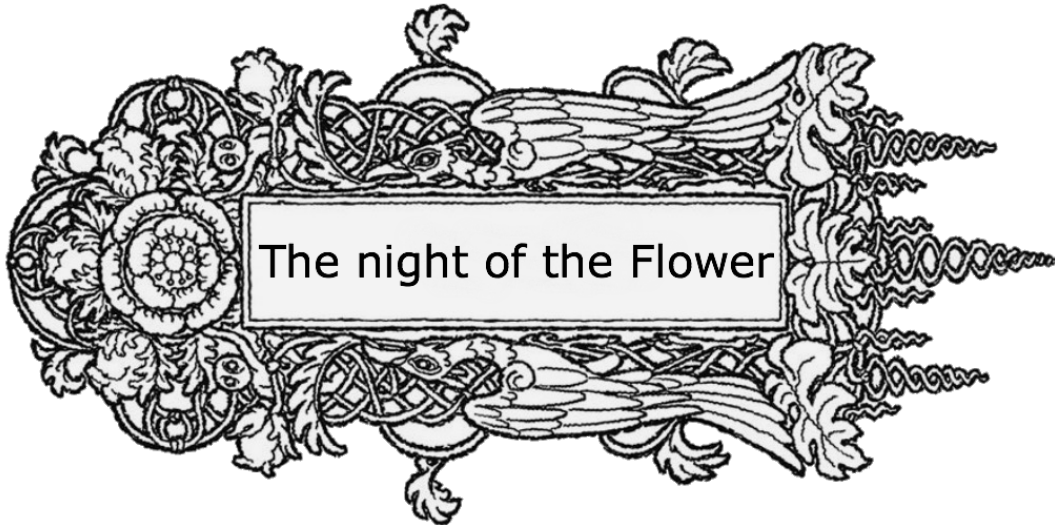


# Chapter 4



## Chapter 4 Part 1



## The Hunter Jin's promise.

It was a bit before noon.

Torogai, who had been lying motionlessly next to the sunken hearth, looked up at the door at the same time as Balsa, who had been performing maintenance on her spear. Torogai sat up and whispered. "Someone crossed the barrier..."

Balsa stood up, spear in hand, and pulled open the door.

A man was standing in the dew-drenched meadow, his pale brown hakama tucked into shin guards. A plain double-edged sword was hanging from his belt. He looked like a normal soldier, not standing out in the least, but there were no openings in his stance.

“Long time no see, Spear-wielder Balsa.” Balsa smiled. “I’m glad you made it, Mister Jin.”

“Drop the Mister. Just Jin is fine.” Jin retorted playfully, his eyebrows slightly raised. “If only I had known that this was your hideout back then... though to be fair it would have been of no use considering how badly you tore me up. I wouldn’t have been able to follow you here after you had just put me on death’s doorstep anyway.” Both of them laughed slightly.

As Jin scanned the surroundings, the northern grove caught his attention. His face suddenly grew stiff. “I see. Something strange is over there. Like a beast.”

Balsa nodded and led Jin into the house. Torogai and Jin had met before but Yugno, to whom Jin was a stranger, greeted him with a perplexed expression. After hearing from Balsa that a martial arts master was coming, he may have been expecting a large man, like those the ballads spoke of.

Balsa, feeling impatient, got straight to the point. “Entrusting someone else with this battle is not easy for me, but right now I have no choice but to rely on you.”

“Yeah. I heard roughly about what is going on from Shuga. It’s somewhat hard to believe that the calm and cheerful Tanda I knew turned into something like that. It’s definitely gonna be tough to hold him off for any amount of time without killing or hurting him too much.”

“That’s not all. It seems like he doesn’t feel any pain. I dislocated his right shoulder, but he just started hitting me in the face with his left arm instead.”

The corners of Jin’s lips quirked upwards slightly. “Tough was a bit of an understatement then. But, I owe him my life; I will see what I can do.”

Balsa bowed her head deeply. “Thank you.”

“No need. I was thinking, anyway, if he has turned into a beast, how about we capture him like one? With a net or some rope.”

