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KHEMIRA THE SERIES



Khemjira



Published: 2024

Prologue

Warning

This novel falls into the horror, occult, and superstition genres.

All the chants in the story are real, with descriptions of ghosts and spirits.

Contains scenes of danger, blood, haunting, and cruelty.

Readers under the age of 18, please use your discretion when reading.

One late night in a small house located in an overcrowded community, the slender figure of Khem, an eighteen-year-old high school senior, was staring intently at the screen of an old computer. He was downloading university entrance exam results with an expression of tense anticipation.

To his left was a desk clock showing exactly midnight, and to his right, a small cake with candles providing the only light in the dark room.

The sound of 'tick, tick, tick' from the clock's hands moving forward played in his head, adding more stress and pressure on Khem until he clenched his jaw tightly.

Finally, the results were out, indicating he had been accepted into the university and faculty of his choice.

"Yesssss!" Khem exclaimed with joy, clasping his hands in prayer for a smooth university life, then leaned down to blow out the candle.

Yes, today was Khem's nineteenth birthday.

In the dimly lit room with only the computer screen for light, the young man ate his cake while simultaneously exploring pictures of different areas of the university he had just been accepted into. Eating, looking, and smiling with happiness, until he glanced at the clock and jumped in surprise.

"Two in the morning already?"

Tomorrow, Khem needs to hurry to the temple to inform the abbot about this good news. With that thought, he quickly finished his meal, shut down his computer, washed the dishes, brushed his teeth, and went to bed.

In his deep sleep, Khem dreamed of something he had never seen before.

In the dream, it seemed like an old film being projected, depicting an old Thai house from the era when slavery still existed.

Khem saw a little girl playing in the house, with several servants chasing after her, but they could never catch her. The girl laughed joyfully, looking mischievous and having fun.

Then, the scene shifted to an eggshell-colored wooden house from the time when cars were common in Thailand, the atmosphere reminiscent of the 1980s.

Khem was standing in front of this wooden house, looking inside through the window in a rather impolite manner.

He saw a couple, a man and a woman, dining together at the table, smiling at each other with happiness. Khem furrowed his brows at the sight, feeling his heart squeeze gently, prompting him to clutch his shirt over his chest.

"What are you looking at?" a cold, stern voice came from behind him.

Khem's heart pounded heavily with shock, his body stiffened as he felt the breath of someone who had appeared right behind him.

Khem tried to turn around to look, but his body wouldn't move. The warm atmosphere around him gradually grew cold, making his hair stand on end. The eggshell-colored house before him transformed into an abandoned, desolate-looking dwelling.

Khem gritted his teeth, trying to wake himself up.

This is crazy, wake up Khem, wake up!

"Do you want to stay here with me?"

Khem jolted when he felt a gentle breath move closer, fear overwhelming him to the point his body began to tremble.

"Stay together, just the two of us."

"..."

"Do you want it?" For a split second, Khem considered agreeing just to escape this discomfort, but then he heard someone's voice in his ear.

"Khem, it's time to wake up, son."

Gasp!

Khem jolted up into a sitting position on his bed, looking around his bedroom with alarm, checking if anyone else was there. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something had fallen nearby.

A tiger skin amulet necklace, which Khem had worn since he could remember.

When did it come off...

This amulet necklace was a sacred item, blessed by a monk long ago with powers to protect from unseen dangers. Khem's mother had insisted he wear it at all times.

Even on the last day of her life, his mother had emphasized that he must never take it off.

The thing is, Khem was born into **a cursed family**, specifically related to giving birth to children.

If the child was a daughter, she would be safe.

But if it was a son, he would die before turning twenty.

So, his mother named him "**Khemjira**," a name typically for a girl to ward off the curse, meaning "safe forever."

Although Khem wasn't particularly fond of the necklace's design, he never disobeyed his mother. Whatever she said, Khem followed. After she passed away from illness seven years ago, he continued to wear it, seeing it as a keepsake from her.

Over the past eighteen years, Khem had gone through life relatively unharmed, with only minor accidents typical for someone a bit clumsy, but nothing serious. Everything had been going normally until last night.

Since his birth, this was the first time Khem had dreamed, and it was a strange, frightening dream he couldn't quite describe.

Khem tried to calm himself down. Although still unnerved by the vivid feeling from before, once he regained his composure, he picked up the amulet and put it back around his neck. Then he got up to shower and get dressed to visit the temple and see the abbot.

Khem took a bus taxi to the temple in the district where Abbot Pinto, his real father, was a monk. After his mother's death about three years prior, his father decided to ordain for life. At that time, Khem was exactly fifteen years old.

Everything had been set even before Khem understood much about life; the master who had blessed him with sacred items instructed that his father should find an auspicious time to ordain for life to transfer merit to the family's karmic debt, hoping it would extend Khem's life. This was the reason his father gave him, and Khem remembered crying in refusal back then.

Khem only thought that losing one parent was enough. He didn't want to lose his father too, whether by separation or death.

But ultimately, he couldn't defy his father's and relatives' intentions. He stood there crying, watching his father shave his head and don the saffron robes, reluctantly walking into the temple's ordination hall.

After that day, Khem went to live with his paternal relatives, as his mother's side of the family refused to take him in, fearing he might carry the family curse.

Outsiders might think it was superstition, but everyone in the family and the village firmly believed because no male from his mother's lineage had ever lived past twenty.

The relatives who volunteered to look after Khem were his uncle and aunt. They took the money provided by Khem's father for his upbringing and his mother's health insurance, using it to live comfortably abroad from the very first day they took him in, leaving him with just a few thousand baht in cash and an old house.

Khem didn't want to worry his father just days after his ordination, so he kept quiet. Even though his father found out later, there was nothing to be done.

He lived alone in that house. Fortunately, the neighbors were kind, regularly bringing him food, and whenever he visited the abbot at the temple, he'd return with plenty to eat.

Moreover, Khem's academic performance was quite good, so he received scholarships from the fourth year of secondary school through to the sixth year. Thus, life during his high school years wasn't particularly hard.

Oh, and for university, Khem also got in by competing for a scholarship.

"Paying respects, father abbot." Khem said after entering the abbot's quarters. He bowed three times to the ground before looking up with a faint smile, which the abbot returned with a gentle gaze.

"Hmm, the exam results are out, aren't they?" Khem scratched his cheek awkwardly with one hand, while the other remained in a praying position.

"How did you know, father abbot? I was planning to surprise you." Khem said. The abbot gave a small, fond smile.

"Yesterday, two novice monks left for their studies. They told me that the university term has begun."

"Ahaha, well, I got into the Faculty of Fine Arts at a university in Bangkok..." Khem's voice trailed off to barely a whisper, his hands still clasped in prayer, eyes sneaking a peek at the abbot.

"You have to go all the way to Bangkok, do you?" The abbot asked, his demeanor composed but his eyes showing concern.

Khem shrank a little, knowing how worried the abbot was about his safety, not just because of the lingering curse, but also because he would be alone without adult supervision.

But Khem dreamed of becoming an artist. He had been earning extra money by drawing all this time and had saved enough to afford his school supplies and rent a modest dorm room.

Khem wanted to excel in this profession; if he were to die tomorrow, he wanted to have lived his life as he desired at least once.

"The program I want to study isn't offered here." Khem stated truthfully, also wanting to affirm his stance.

Seeing his son's determination, Phra Pinto, who had been a monk for many years, understood the truth about life, aging, sickness, and death - these were all natural to humans. He had done everything a father could do; the rest was up to fate.

"Hmm. Well then, study hard. Whatever you do, do it with mindfulness and caution, don't be careless." Khem's smile grew when his father gave his blessing, and he quickly nodded in response.

"Yes, father abbot."

They spoke a little more, then Khem paid his respects and left to finish some pending work.

At that moment, Phra Phinto sat in meditation, watching his son's receding back, along with the fading shadows of more than one mysterious spirit...

Chapter 1

As the new semester approached, Khem moved his belongings into an apartment that was incredibly affordable, though it was quite a distance from the university. But that wasn't an issue for Khem, who preferred walking over driving or taking public transport, unless the distance was too far to walk. For classes, he just needed to wake up early to allow for the walk.

You might wonder if he came to study in Bangkok alone, without any friends joining him.

The answer is that Khem never had any friends because of the family curse known to everyone in his rural village. No one dared to get close to him for fear of bad luck.

Khem understood this well. Everyone loves their own life, and if it were him, he'd probably do the same.

But there wasn't any bullying or boycotting. They talked normally; just not close enough to call each other friends.

One of the reasons Khem wanted to study in Bangkok was to make friends and have a new social circle.

After settling in, he went downstairs to find something to eat. This apartment not only had good rent but was also near a market. No worries about going hungry here. Ah, this Pad Thai stand smells good.

Khem stopped abruptly when the aroma of Pad Thai hit him, changing his mind from passing by to ordering instantly.

"One order of Pad Thai, please, Auntie."

"Just one wrap?"

"Yes."

"Doesn't the other person want one?" Khem paused, slowly looked around before asking,

"Who do you mean?"

Thud!

The Pad Thai vendor accidentally dropped her spatula, her face paled before she gave a strained smile.

"Oh, sorry, my eyes are bad, dear. Here, forty baht." Khem took it, paid, still somewhat confused.

While crossing the road, Khem accidentally stepped on his own shoelace, tripping and nearly falling onto the street before quickly retreating back. He intended to bend down and tie his shoelace.

Screech

Bam!!

Before he could even crouch down, Khem heard a loud noise nearby, causing him to hastily look up. His light brown eyes widened when he saw a speeding big bike just under a bus that was stopping to pick up passengers...

...right in front of him.

Everything happened in a split second. If he hadn't stepped back to tie his shoelace...

Khem thought about the family curse, then shook his head, trying to think positively to comfort himself.

It was just a coincidence, after all, nothing unusual had happened before.

Not knowing when he had instinctively grabbed the amulet around his neck, Khem backed away from the chaos and ran straight back to his room.

The next day, the incident from the previous evening had made it to the news. As Khem was about to pass through the lobby to head back to his room, he stopped in his tracks, looking up at the TV in the common area broadcasting the scene of the accident.

"Last night, a tragic incident occurred. The driver of the big bike with license plate number ๑๒ XXX, crashed into the rear of a bus that was stationary and picking up passengers, resulting in immediate death."

At the scene...preliminary reports indicate the deceased was a final-year university student...who had just returned from a celebration with friends.

Khem's heart sank upon hearing that the other person had died on the spot. His arms hugged the water bottle he had just fetched tightly, as if it were a source of emotional support. He couldn't help but think that if his shoelace hadn't come undone at that moment, this incident might have resulted in more than one casualty...

There was just over a week left before classes started. After that day, Khem tried to live his life normally. Although the memory of that life-or-

death moment haunted him, he knew that if he kept worrying, he wouldn't be able to do anything.

Khem only thought that from now on, he would need to be more mindful and cautious than ever before.

"Done." Khem said to himself. After buying second-hand items to decorate his new room to make it look more organized and inviting, most of which were unwanted by others.

He wiped his sweat once, the wall clock showing almost 10 PM, "Time to study." Khem thought to himself before quickly sweeping up the trash into a black bag to take downstairs.

The trash bin was located in a quiet alley next to his apartment, with only the flickering light from a street lamp in the middle of the alley providing any illumination...

Like a scene from a ghost movie.

This somewhat eerie atmosphere made Khem look left and right cautiously before he hurriedly threw the bag of trash into the bin. But as he was about to turn and leave, something caught his eye, making him stop dead in his tracks, his brain trying hard to process what it was.

Curiosity got the better of him, and Khem glanced back to see what appeared to be a child, unidentifiable as either male or female, wearing a dirty white shirt, squatting and looking at the ground beside the large trash bin...

Khem was certain it wasn't a living person because when he first approached, there was no one there.

The hairs on his body stood up.

What kind of person would sit by a trash bin in such a dark, secluded alley at this late hour!

"Gulp." The young man swallowed hard before tearing his gaze away, his legs moving forward in hurried steps, almost running.

Was that a ghost? In his nineteen years, Khem had just seen his first ghost.

As Khem half-walked, half-ran away, the child's ghost slowly raised its head.

Its lips slowly curled into a smile before its skinny figure stood up and began to stagger after the young man.

Since that day, Khem started encountering more strange things.

First, he had three accidents within a week, which had never happened before, like tripping over nothing while walking, and nearly falling down twenty steps of stairs. Luckily, he managed to grab the railing that day. Otherwise, it would have been disastrous.

Second, Khem began to see spirits more frequently...

Like now...

Khem took a deep breath, pretending not to see the faint ghost of a woman in an office outfit standing with her head bowed in front of the door next to his room.

She had been standing there for three days now.

The room next to Khem's was occupied by a working man and his young son, just the two of them.

When he first saw her, Khem almost called out to ask if she needed help, wondering why she wouldn't go inside, but then he noticed she had no feet...So, he quickly opened his own door and went inside.

Khem thought she might be the wife of the room's occupant, probably still worried about something and not ready to move on...

"Don't...my...son..."

The voice, though faint and faltering, was chillingly cold, making Khem's heart sink. His hands shook as he tried to unlock his door, and by the time he got inside, he was almost relieved.

The young man's legs gave out, and he sat down on the floor, his eyes burning.

Did she just say, "Don't hurt my son"?

Or had something happened to her son?

That night, Khem could hardly sleep, thinking about what the female spirit had said. Part of him didn't want to get involved because he had his own issues to deal with, but another part was concerned, fearing something bad might happen to the child.

The next morning, around eight, after the man next door had left for work, Khem stood in front of their door. After much hesitation, he decided to knock.

The ghost of the office woman was still there, standing so close that their shoulders almost touched.

The door slowly opened, revealing a little boy, about six or seven years old, but because of a chain lock, it only opened slightly, just enough to see the boy's face.

"Hello." Khem smiled and crouched down to be at eye level with the child. "My name is Khem, I just moved in next door."

The little boy didn't reply but nodded in acknowledgment.

Khem peered through the gap unceremoniously, seeing several beer bottles lined up, and the place was cluttered and disorganized.

What's going on here?

"Have you eaten yet?" This time, the boy shook his head, causing Khem's eyelids to twitch in surprise.

The father went out to work without even feeding his child...

At the same time, Khem felt a chill run down his spine, a sense of pressure enveloping him.

"Would you like to have dinner with me? I'll treat you, and I'll bring you back after."

The boy shook his head more vigorously.

It was then that Khem noticed a small chain tightly wrapped around the boy's ankle, leaving a terrifying bruise on his pale skin.

Khem slowly smiled and said to the boy,

"Then wait here for me for a moment."

Khem went downstairs, bought some congee, water, and snacks for the boy to eat.

The boy hesitated but seemed unable to resist his hunger and finally extended his hand to accept.

"Don't tell my dad that I ate your food, please." The boy pleaded with a hopeful look, making Khem feel both heartbroken and angry, but he nodded in agreement.

"Okay, I won't tell."

That evening, after Khem reported to the landlord, the police raided the room next door, arresting the man who was drunk and beating his son right there.

Upon interrogation, it was revealed that the boy was the child of his deceased girlfriend who had died in an accident last month. Currently, the man was deeply in debt; with his girlfriend gone, there was no one to help pay it off, leaving him with the burden, which led to his stress and subsequent violence towards the boy.

Khem didn't know what punishment the man received, only that the boy was now under the care of his maternal relatives.

Hopefully, he'll have a happier life from now on.

Just as Khem was about to drift off to sleep, he heard a whisper by his ear, but being too sleepy, he didn't open his eyes.

"Thank you."

"..."

"Be careful."

Chapter 2

Finally, the university term started.

Khem looked at himself in the freshman uniform with a proud expression in front of the mirror, then slung his cloth bag over his shoulder and stepped out of his room.

It took Khem exactly one hour to walk from his apartment to the university. Tired from the walk, he stopped to buy some water from a stall near the lecture building, still having plenty of time before his class.

"I don't need a straw, please." Khem told the vendor who was offering him a plastic straw. If it wasn't a biodegradable straw, Khem would rarely use one, showing he was quite environmentally conscious.

As he moved to stand by the stall, in the moment he was about to drink, his eyes caught sight of a flower pot that was about to fall.

'Oh no!'

"Watch out!"

Khem heard someone shout a warning, but even though he wanted to dodge, his body wouldn't move, as if it was pinned in place. Just as the pot was about to smash into his head, someone rushed in, colliding with him, and they both tumbled to the ground.

Crash!

"Scream!!"

The sound of the flower pot shattering was followed by screams of shock.

"Are you okay!?" The man who rushed in to help Khem exclaimed, his face full of concern. The man had honey-colored skin, bleached blond hair, and wore a small black headband.

Khem turned his pale face towards the flowerpot that had almost hit him.

"Uh, thanks for helping." He managed to say once his shock subsided, then let out a small yelp as he was pulled along.

"Hey, where are you taking me?" Khem asked in surprise. The other turned back with a serious expression, and intimidated, Khem followed

without protest until they stopped under a frangipani tree behind the academic building where it was relatively deserted.

The man looked around before turning back to Khem and said,

"Dude, you're being followed by a ghost."

"..."

"If you don't do anything about it, you're going to die."

Khem stood there, mouth agape, shocked by a stranger's sudden proclamation. With a furrowed brow, he asked,

"How do you know?"

"Just now, when the flowerpot fell, I saw it on the third floor. That was the ghost doing it." Khem was still reluctant to believe, though part of him already accepted it.

Look at all the strange things he'd encountered since he got here.

"It's okay if you don't believe me. I just wanted to warn you to be careful."

Khem hesitated for a moment before letting out a sigh.

"No, it's not that I don't believe you. I just don't want to accept it." The last sentence seemed more like Khem was talking to himself, "But thanks anyway. If you hadn't come to help, I would've definitely gotten hurt."

The other shrugged.

"No worries. I'm Jett, that's my real name. And you?"

"My name is Khem...Khemjira." Khem introduced himself. When Jett heard his name, he blinked, then looked him over more closely...

Khem gave a strained smile.

"My mom named me like a girl's name to ward off bad luck." Jett looked surprised and then scratched his head awkwardly.

"Sorry, I thought you were a girl because of your delicate features."

"It's okay, when I was younger, I looked more like one."

Jett nodded as if to say, "I thought so." Then asked, "So, which faculty are you in?"

"Fine Arts." Khem replied.

"Whoa, same here, first year, right?"

Khem's eyes widened, and he quickly nodded.

"Yeah, that's right." Jett laughed at their coincidence.

"Cool, let's be friends. First, can I have your LINE?" Khem was excited and happy, quickly pulling out his phone to add each other as friends.

"Let's go to class first, we can talk about your stuff later." Khem bit his lip and then nodded slightly.

They had classes until three in the afternoon. After class, Jett led Khem to sit at a marble table behind the building, the same spot where they had talked that morning.

"Okay, so, do you realize you're being followed by a whole bunch of spirits like this?" Jett said bluntly without giving Khem time to brace himself. Earlier, Jett had talked to him using the formal Thai pronouns instead, but now was using casual pronouns because it felt more natural, and casual pronouns seemed more intimate to say. For friends, people prefer *mung* and *Ku* rather than *naai* and *chan*, which Khem agreed with, preferring using 'rao' for himself due to habit.

Khem hesitated before answering.

"Not really...But there have been many times I felt like I wasn't alone."

"..."

"Plus, lately when I go places, I often see strange things."

"Ghosts?" Khem was taken aback by Jett's directness, then nodded in acknowledgment, causing Jett to raise an eyebrow.

"So, you see ghosts elsewhere, but you don't see the ones close to you?"

Khem's eyes widened in surprise.

"You can see them, Jett?"

"I see them, but not clearly. Sometimes it's like grey smoke, other times black shadows."

"..."

"Like when I first saw you, there was both smoke and dark shadows, swarming all over your back."

"I'm seriously asking, what did you do to deserve this?" Khem swallowed hard. If he said he hadn't done anything, it wouldn't be entirely truthful, so he decided to tell Jett about the family curse. Upon hearing it, Jett fell silent, which made Khem feel down.

"Sorry for not telling you from the start."

"..."

"If you want to stop being friends because of this, that's okay, ouch!" Khem clutched his head after getting a light tap, looking bewildered.

"That's ridiculous. Who would stop being friends for such a silly reason?" Jett said with a furrowed brow. Khem thought about his high school friends who had distanced themselves from him, but he kept quiet.

Khem smiled.

"Thanks, Jett."

"If I didn't want to be your friend, I'd have no friends at all."

"Psh, Jett, you almost made me tear up."

"Haha, your face is hilarious." Khem's expression turned sour.

"Can we continue?"

"You're the one who led us off-topic. Anyway, there are many ghosts following you."

Khem felt a chill again.

"Right now too?"

Jett scanned the area.

"Yeah, but they're keeping their distance." Khem bit his lip, feeling more anxious.

"It seems like you've got something powerful with you, or something's protecting you. That's why they can't do much." Khem undid a button and loosened his tie slightly, pulling out a sacred thread to show.

"I have this, I've worn it since I was a kid." Jett leaned in to look closer, showing great interest but not reaching out to touch.

"Nice item, but its power has faded."

"What?" Khem was stunned. "How do you know?"

"I just know. I've dealt with stuff like this a lot." Hearing Jett's words made Khem even more stressed because if the sacred thread's power had diminished, it might explain why he was encountering more strange things lately.

"So, what should I do?"

"Take it easy, don't stress. Just give me your real name, surname, date of birth, and something you use regularly."

"Anything, right?"

"Except your underwear." Khem blushed, but seeing Jett's serious face, he realized he wasn't joking.

Khem took out a notebook and pen to write down what Jett asked for, along with a white handkerchief embroidered with his name, which his mother had made for him before she passed away.

"Okay, oh, and in the future, don't give something like this to anyone easily." Jett said seriously, causing Khem to furrow his brows.

"Didn't you ask for it?"

"How can you be sure I won't use it for something bad?"

"Oh."

"I'm just playing a scenario. You can trust me, but you can't trust others, I just want to warn you so you don't get hexed." Khem turned pale and quickly nodded in acknowledgment.

"Good, I'm heading back to my hometown this weekend. I'll consult with a monk about your situation to see if he can help."

"Thanks, Jett."

"Yeah. If you die, I won't have a friend to hang out with." Khem wanted to throw something at him.

"You're so annoying, Jett, you've been at it for a while now."

"Haha, damn, you're even swearing at me now!" Jett grimaced.

"You're such a pain, especially when someone's stressed."

"Alright, alright, come on, I'll treat you to some cold bread, I heard the shop in front of the uni is good."

Khem reluctantly agreed, following Jett like a chick following its mother, still a bit sulky but slightly confused about whether they were becoming friends too quickly.

Even though they had only known each other for less than a day, it felt like they had been friends for a long time.

Khem now fully believed that he was being followed by spirits.

Because Jett had told him that when he was around, the ghosts wouldn't approach Khem, thanks to Jett's protective amulets. Since then, Khem stuck close to Jett, going everywhere together except when they had to return to their respective dorms, and nothing major seemed to happen during those times.

There were still some minor disturbances though, like catching glimpses of things moving in his peripheral vision, hearing odd knocking sounds or objects falling, but nothing too severe.

Khem tried to keep himself busy, watching movies or reading books.

Today, after finishing his reading around 11 PM, he moved his chair to face an easel with a sketching board. The next class would assess their skills, judged by a sketch on any topic they were good at, whether it be landscapes, people, animals, or objects.

Khem was skilled at drawing people, and he planned to sketch his mother, thinking it was what he was best at.

His slender hand gripped a 2B pencil, aligning it perpendicular to the paper, squinting to gauge the distance before starting to sketch the initial

outlines of a face.

Khem had practiced drawing his mother's face frequently. The memories they shared were etched in his heart, always bringing warmth whenever he thought of her. This enabled him to draw her face from memory without needing a reference.

"Miss you so much." Khem smiled and muttered softly at the image of his mother's smiling face as he worked on the details, but suddenly he felt overwhelmingly sleepy, yawning despite himself.

Ugh, not now, just a little more and it would be done.

Khem told himself, trying to keep his eyes open, but the sleepiness was overpowering his mind until his hand began to droop, and he eventually gave in.

Khem fell asleep right there.

He woke up with a start, glancing at the wall clock to find it was past 2 AM. Shaking his head at himself, he decided to put away the easel.

"Damn!" Khem jumped up from his chair and backed away so fast that his hips hit the table behind.

The sketch of his mother, which was smiling, had transformed into a woman with only black, soulless eyes, and her smile had stretched grotesquely wide to her ears.

Chapter 3

Khem's legs were shaking so much he collapsed onto the floor. Just then, his phone vibrated, so he pulled it out of his trouser pocket and answered without waiting for the other person to finish speaking.

[Khem, you...]

"Jett! Jett, help me!"

[What's wrong? What happened?]

"Please, come over, Jett, hic, sob."

At that moment, Jett, who was drying his hair, widened his eyes in shock, threw aside the towel, grabbed his motorcycle key, and rushed out of the room.

"I'm on my way. Stay calm and don't hang up!"

Jett arrived at Khem's apartment in less than ten minutes on his motorcycle. After parking, he ran up to Khem's room and started knocking. However, after a long time of knocking, nobody opened the door.

"Khem, it's me, Jett. Can you hear me?" The knocking turned into pounding, and he tried twisting the doorknob frantically.

Click

Suddenly, the door, which was locked from the inside, opened. Jett didn't hesitate and immediately pushed it open.

"Damn it, Khem!" Jett found his friend passed out on the floor, with an easel set up in front of him.

"Shit..." The terrifying face of a woman in the painting gave Jett goosebumps, prompting him to quickly walk over, tear it off the easel, and crumple it up.

Jett tried to wake Khem a few times, but he wouldn't stir, so he had no choice but to carry him out of the room, intending to take him back to his own place for the night.

Jett lived in a condominium that his mother had bought as a gift for him. His family was quite wealthy; both his parents held high-ranking government positions.

That night, Khem ended up with such a high fever that he couldn't go to class, so Jett had to attend alone to take notes for him. At noon, he came back to check on Khem, ensuring he ate and took his medicine before heading back for the afternoon session.

"Khem, I'm going home tonight. You stay here for now." Jett told Khem, who was lying on the bed with a cooling gel pack. In truth, he wanted to take him along, but he was afraid Khem might collapse on the way.

"When will you be back?" Khem asked with a hoarse voice.

"I'll be back on Sunday." Jett answered.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of him." Said Jane, or "Sis." Jett's older sister, with a sweet smile as she leaned against the door frame watching them.

Jane was an office lady, five years older than Jett, and she occasionally stayed over here. This time, Jett called her to look after Khem over the weekend while he was away visiting his family in another province. Of course, nothing in life comes for free; Jett had to pay for her new lipstick, which cost several thousand baht, as her fee.

"Thanks, sis." Jane, whose salary was still intact, replied with a sweet smile.

"Sure thing."

Jett took a flight back to Ubon Ratchathani, spending over two hours traveling in the morning of the next day. He went to see "Pharan." The shaman he respected as his master. The master lived in a large traditional Thai house at the end of the village, quite a distance from the other villagers, almost into the forest.

It was well known in the village that Pharan was skilled in exorcism and treating various ailments. He had many disciples and now mostly waited for people to come to him. Most of his clients had bad luck, were cursed, or were being harassed by spirits to the point of despair. In his spare time, he made and sold amulets to make a living.

There were two things Pharan would not do: cast spells to harm others or interfere with karmic debts.

A man in his early thirties walked out from a corner inside the house and sat down at his usual spot covered with a dark carpet. Behind him was an altar with a Buddha statue, surrounded by traditional offerings like silver and gold umbrellas, similar to other spirit mediums' settings, but since Pharan practiced white magic, there were only Buddhist images on his altar, no spirits.

Jett gave a flattering smile and quickly raised his hands in a respectful wai, but before he could speak, Pharan interjected in a stern voice,

"Jett, what have you brought into my house this time?" Jett, who was clasping his hands in prayer, felt a chill run through him before forcing a nervous smile.

"Haha, just as expected from the monk I respect." Jett quickly took out Khem's handkerchief from his pocket and placed it on the golden tray beside him, along with a piece of paper containing Khem's real name, surname, and date of birth, then set it in front of the monk.

"Master, could you please see if there's anything you can do to help?" After that, Jett recounted Khem's situation to the monk.

Pharan felt like kicking the troublemaker out of the room, but the faint pleasant scent from the handkerchief drew his attention, making him bend down to examine it closely.

The scent was nice, but sometimes it was mixed with the stench of spirits, more than one, and one of them was quite powerful...

Pharan placed it back and pulled out the paper with someone's name and birthdate written on it to read.

'Khemjira, Jantrapisut' The young man furrowed his brow.

Khemjira?

Strange. He felt oddly familiar with that name, though he couldn't recall where he had heard it, so he stopped trying to remember, read the birthdate, then took out his own notebook and pen, writing down the numbers and calculating.

Several minutes passed before he finished, the result being quite alarming.

"Who is this?" Pharan asked while still reviewing the numbers in his notebook.

"He's my friend, Monk. How is it looking?"

"Tell your friend to do whatever he wants to do quickly. He's definitely going to die within this year."

Jett turned pale, spoke urgently,

"Ca-can't you help, Monk?"

"I've told you, I don't interfere with karmic debts." Jett clenched his jaw, looking at the monk with reluctance because if the monk said this, it meant he could help but chose not to...

"Oh, please, even just a little would help, Master, have some sympathy. Khem is a good person, he wouldn't even dare swat a fly or step on an ant, right?" He hadn't even finished speaking when the monk raised a finger to shush him, causing Jett to pull back his neck in embarrassment.

"Jett, other people's karmic debts are not something you should meddle with. Just because someone is good in this life doesn't mean they were good in past lives. You yourself should be careful, don't think just because you've got strong luck nothing will happen to you."

Jett's face fell immediately, knowing that the master was firm and spoke decisively, never changing his mind easily, but he couldn't help but argue.

"Khem is so pitiful, Master. His mother died, his father became a monk for life when he was young, his maternal relatives wouldn't take him in, and his paternal relatives abandoned him, taking his money with them. During high school, no one would befriend him because they feared the curse. It's only me who dared to be his friend..."

While he was looking down, still grumbling, Jett didn't notice that Pharan was writing a protective talisman on a piece of cloth, which he then tossed in front of him.

"Take this, that's all I can do."

Normally, one of Pharan's ghost-repelling talismans would cost five to six thousand baht and was very effective, as confirmed by actual users like Jett. No spirit could enter Jett's room.

Jett didn't know if it was given out of annoyance or pity for Khem, but he was so happy he almost jumped to hug the master, though he only thought about it because if he actually did it, the spirits in the house might break his neck.

"Thank you so much, Master!"

Jett flew back from Ubon Ratchathani early on Sunday morning, and upon arriving in Bangkok, he quickly took a taxi back to the condo, finding Khem had recovered from his illness.

"I'm leaving now." Jane said, shouldering her bag before leaving, not forgetting to add a last remark,

"Jett, be careful, his ghost is strong. Last night they were all over the balcony." She said with a somewhat fearful expression before rushing out of the room.

Soon after, Khem came out of the bathroom.

"Oh, has Sis Jane left already?" Khem blinked and asked.

"Yeah, her boyfriend was waiting for her downstairs so she left in a hurry." Khem looked disappointed upon hearing this.

"I haven't even properly thanked her." Over the past two nights, Jae Jane had stayed awake to watch over him. Khem didn't quite understand why she was so dedicated, but she had told him one thing, "I'm too scared to sleep, Khem." At that time, Khem had a terrible headache, so he didn't press her to sleep.

Jett ruffled Khem's hair affectionately, deciding not to tell him what Jae had said, thinking it would only make him worry needlessly.

"Yeah, sis will come over again next time, we can thank her then." Seeing Khem nod, Jett pulled him over to sit on the sofa and handed him back his handkerchief, which now had white inscriptions on it.

"Thanks, oh, there's a talisman too." Jett nodded.

"..."

"Yeah, keep it with you. The monk's talisman can ward off spirits, but it might only work for a certain distance." Khem quickly tucked it into his shirt pocket, feeling strangely comforted.

"And what did your monk say about my situation?" He looked up, eager to know.

Over the past two days, if it hadn't been for Jane's companionship, Khem would have probably been driven to madness or shock from his recent experiences. He was dying to know if Jett's monk would agree to help, but the area had poor phone reception, so they hadn't been able to communicate.

Khem didn't want to go through something like that again.

"Sorry, I tried. But the monk doesn't really want to get involved with karmic debts."

Karmic debts, huh...That's worse than your average ghost story, right?

Khem bit his lip, his spirits sinking.

"Hmm. It's okay. I understand." Jett, seeing his friend's dejected look, felt a surge of determination.

"You don't have to worry. I won't let you die easily. I'll find another way myself." Hearing this, Khem's hope was reignited.

"Is there another way?" Jett shrugged.

"Nah. Same old way, but this time I'm taking you with me."

"Huh?"

"Even I soften up when I see your face. Let's see if the monk can stay hard-hearted then."

Khem stood there with his mouth open, the logic baffling him.

Chapter 4

In the silence of the night, inside the monk's quarters of Phra Pinto, in his dream, there appeared the figure of a young woman wearing a white blouse and a traditional Thai skirt, sitting with her hands clasped in prayer at the foot of the stairs to his hut. Phra Pinto stood at the top, looking down at her.

"It's been a long time since we last met, Mae Khae." Phra Pinto spoke, and the woman bowed three times before looking up with a faint smile, her once beautiful eyes now showing signs of fatigue and sorrow.

"Paying respects, reverend brother." Said "Khae." or "Khaekhai." Phra Pinto's deceased wife who had passed away over seven years ago. Yet she still lingered by their child out of concern, occasionally entering dreams to convey messages.

"What brings you here this time?"

"Reverend brother, please prevent Khem from returning here."

"Why?" asked Phra Pinto, and Khae Khai proceeded to explain what had happened to Khem.

"The protective powers in the amulet blessed by the master have faded. Khem's luck has started to wane, and he's been having accidents frequently. But after meeting a friend, he has found something to protect him, keeping spirits at bay...including myself." She added in a quiet voice at the end. She, too, was considered a spirit.

"..."

"The boy's name is Jett, he's a disciple of a master, with a much stronger spirit than Khem's, and he's been helping him all along."

"..."

"If Khem is away from Jett during this break, I fear that this time, they might really take our son away." Khae Khai said with tears before bowing again to the ground.

"..."

"Please help our child once more." After that, everything in the dream slowly faded, and Phra Pinto woke up.

After Khem had the handkerchief with the talisman from Pharan, Jett's master, things returned to normal for him. Accidents, whether small or large, ceased to occur frequently. And the recurring dreams of the old Thai house from two different eras no longer came.

As for seeing spirits, Khem still had the ability, but because they weren't aggressive towards him, and with the monk's talisman on him, he wasn't as scared anymore.

However, since that day, Khem hadn't dared to draw his mother's portrait again.

Now, nearly six months have passed.

The old portrait, which Jett had crumpled and discarded, was taken by Khem to be burned at the temple, where he then offered merit to appease the spirits as suggested by Monk Pharan.

This period was the time for final exams, and soon Khem's university would be closing for the term.

While Khem was hanging out laundry on the balcony, his phone rang. Without needing to look at the screen, he knew who it was.

"What's up, Jett?"

[Khem, got any plans for the term break?]

"Well, my abbot is unwell. I was planning to go visit him. Why?"

[I wanted to invite you to join our volunteer camp. At first, the seniors planned to go to Ubon Ratchathani, which is my hometown. I suggested we go to the village where my monk lives, there's a lot of development needed there. Plus, you'll get activity credits, and I figured it's a chance to take you to see the monk.]

The club Khem and Jett were part of was a volunteer club. Usually, every year they held camps in nearby provinces, but this year the university had provided a larger budget, allowing them to go as far as Ubon Ratchathani.

For Jett, he had initially planned to bring Khem to see the monk during the term break. But since the club was organizing a volunteer camp in his hometown area, it was a perfect opportunity to do some good deeds together. He proposed they go to Monk Pharan's rather remote village, which would allow him to bring Khem directly to the monk.

At first, there were objections because people were worried it would be too tough, but Jett convinced his father to sponsor the event, and the seniors agreed to it.

[So, what do you say? Want to join? I really want you to come.] Jett asked, and Khem hesitated for a moment before responding.

"Let me call and ask the abbot first."

[Okay, let me know.]

"Alright." After Jett hung up, it wasn't long before the abbot, Khem's father, called. Khem hadn't even had the chance to call him yet.

"Paying respects, father abbot. How are you feeling?" Khem asked first, then furrowed his brow slightly when the abbot replied:

[I am well. No need for concern. During the break, you don't need to come back to visit.]

"Oh, is that so?"

[Yes, if there's somewhere else for you to go, go there. It might be for the better.] Khem's heart skipped a beat.

"father abbot, do you know where I plan to go?"

[I'm just saying, follow your heart. Take care of yourself while you're away.] Khem bit his lip gently before nodding and responding, agreeing to whatever the abbot suggested.

"Alright, father abbot. Please take care of your health too."

That night, Khem called Jett back to confirm and asked him to sign up with the club on his behalf. The travel was set for the following week after the exams, with a mix of excitement and apprehension.

Before the departure day, Jett stayed over at Khem's place. They planned to go to the university together to catch the bus the next day.

"Khem, pack more clothes." Jett said, lying on the bed, watching Khem pack.

"Why? It's just a four-day trip, isn't it? I've already packed two extra sets." Khem replied without turning around.

"I don't know, you might end up staying with the master until the term starts."

"What? Are you crazy?"

"Not crazy, I just don't want you to come back and be alone. I might have to stay home to help with family business during the whole break." Khem considered this, wanting to reassure Jett not to worry, but honestly, he was scared too about being alone, so he asked:

"Then...can't I just stay at Jett's house?"

"It's possible, but how can I help you there? Being with the master is the safest place for you."

Khem's face showed concern.

"Will it bother the monk...?" Khem felt hesitant; after all, Monk Pharan didn't even know him, unlike Jett who was his friend.

"You don't have to worry about that. The monk's house is as big as a temple, a small guy like you won't take up much space."

"But I feel bad about imposing, and besides, the monk already said he doesn't want to get involved with my issues." Jett slapped the bed with a loud thud, making Khem jump.

"This! This is the face! Remember this expression, when you see the monk, just make this face, guaranteed to soften his heart a hundred percent!" Khem's eyebrows twitched, almost throwing his deodorant at Jett, "You talk too much, how do you know the monk will soften up?" Jett shook his head, recalling his days from when he first became the monk's disciple up until now, then he gave a sly smile and answered.

"You're exactly his type."

"Cough!" Khem choked on his own saliva, then grabbed something to throw at Jett, who easily dodged it.

"What are you talking about? That's a monk master."

"My master, not yours. Trust me. If you want to save your little life, do what I say."

Khem glared at him, "If I do what you say and it still doesn't work. I'll be the first ghost to haunt you, Jett."

Jett laughed heartily.

"Yeah, I'll even tear up the monk's talisman and throw it away for you."

When it was time for bed, Jett laid out a mattress on the floor next to Khem's bed, just like he always did when staying over here because his sleeping habits were like clockwork, always waking up with his head at the foot of the bed, fearing that one good night he might accidentally kick his small friend off.

"Sweet dreams, Khem."

"Sweet dreams, Jett." Jett chuckled at Khem's sarcastic reply; his friend's reactions were what made him enjoy teasing him.

After turning off the light, silence enveloped the room, and soon both Jett and Khem fell into a deep sleep.

Khem was dreaming again...

He dreamed of an old, large Thai-style house by the river. Khem saw the lifestyle of the people in the house, a young girl of about eight or nine

playing mischievously with the servants, and a noblewoman in traditional Thai attire, weaving flower garlands. This time, the dream seemed clearer than before. Khem looked at the face of the young woman and softly exclaimed,

"Mother?" The young woman had pricked her finger with the needle while stringing flowers. The maid, who was sitting and weaving garlands below, quickly crawled over to check her wound. Khem, with concern, intended to go to her, but as if pulled back by an unseen force, he was transported to the eggshell-colored house from a different era.

As always, when Khem dreamt of the ancient Thai house, he would be brought here without much chance to observe or do anything more than watch, looking through the windows from outside.

Khem often saw a couple, though he could never clearly discern their faces. Sometimes, he would see only a woman, looking forlorn, eating alone in the house.

And there would always be a chilling male voice from behind asking if he wanted to stay here, but Khem never responded. Not long after, he would wake up. Lately, he had become somewhat numb to it, until receiving the talisman from Jett's master, after which he stopped having these dreams until now.

This time, the atmosphere felt strange.

Khem saw no one, not even the lady of the house at the dining table...

A cold shiver ran down Khem's back again, making him straighten up. He felt someone standing behind him but, as usual, couldn't turn around to look.

Khem was certain it must be the owner of the mysterious voice that always asked if he wanted to stay, but this time, the other party remained silent, no matter how long he waited.

Usually, Khem would wake up after the voice spoke, but several minutes had passed, and he was still here.

Khem began to feel anxious, to the point where he spoke first.

"Why aren't you speaking?"

The ruler of this dream dimension was overjoyed to hear a response from Khem for the first time, but it couldn't voice out to send him back to reality because another malevolent spirit's pale hands covered its mouth from behind, while its legs wrapped around and tightly clenched its waist, causing pain.

How did it get in here? That was the question echoing in its mind now.

Normally, it was already difficult to deal with this evil spirit. This time, it seemed like its power had grown even stronger than before, to the extent that it could encroach upon others' territories, which was very dangerous...

Khem didn't get an answer, even though he could still feel the presence of the mysterious voice behind him, but instead, he heard another voice that felt very familiar.

Khem...

"Mother? Is that you?" Khem's body trembled with urgency, it was the first time he had heard his mother's voice so clearly.

'Help me, I'm in so much pain.'

"Mother, where are you!" Khem shouted in panic upon hearing his mother's voice in pain, and without thinking about looking back, he rushed out to find her.

The mysterious man who owned this dimension was now wide-eyed, yelling out loud,

'Don't go!'

Khem returned to the first Thai house, still hearing his mother's cries for help in his ears.

"Mother! Where are you!" Khem cried. He ran around the house, now seemingly abandoned, as if it had turned into a desolate place. Then Khem heard another woman's voice he had never heard before.

'Come to the pier,' the voice was slow and cold, showing no emotion, but Khem felt that the speaker was smiling...

He didn't have time to care, knowing where the pier was, Khem ran out of one of the bedrooms directly to his destination.

Outside, it was pouring heavily like a storm. Khem saw his mother's figure clinging tightly to the edge of a mooring post on the bridge, her lower half submerged in the swift current.

'Khem, help me, help me!' Khem heard his mother's voice even though he was still far from the spot, and then his eyes widened in horror as his mother could no longer hold onto the post.

She disappeared from sight as if she had never been there.

"Mother!" Khem's heart was torn in that instant; he shouted for his mother amidst the raging storm, rushing forward intending to jump into the river to save her.

Jett was in deep sleep when suddenly the voice of a woman shouted into his ear:

"Jett!"

Gasp!

Startled awake, he sat up abruptly, pulling off his cartoon-patterned sleep mask. The first thing he saw was the balcony with the light still on, and he noticed his small friend, who should have been asleep on the bed, was up to something.

"Hey, Khem!"

Chapter 5

Khem had run to the end of the bridge, but just before he could jump, he was pulled back from behind.

Khem opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the face of his best friend.

"Hey, Khem! What are you doing?" Khem looked at Jett's alarmed face in confusion, then glanced around and realized he was standing at the edge of the balcony.

How did I get here...

Khem's eyes widened as he realized the cause, almost collapsing to the floor, but Jett supported him.

"Jett, just now, I...I was dreaming." Khem hastily recounted his dream to Jett, his voice trembling. Upon hearing this, Jett grew even more frustrated, quickly pulling Khem back into the room and locking the balcony door.

"I think the master's talisman might be losing its power." Jett said after sitting Khem down on the floor to talk. Hearing this, Khem swallowed hard, his tightly clasped hands turning cold.

"Normally, one of the master's simple talismans would last for years. This ghost must be extremely malevolent." Jett continued, noting that Khem had heard a woman's voice urging him to go to the water, when in reality, it was leading him to the balcony on the fourth floor to jump off. Such malevolence likely indicated it was the karmic creditor of Khem that the master had mentioned.

Khem's face was pale, drained of all color. If Jett hadn't woken up just in time, something terrible could have happened. The thought alone made him want to cry.

"Sorry, man, Khem, you almost went away. If no one had woken me up, I probably wouldn't have woken up." amidst the fear, curiosity arose. Khem furrowed his brows slightly, his eyes still red.

"Who was it?"

"I don't know, but it was a woman's voice, she called me Jett, and when I woke up, you were standing right there on the balcony. I think it might be

some spirit looking out for you." Khem's heart beat faster. He could only think of one person, the only important person in his life who was no longer alive in this world, the one who had always cared for him even in her last moments.

"It must have been Mom..." Khem cried uncontrollably, both scared by what had happened and relieved that his mother's spirit was safe.

Jett let Khem cry for nearly ten minutes, not being very good at consoling people, he just handed him tissues to wipe his tears.

"Jett, I'm scared to sleep now." Khem said after he finished crying.

"Yeah, me too." Jett glanced at the wall clock then turned back to say, "Let's watch a movie. It'll be morning in two hours. We can sleep on the bus."

Khem nodded in agreement. Once he regained his composure, he didn't forget to say something.

"Thanks for saving my life, Jett." Jett ruffled Khem's hair.

"Yeah. Don't worry about it. When we get to Ubon, I'll take you straight to the monk. He'll definitely help."

Jett had planned it out. If the monk didn't want to help, he'd hand out his phone number to every young woman in the village.

Arriving at the university, both Jett and Khem were in a state of sleep deprivation. Upon arrival, they had to wait for the tour bus with others who hadn't arrived yet. Unable to bear it, Jett dragged Khem to buy some coffee.

"One iced Americano with an extra shot." Jett ordered first.

"Yes, and what would the other gentleman like?"

"An iced cocoa, um, make it strong." Khem answered hesitantly, also sleepy but finding coffee too bitter for his taste.

Hearing this, the staff smiled indulgently but didn't comment further, quickly turning to prepare their orders.

After getting their drinks, they walked out of the shop to sit in their usual spot, watching the seniors and other club members going back and forth until they felt dizzy. By the time they boarded the bus, they had just finished their drinks.

Jett suggested sitting near the back. He took the window seat and had Khem sit in the aisle, fearing that Khem might see something strange during the journey.

But after a while, they couldn't resist the sleepiness and both fell into a deep slumber.

When they reached a gas station, which was a rest stop, Jett woke up. He furrowed his brows, looking around, realizing this wasn't the usual route people took. Seeing that Khem was still asleep, he slowly got up to talk to one of the senior staff members, calling out to her by the name tag around her neck.

"Excuse me, Phii Sam, why are we going this way?"

"Oh, Nong Jett, um...the club president didn't want to arrive too late, thinking we might not have enough time for activities. He consulted with the driver, who suggested this route, saying it was shorter." Jett furrowed his brows.

"But this route is dangerous." Jett wasn't lying; from here on, there would only be forest, no more gas stations to stop at, the road was narrow and secluded. Although he had used this road before with the master, the master would never take this route unless it was an emergency.

Because it was known to be a haunt for spirits.

This road might get them there faster than the main route, but what if they actually arrive dead?

"Oh, well, too late to mention it now, Jett. I'll tell the driver to drive slowly, alright?" Sam gave a strained smile, respecting the political figure's son and the main sponsor of the event. The decision was made in the morning without informing Jett beforehand. She didn't expect him to be this displeased.

Realizing that arguing would only stress them out, and they were unlikely to change routes now, Jett nodded and went to buy some snacks and butter for Khem in case he woke up hungry.

And he quickly ate something to stay awake. From now on, he won't be able to sleep.

As the bus entered the forested area, the atmosphere began to change. Jett started seeing shadowy figures resembling people emerging from both sides of the road. But even more alarming was their number, and how they chased and clung to the bus.

Jett jolted when a spirit climbed up the window to stop right in front of him. It seemed to look past him towards Khem, who was still fast asleep, and other spirits began to gather at their window.

Jett steadied his mind, silently reciting a mantra, staring intently at the dark mass in front of him.

"Itisukato, Araham Puttho, Namoputthaya..."

The dark masses in front of him started to retreat, some jumping away, but new ones kept appearing incessantly. Jett chanted continuously, thankful he had brought a large bottle of water. Otherwise, he would have died of thirst.

At that moment, Jett didn't realize that someone else, sitting across the aisle from him, was watching him with suspicion.

"What is Jett doing, mumbling to himself for nearly half an hour now?" That was what 'Chanwit' was thinking.

Chanwit knew Jett and Khem as freshmen from the same club, but they weren't particularly close. He was sitting in the aisle seat next to where Jett and Khem were, giving him a clear view of what they were doing.

'They look like they're playing with spirits like in the movies,' Chanwit glanced at the sleeping Khem. Although he wasn't one to believe in black magic or occult practices, he found Jett's actions unsettling for some reason.

Jett and Khem were close, but Khem seemed naive, possibly being tricked. He should find a moment to warn Khem to be careful of Jett.

At that moment, Jett, who was in the midst of chanting, suddenly forgot the verses he had learned when he looked up and saw dozens of tall, shadowy figures emerging from the forest.

"Shit..." Jett exclaimed in disbelief.

"Ghosts of the dead." with such numbers, and encountering them in broad daylight like this, honestly, Jett had never experienced anything like it before in his life.

A piercing, ear-piercing screech reached Jett's ears, but it seemed like no one else could hear it.

They're following Khem.

Jett broke into a cold sweat, frantically trying to recall the monk's chants and started reciting again, but to no avail; none of the spirits disappeared from his sight. Some of them were so close they were almost touching the bus's window. One of the ghosts standing in front of the bus made a gesture towards them, prompting Jett to raise his arm to shield Khem and immediately close his eyes.

All these actions did not go unnoticed by Chanwit, who was watching intently, his brows furrowed, his demeanor suggesting he was still questioning.

Screeeeech!!

"Hey, what's happening!"

"Scream!"

When the bus suddenly braked and started swerving, Jett decided to get up from his seat and make his way to the driver's area with difficulty. Chan wanted to follow but was held tightly by his friend sitting next to him, unable to move, and could only watch Jett go.

Jett reached the driver's zone where both the driver and his assistant were passed out, unconscious. The driver's eyes were rolled back, his mouth agape with drool hanging, indicating his spirit had left his body, likely from seeing the apparition clinging to the front windshield, which Jett could only see as a dark, blurry female-like shadow hanging its head down.

Jett quickly took off his own Buddha pendant and put it on the driver, holding the steering wheel with one hand while the other was clasped in prayer, asking the spirits of the forest to return the driver's soul, or "khwan." Then he chanted a newly remembered mantra:

"Sabbe Deva Pisajewa Alawakathayo Pi Ya..." The dark shadow in front of them writhed briefly before being whisked away by the wind.

Gasp!

The driver's assistant woke up first, and upon seeing the situation, he screamed in shock, quickly took over the steering wheel from Jett, and shouted to wake the driver. After a few shouts, the driver jolted awake with a dazed look, and together they managed to steer the bus back into its lane.

Jett, breathing heavily, wiped the sweat from his face, thinking the danger had passed. He turned back, planning to ask for his ancestral pendant back from the driver once they reached their destination.

"Jett, what happened?" Khem asked when Jett returned to sit beside him. Woken by the shouts and chaos, Khem had seen the bus swaying dangerously close to the edge of the road.

Khem figured Jett must have gone to the driver and done something, because soon after, the bus stopped swaying and realigned itself on the road.

"I'll tell you when we get there." Jett said, not wanting others to overhear. Khem nodded, making room for Jett to sit and rest, then handed him water to drink.

"You truly are my friend." Jett, who had been chanting until his throat was dry, drank almost the entire bottle. Khem gently patted his friend's head.

"You did great, Jett."

"Should I start barking now?" Jett asked, causing Khem to laugh before getting a light tap on the head. They chatted about other things for a while before both fell asleep, as Jett assured they were now out of danger.

All these actions were almost constantly observed by Chanwit.

The tour bus arrived at the village in Ubon Ratchathani in the late afternoon, where the village chief and familiar villagers came out to welcome them. After that, they helped unload the luggage from the bus.

Jett took the opportunity when not many were paying attention to him to go and retrieve the sacred necklace from the driver.

"Hey kid, thanks a lot for stepping in to help. Otherwise, things would have gone really bad." 'Uncle' said as he placed the necklace back into the young man's hand. The assistant driver had recounted the incident when he woke up to find the young man helping to steady the bus, and even gave him his own sacred necklace to wear.

Jett nodded, took the necklace, and put it back on before asking out of curiosity,

"Uncle, what did you see? Did you know you were so shocked you lost your spirit? I had to call out to you for so long before you came back." The driver swallowed hard, brought his own Jatukam amulet to his forehead in a gesture of apology, and said,

"I saw a woman in ancient Thai dress, who looked like a servant from the old times, very pale with visible veins, long hair hanging down from above, small black eyes, and dark lips that were grinning."

Chapter 6

Jett was talking with the bus driver, as he had previously told Khem he was going to retrieve the sacred necklace. Khem, therefore, separated to help others unload the luggage to store at the village's primary school, which was not far away.

During the school holidays, the roof of the school will be repaired, and a new library will be built within the school premises. The temple roof will also be repaired and expanded where necessary. Additionally, water filtration systems will be installed at various points around the village to provide clean drinking water for the villagers. The team will also visit each house to check if any villagers need help with anything, and if it's something they can assist with, they are more than happy to do so.

After all the details have been communicated, everyone will disperse to rest at their leisure, saving their energy for the next day.

"Now, I will announce the names of the householders by house number. Please raise your hand if you hear your name; the volunteers will come to you. House number thirty-six, Girl Ampai..."

For accommodation, the volunteer group has been divided into ten groups of three members each, with two members, Jett and Khem, left over. However, Jett has already mentioned that they would find accommodation on their own.

We will be staying with the villagers that Jett coordinated with the village chief. Each selected house has more than two family members to help look after the students.

One thing Jett didn't tell anyone is that all ten houses belong to individuals who possess magical abilities.

This village is located at the foot of a mountain near a forest. Known for its forest, aside from wildlife, there are also wandering spirits and ghosts. Villagers often venture into the forest to gather items to sell, or to collect herbs to boil and drink, especially since the nearest hospital is many kilometers away.

However, entering the forest isn't something anyone can do. Some people without magical protection have been known to wander lost for weeks, nearly losing their lives. Therefore, it's necessary to learn occult arts for protection against unseen dangers.

In modern times, however, those with magical abilities are rare.

Considering the incident that occurred on the tour bus earlier, Jett thought it wise to have the club members stay with these knowledgeable villagers.

The village chief and many villagers are aware of the incident. They have promised to protect and look after the children who have traveled far to help develop their village's living conditions in return.

"House number forty-six, Boy Chaiya and Boy Kaew." After mentioning the last host's name, the two kind-hearted village chiefs raised their hands in unison. The group led by Chanwit, consisting of one man and two women, then walked towards them.

"Alright, from now on, please rest well, and we'll meet at the school at seven in the morning. Let's not be late." concluded the club president. After that, he turned off the portable microphone and speaker, packed up his things, and everyone dispersed.

"Come on, Khem, I'll take you to the monk." Jett said, helping to pick up Khem's clothes bag from the ground and sling it over his shoulder, followed by the bedsheet. Khem hugged his belongings, following Jett with mixed feelings of worry. He imagined the monk as someone similar to the abbot he knew, likely covered in tattoos, stern-faced, ready to strike with a cane the moment Khem stepped into his home.

"What if the monk chases us away?" Khem couldn't help but ask, remembering that Jett had just confessed on the bus that he hadn't informed the monk about Khem staying over. They might have to rely on whatever good karma they had left. Every step Khem took was filled with fear, but now that they were here, turning back seemed impossible.

"Don't be scared, I've got a last-ditch plan." Jett grinned wickedly. Khem didn't know whether to laugh or be scared, but decided to go with the flow. If you don't try, you won't know.

Jett and Khem walked towards the western part of the village, going in the opposite direction of everyone else, heading where it didn't even look like houses existed.

Again. These two are doing something odd, separate from the group.

Chanwit felt uneasy and wanted to follow them. For some reason, he couldn't take his eyes off them, even though he wasn't usually one to meddle in others' affairs to this extent.

"What are you looking at, Chan? Aren't you coming?" asked the female friend who was staying at the same place, following Chanwit's gaze, but all she saw was a dark path and banana trees by the road.

"Nothing, let's go." Chanwit adjusted his glasses as he answered, then turned to follow the host who had already walked a considerable distance.

Until he found an answer for himself, Chanwit would keep an eye on Jett and Khem to see what secrets they were hiding.

Some parts of this village still lacked electricity. Jett used the flashlight on his phone to guide them to the monk's house at the end of this road, walking past banana plantations and rubber trees that lined the path on both sides.

The eerie whistling of the wind could be heard, and the deeper Khem walked into the forest, the more his heart filled with trepidation. The cold wind made the hairs on his body stand up, and he clutched his blanket tightly, looking around with suspicion, but all he could see was darkness.

Khem, frightened, couldn't help but ask:

"Are we almost there, Jett?" Jett raised his finger to his lips, signaling for silence without hesitation.

"Shh. Don't make any noise. Don't acknowledge anything you see. Just follow me quietly." Khem swallowed hard. He didn't dare ask more because so far, by following Jett's instructions, he had managed to survive until now. Whatever Jett said, Khem was ready to comply.

Jett tried to keep his mind focused, not letting his fear, a natural human response, distract him. The atmosphere was too strange.

The forest was too quiet...

No sound of birds.

No sound of insects.

Only the howling wind, seemingly on the verge of turning into a storm.

Something bad was surely about to happen.

Finally, Jett and Khem arrived. Khem looked at the large traditional Thai house surrounded by tamarind trees as tall as a person's head. Tamarind trees are believed to protect against and repel bad omens. Khem had noticed that other villagers also planted them, but only a couple of trees at most, unlike here where they formed a fence around the house...

"We're here. When you see the master, make sure to bow respectfully." Khem swallowed audibly again as his blanket was taken from him. His wide eyes looked up to the second-floor balcony of the house, where two kerosene lamps provided light, casting it down below.

Previously, Pharan had become aware of everything that happened since the bus carrying his disciples nearly met with an accident due to the forest spirits, as told by his "spirit followers."

"Were there a lot of them?" He had asked while he was still asleep, opening his eyes upon receiving the answer.

"The whole forest was full of them, Master."

Pharan walked over to sit in front of the Buddha statue, lighting three incense sticks and clasping his hands in prayer, focusing his mind on helping his student. However, Jett's mind was so filled with fear that he couldn't maintain his focus, his concentration scattered almost beyond control. He could only chant prayers for divine protection to keep them safe. Thankfully, he remembered one mantra, which had narrowly saved his life.

All of this was because he got involved with that kid named Khemjira.

But it seemed that Khem's karmic debt was not with an ordinary ghost. It could summon dozens of hungry ghosts to gather in one place, when typically these spirits are solitary and avoid even their own kind.

To have such power, one must have accumulated karma for hundreds of years, gaining immense strength.

"Phii Jett is bringing that friend here, Master." **'Thong'**, a spirit disciple in the form of a twelve-year-old boy, crawled over to whisper. This made Pharan's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

Such stubbornness was indeed inherited from generation to generation.

But it seemed Jett cared deeply for this friend, enough to disregard warnings and even dare to bring him here. He was genuinely curious about what kind of kid this was; if he didn't like what he saw, they might have to spend the night under the house with the spotted dog.

A mixed-breed dog ran out to bark at Jett and Khem. When it heard Jett call out, it stopped barking and approached to nuzzle their legs. Jett gave it a large bone-shaped cookie he had prepared for this purpose as a passage fee, and the dog ran back under the stairs to chew on it.

Khem and Jett didn't have to wait long before the light from the upstairs balcony flickered, revealing the figure of a man slowly walking out. The

man stopped at the wooden fence, looking down at Khem with an expressionless face.

From where he stood, Khem couldn't clearly see the man's expression, but his heart thumped violently, causing him to clutch his shirt over his left chest with shock.

What was this feeling...

Pharan looked at Khemjira's face, half-illuminated by the lantern light.

The moment their eyes met, countless scenes from past lives flooded into Pharan's mind without warning.

Pharan had known since he was young that he could remember his past lives, but he had never desired to recall them. He never wanted to know who he was or what he had done before; he only wanted to live in the present and lead a simple life like an ordinary person.

Remembering or not, it served no purpose, that's what Pharan had always thought.

However, at this moment, he felt a peculiar sensation in his chest. The face of Khemjira greatly disturbed Pharan's mind.

This boy was his lover from a past life, from whom he had been separated.

His sharp eyes narrowed slightly as he looked past Khemjira.

And the man standing behind him...

Khem swallowed as Pharan descended from the second floor holding a lantern. He stood rigidly like Jett, who didn't dare even to greet the master, the atmosphere around the master making one feel uneasy, with chills running down the spine, despite his handsome face showing no emotion.

Khem held his breath as the master approached, the scent of a cool fragrance tickling his nose. He saw the tattoo of a pair of magpies and lotuses on the master's chest, clear as day, but he didn't dare look up to see what the master was doing.

Pharan paid no mind to Khem, who was trembling. He slowly raised the lantern above the young man's head to see the face of the person standing behind him more clearly.

The other thing was a tall, slender young man dressed in khaki, indicating a government job, but his clothes were stained with blood down to his trousers. His skin was pale, almost a light green, and one eye was rolled up so much that the pupil was barely visible, while the other stared at him in astonishment.

Pharan spoke emotionlessly:

"It's you."

This spirit's name was "Chayot." but in a past life, he was bound by blood to Pharan as a sibling.

Memories, half-remembered, flowed into Pharan, telling him this.

Chapter 7

Chayot, upon hearing the greeting, instinctively sensed that the man before him remembered the tales of times past. The sharp, coal-black eyes that looked at him seemed like a predator eyeing its prey, and the aura of dark magic spread throughout the area like flames from hell capable of scorching even souls.

His eyes remained wide open, fearing he might be obliterated, so he immediately retreated into his own dimension to hide.

Pharan let Chayot go. Despite his lingering suspicions about his former younger brother, leaving the two children standing there like dewdrops was out of the question.

He moved away from the young man who had been asleep since earlier, glancing at his disciple who stood there with a forced smile before turning to walk back to the house.

"Khem, has the spirit escaped yet or what?" Jett asked, lightly patting Khem on the shoulder. Khem turned to look at his friend, his mouth twisting as if about to cry; the master was far more frightening than he had anticipated.

"Jett. I want to go home."

"Oh, you scaredy-cat, let's go!"

Once they reached the second-floor balcony after climbing the stairs, the master took a lantern from another post and handed it to Jett.

"Go wash up, then go to bed quickly, and don't leave your room until morning." Pharan instructed. Jett felt an ominous chill from the master's gaze but quickly nodded in acknowledgment, fearing the master might change his mind.

"Uh...hello." Khem said softly, raising his hand in a respectful gesture when there was a pause. The master glanced back, his dark eyes reflecting the lantern's light, before nodding and walking away, leaving Khem to watch his broad back with a sense of unease and despair.

"Come on, Khem, our room is that way." Jett said, his lips tight, as he followed Jett who carried the lantern through the darkness.

The room Jett led to was on the left wing of this Thai house, a bedroom with a large bed. The bathroom was downstairs. Once they reached the room, they set down their bags, arranged the bedding, and then went downstairs to take a quick shower as instructed by the master to get to bed swiftly.

As for Pharan, after parting with the two boys, he returned to the central part of the house used for ceremonies.

The tall figure sat down on a dark carpet near the altar with the Buddha statue, placed the still-lit lantern beside him, and clasped his hands in meditation. He steadied his mind to meditate, for the first time allowing his spirit to journey back into the past.

In the year 2482 B.E. (1939 C.E.), in a traditional Thai house on stilts with a hip roof in the center of a town, lived the "Wongpradit" family, consisting of four members: the father, a military officer; the mother, a master; the eldest son, a doctor named "Phawat." who is Pharan in this life; and the youngest son, who was about to be inducted into civil service as a master, named "Chayot." who now haunts Khemjira.

Pharan wanted to understand the cause of this, because if there was karma between them and he was somehow involved, he could seek a solution to release Chayot's spirit to where it should go.

The first image he saw was of the four family members having dinner together at the dining table, the atmosphere within the family was relaxed and normal.

The scene shifted to a petite woman who looked very similar to Khemjira. Her name was "Khemika." daughter of the district officer, a close friend of Chayot, and Phawat's lover.

Phawat and Khemika first met at a birthday party for a high-ranking civil servant. During a dull moment, both escaped the party's chaos to stroll in the garden behind the house, where they coincidentally met.

Phawat recognized Khemika as his younger brother's close school friend, having seen her from afar a few times, so he took the opportunity to strike up a conversation to get to know her better.

They hit it off until it was time to return to the party. On the way back, they heard a cat meowing from a tree.

Phawat discovered that Khemika was quite the spirited and mischievous woman. This was evident when she took off her high heels and climbed the

tree despite wearing a skirt. Phawat tried to dissuade her, but she didn't listen, and he had to turn away in embarrassment.

Ultimately, she safely rescued an orange kitten from the tree by sending it down to Phawat waiting below, while she herself ended up stuck in the tree, unable to get down.

Phawat laughed, breaking his usual gentlemanly demeanor, then went to fetch a wooden ladder for the young woman to climb down by herself because the young man was too shy to touch her as she was a lady.

After the party, Phawat returned home, unable to sleep as thoughts of Khemika filled his mind. He realized instantly that he had fallen in love with Khemika. Therefore, he decided to earnestly pursue her.

After several years of courtship, Khemika finally agreed to be his girlfriend, and accepted the engagement, amidst the joy of relatives and friends at Phawat's birthday celebration.

Pharan, in his spiritual form, saw the pained look in Chayot's eyes as he stood at a distance. His red, sorrowful eyes gazed at Khemika and Phawat as if holding back. He began to understand more.

Chayot loved Khemika...perhaps he loved her even before Phawat did.

Phawat and Khemika had been together for six years and planned to marry after Khemika completed her master's degree. Phawat's father even favored his future daughter-in-law, investing in building an eggshell-colored wooden house for their marital home. Phawat and Khemika often spent their free time there, with Chayot and another maid accompanying them to prevent any gossip from the villagers about impropriety.

Only three months remained before Khemika would graduate, and their dream of marriage was coming ever closer. However, one day, Dr. Phawat, who was the provincial doctor, was transferred to a military camp on the border due to ongoing border conflicts, and he couldn't refuse the orders of his superiors.

The wedding had to be postponed indefinitely.

"Yot, take care of Khemika for me, I'll come back as soon as I can." Phawat told his younger brother.

"Phii Wat, don't worry, I will look after Khem forever; this is something I can do." Chayot replied with a smile, but Phawat didn't suspect the underlying implications of those words. He simply hugged his brother one last time.

After that day, Chayot began to approach Khemika, taking on Phawat's role. He was straightforward about his feelings, confessing that he had loved her since high school, but Khemika was steadfast in her love for Phawat, unable to return Chayot's feelings, no matter how much he tried to win her over.

Every day, Khemika seemed to live just for the letters from her lover. Both she and Phawat kept in constant contact through letters for nearly two years.

However, Khemika, despite her lively nature, had a frail body, and her longing and worry for Phawat led to her health deteriorating significantly. Chayot watched in pain as Khemika coughed up blood.

But after two years, the letters that used to come regularly suddenly stopped. No matter how many letters Khemika sent, there was no reply.

