

GMM TV

# TO TICKET HEAVEN

ตั๋วขายน้ไปสวรรค์



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## Editor's Preface

*We all have our own paths we aspire to reach...*

*Tanrak, too.*

*The young man lived his life after losing his parents, relying solely on perseverance and faith. He believed that God guided him to find a way to continue living, that God gave him light, and that only God could one day reunite him with his parents. Therefore, his very being, his body, and his soul, were ready to repay God with his entire life.*

*Unlike Barth.*

*The young man declared that he had no faith in God. This was because he had faced so much hardship and saw no way prayer could improve his life. God had never helped him; in his most agonizing times, there was never even a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel. Therefore... his very being, his body, and his mind, had no need to respect God as his mother had taught him.*

*They met one day...*

*Even the owner of a strong and unwavering heart felt moved by the owner of a heart that was so stubborn and firmly convinced of their own beliefs.*

*They were both unknowingly drawn to each other by 'something' that bound their hearts together.*

*Something called 'love'.*

*.....*

*Ticket to Heaven: The Boy Who Didn't Go to Heaven is another novel that will make readers shed tears over the tragic love story of two people.*

*One person... who has faith in God, dreams of reaching the path to heaven so he can meet his parents again.*

*Another one... had no faith in anything. He only dreamed of the chance to see his mother, just to live peacefully with her.*

*Kittisak Kongka wrote this novel with a deep faith in love, conveying the story through exquisitely beautiful prose. Reading it is like watching a spectacular fireworks display, a step forward in the art of linguistic beauty, invaluable in every dimension and every passage of description.*

*And this will be another novel that will impress readers and leave them feeling fulfilled, shedding tears for the love between Tan and Barth in utter surrender.*

*Love...that sometimes needs no meaning.*

*Love...that sometimes needs no permission.*

*Love... if all that's asked is to love... and nothing more than love itself, then there's no such thing as 'impossible'.*

*"For God is love; for God loves humanity unconditionally."*

*Therefore, "Ticket to Heaven" might lie within the faith in our hearts.*

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## Introduction

A pure, radiant light streams through the exquisitely stained glass, transforming the otherwise dull gray world into a breathtaking spectacle of sunlight, as if it were another world. The fragrant scent of incense wafts through the air, welcoming newcomers and plunging them into a bittersweet memory of the past. A floor lined with simple wooden chairs surrounds a central pedestal, forming a unified whole. It's as if every line in the structure points directly to the heart, a single path leading to heaven. Heaven embraces, singing a welcoming song to all, whether they are worthy of entering or not.

Most Catholics had already arrived, and the rhythmic streams of light filtering through the stained-glass windows illuminated the entire cathedral in a surreal spectacle. Sunday was a typical day for devotees to gather here to remember Him and seek redemption, to distance themselves from the filth of life and draw closer to the afterlife when final judgment arrives. But not today, and not here. The crowd was more than usual, filled with elation.

"Our Father," someone began in the midst of..

And the rest responded with waves of faith spreading throughout the place, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil."

The newcomer's gaze swept around, filled with nostalgia. He didn't immediately sit down to worship, but instead, Barth, with his rough hands weathered by nearly half, or perhaps more, life, gently stroked the wooden garments of the temple, as if slowly awakening all his memories. His slow, labored breathing gradually eased, becoming relaxed, as if receiving forgiveness from someone he had never received before.

"Bodhin Tangwongwad" a calm voice called out.

And the person whose name was called turned around in surprise. "Father.."

Barth smiled, a mixture of emotions overwhelming him—guilt, yet a desire to speak with the priest. He observed the priest carefully, noticing that he wasn't as angry as he had initially feared. On the contrary, the priest seemed pleased to see him.

"I never thought I would see you again," the old man said.

"I don't think my father will remember me. It's been twenty years. I myself.." The young man's voice was filled with uncertainty.

"Of course I remember." The other person smiled in response.

"Barth Bodin Tangwongwad, I remember all my children," the voice replied kindly, making the listener feel guilty.

"Even your own child is being ungrateful?"

Barth spoke, seemingly stemming more from a subconscious sense of guilt than from any conscious thought. The parish priest in front of him smiled firmly, reaching out his hand, wrinkled with countless lines, to grasp the speaker's shoulder, squeezing tightly as if about to say something.

Before he could utter a single word, a familiar figure dressed in white from head to toe ran up and whispered something to the old man. Presumably, he was being summoned because the ordination ceremony for the new monks was approaching—a sacred ceremony that had taken almost twenty years to arrive at.

Those who wish to be ordained as priests in the Christian religion must undergo extensive secular and religious education, beginning continuously from secondary school. This includes specialized religious studies in doctrine, languages for communication, and specific disciplines. Therefore, the ordination of new priests is a significant event in the Church; throughout the year, only a handful of priests may be ordained.

"May God bless you."

The parish priest uttered his final words before leaving. The young man stood stunned, unable to respond, his gaze fixed on the procession carrying the newly ordained priest as they entered the ceremony. His heart pounded violently, as if it would explode. A flood of memories overwhelmed him, making it feel as if everything had happened yesterday, or even earlier. The sensations of love and dislike were jumbled together, leaving him unable to compose himself.

Barth could only sit down on his usual bench and watch as the new priest walked in with a calm and composed demeanor.

"Tanrak," Barth murmured unconsciously.

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## 1

### Saint Bartholomew

#### Item 1

Tanrak sighed deeply, feeling a heavy weight on his chest. His eyes stared blankly out the window, which was almost at the very top of the building. A torrential downpour raged in from outside, like a storm of sin screaming in defiance of his pure faith. The high school student shifted uncomfortably; the storm seemed more violent than ever. He worried that the portraits of saints on the glass would be tarnished by this calamity.

"Hey!"

Someone among the young monks cried out loudly at the same moment a loud clap of thunder sounded and all the electricity in the temple went out. The atmosphere wasn't completely dark, as the faint moonlight still shone through the wide-open windows of the church. Tanrak was startled and almost cried out, but he managed to compose himself. His eyes, adjusting to the new darkness, looked around, trying to regain his composure. He and his friends were preparing the place for the upcoming ordination ceremony, but it seemed everything had to be temporarily halted.

"Are you okay?" Tanrak whispered to his best friend.

"It's just a power outage, what else would it be?" Kongdech replied jokingly.

"Hey, I saw you sitting there cutting flower stems. The knife's still in your hand!" he argued.

"Stay calm, my friend," the other person said, laughing.

Tanrak shrugged, not wanting to prolong the conversation. Kongdech made a sound as if to say something more, but before he could finish, the cathedral doors swung wide open, casting a blinding light from outside—the electricity likely still being on. The bright brilliance flooded in, creating a scene like a painting of heaven. The young man squinted for a moment, his eyes still adjusting. At first, he saw Father Anan, the priest in his familiar white robes, before his eyes widened to find someone else standing in the way of the incoming light.

Who...?

The first question that popped into Tanrak's head was, "The newcomer is a young man, probably around the same age as me, or not much older. He has semi-wavy, jet-black hair, large, round eyes with thick, well-shaped eyelids, a high, slightly upturned nose above soft, thin lips. His face is sharply defined, somewhat broad at the jawline but not excessively so. His shoulders are broad, casting a dark shadow that obscures the light, making him seem more like a backdrop to a magical event than reality." A flash of lightning illuminated the scene. Tanrak felt as if he saw a pair of fierce eyes staring intently at him, but he wasn't sure if it was just a fleeting illusion.

"Hey!"

But before they could even ask, a loud crash startled the group of students sitting together. Someone cried out, and turning in one direction, they saw a tall, meter-high cross, prepared for the ordination ceremony, had fallen over onto the ground. The young seminarians rushed to help lift the cross, their faces contorted in panic. It wasn't a pleasant sight to see the Son of God with his face pressed to the ground, even if it was just an image of worship.

Tanrak was the first to arrive and quickly checked that everything was in order.

**"There are no cracks at all,"** he said.

**"Let me see."** Father Anan, barely concealing his anxiety, hurried forward. Everyone else helped push the cross back upright, perhaps because the ropes securing it to the post hadn't been tied properly.

He slightly stepped aside to make way for the priest.

**"There really are no traces,"** Father Anan mused.

**"Let's help each other tie the rope more securely. We might need to tie it in three or four places, just in case."**

The eldest gave the order, and the remaining novices spread out to perform their duties, having become somewhat familiar with each other. In truth, the cross wasn't heavy at all, as it was the cross meant to be carried in for important ceremonies. Tanrak volunteered to hold the wooden pole while the others dispersed to help find more rope.

**"I'll help."**

A calm voice, tinged with a hint of sternness yet maintaining composure, rang out.

Turning, Tanrak saw a newcomer once again blocking the bright light from the remaining streetlights. He hadn't mistaken him for a moment. The eyes of the person before him seemed filled with denial, though they didn't know what to deny. A faint scent of sweat wafted in, though he tried to discern it, unable to. The two young men helped support Christ while Father Anan reached for his personal phone.

**"Thanks,"** he replied in a low voice.

**"Barth..."** the other person said.

Tanrak frowned in confusion until the speaker had to explain further.

**"My name is Barth,"** the stranger said. **"Would you like my full name too? Bodin Tangwongwad, born in 1978. It's now 1996, so I'm 18 years old."**

His mouth almost spoke faster than his thoughts. Tanrak had many sentences in his mind that he wanted to say, but he held back. The person in front of him wasn't his close friend, Kongdech, but a complete stranger. It wasn't unusual for someone to show up or disappear in the middle of the school year; that's how life is for seminarians—people come and go, but usually more leave than in. A seminary student's life starts in junior high, but this was his final year of high school. The person in front of him hadn't arrived by ordinary circumstances, but perhaps by an inexplicable act of kindness.

**"Basketball..."** he said. **"The Basketball, you mean?"**

**"No,"** the other said, **"It's a Barth from Saint Bartholomew."**

The person in front of him spoke, sounding reluctant to talk about it, though it was more of a reluctant request. Tanrak was about to ask something further, but the priest hung up the phone and turned back to the two young men who were supporting the pillar of Catholicism.

**"You know each other, right?"**

Father Anan asked, as the two young men exchanged glances, seemingly questioning each other whether they already knew each other. Tanrak suddenly realized he hadn't introduced himself yet, so he gestured silently towards his school uniform where his name was embroidered, indicating it without speaking.

**"I entrusts Barth to your care, Tanrak."**

The person who was like the headmaster both in worldly and spiritual matters of this school spoke firmly. Tanrak could only frown, not understanding anything. He turned to look at Barth, but the other man seemed to not understand either, so he had to turn to ask Father Anan directly.

**"What can I ask you to do for you, Father?"**

**"Barth has just transferred here out of necessity,"** Father Anan began. **"You know that the seminary community is stricter and has more restrictions than usual. But our school doesn't have time for an orientation for him. You are the head of the sixth grade class, so I think I can entrust Barth to you. He'll need a lot of time to adjust."**

The priest spoke, turning to give an encouraging smile to the new boy who had just been introduced to Tanrak, confident that he hadn't misread the image before him. But Barth's demeanor was filled with resistance, though deep down, he couldn't hide it from his subconscious. The new boy shrugged and moved slightly away from the speaker, his brows furrowed slightly, but he showed no further reaction or spoke a word beyond that, simply listening silently to the headmaster.

Father Anan briefly explained to Tanrak that Barth would be moving in as a seminarian in the final term of his last academic year as a special case, and that this had been approved by the diocese. Father Anan didn't give a reason, but it was probably something not worth discussing. Initially, Tanrak was asked, in a formal manner, to help look after the new student until he adjusted, especially regarding the lifestyle of a seminarian, which has many more details than that of a regular boarding school student.

**"Tanrak, let Barth borrow the seminarian's uniform for now. The tailor will have to make a new one for Barth later, but it probably won't be ready in time for the ceremony this Sunday."**

The speaker uttered his final words before taking his leave, after the students had returned and firmly crucified Christ once again to the temple pillar.

Soon the electricity came back on. Barth introduced himself briefly to his classmates, but no one seemed interested in talking further. The long, stuffy evening air had made their school uniforms damp with sweat, and combined with the power outage and the chaotic situation of dealing with the immediate problem, everyone was probably thinking more about the showers than anything else.

**"Have you ever taken a communal bath?"**

Tanrak asked as he led Barth back to the dorm after the students had all dispersed. Everyone seemed to have lost interest in the new student, except for those who had to fulfill their duties.

**"Never. It hasn't been difficult, though. It's not a big deal,"** Barth replied.

**"Good. There are many daily routines here, but things won't be very busy for now because we have to prepare for a big event this Sunday. In the meantime, I'll let you know if anything comes up. Just follow what everyone else is doing for now. If you have any questions, just ask. Then, on Sunday morning, wear your seminarian uniform and meet me at the church. Actually, the headmaster has already written the daily schedule on the board in front of the dorm. Just follow that. If you need anything, just ask. You're all grown up now, I don't think I need to teach you everything. Just do what others are doing."**

Tanrak gave a lengthy explanation to the newcomer, but honestly, it was almost completely incomplete. He didn't intend to, but the defiant look in the other's eyes made him feel that the other probably didn't want any help or intimacy beyond simply going along with the situation out of obligation. Barth himself didn't show any signs of wanting a friend or anything like that; his gaze and demeanor were full of indifference. Upon reaching the dorms, they parted ways without even asking for directions to their respective beds.

In truth, the story of his new friend, who seemed like an apostle, would have been just another ordinary part of Tanrak's life as a young seminarian. But that wasn't the case at all. The young man knew that the new boy's life was partly intertwined with his own, at least through the duties assigned to him by Father Anan. Yet, for many days, Barth remained out of everyone's sight, to the point that Tanrak almost forgot what he was supposed to remember about this new friend—until the significant event of the new priest's ordination day arrived.

The new recruit arrived at the cathedral dressed entirely in black from head to toe.

Amidst the pristine white attire of most attendees, especially the immaculately clean robes of the seminarians, Tanrak had seen the other person since entering the church. However, the chaos of the ceremony prevented anyone from paying close attention to each other's details. Furthermore, the general Catholics were all wearing colorful civilian clothes, so the all-black outfit didn't stand out too much to anyone. But that was only "almost," because when the ceremony began, Tanrak's peaceful world seemed to crumble before his very eyes.

**"May God be with you."**

**"And may he be with you..."**

The benevolent priest spoke first, followed by the other Catholics who received and knelt in reverence to God, with the exception of only one. Just one. Barth, dressed in all black, stood alone, defiantly and calmly amidst the perfect serene humility.

All eyes in the room were fixed on the one person who was different. Tanrak's heart sank. He quickly entrusted the incense burner to Kongdech before rushing to drag the culprit out of the religious place as fast as possible.

A multitude of noises came from all around, but Tanrak had no sense of anything else to listen to. At first, Barth resisted, but in the end, he seemed to succumb to the raging anger that gripped his arm tightly and dragged him away quickly.

The two young men stood facing each other in front of the church, one being dragged along, refusing to give up as if feeling out of sight of others. Tanrak asked the other what was wrong, irritated, but Barth's answer sent a chill down Tanrak's spine, like being doused in a bucket of ice water.

**"I hate God... because God has never helped me with anything!"**

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## Question 2

Tanrak pulled the new student out of the church while the ordination ceremony continued until it was complete. Soon after, Father Anan followed, calm but with eyes filled with dread, like a still sea hinting at the imminent onslaught of a great storm.

The simple instructions told Tanrak to take Barth to the confessional to calm down. Tanrak sat nearby, waiting, while Barth disappeared inside until he was called back by Father Anan after the other Catholic people had dispersed.

**"I don't think your actions were wise,"** Father Anan said in his first sentence.

**"I didn't do anything wrong. I just didn't respect what I didn't want to respect,"** Barth argued.

**"I heard you say that God has never helped you... Is that true?"**

The senior man asked the new student directly. Barth turned to look at Tanrak, and then quickly averted his gaze, as he was simply reporting to the teacher as part of his duty.

**"Father, you saw it too, didn't you? Isn't it God's fault that my life is like this?"**

Barth remained silent for a long time before speaking. His eyes were filled with such pain that even a casual glance revealed it. He saw a beast trapped in some kind of snare, thrashing and terrified, unable to receive even a touch of compassion.

*"I don't know what kind of life experiences you've been through,"* the older one began calmly, without the anger that mingled with the younger one. *"But don't forget that the fact you were able to come to this school, even with your history of physical abuse that forced you to leave mid-year... that was all because of God."*

The headmaster spoke, gesturing towards Christ, whose gaze seemed to be fixed down from the top of the crucified cross. And if God truly existed, He was surely high above His Son, by a great distance. Barth followed his gaze, deep in thought. He expected the priest to be furious, but the opposite was true.

*"It was a fight... not a physical assault,"* Barth argued, but his voice was much calmer.

*"The truth is important, but the perception of society is also crucial. Even if you are polite and gentle, if society sees you as aggressive, you may find it difficult to function in society,"* the speaker paused, sounding troubled. *"Bodin... you are only here temporarily. In just six months you will complete your education and leave. Be patient, my son. I have tried my best to give you every opportunity, but that is within the limits you must accept."*

The speaker's voice was difficult to decipher; was it a threat, a plea, an instruction, or an explanation? Yet, it seemed to completely dispel the other boy's anger. Barth bowed his head, swallowing hard.

*"You may not love God, but God loves all of you. You may feel that God is not helping you, but God helps all of you... And one day you will understand what I am telling you."*

Father Anan spoke, placing his hand on the new boy's shoulder in a gesture of entrustment, his eyes filled with forgiveness. The rebellious boy bowed his head, unable to hide his guilt. The headmaster left after turning to smile at Tanrak and reiterated the importance of looking after the new friend.

*"Wake up at 5:30 in the morning. Wash your face, brush your teeth, and shower, then go for morning prayers and rituals. After that, at 7:00, we have breakfast together in the cafeteria. At 8:00, we have the flag ceremony. We study from morning until about 5:00 in the evening. In the evening, we're free until 5:00. We shower and have dinner together at 6:00. From 7:00 to 8:00, we do our homework. If there's no homework, we can go play sports. From 8:00 onwards, we go back to the dorm and rest. At 10:00, we turn off the lights and go to sleep... Did I forget to tell you anything?"*

Tanrak spoke at length as he led Barth back to the seminary. This was the largest Catholic school in this small province, not too far from Bangkok. Most of the students came from the local community, except for the seminarians—a special group of students who received scholarships and lived there full-time, ordained as Catholic seminarians. Although they differed from other students only in their uniforms, the rules of the dormitory and many other routines were largely known to others.

*"When were you alive?"*

Barth asked with a chuckle in his throat, causing the speaker to turn and look for confirmation. In that split second, the class president of the sixth grade understood the priest's feelings perfectly. Although Barth's words seemed harsh and unfriendly, looking deeper beneath his impulsiveness, a deeply wounded soul hid within. Even if seen, it wasn't easy to offer help. If the person didn't ask, the benefactor would be helpless.

*"Every minute is precious,"* Tanrak said. *"We're not here for personal reasons alone. Okay, some of us might have financial problems, but that's not the whole story. We also have faith in God; otherwise, we wouldn't be here."*

Tanrak spoke firmly, not to persuade the person in front of him or deceive himself, but the young man was truly like that, as he had said from the beginning. Most people became seminary students because of economic problems at home, but not him. He heard a calling, a whisper inviting him to a distant path above.

*"Why did you become a seminary student?"*

Barth asked unexpectedly, even though Tanrak felt a little awkward about being addressed with informal pronouns like "you" and "me," but it wasn't a big deal. In fact, he always referred to himself that way with his close friends. But now, he didn't feel that Bart was being too familiar with the term "close," but he didn't want to argue further.

*"Why would you want to know?"*

Tanrak paused as he led the other person to the end of the locker room. Most of the lockers were for personal belongings; valuables had to be left separately with the master treasurer. The questioner narrowed his eyes at the new student. Bart had only arrived at school on Friday night; it was only Sunday afternoon. He might know a little about the dorms, but he still needed time to adjust to school matters. However, he didn't seem interested in the life of a seminary at all; anything he said seemed to go in one ear and out the other.

*"I just wanted to know why you seem so devout, especially as the class president,"* Barth elaborated.

After listening, Tanrak could only sigh before telling the story without thinking that there was anything to hide.

*"When I was a child, I was in a car with my parents when a drunk driver crashed into us. The car veered off the road, and I woke up in the hospital. At first, the doctors thought I wouldn't recover. They said I'd been lying in sewage for so long that my brain had become infected. But miraculously, I survived. My parents died as soon as the wreckage was recovered. My medical bills alone were in the hundreds of thousands of baht. I didn't have the money to pay, but the hospital received funds from donations from the diocese to cover the costs."*

Tanrak spoke in a normal manner, his mind wandering to the faded faces of his parents, blurred by the passage of time and discoloration. It had been many years since he had seen his parents in person; all that remained was a small locket, a memento he had received from them as a birthday gift.

Tanrak picked up a memento to show Barth. It was a faded photograph of a man and a woman with a young son in his arms. That moment of happiness was too short to have imagined.

*"And then..."*

Barth seemed unsure of what to say or ask. The listener couldn't discern his emotional state.

Tanrak continued speaking without overthinking it to avoid a headache.

*"I was lost. I have no parents, only a little money left from life insurance, but I didn't know what to do next. I have no relatives anywhere, until I met Father Anan,"* Tanrak said. *"Yes, he is the one who let me continue my studies here. He's a friend of my dad from their school days."*

Barth nodded in acknowledgment but didn't say anything more.

*"He introduced me to prayer. After I prayed, I felt calmer, less distracted, and stopped just crying and thinking about my parents,"* he exhaled. *"You might disagree, but thinking of God really helped me to continue living. At least I didn't feel so alone in this world."*

*"So you became a seminary, huh?"*

*"Yes... I want to see my parents again, at least in the afterlife. I pray constantly that if I die, God will take me to be with Him, that He will take me to see my parents. My parents are probably waiting for me there. That's why I've been trying my best to live a good life, so that I can see my parents again."*

*"Really?... Do you really believe that?"*

Tanrak shrugged after Barth asked in a serious tone. The young man chose not to answer but closed his locker, ready to show the new boy the various places where he would be performing his daily routines within the school grounds. In truth, he should have introduced Barth yesterday, but being busy preparing for the church

event had led him to assume the other boy could manage his life on his own. But after today's events, he would have to reconsider.

Tanrak walked ahead, their first destination being the small chapel on the school grounds where the seminarians went for their morning and evening prayers.

**“Do you really believe it? Do you really believe in God? Do you believe that God created the world, created humanity, sent Jesus to be born, and awaits judgment at the end of the world? Just the basics, nothing else. Just that... do you really believe it?”**

Barth asked in a firm voice. At first, Tanrak chose to remain silent, thinking that speaking would be pointless. But the other man reached out and grabbed his elbow, stopping him. They stopped in front of a small temple, and coincidentally, right in front of a sacred painting depicting an important religious site.

**“This painting is called ‘Ticket to Heaven,’ Tanrak pointed to the painting and said. “The artist interpreted the Old Testament’s journey to heaven, a path filled with thorns and beasts that prey on sinful humans and deny them the purification of their hearts.”**

Tanrak's eyes showed faith from the bottom of his heart.

**“If you ask me if I believe it... I can say right away that I do. I believe it very much.”**

Barth didn't argue, but his gaze was filled with utter incomprehension.

**“Because of God who allowed me to live on, because of God who provided a path after that, because of God who opened the light for me to meet Him, and because of God that I will be reunited with my parents.”**

Tanrak turned to look at the picture again and repeated the words, more to himself than to the person in front of him. He still remembered every moment of himself: a young boy who followed his parents to church every Sunday, until one day his parents were gone, and he decided to seek answers on his own. At least it might alleviate some of the pain of being alone. A young boy who secretly threw the incense burner belonging to the novice monk, because he had heard that his prayers would be communicated to God.

Father Anan happened to find him and eventually adopted him, not physically, but out of the deepest compassion in his heart. A home becomes nothing but bricks, stones, earth, and sand when the parents are gone, but not here. Boarding school might be a nightmare for many, but not for those who have no home to return to. Here, Tanrak is closer to home than he is at his own. There is no doubt about the final path he has chosen for his life. Every word he utters is spoken without the slightest hesitation.

**“If you have enough faith in God... God will provide you with the right path.”**

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### Item 3

Barth, dressed in his seminary uniform, was more reserved than expected. At least there hadn't been a fight on the very first day of the first week after the term started, following the young man's complete revelation about his family background. He seemed about to share something, but ultimately turned to look at the landscape depicting the path to heaven again and fell silent. Tanrak wasn't the type to be bossy; when the speaker chose silence, he, as the listener, chose to remain quiet as well, letting Barth's past remain a mystery.

**“How long do you think this new kid will last?”**

Kongdech asked while Tanrak was folding linen on the bed one morning. Tanrak followed Kongdech's gaze and saw that the person being talked about was still asleep, curled up unaware on the bed. A quick glance revealed no blanket. It wasn't hard to guess that he'd been pranked; someone had stolen it and hidden it without his knowledge. He couldn't ask the master for a new one in the middle of the night, and he couldn't share one with anyone because everyone only had one. He sighed deeply but nudged the other person with a calm demeanor.

**“Wake up... I'll take you to the treasurer's office to get a new blanket.”**

Tanrak called out, but the other person remained still. When he reached out to touch him, he found he was slightly feverish, but not intensely hot. Tanrak shook him again until the new boy slowly opened his eyes, looking harmless. The young man turned to his best friend and gestured for him to go ahead with his morning prayers, as the boy's condition might require taking him to the infirmary. He took the liberty of placing his hand on the boy's forehead out of concern, but thought it wasn't as serious as other cases he'd encountered.

