

Epilogue



Beyond the forest a young, verdant green rice paddy, swaying in the wind, extended as far as the eye could see. The song of the cicadas incessantly poured over everything. People were busily working as the dazzlingly bright rays of light beat down on them. Weeding the quickly growing grass from the rice paddies was a tough job.

“Can you see where we are?” Balsa, who was lending Tanda’s her shoulder as a crutch as they walked, asked.

“Wait a second. Oh, it’s over there. They’re weeding over there next to the edge of that paddy.”

Balsa looked over to where Tanda was pointing. A solidly-built woman was diligently weeding. When the girl weeding by her side started talking to her, she put her hand on her lower back and responded.

Tanda muttered “Well, this place never changes.”

Balsa laughed at him.

“You’re too nice, you know? You risked your life and didn’t even get much in the way of thanks. Even though he’s your brother, it’s ok to expect some kind of reward...”

“Absolutely not. A thanks from him is enough for me. And I did get a mountain of eggplants and cucumbers, you know? Oh wait, of course you know; you and Master already ate most of them.” Tanda sat down in the shade of a tree, taking care to not damage his injured left leg.

“Also, it’s not like I did all that much. I mostly just got in your and Jin’s way. I wouldn’t even have made it without Mr. Yugno.”

Balsa leaned against the tree. "Yugno, huh. He didn't even say goodbye properly before leaving on another journey, and we haven't heard anything since. Who knows where he's singing these days. He was pretty mysterious, wasn't he?"

"When we went to visit your niece, she said something pretty smart. That Yugno is like his songs; he moves the heart, but comes and goes like the wind."

"I'm glad she understood that in the end."

Balsa laughed. "She understood that from the beginning. You can't help having those kinds of feelings though, even if you understand. You can't do anything about it. She fell in love with the wind that passed through on its journey from far away, rather than with Yugno himself."

Tanda smiled wryly. He had still not forgiven Yugno for enticing such a soft-hearted girl with his song. While she did manage to return in the end, she might have died had they made even a single mistake along the way.

But there was no use in lecturing the wind, either. Master Torogai said that it was precisely because Yugno was that way that he could carry the seed of the Flower within his soul. Those words, that she said while telling Tanda the whereabouts of the seed, still remained in his heart.

"I handed the seed over to him because no one else was suitable as a host. The Flower feeds on people's dreams. That's why it chooses its hosts from those who live in this world. However, the Flower is too heavy for normal people. Only a soul born of the Flower and a human could shoulder that burden."

"I didn't get this in the past, but I feel like I now get why the Flower's Keeper chose me as the mother of the host. It's precisely because I had a soul suited to being a magic weaver; I think he could feel that I had the strength to get involved with people's dreams and still go on living."

When she said that, Tanda couldn't help but ask if he lacked such a strength.

Torogai stared at Tanda for a while before answering. "Of course you've got the strength. But you're too nice, so there's always a risk that when you get involved with people's dreams that you may lose your life. If Yugno is a child of dawn and dusk, you, Tanda, are a child of high noon. You think of others first. You're like a kind spring light."

"Yugno is enthralled by songs. He can sacrifice anyone and anything for singing."

"You wouldn't accept the seed of a Flower that possibly lured people's souls to their deaths, even if you had to throw away your magic weaving as a result."

"But you know what? There are things that only a child of high noon can do. No one is all-powerful. There are things that you can do that I wouldn't be able to do no matter how hard I tried."

Can Master Torogai see my limits, I wonder?

As Master Torogai said, the world that can be seen with magic weaving is like a bottomless swamp. The deeper one dives, the farther the scenery spreads out before them. Those who go deep enough might come down with a fever, reminiscent of a powerful madness strong enough to lead those afflicted with it to cast themselves aside without a second thought. Is such a thing inside me as well?

Tanda felt cold shivers run through his stomach.

“What’s wrong?” Tanda returned to his senses upon hearing Balsa’s voice.

“Ehh...” Tanda sighed and spoke his thoughts. “I just thought that it would get pretty lonely to drift through life from place to place, even for someone like Yugno.”

Tanda’s words reminded Balsa of what Yugno had told her before.

The Li gave me an almost terrifyingly wonderful joy. But in exchange they took it all. Everything of mine up until that point, and even the future I would have had from then on.

She whispered in response “Yeah. It would.” before turning her head to look up at the verdant foliage. “But, there is joy in it for him too. Just like those farmers, who experience a different kind of joy when they spread their roots into the earth.”



As Tanda looked at Balsa he said, with a smile in his voice, "That kind of sounded like you were talking about yourself."

"I am. It's about me as well." Balsa looked up at the sky and narrowed her eyes. "I met Chagum and went back to Kanbal for a bit. So much has happened. I feel like I've finally escaped from the ghost of misfortune. You know this already, but Jiguro threw away his country to protect my life. He threw away the life he was meant to live. He had to kill his friends to survive. What a cruel fate..."

"I was always thankful for that, but I also felt that I had incurred a debt I could never repay... It took me so long to realise that that was a huge mistake."

Tanda was shocked. This was the first time Balsa had spoken about herself in this way. She looked at him with a peaceful expression.

"I should have been unbelievably happy that he cared for me so much. There is a joy to be found in protecting someone you love, you see. I want to think that, despite having such a life, Jiguro felt this kind of joy."

