

Chapter 3 Part 2



Chagum and Tanda.

Tanda slowly recreated his own sensations by dreaming of his body.

While the Flower's Keeper was chanting the last of his spells, Tanda cast a spell of his own to protect his dreams. That's how he managed to retain his soul, which would have otherwise completely belonged to the Flower by now.

Nevertheless, when his body was taken over by the Flower, the thread connecting his life and his soul was severed, leaving him no method of returning to it. Tanda bitterly realised that he did indeed walk straight into a trap after all.

Right before the last spell took hold, when that wind came out of nowhere to caress his cheek, Tanda saw a white shadow shaped like a woman behind the Flower's Keeper. In that split second, like lightning, the feelings of that woman pierced him. On the surface, feelings of wanting to forever doze inside this dream, never to wake up. Beneath that, feelings of viscous loathing, wanting to melt all other dreams into one never-ending dream so that someone else would taste the same despair.

Tanda sighed.

That woman is surely one of those that pollinated the Flower, and now the strong feelings of her soul are controlling it.

That's what caused the Flower's Keeper to set such a trap for Tanda. He didn't know what her goal was, but it definitely involved his body back in the other world.

A beautiful colour, sweet nectar, and various means of deceiving insects are all parts of the nature the Flower was bestowed with. I really am a soft-hearted fool to fall for something like this. But...

Tanda had a reassuring thought.

Even a tiny insect can achieve something.

Tanda protected his soul with that last spell. While this did not change the fact that he was stuck inside the Flower, it also meant that he was the only soul there which was not trapped in its own dream. He stood up and glanced at the faintly glowing mist above him.

On each and every petal, a Dream was sleeping. It would be best if he could wake all of them at once, but then he would be noticed by the Flower's Keeper.

This was the Flower's world. If it came to a fight, Tanda alone would stand no chance.

Anyway, I should start by looking for Kaya.

Kaya would surely believe his words and wake up.

Tanda changed his shape to that of a bird, beat his wings once and flew upwards. While looking for Kaya amongst the petals, he found a very familiar dream. Or, to be more precise, someone was dreaming of Tanda, and he got sucked into that dream.

Before he realised what was going on, Tanda found himself by the sunken hearth in his own home. It was subtly different to the way his house looked now. The room was neither this bright nor this spacious, and a vase that he had used for herbal potions, which he had knocked over and broken at some point, was still standing, intact, next to the shelves.

It wasn't early summer, as it should have been, either. Tanda noticed that he was holding a type of mushroom called *kankui* that only grew in the autumn. Balsa was sitting on the other side of the hearth, and Torogai was rudely lying by the fire. He himself was talking to...

"Chagum!" Chagum looked up with surprise in his eyes at Tanda's shout.



“What?”

Tanda dropped the *kankui* and grabbed Chagum’s shoulders. “Oh, no! You got caught up in this mess too?”

Chagum scowled. “Mess? What’s wrong Tanda? What are you talking about?”

Tanda looked at the scenery of Chagum’s dream properly and his chest hurt. The time that Chagum wanted to go back to, that he missed so much that he let the Flower take him, was that autumn he spent at Tanda’s house with Balsa and Torogai.

He hugged Chagum and slowly started speaking. “Chagum, listen well. This is a dream.”

Tanda described from beginning to end of how he came to be here, explaining the nature of the Flower as well as its trap. Understandably, Chagum’s body reacted to this by becoming rigid and tense. After Tanda’s explanation, Chagum twisted away and shook his head. “No! I don’t ever want to return! I don’t want to have to become the Mikado!”

Chagum glared at Tanda. "Such a life would be so much worse! If I am to be trapped regardless, then I'd rather it be in this dream than in the palace ."

Tanda looked straight at Chagum. "Is that so? Can you so easily accept the way you are now, sleeping your life away and trapped within a dream?" Chagum winced slightly as Tanda continued. "If you really don't mind dying a peaceful death in this pleasant dream, then by all means go ahead and do just that.."

Tanda removed his arms from around Chagum. "But if you feel at all like you would regret staying here, even the tiniest bit, then I think you should go back."

Tanda looked at the other Dreams, faintly visible through the bright, translucent mist. "People gather here because they think of themselves as unhappy. There are most likely two types. The first type consists of those who find themselves with nowhere to turn. For example, they may have an incurable disease, or they may have done something terrible which they feel they can't make amends for. The other type consists of those who find themselves stuck living a different kind of life than they would like. They curse their fate and refuse to accept their situation, not understanding why they must be so unhappy."