*"Are you okay?" Tanrak asked as people gradually left the dorm.*

*"Sorry, sorry."*

*Barth stirred and sat up. He seemed to be feeling unwell, but not yet bedridden. The usually stern demeanor was almost completely gone.*

*"Then just lie here and wait. I'll go get some blankets."*

*Tanrak spoke resignedly before walking away, passing the seminarian who was routinely inspecting the dormitories. This school resembled a small diocese, containing a cathedral open to outside Catholics for various religious ceremonies, and a smaller chapel where seminarians practiced. The parish priest was in charge, followed by the seminarian masters or senior seminarians who were awaiting ordination as priests.*

*"Why haven't you gone to the small temple yet, Tanrak?" the master asked.*

*"Excuse me, Master, the new boy's blanket is missing. I'm going to get a new one from the treasurer's office. It seems he didn't have a blanket all night last night, and he doesn't seem well. I was planning to take him to the infirmary, and if I have time, I'll follow you to the church."*

*Tanrak explained, not really wanting to meddle in other people's lives, but his duty as class president weighed heavily on him. Ultimately, if any problems arose, he would have to answer to Father Anan anyway. Therefore, it was better to prevent problems from arising in the first place.*

*"Barth, you mean?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Was he bullied?"*

*The teacher's question broke the silence in the conversation. Tanrak turned to look at his classmate, who had probably fallen asleep on the old, dilapidated bunk bed. His weary, harmless appearance was quite pitiful, though it was easy to guess he didn't want to be there.*

*"I'm not sure... but I think it might be."*

*Tanrak responded with a noncommittal answer. Barth had been living at the seminary for several weeks now. Outwardly, everything seemed fine, but it was easy to guess that he wasn't very fond of socializing. He was always seen walking around alone, and people like him soon became targets of bullying.*

*"Even though they are both young monks, they can't control themselves in such a small way. They know that jealousy is a sin, yet they let it consume their hearts."*

*The master grumbled in displeasure. Tanrak remained silent, his head bowed as if personally reprimanded. The young man himself didn't bother to notice anything unusual. When the higher-ranking official asked about the suspect, he simply replied truthfully that he didn't know, which made him feel considerably guilty of neglecting his duty.*

*"Then go ahead. I will handle things here."*

*The master nodded in confirmation, so Tanrak could only nod and change his target, walking back to his bed to prepare his things for the morning routine and prayers. He unconsciously glanced at the other person sleeping*

soundly, sweating profusely, but did nothing but watch. At first, he intended to tell the master that he would provide a blanket, but on second thought, it would be pointless since the caretaker would probably say so anyway.

Tanrak hurriedly got ready. The bathroom was empty; his classmates must have all gone to the morning religious service. By the time he arrived, he passed other friends who were gradually coming out. He tried to observe anyone acting unusually, but it seemed useless. Everything was quiet. Then, Kongdech walked out last. His close friend was the leader of the church choir today, which is why he was later than everyone else.

**"Have you caught the culprit?" Kongdech asked.**

**"Arrest what? I'm not a cop. I'm just going to get him a blanket, that's all," Tanrak replied.**

**"And what did he say?" the other person continued to ask.**

**"Well, nothing really. I ran into the treasurer on my way to the office, and he took care of it for me. He sent me to the church. I guess he's probably in the infirmary by now."**

Tanrak answered truthfully, his mind wandering to the image of some kind of beast hiding in a cage since the first day they met. No one knew about Barth's past involvement in fights before moving here—at least not as far as Tanrak knew. The young man couldn't imagine how that bullied person would cope with it all.

**"I bet he'll be out within a month. He doesn't think he can last much longer in this condition."**

Kongdech spoke not in a disparaging tone, but rather stating the facts. Frankly, some seminary students enter the monastery due to financial problems and don't have strong religious faith. Aggressive behaviors may be ingrained within them, even if it's not direct physical fighting; the silent bullying is so deeply rooted that it's difficult to eradicate.

**"I wouldn't dare guess. Actually, I don't really like Barth that much, but teasing him like this isn't right either."**

Tanrak spoke openly to his friend. To be honest, the young man had disliked Barth ever since the day of ordination ceremony. What that stranger had done was an attempt to defy God. But, as Father Anan had said, forgiveness was a noble virtue that a religious person should practice. He himself had dedicated himself to religion for the distant future. This test, he had to overcome it. Perhaps, the strange boy who arrived with the sound of thunder was indeed a test from God.

**"If he hadn't been so annoying, it might not have gotten into this."**

Kongdech spoke, and although it wasn't a logically sound statement, it contained a great deal of truth. Tanrak did nothing but shake his head to regain his composure. Why, when he thought of the young man curled up on the bed, did a pity well up in him that he couldn't help but feel? Tanrak tried to avoid getting too close to the new student. Although he didn't dislike him personally, Barth had clearly shown a lack of faith in God, unlike him. The closer they got, the more likely they would become an eyesore to each other.

The image of Barth's pale face haunted Tanrak all afternoon. If someone was responsible for the new kid's bullying, it might be the principal, the headmaster, or perhaps even the class president—undeniably. He couldn't explain why he couldn't shake that image off. All he could think was prayers for Bart's safety, for God to bless and protect him.

**"I came to visit a friend. His name is Bodin."**

Tanrak uttered those first words upon arriving at the infirmary, without realizing it. The person attending to him was an older seminarian. After graduating from high school, seminarians are required to work and help care for younger seminarians for another two years, while simultaneously studying Buddhist teachings.

**"Your friend has gone home. He just left a moment ago."**

Tanrak frowned, glancing at the wall clock and seeing it was almost five o'clock. He had finished his evening classes and was walking here. It wasn't surprising that Barth would also have gone back to the dorm unless he was seriously ill. Soon it would be time to shower, eat, and perform the evening prayers.

The young man nodded in acknowledgment before excusing himself and leaving without any further concern. He thought to himself that it was good that the other person was well, and as for the bullying at school, he had probably already consulted with the teacher if he thought it was an important matter.

**"Tanrak! Tanrak!"**

A shout rang out even before he could see who it was. The young man quickly craned his neck to look and saw Kongdech running towards him, breathless and looking terrified.

**"What's wrong?"** he asked.

**"Barth got into a fight with Kit at the dorm. Kit said Barth stole his headphones. They talked for a short while and then they broke up into a brawl."**

Kongdech recounted, drenched in sweat from running across the building. Tanrak grumbled in frustration before hurrying back to the dorm. It wasn't surprising that his friend had come looking for him first. It would be best to mitigate the severity of the problem, because if it escalated to the point of involving his Father Anan, there was a chance that the troublemaker would be punished, even to the point of expulsion. Often, a problem stems from just a drop of honey, and an entire future can be ruined by the turbulent ripple effect, which would be a great pity.

**"You bastard!"**

**"You're the bastard!"**

Loud shouts echoed as the two exchanged blows, disregarding all odds. The remaining ten or so students in the dorm didn't intervene; some cheered, others hesitated. Most had probably gone down to the cafeteria. Tanrak and Kongdech exchanged nods before splitting up. Tanrak grabbed Barth from behind and dragged him away, while Kongdech restrained the other troublemaker. However, Tanrak struggled against the explosive rage within him, managing to hold out for less than ten seconds before Barth broke free and lunged at the other man.

**"That's enough... I told you to stop!"** The master's voice boomed sharply from the dormitory entrance.

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#### **Item 4**

The entire quarrel ended immediately. Barth and Kit sat on opposite sides of the bed, not far apart. Masser stood guard, preventing them from erupting in anger again. Initially, Tanrak and Kongdech wanted to leave, but Masser ordered them to stay and help, just in case the two lost their patience and started punching each other again. It might take several people to help extinguish the raging anger.

**"From the Bible, Matthew, verse 22:37-38, Jesus says what the first and greatest commandment is."**

The master questioned both parties sharply. They both turned their faces away from each other, and neither spoke a word.

**"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment."**

However, it was the class representative who answered, seeing that no one in the dispute would speak. Therefore, Tanrak answered the teacher on behalf of everyone.

**"The second one is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself."**

The young man elaborated, before the atmosphere in the dormitory fell into an awkward silence once again. Tanrak could only look dejected, not knowing what to do. When the teacher turned to look at the other two, no one would make eye contact, until the class leader had to step in and apologize.

**“Kongkit, follow me here. You go see Father first,”** Master Nen said. **“Bodin, wait here. In half an hour, have Tanrak bring you to the priest’s room. I think Father would prefer to investigate the incident one person at a time.”**

The older man spoke sharply, leading Kongkit out first. The other man followed reluctantly. For a moment, Tanrak felt the other man glance at Barth. That single moment was filled with lingering resentment. Tanrak felt an inexplicable shiver down his spine for the newcomer, but the newcomer seemed unfazed. Kongdech also followed the master, as the small temple was on the way to the priest's room anyway.

Tanrak watched everyone walk away, secretly hoping that the senior novice monk would save dinner for him.

But suddenly, Barth stood up and started to walk away.

**“Where are you going?”** Tanrak quickly asked, getting up to follow, fulfilling his duty to keep an eye on his new friend.

**“I forgot my bag in the infirmary.”**

Barth spoke as he walked out of the dormitory, completely disregarding any rules. Tanrak could do nothing but get up and follow him. At least if Father Anan questioned him, he could explain fully.

As they walked along the connecting corridor, Tanrak moved his lips several times, wanting to ask about the fight earlier, or at least about the missing headphones. But seeing the displeased expression on the other person's face, he changed his mind and decided to keep quiet. He realized it wasn't his business, so he let the other person lead the way through the shortcut that used to be the school's swimming pool.

**“You bastard!”**

The sound of cursing from the person in front startled those behind. At first, Tanrak thought someone was trying to ambush him, but no, Barth was furious and about to climb down from the edge of the pool. At the bottom of the pool, belongings were scattered everywhere. A handbag with Bodin's name embroidered on it was torn to shreds. Its owner was complaining angrily. This old swimming pool was rarely used because a child had once drowned there, almost losing their life. After that, it was permanently closed, and they used the more standard swimming pool outside the school instead.

**“Calm down, Barth.”**

Tanrak spoke, hoping to defuse the other's anger. He himself wasn't exactly cheerful either; if his belongings were destroyed like this, it would be difficult to control his emotions. The young man could only help clean up the mess as quickly as possible. Most of it wasn't wet because the pool hadn't been filled with water for a long time, but there were traces of dirt and neglect. Tanrak glanced around before intending to invite his new friend to climb to the top, but then saw a shadowy figure quickly disappear.

**“The stairs are gone...”**

Tanrak spoke in a whisper, seemingly venting his deepest feelings more than the person in front of him, while Barth spewed several more curses before unleashing a devastating punch to the edge of the pool, the scent of blood wafting faintly. He swallowed hard, trying to put on a brave face, telling himself he had nothing to do with this, but if the other person imagined he was involved in the deception or complicit in the plan, he wouldn't be able to withstand the other's blows.

**“That's why you're stuck here with me, you class president!”**

Barth muttered, not in anger, but more in frustration. The listener breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't been misunderstood. He returned the collected items to their owner, who gathered them into a tattered bag, but they were of little use.

*"It's alright. We'll just shout for help when someone passes by."*

Tanrak responded, trying not to be upset, while in reality he was burning with rage. He kept picturing Barth shivering the night before—even in the enclosed dormitory. But this was the old swimming pool, and it would surely get even colder as night fell. Nevertheless, he put on a brave face, refusing to show any weakness.

*"Try riding on my shoulders first. You might be able to reach it."*

The other person spoke while piling their belongings on one side and making a gesture as if to clasp their hands together for him to step on to push himself up and try to climb into the swimming pool. But Tanrak could only shake his head firmly.

*"The swimming pool used to be for sports competitions. It's five meters deep. You won't reach the bottom no matter how much you climb. Don't bother. You might slip and fall and get hurt more. I think we should just sit and wait for someone to come by,"* he replied.

*"Who will come by?"*

Barth spoke more as if to himself than as a genuine question, but it yielded the same result. Tanrak knew exactly what he meant. This hallway was a shortcut behind the building, connecting the dorms to the teachers' lounge on the other side. Not many people used it because it was the old, dark back of the building; the front passageway was much brighter and easier to navigate. They had chosen this route because the stairs to the infirmary were closed, so they were taking the fire escape instead. Not everyone intentionally came this way.

*"No one's passed through now, but someone will soon. When the master checks the roll call and doesn't see any of us, he'll probably go look for us,"* he continued.

*"But the master doesn't take attendance himself. You're the one who does, and now you're stuck here with me,"* Barth argued.

*"Whatever. I probably won't be stuck here until I starve to death."*

Tanrak shrugged and found a corner to sit in that seemed drier and less bothered by the cold wind. There were no mosquitoes down here, at least not for now. His stomach was rumbling, demanding dinner, but he could only resign himself to the fact that there was no sign of anything coming his way.

*"Ah..."* Barth spoke, taking a small chocolate bar from his shoulder bag and handing it to Tanrak.

Tanrak looked on with interest. The seminary didn't allow any of the children to have their own money. Meals were provided three times a day in the dining hall. The seminarians didn't have money to buy snacks themselves. The money their parents gave them was pooled together in a different bank account run by the master treasurer. Snacks, if any, were only given on special occasions and shared among them. The fact that the person in front of him had food at this moment was like an angel descending to announce to the world that the Virgin Mary could conceive even as a virgin.

*"How did you get those snacks?"* Tanrak asked, unconsciously swallowing.

*"It's probably not against the rules or anything, but it might save your life. Do you want to eat it? Or not, it's up to you,"* the other person said.

*"But it's wrong..."* Tanrak hesitated.

*"Just have faith in God, that's enough. Don't be so obsessed with the rules of the seminary. Only believe it if your God tells you not to eat chocolate."*

The sharp tongue of the person in front of him, yet one concealing a certain truth, freed the listener from all emotional constraints. Tanrak, utterly hungry, grabbed the chocolate in front of him and slowly nibbled at it, afraid it would run out prematurely. The young man glanced across the floor, instinctively searching for moisture. The person in front of him seemed to notice, silently offering him the remaining half-bottle of water. Tanrak thanked them before taking a sip to quench his thirst.

**“If I tell you I didn't do it, will you believe me?”**

Barth spoke up after a long time had passed, a time no one had noticed or remembered. Tanrak turned to look at him. The blinding light illuminated only a sliver of his face, making it difficult to discern the emotion behind his words. But it was certainly the expression of a battered, desperate wild animal.

**“I believe you...”** he admitted. **“Not because I believe everything you say, but because of the reason. You were in the infirmary all day. Where would you find the time to steal those headphones? This morning I even saw Kit secretly listening to Soundabout under the blanket with Man.”** Tanrak finished speaking.

**“Thank you.”**

That soft, yet firm voice seemed to release everything that had been held back for so long, unleashing a torrent. The distance between their shoulders was so close that one could hear their heavy breathing within fingertip reach. The ferocious beast had been freed from its snare by the merciful hunter. The animal stumbled and scrambled through the darkness, yearning for a resting place to soothe its wounded spirit and give it the strength to face the sunlight that would gradually creep in.

**“I know you're not really a bad person, even though you try to make everyone believe you are.”**

Those who came before spoke according to their intuition, without knowing the reason why. Perhaps it was to comfort the lonely, lost, and apologetic, urging them to accept the reality of the world: that if the dark side of night exists, there must also be a bright side of day.

**“Mm,”** the other person replied softly. **“You go to sleep. You've yawned three times already. I'll keep an eye on you and call you if anyone comes.”**

Barth spoke, looking up at the dark sky, the stars completely obscured by the lights from the surrounding buildings. Unlike Tanrak, who could no longer endure the physical strain, he guessed that a considerable amount of time had passed. Today had been an incredibly long day, from morning till night, filled with all sorts of events without stopping. The young man lay down, using the other person's bag as a temporary pillow, secretly hoping that someone would pass by soon—Kongdech, Masseur Nen, or perhaps Father Anan.

But that expectation was only half true. It's true that eventually someone came along, from Kongdech, Master Nen, to Father Anan—in fact, perhaps a hundred people. But the part that was wrong was that by the time everyone found them, it was already morning. Many people gathered to watch the decommissioned swimming pool where two young men lay huddled together, shivering from the cold.

The outside world may be harsh and cruel, but perhaps not within this tiny, palm-sized space where bodies can be reached and embraced.



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## 2

### *Saint Andrew*

#### *Item 1*

*Kongkit was expelled from both the novice monkhood and the boarding school on the same day. The troublemaker confessed to all charges, from hiding the blanket, stealing and slashing the bag, tricking the victim into going to the old swimming pool area and pulling up the ladder, to picking a fight over headphones that had never actually gone missing. Everyone involved was summoned to the headmaster's office for investigation and judgment. Kongkit received the harshest punishment, while the direct victims, Barth and Tanrak, could only remain silent.*

*“Why are you doing all this?” Father Anan asked towards the end of the conversation.*

*“I don't like that he blabbed about me and told the master.”*

*"As for the matter of you sneaking off to smoke in the broom closet behind the small temple, no one has ever reported that to the Master. The master saw it with his own eyes. He hardly ever even spoke to Barth personally."*

*The master shook his head as he spoke, before the person revealing the truth became surprised and confused. Finally, the story unfolded: Barth had accidentally seen Kongkit secretly smoking at school, and the very next day, the master summoned Kongkit to reprimand him. However, Kongkit blamed Barth for reporting him and began silently seeking revenge. When Barth became suspicious, they publicly confronted each other.*

*"But that doesn't mean you're innocent in this matter."*

*Father Anan turned to speak to Barth after allowing the master to invite Kongkit out to handle the school resignation process himself.*

*"But Barth is being bullied, Father," Tanrak blurted out.*

*"Regarding the bullying, I agree that Barth was the victim. But as for the fight, I think both sides are jointly at fault. I should have investigated this matter thoroughly yesterday, but I was held up by an emergency outside. I think Barth needs to learn a lesson to reflect on some things."*

*The priest spoke calmly but with a profound impact. Tanrak observed his new friend carefully. If things weren't as he had initially suspected, Barth wasn't shouting or showing resistance as usual. Instead, the man in front of him kept his head down, his mouth tighter than ever, which even surprised him.*

*"Barth..." Father Anan began, "Can you tell me what the seven deadly sins are?"*

*"One... arrogant, two... stingy, three... lewd, four... greedy for food, five... envious, six... lazy."*

*Tanrak thought Barth wouldn't be able to answer, as he seemed to have always opposed religion, which originated from God. But the opposite was true; the new boy answered each of the seven deadly sins correctly, almost perfectly. The young man looked at his friend with suspicion. Who was Barth? Why did he oppose God so much, yet possess such profound knowledge and understanding of Him? Perhaps the person before him wasn't an outsider as he had thought, but maybe an insider, a deeply inner being who had gradually repented and become something else.*

*"One more grave sin is missing, my child."*

*Father Anan reiterated after noticing the speaker remained silent for a long time. Thanrak secretly observed the person beside him. The other person hadn't forgotten; their uncomfortable expression indicated that. However, it was more like an internal tug-of-war preventing the quarreled person from uttering words that were like a thorn in their side.*

*"It's anger, Father."*

*Barth's final reply surprised the class president standing beside him. If he remembered correctly, this was the first time he'd heard the new boy speak so politely, and more importantly, he'd addressed the priest as "Father" so respectfully.*

*"By which virtue quells anger?" the questioner continued.*

*"Patience"*

*Barth answered firmly, and Father Anan nodded in satisfaction before explaining that Barth's punishment would be to spend time reflecting on his conscience in the chapel, observing silence for the entire time to pray spiritually and communicate with God.*

*"Tanrak will be the one watching over you throughout that time."*

Father Anan continued, and that unintentionally startled those being addressed. Sitting and watching over a friend was like being punished as well, because those watching also had to remain silent and pray.

*"But I didn't do anything wrong," he appealed unintentionally.*

*"For you," the speaker turned to look at Tanrak, "you do this to cultivate your own compassion, a virtue of paramount importance for becoming a spiritual leader in the future. You aspire to be a pastor like me. Joining in prayer with lost friends to help them overcome their difficulties shouldn't be too difficult for you. Or, if you wish for me to join you in prayer, I would be happy to."*

The priest's words were so pure that Thanrak, who had asked the question, clasped his hands together in a gesture of apology for asking an inappropriate question.

The two young men excused themselves from the priest's room to prepare for their next day of moral reflection in the chapel. Although it was a regular school day, Father Anan felt they were quite exhausted from the previous night and allowed them to rest, only asking that they spend some time in prayer to reflect on their conduct.

Tanrak led Bart out of the headmaster's office and headed towards the small chapel.

*"I thought you'd make more of a fuss."*

Tanrak spoke more as if reflecting on himself than directly addressing his friend, who was no longer a newcomer. The person in front of him seemed different than usual, at least in his respect for the elder monk.

*"I didn't think Father would fire Kit."*

Barth said the word "father" with a clear and emphatic tone, and with a logic that even the listener couldn't quite understand: why couldn't Father Anan fire Kongkit?

*"Kit is my father's nephew," Barth continued, probably seeing the question marks all over his face. "Actually, I already knew who did it all, but Kit threatened that he was my father's real nephew, even though we have different last names. My father would never side with me. My father would never choose someone else over his own nephew."*

*"Compassion..."*

Instead of questioning the story any further, he accepted something silently. His heart welled up with a certain reverence for the role model who seemed to be a clear path to heaven ahead. The priest's words were probably true; only those who are full of virtue will ultimately reside in the realm of the Lord. And most importantly, his parents would be waiting there if he followed this path to the end.

*"Hmm... I guess so."*

Barth accepted without further ado. The two young men pushed open the small chapel door from opposite sides. Sunlight from above streamed through the stained-glass windows, creating a dazzling display of colors, like a magical realism. Few people visited the chapel at this time; usually it was for morning or evening prayers, or Sunday Mass. Thus, the place became a secluded retreat for the two young men.

*"What do I need to do?"*

Barth asked, and Tanrak could only frown.

*"I've never taken the time to reflect on my conscience before. Do I need to pray anything beforehand? Is there a specific ceremony? Do I need to sing a song, confess my sins, or do anything?"*

*"Oh..." Tanrak nodded in understanding.*

*“You don’t have to do anything,” the elder in the spiritual path replied. “Just find a seat, meditate, and tell Him that you are about to examine your conscience to refine your patience. During that time, do nothing else but pray, or if possible, talk to Him.”*

*Instead of responding with love, their gaze swept to the Son, resting peacefully on the crucifixion of death, before looking beyond to the heavens higher up, to the Father who had sent the Redeemer to the sons and daughters cast out of the Garden of Eden, to the people stained with original sin, awaiting final forgiveness. A radiant light shone forth, bright but not scorching, seemingly inviting the two young men to draw closer to Him who always embraces those with unwavering faith.*

*“Okay...”*

*Barth nodded in agreement before walking to a quiet corner of the small chapel and slowly bowing before Christ according to the proper procedure. Tanrak watched Barth with surprise. His confidence and unhesitating prayer reinforced the fact that he was not an outsider to the Church at all.*

*“Let me know when you're done.”*

*Instead of speaking, Tanrak said, but there was no response from the other. Barth was probably entering a period of moral reflection to fully reflect on himself. At first, the young man thought his friend would pledge himself back to God's realm, but upon closer observation, he realized otherwise. Barth chose to sit in a dark corner, in the shadows where the light from above did not reach, perhaps due to common sense or something beneath the surface.*

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... Amen.”*

*The young man shook off all distracting thoughts before picking up his rosary and beginning to pray. He started by making the sign of the cross, embracing God and becoming one with Him. Each time Tanrak prayed with the deepest concentration, the world around him seemed to become pure white. There was nothing in his sight but the radiant image of God. His body felt light, as if being embraced by a pure spiritual force.*

*“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”*

*The Supplication to the Blessed Virgin Mary began unconsciously, leaving the young man feeling as if he were kneeling before a magnificent sanctuary, pleading for something he had almost received but not yet received.*

*He had always heard the call of God... he believed that with all his heart.*

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## **Question 2**

*The cold season is creeping closer. For others, the end of the year might be a time to celebrate a long period of hard work, to embrace loved ones, and to start anew in the coming year. But for Christians, the end of the year signifies a pivotal time when the Redeemer was born, bridging the bond between God and humanity through the Virgin Mary, who remained chaste until her last breath.*

*“Our school will be closed for Christmas from Wednesday, December 25th to Wednesday, January 1st, and will reopen on Thursday, January 2nd.”*

*The teacher began making announcements during the daily homework class, which usually included a meeting and discussion before everyone dispersed to work on their own homework.*

*“For seminarians who have to travel long distances to return home, please have you and your guardians contact the Master directly regarding additional leave. For everyone else, the Master requests that these existing leave dates be used as standard. Importantly, guardians must personally pick up their children in order for leave to be granted.”*

The lengthy announcement was nothing new to Tanrak. The young man turned to look at Barth, who had just moved his desk closer to his. Barth was staring blankly out the window, showing no interest in the long holiday weekend, practically the most important festival everyone eagerly awaited.

Life as a young seminarian is uneventful and lacks excitement. Rules and regulations are so strict that movement is virtually impossible. They are forbidden from owning personal belongings, spending personal money, or leaving the school grounds without permission. All of this is part of their training in simple living.

**“Those who do not return home must remain in the dormitories as before. The school will continue to provide three meals a day. The seminarians will still attend morning and evening prayers as usual. The remaining time will be for rest and relaxation as they please.”**

The master explained several more things before walking away, leaving the remaining seminarians to attend to their personal routines. Another important point mentioned was the annual Christmas preparations. All students would have a duty to help the school during this time, as many Christians would flock to the cathedral.

**“What should we do?”**

Barth asked as if nothing had crossed his mind, his gaze sweeping across the blackboard, which was laden with various assignments: welfare, reception, ceremonies, venue, documents, public relations. Many students were already signing up, and the limited number of positions available were creating pressure to secure them quickly.

**“I don't need to go because I have to do my duty as the church spokesperson,”** Kongdech began. **“And this one's the same; he's already in the choir.”**

Kongdech continued, nodding towards him. Tanrak nodded in agreement. The young man had been in the choir since junior high school; it wouldn't be wrong to call him one of the oldest members of the group. He didn't have many hobbies at the novice school; books, sports, and music were just a few things.

**“Really?”**

The newcomer, who wasn't so new anymore, grumbled wearily, burying his face in his arm. It was then that Tanrak finally had time to carefully examine the person before him and discovered several truths. First, Barth's appearance resembled old-fashioned paintings of saints, often rendered in color. Although Barth wasn't strikingly handsome, he possessed a certain quality that was captivating and endlessly mesmerizing, like a spell cast upon the heart of the image, instantly stopping the viewer in their tracks.

Another point was that Tanrak knew very little about Barth, considering him just a classmate. He had no idea what Barth liked to do in his free time, what his passions were, or what his future held. His memory of the new boy was one of rebellion, unconventionality, and rejection—a man who emerged from darkness on a rainy night, who had left in a fight and almost left in another, who defied God, and even now he wasn't sure if he had truly returned to God's embrace.

**“What do you like to do?”** he asked.

**“Looking for..”**

Bart replied, looking confused. At first, he almost didn't answer, but when he saw the look in Tanrak's eyes, he probably thought the question was directed at him.

**“What's your hobby... that way I can help you figure out what kind of position you should apply for.”**

**“Yeah, that's a good idea. Let's help each other choose.”**

Tanrak began, while Kongdech chimed in with interest, their eyes sparkling, in stark contrast to the person having to answer, who was filled with utter weariness.