Four years passed before a letter from the Army, addressed to Khemika, arrived at her home:

"Dear Ms Khemika, fiancée of Dr. Phawat, we regret to inform you that Dr. Phawat has perished in a bombing incident..." Before she could finish reading, Khemika coughed up blood, and the maid beside her screamed in shock. Eventually, Khemika was rushed to the hospital.

Chayot drove to the hospital upon hearing the news, his face filled with horror at Khemika's sudden deterioration upon receiving the Army's letter.

Chayot intended to use this opportunity to change Khemika's mind, hoping that with Phawat gone, she wouldn't have to suffer waiting anymore and could start anew with him.

However, the outcome was the opposite. Khemika went into shock and suffered a heart attack, dying that very evening.

Chayot felt as if he had been struck in the head by a hammer, confused and dizzy, before his heart shattered upon seeing Khemika's lifeless body. The young man collapsed, crying as if to bring down the heavens, for he had never anticipated this outcome.

He had never thought that this situation would lead to Khemika's death.

Ironically, no one could have foreseen that Phawat, whom everyone thought was dead, would return, on the very last day of Khemika's funeral rites...

Pharan could feel Phawat's heart-wrenching pain through the spirit's eyes, seeing despair with no way out in those grief-stricken eyes, leading to an uncontrollable surge of emotion within him.

Pharan steadied his meditation, moving past the sorrow of the past to focus on unfolding the rest of the story.

It turned out that Chayot had forged the letter to deceive the family and Khemika so that he could marry her in place of Phawat. Additionally, all the letters Phawat sent back were intercepted by Chayot, who had bribed the postman to destroy them before they reached anyone else.

"How could you do something so despicable, Yot? I'm your brother! Khem is your friend!" Phawat yelled through tears, clutching the forged letter tightly in his hand, his tall frame trembling with anger.

If it hadn't been his own flesh and blood before him, Phawat swore he would have killed him with his own hands.

Chayot was kneeling on the floor, crying like a madman, hands clasped in prayer, repeating apologies that were now utterly pointless.

Phawat looked at his brother with bloodshot eyes, his voice quivering as he spoke, "All the inheritance, everything that was mine, I bequeath to you. From now on, you and I, we're no longer brothers. I'm going back to the military camp. If I die, let me die as a ghost without a brother. Don't bother bringing my body back for ceremonies. This family can have you, but it won't have me."

From that day forward, Phawat could not bear to look at his brother's face, but he also couldn't bring himself to throw him out to fend for himself. So, he decided to leave instead.

The spirit of Pharan observed his past self, bowing to apologize to his parents for the last time before his physical body called back his spirit, and he slowly opened his eyes.

In the darkness, only the light from the lantern illuminated the room. In the distance, there was the figure of a young woman in a white blouse and traditional skirt, sitting serenely, waiting for him to wake.

"Hello, master, my name is Kae, I am Khem's mother. Thank you for letting me come up." The female spirit said. A child ghost had been the one to invite her, saying it was the master's order.

Pharan's expression softened slightly, as he could guess who she was. He nodded in acknowledgment. This spirit was one that lingered to protect her son with a pure heart, possessing only minor powers, not considered a threat.

"Do you know the ghost of the man in the khaki uniform who's been following Khem?" He asked politely. This was why he had instructed

Thong to bring her up.

Kae nodded in response.

"I know, that man has been protecting Khem from the ghost of Madam Ramphueng all this time." Pharan didn't respond, his sharp eyes fixed on the female spirit, signaling her to continue.

"Madam Ramphueng's ghost comes from four hundred years ago, from the time before the abolition of slavery. I don't know the other details, but I know she harbors intense resentment towards the family. She curses and pursues the lives of all male descendants born into the family, turning them into her spirit slaves."

"..."

"The reason Jett sees so many spirits following Khem is partly because of these deceased descendants." Pharan furrowed his brows slightly. Since Khemjira arrived here, apart from Chayot's ghost and Khemjira's mother, he hadn't sensed any other spirits.

Chayot's ghost isn't one that follows Khemjira's life. It doesn't possess the power to rally all the spirits of the forest or cause the bus Khemjira was on to nearly have an accident. But there's another ghost not present here.

And where could it be?

Pharan closed his eyes to meditate once more, focusing his spirit to search for the malevolent ghost. His spirit extended out from the Thai house in all eight directions, rushing into the dense forest, before he had to open his eyes abruptly when he saw something.

Pharan took a pot that had been blessed and placed it in front of Khemjira's mother's spirit, saying:

"Hide inside for now, it's dangerous outside." The spirit of Khae Khai looked into the eyes of the young man before her as if under a spell. She felt no fear or suspicion at his words, willingly stepping into the pot.

Pharan closed the lid and held it in one hand, the other gripping the lantern as he walked to a room where ancestral portraits and bone urns were kept. He placed the pot in an empty spot, raised his hands in a respectful gesture above his head, asking his ancestors to look after this spirit, before turning to leave.

Pharan then took a large bundle of sacred thread downstairs, tying it around the trunks of the tamarind trees, one after another, that encircled the house, then returned to the altar with the Buddha statue to light a large candle that stood in front of it.

Suddenly, a fierce wind began to blow without cause, a large flock of owls circled in the sky, some perched on the house's roof, screeching in unison as if to disrupt the concentration.

Eyes the color of midnight stared at the candle flame, using the fire element concentration technique to keep the flame steady, unaffected by the wind. Once he had focused his mind, he clasped his hands together, moving his lips in a chant.

"Saratchang, Sasenang, Saphantung, Narinthang..."

Chapter 8

The magic practitioners in the village opened their eyes simultaneously, sensing danger creeping in. The sound of the owls carried on the wind from the west, the direction where Pharan, the revered spirit doctor of the village, lived.

Everyone threw off their blankets, got up, and packed essentials into cloth bags.

Including Chai, the owner of house number forty-six, one of the ten most skilled magic practitioners in this village.

"What's happening, dear?" Mrs Kaew felt uneasy when she saw her husband suddenly get up to change clothes, looking hurried as if he intended to go somewhere.

"I'm going to Pharan's house. It seems something bad is about to happen. Please take care of the students, don't let anyone go outside until morning."

Mrs. Kaew nodded in agreement. If her husband was set on helping Pharan, she wouldn't try to stop him; that man had done much for their family and the village.

"Take care of yourself." Chai nodded, slung his satchel over his shoulder, and left the house. Outside Chai's house, Lah and Mek, who were of similar magical prowess, were waiting. After a brief conversation, they headed towards Pharan's house.

At that time, Chanwit, who hadn't been able to sleep due to a strange feeling, opened his eyes in the dark of his bedroom. He heard the sound of the door opening and voices talking outside.

'Who's doing what at this hour?' Chanwit furrowed his brows. Unable to resist his curiosity, he got up, slightly opened the window, and peered out to see Uncle Chai with two other men whom Chanwit recognized as the owners of the houses where club members were staying.

"Where are they going?"

Chaniittaya's mind was filled with doubt. Apart from these three, there were several other strong-looking men with a similar aura walking on the road, passing by Chanwittaya's house, heading west.

Isn't that the same direction Jett Na and Khemjira went earlier in the evening?

The incident on the bus was still unanswered, and now this!

What exactly are those two and the people in this village hiding?

Chanwittaya opened the door, intent on following Uncle Chai to get to the bottom of it. However, upon opening the door, he saw Aunt Kaew, Uncle Chai's wife, sitting in the middle of the house, sewing by the light of a lantern.

"Oh, where are you going?" Aunt Kaew asked. She was also surprised that Chanwittaya was still up at this hour.

Even though; before leaving, her husband had cast a spell to make everyone in the house sleep soundly, except for her, and the two girls sleeping in another room. She had tried to wake them only to find they were deeply asleep. How could this young man still be awake?

"Where is Uncle Chai going, Aunt Kaew?" Chanwittaya asked directly. Aunt Kaew looked into the young man's eyes for a long time, realizing that Chan Wittaya had a strong mind. Even if she told him, he might not believe her, thinking it was superstition.

"There's nothing, son. Uncle Chai has some business with a friend. It's late, go back to sleep, don't go out anywhere, trust me, okay?" Chanwittaya wrestled with his curiosity for a moment before letting out a soft sigh and nodding. As much as he wanted to know, he shouldn't cause trouble for his hosts, so he went back to his room to sleep.

But no matter how he tried, he couldn't fall asleep.

The small temple in the village housed only thirteen monks and novices. At this time, the abbot, Luang Por Sua, paced along the path and stopped in front of the hut of one of the monks, calling softly:

"Phra Amorn." The door to Phra Amorn's hut opened, and Phra Amorn, who was kneeling behind the door, bowed three times before clasping his hands together and asking:

"What can I do for you, Venerable One?"

"Go fetch the other monks and novices to the pavilion...right now." Phra Amorn sensed from the abbot's tone that something ominous was about to happen. The young monk accepted the command and bowed before heading off to fulfill his task.

Soon, thirteen monks and novices gathered at the pavilion; some were calm, others looked alarmed, not knowing why the abbot had called them at

this hour, but none dared to ask. When the senior monk instructed, they followed.

The temple boys had prepared seats for all the monks to sit in a row, holding rosaries that were passed along until everyone had one. When the abbot began chanting, everyone joined in unison:

"Burapharasang, Prakhutta-khunang
Burapharasang, Prakhamma-tang
Burapharasang, Prakhasakhanang
Dukkha-rokha-phayang, Viwanchai-ye
Sappha-dukkha, Sappha-soka, Sappha-roka, Sappha-phaya
Sappha-koroh, Seniyad-chonrai, Viwanchai-ye
Sappha-tanang, Sappha-lapang, Bhavantume, Rakkhantu, Surakkantu..."

The harmonious chant filled the temple grounds, creating a sense of calm. Golden Pali script, invisible to the naked eye, began to form a protective wall around the village, safeguarding it from any malevolent forces that might try to intrude.

Monks have their path of practice, and so do those with magical abilities, but above all, their purpose is the same: to protect themselves, their families, and the people of this village.

Upon arriving at Pharan's house, some dispersed to stand guard around the perimeter of the house, readying themselves for battle. The ten most powerful magic practitioners marched up the stairs in formation.

The sounds of footsteps on the stairs creaked.

At the foot of the stairs, two boys who looked alike were kneeling, hands clasped in prayer on either side, as if inviting the assembly of practitioners to ascend.

If one arrives here without encountering these two spirit servants waiting at the stairs, it means that on that day, Master Pharan is not available to meet anyone. This is well known among all the spirituals.

Chai, Lah, and Mek, once students of Master Sek, the grandfather of Master Pharan, believed that Master Pharan was born with significant spiritual merit. His character and disposition from childhood suggested this to them.

Master Sek loved this grandson dearly, and before he passed, he entrusted the villagers to look after him. However, it was usually Master Pharan who ended up taking care of the villagers. For instance, ten years ago, when Chai's six-year-old son wandered into the forest and was lost for three days

and nights, it was Master Pharan, then a monk, who found and carried the exhausted child back. That image was indelibly etched in Chai's memory. Lah and Mek, too, had been helped by Master Pharan on numerous occasions, much like everyone who came here.

There had been no chance to repay his kindness until now when numerous malevolent spirits were heading towards this Thai house. They would not stand by idly.

Upon reaching the house, they saw Master Pharan's towering figure in front of the Buddha altar. They all knelt down and bowed in reverence.

Master Pharan was still in meditation, aware that both his and his grandfather's disciples would come. His lips continued to chant mantras without pause.

Chai, the eldest among the ten, crawled forward, took out a tray with candles, and distributed them for everyone to light, arranging them in a square formation around themselves and the master.

Then, they crawled to kneel behind the master. Some pulled out books with written chants, opening them and beginning to chant in unison with the master.

"Lakke, game, charipe, kirisu kara tate..."

Jett also felt a sense of foreboding, which he had been feeling for some time now.

The loud, piercing calls of the owls resounded, startling Jett awake, though Khem continued to sleep deeply.

The owls called for a while before going silent, dispersing in different directions. But no matter how tired Jett was, he dared not sleep again. He wanted to check outside but didn't dare, as the master had instructed not to leave the room until morning.

After a while, the sound of several footsteps climbing the stairs could be heard. Jett woke up with wide eyes and sat up, looking over at Khem who was sleeping soundly on the bed.

"Khem...Hey, Khem." Jett tried calling out a little louder than usual, but Khem didn't wake up. Jett then got up to check his breathing, letting out a sigh of relief when he confirmed that Khem was still breathing.

But this wasn't good. Each day, Khem seemed to be sleeping more deeply, to the point where he could sleepwalk outside, which was very dangerous. Jett was worried that one day Khem might fall into such a deep sleep that he wouldn't wake up again.

Jett was restless and uncomfortable. He didn't know what was happening outside, but when he heard the sound of chanting, he paled instantly.

The chant he heard was the Assembly of Deities Chant, meant to invite gods from all realms to listen to the Dharma prayers, seeking their protection against dangers and evil forces.

It was believed that the louder the chant was, the higher the spiritual power of the chanter, reaching up to the highest heavens.

After the incident in the haunted forest five years ago, Jett hadn't heard the master recite this chant. There was no need to guess what was about to happen.

Jett quickly got up, lit a candle, placed it in front of him, clasped his hands in prayer, closed his eyes to focus on the chant, and listened to which part they were at before joining in:

"Titthanta, Santike-yang, Munivara-wa, Jana..."

The spirit of Pharan saw a large group of ghosts and demons, numbering over a hundred, advancing towards this village. These malevolent spirits were heading straight here, aiming to take Khemjira's life.

Why go to such lengths?

Pharan pondered inwardly while his spirit spread out, searching for the malevolent spirit that was Khemjira's nemesis, a woman from four hundred years ago, dressed in the attire of a slave owner from that era.

But he couldn't find her, nor could he find the spirit of Chayot, his brother from a past life.

Where could they be?

As one of the spirits was lingering in the deep forest for a long time, the scene in front of Pharan suddenly changed.

From a horde of terrifyingly shaped and grotesque spirits-some running, some walking, some crawling-the scene transformed into an ancient, abandoned Thai house, now filled with dust and debris.

"Are you looking for me?"

Master Pharan heard only the cold voice of a woman but saw no one speaking, so he did not respond.

"Don't meddle in this. Hand over the boy and his mother's spirit to me, and I'll let you all go."

Master Pharan replied softly, "What does the boy have to do with this? Can't you just let him go?" The disciples sitting behind could hear the conversation, but they continued chanting.

"Shut up! What I do is none of your business!"

"..."

"Will you surrender them, or do you want to test me?"

"..."

"But I'll tell you this, even your grandfather, Sek, couldn't do anything against me. A child like you dares to challenge me!"

"..."

"Because no matter what, I will never give up on them!"

Master Pharan called his spirit back to his body. His sharp black eyes opened, looking at the candle flames while his ears caught the sound of wailing and shrill shrieks not far away. The stench of decay and the foul odor of spirits wafted through the air. Thirteen pretas and over a hundred spirits had emerged from the forest to encircle his house, but they couldn't enter due to the multiple layers of magical barriers set by several skilled practitioners.

Chaiya and the other disciples could hear, smell, and sense the presence of these spirits, but they did not show undue panic. Despite the sweat dripping down to soak the collars of their shirts, they remained with hands clasped, waiting to see what Master Pharan would do next.

After finishing the chant to summon the assembly of deities, the next step was to invoke the gods and all sacred entities.

"Everyone, maintain your concentration, keep your minds clear, let go of all attachments, don't let your focus waver even for a moment." Pharan warned while still sitting with his back turned. He closed his eyes once more to recite the invocation:

"I, Pharan, with my power, hereby invite the authority of all my masters, all the Buddhas, the Dhamma, the Sangha, my parents, those who have given birth to me and those who have nurtured me in all lifetimes,

All the deities that protect me, including the great deities, the great Bodhisattvas, and all the exalted beings in the nineteen heavens, the sixteen Brahmas, the fifteen layers of earth, the fourteen subterranean realms, the twenty-one realms of Mother Earth, and the sacred river Ganges,

Please protect, guard, and keep safe...me, my loved ones, my students, and all the lives in this village from any harm. Let no danger approach."

Luang Por Sua who was leading a chant at the temple seemed to hear Pharan's voice carried by the wind, sensing the pure and compassionate spirit of the young man who wished to keep the village safe.

Feeling inspired and emboldened, Luang Por Sua raised his chant louder, prompting the other monks to follow suit.

"In this auspicious universe, in all eight directions, may a wall of glass, in seven layers, come forth to protect and encircle us, Anatta..."

At that moment, after finishing the invocation of gods and sacred beings from all realms, suddenly the sky flashed with golden light, and rain began to fall, but not ordinary rain. The demons writhed and screamed in agony as the rain touched them, and thirteen bolts of lightning struck down, hitting the heads of thirteen ghostly figures, the sound shaking the entire house. Jett was jolted out of his meditation, but Khem remained in deep sleep.

Besides the falling rain, the ground that was getting wet began to turn into a mud pit, pulling down the malevolent spirits struggling to escape, their screams of protest echoing before the mud flowed into their mouths, all under the watchful eyes of the practitioners below who were standing in the rain, chanting their spells. Those above could see this through their own visions.

Everyone thought the same thing: that the rain and lightning were sent by Indra, and the mud pit that swallowed the demons was the work of Mother Earth.

Both deities had responded to the call, and if the one invoking them were not of great merit or of a pure heart, such a result would not have been witnessed.

Soon, everything vanished, and calm returned. The soft morning sunlight streamed into the house, touching the figure of the master, who was still seated. At that moment, all the disciples bowed in unison.

Chapter 9

Khem felt as though he had drifted into a vast, empty void. Everything around him was pitch black, with only a dense white mist and smoke swirling in the air, obscuring all visibility.

Where is this place...Khem could only ponder to himself, the uncertainty making him too scared to even move.

Khem was certain he was dreaming, but the unfamiliar situation filled him with fear.

Please wake up, Khem, I beg you.

Time passed slowly. Khem felt like he had been standing there for hours. Just as he was about to reach the peak of his anxiety, he suddenly heard a voice:

'Khem...come this way, my child.' In the distance, a woman in a white blouse and a traditional Thai skirt was standing, waving him over.

"Mom...is it really you, Mom?" Khem bit his lip, holding back tears, his heart beating rapidly out of fear that it might not truly be his mother.

'It's me, my son. Don't be afraid, I'll take you out of here.' Her voice was warm, something telling him that it was indeed his mother.

"Mom!" Overwhelmed by his longing for his mother, Khem quickly wiped his tears and ran towards her with joy.

"Mom, I missed you so much." Khem embraced his mother, but he could not feel her warmth, as if he was hugging emptiness itself.

This only confirmed that she was no longer alive in the real world, merely a spirit appearing in his dream...

His mother nodded and smiled at Khem, then took his hand and led him forward.

Not long after, Khem saw a light, and suddenly his mother stopped walking. She turned to him with a smile and said:

"Khem, follow that light, my child." Khem looked at his mother with concern, his heart aching so much he almost cried.

"And...what about you, Mom?"

"I can't go, dear. Hurry up, don't worry about me."

"But..." Khem was about to argue when another voice intruded into this dimension.

"Khem, can you hear me, Khem?" It was Jett's voice, sounding very urgent.

Khem bit his lip to hold back tears, gently squeezing his mother's cold hands.

"Mom, come find me again, okay? I'll wait for you, Mom."

His mother smiled and nodded.

"Go quickly." After his mother agreed, Khem reluctantly turned and ran towards the white light that was not far away, which was growing larger and larger until...

Gasp!

Khem jolted awake, his heart pounding so fast he was breathing heavily, then he saw Jett's face sitting by the bed.

"Jett..."

"Yeah, you finally woke up." Jett looked greatly relieved. Khem slowly sat up, gently rubbing his face.

"I dreamt I was somewhere unknown, it was so dark, full of fog and smoke...At first, I was really scared, but then suddenly Mom came to me, Jett. Since she passed away, I've never felt her presence until now. What happened...?" Before Khem could finish speaking, he noticed how weary Jett looked, with dark circles under his eyes as if he hadn't slept at all.

"Jett, what happened last night?" Khem asked, his large eyes flickering with curiosity.

Jett had already told Khem about the incident on the tour bus before they went to sleep, how he had nearly put everyone in danger.

He hadn't realized that it wasn't over yet...

Looking at Khem, Jett felt pity for his friend. He didn't want to tell him, but Khem needed to know because it was Pharan and the other village shamans who had saved him.

"Khem. You need to calm down and listen to me..." Jett recounted everything he knew. From hearing the loud screeches of the owls on the roof, which are considered an ill omen since owls are believed to be ghost birds, to many people with magical abilities coming to this place. Jett heard the master chanting the Assembly of Deities spell, which the master had once used to subdue numerous spirits during the incident of the forest breaking five years ago when he was still a monk.

Last night was the second time Jett heard the master chant this spell, indicating that a large number of spirits were approaching, which turned out to be true. After that, Jett heard the high-pitched shrieks of the pretas, similar to what he heard on the tour bus, along with the stench of decay like that of corpses, and the foul smell of ghosts carried by the wind.

Jett thought they must have come for Khem.

"Five years ago, after the master finished invoking the deities, the spirits retreated back into the deep forest. They didn't bother the villagers again, but last night, I heard the sound of rain and thunder multiple times consecutively. After that, the sun rose, and everything returned to normal. It was amazing, but I regret not going out to see it."

Khem bit his lip tightly.

"I'm sorry, Jett."

"Hey, I didn't say it to make you feel bad, I just wanted you to know that last night, the master and the villagers saved you. Go take a shower and then go see the master. Thank him properly." Khem nodded in agreement, although his eyes were still somewhat downcast.

It was now only half past six, with half an hour to spare. After showering and dressing, Khem followed Jett to the central area used for ceremonies. The master, in a long-sleeved black shirt and matching trousers, was still sitting on a raised wooden platform.

Jett crawled forward, stopped at a respectful distance, and bowed, then looked up to pay respects with his hands clasped, smiling shyly. Khem followed suit, but after bowing, he kept his eyes down, unable to meet the master's gaze, who looked exhausted, with dark circles under his eyes far worse than Jett's, feeling guilty.

Pharan looked at Jett with a gaze as sharp as a knife before turning to the other boy who was sitting small beside him.

"You, are you Khem?"

"Yes, that's me, sir."

"Come closer." Khem gave a small start, looked up, blinking as if unsure whether he heard correctly.

"Go ahead." Jett, still with his hands clasped, leaned in to whisper. Khem opened his mouth slightly and then closed it, quickly crawling forward to kneel and clasp his hands before the master who was seated higher, but he didn't dare to look up at the master's face.

After taking a shower earlier, before meeting the master, Jett had told Khem not to make eye contact with the master for more than three seconds, but he didn't explain why. If Jett didn't tell him, Khem wouldn't ask; he always followed what Jett said without question.

Pharan wasn't concerned with how Khem reacted to him. What he was curious about and had been pondering since last night were the words of the ghost Madam Ramphueng, the nemesis of Khem.

"But I'll tell you this, your grandfather's magic can't do anything to me..."

Madam Ramphueng knew Pharan's grandfather, no doubt they had met before, and he felt very familiar with Khem's real name, so he wanted to verify something to put his mind at ease.

"The thing you're wearing around your neck, show it to me." He said calmly. The other boy trembled slightly before pretending to take off the necklace.

"Just show it, no need to take it off." Khem swallowed, slightly startled by the stern tone of the master, but complied by pulling out the sacred thread necklace over his shirt, then placed his hands on his lap and tilted his head back, closing his eyes for the master to see clearly.

"Here it is." The master's face was expressionless, while Jett tried hard not to laugh. He had never seen anyone so scared of the master yet look so funny in their fear.

Pharan, who was sitting in meditation, unfolded his legs and placed his feet on the ground, picking up a betel leaf from a brass tray, using it to lift Khem's talisman. He leaned in close to examine it. Khem caught a faint pleasant scent from the master and closed his eyes tightly, not daring to breathe deeply.

Pharan narrowed his eyes. This was a genuine tiger-hide talisman, one of only three in the world, blessed by his grandfather. One was in the possession of his grandfather's close friend, a well-known monk who now lived as a forest-dwelling monk; Pharan hadn't heard from him in years.

The second was his, as he was his grandson.

The last one, he never thought, would belong to this boy who had no apparent connection to his grandfather.

Pharan remembered now. This was about sixteen years ago. At that time, he was in middle school, and his grandfather often traveled to various provinces to exorcize ghosts as requested, accompanied by three disciples:

Uncle Chaiya, Uncle Lah, and Uncle Mek, the three most powerful shamans in this village.

That day, Grandpa came to visit him at home. At that time, he was still with his father. Grandpa brought snacks and local souvenirs from the provinces he had visited, and as usual, he shared stories about his work.

Grandpa had met a family in Kanchanaburi; it was a family of three - father, mother, and child...

"The parents aren't the issue, but the three-year-old child has a bad fate, cursed by a spirit with a vendetta against his life. No matter how many times they tried to ward off the curse, it didn't get better. Every time the child gets sick, he's on the brink of death. At this rate, he probably won't live to see five..."

"Oh, the child's name is Khemjira, it's quite fitting, but the bearer of the name is a boy, you know..."

Seeing the child's adorable face, Grandpa took a liking to him. So, he gave him a tiger claw amulet. "Haha." Grandpa laughed merrily, but at that time, Pharan, not quite understanding, frowned and asked:

"Grandpa...Didn't you say we shouldn't interfere with others' karmic debts?"

Grandpa nodded.

"Well, yes, but when I saw his face, I couldn't help but feel pity for him. Once you help, you help."

After that, ten years passed, and Grandpa died of old age, but before passing, he suffered greatly and was in excruciating pain. The image of Grandpa vomiting black blood, writhing in pain, and deliriously seeking death every night was still vivid in Pharan's memory, especially Grandpa's dying wish that he would remember forever:

"Be a white magician, not a black one, and don't meddle in others' karmic affairs. Unless you want to suffer like me."

Pharan let go of the amulet and moved back to his original position after receiving the answer. What he was about to tell the boy in front of him was this:

A pottery jar inscribed with runes to bind a spirit was placed in front of Khem. The master said:

"The spirit in this jar is your mother's." Upon hearing this, Khem's heart sank, his eyes widened in disbelief, staring at the pottery jar as if he couldn't believe it.

"Ma...Mom?" Pharan nodded slightly, not caring whether Khem believed it or not.

"Your mother has been with you all this time. She's a spirit with little power, but she's managed to stay because of her pure intention to protect her child."

"..."

"Her accumulated merit from when she was alive, combined with the protective amulet you've worn since childhood, has kept her from being taken by other spirits to become their servant."

"..."

"But now, the magic in the talisman has completely faded. Your mother only survived because someone has been sending her merit and loving-kindness..." Khem's eyes burned with emotion. The person referred to must have been the father abbot, as Khem hadn't had time to make merit for his mother in recent months.

Pharan watched Khem's face, which was beginning to tear up, without any intention of sparing his feelings.

"Your mother isn't a protected spirit; last night, if I hadn't sheltered her in this pot, she would likely have been destroyed by the stray magic."

Remembering the dream he had this morning, Khem couldn't hold back his tears. He believed every word the master said, so he bowed down to the floor.

"Thank you so much, masterer, thank you for saving my mother." Pharan looked at Khem without acknowledging the thanks, then continued,

"From now on, the ghost that's your nemesis will grow even more powerful. If your mother continues to linger around to protect you like this, it won't be long before that ghost takes her." Khem shook his head in refusal, tears streaming down his face, his large eyes pleading as he looked at the master's face.

"Then...what should I do, master?" Pharan placed the magical pot in front.

"Take it to the temple, perform the rites to send her spirit to the reincarnation where it should be."

"Huh." Khem nodded, wiping his tears with his sleeve before embracing the pot.

"Can I do it tomorrow, master? I...I want to spend one more night with my mother." Pharan watched Khem, who was crying with a runny nose. Not

wanting to admit he felt sorry for him, he pretended to sip his black coffee and replied softly,

"Do whatever you want."

"Thank you, master." Khem bowed again with joy, it was almost time to meet with the club members. He quickly took the pot containing his mother to his bedroom.

Khem placed his mother's pot on the head of the bed, before leaving he gently stroked the lid and spoke to his mother's spirit,

"I have so much I want to talk to you about, Mom. I'll come back soon."

As for Jett, as soon as Khem waddled off with his mother's pot, he quickly crawled closer to the master.

"Master, was it the vengeful spirit after Khem last night?" Pharan looked at Jett with a reprimanding gaze before answering curtly:

"Yes." Jett gave a strained smile.

"Thank you for protecting Khem, Master. You're truly amazing!" Jett exclaimed, but then yelped as the master tapped his head with the edge of a stainless steel tray, causing tears from the pain.

"Just this once. If anything happens again, I won't help. You deal with it yourself."

"Oh, Master, don't you see how pitiful Khem is? He'd be blown away by a mere breeze. How could he possibly confront such a spirit?" Pharan fixed Jett with a stern look.

"Don't make me repeat myself." Jett clenched his lips. He usually didn't argue with the master. If the answer was no, then it was no. But he wanted to plead just this one time for Khem.

"Master...if you won't help Khem...I'll leak your phone number to-...ouch!" Pharan kicked Jett, sending him sprawling backwards.

Chapter 10

Jett thought about getting even with an elbow smack, but this time he feared he'd lose both his elbow and his ground, so he retreated, clasping his hands in apology over his head. When Khem returned, Jett almost carried him away from the house.

Pharan watched the two boys until they were out of sight, then shook his head in mild exasperation.

"Khem is quite cute, isn't he, Master? Won't you help him for real?"

"Yeah, Master, he's really pitiful."

"Thong" and "Ek." The twin ghost boys appeared, sitting formally and clasping their hands in supplication. These two ghosts were quite close to Jett; whenever they were together, they got along like peas in a pod, causing trouble since Jett was knee-high to a grasshopper.

"Want to get your heads knocked like Jett?" Both ghosts gaped at each other before quickly crawling away. Ordinary people might not be able to touch spirits, but the master could!

"We're leaving, we're leaving!"

Jett and Khem arrived at the assembly point right on time at seven in the morning for their scheduled meeting. The first thing they had to do was exercise by doing aerobics to stretch their muscles, led by a senior female club staff member. Many villagers also joined in the exercise.

"Oh, I'm hungry." Jett groaned while rubbing his stomach. After exercising in front of the flagpole, they all gathered at the school cafeteria for breakfast.

"We didn't eat anything last night, and Jett hasn't slept all night. I'll go get some porridge for you, wait here." Khem said, and Jett nodded while yawning. While waiting for Khem to fetch the food, Jett slumped his face down onto the table to nap.

Chanwit, who was in a similar condition, sat down at the table opposite Jett with some porridge. The events of last night left him curious and sleepless. Uncle Chai, the homeowner, had returned at some unknown time;

when he went to take a shower, he saw Uncle Chai sleeping on a bamboo bed behind the house.

Seeing Jett this sleepy only reinforced Chanwit's suspicion that whatever happened last night, Jett and Khem were definitely involved.

Today, he would keep a close eye on these two to find out exactly what happened last night!

Jett devoured two full bowls of pork porridge and a strong cup of black coffee, the bitterness of which woke him up completely, making him ready for the hard work ahead.

Next, they divided into groups to head to different sites: one group to repair the school roof, another to build a library, and another to go to the temple to restore and repair the damaged areas, which were not far from each other, allowing for help if one group needed more people.

The installation of the water filter was scheduled for the next day. After the major Buddhist holiday and the ceremony to honor Indra and Mother Earth, which the village chief had just announced to the volunteer students this morning.

"I heard that the big Buddhist holiday and the ceremony to honor heaven and earth here are usually held in the ninth month, and we're only in the fourth month. Why the rush?" one student remarked to another while they were painting the school fence.

"The villagers might want us to experience their culture. That's good, I brought my camera." another responded.

"Yeah, that's great. We'll get lots of pictures to post on the university page, which might help us get more funding next year." They said, laughing cheerfully.

Cut to Jett and Khem, who were part of the temple restoration team. Jett, looking more robust than Khem, was recruited to fix the roof of the pavilion. After helping others scrub and clean the temple walls, Khem was assigned to be the mural painter on the walls, along with five other club members.

"Wow, Khem, you draw really well." praised Phraemai, a fellow student sitting next to him. Khem's drawing depicted a woman in a white blouse and traditional Thai skirt, kneeling with hands clasped in prayer, with a small boy around three or four years old sitting beside her, and a monk in front giving blessings. The scene captured the early morning atmosphere of a crowded community.

Indeed, Khem had drawn his own family.

"Yours is beautiful too, Phrae. The color balance is great, and the detail on the clothing is excellent." Khem complimented Phraemai in return. She had drawn a woman in ancient Thai attire floating on a boat in a pond surrounded by lotus flowers.

Phraemai laughed when she saw Khem sincerely admiring her work, "Haha, you're too kind, thanks. Seeing you so focused made me serious too." Khem blushed at the compliment, slightly easing his tension as he noticed how easily Phraemai got along with others. They chatted a bit more before each returned to their work.

Jett watched Khem from the temple roof, while Chan, who was helping the villagers mix cement below, also kept an eye on both of them. Come lunchtime, they had sticky rice and fried pork wrapped in banana leaves for lunch, courtesy of the villagers. The sweet and salty taste was something Khem especially liked, reminiscent of how his mother used to fry pork for him with stir-fried vegetables when he was a child.

Missing his mom, Khem wanted to finish his work quickly and return to the master's house to be with her.

The temple work finished around three in the afternoon, later than the school project. This was a free time for the students in the club; some went back home to rest, while others hitched a ride on the village chief's truck to the market in the sub-district, as the next day was a major Buddhist holiday with a planned ritual, requiring preparations.

Once Jett came down from the temple roof, he was immediately engaged in conversations by various villagers. Meanwhile, Khem was all over the place, running in and out of village houses.

Jett had told him that last night, many of the village's spirit doctors had to rise and deal with spirits to assist Master Pharan, not getting any sleep, which Khem felt responsible for, even though no one knew this as the master had kept it secret. To make amends, Khem wanted to help the villagers. In some houses, he helped repair water pipes; in others, he cleaned; he helped dig in gardens for planting, and at some places, he assisted in sorting grains.

After Jett finished talking with one of the villagers, he couldn't find Khem. He had seen him heading towards Grandma Si's house, but when he asked her, she said he had finished cleaning her house and then left.

Chanwit watched Jett, who seemed restless whenever Khemjira wasn't nearby, and he couldn't help but furrow his brows in suspicion about their relationship. It was unusual for friends to not let the other out of their sight like this.

Or were they more than just friends?

Chanwit was left to ponder this on his own. The world had moved on; even though he might seem like he was from another era, it wasn't as if he didn't understand human rights.

But the look in the eyes of people with romantic interest was not like this. His father had once been entranced by a woman, leading to his divorce from Chanwit's mother. The way his father looked at that woman was filled with love and desire.

But the look in Jett's eyes when he looked at Khemjira was more like how a mother watches her toddler taking his first steps, as if if Khemjira stumbled, Jett's world would end...or so he thought.

Damn it.

Chanwit pinched his temples, not understanding why he was so fixated on Jett and Khemjira.

"Hey, you." Chanwit lowered his hand, his eyebrow twitching slightly when someone called him "you." in the rudest way possible, but when he saw who it was, his body tensed up instantly.

Confused, suspicious, and excited, these three feelings clashed in Chanwit's head.

"Khun Jett?" Chanwit accidentally called out, which made Jett raise an eyebrow, wondering how the other knew his name, but then he remembered he was somewhat famous and didn't think much of it. Right now, he had to find Khem.

"Yeah. Have you seen my friend? He's small, big eyes, brown hair, and is wearing a blue t-shirt." Jett described Khem to Chan, but the answer he got left Jett momentarily speechless.

"My name is Chanwit, you can just call me Chan." Chan responded with a frown. He was usually polite to others, but being called "you" by someone he wasn't close to was really irritating, especially by Jett.

"Oh, right, okay. Chan, have you seen my friend? Small, big eyes, brown hair, wearing a blue t-shirt." Jett corrected himself by adding the name, thinking the other just wanted to introduce himself. Chanwit was still annoyed, but it was better than being called "you" earlier.

"Why do you keep following Khem around all the time?" Chan thought it was best to ask directly because he had been observing these two all day without getting any answers, and it was wasting his time.

"Huh?"

"The incident where the bus nearly crashed, and then many villagers walking down the road to the west in the middle of the night, in the same direction Jett and Khem went earlier. What exactly is going on? What are you two up to?" Chanwit fired off questions without giving Jett a chance to respond.

Hearing the accusations, Jett started to get irritated, about to curse out Chan, when Khem's voice rang out from behind:

"Jett, help me, help me!"

"Damn!"

"Watch out!"

Khem was struggling to carry a whole bunch of bananas, his arms laden with bags of food and snacks hanging off them. He stumbled over a stone.

Both Jett and Chan felt like they'd been zapped, their bodies jerking as they rushed to help Khem. Chan, being the largest and strongest, took on the task of carrying the banana bunch, which was quite heavy...

Meanwhile, Jett quickly relieved Khem of the bags of snacks and other food, complaining as he did so:

"Why did you bring back so much stuff? Are you starving or what, Khem?"

"The villagers gave these to me, okay? Keep talking, and I won't share any!" Khem retorted immediately.

In truth, Khem initially didn't want any reward, intending to repay the villagers and atone for the trouble he caused. But the villagers wouldn't take no for an answer. Eventually, Khem couldn't refuse their kindness and accepted everything they gave, including this entire bunch of bananas...

"You've gotten quite bold, huh?" Khem stuck out his tongue at Jett before turning to the man who had come to help carry the bananas. This man was tall, with jet-black hair slicked back and wearing square-framed glasses, giving off a scholarly vibe. Khem vaguely remembered his name was Chanwit.

"Is your name Chanwit? Thank you for helping. Otherwise, I'd have fallen flat on my face. Here, let me take it now." Khem said, checking his hands and shirt, which were already stained with paint. He then extended

his arms to take back the bananas, thinking he could manage now that his arms were free from the other bags.

However, Chan shook his head in refusal. He stole a quick glance at the red mark on Khem's arm before replying.

"I think it's better if I hold it for you."

"Let me choose one for you to hold." Jett quickly said, feeling a strong aversion to Chanwit since the earlier incident, wanting to send Chanwit away.

But Khem felt an immediate liking for Chanwit, sensing he was probably a good person. There was something about Chanwit that made him feel safe, and he seemed more mature than both Khem and Jett. If they could be friends, it wouldn't be bad at all.

"Then, how about we go sit and eat some snacks? We've got so much, no way we can finish it all." Khem suggested with a flushed face. Chanwit looked at him and felt a sense of endearment, so he nodded.

"Sure, there's a small wooden pavilion up ahead where we can sit and rest."

"No way, Khem, let's just go home. I want to take a shower." Jett objected with a displeased face, but he was taken aback when Khem turned to look at him with a pout and raised eyes.

"Can't we sit and have some snacks first, Jett? I'm hungry, and if we walk all the way to the master's house, I'll definitely faint." Jett's mouth opened and closed as he glared at his friend in annoyance.

"Fine, but you turned to stone in front of the master, remember!" Khem put both hands over his ears as if to block out the words, just thinking about the master's face made his legs tremble.

"Alright, alright, Chan, lead the way."

While eating snacks at the village's central wooden pavilion, Khem eagerly asked Chanwit about himself, his major, and year of study. It turned out Chanwit was studying Social Sciences, majoring in Psychology, and was in the same year as Jett and Khem.

"Wow, you're really smart."

"It's just okay, ouch." Jett yelped as Khem pinched his waist. Chan wasn't paying attention to Jett. He nodded to Khem and responded,

"Khun Khem, you are smart too."

"Ugh, sorry, sorry."

"Sorry on behalf of Jett, he's just got a foul mouth like this, but he's actually a good person." Khem apologizes on behalf of his friend while Jett turns his face away, and Chan gives a small smile.

"I don't mind crazy people." Jett says, turning back with his neck almost snapping.

"Damn, do you want a punch, Khem? My waist is all bruised now!"

"Jett, calm down!"

For the sake of Khem, both Chan and Jett temporarily stop their bickering and focus on eating, with some small talk about tomorrow's plans. After eating, they helped clean up the trash, but Khem had set aside some food for himself, his mother, and the priest. Khem hadn't properly thanked the priest for the events of the previous night.

Then, Chan walked Khem and Jett to the end of the concrete road, flanked by banana trees, with a rubber plantation ahead where a narrow dirt road cuts through.

Earlier, Chan found out that Jett and Khem were staying at the house of Master Pharan, a respected shaman in the village. Khem explained that Jett was also a disciple of Master Pharan, which is why they were staying there since Jett's real home was far away in the district.

"Just drop us here, you can go back." Jett quickly grabs a bunch of bananas from Chan, while Khem stands waiting not far away.

"About what you asked me, don't go asking Khem about it, got it?" Jett warns as a final note. Even though Chan didn't mention it to Khem earlier, one can never be too sure in the future.

Chan shrugs.

"Next time, if I ask you and you don't give me a good answer, I'll ask Khun Khem."

Jett glared at him.

"Damn, you'll get it from me." Khem shouts, hearing something about getting 'it'.

"Jett, what are you saying!" Jett immediately gets annoyed.

"Ugh, you're really annoying, you know that!"

Chapter 11

After arriving home, having taken turns to shower and change clothes, Jett told Khem to go prepare the meal for the priest in the kitchen. Meanwhile, Jett would go invite the priest downstairs for dinner.

The villagers had provided both savory and sweet dishes, along with homegrown brown rice, so Khem didn't need to spend time cooking rice.

The master came downstairs alone. Where Jett had gone, nobody knew. Khem stole a glance and noticed that the other man seemed to have just woken up. His hair was slightly messy, but he still looked very handsome.

Khem shook his head to clear his irrelevant thoughts before quickly pulling out a chair from the fine wooden table for the priest to sit down, where the table was laden with food.

Pharan sat down, immediately started serving himself some food, and then quietly said to Khem, who was standing awkwardly behind him:

"You can go find your mother if you wish." Khem pressed his lips together before nodding quickly.

"Thank you, Master." After saying this, he went into the kitchen, grabbed the trays of food for his mother and himself, and headed straight up the stairs to the bedroom.

Pharan looked at the abundance of food on the table and sighed to himself, as he had actually already eaten dinner before these two young men returned.

It was quite a commotion.

"Tonight, you stay with your mother, I'll sleep outside."

Khem nodded, "Thank you, Jett."

"Easy, just call me if you need anything." Jett ruffled Khem's hair gently before taking his pillow and blanket outside.

Khem placed his mother's food tray on the floor, separated his own plate from the tray, got up to open the pot lid on the bed's headboard, then sat back down on his knees to light an incense stick as per tradition, closed his eyes and said:

"Mother, I've brought the food. There's your favorite green curry too. Come out and eat with me, Mother." A warm breeze passed through, and Khem slowly opened his eyes to see his mother's face, which, though slightly pale, was still as beautiful as ever.

"I am here." Khem held back his tears as best he could and nodded, giving his mother a sweet smile.

"Let's eat, mom, there's nothing but delicious food here." Kekai nodded, looking at her child's plate which only has an omelet over white rice because the child gave her the best and tastiest food.

Her eyes felt hot, her heart ached with unbearable pain. She wanted to scoop some of everything onto her child's plate so they could eat together, just like when she was still alive.

But now, she couldn't do that.

Because she had passed away.

She was no longer in the same world as her child.

Therefore, the food offered to the dead, the living can't eat together.

"Thank you, my child." between us, mother and child, there was an incense pot barrier. Kekai, swallowing hard, forced herself to eat the food with tears in her eyes.

"Mom, please don't cry, I'm very happy to be able to eat with you again." Khem said with a smile, though tears streamed down his cheeks as he ate, wiping his tears because he couldn't stop crying.

Kekai nodded.

"Okay, dear, you shouldn't cry either."

The two both ate until we finished, then Khem took the dishes downstairs to wash and brushed his teeth before bed.

"I'll run up quickly, mom."

Kekai shook her head, **"No running, dear, be considerate of the spirits of the house."**

Khem smiled and nodded, "Okay, mom, I won't run."

Meanwhile, Jett leaned a wooden ladder against the house by Khem's bedroom window, with a shoulder bag containing a hammer and nails, and in one hand, he carried a solid wooden rod about a meter long or so. He placed nails into the wood to block the window, preventing anyone inside from opening it and jumping out.

After the day Khem almost jumped from the balcony, Jett didn't trust him to sleep alone anymore, and even when sleeping together, he tied Khem's

leg to himself. Today, not sleeping together, he couldn't help but be wary, fearing Khem might have strange dreams and open the window.

Once done, he put the tools away and returned to the house, setting up the mosquito net and laying out the bed near the door.

At this time, Pharan was meditating to enter a trance as usual when he heard the sound of someone hammering something, and he immediately guessed who it was.

That Jett...

Khem came back upstairs once more, passing by Jett who was lying guard near the door. His mother was still sitting on the bed, waiting, so he quickly climbed onto the bed to be close to her.

"Mother, can I sleep in your lap?"

Kekai smiled, **"Of course, my child."**

Khem lay down with his head in his mother's lap and told her about what he had done that day. Her pale hands gently stroked his hair to lull him to sleep, as she often did when he was asleep.

She didn't dare to appear in front of her son, fearing he might become too attached and worried, so she had always just watched from a distance.

Khem looked up at his mother, taking her cold hands and holding them to his chest.

"Mother...tomorrow, I...I'll take you to the temple, okay mother?" Kekai pressed her lips together, tears in her eyes, nodding slightly, though it was hard for her to let go, but ultimately, she had to allow her son to face his destiny alone.

Master Pharan had told her. That if she continued to follow her son like this, it would only make Khem's life harder.

The more spirits that followed him, the weaker he would become.

Because she was a spirit with very little power, unable to contend with anyone, if one day her spirit were to vanish or be taken as a servant by another, her son would surely suffer and blame himself.

"I will go with you."

Khem reached up to wipe his mother's tears, then gave her a faint smile.

"Mother doesn't need to worry about me, I'll get through it, I'll live until I'm old, believe in me, mother." Kekai nodded again.

"I believe in you...It's very late now. Go to sleep, my child, you have to wake up early tomorrow."

Khem shook his head from side to side.

"But I still want to talk to you, mom." Khem tried to keep the conversation going with various topics, but soon, his body couldn't resist fatigue, especially with his mother's hand combing through his hair and her lullaby soothing him to sleep. Khem slowly sank into a deep slumber.

Sleep now, my dear, I'll sing you to sleep,
Gently rocking, my lullaby deep,
Golden mother, don't cry and weep,
Your love, my dear, forever to keep...

The lullaby was melodious, carried by the breeze, echoing eerily, mixed with the chirping of crickets and interspersed with intermittent sobs that would touch anyone's heart. Some villagers, half-awake, even got up to chant prayers out of compassion, not knowing who the singer of this child's lullaby was...

When Khem was soundly asleep with a slight smile of contentment on his face, Kekai gently placed his head on the pillow, covered him with a blanket, and stroked his head one last time before whispering softly,

"Sweet dreams, my child."

Kekai stepped out of the bedroom, seeing Jett sleeping in the mosquito net near the door, she smiled with affection, knelt down, and gently stroked the young man's head.

"Thank you very much for always taking care of Khem, may blessings protect you from now on, may you be safe, my child."

Jett felt a cool touch on his head, but being too sleepy, he didn't open his eyes. He just took note of it in his heart...

Pharan, who was meditating, slowly opened his eyes. The light from the large candle helped him see who had come to visit, though not very clearly.

"Hello, master." Kekai said before bowing to the ground. Pharan felt reluctant to have her bow to him but didn't interrupt her faith, so he just nodded in acknowledgment.

"Thank you for helping me and my child." She looked up with a beautiful smile, and Pharan's expression softened slightly.

"I just did what I could, it's not a favor." Kekai nodded.

"Master, Khem is a good boy."

Pharan listened silently, not quite understanding why she brought this up.

"He speaks well, studies well, draws beautifully, cooks well, and does all the household chores competently."

"..."

"If in the future, Master, should you wish to have someone by your side, please consider my son too, okay?"Pharan believed that if he had taken a sip of the tea next to him a moment ago, he would have scalded his mouth. Thong and Ekk spirits sitting in the corner of the room even raised their hands to stifle their laughter, while sending teasing glances his way.

Pharan didn't know how to react facially, but he nodded in acknowledgment to the young spirit before him and replied:

"Yes, Auntie."

Kekai smiled. She didn't know why, but she felt that this man would help Khem survive safely, especially after what had happened before. She felt confident about this.

"Please take care of Khem, Master." She bowed again. Even though Master Pharan didn't explicitly promise, his eyes softened, which reassured her a lot, and then her body gradually faded into the air.

Kekai appeared again in front of Phra Pinto's cabin, her former husband. This time, Phra Pinto wasn't standing on the steps anymore. He walked down and stopped in front of her, where she sat cross-legged on the ground, the distance neither too close nor too far.

Kekai clasped her hands in prayer and bowed three times, then looked up with a faint smile.

"I've come to say goodbye, my dear monk." A tear streamed down from her beautiful eyes, even though her lips were still smiling.

A sudden pang of emptiness filled her heart, but Phra Pinto remained composed, then spoke to his former wife's spirit:

"Goodbye, Kai, do not worry, do not be anxious anymore."

Kekai nodded through her tears.

"Thank you so much for everything, my dear monk."

"..."

"If I hadn't met you in this life, I wouldn't know how much I would have suffered."

"..."

"If there is a next life, I hope we can meet again." Kekai said, then bowed at Phra Pinto's feet, her tears dropping onto the ground, making it damp. Her ears caught the sound of chanting, and her pale body suddenly glowed with a bright golden light.

"Sabbeputta, sabbedhamma, sabbesangha, palappatta, paccekaanam, jayang palang..."

Chapter 12

Khem woke up at four in the morning, looked around the room, didn't see anyone, so he quickly sat up. Glancing at the clay pot, he saw it was tightly closed, realizing his mother had returned inside it.

Knock knock

"Khem, are you awake?" Jett's voice called out, waking him. Khem replied that he was awake, then got up to tidy his bed before hurrying out.

Master Pharan was waiting on a bamboo platform not far from the kitchen, with a cup of black coffee beside him, and a dog named Ai Dang was lying guard underneath.

"Go wash your face and come help prepare things." Master Pharan said quietly without turning to look. At that moment, he was wrapping tobacco, betel nut, and miang into bite-sized portions on a tray with banana leaves.

Jett and Khem took turns washing up and brushing their teeth before rushing into the kitchen. Jett had steamed the sticky rice in a pot since three in the morning before going back to sleep. Now, with the rice cooked, he took it out of the pot, flipped it onto a tray, and used a clean stick to spread it out, letting the steam escape.

Khem took charge of preparing the savory dishes, which included fried pork and fried fish, simple meals as instructed by Jett.

Once done, they both carried the food out to Master Pharan's bamboo platform, then found low stools to sit on below while Master Pharan sat alone on the platform.

"Oh, damn, I forgot I asked the village chief to buy some sweets." Jett said as he remembered, scratching his head, putting down the banana leaf, and standing up. Khem was also startled.

"Should I go with you, Jett?"

"No need, you stay here to help Master Pharan. I'll go quickly and come back. Master, may I borrow your bike, please?" When Master Pharan nodded, Jett ran to grab the master's bike with a front basket, pulled it from under the house, and cycled off immediately.

Khem could only watch with drooping eyes as he was abandoned by his friends, before he made up his mind and slowly turned back to look at Master Pharan, who was wrapping sticky rice and fried pork in banana leaves. He watched Master Pharan's slender, veined hands, observing his movements and trying to mimic them.

But the oppressive atmosphere emanating from Master Pharan made Khem feel like he couldn't breathe properly, so he gathered his courage to strike up a conversation, figuring if he got scolded, he'd just stay quiet.

"Uh, what is this called, Master?" Pharan glanced at Khem's face for just a moment before answering calmly:

"Small rice packets." Seeing that Master Pharan was willing to respond, Khem's spirits lifted, and he immediately asked another question.

"What are they for?"

"They're placed at the base of trees around a few temples, as an offering for the spirits." Pharan, seeing Khem listening intently with wide eyes, continued to explain when, where, why, and how, until Jett returned on his bicycle with a bag of sweets. Then Master Pharan stopped his explanation and focused back on wrapping the rice in banana leaves.

Khem understood from what Master Pharan had explained that this tradition is also known as "The Merit-making Ceremony of Decorating the Earth with Rice." a long-standing practice in the Northeastern part of Thailand.

On the fourteenth day of the waning moon in the ninth month of every year, villagers would bring various foods, both savory and sweet, fruits, betel nuts, and cigarettes, wrap them in banana leaves, and place them under large trees, on the ground near the temple area, around the stupa, or the ordination hall, to make merit for the spirits of deceased relatives or ancestors, as well as for wandering spirits, those without kin, and hungry ghosts.

Jett handed a bag of sweets to Khem to wrap in banana leaves, then went to cut a banana bunch that Khem had received from the villagers the day before into small pieces to be placed in bowls.

Once everything was prepared, Jett and Khem followed Master Pharan into the woods behind the house. Not far into the woods, Master Pharan placed nine small rice packets at the base of a Bodhi tree, lit one candle and one incense stick, chanted an invocation for the spirits in the area to come and receive the food, and then planted the incense into the ground.

"Stay here." Master Pharan turned to say briefly before, carrying a bag of small rice packets, he walked further into the woods.

Once alone with Jett, Khem quietly asked:

"Jett, Master said this tradition is held in the ninth month, but it's only the fourth month now. Why are we doing it so early?" Jett scratched his head, having completely forgotten to tell Khem about this.

"It's about the incident where the spirits invaded the village two days ago. Today is the Buddhist holy day, so Master Pharan suggested to the other shamans who came that day that we should hold this ceremony now, rather than waiting for the ninth month when the spirits might come out to cause trouble again." Khem said with a nod of understanding, pursing his lips.

"I'm sorry." Jett shook Khem's head back and forth.

"Don't overthink it, it's over now. No one wanted it to happen. Better to spend your time thinking about how to deal with the spirits or karmic debts." Khem nodded, and Jett was right again.

After a while, Master Pharan returned. Jett explained that Master Pharan had gone alone because he was worried about their safety, as there were not only many spirits but also potentially harmful animals in there.

Then Master Pharan went back inside the house. Meanwhile, Jett and Khem cycled around on Master Pharan's bike, placing offerings at various locations from the rubber plantation, banana grove, the village's three-way junction, to the temple area. Several volunteer students who were interested in local culture also joined in. Although it was done quietly, the atmosphere was quite lively.

Wherever Jett and Khem cycled, they were greeted and called to by villagers all along the way. When they met Chan, Khem quickly pulled Jett's shirt collar to make him stop the bike.

"Ack, let me go, Khem!"

Khem ignored Jett's whining and greeted Chan.

"Chan, you're out too?"

Chan had just finished watering the plants by the roadside and stood up with a polite smile.

"Hello, Khun Khem, where are you heading?" Jett was about to curse, but Khem covered his mouth.

"We're going to the temple. Want to join, Chan?" At first, Chan was going to decline, as he had already done his merit-making, but seeing Jett's glare, he nodded in agreement. Khem immediately jumped off the bike to walk

with Chan, forcing Jett to get off and push the bike, restraining himself from cursing the thick-skinned Chan since they were now near a sacred area.

The three of us arrived at the area beside the temple's ordination hall and sat next to Grandma Si, a seventy-year-old woman lighting incense, clasping her hands together, calling out for her relatives and ancestors to come and receive the merit.

"Come, dear parents and siblings, grandparents, today we offer food and alms. There's plenty to eat, a big fish cake, rice, water, sweets, bananas, sugarcane. May all suffering be relieved, may all karmic debts be resolved, may you ascend to heaven. Amen."

As Grandma Si said "Amen." Jett, Khem, and Chan followed suit, then helped her up from the ground.

"Oh, thank you very much, boys. Go, go get the sweets from home, there are plenty."

After receiving the sweets, Chan parted ways with Khem and Jett at Grandma Si's house. Each went back home to bathe and get dressed, preparing to return to the temple to offer food to the monks and listen to the sermon at eight in the morning.

After Khem had bathed and dressed, he prepared food in a lacquered food container while waiting for Jett. The food had been set aside earlier for offering to the monks.

"Khem, are you done?" Jett, dressed in a white round-neck shirt and baggy jeans styled like the 90s, asked while putting on his sneakers at the bottom of the stairs. Khem nodded after neatly stacking the food containers.

"Done, just wait a moment. I need to get my mother's pot first." After saying this, Khem ran past Jett upstairs to the bedroom to get his mother's pot, wrapped it in white cloth, tied it up, and placed it in a yellow shoulder bag.

"Here we go." Khem said after slinging the bag over his shoulder and picking up the food container. Jett went to fetch the priest's bicycle again.

"Get on." Khem hesitated, not daring to move forward, secretly looking up to the balcony to see if anyone was watching.

"Uh, is it okay to take the priest's bicycle, Jett?"

"It's fine. At this time, the priest is asleep and not going anywhere. Don't worry." Khem made a doubtful face but then agreed to sit on the back of the bicycle.

"Wait, isn't the priest coming to the temple?"

"No, he usually doesn't go to the temple much, only when there's something important. But later in the morning, there will be a spirit worship ceremony, I'll come back to pick him up."

Khem nodded in agreement to whatever Jett said.

Once they arrived at the temple, the first thing to do was to deliver his mother's pot to one of the senior monks.

"You wait here, I'll go invite the abbot." Jett said, leaving Khem standing under a tree while he went to the monk's quarters. Soon, a monk returned with Jett. Seeing the monk, Khem quickly knelt down, placed his mother's wrapped pot beside him, and bowed three times on the ground.

"Paying respects, father abbot."

"Blessings to you, benefactor."

Jett came around to sit beside Khem after paying respects with his hands over his head and introduced the monk to his close friend.

"Khem, this is Luang Por Sua, the abbot of this temple." Khem's eyes widened in surprise, and he quickly bowed again, not expecting his friend to bring such an esteemed monk.

"Na...Namaste, Luang Por Sua. My name is Khem."

"Hmm. No need for too much formality. Your mother is in there, right? Bring her here; I will perform the rites." The abbot said, his eyes softening with compassion, knowing this child's karma was unusually heavy.

"Here, thank you very much, father abbot." Khem said after handing over the pot. He stepped back and bowed three more times.

"You don't need to worry. Your mother's spirit is a good one; her path ahead is certainly not one of hardship." Hearing this, Khem felt relieved, quickly wiping away his tears and smiling.

"Understood, father abbot, thank you for your trouble."

After that, Khem and Jett joined the other villagers and students in the temple's pavilion. They began the ceremony of offering alms for the morning meal to the monks and novices. After the offering, Khem returned to the same Bodhi tree to perform the water pouring ritual to transfer merit to his mother.

"I wish for my mother to have only happiness, to become an angel in heaven, and for us to be mother and child again in the next life, mom." With delicate hands, he poured water from a brass vessel onto the ground,

unaware that behind him appeared the figure of his mother, waiting to receive the merit.

Kekai's beautiful face smiled brightly, her body glowing with a golden radiance. Her hand gently stroked her son's hair as he performed the ritual, though Khem could neither see nor feel it.

"Thank you, my child." Then, Kekai's spirit slowly dispersed into golden particles that floated up into the sky, leaving only a warm breeze to embrace her beloved son before departing forever...

Pharan woke up again in the morning, about an hour before the scheduled ceremony.

Today, he dressed in a long-sleeved white shirt, black well-fitted slacks, matching leather shoes, and sunglasses to shield his eyes. Once properly dressed, he walked to the area designated for parking bicycles.

However, there was nothing...

Pharan looked up at a window of a bedroom, made of fine golden teak wood, which had been blocked off with decayed wooden shutters without permission, and at the bicycle parking spot that was now empty, he could only close his eyes to suppress his feelings, and decided to walk into the village like this...

In the center of the village, where the ceremony to worship the heavens and earth was taking place, the square table, formed by connecting four tables, was now laden with offerings. There were the Brahmin and the Hindu celestial offerings, five kinds of savory dishes, nine types of auspicious sweets, including boiled pig's head, boiled duck, boiled chicken, and steamed snakehead fish, each one, nine types of fruits and various grains in one bowl, two bouquets of flowers in vases, betel nuts, tobacco, two garlands of marigolds, popped rice, and incense with four incense holders at the corners, all in adherence to the twelve traditional items.

Jett and Khem were so busy helping the villagers set up for the ceremony that they completely forgot something important, and by the time they remembered, it was too late.

Khem's jaw dropped when someone appeared, while Jett slapped his forehead loudly.

"Damn it, I forgot to pick up the master!"

After this event, it was expected that Jett would certainly be cut out of the inheritance by the priest...

The atmosphere at the worship ceremony changed immediately when Master Pharan appeared. His handsome face, though partially hidden by sunglasses, and his strong, confident demeanor made it impossible for onlookers to look away, especially the women. Some even tried to position themselves closer to the priest, but they were pushed back by his disciples.

Master Pharan, accustomed to ignoring his surroundings, was only focused on fulfilling his duties so he could return home to sleep early.

"Jett, why do the women in the village seem so excited?" Khem asked upon seeing the slight commotion at the front, while he was holding his hands in prayer, watching Master Pharan light nine incense sticks to worship the Triple Gem from afar.

Jett, also with his hands in prayer, replied:

"I could tell you about this all day and still not finish. Let's just say the priest usually keeps to himself at home, he rarely comes out among people like this." Khem nodded in understanding, the vibe was like when a friend who rarely comes to class shows up, and everyone gets excited to see him.

Pharan performed his duty as the master of ceremonies, his large hands holding sixteen lit incense sticks at chest level, his lips moving in chants to invite and praise the gods and deities.

"I invoke the gods and deities, the sacred Phra Pirun and Mother Earth, to protect and safeguard the lives of the villagers here from all inauspicious things..."

The villagers all clasped their hands in prayer while Master Pharan conducted the ceremony step by step. Those close to the ritual area sat cross-legged on the mats, while those further away stood with hands clasped in prayer, mostly the volunteer student members.

Suddenly, it began to rain, amidst the sound of traditional Thai music being played and the dancers performing to honor the gods.

Master Pharan stood tall in front of the altar, his white shirt soaked by the rain, clinging to his body, revealing the intricate tattoos by a renowned monk covering his back. Despite the rain, the incense and candles still burned. No one moved to seek shelter; instead, they all raised their hands in reverence, covering their heads in respect.

Chapter 13

At a time when many, including Jett and Khem, were filled with faith in Master Pharan, a whisper could be heard from two young men standing at the front.

"I think the villagers are just being superstitious."

"Right, like any ordinary person could summon rain." 'Kornkan' replied, with 'Pondit' nodding in agreement. This was their reaction after seeing the villagers almost bowing to the man in a white shirt leading the ceremony, believing the rain was due to mere coincidence.

Both were first-year engineering students who had ended up joining the volunteer club because their preferred clubs were full. They weren't really enthusiastic about participating in this event, but they were worried about not meeting the activity points criteria in the future, and also wanted to experience a trip out of town, so they reluctantly agreed.

Upon hearing this, Jett's eyebrows furrowed sharply. Khem, who heard the same, quickly grabbed his friend's sleeve, tugging to prevent Jett from saying or doing anything, as the ceremony was still in progress.

Chan, standing quietly beside Khe, couldn't help but furrow his brows as he looked towards the two people. He himself had a rather agnostic view on religious matters. Although he had some experience, he wouldn't believe anything unless he saw it with his own eyes, yet he never disrespected or spoke out in a way that made others feel uncomfortable, unlike what those two were doing.

People don't necessarily have to say everything they think, but they should think before they speak...

Jett could only seethe internally because there was nothing he could do except remember the faces of the two men in front of him. Next time if he hears them say anything offensive, he won't just stand by.

Pharan was invited by the village chief to watch the traditional dance performance accompanied by local music inside a tent, seated on a long wooden chair reserved for the chief of the ceremony. Before the

performance, one of his students brought a clean cloth for him to wipe his face.

Once the performance ended, Pharan prepared to walk back home, but someone half-walked, half-ran, pushing a bicycle alongside him.

"Uh, Master, your bicycle, sir." Khem spoke kindly, with beads of sweat on his face, fearing he might get scolded.

Pharan looked at Khem for a moment, then his gaze went over the young man's head, spotting Jett hiding behind a mango tree, using his friend as a scapegoat. Although he felt annoyed, he kept it to himself, planning to deal with it later.

Pharan placed his hand on one of the bike handles, causing Khem to let go and step back.

"What are you guys planning to do next?"

Khem, who had been looking down in fear, immediately looked up at the master, surprised he wasn't scolded and was instead being asked a question.

"Uh, after we finish installing the water purifier, the village chief will take us to plant trees in the forest, and then we'll go to the waterfall, sir."

Pharan slightly frowned at the mention of the waterfall; this village indeed had a small one, about five hundred meters north into the forest.

At this time of year, the water wasn't swift or deep enough to be dangerous, making it possible to play safely, but with Khem, who knows...

He considered forbidding him from playing in the water but was afraid it might cause an unnecessary fuss. Pharan sighed softly, pushed down the bike stand with his foot, and said...

"Give me your arm." Khem blinked once before quickly extending his arm to Master Pharan. The other man took a thread from his shirt pocket, tied it around Khem's wrist, and mumbled some incantations that Khem couldn't understand. Then he tapped Khem's wrist and blew on it softly.

Master Pharan's actions shocked Khem so much he almost fainted, his face growing so hot it felt like it would burn.

"Don't let it come off." Master Pharan said with a calm voice after raising his head, and Khem felt fortunate that Master Pharan was wearing sunglasses. Otherwise, he would have seen how red his face had become.

"Yes, understood, thank you, Master." Khem said with a bow. Master Pharan then let go of his arm and turned to mount his bicycle, cycling back to his home, leaving behind the warmth at Khem's wrist, which he

absentmindedly touched while his light brown eyes followed Master Pharan until he was out of sight.

The village chief had brought the volunteer club students to plant trees in the forest because the students wanted photos of their activities to post on the university's page to promote their club. They also wanted to visit a nearby waterfall.

Seeing that the kids had worked hard for two full days and needed a break, the village chief reluctantly agreed to take them, despite not wanting to go into the forest during this time.

The volunteer students worked with zeal to finish planting the trees quickly, eager to head to the waterfall sooner rather than later, as the later it got, the less time they would have to enjoy. Except for Jett, who was already tired of playing.

It took less than an hour to finish planting. The village chief led the students deeper into the forest, about three hundred meters further. Soon they encountered a small waterfall, about waist-deep and ten meters wide, cascading from the mountain through the forest.

But before letting the students play in the water, the village chief lit incense to ask for forgiveness from the forest spirits, to prevent any disturbance or unintentional disrespect.

The villagers here had been taught from their ancestors that every part of this forest has its guardians, and one cannot do as they please without regard.

"Man, even for playing in the water, they have to light incense and pray." Kornkan's voice remarked to Pondit, shaking his head in disgust.

"I don't know why these villagers are so blindly believing in things science can't prove. None of what they do makes any sense." Pondit laughed under his breath, nodding in agreement.

Yet, it was Jett, Khem, and Chan who once again overheard this conversation.

However, before Jett could take a step, Chan moved in first to speak with Kornkan and Pondit.

This time, Khem didn't think to stop Jett because what those two had said was too harsh, even for him who was much calmer than Jett.

"Both of you should watch what you say. How do you think people who believe feel when they hear you talk like this?" Kornkan and Pondit, feeling

embarrassed after being scolded like that, one of them even pushed Chan's chest in response.