Tanda returned his eyes to Chagum. "What is a 'different kind of life', Chagum? I don't know about the others here, but in your case, not all hope is lost! If you wanted it, both me and Balsa would help you escape to another country or something even if it cost our lives. A year ago, I thought that you understood this, but you chose to instead give this kind of life a try. You faced the terrible darkness of the fate of becoming Mikado, and shouldered your loneliness with your head held high. You wanted to be proud of your choices, right?"

Tanda let out a small sigh. "I think it's pretty important for all people, from the lowest peasant all the way up to the Mikado, to be able to feel proud of themselves. It's pretty hard to achieve, and it involves coming to terms with feelings so private and embarrassing that you can't share them with anyone."

"At least, that's what I've been trying to do as I live my life. Whenever I find myself at a crossroads and I don't know what to do, I always try to choose the road that will lead me closer to my ideal self."

Chagum was gritting his teeth. Tanda took his hand. "In any case, the final decision is yours. At least that much is fair, right?"

Chagum nodded his head slightly.

"We're inside an empty dream. Do you still think you can continue sleeping until you die, surrounded by your self-created illusions of Balsa, me and Master Torogai, now that you are aware that this is all a dream?"

Chagum closed his eyes and started trembling slightly.

"Or, will you wake up and live your life till the end no matter what struggles you face? If so, I will tell you how to get out of here."

After taking a deep breath and expelling it, Chagum raised his eyes and looked straight at Tanda. Tanda smiled. "Ok. Look here. Can you see these white, glowing threads?"

Tanda pointed at the thread extending from Chagum's forehead. Chagum looked at it with surprise. "I can see it. Though I didn't notice it before..."

"In the world of souls, you can't see anything until you explicitly notice it. That is the way of magic weaving, you see."

Tanda laughed. "The other end of this thread is connected to your real body. If you follow it, you will definitely be able to return. But, there's one very important thing I must warn you of." His face stiffened and he grabbed Chagum by the shoulders. "No matter what you see or hear, whatever happens, do not turn around. This is really important. Do not turn around for anything. Remember, anything you might see or hear is just an illusion made by the Flower to tempt you."

"Do you understand? Promise me!"

Chagum pressed his lips together tightly and nodded. Tanda let go of his shoulders in relief. "Also, when you're back, I want you to give Master Torogai a message. Tell her that the wind that will scatter the Flower's petals will come from her world in three days' time, during the night of the half-moon. If she is thinking of doing the Soul Call, that will be the last opportunity."

"I understand. The night of the half moon, three days from now, was it?"

"Yes. Please tell Shuga about this. He can meet with Torogai in secret. He is a smart man and I believe that he will definitely convey this properly."

Chagum nodded vigorously.

"It will be helpful for her to know this.. If she knows the place that the wind will blow from, and where the two worlds are connected, the Soul Call should be easier for her."

Chagum narrowed his eyes at Tanda's words. "Tanda, wait."

"Yes?"

"When I was invited here, I think I saw something strange. I was dreaming of being at your fireplace, but you know how dreams can sometimes suddenly change location? It was like that. For a while, I thought that I could see something like a palace."

"That's what this place actually looks like, probably. I told you, didn't I? The Flower is blooming in a garden inside an empty palace."

"Yes. The thing is, this palace looks really similar to the royal mountain villa."

Tanda looked at Chagum's surprised face. "Is that right? Now that you mention it, I did hear that the mountain villa was built on the bank of a lake..."

"Yes. It looks just like it. I go there with Mother and her attendants every summer. I wouldn't mistake it for anything. Also..." Excitement transformed Chagum's face. "Kokoru, who used to teach me before, said that the previous Mikado, Yamur, built the mountain villa about fifty years ago. It was built there because the Second Queen at the time, who had just lost her son, had a very sad but beautiful dream and asked the Mikado to build a palace just like the one in her dream in memory of her son. In the dream, she followed a singing voice across the Aoyumi River to a palace on the bank of a beautiful lake surrounded by mountains. This was investigated, and a lake just like the one in the Queen's dream was found. And so they built a mountain villa there."

Tanda's eyes sparkled. "There is no mistaking it. We know that Master Torogai was not the only one called by the Flower. She told me that the others, who the Flower's Keeper didn't fall in love with, left without ever entering the

palace. The Second Queen of Mikado Yamur must have been one such individual. I'd love to see the face Torogai will pull when she hears this! Anyway, Chagum, please tell Shuga everything you just told me too."