*"No..." the person replied emotionlessly.*

*"Funny... think carefully," Kongdech refused to give up.*

*"No..." Barth repeated.*

*"So, what do you usually do in your free time? Around 7 or 8 PM, after you've finished your homework," Tanrak didn't give up either. Suddenly, he felt like he wanted to get to know the person in front of him better.*

*"Go to sleep... or go ask the teacher for some snacks."*

*Barth replied and slumped back down onto the table. Tanrak still hadn't lost his patience, but it seemed Kongdech had. He shook his head and excused himself to do his English homework in the sound lab. The young man who remained continued to be bossy, perhaps because he had finished all his homework.*

*"So what are you going to do? You can't be unemployed on Christmas Day. You're a novice monk," Tanrak retorted.*

*"We can do the same thing, it's easier," Barth replied casually.*

*"What... singing in harmony? You can sing?" he asked*

*"Anyone can sing, right? Even the novice monks sing in the temple every day."*

*Barth continued to answer dismissively, causing the listener to burst into laughter. What he said wasn't wrong; every novice monk had to sing practically as a way of life. But the choir wasn't like that. We selected pitches, divided rhythms, and created small-scale performances through the harmonies of the lyrics.*

*"Actually, the band is short on members. The band leader wants to add a tenor, but we don't have anyone yet," Tanrak said.*

*"Tenor?" Barth raised an eyebrow in question.*

*"Yeah, tenor, the second-highest voice in a choir, from soprano to alto to tenor and then bass," Tanrak said, tracing his fingers. "The choir is currently missing a tenor, a highpitched male voice. Why don't you try auditioning? Actually, there's no need for anything formal, just go see the choir leader."*

*Barth didn't answer, but nodded as if to say, "Take me there now." Tanrak accepted, confused, but willingly agreed to go along.*

*The choir leader was an older seminarian who had already graduated from high school and was responsible for overseeing the seminary for another two years. Thanrak led Bart to the choir's room, located on the lower floor of the hall, not far from the rehearsal room. The choir leader was there, so Tanrak informed him of his intention on behalf of his friend.*

*"Yes."*

*The band leader nodded simply before turning to rummage through a pile of documents to find suitable song lyrics for the band's selection process. The requirement might be to choose songs that appropriately showcase the use of low vocal range. Tanrak glanced at his friend, who seemed to be getting a little nervous.*

*"Cheer up, man," he whispered.*

*"He didn't let me practice first? I didn't expect to have to sing right away," Barth whispered in reply.*

*"Probably not. I think he's just looking for meat for you."*

Instead of offering comfort, before a clear conclusion could be reached, an alumnus picked up a piece of paper and walked towards the electric piano. He then handed the paper to Tanrak, who was closer, and had Tanrak pass it on to the newcomer. The band leader then nodded as a signal.

**“Once you get into the lyrics, you can sing right away. Keep your voice natural, don't try to fake it.”**

**“What... you're going to cry, huh? Can I practice first?”** Barth pleaded.

**“No need for rehearsals. I want to hear your voice, not your singing technique. Just the tone first, whether you're a tenor or not. If you are, then we'll talk. Because if you're a bassist, you probably won't be accepted. My bass line is already full; we just need a tenor.”**

The choir leader responded, his fingers gliding across the electric piano, giving the other no room for further negotiation. Thanrak watched his friend swallow nervously and offered a reassuring smile. The young man gently clenched his fist, trying to help his friend relax.

**“Cheer up, man,”** he whispered.

Barth took a deep breath before nodding, seemingly regaining his composure. The atmosphere in the choir room was that of an old classroom that had been converted into an empty space. Some soundproofing was added to minimize disturbance to others. One side had a blackboard for writing, the other wall was blank for displaying important song lyrics. The rest was mainly learned by holding instruments and memorizing them. The only instrument in the room was an electric piano, providing rhythm. The music was drifting closer to the other rooms, coinciding with the first notes of the melody sung by the auditionees.

*~In this vast world, I have discovered many kinds of love. But I don't understand the meaning of all of them. People define love in many different ways. However, I only understood when I discovered the purest kind of love—a love that expects nothing in return, a love like refreshing raindrops on cracked, dry land during a drought, enriching it with love and loyalty forever.~*

**“Barth's voice was more beautiful than I had imagined...”** Tanrak murmured to herself. It wasn't the pure, clear high tones of a woman's voice, but rather deep and resonant, yet not aggressive. The tone, accompanied by the piano melody, was surprisingly warm. Tanrak felt as if he were being lulled into a land of love without realizing it. The hymn spoke of love, a love found in an unexpected place, a love amidst an endless, long drought.

**...A love that will change the rest of your life forever, never to return.**

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### **Item 3**

The new student in the second semester of their final year of high school finally got a position in the choir, and joining the choir made Tanrak and Barth inseparable. They regularly came to the club room in the evenings, including weekends. As December began, everything at the seminary became increasingly hectic, including Kongdech. For many days, Tanrak barely spoke to Kongdech outside of class.

**“Hello, P' Ath.”**

Tanrak was the first to speak upon arriving at the choir club room, followed by Barth who bowed respectfully. P' Ath was an alumnus who tested the new members and currently held the position of choir leader. The choir required singers of all vocal ranges, so the novice choir only practiced the tenor and bass parts using recordings. As the actual performance approached, the choir would practice with the Catholic congregation of the main church, which included female soprano and alto singers.

**“Excuse me, could you do me a favor?”**

The senior student spoke, pointing to a pile of equipment haphazardly arranged on one side. **“For the upcoming Christmas event, Father Anan will be opening the first floor of the seminary to the public, like an exhibition. So, I asked some of the students to help tidy up the room and get it ready for the event. We only**

*invited two alumni because there wasn't much work to do; the more people, the more complications. And the job fell on Barth, a new member of the club, who then invited Tanrak."*

*"If I'm not around, please look after the club for me."*

*Ath said casually while decorating the lyric chart board to resemble the Nativity scene. Tanrak raised an eyebrow before realizing the speaker had turned to face him.*

*"Me, P'?" he asked.*

*"Yeah, of course. If it's not you, then who?" The speaker chuckled softly. "The club only has two high school students, you and Tang. Tang probably won't continue as a monk anyway, so it's just you left." P' Ath spoke as if discussing the weather, while the listener just frowned.*

*"Is Tang going to resign, P'? How did you know?" Tanrak asked.*

*"Wow, are you pretending not to know, or are you just pretending not to know? Tang has been secretly dating his girlfriend since middle school. They exchange letters almost every day. There's probably a whole basketful of love letters in his locker. Someone like him is bound to quit and get married one day, have kids, and have a wife. How could he possibly stay a seminarian?"*

*Alumni recount their journey to ordination as Catholic priests, a process that took almost twenty years. It begins with becoming a seminarian, usually starting in lower secondary school and continuing through upper secondary school. After graduating from high school, seminarians spend two years mentoring younger seminarians before dispersing to seminaries in various areas to study specialized subjects, languages, and religious teachings. This process continues for another ten years after high school graduation before they are fully ordained as priests.*

*"Tang's family has financial problems. Actually, Tang's love affair isn't a secret. My father and the priest know full well, but they've turned a blind eye. Tang is a well-behaved boy; he's never been rebellious or given my father any headaches, but he's poor. If my father didn't help, he wouldn't be able to afford his education. He doesn't even have an ID card. Even if we didn't get a priest, we would probably get a good Catholic. After graduation, he'll probably go on to further studies or find a job. With love burning so strong, it's impressive he's even managed not to climb over the fence and run away from school."*

*Tanrak nodded in agreement, quite surprised that all the adults at the school knew about Tang's relationship. A romance with a novice monk was forbidden; if found, the student would be reprimanded or, in the worst case, expelled. But Tang was different. Even though they exchanged letters and smiled openly, making it known to everyone in the dorm, Tang never misbehaved. He never skipped school to see his girlfriend, never stole Father Anan's phone, and never did anything more than secretly exchanging letters whenever the opportunity arose.*

*"Life as a seminary is so hard, P' "*

*Tanrak spoke with a lack of words. Part of him wanted to avoid commenting on his friend, while another part felt strangely relieved. He had never experienced love before, never even knew what romantic love between a man and a woman was like. The young man had never been interested in such matters, never viewed any woman as anything more than a fellow human being. All he knew and understood was the love for his parents, the love for God, and the love for his fellow human beings as covenant neighbors.*

*"Can you play the piano?"*

*Barth asked, snapping out of his daydreaming and bringing him back to reality after the alumnus excused himself to prepare additional documents for requisitioning supplies at the treasurer's office.*

*Barth looked at Tanrak's face. There was still plenty of time until the evening prayers.*

*"Okay... but not good," he shrugged.*

*"Really?... Teach me," the other person said.*

*“Why? Do you want to play?”*

*“Yeah, I thought P’ Ath looked cool playing.”*

*Tanrak listened and moved his lips to say something, like, “Is Barth going to use this to woo a girl?” The young man admitted to himself that after hearing P’ Ath talk about Tang, his perspective on Barth had changed. Barth was probably like Tang, here only temporarily, borrowing God’s grace for healing and leaving when his wounds were completely healed. There was no reason or indication that he could remain as a seminarian long enough to become a priest. Unlike him, who was determined and considered it a prayer he could not betray.*

*“How should I put it?” Tanrak paused for a moment. “I’ve never really studied it properly. I just learned it by observation. Can I teach you the way I learned it? Just put your fingers on the chords and press slowly according to the rhythm. There’s no real principle involved.” He spoke at length.*

*“Sure, just enough to have some fun,” Barth smiled.*

*“Then come sit here.”*

*Tanrak beckoned Barth to sit down in front of the club’s electric piano, before pointing to the two white chords side-by-side in the center of the piano.*

*“This is called Do, the middle note. If you move to the right, the other Dos will go higher. If you move to the left, the other Dos will go lower. When you place your hand, place it on this Do... begin.”*

*Tanrak explained, while the other man hesitated awkwardly, causing him to become somewhat annoyed. He took Barth’s hand and placed it on his target area. But in that same split second, the young man felt strange, as if he had just realized that this was the first time he had intentionally touched the other’s hand. It was a feeling difficult to explain, perhaps because they were outsiders to each other. That feeling was different from anyone else’s, unlike any feeling he could ever compare to anyone else.*

*Barth’s hands were rough, not cracked, but they were noticeably callous compared to his own. That might have been the longest second in a young boy’s life. The distance from his lap to the C chord on the old piano seemed like a light-year. Tanrak’s heart couldn’t behave normally. No, it couldn’t. It trembled, raced, and sometimes the rhythm vanished from his chest as if it had never existed, untouched, never real.*

*“Here?”*

*“Okay, right here.”*

*“And then what?”*

*“Well, nothing more... just press the button.”*

*Tanrak spoke hesitantly and nervously, not intentionally trying to be disruptive, but as if his mind had gone completely blank. Meanwhile, Barth refused to let go of his hand; in fact, he did the opposite. He pushed him to sit beside him, then took his hand and placed it on the wide piano floor, holding it innocently and unaware. Their hands rested on the instrument as if side by side.*

*“What do I press next?”*

*“Well... just press the buttons according to the music.”*

*Tanrak spoke, barely having lost any sense of reason. It was as if his brain had suddenly short-circuited and become someone else’s. He could only sit still, barely able to resist falling off the chair.*

*“How am I supposed to know which note to press and how to play it for each song?”*

*“Just try pressing the button first... like this... just try it out.”*

*Tanrak pulled his new friend's hands, urging him to put weight on the instrument, to play just one note. Contrary to his expectations, it was a hoarse, laughter, a deep, trembling tremor from the heart. Barth's hands moved slowly, not on the sheet music, not according to the teacher's instructions, not anything the young man could have imagined. For a moment, each of Tanrak's own fingers became innocent.*

*~When he takes me in his arms,  
He speaks to me softly,  
I see life through rose-colored glasses.  
He tells me words of love,  
Everyday words,  
And it does something to me.~*

*~When I'm in his embrace, he speaks softly to me, my world turns pink. He tells me he loves me, whispering sweet words every day. I feel so overwhelmed (my world turns pink).~*



The boy lied about everything. Barth could play the piano, perhaps even terribly well. His new close friend manipulated the young man, drawing him into a sweet melody that was impossible to put into words. Tanrak's heart felt like it was about to explode; it was suffocating, frustrating, yet so sweet it felt like he couldn't breathe.

He couldn't answer, not even a little, what all this meant. He only knew he wanted a little more time, just one more song.

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#### Item 4

The breath of the determined boy striving for heaven seemed to be cut short for a long time, long enough to die and be reborn. Thanrak tried to gather his wits, resisting the weakness in his hands from succumbing to the other's grasp, but he couldn't succeed. It wasn't until the final chamber of the song about the sweet world that the young man and his body were finally free. He took deep breaths again and again, trying not to show any signs of distress. His gaze swept around, only to find that there was no trace of Christ's eyes in the room.

**"What's wrong?"**

Barth asked, as Tanrak unintentionally pulled his hand away from the other's grasp. The young man turned his face away, gazing at the unfinished Nativity cave, swallowing all strange feelings as deep as possible.

**"Your shirt smells, it's full of sweat," he teased.**

The other person burst into laughter. **"That's true, I'm all wet."**

Although not intentionally emphasized, his new friend's upper body was indeed drenched in sweat. Before coming here, Tanrak had gathered his homework notebooks for the teacher's class to take to the master in his room. Barth, who was waiting, had picked up a ball to kick around. By the time he returned, he was already covered in sweat.

After arriving at the club room, they were still busy with trivial tasks. Their thin, breathable school uniforms were soaked and clung to the other person's body. Tanrak gestured sarcastically, but it only made the other person burst into laughter again.

**"That's all there is to it."**

The other person didn't solve the problem by moving away so his sweat-stained shirt wouldn't stain him. Instead, Barth chose to carelessly take off his school shirt and toss it onto a chair on the other side, leaving his upper body bare. And yes, there was no longer a sweat-stained shirt.

**"Barth!"**

**"What else...?"**

**"Why did you take off your shirt?"**

**"You complain so much, it annoys me."**

Barth continued speaking with a hearty laugh, ignoring Tanrak's protests and urging him to put his shirt back on. The other man pretended to cover his ears and acted as if he hadn't heard anything.

**"Put on a shirt!"**

**"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I didn't hear, I didn't hear, I didn't hear."**

Barth covered his ears with his fingers and wriggled around, speaking and sticking out his tongue in a comical way. Conversely, those watching him found it neither funny nor comical. Instead, it was an overwhelming, uncontrollable, and embarrassing sensation that surged within them.

Barth's body seemed meticulously sculpted by the most delicate artist. His broad shoulders, neither too large nor too small, perfectly complemented his beautifully shaped chest, the result of regular exercise. His skin was smooth and radiant, inviting the eye to follow down to his slender, well-proportioned waist.

**"Put on a shirt!"**

**"I don't know, I don't know, I don't know. I didn't hear, I didn't hear, I didn't hear."**

If there's one feature that's hard to look away from, it's the six perfectly sculpted abdominal muscles, sculpted with just the right amount of curves and contours, neither too much nor too little. The soft, fine hairs around the navel and downwards seem to subtly draw the eye in.

Hid breathing hitched, as if his body was short-circuiting and he could no longer control it. Tanrak prayed for someone to appear, to break this strange atmosphere and end it all quickly. Anyone, just someone.

**"I think I'd like you to teach me another song..."**

**"Barth... no... I'm not playing anymore..."**

Tanrak tried to refuse, but it was almost like a faint whisper that quickly faded into his throat. His new friend seemed barely aware of his resistance. He was pulled closer to sit on the piano again, but this time it was as if his senses had completely shut down.

What song is playing?... I don't know.

Where exactly are they residing...? (Unseen)

What feeling is unfolding...? It's indescribable.

Barth reached out his body to grasp his hand, guiding him to play the musical notes. The young man found himself in a rather intoxicating embrace, his mind completely blank, as if nothing had left. The dangerously close proximity made it difficult to breathe.

**"I'm going now... See you this evening."**

Tanrak interrupted, gathering the meager strength that Kaniknan had left, combining it all into one, and with great difficulty, pushed herself up to her feet.

**"Hey, where are you going?"**

**"I'm going to the bathroom."**

**"Oh, I'll come too."**

**"No need. If P' Ath comes back, he won't find anyone."**

Tanrak quickly brushed it off and ran out of the room without looking back. The young man didn't have a mild or severe stomach ache, but it was a shockingly difficult-to-describe feeling. It was so close to a painful ache that it was hard to accept, but damn it, he didn't want to.

A churning sensation lurked deep beneath the surface of his body, a feeling he didn't want to acknowledge. Tanrak ran down the hallway as if someone was chasing him frantically, but there was no one there. The hallway was empty. Perhaps only the abyss within him was violently pounding against him.

Overwhelmed, too much to bear. Tanrak ran down the hallway, his head bowed, avoiding eye contact for fear of seeing the sight he least wanted to see: the image of God, the holy cross, the statue of the benevolent Virgin Mary.

Tanrak opened the door and entered the treasurer's office.

*This room had always been a secluded haven for all the students. No one wanted to get involved or cause trouble. If it were a place of refuge, it would probably be the best. He walked to the bathroom, opened the door, and slipped inside silently, locking the door behind him as if to shut off any other feelings from entering.*

*“I’m sorry, Father..”*

*Instead of stopping, he murmured to himself, his mind drifting to the pristine white land he had encountered when he offered his sacred prayers. The young monk's once ragged breathing gradually slowed, and he had the opportunity to gaze at his reflection in the mirror slowly.*

*The bathroom for the senior monks is different from the bathroom for the junior monks. The outside bathroom is communal, with shared showers and minimal private space. It's divided into narrow stalls, except for the toilet area, which has no mirrors at all. The only reflective surface available is the long, unprivate hand-washing area.*

*But the monk's restroom had a peculiar appearance, one that few knew about. It seemed to have been converted from another room, and thus had a mirror large and tall enough to see a person's entire body. Tanrak accidentally discovered it once while running errands and experiencing sudden stomach pain.*

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*

*The novice began to speak of the Trinity, but couldn't clearly answer the question of why he was doing all of this. Tanrak slowly removed his school uniform, carefully examining every inch of his body.*

*A feeling of dread and terror, as if at any moment a strange monster would grimace and devour the body, turning it into a parasite, stained with the dark, festering sins that could not be cleansed by the final flame.*

*Tanrak's shoulders are much narrower because he doesn't exercise regularly. His chest is flat like that of a very thin person who doesn't often eat sweets or snacks outside of meal times. His torso is skinny and lacks any attractive muscles. He only plays sports when forced to.*

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*

*Tanrak uttered a sound, simultaneously carelessly unbuttoning his school trousers, letting them fall to his ankles. His mind forgot everything, yet certain images replayed on, not a sacred light, but a certain darkness. Soft, wispy hairs that unconsciously drew his gaze downwards.*

*With trembling hands, she nervously grasped the last piece of clothing, gathering all the strength she had left to push it down to her feet, exposing her body, a body steeped in original sin, banished from Paradise and never to return.*

*The sight of the naked, yet impure, body captivated one of the novices, almost making him forget to breathe. He examined certain parts of the body that he hadn't paid much attention to before. His feelings were no different from those of some kind of heretic, incarnated to inhabit this body for the purpose of sin, committing sins, or even becoming sinful himself.*

*“In the name of the Father,” he said, touching his forehead.*

*“And the Son” touched his breast.*

*“And the Holy Spirit” touched his left shoulder and his right shoulder, respectively.*

*Tanrak stood still, enduring something unbearable, before rushing to the sink and vomiting everything out. Old food mixed with the bitter, greenish residue of digestive juices filled the air, emitting a pungent stench like a grim cesspool. Tanrak could do nothing but cry uncontrollably and begin praying. His sobs echoed repeatedly in the confined space, unheard by anyone.*

*...No one heard.*

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3  
Saint Thomas

**Item 1**

*The cold weather brings hunger with it. In Thai culture, the cold might be seen as something to be celebrated, as it's associated with various festivals and the end of the year. But not for the seminarians deeply rooted in the origins of Catholicism. The low temperatures are a harsh reality of famine, leading to fasting as a lesson in patience, and also teaching humanity the sin of gluttony to consume only what is necessary.*

*"...Therefore, humans should restrain themselves from the desires that tempt them to go astray..."*

*The soft melody of a small radio filled the air as Tanrak stepped into the school's main chapel. Here, outside Catholics were welcome to participate in the veneration of the Son of Christ, offering the closest possible opportunity. The seminarians took turns assisting Father Anan during the ceremony. The young man arrived well early, for several personal reasons. One undeniable reason was to avoid someone who had been haunting him for the past few days.*

*"In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."*

*Tanrak spoke as he reached for the holy water in the basin at the church entrance, preparing to perform the usual act of worship to the Holy Trinity. But for a moment, he hesitated, struck by a strange feeling. His hand, about to touch the sacred liquid, froze.*

*Certain images haunt me, impossible to deny to my subconscious. The empty body reflected in the never-deceiving mirror, the uncontrollable reactions revealing impure intentions, the undulating ripples of muscle unintentionally sweeping across my form.*

*The young seminarian's hands trembled uncontrollably. The distance to the water jug seemed endless, like an eternity. His breathing became noticeably short and erratic. Deep down, he tried to put on a brave face, but it was an overwhelming struggle.*

*"Tanrak..."*

*The familiar voice startled the person being called, causing them to instinctively withdraw their hand. Turning around, they saw the culprit behind all the trouble: Barth, dressed in white, the uniform of an assistant mass officiant. His expression wasn't exactly accusatory, but it was tinged with suspicion.*

*"Why didn't you wait for me?" the other person grumbled. "I went to take a quick shower, and when I turned around, you were gone. We're on the same shift, and you should have walked with me."*

*"I finished quickly, so I'm too lazy to rush you. You'd better come out first," he replied dismissively.*

*"What's wrong? You usually wait for me."*

*"Nothing, I'm just too lazy to rush."*

*Tanrak brushed it off again, trying to avoid the harsh gaze and trying to uncover the truth. Meanwhile, Barth reached out to touch the liquid and performed his usual act of reverence, unlike the earlier one who changed his mind, shoved his hand into his pants pocket, and pretended to forget.*

*"I'm going to practice swinging the incense burner first," Tanrak said.*

*"What the hell? You've been swinging around since middle school, what are you practicing for today?"*

*Barth spoke with a mixture of confusion and suspicion, which only made the person being observed even more flustered. The respondent's voice trembled at times, but he managed to mask it.*

*"Last time I accidentally made the wrong hand gesture. I wasn't very confident."*

*"Okay, okay, make yourself comfortable. Let me know if you need any help."*

*Tanrak made an excuse before walking away to the back room for the priests and seminarians. Barth was in charge of reading the Bible that day, so he went to arrange with the Catholic representative who would be reading it. Therefore, the two didn't have much opportunity to talk.*

*The Mass will begin around nine or almost ten o'clock in the morning. Catholics are already beginning to arrive at the church, but only in small numbers. The priest has arrived and is taking his place in the confessional for those who wish to confess their sins before receiving communion shortly afterward.*

*"What's wrong with you?... Behave yourself."*

*The alarm sounded. Tanrak turned around and found Kongdech already sitting in the preparation room; he didn't know how long he'd been there. The young man seemed to have lost his senses, unaware of anything around him.*

*"When did you get here?" he blurted out.*

*His best friend frowned. "I've been here ever since you started pacing back and forth nonstop. You look like a madman. Did you steal something? You look like you're running from the police."*

*Tanrak was stunned into silence until the other person's expression changed.*

*"Don't tell me you actually stole something," Kongdech frowned.*

*"That's crazy! Who would do that? I'm just a little confused," he replied.*

*"What's confusing you?"*

*"I don't know..." he said, thinking to himself. "I'm not sure if what I did was a sin or not. I'm uneasy, but I'm not certain."*

*"You probably can't tell me, can you?" Kongdech shrugged.*

*"Well, I'm not sure."*

*Tanrak spoke awkwardly, but his brain screamed, "No, I can't tell him. I absolutely cannot tell Kongdech. He's my fellow novice monk, we've studied together since high school, and we've always aimed to become priests together. I can't let Kongdech know that I'm teetering on the brink of straying from the right path."*

*"Then why don't you go and confess your sins? God might have the answer for you."*

*Kongdech spoke, and that was like a flash of light that made Tanrak feel strange. The young man hesitated. Kongdech turned to look at him again with a sharp gaze that made Tanrak avert his face. Soon, his close friend walked away without a word, as if to give Tanrak time to make a decision.*

*The young man glanced at the wall clock again. There was still about an hour before the Sunday morning ceremony began. The priest was already in the confessional, and it would be private enough for him to discuss, or at least vent, something that had been weighing on his heart.*

*Tanrak decided to go to the confessional, a narrow room tucked away from the central ceremonial area. This space was provided for Catholics to confess their sins to God before Mass began, in order to receive the sacrament of renewedness and become new people.*

*"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... Amen."*

Tanrak began to speak, sitting down on one side of the confessional. The room was made of wood, about two meters on each side, with a small opening in the middle to allow sound to pass through easily, but neither the priest nor the confessor could see each other directly. The young man began the pre-confession prayer as he usually did, but this time it was more difficult than ever. Every word was hesitant, as if requiring immense energy to utter, until he heard the person on the other side shift.

*“What is your sin?”*

*“Bless me, Father, but I am not sure if I have already sinned.”*

The young man spoke from the bottom of his heart, unsure even to confess, because he wasn't even sure if it deserved to be called a sin.

*“What makes you think that?”*

*“I'm not sure,” Tanrak began. “Many times I understand that what I'm doing is permitted by God, but sometimes I feel afraid.”*

*“What makes you think that way?”*

*“Love... Father... Love,” he choked out, “I feel that I am loving my fellow human beings as I love myself. I should be happy, for God taught me to love my neighbor as myself, but instead I am burning with sorrow and distress.”*

The young seminarian spoke, breathless and struggling to control his voice, trying to convey an identity that the person on the other side of the confessional couldn't recognize, but he was utterly helpless to know if he had succeeded or not. What he was saying was filled with confusion, like swimming aimlessly in a vast, inescapable ocean.

*“Love is not wrong, my child...”*

The priest began to answer, and Tanrak listened attentively.

*“Love is something God has taught humanity to always give to one another. But this love must be pure, unconditional, and without the desire to possess. If Christians can think like that, love will always receive God's approval.”*

*“Isn't love a sin, Father?” he murmured to himself.*

*“Love and lust are so close together it's frightening,” a gentle voice replied. “If love is unconditional, if it doesn't yearn to possess, then it is love. But if love demands reciprocation, if it desires possession, then it ultimately becomes a grave sin.”*

*“I don't think what I did was a sin,” he said.*

*“I am delighted for you, my child. True love, within reasonable boundaries, is certainly not a sin... You don't need to confess anything.”*

The priest spoke in a familiar voice at the end. It was as if something had been completely washed away from Tanrak, like a body stained with filth, cleansed and polished to become pure and radiant once again.

