



# Awakening.

When something cold touched his face, Tanda woke up. He tried to open his eyes but his eyelids felt heavy and he couldn't.

"His left ankle is cleanly broken."

"That must be Jin's doing. The shoulder joint I dislocated is now back in place but the area around it is swollen badly. Oh yeah, I'm also pretty sure his left eardrum is ruptured."

Tanda recognised Balsa's voice. It echoed strangely and he couldn't quite make out the words. He didn't recognise the other voice at all.

"The biggest problem is exhaustion though, isn't it?"

"Yes. He probably hasn't eaten anything for a while either. I still can't wrap my head around how he could have possibly reached here in such a short time with his ankle broken."

He heard the sound of someone clearing their throat beside his ear and recognised it. "Yeah. It's because he can't feel tiredness or pain. We went on horseback, so we had to choose the longer, but horse-friendly, route. We did rest a few times too."

As soon as he realised this was his Master's voice, sensation returned to his entire body. He groaned. He felt the heaviness far more than the pain, as if lead had been poured into him.

A dry hand touched his cheek. "Tanda! Are you awake? Tanda, can you hear me?"

He heard Balsa's voice, but he wasn't yet at a stage where he could answer. "He's groaning."

"As he should be. It must be tough... Balsa, this isn't like you. Stop panicking." Tanda heard Torogai speak tiredly.

"He's fine. Well, not really fine, but he won't die at least. Do you not trust my diagnosis?"

"I do. But, don't you have something for the pain? The medicine you gave me earlier worked really well. Can't we give him some of that?"

He heard a rustling noise. It sounded like some oil paper was being unwrapped. "Yeah, since it seems he's conscious, let's give him some medicine. Raise his head, please."

He felt not just Balsa's but also someone else's hands support his body. He was raised very carefully, but still he felt a terrible dizziness.

The cold cloth that had been placed on his forehead fell to his knees, and he could finally see. His surroundings were spinning, but as the dizziness faded he could begin to vaguely make out an image of many worried faces looking at him.

It was still in the middle of the night. The bonfire burned enthusiastically. He felt cool water enter his mouth.

“Tanda. Have some water. Do you understand me? Swallow the medicine. Make sure you don’t choke.”

The bitter taste of the medicine spread throughout his mouth.

Tanda managed to recognise the medicine as *raigol* root and briefly worried about its soporific properties before once again falling into a deep sleep.

The next time he woke up, white light was dancing on his eyelids. His whole face felt pleasantly warmed by the soft rays of the morning sun.

He listened to the bustle of his surroundings with his eyes still closed. The pleasant smell of oil-baked fish cooking in the ashes of a fire wafted over.

“Is your shoulder ok?” He heard Chagum’s voice.

“Well, the bandage that Mr Shuga so kindly wrapped it in is a bit tight, so it hurts and is hard to move.” When Balsa answered, a man whose voice Tanda had heard last night, but didn’t know, continued the conversation.

“I’m sorry, but the blood loss was quite severe. The wound is quite deep.”

Balsa laughed lowly. “Oh, I’m not complaining. I’m grateful that you patched me up.”

“Indeed, especially as the guy who would usually do it is laid out over there.” Tanda heard Torogai’s mirth.

Tanda felt someone approach and cast a shadow on him. He felt a dry and warm hand on his forehead. He thought it was Balsa’s.

This time when he opened his eyes he saw Balsa’s face clearly. Her face, utterly unchanged despite half a year passing since he saw it last, wore an easy smile.

“Hi.” Her low, pleasant voice sounded in his ear. Tanda also smiled faintly.

“I see you are back, then?” His voice came out frustratingly weak.

“Yeah. A lot happened these past six months. A lot of... so many mysterious things happened while I was on the move, and I found myself thinking ‘if only you were with me’ countless times.”

A hard finger, calloused from years of spear usage, moved the hair stuck to Tanda’s forehead ever so gently. “When you’re a bit better, I’ll tell you all about it. And about everything that happened while your soul was over there...”