Balsa’s face clouded over. “I thought of doing that at first too. It doesn’t see Tanda’s body as anything more than a tool. If we tied him up, he would rub his skin and flesh off to the bone to escape. How would we stop that? We can’t talk to him, and he won’t pass out. We can capture him with a net, but it won’t stop struggling until Tanda’s body is in pieces. By nightfall Tanda would be...”

Jin frowned. “I see.”

Balsa shook her head slightly as if to dislodge an unpleasant image. “That’s why we only want enough time to get to the lake before him, then you should let him chase us. Otherwise he might get hurt. That’s what we wanted to ask of you.”

“Got it.” Jin nodded, then continued speaking, remembering something. “Oh yeah, I almost forgot. The Crown Prince is coming to that lakeside tonight.”

“What?” Both Balsa and Torogai stared at Jin wide-eyed. Balsa clicked her tongue. “I know why he did it, but isn’t this too dangerous? Why didn’t you stop him?”

Jin responded soothingly. “I have the Hunters Zen and Yun protecting him, so nothing shall be able to physically harm him.”

Torogai and Balsa exchanged looks. They were more worried about spiritual harm than physical, but they weren’t about to tell Jin this. Feeling that her worries had doubled, Balsa sighed.

Jin spoke decidedly, trying to dispel the heavy atmosphere. “Either way, I’ll delay the Guardian of the Flower or whatever he’s called for as long as I can. There’s no use in worrying about anything else right now.”

Once everything was ready, Balsa stopped and looked back at Jin, with one hand on the front door. She inhaled quietly, but no words came to her.

Jin’s chest was pierced by her expression.

Balsa was clearly wishing she could be in two places at once. She feared that Jin would hurt Tanda but could not say that to him when he was about to risk his life in a desperate battle.

Jin grabbed Balsa’s arm without thinking. “If I can’t hold him back, I’ll aim for his left leg. For the bone. You understand what I’m getting at, right?”

Jin took his sword belt off in front of Balsa and used it to tie the sheath and handle of his weapon together. He was signalling that his intention was to never draw his sword, no matter the circumstances.

Balsa looked at Jin with profound gratitude in her eyes and quietly said. “It seems this time, I owe you a life. I will definitely pay you back some day.”

Jin laughed. “Don’t make me laugh. I’m here to repay a favour in the first place, remember? If we include your debts and favours too it will just complicate matters. Anyway, now that you’re ready, is it time to go?”

Jin left first, then Balsa, followed by Torogai. When Yugno finally stepped out into the meadow, everyone suddenly felt the thing in the northern grove.

“I’m dissolving the barrier.” Torogai murmured. Balsa and Jin moved to stand on either side of Yugno, who stared at the grove without blinking, his face drained of blood.

Torogai closed her eyes and put her hands together in front of her chest. She then quickly and forcefully parted them.

The second she did that, a black shadow shot out of the branches like an arrow. Aiming straight for Yugno.

Jin swung his sheathed sword in a wide arc. It connected with the shadow’s flank. The Flower’s Guardian fell to the ground with a dull thud.

Balsa grabbed Yugno’s hand, who was still frozen, and started running just before Jin shouted “Go!”. She didn’t turn back.

Jin’s attacks were such that any normal human would have been unable to move for a while for lack of breath.

The Flower's Guardian though, regained his breath in seconds with no signs of feeling pain. It also looked like he had put the shoulder Balsa dislocated back into place.

*I see. This thing isn't human.*

When he looked into the eyes of the Flower's Guardian his chest felt cold. The face was definitely Tanda's, but his demeanour was nowhere to be seen.

*How does a human face change this much with a single expression?*

Jin noticed the Flower's Guardian bending his legs at the knees and figured that he would try to pursue Yugno by jumping over his opponent.

A moment later, the Flower's Guardian was in the air above Jin, who just managed to grab his left ankle. Jin's whole body was pulled by the momentum and he ended up falling to the ground.

He didn't let go of the ankle during the fall, but the Flower's Guardian tried kicking Jin's arm with his right leg, to dislodge it. Right before his leg could connect, Jin let go of the ankle, rolled and jumped back onto his feet.

Nevertheless, the Flower's Guardian managed to get back up slightly faster. He shot past Jin, uncaring, in the direction Yugno had run off to.