Tanrak opened the door and walked out of the confessional, feeling like he had become a different person. But before he could do anything, he looked up and met the gaze of someone—a new friend who was no longer new. Barth, dressed in his white robes as a seminarian, his pure face fixed on him like an angel scrutinizing a sinful human for any inappropriate actions. Tanrak instinctively averted his gaze.

*“Are you angry with me about something...? I think you're acting strange,” Barth asked.*

*“No... not at all,” Tanrak replied, trying to cover everything up as normally as possible. “Before this, I had a lot of stressful things going on, so I kept quiet. But now I’ve talked to my father and I feel much better. Finally, God gave me the answer. Now I’m back to normal, very comfortable.”*

*Tanrak laughed as he walked over and casually put his arm around his increasingly close friend's shoulder. For a fleeting moment, it was as if a high-voltage electric shock coursed through the body, but in just a fraction of a second, everything vanished into the ocean of friendship.*

*The young man smiled broadly. At first, Barth seemed to not quite understand, but seeing his friend acting normally, he no longer questioned it.*

*Tanrak sighed with relief... A love that is right and within boundaries is certainly not a sin.*

---

## **Question 2**

*~O Lord, please grant me your immense love, cleanse my troubled heart, my heart filled with jealousy. O Lord, please grant me the path of light, lead me to love, a love that is unconditional and unpossessive.~*

*The music serenaded the cathedral, creating a sense of a heavenly transition from earth to paradise. The choir from the seminary, led by alumni, was rehearsing the songs for the upcoming Christmas carols. Tanrak and Barth were also practicing, but standing on opposite sides. Tanrak, being the lowest bass line, stood at one end, while Barth, being the tenor, stood across the center.*

*“Okay, let's take a break.”*

*The headmaster's voice, overseeing the choir, boomed, bringing the long, soothing melody to an end. Today, the choir was large because rehearsals at the church included female voices, such as sopranos and altos. Many of them were Catholics participating in the activities, some were female students from the same school network. The female voices usually rehearse separately, and in the choir, the seminarians often played the male roles and voices.*

*“It's alright... I can stand...”*

*A girl's voice floated over, drawing Tanrak's attention. No, she wasn't loud enough to make everyone turn around. On the contrary, her voice was reserved and almost a whisper. The girl's name was Cherry. She had a beautiful, gentle alto voice that wasn't harsh on the ears. The young man always listened to her with excitement. Cherry wasn't new to the choir; she, like him, had been singing in various religious ceremonies since junior high.*

*"Another one heartbroken..."*

*A man in the bass group spoke up after someone offered Cherry a chair to sit on while waiting for rehearsal, but she politely declined. However, this almost implied a desire to keep her distance. The well-meaning person withdrew the chair dejectedly. Tanrak could only watch. Cherry always had men trying to court her, but none had ever managed to break through that incredibly thick and high wall around her. But before his thoughts could wander further, the call to resume rehearsal rang out.*

*“Can I have the same song again?”*

*The band leader spoke, but things didn't turn out as everyone expected. A variety of strange noises erupted in the middle of the group.*

*“Okay.”*

*“Hey!”*

*“Ouch!”*

*“Excuse me!”*

*“It's alright. We're clumsy too.”*

*Before the music could resume, a minor commotion erupted unexpectedly. A man in the tenor group shifted into position and bumped into a chair where someone had placed a glass of red juice during a break. The juice spilled, but not all the way to the floor; instead, it splashed onto Cherry's shirt, soaking it and staining it bright red. The clumsy man apologized profusely, while the victim tried to salvage the situation.*

*Tanrak looked again and his eyes widened. That man was Barth of Tenor.*

*Tanrak's feelings changed in a way that even surprised him. It was as if something had sucked all the air out of his chest. His heart pounded faster and faster. The young man from the tenor turned his face away, but only for a second before he couldn't help but look back. The murmurs from around him grew louder. He averted his gaze again, turning towards the holy Christ to compose himself. It wasn't just Tanrak; it seemed many other seminarians were doing the same.*

*“Excuse me...” Barth's voice was filled with discomfort.*

*The bright red liquid had splashed onto the already thin schoolgirl's shirt, soaking it completely and revealing her skin. The wet fabric clung to the curves of the young girl's body as she began to mature into adolescence. Though unintentional, the sight created an awkward atmosphere for everyone present. Most of the boys turned their faces away, but many others did the opposite. The perpetrator himself seemed flustered and didn't know what to do.*

*“Excuse me...”*

*“It's alright...”*

*Both Cherry and Barth were at a loss for what to do.*

*“Does anyone have a jacket? A winter coat would be fine.”*

*Barth spoke loudly, sweeping his gaze around, but everyone seemed to shake their heads or murmur in denial. Cherry tried to pull her wet, heavy shirt away, but the fabric was so damp that when she let go, it shrunk back to her skin.*

*“Does anyone have a jacket? A winter coat would be fine.”*

*Barth repeated his point, but this time it seemed even more desperate. Tanrak observed the situation without getting involved, feeling like a complete outsider, with no room even for him to reach out with his fingertips.*

*“Excuse me...”*

*The person in question apologized, for the tenth time, but this time was different. Barth decided to take off his novice monk uniform, brushed off the dust, and shook it as if to get rid of as much dirt as possible, before nodding his head as if asking for permission and draping the robe over the girl in front of him.*

*Tanrak heard the sighs of many people. The almost scandalous scene vanished from everyone's view, especially in this truly sacred land.*

*“Thank you.”*

*There was not the slightest sign of disgust or resentment from Cherry. The girl lowered her head, her face flushed with embarrassment. She probably felt what everyone else felt as well. Barth whispered something to Cherry, as if consulting her, before the choir leader walked over.*

The chaotic situation continued for a while longer. One of Cherry's female friends led her to the restroom, with Barth following at a worried distance. The remaining ten or so people looked at each other, wondering what they should do next.

*“Let’s take another ten-minute break from practice,” the band leader said. “But we’ll probably have to continue practicing anyway, because it’s going to be difficult to get everyone together, and the event is very close.”*

Everyone nodded in understanding before letting everything proceed as normal. Not long after, Cherry and her friends returned. At first, Tanrak expected to see the girl in a different outfit, but no, Cherry was still wearing Barth's seminary attire.

The owner of the shirt was left with only the upper half of his body bare, yet he seemed indifferent, more concerned than with the situation unfolding. Tanrak turned away again when he saw Barth's body fully, a whirlwind of conflicting emotions swirling within him.

*“You can continue now..”*

The band leader spoke as if nothing had happened, and everyone else tried to get through it as if nothing had occurred as well. The same music began to play again, but if it were the gaze of the Son of God looking down from the cross above, He would surely see that the choir, rejoicing in praise, was filled with unbearable strangeness, especially one couple standing out in the center. The man was shirtless, while the woman was dressed as a seminarian.

*~O Lord, please grant me your immense love,  
cleanse my troubled heart, my heart filled with jealousy.  
O Lord, please grant me the path of light, lead me to love,  
a love that is unconditional and unpossessive.~*

The novice, a pilgrim on the path to paradise, turned to look at Christ once more, pleading for compassion and mercy to purify his heart. But perhaps it wasn't enough, or in a sense, he had become a sinner whom God would no longer accept. The young man's heart trembled, his voice, as he spoke the divine message, wavered, but not enough to swallow all his frustration deep within once more.

*“Please, Lord... please grant me your immense love, and cleanse my troubled heart... a heart filled with jealousy.”*

Tanrak's voice sang out from a depth rather than a melodic response to the lyrics. The young man seemed to have forgotten how to breathe, especially when he turned to look at the man and woman who had become the center of all attention. The sparkling eyes and smiles of his bandmates, after a short rehearsal, created a new wave of sound that no one had anticipated. At the same time, it became a sound that haunted Tanrak everywhere he went.

*“Cherry Barth... Cherry Barth... Cherry Barth...”*

Those non-syllable words haunted him in place of love everywhere—from the choir, the cafeteria, the classroom, the showers, and in his own soul, through countless dreams. The voice gradually transformed into Adam and Eve. The young man felt as if he saw branches swaying in the breeze, the bitter green of weeds, the sweet fragrance of ripe apples.

In his dreams, he repeatedly asked himself, "Who am I? Who am I in this perfect equation?" The venomous serpent... Lilith... or the son banished from the Garden of Paradise long ago?

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### Item 3

Tanrak had to go to choir rehearsals more and more often each week. In truth, this time of year was usually fun; there wasn't much to do in a seminarian's life. Rehearsing day and night and performing in front of a packed hall seemed like a source of pride—at least for many years. But not this time, and not this year. The

young man felt exhausted and always resisted the rehearsals, especially the ones at the cathedral that involved rehearsals of all the notes in the song.

*“Wait for me!”*

A voice came from behind. Tanrak was walking out of his dormitory with his bag slung over his shoulder, heading to singing practice. He quickened his pace.

*“I told you to wait.”*

The sound was close to his ear, mixed with heavy breathing. A faint scent of sweat assaulted his senses first. The young man stood stiffly while his friend held his shoulders as if afraid the approaching person would run away. Tanrak turned around but tried to keep his expression completely neutral.

*“What's up... I was just lost in thought,”* he said, trying to cover it up.

*“I told you to wait so we could walk together.”*

Barth told him that morning to wait for him to walk to church together during choir rehearsal, but Tanrak forgot... or pretended to forget.

*“Sorry, I was just lost in thought.”*

Tanrak repeated, having no other intention than running out of other excuses. If he had to admit the truth, the young man would have to say he wanted to avoid seeing his friend for a while, at least until the sound of "Cherry barth, Cherry barth, Cherry barth" faded from his head.

*“I told you I have something to discuss with you,”* the other person said, sounding slightly irritated.

*"What's up?"*

Instead of reacting emotionally, he pretended not to notice, acting as if nothing had happened. The distance from the dorm to the cathedral where they rehearsed was about a fifteen-minute walk. Normally, the faculty provided a shuttle, but walking helped to change the mood and atmosphere.

*“His father just called Nob in to discuss Christmas arrangements.”*

Barth began to tell him about Nob, who was the leader of the choir, as he quickened his pace to walk alongside him.

*“Ah...what is it?”*

*“My father said he'd like the choir to put on a small performance to accompany the singing. He thinks the children would enjoy it. He also wants to open registration for a call to action camp, in case more children become interested.”*

*“Those who walked together explained further that the 'Calling Camp' is a camp dedicated to studying Catholic teachings. It's mostly for pre-high school students to get to know different aspects of the teachings. If anyone shows promise or interest, they will be encouraged to apply to become a seminarian.”*

*“So, Nob came to invite you to perform, huh?”*

Instead of interrupting, Tanrak stopped Barth—who was hesitating, in a startled expression. He eventually let out a long sigh of relief.

*“Yeah... that's why I came to ask you first,”* the other person said.

*“You... you're asking me? Whether you're performing or not, you should ask yourself. Why are you asking me?”* he said, chuckling.

*"I don't know. Lately, you seem a little unhappy with me. So I wanted to ask you first to put my mind at ease. I'm afraid you might get angry with me later."*

*Barth spoke in a hesitant voice, as if he wasn't sure about what he was saying. Tanrak, listening, could only shake his head.*

*"How could I be angry with you? Do whatever you want. Go ahead."*

*Tanrak shrugged as if indifferent, but inwardly he felt like he had already envisioned something unfolding. After this sentence, Barth changed the subject as if he had nothing to worry about anymore. It didn't take long before they arrived at the church, their destination.*

*If my imagination is correct, Barth will play Joseph the carpenter, while Cherry will play Mary. Together, they will witness the arrival of the Son of Redeemer as righteous parents, in this Christmas-themed performance.*

*The choir leader explained the process of the new singing performance, which would involve accompanying the singing with performances. The performance would be divided into short scenes, with a narrator providing commentary between scenes. This would alternate with scenes of standing choral singing before continuing the performance, and the cycle would repeat until the end.*

*"Mary... I'm sorry. I have tried knocking on every door of every house, but I found only this one place in Bethlehem that could offer you warmth."*

*Barth spoke, holding a lengthy passage from "The Worries in the Stable," an early scene during the opening of Christmas Day, where the pregnant Mary finds no suitable place to stay overnight.*

*"You need not worry, Joseph. It's warm here. I feel calm and am not cold or afraid at all."*

*Cherry spoke, holding a sheet of paper with the script in her hand. She gestured towards the designated areas, which likely represented an animal pen and a haystack.*

*"I will find as much warmth for you as a humble carpenter can. Trust me, Mary."*

*Barth continued speaking, simultaneously taking the blanket that covered him and wrapping it around Sherry, who was shivering from the cold. The two embraced with pure hearts, gazing up at the sky above, a symbol of God's immense power.*

*"Very good!"*

*Nob interrupted, amidst a few claps, but amazed glances from all directions were fixed in one direction. Tanrak didn't want to lie to herself, but Barth and Cherry were truly well-suited to each other, as befits Joseph the carpenter and the Virgin Mary.*

*Tanrak walked away from the choir, heading straight to the restroom to calm herself down. Upon reaching it, she turned on the tap and splashed water on his face. For a split second, the water splashed, as if awakening his senses. Tanrak stared at his reflection.*

*'Why...'*

*A single question echoed in his mind and ended without further ado. Thanrak reached out and stroked the stubble of beard, fading with age and hormonal changes. His hand moved lower to caress the prominent Adam's apple, the flat chest, and the body devoid of curves.*

*"Tanrak... are you alright?"*

*A very familiar voice was the first to speak. Turning around, he found the actor who had been playing Joseph standing there for who knows how long. He felt quite embarrassed that he might inadvertently show any strange reaction, but he forced himself to act as normal as possible.*

*"No... I was just sleepy, so I came to wash my face," he said.*

*"Really...? I thought you were acting strangely," Barth hesitated.*

*"I'm not feeling well either, so I was thinking of going home early."*

*Tanrak spoke, shifting uncomfortably, wanting desperately to avoid the other person's gaze. He couldn't help but be disturbed by the image of the intimate embrace between the two, a man and a woman of great reverence. In contrast, Barth extended his hand towards him with a look of concern.*

*"Let me try..."*

*"Don't touch me!"*

*Tanrak inadvertently gasped in surprise, causing the person in front of her to freeze and not know what to do. The atmosphere in the restroom became incredibly awkward.*

*"Sorry... I was startled. If I have a cold, I might have germs. If you come closer, you might catch them. You have to keep acting. If I get sick, it'll be a big mess."*

*"Probably not," Barth argued.*

*"Trust me, I think I'd go home. I can't take it anymore."*

*Tanrak quickly summarized the situation before hurrying out to meet the head of the choir. She told him in a firm voice that she was too ill to continue singing and needed to leave. The other woman seemed hesitant and didn't seem to understand what was going on.*

*"I'll walk my friend home myself."*

*One voice suggested it, and it was Barth. This time, the troupe leader found it even more difficult to decide, because the person who offered the role was also the main character in the performance. But perhaps because of his seemingly unwillingness to accept any refusal, Nob could only nod in agreement.*

*"Have a safe trip back and get plenty of rest."*

*The conversation ended there, before the two young men walked out of the deserted cathedral in silence. Although the music continued to play inside, it was already evening outside, and no one was passing by anymore.*

*Tanrak and Barth walked with their heads down, barely speaking. At first, Barth tried to engage Tanrak in conversation, but Tanrak only gave short, monosyllabic answers, until Barth, feeling helpless, decided to remain silent. It took almost ten minutes to reach their accommodation.*

*"Go take a shower first. Even just washing yourself off is better than sleeping in sweat."*

*Barth protested as Tanrak looked like he was about to lie down on the bed, ignoring everything else. But when he was reminded, the young man felt sticky all over, making it hard to fall asleep. Finally, he got up, gathered his things, and went to the bathroom as his friend suggested.*

*The bathroom was now empty. The large cement tub filled with water had only two occupants left. The two novices usually bathed together, a practice they were all too familiar with. Tanrak thought he was used to it all along, until he turned around and saw Barth stripping off his clothes, leaving nothing to cover his body.*

*...not even a single piece.*

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

— Genesis 1:27

Genesis chapters two and three convey the truth of the world: God created the first man from dust and breathed the life force into his nostrils. God then created the fertile Garden of Eden, filled with various plants, for Adam to live in and care for. Not wanting Adam to be alone, God took his rib and created the first woman, Eve, and commanded that these first two humans live in the Garden of Eden forever.

God commanded that humans could eat from every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. However, the wicked serpent tempted the two men to take the fruit and eat from it. When God found out, he expelled them from the garden of paradise. The relationship between God and man was broken. Man brought sin to the world and awaits the day of reconciliation with God again.

As a devout disciple of God, Tanrak could recite the stories from Genesis even before any Aesop's fables in the world. However, the young man had been filled with questions from childhood to adulthood. He couldn't understand why Adam and Eve couldn't follow the right path, why they couldn't find refuge in God's embrace, dwell in a land of purity, and escape the wicked desires and sins that burned like fire.

“Tanrak...”

A voice called out, jolting the young man back from his reverie. Tanrak turned around, realizing he was in the bathroom with his best friend, both completely naked. In truth, communal showers usually meant undressing in front of each other, but that was the limitation of "communal." When there were many people, one's awareness was easily distracted. But not now. He tried to convince himself of this, but with little success.

“Are you running a fever?... Are you alright?” Barth spoke with concern, reaching out to touch their forehead and neck, but that only made things worse. The close proximity caused the two young men's bodies to inevitably touch.

Tanrak swallowed hard, trying to regain his composure. The lump in his chest pounded wildly, losing all rhythm; he almost forgot how to breathe. His movements were erratic and disjointed, leaving him with little strength to stand.

“No,” he brushed it off.

“Are you running a fever?”

Barth tried to touch him again with his hand, but Tanrak could only move away as much as he could. The young man had only enough strength left to refuse.

“It's really hot.”

“I...”

Barth spoke, almost relieved that his hypothesis was correct, but the heat was unlikely to be from a fever, but from the flushed face, the cause of which even he refused to admit.

“Okay, it's hot, that's enough. I'm going to take a shower and then take my medicine,” Tanrak pushed his friend away.

“What the heck...?”

Barth grumbled, wriggling around as if pretending to be a child shaking his head and swaying his whole body. But he may have forgotten that their bodies were pressed together; as their upper bodies swayed, the rest of their bodies unintentionally rubbed against each other.

**“It's time to take a bath.”**

Instead of moving away, the young man pulled away, but as their bodies separated, he discovered a truth about his own body that was too shameful to accept. Instinctively, he hunched over, protecting himself more than he intended, and quickly turned away to the other side.

**“What's wrong...?”**

**“No...”**

**“Nothing's wrong. You're the one who's turning away...”**

Barth chuckled, leaning forward as if to catch his friend hiding something unusual. But upon discovering what was amiss, he fell speechless, his gaze shifting from the striking features below to his friend's face.

**“You...”**

**“No, it wasn't me...”**

It was as if his close friend was about to say something, but Tanrak didn't wait any longer. The young man hurried to another part of the spacious bathroom. It was the side with the toilets, divided into small stalls for personal use. He rushed in and locked the door as securely as possible, taking nothing with him, not even a towel.

**“Tanrak!”**

**“You!”**

**“Hey, Tanrak!”**

**“Come out and talk to me first. Don't do this!”**

A loud knocking echoed through the spacious bathroom, where no one else could be found but the two lost pilgrims stranded in the labyrinth. Tanrak clutched the doorknob tightly, as if it were her last refuge in the world. His heart pounded with a strange, terrifying feeling, too cowardly to utter a sound.

Barth, who had been relentlessly knocking on the door, gradually lessened his efforts until there was complete silence. Heavy breathing came from the other side, as if they were both suffering in a similarly difficult world. The calls to open the door had also faded.

Tanrak slumped down, leaning his naked body against the doorway made of a vast mountain, less than a hand's width wide. If he had magical eyes, he would see his best friend leaning naked on the other side of the doorway as well.

**“You...”** Barth began, while the other remained silent.

**“Do you have something on your mind that you want to tell me...? I mean...what...?”**

The other person's voice was filled with confusion, not a tone often heard. Thanrak, listening, stared blankly at the empty wall, as if some answer might suddenly appear, but it didn't. It never did.

**“No...”** That was all he could say.

**“What's wrong with you...?”**

*The voice repeated the question, but the listener could do nothing, merely allowing themselves to drift aimlessly in the lake of blindness, unaware of the impending awakening.*

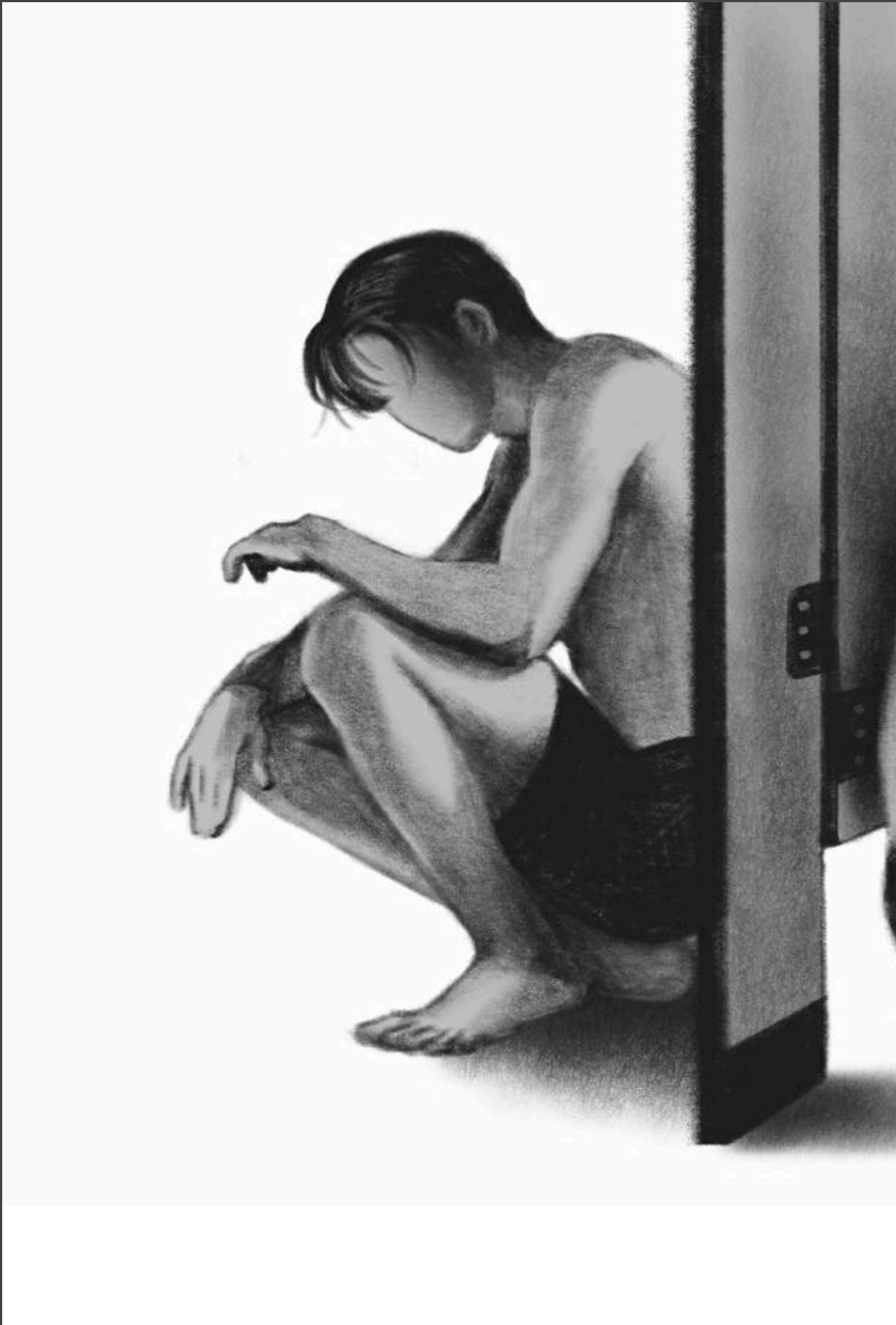
*“I don't know... I don't even understand myself...”*

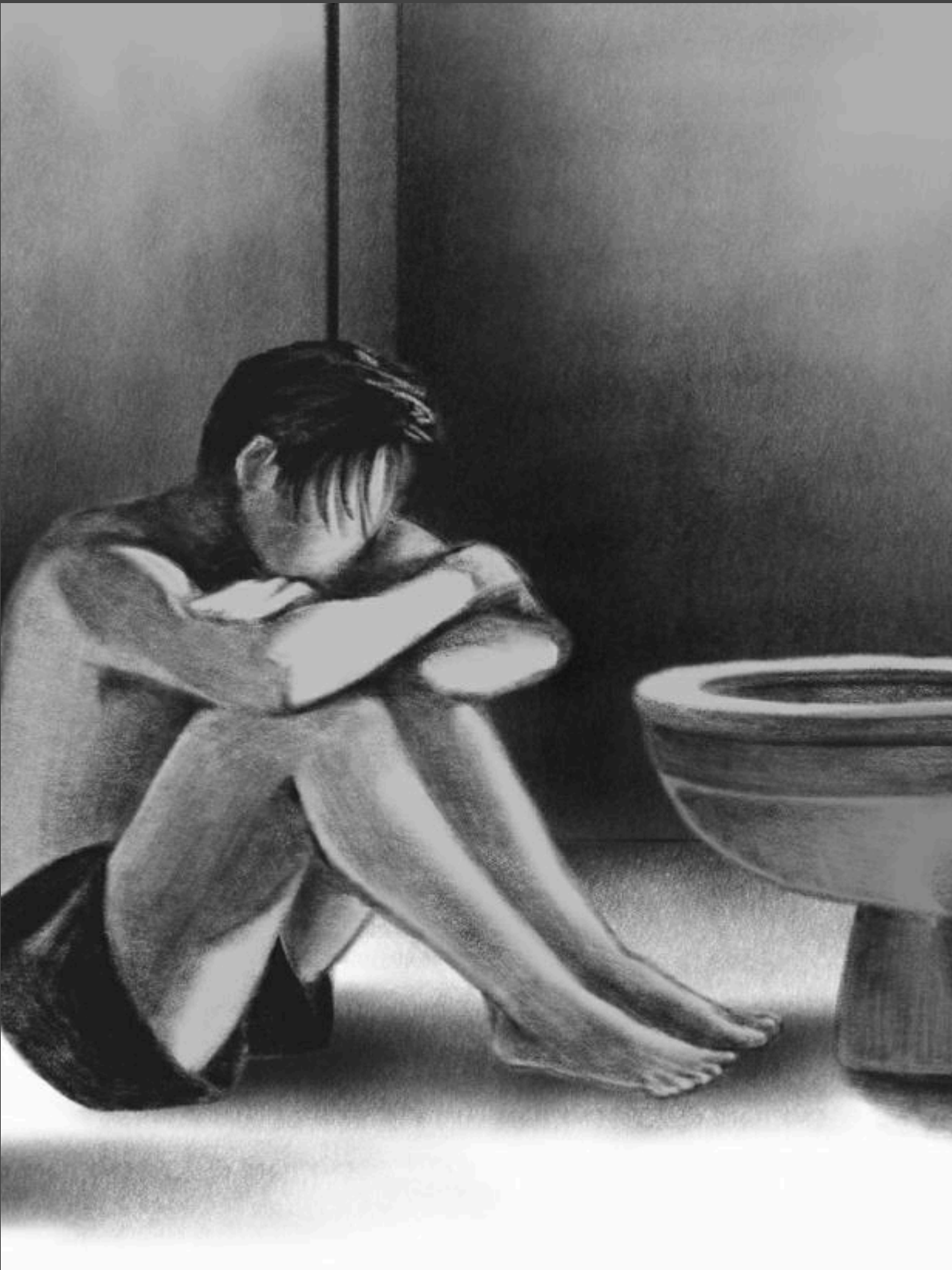
*Tanrak replied, his voice sounding confused, but deep down, the young man wasn't confused at all. He was so aware of himself that he was on the verge of going insane.*

*“Nothing will ever be the same again, will it?” Barth asked.*

*“I don't know...” Tanrak answered like that, but deep down, the young man knew the real answer. Things hadn't been the same for a long time. Not just now, not at this moment.*

*“You know everything, don't you?” Barth asked.*





And Tanrak replied, “What is it?”

