



ห้องกลิ่น ความรัก

VIOLET RAIN เรื่อง kanopy ฟ้า

I Feel You Linger in the Air ()
English Translations

500od4

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Introduction

I Feel You Linger In The Air new BL romance/historical series, adapted from the novel "Sweet Smell of Love" () by Violet Rain slated to be release in 2023

Cast:

- Nonkul Chanon ()
- Bright Rapheephong ()

The 9-minutes pilot trailer of the series:

[There should be a GIF or video here. Update the app now to see it.]

!!SPECIAL STORY ANNOUNCEMET!!

Khun Fon a.k.a Violet Rain the Author of this novel tweet about a possibility of Special Chapters / Spin off. she will releasing a Special Book for Khun-yai and Jom. The release date still unknown. she hasn't announced it yet. But she gave us the snippet from the story she's working on. The story will be released in a physical book format and ebook.

This story will take place in the parallel universe of the 1st Book.

!!INFORMATION!!

The author make a rough map for the readers to make it easier to see which places are in which parts of Chiang Mai. In case anyone want to know about all the places that exist in the novel.

Sketch of Khun Yai's Little House

Source: Violet Rain

Prologue

Prologue

A wormhole is part of the black hole with a dense collection of matter sucking everything near, even light. If spacetime were a piece of paper stretching infinitely, endlessly swirling onwards, wormholes would be tiny pipes connecting the surface from one point to another, where the pipes coincidentally curved closely, resulting in forming a passage, which would open and close in the course of a few seconds, from one place to the other. That is my understanding.

Nonetheless, humans have no ability to create wormholes even if they constantly form without our knowledge, and we probably can neither specify the destination or place nor pull the wormholes out of quantum foam-tiny bubbles caused by the vibrations of space and time-though Einstein's theory of relativity suggests quantum foam exists in every molecule of matter.

I can't believe this is what I am thinking about as I descend to my death. My car crashes through the road railing, plunges into the air, smashes the water surface, and drowns. My head has a spinning sensation from the impact. Water begins gushing in.

the open windows. I struggle to get myself out of the car but don't have enough strength to push through the flooding water.

It soon fills up the inside of the car and engulfs me in its coldness.

I hear ringing in my ears, the way you would hear when immersing your whole body in the river. It sounds like crickets chirping that gives you peace and chills at the same time. It feels like I am floating as my car sinks to the bottom of the Ping River.

As my consciousness slips away, my nose catches the scent of the fragrant Lantoms* in the water and voices hit my ears.

I swear by all that is holy that I will love only Poh**_Jom in all lifetimes...

Poh-Jom...My Jomkwan, does this mean I am forcing myself on your heart...?

The first voice is firm, whereas the voice coming after is pleadingly and slightly teasingly sweet. My chest is filled with warmth by the strange feeling that consoles and deeply arouses me. All happens as the dim light seeping through the surface of the water vanishes, replaced by darkness.

* The Thai term for plumerias

** Poh (we) is a word used to address other males in Thai old eras.

Chapter 1: Jom

Part 1

"Jom, where do yer want me to put away the antiques and the trunks in the great house?"

The northern dialect drew my attention from my rough sketch.

I turned to Tan, the local head carpenter in Chiang Mai, the subcontractor working for my company, where I was an assigned architect.

"The storeroom is already full?"

"No, sir, but I'm not sure if the stuff in the trunk is valuable.

If the builders ruin them, I doubt they will be able to pay the lady back."

"What's in it? Let me have a look." I closed my sketchbook, stepped out of the waterfront pavilion, and strolled along the laterite path cutting through the lawn freshly watered.

The hot wind blew softly, carrying with it the pleasant scent of Lantoms that reached my nose.

The white flowers had fallen onto the lawn, small dots on the bright green grass. I bent down and picked one, then I smelt its aroma and dropped it in my shirt pocket. If it were before, the flowers would have been planted at the temples, not residences, as the meaning of its name

was ominous, indicating misery. However, after the name had changed to 'Leelawadee', its status rapidly upgraded. A few hundred trees grew to five thousand, becoming the popular plant decorating the front and back yards, including resorts all over Thailand.

This house was an exception, given that the previous owner had grown the trees a long time ago. I wasn't sure if he was too progressive to buy the old beliefs or was so heartbroken and miserable that he filled the backyard with Lantoms as a remembrance.

From the waterfront pavilion lined with Lantoms and through the spacious lawn, it opened to the huge ancient great house presumably a hundred years old. The two-story building was built in a Manila style mixed with colonial architecture. The first floor was brick walls painted in

concrete, curved into a sequence of white arches evenly spaced above the pathways.

The top floor was made of nearly black teak, the roofs hipped and gable. The owners must have been well-off since their ancestors to own such a property with a great house adjoining the Ping River.

I passed under the arch and ascended the stairs to the large balcony surrounding both sides of the house under the shades of the shielding roof. The paints of the wooden poles and the etched railing peeled due to old age, but the wood stood firm. Two thick, heavy trunks sat on the balcony floor, flanked by a builder waiting for an order regarding what to do with them.

"Let's see what's inside. If it's gold, will we be able to hold back?" I joked as I approached.

I unhooked the large keyring from my waistband. The great house owner left every key with me just in case I needed any of them. The ring contained a house key, room keys, and small keys for cabinets and drawers. I tried each of them until I found the right one. I opened the trunk and got surprised because it consisted of arranged stacks of framed photos, each wrapped in cloths as though they were cherished by the owner.

I unlocked the other trunk and it was also full of framed photos, but there was also a dark, thick wooden container the size of a napkin box. The lid was curved and tightly locked. I picked it up and tried to work it with the keys, but none worked.

I put the small wooden box back in the trunk and hooked the keyring on my waistband before carefully checking the photos one by one.

"Hmm...? These are all pencil drawing pictures." I looked at it, stunned.

Every picture was old, the paper yellow. The stains on the glasses made it harder to view them, though the style somehow felt familiar. Most pictures presented different angles of the property-the great house, the little house, and some sceneries.

Some were drawn in detail, and some were roughly sketched as if the artist was too lazy to be meticulous. And then, I found something interesting.

It was a sketch of the Chiang Mai Railway Station in the past, which was conspicuously dissimilar to the present building.

It meant the picture must have been drawn before World War II, before the Allies bombed the station to destroy the Japanese transportation route. It

was restored years after that.

"Wow, I think it's absolutely valuable, Tan. I mean, historically. Look, there are several pictures of this great house and the little house, seemingly before some renovations. Do you see it here, Tan? The back balcony of the great house is intact."

"Maybe it's the artist in that era's piece?"

"I don't know." I shook my head. "But it's definitely something emotionally precious to the house owner, considering how they had been kept in the trunks. Why don't we put them in the little house for now? No one goes there and it can be tightly locked."

"Good idea." Tan nodded in agreement.

I wrapped the pictures with the cloths and put them back in place, then my eyes caught a small framed picture leaning on the inner wall of the second trunk. I picked it up to check. It was a picture of the water front pavilion different from the present one.

I assumed it had been built simultaneously as the great house but gotten demolished due to it decaying, replaced by a new one.

My heart oddly dropped as I looked at the picture. I felt both happy and sad. A smile flickered in the corner of my mouth, though I had no idea why.

I stopped smiling before Tan could notice. I cleared my throat and ordered the builder, "Put these in the bedroom of the little house. I will unlock the entrance for you."

Once the builder put away everything as I had wished for, I walked down the stairs with Tan.

"What time will the lady arrive, Jom?" Tan asked.

"On Wednesday," I answered. "She's coming with her children."

The said lady was the owner of the place and the client hiring my company to renovate the great house, including expanding the little house to turn it into a gallery. Judging from the pictures in those two trunks, I guessed they would be showcased after the expansion was completed.

Actually, given the scope of the project, it was unnecessary to contact an architecture company in Bangkok. Chiang Mai possesses tons of competent architecture companies and contractors that charge less than the companies in Bangkok. But my question had been answered by the explanation from Thanet, the chief architect of my company.

'Jom, the client requested an architecture team that renovated the old house in Khlong San to carry out this project.'

"Whoa..It's far in Chiang Mai and not even a big project. Why did the client choose our company? Do they want a turnkey?"

A turnkey project is a contract where the design and construction are included, meaning the company undertakes the process of designing, constructing, and sending the team to supervise the construction until the project is completed.

'Not that reason. The house owner is a high lady, the old friend of the president's father. She and her family are still abroad, so she prefers to have an acquaintance take care of it. Is that good enough of a reason?'

Um...it was the reason of the rich with connections. Why the architecture team that renovated the house in Khlong San specifically?'

'The architects are handsome, I guess,' Thanet bantered, but I cracked a proud smile.

'She saw it in the magazine with Un's and your interview. You had an internship in Chiang Mai, didn't you?'

'Right,' I drew out my voice. I chose to intern there for two months during college.

'Will Un agree to go, though? His wife is far gone in her pregnancy.'

Un was another architect who had worked on the project in Khlong San with me.

'He's not going.' Thanet shook his head.

'Oh, that means..'

'Yeah, you're going alone.'

My mouth flapped open to argue. What the hell? The fact that I was single and had no family didn't mean I was unlimitedly free to do everything. Life was convenient in Bangkok. A lot of my friends were there. And was being single status to be bullied?

'2.5 pay raise,' said Thanet.

Hmm..? Wait, let me catch my breath...A..., 2.5 raise is the rate for the architects responsible for overseas projects.

'With a daily allowance and laundry fee. There's no construction camp, so if you rent an apartment, the company will pay for it.' Thanet bombarded me with benefits.

'Um...' I thought hard.

After mulling over it for ten seconds, I replied

'I kind of miss Chiang Mai anyway.'

And there I was, in Chiang Mai, in front of a hundred-year-old great house, and practicing the northern dialect I once understood. as an intern. I comprehended it and understood the meaning, but I wasn't yet good at speaking it.

"I'll be leaving it to you on Monday," I reminded Tan.

"I'll be late. Maybe in the afternoon."

Tan nodded and promised, "No worries. Yer heading back tomorrow, right?"

"Yeah," I answered. Tomorrow was Saturday. I would be overseeing the construction in the morning and off to Bangkok in the afternoon. I'd be back on Monday after two nights.

"If there's nothing else, I'll go home now, Jom. My men are waiting on the truck." Tan pouted at the truck where the builders clustered in the back.

I glanced at my watch, It was five in the evening. These builders were punctual, especially when it was time to clock out.

"Of course, Tan. See you tomorrow

"Yer also don't go home late. It's dusty in Chiang Mai at the moment. If yer trip on some root and get knocked out here alone, no one will save yer."

"Well, my corpse won't be rotten after just one night," I said with a laugh.

Tan started the engine and drove off. I plopped on the bottom step of the stairs at the front of the little house and opened my sketchbook to resume the work I had paused earlier.

The design had been finished at the company in the form of blueprints, but during the construction, there were many details to be added. There were parts to be fixed due to unexpected problems and parts where the blueprints didn't thoroughly cover.

Even the tiling, the builders had asked me if it had to be spread out from the center or started from the left or right side for an optimal result. The picturesqueness of things was to be decided by the architects.

I sat there under the shade of the Bengal almond tree extending over the roof covering the outdoor stairs, with the occasional breeze cooling me off. I liked the little house more than the great house. It was a two-story teak house suiting a small family, not gigantic or occupied by numerous rooms like the great house.

I stayed there for a long while and stopped sketching when the sky darkened. I rose and stretched to rid the ache before striding away from the

little house while thinking where to have dinner. I walked on the lawn under the grey sky of dusk.

Chills suddenly ran down my spine. It was like someone was staring at me.

Poh-Jom...

I turned abruptly to the little house...On the upper balcony, I glimpsed at something similar to a human shadow. I knew no one was there. I just walked out a few meters away. If someone had gone up the stairs, I would have noticed.

Was it a ghost?

Chills spreading all over my limbs, I spun and marched off without even a thought of proving anything. The scent of Lantoms reached my nose, stronger than in the afternoon. But I was at the front lawn! How could they be so aromatic?!

As soon as I hopped in my car, I started the engine and accelerated off the property with no looking back. To be honest, I didn't even dare to glance at the rearview mirror. No matter how much I loved Lantoms, it didn't mean I could deal with every situation.

Fifteen minutes later, I enjoyed the music at the restaurant by the Ping River on the same side as the Ket Karam Temple, near the church and multiple galleries in the area. The restaurant was a gastrobar that served food in the daytime and provided live music at night. On Friday night, it was crowded by people who had come early to get good tables and stayed long into the night.

The music played by the band in the corner chased away my recent fright. I ordered a Frankfurter paired with a cold beer. Part of me wanted to call the engineers over, but I changed my mind. Those guys drank alcohol like it was water, chugging it down their throats continuously with no sign of stopping.

Tonight, I was satisfied with a can of beer. I didn't want to get drunk or make my head feel foggy during my trip tomorrow.

Taking in the vibe and music, I soon forgot about the frightening incident at the little house. I took out my phone and made sure for the hundredth time that the detail of my flight and the hotel I had booked for two nights was correct. Next, I accessed my phone gallery and scrolled down past the photos of the construction site until I finally found the one I wanted to see.

It was a photo of a man clasping his hands behind his nape and smiling faintly at the camera with Westminster Cathedral in England as the background. He was tall, good-looking, with broad shoulders and a warm personality. He was flying from England to Thailand after studying there for four years.

My heart swelled at the sight of his smile, longingness fanning out in my chest. I tapped the screen gently and whispered.

"See you tomorrow."

Ohm...the first and only boyfriend in my life.

The phrase might not be wrong but also might not be right. Not because I couldn't predict if something would change us in the future, but because I didn't have a single idea that the definition of my 'life' would go beyond the meaning and time, far more than I expected at the moment.

Chapter 2: Didn't You Say Heartbreak Doesn't Kill?

Please note that northern people in this era speak in the old northern dialect.

In the morning, I took the taxicab, with my suitcase, to stop by the construction site as planned. When I had arrived, I was surprised to see the builders gathering before the little house despite our current job being the renovation of the great house.

"What's the matter, Tan?" I asked even before I reached there.

"The branch was broken and hit the roof of the little house last night, Jom," Tan explained.

"Above the stairs."

I gazed up and saw a branch the size of a thigh stuck in the roof.

"Whoa, hold up. It pierced through the roof?"

"And the balcony floor. They said the wind was strong last night, like it was going to rain."

"Did it hit other parts of the main roof?"

Worried, I strode to the little house. The roof and the floor could be repaired, but I was afraid the stuff inside would be damaged or stolen...There was a shadow yesterday.

The little house was a two-story teak building. The big roof covering the house was hipped while the roofs at the sides were gable with a part extending over the L-shaped outdoor stairs leading upstairs.

I avoided the planks on the landing holed by the fallen branch.

Damn it. I hadn't ordered the materials for the little house and now I had to fix it. I looked up at the roof. A line of tiles was ruined. Three broken purlins. The rafter was safe, fortunately.

I stepped up to the top floor and made my way through the balcony, which surrounded the house in the shape of U, and into the hall inside. I unlocked the bedroom door to check the things kept in there. The room was dark even if it was noon. I walked to the window and pushed it open to let

the light in. The room was as it had been when I had come yesterday. The roof remained unscathed. The four-poster bed stood with its head abutting one wall, no other piece of furniture in sight.

I heaved a sigh of relief when I spotted the two trunks safe at their places, with no signs of attempts to force the locks. I flicked my eyes to the wall.

A framed photo decorated the wooden wall. It displayed a gentleman, the old house owner, who seemed to be a Phraya*, along with his wife, two sons, and one daughter. The five of them stood on the lawn before the great house, their expressions deadpan the way people in the past pulled when taking photos. They didn't smile brightly and make the peace signs like the people in our era.

I cocked my head. The photo was indeed old, yet I surprisingly wasn't scared. Wasn't a photo of the dead ones supposed to haunt us? It wasn't supposed to soothe my heart like this.

From what Thanet had told me, the current high lady was the niece who had moved to the US and left the house abandoned for ten years. The reason was she was heartbroken by the General, her husband, blatantly taking his mistress the age of their child to the social functions without care of his wife. Consequently, she brought her kids to study in the US and planned to never return. That way, her kids wouldn't have to watch their father dote on his mistress in the media. I wondered what had changed her mind.

I paid respect to the photo and whispered

"If you want me to repair this house successfully, please keep the wind and rain at bay until I come back."

I locked the room and met up with Tan at the lawn.

"I need to order wood and tiles to fix the roof of the little house as fast as possible. Please tell the builders to get rid of the branch first.

Be careful not to break anything else."

"Okay," Tan promised.

"The guardian spirit of the house probably didn't want yer to flee and decided to hold yer back."

I laughed. An old man's humor sure lit up the mood.

"Nonsense. I'll be back in two days."

I took out my phone from my pocket to report the issue to my company so that I could place the order quickly. The signal was so poor that I had to go near the river to make a proper phone call. I needed to deal with this before my departure time.

I had waited for Ohm for years. I wouldn't let the branch falling on the roof stop me.

After struggling to make the call and a long explanation, I was finally done. I jogged to the front of the property to call the taxicab to take me to the airport.

Tan stayed by the little house, supervising the builders to cut the branch into smaller pieces so it was easier to throw away.

But when he turned to see me, he halted, his face pale as if he had just seen a ghost.

I winced, "What's wrong, Tan? Are you having a heatstroke? Get some rest."

"Weren't yer in the little house?"

"No." I shook my head. "I went down for some time."

"I just saw yer on the balcony. Yer called me and were about to head down, but then Noi asked if I wanted him to cut the whole branch. I was busy answering. When I turned around, yer were gone."

"Your eyes were playing tricks. I've been on the phone at the backyard for half an hour. The signal was stronger there."

"Well..." Tan swallowed and ended it there.

"What?"

"Some call it a wraith," Tan said in a lower voice.

"It appears when that person is about to undergo an ill fortune."

I was speechless. Was it like a doppelgänger or the evil twin?

Tan was sure modern. I guessed he watched a lot of movies.

He even knew foreign urban legends.

"Nonsense."

"If yer have to drive, be careful. And if yer have a chance, go and make merit."

"Thank you for your worry, but be at ease." I smiled.

"I'm taking a taxi cab today."

The moment the taxicab pulled over, I hopped right in, afraid to miss my flight. The car soared on the road around the old town moat, both sides beautifully edged by the golden shower trees blossoming bunches of yellow flowers. Purple and pink Bungor trees showered the grass with their falling petals. It was such a spectacular sight that I wished the Tourism Authority of Thailand would seriously promote this area. Perhaps, it could balance out

how Thai people flew to Japan to see the cherry blossoms at the same time of the year.

Unfortunately, the air was filled with dust and smoke. It was foggy as if I was in the Mist. It is Chiang Mai's weak point during this time of year, where the smog rate exceeds the standard.

Mask-wearing is promoted and it is best to refrain from outdoor activities to prevent respiratory diseases. I caught the airplane by the final boarding announcement. It took me around an hour on the plane to finally arrive in Bangkok.

While I took the Airport Rail Link from Suvarnabhumi to Phaya Thai Station, I texted my sister that I would visit my home in Chonburi in two weeks.

"Buy me spicy sausages. Mom wants sweet strawberries. Dad wants nothing. Just buy anything for him. Anything. He can eat everything anyway."

I smiled at my sister's reply. My family lived in Chonburi.

They owned a convenience store brand branching out all over Thailand. My sister, Somjeed, was a senior in college. I could go home this week, but I postponed it as I wanted to see someone my parents probably wanted to meet as well. He wasn't free this week, but I could wait. I had waited for years, after all.

..Ohm, my lover.

I had dated him for almost four years. We met when I was a fourth-year architecture student and Ohm was a senior in the same college, studying economics. Ohm came to hang out with his friend at the residence where I rented a room. We met at the front of the elevator, then we kept bumping into each other at college, the residence's hallway, and the elevator hall.

One day, eventually, he pulled over at the bus stop I was at and asked if I needed a ride.

Our story wasn't as thrilled as the ones in books, which were full of fights and competitions for love. It was simple and natural, though it often made my heart skip a beat. It was one of the happiest times in my life. We kissed for the first time in his car, in the parking lot of the residence while it rained.

It was raining cats and dogs that I couldn't hear anything else. However, I could hear his voice clear as day.

'I love you.'

A short sentence more impactful than just three words. These words, no matter how many years had passed, were still clear in my mind. It felt like I heard them just a few minutes ago. Even though Ohm had gone to study abroad, causing us to be apart, my feelings for those words never faded.

I knew I must be grinning throughout the trip on the ARL. The heat as I changed the station didn't even faze me. I couldn't help it. I was happy. I checked in at the hotel in the shopping center at BTS Asok Station. I had booked a junior suite room, spacious, with a nice view and a big bed. The mattress was incredibly soft.

It was pretty expensive, but I thought it would be worth it. I wasn't thinking of anything perverted.

After daydreaming in the room and rolling on the bed alone, hoping two people would be rolling on it tomorrow night, I took the ARL to the airport again at dusk.

I waited at the Arrival Gate. A while later, I spotted Ohm's family heading this way, his parents and Ant, his little sister. I walked over to greet them.

"Good evening," I said, my hands folded over my chest. I had met them twice when Ohm hadn't flown to England.

His parents seemed surprised to see me but fairly happy, while Ant folded her hands over her chest and gave me a smile.

"Jom, it's been a while. How have you been?" Ohm's mother asked.

"I've been well. What about you two?"

"We're old folks, frail and weak, but there's nothing serious. Ah..It's nice that you're here to pick him up. I thought you two had stopped talking to each other. This is good. Keep being brothers."

...Brothers.

Admittedly, I was confused. I had never once been brothers with Ohm. All right...we acted that way at times in public areas, but when we were alone, we were always something else. And Ohm never hid it from his family.

Ant was the first to notice something was off. She frowned before reaching out to hold my arm and saying,

"Jom, it's been a while. Buy me coffee. I'm parched. We'll be right back, Mom."

She dragged me to the other side where there was a café. Instead of ordering her coffee, she leaned closer until I could see her big round eyes

clearly, then she asked,

"You don't know, right?"

"Don't know what?" The weirdly tight squeeze on my arm took me aback.

A strange expression painted Ant's face, like someone about to scream out of discomfort. I caught a glimpse of sorriness as well. Ant inhaled and continued, "When was the last time you talked to Ohm?"

"We talked two weeks ago. Ohm said he would be back in Thailand today."

Ant's eyes widened. "And he told you to pick him up? Wow, this is too much."

"What? It's no big deal. My flight was only an hour," I said with a laugh.

"Ohm didn't tell me to pick him up. He told me to wait in Chiang Mai and he would fly there the day after tomorrow. But I happened to be free, so I came here. I've missed him." Ant now looked like she was going to cry.

"Does he know you're here?"

"It's a surprise."

"I fucking knew it...Ugh, sorry. I didn't mean to cuss."

Ant fidgeted. She bit her lip, greatly troubled. "Jom...Ugh, how am I going to tell you?"

My heart dropped. What happened? Could it be...Ohm had an accident?!

"What happened to him? Is he sick...? What's wrong?" I asked fast.

Ant shook her head. "No. How about this? Where's your hotel?" I said the name of the hotel, still confused.

"Why don't you head back first? I'll give you a call. Or I'll just go there, okay?"

I began to sense something unusual. "Why don't you just tell me what's going on? I'm not going back like this."

Ant was about to yank her hair. Finally, she gave up. Ant took my arms. "Jom, listen to me. Take a deep breath and get it together. Ohm..."

Her eyes instantly widened ever more in a panic.

"Ah! Shit...Too late."

I followed her gaze. Ohm had arrived. He was exiting the gate, pushing a cart with two huge suitcases.

My legs felt light, my heart inflating like a balloon. Ohm was still the same, with his tall figure, handsome face, charming appearance, and his

warm smile. I was a bit befuddled when the smile was directed to someone next to him.

"Who's he coming with?" I asked.

"That's...Ohm's fiancée, Kaimook." I turned my head abruptly to Ant.

Ant looked sheepish. "Please don't make a fuss. I don't know what to do now. I'm sorry...Please calm down. I'm begging you."

Chills ran all over my body as Ant kept apologizing as though it was her fault.

"You're not kidding, right?"

Ant shook her head. I turned to Ohm again. Now I could see the woman hooking Ohm's arm with her hand. She was pretty, fashionable, and classy. They both went ahead and greeted his parents, and they gladly responded. My head spun, my brain unable to process the situation.

"How long?" My voice trembled.

"They've engaged...ah, for a month now."

"Jom." Ant held my arm, pitifully fidgeting. But I pitied no one right now.

"I'll go and greet him." I yanked my arm back, not caring if it looked mean and rude, and strode towards Ohm.

I couldn't bring myself to believe it...Ohm? The one who said he loved me and kissed me gently would do such a thing? I couldn't believe it.

When I was near enough for them to notice, Ohm turned around.

"Jom.." His face went pale.

I halted, immediately realizing it.

The second our eyes met, it conveyed everything more than what Ant had said. The Ohm I had missed was here, but not in the way I had dreamed of.

I greeted Ohm, my face numb, my hands freezing.

"Good evening, Ohm. Welcome back to Thailand."

"Jom...You're here?" He seemed to still be in shock. I stared into his eyes. My emotions ran wild. I was stupefied and flabbergasted..How could he do this to me?

"How am I not?" My voice weakened, doleful.

"Jom..."

"....." Ohm couldn't say another word, only his eyes reflecting worry and apology. Pain rushed in my chest, piercing more sharply than any other feelings.

"I need to leave now. Let's catch up later." I turned to his parents, my hands folded over my chest.

"I'm taking my leave."

I had no idea how I went back from the airport to the hotel. My head was flooded with questions, while the feelings in my heart were a combination of love, disappointment, anger, pain, disbelief, unacceptance. But in the end, I had to believe it.

I sank into the upholstered chair by the large window overlooking the view of city lights. I took out my phone and dialed the number I remembered too well.

Ohm picked up soon enough, his voice not muffled or stuttering like he wasn't trying to avoid my call. It was painfully calm.

[Jom, it's not the best time to talk. I'll go to your hotel tomorrow.]

"Why not now?"

[We shouldn't talk right now]

"Why? What's the difference? If you're going to break my heart, I'll be hurt whether it is now or tomorrow. I don't want to wait until morning. I want to talk now."

He paused on the other end.

[No, Jom. We need to talk in person. Trust me. Go to bed. We'll talk in the morning.]

Ohm hung up when my phone was still in my grip. I diverted my gaze to the glass window, not looking out but at the reflection on it. The face I had seen every day in the mirror felt dissimilar today. It displayed sadness, the kind I had never witnessed before.

In the morning, Ohm met up with me as promised. We sat across from each other in the corner of the hotel restaurant.

"Sorry for being late," Ohm started. "Mom wanted me to make merit with her first."

"No need to apologize. I'm not mad about that." Ohm went still.

"So, are you really dating that woman?" I cut to the chase, not wasting time.

"Yes," he answered firmly.

"When? When did you meet her?"

"Half a year ago. She's the daughter of my adviser."

My heart hurt as if someone smashed it with a hammer.

"Then what was us all this time?" Ohm looked at me, no hesitation in his eyes.

"You know it was love."

"What about her? That woman. What's her name...? Kaimook? Did you fall in love with her too? Or you were so unbearably lonely that you hooked up with whoever blindly?"

His dark eyebrows knitted together. "Jom, don't say that."

"Why? Are you upset? What about me? I'm upset too. Why didn't you tell me four or five months ago? How could you let me daydream about us all by myself?!"

"I didn't want to break up with you on the phone. You weren't my temporary sexual partner. You were my boyfriend, my lover."

I was stunned. His words landed firm, as though he had no idea what he spewed out was brutally tearing me apart.

"You loved me...Then why did you do this to me? How fucked up are you to have pulled something like this?" His beautiful lips were pressed together. He offered no excuses.

"You're going to marry her, right?" I said, bitter.

"She's over a month into her pregnancy. We're planning our wedding."

Was that his reason? He was taking responsibility for knocking a woman up... Unbelievable. I had only heard this kind of story in a soap opera.

"Was it a mistake?" I asked.

"No." His answer left me speechless.

"It wasn't a mistake. I love Kaimook."

"So what? I don't get it. You love her, but you also love me.

Are you saying you love us both equally but you're going to marry her because she's pregnant and I can't?!"

Ohm suddenly seemed exhausted. His voice was soft, scratchy, tired, like he was in pain.

"Loving equally.. There's no such a thing, jom

Staggered, I felt like lightning struck my head. It wasn't pain. It was an unexpected appalment that soon turned into massive rage. My hands trembled as I took in the sight of the man I had loved for almost four years.

"You..." My voice quivered that my words came out gibberish.

"Get the hell away from me. And from now on, for the rest of my life, don't even show your face or utter a single word to me. No matter how

happy or sad you are, don't contact me. Just go and die from my life."

"Jom.."

"Leave!" I yelled, clenching my fists. Other customers turned to us, but I didn't care. I just wanted the man before me to go away.

Ohm rose. He stood there like he hoped I would hold him back. However, I didn't even want to glance up at him.

"I know my apology means nothing to you." Ohm's voice was gentle yet firm.

"But I hope you know I'm sorry things turned out this way, and I know you will forgive me one day even though I don't deserve it. That's the kind of person you are, the person I would fall in love with over and over again if I hadn't met Kaimook. I don't have any excuses, but I hope you know I never regret loving you." And he left.

I sat there for a long time, collecting the pieces of my heart shattered by someone stomping on it as if it was nothing. I decided to return to Chiang Mai in the afternoon of that day. I packed my stuff, checked out, and called the airline to change my flight without care of the cost of the difference. I stepped out of the hotel lobby and headed to the connecting walkway between BTS Asok Station and the mall with the subway underground. I marched hurriedly like everyone else there.

And then I stopped, going rigid in the middle of the walkway of BTS Station, letting my backpack fall down by my feet, absorbing the gush of emotions.

Earlier, I was baffled by the wave of emotions that I couldn't distinguish or deeply realize its existence. But now, it was attacking me, slowly but surely, one by one, with no holding back.

Amidst the bustling sound of the traffic below, the conversations, and people passing by, I was made aware of the loneliness forming into a tiny dot in my chest. It expanded at full tilt until it swallowed me whole. I was lonely and alone. I looked around. Despite loads of people around me, I felt empty, like I was standing by myself in a deserted city void of a single soul.

... Just go and die from my life.

I had said those words without knowing death would bring us apart for real...And it wasn't going to be his death. I reached Chiang Mai late in the afternoon. The visibility was so terrible that the pilot had to circle around for some time before landing.

As soon as I was at my accommodation, I grabbed my car key and drove off to some restaurant as my destination, any place that sold alcohol at the moment. If clear consciousness made the pain more vivid, I would go with the option that inflicted less pain.

The sky in the evening was clouded than usual because of the weather. I propelled on the road skirting the Ping River as fast

as I could, nearly over the speed limit. I turned the volume of the music up to drown the voice in my head. 'I know my apology means nothing to you, but I hope you know... I'm sorry.'

...You piece of shit. 'You know it was love.'

I gritted my teeth, suppressing the fury and sadness soaring continuously. My eyelids felt hot, but I didn't want to waste my tears over this, over the damn liar. Regardless, emotions sometimes refuse to be controlled, though they are ours. Soon, tears clouded my vision, making it harder to see the road covered in smog. I leaned down to wipe my tears with my forearm, and the phone in my pocket rang.

I looked down at it.

That moment was a mistake. I never thought of ending my life. I didn't even plan to drive back tonight if I got wasted. My car slid into the other lane at full speed as I reached for my phone. When I turned my eyes to the road again, light blasted through the smog, followed by a long piping horn. My eyes went wide in utmost shock as I swerved my car at the last second.

I survived the crash I had managed to avoid, but my car hurtled into the railing, colliding with it, tearing it in half, then I plunged through the bizarrely thick smog into the turbid water.

SPLASH!

For a moment, I think I see the light flashing like lightning, so bright that I have to shut my eyes. My body is then enfolded by a mass of water.

I don't want to die...I don't want to die like this! I don't want my parents to be sad because their son killed himself out of heartbreak when it's not true. Amidst the panic, my body plummets as though I am being sucked into the center of the whirlpool. I have no idea how I got out of my car. The ringing in my ears hasn't ceased. I try to struggle against everything, but it's fruitless.

Eventually, the last gulp of air slips off, used up, and I am forced to breathe in the water instead of fresh air. My body is instantly no longer in motion, floating still like I am in a vacuum.

I hear no sound. It is strangely quiet. A second later, an immense force pushes me upwards, a movement unlikely possible in the water. My ears pop. I curl, my hands automatically flying up to cover them, before I feel my body emerging through the water surface.

"Ha. Ha..!"

I gasp for air, filling my lungs ravenously, when my head is above the water.

I cough violently, choking on water, but I try to keep myself floating. Then, I rush to the shore nearby.

I successfully swim to it and pant on the riverbank, my whole body sore. I lie there until my exhaustion ebbs. Finally, I force myself to stand up and flick my eyes around.

What is this place? Life after death?

It's different from what I read in the book, the one saying we have to swim through the River of Death to the land on

the other side, the land only accessible by the souls of the dead.

But this feels like the human world. There are dirt, rocks, trees, bugs chirping, and a boat behind the bushes tied to the riverbank , Only it's night time.

I totter on the ground and stare into the darkness before me, then I spot the distant light and decide to go there. When I am close enough, I find out it's the light from the flickering lamp on the terrace.

...A house! I scream in my mind with joy as I jog over.

"Hey, help me. I fell into the river and got up here," I shout when I see two figures moving on the terrace. The figures halt when they hear my voice, but they remain silent.

I wish I could wait longer, but I can't. I am drenched and need help. I decide to ascend the steps while explaining, "Excuse me. I need to bother you. I fell into the river and swam into your place. I don't know how to get to the road."

Under the glow of the lamp, I can make out that the shadowy figures belong to a man and a woman. The man wears a northern cotton shirt and fisherman pants. The woman hides behind his back. They both seem shocked by my appearance.

"Ah...Mister."

That's all I can manage to say when I am welcomed by a foot booting me, sending me falling on my butt.

"Ouch!" I yelp.

"E*-Kammoon, go to the boat," the man orders impatiently.

The woman darts down the stairs, heading to the river. I push myself up despite the pain. Eyes bulging, I get dragged by the collar and shoved into an open door.

"Wait...Please listen," I sputter.

The same foot kicked me in the stomach. I lunge through the door and sway.

THUD!

My head hits the pillar, and I black out.

I regain consciousness when I hear people talking and see the light leaking through the wooden planks. I sit up groggily, my head throbbing that I groan. I touch the left side of my head, which swells like an orange. It hurts where the small wound is, the oozing blood now drying up and sealing the cut.

"E-Kammoon, get up. Are you a servant or a boss, doggone it?" A woman pipes in front of the door. I turn towards it. The door is flung open, revealing a woman in a sinh and a dark cloth wrapped around her chest standing there. We hold each other's gazes for five seconds before she shrieks and dashes away.

In a moment, hell breaks loose. I am dragged out of the room by a mighty man dressed like he's going to perform a sword dance at the Cultural Arts Center. He wears only a short loincloth, flashing his chest muscles and ripped legs. "Who are you?!" he bellows after throwing me on the terrace. I can see now that it's a small wooden house with Phluang* leaves as a roof.

"I..... I got lost. I swam here..."

Before I can finish, a girl roars furiously, stomping up the stairs.

"I told you to keep an eye on her for a night. What's the fuss now, E-Mei?"

The voice owner appears. She's a chubby woman around fifty years old with...boobs, bare breasts, hanging and swinging. I freeze. It's not like I've never seen boobs before, but I've never expected to see them right here, right now.

"He was in the room when I opened the door." The girl in the morning clarifies. "If I had known it was man, I wouldn't have been able to sleep. What will I do if people find out?"

"Quit your bullshit, E-Mei," the braless woman seems fed up.

"You weren't in the same room as him."

"But still under the same roof." Mei doesn't give up. The other ignores her and turns to me. "Who are you?"

"I..." I don't know how to respond. "My name is Jom."

"Why did you pretend to be a woman?"

"Huh...?" I am utterly confused.

"Last night, when Oui**-Ta sent you here, you were a woman. How come you turned into a man in the morning?"

"You're mistaken!" I protest. "I didn't pretend to be anyone. I got here last night and kicked into that room. I wasn't pretending."

"Why are you speaking in a central dialect, not northern? What an odd lad." The braless woman glares and turns to the topless man.

"Ai*-Ming, keep an eye on him. I'll tell the boss that Oui-Ta scammed us. He sent us a son instead of a daughter."

The woman storms away, leaving me sitting here in dizziness from the headache and confusion with the man named Ming, who eyes me in annoyance.... What the hell is going on?

"Who are you? Oui-Ta doesn't have a son. Are you his nephew?" Ming asked. I shake my head, not knowing what to say.

"I said I got lost."

"How did you get lost into Mei's room?" His face expresses contempt.

"We're fucked up. Oui-Ta sold his daughter outright.

Why did he send a man? He knows the foreign boss** prefers women."

Something is off. I don't think I got myself out of the water to a normal riverbank. Now that I think about it with a clear mind, how could someone breathe in water for almost an hour and surface at night?

There are two possibilities: I am dreaming, or I am living the life after death. I tick off the first one. No need to slap my face to prove it because I can still feel the kick from last night, not to mention my swollen head. The kick was real. The pain was real. No faking it.

I choose to ask, "Mister...Ah, your name is Ming, right? Have you ever died?"

He looks at me like I'm crazy. "What kind of question is that? If I died, how could I be here?"

I glance at his temples down to his neck...He's right. His bulging veins throb. I try to prove it by feeling the pulse on my wrist. Yeah, we're not spirits. We're breathing. We're alive.

I cast my eyes over the Lanna* house covered with Phluang leaves, people dressed like actors in a period drama, and the keyword, 'the foreign boss'. I take a quick, deep breath, my heart racing..No. No way.

"Ming, let me ask you one more thing. What B.E. is this?"

"Bee-Eee?" Ming looks bemused.

I change the question. "I mean... Who is the provincial governor? Wait, wait, I mean, the king, the city leader, the...Oh, right, who is the ruler of this city? Do you know it?"

Ming stops looking at me like I am crazy, instead he looks like he thinks I am stupid. He replies, "Of course, I know."

He raises his folded hands as he utters the name, "Prince Kaew Nawarat, the ruler of Chiang Mai." Chills run down from the roots of my hair to my toes....Holy crap. An ultimate misfortune of my life. I may not excel at history or be knowledgeable, but I know this. I've visited several historic landmarks in Chiang Mai. Prince Inthawichayanon, Prince Intawaroros Suriyawong, Prince Kaew Nawarat. The names of other northern princes pop up in my head, respectively, as if I am reading a book backward.

I'm going to cry.

I think I've traveled back in time to the Sixth Reign, the era where foreigners played considerable big roles in Chiang Mai, the pre-war period!

Chapter 3: Wormholes, Piglets, and That Man

A while after being left with Ming with my heart pounding at the latest information of my own speculation, Mei saunters back and says to Ming.

"Ai-Ming. The boss has driven off, but the lady boss said to bring him to the great house." I stare at her in puzzlement.

"The lady boss?"

"The lady boss Ueang Phueng." Mei puts on air, answering proudly,

"The Lanna wife the foreign boss married publicly.

Don't you know her?"

"I'm from somewhere else. I don't live here."

"Ugh, whatever," Mei cuts short.

"The lady boss called for you. Hurry up and go."

I am led to another place, passing the lines of abundant trees of longan and mangoes. And then, we arrive at a wide well-maintained lawn. My eyes widen in astonishment at the gigantic black wooden great house standing out among the green trees in a perfect condition, which is rare to find in my era.

The great house is a two-story house built in an Indo-Portuguese style, its hipped roof laid with Lanna clay tiles, with hexagon roofed porches sticking out on both sides. The cape leadwort blossoms in indigo bunches, edging the stairs leading up to the veranda under the pleasant shade of the trees.

I follow Ming up the stairs to the sizeable planked veranda. The whole great house is probably made of teak. I peek through the door and see a European couch set for welcoming guests inside. The enormous tusks are on display to flaunt the house owner's grandeur.

I flick my eyes back to the veranda and spot a woman seated on a wooden bench surrounded by the servants on the floor, ready to serve, including the braless woman whose chest is now wrapped in a cloth (Thank you so much) The woman rests her arm on a triangle pillow. She wears a long-sleeve straight-cut shirt with a shawl draped around her chest and over

her shoulder and a sinh covering her ankles, her long hair tied up in a bun decorated with an orchid. When I see her face clearly, I gape.

Somjeed, my little sister! "Sit down, damn you." Ming yanks my arm.

"Don't tower over the lady boss."

I sit on the floor beside Ming, my eyes fixed on these people's.

"lady boss'

Somjeed...This is definitely my sister but in a more mature and dignified state, unlike my whiny little sister. My thoughts run wild as I recall the elders' belief regarding reincarnation and how we meet certain people because we have been through thick and thin together in the past lives. Is this the past life of my sister?

...That explains why she loves spicy sausages so much. She was a local northern woman in her past life. Plus, my grandma's background can be traced back to Nan*.

"Why in the world are you gawking at me?" is the first thing she says. I drop my gaze. Not only is the face identical, but also her voice.

"I don't think he's the person from last night," Somjeed, or the lady boss Ueang Phueng, notes.

"The one from yesterday...wasn't this gorgeous."

Whoa...Should I be happy to be complimented compared to another woman? At least respect my slightly muscular arms.

"So? Who are you? Are you Oui-Ta's son being sent here to replace E-Kammoon?"

"It's not like that," I answer. "My name is lom. I'm not Oui-Ta's son. I don't even live here. I don't..."

I shut my mouth in time and weigh the pros and cons quickly. What will happen if I deny everything? I don't know if that Oui-Ta will receive a punishment of some kind. But where am I going to sleep? Will I stagger along the road and live in the open like a homeless man?

No...I don't have any emotional strength left to deal with more pressure. Think of what I've been through in less than twenty-four hours. Who would have any sort of strength left to fight against anything? And I even woke up in the wrong place and time. If I stay here, at least I will have a roof over my head.

Who knows? When I open my eyes tomorrow, I might be back on my bed in my apartment. Therefore, I must survive the current situation. I hold my breath and say.

"I am Oui-Ta's nephew...I am here in place of Kammoon."

I'm not lying since I am literally here instead of the woman named Kammoon. I got booted into that room, and Kammoon must have fled with the man with a strong kick.

"Why are you using a central dialect? Well, you don't look like you belong here" the lady boss continues.

"I thought you were a child of some Jek* sailing here to sell goods." Whoa..that hurts. Did she just call me a child of some Jek? I wish I could tell her she's the child of our Jek father as well. In the next life, I mean.

I fight the urge to pinch the rascal's mouth.

"My father is Chinese. My mother is Thai...Ah, a northern Thai woman." The lady boss Ueang Phueng locks her eyes on me in contemplation before sighing and shaking her head slowly.

"The boss will not be pleased. He's not a woman."

My heart drops. What does it mean? Are they going to send me back to Oui-Ta, my fake relative? I'll be exposed! But the recently braless woman whispers,

"Lady boss...I think a man will be more useful than a woman." Whatever that means, it seems to work. The lady boss Ueang Phueng goes quiet for a moment.

"That's true, but will it be all right, hmm, Kumtib?"

The woman whose name has finally made known as Kumtib cracks a cunning smile.

"The boss would not dissatisfy you now. He only wishes for your happiness." The lady boss Ueang Phueng ponders it, then says

"I will talk to the boss, then. Since this one is a man, we can keep him for other jobs. No need to take offense at Oui-Ta."

"Anything you wish, lady boss."

I sneak a sigh of relief, and the lady boss shoots me with questions.

"What can you do? Can you cook?"

"No, I can't." My face falls. I can do simple dishes like omelets and clear soup. Northern food is out of the question.

"Can you box?" the lady boss resumes

"The boss owns a boxing club. Sometimes we perform at the royal residence for the prince."

"I've never boxed before."

The lady boss seems annoyed when Mei cuts in

"His skin is smooth like a woman. Should we train him to do the fingernail dance, lady boss?"

"No! I can't do that," I cry out in alarm.

"Ugh! You can't do anything."

"E-Mei, don't speak too loud." Kumtib scowls.

"It will irritate the lady boss."

The lady boss Ueang Phueng waves her hand in frustration.

"Just make him a coolie or a cowherd or something. I don't care anymore. I'm tired. I want to sleep!"

The rest of the servants immediately rush in to respond to her needs with balms and herbal inhalants, then escort her inside, nearly carrying her. I hear Kumtib speak after them.

"Please rest well, lady boss, so that the baby in your tummy can grow strong."

I'm stunned.....My sister is pregnant. Ugh...What will Dad say about this? And... Who got her pregnant!?

Then, I am taken to the row houses for male servants situated quite far away from the female servants'. I'll be sharing a room I with Ming in a house resided by around ten servants. Ming is sullen as if he doesn't want to associate with me but has no choice as it's an order. But when he notices the pile of my clothes, a laugh escapes his mouth.

"Why did you bring female clothes?" Ming snickers.

"Are you into this kind of stuff?"

"Well..." A cat gets my tongue. These are what Kammoon left, not mine.

"Can you find some male clothes for me?"

"Yeah...I'll fetch some. I don't want to sleep with a nutcase dressed like a woman."

Ming soon comes back with four to five sets of old clothes belonging to other servants.

"You can put on only a loincloth like me," Ming suggests.

"I get cold easily. I'll wear a shirt," I quickly reply... There's no way I'll do that. Even though I've traveled back to the era where men work with their hests bare, I feel uncomfortable. Besides, I'm not in the mood to show off my body to anyone.

Ming exits the room, leaving me alone to get changed. I take off my shirt and something falls out of the pocket. It's my phone!

I stare at it for several seconds before I pull myself together and grab it. I speed off the house in extreme joy. With this device, I have a chance to contact my family! Ming looks at me in bewilderment and shouts,

"Ai-Jom, where are you going? You loony!"

I don't care if Ming thinks I am crazy. I dart out to the dirt yard and raise my phone to get the signal in utmost anticipation. But.....No signal detected.

The screen is bright, with no applications popping up. It's a blank screen emitting faint light as its sole function. My arms drop to my sides, my shoulders drooping. I return to the servants' quarter, my eyes downcast, with sharp disappointment.

After changing into a Mauhom shirt and fisherman pants and finishing my meal, Ming tries to find me a job. But hell, nobody wants me. I'm not a brawny brute like most servants here. My body is average, neither fat nor slim. The woodcutters shake their heads, smiling. I want to help in the kitchen, but both Thai and foreign chefs have more than enough assistants.

At last, I end up working with an old man everyone called 'Oui-Suya'. He's in charge of taking care of the horses and cows, which are part of the vehicles in this era, where people travel on carriages and carts.

So, my task in this life is to clean the stable, the cowshed, and the pigsty. R.I.P, the promising architect. Goodbye, blueprints and pens...Hi, dung.

Oui-Suya is kind, though. He patiently instructs me despite my sulky face and incapability. He also initiates conversations so I won't be too stressed out.

As a result, I learn rough information that the house owner the servants address as 'the boss' or 'the foreign boss' is Mr. Robert, a timber merchant, a manager of a teak company in England, who has been granted a concession to operate his business in an area of the woods in Chiang Mai.

"The boss hardly uses carriages anymore. He has a car. There aren't many cars in the capital of Chiang Mai, all owned by the wealthy."

I nod along, not asking anything much. I'm still muddled and can't adjust to everything, and the smell of dung does nothing but remind me that my hipster life is in the past...oh, in the future, the future that becomes the past. This is even more confusing.

I keep working without thinking much. When the evening comes, I finally get to meet my brother-in-law.

I have to say this is not something I've ever expected to be a product of the decision made by my sister, who ran around fangirling over K-pop idols

and twisted her body in front of the laptop while passionately cheering, 'Oppa...Oppa.'

Mr. Robert is an imposing tall foreigner with blond hair, blue eyes, and a beard. His loftiness makes him come out as arrogant. He gets out of the car and heads to the great house when I return the female clothes to Mei at the white champaca tree by the side because I don't want to go near the female servants' quarter at night.

Mr. Robert isn't fond of the fact that I am here instead of Kammoon, but he doesn't kick up a fuss as his wife is pregnant.

At night, I form a circle with other servants in the same house to have dinner. The food I can eat is sticky rice and grilled fish curry in banana leaves, similar to grilled Homok. The dish I dread is Lhu, which is made with meat, raw blood, and spice.

"The lady boss accepts you, but the boss isn't happy about it. I bet someone will sell their daughter to him in a few days," Insorn, a servant sharing the same house, remarks, and nods with the others.

"Are they short of female servants?" I can't help sticking my nose in. They mentioned me, after all.

"Enough to do chores." Insorn pulls a perverted smile.

"But not enough to do something else."

And everyone laughs as though it is such a hilarious matter. I glance left and right, hoping for further explanation, and see Ming glowering at his plate.

"What, Ai-Ming? Are you worried about E-Mei?"

Insorn nudges Ming's side with his elbow.

"Don't worry. The boss won't do anything to her. E-Mei has served the lady boss since she lived in the tycoon's great house. The lady boss asked to omit her."

"I'm not worried about her. I'm hot!" Ming snarls, but his ears redden.

I kind of understand now why Ming treats me rather coldly. He has a crush on Mei, and I guess he is upset that I showed up in Mei's house. Plus, I am fairly good-looking. He must be worried that Mei might be into me.

Before going to bed, I muse "How old is Mei?" Ming turns his head abruptly, glaring.

"Why do you ask? You like her?"

"No," I deny straight away.

"Mei is sure a beauty, but I prefer chubby women with dark skin. They seem warm. I'm asking because I wonder why she serves the lady boss closely when she looks quite young."

"Mei was sold to Mr. San, The lady boss Ueang Phueng's father, since she was a kid. The lady boss adores her and wants her to marry a fine man, not be anyone's mistress. You sure you don't like her?" Ming repeats the question to make sure.

"No," I reply firmly. I actually want to clarify that I'm into men, not women, but I'm scared to be booted off the house. After a few words exchanged between us, Ming's tone of voice convinces me that he no longer holds a grudge against me.

He falls asleep while I stare into the dark with open eyes. I try to think about how I ended up here, coming up with hundreds of speculations. Finally, the most likely supporting reason is I traveled through wormholes. Not the holes dug by worms, but 'wormholes'. It's a theory about quantum physics-still a controversial topic among scientists and opposed by several theories. Regardless, it concerns time traveling in space.

To put it simply, according to the theory of relativity, if spacetime, the course of time going on in space, were a piece of paper, the piece of paper would stretch out infinitely. And if a vibration caused spacetime to bend, there would be a chance a passage would be formed, a tiny pipe connecting one point on the paper to another. If we happened to be the thing flowing through the passage, we would jump to another period of time.

Have you ever watched Interstellar? It's one example of time-traveling through wormholes inside a black hole. Someone has remarked that if you traveled in space more than 4.6 billion light-years, a distance older than the age of the world, you might turn around and witness the birth of the world.

However, loads of scientists believe we can't specify the place, time, or dimension of the wormholes. No one has the right to decide for them. We could jump to another galaxy, on a planet full of aliens.

Thus, according to the opinion of a non-expert like me, wherever the wormholes will take us is up to them. No one can make the decision for them. I'm glad the wormhole sent me here instead of on a planet filled with water and ten-story high waves like in Interstellar, though it's my favorite planet in the movie. Tonight, I can finally put myself to sleep, all the while hoping that when I wake up tomorrow, everything here will disappear and my world will be back.

In the morning, I wake up to the sound of roosters crowing under the same wooden roof, and I lose it. I scream at the top of my lungs.

"Ai-Jom, are you okay? If you're not, I'll tell Oui-Suya you...you have diarrhea," Ming asked during breakfast.

Right now, Ming isn't the only one thinking there's something wrong with my brain, but the other servants begin to guess I might be screwy, the result of my furious scream in the morning. I've told them later I had a nightmare.

"I'm okay," I answer curtly, pressing a ball of sticky rice into some spicy paste seemingly containing fermented fish. The taste and smell are weird, unlike anything I've ever experienced.

Whatever. It won't kill me. I shake my head and sigh in frustration... Why? When I read books where the characters have accidents and travel to the past, they will take over the bodies of someone super cool like the heir to the throne, a concubine, a philosopher, or a destructively beautiful woman. I am none of that, stuck in my own body.

I am Jom, a twenty-four Thai-Chinese man with okay looks and zero skills as a livestock caretaker, yet I have to live my life taking care of pigs and horses.

Once I've finished the meal, I walk to the stable without a choice. After a deep sleep last night, my body no longer aches and gains more strength to work. I decide to adjust the way I speak to suit the situation, annoyed that people keep asking me why I talk weird. I address myself accordingly, depending on whom I speak to, and sometimes I end my sentence with 'kind sir' to fit the era. I don't know if I use it right. I don't care that much.

Sometimes I unintentionally speak in a modern way. Today, Oui-Suya assigns more tasks to me. I carry each out as ordered, but my mind is somewhere else. I keep thinking of how to go home. I don't want to be here. Even though the place I came from retains something that hurts me, it's my real world.

"Lad, why spacing out? Something on your mind?"
Oui-Suya asks.

"No." I shake my head. Oui-Suya goes still, his eyes and gesture oozing kindness an adult has for a kid. Feeling guilty, I mumble out a reply.

"Oui-Suya, you said the boss hardly uses the carriages. Why are there so many horses?" I try speaking in a central-northern dialect. I kind of make it up, to be honest.

"Those two are for polo." Oui-Suya points at two horses in better condition than the rest.

"Thoroughbreds. The boss loves them dearly."

"They play polo?"

"Yes. At the club of the foreigners. They have all equipment. Ho...it's more convenient nowadays. They do delivery in train. It doesn't take almost a year to ship something across the ocean like before."

That gets my attention...Hey, hold up. If there's a train reaching Chiang Mai, it means this should be the late Sixth Reign, right? Is it the Seventh Reign already? Prince Kaew Nawarat ruled over Chiang Mai for quite a long time, overlapping two reigns.

What year did the train start running here?

Damn it! Who would know? Even if I once knew, I have forgotten it.

My mouth is itching to ask what B.E. it is, but I know it's useless. Oui-Suya would answer me with a Lanna year, and I wouldn't be able to calculate it to B.E...It's okay. If I'm stuck here longer, I'll piece things together with other clues. If I'm lucky, I'll meet someone who can provide the answer. I am curious what year I got lost to.

At night, my thoughts run even wilder. I fidget on my bed, disturbed by so many feelings. I'm worried about my parents. How distressed must they be to find out I have disappeared? For a brief moment, I think of Ohm... Has he discovered my car fell into the Ping River? If he has, what will he think about it? Will he blame himself for being part of the cause of the accident? Will he regret it? Will he cry? Or does he stick with his fiancée, the mother of his child, and know nothing at all? My heart throbs in my chest, my eyelids feeling hot, but I suppress it. I think of people who love me, my dad, my mom, my sister.

The one who doesn't love me...doesn't deserve a room in my mind.

Another night passes by with a whirl of thoughts. I am positive that my wish has failed to reach the God of Wormholes or whoever took part in sending me here because when I open my eyes, I am still in the same house with Ming sleeping nearby. And I still have to clean the dung of the pigs and cows.

Though miserable, I console myself not to lose hope.

If I can come here, I can leave. I just haven't figured out when and how, but there must be a way. For now, I need to guide myself through living in this

place as smoothly as possible. I hope there will never be an incident forcing me to wander off.

Today is chilly, but the sunlight is strong in the afternoon. Sweat trickles down my face and forms into tiny beads above my upper lip.

"Add water into the trough for the pigs," Oui-Suya says.

I carry a bucket to the outdoor well. In it is groundwater to be pumped by an ancient water hand pump. Two servants were there, pumping the water into their buckets. I wait a distance away.

"You go first. I'll catch up," one servant says after filling his bucket.

"Go first? Where's first?" the other jokes.

"Ha. You prick, just go where you came from." He tries to kick the other servant, who dodges it and, laughing, leaves with his bucket on his shoulder.

I watch the water flow out of the faucet, and it suddenly dawns on me....Just go where you came from. Chills rush in my chest. I turn my head to the river immediately.

On the day I came here, my car had plunged into the water and drowned. I remember my whole body was in the water and I was about to take my last breath, then I heard air whistling past my ears and turned up here.

The river...The river is the key. There's a passage under it, a wormhole that will take me back home!

My heart races in excitement. So, if I want to go back, I must do it in the water. And it must be the exact same place I got here.

I calculate everything quickly in my mind. The dock at the side of the female servants' houses is pretty far from here. I have to make my way past the row houses, the kitchen, and the vegetable garden.

Someone might stop me before I get there. Not to mention that jumping into the river at the female area during this time of day is a mindless move.

I take a deep breath... It's okay. After waiting for a few hours, I will leap into the water to my heart's content. At night, when Ming and the others have fallen asleep, I tiptoe outside, not forgetting to bring my phone. Better safe than sorry. I don't know what factors are required to travel through the wormhole. The phone signal could be one of them. Be damned if it's not. I'm not afraid the water will ruin it. Fortunately, I was persuaded by my friends to buy this waterproof phone.

I never thought it would be of use. The dock at the female area is indistinct in the dark. Next to where someone once tied a boat, crickets

chirp in the thick growth of grass. I glance around. Once confident no one is present, I step onto the dock. The plank softly creaks when I stand on it.

Each step I take is full of excitement and anticipation. I stop at the last plank and gaze down at the black river gently flowing under the moonlight. I hold my breath and jump.

SPLASH!

The water splashes noisily when my body dives into the cold river. I open my eyes and let myself slowly sink, not fighting against it. Darkness envelops me. There's only ringing in my ears.

I hold my breath patiently, waiting to hear the air whistling as hoped. Soon, I begin to run out of air, bubbles escaping my mouth. I struggle to hold on in restlessness, trying my best not to give up.

Still, human bodies have limits. At last, I can't keep on. I crawl up with my arms and do flutter kicks until I reach the surface.

"Ha..."

I inhale industriously to fill my lungs with air, then I choke. I tread to the shore in weariness, soaked and shivering, my heart screaming in bafflement...Why didn't it work? What did I miss? Why didn't the wormhole open like it had when I had first drowned? What did I overlook?! My breath is ragged, my fists clenching around the grass in an attempt to calm myself down. I have to get it together. My hope hasn't wilted. I need to fight on, and I will not let myself get stuck here for the rest of my life.

I catch my breath on the riverbank for a moment before springing up. I march the length of the planks jutting out over the river again, drops of water dripping from my clothes, forming puddles on the planks tracing my steps. I pause at the edge.

The river still flows gently, moving in ripples as if to mock my effort. I inhale deeply and jump one more time. I don't keep track of how many times I have jumped and choked, but I have concluded that it doesn't take me farther than a small deck in Mr. Robert's property, in the Ping River that has existed since my previous lifetime.

I go back to the male servants' quarter drenched, both cold and angry. You fucking wormhole! It brought me here and fucking refused to take me back!

Time passes by with me cursing the God of Wormholes and trying to find the passage under the water in as many areas as possible. In the evening, I would bathe later than the others and spend a long time at each dock as I

had to drown in different places in case it might work or show any sign that would give me some sort of hope.

After getting disappointed repeatedly over my futile efforts, my vigor gradually fades and discouragement creeps in instead.

I feel dispirited and start to fall into resignation. I make peace with the fact that I might have to be here longer than I thought.

I decide to adjust myself again and interact with other servants more to make it feel like I am part of this place. I am fed up with unease at night and the agony of my failure to find a way out.

I need to relax more if I don't want to go crazy for real like Ming kept remarking. A man time-traveling to be crazy. What a tragedy.

In one afternoon, Mr. Robert's tall and big figure appears near the cowshed and pigsty, shadowed by Oui-Suya standing respectfully.

I am surprised to see him here. Mr. Robert looks at two large pigs wolfing the food in the trough and shakes his head.

"This won't do."

I tense up. Is he criticizing my working performance?

Step back, will you? I've worked here for only over a week. How perfect do you expect it to be?

But then, he says "I want a fast piglet."

...I'm at a loss for words.

A-FAST-PIGLET.

"Ah...Did you mean...a 'horse'*? Not a 'piglet', right?" I ask.

Are we on the same planet? I've never heard of a fast piglet ever since I was born!

"No, I mean a piglet, a piglet that runs fast." He frowns slightly.

"You know English?"

"A little bit. I once worked with....ah, the missionaries." The lie slips out at the speed of light.

Mr. Robert is about to say something, but he loses interest and turns his attention back to the piglet.

"Find me one." He points at my face.

"A fast piglet."

My question finally gets answered by Oui-Suya's explanation.

"The boss wants a piglet for the piglet race on Shitamas. It's a big event held annually in winter by the foreign timber merchants, a month after Loy

Krathong Day. Last year, the boss participated in polo and the horse race. This year, he wants to join the piglet race as well."

I process the information given by Oui-Suya. "Shitamas...You mean Christmas?"

"Yeah... Yeah, that." Ha...He said it rather dangerously.

Well, all right, I got it now. My task is to find a 'fast' piglet for the foreign boss.

"Where can I find the piglet, Oui?"

"No worries. I'll tell Ming to take you to the market by boat tomorrow."

The following day, I board the boat at the dock at the back of the great house and head to the market as Oui-Suya instructed.

I admit I'm pretty excited since I've never seen Chiang Mai in this era. Ming paddles slowly along the Ping River in the cool air and warm sunlight.

Ming guides the boat past the line of little houses behind the row of trees not far away from the dock I appeared at on the first day. I've never known they existed as they hid behind the grove.

"Is that where the female servants live? What lovely houses," I ask. Ming chuckles

"Those are the residences of the foreigner boss' women." It takes me aback. What does it mean? Mistresses' houses? How many mistresses does my brother-in-law have? Looking at the little houses, I shake my head... These are basically harems. I feel so bad for my sister.

Next to the fence line of Mr. Robert's place is the neighbor's property, sheltered by the trees, both big and small, casting their shadows on the bright green lawn. It makes me want to roll down the grassy knoll. The house looks as cozy as Mr. Robert's.

In the distance, I glimpse a house roofed with Lanna clay tiles behind the bushes. It seems fairly huge, though it's hard to make out clearly from here.

Near the great rain tree spreading branches over the lawn, I spot a large grove of Lantom trees growing beside the riverbank, which is odd as it's not a conventional house plant in this era.

A waterfront pavilion protrudes over the river alongside them. Ming pushes us along the river with the paddle as the breeze brings the mist mixing with the scent of Lantoms over. I notice a man resting in the pavilion. He wears a hemp shirt and satin trousers, the attire of people from

the Central Region. He is reading a book, totally focused. When our boat approaches, he gazes up.

He is a charming man, his skin light, his facial structure sharp of a Thai man. He stares at me without breaking eye contact, stunned or maybe in extreme shock. We hold each other's gazes for several seconds before I avert my eyes. My heart beats fast for some unknown reason. I'm not sure why I'm feeling this way. It's not because he's handsome. I'm not crazy enough that my cheeks would redden like the traffic light whenever I stumbled across a good-looking man.

Something in his eyes somewhat struck my heart. And there was a flicker of something in them...

"Whose house is that, Ming? It's large and grand. Is it the royal residence?" I ask when our boat is far enough from the pavilion, a huge building built inconspicuously behind a row of trees for privacy coming into sight. Yet, its balcony sticks out towards the river.

"No. It's the accommodation for the civil servant from Siam* "

"Oh...That's why he's not dressed like Lanna people. Who was that just now, though?"

"How am I supposed to know? I don't serve there."

"What? You're neighbors. Don't you know each other?"

"He's moved here for a few months. The name of the house owner is Luang* something. I don't remember.

The servants there use a central dialect like you. Our foreign boss treats him well. He sometimes invites the Luang to the parties."

Oh...I remember it now. If I'm not mistaken, in the previous reign, the northern prince used to have the sole discretion to issue permits for forestry to foreigners. However, Siam recently started to take control over the North by sending governors and officials from the British Embassy there. Subsequently, forest ownership was transferred to the government.

I reckon roughly about Princess Dara Rassamee, the princess consort of King Rama V. She persuaded her relatives to accept the share of the timber fees the government collected each year as the benefit in exchange for them waiving their sole discretion over the forests. I heard the amount was hefty to the point that they needed to carry the money back in bamboo baskets.

It's no surprise why the foreigners who wish to run forestry businesses in Lanna in this era must fraternize with government authorities for the benefits regarding the concessions to produce teak in Thailand.

A few minutes later, my interest in the neighbor is dropped, replaced by excitement towards something else appearing before my eyes.

All kinds of small boats, including scorpion-tailed boats, glide by the port. The bank adjoining the river is occupied by a huge wooden great house, the residence of the Siamese governor, as Ming clarifies. I remember it is used as the residence of the provincial governor in the present time. Further down the opposite side of the river, I spot the pagoda of the Ket Karam Temple rising above the tree line, not flanked by nightclubs by the river like in my time.

I almost jump on my feet when I see the Nawarat Bridge extending across the Ping River. It is still a steel bridge, not concrete as I have seen.

Besides the riverside lifestyle, another thing that thrills me to the point that I crane my neck to get a good look at is Thapae Street, an important street even in this era. Both sides are packed with stalls. Beyond the street locates the Ton Lamyai Market and the Warorot Market, our destination today.

The markets are bustling with people shopping. Most women are clothed properly, but some of the older ones only drape long sheets loosely around their breasts. Some men are topless, showing off their tattoos. The markets are the center of merchants from different nationalities. I constantly overhear conversations of unfamiliar languages.

Ming shakes his head at how amazed I am by the city and mumbles that I am a loony, but I have gotten used to it. Ming takes me to the pork merchant to ask if there is a house with newborn piglets.

Then, we both meet up with the owner of the pigsty where a sow gave birth less than two months ago. The piglets are all weaned and consume solid food.

There are ten piglets, all chubby and cute. I select three that seem stronger than the rest. Ming takes care of the payment and orders the owner to deliver them to the great house of Mr. Robert, the British forestry manager, tomorrow.

When the sunlight fades and the breeze comes in the evening, Ming paddles our boat back. The weather is still pleasantly cool as a northern city. Ming ushers us past the Luang's property next door. I glance at the waterfront pavilion, but no one is there. I reach out and cup a Lantom floating in the water and inhale its fragrant scent.

Hmm...how refreshing.

Once shored, I quickly ask the other servants to expand the pigsty for the three little piglets that will be the new members tomorrow. I don't want any flaws present to be complained about by the foreign boss. I also help the servants build the shelter, my body sweating profusely. When the expansion is finished, I exhausted, bathe, eat, and go to bed straight away.

Instead of getting knocked out by the exhaustion, I can't believe I am concerned about the piglets and the upcoming race in a few weeks. How do I train them? Do they need some extra care? Is it enough to feed them normally and let them eat grass and straw?

They are racing piglets. Shouldn't we give them specific food? I think of some pig pages on Facebook I followed. One of the admins raised a mini pig to be a healthy giant pig. I reckon he fed the pig with various food, pastries, tomatoes, watermelons, even durians. He even potty-trained it. Maybe I have to discuss how to feed and train the piglets my way with Oui-Suya tomorrow, to consider the plausibility. I might need Ming to take me to the market again to buy the things we're short of. Once the piglets arrive, we will have everything ready.

I flip on my side and move the Lantom placed at the top of the mattress closer to my face so I can smell its scent as my vigor rockets.

Bring it on! If I can't go home yet and have to continue living in this past world, I will not live in despair. I will fight on as my strength will allow me. My piglets must be the champions!

Chapter 4: The No.1 Love Rival

"Jom...Jom, wake up," a rough voice whispers in my ear.

I'm groggy, half-asleep. I want to open my eyes, but my eyelids feel too heavy, then I fall into the dreamland again. I hear a chuckle next to my side. Though I don't see the face, I know the voice owner is smiling.

"What a sleepyhead," the voice nags resignedly yet lovingly. I can feel the teasing touch climbing up my elbow to my upper arm, followed by a whisper.

"If you don't wake up, I'll hold you."Ohm!
My eyes open wide in the dark. H...He's not here.

I huff, feeling my heart racing in my chest. The sight before me is unfamiliar. Above me is a roofline without a ceiling. I have to remind myself where and what period I am. I lift my upper body and throw a glance around in the dim light from the hazy sky out the window, which indicates it is almost dawn and I am still lying in the servants' house in Mr. Robert's property like yesterday.

Ming snores softly from the other side of the wall, convincing me that the voice I heard was just a dream. I rub my face and pull my knees up before tugging the blanket up to my chest. It's freezing, but I don't have the heart to get up and shut the window left open since last night. The dream felt too real, so real that I wish I could fall asleep and resume it. It was warm, tempting, and heart-wrenching, yet I yearn to hear and feel it again.

'...Jom.' Sharp pain strikes my chest along with odd pleasure as I think of the teasing voice and the familiar way of speaking. I can't pinpoint which feeling overpowers the other between joy and anguish and the feeling of losing something I once owned over again, though it is just a dream.

I wrap my arms around my knees, press my cheek on my upper arm, and close my eyes. Oh, dear... No matter the lifetimes, even if I have escaped this far, to a different world, his shadow still follows and hurts me. I sit like that until daybreak. The roosters crowing from the back of the garden reach my ears. I force myself to stand when I see Ming trying to get up in drowsiness. My life must go on in this place, right here, like it or not. I

barely have a choice left. I was pumped up about the piglets last night, but now the joyous dream is wearing down my strength.

I hate myself so much. I get ready and have breakfast in a circle with the other servants, then I advance to the pigsty, my current workplace. Oui-Suya is already there, preparing water-filled buckets to pour into the trough. Next to him, banana stalks lie on the ground.

"Lad, the piglets will be delivered in the afternoon, correct?" he asks. I mumble the answer listlessly. I flop on the small wooden bench and start chopping the banana stalks to mix in the pigs' food to blow off steam.

"What are we going to do to make them run fast as the boss wants?" Oui-Suya shakes his head at a loss. He has no idea how to make the piglets run faster than the others. Oui-Suya's question gets me looking back to the strategy I came up with last night. It's a tactic adapted from the puppy training that I never practiced. I simply saw it in a book or on TV.

Even so, I think it's better than leaving it up to fate. "I've got an idea, Oui. We will train them to follow orders and get rewards, if possible."

"We can train them like monkeys?" Oui-Suya shoots me a sidelong glance in disbelief. Oui-Suya's action brings a smile to my face.

"Not like monkeys, but we can try, in case it increases the foreign boss' chance of winning. It's better than raising them blindly." I explain how to train the piglets to Oui-Suya. He occasionally either nods or scrunches his face in doubt.

"How about this? If we lose, I'll take the blame alone. I'll be the one getting punished by the foreign boss," I end the conversation boldly. Seriously, I have nothing to lose. I am already in the most unfortunate situation. I'll probably feel numb if things get worse.

"Hmm," he waves his hand.

"The boss isn't that cruel."

"On the other hand, if we win and get complimented by the foreign boss, I'll give all credit to you," I say.

"If he rewards us, you can have it all."

Oui-Suya ponders it in silence for a moment before finally saying

"If the boss actually rewards us, let's split it."

"Roger." I smile, raising my right hand.

"Who?" Oui-Suya looks at my hand, puzzled.

I shake my head in amusement and lift Oui-Suya's hand, then I smack our palms together.

"I mean, okay." I turn my attention to the banana stalks with less stress. Having something distracting you and requiring your care is a great help in drawing you away from the life drama in which you are the main character encountering a series of misfortunes.

In the afternoon, the three piglets have arrived. They are cute and plump. Mr. Robert stops by to check and names one of them Golden, implying it will win the gold medal. The other one is Polka-dot because of its two dark brown dots on its nose.

The last one is Hope. It seems more agile and faster than the others, so it's our hope. The boss reminds Oui-Suya and me to take good care of them so that they are ready for the race on the approaching Christmas.

I look at the piglets in the shelter and can't help expecting a lot in them as well. They munch their food and waggle their tails adorably. I pat their heads and call each of their names before heading out to the foreign kitchen to fetch something I need. I plan to train them like dogs, with collars and guiding leashes. I will also reward them if they accomplish their missions. Usually, the pigs' food is simple. Aside from rice bran, every other ingredient can be grabbed anywhere, banana stalks, pumpkins, corns, potatoes, taros, all in the garden. In addition, Oui-Suya makes nourishing food for the piglets--fruits fermented with molasses and a little bit of alcohol. The sweet taste will stimulate the piglets' appetite.

However, the reward for my piglets must be more special and impressive. It must be the irresistible, tempting delicate sweetness.

A ripe cultivated banana cake. Given the name, you may think it's impossible and extravagant. But don't forget whose place it is. Mr. Robert doesn't accept other kinds of breakfast except for the Western breakfast, consisting of toast, eggs, and coffee. Moreover, his dinner is a full course meal, with appetizers, main dishes, and pastries as the dessert.

Thus, a cultivated banana cake isn't too hard for me to bake. I don't even need high-quality ingredients, just taking some of this and that from the foreign kitchen. Eggs are all-time available in the coop. We even have goat milk. The trees in the garden grow bunches of bananas. It's not necessary to use the human's recipe. I will be fed to piglets. Just by the delicate softness of the cake texture, the sweet fragrance of the cultivated bananas, with a hint of the aroma of Cavendish bananas, my piglets will ascend to heaven.

My reward cake. I ask for help from the chefs and the sous chefs, They are excellent in creating Western dishes from the available ingredients. At

the moment, they are busy preparing for the party tomorrow. All of them cooperate with me and are willing to help me bake the cake after cooking the main meals because the words 'the foreign boss' racing piglets' are like an ordinance that everyone must bow to the floor to show respect to.

Late morning on the next day, after I have finished my regular tasks, I drop by the foreign kitchen to make sure my ingredients are all prepared. Pressed for time, I want to start training the piglets today.

But when one of the sous chefs says

"We ran out of Cavendish bananas," I'm disappointed.

Mr. Robert's tonight party is the reason. Tonight, the feast must be various and perfect, with savory dishes, desserts, whisky, and appetizers. And so, some of the ingredients have been used up.

I turn around uneasily because the additional Cavendish bananas are the key, as they give a stronger scent than cultivated bananas. So, I plan to make my cake smell like them even though I have to use a larger portion of the cultivated bananas.

The problem is we don't grow Cavendish bananas in the garden. They're not popular among the locals and are more expensive than cultivated bananas. If I buy a bunch of Cavendish bananas just to bake a cake, it is extravagance. But I can't leave them out. I need them for the recipe. I decide to go to the market to buy the bananas right now. That way, I will come back in time in the afternoon to clean the cowshed and pigsty and have time to train the piglets.

I march to Ming, who is digging a hole in the garden.

"Ming, take me to the market," I say. Ming looks at my face.

"The market," I repeat, trying my best to pull off the northern accent, and speak the holy sentence

"I need Cavendish bananas to feed the foreign boss' racing piglets." Ming stays quiet for a moment, then nods actively.

"Let's go." I follow Ming to the boat tied to the dock. When we walk past a group of servants building a howdah, one of them teases us.

"Going out, huh, Ai-Ming?" Ming turns to answer

"I'm going to teach Ai-Jom how to paddle." I halt and stare at him....
What?

Ming rests his hands on his hips, leans in, and utters in my face

"Am I your servant, taking you to places? If you don't know how to paddle, learn it!" I'm shocked, but Ming drags me to the riverbank without

care.

"The river flows slowly here, easy to paddle" Ming says when we have reached the riverbank. He unties the boat from the pole.

"Get in. I'll show you how first, then you'll try."

I swallow hard and board the boat as told without a choice. I look at the calm Ping River that appears pretty harmless. It's not a meander or a torrent, good for practicing paddling, as Ming pointed out. Am I confident, though? Hell no.

"Are you left-handed or right-handed?"

"Left-handed," I reply.

"Then hold the paddle with your left hand and only paddle on the left side."

"Will it go forward?" Rather than answering, Ming shows me. He paddles on the same side, yet the boat goes straight without tilting since he has a technique to flip the paddle at the right moment. It's like he directs the boat by pushing the blade against the tide instead of paddling on the other side. He holds my gaze all the while and lifts his eyebrow when the bow starts inclining to one side, then he tracks straight and leads the boat forward in a smooth motion. His face is freaking cheeky. I want to kick him off the boat but hold back.

"Easy?" he asks.

"You just have to lean forward a little, stab the blade into the water, and push it behind while adjusting your position back to normal. When your arm reaches the farthest, you pull up the blade. Twist your wrist to flip the blade to direct the boat and prevent it from turning." He slowly demonstrates each step as he explains. I watch him intently. It looks easy because Ming is good at it.

"Now, you try." Ming passes me the other paddle. Though hesitating, I accept it.

"Do as I said. It's not hard," he stresses. I grip the paddle with both hands on the left side, lean forward, plant the blade in the water, pull it to the back, and lift it. The boat won't move.

"Do you have any strength?" Ming sounds annoyed and condescending.

"You're as weak as an ant."

I clench my teeth...I do have strength but zero confidence! I try again. It seemed like I did it too quickly. This time, I go slower, but I'm still

awkward and have a problem with my position. Ming crosses his arms over his chest and sighs after watching my failed strokes over and over.

"What's so hard about it...Ai-Jom? Just stab it, move it, and lift it. I'm about to fall asleep right here, waiting for you," Ming taunts.

I take a deep breath, get a grip, and lean forward. I immerse the blade into the water, slowly bend backward, and push the blade behind me. This time, the boat clearly moves further than before.

....Hey, it's not that hard. I mimic the way Ming flipped the paddle to direct the boat, but I have not yet gotten the hang of it. When I raise the blade, the bow veers to the right. Ming turns it back on track with his paddle.

"Try again," Ming orders, beginning to be pleased to see my progress. My courage also comes back. I raise my paddle to do another stroke.

"Like that! Lean backward," Ming shouts the order.

"Flip your wrist. Steer it!"

"Again!"

"I told you to steer it!" He yells.

I clench my teeth against Ming's reverberating shout.

I can paddle. I pull the blade with strength from my shoulders. The boat sails forward, but Ming stops helping me direct the boat with his paddle. The servants on the riverbank laugh when they see me paddle the boat in circles.

"Ming! Why is it circling?!" I bellow.

Ming doesn't answer since he's busy laughing, his hands clutching his stomach. In the end, Ming relents and paddles for me until I know how to do it. After all, the piglet race is an important matter that requires everyone's cooperation.

We're in the boat heading upstream towards the north, where the markets and the bridge are. The sunlight sparkles over the surface of the water. The weather is cool as usual. Big fish leap and make splashes as Ming approaches. Small boats glide past us, some full of crockery and fruits, presumably on their way back from the markets. Some know Ming and greet him. To say it's an impressive scene is pretty accurate, but I'm not part of it.

Our boat moves past the great rain tree branching out over the river. The waterfront pavilion I have seen is a short distance away. Ming paddles slowly not far from the bank as if to be sheltered by the shade of trees. I

sneakily put my hand into the water and collect a Lantom like that day. When our boat gets closer to the pavilion, I notice the same man resting there in his clean white shirt and blue satin trousers. He sits cross-legged, his back straight, absorbed in the book set on a short table. As Ming ushers us even closer,

the man looks up. His charming face turns my way, neither shifting away nor returning to the book.

He's looking at me again, not in shock like that day. He gazes at me calmly as though he has expected I would pass by again.

And then, his lips move...A smile. Is he smiling at me? His lips curve up, then spread into a smile. He has such a nice smile. All ancient people have beautiful smiles, I suppose.