Feeling like a small load had been taken off of his shoulders, Tanda let out a small sigh. "I didn't think you'd be one of the invited ones, Chagum. Was the song really that beautiful?"

Chagum laughed a little in embarrassment. "Yeah. The words were just a love song, but the melody... I don't know how to put it. It was a melody that clawed at my heart and stirred up the things hiding deep within. The first time I heard it my chest hurt, but I told myself to calm down and managed to contain my emotions."

He continued after a pause. "But... when I heard about you guys from Shuga, I remembered all that stuff and I couldn't bear it anymore."

Chagum was trying his best to explain how he felt when he found out that Shuga was meeting Torogai in secret. "Then, when I went to sleep while feeling like that, I could hear a woman's voice calling me. The voice was kind, and when I looked its way I saw a very nostalgic and fiery light. When I woke up, I was here..."

Tanda scowled. "A woman's voice?"

Chagum nodded, then suddenly turned pale in fright. "Oh! Then that was the voice of the First Queen. Speaking of which, she has been asleep for quite a while already."

Tanda shuddered as he remembered the white face of the woman he saw behind the Flower's Keeper.

Chagum collected himself and spoke again. "After losing Sagum to an illness, the First Queen couldn't overcome her sadness and locked herself up in the mountain villa. But, six days ago, she fell asleep and wouldn't wake up..."

Tanda was gripped by a terrifying thought while listening to Chagum's whispers.

Since the son of the First Queen passed away, Chagum, the Second Queen's son, became the Crown Prince. The First Queen didn't just lose a son; she was going to be the mother of the next Mikado, the very highest position a woman in this kingdom could attain. That bright future was suddenly taken from her along with her son. All that was left for her now was to watch over the son of the Second Queen. To watch *him* become the Mikado instead.

Tanda remembered the feelings of the woman standing behind the Flower's Keeper. The strong feelings of wanting to remain dreaming forever, to never wake up, and the feverishly hatred-filled desire for others to suffer the same sadness as her.

Tanda paled.

Suddenly, the scent of the Flower thickened significantly. Chagum was soon enveloped completely by it and his eyes began to droop.

This is bad...

There was no doubt, then, that the First Queen had been listening in on everything so far. As soon as it was clear that Tanda was aware of her, she attempted to control Chagum without hesitation!

Tanda put his hands together and concentrated. He took a deep breath of air and then released it slowly, changing it into a white mist to surround Chagum and himself.

Tanda placed his hands on either side of Chagum's face and continued to exhale towards him, waking him from his trance abruptly, with a shock as if cold water had been poured all over him.

"What is all this?" Chagum let his eyes open and moved away from the forming wall of mist. Tanda extended his hand and pulled Chagum into a tight hug. Outside the wall of mist, a human form could be seen writhing around, their voice resounding in a drawn out moan and filled with an obvious and terrifying hatred.

The wall was being pushed against from the outside, but it didn't budge in the slightest.

"Don't worry. This is a barrier I created. I'm not like the souls sleeping in the Flower. At the last moment, when the last spell was being cast on me, I managed to protect my soul. My barrier will not be broken so easily."

The strength of the barrier was the strength of the soul that formed it. Tanda thought to himself with determination that he would protect this barrier no matter what.

"Tanda, what happened? Whose voice is that?"

"The First Queen woke up. She most likely wanted to bring you here to drag you down with her. Your heart was in a state that made it easy for her to do so. Now she has you within her grasp, she isn't going to just let you go."

Chagum frowned. "But the First Queen is a kind person. I haven't met her too many times but she was always beautiful and gentle, an ephemeral flower. I just can't see her as someone who could curse others like this..."

Tanda smiled. Chagum was a stubborn child, but at times like these you could see his kindness shining through. "Is that so? I think everyone feels some resentment when they are hurt. Kindness is unrelated. Also, in dreams, people's feelings become embarrassingly frank, right?"

Tanda continued after looking at Chagum. "I'm not saying that she's a bad person. I'm saying that this is a place where the darkness we all hold deep within our hearts is brought to the surface and exposed. Either way, it's good that we noticed the First Queen before I sent you back. If we didn't, you would have surely been caught in a trap along the way. She is very cunning. I was almost completely fooled as well."