“The thing is, I’m not God’s favorite child.”

That voice brought a sudden stillness to the abrupt conversation. Thanrak stood stunned, puzzled. The young man couldn’t decipher the tone, but the mournful, sorrowful voice captivated him, almost shattering his emotions into pieces.

“Tanrak... I like you... Do you hear me...?”

Barth’s voice was hoarse, but it was like an ice-cold towel, almost paralyzing the listener and making them unable to move. It was hesitant, a jumble of indescribable emotions: joy, shock, elation, pain, confusion, lostness, questioning—a vast array of feelings contained within a single sentence.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m gay...”

Tanrak opened the bathroom door with a mixture of emotions, but the clearest feeling was the face of someone who seemed lost for a very long time. The two young men stood facing each other, with no words separating their lips.

*It stings like poisonous liquid.*

*Bitter and strong like iron.*

*Broken like the land of the eternal original sin.*

*Their lips met, then crushed together in a passionate embrace, a desire so intense it was beyond description. Their hands entwined, as if they had forgotten whose body belonged to whom.*

*Things you dared not see, you will see with your own eyes.*

*Things you dared not touch, you will now experience fully.*

*What you dare not kiss will eventually be yours.*

*The sounds of gasping, thirsty expressions and overwhelming emotions echoed repeatedly in the isolated, untouched bathroom. The two young men had become acquainted amidst a dark, distant garden, far from the sight of God—at least, at least, as far as they both assumed.*

***“I guess I'm not God's favorite child either.”***

*Instead of a reply, a reply came only after a very long time. It was like crossing a vast fortress, built over a lifetime only to crumble irrevocably. For a fleeting moment, the young man's mind wandered to the radiant, pure stairway to heaven. Along the way, ferocious beasts lurked, preying on sinful humans, preventing them from reaching God. Those who err will have their tickets to final judgment revoked. The bright path grew further and further away; the ticket to return to God's paradise grew increasingly distant.*

***...Or will the boy never have the chance to go to heaven again?***

---

## 4

### Saint Simon the Zealot

#### Item 1

*But the Garden of Paradise did not collapse suddenly; at least not long enough for the birth symphony to begin and end. The green and red decorations were filled with joy, amidst the frantic sopranos, the sweet altos, the enchanting tenors, and the devoted basses. The cathedral, in a dazzling display, transformed the earth into a Nativity scene, hundreds of miniature replicas of the Christ, a fragment of the universe where a humble carpenter had clad a virgin to create the complete image of the Redeemer.*

*The scene depicting the tale of Saint Joseph and Mary unfolded smoothly. Bart and Cherry were like symbols of purity, bathed in a radiant light, as if dispelling all evil. Tanrak watched the rhythm of the spectacle, both fast and slow, with a heart full of joy, devoid of any jealousy. Meanwhile, the gazes of others secretly fixed upon her were filled with such longing that they repeatedly averted their eyes.*

***“Thank you so much, Barth. If you hadn't whispered the lines to me, I would have forgotten so many parts. I got so nervous in front of so many people that my hands got cold.”***

*Cherry said, as the choir members began to disperse, most of them having families with them to watch the performance and then taking the opportunity to celebrate the important day afterward. The boarding school had officially closed for the short term yesterday, and the seminarians who didn't have important business had all gone home, except for those with duties on Christmas Day, most of whom planned to return tonight after work. Even though not much time had passed, there were few people left backstage at the church.*

*"You did well. Judging from the audience, they didn't even notice. Everything flowed very smoothly."*

*Another man whispered, "Tanrak has seen the student several times during singing rehearsals, but he didn't think he knew Cherry particularly well. They're from the same school network that usually helps out, and they didn't seem to talk or be especially close."*

*"Ouch!" Barth cried, but it seemed like he was only joking.*

*"What's wrong?" Cherry asked, startled.*

*"The ants are biting... it's too sweet."*

*The actor playing the humble carpenter spoke with a laugh, and an awkward atmosphere arose for a split second. However, neither of them seemed to be hiding much. Tanrak guessed that Cherry might have talked to Barth beforehand, as the two might have been awkwardly paired together.*

*"Where are the ants? Are they around here or over there?"*

*Cherry feigned surprise and pointed at the man who was presumably her lover, then at him sitting eavesdropping on the other side. Tanrak jumped, understanding everything perfectly, and before he knew it, he was blushing and looking down.*

*"Call for peace! No more playing. It's not fun anymore."*

*The girl playing the role of the benevolent Virgin laughed heartily, then nudged her companion as a signal and excused herself to leave. Backstage, the rest of the choir was gone, leaving only the two boys standing and looking at each other.*

*"Hey... don't think too much about what you asked. Do whatever you want."*

*Cherry spoke her last sentence before gesturing towards Tanrak, who looked bewildered and completely confused. The girl giggled while Barth glared at her and quickly tried to cover it up. Cherry stuck out her tongue playfully before linking arms with what appeared to be her lover and walking away.*

*"What were you talking to Cherry about?"*

*Tanrak rushed over immediately. Barth tried to hide his embarrassment, but the young man thought his eyes weren't mistaken; faint traces of emotion were present.*

*"No," Bart replied.*

*"Your voice is so high," Tanrak narrowed his eyes.*

*"No, really."*

*Tanrak looked on, trying to find fault, but when his gaze inadvertently fell upon those sweetly bitter lips, he was the one who had to avert his eyes. The young man hurriedly gathered his belongings into a bag, as if he had a thousand or a hundred items to carry, when in reality he only had a piece of paper with song lyrics written on it.*

*"Shall we go back?" Bart asked.*

*"You can go back first," Tanrak replied. "Father went out for an event, so he asked me to help make sure the church is properly locked up and to return the keys to the school. The person who usually looks after the church has gone home to see his family."*

*"We came together, so we'll go back together."*

The other person spoke jokingly, as if to suggest that what Tanrak said was more distant than their current relationship status. But honestly, he himself didn't know what everything meant, other than the sweet taste that was like fruit coated in poisonous honey.

*"Then you can find something to do while you wait. It'll probably be a while."*

*"I wonder what I can do... for quite a while longer."*

Barth's words were ambiguous, almost impossible to interpret in any particular way, if not for the sparkling eyes of a child about to receive a toy, and the way he looked at him as if he were the toy itself. Tanrak swallowed hard before turning away. Something was on his face—either a bright red tomato or a ripe ivy gourd.

*"Nonsense..."*

Tanrak brushed it off and tried to walk away, but Barth followed.

*"So what's meaningful?"*

*"No, there's nothing worthwhile about being with you. You're pointless."*

Instead of getting angry or upset, Barth smiled good-naturedly. The two walked out from the backstage area, revealing that the public space had become a private haven; the vast cathedral was too small for just the two of them.

*"Wow... there's nobody here."*

*"Yeah, that's true."*

Barth spoke first, as if he had noticed the fact beforehand. Tanrak, who followed behind, then looked around and murmured in agreement.

*"So beautiful."*

Tanrak spoke, seemingly more instinctively than anything else. The spacious religious building had a stage for the priest in the center, surrounded by tiered wooden benches sloping down in waves toward the center. The surrounding walls were pristine white, interspersed with varnished wood panels.

*"It's like heaven," Barth said.*

*"You talk as if you've been there before."*

Tanrak chuckled, but the other person didn't argue back. Instead, they half-sit, half-stand balanced on a long bench, not far from where the moonlight streamed through the stained glass window, casting shadows. Perhaps it wasn't moonlight at all; maybe it was just the ceiling lights, the streetlights, a deceptive light luring moths to flutter around.

*"Maybe I almost did."*

Barth spoke, using hands that others recognized as rough and calloused to unbutton his novice robe, revealing skin that was pale and gleaming when touched. Tanrak felt both curious and a thrill in his chest, yet the other's seriousness reminded him that something was wrong.

*"Really...?"*

Tanrak deliberately surveyed the man's body. His shirt revealed a well-defined, muscular chest, his gaze tracing down from his shoulders to his sculpted abdomen, glistening with sweat. It wasn't a sight he'd never seen before; he'd seen it many times, but never truly considered it.

*“Here it is... a ticket to almost heaven.”*

*Barth emphasized, tracing his finger across the center of his chest, his demeanor more like recalling something than intentionally stating it. He focused intently, and at the same moment, as he tensed and the light hit him, Tanrak realized something was there.*

*“A birthmark?” he asked.*

*“No...it's a scar.”*

*Barth spoke. Tanrak moved closer, his gaze filled with curiosity. The owner of the pure, statue-like body took the young man's hand and guided it to touch. It was almost like a plain sheet of flesh—almost, because upon closer inspection, it seemed to be slightly indented, like a scar.*

*“Was it an accident?” he asked.*

*“Not exactly...”*

*Barth replied, releasing her hand. Tanrak frowned, not understanding much, but didn't dare ask. The other person probably sensed her confusion and continued to explain.*

*“My parents were devout Christians. Every Sunday I went to church, prayed, sang hymns, and attended Mass.”*

*Tanrak raised his eyebrows in shock. From his memories, Barth hated God and had turned his back on his belief in Him, but the young man never imagined it would come from this background.*

*“My parents were always arguing. My dad cheated on my mom once, and after that, our family was never the same. My mom became paranoid and constantly suspicious, and my dad started beating her. But the funny thing is, my parents refuse to divorce. Do you know why? You might laugh if I told you.”*

*Instead of averting his gaze, he inadvertently turned to look at the center of the cathedral. There, the Son of Christ was crucified, his sorrowful eyes seemingly listening in on the boy's agonizing story. The scar was one that would never heal.*

*“God...”*

*Barth replied, and Tanrak understood everything. Strict Catholics believe that marriage is a divine consent; man and woman are born together as one. Divorce, therefore, is seen as proof that God's consent is flawed. In a Catholic context, divorce never truly existed; rather, it would be a reversal, declaring any previous marriage null and void that ever truly existed.*

*Instead of lovingly embracing Barth, he silently embraced him. There was no explanation other than a trace of understanding. Strong faith can sometimes hurt us. The wounded boy didn't speak further, and the listener didn't ask any more questions.*

*Barth rested his face on the other's shoulder, while the owner of the shoulder gently stroked his head in a comforting manner.*

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## Question 2

*The atmosphere at the boarding school was quiet and somber. Most of the novices came from homes far away, so long holidays were a significant time that families looked forward to all year. The dormitories were often sparsely populated, making them feel lonely. Some had gone home before Christmas, some stayed to work during the festivities before returning home, and some had to wait for their parents to be available to pick them up. The novices were not allowed to travel home on their own.*

*“Are you going home this year?” Tanrak asked while washing dishes with his close friend Kongdech. Kongdech listened, turned to look at him, and nodded. Kongdech was from the north, from a remote village, almost a minority group. The small community relied mainly on agriculture and self sufficiency. Kongdech was able to attend school thanks to support from the diocese. His close friend had a main goal: to change his life, escape poverty, and dedicate himself to a religious path.*

*“Maybe I’ll go back. I don’t know for sure. If my mom comes to pick me up, I’ll go back,” Kongdech replied uncertainly.*

*“Didn’t Mom send a letter?” Tanrak asked.*

*“No,” Kongdech said. “Postage is expensive. I’d have to hire someone to deliver it into town, which would be about the same price as a bus ride to see me. If they come, they might. But I’m not sure. If there’s shooting going on, they probably won’t come out. Maybe it’s better to stay here than go back.”*

*Kongdech spoke as if he were describing the weather, but in reality, his family had faced many hardships. Although they had a registered address, their community was located near the border and close to an area inhabited by ethnic minorities. Numerous problems stemmed from poverty and neglect by the government along the border: territorial disputes, illegal businesses, and even resistance against the government in neighboring countries. Kongdech's father also died from a stray bomb blast during the war.*

*“If it weren't for this place... I might have died along with my father.”*

*His close friend continued, washing the few dishes piled up for the young monks. Kongdech's father had died while driving a truck loaded with agricultural produce to sell in the city, due to a misunderstanding by unknown armed groups. Kongdech's mother came to the school to tell him the news but couldn't bring him back for his father's funeral because the situation wasn't good. His close friend said that if he had been at home, he would have died, because normally his father would always invite him to ride along in the car to keep him company and keep him awake.*

*“If it weren't for God... I would have died.”*

*Kongdech's voice overlapped with someone not far away, who was helping another group of friends clean the cafeteria. Kongdech and Barth's lives were ironically contrasting; one had recovered thanks to God, while the other seemed to believe in the opposite.*

*“Kongdech...please meet your relative in the master’s room.”*

*A voice interrupted their conversation, bringing it to an end. Neither Kongdech nor Tanrak turned towards the source of the sound first, but instead turned towards the other side where relatives were waiting to pick up the novice monks. Kongdech's mother had arrived to take him home. Tanrak recognized her reserved yet somewhat insecure demeanor. The middle-aged woman peered at her son excitedly. Tanrak quickly raised his hands in a respectful greeting. Kongdech hurriedly washed and dried his hands, preparing to go meet the master and complete the necessary paperwork to return home.*

*“I told you to come during the day,” Kongdech muttered. “Last time, by the time we got to the bus station, all the buses were gone. We’ll end up sleeping at Mochit again. Mom, oh Mom.”*

*The son's complaints weren't serious. Kongdech always seemed humble and serious about life. He often complained about his mother, both in front of and behind her back, but Tanrak easily saw through it. Kongdech loved his mother more than anything; his complaints were simply because he was too shy to express them.*

*“Come on... at least you still have a home to go back to.”*

*Tanrak spoke without thinking and continued washing the dishes without making any gesture of walking his friend to the door. If asked if Tanrak had a home, he would probably say yes, but he wouldn't wholeheartedly call it a home. For him, a home needs someone to live in it, not just a building structure.*

*“This is your home... He is the father of all of us.”*

Kongdech spoke, patting his shoulder firmly. That touch reminded him of the promise of the little boy, just over ten years old, who sat praying before the sacred cross, pledging himself on the path to God's love. Without God's love, both of their lives would be meaningless.

Kongdech left, leaving behind a certain residue in his heart. Not new thoughts, but the same old ones, simply left to settle. It was a simple conversation that gradually stirred everything up again. Tanrak unconsciously reached for the locket containing a picture of her parents, engraved with a cross.

**“Your hand is probably so chapped it's falling off.”**

A voice startled the hand that was rinsing the sink, and he quickly turned off the water. Turning around, he saw the person he had been lost in thought with. It seemed the big cleaning of the cafeteria was now complete.

**“Busy”**

**“Busy...”** Barth said softly, lowering his head slightly and glancing around cautiously. **“Busy... does that mean busy with your heart?”**

The love on the other side reached a boiling point without needing to spend any time fanning the flames.

**“Barth!”**

**“Yes, sir!”**

**“What did you say!”**

**“Tell the truth!”** Barth burst into laughter, feeling triumphant, but his laughter was short-lived. Tanrak pretended to wash his hands, then seized the opportunity to splash water all over Barth's face. The young man laughed loudly, clearly enjoying himself.

**“What are you doing? I just finished mopping the floor.”**

**“The punishment for talkative people. Why are you talking so much? Huh? Why are you talking so much?”**

The victim refused to give up, immediately grabbing the soaking wet shirt and rubbing it against the perpetrator's body. Tanrak tried to move away, but it was too late.

**“Let go! What are you doing?”** he yelled.

**“You started it,”** Barth argued.

**“No, no, don't play like this.”**

**“Wow, so you start by attacking others and then say you don't want to play anymore?”**

Tanrak protested and raised his hands in surrender, but Barth refused to give up, wrapping his arm tightly around the young man. Taking advantage of the argument, Tanrak managed to wriggle free and escape. Barth didn't give up and chased after him all the way to the cafeteria, where only two people were left.

**“Master..”**

The voice, though not loud, was sharp and stopped the two young men in their tracks. Tanrak swallowed hard, his throat dry. Even without seeing, he could guess who the speaker was, judging by the style of the sentence, the tone of voice, and a sense of personal familiarity.

**“Excuse me, Master.”**

Tanrak turned to speak first, then bowed his head in guilt, while Barth awkwardly clasped his hands together in a respectful gesture. In front of them stood the seminary's caretaker. From the distance they had walked into the dishwashing area at the very back of the dining hall, it indicated he had witnessed everything for a while.

*"The cafeteria is not a playground."*

*"Excuse me," Barth replied.*

*"If you have so much energy, go play sports, but don't come running around like this. What's your relationship with each other? Tell me."*

*Although it wasn't a harsh reprimand, it was still incredibly awkward and made one feel guilty, especially for Tanrak, the class representative who was supposed to supervise and look after other students.*

*"Seminarian,"*

*"Seminarian,"*

*Tanrak answered first, followed by Barth. Masser nodded in agreement, not exactly in anger, but more in a mixture of displeasure and exasperation.*

*"As seminarians, you should be more composed. If you have a lot of energy left, go and clean the small temple. Consider it exercising in a proper way."*

*The master gave a command before walking away. Tanrak and Barth could only nod in agreement, sighing deeply with guilt. Ultimately, there was nothing they could do but go to the small temple where the novice monks performed their morning and evening prayers.*

*"It doesn't look dirty at all."*

*Barth grumbled, and Tanrak thought the same, because before the short school break, Father Anan had already mobilized the students to help with a big cleaning once before.*

*"Don't complain.. just do it."*

*Tanrak grumbled at his friend but did nothing more than walk around to the cleaning supplies room nearby. Barth seemed to be busy tidying up various items. He told Tanrak that he didn't need to help; he could carry everything himself.*

*"Barth..." Tanrak almost said something but swallowed it back, because when they returned to the small temple, they found that the open doorway allowed only a single beam of light from outside to stream in, connecting to the statue of the Buddha crucified on the sacred wooden pedestal.*

*While another young man moved to a corner to clean the other side of the window, where light streamed in from outside, casting faint shadows, the scene before him seemed like a warning sign that Thanrak couldn't easily erase from his mind. The path to Christ and forgiveness, and someone else whose shadow was drifting far from goodness.*

*"What's up?"*

*Barth walked over when he heard the call, but instead of love, a whirlwind of conflicting voices filled his head, making him too afraid to meet the gaze of the Redeemer gazing down from above. The young man let the broom and mop clatter against the floor and turned to flee from the overwhelming reality that was assaulting his mind, but someone else grabbed his hand with a forceful pull. He looked at the hand of the person who bore the same name as the apostle, overwhelmed with guilt.*

*A pleading gaze lingered, but drifted far beyond. The light from above faded into the distance.*

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### Item 3

Boarding schools are quite different from regular boarding schools when they're not packed with students. The dormitories for seminarians are large rooms, like several classrooms connected together. Each side is lined with beds, leaving only a small walkway in the middle for easy movement. The dormitories are divided by year level, and each student is not allowed to move their own bed, nor are they allowed to meddle in the dormitories of other year levels.

Typically, Tanrak and Barth's beds were on opposite sides of the building. Tanrak, being the class president, was assigned a bed near the entrance/exit so he could help the masters supervise and maintain order. Barth, being the last new student to arrive, had to sleep on the furthest side, the one nobody wanted because it was a long walk. Tanrak could see his friend from the other side, but they weren't close enough to hear each other's voices. If they needed to talk, they would occasionally walk over to talk, but not often.

*"Oh, hey, Sorn moved the bed!"*

Barth said when they returned to the room. Tanrak looked in that direction and saw that, of the approximately thirty students in their year group, only about five remained.

*"Uh... I guess it's alright, it's a holiday."*

Tanrak spoke as the class president, *"Now the other students have moved to sleep on the other side of the room, on the inner side. There are large windows there, and it's known to be the coldest place."*

*"Then I'll move too."*

*"Whatever you want. Go ahead."*

Tanrak said, *"I remember last year the master also came to inspect the rooms late at night during a long holiday like this. The students moved to sleep closer together because there were fewer people left, but there were no complaints or criticisms."*

*"I've already said it, class president."*

Barth spoke with a chuckle as he walked away to his own bed, returning with a pillow and a blanket. At first, Tanrak thought he would sleep near the entrance door, where the breeze would flow nicely.

*"Hey!"*

*"Right here."*

But contrary to expectations, Barth walked past the best spot to the corner of the room near the entrance, before tossing a pillow and blanket onto the top bunk. Tanrak wouldn't have gasped if he hadn't already been sleeping on the first bunk.

*"Barth!"*

*"What!"*

His close friend teased him in a tone that sounded like he was yelling, but his playful behavior didn't show any sign of genuine distress.

*"You and I just got punished by the master, and you're still playing?"* he grumbled.

Barth didn't answer at first, but then he exerted himself to climb the ladder to the top bunk before leaning his head out to speak.

*"I wasn't playing, I just moved here to sleep."*

Tanrak could only shake his head. *“That's right, if Master sees this, he'll complain again.”*

*“Who's complaining? What are they complaining about? We're not running around in the bedroom anyway. We just moved closer together for the holidays.”* Barth chuckled.

Tanrak opened his mouth to argue further, but in a split second, just a split second, a certain expression in the other person's eyes seemed to change. It was the look of loneliness and isolation in a silent night, a look that didn't want to exist alone.

*“Don't complain yet.”*

Barth said that, his gaze having changed. The person in front of him touched his lips with a finger before slowly moving it away from the top bunk. Tanrak watched the scene as if mesmerized, unable to understand why he extended his own index finger to touch the other person's.

*“Good night,”* Barth whispered.

*“Good night.”*

*“Tanrak,”* he replied in a whisper, but it echoed loudly in the darkness of the cold, lonely night.

The young man tossed and turned repeatedly, unable to fall asleep. He didn't know why. Meanwhile, he saw the upper bunk continuing to sway restlessly, just as he was. He was trapped in that labyrinth of youth again and again throughout the night. A deep-seated longing compelled him to raise his index finger and kiss it with the utmost gentleness.

*There are three things that exist: faith, hope, and love. But love is the most important.*

*— 1 Corinthians 13:13*

*If there are three things that matter in the human world, it might be faith, hope, and love. Believing in these words without any further argument, the young man stood gazing at the landscape, his thoughts swirling endlessly. From the soaking wet dining hall, the lonely small temple, the solitary bunk bed, and the distant sacred site...*

*Currently, Tanrak is at a church quite far from the school. Father Anan has an important engagement and has instructed the seminarians to attend Mass here in his place.*

*The Lamb of God, who sacrificed His life to atone for the sins of the world, have mercy on Him.*

*The Lamb of God, who sacrificed His life to atone for the sins of the world, have mercy on Him.*

*The Lamb of God, who sacrificed His life to atone for the sins of the world, grant us peace.*

*The sound of prayers echoed throughout the cathedral. Tanrak, dressed in civilian clothes, stood in a corner, further away than usual. If this were the school church, the seminarians would have been assigned some role in helping, but today he was here only to participate as a Catholic.*

*“May God be with you,”* the priest said.

*And the Catholics received it, “And may he dwell with you.”*

*Tanrak stood beside Barth, watching everything unfold as it should on a Sunday morning. Before them lay the magnificent cathedral, under the benevolent gaze of the Son, and above him, the Father who created everything.*

The priest conducted the Mass. Thanrak watched the scene with a sense of wonder. For a moment, he felt a dryness in his throat, a roughness as if he could no longer taste the flavors of the body.

*“Blessed is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world; he who has been called to the shepherd,”* said the pastor.

*And the Catholics responded, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you dwell with me; but only say the word, and my soul will be purified.”*

*The Mass has begun. Catholics will line up to receive communion, to receive God's presence to guide their lives in love and peace, for love is the most important thing.*

*“The Body of Christ, God,”* the priest said.

*Catholics respond with "Amen”.*

*Tanrak and Barth stood in the long line to receive communion together, neither speaking to the other. The young man watched as each Catholics received communion, a symbol of the Son of Christ's body, to serve as spiritual nourishment. Prayers and music filled the reverent cathedral.*

*“Barth,”* Tanrak said.

*And Barth accepts “Tanrak.”*

*The two young men spoke to each other with feelings that were difficult to put into words. Those who were to receive the sacrament had to be pure of their sins. Before the ceremony began, the priest would give the faithful an opportunity to confess their sins in order to be re-received.*

*Tanrak watched the line for receiving communion shrink rapidly, feeling uncertain about the reality before him, especially about his own purity and that of those beside him—whether they were worthy of receiving the communion from God, and whether their purity would endure if accepted.*

*The breath of the young man and the young woman seemed to be slowly and unknowingly being sucked away. An invisible hand gently pressed down on their chests, making it seem as if they couldn't breathe. Then, a sensation arose amidst them; their index fingers accidentally touched.*

*Perfect love casts out fear.*

*—1 John 4:18*

*“Barth,”* Tanrak said.