I unintentionally keep staring at him. Before I realize I should respond with a nod or a smile, my boat sails away. I turn my head back. The petals of the Lantom on one side are bruised because I was unconsciously clenching my fist. I'm irritated at myself for not smiling back at him. How rude. We're neighbors, yet I acted unfriendly.

The boat passes the serene, shady plantations to the bustling port and markets. It doesn't take long to get the Cavendish bananas, and it's kind of funny to buy them with this strange-looking money. It's like I'm not using something of value, and instead, exchanging this weird strip for the goods, which feels like I've gotten it for free.

I carry a bunch of Cavendish bananas I have gone this far to get with care. Now, my piglets will be in the palm of my hand. Mr. Robert will be stunned and accept his wife's brother from the future.

Our trip back is faster by half as we go downstream. Ming knows the river well. He avoids the rapids and paddles in relaxation, not using much force.

When we have reached the fruit gardens, Ming pouts towards the other paddle on the boat.

"Try it." I am stupefied as I haven't braced myself for this, but Ming won't let it slide. I have no choice but to pick up the paddle.

"Do as I taught you. Go with the flow of the river," he says.

"From this point to the great house, it won't take long." I tighten my grip around the paddle and think of Ming's lesson. Stab, move, lift, repeat. Don't get worked up. I review everything in my mind and start paddling with determination. I'm doing better this time, apparently. I laugh in contentment

when the bow slices through the water without inclining either side too much. I get the hang of it now. The river flows slowly down here, so it's easy to direct the boat.

"You can do it once you put my mind to it," Ming says. He looks proud as well.

"Compliment me more." I smile happily.

"You got a good teacher."

I laugh and continue paddling a good distance. I make a few mistakes but regain control every time. Ming drops his paddle, letting me show off my skill. The Luang's waterfront pavilion is near. My strokes are steadier now. Ming puts his hands behind the nape of his neck, leans backward, and closes his eyes, enjoying the breeze and sunlight like he is a boss, and I, his servant, paddle for him in this leisurely boat ride. I don't mind that and focus on paddling to Mr. Robert's property in the distance.

A scorpion-tailed boat zooms past us. It's a big boat built from teak, its bow long, its stern curving up like a scorpion's tail, the roof covering near the back, with the capacity of ten people.

Unable to resist, I turn my head fully that way when I spot civic servants in the raj-pattern costumes on the boat, a historic sight I have never thought I would get a chance to witness in person.

"Oh," I cry out softly when the waves created by the scorpion-tailed boat rock and sway my boat in the other direction. I attempt to regain the balance and steer the boat back on track to save the situation. However, with shock and inexperience, the force I put with all my might only worsens it.

"H... Hey, wait," I cry out when the bow soars to the waterfront pavilion.

Ming widens his eyes, trying to seize the paddle on the bilge, but it's too late. The damage from my inefficient attempt and the rushing current causes us to soar towards the target.

"Hey!"

BAM!!!

The whole boat shakes when the bow crashes with the pole directly, then the boat tilts.

SPLASH!

Ming and I fall off into the river. In the cold water, I crawl towards one of the pavilion poles. I hold on to it and emerge.

"Can you climb up?" a voice sounds near me.

I rub my soaked face with my hand before opening my eyes. A face hovers over me...It's him, the man who read the book in the pavilion.

A man feels like a wrong term. Up close, I can see that he has a much younger face than I thought. His skin glows like those born in wealthy families. His eyebrows are thick, his sharp nose complementing his jawline with a faint trace of freshly shaved stubble. I assume he is four or five younger than me. Regardless, his tall and big figure of a full-grown man made it hard to guess his age from afar.

"Grip my hand and climb up," he says.

I hesitate. He holds out his palm before me, within my reach, then someone speaks from behind his back.

"Khun*-Yai, kindly let me help him. You will get wet."

"It's all right, Nai**Jun. If I get wet, I will play in the water with him," he says in a good mood while the old man behind him cranes his neck in worry.

I reach out reluctantly, but he moves forward to grasp my hand and pull me up to sit on the edge of the pavilion. His palm is big and his grip is tight. He's not letting go until I sit properly.

"Thank you," I say, drops of water forming puddles in the planks. I eye them in shame.

"Pay no mind," he says, releasing my hand. "You can go back down once the boat is retrieved."

His words make me turn my head to the river. Ming swims and grabs the edge of the boat that has floated quite far away.

I groan in dismay, knowing Ming will nag at me until my ears go numb.

'Khun-Yai' lets out a soft laugh, his voice low in his throat. I turn to him and stare unconsciously. His voice and his action are so pleasing to the eyes, but what strikes me is not his perfect sculpture-like face or his manners of a man in a noble family.

It's the sparkling jet-black eyes fixed on me. They're clear and quite dazzling.

"Do you live in this area? I saw you paddle past by pretty often," he asks.

"I am Mr. Robert's servant."

"Oh, the British timber merchant." He slightly nods.

"I've seen him visit my father."

...His father. So, he is the son of the owner of this place. His father is Luang something, whose name Ming doesn't remember.

"I....ah, I'm Jom. That guy is Ming. Sorry we bumped into your pavilion. It's my first day learning how to paddle." I fold my hands over my chest in apology. He looks younger than me, but I am in a lower class. I guess it is right to show him respect.

"I am Yai." I crane my neck to check out the pole my boat has collided with. There is an unmistakable scrape. My face goes sheepish.

"Will the pole be okay?"

"If the pole breaks, Poh-Jom will need to pay for it."

His words make my head turn abruptly. Seeing his solemn expression, I get disheartened. I can't utter a single word, thinking of the compensation I won't be able to cover. Then, his stoic disposition breaks into a bright smile as he fails to stifle his laughter. Snickering, he says...

"The pole is fine. Your boat may be not." Wow..how wicked.

I want to punch him in the face. Are all ancient people cheeky like this? I was shocked. Well...he seems young, maybe seventeen or eighteen years old. Although he is the son of a noble family, his mischievousness and playfulness are on par with teenagers in my time. He just speaks more gracefully and isn't as eccentric.

Ming has successfully retrieved the boat and paddled to me, drenched. He keeps bowing gratefully since 'Khun-Yai' doesn't take offense at us. Nai-Jun, the servant of the family, lends us a new paddle, seeing as the one Ming used to guide the boat here is broken in half and the other has drifted away in the river.

In the afternoon, the news about me crashing the boat into a pole of the waterfront pavilion in Luang Thep Nititham's property becomes the talk of the town, spreading like fire. Ming now remembers the name of our neighbor well because he needs it in his narration, announcing it to the world.

"Ai-Jom, did you really crash your boat into Luang Thep Nititham's pavilion?" one of the servants asks while I walk to the well to fetch water.

"Yeah," I reply evenly, as I have done to so many others.

"I heard it hit his son. Is it true?"

Ugh....this is getting out of control. I sigh in weariness.

"I bumped into the pavilion, not flying inside. His son was resting inside."

"Oh, I thought he got hit." His voice sounds disappointed since the story isn't as intense as he has heard. "Paddle slowly next time. I feel bad for the

pole."

He leaves, laughing as if it is such an amusing topic. I've spent the whole afternoon answering and correcting the rumor because the information passed by word of mouth has been twisted and altered. They lately put a spin on it that my boat crashed into the pavilion so hard that Luang Thep's son jumped into the river in shock...How ludicrous.

Moreover, I haven't trained my piglets as I hoped because I got suddenly called for to complete other tasks for the party tonight.

The party will be held in a wing of the great house, a massive hall decorated opulently with European furniture, brightened with electric lights. A variety of flowers ornament all over the room and hallways, emitting their fragrance. The music from the gramophone makes the ambiance vibrant. Some servants even want to sneak glances at their bosses dancing in a western style.

A group of servants and I, who have decent looks and demeanors, are assigned to assist the guests in the parking area and light the way in case they park their cars far from the party hall.

The female servants are clothed beautifully in Lanna dresses and walk in a courteous manner. Meanwhile, the lady boss Ueang Phueng wears an international lace gown, smiling sweetly next to Mr. Robert. I crane my neck in excitement as each car entering the property is gorgeously classic, as if to flaunt their prosperity.

The guests are in their fancy attire. The ladies wear frilly gowns while the gentlemen have their suits on. The atmosphere is mirthful and merry as a dance party. I notice there are almost no Thai guests. Most of them are foreigners and chat in English.

"The guests the foreign boss invited are the families of his fellow timber merchants. It's rare for a foreigner to marry a Lanna woman outright. The lady boss Ueang Phueng is indeed blessed," one of the servants assigned to be in the parking area like me whispers.

"Oh, how come?"

"They see them as rural and look down on them. It was worse before. Whenever a timber merchant wedded a Lanna woman, his friends would be disgusted and refuse to attend the wedding. It's gotten better nowadays."

I nod in understanding, though it aggravates me. These foreigners come to Thailand to exploit the resources their countries

lack, yet they view us as savage, uncivilized, uneducated, and not as superior as Westerners. I wish they could see the world in my time. Would their hearts be shattered to learn that Thai people are part of international projects and march on the same carpet as the famous Western figures? It's a world where opportunities come along with talents, not obstructed by this medieval perspective. In contrast to the lively great house, the kitchen is in chaos. Various dishes are served one by one. I don't get to see every menu as I am working on the other side, but I know they are plenty, with canapés as the appetizer, tiny pastries, savory dishes like baked pork, stuffed chicken, Western desserts, whiskey, and ice that is considered extravagant in this era.

It is late into the night by the time the party is over. My legs have gone numb from the long hours of standing. I wait until every car and carriage is gone and trudge back to my quarter.

When some of the neon lights in the great house are turned off, the lanterns in the servants' quarter are gradually snuffed, an inequality I find fascinating. The smell of the oil wick faintly fills the air in the dark and coolness that lulls me to sleep.

Tonight, I fall asleep without an attempt to stop thinking of things that shouldn't be paid attention to unnecessarily. I prayed over my pillow and thought of my parents and hoped I could go back to my family, then I looked back to the incident at the waterfront pavilion today in order to prevent my mind from wandering to the person in another era who could appear in my fanciful dream. Humiliation and annoyance towards the rumor felt better than the pathetic longing for the taken man.

Tomorrow, I will have to continue correcting the twisted rumor. By now, they might have spread the word that my boat hit Luang Thep Nititham's son and broke his leg, and they were furious and would make me suffer the worst punishment.

Khun-Yai...

I thought of the clear eyes and the lovely smile on that charming face. When he grows older, I bet he will become a flirtatious playboy putting the girls' hearts in misery with the poisonous fever of unrequited love. I mean, his eyes are full of tricks, not to mention the beautiful plump lips speaking in the resonant voice.

Hmm..by putting hearts in misery, does it include men's hearts?

I didn't dream about Ohm last night. Maybe I did and then forgot. When I wake up, I don't remember my dream. I walk out of the house to work and brace myself to be teased about the boat crash incident all day.

As it turns out, today, there is a more exciting incident than the rumor about me destroying the pole of the waterfront pavilion next door.

"Have you seen her, the girl her father gave the foreign boss in exchange for paying interest this morning?" A servant delivers the news they have heard in enthusiasm.

"Her father borrowed the boss' money last year, didn't he? He couldn't pay back and so gave out his daughter to serve the boss," the other responds in kind.

"Yeah, right. They said she was a beauty. The boss even gifted the father a cow. I don't think she can slip out of the boss' grip.

When he got Ai-Jom last time, he was displeased. The lady boss' stomach grows larger every day."

I shake my head. This is nuts. He exchanged his daughter for a cow. Isn't it illegal? They all laugh while I listen in silence. The law is useless as long as the traditional lifestyle and mindset of the people don't change. and leans close to me.

In the evening, after I have finished my task, Ming comes.

"Ai-Jom, have you seen her?" Ming asks. "They said the new servant was a real beauty. The other guys have taken peeks" I shake my head. I have zero interest in knowing how pretty the woman who would be the thorn in my sister's heart is.

"Let's go and have a look. I wonder if her beauty matches E-Mei," he says.

I turn to Ming and realize it right away. He just wants to see Mei. With that, I decide to accompany him. We both crouch behind the bushes and try to peek. I see the said girl following Mei downstairs, presumably returning to the female servants' quarter. She has a slim figure and fair skin, looking quite attractive.

She seems nervous, looking around, alarmed by the new environment. She turns her head in the direction Ming and I are hiding. When I see her face clearly, I spring up in shock. The oval face shape, dainty facial structure, round chin, big round dark eyes. Even though I have met her once, I can never forget her. To be accurate, I can't shake her face off my head.

.....Kaimook.
Ohm's fiancée.
My No.1 love rival!

Chapter 5: Traveled Back in Time to Be Hurt Again.

I don't get why we see each other again here. What sin did we commit together that cursed us to reunite in every lifetime? Is the elders' belief that people we meet in each stage of our lives are those we have met in the past lifetimes true?

Kaimook doesn't spot me. She spins and trails after Mei towards the female servant houses.

"Ming, do you know her name?" I ask.

"Ai-Som said her name is Fongkaew." I press my lips together. No matter if it is Kaimook or Fongkaew, I hope not to be near or have anything to do with her.

Today, I train the piglets as planned. I make leashes out of cloths and ropes to guide the piglets to run a short distance with me. They are super naughty and keep dashing off course. I need to hit their hips gently so they learn to follow orders and don't forget to reward them after they run a little bit.

A few days later, the piglets' performances have made progress. They know I am a person with yummy stuff. I have Oui-Suya hold the piglets at the starting point and I stand further away. When I clap as a signal and call their names, the piglets scuttle towards me to eat the tasty cake. But if something catches their attention, they will get distracted and instantly go off course. Sometimes, when they are halfway up, they change their minds and roll around on the muddy ground. They also swerve to the sides to nuzzle something in the grass. The overall situation is hopeful, though. I pour my attention to the piglets, not caring about what happens in the great house. I turn a deaf ear to everything not concerning me, especially the great house owner's love affairs. But it's hard because Mr. Robert's new concubine is the main gossip at every meal.

"They said the boss called for Fongkaew to serve in the house. Is it true?" one of the servants asks.

The said house is not the great house resided by Mr. Robert and the lady boss Ueang Phueng. It refers to another house near the mistresses' accommodation, where some female servants live. It is a small guesthouse built under the shade of trees in the middle of the garden with full facilities, the kind of place to relax when you want to hang out with a couple of friends or rest to be free from the day's stress. It's not hard to guess what type of relaxation happens there.

"No." Another servant waves his hand.

"She was ordered to welcome his guest with a tray of oranges. The boss wanted to show off to his friend that he has a beautiful woman in possession."

"Hmm? Was it really just a friend?" Another servant joins in.

"Didn't they try to follow in the footsteps of Doctor Cheek and Missa Louis?" Content hollers sound over the meal circle. I look at them in confusion and can't help asking.

"Who are Doctor Cheek and Missa Louis?"

"Don't you really know?" one of them eyes me in disdain.

"Where have you been? How come you don't know Doctor Cheek*, the infamous foreigner, and Missa Louis, Ma'am Anna's son? They said she used to teach the sons and daughters of the King of Siam English. Both of them were timber merchants in the past, decades ago, but never forgotten. They are the legend."

He pulls a cheeky face while saying that. 'Missa Louis, Ma'am Anna's son' kind of rings the bell, so I ask, "Is Missa Louis Mr. Louis T. Leonowens?"

"Oh, you know him. You keep switching between central and northern dialects." The same servants tsk in annoyance.

"Doctor Cheek was filthy rich back then. They said Doctor Chitt** built a great house larger than our boss' and had dozens of women serving him. Both Missa Louis and Doctor Cheek were granted concessions for forestry and became business rivals, then they grew closer. So much closer." The way he draws out his voice, his pervy smile, and the other guys' manners increase my curiosity. I'm not familiar with the name 'Doctor Cheek', but I unquestionably know about Louis T. Leonowens. His name has been mentioned in multiple historical records. He used to run around in the palace since young as the son of the foreign teacher, Anna Leonowens,

whose life story was later adapted into the well-known film, Anna and the King.

Since Louis was a competent man and had connections, acquainted with numerous high-rank authorities in Siam, he acquired great business opportunities. Regardless, he was a foreigner who was deeply attached to Thailand. But I doubt these servants are being amused by the foreigners, Doctor Cheek and Louis, getting rich from forestry businesses.

Thus, I ask, "What kind of legend did you mean?" And I get the answer right away when one of them sings a northern song. Once he starts, the others chorus along merrily.

***Doctor Chitt and Missa Louis
Sleeping with two girls
Two nights for fifteen rupees
Miss Luang is on the bed
Miss On is waiting
Hurry up and finish, Doctor...***

***Doctor Chitt and Missa Louis
Sleeping with two girls
Two nights for fifteen rupees
Miss Kum asked for silver
Miss Huan asked for cloth
Miss Noja asked for an elephant
Hurry up and finish, Doctor. ****

Startled by the meaning of the song, I blurt, "Why does On have to wait? They can call for her on the next day.

"What fun would they have if she came another day? It has to be the same day, in the same room. Let On sit and watch. Both tycoons will come at her later at the same time." Everyone laughs.

Ugh...Is this an ancient perverted story? I don't know how to respond. Basically, this song means Doctor Chitt, or Doctor Cheek, and Mister Louis pay two women fifteen rupees to sleep with them for two nights. One of them will get in bed first while the other waits and tells Doctor Cheek to hurry.

I try not to imagine the orgy scene of two best friends generously sharing women on the same bed. It's no surprise why it was deemed scandalous to the point it was made into this mocking song. Having several wives is one thing, but committing sexual activities with more than two people at a time

is another. I can only get myself out of the perverted chat when I leave to go to bed. Ming croons the song in a good mood, probably dreaming of being a Lanna playboy like those two foreign timber merchants. When I plop on my bed, Ming speaks.

"Oh...Ai-Jom, I returned the paddle to our neighbors yesterday. Luang Thep Nititham's son, the one named Khun-Yai, asked about you."

"Hmm...?" I swiftly turn to Ming.

"I told him you were busy training foreign boss' racing piglets, so you didn't come."

"Yeah? Did he say something else?"

"No," Ming replies.

"He just nodded and went quiet. What else do you expect him to say?" Oh...Ming is right. What else could he have possibly asked about me...? Poh-Jom, did you get sick after falling into the river that day? Something like that...? I am out of my mind. I clear my throat to hide my embarrassment, turn my back to Ming, and pretend to be so sleepy I am knocked out.

A few days later, Mr. Robert requests my presence at the great house to show him the progress of the piglets.

I stand on the lawn in front of the great house. Mr. Robert and his two foreign friends sit on the guest chairs on the shady balcony under the trees casting shadows. The lady boss Ueang Phueng rests on the stool under the shade farther back. I see Fongkaew sitting with her legs folded to one side on the floor near the stairs with another female servant, serving Mr. Robert.

Obviously, she is becoming his favorite. The servants gossiped that she hadn't lost her virginity because the foreign boss adored her so much that he was willing to wait for a while until she was ready to serve him in bed on her own account.

The sunlight in the afternoon is fierce, but the cold breeze fanning through the groves of trees feels relaxing and refreshing, I bend down and cross over the temporary stall to talk with the piglets.

"Golden, Hope, Polka-dot, time to show them what you got." I pat their heads one by one, my other hand carrying a plate of cake.

"Do your best, my babies." I wave the cake past their faces to stimulate their appetite, and they sniff it. I jog to the finish line. Many servants working nearby gather by the lawn to watch, but Mr. Robert doesn't mind.

He sees this as a leisure activity and it is similar to the real race watched by a lot of spectators.

I get on one knee, place the cake before me, and nod to Oui-Suya as a signal. The whistle goes off. The wooden barrier rises. The piglets scurry out. I clap loud and call their names.

"Golden, Hope, Polka-dot, run!"

Hope charges towards me as if it understands my words. Its small hoofs scuttle across the grass, both cute and hilarious. The other two trot unhurriedly. The servants cheer and clap in enjoyment. Golden begins to hesitate and is about to stop in the middle of the lawn, whereas Polka-dot gets pumped up like a mad piglet by the cheer. It outruns Golden and shortens the distance between him and Hope.

"Polka-dot! Hope! Faster!" I shout.

All of a sudden, Polka-dot veers off the lawn and darts to the sweet pea shrubs, where a duck and its ducklings are coincidentally tottering around. Laughter resounds over the lawn when Polka-dot tries to mess with the ducklings and gets attacked by the mother duck. In the end, Hope is the only piglet on course and reaching the finish line.

Mr. Robert is satisfied. He stands beside the stenciled wooden railing and points at Hope.

"That one will race."

After the piglets' racing show, the servants get back to work. A man, Mr. Robert's guest, descends the stairs and walks across the lawn to me.

"What's your name?" he asked, stopping in front of me. The piglets are relishing the cake.

I glance up. This man is well-built as a European, with blue eyes, light-brown hair, and a friendly disposition, not putting on airs like most foreigners I have met in the parking area during the previous party.

"I'm Jom," I answer.

"Um, you're quite something, very good at training the piglets. Where did you learn that?" Youtube and Facebook. I don't say it out loud, though, just smiling.

"Why don't you train my piglets next time so I can join the race as well?"

"You...Ah, are you raising piglets, sir?" He smiles when I stutter. I'm not sure how to address him.

"I'm James, Mr. James, a forestry assistant manager at the Lampang Station. I don't have a single piglet right now." He squats, strokes Hope's

body, and laughs when it gets earnestly interested in his hand and sniffs it nonstop. I guess his hand has the smell of pastries. Mr. James moves his hand to scratch Hope's chin as if it's a cat, not a piglet.

"Why don't you find me a piglet next time, Jom? A smart and healthy piglet like these ones. I can join the race next year."

"Next year..." I mumble, my heart pounding at what I am thinking. I throw a sidelong glance at Mr. James. He's still smiling, his blue eyes gentle, not harsh. It encourages me to ask the following question.

"What year is next? I mean, A.D. Well... Anno Domini, Christian year."

"Oh, you know Anno Domini?" He looks amazed.

"This year is 1927, so next year will be 1928." I calculate quickly in my mind by adding 543, the difference between B.E. and A.D., to the year. It means I am unmistakably in B.E. 2470. My palms get cold with a thrill because I have found out what era in the history I have traveled back to. I am in the Early Seventh Reign, the interwar period, nine years after World War I and twelve years before World War II!

"Jom, are you okay?" Mr. James asks since I have gone rigid.

I say nothing as I am struck by this one fact, the Greater East Asia War that will occur during World War II. It will significantly affect the foreigners' forestry businesses, and the prosperity presented at the moment will be lost to the war. The forestry companies will be confiscated while the people will be chased by Japanese soldiers and put in the concentration camp as prisoners of war, living their lives in misery. Countless people won't be able to survive it. I raise my eyes and look at Mr. Robert chatting away with his other friend on the veranda. I have never cared about him before, that's true, but he is my sister's husband at the end of the day...

Somjeed, my sister, what will happen to her when that time comes? Will she be captured or go into hiding in time? What about my sister's child? Will it be safe? Will it become an orphan?

"Jom, your face is pale. I think you're going to faint." Mr. James holds my upper arm.

I flick my eyes back to him but perceive nothing before me, my head full of the deplorable scenes that will take place during that time.

"I will take you to the rest in the shade." Mr. James wraps his other arm around my shoulder.

I shake my head rapidly, try to get it together, and withdraw from his arm carefully to not offend him.

"It's all right. I'm fine. Just a bit hot."

Time passes by with anxiety and dispersed concentration. I live day by day, my mind wandering in disorder. I know I can't change history, and I don't know what I should do. Worse, I have no idea why the wormhole sent me here. Late into one night, after tossing and turning for hours, I get up, walk out of the house, and head to the river.

The Ping River in the moonless night looks mysterious. I amble from the dock in the male servants' quarter, skirting the riverbank on the grass, to the center dock between the female and male servants' row houses. It is where Ming took me to the markets by boat. The night air in December is chilly. I sit on a clump of grass near the dock, hug myself to keep warm, and watch weeds floating aimlessly in the river. I just want to try again to see if this river will take me back to the era I came from. My hair stands on ends from the coldness as my calves are halfway in. I force myself to step forward until my chest sinks under the water.

Before I hold my breath and immerse my head, I hear something rhythmic breaking the surface of the water in ripples.

Splash...splash. I soon realize it is the paddling sound, and it is approaching. I frown. Who paddles here in the middle of the night? Before any consideration, I inch closer to the bank and squeeze myself between the caladiums spreading along the riverside, hiding under the giant leaves without even knowing why.

The boat stops by the dock shortly. I catch a shadowy figure up there, a sturdy man in a short loincloth unbothered by the cold air. I peek without sticking out my face since the way he looks around suspiciously suggests he is about to commit something terrible.

...Is he a thief?

With that thought, I slip back in the caladium leaves, worried that he might have a weapon. My teeth clatter from the iciness. That man lights up a lantern that shines dimly in the dark. He lifts and lowers it a few times as though sending a signal, to my surprise. His shoulder and back face me from this angle, his face out of sight.

In a heartbeat, I hear someone's footsteps coming near. I crane my neck and get shocked to see Fongkaew!

Fongkaew strides to the dock, glancing left and right nervously.

My heart races. Fongkaew secretly meets up with a man in the middle of the night. If the foreign boss finds out, she will be in real trouble. I have

been avoiding anything to do with her. But why is she putting me in a difficult situation? Will she be the bane of all my lifetimes?

Before I further elaborate on her evilness, the man on the boat speaks.

"Fongkaew."

I turn my head immediately. I'm not surprised by her name. It's the man's voice, the awfully familiar voice. Now, the man turns his body more in my direction with the lantern still in his grip, and it helps me get a clear look at the brawny figure of a laborer and his face.

...Ohm!

My heart plummets, my limbs freezing under the water. They throw themselves into each other, not embracing but stroking each others' arms and shoulders longingly to convey their feelings. This is obviously a love story of a man and a woman.

I feel a sting in my chest when Ohm touches Fongkaew's cheek gently with one of his hands.

"Fongkaew, how have you been? Have you been well?" Kaimook or Fongkaew in this life shakes her head, her voice soft and weary.

"I've been well. Ai*-Kamsan, you shouldn't be here. It's dangerous."

"I've missed you." His voice is warm and gentle, and it burns my heart painfully.

No matter what lifetime, they are in love with each other... Fongkaew dips her chin, trying to stifle a sob, as Ohm grasps her arms tight. They look pained. More likely, the three of us are in pain. None of us succeeds in love, and each of us grieves and suffers disappointment inevitably.

In the silence and chilliness, I hear Ohm speak.

"Fongkaew, run away with me."

Chapter 6: Happy Shitamas (Christmas)

Astonished, I lunge out of the caladiums.

Ohm and Fongkaew flick their heads towards me, but then their attention is drawn by a sudden shriek.

"E-Fongkaew, what are you doing?!" I turn to the source of the voice and see that it is a female servant from the row house!

"Help! E-Fongkaew is running away with a man. Help!" she yells.

"Fongkaew, get in." Ohm seizes her arm and pulls her down from the dock. But Fongkaew shakes his hand off harshly, shocking Ohm.

She steps back and shakes her head.

"I can't go."

"Fongkaew, come with me right now." Ohm won't give up. He tries to grab her, but she recoils and gets back on the dock.

"I'm not going. Ai-Kumsan, leave before someone spots you," she sputters, eyeing me.

"It will be a big problem." A clamor sounds in the distance, indicating people are coming this way. The female servant keeps shouting for help.

Ohm turns his head reluctantly before deciding to back away. He looks at me and we make brief eye contact. My heart leaps, though Ohm just frowns. His eyes show no sign of anything besides irritation and worry, not a single hint of remembrance of our past deep relationship. He snuffs the lantern, veers the boat away from the dock, and paddles away in a hurry. A few seconds later, his figure is swallowed by the darkness.

Soon, the dock is filled with chatters. Male and female servants come out of their houses to observe the situation in curiosity. Kumtib, who is considered a senior servant in charge of maintaining the great house and taking care of the female servants, trembles and slaps her chest as if she is going to have a heart attack. She clasps Fongkaew's arm.

"E-Fongkaew, you've caused us trouble. Go to the great house. The foreign boss is waiting for you."

She turns to me and the female servant who witnessed the incident.

"E-Pad, Ai-Jom, go with her."

I set out as told, still soaked and shivering, but I can't sneak off. Ming runs after me in a second and hands me a blanket to cover myself. I thank him with utmost gratitude.

The great house is illuminated by the lights. Mr. Robert is already waiting with a glower. The wooden bench next to him is occupied by the lady boss Ueang Phueng, who fidgets in worry rather than seethes with rage like Mr. Robert.

I sit on the plank floor outside the terrace, my teeth clattering from the coldness. Good thing I have a blanket over my body, or else I will get a fever sooner or later.

Pad, the female servant, tells the boss everything she saw. She starts from Fongkaew leaving her mattress, which means she has been assigned to keep an eye on Fongkaew to prevent the history from repeating itself. Like in my case. Fongkaew goes paler...and paler in every minute into Pad's narration. She looks drained when Pad reports to the foreign boss that she saw with her own eyes the person meeting up with Fongkaew was a mighty young man.

"Are you sure he was a man, E-Pad?" he asks sternly, his eyes cold. He's not fuming, which only increases the tension. Even though Mr. Robert is strict and feels superior to these locals, this is the first time I have heard him address his servant as 'E'.

"I am sure, sir. My eyes wouldn't trick me. Ai-Jom was also there. He must have seen the same thing."

All eyes are locked on me. I glance at Fongkaew. She is pale like an ill person and throws pleading eyes at me. I press my lips together and drop my gaze, conflicted. What is she pleading me for...? Is she begging me to help her?

The scenes of those two throwing themselves into each other and Ohm breaking up with me at the hotel pop up in my head. My fists are clenched by my sides.

Why should I lie for her when she was the one taking away my lover? Even if it happened in a different lifetime, she is the thorn in my heart that hurts whenever seen. And even if we have nothing to do with each other in this lifetime and she is not my enemy, she is not someone I would go as far as to lie to Mr. Robert for. She must take responsibility for the consequences of her own actions.

"What I saw was a man," I answer firmly with the truth. No more excuses. Fongkaew drops on the floor and wails. I am allowed to return to my quarter right away, not being questioned why I was there in the first place. It is all thanks to the nickname, 'The loony Ai-Jom,' that has become my protection.

Many male servants have confirmed that I snuck out at night to play in the water countless times.

As I walk back towards the stairs to leave, I eye the lady boss Ueang Phueng. She watches Fongkaew quivering face-down on the floor with a look of reproach and shakes her head lightly, though, surprisingly, a hint of sympathy reflects in her eyes.

I return to my room in a sour mood. It was undoubtedly Ohm at the dock. Who is he in this lifetime? Where does he live? Why did he show his face and cause me grief again? For a second, I wonder if what I did was right or wrong by telling the truth without caring about how it would affect Fongkaew. I wanted to be a good person, but when I thought of what those two have done to me in another lifetime and Ohm's eyes that were void of any affection towards me at the dock, I felt too hurt to try to be a good person. He doesn't love me. He doesn't even know me in this life, yet it tortures me more than when he broke up with me because at least we had our story back then. There is nothing here, empty, as if I don't exist and am worthless to this world. I force myself to sleep and tell myself I did no one wrong.

Two days later, I have discovered the reason behind the lady boss Ueang Phueng's sympathy.

"Did you know that Fongkaew was called for yesterday to serve the foreign boss at the guesthouse?"

One of the male servants dashes into the lunch circle on the lawn in the shade beside the kitchen, where other servants and I are having our meals.

"For real?"

another servant asks amid the others' blatant interest.

"How can it not be for real? She didn't sleep at the servants' house. She was with the foreign boss all night and left late in the morning."

"The boss might have only made her massage him."

"I don't know what kind of massage happened," the same servant says, wiggling his eyebrows, putting on a pervy grin.

"But E-Pun told me E-Fongkaew was washing her bloody sarong at the dock."

My hand holding a spoon of soup suddenly weakens. My stomach feels full even though I only had a few bites. Finally, I can't force myself to eat anymore. I give up as the servants mindlessly spew out their opinions over the news. By dusk, all servants have spread the word that Fongkaew has lost her virginity to the foreign boss a day after she got caught rendezvousing with a man. I listen to the story in distress.

He quit waiting until she was ready. Since he wanted her at that second, she had to satisfy his demand despite herself. How was it different from rape? I somehow felt awful. I despise the sight of Fongkaew, that's true, but it doesn't mean I want her to undergo that kind of thing. No one in the world deserves such maltreatment. Later on, my uneasiness towards the spreading story develops into disturbing guilt. That night, if I had risked lying that it was hard to see and saying the person meeting up with Fongkaew could have been a woman, she would have had a chance to lie that it was her mother or relative.

Fongkaew would have gotten away for the time being, not being punished by heartless physical and emotional abuse. Is this why...? Is this the reason? I played a part in pushing her off the cliff. I have sinned against her, so it is her turn in the next life to hurt me.

One day, I have found my chance. When Fongkaew leaves her house and heads to the kitchen, I drop my task and jog after her.

"Fongkaew," I call. Fongkaew halts and turns around. When she sees me, her face goes distant. I take a step closer. I know she doesn't want to see my face, but I have to resolve this. I gulp and start.

"Fongkaew, I'm sorry for telling the boss what I saw that night. I didn't think..." My voice trails off.

"I didn't think it would turn out like this." Fongkaew casts her gaze at me, clear drops of tears brimming her eyes. Fongkaew suppresses them not to fall before shaking her head and looking away.

"I don't blame anyone. It is just my misfortune."

Her words only make me feel worse. There is no sarcasm or grudges in her tone of voice. I have never felt this horrible in my whole life. I stare at her, wishing she would curse at me. That would be better than what she is doing right now.

"Why didn't you run away with...your lover that night?"

"How could I?" She spins her head back to face me, her big round eyes full of anguish.

"If I ran away, my parents would be forced to send my sister here instead to be one of his concubines.

My sister is eleven this year. How could I be so cruel as to let my sister be responsible for my action?"

I go stiff, speechless. Fongkaew drops her eyes at her clasped hands.

"I have said it is my misfortune. I blame no one."

I look at her with both eyes. Fongkaew in the future might have stolen Ohm's heart from me, but Fongkaew before me is no devil. She's just a woman with limited life choices in this era. And so, I say what I have never thought I would say to the person I once called my love rival.

"Fongkaew, blame me or not, if I can ever be of help for you someday, just say it. I will help you."

Fongkaew gives no answer. She sighs and takes off quietly, leaving me here with this unshakeable guilt.

Time passes by. The gossip about Fongkaew has died down from everyone's interest, replaced by something more colorful, merrier, and livelier.

It is Christmas, or Shitamas, as Oui-Suya and some servants call.

The vibe is vibrant before daybreak. Everyone wakes up and diligently carries out their tasks. Oui-Suya and I feed the piglets and bathe Hope clean, ready to be shown off at the foreign club today as the racing piglet from Mr. Robert's forestry company.

The smell of pastries fills the great house, aromatic as it should be on Christmas. Not only is the foreign kitchen active, but also the Thai kitchen. Today, the foreign boss will be participating in two competitions, polo and trapshooting. If he wins, all of us will definitely receive the result of merit. We will feast until we are full for days.

Hope is in high spirits. It walks around and nuzzles everything energetically. Oui-Suya and I are as excited. We practice, check the stall, and don't forget to bring some cultivated and Cavendish bananas. A lot of servants stop by to wish Hope luck in the race.

Late in the afternoon, Oui-Suya and I go to the sports club with Hope, our fast piglet, because the piglet race is the last event before the party in the evening. I am really excited since I get to sit on the cart pulled by two huge cows specifically trained to pull carts. They drag our cart across the

dirt ground full of long traces of wheels, not a display in some tourist attraction I once saw.

Along the way, I spot carriages and buffalo carts but not many cars. Houses line both sides off the road at intervals. Most are ancient wooden houses resided by the villagers, surrounded by fruit gardens. Some places, influenced by Western architecture, are grand and fancy. I enjoy the view. This is the path I have never set foot in, yet it is oddly familiar.

Soon, I know it's not all in my head. I catch the towering rubber trees edging the path beyond. This is the Rubber Tree Road, the old Chiang Mai-Lamphun route that stands long into my era. Thrilled, I cry out,

"Oui-Suya, look. Rubber trees!" Oui-Suya smiles, amused.

"Have you not seen them? They've always been here."

"I have, but not like this. I've seen them differently."

Oui-Suya seems puzzled by my answer, but I won't explain anything more. The sight before me presents rows of tall rubber trees growing thicker than in my era. The shades of their large trunks cast down, painting the road with impressively stunning lights and shadows. It is the road printed on promotional postcards and appearing in photos of tourists in Chiang Mai. I drove on this road hundreds of times when I was an architect renovating the old great house by the Ping River before getting sucked into this era. I gasp and turn around to the path behind us, my heart beating fast as I calculate the distance and possibility. I never thought about this seriously before because the remarkably dissimilar environments of both eras and the unfamiliar water transport made it difficult to speculate the distance.

But now, on the same road I used almost every day for months of work in Chiang Mai, I know Mr. Robert's place is not that far from the ancient great house I was assigned to renovate. I don't know which one I should be excited about more. The fact that I never drove past Mr. Robert's place, which means it no longer existed in my era, or the fact that the ancient great house and little house by the river with groves of Lantom trees in the backyard could have been built in this era, where I currently am?

My train of thought gets interrupted when we arrive at our destination, the Chiang Mai Gymkhana Club. The Chiang Mai Gymkhana Club was established by the European expatriates in Thailand and the officials from the British Embassy. It is a two-story building located on a vast property. And, of course, the members must be their fellow Europeans. Only the

noble from Siam and northern rulers are invited as honored guests. The commoners can only dream.

My cart turns in the opposite direction, going farther down one side of the parking area taken by cars and fancy carriages.

I actually visited the club in my era. It is a golf club with a restaurant where general people can drop by to have lunch. It is different from now, where I am granted access as Mr. Robert's servant and must stay in the equipment area. It is used as the waiting room for the animals that will be racing in each program.

Oui-Suya and I sit on the floor with Hope staring at us in the wooden stall. Today, it looks cute in a green-blue bow tied around its neck, a mark indicating it will race in the name of Mr. Robert's company. A stable is settled nearby, with several handsome horses inside. They are probably prepared for the horse race and polo.

I stick my head to peek at the club building bustling with claps and laughs as the pony race is taking place in the field. The sight of giant foreigners trying to ride little ponies is simultaneously hilarious and pitiful. If I had my phone with me, I would call World Animal Protection. If it has been established, I mean. Oh. I forgot I can't make a call anyway since telephone exchanges haven't been expanded to Chiang Mai in B.E. 2470.

I watch the event enjoyably since the ambiance is incredibly festive. The women are in their fine dresses and wide-brimmed hats. Some men are still in cricket whites and horse racing uniforms, but some wear suits for the party in the evening. The place is packed with people celebrating and chatting away in foreign languages, a peculiar sight giving off the feeling that this is not Thailand.

Nonetheless, there is something dismal behind the joyous atmosphere. Every single person I am watching are people in the past, those existing in history. They are playing their parts in driving the Lanna history forward in a certain period. Next to the greenery field in front of me, farther down one side, is the location of the quiet, shady foreign graveyard. Whenever I drove past it, I always got chills. Some of the people before me might not have a chance to return to their homelands and end up under the ground of this country. I let my thoughts wander, not noticing someone approaching until he speaks.

"Jom, where has your mind wandered off to?" I spin and see a tall European man with blue eyes smiling at me. It is Mr. James, the forestry

assistant manager, whom I met at Mr. Robert's great house. Today, he wears a horse racing uniform with gloves and long boots, looking super cool. I fold my hands in greeting.

"Have you stood here long? I'm sorry I didn't notice."

"You couldn't take your eyes off that carriage. Wanna ride on it?" I turn my head. It is a shiny black roofed carriage. The square roof is exquisite and classic, but I didn't look at it. I was lost in thought.

"I don't want to ride on it. I was just looking."

"What a shame. I was thinking of inviting you to my carriage. It's not as luxurious as this one but pretty striking."

"Are you also attending the event? I thought you were stationed in Lampang," I talk to him casually, not nervous or anything. Mr. James seems friendly and doesn't look down on the locals or act superior like many foreigners here. Besides, I am unlike the people in this era who might feel intimidated by foreigners.

"I actually should be there as you pointed out since Lampang also has a clubhouse called Lakhon Sports Club. They're also holding a party, but I decided to come here probably because..." He grins before continuing.

"I am into something here." I respond with a smile, not daring to be rude by asking what he is into, and change the subject.

"What program are you participating in?"

"Horse racing. Will you cheer for me?"

"Sure."

"I will cheer for you as well." A moment later, his European friend takes him away. They go to the stable and talk, gesturing away with their hands.

It sounds like they are arguing about whose horse looks better. I turn my head back and stroke Hope's body. It sniffs my hand because of the smell of the Cavendish banana cake.

"You will get to eat it. Don't worry. Just run fast,"

I tell it.

I divert my eyes to the parking area. A black car has recently entered. When it stops, someone steps out of it. He is a truly dignified man. I look at his long legs and broad straight shoulders as he strolls along the footpath.

Khun-Yai.

He looks different today in a crisp black universal suit with a bow tie, the attire for the evening party. It is like he jumps out of a romance novel. You appealing young man. You blessed fine lad. How can you be so attractive?

Oui-Suya follows my eyes and asks.

"Who's that? You know him?"

"Luang Thep Nititham's son, our neighbor. I talked to him once." Ouisuya mumbles a response in acknowledgment. I see Khun-Yai stop and greet two foreigners. He is confident yet polite and graceful. What a pleasant combination. And then Khun-Yai turns my way. He pauses before resuming his conversation with those two foreigners. A moment later, Khun-Yai walks towards the stable, not the spectator area.

He unhurriedly saunters like he is taking a leisurely walk. I sneak a smile, knowing he is coming this way on purpose. Ancient people sure are subtle, huh? He wouldn't just march here to maintain his reserved manner.

Once he reaches where Ouisuya and I are sitting, I fold my hands in greeting and brazenly flash a smile. I am not from a noble family, so I don't need to be unnecessarily careful. Since I took a liking to him and clicked with him, I can openly smile without feeling worried that I might show my teeth too much.

"Is this the piglet Ming said you were taking care of?" Khun-Yai's voice is pleasantly sonorous.

"Yes," I answer proudly. "Its name is Hope." Khun-Yai gives a slight nod.

"How adorably chubby."

"It's not just adorable, Khun-Yai. It's fast," I brag, knowing he doesn't mind. He's younger than me. Despite the burly body of a grown man of his, I know he has a mind of a young man behind the courteous manner. Khun-Yai smiles with his eyes.

"I am looking forward to finding out if it is as fast as you have boasted."

"Are you participating in any program today?"

"No. I am here as a guest on behalf of my father. I came early to watch the races."

I don't feel surprised. He is the son of Luang Thep Nititham, a civil servant from Siam, so he is welcomed and respected by the Europeans who still have to rely on and build good relationships with his family for business benefits.

"That's good to hear. The piglet is the last program. You will get to see Hope racing. Two programs left."

Khun-Yai nods.

"How is your paddling practice? Have you gotten good at it?" I paste on a sheepish smile.

"I've gotten better. Are you asking because you're worried about the poles of the waterfront pavilion?"

He chuckles.

"I am asking out of worry for you. I am afraid you will crash into someone else's pavilions. If they take action, you have a low chance to slip away."

"It won't happen. I paddle only in the neighborhood, not going far."

"You can paddle by my place to collect the Lantoms. I don't mind." I look at him in surprise. He knows I like Lantoms. He probably saw me pick them up in the river.

"Okay," I reply.

"I will go and collect the fallen ones on the bank. It smells refreshing. It helps me sleep when I put it beside my pillow."

I hear hearty laughter from the stable. Mr. James and his friend are chortling as they lead their horses out to race. He turns our way and bows to Khun-Yai, then shoots me a smile to remind me to cheer for him. I return his smile as a response.

When I turn my head back to talk to Khun-Yai, I am a bit surprised to see his expression clouded. He no longer smiles in a good mood like earlier. Khun-Yai speaks levelly.

"If I am in the pavilion, you can pick up the Lantoms from the trees." Khun-Yai takes his watch out of his shirt pocket. It is a vintage winding pocket watch with a chain attached to it. He looks at the dial and speaks in an even voice.

"It is almost time. I need to be present in the guest area. I wish you triumph from the race today."

"Thank you, Khun-Yai." When Khun-Yai is out of sight, Oui-Suya begins commenting.

"The son of Luang Thep is such a pleasant talker. He is also handsome and doesn't act arrogant like other children from noble families."

"You're right." I nod in agreement.

"Khun-Yai is kind. When I bumped into the pole of his pavilion, he didn't take offense and even pulled me out of the water. He didn't mind getting wet at all." Oui-Suva casts a sly smirk.

"Why are you smiling?" I can't help asking. I don't think it is due to the confusing mixed dialects of mine since everyone is used to it.

"Nothing." He waves it off, but his eyes remain sparkly. He asks shortly after.

"Have you had any odd dreams lately?" Thinking along, I don't remember my dream last night.

But two nights ago, I dreamed about myself swearing at the universe and wormhole in an empty meadow. After a moment, the universe started to get mad by all the cusses and threw stars at me. One of them lands on my hands, shining brightly in my palms.

"Um. I dreamed a star fell on my hands two nights ago. Why?" He thinks about it before saying.

"They say if you dream about receiving a star or a moon, you will be pregnant as a woman and gifted a two-legged animal as a man."

"What kind of two-legged animal, Oui-Suya? A chicken?" I say with a laugh. If I were to be gifted a four-legged animal, my guess would be a pig. But we are talking about a two-legged animal. It will be either a duck or a chicken. It hits me that if we win the piglet race today, Mr. Robert might throw a feast for the servants with grilled turkeys. After all, this is Christmas.

Mr. Robert never lets his servant starve. However, the servants' meals usually consist of sticky rice, chili paste, and fresh vegetables, with meat at times. If there is roast beef or spicy buffalo meat salad, I have no choice but to be a vegetarian during the meal as I don't like meat from cattle. Therefore, an aromatic giant grilled turkey is truly heaven.

"I don't know if it will be a Thai chicken or a foreign chicken," Oui-Suya muses with a smile on the corner of his mouth, though there is nothing mysterious about it. Whether it is a grilled chicken or a grilled turkey, it will be delicious as a whole.

I give him a smile without an opinion, letting the subtlety of ancient people's minds remain incomprehensible to someone from another era like me. Soon, the piglet keepers are ordered to stand by the race field.

When I get up, my eyes land on something. It glistens in the sunlight on the grass near Oui-suya and me. I walk over and find a round steel piece the length of five centimeters in diameter attached to a small chain.

...A pocket watch.

I pick it up right away. It is a winding pocket watch, its porcelain dial adorned with tiny rubies displaying three units of time with sub-seconds in

an hour dial. This is Khun-Yai's pocket watch, undoubtedly. He took it out around half an hour ago. I remember its features.

"Oui-Suya, this is Khun-Yai's pocket watch," I say.

"He must've dropped it when he checked the time. It looks expensive." Oui-Suya eyes the watch in my hand.

"I guess you're right."

"I need to return it to him."

"Not right now." Oui-Suya shakes his head strictly.

"We are servants. We can only stay in the area we are allowed to. We can't walk around. You have to wait until Khun-Yai walks by."

I gaze up at the sky painted orange by the sun nearly setting over the horizon. The evening party will start in a while. I doubt Khun-Yai will revisit this area. After the races are over, I suppose he will wait at the library playing bridge or getting together with other guests of high status.

"What if Khun-Yai doesn't come here, Oui?" Oui-Suya thinks for a moment before answering.

"Then you have to return it tomorrow."

I surrender to the unarguable reason and keep the watch with me for the time being, as Oui-Suya suggested. By the time Hope and other piglets are getting ready at the starting point, the sky turns dim in the dusk of evening. I cast my eyes to the spectator area under the building and the space with wide umbrella tables, searching for Khun-Yai, but there are loads of spectators. Plus, I am quite far from the building, so it is hard to see.

The host announces the names of the piglets and the companies they represent. I crouch by the finish line next to other piglet keepers from other companies. Earlier, Oui-Suya and I went to Hope behind the temporary barrier and fed it with crumbs of the cake I crushed in my hand on purpose to intensify his appetite.

The whistle goes off as a signal to lift the barrier.

Hope charges forward while the other piglets hesitate. I clap and shout its name over the other keepers' voices. Hope, as if understanding, runs in my direction. The spectators burst out laughing when a piglet dashes past another piglet and causes it to wobble off course and out of the field with no return. Hope stays focused and keeps himself on course. His ambition to obtain the cake is unstoppably powerful.

The crowd chants Hope's name and the other piglet's name called Cinnamon as both of them are neck and neck, none refusing to give up. I

slap the ground next to the cake before me and scream Hope's name at the top of my lungs.

Finally, Hope takes the lead!

Hope!

Hope!

Hope!

The crowd cheers and claps rhythmically as I hold out the cake at arm's length. The scene before my eyes is in slow motion. Amid the cheer, Hope leads ahead, leaving the other piglets behind. It vigorously zooms as if charged with a high-capacity battery. It scuttles across the grass, carrying its plump body forward, the bow around its neck blowing in the wind. My heart swells in my chest. My Hope, the smart piglet, the champion piglet. I know it is no ordinary piglet!

"Hope! Come on!" I yell. Nevertheless, the wind carries with it something I did not expect.

Hope halts when it smells the Cavendish banana cake in the air. It is so strong that Hope loses his balance. Unfortunately, the smell doesn't come from my cake. At the tables under large white umbrellas, where the foreigners enjoy viewing the race, a waiter brings out a tray of freshly baked Cavendish banana cakes. He serves them at each table. The smell is temptingly appetizing.

Do you remember what my banana cake is?

It is a cake made from a large portion of cultivated bananas with only a hint of the smell of the Cavendish banana, a reward fake cake. How can it ever beat an authentic Cavendish banana cake!?!

Hope, knowing the difference, changes its direction.

It runs towards something more enticing. I watch in shock as Hope reaches the spectator area and clambers around the waiter. I gape when it bites the waiter's slacks and yanks him relentlessly until he trips. The waiter doesn't only fall.

One of his hands automatically flies up and grabs a tablecloth! The white linen slips, bringing with it the ceramic plates and glasses. The fancy knives and silver spoons tilt slantingly and tumble, scattering over the grass field amid the exclamations.

The Cavendish banana cakes drop as Hope wishes.

It gobbles them amid the amused laughter and the disaster it has brought upon. I decide to leave my position when Cinnamon hits the finish line. I

dart to Hope and grab it, its mouth full of the cakes. Hope chews in merry, sending crumbs all over its face and my clothes, which only draws more laughter.

I carry Hope out in a hurry before it can do anything worse, then I catch Mr. Robert sitting on a European tufted leather chair with his timber merchant friends. His face reddens, almost dark, and is void of a smile, which clearly denotes his fury. The laughter is an amusement to others but humiliation to Mr. Robert.

The future of my career is doomed.

Late in the evening, I ride the cart back with Oui-Suya in low spirits. Mr. Robert's glower is still vivid in my mind. Hope looks happy to have filled its stomach with its favorite snack. I pat its head, feeling pity more than anger. It's not its fault for being gluttonous. It's a piglet.

We deliver the disappointing news to the guys. They console me to the point that I want to resign from the world and enter the monkhood. From now, the future of my career will irrevocably go down. Unbelievable. I used to dream of running my own architecture company one day, but look at me. I can't even dream of being promoted from a piglet keeper.

At night, I go to bed gloomily. I lie on my back with my arm on my forehead, sighing at the incident today.

"Why are you so depressed? You lost, that's all," Ming says in vexation, hearing my continuous sighs.

I shake my head. He doesn't understand that it was partly a way to prove myself to Mr. Robert. I will never get to leave the cowshed and pigsty from now on. Buckets and broomsticks will perpetually be part of my working life.

"It's such a shame. What a bummer. I bet the two-legged animal Oui-Suya talked about means the foreign boss' feet on my face."

"The two-legged animal?"

"I dreamed about receiving a star days ago. Oui-Suya told me I would be gifted a two-legged animal. I thought it would be a grilled turkey. I guess it's not."

Ming pauses, then guffaws.

"You fool! The two-legged animal is a human. You will have a wife!" I turn to Ming. No...I will never make him my wife. The other guys are a no as well. The female servants are out of the question.

"I don't want a wife. I want a turkey," I say, flipping to my side in dejection. On the next day, I work in a daze, cleaning the cowshed and pigsty in acceptance. I don't even want to say a word of complaint.

I feel sorry for Hope. It used to be Mr. Robert's favorite pet, but it is out of favor now. The same goes for me, its keeper. I probably have been labeled as the person Mr. Robert despises who must humbly hide here and never show his face to unnecessarily aggravate the boss.

In the afternoon, I decide to paddle to Khun-Yai's place to return the watch to him. I shouldn't keep something valuable with me for long. I would be in trouble if I lost it. I paddle along the river, trying not to steer too far away from the bank. I have gotten a knack for it now, so Ming doesn't need to accompany me. The cool breeze brings the scent of the trees mixed with water spray. I take a deep breath and feel calmer.

Before long, I cross into the property of Luang Thep Nititham and crane my neck from a distance. Khun-Yai isn't reading a book in the pavilion like usual today, and it disappoints me. I keep paddling until my boat reaches the stairs of the waterfront pavilion.

I stick my head up. Not far from the slope of the lawn, Nai-Jun, an old man whom I always saw sticking by Khun-Yai's side, is ordering the other servants to move a large lotus basin to the other side. I sit there awkwardly for a moment before calling him. When Nai-Jun turns and sees me, he comes over.

"Oh, it's Nai-Jom. What brings you here?"

"I found Khun-Yai's pocket watch at the Gymkhana Club," I say, taking out the watch wrapped in a cloth and unfolding it.

"I'm here to return it." Nai-Jun studies the watch for moment, then nods.

"This is indeed Khun-Yai's watch." I hesitate, unsure if I should ask Nai-Jun to deliver it to Khun-Yai. He seems to be the head servant who keeps things going in the great house and doesn't look like a deceiver. Still, I feel paranoid. We can't judge people by their looks. There have been many cases to learn from.

Luckily, I don't have to fret over it long because Nai-Jun offers me a suggestion.

"Khun-Yai is talking to the foreign teacher in the little house. How about this? You wait here. I will send word to Khun-Yai."

"Okay," I agree gladly.

Nai-Jun heads off, leaving me waiting at the pavilion. I glance around. This area is absolutely shady. The gigantic rain tree casts its shadow over the grass resembling a soft, thick green carpet. I want to lie on it, I feel like getting up there to pick up the Lantoms falling all over the ground, but I hold myself back. I should wait until Khun-Yai is present, or else they would say I am thievish. I suddenly think of Nai-Jun's words. The said foreign teacher must be the one teaching English. That is why Khun-Yai conversed with people at the club without difficulty.

Shortly after, Khun-Yai strolls to the pavilion. Today, he is in a white hemp shirt and satin trousers, looking relaxed and familiar. I wait until he arrives at the pavilion and sits down before greeting him with my hands folded over my chest.

"I am sorry Hope did not win yesterday," Khun-Yai says, faint green stubble painting his fair, clean skin.

"I am sorry too, but it has passed," I reply, trying not to dwell in my sadness.

Khun-Yai fixes his gaze on me, his big and jetty eyes reflecting sympathy and encouragement, which draws me a great distance away from sadness.

"Nai-Jun said you found my possession."

"Right," I say.

"When you walked out yesterday, you must have dropped it. Good thing I found it." I take out the watch. It sits peacefully in the small cloth.

Khun-Yai holds out his hands to get the watch. But, instead of picking up the steel chain, he cups the back of my hand with his palm and places the other on top. I raise my eyes in surprise.

The warmth of his hands seeps through my skin. And then, he withdraws them longingly as if he wishes to hold my hand a little bit longer. I blink stupidly, but Khun-Yai's expression remains unchanged, as though the way he touched my hand like that is nothing out of ordinariness. Seriously, is this normal? Am I overthinking it?

"This watch has immense sentimental value for me," Khun-Yai says gently, ignoring my bewildered face.

"It was gifted to me by my uncle. It would be a shame if I lost it."

"F... Fortunately, I found it." ...All right. It is normal, then. Don't be surprised when it's my turn.

"You're right." Khun-Yai slightly nods, his jetty eyes gleaming.

"I suppose I shall reward you."

"You don't have to," I say quickly, not wanting to bother him.

"You dropped something and I returned it to you. I didn't do it for any reward. When you helped me last time, I haven't paid you back."

"What if I insist? If I wish to reward you out of amiability and affection, will Poh-Jom so much as reject it?" I am totally stunned and unable to argue...Ugh, who could have turned you down when you had gone this far?

"I don't want money," I say straightforwardly.

"What do you want, then?" A spaceship, the Anywhere Door, or anything that will take me back to my world.

"I can't think of one, Khun-Yai. If I know what I want in the future, can I tell you then?" Here is my answer.

"Of course, as long as you promise that you will not forget about it. Please do not make me go to Mr. Robert's place to remind you." I smile. What is this? Why would a rewarder remind a recipient to get a reward?

"Sure, I promise."

We chat for a brief moment. It doesn't last long since I am a servant of another family. I have no right to laze around here. Regardless, a few words exchanged between us chase away my downheartedness. Khun-Yai feels like the source of something close to happiness. He puts people around him at ease, convincing us that no problem is too severe to be fixed.

I take off from the pavilion, not forgetting to collect a fallen Lantom with me, not knowing our recent conversation about his wish to reward me bears a deeper meaning.

Because I have not been aware that what I will ask of him is not going to be an object or money, and what he wishes to give me is not an object either.

Chapter 7: An Old Flame or a New Blazing Flame?

After Christmas, here comes New Year's Day. I am taken from B.E. 2470 to B.E. 2471 in a daze.

My life is the same. A small difference is the physical strength I have gained from the daily labor. I am still rejected by the future world. No access granted.

The weather in the week after New Year's Day gets considerably chillier. Frost is formed on the grass, sparkling on the green leaves.

The breathtaking snow of the North. The fog even comes out of my mouth when I speak. Today, the lady boss Ueang Phueng will visit the temple early to pray that the baby in her tummy is healthy. She wears a long-sleeve straight-cut shirt draped by a shawl and a patterned sinh covering her ankles. Her hair is tied up in a bun secured by a gold hairpin with tiny flowers hanging down from it.

Her complexion is glowing. I am not accompanying her, but I pray in my mind that my Thai-American nephew or niece in the lady boss Ueang Phueng's tummy will grow up healthy and well and not be promiscuous like the father.

Seeing Mei stepping down the stairs of her house, I pop out of the bush and call.

"Mei." Mei turns around. She stops in her steps to catch up with the lady boss and Kumtib at the car and walks towards me.

"What's the matter, Ai-Jom?"

"Can you bring this to the car? Just in case the lady boss gets nauseous." I hand a banana-leaf bowl of ten pandan-leaf woven carps to Mei. I usually asked Kumtib to deliver them late in the morning after Mr. Robert left to work. But since the lady boss will be going to the temple early, I have waited here in advance.

"You're very diligent, Ai-Jom. You wake up to weave little fish every day." Mei takes the bowl.

"Yeah. Get going," I say, gesturing to her to hurry.

I have been doing this every day after learning that the lady boss Ueang Phueng had morning sickness and dreaded the smell of every dish in the morning. She could only eat biscuits while sipping on pandan juice. I figured the mildly aromatic scent of pandan leaves relieved her morning sickness, so I wanted to make something the lady boss could carry with her. As I wasn't nearly skilled enough to make garlands or woven roses I had seen, I attempted to thread small rattan balls and had Kuntib put them beside the lady boss. Later, my skill slowly developed until I could weave carps. Thanks to my home economics teacher in my primary school, I have finally made good use of the subject.

Once Mei is far off, Ming muses.

"E-Mei is such a beauty." I follow his eyes. Mei looks really pretty today, glowing and beautiful as a northern woman who has recently bloomed. Her manner is pleasantly graceful. No surprise why Ming is so smitten with her.

"Soon, she will wed some merchant who sells clothes and gems to the lady boss," Ming sighs.

I throw a glance at him, sensing disheartenment in his voice.

"Will the lady boss force her?"

"She won't. The lady boss adores E-Mei. She wants her to wed a good person. She once said she would gift her a gold ornament for investment when E-Mei got married." I can't help feeling proud that my sister is a kind-hearted woman.

"Has Mei ever said she liked merchants?"

"No." He shakes his head.

"E-Mei said if she weren't the only wife, she would continue serving the lady boss, being a spinster until she died, rather than being someone's mistress."

"You are a good person." I smile.

"And loyal." Ming turns his head abruptly, his eyes widening with rage, and lifts his foot to kick me. Seeing it coming, I hop backward. He changes his mind, lowers his foot, and heaves a sigh.

"I am a servant. Why would I wed her just to give her a bad life?"

Ming walks away disgruntledly, and I can only watch him leave with sympathy. I remember Ming said he wished to raise chickens and grow crops, but, tied with his parents' debts, he had to work here instead of living in his home and following his dream. If only he had a budget to start

something, not an empty wallet with a negative number. I head off to the cowshed, my current office, and pause when someone calls me.

"Ai-Jom, please wait."

I turn around. Fongkaew or Kaimook stands beside the orange jasmine bushes, her eyes fixed on me. She has grown much prettier, her skin fair and radiant in the Lanna dress. She wears fancy gold accessories, bracelets and earrings, strangely magnificent. I haven't talked to her in a while since our last conversation by the kitchen that day. Since our jobs are drastically different-I work by the pigsty and she serves in the little house-we haven't crossed paths often. Plus, even though I no longer detest her, it doesn't mean I want to be her best friend.

Presently, Mr. Robert has given Fongkaew the sole possession of one of the little houses without housemate mistresses. She even has her own servant. This is quite dramatic progress. She totally beat the mistresses coming before her. However, let's not blame her for making her way up using her body. At least I know she was never willing to use her body to do anything in the first place. I nod to her a little as a greeting and ask.

"What's the matter?"

"Can we talk over there?" Fongkaew points at the great bullet wood tree, which makes me knit my brow. It seems she wants to hide from others.

I feel reluctant. Talking with women in this place may not be a big deal, but it can be if the woman is Mr. Robert's favorite mistress who has done him wrong.

Still, I agree in the end.

"Okay." I walk to the bullet wood tree with Fongkaew falling behind and flicking her eyes around cautiously. Once we are shielded by the tree, she speaks.

"Ai-Jom, do you remember what you have said to me?" I tense up despite myself. Why wouldn't I remember? Ever since I resided here, we have exchanged only a few words. And there is only one matter that connects us.

"I do. How can I help you?" I ask, my heart dropping uncontrollably. Please, don't make me do something like being a lookout for her to run away with her lover. That is off-limit. Even if I were that bold and capable of watching her get in the boat with Ohm and escape, she should think of my repercussion. Will I be whipped until my back breaks? Fongkaew inhales, her big round eyes locked on me with determination.

"Tonight, Ai-Kumsan, the man you saw last time, will wait for me at the dock."

...I knew it!

"Fongkaew." My voice goes croaky in pleading.

"Please don't do that. Didn't you say your sister would be in trouble if you ran away with him?"

"I'm not running away." Fongkaew's voice gets harsh.

"I don't even want to see Ai-Kumsan again. I want you to meet up with him for me." Dumbfounded, my mouth flaps open and close, unable to utter a word.

"I don't want to associate with Ai-Kumsan anymore," Fongkaew stresses.

"That's why I want you to tell him that I am happy living here. I am blessed to serve a timber merchant. Though I am a mistress, I am comfortable. I don't want to live a difficult life again. I hope Ai-Kumsan will forget about me and never returns to put me in trouble."

"Are you giving up on him this easily?" I blurt out before I can stop myself. Fongkaew's eyes change. She blinks, her lips pressed together. Then, she parts them and says.

"Love doesn't conquer all. I am not the Fongkaew I used to be."

"You think your Ai-Kumsan will listen to me? Who am I to him? Why would he believe me?"

"I know what to do." Fongkaew hands me a square folded piece of paper.

"This is a letter I would like you to pass it over to Ai-Kumsan. You can read it since there is no secret in it.

I wrote that I have no feelings for him anymore and that he must stop having hope in me. Let us end here."

I look at Fongkaew's face. Her eyes gloom, her lips curving down as if she is in deep pain to do this. Her voice is frail and tired.

"Can you please help me?" I avert my eyes, absolutely uncomfortable. Yet, whether it is to keep my promise or anything, I agree to help.

"I will tell him for you."

"Thank you, Ai-Jom," she says in appreciation.

"I will be grateful to you until the day I die." I can only hum a response as Fongkaew continues.

"Please deliver this to him as well. It is the only thing Ai-Kumsan gave me as a memento of his feelings for me." Fongkaew takes

something out of a wrapped cloth in the sinh pocket. It is a thick circle silver bracelet etched with delicate vines. It is not an object of luxury to a wealthy man such as Mr. Robert, but, for a commoner living from hand to mouth, Kumsan must have worked hard to save up enough money to buy this gift for his beloved one. I take the bracelet and the small letter. Fongkaew looks left and right before thanking me and taking her leave.

At night, I wait until Ming and the other servants fall asleep. When the moon glimmers in the sky, I carefully tiptoe out of the house. I march along the path leading to the dock, occasionally glancing back to see if someone follows me. The air at night is more frigid than in the daytime. I wear a long-sleeve cotton shirt and fisherman pants and still feel cold. I quicken my pace until the dock comes into view.

I am surrounded by silence, no boat paddling by nor a person walking past, only the river flowing and bugs chirping. I decide to sit on the bank, hidden behind clumps of grass, waiting for Fongkaew's dear Ai-Kumsan to arrive. I rub my hands together and blow on them to keep warm. The crescent moon reflecting on the ripples assembles an odd shape. I think of the letter and the thick silver bracelet I have brought.

What will Ohm feel when he sees these two things? I guess he will be heartbroken or cry his heart out in desperation. My heart feels strangely shaky. I have never seen Ohm cry. I don't know if seeing him cry out of heartbreak will please me. I wait there for a long while. When my legs get tired and my cheeks are freezing, I hear a paddle striking the water. It snaps me awake. The shadowy figure of a man comes into sight in the distance, paddling a small boat over here.

I watch quietly until the boat stops by the dock. We both stay silent for a moment to make sure no unwanted people are present. Shortly after, Ohm or Ai-Kumsan lights up his lantern. He slowly raises it and lowers it the way he did the day he rendezvoused with Fongkaew. I decide to stand up and call softly.

"Ai... Ai-Kumsan." He abruptly turns his head. Seeing it is not Fongkaew, he grabs the paddle to get himself out of here.

"Ai-Kumsan, hold up. I mean no harm," I say quickly.

"Fongkaew told me to wait for you right here." Her name stops Ohm short. He turns to me again and pauses in hesitation. I step closer. He lifts the lantern and squints before frowning as he remembers.

"You were the one hiding behind the caladiums last time, right?" I'm relieved. At least he might not hit me with the paddle before we get to talk.

"Yes. Fongkaew asked me to come here in her stead," I reply, step up on the dock and, and make my way to his boat. The light from the small lantern helps him see my face more clearly. Although his body is ripped and his skin looks rougher than the Ohm I knew, his eyes, his straight nose, and the lips that will break into a winsome smile belong to Ohm in every lifetime. My chest stings. I thought I would feel nothing towards him by now or not have any positive feelings left at the least. I even thought I would loathe him. But that is not the case. I have tried not to love him, but it is not a complete success. Love withers while affection lasts. He looks at my face, studying it for a moment.

"Who are you?" I am both amused and hurt, not sure if I should laugh or cry. Ohm is asking my name like a stranger with zero attachment.

"My name is Jom. I am a servant here. Fongkaew and I are...ah, friends." He nods a little, still not trusting me.

"Why is Fongkaew.."

"She's not coming," I cut in. Ohm's face shifts, his eyes gleaming.

"Did the foreign boss lock her up?"

"No," I say. "No one locks up anyone. Fongkaew is well and loved by the foreign boss. She...doesn't want to see you anymore." He goes rigid for a moment before growling.

"I don't believe you." His brusque voice and eyes piss me off. I have brought myself here to help. It's not easy, yet I have to face things like this.

"If you don't believe me, look." I hold out my hand to show him the two things I took with me. The silver bracelet glints under the luminous moon. Beside it is a square folded piece of paper.

"Fongkaew asked me to give them back to you, the bracelet and the letter, and to tell you to cut ties with her. Let it end here." His eyes widen as he looks at the bracelet in my hand, his face pale in shock. I start to feel sorry for him, but I need to go on.

"Read her letter and give up. If you insist on having her heart, things will drag on, and Fongkaew will be more miserable." He reaches out his trembling hand to get the bracelet and the letter in my hand. Before he succeeds, a voice blasts. It belongs to a woman filled with rage.

"E-Fongkaew! You damned witch. She's sneaking out to see her lover!" Ohm and I flick our eyes over there. I falter and gape when I spot

Fongkaew standing next to the bullet wood tree quite far away from the dock. She seems as shocked as us. Farther behind Fongkaew, a woman, one of Mr. Robert's mistresses, jumps up and down, screaming and pointing at Fongkaew. Her shout reverberates across the whole place.

"Help! E-Fongkaew is going to run away again!"

Fongkaew hesitates. She must have watched us for some time. She turns in our direction and yells anxiously.

"Ai-Kumsan, go!" I turn to Ohm. He is back on his boat and paddles away in a hurry without bringing anything with him. I am startled to see Fongkaew's letter floating over the surface of the river, having no idea when it slipped out of my hand. It is drifting away in the river flow and will soon sink in the dark water.

Less than ten minutes, Fongkaew and I are dragged to Mr. Robert's great house. The light in the great house shines brightly despite it being midnight. Mr. Robert sits on a chair with a snarky face. The lady boss Ueang Phueng is next to him, her expression stern. I am shoved to the floor in the great house and flanked by two might men as Fongkaew wails that she has done nothing wrong. No one looks convinced, though. Even Kuntib eyes her in doubt. Having become Mr. Robert's favorite didn't only come with fine clothes and fancy jewelry. There was something else. Fongkaew inadvertently made enemies. The out-of-favor concubines despised her. They monitored every single move she made with jealousy, waiting to stomp on her once she made a mistake.

And this time, it is Fongkaew's severe mistake for being unable to hold back. She was so worried that she came out to check on Ohm and me at the dock.

"I noticed Fongkaew sneakily speaking to Ai-Jom this morning, so I kept an eye on her, thinking she would have an affair with Ai-lom. The woman yammers in detail. She is On, one of the mistresses that have been out of favor.

"I didn't think she would try to run away with another man while Ai-Jom on the lookout."

"I wasn't on the lookout," I object.

"Really?" On sneers in derision.

"Didn't what E-Fongkaew give you this morning the reward for helping her?" My jaw drops as Fongkaew shakes her head and denies in a quivering voice. Mr. Robert's eyes land on me. His gaze is cold.

"Search him," he orders. It is not hard, not even lasting half a minute. They just reach into my shirt pocket and the bracelet is out for all to see. Mr. Robert snatches the bracelet. Fongkaew trembles, her tears falling when Mr. Robert holds it out in front of her.

"What is this? Can you say this is not yours?" His voice is sinister.

"I saw you wear it the day your parents sent you to me." He throws it at Fongkaew. She shrieks in fear, her tears flooding.

"It's not like that, sir," I stammer.

"I wasn't bribed to be a lookout for anyone, and Fongkaew wasn't cheating. She was going to cut ties with that man so he would never show up again. Fongkaew asked me to return the bracelet to him and a letter explaining that she hoped to end things."

"Where is the letter?" Fongkaew stops sobbing. She looks at me with hope, though her face is streaked with tears. I swallow, my throat dry.

"I...I dropped it in the river." Mr. Robert's patience for the interrogation vanishes. Anger turns his face crimson. He bellows so loud that all servants get startled.

"You lowlife, how dare you lied to me! Ai-Som, get me a rattan stick. I'll beat him!" I gape in shock. The others are just as stunned.

"I said, get me a rattan stick!" The man receiving the order scurries out. I am frightened. I know slavery no longer exists in the Seventh Reign, and the brutal punishments, including beating to death with rattan sticks, have been legally abolished. Regardless, this method...is still used to punish the servants by some families. They don't beat their servants to death, but enough to give them lessons for a long time. My body shakes when I see a meter-long rattan stick in

Som's grip. If he whips my back with it, my skin will rip and tear on the second or third beating. And I have no idea how many times it will be. I can't resist at all when the two mighty men push me on the plank floor on my stomach and grasp my arms and legs for Mr. Robert to take action. My heart pounds as Mr. Robert approaches. Fongkaew sobs and stutters in gibberish. She is freaking out since I am about to be beaten.

All of a sudden, the lady boss Ueang Phueng, who has observed everything in silence, lets out soft groans.

"Oh...Ohh..." Mr. Robert spins. Seeing the lady boss Ueang Phueng holding her belly with a frown, he immediately asks.

"What's wrong, Veang Phueng? Are you going into labor?" The lady boss shakes her head.

"I'm not. The baby...kicked really hard."

Mr. Robert furrows his brow. He looks at the lady boss in worry and gives Kumtib an order.

"Kumtib, escort her to rest in the bedroom. Don't let her witness the foul scene." Kumtib steps in and supports the lady boss as she resumes.

"Ai.. How are you going to punish him?"

"I will beat him ten times and kick him out." His voice is hostile.

"Ai, there is an old belief that the sin will fall upon your children.

"What sin? He is despicable. He worked with someone else to pull out this shit in my house. I can't let it slide."

"Ai..I'm begging you." His pregnant wife's pleadingly feeble voice makes him stand still. The rattan stick is gripped by his side as he presses his lips together tightly. Mr. Robert is seemingly suppressing his infuriation. Finally, he raises his grip and flings the rattan stick on the floor, startling everyone. It bounces and slides towards my face. Mr. Robert points at me and yells.

"Get the hell out of my house and never so much as let your shadow cast on my property!" With that command, I scamper out of there. I trot back to the servants' row houses to pack the little stuff of mine to leave this place. The other servants watch from afar. None of them wants anything to do with me, except Ming.

"I don't believe you did what On said. That prick spoke nonsense." Despite the tension in the air, I force a smile at him in appreciation.

"Thank you, Ming."

"Tomorrow, I will paddle the boat for you." he says.

In the morning, I wake up before daybreak and carry my things, a few sets of clothes and some necessities, getting ready to leave before Mr. Robert is awake. But before I exit the house, a servant from the great house runs over to deliver a message.

"Ai-Jom, don't leave now. Wait until the foreign boss goes out first, then come to the lady boss in the great house."

"What's the matter?"

"I don't know. Just do as she says," he answers in a curt voice and walks away. I wait until late in the morning. Confident that Mr. Robert's car has taken off, I go to the great house to see the lady boss as told. The lady boss

Ueang Phueng is waiting. Leaning on the triangle pillow, she gestures to me to come closer.

"Take this with you. It is all I can help." The lady boss sits straight and hands over a small wrapped cloth. I look at it in surprise.

"Save your breath, Kumtib." The lady boss waves it off when Kumtib is going to say something.

"I don't know if I ever had some kind of connection with him in the past life, but I took a liking to him. How can I let him stray and end up starving to death? I have a baby in my stomach. Do you want me to commit a damn sin?" Her cussing word shuts up everyone. No one dares to make a sound. The lady boss Ueang Phueng nods to me. I take the wrapped cloth. The feeling of it tells me it is money. It might not be much, but enough to feed myself for days.

The lady boss Ueang Phueng leans back on the triangle pillow as if suddenly feeling tired. She doesn't look at me anymore, but she picks up a pandan-leaf woven carp.

"You can leave. Don't worry about anything here. Mei can learn how to weave carps." I gaze at her gratefully. The lady boss Ueang Phueng might not know her action is more meaningful than a cloth of money. Her kindness during my dark moment must have formed some sort of invisible bond and probably fated me to take care of her as a brother in the other lifetime. I say goodbye to everyone who cares enough to talk to me.

It narrows down to only Oui-Suya and Ming. The others avoid me at all cost. All I can do is sigh and look around the property. I am not attached to this place, but I suppose I will never get to set foot in here ever again. The most I can do will be to ask Ming how the lady boss Ueang Phueng and Fongkaew are doing.

I don't let Ming paddle the boat for me as he wished. Instead, I allow him to see me off at the gate, aware that I have nowhere else to be. I have no relatives here and don't want Ming to know the truth. I have been sent here and tossed around by the hands of fate. And now, the said fate is kicking me out of Mr. Robert's place with its foot. I wonder if it has fun making me suffer repeatedly. The huge wooden gate of Mr. Robert's place is shut. I trudge down the dusty road in a daze. It stretches far and curves into the groves of trees, hiding the way to make us wonder where the path will take us. Tracks of animals and carts are evident on the road. The air is chilly despite the sunlight.

Where should I go? I ask myself as I walk on the solid dirt ground. The faint sunlight seeps through the bushes in bars. I remember this road runs to the Rubber Tree Road and finally the Nawarat Bridge across the Ping River. On the opposite side of the river over there locates the residence of the provincial governor and the Warorot Market. Maybe I can start there. I might work as a coolie or in an elephant stable. Shit..I don't know how to ride an elephant, and I barely have muscles. I might have grown more muscular from all the labor, but I am not strong enough to carry sacks of rice. Who would hire me? It is probably too late to learn to do shows.

A cow cart wheels past. I guess the rider is a villager on his way back from selling their goods at the market this morning. I listen until the thuds and the sound of the wheels grinding the road fade. The road here is not as jammed as the area near the bridge. Still, carriages and carts appear occasionally. Each house is built far from one another. I keep walking until sweat forms along my hairline, past a place with a large gate suggesting the owner's wealth and some villagers' house surrounded by fruit gardens. My stomach growls, reminding me I haven't had anything since morning. I quicken my pace and glance into the forest by the road, thinking I might need to dig out taros and potatoes to eat. I hear horses trotting from behind. A carriage speeds along the road and soars past me, sending dust everywhere. I wave the dust off my face and inch closer to the edge of the road before tripping on a rock and lunging into the bush at the side.

"Where the fuck are you rushing off to?!"

I shout after the carriage in aggravation aloud as I know they don't hear it. I shift from the bush and flop there, my whole body covered in dust, too frustrated to get up. I am at a loss to the point that I start imaging living like a homeless man.

Before I imagine myself in a tattered shirt with disheveled hair that possibly has lice, a car accelerates from the other side of the road...Bring it on. If it is going to blow dust at me, go for it.

I am bracing myself to become a homeless man anyway. I might as well change my name to Ai-Fak* to match my misfortune. Nonetheless, the car doesn't pass by as I have expected. It decelerates and comes to a stop. A window rolls down, followed by a voice and a face of a person.

"Jom...Is that you, Jom?" I blink stupidly.... Khun-Yai! I rise in a confused face, then decide to fold my hands in greeting.

"Where are you headed, Jom? Why are you sitting here?" Khun Yai asks. I hesitate, not sure how to respond to both questions. Khun-Yai senses that something is off. He shoots a glance at the wrapped cloth in my hand before turning his eyes to my face and saying.

"Jom, can you come here for a moment?" I walk across the road to him. Khun-Yai tells me to get in the car, but I hesitate whether to get in the passenger's seat at the front or not.

"Come sit with me. We won't be able to talk well if you sit at the front," he says. Thus, I hop in the backseat beside Khun-Yai and try to make myself small, afraid I will dirty the seat. I must look horrible because I just fell into a bush.

