

Chapter 3 Part 3



A secret meeting.

Upon entering the Anything Shop from the back door at dawn and finding out from Toya that Torogai wasn't yet there, Shuga frowned in his usual manner. "Isn't this strange? Master Torogai said that she would wait here every morning, even if her trip would prove wasted."

"Yes. She said so to me as well, but... maybe something happened to her?"

"This is troubling indeed. Do you know where Master Torogai lives?"

"I know the rough area, but not the exact place. The people of the village near there will know for sure, but it might be about a *dan* or more away even if you're lucky. It's apparently out in the middle of the mountains. I can come with you and guide you, though. What do you want to do?"

Shuga remained silent with a stiff face. Sneaking out at dawn to meet with Torogai was already rather dangerous. In about a *dan* and a half, the Morning Meeting, in which the Star Readers gather to discuss the observations of the previous night, would begin. If it became clear that he wasn't in the Star Palace to participate in this, questions of where he had been instead and what he had been up to would undoubtedly arise.

Was it still worth the risk of being punished by excommunication to save the people trapped by the Flower, now that Crown Prince Chagum had woken up? Such thoughts were floating around in Shuga's head. Besides, the night when the Flower was forecast to scatter was still two days away, from what the Crown Prince had said. "It's too bad, but I'll have to try again tomorrow. For the time being..."

He was interrupted by the unusual sound of a horse's hooves vigorously approaching the shop from the direction of the back streets. Shuga and Toya looked at each other and, in a panic, Shuga disappeared into the shop's hidden room.

Shuga thought that it sounded like the horse had stopped right outside the Anything Shop's back entrance. When Shuga stopped breathing and strained his ears, he heard the knocking pattern that signified Torogai's arrival.

He also heard Toya's surprised voice. "Miss Balsa!"

"Sorry, Toya, but can you take care of the horse? Is the Star Reader called Shuga here?"

Shuga frowned slightly at this turn of events, but he soon opened the hidden room's trapdoor and lowered the ladder. "I'm here. Please come up."

A woman appeared at the bottom of the ladder. The sharpness of her gaze pierced him as if it were a drawn sword and he reflexively ducked back into the hidden room. The woman climbed up the ladder before Shuga could collect himself.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Balsa. Master Torogai couldn't make it, so I came in her place. Sorry, but I'm kind of in a hurry, so make this quick."

Balsa told him about Tanda being turned into the Flower's Guardian, about Yugno, and about the barrier that necessitated Torogai staying where she was. "I've heard that Chagum was also stuck in a dream. Has there been any progress?"

Shuga smiled at her brash way of asking. "Yes. That's why I wanted to meet with Master Torogai so urgently. You will be pleased to hear that the Crown Prince has woken up."

"He has? What a relief!"

"He woke up yesterday at noon, saying that he has very important information to pass on to Master Torogai. Apparently, the day after tomorrow, on the night of the half moon, that world and our world will become close and a connection will be established. The Wind will then blow in, scattering the petals of the Flower. If Master Torogai is to save the Dreams with her magic weaving, then that will be her last opportunity. He also said that the place where the Flower is actually blooming might be the lake close to the royal mountain villa."

Balsa's expression softened to a surprising degree. "That's great. As expected of Chagum. He's a strong child. I thought he would manage to return."

Shuga suddenly remembered the kind of expression Chagum often wore when he spoke of this bodyguard. "That's true. His Highness is indeed a person of great strength. Nevertheless, he did say that he would not have made it back if not for the help of the man who was turned into the Flower's Guardian, if that is the correct term. I believe you said his name was Tanda?"

Balsa's face turned utterly joyous at those words. "He was saved by Tanda? Then it's only his body that's been taken over! His soul is clearly still around, at least. Master Torogai said that his soul should have been taken over as well."

"No, it would certainly seem as though his soul is just as it was. The message about the last opportunity to save the Dreams was also from Mr Tanda to Master Torogai. But... he also conveyed that he has no way of coming back."

Shuga recollected Chagum's whole story to Balsa. When they reached the part pertaining to the role of the First Queen, Balsa opened her eyes wide. "So that's it..."

Shuga looked at Balsa with a puzzled expression.

"Well, you see, Master Torogai thought this was strange. Why did the 'Flower', or whatever, make Tanda into the Flower's Guardian and force him to chase after Yugno? She thought it was somehow out of character."

"I see. I was also very interested to hear Tanda's words about souls changing shape due to thoughts, and that shape being a manifestation of their true nature..."

Shuga spoke with a sparkle in his eyes, but Balsa only nodded along absentmindedly to this tangent in the conversation, which she had no real interest in, while thinking her own thoughts.

When Shuga stopped speaking, Balsa quickly changed the topic. "Mr Shuga, can you get ahold of one of the Hunters by the name of Jin?"

The Hunters were a secret group who dealt with assassinations and other dirty jobs for the Mikado. Usually, only eight of the palace guard are appointed as Hunters at any given time. Their existence was a closely guarded secret, but Balsa had previously risked her life fighting them in order to protect Chagum. Shuga, on the other hand, found out about their existence only upon becoming the right hand of the Master Star Reader.

Through a set of strange circumstances at that time, the Hunter Jin was once saved by Tanda, and he vowed to someday repay this debt. He was a man with a good head on his shoulders and the physical abilities to match.

"I think I will be able to contact him, but why?"

"As I said before, Tanda has become the Flower's Guardian. It's terrifying; he moves like a wolf and his strength is incredible. A normal warrior would be no match for him."

After seeing Shuga nod, Balsa continued.

