I'm many other people all at once. When I invited Chagum over here and trapped him, it was out of a burning desire to make the Second Queen go through the same pain I did. However, when I became one with the Flower and cultivated his dreams, those feelings faded. Then, when he was leaving this place, I was distracted by the sound of strong wing beats and didn't manage to stop him."

"When embracing Yugno to stop him from becoming the wind that would awaken the Dreams, I wished that we would all become tiny and even disappear, but amidst that wind, I felt that going back to the normal world would not be so bad... It's my own soul, but it strangely won't do quite what I ask of it." Riano let a sad smile grace her lips. "I've dreamed many of these dreams. Those of men, women, girls and boys..."

Torogai smiled wryly. "That's tough. Dreaming is tiring, isn't it?"

Riano's smile widened. She nodded in agreement. "I feel like I've been dreaming for ten, maybe twenty years."

"Doesn't the smell of this wind remind you of the morning light?"

Riano's eyelids peacefully fluttered shut and she inhaled the smell of life that the wind carried. Torogai whispered, as she watched the mask of the Guardian of the Flower, which was trapped within the Flower's stalk, blacken and wilt. "Look over there. This wind can't wake all the souls by itself."

Amongst those who fell from the petals and crumpled, some had severed life threads uselessly extending into nothingness from their sleeping faces, and they were slowly fading into the stem of the Flower.

"Sleep is so close to death, you see. The souls of those who are truly close to their limits can easily slide from sleep into the darkness of the other world." Torogai grabbed Riano's arm and said in a commanding voice. "It's time to wake up now! One day you won't be able to no matter how much you might wish to."

"I'll give you the best send off this magic weaver can, Riano. I'll turn you into a white bird and let you taste the joy of flying amidst the blue sky."

"Become a bird Riano! Imagine cutting the wind with your beautiful wings, a white flash dancing in the sky. In the world of dreams, your imagination is what's really powerful!"

Riano stilled for a while, as if uncertain, but eventually with a single intake of breath, she started glowing with the light of a firefly, and transformed into a beautiful white bird."

"Fly, Riano!"

Pushed by Torogai's voice, Riano rose, and with a beat of her wings, she flew straight for the moon.

Torogai watched her disappear completely into the white light. Then she kicked Tanda, who was spacing out and staring into the moon, in the shin as hard as she could.

"Ouch!" Tanda groaned, holding onto his leg.

"You huge idiot! Making me work overtime like this!"

Tanda smiled while crying and looked up at Torogai. Her face suddenly stiffened. Tanda noticed that she was looking at something behind him and turned around.

A lone, tall man stood there, gazing at Torogai. She lost her voice. The face of the Flower's Keeper was far older than she remembered.

He smiled slowly. "Our son let the wind in, didn't he." His voice had grown hoarse and hard to hear. His whole body was also gradually fading. He spoke again while looking at Torogai and Tanda. "The seeds were safely produced and most of the dreams returned."

"Your other son helped me out so much. I didn't intend to make a resentful Guardian of the Flower, but the power of the pollinator Dream was so strong that I could never get anything to go quite the way I wanted."

"But you helped in the end, didn't you?"

The Flower's Keeper nodded in answer to Tanda's question. "Yes. I did what I could, so that the Flower's Guardian didn't crush Yugno's throat."

He looked up at the moon. "The moon has begun to fade. This Flower's time is almost over." His body had become as transparent as the wings of a mayfly. He took Torogai's hands into his. "Farewell, my beloved Tomca."

"The Flower's life is an eternal cycle, but the me who treasures his memories of loving you is coming to an end. My world is about to disappear. This is goodbye for good."

"Farewell, my most beloved Tomca..."

Torogai grit her teeth. "Farewell."

He faded as if dissolving into Torogai's hands. She gasped. Along with the Flower's Keeper, she felt his last wish flow like a torrent and also melt into her hands. She held onto it.

She took a deep breath and looked up. She quickly glanced Tanda's way then turned into a bird and rose into the sky, beating her wings strongly. Tanda quickly followed and flew after her.

The two birds put all their strength into flying towards the disappearing moon. It was almost a half moon by now.

"We're gonna slip through! Make your body thin!" They twisted their bodies and slipped through into the bright light, as a gentle wind pushed them.

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Yugno watched as a number of lights rose up from the moon reflected in the lake and scattered. Every time the threads coming out of the lights pulsed, a beautiful and clear sound resounded in the empty sky. As he watched, the moon waned and the upside-down palace vanished. Just as the light of the palace had vanished completely, two shining birds appeared on the surface of the lake, as if they had sucked up all of the palace's remaining light.