"So? You brought so much stuff. Where are you headed?" Khun-Yai asks.

"Well...I'm thinking of going to the Warorot Market."

Khun-Yai slightly nods.

"You must be running an errand for Mr. Robert."

"No. I..." I hesitate.

"I don't serve there anymore." Khun-Yai knits his brow and studies me for a while. My face falls as I don't know how to act. Finally, Khun-Yai says.

"Tell me. What is the reason you don't serve there anymore?" I tell Khun-Yai what happened truthfully, avoiding elaborating certain details unnecessarily, such as Mr. Robert's prejudice against me or how he was going to punish me with the rattan stick. I reveal only significant parts-I foolishly volunteered to help a woman out of goodwill and got misunderstood.

Without any evidence to prove my innocence, I was later kicked out. Khun-Yai listens quietly without asking much. Once I am finished, he is deep in thought, then says.

"Are you looking for a job?"

"Yes," I answer in a weak voice.

"I'm going to the market. Perhaps someone there needs a worker."

"You are not picky, are you?" I almost bark a laugh. Am I in a position to be picky?

"I'm not picky in the slightest."

"Good." Khun-Yai nods.

"Come with me, then. I can find you a job."

"Hmm?" I get surprised.

"What kind of job? Where? Who's the boss? What occupat...Ugh, it doesn't matter. I'll do anything."

Khun-Yai cracks an amused smile.

"A job at the place of my father, Luang Thep Nititham." My face freezes in that surprised expression. Khun-Yai orders the chauffeur to drive off in the direction I came from. Later, I have learned that the big gate I walked past earlier was Luang Thep Nititham's house gate. The car enters the parted entrance and runs across the macadam lined with the lawns and beautiful dwarf plants. Porcelain basins of colorful lotuses are set at intervals. I look at everything, impressed. When the car swerves at the curve and the view of the great house standing grandly among the shadiness from the trees comes into sight, my impressed feeling becomes astonishment! My eyes widen and my hands go cold as the great two-story house is right before me. It is a building influenced by colonial architecture, a Manila-style house with hipped and gable roofs. On the bottom floor, white thick square concrete poles border the front and the sides, each gap forming arches with magnificent stuccowork. The top floor is made of teak, its front and sides are encompassed in a large balcony. This is the house I was renovating when I was an architect before I swerved my car and plunged into the Ping River and traveled through the distortion of spacetime to the past!

"Jom, what's wrong? Why are you so pale? Are you scared? My father isn't scary," Khun-Yai says. I turn to him, speechless. Khun-Yai...Was he in the old photo in the stenciled frame decorating the wall in the bedroom of the little house? It was a photo of the owner of this place and his three children standing on the lawn before the great house. The photo was fading in my mind, but it is vivid and colorful in front of me right now. Before, it never struck me that it was the same house. Whenever I paddled past, I only glimpsed the roof and the back balcony with a stenciled wooden railing behind the line of trees from a distance. In my time, the back of the house has been ruined and repaired into a room with brick walls painted in concrete. The images of the house in my time and this period were different, so it never occurred to me.

"Jom....Jom, are you okay?" Khun-Yai clasps my hand.

"Why is your hand so cold? Are you sick?" I pull myself together, force a smile, and come up with some excuse.

"I'm okay, Khun-Yai. I'm just excited. I've never met a high-rank authority before. Is the Luang a scary man?"

"My father is not vicious. Why are you scared? He is out to work at the moment. Only my mother is present. She may appear fairly strict, but she is kind."

"Do I need to meet your mother?"

"Not now. I have to inform her first. Please wait at the pavilion. I will catch up and tell you if I successfully secure a job for you."

"Sure," I agree compliantly. I advance to the pavilion on the lawn as told as Khun-Yai's car pulls over by the stairs leading to the entrance of the great house.

My eyes trail after his figure stepping up the stairs. It feels like this is half-dream, half-reality for me to be here, at the same place I used to stand and watch the house with a sketchbook and a pencil in my hands. The difference is the nearly a hundred-year gap.

I don't know how long time has passed since then. I let myself drown in my train of thought, wandering through all incidents I have encountered, experienced, and lived, both in the past and future. I sit there for fifteen or twenty minutes or maybe more. I can't tell. Finally, I notice Nai-Jun descending the stairs and marching to the pavilion. I remember Nai-Jun. Besides Khun-Yai, he is the only person I know in this place.

"Nai-Jom, Khun-Yai requests your presence upstairs to meet his mother." I suddenly get excited and repeat his words.

"His mother?"

"Right." Nai-Jun nods.

"Her name is Khun-Kae." I clasp my hands together, suppressing the nervousness, recalling the information I learned when I departed from Bangkok to oversee the renovation in Chiang Mai. The ancestor of this place is a Phraya, which strikes me that Luang Thep Nititham will be promoted to Phraya in the future, and Khun-Kae will be addressed as Lady Kae in the future as well. I follow Nai-Jun up the stairs to the expansive balcony decorated evenly with flower pots. It adjoins the living area where the plank floor is raised a step higher, shielded under the stenciled eaves. I crawl into the hall floored with shiny polished wood. The sunlight shimmers through the open louvers. The air is cool and filled with the scent of fragrant jasmine. Khun-Kae rests in the room. Nearby are a servant sewing banana leaves and another one stringing jasmine garlands. Khun-Yai

sits farther to the side, more reserved than I have ever seen. I bow on the floor. Khun-Kae is a middle-aged woman, her face sharp and beautiful despite her age. Her manner is gentle and dignified, but her eyes are keen. She gazes at me and says.

"Is this the artless Nai-Jom Poh-Yai talked about? Lift your chin." I raise my head as told.

Khun-Kae looks at me, her pupils glossy dark and wide, similar to Khun-Yai's.

"Clean, flawless skin. You don't look the likes of people here, though. Are your family not from the North?"

"My father is Chinese. My mother is Thai."

"You speak Thai rather fluently." I drop my gaze and stay quiet. I can't tell her my problem is the northern dialect.

"Are you literate?"

"Yes." Khun-Kai hums softly, seemingly quite satisfied, then she speaks to Khun-Yai.

"You want him here to help out?"

"Yes, Mother, if you allow. Father has been busy lately and needed Nai-Jun at his heels to assist at all times. If Poh...ah, Nai-Jom can run errands for me, it will lessen the burdens." I kind of get it now. Nai-Jun is like a butler, a close servant taking care of matters ordered by the Luang. People in this era may refer to him as a majordomo. That explains why he has the power to order other servants and often sticks by Khun-Yai. Khun-Kae ponders it for a moment.

"If Poh-Yai would like a servant, it is not a problem. Your father will not oppose it, for he is busy as you pointed out. But what about his recent misdemeanor? What are we going to do about it?" Khun-Kae turns her head to me.

"Tell me. Did you play a matchmaker and get bribed to assist a woman to commit adultery?"

"That's not true," I deny humbly yet firmly.

"Mr. Robert misunderstood. I met up with Fongkaew's former lover to deliver her letter to him since I was aware that the letter was the means to end the relationship, to cut ties with him. The letter, however, dropped in the river, so I had no evidence to prove the truth. I only had a silver bracelet Fongkaew asked me to return to her former lover, which was mistaken as the bribe and made my behavior inexcusable."

"Why did you help her?"

"I...felt sorry for her. As Fongkaew had a younger sister, she would not commit adultery to put her family in trouble. Fongkaew is a grateful child. I couldn't help sympathizing with her." Khun-Kae narrows her eyes at me to squeeze out the possible lie hidden in my eyes or facial expression, but I have nothing to hide. Every spoken word about Fongkaew was true.

"And so, you got kicked out?" Khun-Kae pauses to think. My heart beats strangely. I stare at the lower-arm-long plank on the floor, not daring to glance up at Khun-Kae or Khun-Yai. Soon, she says.

"Do you know what convinced me to believe your word? Aside from Poh-Yai guaranteeing that you are an artless man, not greedy for others' possessions-you even returned Poh-Yai's pricy watch-you were careful with your choice of words, not defaming your former boss or sabotaging the woman. The evil possesses a self-serving bias, but you don't." Khun-Kae lets out a soft sigh before speaking in a gentler voice.

"The old belief says to adopt the stray cats and dogs entering the house. How can I dismiss a human? All right, you can stay here. But you must not misbehave by visiting the gambling den or smoking opium and such. The Luang will not tolerate it." My heart swells in my chest. I bow down on the floor immediately.

"I will never do that." Khun-Kae turns to Nai-Jun and orders.

"Well then, have someone prepare the room in the little house. Clean and tidy it up so he can reside there starting tonight."

"Right away," Nai-Jun replies. I wonder why I will be in the little house instead of a row house with other servants as it should be, but I don't dare to ask.

"Poh-Yai, are you moving to the little house tomorrow?" Khun-Kae now asks her son.

"Yes, Mother. I can focus on reading better over there. I listen in surprise.

"Ha. I see you don't want Lek to bother you." A small smile flickers on Khun-Kae's face.

"All right. We don't have any guests to use the house anyway. You will be off to Europe in a few months, so you should focus on studying. I will have someone transfer your necessities to the little house early in the morning."

"Thank you, Mother." Khun-Yai bows on his mother's lap. She strokes her eldest son's hair affectionately.

After that, I follow Nai-Jun out of the great house and get introduced to a woman named Erb. She is an old servant serving Khun-Kae since she was a young lady. Erb is a chubby woman around fifty years old. She wears a cloth wrapped around her chest and loincloth in a central style, her mouth red from constantly chewing betel nuts.

"Erb, this is Nai-Jom. He will serve Khun-Yai at the little house," Nai-Jun introduces me to Erb.

"Please train him. He seems a quick learner." Erb stares at my face, spits the betel juice in the spittoon, and says.

"Your face is white as a boiled egg. Must be a Jek's child." I am then left with Erb, who seems to be a head servant who takes charge of things in the houses in general, from taking orders from Khun-Kae to distributing tasks to other servants to do household chores, prepare meals, and other stuff.

I am assigned to assure convenience for Khun-Yai. I have to bring his meals from the kitchen to the little house and make sure every necessity is ready to use. A female servant will deliver clean clothes to the little house. In addition, I have to run errands for Khun-Yai as he wishes. Erb reminds me not to go to the great house if unnecessary. Besides the Luang and Khun-Kae, Khun-Prim-Khun-Yai's sister

-and Khun-Lek-the youngest son-live there. It is a place male servants shouldn't hang around if not called for. After a brief lecture, I follow two female servants to the little house to clean up before Khun-Yai moves in tomorrow. My heart swells in my chest. Apart from the majestic great house, the little house is another building that impressed me and deeply fascinated me even before I traveled back to this era.

The familiar house appears in the distance, and I can't help but grin. Every piece of wood is new and dark, not a single one pale. I lift my gaze at the sloping roof. No trace of a hole from the giant branch piercing through like the day I observed the damage in worry back in my era. The stairs at the side lead to a landing connecting to another set of stairs stretching up to the balcony above. This house is designed to have a U-shape balcony surrounding the front and the sides. In the middle is a hall extending to a 4x8 meter bedroom where a wide wall abutting another smaller room that will be used as my sleeping place so I can serve Khun-Yai at all times. I walk the length of the front balcony and turn to the side towards the small bedroom without directions from the female servants. I know the plan of this house as well as my own apartment.

Plus, I know the small bedroom shares a wall with Khun-Yai's bedroom. It is not connected, though. The small bedroom can be accessed from the side balcony, but I have to go through the hall to reach Khun-Yai's bedroom. The two female servants are tidying things up on the bottom floor, leaving me taking care of my room and putting my items in the wooden closet brought here by someone. I plop on the plank floor facing the open window, feeling oddly at ease.

I can't believe this. After a series of misfortunes throughout my time in the past era, my luck has made a dramatic turn. My career advancement shoots up drastically, from a piglet keeper of a timber merchant to a majordomo of Luang Thep's son. I have jumped to such a higher position that the landing almost broke my leg. I am too absorbed in admiring my luck to notice someone standing by the door.

"How is it? Are you comfortable?" Startled, I turn my head before smiling since it is Khun-Yai. He stands by the door with his hands behind his back, sweeping his gaze around the room.

"I am very comfortable, Khun-Yai," I answer.

"Thank you for your kindness. Without your help, I have no idea where I would have been."

"Are you pleased?"

"Ugh, I am more than pleased." My smile nearly rips my skin. Everything is great, as great as a dream. Aside from no one here despising me, it is a place I have been granted a chance to set foot again knowing that in another hundred years, I will be honored to renovate both houses. This place is the actual connection between my world and the past world, and the fact somehow warms my heart.

"So am I." Khun-Yai nods, then steps over the threshold and into the room. Khun-Yai locks his eyes on me for a brief moment, and his beautiful lips break into a bright smile that turns his face playful and wily, a totally different expression he put on in front of Khun-Kae.

"We live under the same roof now, Poh-Jom."

Chapter 8: The Passage in Time

I must be staring at him without blinking. Catching himself, Khun-Yai saunters past me to the window.

"See, your room overlooks the Royal Poinciana tree. Pretty color, but the branches are brittle. A branch broke and crashed down from the last rain. It was huge and the servants were all shocked. No one got hit, fortunately."

"Really?" I mumble, not even looking at the window. I still stare at Khun-Yai's face, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks earlier. Khun-Yai turns around, his recent expression gone. He is calm and graceful as usual now.

"Can you sleep alone tonight? I suppose you are not afraid of ghosts?" His questions freeze me, and my eyes widen. I flick my eyes around, paranoid. This house must have been newly built. There is no horrifying history here. Even so, a small ancient house sited far away from other quarters must be hauntingly quiet at night, with only the sounds of the wind and bugs chirping. Maybe creaks on the plank floor in the dark. Ugh... The atmosphere gives off the vibe.

"This house...is made of newly cut wood, isn't it?" My voice automatically goes soft. You don't talk about ghosts out loud.

"Not the old wood from other houses, right?" I hope in desperation that he will say no. On the contrary, he asks back in an even voice.

"Are you scared?" I blurt out

"Of course, I am!"

"Don't be scared." And he leaves. Gaping, I watch his long legs carrying himself out the door. I crawl on my knees out of the room at the speed of running.

"Khun-Yai, please wait! What's the scary story of this house?" Khun-Yai halts, his hands held behind his back. He turns his head towards me and speaks evenly.

"What sort of story could there be, Poh-Jom? You are scared like a little child. I will sleep here with you tomorrow anyway." My eyes stick to Khun-Yai's back as he descends the stairs disregarding the bomb he has left here.

And the last thing he said is not helpful in the slightest! What am I going to do tonight? Should I hide under the blanket all night? The crossbeams of this type of roof are freaking...visible. Thai ghosts in the movies are usually on the crossbeams, sitting there or hanging their heads down from them.

In the afternoon, disconcerted, I attempt to feel out Nai-Jun as I help the other servants carry Khun-Yai's necessities from the great house to the little house to prepare the place for Khun-Yai's moving tomorrow.

"Nai-Jun. Is the little house newly built?" I ask.

"Yes. Since the Luang moved here for his work, he built the great house first and then the little house for his guests."

"Did they use the old wood from other houses?"

"No. Why do you ask?"

"Well... The house is stunning, and it is a Lanna house," I spit the lame excuse.

"So I thought they used the wood from other houses."

"The Luang hired the best contractor in the North to build it." I smile at Nai-Jun and walk away to help the servants bring the wooden stool upstairs. Khun-Yai, who exactly behaved like a little child? Did you have fun scaring me? It is not funny.

In the evening, I get to meet Luang Thep Nititham, the owner of this place, when he has come back from work. The Luang has this noble character. He wears a raj-pattern shirt, a purple loincloth, long white socks, and leather shoes as a Siamese man. He steps out of his car and advances across the path with Nai-Jun holding a document bag behind. I am standing by the stairs of the great house, waiting to help the other servants move Khun-Yai's books to the little house. I kneel and fold my hands over my chest once he arrives. Luang Thep Nititham casts his eyes on me and queries.

"Who is this? His face is unfamiliar." His voice is deep and not arrogant, yet it has this respectable impact upon those who hear it.

"I...My name is Jom, sir." I try to come up with the most appropriate wording. I have to speak like this to adults, right? I hope I am not mistaken. Nai-Jun adds humbly.

"Khun-Kae took him in today to serve Khun-Yai, sir." The Luang hums a response in his throat and asks nothing more. I wait until he disappears into the house and ask Erb in worry.

"Will he call for me to interrogate one more time the way Khun-Kae did?"

"The males take care of work outside the house. The matters in the house are taken care of by the females. If Khun-Kae approves your stay, the Luang will not mind unless you get into a fight with someone and he hears about it. You will be in trouble that way. Why? Are you afraid he won't allow you to stay?" A sheepish smile paints my face. Why wouldn't I be scared? I have nowhere else to go.

The next day, Khun-Yai's stuff is arranged perfectly in the little house. A black, wide short table embellished with pearls is placed in the center of the hall for Khun-Yai to study. Beside it is a wooden cabinet packed with both Thai and foreign books. His bedroom is speckless and ready, with a four-poster wooden bed standing tall, white curtains tied with the brass hoops on each pole of the bed. The mattress and the pillowcase smell of scented water that will put him in good sleep. Black wooden cabinets take over one wall. Next to the window are a black wooden curved-leg table carved in delicate patterns and a chair with a backrest.

A female servant, Kesorn, teaches me how to organize the clothes in the wardrobe by dividing shirts, trousers, and nightclothes to keep in separate places. She also instructs me on how to prepare the daily essentials for Khun-Yai for when he wakes up, bathes, has meals, and goes to bed. Basically, I have to serve Khun-Yai almost in all aspects. Female servants will take care of chores and cooking.

From morning to noon, I haven't seen Khun-Yai. Kesorn tells me Khun-Yai had breakfast at the great house today with the Luang before he went out to work. Late in the morning, a foreign teacher comes to tutor Khun-Yai in the study at the other side of the great house almost every day except on weekends and holidays. I help the servants with trivial tasks aimlessly and can't help constantly craning my neck to check if Khun-Yai is on his way here, all the while imagining studying hard in a proper sitting position.

The image puts a smile on my face despite myself. Today, I have lunch in the kitchen as the other servants take turns having their meals. Luckily, most of the servants here speak in a central dialect, so it is easy for me to blend in. Except for when I use phrases from my era, they will laugh. I don't mind, though, because when they speak with odd ancient terms, like 'a-pern' for 'apple' or a profanity such as 'You horseshoe face', I laugh so hard my

ribs hurt. I listen to them chatting until I lose track of time. It is absolutely entertaining. Before I know it, it is late in the afternoon.

And when I head back to the little house, Khun-Yai is already there. He sits at the short black wooden table in the hall with an English text open on top. Khun-Yai is legibly writing on paper with a fountain pen, presumably summing up the content. I inch closer and say.

"I am sorry, Khun-Yai, for being late. I was having lunch at the kitchen." Khun-Yai raises his gaze from the book and offers a small smile, unoffended.

"It's okay, Poh-Jom. I just got here."

"Would you like to have some snacks?"

"Not now." Given that he is concentrating, I sit in silence, not disturbing him. Meanwhile, I think of what a majordomo should do at times such as this. The weather is cool, so I don't need to fan him. Everything in the house is in place. There is nothing else to do. Should I massage him? Where should I do it? His shoulders, neck, or feet? But if I give Khun-Yai a massage, he won't be able to write comfortably. And if I squeeze some strange spots and he has spasms, will I dodge in time? And if I manage to dodge and, in doing so, unintentionally chop his neck, will I be at fault? Before my thoughts run even wilder, Khun-Yai asks a question.

"Did you sleep well last night?" His question reminds me of how he messed with me yesterday.

I answer in a plain voice mixed with exasperation.

"I was half-asleep because I was scared of ghosts." A smile slips from Khun-Yai's mouth, then he puts on a deadpan expression and focuses on the book in front of him. I sneakily roll my eyes as I can't do anything more than that. Even though I am older, he is my boss. After some time, he closes the book and says.

"I will go to the waterfront pavilion. Please bring the snacks there." I acknowledge the order and wait until Khun-Yai leaves before going to the kitchen. The kitchen is not divided into Thai and foreign parts as in Mr. Robert's place. It is a broad single-story building. The walls above the waist height are lathed in rhombuses for ventilation. There are small and big brick ovens. Large frying pans hang on the walls, along with other kitchen equipment. It all indicates this family feeds numerous servants. Khun-Yai's snacks consist of two desserts. One is the tasty-looking toddy palm in clear

syrup. I don't know the other one, round dough sheets grilled with butter served with a small bowl of something resembling massaman curry.

"It's called ludti*. Don't you know it?" Pun, one of the cooks, explains, catching me staring at it.

The name rings the bell. So, this is the ludti mentioned in the Verse of Food and Dessert** I learned about in my middle school.

"This is the first time I saw it," I admit.

"Khun-Kae loves it, which makes Khun-Yai love it as well. Now, serve them. Don't forget to bring a pitcher of cold jasmine-infused water. It's a must."

"It pairs well?"

"Khun-Yai drinks it regularly," Pun says. "Khun-Yai enjoys drinking cold rainwater with fragrant jasmine floating in it...Now, enough with the questions. Hurry up and serve them." I quickly carry the tray of snacks as told. The sunlight is gone now, replaced by the breeze. The weather is pleasantly cool. Khun-Yai, apparently, is not resting in the waterfront pavilion. He is admiring the dwarf plants in porcelain pots positioned between the lotus basins on the lawn. I set the tray of snacks on the short table in the pavilion and arrange them so artistically that I want to take a picture and post it on Instagram. My eyes land on a book Khun-Yai brought.

It is the Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen*. I flick my eyes to Khun-Yai and see him still looking at the other pots without turning this way, so I decide to walk over to him.

"The snacks are ready, Khun-Yai," I inform him.

"Um." Khun-Yai nods, his eyes fixed on the branches of the ebony tree. I observe his face. Up close, his facial structure is beautifully unique. Despite his fair skin, his facial parts are sharp as a Thai man. His eyes are big and long by the tails as if painted by a paintbrush. My favorite part is his lips that are full and have an obvious cupid's bow. They are captivating and kissable lips. I notice two tiny moles on the edge of his cheek near his jaw.

"Are you peeking at me?" His voice startles me, and I deny it straight away.

"Huh... Hmm? I'm not."

I mean, I am not peeking. I am staring directly. Since it will be weird if I elaborate, I divert his attention instead.

"Aren't you hungry, Khun-Yai? I have brought the snacks." Khun-Yai holds my gaze to find out if I lied. I stare back since I don't think I did

anything wrong. Finally, Khun-Yai gives up and say.

"Let's go." I trail after Khun-Yai across the lawn to the waterfront pavilion. The chilly wind blows and spreads the scent of Lantoms. The ivory petals dance in the air and fall on the ground. I squat and pick them up as they are all over the grass. When I rise, Khun-Yai is right in front of me. His body faces my way and he looks at me with the gaze that takes me by surprise. His disposition is delighted, his eyes clear, the smile on his lips gentle, with a hint of something similar to affection.

"There is a Lantom in your hair." Khun-Yai reaches out. I can barely breathe when his hand grazes past my face to the side of my head, above the back of my ear, and picks the Lantom out of my hair. He slowly pulls his hand back and the petals brush my skin. It feels both tingling and tickling. My eyes widen when Khun-Yai slightly dips his chin and presses his nose on the ivory petals. As he flutters his long eyelashes and meets my eyes, the skin on my cheek feels hot as if kissed, though he doesn't touch me at all.

"Um... Smells nice." I don't know how to act at that second. Khun-Yai rolls the stem with the tips of his fingers, not releasing it on the ground.

He simply spins and strolls to the pavilion in his usual manner. I stand there in a daze for a moment, trying to understand what kind of atmosphere that was just now. Am I thinking too much or is he thinking too less? Was that a typical action of a charming man?

Since I can't find the answer or the answer is not good enough, I stop thinking for the time being and catch up with him. Khun-Yai enters the pavilion and settles at the table. I move along, ignoring the Lantom he has laid down next to the book. Though bothered by the previous incident, I have work to do here. I better get it together.

"There are toddy palm in syrup," I say, removing the lid from the bowl, "and impressive ludti spreading out in round sheets." Khun-Yai seems surprised.

"You read writings by the King?" I realize that slip of the tongue. I recited a line in the Verse of Food and Dessert without thinking. Who to blame if not the Lantom near his hand?

"I learned about it in grade...Ah, I mean, I read some.

"I quickly make an excuse. I doubt servants of the noble families in this era receive a proper education. Some of them are literal, at the least.

"I used to study in a temple and with the missionaries who came to promote Christianity, so I know some English as well." I make another excuse in advance, in case I say something by mistake again. Khun-Yai pauses. He asks nothing more about it and instead fixes his considering gaze on me, then he slides the book towards me.

"Can you read this for me while I have the snacks, then?"

"Huh..? Ah, read this?" I stare at the thick volume of the Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phoen.

"Yes. I have read so much today. It will be nice if someone reads for me." To be honest, I think Khun-Yai is testing me, but I don't care.

I won't pretend to stutter. I have pride. To me, pretending to be uneducated is intolerable. If I can't even read words right, it feels like the tuition fee my parents worked so hard to afford is worthless.

"Sure," I obey, taking the book.

"Where should I start? I don't know what chapter you are on."

"Chapter six, Plai Kaew goes into Saithong's room." I flip the pages to that chapter. This volume of verse is the version of the National Library. Chapter six opens with Khun Chang yearning for Nang Pim. He feels so troubled that he heads to her house to flatter her mother. I clear my throat and start reading.

"Here is Khun Chang longing for Nang Pim, yearning for her until lights have gone dim, ever since departing from the house of Sri Prachan."

We all know the story and how it ends. I have learned about some chapters as part of the subject of literature. For the record, this chapter wasn't in the textbook. It is probably because of...hmm, the sexual intercourse scene, I assume. It gets even more entertaining as I go on. The more I read, the more I enjoy it. Ancient authors are superb. Their words are profound and impactful, beautiful and sentimental.

I get completely absorbed when I reach the part where Nang Pim insults Khun Chang as she knows he fawns on Sri Prachan in the hopes that she will accept him to be her son-in-law. You hairless licentious impertinent flirt. Seducing dogs with your hem wiggling in the dirt. Perfumed powder and oil hideously smeared. Hair jutting, splitting like parted labia. Pushed off the mutt to be born in its place.

Worth less than a coin, why not fall to your death?

A face such as yours desiring to be wedded. You fallen mango only a dog would fetch. How savage. If a woman called me a fallen mango only a dog

would fetch, I would be speechless. No matter the era, women's insults pierce like knives. I think Pim is quite stubborn. She doesn't show herself when her mother calls, and even humiliates Khun Chang offensively. I feel sorry for Khun Chang and amused at the same time. I continue reading, totally engrossed. I don't know what kind of expression I have until I hear Khun-Yai ask.

"Are you tired, Jom?" I lift my gaze from the book.

"No, I'm not."

"You're frowning."

"Oh. Really?" I rub my brow with my fingers. "I was too into it. It's annoying. Not the reading, though. It's the story."

"Which part do you dislike?"

"It's Plai Kaew. That man is fuc...horrible. How can he sneak out to get laid with the maid after flirting with Nang Pim? The maid doesn't even give her consent, yet he has the nerve to cast a spell on her."

I stop myself from cussing in time, but I don't hold back on something else.

"You despise disloyal men?"

"I do despise them," I say in a firm voice. I hate two-timers.

"I doubt anyone is fond of them." I realize that this B.E. is in the middle of the movement campaigned for legalizing the monogamy law. Still, it is not easy to cancel polygamy in real life. Besides, I have no idea if the Luang has concubines. If I am not careful, my words will pique Khun-Yai as it sounds like I am offending his father.

"Well, I am aware that having concubines is considered normal for many families in this era. Some women are even willing to be ones, but I kind of feel sorry for them."

"You are speaking as though you are from a different era." I stop short. I was too worried about one matter that I forgot to be careful about the other.

"It's just a figure of speech. Do I continue?"

"That's enough for today." I sneak a sigh of relief. Khun-Yai is sure quick-witted.

I can't let my guard down. When I served at Mr. Robert's place, I did say something like this by mistake, but not a single servant got suspicious. They simply thought I was crazy. Khun-Yai drinks from the cut glass containing mildly jasmine-scented drinking water. I smile when his expression shows how refreshing it is. How adorable.

"You love jasmine-infused water more than regular water?"

"Um." A small smile flickers on his face. "It's fragrant, more refreshing than water." I beam.

"I will prepare it every day without fail." In the evening, when the Luang has come back from work, Khun-Yai returns to the great house. In conclusion, Khun-Yai has breakfast and dinner at the great house. I only have to serve his meal at the little house at lunch. At night, I prepare nightclothes for Khun-Yai. They smell of scented water presumably made from flowers. I organize the bed and the curtains and don't forget to ask him if I have completed my tasks perfectly.

"You did well," Khun-Yai says. His answer makes me relieved. Though I am new to this, I will do my best.

"You've moved to this house, in a new place. Will you have trouble sleeping?" I say, shutting the window in Khun-Yai's room. The night air is cool, but the temperature will drop later. Sometimes it can be freezing that you wish you had another blanket.

"If I can't sleep, what will you do?" ...Hmm? Look at him in puzzlement. Do I need to do something Apparently, yes, because Khun-Yai stares at me, waiting for the answer. I have never known a majordomo has to be this versatile.

"How about counting sheep?" I suggest.

"The sheep jumps over the fence one by one. One, two, three, and so on."

"Does it put you to sleep?"

"No. It bored me to the point that I got angry. I opened the fence for them when I counted to twenty."

"Right."

"Then.." I pause, thinking. "How about I scratch your back?" This is one of the tips to lull babies for every family. Just keep scratching and the babies will drift to dreamland.

"Um." Khun-Yai nods in agreement.

"If you can't sleep, should I scratch your back?" I gape
Khun-Yai chuckles and speaks with a smile.

"Never mind. You must be tired today, having worked since morning. Have a good sleep tonight. No need to scratch my back." I go to bed as told, still wondering if he meant it by scratching my back... No way. Who would like to scratch someone else's back? It is a tiring job. That is why they invented a back scratcher.

I suddenly recall what happened during the day. The Lantoms on the grass and the way Khun-Yai looked at me replay in consecutive scenes in my mind. I frown, not sure how to think of that. Is he into men..? I shake that thought away. The fact that I have been dumped by a man and am deeply sad that I want something to hold on to, doesn't mean I can generalize that every man who approaches me or treats me with kindness has romantic feelings for me. That's pathetic. The more I think, the worse I feel, so I force myself to fall asleep. The next day proceeds ordinarily. I wake up early, get ready, and open the door and windows in the hall. I prepare a ceramic basin, a jug, and a clean cloth for Khun-Yai to wash up on the nightstand when he wakes up. Also, I don't forget to set a pitcher on the desk in the hall.

The pitcher contains clear rainwater with a few jasmine flowers floating on the surface. The cook stressed repeatedly that I couldn't leave the jasmine in the water for over six hours. Otherwise, the water would be bitter rather than refreshing.

At noon, I visit the kitchen to collect Khun-Yai's lunch and deliver it to the little house. Khun-Yai's meal is arranged in premium gold-trimmed ceramic dishware with flower patterns, with every bowl and plate matching. There are five menus, a soup dish, a stir-fried dish, a spicy salad, everything. Aside from the savory dishes, there are desserts. I am relieved that I traveled back in time in my own body, not in the body of some striking lady. My job is to serve the food. It doesn't matter that I can't spread the batter for crispy pancakes or carve Marian plums. Another day passes by smoothly. I used to spend days like this back at Mr. Robert's place, yet, oddly enough, it felt different. I feel at ease at this moment, in this place. I can even say I am happy, though I never forget I am living in the wrong era.

My phone still hides in the closet between the layers of folded shirts, a reminder of where I came from.

To put it in a way, I have a place to return to. The next morning, I get up at dawn to the distant crowing of roosters. I stretch a little before sitting up. A good night's sleep lights up my mood. I scoot closer to the wall shared with Khun-Yai's room and listen carefully. But it is too early for him to wake up. I stand up and open the window. The morning air is so chilly that I slouch and rub my arms. Thick fog blurs the scenery out there. White smoke floating in the air conceals the ground out of sight. It feels like I am in heaven or a painting. The Royal Poinciana tree appears indistinct in the

mist. I cover myself in a blanket and step out into the hall, planning to breathe in the fresh air out there to my heart's content. I unbolt the door, fling it open, and take a deep breath, smelling the grass and flowers mixing in the air. I walk to the balcony with fog lingering close. The plank floor is cold yet satisfying. I step forward, thinking of something fun.

I want to feel the grass with my bare feet. In my third step, the feeling of the plank floor changes. I look down and get surprised to see the planks have gone pale and rough. The surfaces are torn and ripped like old wood. I stare in bewilderment, remembering how glossy the plank floor I walked on yesterday was. I am even more baffled when I notice that every plank on the balcony is dull. I tip my head up and blink. The second my eyelids shut and open, everything changes. I go stiff, taking in the sight before me in greatest stupefaction! I still stand in the same place, yet nothing else implies that this second connects to the previous one. Under the blazing sunlight, I am on an aged balcony of an ancient wooden house. The heat in the air seeps through every pore of my skin. The commotion from the side of the house down below draws my attention. I get chills from head to toe when I see the huge branch sticking through the roof above the landing. Around five builders are trying to remove it. The landing is holed. My heart almost stops beating when I spot Tan. The head carpenter of the contractor stands on the lawn below, instructing the builders. Now I know what period I am in. This is the day I will be heading back to Bangkok, a day before my car plunges into the Ping River. It is my present world, not the past!

"Tan!" I shout, my lips trembling. Tan turns in my direction with a surprised face. I pivot to the stairs and run down as fast as possible to be away from the balcony, but then, something happens. The scene before me shifts in slow motion and there is this heaviness in the air molecules. My eyes get teary as it occurs to me that every step is taking me back in time. Each plank my feet touch switches slowly from dull to polished. It spreads like glazes splashing swiftly. The shattered tiles from the roof float back up and piece themselves together into perfection, and the hole on the landing seals itself. Everything happens in front of me. I feel the wind of the drought blowing dust in the air, and it makes me close my eyes.

When I open them, 'my present world' has disappeared. All that is left is the sound of my pounding heart in the body standing in the past...

Chapter 9: The story of the picture

"Jom! Jom, what's wrong?"

The voice comes with the arms grabbing my body, keeping me from jumping down. It is Khun-Yai. He looks at me in worry, his arms tightening around me.

"What happened? I heard you shouting and it looked like you were about to jump from here." I divert my gaze to the same spot and swallow the bitterness down my throat as I see the peaceful lawn down there. No traces of anything I have witnessed just now. Tan, the builders, and the broken branch are gone as if it was all illusions. I am shaking, unsure if I should be afraid, mad, or sad. I point at where Tan was earlier.

"Just now, did you see anything on the lawn?"

"I saw fog."

"Was that all?" I have no idea how my voice sounds. I don't even know my hand is shivering until Khun-Yai reaches out and presses my pointed finger back down.

"Your hand is freezing. Let's get inside. It's dewy out here. You will get sick." Khun-Yai loosens his embrace, but one of his hands grips my upper arm as he takes me inside. I trudge along, distracted. What was that just now? The spacetime twisted and formed a passage connecting the past and the future again? Why didn't it take me back? Once we have settled at the pearl-embellished desk in the hall, Khun-Yai asks.

"Who is Tan?" I flick my eyes up at him instantly, then cover it up with a question.

"Khun-Yai...heard it?"

"You shouted so loud. Of course, I heard it."

"I.." I hesitate, short of excuses. "I was probably dreaming and...sleepwalking." I drop my eyes, my heart still racing. It is not easy to get it together after the previous incident. I slowly glance back up at Khun-Yai. His solemn eyes tell me he is not convinced.

"Do you sleepwalk often?" For a second, I want to tell him everything. I want him to know so he can help me deal with this. My lips part, yet not a

single word slips out. I can't say anything. How can he possibly understand the situation when I don't get it myself?

My hesitation draws a soft sigh from Khun-Yai's mouth.

"Never mind. Take a rest today. You can serve me later when you feel better."

"No, I'm not sick," I object. "I'm okay. I've become like this because I slept too much. I'll get a jug and a cloth for you right away." Khun-Yai looks at me quietly. I can only plead in a soft voice.

"Please...Khun-Yai." In the end, Khun-Yai allows me to do my job, though, in fact, I feel agitated. My mind wanders to the incident and I lose focus, but I force myself to get a grip, knowing Khun-Yai is keeping an eye on me.

Since it is the weekend, there is no lesson with the foreign teacher. Khun-Yai usually spends his time at the study with the Luang before noon unless they have guests, like today. I prepare Khun-Yai's attire as he orders and help him with trivial stuff while he gets dressed. When Khun-Yai steps out of the little house, I heave a sigh of relief as I don't have to put on a straight face and pretend that everything is okay in front of him anymore. I take the chance when Khun-Yai is absent and Kesorn, the female servant, is tidying up the house to explore the lawn. The morning fog is gone, leaving only the pale sunlight and a whiff of coolness in the air. I step on the damp grass and plod around in the hopes of finding any traces indicating anything that seemed to be present here at dawn. Maybe the tiny source of fog is the passage to my era, and it is perhaps waiting to open again. I even wish to stumble upon a piece of paper with Tan's handwriting on it. At last, my hope is no different from the swirls of fog fading in the sunlight. After going back and forth between the lawn and the stairs for some time until Kesorn glances at me suspiciously, I decide to give up and get back to work.

Kesorn goes back to the great house once she has finished cleaning. The little house is quiet. I am alone at Khun-Yai's desk, organizing things aimlessly, encouraging myself not to lose hope so easily. Maybe the passage in time will occur again at the same spot tomorrow. This time, I have to jump down before everything vanishes. I hear a click when I absentmindedly brush my hand against Khun-Yai's pocket watch on top of a book. It slides down to the dark wooden surface of the pearl-embellished table. I pick it up. It is a winding pocket watch with a porcelain dial adorned

with seven rubies, displaying hour marks in Roman numerals. The brand 'Elgin' is printed conspicuously on the dial. I can't help smiling as I trace my fingers along the golden chain. Without this watch, I wouldn't have had any business to visit Khun-Yai at his place, and he wouldn't have had a story of my good deed to pass on to Khun-Kae and successfully persuaded her to welcome me. If I disappear, returning to my world, will Khun-Yai be uneasy and look for me? Of course, he will. A person is gone. How can one be at ease about that? They might search for me urgently in fear of the possibility of a murder. For a second, I think Khun-Yai will not look for me with the same feeling as the others have.

There is something special in his eyes. It could be kindness or adoration, and it always emerges every time he looks at me. I don't want to simply disappear and worry him. If the past world, where I am, is full of obstacles and sufferings generated from misplacedness, Khun-Yai is the only thing that brings me joy and warmth. It feels like there is good luck amid the misfortunes.

I like him a lot, honestly. If I return to my world, I will certainly miss him. I run my fingers to the end of the chain and get a bit surprised by a small clip attached to the end of the chain. I study it, flipping it over. The clip is in good condition and has a good lock used to hook with the fabric to prevent the watch from dropping. How did the watch fall out of Khun-Yai's pocket? I stop and think for a while. It is not that complicated, just a small, unexpected accident. Regardless, when I recall Khun-Yai's occasional facial expression that wasn't innocent and reserved as the one he put on in front of the elders, my chest is somewhat tingling. It's okay. When Khun-Yai comes back, I will feel him out. The cool air and the sound of the leaves blowing gently in the breeze bring laziness upon me. It will be a while before Khun-Yai is back at the little house. No need to rush to the kitchen.

I stretch my arms before laying one of them on the desk and propping my head on it. The scent of the orange jasmine grown by the stairs fills the air, so refreshing that I close my eyes in a dreamy state.

And then I jump due to the familiar voice close by.

"Who is this? Why are you sleeping in Yai's house?" I sit straight immediately and turn my head towards the voice. The high voice is owned by a little boy around nine or ten years old. He is lanky and fair-skinned, his eyes big and sharp, holding a slate board in one arm. I quickly back away. Judging from the way he speaks, I can tell in an instant that he has some

sort of power in this place. His tone of voice and words are neither rude nor harsh but firm and clear. He must be one of the bosses of this place.

Before I respond, a woman's voice cuts in.

"Ugh. .Khun-Lek. How can you run so fast? Just a second and you're already here." A female servant climbs up the stairs, panting.

"Khun-Kae said not to bother Khun-Yai studying."

"Yai is not studying. He is at the great house with Father," he argues, then asks me again.

"Who are you? What is your name?"

"I am Jom, Khun-Yai's majordomo," I reply.

'Khun-Lek' nods while I observe his face. This little boy is unquestionably Khun-Yai's brother. He has the same exact facial structure and manner as Khun-Yai, like a miniature version of him but with a slimmer body and a more feminine face. His eyes, however, display as much intelligence as his big brother's. More importantly, his manner indeed belongs to a child of a noble family. That is why they say nobility is a trait one possesses since born.

"Khun-Lek, I don't think you should play around in here. Let's go over there." the same woman says. I guess she is Khun-Lek's nursemaid. Her face is familiar as I have seen her in the kitchen. I didn't learn her name, though.

"I am not playing around. I came here to ask Yai to teach me how to draw," he says, seated himself at Khun-Yai's desk and placing the slate board on it

"Will you teach me instead, Prik? Do you know how to draw an 'airplane'?"

"Oh...what is an e-pan? I don't know what it is. Ever since you entered the foreign school, you've been confusing me with foreign words," the nursemaid complains.

"If you play around in here, you will get scolded by Khun-Yai."

"Yai will scold me? That's impossible. It would sound more likely if it was Mother or Prim. Prik, bring my snack. I will have rice crust while waiting for Yai at this house." Ordered by the little boss, the nursemaid frowns in vexation and draws out her voice with a sarcastic tone.

"Yes, sir..." After the nursemaid has gone, Khun-Lek starts scribbling on the slate board. I sneak a peek and see him drawing a man in a soldier-like

uniform and trying to draw something above. He keeps drawing and erasing it. His brow is knitted like a knot that I can't help asking.

"What are you drawing, Khun-Lek?"

"An airplane," Khun-Lek answers.

"The teacher said to draw my dream occupation. I want to be a 'pilot'* flying an airplane. Oh...Do you know what it is? The school doesn't teach in a northern dialect. The Princaroy's College is a Christian school. They teach in Thai and English."

I smile. The Prince Royal's College in which Khun-Lek calls and hears as 'Princaroy' lasts to my era. Whenever I drove by it, I could glimpse the white church with the remarkable blue roof on the property. For the record, the school was seized by the government during World War II and returned after the war had ended.

"Can I try? Khun-Lek might like it." Seeing him drawing and erasing and sighing repeatedly, I feel bad.

"You know how to draw?"

"I do." Now that I have offered my help, I realize... Shit, what do airplanes in this era look like? Do they have commercial air transport? Or is there only military aircraft? Too late to turn back now.

Khun-Lek hands me the slate board with those big, round jetty eyes. Ha....they're sure brothers. I can never say no to them. I try sketching the structure of something similar to a modern airplane but more old-fashioned and glance up. Khun-Lek furrows his brow. I rapidly erase it and outline another one. This time is a bomber.

"Is this the one?" I flip the slate board towards him.

"It looks different from the one I want." I grit my teeth...Hmph! It must be more classic, huh? I think of old pictures and weigh whether to draw the Bréguet with two pairs of wings or the Nieuport with a set of wings. I choose to go with the first one.

Khun-Lek's face brightens instantly.

"Draw a national flag at the tail." I smile and add the flag as told. Khun-Lek loves it. He takes the slate board and admires the picture with a grin.

"I will draw a person on the plane. How will it fly without a pilot?"

"Let's do that," I support.

"Goodness, Lek. Are you playing around in here?" Khun-Yai's voice sounds from the balcony, and Khun-Lek and I turn our heads at the same time.

"Yai." Khun-Lek beams, showing his lower teeth with a tooth missing.

"I was waiting for you to teach me how to draw." Khun-Yai looks at us and casts a small smile.

"You're smiling now?" It takes a minute for me to realize he was talking about me, not Khun-Lek. I was so absorbed in helping Khun-Lek draw the plane that I forgot the incident in the early morning for a while.

I forgot what I had done to Khun-Yai. He must have been shocked that I almost sleepwalked myself out of the balcony. He also had to deal with me fairly panicking after that...Ugh, will he think there is something wrong with my brain? I plaster a sheepish smile and reply.

"Yes." Khun-Yai says nothing more and joins Khun-Lek at the desk.

"Let me see. What are you drawing?" Khun-Lek slides the slate board to show off his art.

"An airplane. The teacher said to draw my dream occupation. I drew clouds and a pilot. Nai-Jom drew the airplane for me." Khun-Yai eyes me, and I respond with a smile.

"I want to fly an airplane, to be a pilot." Khun-Lek's voice sounds unconfident.

"Do you think I can do it?" Khun-Yai pats his brother's head lovingly.

"Of course."

"They say I have to learn how to fly in France like Phraya Chalermakart." Watching two brothers chatting, I can't help thinking of my sister. How is the lady boss Ueang Phueng doing? She must be far gone into her pregnancy, lumbering around with servants supporting her, Is Mr. Robert taking good care of my sister? He must be, There is one good thing under his heartlessness, He seems to love and care about the lady boss Ueang Phueng dearly. Khun-Yai and Khun-Lek are still chatting like the brothers they are. I excuse myself and head out of the little house to check on Khun-Yai's lunch at the kitchen. Despite knowing the fog is gone, I flick my eyes around as I walk past the lawn. At night, while I undo the curtains from the brass hoops on the four-poster bed, Khun-Yai says.

"Tell me about your dream last night." I freeze and pretend to smooth the curtains.

"It was nothing. Just a silly dream."

"Tell me. I will decide whether it was silly or not." I shift my gaze left and right, not knowing what to say. A dream, my ass. It was real. If I am to say something is a dream, my current situation is more like it. A dream I

have no clue how to wake up from.
But I have to give him an answer.

"Sometimes I dreamed about this strange place. It was...ah, a town not existing in this era. The people, the objects, and the buildings were different from now, and I lived there. It was indescribable. I can't remember the details. I focused on my tasks today and forgot." Khun-Yai stays silent, probably knowing he can't squeeze anything out of me more than this.

"Why don't you sleep in my room?"

"Huh?" My mouth falls open. "Why?"

"If you sleepwalk, I will grasp you. I will not let you go near the balcony."

"Oh, Khun-Yai, please don't burden yourself. I am your servant. How can I lie around in your room? It is inappropriate." The thing is, I am not afraid that I will get so horny that I try to get it on with him someday if I sleep near such a handsome man. I am afraid he will discover that I am sneakily attempting to find a way back to my world. Besides, I am not a five-year-old kid. I don't need a babysitter keeping an eye on me.

"Inappropriate?" Khun-Yai stifles his laughter.

"I am not making you sleep on my bed. Are you scared that I will ask you to scratch my back all night?"

"I can scratch your back right now. I don't need to sleep here. I won't sleepwalk again." Khun-Yai stares at me, and I respond with an innocent face.

"Do you want me to turn off the light now?"

"I will do it."

"Then..I'm going to bed," I say, wishing to dash out.

Being stared directly by Khun-Yai like this gets me all tingling. As I step over the threshold, I hear Khun-Yai speak.

"If you sleepwalk again, you will sleep in my room." I spin around and open my mouth, but the light is off.

It is to be understood that the previous sentence is an order, not a suggestion. The next day, I am awake before daybreak. I get up, tiptoe to the window, and open it. The air is crisp like the days before. Fog hovers over the trees and grass, blurring everything. The atmosphere is coldly grey. I push the door gently, trying not to make a noise, and walk out into the freezing balcony. My heart races as I reach the railing and throw my gaze down. Fog takes over every inch of the lawn. I make for the stairs and peer

through the whiteness to see if the planks change to decaying wood. To my disappointment, they look fine.

I rush down the stairs and run to the center of the lawn. I turn back and forth, not knowing which direction to be. My heart stings in dismay when I discover nothing as hoped. Morning fog encircles me. Normal fog with no passages to any other world. I am still in B.E. 2471.

Overwhelmed by the pent-up anger, I bark out curses with no holding back. I swear at the theory of relativity, the black hole, and the wormhole. I know this is not superstition. No one sent me here with some black magic. But science is everything but helpful. Spacetime is freaking irresponsible! I yell until I run out of energy and end up puffing on the lawn. I stand there for a while, absorb the disappointment, bear the indignation, and march back to the little house.

"Ouch!"

My face collides with something firm, causing me to lose balance. Before I fall on my butt, my arm is gripped by something that keeps me in place. I stand in bafflement, enduring the pain in my nose and squinting at the shadowy figure of someone taller than me. Before I utter a word, the person speaks first. The voice is familiar, and the words send chills all over my skin more than the frigid air.

"Are you sleepwalking again, Poh-Jom?" The moment after that showcases the ultimate attempt of my life to put my lying skills into practice. It is a disaster. I can make up lame excuses for the wormhole and the black hole and succeed in convincing him, shamelessly so. At least, they sound like animals or natural things. The worst part is:

"I want to know about the theory of relativity." I scrunch up my face, feeling like crying.

"No. It...It's an activity. I was trying to find an activity to do." Khun-Yai stares at me intently. I dip my chin and admit in a soft voice.

"Yeah, I sleepwalked."

Good thing Khun-Yai accompanies Khun-Kae to make merit at the temple today and has business somewhere else after that. He doesn't have time to interrogate me more yet. I spend most of my time helping the gardener tend to the potted plants near the little house and the veranda. Late in the afternoon, a small figure shows up at the stairs with his nursemaid and pieces of paper in his hand.

"Nai-Tom, I want to draw." And so, Khun-Lek, Prik, and I settle under the great tropical almond tree in the garden to draw pictures as Khun-Lek wishes. By wanting to draw, Khun-Lek means I will be the one drawing, and he will tell me what he wants me to draw. Today, I draw on paper, not the slate board, because the pictures have to be erased on the board. It is a shame. I lean my back on the tree trunk in the shade of tropical almond leaves branching around. Khun-Lek rolls on the reed mat laid out over the grass, watching me sketch while munching on his snacks. The area is pretty far from the little house, with the shady, wide garden stretching before us and paths cutting across the lawn skirted with potted plants.

"You want me to add a deer in the garden? There is no deer in this place," I point out when he wants me to draw a deer next to a few pheasants pecking bugs in the garden.

"I like deers for their long horns. Can't you draw it?"

"Sure, I can." Just a deer. Why wouldn't I be able to do it for Khun-Lek? Khun-Lek cocks his head when I am done.

"You're a majordomo. How come you're so good at drawing?" I was an architect and got As on drawing and sketch design. I don't tell him that. Instead, I smile and ask.

"Do you want me to draw a cat walking on the balcony over there?"

"Do it. Draw Yai's house as well. Make the cat walk on the railing." I say with a laugh.

"If I have to draw the house, it will take long."

"Take your time. I'll eat snacks while waiting." I decide to draw it on a new piece of paper because the current one is packed with all kinds of animals. No room for something big. I shift to find the right angle and start sketching. From this angle, I can see the spacious garden and the paths extending across the lawn to Khun-Yai's black teak house. Scenery with a beautiful composition. I slowly outline the little house, feeling oddly contented as I draw. This is the closest to who I am. For someone with the career living on the other side of time, each line drawn brings this strange surge of joy. Even Khun-Lek watches in silence, not asking to add this and that like earlier.

"Do you want me to add blowing leaves, Khun-Lek?"

"Yeah, a lot of them. And the squirrel. I see it scurrying on the trees every day."

"You want a squirrel too?"

"Must have one," Khun-Lek confirms in a serious manner. I add a squirrel as he wishes. It is a jumble of lines on the branch of the rain tree, but Khun-Lek seems pleased. I don't forget to add birds flying in the distance in the sky and the swirls of the wind, believing it brings the picture to life, like it is moving. Once I have finished, Khun-Lek takes the picture and compliments me in delight that I have drawn everything he wants on one piece of paper. But then, I freeze as something pops up in my mind. I stare at the picture in Khun-Lek's hands. It is just a piece of paper with carbon lines from a pencil illustrating a story, but what I am looking at right now is much more than that. The details in the picture, everything created from my own hand in my point of view, and the feeling as I drew, it all belongs to the uniqueness of someone.

I think I have seen this picture before. My hair stands on end. This is one of several pictures kept in the huge trunks I ordered Tan's builder to move to the little house when I was an architect renovating this place. Both delicate drawings and rough sketches were framed and wrapped in cloths, nicely protected in locked trunks, never transferred to anywhere else until I found them.

My hand holding the pencil trembles. I know now why the sketches are so familiar.

I think every drawing in the trunks I have seen that day was drawn by me.

Chapter 10: Poh-Jomkwan

I spend hours after that recalling the pictures I have seen in the trunks. Although I can't remember every drawing, the ones I do turn my face pale, my hands cold.

The drawings of the waterfront pavilion, the front of the great house, the back balcony, the view of the Ping River, and several scenes from various angles that I am not sure where they are. Every picture hits like heavy fists hurled at me, reminding me that I will not be stuck in the past for a short time as expected. It will be a month or a year. Maybe years. My heart plummets when the other kind of answer I have never thought of before occurs to me. I might never be able to go back. The thought is the final punch that knocks me down on my knees. I have no strength to stand, my arms going feeble, that I flop on the stairs of the little house after Khun-Lek has left.

Everything I have just learned crushes my recent hope. Even if I have told myself I might be here longer than I thought, I never once believed that I would never make it back to my world. I have been hopeful for all this time. My hope was sometimes dim, sometimes bright, but never faded. I glance around, a hollow in my chest. I like this place. I like the cool shade of trees surrounding both teak houses. It is serene and pleasant.

I like the warmth of the lantern at night. I like the faint smell of the burned wick that lingers even after the light is snuffed out and sleeping to the sound of bugs chirping at night. I like Khun-Yai and Khun-Lek, and I respect the Luang and his wife, Khun-Kae. But it shouldn't be like this. I lean my head on the railing of the stairs in hopelessness and stay like that for some time.

Khun-Yai comes back in the evening with Khun-Kae in their car trailed by another one. I don't know whose car it is, but he seems to be an important guest or a close acquaintance of the family, considering how the whole family is out to welcome him delightedly.

"Poh-Jom, prepare my attire," Khun-Yai says in a cheerful voice as he enters the little house.

"After bathing, I suppose I have to go to the great house again."

"Yes. I saw another car pulling over. You have a guest?" I try to sound happy and pretend to be busy preparing a towel for him to avoid eye contact. Khun-Yai is observant. He will sense something wrong if he looks me straight in the face.

"It is my uncle. He came from the Capital," Khun-Yai answers.

"He is a distant relative on my mother's side, but my father treats him as his close friend. Uncle is the one gifting me the pocket watch you found. Do you remember?"

"I do," I reply.

"Which clothes do you prefer?"

"A white shirt and a grey sweater," he says. I collect them as told. After bathing and getting dressed, Khun-Yai walks over to the great house. My eyes trail after his broad back until he is out of sight, then I sit on the terrace and let out a deep sigh, trying to make peace with everything. Still, I know it is not something to get over so easily.

The night comes fast in winter. Soon, the sky turns gloomily dark blue. The air is cool. Khun-Yai is still getting together with his guest at the great house. I light up the lantern outside the terrace and wait for him to return.

The house has electricity like other residences of the high-rank authorities and rich families in Chiang Mai that can afford generators, whereas poor commoners stick to lanterns. Nevertheless, I only turn on the lights in the areas Khun-Yai occupies and use a lantern in my bedroom. I don't want anyone saying I act as an equal to my boss. A couple of hours later, Khun-Yai is back. I have prepared his nightclothes. Khun-Yai seems to have quite a few drinks. His eyes are unusually glazed and gleam like shiny jets.

"Poh-Jom, I think I am drunk." Khun-Yai's voice is lively.

"Fetch me a basin of water and a towel. I'll wipe myself before going to bed." Drunk, huh? How can a drunk man walk straight up the stairs like that? He doesn't even wobble. I guess he didn't drink that much, just enough to be tipsy.

I head downstairs to get a jug of water and a ceramic basin and carry them up as told. When I enter his bedroom, I spot him sinking in the chair with his eyes closed. I pick up a bottle of cologne 4711 on the table to mix it in the water for Khun-Yai to wash up with. The scent is classic and

dreamily refreshing. Since Khun-Kai is resting comfortably, I am reluctant whether to wake him up or let him sleep. But then, Khun-Yai opens his eyes.

"Oh...It's my Poh-Jomkwan. I thought I was dreaming." I fight the urge to roll my eyes. If Khun-Yai drinks often, I will drown in sugar to death as he is so sweet. Well, this is good. Being in a good mood when drunk is better than beating his servants.

"Can you wipe yourself? Do you need my help?"

"I need your help, Poh-Jom." I step forward and unbutton his shirt. Khun-Yai slides his eyelids shut again, letting me wipe his face, neck, and down to his chest with a damp towel smelling of soft fragrance.

"Do you drink often?" I ask.

"No. I only drink when socializing." For a second, I think of myself back when I was an architect. After getting off work, I would drink with other staff on occasion, and the engineers would sometimes join us. Those things feel like they happened forever ago, far away from here, and will never happen again.

"Where is your mind wandering off to?" I snap back to reality when Khun-Yai holds my hand.

"Oh. It's nothing."

"Are you thinking of your lover in Mr. Robert's place?" His words draw a laugh out of me despite my sour mood.

"I have no such things, only piglets."

"No one?"

"No..." I am about to deny it firmly, but something has changed my mind.

"Well...I had one. It ended long ago." A soft sigh escapes my mouth, and I pull my hand back.

"You seem really drunk."

"Even sober, I'm drunk with love's drink. What d'you think might put it aside? Mid-day cup dilutes morn' cup of wine, but love's wine keeps me drunk all the day*." Seeing him reciting a poem with such a bubbly face, as I have been cranky since noon, I can't help feeling irked. Unable to hold back, I say.

"If you follow in the footsteps of Phra Sunthonwohan, you will have a dozen wives sooner or later." Khun-Yai chuckles, taking no offense. He eyes me with a smile.

"I only want one wife." Wow..How smooth. If I were a female servant, I would definitely melt to the ground and strip for him right here. I respond by wiping his arm and keeping a straight face while cleaning other parts of his body. Shortly after, I go downstairs to put away the basin and find other trivial things to do on purpose, stalling for time. Why? I have seen that Khun-Yai drank, and he was out all day.

There is no way he is not depleted. As expected, when I return to the bedroom, Khun-Yai has fallen asleep out of exhaustion, looking like a little kid. I unhook the curtains from the poles and quietly walk out, trying my best not to make a noise. I don't want to wake him up. When I arrive at my room, I heave a sigh and plop on my mattress. I place my arm on my head like a miserable person. What do I do? Accept my fate without putting up a fight? Aside from being a question with no answer, it infuriatingly multiples more questions. If I could put up a fight, who would I put up a fight against? An angel? Or the God of Wormholes? I don't even know who the culprit that sent me here is. Who can I even offend? I shut my eyes and rub my brow with the knife-edge of my hand in distress and bitterness. Do I have to stay here and continue drawing those pictures until the end of my lifespan and die without my family in this era? How long will it be? There are more than ten pictures.

Hold up.

...More than ten picture. I freeze, then spring up. If not mistaken, there were over ten framed pictures in the trunks. If I had slowly drawn pictures throughout my life, there would have been more, not only the bunch I saw. There are two possibilities.

First: I lived in the past in the span of time in which I drew all of those pictures and then returned to my world somehow.

Second: I lived here until old and had drawn countless pictures, but only over ten survived to the next generations until found during the renovation.

My heart beats fast at the thoughts. I don't know which one is right. Regardless, if there is no clear answer, it means I still have hope. I still have a chance, and the only way to prove my hypotheses is to draw all those pictures. I inhale in excitement. Hope rushes in my chest. From tomorrow on, I have to find a way to get myself to draw those pictures. It shouldn't be beyond my abilities as long as I have Khun-Lek's support. Perhaps Khun-Lek will be the one framing those pictures and passing them on to his offspring. That is just my speculation. One thing for sure, I should start

drawing the pictures as soon as possible, every single one of them, so that I can find them in the huge trunks a hundred years from now. I lie back on the mattress with my eyes still opening wide, my head full of plans to be executed.

...I hope I will not finish drawing those pictures and then get hit by a car.

In the morning, I wake up refreshed and enthusiastic. I get up, open the window, and breathe in the fresh air, unbothered by the freezing temperature. I leave the room in high spirits and descend the stairs to take a walk on the lawn. As it will be a while before Khun-Yai is up, I amble to the waterfront pavilion and look for nice spots to draw pictures, no longer searching for the source of the strange fog. When I come back to the little house and enter the hall, I halt. Khun-Yai is awake, washed up and dressed, sitting at the desk with a sullen face.

"Poh-Jom cheated." Several minutes later, I can only sit on the floor with my head down, my hands folded on my lap, and accept all accusations with no argument. Who would have thought he would wake up at dawn before I could prepare his necessities?

I missed showing my face before he woke up and pretending to have spent the night in his room. Here is the consequence of getting cunning and deceiving my boss. At first, Khun-Yai planned to have me sleep in his room for a night or two to make sure I didn't sleepwalk every night as he believed. But now, I have to sleep in Khun-Yai's room until he is certain that I will never sleepwalk again. How many nights? He will tell me when he considers it is time. No matter how itching I am to argue, I don't dare to. After that, Khun-Yai heads to the great house as usual while I carry on with my tasks, not as depressed as yesterday.

Khun-Yai is back in the afternoon. When he has finished his lunch, he orders me to prepare his things for his reading at the waterfront pavilion. I smile brightly and take care of everything as commanded so willingly to ease his anger towards me tricking him. The weather is nice today, with the clear sky and warm sunlight. It is not as cold as the other days. Khun-Yai sits at the short table in the pavilion on the Persian carpet as the breeze carries the scent of Lantoms in the air.

"Would you like a glass of jasmine-infused water?" I offer. Khun-Yai hums a response in his throat. I quickly pour the water from the pitcher into the cut glass, but he doesn't drink it yet. He gazes out at the river, looking at nothing in particular. Considering his sulky manner, I figure I need to step

up my game. How do they make up with their bosses in this era? Will he stop being angry if I perform the elegant dance of Brahman? I glance at the stack of books on the table and have an idea.

"Would you like me to read for you? We were at chapter six last time. It was getting fun"

"Not today." He keeps giving me short answers that my cheerful expression drops. Noticing my gloomy face, Khun-Yai softens. He sips the water and shoots me a question.

"Lek showed me the pictures you drew yesterday. He kept bragging that he loved your drawings."

"Did you see them?" My eyes widen in surprise.

"You drew well. Where did you learn how to draw?" Happy that he initiated the conversation without me trying to find the timing, I almost say the name of my college. I catch myself first, fortunately.

"I learned through the back door. I saw them drawing at the temples and other places, so I observed and copied them."

"You are skilled as if you took lessons." Good grief, Khun-Yai. Is he luring me into a trap? Why can't he let it slide like others? I know that if my answer is not more convincing, he will not stop interrogating me. I have no choice but to lie.

"Back when I lived at my home, my neighbor was a painter. He used to paint backdrops in the theatre for a northern prince."

"Which prince? I might recall it."

"I don't remember." Don't think I will get caught so easily.

"What is your family background? Why don't you fill me in?" I knew it would come to this. I repeat the same script I came up with since I was at Mr. Robert's place that I have memorized well. My father is a Chinese man traveling here by boat to make a living in this region. My mother, a Thai woman, followed him here. She has a relative, Oui-Ta, who owed Mr. Robert's money and subsequently had to send his daughter to serve him. His daughter ended up running away, so I was sent there in her stead. It is a lie with more details added as I go along.

"Do you like drawing?"

"I love drawing, but I hardly have a chance to do it. That's why I didn't hold back when Khun-Lek asked me to draw. I hope you don't mind that I sketch on paper."

"You can sketch on paper. I don't mind. But when you finish, show me the drawings. Don't let Lek take it all." Aw, how kind. I will repay him with all my might. I will scratch his back as best I can that he falls asleep just like that.

"Okay," I promise. Khun-Yai picks up an English text and goes to the page he bookmarked. I look at him and think.

Will it be Khun-Lek who keeps my drawings...or will it be Khun-Yai? I gaze at Khun-Yai's face that tips down a little. His eyelashes are thick and his skin is fair and clean. Two tiny moles dot the edge of his cheek above the shaved pale green stubble. My heart somewhat melts. I am not sure if it is due to the thought of him keeping my things or the thought of his reason for the action. I shake the thoughts off fast before they get wilder and focus on the other thing. After all, he is the one permitting me to draw as I wish.

"Thank you, Khun-Yai," I thank him with sincerity. After that, the air around us feels lighter. Khun-Yai has seemingly stopped being mad at me and become a casual boss again. He allows me to draw while he reads, which makes me so happy I almost spring up and scream. Once Khun-Yai has finished the book, he tells me to read him the Tale of Khun Chang Khun Phaen from where we left off. He listens to me narrating the story amid the cool air and the faint sunlight glistening on the ripples.

"Khun Chang is more reasonable than Plai Kaew. Even though his friend is getting married to the woman he loves, he forces himself to turn up to congratulate them," I comment when I reach the part where Plai Kaew marries Nang Pim.

"Plai Kaew is the thoughtless one. When he was a monk wearing an orange robe, he sneaked into a woman's room. If he were my child or my nephew, I would give him a good beating. I wouldn't go along and hold a wedding for him as Nang Thongprasri does."

"If your child bowed and begged over your feet like that, would you be able to stay unyielding?"

"We have to be unyielding in this kind of situation. If you kept indulging them, they would become spoiled." Khun-Yai looks amused.

"You are talking like adults. How old are you?"

"I am twenty-four," I answer honestly.

"Old enough to have children." There is a peculiar flicker in his eyes. He nods in acknowledgment and asks no more. But I am the one wanting to

continue.

"How old are you, by the way? I have never learned your age." Khun-Yai stays quiet for a moment before replying, reluctantly so.

"I turned fully eighteen a month ago." I smile. He is six years younger than me. Despite his well-built figure, the noble air around him, and his personality that is more mature than his age—the result of being taught well etiquette as he is the eldest son of Luang Thep Nititham—he is a young boy. There must be times when he wants to act reckless and mischievous like a boy of his age. I did catch him expressing the playful side of a young boy when other people weren't around.

"Don't forget to bring your ID card when you go to nightclubs." It slips out of my mouth as I think of him living in the same era as mine. He would have recently graduated high school. Imagining him in a school uniform of a white shirt and blue shorts, ugh..how adorable.

"What did you say?"

"Don't eat only carbs. Eat some cabbage." I change the sentence structure immediately despite knowing it will make me look crazy.

"I remind myself at times that I need to eat more vegetables, not only rice."

"You don't eat vegetables. You are naughty like a child, Poh-Jom." I try to stifle my smile. Why wouldn't I notice he was a bit let down by the fact that he is younger than me, and so he called me a child? He must have thought I would be younger.

Actually, I am a lot younger than him. I was born around ninety years later. The thought is even more hilarious. Right then, my eyes catch Khun-Yai's pocket watch lying near pieces of paper and the fountain pen, and the thing that has been bothering me pops up in my mind. I stare at the chain attached to the case and clip to hook the watch to pockets of shirts or trousers to prevent it from falling. I arrange the words in my head and speak carefully so my voice won't sound suspicious.

"The watch is beautiful, Khun-Yai. What country is it from?" Khun-Yai picks up the pocket watch and pushes the lid open, revealing the soft-color porcelain dial and seven striking rubies.

"It's Elgin, made in the US."

"How exquisite. The watch looks durable, but the clip looks fragile. It seems easy to slip off."

"No. I have used it for ages. I never slipped off once."

"Not once?"

"No"

Something strikes Khun-Yai as he freezes. We hold each other's gazes in silence. Khun-Yai slightly presses his lips together, his eyes fixed on me. And he shuts the watch lid as if to end the conversation.

"You can stop reading. I am parched. Will you go to the kitchen to see if they have made hot honey lemon tea? If they have not, tell them to prepare a teapot for me." Unbelievable. I gape despite myself. His action resembles when he diverted my attention to the Roval Poinciana tree out the window the first day I lived here and caught a glimpse of his cunning eyes. For a second and it was gone. Like he wanted to hide it so no one could read his thoughts. Wow...how wicked. Khun-Yai clears his throats, gazing at the river.

"Um...The wind is strong. I am thirsty."

...Yeah. I scoot out of the pavilion. He ordered me to fetch honey lemon tea when the pitcher of jasmine-infused water was right on the table. He could have sipped on it to hydrate his throat, but he wouldn't. I walk across the lawn to the kitchen as told, my mind occupied by the recent incident. Khun-Yai was exposed that he had dropped the watch on purpose but wouldn't admit it. Unbelievable. Behind the innocent face is a pack of schemes.

...Why did Khun-Yai drop the watch on purpose, though? Did he hope I would collect it and return it to him? Did he test me to check if I would be honest or greedy? Or did he wish to develop our relationship aside from me crashing my boat against the pole of his waterfront pavilion? I go stiff, realizing what I am thinking about...Again. I shake my head in frustration, annoyed by my own delusion. I am back at the waterfront pavilion with honey lemon tea, but Khun-Yai is not there. I set the tray and look around reluctantly.

"A servant from the great house told him he had a guest," the gardener weeding the nearby area says.

I decide to wait in the pavilion, in case Khun-Yai will come back soon. After a while, I start fidgeting as there is nothing to do.

I choose to pick up a piece of paper and a pencil. Since Khun-Yai gave me permission and didn't order me to take his things back to the little house, it should be fine if I stay here drawing while waiting for him. I shift to one side of the pavilion. From this angle, I can see the back balcony of the great

house that will be ruined and rebuilt later in a different style. I adjust my position and begin sketching passionately, remembering it will be one of the framed pictures.

Time has passed for I don't know how long. I am totally focused on what I am doing until I hear a rustling sound near the riverbank. Turning around, I spot a boat stopping by the clumps of grass near the pavilion. A muscular tan-skinned man is on the boat. He dips his chin and his hands grip the paddle tightly as if he is weighing something. When he gazes up, my heart plummets.

...Ohm!

I can only stare at him as he stutters.

"You.. used to serve the foreign boss, didn't you?"

Chapter 11: Return Love to the Wind

"O...Ai-Kumsan," I call his name in this lifetime, my eyes glued to his face.

"You remember me." Ohm tries to smile, but his lips are chapped and his eyes are full of despair. His smile is bitter and void of happiness. His words make my chest feel heavy. He has no idea that no matter how hard I try to forget, it is never easy.

"Are you serving here now?" he asks. I stand up and move closer to him.

"Right. I got kicked out because I was accused of getting bribed to be a lookout for Fongkaew to run away with her lover the night you came to see her. The bracelet Fongkaew meant to return to you was the evidence of the accusation." Ohm swallows, his eyes downcast in guilt. I look at him quietly. Part of me wishes to rub salt in his wound, yet another part of me knows I would regret it if I did that. After a moment, he raises his eyes.

"I am sorry." There is this weird lump in my chest. His countenance possesses the attractiveness of the Ohm I knew, but the roughness and misery have eroded him to the point he has lost the splendor I was familiar with. I heave a sigh.

"Never mind. It's all in the past. I'm serving here now." Ohm pauses and speaks in a soft voice.

"How is Fongkaew right now? Do you know?"

"Why are you asking me?" My voice sharpens.

"I got kicked out. Do you want me to show my face there just to be chased away like pigs and dogs one more time?" Ohm's face falls.

"I don't know whom to ask." His expression and words evaporate my resentment. I shake my head.

"I don't know either. Ever since I left, I haven't spoken with anyone in that place." Ohm's shoulders droop in melancholy. Looking at his sorrowful disposition, I feel a sting in my heart. Not because he doesn't love me, but because he was once the person I cared about deeply.

"How about this?" I say, finally.

"Tomorrow, I will paddle to the dock of that place. I might get to ask someone how she is." Ohm's face lightens up instantly. Before I know it, he

rushes forward and holds my hands.

"Thank you so much...Jom. Thank you so much."

My eyes land on my hands in his big, rough palms.

Some feeling assembles in my chest, and my voice comes out colder than I thought.

"Have you forgotten? However Fongkaew is doing, there is no hope for you to be with her. That night, I was waiting for you to deliver her message that she wanted to cut ties with you." Pain reflects in his eyes again. He nods without a word. I withdraw my hands from his.

"The day after tomorrow in the evening, wait for me here. If I have any pieces of news, I'll let you know then." Ohm agrees, his eyes showing gratitude, then he paddles away in silence. Once Ohm is gone, I sit and sigh in the pavilion. My drawing is on the table. Eyes on the flowing river, I stroke my chest gently.

I hate the way I am feeling right now. It is not sadness but somewhat is. Sadness with no tears.

Apparently, Khun-Yai has some business outside the whole afternoon. He says he is going to the club, and I ask nothing more. The boss' businesses are unquestionable, not something a mere servant should pry. Plus, my mind still fixates on the incident at the riverbank today.

Khun-Yai arrives home in the evening. He steps from the balcony and into the hall floored with large polished teak in his white tennis uniform. His small towel is soaked in sweat.

"Why don't you rest for a bit before bathing?" I take the towel from his hand. Khun-Yai smiles at me and sits at the pearl-embellished wooden table. On top of it is a pitcher of jasmine-infused water I have prepared, set beside a clear cut glass.

"It seems our house will hold an auspicious ceremony soon, Poh-Jom," Khun-Yai says.

"Hmm...? What ceremony? Don't tell me you're getting married."

"I am not." Khun-Yai's voice is a mix of amusement and sternness.

"It is Prim, my sister. Did you see the guest in the afternoon?"

"I didn't. I was waiting for you at the pavilion."

"Phra* Soradej took his son, who has recently graduated from Germany, to meet my father. His name is Sak. But I suppose their true intention was to have a marriage meeting with Prim. If Prim doesn't oppose it, the elders from both sides will be pleased."

A marriage meeting. Sounds super outdated. If this happened in my era, the children would kick a freaking big fuss. In this era, on the other hand, it is normal for parents to select suitable partners for their children. I can't help feeling happy for them.

"This is good news."

"I hope the auspicious date will be earlier than my departure to England."

"When are you leaving?"

"In three months."

"In three months. How fast." My heart sinks. I don't know if it is because he will be far away or for some other reason.

"Your face glooms. Are you afraid you will be lonely?"

"No," I reply, catch myself, and answer again in a meek voice.

"A little." Khun-Yai cracks a faint smile, his voice and lingering eyes are gentle.

"I will be away for only a few years. Wait for me here."

"I....ah, I don't know," I stumble. Although I appreciate his kindness, I can't promise that. Khun-Yai will be gone for years. What if the passage in time opens during those years? What will I do? Will I have the right to choose whether to step in there or back away? Will I be able to resist the force?

"Where will you be, Poh-Jom?" Khun-Yai turns around upon hearing my answer.

"Well...In San Kham Paeng. My home is there," I just lie.

"I don't allow you," Khun-Yai says gently, but there is a firmness in his voice.

"Hmm...?..." I am stupefied.

"I'll just be visiting my relatives and acquaintances over there."

"I don't want you to visit them."

"Huh...?" I am shocked again.

"If you run away and never come back, who will be my majordomo?" I can't help smiling.

"Oh... Khun-Yai, you can find a new majordomo. It shouldn't be hard to replace me with someone. There are countless literate people out there."

"I will not find someone new." Whoa..How stubborn. When he acts this way, I am at a loss. If he is keen on something, he never yields.

"What if..." I gulp, deciding to feel him out.

"What if I really need to leave because I have no choice as it is fated? I mean, what if I have to be somewhere so far away and don't know if I will ever come back?"

"Where is that place?" I meet his eyes, my fists clenched on my lap. I wish I could bare my heart to him.

"What if it's a city in a different world, a world taking place in a different era from this? What if I am from that place and have to go back and we will never see each other again?" This time, he spins and faces me.

"What are you talking about?" His knitted dark eyebrows and his gaze snap me back to reality.

Quickly, I say.

"Khun-Yai, it was just my imagination. I was joking."

"Do not joke like this. I don't like it." His voice unmistakably darkens. I plaster a sheepish smile and promises weakly.

"Okay, I won't do it again." At night, I carry my pillow and blanket to sleep next to Khun-Yai's bed as promised. He watches me spread the mattress and place my pillow from his bed. He acts calm, but his sparkly eyes reveal how entertained he is to see me having no options but to obey his command.

"Scratch my back as you promised," he reminds me.

"Yeah," I draw out my voice, secretly rolling my eyes.

A moment later, Khun-Yai lies on his side, waiting for me to serve him. I kneel on the plank floor beside his bed and say.

"Could you move closer to the edge? If you lie in the middle of the bed, I can't reach."

"Get on the bed, then," he says.

"I don't think it's a good idea. I'm a servant. If I roll around on my boss' bed, I will be chastised if found out."

"Who would find out? It is uncomfortable to scratch my back on the floor. You will get tired in no time. Just sit on my bed with me. It will not be tiring, and you can scratch my back for a long time this way." With such a weighty reason, how can I argue? I mumble an apology and sit on the bed next to him. Khun-Yai watches in satisfaction, his eyes clear, gleaming, and quite affectionate.

"If you turn this way, I can't scratch your back," I say.

"You're right." And so, he flips to the other side, his back facing me. I exhale a soft sigh. Ha...He was acting like an adult this evening, scolding...

and scolding me until I slouched. Now he acts like a child.

"Excuse me," I say. I lift his shirt halfway up and start scratching his back. I am the master of back-scratching. Khun-Yai even moans in his throat with pleasure when I scratch the right spots. Everybody knows that even if your back doesn't itch, having someone scratch your back is so pleasant that your back will feel itchy all over. As my hand moves, I think of my conversation with Khun-Yai this evening.

In three months, Khun-Yai will be studying in England and probably stay there for years. My mind wanders to the historic event that will happen in the future from now. I am in B.E. 2471, which means, in the next four years, the absolute monarchy will be deposed and replaced by democracy.

It means, during the next four years, Luang Thep Nititham, Khun-Yai's father, will climb the ranks and eventually be titled a Phraya. My assumption is based on what I heard from my senior in the office when I had been assigned to renovate this place. He said the owner was a Phraya.

Nevertheless, after the democratization, all ranks and titles will be frozen. The Khuns*, Luangs, Phras, and Phrayas will remain in their positions with no promotion. The titles will simply become names. They will continue doing their duties until the official abolition of ranks and titles in the Eighth Reign. I think of the word, 'to balance out', caused by the equilibrium. It means the dismissal from the Civil Service due to the economic crisis at that time. Numerous civil servants will be stripped of their positions and become powerless. Tons of them will have to sell their possessions to feed themselves. On the contrary, the commoners will earn significant ranks in their cities. There will no longer be privileges for children of the high-rank authorities as before. It is one of the consequences of democratization. From then on until World War II, the dark time will ensue. It will be a period of impoverishment and depression for millions. Yet, there will be opportunities for some people to take advantage of the situation and become millionaires. It is the era sarcastically called, 'The good hide in the alleys, the bad roam the streets' Worried by the thought, I ask out a question.

"Khun-Yai, since your family moved from Bangkok, it means the Luang has houses and properties in the province, doesn't he?"

"The province?" Khun-Yai turns his head. I slap my mouth once in aggravation. Bangkok in this era is probably referred to as the Bangkok Region and the Capital.

"Sorry. It was a mistake. What I mean is, did your family move from the Capital?" Khun-Yai eyes me with mild suspicion but still answers.

