



The gate of the moon.

Balsa thought she heard someone calling her name and raised her head.

When she saw four person-shaped shadows approach from around the lake, her chest swelled with joy.

“Balsa!” Chagum ran, tripping over himself. He had grown taller since the last time they had met. His voice was also no longer the high pitched trill of a child, but had dropped and become that of a young man.

“Hey! Watch out! Don’t you damage the barrier! Step over it carefully as you come in.” Chagum slowed down after hearing Torogai’s worried shout. He gently stepped over the rope as he was told, his face screwing up at the sight of Balsa. Memories of the time they spent together flashed before his eyes.

“You’ve grown so much, haven’t you Chagum?” Balsa’s voice was hoarse as she took hold of his face. The top of Chagum’s head used to just about come up to her chest, but now it reached all the way up to her shoulder level. He embraced her tightly and started to sob.

Neither had thought that they would get to meet again, and once this night was over they would have to part once more.

Shuga and the Hunters Zen and Yun had entered the barrier soon after Chagum, and now stood still, just watching the two of them silently.

“The moon is rising...” At Torogai’s warning, everyone looked up into the sky. The dull, red face of the large half-moon was peeking over the ridges of the mountains.

“So, I need to make preparations for the Soul Call before the moon is reflected in that lake. Can you all sit quietly while I do that?” Balsa returned to her senses upon hearing Torogai’s voice. Chagum let go of Balsa and, with a chastised expression, started to sit on the ground, only to be stopped by a panicking Yun. “Please wait a second, Your Highness.”

He removed a cloth from his back and laid it down on the ground. Chagum looked at the cloth with a displeased expression, and only when Balsa nodded did he obediently sit down on it.

Balsa looked over at Shuga who was standing nearby and bowed her head deeply. She made it look like an innocuous greeting of a stranger, but it seemed like Shuga understood her true intention. He smiled slightly before returning to a serious expression, and returning the bow.

Balsa also nodded in greeting at the two Hunters, who did not look at all similar to one another. The short and stout Hunter with a thick neck, Zen, expressionlessly returned her nod. However, the one whose face bore a scar that she had once caused, the thin and tall Yun, hesitated for a moment before sullenly reciprocating.

Balsa tried feeling out for anyone else who may have been hiding in the surroundings, dark and deeply silent except for the occasional whistling of birds. She couldn't sense the Guardian of the Flower. It looked like they had managed to safely get here without being followed.

She couldn't bring herself to be glad for this, though as she imagined Tanda, running in the darkness and becoming increasingly worn down.

Don't come here, Tanda! Despite thinking this, she nevertheless couldn't stop another thought from popping into her head. *Please show me that you're still alive Tanda.*

Before she knew it, the small, bright and white semicircle of the moon had risen high into the night sky. The outlines of the surrounding mountains were made clearly apparent by its light. The white, wooden roof of the lifeless mountain villa, towering over the opposite shore, was glimmering in the light as if covered in frost.

Suddenly, Yugno stirred. "What's wrong with the palace?"

Everyone looked at the lake's surface where Yugno was pointing. The mountain villa was reflected in the dark surface of the lake, as clearly as if in a mirror. The reflection was far too clear to be caused by the moonlight. Yet more unsettling, however, was the stillness of the image, undisturbed even as the wind created ripples on the surface of the lake.

Chagum whispered, trembling, "The moon is weird too..." The object visible in the sky was a perfect half moon, but the reflection in the lake below instead depicted a swollen, almost full, moon. As they watched, it seemed to grow ever fuller, as if a circular window were opening up in the sky, gradually letting more and more light through.

The moment the moon became completely full, a high pitched noise rang out and broke through the silence, giving Balsa a strange sensation on her skin and the sound became higher and higher.

"Wind?" Shuga shook his head at Balsa's murmured question. "The surface of the lake is undisturbed. As are these flames and the nearby reeds."

Nonetheless, those sitting there by the lake certainly felt something like wind.

"Ah." Everyone saw it at the same time and sucked in a sharp breath. The mountain villa was in total darkness, with not a single light visible, but the upside-down palace reflected on the surface of the water was illuminated from within by a warm, dim, flickering brightness, like that of a torch.

"It's the Flower" Chagum whispered. "That's the light of the Flower, coming from the inner-garden." Balsa grabbed Chagum's arm suddenly upon hearing his sleepy and spaced out answer. "Don't get pulled in Chagum! You've gotta keep it together!"

Chagum started trembling with a start. Some of the others, who were also starting to drift off, looked at Balsa with expressions as if she had just kicked them awake. "Be careful! That Flower attracts dreams. Right now *here* and *there* are close together, connected! If you relax, you're gonna get dragged in!" Balsa felt that her desperate words were ineffective like a muffled, distant shout within a dream. The air felt like liquid.