Suddenly, he was filled with feelings of loneliness. The Flower he had been watching since birth was gone. The Flower was a bright, forever-blooming beacon in his heart. Yugno started to sob.

His surroundings were astir. He heard Torogai saying something and Balsa and the others making sounds of joy. But to him they all seemed like nothing more than moving silhouettes seen from far away.

He slowly stood up and moved to a grassy patch a bit farther away from all of them, before sitting down again. His body felt sluggish, as if he were completely empty. After singing with the Li, his entire body was usually overflowing with energy. Now, for some reason, he just felt as if the light of life was gone from his body.

He lied down on the grass and closed his eyes. He heard someone calling to him worriedly, but he waved them away.

How long did he stay like that?

Eventually, he noticed that he was standing amidst a pale blue darkness. In the first moment after he composed himself, he realised that he was standing in that familiar inner garden.

As he looked around, he spied a shadow standing away from him in the darkness. He slowly approached the small old lady, her skin black.

"Master Torogai."

Torogai was smiling, her expression much more serene than it was earlier that day.

"Is this inside the Flower's dream?"

"No. I called you into my dream. When I touched you, you seemed awfully lonely."

Yugno nodded minutely. "When the Flower disappeared, the light inside me did so too, it would seem. My heart has become awfully empty."

Torogai reached out with her hand, and caressed Yugno's cheek, like one would a small child's. "Yugno, the Flower hasn't disappeared. Look."

When Torogai opened her palm, atop her wrinkled skin rested a single seed.

"This is..!"

"Yes. It's the Flower's seed. The Flower's Keeper left this in my hand at the end." Torogai rolled the tiny seed atop her palm. "What in the world even is the Flower? When was it born? Where did it come from? Is that fire-coloured thing I saw even really a flower?"

The tiny brown seed atop Torogai's palm looked exceedingly ordinary, but as Yugno watched it, its shape suddenly wavered and in its place appeared a large white seed instead.

As he continued watching it in astonishment, its shape continued to waver and it returned to being a plain brown seed.

“As long as it keeps looking like a seed, it can change to be any colour or shape, but it can’t become, for example, a stone. Things that exist only within dreams can change their appearance limitlessly as long as they stay within the boundaries set by their inherent natures.”

Torogai looked up at Yugno. “Since the Flower obtained its form by being dreamed, it ended up being controlled by the dream that pollinated it, the First Queen’s. Even so, it still remained true to its nature of being pollinated, producing a seed, then scattering.”

Torogai screwed up her face lopsidedly. “The Flower’s Keeper is surely the power that protects that. A protector ensuring that a seed is left behind and that the flower scatters, even as it is controlled by dreams.”

“What does the Flower’s Guardian do then?”

Torogai smiled widely and chuckled at Yugno’s question. “The role of the Guardian was to protect you wasn’t it?”

“Huh?”

“It’s original purpose was probably to protect you in the other world, by inviting a soul from that world and controlling the body left behind.”

“And that was twisted by the First Queen’s will?”

Torogai nodded while smiling, though suddenly that smile turned to a poisonous one. “But, probably, there was one common goal shared by the First Queen and the Flower; preventing you from cutting your ties with the Flower and running away.”

“I’m sure both wills agreed on this one point when they sent the Flower’s Guardian to bring you back to the Flower on that night.”

Yugno felt his skin break out into goosebumps.

“But when the First Queen tried to crush your throat, that was not in accordance with the Flower’s will. The Flower’s Keeper said that he tried his best to not let the First Queen control the Flower completely.”

“The First Queen, as deeply connected to the Flower as she was, might have even sensed the Flower’s will on this matter. That’s why she feared that you would bring the wind of life and free the Dreams. To prevent this, she decided to send the Flower’s Guardian to attack you.”

Torogai picked up the seed from her palm. “The Flower is most likely a living organism that behaves like one of those flowers which have the wind carry their seeds to far away places. The fact that you became Li Tou Ruen, ‘the one loved by the echoes’, was surely not a coincidence. There isn’t a more suitable person to become the wind which carries the seeds than you, a person who lives a long life travelling from country to country and singing songs that change peoples’ lives and move their souls.”

“I’m telling you this because when you told me that the scary mother in your nightmare said that the Flower’s Guardian would crush your throat so that you could never sing again, it made me wonder; why was she so fixated on you, on your song? But if we put it in this context, it makes sense doesn’t it?”