"Yes. My father owns plenty of lands in the Capital. My mother also has hundreds of lands in Thonburi and Nakhon Pathom. My grandfather transferred the ownership of the properties to her before she was born. Why do you ask?" Oh...So, his parents have always been well-off. I take a deep breath and speak in all seriousness.

"Keep the lands safe. If not necessary, don't ever sell them. The prices of lands in Thonburi will be higher than gold in a short time. Capitalize the farms and paddy fields. If you don't gain much profit from renting them out, take care of them yourself. Hire workers and manage your own lands. As for the properties in the Capital, I hope you protect them with your life. Build residences or row houses for rent and collect the monthly rental fees. You will make more money than the salary of a civil servant."

I have thought it out with ambition. No matter what, I will not let Khun-Yai become a nobleman turning poor. He must have a business with a stably monthly income, not only a salary from any title. The row houses and everything will be designed in advance by me. I will do it for free, not charging a single coin. I am so engrossed in my plan that I don't notice Khun-Yai turning around and smiling.

"Do you know what you sound like?" Seeing his weird, playful gaze, I ask right away.

"What do I sound like?"

"You sound like a wife concerned about her husband's possessions, worried about how to gain profit from them" he stresses every word loud and clear.

"Khun-Yai!!!" I exclaim in shock, eyes widening.

"Yeah...? Uggggggh."

"Don't speak in such a sweet voice." My head hurts as if I have a migraine, but a contented grin paints Khun-Yai's face.

"Please don't say that. It's inappropriate. Besides, I'm a man. I can't be a wife."

"What is appropriate, then? Should I ask for your parents' blessings to have their son manage my possessions for the rest of my life?"

"Khun-Yai, I'm begging you. Don't joke like this. I'm going to have a heart attack." My heart is fragile.

"Please turn around so I can scratch your back." Seeing my serious expression, he relents and turns around, not forgetting to throw one last playfully flirtatious glance at me. I inhale and claw his back in annoyance.

"Ohh..Poh-Jom, if you scratch that harshly, my back will break," Khun-Yai groans.

The next day, Khun-Yai tells me he will be attending a welcome party for Khun-Sak at Phra Soradej's place in the evening. The whole family will be there. It means the marriage meeting yesterday was a success. They will find an auspicious date soon as Khun-Yai has said, I suppose. I use the chance when the family leaves for the party in the evening and the servants split up to have meals and bathe before going to bed to execute my plan.

I paddle along the river to Mr. Robert's place. I have asked for Khun-Yai's permission to visit an old friend there. I stoop a little when the wind blows the fallen leaves into the river. Tonight will be more frigid than yesterday since this kind of wind whips when there will be a storm. I usher the boat to the dock at the side of Mr. Robert's male servants' row houses and spot several of them scrubbing away the dead skin from all the work, unbothered by the coldness.

"Ming," I call, catching him in the group. Ming hears my voice, and when he sees me, he swims over immediately.

"Ai-Jom!" He hollers in rejoicing when he reaches me and grabs the rim of my boat.

"Are you really Ai-Jom?"

"Of course, I am. Who did you think it would be?" I beam. He sweeps his eyes over me and grins, showing his white teeth.

"I thought a female performer got lost here. Your face is white as a boiled egg." His words crack me up. I know he is just teasing me.

"I am serving at Luang Thep Nititham's place, not performing anywhere." Ming nods.

"I heard." After catching up with Ming, not forgetting to ask about the lady boss Ueang Phueng, in which he says her belly grows bigger every day and is basically wrapped in cotton wool by everyone in the house, I get to the point.

"What about Fongkaew? How is she? Is she comfortable?" I speak in both central and northern dialects when I catch myself.

"Whoa.." Ming waves his hand.

"Don't worry. Who would be as blessed as E-Fongkaew? The foreign boss gifted her gold ornaments to wear all over her body. Her mother boasted at the markets that her daughter had a good life." Ming lowers his voice, afraid someone will overhear him.

"I heard the female servants gossiping that Fongkaew has been throwing up for days. The foreign boss might have another baby." My heart drops, thinking of Ohm's expression when I deliver the news.

"For real?"

"I don't know." I chat with Ming a bit more before deciding to head back because the wind gets stronger, and Ming seems really cold. I paddle back to the dock of the Luang's place and halt when I see a shadowy figure on the boat by the riverbank near the waterfront pavilion. He cranes his neck towards the house as if waiting for someone. Before I can ask anything, he starts.

"Jom..." It is a voice I remember so well that it belongs to Ohm before he even raises the lantern to show his face. He must be awfully anxious to look for me when we have agreed to meet up tomorrow.

I moor my boat and get on the bank. Ohm follows when I allow him to get up here. No one will be out here at this time of day. As I expected, the color drains from his face after he has learned about Fongkaew from me.

"Fongkaew is pregnant..." He repeats in a daze, looking like his heart has just been ribbed off.

"Give up, Ai-Kumsan. See it as you're not fated to be together," I say. Ohm doesn't respond. He stands still, his head slightly tipping down, his eyes casting on the grass. He is quiet for so long that I feel uneasy.

"Jom." He grabs my upper arms. The tight grip makes me wince.

"I love Fongkaew. I love her to the point that even if you tell me to give up, I can't." I get even more shocked when clear drops of tears brim his eyes and trickle down his tanned face.

"Ohm...Ai-Kumsan," I call, at a loss. The sight of Ohm crying is absolutely unfamiliar to me.

"I know Fongkaew doesn't want me to associate with her anymore. How blessed she is to be taken by the foreign boss. But I really love her. Even if I drop dead right here, I will love her still. Even if she loves me no more and has given her heart to another man as you said she wrote in the small letter."

My heart sinks. It is not true. Fongkaew did ask me to pass over the breakup letter to Ohm along with the bracelet, but it was all a lie that hurt

Fongkaew the most. I look at Ohm's face and his manly tears dripping down from the pain of love he has for someone that is not me. At that moment, I realize the truth in my heart more clearly than any day ever since I got thrown back to the past.

"Ai-Kumsan, listen," I say in a gentle yet clear voice with a central dialect, to tell this to him and me.

"The letter was a lie. It's not true that she doesn't love you anymore. The situation had her hands tied and she had to do things against her will. There is no use fighting a hopeless fight against such power. You might never be together, but Fongkaew's heart, I believe, is yours and never will be anyone else's." Ohm's knees buckle. His shoulders tremble as the sobs escape his throat.

"If you stay true and continue to love her, I will not judge whether it is right or wrong. But please, don't cause her trouble. Even though you two are unfortunate and fated to be apart in this lifetime, trust me that Fongkaew and Ai-Kumsan will be together in the next lives." When I say the last sentence, my voice shivers uncontrollably. Ohm looks up at me, his face damp with tears.

"Jom, Thank you so much. I don't know how to repay your compassion and kindness." I swallow the peculiar bitterness down my throat.

"You have repaid me. You just don't know it." I utter those words as it is the truth. He has no idea that around a hundred years later, he will repay me more than I deserve. He will be close to me, care about me, and shower me with love. Even if it will last only a certain period of time before he hurts me greatly by breaking my heart, his feelings for me before then will be real, the kind of realness that can never be faked.

I walk back to the little house in a daze, bringing a Lantom back unconsciously. I put it next to my pillow and try to finish my tasks as I have done every day.

Khun-Yai comes back a while later. He bathes and changes into nightclothes before sitting on his bed and looking at me. After a brief moment, he can tell that I have something in mind.

"You look truly sad today, Poh-Jom. Your expression is one of a heartbroken man. What ails you?"

"Nothing. I'm just a bit tired." I shake my head, forcing a stiff smile.

"Are you thinking of your old lover? Did that person hurt your heart?"

"It's not like that, Khun-Yai. I'm thinking about my work tomorrow. I want to cut the branches of the orange jasmine tree. It has grown so tall that its branches stick over the stairs." I pretend to arrange my perfectly organized mattress.

"Do you want me to scratch your back like yesterday?"

"Not today," Khun-Yai says gently.

"You're tired, so go to sleep. It's windy tonight. Use two blankets." I thank him for his kindness. Had it been any other day, I would have refused. I wouldn't have accepted a blanket from my boss. But tonight, my heart feels oddly weak. Though it is just a blanket, I want to hold on to it and rely on its warmth.

I lie on my side with my back turned to Khun-Yai in the constant sound of the wind gushing through leaves outside. Ohm and I are over for real. The only thing lingering is the attachment to the person I used to be in a relationship with. Our bond was woven by threads of our feelings for each other, little by little, day after day until it became love. And now, it hasn't yet been torn apart because I don't hate him. Still, it has ceased to be woven further.

I don't hate Ohm, but I also don't love him as before. More importantly, I wish to have no future with him. Despite the hollow in my heart at this moment, I know that when I think of Ohm one day, I will not feel sad or angry. I will feel calmness and peace, like clear, cold water with no murkiness deep under. It will be a sort of recalling, a memory of us once being in love.

As I lie there with my eyes open, unable to sleep, I hear Khun-Yai speak in the dark.

"Forget that person...Poh-Jom." His voice is low and gentle, as if he reached out to embrace me with words. A speck of warmth blooms in my chest and spreads all over.

Amid the whistling of the wind and the cracking of branches rubbing against each other that sends leaves falling, I hear myself answer.

"Yes...Khun-Yai."

Chapter 12: The Rain and the Lonely Man

I have lived through days after that night rather smoothly.

Days became weeks. And in the blink of an eye, I have resided in Khun-Yai's place for nearly a month. All the heaviness piling up on me, I don't know when it vaporized. All I feel is this peace of mind, as though I am part of this place.

Perhaps it is for the first important reason: I have discovered that I can't go back to my world as fast as I wish. I need to stay here for a long time, long enough to draw several pictures at the least. It eases my recent anxiety. The other reason is probably Khun-Yai. He is comfort and solace. Like a tree, strong and reliable, though the tree is a charming and playful one. If I let my guard down, I might fall into something from his kindness.

In the daytime, I handle trivial tasks in the little house and assure convenience for Khun-Yai. In the nighttime, I sleep next to his bed. Sometimes I scratch his back or just chat with him. It felt weird at first, but I have found joy in it lately. It is fair to say I have gotten used to talking to him every night. The only thing I can't bring myself to get used to are his incomparable sweetness and his flirtatious words that I don't allow myself to accept or unnecessarily daydream about at all cost. His humbleness and flirty teases, though spoken only a little, can cause the listener to overthink. Khun-Yai might not be bothered, but I am not a rock. Plus, I am homosexual. If he is not careful, I have to be.

"Khun-Yai, it's been over a week. You've seen I haven't sleepwalked even for a day. Could I sleep in my room now?" I ask as he writes his lesson in the waterfront pavilion. The weather is much warmer, only cool in the morning. It gets pretty hot when the sunlight shines late in the morning, ready for the full-on summer. Well, it is incredible that winter lasts for months, unlike my era where winter stays for five to six days. It is like winter comes for a picnic in Thailand and hurries off to run errands elsewhere.

"Besides the sleepwalking, I am worried about something else," Khun-Yai answers my question, his eyes glued to the piece of paper.

"What is it?" He glances up slightly and says in an even voice.

"I don't want to see you sad like that windy night."

Oh...Is it about this? He pities his heartbroken servant. Khun-Yai could guess the situation by my answer, which vaguely admitted that I had a lover and got dumped. He never asks for details to stir my emotions. How kind. If you are so sweet, I will fall in love with you for real.

"Don't worry about it. I am perfectly fine. Lack of food kills, lack of love doesn't, Khun-Yai."

"You won't die, but have you ever thought that someone might be half to death?" Hmm..? Because of the lack of love? Who? Of course, Khun-Yai is out of the question. He is perfect in looks and wealth. If he happens to be into a daughter of some family, they will open their house gate waiting for him to come and propose.

"Khun-Yai," I change the subject.

"I have noticed this for quite some time. You see the watercourse on the riverbank over there, farther down the rain tree?" He turns his head to where I am pointing, the backyard full of trimmed flowering plants and shrubs. The turf is cut evenly like a velvet carpet. Farther away from the dirt ground, the area I am pointing, is the location of the great house. The top balcony sticks out to view the river with a terrace below that is spacious enough to throw a small party. If they add chairs and tables in the backyard, they can hold a bigger party with a lovely atmosphere.

"Um... What about it?" Khun-Yai asks.

"It is on the outside curve of the meander. Have you ever heard the term, 'the deposition and erosion of lands? It happens when the rivers crash the banks and gradually erode the earth's soil. Over time, the soil on the outsides of the river bends will be scoured until the lands wear away. On the contrary, the lands on the inside of the river bends are deposited."

I have been trying to find a chance to bring this up for a while. I plan to design row buildings for Khun-Yai, so I need to slowly get information from him in an indirect way about the locations of his properties, the sizes, and whether they adjoin the streets or canals. It will take some time. However, what I am looking at with my own eyes is the great house, and I remember that after time passes by to my era, the back balcony will not remain like the other parts of the house. It will collapse and have to be rebuilt instead of repaired. Now that I got to see its perfect state, it pains me.

"Where did you learn about this? Who taught you?"

"Oh. Everyone with houses by the rivers knows about this. I mean, those with small pieces of land, who one day realize their house pillars stand close to the banks when they actually built their houses far away from the river. People with large pieces of land may not notice."

I lie smoothly, coming prepared. Khun-Yai nods, seemingly swayed. I quickly spit out more information, not giving him breaks.

"Speaking as an expert in hydrography, the land over there will be eroded without a doubt. It might not be a problem for you as the Luang's land is vast. A small erosion is no big deal. But, over time, a landslide will occur at the bank and loosen the soil of the surrounding area, which will lead to soil subsidence in the future. The terrace and the top balcony will afterward be affected."

"An expert in hydrography...?"

"Yes."

"But you couldn't paddle." I inhale and tsk in annoyance.

"They're two different things." Khun-Yai smiles and stops interrupting. I continue.

"You should build a retaining wall." With that, I grab a wooden board placed next to me and a pencil. I have my own drawing equipment now: A drawing board, pieces of paper, and pencils, all kindly provided by Khun-Lek's command so I can conveniently satisfy his artistic demands on weekends. With Khun-Lek supporting me this way, no one can oppose it.

"I've seen people build it like this." I sketch deftly. It is a simple retaining wall built with huge rocks and wooden pillars to compact the soil. No advanced technology that will get Khun-Yai suspicious.

"Um, good idea."

"Right? Prevention is better than cure." I mark the details of each material and calculate the spaces. I don't want to sketch roughly and turn this piece of paper into a random drawing. I want it to be decent and practical.

"It sounds good, and your drawing skills are excellent," Khun-Yai compliments.

"Thank you." Let me have this. I am not in the mood to be humble.

"It looks like you studied it."

"Yeah. I graduated from..." I freeze and shut my mouth before I finish the sentence. We hold each other's gazes. I stammer as Khun-Yai stops writing,

his hand hovering in the air. He raises his eyebrow as if pressuring me to complete the sentence.

At that second, I choose to reach out slowly and gently place my hand on top of Khun-Yai's.

"Um...Khun-Yai," I say mellowly with a hint of sweetness.

"Are you hungry? I saw Pun making Kanom Tian Kaew*. They were tiny and looked delicious." Khun-Yai stares at me in silence, not responding, but both of us know what this is.

This is the 'a chicken sees the snake's foot and a snake sees the chicken's breast**' situation. It happened before when I tried to expose him about the pocket watch. But I have seen his foot clearly while he has just caught a glimpse of my breast since he hasn't found out what I am hiding exactly.

"The scent of the candle smoke reached the little house," I speak in a small voice, trying my best to get myself out of this situation.

"I think the snack is ready by now." A faint smile flickers on Khun-Yai's lips. His eyes stare knowingly, sending chills down my spine, then he locks his fingers with mine.

"You are a smart man," Khun-Yai says, his eyes fixed on my face. I shiver when he runs his fingers along the back of my hand and knuckles.

"Smart and slv." I laugh it off.

"Well. Not that much." I pull my hand back slowly, smiling.

"I will bring your snack." Once I have escaped, I let out a sigh...That was close. I must not let my guard down around Khun-Yai. One wrong move and I will be exposed.

Oh...Come to think of it, what will happen if I get exposed?If I confessed that I was an architect from the future a hundred years later, how would Khun-Yai and everyone in this place react? Obviously, the Suanprung Psychiatric Hospital would be my next accommodation. If the hospital hadn't been established in this era, I would be locked up in the basement, my wrists and ankles chained to the poles, in case I went hysterical. Not a lifestyle I prefer. I was unfortunate and got tossed to the past. There is no need to add to my misfortune and I should live as smoothly and simply as possible. Nonetheless, a simple life is not the option. A few days later, Luang Thep Nititham's place is full of lively energy as the big news everyone has been waiting for has been announced. It is the auspicious date of the wedding of the family's daughter.

In the next two months, the wedding of Khun-Prim and Khun-Sak, the son of Phra Soradej, will be held.

Excitement and exhilaration fill every inch of the place, including the kitchen and the servants' houses. Erb's and Pun's smile is as wide as a raised plate since they will get to epically show off their dessert-making skills to the guests. There will be Siamese civil servants, northern high-rank authorities, and influential people in the area since Phra Soradej and Luang Thep Nititham are both men with titles. Tons of people come in and out of the great house each day to prepare for the wedding.

Khun-Yai also gets busier. Though he doesn't be involved in preparing the clothes and ornaments, he has to welcome the guests volunteering to lend their hands. Today, I spot him getting ready to go outside with Khun-Sak, his brother-in-law. It has nothing to do with the wedding but is more like socializing with people of the same social circle. I saw Khun-Sak in a horse-riding outfit pulling over a garnet red convertible by the great house.

'Khun-Sak just came back from abroad. He is not yet familiar with people here,' Khun-Yai told me.

Today, Khun-Yai wears a white shirt, dark brown breeches, and shiny leather boots, looking like he pops out of a painting. I admire the sight of him. His shoulders and chest are broad. When he is in an attire that fits his body, every angle of his is stunning.

"Khun-Yai is so handsome," I voice my thought.

Khun-Yai smiles sweetly, his eyes curving.

"You are complimenting me this early. I guess I will be lucky all day."

"It's a shame I can't go with you, or else I'll get to see you ride a horse."

Khun-Yai gazes at me quietly, pondering something, but says no more. Despite the lively ambiance in the house and people going to and fro preparing the auspicious ceremony, one person doesn't seem excited and even expresses his annoyance. It is Khun-Lek.

"What a hassle. What a fuss. I won't get married. It's boring, right..? Nai-Jom, right?" He nods to me as he says the last words. I offer a smile and draw a motorboat on a piece of paper as he has asked. It is the weekend. Khun-Lek has completed his homework and ordered a servant to get me to draw pictures for him on the mat under the tropical almond tree at the front of the great house, with snacks and water ready. The nursemaid, Prik, sneaks a scowl at Khun-Lek and says.

"Khun-Lek complained because Khun-Kae said not to run around making noises when they had guests. It's a wedding, after all. Who would hold it in silence? When it's Khun-Lek's turn to be wedded, I'm afraid we'll be running around making sure everything is perfect. An auspicious ceremony must follow the tradition to perfection. We can't miss a thing, or people will criticize us." Khun-Lek purses his lips, losing interest in the topic. He looks at my drawing.

"Are you missing anything, Nai-Jom?" I study all sorts of vehicles I have drawn on a piece of paper for Khun-Lek and can't help thinking that when he grows up, he will either work in an army or become a founder of an automotive manufacturer or an automobile import company. He seems so into it.

"I think I drew everything. Trains, cars, boats, planes." Khun-Lek gazes at them, deep in thought, his brow slightly knitted together above his button nose. How adorable.

"Should I add more airplanes? Like a fleet?" I suggest.

"We have three boats in the river."

"Good." Khun-Lek nods in agreement. I draw as he wants. Soon, another three airplanes fly in the sky.

"That's Yai" Khun-Lek chirps, making me look up.

"Nai-Jom, let's show Yai the picture." By the cape leadwort shrubs near the stairs, I spot Khun-Yai talking to a small figure of a slim woman in a dress, not a sinh.

"Please don't disturb Khun-Yai," Prik cautions.

"He's discussing something with Khun-Bongkoch. Khun-Kae asked her to arrange the flowers for Khun-Prim's wedding. She said Khun-Bongkoch arranged flowers beautifully. She can even make bouquets in foreign styles." Prik's admiring voice as she talks about 'Khun-Bongkoch' bugs me, but I resume drawing the fifth airplane. Khun-Lek then says.

"Did Mother ask her to arrange the flowers or to be her daughter-in-law?" The tip of my pencil slips as Prik shrieks.

"Ugh! Seriously, Khun-Lek, where did you hear that? Khun-Yai will be off abroad in a few months. He won't get married anytime soon."

"Am I not right? Mother is scared to death that Yai will wed a foreign woman. In Prim's wedding, Yai might get to throw a flower garland to select his partner." Prik giggles.

"Men don't throw flower garlands to women. Khun-Yai is as charming as Enau*. He is bound to be with Busaba**, not Laweng Wanla***"

"You've watched too many performances and kept daydreaming," Khun-Lek nags, turning to me.

"Are you done drawing the airplanes?"

"I am," I reply evenly, glancing at where Khun-Yai was just now. I see him heading to the garden with Khun-Bongkoch. My cheerfulness somehow vanishes. I drop my gaze at my drawing, a strange feeling rising in me. It is not an appropriate feeling.

"Khun-Lek, do you know that if we arm the boats," I sketch guns sticking out of the boats.

"it will become battle boats? And the planes will become warplanes. Now they can shoot each other."

Khun-Lek's eyes widen with interest.

"Will they battle?"

"Do you want them to?" Because I do.

"Do you want me to demonstrate?"

"Do it." Khun-Lek nods, approving. I draw a line from a boat to a plane.

"Fire! Boom!" I rub the tip of my pencil, forming entangled lines, over the shot part and shout a sound effect.

"Again?" Khun-Lek's eyes get wider. He bobs his head.

"Boom! Boom! Get it. Fire!" I go all out. Khun-Lek guffaws when I bomb a plane.

"Let me shoot this time," Khun-Lek says in enthusiasm. Khun-Lek and I scream continuous booms, and, at a split second, the drawing is all blackened by the destructive pencil lines. Prik eyes me in fear. I won't blame her if she tells others I instilled violence in Khun-Lek. After venting my frustration on Khun-Lek's piece of paper, I leave and carry out my daily tasks. To my surprise, this vexation clings to me ceaselessly. Even the trees and grass annoy me.

In the evening, as I deliver some of Khun-Yai's textbooks to Nai-Jun, the Luang's majordomo, for restoration as the spines are broken, I get to see Khun-Yai again. He descends the stairs and walks in my direction. I am reluctant if I should pretend not to notice him and return to the little house. After a thought, I don't think it is a good idea. Khun-Yai has spotted me anyway.

"Jom, are you here to wait for me?" Khun-Yai flashes a bright smile. His smiley face irritates me even more.

"No. I came to deliver something to Nai-Jun." Thunder roars above our heads. I look up. The sky has been clouded since late afternoon and now darkened, about to rain at any second. It is the unseasonal rain, as Erb calls.

"Please wait here. I will run back to bring the umbrella for you," I say. Khun-Yai seizes my upper arm.

"By the time you come back, the rain will already fall. Let's run back to the little house together." Khun-Yai takes off, leaving me no choice but to follow. When we are halfway there, it starts raining cats and dogs.

Khun-Yai and I are soaked from head to toe.

"Khun-Yai, please go to the bathroom. I will get a towel for you." I tell him once we have rushed up the stairs and sheltered by the eaves of the little house. The bathroom is sited on the back balcony, where Khun-Yai bathes. The other servants and I clean ourselves in separate bathrooms or in the river. Thunder rumbles, followed by lightning and a loud clap of thunder. I jump, startled.

"Are you scared, Poh-Jom?" Khun-Yai asks with a laugh.

"I'm not. Just a bit startled. It was thunderous." I frown... Good grief. I was putting on a sour face. It was all ruined. Khun-Yai smiles before stepping closer to me. So close that if I lean forward, I can rest my head on his shoulder. I glance up at him in puzzlement. Khun-Yai looks at me, his fair, flawless face wetted by the rain, dark locks of hair sticking to his forehead above the raven eyes as deep as the sea of emotions. Khun-Yai lifts his hand and tucks the lock of damp hair on my cheek behind my ear.

"Good spirit...do not burn. Good spirit, do return to Poh-Jomkwan." I go rigid, unable to avert my eyes from his face as if enchanted. His big hand slides from my shoulder to my back, and he pulls me into his embrace. I am stunned. My heart pounds in my chest against the rain sound. What Khun-Yai does is the act of comforting a shocked child, whether he does it purposely to tease me or to actually comfort me. Regardless, since I am an adult and Khun-Yai has a body of a grown man, this hug, to me, can't be defined as child-comforting, like a distance between Earth and Mars.

"Your heart is beating so fast," Khun-Yai whispers.

Even if he didn't say it, I would have known he could feel it. Why wouldn't he? Our skin is pressed against each other.

The soaked shirts do nothing to block our contact. My chest touches his, my cheek resting on his shoulder.

"Khun-Yai, I'm not startled anymore," I force the words out, my voice hoarse in fluster. I push him gently with my palms. Khun-Yai doesn't resist, releasing me. Now I am the one regretting it. I stare at his chest revealed vaguely under the wet white shirt. It is so provocative that my mind is in disorder and I want to bury myself in it again. This is bad, This is the worst. I hold my breath and force myself to say.

"I will fetch a towel and clothes for you." Not waiting for the answer, I dart through the entrance of the hall, leaving trickles of water on the plank floor after my footsteps. I leave them just like that. I can clean the wet floor, but my feelings at the moment are frightening and dangerous and need to be dealt with immediately.

A while later, the rain stops. There is only the sound of pitter-patters from the droplets of water falling from the eaves to the balcony. The weather is pleasant and cool, making me want to lie in bed and have a good dream. I stand by the window in Khun-Yai's bedroom and draw the curtain close. We both have changed our clothes and are getting ready to go to bed.

"Do you want me to let down the curtains right now?"

I ask without meeting his eyes, kneeling on the floor. The bizarre feeling still smolders in my chest. It is not irritation like in the afternoon but an unsettlingly deep emotion.

"Not now. Won't you roll out your mattress?" he asks since I am not spreading my mattress beside his bed as usual.

"I don't feel very well, a bit under the weather," I mutter.

"Would you allow me to sleep in my room tonight? If I have a fever, you might catch it." He stays silent for a moment. I squeeze my folded hands on my lap, begging him in my mind to let me go. And he lets me go as I have prayed. I thank him and leave right away, afraid he will change his mind.

Once I am in my room, I slump on the floor and lean on the wall, out of energy, my arms dropping by my sides, my eyes gazing out the window. How did it come to this? How could I let my heart be out of control like that? I rest my head on the wooden wall between my room and Khun-Yai's. The light from the lantern glows warmly while my chest burns. There is a clattering sound from the other side of the wall. Khun-Yai might be sitting on his bed and reading or doing something else.

I take a deep breath. The image of Khun-Yai shapes in my mind, vivid as if he is standing right in front of me. I think of his fair, flawless face, his flirtatious smile, and his affection gaze always fixed on me. I think of his warm hand touching my shoulder, my back, brushing my cheek. My chest feels hot. The desire I have suppressed oozes out and spreads all over every inch of my skin. My eyes shut as I reach down to the edge of my pants and slip my hand inside to touch the excited thing under the fabric.

My breath is ragged from the sensation. My palm wraps around my hard part and slides up and down rhythmically. For a second, I am ashamed to think of him while doing this, yet I can't stop myself. The desire triggered by his supposedly unintentional closeness stirs me up so bad that I can't hold it.

I think of his wet lips, his firm chest under the soaked shirt, and his warm breath on my neck.

I move my hand faster, speeding up impatiently, hearing myself softly moan as I am almost there. I tense up as elation rushes in, releasing the hotness all over my palm. The sound of falling droplets on the balcony has stopped, leaving only the refreshing coolness and the smell of grass after the rain in the air. I breathe out weakly in exhaustion, hoping Khun-Yai will never find out what I have done...

Chapter 13: The Scented Lantoms

The next day, I am annoyingly consumed by the mess of my emotions. My head feels like a jar stuffed with all sorts of necessary and unnecessary things. I don't know why I keep it all in there. When I realize it, I pick them out and throw them away, but they roll back into the jar again.

My concern has been ambiguous and uncomfortable enough since the incident yesterday, yet I have the nerve to worry about someone else's family's business. I have no idea why the sight of Khun-Yai and Khun-Bongkoch strolling in the garden together and Khun-Lek's words bother me so much that I get all cranky. In fact, it is normal that Khun-Kae is looking for a wife for her son, and it is up to Khun-Yai whether he will accept it or not. I can never guess and have no right to meddle. Come to think of it, everything eating at me was originated from one person: Khun-Yai. Is he aware of all of this? Look...He saunters gaily from the great house without a trace of dismal. What an aggravating sight.

"You don't have to bring my things to the waterfront pavilion. I will be running an errand for Mother shortly."

"Okay." I stop cutting the branches of the orange jasmine trees near the stairs and speak in a level voice without looking at him.

"I will prepare your clothes."

"Wait." Khun-Yai's order halts me, stopping me dead in my tracks.

"It seems you are avoiding me."

"I'm not," I say, not meeting his eyes.

"Really?" He approaches me, leans down slightly, and cocks his head to look at my face. I flick my eyes to his face and divert them in an instant. My cheeks feel hot as my emotions are in chaos because Khun-Yai's face is too close and he is smiling. Normally, I would have loved it when a person's smile reached his eyes like this. But, I am nothing close to normal right now, especially when an image pops in my head, and it is...a shameful one.

"Where are you headed? I will prepare your attire accordingly," I sputter. Khun-Yai straightens his back, and I can breathe again.

"Not now. I want Poh-Jom to do something for me first."

"What is it?"

"Learn how to use a vehicle."

"Pardon?" I blink and ask back, uncertain.

"Which one? A carriage or a cart? I'm not good at controlling animals. I don't know how to ride horses, let alone cows and buffalos."

"Not those. I am talking about a car. You want to accompany me outside, don't you? Learn how to drive and drive for me." I take a deep, loud breath, my eyes widening in disbelief... The shiny black ancient car parked at the great house?!

"Do you want to learn it?"

"I do," I answer cloud and clear, half of my current aggravation disappearing. If someone can be bought with money, I can be bought with cars.

Soon, I stand in front of the black classic Ford Model T. The model is produced and exported all over the world in this era. The special part is this model has designs with both left and right steering wheels to be used limitedly in every country. I stand in place, pressing my lips together, as I stare at the vehicle I have never once dreamed of touching in my life. The thing before me is not a car. It is history. I study the sleek black steel assembling into the structure of an old-fashioned square car. Round headlights jut out at the front, near the mudguards extending from the side steps and curving above the wheels with spokes. The front and back seats are brown leather.

"Are you scared, Nai-Jom?" Nai-Tem, the chauffeur, asks with a smile. He is a polite, friendly middle-aged man. Right...I am scared. I am scared I won't get to drive it. I turn to Nai-Tem and inhale.

"Shall we start, Nai-Tem?" Today is one of the Luang's working days, where he leaves to work in the morning and comes home in the evening. Thus, the car is left in the garage, waiting to pick up the Luang when he gets off work. If no one in the house has business somewhere, the car is parked inside all day.

Less than an hour later, I impress Khun-Yai and Nai-Tem with my quick-learning skills. Of course, I am a quick learner.

I have been driving for years. I just need a moment to get familiar with the old system and accelerate it, steering around on the paths in the place. Many servants flock around the lawn to watch me learn how to drive in excitement. In this era, driving must be as thrilling as flying an airplane

since commoners can't own cars. Only the royals, the high-rank authorities, or the wealthy can possess them. As Nai-Tem explains, there are a few dozens of cars in Chiang Mai.

"Can I try driving on the road?" I ask enthusiastically.

Who would be able to contain, especially in the era where there are only a few cars on the road? Nai-Tem looks unsure, though he has witnessed first-hand how excellent I am. On the contrary, Khun-Yai cracks a big smile.

"Okay, I will go with you." Since Khun-Yai has said that, Nai-Tem steps back and lets me show my skills. I reassure him that I will drive carefully and keep in mind that the Luang's son is in the car with me.

Khun-Yai doesn't hop into the backseat as he should. Instead, he sits in the passenger's seat. It is a bit weird but not abnormal. It seems like he wants to sit next to me for supervision.

I drive out of the gate and speed across the unpaved road flanked by tall trees, houses, and shady gardens. It feels odd that I am not sharing the road with numerous cars jammed together like in my era. On the other hand, I have to be mindful of carts and bicycles. Tons of people in Chiang Mai in this era use bicycles. Despite the nice weather, the fading sunlight, the cool breeze, and the groves of trees casting shadows on the road that freshen up the atmosphere, I suddenly feel moody again. Maybe the excitement of driving has subsided and been replaced by the recent bitterness. And it is not only bitterness. There is a mix of peculiarly uncomfortable sadness as well.

I glance at Khun-Yai's side profile... Why? What was the world thinking to create this kind of person? He is attractive, kind, and playfully flirty. His charm can make anyone who comes close to him fall in love anytime. I am lucky to have him as my boss. He is incredibly kind and caring to me. He treats me so well that I can find no fault. His tremendous kindness generously spreads to everyone, including the beautiful Khun-Bongkoch. To say 'it spreads' is inaccurate. He actually 'pours' his feelings out. We all pour out our deep, special feelings to the person we choose to be our partners. Now that I think about it, Khun-Yai is not as perfect as I have praised. Is there even a heart under that gorgeous face? My brain is about to explode from my own worry. I can't go back to my world, and if I stay here, I have to wait for years for his return. When that time comes, how much will he change? This is not a trivial issue to me. What kind of boss is he?

Why is he ignorant of my worry..? How heartless. My chest is filled with this upset feeling.

"Are you going to get engaged before going to England?" I blurt out, unable to hold back. My sudden question makes Khun-Yai turn his head abruptly.

"Where did you hear that?"

"Well...Khun-Lek told me."

"When?"

"Yesterday. When you took a walk in the garden with Khun-Bongkoch." I try to sound casual and uninterested, but in my mind, I stress each word clearly.

"Khun-Lek said Khun-Yai might be engaged with someone before going to England." Khun-Yai remains silent, then says.

"Go on." I should stop here, but my break fails.

"Khun-Lek said Khun-Kae was afraid you would come back with a foreign partner, so she wished you would be engaged before leaving to England. And Khun-Bongkoch could be the one she hoped to be your partner." Khun-Yai sighs in weariness and slowly shakes his head.

"What Lek said isn't true. The assumption can damage a woman's reputation. Khun-Bongkoch visits us to help with Prim's wedding, and I simply welcomed her out of courtesy. Parents indeed mean well to their children, but my parents never force their children over this matter. Lek knew nothing and spread the false rumor. I never hit my brother, but I suppose I have to pinch him this time so he won't mindlessly blab about things like this again."

His voice is firm as he utters each sentence, and it diminishes my exasperation like a boiling soup with the heat lowered.

"Ah.. please don't go that far," I say in a meek voice.

"Khun-Lek probably didn't mean it. He must have heard people gossiping and blabbered away as a kid." Still, he deserves a pinch for causing me anxiety.

"Is this why you have been mumpish with me since yesterday evening?"

..Huh?

I turn my head towards him instantly and quickly focus on the road again, my mouth flapping open and close, speechless. What is he talking about..? Mumpish? What is this word? I hesitate, not sure which point I will argue about: One, him accusing me of being sulky since yesterday evening,

which means he thinks I am upset with him. Do I even have the right to be upset? Two, the reason why I am upset. That is...nonsense!

"I'm not..."

"No worries," Khun-Yai cuts in levelly, not letting me finish.

"I don't mind." He turns to the other side. When I sneak a glance, the corner of his lips obviously curves up on his cheek...He is smiling.

Ugh..Damn me!

I drive for another while to get used to it and return to our place. Nai-Tem looks relieved that I have brought Khun-Yai back unscathed, and the car is free from scratches as when it departed. Nai-Jun, the Luang's majordomo, walks straight to us from the great house, seemingly having some business to report to Khun-Yai. I excuse myself and head to the little house, not sticking my nose in. I have to prepare clothes for Khun-Yai anyway.

While I walk across the green lawn dotted with fallen Lantoms, the wind fans out the fragrant scent in the air, and I can't help but bend down to pick up a few to place beside my pillow.

All of a sudden, Khun-Yai's face when we were in the car together flashes in my mind, his side profile and the contented smile he tried to hide from me, as if he was pleased that I was 'mumpish' with him. I bite my lip to stifle my smile and fail because my heart swirls like the petals of Lantoms blown by the wind and falling from the trees. I raise the Lantoms to my nose to hide it, though no one is around. I wonder why the Lantoms are more fragrant than usual. The next day, three sets of new clothes are given to me at the little house. Kesorn explains that these were requested by Nai-Jun. If I am going to drive the car and accompany Khun-Yai outside, I have to dress properly, not ruining my boss' image.

I stand respectfully in my attire, a white shirt perfectly tucked in black trousers, basically a chauffeur uniform. The fabric is not of high quality, but things like this depend on the person who wears it. Shamelessly speaking, I look more like a college student from a rich family than a chauffeur.

When Khun-Yai walks in and sees me, he halts, his eyes glistening.

"Is that Poh-Jom? I thought you were Busaba disguised as Unakan*"

Nonsense. Even if Busaba pretends to be a man, she is still captivating. I am not that pretty. My skin is smooth and fair as I am half-Chinese, but it is quite an overstatement to compare me with a lady in literature. Plus, my body is not slender or fragile. Does Khun-Yai want to prove it? Well...The last sentence is just a joke.

"Where are you headed today? I am very ready to serve you. Please state your command." I smile brightly.

"I have to order something at Kiti Panit on Thapae Street. Do you know the way?"

"Yes," I reply in earnest. I paddled past Thapae Street a few times with Ming to get to the markets, the time I had to take care of the piglets for Mr. Robert. This time, I have to drive there. I doubt it will be a problem since Khun-Yai will be with me. In the afternoon, I spend my time on the economic street of Chiang Mai in this era. Both sides are lined with shops. Back when I was a piglet keeper, I could only glimpse at the street from afar because I had no business here.

Everything around me feels like a dream. It is as though I am in the picture taken in the past, but everything is not in black and white like those old photos. I am surrounded by colors and liveliness of people. Buildings in Western architecture are everywhere. The street is bustling with trading and the crowd. There are malls, printing houses, tailors' shops, photo shops, souvenir shops, and even cafés that serve Western-style breakfast. I follow Khun-Yai, mesmerized by everything. Amused, probably, he asks.

"Is this the first time you came here?"

"Yes. You can tell, right?" I say honestly.

"What a shame I didn't bring my drawing papers. Otherwise, I can sketch the scene roughly as a keepsake. This is 'amazing*. Worth to be captured." Khun-Yai seems amused by the way I speak in both Thai and English. I guess he is used to my strange behaviors since he just smiles. Besides, I did tell him I learned English with the missionaries promoting Christianity. I stop short when we reach the grocery store with stalls at the front. Next to them is an advertisement sign displaying a picture and a text, 'Sriwiang Theatre'.

"Khun-Yai," I whisper excitedly. "There is a theatre in Chiang Mai?"

"The Sriwiang Theatre is a bit further away from the Uppakut Temple intersection. Don't you know it?" he asks back.

"I don't. I lived in San Kham Paeng and started living in town when I served Mr. Robert," I lie right away. I don't know there is a theatre in Chiang Mai. I thought they were only in Bangkok. Khun-Yai gives a small nod.

"It was closed for a long time and reopened a few months ago. Drama troupes perform there on occasion, musicals, dialogue plays. Do you like dramas?"

"Not really. I just heard them talking about it during meals in the kitchen."

"Do you want to see it?" Hmm..?! My eyes widen.

"Can I?"

"If you want to, I will take you there next time. Where there is a performance, a brass band will promote the show on the street, announcing the names of the show and performers"

"Is the ticket expensive?"

"There are three prices: twenty-five satang, fifty satang, and one baht. When I take you there, I will buy you the one-baht ticket." Wow... What a sugar daddy. Can I have a carbonated drink and cheesy popcorn too?

"Please keep your word." I grin.

"I am a man of my word." Khun-Yai then leads the way in another direction to take care of his business, the main purpose. Kiti Panit is one of the big malls in Chiang Mai in this era. It is a two-and-a-half-story concrete-wood building painted in yellow, with balconies and sunshades under the eaves. The air outlets above the doors and windows are made of wood, stenciled delicately like the European gingerbread house.

I step through the entrance, thrilled. This place has a variety of things-clothes, jewelry, cut glassware, Chinaware, perfumes, soaps, and fancy products imported from overseas. There are even sections of auto parts and construction tools. It obviously targets high-class customers, such as northern princes, high-rank authorities, and the wealthy in Chiang Mai. When Khun-Yai walks inside, the manager welcomes him familiarly and invites him to talk in his office. Khun-Yai is here to order something for the Luang, supposedly. I stroll away to check out the products in the showcases while waiting for him. I turn my eyes out the window and spot a tall foreigner with light brown hair shopping outside.

It is Mr. James, the forestry assistant manager stationed in Lampang, a friend of Mr. Robert, my former boss. I am not sure if I should greet him or stay here waiting for Khun-Yai. But since a group of well-dressed women giggling while selecting perfumes nearby makes me feel out of place, I choose to step outside eventually. Mr. James remembers me. He seems really glad that I greet him.

"You're Jom. It's been a while. How are you doing?"

He pats my arms like a friend.

"I'm doing okay." I smile. "Have you been well?"

"Yes. I visited Mr. Robert some time ago and didn't see you there. I asked a servant and he said you quit."

"Right, I quit due to a personal issue. I'm now serving at Luang Thep Nititham's place down the street." Mr. James nods, not asking for the details about the reason I quit working for Mr. Robert. He asks something else.

"Do you want to go to Lampang with me?"

"Pardon?" I say with a laugh. "What can I possibly do there?"

"Take care of my place," Mr. James answers.

"Before the rainy season, I will work in the office, not in the forest. If you go with me, you can prepare my meals."

"I'm not good at cooking. Not at all," I say, smiling.

"You can learn. I'm a meat-and-potatoes guy. I'm not picky like some of my friends who prefer full-course meals. You can drink whisky and chat with me at night."

"I appreciate your kindness." I fold my hands over my chest, touched..... Well, how lucky I am that someone took a liking to me to the point that he wants to hire me.

"But I am serving the Luang's son at the moment, like a butler trainee. It will be inappropriate if I suddenly quit."

"Or you want to raise piglets? If so, I will have a piglet to join the race next Christmas." Mr. James doesn't give up.

"Did you forget what a disaster Hope caused last time? The spectators were shocked."

Mr. James laughs. He strokes my shoulder and back in satisfaction and doesn't forget to remind me before he leaves that if I change my mind and decide to work for him, I am welcomed anytime. When I return to Kiti Panit, Khun-Yai has finished his business. He stands with his hands behind his back with a sour face, waiting for me by the entrance.

"Are you going anywhere else?" I ask.

"No," he says.

"Take me home." I agree and do as told.

After that, the air around us feels foggy, gloomy and uncomfortable. Khun-Yai doesn't talk or smile as he did before. He sits in silence throughout our trip back home. I don't know what gives. Was the order unsuccessful? Did

some mistake irk him? I get to learn the cause of his sour mood when we arrive at the little house and stand by the stairs. Khun-Yai turns around and asks a question with a sullen face void of a smile.

"That foreigner, are you close to him?"

"Who?"

"I saw one speaking to you today."

"Oh...It was Mr. James, the forestry assistant manager in Lampang. He is a friend of Mr. Robert, my former boss. Don't you know him? When I raced the piglet at the Gymkhana Club, Mr. James was also there."

"I know who he is." Khun-Yai's voice is startlingly harsh.

"I want to know when you became close to him. How close are you two for you to let him touch your body like that?" I get flustered, scared even though I did nothing wrong. Khun-Yai's attitude feels different. He looks absolutely displeased, and the tone of his voice is reprimanding.

"Khun-Yai, Mr. James is a man. I am a man. It is not scandalous for us to chat and get touchy as it would be if we were a man and a woman. It's fine."

"It's not," Khun-Yai says sharply.

"I hate it when someone touches your body."

"Hmm...? Ah. I stutter.

"Khun-Yai, I don't get it."

"Don't you know how I feel towards you, Poh-Jom?" My eyes widen. The words escape my mouth automatically.

"I...I don't know."

"You don't know, or you close your heart and refuse to be aware of it?" Khun-Yai stresses every word, anger and a hint of sadness reflecting in his eyes.

"I believe my sincere actions convey my feelings better than words, but if my actions fail to reach your heart..." Khun-Yai stares into my eyes. His eyes that used to be forever affectionate are now gleaming.

"Should I write you a poem?" He storms up the stairs, leaving me alone in shock with his words echoing all around.

...A poem. As in a love poem...!?

Chapter 14: Affection

I have no idea how long I have been standing here, dumbfounded, as my brain was flooded with so much shocking information that it can't process everything all at once.

It is not true, right? Did I mishear it? Khun-Yai's disgruntled expression, his words, and his upset gaze replay in my head. I need time to stomach the other things, but one thing for sure is that he is angry to the point he has lost his composure. I have never seen him this furious, and I am the cause of it. With that, I sprint up the stairs, then stop short, realizing I am going to make up with him. The question is how. What am I supposed to say to Khun-Yai?

'..Don't you know how I feel towards you, Poh-Jom?'

'Should I write you a poem..?'

My blood pumps, making my face and neck burn. I press my arm against my cheek and shut my eyes tightly as if it would help. My heart drums aggressively in my chest like it struggles to do something. And when I ask myself the question Khun-Yai has asked me, the answer simply pops up, honest and shockingly clear.

....Why wouldn't I know? Ever since the first day he held my hand to take the pocket watch back, there has been hardly a day afterward that I never felt the feelings he conveyed when we met eyes. His sweet words, his concern, how he took care of things, the flirtation in his actions, all indicated his feelings without words. He hid it as best he could and revealed as much as people in this era were allowed to do. He was right. I knew it all along, but I never admitted it. Whenever my mind wandered to the matter, I didn't let myself believe.

....Khun-Yai has feelings for me.

The thought gets my knees to buckle. They go weak that I flop on the step like I am about to faint. My vision blurs that my shadow looks paler than usual. Despite the incredulity, the tingling in my chest feels so vivid. I dip my chin, hiding the flustered heart and my burning face from everyone.

I have to make up with him. That is the only way!
Even so, I need some time to steady my heart. I don't want to see him with my flushed face displaying my feelings and causing us to be awkward. I am older than him, so I should control my emotions and the situation. If he is fire, I need to be water. I force my mind off whatever that will waver it and attempt to walk stably through the hall and to Khun-Yai's bedroom. I knock on the door and call.

"Khun-Yai." Receiving silence as a response, I knock on the door again.

"Khun-Yai, I'm sorry." My voice is neither blunt nor overly pleading. I want him to feel the sincerity in my apology and know that I care about him. No answer. I know Khun-Yai is listening, though. I inhale and continue.

"I will never do that again. I will be careful and not let anyone carefreely touch me." After a moment, the door is pushed open. Khun-Yai stands there with his hands behind his back, still looking bitter. He doesn't look at me directly, but I think his anger has abated to some extent. He wouldn't act this way, otherwise. He would have burned a hole in my body with his stare.

"Khun-Yai, please don't be mad." I brave up in front of the tiger, a sizeable young tiger.

"It worries me when you're mad." Khun-Yai turns his head to me, his lips slightly pressed together, his eyes as clear as water with a speck of shame. Then, he speaks.

"It is not your fault. I was the one losing control. If I kept you here, no one would look or touch you."

That is all it takes to crush down everything I have fought to keep in check. I stare at him without thinking and divert my eyes seconds later. Words spew out of my mouth in disorder.

"Khun-Yai...Ah, you've changed your clothes. You're going to the great house, aren't you? Right, I didn't prepare your attire in time. I haven't even brought your snacks. Would you have it now or... What do I do?" Khun-Yai watches me panic. His intense gaze softens, and a smile returns to his lips.

"It is long past snack time, Poh-Jom. I will inform my father of the errand I ran for him and come back in the evening. Wait for me."

"Yes," I reply too energetically, still averting my eyes, unable to meet his gaze too long. Damn...Is there a person in this world who blushes when the other person says he will meet up with his dad...? How freaking ludicrous.

The time after that is me showcasing my poor working performance. If I were my employer, I would fire myself with no hesitation. I wish for the ability to focus but find none. One minute, I sigh nonstop in stress. Another minute, I can't hold my bright smile. I look crazy, and I have been this way from afternoon to evening. Fortunately, no one comes to the little house during this time, so I don't have to worry people will spread the rumor that I might be possessed.

When the sky darkens, I see Khun-Yai walking back. I rise and welcome him as usual, but this time, it is full of nervousness. I wait until Khun-Yai has bathed and changed into new clothes before entering his room. Khun-Yai sits on the chair in a cotton shirt and bedtime satin pants. A book lies open on his lap. I head to the window to draw the curtain, worrying about his next move. Even if this kind of thing has existed eras before-they wouldn't have established the terms 'lesbianism' and 'sodomy' otherwise-it must be perfectly concealed. If exposed, you will be the talk of the town. Khun-Yai lost his temper at noon. He might be regretting spitting those words out.

My heart suddenly deflates, and I can only close the curtain in silence. Before I think anymore, Khun-Yai shuts the book, steps towards his bed, and speaks.

"Poh-Jom, come and sit here." I turn to him and decide to sit on the floor beside his bed. Khun-Yai knits his brow slightly, dissatisfied, and orders once more.

"I mean, next to me. On my bed."

"Ah..." I open my mouth to protest, but when I see his sharp gaze, I know I can't say no. I get up and settle next to him as told, keeping a proper distance. Khun-Yai turns to pick something in a wrapped handkerchief beside his pillow and place it in my hand. It is a small twig of four Lantoms.

"I brought it for you since you loved putting them next to your pillow." His voice is pleasantly resonant.

I glance down at the ivory flowers in my hand. The scent is fragrant and refreshing. He didn't simply walk past the tree and pick some out. He cut it especially for me, considering the perfect oblique cut at the end of the twig. I look up at him and smile.

"Thank you."

Khun-Yai smiles back, and my heart drops. I wish I could exchange everything I have to possess his smile forever. If only things are as simple.

"Am I troubling you?" Khun-Yai asks.

"What do you mean?"

"About my romantic feelings for you." My heart races uncontrollably. I fix my eyes on the Lantom twig in my hand that gripping it tightly as if it is my anchor.

How do I respond? Do I tell him honestly that my heart is fluttering and melting, or give him a vague answer that I don't mind things like this and just never thought he would have feelings for me?

"If you are repulsed, I will not push or force you."

His words make my head bob up.

"It's not like that. I just..." I know right then that I have screwed up. Big time. When I meet his eyes, everything in me liquefies like burning wax. How can he...convey his feelings so intensely through his gaze? We are inches away from each other, but my skin feels hot as if he touches me here and there where his keen eyes land on. Heat rushes up my cheeks, and he probably sees it.

"Khun-Yai..." I force the words out.

"like men?" Khun-Yai pauses before saying.

"If you were a woman, I would object. But since you are a man, my answer is assumably yes."

"How come it depends on me?"

"Who else would it depend on when I had never been into any man until I met Poh-Jom?" Ugh...My heart is melting.

"If you stay silent, I will consider it as you accept my feelings." I gape. I want to argue with some snappy remarks in revenge for his iniquity, but all I do is protest in a weak voice with zero intrepidity.

"This is unfair."

"Unfair?" Khun-Yai scoots close to me.

"If you have no feelings for me, look at me and say it." He clasps my upper arms, forcing me to face him. I drop my eyes, refusing to look at him.

"Look at me."

As if I would do that. This is doubtlessly a trap. If I meet his eyes right now, our sitting positions will change to lying down for sure. But I underestimate him. Since I won't tip my head up, Khun-Yai leans down instead. Chills run all over my body when his face moves closer and almost

touches my cheek. He slides his hands down in a caressing manner. Where did he learn this? He is already this skilled at the age of eighteen. I don't want to imagine how wicked he will be when he grows older.

"You are...forcing yourself on my heart."

I oppose softly, out of strength. My heart shivers as his lips brush my cheek. If I tilt my head a little, our lips will touch, and I will get to taste his lips to find out if they are as sweet like honey as his words. A sensation gathers below my stomach, burns, and spreads. I want to kiss him like crazy. I am about to lose it. God, help me. If I successfully overcome my desire, I will practice vegetarianism for seven days.

"I have not taken advantage of you. How can this be me forcing myself on your heart? I have been patient for all this time and never once laid a finger on you against your will."

"Then give me time to think it over. The matter of love requires time." Khun-Yai goes quiet, then speaks with an unwilling tone.

"If you say so, how can I object?" I heave a sigh of relief. "Can I sleep in my room in the meantime?"

"Do you not trust me?" I don't trust either of us, but I won't say that.

"If I stay close to you, how can I concentrate on figuring out my feelings?"

Submitting to my reason, he permits me to leave quite reluctantly. I stand up and unhook the curtains from the poles of his bed. Khun-Yai watches me with his arms crossed silently, not saying another word. Once done, I excuse myself. Before I step out of the door, I am held back by the arms as Khun-Yai embraces me from behind. I stand stiffly, unsettled by his strong arms and the other thing below that presses my backside.

"Let me make certain Poh-Jom will never think of anyone else in the meantime but me." My heart tingles like I am about to float when he presses his lips on my cheek. He can kiss it and pull back right away, but no. His lips and nose linger there, and I almost fall on my knees. I try my best to get it together so my emotions won't be out of control. I resist his embrace and stutter.

"Yes... Yes, I will keep it in mind."

And then, I pull myself out of his arms and strides away without looking back. When I am in my room, I clutch my chest. My heart flutters by his touch. The kiss still feels hot on my cheek, not to mention the closeness from his hug. Khun-Yai is...enormous.

I cease my wild thoughts by attempting to sleep. I put out the light in the lantern and lie on my mattress, but then I think of the night I relieved my emotions with Khun-Yai in my mind. It is different this time because I have discovered that the man in my mind also wants me, and the thought burns my skin like a fever. There are soft knocks from the other side of the wall dividing my room and Khun-Yai's. I can hear it clearly since my mattress is a short distance away.

"Poh-Jom...Are you sleeping?" Khun-Yai asks from the other side.

I answer, "I'm about to."

Silence falls upon us. A moment later, I tug my thin blanket over my head and close my eyes. Although we are only a wall away from each other and I can easily barge into his room to make out with him to my heart's content, I have to hold back as I don't want to regret it later. Moreover, please don't let me be the one hurting him. Nevertheless, the flame of desire is not easy to extinguish. The heat fuming in my chest burns relentlessly, sensual and tormenting, and it makes tonight one of the longest nights in my life.

From then on, I feel like my world is a different one from days ago. I wake up refreshed in the morning. Everything feels alive like I have never once experienced grief. The birds' resounding chirping in the morning that used to be annoying sometimes now sounds melodious as if composed by heaven. The flowers bloom everywhere, orange jasmine, night jasmine, Lantoms, and lotuses in the basins. It is like they have agreed to fan out their petals and emit their scents across every inch of the garden. The muddy swamp at the edge of the river, refusing to be outshined, shows off the water hyacinths in full bloom.

... I am about to go over the bend, huh?

My dear Khun-Yai doesn't back off either. He used to flirt with me routinely day and night, but I acted dumb the whole time. Now that his feelings are out, every action makes me blush. Before, when our hands or arms touched, it was no big deal because I told myself he didn't mean anything. It is a different story this time. Even the softest touch sends an electric shock, and I am nearly knocked down just by the brush of his fingertips. If he steps up his game, I doubt I will be able to resist.

Today, the Luang has left to work in another district early in the morning, so Khun-Yai has breakfast at the little house. He eats shrimp porridge, a

dessert, Ma-hor-pineapple morsels topped with salt and sweet stuffing-and finishes off with coffee. I slide a small ceramic jar of sugar to him.

"Would you add some sugar?"

"No. It is sweet enough." He locks me with his loving gaze and drinks his coffee. I wish I could cry out, 'Ugh,' for as long as an eternity. That is black coffee. How can it be sweet? How can he flirt even during a meal? After that, Khun-Yai goes back to his room to get changed to study English with a foreign teacher at the great house. I descend the stairs, humming joyfully. And then, I halt and stand rigidly on the step. Everything around me is bright by the late sunlight.

The leaves rustle in the wind. The branches cast their shadows over the grass and the landing. I close my eyes and reopen them to look again intently. I even reach out to pull the orange jasmine twig towards me, yet the sight before me doesn't change. My shadow is paler than everything around me.

I stand there, frozen, in perplexity. A thought pops up in my head and it stuns me to numbness.

This is the first time it occurs to me that I might have never traveled through a wormhole to this era. Spacetime might not have twisted and formed a passage as I speculated. I have just realized another possibility, the one unexplained by science.

Maybe it is not time-traveling. Maybe it is an earthbound spirit shifting to another lifetime.

A ghost without a shadow. I have heard the term from some horror books and movies. My shadow is there, but it is pale, not as vivid as all other things in this world, an incomprehensible phenomenon.

Perhaps...I have been dead since my car plunged into the Ping River, and the body right here is the spirit of the person killed by the unexpected accident.

I freeze in place, hearing Khun-Yai's voice from the balcony.

"Poh-Jom, why are you standing there? Is something wrong?"

Chapter 15: Shadow

I don't turn my head even if I know Khun-Yai is heading my way. My widening eyes lock on the shadow on the landing that suggests something is wrong with me until Khun-Yai's palm touches my arm.

"Poh-Jom, what's wrong? Your face is pale like a sick person."

I slowly move my gaze to his face. My expression must be visibly frightened because Khun-Yai slides both his hands up my upper arms.

"Poh-Jom..."

His voice and eyes seem worried.

"What's wrong?"

My brain is overwhelmed by scattering puzzles. What am I supposed to do at this point? Do I lie to him as I have always done? It should be like that. If I wish to live here smoothly, I have to lie. But I can't take this anymore. What I have seen shocks and terrifies me so much that my fear towards other matters feels less significant.

"Khun-Yai." I point my trembling finger to the shadow on the wooden landing.

"My shadow."

Khun-Yai's eyes follow my finger to the cleanly scrubbed wooden landing. My shadow and Khun-Yai's lengthen side by side on the polished planks. Khun-Yai's shadow is dark, almost black, like the casting shadows of the branches and the eaves, while mine is gray, contrasting to everything around us. Khun-Yai squints, then his eyes widen. He turns to me in shock. I gulp and force the words out of my dry throat.

"If I tell you the truth of where I came from, will you believe me?"

I have spent around an hour later thoroughly confiding in Khun-Yai about my story, who I am, where I am from, and how I got back to the past. I even told him I still had my phone with me, kept safe in my closet in the hopes that one day it would be a medium taking me back to my real present time. It is inexplicable torture to see doubts and bafflement in his eyes as I speak. He listens quietly at his desk, with me sitting farther to his side. It must be hard for him to believe me as the story is unbearably bizarre. Regardless,

my unmistakable shadow is not to be overlooked due to the fact that not a single human being has a shadow like mine. It is as though I am not real. The scientific theory is not very convincing, but the superstitious one seems to worsen everything.

"Do you believe what I am saying?" I ask.

Khun-Yai offers no response. He remains silent for such a long time that I feel disheartened, not daring to utter another word. I press my lips together and squeeze my hands, trying to suppress all negative feelings surging in my mind. I have chosen to confess out of panic and my wish to not lie to him anymore.

Deep down, however, I know I want to rely on him. I want him to support me through everything. I glance at Khun-Yai's hands on his lap, feeling like grabbing one of them to press on my cheek, to feel safe by its warmth, but I don't dare to. What I fear the most is him yanking his hand back, which will indicate his current feelings clearly that he no longer sees me the way he did before. I would be an unhinged person, a liar, a weirdo, a fault, or even a spirit.

I feel like my heart is about to be torn to shreds. I realize at this moment how much how he thinks about me has an impact on my feelings. After a few moments that feel like an eternity, Khun-Yai finally says.

"Bring me the thing you have kept in your closet."

Khun-Yai's unreadable voice makes my eyelids burn. I reply softly.

"Yes."

I step back silently. Once in my room, I flop on the floor in exhaustion... What happened to me? Is this my body? Do I have another body of mine in the era I am from? What are the people I love in that world doing? Do my parents and my sister think I have disappeared as my body is here? The worst-case scenario is my body has gone nowhere, sunk at the bottom of the Ping River, and only my spirit has drifted here.

I wrap my arms around my knees in distress, too lost to have the strength to get up. Eventually, I force myself to walk to the closet and take my phone out from under a pile of shirts. The coolness from the rectangular black steel object seeps through my palm. Its weight denotes its existence. 'All matter is indestructible.' I think of this sentence as I stare at my phone in puzzlement, but my brain is too foggy to find an explanation. I leave my room, make my way across the balcony encircling the house, and enter the hall, where Khun-Yai is waiting.

Khun-Yai locks his eyes on my phone on the dark wooden table. He hesitates a little before picking it up. He flips it around for a while and says.

"I have never seen anything like this."

"Yes. It's a phone in my era."

"There are no telephone exchanges in Chiang Mai, only in the Capital."

"It has a different system from the one in this era. It's a wireless phone enabled to communicate with other phones by cell towers or the network from the satellites that have been sent up in the sky to link the signals."

Khun-Yai's expression is troubled. He doesn't return my phone and places it next to him instead. Silence enfolds us, thickening as if to suffocate us. Khun-Yai heaves a sigh and says.

"What you have said sounds unbelievably bizarre."

My heart sinks. I can't even look up, my eyes nearly piercing a hole on the floor. Khun-Yai resumes.

"But I don't think you are lying, and I will never believe you are a ghost."

I glance up at him in surprise, warmth swelling in my heart when I see the way he looks at me.

"Khun-Yai... Why do you think so?"

"Have you never realized that you often spoke as though you could predict the future? What you have said could be a vision."

...No, he is twisting my story.

"Khun-Yai, it's not a vision," I deny in a raspy voice.

"I can't foresee the future. I am from there. Please don't forget about my shadow. No one in this region, including you, has that kind of shadow."

Khun-Yai presses his lips together as if he is fighting his own thoughts. I feel terribly sorry for him. He shouldn't have to experience anything like this.

"As for your shadow, it is beyond my comprehension. You might be from a legendary town or the Himmaman Forest* That would explain why you are different from others. But the assumption about you being a ghost or spirit, I don't believe it."

"Khun-Yai..." My voice trails off in weariness. "I'm not from the Himmaman Forest. Definitely not."

Khun-Yai seizes my wrist. I raise my eyes and meet the gaze exuding an intense emotion.

"How can a spirit be warm with flesh and blood like this? I can't bring myself to believe it."

Khun-Yai pulls me into his arms. I don't resist, burying myself in his embrace. At least the best thing among these horrible situations is he doesn't let me fight on alone.

"Aren't you afraid of me?"

"I am not," he answers in a clear voice. I close my eyes and whisper.

"But I am."

Even if the possibility that Khun-Yai would banish me from his life is dropped, it doesn't mean the other problems are solved. The truth about myself remains a mystery even to me, and no one can be at ease over this matter. Days pass by with my growing despondent feeling. I wake up each morning feeling heavy, but I have to live on despite my zero confidence. I hate the sun. I hate its powerful bright light that seems to announce to everyone in the world I am the fault of this era. Khun-Yai is aware of this as I sometimes notice him sneak glances at me in worry from his bedroom window.

Seeing my loved one anxious doubles the pain. I try to avoid spending time with Khun-Yai for too long so that his mind won't be occupied by me. I even fake a smile like I don't overthink it to ease the tension, but it turns out a laughless joke when I can tell that he is trying to pretend he is not worried about me as well.

In front of me, Khun-Yai acts normal and moves on with his life as before. Even so, I catch his face clouded whenever he thinks I am not looking. He sometimes embraces me and kisses my temple gently to offer some solace and encouragement, but I can sense his concern hidden in his eyes. The house that used to feel nice and warm is permeated by dejection hiding in corners, with uncertainty as the master of the house.

It all gnaws at us every second, torturously wearing us down, slowly killing us in our living bodies. It makes me reflect on my current situation one more time. Ever since the first day I met Khun-Yai, there has never been a day he treated me wrong. He is my utmost delight, my hope, and my anchor. My heart swells every time I catch affection visible in his eyes. If he loves me to the point he is willing to get stuck in the unexplainable dark with me, how can I love him so less that I can watch him drown in despair without doing anything? Finally, my patience has reached its limit. On a night he is about to go to bed, I say.

"Khun-Yai, I have a favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"I want to visit a temple," I stress every word.

"Any temple. I hope you will accompany me there."

"For what purpose?" Khun-Yai frowns.

I breathe in.

"I want to know what will happen, if I can get into a temple. If I meet a monk, he might see something in me and point it out if I am actually a spirit." Khun-Yai slowly shakes his head.

"I disagree,"

"Why? Are you afraid I would be burnt to a crisp if I step into a temple?"

"Poh-Jom." Khun-Yai's voice sharpens.

"Don't say that."

I go silent. Catching himself, Khun-Yai utters the next words with a softened and pleading voice.

"Since I don't think you are a ghost, there is no need to prove it."

"You can't make me stay like this." My voice cracks as I can't suppress my feelings anymore.

"I'm going crazy. And so are you."

"I don't want to risk it."

That hurts even more. What he has said bring me happiness and misery at the same time. It indicates how he holds fast to keeping me safe more than the thought that living with something that could be either a ghost or a human is abnormal.

"I'm scared too, Khun-Yai," I admit.

"But I can't stay like this. There has never been a night I could sleep without feeling this agony threatening to explode my brain. When I closed my eyes, I saw myself drowning. When I dreamed, it was a nightmare. I dreamed that the sun evaporated me. The terror felt perpetual because when I opened my eyes, it still looked like I was in a nightmare. If you do me this favor, at least we can find some answer whether I'm a human being or not. Even if it turns out I'm not, it's better than being blind from the truth. That would be no different from concluding that I am dead."

Khun-Yai quietly listens to me bemoaning. Still, I can tell from his physical reaction how much my words pressure his feelings. He clenches his jaw, pressing his hands on the wooden edge of his bed that his knuckles go white.

"If you insist in proving it, I have no choice but to permit."

The next day, Khun-Yai and I drive off the house and roar across the route skirting the Ping River to give offerings at the temple. I gaze at the sunlight shining through the trees and onto the road. The air is warm and bright as if nothing terrible will ever happen in this world. Khun-Yai is next to me, but we don't talk much. Looking back, ever since I noticed my shadow that day, we have conversed less, like we have been walking on eggshells on our words, in fear that they may hurt either of us. As our car approaches the market's area, it gets more crowded since the other side of the Ping River locates the Warorot Market and Thapae Street. I drive past the Nawarat Bridge, heading to the pagoda sticking out over the groves of trees. Shortly after, the white wall of the temple stretches before us.

I slow down and decide to pull over beside the wall near the entrance instead of driving right in. My hands are sweaty.

"Let's get out, Poh-Jom. If you can't go inside, then don't do it," Khun-Yai's gentle voice sounds close to me. We both step out of our car. When we have reached the entrance, I am reluctant to go forward. Khun-Yai holds my arm, making me look at him.

"If anything happens, I will pull you out."

His words and reassuring eyes give me courage. I take a deep breath and force myself to step into the temple's entrance.

...Nothing happens.

My body doesn't burn or writhe in pain the way I saw in dramas, only the breeze blowing the bullet wood flowers onto my arms. I turn to Khun-Yai and see his relieved and glad expression. I say.

"I will bring the offerings."

A moment later, Khun-Yai and I sit inside the temple while other people give their offerings. I pay respect to the principal Buddha image, pay homage to the Buddha, and wait with Khun-Yai. I slide the offerings to Khun-Yai when it is our turn, but Khun-Yai says.

"Come with me, Poh-Jom."

"Ah...Is it okay?"

I hesitate. Before Khun-Yai answers, the monk speaks.

"Bring them together."

I raise my eyes at the monk. He fixes his kind gaze on me as he does others in the temple. Suddenly feeling comforted, I mumble an agreement.

After giving the offerings, the monk sprinkles the holy water on us. Its drops feel cool on my arms. I glance at Khun-Yai and see him smiling my

way. Khun-Yai gestures to me to come closer so the monk can bind our wrists with the holy thread.

Once we are back in our car, Khun-Yai says.

"How can a ghost be sprinkled by the holy water and have its wrist bound in the holy thread?"

I look down at my wrist and can't help asking.

"If it had turned out I couldn't go inside the temple, or if I had screamed and shaken when the holy water touched me, what would you have done?"

"I would have taken you back home."

I almost smile.

"And let the spirit keep on wandering around the house?"

"I have no problem with that. I am not scared of a spirit like yours."

The air is totally dissimilar on our way back home. The peace of mind we have received lights up our moods. I am just an unfortunate man cluelessly jumping to another world, but I am not a ghost. Even though this is just a belief that can't exactly be proven, it indeed affects our minds. My mind feels clearer and isn't fogged by the shadow thing as much as before.

"If you are bothered by the sunlight, avoid coming into contact with it. Bring an umbrella wherever you go" says Khun-Yai.

What..? Is he seriously suggesting I travel around the town under an umbrella like a lady with fragile skin? I hate myself just by the thought of it. Just trying to avoid the sunlight is good enough. My mouth itches to joke back.

"Wouldn't it be easier to extinguish the sun?"

"If I could, do you think I wouldn't?"

A smile paints my face, the first genuine smile since the day I found out my shadow was paler than everything. Khun-Yai returns a smile, one as bright as his eyes, and it touches my heart as if it will engrave in there forever. What kind of virtue or good deeds have I ever committed to have someone like him my own? We have arrived home soon later. I follow Khun-Yai up the stairs of the little house and remember something.

"Khun-Yai, is my phone still with you?" I ask.

Khun-Yai cocks his head towards me.

"What about it?"

"Well...It's mine. Shouldn't I be the one keeping it?"

Khun-Yai turns on his heels and says every word clearly.

"If that thing might be a medium that takes you back to where you came from, don't even think of seeing it again."

..Wow.

Is he just going to confiscate it like this? I stand there for a moment, dumbfounded, before asking.

"Are you going to keep me here for the rest of my life?"

"Are you afraid I can't take care of you?"

His words make my cheeks burn, and the heat might spread to other parts of my body. Smiling, I mumble.

"I guess I hit the jackpot."

Khun-Yai says no more. He simply smiles, spins around, and step up into the balcony. My eyes trail after his back and my heart inflates as though it is about to float. Joy fans out in my chest, warm and cool. I feel happy as if I am home. A feeling emerges, more explicitly than it has ever been before. Maybe...I might not have been thrown into this world for any significant reason in the grand scheme of the universe. I might not have been sent to warn or prevent the danger or cease the war.

The reason could be for me. I might have jumped here to meet someone waiting for me on the other side of time. Since the person couldn't travel through time, the other person had to. My home is not sited on any land or filled with luxurious furniture. My home is in Khun-Yai. In his heart. Who else would transcend the conditions one should have in mind like Khun-Yai? About me being a man, possibly a ghost, or even not real at all. People would give up with just the first condition.

I am more certain than ever that it is him...He is the only one who will stay by my side no matter what my problem is. He will be with me in joy and sorrow and get through any circumstances in the future with me. I know it won't be easy, but if he is next to me, I am ready to fight for him too.

"Khun-Yai," I call.

Khun-Yai turns around with a trace of a smile on his face, his eyes visibly displaying his feelings for me as always. I speak again, hoping that this time my expression and eyes will convey everything in my heart to him as well.

"If you don't mind, can I sleep in your room tonight?"

[NC] !! Chapter 16: Entrust My Love

Khun-Yai's eyes widen slightly in surprise, then pleasure.

"Have I ever turned you down?"

he says, his eyes sparkling. After that, Khun-Yai gets changed and walks to the great house to have dinner as usual while I complete my trivial tasks as my duty. When the sky turns dark, I return to my room to collect my clothes and go to bathe.

I bathe particularly meticulously. Every inch of my body is squeaky clean. I prepare a new bedsheet, pillowcase, and curtains in Khun-Yai's bedroom. I don't know if we will use them, but I will make sure they smell scented.

At night, Khun-Yai comes back to the little house faster than usual. After bathing, he reads a book in his chair as he has always done. The difference today is he turns on the music. The melody flowing out of the gramophone is the touchingly sweet gamelan. A serenade, I suppose. The air tonight is pleasantly cool with the refreshing breeze, so Khun-Yai tells me to leave the window open.

I look out the window to the full moon shimmering in the dark blue sky. Everything seems normal like the other days, our conversations and behaviors, but we both know nothing is normal. I almost drop everything I pick up out of nervousness, knowing he is watching.

Khun-Yai must be aware of how nervous I am because he keeps smiling without a word. Ha... I want to ask him if that page is hard to read since he has been stuck there for about half an hour. When it is time to get in bed... I mean...go to bed, Khun-Yai starts.

"Are you sleepy?"

"Are you going to bed now?" I ask back.

"Yes." I open the blanket and organize his pillow before rolling out my mattress next to his bed, Khun-Yai goes to the hall to shut the music and comes back to sit on the edge of his bed and watch me arrange my pillow. But trust me, none of us is sleepy. I turn off the center light, leaving only the lamp on the nightstand on.

"Poh-Jom, come and sit here."

Khun-Yai pats the space beside him. I step over to sit next to him as told, not keeping my distance like before. Khun-Yai casts his gentle eyes on me and asks.

"Are you happy living here?"

"Yes. Everyone treats me well, especially you."

Khun-Yai nods a little. My heart drums when he tucks my hair behind my ear and plays with it. The feeling of his fingertips on my cheek is gentle yet tingles my skin.

"Are you happy enough to stay here forever?"

His voice is melodiously resonant. I glance at him. Khun-Yai is so close that I can smell the faint scent of soap from his body.

"You want me to stay with you forever?"

"I love you, Poh-Jom. Of course, I want the person I love to be with me."

"When did you start loving me?" Though nervous, I ask in curiosity.

"When I met you for the first time, I knew you were my person, the one I had been waiting for."

I smile, recalling the day my boat glides past the waterfront pavilion. Khun-Yai looked stunned when he saw me.

"Was it love at first sight?" Khun-Yai thinks for a moment and answers.

"Not quite. It felt like I had loved you for a long time. I knew I loved you before I met you that day."

..How romantic. I have never heard a love confession that melts my heart this much before.

"Did you not feel the way I did?"

Khun-Yai slides his hand down my shoulder to my hand. He holds it before lifting it to his lips. He showers his kisses on my wrist, my palm, my knuckles, and my fingertips. My chest tingles as he leans forward, his face closer to mine. His sharp nose touches my cheek, stroking it. His warm breath and lips send electricity on my skin, so thrilling that my limbs lose strength.

"So? Did you not yearn for me, miss me in the morning, and long to see my face in the evening as I did for you?"

He whispers on my cheek, his lips moving close but never touching mine, like he tries to drive me crazy. Though I want to kiss him terribly, I say.

"What a sweet mouth you have."

"How do you know? Have you ever tasted it?"

Even though I don't turn my head, I know he is smiling with his glistening eyes. Khun-Yai's palm runs up my upper arm, the touch purposefully tempting me. What a tease he is. I know people in this era must be reserved so others will not insult you for being easy. Come to think of it, for all this time, I have been reserved long enough. Therefore, I say.

"I'm about to taste it."

I tilt my head and our lips touch. I part my lips and close them over his mouth, tasting him for the first time. Khun-Yai seems surprised I am kissing him this way. I suck gently, letting my tongue touch the insides of his lips before pulling away. Despite the blush, I want to smile at him. This is the result of his tease. Our lips are moist from the kiss, and his eyes gleam in ripples like small bonfires.

"It seems you have yearned for me a great deal as well," says Khun-Yai.

When you tease a little tiger, you get eaten. He moves closer and kisses me with his parted lips, his tongue soft and feeling good. It is driven by the force of nature. His kiss is sweet yet ravenous, indicating his desire to devour me. His lips move from mine to my cheek and down to my neck.

He unbuttons my shirt one by one from the top, yanks my collar open to reveal my shoulders, and kisses them. I let out a soft moan, a sensation rushing below my stomach. His lips are hot, threatening to burn my skin. He kisses and leaves pink marks along the skin below my neck and chest.

Khun-Yai lowers his hands to my waist and moves them up to caress my back. Getting aroused by his big hands, I quiver, desire spreading all over my body. I raise my hands to unbutton Khun-Yai's shirt, wanting to touch him with nothing in between too.

Khun-Yai's bare chest is in front of me, tense with appealing muscles. I place my hands on it and touch it as I wish, but my action is a double-edged sword that stimulates both our emotions. I suppress my desire for a moment and whisper.

"Let's turn off the light first."

I get up to turn off the lamp on the nightstand. The light is now off, only the pale moonlight in the sky glowing through the window. Khun-Yai sits on the edge of his bed and watches me.

His chest is exposed. Even though the moonlight is faint, it casts on his topless torso and the bulge at his crotch that pushes the soft, thin fabric,

revealing its shape clearly. My breath gets ragged. Khun-Yai looks sensually strong.

I step forward to Khun-Yai, wondering if the Luang has ever prepared the lesson in sex for his son. Maybe it wasn't the Luang but the relatives or friends that wanted him to experience sex when he hit puberty. If that were the case, it would mean he has had sex with a woman, not a man. Or perhaps...no one at all.

It's okay...I will do it for him. I stop in front of Khun-Yai. He grabs my hand and pulls me to sit beside him. We exchange our fervent kiss again. Khun-Yai caresses my thigh, and it makes me want to touch him as well. My hand touches something hard and excitingly enlarging.

I break our kiss and look at his face. Khun-Yai returns my gaze with his glazed, pleading eyes reflecting a question as to why I stopped. As an answer, I kneel on the floor between his legs and kiss his chest. Khun-Yai looks satisfied. He props his hands on my shoulders and fondles them as I kiss him lower and lower.

"Poh-Jom..." He cups my face and tips it up as if wondering what I am about to do.

I tilt my head to kiss Khun-Yai's palm and speak in a sugary voice.

"Let me do it for you."

Khun-Yai doesn't resist when I kiss his chest again.

His clothes are all stripped, revealing his completely naked body before me. He is perfect in every part, like a statue. That part is plump and has gotten unsettlingly big.

I wrap both my hands around it and feel the throbs in my palms. I tip my head and kiss it. Khun-Yai tenses up, a low growl in his throat. I lick from the bottom to the tip and grind it with my lips before putting it into the warm wetness of my mouth.

His moan is full of pleasure, his strong fingers pressing the skin on my shoulders, lustfully kneading them. I serve him willingly, feeling his thighs tensing up where I rest my hands on.

I run my hands down to his soft, warm balls as my lips and mouth take him in as much as possible. He must be thrilled by this unfamiliar new sensation as he soon releases it in my mouth. Pressing my fingers on his thighs, I swallow every single drop. Then, I stand up and walk to the table by the window. I pour water from the cut-glass pitcher and drink it. Khun-

Yai must be shocked enough to be given a head. I won't be cruel and kiss him with his taste still in my mouth.

After finishing a glass, I throw a glance at the other table next to the closet. Khun-Yai's necessities are set on it, including a tiny glass bottle of olive oil he applied on his skin during winter. Tonight, I will use it on his skin and mine at the same time. When I return to the bed, Khun-Yai pulls me onto it to cuddle.