"Who are you to lecture us, you glasses-wearing nerd? Want to get hurt? I'm already in a bad mood." Kornkan said aggressively, but Jett stepped in front of Chan with an even more confrontational stance, pushing the other back. Khem, unable to intervene in time, could only follow and stand nearby.

"Whoever I am, it doesn't matter. You two have filthy mouths. Who could stand by and not say anything?" Kornkan nearly threw a punch at Jett's face, but Pondit held him back.

"You, you are the son of..." Hearing this, Kornkan gritted his teeth in anger but didn't dare do anything to Jett and stormed off in frustration.

Khem sighed with relief as the situation ended peacefully, without the violence he initially feared.

"Let's go clean ourselves up." Chan said calmly after looking at his own dirt-stained hands, then started walking away. Khem tugged at Jett's shirt to stop him from glaring after Kornkan and Pondit, and Jett reluctantly followed Chan without his usual hostility.

After cleaning up, Jett and Chan stood on a large rock above a waterfall stream, watching Khe playing in the water with a girl named Phraemai. One seemed to have played until bored, the other never liked such childish activities, despite knowing how to swim.

Jett standing there watching over Khem wasn't unusual, but for Chan, who had only recently met them, it felt odd to share Jett's concern for Khem without any apparent reason, and Chan wasn't even trying to figure out why anymore.

"Thanks for earlier." Jett said quickly, almost too fast for anyone to catch, causing Chan to turn and look at him, asking for clarification.

"What?" Jett frowned in irritation but repeated himself slowly and clearly, "I said, thank you." Chan blinked once.

"I must have misheard, could you say that again?" Jett nodded and then kicked Chan into the water without warning.

Chan, not expecting this from Jett, fell into the water unprepared.

Thump!

"You deserve it for annoying me!"

"Hey! Chan!" Khem, seeing the incident, quickly swam over, and Phraemai, who also witnessed it, followed to check if their friend, who

lived in the same house, was okay. Phraemai had met Chan when they both joined the club, but they weren't particularly close; they only started talking more frequently when they came here.

Hearing Khem's voice, Chan slowly stood up, his wet black t-shirt clinging to his body, revealing his abdominal muscles clearly. He brushed back his now disheveled, water-soaked hair that was once neat. His sharp, dark brown eyes narrowed slightly before he turned to Khem and said,

"I'm fine, Khem, please continue playing in the water." Khem slapped his forehead in frustration.

"Chan, that's Phraemai. We're over here!" Phraemai, momentarily stunned by Chan's appearance without his thick glasses, quickly came back to her senses and burst out laughing.

"Oh my, are you short-sighted or just blind, Chan!" She exclaimed.

"Sorry, uh, where did my glasses go?" Chan tried to dive back into the water to look for his glasses. Seeing this, Khem put his hands on his hips in anger, pointing at Jett who was standing on a rock, and shouted an order,

"Jett, get down here and take responsibility right now!"

At first, Jett seemed reluctant to help search for Chan's glasses, but Khem chased him down and dragged him into the water, so he ended up helping look for the glasses anyway.

"Found it!" Phraemai, who was several meters away, shouted. Luckily, the glasses had floated to a crevice in the rocks and hadn't been swept further away. She quickly swam over to retrieve and return them to Chan.

Chan put his glasses on immediately, even though they were wet, but it was better than not having them at all.

"Thank you very much."

"No problem, I'm off now, see you later." Phraemai said before waving goodbye to Jett, Khem, and Chan, as another female friend called her to come out of the water.

Khem gently patted his friends on the shoulder to stop them from glaring at each other.

"Let's stick together, the three of us."

On the other side, Kornkan, Pondit, and another male friend named Tejathon, who had been close friends since middle school but went to different university faculties, approached the village chief who was waiting for the students to finish their water activities under a banyan tree. It was now time to head back.

"Village chief, I heard there's a viewpoint up there. Can we go up and take some photos?" Kornkan asked, pointing towards the forest on the opposite side of the waterfall where steps had been cleared for climbing the mountain.

He had learned about this from Tejathon, who heard it from Phraemai, his girlfriend, but he lacked the courage to ask the village chief himself. Kornkan, being the bravest among them, took the initiative, partly because he also wanted to enjoy the view from the top.

However, the village chief shook his head, quickly denying the request.

"No way, young man. It's getting late. Better we all head back to the village." The village chief didn't provide the real reason for not allowing them up there, fearing it might scare them or they might think he was making up stories. He simply walked away to gather the students from the water.

Kornkan frowned in frustration, compounded by his earlier altercation with the likes of Jett. He was now even more irritated.

"Seriously, what's the big deal about just sitting up there?" Pongit was equally annoyed. Tejathon sighed in disappointment.

"I say, let's sneak up there anyway. The path isn't that complicated, we'll be back fine." Kornkan proposed. The three hadn't gone into the water because they didn't want to get wet, so they weren't enjoying themselves like the others. They wanted to do something they liked before returning to Bangkok the next day. Otherwise, it would feel like they hadn't really been there.

"Yeah, count me in. What about you, Te?" Pongit asked Tejathon, who thought for a moment before nodding in agreement. Seeing his friends ready to join, Kornkan smirked with satisfaction.

"Great, I won't let you guys down."

Back in the village, Kornkan arranged to meet Pongit and Tejathon at a wooden pavilion near the forest edge, a place not frequented at night. Each brought their backpacks and lanterns. Fortunately, they were staying in different homes, so they had told their hosts they would be sleeping over at a friend's place, confident they wouldn't be caught.

"Hey, Prae." Pongit greeted Phraemai as she walked over with Tejathon, though it looked like she wasn't too keen on coming. Phraemai smiled awkwardly before greeting Pongit and Kornkan somewhat reluctantly.

"Hi, Korn, hello, Poon." Kornkan nodded in acknowledgment. Having Phraemai here was good; if they got caught tomorrow, they'd have company for the scolding.

Phraemai didn't want to come because she was afraid of the dark and the unseen, but she couldn't resist her boyfriend's insistence. She and Techathorn had been dating for five months, and since she was the one who pursued him, she didn't want to upset him. She was willing to compromise for the person she liked a lot.

However, Phraemai didn't particularly like her boyfriend's two friends; both were troublemakers who often didn't listen to others, frequently got into fights, and liked to drag her boyfriend to bars, even introducing him to other women. Despite this, her boyfriend always returned to his room on time and never cheated on her, as per his friends' teasing.

Once everyone was there, Kornkan spoke up,
"Shall we go?" Pongdit nodded in agreement.
"Yeah, lead the way."

Kornkan used a lantern to guide everyone along the path he remembered. When they reached the waterfall, they crossed a wooden bridge to the other side, then climbed a set of stairs leading up, as Phraemai had mentioned there was a viewpoint not too far away.

But Phraemai hadn't expected to be taken to see the view at night like this.

Suddenly, she had an uneasy feeling.

"Te, I want to go back." Phraemai said with a trembling voice. Techathorn didn't want to give in to his girlfriend's wish, not wanting to upset his other two friends.

"Why go back, Prae? We've come this far. Don't be scared, I'll hold your hand all the way." Techathorn said. Phraemai bit her lip, and seeing Kornkan and Pongdit look back at her with annoyed expressions, she was too scared to say anything more and quietly followed the three of them.

Finally, they reached the viewpoint, which was a flat area with a large rock jutting out from the cliff, well fenced with wooden railings to prevent falls. It seemed like this spot was frequently visited because there were no weeds or undergrowth, making it look neat.

Above all, the air here was much fresher than below, and looking down, you could see the village still brightly lit. The cool breeze gently blew, and the sky was full of stars, a rare sight in the urban areas of the city.

"Damn, this is how it should be." Kornkan said with a proud smile, feeling justified in convincing his friends to come up here.

"Yeah. You three set up the tents, I'll start the fire." Pondit said cheerfully, equally pleased. Phraemai, seeing that things weren't as bad as she had feared, felt reassured and went along with them. Soon, three tents were set up, and the fire was lit. All four sat around the campfire; Phraemai boiled water on the small stove she brought to cook instant noodles. Meanwhile, Tejathon took out his acoustic guitar to play and sing happily.

Kornkan raised his hand in a mock salute, then opened his bag and placed what he had prepared on the ground for everyone to see.

"Holy crap, Kornkan, you actually brought it?"

"Heck yeah, would I miss out?"

What Kornkan laid out were over ten cans of beer. He had bought them and stashed them in his backpack back at the rest stop, anticipating that the staff would check bags for illegal items, including alcohol, before boarding the tour bus.

Pondit burst out laughing.

"True to form, Kornkan, your life revolves around booze. You carry it everywhere."

"Talk too much and you won't get any."

"Hey, I was just kidding, give me one." Pondit then distributed the cans to everyone except Phraemai, who wasn't much of a drinker and was worried about getting drunk and falling off the cliff, so she politely declined.

After finishing his first can, Kornkan habitually tossed the empty can off the cliff, which furrowed Phraemai's brows because she didn't approve of such crude behavior, but she didn't dare to say anything. She quickly picked up the can Tejathon had discarded and put it in a trash bag, fearing he might follow his friend's example.

Time passed leisurely as they relaxed until Kornkan stood up, announcing he needed to pee. Pondit and Tejathon, having consumed several cans themselves, felt the same and followed him. This left Phraemai alone by the nearly extinguished fire.

But several minutes passed, and neither her boyfriend nor his two friends returned, and the firewood they had brought was all used up. Not daring to go alone to fetch more wood, she got up and walked in the direction where the three had disappeared.

"Te, Korn, Poon, do you hear me, Phraemai!" Phraemai called out in a rather loud voice, but there was no response from anyone.

Phraemai started to feel disheartened. She lifted her lantern, looking around, seeing only trees of various sizes. But as she looked, her imagination conjured faces peering out from the darkness.

The darkness and silence gnawed at her mind until she could hardly stand it. Phraemai's mind was in turmoil as fear took root, her delicate face covered in sweat from the pressure, yet her concern for her boyfriend and the others still outweighed her fear. She forced herself to take short steps deeper into the forest to find the three of them.

"Te, can you hear me, please answer me."

"..."

"Te, don't play around like this with me, I'm really scared, Te." The deeper she went, the quieter it got, and Phraemai began to cry. She thought they might have left her alone up here, perhaps everyone else had gone back down.

Fear, disappointment, and anger mixed together in her heart until she burst into tears, thinking that if she made it back and found them, she would slap each one for daring to do this to her, and she would break up with her boyfriend.

Ding

Suddenly, Phraemai heard a sound like a bell from behind. With hope that her boyfriend had stopped teasing, she turned around immediately.

But what she saw was not Tejathon, Kornkan, or Pongdit. Instead, it was a woman in a vibrant red Thai dress, her face pale with dark veins spread across it, her eyes completely white without pupils, her lips a dark purple, open wide as she screamed at her,

"Get out!!!"

Chapter 14

When the light revealed something she did not want to see, Phraemai, in her utmost fright, threw the lantern away and ran for her life, not caring what lay ahead, only knowing she couldn't stay there for even a second longer.

The sound of the Thai-dressed woman in red repeatedly echoing in her ears: **"Leave! Leave! Leave! Leave! Leave!"**

"AAAAHHHHHH!" Phraemai's scream echoed through the forest, startling the birds into flight from their nests. Simultaneously, Pharan, who was meditating with his eyes closed in a room lit by candles, opened his eyes abruptly.

It was almost midnight. While the villagers were asleep, suddenly there was crying and loud banging coming from one of the houses.

Bang bang bang!

"Open the door! Please open the door! Help! Help! Sob!" Chan, who was sleeping in a room near the door, was startled. The voice he heard now sounded a lot like Phraemai's. Realizing this, he quickly got up to check the situation and found that Uncle-Chai, Auntie-Kaew, and Mint, Phraemai's close friend, were also rushing out of their rooms to the front door.

Knock knock knock!

"Mint, Chan, Auntie-Kaew, Uncle-Chai, help me!" Uncle-Chai, who tried to sense if it was a ghost or some other entity, realized it was truly Phraemai, not an apparition, and quickly opened the door.

"Prae!" Mint's eyes widened, and she rushed out to meet her friend. Chan was fully alert when he saw Phraemai's condition, as if she had just run through a battlefield, covered in mud, her hair disheveled, her usually sweet face marred by tears and scratches, with bits of wood and leaves stuck to her clothes.

"Help! Help! I'm scared! Help!" Phraemai, her hands clasped in a pleading gesture to Mint, cried out as she slumped to the ground, shaking her head in a panic. Auntie-Kaew and Uncle-Chai exchanged concerned glances.

This wasn't the first time they had seen someone in such a state, but they were curious about what had caused it.

"Scared! Scared! Sob!"

"Prae, calm down, try to gather yourself. What happened!?" Mint knelt down to hug Phraemai, asking gently.

The more she was asked what happened, the more the previous events replayed in Phraemai's mind, despite her attempts to forget. The image of the woman in the red Thai dress and her shrill voice still echoed in her head. The overwhelming fear caused Phraemai's eyes to roll back, her lips to twist, and her limbs to stiffen and convulse.

"Prae!!" Mint cried out in shock upon seeing her friend's condition, starting to weep out of fear.

"Oh no." Uncle Chai exclaimed, along with several villagers and students who had come out to see what was happening. Once almost everyone had gathered, the host of Kornkan, Lah, spoke in the local Isan dialect, looking around immediately.

"AiTud, I heard that my student said he was going to sleep at your place. Where is he now?" Tud shook his head.

"No, he's not at my house. My kid also said he was going to sleep at your place."

"Yeah, that's what mine said too." Mek added. Hearing this, the village chief's face tensed up, a vein popping out on his temple.

"I think they sneaked into the forest to have fun. They told me they wanted to go up, but I didn't allow it; they must have not listened. This girl probably went with them." Mint, understanding the local dialect, quickly nodded in agreement, wiping away tears.

"Yes, Prae told me she was going to sleep with Te, the one staying at Uncle Tud's house, but I didn't know they would sneak into the forest. If I had known, I would have stopped her."

"village chief, can you take Prae to see a doctor? I'll fill up the gas." The club president said with concern, knowing if something serious happened to Phraemai, it would become a big issue.

However, many villagers, including the village chief, shook their heads.

"By the time we get to the hospital, your friend might be dead. Besides, doctors can't help with this; only a shaman can." The village chief said. Chai then nodded quickly, instructing his wife to bring out their sidecar

motorcycle from the garage. Madam Kaew hurried to comply, as they would take this child to see Master Pharan.

"Come on, let's carry Prae up."

When Madam-Kaew brought out the sidecar motorcycle, Chan, who was nearby, helped lift Phraemai onto the bike, with Mint holding her close. They all got on.

Chai started the motorcycle, letting his wife ride behind, and before driving off, he turned to tell the village chief,

"Village chief, go get Grandma-Si, take her to the master's house. This ghost girl is MaeYing, the master won't handle this himself."

"Alright, alright, go go." The village chief agreed and quickly headed towards Grandma-Si's house. Meanwhile, Chai drove the motorcycle with Phraemai towards Pharan's house. At that moment, someone else brought a pickup truck, and the students, too worried to go back to sleep, hopped on to follow the villagers.

The president of the volunteer club wasn't confident in Pharan's father's abilities at all. He didn't even know the man, but what the villagers said made some sense. The hospital was nearly a hundred kilometers away from the village, and without preliminary treatment now, she might not make it there in time.

"What should we do, Kit? Should we call her parents?" Som, a fellow staff member, asked. Kit, the club president, quickly shook his head.

"Let's not call yet. It's too late. Let's wait and see. The master might really be able to help." Som bit her lip, hoping Kit was right, before they both followed the others to another truck heading to Pharan's house.

At that moment, the lights around Pharan's house were already on, as if anticipating the arrival of many people. Jett, sensing something was amiss, woke Khem from his sleep, and they went to find the master at the central ceremony area. They saw Pharan lighting incense and candles, paying respects to the Triple Gem, so they quickly crawled in to pay their respects as well.

Ekk and Thong stood waiting at the bottom of the house stairs, some noticed, some didn't. Soon, Phraemai was carried up by Chan, followed by Mint, Uncle-Chai, and Auntie-Kaew, along with nearly all the villagers and students present.

"Prae!" Khem couldn't help but shout, trying to get up to go see his friend, but was held back by Jett.

"Don't go near her." Khem swallowed hard, sat back down next to Jett, but kept watching intently as Chan laid Phraemai down in front of the master, who was seated higher up, following Uncle-Chai's instructions, then sat back next to Khem.

"Chan, what happened?" Khem asked with a pale face, but Chan shook his head, having not understood the villagers' earlier conversation, so he just reported what he had seen.

"I'm not sure, but it looks like Phraemai went into the forest, and when she came back, she was like this." Khem turned even paler. Jett, upon hearing this, could only think 'Oh no' repeatedly in his mind.

"Master, it seems this young lady and three other guys sneaked into the forest, but only she came back, and in this state." Chai explained with his hands clasped to Master Pharan. They had brought her to see the Master first because the forest was still dangerous. It wasn't safe to go in carelessly, so they came to consult Master Pharan on what to do next.

Master Pharan looked at Phraemai, who was still twitching, and spoke calmly,

"It's good they let her return."

The students, who had gathered in the house until it was packed, exchanged looks upon hearing this. Some, observing Phraemai's condition combined with Master's words, got goosebumps and rubbed their arms.

"Where's Grandma Si?" Master Pharan asked Chai. Before Chai could answer, Grandma Si walked into the house with a white shoulder bag and a bamboo container of sticky rice, followed by the village chief. Grandma Si sat down and raised her hands over her head to pay respects to Master Pharan, who was younger than her. Master Pharan, in return, clasped his hands in respect as he always did when meeting her.

Master Pharan considered Grandma Si as a senior relative because she was friends with his grandfather. When he was young, Grandma Si had helped raise him when his grandfather was out working. His grandfather was a shaman, and Grandma Si was a soul healer, the best in the village.

"Master, how should we proceed? Can we go up the mountain? If we don't call back her spirit, it might get worse." Grandma Si said, having prepared everything necessary for the ritual after hearing from the village chief, ready to act if Master Pharan gave the go-ahead.

Master Pharan nodded, replying in the same dialect but with a softer tone,

"We can go. It's fine. Take many people with you to help find the other three children."

Grandma Si raised her hands over her head once before looking around.

"Anyone close to this young lady, come with me, I'll perform the soul-calling ritual to bring her spirit back."

The soul-calling ceremony, also known as the spirit-fetching ritual, is an ancient rite among the Isan people. It's believed to cure ailments caused by accidents or shocking events that might cause someone to lose consciousness, like Phraemai.

Mint, who had just finished crying, quickly raised her hand and crawled towards Grandma-Si. Then, the village chief explained the current situation to the students. The atmosphere grew tenser when they learned that three of their club members were missing.

"Right now, the forest is quite dangerous. I'm looking for men who are confident they have strong luck, born on Saturday, Tuesday, Wednesday, or Sunday. We're going into the forest to look for your three friends. We might be searching all night until noon."

One of the male students raised his hand, puzzled.

"Why before noon?" The village chief hesitated, not wanting to answer, but had to tell the truth.

"If we haven't found them by noon, it means they're dead."

A collective gulp could be heard from the back, fear and anxiety gripping the students. The club president, born on a Tuesday, quickly crawled towards the village chief to join them first, not wanting to delay any longer, followed closely by the other nine men.

Khem, seeing there were few volunteers, stood up to join, but the master was quicker. He swung a cane through the air in front of Khem, startling him back into his seat. Jett and Chan were startled as well.

The master's stern gaze seemed to tell Khem not to get involved, suggesting he would likely be more of a burden than help, as had been the case before.

Realizing this, Khem sat back down, looking dejected. Jett understood both the master's and his friend's feelings but could say nothing, only patting Khem's back to comfort him.

"You know why he can't go, and you...why aren't you going?" Pharan glanced at Jett, who was born on a Sunday and known to be quite tough-minded.

Jett quickly clasped his hands together, lying, but Pharan knew it immediately from just a look.

"Who will look after you and Khem if I go?" Jett gave a cheeky smile; the truth was he just didn't want to help. Those guys had loose tongues, they deserved whatever was coming to them!

Pharan frowned at Jett, seemingly aware of his thoughts, then turned to another bespectacled boy sitting next to Khem.

"And you, why aren't you going?" His sharp eyes locked onto the eyes of the boy, who looked slightly astonished.

Chan was born on a Wednesday night, which according to the village chief's rules, could have implications, but he was hesitant about whether to go or not. On one hand, he was worried about Phraemai, who was his housemate, especially since Mint had gone with Grandma Si. On the other hand, he also wanted to help search for the missing three.

Right now, Chan felt like a child caught hiding something by an adult, so he started to stand up to follow the village chief and the others.

However, Jett reached around Khem to pull Chan's shirt, making him sit back down.

"Master, Chan is very nearsighted and also very clumsy. If he loses his glasses in the forest, he'll just be a burden to others." Jett said. In truth, he just didn't want Chan to go help find those three, especially since Chan shouldn't be the one to go out of his way to help them.

Master Pharan immediately sensed that Jett had issues with the group of missing kids, which explained his reaction. He was surprised that Jett had made a new friend and was now preventing this friend from helping others. This kind of extreme loyalty and dislike was something Jett had exhibited since childhood. Master Pharan sighed and nodded, not wanting to prolong the discussion.

"There's nothing more to do here. Uncle Chai, have someone take the rest back to rest. Lock the doors well, and don't go out until morning." Uncle Chai acknowledged the order with a bow before passing it on to another student who had brought a pickup truck, to take the rest back home to wait for news, making sure to emphasize Master Pharan's instructions.

Soon, only a few people were left in the house. Master Pharan closed his eyes to meditate, sending his spirit out to check on Grandma Si's situation. From afar, he saw several lanterns slowly moving up the mountain.

Once Grandma Si reached the destination with help, she saw the scattered remains of civilization. Her heart sank, realizing why the three children were taken, but she knew she couldn't do much; this was beyond the capabilities of a soul healer like her.

Grandma Si took out her equipment from her shoulder bag: a banana, a boiled egg, a ball of sticky rice, and a garland of jasmine flowers, arranging them on a plate and lighting a candle, placing it near the extinguished campfire.

"Come, spirit." Grandma Si said before opening the bamboo container of sticky rice, now containing Phraemai's personal items like a face cloth, a compact of powder, and lipstick, which Mint had run to get from the house. Grandma Si lifted the container and made motions as if scooping the spirit from the air, all while calling for Phraemai's spirit to return.

"Come on, Phraemai, do not stay among the crows in the fallow fields, do not stay among the chickens in the rice paddies, do not linger in the wide wilderness that is not home, come back, come back to our home."

When Grandma-Si called out, Mint, who was kneeling nearby with her hands clasped, also helped in calling.

"Come back to me, Prae, I'll take you home to your parents." This time, not only the village chief, but also the villagers and the male student friends started calling out. Something tried to approach the rice basket, but Grandma-Si quickly closed the lid. She frowned and shooed it away:

"Go away! I didn't call for you, leave, leave!"

The master opened his eyes at that moment, looking down at the piece of paper someone had given him with Phraemai's real name and surname written on it. He clasped his hands together and chanted incantations to ward off forest spirits, preventing them from scaring away the soul and taking its place.

"Buddhang, Vantami, Dhammang, Vantami, Sanghang, Vantami, by the power of the Triple Gem, please dispel the forest spirits, do not let them near, and call back the spirit of Phraemai, so that she may return home safe and sound."

Not long after, Grandma-Si opened the lid of the sticky rice basket, scooped something out, and quickly closed it, then said loudly:

"She's back, Phraemai is back, let's go home."

Chapter 15

Uncle-Chai's sidecar motorcycle, driven by a villager who was asked by the village chief to bring Grandma-Si and Mint, stopped next to the stairs of Pharan's large Thai house. Then, Grandma-Si and Mint hurried up to the central area for the ceremony.

Pharan opened his eyes from meditation, and upon seeing Grandma-Si and Mint return, Jett, Khem, and Chan all sighed in relief, watching Phraemai who was still convulsing with her eyes rolled back, hoping for her recovery.

"She's back, Phraemai is back." Grandma-Si announced before placing the sticky rice basket beside Phraemai. With her age-worn hands, she opened the lid, took out a sacred thread and tied it around Phraemai's wrist, all while chanting:

"Spirit of Phraemai, come back and enter the body, come to peace, come to happiness, come to purity, come to health, come to prosperity, come to serenity, come to be with the body."

At that moment, Master Pharan saw a faint white smoke emerging from the bamboo container and entering Phraemai's mouth, causing his eyebrows to relax.

Phraemai had truly returned.

"Buddha protects, Dhamma protects, Sangha protects, do not wander, stay with this body, so be it." Once Grandma Si finished chanting, the body that had been convulsing relaxed, the eyes that had rolled back returned to their proper position, and the twisted mouth returned to normal. Soon, her eyelids gently closed, her breathing became steady.

Khem couldn't help but smile with relief. Mint, on the other hand, wiped her tears, her skepticism about such matters instantly transformed.

Then Grandma Si called for those present to come and tie the sacred thread around Phraemai's wrist to welcome her spirit back. Master Pharan was the first to do so, followed by Uncle Chai, Auntie Kaew, Mint, Khem, Jett, and Chan in order of seniority.

Once Phraemai's situation was resolved peacefully, Master Pharan instructed everyone to return home to rest, except for Uncle Chai and Jett, who had to stay to assist him. Tonight, Master Pharan would perform an out-of-body spirit journey, leaving his physical body behind, and the house needed someone to watch over it, ensuring no disturbance.

Chan carried Phraemai down from Master Pharan's house as he had brought her up, following Grandma Si and Auntie Kaew, with Mint bringing up the rear.

Chan's sharp eyes turned to Khem before he said,

"You should also stay at Auntie Kaew's house." Jett was left with his mouth agape, while Khem blinked, not understanding.

But thinking back to the recent events, Khem realized he would only be in the way here and wouldn't be able to help Master Pharan. He stood up with a bowed head and followed Chan.

"Master, why do you need to send Khem away to sleep elsewhere?" Jett asked with a furrowed brow, not understanding. Master Pharan, accused by his student, took a switch and tapped him on the head.

"Ow." Jett mumbled, rubbing his head.

"And why do you want him to stay awake here with you?" The reason was simple. If Khem stayed here, he wouldn't leave his friends to sleep alone in his room, and with less rest, his body would be weak, making it easier for his spirit to leave his body.

Jett gave a sheepish grin and quickly raised his hands above his head in apology, misunderstanding Pharan.

"Ha ha, I forgot, sorry, Master."

Then Pharan began meditating to enter a trance, with Uncle-Chai by his side to keep the oil lamp filled and ensure the candle didn't go out. Meanwhile, Jett went downstairs, untying the sacred thread and winding it around the fence of the house, then went into the kitchen under the house to make black coffee and grab some snacks, intending to stay vigilant against any wandering spirits entering the area, confirming he wouldn't sleep that night as the master had implied.

That night, Auntie-Kaew arranged for everyone to sleep together in the central hall of the house, separating the genders, with Auntie-Kaew herself sitting close by, sorting grains while keeping watch, with a lamp providing light.

Khem lay down next to Chan, his mind replaying the image of the master lifting the cane as if to strike, along with the stern look the master gave him, and being chased out of the house. These thoughts kept running through his head, causing his eyes to well up uncontrollably.

Khem couldn't understand why he felt so hurt by what the master did, even though the master hadn't done anything wrong; on the contrary, the master was right.

The more he thought, the more his heart ached until tears started to flow. Khem cried quietly by himself until he fell asleep.

At around three in the morning, Khem woke up groggily when he felt someone walk past him. Looking closely, he saw Phraemai heading towards the door to go outside.

"Prae!" Khem called out, but she didn't even turn around. Seeing this, he quickly got up and shook Chan, but Chan wouldn't wake up. He then crawled to wake Mint, but she, too, was deeply asleep. Auntie-Kaew was no longer there.

Khem was scared for himself, but he couldn't let Phraemai go out alone. He put on his shoes and ran after her.

"Prae, wait for me!" Khem tried calling out, but Phraemai seemed deaf to his voice, walking as if in a trance. Khem understood this well because he had sleepwalked almost to the point of jumping off a balcony himself. The only thing to do was to catch up to her and grab her.

"Prae!" But even as he ran, it seemed like Phraemai was still far ahead, disappearing into the forest.

Khem stopped in his tracks, looking around frantically, trying to wake Chan who wouldn't stir. All the villagers who could have helped had already gone up the mountain. Running to Master Pharan or Jett was too far, and Khem was afraid Phraemai might disappear for good this time. He decided to run after her into the forest.

Chan turned over, the light from the lantern flickering before his eyes, forcing him awake. But instead of seeing Khem's small head, he saw only emptiness beside him, and next to that, Phraemai's face, still fast asleep next to Mint.

Rising, he reached for his glasses, the clarity confirming Khem was gone.

"Auntie Kaew, have you seen Khem?" Chan asked Auntie Kaew, who was still sorting grains nearby.

"Oh, he's sleeping...Wait!" Madam Kaew was about to say that Khem was right next to Chan, but upon looking again, he was not there.

At that moment, Mek and the head of the search team were performing a ceremony, asking for forgiveness from the spirits of the land and forest to help clear the path, open their ears to hear, and their eyes to see, so they could bring the children back home.

Master Pharan sent out eight spirits in all directions to trace the children, but there was no sign of them.

While lighting incense and candles, suddenly a strong wind blew, making it impossible to light them. Everyone quickly knelt, hands clasped in prayer.

Master Pharan, observing from afar, shook his head and sighed.

It seemed like the other side which had taken Phraemai friends wasn't willing to give them up easily...

Even the students, who weren't afraid of ghosts, found themselves looking around nervously, as this was an experience they had never encountered.

Master Pharan decided to unite all eight spirits into one, soaring towards the peak of Mount Kheri, passing through the dense forest until reaching the deepest, untouched part where there appeared a medium-sized cave behind a waterfall.

The spirit in the form of a person walked through the waterfall's veil into the cave. Pharan had always been aware of the presence here, acknowledging the existence of something within, but he had never thought to disturb it.

However, this situation could not be avoided. He had to ask for help.

Pharan stopped in his tracks when he reached the end of a long pool with no further path. He bowed down on the stone floor and addressed what was observing him:

"O spirits of the land, the forest, and the mountains, if I, Pharan, Reuangdej, have inadvertently offended you in body, speech, or mind, whether intentionally or not, please forgive me." Pharan bowed once more, then stood up and continued,

"Today, I am troubled and come to seek your help. Please show mercy and grant my request. If my merit is insufficient, I am willing to leave peacefully."

Suddenly, the cave lit up with the light from countless fireflies, illuminating everything clearly. Pharan heard something moving through

the water, approaching him. The shadow on the cave wall took the shape of a large serpent.

A black snake emerged from the water, lifting its head about two meters high, its amber eyes looking down at the young man who was bowing below. It spoke in a deep voice through the mind:

"If your merit wasn't enough, you wouldn't have made it here." Pharan bowed in acknowledgment. The snake, named "Phuchong," continued,

"You're here because of those three kids, right?" Pharan nodded, then looked up at the giant serpent leaning closer, peering into its large amber eyes, and he saw the sequence of events from when the three kids entered the forest.

From speaking disrespectfully, challenging, spitting, littering, making loud noises, to even urinating on a tree inhabited by a tree spirit without any apology or request for forgiveness.

It was as if it was explaining to Pharan why those children had disappeared.

"After this, I will make them atone for their actions, just release them...while they still breathe." Phuchong observed Pharan, who met its gaze without fear, daring to bargain for the lives of those who had wronged. Phuchong memories from hundreds of years ago resurfaced at this man's habits.

This man's nature remains unchanged throughout his life.

Phuchong straightened up and retreated into the water until its head were level, then it said:

"I can make the spirit of the Takian Nang release those kids, but they must ordain as monks for at least six vassa (monastic years), live by the eight precepts for life. If they don't do this, I will retrieve them, and they'll become wandering forest spirits, never to be reborn." Master Pharan bowed again in gratitude, but he froze when he heard the next sentence, before the other entity sank back into the water. The fireflies slowly dimmed, but the previous words still echoed.

"But I can only release three. You'll have to find the way for the last one yourself."

Master Pharan's spirit returned to his physical body, his sharp, dark eyes opening instantly. At the same moment, Jett and another boy, Chan, ran up

the stairs, and then crawled to clasp their hands in prayer to him with faces full of panic.

"Father, Khem has disappeared!" The words hit Master Pharan like a heavy object on his head, especially after hearing from Chan that Khem vanished without anyone noticing. Even Auntie Kaew, who was awake watching, hadn't seen when Khem left, which only added to his frustration.

The last words from the guardian spirit indicated that it was not involved in this matter and couldn't help further, suggesting that Khem's disappearance was due to his own personal karma.

"Uncle Chai, go help the village chief and the students. Tell everyone the children are still alive, keep searching; they'll be found."

"Yes, Master." Uncle Chai bowed in acknowledgment and hurried out, knowing there was nothing more he could do here.

After Uncle Chai left, Master Pharan turned to Jett and Chan.

"You two keep an eye on the candles and lanterns, don't let them go out. If I'm not back in an hour, light one incense stick to call me." Jett immediately bowed in agreement. Though Chan was still confused, he also bowed to accept the instruction.

Master Pharan closed his eyes, recalling when he had entered the dimension of a vengeful spirit named Ramphueng. He concentrated on the memory and feeling of that time to find his way back into that dimension.

After a long search, he finally entered, but he could only reach the ancient Thai house's boat dock in this dimension, unable to go further.

What Master Pharan saw now were signs of a lightning strike; the dock area where he stood was covered with black burn marks, and several trees around the house had fallen, their branches breaking through the roof.

The lightning event from the previous night must have affected Madam Ramphueng's dimension as well.

Pharan could sense that the spirit of Madam-Ramphueng was hiding within this Thai house, as her spirit must have been injured, and thus, she had been quiet, not causing any disturbances outside for a while.

However, Khem's spirit was not here...

So where could he have gone?

Khem didn't know when he had lost consciousness, but he woke up in a bedroom that felt oddly familiar.

"Wake up, Khem?" The speaker was a tall man in a khaki uniform, with a handsome face and a voice that sounded strangely familiar, causing Khem

to furrow his brow and back away as the man stepped closer.

"Who are you?" The man in front of him let out a soft laugh, but his dark eyes lacked any humor, before he sat down on the bed and leaned in close to Khem.

"We haven't seen each other in many nights, have you forgotten me?" Khem looked into the man's eyes, trying to dredge up a fading memory.

Haven't seen each other in many nights, huh...

"Take a good look at this house, Khem." As Khem did so, he noticed that everything around him was from an old era, like a set from a Thai period drama from the 1980s he had once watched, with wooden walls that had an eggshell color...

Khem's eyes widened, and he quickly turned back to look at the man in front of him.

"You, are you the person from my dreams?" Chayot nodded, then took Khem's hand into his own.

"Khem, stay here with me, I'll take care of you from now on, okay?"

Khem pulled his hand back and shook his head vigorously.

"No way. If I stay here, that means I'm dead. I don't want to die yet." Khem's refusal caused Chayot's expression to darken.

"When will you stop rejecting me, Khem? When will you start looking back at me!" Khem startled, quickly retreating as the man's face, which had looked normal, began to turn pale and then greenish.

Chayot slowly crawled onto the bed, bringing his now horrifying face closer to Khem, speaking with a chilling voice that Khem had heard before.

"I've cherished and protected you for centuries, do you think I'd let someone else have you? Dream on!" Khem felt like he was being electrocuted and cried out in fear before jumping off the bed and dashing out of the room, hoping to escape the house, praying to wake up from this nightmare.

"Where do you think you're going!" Chayot's voice echoed through the house. When Khem turned around, he was so shocked his legs nearly gave out.

The sight was of a man in khaki clothes with a grotesquely twisted body, as if all his bones were broken, blood everywhere, his skull caved in, neck bent against his shoulder, using his seemingly lifeless legs to chase after Khem with alarming speed.

Khem turned back and ran down the stairs, but he tripped on the last step, twisting his ankle. The pain felt real, not like it was from a dream. Despite the pain making it impossible to walk, Khem still chose to crawl away, crying silently.

The door that was left ajar was suddenly slammed shut with a loud 'bang'. Khem, whose hopes were crushed, stared wide-eyed before the closed door was replaced by the sight of the twisted, khaki-clad legs.

Khem immediately looked down, not wanting to see, fear consuming every bit of his being until he could barely breathe. He curled up, hugging himself and crying without sound.

Chayot knelt down and leaned in, just a moment away from embracing Khem.

However, someone's hand reached out, grabbed Chayot's hair tightly, and pulled him back.

What appeared before Khem was the face of Pharan, glaring at him with such anger that his black eyes seemed to shrink.

Chapter 16

Pharan glanced at Khem, who was still overwhelmed by fear, unable to lift his head.

'Master, it's been an hour, please come back!'

But Pharan could do little more than pull Chayot's head out of its dimension along with him.

"Master!" Jett called out. At that moment, Pharan opened his physical eyes and spoke firmly:

"Go fetch a pot." The shadowy figure, emitting a strong odor of decay, was struggling in the master's grip. Jett swallowed hard and ran to grab a clay pot enchanted with protective spells, handing it to Pharan immediately. Meanwhile, Chan could only frown in confusion, looking from one person to another, as he didn't see what others were seeing.

Without further ado, Pharan opened the lid and stuffed Chayot's spirit into the pot, then closed it and wrapped it in a red cloth inscribed with mystical symbols, indicating he would deal with it later.

"Follow me." He said shortly before walking down from the house.

Jett and Chan followed the master into the forest behind the house, which was a different path from where the group was searching for Kornkan and his friends.

The three of them ventured deeper into the woods, each carrying a lantern for light. Jett and Chan trailed behind Pharan, not knowing where they were being led.

As it approached five in the morning, Pharan stopped and looked around, telling the two young men that Khem was nearby and instructed them to split up and search.

Chan started to walk in another direction, but Jett pulled him back.

"Where do you think you're going, you'll probably fall off a cliff and die." Chan furrowed his brows and pointed ahead.

"It's just a normal path, how could there be a cliff?"

"Huh?" Jett looked again, rubbing his eyes once more, and what he once saw as a cliff now appeared as a small, walkable path.

Jett clicked his tongue in annoyance. He hadn't realized he was under a spirit's illusion; what a complete misjudgment!

Pharan turned back and walked towards where Chan indicated. Soon, they saw a faint golden light shining from behind a large tree.

Pharan approached the tree, followed by Jett and Chan. Upon reaching it, they found the source of the light: the sacred thread he had blessed and tied around Khem the previous day...

"Khem!" Jett shouted, joyfully jumping towards his friend, but Khem lay there motionless, his eyes lifeless and unresponsive, much like Phraemai had been.

"Call his spirit back first." Pharan instructed. Jett stepped back to allow the master to light incense and candles for the ceremony to summon Khem's spirit. Fortunately, Jett had instinctively grabbed the master's bag of supplies.

After planting the incense in the ground, Pharan clasped his hands together, closed his eyes, and began to pray.

"Spirit, oh spirit, come back, where has the spirit of Khemjira flown to? May the deities of the forest watch over and protect, bring him back to where he belongs, let him not wander away again."

Khem's eyes slowly closed, his previously stiff body relaxing against the trees.

Khem had returned. Now just sleeping, Jett didn't want to wake him, so he carried him as he was, though it was somewhat cumbersome since Jett wasn't particularly strong or large, and after being up all night, he wasn't in the best shape...

Chan was about to offer his help, but Master Pharan was quicker.

"Give him here, I'll carry him." Master Pharan said, seeing that Jett might end up rolling down the mountain with Khem.

"Uh, are you sure, Master? I can carry him. It won't be a bother for you." Jett was startled, barely keeping his composure.

Even though Master Pharan had been a layman for years, he still carried himself like a monk. Jett had never seen him carry anyone before, be it man or woman.

"Give him here."

"Here you go." Sensing the chill in Master Pharan's voice, Jett quickly handed over Khem. Master Pharan shook his head, tired of repeating

himself, before turning to the other person who had been watching from a distance.

"You're Chan, right?" The other nodded in confirmation.

"Yes, Master."

"Lead the way." Master Pharan said calmly. Chan nodded again, though he didn't fully understand, before turning and walking ahead.

Once out of the forest, Master Pharan carried Khem back to the house. Seeing that the villagers and student friends searching for Kornkan and his group hadn't returned, Jett couldn't stay indifferent. He grabbed a coffee, took Master Pharan's bicycle, and went to help in the search, dragging along the more determined Chan, leaving Khem in Master Pharan's care.

Master Pharan left Khem's bedroom, heading to the room where Chayot's jar was kept. He opened the lid, reached inside, grabbed Chayot's head, and pulled his body out.

This room was surrounded by magical incantations; spirits inside couldn't leave, and those outside couldn't enter. It was a room specifically used by Pharan and his grandfather to subdue ghosts.

The many candles placed on the floor suddenly illuminated the room with their flames, yet the atmosphere remained chillingly cold. Chayot felt as if his spirit might dissolve just by meeting Pharan's gaze. Overwhelmed by frustration and fear, he began to cry.

Pharan slowly released the head of his former younger brother, seeing that his power had waned. He then brought over a wooden chair, placed it in front of Chayot, and sat down.

"Why are you doing this?" Pharan asked, and Chayot thought the question seemed to reflect back on past events as well.

The spirit in the khaki uniform slumped to the floor, kneeling, gripping his pants tightly as he responded:

"How long I've loved him, you never knew...Last time you abandoned him, and in this life, you haven't shown him love or care, so why-"

Before he could finish, Pharan kicked Chayot with full force, catching him off guard, sending him sprawling backward with a loud thud. Not satisfied, Pharan then crouched beside him, grabbed his hair, and forced him to look into his eyes as if to burn his spirit away.

"You don't love him, Chayot. You love yourself."

"..."

Pharan's words felt like a sharp spear piercing through Chayot's heart, causing such pain that it seemed it might shatter into pieces. His black eyes rolled in resistance, unwilling to accept the truth, while tears continued to flow.

"Last time, you forged my letter, causing his death. Now you want his life again, you arrogant fool. What am I supposed to do with you?"

"You don't understand. I just wanted to protect Khem from that evil spirit. If I had his spirit, my power would increase, and I could definitely protect Khem from it, aarrgh!" Chayot cried out in pain as Pharan's grip tightened, forcing his head back.

"Did you ever ask him if he wanted you to protect him? You don't have to mention the past; your selfish nature hasn't changed. You think if you love someone, they must love you back, you want what you want, and when your good deeds don't get rewarded, you react like this. Who asked you to do all this?"

Chayot squirmed, trying to escape, but the more he struggled, the more it hurt. Such pain was something this ghost hadn't felt in a long time.

"Aaah, it hurts, it hurts! I'm scared! Let me go!"

"You also hurt him, scared him just the same, and yet you dare to say you love him even as a ghost. After all these lifetimes, and you still don't get it? How about spending ten or twenty years at the bottom of the river, tied with a rock, inside a jar?" Chayot's eyes rolled back as he shook his head. The thought of being confined in such a cramped space, unable to move, was tormenting in less than a day, let alone ten or twenty years.

"No! Don't do this to me! I want to stay with Khem! She'll come back. If I'm not here, who will protect Khem!" Chayot sobbed, begging for mercy. Hearing this, Master Pharan paused, a mix of emotions swirling inside him with hesitation.

If not Chayot, then who would protect Khem...

His sharp, stern eyes narrowed dangerously.

"That's not the duty of a ghost like you. So remember my words well today, and reflect on your actions in that jar. If you haven't changed your ways by the time I come back, prepare to be weighed down at the bottom of the river."

"No! No! Ahhhhhhhh!" Master Pharan closed the lid after shoving Chayot's spirit back into the jar, wrapped it with the same red sacred cloth, securely tied it, and placed it back on the table before leaving the room.

This morning, the sky was clear and the sun bright, a stark contrast to the night before when everyone expected heavy rain all day.

But last night, around three or nearly four in the morning, when Chai came to tell everyone to keep searching for the three students and assured them that they were still alive, it reignited hope in the search team. The ominous cloud that seemed to hover over the village, created by Mek's worry, gradually dissipated in a miraculous way.

It was obvious who could achieve such a thing.

Jett and Chan joined the search team at six in the morning to help find Kornkan and his group. Since there were already many people searching higher up, they decided to focus on areas near the base of the mountain.

The two split up to search, but stayed close enough to shout if they found anything.

Chan walked along the stream of the waterfall, catching sight of a beer can floating by. He adjusted his glasses and followed the water upstream, his heart pounding with anticipation.

And then he found them...

Chan swallowed hard upon seeing the condition of the three bodies before averting his gaze to shout across the waterfall to Jett.

"Khun Jett, over here!" Jett, who was looking down under a wooden bridge, immediately looked up when he saw Chan waving from behind a large rock, his eyes wide with surprise.

"Did you find them?" Without waiting for an answer, Jett ran across the bridge to reach him.

Chan moved aside to let Jett see closely, and upon seeing it, Jett couldn't help but curse.

"Damn..." For most people, Phraemai's condition from last night was already terrifying, but the state of Kornkan, Pondit, and Tejathon now surpassed that by far.

The three were lying on the riverbank, surrounded by several beer cans and debris, their clothes tattered and dirty, their pale skin covered with dark bruises, mouths agape, eyes rolled back, hands and feet bloated from prolonged exposure to water. Yet, their chests were still moving faintly, indicating they were still alive.

It was a horrifying and heart-wrenching sight.

"What do we do?" Chan asked, hesitant to touch them, fearing they might have internal injuries, and they had no equipment to carry them.

"You stay here, I'll go get help." Jett said, turning to run off immediately.

Chan didn't have to wait long before Jett returned with several villagers and male students, bringing first aid kits and stretchers.

Everyone was taken aback by the scene; some even clasped their hands in a prayer of thanks and apology to the spirits. Then they began to carefully lift the three onto stretchers for preliminary first aid before sending them to the hospital.

By morning, after everything was settled, Jett reported back to Pharan that they had found Kornkan and his friends, but their condition was critical. They had been taken to the hospital, and Chan, who was quite dazed, was told to stay with Khem as a form of responsibility for finding him. Chan didn't object.

Seeing Chan with his bag packed, Pharan nodded in agreement, though not without giving Jett a look of reprimand for acting without consultation, before continuing to make holy water by dropping candle wax into a basin.

After showering and changing into nightwear, Jett and Chan went to sleep in the same room as Khem, each on a different side of the bed with Khem in the middle. The master had said that Khem wouldn't wake up soon but definitely by tomorrow at the latest, and seeing no immediate danger, combined with their accumulated fatigue, both fell into a deep sleep as soon as their heads hit the pillow.

In the dead of night, the bedroom door of Khem was gently pushed open. Master Pharan chanted a spell to ensure that the two guardians slept soundly and wouldn't wake until morning before he slowly entered and sat on the bed.

His sharp eyes gazed at Khem's face, which was beaded with sweat. Earlier, he had asked Auntie Kaew to come in and help with changing Khem's clothes and wiping him down, but he needed to check periodically to see if Khem had a fever.

Master Pharan felt responsible for this situation, having been the one to suggest that Khem sleep elsewhere. It wasn't out of any personal feelings.

He gently placed his hand on Khem's forehead, only to find that Khem wasn't hot, yet tears streamed continuously from the corners of his eyes.

He must be having a nightmare.

And Master Pharan could guess what Khem was dreaming about.

In the realm of dreams Khem was currently facing, it was their past lives where he and Master Pharan had been lovers, but their love wasn't as sweet

and enduring as others'.

Duty and career had kept them apart for an eternity, and death had separated them forever, preventing any return to the love they once dreamed of.

It was a pity, as they missed each other by such a brief moment.

Khem stood at his own funeral, seeing how devastated the person who arrived just a step too late was. In Khem's mind, he was crying out, "Why?"

Why did he believe others' deceit?

Why wasn't he strong?

Why didn't he wait patiently?

It was just a little while longer.

As he was about to embrace the person kneeling and crying in front of his photo, Khem was suddenly pulled out of that moment. His body jolted in fright, and he woke up to see Master Pharan's face looking at him.

"Ugh!" Khem looked at Pharan's face and burst into tears, feeling a sharp pain in his heart upon learning why they parted in their past life, still immersed in those emotions, finding it hard to detach.

He sat up and lunged to hug the other, driven by a longing, momentarily forgetting who he was now and who the other was.

Pharan immediately understood what Khem had dreamt about to react this way, so he didn't push him away or reject him, but he also didn't reciprocate Khem's feelings, instead reminding him to think rationally.

"You can hug as much as you want, cry to your heart's content, but remember, I'm not Phawat, and you're not Khemika."

"..."

"The past is long gone. Now we are just people who happened to meet. Not lovers, understand...?"

Khem's heart slowed down. After hugging and crying to satisfaction, he came to his senses about his actions, though it was difficult to control his emotions, unlike Pharan who could clearly distinguish between past and present.

But would it matter if Khem wanted to cherish this moment a little longer?

"Master, can you please stay with me a bit longer, until I fall asleep? I promise, I won't ask for this again." Khem pleaded, tears still streaming down his cheeks, his body still hiccupping slightly.

The master fell silent, making Khem feel disheartened, but then he smiled when he heard the next sentence. His tears stopped as if the tap had been turned off.

"If that's the case, then lie down."

"Yes." Khem quickly lay down as instructed. Even though his eyes still followed Pharan, who turned to open a drawer in the wooden cabinet by the bed and pulled out a book of Dhamma to read while waiting for Khem to fall asleep, he didn't miss the stern look sent his way.

"You're staring like that, when will you ever fall asleep?"

Khem closed his eyes out of slight fear but felt reassured because he knew the master was kind.

"Um, can I hold your hand?" The response was a look that seemed to threaten discipline, so Khem promptly closed his eyes in feigned sleep.

Not long after, Khem felt a single finger slide into his hand, and without hesitation, he grabbed it like a cat catching a mouse.

Khem's heart was beating so hard it felt like it might burst out, and he opened his eyes to look at Master Pharan, who was intently reading a book on Dharma, overwhelmed with joy.

Master Pharan, annoyed by Khem's gaze, spoke up,

"Only this once, next time you get the switch."

Chapter 17

Khem woke up early in the morning and turned to see that Master Pharan was no longer there. However, the sense of satisfaction from the night before made Khem smile.

Initially, he had planned to return to Bangkok if Master Pharan didn't help, but now, Khem had changed his mind. Jett wouldn't need to persuade Master Pharan or do anything else on behalf of Khem because from now on, Khem would handle it himself.

Khem would make Master Pharan's heart soften!

First, he would start by tidying his own bed. Khem got up and was slightly startled to see Jett and Chan sleeping on either side of his bed.

"When did you guys get here?" Khem blushed, thinking they might have heard his conversation with Master Pharan last night, given how loudly he had been crying.

Seeing they were sleeping comfortably, he didn't want to wake them, but he had to because Khem intended to clean the entire Thai-style house, though he didn't know where to find the cleaning supplies.

"Jett, wake up, wake up." Khem gently shook Jett's shoulder, and soon Jett sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"Is it morning already?"

"It's, uh, five in the morning." Jett almost bit Khem's head off.

"Damn it. Why are you up so early?"

"Sorry. I want to clean the house for Master Pharan, but I don't know where the cleaning supplies are." Khem replied sheepishly, feeling guilty.

"Maybe if we do this, the master will be more lenient and let us stay here." Jett slapped his knee excitedly, flames of determination in his eyes.

"Good! That's how we should do it. Let's go, wash up, and I'll help clean!" Jett stood up abruptly, heading to wake the other friend.

"Chan, wake up, man!"

When Chan woke, Khem first apologized to him. Seeing that his friend wasn't angry, he explained his plan. Chan, still a bit confused since being dragged here by Jett the day before, nodded in agreement (once again).

The three of them lined up to leave the room, heading downstairs to wash their faces and brush their teeth before going to the cleaning supplies room. Usually, the master hired a trusted maid to clean weekly, but she had recently gone on maternity leave, so lately, the master had been cleaning the house himself.

The kids, now well-rested and full of energy, cleaned with such fervor that the noise reached Pharan's ears as he lay in bed.

The sounds of clinking kitchen utensils and the banging of a ladle against a pan mixed intermittently, causing the master to furrow his brows.

'The older ones are cleaning the house, master, the teak floors are as shiny as mirrors,' whispered Ekk, standing to the left of the bed, followed by Thong from the other side.

'Phii Khem is cooking as well, it smells delicious. Phii Khem's mother was right, master, you won't...' But seeing the master reach for the cane by the bedside, they both dashed out of the room.

Who would have guessed that Pharan would leave the children's room at almost four in the morning...

Dressed in a white t-shirt and black cotton trousers for sleeping, Pharan had to get up. He walked out to sit at the ceremonial area and saw the three children, sweat covering them, already waiting. As soon as he sat on the higher seat, Jett, being the eager student, quickly crawled up to him.

"Master, Khem woke us up to clean together today, that is, um...well...you see..." Jett hesitated when he met the master's look that seemed to say, "And then what?" Chan glanced up, having just tried to speak to the master himself.

Seeing that things weren't going well, Khem quickly crawled closer to the master, clasped his hands in front of his chest, and looked up with wide, hopeful eyes.

"Can I stay here until the new term starts? I promise I'll help with all the housework and won't be a burden to you, Master." Khem blinked at Master Pharan once, who felt like smacking that handsome forehead with a coconut, but Jett was to blame for this behavior.

However, he could only think it because in reality, Master Pharan just sighed with exasperation.

These guys were arguing without him even saying he wouldn't let them stay.

"If you're going to stay, you must formally become my disciple." As soon as he finished speaking, Khem smiled broadly with joy, and Jett almost hugged him but restrained himself out of respect for Master Pharan, only jumping for joy quietly in his mind.

But the matter wasn't settled there.

"And you, do you know the situation with these two? Is that why you followed them here?" Master Pharan turned his question to Chan, who shook his head in response. Jett immediately looked uncomfortable.

Oh no. If Master Pharan tells the truth, their plan to trick Chan into being Khem's protector would fall apart!

Khem bit his lip, feeling guilty when Master Pharan's look seemed to scold him for not telling the truth to his friend, so he quickly crawled back to Chan, leaving Jett to be disciplined with a tap on the head by Master Pharan.

"Chan, I'm sorry for not telling you everything. It's just that..." Khem proceeded to tell Chan everything, from the curse on his maternal family to the near-death experiences. Chan was visibly shocked by what he heard.

If anyone else had told him this story, he wouldn't have believed it, but after getting to know Khem and Jett, he could accept it easily.

"You all need to decide carefully. If you're in this together, it means you three are willing to risk your lives for each other when faced with danger. But if you're not sure you can do that, it's best to go your separate ways from now." What he said was the truth; he couldn't guarantee everything would end well. If someone later panicked and feared for their life, all his teachings would be in vain.

It was better to make the decision now, to avoid wasting everyone's time.

Jett and Khem looked at each other before turning to Chan. Chan adjusted his glasses slightly before crawling closer to Master Pharan...and bowed in a way he never had before.

If asked how he felt after hearing what the master said, he would have to admit he was scared...Who isn't afraid of death, right? But watching over Jett and Khem had become another reason for him to live, and he didn't think he could just stop doing it, so he wanted to try asking,

"I'd like to become your student, master."

Jett stood up straighter as if to say Chan spoke well. Khem was both overjoyed and relieved to the point of tears, but quickly wiped them away and smiled to thank Chan.

To become a student, one had to perform the traditional "Wai Kru" ceremony like the other students of Pharan. So, they would need to prepare offerings and incense for the ceremony tomorrow. Today, after setting up the meal for the master, they had to inform their volunteer club friends that they would be staying behind, to not worry everyone.

Regarding Kornkan, Pongit, and Tejaton, they were now out of danger but still needed to stay in the hospital for observation for several days, with their parents closely watching over them. Once they were better and returned home, they would have to fulfill their promise to ordain as monks for six years and maintain the eight precepts for the rest of their lives.

It was hoped that their experiences would serve as a lesson, making them respect places they visit and refrain from rude behavior or disrespectful challenges.

After the ordeal had passed, the villagers organized a "Baai Sri Suu Khwan" or in the Isan dialect, "Soot Kwahn." ceremony for the students to call back their spirits and morale, and to wish them good fortune before their long journey back to Bangkok.

Khem, Jett, and Chan went to Grandma-Si's house, where the ceremony was to be held. Grandma-Si's house was half concrete and half wood, with a spacious ground floor that could accommodate dozens of people. From the front, one could see the prominent seven-tiered golden tray for the spirit calling, with village elders and residents seated around the walls, each holding several sacred threads.

Upon arrival, Khem, Jett, and Chan walked respectfully through the crowd to get inside, then crawled to sit near Phraemai, who was positioned at the front.

"Prae, how are you feeling? Are you okay now?" Prae almost burst into tears again seeing Khem.

"I'm okay, you're okay now, right, Khem? I heard that..." Phraemai bit her lip, not daring to say the word "ghost." but Auntie-Kaew had told her that Khem had disappeared without anyone noticing, only to be found later lying in the forest, luckily found and brought back by Pharan.

"Sorry, Khem. It's because you were watching over us, right, that this happened?"

Khem shook his head.

"It's not because of you, Prae. My luck has just been down lately, but it will get better soon. Don't worry." Prae exhaled before nodding.

"When the term starts, let's have a barbecue. Including Chan and Jett." Phraemai didn't forget to turn to tell the other two friends sitting next to Khem, because everyone here had been affected because of her.

Jett and Chan nodded with a smile, hoping they would all survive until the term started.

Soon, Grandma Si began the ceremony chants, asking everyone present to clasp their hands in prayer.

"Namo, me, Buddhatejasa, Ratanattayathamika, Tejapasiddhipasithi deva, Narayana, Parameswara..."

"Shri, Shri, this is a good day, Shri, Shri, this day, elders say is good, a day of divine luck, for calling back the spirit, we then recite the spirit-calling chant: Come here, spirit, thirty-two spirits, gather ninety-two spirits, come back to be whole in the body, to continue the lineage."

"The old healer calls for the spirit to return, saying: Come, spirit, the head spirit stay at the head, the eye spirit at the eyes, do not leave, the mouth spirit at the mouth, do not flee, the hair spirit from feet to crown, come to admire the new, the shoulder and round eye spirits, come to fill the body, both the foot spirit, and the hand spirit, the navel and small belly spirits, do not separate, come to be placed in the body, calling: Come, spirit."

The chest spirit come to the two breasts, the hair spirit come to the hair, the leg spirit come to the legs, the shin spirit come to the shins, the neck spirit come to the neck, the belly and chin spirits, the slender waist and arched eyebrow spirits, all spirits within, calling: Come, spirit..."

After that, Grandma-Si took the holy water that Pharan had blessed and used the sprig of jasmine to dip in it and sprinkle it over the students, especially drenching Phraemai and Khem.

After receiving the holy water, they lined up to have the villagers tie sacred threads around their wrists. Over these four days, they had experienced much, both in terms of care and protection.

"May you be happy, always surrounded by good things, may you not know pain or sickness, young lady."

Upon receiving these blessings and as the time to leave approached, some students were moved to tears from the emotional attachment, especially Phraemai, who cried immediately upon seeing Auntie-Kaew and Uncle-Chai, even before they could tie the threads. Auntie-Kaew hugged her for several minutes to calm her down before tying the thread.

Jett, seeing Grandma-Si chewing betel nut alone, crawled over to her.

"Grandma-Si, please tie a thread for me." Grandma-Si, who had just taken a break, pulled a thread from the golden tray. She had known Jett since he was little; back then, he was a chubby, cute, yet mischievous child. He had always called out to her, and now, grown up, he was still as playful as a monkey, just like his father's ancestors.

"May you be strong and healthy, free from pain and illness, may you sleep soundly and wake up refreshed, and remember to wear shoes when you walk outside."

Jett burst into laughter, thinking that only Grandma-Si would bless him like this. It was worth all the times he had refilled her refrigerator with water!

Once the ceremony was over and it was time to go home, Jett, Khem, Chan, and many villagers stood to see off the students onto the bus. They didn't forget to hand over gifts for everyone to share on the journey, waving goodbye for the last time.

As the tour bus departed, leaving behind a faint cloud of dust, it was time for everyone to go their separate ways and resume their duties.

"Let's go back home, we need to prepare the offerings for the master's ceremony." Jett said. Khem nodded hesitantly. Chan, as usual, followed quietly behind.

Chapter 18

Before returning to the Master's house, Jett, Khem, and Chan stopped by the banana grove to cut some banana leaves. They didn't forget to ask for forgiveness before cutting, and after that, they continued walking, picking up beautiful flowers along the way. They got so engrossed in collecting flowers that Khem had to use his shirt as a makeshift container when his hands were full.

Master Pharan, who had come down to the kitchen to make some coffee, raised an eyebrow when he saw Khem walking in with his belly exposed but quickly turned away and went upstairs to continue his meditation.

The trio carried banana leaves, flowers, and borrowed tools from Grandma Si to a bamboo platform. As soon as they picked up their tools, the artistic blood within Khem and Jett started to boil. They decided that their work had to be something Master Pharan could be proud of. Chan, who wasn't artistically inclined, could only help by tearing the leaves for Jett and Khem to fold.

When there were no more leaves to tear, Chan switched to helping with other tools like needles, thread, flowers, or scissors, quietly observing the duo's work.

Jett and Khem worked away, heads down in concentration, not speaking a word to each other, each lost in their own world.

Time passed until it was well after one in the morning.

"Ouch."

"Ouch." Jett and Khem exclaimed together after finishing attaching the last piece of banana leaf. When they lifted their heads, their necks cracked in unison, their backs aching so much they nearly cried.

"Damn, Khem. Next time, I'm not going all out like this with you!" Jett said with a grimace, while Khem, looking at his hand pricked full of needle marks, agreed in pain.

"Yeah, me too."

Chan was amazed at the sight of their work, his eyes sparkling with admiration, so he took out his phone to take pictures.

How could he not? His two friends had crafted a tray in the shape of a seven-headed Naga.

This piece was Khem's idea, inspired by an image from a ceremony where rain suddenly fell, soaking Master Pharan's back, revealing his tattoo clearly to Khem, who was very impressed.

Jett explained that Master Pharan's tattoo was, "The Maha Yant Ananta Phaya Nakaraj, or the seven-headed Naga, the king of all Nagas in the cosmic ocean. It was inked by a famous monk who was a close friend of Master Pharan's grandfather."

The next morning, Pharan looked at the tray of offerings with an inscrutable gaze, before locking eyes with Khem who was watching with bated breath, and then said something that Khem never expected to hear.

"You can stay here too, but you don't have to offer yourself as a disciple. I'll only accept Chan." Khem was left with his mouth agape, while Jett and Chan also looked equally stunned.

"Why, sir?" Khem asked in a rush, almost unable to get the words out, as Jett turned to look at his friend, knowing that the master must have had some reason.

And indeed, after much contemplation, Pharan had his reasons for not wanting to accept Khem as his disciple.

Pharan met Khem's eyes again, his calm and serene gaze subtly trembling.

"To become someone's disciple, you must swear an oath to revere that person as your master. You cannot disrespect, harm, or have any impure thoughts towards them. If you break this oath one day, not even a hundred Jetts and Chans could help you."

Everything the master said was true, and Jett could confirm this because he knew of a student who betrayed the master to join a dark sorcerer, stealing personal items to perform unorthodox rituals. Within three days, that student had lost his mind.

Those who believe in mysticism call this phenomenon the 'Power of the master'.

Khem slowly lowered his head, unable to refute the master's words, admitting that since the dream about their past life last night, he had seen how much they loved each other and how painfully they parted.

Even if he tried to forget the past, Khem couldn't do it; he couldn't think of the other as his close friend's master anymore.

"I understand, master." Khem nodded before backing away to sit at a distance, leaving Jett and Chan to handle the tray together. Jett was confused and bewildered, not understanding what the master and his best friend were discussing, but seeing the master's gaze, he had to refocus on the ceremony. Chan felt the same.

Jett had conducted this ceremony before. This time, he was merely guiding Chan, much like a tour guide leading a chant and explaining the next steps.

The master turned to light incense and candles to honor the Triple Gem, nodding for Jett and Chan to bow first before he clasped his hands in prayer.

After finishing their prayers, they all chanted "Namo" three times as they had practiced.

"Na mo tassa, Bhagavato, Arahato, Sammā, Sambuddhasa..."

After chanting, Jett instructed Chan to recite his oath, then moved to sit beside Khem, allowing Chan to proceed with the next steps.

Chan recited his oath in a soft, pleasant voice, his eyes firm and unwavering:

"Dear revered master, I, Chanwit Panichakorn, hereby offer my body and soul as your student to learn your teachings. I promise to study diligently, obey your instructions, and treat you with respect. I will never do anything to dishonor you."

He then bowed down. The master nodded and placed the offering tray beside him before touching Chan's head, closing his eyes, and chanting a mantra to connect their spirits. This was to aid Chan in times of danger, similar to what Jett had experienced during an incident on a bus.

After the mantra, he tied a sacred thread around Chan's wrist, blessing him for happiness and success. Khem watched with a mix of envy and sadness...

Once done, Jett took the tray to store in the master's storage room. Khem glanced at his own work, which he had meticulously crafted late into the night, but noticed the master seemed uninterested. Khem then looked at his hands with a heavy heart.

The master then suggested they all go to rest, knowing they had stayed up late and woken early. By three in the afternoon, he called them back downstairs for the final step of the disciple initiation ceremony. Hearing this, Jett swallowed hard.

"You will go into the forest behind the house and find a red piece of paper rolled into a spiral. Bring back the first one you find." Chan clasped his hands in respect.

"Yes, master." Pharan glanced at his good student standing there relieved, then continued,

"Jett, you go too."

"What!?" Jett turned sharply to look at the master, mouth gaping, but when the master raised an eyebrow, he had no argument, just stood there accepting his fate.

"Jett, Chan, good luck." Said Khem. Though he wanted to join the fun with his friends, he didn't dare enter the forest again. The master must have known this, hence not ordering Khem to participate.

Seeing his friend downcast, Jett quickly walked over to pat his head, promising to bring back delicious wild berries. Chan also approached, giving an awkward fist bump, unsure how to comfort Khem, but this made Khem smile happily, waving them off before sitting to wait for his friends on a low stool by the bamboo bed where the master was reading.

Suddenly, the master stood up, went up to the house, and returned with a silver bowl containing about one to two thousand baht in coins, placing it in front of Khem. In the bowl were small scissors and several colored ribbons.

"Coins for almsgiving, folded into flowers?" The master asked. Khem, not yet daring to look up at the master, nodded, pulled the bowl towards him, and bent over his assigned task.

Pharan watched Khem silently, knowing what was on his mind, but he couldn't force Khem's feelings to stop, nor offer any comforting words. Instead, he left him to find distraction in the task.

Luckily, Khem had been trained in handicrafts since childhood, including folding coins like this to make a living for his education; he took any job he could get.

Khem began using the ribbons to fold the coins into various shapes like jasmine, roses, lotuses, and even fruits like oranges and apples, and soon he was enjoying himself, forgetting about the master's earlier words.

"Cute..."

"..."

"Dragonfruit is hard to make..."

When Pharan saw that Khem's mood had improved, he returned to his book, but his ears were still tuned to Khem's quiet murmurs.

Switching to Chan and Jett. While searching for red colored paper rolls on the ground and among the bushes, Jett kept looking for something he dreaded to find.

This was the main reason he feared entering the forest behind the master's house.

It was something that usually slept during the night and woke during the day, unlike other spirits.

"Hey, Chan, have you found it yet?"

Jett asked with a nervous tone, truthfully, if he wasn't afraid of getting a beating from the master with a stick, he would have run back out immediately.