Tanda nodded and closed his eyes. He was sucked into a deep sleep once more.

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After watching Tanda drift off, Balsa stood up and returned to sit by the fire. Yugno was pulling out some *raada* from amidst the ashes and shaking them off with a practiced hand.

“They’re done. Let’s eat.”

Torogai held out her hand first. *Raada*, made from rice flour kneaded with water and salt then stretched out and grilled, was especially good when wrapped around grilled fish or dried meat.

Everyone started to wrap some grilled fish, or dried meat that they had brought with them, as they liked. Chagum noticed the Hunters only eating dried meat and called out to them.

“Zen, Yun, eat some fish too. I said it was fine to fish here, so there’s nothing to worry about. The servants of the mountain villa eat the lake’s fish you know?”

After hearing that, the two looked at each other and grabbed some fish.

“That was a rather mysterious night wasn’t it?” Shuga muttered, before turning to look at Yugno, who was stuffing his cheeks with *raada*.

Zen, the usually quiet Hunter, broke his silence to the surprise of all. “I was obviously surprised by the Flower and the palace and all of that, but the biggest surprise by far was your singing. You must be Li Tou Ruen, the one loved by the echoes, right?”

Even Yun turned to face his comrade in his surprise. “What’s this Li thing?”

Zen wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “When I was still a kid, I used to travel with my aunt. She hired a Yakoo guide to lead us through a mountain pass. My aunt liked songs and sung all the time. When we got to a lake in the mountains, though, the guide asked her to stop.”

“He said that the Li or echoes live on the shores of mountain lakes and if a good singer sings nearby the Li will put them under a spell.”

“That Yakoo man was a great storyteller. Apparently, when a good singer sings by a lake, they Li fall in love with them and cast a spell which makes their singing so amazing that they can move people’s hearts and bodies. I thought it was an interesting story but didn’t take it seriously.”

Zen looked at Yugno. “When I heard you sing, it was like being struck by lightning. ‘Ah, this is it’, I thought. This could only be the song of Li Tou Ruen, the one loved by the echoes, exactly like in that old man’s stories.”

Yugno shrugged his shoulders and smiled, but he did not answer Zen either way.

Once they finished eating and packing up, Chagum spoke to Zen. “Zen, could you carry Tanda back to his house? Balsa’s shoulder is hurt and I don’t think Yugno could carry Tanda all the way back. I’m also worried about Jin.”

“Yes.”

Chagum bitterly smiled when he noticed the surreptitious look that Zen had given Yun before answering. “Don’t worry; I will return straight to the capital with Shuga.”

He then turned to Balsa. "I didn't expect to meet you here again but I'm glad I did."

Balsa smiled and softly put a hand on Chagum's shoulder. "Yeah. I've got a feeling that there might be more of these unexpected meetings in the future. Our fates seem to be strongly connected, after all."

Chagum inhaled sharply, pressed his lips together tightly and turned his face away.

They stayed in silence for just a moment, before Chagum looked at Shuga. "Shuga..."

Chagum started whispering with his face still turned away from Balsa. "Shuga told me something interesting, while we were on our way here, about how worlds come together and then move apart like sea currents. I wonder if the fates shared between two people might be like that too."

The palace, wrapped in silence and surrounded by the sprouting greenness of the early summer mountain, was reflected in the lake. As white mist crossed over the lake, the upside-down reflection of the palace disappeared as if hidden by clouds. An utterly ordinary sight under the morning sun. The ordinariness was reassuring.

Chagum looked back at Balsa and spoke to her with his voice back under control. "When Tanda wakes up, thank him for me."

Balsa nodded.

The wind disturbed the reed bed as it blew through it. A single bird flapped its wings and used the wind to climb, then glided over the lake and disappeared.

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For those interested:

1. Raigol is written ライゴル in katakana.
2. Raada is written ラーダ in katakana.

Feel free to suggest different romanisations.