"Poh-Jom...My Poh-Jom," he murmurs, nuzzling me, kissing all over my face and neck. I smile. Who would have thought the dignified young man in his social circle would be sweetly clingy in bed? I kiss his cheek and say.

"You're also mine."

He grins. We snuggle up against each other affectionately. After a brief moment, our closeness leads to another round of excitement. Khun-Yai pins me down on the mattress and fondles my chest with his hands and mouth. I jump when he accidentally kisses the tip of my nipple.

"Ah.. Khun-Yai...That place is..." He halts.

"Did I hurt you?"

"N.. No," I stutter, frowning.

"That place is sensitive like...ah, what I did for you." He understands immediately. Khun-Yai leans his face back down, and, this time, he focuses on teasing the place I said is sensitive. He folds his lips around it, sucks, bites, and licks. The sensation shoots down my body and wakes up that part of mine.

"Ohh..."

I throw my head back when he sucks harder. My palms press against his shoulders as if to push him away, yet my chest rises against his mouth, letting him take care of it with his warm tongue and lips to his heart's content. The reaction turns him on tremendously and it is absolutely out of my control.

"I want to eat you up, Poh-Jom."

His voice is hoarse, and it stirs my emotions in disorder. My body burns from the pumping blood. If I let him do this any longer, I will have an orgasm. I start begging.

"Khun-Yai, s...stop." My voice trembles.

"Please." My begging makes him halt. I touch his face and say.

"Please let me go and wait for a moment."

Khun-Yai obeys. I slide off under his body and scoot to the side of the bed to get the bottle of olive oil I sneakily put there. Khun-Yai shifts to hold me, but I place my hand on his chest to stop him.

"Just a second," I say.

Khun-Yai backs away and leans on the pillow at the bedhead. His big hand rests on the enlarging part in the middle of his body, failing to cover it. I pour the olive oil into my hand. Its smell wafts in the air. I kneel and prop one of my hands on the mattress. I reach my other hand to my backside and slip my fingers into my tight entrance.

"Ah..." A moan escapes my lips uncontrollably. Stunned, Khun-Yai stares at me without blinking and mumble in a low, raspy voice.

"...Poh-Jom."

Despite the considerable embarrassment, I don't know what to do. I don't mean to seduce him by touching myself in front of him like this, but it has been a long while and I need to loosen that part. Otherwise, it won't be able to take his size. The slipperiness of the oil is a great help to my preparation. It softens, probably ready to take something larger than fingers.

I approach Khun-Yai. He looks at me with anticipation. I drape my palm, still slippery from the olive oil, around his manly part and start jerking it. Khun-Yai groans in his throat, his thing getting bigger in my palm and frighteningly hard. My breath catches by the thrill. I bestride his body, kneeling over him, and press his huge part against my back entrance. I slowly lower my hips, swallowing Khun-Yai's hard part inside my body.

When his firmness squeezes through the sphincter for an inch, both Khun-Yai and I moan. My body shivers from the intense desire. I know Khun-Yai desperately wants to thrust it in, but making love should feel good for both parties. I want to feel both pain and pleasure, not pain taking over pleasure.

"Slowly first," I tell him, my voice quivering and indecipherable.

I lay my hands on his chest and move my hips slowly. Each time I lift my body and press my hips down his hardness, pain and bliss surge. My back entrance is tight but flexible. Eventually, it almost takes all of Khun-Yai's firmness. Khun-Yai's part fills me up tightly. I place my hand on my lower abdomen, feeling the thing inserting deep inside.

"Ummmmmm..."

My eyelids flutter shut in contentment. I move my hips faster and more continuously, making the penetration as deep and long as it should be.

Beads of sweat form along my hairline above my forehead. My breath slips out with moans the whole time. Each thrust sends this wave of pleasure that I am almost unable to continue. My thighs shake a little. It must be too slow for Khun-Yai because he grasps my hips, not letting me stop halfway.

"Ah..."

I cry out loud when Khun-Yai shoves his hips up. It hits the weak spot inside of me and I almost see the light. Khun-Yai has discovered the area that makes my whole body shiver. He lowers his hips and thrusts it up, hitting the same spot. He goes slowly but firmly at first before speeding up.

The wind gust in, blowing the fragrance of flowers emitting their scents at night in the air. The curtain at the window swishes by the wind. The moonlight showers our connected bodies.

The sound of flesh on flesh mixing with the wetness is resoundingly rhythmic. Khun-Yai sits up with his thing still inside of me. I spread my thighs and interlock my ankles behind his back. Khun-Yai wraps his arms around my back and whispers hoarsely.

"Poh-Jom...Um, allow me to love you harder."

"Yes... Khun-Yai."

With that, I cry out in surprise and tighten my arms around him as his thrusts send me bouncing. Khun-Yai can no longer hold back and slams relentlessly.

"Ah..."

I quiver and squirt all over my stomach and his chest. Khun-Yai keeps thrusting without a pause. I hold my voice despite the extreme pleasure because I want him to enjoy this as much as possible. His big hands clench my hips as he shoves it in with a speeding pace until he reaches there. He pushes it all the way in, filling me with hot liquid.

After the steamy love-making, Khun-Yai and I lay next to each other on the bed. He lies on his side, cuddling me. He rests one of his arms on my stomach while nuzzling my neck and shoulder. I turn away, tickled, as he snuggles up closer playfully, tapping his fingers on my waist.

"Poh-Jom...My Jomkwan." He bites my shoulder teasingly.

"Does this mean I am forcing myself on your heart?"

I laugh and flip over to bite his upper arm, harder and wider. Khun-Yai fakes groaning mischievously. We tease each other, all lovey-dovey like newlyweds, for some time, before falling asleep in exhaustion in each other's arms. Near the break of dawn, I am woken up by hands groping my

body. After the tiger was taught how to hunt its prey once, this baby tiger grew up to be a young tiger in a night, vigorous and greedy.

Khun-Yai wakes me up with kisses and his hands kneading my chest and lower part, ravenously fondling even though he has recently eaten. This time, he takes the lead. He grips my waist, positioning me on all four on the bed, and inserts it in from behind. I clutch the bedhead with one of my hands. The force from his hips slamming his part inside of me shakes the bed, and I am scared it will break. The bed legs creak frighteningly for a long while before everything ends a few minutes before the crowing of roosters.

The result of the overdoing exercise, with the energy of an eighteen-year-old and his overflowing sex drive, is me fluttering my eyes open to the morning sunlight tired, my whole body aching. I push myself up before changing my mind and lying down again. I press my burning cheek on the pillow and shut my eyes. Only one night of our lovemaking...my body has weakened and gotten a fever.

Chapter 17: Only You

The late-morning sunlight gleams through the half-shut double-door wooden window. The upper part of the door is a louver, while the lower part is dark wood. It creates odd - pattern shadows on the polished plank floor.

I rest on my mattress in my room, watching Khun-Yai deliver his requests with my mouth shut. As soon as he knew I had a fever, he ordered other servants to prepare medicine and breakfast-porridge with three side dishes-including a pitcher of hot water to sip during the day and a small basin with a towel to wipe me down, and bring them to the little house.

I drift in and out of sleep and sometimes just fix my eyes somewhere, not knowing what expression I should put on. Khun-Yai stands with his hands behind his back by the door, looking at Kesorn and another servant from the kitchen arranging things as he wishes. I know my condition is not serious. I am not suffering from an illness or disease. My body just aches and has a fever from the thrilling sensual activity that lasted almost all night.

I am simply knackered and sleep-deprived, which can be healed by a good rest. That is all. Kesorn sets the basin and the towel beside my mattress, as Khun-Yai orders, and asks with thoughtfulness.

"Can you get up, Nai-Jom? Do you want Ai-Yoi to wipe your body?"

The said Yoi is the other servant of the little house, a cook's son. Yoi and I had meals together several times, so we are pretty close. Before I decline, Khun-Yai cuts in.

"No need to." His voice is more blunt than usual.

"Jom can do it himself."

Kesorn acknowledges it and backs away. Once she has left the little house, Khun-Yai steps closer. He sits on the mattress and touches my arm, his voice gentle.

"Can you get up, Poh-Jom? Get up and take some medicine."

My body is too weak to get up because of him. I crack a faint smile as I sit up. Khun-Yai removes the lid from the ceramic bowl and holds it at my mouth.

I study the murky liquid in the bowl. It must be herbal medicine made from plants that help reduce a fever. Wisdom of traditional medicine.

"It's Thai medicine," Khun-Yai says, reading my mind.

"Do you prefer foreign medicine?"

"It's all right."

I shake my head. I don't want to bother Khun-Yai anymore than this. If he ordered someone to fetch pills at the great house, it would seem too much of a big deal. I am not that sick and my fever is not high to the point imported medicine is necessitated. This decoction must be similar to *Andrographis paniculata* consumed to treat a fever or other infections.

I take a gulp and almost spit it out. The taste is unpalatable and bitter as if designed to test how enduring our taste buds are. My mind is overwhelmed with the desire to knock the bowl away and scream for tablets of paracetamol 500 mg.

Khun-Yai's worried and expectant expression stops me. I open my eyes and force myself to take two more gulps before pushing the rim of the bowl away. My eyes almost get teary. They say even vegetable broth tastes sweet when you are in love. What a lie.

Khun-Yai puts down the bowl and scoots over. He bends down and presses his cheek on mine.

"You have a temperature," he says.

I smile. If you check my temperature this way, you might get carried away and check the temperature of something else too, Doc. His recently shaped stubble prickles my skin, but it kind of makes me happy.

"Let's wipe you down," says Doctor Yai. I slide the basin Kesorn brought closer. Instead of letting me wipe myself as he told Kesorn, Khun-Yai soaks the towel, squeezes it, and starts rubbing it on my forehead and cheek.

"Khun-Yai, I can do it."

I hold his hand. I am not worried someone might see us since I heard it with my ears that Khun-Yai forbade everyone to come to the little house today as he needed to concentrate on studying.

I can rest for the day. No need to work. If he doesn't call for anyone, no one must show up.

"You are being like this because of me," he says in a low, rich voice.

"I will do it."

At a loss, I let him do as he wishes. Khun-Yai wipes my body gently and carefully. It feels weird to be tended like this when he is my boss. But since

he now has two positions, my boss and lover, I have to let it slide.

After the wiping, it is time for breakfast that has been set in waiting. Khun-Yai removes the lid from the porridge bowl. Warm smoke puffs from the nicely boiled rice, with a mild scent of pandan leaves. Khun-Yai spoons the porridge, blows on it, and touches his lips on it.

..Aw, he even checks the temperature of it. If anyone poisoned me, Khun-Yai would die first. He holds the spoon at my mouth, and I take the bite obediently, knowing it is no use declining it. It should be fine to indulge him a little. After two bites, I say.

"Please let me eat by myself. It's more comfortable that way," I say plainly.

I didn't plan to make him feed me the whole bowl anyway. I am not that sick. If I get too clingy, it will only worry him. Khun-Yai accepts my request. He backs away and watches me. The deboned snakeskin gourami is delicious, meaty, no bones, moderately salty, perfect to eat with porridge. Stir-fried gurmar with eggs and spicy dried shrimp salad make the meal not too greasy or too strong. Khun-Yai looks pleased to see me eat with gusto, unlike other sick people.

"Eat a lot to gain back your strength. When you recover, I will take you to the theatre." I almost laugh while chewing the food.

"Khun-Yai, I'm not a kid. You don't need to lure me into finishing my meal with a theatre."

"How do I lure an adult such as you with, then...hmm?"

His eyes sparkle. He keeps teasing me despite the fact that I am sick. I continue eating, saving my breath. I could suffer the consequences otherwise. I haven't fully recovered, so I don't want to wake the sleeping tiger. Therefore, I am a young master lying in bed all day today. I don't have to work at all.

Khun-Yai moves from the hall to study on the balcony under the shade of big trees casting their shadows down and occasionally looks at me. The distinct music plays from the gramophone placed on the table in the hall. The melody is soothing. It must be a phonograph record Khun-Sak, his brother-in-law, gave him as a gift from abroad. It is a foreign song I don't know.

"Do you need anything else, Poh-Jom?"

A star and a moon. I want to say that just for fun, but the listener gets me anxious. If he takes it seriously, I will be in trouble. So, I ask for what I

truly want.

"Could you find me a casket or a small box tomorrow? One with a lock."

"Do you have something valuable to keep?"

"Yes. You will see it tomorrow...Oh, I prefer a plain box with no exquisite pattern. Just a strong, durable one."

"I will find you one."

At night, I get to sleep on Khun-Yai's bed again. He doesn't allow me to sleep on the floor or rest in my room. His excuse is to make sure my fever will not worsen during the night. My heart races as Khun-Yai lies down beside me. Will he go hard on me another round..? I can't take it. Human bodies need repose. Let me sleep for a night and I will obey him tomorrow.

I shut my eyes tightly with thrill as he hugs me. His embrace feels firm and warm from his flesh and blood. I hesitate about my next move. Part of me wants to push him away in warning, but another part of me wants to respond. It is not like I don't want to make love with him. He is such a tempting and adorable person. To hell with my health? I won't die from another day of a fever.

"Get some sleep. I will not disturb you. I will only hug you," says Khun-Yai evenly.

I open my eyes and look at him. The pale moonlight showers Khun-Yai's smiling face. He kisses my forehead and pulls me closer, and I lean on his chest and close my eyes again. If I have never thought to love him before, now I love him with all my heart.

The next day, my fever is gone. I wake up early and prepare things as my old routine, so energetic that Khun-Yai glances at me and smiles. He seems relieved that I have recovered. After getting dressed, Khun-Yai walks to the great house to have breakfast with the Luang as usual.

In the late morning, Khun-Yai returns to the little house with an object I asked for.

"Is this one okay?" He sets a wooden box on his desk.

"Yes." I answer.

No boxes will ever be as okay as this. I observe the rectangular wooden box not over a foot long in front of me. The lid above is thick wood curving down to the lock. My chest suddenly swells as I know it would be this one. It is the same box I saw the day I opened the large trunk with Tan. I found it in there with several pictures I drew.

"Could you bring my phone?"

Khun-Yai frowns, his eyes doubtful.

"I won't keep it," I say.

"Also, could you lend me a piece of paper and a pen?"

He agrees before rising and heading to his bedroom.

I shut my eyes with melancholy in my chest, pressing my lips together tightly to suppress my feelings. I open my eyes again and take a deep breath, hoping I will be strong enough. Khun-Yai comes back shortly with my phone. He sits at his desk and fixes his eyes on me quietly in need of an explanation.

"I want you to keep my phone and the letter I am going to write," I say.

"Keep them in the box and make sure it is securely locked. Don't ever lose it."

Khun-Yai still listens in silence, his face grave as he understands what I am telling him is immensely important to me.

"I suppose I won't ever have a chance to return home.

I will write a letter to my parents." My voice trembles.

"Please keep this box and pass it on to the next generations. Keep it in this house until the set date. I want my parents to read it. I want them to know what happened to their son."

"Poh-Jom..."

"You don't know this, but I know you will keep some of my possessions for a long time until the era I was born. I saw them with my own eyes the day before I drove off into the river. You put my pictures in huge trunks, including this box."

"Did I do that?" he muses. I smile, feeling like crying.

"Yes. For whatever reason, you kept a ton of my drawings." Khun Yai slightly nods. I think he begins to understand now.

I am asking him to make a will for the next generations of his family. No matter possessions he will hand over to anyone, the huge wooden trunks will remain here in this little house for another hundred years.

"Could you promise me you will do it?"

"I promise," he replies firmly.

"Thank you," I murmur and position a piece of paper before me. I inhale and put the tip of the pen on the surface.

After writing a line, my tears fall. My hands and shoulders shake like my heart is about to rip. My parents and sister are the people I miss the most in the world I came from. The content of the letter explains that I have moved

to a faraway place. I am sorry that it is so sudden that I can't say goodbye in person. Don't wait or look for me. I didn't commit suicide or run away because of heartbreak or anything. The things I love are me and my family. I promise I will spend the rest of my life with happiness. Please don't worry about me in despair and live happily the way I will. I shall say goodbye to you here.

I finish with the word of love that is squeezed from every tiny particle of my heart, each letter written firmly. My tears dribble on the hand gripping the pen. I fold the letter three times, careful that the creases will not overlap the paragraph, and seal it with a kiss that I hope will reach my beloved ones in another hundred years from now.

"I'll leave it to you." I wipe off my tears and pass the letter to Khun-Yai. He promises and places it in the box along with my phone.

"I will keep my promise and take care of you as best I can."

The firm assurance from Khun-Yai's mouth soothes my heart and consoles me, pulling me out of sorrow. He then asks me about a couple of things regarding the trunks and the future of his family. I tell him honestly that I don't know much.

I only know the Luang will supposedly be promoted to a Phra and then a Phraya in succession before the democratization, and the trunks are thick, heavy wooden chests. The shapes are typical, not standing out, but strong and securely locked.

"If you wish to keep them out of the thieves' eyes, the trunks should be as you describe. Fancy trunks will be inappropriate. As to the padlock of the little box, I will entrust it to a trustworthy person in writing. Don't worry."

In the afternoon, Khun-Yai asks me to go for a drive together, saying he needs to hit a stationery shop on Thapae Street. I think he actually wants to take me out to get some fresh air to lift my mood because when we are halfway there, Khun-Yai asks.

"Is there any place you want to go?"

"You said you would take me to the theatre tomorrow night."

"I mean, for today."

"Oh...What about the stationery shop?"

"We can go there another day. I am not in a hurry." I knew it, I think in my mind. Actually, I have brought my drawing board and pieces of paper. If Khun-Yai takes long, I can draw while waiting for him.

"Then, could we visit the Chiang Mai Railway Station?"

Khun-Yai raises his eyebrow to inquire about my reason.

"I want to see the real thing and draw it before it gets exploded and rebuilt."

"Exploded?"

"Ah...In the World War."

"I think you are mistaken. The war was over in B.E. 2461. It has been years."

"I mean the Second World War."

"I beg your pardon?" This time, he turns fully to me in disbelief.

"It will happen again. I know you half-believe everything I say, but it will definitely happen. The democratization and World War II. I am telling you to beware."

"Do not go around mentioning the democratization to anyone. I did learn from my father someone is planning to execute it." His voice is seriously stern.

"But you can't harp on things like this. It can get you in prison."

"Yes. I only tell all of this to you. Don't share it with anyone, or they will think something is wrong with my brain."

His stern expression lifts. He now looks like he is stifling his smile.

"Do you think I will?" Good grief. I warn him about everything out of worry, yet he is amused by the possibility of me being called crazy.

"As for capitalizing the fruit gardens and building residences for rent, I am serious. Please don't see it as a far-fetched matter. Numerous noble and wealthy families in this era will be negatively affected by democratization and become poor. Their children and servants will go their separate ways, and they will need to sell their possessions to feed themselves. Tons of them will struggle to survive."

"Are you worried I will be poor?"

"Yes, I am truly worried. Don't joke about this, especially World War II. It will last around five to six years, the biggest loss in history. People in our country will suffer a great deal, trapped by famine. Even basic things like sugar and rice will be unaffordably expensive. Not to mention medicine."

"Rice and sugar?"

"Yes. They will be traded with prices of gold. Besides the effects of the war, there will be a big flood in the Capital and Thonburi during that time. Please keep in mind that you will need to be prepared around ten years later so you won't have to struggle. Some people will conduct trade in the black

markets. It makes more money to sell goods to foreigners than Thai people. Many of them will become millionaires in a short time."

"Selling our rice and sugar to foreigners instead of Thai folks and getting rich while our fellows suffer, how will I sleep at night?"

"No. I mean, you should stock it for yourself. Supply a lot for your family and relatives. That way, you won't be taken advantage of or fleeced."

Ugh... If I suggested he stocks rice to sell it to Japanese soldiers that come to Thailand during that time, Khun-Yai would accuse me of persuading him to betray our country.

"Do you believe anything I've said?"

He pauses for a long while, then he mumbles.

"If I didn't listen to the one by my side, who would I listen to.."

I beam. This is good enough. I know he doesn't wholeheartedly and undoubtedly believe me. Khun Yai is a reasonable person. It will take him some time to find out I have stated the truth. I drive along the Ping River to the intersection by the Nawarat Bridge. Instead of crossing the bridge to Thapae Street as firstly planned, I change our course to the route heading to the Chiang Mai Railway Station.

Fifteen minutes later, I stand on the open space of the Chiang Mai Railway Station. Around twenty meters from here settles a gigantic reinforced concrete building with its style visibly influenced by Western architecture. The façade is thick, dark concrete lined with long windows installed inwardly into the wall. The roof is hipped, with small gable roofs over the two entrances.

"Now that I have seen it, I feel the great loss"

I say, grabbing my pencil to sketch the building.

Khun-Yai lets me fulfill my desire. I search for the angle that will give me a full shot of the front and the side of the building and also the platform. When I have found it, I start drawing. It takes me nearly an hour to sketch the whole building. The details must be collected as thoroughly as possible as they aren't something to be added out of imagination. I can add lights and shadows later. The environment is roughly sketched. Khun-Yai hovers in the seat in our car, watching me draw and occasionally starting conversations.

Once I have drawn all significant parts, I say.

"This is enough, Khun-Yai. I can complete the details later."

"Are you tired?" He brushes the locks of hair over my forehead.

"No." I smile. "Before we leave, can I take a look inside? I have never been here. I want to know how it is like."

Khun-Yai agrees. We walk side by side, stepping up the stairs and into the building. I have to say that no matter the year, the atmosphere of the railway station barely changes-the shooting steam from the tracks, the bustling crowd, the ickiness, the faint smell of sweat of the travelers, and indistinguishable conversations. The only differences are the clothes of the era and the language.

"Khun-Yai," I whisper when I spot a man selling something near the platform. His shoulder pole consists of dozens of lining cut bamboo tubes.

"Is that palm wine?"

"No. It's palm juice," Khun-Yai corrects.

"Juice from coconuts or palm fruits is called palm juice. If you ferment it with ebony or Resak tembaga, that will be palm wine. Do you want to try it?"

I smile as a response. Khun-Yai heads over to the man selling palm juice, knowing what I want. This is the perk of having a generous rich boyfriend. I look around for a short while and exit the building as I feel sorry that Khun-Yai has to endure the sticky heat with me.

We both return to our car, and I drink the palm juice from the bamboo tube. It is refreshingly aromatic and sweet.

"Is it sweet?" asks Khun-Yai.

I glance around. There is no one passing by. I have parked the car pretty far to find the right angle to draw the whole building. I turn my head back to Khun-Yai and lean over to give him a quick kiss on the lips. I smile at his eyes.

"Sweet?"

Khun-Yai is stunned for a moment, surprised, before his ears redden. His eyes gleam playfully.

"You have just recovered from a fever. Goodness, I will punish you when we are home."

Despite the threat, a pleased grin paints on his face. Should I be scared? Well, I rested well last night. I will be fine if the punishment is not too harsh. The weather is nicer than our trip to the station. The sunlight fades, replaced by the breeze, as it is late afternoon. We drive past the ancient church established during the missionaries' first

arrival in Chiang Mai and further along the road flanked for kilometers by towering rows of rubber trees.

"Khun-Yai, can we pull over for a moment?" I ask, remembering something.

"What are you going to do?"

"I want to draw this road. See, less than half of these rubber trees survive until my era."

"How is that possible?" He sounds unconvinced.

"These rubber trees have been grown since the Fifth Reign. Those planted before houses are tended by the families living there. If one is dead, it will be replaced on the same spot. Even so, they do not last?"

"No. Development came fast, the city evolved rapidly, and the population increased. Things developed too quickly to be caught up by conscience. People in my generation did try to reserve them. They even planted *Dendrobium lindleyi* on the trunks of the rubber trees in the hopes that the beauty would attract tourists and maintain them for a long time. I don't know how long they will stand, though."

I pull over the side of the road so I won't block other cars, though one appears only once in a while. I kill the engine and gaze out the window. The sight before me is created breathtakingly by the artist named nature. Rows of the white-grey trunks too large to be held in the arms' length stretch endlessly.

The branches at the tops spread their shade, filtering the sunlight so the road isn't scalding. The cool breeze blows the fruits off the stems. Their wings spin and soften the landings.

"How beautiful. It feels like I am in the magic land."

"True as you said."

I turn to look at Khun-Yai's side profile facing the windshield. The cute moles dot the edge of his cheek near his jaw, making me want to give them a kiss.

Khun-Yai flicks his head and smiles at me, and my heart feels oddly warm. His eyes are big and sharp, the shapes wide and long. His jetty, dark eyes compliment his charming face. I can't take my eyes off him. More than the deep affection in his eyes is the irreplaceable emotion. It is exceptional loyalty. It feels like if there were tens of thousands of questions in this world about his love, all answers would be me.

"Khun-Yai, you will be off to study abroad soon, won't you?"

Khun-Yai takes my hand and strokes it gently.

"Will you miss me, Poh-Jom?"

I smile.

"Of course, I will miss you. You will be studying law.

The Luang will be very proud when you come back."

"When I am back, I will take the exam to become a judge."

I will miss him dearly, probably more than he can imagine, and he will miss me a lot as well. I drop my gaze to my hand in his, my feeling unhesitantly clear.

"Khun-Yai, do you remember when you asked if I would wait until you graduate and return?" I raise my eyes at him.

"I will. I will wait for you at the little house until you come back to me."

His eyes shimmer with joy, the joy filled with hope. He lifts my hands with both of his, and I engrave his next words with all my senses.

"I promise you right here that I will never change my mind. No matter how far, no matter how long, no one will ever sow my love from my heart, except you." He kisses my hands.

"Only you."

I feel like my heart is melting. It would be great it could actually melt and vapor and cling to him wherever he goes. I breathe in, suppressing my overflowing emotions, and say.

"If you continue, I will cry for sure."

A soft laugh escapes his mouth, and it makes me laugh with him. If my tears fall, at least they will be tears of joy.

"I have an idea. How about this? You get out and lean on the car, and I'll go over there."

I point at the row of rubber trees.

"Let me draw you in my picture for once. When you go abroad, I can look at it when I miss you."

"I have to allow you, don't I?"

"Why? Are you afraid I won't draw you handsome?" I say with a laugh.

"From that distance, you'll be handsome no matter what."

Khun-Yai steps down as asked. I choose a few pictures that haven't been put away in the little house-still clipped to the drawing board-for Khun-Yai to look at while being my model to kill his boredom.

I walk to my preferable spot and turn around. From here, I can see tall rubber trees stretching out and curving behind our parked car.

What a nice angle. I smile when Khun-Yai rolls up his sleeves to his elbows and studies my picture in earnest. Photographs and drawings have distinct feelings. When Khun-Yai and I are apart, every time I look at this picture, I will recall the details of my current surrounding. It is a memory captured with my senses, sight, taste, smell, and hearing. I will see Khun-Yai, feel his kiss, and remember his voice uttering the word of love to me. I will remember his scent and the feeling of the wind dancing on my skin as I stay with him at this moment.

I lean on a rubber tree and adjust the drawing board to be at the right angle, getting ready to start sketching. I freeze when I glance at the road covered in falling rubber leaves. The branches and leaves high up on the rubber trees cast their shadows into intricate patterns on the road. Even so, you can tell they are shadows of trees from the dark shade, unlike my shadow.

My shadow right now is dim, nearly invisible. It turns so pale, blending with the road, as if the light shines through me. The bewilderment changes into an immensely stronger feeling as something appears before my eyes.

The fog.

My heart sinks, my hands and feet cold. The white fog hangs low, swirling like smoke past my ankles and the area around me. I look up instantly, my heart alarmingly thumping. Khun-Yai still admires my pictures by the car. He rests one of his arms on the hood and flips each drawing. I can't move my feet, not because of fear, but I literally can't do it. The fog pins me to the ground as though it has figured out I don't belong here. The force feels bizarre, both magnetizing and pushing me away from here.

"Khun-Yai!"

I shout in a quivering voice. Khun-Yai turns his head. He pauses for a second before widening his eyes in shock. Khun-Yai lets the drawings fall on the ground and runs as fast as he can towards me. But he's not fast enough.

The last sight of Khun-Yai before my eyes is his panicked face, his terrified eyes, and his arms reaching out to grasp me but only seizing air. I will never forget the image for the rest of my life. The gust of wind blows the leaves. The rubber fruits swish in the air. My body is yanked with the irresistible massive force. The scene in front of me vanishes as though shut down.

There is a cracking noise in my ears, followed by the long ringing, and then it stops. After that, there is darkness and infinite silence, the kind that deafens even the sound of my breath. My body sinks and drifts into the peculiar tide like when I was brought here.

The End of Part 1

Chapter 18: Reverse

Part 2

Does the course of time flow as we believe, or does it actually stay still and we are the ones moving through it and defining each destination a present, a past, and a future? If it were the case, I would stop my time at Khun-Yai, where we stand side by side, neither moving forward nor reversing for even a minute.

But, as we all know, the mystery of the universe remains a mystery. No matter how many theories humans attempted to construct, none has ever been proved. My body is still bound in this peculiar tide, clueless of the host's fate.

After the horrifying silence, amid the atmosphere that feels like I am floating in emptiness, dark and void of movement of even the air, I am terribly scared. If this is my death, it is the utmost ruthlessly tormenting one, capturing me in this place for eternity.

Suddenly, I feel the soft wind brushing my skin. I smell incense, candle smoke, and aromatic flowers. I hear water flowing and imperceptible mumbling that gradually sounds clearer.

The sound resembles a chant mixing with verse uttered in archaic words. The sentences are lengthy and sound like a sacred ceremony to arouse vigor and curse traitors. Each rhyme is difficult to distinguish and comprehend as if it is rooted in another language.

Om, om, deities roaming the earth since the beginning of time...
Souls of betrayers shall be clutched by the hands of the ghostly divine...

An indistinct scene appears before me. The sight of numerous shadow figures seen from under the water. It seems they are gathering to perform a ceremony. The chant stirs my spirit and somehow frightens me at the same time.

Burn in flames and dry out to death.
All canals be poisoned, thou expire in bed.
Grass be swords slashing life out of thee...

The last lines are strangely familiar, like I have heard them before. I squint through the water streaming down like a curtain to the shadows of people on the other side. Puzzled, I reach out my hand through it.

The chant ceases in an instant. In the blink of an eye, everything disappears.

My body jerks and hurls back as though something is furious with my attempt to go through the curtain of water. The ringing is so excruciating that my hands fly up to my ears. I tumble over and over, my head spinning, my stomach churning, then I get shoved out like being spit.

SPLASH!

The water splashes as my body falls into it. The coolness hits my skin too abruptly that it feels like blades. My body plunges, pushed down by the plummeting water as if I am under a waterfall.

I struggle with all my might to clamber up to the surface.

When my head emerges above the water, before I can pull myself together and wipe my face for better vision, I hear thunder rumbling over my head. The brilliant lighting blinds me.

BANG!

The deafening thunder startles me. I cry out in shock and drown again. Lightning flashes above the water. Fuck! What the hell is this place! Is this hell or the center of a wormhole? Why are there both water and lightning?! Despite the terror, I have to swim up before I run out of air and die. My face resurfaces above the water and gets spattered by the rain. The sound of a cascade crashing the water surface and breaking into bubbles comes from behind. I kick my feet to propel myself from it until the current weakens enough for me to open my eyes.

..A cave.

I am in a place similar to a cave. It is dark and nippy and has a unique scent suggesting the area is deep in the ground. The dim shadows of stalactites along the walls form fake nooks and scary silhouettes. It looks like monsters or ghosts will jump out. High up above my head at the top of the cave is a vast cracking hole, allowing the light to shine through along with the rain and water flooding down like a cascade, creating the pool I am treading.

The rain from above pours continuously. The confusion is too much for my brain to process. Where did the wormhole toss me, in the middle of the woods or the phantom zone? I swim to the waist-deep water, balance myself on my feet, and wipe my face so I can see the surroundings more clearly. I

go stiff when I spot looming figures on the ground. They are a group of men flocking and staring at me. At the front is a brawny man standing tall as if to protect something behind. His hand grips a longsword in a ready-to-fight posture. When I make out his face, I am speechless.

...Ohm!

Instinctively, I lunge forward without thinking, holding out my hands for help.

"Ohm."

"Stop!"

The voice shouts from my side, followed by a fast movement towards me. My body goes rigid as a sword is pressed against my neck.

"Don't even think of taking one more step." The voice is powerfully hoarse and low.

I stand still, my heart pounding in fear. Water on my hair drops on the shiny, sharp blade. Ohm locks his eyes on me from the ground while the owner of the sword held at my throat delivers another order.

"Turn around. Don't pull a trick. You can try if you want your head cut off."

Trembling, I do as he said. I spin slowly and divert my eyes from the dreadful blade to its owner. His hands are big and firm. My eyes trail along the wrist tattooed in characters and patterns to the ripped upper arm and shoulder. When my eyes meet his face, my heart jumps.

"Khun-Yai!" I blurt out.

Khun-Yai is actually in front of me! He plants his feet on the thigh-deep water, still pointing his sword at my throat. Khun-Yai fixes me with a fierce stare without a sigh of recognition before barking out harshly.

"Who are you? How do you know my name?"

Chapter 19: Commander Yai

I gape, totally speechless. I can't even speak a word, let alone explain how I know his name. Khun-Yai is not pleased with my silence. He raises his arm.

"If you do not speak, then die." My eyes widen as my heart leaps.

"Wait, Commander Yai," a voice cuts in the frightening moment.

The voice owner is a middle-aged man in white attire.

He steps out of the group of men on the ground. His manner is prudent, unlike the mighty men around him.

"Have you forgotten where we traveled past before the downpour?" he says.

Khun-Yai doesn't relent. He points the tip of the sword at my throat as he answers.

"The walls of the old city and the ruins have no connection with this man. The Taw City has fallen for ages. I am afraid he might be a thief spying on us and will bring his lots to rob us later on."

"Though it is a fallen city, we should not disrespect it."

The man in white attire resumes.

"How are you going to explain the appearance of this man? How could a bandit hide under the water for so long without drowning to death?"

Even if I am baffled by the situation, I am not insensible. A bandit... This is nuts! Me? A bandit?!

"I'm not a bandit," I protest in a shaking voice. I won't let myself get killed because I am mistaken as a bandit! Khun-Yai flicks his keen eyes towards me.

"Who are you? Where are you from?"

"My name is Jom. I came from.." I pause. I don't know the answer to that. I don't even know where this place is in the world. I can't risk answering without discreetly thinking. If they take it as a wrong answer, I might die here.

I glance at the men on the ground. They are dressed like they have jumped out of a historical folktale I used to watch on TV. Some of them are topless and wrap their lower bodies in drawn-up cloths like short loincloths,

but many wear shirts. Ohm is in a short-sleeve shirt and a drawn-up cloth in a different color from the others. All in all, none of them looks like they are from the place or the era I have recently left.

Where did the wormhole take me to? Is it in the same universe or a multiverse?! My hesitation deepens Khun-Yai's suspicion. He fixes his eyes on me as the man in white attire interrupts again.

"Commander Yai, I beg you listen to me. Our caravan has journeyed through the woods and mountains without so much as danger, for we have been protected by the deities. How can you forget that? Though he refuses to share his background, you and I have both witnessed that this man appears in the water as it once happened in the Taw City in the past."

"Which event do you mean, royal physician?" Khun-Yai asks.

"The event that took place during the Oath of Allegiance back when King Taw established the city."

Khun-Yai is stunned for a moment, then he orders sternly.

"Take him."

Five armed mighty men drag me out of the pool. Khun-Yai goes to the other side to talk to the man in white attire called the royal physician but still glances my way distrustfully. Ohm remains where he is.

I kneel on the ground, drenched. I have been ordered to keep my head down, but I try to observe my surrounding as much as possible. When I got out of the pool earlier, I noticed a tent behind Ohm and those mighty men. I assume they are protecting something in there. No matter what it is, it must be important to this group of people to the point they are willing to kill someone turning up out of nowhere.

I suddenly get chills. Did I get swept to a barbaric land or something? What kind of joke did the wormhole play on my life this time? I think of Khun-Yai discussing the matter regarding me at the other side of the cave and feel unfathomably confused. Part of me longs for him, wishing to go there, touch, and look at him closely to see if he is indeed my Khun-Yai. But another part of me is scared. He seems fierce, unlike the gentle Khun-Yai I knew. The worst part is he is seemingly displeased with me. They talk for a long while before Khun-Yai walks back with a man in white attire called the royal physician.

He asks me bluntly.

"I will ask you one more question. For what purpose did you appear? Do you hold an ill intention towards Seehasingkorn?"

I am perplexed.

"Sechasingkorn...I've never heard of this city."

Khun-Yai and the royal physician exchange glances.

Khun-Yai then shakes his head slowly.

"He talks strange. How can you ask me to trust him, royal physician?"

My heart drops. I turn to the royal physician pleadingly.

"Since we have not yet unearthed his intention, please spare his life. We do not know if he has been sent here by the deities or forest divinities and for what purpose. If you kill him, I am afraid it will be a disrespectful action."

"If you insist as you are afraid it will bring upon ominous events, I will spare his life and take him with us, but I will not grant him freedom as the others."

The royal physician bows slightly.

"As you deem proper."

I look around in a panic. What do they mean? What are they going to do to me? My question is answered a few minutes later. I am held up as they chain my arms and legs. My ankles are suspended in shackles attached with a chain long enough for taking steps. If I run, I will trip and fall. I look at myself in disbelief towards the situation. My state is no different from a criminal or a prisoner of war.

I turn to Khun-Yai, who keeps watch on me a short distance away, yearning and feeling upset. Why did he do this to me? However, the cold gaze makes me realize my place and understand that, among these strangers, he is the one wishing to get rid of me the most.

Once I am securely chained, Khun-Yai yanks my arm and pulls me away from that area. My heart drums. I sneak a glance at his hand and arm that tug me forward, not caring that it is difficult for me to walk.

The person beside me has the same appearance as the Khun-Yai I knew. Even though their faces and heights are the same, this person looks more mature. His physique is sturdy like a warrior, and he seems audacious, not graceful like a son of a noble family.

His skin tone is slightly darker, indicating he does his activities outdoor rather than indoor. He wears a ring on his right forefinger. It has a lion-head case holding a white-grey gemstone between its fangs.

"Khun-Yai..."

I mutter, my chest feeling heavy. I don't know what to say but still want to call his name.

Khun-Yai turns his head to me. My heart swells with the feelings I have for him. Is Khun-Yai right here the same Khun-Yai of mine..? Is he the person left watching me disappear in the fog on the road flanked with rubber trees? My lips tremble, but no word is spoken.

"You are strange." He furrows his brow, his eyes curious yet distant.

"You are as weak as a woman, but I don't trust you."

He tightens his grip around my arm and yanks me to the area near the entrance of the cave. Many people are there, all males. They build a fire and dry their clothes on the rocks. I look outside the cave. It is dark, and I can only glimpse the shadowy shrubs and trees because it is nighttime. Still, I can tell we are in the woods, not a city. The rain has stopped, and I hear frogs croaking in the dark. Khun-Yai pushes me to one of the men circling the fire.

"Captain Mun and all of you, take turns keeping watch on him," he commands.

I watch Khun-Yai's back as he exits the cave without care of me. The man responding to Khun-Yai's order walks to me. I flick my eyes at him and gape.

...Ming!

I blink, but the sight before me is unchanged. This is Ming, the servant in Mr. Robert's place, the one who taught me how to paddle. He sweeps his eyes all over me suspiciously before pointing at the narrow ground encircled by rocks. It is a blind spot with the only way out: Through the group of men ringing the fire.

"Stay there. Don't try to escape or pull a trick, or I will chop your legs off."

Wow...How ferocious. These people are as fierce as a pack of wild dogs. I nod in acknowledgment and plop on the ground as told. Ming tosses a cloth, a big, thick blanket with a lint texture.

I look at the fabric in my hands and glance up at him.

"Sleep on the dirt and rocks if you want," he says.

I cover myself with the blanket and sit still, occasionally glancing at them. The men look at me as well. Their eyes and manners display paranoia. I ponder in silence. These men seem to be under Khun-Yai's command. I clearly heard they referred to Khun-Yai as Commander Yai, a military title.

Ming is the Captain and takes orders directly from Khun-Yai. Therefore, the rest of the men must be their crew.

Silence prolongs suffocatingly. At last, I decide to lie down with my back facing the men and pretend to sleep. Soon, someone whispers a question.

"Is he a remaining Tawian?"

"How idiotic of you," another man shoots.

"The Taw City has been abandoned for decades. Not an animal survives to this day. Let alone a human. All that is left is the broken stone walls. The houses and buildings were completely destroyed. How could he have survived alone? His complexion is oddly fair."

"That's why the royal physician suggested we waited.

This could be a good omen as it was back when King Taw established the city. He witnessed a divinity appearing behind a waterfall, reaching out his hand as though to offer a blessing. The Taw City was abundant with water resources and healthy earth until it perished in a war. This man could have appeared by the power of divinities."

I start to have an inkling. The story is strangely familiar.

"Is he a warlock?"

A clamor sounds around the fire while I fight the urge to get up. What are these men imagining? If they are going to come up with wild imaginations, they should consider my state first.

"Are you going to argue?" the same man continues.

"He's either a warlock or a divinity or a nymph or a Gandharva in disguise. How could a normal human have emerged from the water without running out of air and dying?"

Some of them mumble positive responses. They resume talking while I mull over their previous conversation. Frankly speaking, I don't know the Tawn City or Seehasingkorn, but the story is freaking similar to when I was drifting in the peculiar tide. I saw the curtain of water and held out my hand through it before getting yanked back and thrown out here. It happened in a few seconds, but could it have been decades?

"Is he a ghost?" another man exclaims, scared. "A ghost of a Tawian man violently killed in the battle with Lanna."

Another clamor. My ears perk up and my eyes widen.

"Ai-Jun, fuck your shitty mouth. I'll kick the hell out of you."

This voice belongs to Ming or Captain Mun.

"How could a ghost be chained? He could've broken the manacles or your neck by now."

My heart beats faster upon what I have just heard... Lanna. It is the only thing I know since I was sent here, and it gets my brain worked up instantly. I take a deep breath, get a grip, and piece every puzzle together. The Lanna Kingdom, the Oath of Allegiance, the city establishment, and other things I recollect. I try to analyze and organize them into an intelligible story pointing out my situation.

Om, om, deities roaming the earth since the beginning of time...

The chant I heard when I was drifting in the peculiar tide before being sent here replays in my head. It was archaic verses mixed with long chants to pledge allegiance to the king, consisting of Praise to the Holy, Curse to the Treacherous, and Blessing to the Loyal.

I remember it now. The reason it sounded familiar wasn't that I used to be in the situation, but I once read about it. I picked up the book from the shelf in a bookstore because the title piqued my interest. I wondered how the writer composed and interpreted the enigmatic pieces of ancient literature, especially the spectacular Curse.

Burn in flames and dry out to death.

All canals be poisoned, thou be haunted in bed.

Grass be swords slashing life out of thee...

Each line in the Curse implies that every step of the traitors to the land will take them to excruciating death. Burned, poisoned, and even terrorized in their own houses. The grass under their feet will become deadly blades. Killed by wild animals, crushed by the falling sky, sucked under the earth, beheaded by water, disemboweled, and other causes of torturous death.

Accomplices committing treason be damned by the deities. Die in three days, not three months, nor three years. Robbed off of merriment..

This malediction is in the Curse on the Water of Allegiance as part of the Oath of Allegiance! The hair on my arms stands on ends. The Oath of Allegiance is the rite to swear the oath with water before the king, influenced by India and Khmer. There is a historical record stating Thailand performed the ritual from the Early Ayutthaya Period, the Thonburi Period, to the Rattanakosin Period, and was abolished sometime after the transition of government.

...Shit.

It must have been me who appeared when the Tawians performed the Oath of Allegiance, not a divinity. Worse, I know now I haven't been sent to some bizarre universe. This place is the same world I have lived in, if a different period.

To put it simply, I have reversed further into the past! Unable to fake sleeping any longer, I sit up and turn to the group around the fire. They are startled when they see me.

"Captain Mun...Ah." I clear my throat softly and speak to Ming.

"I'm parched. Can I have some water?"

Ming hesitates, then he approaches me, holding out a bamboo tube of water. I take the tube and drink from it, thinking of the right words. I want to know exactly what period I am currently in. The Lanna Kingdom lasted for a long time and covered several cities, with periods of independence and being annexed. I need to narrow it down. I want to find out where in the country and what period i'am.

"Thank you." I return the tube and offer a small smile to show amity. Ming nods quickly in acknowledgment and acts like he has no wishes for more conversations. But hell, I won't let my chance slip away.

"Captain, when you talked about the Taw City falling down in the battle with Lanna, what city and which king did they fight against?"

Ming pulls a face, his eyes exasperated.

"We are Seehasingkornians. Why would we stick our noses in the business of another city? Stay away from me and never ask a single question."

I go back to my place right away, not risking getting kicked by Captain Mun. I don't think he would harm me, though, given the slight fear in his eyes. He must be unsure if I am a human or a warlock, but I still shouldn't risk anything. Their city, Seehasingkorn, doesn't seem to be on good terms with Lanna, considering Captain Mun's irritation.

I lie down silently. The men around the fire also fall silent, taking turns resting and keeping watch. Time passes with all horrible feelings. I can't sleep, though I wish I would fall asleep and wake up to find out it had been a dream. I wish I could wake up on Khun-Yai's bed in the little house. He would comfort me, saying it was just a nightmare. He would kiss my cheek and forehead and hold me in his arms until daybreak.

My heart stings with these tormenting and longing feelings. My eyelids feel hot. I can feel warm tears brimming my eyes and overflowing in my

chest. I curl up and hug myself. How is Khun-Yai right now? How shocked and hurt must he have been to see me disappear in front of him? How long did he stand there until he accepted I was gone from his world without a clue if we would meet again? Will he wait for me? What will happen if I can never return to him?

The thoughts occupy my head all night and get me restless. Before dawn, I fall asleep out of exhaustion.

Captain Mun shakes me awake. I groggily rise as told and follow him to the cave entrance. It is early in the morning. The sun hovers indistinctly above the trees. The air is cool, probably from the rain last night. I halt and rub my eyes as I take in my surrounding. When I peered out of the cave last night, I only caught shrubs and trees and nothing else.

Now, the scene before me is beyond my expectation. A male elephant stands by the great tree, carrying a carved wooden howdah covered in an intricately embroidered fabric for a person to sit on, sheltered under a large long-handled umbrella. People over there are busy with their tasks. I spot luggage carts and multiple horses, huge war horses. Some people are feeding them food and water.

The smell of freshly cooked rice wafts in the air. They all wear garments revealing their chests, like parted vests, and cloths drawn up over their knees. They resemble ancient warriors. My heart drops in a panic. Don't tell me I popped up in the middle of a war!

"Captain, wait." I grab Captain Mun's arm, trying to steady my shaking voice.

"Are you marching an army to wage war?"

Ming turns around and yanks his arm back, both amused and annoyed.

"Take a damn good look around. How can an army have men less than a hundred? And fifteen of us are females. Why would we attempt an attack just to be laughed at? We are part of the royal procession of Her Royal Highness Princess Amphan Niwat to Seehasingkorn with Commander Yai and Commander In as the Royal Guards."

"Princess Amphan..." I mumble, thinking if I ever heard the name.

"Her Royal Highness is the sister of His Royal Highness Prince Seeharaj, the ruler of Seehasingkorn in the present."

I nod. Things are coming together. The tent I saw last night must have belonged to Her Royal Highness. With my sudden appearance, I did deserve to be held by a sword. Captain Mun leads me to the side where the narrow

stream runs by. Water trickles between rocks from the side of the cave into the stream. I guess it comes from the pool inside. Ming and I scoop water from the stream to wash our faces and bodies like the other guys nearby. They greet and chat and throw weird glances at me. I don't blame them, knowing how out of place I look, and my story must have been twisted and spread since last night.

Shortly after, we head back to the front of the cave.

A few women carry trays of food inside. They are beautifully dressed in woven silks and round-neck straight-cut shirts. Shawls hang around their necks, letting down the tails on both sides of their chests. Their hair is tied up in buns and secured with gold flower hairpins. They must be female royal attendants serving food to the princess.

"Keep staring, and your head will be cut off," Ming says in amusement, catching me looking at them until my head turns. I force a sheepish smile, not arguing. I don't want to explain that my heart doesn't flutter by those pretty attendants at the slightest.

I get to eat soon later. Rice and grilled fish. I stare at them quietly for a moment. I have no problem with the meal as the fish is nicely grilled, but my hands are shackled. The chain between the metal rings is the length of a palm, not one foot long like the chain at my ankles.

"Captain, how do I eat?" I ask.

"If it's too hard, just starve,"

he shouts from the meal circle not far away. His comrades in the circle laugh, finding it hilarious.

In the end, I eat just like that. Quite a struggle. But there is no better way. After that, they prepare to resume their journey. Captain Mun strictly orders me to keep my head down. Do not look up when Princess Amphan exits the cave and gets on the elephant. The elephant is followed by the carts for the female royal attendants, roofed carts that shelter them from the rain and sunlight. Trailing behind them are the soldiers walking in formation with, lastly, luggage and food carts at the back. Cavalry officers patrol along the procession.

I am positioned in front of the luggage carts with Captain Mun. I gasp when Ohm rides his horse past where I am to make sure things are in place. He is in a full soldier uniform with badges stuck to his arms and shoulders, wearing round silver earrings. He looks gorgeous. Handsome and dignified. I avert my eyes and dip my chin when he turns my way, not wanting him to

know I was staring. Khun-Yai already has an eye on me. I hope Ohm won't do it either.

Ohm stops his horse. Feeling his gaze, I don't dare to look up. I wait until he trots away before glancing up and asking Captain Mun.

"Who is he?"

"That's Commander In, the other commander guarding Her Royal Highness."

I mumble a response in acknowledgment and ask nothing more.

The procession starts moving. I drag the chain on the bumpy road and trip over after a few steps. My white shirt is splattered in mud, which only worsens my state.

"How hard can it be? Just take fast, short steps," says Captain Mun, helping me up.

I grit my teeth. He can say that because he can walk freely, not shackled like me. I tell myself in my mind to be patient and balance my steps. I keep my eyes on the road to watch out for muddle puddles.

I soon hear a trot approaching. I turn my head when the sound stops beside me. It is Khun-Yai or Commander Yai. He straddles a horse, imposing as a warrior he is. He isn't topless like last night when it rained. He is now in a black short-sleeve shirt embroidered in gold laces like Ohm's. And those badges of rank. I notice Ohm and Khun-Yai wear violet-blue drawn-up cloths with particularly exquisite patterns, suggesting their rank is higher than other soldiers.

Khun-Yai casts his gaze on me, sweeping his eyes from my head to toe in silence. I brave up and flash a smile, an open, friendly, and genuine one.

Khun-Yai doesn't smile back. He glowers and trots away to the front of the procession, leaving me smiling at the air to no one. Wow...Did he have to dismiss me like that? I press my lips together in infuriation. I wish I could shout some harsh cusses at him but don't dare to risk it.

Khun-Yai's horse trots up next to Ohm. They chat in a friendly manner. He was so protective of his smile and wouldn't share a glimpse of it with me, but now he smiles brightly at Ohm. Khun-Yai pats Ohm's shoulder, wraps his hand around Ohm's neck loosely, and lets go, while Ohm touches Khun-Yai's waist.

Then they both gallop up side by side.

I frown. Feeling greatly bothered, I ask Captain Mun.

"Commander Yai and Commander In seem close. Did they fight in battles together?"

Captain Mun chuckles and answers my question. It stuns me for a long moment. I am unfathomably stunned and flabbergasted.

... Damn.

I already thought I was tremendously unfortunate to be driven away further into the past. Regardless, I am not sure if the latest information will make the chart of my fate shoot up or down.

In this period, my ex-lover and my new lover are siblings.

Chapter 20: Do Anything but Strip

I try to start another conversation with Captain Mun, but he doesn't seem too interested. He sometimes pretends not to hear. A moment later, a man walks towards us.

"Captain Mun, Commander Yai requests your presence," he tells Captain Mun and glances at me.

"I will keep watch on him."

Captain Mun nods and strides off, leaving me with the man delivering the message, also dressed like a soldier. I decide to greet him first to offer my friendship.

"I'm Jom."

He looks at me weirdly and goes rigid as if he has no idea how to respond or doesn't expect me to speak a human language. He flicks his eyes forward without replying. Ha... Why is it so hard befriending these men? Since no one wants to be my friend, I keep walking while looking around and being careful not to trip over too often. I eavesdrop on everyone's conversations and observe everything around me as I can never know what will be of use in surviving my current situation. There is no book covering how to survive when you travel back in time anywhere, so I need to note everything and come up with my own solutions, winging it awkwardly as you see.

Fortunately, their language is similar to the Thai language I used in the modern era. The differences are the accent and some archaic words that make me speculate that Seehasingkorn borders some provinces in Thailand. In fact, the roots of many cultures of us were influenced by numerous countries, such as Khmer, Mon, Laos, and even India. Captain Mun comes back a moment later and gestures to my temporary guard to leave. The man looks relieved that he doesn't have to be near me anymore. After a few steps, Captain Mun turns to me and holds out a bamboo tube containing water.

"Here, take a gulp or two. The sunlight gets stronger by the second. If you faint, it will be a problem to me."

My eyes widen. I gawk at him, not sure if I heard him right. Captain Mun seems annoyed.

"Just have it all. Will you take it or not?"

"Yes...Yes," I reply quickly. I drink from the tube and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, smiling at him with appreciation.

"Thank you."

The atmosphere of the trip improves. Captain Mun must be sympathetic with my pitiful state. He becomes friendlier and doesn't pull an irritated face when I trip.

"You don't seem familiar with the woods, as though you never traveled through one," he says when I trip on a rock and he has to seize my arm.

"I did, but not in this kind of woods," I reply honestly.

"What city are you from?"

I hesitate, not certain how to answer. I can't say Chiang Mai or Bangkok as those are my workplaces. I was actually born in Chonburi.

"My home is in Sriracha." I adjust my pronoun*, thinking it will be safer this way.

Given their conversations from last night until now, I have heard them using all sorts of pronouns. They either addressed themselves with those or by their names, depending on whom they spoke to, the mood, ages, and the feelings as they conversed.

During the conversations, they sometimes got angry and used the ruder pronoun instead. And those who always addressed themselves with the ruder pronoun sometimes used the mellow one to ease the tension when their banter went wrong. I have decided to use the most neutral pronoun. No more or less.

"Hmm.." Captain Mun thinks hard. "Never heard of it. Who's the ruler?"

I smile. I don't even remember who the current provincial governor of Chonburi is.

"You wouldn't recognize him anyway. It's a ah, pretty mysterious city. No one here knows or ever visits it."

Captain Mun gasps despite himself and hides it by coughing softly, but I can see the change in his expression and eyes. He looks uneasy and worried. He pauses for a moment and asks.

"What is the reason for your arrival?"

Maybe it is the feeling that he is Ming, my old friend, that makes me want to tell him the truth without concocting things.

"I didn't want to come here. I was sent here, actually. I don't know why, though. Please don't ask about who sent me here. I can't explain it because the sender isn't human."

Captain Mun was astounded. I give him an understanding and concerning look. I hope I can explain the wormhole theory, but I guess it is better to let him believe this to be spiritual and supernatural as people in this period would.

"How long will it take to get to your Seehasingkorn?"

I ask, feeling like my legs are about to fall off.

"Days," he replies.

When he sees my expression, he adds.

"The procession will take a break soon."

I heave a sigh of relief. The trip across the bumpy route is a hassle enough, and I am shackled. Beads of sweat form on my forehead and back from the increasingly hot air. If I don't rest soon, weariness will knock me out on the ground.

Shortly, the procession stops by a river. I sit with the soldiers and servants, separated from the area Princess Amphan and the female royal attendants are resting. The top of the white long-handled umbrella can be seen from a distance.

I settle on the grass under a tree and watch the servants pull the horses to the river to get hydrated. They all sit scatteringly on the grass and rocks on the riverbank. Some wade into the river, thigh-deep, and rub themselves with the water. Even though the sunlight is scalding, there is this cool breeze. I stretch my legs to reduce the stiffness and spectate the sunlight dancing on the ripples.

"How fortunate that we stumbled upon the river on our way,"

I say to Captain Mun.

"The horses and cows would have been dehydrated otherwise."

Captain Mun scoffs.

"We didn't stumble upon it. The river, wide and deep, runs past small cities to Seehasingkorn. Though the procession advances on the common traveling route, it will always lead back to the river. The stream you washed yourself in at dawn also flows into the Ping River."

I stare at Ming in surprise..The Ping River. Did I hear it right?!

"Ming...I mean, what did you say, Captain Mun? Is this the Ping River?"

I grab his arm, getting too excited.

"Right." He frowns.

"Don't you know it?"

"I do." I release his arm.

"I know the Ping River, but I didn't know this is the Ping River."

My words baffle him quite a bit. Captain Mun mumbles something and turns away as though he can't deal with me anymore. I look at the vast body of water flowing lazily under the sun, my hand moving up to my heart. This is the river I am deeply familiar with. I used to swim in it, paddle in it, and collect the falling Lantoms from it to put beside my pillow.

My chest feels devastatingly hollow when it occurs to me that if I skirt along the river, I will reach the area locating Khun-Yai's house at some point. He is alive in a period of time, and I have been swept into a brief moment of that time, to be part of his life, to collide, to love, and to depart.

"Please go and relax as you like, Captain Mun," I say, noticing him glancing at the group of his friends chatting by the river not far away from here.

"I will rest here, not fleeing."

Captain Mun is reluctant. However, when he sees my downhearted state, which clearly shows that I have no strength to even get up and run right now, he points his finger at me.

"Stay here. Don't wander around, or we both will be whipped in the back."

I nod. Captain Mun walks away, leaving me sitting under the shade, but occasionally looks my way from afar. I pull my knees to my chest and drape my arms around them. I lean my head on my arms and lock my gaze at the river, my heart feeling lost.

...Why did the wormhole bring me here?

Under the shade of branches spreading around the trees and the sunlight seeping through the twigs, I notice and realize something. I hold out my hand and look at the ground. My shadow is the same dark shade as other shadows around me, confirming my existence. I think, scornfully, that this must be their fucking despicable genius plan, huh? They force my existence when they want and take away even my shadow when they want.

Something has become clear in my mind, which weighs me down more than putting me at ease, when I think of the possibility of what I have just seen and how it works. I reckon that my shadow went paler when my time

was almost up, then it eventually vanished along with my existence during that time. I stare at my dark shadow on the ground at the second.

...I won't get to go back anytime soon. I might never go back at all.

After a long while, the journey proceeds. On the way, I hear them pointing out that if there is no more downpour, they will reach a village in two days and might stay there for a night or two to take a break from the trip and find more food. I feel rather relieved to hear that.

In the evening, they camp in the meadow a distance away from the woods but still close to the river. They arrange the tents in a precise pattern. The tents of Princess Amphan and the female royal attendants are in the safest zone, surrounded by the tents of the guarding soldiers that are sited inches away from each other.

Further out are the sleeping place of the servants and the carts, where I am. They have to build fires in this area and take turns keeping watch all night for thieves or wild animals. They don't sleep in tents like the Royal Guards. Instead, they simply stick wooden poles into the ground in four corners and tie a cloth overhead to presumably shelter themselves from the morning dew.

I rest on the grass near the luggage carts and watch the servants take the beddings from the carts for the female royal attendants. On the other side, the cooks are building a fire to make some food. I feel so drained that I want to sleep right here. The air is cool, making me want to take a nap, but someone's voice snaps me wide awake.

"Ai-Mun! I told you to keep watch on him. Where are you? Do you wish to get thrashed?!"

I jump and turn my head. Khun-Yai is riding his horse over here. He flicks his eyes around before landing his gaze on me.

I automatically slouch and drop my eyes in an instant. Captain Mun scurries towards us and keeps bowing.

"Please don't be infuriated and punish me, Commander. I was gone to help pass things to the female royal attendants. I wouldn't dare to wander off anywhere, Commander."

"Ha...You have the nerve to argue. Do you think I'm not onto you, you randy bastard?" Commander Yai points at his face.

"Is it your job?"

Captain Mun shuts his mouth and hums a response, accepting his guilt. Khun-Yai diverts his gaze to me.

"Where will he sleep?"

I tense up as he mentions me. Captain Mun immediately replies, happy that the unwanted attention is shifted to me.

"On the cart, Commander. It will keep him from the dew and in the soldiers' eyes all night long."

"If tigers come to take the cows, won't they take him as well?"

Extremely startled, I turn to Captain Mun, and then Khun-Yai, and then Captain Mun again in shock... Holy freaking shit. They're not joking!

"True as you have said, Commander. Should he sleep with the servants and have the soldiers keep an eye on him?" Captain Mun scratches his head.

"If the thieves strike, he will not survive because of the shackles. He will not be able to run from the tigers as well. They will drag him into the woods."

I am going to cry. I look at Commander Yai pleadingly, my lips trembling. I will do anything, but don't let me get eaten by the freaking tigers!

Commander Yai stares at me with a deadpan face. He slowly presses his beautiful lips together in aggravation and snarls.

"Take him to my tent."

I almost holler and hug Captain Mun, happy to be away from danger. But he glares at me, so I level down my happiness to a relieved smile and watch Khun-Yai lead his horse away without another word.

Night falls. After finishing the meal, Captain Mun brings me to the river. I throw a surprised glance at him when he takes out a key to unlock the shackles on my ankles.

"Clean yourself up," he says.

"If I brought you to Commander Yai in this state, not only would you get kicked out, Ai-Jom, but I would also get a taste of his foot. You're a dirty mess."

I look down at myself. It is just as Captain Mun said. I am no different from a homeless man. My shirt and pants are caked with mud, and I don't smell too good. Captain Mun unlocks the shackle on my wrists so I can take off my clothes. He pouts at the river.

"Bathe near the bank. Don't think to swim away. I will watch you from right here."

I am stunned at first and then simply accept it. All right, although it is super weird to bathe with a spectator, it is better than getting shackled and

cleaned up by Captain Mun. He has compromised as much as he could, and I suppose he would feel more uncomfortable if he had to scrub my skin.

When I get back up, Captain Mun tosses new clothes on the ground.

"Hurry and put these on."

I pick up the shirt and see it is a tarnished, rough round -neck short-sleeve cotton shirt, the kind the servants wear, not the vest-looking shirt of the soldiers. I feel relieved I don't have to show my chest to anyone. My skin is pretty light compared to the men here. Given my moderate amount of muscles, the uniform will be dull instead of intimidating as it looks on their ripped bodies.

Once I have put on the shirt, I collect the cloth for my lower body and go stiff. Shit...What the hell is this?

A long dark brown cloth is in my hands, a single fabric resembling a loincloth but wider and longer. I hesitate, not knowing how to wear it, while Captain Mun crosses his arms and lifts his eyebrow.

"I don't know how to put it on,"

I confess in a meek voice. Here comes the memorable cloth-wearing practice. Captain Mun explains the way and grumbles about where exactly I came from that I never tried on a drawn-up cloth. He demonstrates nimbly, starting from draping the cloth around my waist and letting the hems down. He ties a tight knot before my stomach, folds the front the edges of the fabric together, and draws up the parts covering my ankles. He combines those edges at the front before pulling them under my crotch and tugging them in the waistband at the back. That is it.

I noticed Captain Mun looking extremely amused but trying to stifle his laughter throughout the process. Once he is done, I almost dance around because he did a wonderful job. It fits me well and is practical, looking great as if I am about to perform a folktale for foreign visitors. I try moving around to check if it will undo itself, but it appears secure even without a belt. In fact, I haven't seen anyone wearing belts except Commander Yai and Commander In. Their belts presumably relate to their rank.

"People in this era are smart." I beam, shifting left and right in satisfaction.

"They came up with the way to wear this cloth."

Captain Mun gazes at me silently for a moment, then his expression changes. It is somewhere between shame and discomfort. Curious, I ask.

"What's wrong?"

"You. don't look like an evil person."

I sigh. Those who haven't spent time with me like Captain Mun must view me negatively as Captain Mun did before.

"I'm not evil," I tell him.

"Don't be paranoid or scared. Besides not being a thief, I possess no magic to harm anyone. I even needed your help with a cloth."

He cracks an amused smile and leads me back to the camp. When we have arrived, the sky is dark and the stars glisten on the vast sky. The men circle the fires built around the area. Captain Mun leaves me with the night-shift sentries. He is gone for a while before coming back and gesturing to me to get up.

"Commander Yai and Commander In are waiting."

My heart plummets upon hearing those words. I stand and follow him to Commander Yai's tent further inside. It is sited a certain distance from the tents of the female roval attendants. Close enough to hear them screaming and charge in to help if necessary, but not too close to disturb their privacy.

When I enter the tent, I spot Commander Yai and Commander In sitting together inside. They both flick their eyes at me, making me more nervous. I slouch as I trail after Captain Mun inside and sit on the mat before the two brothers a distance away. The tent is lit by a small lantern. I fidget when Commander Yai nods to Captain Mun as a signal for him to leave.

"What is your name?" asks Ohm or Commander In
I answer as politely as possible.

"Jom, sir."

"Do you know your age?"

What a ridiculous question. Who wouldn't know their own age? It means he still dwells in the same imagination as the royal physician has. That I was sent by a divinity. Come to think of it, the belief is safer for my life than the one Commander Yai has.

"Twenty-four, sir."

Before Commander In asks anything more, Commander Yai's deep, hoarse voice cuts in.

"Where is Sriracha? How come I don't recognize it?"

I am speechless for a second, finally understanding why Captain Mun suddenly offered me some companionship during the day. Commander Yai ordered him to spy on me. I press my lips together, angry and upset. How can he be like this? Only yesterday, he said he loved me, kissed my hands

gently, and told me to wait for him. But now, he isn't so much as bothered to have a nice conversation with me.

"I think he's lying," he tells Commander In, his eyes fixed On me. My anger skyrockets, and I blurt out in resentment.

"How can you recognize it? It is not a city in your era, and I...ah, I will state it right here that I am not a bandit coming to rob you lots as Commander Yai believes. I got lost. I didn't choose to show up in the middle of your caravan, let alone have an ill intention towards you. I only learned you are Seehasingkornian when you said it. If you think I will harm you, Commander Yai, you can send me back to spend the night in the cart."

I know that was stupidly bold of me to yammer like that, but I don't freaking care anymore. I would rather risk getting eaten by a tiger out there than letting him hurt me over and over.

"Your limbs are as tiny as twigs. How will you hurt my brother?" Commander In points out, more amused than furious. "If you raise your arm, my brother can simply rip all your limbs off."

"Don't lower your guard, In, my brother. You can't trust someone by their appearance. There are people with beautiful faces and evil minds."

"Brother, are you afraid I will be charmed by his appearance?"

Commander In jokes. Commander Yai doesn't laugh. He utters in a low voice.

"Whoever holds an ill will towards my brother, no matter who they are, I will draw blood out of their heads."

Damn... This is crazy.

I sigh, bummed. They are the same, my ex-lover and my new lover. My brother this... my brother that. They keep doting on each other. Who the hell is sitting here, huh? Ai-Jom, the worthless piece of shit?

"Let's not be hasty, brother." Commander In places his hand on Commander Yai's knee.

"If he has no ill will, the sin will fall upon us as the royal physician warned. But if he does hold an ill intention, I, Commander In, will decapitate him myself."

After threatening me, Ohm vacates the tent. I am not sure if he meant it or just joked, but I have no wish to prove it. Now that we are alone, the tension amps up. I keep my head down, squeezing my hands, and sneak glances at him to predict his next move. Will he send me back outside as I

challenged him like an idiot? Damn it...Ai-Jom, you will be damned by your own words.

Commander Yai sits in silence, not a word escaping his mouth, while I can only study his feet. Um... His feet are long, his ankle in bracelets. Both Commander Yai and Commander In wear them. The material is silver like their earrings, I guess. I peep at his face and jump since Commander Yai is staring at me. My heart drums from two feelings, longing and fear of who he is right now.

"You know me, don't you?" he asks.

My head bobs up immediately, my heart pounding with hope. Does he feel our bond? The deep attachment between us might reside in his heart no matter the lifetime.

"What about you, Commander Yai? Do you know me as well?"

My voice quivers. The hope in my heart blooms and uncontrollably shakes my emotions.

"It's Jom...It's me."

Commander Yai knits his brow, surprised by my reaction. He shakes his head and says.

"I have never met you. How can I possibly know you? Though you hold no ill will, speak honestly. If you have been ordered by some bandit, confess. I will take no offense and set you free."

My heart deflates, not only from his solemn manner but also his voice and eyes. He seems distant, like a stranger. He doesn't remember me at all. Not a single place in his heart feels attached to me.

"There is nothing like that, Commander Yai," I say bitterly.

"No matter how many times you ask, the answer will be the same. No matter who you send to ask me as well. I got lost into this place accidentally and against my will. I know you are suspicious that I might be a spy of an enemy, but I confirm that I have no ill intention towards Commander Yai or anyone else here. This is the truth."

Commander Yai remains quiet.

"And these manacles." I raise my wrists.

"Shackled or not, it doesn't matter, as I have no plan to flee. In this world, in this period, I have nowhere else to go."

I stare into his eyes, suppressing the disturbing feeling in my chest.

"I wish I could go back, Commander Yai, but I don't know how."

He shakes his head slowly.

"Your words are rather difficult to stomach."

I blurt.

"If I say I got lost from another lifetime, would you believe me?"

This time, he is taken aback. Commander locks his unfathomable gaze on me. He looks neither angry nor sympathetic. It could be confusion. I can't guess how he feels. After a while, Commander Yai rises and speaks in an unreadable voice.

"Stay here. Do not go anywhere."

He exits the tent, and I just sit here as told, not daring to wander around or peek outside through the gap of the curtain door. I sweep my eyes around. There is not much in this tent. The ground is covered in a mat with a carpet on top to sit and sleep on. A trunk rests next to the lantern. Commander Yai's bed is a thick mattress resembling a Japanese futon placed on the carpet, with a pillow and a blanket folded neatly on it. I can't find my mattress, though.

I fidget for some time before Captain Mun steps inside.

My heart drops when I see his face. Commander Yai has decided to chase me out to be a tiger's bait, huh?

That is not the case, as it turned out, since Captain Mun hands me a blanket and warns.

"Don't run or pull some nasty trick while Commander Yai sleeps. If the chain moves an inch, your head will be cut off."

"Where do I sleep?" I turn my head left and right.

"If Commander Yai sleeps over there, you sleep on the other side,"

Captain Mun answers in vexation like I am an idiot.

"Stay away from his feet and swords. Or if you want to sleep on the mattress with him, do as you wish."

He walks out, leaving me alone again. Great...Damn hierarchy. Commander Yai gets to sleep on a clean mattress on a carpet, whereas I have to sleep on a rough mat with one blanket to prevent me from freezing to death.

Okay... It is not that cold, kind of pleasantly cool, actually. Still, it is obvious he doesn't care about me at all. Perhaps he wants me to know my place, and that I am just a suspicious stranger he needs to keep an eye on.

Commander Yai returns around half an hour later. He has his shirt off, wearing only a drawn-up cloth, water drops shimmering on his chest. He just bathed, apparently. His body figure is gorgeous, his chest muscular, his

back broad and narrowing down to his waist. One of his arms is tattooed from the shoulder to the elbow. He has taken off all his accessories except one ring.

Commander Yai acts like I am just air. He walks to his bed without batting an eye at me. He sets his sword at the head of the mattress before sitting down, closing his eyes, and folding his hands over his chest. He mumbles something, like prayers.

I don't know what to do and just watch him in silence, not daring to make a sound or breathe too loud. After praying, Commander Yai snuffs the light and lies down, leaving me clueless in the dark.

A moment later, I muster my courage to ask,
"Commander Yai, ah...can I sleep now?"

He answers from the mattress.

"Who forces your eyes open?" I roll my eyes at him in the dark and lie down. Though I want to do more than that, I don't dare to. Who would know when I am allowed to do anything? Why would I have the guts to do whatever I want when he is so fierce? I think in my mind, feeling pent-up. Ferocious like a wild dog with a face of an angel.

That is the most fitting definition of him right now. The night passes with anger fuming in my chest, but I get to sleep longer than the other night. I must be exhausted from the trip.

When the morning comes, the first thing I feel is my cloth loosening. It hasn't slid off to my feet or something like that. The knot on my belly is still tight, but the edges of the fabric tugged at the back fell off. Therefore, I am wearing a cloth parting at the front, revealing my fair thighs. I must have rolled around during my sleep or unconsciously pulled it off.

My heart jumps.

I swiftly turn my head to Commander Yai's mattress and exhale a sigh of relief. Ugh... thank goodness. If he were here, he would behead me for stripping myself. I get up hastily to fix the cloth, but it is difficult due to the shackles on my wrists and ankles. The attempt is clumsy. I stretch my arms to combine the edges of the fabric so I can tug it behind my back. It doesn't have to be pretty. I just don't want to stand with my cloth parting at the front to show off my thighs.

The chain connecting my ankles doesn't cooperate. It keeps getting in the way of me folding the fabric. The edges slip off my grip twice. I swear with rage and restart.

"What are you doing?!"

The shout at the entrance startles the hell out of me. I release the edges of the cloth and they fall around my feet, parting dangerously, making the sight erotic. I am not confident if it displays art or obscenity. Commander Yai stares daggers at me and repeats his question in a voice forced out of his throat.

"What are you doing?"

"The... The cloth came undone, Commander Yai,"

I sputter, trying to grab the edges of the fabric on the ground.

"If so, fix it quickly!"

I nod fast, my hands shaking.

"I'm trying. Don't rush me Commander Yai. It's pressuring. Ugh... Why is it so hard?"

Commander Yai clenches his jaw. I don't know if he is mad or what, but it is not a positive feeling for sure.

The more I try, the more I fail. I spread my legs as far as the chain allows and stoop a little, then I roughly roll the edges of the cloth as fast as possible.

However, when I am going to tug it behind my back, the chain appears not long enough. When I turn to Commander Yai in the hopes that he will lend me a hand, I see him clenching his jaw, his face turning red and green. He must be greatly exasperated.

"How about this, Commander Yai? I will go out and ask Captain Mun to help me."

He shoots back.

"Are you going to leave my tent with the cloth loosening like that?"

Oh, what am I supposed to do, then? If I can't fix it, I need to find someone who can, right? And he wouldn't offer his help. In the end, the edges drop again. I groan hopelessly, on the verge of tears, and bend down to collect them again. To make it worse, I trip on the hem and fall face-first.

"Ouch!"

I cry out, my state indescribably pathetic.

Commander Yai presses his lips together in frustration. He steps forward and pulls me back up with one of his hands. Since he uses too much strength out of aggravation, I sway and bump into him, my face hitting his chest.

"Ohh..."

I suck in my breath as my nose hurts.

At the second, a voice sounds from the front of the tent and the curtain door is parted.

"Brother, what's happening? I heard the cry from outside."

Commander Yai and I turn our heads abruptly. The light seeps in with a figure of someone standing tall over there.

...Ohm!

Ohm is astounded. He stares at us, whose bodies stick together. Commander Yai's hand still clutches on my upper arm, and my face, close to his chest, is red from the bump. Have I told you my cloth is jerked down and now opened wide, presenting my fair thighs for all to see?

As naked as you can imagine.

Ohm rapidly diverts his eyes to Commander Yai's face, his voice coming out croaky.

"Brother...You..."

Chapter 21: Daydream

Thud!

"Ouch!"

Commander shoves me off, sending me falling on my butt.

"I didn't do anything," Commander Yai snarls, pointing at me.

"He's a madman! He stripped anywhere without a care."

"No! I didn't," I roar.

"The cloth was undone when I woke up. I tried to fix it but couldn't, and Commander Yai wouldn't help me."

Commander In goes silent for a moment, then bursts out laughing. At last, Captain Mun is called for to save the situation.

The atmosphere is hilariously awkward. Captain Mun presses his lips tightly as he hurriedly ties the cloth for me. Commander Yai's face still has the shade of red and green, looking like the angry Indra. Commander In tries to keep a straight face for his brother's sake but fails. His stomach and neck tense up from holding the laugh. He then follows his brother, who storms out of the tent.

Late in the morning, I have become the talk of the town among the carts and the brave soldiers.

"How bold of you, Ai-Jom, to take off your cloth in the commander's tent. I have to give it to you."

Captain Mun guffaws, his face red, his hands clutching his stomach. They all whisper and laugh about this throughout the trip in the morning, truly entertained. But when Commander In or Commander Yai ride their horses past them, they shut their mouths and focus on the journey. I am awfully bummed and can't help correcting him.

"I didn't take off the cloth. It undid itself. I never wore it before. You know it."

Does anyone care about my explanation...? No. Those who are too scared to laugh in front of me turn their backs or look in other directions, though their shoulders tremble violently. Forever the talk of the town, huh? Last time, I crashed into Khun-Yai's waterfront pavilion and

flipped my boat. It is quite a development this time around as my cloth fell off in front of him.

Plus, Captain Mun or Ming is the pain in the ass in every lifetime. At noon, the procession stops for a break. I note that the groves of trees in the area aren't as thick as where we traveled past yesterday in the woods. I sit, lean my back on a rock, and stretch my legs. I feel aching all over, like my soul is leaving my body. The others don't seem as tired as me. They live in this period where people mainly farm lands for a living, so their bodies are firm and stronger than a city man like me. Besides, they are more familiar with the landscape and the weather.

I draw my breath when the shackle on my ankles moves and stings them. The skin around my ankles and anklebones is bruised by the contact with the metal rings in each step. It wasn't this bad yesterday since I wore my old clothes that included long pants. The hems protected my skin from direct contact with the rings. Now, I wear something like a thigh-length loincloth. My black leather shoes have been thrown into a cart, replaced by flat sandals made of leather and ropes. Nothing shields my skin from the scraping. I stroke my ankles gently and wince when I touch the stinging part.

I jump as I spot Commander Yai trotting nearby on his horse. He is looking this way, so our eyes meet. I don't smile at him just to be ignored again like yesterday. Instead, I convey my message that I hate him with telepathy. Commander Yai flicks his eyes past me without a care. I heave a sigh. It would be great if I could hate him for ten percent at the least because I actually don't hate him at all. It is impossible to hate the person with the face of the one you love with all your heart. When it is time to continue the journey, I stand up and hobble to my position next to Captain Mun.

"Captain Mun, do you have some fabric scraps?" I ask.

"Please give me some to tie my ankles. Otherwise, I won't be able to walk any further."

Captain Mun eyes the red scratches on my ankles and agrees, though he complains that I am being fussy. He fetches some cloth from one of the luggage carts and rips it into long, thin strips. Before I can tie them around my ankles, I hear a trot as Commander In approaches on his horse.

"Remove the shackle," he orders.

Captain Mun looks dumbfounded.

"But Commander Yai..."

Commander In pulls an annoyed face.

"I'm telling you to take it off, so do it. Ask no more."

Captain Mun obeys and removes the manacles. I feel absolutely relieved that my legs are finally free. My wrists are still shackled, but it is not as burdensome and painful when I walk as the ankle shackle was.

Commander In studies the bruises around my ankles and frowns.

"His skin is oddly fragile. These tiny metal pieces even cut through his flesh."