Chan was looking up and down for a while until he found a red paper roll. When he turned to tell Jett, his eyes caught sight of something else. He slowly raised a finger to point at it and said,

"Khun Jett...behind you." Jett's eyes widened, his hair stood on end, praying it wasn't what he thought, and slowly turned to look...and it was exactly what he feared!

A fierce wild boar, nearly thirty years old, almost as old as the master, was staring at them intently, reminding Jett of the time he was chased by it like it was a matter of life and death.

The master had named it 'Phrai', and it was the lord of this forest.

"Listen, Chan, I'll count to three, then run. One..."

Bang!

Jett was left with his mouth agape when he felt a gust of wind rush past him. He then shouted after Chan,

"I haven't even counted to two yet, you bastard!" Chan ignored the insult and the person insulting him who was running close behind, not understanding why they had to wait for three, couldn't they just run already?

Crash!

The wild boar, seeing people running, chased them, and it was fast.

Chan and Jett ran until they reached the outskirts of the forest. The wild boar, having chased them to the edge of its territory, stopped, looked at the two kids who had escaped with a slight sense of regret, then turned back into the forest.

As evening approached, Jett and Chan returned to the master, looking quite the worse for wear. One had lost a shoe, the other had lost his glasses.

"Here you go, master." Chan handed over the red paper roll after kneeling down. Before Jett's hand could slap him on the back,

"Damn, that's the wrong guy! The master is over here!"

The scene was Chan kneeling on the ground. The master, however, was sitting on the same old bamboo bed, this time with a dog named 'Dang' lying by his side.

Besides having terrible eyesight, Chan's attention was also off...

Pharan shook his head in exasperation, picked up the red paper Chan had retrieved, and read it: "Metta Mahaniyom, Kong Krapan Chatri". He nodded, then pulled something out of his bag and handed it to Chan.

Jett grabbed Chan's hand to accept it. Chan, peering closely, saw that it was a coin made from meteoric iron.

"I give this to you. Keep it with you, it'll help in times of danger. It's not hard to honor, but you must never break the third precept." Pharan explained that each sacred item has its own way of veneration and precautions.

Chan bowed in gratitude to the master and put the coin in his shirt pocket, intending to make it into a necklace.

As for Jett, last time he received a carved wooden monkey statue that had helped with luck and business.

Khem, who was quietly folding coins, reminded himself not to be jealous when he saw what his friends received, no matter how hard it was.

When it was time to sleep, Jett and Chan, exhausted from the day's activities, fell asleep easily, leaving Khem tossing and turning on his bed, his mind filled with confusion and turmoil, before finally drifting off to sleep near midnight.

Meanwhile, Pharan. After setting up the tray of offerings that the three boys had prepared, he sighed after looking at it for a while, then stood up and walked out of the room to another part of the Thai house.

The door to Khem's room was gently opened for the second night in a row. Seeing that everyone was fast asleep, he didn't chant any spells, walked directly to sit beside Khem, took out a small tin of herbal ointment for wounds from his pocket, opened it, and used his fingertip to apply it to each of Khem's slender fingers, both left and right hands.

Once he was done applying the ointment, he didn't linger, stood up, and walked out of the room immediately.

At that moment, hearing the door close, Khem slowly opened his eyes, his lips tightly pressed together, his face flushed with a heat that couldn't be controlled in the darkness.

Who wouldn't be touched by such an act?

Chapter 19

The next day, Khem, Jett, and Chan woke up at five in the morning, got up to clean the house and prepare breakfast for the master. Most of the ingredients were vegetables and fruits grown by the villagers and brought to the master. For meat, the master would have the village chief buy it from the market every week.

The master ate simply. He didn't have any particular favorite foods, so Khem prepared dishes he was most skilled at, like clear tom yum soup with stir-fried Chinese kale in oyster sauce, omelet with acacia leaves, and garlic pork. Chan, who could cook a bit, assisted. Jett, besides cooking rice, wasn't good at much else and was afraid of hot oil, so he stood in the corner behind a pillar, waiting to help carry the dishes outside.

Once they finished eating, they separated their own portions from those of their friends, because the students could not eat with the master.

When Jett invited the master to come down to eat at the table, the three of them distanced themselves and sat in a circle around a bamboo bed set up outside the house, not far from where the master was eating, just in case he needed them.

Khem kept glancing at the master while eating, which was noticeable. Jett slightly squinted at his friend, feeling suspicious about Khem's behavior towards the master since yesterday, but hadn't found the right moment to ask about it. He decided to wait and watch for a while before having a heart-to-heart conversation.

As for Chan, luckily he had brought spare glasses for emergencies. Otherwise, he would have had to go back into the forest to find his old ones or perhaps borrow the village chief's pickup truck to go into town to get new glasses.

After they finished eating, they collected the dishes and helped each other wash them. Then, they lined up to go up the stairs where Pharan was waiting.

Khem crawled to sit at the side, leaving Jett and Chan to crawl forward and pay their respects to the master.

Once the students were gathered, Pharan began to explain the path ahead in learning the mystical arts, starting with Chan.

"Before learning the magic arts, the basic practice is to train in meditation, or what we call 'Samatha-Kammatthana'. Meditation involves chanting mantras while controlling your breath. As for Kammatthana, it's a bit more complicated." Jett nodded in agreement while listening with his hands clasped. Chan, not yet knowing what Kammatthana was, sat quietly and listened intently to the master.

Pharan pulled out two books; one was a common guide on Kammatthana practice, and the other was a compilation of various spells that a beginner could learn in a short time.

"There are forty objects of meditation, you must choose one to focus on. Try reading and see. If you want to practice, I'll guide you, but mastering it takes time, whether it's slow or fast depends on the individual. If you don't want to practice, that's okay too."

"Yes, master." Chan bowed in gratitude and reached out to take the two books.

"The other one is a spell book compiled for protective Buddhist magic. You are absolutely forbidden to misuse it." Chan nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"The rules of learning the art of black magic are important. First, you must have unwavering faith in the subject you're studying, believe in your master, behave according to moral precepts, and have patience. Only then can you succeed in this art."

Chan clasped his hands together in reverence to accept the instructions.

"I understand, master."

Pharan nodded, his sharp gaze meeting Khem's just as he was caught peeking. Khem, startled, quickly lowered his head, his face turning red to avoid the master's notice.

But there was no way he wouldn't be noticed. Pharan raised his eyebrows slightly, aware that what happened last night probably meant Khem hadn't slept as soundly as he thought.

"Then let's start with the first step of training." After that, Jett and Chan were often taken by the master into the shrine room to practice meditation for their lessons, without Khem being allowed to join. They would spend their time there from morning till evening, only coming out during lunch

breaks and bedtime, during which Khem would always prepare meals for everyone.

However, the master rarely came out where Khem could see him, and if he did, it was when Khem wasn't paying attention, almost as if the master was avoiding him.

Today, as usual, Jett and Chan came out from their training room at lunch to eat, but the master did not join them.

Khem looked at the omelet with acacia leaves on the separate plate meant for the master with a sad expression because the master wouldn't come down to eat.

"Khem, do you want to eat this? If not, give it to me." Jett, who was gobbling his rice, asked Khem, who was just staring at the remaining omelet without touching his food, having been lost in thought for some time.

"Khun Khem, is something wrong? You seem less cheerful lately." Chan, sitting across from him on the bamboo bed, pushed up his glasses and inquired.

"Yeah, that's right. Or are you lonely? Should I ask the master to let us go for a day or two and take you out somewhere?" Jett's eyes sparkled with the suggestion, and Chan nodded in agreement, though he didn't dare speak up too much for fear that the master might overhear.

The master had whispering spirits, Chan felt that sometimes he seemed to be listening to someone, and Jett seemed to see it too, but no matter how hard he looked, he never saw anything.

Khem swallowed his rice and shook his head.

"We. We made it for the master, but he probably won't come down to eat. Jett, you can eat it. We'll make another one for the master this evening." Khem said before passing a plate of omelet with acacia to Jett.

Jett, dizzy with hunger, didn't notice his little friend's feelings and accepted the plate out of sheer hunger, as the training had sapped a lot of his energy.

"I'm not lonely, really. The master is going out of his way to teach us, so Jett and Chan, focus on your training. Don't worry about me."

"Are you sure? If you feel lonely, just tell me. Don't worry about the master scolding you; he's actually very kind at heart."

Khem felt reassured.

"Oh, thank you."

Chan blinked and looked at Khem again, it seemed like he might have had a hint of tears in his eyes but was trying hard to suppress his feelings. Chan wanted to ask but decided against it if Khem wasn't willing to share, so he continued eating with his head down.

As evening fell, Jett and Chan came down for another meal, washed up, and then returned to the shrine room to continue their training. Khem sat swatting mosquitoes while guarding the master's meal on the bamboo bed until almost midnight, but still, the master did not come down.

What could have happened to the master? Considering just last night, he had come to Khem's room to apply some ointment...

Khem clenched his jaw, feeling both uncomfortable and sad, thinking he must have done something wrong for the master to avoid him like this. But no matter how hard he tried to figure out what it could be, he couldn't. So, he decided to take the plate of fried rice with egg upstairs. He intended to knock on the master's door and insist he come out to eat, even though it was well past dinner time.

Khem walked upstairs carrying the plate of fried rice, but before he reached the shrine room where Jett and Chan were training, something tugged at his shirt from behind. Turning around, he saw something fleeting disappear into the door of the master's bedroom, which was adjacent to the shrine room.

That thing indicated that the master was in there, not in the shrine room where Khem was heading to knock.

Khem turned back towards the master's bedroom door, took a moment to steel himself, and then knocked.

"Master, are you asleep?"

There was no immediate response, but after a moment, the door slowly opened, revealing the master in cotton clothing, his gaze cold as he looked at Khem.

"What is it?" The master's stern voice made Khem clamp his lips tight, his eyes burning with emotion, feeling a tightness in his chest he couldn't describe, but he still tried to keep his composure, knowing there was no turning back at this point.

"I...I noticed that you haven't come down to eat...so I brought some for you." Pharan looked at the plate of fried rice in Khem's hands without expression before replying,

"I'm not hungry. You can take it back and eat it yourself."

Khem swallowed hard, as if swallowing his hurt along with his saliva.

Seeing Khem with his head down and silent, Pharan was about to close the door to dismiss him, but before the door could shut, a small hand got in the way and was caught in the door.

Pharan pushed the door slightly away from Khem's hand but didn't open it to look at Khem's face again.

"Have I...done something wrong, master?" Khem asked, trying to keep his voice from trembling.

"..."

"If I've really done something wrong, could master please tell me? So I can apologize properly, master."

Pharan was silent for a moment before gently prying Khem's fingers from the doorframe.

"You haven't done anything wrong. I just don't want to eat. If you're not going to eat it, give it to the dog, don't waste it."

"..."

"And from now on, don't make extra. If I'm hungry, I'll make something for myself."

The door closed. The sound of the lock clicked in Khem's ears, and tears continued to flow down his cheeks from earlier, but not wanting to bother the master further, he carried the plate of fried rice away.

Khem went to give the fried rice to the spotted dog, watching it eat with joy, which slightly comforted him, and he gently patted the dog's head.

"Thank you, dog. Sorry for giving you something that someone else didn't want."

Inside Pharan's room, after Khem left, the peace that had settled in his heart for several days from not facing Khem was once again disturbed.

The reason was the night Pharan realized he had been caught sneaking in to apply ointment to Khem.

Pharan thought that his excessive attention towards Khem was due to lingering feelings from a past life. If he hadn't looked back, he wouldn't feel this way, but forgetting was impossible. So, he tried to avoid and distance himself from Khem, treating him like any other acquaintance who wasn't his student. Even if it were his student knocking on his bedroom door late at night for such matters, he might face more than just his usual cold words.

It wasn't like he hadn't eaten anything lately; he often used magic to make himself invisible to Khem, so Khem wouldn't notice when he went

down to eat.

Sitting down by the bed, he loosely clasped his hands, resting his elbows on his knees, staring at the closed door as if he could still see Khem standing there. When he heard the dog named 'Dang' bark several times in a row, he guessed that Khem had probably given the fried rice to the dog as he had intended, and he let out a soft sigh.

The two friends, Ekk and Thong, who had tried to play matchmakers, exchanged looks and then shook their heads in resignation.

Jett and Chan had made satisfactory progress in their meditation practice in a short period, and they had memorized almost all the magical spells the master had assigned. The only remaining step was to apply these skills in real situations, which would be their next test before all three, including Khem, had to return to university for the new term.

Two days had passed, and Pharan and Khem still hadn't had a proper conversation, which Pharan thought would continue.

Today there was no training, but Jett, Chan, and Khem weren't just lounging around or going out to play. They helped clean up around the house, sweeping leaves, and weeding. Meanwhile, the master was weaving bamboo into mats for covering food.

Not long after, a four-door pickup truck arrived, and three people got out: a middle-aged man, a young woman, and a young man in his late twenties, all dressed in expensive-looking clothes.

"Hello, master Pharan." The man greeted with a respectful wai, and Pharan, who had stopped his work, returned the greeting.

"Hello, village chief." replied the village chief with a smile and quickly calling his daughter and son forward to pay respects to Pharan.

Prim, once her father made way, quickly moved to the front and performed a wai, then gave Pharan a sweet smile, followed by her younger brother, Pong.

Pharan nodded in acknowledgment. Although he didn't make eye contact with Prim, his expression wasn't as cold as usual.

"What business do you have with me, chief?"

The chief nodded, gently stroking his daughter's hair with a look of concern.

"Recently, Prim's luck has been down. She was even grazed by a car a few days ago, so I wanted to bring her to you, master, to take a look. And

for Pong, he's got a match next week with the neighboring sub-district, so he'd like to ask for something blessed by the master."

Pharan nodded in acknowledgment and invited the chief, his daughter, and his son up to the house, amidst the curious glances of the disciples standing not too far away.

Especially Khem, who, upon seeing the look in the young woman's eyes, immediately understood how she felt about the master.

"That's strange. Normally, Khun Prim never gets to come up to the master's house." Jett remarked, arms folded over the broom handle, his voice filled with curiosity. His words made Khem pursed his lips slightly before asking hesitantly, while Chan continued pulling weeds silently.

"Why, Jett?" Jett then recounted that once, 'Prim' or 'Khun Prim', the chief's daughter, was almost engaged to the master according to the elders' wishes, because the master's father and the chief were close friends.

However, the master's grandfather loved him more than anything and didn't want the chief's family to use his grandson's magical skills for their own benefit, so he opposed the engagement and made the master become a monk to follow a more spiritual path.

The master, who loved his grandfather more than his own father and had no affection for the chief's daughter, went along with his grandfather's wishes. This caused a great rift between the master's father and both his grandfather and him, leading to his father remarrying and moving abroad, never setting foot here again since that day. The master's mother had passed away when he was young.

Khem's expression saddened upon hearing the master's backstory, never imagining he had such a sorrowful past.

"Poor master."

"Yeah, and that's not all." Jett continued, explaining that Khun Prim liked the master a lot, to the point where even when the master became a monk, she would drive from the district to offer alms in the village almost every day, and on special Buddhist days, she'd come to make merit at the temple.

"But besides Khun Prim, there were many young women enchanted by the master. I don't know what he did to charm so many people. There was even a Pharan Monk Fan Club formed back then. On Buddhist days, groups of people would come to the temple looking for the master, causing the abbot to constantly remind them of their manners."

Khem's mouth hung open slightly in surprise.

"Was it really that much?"

"Men can be like that too, that's why I told you not to make eye contact with the master for more than three seconds." Jett remarked. In Jett's eyes, Khem often seemed more like a girl than a boy, which prompted him to caution him without knowing whether Khem liked men or women. But regardless of Khem's preferences, the feelings Jett had for him would never change.

"Is that why the master disrobed?" Khem guessed, not thinking he was right.

"Yeah, the master didn't want to trouble other monks, so he chose to disrobe and set up this school at the end of the village."

"..."

"Even now, Khun Prim hasn't given up on wooing the master, but it's been a long time, and the master still hasn't softened towards her. This is the first time she's come into the master's house. Normally, he doesn't allow women into the house unless it's absolutely necessary."

Khem clenched his jaw, his eyes burning, as each word from Jett made his heart squeeze with fear.

"Or maybe the master wants to walk the middle path again, hey, Khem, why are you crying!?"

Chapter 20

Chan quickly stood up in shock as Khem suddenly started crying. Seeing Khem's behavior, Jett got goosebumps, something screaming in his head that this was bad. He dropped the broom and dragged his little friend to sit on the bench under the mango tree.

"Khem, what are you hiding from me? Tell me everything!" Jett accidentally raised his voice at Khem, causing Chan, who was standing nearby, to intervene while pointing at Khem, who was now sobbing heavily.

"Khun Jett, calm down first, can't you see Khun Khem is crying even more now?" Jett pinched the bridge of his nose to relieve stress and then hugged his friend.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Go ahead and cry it out, there, there."

Khem hadn't intended to cry...but all these feelings were being filtered out by memories from past lives that the master had once told him to forget. Thinking that the master might soften his heart for that woman named Prim, his chest ached painfully.

After crying until he felt slightly better, although tears still flowed and his body was still hiccupping lightly, Khem moved away from Jett's shoulder, his head down with embarrassment, wiping his tears.

"Jett, Chan. I'm sorry."

"Khem. You and the master have something going on, right? I've been puzzled ever since the master refused to take you as a disciple, and then he said some weird things." Jett asked with a tense voice, his eyebrows furrowed. Initially, he intended to wait until he was sure before asking, but now things seemed to be getting clearer.

Khem pressed his lips together tightly, looked up to meet the eyes of his two friends, his round eyes quivering, until Chan softly asked,

"Khun Khem...do you like the master?"

"Uh..." That question was like a bolt of lightning striking Jett's head. He was about to turn and curse at Chan for being so direct, especially when Chan had just advised him to stay calm!

Khem started crying again, nodding and shaking his head, looking utterly confused.

"Me and the master, hic, we were lovers in a past life." Jett's mouth dropped open; a second bolt of lightning struck the same spot, followed by a third, fourth, and fifth as Khem recounted everything, including how both he and the master had shared a past life and had revisited those moments together, as well as what had happened in the middle of the night.

Both Jett and Chan believed Khem's entire story without reservation.

"Actually, I wasn't asleep that day either." Chan said. Usually, he was a light sleeper, and because the house was made of wood, footsteps were clearer than in a concrete house. The faint scent of incense told Chan it was the master who had entered, but he thought the master was just checking on them, so he didn't bother to open his eyes to look.

Khem nodded, "I'm sorry, even though the master is your master, and yet, hic."

Khem wanted to forget, tried to forget, but he couldn't. As long as he saw the master's face every day like this, there was no way Khem could forget...

Chan, imagining a future where they both decided to be together, nodded in agreement.

"For me, the master is just an ordinary person. Not a monk forbidden to marry or start a family. Whom he loves or likes, or how Khun Khem feels, that's a matter between both of you. Khun Khem, you don't have to worry about this."

Jett nodded, but his expression didn't improve; it actually looked worse.

"That thing. If you and the master both like each other, that's fine, I wouldn't mind, it would be good knowing someone would take care of the master in his later years. But from what you've told me, that's not the case now, right?" Jett's words felt like a lump stuck in Khem's throat, and Khem couldn't deny that the master had always set clear boundaries with him.

It was only Khem who harbored one-sided feelings for the master...

Seeing the pain and confusion still in Khem's eyes, Jett further emphasized the truth about the master he knew.

"I've known the master since I was a kid, and he's always been a man of his word. When he said he wouldn't help you, he meant it. He only took in Chan because he wanted to pass on his knowledge, so there would be someone to help you in the future, even though the master usually doesn't take just anyone as a student. That's already him bending his rules for us..."

Yes, so Khem shouldn't complicate things for the master any further.

Everything seemed dark to Khem; wherever he turned, he was haunted by old memories, especially those from just a few days apart when they parted in such pain, reminding him of the hurt from not being able to change anything.

Moreover, in this life, Khem was a man, which might be one of the reasons why the master rejected him.

With tears in his eyes, Khem asked softly,

"What...what should I do, Jett?" Jett pulled Khem into another hug, gently patting his back in comfort, although his words felt like sharp spears piercing his best friend's heart.

"Let it go, Khem, just let everything go. It's hard, but I'll help you, trust me."

Khem closed his eyes tightly before breaking down in tears he could no longer hold back.

"Ugh..." Khem was like a fragile glass that had shattered repeatedly, like a small creature wounded all over, yet still struggling to breathe.

Chan had no words to add because he agreed with Jett's sentiments. He could only stand silently, shielding his friends from the sun...

Pharan led village chief Chang, along with his daughter and son, upstairs to the house. They sat down in positions that were level with each other but at a certain distance, as the others were not his students who needed to show him reverence. They were like the forest and the tiger, interdependent.

For the village to receive funding, it was exchanged for sacred items and assistance from his magical abilities, as long as it wasn't beyond his capacity, like in this case.

The master asked Prim and Pong to write down their birth dates on paper and give it to him. He then calculated the numbers and gave a prediction based on what he saw.

However, in the midst of silence, Pong suddenly clasped his hands together and spoke up.

"Master, could you do me first, please? Uh...I need to use the bathroom."
chief Chang glared at him.

"I told you not to drink so much water!"

Pong, still with his hands clasped, raised them over his head in a gesture of apology, and Pharan glanced at him briefly before switching to Pong's birth date paper.

"Before the fight, try not to leave home much. As for the sacred item, I'll make an armband for the boxer and send it to your house, but it'll take about three to four days."

The armband Pharan referred to wasn't just a piece of cloth with magical inscriptions; it was a specific type of equipment boxers wear around their upper arms during fights, considered a talisman for protection and invulnerability, made from cloth or sacred thread inscribed with magical symbols, sometimes containing herbs, yantra scrolls, or other amulets inside.

Pong smiled broadly, his hands clasped over his head in gratitude.

"Thank you so much, Master. Uh, may I use the restroom?"

"Go ahead." Once given permission, he quickly excused himself and went downstairs.

Pharan then turned back to Prim's birth details, frowning his brows as he calculated, before shaking his head and sighing silently to himself.

"Khun Prim doesn't have a fate for accidents, but she does have health issues. It would be better if you rest more during this period."

Prim blushed because it was evident she often had minor accidents due to overworking herself and not getting enough rest, though she had covered it up with makeup, and her father couldn't tell, leading him to make up an excuse to bring her to see the master.

"Oh." when he turned to see her gaze, she was startled and gave a dry, sweet smile instead. Then, she took the opportunity to talk and catch up with the master as planned, especially since this was the first time she had a chance to be in the house.

"Is the master well?"

Pharan nodded with a softened demeanor, a mix of resignation and fondness for the young woman, because despite her age nearing thirty, Prim still hadn't decided to settle down with anyone. She was only a couple of years younger than him.

For Pharan, Prim was like a little sister who grew up alongside him, someone he had known since childhood, so he never thought of her in any other way, even if she didn't feel the same and had declared she would only let go when he got married. But this couldn't change his feelings.

"I'm fine, and how about you, Khun Prim?"

"Ha ha, as you can see, I've been busy with work lately, so I haven't been sleeping much..."

The initial solution to the issue between Khem and the master was this: after Khem agreed to let go of his feelings for the master as suggested by Jett, the approach was for Khem to avoid meeting the master. If they had to meet, he should keep his behavior and words reserved, like a layperson speaking to a monk.

As for the master, Jett would continue to keep an eye on him because, in reality, there weren't many who truly understood the master well enough to see through him. But because of this, he didn't want Khem to take such a risk, as if the master truly didn't like him, Khem would be the one to suffer the most.

Jett and Chan decided they needed to master their skills quickly and take Khem back to Bangkok as soon as possible.

Khem understood and was aware. When Jett gave him a straightforward reminder, he regained some composure. Even though it was hard, he had to try. He reminded himself not to trouble the master and to look at his own situation.

While sweeping leaves, lost in thought, he backed into someone in the kitchen.

"Sorry." Khem quickly moved away, bowing his head in apology. The other person was a tall, well-built man with tanned skin and an undercut hairstyle, who was blinking at Khem in confusion.

"Who are you? I've never seen you before. What's your name?" Instead of accepting the apology, the man asked in a friendly manner, addressing Khem with 'casual mung', which Khem found a bit awkward, making him more inclined to want to run away.

"Uh, my name is Khem." He said, and then the man standing opposite him had a strange glint in his eyes, causing Khem to lower his gaze.

"Such a cute name. I'm Pong, nice to meet you." Khem was about to bow in greeting, but instead, Pong extended his hand, so Khem had to lower his hand and offer a handshake instead.

However, before they could shake hands, Khem felt a chilling cold on his back, and someone standing behind him passed a scripture through Khem to Pong.

"You have a tendency to get hurt physically during this period. I recommend you recite the thirty-fourth verse before sleeping every night, Pong." Pharan said calmly, yet suddenly Pong felt a chill down his spine. The image of Master Pharan standing protectively behind Khem seemed

like a warning to back off. Therefore, Pong clasped his hands in respect, took the scripture, gave a stiff smile to Khem, and then walked away to find his father and sister. Even though he felt it was a pity to let someone so much to his liking slip away.

Khem stood silent, head bowed, not responding to the master, until he heard the master's quiet command.

"Finish sweeping the leaves and then go prepare the meal. When it's done, cover it with a lid, and I'll come down to eat."

Khem looked at the table and saw that the lid the master referred to was one he had made since that morning. After giving his instructions, the master walked away, leaving Khem standing there alone.

And he said I didn't need to make it...

Khem wanted to ask but didn't dare, so he just took a deep breath, trying not to think too much about the master's actions, believing that the master must have his reasons for behaving this way.

"Don't waver, Khem. Otherwise, Jett will surely beat you to death." He told himself three times before heading to the kitchen to prepare the food as instructed.

Chapter 21

Why did he have to touch someone he'd just met for the first time...

That was the thought that crossed Pharan's mind as he intervened.

Pharan returned to his room to meditate, calming his mind and heart, reflecting repeatedly on his actions because what he had done was not befitting of his role and age.

If the consequences of revisiting the past were this impactful, one would need to be much more cautious in the future...

Three days after that day, Khem followed Jett's advice diligently. He woke up early to clean the house and cook, spent his free time meditating and listening to Dhamma talks on the radio, and when he was bored, he would sketch around the area of the master's traditional Thai house. He didn't venture outside the premises for his own safety.

Most importantly, Khem avoided encountering the master. If there was no necessity, he barely went through the central area where ceremonies were held, which he used to sneak glances at multiple times a day. Now it was down to once or twice a day...

Khem really wanted to clasp his hands and apologize to Jett, but ignoring the master entirely was something he couldn't do.

Currently, Khem was making palm fruit in syrup, as Auntie-Kaew had brought some palm fruit over that morning on her sidecar motorcycle. Once done, Khem planned to portion some into bags for Auntie-Kaew.

When it was lunchtime, Jett and Chan came down to the kitchen to find Khem. They helped carry the food to eat on the bamboo bed. Having just finished making the sweet, Khem turned off the stove to eat first, planning to enjoy the dessert later, not forgetting to set aside a portion for the master as usual.

"Khem, let's go to the market today."

Jett said with a good mood, looking forward to going out.

"Oh, isn't the village chief free today?" Khem asked while blinking, since usually, the village chief was the one who bought the ingredients.

"Yeah, Grandma-Si isn't feeling well, so the village chief took her to the doctor in town." Jett answered.

Hearing that, Khem quickly asked, "What's wrong with Grandma-Si?"

"It seems just a normal cold, nothing serious. Elderly people can get sick easily with a little wind or rain." Khem nodded, relieved by Jett's explanation since Grandma-Si had lost her husband less than two years after they married and had no children, choosing to remain single. If it had been something serious, Khem worried there'd be no one to take care of her.

"Let's find time to visit Grandma-Si."

"Yeah, I was thinking of helping to fill up her fridge."

Chan sat quietly, listening while serving the food onto the plates for Jett and Khem, to keep their conversation flowing. This act had only recently become a habit, almost as if it happened naturally without much thought, and with repetition, it had become a routine.

Today, since the three kids needed to go to the market, Pharan decided to let Jett and Chan off early. He walked downstairs to have lunch in the afternoon, after the children had already eaten. This was his routine to avoid direct encounters with Khem.

Khem was aware that the master was avoiding him. Whenever the master came down to eat, he would usually excuse himself to do something else. But today, Khem had made a dessert, so he stayed to serve it after the master finished his meal.

"Master, would you like some sugar palm in syrup?" Khem asked, coming out of the kitchen, his head bowed and hands clasped behind the chair where the master was sitting. Pharan, who was about to leave, sat back down and simply said,

"Bring it over." Khem pinched himself, trying not to get too excited, reminding himself that the master was an easy eater who would consume whatever was prepared. Even if it wasn't made by Khem, the master would eat it. So, he turned to serve the aromatic sugar palm in syrup into a bowl and placed it in front of the master. After setting it down, he intended to leave, but the master called him back.

"Wait." That was all the master said before he started to slowly taste the dessert Khem had made. In less than three minutes, he had finished it all, including the syrup, then stood up and turned to face Khem, who was still standing there with his head down.

Five thousand baht in banknotes were handed to him.

"Here's for the groceries. Buy enough for a week, and use the rest to get yourselves some clothes and necessities." Pharan said, noticing that the three kids were wearing the same clothes repeatedly.

"No, it's okay, Master, I mean..." Khem shook his head, hesitating to refuse out of politeness, but then he thought about the others, knowing he couldn't refuse on their behalf. Perhaps Jett and Chan needed it, and five thousand baht seemed like quite a lot.

Khem was still contemplating when he heard the master sigh, which made him feel guilty and unable to refuse. He just pressed his lips together.

In the end, the five thousand baht was folded in half by the master and slipped into the pocket of Khem's short-sleeved shirt. Then the master turned and walked away immediately.

Khem felt downcast but knew he shouldn't refuse the master's kindness. He decided he would discuss with Jett and Chan how to best use this money.

At three in the afternoon, Jett and Chan were released from their training room. One of the disciples brought a pickup truck for the kids to drive to the market as requested by the village chief. The disciple went up to pay his respects to the master, had a brief conversation, and then came back downstairs. He then rode back home on a motorcycle with his wife who had come to pick him up.

"Who's driving?" Khem asked as they were all getting ready in the room. He himself couldn't drive a car, could manage a bicycle, but wasn't confident with a motorcycle. Most of the time, he just walked wherever he needed to go.

"I'll drive." Said Jett while applying face powder at the vanity mirror. Khem, who was applying sunscreen from a packet beside him, was slightly taken aback.

"Jett, you can drive a car too? I didn't know that."

"Yeah, I've been driving since I was fourteen. My dad taught me."

Khem nodded, thinking it was somewhat enviable, but he was too scared to learn to drive himself. Walking was more comforting. He then turned to ask Chan, who was styling his hair with gel.

"What about you, Chan? Can you drive a car?" Chan nodded, looking at Khem through his thick-lensed glasses.

"I can manage, but my mom doesn't let me drive much because of my poor eyesight." Khem made a sympathetic face, and Chan smiled, lightly

ruffling Khem's hair as if to say it wasn't a big deal.

Once they were ready, they all got into the old but well-kept white pickup truck and headed straight to the Saturday market in the sub-district.

The weather was quite hot, and the market was starting to get crowded, so the three decided to shop quickly and head back. Besides buying ingredients, Jett, Khem, and Chan each selected three sets of clothes.

Most were local cotton outfits made by the villagers, along with some personal items, as they would be heading back to Bangkok in just a week.

But they hadn't expected to bump into Pong, the village chief's son whom they had met three days prior while at the market.

Today, Pong was tasked with being the driver for his mother and sister, but seeing the crowd, he decided to wait near the market exit instead of joining them.

Initially feeling bored because his mother and sister were taking too long, his annoyance vanished upon seeing Khem, whom he didn't expect to see again. He was filled with joy and quickly approached to greet him.

"Hello, Khem. So we meet again." Pong smiled, his eyes sparkling. Although Khem was startled, he gave a small smile and returned the greeting with a wai, knowing that Pong was several years older.

"Hello, Khun Pong."

"Oh, Phii Pong, hello!" Jett, who had just followed Khem and was haggling over the price of fresh chicken, greeted Pong.

Jett and Pong knew each other quite well since their families were both in government service, their homes were close by, and they had known each other since childhood when Jett was small and not very good at fighting, often needing Pong to protect him.

"Chan, meet Pong, another of the master's disciples." Jett took the opportunity to introduce Chan to Pong.

Chan just smiled in greeting and slightly bowed his head since his hands were occupied.

"Hello, oh, you've bought a lot. How are you getting back? Want me to give you a ride?" Pong asked enthusiastically, hoping to score points with Khem, but Jett shook his head.

"No need to trouble you, Phii. We've got a pickup truck."

"Oh, really..." Pong said with disappointment. Khem quickly averted his gaze. At that moment, Jett sensed something but didn't comment.

Seeing that they had met anyway, Pong didn't want to miss the chance to get to know Khem better, so he brought up another topic.

"How about you guys come with me to the temple fair tonight? There'll be a folk music performance. If you're going, I can pick you up this evening."

Upon hearing the word "folk music." Jett's ears perked up and his eyes sparkled with excitement. His blood started to boil with the same fervor he felt back in high school. Jett never missed temple fairs, merit-making events, or any gatherings where there was a stage for folk music!

"Khem, do you want to go? The district temple has a big fair every year with lots of food and games." Jett said, eyes wide for effect, making it clear he didn't really need to ask Khem's opinion...

"Well, if the master allows us to go, we'll go. What about you, Chan, do you want to go?" Khem turned to ask Chan, elbowing Jett who was pressuring him with his gaze.

Chan nodded.

"I'm fine either way, but we should ask the master first, like Khem said." Khem nodded in agreement, and Jett then turned to smile at Phii Pong.

"That's fine, Phii Pong. I'll call you again later, Phii."

Pong, who was about to ask for Khem's contact information, quickly shut his mouth and nodded to Jett, deciding to wait until after the outing to ask.

"Then we'll head out first, Phii, take care."

"Sure, drive safely." He gave a small smile to Khem, who merely bowed his head in response before following Jett, with Chan bringing up the rear.

Upon returning home, after preparing the meal for the master, the three of them hurried back to the house to ask for his permission. Jett volunteered to be the brave one, crawling close to the master and clasping his hands in a wai.

"Master, there's a temple fair in town today. Can we go?"

Pharan immediately gave Jett a sharp look, as Ekk, who had accompanied them to the market, had already reported to him. He knew who had invited them and what the intentions were, but he didn't explicitly forbid it.

"Are you sure you can take care of yourselves?"

Khem kept his head down, avoiding eye contact with the master. Chan stayed silent, while only Jett stood up confidently, sure of the skills he had

learned over the past days under the master's rigorous training. No ghost or person could easily mess with them.

"I won't let the name of the master's student be tarnished!"

Pharan nodded with a hint of annoyance, because every time they said this, something always happened. But it was good for them to go out; he would have some quiet time alone.

"You have until midnight." Jett almost jumped to hug the master but restrained himself, instead nodding rapidly and giving the master a leg massage in flattery.

For a moment, Pharan's eyes met Khem's, who was looking, and soon they both looked away.

Having received permission, they quickly went to bathe and dress up with excitement and joy, applying powder and cologne until the scent reached the village entrance. Soon, Phii Pong arrived in his four-door pickup truck to pick them up at the house steps.

When Pong arrived, he first went to pay respects to the master to get permission to take the kids out, also mentioning the sacred armband he planned to wear for a match that the master had promised to make. He thought it would be ready by tomorrow or the day after.

Once the three kids were dressed, they crawled over to sit beside Pong in the main part of the house. Pong turned to look at Khem, who was wearing a light yellow T-shirt, and smiled with affection. Today, Khem looked particularly cute.

But before long, a strong gust of wind passed through, making Pong look around for the source, but finding nothing unusual, he furrowed his brows and said,

"Is it going to rain, or should we hurry?" Jett quickly nodded in agreement, and all four of them went to say goodbye to the master before heading to the parked truck downstairs.

Once they reached the truck, Pong rushed to open the door for Khem, who smiled and slightly bowed his head in thanks.

Pharan stood on the porch of the house, watching the four of them with an unreadable expression, which subtly conveyed a slight hint of displeasure...

It was at that moment that Khem turned to look back at the master, his heart skipping a beat, but he didn't want to read too much into the master's gaze or assume it was disapproval.

Khem thought that in this short amount of time, he wouldn't be able to detach himself from the master as everyone might expect. So, acting this way would probably ease the situation for everyone. He slowly turned back to smile at Phii Pong before getting into the truck, allowing the other to close the door for him.

The four-door pickup truck had long since driven away from Pharan's Thai house, but he remained standing there, his brows furrowed as he recognized a stronger wave of his own displeasure.

Even after several minutes had passed, the image of Khem smiling back at Pong was still vivid in his mind.

Instead of returning to his room to sleep as he had planned, he changed his mind and headed straight to the shrine room to meditate.

"Thong, Ekk." Pharan called out after closing his eyes for a while. Soon, the two boys appeared, responding in unison,

"Yes, Master."

"Go keep an eye on them." Ekk and Thong held back their smiles, one of them wanting to tease the master a bit more, so he asked with an innocent face,

"And if they split up, who should I follow, Master?"

Pharan opened his eyes, his hand now gripping a cane that had been beside him, which made the twin spirits' mouths drop open in surprise. They quickly stood up and dashed through the wooden wall.

Chapter 22

It took about forty minutes to travel to the temple fair in the district, which was lively with lights, sounds, and people. The roads were constantly busy, contrasting with the peacefulness of the village where master Pharan lived.

Pong let the kids off at the temple entrance so he could go find a parking spot. Jett suggested they wait near the stage where the traditional Thai music was being performed.

Jett and Khem walked into the fair together, with Chan following behind, passing through numerous street food stalls towards the stage area to find a place to sit. Jett and Khem stood waiting while Chan went to rent a large mat for them to sit on.

Not long after, Phii Pong arrived, bringing with him several items of food.

"Nong Khem, I bought this for you." Phii Pong said as he handed over a cup of buttery popcorn that Khem had been eyeing since they entered the temple gate, but had decided against buying due to the long line, not wanting to make Jett and Chan wait.

Khem's mouth slightly dropped open in surprise, not expecting Phii Pong to go through the trouble of lining up to buy it for him. He quickly bowed his head in thanks before accepting it with both hands.

"Thank you, Phii Pong." Khem gave a little smile, his eyes sparkling with joy, forgetting his previous reserved manners as he eagerly started eating.

Pong's heart raced, the name 'Phii Pong' echoing in his ears like a ringing bell, which filled him with such contentment that he didn't feel like eating anything else.

Seeing the sweet look in Phii Pong's eyes and the single serving of popcorn, Jett immediately concluded that Phii Pong was interested in Khem. Rumors had circulated since their school days that Phii Pong had an interest in men.

Jett nodded to himself. If Phii Pong was serious, he was ready to help, as the other man wasn't bad; he didn't drink alcohol or smoke, being an athlete,

and he was financially stable. But for now, they would have to take things slowly until they could handle the issues with Khem's karmic debts.

After finishing the popcorn, Khem suddenly thought of the master. It was a pity that the master couldn't enjoy these delicious foods, but if he had come, there would be no one to watch over the house. If it were Khem, he probably wouldn't dare to leave the entire teak wood Thai house unattended to go on a long outing either.

"Jett, can we buy some food to take back for the master?" Khem asked, turning to Jett, who was stretching, preparing to go and dance in front of the stage. Jett nodded.

"Sure. You buy them, and I'll give them to the master myself." Khem smiled and nodded quickly.

"Can I come too? I want to buy something for my mom and my sister as well." Pong added.

"That's great, brother. Then, could you buy something for my friends too? I'm going to dance for a bit. Come on, Chan, get up." Chan, who was savoring the last meatball, was pulled by the collar from behind and had to let go of his food to follow.

"Greetings to all the friends and fans of the Mor La Sing Isan singing troupe..."

"There it is! Come on, Chan!"

Khem could only wave his hand in the air as he heard the host's voice and the drummer's beat, while Jett dragged Chan towards the stage, running so fast that dust flew without waiting for Khem's objection. In the end, Khem had to go shopping with Phii Pong alone.

Memories from the past came flooding back; Khem and the master in their previous life often went to temple fairs together. Grilled squid was something Phawat loved to eat...

Khem gazed at the grilled squid stall, until Pong, walking beside him, asked,

"Nong Khem, do you want some? I'll go stand in line for you." Khem looked at Pong, shook his head, and then smiled.

"No, let's go to that stall instead." Khem pointed to a vegetarian spring roll stall a few shops down.

From what Khem had observed, the master in this life didn't really enjoy eating meat.

Pong nodded with a smile.

"Okay, let's go then."

Cut to the front of the stage. The crowd had made space for the dancers.

"Here comes the shining star, the young politician!"

"Go, Jett, don't let your father's name down!" As soon as Jett took his usual spot, he received cheers from those who recognized him. Jett smiled, raising his fist to the sky, ensuring that this performance would not disappoint anyone.

Chan did not join them in that area, merely standing at a distance, occasionally glancing left and right because he had a feeling that something bad was about to happen soon.

The sound of drums started up again after the female singer had finished her introduction.

"Listen up, brothers and sisters, the magpie bird flies over the bamboo tip, who's got something big, let's hear you shout now!"

At that moment, Jett responded with a loud shout, catching the attention of the man standing next to him, but Jett paid no mind, raising his hands to dance as the melodious sound of the traditional Thai instrument, the phin, came from the speakers.

Soon, the rhythm shifted to a waltz, with the sound of the phin blending with drums, guitar, and heavy bass. Chan was taken aback when Jett began to perform an array of dance moves that resembled dancing worms, mango snatching, hair combing, applying powder while looking in the mirror, and many more moves that were hard to name.

All Chan knew was that he wanted to stop being friends with Jett right then and there.

Jett let go and lost himself to the music and rhythm, unaware that someone had him in their sights. As he was swaying his hips in high spirits, someone's foot kicked him from behind, nearly making him fall forward.

"Damn, who did that!" Jett turned around angrily, only to clench his teeth when he saw who it was.

"Hey, long time no see, huh?"

"Klaa!" Klaa was Jett's peer from school, though they were in different classes, and he was the nephew of a black magic practitioner whose relationship with the master was not great, which naturally reflected on their own relationship.

"Yeah, it's me. What's your problem?"

"I should be the one asking, kicking someone out of the blue. Are you stupid?"

As soon as he finished speaking, Klaa's friends who were standing behind him stepped forward, each of them giving Jett intimidating looks. Realizing how many there were, Jett instinctively took a step back.

At that moment, even the music and singing paused for a second, though they continued with a sense of caution.

Chan thought Jett's dance moves must have provoked someone, so he hurried over.

"Khun Jett, what's going on?" Jett, seeing the number of people on the other side and then looking at his own friend, started sweating. He grabbed Chan's shirt and said briefly,

"Run."

Pong noticed that Khem wasn't very lively, so he invited him to shoot at the toy booth in the amusement area. With ten bullets, Pong shot down several toys and hung them around Khem's neck since Khem couldn't hit any, barely managing to hold the gun up...

After that, they went on the kiddie train and the carousel, which helped Khem relax and let go of many things. He thanked Pong several times and bought two sticks of grilled pork skewers because that was all he could afford from the five thousand baht the master had given him, intending to use the rest for groceries for the master before returning to Bangkok.

Pong observed Khem looking lost in thought, seemingly missing someone, and decided he should do something. He asked Khem to wait there and went to buy some cotton candy on a stick. When he returned, he handed it to Khem and said,

"Khem, I like you. Not as a brother, I mean, I like men. If you feel the same way, would you give me a chance to court you?" Khem was taken aback, mouth agape, as he hadn't expected this confession so soon. He had an inkling of how Pong felt about him, but not that it would come out so quickly.

However, even if given more time, Khem knew he wouldn't be able to reciprocate Phii Pong's feelings.

"I..." Khem hadn't finished his refusal when a commotion from behind made him turn around. It was Jett and Chan leading a large group of young people running towards them.

Pong's eyes widened when he saw who was leading the group; it was his upcoming boxing opponent.

Seeing Pong, the leader grinned and reached into his pocket, pulling out some tamarind leaves, which he then used to chant a spell. Soon, the leaves transformed into dozens of hornets in a magical display, though the villagers and vendors couldn't see them.

"Phii Pong, Khem, run!" Pong, sensing danger, grabbed Khem's hand and ran towards the back of the temple where there was a pagoda filled with urns. Jett and Chan followed closely, with some hornets stinging along the way until they reached the temple wall, where they were cornered.

Jett and Chan turned to face their adversaries, protecting Khem and Phii Pong. They clasped their hands together and chanted in unison,

"Pah, Nah, Tah, Mah!" This was a spell to momentarily immobilize enemies with malevolent intent. Although hornets could be conjured similarly, Jett and Chan didn't have the materials to act as a medium for this spell. Moreover, if not controlled properly, this magic could backfire, harming themselves or innocent bystanders.

But Klaa lived up to his name in the worst ways possible, regrettably!

Since Jett and Chan had practiced meditation well and both had strong wills, the spell they chanted worked effectively. When everyone stopped moving, Jett quickly spoke up.

"Phii Pong, the car keys, please." Pong, guessing what Jett was planning, immediately handed over the keys.

"Chan, take Khem to the car and drive to the exit. Phii Pong and I will follow later." Chan nodded, quickly taking the keys.

"Let's go, Khun Khem." Chan said to Khem. Khem was worried about Jett. Although he didn't know what was happening, he understood the situation was bad, and his presence would only be a burden.

"Jett, Phii Pong, be careful." Jett nodded repeatedly, and Pong smiled, pleased that Khem was concerned. Then, Khem and Chan ran off to one side.

On their way, Ekk, who had come out to prevent ghosts from the graveyard from obstructing them, helped them get to the car without issues.

Back to Jett and Pong, after Chan had taken Khem away, they quickly used physical force to deal with the larger number of opponents before the spell wore off.

At the Thai house, Thong, who had rushed back, reported the situation to Pharan, who was meditating in the shrine room.

Upon hearing the report, Pharan's sharp eyes opened. He stood up, went to the storage room, and retrieved a jar full of tamarind leaves, no less than ten thousand, took them downstairs, and then poured them out, chanting a spell with a calm voice:

"Turn into wasps."

Because Chan, who was part of the spell, had left, the immobilizing spell quickly dissipated. As Jett was still exchanging blows with Klaa, and Klaa was about to pull out more tamarind leaves to summon more wasps, suddenly the moonlight dimmed, and a loud buzzing filled the air above.

"Shit!" Klaa and his followers were startled by the sight. The sky, once lit by the moon, was now filled with an immense swarm of wasps, clearly sent by someone.

But among those with magical abilities that Klaa had encountered, at most they could conjure just a thousand hornets!

Klaa knew 'who' had sent these hornets, but they were only meant to intimidate him since the other party didn't want to cause trouble with his master or uncle, and had been avoiding any direct confrontation with his uncle.

However, Klaa had no intention of backing down. If he were to be attacked by this swarm, he wouldn't die but would certainly be in a bad shape.

"Damn it, just wait, you'll get yours!"

Once Klaa and his gang ran off, Pong immediately fainted. Luckily, Jett caught him in time.

Jett saw red rashes slowly appearing on Phii Pong's face and body, along with his body temperature rising, which made him exclaim in panic,

"Oh crap!"

And when he looked up to see the swarm of hornets still hovering, as if urging them to hurry back, he felt like banging his head against a pagoda to escape the blame.

Upon returning home, the three kids quickly carried Phii Pong up to see the master.

Pong, who had no protective amulets against magic, naturally couldn't handle being attacked by magically conjured hornets. This was unlike Chan and Jett, who, despite having swollen faces, felt no pain.

Thus, when learning to cast spells, one must also learn to counteract them. Besides providing medicine, Pharan didn't intend to help further; Jett and Chan had to treat Pong on their own. The matter of their punishment would be discussed the next day.

After that, they parted ways. Jett and Chan couldn't rest because they needed to heal Phii Pong by that night. They had learned enough from the master about treating ailments caused by magical means.

Khem came downstairs, intending to sit and feed the dog the spring rolls he had bought, which were now in a mess from running away from the gang, making them unappetizing. He didn't dare offer them to the master.

But before he could sit down, someone who had been standing behind him since who knows when tugged at his shirt collar with a finger.

Khem jolted and turned to face the master, quickly hiding the bag of spring rolls behind his back.

"Master..."

"What are you doing?" Khem looked into the master's eyes, thinking he already knew, so he lowered his gaze and answered softly.

"I...I bought spring rolls, but they're all mushy now. So, I was going to feed them to Dang..."

"For whom did you buy them?" Khem bit his lip gently before answering.

"For you, master."

"If it's for me, put them on a plate." Khem glanced at the master's face briefly and then looked down, unsure.

"But, they're mushy now, sir."

"I can eat them."

Khem pinched himself to not show his happiness, nodded, and went to put the spring rolls on a plate, setting it on the table for the master.

"Please, enjoy."

Pharan sat down, looking at the plate of spring rolls filled with vegetables that he liked. Though his face didn't show it, he ate them all with his head bowed. When he finished, Khem, who had been waiting to clear the plate, did his duty, looking at the empty plate and repeatedly telling himself not to be too happy.

After washing the dishes, he came out of the kitchen, but seeing the master still there, he hesitated to walk past.

"Sit here." The master said, looking at him intently. Khem saw a nearby chair being pulled out and, curious, walked over to sit.

Pharan took out a tin of herbal medicine, opened it, and touched the ointment with his fingertip.

"Stay still." He said, gently applying it to Khem's clear temple, where there was a red, swollen mark from a wasp sting.

It was a good decision to send Ekk and Thong to follow them. Otherwise, he might have ended up like Pong...

Khem stared at the master, but when their eyes met, he quickly looked away, his heart beating so hard it felt like it might leap out, his hands clenched tightly in his lap.

Pharan noticed the red streaks covering both of Khem's cheeks before looking down at the several talismans hanging around his neck, speaking softly as he moved his finger to apply the ointment to the other temple.

"Tomorrow, the orphanage will come to pick up donations. Anything you don't use or can't use anymore, donate it for the children's benefit."

Chapter 23

After applying the ointment, the master closed the tin, put it back in his pocket, and left, leaving Khem in a state of confusion, his face still flushed and his lips tightly pressed together.

The master was kind to him again...

Khem shook his head, pinching his own thigh to prevent himself from feeling more than he should, because soon the master would likely revert to his cold, indifferent self as usual.

Yes, absolutely no self-indulgent thoughts.

After slapping his cheeks to regain his composure, he stood up and walked towards the stairs on the left side, intending to take another shower before bed.

Unbeknownst to him, Jett was hiding behind a jar, biting his fist to stop the tears, while Chan sat beside him, patting his shoulder in comfort.

The two had intended to tell Khem that they wouldn't be returning to their room to sleep tonight, and that he should lock the door properly. But seeing that Khem wasn't in the room, they came looking for him and witnessed the whole scene, choosing to hide behind the jar out of fear of being noticed.

"The master has feelings but doesn't say so. If he finds out later that I encouraged Khem to move on with Phii Pong, I'm sure I'll be put in a pot and thrown into the water." Jett lamented. Chan shook his head.

Not denying the thought that the master might have feelings for Khem, which anyone could see, but shaking his head at Jett's unfounded fear. How could Chan be the one to get dunked in a pot? Besides, the master wasn't that irrational.

"Crazy." Chan seemed to mutter to himself more than anything, causing Jett to turn towards him because he didn't hear clearly.

"What did you say?" Chan adjusted his glasses and gently swatted a mosquito off Jett's knee.

"Can you get up now? I've been swatting mosquitoes for you until I'm tired. Why do you wear shorts anyway?" Jett glared.

"Let's get up then, you're getting more and more annoying by the day!"

By morning, the village chief, who had heard the news from the master the night before, came to the master's house to take his son to the hospital for further treatment. Father and son paid their respects to the master before leaving.

"I've had someone investigate. It seems Klaa knew that Jett and Pong were going to the temple fair together, so he set up an ambush, hoping to harm Pong to prevent him from boxing against him. Unfortunately, we couldn't catch him due to lack of evidence. Plus, the people at the scene couldn't even remember what happened last night." The village chief said, frustrated.

Pharan listened quietly without responding, as it seemed the village chief just wanted to vent his frustration. Without evidence, they had to let it go.

The reason the people involved couldn't remember wasn't because they forgot; it was more likely that they had been under some form of magical influence from the beginning.

"..."

"I warned him not to go far from home, to listen to the master's advice, but he was stubborn and had to go out. I apologize for him disturbing you at this hour." The village chief continued, giving his son a stern look. However, Pong's eyes seemed to be constantly searching for someone.

Pharan looked at Pong, then set down his coffee cup and nodded, replying calmly, "Don't worry too much, Subdistrict Head. It's just a common illness now. Take him to the doctor quickly."

The village chief thanked the master for his help before leaving with his son to the hospital.

Pong wanted to say goodbye to Khem and get his phone number before leaving, but it appeared Khem wasn't around. He didn't dare ask Pharan for it. In the end, he had to bow to the master and leave without fulfilling his wish.

After they left, Jett, Khem, and Chan returned from the forest behind Pharan's house, carrying a large bag of oyster mushrooms.

At first, Jett didn't understand why, out of nowhere, the master wanted chicken tom yum soup with oyster mushrooms that morning, sending them into the woods to fetch some. Fortunately, they didn't encounter any wild boars or spirits of the forest, as they didn't have to go deep to fill the bag.

Upon returning, they saw that Phii Pong's car and the village chief's car had just left, missing each other by mere minutes, and suddenly everything made sense. Jett was left with his mouth agape at the master's genius...

But Khem, who was unaware of the situation, upon seeing that Pong had already left, expressed his regret. He remembered how Pong had held his hand to run away from the trouble last night, realizing he hadn't even thanked him yet.

"Phii Pong has already left. I went through all the trouble of cooking rice thinking I could make some congee for him to eat."

Jett, who was washing mushrooms in a basin beside him, made a face of disappointment. He wasn't sure if the master, who was reading the newspaper at the dining table behind them, had heard, so he quickly changed the subject with his close friend.

But there was no way the master didn't hear.

After finishing their meal, the master called Jett, Khem, and Chan into the storage room to help sort through the old toys in the large glass display cabinet that were still in good condition. They placed these toys into plastic crates to be donated to representatives from the orphanage who were due to visit the village that morning.

These toys in the cabinet were bought by Pharan's grandfather, but young Pharan didn't much enjoy playing with typical children's toys, preferring to collect them instead of playing with them, which meant many items were still in excellent condition.

He had been contemplating what to do with these items for years, whether to donate them, feeling they were a keepsake from his grandfather, and he felt an attachment to them after keeping them for so long, but he also didn't want to be overly attached to material possessions.

And finally, he decided it was time to donate them.

"Do you guys want to donate anything as well?" The master asked. Chan remembered he had some blank notebooks and a new stationery set he hadn't used yet. He decided to donate these too, since he had forgotten his old notebooks and pens at home and bought new ones for emergencies, but now he had no need for them.

Jett had several old phones he used for gaming, but brought only two with him. Lately, he hadn't been playing much, so he followed Chan out to get them.

As for Khem, he had eight round toy figures he won the previous night; he planned to donate seven and keep one for himself. Decided, he ran after Jett.

Soon, all three returned, placing their items into the crate with the master's toys.

Pharan looked at Khem's seven chubby toys with a blank expression before closing the crate and having a disciple take it downstairs.

At that moment, the village chief's pickup truck pulled up in front of the house, as the master had called ahead to arrange for someone to pick up the donations. The master sat in the passenger seat, while the three kids, after loading the crate, agilely hopped into the back.

When they arrived at the village community hall, the master, in a dark gray long-sleeved collared shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing the five-line yantra tattoo on his left arm and the diamond-shaped yantra on his right, wore a black stone bracelet on his left wrist and a tiger skin scroll amulet left by his grandfather.

And something that couldn't be missed were the sunglasses. Many might wonder why the master always wore them when leaving the house. There were two main reasons: one, the master's eyes were sensitive to light, possibly due to his irregular sleep schedule; the other, he didn't want women to look into his eyes because it often led to trouble.

There was even an instance where someone tried to climb into his house, Jett swore this wasn't made up.

Upon entering the pavilion, the master handed over donations to the representative from the orphanage, along with a sum of money, just like many times before. The orphanage representative only came to collect donations from the villagers here once every two or three months.

Then, they took a photograph, with the photographer being someone from the orphanage. Even though they had asked the master to pose for photos every time they came, they wanted to take another one, seemingly to add to their gallery.

Jett, Khem, and Chan were called to join in the photo. Jett, seeing the master standing still, pushed Khem into place next to the master. Khem, caught off guard, accidentally bumped his nose lightly against the master's arm.

"Sorry." Khem closed his eyes, expecting a scolding, but the master merely glanced at him and told him to stand properly. Khem then shot Jett a

glare and stepped on his foot, causing Jett to nearly yell from the pain, but Chan, standing beside him, quickly covered Jett's mouth, just as the photographer snapped the picture...

After that, the four of them walked to visit Grandma-Si at her house. Upon arrival, they saw Grandma-Si baking sweets in the kitchen, the sweet aroma and white smoke of palm sugar sweets wafting out to the front of the house.

The master, Khem, and Chan waited outside while Jett went to call Grandma-Si. Not long after, Grandma-Si came out, with Jett carrying a tray of freshly made palm sugar sweets.

"Come in, come in, sit in the house, let's cool off with the fan and have some sweets." Grandma-Si said in the Isan dialect, gesturing for them to enter. With her permission, Khem and Chan took off their shoes and followed the master inside.

Pharan sat on a plastic chair that Jett had brought over, next to Grandma-Si. The others sat around a low wooden table on the floor, with a tray of appetizing palm sugar sweets in front of them, their aroma filling the air.

"Grandma made these sweets just in time, thinking of sending them through the village chief for you all to eat at your place. What brings you here?"

The master, who had taken off his sunglasses and tucked them into his shirt collar, responded in the same dialect with a gentle, deep voice.

"I've brought some donations for the children, and heard you weren't feeling well. So I brought these folks to visit."

Grandma-Si nodded, her cloudy eyes seeming to sparkle with delight. As an elderly woman without children or grandchildren to look after her, a visit showing concern was something to be happy about.

"I'm much better now. No need to worry, old people are like this, Master. Come, eat." Grandma-Si said, reaching into the tray to hand the master a plate of palm sugar sweets she had set aside for him, so the children could eat after him.

Once the master had taken a piece, Khem and Jett, who were waiting, smiled and took some for themselves. Chan, however, ate his food more reservedly.

Then Grandma-Si started talking to the master about other things. Khem couldn't keep up with Jett's pace and only managed a few pieces before they were all gone. Pharan glanced at Khem for a split second before turning

back to answer Grandma-Si, then quietly moved his own plate, still with many pieces left, in front of Khem without looking.

Khem pressed his lips together, glanced at the master, and quickly looked down, mentally steeling himself. Jett, seeing this, tried to grab a piece but was met with Khem slapping his hand away and moving the plate out of reach, warning him like a hissing kitten,

"This is for you!" Grandma-Si laughed fondly, telling everyone to wait a bit longer, that another batch was almost ready and she would pack some for them to take home.

Khem's warning had done little; they ended up sharing anyway. Khem chewed on the sweets until his cheeks puffed out, thinking he had never tasted sweets as delicious as Grandma-Si's.

Pharan, catching sight of Khem's cheek bulging like a rabbit, felt a strange tickle in his chest and decided to look away. When he met Grandma-Si's gaze, he quickly put his sunglasses back on, saying he would help finish weaving the basket she had left outside before they left, and then he stood up to sit on the bamboo bench in front of the house.

Meanwhile, the others intended to help sweep and mop the house, refill the fridge with water for Grandma-Si, and then head back.

Once they were done, Grandma-Si called Khem into the kitchen, handed him a bag of sweets, peeked outside, and then turned back to Khem to say,

"Listen to me, my dear, it will surely do you good..."

Khem's face flushed red and hot with embarrassment as he listened.

After returning home, Jett noticed that Khem was acting unusually quiet. He was also frequently sneaking glances at the master, and once they were in the bedroom, it seemed like he was constantly thinking about something.

Finally, Jett couldn't contain his curiosity any longer and asked,

"What's wrong with you, Khem? You've been acting strange since we got back." Khem looked at Jett and eventually decided to tell him about everything from last night to what Grandma-Si had said.

Khem couldn't bring himself to give up on the master, whether it was in the past or the present.

"Jett, don't judge me." He said, looking glum, prompting Jett to get up from his bed and sit next to Khem on the bed, gently patting his head to comfort him.

"I won't judge you, you can't clap with just one hand. Last night, I saw that the master made the first move!"

Khem's eyes widened, and he playfully punched his friend's leg, his face turning red.

"Peeping, huh? That's not a good trait, Jett!" Chan, who was chanting and paying respects, wanted to kick Jett out of the room, feeling like he had been insulted too.

"Forget about last night, let's talk about what Grandma-Si said. I was a bit surprised that Grandma-Si understood this kind of thing." Jett referred to the love between two men.

Grandma-Si had asked Khem if he loved the master romantically, then advised him to do this:

Jett knew that Grandma-Si loved the master like a real grandson and was worried about him because even now he hadn't married. Perhaps she didn't want the master's later life to be like hers, so she encouraged Khem to do what he wanted to do, say what he wanted to say, so he wouldn't regret it later like she did when she lost her beloved when she was young.

If the master had someone to look after him, Grandma-Si could die in peace.

"Should we go for it? I'll keep watch nearby, don't worry."

Khem's eyes welled up with tears, grateful that Jett understood and didn't judge him for not being able to let go of his feelings for the master. He nodded, determined to follow Grandma-Si's advice.

Chan felt uneasy, wanting to advise Khem against it, but he didn't want to go against anyone's belief. In the end, he just went along and stood behind the same pillar as Jett.

It was quite late now. Khem thought the master must be asleep, so he walked to stand in front of the master's bedroom door, clasped his hands together, and recited the spell Grandma-Si had given him:

"Ya Metta, Mo Karuna, Buddha Pranee, Tha Yindee, Ya Endu, Dua Namoputtaya."

Then, Khem took out a can of cooling powder from his underarm. Normally, Khem would use regular baby powder, but since it was out, he used the cooling powder instead. He poured some into his left hand, used his other index finger to swirl the powder in three circles, took a deep breath, and blew towards the priest's room door.

Unfortunately, at that very moment, the bedroom door opened.

The master's face, already pale, became even paler. Khem stood there, frozen like a stone, hearing Jett's voice faintly telling him, "Hey Chan, run!"

Khem stood there with his eyes wide for several more seconds before slowly turning around.

Chapter 24

But before he could even start running, a slender finger grabbed his collar from behind, pulling him back into the room and shutting the door immediately!

Khem wanted to cry but didn't dare. He could only steel himself, close his eyes, and slowly turn around to face the master.

"Ma-, Master, it's me..." Pharan didn't wait for Khem to finish speaking, and with a steady voice, still unable to open his eyes, he said, "Go get a damp cloth to wipe my face."

Khem bit his lip and nodded, feeling immediate shame because instead of accepting responsibility, he had thought about running away.

"Ye-, Yes, sorry, Master. Please sit and wait for me." Khem quickly supported the master to sit on the edge of the large bed, then walked around the room looking for a clean cloth.

The master's bedroom was spacious, with few pieces of furniture, and it looked very clean. Once he found a clean cloth, he rushed into the bathroom inside the room.

So that's why he had never seen the master use the downstairs bathroom.

Khem dampened the clean cloth, wrung it out, and walked back to the master. He quickly knelt down and shuffled over to where the master was sitting with his eyes closed, waiting. He stopped at a respectful distance, still hesitating to take action.

"Um...Ma-, master, would you like to wipe your own face?"

Pharan furrowed his brows before shaking his head slightly, speaking with a slightly irritated tone.

"You wipe it, come closer."

Khem swallowed hard, then slowly shuffled forward on his knees.

As he got closer than usual, Khem's heart started beating faster, overwhelmed by the mysterious, cool scent emanating from the priest, the undone buttons of the priest's long-sleeved nightshirt revealing a clear tattoo of a pair of magpies with lotuses, and his well-proportioned, handsome features...

Khem took a deep breath, softly asked for the priest's permission, then cautiously reached out his trembling hand to wipe the powder from the priest's face.

Pharan leaned his head down, allowing Khem to sit and wipe comfortably without having to stand and strain his knees. The cool damp cloth worked well with the cooling powder, numbing his face.

"What were you mumbling outside my door just now?"

Still shocked from the priest leaning so close earlier, Khem's face quickly changed from red to pale.

Khem closed his eyes tightly, thinking his end was near. He didn't want to tell the truth, but at this moment, he couldn't lie because he was not good at it...

His clear round eyes flickered hesitantly for a moment before answering,

"Well, uh, just a regular Buddhist chant, master." Pharan slowly opened his deep onyx eyes, looking into Khem's light brown, large eyes for a moment before asking in a whisper that was loud enough for both to hear,

"What was it?"

As if time had stopped, Khem felt frozen in place. The master's sharp eyes, now glazed with a clear, sweet look, were so beautiful that Khem felt he could stare at them all day and night.

Now he understood why Jett had warned him not to make eye contact with the priest, and why the priest often wore sunglasses to hide his eyes when out and about.

Because the master's eyes were this beautiful...

"What did Grandma-Si teach you?"

Khem bit his lip gently, his cheeks turning red as if teased, knowing that the priest was fully aware of the truth...

But since he was already caught, what harm would there be in reciting it aloud?

"Metta, Karuna, Buddha Pranee, Thayindee, Yen-doo, with Namu Buddhaya."

Pharan looked at the small lips that had just recited a spell directed at him, his eyes, though not full of affection, surveyed the sweet face that still bore the resemblance of their past life down to every detail. Yet, in the likeness, there were differences.

It was an endearing difference.

"Um." Pharan inadvertently responded, realizing only after he had already been enchanted by Khem's lips that he had thought something inappropriate. He then lowered his gaze and nodded.

"You may go and rest now."

Khem, still blushing, nodded awkwardly, slowly stood up, and walked out of the room in a daze, closing the door behind him for the master. But he couldn't help but stand there, confused, with furrowed brows.

Did the master just say, "Um"?

However, because there were more pressing matters at hand, his anger surged from his toes to the top of his head when he remembered, quickly dismissing the master's suspicious response from his mind.

"Jett, you're dead!"

Jett and Chan hadn't actually run away; they had just retreated to a strategic distance. They were confident that even if caught, Khem would be safe, but they knew they wouldn't be!

Pong had recovered after receiving treatment at the hospital. Not even two days had passed before he was back to his robust self. After the doctor allowed him to go home, he changed into new clothes his mother had sent with his father, and then went out to wait for his medication.

"Dad, I'm going to pick up the armband from the master's house. It should be ready by now." Pong said after leaving the hospital, since they were driving back in separate cars anyway. He planned to go there directly.

Chief Chang nodded.

"Yeah. It's good that you're going to get it yourself, saves the master from having to send it by mail. We've already troubled him enough." Instead of feeling scolded, Pong grinned, quickly bowed in respect, and got into his car.

Picking up the armband was just part of it; in reality, Pong just wanted to see Khem.

During the two days in the hospital, whether eating, walking, sitting, or sleeping, Pong couldn't stop thinking about Khem's face. His confession of love had yet to receive an answer, leaving everything hanging in his heart to the point where he could barely eat or sleep.

Pong didn't know if Khem would reciprocate his feelings, but he just wanted to try something. If it didn't work out, he would just go home and cry to his mother for comfort.