"But, for Master Torogai to save the souls captured by the Flower, she needs to use the magic weaving technique Soul Call at the mountain villa, and I need to be there to protect her on the way. While it is really Yugno that the Flower's Guardian is after, I couldn't just take him and escape while leaving Master Torogai alone because there's no guarantee that she won't be attacked. It would be best if all three of us go to the lake, so I can protect them both. For this to work, though, I will need someone else to hold him off, even if just for a little while."

Balsa's brisk way of speaking reminded Shuga, once again, that the woman sitting in front of him was a formidable bodyguard.

"The real problem is trying to stop it in its tracks without killing Tanda. It can't be knocked unconscious, but I want to hurt Tanda as little as possible, especially now that I know his soul is still intact somewhere."

Balsa's expression was becoming increasingly dark. "Also, we don't know how long Master Torogai's barrier is going to last. That's why I rushed here on horseback. The owners of the stables had a rude awakening this morning as I banged on the door to rent one of their horses."

"And that's why you want Jin?"

"Yes. Jin feels indebted to Tanda, and he's pretty strong too. He would be able to hold Tanda off for a while in my place." She paused briefly. "So, I'm going to rent two horses now and get them to Yashiro Village. As soon as Jin joins us, I will guard Master Torogai and Yugno as they head to the mountain villa. When we get there, Master Torogai can set up another barrier."

Shuga listened to Balsa's plan with a stiff face, before eventually interrupting her. "Miss Balsa, there are a few problems with your plan." Balsa nodded, encouraging him to continue. "First of all Jin is, officially speaking at least, a member of the palace guard. He is thus not allowed to leave his post without the Mikado's permission. Furthermore, since we cannot be sure what will happen on that night, we should evacuate the mountain villa to be on the safe side. This would, of course, also require the Mikado's permission."

"I see..."

A small, wry smile graced Shuga's lips. "Oh, and there is one other matter I'd like to discuss. Please keep in mind that the connection between Master Torogai and myself is of the utmost secrecy. If this were to be made public, I would be excommunicated immediately. While the current Master Star Reader is an outstanding and open-minded man, I do not think even he would forgive me this indiscretion."

Balsa gave Shuga a piercing look. "You're saying that you can't afford the risk of someone wondering why you know about this plan."

Shuga withstood her gaze without flinching. "Yes. If Crown Prince Chagum were still asleep that would be one thing, and I would have risked expulsion for his sake. Now that he is fine, however, I will not."

Balsa realised that this pleasant-seeming man was in fact quite shrewd. "You're pretty direct, aren't you..." She suddenly smiled. "Unfortunately, this puts you at a disadvantage. You see, I could expose your connection to Master Torogai any time I want. Have no doubt that I would do anything, no matter how dirty, if it means I can get Tanda back to the way he was."

They stared at each other for a while, but it was Shuga who turned his gaze away first. "Yes, it would seem that I am indeed at a disadvantage here. Well then, I will simply have to think of a way of making your plan succeed without getting myself excommunicated."

Balsa stood up after nodding. "Thanks. I'll draw you a map to the house we're staying in."

Having said that, Balsa thought of something and looked at Shuga. Shuga opened his mouth at the same time and they spoke over each other.

"I could get His Highness to..."

After a pause, Balsa spoke again first. "How do you feel about having Chagum tell a lie for the sake of the plan?"

Shuga smiled. "Yes. I could get him to say something about receiving instructions in a dream, or something..."

"Yeah. That kid has guts, so he could definitely pull it off."

"In that case, I'd better come up with a convincing story on the way back to the palace. All being well, Jin should arrive at your place by tomorrow morning."

"Let's hope that it does go well, then. For *both* our sakes."

Balsa returned Shuga's wry smile.

It was not long after noon when Shuga interrupted Chagum's sky reading lessons under the pretence of urgent business. Once they were left alone in the room, in which he usually also tutored Chagum on the ways of Tendo, Shuga bent forward and whispered into Chagum's ear, telling him the plan that he and Balsa had come up with.

"Balsa! You met with Balsa?" Chagum's eyes shone.

"Yes. Just as in the stories Your Highness has told me, she is most certainly a rather fearsome individual of the female persuasion."

Chagum burst into laughter without thinking, but quickly panicked and shut his mouth. "So, Balsa wants me to put on a little act to convince Father."

Shuga nodded. "There are two main goals of this. Sending Jin to Balsa's aid, and the evacuation of the mountain villa. You need to make this happen without letting anyone know that these orders come from commoners like Torogai or even Balsa."

Excitement lit up Chagum's eyes further. "And that's why we're pretending that I learned of this in that dream? In that case, it would be best if I mentioned Emperor Yamur's Second Queen, and her dream of the mountain villa."

Surprise appeared on Shuga's face. "Your Highness, I also thought that such a tactic would be optimal." Saying that, Shuga lowered his voice further and shared the story he put together with Chagum.

Chagum listened to the whole story, nodding all the way, before finishing off with one big nod. "I understand. Leave it to me. Deceiving Father with this will be child's play."

Shuga's face clouded. "Your Highness, please do not underestimate the Mikado. He is fearsome, and very sharp-witted."

A darkness was reflected in Chagum's eyes. "Do you think I do not know that? Me, who was almost killed by him?"

"I'm only making sure. Additionally, the Mikado will no doubt ask for the Master Star Reader's counsel before passing down his judgement on the matter. To succeed, we must face and overcome the two most formidable people in this country: the Mikado, and the Master Star Reader. Please keep this in mind."

"I will. If I can't even do this much, then what was the point in me coming back here."

Chagum's face broke into a fearless smile.