He takes out a cloth hooked in his belt and tosses it to me. I catch it before I can process anything. It is a clean ivory-color handkerchief with the edge neatly embroidered in a tiny pattern. When Commander In leads his horse away, I find Captain Mun looking at me with cheeky eyes. He lifts his eyebrow to ask which fabric I will use between the one Commander In tossed over and the dirty scrap he randomly picked out from the cart.

I respond with a smile and crouch down to wipe the blood off the bruises with Commander In's handkerchief with no hesitation. I hear Captain Mun muttering in the air something like...I knew it. At night, we make a camp in the woods again. The positions of the tents and the sentry system are the same. It takes me by surprise when Captain Mun unlocks the shackle on my arms when it is time to sleep.

"The commander said you didn't have to be shackled anymore," he says.

I am happy to move my limbs freely yet still wonder which commander it was. Commander Yai or Commander In?

"Where do I sleep tonight?"

"The same place," he replies.

"The commander hasn't given me a different order."

I follow Captain Mun to Commander Yai's tent, my heart thumping at the thought of facing him again. When we have reached the tent, Commander Yai is already in there. Captain Mun walks away, leaving me breathing difficultly inside with Commander Yai.

I sit reservedly in my corner. The source of light for tonight comes from the lit candle in a brass holder next to Commander Yai's mattress. He looks at me and lowers his eyes to my ankles.

I wrapped one of them in Commander In's handkerchief as the skin was scraped. I leave the other untied because it is just red and a bit bruised.

"It's Commander In's," I explain in a sheepish voice like I am guilty, though I didn't steal it.

Commander Yai says nothing. He turns his eyes away with a deadpan face and shifts to a praying position.

Seeing him doing that, I realize I should say a prayer too. I kneel and close my eyes, then I pray in my mind, not mumbling it out like Commander Yai in fear that it will interrupt him.

I pray to the Triple Gem to protect me from danger and not let any more misfortune get a hold of me.

Then, I wait silently until Commander Yai finishes his prayer.

He extinguishes the light and lies down. This time, I don't ask him if I can sleep and roll the blanket to be my pillow since the air is not cold tonight. When it gets chillier in the morning, I will spread it out to serve as a blanket again. Before my head touches the pillow, Commander Ya speaks in a cold voice.

"If you cloth loosens again tonight, I will whip your back on the ground."

I lie down with my back facing him. I clench my jaw really hard, afraid I will lose it and snap back. Let me ask you. Who would loosen a cloth for fun? He said it like I did it on purpose. The tent now falls into silence.

I lie there with my eyes open in the dark, my thoughts beginning to wander to all kinds of things. Commander Yai is probably not asleep right away, but he says nothing more. I can only sigh. He obviously has no intention to converse with me. He only lets me sleep here because you should keep your enemy close. He seems more skilled in battling than everyone here. If I pull a trick, it will be easy for him to get rid of me. This is better than leaving me outside to cause worse damage.

I could slit the sleeping soldiers' throats, steal the food carts, or bring other bandits to rob them.

I seriously want to tell him the worst damage I have the ability to cause is I might snore. Nearly an hour later, I am still awake. Worse, things become more vivid in the dark. I can smell the woods and leatherwear.

I can hear Commander Yai breathing, a constant rhythm that makes me imagine his chest heaving up and down in time with it. I shut my eyes with this bitterness of longing. He is a few inches away, yet it feels like we are in different worlds. Maybe it is because his heart is far away from me. Do we possess memories from the future...? I suppose not. Moreover, they shouldn't be called memories.

Tonight, I dream about Khun-Yai, a dream from this crazy, overwhelming longing, a mechanism of humans' minds that helps us cope with reality. Alleviating the pain with sweetness. In the dream, I stand in front of Luang The Nititham's great house in B.E. 2471 in the morning, where the servants are following their routines. Everything looks normal, as if this is not a dream. But, deep down, this feels strangely surreal. Perhaps my consciousness holds on tight to reality.

Khun-Yai isn't with Khun-Kae in the house. I crane my neck and view each room, hoping to spot him studying with the Luang or the foreign teacher, but he is nowhere to be seen. I look for him uneasily in the garden and the waterfront pavilion. When I fail to find him, I start shouting and crying. Finally, I have found him. Khun-Yai is reading on a chair on the balcony of the little house, under the shade of the great tree and the faint sunlight. Khun-Yai smiles when he sees me.

The smile is so warm my heart nearly melts.

"Poh-Jom...I have been waiting for so long. Where have you been?"

I run up the stairs with my soaring heart, almost lunging at him. I can't put into words how much I have missed his voice and his presence. I wrap my arms around Khun-Yai's waist and bury my face in his chest.

"Where have you been, Khun-Yai? I looked for you around the place and couldn't find you. You were nowhere. My heart was about to break."

"I have never gone anywhere. I have been sitting here for a long time, waiting for Poh-Jom. I was thinking you were lazing around." I tighten the embrace, sobbing violently. Tears flow down my cheeks. Khun-Yai wipes them off with his big hands.

"You're crying like a child. Don't cry."

I clasp his hands and kiss them. My tears get all over his skin.

"I've missed you, Khun-Yai. I've missed you so much. Please don't ever leave me again."

"I have never left you. Not once," he comforts me with his resonant voice.

"Good spirit...do not burn. Good spirit. do return to my Poh-Jomkwan."

And I wake up.

I open my eyes to the blurry sight before me, my chest still heaving from the sobs. Tears streak my cheeks as I adjust my vision and feelings, trying to comprehend what I am looking at. The faint light showering the fabric from the outside, the tent structure, and a man's hands in my grip. I blink

away the tears and attempt my best to pinpoint what period of life I am in. The charming face resembling the one in my dream hovers over me. He wears an ancient outfit, his brow furrowed. And I mumble.

"C...Commander Yai."

I let go of his hands the second he pulls them back.

Commander Yai narrows his eyes, his lips slightly pressed together, his gaze full of questions. I flick my eyes around in a daze, my heart feeling weak with the same feelings I had in my dream, if emptier. I sniff, the words slipping out of my mouth without so much thought.

"I'm sorry."

Commander Yai says nothing. He looks at me with eyes filled with perplexity, then he stands and walks out of the tent. I push myself up and rub my face, wishing I hadn't woken up. The journey resumes in the late morning. The ambiance is livelier than the other day since we will soon reach the village where travelers usually take temporary shelter and stock their supplies. I am not in the mood to chat or enjoy the scenery, though my arms and legs are shackled no more. All I think is, whatever happens, happens. At noon, we have arrived at the small village, Baan Thung Hin.

The narrow route edging through the woods opens to a wider road with tracks of carts, footsteps, and animals, implying the road is frequently used. The royal procession stops by the edge of the woods. Before us is an expansive grassland stretching to the village. I can see the roofs of many houses in the distance. They set the tents around the edge of the grassland, pretty far from the villagers' cultivated lands and paddy fields. A small stream runs nearby, the source of water for the villagers' farms. I sit next to a cart and watch the servants carry down the equipment and build the tents. All eight horses are tied at the trees near the stream, grazing the grass with no worry.

"Do you need a hand?"

I ask a servant. A stack of blankets is in his arms.

Eyes widening, he shakes his head fast and steps away from me. They must still believe I am a fault in this place, a mysterious man with an unknown background. Well, I can't blame them. Shortly after, Captain Mun comes to me with another four of his fellow soldiers. They are no longer in soldier uniforms and now wear casual outfits. Captain Mun chirps with a cheerful face.

"I'll visit the market. They say the liquor at Baan Thung Hin is strong. I wish to try it."

"How many times are you going to try it, Captain Mun? You finished half the jar last time,"

one of the soldiers argues in amusement.

"Quit making excuses. Just admit you're craving liquor."

Captain Mun raises his foot to kick the man, but he dodges and laughs out loud. It makes Captain Mun laugh as well. I can only plaster a vague smile at the situation.

"Come on, get up," Captain Mun tells me. "Do I need to carry you on my hip?"

I look at him in confusion.

"Hmm..? I can go with you?"

"The commander told me to keep an eye on you. Do I have a choice but to bring you with me?"

I stand up as told and join their trip. The distance from this point to the village is quite long. Our backs will be sweaty without horses or carts. Even so, they all look energetic despite the burning sunlight, teasing each other along the way. I only watch and listen silently.

About halfway there, we halt as a group of mighty men shows up behind a grove of trees and the thick growth of grass on the side, supposedly waiting for us. My heart pounds, noticing these men are fully armed with swords, axes, and crossbows, each of them fixing us with hostile stares. One of them speaks in a growl.

"Who are you?"

Captain Mun and his fellow soldiers exchange wary glances, then he asks back.

"Who are you lots? Why are you blocking our way?"

"Answer me,"

the other guy points up his sword intimidatingly. Seeing things are getting worse, Captain Mun says.

"We are soldiers traveling by."

"Soldiers or bandits?" the other guy pesters. He sweeps his eyes all over us.

"Soldiers fleeing from a losing battle are bound to become bandits."

"You're the bandit!" One of Captain Mun's fellow soldiers barks back, incensed at being accused.

"You're hiding in the woods. If you all weren't bandits, who would be?"

"You wish a taste of my sword, bastard?!"

Captain Mun and his friends draw out their swords abruptly, and the other men don't waste a second. Everything happens so fast. They all charge towards one another and fight with their weapons. I falter backward, my heart dropping in fear.

I am the only one here unarmed! I hear a swish in the air above my head and look up. A spear flies across the field and stabs the ground. It lands precisely in the middle of the battling men, ceasing the fight in an instant. I turn my head in the direction the spear was thrown from in shock. A warhorse soars across the dense grasses hovering overhead, swift like the wind. Its neigh reverberates vigorously across the field when its rider speeds it up in the snappiest gallop. I watch with a thrill. Though the sight is backlit, I recognize that the burly figure on the horse is Commander Yai! He cues for a halt amid the fight, fearless at the weapons of the surrounding strangers. His fiery eyes cast around before he utters in a powerful, hoarse voice.

"What's happening? Why are you all fighting?"

Captain Mun and the other soldiers don't lower their weapons. He replies.

"These men attacked us first, Commander. I fear they are bandits attempting to rob us."

Those mighty men are stunned upon hearing how Captain Mun addressed Commander Yai.

"Have you lost your eyes, Captain?!" Commander Yai bellows.

"Their swords and knives are made of fine steel of Baan Thung Hin. How can they be bandits?!"

In the end, the conflict is resolved when both parties have learned none of them is a bandit. The group of mighty men blocking our way is the young men from the village volunteering to guard their home. Bandits have been attacking villages lately, so they help each other protect theirs to be safe.

Commander Yai has to ride into the village to meet the Village Headman, Nankum. Even though it is an impulsive misunderstanding from both parties and the injury is not serious, Commander Yai deems it necessary to meet the Headman and officially apologize to prevent further frictions.

I also get tangled up even if I have done nothing besides standing tremblingly near the fight. I have to crouch down on the lawn with Captain

Mun and his gang in the house of Nankum, the Village Headman, and bow down in apology for hurting the Headman's men without meaning to.

"My men acted rashly. Please forgive them, Poh-Nan,"

Commander Yai pleads. Despite his usual imposing manner, he looks humble in the presence of an older person. Nankum shakes his head. He is an elder around fifty years old but still looks healthy, his disposition kind.

"Do you need to apologize over such a matter? My men are no different. They get hot-headed when provoked a little and always rush for a fight."

The said men avert their eyes, though they were challenging us fiercely earlier. So, things are patched up smoothly. Both parties hold no grudge over the incident. Nankum orders his servants to bring the betel nuts and tobacco to the bamboo bench to welcome their guests.

"Mae*-Ing, Jumpa, prepare a meal for our guests."

But Commander Yai rejects.

"Please don't bother, Poh-Nan. I have to return to my camp to guard Her Royal Highness, so I can't stay long. I would appreciate a bowl of jasmine rainwater in the earthen jar by the fence, Poh-Nan."

I freeze and glance up at him, stunned for a moment... Did he just say 'jasmine rainwater'?

Soon, a girl named Jumpa, Nankam's daughter, as I reckon, carries a silver bowl of rainwater with a few jasmine flowers floating inside and sets it before Commander Yai.

He sips on it slowly with a posture that stirs the emotions in my chest. His expression and gaze, refreshed by the infused water... He is definitely my Khun-Yai. I clench my fists on my lap, staring at him inevitably, my heart indescribably yearning.

"Thank you, Mae-Jumpa," Commander Yai says when he lowers the bowl back down. Jumpa twists in shyness, and I pull a face without thinking.

I understand that when a young woman hears a low voice uttered by a dignified, dauntless man, she is bound to twist like a pretzel. Yet, I can't help feeling this pricking in my heart. How pathetic. I am acting like the evil character in a soap opera who gets jealous of the female lead. Not to mention the male lead doesn't even give a damn about me. I drop my gaze and stop my thoughts from going any wilder.

After saying goodbye politely and exiting Nankum's place, Commander Yai rides his horse back to our camp. On the other hand, Captain Mun, his

gang, and I don't go back with Commander Yai and stay in the village as planned. Though Baan Thung Hin is a small village, its market is pretty vibrant. I suppose the reason is that this place is a rest stop for travelers to take shelter and buy food before resuming their journeys.

We stroll in the market full of merchants. Both sides are lined with stalls and shops selling clothes and various equipment. Some merchants settle their shoulder poles on the sides of the road to attract customers. There are weird-looking food, appliances, wild fruits, and plants I have never seen before. They even have trinkets and toys. If it took place in my era, I would be excited and enjoy the ancient vibe of this countryside market. I would grab my phone and capture tons of pictures, impressed. But since I am not a tourist and don't even know what status I own in this era. A prisoner or a captive? A miracle or a fault? All in all, the market is not all that appealing to me.

Captain Mun and his friends window-shop for a moment before going for what they came for in the first place, a food stall that sells booze. They order liquor and several dishes. They also warn each other not to drink too much because some of them are assigned to be the sentries tonight. Commander Yai might punish them. Captain Mun is kind enough to let me have grilled deer meat. I eat a piece, trying not to think of its big, round eyes. After getting a bit tipsy, they all point at a Mon woman who carries a shoulder pole past the stall. She is a striking woman with a gorgeous figure. They all suck in their breath and nudge one another with their elbows, chirping dirty jokes jovially. Captain Mun, more attracted than anyone, rises and cranes his neck longingly.

"Wait for me here," Captain Mun tells me and turns to one of his friends.

"Ai-Son, come with me. The woman is such a beauty. How can I let her walk by without doing anything?"

Having no choice, I wait quietly for Captain Mun's return. After a while, things get messy. The soldiers get cheeky and start flirting the women in the village, which aggravates the men at the next table. I begin to worry, afraid they will break into another fight. Keep in mind that I am an ordinary person with no battling skills like they have. I don't even have a single weapon to protect myself. When one man starts shouting, I decide to get up.

"I will look for Captain Mun."

No one bats an eye as they all pour their attention to the next table, which is good. I stride away from the stall and head along the path Captain Mun

disappears into with his friend.

I wander around for some time and realize I am lost. I can't find Captain Mun or return to the stall. I look left and right anxiously. The sky is darker than when I joined Captain Mun's trip to the village as dusk falls. If I still can't find them when it gets later, what will I do? Sleep by the road? What if the procession continues without me...? I start panicking and spin around in uneasiness, but then I spot someone.

..Commander In.

He is not in a full soldier uniform as I saw in the morning but dressed in a thigh-length drawn-up cloth, topless, revealing his muscular chest. I march towards him and open my mouth to call his name, but it is too late because I am too far. Commander In glances around before entering a shop.

I quicken my pace after him. When I step into the shop, I halt. Hmm..? He is shopping for female ornaments. I am a bit reluctant, then I decide to sneak out and wait by the entrance outside, feeling it is a personal matter that he probably doesn't want anyone to pry. I keep an eye on him from afar, though, afraid I will lose sight of him. Commander In spends his time choosing and finally buys a hairpin. He tells the shop owner to wrap it in a silk cloth with a beautiful pattern.

I smile. Commander In...Who are you in love with? If he purchases it in secret, I assume the woman must be some female royal attendant. He did look around before getting inside. I grab the chance when he hands the merchant his coin to step away from the shop entrance and hide behind a banana stall. Once Commander In is a few steps away from the shop, I call his name.

"Ah. Commander In."

Commander In turns around and seems surprised to see me here. He quickly puts the silk wrap in the waistband like he doesn't want anyone to see. Too late. I have watched from the beginning to the end.

"Commander In, I got lost from Captain Mun and walked around in circles for several times. I saw no one but you. Could you show me the way back to the camp?" He doesn't think much, just nodding and saying.

"Come with me."

I follow Commander In silently. When we have reached the stall selling a variety of dried meat, I spot his horse tied at the tree behind. Commander In pays the stall owner and pulls his horse onto the road.

"Hop up,"

he orders. Alarmed, I look at him and the horse back and forth with uncertainty. Riding a horse with Commander In...is allowed? I guess so, given that he stares at me, waiting for me to do as told. I observe the horse in anxiety. I have never even ridden a typical horse, and this is a huge, formidable warhorse. How do I get up? Commander In can tell from my hesitation. He says.

"Hold my shoulders and put your foot on the stirrup."

Commander In's shoulders are incredibly firm. I clutch them and successfully push myself up on the horse with the stirrup, with a little help from Commander In. He straddles the horse behind me, seizes the reins, and signals the horse to move. The horse trots past the residential area and into the edge of the grassland, then it speeds up out of the blue. I cry out when the horse gallops forward.

"What are you yelling for?" he asks.

Eyes widening, I grip the mane tightly.

"Commander In, I've never ridden a horse before. This is my first time. Could you slow down? Heeeeey!"

Commander In doesn't reduce the speed. Instead, he goes faster. My heart bounces in time with the gallop. I scream again when he makes the horse jump across the narrow stream, as if teasing, and laughs at my reaction. Now that the thrilling moment is over, I start laughing, a little bit mad. If I got shocked and fell, what would he do? He would simply pull me back up and laugh even harder, I guess.

Come to think of it, this is rather odd. Despite being the spitting image of Ohm, he possesses many distinct aspects from the Ohm in my era. Ohm is solemn and more mature, while Commander In is a young horse, gallant and bold. He is charming in a different way. Soon, we have arrived at the edge of the grassland on the other side, where our camp is located. Commander In steers the horse through the carts and slows down when he spots Commander Yai. I tense up automatically when Commander Yai throws his glance at us. Noticing my reaction, Commander In says.

"Now, see, my brother is not as cruel and heartless as you think. He is a man of tremendous kindness. But since he is the head guard of the royal procession, he can't afford to be careless. If he so much as makes a mistake, he will suffer punishment."

I listen without arguing. Commander In stops the horse once we are closer. We both dismount the horse and walk towards Commander Yai.

"He got lost from the soldiers and wandered around in the market until I saw him and took him here together"

Commander In explains to his brother the reason he brought me with him. Commander Yai, not making a fuss, nods and tells his brother to get prepared to have an audience with Princess Amphan together after Her Royal Highness finishes dinner. To discuss their journey of the following days, I assume. Commander Yai doesn't punish me, to my relief. My eyes are glued to his back as he walks away, then I speak to Commander In.

"Commander In, as to the handkerchief you lent me, I will wash it clean and return it to you later."

I pause when I catch his expression. Commander In stares at me before breaking into a grin. His voice is more melodious than ever.

"Oh, Jom, in battle, I can never surpass my brother. In other things, however..." He pulls a sly smile.

"I am no incompetent. Just by a glimpse at your eyes, I can see through your heart that you hold no ill will towards my brother."

I am deeply touched, utterly grateful that he views me in a positive light, unlike the others. Before I can express my gratitude, Commander In continues.

"Still, mark my warning, Ai-Jom. Though the royal physician believes fate brought you here to be of some use for us in the future, you should beware. Otherwise, people will not be convinced that you were sent here for the benefits of the civv."

I get flustered, my heart plummeting.

Commander In leans closer and whispers.

"If you don't stop gazing at my brother with such longing eyes, they will believe you were sent to belong to my brother alone."

With that, he laughs and pulls his horse away, leaving me gaping here. Hmph... What nonsense did you spew out, Commander In?! Tonight, they build a big fire in the field and settle around it together instead of kindling multiple fires like the other day.

This feels like the night they relax after days of traveling through the woods.

Commander Yai and Commander In also join the circle, even if they usually rested in their tents and occasionally came out to make certain things were in order. They both wear drawn-up cloths without their shirts, presumably to blend in with the others. No discrimination. Regardless, they

stand out by their unique characters of leadership from the way they speak and their manners.

The night air is soothing. The breeze under the stars, the warm fire, and the appetizing smell of grilled fish. They also drink, but they keep it under control, not getting loud and disturbing the princess. They heartily chat while relishing the liquor and grilled fish.

"Ai-Jom, you don't have to sleep in the commander's tent anymore,"

Captain Mun tells me. I am sitting with the infantry. The cavalry is farther away from us.

"Oh, how come?" I ask, sneaking a glance at Commander Yai on the other side of the fire.

"How idiotic. The commander has seen that you won't flee and isn't in disguise with an ill intention, so he allows you to sleep on the cart. Aren't you happy?"

"Well..." I hesitate.

"I'm happy, but I'm scared of tigers."

"Ugh! Why would tigers or bears hang about a village full of people?"

The later, the livelier the atmosphere gets. I get to taste the liquor Captain Mun's friends pass over. It is made from corns, fragrant and super strong. It feels like I splash fire down my throat. I don't drink much, aware that I am a lightweight, just sipping on the drink passed over. Commander Yai drinks some as well, but not as much as Commander In, who keeps chugging the booze down. He seems a heavyweight, considering he still stays sober after countless glasses.

I notice that Khun-Yai doesn't put on his stony expression all the time as when he was with me. It is even more evident now that he drinks. He jokes around in a good mood, chats, laughs, and drinks the liquor his subordinates offer, accepting their thoughtfulness. Amid the cool breeze and the starry sky, I hear music in the wind. It sounds like a zither and other instruments.

"Where does the sound come from?" I ask Captain Mun.

"Those beautiful female royal attendants. They play music for Her Royal Highness. We are blessed to hear it in the process."

I nod. The music is sweet and melodic. I look through the fire burning In into the air in tiny sparks to the charming face of the man on the opposite side. Commander Yai laughs merrily when Commander In says something that makes the soldiers slap their knees and guffaw.

I think of his expression and manner when he sips on the jasmine-infused water, and my heart flutters. Has he any idea how pleasant-looking he is. I ponder as I get a bit tipsy from the alcohol. I have suddenly been exiled from Commander Yai's tent to sleep on a cart. Part of me is relieved that I no longer have to be intimidated by his presence, but another part of me feels somewhat empty.

Even though I have been maddened by the lack of gentleness in his actions time and time again, I can't deny that he is my only emotional anchor. Khun-Yai, oh...Khun-Yai. The love plant he has grown in my heart still blooms even at the aridest moment of my life, in the darkness with no way out. Even when I have met him in another lifetime where he shows no amity to me, the feelings tightly attached to my heart, sweet and sentimental, never fade.

Amid the foggy puzzlement in my head, my ears hear someone chanting a verse along with the orchestra performed by the female royal attendants. The voice is playful, like when I rubbed his face with a towel soaked in scented water.

Even sober, I'm drunk with love's drink.
What d'you think might but it aside?
Mid-day cup dilutes morn' cup of wine,
But love's wine keeps me drunk all the day...

I continue gazing at him, unfathomably feeling troubled with myself. Commander Yai has no clue that he has become part of my uncontrollable daydream, still chatting and joking around with the others. His smile is clear, the same as the smile once directed to me. And those gorgeous sparkling jetty eyes.

Why wouldn't I remember how playful and affectionate they were when we were side by side? I would be glad to stare at them until morning. I tilt my head and prop it on my upper arm, sighing, unable to take my eyes off his face. I think I am a little bit drunk, but yeah... I feel unsure what I am drunk in.

Force feelings to stop, possible,
But yearning's out of the question.
Thoughts dismissed, crossed out one by one.
Can't erase affection out of mind. *

...Hmm.

How do you hit on a man in this era...?

Chapter 22: Dig a Hole to Catch the Commander

At daybreak, I open my eyes in a luggage cart, Captain Mun is next to me, snoring softly, sprawling. It is more comfortable to sleep on a cart than in Commander Yai's tent because I can roll around as much as I want. The worst would be bumping into the other guy, but then I could just shift. Still, I can't help thinking of the warmth from the candlelight and Commander Yai praying under his breath.

I get out of the cart, trying not to wake up Captain Mun. The dim orange light paints the horizon. Soon, the sun will rise over the line of trees. If it were the past days at this time, everyone would have been up and prepared everything to resume the journey in the late morning. But today, only the cooks are up to make breakfast. I wobble to the other side of the grassland, where the small stream cuts past. I am not yet fully awake, but I need some time alone to think.

The water in the stream is cool. I wash up to freshen up while thinking of last night. I remember I sat by the fire with the soldiers and drank some booze, enough for my mind to run wild. Enough to have a wild daydream.

It was the result of the alcohol and the weirdly romantic atmosphere. My mind went wild to the point I imagined that I heard two verses by Suthorn Phu recited with the music. I didn't hesitate to grab that bittersweetness and put it into my heart, to console myself to not dwell in the longing feeling. I gazed at Commander Yai for half the night, my mind capturing the sight before me and arranging it with the heartwarming images of Khun-Yai and me in the past. The worst part is, I got so bold to even think about hitting on Commander Yai.

I rub my face and groan softly in my throat. If Commander Yai found out, would he whip me on the ground in front of everyone..? For what reason? For having the nerve to flirt with the Seehasingkornian commander? I can't imagine if Captain Mun would stab his stomach to stop himself from bursting out laughing, not to mention Commander In. He would crack the cheeky grin until the end of the world.

I stand up and hesitate whether to chill out here or go back to the cart Captain Mun is sleeping on. But then, I hear a noise from one side of the grassland. I feel reluctant before choosing to walk to the source of the sound. It is Commander Yai. He is practicing sword fighting in the field showered in the orange sunlight, with a strawman tied to a wooden pole as his sparring partner. Commander Yai moves his body swiftly, wielding his dual swords as though dancing. The blades swish through the strawman, sending the straw flying in the air and falling on the fluttering grass.

I stare at him, enchanted. Commander Yai looks stunning and powerful. His muscles are ones of a statue, the firm chest, broad back, and V-cut abs. Good thing he wears a drawn-up cloth tied in a tight knot, so I can admire the muscles of his thighs without getting distracted by something else. When the sparring partner has become the scattering straw, Commander Yai stops. He wipes the sweat off his face and flicks his eyes to mine. I tense up, cursing myself for getting absorbed in staring at him that I forgot to hide and sneak a peek, not standing in the open like a fool and getting caught like this. I struggle to make up an excuse.

"I'm here to wash up."

I point in the direction of the stream. Ignoring my excuse, Commander Yai approaches me. I gulp when he stops before me a few steps away.

"Were you peeping at me?" His voice is low and hoarse.

Actually, I have been watching him since yesterday and hoping he wouldn't notice. I divert my eyes, avoiding his gaze, thinking of a reason to support my action.

"I'm interested in the art of fighting. Swords, spears, arrows, I like it all. When I saw you practicing, I couldn't help but watch."

The low chuckle in Commander Yai's throat draws my eyes back to his face. His lips curl up.

"You're into the art of fighting? You look like you emerged from under a lotus and never once touched a weapon. But if you're capable of casting spells, deception, or ambushing, I won't be surprised."

My heart falters. Why is he giving me that smile? Even if it is half-scornful, it affects my feelings so much. And those words. Would he just choose whether to compliment or insult me? It was like he meant I had nice, fair skin but looked deceitful and not to be trusted. My head is foggy right now. I can't process complicated things.

"You're underestimating me too much. I might not be brawny like all of you, but I'm not weak. I used to learn swordplay."

It is true. Back in high school, it was one of the subjects in PE.

Commander Yai raises his hand, and my heart sinks when he flicks his wrist to flip the sword. I gasp when he stabs the ground in front of me with it.

"I hope to witness it for once. Would you bless my eyes with your swordplay?"

It sounds like a request, but his expression and voice state it as a forceful command. I land my gaze on the long sword in front of me in a panic... Seriously? Is he commanding me to show my fighting skills with a sword? Ugh...And that is a real sword. I have no idea if it has slit anyone's throat or pierced through someone's stomach. I swallow and eye it nervously before lifting my gaze at him. Commander Yai locks his eyes on me. I guess I have to show him for real if I don't want him to believe I was peeping for a while to admire his body and that I am not into the art of any kind of fighting.

"Sure," I say.

I pray to Mr. Polawat, who taught swordplay, and try to recollect the old information regarding the moves. Holding my breath, I pull out Commander Yai's sword, grip it in my hand, and get into the fighting stance as I have learned. I remember some, fortunately. I adjust my posture to the basic stance. I put my thumb and index finger together over my chest and step forward. I take a step, bring my other foot alongside the lead foot, and raise the sword.

It looks awkward at first, but I improve my moves a moment later.

I show him my footwork and strike my lethal move.

Grab, put my thumb and index finger together, close the step, jab, stab! Commander Yai is speechless for a second, then asks in an off-tone voice.

"Where's your school?"

His disposition maddens me. Is he disrespecting my school? I was a student of a teacher. Even if Mr. Polawat was a P.E. teacher, not a commander, he taught his students in earnest and was always generous when grading. If he has to blame someone, just blame me for being good at drawing and sucking at this. I tell him the name of my high school.

He shakes his head.

"Never heard of it. Does it still stand?"

"What do you mean by that, Commander Yai?"

Commander can't hold his smile anymore. He points at my chest and says.

"If your swordplay is this shitty, will your whole school not perish in battle? Don't go and fight anyone just to get killed."

He seizes the sword back from my hand and walks away, leaving me seething in the middle of the grassland. In the late morning, they send some servants to get more supplies. I don't go to the village this time as Captain Mun needs to guard the camp.

He grumbles that he has lost the chance to court women in the market, and that he will be lonely for days and might end up losing it and wed a monkey.

In the evening, once they have finished packing the supplies for the trip, it is time for recreation.

Tonight, they don't drink around the fire like the other night because the journey will continue tomorrow morning. And so, they do another activity. They play a game. It is a fighting game requiring especially strength. They are divided into two teams of ten each. Each team will tie the strips of particular colors to their upper arms. There are two high wooden poles with flags of the teams' colors hanging up there. The team that reaches the pole and snatches the flag of the other team first wins.

For fairness' sake, Commander Yai and Commander In will protect the flag poles of different teams.

The game starts in excitement. It is a thrilling, harmless tussle. Both teams charge at one another and wrestle with vigor in the attempts to rip the strips off each other's upper arms. Those who lose their strips are eliminated immediately. The team that gains more strips has more chances to successfully get the flag at the pole. This is freaking fun! The scuffling sound and the continuous roar reverberate. Dust puffs in the air from the fight. The grassland is filled with a cheering sound. We holler with a thrill every time someone yanks a strip of the enemy's arm. Each team gradually loses its members. Eventually, there are only two people left.

If one of them gets the strip first, he will run to the flag pole of the other team, with the flag keeper of the same team joining in to help. The spectators whoop when both of them yank each other's strips off at the same time. It means both teams have lost all teammates and the game ends with a tie. None wins or loses. Nonetheless, Commander Yai refuses to end here.

He grabs the flag pole of his team and hurls it to spike the earth in the middle of the battleground, challenging Commander In to come and get it.

Commander In barks a booming laugh before clasping his flag pole and flinging it to the side of the other.

Both commanders charge towards each other and wrestle away, kicking dust up, not letting the others get a hold of their flags. The cheer is roisterous as if we are watching the fight between a tiger and a bear. You can guess who I am rooting for, right? I clap and shout Commander Yai's name with no shame of how weird it looks for me to cheer for the man who has been treating me coldly.

The sight before my eyes pushes me to ask Captain Mun.

"Commander Yai and Commander In don't look similar at all."

"Understandable," Captain Mun's eyes fix on the tangling fight.

"Commander Yai is the child of the second wife, and Commander In the first."

"Hmm...?" My eyes widen in curiosity.

After some explanation from Captain Mun, I finally understand. Commander Yai and Commander In share a father. Commander In's mother had been married to his father for years but failed to bore a child. At last, she allowed her husband to bring in a mistress who eventually gave birth to the first son, Commander Yai.

However, a year after the birth of Commander Yai, the first and second wives got pregnant at the same time. Commander In's mother passed away two days after giving birth. The second wife, who recently bore a baby girl, Commander Yai's sister, felt terribly sorry for the motherless child and asked for permission to raise Commander In and breastfeed him. Thus, she is both his stepmother and wet nurse.

No surprise these two siblings born from different mothers are close to each other. They were raised together side by side.

Well, it is rather odd that both my lovers are brothers in this period but don't relate to each other whatsoever in another, just two people living in the same city. I stare at Commander Yai. He seems truly entertained by the game. His lips part into a bright smile, and it reminds me of the time he smiled at me. I know I am about to daydream again, though I haven't sipped a drop of alcohol.

...How inappropriate. They are fighting zealously while my mind wanders to his plump, kissable lips that were soft and moist when our lips

touched. I recall the sweet words Khun-Yai showered me with. No matter where fate pulls a trick and tosses me to, his love words remain engraved in my heart. I think of our conversation I remember clearly.

'When did you start loving me...? Was it love at first sight?'

'Not quite. It felt like I had loved you for a long time. I knew I loved you before I met you that day.'

I freeze at the memory. Hold up...He loved me even before he met me. Astonishment rushes all over my body. What if those weren't simply romantic words of a person in love? What if they came from the true feelings in his heart and the meaning was literal?

Khun-Yai had a deep attachment to me even before we met.

That explained why he seemed stunned when my boat glided past the waterfront pavilion for the first time!

This may be my desperation, my struggle to fight against the disappointment, how I can't endure the situation I have been put into without an option and so seek an explanation to support it. Regardless, I can't stop my thoughts.

My whole body gets goosebumps as I mull over the belief of reincarnation that has been passed on since the generation of our great-grandparents. Khun-Yai could have loved me since this period, where he was Commander Yai, and held on to this love to another lifetime. Is a soul indestructible energy like all matter? I don't have the answer to that. But, at this second, I consider another explanation. It is the potential possibilities of our decision. Our actions and decisions today directly affect our future.

It is from the theory of quantum parallel universes, an unproven hypothesis of quantum physics. It states that every second our actions require decision making-to turn left or right, to keep going or stop, or even to pick a dish for a meal-the consequences will be different each time we decide.

If Commander Yai in this era loves me, it will possibly impact Khun-Yai in B.E. 2470 to love me as well.

I might be out of my mind to come up with such a conclusion, but I don't fully believe the theory about how parallel universes are entirely separated. If my cat got bitten to death by a dog this evening, and I traveled back in time to kill the dog in the morning before the incident, the dog I had killed might be a different one from the dog that would bite my cat in the evening. It would create a parallel universe where my cat would survive.

But I can't take it anymore. If there are tens of millions of versions of the parallel universes to be created from this second, I want all of them to lead to Khun-Yai in B.E. 2470 loving me.

At least I want to increase the chances as much as possible. I can't stand the thought of him looking past me without a hint of recollection, of him having no interest in me and never attempting to bring us close and be in love.

This is the hope I will hold on to. Whether the theory of quantum parallel universes and the belief of reincarnation are real or nonsense, the truthful thing of it all is my love for him, and it is powerful enough to drive me to make up my mind about my next move.

I stare at Commander Yai and Commander In wrestling on the ground, none willing to surrender, my heart filled with this immense ambition. Commander Yai... I will steal your heart. In the late morning of the next day, we depart from Baan Thung Hin. I stride across the road bordered with grasslands towards the edge of the woods and the great mountains before us.

The sunlight today is bright and it is gusty. The wind blows the grass on the sides and sends leaves and white pieces of cotton from the stems of some plants flying in the air. Maybe kapok or pussy willow. I look up at the cloudy sky, wondering what the date is.

Ever since I came here, I have been a blind man with no clear perception of anything. Judging from the trees shedding leaves and the morning air that isn't as cool as the first days I got thrown here, I assume I am in the transition from winter to summer. Perhaps it is February. Ha... I have no one to hold hands with in this month of love. I can't help craning my neck forward to hopefully catch a glimpse of someone riding a horse past by.

Since morning, I saw Commander Yai once when he gave everything a final check before the procession started. I will supposedly see him again at noon or in the afternoon or watch him from afar in the evening.

This is not okay. My unrequited love for him is sad.

This passive approach is getting me nowhere. I need to be more proactive. I need to find a way to be closer to him.

If I sit back, smile, and shoot flirting eyes at him from a distance, this lifetime will be over before I know it. But since I don't know much about Commander Yai, I have to probe for more information at once. If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred

battles. I grab a chance during the break in the afternoon and subtly interrogate Captain Mun, my only source of information.

"Um... Captain Mun, do you happen to know what Commander Yai favors?"

Captain Mun gives me a weird look.

"I'm not his wife. How in the world would I know?"

"Huh..? What?" My face goes alarmed, my heart dropping on the ground.

"Does he have a wife?"

"No." Captain Mun shakes his head.

"Why do you ask?"

Damn, Captain Mun. He just gave me a heart attack. Luckily, the answer is not horrible.

"Nothing. Well, Commander Yai kindly freed me from the shackles, so I want to repay him."

Captain Mun thinks for a brief moment and replies,

"Besides selecting and training soldiers, I have never seen him taking an interest in anything."

"Selecting soldiers..."

I mumble, contemplating. Is it like enlistment? What do they do? Is there a physical fitness test or something like that?

"How does he select them, Captain Mun?"

"He groups them and has them spar each other."

That's too much... Given my swordplay, I doubt Commander Yai would select me to join his army. And I don't want to spar with anyone. I shake my head and mutter.

"You all seriously love to fight, huh?"

"How odd of you to say that. Who would fight if not necessary?"

Seeing me blinking stupidly, he explains.

"Our city is not peaceful, Ai-Jom. Though we have submitted to His Majesty King Kham of Chiang Mai, we are far from trusting each other. And we are yet to find out if the Ayutthaya Kingdom is our ally or enemy. If one day they march the army to take our city and Chiang Mai in succession, we will be left with no choice but to die for our homeland."

I am astounded by the new information crashing into me out of nowhere. He just said the Ayutthaya Kingdom... The Ayutthaya Kingdom! My heart drums so fast it nearly pops out of my chest. Does this mean Seehasingkorn adjoin the Ayutthaya Kingdom? Is that why they are scared their city will

be attacked and taken over by them? What time am I in the Ayutthaya Period? I have no idea what time King Kham, the ruler of Chiang Mai, reigned compared with the Ayutthaya Period.

I squeeze my hands, trying to keep my emotions and voice steady.

"Are you saying Seehasingkorn is on good terms with Chiang Mai but holds enmity towards the Ayutthaya Kingdom? Is that so?"

"What kind of good terms were expressed with victimization?"

Captain Mun scoffs, his expression and eyes clouded.

"Seehasingkorn was taken over by Chiang Mai back when Chiang Mai had refused to submit to Hansawadee and decided to be independent. His Majesty King Kham planned to expand his power, so he marched his army to take Seehasingkorn. We have been seized by them since then."

"Did Commander Yai lose in the battle?" I blurt.

"No," Captain Mun lowers his voice.

"Commander Yai wasn't a soldier back then. The father of His Royal Highness Prince Seeharaj led the army himself and got killed by a scythe on his elephant. Having achieved victory, His Majesty King Kham made His Royal Highness Prince Seeharaj the ruler of Seehasingkorn. We have to send tribute to Chiang Mai thrice a year. It has been three years."

I look at Captain Mun clenching his jaw, sympathetic with them. I was born in the era where the countries wage economic warfare, not annexing others with real war. Captain Mun senses the sympathetic anger in my eyes. He continues.

"I am truly distressed. Half of what we harvest must be delivered to them. Worse, they demanded that the two sisters of His Royal Highness must offer themselves to His Majesty King Kham. However, the health of Her Royal Highness Princess Amphan is not in good condition as the frigid weather in Chiang Mai caused pain in Her Royal Highness' chest. His Majesty King Kham stated his command to send Her Royal Highness back to Seehasingkorn to recover, leaving Her Royal Highness Princess Duean Klum there."

As a hostage, huh? I glance at the white long-handled umbrella in the distance. Despite the nobility, the princess suffers in a way commoners like us will never experience. She can't decide on the path of her own life. Everything depends on the good of her city.

"Why sending both? Couldn't His Royal Highness send one?" Captain Mun snarls.

"They feared Seehasingkorn would betray them by forming an alliance with the Ayutthaya Kingdom and offering one princess to the King of Ayutthaya."

"And you have to follow their orders like this?" My voice cracks.

"What can we do?" Captain Mun fumes.

"Think with your toe. If we resisted and got another attack, wouldn't our city be demolished? Our army is not ready. We have to endure it for the time being, but not for long, Ai-Jom. Our trip to Chiang Mai this time has shown us the capacity of their army. Once Commander Ya strengthens our army and prepares enough elephants, horses, and wheels, and once His Royal Highness delivers his order, we will..."

He pauses, realizing he has spoken too much. Captain Mun clears his throat and acts annoyed.

"What's with all these questions? Look... The commander is telling us to get prepared. If you dawdle and get shackled again, I will laugh at your face."

I quicken my pace after Captain without another word, though my mouth is itching to ask more. So, I haven't gained many personal facts about Commmander Yai today, but the other information is worth it. Now I am confident that I have traveled back to the Ayutthaya Period.

The year is unspecified, though. The reason I don't know Seehasingkorn might be my shallow knowledge of history. Or perhaps Seehasingkorn is a small city that has never appeared in any historical records, like many provinces in Thailand hardly mentioned in the records.

The story Captain Mun unintentionally revealed in fury changes my view about Commander Yai in a positive way. He is not an emotionless rock without a heart. He needs to be strict due to the burdens of the city he carries on his shoulders, so he can't afford to lower his guard and fool around. I take back what I said about how he was ferocious like a wild dog.

I crane my neck over the rows of soldiers to the front, but all I see is the back of the carts of the female royal attendants. Commander Yai must be riding his horse over there to keep things in order. I think of his determined eyes and the small smile occasionally appearing when he feels pleased. If I can do something for him, I will.

In the evening, we camp in the woods. It seemingly will be like this for several nights. While I eat next to Captain Mun, an idea pops up in my head. I sweep my eyes over each dish of this meal. Salted beef, chilly paste,

fresh and boiled vegetables. These dishes are simple and downright homely. We are sometimes fed with special menus like simple grilled fish curry in banana leaves, spicy cooked minced meat salad with roasted rice and herb, banana blossom soup, or taro soup, indeed. Still, they taste good but aren't beautiful or delicate.

I set my plate and turn to Captain Mun.

"Captain Mun, do you know Commander Yai's favorite food?"

"I usually see him eat everything. We're soldiers. How picky can we be? We're fine with taros and potatoes."

That's right. But if there are delicious dishes that are pleasant to your eyes and on your tongue, who won't love it? I am not a good cook, but I believe in the Verse of Food and Dessert and what I witnessed when I waited in the kitchen to deliver Khun-Yai's meals to the little house each day.

The plan in my head is taking shape. I will not go as far as to make stuffed flower-shaped dumplings or rice noodles in fish curry sauce. However, Commander Yai will get to taste the sweet mango sticky rice, refreshing watermelon with sweet dried fish flakes, and the killer menu I wish to successfully make: Run Juan curry that will make Commander Yai yearn for more after a taste.

The way to one's heart is through their stomach. I take a deep breath with ambition and determination.

"Captain, will it be all right if I lend the cooks a hand? I want to help out, not just eating and sleeping without doing anything."

Captain Mun responds with a face and eyes that say, 'Whatever.'

After the meal. I head to the cooks. There are both men and women. When I express my intention, a chubby woman and a man step away to discuss something in whispers. They seem to have the power to decide things regarding kitchen work. Soon, the man comes to me.

"You can do anything aside from cooking."

"Oh. Why?"

"This kind of thing must be carried out by skilled cooks. Most are the women.

After a few seconds, I understand. They are afraid I will poison the food. As I am neither an outsider nor an insider, they don't trust me enough to cook for the others.

"You can help us butcher the animals." He pouts in the direction where the animal cages are placed.

I turn my head. One has a living chicken, and another one has a rabbit. I gulp and force a smile.

"Is there anything else I can help with?"

A few minutes later, I trudge back out, feeling bummed. My plan to steal his heart with food is inevitably dropped. Plus, I have to help them chop wood tomorrow because I can't bring myself to kill the chicken or skin the rabbit. Before I reach the area where Captain Mun is building a fire, I spot Commander Yai heading out of his tent to the other way.

He is topless. I look up at the sky, now dark and starry, and it strikes me.. Right, Commander Yai is going to bathe! Hmm... The chance emerges out of nowhere! I march towards the cart I kept my clothes in and fumble for the clean ones, afraid I won't be able to tach up with Commander Yai. I don't have that many chances to chat with him, so I can't miss it. When I have found the new set of clothes, I shout to Captain Mun.

"Captain Mun, I'll go bathe."

Then, I sprint as though being chased by a buffalo in the direction Commander Yai has gone. I am not scared to be lost as I have seen the others heading this way. There must be a pond or a river, considering they always choose to camp near the natural sources of water.

After a few meters, I hear conversations. I follow the sound and soon stumble upon the broad stream winding down from the mountain. A group of servants is scrubbing their bodies and chattering away. I take a quick look because I have no desire to observe anyone's things, but Commander Yai is not present there.

I suppose he wants to soak his body alone in silence.

I weigh in my mind which way to go. Down or up the stream? I decider to go upstream. If it were me, I would go there. I finally see him. Commander Yai swims by himself, submerging under the water like fish, a huge and remarkably strong one. He surfaces after remaining under the water for some time. He runs his big hand through his raven hair to the back, making it stick to the nape of his neck.

I restrain myself from watching to save my plan. I have seen everything anyway. I have done even more than seeing. I tiptoe away carefully, avoiding making unwanted noises. Fortunately, it is a moonless night. The light is dim, and any noises I make are concealed by the bugs chirping. I

have gone far enough to be out of his sight and wade into the nicely flowing water. I sink myself waist-deep before slowly immersing my whole body and emerging again.

Splash...splash

I tread water loudly on purpose to let him know someone is here. I swim around like I am enjoying myself in the water, waiting until he is aware someone is bathing nearby. I scrub my skin roughly, clear my throat, and start singing to lure my target.

"My heart is free. Will someone care to take it? I am giving you a chance to own my heart."

It works... The splashing in his direction goes quiet, replaced with a rustling sound near the bank. Commander Yai must be heading this way. I hide my smile and continue singing.

"My heart is free like a pretty building. If you don't book it, you won't get a room. If you're slow, someone will take my heart. If you miss the chance, you will regret it."

I draw out the note to spice it up. I choose this song specifically for him. Commander Yai finally shows up. He crosses his arms over his chest and leans against the tree on the bank, landing his gaze on me. I pretend to turn around and see him for the first time.

"Oh...Commander Yai, were you bathing over here? I didn't see you."

Let me get back at him for accusing me of peeping at him when he practiced sword fighting.

"Were you peeping at me?"

"Peeping at you?" He sounds both amused and annoyed.

"Is there anything pleasant to look at?"

"If you look carefully, there are lots of pleasant things to see, Commander," I say plainly.

"Well, you were standing in the dark, not making a sound. How am I supposed to know what you were thinking?"

"What would I have thought if not it was irksome? You were complaining so loud. Even the birds and rats deep in the woods could hear it."

"I wasn't complaining. I was singing," I argue in frustration.

"Don't Seehasingkornian people sing? Do you all only spar? Singing while bathing is a way to relieve stress, Commander Yai. Try it if you don't believe me."

He shakes his head.

"Useless."

And he strides off without looking back. Oh. Hey, is he just going to leave like this? It is hard to find a chance to converse with him. I move up to follow Commander Yai but realize I am naked. I want to talk, not seduce him. Still, I would fail to catch up with him anyway if I ran after him once dressed up. All I can do is crane my neck stupidly. I think of the last word he said before leaving.

'.....Useless.'

I bite my lip in contemplation. What did he mean?

Was my suggestion useless? Or did he try to say I was useless? The thought infuriates me. How dare he say I was useless?! If he wanted to build houses, I would design every building and even supervise the construction for him right away. But we are traveling in the woods. I don't have a chance to show off my skills! This is freaking maddening. Commander Yai...you snobby prick. Just you wait!

The next day, I wake up before dawn and march with determination to the group of people building a fire to make breakfast. The man I talked to yesterday was Lom. He seems surprised to see me.

"I'm here to chop wood as I promised yesterday," I say firmly.

I have never wanted to chop wood this much in my life. Lom looks nervous that I am talking to him. He answers, nonetheless.

"Now? We usually prepare firewood by dusk."

"I'll do it now. You all go on and cook. I'll take care of chopping wood," I say.

"And when dusk falls, you will have firewood ready for supper and the soldiers can build fires straight away."

Acknowledging my resolution, Lom relents. A few minutes later, large pieces of wood are scattered on the ground, waiting for me to chop them into smaller pieces for kindling. I spot Commander Yai standing by the horses tied to the trees. He is an early bird. I know that.

I turn my attention to the matter at hand and grab a piece of wood to set it on the stump. I roll up my drawn-up cloth and grip the ax tightly. Open your eyes and watch, Commander. I am not as useless as you think. I lift the ax and fling it down with all my might. There is a 'THUD!' when the cutting edge splits the wood into half, corresponding to the force I put in. I look at my work with teary eyes.

Ohh...My shoulders burn.

I grit my teeth and chop another piece of wood without so much as a glance at Commander Yai. I focus on battling with the pile of wood. Finally, a big stack of firewood stands tall as I wished. I return the ax to Lom with a smile, my whole body in pain. Throughout the journey today, I feel grateful every time they take a break. I overdid it with the wood chopping this morning, resulting in my constantly aching body. However, I force myself to keep walking like the others, as if nothing has happened. When the procession eventually halts to set a camp, I let out a sigh of relief that this time has come.

While the others carry out their tasks, I climb up on the luggage cart parked far away from the rest and lean on a pile of blankets in exhaustion. I watch a group of servants advancing into the woods to set animal traps. Even though they have rice and dried food on the supply carts, they always find more fresh food during the trip. As I am about to drift into dreamland in weariness, I get startled by a shout.

"Hey! Catch it!"

I bob up my head and shift towards the back of the cart. The clamor goes on.

"Block its way!"

"The boar got in. Block its way now!"

When I stick my head out to take a look, I am completely awake. A boar is darting this way with some servants at its heels. Despite its chubby body, it is fast. This boar is not fully grown, its body covered in rough, stiff black hair, its fangs curving out of the corners of its mouth. My eyes go wide when a running servant points at me.

"Hey! Block its way. Don't let it escape!"

Panicking, I look back and forth helplessly. At the same time, Commander Yai parts the curtain door and appears from the tent. Fucking boar! Why are you coming this way?! Nevertheless, I can't let this boar slip away, not when Commander Yai is watching! I can't let him believe I am useless anymore. In a split second, I make up my mind, leap out of the cart, and trip over because my knees buckle. Not giving up, I grasp a rock on the ground, push myself up, and dash towards that damn boar.

"HWAAAK!!!"

I roar and throw everything I can grab within my arm's length at the boar. Rocks, firewood, and so on.

BONG!

A ladle hits the boar's head with great accuracy. It is not enough to take it down, but the boar loses balance and wobbles into the thick growth of grass. Three men jump out of the bushes with spears in their hands. They rush in and stop the boar a few minutes later. Whoops echo across the camp joyfully and triumphantly. I guess they will feed on tasty boar meat for several meals onwards.

Tears well up in my eyes, not from delight but the pain spreading all over my body. At night, I sit by the fire with Captain Mun and the night sentries, my body full of bruises. Many of the men smile at me in a friendlier manner now. Captain Mun is called for shortly after and comes back with a big plate of grilled boar meat. Captain Mun passes the plate to me and says.

"It's yours."

"Hmm?"

"Commander Yai said you could have the whole plate."

I take the large plate in my hands. The meat is freshly grilled and sliced nicely on the plate, looking appetizing and aromatic-smelling. I look at it, downhearted. Poor me... I fought my ass off for him but got rewarded with one plate of boar meat. Tonight, I toss and turn next to Captain Mun on the cart.

A way to be closer to Commander Yai demands this much blood, sweat, and tears? Will I be knocked out before I win his heart? No...I don't believe I have reached the dead-end. Humans evolved from the Stone Age to the modern era with intelligence.

We are Homo sapiens, the genius species, and we don't surrender to obstacles easily. At last, I have a plan. This plan is called, 'Dig a hold to catch fish. In this case, I will call it, 'Dig a hole to catch the commander,' because I have brought upon this plan especially for him.

I crack a smug smile in the dark. I can kill two birds with one stone. This plan, besides being the method for me to be closer to Commander Yai, might convince the others to open their hearts and accept me as their friend. Clenching my fists, I elatedly shout.

"Yes!" and groan because my body aches.

In the morning, while everyone packs their stuff to resume the journey, I walk the other way to collect stones around the area. I carefully select the preferable sizes and shapes. Not long after, I have all that I need. During the day, I spend my break time working on my invention. Each stone is partly

painted in black marks to be distinguishable. I choose a piece of cloth and draw a pattern of squares. Finally, I have everything I need.

This is equipment for playing chess. When the sunlight fades and the cool breeze takes place before sunset, as many of the others have completed their tasks and are relaxing from all the exhaustion from the whole-day trip, I carry my equipment to Captain Mun, my first player. He doesn't seem too interested at first but still plays with me to kill time. But, after the first game, Captain Mun falls head-first into my trap. He asks for another round right after supper.

The second game is followed by the third, the fourth, and the fifth. The fun escalates every time.

The others begin to be interested and gather to spectate. I explain the rules and how each stone moves differently-pawns, bishops, rooks, knights, and kings. Soon, they start asking to play, and I welcome them with a smile. This is what I have been waiting for. In three days, the popularity of the game skyrockets, spreading like mold on spoiled food. I have become the person accepted by every group, like the chess master with tons of pupils.

They play chess whenever they have a chance. During the break, after meals. They even bathe fast just to play chess quicker. No more yawning and dozing on night sentry duty. They play chess with exhilaration. Both players and spectators are entertained and stay awake without the need to rely on caffeine. Eventually, my time has come. After I have finished my meal and bathing, as I fold my clothes and Captain Mun plays chess with the other guys by the fire, a soldier comes to me.

"Commander Yai called for you," he says.

"To where?" I ask.

"At his tent. He also said to bring your chess cloth."

"Okay. On it."

I reply evenly like this is no big deal. When I turn around and know no one is watching, my lips twitch and crack the smile I hope no one sees. Joy spreads all over the pores of my skin. Finally, the big fish has swum into the hole I dug. I pull a chess set I have prepared out of a wrapped cloth, biting my lip to stop myself from smiling like a pervert.

...Ha.

Commander Yai... You are the one inviting me to your tent this time.

Chapter 23: Even Sober, I'm Drunk like a Fool

I head to Commander Yai's tent with a chess set as told. I walk past the servants and soldiers gathering to play chess. Many of them ask me to join in, but I smile and decline.

When I open the curtain door, Commander Yai is already waiting inside. He sits cross-legged on the reed mat. The lit lantern is set farther by his side. His swords lie on the head of his bed as they have always been.

"Sit." he orders.

I settle in front of him, leaving a big gap between us.

Commander Yai fixes his keen eyes on me. It makes me drop my gaze to his chest, afraid to meet his eyes.

Commander Yai's bare chest is brown from the sunlight. I flick my eyes to his arm. The tattoo from his shoulder that runs down to his wrist reminds me of the guardsmen in the reign of King Narai the Great. Even though Seehasingkorn doesn't submit to the Ayutthaya Kingdom right now, judging by the attire, accessories, and appliances, I think their culture is influenced by the surrounding countries. The way Thai culture has been influenced by several countries since the old days, such as Khmer, Mon, Laos, Myanmar, and even China and India.

"They said you played with stones."

"Chess," I say.

"You can call it a chessboard since we're supposed to play on a board as it is more comfortable to move the pieces. I use a piece of cloth because it's all I can find.

Would you like me to explain the rules, Commander Yai?"

When he nods, I hurriedly position what I have brought. I roll out the chess cloth between us and arrange the white and black stones on opposite sides of the fabric. Sixteen stones each in line. Two rows in their positions on my side and Commander Yai's.

My heart flutters when his lips curl up as I put a Knight down. I picked a long stone and painted the tip to resemble a knight.

"These stones must be divided by colors to mark the pieces of two players. We call them chess pieces. They all look dissimilar due to their moves."

I point at a stone.

"This one is small and round. I call it a pawn. Each player has eight pawns. They move vertically forward one square like this."

I slide a pawn forward one square. Commander Yai nods quietly. I explain the rules and the moves of each piece. Pawns move vertically forward and capture one square diagonally. Rooks move horizontally or vertically any number of squares.

Knights move in an 'L' shape and can jump over other pieces. Queens move diagonally. Bishops move one space diagonally and one space forward. Kings move one square in any direction.

"Kings are the most important pieces, moving one square in any direction. You need to be careful because the kings are the equivalent of the supreme commanders. If the kings are captured, it means the supreme commanders are killed. No matter how many pieces you have left on the board, you lose,"

I say.

Commander Yai appears amazed by the rules. He studies each piece in contemplation for a moment and points out.

"It's a military strategy."

"Right, as you said." I smile at him.

"A brain exercise. Enriching your mind."

"You know of this?"

The way Commander Yai slightly narrows his eyes catches me off guard.

"Oh.. Wait, Commander Yai," I pipe.

"It's just a game... I mean, it's a play for entertainment. Please don't view it negatively and assume that I am a spy who is actually a military strategist or something like that. I don't possess such intelligence. I'm a mere commoner, and my city doesn't thirst for annexation!"

"I have not said a word. Why are you flustered?"

Commander Yai sounds simultaneously amused and vexed.

"As to your intelligence, I learned of it when you stupidly charged towards the board."

"Stupidly?" I repeat his word. "Stupidly or swiftly? Please state it clearly, Commander Yai."

"Stupidly," he stresses.

I stare at him, wanting to cuss but the cat has gotten my tongue. A wave of emotions overflows in my chest. I feel hurt and upset. Has he any idea I did it all for him?

"You're right," I snap at my pitiful self.

"I'm stupid as you said. Smart people wouldn't pull off something like that, would they?"

He goes quiet for a moment and continues.

"Why didn't you take the spear? Should I call you smart for doing what you did? Had those servants not shown up, would you have knocked the boar down by bumping into it?"

I press my lips together and dip my chin, not wanting to see his face. He has a point, but I don't want to listen to only the reprimand. Ever since I met him in this lifetime, he has never once spoken of me in a positive way.

Commander Yai mumbles.

"Your one good trait is your blind boldness."

I bob my head up.

"Right, I think you're brave," Commander Yai stresses and shakes his head wearily.

"Now, quit making a face like you're going to cry. It irritates me."

I nod quickly, not knowing why his small compliment chases away more than half of my bitterness. I focus on the chess game before me and start it by letting him move first. I play casually as the experienced one, whereas Commander Yai takes his time to decide on each move longer than me. He is a quick learner. But since this is his first game, I have the upper hand.

"Oh...Oh, if you make such a reckless move, you'll lose your piece to me, Commander Yai."

I capture his rook with my knight and place it a bit loud for satisfaction's sake...Hmm? Are you still going to call me stupid? Commander Yai grunts, annoyed to lose his rook. He touches his chin with his fingers and studies the pieces on the chess cloth more intently.

I grab the chance to observe his face. Commander Yai's eyelashes are thick and long. Too bad they aren't curled. Otherwise, his eyes will be more loving and sweeter. He will be a commander with pretty eyelashes. In all honesty, even if Commander Yai and Khun-Yai are similar, I notice subtle differences now that I am looking at his facial features up close.

Commander Yai is sharply handsome. He has a clearly defined facial structure as a Thai man in the past, his nose long, his eyebrows bushy, his eyes keen and fierce. On the contrary, Khun-Yai's facial structure is more delicate, especially the eyes he got from Khun-Kae. They are clear and dreamily affectionate.

A while later, I have cornered Commander Yai..

"Checkmate." I smile, closing his move with my knight.

"I defeated you."

Commander Yai hums in his throat in admission while I have this smug grin on my face. He demands another round immediately, and I don't decline.

There is not much to say. He has lost again in the second round because our experience is not on par. I don't go easy on him at all. Why would I? He is better than me in almost all aspects regarding survival skills for this era. Let me have one thing to balance out his superiority.

In the third round, Commander Yai begins to have a hang of it. He is more prudent in fixing the situation, and we end the game with a tie partly because of my carelessness. I got distracted many times. When the round is over, I decide to call it a day.

"Commander Yai, I feel sleepy," I tell him.

"I will excuse myself to rest on my cart now."

Commander Yai frowns like I said something wrong.

He obviously wants to keep playing.

"Why are you sleepy this soon?"

"I just am, Commander Yai. It's tiring to use your brain for a long time."

I yawn and cast my eye on his bed, the thick mattress atop the carpet.

"Or would you like me to keep playing until I fall asleep in here? Your call."

He answers without thinking.

"Go and sleep in you on your cart."

I want to roll my eyes but hold back. Why is he so protective of himself? What can I do besides looking? If he could conceive from getting stared at, that would be a different story. I gather the pieces into the chess cloth and shift back. Before I exit through the curtain door, Commander Yai speaks.

"Wait."

I spin and see him sitting on the mattress. He clasps something in his hand and tosses it to me. I catch it and have a look. It is a ceramic bottle

shaped like a tiny vase.

"An essential oil for sore muscles," he says.

Noting my confused expression, he resumes.

"Apply it on where it aches."

My foolish face turns bright in an instant. I hold the ceramic bottle in my palm like a valuable object.

"Cool...I mean, thank you so much, Commander Yai. I will use it well. I will keep rubbing... and rubbing it on my body every day."

Commander Yai looks so done as if he feels like he is talking to a crazy man, and he waves me away. Tonight, I sleep on the cart with Captain Mun as usual, my heart not as heavy as before. I don't think things will go smoothly and pleasantly like when I got swept into Khun-Yai's era, but I at least want this hope for my heart to hold on to.

On the following night, I, and my chess set, are requested to be present at Commander Yai's tent again. I bring a special feature with me this time. I have been thinking all day that it will help me gain more benefits from the situation, given that Commander Yai is not as experienced in playing chess as me and has a chance to be defeated several rounds.

It is liquor from Baan Thung Hin that I asked for from the supplies. My excuse was I would serve it to Commander Yai.

No... I am not planning to get him drunk as I have learned that he is a heavyweight. I simply want to lift his spirits and make him relaxed. It might break down the walls between us and we can open our hearts to each other more.

Commander Yai is already waiting for me. He raises his eyebrow a little when he notices the bamboo tube of liquor in my hand.

"The loser drinks a shot."

"It's not fun if we only play chess. Let's make a bet," I say.

Commander Yai glares at me as if to pierce through my skull and read my thoughts.

Scared, I mumble out.

"Well...If you're not okay with it, we don't have to do it."

"Make it two," he says.

"One shot is pointless."

Whoa...Okay. I sit opposite Commander Yai, roll out the chess cloth, and arrange the pieces. I glance at him and pour the liquor into the shot glass beside the fabric to remind him of the loser's punishment.

The game starts with me. Commander Yai looks ready for the chess battle today. He no longer randomly moves the pieces like the other night. He is more discreet and better at reading the enemy's next moves, though he takes long at times.

I peek at his face whenever chances arise. Look at him... adorably frowning. I want to massage his brow with my fingers to ease it, but I doubt I will receive a good reaction.

"Hmm...Are you sure you're going to do that?" I tease him when he hesitates to move his piece.

"Think wisely, Commander Yai. If you are careless or make a mistake, I will...capture you."

I crack a smug smile at my blatant flirtation. I have always wanted to do this and just gotten a chance to do it. Yet, he can predict my move. He sacrifices his bishop to steer his king away from my piece.

Commander Yai gazes up and grins, his eyes sparkling in the flickering lantern light.

"I won't let you capture me so easily, Jom."

My heart falters like a leaf blown by the wind, but it is not the wind that blows my heart. It is his smile. I clear my throat to shake off this fluttering feeling and concentrate on something else.

"Your ring is beautiful. I've never seen a ring such as this one."

Commander Yai eyes his ring and turns them back to the chess game. It is a ring with a lion- head case holding a misty white-grey gemstone between its fangs.

"I got it during the Ban Rahaeng battle. His Royal Highness Prince Seeharaj gifted it to me for achieving victory."

"Ban Rahaeng..." I mumble, thinking.

"I don't know this city."

"Back then, I volunteered to be the captain of the breakthrough unit to fight against the Myanmar army that attempted to seize the cities along the way from Seehasingkorn to Ban Rahaeng. They hoped to annex from the Tak Kingdom to the Avutthaya Kingdom."

I halt, my eyes widening at the unexpected information.

"Does Seehasingkorn border the Tak Kingdom?"

Commander Yai hums a response in his throat lightly, his eyes locked on the chess cloth, as excitement spreads all over my body.

"And...have you ever waged war against the Tak Kingdom?"

I try to steady my voice.

"Who is the ruler of the Tak Kingdom? Is it King Taksin?"

This time, Commander Yai raises his eyes at me.

"I have not heard of that name. Though Seehasingkorn borders the Tak Kingdom, we have never waged war against each other. Maha Thammaracha of the Ayutthaya Kingdom has never attacked us either. Your question is rather odd. What do you know?"

...This is enough.

I suppress this surge of emotions in my chest. If the Tak Kingdom isn't yet ruled by King Taksin and the king of Ayutthaya in this period is Maha Thammaracha, it means I am in the Late Ayutthaya Period, years before the second fall of the Ayutthaya Kingdom.

I gulp and force a smile at Commander Yai to cover my suspicious behavior.

"Nothing." I shake my head.

"I suppose I got things mixed up. You know I'm from another land, not anywhere around here."

Even if he is visibly doubtful, the topic is dismissed because I distract him with the chess game. It works. Now he needs to fight against my offense, like, if he so much as blinks, he will lose.

The first round ends with a tie because I have not recovered from the discovery of the period in the past world I traveled back to. Commander Yai and I drink a shot each since no one wins. I wince, remembering how strong the liquor is. Just a sip burned my throat. And now I down a shot. I try to pull myself together before playing the next round, with much success.

I have not entirely lost my consciousness.

"Hold up," I shoot, noticing Commander Yai's piece has magically changed its place when it is not his turn.

"The piece was over there just now. Did you move it, Commander Yai?"

He refuses to admit.

"Were your eyes playing tricks?"

"No," I object, confident. I was going to capture that piece, and it moved out of the blue.

"I turned to scratch my arm, but when I turned back, it changed its place. It definitely moved. I know it."

He rubs his nose suspiciously.

...Goodness, Commander Yai cheated!

"Whoa... Commander Yai, you can't just cheat outright like this," I cry out, unyielding.

"You lost this round!"

"Be it, then. I don't mind." He tsks like it is no big deal.

"In battle, Jom, listen, though you are taught a certain way, you can't be wholly faithful to it. If you aim for victory, you need to scheme."

...Unbelievable!

"Quit making excuses, Commander Yai! That is war. This is chess, something we play for fun. They're different, and you cheated. Drink four shots, or I will tell everyone you cheated!"

With that, I get on one knee to get up, cup my hands over my mouth, and shout out the curtain door.

"Everyone...everyone, listen. Commander Yai cheated at chess."

Commander Yai grabs me immediately. He yanks my body to his chest and covers my mouth with his hand. My eyes widen in shock. My temple touches his cheek, my back on his chest, while his arm tightens around me to keep me in place.

"Why in the world were you shouting that?"

He forces his voice out and tilts his head down to talk to me, so close that my heart pounds.

"All right, I will drink six shots for you, so shut your mouth."

I nod in agreement. Commander Yai withdraws his hand and arm. I place my hands on the ground, trying to breathe, and shift my body out of his embrace. My nose brushes Commander Yai's neck, and I just happen to inhale at the moment. I shamelessly sniff his neck, but it is instinctive, not planned. If I had a moment to think, I would restrain myself from doing it. After smelling his scent for less than a minute, I go insane. I can no longer concentrate. Does Commander Yai use perfume distilled from cannabis leaves? Why does it overwhelm and captivate my heart so much? I can't even aim for a tie in this round, let alone corner him like in the previous game. As a result of being charmed by the scent of a warrior, I lose to Commander Yai in the second game and have to chug two shots as we bet. It doesn't benefit me in any way. I feel dizzy, my vision starting to blur.

I am totally defeated in the third round and drink another two shots. My consciousness floats like smoke, and I can only watch Commander Yai move his hand to walk his pieces without putting on the defensive. My pieces are continuously captured, and he will soon checkmate me.

"Jom, why don't you cleverly fix your moves?"

Commander Yai puts on a mocking smile.

"I'm waiting to see how you're going to capture my king."

I look at his face. How can someone be so attractive even when taunting? His lips are beautiful. His eyes are beautiful. I cast my eyes on his hands... How crazy. Even those big hands are beautiful. I gaze at Commander Yai's hands longingly, desiring to touch him the way I used to. Commander Yai is clueless that he is seducing me. I start breathing heavily, trying my absolute best to hold myself back. No...I'm at my limit! I grab his wrists. Commander Yai startled and shakes my hands off right away.

"Hey! What are you doing?!" he bellows.

I don't give up. My determination is frighteningly strong. I lunge forward to clasp his wrists again, my knees landing on the chess cloth and knocking down the pieces. I try to grasp his arms, but Commander Yai pushes me off and stands up. My body falls down his waist to his legs. I hold his thigh tightly like a leech.

"Let go of my leg!"

"No!" I shout, my eyes shut.

"No matter if it's this lifetime or the next, I'll never let go of you!"

"What nonsense are you talking about?! What's with your damn lifetime?"

He tries to shake me off but fails.

"I'm not crazy. I'm speaking the truth! Have you not been wondering why I already knew you when you had never met me? I'll tell you. We used to be together. You were my lover in another lifetime. Even though you don't remember me in this lifetime, I can't forget you. I love you...I love you so much my heart is about to explode. Please don't be so mean to me, Commander Yai."

"Ai-Jom, let go of me now."

"Love me first."

"Ugh! Damn you!"

At the last failed attempt to stay conscious, I think I am being dragged out of the tent. I hear people yelling. My body moves obediently to where I am hauled to, and then I completely black out.

In the morning, I open my eyes on the luggage cart as I always did. I blink and squint in the sunlight so painfully that I need to rub my eyes with

my hand to ease the discomfort. My head feels heavy, like a bunch of rocks is inside instead of a brain.

When I force myself to raise my head, I jump. Captain Mun lies on his side with his head resting on his palm, staring at me.

"Ugh, Captain Man, you scared me."

My voice is croaky due to my parched throat. My whole body is sore.

"Hmm."

Captain Mun nods and turns to pass me a bamboo tube of water.

"Drink this."

I sip the water until I feel better and return the tube to him with thanks.

"You were drunk like a fool last night," says Captain Mun.

I avert my eyes in shame and attempt to clear my way through the pile of rocks in my head to recall what happened last night. I remember some situations when I played chess with Commander Yai. I recollect losing to him repeatedly and drinking shot after shot. What happened after that was in a blur because I was drunk. My heart sinks when I vaguely reckon that I clung to Commander Yai's leg. I am not sure, though.

"And I...Ah, what did I do?"

"You blacked out and talked in your sleep. I had to carry you out of the commander's tent."

"Hmm...?" I suddenly feel sober. Did I get drunk, fall asleep during the game, and have a wild dream? It was embarrassing but not as bad as what I am scared of.

"I didn't say something strange while sleeping, did I, Captain Mun?"

"No." Captain Mun shakes his head.

Oh.. What a relief. I was scared.

"But before you were knocked out and I had to drag you out of Commander Yai's tent, I unmistakably heard, when the commander pried you off his leg and pushed you to me, you saying you loved him."

.....

.....

...This is a disaster.

My life is doomed...

Chapter 24: Jom's Tears

Noting my stunned, pale face, Captain Mun pats my shoulder.

"It's no big deal, Jom. I also love and respect the commander with all my heart, though I never whine about it like a madman the way you did."

"Huh...?"

I stare at Captain Mun in confusion for a second. When I understand his meaning, I quickly play along.

"Oh... Right, I love and respect him so much. He's like.. my guardian angel."

"Your guardian angel?" Captain Mun looks amused.

"Whatever. Just don't be drunk and hold on to your guardian angle like that again, or you will get us all in trouble. Commander Yai has forbidden everyone to give you liquor. Otherwise, that person will be punished."

I gulp.

"I won't do it again, Captain Mun. I will never drink liquor again. Not even a sip."

As Captain Mun carries out his routine duty, I spend this time heading to the bank to reflect on my action. It takes a while before my brain can process anything. The scenes from last night gradually replay in my head one by one. It looks normal at first, but after Commander Yai grabbed me and covered my mouth, not a single scene is good.

This is.. disastrous.

I rub my face, ashamed. What evil spirit spurred me to do such a thing? Ever since I was born, I have never thought I would fall on the ground and hug someone's leg like that. What would Commander Yai think of what happened? Would he see it as a hilarious action of a madman or feel displeased that I claimed to be his lover from another lifetime despite being a man? I stick out my head to look at my reflection on the clear water.

They say the sons that resemble their mothers will be lucky, free of misfortunes. I am the spitting image of my mom. My grandma is a northern woman married to a central man, so my mom has big, round eyes, an oval-shaped face, and cute, small lips and nose. Only my eyes are slightly

different from hers. I have double eyelids, but the tails of my eyes are long because my dad is half-Chinese. If I am this similar to my mom this much, why am I so unfortunate? It is no use blaming fate. I heave a sigh and scoop water with a small dipper to brush my teeth. Oddly enough, I have become accustomed to this daily routine.

The natural water in the woods is cleaner and more refreshing than tap water. The toothbrush is made of a twig of the rough brush smashed flat by the end. I dip it in salt and brush my teeth with it. When I chew guava leaves like the other guys after that, my breath smells fresh all day. I finish washing up and stay there, watching two doves perching on the branch side by side. One of them flies down to peck a bug and soars back up to flirt with the other. It probably didn't try to make its lover drunk last night. That explains why they are still lovey-dovey in the morning.

What do I do now? Do I try to get out of it by playing dumb? Do I go to Commander Yai and apologize for getting so wasted I committed something awfully embarrassing? I confessed my feelings and begged him to love me back... How the hell could I do that? I yank my hair in frustration. I had been hiding my feelings and never once brazenly expressed them. Alcohol doesn't change you. It reveals your true colors.

I have to untangle the knot I tie and accept the consequences of my action. I must face Commander Yai even if I might be sniped at or punished to keep my distance three meters away from him at all times.

Things go on typically this morning. Captain Mun and his friends chatter away, not forgetting to bring up the incident where I got wasted in Commander Yai's tent during their spirited conversation.

"See, Ai-Jom, if you crave liquor next time, drink it secretly behind his back," one of them tells me.

"Put some in a small bottle and hook it in your waistband, away from the others' eyes. Don't tell anyone I suggested this."

I smile meekly, accepting every tease coming my way. Go on... Have at it. I can't stop them anyway. Before my bummed smile disappears, my eyes catch Commander Yai riding his horse past by. He turns in my direction and our eyes meet. My heart drums, hesitating about what to do. Should I offer him an apologetic smile? But Commander Yai looks away.

I stand there dumbly until the person walking behind bumps into me.

"Ugh! Why did you stop?" he barks.

"Sorry," I say, distracted. "I spaced out."

"The sun is nearly rising above our heads and you're still not sober?"

The other guys laugh merrily. I don't find it funny this time, worried about Commander Yai's behavior just now. Is he seriously mad at me? The thought drains strength from my limbs. Have I circled back to the start, where Commander Yai showed no amity to me? Back then, he was suspicious of me. But now, he might hate me for real. My anxiety grows as time passes. Finally, I have found a chance during our afternoon break. I stride to Commander Yai when he adjusts the horse saddle alone.

"Commander Yai, could I have a word with you?" I ask softly.

Commander Yai turns to me but says nothing.

I try to brave up. I need to heal the damage I caused last night.

"Well...About last night. I know you must be angry at me, but I want to explain the reason for my action. I never meant for it to happen. I drank too much and spoke nonsense without thinking. I'm mad at myself as well. As to.. It"

"I'm not angry," Commander Yai cuts in, his face deadpan, almost empty.

"If you're worried that I will punish you, don't be. Return to your position. It's about time to set out."

I can't utter a word and just look at him speechlessly. I have braced myself to be reprimanded with offensive remarks, not to receive this coldness as a response. I swallow the bitterness down my throat. My explanation is pointless now. An apology will be enough. I clench my fists and deliver it.

"I'm sorry."

Commander Yai nods but gives no reply. He puts his foot on the stirrup and mounts the horse. This is worse than I expected. I suppress my feelings and decide to spin and walk off, but I halt after three steps. My heart feels so heavy that I nearly lose my fight, yet I refuse to let things end this way. I speak with my back on him.

"I apologize for my inappropriate action. But, as to what I said about us being lovers in another lifetime, I meant it."

I hold my breath and head away without looking back at him again. Time passes with my crestfallen heart. Even the atmosphere is duller than ever. The sky is smudged with dark clouds and the wind is gusty. Eventually, the procession halts to make a camp as we fear the possible downpour. During the hours of the afternoon trip after my conversation with Commander Yai, I reflect over and over on what happened.

The more I ponder, the more mistakes I pinpoint. I try to be in his shoes. If a stranger came into my life and did all the bizarre things I had done, how would I feel? The answer isn't a positive one. In the evening, Commander Yai doesn't call for me as the other days, and it only intensifies this pain and the feeling of being a failure of mine. I force myself to eat a few bites during the meal before moving to the area they will build a fire later tonight. They are happy that the wind blows the clouds away to rain somewhere else. Therefore, their evening activities remain unchanged.

A while later, seeing the others enjoy playing chess, I plod to the line of carts but don't get on one of them. I continue walking to the great tree not far away, stepping on the dry leaves piling up from the wind in the evening. I flop by the tree trunk and gaze up at the moon in the sky. The crescent moon glows behind the curtain of thin clouds. I look at it and sigh.

The moon is the same one I have seen in the world I was born and raised in and the world I lived in with Khun-Yai. It stays past every era together with our world and possibly always gazes down at us. If the moon could talk, I would ask what it had witnessed. Did it ever stumble across me having a happy ending somewhere? And all the feelings I have been suppressing pour out.

I pull my knees to my chest and drape my arms around them. I clench my jaw to stop the hotness behind my eyes. Weakness is something I never wish to encounter, but it now overpowers my mind in a way that I can't put up a fight against. In the past hours, I reflected on a lot of things and discovered some facts I had overlooked. Before, I thought I had it together, that I could live here without losing my mind or falling into death. But no. I was in denial. My heart has shattered since the day I was forced to part from Khun-Yai and shoved to this place.

I was knocked down and never got back up even to this very second. The things I told myself to think and do are merely the struggle to survive each day.

I am utterly weak and confused right now, not even sure about my feelings. I feel scared, sad, and yearn for strength and hope. I want myself to be able to live without falling apart into tiny pieces. And the most terrifyingly fragile feeling out of all is the feeling of missing someone. I am scared to miss Khun-Yai.

It is the part that consoles and torments me at the same time.

I am scared to keep thinking of him looking at me on the road edged with rubber trees. I am scared that I won't be able to endure it anymore. I know Khun-Yai will wait to reunite with me again, and he actually succeeds on a certain day in his world. It was the day Chiang Mai was shrouded in smog in my era.