At that time, Khem was sitting on a bamboo bench under a mango tree, folding coins for the alms-giving ceremony for the master. The bench had been moved there by Jett and Chan to provide shade. After setting it up, they went inside to practice their skills. These coins that Khem was folding were meant for merit-making during ordination ceremonies in the village.

After sitting there for a while, a familiar four-door car pulled up and parked nearby. Phii Pong stepped out of the car.

"Hello, Phii Pong." Khem greeted with a wai, making Pong's heart beat faster with longing, though he tried not to show it too much. He smiled and walked over, stopping at a respectful distance.

"Hello, Nong Khem, what are you doing?" Khem smiled, showing Pong the coin he had folded into the shape of a rose with a ribbon, his cute demeanor nearly making Pong unsteady on his feet.

"I'm folding coins for the master's alms-giving ceremony. Phii Pong, did you come to see the master?"

In his heart, Pong wanted to say he had come to see Khem, but he restrained himself and nodded with a smile.

"Yes, I came to pick up the armband that the master promised to make for me. So, I'll go up to see the master first." Khem nodded slightly, quickly got up from the bench, put on his shoes, and turned to Pong with a smile, "Alright, Phii Pong, go ahead. I'll bring some water up." Hearing this, Pong felt his heart swell, and he nodded quickly, not realizing that Khem just wanted an excuse to go up to the master...

Khem brought two glasses of cold pandan water; one he gave to Phii Pong, and the other he carried over to the master.

"Here you go." When the master didn't acknowledge him but instead scolded,

"You left the money on the bench like that. Aren't you afraid someone will steal it?" Khem looked a little embarrassed, quickly apologized to the master, and hurried past Pong down the stairs, not noticing Pong's concerned look.

Pharan cleared his throat lightly to get Pong's attention, then handed him a wooden box containing the magically enhanced armband.

"Master, my father said he'd like you to come to the boxing match with us. He's worried that Klaa's uncle might be there. Uh...but if you're not available, it's okay." When he saw Pharan thinking for a while, Pong quickly added, not expecting that the master would nod in agreement.

"If there's no urgent business, I'll be on my way." Pong smiled, his spirits lifted a bit. Not only did he have the master's support if the other side played any tricks, but he also had Khem nearby.

With all this encouragement, Pong felt certain he wouldn't lose to the likes of Klaa and his dirty tricks.

Pong chatted with the master for a few more sentences before bowing in farewell and heading downstairs to find Khem. Seeing Pong approach, Khem, who had been sitting idly, quickly smiled and greeted him with politeness.

"Phii Pong, you are leaving already?" Pong took a soft breath in, though he didn't want to leave, he had to. But before going, he wanted to mention something important, something he had intended to say from the start.

"Nong Khem, I'm fighting in two days. I'd really like for you to come watch. Would you?" Khem looked into Phii Pong's eyes, swallowing lightly because he thought he could read the other's intentions.

Previously, Khem hadn't responded to Phii Pong's advances, but to outright reject him now didn't feel right.

Though it was difficult, Khem didn't want to discourage Phii Pong, so he smiled and nodded.

"Of course, I'll come."

Pong's smile widened, showing both dimples, nodding with joy.

"Thank you. I'll be going then, see you there."

"Goodbye, drive safely, Phii Pong."

"I will, I'll drive very carefully." Khem smiled, chuckling softly at Phii Pong's earnest demeanor, waiting until he drove away before sitting back down, sighing with his thoughts in a muddle.

How does one reject someone without hurting them...

At that moment, Khem didn't realize he was being watched from a window above.

Two days later, Jett, Khem, and Chan got up early to clean, making a racket as usual, which woke Pharan earlier than he would have liked (again).

Over those two days, Khem and Pharan had barely seen each other. This was partly because Pharan was rushing to teach the remaining lessons to Chan and Jett. Despite their strong spirits, their training time hadn't been sufficient to easily handle a ghost like Madam Ramphueng.

Secondly, Pharan felt he was losing his focus because of Khem, so he tried to avoid him to fully concentrate on teaching his two students. Meanwhile, Khem was still preoccupied with thoughts about Pong, which resulted in them both inadvertently keeping their distance from each other.

After they had showered, dressed, and eaten, Uncle-Chai brought the car for the master, with Auntie-Kaew following behind on her sidecar motorcycle to take them back.

The car for today was a black sedan, driven by Jett, with the master sitting beside him, while Chan and Khem sat in the back.

They soon arrived at the venue hosting the boxing match. The boxing ring was outdoors, surrounded by numerous stalls, mostly food vendors. This event was also being broadcast live on television.

Today, the master was dressed in a long-sleeved white silk shirt, black slacks, and his usual sunglasses. Jett, Khem, and Chan trailed behind the master until they reached the boxing ring area, where the village chief, upon noticing them, immediately invited the group to sit in the front row.

Upon sitting down, Pharan spotted the sorcerer, "Krailert, the one with mystical powers from the southern district." and as soon as the other saw him, he began to silently chant spells. Of course, Pharan did the same, but only with protective spells...

So, they started their confrontation right upon arrival, indicating that the other party knew he would be attending this event.

Soon it was time for the fight. The armband that Pharan had made was now wrapped around Pong's right bicep. First, there was the traditional Thai dance to pay respects to the master, and then, as the bell rang, the fight began.

Throughout the match, Pharan silently chanted spells to counteract any magical tricks or mental manipulation from the opposing sorcerer aimed at Pong. Any venomous creatures conjured up were instantly reduced to ashes, though no one noticed this anomaly because everyone was focused on the fight.

Ding!

After a prolonged exchange of blows, the bell signaling the end of the round rang. Pong knocked out Klaa, his opponent, despite both being in rough shape, eliciting a roar from the crowd because this year, the district led by the village chief had won.

Once Klaa, Pong's opponent, was helped off the ring, the sorcerer, who was Klaa's uncle, Krailert, stood up from his chair and sent a smile Pharan's way, seemingly enjoying the magical confrontation. He had no intention of causing real harm or taking lives, knowing well that someone like Pharan wouldn't stoop to black magic, especially since it was his nephew who started the trouble last time.

It was good that Pharan hadn't turned to dark magic as well; otherwise, it would have been tough for everyone.

After receiving his award, Pong quickly left the stage to change clothes and then walked over to Khem, who was sitting beside the master.

"Nong Khem, can I have a moment of your time?" Khem glanced at the master, Jett, and Chan briefly. The master was still watching the new fighters on the stage without turning his attention to Khem, but seeing his friends nod, Khem stood up and walked away with Pong.

Pong led Khem to sit on a bench under a tree, then pulled out a small velvet box the size of a fist. Opening it, he revealed a luxurious rose gold bracelet, and then spoke directly to Khem.

"Nong Khem, I stand by what I said before. I like you. Would you give me a chance?" Khem pressed his lips together, took a deep breath in, and slowly reached out to close the velvet box.

"Phii Pong, thank you for your kind feelings, but I...I already like someone else." He said almost in a whisper, lowering his gaze, unable to look at Pong.

Pong pressed his lips with disappointment but nodded in understanding. He had an inkling of who that person might be, but he had been trying to fool himself.

"I'm sorry, Phii Pong, please don't be angry, and don't hate me." Khem said with a trembling voice, seeing Pong's prolonged silence.

Pong sighed, disappointed, but then gave a small smile, not wanting Khem to overthink.

"I understand. Don't worry about it, I'm not angry. I don't hate you, Nong Khem." Hearing this, Khem felt relieved and quickly smiled back.

"Thank you, Phii Pong." Seeing Khem's expression, Pong couldn't help but feel a twinge of pain, playfully tilting his head as he teased,

"Then...would it be okay if I asked for something else?" Khem blinked, nodding once more.

"We can be Phii-Nong then." Pong laughed, not quite crying, feeling cornered into this option by Khem, who left him no other choice.

"But it's better than having no choice at all."

"Alright, Phii-Nong then. Oh well, such a pity. Could you come and walk with me to get some food?" Khem nodded eagerly, wanting to buy something for the master and his two friends to eat too, so he replied evasively,

"Hold on, I will treat you to some blended drinks to soothe your spirits."

Cut back to the scene at the front of the stage, where Pharan was still watching the boxing match, albeit with less concentration.

"Master, Phii Khem and Phii Pong are walking together to buy food. They look so happy and close, don't they, Thong?"

"Yes, yes, Phii Pong even wiped Phii Khem's sweat for him, master. Isn't that enviable, Ekk?"

Pharan regretted not bringing a switch with him today.

Chapter 25

Jett had noticed the white smoke, about waist-high, swirling around the master since earlier. These were the twin servant spirits, Ekk and Thong, that the master had taken care of.

In truth, Ekk and Thong were originally servant spirits of Pharan's grandfather, a powerful sorcerer. When the grandfather passed away, Pharan took over their care instead of releasing their spirits as one might expect.

When Jett was younger, he could see spirits more clearly than he does now, so he remembered what Ekk and Thong looked like. The first time he met them, he ended up talking and playing with them for a long time, only realizing they were ghosts when the master made them disappear right in front of him.

Back then, Jett was very attached to Ekk and Thong. Even knowing they were spirits, not humans, he would often call out to them and play with them. This behavior seemed strange to others who saw him talking or playing alone, showing no interest in other children. This was because Ekk and Thong always warned him about who was good or bad, and most people were envious of his wealth or saw him as a stepping stone to climb higher.

Eventually, Jett became a quiet child who didn't socialize much. His parents, fearing this behavior would cause issues in the future, asked the master to help adjust Jett's behavior, as they were too busy to handle it themselves.

Jett was put through a ritual by Pharan to close his third eye, preventing him from seeing spirits anymore. This meant Jett could no longer see Ek and Thong. At twelve years old, Jett went through the ritual crying, overwhelmed by sadness.

In the end, out of pity, the master softened and changed his approach, so that Jett could still see ghosts or spirits, but they appeared rather indistinct, and he couldn't communicate with them.

Nowadays, Jett could still sense that Ekk and Thong often lingered nearby to protect him and his friends. Even though they no longer spoke as

they used to, this was enough for him.

While he was lost in thought, the master suddenly put on his sunglasses that were tucked in his shirt collar and stood up.

Jett thought the master wanted to go home, so he stood up to follow. This also prompted Chan, who was watching the boxing, to stand up, but the master gestured for Jett and Chan to sit back down.

"Where are you going, Master?" Jett blinked and asked. The master replied without looking back,

"I'm going to get some iced tea."

"Are you going by yourself, Master? It's very hot outside. Wouldn't it be better if I went to buy it?" Jett offered with good intentions, but the master shook his head briefly in refusal.

"I'll go myself." With that, he turned and walked away, not giving Jett a chance to object further, which left Jett puzzled, frowning his brows and tilting his head in confusion.

In truth, when the master was alone, he usually did things by himself. But when his disciples were around to serve him, he never turned down their kindness. The disciples were always allowed to do things for him, making it rare for him to insist on doing something alone like this.

Or could it be...

"Hey, Chan."

"I'm not going. Just sit here quietly and let the master go."

Jett was about to suggest they follow the master, but Chan guessed his intention.

Upon hearing this, Jett was momentarily annoyed.

Luckily, before sitting down, Chan had bought some grilled bananas that Jett liked, which helped him calm down and sit quietly, eating the bananas.

Indeed, it was as hot outside as Jett had mentioned.

Pharan walked past several old coffee shops until he stopped in front of a juice bar...

It seemed that with each passing day, his resolve was slipping more and more.

"Have you finished buying things?" Pharan's voice came from above Khem's head, causing Khem to jump and look up. Pong was equally startled, not having noticed when the master had arrived.

"Uh, master." Pharan responded with a frown.

"I asked."

"Y-Yes, I am done, here...Phii Pong."

Pong looked at the master and then at Khem, feeling a twinge in his heart, but there was little he could do except accept the watermelon smoothie from Khem's hand, especially since the real deal was now here. It was time for someone like him to step back.

"Thank you, Nong Khem. We'll talk later then." But something prompted Pong to gently ruffle Khem's hair and smile before respectfully bowing to the master.

"I'll be going now, master. My father and I will come to visit when we have time."

After Pong left, Khem looked up at the master and asked,

"Shall we go now, master?" Pharan looked at Khem's slightly disheveled hair, which had been ruffled by Pong, with an unreadable expression hidden behind his dark sunglasses. His emotions were turbulent within him, yet he had no outlet for them.

There was no scripture to recite, and he couldn't meditate right there.

In the end, he reached up to fix Khem's natural brown hair back into place, seemingly ignoring Khem's wide-eyed, almost frightened look, and said,

"I want some iced tea." Khem's face immediately flushed, and he quickly nodded in agreement, following behind the master to buy iced tea, his hand secretly touching where he had been touched, his heart beating fast, before letting out a small sigh.

The master always made him think too much, and Khem was tired of constantly having to control his feelings.

Jett and Chan, who had not been waiting for long, saw the master return with a bag of oliang for the tea and their best friend following with cold milk. This sight made Jett bite his lip to contain his laughter, almost ready to slap his knee in triumph because his guess was spot on.

But he didn't dare...

There were also two more bags of iced tea that Khem brought, because Pharan had offered to buy him a drink, so Khem decided to get some for Jett and Chan as well.

After watching the boxing for a while longer, chief Chang came to discuss business as he had arranged with the master. It was about installing a mobile phone signal tower, which would improve communication for the villagers and those in nearby areas.

Once their discussion was over, they headed back home. Not long after Jett parked the car, Uncle Chai and Auntie Kaew came to take it back and also brought some of Grandma Si's steamed custard cakes.

For dinner that evening, Khem had bought fresh shrimp pad Thai from the boxing match event because it looked clean and appetizing, and it was plentiful, so they didn't cook anything else.

After finishing both the savory and sweet dishes, everyone dispersed. Today, Jett and Chan were given a break from their usual meditation practice, so they planned to watch movies with Khem. They bought some snacks on the way back to prepare for their movie night.

Meanwhile, Pharan, after parting ways with the kids, went to meditate in the shrine room, reflecting on the events of the past few days.

Why had all this started, and when did it begin?

Why, the more he tried to run away, the more he was drawn closer?

Why, the more he pushed away, the less he could bear it when the other person tried to distance himself.

Was it because of the lingering memories from the past, or was it out of pity for that child?

Maybe both, or maybe neither.

His furrowed brows relaxed slightly.

Time would be the ultimate test.

But before reaching that point, he should resolve the issues carried over from their past life.

Late that night, after finishing two movies, Jett and Chan moved from Khem's bed to their own.

The wooden door of the bedroom was pushed open once more, this time with Pharan using magic to ensure Jett and Chan slept soundly as before, albeit it took longer than usual because their spirits had grown much stronger through daily training.

His efforts in teaching them hadn't been in vain.

With his long legs, he approached the person sleeping with fluttering eyelids, sat down beside the bed, placed his hand on Khem's forehead, silently recited a spell, and then gently blew on Khem's head.

After only a few moments of waiting, Khem, who had dreamt of the master, woke up. Once his eyes adjusted to the darkness of the room, they widened as he saw the master sitting beside him.

"Master..."

"Come with me." The master said softly, almost like an order, before standing up and leaving the room, leaving Khem to follow in a daze.

The master led Khem to the kitchen, instructing him to prepare two simple dishes: fish cake soup and fried salted fish, along with hot steamed rice. Then they carried the tray of food up to the house.

At this time, only the light from the lantern in the master's hand guided them. Khem followed the master to a door on the right wing of the Thai house, an area Jett had warned Khem never to enter.

The atmosphere here was eerily cold and unwelcoming. Above the door was a red talisman written by hand. Just looking at this door made Khem's heart beat with unexplained fear, wondering why the master had brought him here.

Pharan seemed to sense Khem's feelings, turned around, and looked at the trembling figure behind him.

"Look up." He commanded, but Khem stubbornly refused to comply. In the end, Pharan had to gently lift Khem's chin with his fingertips. The light from the lantern clearly revealed Khem's face.

Before he knew it, Khem was already crying.

Seeing Khem's tears softened Pharan's demeanor. He spoke in a soothing, deep voice,

"I'm here. What are you afraid of?"

"..."

"Take deep breaths and focus your mind." Khem blinked away his tears, slowly inhaled, and tried to compose himself as instructed by the master.

Pharan approved with a hum when he saw Khem's obedient demeanor, as if praising him for doing well, while gently wiping the tears from Khem's cheeks with his finger. Khem was so startled his eyes widened, then he quickly looked down again.

"I'm sorry." Khem said, feeling both guilty for acting without considering the situation and embarrassed, unsure which emotion was stronger.

"Come in." Khem swallowed hard before stepping into the room behind the master.

The master placed the oil lamp on the floor, instructed Khem to set the food tray on the opposite side, and then sat down with the lamp between him and the tray.

The master had disappeared somewhere within the room. Khem looked around to survey the surroundings. Although he couldn't see clearly, he

guessed this must be a storage room.

Not long after, the master returned with a clay pot inscribed with symbols, its opening covered with a red yantra cloth, which he placed near the food tray before sitting down beside Khem.

However, upon seeing the pot on the other side of the oil lamp, Khem's fear intensified, making him want to retreat, but the master's arm barred his movement.

Khem immediately sensed who was trapped inside that pot.

The deeply buried, terrible memories were dredged up again, and the horror of it made Khem want to cry out loudly.

"Ugh..."

But in reality, Khem couldn't cry out; he could only stare at the clay pot with wide, unblinking eyes, his breath shaky and uneven, enough to make anyone's heart sink.

Unsure of when it happened, the master had moved to sit close enough for their shoulders to touch. His warm hand gently stroked from Khem's head down to his back in a soothing rhythm, his deep voice seeming to sweep away the fear.

"Stay calm."

"I'm here."

"Ugh." Khem hiccupped before slowly nodding through his tears, his cold hand reaching out to tightly grasp the master's rough one, seeking the warmth to calm his mind, only to find himself being held in return...

This action entirely shifted Khem's attention back to himself.

"Listen carefully. This is what you need to do."

"..."

"The karma from this life is too heavy for anyone to help you escape, whether it's Jett, Chan, or even me."

"..."

"The matter of the karmic debts related to your family, even though I can't help much, but as for Chayot's case, I have a responsibility to share with you."

"..."

"At least, if we can release him, it will lighten the burden."

"..."

"Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Khem slowly nodded his head, his heart swelling then suddenly deflating when he realized that all these actions were taken by the master merely out of a sense of past responsibility, not out of any other feelings towards him.

But at least, the other party was acting out of goodwill towards him, even though he was just someone seeking refuge. Not a student that needed protection and care, yet the master still extended his compassion.

Khem took a deep breath before softly asking,
"What should I do, sir?"

Pharan could read Khem's eyes and thought he might have misunderstood something, but he didn't intend to explain now. The important thing was releasing his brother from the past.

"Meditate, control your breathing, think of something that calms your mind, and let go of your worries." The master's touch gradually withdrew as Khem placed his right hand over his left and closed his eyes.

Khem thought of painting amidst nature, surrounded by green trees, with a light mist and gentle breeze.

Once his mind was calm, Khem's demeanor relaxed. Pharan continued,

"The reason Chayot has followed you across lifetimes like this must be because there was a promise between you in the past. Try to remember what you did or promised, take your time to recall it. Don't rush."

Khem inhaled deeply again and followed the instructions, delving deep into his fading memories, swimming through the pain, farewells, smiles, and laughter of every age, up to the first time he met Chayot.

That day, it was drizzling. Khemika, at nine years old, was riding in the car her father was driving back home. However, as they were passing by a playground, she noticed a boy sitting alone on a swing, even though the rain was about to pour heavily.

Khemika recognized the boy; he had recently transferred to her school and was even in her class.

She quickly asked her father to stop the car, grabbed an umbrella, and ran through the rain to reach the boy.

Chayot, who was hoping to get sick from sitting in the rain to avoid going to school, slowly lifted his head when he saw the hemline of someone's skirt and realized the rain had suddenly stopped.

He then realized the rain hadn't stopped; instead, the girl in front of him had extended her umbrella to shield him from the rain.

"Who are you?" Chayot raised his eyebrows in question. Khemika smiled and replied,

"I'm Khemika."

"..."

"And you?" Chayot looked at Khemika's face for a while before softly replying amidst the increasingly heavy rain,

"I'm Chayot."

"Oh, I actually knew your name already." Khemika said with a laugh.

Strange person...Even though she was getting wet because she shared her umbrella with him, she laughed with a clear, untroubled voice.

Chayot thought to himself and looked away, not saying anything.

"Where's your house? Can I walk you home?" Khemika blinked and asked. Chayot bit his lip, looked down, and shook his head.

He didn't want to go home right now because he had just had a fight with his parents.

Khemika understood his body language but persisted, "If so, why don't you come to my house? We have lots of snacks and toys."

Chayot frowned, feeling a bit insulted at the implication that he could be easily lured with snacks and toys.

But just seeing the pleading look in her eyes, mixed with a slight shiver from the cold, was enough for him to easily agree and follow her to the car.

Khemika's family was kinder to strangers than he had anticipated; simply stating that Chayot was a schoolmate was enough for them to warmly welcome him.

Khemika grew up in a well-rounded family, quite different from Chayot, who was often compared by the adults in his family to his brother, who was smarter, more composed, and always did better academically, not to mention in other aspects of life.

However, Khemika was different from those people; she never compared Chayot to anyone else. She never forced him to be something he didn't want to be, and she never praised Chayot's brother in front of him.

This was why Chayot opened his heart to Khemika, eventually becoming very attached and ultimately becoming best friends.

"Khem, when we grow up, shall we get married?" Chayot asked while they were playing house, taking on the role of a customer.

Hearing this, Khemika smiled in response, envisioning a future where she had someone to protect and care for her. Someone who would always go

along with her wishes and would stand up for her if she ever did something wrong didn't seem like a bad idea, so she nodded in agreement.

*"Yes, if by then I haven't found someone better than you, I'll marry you."
Chayot laughed, pleased with her statement.*

"Then start preparing to be my bride, because there's no one better than me in this world."

Chayot was confident about this until the day Khemika met his brother, Phawat, and all his dreams began to crumble.

Chapter 26

Phawat was like a giant wave eroding the shore, gradually expanding and infiltrating the space in Khemika's heart.

The place that should have belonged to Chayot.

But reality was harsh, and Chayot couldn't deny that he couldn't match his brother in any aspect - be it looks, education, or career. Thus, all he could do was watch as their love grew beautifully and steadily.

Finally, the opportunity he never thought he'd get came about when the two were forced to part ways.

Chayot seized that opportunity to get close to Khemika again, doing everything he could, directly or indirectly, for better or worse. He didn't care what others thought of him, whether they labeled him as vile or despicable, as long as he could stand by Khemika as her lover, it was enough.

However, tragically, things didn't go as Chayot had hoped. Not only was he unable to replace her brother, Phawat, but he also ended up destroying the person he loved the most, Khemika, bringing her to a sorrowful end.

Khemika died holding a forged letter created by Chayot to deceive her, and that image haunted Chayot like a nightmare, leading to his depression. Every breath he took was filled with pain and suffering, eating away at his will to continue living in this world until he was worn down.

Five years after Khemika's departure, on the calendar date of October 12th of that year, Chayot decided to end his life by jumping off a building.

That day was marked by heavy rain, the same weather as when Chayot first met Khemika at the playground, and the last time he saw her at her cremation.

Khem opened his eyes, tears streaming down his face after witnessing those scenes, now understanding why Chayot chose to linger and wouldn't leave.

Chayot loved Khemika deeply, more than anyone else in the world, more than himself.

But because Chayot had never received proper love and upbringing from his family, he didn't know how to be a good lover, leading to this tragic end.

Pharan slowly opened his eyes. The scenes Khem had just seen were possible because Pharan had previously communicated with Chayot's spirit, which was trapped in a jar, and had once delved into Chayot's memories. What happened was a transfer through Pharan's memories, acting as a medium.

Of course, there were scenes too terrifying for Khem to handle, so he slightly adjusted his own memories, making what he saw less unbearable.

"Once you've come to terms with it, light the incense." Pharan continued.

Khem quickly wiped away his tears and took one incense stick from the stainless steel tray prepared by the monk, lighting it. He then clasped his hands together with the incense and began his invitation, as the monk went to unveil the red yantra cloth from the pot.

"Chayot...it's me, Khem."

Suddenly, a cold breeze swept through Khem's body and distorted the smoke from the incense, even though the room was sealed without windows, making it impossible for outside air to enter.

Khem thought that Chayot must have heard his voice but was too afraid to show himself.

"Chayot, I've never been angry at you. I understand you didn't mean it, so don't be scared, okay?"

"..."

"Come out and have another meal cooked by me." He finished saying, then placed the incense into a small pot in front of him.

Looking up, he saw the figure of a young man in a khaki civil servant uniform once again through the incense smoke, and gradually everything became clearer.

Chayot looked quite normal, not as terrifying as in the dream, just pale and lifeless. He was kneeling, his head bowed, gripping his pants tightly with both hands, filled with fear, sorrow, and pressure.

Khem took a deep breath and slowly crawled closer to Chayot, sitting down beside him.

"Chayot." Khem called out again, reaching out to place his hand on Chayot's, which was cold and pale.

Chayot looked up with a start, surprised that Khem would dare to touch him like this, especially after he had created such terrible memories for

Khem.

And then there was the matter of their past life, for which he felt he shouldn't be forgiven.

Khem met Chayot's eyes and smiled, his large round eyes curving into crescents, before tears began to stream down his face.

"Chayot, thank you for everything you've done for me."

"..."

"I was so stubborn in our past life, and in this one, I've been weak. You must have been exhausted, always protecting me." Khem said, his lips tightening before he slowly bowed his head.

"..."

"I'm sorry for all the trouble I've caused you, Chayot."

"..."

"Even though, hic, I really wanted you to live a happy life, just like I did, hic, I'm so sorry, Chayot." Khem's words were like a warm stream soothing Chayot's heart, and the small hands now holding Chayot's were free of fear, filled instead with goodwill and a guilt that no one had ever shown him before.

Khem had never harbored resentment against Chayot and was always ready to forgive him, yet Chayot had committed numerous vile acts against someone who deserved the utmost care.

Chayot wept silently, his sobs nearly breaking his heart as he recalled the nightmarish events, slowly lifting his fragile hands to his forehead, resting it against that warmth, and tears flowed incessantly.

"I'm sorry, Khem, I'm sorry for making you suffer waiting for your brother's letter, sorry for causing your death when you didn't deserve it, sorry for not letting you be with the one you loved as you always hoped. I'm sorry."

Chayot's voice echoed in Khem's mind, conveying his deep regret and sorrow for what he had done.

Khem's heart gradually lightened as he let go of everything. With his free hand, Khem reached out to touch Chayot's shoulder, gently comforting him before accepting Chayot's apology.

"It's okay. I forgive you. From now on, Chayot, you don't have to feel guilty or be bound by anything to do with me anymore."

That's right. The reason Chayot lingered and never left wasn't because he wanted to possess Khem, but because he felt guilty for causing Khemika's

death and wanted to protect and watch over Khem, ensuring he was safe from all dangers in this life.

Chayot just wanted Khem to live as long as possible, that's all.

Chayot nodded in acknowledgment, even though his tears wouldn't stop flowing, before the scene before him changed from Khem to his brother, who had been reborn.

"P...Phii." Chayot swallowed hard, trembling, then lowered his head to avoid his brother's sharp gaze once more. His brother in this life was not as kind or gentle as in his past life.

But no matter how different they were, Khem's heart belonged to this person once again as if it were predestined.

In any lifetime, he could never outmatch this man...

It was at that moment that Chayot felt a gentle hand reaching to stroke his head lightly.

Chayot opened his eyes wide at the tender touch, reminiscing about his childhood when he constantly followed his older brother around, clinging to his legs wherever he went.

This was the love and attachment Chayot had for his brother, without any conditions.

Then came the day when his brother won a scholarship to study abroad at the age of thirteen. Slowly, they began to drift apart.

Before he realized it, Chayot found that he could no longer keep up with his brother. The pressure and comparisons from family and relatives made him feel inferior, which transformed their once close relationship into one of distance and coldness.

When Phawat returned after finishing his studies, everything had changed. The younger brother who used to run and cling to him every time they met now just smiled, paid his respects, and went off to spend time with friends outside the home. When he returned, he would lock himself in his room instead of watching TV together like they used to.

Phawat withdrew his hand and spoke softly,

"I'm sorry I wasn't a good brother to you back then."

In their past life, Phawat was so consumed with chasing his dream of becoming a doctor that he neglected his younger brother, leaving Chayot to face pain he had never known before.

Even when Chayot died and news was sent, Phawat was still treating patients on the battlefield, never looking back.

"If I had known how our parents treated you, I would have taken you with me."

"..."

"If I had just asked you what was happening, if I had cared more about you, things wouldn't have turned out like this."

"..."

"Everything that happened is my fault for failing you."

"..."

Chayot stared into Pharan's eyes with disbelief, but those black, calm eyes were filled with sincerity and steadiness, every word uttered from true heart without embellishment.

"But I won't ask for your forgiveness. Just tell me what you want. If I can do it for you, I will do everything."

Chayot's eyes grew hot once more because he had been waiting for these words from his brother for so long. He had wanted protection, he had wanted care from his real brother just like other children.

At the very least, if his parents didn't love him, having his brother's love would have been enough.

But just as water cannot flow backward, time cannot be turned back.

Now, Chayot, receiving an apology from his brother, felt as if all the suffering in his heart had been released. He no longer needed love or care.

Chayot lifted his arm to wipe away his tears and nodded, his voice still trembling with soft sobs. With his pale hands clasped together, he bowed at his brother's feet in place of asking for forgiveness.

"Thank you. I thank you, and I apologize for everything I have done."

"..."

"I ask for your forgiveness, hic, and please take care of Khem for me, can you do that? I promise I'll go to where I should be and not disturb you or Khem anymore." Chayot said through his tears, still sniffing. His only remaining concern now was Khem; that vengeful spirit wouldn't relent until it got Khem's soul.

Pharan placed a bowl of rice in front of Chayot, followed by two dishes, and spoke softly, "I forgive you. As for what you've asked, I promise to do what I can. You don't need to worry."

Khem bit his lip gently, unsure if what the master said was to encourage Chayot to let go and depart peacefully or if there was some truth in it, but

he couldn't help but feel a bit of joy deep down.

Chayot wiped his tears once more before nodding, then picked up the chopsticks and took a bite of the food Khem had prepared. With just one mouthful, he felt the warmth of the food spread through his chest.

Chayot hadn't had such a good meal in a very long time.

Tears flowed down Chayot's cheeks again before he turned to compliment Khem with a smile.

"It's so delicious, your cooking still tastes the same, Khem." Khem smiled back and nodded.

"Uh, eat a lot then. After this, we'll make merit together often, so don't worry, Chayot." Chayot beamed with joy upon hearing this, despite the sadness in his heart at the thought of parting.

But this was for the best.

After finishing the meal, it was time for their final farewell before Chayot would return to the pot, so they could take it to the temple for the monks to perform the spirit-sending ceremony the next day.

Chayot reached out and gently stroked Khem's head.

"From now on, take good care of yourself."

Khem nodded in understanding.

"I understand. You too, Chayot."

Chayot smiled gently. His face seemed more radiant after the meal, then he turned to his brother to say, "I'll go now."

Pharan nodded, replying simply,

"Good luck."

With that, Chayot stood up and stepped into the same clay pot, and Pharan then covered it with the red yantra cloth, placing it back in its spot before returning to Khem, who was standing with a lamp, saying in a calm yet gentle tone,

"When you wake up early tomorrow, I'll take you to make merit at the temple."

The next morning, Pharan and Khem arrived at the village temple together. Pharan wore a long-sleeved black shirt, well-fitted grey trousers, black leather shoes, and the same sunglasses. Khem was in a traditional white cotton outfit that he had bought with Jett and Chan a few days earlier.

Today, neither of Khem's friends came along as they were sent by the monk to run errands outside the village.

On the way, they stopped to offer alms with Uncle-Lah's family. Upon arriving at the temple, they handed over the pot to the abbot, as they had done before, and together they offered a large container of monastic requisites, dedicating the merit to Chayot. Then both of them slowly poured water from the brass water-pouring vessel, reciting the water-pouring chants in unison as instructed by the abbot.

"May all this merit lead to forgiveness for those who have been wronged. May all those who have been wronged find happiness."

As the words were concluded, a gentle breeze softly blew through the two figures, as if in acknowledgment.

Khem sat listening to the abbot and Pharan talk for a short while longer. Then, both of them bowed in respect and took their leave.

Chapter 27

Khem felt his heart lighten, as if a great weight had been lifted from his chest. Though there were still heavier burdens to bear, it helped him breathe easier. The act of making merits further soothed his mind, giving him the strength to carry on with life.

Khem followed the abbot out of the pavilion, pausing to look up at the clear sky. The cool breeze carried the sweet fragrance of frangipani flowers, and a gentle smile spread across Khem's face.

Khem prayed that both his mother and Chayot might live happily in their next lives, free from the worry of watching over him.

Feeling unburdened, Khem momentarily forgot he wasn't alone here. Realizing this, he started slightly, but when he looked ahead, he saw the broad back of the abbot not far off, his long legs stepping slowly as if waiting for Khem to catch up. This sight made the slight figure of Khem unable to suppress a joyful smile, and he quickly stepped to follow.

Jett and Chan were sent to look for information about a famous monk, a close friend of their grandfather, who Pharan also respected as a master. The monk's name was "Luang Por Kasem." He hadn't been heard from for many years since he went on a forest retreat. Since the village was quite remote with poor cell phone reception, making contact was difficult, so Jett and Chan were to ask around among the other disciples in the city for any leads.

They wanted to ask him about something specific, believing he still carried it with him.

That evening, while sitting at the dining table reading a book and waiting for Khem to finish preparing dinner, the rain suddenly started pouring heavily, lasting for over an hour.

"Reverend, Jett texted to say there's heavy rain in the city, so they won't be able to return tonight. They'll stay at the city temple and come back tomorrow morning." Khem said, as he placed a plate of the finished dish he had prepared in front of the abbot. It seemed the intermittent phone signal was just enough to communicate with their friends.

"Um." Pharan replied softly, closing his book and placing it aside before quietly starting to eat.

"Master, Grandma-Si had the village chief bring some pandan pudding for you. Would you like some?" Khem asked while he was clearing away the dishes. Pharan, still seated and reading, nodded.

"Bring it over."

Memories from when he was a child surfaced; pandan pudding was the first dessert Grandma-Si made for him. It was made to replace his eleventh birthday cake. That year, Grandfather couldn't return from his business in another province in time, and his real father was busy at a celebration for a high-ranking official. Whether they were busy or not, they never paid much attention to him anyway.

On his birthday, Grandfather left him with Grandma-Si, promising to pick him up in the evening for a treat, but he had an accident and couldn't make it back. So, he had to stay overnight at Grandma-Si's house.

Grandma-Si knew it was his birthday, and seeing the little boy waiting at the door, she felt a pang of sympathy. She got up to make pandan pudding, topped with young coconut, and placed a single candle in the center. She brought it out to him, singing a traditional Isan birthday blessing, as she didn't know the English birthday song.

At that moment, his face broke into a rare, full smile, warmth spreading in his chest, a memory etched permanently in his heart.

The pandan pudding was placed in front of him. He picked it up quietly and ate it until it was gone.

Once Khem had finished cleaning up the kitchen, Pharan finally stopped reading, stood up from his chair, walked up the stairs to the house, and listened for the footsteps following him.

"Can you sleep alone?" He asked before Khem headed to his own room. Khem quickly nodded.

"Yes."

His onyx eyes looked at the person with his head bowed, his voice lacking any confidence. Pharan guessed that Khem was used to having bodyguards sleep nearby, and without his friends, he looked unusually subdued and spoke less than normal.

But if he says he can do it, then he'll definitely do it. If he can't do it, he'll still find a way. He certainly wouldn't want to waste time lingering like last time.

"Hmm, take a quick shower and go to bed." Khem said, nodding once more with a firm expression.

"Yes, Master."

Today, Khem showered faster than usual and went straight to bed, intending to fall asleep quickly, hoping to wake up to find Jett and Chan the next morning.

It took Khem a while to feel sleepy, but just before he drifted off, he heard the small voices of two boys.

"Phii Khem has fallen asleep."

"Yeah. Should we stand guard, or should we leave?"

"The Master said to keep watch, but he didn't say until when."

"Let's stay for now. Phii Khem might have another nightmare."

"That's true."

At that moment, the hair on Khem's arms stood up, and his eyes, unwilling to stay closed, opened to see who was standing there talking by his ear.

Khem saw two boys in blue school uniforms with their hair in buns, both no older than twelve, with pale, nearly identical faces.

Even as their eyes rolled in unison back to the center and stared directly at Khem, the synchronization was eerie...

Khem gasped sharply with fear, grabbed his pillow and blanket, and ran out of the room crying without looking back.

Thong and Ek turned to look at each other in that instant.

"Oh no."

"We're in trouble now."

Fortunately, the Master had left the lights on in the house tonight, so Khem didn't need to waste time lighting a lantern to guide his way. He ran straight to the door of the master's room. However, he didn't dare to knock or call out, even holding back his sobs so as not to disturb.

The two child ghosts he had seen didn't follow as he had feared, so Khem decided to sleep in front of the master's door. But just as he was about to lay down his pillow, the door opened.

Pharan looked at Khem with a stern expression and asked abruptly,

"What are you doing?"

Khem quickly wiped his tears, stuttering as he spoke, glancing around cautiously.

"It's just...Can I sleep in front of your door, please? I promise I'll be quiet and won't disturb you, Master." Khem didn't dare to say he was frightened by a ghost, as it sounded too ridiculous to bother someone late at night for such a reason.

Pharan stared at Khem in silence, his sharp eyes then darting to the two culprits standing guiltily in the corner of the room. He waved his hand dismissively, sending them off to play elsewhere.

"Come in." He said, moving aside, but Khem just blinked, seemingly not understanding.

"Huh?"

"If you think sleeping in front of my door will save you, then do as you please."

As he was about to close the door, Khem's survival instincts kicked in, and he jumped inside.

Pharan sighed softly before closing the door, nodding towards a cabinet.

"The bedding is in there. Go get it and make your bed." Khem nodded, though he still seemed unsure.

"Where would you like me to sleep?"

"Wherever you want." Pharan replied, then walked back to sit leaning against the headboard to continue reading his book, no longer paying attention to Khem.

Khem quietly placed down the pillow and blanket, then went to retrieve the picnic mattress from the cabinet, closing it neatly afterward. He laid the mattress beside the monk's bed, not forgetting to softly ask for permission before doing so.

After that, no one spoke. Khem didn't want to disturb the monk's concentration while reading. Once the bed was made, he placed the pillow, unfolded the blanket, paid respects to the Buddha, and lay down.

Suddenly, Khem felt extremely sleepy. His clear round eyes fluttered as he tried to take one last look at the monk, whispering a thank you before drifting off to sleep.

Pharan slowly closed his book and placed it on the headboard, gazing at the child lying on his side, cheek pressed against the pillow, for a long moment before extinguishing the light from the lamp to prepare for sleep.

Outside, the sound of thunder rumbled in waves. At this time, everyone in the village had already closed their doors and gone to sleep.

Grandma-Si walked out of her house into the rain, making her way to a banyan tree at a three-way junction. She sat down in front of a small banana leaf packet filled with food, which was now soaked with rainwater.

Grandma-Si smiled, revealing teeth stained dark from betel nut chewing, and began to ravenously eat the food from the packet.

Khem, thinking he had woken up early, was still later than the Reverend. After waking, he quickly put away his bedding, took his things back to his room, and went downstairs to prepare breakfast.

Since Grandma-Si had made some steamed coconut-rice cakes the previous day, the master instructed Khem to cook extra food for Grandma-Si as well, asking anyone passing by to take it to her.

Regarding the two young boy ghosts Khem saw, when he asked the master while serving him coffee, he learned that they were spirits the Reverend had taken under his care, named Ek and Thong. They had watched over Khem last night because Chan and Jett were not around. They didn't intend to scare him; they just didn't expect him to wake up.

Hearing this, Khem felt relieved and a bit guilty. If he were to take food to Grandma-Si, he planned to buy some red drink to offer as well.

By about 9 a.m., Jett and Chan still hadn't returned. Seeing no one was coming by, Khem borrowed the master's bicycle to take the food to Grandma-Si, worried that it would become cold and less tasty.

Before reaching Grandma-Si's house, Khem saw her standing by the temple wall as if she knew he was coming. Grandma-Si waved him over. As Khem approached, he stopped the bike and smiled,

"Grandma-Si. I brought you some food. Where are you heading to?"

"I'm going to pick lotus stems from the pond behind the temple. Can you come and keep me company? I'm scared of falling in the water."

Khem nodded upon hearing her request, thinking he could swim well enough. There shouldn't be any problems.

"Okay, let's go then."

"Ah, thank you so much."

Khem led Grandma-Si to the pond behind the temple. There was a small dock with a rowboat for two people tied up, indicating that villagers often came here to gather lotus.

"Can you row, child?" Grandma-Si asked without looking back.

"Yes, I can. Grandma-Si can stay here, I'll gather them." Khem replied, remembering that Grandma-Si had said she was afraid of falling into the

water, and he was also worried she might actually fall in.

"No, I'll gather them myself." Grandma-Si said firmly, making Khem blink in surprise. But when he saw Grandma-Si walk down and sit in the boat on her own, he quickly followed, sitting behind her.

Khem untied the rope securing the boat to a stump, pushed off from the dock with the oar, and started rowing with determination.

Suddenly, Khem felt the atmosphere around him grow eerily quiet, the sky unnaturally dark and still. There were no bird calls or insect sounds, and the temperature dropped, sending chills all over his body.

Khem gradually stopped rowing because Grandma-Si was still sitting motionless, not reaching out to pick the lotus stems. Feeling increasingly uneasy, he asked, his heart starting to beat faster,

"Grandma-Si, aren't you going to pick the lotus stems?" But Grandma-Si didn't reply with words; instead, she began to sway gently, making the boat rock side to side, causing the wood to creak.

Khem's heart sank to the bottom of the boat, fear flooding his chest, a familiar dread. He called out, hoping what he feared wasn't true.

"Uh, Grandma-Si..."

And then, Khem's plea went unanswered. Grandma-Si slowly turned her head towards him, her body not following, still swaying.

Her eyes were entirely black, no whites, her lips a dark purple, and her face, once familiar, now belonged to someone else.

The dark lips slowly smiled, the entirely black eyes curved, and in a chilling voice, she said,

"This time, don't expect to escape."

Chapter 28

Pharan continued his meditation even after Khem had left on the bicycle. However, not long after, the dog lying under the bamboo bed suddenly got up, howling and looking up towards the second floor of the house, sensing that something was about to happen, before it ran away in fear.

It's back.

Pharan called back the consciousness he had sent to follow Khem. After seeing the unfolding events, his black eyes suddenly widened, and he coughed up a mouthful of black blood.

Disaster.

This word echoed in Pharan's mind like a broken record. A pain as if a thousand needles were piercing his fingers and toes, combined with a burning sensation in his chest, made it hard for him to breathe. The clear images before his eyes were now growing dim, and his once clear eyes were now leaking blood in a disturbing manner.

What he saw in his consciousness indicated something deeply disturbing to Pharan, but the immediate concern was to find a way to reverse the dark magic curse.

It had entered Pharan's body through ingestion.

The vision reflected memories from yesterday when he had eaten Grandma-Si's steamed coconut-rice cake without much caution. That cake might have been mixed with saliva or perhaps passed over by something impure multiple times. Moreover, Grandma-Si herself possessed some magical knowledge, making it not difficult for her to cast a curse...

Now, both of Pharan's eyes, still leaking blood, had gone blind. With one hand, he groped around for the silver basin containing holy water. Despite the excruciating headache that felt like his head might explode, he couldn't afford to lie down.

Upon finding it, he placed the basin in front of him, reached out to take a candle and a lighter from a stainless steel tray, and lit it. Unable to see, he couldn't focus his meditation on any particular point, so he couldn't use his usual fire magic.

Feeling the warmth of the flame, he slowly dripped candle wax into the holy water, while moving his lips, still stained with dark blood, to chant the three Namos three times, followed by a chant to counteract the curse, both for spirits and humans that he had learned.

"Itipija Sukkhato Lokanatho Araham Patto Nānibbānasaññā..."

Meanwhile, Jett and Chan, who had to stay overnight at a temple in the province due to necessity, felt restless and couldn't sleep because they were worried about the master and Khem. By 5 AM, they got up, washed their faces, brushed their teeth, and left the empty monk's quarters to bid farewell to the abbot before heading back, even though it was still drizzling.

Jett drove back to the village using a shortcut he remembered from a past volunteer club trip, opting for this route because it was shorter than the usual path and to avoid the city's congested traffic. His heart was uneasy since morning, which only intensified his driving.

The more he thought, the harder he pressed the accelerator, causing the speedometer to climb, though to Jett, everything around seemed to be moving too slowly, contrasting with Chan's feelings in the passenger seat.

"Khem Jett, you're driving too fast." Chan said tensely, sweat trickling down his temple, something in his mind screaming that a disaster was imminent.

At that very moment, Jett saw a black dog dash out from the roadside, too close to stop in time. Both men's eyes widened in shock, and Jett made the split-second decision to swerve off the road, crashing into a large tree.

BAM!!

Back with Khem, his large eyes were wide open in terror, his heart pounding with fear more intense than ever before. The sensation of dread gripped his throat, making it hard to breathe, as if the whole world had stopped spinning in an instant.

Khem recognized this voice; it was the same one he'd heard in his dreams, the one he woke up to when he was about to jump off the balcony.

And those entirely black eyes, the nearly black-purple lips, that face he'd seen in the sketches.

Before him was the vengeful spirit that cursed his mother's family, the owner of the ancient Thai house dimension Khem had been dreaming about.

"..."

Tears streamed down Khem's cheeks as he responded in a voice trembling with both fear and anger, because even though the face was

someone else's, the body belonged to Grandma-Si.

"Why use Grandma-Si's body, what did Grandma-Si do to you?" The question made Madam Ramphueng's smile slowly fade, her neck twisted back to an angle, her eyes that were squinted now wide open, and she replied in a chilling voice that echoed across the area,

"Now. Shouldn't you be more worried about yourself?"

At that very moment, the boat rocked violently, flipping over, and Khem fell into the cold water. Although he could swim, at this moment, his arms and legs wouldn't move as he wanted them to, his eyes wide in shock.

He saw the figure of a woman in ancient Thai servant attire, with the same face as before, floating closer.

Her skin was pale like paper, revealing dark veins across her body, her eyes now mostly white with the pupils shrunken, and her dark lips still smiling.

As the face came within inches of him, the same voice whispered into his ear,

"I'm going to show you the vile things you and your family did to me."

Khem was pulled back into the dimension of an ancient Thai house once more. The scene was still in sepia tones, like an old drama being replayed. It was the same perspective he had seen multiple times in his dreams, but this time, it seemed different because Khem could clearly hear the voices of people in the house.

Memories of someone flooded into his mind, tracing back to about four hundred years ago when this Thai house was bestowed by the king to "Phraya Worasingh," a high-ranking official who had been appointed as the governor of a secondary city in Siam at that time.

Phraya Worasingh was the son of "Lord Phakdiwijitra" and "Lady Anantawadi" who had risen from a minor noble rank due to the influence of "Lord Phraya Chalerm Sak," whose daughter "Mae Ying Kesakaew" was his fiancée, and who was also a friend of the king, helping him to secure a position in the royal court.

At seventeen years old, Phraya Worasingh was a man of striking features and a tall, robust build, unmatched in this region by birth, and known for his sweet and charming speech with women. Anyone who came close to him would inevitably fall for his charm.

His reputation spread throughout the Kanchanaburi region, known as the most desirable man for young women to marry. This reputation reached the ears of MaeYing Kesakaew, the eighteen-year-old daughter of Ookya Chalermesak, a high-ranking official about to be promoted even further. Out of curiosity, as a young woman about to be married, she went to secretly observe Phraya Worasingh's face.

From the very first glance, there was an immediate infatuation and admiration for each other. MaeYing Kesakaew was determined in her heart that she would marry Phraya Worasingh at any cost.

Originally, MaeYing Kesakaew was the youngest daughter of Ookya Chalermesak, raised with indulgence, which made her quite self-willed. She used her father's rank and title to coerce Phraya Worasingh into proposing marriage to her.

At that time, Phraya Worasingh held a third-tier noble rank, his full name being "Lord Singharat". He was someone who cared deeply about his image and sought ways to advance to a higher noble rank to honor his family's prestige. Hence, he agreed to marry MaeYing Kesakaew not out of love but out of necessity, fearing gossip from the villagers. They were engaged for two years before setting a date for the wedding.

Being eloquent and skilled in negotiation, after working in the palace and becoming close to the king, Phraya Worasingh used his cunning and quick wit to climb the ranks. Just three years after marrying MaeYing Kesakaew, he was promoted to the ninth-tier noble rank and was granted the new title, "Phraya Worasingh".

Phraya Worasingh was set on having one or two sons to continue the family's noble status and virtues, hoping they would achieve success as he had at the age of twenty, becoming a high-ranking noble and bringing honor to the family.

However, after three years of marriage, MaeYing Kesakaew had not given birth, whether to a daughter or a son. No matter what methods were tried, she simply did not conceive.

Unable to wait any longer, Phraya Worasingh married a second wife named "MaeYing Radamani", the daughter of the left minister, with the king's support. Even Phraya Chalermesak, who was known for his rebellious spirit against the monarchy, could not object or do anything.

MaeYing Radamani was much loved by Phraya Worasingh for her decorum, composure, youth, and flattery. She soon became pregnant and

gave birth to two daughters in quick succession, but tragically, after giving birth, she could not have another child due to a mysterious accident where she fell from a balcony and died only a year after childbirth.

MaeYing Kesakaew, the primary wife, showed no interest in raising the children in place of their deceased mother, so Phraya Worasingh decided to send the girls to live with their grandparents in another nearby city.

Not long after, Phraya Worasingh took a third wife, "MaeYing Koknang", daughter of "Ong Luang Surachet". This marriage was one of obligation on her part, as she could not defy her parents' orders. Within a year of their marriage, she gave birth to a daughter named "KrongKwan".

MaeYing Koknang was known for her reserved nature and modesty. Even though Phraya Worasingh felt disappointed for not having a son as he hoped, he never dared to show his irritation or displeasure towards her. He only named the child and returned to his duties at the palace as usual.

Two years later, a new group of servants was sent to Phraya Worasingh's residence, among whom Phraya Worasingh noticed a woman with radiant skin and beauty beyond the ordinary. Upon inquiring, he learned her name was:

'Ramphueng'

PhrayaWorasingh was greatly enamored with Madam-Ramphueng, his heart almost bursting with desire to make her his wife. He even had severe arguments with his primary wife, MaeYing Kesakaew, because he had promised not to take another wife.

Ultimately, Phraya Worasingh managed to elevate Madam-Ramphueng to be his fourth wife, as his heart desired. Not long after, Madam-Ramphueng conceived another child for him.

However, during this same time, MaeYing Kesakaew also became pregnant. This coincided with Phraya Worasingh being away for a long time due to his official duties.

MaeYing Kesakaew began to intentionally harass the servant wife, Madam-Ramphueng, in various ways. MaeYing Koknang, being in a lower position, could not intervene, as the primary wife held greater power, and she didn't want to cause trouble for her parents if the conflict reached Lord Phraya Chalerm Sak's ears.

Nevertheless, MaeYing Koknang often secretly sent necessary items to Madam-Ramphueng out of compassion, hoping both Madam-Ramphueng and MaeYing Kesakaew would give birth to sons for Phraya Worasingh.

When the delivery day came, both MaeYing Kesakaew and Madam-Ramphueng went into labor simultaneously. However, a terrible event unfolded: MaeYing Kesakaew gave birth to a son but the son died before seeing him, while Madam-Ramphueng delivered a healthy son safely.

MaeYing Kesakaew screamed and cried uncontrollably before fainting from the shock.

That very night, after MaeYing Kesakaew regained consciousness, she led several servants to Madam-Ramphueng's room, ordering them to hold Madam-Ramphueng while they took her child away.

Madam Ramphueng's heart sank to the pit of her stomach; she quickly shook herself free from the grasp of several servants who were holding her back and ran after MaeYing Kesakaew, fearing that what would happen next might shatter her heart.

Upon reaching the riverbank, MaeYing Kesakaew stood at the end of the pier, holding Madam Ramphueng's child. Madam Ramphueng cried out silently in sheer terror, her arms reaching out in desperate hope of reclaiming her son.

'Madam, please don't do this, return my child to me, I beg you.' pleaded Madam Ramphueng. However, MaeYing Kesakaew shook her head, rejecting the plea.

If the child of a servant in her household were to grow up and take everything that should have belonged to her own son, not to mention the gossip and accusations that would come, her life was already miserable enough. She could not let that happen.

'If my child was not to be born, neither will yours.'

With that, the baby, who was crying, was mercilessly thrown into the river right before the mother's eyes.

Madam Ramphueng's scream pierced the air, but it was soon muffled as the servants of MaeYing Kesakaew caught up to her, holding her back and covering her mouth to prevent any sound, leaving only her wide eyes filled with disbelief and tears streaming down.

This harrowing scene by the water's edge was witnessed entirely by **Krongkwan**, the daughter of **MaeYing Koknang**, who in this life, is none other than **Khem** and his now-**deceased mother**.

Chapter 29

The little girl had only intended to sneak out to catch fireflies at night because she couldn't sleep. She never expected to witness such events with her own eyes.

Krongkwan was a clever child and well aware that MaeYing Kesakaew was the most powerful woman in the household. Her mother had always warned her not to play or be mischievous near her, and often, she had seen MaeYing Kesakaew beat the servants. Thus, the child was deeply afraid of this lady, but this time, the cruelty was beyond what a seven-year-old could handle. Just as she was about to scream, a hand from behind covered her small lips.

MaeYing Koknang, upon looking for her child and finding her, could guess what had happened to Madam-Ramphueng even though she hadn't witnessed the events.

Even MaeYing Radamani, who was the daughter of a high-ranking official, had such a tragic fate; how could Madam-Ramphueng, merely a servant, ever hope to rise to fight the level of the primary wife like MaeYing Kesakaew?

MaeYing Koknang's eyes were red with fear and shock at her daughter having witnessed such an unspeakable scene. She didn't even want to think about what would happen to them if they were caught.

Krongkwan pointed at Madam-Ramphueng, but MaeYing Koknang shook her head, then scooped up her child and half-ran, half-walked away.

However, they did not escape MaeYing Kesakaew's sight, nor did they miss the hope in Madam-Ramphueng's eyes, which seemed to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Seeing the hopeful expression on Madam-Ramphueng's face, MaeYing Kesakaew sneered, grabbed Madam-Ramphueng by her hair to make her look up, and said,

"Do you think those two, mother and daughter, can help you in any way?"

Madam-Ramphueng was still crying as if her heart would break, but MaeYing Kesakaew showed no pity or compassion. She turned to speak to the two male servants holding Madam-Ramphueng,

"Take her to the storage room and lock her up. Follow me." She then spoke to the rest of the servants, pushed Madam-Ramphueng's head away forcefully, and walked towards the left wing of the house where MaeYing Koknang and her daughter resided...

Two days later, Phraya Worasingh returned home upon receiving grim news from one of the servants. The first was that MaeYing Kesakaew had given birth to a son, but the son had died shortly after birth. The second was about Madam-Ramphueng...

Madam-Ramphueng was released from the storage room where she had been locked up for two full days after hearing that her husband had returned. She ran to the house to complain about what had happened to her and her child, but in the house, there were not only Phraya Worasingh but also several men from the same lineage, from young to old, who had all received the same report.

The male servant who delivered the letters to everyone was from Ong Luang Phakdiwijitra, PhrayaWorasingh's father, who was placed in the household to report back on the various goings-on to his master.

Phraya Worasingh had four full brothers and seven close male relatives, all of whom held good positions thanks to the connections of Phraya Chalernsak, father of MaeYing Kesakaew, and a friend of the current king. Whatever happened within Phraya Worasingh's household, whether good or bad, was always under scrutiny by those in power.

Naturally, in this matter, everyone with stakes could not remain indifferent.

"So, what exactly happened? Madam-Ramphueng, you explain!" Ong Luang Phakdiwijitra asked with a stern face. Surrounded by the men of authority, Madam-Ramphueng felt a glimmer of hope. She quickly clasped her hands together and recounted the whole story in search of justice, her body still weak and tears streaming down her cheeks.

Phraya Worasingh's face grew increasingly somber as he listened, and once she finished, he spoke up, then turned to a female servant waiting for orders not far away.

"This matter cannot be judged one-sidedly. Go fetch MaeYing Kesakaew and MaeYing Kaknang."

"Yes, sir." The servant replied, hiding a smile before she left. Soon, she returned with MaeYing Kesakaew, who was being supported by a close attendant, looking frail and pale from grief and lack of sleep after losing her son. MaeYing Kaknang followed quietly, holding her daughter's hand, her head down.

Once all three women were seated, Phraya Worasingh, with a trembling voice tinged with anger and sorrow, got straight to the point.

"Madam-Ramphueng says you threw her child into the river. Is this true?"

MaeYing Kesakaew, ignored in her own loss of a son and having nearly bled to death, could only swallow her grief and lift her head to speak:

"After losing my child, I've been feverish and bedridden, without the strength to do such a thing. Last night, Madam Kaknang and her daughter even came to visit me. If you don't believe me, ask her."

"Is this true?" MaeYing Kaknang met Madam-Ramphueng's eyes briefly before looking away to respond to her husband.

"Really, sister?" Madam-Ramphueng's eyes widened in disbelief at what she heard from MaeYing Koknang, then she screamed with all her might, her body thrashing in refusal, though still held down by the two male servants.

"It's not true! It's not true! Didn't you and your daughter see what MaeYing Kesakaew did to me that night? Why lie about it?" Phraya Worasingh looked at Madam-Ramphueng with a mix of pain and pity in his eyes, then turned to look at MaeYing Koknang, who maintained an impassive expression, keeping all her emotions tightly controlled.

"What do you have to say?" Phraya Worasingh asked, feeling a tightness in his chest.

Madam-Ramphueng, fearing she wouldn't receive justice, turned to Krongkwan.

"Krongkwan, you saw it that night, didn't you? Please, help me!"

At this, all eyes turned to the little girl trembling beside her mother. But when her mother gently stroked her back, she took a deep breath and spoke in a quivering voice,

"Y-yes, I saw it." PhrayaWorasingh swallowed hard, then continued to ask his daughter,

"What did you see, Krongkwan?"

"I saw Madam-Ramphueng throwing the baby into the river."

After Krongkwan finished speaking, while Madam-Ramphueng was still in shock, the men, who were the decision-makers, subtly exhaled in relief.

Not long after, a female servant who had once been a close friend of Madam-Ramphueng, before she was made a wife, ran onto the platform holding a banana leaf parcel, saying a merchant from the market had left it for her.

"The merchant said Madam-Ramphueng had arranged for opium to be delivered every week, but she didn't show up today after waiting for a long time. I went out to buy things for Lady Koknang, and he recognized me, so he left it with me."

Upon hearing this, Madam-Ramphueng understood what had happened. She had been framed as an opium addict, having thrown her child into the river in a drug-induced frenzy, mistakenly believing that MaeYing Kesakaew, whom she despised, was the perpetrator. That night, MaeYing Kesakaew had ordered her to be locked up until Phraya Worasingh returned.

"Aaaargh! No! No! Ugh! Waaaah!" Madam-Ramphueng screamed in anguish, but soon a servant gagged her with cloth, and two more men gripped her arms tightly, leaving only her legs to kick helplessly. The image of her child being thrown into the river was like a knife repeatedly stabbing her heart.

What the truth was, everyone knew well, but here, the truth was something that would only bring harm to oneself. Even Phraya Worasingh did not speak up or help Madam-Ramphueng.

When everything settled down, Ong Luang Phakdiwijitra struck his cane on the ground with a loud thump and declared:

"Take this deceitful servant away to be flogged to death!"

Madam-Ramphueng was dragged away crying, but the physical pain was nothing compared to the emotional torment she endured.

She had only held her child a few times, embraced and smelled her baby only a handful of moments, and looked into the adorable face for a brief while before he was cruelly taken from her. Her husband did not lift a finger to help, the last beacon of hope turned his back, and she was falsely accused and left to die in disgrace.

Madam-Ramphueng's body was left to lie in a pool of blood on the dirty ground, her once beautiful eyes now bloodshot and staring blankly like those of a demon, tears streaming endlessly, her lips, bitten until they bled, turning a dark purple as she muttered her last words:

"With my last breath, I curse you all..."

"..."

"Kesakaew, may you suffer a fate worse than what you've done to my child, and when you die, may you burn in hell, never to be reborn as a human."

"..."

"From here on, may this family only face calamity. No sons shall continue the lineage. If the descendants are born as women, may they lose their lovers, either by separation or death. If they are born as men, let them die before the age of twenty."

"Phii Khem! Phii Khem!"

"Phii Khem! Can you hear us!"

A small voice, as if heard before, pierced through the dimension, and her eyes opened wide to the scene before her.

From the ghostly form of Madam-Ramphueng, it transformed into Grandma-Si, with entirely black eyes, her hands strangling a boy with a ponytail in a blue mahout outfit who was struggling for life. Khem recognized them as Ekk and Thong, the ghost servants kept by the monk.

'Run, Phii Khem!'

The voice of someone echoed again in Khem's mind, snapping him back to the reality of his current situation. Although part of him didn't want to escape alone, he knew he couldn't do anything more. With his last bit of strength, he swam as fast as he could towards the surface.

Khem struggled up onto the dock, panting and crying, then crawled to the edge to look down into the water.

Grief, confusion, and anger churned in his chest. Grandma-Si, Thong, and Ekk, all of them were in this dire situation because of Khem.

Khem gasped for air, still sobbing. His heart wanted to jump back in to help Grandma-Si, Ek, and Tong, but he was also terrified that he might only make things worse.

At that moment, Khem's arm was pulled back by Jett, with Chan running up, looking distressed.

"Khem! Are you okay?" Jett asked. Khem shook his head, tears still streaming down his face like someone out of their mind, his whole body trembling.

"Jett, Chan, Grandma-Si, Grandma-Si, ughhh." Khem sobbed almost to the point of breaking down, while Jett and Chan exchanged confused

glances. Then someone ran past them and dove into the water swiftly.

Splash!

Jett pulled Khem away from the edge, his eyes fixed on the spot where the water had rippled, his heart pounding. He didn't dare to ask Khem what had happened.

Because the person who had jumped into the water was the master.

Pharan, in his blood-stained white shirt, dove into the pond. What Khem saw was Grandma-Si, no longer possessed by the evil spirit, and Ekk's body floating beside her. On the other side, only a golden dust, the remnants of Thong's spirit that had shattered, remained.

The tall figure swam to support the one who was like another mother to him, embracing her in his arms, while his other hand touched the head of his remaining spirit servant, reciting a mantra in his mind to send him back to the house.

Shortly after, Jett, Chan, and Khem saw the monk carrying Grandma-Si's body out of the water. The oppressive and frightening feeling made the three of them step back several paces. Khem stood still, allowing the monk to pass with Grandma-Si in his arms, only watching the pale feet of Grandma-Si with a pained expression, not daring to look up to see the monk's face.

Because they all knew that Grandma-Si, as the monk carried her, was no longer breathing.

Chapter 30

Jett and Chan took Khem back to the master's residence. Jett decided to return to Grandma-Si's house to assess the situation, leaving Chan to look after Khem at the master's place.

Upon returning, Khem locked himself in his room, and Chan could only sit outside, listening to his friend's cries, feeling the overwhelming sorrow that could not be expressed in words, unable to do anything to help.

He prayed that everything would pass quickly and well.

The sound of the "Thani Krasang" funeral song played throughout the village.

Grandma-Si's funeral was held that evening, amidst the grief of many villagers. Her body was to be kept at her home for a single night for merit-making before being cremated at the temple the next day, as per her final wishes conveyed to everyone.

Since she had no children or grandchildren, she didn't want to burden the villagers. Although some disagreed, preferring traditional customs, they realized they had never repaid her kindness; thus, fulfilling her last wish seemed appropriate.

"Master, why don't you go back, shower, and change your clothes? I'll take care of things here." Jett approached the master, who was still in his bloodstained white shirt, wet from the pond, not having changed even after over two hours. He was worried the master might fall ill.

The atmosphere around the master was too tense for anyone to casually speak, except for his close disciple, Jett. But seeing the master nod in acknowledgement, Jett quietly stepped back, not saying anything more.

At this moment, no matter how chaotic the surroundings were, Pharan sat still on the floor, his black eyes fixed on the incense sticks in the pot in front of the coffin, which burned away one by one.

Every minute passed slowly, and every memory flowed back, shaking the feelings he had kept hidden in his heart with sorrow.

For Pharan, Grandma-Si was not unlike a mother who had given him life. She had given him his first embrace after losing his mother, fed him his first

spoonful of rice, and made the first treat with care. All of these were acts of Grandma-Si.

Thus, despite understanding the truth of life that all humans are born to eventually pass away, it's impossible not to feel sorrow.

Before the time for the monks to arrive for the funeral rites, Pharan had to return home to bathe and change. During the walk back, every step felt heavy, as if the ground itself might split apart, the forest spirits recoiled in fear. Even the land spirits of this area trembled.

It was a kind of anger no one had encountered in this life before.

Upon returning to the house, as he ascended the steps, he heard two distinct sobs from both wings of the house. He paused at the central part, listening to both, then decided to head right.

Pharan entered a room where a table held an incense pot and two bottles of red soda. In the center of the table stood a wooden sculpture of two boys holding hands, crafted by a woodcarver.

The crying came from one who had lost his twin brother, never to return.

"Ekk." Pharan called out softly. Soon, the boy in the blue school uniform appeared. The young boy clung tightly to Pharan's trousers, still sobbing pitifully.

"Master, hic, Thong, Thong, huhu." Pharan gently stroked Ekk head, then responded in a low voice,

"Um, I know."

"Hic, I can't stay here without Thong, Master, hic, can you bring Thong back to me?"

Pharan held his breath for a moment at that request, knowing well he couldn't fulfill it.

Pharan understood well the pain of losing someone so dear, but if one still had breath, the only option was to keep struggling. However, for those who had lost their breath, there were still ways to meet again.

"I can't bring him back, but I can send you to him if you wish." Pharan said, causing Ekk to slowly lift his head to look at the monk's face once more.

"..."

"What do you say?"

"..."

"Do you want to stay here, or go to where you both should have been from the start?"

In truth, neither of them should have been summoned into this statue by Pharan's grandfather, a shaman, if it hadn't been for his youthful experimentation. If not for that, they would have been reborn long ago. Hearing this, Ekk, thinking of all the time spent here, cried softly, nodding before retreating and bowing at the monk's feet in respect.

The memories in this Thai house were precious to the orphaned spirits like Ekk and Thong, who had no one to care for them, but ultimately, what was most valuable to Ekk was his twin brother. With tears in his eyes, he said to the master,

"Thank you so much for everything."

Upon finishing his words, Pharan knelt down, touched the young spirit's head he had spent decades with, and chanted a mantra to adjust their spiritual state. Ekk's form slowly transformed into a soft yellow light floating above Pharan's hand, which he then placed into a wooden box. Tomorrow, he would take it to the temple for the abbot to help send the spirit to a better place alongside Grandma-Si.

After placing the wooden box back in its spot, Pharan stared at it for several minutes before saying:

"I hope in your next lives, both of you will be born into a family that loves and cares for you well."

Khem got up at dawn to prepare food, which he then took in a basket to Grandma-Si's house with Chan. Upon arriving at the funeral, the first thing he did was pay his respects by lighting an incense stick and offering an apology.

