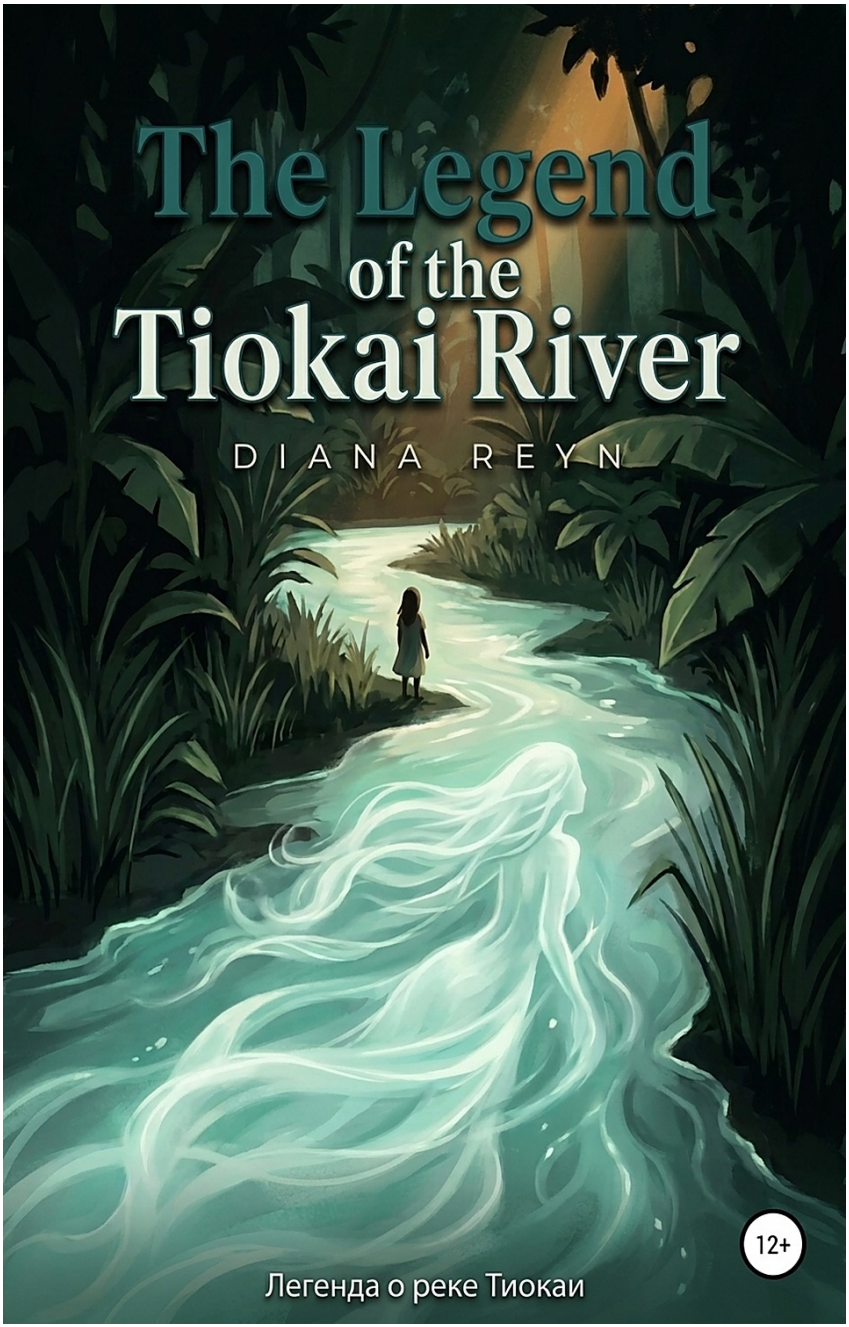

The Legend
of the
Tiokai River
DIANA REYN
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Легенда о реке Тиокаи

The Legend of the Tiokai River

Companions and Spirits

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Легенда о реке Тиокаи

An English translation of a Russian-language original.

The Legend of the Tiokai River

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Only by surrendering everything can one truly find. Misfortune has befallen the tribe once more. To save her kin, the youngest princess must now repeat her mother's heroic deed.