*And Barth accepts "Tanrak."*

*They each called out to the other, unaware of any other reason, but found their fingers intertwined again, unable to break free. The two young men decided to turn their backs on the sacrament line, the bread of the Son, and the images representing the Father above.*

*Tanrak and Barth turned their backs to the sorrowful body of the Redeemer watching from the cross. They linked their fingers tightly before slowly walking through the large crowd of people arriving to receive communion with devout faith. With each step, the distance to God seemed even further.*

*Tanrak felt a sense of freedom. Barth felt a sense of freedom, but it was a bittersweet feeling that could not be fully understood without experiencing it firsthand. Before them was a blinding light emanating from the exit gate to a place of worship, a world far removed from which even moral principles could not reach.*

*...even with His mercy.*

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Item 4

*Do everything with love.*

— 1 Corinthians 16:14

*“Barth,” Tanrak said.*

*And Bart accepts "Tanrak."*

*Whispers of endless love echoed repeatedly. Tanrak sat behind Barth on a motorcycle. The paved road stretched endlessly, flanked by fields of golden rice. Barth urged the engine on, speeding through the blazing sun into the desolate yet not lonely countryside.*

*The wind rustled, stirring the dust swirling along the roadside like smoke. The passenger clung tightly to the driver's waist, eliciting a sweet yet bitter laugh from the person ahead. The tires screeched against the road for a short while before turning into a narrow, shaded area under a large canopy of rain trees. The driver carefully parked, dismounted, and extended his hand to the waiting passenger. Then, the two entered the secret garden before them.*

*This narrow path wasn't particularly well-maintained, yet it was likely frequented by many. Footprints created slopes between the earthen embankments and the deep, dense forest. The sound of liquid splashing was surprisingly relaxing. A cool aura emanated from within, the pungent scent of grass mingling with the earthy aroma that likely wafted in waves, greeting the two young men with friendliness.*

*“Watch out...”*

*Barth spoke as he walked ahead. There was little to hold onto on either side of the path. The ground was quite hard and firm due to the abundance of cobblestones, but even a slight deviation would lead to soft, slippery soil that could easily cause one to lose their balance. The person leading the way turned back to look at those behind him with a worried expression.*

*“Is it still far?” he asked.*

*“Just a little more,” Barth replied.*

*Sweat trickled down Tanrak's face. The young man panted, unaccustomed to prolonged physical exertion. As a novice monk, he often had to perform strenuous work, but never in such stifling heat.*

*“We've arrived!”*

*Barth, who had quickened his pace by about ten steps to check out the intersection ahead, shouted back and turned to wave, beckoning him over.*

*“Is it pretty?” Tanrak asked.*

*“Yes, it's beautiful. Very beautiful.”*

*Barth replied cheerfully, the sparkle in his eyes unlikely to be deceiving of any other intention. Tanrak shifted slightly, as if gathering his strength, before following him inside. He wasn't very fond of the heat, especially his sensitive and easily sweaty body.*

*“And then you complain that I smell of sweat,” Barth teased, seeing the other's condition. “You're sweating that much from just walking this far?”*

Tanrak slumped down into a seated position, shaking his head. He took a deep breath before answering, "I didn't go out because I'm tired, but because it's hot. I don't like hot weather."

Tanrak looked around, taking another deep breath. The place Barth had brought her to was a small waterfall hidden behind a field of grass and rice paddies. It wasn't a short walk, but not too far either, perhaps about twenty minutes to half an hour. The path was shady, but perhaps stuffy due to the unusually hot weather today.

A pool of water, neither too large nor too small, immediately gives a refreshing feeling upon sight. The clear, bright liquid, like glass, invites one to dip one's hand in and get to know it firsthand. This place is like a secret garden of a prophet, shady and secluded, far removed from all norms that could ever be encountered.

"The water's cold."

Tanrak spoke upon first touching it, before gently misting the dampness across his face. Barth, hearing this, became interested and scooped up water to wash his body as well.

"It's beautiful. How did you find this place?" Tanrak asked.

"My mother used to bring me here..." Barth paused for a long moment, his gaze drifting into the distance, "when we were still together."

Tanrak was silent, his lips were tightly closed, sensing the unease in the atmosphere. His mind raced, trying to piece together all the memories he could, but he couldn't quite recall anything the other person had said about his parents: devout Catholics, the rifts and animosity, and a marriage ceremony that refused to be annulled.

"Your mother is still alive, isn't she...?" Tanrak asked in a faint voice.

"My mother is still... in prison."

Barth's voice couldn't mask the pain and heartbreak. Tanrak could do nothing more than pull Barth into a tight embrace, pressing their love firmly against him. The other buried his face in the warm chest, as if trying to escape the questioning look in his eyes.

Tanrak felt the tear stains on his shirt. He released his embrace before gently kissing Barth's face and kissing his forehead. He didn't know why, but instinct told him to do so.

Barth embraced him again and again and again, for what seemed like an eternity, yet as fleeting as a fraction of a second. The lost boy whispered the story to completion, an epic that was almost the conclusion of everything about the origins that had brought the boy wandering to this place.

"My father found out I was gay," Barth recounted without looking at him. "He didn't like it. He was very strict. He believed that God only created men and women."

Tanrak didn't answer anything, he only nodded in agreement.

"That day, I went back home and he was already waiting. He secretly read my diary and saw what I had written about my life."

"It's okay... you don't have to tell me if you can't handle it."

Instead of interrupting with a loving remark, when he noticed the other's voice beginning to tremble, Barth simply took a deep breath before continuing.

"My father was raging again, but this time he didn't take it out on my mother, he took it out on me instead," Barth swallowed hard. "I couldn't overpower him. I clasped my hands together and begged him to stop, but he wouldn't. So my mother stepped in, but that only made him angrier."

"Calm down. You can tell me slowly."

*Instead of comforting him, the young man tried to soothe him when he saw the other's voice starting to falter. He didn't stop him, perhaps understanding that venting would be better, or perhaps it was a selfish move to delve deeper into territory the other didn't like anyone entering.*

*“My mother hugged me tightly. My father was furious and ran to the safe... and pulled out a gun.”*

*The narrative almost came to a standstill; both the speaker and the listener seemed to forget to breathe.*

*“When I saw it, I rushed in to grab the gun because I thought someone like my father would definitely shoot me and my mother. He slapped me in the face with the gun, I fell face down on the ground, and he raised the gun to shoot me again.”*

*Tanrak was speechless, his hands trembling as he tried to imagine the scene.*

*“My mother then used a statue of a saint that was sitting there to hit my father on the head with full force, probably hoping to knock him unconscious. My father dropped his gun, but he didn't fall unconscious. When he got up again, he yelled loudly that he would kill us, both my mother and me.”*

*Tanrak hugged Barth once more,*

*“My mother grabbed a gun and shot my father first, because if she didn't, he wouldn't let us live. He would have shot both my mother and me anyway.”*

*The narrator's voice fades into the shadows, as if the tragedies have torn the narrator's soul into pieces, yet at the same time, gradually release a pitiful spirit once again.*

*“My mother was charged with manslaughter without premeditation. The prosecutor said that if it was just self-defense, there was no need to use a gun. My mother is being detained while the case is being considered. I want to bail her out, but I don't have enough money. I can't do anything. I can't help my mother at all.”*

*Barth paused before elaborating at the end.*

*“Not only did I not help my mother, but I also caused trouble. The whole thing about my mother shooting and killing my father escalated to the point where it reached school. Some asshole started making fun of me, calling me gay, which led to my mother going to jail. So... that's how I ended up here, unintentionally.”*

*The two young men let time pass slowly in silence. Barth's story seemed to end there. They removed their sweat-soaked shirts, looked at each other, and then turned to gaze at the clear water before them. The cool, refreshing mist beckoned them to enter, but going in fully clothed would leave them soaked and make return home difficult. So, the two boys slowly stripped off their clothes piece by piece until they were naked, before stepping onto the soft earth and into the small pool in the secret garden.*

*In love, there is no fear.*

*—1 John 4:18*

*“Do you think there's a chance we could be more than just close friends?” Barth asked.*

*“Of course... whatever you want to be... you can definitely be...”*

*He said, as the rough hands of the man before him carefully removed the cross-shaped locket from his neck and placed it among his clothes. A kiss, a touch as if seeking forgiveness for all sins, seemed complete. Wasn't true love not sinful? The young man couldn't know, couldn't understand. He would have to let the questions and answers unfold gradually.*

*Tanrak bent down and gently kissed Barth's wound, a confession of everything amidst the bittersweet scent. Their lips met again, with nothing separating them, in the secret garden, unseen by the conventions of the outside world. A secret relationship began and would continue to unfold.*

*Right or wrong... He doesn't know.*

*Suitable or unsuitable... He can't see it.*

*But its sweetness and fragrance are beyond measure.*

*Tanrak felt as if she had to pay the price of everything in life to embrace the sweet relationship that lay before him. But damn, it was worth every penny. Their lips, overflowing with love and longing, seemed to have waited for each other their entire lives. For a fleeting moment, Tanrak felt the warmth of a family he had been missing for so long and had forgotten he ever received.*

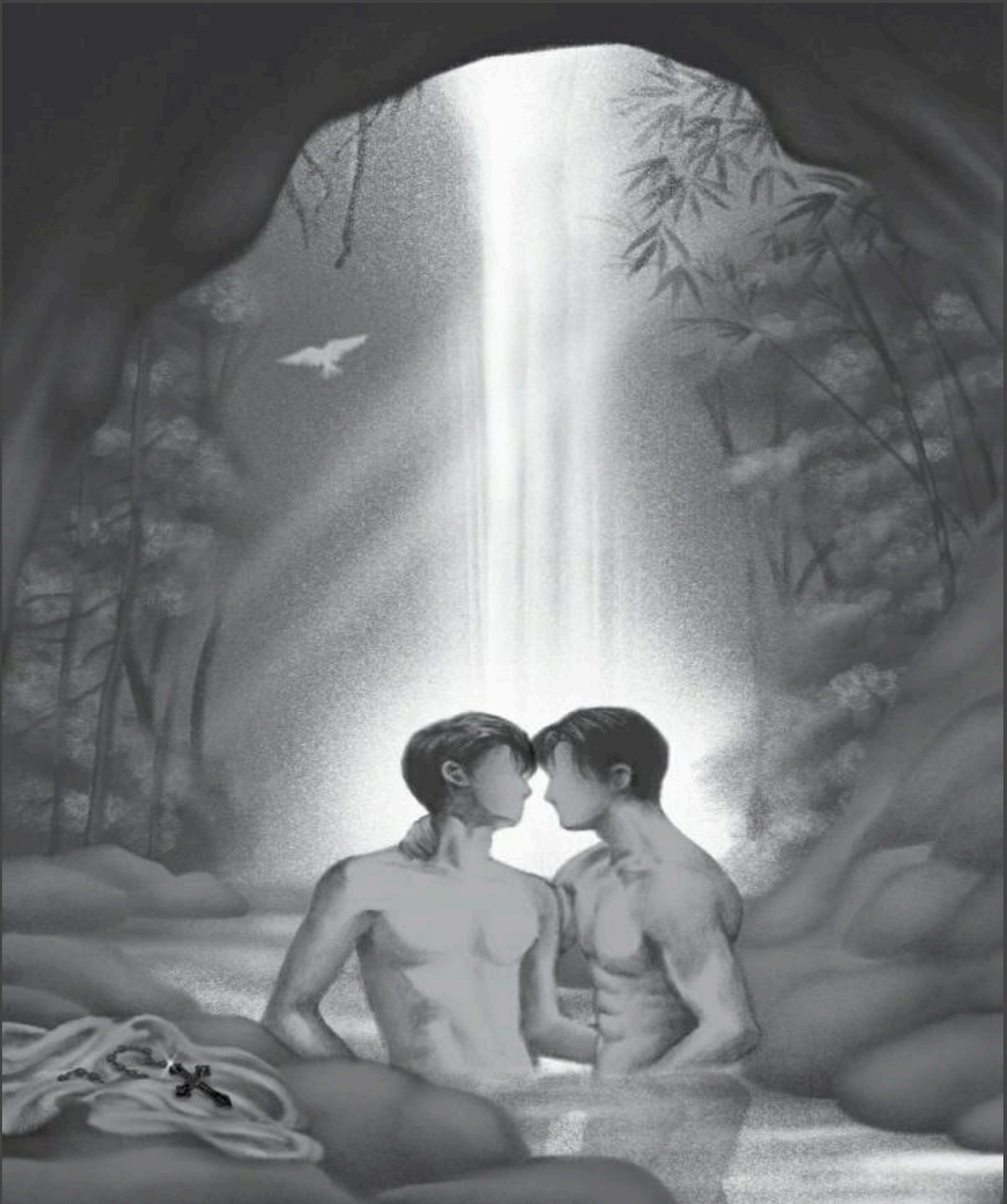
*The person in front of him feels like home.*

*A home waiting for you to return.*

*A person represents a place to remember.*

*It might have been a sin too great to describe at first, but a certain warmth from within gradually transformed into a cool, comfortable comfort. The young man surrendered his body and all his trust to the chest of the person in front of him, his lips whispering love through touch, with kisses and kisses and kisses, over and over again, as if to say it again and again, a kiss of love in place of love, a kiss to replace friendship, a kiss to transform into something else.*

*This kiss is no longer that of a friend; it's that of a lover.*



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## 5

### (Saint) Judas Iscariot

#### Item 1

*The New Year season arrives, bringing with it the seminarians gradually returning to the boarding school. This return is quite different from their departure. At the beginning of their break, the students leave individually; some leave before Christmas, others later. But upon their return, almost everyone comes back together. This is because it's well known that the annual Parent-Teacher Conference takes place after the New Year. In other words, it's a time when parents bring their children back into God's embrace, allowing them to be reunited as a family.*

*Tanrak and Barth arrived at the parents' meeting room a little later than the others. The novices who hadn't gone home had their usual routines to follow, and finishing their morning prayers took a while, delaying everything. Those who had just returned from home were able to wait for the meeting with their parents. The young man looked around for his best friend, and when he saw him, he waved in greeting before respectfully bowing to his friend's mother. The two boys then walked to the empty chairs next to Kongdech and his mother.*

*“How are you doing, my child? Will you be able to continue your studies at the central seminary?”*

*Kongdech's mother whispered a question to Tanrak while they sat waiting for the parish priest to begin the meeting. Her wrinkled face showed more emotion than usual. Tanrak swallowed hard, a bitter taste in his throat, and turned to look at the small statue of Christ crucified in front of him.*

*“I haven't thought about it yet, Mom.”*

*Tanrak answered honestly, “A seminarian's life begins in the minor seminary, which covers levels from lower to upper secondary school. After that, for another year or two, if they pass the minor seminary, they move to the middle seminary. After that, they go to the senior seminary, Saengtham, to prepare to become a priest.”*

*“Mother is entrusting Kongdech to you, son, in case he can come and stay at the central seminary with us.”*

*“Yes, Mom.”*

*Typically, after graduating from high school, novices stay at the minor seminary for another two years to help mentor the novices who are continuing their studies. However, this is not always the case. If there are many novices continuing their studies, some may transfer directly to the middle seminary.*

*“It seems like this year Father will be allowing some of the seminarians to go to the central seminary.”*

*Kongdech added something, but before he could continue, Father Anan entered the meeting room, bringing the conversation to a halt. The meeting proceeded as usual: reports on the behavior of the novices, the conditions and details that the guardians must follow, and the novices' future path.*

*“Now we come to the most important part of this meeting.”*

*Father Anan spoke after a series of miscellaneous events. An unintentional silence enveloped the meeting room. Tanrak felt a sudden surge of heat in his chest, but noticing no particular gaze fixed on him, he tried to reassure himself.*

*“All the seminarians and their guardians are well aware that in a few months, their secondary education will come to an end. I don't want to beat around the bush, but it's well known that many of the novices don't intend to continue on the religious path. I know that many of them are studying hard to prepare for university entrance exams, or some are even skipping their dorms to take them. I've always turned a blind eye to this, because I saw that it was partly their own future, and I didn't want to hinder it.”*

*“For those seminarians who are certain they wish to leave, I would like you to tell me honestly so I can arrange for you to be sent to the central seminary. But for those who are still hesitant, I would like you to reflect on how much the diocese has paid for your tuition and living expenses to get you to this point. I want you to think about this carefully. If you wish to dedicate yourself to serving God in return for His kindness, I must express my gratitude for you not forgetting what God has given you.”*

*An uncontrollable awkwardness permeated the cramped room. Father Anan had never spoken so frankly before. Normally, he would act as if the option of leaving the seminarian's life never existed, partly to minimize his choices and avoid revealing too much. But now, a crucial crossroads in the young seminarian's life had arrived.*

*Hesitation would only complicate things further. Tanrak lowered his head, avoiding Father Anan's gaze, Kongdech's gaze, and the sharp, piercing gaze of the young monk.*

*“What do you think?”*

*Kongdech spoke up after Father Anan dismissed all the students to return to their normal routines. Kongdech's mother had already left.*

*“Which story?” Tanrak teased.*

But he received a sharp glare in return. **“You know what I’m talking about.”**

Tanrak sighed deeply. He had dedicated himself to this path since he could remember. Therefore, he never imagined himself going to university or even pursuing another profession. All the time, he only saw himself holding an incense burner, reading the Bible, and giving sermons to Catholics in the cathedral.

Until someone came and changed his life. Someone who came on a night of turmoil to alter the imbalance in the equation. Unconsciously, Tanrak reached for the rosary in his shoulder bag. A voice in his head prayed, pleading with the Virgin Mary.

**“I haven’t thought about it yet. Wherever my father tells me to go, I’ll go there.”**

He answered dismissively. Tanrak understood that his close friend wanted an answer about which seminary he wanted to go to, but the look in his eyes was full of suspicion.

**“Don’t worry too much about what my mother said. Do whatever you want.”**

Kongdech spoke as they walked towards the dormitory. Barth seemed to have to separate to discuss the additional teaching exam with the master, so he didn’t walk with them.

**“What do you mean?”**

He asked, but the other person didn’t answer immediately. Instead, they stopped, reached into their pocket, and rummaged for something before handing it back to him.

**“Your rosary, I saw Barth drop it in front of the bathroom this morning,”** the other person paused, **“but I’m not sure if I should return it to you or Barth.”**

Kongdech shoved the rosary into Tanrak’s hand before turning his back and walking away with an expression the young man didn’t want to think about, but had to admit was sarcastic. Especially the smile, which seemed half-angry, a look he had never seen on Kongdech before.

Tanrak stood motionless in the hallway, completely at a loss. His mind was blank, filled only with images of himself, Barth, and Kongdech. His own voice, Barth’s, and his father Anan’s voice flashed back and forth. He felt too exhausted to even think about what to do next.

**“Tanrak…”**

**“Tanrak…”**

**“Tanrak…”**

Someone’s voice called out, seemingly from a great distance. The young man knew he should turn towards the source of the sound, and should answer something, but his hands and feet were cold, his heart felt like it would explode. Tanrak stood frozen, letting the voice continue.

**“Tanrak…”**

**“Tanrak…”**

**“Tanrak…”**

The touch on both shoulders was firm, as if awakening Tanrak from his slumber. In a clear vision, the young man saw the sorrowful eyes, overflowing with tears, of someone else. He turned away from that heartbreaking wound, only to meet the person who might be the cause of it all.

**“Tanrak!”**

*“Barth,” he cried out in alarm, his eyes quickly scanning the surroundings. But the wide corridor was deserted. Driven by a negative instinct, the young man hurriedly grabbed Barth's arm and pulled him around a corner, away from the easily observable gaze. He couldn't even decide who to avoid.*

*“What the hell happened?”*

*Barth spoke with complete incomprehension, but Tanrak ignored all appeals. The young man dragged Barth into a small room used for cleaning supplies, slamming the door shut and locking it, plunging the room into complete darkness, dust, a musty smell, and forbidden love.*

*“Barth,” he said breathlessly.*

*“What's wrong with you?”*

*A whisper in the darkness asked, its voice barely concealing its urgency. The two figures' arms were intertwined in the unbearably narrow confines of the space.*

*“Kongdech knows... Kongdech knows about us.”*

*Tanrak couldn't hide his apprehension, not even a hint of it. His heart felt like it was going to leap out of his chest. His voice trembled, and he raced through his mind, thinking of all sorts of possibilities, especially if his strict best friend were to tell his Father Anan about it.*

*“Calm down, calm down,” the other person said. “What happened? Tell me. How did you know that Kongdech knows about us?”*

*Tanrak tried to compose himself, though it was difficult. But the comforting touch of his lover helped to heal him. The young man slowly recounted everything that had happened during his conversation with his best friend: the strange words, the rosary, and the unprecedented distance.*

*“No, you can't conclude anything from this. Don't get defensive. The more you show emotion, the more it will seem like you're admitting it. It's better to just stay quiet.”*

*Barth spoke, planting a gentle kiss on the forehead in a comforting gesture. It was like an overwhelming embrace of love that couldn't be fully described. His previously ragged breathing gradually calmed and returned to normal.*

*“Don't worry... I'm always here with you.”*

*The covenant was signed through a tight embrace. Barth didn't tell him to believe, but always made him believe. Tanrak buried his face in his broad chest, confused, gradually letting all his suffering flow away in the silence.*

*Love might be the best shield in times like these.*

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## Question 2

*Their new relationship began in a cramped broom closet. The two young men agreed to keep some distance to avoid attracting too much attention. With only a little over a month left until the end of the school year, and at least Barth hoping to earn a full diploma to move forward in the future, a potential expulsion would be a lifelong problem. Yet, they insisted they didn't want to let go of each other.*

*Tanrak and Barth agreed to communicate by sending letters instead of spending time together as before. They agreed to keep their Old Testament Bibles in their respective lockers, and when a letter arrived, they would place it there. They would exchange letters secretly, keeping their relationship hidden from everyone. From being constantly together, they gradually drifted apart. However, at the same time, because no one could see them, they grew closer, compensating for the enormous gap that had been created between them.*

Today, the master called me in for another round of teaching examination.

Why are the prayers in Corinthians so difficult? The ones in John are much easier. I've answered incorrectly so many times that the teacher ordered me to copy them a hundred times.

— Nathanael

I told them to pay attention while reading, but they wouldn't... How's that for a change, huh?!

Today, Kongdech almost saw the little note, but luckily he hid it in time. He seems much more at ease now. I don't want things to go back to how they used to be.

— Philip

Come on... someone like Kongdech will forget soon enough.

Let's meet in the broom room as usual today for homework time. Knock on the wall three times as a signal, just like before.

— Nathanael

## Thank you for the roses

So beautiful... I love it... I just noticed it was tucked inside a book. I was so surprised at first. How did you find it? Don't tell me you secretly took it from the cave of the Virgin Mary!

— Philip

No! But close enough. (Haha)

I got these from the altar. Valentine's Day is almost here. I'm sorry I could only find this much for you, but I promise that if I get the chance, I'll find some really beautiful roses for you.

P.S. See you at the usual place today.

— Nathanael

Why aren't you free to come see me? I'm dying to see you!

Do you know how hard it is to see each other every day but not be able to walk up to each other, talk, or smile, when deep down I want to hug you so badly I'm going crazy?

stocking up on kisses when we're not talking... no matter how many, it's never enough.

Seriously, about.

Even being apart for less than ten minutes, I already miss you. Can we meet? Five minutes, or ten minutes, please. Leaving you like this is so agonizing.

Don't you miss each other?

Don't you want to hug each other?

Don't you want to kiss each other?

Can we meet at the usual place today? I don't know, but even if we can't, I'll still wait.

Even if you don't come, I'll still wait. I'll wait until we both know what it's like to be driven

crazy by love.

— Nathanael

miss...

I love you too...I miss you too...

— Philip

Tanrak looked at the small letter in his hand with unease, but could only sigh deeply, unable to make a decision. He slipped the letter back into the Bible, put it away in the cupboard, and gathered his belongings to cover it up. He glanced at the clock on the wall; it was almost time for homework. That meant that if Barth had done what he said, he would probably be waiting in the hot, dark broom room for hours. The young man was extremely worried about his lover.

Lately, Tanrak and Barth have been seeing each other less often than usual, when they used to sneak in almost every day. Partly because the final exams were approaching, and they both needed to prepare. Also, one day during their planned meeting, they discovered a padlock had been added to the broom closet, a room that had never been noticed before. It seemed like a threat from someone who knew the broom closet had been used improperly. Worried, Tanrak decided to put their secret meetings on hold.

## Sorry... I just saw the letter.

Let's meet tomorrow afternoon in room M.5/2, in the old building near the swimming pool. Whoever arrives first should lock the door. Those who arrive later should knock on the door three times as a signal, just like before.

— Philip

At first, Tanrak almost went to find Barth in the broomstick, but when he turned and saw someone's gaze fixed on him, he felt an uncontrollable fear. When he tried to look again to be sure, the person was gone. He didn't know if it was just his imagination or if someone was really observing their conversation through these letters.

The young man discreetly slipped the paper into his lover's Bible before returning to his dorm, silently praying that his lover wouldn't be upset at being left waiting alone.

Sure...gone...See you soon!

— Nathanael

Tanrak arrived at the meeting point on Saturday afternoon. The old school building was deserted. This area used to be classrooms for regular students, but after the new building was completed, everyone moved out, leaving only the old classrooms behind, to be renovated for other uses. The young man twisted the doorknob only to find it locked. He knocked three times as quickly as he could, before the wooden door slowly swung open as if waiting for him. Upon entering, he was immediately met with Barth's embrace.

“I'm going to go crazy.”

The voice of the person who had been waiting spoke before gently pressing lips to the forehead, left cheek, right cheek, and finally to the eyes. Before a single word could be uttered, all words were swallowed up by the sweet and bitter taste once again. Thanrak willingly opened his face to receive it, his heart burning with the same fire. He could almost see his beloved with every breath he took, praying and counting the days and nights until they could meet again, through kisses, embraces, and without anything separating them.

“I... too...”

Instead of speaking, Thanrak didn't get a chance, not even to finish the sentence. Barth pulled back for a moment to catch his breath before greedily lunging in for another kiss. The young man responded with equally ravenous hunger, a multitude of longings building up to explode in a split second. Their breathing was ragged and loud, but not louder than a strange, unsettling sound that crept into their ears. It wasn't their imagination; it couldn't be.

*"Someone's coming!"*

*"Get out of the way!"*

Tanrak quickly spoke up, while Barth, equally alert, looked around and saw a pile of old beds scattered on one side, stacked in a makeshift storage room. They quickly grabbed hands and crawled under the beds as fast as they could. Although the door was locked, an instinct told them that whoever came in would have a key. And if that were the case, it could mean the senior seminarian, the supervising seminarian, or even the priest.