"Grandma-Si. I'm so sorry for causing you to leave like this. It's all my fault."

"..."

"If I hadn't come here in the first place, all these terrible things wouldn't have happened."

"..."

"If there's still a breath in me, I'll make sure to do merit often for you, Grandma."

"..."

"I'm really sorry." After saying this, he placed the incense stick into the pot, bowed once, and slowly stepped back to place the food from the basket he had prepared into the alms bowl set aside, then went to sit at a chair behind where no one would notice, to listen to the monks chanting.

Khem spoke little and was more silent than usual, causing Chan, who had been observing him all the time, to feel uneasy. Even Jett, who was assisting the Reverend, kept glancing at him frequently.

Jett was worried that Khem might blame himself too much, but he was also concerned about the master's state of mind. Thus, he stayed close, not daring to leave Khem alone.

Jett had no idea how the master felt about Khem now, after losing someone so dear, almost like a mother, due to Khem's karma. However, to Jett, Khem was still a friend he would never let go of easily.

'Just wait, Khem. I'll make the master understand that none of this was your fault,' Jett thought to himself.

When the time came for Grandma-Si's cremation ceremony, her body was placed in a pickup truck and driven into the temple. Ten villagers were ordained to perform the ceremony, ten monks chanted Buddhist mantras, offerings were made, a sermon was given, and the monks chanted the Matika Bangsakol, followed by the offering of traditional items and then the pouring of water as the final step.

After the merit-making for the deceased, the abbot, or Luang Por Sua, led the procession. During the procession, the village chief carried a lit incense stick. Behind him, the master, dressed in black from head to toe, held Grandma-Si's portrait, followed by Jett, Uncle-Chai, Uncle-Lah, Uncle-Mek, and two other men carrying the coffin on their shoulders, with the villagers bringing up the rear in the final farewell to Grandma-Si.

After circling the funeral pyre three times, Grandma-Si's coffin was placed on the cremation platform. During the recounting of Grandma-Si's life and her good deeds for the village, there were intermittent soft sobs.

Understanding the truths of life, they conducted the Bangsakol cloth offering ceremony, followed by villagers placing jasmine flowers and incense sticks at the base of the pyre for the lighting. The monk was the first to walk up, placing sandalwood flowers, candles, and incense, and also set the wooden box containing Ekk's spirit next to Grandma-Si, entrusting her to watch over this spirit too. He spoke softly in the Isan dialect, as always:

"See you later, Grandma. Please take care of Ekk too."

After the monk had placed the flowers and returned to his seat, the villagers followed, lining up to place their own sandalwood flowers. Among them were Chan and Khem.

The final act was lighting the cremation pyre. Grandma-Si's coffin was moved into the crematorium, and the light grey smoke wafting from the top of the pyre was a sight that tugged at many hearts, leading them to clasp their hands in prayer over their heads.

From now on, this small village would no longer have Grandma-Si, the guardian of their spirits. May Grandma-Si be with those she loved and find peace in a good realm.

As everything concluded, Khem felt a change in the hand he thought was Chan's; turning, he found it was not his friend but a village child looking confused. Chan quickly let go, apologizing.

Looking around, Chan saw only villagers milling about, and Khem had vanished without him noticing. His already worried heart grew even more anxious.

At that moment, Jett, having finished his duties with the monk, hurried over but frowned when he saw Chan standing alone, looking pale and sweaty. He rushed over without hesitation.

"Where's Khem, Chan?" Chan, still frowning, shook his head.

"I don't know." Jett, in frustration, slapped his own forehead, then grabbed Chan's arm, urging him to move.

"Damn it, come on, let's go back to the house!" Jett hoped that Khem was just tired and had gone back to wait for them at the residence, praying he hadn't gone anywhere.

But their prayers were in vain; Khem had packed his belongings and left the village, leaving behind only a tear-stained letter.

'To Jett and Chan, thank you for always helping me. I'm sorry for causing you trouble. Please apologize to the master and the villagers for me. I'm sorry I'm too cowardly and weak, causing problems like this. I hope you all have a good life from now on. Goodbye.'

After reading the letter to the end, Jett placed it back where it was and made to dash out of the room, but Chan grabbed his arm.

"Khun Jett, where are you going?" Jett looked incredulous before replying sharply,

"To find Khem, what else? If we let him go like this, he'll definitely die!" Chan furrowed his brows in response,

"I understand how you feel. I'm worried about Khem too, but we can't just rush out like this." This was because neither Jett nor Chan knew where

Khem was at the moment or where he intended to go. Acting without a clear plan would only waste time and could potentially make things worse.

"Let's consult with the master first." Jett, after considering the reasoning, took a deep breath to calm himself and then nodded in agreement. When they left the room, they saw the master waiting in the central area of the house, as if he already knew what had transpired.

Without delay, Jett and Chan approached the master on their knees, hands clasped in a wai before speaking,

"Master, Khem has left the village." Jett said urgently. Pharan set his coffee cup down beside him before responding,

"And what of it?"

Jett swallowed hard seeing the Reverend's impassive gaze, then continued in a trembling voice, "Master. If he goes out there in that state, he's surely going to die. Please, master, help us." Before Jett could finish his sentence, the Reverend cut in,

"In fact, you shouldn't have brought him here in the first place."

"..."

"I told you, didn't I? Not to meddle in someone else's karma."

"..."

"Do you see now what happens when you interfere in others' affairs, or must I die for you to realize?"

That statement hit like a lightning bolt. Jett swallowed, reflecting on the master's words, his heart trembling with sorrow and regret for his actions.

Indeed, it was Jett who had approached Khem, bringing him here, which led to many people getting troubled and even caused Grandma-Si's death due to Khem's karma. Everything was Jett's fault.

But the thought of stopping everything and letting Khem face death alone felt like a spear piercing his heart.

Khem was a dear friend whom Jett loved and wanted to protect with his life; he wanted to see Khem live a long life with him. Therefore, he couldn't bring himself to stop.

Having thought about it, Jett slowly knelt down and spoke with a tearful voice:

"I'm leaving now, Master."

Jett and Chan shouldered their bags as they left the master's house, but they hadn't even passed the rubber tree forest when they spotted a white

pickup truck parked by the road, with the village chief standing beside it. Seeing this, they approached.

"Uncle village chief, are you going somewhere?" Jett asked softly, not daring to think much of himself at this moment.

"I'm here to pick you up. Aren't you going to look for Khem? There's still time if we go now." Both Jett and Chan's eyes widened, they exchanged a glance before Chan asked further:

"Do you know where Khem is, village chief?" The village chief nodded, not admitting that he actually didn't know when Khem had left the village or where he intended to go, if someone hadn't come to tell him.

"Hmm, hurry, get in the truck, we don't want to miss him." That was all it took for Jett and Chan to rush and jump into the back of the village chief's truck.

The house fell into silence after the two disciples left. What Pharan did next was to drink from a sacred water pot he had blessed earlier, then he retched out the black blood that had accumulated in his chest over the past two days into a basin, repeating this process day and night.

Chapter 31

Khem had been preparing to leave the village since the previous night. He took advantage of the chaos after Grandma-Si's cremation ceremony to slip away quietly, unnoticed. He quickly returned to the master's house to grab his hidden clothes bag in the kitchen and made his way through the forest edge until he reached the road near the village entrance. Fortunately, all the villagers were still at the temple, so no one noticed Khem's departure.

Khem didn't want anyone else to suffer misfortune because of him, especially Jett, Chan, and the master.

Khem gripped his bag's strap tightly, walking along the road away from the village for about two kilometers until he reached a roadside pavilion. He remembered that in the evening, a red pickup taxi would pass by this spot to take passengers to the bus station in the city.

And at six in the evening, this would be the last trip of the day.

Khem didn't wait long before the red pickup taxi arrived. There were no other passengers on the truck, which actually relieved Khem.

Praying that this vehicle would reach its destination safely.

When Jett and Chan climbed onto the back of the village chief's truck, it drove out from the village and headed north. Even though they didn't know where the village chief was taking them, both felt confident that they would definitely find their friend at the end of the journey.

The village chief stopping to wait for them earlier was no coincidence. There was no way he could have known what was about to happen.

This was the master's final act of assistance.

The two all placed their hands in a wai above their heads as the truck passed by the shrine of the local spirit.

Please, sacred spirit, protect and keep my friend safe.

At half past ten, Khem arrived at the bus station safely.

After paying the fare to the driver, Khem hugged his bag and walked to find a seat far from other people. Once he found a spot, he sat down and reflected on everything that had happened, alone.

Throughout Khem's life, he had endured many hardships from a young age. Khem never blamed anyone for all these troubles. He was grateful to have been born into this world and had always tried to live a good life. Although sometimes Khem felt lonely, he had learned to accept it and adapt to being on his own.

Until the day Khem met a friend like Jett.

Jett was hot-tempered, reacting directly with anger when someone wronged him, not one to be taken advantage of. He also had a loud voice as if he'd eaten microphones instead of food, in stark contrast to Khem, whose every word spoken would make everyone stop and listen attentively.

Khem was weak, timid, and not one to fight back, unlike Jett who was always ready for action if someone displeased him. To others, Jett might seem intimidating, but for Khem, he was the best friend he ever had.

Though outwardly Jett might seem like a moving bonfire, he was a fire that could warm you during the coldest times.

Khem had been well-protected by Jett, leading him to believe that this life was worth living to the fullest.

With Chan, even though they hadn't known each other for long, Khem felt as connected to him as he did with Jett. Having Chan nearby always made Khem feel at ease.

Chan was calm, reasonable, often providing what those around him needed without being asked, composed, and communicated more through actions than words, contrasting with Jett like opposite poles.

If Jett was the warm fire, Chan was like the cool water that soothes the soul.

Khem was glad to have met both Jett and Chan. The time spent with them was filled with happiness, which is why he chose to leave quietly, not wanting to burden them with his troubles.

Because this time, it was more than Khem could handle. He was heartbroken to have caused the death of someone as good as Grandma-Si and to have brought pain to the master and the villagers.

Everything was because of him...

When they reached the bus station, Jett and Chan quickly jumped off the truck, went to thank and bid farewell to the village chief, then rushed into the station to look for Khem among the crowd.

Jett ran around frantically while Chan approached the station staff, explaining they were looking for a man about his height, with fair skin and

dark brown hair, showing a picture on his phone of Khem taken during a bai sri su khwan ceremony.

The middle-aged male staff member looked at the picture for a moment before nodding.

"I think I saw him near the restrooms. The bus hasn't left yet, he should still be around here. Go look for him."

"Thank you." Chan said with a wai to the other person before heading to where Jett was standing, anxiously tapping his foot. Once he finished speaking, they went together to look for Khem near the restrooms as directed by the staff.

Khem took a deep breath, looking left and right to decide his next move.

Where would he sleep tonight?

Where would he go tomorrow?

What else was there left to do?

Tomorrow, the university semester will start. Should he go back to studying, or should he return to the monk?

Khem clenched his lips as he felt his eyes start to burn, then wiped away the tears with his arm.

Being alone again felt so unfamiliar...

At that moment, overwhelmed by feelings of emptiness, fear, and confusion, Khem suddenly noticed the tips of two pairs of sneakers that he remembered being washed just a few days ago.

Khem bit his lip to hold back tears, then slowly looked up at his close friends, softly calling out to them,

"Chan, Jett..."

Chan smiled, his face covered in sweat, while Jett reached out to gently tap Khem's forehead with his fist.

"You ran away quite far, didn't you?"

After finishing his sentence, Khem's strained composure began to crack, as he realized he wasn't being haunted by ghosts. The walls of his endurance crumbled along with his clear tears.

"Huh, huhu..."

Jett and Chan moved closer to Khem. Jett pulled Khem into a hug, and Chan reached out to gently pat his shoulder.

Jett took a deep breath, the relief of finding Khem causing his emotions to swing erratically. His heart was still pounding from the sudden joy, making his voice tremble more than usual.

"Listen to me, Khem."

"..."

"No matter what happens in the future, I won't let go of you, ever." Jett wanted to say more, but feeling his tears about to spill, he chose to remain silent.

Regarding Grandma-Si, it wasn't that he wasn't saddened by what happened. He had always felt guilty, knowing that Grandma-Si had once fed him when he was young. His respect, love, and connection to her were not small, but Khem hadn't done anything wrong; if anyone was to blame, it was himself for bringing Khem here.

From the moment he met Khem, Jett had set a goal to help him overcome any bad situations. Until he saw Khem have a bright future and live happily, he would stay by his side, protecting him.

Even if it meant he had to die.

"Don't run away like this again, you understand?" Khem, hearing this, sobbed more, nodding once in agreement, one hand clutching Jett's shirt, the other holding onto Chan's thumb.

"Thank you, thank you so much, Jett, Chan. I really mean it."

Then Chan left Jett alone with Khem, going to buy food and water for all three of them, as none had eaten since the afternoon.

They decided to head back to Bangkok the next day, but before that, Jett had a place he needed to visit. For tonight, they chose to stay at a nearby temple, thinking it would be more comforting than a hotel.

Fortunately, the abbot was kind and compassionate, arranging for the temple boys to set up bedding for them in the sala, in front of the large Buddha statue.

After bathing and changing, they quickly went to bed since they had to travel early the next morning. Before sleep, they didn't forget to chant prayers, asking for divine protection during their slumber. The sleeping arrangement remained as always, with Khem in the middle, flanked by Chan and Jett.

"Jett, where are you taking us tomorrow?" Khem asked. Jett stared at the ceiling of the sala for a moment as if weighing his words before responding.

"To see someone who might be able to help you." Khem pressed his lips together tightly.

"Can't we not go, Jett? I...I don't want to trouble anyone else." Jett shook his head in refusal and reached out to pat Khem's soft hair.

"He'll definitely help. No problem. Trust me, just relax and don't overthink it." Khem took another breath and nodded in obedience.

The three of them didn't talk for long about the next day before exhaustion took over, and they fell asleep.

Unbeknownst to them, the abbot and several senior monks were chanting prayers all night to ward off evil spirits coming from all directions.

The next morning, they quickly got up to wash and brush their teeth. After finishing, they went to pay respects and bid farewell to the abbot. Then they shouldered their bags and waited at the front of the temple for the songthaew.

Jett led Khem and Chan to a nearby sub-district, ringing the bell to get off at the village entrance pavilion. He guided his friends through narrow alleys until they reached a house on stilts surrounded by a low bamboo fence with a sign that read, "Maw Krailert's Residence."

"This is it, let's go in." Jett said before leading Khem and Chan inside.

At that moment, Maw Krailert, who was meditating, suddenly opened his eyes. His sharp gaze narrowed as he looked at the three teenagers approaching.

What do Pharan's disciples want here?

This question was evident in his expression. Jett, who had crawled forward to sit about a meter away, quickly raised his hands in a wai, followed by Chan and Khem.

"Uncle Krai, hello." Jett greeted. Krailert furrowed his brows, nodding before he spoke,

"Why have you come to see me?"

Jett quickly pulled Khem forward and looked back at Uncle Krai, one of the most powerful shamans in the area, and relayed the important parts of their story.

Maw Krailert gave Khem a fleeting glance, already sensing how grave his condition was. Upon hearing the story, he responded with a voice holding back laughter,

"Even your master wouldn't interfere. And you're hoping for help from an outsider like me, huh, Jett?"

Hearing this, Jett quickly started to plead in his usual manner.

"Oh, Uncle Krai, our master is a white magician. He doesn't deal with these matters. In Ubon Ratchathani, the only shaman as skilled as our

master is Uncle Krai." Jett tried his best to flatter, but Uncle Krai remained impassive. Finally, Jett had to resort to his last card.

"I've saved up half a million. I'll give it all to you, Uncle Krai, please help me and my friends." Hearing the sum, Uncle Krai's face finally showed emotion, his eyes gleaming like a predator, his voice menacing enough to instill fear.

"Jett, if you lie, I'll kill you."

Jett nodded earnestly, his gaze serious and unwavering, devoid of any jest. This pleased Uncle Krai, who responded with satisfaction.

"Then you all wait here."

After saying this, he got up and disappeared into the back room, leaving Jett, Khem, and Chan to wait.

Not long after, Uncle Krai returned with a wooden box about an elbow's length, placing it in front of the three young men.

"Here, open it and see." With permission granted, Jett opened the box to see what was inside, his eyes widening at the sight.

"Shit..." Jett exclaimed, quickly covering his mouth, his shocked demeanor making Khem and Chan look at him with confusion.

"What's this, Jett?" Khem asked, his eyes shifting between Jett and the contents of the box, which looked like a charred piece of wood, blackened and covered with thorns like a rosewood tree.

Jett swallowed hard before answering:

"It's called Black Rosewood..."

Black Rosewood looks like an ordinary rosewood on the outside, but its wood is pitch black throughout. The ancients believed it to be a magical tree protected by deities, found in deep forests, taking hundreds of years to grow to be discovered by humans. It's considered a highly potent magical artifact.

If it's a tree where the deity has sacrificed itself and turned to stone, it has the power to protect one from all kinds of dangers, especially from dark magic and evil spirits.

Nowadays, real Black Rosewood is incredibly rare. Its value is immeasurable."

"Uncle Krai, you're really giving it to us?" Jett asked, feeling a bit uncertain due to the value of the item likely exceeding the amount of money he had offered.

Krailert nodded before replying,

"I've been nurturing this piece of ebony for years, but I don't need it anymore. Take it, but don't forget our agreement."

It wasn't just the money that made Krailert agree to help and hand over this family heirloom to the three youths; he was also curious to see if his magical studies could stand up to someone like Pharan.

Having avoided direct confrontation to prevent damage for a long time, this might be a way to determine who was truly more skilled. That was the only reason.

If he could find out, Krailert thought he could die content in this lifetime with no regrets.

Jett clasped his hands in a wai and bowed, followed quickly by Khem and Chan.

"Thank you very much, Uncle Krai."

Jett, Khem, and Chan returned to Bangkok that afternoon by airplane, arriving in just two hours. Both Jett and Chan brought their clothes to Khem's room, planning to stay together until Khem's twentieth birthday in a week.

So, they prepared by stocking up on food and essentials, intending to leave the room as little as possible.

If their plan was correct, in just seven days, the curse and the vengeful spirits from Khem's past life would no longer be able to affect him.

Chapter 32

In the early hours of the night, around one in the morning, after Khem had fallen asleep from exhaustion, Jett woke Chan who was sleeping on the other side of Khem's bed.

"Chan, wake up." Chan opened his eyes, reached for his glasses beside the pillow, and with the light from the balcony which had been left on for the night, he could see Jett's tense face.

"What's up, Khun Jett?"

"Come downstairs with me." Jett whispered back, cautious not to wake Khem. His response made Chan furrow his brows a bit.

"And Khun Khem? Will we leave him sleeping alone?" Jett scanned the room once more for safety, ensuring all sharp objects and potential weapons, including pencils, had been removed and locked away in the apartment's locker since evening.

The balcony glass door from which Khem had once nearly jumped, as well as the bathroom door, were securely locked with padlocks. Not to mention the numerous protective amulets Jett and Chan had written and plastered on all four walls, and the legendary sacred object from Uncle Krai, laid with jasmine flowers on the wardrobe near the door, potent enough to make any resident spirits in the apartment hide away, truly justifying the half-million baht investment.

Despite all these precautions, Jett still felt uneasy.

After making sure everything was secure, he nodded.

"Yeah, he'll be fine in here. Are you coming or not? I'm asking." Chan sighed, clearly tired of Jett's habits.

Jett wanted to kick Chan but held back, mindful of the steel amulet the monk had given him, which he wore as a constant necklace.

Unable to do more than glare, Jett quickly got up, leading Chan out of the room with his satchel full of items.

Before leaving, he didn't forget to lock the door from the outside with another key, confident that Khem wouldn't sleepwalk outside.

After locking up, they descended from the fourth floor to the ground level. Walking until they reached the front gate, ensuring no one was around, Jett opened his satchel and took out twelve slender rattan canes, each about a ruler's length, handing them to Chan before saying:

"Take these rattan sticks and plant them in the ground, half a building's width apart around the perimeter; I'll tie the sacred thread myself." Chan was still groggy from sleep, but eventually couldn't help but ask,

"Why do we need to do this?" Jett, irritated, pursed his lips but then remembered that Chan couldn't see what he could, so he explained,

"This apartment doesn't have a spirit house. Spirits roam freely here. I've noticed it since the first time I came to visit Khem."

"..."

"We got something powerful, sure, but I'm not entirely sure about it, especially with Khem's birthday approaching, it's going to get dangerous. Since yesterday, I've felt like I'm being watched all the time."

"..."

"Khem's karma spirits are already strong enough. If more come from elsewhere, you and I won't be able to handle it. Even the ebony wood, which has been enchanted for years, might not hold up."

"Let's ask the apartment owner to conduct a spirit house ceremony tomorrow, but tonight we need to perform a protective ritual to buy us some time. Otherwise, I won't be able to sleep. Understand?"

Chan nodded, turned around, and went to carry out his task. Jett, seeing this, picked up a roll of sacred thread and followed to tie it to the rattan sticks Chan was planting around the building.

Once the sacred thread formed a square perimeter, Jett sat down on the ground, took out a gold plate from his bag, placed it on the ground, followed by a silver bowl, then took out a bottle of holy water from the temple where they had stayed overnight, which Jett had requested from the abbot.

He opened the bottle and poured the holy water into the silver bowl almost to the brim, then placed a small Buddha image into it, wrapping the sacred thread around the gold plate three times. Meanwhile, Chan went to pick jasmine flowers from beside the wall to use in the offering.

Jett lit nine incense sticks, holding them in a wai at his chest, while Chan knelt beside him, lighting five candles and placing them on the remaining

space of the gold plate. They both closed their eyes, clasped their hands, and began to chant in reverence to the Triple Gem.

As soon as they started chanting, the lights around the building flickered on and off, followed by gusts of wind coming from all directions.

The incense smoke wavered with the wind, and suddenly, all five candles went out.

The putrid smell of ghosts crept into their noses, wafting around the area. Outside the protective lines, numerous dark shadows appeared, including both children and adults, from young to old. Some looked normal, others were twisted and distorted, moving closer yet unable to cross the protective boundary.

Jett's ears heard screams mixed with laughter that seemed to mock them.

Cursing, wailing, and cries as if on the verge of death filled the air, all intended to break the concentration of the young men, but both Chan and Jett maintained their focus.

"Pahuneyo, Dakkhineyyo, Anchalikaraniyo"

"..."

"Anuttarang, Punyakhattang, Lokassati"

After the chant, Jett placed incense beside the building and returned to kneel in his original spot, hands clasped in prayer.

"My name is Jett, surname, Nakantakul."

"My name is Chanwit, surname, Charoenkiatprecha." After stating their full names, they spoke together:

"Also, Khemjira, Chantharapisut. We three respectfully offer our homage to all the Buddhas, the Dhamma, and the noble Sangha throughout the cosmos, to the Brahma, deities, and to all our masters. Please bless this holy water for us to protect us from all misfortune and malevolence. Amen."

As their prayer ended, the protective lines and the golden tray suddenly glowed with a golden light, though Jett and Chan, not yet at the highest level of training, couldn't see it. What they felt was a warm breeze that cleared away the stench of the spirits, and their ears were no longer assaulted by the disturbing noises. The dark shadows that had crowded around retreated, leaving emptiness in their wake.

Jett then took out a jasmine garland from his satchel, dipping it into the sacred water. He had Chan help carry the tray as they walked around the building, sprinkling the holy water to complete the ritual.

"Alright, let's go back to sleep." Jett said, yawning so hard his eyes watered, before leading Chan back inside.

Upon returning, seeing Khem still fast asleep, they both felt relieved and quickly settled back into their own sleeping spots, falling into a deep sleep.

That entire night passed peacefully as they had prayed for.

The following day, Jett, representing the group, negotiated with the apartment owner to set up a spirit house. Although the owner followed a different religion, Jett managed to persuade him by briefly explaining the problems and offering to cover all expenses themselves. The owner agreed, providing his name, surname, and birth details to Jett for selecting the auspicious time.

Jett combined the owner's birth details with Khem's to find a suitable time. Fortunately, they found an auspicious time three days before Khem's birthday.

During those three days, everything remained calm until the day of the ceremony. Jett ordered the necessary items for the ritual from a delivery company to avoid going outside, and also called a Brahmin priest known to Chan to perform the ceremony.

Since there wasn't enough space beside the building to place the spirit house, they decided to set it up on the rooftop.

On this day, the sky was overcast, and the atmosphere was not conducive to the ceremony, despite it being the best day of the month. The priest felt an uncomfortable pressure in his chest, reluctant to proceed, sensing as if someone's malevolent gaze was upon them continuously.

However, having accepted a significant sum of money, he felt compelled to continue despite his discomfort.

Jett, Chan, and Khem also felt uneasy. Throughout the ceremony, Khem kept looking around, while Jett and Chan continuously chanted protective mantras without pause, even though nothing seemed to interfere with the ceremony.

Finally, the spirit house ceremony was successfully completed. The Brahmin priest hastily excused himself after finishing his duties, and Jett, Chan, and Khem returned to their room.

It seemed their worries might have been self-induced, as after the ceremony, the sky cleared up, the sun shone brightly, and the atmosphere no longer felt gloomy like it did in the morning. It also appeared that the spirits

that had been lurking in the apartment had vanished as if they never existed, something all three could sense.

This meant that setting up the spirit house to invite the guardian spirits had worked wonderfully. Even though their bank accounts were nearly depleted from purchasing the items and hiring the Brahmin priest, it was an investment well made.

When they felt the situation was safe, Jett and Chan began to take turns going out more often. Whether it was to go to school, return home, or fetch delicious food to bring back for Khem, with Khem always staying in the room with one of them, not going anywhere. Three days had passed safely without incident.

Jett glanced at the clock while the three of them were watching a movie on the bed; in just a few hours, it would be Khem's birthday. But he felt they couldn't let their guard down until the very last moment tonight. Jett and Chan decided to stay awake all night watching over Khem.

"Damn, it's like clockwork; he shuts down at 11 PM sharp." Jett muttered to Chan, explaining the situation while Khem was leaning against his shoulder. Chan, on the other side of Khem, looked away from the laptop screen to see Khem's eyes fluttering shut, then helped adjust him to lie comfortably on the pillow.

Lately, at 11 PM, Khem would fall into a deep sleep and not wake until morning, which was good because he would sleep without nightmares or sleepwalking, which had been a concern.

Jett watched the clock for a moment before announcing, "Let's go, Chan, it's time for the chants." Chan nodded, closed the laptop, placed it on the bedside table, and followed Jett to sit for chanting. Jett had placed a Buddha statue on a chair, with the Black Rosewood box on the floor beside it.

Jett lit two candles, placing one on either side of the Buddha statue, opting not to light incense to avoid disturbing Khem's sleep. Chan turned off all the lights in the room, leaving the candles to provide illumination.

Jett and Chan sat facing each other with the Buddha statue and the wooden box between them. They raised their hands in a prayer gesture and began chanting, starting with the homage to the Triple Gem according to the scriptures, followed by the Itipiso chant, which they recited one hundred and eight times, as taught by the monk for enhancing one's destiny, warding off spirits, and strengthening the mind.

The two voices blended together in a soft, rhythmic chant within the room:

"Itipiso, Bhagava, Arahant, SammasamBuddho, Vijjacaranasampanno..."

The hour hand of the clock moved steadily until it reached ten, but during the one hundred and seventh recitation of the Itipiso by Jett and Chan, everything turned pitch black.

At that moment, Khem got up from the bed, his feet slowly touching the floor, and he stepped quietly past Jett and Chan, leaving the room.

At fifty-five minutes past nine in the evening, Chan suddenly jolted awake. The light from the balcony illuminated the room enough to see Jett sleeping on the other side. Chan's eyes widened as he turned to look at the bed, only to find that where Khem should have been sleeping was now empty.

"Khun Jett, Khun Jett!" Chan woke Jett with a louder and more urgent voice than usual, driven by fear. Jett woke up startled by Chan's shout.

Their eyes met for just a moment, and the panic in Chan's eyes made Jett immediately turn to check the bed.

"Shit!" Jett sprang up and ran out of the room, not even pausing to look at the knee he scraped when he stumbled.

Breathing heavily, Jett looked left and right before deciding to head downstairs, but before he could take a step, Chan grabbed his arm.

Chan shook his head and said,

"No. Not downstairs." Something told Chan that the direction Jett was about to take was wrong. Jett was about to ask what made Chan think that, but past experiences had taught him to trust Chan's instincts without question. He then led Chan in the opposite direction.

Jett ran up the emergency stairs to the rooftop with Chan following closely behind. The first thing they saw was the newly set up spirit house from a few days ago, now turned into a dilapidated shrine covered in cobwebs and emitting a foul, nauseating smell.

"Khem!!" Jett shouted when he saw Khem standing with his back to them on the edge of the rooftop wall.

Jett's heart pounded harder with each passing second, his legs shaking as he took cautious steps forward, trying to get as close to Khem as possible. In contrast, Chan moved slowly and steadily behind Jett, silently devising ways to save Khem.

But it seemed they were too late.

The wind blew past, sending a chill through the air, and Khem turned back to face Jett and Chan.

At fifty-nine minutes past nine in the evening, Khem's eyes, which were once a clear brown, had turned completely black without a trace of white. His lips slowly formed into a smile, and he spoke briefly to the two,

"I'm taking him."

With that statement, Khem's body leaned back and fell off the rooftop.

Chapter 33

Pharan woke up in the pitch dark, feeling his heart pounding irregularly. Sweat beaded on his forehead, and his body was tense all over.

He sat up, gradually relaxing when he realized it was just a dream.

Pharan understood that the dream he had was not an ordinary one; the ancients would call it an omen.

Not only did he see what might happen in the future, but he also saw what had happened to Grandma-Si.

To verify once more, Pharan got out of bed and went to the central area for rituals. He lit a lantern, placed it aside, and took out paper and a pen to write down Grandma-Si's name, surname, and birth date.

After calculating the numbers, he found that what he saw in his dream was true.

Grandma-Si had run out of merit one day before being possessed by Khem's karma ghost, which meant she had passed away peacefully due to her lifespan, not murdered as he had thought.

With the truth now known, Pharan put the paper and pen back and softly spoke:

"If you haven't gone anywhere, please show yourself."

At that moment, the shadow of someone slowly stepped into the area lit by the lantern's light, approaching steadily until standing just one meter away from Pharan.

The visitor was a tall man with long hair flowing down to his waist, his upper body bare, wearing only a black traditional Thai loincloth with gold-threaded patterns, the cloth trailing on the ground like a snake's tail.

A gentle breeze carried the scent of damp earth throughout the area. Pharan knelt, bowing once, then looked up into the amber eyes he had seen not long ago.

"Why have you come to help this time?" Pharan asked the figure known as the forest and mountain spirit.

Phuchong met Pharan's gaze for a moment before responding in a low, hoarse voice,

"Consider this as repaying the kindness you once showed me in a past life."

With that statement, certain memories from an ancient lifetime flowed into Pharan's mind.

A thousand years ago, in a past life, Pharan and Phuchong were born as naga princes of the Kanha-Kotama lineage, blue serpents dwelling in the subterranean realm. They were both nagas tasked with guarding the treasury gates of the underwater city.

Pharan was a naga known for his calm demeanor, deep wisdom, and spiritual prowess through diligent practice. Phuchong, on the other hand, was hot-tempered and arrogant, though naturally gifted with immense abilities.

One day, Phuchong's son got into a heated argument with a garuda at the human city, leading to a fierce battle where Phuchong's son was gravely injured.

Fueled by anger, Phuchong stole a powerful weapon with the capacity to destroy entire cities from the treasury without Pharan's knowledge. He used it against the garuda, causing widespread destruction across the Himavanta land, leading to the death of many deities. When the news reached the ears of Lord Paranimmitavasavatti Maharaja, the ruler of the highest celestial realm, he called an assembly of the gods to address the incident, including Phuchong, his son, the offending garuda, and Pharan, who was summoned as a key witness.

Both the nagas and garudas defended their own fiercely, leaving no room for compromise. Ultimately, Lord Paranimmitavasavatti Maharaja, the supreme ruler of the Chakammavacara heaven, decided on the highest punishment for Phuchong, his son, and the garuda: the destruction of their spirits, or the divine equivalent of execution. Once the spirit was destroyed, there would be no rebirth, no cycle of existence, a fate worse than death for a divine being who could otherwise be reborn as a human.

When no one would admit fault, obliterating all involved was deemed the just punishment for all parties, as they were all responsible for the severe damages.

Upon hearing the verdict, Pharan pleaded with Lord Paranimmitavasavatti Maharaja to reconsider the punishment. He confessed that he had suggested Phuchong steal the weapon because of his own deep-

seated resentment towards the garudas. He wanted to use Phuchong as an instrument of revenge.

He argued that Phuchong acted out of love for his son; any father seeing his child on the brink of death would naturally feel anger and seek retribution, not with the intent of rebellion.

Therefore, he requested that Lord Pranimittavasavatti Maharaja, the supreme ruler, punish Phuchong by transforming him into a large black snake to practice penance in the deep forest of the human world, with only a small pool of water to coil around as his abode. He must accumulate merit for five hundred years before he could transform back into a Naga and return to the underworld.

As for himself, Pharan, he asked to die as a Naga and be reborn as a human, destined to struggle and sacrifice for the benefit of many in every life, to atone for the losses incurred this time.

Lord Pranimittavasavatti Maharaja agreed with Pharan's words, even though he knew the truth.

Despite being born from a mud pit, Pharan, through his diligent practice, had shone with a golden aura and gained powers equal to that of the highest Nagas in just a few hundred years. How could he be one with a dark heart? All his actions were to protect his friend Phuchong and his son, making him truly virtuous.

With no objections, Lord Pranimittavasavatti Maharaja altered the punishment for all involved to practice penance in the human world as he saw fit, but only Pharan received this blessing:

"No matter what life, may you be loved by both humans and deities."

This sequence of events was why Phuchong reached out to help Pharan now, repaying the favor for when Pharan had once saved his and his son's lives.

Understanding everything, Pharan bowed again in gratitude. Although they were once equals, that was not the case now.

"I can help you this much. The rest depends on karma. Good luck." Phuchong said before slowly fading into the darkness. Pharan opened his eyes again and realized he had been meditating, still holding the paper with Grandma-Si's name, birth date, and surname, understanding that what had just happened was Phuchong's doing, as he didn't want to reveal his form as a large black snake.

Afterward, Pharan stood up to his full height, walked into his bedroom, took out a black square bag from atop the wardrobe, filled it with necessities, and locked it shut.

He removed his sleep shirt, placing it in the laundry basket, then put on a long-sleeved navy blue shirt from the wardrobe, followed by tailored black slacks, a matching leather belt, black socks, and polished black shoes.

Once dressed properly, he opened the bedside drawer and took out an old-fashioned button phone, placing it in his left trouser pocket, a brown leather wallet in the right, and finally, a wristwatch before stepping out of the bedroom, down the stairs to where his beloved bicycle was parked.

"Hoong!" The spotted dog barked as if it knew where its master intended to go, quickly getting up from under the bamboo bed and half-walking, half-running after the master's bicycle.

On days when the master had errands that took him away, the spotted dog would relocate to the village to scrounge for food among the villagers while waiting for his return.

The master wheeled his bicycle into the chief's compound, but today, the courtyard was crowded with many people.

Everyone in the village was aware of the great and dangerous journey the master was about to undertake, foretold by a dream of a large black snake appearing and speaking of future events.

This meant that the village might no longer have the priest to protect and guide them.

The villagers gathered to see him off, setting out a five-tiered tray of offerings on a mat in the center of the courtyard, along with various items. A soft, cushioned seat was placed beside it. Upon seeing the master arrive, the chief hurried over to invite him to sit. The rest of the villagers sat on the ground, forming a circle around him.

Both the master and the villagers raised their hands in prayer, palms together at chest level. This was a ceremony called "sut khwan." performed to send off someone on a long journey, blessing them for safety and protection from all dangers.

Today, Grandma-Si was not there to lead the sut khwan chants. So, all the villagers had to join in the recitation themselves:

"Shri, Shri, hand, the mother's good hand, Shri, Shri, today is a good day, a day of divine luck, we adorn with blessings, and so we invite the spirit with these words, come here, oh spirit..."

"..."

"Thirty-two spirits come to you, ninety-two spirits come to your home, gather in your flesh, continue in your lineage, you have patterned cloths, you have variegated mats, boiled eggs for sustenance, betel nuts and fruits, liquor and sugarcane, all these we offer to you, rings of gold and silver, many things to please the heart, betel nuts to chew red, sweet potatoes, sugarcane pieces, fragrant moon oil to anoint, floral garlands for your hair, sweet-smelling wreath, fully bloomed flowers to adorn, thus we invite your spirit."

"May you live well and in happiness, may you not suffer from illness, may the forest spirits not come near, may evil spirits not approach, may the power protect you, may your spirits in every part of your body stay with you until you reach the age of five thousand rains. So be it, five hundred rains, may you have life and prosperity."

When the chanting ended, Pharan raised his hands in a respectful gesture, softly saying 'Sadhu' before standing up to allow the villagers to come and tie sacred threads on his wrist, nodding to accept their blessings, and absorbing all their good wishes.

Auntie Mai, who had been Grandma-Si's friend since their youth, was the last to tie the thread on his wrist, finishing with a gentle pat on the back of Pharan's hand.

"Master, remember that it's not just you who loves and cares for us. We love and care for you too, take good care of yourself, and come back soon, we'll have food and water ready for you."

Pharan nodded, responding in a soft, low voice, "Yes, Auntie Mai."

With time being limited, the ceremony proceeded quickly. Soon, Pharan's right wrist was full of the villagers' sacred threads, and he stepped onto Uncle Chai's pickup truck heading straight to the airport to catch the last flight of the night.

Pharan arrived in Bangkok by nearly nine in the evening, carrying a black toolbox filled with his professional tools and items. Not knowing where to find the people he needed to meet, he started by taking a taxi to the university where all three of them had studied.

Pharan found a quiet spot to meditate and sent out his spirit to search for traces of Jett, Chan, and Khem. However, the city was full of people and spirits, with sights, sounds, and scents all mixed together, making it

impossible to distinguish one from another, complicating the search for where the three might currently reside.

Things would have been easier if Pharan had decided to call Jett, but since it was very late, he didn't want to disturb anyone's sleep.

It took him over an hour to sense the presence of the three children. Once he knew where they were, he continued walking down the sidewalk.

Along the way, he encountered stray dogs. They often came to sniff and follow him; from one, it became two, then four. Soon, there was an odd sight for passersby: a strange-looking man being followed by a large pack of dogs, yet whenever anyone tried to take a photo, they couldn't focus clearly on the mysterious man's face, leaving all images blurry and curious.

Pharan walked until he reached an apartment that was neither too old nor too new, about five stories tall, located right by the road, but at this hour, hardly anyone was out wandering.

After confirming his destination, he approached an uncle selling skewered meatballs who was dozing off on a stool beside his cart. Pharan tapped three times before the man slowly opened his eyes.

"What would you like, young man?" The vendor asked. Pharan took out his wallet from his trouser pocket, handed over a thousand baht note, and said,

"I'll take everything, but please share it with them."

"Them" referred to the almost twenty stray dogs now standing behind him. The vendor, eager to pack up for the night, nodded quickly, and when the new customer declined the change, his smile widened even more. He took the money and blessed Pharan generously.

Once Pharan left, the meatball seller did his duty by distributing all the remaining meatballs to the stray dogs as instructed.

Pharan crossed the street, entering the apartment building, and as he got closer, the scent of something potent grew stronger.

It was the scent of the formidable spirit, Madam-Ramphueng.

Pharan climbed the stairs up to the fourth floor, stopped in front of room number 407, reached for the doorknob, muttered a quick incantation, and the previously locked door opened.

The scene before him was all too familiar: one child on the bed, two guarding on either side like sentinels.

However, it was not the time to feel sympathetic towards the sight, as there were more important things to do.

A tall figure stepped around Jett's body to the side of the bed, then gently sat down on the open floor space.

The thick hand was placed on Khem's smooth forehead, closing his eyes to search for Khem's spirit that had drifted away from his body.

The reason Khem was in a deep sleep after nine in the evening was not because he felt relaxed enough to sleep peacefully, but because his spirit had drifted away from his body.

The sharp face leaned down, whispering softly on the back of his hand that was resting on Khem's forehead.

"Khemjira"

"..."

"You can come back now."

At that moment, Khem found himself lost in the darkness once again. This was not the first time Khem found himself in such a dark and cold place. Since returning from Ubon Ratchathani, Khem often ended up here every night, and the longer it went on, the more time it took to find a way out.

Khem didn't dare tell Jett and Chan about this; he knew well how much they worried and how much they had suffered, sacrificing so much to help him escape from this wretched fate.

Khem didn't want to cause them any more trouble. He was determined to struggle and live on his own, to honor the loss that had occurred and the efforts of Jett, Chan, and many others who had helped him all along.

But today, he felt extremely exhausted.

Why is surviving so difficult?

Khem pondered this every day, every moment.

Sometimes, he felt that leaving peacefully would be better than being a burden to others.

It's so tiring...

Khem had decided to stop looking for a way out of there, but suddenly, he saw a golden light flickering in the distance.

Khem's heart began to beat faster and faster as he felt his back grow hot, as if being stared at with resentful eyes.

Khem's ears picked up the sound of many footsteps rapidly approaching. Although he couldn't see them, his heart was filled with fear, scared that they might catch up and grab him.

The human instinct to fear death propelled Khem to run towards a distant light, as if it were a safe haven in this moment.

In the final second, someone's hand nearly grabbed him, but just then, Khem's clear brown eyes snapped open.

Breathing heavily, the light from the balcony poured into the room, allowing Khem to clearly see the face of someone he never thought he'd see again.

"Master..." Khem murmured softly, his eyes growing hot with tears.

"Hmm." came the response, accompanied by a damp cloth pressed against his temple, and tears slowly began to trickle down from the corners of his eyes.

Khem gripped the priest's hand against his chest and asked with a trembling voice,

"What are you doing here, Master?"

Pharan looked into those clear, round eyes he hadn't seen in days for a moment before gently wiping away the tears with his other hand, responding in a low, concerned voice,

"You must continue to live."

"..."

"We have to be together in this lifetime, no matter what our status is."

Chapter 34

Upon hearing these words, Khem slowly let out a cry, and seeing the master face, hearing those words, his heart ached even more, shaking his head and saying,

"Why [sniff] why do you want me to keep living when you don't even feel the same way about me, huh?"

"..."

"Master, you told me you didn't want to be involved, told me to give up on you, didn't you? Now that it's come to this, why won't you let me go?"

"..."

"Until now, I've been trying, but now I'm tired, master."

"..."

"Now, I don't want to live anymore [sob]"

A multitude of emotions swirling in his chest made Khem express his frustration without fear, because even though he felt happy at the first sight of the master, the more he thought about it, the less he understood why the master would do this.

Why say this now, when he no longer needed it?

Pharan understood the feelings Khem was going through at that moment, so he slowly lifted the slender body into an embrace.

The cool, familiar scent, the warmth from the body that Khem had longed for all this time, gradually permeated into Khem's heart.

In the end, he couldn't resist the overwhelming feelings in his chest, the memories of past lives where they were separated, which gave birth to the desire to hold onto this embrace once more. These thoughts deepened with every moment, making it impossible for him to resist, causing his tightly clenched small hands to gradually relax, and instead, they reached up to grip the shirt of the other in response, though still with a mixture of fear and hesitation.

"Master..."

"Sorry for making you cry."

"..."

"But there won't be any more of that after this."

"..."

"Right now, I can't say much, except that I want you to trust me."

"..."

"No matter what happens, I will do everything to make sure we are together again." Pharan finished, then moved back slightly. He lifted Khem's chin with his slender fingers so their eyes met, their noses almost touching.

The feeling inside was hard to put into words, but Khem felt warm and safe...

"Okay?" Pharan asked in a whisper.

Khem bit his lip as tears still welled up in his eyes.

"But what about Grandma-Si and..."

Pharan shook his head, not waiting for Khem to finish his sentence, quickly correcting the misunderstanding.

"Grandma-Si passed away due to her age, not because she was killed. Her spirit was just being used by that ghost." What Pharan saw in his dream was that Grandma-Si had been suffering from a serious illness for a long time. She didn't tell the villagers because she didn't want to be a burden, and she knew her time was limited. Before she passed, she made traditional sweets to distribute among the villagers and cleaned her house.

"As for Thong and Ek, they've been dead for a long time. I should have let them go when Grandpa died, but I kept them around because I wanted to use them." Pharan explained.

"..."

"You don't need to feel sad; just think that they've been released to where they should be."

While saying this, Pharan gently wiped away Khem's tears.

Khem's eyes widened in shock at what he heard, as he had always thought Grandma-Si died because of a vengeful spirit due to his actions. He asked with a shaky, uncertain voice,

"Is that really true, Master? Grandma-Si wasn't really killed?"

Pharan moved his hand to softly wipe away more tears before nodding in affirmation, "Hmm."

Khem covered his face with both hands and cried out in relief. Although he was saddened by Grandma-Si's sudden departure without a chance to say

goodbye, it was better than thinking he had caused such a good person to suffer a tragic end in her last days as he had mistakenly believed.

As for Ekk and Thong, even though they had moved on to their rightful place, these events would remain etched in Khem's heart for the rest of his life. If he still had breath, Khem would remember the moments they helped him until the day he died.

But right now, there was something more important that Khem couldn't overlook, and that was the person right in front of him...

If you say that Ekk and Thong had left since that day, it means that the master has been alone all this time, hasn't he?

Khem slowly sniffed, wiping his tears to look at the master more closely.

"Are you okay now, master? I remember that day..." Khem swallowed, not daring to meet the calm, steady gaze of the master due to his own trembling.

That day, Khem saw bloodstains on the master's shirt, as well as drops of blood scattered along the hallway of the house.

Jett had said that the master must have been cursed, which caused the bleeding, and that's why he was late in helping everyone, leading to the sad incident.

Pharan didn't want to tell Khem that his body still bore much pain. He simply pressed his forehead against Khem's smooth, clear forehead, gently transferring warmth.

"I'm fine, just waiting for your answer."

"..."

"So, do you still want to live on together?" That sentence was like a thick rope dropped into the deep pit of darkness where Khem was, and he didn't hesitate to grab onto it.

This time, Khem would fight on once more.

One hand still clung tightly to the master's shirt, Khem answered with a slight nod.

Time seemed to pause momentarily as the master's gaze focused on Khem's lips. The sharp nose brushed past the clear cheek, moving closer to the lips, making Khem's heart beat faster.

Until...

"Khem, don't!"

Jett, in a nightmare, shouted and sat up suddenly, startling Khem. Pharan could only let out a soft sigh and move away with an expressionless face as

if nothing had happened.

"You go change your clothes, wear something warm. We need to travel tonight."

"Where are we going, master?"

"You'll find out soon enough even if I don't tell you."

Khem nodded in acknowledgment and went to follow the instructions, opening the wardrobe to grab a long-sleeved shirt and long pants before heading into the bathroom. Once the bathroom door was closed, Pharan released the spell that kept Jett in a deep sleep. He then opened his black box to take out a stainless steel tray, using it to knock hard on Jett's head, who was still dozing off, causing a loud clang.

Jett woke up with a start from his dream, immediately feeling a sharp pain across his forehead which made him clutch his head in pain.

"Ow, crap, who did that!" Jett quickly turned to see who it was, only to find himself staring in shock at someone he didn't expect to see here. He even slapped his own face to check if he was dreaming, but the person in front of him didn't disappear, leaving him almost speechless.

"Ma-Ma-Ma-Master!" Pharan just looked at Jett without saying anything.

"..."

"How did you get here, Master...Shit! Khem!" But seeing his friend lose his composure just because he couldn't see Khem nearby, Pharan used the tray again to snap Jett back to his senses.

"Ouch, why did you hit me, Master?" Jett asked with a pained voice, rubbing the spot where he was hit.

"Your friend is in the bathroom. How many times have I told you not to lose your mind?"

Because of this, spirits like Madam-Ramphueng could easily approach Khem...

Pharan thought to himself without speaking out loud.

When Jett was reminded of his constant flaw since childhood, he could only give a sheepish smile and quickly raised his hands in a respectful gesture above his head.

"Sorry, Master."

Pharan just said that and put the tray back into the box, then stood up to his full height and left the room.

Jett, still scratching his head in confusion, knew he had to follow Master's instructions. He intended to wake Chan, but Chan had already

woken up, sitting up and folding his bedding.

"I was so startled I woke up when I heard the tray, I guess."

Jett, in front of the house, spoke with a red, flushed face.

"Damn, I had been kicking for so long, why hadn't you gotten up yet!"

"Think that just because I'm awake, you'll be safe? Stop complaining and go change your clothes." Chan said calmly before getting up to attend to his own business. Jett gritted his teeth in anger but could do nothing, (again), because Khem had already come out of the bathroom.

"Uh, where did the master go, Jett?" Khem asked while looking around. Jett then pointed upwards.

"Roof. Just wait a moment to change your clothes."

It didn't take long for Jett, Khem, and Chan to reach the roof. The sight they saw was the master standing in front of the spirit house. Near the ground, there were two pound hammers lying around. All three of them hurried towards the master without delay.

However, the closer they got, the more they were hit by an unpleasant smell, and they saw the condition of the spirit house, which now looked dark and dilapidated despite being set up just a few days ago.

"Damn, this shrine was just set up two days ago, wasn't it, master?" Jett exclaimed in shock, not unlike Chan and Khem. Pharan nodded as if to confirm that he knew. He had seen everything in the vision created by Phu Chong.

If he hadn't come today, the next night would have been when Khem would have fallen backward from here.

"This shrine wasn't used to invite a deity to reside, or if it was, no one came, so it ended up calling for wandering spirits instead."

"..."

All three of them, Jett, Khem, and Chan, swallowed hard. Pharan continued to explain what he had seen in the vision.

"Now it's not a spirit house, but a ghost gate that connects to Madam Ramphueng's dimension. You two help to destroy it."

Jett and Chan knew well who the two people he referred to were, so they stepped forward to pick up the pound hammers that the master had prepared.

With such heavy hammers, if Khem tried to lift one, his bones would likely break.

The wind howled as it passed through, causing Jett and Chan to immediately rush in and start smashing everything in sight. While breaking things, they chanted incantations to increase their strength beyond normal. Soon enough, the shrine was nothing but ruins.

Then, Pharan took out a bottle of holy water from his bag, stepped forward, and poured it over the debris. Black smoke rose, emitting a nauseating stench that made Jett and Chan turn away.

They still had a lot to learn before they could get used to this.

Once the cleansing was done, Pharan turned to Jett and Chan to give them further instructions.

"From now on, we need to split up. You two go back to Khem's hometown to look for something that's been passed down through generations. I don't know what it is, but I believe it's what's keeping the family's vengeful spirit tied to this world. Once you find it, perform a cleansing ritual, then have it burned by the crematorium." Jett and Chan took a deep breath and nodded in unison.

"And where will you be going, Master?"

"I can't tell you yet. Once you finish your task, come back here and wait."

"..."

"Be very careful." Jett and Chan nodded again. While waiting for the priest to pack up, they discussed the details with Khem about the route to take and who to seek out.

"Jett, Chan, be careful." Khem said with a trembling voice, his eyes brimming with tears. Seeing this, Jett softened, pulling Khem into a hug and rocking him gently. Chan also patted Khem's head soothingly.

"This is nothing; for our bright future, I can do this. Don't worry about everything; it will turn out fine."

Khem nodded, then turned to hug Chan.

"Please look after Jett, Chan."

"Khun Khem, don't worry. Take care of yourself too." Chan replied softly, and Khem nodded in acknowledgment.

"Uh, thank you."

If Khem had one wish left, it would be that they could all meet again.

Chapter 35

At almost one in the morning, the four of them parted ways at the base of the apartment building. Jett drove off in his personal car with Chan, heading straight to Kanchanaburi, Khem's hometown.

Once Jett and Chan's car was out of sight, the master, standing beside Khem with a black toolbox in hand, quickly pulled out an old-style flip phone and dialed someone. The name that came out of the master's mouth was one Khem had never heard before.

"Khachen, come pick me up." The master said before his fine eyebrows furrowed together, his dark eyes glancing briefly at Khem who was watching with wide eyes, then he looked away and responded.

"..."

"I can't wait."

Khem whispered, feeling guilty for causing trouble for others again. His face turned red as a loud moan of a man and woman came through the phone.

"..."

"Is it that hard to just put it in your pants?"

"..."

"Apartment...in the alley..."

"..."

"Okay." Khem didn't know what the other person replied, but it was enough to make the master agree and hang up the call.

Pharan put the phone back into his pants pocket as before, then reached out to take one of Khem's hands, which was tightly gripping the other, showing signs of stress and guilt.

"It's my friend; this is nothing I can't handle." Said Pharan with a deep voice as Khem looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. Hearing this and feeling the priest's hand holding his for the first time, a warm feeling surged in Khem's chest.

Khem smiled with gratitude and nodded in acceptance.

"Yes, Master."

They didn't have to wait long before a luxury two-seater sports car pulled up alongside the sidewalk in front of Khem and the master. The driver's side window slowly rolled down, revealing the handsome face of the car's owner leaning down.

The man had dark hair, a tall, slender build, wearing a slightly disheveled long-sleeved brown shirt. His gray-blue eyes sparkled with a gentle, almost teasing curve as he made eye contact with Pharan, accompanied by a faint smile that seemed to beckon anyone who looked at it to fall in love.

Khem quickly averted his eyes, feeling like a small mouse being watched by a lion. He raised his hands to greet him, but before he could say anything, he was startled by the sound of Pharan tapping on the car's roof.

Ping!

"Why did you bring this car?" Pharan asked, frowning. Khachen blinked innocently at the question.

"You didn't tell me how many people were coming." He replied. Pharan felt the urge to open the door and kick him out, but Khachen had always been an irritant to him, even though they hadn't seen each other in nearly three years.

This expensive car was seldom driven out by Khachen from his garage for others to see, and Pharan knew well that Khachen had intentionally brought it to annoy him.

Pharan didn't like supercars, nor did he appreciate overly expensive things. Though he never explicitly expressed this, their long-standing friendship from school days made it easy for Khachen to guess.

But he could swear, Khachen had no idea that his best friend was bringing along this cute-looking young man.

"Or do you want me to go change the car?"

Pharan checked his wristwatch, then shook his head. Waiting longer would be too late. He opened the door, placed his box on the back seat floor where there was still some space, sat down, and then turned to tell the still-dazed Khem,

"Get in." Khem looked around inside the car with confusion, not noticing the facial expression of the driver who was looking out the window, before asking hesitantly,

"Uh, where exactly?" The response he received was the master spreading his legs slightly to make space, pointing to that area and saying,

"Right here." Khem suppressed the heat on his face and his embarrassment, taking a deep breath to gather his wits, because now was not the time for such frivolous thoughts. He then slowly maneuvered his body into the car, almost hitting his head on the top of the door frame. Fortunately, the master's hand cushioned the impact.

"Thank you." Khem said in a voice quieter than a whisper as the master's strong hand helped him sit properly. Even though there were only two seats, the interior was spacious enough to not feel cramped.

The master's body was very warm, Khem realized that day.

The car started moving when the door was closed and the driver knew the destination.

After sitting for a while, Khem suddenly felt he was being watched by the person next to him. He turned to meet the other's gaze, only to receive a teasing, caring smile in return.

But before he could blush, the master's thick hand lifted to cover his face and turned him to face the window instead.

"Sleep." The master simply said, and Khem's bright eyes soon grew heavy and closed.

"I wouldn't believe it until I see it with my own eyes." Khachen's voice broke the silence, his eyes still sparkling with teasing that he didn't bother to hide, but Pharan, who was resting his eyes, didn't respond.

Khachen was used to Pharan's temperament, having known him since vocational school days, and it had always been like this. While others might see Pharan as frightening and dangerous, he appreciated that side of him.

"Don't forget what you promised me, I'm missing your dear disciple badly." Khachen continued talking alone until he got a slightly irritated response from Pharan, which finally made him stop talking and focus on driving.

Who would have thought that someone like Khachen would be forbidden by his close friend from stepping into the village or contacting a disciple like Jett since he was seventeen, due to an incident in high school where he almost led him astray?

Really, it wasn't that serious. He just helped one kid see the world a bit, that's all...

After nearly two hours, it was past three in the morning when the luxury sports car drove through the desolate road to the base of a mountain in Phetchaburi province, surrounded by forests on both sides.

Khachen didn't feel the need to ask why Pharan had instructed him to drop them off here. If Pharan wanted him to know, he would have explained from the start. If he was still silent upon arrival, it meant he preferred to keep it undisclosed. So, he simply said,

"Give me a call if you need anything."

"Thanks." Pharan replied. Khem, who had been leaning against Pharan, stirred slightly and opened his eyes upon hearing a quiet whisper by his ear,

"We're here." Khem nodded quickly, turned to thank Khachen with a wai, and then got out of the car to stand outside.

Pharan reached back to grab the box, turned to Khachen, and said as a final note,

"Keep the amulet around your neck until Sunday. On your way back, stop at the nearest hotel to rest, and come back tomorrow morning."

Khachen immediately nodded in agreement.

How could he not comply when they had just been chased by a horde of spirits...

Once Khachen drove off, Pharan led Khem to the side of the road where a large 'Phayom' tree stood, with a wooden sign indicating it was a meditation site, complete with stairs leading upwards.

Judging from the look of things, it didn't seem like many people visited often.

Soon, they reached an open area surrounded by five small, partly old, partly new two-story wooden houses that resembled monks' quarters, but there was no one there at the moment.

"Why are we here?" Khem looked up and asked the person beside him. Pharan took Khem's hand and led him to one of the houses, opened the door, and then answered,

"I'm looking for the monk, a close friend of my grandfather, because there's something I need from him. But he's been on a pilgrimage for years, and we haven't been in contact. According to Jett and Chan, this was the last known location of him from his disciples." The door closed, and Pharan moved towards the corner of the room in the dark, still explaining to Khem.

"What he has might be the last thing that can help us, so I need to find him before tomorrow night." As he finished speaking, the lantern in the room suddenly lit up, revealing a well-cleaned interior with basic amenities like kitchen items, dried food, and neatly folded beddings.

"I've already had someone prepare things. Now you rest and regain your strength. You can cook in the morning." The master said in a deep voice as he handed Khem a lantern to hold.

Khem's eyes were filled with various emotions swirling within them: respect, gratitude, and deep appreciation, to the point where he didn't know how to express everything in words.

Khem knelt down, placing the lantern beside him, intending to bow at the master's feet. However, after just a slight bow, his hands, which were clasped together in respect, were placed into the master's hands that bent down to catch them in mid-air.

"That's enough." Pharan said curtly, and Khem nodded in compliance.

Once Khem stood up and began to set up the bed mosquito net effortlessly, Pharan walked back to the corner of the room where there was an altar with a Buddha statue. He sat down on a meditation cushion, lit a large candle, then closed his eyes, placing his right hand over his left to meditate.

When everything was calm, he began chanting a mantra to create a luminous golden shield, like a dome, over this area to prevent wandering spirits from intruding. After that, he let his spirit extend in all directions to search for the master as he had intended.

Switching scenes to Jett and Chan:

This time, it was Chan who was driving, even though he wasn't very familiar with the route. However, his calm and meticulous nature, combined with an unyielding spirit, made this journey seem safer. Additionally, he brought along a black ebony box.

Previously, when both had an accident and crashed into a tree, they were lucky to have been wearing seatbelts, and the car's safety features worked effectively, so they weren't seriously injured. Once they regained consciousness, they got out of the car to call the owner of the vehicle, another disciple of the master.

The other party, upon receiving the call, rushed over immediately. Fortunately, he didn't hold it against them since he was quite close to Jett, almost like senior and junior disciples. Not only did he handle the car issue himself, but he also helped take both of them to the village as requested, albeit too late...

After that day, Jett lost all confidence in his own driving. He even allowed Chan to drive his precious car, which he didn't even let his parents

or his sister touch.

"Is anything following us, Jett?" Chan asked while focusing on the road, and Jett glanced at the rearview mirror before furrowing his brows in response.

"None. Since we left the apartment, not a single one has followed."

Weird, this was too strange, Jett didn't expect their journey with Chan to be this calm and quiet.

Thump!

"Shit!" Jett jolted as something was thrown against the window on his side. Since the car wasn't moving very fast, and with the occasional streetlights, he could see what it was.

It was a ripe banana with an incense stick still sticking out of it, rotting chicken meat, and some offerings that were clearly not placed there by a human hand.

Jett remembered they had just passed a three-way junction.

Thump!

This time, similar items were thrown towards Chan's side, but Chan remained unfazed, continuing to drive steadily without any sign of panic.

However, the closer they got to Kanchanaburi, the more intense things became. Not only were offerings being thrown incessantly at the car windows, but stray dogs and cats kept darting in front of the car every five minutes.

"Na-ut, a, tu, wi, ka, lo, to-ka

Su, no, pun, sam, na, ra, ja cha

Wi-chi, tho, put, sam-ma, sam, hang, ra

A, wa-ka, pha, so, pi-ti-i"

The more Jett chanted to ward off spirits, the more it seemed to provoke them, increasing their anger.

Just as they were about to cross a bridge over a river under repair, with wooden barriers placed along the sides to prevent falls, a truck suddenly swerved into their lane from the opposite direction.

At that moment, the bright headlights of the truck blinded both Jett and Chan. Chan made a split-second decision to swerve, crashing through the wooden barriers, sending the car tumbling off the bridge.

Boom!!!!

Water quickly surrounded the car, while the lights were still on. Both unbuckled their seatbelts in haste, used hammers they had to break the car

windows, and swam out with difficulty.

Unfortunately, the current was quite strong, but Jett managed to swim to Chan, whose glasses had come off, just in time.

However, now, driving above water wasn't easy, and both were hesitant and scared.

With their last breaths, their lips met in a sudden kiss.

But then, suddenly, their bodies were pulled back as if yanked, along with a flood of memories.

The faint, dreamlike vision revealed scenes that Jett and Chan had never seen before, stories of three women who were close friends: one named Jintana, another Khemika, and the last one named Chaiada.

These three were best friends from middle school at an all-girls school, loving, caring, and attentive to each other, especially towards Khemika, who wasn't very strong, so Jintana and Chaiada always took special care of her.

However, there was a secret Khemika didn't know: Jintana and Chaiada were attracted to their same sex and eventually fell in love with each other.

But because society at that time did not accept such relationships, they had to keep it hidden from everyone, even Khemika, fearing her disappointment or rejection for being different.

One day, their love was abruptly cut short when their families found out. Jintana was forced to get engaged to a promising young civil servant she didn't love. Chaiada was to be sent abroad for further studies right after high school.

On the day of Jintana's engagement, it happened to be the same day Chaiada was leaving the country.

They met secretly at a place known only to them. Jintana was still in her ceremonial dress, while Chaiada was ready to head to the airport.

They couldn't say much, only wishing each other a good life.

They hugged for the last time, kissed for the last time, but still cried every time we remembered their times together.

There was only one word to remember forever.

Goodbye, the one person I love with all my heart.

Chapter 36

One night had passed, leading into the late hours of another day.

Pharan still sat upright on the meditation seat, facing a large candle that was close to burning out, with Khem watching from not far away to ensure the candle didn't extinguish too soon.

Sweat beaded down from Pharan's forehead in a steady stream, soaking his entire body, as the effort to locate Luang Pu Kasem was proving to be incredibly difficult.

Pharan's concentration was heavily disturbed by numerous spirits in the forest who seemed intent on preventing him from finding Luang Pu Kasem, as if they were trying to buy time for Madam-Ramphueng, who had followed his two disciples.

The sounds of screams, laughter, and curses filled his ears, and through his spiritual vision, he saw hordes of forest spirits emerging from the ground from all directions, crawling towards this meditation area but unable to breach the golden barrier of sacred script, only able to moan with hunger.

Eight spiritual senses were extended far and wide without relent, racing against the scant time remaining. His blood boiled with the intensity of his effort, and the pain from a still-healing curse worsened with each passing moment.

Khem sat behind, hands clasped in prayer, tears falling as he felt the agony Pharan was enduring. He closed his eyes, imploring the sacred entities for mercy and compassion, to help them overcome this ordeal and end these dreadful events once and for all.

The next moment, a strong gust of wind blew through the gaps in the wooden house, hitting their bodies, and the candle flame suddenly went out as Pharan opened his eyes.

He found him.

After navigating through the eternal past, Jett awoke to find himself being given CPR by a man in rescue gear, trying to revive him after he had stopped breathing for nearly two minutes, near the site of the incident.

Jett coughed out a large amount of water, taking deep breaths and coughing several times.

"He's awake over here! How are you, Phii?" That was the question from the man in front of Jett. The surrounding voices were chaotic with panic. Jett nodded once before turning to look beside him, finding that Chan was still unconscious and being given CPR.

Jett's eyes widened, fear rushing into his heart in that moment. Despite his fatigued body, he was suddenly spurred into action, crawling off the makeshift bed to stop beside Chan.

"Chan! Can you hear me? Don't die on me, wake up quickly!" Jett shouted in panic, shaking the other man's arm, hoping for him to wake up and scold him as he always did when woken up. He didn't care who tried to comfort or stop him.

However, there was no response; Chan remained still.

Jett pressed his forehead against Chan's arm, tears flowing unexpectedly, pleading.

"You saw it too, didn't you? Our past."

"..."

"Please, wake up and stay with me, don't leave me like this."

Time passed, and despair seemed to creep in. Jett didn't want to look up and face the harsh reality, so he could only cry, but then, someone gently stroked his still damp hair.

"Jett...why are you crying?" Chan asked hoarsely. Jett quickly lifted his head to lock eyes with him, then burst into happy tears.

"Ugh, sob, Chan."

Chan raised his hand to wipe away Jett's tears, then softly responded,

"In this life, let's start anew, shall we?"

Jett, overwhelmed with mixed emotions, didn't think about the future, only filled with fear of losing him, but he nodded several times in agreement.

The sun was about to rise. Time was of the essence, so both Jett and Chan declined a hospital check-up, determined to continue their journey immediately, disregarding their car which was still submerged in the river, waiting to be recovered.

But before they could ask the rescue team or the police for a ride, a stern-looking man approached them directly.

"Kids, I'm the truck driver who caused the accident by swerving into your lane. Could I have a quick word? Are you in a rush to go somewhere?" Jett and Chan, wrapped in large towels, immediately exchanged glances, then turned back to nod at the man who had approached them.

Yes, they were in a hurry, and they knew well that the accident wasn't just a coincidence, but it seemed like what this man wanted to say was important. So, they were willing to listen.

"Sure, go ahead, Uncle. What happened earlier?" Jett responded.

"My name is Boonrit, but you can just call me Uncle Boon. I need to sincerely apologize for what happened; I'm glad you both made it out like this." Uncle Boon spoke with a mix of stress and relief, also giving a wai, which prompted Jett and Chan to return the gesture.

"It's okay, Uncle. We know you didn't do it on purpose." Jett replied, causing Uncle Boon to exhale deeply.

"You might not believe this, but just before the bridge, I saw a woman in ancient Thai attire, like those from the servant class long ago, standing in the middle of the road and pointing at me. Suddenly, I couldn't control the steering wheel, and that's why my truck veered into yours." Both Jett and Chan inhaled sharply, thinking it was surely the work of Madam-Ramphueng's spirit.

"Actually, we should apologize to you because that spirit was following us."