Where the north wind meets the sea

There flows a river full of memory

Fifteen years ago, that same terrible sickness swept through the jungle. The livestock and birds did not die, but they took ill all the same, and those who ate their meat suffered for weeks afterward. Even the fruit turned poisonous, and the corn never sprouted at all. In those days, the people were certain it was the work of the Dark Juju, who had, for no reason anyone could name, turned against their tribe—launching raids and casting curses, bent on wiping every last one of the Pupupunu from the earth.

The chief remembered that time well, for amid all this horror his second daughter was about to be born.

He remembered it just as clearly for another reason: the price of lifting the curse had been terribly high.

The chief recalls it every time he gazes upon the Tiokai river—a long, mighty river that, they say, runs all the way to the world of Juju. Within its waters lies the one who ended her tribe's suffering.

The chief does not wish to imagine whom the river will claim this time.

Sleep, my darling, safe and sound

For in this river all is found

Dzhera never knew the sound of her mother's lullabies. Instead, for many, many nights on end, she listened to the one bedtime song her father had to give—a song of the Tiokai river, of a brave woman, and, of course, of the spirits of Juju. That brave woman did not fear the

cruel beings from the magical world; nor did she fear to stand against them, if only it might bring peace and well-being to her people.

Since childhood, Dzhera had dreamed of being like that woman in the song. Perhaps one day she, too, would have the chance to stand against the Juju spirits, though these days they no longer raged and stormed as they once had.

Her father had forgotten to tell her that this brave woman never wished to be a hero. She wanted only one thing — that her newborn daughter might sleep in peace.

In her waters, deep and blue

Lay the answers and a path for you

Dzhera stood on the shore of the Tiokai, unable to tell whether she ought to weep or smile. The beautiful, cruel river had taken her mother. Her mother had walked into it of her own will. The old shaman had said that until the last grains of her bones were washed from the riverbed, the tribe would face neither famine, nor plague, nor curses.

Dzhera could not believe that not a single grain of her mother remained on the bottom.

It was harder still to believe that from now on the river would accept only those who shared her mother’s blood. The river had taken such a liking to her.

Dive down deep into her sound

But not too far or you’ll be drowned

The water proved colder, darker, and swifter than Dzhera had expected. It knocked her off her feet, dragged her toward the bottom, and blinded her within the very first minute after she stepped off the bank. Her body was meant to be swept over the waterfall. And how could that help the tribe, if not a single grain of you would remain even for a day?

“Have you completely lost your mind?!” Tak cried out at her.

Dzhera clenched the wet sand she had managed to scoop up in her fist. Not a crumb, nothing of her mother remained there anymore. That was why her tribe was dying.

“And what if I hadn’t been nearby?” the young shaman kept shouting.

Dzhera unclenches her fist, and a sodden clump plops onto the ground at her feet. Tiokai had not liked her, had not wanted to take her in. Or perhaps it was Tak she had not liked.

“How did Father let Mama go into the water?” she asks herself, oblivious to the angry shouts.

Yes, she will sing to those who’ll hear

And in her song, all magic flows

Her mother sings to her at night, and the echo of that voice goes on haunting Dzhera even in her waking hours. Hunger and pestilence must be to blame — she is not the only one here beset by visions of every kind. People go mad, mutter to themselves, see things that are not there — and then they die.

Yet Dzhera senses her mother’s song has nothing to do with that. Nor is it why the pink fireflies appear to her along the path — yorbls she should not be seeing. The tiny lights sway above the ground, luring her on through the whole of the jungle.

Straight to the Tiokai River.

But can you brave what you most fear?

Can you face what the river knows?

“How did Tiokai accept Mama?”

Dzhera isn’t asking — she is all but shouting the question into the old shaman’s face. Yet he pretends all the same not to have heard her, and sets about mixing his dried herbs.

“The current is so fierce. Why wasn’t she washed up at the waterfall?”

The old shaman grinds berries between stones, never lifting his head to her.

“You were there, you’re the one who prepared her. Dzhibolba, you have to tell me, or else… or else…”

At last the old shaman slowly lifts his face to her.

“Do you understand that Tiokai cannot be mastered without magic? Then you can be the one to speak with whoever consents to grant you that magic.”

Dzhera turns pale.

That is far more terrifying than wading into Tiokai’s raging waters.

Where the north wind meets the sea

The river unrolls before her, calm and smooth as a sheet of dark glass. The water is black—not even starlight shows upon it.

Only the glow of torches along the shore.