It seemed the instincts of those hiding were correct in the slightest. Heavy footsteps echoed down the hallway, followed by the sound of keys unlocking and exploring room after room, until the lock of the room where the two were hiding finally came undone. Tanrak, pressed to the floor, saw nothing but the hem of trousers and the shoes of Father Anan, which he immediately recognized as belonging to him. He himself couldn't understand why Father Anan would be exploring the old building at this time.

*"Lord... hasten to my aid... Lord... hasten to deliver me from this danger... Amen."*

Tanrak clutched the crucifix he always wore around his neck, gripping it tightly, and whispered a prayer as softly as possible, imploring the Father of all living things. That moment of stillness lasted less than five minutes, but in the young man's heart, it felt like an eternity. Finally, the inspector's shoes turned away, and the door was locked as before.

Tanrak rushed to embrace his lover tightly before bursting into tears, overwhelmed by unbearable emotion.

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### Item 3

~O God, with your boundless and expansive heart,  
show me the way, to remain steadfast and follow the righteous path.  
I do not wish to stray from You.  
O God, with your boundless and expansive heart,  
I struggle against the cruel original sin.  
Show me the light to eternity.  
I seek You, and I will follow You... forever. ~

The music inside the vast cathedral made everything feel soft and light, like walking on cotton. Tanrak looked around with wonder. Today was a special occasion; Father Anan had brought a number of seminarians to celebrate the church's festivities outside the school. Tanrak walked alongside Kongdech along the corridor with a calm demeanor, yet at the same time, a wondrous feeling of overwhelming joy welled up within her. Barth wasn't with them today because he still had to take additional catechism exams to complete the remaining curriculum.

*"I want you to consider this seminary carefully."*

Father Anan said this while leading the group of seminarians to view images depicting important religious events on one side.

*"This church is the most rigorous seminary in terms of practice, but at the same time, it offers many opportunities for seminarians to further their religious path. Serious seminarians often request permission to continue their studies here, and the priest considers each case individually. This place is suitable for those who are serious, have a basic understanding of languages, and are committed to the path of good conduct."*

The priest continued speaking as he familiarly led the seminarian around the church, almost like a field trip or a visit to the site, rather than the main purpose of the day being the church celebration. Tanrak looked around, amazed. The cathedral was mostly built in pristine white, adorned with images of important apostles. Unlike other places that often rely on the dark and somberness of the building, this one was airy, spacious, and vast, as if heaven were just a stone's throw away.

**“Many of you will remember the painting ‘Ticket to Heaven,’”** the guide began. **“In fact, the painter drew inspiration for that painting from this place. As you arrive, you will see that this church is far from the city, and at times it is very remote.”**

Instead of dwelling on love, the image in my mind was the one displayed in the church at my school: a pure white staircase leading to heaven, but along the way, monstrous creatures lurk to devour sinful humans, preventing them from reaching the destination— the abode of God.

**“The painter was inspired by this beautiful place, which seemed like a replica of paradise, but the path to get there was fraught with many obstacles. Perhaps it could be called a replica of heaven. And this place does not allow sinful humans to reside here.”**

Tanrak paused, stunned, to gaze at everything once more. The religious structure before her had a high, concave roof that seemed to open wide to an endless world above. At the central end was a staircase leading up to the altar and connecting to Christ, who dwelled in the very heart.

**“Tanrak”**

A whispered call, sometimes like a voice, sometimes like a beckoning stream. The young man swallowed hard, his throat dry, before shaking his head to regain his composure. The person before him was Kongdech, his close friend since childhood, the one who always urged and guided him on the right path.

**“Would you like to come here?... I think this is a nice place to live.”**

Kongdech asked again, but the sound seemed like a distant echo, its origin unknown. The listener frowned, as if the question was repeating itself over and over in his mind, urging him to awaken. Tanrak pondered once more, was the call he heard still clear? Was it as clear as it was on the first day?

**“Tanrak,”** Kongdech repeated, **“do you still want to walk the path to heaven? Do you still want to see your parents? Do you still want to live under the protection of God?”**

Tanrak paused and closed his eyes again, taking a deep breath before letting out a long sigh. He couldn't think of anything, only knowing that the countless little things cluttering his mind were so numerous and disturbing that he could barely continue living normally.

**“I'm not feeling well. I'm going to go sit down and rest. I don't think I'll be able to manage.”**

Tanrak appealed in that way, then shook his head and walked to a secluded corner of the temple, ignoring everything else. The young man buried his face in the backrest for a long time, as if wanting to leave all time behind. His breaths, both inhaling and exhaling, seemed to cut deep into pieces. He wanted to throw everything away, to let his mind be empty. Everything Kongdech had said was true. This place was beautiful, like a paradise garden, but he was so tired, too tired to perceive anything.

Peter came to Him and said, "Lord, if my brother sins against me, how many times should I forgive him? Is seven times enough?" Jesus answered, "I do not tell you seven times, but seventy times seven."

— Matthew 18:21-22

Tanrak returned to school feeling extremely emotionally exhausted. It was as if his body was reflecting the stress; the young man felt dizzy, had difficulty breathing, and was so weak he felt like he was about to fall ill.

*“Tanrak... I have something to talk to you about.”*

*Kongdech's voice called out again as the young man intended to walk away to change his clothes and ask the master to let him go to bed early.*

*"Hey... I think I'm not feeling well. Can we talk later?" he bargained.*

*“Stop running away from your problems. You can pretend to be sick all you want, but the problems won't go away. Just accept the reality.”*

*The voice was so harsh that Tanrak was startled.*

*“What are you talking about?”*

*Tanrak asked, as if his brain had temporarily forgotten the heavy weight around him, replaced by a certain chill.*

*“Do you want to speak for yourself? Maybe then you could show me some sincerity...”*

*“You...”*

*“...As a close friend... Oh, maybe I'm the only one who's too close.”*

*Tanrak looked into the eyes of the person in front of him with an unbearably strange feeling. The gaze was filled with resentment, disappointment, and malice—something unbelievable coming from his dearest friend. He tried to swallow hard, putting on a brave face.*

*“What are you talking about? I don't understand.”*

*"Really?...What are you hiding from me? What are you doing secretly and sneakily?"*

*Kongdech repeated, for a fleeting moment his gaze seemed to plead with her to confess on her own. But damn it, if there was even a 0.001% chance that the man in front of her didn't know, Thanrak had to grab onto it as a last resort.*

*“Then tell me, what is this?”*

*Kongdech seemed consumed by the fire of anger, transforming into a different person. He reached into his personal bag and pulled something out. Tanrak repeatedly prayed it wasn't him, but it was—the Holy Covenant, a book concealing countless sins of lust.*

*“Kongdech...”*

*“Take it, and tell me what it is.”*

*“I'm sorry...”*

*“I asked what it is!”*

*Tanrak reached out with trembling hands to take it, but before her hand, burdened with guilt, could reach it, her best friend deliberately let the Bible fall. The thick book crashed with a loud thud, then flipped over and scattered numerous letters all over the floor.*

*“Didn't you promise me?!”*

*Kongdech spoke while grabbing the listener's collar. Tears of disappointment welled up in the eyes of the person in front of him. For Tanrak, it was no different; they were tears of disappointment in himself.*

*“Didn't you promise me we'd become monks together? That we'd become priests together? Didn't you tell me that it was God's will you were able to live on, that God would reunite you with your parents? Didn't you tell me that no matter what, you would repay God with your life...?”*

*From intense anger, it gradually turned into overwhelming disappointment. Kongdech yanked him back and forth while questioning him, perhaps hoping for a furious rant or a fight. But no, Tanrak's legs were completely weak; he couldn't even stand. His entire body collapsed to the ground before he began to sob louder and louder, his body shaking.*

*He sinned against his friend...*

*He sinned against his parents...*

*He sinned against Him...*

*Tanrak wept uncontrollably, unable to suppress any other overwhelming emotions. The wickedness, the love, the good, the evil—everything that had been pulling and tossing within him for months, or even many months—had shattered the boy into a million pieces.*

*A sudden gust of wind blew, sending the small letter flying far beyond his reach. Instinctively, Tanrak followed with his gaze and saw familiar clean white trousers and shiny black shoes. His heart sank. Looking up, he saw someone intently reading the letter.*

*...Father Anan*

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#### *Item 4*

*An atmosphere of unease permeated the hallway leading back to the novices' dormitory. Kongdech, sensing the severity of the situation, quickly gathered the fallen letter and scriptures into his bag. Tanrak, meanwhile, was speechless and unable to react, anxiously awaiting judgment. Father Anan didn't seem as furious as the young man had imagined—at least not with his own eyes, which had perceived the situation as if he were about to die before his very eyes. Father Anan then handed the small piece of paper back to Tanrak.*

*“How did you get the receipt? Did you carry money with you?”*

*But the question from the person in front of him was completely different from what he expected. Whether it was good fortune or bad karma, a sudden movement caused the paper that fell in front of the priest to be not a short letter between Tanrak and Barth, but a receipt from a convenience store not far from the cathedral.*

*“Nop, the choir leader, was treating everyone in the choir to drinks, so I volunteered to go buy some.”*

*Tanrak answered honestly, but the listener didn't seem to believe him. His eyes narrowed, but ultimately he cut the conversation short, saying nothing more. Too often, he felt that his father, Anan, knew many things behind the scenes but chose not to speak them aloud.*

*“What were you two arguing about just now? The noise reached the treasurer's office.”*

*Father Anan continued questioning, seemingly no longer concerned about the receipt, but instead returning to the recent argument. The repeated questioning reminded the young man that he had just been quarreling with his best friend, and the matter hadn't even been resolved yet. He lowered his head, and his friend did the same.*

*“The two of you probably won't answer.”*

*Father Anan glanced at each person, but Tanrak and Kongdech remained silent. Finally, it seemed the questioner himself had lost patience waiting.*

*“Then both of you go and calm yourselves down,” Father Anan said instructively. “Both of you separate and go into silence until it’s time for bed. Go to different places, decide between yourselves. One of you go to the small chapel, and the other to the classroom.”*

*Tanrak and Kongdech nodded in agreement and clasped their hands together in a gesture of apology. No excuses came from either of their mouths.*

*“Separate now. If you stay together, you’ll just argue again. Go and calm down. Try talking to God about whether letting your impulsiveness run wild was the right thing to do.”*

*Father Anan reiterated his instructions, causing Tanrak and Kongdech to exchange a brief glance. They remained silent until the young man chose to walk away towards the small temple first, followed by Kongdech towards the catechism classroom. After they had separated for some distance, the priest who had given the instructions went his own way.*

*“In the name of the Father,” Tanrak said, touching his forehead.*

*“And the Son” touched his chest.*

*“And the Holy Spirit” touched his left shoulder and his right shoulder, respectively.*

*“Amen”*

*He slumped down before the altar. The small chapel was now quiet and empty, the evening prayers over and no one was there anymore. High in the center, before him stood the majestic Jesus Christ, his gaze cold and serene. For a moment, his mind wandered to images from the distant past. The smell of burning and loss wafted to his nose; the never ending cries of weeping; and the scent of incense, the beginning of everything.*

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”*

*A high-pitched voice of a young boy broke the silence. Tanrak, not yet ten years old, was vigorously rocking a large incense burner back and forth. Some of the remaining incense stalks scattered, but not as beautifully and perfectly as in a Mass ceremony.*

*“Om... May the child be reunited with his parents. May the child be reunited with his parents.”*

*The boy's voice murmured prayers as best he could remember. As a child, he had heard that incense was used to communicate with God, and that priests burned it during religious ceremonies. So, he secretly came here again in the evening to communicate with God alone.*

*“Do you want to see your parents?” a voice asked.*

*“Yes, I want to see my parents again.”*

*Instead of responding directly to God, the child responded to a man in white robes who seemed to be an angel sent down to represent God. Father Anan smiled gently and stroked the little boy's head with compassion. The boy was not afraid; he remembered clearly that this priest was a friend of his father.*

*“Your parents have departed from this world,” the voice emphasized. “But you will meet your parents again at the final judgment. If you are as good as your parents, you will be with them, and you will be with Him forever.”*

*“I want to be a good person like my parents.”*

*The boy spoke hopefully, and that became the beginning of everything on his long journey as a seminarian. Tanrak began wearing white robes, carrying a Bible every Sunday, hiding behind the altar, watching the many Christians who flocked there with faith.*

*“I'm sorry, Father..”*

Tanrak spoke, even though he knew it was wrong. But the young man had already done far too many wrong things. His feelings inside were shattered into pieces. He felt like he was in an endless hell, biting at the humiliating truth until he felt like he was going to go insane. Tanrak clutched the novice's robe tightly, his grip deep on the crucifix inside, which contained images of his parents and himself. His gaze swept around before settling on the small confessional room.

Normally, all the seminarians would attend Mass at the cathedral located within the same school grounds. Any confession process would also take place there. However, this small chapel had a confessional room, a miniature administrative office, like a room where seminarians could consult the master about potentially serious problems. Tanrak arrived quickly, dialed the internal phone, and pressed the number indicating he needed to speak with someone.

**"God is with you."** Tanrak waited for a long time until the partition between the counselor and the counselor opened, and the voice that came through was one he never expected to hear— Father Anan's voice.

**"And may you be with him,"** Tanrak stammered, but could no longer contain his sorrow. **"Bless me, Father, but I am not sure if I have already sinned."**

**"What is something you think you have done that is a sin?"**

**"Your child... Your child is in love."**

Tanrak had been silent for so long it was as if he were about to suffocate and die, submerged in the freezing abyss of the ocean of sin. But if he didn't swim to the surface, he would surely sink forever, drowning slowly for the rest of his life.

**"Who is it, my child, the person you love? Is it a fellow human being, as God has taught you to love?"**

Instead of answering, Tanrak remained silent in a labyrinth of embarrassment from which he couldn't escape. Yet, a certain feeling was unbearably pressing.

**"Your son kissed a man, Father... Your son kissed a man..."** Tanrak stammered, as if his heart would break. **"He's gay."**

A profound silence arose out of nowhere. The tears streaming down Tanrak's cheeks turned cold with fear. He had spoken. He had revealed his entire secret. If he were expelled from school today, what would his life be like?

**"Do you still want to see your parents... in the world where He awaits you, in His kingdom?"**

The voice asked, devoid of anger but filled with compassion that overwhelmed the listener with a heart full of guilt. Eyes filled with tears welled up, overflowing with an uncontrollable emotion.

**"I... Father... I long to see my mom and dad."**

Tanrak spoke with the utmost sincerity. He longed to hug his parents one more time, to tell them he loved them one more time, especially during this difficult period of making such a difficult decision. If his parents were there, gently stroking his head, the world around him would feel so much less harsh.

**"If that's the case, then go and end it all. Cleanse yourself of your lustful love and return to the right path. God always forgives you. God always gives you a second chance... Just come back."**

Tanrak accepted the confession, swallowed hard, and made a final decision. There was nothing more to endure. If this was his last chance to return to the right path, he should seize it. The young man excused himself from the priest before slowly leaving the confessional and running out of the small chapel.

He ran searching for Barth everywhere. This was the last free time before returning to the dormitory; Barth could be anywhere. He searched the dining hall, the lounge, the TV room—he wasn't there. The dormitory, the showers, the homework room—he wasn't there. The young man decided to run out to the darkened sports field.

*“Barth...” Tanrak called out, his voice echoing.*

*Someone's busy throwing a basketball into the hoop all alone in the darkness. He didn't need to try; just hearing their breathing, their labored curses, or the quietest movement, he recognized them.*

*“What about us...?”*

*The young man spoke, almost shouting, nearly succeeding, so close to completing each syllable, but it was too late as sweet lips pressed against his. Tanrak burst into tears again, utterly helpless. How could he leave this man? Their breaths had almost become one.*

*“No!” the other person said, as if knowing what he intended to say.*

*“But...” Tanrak hesitated, the conversation from the confessional room echoing in his mind once again.*

*“I'm not giving up.”*

*“But we can't continue like this for the rest of our lives. We are novices, we are about to be ordained, and what we are doing is a sin... a grave sin.”*

*Tanrak spoke as if he were completely shattered, beyond repair. Tears streamed down his cheeks again and again and again. Inside, a whirlwind of emotions raged. For a moment, the young man prayed to himself, “If only I could turn back time. If only I could turn back time. If only I could have been in that car with my parents.”*

*“Let's escape from here...” The whisper was soft, and a firm kiss was placed again on both cheeks. Gently, the overflowing tears were wiped away, gradually softening into a tenderness.*

*Instead of rushing to embrace the person in front of him, he nodded repeatedly, begging for help, pleading, “Please, take me somewhere far, far away from here.”*

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## 6

### Saint Simon Peter

#### Item 1

*Two bare legs intertwined on the soft bed for so long that Tanrak could barely remember the last time he'd slept at his own home. His parents had left him many inheritances, including the house he'd lived in since childhood. But after his parents passed away, Tanrak moved to a boarding school and never returned home. As a child, it might have been a matter of safety being alone, but as he grew older and could take care of himself, it was probably more about the loneliness of being by himself.*

*“Wake up!”*

*A soft whisper, accompanied by a sweet, fragrant touch on his nose, made Tanrak squint open his eyes to find someone already gazing at him. He pretended to look away, but that wasn't enough. Barth rubbed his newly grown stubble against Tanrak's cheek and neck, causing the one pretending to be asleep to chuckle. The small bedroom was bathed in the warm morning light. The two seminaries' robes had been changed out of and stored in another room, far away and unseen.*

*“Ugh... don't tease me.”*

*“We're just sleeping. We didn't skip class to just lie around.”*

*Barth spoke with a laugh. At first, Tanrak wanted to turn away and go back to sleep, but in the end, he was overcome by the effects of the mustache and had to surrender, finally turning to negotiate.*

*“Our agreement is only for two days... Where should we go?”*

*The treaty that Tanrak made with Barth was only for two days—the last two days before the final exams. This decision to run away from school was probably the biggest mistake the young man had ever made. But honestly, he couldn't tolerate the dilemma at school any longer. At least escaping to regroup and potentially find a solution when he returns to face the problems again might be enough.*

*“Where should we go...?”*

*He spoke while thinking, "A seminary student's life doesn't have many places in mind. Just school, a church, or one more place that comes to mind..."*

*“I've figured it out.”*

*Tanrak sprang to his feet so energetically that Barth was startled, but the other only chuckled softly. The young man excused himself to take a shower, racing against time. Once he realized where he wanted to go, a flood of energy came to him effortlessly.*

*“Where are you going?... You've made me really curious.” Barth called out from outside the bathroom.*

*The young man, who was lathering up with soap, laughed loudly before answering in a cheerful voice.*

*“I'll take you to meet my parents.”*

*Tanrak replied, though it sounded strange, it was true. The young man took Barth to his parents, who lived not far from both home and school. Tanrak's parents slept peacefully in a Catholic cemetery outside the city.*

*Normally, Tanrak would visit his parents every year for the cemetery blessing ceremony, but this sudden event would only mean a visit, not participating in the ceremony itself. The young man longed to introduce his lover to his parents, no matter what the future held.*

*The two young men boarded a bus not far from their home. The Catholic cemetery was located on the main road connecting two important districts. The journey, while not easy, wasn't too difficult for those without a private car.*

*“This is the first time I've ever been to a cemetery.”*

*Barth spoke excitedly, while Tanrak turned to look with interest. Barth's family came from a devout Catholic background; it was strange that they had never been to a Catholic cemetery before.*

*That's strange,” he said, prompting the other person to continue.*

*“I'm not very close to my father's side of the family. As for my mother's side, they were originally Buddhist, but my mother converted to Catholic on her own. I'm not sure if she changed religions because of my father, or if she was Catholic before she met him. I've only ever attended a Buddhist funeral. I didn't go to my father's funeral.”*

*Tanrak nodded in agreement and chose not to ask any further questions, unsure if any of his words might reopen old wounds and cause further bleeding. The young man simply continued walking in silence. The cemetery was outside the city; the atmosphere was serene and peaceful, and not many people visited.*

*“Hmm, I remember it's usually not locked.”*

*Tanrak grumbled as he walked towards the entrance closer to the street. This was just a small gate, like a shortcut.*

*“We can go to the other side, it's a short walk.”*

Barth spoke, pointing towards the large door that required a rather roundabout walk. Tanrak nodded resignedly, but didn't have many options.

*"Please wait a moment, I'll open it for you."*

A cry rang out from behind, but it was a voice that seemed both familiar and unfamiliar. First, the voice was too deep and wide to be a woman's. Second, it was very familiar, so familiar that Tanrak could almost see the speaker's face, yet the source of the voice seemed to have distorted its pitch.

*"Excuse me."*

The person in front of him was a tall, slender woman in a long-sleeved shirt and kneelength skirt. Her hair was neatly tied back, and her face was adorned with makeup, a touch of color but not overly flashy. Tanrak scrutinized the figure before her, a mix of overlapping memories, a familiarity so strong that the name seemed almost on the tip of his tongue.

*"Uncle Lek... Is that you, Uncle Lek?"*

Tanrak's voice grew louder, almost a shout, in surprise. He recognized the familiar voice. It was the voice of his father's close friend who visited their house often. Uncle Lek had even taken him to an amusement park once. The voice, though slightly altered, was unforgettable. There was only one difference: Uncle Lek was a man. No, Uncle Lek used to be a man.

*"Is that you, Tanrak? Is that you Tanrak, my child?"*

The person in front of him spoke in surprise, but after exchanging greetings, the young man quickly introduced Barth and his aunt. Meanwhile, the older man unlocked a small door to lead them into the graves where Tanrak's parents lay.

*"Make yourself at home, dear... I won't bother you anymore. I'll go work over there at the pavilion. When you're finished, come see me. Let's talk and catch up."*

Uncle Lek spoke as he led Tanrak to his parents' graves. Tanrak bowed in respect before Uncle Lek walked away. The young man watched him until he was out of sight before slowly lowering his gaze to his parents' graves.

Tanrak first reached out and picked up the fallen leaves and grass, then used the plastic bag he had prepared to put the old flowers he had left there since the previous year into. He took out a towel, dampened it with water from a bottle, and began cleaning as much as he could.

*"I'm sorry... this is all Rak can find."*

Tanrak spoke, picking up a small garland, the kind popular for hanging in cars. Actually, the young man intended to buy roses, his mother's favorite, but there were no flowers for sale along the way, only garlands sold by an elderly woman at the minibus stop."

*"I love and miss you, Mom and Dad."*

The young man placed a wreath in front of his parents' tombs, which stood side by side. Although it seemed a little awkward, Tanrak was confident that his parents would understand him.

*"What did you just call yourself when you talk to your parents?"*

Barth asked, causing Tanrak's hand, which was adjusting the steering wheel, to pause. At first, the person being questioned pretended not to have heard, but it seemed to be in vain.

*"Love... what?"* Barth repeated.

*"Rak..." Tanrak said. "My parents named me Tanrak because I represent their love. But when I talk to my parents, they like me to refer to myself as 'Love' because I am their love."*

*Tanrak explained, lowering his head in embarrassment. The truth was, he'd never told anyone about this before, because calling himself "Rak" (meaning "love") sounded strangely odd.*

*"That's sweet," Barth crouched down beside him.*

*"When you talk to me, call yourself 'Rak' sometimes. You're my love too."*

*"I only use it with my parents, you idiot! Are you my father?" he yelled.*

*"Hey... do you know that when you're embarrassed, you tend to yell loudly? I think it's cute," the other person teased. "Come on, call yourself 'Rak' already! Rak, Rak, Rak!"*

*Barth teased, playfully nudging Tanrak with his shoulder. The young man was taken aback; Even though they'd been more than friends for over a month, he still couldn't handle this level of sweetness.*

*"Stop joking around."*

*"I'm not joking, I'm serious."*

*"I don't know..." Tanrak ignored him, even though the other person looked stern. "Mom and Dad, this is Barth, my best friend. I wanted to bring him to meet you." He changed the subject.*

*"Are we more than just friends?" Barth argued.*

*"Mom and Dad, this is Barth, my boyfriend... Are you happy now?"*

*Tanrak said, turning to Barth for the last sentence, his face showing utter exasperation but also blushing bright red. His lover burst into laughter, delighted, before introducing himself as if he'd known Tanrak's parents for ages. The young man, annoyed, decided to stand up when he saw everything was settled.*

*Tanrak walked back to the central pavilion, which was used for rituals like consecrating tombs, to escape the sun. Today, almost no one was there except Aunt Lek, who sat quietly drinking water. The young man walked in first, with Bart following closely behind.*

*"It's been a long time, Tanrak," Aunt Lek started a conversation. "The last time I heard about you was when you became a seminary. Are you still a seminarian now, son?"*

*Tanrak hesitated for a moment but answered in a way that would get him through, "Yes, I'm taking time off to visit my parents before my long exam break."*

*Aunt Lek nodded in agreement before turning to gaze at the vast sky, as if something was settling in his heart. Tanrak stared at the figure before him, his image superimposed on another man who, in his memory, was handsome, muscular, and well-built for his age. However, now transformed into a woman, he seemed somewhat out of place, especially his masculine physique: broad shoulders, large arms, a straight, unbent torso, a prominent jawline, a sharp Adam's apple, and muscles that were difficult to conceal.*

*"I used to be a seminarian myself. I don't know if your father ever told you about it," the person in front of him began, almost stopping all interest. "I dropped out after graduating from high school. I probably don't need to explain much. My body and mind weren't in sync. I couldn't bear to live in a strict society that expected me to be something I wasn't."*

*Instead of answering, Tanrak gazed deep into her broken eyes, trying to understand.*

*"Tanrak, do you know... in the old days, I thought there was only one path to God's kingdom. But you see, nowadays I'm not a priest, I don't bless water, I don't give blessings to anyone."*

The transgender woman in front of Tanrak paused, as if talking to herself more than to him.

