

Chapter 3 Part 4



Chagum's scheme.

Yogo Palace was a trapezoidal structure sprawling from east to west, with its back facing north. At its center was the Mikado's Path; a realm off limits to all but those allowed by the Mikado himself...

At the southernmost point, the part closest to the city, of the Mikado's Path was a gigantic space reserved for audiences between nobles and the Mikado. To the north were the Mikado's private quarters, accessible only by those closest to the Mikado such as members of the royal family and the star readers.

At present, there were three people in the living room of the Mikado's private quarters. The polished, plain wooden floor was covered by a coarse and pure-white rug of the finest quality.

The Mikado's body was deeply embedded in his lacquered chair, inlaid with polished mother of pearl. Crown Prince Chagum faced him, kneeling formally in a low seat situated on the rug.

A star reader, who had been temporarily recalled from the mountain villa where he had been attending the First Queen, knelt behind and to the side of Chagum, directly upon the rug.

Chagum felt the star reader's gaze on his back more strongly even than the gaze of the Mikado who sat directly in his line of sight. Hibi Tonan had a body one would usually expect of a warrior, rather than a star reader. He was a big man with broad shoulders, his brows and facial hair bleached by the passage of time, but his eyes still shined with the kind of dignity particular to those who have been wielding considerable power for a considerable length of time.

Chagum was vaguely aware that, last year, this man was one of those involved with both the plan to kill him and the later efforts to save him.

The Mikado spoke. "Chagum, it concerned me to hear that you would also not wake up. I am glad it was not serious."

Chagum put both hands on his knees and bowed deeply before raising his face. "Father. I am most sorry to have worried you."

"Indeed." The Mikado paused for a second. "Did you not have something you wished to tell me?"

His Father's face was utterly expressionless, but Chagum nonetheless detected a sliver of caution deep in his eyes as he looked into them. "Yes, of course. Father. Professor. I thought that I should tell you the reason behind why I couldn't wake up, considering the possibility that this information may be of use in waking the First Queen from her sleep."

You must not declare that we can definitely save her. Chagum remembered Shuga saying. *Our position would then be compromised, if she chose to stay in the dream.*

“Aha. If so, then this would be a most important conversation. Very well. Speak.”

“Yes. Father, I had a very strange dream that night. It may just be because I was thinking about the mountain villa as I was falling asleep, but...” Chagum feigned uncertainty. “In the dream, there was a woman standing in the pale blue light, beckoning me forth. As I approached her, she said

‘We are Mikado Yamur’s Second Queen.’” The Mikado furrowed his eyebrows at this, but Chagum continued, paying this no heed. “I knew at the time that this was a dream, but it nevertheless left a profound impression on me.”

Chagum continued quickly so as to not give anyone a chance to interrupt him. “The person claiming to be Mikado Yamur’s Queen recounted to me a most strange tale, all the while warning me not to dismiss this as a mere dream. She also instructed me very clearly to convey her words to the Mikado. I will now proceed to convey them.”

Chagum took a deep breath and straightened his back before speaking again. “We dreamed of a beautiful shrine made of plain wood built by the bank of a blue lake. Unbeknownst to all, some nobles lived there. Their birthplace had prospered for more than a thousand years prior, but was now in its twilight and would soon perish. Nobles from across those thousand years sang for us about the vicissitudes of their lives, and their last dreams.”

“They said ‘We transform into the Flower and live our dreams, until a wind from your world blows and we scatter. Please, build a shrine on the bank of this lake and let our dreams bloom. Should you do so, we will welcome the soul of your son into our ranks.’ ”

“It is after hearing this song, this wish, that We had the mountain villa constructed. And after death, Our soul, along with those nobles, became the Flower and dreamed.”

“However, listen well my Grandson, this Flower’s nature is to entice. It shows sweet and beautiful dreams like no other to lonely souls. Even now, the Queen who has lost her son is trapped in such a dream.”

“Listen well, Grandson. The time for this Flower’s petals to scatter has finally come. The coming night of the half moon will be the night of ruin.”

“When a path opens between this world and yours, those residing within the villa risk being pulled into dreams of despair.”

“Grandson, take care that none but the slumbering Queen remain within the mountain villa on that night. Furthermore, as the one who dreamed of those who became the Flower, those who will soon perish, please bid us our final farewell. Guide those sad souls who remain trapped in a dream so that they may be able to return.”