Uncle Boon went silent as if he forgot to breathe, then quickly nodded.

"She's a very powerful spirit; even though I've encountered many and am somewhat used to it, I still felt fear. It's been a long time since I've felt like this."

Jett and Chan nodded in acknowledgment. Uncle Boon, looking at the two young men, sensed something about them - they were practitioners of the arcane arts just like him. Moreover, the scent of magic that clung to them reminded him of someone he had known long ago.

Feeling a sense of compassion and pity, he removed the amulet necklace he was wearing and handed it to Jett.

"I don't know what kind of trouble or what you're facing, but since we've met, consider it fate. Take this necklace; it might help a little, because what you have with you right now isn't enough."

Jett and Chan swallowed hard, looking down at the ordinary-looking amulet necklace that now felt warm with its mystical power, evoking a

sense of deep gratitude.

"Is it really okay for us to have this?"

"Of course, I don't have any children, and I've been thinking about giving it to someone. Just take it." Jett nodded, clasped his hands together, and raised the amulet above his head, saying 'Sadhu' just like Chan.

"Thank you, Uncle. If we make it through this, I'll find you and repay you later." Uncle Boon nodded with a smile, gently patting Jett and Chan on the shoulder.

"I'll just accept your thanks. As for finding me, if fate allows it, we'll meet again someday. You guys hurry along, I'll handle things here." Jett and Chan bowed in gratitude to Uncle Boon once more, spoke briefly to the police about not holding Uncle Boon responsible and asked them to take them to a certain place, which was the temple where Khem's father, or Pinto, was the abbot.

Fortunately, the temple was only about ten kilometers from the accident site. Soon, the police car drove Jett and Chan there, and by now, the position of the sun indicated it was about eight in the morning.

The two jumped off the back of the truck together, thanked the police for bringing them, and then hurriedly entered the temple grounds. Seeing a monk sweeping leaves under a large Bodhi tree, we rushed over, clasped our hands in prayer, and greeted him.

"Paying respects, Abbot." The abbot stopped sweeping and turned towards us immediately.

"Blessings upon you, laymen. What brings you here? You seem quite agitated." The abbot asked.

"We are looking for Abbot Pinto. Do you know if he's here?" Jett replied, and the abbot nodded.

"The monk you're looking for is me."

Jett and Chan almost jumped to hug each other. After explaining the events to the abbot, they could see clear concern in his eyes.

In his role as a monk, Pinto had renounced worldly attachments, so he couldn't directly intervene to help his son, Khem, much, except to pray for his safety every day.

Luckily, Khem had met good friends like these two young men.

"We are looking for something that seems to be a family heirloom of Khem's family, something very old, like jewelry." Chan said with a calm

face, his voice showing confidence in the matter, even though no one knew exactly what this item was or if it was indeed jewelry as Chan had said.

Jett wanted to ask how he knew, but he kept silent and just nodded, thinking he'd inquire about the reasons later. What he knew for sure was that Chan wouldn't speak with certainty unless he was confident in his thoughts.

The monk paused to consider Chan's words before responding,

"Actually, there's something that Khem's mother received from her sister, an old wooden box. Please wait at the temple pavilion; I will fetch that item for you."

Phra Pinto returned to his kuti, opened the wooden cabinet, and took out a dark-colored wooden box that had been stored deep inside, wiped off the dust, and carried it over to Jett and Chan at the temple pavilion.

Once he placed it before them, he said,

"This is the only heirloom that Khem's aunt left for him. I intended to give it to Khem after he finished his studies. Once, she told me that it was passed down through the family to a daughter or niece, whomever it was decided to be given to, but there's a rule that it must never be sold or destroyed."

Jett and Chan glanced at each other before Jett asked,

"Can we open it, Luang Por?" Phra Pinto thought for a moment before answering,

"I've never opened it myself, but I believe there should be no harm. Go ahead and open it." With permission, Jett immediately lifted the lid of the wooden box to find it filled with various small pieces of jewelry, all looking very old, including rings, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings.

Chan pondered for a while before his hand reached in and picked up something for all to see.

"This is it."

What he picked up looked like an infant's ankle bracelet made from snake skin, adorned with tiny bells that jingled when shaken.

"Are you sure?" Jett asked with a furrowed brow, to which Chan nodded. He couldn't explain why; it was all guided by intuition. To put it simply, his 'sense' told him so.

"If that's the case, could Luang Por help us destroy it?" Phra Pinto took it in his hand, but after holding it for only a moment, he returned it and shook his head.

"This item has an owner; I can't destroy it. You must return it to its rightful owner."

At the end of the sentence, Jett froze halfway. He intended to say something, but Chan held his wrist to stop him. Seeing this, the abbot continued,

"Don't be afraid. If you've never been involved with it, it can't harm you, except perhaps delay you. So far, aside from the male descendants who have died due to this curse, no innocent person has ever been harmed by it to the point of death."

"..."

"So, wait a bit longer before you set out, and everything will be fine."

At thirty minutes past midnight, a helicopter appeared in the sky above the residence of the master and Khem, its rotor blades creating a loud, thunderous noise and a strong wind. It slowly descended to land on a wide space surrounded by candles that flickered but miraculously did not go out.

This helicopter had been arranged by Khachen, following a call from Pharan about twenty minutes earlier.

A man in a forestry department uniform stepped out of the helicopter to invite the two people waiting to board the passenger seats. After ensuring safety, he slowly took the helicopter back into the sky.

"Which way should I go?" The officer asked, receiving an answer from Pharan:

"East, keep flying straight. Please maintain your focus, and don't mind anything unusual you might see." The officer nodded.

"Yes."

No sooner had he finished speaking, the officer's eyes widened as the landscape ahead showed shadowy figures, tall and stretching to the sky, dozens of them, approaching. His ears picked up sounds like ship horns blaring, a noise he had never encountered before, followed by chanting from those seated behind him.

"What would happen if we fly into them?" The officer asked. He believed in spirits because he had spent half his life in the forest, but he had never been harmed by such entities before. However, what he was seeing now felt different from his previous encounters.

"You'd be in trouble." came the short reply.

The officer swallowed hard and steered the helicopter away from the figures. Several times, he had to dodge massive hands reaching out,

swerving left and right until he began to feel dizzy, with cold sweat beading and dripping from his forehead to his chin.

That's why Khachen needed the most experienced and composed helicopter pilot among all the officers, knowing they might encounter such thrilling events, and the high compensation made the risk worth taking. Otherwise, he surely wouldn't have agreed to come.

Apart from the hordes of hungry ghosts that appeared, the black waves of forest spirits also chased after them. They merged together like a giant wave, climbing over one another in an attempt to drag the helicopter down. Some manifested as dark, swirling clouds, darting around to distract, but they couldn't cause any real harm, especially with Pharan standing by the open door, constantly chanting protective incantations, forming a barrier of glass-like energy that shielded them.

The helicopter flew at high speed, racing against time, while the pilot had to be vigilant in all directions, holding his breath several times from the stress and pressure. He had never imagined encountering such bizarre and life-threatening phenomena before. Even encountering a tiger in the forest wouldn't have frightened him as much as this did.

And then, the journey came to an end when the tall figure behind said, "We're here." Hearing this, the officer quickly wiped the sweat from his eyes. There was a cliff behind where they could land, so he immediately maneuvered the helicopter to touch down.

Branches from the surrounding trees swayed in the wind as the helicopter landed. Before disembarking, Pharan handed a black Buddha amulet to the officer, who quickly clasped his hands in a wai and accepted it with both hands.

"Keep this with you; it will keep you safe. Thank you for the ride."

After saying this, Pharan woke Khem, who had fallen asleep. He had wanted to wake him earlier when he sensed Khem's soul being drawn away, but the need to defend against the forest spirits had kept him focused. Fortunately, Khem hadn't gone far, and it didn't take long for him to wake up after Pharan called out.

Khem jolted awake with a fearful expression, as his consciousness had returned to that Thai house again.

"Master, I..." Pharan nodded to indicate he already knew, while gently patting Khem's head to comfort him.

"You'll be fine, come on."

At around five in the evening, after the helicopter had left, Pharan took Khem's hand and walked into the forest. He carried his black toolbox in the other hand, using the moonlight and the glow of fireflies that appeared around them, neither too close nor too far. Within ten minutes of walking deeper into the woods, they found the person they were looking for.

Luang Pu Kesem was meditating under a kapok tree, his posture serene and filled with spiritual power, surrounded by fireflies that provided light.

Pharan tapped Khem's back gently as a signal to follow, then they stopped at a respectful distance and bowed three times in reverence.

Luang Pu Kesem slowly opened his eyes, which were slightly clouded with cataracts from old age, yet they shone with compassion for all beings seeking help.

Especially for the two young men before him.

"I was waiting." Luang Pu Kesem said meaningfully, indicating that he knew Pharan would come, which is why he was waiting not far from where the helicopter had landed.

"Paying respects, Luang Pu." Pharan said, and Luang Pu Kesem nodded slightly.

"Blessings upon you, layman." Pharan was silent for a moment before continuing with what he was seeking.

"Luang Pu, do you still have Grandpa Sek's magic knife?"

"The magic knife of Sek, forged with dark sorcery techniques, though it holds great power, a white magic practitioner like you touching it might mean there's no turning back. Sek was afraid of this, which is why he left it with me."

Pharan knew this well. Grandpa Sek and Luang Pu Kesem were close friends, both having studied black magic in their past. However, Luang Pu Kesem chose the path of purity by becoming a monk, whereas Grandpa Sek continued on his own dark path.

Until his final, torturous moments, he realized he had chosen the wrong path all along.

Khem, listening intently, turned to look at the master's profile upon hearing this.

Did this mean that this object could taint someone as pure as the master?

Khem reached out his hand to grab the master's sleeve, his eyes moistening with tears, showing his reluctance. He shook his head, and a single tear fell, rolling down his cheek.

"Master, please, don't go to such lengths."

"..." Khem inhaled shakily before lowering his head to speak.

"My karma, I should atone for it myself."

"..."

"Please, don't suffer because of me."

If Pharan helping Khem meant enduring future suffering, Khem knew he could never accept that.

"What do you want then, do you still want this?"

Khem hoped Master would listen and refuse, but instead, Pharan knelt down on the ground, staying still without looking up, and spoke to Luang Pu,

"Please help me one more time."

Khem's tears fell again, unable to deny how much he still wanted to live to see more of this world.

He wanted to spend his life following Pharan and his friends, to repay the kindness of Luang Por who had guided him, to wake up and make merit for his mother, Grandma-Si, and for Thong and Ekk who had sacrificed themselves for Khem's safety.

Khem did not want to die...not before seeing everyone live happily.

Khem sobbed until he was shaking, then stepped back and slowly knelt beside Pharan. This kindness, even if the heavens and earth were to crumble, could never be fully repaid.

Luang Pu Kasem was truly a man who had renounced worldly desires, dedicating himself to spiritual practice and accumulating merit for a long time, understanding the truths of life profoundly, thus seeing things that ordinary people could not, though he could not share these visions.

"Raise your head. I believe everything will turn out well. Come, take this."

Luang Pu Kasem spoke while pulling out a dagger wrapped tightly with red-lettered sacred cloth from a bag by his side and handed it over.

Khem clenched his teeth tightly, watching as Pharan moved forward on his knees to accept and hold the dagger.

"Those creatures are close to breaking through the glass wall. Go do what you must with the magic knife; if used with a strong and pure heart, it won't turn back to harm you." Pharan listened intently to the sounds of the spirits outside Luang Pu Kesem's protective dome before turning to meet Khem's gaze, who seemed to be weighing something in his mind.

Until he heard Luang Pu say:

"Leave Khem here. For this karmic debt, I will handle it myself."

This was far beyond what both Pharan and Khem expected, but since the abbot had spoken thus, there must be a reason, so they bowed in gratitude without questioning further.

Khem looked up at the master once more, his eyes still hot with emotion, but before he could say anything, the master's hand gently patted his head, and in a gentle voice, he said,

"Wait here, I'll be back." Tears flowed from Khem, understanding the true meaning behind those words, he nodded once more, firmly.

"Okay, I'll wait."

Chapter 37 End

Khem watched the master's retreating back as he walked back along the path with his black toolbox and the enchanted knife, until he was out of sight. Then, he turned to look at Luang Pu Kesem, his hands still clasped in prayer.

"You don't need to worry about Pharan. Close your eyes and meditate, think of your parents and the Triple Gem." After these words, Khem closed his eyes as instructed, and soon his ears were filled with the melodious sound of chanting that soothed his soul.

"Itipiso, Visesei
Issei, Phuttanameei
Imena, Phuttatangsoei
Isotang, Phuttapitii."

Pharan halted at the cliff's edge, his eyes clearly seeing the situation below, where hordes of forest and hungry ghosts were on the verge of breaking through Luang Pu Kasem's glass barrier.

He knelt down, opened his bag, and took out four sections of rattan, planting them into the ground to form a square around himself, then tied a sacred string from one piece to another, creating a forbidden zone.

Once that was done, he placed a small incense burner on a tray, filled it with soil from the ground, lit nine sticks of incense, spoke words of apology to the spirits of the forest and mountains, and then inserted the incense into the soil, followed by placing two medium-sized candles beside the burner.

Next, he unwrapped the red sacred cloth tightly binding his grandfather's magical knife, immediately feeling the aura of the dark arts and the anguished cries of the spirits trapped within, numbering in the hundreds.

One spirit, driven by pain, burst from the knife to attack, but was firmly held by Pharan's strong hand on its face, which was covered in burn scars, and he said in a calm voice,

"Calm down, I'm not here to hurt you."

This spirit locked eyes with Pharan for a moment, seeing in those deep, dark eyes a compassion that was hard to fathom.

"I'm...in pain, let...me...go." The spirit said. Pharan, sensing its suffering, nodded in agreement.

"I will release all of you."

Hearing this, the spirit's tears flowed, longing for its family and homeland it had left behind so long ago; it had once been a soldier who died in battle. Being told it would finally be freed after being trapped for decades, its despair turned into hope, so it retreated back into the knife to await its liberation.

As Pharan gently touched the blade, the many agitated spirits began to calm down.

Then, he closed his eyes to focus his mind, his lips moving in chant to invoke the Emperor's Mantra for the immediate release of these spirits.

"Na Mo Putthaya, Phra Phuttha, Trairatana Yana..."

Buddho, Dhamma, Sangho, Yathaputmona

Worship Buddha, Worship Dhamma, Worship Sangha

Akki-thanang, Varangandang, Sivali, Ja Mahatherang

The offering of fire, the best of perfumes, the elder monks,

I venerate from afar, I venerate the elements,

I venerate all beings.

"..."

"May the things I pray for be sacred and come true immediately."

"..."

"Arahant, this is done by karma, bound by karma, let life go to a good rebirth, let every life and every spirit that has been bound in this thing, be reborn in a good realm, so be it."

This enchanted magic knife seemed to have been purified until it shone with a golden light. Golden spirits, like flames, gradually emerged from it, from one to two, from two to three, until all one hundred and eight were released, scattering in all directions towards the places they longed for. Some went to find their departed loved ones, others returned to their origins in hell to atone for their remaining sins.

Pharan could have used the power of these spirits, but forcing all beings to yield was not his way of conduct. Thus, releasing them was the best choice.

Then, his ears caught the faint sounds carried by the wind, voices that ranged from young women, young men, to the elderly, saying:

"Thank...you."

"Thank you very much, dear."

"Thank you so much."

In truth, not just anyone can do such a thing. To release so many souls, one must be pure from within, filled with true compassion for all beings. Such individuals are rare in this world...

After cleansing the dark magic involving trapping and using malevolent spirits, master then picked up the magical knife, holding it reverently with both hands as he closed his eyes again to perform what is known as "invoking the magical knife." a crucial step before using it.

At that moment, the wailing of numerous spirits, including dozens of hungry ghosts and forest spirits from all directions, resonated so loudly that it seemed to shake the earth. Pharan remained focused, chanting the following mantra:

"Phutthang Raksa, Dhammag Raksa, Sangham Raksa, Satru Ma Bidha Vinasha Santi."

Upon finishing this chant, the dark sky began to show flashes of lightning, accompanied by thundering roars, serving as a warning to those who would commit evil to cease their actions.

After the invocation, Pharan then proceeded to chant the praises of the five divine weapons:

"Sakkassa Vajiravutthang (The weapon of Indra)

Vessavanassa Kathavutthang (The club of Vessavana)

Alavakathu Savutthang (The red cloth of the giant Alavaka)

Yamasanayana Vutthang (The eyes of Yama)

Narayanasangakkara Vutthang (The discus of Narayana)

Panca Avutthanang, Etesang Anubhavana..."

As he chanted, the glass barrier shattered into fragments, and the spirits surged forward in a solid wave of darkness, some running, some walking, some crawling with their arms, some whole, some twisted and broken, their stench of decay spreading for miles.

While chanting the praises of the five weapons, the magical knife in Pharan's hand glowed. Gradually, golden lines identical to the knife's design appeared in the sky, forming nine concentric circles that expanded to fill the sky, charged with static electricity and echoing with thunderous roars.

Pharan seemed to be drained of almost all his life force, his previous injuries resisting the power of the Buddha within him, causing blood to

flow from his eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. Yet, he continued the chant, now moving on to the summoning of the gods.

"Sakke, Kame, Jara, Kirisukaratae,
Jantarikhe, Vimane, Tipe, Rathe, Cha
Kame, Tavonakahan, Keha
Vatthumahi, Kette, Bhummacchantu, Deva
Chalathala, Visame, Yakkhapandappanaga
Tithanta, Santike, Munivara, Janang
Sadavo, Me, Sunantu"

"..."

"I call upon the divine assembly, residing in the heavenly realms of Kama, in the realm of Rupa, the realm of Arupa, including the great Brahma, and upon the deities dwelling in mountains, caves, and celestial palaces, those residing in the royal island and cities, in humble homes and grand palaces throughout the countryside, and those who manifest in the shrines of the earth spirits."

"..."

"Also, I call upon the deities living in streams, ponds, and all the greenery of the forest, whether equal or not."

"From the Yaksha, Gandharvas, Garudas, and Nagas,

"Please gather here in this place."

Invoking deities isn't an easy task, nor does it succeed every time one attempts to do so, due to various factors.

The two previous times the invocation was successful were during the forest's upheaval five years ago, when the deity invoked was Lord Vessavana, and the second time when Khem appeared, it was Phra Phirun and Phra Mae Thorani. Both times, the invocations were made with the intent to protect the entire village. However, this time is different.

This time, he prays with the sole intention of protecting his beloved and desiring to spend his life with her until old age.

At that moment, the tattoo on Pharan's back suddenly warmed, and behind him gradually appeared the seven golden heads of the supreme Naga king, also known as "Maha Ananta Phaya Nakarat."

The Naga king, nearly five meters long, slithered to a stop just outside the sacred boundary, arching its neck down to shield Pharan's head with its hood. Its tail, adorned with shimmering golden scales, coiled around

Pharan's territory like a magnificent fortress. Then, tiny drops of nectar began to drizzle down.

Pharan placed the magical knife on the red cloth and stood up, his calm eyes surveying the encroaching spirits.

The golden circle of knives remained suspended in the sky. As a hungry ghost's hand reached for him, Pharan raised his right hand to his chest level and made a gentle sweeping motion.

Wheee!

A sharp, piercing scream rang out as the ghost was impaled by unseen golden knives, its spirit extinguished. One of the Naga's heads then stretched out, opened its mouth, and swallowed it whole.

This sound momentarily stopped the wave of forest and hungry ghosts, but instead of fear, it drove them into a frenzy. One forest spirit tried to take advantage of Pharan's stationary stance by diving from a tree, only to be struck by the Naga's tail, turning to ash instantly. Everything happened so fast it was hardly visible.

Once Pharan had determined the direction, he raised his hand higher and struck down through the air in a straight line.

Suddenly, the nine rings of golden knives descended like a torrential rain, accompanied by bolts of lightning striking down.

Blood still flowed from Pharan's eyes every second, and with just one strike, tens of thousands of malevolent spirits were obliterated.

Khem, sheltered within Luang Pu Kasem's glass barrier, was unaware of the external events. He had been sitting with his hands clasped, listening to the chants for only a few minutes before his hands slowly fell to his sides, the clear vision fading, and then he collapsed unconscious.

At that moment, outside the glass dome, a figure appeared, a deity in pale yellow Thai attire, her face strikingly similar to Khem's. She looked towards Luang Pu Kasem with a plea for compassion, to allow her entry into the glass dome.

She was summoned from heaven by a man of great spiritual power, yet she followed the spirit of someone until she reached here. Upon seeing this boy, whose spirit was gradually weakening, she found him on the brink of life and death.

Though she couldn't remember who he was, this child had called her to him. Not only was he gentle in nature, but he was also very cute, making

her feel an immediate connection. She wanted to ask the senior monk for permission to approach.

Luang Pu Kesem, seeing their deep connection, allowed her to enter. Once inside, she sat down on the floor, lifting the young boy's head onto her lap, gently stroking his soft hair.

Poor little one, burdened with such heavy karma, she regretted not being able to alter the fate that had been set by higher powers.

Her light brown eyes were filled with compassion. Something told her she was deeply connected to this child.

Even now, when our destinies no longer intertwine, the care and concern still linger in my heart.

"If you can return, may it be safely, but if you breathe your last, I will embrace your spirit myself."

Khem heard a voice that seemed familiar, gentle like a whisper, too faint to catch clearly, but the warmth enveloping his body and heart made him slowly open his eyes to see that he was lying at the dock of an old Thai house from four hundred years ago.

The scene in front of him gradually became clearer. Khem's eyes saw the bare, pale, lifeless feet of many people. He swallowed hard, his hands trembling as he clasped them tightly, then slowly stood up to face what he had been escaping his whole life.

Before Khem stood the male descendants of his mother's family, all of whom had died young, dressed in their last worn outfits, their bodies standing stiffly, their eyes vacant of spirit, devoid of any warmth or emotion.

A chill ran down Khem's back when he sensed someone standing behind him.

"Look at them closely, do you recognize who they are?"

Khem couldn't move, only able to watch as a pale, pointing finger extended over his shoulder, compelling his gaze to follow.

The faces of people from the past superimposed over each of these figures, revealing another truth to Khem.

Indeed, all the descendants who had passed away were once part of that fateful event.

From Phraya Worasingh, who was the root cause of all events, to Lord Phakdiwijitra, who was so enamored with power that he forgot virtue,

There were also the three legitimate sons of Lord Phakdiwijitra. Not to mention the seven close male relatives who stood by watching with indifference, without even a shred of compassion.

And it included all the servants in Phraya Worasingh's household who had a hand in tormenting Madam-Ramphueng during her stay, sometimes nearly costing her her life, those who slandered her, and the servant who beat her to death.

Everyone had reincarnated into the same lineage to atone for what they did to Madam-Ramphueng according to the curse.

Now, only Khem remained alive.

"Do you remember now? You know well what you've done to me. Why did you think you could be the only one to escape?" Khem felt two icy hands slowly move to his throat and begin to squeeze.

Tears flowed from Khem's eyes out of fear, and he swallowed hard before speaking with a trembling voice,

"That day...I and my mother, we didn't...mean to." Khem had to lie because Lady Keskaew had threatened that if they did not comply, MaeYing Kaknang's entire maiden family would suffer. Neither Khem nor his mother could defy her orders.

But the response he got was a scream filled with hatred that pierced his ears. Madam-Ramphueng's form appeared before him, consumed with anger, before she lunged forward and gripped Khem's throat with immense force.

"Liar!"

"..."

"Whether you and your mother intended it or not, in the end...my child and I had to die in agony! Do you think such a reason will make me spare you? You're dreaming!"

Khem gasped for air, his hands tightly gripping the pale wrists, struggling and resisting with all his might.

"The only way you all can atone for what you did to me and my child is through death, and only then will justice be served!!"

Khem slowly slumped to the floor, death drawing near with every breath.

In his final moments, Khem's mind was flooded with countless memories of his life, both good and bad.

Though his life had been difficult, Khem was happy. He was glad to have been born as his parents' son, to have chased his dreams even if he hadn't

reached the end, to have had wonderful friends like Jett and Chan, to have joined volunteer camps, and learned how to interact with others.

He had met Grandma Si and everyone in the village.

Ultimately, Khem was overjoyed to have met the master again...

Khem closed his eyes, weary and in despair, his heart silently repeating apologies with all his might.

"Sorry for being weak, I am...sorry...for only being able to struggle this far."

Now, Pharan understood some truths.

In truth, four hundred years ago, he was a significant military leader in Phetchaburi, leading soldiers in battles to protect the nation. Even though it was his duty, he had killed many on the battlefield.

And the battlefield, or the place where the bloody events occurred, was this very dry forest.

According to principles, attracting such a multitude of malevolent spirits would not be due to the hatred of one ghost alone. Instead, everything that happened was interconnected karma, directly or indirectly.

Hundreds of thousands of magic knives created by Pharan flew through the air like a flock of birds, attacking and destroying the evil spirits under the command of his strong spirit, preventing them from climbing up this cliff.

However, some spirits managed to slip through. A black, ghostly figure resembling a soldier from centuries ago, moving with two arms and one leg, charged towards Khem, who was being held by the deity.

Before it could reach him, two child-like spirits, no older than twelve, appeared in front, blocking its path. Each used one of their feet to push against the ghost's shoulders, stopping its malicious intent.

And before it could do more, several golden magic knives stabbed into its back, and in a blink, it vanished as if it had never existed.

Pharan could sense the spirits of Ekk and Thong, and then his ears heard the voice of an old woman not far away.

Sri Sri, the voice of comfort, come forth, my spirit...

Feeling the warmth he had missed so much, but the pain made it impossible to open his eyes, tears mixed with blood streamed down his cheeks. Pharan's body, if not for the support of the great Naga king, would have lost consciousness long ago. Now it surged with immense strength. In the sky, nine concentric circles of knives formed before golden knives

rained down again, causing agony to the malevolent spirits once more, and again.

Due to pushing beyond human limits, the agony in Pharan's chest caused him to cough up a large amount of red blood.

Even though it was now midnight, there was no sign that the ordeal would end easily.

This was because the time of Khem's birth was not now.

In the last gasp of Khem's breath, Luang Pu Kasem's voice suddenly rang out behind Madam-Ramphueng.

"That's enough, layperson."

Madam-Ramphueng paused, her grip loosening in surprise, not expecting anyone to enter this dimension. Even someone like Pharan, who had accumulated merit over many lifetimes, could not do so.

Moreover, to enter, one must have had a past connection, creating karma with her, and if that person was a man, they would have all died at 20 years old and become her servants. So, who was this person?

With this question in her mind, Madam-Ramphueng slowly released Khem to fall onto the floor, then turned to face the speaker.

Before her stood an elderly monk. Madam-Ramphueng tilted her head left then right, her white eyes with shrunken pupils staring at this monk with bewilderment.

"How is it that you can enter here?"

"..."

"Regardless, this matter does not involve you. Please leave while I am still speaking kindly."

"The root of all these evils involves only one man and one woman. One has long died by your own hand, and the other is still atoning for their sins in hell, unable to be reborn. Is that not enough for you?"

Upon hearing this, Madam-Ramphueng lunged forward to stand just an arm's length from Luang Pu Kasem, her eyes filled with resentment as she looked at him, the pain of her memories driving her nearly mad.

"They all must pay with their lives!"

"..."

"If they don't want to die, then they must return my child to me. Only then will I be satisfied!" Madam-Ramphueng knew she was saying something impossible, as her child had already died.

Died right before her eyes.

Luang Pu Kesem did not take offense at Madam-Ramphueng's harsh words. His eyes, clouded with cataracts, softened with compassion before he spoke:

"If you desire that, I will offer this child's life in alms, in exchange for my own."

Madam-Ramphueng tilted her head, looking confused at Luang Pu Kesem, wondering why he would offer such a proposal to her, and why she should agree to this exchange. But before she could say more, she was plunged into memories conveyed through the gaze of the monk before her.

From the day he first opened his eyes to the world, until he was six years old, Luang Pu Kesem knew he possessed the sixth sense, allowing him to see things he shouldn't, like spirits. Haunted by ghosts from a young age, he developed a desire to eradicate these malevolent spirits from the world, disregarding the law of karma. Then, he met a man named Sek, who had similar abilities.

The two became inseparable friends from their teenage years, pledging to keep their ability to see ghosts a secret and to live like ordinary children.

They grew up together in vocational school, both good-looking and multitalented, becoming the object of affection for many girls. But as with any coin having two sides, where there were admirers, there were also those driven by envy, leading to conflicts with others.

The situation escalated until a critical moment when Luang Pu Kesem, as a young man, was shot in the back by rivals and nearly died. This forced both to resort to occult practices to protect themselves.

However, these practices, if used correctly, could benefit, but if misused, could bring great harm. One day, due to their feuds with their rivals, Luang Pu Kesem's family suffered a calamity, resulting in the accidental death of his younger brother.

For Luang Pu Kesem, there were only two paths at that time: one was to delve deeper into black magic to seek revenge, and the other was to break this cycle of evil by ordaining as a monk for life to calm his own mind, otherwise, he would never find peace.

At that time, Luang Pu Kasem chose to ordain as a monk, having calmed his mind, let go of attachments, ceased creating negative karma, and strived to perform good deeds. After ordaining and adhering to the Buddha's teachings for over fifteen years, he began to see visions of his past lives.

In one life, he was born as a fish in a lotus pond, in another as a heron, and in the third life as a human.

Madam-Ramphueng's eyes widened, tears streaming down her cheeks when she realized that in the life before Luang Pu Kasem was born as a human, he lived only for a short time before being thrown into the river by someone.

At this very location.

Madam-Ramphueng took trembling steps backward to look at Luang Pu Kasem's form more clearly, meeting his compassionate gaze.

What she saw was not a fabricated vision; everything was undoubtedly true. That was why this monk could enter her dimension.

"Ugh, huh, my child." Madam-Ramphueng collapsed onto the wooden dock, her strength gone, then crawled forward to prostrate herself at Luang Pu Kasem's feet, crying out in a wail that seemed to tear at her soul.

She had been consumed by bitterness and resentment for centuries, with no way to rectify her feelings. No matter how many she killed, it could never replace the loss of her son.

In her life as a servant, she endured suffering worse than a living death. No one loved her, no one wanted her, and she never truly owned anything.

The one thing most valuable to her was her child.

Raising her child to grow up as happily as possible was what she yearned for until her last breath.

And now she had seen it.

Luang Pu Kasem, seeing that Madam-Ramphueng was softening, continued to speak:

"Do not create more enmity or karma. Let go of what you hold, and allow me to escort you." Madam-Ramphueng slowly lifted her head and then turned to look at Khem, who was kneeling behind her, crying inconsolably just like her.

As her anger that had once clouded her vision began to fade, she realized that half of this child, in a past life, had helped her numerous times. Her heart, once filled with resentment, now returned to emptiness with a sense of resignation.

She herself was tired after all these years. Having received what she always wanted, she could finally let go.

Now, she only wished to spend a little more time with her child, to have a brief conversation, which would be enough. She clasped her hands in prayer

and said to Luang Pu Kesem:

"Very well."

"Then, please rise." Upon hearing this, Madam-Ramphueng slowly stood up, and as they began to walk away, Luang Pu Kesem spoke to Khem, who was still in a prayerful pose, with compassionate understanding:

"Khem, do not think too much."

"..." Khem clenched his lips tightly as tears began to flow once more.

"Everything was predetermined. We have no debts left between us. Hurry back now."

As if those few words from Luang Pu Kesem had unlocked Khem's heart, he sobbed with relief before bowing in gratitude to the monk.

Madam-Ramphueng followed the monk in his yellow robes with a heart now full of joy. The vision she saw was of a little boy in traditional Thai attire, holding her hand as they walked towards a bright path, accompanied by the sound of a single ankle bracelet's bell ringing, soothing her soul.

Thus, the centuries-long resentment and suffering of Madam-Ramphueng came to an end.

At five forty-five in the morning, the gentle yellow light gradually bathed the vast sky.

Khem slowly opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the lifeless form of Luang Pu Kesem in meditation, his face serene and free from worry.

Khem gradually stood up from the ground. His body was still warm, not feeling cold, and there were no insect bites as there might have been, except for the exhaustion that felt like he had slept for many decades. He felt no pain anywhere else.

Khem started looking around but couldn't see any sign of master, so he quickly bowed to Luang Pu Kasem, stood up, and half-walked, half-ran along the path master had taken the previous night.

His heart was pounding painfully in his chest, but it began to slow down when he saw the master walking back towards him.

Behind the master, the sun was rising over the mountaintop, its rays shining through the master's broad back, blurring Khem's vision. Tears of joy streamed down Khem's cheeks.

Pharan, carrying a box, walked straight towards Khem, while Khem, running until his legs gave out, forced himself to stand and run to him.

At the same time, Pharan set the box down on the ground to catch the smaller figure rushing towards him and embraced him tightly.

Khem sobbed, his body trembling, returning the tight hug, seeing the blood stains on Pharan's face.

"Master, does it...hurt a lot?"

Pharan's head gently rested on Khem's shoulder, shaking slightly to dismiss the question. The only feeling in his heart was the overwhelming joy of seeing that Khem was still breathing.

At this moment, the pain prevented him from speaking, so he could only tighten his embrace a bit more.

6:06 AM on June 6th

Khemjira had safely passed his 20th birthday and escaped the curse.

Epilogue

The two didn't stand hugging for long before they heard the sound of a helicopter landing, the strong wind from the rotor blades blowing their hair and clothes, and they slowly pulled apart.

Soon, they saw Jett and Chan running towards them. Even though Pharan was extremely exhausted, there were still many important things he had to do, like summoning the spirit and taking the monk's body back to the temple for funeral rites.

Once Jett and Chan arrived, they quickly helped support both master and Khem. The four of them walked back to where Luang Pu Kasem was sitting.

Upon arriving, Pharan knelt down in front of Luang Pu Kesem, about two meters away, with Jett, Chan, and Khem sitting behind him in prayer. He began preparing for the spirit-summoning ceremony by taking a white cloth from his toolbox, spreading it on the ground, and placing an incense pot, a pack of incense, an oil lamp, and a string of beads on it. He then brought out a stainless steel tray, followed by canned rice and pickled vegetables, which he placed on the tray. After opening the cans, he inserted an incense stick into the rice can and lit it.

"Go fetch Luang Pu's bag." Pharan instructed someone, and Chan crawled over to retrieve the bag not far away. Pharan took it and placed it beside the food tray, then lit another incense stick to call Luang Pu's spirit to receive the offerings, and finally placed the incense in the pot.

Then, Pharan clasped his hands in prayer, closed his eyes, and chanted the seven books of Abhidhamma and the Matika Bangsukul. Normally, this ceremony would involve inviting a monk to perform the rites, but with none available, he had to do it himself.

After finishing the chants, Pharan held up the incense pot with both hands, softly saying:

"You are now free from suffering and sorrow. Let's go home, Luang Pu." After speaking, he slowly stood up, supported by Khem. Meanwhile, Jett and Chan, once the ceremony was over, helped pack everything back into

the toolbox. The canned food, now with extinguished incense, was placed under the Kapok tree where Luang Pu Kesem had sat.

Once everything was ready, Jett carried the master's nearly ten-kilogram bag, while Chan carried Luang Pu's body. They followed the master to the waiting helicopter to return. The driver was the same forestry officer who had volunteered for this mission.

Earlier, around four in the morning, Chan, who was resting in Pinto's hut, woke up and roused Jett, saying it was time to leave. Not long after, Jett received a call from Khachen, whom he hadn't seen in three years, informing him that a helicopter would pick them up to go to a certain location, which was here.

Upon arrival, Khem helped the master into the back seat, followed by Jett with the master's bag. Chan placed Luang Pu's body next to the driver's seat and then sat in the back beside Jett.

After ensuring everything was in order, the driver took off the helicopter, heading towards Ubon Ratchathani.

When Luang Pu Kesem's remains returned to his home temple, Pharan sent Jett and Chan to inform his disciples, relatives, and the villagers of the news, so all could come to pay their respects.

Jett, Chan, Khem, and Pharan himself, despite their bodies being in pain and utterly exhausted, had to force themselves to go through with Luang Pu Kasem's funeral rites first.

Because of the grave karma from this life, they had survived due to the compassion and sacrifice of Luang Pu Kasem. If they didn't fulfill this, none of them could eat or sleep peacefully and continue living with ease.

Since Luang Pu Kasem was a senior monk with many years of ordination and impeccable moral conduct, his funeral was grand, with all the disciples, including Pharan, cooperating. People came in droves to pay their respects to his body, continuing until the cremation ceremony in the afternoon of the next day.

During the offering of sandalwood flowers, after everyone had been busy with the funeral proceedings for Luang Pu Kasem, Jett, Chan, and Khem finally had time to talk.

"Khem, the monk left this for you." Jett said, handing over something wrapped in clean white cloth. Khem took it, unwrapped it, and saw an infant-sized anklet made from snake skin.

Just by looking at it, he knew whose item it was and what he should do next.

"Jett, Chan, thank you so much." Khem said, with Chan nodding slightly and Jett patting Khem's shoulder a few times before they all walked up to the crematorium to offer sandalwood flowers with others.

When it was Khem's turn, he placed the sandalwood flowers and the anklet on Luang Pu Kasem's left ankle, then spoke softly to the lifeless body,

"I'm returning this to you. May you go to a good rebirth, Luang Pu. I will remember this kindness for my entire life."

After the offering of sandalwood flowers concluded, the final cremation ceremony began. Jett, Chan, and Khem approached Pharan, who was standing under a tree, all of them watching the white smoke rising calmly into the sky from the chimney.

No one knew that the anklet had been tightly held by Madam-Ramphueng in her last moments of life until it was stolen and sold by a close servant, who didn't know that the item was meant only as a gift for the descendants of the Phraya Worasingh family.

About three years later, one day, Mae Ying Kaknang, along with her daughter Krongkwan, went to the market and found the item for sale. They bought it back, the maid who had sold it was punished and immediately expelled from the house. The item was preserved and passed down from generation to generation, with the hope of returning it to its rightful owner someday.

After that, the four of them went to the hospital for treatment and examination, spending three days and two nights to ensure their bodies had returned to normal strength before they traveled back to Pharan's village.

Although Pharan appeared outwardly strong, his body internally had damage that medical science could not detect, an ailment referred to by ancient beliefs as a karmic illness.

Therefore, after returning, he had to continue treatment at home. Jett, Chan, and Khem chose not to go back to school out of concern, fearing that the master would have no one to look after him.

However, today, everything had to end because exams were approaching, and both classmates and professors had called, insisting that the three return to their studies.

That night, Pharan had to bring up the topic:

"It's time for you all to go back to school."

"Oh, master, how can we leave you when you're still in pain?" Jett, who was currently kneeling and scrubbing the floor along with Chan and Khem, looked up to argue immediately, but then winced as he was hit on the head with a tray again.

"That hurts, master."

Pharan narrowed his eyes and said.

"It hurts but isn't fatal. Do you want me to tell you why I haven't gotten better?"

"But..."

"No buts. Go pack your clothes now. I'll have Uncle Chai take you to the airport."

"Master!" Jett almost threw himself on the floor in protest, but Chan quickly pulled him away. Seeing his friends leave, Khem wasn't sure what to do next, except to quietly follow them.

"You stay here."

Khem pressed his lips together, turned back to the master, sat down, and kept his head bowed, not daring to look up.

And every time Khem acted this way, the master would always gently lift his chin to make eye contact.

"Don't cry."

Khem didn't want to cry, but controlling himself in front of master was extremely difficult.

"Master, I..."

"You're confused. You don't know what to do next, right?" Khem nodded, then shook his head due to the conflicting thoughts in his mind, before resting his face in the warm palms and holding them, gazing into the dark eyes.

"I want to stay here with you."

Pharan's eyes softened, his thumb gently caressing Khem's cheek.

"You don't need to rush that."

"..."

"This home will always have its doors open, welcoming you."

"..."

"Right now, you should go and live your life as fully as you've always intended, do your best in your responsibilities first, and when you want to come back, you can."

"..."

"I'll be here waiting for you. Agreed?"

It felt like a great weight had been lifted off him once more. The events that had just transpired made Khem reluctant to leave Pharan, wanting to care for and repay his kindness right here with no intention of going anywhere.

But beyond this, there were many things Khem wanted to do.

Tears flowed from Khem's eyes onto the master's hands continuously, before he slowly nodded, filled with respect and love.

"I promise I'll live my life well and come back to you soon."

After that day, Jett, Chan, and Khem returned to their full-time roles as university students.

Time passed in peace, Khem learned a lot, understanding the balance between hard study and fun, chasing his dreams alongside Jett and Chan, making new friends, exploring new interests, and even entering art competitions where he won numerous awards. He even got the opportunity to study abroad.

During the school holidays, they returned to participate in community development volunteer camps organized by various rural volunteer clubs in different provinces, places they had never been before, fostering close relationships with the club members, especially with Phraemai.

As for Kornkan, Pondit, and Tejaton, after surviving a life-threatening event, they continued to be ordained as monks, practicing virtue at the temple near their homes.

However, since all of them resided in Bangkok, not far from the university, their studies did not stop; they simply switched to attending special classes every Sunday. They occasionally met with other friends and had conversations.

The volunteer club friends did not hold any resentment towards what the three had done that day; instead, they rejoiced in their merit of becoming monks and regularly visited the temple where the three were stationed to make merit together.

Moreover, Khem got to know Jett's family. His father is currently a member of the parliament for Ubon Ratchathani province, and his mother is the director of a well-known private school in the same province. His older sister, called Sister Jen, loves and cares for Khem as if he were family.

Additionally, Chan's mother owns a medium-sized hotel business in Chonburi province. His eldest brother is now a surgeon, and his youngest brother is still in middle school. Chan's family environment is much stricter than Jett's. Since his mother raised three children on her own, all have grown up to be good and love each other deeply. Knowing Chan has friends, one of whom is quite wealthy, though a bit roguish, and the other, Khem, who is academically excellent and well-mannered, she feels less worried and lets Chan live his life to the fullest.

Every moment and many events that Khem went through were always shared with two people: the father abbot and the master.

After leaving the master's house that day, it seemed the master had switched from a button phone to a smartphone. Khachen, a friend of the master, helped him buy it.

The master, not knowledgeable about technology, was tricked into buying an iPhone Pro Max, which, along with being confusing to use, was as expensive as a motorcycle. He also sent one to Khem to have a matching set. This was during the time when the province approved the installation of a mobile signal tower near the master's village.

Khem and Pharan didn't talk on the phone often; they both had their own daily responsibilities. Mostly, they exchanged short messages before Khem went to bed, or sometimes Khem would send pictures of delicious food, funny pets, or beautiful sunsets.

And he discovered that the master also had a romantic side when he sent back similar pictures.

And finally, the day arrived when Jett, Chan, and Khem graduated together. The atmosphere at the graduation ceremony was hot and humid, but wherever one looked, there was joy, smiles, and laughter.

Unfortunately, on this day, neither master nor father abbot could travel to attend Khem's graduation, but Khem understood and held no resentment.

What Khem didn't expect was the arrival of Khachen, who came with a bouquet of flowers and the keys to a Benz, saying to Khem,

"Pharan asked me to bring you your graduation gift."

Khem was so shocked he almost fainted, but after recovering from the initial surprise, he accepted everything with a joyful smile, thanking Khachen for bringing the gifts. Before Khachen left, they didn't forget to take a selfie together to send to their master.

"I've transferred a hundred thousand baht to you. Use it to buy some snacks. By the way, where's Jett?"

"Oh, over there, hey! Khachen, don't go yet, that's too much money!"

At that moment, Khem didn't know what to do and chased after Khachen, trying to give the money back, knowing well that this person wouldn't listen or comply with his request.

After the graduation day ended, Khem drove the white Benz that master had given him as a gift, taking Jett and Chan to visit father abbot in their home province. When they arrived in the morning, they rushed to find Father Abbot at the temple pavilion and bowed to him.

"Paying respects, father abbot." Khem said, with Jett and Chan following suit.

Phra Pinto looked at his son with eyes full of affection, along with the two young men he had seen once a year since that time.

"Blessings upon you, layman."

"Father Abbot, I brought my diploma to offer to you." Khem took the diploma out of his bag, placed it on a golden tray, and respectfully presented it to the abbot, then stepped back and bowed three times.

"Father Abbot, thank you for raising and supporting me, for always helping and protecting me, sacrificing yourself for me all these years."

"..."

"I've gone through life and death situations. I've lived my life with caution, as you always taught me, and now I've graduated, capable of earning my own living. There's nothing for you to worry about."

"..."

"Father Abbot...would you like to disrobe and live with me?" Khem clasped his hands in prayer, looking at the abbot, hopeful that he might agree, but if not, Khem knew he could only accept whatever decision was made.

Phra Pinto smiled slightly, his eyes clear and filled with compassion and pride for his son. However, returning to a layman's life at this point was something he felt he could no longer do.

"You don't need to worry about me. I am well and happy with my ordination. Leaving worldly life behind to follow the path of Dharma, I don't feel any distress."

"..."

"Today, what I've been waiting for has come true. That is, to see you living the life you dreamed of since childhood, graduating, having a job, smiling like other young people. That's all I need to feel at peace."

"..."

"From now on, I will continue to live by the principles of a monk until the end of my days."

Khem smiled before nodding, having already anticipated that the abbot would choose this path.

"..."

"Whenever you wish to see me, just come and visit. While you still have the strength, do what needs to be done, don't leave anyone waiting for too long."

Khem's heart skipped a beat, and he blushed slightly, knowing that once, Pharan had come here to see father abbot, but he had no idea what they might have discussed.

Once he understood father abbot's wishes, Khem didn't think to challenge or persuade him otherwise. Instead, he changed the subject to health, the upcoming temple fair, and shared his near-future plans, with Jett and Chan answering questions along the way.

When it was time to leave, Khem, Jett, and Chan bowed to his father together, then looked up with cheerful faces.

"Paying respects and farewell, father abbot. Next holiday, I'll make time to visit again."

"May blessings be upon you, and may you all travel safely."

After these words were spoken, all three raised their hands in prayer and said in unison, "Sadhu."

By a little after ten at night, Khem, Jett, and Chan arrived at the master's village.

Upon arrival, they parked the car at the village chief's house because they wanted to reminisce about old times. They shouldered their bags and walked to the master's house.

The night air in the village was quite cold, especially when they walked through the banana and rubber tree plantations towards the master's home, it felt even darker and colder.

Everything around was eerily silent, with only the faint sound of the wind. But this time was different from before because Chan was with them.

Just a few dozen meters from master's house, Khem took the opportunity to hand all his belongings to Jett, saying,

"Take care of these, Jett. I'll go ahead." And with that, he sprinted off, ignoring his friends' protests which were loud enough to scare the birds.

"Hey, Khem, what's the hurry? Wait for me!"

Khem reached the master's house first. He stifled a laugh when he saw the master reading a Dharma book, waiting on a bamboo bed in front of the house.

Pretending not to notice that the master was reading the book upside down, Khem quickly approached. The master set the book down as Khem sat down beside him.

Khem met master's eyes and then slowly bowed down at his feet.

Once again, the master lifted his hand to gently hold Khem's face. After a moment, Khem looked up and smiled.

"I'm back, master."

The master's slender fingers brushed the hair from in front of Khem's eyes, then flicked his forehead gently.

"What did I tell you to call me?" Khem bit his lip softly, his face flushed as he remembered that the master had recently asked him to change how he addressed him from "master" to something else. Khem wasn't quite used to this yet.

"..."

"Phii Phim..."

"What was that?"

"I am back."

The change in the term of address indicated a new form of relationship between us, and this nickname was one that only Pharan's mother used to call him.

After his mother passed away, Pharan hadn't heard it until today.

As if time had stopped, Khem was held still by the master's dark eyes. The distance between them gradually shortened until he could feel the cool, moist tip of the master's nose touching his cheek.

And then, his lips were kissed gently and sweetly, with the master's hand behind his neck, preventing him from leaning back.

At that moment, Jett arrived in front of the master's house, but before he could see anything, Chan, who was right behind him, spun him around,

pulled out a cold powder from his side bag, poured it into his hand, and immediately smeared it on Jett's face.

"Yikes, what the hell, man, Chan, it stings my eyes!"

At that time, the full moon shone brightly, adorned by a sky full of twinkling stars.

The cool breeze and familiar atmosphere warmed the heart.

Accompanied by the howl of the spotted dog welcoming everyone back home, ready to start a new life together.

THE END

Special Chapter 1: Kathin and Loy Krathong Festival

This year, the temple's Kathin festival ceremony coincides with the Loy Krathong festival. The villagers decided to hold the Kathin almsgiving in the morning, and the Loy Krathong festival in the evening.

Khem loves the Kathin festival because there's a lot of delicious food. However, he doesn't enjoy the Loy Krathong festival as much because he nearly drowned twice in his life, which left a deep impression, and he needs time to get over it.

Khem returned to Pharan just in time for both events. This year, he planned to make palm sugar sweets to distribute at the temple's alms hall, along with his team, Jett, and Chan.

In the morning, Khem woke up Jett and Chan to clean the house and prepare for the merit-making event.

Jett was groggy and didn't want to wake up, having stayed up late playing a game with friends. Chan had to carry him out of the house to wash his face and brush his teeth. Jett was so sleepy he nearly fell into the sink while brushing his teeth, but Chan and Khem held him back by his shirt collar.

What a pity...

After cleaning the house, they took turns bathing. Khem, who dressed first, went out to make some hot ginger tea to wake up Pharan, who was still in his room.

The golden teak door was gently pushed open, and Khem walked in with a glass of ginger water, placing it on the bedside table. He then knelt on the floor and softly called out to the person sleeping, who was turned towards him.

What kind of person. Even asleep, he's still handsome.

"Master, wake up, it's morning." He said.

"..." But there was no response. Khem felt the heat rising in his face, knowing well that Pharan was already awake but just wouldn't open his eyes.

"Phii Phim." Pharan's sweet, just-awoken eyes slowly opened to look at Khem before closing again. Not only that, but he also shifted, expanding the space beside the bed, and slapped the empty spot three times.

Khem clenched his lips, then slowly moved to lie down where indicated. He placed his head gently on Pharan's strong arm, and Pharan's other arm came around his waist, Khem's hands loosely clasped together over his chest, unsure where to put them since today Pharan was only wearing silky blue pajama pants.

Khem's heart beat erratically as he stared at the onxy-and-white lotus tattoo on Pharan's neck. Even though this wasn't their first time, he still felt a bit uneasy.

In the past, Khem and Pharan had never had a deep physical relationship. Everything had started from zero, slowly developing over many years until now, where they could lie together in bed and listen to each other's breath in the morning.

"Five minutes." Khem said. Pharan hummed in a low grunt in acknowledgment, and Khem closed his eyes too.

When the time was up, both men, lying loosely embraced, opened their eyes simultaneously.

Khem got up first to hand the now comfortably warm ginger water to Pharan, who got up after him. Then he went to prepare the clothes ironed the night before, socks, and polished shoes, setting everything except personal items like underwear at the foot of the bed.

"Come here." Pharan called in a deep voice, beckoning Khem with a wave. Khem approached and knelt between Pharan's legs.

Pharan touched Khem's left cheek gently before pressing his cold nose against the pink flush on the right side.

Khem recently learned that this is the body language Pharan uses to express "thank you."

After that, around six in the morning, Uncle-Lah's truck, which volunteered to pick up instead of the village chief, arrived and parked in front of the house. Uncle-Lah got out of the truck to help carry things from the kitchen and load them into the truck bed, including the Kathin tree that Pharan co-sponsored as he does every year. Once everything was loaded, they set off for the temple.

Upon arrival, they helped unload everything from the truck. Many of Pharan's students who came to participate in the Kathin merit-making event

greeted him upon seeing him, helping to carry the items and the Kathin tree down from the truck bed.

The atmosphere at the temple had tents, tables, and chairs set up to facilitate those giving and receiving alms. Jett started a fire in the charcoal stove while Khem and Chan mixed the dough for palm sugar sweets before steaming them. Meanwhile, the head monk was invited to the main pavilion with the Kathin tree for the ceremony. He would return after the ceremony.

The sweet aroma of palm sugar sweets filled the air, attracting villagers to line up for them. Each bag contained five pieces of sweets.

After the Kathin ceremony concluded, the atmosphere became even more lively and chaotic as people started to leave the pavilion. Khem, Jett, and Chan were busy making and distributing sweets until their hands were stained.

To top it off, when Khem's distribution table was visited by the "the master" or the head monk, whose charisma seemed to make the already long line even longer, the trio was sweating profusely, panting heavily after distributing all the sweets.

"You did well." Pharan said, gently ruffling Khem's soft hair. Khem smiled at the praise, his face still flushed from the heat, but his heart full of joy from the merit-making.

"Have you eaten anything yet, team? Are you hungry?" Khem asked.

Pharan shook his head slightly, wiping away a bead of sweat from Khem's cheek.

"I was waiting for you."

Khem nodded in acknowledgment, quickly helping Jett and Chan gather all the things together on the table. After they found something to eat, they would load everything back into the truck to take home and clean.

Once finished, Chan lured Jett away by saying he wanted a thermal cup as a prize at the shooting booth but wasn't good at shooting. Hearing this, Jett rolled up his sleeves and headed straight there.

Chan is really smart, Khem genuinely admires him...

"Let's go." Pharan loosely held Khem's hand and led him away to grab something to eat. This scene had gradually become a familiar sight for the villagers. They thought that soon enough, they'd have the honor of attending the celebration for Master Pharan and Khem.

Today, Pharan wore a long-sleeved white Chinese collar cotton shirt with the sleeves rolled up, revealing his tattoo. His usual black sunglasses were

tucked into his shirt collar since it wasn't very sunny, accompanied by well-fitted black slacks and leather shoes.

Khem, on the other hand, wore a matching cotton outfit, but with short sleeves that were slightly more form-fitting, along with black jeans and white sneakers, looking quite chic. Wherever they went, people would wave at them, offering food until they had to call someone to help carry everything.

One was a benefactor to the entire village, and the other was a charming, sweet-talking youngster who always brought back gifts from his school breaks. How could they not be loved and cherished by everyone?

As evening approached, it was time for the Loy Krathong festival. Jett was especially excited because the temple was hosting a retro dance, thanks to his father who arranged it to keep Jett from going out into the city, unlike the last time when he got into trouble.

Pharan, having been out in the sun all day, was feeling weak and had been asleep since returning home around three in the afternoon. Although Khem wanted to invite him to join the Loy Krathong festival, he didn't dare wake him, so he decided to let Pharan stay at home and buy some food to bring back later.

"Feeling sorry?" Jett asked Khem, who was watching couples floating their krathongs. Khem quickly shook his head.

"No way, ouch, why did you hit my head?"

"Who are you trying to fool?"

"Well..." Khem wanted to say he wasn't really sad, but under the gaze of Jett, who was like a second mother to him, he had to shut up.

Actually, he was a bit sad. In the past, Khem had always celebrated Loy Krathong in Bangkok because it wasn't during school holidays. This year was the first time he was here with Pharan during the festival.

Seeing Khem's eyes moisten, Jett felt a pang in his heart.

"Oh, come on. Don't you dare cry." Chan pushed up his glasses and grumbled.

"Khun Jett, why would you want to make Khun Khem upset?"

"Oh, sorry, sorry, I'll go win a stuffed toy for you with a balloon dart." Jett consoled Khem by patting his shoulder, and all Khem could do was nod in a subdued manner.

After they had their fun, they went to float their krathongs at the lotus pond. Upon arrival, Jett told Khem to wait here and dragged Chan to buy

krathongs.

After arriving, Khem felt he didn't want to participate in the Loy Krathong festival anymore, because the memory of losing Grandma-Si, Ekk, and Thong came back to haunt him, and the incident happened right here...

While standing still, lost in old memories, someone came to stand behind him, holding out a krathong made from bread shaped like a lotus flower.

"What's on your mind?"

A familiar voice asked softly. Khem bit his lip, quickly wiped away a tear, and took the krathong before turning to smile at the newcomer.

"Phii Phran." Pharan nodded, gently stroking Khem's head to comfort him.

"Why didn't you wake me?" Khem asked, looking down slightly.

"I saw that you were tired, so I didn't dare to wake you up." Pharan said, caressing Khem's cheek with affection.

"You could have woken me."

"Tell me if you want to go somewhere, or do something." The tender brown eyes conveyed so much love and reverence that words couldn't describe, Khem could only nod slightly in response.

"Yes, next time I will tell you."

"Alright, let's go."

Pharan led Khem by the hand to the spot for floating the krathongs, passing by Jett who stood dumbfounded because he had bought the most magnificent and expensive banana leaf krathong shaped like a swan, intended to impress Khem, ignoring Chan's warnings. Chan watched Khem go with a sense of relief.

He was sure that the head monk would follow.

"Let's go float ours too." Said Chan, pushing Jett to follow the head monk and Khem.

At that time, the full moon's double illumination lit up the night sky, accompanied by a myriad of fireworks bursting and displaying their beauty, captivating everyone's gaze.

The bread krathong shaped like a lotus was adorned with incense and candles, lit up, and lifted for a prayer. They asked for forgiveness from Mother Ganga, wishing for blessings upon the dearly departed for eternal happiness, and for themselves and those still by their side to live a life of peace, joy, and harmony forevermore.

After the prayers, Khem and Pharan gently placed their krathong onto the water, pushing it away softly. Khem laughed when he saw small and large fish swimming around their krathong, seemingly to receive the prayers.

Jett and Chan, upon floating their krathongs, felt an overwhelming sense of joy, especially Jett, whose krathong floated prominently and majestically on the river, more so than anyone else's. However, he soon shrieked in frustration when a village child surfaced from the water to dismantle his krathong, searching for coins even though it hadn't floated far.

Jett's face flushed with anger; he stood up, rolled up his sleeves, and pointed at the child.

"Are you Granny Pia's grandson? You're dead meat!"

"Khun Jett, don't..."

Splashhhhhhhhh!

With nothing else to be done, Chan closed his eyes, accepting the water that splashed onto his face, feeling a sense of resignation beyond words.

Special Chapter 2: Tales from Khachen

Khachen was staying at Pharan's house during this period because the whole month was dedicated to ordination ceremonies for the villagers' children. His primary aim was to enjoy free liquor and listen to the lively traditional music, as he loved being social.

His secondary goal was to rest his mind and body from exhaustion, as there was no place in the world more peaceful and serene than Pharan's home.

"Phii Khachen, what would you like to eat today?"

Plus, there was a little chef always ready to whip up delicious meals, which added to the envy of others.

"Do you have any fish? I'm craving something hot." He said as he sat down on a chair, resting his face on his arm, and closed his eyes.

Khem, who was peeling garlic next to him, nodded slightly in acknowledgment.

"Sure, once I'm done peeling the garlic, Khem will make tom yum with snapper for you to eat."

Khachen slowly lifted his head, resting his chin on his hand as he looked at Khem. His gray-blue eyes flickered with something before he spoke softly.

"Nong Khem, has Pharan ever told you stories about the old days?"

Khem furrowed his brows slightly, then shook his head.

"He never has, and I didn't dare to ask."

"Do you want to hear?" Khem looked around, then met Khachen's gaze and replied hesitantly,

"Would that be okay? Won't Phii Phran get angry?"

Khachen let out a soft laugh, his gray-blue eyes sparkling with flirtatious fun.

Khem had to admit that Khachen was very handsome, with a charm that enticed like a flower emitting a sweet fragrance that constantly attracted beautiful butterflies.

Different from Pharan. If likened to a flower, he would be more like a lotus, worthy of reverence and worship.

In terms of looks, they were on par, but when it came to being approachable, Khachen took the lead by far.

Because with Pharan, only Khem is allowed to approach him; others are off-limits!

"It's not something that needs to be kept such a secret, what do you say, do you want to hear it?" Khem nodded quickly, his light brown eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Yes, I want to."

Khachen began to tell the story from the time he first met Pharan when they were both fifteen, on the first day of enrollment at the vocational college. Both Khachen and Pharan had chosen to study in the electronics engineering department.

Back then, their good looks were the talk of the college. Everyone wanted to get to know them.

Pharan was quiet and rather reserved, focused solely on his studies, not interested in socializing, while Khachen was friendly, always smiling, fun-loving, and enjoyed social interactions. Plus, with his relatively wealthy background, it wasn't long before he had many followers.

We two were not in each other's circles, but one day fate brought us together due to what is called a school project, where we had to draw lots to choose partners, and we both ended up with the same number.

At the time, Khachen thought he was lucky to be paired with Pharan. One reason was because Pharan was incredibly smart, having scored the highest in the last exam, while Khachen was not particularly adept at studying, but rather at using money to buy people. So, he proposed that Pharan should do all the work and he would pay him.

"Do you know what he told me that day?" Khem mused, then tried to guess.

"If it's the Phii Phim I know, he definitely wouldn't take the money and would insist on working together." Khachen laughed heartily, pleased with the answer.

"Exactly, he's your boyfriend, after all. He rejected my offer of ten thousand to do all the work alone and told me to meet him under the school building on Saturday before he walked out of the classroom."

"So, what did you do?"

"I was stunned. That was the first time in my life someone refused my money, especially not a small amount for a sixteen-year-old."

That was the first instance that made Khachen truly interested in Pharan, and it led him to reflect on his own behavior of using money to gain favor with others. However, being young, he hadn't yet fully grasped whether his actions were right or wrong.

But if he wanted to find an answer to this question, he would have to immerse himself in the company of the person who provoked such questions.

Two days later, on the appointed day, while Khachen was waiting at a traffic light on his big bike, several motorbikes surrounded him, telling him to follow them. Khachen immediately sensed he was in trouble but was curious to see what would happen next, so he followed willingly.

They led him to an abandoned warehouse in a secluded area, a common spot for rival student groups to settle disputes, and Khachen remembered that day well.

The ones waiting were a group of students from a rival technical course at his college, around twenty in number. Before any words were exchanged, someone attacked him.

That was Khachen's first encounter with physical fighting, and unfortunately, he wasn't particularly good at using force.

Just when he was about to be overwhelmed, right before someone kicked him in the stomach, Pharan appeared out of nowhere and pushed the attacker away with a chest bump, sending him flying back.

At sixteen, Pharan was nearly 180 centimeters tall, with an intimidating and chilling presence. His sharp, cold eyes could make one shiver all over. His deeply lined lips moved constantly, speaking something. Khachen noticed that some of the rivals stopped in their tracks, others were confused and dazed, and in the blink of an eye, they were all knocked down by Pharan's powerful punches.

After handling everything, Pharan sauntered over and sat cross-legged beside Khachen, who was lying there in pain, watching the scene unfold with astonishment.

Then he said something even more shocking,
"Get up. Do you want to work?"

Upon hearing this, Khem burst out laughing so hard he choked, causing Khachen to pour water into a glass for him. After drinking, Khem asked

excitedly,

"Is that true?"

Khachen smirked,

"Absolutely true. I was nearly dead from the pain at that time."

"And then what did Khachen do?"

"What else could I do? I handed him the keys to my big bike to drive, and I got on the back." Khem laughed so much his face turned red.

"Phii Phran is so cool."

"Don't fall in love." Khem laughed again.

"And what happened after that?"

After that incident, they found out the cause of the other side's grudge. One reason was that Khachen was very good-looking, attracting many girls from their department to pursue him. The second reason was that there had been a longstanding rivalry between Khachen's department and the other. That's all there was to it.

But one thing Khachen learned was that in life-or-death situations, if you don't know how to defend yourself, you could end up hurt like he did that day. And how fortunate it was that Pharan came to his aid without expecting anything in return.

Khachen had never truly appreciated the concept of "friendship" before, as everyone approached him for his looks or wealth. But Pharan was entirely different from those people.

After that day, Khachen decided to stick close to Pharan, learning numerous valuable lessons, until a bond was formed that could not be severed, no matter how much Pharan might want to cut it off.

"And in that kind of social setting, has the master ever had a drink?" Khem asked out of curiosity. Even he himself, sometimes for social reasons, had to drink, though not much because he had a weak tolerance.

"Hmm, occasionally, yeah. He's tried everything once just to know, but he didn't like it."

"And what about women?" Khem blushed, not daring to continue, while Khachen burst into loud laughter, nodding cheerfully before saying,

"Yep, when he was eighteen, nineteen, Pharan wasn't to be underestimated. He had plenty of admirers, but he never had a girlfriend. He didn't like anyone messing with his personal life."

Before Khachen could finish speaking, the subject in question approached silently from behind.

Pharan extended his hand to the side, took a tray from Chan, and immediately used the edge of the tray to hit Khachen on the head with full force, causing a sharp screech that rang in everyone's ears.

"Have you talked enough? Move away, sit further."

"You cruel person! We're friends!" Pharan raised the tray again, prompting Khem to quickly intervene. Khachen took the opportunity to leap over the table to escape. Not content with just that, he grabbed some garlic that Khem had just peeled and threw it at Pharan, teasing that Pharan looked like a vampire. Annoyed as he already was, Pharan took off his shoe and threw it, leading to quite a commotion.

Chan shook his head in exasperation, thinking it was fitting that Khun Jett called him a master...

Once Khachen had run off, Pharan turned to the person clinging to his arm and asked softly, "Do you believe him?"

Khem blinked, "Phii Khachen, are you lying?"

Pharan shook his head.

"He's not lying, but he exaggerates."

Khem laughed brightly, soothing Pharan's shoulder to calm him down, then smiled and said,

"The past doesn't matter, what's important is how you are now."

They had been through many good and bad times together, and the past had no bearing on Khem's feelings anymore. It was just another humorous story to him.

"I don't feel bad about Phii Phran's past that Phii Khachen told, right? Phii Phran, you are just a normal person, it's natural to have trial-and-error moments during one's youth, I have felt that way too sometimes."

Khem explained with a cheerful voice, his eyes softening with affection.

"And how about now?"

Khem felt a flutter seeing Pharan's sweet gaze.

"Well, you are a good person, kind-hearted, likes to do good deeds, helps people in need, and is very nice."

"And what else?"

Khem bit his lip, his face turning red as he looked down and said softly,

"You are my boyfriend."

This answer brought an immediate small smile to Pharan's lips before he leaned down to kiss Khem's smooth forehead as a reward.

"Very good."

After this, he would settle this with Khachen several times later.

Special Chapter 3: Conclusion of Chan and Jett

After an incident where they faced life and death and glimpsed each other's past lives, Jett started avoiding eye contact with Chan and gradually distanced himself. This was in contrast to Chan, who remained unaffected and continued living as usual.

For Jett, everything seemed confusing and chaotic, not knowing how to handle these feelings.

Jett values his freedom, having been raised with little restriction, making him self-centered and hating to be confined. He knew finding someone who could handle his mood swings, more fickle than a storm, was rarer than finding a needle in the ocean. He also had no intention of committing unless he genuinely felt love. Until now, he had never been in a relationship.

After that day, Chan directly asked Jett what he wanted to do about their relationship, to which Jett replied, "I need time to think and be sure."

Until that day arrived, Jett wanted Chan to wait patiently, and Chan complied with Jett's words effortlessly. They each continued living their own lives, with Jett often avoiding being alone with Chan, frequently going out to bars with Khachen, leaving Khem and Chan together in the room, as neither of them liked going to such places.

Over time, Khem began to sense something was amiss. One day in their dorm room, he asked Chan, who was staring blankly at his plate without eating,

"Chan, is there something you want to tell me?" Chan turned to meet Khem's gaze, feeling he couldn't lie, and proceeded to tell Khem everything. From how he and Jett had seen their past lives, to his feelings for Jett.

Having experienced many things himself, Khem wasn't particularly shocked; instead, he gained a deeper understanding.

