

Chapter 4 Part 2



The lake in the mountains.

When the afternoon sun started to lower, Balsa and the others stopped their horses. Balsa dismounted first and lifted Torogai, who had been sitting in front of her, down from the horse.

“That was awful, just awful.” Torogai stretched her aching back, muttering all the while.

Yugno smoothly slipped off his horse and crumpled onto the ground. He had ridden on horseback only twice or thrice before as a reward for singing for rich people, but such experiences could not have prepared him for riding alone at the speed necessary to keep up with Balsa’s horse in front. The skin on the backs of his knees had peeled away, and his thighs would not stop trembling. He would not be able to stand for a while.

“You okay over there?” Balsa leaned over to peer at Yugno’s pale face. Yugno moaned as he rubbed his cramping legs. She placed a hand on Yugno’s shoulder. “Let’s rest for a bit. We had the horses go pretty fast. Human legs couldn’t possibly keep up.”

They had travelled for almost five *dan* (A *dan* is a unit of time roughly equal to one hour) since leaving Tanda’s house and getting horses from the nearby village of Yashiro. Once mounted, they left the village and crossed the shallows of the Aoyumi River. From here, there were paths leading up into the mountains that had been made by the transportation of felled lumber down to the river. Balsa and the others continued their journey by following one such path in the direction of the mountain villa.

The place Balsa had now stopped them was a watering hole for pack horses; a place the lumberjacks made to let their horses rest. Beyond this, though, the logging road veered off to the North and wouldn’t lead them any closer to the mountain villa. To continue, they instead would be entering the realm of the royal family, where activities such as cutting trees and hunting were not permitted.

Balsa left Yugno and Torogai to rest, and untacked the horses. The watering hole consisted of a bamboo pipe which transported water from the lake to a box in a hole dug out at ground level. She collected the cold water dripping from the pipe and brought some to the resting pair. Then, she pulled the horses along and let them drink their fill. When she placed the feed bags around their necks, they happily and noisily started to devour the contents.

Watching them made Balsa suddenly feel rather hungry. So far they had been riding with such urgency that she didn’t even begin to feel like eating in the few breaks they had.

Not much of a bodyguard, am I? Balsa thought as she took out a parcel wrapped in bamboo peel, opened it and started eating *shuruji*, which are made of finely-diced dried meat, first stewed in salt and sugar, then mixed with freshly cooked rice and formed into shapes easy to hold and eat while on journeys.

Seeing Balsa stuff her cheeks with *shuruji*, Torogai extended her hand in the universal gesture of 'give me some too'.

"You guys are amazing." Yugno murmured, his breath feeble and intermittent. "I couldn't possibly eat anything."

Balsa sat down next to Yugno, took out a small wooden container from her bag, opened its lid, and took out a fragrant, red *maika* fruit stewed in honey. "Get this in your mouth. Bite it slowly then swallow, bit by bit."

Yugno scrunched his face in distaste, but still put the honeyed fruit in his mouth. Soon after, his eyes flew open in surprise. A surprisingly refreshing sweetness accompanied by a pleasant aroma spread through him. His mumbling of "I didn't think *maika* were this good..." made Balsa smile.

"I brought a bit of Tanda's prized honeyed *maika* along. I think he slowly boils it in honey with a herb called *roga*."

"Interesting. My head feels so much better. I feel like all that tiredness was just taken away."

"I know right? It's the best medicine for tiredness." Suddenly a memory flashed before Balsa's eyes, surprising in its clarity. It was from when she was about eighteen. She was returning home just as the bone-deep tiredness from Jiguro pushing her to her limits was starting to set in. Tanda brought her some *maika* on a plate. She wouldn't ever forget that taste. She felt like the pain in her flushed body just disappeared...

Torogai reached out and took a *maika* for herself. "They say that healing is a woman's job, but that's a load of crap. Tanda is a born healer. Making this kind of stuff is what he's best at."

Yugno glanced at Balsa. She was looking at the fruit in her hand with a severe expression.

When everyone finished their honeyed *maika*, Balsa wiped her hands on some grass and stood up. "Let's get going. We have to get to the lake before the moon rises."