The day I headed out from the little house to my car before starting the engine to drive to the nightclub by the Ping River. Khun-Yai saw me and called my name, but what I did was walk away as fast as possible. Nothing hurts my heart more than missing the person forever out of my reach. I can't do anything for him despite knowing how much pain he has to go through. And right now, both Khun-Yai and Commander Yai are out of my reach.

As to Commander Yai, I held on to him as my anchor and used him out of my own selfishness, as if he was a log floating down the river that I clasped to save myself from drowning. I viewed him as the only tangible hope in the world unknown to me, as the person I wished to rely on. That was all I thought about, and I did everything without considering how he truly felt.

I prop my face on my arms and try to hold my tears. The leaves fall on my shoulders and around my body. It hits me that there is no wind besides the occasional, barely unperceivable breeze. I raise my head from my arms to find out the leaves only fell around me. look up right away....Commander Yai.

He is leaning against the upper trunk on the branch above my head, a small clump of leaves left in his hand. He blows them down on me. I stand up, feeling awkward now that I know I chose the wrong place.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know you were here first,"

I mumble and spin rapidly.

"I'll be off now."

Before I take a step, he speaks with his low, hoarse voice.

"You can recall your incarnations?"

I halt, too afraid to turn around. I hear him jumping down from the tree and walking on the dry leaves towards me.

"Answer me." Commander Yai's voice is so close.

I slowly turn around and muster my courage to lift my eyes at him. Commander Yai rests his gaze on me, waiting for my answer. His expression is not as moody as during the daytime. He looks solemn, his eyes gleaming like jet.

"I don't know how to put it simply for you,"

I whisper.

Not that I feel intimidated by him, but my mind is exhausting.

"Explain it how you prefer."

I nod and drop my gaze, trying to think of words that people in this era can comprehend.

"I don't live in the same era as yours. I'm from somewhere you never know of. I came with the river and the fog with unknown sources the way you saw for yourself the day I emerged from the cascade in the cave."

"What purpose did you come here for?"

"I have no idea," I say bitterly.

"I was swept away forcefully from where I had been. Last time, it brought me to another place, and there I met you in another lifetime. In that period, we were in love and shared our bed. That was why I did what you saw I did."

Commander Yai is stunned. I shoot him an understanding gaze.

"I know you must feel uncomfortable because you don't think of me that way. Nonetheless, the feelings in my heart are still there and never fade away, and I don't want to erase them. I will never throw away something meaningful to me. If love hurts, then be it. I've realized this is an issue I have to deal with on my own. I can't make you take responsibility, so please don't be bothered by it."

"What you said is puzzling. I'm uncertain of how to think of it."

"Don't think. Pity is not love. Just go on with your life,"

I tell him.

"because I don't know what to think anymore either.

I just want a moment of silence to calm my mind."

Commander Yai lets out a soft sigh and says.

"Then stay here. I'll go."

I nod, and Commander Yai walks past me. My heart plummets as though it is torn out of my chest. I turn towards him. The sight before me rips off the strength to hold myself back. I step forward and wrap my arms around Commander Yai from behind.

"Commander Yai, please don't push me away." My voice quivers.

"Let me stay like this for a moment, and I will never ask for anything this crazy again. I will never bother you anymore."

Whether it is out of pity or to get it over with, Commander doesn't take my hands off. He allows me to bury my face in his back and hugs him tightly as if afraid he will disappear. My shoulders shake as I sob. I can stifle my voice, but I can't stop my tears. Warm teardrops stain his back, and he knows.

"Do you love me so much?"

"As much as my life."

My answer comes out with a sob. Commander Yai speaks to me in a softened voice.

"Jom-Jao*, don't cry. If we were lovers in another lifetime for certain, I** might recall it someday like you."

His words make me cry even more. How can he ever recall it when our times run in opposite directions? His time flows forward while mine backward. My past is his future. How can one remember something that hasn't happened? I loosen my embrace.

Commander Yai doesn't leave as I thought he would. He slowly turns to me and looks at my tear-streaked face.

"Don't cry." He reaches out his hand and brushes the tears off my cheek with his thumb.

"Don't stain your cheeks with tears. Let the moonlight shower your cheeks instead."

The touch on my cheek feels oddly familiar, as though he once did it before. I glance up at Commander Yai. He doesn't look cold or annoyed the way he always expressed. His eyes soften more than ever, like he has this kindness and adoration to offer and genuinely wants to comfort me.

Maybe Commander Yai has always possessed this gentle side that I have never caught a glimpse at. I sniff and force a smile at him. Though my tired heart makes it hard, I don't want to disregard his kindness.

His comforting words mean the world to me and save my heart from crumbling down any further. I smile at him and speak with sincerity.

"Thank you so much, Commander Yai."

Chapter 25: The Bear Jom

Days go by leisurely as we travel through the winding route under the shade of trees on the towering mountains surrounding us. My overall lifestyle isn't better or worse. The good part is I have started to grow accustomed to journeying in the woods. I have learned which wild fruit is edible and how to build a fire with an antique lighter. I fall asleep to the soft chatting sound in the night breeze and the constant crackling of the fire. I wake up to admire the sunrise painting the sky in orange until it floats over the trees and turns the darkened world into the shade of ivory, the charm that makes me appreciate its existence.

Ever since I talked to Commander Yai under the tree that night, he has stopped ignoring me. He gives me a small nod when I smile at him from my position as he rides his horse by. Sometimes, when we rest in the same area, though we both chat with the others, if our eyes meet, his lips will curl up as if smiling at me, and it brings life and colors to everything around me. It is the way it is. Keeping love in my heart and letting things be may sound hopeless, but not all that is hopeless. As long as I don't struggle to take possession of his heart, this feels like a small, cool stream that nourishes my heart.

There is pain. There is joy. There is loneliness at times. Regardless, my life is able to go on.

"Captain Mun, how far are we from Seehasingkorn?"

I ask Captain Mun, hitting my calves with my fists to ease the stiffness.

"After we cross this mountain, we'll be halfway there," he replies.

"How does your city look like?"

"A city is a city. There are houses, gardens, paddy fields, people, and markets."

"Is it similar to Chiang Mai?"

"No." Captain Mun shakes his head.

"Chiang Mai is a big city with various tribes and races. Seehasingkorn is small and not hectic."

I hum a response as Captain Mun goes on.

"Though a small city, it owns abundant water resources and healthy soil. In the farming season, you will see the green rice fields stretching to the base of the mountains. There are year-long eaglewood and honey to harvest. And in the festival of the twelfth month, we'll light candles and line them along the river in the evening. We'll bring popped rice and flowers as offerings to the deity. If you receive a flower hair garland from a woman that night, it means she gives you her heart."

I imagine the scenes he has described and smile.

"I want to see it soon.

"I also miss my home terribly,"

Captain Mun sighs. My life goes on with no thrilling occasions until Commander Yai appears one day. I am helping the servants transfer the stacks of blankets to the luggage carts. I stop when Commander In approaches me.

"Commander In," I say softly.

Since the day we rode his horse back to the camp together, we have barely had proper conversations. However, Commander In is different from Commander Yai. He is affable and jokes around with everyone, including me. When Commander In walked by, he would sometimes throw tiny wild berries for me to catch, and he would laugh out loud when I tasted them and winced because of the intense sourness.

Commander In stops before me and says.

"Jom, get prepared. You will have an audience with Her Royal Highness this afternoon."

My eyes widen.

"For what reason, Commander In?"

"Well, what have you done?" he asks without a smile.

Commander In's words and manner unnerve me. I sputter.

"Nothing, Commander In. I've done nothing wrong. I've been with Captain Mun day and night and never committed a crime. I'll swear to any holy tree."

Commander In lets out a peal of laughter, his fake grave expression turning into amusement.

"I was joking, Jom. You're such a scaredy-cat. If you've done no evil, why are you flustered?"

Even if he has said that, it doesn't put my mind at ease at the slightest.

"If that's not the case, why does Her Royal Highness request my audience?"

"Her Royal Highness would like to witness your chess play,"

Commander In replies.

"I have the men prepare the chess cloth and pieces. You just get ready."

And he leaves with a rejoicing smile. As soon as Captain Mun has learned about what happened, he finds new attire for me to wear when presenting to Princess Amphan. It includes a light purple high-quality cotton shirt and a short flower- patterned woven loincloth in navy. He even slicks my hair back, showing my forehead, with coconut oil. It feels weird, but I have to admit I look pleasingly handsome.

"This purple shirt complements your fair skin," he says in satisfaction while flicking his eyes around me. "If you were a woman, I would put golden bracelets on your wrists and ankles."

I laugh. Captain Mun acts like an overdramatic parent getting his child ready for the first day of school.

"Thank you," I tell him, smiling.

However, the smile vanishes when it is time to meet Princess Amphan. I trail after Commander In uneasily, my hands sweaty, my feet tripping on things along the way.

"Jom, will you get it together? Should I carry you on my shoulder?" Commander In sighs deeply.

"I'm nervous," I mutter.

I have never have an audience with the royals before in my life, except in my commencement day. It lasted around a second and I didn't have to say a word.

"Commander In, what if I use incorrect royal words*? Will Her Royal Highness punish me?" I ask in worry.

The royal language in this era is different from what I have learned in school. Even if they were exactly the same, I doubt I would excel at it.

"You're worried too much."

Commander In is both amused and annoyed.

"I have guarded Her Royal Highness for months and never once seen Her Royal Highness getting aggravated and ordering a beating to anyone. If you're not certain with your words, Commander Yai and I will correct them for you."

I nod and follow Commander In to the area I have never stepped into. It is a few meters away from where the other and I rested, but the atmosphere is distinctly dissimilar. Inches away from the tree that sends orange petals falling all over the grass, under the large white long-handled umbrella partly curtained with a thin fabric, leaving the front open, is Princess Amphan's dwelling.

Next to the seat, a female royal attendant fans the princess with a long-handled fan. The other female royal attendants sit in line farther to the side, each of them dressed in beautiful satin clothes, their hair tied up in buns ornamented with flowers. I can smell the fragrant scented water from the distance.

I spot the royal physician and Commander Yai settling on the opposite side of the female royal attendants. Commander notices me. He freezes and looks slightly stunned. I crawl on my knee and bow without a glance at the princess' face if not allowed as Commander In instructed.

"I have brought Nai-Jom as Your Royal Highness wishes,"

Commander In informs the princess with the royal words in this period. I keep my head to the ground as Princess Amphan speaks.

"Is this the one creating this play?" Her voice is as clear as a bell.

"Yes, Your Royal Highness,"

Commander In answers.

"Look up. I merely caught a glimpse of you last time. You surfaced from the water like fish. How peculiar."

I raise my head as told and get stupefied. The princess' face is elegant, like an angel in ancient paintings. Her eyebrows curve gorgeously, her eyes sweet, with a hint of sharp dignity of a person born into a royal family. It is the face I am familiar with and remember well.

..Kaimook, Ohm's fiancée!

That isn't something that shocks me the most. There is another thing before my eyes, and it makes my heart race.

"Um, what a flawless complexion. Had the royal physician not remarked that you could be a divinity in disguise, I would have wondered it myself. Isn't he such a pretty man, my royal attendants?"

The princess asks the female royal attendants, and they cover their mouths and giggle. I drop my gaze, my lips trembling, my hands cold. My eyes didn't trick me. Besides her beauty, her attire and accessories are

exquisitely magnificent. The necklace and bracelets are gold, except the hairpin securing her hair bun.

It is the hairpin with tiny silver flowers hanging down, the one I saw Commander In bought and kept nicely in the satin cloth! The following conversation goes in my ear and out the other, completely incomprehensible, until Commander In volunteers to play chess with me.

"I volunteer, Your Royal Highness."

I give him a sidelong look. Commander In's face glows with delight. Commander In turns to me.

"Jom, please have mercy on me, or I will be humiliated in front of the others."

Princess Amphan laughs.

"Do you fear to be humiliated in front of the royal attendants?"

"I fear that in front of everyone, Your Royal Highness."

Commander In smiles and gazes up, his manner humble and respectful. But, the moment their eyes meet, I can see love and admiration in Commander In's eyes. It is beyond the kind of love one has for their boss.

I explain the rules in a stutter, but the others aren't suspicious. They probably think I get awkward out of nervousness. As I play chess with Commander In, I have trouble concentrating. Still, I beat him since he is basically a newbie. It was close, though. I keep wondering why Commander In has the guts to do such a thing. Has he no common sense? The royal law in the past is rigorous no matter what country. It is a far-fetched matter to all commoners. Just thinking about it is wrong. Commander In...what have you done? He can be given the death penalty!

I leave that place with my mind in disorder. A pouch of coins rewarded by Princess Amphan is in my grip, yet I don't rejoice. The thing between Commander In and Princess Amphan occupies my mind.

...They must be in love. Otherwise, Commander In would have been beheaded. Princess Amphan must reciprocate Commander In's feelings, given that she openly used the hairpin to style her hair, with no one knowing it was gifted to her by Commander In.

Time passes until dusk falls. The servants and the cooks carry on with their daily tasks. The smell of cooked rice wafts in the air and causes stomachs to growl. Some of them rest and relax while some prepare the chess set to play together. The women chatter as they head to the stream to bathe.

Everything looks normal like any other day, but my mind is unsettled. What I have seen disturbs me so much that I get jittery. I know this is none of my business, but I also know that it is inappropriate and too big of a deal to turn a blind eye to. I suddenly think of Commander Yai. Does he know of this?

Is he letting his brother pursue the lady who is out of his reach to the point that he could never reach her even if he died trying...? No way. Even I am aware of how precarious this is. Commander Yai wouldn't let things go this far.

Restless, I begin to look for Commander Yai. Even though I have no idea how to talk to him about this issue, I want to see him. I search for him in other groups of men and throw a glance at his tent, totally dark, which means Commander Yai isn't there. I decide to steer away from the camp, bringing a lantern with me. It is too early for Commander Yai to sleep. He might be patrolling or spending his time alone somewhere, like the day he rained the leaves on me.

The woods in this area is thick and full of dry leaves. I walk carefully, watching out for roots and rocks. I try to find him on the trees, then realize how ridiculous this is... I have lost my mind. Commander Yai is no monkey. Why would he hang out on a tree every night? As I hesitate whether to keep going and head back to the camp, my nose catches the faint smell of smoke. I raise the lantern forward to get a better vision. When I see something swirling over the shrubs and bushes, my body is freezing.

...Fog!

I go rigid in a panic. My heart pounds in my chest, then I notice a second later something is off from what I thought.

...No, it is not the fog that sweeps me away to other eras. There is no powerful, irrepressible push and pull coming out of it. It is simply faint smoke with a burnt smell in the air. I step towards the source of the smoke and gawk in shock when I see the streak of fire burning over the thick growth of grass in the distance. Gusts of wind must have made the branches rub against each other. The heat from the flames spreads in the air.

The wind only worsens the blaze, and it is about to catch the dry branches and leaves scattered all over this area.

...It's a wildfire!

I falter backward in terror. The wildfire will spread more rapidly with these dry branches and the wind. I don't know how long it will take to get to our camp. I spin around and dash out right away.

"Commander Yai!" I shout, sprinting.

"Captain Mun.

"Commander In! There's a fire!"

I jump at the sound of the combustion behind. When I turn around, the branches and dry vines are set ablaze before my eyes. Panicking, I make a run for it blindly until I stop and stand in confusion in the middle of the woods, with a big fire lurking behind me. Where are the carts? Why aren't they where I have run to? My heart drops as I realize I am lost.

I look around without a clue of directions.. This is the worst. As terrible as being burned to death is that I can't help the others escape the fire in time! I decide to run through the widest path and shout at the top of my lungs.

"Commander Yai! Help! There's a fire!"

My voice reverberates across the woods. I dart through the thickets as if my life depends on it, not caring about the sting from the twigs scratching my skin. Amid fear and confusion, someone lifts me from the ground.

"Commander Yai!"

I exclaim, finding out I am on a horse reined by Commander Yai. I say in a quivering voice.

"Commander Yai, the wildfire."

"I saw it.," he says deeply.

"I heard you calling my name and rode here."

The horse is incredibly fast, and we soon arrive at the camp.

Chaos breaks loose the moment Commander Yai orders everyone to evacuate from the wildfire. They quickly collect their things. A group of soldiers leads the women the other way to stay far from the area as much as possible.

"Jom," Commander Yai demands.

"Follow the royal physician and the female cooks."

"But there are lots to retrieve, Commander Yai,"

I argue, looking at the commotion.

While a group escapes, the male servants are hastily grabbing the supplies. Mattresses and pillows fall all over the ground. There are rice and dry food to collect.

"Jom-Jao, don't be stubborn and do as I say,"

Commander Yai scolds in a stern voice.

"They are big and strong. A man as small as you are can't be of much help. Hurry and follow the women.

Don't cause trouble."

He rides his horse another way and barks an order to everyone to run upwind to avoid the direction of the spreading fire. Commander In trots to Commander Yai on his horse. He seems reluctant.

"Yai, if we retreat that way, we will have to make a detour. It will lengthen the journey."

"Be it." Commander Yai grits his teeth.

"I won't risk pushing through the fire. Have you forgotten whom we are guarding? Go!"

With that, the flames reach the carts. Commander Yai and Commander In split up to handle the situations. One heads to protect Princess Amphan and the others, and one deals with the supply transference and the evacuation. The soldiers try to calm the cows and horses from the panic as the servants hurriedly rein the cows to the carts. The process is arduous due to the animals' terror towards the fire. The carriages with the women have departed. What is left is the supply and luggage carts.

I watch everything, frightened. A spark of fire lands on the roof of a cart, and the servants try to smother it while taking the food supply out. I hesitate. I know Commander Yai forbade me to help, but we are in a critical situation, and he isn't looking at me. I make up my mind in an instant. Instead of joining the running group, I charge towards the cart. Okay.. I know I act like a freaking idiot. But, hold up. I have watched tons of movies, and I absolutely hated it when some characters took unnecessary action and ended up inflaming the damage. Some even caused injuries or death to themselves or others. I'm not that stupid.

I can force myself to get over the torn sacks of rice and ignore the scattering pillows and blankets they have failed to bring in time, but I can't give up salt. Salt in this era is expensive and valuable, and its benefits are diverse. It is utility in food preservation and Thai traditional medicine. Salt can disinfect wounds, reduce inflammation, induce vomiting in case you swallow a poisonous substance, and so on.

I bolt to the cart. The servants, unable to smother the fire on the roof, try to get the food supply out as much as possible.

"Salt!" I shout.

"Take the salt sacks out first!"

A servant hops onto the cart and comes back with a sack of salt. He throws it to me and the other guy before returning inside. He tosses out everything he puts his hands on. When we get another two salt sacks, I shout.

"Enough! Get out!"

He jumps to the back of the cart before the flames can catch up and hurt him. We rush off with the sacks in our arms and join the group of men putting the supplies on the cart that still has room. Once we have successfully fled from the fire, we all make our way back down to find another place to set a camp. All in all, we have lost one cart and some of the supplies. No one is severely injured, fortunately.

When we have trekked far enough and found a spot to make camp, we stop for a rest. I sit with the male and female cooks to take a breather. Many of them have recovered from the terror to some extent, but everyone is knackered. The servants begin to set the tents again. They build a big fire. Everything gradually turns back to normal, though some keep talking about the recent incident. I crane my neck towards the men checking on the retrieved supplies. I want to help them but hold back. Commander In and Commander Yai are still overseeing the tents of the Princess Amphan and the female royal attendants.

Finally, Commander Yai appears in this area. I act like I have been sitting here for a long time and never run to the cart that got burnt earlier. Commander Yai stares at me. He frowns and asks in a gruff voice.

"Did you not listen to me at all?"

"What do you mean? When did I disobey you?"

I lie, acting innocent. He steps towards me, rubs my forehead and cheek with his palm, and lays it in front of me. I gulp when I see the soot on his hand.

Out of excuses, I blink and lock my eyes on the evidence showing that I have interfered with the transference. Not wasting a second, Commander Yai grasps my upper arm and pulls me with him.

"Where are you taking me, Commander Yai?" I ask.

He wouldn't give me a beating by the fire as an example for everyone, right? We have just escaped from the wildfire. Can't he let it slide?!

"Silence."

I have to order him without a choice. Commander Yai helps me mount his horse and we gallop off. A short distance away from the camp, Commander Yai stops the horse by a stream. He ties the horse to a tree and turns to me.

"Wash your face and the scrapes on your body."

I walk to the stream, leave my shirt on the grass, and wade in until half of my calves are in the water. I scoop the water with my hands and wash my face and limbs. Commander Yai follows me and starts cleaning himself.

I glance at him.

"Have you stopped thinking I'm a spy?"

"What kind of spy is worried about his enemy more than himself?"

I can't help smiling. He must have seen the good side of me. I hope it will be enough for him to treat me with kindness for a long time.

A while after we have finished bathing, Commander Yai and I just hang out by the stream to relax. He turns to me and speaks.

"Jom, thank you so much. If we had known of the fire even a bit later, we wouldn't have lost only one cart."

"Don't make it sound like you owe me. I didn't want anyone to be hurt. Captain Mun, the soldiers, and the servants are my friends. They treat me well. So do you and Commander In. I'm very relieved everyone is safe, and I'm glad I could be of some help."

Commander Yai rests his gaze on my face, his eyes softening. He reaches out and ruffles my hair.

"Let's head back. It's late. Once we're at the camp, I'll ask for a salve from the royal physician for you. Your body is covered in scrapes from those twigs. Apply it on your skin day and night so they don't leave scars."

His words melt my heart. Has he any idea that every time he treats me with gentleness, I don't want to do anything besides whatever he says? I want him to adore me, and I want to listen to him speaking again and again. I rise and follow Commander Yai to the tree with his horse tied to it. I wonder why Commander Yai doesn't get lost as easily as I do.

"How do you remember the directions? To me, the trees look the same. It confuses me even more in this darkness. If I were to head back alone, I would get lost for sure."

"The star in the sky tells the time and directions."

He looks up at the sky.

"In this season, the Evening Star appears in the west after sunset until the end of the rainy season. And in the twelfth month, the Morning Star appears in the east before sunrise. The directions of the star change seasonally. They were recorded with the wisdom of our ancestries."

I smile at him.

"You know, there is the science of stargazing in my era. They grouped the stars in constellations and gave them names for easy recognition. I know some of them."

His lips curve up as he lifts his eyebrow in curiosity. I quickly boast about my knowledge since the chance only comes up once in a while.

"Look that way."

I point at the sky in the north before making a square frame with my index fingers and thumbs of both hands, like when you try to aim for the right angle to photograph.

"Come closer, Commander Yai, so you can see."

He moves closer as told.

"See? There are seven stars brighter than the others.

They form a shape of an animal, with a head, a body, and a tail. This constellation is the Great* Bear."

Commander Yai goes silent for a moment, then mumbles.

"Hmm...how odd."

"Why?" I turn to him, and my heart flutters at his expression. How do I put it? He is smiling, but the smile looks weird. It is like he wants to smile but presses his lips to stifle it. His eyes sparkle.

"We call them the Big Dipper."

It takes me a moment to get what he means. My mouth flaps open and closed for several seconds before I can speak.

"Wait... You're not thinking I named the constellation after you on purpose, right?"

He offers no reply. Instead, he twists his lips into a content smile and turns aside. I gape.

..Oh, dear.

How narcissistic!

Deeply bothered, I blurt out.

"All right... Commander Yai, forget it. It's not called the Great Bear. The constellation is the Bear Jom. I named it myself!"

He doesn't mind my outburst and simply mumbles.

"Did I say anything? Call it however you want."

...Ugh...unbelievable.

Seeing no point in arguing, I press my lips together tightly in aggravation and shyness. Meanwhile, Commander Yai pretends to gaze at the sky with that pleased smile on his face. In a heartbeat, it feels like I have double vision. Khun-Yai once had this expression when I drove his car out with him for the first time.

That day, I unintentionally spoke with a temper because I was jealous of Khun-Bongkoch.

Khun-Yai pretended to look out the window, his face pleased that I accidentally expressed my romantic feelings for him. And right now, that expression paints on Commander Yai's face. My heart tingles at the thought.

Does he know his action is giving me hope, not to mention those teasing, compliant words? Where should I keep my heart so it won't flutter? No... I have to stop thinking. This is a pathetically delusional thought that often occurs to people with one-sided love. Their crushes treat them a bit nicer and they assume their feelings are reciprocated. They always end up with tears trickling down their cheeks, bawling, helplessly heartbroken.

I scoot away from him and stride to the horse tied to the tree.

"Let's go back to the camp, Commander Yai. It'll be dawn in a few hours. My eyelids feel heavy."

Commander Yai doesn't oppose the suggestion. He helps me mount the horse, settles behind me, and signals the steed to trot. The physical contact ignites this strange feeling in me again, which is unpreferable. If I lose control, fail to hold myself back, and needlessly express my feelings, our good relationship right now will deteriorate into the previous state. I don't want him to feel uncomfortable and give me the cold shoulder again.

I hope he is kind to me like this for a long time.

To stop my wild thoughts, I divert my attention to something else by initiating a conversation with Commander Yai to make things feel as normal as possible. I try to keep my voice steady.

"We've moved far from the wildfire, yet the burnt smell still reaches here."

He remains silent for a second and says.

"I smell nothing"

"It's so strong. Can't you smell it?"

He exhales a deep sigh.

"My nose keeps catching another scent. It's bothering me so much."

"Hmm....? What scent?" I sniff the air.

"Turn this way."

I turn my head as told and jump a little because Commander Yai's face is closer than I thought. He is looking at me with a smile, a teasing, playful smile that shakes my heart.

Suddenly, he slides his big hand around my waist and leans his charming face closer.

Then, Commander Yai kisses my cheek.

Chapter 26: The Scent of Your Cheek

My eyes widen in astonishment while Commander Yai smiles and flicks his gaze forward brazenly.

"Commander Yai.. what was that?"

"No need to make a fuss," he scolds in a gentle voice.

"You kissed my cheek."

"Who told you to put your cheek near my mouth?"

His excuse makes me gape. Seriously...? Hell, no! Love makes you blind, but it doesn't damage your brain. I cup my cheek, my blood pumping to my face, making my skin feel hot.

"Commander Yai...that was... not..

I stutter, at a loss for words. I can't find a single word to describe these things swirling around in my head. Questions and feelings crash into each other as though they are trying to stand out and make me prioritize them first.

I am shocked. In the shock, nonetheless, there is happiness.

Along with that happiness, there is a question as to why Commander Yai did that. The answer, one I can't bring myself to assume, forces me to suppress this happiness that attempts to bloom

in my heart. I am awfully scared to be disappointed, yet, deep down in my heart, I want to hope. It is hard to organize the feelings that urge me to be hopeful and know my place at the same time.

Noting my awkwardness, Commander Yai speaks softly.

"I was teasing you, Jom. What should I have done if not kissing you? You were clinging to my back, crying, a few nights ago.

Now you're ignoring me."

A new question pops up and crashes through the old ones, sending them scattering. What did Commander Yai mean?

Was the cheek kiss just a tease? Were his words a tease while the kiss was real? And when did I ignore him?

When I open my mouth to ask, we have arrived at the camp.

Commander In is hovering near the fire. Spotting us, he marches here

immediately. He glances at Commander Yai's hand on my waist for a second and flicks his eyes away as if he's not suspicious of anything.

"Yai, I need to discuss our travel route with you," he says with a serious face, looking troubled.

Commander Yai agrees. He helps me dismount the horse and tells me, "Don't sleep yet. I'll have someone bring the salve to you."

I acknowledge it, feeling distracted.

A while later, someone delivers a small bottle of salve to me as Commander Yai has said. I sit on a cart, dab my fingers on the ointment that feels like soft beeswax, and apply it on the scrapes on my limbs, thinking of everything that has happened.

Commander Yai's action tonight is puzzlement, making me

ponder loads of things. Some put a smile on my face, but some perturb me.

Tonight, I fall asleep with these unanswered questions until daybreak.

The next day, the procession advances late in the morning.

Some of us are still drained from the wildfire escape last night but have to push through. We trek for several hours into the shadier and damper area. The plants over here appear dissimilar, with thick clumps of bushes and parasitic plants growing on other trees.

The great trees extend their trunks up high, spreading their overlapping branches and leaves. The air is distinctly cooler.

Captain Mun tells me the route is longer than the previous one, but the good thing is we can avoid the wildfire, and there is a small village ahead to take shelter. Commander In isn't happy with taking this route but has to accept it without a choice.

As we journey on, my mind keeps wandering to Commander Yai. I know I am preoccupied. Can I help it, though, when what he did was not normal?

How could he hold my waist and kiss my cheek like that?

I am not a five-year-old kid whom he can put on his lap and kiss and peck as he wishes. Did he do it out of affection or adoration?

Kissing my cheek because he adores me isn't funny. I am a grown-ass man. It is impossible for me to feel nothing. And the way he talked like he was sulking...My limbs feel weak at the thought, and I start feeling irritated with myself.

In the afternoon, Commander Ya halts the procession to

make camp. We settle down earlier than other days because Princess Amphan is too tired to continue the journey.

"Do you have a fever?" Captain Mun places his hand on my forehead. "Your face is all red."

"No, I don't. I feel worn out by the wildfire escape last night," I make an excuse. I can't possibly tell him why my face reddens.

Shortly after, I discover why this area is exceptionally healthy-it is close to a cascade. I follow Captain Mun to the waterfall. The water plummets onto the rocks and splashes in tiny bubbles that cling to leaves in clear drops. Captain Mun and his gang wade into the water energetically and attempt to catch fish with bare hands. A few moments later, we all head back to the camp to carry out our tasks.

I grab a chance while everyone is busy working to return to the waterfall. The servants are setting up the tents and preparing ingredients for supper. It is a good chance for me to bathe as everyone is doing their job. I usually help them with trivial stuff, but I want some time alone today.

Water cascades through crevices. Further away, I spot a pond curving into the bank like a large bathtub. It hides behind thick bushes, inconspicuous.

I edge that way, leave all my clothes on the bank, and get in the water, the shallow area where pebbles are visible. I swim to the pond I targeted and test the depth of the water.

The pond is clear and flows slowly, cool and refreshing.

The water isn't as rapid as the part connecting directly to the cascade.

I tread to the other side, where branches hang low from the trees

on the bank. The water right here is at shoulder level, not as deep as the center of the pond, which is an arm's length above my head.

I float with my head above water in relaxation. Petals and leaves are blown and fall on the water surface. They drift slowly in circles, not flowing away so easily. It feels like I am bathing in a fancy spa filled with the scent of the forest.

I float on my back, close my eyes, and absorb the nature surrounding me. The breeze, the shady trees, the lulling sound of flowing water. Yet, my mind wanders to what happened last night, when Commander Yai kissed my cheek.

The sight in my head makes my cheek tingle, and I shut my eyes more tightly. How wicked of Commander Yai. He brazenly did that without asking for my consent. Still, if he had asked, I am not sure what would have

been my response.

I hear a rustling sound approaching like someone is walking through the bushes. I open my eyes, sink my feet in the water, and turn to look.

...Commander Yai.

He stands on the bank a short distance away from the pond and flicks his eyes to me. He says, "Let me bathe, too."

Startled, I quickly spin when he starts taking off his clothes.

I swim to the other side of the pond and wait until I hear him jumping in before turning around.

Commander Yai swims to the deeper part that connects to the cascade. I shake off my imagination of his body under the water from my brain. My profession requires imagination and creativity, but I hope they don't go so wildly in this moment.

I am nervous and thrilled at the same time, but Commander Yai seems to have no problem at all. He submerges in the water, resurfaces, scrubs his body, and washes his hair comfortably as if he is alone...Is he trying to seduce me? If so, needless to say, he is super mean. If it were before, I would just watch without blinking and take it as a good chance to admire his body with my eyes. But now, I have realized doing that is more dangerous to me. I force my mind to think of something else rather than the sensual beauty of a human's body.

Soon, Commander Yai does what I fear by gliding into the pond I am bathing in. I hesitate whether to leave or stay.

A ludicrous thought. Commander Yai is no bandit. Why should I run away? There is another reason that stops me from getting out of the water-it might not look like I am running away, but it will look like I am desperately seducing him by showing my body.

Commander Yai leans his back on the other side, resting his arms on the ground. We are on the opposite sides of the pond.

It doesn't help much, though. The water at his side is at chest level, exposing his firm shoulders. Commander Yai slicks his wet raven hair back with both hands, pasting it on his nape. Drops of water glisten on his face and over his chest.

I am awfully nervous. My limbs move awkwardly as if they aren't part of my body. I sink until the water reaches my chin and blow the surface gently, not looking his way. It is a meaningless action executed by my brain to look natural, not going stiff and gawking at him like a madman.

After faking sane for a while, I peek at him.
Commander Yai is watching me. Despite his sharp eyes, a gentle smile flickers on his lips. I avert my eyes, my heart uncontrollably shaking.
"Are you still mad at me?" he asks in a soft tone.
I bite my lip, struggling to find an answer. At last, I reply with a question,
"About what?"
"That I kissed you."
...Ugh, he couldn't be more direct. I scratch my arms secretly under the water to suppress my emotions. He doesn't have to be so straightforward. I mutter, "I don't know why you did it."
"You were ignoring me."
"When did I ignore you?" I am confused for real now. For the past few days, I have been careful not to express my affection to him with my eyes or actions. I had no clue if I did well. I might have stared at his back longingly sometimes.
"I looked at you every day. Did you not notice?"
"I...did."
So what? I also looked at him every day and even had to remind myself not to stare too long.
"Hmm..." Commander Yai heaves a sigh. "And you're saying you didn't ignore me."
This is nuts...He calls that ignoring? I was avoiding eye contact.
Didn't I do that in fear that he would be aggravated? I have been crazily mindful of him, yet he put it that way.
I press my lips together and frown, not sure if I feel shy or upset by his absurd accusation. Receiving no response,
Commander Yai speaks.
"Do you think I did that to tease you?"
"I don't know. How am I supposed to know what you're thinking?"
Commander Yai pauses before gliding towards me. I turn aside in alarm. The petals on the surface are sparser than earlier and everything under the water is more visible. Maybe the petals are the same and it is all in my head.
My heart thumps... He is naked. And so am I.
Commander Yai stops before me, within arm's reach.
"Do you care to find out? Come closer, and I'll tell you."
His voice is so gentle that my body nearly melts.

I try to suppress my feelings. Though I want to know the reason like crazy, I don't even dare to breathe because of his action. Commander Yai needs to back away a bit more if we are to have a sensible conversation.

Commander Yai fixes his eyes on me, a small smile lingering on his lips. He lowers his gaze to my neck and shoulders, not in a leering way, but in a way that conveys some indication that burns my skin.

"Your skin is so light, Jom," he whispers, raising his eyes back to my face. "Since yesterday, the scent of your cheek has been lingering in my nose."

My racing heart is now pounding. Commander Yai is more vicious than I expected. He attacks me with his gaze and sweet, subtly flirtatious words, the kind that defeats me. I can't take this anymore. I will die if I stay. I shift towards the waterfall.

"I'll go over there."

"Wait." Commander Yai grabs my upper arms before I can leave.

I need to face him without a choice. Our eyes meet, and I instantly know something is about to happen. I clench my fists under the water, anxious and anticipating.

But then, I hear people chatting from the other side. We both turn to the sound. Even if we can't see them yet, judging by the words and accents, we know they are either the soldiers or the servants from our procession.

Commander Yai moves his grip on my upper arms and abruptly embraces me. I exclaim in shock, but he seals my mouth with his lips, absorbing my voice in time, then he pulls me down under the water with him.

Amid the disarray of my mind and our rubbing bodies, I try to ask myself what is happening. Is he kissing me or stopping me from making a sound? I would have found the answer more easily had our bodies not been this close. Commander Yai holds me tightly, chest on chest, abdomen on abdomen. I am startled as I can feel the shape of his body.

Before my soul slips out of my body from this underwater kiss,

Commander Yai lifts me over the surface a few seconds later.

He removes his arms as slowly as the way he lingeringly withdraws his lips. Commander Yai slides his hands to my upper arms and leans his face closer to whisper.

"Jom, my tent is spacious, and your chess cloth and pieces are still there."

Before I get the meaning, Commander Yai tilts his head to

my ear and speaks. I give him no reply even when he backs away and swims off to the bank, where he jumped in the water earlier.

The others start coming to bathe. I can hear their occasional chatters and splashes.

Commander Yai has walked off pretty far now, but I remain here, gazing at the treetops swaying in the wind. It snips the flowers and sends them falling. Commander Yai's last words are clear in my mind as though he is whispering by my side. Heat rushes from my ears to my chest.

'Jom-Jao, come to me tonight... I'll wait.

[NC] !! Chapter 27: Sarantom

Do you believe that I won't go? Once Commander Yai has said that and left, I stand there for several minutes to process my feelings, shocked, happy, surprised, caught off guard. A tiny ball of joy assembles in my chest, like an undersized lotus blooming in a dry, abandoned pond.

Commander Yai doesn't despise me as when we first met. Furthermore, he seems to take a liking to me for quite a bit. The person despising you wouldn't kiss your cheek, right? My heart shakes at the thought.

Commander Yai has made it clear that he wants to be closer to me with his body and words. What he has done melts my heart, and I want to just follow him mindlessly. I can find pleasure by stepping into his tent through the curtain door and indulging myself in whatever will happen, but a small part in my heart holds me back.

I indeed love him. However, one-sided love is different from holding hands and getting through everything together. It is true that I tried every method to steal his heart before, but I was a mess and lost back then. Now, I am more collected and look forward with a calmer mind. Each day, I attempt to support myself to step forward slowly but steadily, hoping I won't trip and fall in every step like before. Regardless, now that Commander Yai opens his arms, welcoming me to step into his embrace, it becomes too big of a decision than I expected. This is not only about pleasure and physical activity. There are deep feelings included.

This is about deciding whether to step forward alone or lean on his shoulder and step forward together. Confusion and fear cause me to stop and fall back. I can't move forward. I have been miserable and lost enough. I have no strength to put up a fight against whatever comes crushing. I doubt I can endure even a small disappointment. And when I ask myself what I am so afraid of, I can't pinpoint it.

Tonight, I don't share a cart with Captain Mun like before and instead ask the cooks if I can sleep in the tent with them, and they all welcome me wholeheartedly and respectfully. They go as far as to roll out another mattress and give me a pillow and a blanket. They used to see me as some

otherworldly being because of my mysterious background. But, after I have helped everyone escape the wildfire in time, they now treat me with acceptance and respect.

I sleep early, smiling by myself in the dark, and never leave the tent until morning. As it turned out, the fact that I warned them about the wildfire brings about more positive consequences than I thought there would. When I open my eyes in the cooks' tent, waking up to the aromatic smell of food, I sit up and stare at the meal set placed on the ground by Lom, the cook I once spoke to.

"Hmm..? Whose meal is this, Lom?"

Lom cracks an amused smile.

"Whose meal would it be? Please eat up, and I'll come back to take the plates."

"Hmm..?" I am still confused.

"You don't need to bring my meal in here. I'm not sick. I can go outside and eat with Captain Mun."

"I know you're not sick, Poh-Jom, but Commander Yai, Commander In, and the royal physician all have someone serving them food."

Lom's words and expression imply something I can vaguely assume. There is willingness and respect in his manner. I paste on a meek smile. Have they upgraded me to a status almost as high as the royal physician? They were scared of me as I could have been a warlock. I think they see me as their guardian spirit right now.

"The meal is different from what I had with Captain Mun and the men."

Jom laughs.

"How can they be the same? These dishes aren't enough to fill the stomachs of the soldiers and servants. They prefer boiled beef or grilled pork. Nang*- Inn, the royal cook, prepared this meal, in case it suits your taste buds."

Oh... I see. The cooks are divided into two groups. One group takes care of typical meals and delicate dishes. The second group cooks food that boosts energy for those who need strength and travel on foot.

I observe my meal in excitement. The set consists of turmeric rice with chicken and spice, fish curry, and clear soup served in a coconut shell, a savory dish I get to taste for the first time. The dessert is these round balls covered in white sesame seeds, stuffed with mildly sweet ground green bean, with the fragrant scent from palm sugar.

They are served in banana leaves pinned with small bamboo sticks, looking delicious. I think back to when I tried to steal Commander Yai's heart by making him breakfast. I almost humiliated myself. My food would never be half as superb as this meal set. After finishing my morning routine, I gather with Captain Mun and the guys that are getting ready to continue the journey. They talk about the travel plan. So, Commander Yai has decided to speed up our pace to reach the small village ahead before dusk.

I crane my neck to look for Commander Yai and see him on his horse. He is overseeing everything before signaling the procession to advance. My heart thumps when he trots this way. I stood him up last night, leaving him waiting for nothing. I don't know how bad he is angry. I lift my gaze as Commander Yai approaches, scared of the treatment I will receive. Our eyes meet, none of us speaking, then he turns aside.

Whoa...he is upset.

I gape as he steers the horse away without so much as a word. Am I in the wrong here? He didn't wait for me to agree or refuse to go, but when I chickened out and didn't show up, he got mad. In the end, after contemplating for half the day, I decide to talk to him. I want to make up with him, that is. I already care about him dearly. Ever since he spoke to me with those sweet words yesterday, my heart has been inclining towards him.

During the break, I grab the chance when everyone splits up to find resting spots to follow Commander Yai, who is taking his horse to a brook to get hydrated. He seems to love this steed in particular. He always brings it to drink water by himself instead of letting the servants do this job.

"Commander Yai,"

I greet, sticking out my face from behind a tree. I must look quite ridiculous, but Commander Yai says nothing. He flicks his head to me and speaks levelly.

"State your matter."

Whoa...How brusque. He isn't sweet and flirtatious like yesterday at all.

"I didn't show up last night,"

I say sheepishly, knowing half of it is my fault.

Commander Yai turns to face me. He locks his eyes on my face as a gesture for me to explain my reason for disobeying his order.

"The thing is...I was scared," I say.

"What were you scared of? Your chess skills are superior. I should have been the intimidated one."

..Chess is not the point here.

"I was afraid you would do what you did to me at the waterfall,"
I blurt.

"To be honest, I was afraid you would do more than that."

Once I have said it, I know I spoke too much...Damn me! Did he trick me into exposing my thought, or was I just an idiot?

Commander Yai crosses his arms over his chest, his eyes gleaming.

"You said you loved me."

"That's another matter, Commander Yai. If I let you take advantage of me, I would be no different from some wayside flower for you to pick on and throw away."

Commander Yai looks like he is trying to stifle a laugh, his knitted brow loosening.

"What kind of man would compare himself to a flower?"

"Many, Commander Yai. You just never met one."

"How did you know I would take advantage of you?"

Hmm? The nerve. He embraced and kissed me in broad daylight. Who knows what he would have done in a closed tent? I bark back.

"You wouldn't?"

Commander Yai is a bit taken aback. He lets out a soft sigh and speaks in a softer tone.

"Jom, what kind of person do you take me for? Do you think I will force myself on you against your will?"

"You're only going to play chess with me, right?"

Seeing as I don't fall into his trap so easily, he blurts.

"What's the big deal if I'm going to kiss you!?"

"What?!"

I am both amused and furious. Why is he so unfair?!

"You can't do that, Commander Yai. I'm a child of someone, you know? You can't just kiss me whenever you like."

"Where are your parents? I'll ask for their permission."

"Commander.."

"I am at a loss for words. It doesn't do any good talking to a shameless person. He has no shame, but I do, a lot of it. I just hope we have a proper conversation that helps me understand you, the way you said you would explain your feelings to me in the pond. Well, if you don't promise you won't...um, take advantage of me, I won't go."

He stares into my eyes, looking like he wants to push on. But since I stare back unyieldingly, he finally mutters.

"If you don't permit, I won't do it."

I hide my smile.

"Very well, then. I will play chess with you in your tent tonight."

Commander Yai nods.

"Whatever suits you, Jom."

I step back to join Captain Mun and his gang where they are resting. Before I put my foot on the ground, Commander Yai grasps my arm and leans down to whisper in my ear, so close that my hair stands on ends. He squeezes my arm so hard that I don't dare to move.

"If you don't turn up tonight, I will search for you in every tent and cart. Try to run if you want to test me."

I gulp and promise him right away.

"I'll be there. Please don't worry."

The journey is slower than they have planned because Princess Amphan throws up and feels fatigued. Subsequently, the procession halts many times and each break takes longer than usual. In the end, we need to make camp in the woods again and will advance to the village tomorrow.

"How is Her Royal Highness' condition, Captain Mun?"

I ask after the servants have finished setting the tents. The fire is built in the center of the space where the grass is completely cut off. The sky tonight is dim due to the thick clouds. The air is pleasantly cool.

"The royal physician said there was nothing to worry about. The fatigue from the wildfire escape the other night caused Her Royal Highness to have trouble sleeping. The royal physician has given Her Royal Highness medicine," replies Captain Mun.

I nod in acknowledgment and watch the servants add pieces of wood into the fire. Tonight, the sentries are playing chess as always, though they try not to get too loud. I spectate their game for a while before poking Captain Mun's arm.

"Captain Mun, I'll go to Commander Yai's tent. He asked me at noon to have a rematch with him."

Captain Mun mindlessly mumbles a response, his eyes glued to the chessboard. I clear my throat and continue.

"I have a favor to ask of you."

"What is it?"

"Before the next shift, can you pick me up at Commander Yai's tent?"

This time, Captain Mun turns his face to me, obviously wondering if I have lost my mind. I quickly explain.

"In the evening, I saw Commander Yai taking liquor into his tent. I fear he will think it will be fun to a bet with it again. You remember how I was when drunk, right?"

Captain Mun thinks for a moment before agreeing. I walk past the carts and the servants' tents to the soldiers' tents. I suddenly feel excited even if I have been there several times. Commander Yai's tent is lit up inside. I stop in front of it and announce my presence.

"Commander Yai, it's Jom."

"Come in," answers the low, hoarse voice.

I part the curtain door and enter. Commander Yai sits cross-legged on the carpet with a chessboard and pieces at his side. The light from the candle in the brass holder glows in pale yellow. Farther behind him is his mattress. I feel more like a concubine offering my services than a chess partner. I settle opposite him. Commander Yai only has his drawn-up cloth on, topless, his usual nightclothes. The unusual thing is my heartbeat. It somehow quickens, especially when I am reminded that those muscular arms once pulled me to his chest.

I turn to the chessboard set nearby. It is made of a nicely sanded square piece of wood. Each piece is arranged in their positions. I pick up a knight, a long stone painted to resemble a knight. My piece. Commander Yai cracks a sparkly smile.

"I had someone make this board to replace the cloth, but the pieces are yours."

I return a smile. The soldiers no longer play on the chess cloths as they have built proper boards. Even the pieces are wood carved into shapes more similar to the modern chess pieces. I slide the board to the center.

"Last time, you played the black pieces. Will you use them or the white ones this time?"

"Choose for me."

I nod, feeling oddly shy. He just told me to choose the pieces for him, but it gets me all tingling. Will we get to have a proper conversation tonight? I start the game by moving my pawn forward. Commander Yai doesn't take long to decide his moves, unlike me. I get slower and slower each time. My

hand shifts my pieces while my mind gets distracted. Moreover, the way his eyes flick to my face and cast on my arms and hands as I move my pieces makes me fidgety.

Eventually, I point it out.

"Commander Yai, please look at the board."

Instead of responding to my request, Commander Yai rests his eyes on me even longer.

"Jom-Jao, did you come here just to play chess with me?"

His question cuts to the chase. I drop my gaze and recall when we were in the pond by the cascade. It felt like Commander Yai was about to voice his feelings to me.

"Actually, I want to talk to you."

"What do you want to know?"

"Why are you suddenly being nice to me?"

"You're putting it as though I treated you so poorly."

"Didn't you? When we first met, you pointed your sword at my throat, then ordered someone to shackle me. Besides, you sniped at me at all chances. 'I don't trust you,' There are people with beautiful faces and evil minds.' Have you forgotten, Commander Yai?"

"I didn't love you back then."

"Hmm.?"

My eyes go wide. The words I have never thought to hear leave me speechless. My mouth falls open without another sound.

Commander Yai heaves a sigh.

"Jom, do you think I have no heart like the others? On the second night you spent in my tent, you were calling out my name in your sleep, in tears. It took me by surprise. Part of me felt sorry and wished to wipe off those tears and comfort you, but I had to stop myself. I didn't know where you came from or your intention."

It was the night I was ordered to sleep in his tent unshackled. I dreamed about looking for Khun-Yai until I found him waiting for me at the little house. I hugged Khun-Yai with tears running down my face and let him wipe them away. But, in fact, it was Commander Yai brushing off my tears before I woke up. Warmth fills my chest. I tip my head down and mumble.

"And so you continued to be mean to me."

"You're talking as if I was the only one being mean."

"Oh. When was I being mean to you?"

I bob my head up.

"You kept yelling at me. Did you forget when you chased me off? I taught everyone to play chess in order to be closer to you, but you kicked me out of your tent like a dog!"

"Huh?! But what did you do back then? How was I supposed to fathom your endearment? You suddenly confessed your feelings in intoxication and tried to get on top of me as though I were a woman,"

he growls, seething.

"I kept thinking about what you had said until, before I knew it, the sun rose. One thing I made peace with was, goodness... I was lost to this pretty man. My heart got played like a toy."

I blink stupidly as I listen. I didn't know he would also think about me until daybreak...Ugh, he's too adorable.

"And, on the next day, you told me it was liquor that made you say all of that. I had you in my mind all night like a madman, yet you said those words meant nothing. How could I not be angry?"

I bite my lip. How could I possibly guess his mind?

"I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. I was also sad when you were mad at me."

"I knew you were sad when you sat quietly under that tree."

His voice softens.

"If my action hurt you, I'm sorry."

I hold his gaze. When Commander Yai scolds me, he scares the hell out of me. But when he is kind, he is surprisingly lovely.

"Ever since you cried on my back, I haven't been able to get that moment out of my head. When I opened my eyes, your crying face would slip into my mind. My heart felt concerned. I looked for you in the morning, but you acted indifferent. You know how many days it has been that way. How could I not be upset?"

I glue my eyes at the chessboard because I don't know where I should look to stop myself from grinning like a crazy man. Commander Yai is huge and strong as the commander of an army, but now he is whining about how upset I made him feel. Furthermore, he is soft to a crying person.

"During the wildfire, I witnessed that your heart was as beautiful as your appearance. In danger, you were concerned about the others more than yourself. You love your friends as I do. Jom... I lost to you in every way.

When I had a chance to ride with you, I kissed your cheek to let you know I loved you."

My heart races. I can no longer meet his eyes. All I can do is mumble a response in my throat in acknowledgment.

"You asked about my feelings, and I have told you everything. Will you not show me your kindness?"

"How do I show my kindness?" I ask in a whisper.

"Allow me to kiss your cheek. When you said you taught the men to play chess to get closer to me, I was happy."

Ugh... My limbs have lost all strength. How is he so good at flirting? Now that he is asking to kiss my cheek straightforwardly, I don't know what to do.

Commander Yai slides the chessboard to the side. He moves closer and presses his lips on my cheek.

My face burns as my blood pumps. Commander Yai lingers, not backing away, his hands touching my waist and arm. His face is still close to mine, and I have to protest.

"You did it. Please move."

"Hmm..." He sighs, his hand holding my arm.

"It felt wonderful, but not nearly enough, Jom."

"Oh..." I turn my face to him and he kisses my lips.

"Hey!"

I exclaim in shock when he wraps his arms around my body and pulls me onto his lap.

"Commander... Wait! You said you wouldn't take advantage of me!"

"Just a little."

A little? Not sure when you got me on your lap like this! A few kisses can lead to something more. I didn't brace myself for this at all.

"Commander... This is not a little. Please stop,"

I cry out, trying to push his shoulders away, but Commander Yai is too strong. I struggle and push until we both fall on the carpet. I hit his shoulder with my elbows, to which Commander Yai responds with a smirk.

"Go on and hit me. I don't feel a thing. I'm more afraid your arms will be bruised."

How infuriating. I am about to throw another blow when the voice outside the tent halts me and Commander Yai.

"Commander Yai, this is Captain Mun. Is Jom inside?
Did he fall asleep?"

We lock our eyes on each other. Commander Yai snarls.

"Ai-Mun, that bastard. Has he nothing else to do? I will whip him on the ground tomorrow."

His cusses almost crack me up. Is Captain Mun's punishment that severe?

"I'll tell him to leave."

"No, Commander Yai,"

I stop him.

"I asked him to come."

Commander Yai looks at me, his eyes visibly resolute. I say in a stern voice.

"If you insist on going all the way against my will, I can't stop you, but I will be very hurt."

My words freeze him. We hold each other's gaze with his body on mine. Commander Yai squeezes my arms, his gleaming keen eyes flicking on my lips and down to my neck. I know how he feels without saying.

Commander Yai presses his lips together tightly, attempting to put his emotions at bay, then rapidly backs away. His voice is raspy.

"Hurry and leave, or I will take back my words and force myself on you and end up breaking your heart. My desire for you is overwhelming. I fear I won't be able to restrain myself."

I sit up and look at Commander Yai, who is a few inches away from me. Reluctantly, I speak.

"I'll leave for tonight. I hope we can finish our match next time."

Commander Yai offers no response. I exit the tent and see Captain Mun waiting for me with his chin resting on his palm. He throws a glance at me but asks nothing. He must at least wonder why there was no sound of chess pieces hitting the board during a chess match. I explain myself awkwardly, acting all suspicious.

"We've just finished. Thank you for picking me up, Captain Mun."

I walk with Captain Mun with my heart swaying like a treetop blown by the wind, nearly toppling over. Commander Yai isn't the only one restraining himself. I am no different. The touch on my cheek, lips, and every part of our bodies touched leave this arousing feeling in my chest. It is sweet but also tingling.

Tonight, I lie on my side with my back facing Captain Mun on the cart and look up through the treetops to the moon glowing faintly behind thin clouds. I smile at the moon like a crazy person. The smile might remain on my lips even when I have fallen asleep.

On the next day, we have arrived at a small village on another route to Seehasingkorn. It is a village in the middle of the woods with a few dozen households. Each house is built along the slope of the mountain, surrounded by paddy fields and cornfields. I notice streaks of smoke floating out of the roofs of some cabins, which means they cook inside.

The ambiance of the procession instantly gets livelier. Ever since we fled from the wildfire until now, many of us have been worn out to various extents. Taking a break at this village feels like stumbling upon an oasis in the desert. The servants and soldiers start dividing into a group that will watch the carts and a group that will head into the village first, even before we reach the destination.

We make camp pretty far away from the villagers' fields.

I observe the houses below. Cropped paddy fields occupy one side of the village, whereas the opposite is full of farms. The rice-planting season must have been over, so they are planting crops that grow well in the drought, like corns, beans, and sesame seeds, while waiting for the next rainy season.

"Jom, will you ride with me or join the group of soldiers and Captain Mun?"

Commander Yai asks. The servants are setting the tents and transferring the supplies from the carts. They have decided to spend two nights here to relieve fatigue before resuming the journey.

"With you, of course,"

I chirp the answer without thinking twice.

Commander Yai helps me mount the horse and we gallop across the grassland sloping down to the village below. Flowers dot all over the meadow, their tiny stems swinging in the wind as if dancing. I gaze down at the vast land below, where the cornfields stretch for miles on one side, looking like the ground is covered in a giant green carpet.

What an impressive view that I can only capture in my mind instead of getting photographed. Commander Yai kisses my cheek as I am amazed by the marvelous scenery, and he kisses me again a few moments later. I let him do it without protesting. I actually want to kiss his cheek as well, but,

judging by how easily aroused he is, I have to hold myself back in fear that we won't make it to the village.

The horse carries us past the farmlands to the residential area. Commander Yai slows the horse into a trot as I look around in excitement. The houses are elevated and made of wood, roofed with lalang or Phluang leaves. The unique Galaes, two carved pieces of wood, crisscross at the gables. The villagers are clothed in handspun cotton fabric. The men wear Mauhom shirts. The women are dressed in sinhs and black long-sleeve shirts.

Commander Yai asks to meet the person who sells rice wholesale to add to our food supply. I look at him in surprise. He doesn't have to do this since there are already servants whose job is to store enough supplies for the journey. Once we have reached the place, the house owner welcomes us with amity after learning Commander Yai's request. He invites us to rest on the bamboo bench in the front yard. Silver bowls of refreshing rainwater are served with betel nuts and tobacco.

Commander Yai's horse is tied to a tamarind tree, enjoyably grazing the grass. I wait until the house owner walks off to order his servants to prepare the rice, then I ask Commander Yai in a whisper.

"Don't the servants and cooks usually take care of getting food supply? Why are you doing it this time?"

Commander Yai cracks a small smile and casts his eyes on me in adoration.

"The food supply isn't the point here. Did you not notice this house is bigger than the others and the owner has goods to sell large quantities? It means he is influential in this area. We need to form a companionship with him so that we can rely on him in future predicaments. If he hears pieces of news that may benefit our city, he might send words to us."

I nod in understanding. His thought is clever as the leader he is. Soon, the house owner returns to talk to Commander Yai. He offers metal equipment, such as axes, hoes, spades, and machetes, which are kept near the barn, for sale. They decide to go there together, leaving me waiting on the bamboo bench alone. I swing my legs and drink cool rainwater while waiting. The relaxing breeze makes me want to lie down and sleep. I sweep my eyes to the plant bed beside the house. The vines of the plant crawl on the ground. My eyes widen when I see the fruit sticking out between the tangling leaves and vines. It is a watermelon.

I get up and march to the watermelon's bed. I have never seen a watermelon attached to its stem before. I stare at the big fruit and swallow. Can I ask Commander Yai to buy one for me? This organic watermelon must be super sweet and juicy. The wind blows from the back of the house, wafting the fragrance of flowers in the air. I freeze. The scent is so familiar that I get chills. It is not the scent of wildflowers I stumbled across during the journey. I step to the backyard and find the source of the pleasant odor. Amid a variety of plants-fruit trees and shady ones-all over the backyard, a Lantom tree stands in the center of the dirt ground.

The light brown-grey trunk spreads its branches and shiny green leaves. Bunches of white flowers dot the twigs, emitting their sweet scent in the wind. I stand there and gaze at the tree, enchanted, my chest filled with happiness and longing.

"What are you looking at?"

Commander Yai's voice sounds, bringing me back to reality.

"Lantoms." I point at the tree.

"I've just found out there are Lantoms in this area...Oh, northern people call them Champa Laos, don't they?"

I step into the backyard, where the Lantom tree is.

Commander Yai trails after me.

"You know this plant? It didn't grow in this region in the past. When the Khmer princess was married to His Royal Highness Prince Num of Lan Xang, the princess brought this plant to grow in the palace. Later, it was widespread to the people's houses due to its beautiful flowers and pleasant scent."

I smile. From what I have learned, Lantoms were brought to Thailand in the Fifth Reign when King Rama V visited Indonesia. Now, according to Commander Yai's words, I have discovered two versions of its origin. I bend down to pick up a fallen Lantom.

"You like the flowers?" he asks.

I nod.

"Yes. I used to put them next to my pillow. The fragrance helped me sleep soundly. 'Lan' means 'to throw away.' 'Lantom' means 'to throw away sorrow.' Lovely meaning."

I have never interpreted its meaning that way. I just thought the name sounded sad, like the feeling of misery and grief.

"If you like this plant, I will grow them around my house for you to pick their flowers,"

says Commander Yai. I glance up at him and can't help smiling.

"You'll take me to live at your place?"

"Will you come?" His voice is soft and deep.

His words make me turn away, a smile still plastered on my face.

"I don't know. I might ask Captain Mun to take me in."

"Ai-Mun's place?" Commander Yai's voice darkens.

"He raises ducks and chickens under his house. His sister will be married and leave the place in a few days. His house will turn into a pigsty then because a man like him is everything but tidy. He probably never washes his bedding and pillows. If he gets ringworm, I doubt he'll care."

Does he have to roast Captain Mun like that? I bite the inside of my cheek to stifle a laugh.

"It has to be your place, right.?"

"Right," he confirms plainly.

What a great flirt and persuader. If I don't control my feelings well, I might lose it and be swayed by his words. I smell the Lantom to hide my shyness as Commander Yai rests his affectionate eyes on me. A voice calls from the front yard, snapping us out of this inordinately sweet moment. We both walk back to the house owner, who has prepared everything.

Commander Yai pays for the goods and tells the house owner he will send someone to pick them up later. After that, he takes me on his horse, and we trot around the village. As we pass this house, I hear something that sounds like a chant, like the family is holding a ceremony.

I listen carefully. I know some northern words they are chanting. Even if the words are old and hard to grasp, it is not entirely incomprehensible.

"Commander Yai, what is this family doing?"

I crane my neck and spot people gathering inside, the lines extending to the fence.

"The blessing ceremony," replies Commander Yai.

"Um... I see." I listen again.

"Wait. Why does it sound like they are saying, 'The missing spirits, come back. All thirty-two spirits, don't scatter elsewhere.' Why are there so many spirits, Commander Yai?"

"People in this area believe we have thirty-two spirits in our bodies. If we lose any of them, we have to call it back so the host can be healthy and not

fall sick."

"So that's how it is. This is the first time I heard about it," I mumble in amazement.

Commander Yai guides the horse out of the village. We trot a long way to the pool at the farther side. It is the essential water source the villagers use to grow crops, wide enough to be a lake. My mind is clearer now. It feels like I can continue living here with little difficulty, unlike the first days after I got tossed into this era. Commander Yai brings lots of feelings to me, the warmth, the comfort, and the feeling of not being alone.

Once we are back at our camp, the tents are all set up. Tonight, they build a big fire on the ground where the grass is cut off. After the meal is ready and we all have taken care of our own business, everyone gathers around the fire the way we did at Baan Thung Hin. The night air is much chillier than the daytime, but the warmth from the fire shields us from the cold. Tonight, they don't play chess like usual. They simply drink, eat, and chat, careful not to get loud. It is a pleasing and warm atmosphere.

I sit opposite Commander Yai on the other side of the fire. He talks to the soldiers next to him, but his eyes keep meeting mine. He smiles at me and I smile at him. Nothing can come between our feelings anymore. The music from the tents of Princess Amphan and the female royal attendants drifts in the air. Despite being sick, the princess loves to listen to the tune played by the royal attendants. The melody is mellow and dreamy. Commander Yai no longer cares about the men chatting around him. He locks his eyes on me squarely. We hold each other's gazes through the blazing fire. My chest feels hot from this tingling sensation.

But then, Commander Yai rises and says something to the soldiers. I assume he is telling them he will return to his tent. One of the soldiers playfully whines and tries to hold him back. Commander Yai laughs and walks off, not forgetting to throw a quick glance at me. Have you ever been given the eye? It is indescribably arousing. I close my eyes, keeping my emotions in control, and tip my head to whisper to Captain Mun.

"Captain Mun, I'll go and play chess at Commander Yai's tent. And..."

I clear my throat.

"You don't have to pick me up tonight. I'll come back on my own when I feel sleepy."

I step towards Commander Yai's tent with this weird feeling. It feels like I am sneaking into a girl's room. However, the person in the tent is no girl.

He is a burly man that seems rather wicked. I stop in front of Commander Yai's tent, place my hand over my chest to calm down, and say.

"Commander Yai, it's Jom." My voice is a bit raspy from nervousness. When he permits me, I enter through the curtain door. Commander Yai is sitting cross-legged on the carpet. Farther to his mattress, the light from the small candle glows in the brass holder. The candlelight flickers over the content smile on his face, showing he is pleased and has been waiting for me.

"Are you going to sleep now? Am I disturbing you?"

I ask out of courtesy.

"I hope you disturb me all night."

I shouldn't have asked that just to dig my own grave. I settle across from him on the carpet. Commander Yai looks at me with a smile before turning to the perfectly set mattress behind.

"I have something for you," he says.

Commander Yai takes out a cotton bag around two palms long and places it in front of me. I eye it in curiosity.

"What is this, Commander Yai?"

"Open it."

I move forward and part the bag as told. Inside is a twig with a bunch of flowers. Lantoms.

"I brought it for you to put beside your pillow tonight," says

Commander Yai.

I go still, stunned, my gaze resting on the fragrant ivory flowers in front of me. Tears well up in my eyes as I fail to hold them. Not expecting this reaction, Commander Yai hesitates, uncertain of how to act.

"Did I do something to upset you and make you cry like this?"

"I'm not upset." I sniff, forcing my tears to stop forming.

"Commander Yai, see, you used to do this for me in another lifetime. You brought me Lantoms in a handkerchief."

"It's okay. Don't cry." Commander Yai shifts forward and embraces me. He strokes my back and shoulders in comfort.

"When you're sad, my heart feels sad as well. Jom-Jao, don't put yourself in sorrow by longing for the past. If we were once lovers in another lifetime, we are bound to be together in this one. We must have committed good deeds together since I fell in love with you in this lifetime as well."

Warmth spreads in my chest, sweet and consoling like his words. I lean my head on his firm shoulder and drape my arms around him willingly.

"Can you say it again? I want to hear it."

Commander Yai props his hands on my shoulders and pushes them off gently. He lands his gaze on me and repeats.

"Jom, I love you."

I smile. Those droplets welling up in my eyes turn into tears of joy. I stare deeply into his eyes and utters.

"I love you, too, Commander Yai."

Commander Yai cups my face in his palms and kisses both of my cheeks.

"I'm relieved now that you're smiling."

"Where did you get the Lantoms?"

"From the tree you found. When you didn't notice, I rode my horse back to the village."

I pick up the twig of Lantoms to my nose and mumble.

"Great effort."

"Do you know that Khmer people call this flower a Sarantom?"

I lift my eyes.

"What a lovely name. And it sounds like a Lantom. Do you know what it means?"

"Sarantom' means 'great love.'"

His lips curve into an appealing smile as clear as his eyes. I smile back. It feels like our hearts are so close. Commander Yai brushes my cheek with his knuckles and gently says.

"Put down the flowers so the petals won't be bruised."

He takes the twig of Lantoms from my hand and lays it next to his pillow.

"I'll put it beside the pillow as you like."

I flick my eyes to his hand and protest.

"If you put it next to your pillow, how will I smell it?"

Commander Yai's eyes sparkle, cheekily glistening, to my annoyance.

"Are you going to sleep on the cart? The air is freezing tonight. Stay here with me."

Wow..besides being flirtatious, he is strategic. In this chilly weather, Captain Mun and the men will be crammed in the tents as well. There are tons of blankets. I won't suffer from the coldness as he implies. Receiving no reply, Commander Yai moves closer and slides his arm around my back, his other hand caressing my upper arm.

I eye him.

"What are you doing?"

"Tucking you in."

Is he going to tuck me in just like this? I am both amused and shy. I can stop him, but I know I don't want to do that. Still, I am too annoyed by his sly action to let him have his way.

"I haven't said I would spend the night here."

I look at his face. My heart drums when I see his gentle smile and playful eyes.

"Jom-Jao, don't hesitate. It's normal that lovers want to be close to each other. Don't you want me to give my love to you?"

My cheeks burn from his direct words. Commander Yai holds my hands and strokes the back of them gently.

"Jom, if you give me your body and heart, I will lay my heart on your lap and no one else's."

He kisses my hands, softly and lovingly, melting my heart. When he raises his eyes, I kiss his sharp nose and say.

"I will let you keep my heart as well."

We exchange a smile. My heart feels so full with feelings that need no description. He leans his charming face towards mine, and I close my eyes as he presses his lips on my cheek. Commander Yai moves his lips to the corner of my mouth, his hot breath making my heart flutter. When his lips touch mine, I tilt my head so our lips are completely sealed. My chest tingles as if my body is about to plummet as he slips his tongue into my parted lips.

The kiss is fervent and overwhelming, and it excites my lower part. I slide my palms up and caress his bare chest. It is firm and full in my hands, just the way I like it. Commander Yai's breath gets ragged a little. I know it is because of the touch of my hands. His kiss grows more intense, and I absolutely love it.

Commander Yai unbuttons my shirt. I don't protest until he pulls the shirt off my shoulder. I catch myself and grab his hands.

"Put out the light first, Commander Yai."

"No need to put out such a small candle. When the whole wick is burned, the light will snuff itself."

"It will take a while before the wick is burned throughout. Please snuff it, Commander Yai. Someone might see us."

"Who would dare to come here without my command?
Jom-Jao, don't be shy. Take off your shirt."

How stubborn. I turn my head away from the kiss he tries to distract me with.

"It's okay to take my shirt off in the dark. I'm not planning to leave, anyway."

"I want to see you clearly. When I saw you bathing by the waterfall, your skin was strikingly fair. I dreamed about it for nights. Can't you spoil me a little?"

My heart goes soft from his pleading. My shirt falls off my body. Commander Yai showers my shoulders with kisses and nuzzles my neck. My body is gently pushed down on the mattress.

Commander Yai kisses my neck and down to my chest, and I hold him in satisfaction. When his lips touch my nipple, I arch my back and moan.

His tongue is warm and wet. He sucks them so hard that I shiver. The sensation shoots down and hardens my sensitive part. I flutter my eyes open as Commander Yai pulls away. Commander Yai looks at me, casting his gaze all over my bare skin. My neck, my chest, my abdomen. His eyes darken as his desire intensifies. Heat rushes up my face when I drop my eyes at my body. My fair skin is now pink from the pumping blood.

My nipples are wet and stick out, revealing how much I enjoyed what he did. I hold my breath automatically as he unties my drawn-up cloth. I seize his wrists, but Commander Yai knows exactly what to do. He kisses me again. His skilled tongue sucks and swallows until I forget myself and let him take the fabric away with no strength to put up a fight.

Completely naked, I tremble a little under the candlelight and his sparkly keen eyes. Commander Yai caresses my chest down to my stomach. His palms are rough as they always hold weapons, and they make me shiver even more. The candlelight brightens his face. Commander Yai leans his face down and nuzzles the clump of hair and my sensitive part.

A moan escapes my lips. My hand flies up over my mouth in an attempt to muffle my voice. His breath is hot and his lips are terribly naughty. I reach down with one of my hands and run my fingers through his thick hair. My body twists in pleasure, feeling the clear, sticky fluid seep out of the tip of my thing. Commander Yai slides his hands up my legs.

His rough palms fondle my inner thighs, sending this unbearable contentment all over my body. I tense up as I feel he is spreading my legs.

Commander Yai whispers in a deep, low voice.

"Jom-Jao, spread your legs. I want to see every inch of your body."

His voice puts me under a spell, making me obey. Despite the embarrassment, I let him do whatever he wants. My thighs part, exposing every nook and cranny of my body. Commander Yai grunts softly, and it makes me feel hot.

He places his hand on my crotch and touches my hard part down to my balls. He fondles them the way only men know it will feel good. His fingers trail down and press the skin over the sphincter, and I cry out in a quivering voice.

"Commander Yai... Wait, do you know how to do it? I'm...a man. I mean...ah, do you know where to put it in?"

"I see only one place to put it in."

You know-it-all. I bite my lip when he presses the skin near the sphincter again. The pleasure sucks out all of my patience, so I tell him.

"Commander Yai...do you have anything to lubricate it?"

"Hmm?"

"Something that will. reduce the pain when you get inside me."

He makes a sound of acknowledgment and shifts towards the mattress. I watch him take something out of a leather trunk at the end of the mattress. It is a glass bottle of clear liquid.

"Coconut oil. Very scented and slippery."

I give him a slight nod, and Commander Yai leans down close. He embraces me and showers my neck and chest with kisses. Our bodies rub against each other. I can feel his thing nudging my groin. He is turned on, a lot, given how it has enlarged and gotten so hard. I suck in my breath, overwhelmed by the sensation, imagining when it enters me. I might sound like a pervert, but Commander Yai is worse. He whispers in my ear.

"Let me give myself into your body. You are so wet, Jom-Jao."

Why wouldn't I know my clear liquid is flooding out on his stomach? But I can't let him get inside me now.

"Wait, ummm... you have to help me first. Put the oil in the bottle on your fingers and. loosen it for me."

I hate that he is such a quick learner, probably hating it as much as I love it. Commander Yai removes the lid, pours the coconut oil in his palm, applies it all over his hands and fingers, and comes closer to me. I decide to

flip on my stomach, hug the pillow, and hide my face from his gaze. Commander Yai gets on top of my body.

He places his hand on my butt and caresses it.

The caressing changes into fondling. I bite my lip as he lowers his hand to my back entrance. He circles my sphincter and presses it with his strong fingers. The pleasurable and tormenting sensations are driving me crazy.

His other hand kneads my hip. I gasp when he squeezes his finger inside the tight passage, and I moan despite myself. From one finger to two fingers. My hips are lifted. He slips one more finger inside and moves them in and out, swirling them around slowly as though to drive me insane. He has discovered the spot that gets my whole body shivering.

"Commander...ah, put it in. I can't take it anymore,"

I beg, my back entrance throbbing. I need him now. Commander Yai withdraws his fingers. Hearing him shifting behind, I turn my head and see him applying coconut oil on his fully enlarged part. He slides his palm up and down. The oil makes it shiny. It is firm and huge, corresponding to the size of his body. I turn my head back in alarm, imagining when the frighteningly large tip squeezes through my sphincter.

My hips are raised even higher, putting me on my knees. I keep my face buried in the pillow. Commander Yai presses his firmness against my back entrance and pushes it in. My voice is muffled in the pillow I am holding tightly. My back entrance is so tight it might tear. Commander Yai moves slowly, impatiently pushing the particularly huge part inside. When the thickest part has gotten in, I let out a sigh of relief.

Before I can brace myself for what is to come, Commander Yai withdraws his hips and slams it halfway in. Bliss shoots up my spine and I almost shoot my load. My inside is flexible enough to take him in more now. Commander Yai grips my hips and moves at a constant pace. He thrusts it in deeper and deeper, rubbing my prostate. The front of his thighs hits my skin in rhythmic slaps. My mind drifts as if I am in a dream. I gasp when he pulls it out and shoves it all the way in. I have reached a state of ecstasy. Commander Yai kisses the nape of my neck and hugs me as I shoot out my semen. My legs shake so much that he has to let me flop on the mattress, seeing as I can no longer balance my body on my knees. He props his body on mine with his thing still inside me.

Commander Yai gently kisses my cheek and shoulder over and over. I have climaxed, but he hasn't. Soon, Commander Yai starts moving again. I

whimper because the orgasm still hasn't worn away, yet I feel sorry that he hasn't ejaculated. Commander Yai slips his arm under one of my knees and lifts it so he can push his part inside without me getting on my knees. He moves his firmness in and out of my body. Each time arouses my pleasure, and my part gets hard again. I moan softly, which confirms to Commander Yai that I am turned on again.

Commander Yai lets out a low grunt. His prior gentleness turns into something entirely different. He yanks my hips up and slams it in violently. I have to steady my body on my flat palms to take in his aggressive thrust, though it barely helps. My body bounces from the impact.

"Commander...ah, slower...um..."

He doesn't lower the speed. On the other hand, he slams his hips harder and faster. The pleasure deep in my stomach increases. Commander Yai's sweat drops on my back. His hands grasp my butt cheeks and spread them so he can see every thrust inside my body. I bite my lip, nearly losing my mind. My muffled moan begins to sound like a sob as I am about to have another orgasm.

Commander Yai pounds it in a few more times and buries it deep inside at the last thrust as though to embed it inside of me. He releases his load continuously. My body shivers and tightens, absorbing every drop. We lie on our sides, with him embracing me from behind.

A few moments later, Commander Yai shifts.

He kisses my shoulder and pulls out his thing. My thighs are smeared with the liquid flowing out. Commander Yai pours clean water from the pitcher on a towel and wipes my body. I breathe weakly from the rough battle with the real commander who isn't only formidable on a battlefield.

I have no clue when the music played by the female royal attendants has stopped. All I can hear right now is the breeze dancing through leaves. Commander Yai pulls me to his chest, and I snuggle up against him for warmth. Commander Yai kisses my forehead and holds me until morning.

Chapter 28: If We Can be Together

"Jom... Poh-Jomkwan, wake up."

The touch on my cheek makes me flutter my eyes open. Under the shady trees, on the veranda encircling the teak house built in the Seventh Reign, as the leaves are swayed in the breeze, my head is resting on someone's lap. The face hovering over mine has a pleased smile on it.

"Did you have a sweet dream? What was it about? Was I there?"

His dark, jetty eyes are playful. I stare at them in enchantment. Khun-Yai is right here in front of me, clothed in a white hemp shirt and satin trousers. His usual attire. The faint green stubble lines his sharp jaw. I hold out my hand and touch his face and run my fingers along his facial structure gently, afraid he will disappear.

The fragrance of Lantoms wafts in the wind.

And I am awake. The nearly identical face appears above me. Despite the slight differences in the details and skin tone, the way he looks at me is exactly the same. Commander Yai is looking down at me, a twig of Lantoms in his hand, brushing the flowers on my cheek to my nose.

"What did you dream about? Was I there?"

I blink. As I realize I am in Commander Yai's tent, I throw my arms around him in alarm. Commander Yai seems surprised. He mumbles a curious sound but still strokes my back.

"I miss you."

"I'm right here."

"I still miss you."

Commander Yai chuckles.

"How endearing. Are you afraid I won't fall head over heels for you?"

I eye the dim light showering the outer side of the tent, hearing the distant crowing of roosters. The light has grown outside. I move my body.

"It's morning. I'll be off."

"Stay and have a meal with me. The cook will serve it shortly."

"No." I shake my head.

"I'm not a commander or a high-rank authority. It's inappropriate to behave like their boss. I'll eat with Captain Mun and the soldiers."

"How lovely of you to be so humble."

Lovely, huh...? Is that why he loved me for almost half the night and explored every inch of my body?

"Can you get up and walk?" Commander Yai touches my elbow. I side-eye him. He speaks in such a gentle voice, but he didn't hold back at all last night.

"I won't wobble and groan while massaging my hips in front of the others to humiliate myself. Don't worry."

I yank my arm back and huff, but commander Yai just smiles. The dawning air is cool. The sunlight will grow stronger later in the morning like the other days, I suppose. I sneak to the area occupied by the line of carts to bathe. Fortunately, everyone is too busy with their routines to pay attention to me in the morning, and no one usually washes up during this time of day. I have to, though. I need to scrub off what Commander Yai has left on my body.

Once the sun has risen to the treetops, I join the meal circle of the soldiers and Captain Mun. Each of them is remarkably energetic today since we will spend another night here, meaning more time to stroll about the village.

"Who won last night? You or Commander Yai?"

Captain Mun asks as we eat. I almost choke and quickly hide it by drinking from the bamboo tube. I answer in a mumble.

"We took turns winning and losing, Captain Mun. In total...um, it was a tie."

"If none of you has won squarely, I think Commander Yai will demand another rematch tonight, Jom."

I paste on a sheepish smile, not sure what kind of rematch it is going to be. Luckily, the topic is changed. They agree to ride horses to the village after finishing breakfast. Captain Mun points his finger at the soldier named Kab. Last time, he flirted with a woman at Baan Thung Hin and almost broke into a fight with the male villagers.

"Don't cause trouble this time. Make sure the woman you'll flirt with isn't married."

"I did make sure last time. Well, I won't cause trouble again. I'll just find liquor. I won't bat an eye at any ladies."

Kab rubs Captain Mun's arm flatteringly.

"Pui!"

Captain Mun spits, but Kab raises his plate just in time.

"Spew that nonsense to a dog. A flirt like you can never restrain yourself. Don't cause me trouble again. This time, I'll leave you beaten into a pulp at the village."