The gathered crowd is small, but if she does not enter the water, it will grow smaller still, and Pupununu will vanish. She is no chieftain, and never will be now, yet she can still save her people. They will endure, all will be well, and mothers will sing songs of the brave girl and the river Tiokai.

Her sister embraces her tightly, arrays her in all her ornaments, and in exchange takes the light hibiscus flower from her hair.

Her father stands behind everyone. He dares not come near her, for if he did, he would never let her go.

Kiko drums out a monotonous rhythm, and in the torchlight Dzhera sees how his eyes glisten with moisture. He is gravely ill, yet he could not fail to come and see her off. After all this, he simply must recover.

And at last there is Tak, standing knee-deep in the water, the crystal of the magic staff dipped beneath its surface. It was he who tamed the river. Tiokai has fallen asleep so that the princess may come near her.

“You have completely lost your mind,” he whispers, hardly above a breath.

The water is cold, so cold—colder than the stones deep within the caves. Cramps seize her legs, and Dzhera batters her toes and soles bloody against the rocks, but the herbs the old shaman gave her dull the pain. Her hair hangs loose; she wears a wreath of lit candles and lily blossoms, holding her head level so the candles will not topple. Walking is hard—she is laden with adornments, and stone tiki heads are bound to her feet to guard her from evil spirits.

Is it her imagination, or does the water itself shimmer faintly with a pink glow?..

There is a mother full of memory

Hunger, pestilence, the fumes of intoxicating dried herbs — whatever the cause, Dzhera sees a familiar female figure before her. She looks remarkably like her sister. Her image hovers barely discernible above the water, yet Dzhera cannot tear her eyes from it, and it seems to grow brighter.

Someone takes her by the hand, and she flinches. She is already waist-deep, wading slowly forward, having forbidden herself so much as a backward glance at her tribe.

Tak slips his bracelet onto her wrist and looks her straight in the eye.

“Nod, and I’ll pull you out of here,” he whispers, his lips hardly parting. “Please.”

In answer, she offers him a flower from her wreath. It weighs nothing.

Tak cannot understand that she is doing this because she loves her tribe. And him. Very much.

Come, my darling, come home

The cold has receded; only the water remains — calm and still, sleeping, and hungry. Dzhera lifts her head higher so her chin will not touch it. Not now. She wants a better look at the silhouette of the woman before her. How beautiful she is. The woman spins, reaching out her ghostly arms, spreading them wide as if for an embrace. Her voice scarcely reaches the ear. She seems to be singing…

Another step, and the frigid water touches her lips — Dzhera starts. Her heart is already pounding, hidden beneath the river, and fear — icy, devouring fear — races across her skin like goosebumps. She stops.

It is not too late to turn back!

Under the water, Dzhera's hand finds Tak's bracelet on her arm; her fingers drift to her sister's necklace. She cannot let them down. She cannot doom her tribe to death merely because she suddenly grew afraid.

If only she could look back at them, one last time.

Behind her, she can see nothing but a line of torch flames. And near the shore, a pink crystal shimmers faintly beneath the water. The people are impossible to make out, yet every one of them is still there, still drumming, still watching the burning candles upon her head.

Drawing a deep breath, the princess turns away from them and raises her eyes to the spirit before her. Finally, they have met.

She takes a step, and water rushes up into her nose.

The woman rises out of the river, reaching out to her, and sings.

At last, they will be together.

Where all is lost, then all is found

When the last candle — the tallest of them all — goes out in the middle of the river, the drums fall silent. A heavy hush swallows everything. No splash of water, no sigh, nothing. It is time. But Tak

lingers, unable to tear his gaze from Tiokai. What if she could still come back? What if she changed her mind? What if…

“It is time.”

The Chief’s quiet voice reaches him from the water’s edge. If his own father has decided…

Slowly, slowly, Tak lifts the staff, and the crystal’s glow dies. The next instant, the river comes alive.

The shaman sways with the current but does not come ashore. He keeps staring straight ahead. There are no candles now, no flowers — nothing at all. The younger princess has vanished without a trace.

It cannot end like this. How could he simply lose her — just let her go? His hand tightens, of its own accord, around the fragrant blossom. Surely this cannot be all that remains of her in this world.

“Tak?”

He swallows, blinks — and tears come streaming down his cheeks. Wiping his face with the back of his hand, he turns around. Kiko stands on the shore, pale as a ghost.

“It was her own choice. She saved us—and she found her mother.”

Yes, but the whole tribe lost her all the same.