Chagum took a break, having recounted the whole story at once. The Mikado had been looking at Chagum the entire time. “I see. Certainly, a very strange dream. Whatsmore, you remembered it in its entirety? Can one truly recall a dream with such clarity?”

Chagum hesitated for a second. “That very detail is precisely the reason thought this to be more than a mere dream. It still echoes within me vividly, like a song that continues to play in one’s head.”

The Mikado stilled completely, thrown off his line of thought. “Hmm. Regardless, you wish to tell me that you believe this dream and wish to empty the mountain villa on the night of the next half moon.”

Chagum averted his eyes. "That is so. I am aware that I may be ridiculed for believing a dream and acting on it. However, as this concerns the First Queen I thought that, with the consent of yourself and the Professor, it could be done."

Silence took over the room. The Mikado discreetly turned his gaze to the star reader behind Chagum.

"Should we proceed, there would be no need to tell those involved the whole truth." Chagum stiffened upon hearing the star reader's deep voice from behind. "If the Mikado orders it so, we could declare that perhaps that the mountain villa needs to be purified. Then, an evacuation would certainly be possible. I could take responsibility for the protection of the First Queen."

The Mikado stood up. "You give the impression that you believe Chagum's dream."

"A dream is always just a dream. Nevertheless, given the fact that the First Queen is still asleep, and that the Crown Prince himself was in a similar state until yesterday, it is not unthinkable that the strange dream he had as he slept would have some kind of meaning."

Chagum masked his intense relief. The star reader continued speaking with a voice that suggested a slight smile. "What does appear to be a problem, however, is the suggestion that His Highness the Crown Prince spends that night on the bank of the lake."

The Mikado nodded fervently. "Precisely. I will not let the Crown Prince take such a risk. Who knows what might happen there?"

Chagum started speaking, all the while internally chanting 'don't panic', over and over again. "But, Father, that dream... the sadness of those nobles... only I, having had that dream, can truly understand. Since I've been able to escape from the confines of that dream once already, surely I would be able to act as a guide. Please, please allow me this single whim, just this once."

The Mikado's eyes sharpened. "Had you any self awareness of your position as the Crown Prince, you would not ask such things."

Chagum's pulse heightened enough to make his chest hurt. He was desperate, now. He turned his face away and spoke again. "I only became the Crown Prince because of my brother's untimely passing; because the First Queen lost her son. I have not grown used to it yet."

"Father, it was me and only me who had this dream. I am sure that there must be some reason for this. Won't you let me do this, so that I can both apologise to and thank the First Queen from the bottom of my heart? I think only then will I be able to come to terms with the fact that I am now the Crown Prince."

"Since the Hunters are under your command, you could order Jin and the others to guard me. Then, there should be no chance of me coming to harm. I ask again, please, grant me this wish."

The Mikado frowned in the direction of the star reader. The star reader's face, as usual, appeared vaguely amused. "It would seem that His Highness the Crown Prince has changed somewhat, as a result of this dream." He continued in a serene voice. "Mikado, what are your thoughts on this? I, for one, think that this is a change in the right direction."

"Is that so?" The way the Mikado was looking at Chagum was not the way a Father might look at his son. Chagum had hated his father's gaze since so very long ago, to the point where it usually made him feel sick. This time, though, he didn't feel such nausea. Such was the extent of the distance he had drifted from his Father.

A thought crossed Chagum's mind - in the future when he became the Mikado, in what way would he look at his own son.

"Very well, then. It is not as if I don't understand your desire for some closure regarding your brother's death. It is also true that you have escaped that dream once already. I will give you the Hunters. Take this opportunity to try your hand at leading some men."

Chagum put both his hands atop his knees and bowed deeply.

Upon hearing of these proceedings, later on that day in the study room, Shuga stared at Chagum. "Your Highness! What did you... why did you add all of these details?"

Chagum smiled slightly. "Since it got us more than we wanted, it's fine isn't it? I wanted to meet everyone again, no matter what. That, and I want to see how this plays out with my own eyes."

Shuga cursed himself. He should have predicted that Chagum would be able to scheme at least to this extent. His ability to do so was clear to anyone who knew his personality and was aware of the strength he possessed.

His irritation would not diminish. "Your Highness! No one knows what will happen at the mountain villa on that night. Balsa's group, and even the Hunters, will be there of course, but what if even they cannot protect you?"

Chagum shrugged his shoulders. "If that happens..." He swallowed the remainder of the sentence when someone knocked at the door.