It was then that light started to bleed forth from Torogai's slowly swaying body. It was a pale yellow glow, resembling the light of fireflies. With time, that light gathered at her forehead.

Balsa then saw a soul for the first time. It took on the shape of a beautiful bird and rose up, still shining like a firefly, only to be sucked straight into the moon on the lake's surface, dragging a white thread behind it.

Torogai was sucked into the reflected moon at great speed, reminiscent of a bird trapped in an air current. The aimlessly lingering, bluish mist in the area made her think of the blue tint of the fading darkness just before dawn.

Alarm bells deep within her were ringing.

There is a strong magic hidden among this mist. I can't let myself get caught up in it...

However, those feelings unravelled into nothing as she descended deeper into the blue mist, and her time began to flow backwards.

By the time she navigated the interconnected corridors and arrived at the garden crowded with trees, she had forgotten fifty-two years of her lifetime and was once more the twenty year old Tomca.

When she saw a tall man dressed in grey robes tied with a brilliant green sash, Tomca felt a sharp joy. Before long, this turned into a warm euphoria and enveloped her.

"Tomca, where is the child?" Tomca, shocked at his words, looked down at her hands.

Gone! Even though I've been holding it this whole time...

Only a faint coldness in her arms remained, the baby's warmth having disappeared. "It's okay, Tomca. Why don't you try calling for him? I'm sure he'll come back."

Tomca became relieved. "You're right. I know where he is. I know how to return him to these arms too."

Tomca spread her arms and called for her son.

A few things happened at once.

The magic weaving tool made of a spike of zebra grass that Torogai was holding suddenly went up in flames.

The string of the barrier ripped and was flung outwards.

A shadow reminiscent of a three-legged beast jumped out from the reed bed and attacked Yugno. Balsa just about managed to slide between the shadow and Yugno, but was beaten into the ground with tremendous force.

She saw Yun the Hunter, out of the corner of her eye, draw his sword, shouting "Monster!"

Balsa put her arm into the armpit of the Flower's Guardian, wrapped her leg around his right ankle and turned him over with all of her strength, pinning him down.

Yun's sword, which was meant for the Guardian's back, instead pierced Balsa's left shoulder.

As he pulled it out in surprise, Chagum came flying at Balsa, shouting the entire time, and pressed down on that shoulder, trying to stop the bleeding.

The Guardian began to writhe below Balsa in an attempt to get free. She suddenly got up and picked him up by the shoulder using only her right arm.

Balsa tried carrying him away like that, but he rolled both of his hands into fists and struck her back with immense force.

Balsa groaned, dropped the Guardian, and collapsed on top of him.

Yun was stopped by Zen from attempting to stab the Guardian again. "You protect His Highness!" He shouted his order at Yun as he himself restrained the Guardian's hands from grabbing Balsa's neck. She managed to raise her head while coughing. "Don't kill him, it's Tanda."

"I know." Zen pulled the Guardian from underneath Balsa, but when he noticed that the Guardian broke his own arm to try and get free, he paled.

Yugno was scared out of his mind. The monstrous Guardian kept lunging at him and when he stretched his fingers, crooked like an eagle's talons, towards Yugno's throat, he lost his senses completely.

Running on shaking legs, he desperately retreated away from the grappling fighters and towards the lake.

That's when a pleasant smell wafted towards him. It reminded him of his hometown's stew made over a sunken hearth and he became enveloped in its warmth.

He heard a nostalgic voice from deep within. "Yugno..."

Mom's voice. Yugno thought with a clouded head. *The voice that always comforted me after a nightmare.*

The second he heard it, the stiffness brought on by extreme fright left his body and his awareness and memories of the current nightmare were pushed back into a far corner of his mind, as his desire to see his mother eclipsed everything.

"Come quickly..."

In that garden in which his soul was born, the light of the Flower flickered invitingly.

Yugno fell to his knees upon the grass...

The end of the Flower's world finally began. A gust of wind blew in like an omen and increased in intensity, its howl louder and louder.

As the wind started to get stronger, Tanda decided that he no longer had time to hesitate. He transformed into a bird and flew up, looking for Kaya.

The Flower's light swayed in time with the intense gusts, casting dancing shadows everywhere. Petals rained down from scattering flowers. The overpowering smell of the Flower began to transform into the sickly sweet scent of death.

Tanda panicked as he noticed that he couldn't control his flight as he wished.

Is it because of the wind? Or is my possessed body in the other world dying?

Whichever it was, an unbearable tiredness came over him.

At the very least, I want to save Kaya.

Tanda flapped his wings desperately and approached a flower head. It also appeared to be sharply swaying. His suspicions were confirmed when the petals scattered. He only barely dodged them.