Yugno laughed weakly. "And now my duty is done. That's why I've become so empty, isn't it?"

Torogai laughed. "Absolutely not. Your life has only just begun."

Yugno shook his head sluggishly. "But, for some reason, I feel so tired. Even my desire for singing has dried up..."

Torogai gently stroked his hand while stifling her laughter. "Yugno, you're a child of dawn and dusk. Like this pale blue darkness, you exist in the boundary between night and day.

"Like the cheerful light of day, your song has the power to brighten up people's lives. The source of that power was your nightly dreaming. Sleep heals the body, getting rid of the tiredness of the day. Dreams, however, heal the soul. Even nightmares serve this purpose of healing. They help your soul's deepest wounds heal similarly to exposing them to the wind and drying them out."

"The Li resonated with your soul and birthed a Song. The power you have when you sing it is the power of dreams."

Yugno bit his lip. Torogai asked quietly. "Do you want to continue singing? Or do you want to live like a normal human?"

"Humans are strong creatures. Even if you lose your song, with time you'll get used to the emptiness you feel now and eventually it will disappear completely. I will help you find some other path to follow. I'm sure you could have a peaceful life."

Yugno's face screwed up into a sad smile and he slowly shook his head. "I... I can't live without singing."

Torogai nodded. "Give me your hand, then."

When he realised what Torogai was about to do he felt a chill in his spine. *It's like that time.*

He remembered the fear he felt on that distant day when he sang in front of the lake for the first time, as well as the feelings overshadowing his fear. *I'm at another crossroads.*

How many times had he wondered what life would have awaited him if he had not sung by the lake that day, so long ago.

He knew now. Whatever happiness waited on the other side of the crossing, whatever misfortune awaited him on this side, it paled in comparison to his desire to sing.

Yugno finally held out his hand. Torogai placed the Flower's seed in his palm.

The seed was as warm as Torogai's skin, but as he watched it, it wavered and sank into his hand. Heat spread gradually to all parts of his body.

With the heat, the memories of the Dreams still dozing within the seed rushed into Yugno's soul like a flood. He gasped and covered his face with both hands.

Their feelings, their burning wishes, and the heart rending sadness of wishes gone unfulfilled, swirled within him.

Countless lives became a dizzying current of impressions as the long, long years people had spent living all surged into Yugno in a matter of seconds.

Eventually, the whirlpool of Dreams sunk to the bottom of his soul. When the seed had completely melted into his soul, Yugno was changed through to his very core.

He let his hands fall slowly and raised his face.



His skin and hair remained that of a youngster in his twenties, but Torogai noticed that his eyes now were coloured by the passage of time.

The boundless brightness that coloured children's eyes disappeared, and in its place appeared the deep light of a person who could feel other people's pain as his own. Because the dreams of others had melted into his heart, he finally understood the pain hidden in dreaming. The pain of those who couldn't enter dreams of their own volition.

"Hold onto the Dreams tightly, you hear?" Torogai smiled faintly and whispered. "Your song might lose the easy cheer it had before."

"In exchange, you'll probably be able to move people deeply even without the spirits' help. When I leave this world, I'll call for you, so please send me to the other world with your song."

Yugno nodded. Torogai took his hand. "I don't know if ages ago, the Flower was borne of your soul, or if your soul was born from the Flower, or if in the beginning you were one. You're definitely entwined so profoundly that it's hard to separate the two of you."

Torogai looked at Yugno and whispered as if she were chanting a spell. "You're the child of dawn and dusk. The child of the pale blue darkness. You're the wind that takes the Flower's seeds and spreads them far into the world."

"The seed naps within you, and when you face your night, it'll sprout, take shape within your last dream, and invite over someone else's dream. Eventually a new Flower will bloom. It's probably been like this since forever. The end of one circle, is the beginning of another, you see?"

Yugno looked at Torogai. She clapped him on the shoulder as if she had regained her strength. "Fly with a cheerful song on your lips, son of my dream."

Yugno woke from his daze and slowly got up. He thought it would have been around dawn, but his surroundings were still pitch black. The light of the fire was flickering as he saw Balsa and the others worriedly crowd around Tanda.

He should have been dreaming for a long time, but it seemed that his conversation with Torogai did not take much of this world's time.

He saw Torogai sitting up from where she was lying next to the fire. She looked around, searching for Yugno and smiled slightly when she found him.

She stood up with a heave and walked over to Tanda's side.

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**For those interested:**

1. Riano is written リアノ in katakana.