Tanda smiled bitterly. "My barrier lets us hear sounds from the outside, but our voices and bodies are still concealed. Listen well, Chagum. To escape from here safely you must change your shape. Not to fool the First Queen, though. She won't be fooled so easily. What you really want to do is to draw out the full power of your soul. The shape of a soul shows its nature. If the shape is human, then you can only run as fast as a human, but if you take the form of a bird, you move with a bird's speed too."

"What if I become an arrow then?"

Tanda smiled slightly. "It's the fastest at the time of release, but it has no power of its own to fly with after that, so it will not be enough. I'll have you change into a falcon now, so fly as fast as you can. Follow the thread closely and do not turn around. The First Queen will most likely try to trick you, but do not turn around no matter what she tries."

Tanda grabbed Chagum's shoulders and squeezed. "You were invited here because your heart wanted to come here. The Flower has a lot of power over you because of this. But, listen well. It still shouldn't have enough power to stop a soul that has decided to return to its body. If you don't show any uncertainty, you should be able to return. Don't stray. If you get lost, you'll be dragged back."

Chagum's face stiffened. "By the First Queen?"

“No. By your own heart.” Tanda gazed at Chagum. “Isn’t it strange? People can want to just sleep forever, or even choose death, despite being alive and well. Why do people have souls too big for their bodies?”

Chagum inhaled sharply. His voice trembled. “This Flower is a cruel being, isn’t it Tanda? Using people’s dreams, making them feel like this... I couldn’t realise my dream on my own.”

Tanda hugged Chagum. Chagum buried his face in Tanda’s chest and sobbed. “Tanda. I feel bad for the first Queen. She was surely in so much pain that it was hard to even breathe. It’s not her fault.”

“But her dream became a true nightmare when she ensnared you in it, it would seem. If only she could hold you here, lock you up forever, dragging you down with her. The moment she thought that, her sadness turned into resentment. It’s not really directed at you. She probably resents her fate. ‘Why is it just me?’ The Second Queen has you, and you will become the Mikado eventually. She envies the Second Queen so much... But the kind First Queen didn’t want to think such thoughts, she punished herself for it. In the dream though, her deep-seated resentment cannot be held back.”

And, unfortunately, that resentment gained control over the flower, as troublesome as that is...

Tanda added to himself. He remembered the brilliance of the plan that fooled him into giving up control of his body, and felt that something didn’t quite fit.

If the Flower can be taken over by the invited souls in this way, then how did it survive this long? There must have been other souls that wished to end the world and drag other souls into death with them.

In fact, all the souls that were invited over by the Flower should have been so strongly disillusioned with their current lives that they wanted to escape from it. If there wasn’t some power protecting the Flower from souls like these, that wanted to die, then the Flower would never have been able to disperse its seeds and repeat the cycle. It would have died out long ago.

Tanda shook his head. This was not the time to be thinking these thoughts. “Anyway, we need to release you from the First Queen’s nightmare as soon as possible. For the sake of the other dreams that are trapped here too.”

Chagum pressed his lips and nodded in determination.

Filled with Chagum’s courage, Tanda reflexively put his hands on Chagum’s cheeks once more. “If you ever lose your way, remember that me and Balsa think of you as our son, even if we share no blood and we vary greatly in status. We want you to be well.” Tanda continued after a pause. “Your power to fly is the same as your will to live. Fly! Cut through pain and darkness. You have the strength to do that. Both me and Balsa know you have what it takes.”

Tears welled up in Chagum’s eyes. Tanda clapped him on the back and helped him stand up. Desperately trying to reign in his tears, Chagum asked a question. “What will you do, Tanda?”

“I can’t go back. I let the Flower take over my body, you see.”

Seeing Chagum’s screwed up face, Tanda laughed. “Silly. Don’t make that face. I only have my own inexperience to blame. If Master Torogai finds out, she’s going to turn me into a turtle. That’s how bad I messed up. I guess I got what’s coming to me.”

Chagum paused for a second before answering. “Torogai or Balsa will definitely come and save you.”

“Yeah. As pathetic as it may be, that’s what I’m hoping for at this point too.” He replied as he was getting to his feet. His face returned to being serious and he placed both his hands on Chagum’s head. “Anyway, close your eyes and calm your heart. You’ll feel a warm light in your chest... Do you feel it? It’s warm, isn’t it? That heat is slowly changing you. Both of your arms are becoming wings, aren’t they? Dream of a beautiful, strong falcon. Just like that. Try spreading your wings now!”

While releasing warm light similar to that of a firefly, Chagum’s shape changed slowly. Tanda grabbed the warm falcon with both hands and threw it up into the air. “Fly straight back home! Fly with the wind in your face!”