Amongst the petals carried away by the wind he saw vague human shapes drift downwards.

As soon as he processed what he was seeing, he abruptly changed back into his human form.

"Kaya!" As he screamed her name, Tanda caught the falling shape of a girl and positioned himself below her, as they fell with their backs to the ground, into the inner garden.



The impact of the fall was far smaller than Tanda expected. The water in the inner garden was somehow similar to sand. The girl in his arms began to move.

“Kaya, are you conscious?” At Tanda’s voice, Kaya looked up with confusion on her face.

“Uncle Tanda? Where are we? Why am I here?”

The flower heads were scattering one after another, and many human figures began falling into the inner garden like ripe fruit. Once on the ground, they curled up like babies and stopped moving.

Tanda thought to wake them, but his body would not move as he wished it to. A terrible tiredness took over his entire body.

I have to turn Kaya into a bird...

With that thought, Tanda stopped moving. A paralysing fear entered the depths of his chest and he gradually picked himself up.

Am I gonna die in a place like this?

The things he wanted to do, the future he should have lived, began to fade away like the light at dusk.

“Uncle Tanda? What’s wrong? What is going on?” Kaya shouted in fear as she shook Tanda.

He finally managed to find his voice again. “Kaya... You have to get away from here. Can you see the threads?”

“Threads?” Kaya squinted. As she noticed the thread of light coming out of her forehead, she raised her voice in surprise. “I see it! Uncle Tanda, I see the thread!”

Tanda grabbed Kaya’s hand. “I’ll turn you into a bird now, so promise me that you’ll follow that thread wherever it goes. You can fly home like that.”

“Into a bird? You can do that?”

Tanda lifted the corners of his mouth into a slight smile. “Yes, I can. I’m still a magic weaver, even if not a very good one”

Tanda closed his eyes for a second. When he opened them, he got started on his final job. He would turn Kaya into a bird by using subconscious suggestion. However, his body wouldn’t move the way wanted. It became incredibly heavy, and his vision went dark...

Zen slowly let go of the Flower’s Guardian, who he had been holding down, and looked up at Balsa. She was pressing down on her injured shoulder and staring at Tanda’s unrecognisable form in a daze. She looked at his face, illuminated by the incandescent fire grates, and she got the feeling that he was at his limit.

Balsa felt pain in her chest as if she had been stabbed with a blade. Things hidden deep in her heart came forth unbidden in that moment, and her sadness spread like a numbing chill through her entire body.

Balsa kneeled next to the unmoving Tanda, cradled his head and pressed her forehead against his. She couldn't stop her teeth from chattering. Her throat constricted and she couldn't breathe. "Tanda..." Tears fell from her eyes. "Don't you dare die. Tanda!"

Tanda thought he heard Balsa's voice. He looked up. His body still felt heavy, but for some reason a desire to continue living began to insistently pulse inside him, giving him the strength necessary to move his body.

He propped himself up on an elbow and noticed that Kaya was looking at him with worried eyes.

That's right. For Kaya's sake, he couldn't let himself die now.

Having thought that, he suddenly noticed that a young girl was standing next to the Flower's Keeper by the roots of the scattering Flower. The girl seemed to not even notice the raging wind and had her arms out as if she were hugging someone.

She was nothing more than a young Yakoo girl, but her face held faint traces of familiarity.

Impossible... Tanda gasped before mustering his strength for a shout. "Ma...master! Master Torogai!!!"

The girl turned to look at Tanda with confusion, but a light returned to her eyes as they met his. "Tanda?"

When Tomca saw Tanda, a deep shiver went through her entire body. Something that had been put to sleep started to slowly but firmly awaken, and her plump face with a vague expression returned to its usual wrinkly and stubborn-looking gaze.

"Tomca, be careful, you're starting to age unattractively." The Flower's Keeper warned harshly.

By the time she shook her head and laughed, her face had fully returned to that of Torogai. "Is that so? Is it really that bad?"

"But you know what? This is just how I am; it took me fifty-two years to grow this face." She glared at the Flower's Keeper. "You aren't the Flower's Keeper, are you? You little shit, that was a dirty trick. I can't believe I fell for it!"

Torogai turned herself into flames and jumped onto the man, but he swayed abruptly and disappeared.

His illusions vanished with him, and Torogai was no longer shielded from the wind storm surrounding her..

The petals continued to fall with the wind. The palace crumbled like sand and disappeared.

"This is bad!" Torogai grumbled as she tried to rush through the gale towards the crouching Tanda. As she proceeded, though, his form was obscured by the growing sandstorm.

"I won't let you go." A thin, high pitched, woman's voice resounded. "We are all staying here forever. Return to me, sons who have escaped my grasp!"