"What is it?" Both Chagum and Shuga froze upon hearing the voice that responded. "It is Hibi Tonan. Please excuse this sudden visit, but there is a matter I wanted to discuss with the Crown Prince."

Chagum answered, after remembering how to breathe. "You may enter."

The star reader came alone, without even an attendant. He opened the door himself and entered the room. He bowed slightly and sat down in the chair indicated by the Crown Prince. He did not seem surprised that Shuga was already in the room.

He faced Chagum and started without preamble. "Well then, Your Highness. I have come to inquire as to how much of the story you just told was true, and how much was made up."

Chagum's face stiffened, but he quickly regained himself and glared at the star reader. "What are you talking about? I said nothing but the truth."

"Is that so? Unfortunately, that is not what it sounded like to me. In particular, regarding the order for Your Highness to act as a guide for the souls trapped in the dream."

The star reader smiled. "It sounded rather like a detail added solely for Your Highness's benefit."

Chagum's heart was about to explode with how fast it was beating. The star reader, expressionless, nodded. "You probably know this already, but I can't help hating the fact that I have to live as the Crown Prince now. If I had any say in the matter, I would have chosen to live my life as just Chagum. A commoner."

"The part about the Flower trapping people in a dream is true; it captures people who want to escape from their current lives, like me. It gives you dreams of things you want from the bottom of your heart. It's also true that the First Queen was captured by the Flower, but I have seen firsthand that she is but one of many."

Chagum glared with eyes that screamed defiance at the star reader, who continued sitting there with a blank face. "That the Flower will scatter on the night of the half moon is also true. When it does, something strange will surely happen at the mountain villa, hence why I want to evacuate it."

"However, I made up Mikado Yamur's Queen. The one who truly saved me from the dream and told me what was going on was Tanda."

The star reader's expression changed for the first time. "Tanda?"

"Yes. The pupil of the magic weaver Torogai. The one who helped save me a year ago."

So that Shuga's secret would not be revealed, Chagum told the star reader that he found out about everything from Tanda. With a wry smile he continued.

"You understand the reasons why I couldn't tell Father that."

The star reader straightened. "I see. What about you personally going to the lake that night, Your Highness?"

"That's a lie too. Tanda said that Master Torogai would be able to save the trapped souls with a technique called the Soul Call, if not for the fact that a spirit called the Guardian of the Flower won't let her; it will attack her on sight. That's why I wanted the Hunters - to protect Master Torogai. I made up the part about me needing to be a guide to that end."

Chagum discreetly peered at Shuga before facing the star reader.

"I want to get over my feelings and settle this matter. I want to see with my own eyes what happens on that night. I want to know whether the souls trapped in their pleasant dreams will return or not, and whether they will have a chance to make their lives better."

The star reader didn't say anything for a while and just looked at Chagum. Eventually he spoke with a voice as cold as the steel of a sword. "There is not just one path open to you, Your Highness. You are aware of this, are you not?"

"The Mikado is still young. It is possible that he will have another son with a Queen in the future. Even if another son was not born, one of the princesses from Sannomiya would suffice. In either case, the continuation of the bloodline would not be dependent on Your Highness."

"However, for someone who has fully accepted the role of Crown Prince, there would then be only one path remaining. The Crown Prince is he who *will* become the Mikado. Nothing short of death by illness or accident could come to prevent this. After all, it is common sense that a Crown Prince who simply does not want to become the Mikado could not possibly exist."

Shocked into silence by the star reader's words, Chagum and Shuga could only look at him. "Even so, do you still wish to go to the lake that night?"

Chagum responded quietly. "Yes. Because only such a death by illness or accident would await me otherwise."

The star reader smiled. "I understand. Then we will leave the Mikado with the story he has already heard. Preparations to deploy the Hunters for Your Highness should begin shortly."

Once the star reader stood up, Shuga got his attention. "Could I also be permitted to accompany His Highness tomorrow night?"

The star reader looked down at Shuga. "That will be fine. Protect him well."

Once the star reader had left and the sound of his footsteps died out into silence, Shuga whispered. "I thank you from the bottom of my heart, Your Highness. I will never forget how you protected me."

"With this I can send Jin over to Balsa, but..."

Chagum smiled wryly despite his pallid face. "But now, if I try to run away with Balsa, the Hunters' blades will surely turn against me..."

For those interested:

1. Hibi Tonan is written ヒビ・トナン. Easy romanisation this time.