After pausing for a second, just beating his wings in place, Chagum rode an incoming wind and rose up high. He left the mist farther and farther behind him. As he rode the wind, as he felt it gently blowing on his face, he heard a voice from behind. “Wait! Chagum, wait!”

It was Tanda’s voice. Chagum almost turned without thinking, but stopped himself in time. Even if Tanda did forget to tell him something, the risk was not worth it.

The mist started swirling, and he saw visions of times long past. The grand hall of the Yogo palace. A blushing Sagum stood before his father, wearing his golden crown. Sagum stepped forward onto a pure-white woollen rug and his father placed a cape weaved with golden thread on his shoulders, signifying that he was now the Crown Prince. The thread caught the afternoon light and shone brilliantly. Sagum smiled widely enough to show his teeth.

Chagum’s chest was pierced by a sharp sadness. He didn’t speak with Sagum all that much. He didn’t feel like they were really brothers, either. What saddened him so was the unreasonable transience of life.

Sagum probably didn’t think at the time that in just less than a year he would no longer be alive. He must have thought that he was going to continue maturing as a Crown Prince, until one day he would put on the Mikado’s crown.

Why did he have to die, leaving me to become the Crown Prince. I don’t even want to.

Chagum thought that destiny was a cruel thing.

Suddenly he heard a thin voice. “Why did Sagum have to die? Even though he wanted to become the Mikado...”

He felt like someone had ripped his chest open with claws.

“Why did he, who wanted to live, have to die, while you who would rather die than be Mikado, have to live? After you return to the palace will you be able to live out those cold days, insipid as sand? What have you even got to look forward to?”

Chagum’s wings moved as if they were made of lead. It was true. There was not exactly an enjoyable life waiting for him upon his return. As soon as he thought that, he was plagued by an unbearable exhaustion.

How nice would it feel to stop beating these wings and sleep for a bit... Maybe the First Queen’s sadness would lessen then. Her hatred of me would disappear as well.

At that moment, a wind from the East rubbed against Chagum’s cheek. With it, Tanda’s voice resounded in his ears with surprising strength. “If you ever lose your way, remember that me and Balsa think of you as our son, even if we share no blood and we vary greatly in status. We want you to be well.”

It felt like light was shining within his eyeballs.

“Your power to fly is the same as your will to live. Fly! Cut through pain and darkness. You have the strength to do that. Both me and Balsa know you have what it takes.”

An image of Balsa appeared in front of his eyes. She stood in front of him protectively, pointing her spear at the terrifying monster, Rarunga. She was willing to put her life on the line to protect a child that wasn't even hers.

Balsa has also had many things stolen from her. Her parents, a normal life. But Balsa would never run away into a dream like this. Even if she wanted to do so, she never would.

From deep within his heart, Chagum felt hot power welling up. He beat his wings strongly and felt his body rising on the wind. For the first time ever he felt that his life, in all its transience, that could be taken away at any point, was nevertheless very precious.

Before his eyes the cold and vast landscape of Nayugu that he had seen as the Guardian of the Spirit stretched out. The world where life is as it is. That quiet, bare mountainscape.

Suddenly, his body felt weightless. Chagum continued to fly, following the faintly glowing thread, but he was eventually engulfed by a bright light.

As if thrown out of the dream, Chagum jumped to his feet. In the bright light of pre-noon, Chagum gasped. The feeling of the silk nightwear on his skin told Chagum that he was awake. His heart was hammering painfully in his chest.

That was a rather strange dream.

Tanda's words were so true that it was amazing.

At the loud sound of a teacup breaking nearby, Chagum turned to look in the direction of the doorway. The young chamberlain that took care of him was standing there. “Is everything okay, Rasam?”

“Y...Your Highness...” Upon hearing Chagum's whisper, he turned on his heel and ran down the hallway shouting “His Highness has woken up!”.

Chagum only found out that he had been asleep for three days after the chamberlain had shortly returned with a physician in tow. As soon as he realised that, the memories of the still-asleep First Queen, his meeting with Shuga and his encounter with Tanda hit him with full force. “Oh no! Call Shuga immediately!”

After shouting so at his attendants, he noticed their surprise and panicked a little. He rephrased his earlier request. “Inform Star Reader Shuga that I have urgent business with him.”

For those interested:

1. Kokoru is written ココル in katakana.
2. Yamur is written ヤムル in katakana.
3. Rasam is written ラサム in katakana.