Balsa tied the horses to a tree next to the watering hole and hefted the now-slightly-lighter luggage over her shoulder on the end of her spear. They would have to traverse the pathless slope on foot from here on.

Balsa took the front and made a path, sometimes cutting through bushes with her hatchet. Yugno followed behind her with Torogai bringing up the rear. Balsa steadily made progress, but both Yugno and Torogai could only follow at a much slower pace, after having tired themselves out with the unfamiliar strain of horse riding. Nevertheless, they simply continued to push on, no matter how many breaks were necessary.

As the sun continued its descent, less and less light could reach them through the foliage. The three walked in silence, between trees that were now only bathed in twilight on their north sides.

Eventually, the sun set and Balsa stopped for a while to use some flint and tinder and skillfully lit a torch which consisted of a candle in a basket woven with thin bamboo, held away from oneself by its short handle.

"Can you hold this?" Balsa passed the torch to Yugno then went back to cutting a path through the undergrowth. The light hardly reached Balsa's feet, but her gait never wavered. Other than the cries of birds startled by the noise and flying out of the trees, Balsa's hatchet-cutting, and 3 pairs of footsteps, the forest was silent.

As Torogai walked, she began to feel like she was in a dream. Like when she was young and she was called by the mountains, and she just kept walking until she reached the lake. She was in a dream back then after all...

In the middle of pitch black mountains. Walking and walking and walking...

Eventually, just like last time, it suddenly stretched out before them. Surrounded by tall mountains, the black, enormous lake spread out from mountain to mountain.

Torogai felt a numbing shock go through her head and she was frozen in place. "It's this lake..."

Balsa and Yugno turned around upon hearing how hoarse Torogai's voice was. She stood, dazedly looking at the lake, then pointed at the northern mountains. "That other time, I crossed the mountains from that side. My birth village lies beyond those mountains. The graves of my children..."

Torogai felt as if her face was stroked by a pair of cold hands. Memories of her husband and the deaths of her children flowed before her eyes like some unstoppable current. She bitterly thought that for all this time she had managed to subconsciously look away from her past, keeping a lid on these memories. The past she had so long ago thrown away, turned her back on, walked away from, and endeavoured to forget, was now reaching out to her with those cold hands.

In addition to that, there was the effect of seeing the imposing mountain villa, towering over the lake's banks. Torogai shivered as a chill ran down her spine. That huge gate and the complicated roof made of white wood; it was without a doubt the palace from that dream.

Was the upside-down palace floating in the lake that I dreamt of fifty-two years ago a reflection of this palace through time?

Torogai took in a deep breath and scolded herself.

Impossible. The mountain villa, is simply an imitation of that dream. Built by one who had the same dream as me. I heard that it was exactly the same in Chagum's message, didn't I?

Torogai knew exactly why she was this shaken. She closed her eyes and told herself.

I'm not the miserable, weak little Tomca from fifty-two years ago anymore. I am the magic weaver, Torogai. One who walks upon this earth.

Torogai spoke to Balsa and Yugno with strength in her voice. "Anyway, let's put up a barrier. Make the preparations as I showed you."

The three of them walked past the clumps of reeds that grew on the banks of the lake, and came out onto the edge of the lapping water.

Torogai stabbed 4 thick and long reeds, which she had pulled out from the reed bed, into the bank. She connected the reeds with a rope woven from thin grass. Meanwhile, Balsa and Yugno took the four unglazed fire grates that they had brought with them, placed some charcoal on each, then lit them using the torch. To get them properly burning, they put some peculiar-smelling dry grass on top.

The white smoke that emanated from the dry grass, rose into the air like a smoke signal and slowly drifted towards the lake.

For those interested:

1. Shuruji is written シュルジ in katakana.

2. Maika is written マイカ in katakana. This was a weird fruit name to me, because that's how you katakana the English word mica, which is a silicate mineral. You wouldn't wanna eat that. Interestingly, it's also a type of squid... What are you doing Nahoko?
3. Roga is written ロガ in katakana.