Jin grabbed his still-sheathed sword and threw it. It got caught between the running legs of the Flower's Guardian and tripped him up.

Jin threw himself onto the Flower's Guardian before he could get up. He quickly passed each of his arms under the armpits of the Flower's Guardian and laced his fingers on the back of his head. Like this, not only did Jin immobilise the joints in the shoulders and the neck, he could also with but a slight change in position even break the neck of his opponent.

Having shifted his weight backwards, Jin thought that he had captured the Flower's Guardian. He would simply need to maintain this lock for as long as he could and everything would be fine. If he managed to kick his opponent's legs out from under him, roll to the ground, and wrap both his legs and arms around his opponent's he would be able to hold him down until he ran out of strength.

Jin, similarly to Balsa, had experienced real combat since early childhood. When one becomes truly good at martial arts, one can manipulate their own weight to an extent. Jin was by no means a big man, but by cleverly changing his center of gravity or using breathing techniques, he could make his body feel heavier than that of any bigger man. He had absolute confidence that once he held an opponent this tightly, there could be no escape.

That's why when he felt the Flower's Guardian moving under his arms, Jin felt a cold, sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The Flower's Guardian started bending his arms towards his back. Hearing the creaking of his opponents arm bones, Jin broke into a cold sweat.

*This guy is trying to break both of his bones!*

He was trying to escape Jin's tight hold by breaking his own bones. Jin remembered Balsa's words:

*"It doesn't see Tanda's body as anything more than a tool."*

Whether he broke his own arms, or even they were cut off, as long as he was still alive he would chase after Yugno.

The terror of this creature finally sank into Jin's body.

Jin quickly loosened his arms and kicked his opponent in the back of the knees. They jerked and shook and the Guardian fell to the ground. Jin positioned himself with his legs spread on either side of the Guardian's knees. He then stuck his knees into the backs of the Guardian's knees and suppressed his legs with his own shins. He also held down the Guardian's neck with his right hand, making sure his head couldn't move. The Guardian swung both of his arms in an attempt to remove the hand holding his head down, but Jin swatted them away with palm strikes. However, the Guardian would not stop moving and continued trying to get Jin off of him without pause and with inhuman strength.

Jin's forehead was covered with sweat. He didn't even know how much time had passed since the beginning of their fight. He managed to swat the Guardian's arms while simply holding him down for quite a while, but eventually his concentration broke for a second.

In that second the nails of the Guardian's right hand cut Jin's right arm. A hot pain pierced him and he covered the wound with his left hand by reflex. The Guardian used this lapse to heave his entire body, like a shrimp, sending Jin to the ground faster than he could formulate a coherent thought.

When the Guardian stood up he attacked Jin. It would seem he deemed this man to be an obstacle in his pursuit of Yugno.

It wasn't the way a human fought. With nails and teeth, he tried to rip Jin apart. He started hitting Jin's head with an incredible speed. Jin tried twisting it away slightly, but only ended up with a slash right next to his left eye, the blood filling it and making it hard to see. When Jin finally noticed that the Guardian was aiming for his throat, he realised that he couldn't afford to hold back any longer.

As the Guardian tried to latch onto his throat with his teeth, Jin screamed and struck his opponent's chin with his right fist as hard as he could. The Guardian's head was flung backwards, allowing Jin to punch him in the throat.

After finally getting away from the Flower's Guardian's barrage of attacks, Jin used the opening by barging into him with his shoulders, and striking slightly above his left ankle with a chop. He could feel the bone snap cleanly under his hand.

Just as he thought he had done it, the Guardian's right hand hit him on the cheek. The impact was as intense as if he had been hit with a club. His vital points barely avoided, Jin was sent flying and lost consciousness before he even hit the ground.

The Flower's Guardian tried standing up, and only then noticed that he couldn't use his left leg much. He sat down for a while, touching it. Eventually he got up onto all fours and restarted his pursuit, running on two hands and one leg. Surprisingly, even in that state, he did not run much slower than a normal human.

The Flower's Guardian, in Tanda's body, was gone in the blink of an eye, resuming his pursuit of Yugno.