"When I was protecting Chagum, I was happy. I was risking my life for a stranger, but still, I was happy." A shadow of a smile graced Balsa's lips.

"I've been cursing my misfortune ever since I was a kid, but it's taken me this long to learn to admit my happiness too. That's pathetic."

"I acted like it was because of my accursed fate that I had to go around fighting and killing people. I needed such an excuse to come to terms with the blood on my hands. When I noticed my happiness, I couldn't make these excuses anymore. Yet, when I think of what I want to do now, I can't think of anything other than being a bodyguard."

A normal person would surely think of a few different paths to take here, for example, to open a business or a martial arts school with the savings they had accumulated so far. But some part of Balsa, throbbing deep in her heart, still didn't want to live that way. The black rage that she had held onto since a young age was not so easily quelled.

As Balsa watched the sunlight filter through the tree canopies and dance on the grass, she whispered. "I have caused and will continue to cause strangers, and maybe eventually myself, to die because a part of me cannot let go of its desire to fight. This is my inexcusable darkness."

Tanda sighed, then spoke with an unusually severe expression. "Idiot. At least let yourself make excuses! If you hadn't been involved in that ugly throne succession plot, your ugly desires might have been completely different now."

Balsa looked at Tanda. A slow smile spread across her lips. "In other circumstances... Maybe if I had been born to a loving family of farmers, I might have been surrounded by five or six kids by now. I might have been a mother."

"I would have had other reasons to suffer and I might have been complaining that maybe if I had been born into a different life, I might have had more interesting and fun things to do." Balsa shook her head as she shooed a black fly away from her eye. "These maybes are what I dream about when things get tough. When I wake up, I'm back to being the normal me though."

"I haven't been given the kind of life I can escape into a dream from."

Tanda closed his eyes. An outburst of cicada song enveloped them completely, like a sudden rain. "There are people who didn't come back from their dreams."

“Eh?”

“Like Master Torogai. She awakened from the Flower’s dream, but she didn’t return to her home. She became a magic weaver instead.” Tanda raised his eyes and vaguely looked in the direction of the people working the paddies.

The life he threw away, when he was once at a crossroads, was over there.

It had been twenty-two years since he veered off that path alone, following the faintly shining birds of Torogai’s soul flying in the twilight sky, into the dark middle of the mountains

Tanda closed his eyes and remembered the almost choking smell of the Flower. The sight of the swaying reflection of the lit up petals in the inner garden’s pool of water amidst the darkness of night. The many happily dozing Dreams inside...

The thoughts that were suppressed during daytime came freely to the forefront of one’s mind when they slept. If he had been one of the dreams within the Flower, what would he have dreamt of? Would he have been able to wake up from that dream?

People whose souls are too large for their bodies can only freely dance when in the open skies called dreams. But that’s also precisely why those dreams can become traps they want to escape from.

Tanda thought back to the words Master Torogai once said.

“Those who become magic weavers are those who have had the experience of being flung about by their soul and having been pushed to their limits. You were too young and could have not noticed, but during that dusk when you were eight, you were at your limit too.”

“Those faintly glowing soul birds are beautiful, but if a normal child even saw them, they’d find the light terrifying. Those soul birds dance at the edge of death after all.”

“When you were drawn in by the birds and came running, just like that child who was drawn in by a spirit’s voice and was swallowed up by the river, you were actually drawn towards death.”

Torogai grinned after having said that. “But that time, instead of dying, you met a teacher like me. And once you get pulled into the circle of magic weavers, it becomes a lot harder to die. Before you know it, you learn the toughness necessary to walk the tightrope between life and death.”

“Tanda, remember this well. The more a magic weaver in training like you, gets absorbed into magic weaving, the harder it is for them to see anything but darkness. Precisely because this world is invisible to normal people, we start to think that our world holds all the power. We start to take normal people lightly.”

“But real magic weavers know the truth. The powers of the night and the powers of the day are not superior and inferior but instead equals that complement one another. You’ll know one day too, about the toughness of the ordinary people who can’t see souls, the strength of those who can live normal lives.”

She looked at Tanda with unusually serious eyes and said. “But even tough people can become lost. They sometimes carry dreams that can’t be held in check with the powers of the day. Magic weavers must bring back the souls that have flown all the way to the edge of death.”

"We, who stand on the boundary between the powers of the day and the night, are *The Guardians of Dreams*."

Tanda raised his eyes and looked upon the landscape, illuminated as the white light of high noon dances across. The loud sound of the cicada song returned.

Tanda returned to his conversation with Balsa. "It's about time for the *ju/so* to bear fruit. Since the summer has been this hot, the winter will surely be a terrible one. We'll have to prepare more cold medicine than usual. Will you help me gather some?"

"Yeah, sure. Shall we get going soon, then?" Balsa grabbed Tanda's hand and helped him stand up.

They heard a song from the direction of the paddy fields. Someone was probably singing to distract themselves from the hardship of work. Soon other voices joined and became a merry chorus echoing across the summer sky.

*The grass grows on a summer's day. Really, really grows.
If this grass had been rice, we'd be rich by now.*

*Oh world, you're out of our hands.
Oh summer's day, you're out of our hands.*

The end.

For those interested:

1. *Julso* is written ジュルソ in katakana.

Feel free to suggest different romanisations.