Regarding the relationship between Chan and Jett, Khem had long observed that they had always felt warmly towards each other. However, more recently, Jett had started to distance himself bit by bit, probably not wanting Khem to feel uncomfortable.

Asked if he felt hurt that they had kept this from him for years, Khem admitted he did feel a bit hurt, but his friends' feelings were more important to him.

Khem nodded in understanding and gently patted Chan's shoulder in sympathy.

"I understand, Chan. I've been through something similar; it's really not easy." Chan looked at Khem silently before lowering his eyes out of guilt.

"I'm sorry for keeping it hidden for so many years." Chan apologized. Khem smiled and shook his head.

"That's okay, but now, I want to ask you something, and I want you to answer honestly." Chan nodded.

"Yes."

"Between Jett from the past life and this one, who do you like more?"

Chan thought about what Khem had said and soon had an answer. He pushed up his glasses and spoke directly to Khem,

"This life."

"..."

"I'm gay, Khun Khem."

Khem choked on air. The statement was straightforward, easy to interpret; in this life, Chan liked men, whereas in the past life, Jett was a woman but is now a man, so naturally, Chan of this life would like Jett of this life.

Moreover, the personalities of both Chan and Jett in their past and present lives were quite different, making it not too hard to distinguish their feelings.

The only issue was Jett, who still hadn't accepted his own feelings.

"It's been three years now. What will you do? Will you keep waiting like this?"

Chan sighed softly before picking up an alcoholic fruit juice can to drink in an attempt to relieve stress, then set it down and stared at it.

"I don't know how much longer I can keep waiting for him like this."

Khem blinked.

"Why?"

Chan's eyes behind his glasses turned to meet Khem's again before he started to explain something.

It was something Chan had been hiding from both Jett and Khem for a long time.

The unsolvable problem led Khem and Chan to try sitting down to drink at the bar, just like Jett liked to do.

Before deciding to come, Khem had already texted Pharan but didn't tell Jett for certain reasons. He only took a photo of Chan in a black T-shirt, with his undercut hairstyle slicked back, not wearing glasses but contact lenses, turning to look at the stage, holding a glass of liquor in his hand, and uploaded it to his story with the caption:

'My friend is single.'

The most cunning smile Khem had ever made in his life was released gently after clicking confirm.

The rest was just a waiting game.

Soon, Jett sent a message asking where Khem was. Khem saw it but chose not to reply.

Almost at five in the evening, Chan's senior from his faculty walked over to greet them and invited them to join his table, which wasn't far away, where both men and women were sitting together.

Chan was about to decline out of concern for Khem, but Khem nodded in agreement and said he'd join later.

"What are you planning, Khun Khem?" Chan turned to look at him with a knowing squint. Khem responded with a mischievous smile amidst the loud music, leaning in to whisper in Chan's ear,

"Just wait and see my handiwork."

Khem led Chan to sit with their well-known senior in an empty spot. Many of these seniors were also part of the volunteer club, making it comfortable for them to talk and drink together, even though Khem's glass only contained plain fruit juice.

Khem took a picture of Chan talking to another senior, a woman, who was sitting next to him. Though their conversation mostly revolved around academic topics, the photo suggested something more to an onlooker's imagination.

Khem posted the photo to his story with the caption, **'So cute.'**

Soon enough, Khachen, who was expected to be with Jett, replied to the story with,

"Are you teasing your friend?"

Khem chuckled softly and sent back a sticker of a sly cat.

Khem checked the watch that Pharan had given him as a birthday gift and began a countdown.

When he received another message from Khachen, Khem nudged Chan and whispered, "Good luck, Chan. I'm heading back."

"Wait a moment..." Before Chan could grasp the meaning of Khem's words, Khem had already quickly left. Then, someone's silhouette approached and overlapped with Chan's.

Turning around, Chan saw it was Jett. They locked eyes for a few seconds before Chan asked,

"How did you get here, Khun Jett?" Jett didn't answer; he just nodded to greet others they knew well, except for the female senior sitting next to Chan. Then, he grabbed Chan's shirt, pulling him up from the seat and dragging him out.

Once they reached the parking lot, Jett extended his hand and said in a cold voice,

"The car keys."

"Khun Jett..."

"Give them!" Chan sighed softly before handing over the car keys to Jett and walked to sit in the passenger seat, only because Jett wasn't drunk, while he himself was starting to feel dizzy.

When they arrived at Jett's condo, Jett seemed to have calmed down, while Chan's emotions were rising, his thoughts becoming more confused.

"You sleep here, I'll go sleep with Khem." Jett said after pulling Chan into the room. As he turned to leave, Chan grabbed his wrist, pulling him back to face each other.

"Why are you acting like this?" Since they met, Jett had never been asked this question by Chan before, so when he heard it for the first time, he was caught off guard.

"I just came to bring you back, why do you have to ask? Do you have a problem with that!?"

"Why do you have to bring me back? I just went to drink with friends, like how you like to drink with Phii Khachen. Did I do something wrong?"

"And why were you sitting next to that woman!!" After Jett's emotional outburst, the room fell into a long silence before Chan spoke up.

"Khun Jett, are you jealous?"

"I'm not..."

"Khun Jett, do you know, every time you go out with Phii Khachen, I feel the same way."

"..."

"I don't know what your past was like, why you seem so close, but I didn't dare to ask. No matter how upset I was, I had to endure it."

"..."

"Every time you run to him, I want to pull you back and tell you not to go, but you wouldn't listen to me, would you?"

"I..." Jett wanted to argue but couldn't find the words, leaving him stunned as Chan grew increasingly angry and resentful.

"I eat whatever you give me, go wherever you drag me, do whatever you order me to, wait whenever you tell me to, like some kind of pet."

"..."

"But pets have hearts, they have their limits too." Jett furrowed his brows, feeling his heart clench as he sensed something in what Chan had just said.

"What exactly are you trying to say?"

"Khun Jett, you have time to reflect on yourself before we graduate. After that, I won't be able to wait for you anymore."

Jett's eyes widened, his heart racing, prompting him to grab Chan by the collar and ask urgently.

"Why can't you wait? Where are you going? Or are you sick?"

Chan held Jett's wrist, gently pulling it away while looking into his eyes as if searching for something, before revealing the truth to Jett.

"I'm not going anywhere, and I'm not sick."

"..."

"But I have to get married to a woman chosen by my mother."

The opportunity Khem had created for his close friends to reconcile had fallen apart. Upon hearing that Chan had to marry after graduation, Jett was both shocked and confused, deciding to walk out of the room without a word. Chan just stood there, staring at the door that had just closed, for nearly an hour.

Because of the internship period, both went their separate ways to fulfill their respective duties.

Jett remained Jett, even though he was deeply troubled; he pretended everything was fine in front of close friends like Khem, refusing to involve Khem in his personal problems, choosing instead to bear it alone.

As for Chan, who was interning in a more remote area, he went silent from that day on.

Two months passed, and the internship period finally ended.

Today, Jett was staying over at Khem's place. Although everything seemed normal, Khem could sense how much Jett had changed. He looked thinner from not having seen each other for nearly two weeks, had dark circles under his eyes like someone who hadn't rested enough, and often seemed lost in thought.

Moreover, since that day, Jett hasn't hang out with Khachen as much as he used to.

Khem bit his lip slightly before saying,

"Jett, shall we go eat outside...?"

"..."

"Jett!" Jett, who had been staring blankly at his phone, jolted up.

"Huh, what?"

"I asked if you want to go eat outside?"

"Oh, yeah, let's go, I'm just hungry."

Khem shook his head slightly, knowing full well Jett was lying. He had been poking at his food for an hour, how could he be hungry? But Khem didn't want Jett to mope around in the room on this day off and wanted to take him out for some fresh air.

Upon arriving at the train market, Jett's mood seemed to improve with the sight of many people, the soft glow of lights, and the delicious food. Khem hoped to use this relaxed time to have an open conversation with Jett about his relationship with Chan.

However, they hadn't walked far when Jett suddenly stopped, causing Khem to halt as well.

What Jett saw was Chan, holding bags full of food, walking arm in arm with a beautiful woman.

After their argument, for the past two months, Jett had been reflecting on what he truly wanted, and he thought he might want to talk to Chan one more time to be sure. But he still held onto his pride because he expected Chan to be the one to reach out first, like he always did.

But it seemed it was too late now.

Jett felt a sharp pain in his heart, as if it were about to fragment, and he unconsciously raised his hand to touch his chest lightly.

"Jett...Jett!" Jett ran off from that spot without even hearing Khem calling after him. Khem could only look back in shock at Chan, who seemed taken aback and at a loss, and the woman who looked equally confused by the situation. Khem had to gather the things Jett had dropped and run after him.

Jett was waiting in the car for Khem. No matter how heartbroken he was, he didn't dare let Khem go back alone.

Jett just didn't know what to do, and he was afraid of showing an unpleasant expression...

When Khem got to the car, he opened the door and sat down, his large eyes full of concern. But since Jett had never discussed this with Khem before, Khem didn't dare to ask or express what was on his mind.

When they reached the apartment, before Jett left for elsewhere, Khem spoke up in a voice that he tried to keep from trembling,

"Jett, I'm worried about you."

"..."

"If there's anything I can help with, Jett, tell us." Khem said, seeing the pain in Jett's eyes. Even though Jett had never told him anything, Khem was already aware of everything.

He was just waiting for Jett to say it himself.

Jett was about to lose Chan, and it was causing pain to his close friend, Khem, in a similar way.

Due to stubbornness and clinging to pride, everything had come to this point.

Continuing like this, they would surely lose someone important.

After hanging up with someone, Khem sat by his phone for hours, hoping that Jett would call back.

Time passed until nearly midnight when Khem, who had been dozing off, was startled awake by a call. Seeing who it was, he smiled broadly and answered immediately.

"Jett."

"Khem. If I want to do something risky, will you come with me?" Khem laughed warmly upon hearing this, nodding at the phone.

"Yes, come pick me up quickly."

Jett and Khem left Bangkok just after midnight and arrived at Jett's house in Ubon Ratchathani around nine in the morning.

Jett's house was a large two-story concrete home located in one of the districts, with a spacious lawn and considerable surrounding area, including a large swimming pool.

Luckily, it was a holiday, so both Jett's parents were home, and it seemed they were waiting for them.

"Dad, Mom, hello."

"Hello."

Jett and Khem greeted Jett's parents with a wai, who were sitting on the guest sofa. They returned the wai, then Jett's mother beckoned them to come closer.

"Come inside and have some water, children."

Jett and Khem quickly walked in, bowing. Jett stopped three meters away and then proceeded on his knees, and Khem followed suit. This unusually submissive behavior caused their father to burn his tongue on the coffee he was drinking.

The parents knew that if their son acted like this, it wasn't because he had committed a serious offense, but rather he was about to ask for something extraordinary.

"Dad, Mom, I have something to confess." Both parents grabbed their inhalers and nodded in readiness.

"Go ahead." Jett closed his eyes for a moment, then gathered the courage to say,

"I am gay."

Everything fell silent. There was no response, and Jett felt his heart sink, slowly opening his eyes to see the puzzled expressions on his parents' faces.

"And the? You came all the way from Bangkok to tell us this? You've really wasted time from work!"

"Uh, uh, aren't you and mom mad at me?"

"We raised you, not your sexual orientation, which isn't a crime or murder; why would I be mad?" The father nodded in resignation.

"Yeah, if I told you to stop being gay, would you stop? You don't even listen to my simple orders."

Khem laughed, and Jett pouted, feeling embarrassed.

"Dad..."

"I asked what else, there must be more to this story, right?"

Jett nodded before recounting his relationship with Chan to Khem, along with his parents.

After finishing the story, he quickly crawled over to hug his father's leg with a pleading look, alternating glances between his mother.

"Dad, Mom, could you please propose marriage to Chan's family for me? If it gets any later, he'll end up marrying someone else, please."

"You brat, you are always causing trouble that could put me in jail. You want me to suddenly go and propose to someone at random, what if the

homeowner calls the police?"

"Oh, Dad, with your connections, who would dare arrest you?"

"I'll get straight to the point. No, no, if you're going to ask for his hand or have him ask for yours, both sides need to agree, you can't just decide on your own."

"No way, by the time you have time to talk about it, it'll be too late."

"What do you mean too late? If he's free today, talk today, here, and get it over with."

"Oh, and how are we supposed to talk here!"

"Just turn around and talk, you brat."

Hearing this, Jett's jaw dropped, and as he slowly turned, he saw Chan standing behind him, while Khem had disappeared from the scene.

"Sort it out, your mom and I will wait outside." Said Mrs. Jinda before she took her husband's hand and half-dragged, half-led him out of the room.

"Chan..." Jett called out unintentionally, confused and shocked to see him there, but before he could ask, Chan, who had been standing, walked over, knelt in front of him, and reached out to wipe away the tears streaming down Jett's face.

"Khun Jett, I'm sorry." Chan apologized. Upon hearing the apology, Jett regained his composure, quickly shaking his head, grabbing Chan's wrist tightly as if afraid he might disappear.

"I'm the one who should apologize, I'm sorry for making you wait so long, for being selfish and self-centered. I realize now how badly I've treated you." He finished speaking, then wiped his eyes and nose with his arm, tears flowing like a broken dam.

"Khun Jett..."

"Wait, let me finish." Chan nodded, perhaps shocked because he had never seen Jett cry this hard.

"Yes, I'm listening, Khun Jett, take your time to speak."

"About Phii Khachen, when I first met Master Pharan, I admired him as an idol because he was rich and cool. I respected Master Pharan for his magical skills, but with Khachen, I admired how he lived his life."

"..."

"When my dad first got into politics, it was quite dangerous, so he left me with Master Pharan and the village to look after me, in exchange for funds to develop the village. When my dad was still young, he was also left with Grandpa Sek in a similar way."

"..."

"Even though the master is strict, he took care of me very well, like a real father. But because of his strictness, I didn't go out much. Partly, it's also because of my own hot temper, fearing that going out would lead to trouble with others."

"..."

"But when I got to know Phii Khachen, whenever the master was busy, Phii Khachen would take me out often, from playgrounds, malls, to pubs and bars, showing me things I had never seen. At seventeen, I even tried drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, and had my first one-night stand with someone else."

Upon hearing this, Chan couldn't help but raise an eyebrow, feeling a mix of irritation and curiosity, prompting him to ask directly,

"With whom?"

Jett, unaware of Chan's thoughts, tried to remember.

"A woman, Phii Khachen, selected her for me. It's been a long time; I don't remember her face anymore. I just know she was young, but I made sure to take precautions and get tested for STDs every year. You don't need to worry."

"I wasn't worried about that...Never mind, go on."

"Yeah, during all those times, Phii Khachen was always watching over me. He taught me many things about life, making me respect him like a mentor. But when the master found out, he got furious and forbade Phii Khachen from contacting me until it was the right time, or in simpler terms, until I was more mature than I was then."

"..."

"So, to sum it up, Phii Khachen and I don't have the kind of relationship you misunderstood."

At the end of his sentence, Jett spoke softly. Chan nodded in understanding.

"Thank you for telling me." Jett bit his lip and wiped away another tear.

"Chan, I, can I have another chance? This time, I'll behave better. I won't be difficult. I won't be self-centered anymore. Please don't marry someone else."

Chan shook his head.

"It's not possible."

"Oh."

"Listen to me first." Jett fell silent, listening intently, while his hand gripped Chan's wrist, unwilling to let go.

"Khun Jett, I don't want you to force yourself or do something against your nature."

"..."

"For me, no matter how willful or harsh you might be, I can accept it all, as long as you stay by my side forever. Is that okay?"

Jett, still sobbing, nodded immediately.

"Have you stopped being mad at me?"

Chan smiled affectionately.

"Coming this far, I have to have forgiven you, right?"

Jett nodded, then furrowed his brow.

"Now tell me, who was that woman I saw that day?"

"Sister Nant is Phii Chet's wife, my sister-in-law."

Jett's jaw dropped in disbelief.

"Sister-in-law!?"

Chan nodded.

"Yes, that day, Phii Chet took Phii Nant to the hospital for a check-up, but he had an emergency, so he asked me to pick her up and take her home. On the way, we passed a market, so I stopped to buy some food for her."

"I've never seen her before."

"Phii Nant is a flight attendant, she's only at home for a few days a year. She decided to resign after getting pregnant. You'll probably see her more often now." Jett bit his lip, his face red with embarrassment, then nodded in acknowledgment.

But before they could get any sweeter, someone's voice rang out,

"Have you kids finished talking? I have an urgent meeting this afternoon."

The speaker was an elegant woman in her late forties, dressed in a light pink Thai formal attire, who had somehow been standing there unnoticed.

Her name was Lady Aranya, the owner of a medium-sized hotel business in Chonburi, or in other words, Chan's mother...

Jett's eyes widened in shock, he shouted,

"Auntie!"

Lady Aranya clicked her tongue; the potential son-in-law still had a knack for making people want to scold her until she cried, always the same, "What auntie? You should call me 'Mother'."

"What?"

"Alright, you can invite the elders now. I have some business to attend to; come out of the room, everyone." This time, Jett was so shocked he nearly fainted because, besides Khem, Pharan, Khachen, Chan's younger brother, his eldest brother, and his sister-in-law all walked out. And even...

"You're here too, eh? What on earth is this!?" Phii Jane put her hands on her hips, looking annoyed.

"What? When my brother is about to get engaged, of course, we should come."

"Engaged!?" And before Jett could actually pass out from shock, Chan calmly explained everything.

In summary, after the misunderstanding at the train market, Chan called Khem to explain everything and asked for his help. Khem then decided to call upon the head monk and Phii Khachen for assistance.

Pharan took the last flight of the day to Bangkok and then traveled with Phii Khachen to Chonburi to talk with Lady Aranya about Chan and Jett.

Everything wasn't as difficult as thought because, despite Lady Aranya being strict and concerned about her image, above all, she loved her children. Chan had always been an obedient child, never once rejecting the idea of marriage, so she was unaware that her middle son already had someone he loved and wanted to marry, and that this person was a man.

At first hearing, she found it hard to believe her son had homosexual inclinations, but when Chan confirmed it directly, she couldn't help but be shocked. However, since Chan had never been stubborn or asked for anything before, she was taken aback for a long time.

Apart from Chan's own admission, two other factors helped Lady Aranya accept this scenario: the imposing presence of the master, Pharan, and the ever-present aura of wealth emanating from Khachen, who sat there adding pressure.

Well, upon reflection, it didn't seem like there would be any real harm, and it might even bring more benefits, so she agreed. She booked plane tickets for the whole family to travel early in the morning, just before Jett and Khem arrived about half an hour later.

But because Chan wasn't sure how Jett felt about him, he decided to hide until Jett expressed his true feelings before revealing himself.

As if there was a blazing fire in Jett's eyes, Khem, who had been hiding behind Master Pharan, only managed to offer an apologetic grimace.

Meanwhile, Khachen, seeing that his beloved disciple had found his match, felt relieved because when Jett had been clingy like a child with his father, it had almost deprived him of his single man's freedom.

The engagement ceremony proceeded, albeit in a rush. Jett was still dizzy and confused, his emotions in a whirl.

"Khun Jett, are you okay?" Chan asked with a concerned look, while trying to put the engagement ring, provided by his mother, on Jett's left ring finger.

Jett glared at him.

"Put it on quickly! I'll deal with the rest later!"

After the impromptu engagement ceremony, in front of their significant witnesses, although Chan and Khem got pinched until their skin bruised for their role in cornering Jett, it seemed like our trio's bond had become even stronger.

Thanks to the sacred presence of Master Pharan and the wealth of Professor Khachen, this engagement could take place and conclude beautifully.

Amen...

Special Chapter 4: About the Two Crystal Balls in a Dream

On the night of a full moon, Khem was sleeping soundly alone in his new bedroom, separated from Jett and Chan to give them their privacy, and not sharing a room with Pharan as they had agreed to follow tradition and marry before sharing a bed comfortably.

Khem wanted some time to pursue his dreams, to work hard at what he loved for a while longer before getting married. During this period, he often traveled back and forth between Bangkok and Ubon Ratchathani, unable to bear the longing, including during the annual holidays this year.

After five years since the resolution of their dark times, Khem had never dreamt of anything, good or bad, until this night. In his dream, an elderly woman in white, whose face Khem couldn't see clearly, approached carrying a bamboo basket which she set down at the base of the staircase of a traditional Thai house, then left without a word.

Khem walked down the stairs and picked up the bamboo basket, his eyes following the elderly woman's back with a strange sense of empathy, yet he was happy to see that she was in good health.

Khem looked down at the bamboo basket in his arms, using his other hand to pull off the clean white cloth covering it, revealing two clear glass orbs the size of his fist sitting side by side.

These two glass orbs shimmered brilliantly, reflecting the sunlight in beautiful rays around them, warming his heart to the point of tears.

Khem woke up at that moment, and found his face wet with tears, his heart pounding so hard it hurt, prompting him to slowly get up because he couldn't sleep anymore.

Khem left his bedroom to knock on Pharan's door. He didn't wait long for a response before gently pushing the door open.

The sight that greeted him was the lamp on the bedside table that Pharan had left on for him. Upon reaching the bed, Khem immediately slid under the covers and nestled into the arms of the man who was asleep.

"Phii..."

"Hmm?"

"I had a dream." After saying this, the arm around his waist moved up, a large hand gently stroking his head before asking softly,

"What did you dream about?"

Khem recounted his entire dream to Pharan, and upon finishing, he heard a soft chuckle.

"There will be good news in the future." Khem, hearing this, nodded slightly against Pharan's chest.

"Let's hope it's true."

After that day, Khem returned to work in Bangkok to set up an art exhibition booth with other artists that would last for fourteen days.

Throughout those two weeks, there wasn't a single night where Khem didn't dream about the old woman and the two glass orbs, to the point where he couldn't focus on work, couldn't eat or sleep properly because he was constantly thinking about it.

Khem immediately went back to Pharan once the exhibition was over. When he arrived, Pharan, already aware of the situation, advised Khem to calm down, to chant and meditate to find peace, and then he checked Khem's birth chart. He found that the good news he had mentioned would indeed happen soon.

That night, Khem asked to share a room with Pharan because he was still feeling exhausted from the unsettling dreams he'd had over the past few days. Pharan, understanding, didn't object and spent three nights holding and soothing Khem until he fell into a deep sleep.

The next day, it was the date when representatives from the orphanage were supposed to come to pick up donations from the village, but no one showed up. When the village chief called to inquire, they learned there had been an electrical short circuit last night, causing a fire in the orphanage's cafeteria, damaging property but fortunately, no one was hurt.

Hearing this, Khem felt his heart sink, not wanting to think about what could have happened if the fire had spread to the building where the children were sleeping.

"The children must be so scared. I'm worried. Should we go check on them?" Khem turned to ask Pharan, who was slightly frowning, his expression also not looking so good.

Hearing his lover's request, Pharan nodded immediately, as he had been thinking the same.

"Hmm, let's go."

Pharan and Khem went back home to change into more formal and respectful attire. Pharan wore a light brown shirt with black fitted slacks that Khem had chosen for him, as they were going to a place with many children, and they didn't want the atmosphere to be too somber. Pharan understood Khem's reasoning and agreed to wear it, even though he had never worn light colors before.

Khem, in contrast, wore a crisp white collared shirt with well-tailored cream-colored pants, looking neat and composed. After getting dressed, they got into the white pearl Mercedes Benz that Khem had received as a graduation gift, with Pharan taking the driver's seat.

Usually, Pharan drove smoothly, not too fast or too slow, but today he seemed to be driving faster than usual. Although his face was calm, his dark eyes appeared tranquil, and his posture was as relaxed as always, Khem could sense that Pharan was eager to get there quickly.

Was there something waiting at the orphanage?

It took less than thirty minutes to reach the orphanage, which was bustling today due to the fire incident the night before. The few staff members were busy cleaning up the debris from the damaged building. Most of the materials were wood, and the other materials weren't of high quality, so an electrical short circuit wasn't surprising.

Upon getting out of the car, a young woman who served as one of the caretakers at the orphanage approached to greet them respectfully. She was often the representative who would take other staff members to collect donations at Pharan's village, so they were familiar with each other.

"Hello, master, Khun Khem." Pharan nodded in acknowledgment, and Khem returned her greeting with a respectful wai.

"Hello, Sister Namkang. I heard from the village chief so I came to visit, is the damage extensive?" She immediately gave a wry smile.

"Yes, it's quite extensive. We'll have to demolish and rebuild the cafeteria. We've applied for a budget but aren't sure when it'll come through. We've had to use our own money for now." Khem looked at her with sympathy, then turned his gaze to the main building where he saw children playing, and asked,

"With the cafeteria damaged like this, have the children had anything to eat this morning?" Namkang nodded.

"We were lucky to have some food ingredients left, and an electric skillet that wasn't damaged. This morning, the children had fried rice, but after one meal, the skillet broke." She shook her head and smiled as she spoke, but seeing her usually cheerful self looking so weary made Khem feel compassion; he gently tapped her hand to offer encouragement.

"It's okay, we'll help with the children's lunch."

Namkang seemed to see a light at the end of the tunnel. In the past, the master and the villagers had always helped, but in recent years, due to economic downturns and various reasons, many more orphans had been brought in, stretching their budget thin. She wiped away tears and immediately thanked both of them.

Since Khem wanted to ensure the children's lunch was nutritious, clean, and hygienic, he went out to the market to buy ingredients himself. He also purchased kitchen equipment for the orphanage with his own savings. However, due to the severe damage to the cafeteria, they had to cook outdoors. Fortunately, the sun wasn't too harsh today.

Meanwhile, Pharan arranged for workers to come and demolish and rebuild the cafeteria, offering to cover the labor costs and provide the highest-quality materials for construction. Once everything was set in motion, he came to help Khem distribute lunch to the children, not forgetting to remove his sunglasses, tucking them into his shirt collar.

The menu that Khem and the two regular cooks at the orphanage prepared included stir-fried mixed vegetables, clear soup with tofu and minced pork, and large seedless red grapes in compartmentalized trays. When it was time, the children lined up to receive their food. During this somewhat chaotic time, Khem didn't have the chance to notice who was who or their faces.

After distributing the food, the caretakers led the children to sit under trees and various spots to eat their lunch.

Hearing the laughter and seeing the happy smiles on everyone's faces, Khem couldn't help but smile broadly, feeling joyful himself.

Now that it was almost time to head back, Khem and Pharan were surrounded by children who came to receive toys and snacks. Khem noticed that Pharan seemed to be looking for something since they arrived.

But before Khem could ask, both of their trouser legs were gently tugged by small hands, prompting them to look down.

In front of them were twin boys, about three years old, with fair skin, round eyes, and faces so similar they looked like perfectly matched steamed buns, making it impossible to tell them apart.

The four stared at each other for a long moment, a feeling of familiarity overwhelming Pharan, who immediately sensed who they were, and Khem seemed to feel the same.

Before any greetings could be exchanged, the little twins moved in to hug their legs tightly, looking up with innocent eyes, and one of them said,

"Can me and my brother go live with you, please?" After the older one spoke to Pharan, the younger one hugging Khem's leg nodded in agreement.

Seeing the twin boys, Khem instantly understood the meaning of the two crystal balls in his dream. When he turned to look at Pharan, he could see the immense affection in his eyes. When Pharan met Khem's gaze and gave a slight nod, Khem was so happy he nearly cried.

At that moment, both Khem and Pharan bent down to pick up the twin boys, and Khem smiled and said,

"Yes, come live with daddy Pharan and me."

Pharan proceeded to apply for the adoption of the two children immediately without hesitation. After briefly inquiring about their background, they learned that three years ago, in the early morning, someone had left these two newborns, who seemed only a few days old, in front of this orphanage.

They were placed in an old bamboo basket, with no birth certificate or even a name, just a piece of paper with their date of birth. At the orphanage, they were simply called "the Twins." No one had dared to name them for some reason.

The process of adopting children from an orphanage involves legal steps where the adopting parents must meet all the legal qualifications, and they need certification from credible individuals before submitting their application to the court in the subsequent steps. Therefore, the twin boys had to remain at the orphanage until all procedures were completed.

The only issue was that Pharan and Khem were not legally married according to the requirements, and the country's laws did not yet recognize same-sex marriage. However, these issues were easily resolved with Pharan's financial and social influence.

Within two weeks, both twin boys were under the care of Pharan and Khem.

The twins were named as follows:

First, the older twin boy was named "Singharaj Ruangdech", nicknamed "Singh".

Second, the younger twin boy was named "Phayak Ruangdech", nicknamed "Sua".

These little twin boys had thick black hair and large, light brown eyes. The older one was talkative and sociable, while the younger was slightly more shy, but overall, they were easy to look after, eating when told to eat, sleeping when told to sleep.

The reason for choosing the nicknames Singh (Lion) and Sua was to remember the deceased Grandfather Sek and Grandma-Si.

After adopting the twins, after three days, Khem moved into the same room as Pharan. He didn't want to be apart in a way that might confuse the children, and he wanted to provide love and warmth to compensate for what they never received from their biological parents.

This morning, Khem woke up earlier than usual. The first sight he saw was Sua's forehead, then younger twin lying on his back facing the other way, with the older twin, Singh, lying face down on his chest, looking towards Khem, his small back supported by his new father's hand to prevent him from falling off.

Because the scene was too adorable to describe, Khem picked up his phone from the bedside to capture the moment for future memories, intending to collect many such moments as the children grew up. Then he gently woke everyone because today they had to do something.

Pharan woke up immediately. Khem noticed that even with the children, Pharan remained quiet and economical with words, but his actions were different; it was clear he spoiled the kids a lot. Singh, who was the clingier one, wasn't woken up but was carried into the bathroom.

Singh rested against his father's shoulder, comfortably listening to the sound of his father brushing his teeth.

As for the younger twin, he was easily startled, but when he saw his father holding his brother, he begged his mother to hold him too. In the end, he ended up no different from his brother when they went into the bathroom.

It took quite a while to bathe and dress both themselves and the children.

Now, Sing and Sua, dressed in traditional cotton outfits, stood in front of Pharan and Khem, extending their chubby arms for their parents to tie the sacred thread as a welcome ritual.

"May Sing be a good child, obedient and healthy." Khem said to the older twin. Sing nodded vigorously, puffing up his chest and declaring,

"I won't be naughty, won't give mommy a headache, promise!" Khem laughed before pulling his little son close to kiss his cheek lovingly.

On the other side, after Pharan tied the sacred thread for the younger one, he quietly blessed him,

"Listen to your mother." Sua nodded, his face turning red, and replied,

"I will listen to mommy, promise." Pharan's dark eyes softened with affection as he gently patted the boy's head.

The boys switched sides to receive the sacred thread from both parents. After that, Pharan and Khem carried the twins out of the house, walking through the rubber tree and banana plantations back into the village, with the spotted dog following closely to ensure their safety. The villagers had prepared a traditional welcoming ceremony at Grandma Mai's house.

When they arrived, they sat in a circle with the community elders who had arranged for the welcoming ritual. The four of them sat cross-legged, with the twins' hands folded in prayer by their parents, before Grandma Mai began to chant the welcoming verse.

"Shri, Shri, this day is a good day, the day the child was born, bringing great joy to our home, ten months and ten days in the womb, brave and strong, born like the moon, a noble offspring to cherish, gazed upon by countless eyes, you, the tender young one, come from afar,

From the celestial city,

From the sacred grove of the three realms, adorned by the earth, from the heavens, born under a lucky star, you come at the king's hour, born into this human world, a blessing for father and mother, to join the family under the grandparents' roof, to be a precious jewel, to be of great worth.

You are born, lovely and brave, strange as gold, with shining black hair, eyebrows like bows, who would say you are not beautiful, born from the clear stars, come from a distant palace, you are unique in this world."

"..."

"Like Sita Ramalak, blessed by your past merits, you have come to be born among humans, to be seated as Phraya, to be the king, to have three

palaces in the seven-tier palace, with people to adorn and bring, people flowing to honor you, as the root of the divine.

With thousands praising, overwhelming all, both men and women paying homage, with a retinue of countless, let no harm come to you. With followers on both sides, when you move, may there be vehicles to ride, people flowing to greet, many to admire you.

Let your mother be pleased, with power like the vice-king, with strength like Narayana to the south, people respecting you, may you be complete like Lord Shiva, with abundant prosperity, to sit in the golden mansion, with a throne as your base, with wisdom like the wise one, quick-witted like the auspicious one, wise like Vessantara, with many coming to bow, let them bow like before, when you travel swiftly, may you be cherished in heart."

"..."

"Whatever you wish for, let it be fulfilled, with abundant wealth, never lacking, money flowing ceaselessly, words flowing like a river, with women to attend, when you speak, people respect you, with a body like a god, with many surrounding to honor you, with followers by the multitude.

Let there be no harm or evil, with plenty of followers, with people to bring things, calling for your spirit, may your spirit not linger in the heavens, may your spirit not be careless to take you back, calling for your spirit."

After the spirit-calling chant, Grandma Mai was the first to tie the sacred thread around the wrists of the little twins, thrice over each chubby wrist, while reciting the next verse:

"Shri, Shri, the thread of the old doctor's wisdom, blessed by the Buddha, with power to overcome all obstacles, may spirits and ghosts flee, may all evil be vanquished, do not harm the little ones, I will vanquish them with the sacred mantra..."

By the power of all Buddhas, by the power of all Dhamma, by the power of all Sangha, may all suffering, all dangers, all diseases be destroyed, may there be long life, good complexion, happiness, strength, Sadhu."

Following this, the young twin boys received many sacred threads tied around their arms along with various blessings from the villagers, some threads had candies tied to them. Behind them, Pharan; the father and Khem; the mother sat nearby, offering support, feeling excited, shy, and happy, their cheeks flushed throughout the celebration.

In this life, Sua and Singh are surrounded by love and warmth. No longer do they have to endure the cold and dark together.

Thank you, grandma, for bringing them here.

Special Chapter 5: Entering the Marriage Gate

After overcoming many hardships and spending seven years understanding each other's hearts, today was the day Pharan and Khem had chosen for their wedding, following the traditional ceremonies.

The wedding was held at a modest-sized Thai house, newly constructed with the hard work of Khem over the years, located not far from the temple of Abbot Pinto.

After the traditional asking for the bride's hand, Lady Aranya, Chan's mother, represented Khem's side in place of Abbot Pinto, who is now the abbot of the temple. They agreed on the wedding dowry.

Three days before the wedding, in accordance with Isan tradition, it is called "Mue Hom" or "Mue Suk Dip." monks were invited to chant at Khem's home. Both families' elders along with the local villagers came to make merit by offering food and listening to the sermons. Among the monks was Abbot Pinto, Khem's father, who also came to give blessings.

Throughout the sermon, Khem looked at his father with joy, and the abbot looked back at Khem and Pharan with kindness. Khem planned to take his future husband to pay respects to his father at the temple after the wedding.

The day before the wedding, known as "Mue Tao" or preparation day, was when many from both sides gathered to prepare the food and decorate the venue. A feast was arranged, and food was cooked to feed guests as per tradition.

On the wedding day, the procession with the dowry started about a kilometer away from Khem's house. It included Khachen, Jett, Jett's family-who have been close with Pharan's for decades-the former village chief acting as the senior relative, and all the villagers who had come in tour buses since three days prior to join in the celebration.

Pharan's father, however, was not invited. Since his grandfather's death, he had remarried and moved on with a new family long ago, so Pharan only informed him of the wedding but did not invite him.

The dowry procession began with the former village chief, who acted as the chief negotiator, carrying the dowry tray. Following him was the groom, dressed in a light blue shirt with rolled-up sleeves, well-fitted black slacks, and sunglasses to shield from the sun. Khachen, his close friend, was there to hold an umbrella over him, with Jett on the other side offering a bottle of water and smelling salts, worried that Master Pharan, who rarely sees the sunlight, might faint along the way.

Next, a pure, unmarried woman from the village carried the spirit, betel nut, and liquor in procession, followed by nearly a hundred villagers who had dressed up since early morning to join the parade, accompanied by traditional music played in a joyful rhythm.

Upon arriving at Khem's house, after being welcomed by Khem's relatives like Chan's mother, Chan, and Phraemai, along with classmates and fellow volunteers, the next step before entering the house was for the junior relatives of Khem to wash the feet of the groom and the senior relatives according to tradition.

Pharan took off his shoes, placing his bare feet on a stone pedestal covered with banana leaves.

The ones performing the foot-washing duty were the five-year-old twin boys, both wearing short-sleeved white shirts, blue sarongs, and gold silk waistbands, looking adorable and tidy.

After washing the feet, they distributed white envelopes containing several thousand baht notes. Sua and Singh, in unison, bowed to thank their father, then both raised their hands and said,

"Daddy, kiss-kiss!" Pharan removed his sunglasses, tucked them into his shirt collar, knelt down, and hugged both boys, kissing each on the cheek with a composed expression. The children then returned the kisses, one on each side. Jett, capturing this adorable father-son moment, felt like screaming with joy.

Once the feet of the former villager chief and the groom were washed, they were invited into the house. Sua and Singh were carried away by Khachen to eat sweets elsewhere. The first gate of silver and gold was manned by Jett, who had suddenly switched sides, and Chan, who was dragged by Jett to stand by his side.

Luckily, today Pharan was in a better mood than usual, so Jett received ten thousand baht to eat sweets without getting slapped by the 'holy hand'.

Before passing through all the gates, a total of one hundred thousand baht was spent.

In the central ceremony area, Khem, dressed in a light blue shirt and well-fitted white trousers, sat waiting with Chan's mother and friends. It wasn't long before the senior brought the groom to sit beside him.

Here, everyone sat on the floor together, as no one could sit higher than the groom.

The next step was the presentation of the engagement price or dowry, which included nine million baht in cash, nine gold bars, and nine rai of prime real estate in Ubon Ratchathani, totaling over ten million baht in value.

Although it might seem like an excessive amount for Khem, ultimately, all of this was not for any one person.

Chan's mother, representing Khem's senior family members, received the dowry with ceremony. After the dowry was presented, the couple exchanged rings, which were simple silver bands adorned with small diamonds, engraved inside with each other's real names.

Following the dowry presentation and ring exchange, the ceremony continued with the "Sood Khwan" or soul-calling ritual, where a Brahmin expert from a nearby village officiated.

"Shri, Shri, the day, month, and year have passed. Now the children have grown, aunts, uncles, and parents, both old and young, have gathered in great numbers to celebrate this union, according to the time set by tradition. Live righteously after marriage, lead your family across the river of life with a heart like the four qualities of water:"

"..."

"One, the water is pure and clean, as clear as it can be.

Two, it can adapt, can take in both small and large matters.

Three, it's truly cool, quenching thirst and hunger.

Four, it unites easily, even when cut, it can be joined again."

"..."

"These four qualities are most excellent. May your hearts be like water, so you may thrive. U, A, Mu, Ma, Mul Ma, Maha, Mul Mang, Swaha, Amen."

After these words, Pharan and Khem, who had been listening attentively with hands clasped in prayer, bowed to receive the blessing and softly said "Amen." Then fed each other halves of a boiled egg given by the Brahmin,

an act which almost made Khem eat his own egg out of embarrassment from his soon-to-be husband's gaze.

After the egg feeding, the elders came forward to tie sacred threads on the couple's wrists and give their blessings. This included Uncle Chang, the former village chief, with his son Pong and his boyfriend, followed by Prima with her husband and their three-year-old child.

Years ago, Prima had fallen in love and planned to marry, but the wedding was postponed several times due to various issues. Feeling something was wrong, she consulted Pharan and learned that she had previously sworn to remain single until he married. This led to a big ceremony to undo the vow, after which she was finally able to marry her boyfriend without any further obstacles.

As for Pong, despite his strong affection for Khem and the rejection he faced, he retreated to heal for nearly half a year. However, due to his inherently optimistic nature, he was able to move on after a while.

Until he met someone who made his heart beat again last year, the other person was a nurse stationed at the boxing venue on the day Pong had a match.

That day, Pong was defeated in the competition and was quite injured, so he received first aid from this handsome young nurse. Even though the nurse's hand was heavy enough to bring tears, Pong endured it. After a long period of courtship, they finally became a couple. Now they have been dating for nearly a year.

Despite their different paths in life, Uncle Chang, the former village chief, Pong, and Prima still frequently visited Pharan and Khem, and the hosts always welcomed them warmly.

After the elders at the ceremony tied bracelets for Pharan and Khem, it was Khachen's turn. This groomsman didn't know how much money he had put in the envelope, and Khem didn't dare to look inside.

Then came Jett, Chan, and their university friends, who crawled forward to tie the bracelets with a mix of boldness and fear due to the awe-inspiring presence of Khem's groom.

"Khem, I'm so glad to have met such a wonderful person like you. Thank you for always joining me for shabu-shabu. Here's to a happy life after marriage." Said Phraemai with teary eyes. Khem smiled sweetly in response to her blessings.

"Thank you, Phraemai." She smiled broadly in return, then inhaled deeply and moved slowly towards the head monk.

"Um...uh, congratulations, master, may you be very happy, and stay in good health...Sadhu." Phraemai, stuttering a bit, tied the sacred thread with trembling hands, not daring to look at the groom even for a moment, only bowing in respect before quickly crawling away, then rushing over to slap Jett who was laughing so loudly it shook the house.

After the wrist-tying ceremony, Sua and Singh ran to their parents with garlands of sweets Khachen had mischievously hung around their necks, making them look messy. At that moment, Jett asked to take a family photo. Khem and Pharan arranged for the children to sit properly before smiling at the camera; Sua and Singh sat still, showing off their corn teeth for Uncle Jett's photo, because they'd grow up to be stars.

The villagers, seeing the master settled, were moved to tears, feeling both happy and relieved that in this life, someone like Pharan would be taken care of and cherished into old age.

Because this man, who has always given and sacrificed for others, truly deserves all the good things in return, a hundred or even a thousandfold, and that was happening today.

The wedding celebration eventually came to an end, and everyone dispersed to their accommodations, leaving the newlyweds to have their time together in the bridal chamber. The twin boys were taken care of by Chan's mother, allowing the parents to relax without worry, as staying with Khachen would likely have kept them all awake all night.

Khem showered after Pharan, taking longer than usual to prepare himself.

It might be embarrassing to admit, but by the time this day arrived, the 29-year-old Khem had thoroughly studied how things should go, even though he had never actually experienced it...

Khem stared fixedly at the bathroom door, swallowed nervously, his cold hands clasping together lightly to calm his mind, because when it came down to it, Khem felt unsure, nervous, and excited to the point where he felt dizzy. He didn't dare step out of the bathroom...

But it seemed the impatient one couldn't wait any longer. Suddenly, the door slid open, startling Khem who was standing behind it.

Pharan, wearing only white pajama pants, was looking at Khem with an unreadable gaze, which nonetheless made Khem's heart race and his body

feel as if it were engulfed by flames.

As Pharan approached, his cool scent wafting over, his slender hand gently touched Khem's pale cheek before he asked in a soft, deep voice,

"What's wrong?" At this, Khem's body began to tremble. Unable to look away from Pharan's dark eyes, Khem replied with a shaky voice,

"I..." That was all he could manage before swallowing, unable to continue, wanting to pinch himself hard to regain composure and stop being so excited.

Why, after all the physical closeness they had shared over the years—holding hands, hugging, kissing—did this moment make him feel so nervous?

Pharan tilted his head slightly, his dark eyes seeming to seek an answer on their own. Once he felt sure, he asked,

"Are you afraid of me?"

Khem's jaw dropped, he quickly shook his head and stammered out,

"I isn't afraid of you, Pharan, just just excited."

"..."

"And, I'm a bit worried..." Khem said in the last sentence, his voice almost a whisper, his small face looking down, avoiding Pharan's gaze out of embarrassment.

Khem knew that Pharan had been patiently waiting for this moment.

The dark eyes softened once more, understanding Khem's feelings well, gently pulling his wrist to step away from the cold floor of the bathroom, pulling the slender body close to his bare chest, and loosely embracing him.

"No need to worry. If you're not ready, I won't force you."

Khem bit his lower lip upon hearing that the other would wait patiently again, and a feeling of unwillingness stirred in his heart.

Khem quickly wrapped his arms around the taller figure, his small face seeking warmth, shaking his head.

"No, I am ready." Seeing Khem's reaction, Pharan gently stroked the back of the startled kitten.

"Take your time with this, there's no rush."

"But..." As Khem grew more anxious, his round chin was lifted to meet Pharan's gaze. Upon seeing the calm eyes, Khem felt as if cooled by a gentle stream, calming his heart.

"Think carefully if you really want to do this."

"..."

"Or if you just want to please me."

Khem felt his throat dry up as he met Pharan's gaze at this moment, for it seemed as if the deepest, unspoken feelings were being touched by an invisible hand. The handsome face, the aura of nobility, and the sharp, captivating eyes that were hard to grasp, all stirred the desire of those enchanted by Pharan's charm.

Khem could not deny his own heart, how much he wanted to possess this man alone.

His small tongue flicked out to lick his lips absentmindedly before quietly telling the one waiting for an answer,

"I want to do it."

The dark eyes glistened for a moment before Khem's slender wrists were clasped around Pharan's neck, and he was lifted up. Instinctively, Khem's legs wrapped around Pharan's waist.

No words were spoken, but the intense desire in Pharan's gaze was like a fire that threatened to burn Khem to ashes.

Khem was gently placed to sit on the bed, his heart pounding so hard it felt like it might burst from his chest, unable to predict Pharan's next move.

Pharan reached into the bedside drawer, pulling out protection and lubricant, placing them nearby before stepping back to remove his pants in front of Khem, who watched without blinking.

Khem felt like all the air was sucked out of him when he first saw his lover's arousal, the dim light from the lamp making everything clear. The size of it caused his throat to dry, and he swallowed nervously.

"Want to touch it?" The deep voice asked amidst the silence. Khem sensed it wasn't really a question but an invitation, and with trembling hands, he reached out to touch it gently.

His wide eyes grew even larger as it expanded in his hand. Khem tried gripping it firmer, moving his hand up and down slowly, as he had learned from adult content.

"Hmm." The grunt of satisfaction made Khem wonder what more he could do. He looked up into those sharp, desire-filled eyes and asked softly,

"Phii Pharan, can I use my mouth?"

Pharan paused, seemingly taken aback, before his long fingers gently slid into Khem's soft hair, nodding in approval.

"Go ahead."

At this moment, curiosity outweighed any shyness for Khem. He stared at the large, now fully erect member in his hand, with veins prominently

displayed, marveling at how different it looked from his own.

The more he looked, the more he was drawn in, until he moved his face closer, his small pink tongue flicking out to lick the tip, which was slightly parted and leaking. The tense atmosphere was palpable, Pharan was clearly holding himself back to remain still.

Khem tasted the faint sweetness of the milk that seeped out again, then opened his mouth wider to envelop the vibrant flesh, pressing his head down to go as deep as possible, as if measuring its length, and found that it was longer than his small mouth could reach.

"Ah..."

The deep groan made Khem feel encouraged, so he started to mimic the rhythm of a video he had seen before by bobbing his head up and down. He was slightly surprised to find that Pharan's member could still expand further.

Pharan was both aroused and surprised at himself, despite having not been preoccupied with such things for a long time. In the past, he could remain indifferent and maintain his composure no matter what he encountered, but with Khem, he easily lost his patience.

"Uh!" Khem flinched when a strong hand held his head. Pharan, who had been standing still, began to move his hips, thrusting into the soft warmth of the small mouth.

Khem gripped the muscular thighs, closing his eyes to accept the thrusts which weren't too forceful. He used his mouth to hold onto the other person's member, not letting go, and occasionally flicked his tongue at the tip while lifting his other hand to massage the two testicles.

The increasing speed of the thrusts signaled the approach of climax. At that moment, Pharan intended to pull out to release outside, but Khem didn't cooperate, instead holding it and gently jerking it while keeping half of it in his mouth.

His clear eyes looked up at Pharan, whose hands were still pressing down, urging him on. Pharan felt an indescribable itch and thrill, so he ended his restraint and released a large amount of semen into Khem's mouth.

"Ugh." Khem wanted to taste Pharan, so he swallowed every drop. Even though the taste was not as sweet or aromatic as one might expect from his appearance, Khem enjoyed it.

Phii is very tasty.

"Where did the person in front of the bathroom go?"

Khem blushed upon hearing the teasing, before his lips were gently wiped clean by a slender finger.

"Come to bed properly." Pharan said. Khem nodded and crawled onto the pillow, waiting for the older man to follow.

Khem swallowed as a large shadow loomed over him, the dark eyes pinning him in place. The strong hands touched the edge of Khem's pajama pants, slowly pulling them off from his feet, followed by the round-neck T-shirt he was wearing.

The pale, bare body reflected the light, and Khem's face flushed red under the gaze he couldn't fathom. He had to cover his mouth with his hand when Pharan's rough touch grazed his sensitive parts.

"Ph-Pharan, uh." Khem bit the back of his hand to stifle his moans, swallowing for the hundredth time as his sensitive area was gently stroked and the tip was teased with Pharan's thumb, alternating between rubbing and pressing. Seeing Khem trying to hold back seemed to urge Pharan to speed up his movements, almost as if retaliating for earlier.

Khem bit his lower lip hard, rubbing his legs against the bed in agony as if thousands of butterflies were fluttering in his stomach. The sensation shot up from his toes until he couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Slow down, Pharan, I will~, Ah!" Finally, he released his milky essence covering Pharan's warm hand as he lay there, panting heavily.

Khem barely had time to catch his breath before he was moaning again, as Pharan's hand smeared his semen across his smooth belly, the wet touch moving up to knead his chest, massaging and teasing his pink nipples with his fingertips.

"Uh--ah"

Unable to resist, Pharan bent down to suck and lick them, not caring that he was lowering himself below his younger partner, treating him with the same respect as one would a wife.

"Pharan, ah!" Khem was startled and wanted to protest because this was a new experience for him, but his protests turned into moans of pleasure as Pharan alternated between gentle bites and licking to distract him.

Feeling Khem's increasing desire, Pharan stopped teasing, sat up, and tore open a condom packet with his mouth, sliding it onto his firm, aching length, then squeezed some lubricant onto his middle finger.

"Ph-Pharan." Pharan nodded, leaning in to kiss his temple and rosy cheeks softly.

"If it hurts, tell me." Khem's heart raced, slowly spreading his legs apart, too shy and excited to watch what Pharan would do next.

The finger, now cool with gel, touched the soft entrance below his balls, rubbing in circles three times before slowly entering.

Another thing Khem learned today was that Pharan's fingers were very long and well-defined, and when they entered him, the sensation was so intense it was almost unbearable.

As the long, slender fingers began to move in and out rhythmically, an intense sensation spread through his entire body, making him rub his feet back and forth on the bedsheet, feeling so good he thought he might wet himself.

"Ah! Phii Phim!"

"What do you want?" Khem's tears flowed down his cheeks, his body trembling before he voiced his desire.

"Uh, another finger, please add another finger."

The older man listened to the request and immediately complied, inserting his second finger as well, starting to move in and out. Occasionally, he would intentionally crook his fingers to rub against the soft inner walls, causing Khem to clamp his legs around Pharan's waist in response to the overwhelming sensation.

"Ah! It...it feels good!"

The embarrassing, wet sounds didn't last long as, just as he seemed about to climax again, the two fingers were withdrawn, replaced by something much larger.

"Don't tense up." Pharan said calmly after lifting Khem's hips to rest on his thighs, then guiding his member to press into the now stretched passage.

"Phii, Phim, it's big, oh!" Halfway in, the sensation was too much to bear, so Pharan thrust the rest of the way in one go, while bending down to give Khem a comforting kiss.

Pharan at this moment felt so good he was almost dizzy.

"Ugh." Khem was both shocked and choked up, unable to scream, but the sweet taste of Pharan's kiss helped his body to relax.

Khem took in the overwhelming sensation, letting his body slowly adjust. Once he felt the younger man relax, Pharan began to move his hips in and out.

"Ah, uh!"

"Does it still hurt?" He asked with concern, even as he relentlessly thrust into the soft warmth, almost like a man possessed.

"It doesn't-- Ah! Phii Phim, it feels good!" Khem squealed, his eyes rolling back when the large tip hit a sensitive spot inside him repeatedly, his small hands moving to clutch at his own chest to vent the intense pleasure.

The sight of Khem now completely destroyed Pharan's intention to be gentle with this small body.

His dark eyes watched Khem's smooth stomach bulge with each thrust of his own member, curiosity driving him to press down on it with one hand, while his body continued its relentless assault.

Thrust! Thrust!

"Uhh, ah, Pharan, it's too much!"

"Then push back harder." Although nearly overwhelmed by the sensation, Khem endured and followed the instruction, pushing back with increased force, which felt like adding fuel to the fire.

Khem was startled when he was suddenly flipped onto his stomach, then moaned as the large presence withdrew only to thrust back in deeply. He saw Pharan adjust a pillow under his head for comfort.

Without hesitation, Khem buried his face in the pillow, his lips tightly pressed together as one of Pharan's hands moved to massage his chest and tease his nipples to relax him, while the other rhythmically stroked his length.

"Ah." Khem clenched his teeth, tears of pleasure streaming down his face, before Pharan took his hand from the pillow and placed it on himself, encouraging him to take over.

Pharan used both hands to knead Khem's buttocks thoroughly, his low moans making Khem's skin prickle in anticipation of what was to come.

His thumbs parted the tender flesh, but the entrance still fluttered with anticipation, and Pharan watched with a mix of desire and lust as his length was swallowed by the tight passage.

This was a longing and an indulgence in carnal pleasure that had been suppressed for many years.

But now, that flame had been ignited and would not be easily quenched.

The firm hips began to move again, and with this new angle, his thrusts became deeper and more forceful.

"Ah, Ph-Pharan, uhh, oh!"

Thrust! Thrust! Thrust!

"Do you like it?" The deep voice inquired.

"Uh, I like it, I like it, ah, right there!" Khem cried out as his prostate was repeatedly hit, the intense pleasure coursing from his toes to his core, obliterating his initial shyness and consciousness.

Even though Khem's arms and legs were shaking so much he could barely support himself, he still moved his hips to meet every thrust without giving up, clenching tightly around the large, long member inside him.

Pharan felt an intense pleasure that nearly drove him mad. His strong hands gripped Khem's spread hips, thrusting with all his might, hitting Khem's sensitive spot repeatedly, not allowing him a moment to catch his breath.

Khem's throat was choked with moans, unable to scream, as he heard the loud sound of flesh slapping against flesh, his toes curling from the overwhelming pleasure, so blissful he cried out.

Instead of feeling pity, Pharan sped up his rhythm to intensify the pleasure for Khem.

"Ah, please, Phii Phim, slow down, I am going to come!"

"Then come." Khem couldn't stop himself, his slender hand quickly jerking himself off while grinding the tip, all while being relentlessly pounded.

Khem felt like he was floating in mid-air, his mind blank, tears and drool flowing, the pleasure inside him reaching its peak until he climaxed, spilling into his hand.

"Aaahhh"

The overwhelming sensation made him clench even harder around Pharan's member. The tight grip from Khem's sudden tensing made Pharan lose control, thrusting three more times before releasing a large amount of cloudy semen into the condom.

"Ah..."

Khem lay there panting, completely exhausted. Pharan stayed inside for a moment before slowly pulling out and removing the condom.

He didn't expect to release that much.

He thought to himself before walking over to throw it in the trash and then came back to sit on the edge of the bed, brushing back Khem's sweat-dampened hair from his face and asked,

"Can you take a shower?"

Khem shook his head vigorously. Pharan, who was not accustomed to dealing with someone so out of shape, bent down to give a gentle kiss on the forehead before standing up from the bed. Not forgetting to pick up the pants lying on the floor, he took them with him to the bathroom.

After they had cleaned up and put on sleepwear, Pharan brought out a small bucket of water and a clean cloth to gently clean Khem, from his face down to the sensitive area that had been thoroughly used, now slightly red and swollen.

Khem watched Pharan's tender actions with a warm heart, his gentle brown eyes full of love and adoration.

Once cleaned, Pharan helped him into his clothes, then pulled a warm blanket over both of them.

Khem snuggled closer into the warmth at the slight tug from his husband.

Pharan kissed his forehead and smooth cheek, asking softly,

"Does it hurt?" Khem bit his lip, his face turning red, then shook his head.

"Not as much as I thought it would." He murmured, snuggling into the warm chest before adding, "I like it."

"You're going to make it wake up." Pharan said, causing Khem to startle, eliciting a soft chuckle from Pharan.

Pharan's thick hand slipped into Khem's pants from behind, making him tense immediately as the long fingers touched that tender spot, causing a small jolt from the sudden discomfort.

Khem felt the cool sensation of some ointment, not knowing when it had been prepared, distinguishable by its scent from the lubricant. His face reddened with embarrassment at his own thoughts.

"No more for now."

"..."

"We'll do it again once the swelling goes down." Pharan assured him. Khem nodded, then rose to give a gentle kiss and smiled sweetly.

"Thank you, Phii Pharan." Pharan's dark eyes softened in a way no one had ever seen before, then he bent down to return the kiss softly, whispering words he had never said before.

Having waited for this day.

"I love you."

Khem stared into those beautiful eyes, stunned. He hadn't expected to hear those words even once.

Countless memories from the first encounter flashed through his mind once more. Throughout their time together, Pharan's actions always spoke louder than words, so Khem never expected to hear such words.

His small mouth pouted slightly before he moved to embrace his husband tightly, crying with joy.

Pharan gave a slight smile, his strong arms pulling the smaller body closer, stroking his head gently.

"Sniff, I love you Phii Phim too...loves you the most in the world."

Until the end of time, from this moment on, nothing will ever separate us again...

Special Chapter 6: New Year's Greetings

After more than four months since their wedding, the New Year festival was just days away.

In fact, for Khem, Pharan, and their twin sons, New Year's celebrations in past years hadn't been anything spectacular or exciting like for other families; it was just an ordinary day spent together in their warm home.

However, this year was special, as Pharan had promised to take his wife and children on their first trip to a different province. Upon hearing this, both the mother and children were excited and happy about the rare opportunity to travel far, so they had been preparing their luggage since last week.

But then, it seemed like the plan might fall apart because Pharan had taken on several jobs back-to-back, leaving him with little time to rest-blessing ceremonies, housewarming events, consecrating sacred objects, and even many monastic duties. Since these clients were all influential people with whom there were mutual interests, he couldn't refuse.

Another important reason was his desire to save money for the family trip, so he worked hard without a single complaint. Eventually, he fell ill with a fever like never before, forcing Khachen to drive over to pick up both 'Sua' and 'Singh' to look after them temporarily until Pharan recovered. Of course, this wouldn't be sorted out by the end of the year since only three days remained.

"Mom, can't we stay with you?" Singh asked, still clinging tightly to one of his mother's legs, and his brother, seeing this, let go of Uncle Khachen's hand to hug the other leg with the same force.

"Yes, dear mom, I promise I won't be naughty at all, not even a little bit."

Khem shook his head, feeling touched. They usually argue all the time, but now, at this moment, they were so harmoniously united.

"It really can't happen. When Dad gets sick, it's much worse than most people, and I am worried you might catch the fever." Khem tried to explain, but the twins seemed reluctant to give up easily.

"But if you catch Dad's fever, who will take care of you?" Singh argued.

"Exactly, if we're with you, there'll be someone to take care of you, right?" Sua added.

Khem laughed at the twins' adorable stubbornness, which they had clearly inherited from their uncles Jett and Khachen. If it were any other matter, he might have already given in. With that thought, he knelt down and hugged both boys.

"I promise to take good care of myself, and when Daddy gets better, we'll go pick you up from Uncle Khachen's right away. No fussing, okay?"

The twins resigned, pouted together, holding back tears to not worry their mother, and reluctantly agreed, each taking one of Khachen's hands with a defeated look, which almost made Khem soften again, but seeing Khachen shake his head with a smile, he had to suppress that urge.

"I'm counting on you, Khachen."

"Don't worry, take care of Pharan." Khachen said, and Khem nodded slightly.

"Yes."

After watching the sports car drive off past the gate, Khem began cleaning the house and prepared to cook. He made a simple dish of ginger fish congee, and once it was ready, he brought it upstairs to serve to the sick man in the bedroom.

Pharan had started feeling ill since last night, forcing Khem to sleep in the children's room and to keep wiping him down throughout the night until this morning.

"Pharan, eat some congee, so you can take your medicine." Khem called out. Pharan, whose fever had slightly subsided since last night, had to force himself up to sit. His sharp features and bare upper body were still glistening with sweat, and his dark eyes, heavy with the sickness, looked at his wife intently.

"After eating, I will change the bedsheets so you can sleep more comfortably."

Khem said this without even looking at his husband's expression, as he was busy blowing on the spoonful of congee.

"Are you tired?" The hoarse voice asked softly. Khem shook his head before lifting the spoon to Pharan's mouth.

"This is nothing, it's very easy. Open up quickly, my dear."

Pharan's eyes flickered for just a moment, then went still, as if lost in thought. That was when Khem slightly startled.

In all the years they've been together, Khem had never fed Pharan, no matter the situation. But recently, with the twin sons having just recovered from a fever, he momentarily treated his husband like one of the little ones.

"I'm sorry, I forgot myself." He said, starting to lower the spoon, but it was grabbed by a warm hand, stopping him.

"It's fine, this is quite convenient." His habit of thinking one thing and saying another hadn't changed, but he couldn't admit that he sometimes felt envious because his wife took better care of their sons than of him; that would be embarrassing.

Khem's face turned red when Pharan lowered his head to open his mouth for the porridge that he was being fed. Some spoonfuls were too hot, burning his tongue because he was too shy to blow on them, but the other person didn't complain or show any reaction. Soon, the fish porridge in the bowl was all gone.

Khem placed the empty bowl on the bedside table and then picked up a glass of water that was nearby.

"Take your medicine now." He said. Pharan took the fever reducer, placed it under his tongue, then drank the water until the glass was empty. After the meal and the medicine, Khem went about changing the bed sheets because the old ones were damp with sweat. Once the bed was made, it was time for a sponge bath.

Pharan lay back on the bed, watching his small wife carefully sponge him down from his neck, both arms, back, chest, down to the clearly defined abdominal muscles. Each touch felt soothing.

After Khem finished with his upper body, he looked up at the man who was watching him with an embarrassed expression.

"Uh...would you like to do the lower half yourself?"

Pharan gently shook his head in response and then said something surprising,

"You even washed the twins'."

"..."

"You don't think I'd be a bit jealous?"

Khem's mouth hung open in shock, then he gently closed it, blinking to realign his thoughts.

Normally, Khem had never heard such direct, reproachful words from Phim before, making him forget that Phim was just an ordinary man. If it

hadn't been for his illness, Khem might never have realized what his husband was keeping inside.

Realizing this, Khem steeled himself, moved closer, and gently kissed Phim on the lips without fear of catching his fever.

Phim accepted the kiss without closing his eyes, intently watching his small wife's brave act. His light brown eyes still couldn't hide the slight embarrassment, yet he smiled faintly and whispered, "I'll wipe you later."

The second night seemed no better for Phim; his fever was high, he had severe headaches, body heat, and was vomiting. Khem stayed close, watching over him all night, hardly sleeping, thinking that if there was no improvement by morning, they'd have to see a doctor.

The sound of a rooster crowing at 4:30 AM startled Khem awake. He lifted his head from where he had dozed off on his arm to look at his husband, only to find the tall figure turned towards him, loosely holding his hand as if afraid he might disappear.

His handsome face was beaded with sweat, his sharp brows furrowed as if in pain. Khem felt distressed, having never seen Phim this sick before. As he tried to get up, Phim gripped his hand tighter.

"Phii Phim..." Their eyes met as Phim's dark eyes slowly opened, and in a hoarse voice, he whispered, "Don't go."

Khem took a deep breath to keep from crying, steadying his voice to respond, "I will go get a cloth to wipe you down."

Phim's fever-reddened eyes blinked slightly, sensing Khem's emotions.

"Don't cry...I'll get better in a few days."

Khem smiled, nodding before leaning down to gently kiss Phim's forehead.

"Okay, I will be right back."

Khem got up and left the room, taking his mobile phone with him. At that moment, the tears he had been holding back began to flow uncontrollably, heartbroken that his husband was so ill and feeling helpless.

Upon reaching the kitchen downstairs, he immediately set a pot to boil water without even drying his tears, but soon his phone, which he'd brought to check the time, showed an incoming call. Khem pursed his lips before accepting the call.

"Hello, Khem, how are things?" asked the eager voice on the other end. Hearing the concern in his friend's voice, Khem started crying.

"[Sniff] Jett, Phim's condition hasn't improved at all."

"Damn, Chan, you step on it! Okay, don't cry. We'll be there in another hour. Hold on."

"Ugh, drive carefully, no need to rush. We can wait."

"Okay, you're doing great. That's all."

"Uh-huh."

Khem quickly mixed hot water with cold to make it warm, then poured it into a basin along with a clean cloth, and went upstairs to wipe down Pharan as he'd been doing for the past two nights. An hour later, Jett and Chan arrived as promised. Once everyone was there, they cooked food for both the sick man and themselves.

After giving Pharan his fever medicine and waiting until he was asleep, Khem half-ran, half-walked downstairs. He hopped onto an old motorcycle that Jett and Chan had borrowed from someone in the village. Chan, who volunteered to drive, started it up slowly and drove to the shrine at the village entrance. Villagers who heard about Pharan's illness followed on bicycles or on foot.

Jett, Khem, Chan, along with the gathered villagers, formed a circle around the shrine, each holding a flower garland, lighting incense, and placing their hands in prayer with sixteen sticks of incense each.

Jett led the chanting of the mantra known as the "Bhojjhanga Paritta." believed to have the power to cure illnesses, his brown eyes closed as he chanted clearly:

"Phochangkosatisankhato Dhammanam Vjayo Vatha Viriyam Pitipassadhi Phochangka Ca tathaphare Samādhupekkha Phochangka Satte Te Sappa Dassina Munina Sammatakkhata, Bhavita Pahulikata"

A gentle breeze carried the scent of incense and white smoke, dispersing around the area. After the prayers, they moved forward to hang the garlands on the wooden rail at the shrine and then planted their incense sticks in pots, concluding the ritual.

That night, Pharan's condition remarkably improved, which might be attributed to belief, but the main factor was undoubtedly the support and care from his wife and disciples who took turns entering and leaving his bedroom all night.

On the afternoon of that day, instead of celebrating New Year's in the North with his wife 'Aiyra' as planned, Khachen decided to bring a large set of Korean BBQ and the twins over to Pharan's house, sparing Khem the need to go pick up the kids as he had mentioned.

When Sua and Singh saw their father sitting on the daybed with a cartoon-patterned fever gel on his forehead, looking pale and wrapped in a thin blanket, their faces fell, and they ran to hug him. Pharan, seeing this, put down his glass of ginger water and bent down to lift one of his sons onto the bed for a better embrace.

"Dad! Uhh, huuuh! Don't die, okay!" Singh said with a voice full of sobs, tears and snot mixing indistinguishably.

"Dad! If you die, how will I and Mom live! Waaah!" Sua cried out just as loudly as his brother.

Without needing to be told, one could guess who they got such dramatic ideas from. Hearing this, Pharan bent down to remove his slippers and threw them straight at the culprit who was about to start a fire.

The slipper, which had some weight to it, hit Khachen right on the head, amidst the shocked looks from Khem, Jett, Chan, and Aiyra who were standing around, watching the scene unfold.

Thwack!

"Ouch!"

And so began the chaotic New Year's celebration with the large Korean BBQ set, ending with beautiful fireworks, smiles, and laughter, just like every time in the past...