*“But life goes on. I discovered that... we can love ourselves and love God at the same time.”*

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## Question 2

*A gentle, clean breeze blew the following day. The sky above was breathtakingly bright, seemingly open and close enough to touch God, yet the secluded surroundings made it feel incredibly distant. Multiple layers of fences unintentionally pressured visitors; strict rules and regulations, and accumulated stress spreading like bacteria in the air, condensed haphazardly, causing visitors to experience shortness of breath.*

*“Are you sure?” Tanrak whispered.*

*“Of course,” Barth replied, his face showing determination and without hesitation. “You’ve taken me to meet your parents, now I want to take you to meet my mother.”*

*The two young men were currently in a large correctional facility in Bangkok. After visiting Tanrak's parents' graves yesterday, Tanrak let Barth choose where they wanted to go the next day, as they had each allocated one day for skipping school. At first, he thought Barth would take him sightseeing in his home province, but instead, Barth took him on a bus to Bangkok for a crucial reason that Tanrak had never anticipated.*

*“I... I don't know how to act,” he said nervously.*

*“Just act normal. My mom is kind.”*

*Barth offered words of comfort as they sat waiting for the prison guard to bring the prisoner to meet his relatives, as per protocol. There were a few people waiting, but not many.*

*“That's right... but I'm still nervous.”*

*Tanrak spoke. He had never imagined he would have the opportunity to meet his lover's parents so soon. No, the young man wasn't worried about Barth's mother being a prisoner. On the contrary, after hearing everything in detail, he felt more sympathy for Barth's mother. But what made Tanrak nervous was that he had never met his lover's family before. If Barth introduced them, the young man wouldn't know how to act.*

*“Bodhin Tangwongwad... is permitted to meet with the prisoner.”*

*A prison guard emerged from what appeared to be a meeting area for inmates, shouting loudly while scanning the area. Bart quickly raised his hand, stood up, and showed his identification card as proof. The guard checked the card against his face and asked a few questions.*

*Tanrak's gaze lingered on the area beside the doorway leading to the prisoner's visiting room. There was a small, somewhat long, semi-table/shelf-contained structure, laden with a multitude of objects—more than the young man had ever expected to see in this place.*

*Buddhist statues, Catholic replicas of Jesus Christ, Christian crosses, and a variety of other religious icons, from Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva to religious scriptures stacked haphazardly, ranging from Hebrew and the Bible to the Quran and the Thai Buddhist scriptures.*

*“In the name of the Father,” forehead.*

*“And the Son” on the chest.*

*“And the Holy Spirit” touched his left shoulder and his right shoulder, respectively.*

*“Amen”*

*Instead of speaking, he offered homage and invoked the name of the benevolent deity through his subconscious. Each time he received the deity's blessing, the young man felt a sense of safety, joy, and inexplicable peace, even though he was often confused about his beliefs regarding the deity.*

*"You..."*

*Barth shook his head as he spoke, but before he could complain further, the prison guard opened the gate for them to enter. Although his lover had remained a seminarian his entire life, he rarely embraced the Holy Trinity, except in the ritualistic ways of a young seminarian.*

*"Don't complain..."*

*Tanrak nudged Barth's arm, urging him to go inside. The visiting room for prisoners was unfamiliar; it was a sight the young man had never seen before and never thought he would see in his life. Thick, heavy, and seemingly sturdy glass partitioned the room, with almost no openings between them.*

*Barth walked straight ahead, knowing exactly where he needed to go. The prisoner's relative settled into a chair, picked up a phone to speak, while someone on the other end did the same. Guards stood behind the prisoner, monitoring the situation, and of course, every conversation was witnessed.*

*"Mother..."*

*"Barth..."*

*The visitor spoke first, before the other could reply. Tanrak stood about two steps back, feeling awkward. Barth seemed indifferent to everything, at least as he appeared, but not to the woman in front of him.*

*Barth's mother was a middle-aged woman with fair, delicate skin. Her face, free of makeup, revealed faint freckles of age. Her jet-black hair was shoulder-length, and she was dressed in a brown shirt and trousers. A wide smile spread across her lips, as if overflowing with happiness.*

*"Have you eaten anything yet, child? How are you?"*

*The person behind the glass spoke through the phone, reaching out to touch the glass barrier as if to get as close as possible to their child's body. Thanrak averted her gaze, a feeling welling up inside her that she could no longer suppress.*

*"I've already eaten, Mom," Barth said, his voice trembling slightly. "Today, I brought a friend to visit you. His name is Tanrak, my best friend from school."*

*Tanrak flinched slightly when he heard his name in the conversation. The young man quickly bowed respectfully, and Barth's mother returned the gesture with a gentle smile. Seeing her, he felt a strange pang of unease. Thanrak couldn't imagine that such a gentle woman could ever decide to take a human life.*

*"Hello, child."*

*"Hello."*

*Barth's mother turned and said something he couldn't hear, but he could guess from the movement of her lips.*

*"I don't recognize this friend of yours. I'm so glad Bart has made some new friends. Teacher Pranom always complains to me about how introverted Bart is and how he doesn't socialize much. Seeing him like this makes me feel relieved... And how is Teacher Pranom doing? Is she well?"*

*"I'm fine, Mom... With that kind of scolding, nobody can do anything to me."*

*Barth replied with a pout, but Tanrak, listening, felt a lump in his throat. The school he attended didn't have a teacher named Pranom, and he believed it never did. Six years of being there had repeatedly reminded him of that. That meant Barth probably hadn't told his mother about the fight that led to him transferring schools.*

Tanrak secretly observed Barth's demeanor with a heavy heart. The other man rarely showed his vulnerable side, but his family background seemed filled with countless stories. He could only listen silently; everything was overwhelming him, and he couldn't quite cope.

**"And do you go to church every Sunday?"**

The person behind the glass asked, and the son's expression changed instantly.

**"Mother... isn't it God who sent you here?"**

Barth spoke immediately, his eyes filled with undisguised reproach. It wasn't anger or rage, but rather a feeling of hurt.

**"Barth!"** the mother exclaimed in surprise. **"I told you that God always gives us freedom. Whether we do good or bad, He will let us learn from our mistakes."**

**"And then he abandoned his mother..."**

**"He hasn't abandoned us, my child,"** the speaker smiled. **"I haven't told you yet, have I, that the lawyer representing me has managed to arrange bail for me? It might take a little longer, but I'll be out soon. The rest will be fought out in court."**

The person in the dark brown suit spoke happily, and that sentence seemed to instantly change the son's gloomy mood.

**"Really, Mom!"**

**"That's right, dear,"** the speaker smiled happily. **"Your father spoke to one of the school principals. He's also a Catholic. He listened to your mother's story and felt sympathetic. He also assured that your mother wouldn't run away or cause any problems. Father Anan, the priest from the church that you've gone to since you were a child, has been very kind to us."**

The listener fell silent, processing everything in his mind. He turned his face to look at Tanrak for a moment, the young man smiling back, offering encouragement and a warm embrace while still unable to fully hold him in his arms.

**"Pray for your mother, my child... Pray that everything will be alright."**

**"Mother..."**

**"Mom wants to go out and hug her child with her own two arms."**

The woman's voice trembled as she ran off, her hand caressing the mirror, a symbol of her love. Her son's sobs were uncontrollable. Bart pressed his face against the mirror, as close as he could to his mother's hand.

**"Barth loves you, Mom,"** the son whispered.

**"Mom loves you too, Barth."**

There was not much more to say in the near-ending conversation. Tears welled up and streamed down the son's face, uncontrollably. The mother could not hold back either. Even Tanrak, who had tried to avoid seeing Barth in his most vulnerable moment, could not stop his own tears.

**"Barth will pray for Mom. Barth will pray every night."**

The trembling voice of the son was more powerful than any declaration of love in the world. A boy who hated God and vowed never to love Him until the end of time, changed his mind and spoke his final words, asking that his mother's prayers be answered.

**“Lord God..”**

Even though it was the softest sound possible, Barth's whisper to the statue of Jesus Christ in front of the visiting room resonated clearly in Tanrak's awareness. He could only smile silently. The sky outside the correctional facility looked bright and radiant, yet warm. Tanrak reached up, trying to grasp the distant sun as if he could possess it.

A certain intuition told him that everything was about to resolve itself at the end. The young man couldn't answer himself why.

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### **Item 3**

Their vacation from the harsh reality of the world is about to end in a few hours. According to their escape agreement, Tanrak and Barth have agreed to spend the last two days before their final high school exams searching for answers about the rest of their lives. They both know that no matter what they choose, they must fulfill their duty to finish their exams or at least do something to prevent things from dragging on forever.

On the first day, they traveled to a Christian cemetery not far from the cathedral and boarding school. But on the second day, they had to take a bus to Bangkok, to a central correctional facility. Their escape was almost over; they were about to board a bus home to face reality. But perhaps due to fate or the naivety of their carelessness, the return bus tickets for that night were sold out. So they had to stay in a cheap hotel and wait for the earliest bus the next morning.

**“Do you want anything else?”**

Barth asked, standing in front of a small grocery store where the shopkeeper was sitting watching television, barely paying attention to them. Tanrak peered into the basket Barth had picked out: snacks, bottled water, toothpaste, a toothbrush, and face wash.

**“There are many more things I want to try.”**

Tanrak spoke with a resolute smile. Throughout his life, the young man had walked a very strict path. If he had to try something different just once, he wanted to do it thoroughly, at least so he wouldn't have any regrets later.

**“What are some examples...?”**

Barth asked, raising an eyebrow. The one who initiated the conversation then led him to the refrigerator and shelves filled with several other items he had caught his eye since entering: amber-colored bottles of liquor, brightly colored beer cans, and packs of the most familiar brand of cigarettes. His mind was blank; he couldn't even guess what these things would taste like.

**“Can I try one more time?”**

Barth whispered, and Tanrak replied with love.

**“Sure... since we're already here.”**

The young man spoke, laughing. The person who asked the question then walked to another corner of the shelves near the salesperson. There, small boxes were lined up everywhere, in all sorts of colors and brands. Both of them looked at them in a daze, unable to even tell what was what.

**“You don't know how to choose, do you?”**

The seller turned around and spoke with a bored tone, getting up and walking towards us as if annoyed that we had been eyeing each other for so long without picking anything.

*“Yes...”*

*“Do you know the size? You need to know the size when you buy it,” the seller asked.*

*The young men quickly shook their heads.*

*“If you don't know, just get a medium size. This one probably won't be too big. Get the other things in the usual sizes. Even a dog can lick its butt like this, so you don't need anything too fancy.”*

*Tanrak and Barth listened, their faces flushed red, but they nodded in agreement. Finally, they had a strange object in their hands: a box. After paying, they quickly stuffed it into their bag because the clear plastic bag didn't obstruct the view of others.*

*They both crossed the street back to the cheap hotel they had spotted. It was a carparking hotel with hourly or overnight rates. Tanrak calculated the time from now until they got in the hotel and realized it wouldn't take too long. Finally, they negotiated a rate that included an extended stay.*

*“Does the room feel strange?”*

*“Hmm...it does seem strange.”*

*Barth asked first, and only after placing his belongings on a table nearby did Tanrak notice. The young man was inexperienced in hotel stays and couldn't imagine what a hotel room should look like. But when the other person pointed it out, he felt a little strange himself.*

*“The design is unusual.”*

*He spoke aloud. The hourly room seemed brighter than he could have imagined. Decorated in red and black, it gave off a feeling of both passion and mystery. Most of the furnishings were leather, and the chairs in the room looked more unusual than those he had ever seen.*

*“I'll take a shower first.”*

*Barth said, rummaging through his pockets for a towel. They hadn't prepared for an overnight stay, planning to take a bus back tonight. Therefore, they'd have to wear their old clothes. Luckily, Bart had his mother's ATM card with him, enough to pay for the hotel.*

*“Or would you like to shower together?” the other teased.*

*“Funny...”*

*Tanrak spoke, waving his hand to urge Barth to go wash off the grime first. The young man opened the wardrobe, looking for something comfortable to wear tonight. The hotel didn't provide pajamas, but luckily there were bathrobes. They'd probably have to sleep in those.*

*Before Tanrak could notice anything, Barth's exclamation drew their attention. It seemed he had just turned on the bathroom light, revealing that the entire bathroom wall was made of clear glass, allowing anyone in the bedroom to see every movement of the person showering without any concealment whatsoever.*

*“Close the curtains!” he shouted.*

*“No, there's nothing to turn it off.”*

*Barth shouted back. The young man frowned in disbelief. Quickly, he moved over to help, trying to figure out how to close the curtains or do something about the clear, revealing window, but there was nothing. The two young men searched for a long time, but to no avail.*

*“Whatever, we shower together at school anyway.”*

***“That's true. Then I'll shower too. I'm too lazy to wait.”***

*Tanrak grumbled nonchalantly after searching for the curtain-closing button for almost five minutes but to no avail. In the end, Tanrak solved the problem in the opposite way, by taking a shower together.*

*They both washed away the fatigue accumulated from their journey and being in an unfamiliar place with cool, clean water. Soon, they dried themselves off and prepared to rest before having to wake up early to catch their bus. They agreed to wear bathrobes to bed, as they simply couldn't bear to wear their dirty clothes after a long day.*

***“What will our lives be like from now on?”***

*Barth asked in the darkness. The room was quiet. All the things they had bought to experiment with living like this lay uselessly beside the bed. The thought that a decision would soon be made filled his chest with a heavy ache, leaving him unable to enjoy anything else.*

***“I don't know... What about you? What are you going to do after you graduate?”***

*Instead of asking, he shifted his body closer to rest on the other's shoulder. A sense of reason told him that if there was anything he wanted to do, he should do it, while he had the chance.*

***“I should probably go into vocational training. I've been looking into computer repair, like the courses offered. You can start working after a year or two. I think a lot of people will use computers in the future, so if I can repair computers, it'll be easy to find a job.”***

*Barth spoke at length, sharing his passions and aspirations for his future career in a way that Tanrak had never heard before. The young man buried his face in his lover's chest, deeply satisfied to hear such an open account of the other's life and the future that lay ahead.*

***“What about you... what are you going to do next?”***

*Barth asked, and that question echoed in his head until this very minute, this very second. Tanrak couldn't answer himself whether he should quit his life as a seminarian or leave all his mistakes behind and move on until he finally found God.*

*Tanrak knew so little about this world. Having grown up for so long, he had always lived under the benevolent protection of others. Deep down, he was afraid—afraid of an unfamiliar life, afraid of a life of self-choice and too much freedom, to the point of becoming toxic.*

***“I don't know... I really don't know.”***

*Tanrak spoke, letting his body follow instinct more than anything else. His soft hand moved across the other's chest, before carelessly parting the folds of the fabric covering him, feeling for skin that was almost indistinguishable to the eye, but in reality, etched with a multitude of painful memories from the past.*

***“Do you think there'll be room for us up there?”***

*Barth whispered, a question that needed no further explanation to fully understand. They are sinful. They are sinful humans, humans who, though climbing the pure and clean ladder, will ultimately be devoured by the beast of morality, perishing before reaching the end.*

***“Genesis Chapter 1, Verse 27: He created them male and female.”***

*Tanrak spoke, unable to explain why he said it. He memorized the scriptures and doctrines with perfect accuracy, so much so that the master had once praised him as a gift from God. But who would believe it? That accuracy might become a stain on the consciences of a heretic.*

***“Or perhaps He simply created two men.”***

Barth whispered in reply, slowly lowering himself to gently and soothingly press his warm lips against the strict man's. Just enough light filtered through to reveal the devoted face and loyal eyes. The young man offered his body unconditionally.

Their hands haphazardly removed the garments that separated their bodies, born from dust, bringing them together to get acquainted once more. The breath of life flowed through every fiber of their being, almost to the point of denial.

A hoarse whisper, a name spoken in lieu of love, echoes softly like a thunderbolt from the depths, reverberating and reverberating in a secluded place beyond the reach of any societal norms. Kisses are shared again and again, touches are shared again and again.

Nothing more than love.

No less than love.

Nothing is more equal than love.

Everything began and unfolded in perfect harmony, like a melody from an endless passage of time. Tanrak didn't even know what the next day would bring, where life's path would lead him—highs or lows—or if he would ultimately pledge himself into the shadow of forgiveness for eternity, he would have no further questions about life.

The mark of acknowledgment of original sin awakens a man to life, to live, to use, and to become life itself.

**A life built by the benevolent word of God.**

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#### **Item 4**

The music serenaded the sacred cathedral, creating a seemingly heavenly atmosphere. Images of the past and present overlapped, like a blurred memory, lost between reality and dreams. An electronic device vibrated in his trouser pocket. His rough hand reached for it to check the screen, only to realize that he had long since passed his high school days at the seminary—thirty years in total.

The young man parted ways with the old man, their conversation mentioning a third person who connected all relationships through pure faith. The young, handsome Barth glanced again at the newly ordained priest, dressed from head to toe, but could not examine him thoroughly, finding himself only able to look down at his own gleaming shoes. A certain taste of sin overwhelmed him, unbearable, as one of the masseurs ran to fetch the parish priest to the other side of the church, not far away.

**“Father... someone wants to confess their sins,”** the teacher said.

Father Anan glanced at his wristwatch before replying, **“The ordination ceremony is about to begin. I'm not available. Please inform them, Master.”**

**“But Father, he's begging for one more chance to talk to you in his life. Perhaps you'd like to try talking to him.”**

The master spoke with a troubled expression, yet seemed to have received something crucial. The old man glanced at his wristwatch again, mentally calculating that there would still be some time left. At least, the order of the ceremony didn't need any further rehearsal.

**“In that case, please lead the way, Master...”**

Father Anan gestured, saying there were several confessional rooms, and that those requesting to confession were likely already prepared in one of them. The Master bowed in acknowledgment, then turned and hurried to one side of the church, before gently opening the door to the confessional on the saints' side and quietly slipping away.

*“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit... Amen.”*

*The voice began to speak, starting from the old man who sat down in the same chair where he had listened to the sins of ordinary people his entire life. The narrow channel connecting the sinner and the listener had been opened beforehand. The voice was calm, yet tinged with an excitement—a feeling he had waited for his entire life.*

*“Reverend Father... please bless me. I have not confessed my sins for so long.”*

*Upon hearing the response, some of the doubts that had lingered completely disappeared. Throughout almost his entire life, having supported and cared for numerous children and grandchildren both in worldly and spiritual matters, the old man had never forgotten anyone, not even a single one, regardless of the reasons for their departure.*

*“Bless me, Father, but I am not sure if I have already sinned.”*

*“What makes you think that?”*

*The priest replied, his voice steady and even, as if suppressing tension. Unintentionally, images from the distant past flooded back.*

*“I was born a man, but I love men.” The voice was hesitant and embarrassed, yet seemed to accept itself clearly. “If I am gay, will I still go to heaven to meet God?”*

*The old man listened silently. The question pierced deep into the heart of the devout priest, clashing with the moral principles and beliefs he had shaped his entire life. The listener shook his head, as if burdened and uncomfortable, yet finally answered.*

*“Is love wrong, Father?” the voice repeated.*

*“Love is not a sin, my son,” the old man finally replied. “But love at the wrong time and place is a sin. While you were here as a seminarian, I always warned you against it, because the role of a seminarian is such that he cannot have love, regardless of gender.”*

*“Father...”*

*“But you have long departed from your status as a seminarian. You have become just another Christian who has love, and love is not wrong, my child. Although, according to religious rules, I cannot marry you in the cathedral.”*

*The old man paused and smiled broadly. “But as a father, as a human being, love is not wrong at all.”*

*There was no immediate answer, but the sound of the confessional door opening and locking open. The old man knew exactly what that meant. Father Anan smiled firmly, having made his decision, before grabbing the door and opening it to meet the one who had been gone for so long.*

*“Tanrak...”*

*“Father...”*

*The young boy, holding an incense burner and pleading with God for a reunion with his parents' spirits, stood before him. The boy, a long-serving seminarian and the greatest hope of his year, the boy whom everyone envisioned as the one who would become the one to administer the sacraments and present the body of Christ in the holy Mass.*

*Tanrak came here with overflowing love for his parents, and Tanrak left with overflowing love for another boy. After graduating from their sixth year of school, Tanrak and Barth decided to drop out to walk the path of ordinary Catholics, and this father could not object.*

*“I thought you would always be angry with me, Dad.”*

*Tears streamed down the face of the boy who had once been silently lost, but if today it seemed he was no longer lost, at least there would be the love of someone to guide him.*

*“We will forgive their wickedness and will no longer remember their sins,” the old man replied with a smile.*

*“Jeremiah Chapter 31, Verse 34”*

*“I still remember your teachings; I have never forgotten you.”*

*The person before him spoke, his expression filled with pain and confusion, yet seemingly unable to escape God's mercy. The old man looked at them with compassion, like a wounded, lost lamb yearning for forgiveness, just once more.*

*“May I love myself...and love God as well?”*

*Tanrak asked, even though almost thirty years had passed—a long time, nearly half a lifetime, or even a whole lifetime—yet the wounds of this lonely boy seemed to never heal. His inner feelings must be conflicted, becoming deeply ingrained and impossible to mend easily.*

*“You can love yourself and love God at the same time.”*

*The old man pulled the lost soul into a loving embrace, an embrace he had always longed for—that if they ever met again, he should be able to hold him tightly and tell the boy that the gaze he had watched had always been directed at his son, and that he had never lacked love in this world.*

*“For God is love; for God loves humanity unconditionally.”*

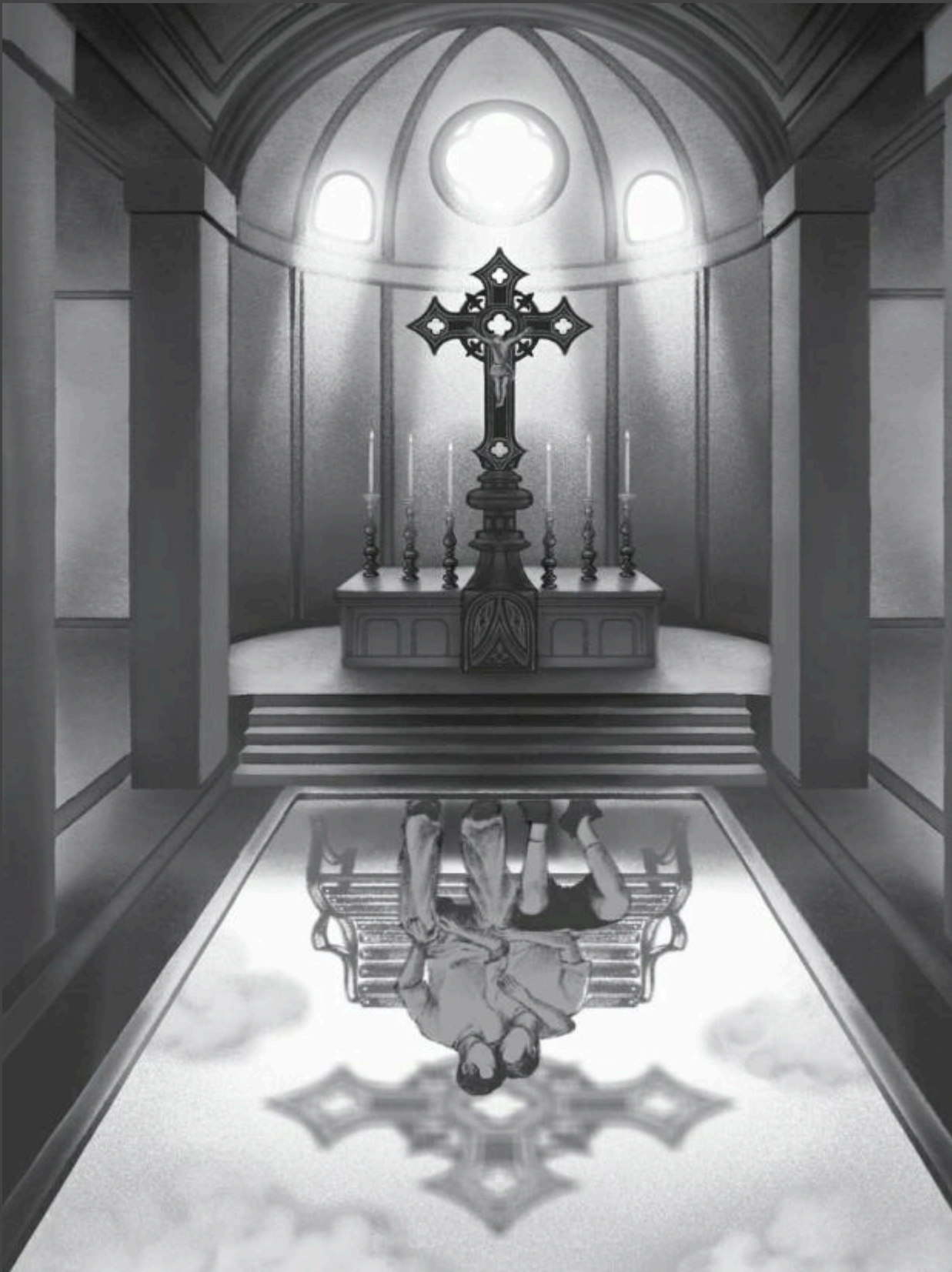
*Instead of crying, his tears burst forth as if releasing everything that had bound his life and soul for so long. A heart that had been healed by such pure and unconditional love, a love so valuable that nothing could ever compare.*

*The ordination ceremony for the new priest has begun. Father Kongdech will continue his role as parish priest at this seminary, after spending nearly twenty years assisting refugees abroad and now returning to his homeland.*

*Tanrak and Barth held hands tightly, as their closest friend from the past fully assumed his position as the supreme ruler. They embraced each other one last time as a final act of reverence before departing from the land of the past.*

*The two men walked back to their car. A winding road, seemingly endless, lay before them. The sun shone brightly, as if welcoming the next step in the never-ending cycle of life. Even with mistakes, failures, and getting lost repeatedly, rising again and again with love in their hearts would ultimately bring peace.*

*...The two pilgrims seeking life had always believed that.*



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### *The following chapter*

*A bright light shone all around, spreading in every direction. A gentle breeze stirred a refreshing atmosphere. The temperature was pleasantly warm, neither cold nor hot, perfect for relaxing for as long as possible. The sound of tiny raindrops gently hitting the ground added to the wonderfully relaxing feeling. A young man sat still and calm, his gaze fixed on the highest point, far beyond the horizon, beyond his ability to discern the details of the surroundings.*

*“Sorry... have you been waiting long?”*

*Another man hurried up the long ladder on the other side. The one who had been waiting all along turned and smiled gently. He didn't answer immediately, but instead gestured with his hand to the flat floor beside him, as if signaling for the other man to sit down beside him.*

*“No... not long at all...”*

*“I'm sorry. I didn't want it to be like this.”*

*The first young man replied with a smile, while the one who arrived later still grumbled with a feeling of guilt. The one who arrived first shook his head gently before reaching out and putting a tight embrace on the newcomer's shoulder. Then, he slowly moved his hand down to hold the other's hand, a silent substitute for the countless words he had always said and would continue to say.*

*“Just being together here like this is the most wonderful thing.”*

*There was no further explanation between the two young men. Each held the other tightly, their heads resting together as if sharing the love and bond that had accumulated over time, like an endless entanglement of threads. Their lips touched gently and softly, and they whispered stories of the outside world to each other.*

*A bright, pure light shone forth once again, illuminating the entire field of vision and uniting it into a single, vivid image.*

*Those who have no love...  
cannot know God  
for God is love.*

*— 1 John 4:8*

*The end*