"Ai-Jom, will you come with us?"

Captain Mun asks me. I shake my head.

"Go without me. I'll stay here. I'm tired. I might take a nap in the afternoon."

After Captain Mun and his gang have ridden down the slope to the village, I hang around the servants' carts. I watch them cut the bamboo sticks into smaller pieces and help them with trivial tasks. The sunlight glares a while later and I am drenched in sweat.

I would continue working if it were the other day, but my battle with Commander Yai last night has sapped my strength for quite a bit. I decide to rest on the nearby grassy knoll. It looks serene, perfect for a nap. After a few steps, I bump into Commander In.

"Commander In," I greet.

"Oh...Jom, aren't you going to the village with the soldiers?"

Commander In offers me a small smile. Why do I feel like his smile is not as bright as usual? His eyes are clouded than before. Does he have a hangover because he drank too much last night...? Oh, right, you are bound to be worried when your loved one falls sick. And you will be even more troubled if the relationship is a secret. All you can do is look from afar in worry. You can't even take care of them by their side.

I shake my head.

"I'll rest under the tree over there for a while, but I'll probably pick some wild fruits with the cooks later."

"Bring a knife with you. When the snake crawled by the path last time, you jumped away in fear."

I laugh. We always stumbled upon snakes or wild animals along the journey. The soldiers and the servants could take care of them with little difficulty. On the contrary, I ran away.

"Um... I'll bring a knife and a wood stick. Thank you, Commander In."

Commander In slightly nods and plods away. My eyes trail after his back. I feel a bit worried, but I don't know how to help him. His problem is too dangerous for me to be involved or help out.

"Quite a longing gaze you have for In. Aren't you afraid someone will notice?"

Commander Yai's voice from behind startles me. I spin around and see him on his horse with a sullen face.

"How was that a longing gaze, Commander Yai? That's how I usually look at him. Everyone knows how kind Commander In is. What are you going to accuse me of this time?"

Commander Yai watches Commander In trudge a distance away. He mumbles.

"In, my brother, is such a charming man."

"Yes?"

"You don't stand a chance, Jom. All women in Seehasingkorn have their eye on In, but he gives his heart to none."

I sneak a laugh. Is he thinking I will be charmed by Commander In? I once was, indeed, but those feelings have burned without so much as a spark left.

"I don't need a chance. I don't want Commander In."

"Don't look at him, then."

"Oh. .Commander Yai, if we don't look at each other, are we supposed to talk with our eyes closed? Are you jealous or what?"

I have said that without thinking much, but Commander Yai is taken aback. He is reluctant, like he wants to argue but can't. His ears redden a little. I look at him in wonderment. Good grief..a person with skin as rough as buffalo skin in the sun is blushing.

"That mouth of yours is rather careless with words. I should give you a beating as a lesson."

Had it been before, I would have been terrified. Before, I was scared even when he walked by, let alone the threatening. Now I know Commander Yai is strict and fierce when on duty. When he is with me, however, he shows the side he only reveals to the people particularly close to him. He becomes the cute tiger version of himself, touching me here and there, melting me with his sweet words, and I let him devour me with pleasure.

Since I don't argue, he drops the topic. Commander Yai holds out his hand.

"Get on the horse with me."

"Where are we going?"

"Just get on as I say."

Commander Yai pulls me up on the horse, and we gallop past the knoll into the woods. We edge through the groves of trees uphill until we reach the overhanging rock sheltered in outstretching branches. From this point, we can see all around the area of our camp.

I have realized why, wherever we made camp, Commander Yai would often disappear. He was patrolling from afar the way he is doing now. Even if there is a breeze, drops of sweat still trickle down from behind my ear to my neck. Commander Yai brushes them off with his knuckles.

"Are you hot?"

"I helped the servants cut the bamboo sticks, so I've been sweating. I'll feel better after resting somewhere here."

"Why would you endure it? I'll cool you down."

"How?"

I turn to him. Don't tell me he is going to fan me. Commander Yai doesn't answer. He steers the horse the other way. Shortly after, we are soaking in the cool stream. The water is at chest level and crystal clear. I wrap my arms around Commander Yai from behind and kiss his shoulder. His skin is light brown in the sunlight and beautified with firm muscles, completely contrasting to my skin.

He turns to kiss me, and I laugh, tickled. The stubble he hasn't shaved for at least three days is now stiff, and it scratches my cheek and neck.

"You threatened to whip me earlier, but now you keep kissing me."

I purse my lips in puckish annoyance. Commander Yai turns his bod to me. "You think I would have it in me to whip you? A whip on your skin would be a pang in my heart. Commander Yai holds my waist and kisses my cheek hard. I smile and run my fingers along his jaw.

"Your beard has gotten long. Do you want me to shave them?"

"Don't you like it?"

I pause to think before replying.

"I do. I like you even with smooth skin or a beard. There is nothing about you I don't like."

Commander Yai's eyes gleam.

"Jom-Jao, you're such a sweet talker. I shall reward you."

His loose embrace around my waist tightens. I fix my eyes on his handsome face covered in clear droplets. His smile and gaze are so loving. When he moves his lips closer, I close my eyes. The sensational kiss leads us to something more intense. I lock my legs around his body under the water as his big hands clasp my hips. Commander Yai carries me to the shallow water. His kiss on my skin burns like fire, making me lose control of my emotions.

A moan slips out of my mouth when he enters me. I dig my nails in his broad back and scratch it in long lines as he trespasses inside relentlessly. Drops of water on my toes dribble down to the surface of the stream at his thighs' level. My body shivers in this sensual sensation he has ignited.

Commander Yai moves his waist faster, and my body bobs in time with his thrust. I call his name repeatedly until stars disperse behind my eyelids. My body clenches as he shoots out his load, then I prop my face on his shoulder in satisfaction. We return to the overhanging rock. I lay my head on Commander Yai's lap under the shade of trees, gazing at the distant view of groves of trees lining down over the foothills, my hand holding onto Commander Yai's. I feel so happy that it terrifies me.

I pull his hand to my lips.

"Commander Yai, we'll be together, right?"

"Jom-Jao, why are you asking such a thing? We have given our love to each other. Who would we be with if not together?"

He twines a lock of hair on my temple with his finger.

"Once we're back home, I'll bring you in. We have farmlands tended by a few servants. We can take care of them together when you live with me."

I press my lips together in contemplation and ask in worry.

"Who will I be at your place? Do people in your city accept two men living together as lovers?"

Commander Yai laughs softly.

"Who would be happy to see their son having a male partner? No one, Jom. They would be humiliated."

"Oh, will your parents allow me to live there, then?"

"My father passed away ages ago. There is only my mother, who raised me, In, and my sister. You can live there as my companion. As time go by, my mother will eventually understand that you're my lover."

"Is your mother scary?"

I get up and look at him anxiously.

"My mother? She's rather a quiet woman, not fond of nagging like the elders in other houses. She's reserved and well-mannered and never once talked back to my father. She loves me dearly. Win over her heart with your virtue the way you won over mine."

I nod, though still worried. How is my life going to be from now on? What will I have to deal with?

"What about other people? What will they think?"

"We live together as lovers in my place. We don't need to announce it to everyone in the city just to be gossiped about. If someone offends you, do calm down and pay it no mind. My family and I love you, that's enough. No one else matters."

"Won't you be humiliated if someone asks or mocks you?"

"I'll cut their tongues off."

I laugh.

"You told me to calm down."

"I'm only submitted to you, Jom. If someone else offends me, I'll draw their blood out."

"Are you really submitted to me?"

"Entirely."

"Liar." Seeing him frown in confusion at what I have said, I change my word.

"You're just saying that. You don't mean it, do you?"

"Oh. Now you're putting me in the wrong. Come here. I'll tell you."

Commander Yai pulls me into his embrace.

"How about this? In all lifetimes, I will always be second to you. If I am reborn as the moon, you will be reborn as Rahu* swallowing me whole. If you are reborn as a chicken or a duck, I will be reborn as rice grain for you to peck at. If I am reborn as a foot mat, you will be reborn as.. It.."

"Commander Yai! I don't want to be reborn as a foot!"

I laugh and push him away, but he grabs my wrists tightly.

The way he looks past my shoulder with a suddenly darkened expression makes me turn around. Below the overhanging rock, I spot a dozen men on their horses galloping towards our camp. Commander Yai springs up and says.

"Mount the horse."

A moment later, Commander Yai and I speed downhill to the camp. He helps me dismount the horse while ordering Commander In and the soldiers to be prepared. My heart drums when the cavalry and swordsmen are ready in formation. On their horses, Commander Yai and Commander In wait in imposing manners. Commander Yai's dual swords crisscross on his back.

Soon, those mighty men appear in the distance. They gallop on and stop before us. I peek at them behind the line of carts and count twelve of them, all dressed in a uniform. The two men at the front look like the leaders of the others.

One of them starts.

"Commander Yai, Commander In, the great soldiers of Sechasingkorn," he greets with a smile that seems friendly, but I know they aren't here with a good intention.

"I am Han* Lueang. This is Han Kaew. We are the soldiers of His Majesty King Kham of Chiang Mai."

The man called Han Kaew stares at Commander Yai and Commander In with a challenging gaze, but he keeps his mouth shut next to the one called Han Lueang.

"I know who you are from the uniform. It's a pleasure to meet the soldiers of His Majesty King Kham in this place," replies Commander Yai, unfazed.

"Did you happen to travel by, or do you have a business with us?"

"We indeed have a business with you,"

answers Han Lueang, his smile turning sinister.

"I am here to deliver the king's command to bring back Her Royal Highness Princess Amphan. Bring the princess to us, or we shall take Her Royal Highness by force."

Chapter 29: Deceive

Han Lueang's words confirm to me that this is not a simple matter. They are soldiers, not mere people from the city. Even their steeds are armed as warhorses. Besides, the said King Kham is the ruler of Chiang Mai. As Seehasingkorn has been taken by Chiang Mai, these soldiers have every right to follow through what their king commands to the Seehasingkornian people.

My heart pounds, my hands freezing in fear. Despite the hostile manner, Han Lueang isn't impetuous, unlike Han Kaew, who seems ready to charge in like an unnegotiable feral dog.

"What is the king's command? Do enlighten us, Han Lueang. Your words are rather offensive, as though we have committed a crime and so need to be dealt with by force. This is considered an insult to Her Royal Highness,"

Commander Yai replies bluntly.

"You are delivering the command with words and have brought only a dozen soldiers. How unlikely for the messenger of the king's command. How am I supposed to believe you?"

"How arrogant, Commander Yai,"

Han Lueang's face darkens with rage.

"I did not receive the command directly from His Majesty. I accompanied Chief Fahkum, the messenger of the king's command, but our groups split up to travel on two divided routes. Regardless, we share our purpose."

"If so, please bring San* Fahkum, the messenger of the king's command, and I will believe you."

"How dare you, Commander Yai!"

Han Kaew roars beside Han Lueang.

"Han Lueang, wait no more. We shall not waste time with these untrustworthy scoundrels. That woman is nothing but a hostage from Seehasingkorn. We only need to bring her back to Chiang Mai."

"Moron!" Commander In bellows.

He flanks Commander Yai in a fury.

"I will not tolerate a single offense towards Her Royal Highness!"

With that, Han Kaew, who has been waiting for this moment, gallops forward with his spear towards Commander In. Commander In blocks the attack and fights back with his spear. The rest of King Kham's soldiers march up on their horses. Both sides clash, battling each other with the weapons in hand.

My eyes widen in a panic. Everything happens so fast and all of a sudden. The fearful shriek of the female servants resounds amid the clang of colliding weapons. Each runs away from the ring of the battle. I hide behind a luggage cart, my heart pounding, nearly jumping out of my chest. Even if we outnumber them, most of our soldiers are infantrymen. The cavalry sure has the upper hand. The battle is horrifying. Commander Yai fights against Han Luang, but Commander Yai's combat skills are obviously superior to him.

Han Luang's spear is knocked off his grip, and two of King Kham's soldiers canter in. Commander Yai is now surrounded by the two cavalry officers, with Han Luang returning to battle. Frightened, I search for Commander In and spot him wielding his spear in the middle of those men. It is evident that they aim to defeat Commander In and Commander Yai, the leaders, to make the soldiers falter and surrender.

Amid the stressful situation, I notice Han Kaew tugs the reins to steer his horse away from the battle and heads over here. I calculate his action in alarm... Undoubtedly, he is making his way past the line of carts in the direction of Princess Amphan's tent!

A servant grabs a sword and darts out to block the way. He gets slashed by the blade of Han Kaew's spear and collapses onto the ground.

Han Kaew speeds on and will presumably ride past me to the tents' area. I decide in a second and snatches a spear in the cart. I know I possess no combat skills and don't think obstructing the experienced soldiers will stop him. Han Kaew is approaching and will soar past me in a few seconds. I move out and plant my feet on the ground, then I muster my strength to my shoulder and throw the spear with all my might.

THUD!

The spear grazes the horse's neck and tumbles on the ground. The blow isn't accurate enough to hit the steed or Han Kaew, but it makes the animal lose balance. The horse neighs and rears before flicking its head towards me. I step backward in terror, trip on a rock, and fall on my butt. Han Kaew

turns to me, his long snaky eyes extremely menacing. My heart plummets as he raises his spear.

SWISH!

A spear pierces through Han Kaew's chest, right through his heart. The figure on the steed goes rigid. Once the spear is yanked out, crimson blood spurts from the hole in Han Kaew's chest, splattering across the grass and on my face in red dots. Commander In appears before me on his horse, gripping the spear covered in Han Kaew's blood. Han Kaew falls out of his horse and lies flat on the ground a few inches away from me.

One of his hands grasps my ankle. Trembling, I watch his twitching body. Kaew's eyes bulge as blood gushes out of his wound like a fountainhead. Seconds later, his body goes still. Someone shouts Han Kaew's name in the northern dialect, which ceases the battle. Han Lueang turns away from the fight and canters towards us. I remove Han Kaew's hand from my ankle and scoot backward.

Han Lueang dismounts his horse and cradles Han Kaew's dead body. Everything falls into silence. Han Lueang clenches his jaw and fumes in infuriation.

"Commander Yai, you have gone too far. You took the princess away, refused to return her, and killed Han Kaew, the high-level soldier, not a mere infantryman. This is proof of Sechasingkorn's defiance, a rebellious action against Chiang Mai."

"You're mistaken, Han Luang,"

Commander Yai argues.

"We hold no ill will towards you or are rebellious against Chiang Mai. We only defended ourselves from your attack. Furthermore, I'm simply escorting Her Royal Highness back to Seehasingkorn as His Majesty King Kham has commanded, seeing as Her Royal Highness suffered a sickness."

"That's a lie, Commander."

Han Lueang glares at Commander Yai.

"His Majesty has never permitted Princess Amphan to go beyond the walls of Chiang Mai. Since the two princesses submitted themselves to His Majesty as the act of loyalty, how could Her Royal Highness leave without permission?"

Commander Yai is astounded. Han Luang resumes.

"I have sent someone to inform San Fahkum and His Majesty. Be prepared, Commander. Tomorrow, I will return with San Fahkum, the

messenger of the king's command. If you don't wish to die here, bring the princess and the person who killed Han Kaew to us.

The investigation and punishment shall be discussed once we are in Chiang Mai."

"If Commander Yai insists on taking Her Royal Highness away,"

Han Lueang's lips twist into a hostile smile.

"in a few days, the lives of your people and your city will be obliterated. We will not spare even young children and infants. The only thing left will be the name of Seehasingkorn to be remembered in the future as the fallen city."

Han Lueang and the rest of King Kham's soldiers gallop away on their horses with Han Kaew's dead body, kicking up dust behind them. Commander Yai and Commander In stand still for a moment, then Commander Yai slowly turns around. His gaze on Commander In sends chills all over my skin. His voice is deep and low.

"In, were you not the person who received the king's command the day I escorted Her Royal Highness Princess Duean Klum to the Lee Chiang Phra Temple*?"

What happens after this is beyond my imagination.

Commander In admits that he set up the situation to deceive Commander Yai. On the day Commander Yai accompanied Princess Duean Klum, Princess Amphan's sister, to the Lee Chiang Phra Temple, Commander In lied that King Kham sent his messenger to his residence to deliver the command.

He forged the order to bring Princess Amphan back to Seehasingkorn. The truth puts everyone in awe. I have never seen Commander Yai in this emotion before. He clenches his jaw with a stressed expression, but his eyes hurt.

"In, which spirit possessed you to do such a thing? You are aware that we need to prepare our army, along with elephants and horses, and train our soldiers. Once we have harvested our crops after the rainy season, Seehasingkorn will declare independence in the twelfth month. Couldn't you wait for a year? Why did you ruin our big plan with your reckless scheme?"

"I couldn't wait, for I hid something from you."

"What is it?"

"Her Royal Highness is pregnant."

Commander In's words stun everyone, including me. The royal physician is called for to clarify the situation right away. The royal physician admits that what Commander In has revealed is the truth. Princess Amphan's fatigue and nausea are symptoms of the pregnancy. The princess ordered the royal physician to keep it secret. The other person who knows of this is her close royal attendant.

"Why did Her Royal Highness want you to hide it?" asks Commander Yai.

The royal physician hesitates. Commander Yai continues in a cold voice.

"Things have gone this far, and yet you insist on keeping a secret from me?"

Finally, the royal physician confesses.

"I had to conceal it as His Majesty King Kham never once requested Her Royal Highness' presence in private. It would be impossible that Her Royal Highness became pregnant from His Majesty."

The royal physician's words are like a lightning bolt striking us. Commander Yai is flabbergasted. He turns to Commander In and stares at him as if he has never known this man before. I think Commander Yai has figured out who impregnated the princess.

"Ai-In!" He yells.

Commander In drops his gaze in admission. Clenching his fists, he says.

"Since everything has been revealed, what do you suggest we do, brother?"

"How dare you! You committed an impertinent action with no respect!"

"If you have to castigate or kill me, I will not fight back. But can you stop love? Once it transpires in someone, it is no different from the inextinguishable flame that will burn the person down. I am guilty, so I will accept my punishment."

"You're claiming that it's love."

Commander Yai points at his face, seething with anger.

"But is it right to put our city in danger? You don't care about yourself, but what about our people?!"

Did it ever cross your mind that they would be doomed by your action?!"

Commander In presses his lips together tightly, admitting guilt in silence. Commander Yai barks an order.

"Captain Mun, shackle him and lock him up!"

Captain Mun scurries towards Commander In as told and puts his hands behind his back. The manacles are brought to shackle Commander In's wrists and ankles.

"Stop, Commander Yai!"

A voice resounds, drawing everyone's attention. Princess Amphan steps into the open space. Everyone kneels on the ground.

"Are you going to chain Commander In and lock him up like an animal?"

"Commander In has committed a crime and is to be receive the capital punishment, Your Royal Highness."

"Release him."

"I can't, Your Royal Highness. Please forgive me"

"How dare you disobey me, Commander Yai!"

Commander Yai remains silent, his manner unyielding. Princess Amphan clenches her fists, fixing her gaze on Commander Yai. Her voice cracks a little.

"Commander Yai, instead of taking me back to Seehasingkorn, you're going to send me back to Chiang Mai despite my pregnancy, aren't you?"

"I can't act against the king's command, Your Royal Highness."

Princess Amphan is stunned, her body shaking.

"What a loyal soldier. My brother must not be disappointed to have assigned such an important task to you."

Princess Amphan raises her chin, her eyes resolute.

"If Commander Yai believes I am guilty of this sin and deserve to perish, then kill me and my child right here. Fear no sentence of treason. I have committed an immoral crime, an unacceptable action of someone born under the royal nine-tiered umbrella, so I am no different from a mere slave, not a princess. I'd rather be killed by you than by the hand of our enemy."

"I have no power to go beyond the call of my duty. I have received the command from His Royal Highness Prince Seeharaj to send the two princesses to Chiang Mai to be submitted to His Majesty King Kham, and I shall follow through with it. Royal attendants, escort Her Royal Highness back to the tent. Whoever disobeys my order, your action will be deemed as a rebellion against His Royal Highness, for you have defied the prince's command."

Princess Amphan stands in silence, tears trickling down her face without a sob. The female royal attendants all cry while escorting the princess back

to her shelter. Commander In lunges forward and bows on Commander Yai's feet, begging.

"Brother, please have mercy. Send me to King Kham to be executed. I fear no death. But please don't bring Her Royal Highness to King Kham."

Commander Yai shakes his head.

"I can't defy the king's command."

His unbending rejection makes Commander In lift his gaze. He stares at Commander Yai, speechless, his sorrowful eyes turning incensed with tears.

"Yai! Are you going to send my lover and child to death?!"

"Shut it, Ai-In!"

Commander Yai roars.

"You're a soldier, yet your action is as low as one of a slave. You'll be rotting in hell, have you no clue?! You shouldn't reach for the forbidden flower. Your decision will bring a disaster upon us all. I will not let your thoughtless action ruin our big plan!"

"Yai, my brother,"

Commander In sobs.

"Have you no heart like others? Is it a rock in your chest that twists your mind? If you have no affection or kindness to me, my love for you shall cease. We are no longer brothers from this moment on. In all lifetimes, we shall never be reborn as brothers again!"

Commander Yai clenches his jaw. He snatches the manacles to chain Commander In. Commander In struggles to free himself but loses to Commander Yai's strength. He shackles Commander In and drags him to the cart containing caged large animals like goats and pigs, the food supply of our journey. He shoves Commander In inside and bolts the door, his face clouded, his eyes full of pain throughout everything.

"Ai-Yai!"

Commander In shouts furiously, tears flooding down his face.

"You heartless bastard, I curse you to never succeed in love like others. If you ever give your heart to someone, I hope you are forced to be apart. You will fall into misery and pain in this life and the next!"

Commander Yai walks off. He doesn't look back despite Commander In's continuous cursing. I stand there in awe. What is happening before me sends the coldness into my chest, and something strikes my mind. I am not imagining things. We believe a person used to be someone in another

lifetime partly according to the belief of reincarnation that has been passed on for generations.

Now I know that is not all there is. It is not only the appearance, identicalness, or physique. There is something intangible as well. The abstract aspect. Something we can perceive with feelings. It is the nature of the individual, embedded in every molecule of a person, never changing no matter the lifetime.

Khun-Yai...No matter if he is the gentle Khun-Yai or the formidable Commander Yai, he is righteous and dutiful by nature. I know how much Khun-Yai in B.E. 2471 loved me. He didn't want to study in England and leave me waiting, yet he knew and understood that it was his duty and we both needed to be patient. Commander Yai chained his brother with his own hands. He loved Commander In and was devastated to do that. However, it had to be done for the sake of his city.

But Ohm...No matter if he is Commander In or Ai-Kumsan, something that never changes in every lifetime is the extreme honesty to his desires to the point of selfishness. He stubbornly tried to maintain his relationship with Fongkaew despite knowing it would get her in big trouble. In my era, he chose Kaimook and ended his four-year relationship with me with no hesitation. Ohm is still Ohm. He cares about his own feelings more than anyone else's.

I step back from the scene and flop on a rock farther away from the carts. In twenty-four hours, King Kham's soldiers will come back. The atmosphere is enveloped in despair. Each of us hardly speaks. Words are uttered only on duty. Commander Yai divides us into two groups. One will follow Princess Amphan to Chiang Mai under San Fahkum's responsibility. Commander Yai orders some skilled soldiers to disguise themselves in the group of servants.

The other group will head back to Seehasingkorn. I sit there quietly for hours amid this helpless situation. The sun slowly sinks, signaling that the light will be gone in a few hours and replaced by darkness. I ask Captain Mun a question when he settles on the ground beside me.

"Will Commander In receive a death penalty?"

"Is there any other choice?"

he replies bitterly.

"They won't let him live to be a bad example to others."

I nod, thinking of what Commander Yai has stated about how Prince Seeharaj, the ruler of Seehasingkorn, will declare independence from the annexation of Chiang Mai. They will spend the next eight to nine months from now preparing their army and weapons to optimal condition, in case they need to battle against Chiang Mai again.

I look around in a daze. These people are my friends, a group of people fate brought upon to form a bond with me in a certain period of time. I am angry that I have no ability to help them any more than this. Plus, I have such little knowledge of history. I know Chiang Mai in the past was annexed by Myanmar and the Ayutthaya Kingdom numerous times, but there were times it was independent, like now.

Nevertheless, I have no idea how long King Kham's reign lasted. Presently, is it the prime time of Chiang Mai, or is it weakening and soon to be annexed by another kingdom? How possible can it be for Seehasingkorn to stand a chance in the fight against King Kham right now? I barely have the answers to these questions.

All I can do at present is stall for time as Commander Yai has planned. Perhaps King Kham's reign* will be over soon, and Chiang Mai will be annexed by the Ayutthaya Kingdom or Myanmar again. Seehasingkorn will simply be a city on the traveling route with a border with Tak, establishing cordial relationships with the neighboring cities, submitted to no kingdom. That is what I hope. Having made up my mind, I muster all of my bravery and courage to stand up and step into the open space.

"Everyone, please listen."

My voice is resounding. Everyone turns their eyes to me, including Commander Yai and the royal physician. Commander Yai frowns. He must be clueless about what I am going to do. I divert my gaze from him, focusing on what I am about to say.

"I know all of you are facing a difficult situation, and it is beyond one's capability to solve everything. However, I have an offer. It might not turn the tables, but it will help you get through this for the time being."

I keep my head up, staring straight, though my hands tremble. I hope no one notices. Why should they send Commander In to his death? They will lose another great warrior with the skills of a commander of an army of Seehasingkorn, and Commander Yai will suffer for the rest of his life from the guilt of handing his brother over to the enemy. If I sacrifice myself, letting Commander Yai take Commander In back to receive his punishment

from Prince Seeharaj, His Royal Highness may postpone the penalty and have Commander In fighting for their homeland. If lucky, the death sentence may be reduced to something less severe.

If he dies in combat, that is one fate of a warrior.

I am not doing this for Commander In. I am doing this for Commander Yai. I take a deep breath and say.

"I had a part in making Commander In kill His Majesty King Kham's soldier. Send me to them instead of Commander In."

A surprised clamor reverberates from all directions. I avoid eye contact with Commander Yai, my fists clenching at my sides. I try to control them not to shake.

...I have no clue when it happened. Perhaps a few days ago or longer. I have been fixated on living through the situations at hand, through misery, sadness, and happiness from love, all the while never noticing the most significant change.

I continue speaking, trying to keep my voice steady.

"You once believed I was a bizarre being sent by the deity and could be of some use to your city, as the royal physician remarked. The assumption was correct. Please don't hesitate to hand me over instead of Commander In. I will be okay."

I point my quivering finger to the ground, suppressing the wave of emotions stirred by the thought that I don't have much time left.

"See for yourself. If I were a human such as you, in the sunlight at this time, my shadow would be as vivid as yours, not faint as though it would fade away soon this way."

Chapter 30: We Will Meet When We Close Our Eyes

Astonishment flashes on everyone's faces. All eyes land on me and my shadow on the ground. It appears oddly faint, differing from every visible shadow under the sunlight at this time.

Silence fills the air. No one makes a sound. There is only stupefaction painting on their faces, reflecting in their eyes. No one will ridicule this phenomenon or have another explanation for it, especially in the era where people believe in deities, myths, devils, and the power of nature.

Amid dozens of pairs of eyes locked on me, I turn to Commander Yai.

"Commander Yai, could I discuss this matter with you in private for a moment?"

I follow Commander Yai to his tent. Commander Yai doesn't utter a word, his expression terrifyingly dark. Once we have entered the tent and shut the curtain door, he spins around and asks me in a sharp voice.

"What did you just say?"

I attempt to contain my emotions.

"Which part? That I offered to be handed over instead of Commander In, or that I was sent by the deity?"

Perplexity flashes in Commander Yai's eyes.

"Are you..."

"No." I shake my head.

"I'm not some supernatural being as I've said. I possess no magical power or anything of that sort.

I'm just a person being swept from another era by an unknown force. It may seem like some divine miracle to everyone here, which could be right, but I'm just an ordinary human with things I know and things I don't."

"And yet you want to go instead of In."

His voice deepens as if he has to force it out of his throat.

"Commander Yai, please listen."

I look into his eyes, patient.

"Han Kaew was going to kill me. If Commander In hadn't turned up, the dead one would have been me. Sending him to King Kham would be him paying off my sin. Commander In is at fault in a lot of things, but saving me isn't one of them. What I'm about to do is so no one will die. Commander In will live, and so will I."

I step up and take his hands in mine.

"I will never arrive at Chiang Mai. I don't have that much time left. Do you remember when I told you I was swept to this era by fog and water? Water brought me here, as you have seen, and soon the fog will take me away. I know this because it has happened before. My shadow is the indicator. The fainter it gets, the less time I have. By the time it fades, my time here is up."

"Where will you be?"

I reply bitterly.

"I don't know. It's not up to me."

It is actually more than that. Besides not knowing where my next destination is, I am unsure if I will time-travel again. It might end here. My body might disintegrate and never reappear anywhere. We stand in this silence, enveloped by many stories we try to understand. No matter how hard and painful it is, I stare into his eyes. Commander Yai's hands are firm in mine, warm and protective as always. A few moments that feel like years pass by. Commander Yai's stern eyes soften with a hint of pleading.

"What if I hold you back?"

"No...We can't resist it. It's too powerful for any human to fight against."

My tears threaten to fall. I have never seen this expression on him before, and it makes me want to exchange everything I have to protect him from the pain.

"That's why I said what I said to everyone, as you've heard. Even if you don't hand me over instead of Commander In, I will disappear either way. Why would we let it happen like that? I'm not sacrificing myself. I've decided to make what is bound to transpire the most meaningful."

Commander Yai doesn't seem to listen at all. He asks me in a scratchy voice.

"How long do you have left?"

This is the question I don't want to answer.

"I'm not sure. Maybe...less than two or three days. It's become really faint, my shadow. Perhaps I..."

My words stop there. Commander Yai pulls me into his embrace and seals my lips with his as though he doesn't want to hear any more painful words from my mouth. It is the most heartbreaking kiss.

He hugs me so tightly that my body is nearly merged into his. He buries his face in the side of my head, kissing and beathing my smell like he never wants to let go. I whisper.

"I'm begging you, Commander Yai. Please grant my final request. Don't make me leave feeling like I have unfinished business here."

Commander Yai says nothing, but I know what the answer in his heart is. I wrap my arms around his body and lean my face on his neck, taking in his scent, engraving everything in my heart. We all sit circling the fire as usual tonight, though it is void of lively chatter like the other day. The fire crackles in the wind. Most of them contemplate things in silence or exchange a few quiet words.

I can tell many of them want to come and talk to me, but everything they wish to say is evident in their eyes. It gives me warmth and builds this shield over my heart, the strength to face whatever awaits. Aside from being a respectable figure, I am someone they love.

Captain Mun is next to me. He rolls a potato out of the fire with a stick, peels the burnt skin, and sets it on a banana leaf topping my plate.

"You...uh, eat up, Your Holiness."

I turn my head to him.

"Captain Mun, I'm still the same old Jom. Speak to me casually like before. Don't suddenly change it on the last day."

Captain Mun's eyes redden like he is about to cry. I pick up the potato, break off a tiny piece, and put it in my mouth.

"Um...Smells good. Very tasty."

Captain Mun's face twists. I give him an understanding smile.

"I know. Though you don't say it, I know. Thank you for taking care of me all this time. I will never forget who taught me how to wear a drawn-up cloth. I can do it well now. Don't worry, Captain Mun."

He throws his arms around me. The potato rolls out of the plate into the dirty ground. Captain Mun sobs, not caring if anyone watches. I pat his back and shoulder hard.

"I'll leave it to you now, Captain Mun. Everything."

The moon descends near the horizon, a sign that says it is half the night now. I ride the horse with Commander Yai past the vast grassland to the

distant foothill. The sky is navy and sprinkled with sparkling stars. He takes me to rest on the grassy knoll under the great tree. As the night air is frigid, we have to drape a big blanket around our bodies.

My hand is warm in his palm, his other hand wrapped around my shoulder, leaning me on his.

"Jom-Jao, what are you thinking?"

he asks since I have been quiet for a while.

"I'm thinking about how fortunate I am to have met you."

I lace my fingers with his, intertwining them.

"What about you? You were gazing at the sky. What were you looking for?"

"The Bear Iom."

I turn my head to him and smile. Commander Yai's eyes glisten with the reflections of the stars. I kiss his cheek down to his jaw. His skin is rough, the way I love it.

"See, in my era, we can't see the stars this clearly. They're blocked by dust and smoke and the city lights. My city leaves the lights on for about half the night. Can you believe that?"

"How do they sleep?"

I laugh.

"Those who want to sleep turn off the light. Those who stay up turn it on. But can you believe that almost every house leaves at least one light on all night?"

"Hmm... What a strange city."

"You can say that. Anyway, I've taken part in building that strange city. I work as...Um, it's called an architect, the person who designs buildings. I draw them out on paper, and the contractors build them up as I've designed."

"I want to see the house you designed."

"I don't have my own place yet. I've only designed houses for others."

"You have one now."

I pause and look at him. His disposition is gentle, his eyes filled with affection.

...Have you ever felt like this? Tears flood in your heart but you have to stop them from flowing out of your eyes. I don't want to cry in front of him right now. I don't want our last hours to be full of sadness. I want to collect every happy moment of ours. I want to hold him close and imprint his

warmth in my body, keeping it with me even though we are apart and no matter how long. The breeze comes. Commander Yai tucks a lock of hair on my cheek behind my ear.

"I will grow Lantom trees around my place as I have told you."

I swallow a sob in my throat, my heart withering.

"Please don't do that, Commander Yai."

I don't want things to be that way. I hope he moves on. I don't want him to dwell on his longing for me in grief for the rest of his life.

"I hope you move forward with or without me. Don't wait for me because I don't know if..."

I don't know if I will ever see him again. I squeeze his hand and resume.

"You will build a family and be happy. You will make Seehasingkorn a strong city submitted to no one."

He chuckles and says.

"I understand that you want me to protect my city. But telling me to have a wife and children? What if you come back?"

I laugh despite being on the verge of tears. That is the least scary thing compared to being apart from each other forever. Love is not always about possession. I have just realized this fact. Even if I can't own him, or even if my body deteriorates with time, I believe our love will never disappear. It will stay for perpetuity.

"Then I'll raise your children. Are you afraid I will hate kids or harass your wife? Don't be ridiculous. I won't do that."

We smile at each other. Commander Yai kisses my lips gently. He doesn't express the word of love, yet I can feel every meaning of that word surrounding me, seeping through every particle of my body. I shift and press my lips on his. A demanding kiss.

Commander Yai slides his hands on my back and hip and pulls me up to straddle his lap. The wind wafts the coolness and the fragrance of wildflowers to us under the sparkling stars and the rustling leaves. My body is warm in his embrace. We absorb each other with every inch of our bodies, with our lips, hands, tongues, eyes, flesh, and breath. The body language of love. Commander Yai throws himself on me, filling me with every emotion. His body shivers as my heart races.

We hold each other tightly. It feels like his heart is beating in my chest, clear and oddly firm. I spend the night in Commander Yai's tent. The wind

rustling the leaves outside sounds like a strange melody. I lie awake as Commander Yai snuffs out the candle and holds me in his arms.

"You know, Commander Yai, we won't be apart for real"

I tell him in the dark.

"When we fall asleep, we will meet again in some dreams. I know it because I used to dream about you in another lifetime."

"What kind of dream was it?" he asks.

"A very happy one."

We will meet again in our dreams. Such sweet words that are full of deep pain. Even if it is painful happiness, we reach for it and hug it protectively. I pull his hand to my lips and place it on my cheek.

"You and I will be like that as well."

In the next afternoon, San Fahkum and around fifty of King Kham's soldiers arrive at our camp. The hot morning air turns murky as the rain clouds gather. A gust of wind fans leaves in the air. The rubbing branches in the woods sound like a groan. Both sides face each other in the vast grassland, under the grey, thick clouds and the blustering gale. The rumbling thunder overhead indicates the imminent downpour.

Commander Yai is on his horse.

The white tassel hanging by the tip of his spear blows in the wind. A few meters away is San Fahkum, the messenger of King Kham's command. He is brawny and imposing as a warrior, like Commander Yai.

"Commander Yai, you and I have no personal hostility towards each other. Everything is the call of duty. Please hold no grudges against us,"

San Fahkum utters.

"I understand and harbor no resentment."

Commander Yai's voice is low and firm, denoting his strength. I stand behind the rows of Seehasingkornian cavalry, shackled by the wrists and ankles, ready to be sent to King Kham's soldiers.

The sky is overcast. The sun hides behind the clouds as though to conceal the fact about my shadow from everyone's eyes. I keep quiet throughout the negotiation, though there is nothing to negotiate. The royal procession of Princess Amphan must return to Chiang Mai under San Fahkum's responsibility, with a handful of female royal attendants and servants to take care of the princess, and me as their prisoner.

My heart shakes when I observe my shadow on the ground. Even if the clouds in the sky obscure the sun and dull every shadow around us, I notice

how fast mine gets faint...I am not even confident if I will last until tomorrow night.

Finally, the time I have been dreading has come. The cavalry parts their rows, opening the path for me to walk through. I step unwaveringly towards King Kham's soldiers. San Fahkum straddles his horse proudly, his eyes landing on me.

I press my lips together in a thin line, not showing any sign of fear in every step I take. I don't want Commander Yai to catch even a glimpse of terror or hesitation in me. I won't burden his heart and weaken it. We will be apart with understanding and both our strengths, and we will remember each other this way.

King Kham's cavalry moves and rings the procession, separating our group from theirs. I keep on walking with no looking back. After both troops go their separate ways in opposite directions, before the group King Kham's soldiers can leave the village, the heavy rain suddenly pours. San Fahkum halts the procession. They will take shelter in the village tonight and depart in the morning.

I lean my head on the bars of the cart, my temporary prison, and watch everything in hopelessness. The atmosphere of dusk disheartens my already melancholic heart. The rain has ceased for quite some time now, leaving puddles on the dirty ground and dampness in the air.

Commander Yai and the others must have gone far away from the village by now. They must be making camp in the woods, building fires, and taking turns on sentry duty. They will reach Seehasingkorn in a couple of days. The incident today will become one of the stories getting passed on to others and eventually disappear from someone's memory with time.

My drifting mind is jolted awake as soon as I spot Han Lueang heading towards me. I scoot away from the bars and glance around nervously. The other soldiers still stroll around back and forth at this time. None seems to pay attention to me since I am locked up in a bolted cart with my wrists and ankles manacled.

Han Lueang stops in front of the door and stares at me with chilling eyes.

San Fahkum, the messenger of King Kham's command, owns an intimidating character. Yet, I can feel he is a steely, dutiful warrior to his city, not a vicious, ruthless man by nature. Unlike Han Luang, obviously.

He glowers at me for another moment before unsheathing the dagger hooked at his waist. My heart drops when he starts talking.

"You must have no clue how many battles Han Kaew fought together with me. We fought shoulder to shoulder and swore to be brothers with our blood."

I keep my mouth shut, not daring to make a sound.
Drawing a breath, Han Lueang fixes his eyes on me.

"Han Kaew has lost his life, but I'm still alive and have to deliver his body to his family."

Han Lueang flicks his eyes to the moon floating over a cluster of clouds. It is the waxing moon, the kind that shows itself in the sky during the daytime and vanishes under the horizon late at night. My blood freezes when Han Lueang leans closer to speak to me.

His voice is low but mercilessly firm in every word.

"Admire the moon to your heart's content because you will never get to see the sunrise. Han Kaew's dagger will be buried in your chest with my own hands tonight."

Chapter 31: Pledge

I gape at Han Lueang who leaves with Han Kaew's dagger sheathed by his waist, my heart pounding in terror. It wasn't a threat. Everything in Han Lueang's eyes and manner told me he would do it. Tonight, he will come back and stab my chest with that dagger.

Time passes by with fright, and my nerves increasingly tense up. Clouds gather again even though it already rained in the evening. The roaring thunder and occasionally flashing lightning foreshadow another downpour. I try to think of my escape plan despite it being none.

They halt at the edge of the field near a village. The villagers' houses are located in the distance, visible and reachable. Princess Amphan's entourage either sets tents or sleeps in the carts as usual, whereas King Kham's soldiers are divided into two groups. San Fahkum and a bunch of cavalry officers take shelter in the villagers' places at the edge of the field. They probably pay for the stay or are acquainted with the villagers.

The rest of King Kham's soldiers remain at the temporary camp with the carts of the Seehasingkornian entourage to guard and keep watch on them. I am isolated from everyone as a prisoner.

I have no right to converse with a single person.

"Soldier, may I ask you for a favor?"

I call a soldier of King Kham ambling by.

"I would like to see San Fahkum. I have something important to inform him."

San Fahkum is my only hope. If he knows Han Lueang's plan, there is a chance he will stop him.

The soldier turns to me. He spits on the ground in contempt.

"Pui! Is it my job to send a prisoner's message to San Fahkum? If you so much as speak another word, I will tie you to a pole in the middle of the field and leave you there in the rain until morning."

I watch him walking away, my heart awfully apprehensive. Ever since Han Luang threatened me, it has been around two or three hours. I glance

up at the sky. A clump of thick clouds shrouds the moon, letting only the dim light shine through.

A clap of thunder after lightning startles me. I decide to shout out when I see a sentry looking for shelter from the rain a short distance away.

"Soldier, could you hang a lantern over here?"

He turns to me with a deadpan face. A weirdly sly grin spreads on his face. Chills run down my spine... This man is in on Han Lueang's plan! He leaves without a word. This much is enough for me to grasp that he intentionally gives Han Lueang an opportunity to kill me while the others are asleep.

I pull my knees to my chest and drape my arms around them, keeping my distance from the door, staring outside in anxiety. The cart I am locked up in is covered with a roof sloping down on both sides, with bars and a grid door at the rear. The drizzle only makes the atmosphere more forbidding.

This is the most frightening moment in my life. I never thought I would encounter this kind of situation. I never imagined I would be killed by a slit in the throat or a stab in my body by a sharp weapon. I have no idea when Han Luang will return. When he turns up, it will be the death of me.

My heart sinks. I widen my eyes in a panic as I spot a male figure appearing in the dark a few steps away from the door. He is dressed in all black, his face masked in a black cloth below his eyes. He stands in the rain and locks his eyes on me.

"Jom,"

he says before I can scream in fear.

I freeze, my heart almost stopping. I recognize his voice. Even if it is only one word, I recognize it!

"Commander Yai!"

I lunge to the bars and clutch them.

"How did you get here?"

I am both happy and confused. Isn't he supposed to be with the Seehasingkorn troop journeying back to his hometown?

"I was waiting in the woods for a chance to come to you," he answers.

"Our soldier that disguised himself in the group of servants snuck out and informed me that he heard Han Lueang would kill you tonight."

I quiver. Despite knowing Han Lueang's plan, the confirmation from Commander Yai reminds me that my life is hanging by a thread.

"Are you going to take me away?" I sputter.

"If you do that, will Seehasingkorn be at fault? King Kham's soldiers will assume you've snuck me out."

"I'm not taking you away," he says in a stern voice.

"I will hide beside the cart. If Han Lueang shows up to end your life, I will draw blood out of him with my swords."

"Why are you here alone?"

I flick my eyes left and right.

"Are the others hiding in the woods?"

He shakes his head.

"Jom, this is no one else's business. It's about you and me. If fate has me falling to my death, my life will be the only one ending."

"Commander Yai, don't say that!" I pipe.

Commander Yai exhales a deep sigh.

"Jom-Jao, fear not. Death is to be kept in mind of a soldier, for a warrior can't afford to be afraid. I will keep watch nearby. Pull yourself together, Poh-Jom. As long as I'm here, no one can lay even a finger on you."

I can't get a word out. Commander Yai hides at the side of the cart. My heart wishes to tell him to leave and not protect me, but my lips tremble so much that I can't say anything. Some time has passed in the drizzle. I try to get it together and suppress this fear clinging to my heart. Finally, I can talk.

"Commander Yai, I doubt I will last until morning. Though Han Luang doesn't come to kill me, I might disappear before then."

"I'll see you off."

His voice is firm and steady, and it somehow calms my nerves. It spreads warmth in my heart. He must be planning to stay with me until that time comes. Without a sign of breaking or destroying the shackles, I will simply vanish, or I might disappear in front of everyone tomorrow, leaving only astonishment and a story of the magical miracle to pass on.

The wind grows stronger. I move close to the wall. Commander Yai is hiding on the other side. I place my hand on it and whisper.

"Are you cold, Commander Yai?"

"This rain feels like nothing on my skin. My heart is freshened by the thought that Poh-Jom is leaning on the wall beside me."

My face twists. I am unsure if I want to smile or cry. Commander Yai is my emotional support even in this horrible situation. I sniff, holding back my tears.

"Are you crying?"

I remain quiet, not daring to answer as I am afraid I will cry. Commander Yai returns to the front of the grid door. The overclouded, rainy sky obscures his figure from everyone's eyes.

"Are you scared?" he asks gently.

I nod.

"Han Lueang will never get to you. I've told you."

I can't hold it anymore. I have tried my best to stay strong as long as possible, but there is a limit to what I can shoulder. Tears trickle down my cheeks. My voice is uncontrollably shaking.

"I'm afraid of something else. I'm afraid I will never see you again. I'm afraid something will happen to you. I'm afraid the fog will take me away from you forever. I don't know what's going to happen. I'm scared of everything."

"Jom-Jao, come closer to me."

I shift forward as told. Commander Yai slips my hand through the bars and touches my face. His palm is cold from the rain but still firm and reliable as always.

"Jom-Jao, listen, though you are fated to be apart from me, my love will never fade, and it will follow you like a holy spirit, protecting you in my place. No matter where fate brings you, no matter the danger you encounter, may those misfortunes fall upon my spirit instead of yours."

I sob.

"I love you, Commander Yai. You know that, right?"

"Why wouldn't I know the feelings in your heart
, Don't cry. Now, listen carefully."

Commander Yai withdraws his hand from my cheek. He takes his ring out of his finger and puts it on mine. It is the lion-head ring, the meaning of Seehasingkorn. The lion holds a misty gemstone between its fangs. This is the ring Commander Yai once told me that Prince Seehara rewarded him in his honor.

"I'm giving you this ring to remind you that my heart will belong to no one else."

Commander Yai folds his hands over his chest, his voice firm and clear, showing his resolution.

"I, Commander Yai, swear by all that is holy that I will love only Poh-Jom in all lifetimes. I will fall for you in our first encounter, and I will never

doubt my love for you."

The tears I have been trying to hold back keep falling. I squeeze his hand, clutching it as if it is the last thing in my life I can hold on to. My voice falters from the sob.

"If there is indeed all that is holy, if I continue to live and don't disintegrate, if there will be another chance I reunite with Commander Yai, I hope we don't forget each other. I hope we recognize one another. I hope we recall everything we have shared in all lifetimes. I hope my wish comes true."

Commander Yai smiles at me.

"May your wish be granted. I will live by my honor and pledge, holding fast to it as my life. I pray Poh-Jom lives on."

I give him a teary smile, feeling happy and devastated at the same time. I want to hug him but can't. All I can do is hold his hand through the bars. Rain pours down. Commander Yai returns to his hiding spot.

I lean on the wall on that side and wait for what will transpire. Han Lueang finally shows up. He stands in front of the grid door like the God of Death, Han Kaew's dagger hooked at his waist. My heart thumps when Han Luang unbolts the door. I curl up in my place, not moving. Lightning flashes, and I see Han Lueang drawing the dagger and staring at me with malice. He steps inside and raises his arm in the position to stab me.

SLASH!

"Abbh!!!"

A blade swings down from the side of the cart. I jump as Han Lueang screams in pain. His fingers, amputated, fly off. The dagger falls on the ground with three fingers rolling nearby.

"Step back,"

Commander Yai demands in a hostile voice.

"If not, your head will be cut off like your fingers."

Han Luang holds his hand, flabbergasted. Blood gutters from the missing fingers, painting his palm in crimson.

"Who are you?!" he barks.

"I said, step back."

Commander Yai points his sword at Han Lueang. Han Lueang retreats from the cart, shouting to his comrades to let them know what is happening. King Kham's soldiers appear and advance towards us.

Han Luang stares daggers at Commander Yai and bellows.

"A bandit! Take him!"

King Kham's soldiers shuffle in. Commander Yai wields his dual swords skillfully in both hands. Each slash leaves severe gashes on his enemies. Blood spurts out from the torn flesh.

Human parts are scattered in the rain puddles.

Commander Yai holds his ground in front of my prison, shielding it from whoever comes close, especially Han Luang, who might find a chance during the commotion to kill me.

Han Lueand has lost his fingers and a dozen infantrymen. There is no way he will let me and Commander Yai survive so easily. Commander Yai's both hands swing his swords against the weapons aiming to take his life. The terrifying clang of metals crashing reverberates continuously. King Kham's soldiers collapse on the ground.

Some groan, but some lie still, becoming dead bodies without heads. I cover my mouth with my hands, my eyes widening at the sight before me in terror.

Nonetheless, a fight between one person and dozens of men is impossible for Commander Yai to receive no blow. I bite my arm hard to mute my voice when the sword of one soldier of King Kham lacerates Commander Yai's shoulder.

Scarlet blood spouts, showering that side of his body. Commander Yai pushes the blade off, but it leaves a deep gash on him. Thunder rumbles overhead, and lightning strikes in deafening noise, shaking the ground. It flashes across the sky. Commander Yai stands his ground and battles against King Kham's soldiers charging in. The flinging sharp blades, though not fatal blows, slice and cut his flesh, drawing blood out all over his body.

Even so, Commander Yai keeps on fighting, not moving away. The stream of his blood mixes with that of King Kham's dead soldiers, coloring the puddles in red. My whole body shivers. How long will he be able to fight? Commander Yai's combat skills are superior to King Kham's soldiers. He can break through them if he wants...but he won't! Sobbing, I tremble and curl up in the cart as the fight continues. The sound of people and horses galloping echoes across the land from the village. My heart sinks. My body freezes in utmost fear. That must be the sound of the cavalry and San Fahkum, the group taking shelter in the houses by the edge of the field.

If San Fahkum reaches here and rallies to all soldiers, Commander Yai will die! Tears run down my face. I lunge to the open grid

door and get soaked in the crushing downpour.

...Then I see the fog.

It assembles in the rain, not related or being part of nature. White fog swirls low above the ground and thickens into a smoky carpet floating towards my cart. It doesn't seem to affect the surroundings except me. In a few seconds, the fog encompasses where I am. It pins me in place, peculiarly pushing and pulling at the same time, the way it happened at the Rubber Tree Road, back when I stood there in B.E. 2471.

In the rainstorm, I utter in a raspy voice.

"Commander...Yai."

Commander Yai throws a glance at me, his eyes widening at the fog engulfing me. The second our eyes meet, though there is no word exchanged and his face is half-masked, his eyes convey what is on his mind at the moment clearly. Commander Yai turns around... He has nothing to worry about anymore.

A bolt of lightning strikes the trees at the edge of the field and sets the tops ablaze. The rain plummets vigorously. My body is controlled by the fog as it carries me to wherever it desires.

The last thing I see is Commander Yai charging into the encircling soldiers. He sweeps his swords as he breaks through. King Kham's soldiers drop dead like fallen leaves while my body is yanked up, my feet lifting above the ground.

Everything is gone. The scene before me vanishes.

The world after that is a pitch- black one. I curl up like a baby and sob in silence, my body heaving. There is no sound or light in this place. Everything is still as if I am in the lifeless abyss.

I float motionlessly, feeling like my life is torn apart. Tears continue to flow out of my eyes, though I have no idea if they instantly evaporate or drift away in droplets around me.

This is the first time I think death is not scary. If death is the end of everything, maybe that is good for me. I have nothing left. There is nothing I wish to do or be. No matter where fate brings you, no matter the danger you encounter, may those misfortunes fall upon my spirit instead of yours..

Commander Yai's words replay in my mind. I hug myself with this feeling of excruciating pain in my heart. There is a soft vibration over my chest for some unknown reason. When it happens again in this weirdly

familiar rhythm, it hits me. It is similar to a phone buzzing when someone is calling.

I open my eyes to look, and the sight before me makes my eyes widen in shock! I am on the road covered in the smog that clouds the vision. The vast river flows slowly in the gloominess of dusk. The railing lines the edge of the lane. A phone vibrates in my shirt pocket, and my hands are gripping a steering wheel. I am back to the present world the night I plunge into the Ping River! My heart drums as I remember what is going to happen a second later at the next curve.

The bright headlights flash through the smog, and the other car appears on the same road. A horn blows as the car speeds into mine. It is different this time. I am not distracted by the attempt to get the phone in my shirt pocket like last time. I keep my eyes straight and tighten my grip around the steering wheel.

I turn the steering wheel abruptly and barely dodge the crashing, yet my car still zooms to the railing as it once did. The hood collides with the metal and tears it apart. My car dives into the river. The difference this time is I slam my fist on the window switch.

SPLASH!

My car hits the water surface and sinks into the darkness below. The icy current of water floods into all four open windows. I try to steady myself from the dizziness of the impact despite the seatbelt having done its job well. A mass of water fills the car in no time. I hold my breath and struggle to free myself from the fastened seatbelt as my car slowly drowns to the bottom of the river. I finally hustle out of the car. The current below is more rapid than the surface, and it is skin-ripping freezing. The discomfort from breath-holding increases by the second. I open my eyes and look around in a panic. In the darkness under the frigid water, I don't know the direction of the surface! I have only a few seconds left. The tormenting discomfort accumulates. My body is begging me to gasp for air when I am surrounded by water.

I can't believe that, in this fateful moment, the theories of wormholes and time-traveling pop up in my brain. I hear distant voices floating in the current of water, mixing with the fragrance of Lantoms.

...I swear by all that is holy that I will love only Poh Jom in all lifetimes...
your heart.....?

...Poh-Jom...My Jomkwan...

does this mean I am forcing myself on Those two voices are surprisingly soothing. I get a hold of myself again and, with the last of my strength, soar in the opposite direction of where my body is sinking.

I can't make it to the surface. My body forces me to take a breath. I gulp water into my lungs and choke violently. My chest hurts as if I have swallowed a thousand needles.

The pain resumes for a few seconds. My brain jerks like it gets an electric shock.

And I black out.

Chapter 32: Waiting for Love ~ Last Chapter ~

I am awake amid a group of people gathering around me.

One of them is a foreigner. My body is drenched. My throat burns after choking out the liquid. The taste of the river clings to my mouth. The siren and the flickering emergency light on a van urge me to shut my eyes again. As my consciousness switches off, I am carried into the ambulance and head to the hospital.

The foreigner accompanies me in the ambulance. From their conversation, this man is a doctor who traveled to Thailand at this time. He was in the car behind me and saved me before it was too late. I was retrieved from the river after I had stopped breathing in less than four minutes. If it had been longer, my brain would have been damaged from the loss of oxygen, which could have caused me death.

What happens in the hospital after that is in disarray, in which I can't exactly pinpoint the order of events. I have the physical examination for a drowned patient from an accident in steps. My consciousness drifts in and out, but not from the shock of the accident. I believe it is due to something else.

One second, I am in the present world, watching the doctors and nurses trying their best to treat me. Another second, my mind floats to the other world, where someone is waiting for me. Night turns to day in the blink of an eye. I watch everything happening as if through someone else's eyes. The sight in front of me is toneless. I can feel and understand everything. I answer questions and cooperate well with the medical crew, like someone who will be discharged soon to go on with his life.

I am the only person who knows this is not normal, and my life will never be the same. The touch of Commander Yai still feels warm on my palm. The smell of blood mixing with the rain is strong in my senses. His firm pledge is etched in my memory, becoming part of me.

No matter where fate brings you, no matter the danger you encounter, may those misfortunes fall upon my spirit instead of yours...

Did he take the fall in my place? Did his resolution bring me back to life instead of drowning in the Ping River? Was it all the bizarre mechanism of the universe we would never fathom? Did it simply follow through with its conclusive scheme? I feel like I only have half of my life left. The being right here is shattered specks of a rock that tries to piece itself into the shape of a human with flesh and blood in a living body. My soul longs for the other half of my life lost in the current of time.

The happiest time is when I fall asleep. The dreams never disappoint me. It consoles me gently with everything I yearn for. Every time I am jolted awake, I quickly force myself back to sleep so I don't have to face my life in reality.

However, we can't live in our dreams forever. After the second night of hospital admission, I open my eyes on my bed and squints at the faint late morning sunlight seeping through the thin white curtains. The smell of porridge on the over-bed table nearby reaches my nose.

"Please have your meal. The doctor will come to check on you later," says a clear voice of a nurse in a white uniform.

I turn my head to her in a daze, still feeling like I am half in my dream, unable to think of a word to respond. The nurse gives me a kind smile when I don't move.

"Don't worry. The results of your examination are good. You will be discharged within today, Mr. Ravit. The doctor in charge of you will come and inform you himself."

I blink repeatedly and shake my head a little to steady my emotions. I have almost forgotten that most people who aren't close to me address me with my real name. My heart still holds on to those sweet words... Khun-Yai's Poh-Jom, and Commander Yai's persuasive low, hoarse voice with a hint of forcefulness uttering Jom-Jao...and the way he addressed himself with an intimate pronoun with me. The kind nurse is gone, leaving me alone with this odd hollowness in my chest.

This immense loneliness makes it hard to believe this is the world I used to live in. I feel out of place, like I don't belong here. I lie still for some time, seriously pondering everything for the first time since I have recovered from the drowning accident in the Ping River.

..Was what happened to me the reality or a dream?

The question is intolerably horrible, yet I allow it to arise. It is any sane people's common sense to find possible reasons rather than believing in the

unproven fantastical tales. Did what I think happened to me in B.E. 2471 and the Late Ayutthaya Period actually occur, or was it a wild imagination I created when I was unconscious? There was no Khun-Yai or Commander Yai. There was only a sorrowful

sweet dream that disappeared when I woke up.

Tears trickle down because I know that is a pathetic lie I am telling myself.

I would rather die here than accept what I know in my heart is not true. Khun-Yai and Commander Yai are real in my memories. They are part of every particle of my body. I raise my hand to wipe the tears off my eyes, and I feel the coolness of metal on my skin. I pull my hand away from my face and look at it.

The lion-head gem ring is still on my finger. The misty gemstone glistens in the sunlight as though to confirm its existence.

The past replays in my head again: Days in the little teak house where Khun-Yai made me the happiest, his endearing smile and gentleness, the smell of the scented water, his warm embrace, until the day I was parted from him, swept away by the fog and water. My encounter with Commander Yai, the times we fought and clashed from the misunderstanding to the day he finally accepted me, the predicaments we got through side by side, and his impressive strength and resolution. It is all tremendously precious to me, and I will treasure everything in my heart and never let go.

I fix my gaze on the ring and finally come to my senses. What was I thinking before? I didn't want to live my broken life in this world even though Commander Yai had done everything to keep me safe, protecting me with his life. I was precious to him, his beloved, and he would hold on to that truth forever no matter how many lifetimes. I lay that hand on my chest, positioning the ring on my heart and clutching it protectively.

A long while after that, the doctor in charge of me turns up. He says the results of my physical examination are satisfactory. No complications to be concerned about. I can be discharged today, as the nurse said. The doctor explains that I am lucky to have received proper treatment from the beginning.

I thank him, then the doctor and the nurse leave the room. When the door is closed, I heave a sigh, get out of the patient bed, and walk to the window to part the curtains more.

My room is on the tenth floor of the hospital, so it overlooks the view of Chiang Mai from one side of the moat encompassing the old city in the shape of a square. I place my hands on the window and observe the city shrouded in smog. What a gloomy sight. The weather in Chiang Mai will be like this for a while until the wind and the rain chase it away.

My eyes focus on the nearer sight. The city of Chiang Mai fades into the background. I see my dim reflection on the glass... This is me, the luckiest person who received endless love from the man I loved as well. I have to live on. No matter how broken I am, I will live the rest of my life the best I can, even if I have to walk alone.

There is no Khun-Yai or Commander Yai here, but it doesn't mean this love will dry out from my heart. Longing for the joy in the past may be tormenting. However, the sweetness and warmth will overpower it and stay in my mind. He will live in my heart forever. I rest my forehead on the cool glass, the overflowing longing rushing in my chest. How far can this missing feeling travel? Can it fly across the sky with the wind to the little teak house by the Ping River about a hundred years ago? Can the leaves rustling in the wind whisper the word of love to him for me? Will it float up and get stuck in the clouds before falling into the cool rain showering the commander of Sechasingkorn instead of my kiss? I hope he can feel it.

Time passes until the phone on the nightstand rings and snaps me back to reality. I walk over there and pick up the call.

"Hello?" I say.

"Jom!" My sister pipes in maximal delight.

"You awake? How are you feeling? We're driving there, Jeed, Dad, and Mom."

"Jeed?"

I force my voice to be more cheerful than I feel. I don't want to worry my family more than this.

"You don't have to come here. I'm okay now. I'll be discharged today."

"You... You can talk now."

"What?" I frown.

"I called you once, but you kept mumbling gibberish like you were delirious. The nurse told me you've recovered. They didn't realize catch it. But I'm your sister. Why wouldn't I know something was off? Dad, Mom,

and I were worried, so we decided to drive to Chiang Mai. We'll be there around evening."

"Why bother yourself? The weather is terrible. Dust everywhere."

I vaguely remember I did talk to my sister on the phone before.

"Your brain must be okay now if you can nag like this.

We'll turn the car back for real" my sister taunts.

"Anyway, Ohm tried to contact you but couldn't reach you, so he called me. When he knew your car fell in the river, he said he would come to Chiang Mai. He told me to give him a call as soon as I'm with you."

"Don't call him," I say.

"I'm still tired. I don't want to talk to anyone right now. There are lots to catch up with the construction site and the office. If Ohm calls you again, tell him I'll contact him myself."

My sister agrees. I remind her to drive safely before hanging up. I don't hold a grudge against Ohm. I forgive him for everything. Let us end it here and never associate with each other again. I sit on the bed and land my eyes on the TV in a daze.

The news currently reports how they have discovered that the Milky Way, where the dense black hole occupies the center, has at least another twelve pairs of stellar systems and low-mass black holes orbiting around each other, or possibly ten thousand. If they collide and fuse, it will cause gravitational waves. I look at the screen, intrigued. The universe is a spectacularly marvelous thing, but we know about it so little despite being part of it. Up until now, I still haven't figured out how I traveled back to the past. What factors initiated such an incident? It is a question I have no idea if we will ever find the answer to.

Perhaps... those supernatural myths, devils, spirits, magic, the inexplicable mysteries, all the unknown things, might have already existed in nature. They might be part of the universe and can be scientifically proved, but humans have too little knowledge about them to stomach how they function.

In the afternoon, I get to see Tan, the head carpenter who has been repairing the two ancient houses under my responsibility.

"Hello, Jom. How are yer? Are yer okay now?"

Tan greets.

I force a smile and reply.

"I'm fine now, Tan. The doctor said I could go home today."

Tan clasps his hands and raises them over his head.

"Dear the deity...chase away the misfortunes and pain and bring happiness and good luck to Jom."

"Thank you, Tan."

Tan asks about my condition. We talk about our work and shift the topic back to my accident again. Tan said that as soon as he heard the news, he came straight to the hospital in the morning. But I kept sleeping and occasionally murmured. He stayed for hours before giving up and going back to work.

"Yer slept like yer didn't want to wake up."

Tan shakes his head.

"I was worried, so I prayed to the holy spirits to watch over you."

"Thank you so much, Tan,"

I say sincerely.

"The holy spirits must've helped me a great deal."

"Isn't it strange yer got saved by that foreign doctor?"

Despite coming from the other land, he saved yer. Yer must've helped him in the past life, so he saved yer in this one. After getting discharged, please make merit often. The good deeds will bring blessing to yer."

"Okay,"

I agree, glancing at the ring on my finger. The misty white-grey gemstone sparkles. I ask in a whisper.

"Tan, you believe in... lifetimes, reincarnation, and rebirth?"

Tan thinks for a moment before answering.

"I can't say I wholeheartedly believe in it, Jom. Some northern tribe believes we have thirty-two spirits safeguarding us. When someone falls sick, they will hold a blessing ceremony to summon the lost spirits to the host. If the person dies, each spirit will be reborn as their close relatives. They always guess who is reincarnated into their newborn babies."

Speechless, I can only smile at Tan, my heart oddly swelling with warmth.

"Oh...Jom, I was busy talking that I almost forgot. Someone told me to hand this over to yer. He firmly insisted that I had to deliver it to yer hand."

Tan takes out a small box and passes it to me. It is around a palm long, in dark brown leather, with a latched lid. I lift my eyebrow.

"Hmm? Who told you to give it to me? Is it someone from my company? What's in there?"

Tan shakes his head.

"Not someone from yer company. It's from a family member of the house owner. I didn't open it as it wasn't my business."

I take the box and unlatch it. My chest freezes when I see what is inside. I bob my head up and ask.

"Tan, who told you to pass it to me?"

Having received the answer, I lunge to the bedhead and grab the phone. My hand shakes so much I almost drop it.

"Tan, I'll leave now."

Amid Tan's confusion, I dial the receptionist outside and tell her I will leave right now. After hanging up, I throw off the patient gown and put on my casual clothes kept in the drawer. At this moment, my heart has flown to the other side of the city.

"Tan, do you have anywhere else to go? Could you drive me to the construction site?"

I ask, tying my shoelaces.

Tan replies.

"I have to pick up wood and dyeing colors in San Pa Khoi, but it's all right. I can give yer a lift first."

I smile in delight and hurry out to the reception counter to take care of the documents and get the prescribed medications. Once it is all done, I turn to Tan.

"Let's go."

"Can yer wait a bit? Here comes my nephew. I called him to get the money his mom left with me. He's my daughter's eldest son."

I flick my eyes to Tan's nephew and my mouth falls open. That is... Captain Mun! Ming or Captain Mun is in a college uniform, looking so handsome like a Korean idol that I have to rub my eyes. He must be around nineteen or twenty years. His skin is flawless, exuding a sparkling aura from a distance. Is this Captain Mun or a heartthrob on the internet? Does he have to shine this much? I look at him, my heart inflating. I want to charge in and hug him but hold myself back.

Tan introduces us to one another. Captain Mun folds his hands as he greets me because I am older. I try to stifle my smile when I learn his name is Mobile. He is studying civil engineering. When he graduates and starts working, he will be Mechanic Mobile... How freaking adorable.

I have an idea when I spot a motorbike key in his hand.

"Cap... I mean, Mobile, can I ask you for a favor?"

I leave it there and turn to Tan.

"Tan, is it okay if your nephew gives me a ride to the construction site instead? It'll be faster, and you'll save time."

Tan gladly allows it. I hop on the backseat of Mobile's motorbike and we ride out of the hospital. The motorbike speeds across the road ringing the moat that encircles the old city of Chiang Mai in the historic walls. The four corners of the walls have names: Jaeng* Ka Tum, Jaeng Hua Lin, Jaeng Sri Phum, and Jaeng Ku Huang. Even though the walls have decayed over time, leaving only the lines of incomplete orange brick walls standing tall in the moat, the people constantly attempt to restore them so they can be in Chiang Mai forever.

The dry wind whiffs, blowing the purple petal of bunches of Bungor flowers skirting the moat. They fall on the road, along the length of the rows of Bungor and Salao trees. The beauty even the smog can't blemish. My arms are loosely wrapped around Mobile's waist as he rides out of the road around the moat to the route stretching to the bridge over the Ping River.

My heart flutters in my chest as we ride across the black bridge called the Iron Bridge. The path before us lengthens to the old road flanked by hundreds of towering rubber trees. We accelerate past the shady foreign graveyard near the expansive field stretching to the old building, the Gymkhana Club. I crane longingly to look at it. It was the place Khun-Yai and I bumped into each other.

He pretended to drop his pocket watch so I could pick it up. I slide up the helmet visor, letting the wind hit my face, taking in the coolness as we run along the Rubber Tree Road. Each trunk is too large for two people to hold it. They have been standing since over a hundred years ago until now. The sunlight cascading through the branches and leaves isn't as glaring as the day Khun-Yai and I stood here together.

I close my eyes, embracing the past that warms my heart, my conversation with Tan at the hospital still echoing in my head.

(Tan, who told you to pass it to me? The son of the lady, the house owner. He arrived two days earlier from the lady and actually visited yer, Jom. He had to pick up the lady at the airport in Bangkok today, so he left the box with me. He kept reminding me to deliver it to your hand)

The motorbike pulls over at the construction, breaking my train of thought. I take off the helmet and turn to Mobile.

"Thank you. Oh, when you have to undertake an internship in your last year, if you want to apply for it at my company, contact me through Tan. I'll help you get in."

His eyes go wide, doubling his cuteness.

"For real?" I smile.

"Yeah, I have some big connections. Why can't I?"

Mobile folds his hands as thanks. I return the helmet to him and walk off. I quicken my pace on the brick path cutting across the lawn. The great Manila-style concrete-wood house built in colonial architecture is up in front of me. Further to the side of the great house locates the little teak house, where I lived for a certain period in the past.

My heart beats faster when I see the front balcony under the shade of trees. I stride forward, nearly flying, past the row of Lantom trees growing along the path from the great house to the little house I have missed so much.

Before I ascend the stairs, Mobile, Tan's nephew, calls me from behind. I turn around and see him running after me with his phone in his hand.

"It's my Oui. He said he needed to talk to you about something urgent."

I take the phone from his hand and speak.

"What's the matter, Tan?"

Tan's voice is firm and clear, yet it feels like it floats from far away. Every word sends a tremor in my chest. My hands get colder and colder. By the time Tan has said everything, my hands are freezing. After I return the phone to Mobile, I climb up the stairs of the little house. Every step is somehow shaky. The plank floor pale and has a few cracks in some parts, but I remember how shiny it was in the past.

I step past the balcony into the inside of the house. The hall is empty, but I can close my eyes and see each piece of furniture that used to occupy the room. The short pearl-embellished desk, the gramophone, the clear cut-glass pitcher, the white curtains dancing in the wind. If objects could absorb the owner's feelings, I believe this place would be full of loving memories.

My hands quake a little as I unlock the bedroom door.

The head of the four-poster bed abuts one wall like before. I open the window to let the light in. The breeze carries the cool mist from the river to

me. My heart melts when I flick my eyes to the photo in a wooden frame on the wall. It was photographed on the front lawn of the great house ages ago.

The photo displays a family of five that owned this place at that time. The Luang, Khun-Kae, Khun- Prim, Khun-Lek, and the person I miss the most... Khun-Yai.

My heart is overflowed with a swirl of emotions. I sniff and step towards the heavy trunk on the floor containing my drawings. I pick up the small wooden box inside. It is a one-foot-long thick wooden box, locked securely. I couldn't unlock it before because I didn't have the key. But now, the key is in my hand. It has been passed on to me by the person Tan said is the family of the lady that owns this place.

I unlock the key with my trembling hand. When I open the lid and look at the things inside, my limbs go weak. It is the phone I left with Khun-Yai the day I thought I would never be able to return to the present world. The material surface had dulled over time. The letter I wrote to my parents is neatly folded below. And the things that melt my heart are the two pieces of hard paper lying side by side.

Two theatre tickets, dated B.E. 2471.

My eyes are brimming with tears. I touch the two small tickets gently with all the love in my heart... Khun-Yai must have waited for me. He must have waited until the last day of his life. [😭😭😭]

The plank floor creaks softly from the outside, signaling that someone is walking through the hall to this room. I draw a breath and turn to the door. I watch the long legs step in the door. That person is a tall, dignified man. Tan's words when he talked to me on the phone earlier pop up in my head.

'Jom, don't leave yet. The lady and her son have arrived at Chiang Mai. They're on their way to the construction site. They want yer to wait there. Yai, the lady's son, is quite impatient. He wants to meet yer.'

'Pardon?' I ask, unable to believe my ears.

'They want yer to wait there, so don't leave first.'

'No. I mean the lady's son. What did you call him?'

'Yai. The ladv's son's name is Yai.'

I look at him with my own eyes, more confident than ever that this is him, the person who has waited for me no matter how many lifetimes. The Yai in front of me looks different. He must be around twenty-eight to twenty-nine years old, with a well-built figure and fair skin of the European side. His striking facial structure is a bit sharper with Caucasian features.

But, something that has never changed no matter how long time has passed is the way he looks at me.

The wind gusts from the river, blowing a Lantom from its stem into the window before it drops on the plank floor.

Yai steps towards me. He bends down and picks the flower at my feet. A gentle smile flickers on his beautiful lips as he speaks.

"Jom, did you wait long?"

His voice is deep and mellow as if to cradle my heart in his palms. It is warm and gentle. I stare into those dark brown eyes, my heart fluttering longingly.

"No.. Not as long as you waited for me."

We smile at each other, the smile that conveys every feeling without a need for words. Love, longing, fondness, every happy moment and pain we both went through. Yai tugs me into his arms and embraces me. I lean on him, feeling the same heart beating in his chest.

The scent of Lantoms wafts in the breeze, spreading its sweet fragrance around me like love. I close my eyes and rest my cheek on his broad shoulder, leaving everything here, letting him be my final shelter as I will be for him.

And we will be each other's home.

- THE END -

Special Chapter 1: Khun-Yai

[Prepare box of tissue for this chapter]

"Uncle, Louis and Alex are messing with Nu*-Dao again."

A high-pitch voice of a five-year-old girl pipes as she stomps up the stairs to her uncle, who sits on a guest chair on the raised platform under the shade of branches spreading over the large wooden balcony.

The taunting noises sound from the lawn below.

The twin boys with Caucasian features blow their sister a raspberry mischievously before running off to the back of the house with their weary nursemaid in tow.

"What did they do?"

asks the resonant, deep voice of the house owner. He is a tall man with a noble character, sitting with another well-behaved girl.

'Khun-Yai' strokes his youngest niece's head in adoration when she darts in and hugs his waist. He hasn't reached forty, yet he has to be 'Uncle Yai' to his four grandchildren: Louis, Alex, Ueam Duean, and Ueam Dao. They are the descendants

Gp. Capt. Keerati Palatip, or 'Khun-Lek', his only brother. His wife kept getting pregnant a few months after the previous child was born. Furthermore, their eldest sons are twins. Khun-Yai looks down at the small face with more Caucasian features than Thai. It makes the girl resemble a doll. His brother's wife is a British woman. They got married while Khun-Lek studied in England.

"They stole my doll,"

she fumes through her cute, small lips. Though she speaks perfect Thai, her accent is a little off, showing that she has been raised in a foreign country or often uses a foreign language. The other girl reading a book nearby sighs in annoyance.

"You keep playing with them despite knowing they love messing with you. When you cry and come to Uncle Yai, it only entertains them even more."

Khun-Yai smiles. His two nieces may look similar, but the older one, Ueam Duean, possesses more Thai traits. Her face is sharp and pretty, and her manner is rather 'prideful' like her grandparents. She isn't naughty and energetic like most half-European children in Thailand.

"But they messed with me." Ueam Dao pouts.

"Don't react. They'll get bored and stop messing with you eventually," Ueam Duean says, not looking up from her book.

"I hate them both!"

"No, don't say you hate your brothers."

Khun-Yai carries his niece and puts her on his lap. He wipes the tears off her glowing pink cheeks.

"Let's read a book with Duean. I have lots of picture books. There are tales and coloring books as well."

The little girl stops being upset immediately.

"Nu-Dao will color pictures."

Ueam Da runs to the antique wooden cabinet in the hall to fetch colored pencils. This house still holds that ancient vibe, with the old furniture and how it has never been renovated. It is a small little house, shady in the middle of the surrounding trees. The Lantoms trees line the path from the house to the backyard adjoining the Ping River.

The little girl's attention span is very short. She starts fidgeting after a few minutes of coloring. When she notices the nursemaid bringing snacks to the twins in the backyard, the little Ueam Do dashes down the stairs, forgetting about her brother's recent mischief.

Khun-Yai reads a book quietly with his other niece, his brother's middle child, in the dim shade of trees and the breeze. He observes the countenance of his niece, who focuses on reading. Her small face is more serious than other six-year-old kids.

"Nu-Duean, don't you want to go out and play?"

he asks.

"I want to finish this book first, Uncle Yai."

Khun-Yai cracks a soft smile. His gentle smile only makes his face dreamy, the charm of a calm and collected middle-aged man.

"I thought you would be bored after a long sit."

"I'm not bored. I love reading in your house."

"Do you love reading or the house?" he teases.

"I love both. I want Father to move to Chiang Mai like you so I can come here every day," the girl says, then she catches herself.

"Will you allow me to do it?"

Khun-Yai lets out a soft laugh. The girl speaks eloquently and cleverly. Her light brown big, round eyes are clear and lively, unlike other little girls that usually act reserved in front of elders.

The man watches her in silence and thinks for a moment, then he pats the little girl's head lovingly.

"Nu-Ueam Duean, do you love this house?"

"Yes."

"If I give you this house one day, will you promise to do something for me?"

The little girl's eyes widen.

"Sure. What promise?"

"Goodness. You've agreed even before knowing what the promise is,"

Khun-Yai laughs, his eyes sparkling like jet.

"When you're older, I'll tell you then."

A clamor from the front lawn below draws their attention to a group of people heading this way. The thirty-three-year-old Khun-Lek carries one of his sons on his back while his other son tries to climb up.

"Daddy*, let Louis get on your back too."

"Don't call me Daddy. I've told you to call me Father and only speak Thai when we're in Thailand. Don't you remember?"

"Father, please let me get on your back as well."

"How do I carry both of you?"

"But you're a soldier."

"A soldier, not a soldier,"

the father laughs. He relents and lets his son climb up on his back. His twins are remarkably naughty. But since they are cute like foreign dolls, the elders of the family usually spoil them more than reprimand them.

Once he has reached the stairs of the little house, he lets his sons get down and orders the nursemaid.

"Duangiit, give them a bath. They're dirty."

One of the twins asks.

"Can Alex play in the inflatable pool?"

"Go ahead." Khun-Lek waves his hand.

The children holler. All three of them race to the great house while Khun-Lek shakes his head in weariness. Ueam Duean shuts the book, puts it back at its place, and follows the nursemaid to bathe without waiting for no one to tell her. Khun-Yai moves into the hall and opens the window to let the wind in. Khun-Lek follows him inside and stretches next to the short pearl-embellished desk his brother still uses to study.

His brother lives in this little house, leaving his room in the great house vacant. He only sleeps there when his family travels to Chiang Mai or visits him.

"Ugh...how exhausting. I don't know if they're humans or monkeys," Khun-Lek complains.

"Kids are supposed to be naughty. They'll be calmer when they grow up."

"You're talking like you have kids, Yai."

"If you're going to talk about this again, I suggest you drop it now."

Khun-Yai stops his brother. He knows his brother is about to bring up the topic of his marriage. Getting caught by his brother, Khun-Lek laughs. He leans his back on the cushion.

"I never want to push you. Mother told me to do it."

Khun-Yai's expression stays nonchalant, unbothered by what he has heard. His brother eyes him, looking both amused and irked, then he continues.

"She's lowered her standard for quite a lot. A decent woman with no sinful record would be fine. Her wealth is a less important matter. This wouldn't have been approved back then. The daughter-in-law of the Palatips must come from a noble family to be suitable to Judge Kritsada Palatip. A nobody wasn't allowed. Neither was a foreigner. Look how it turned out. Her pickiness has made my brother single until now."

Khun-Yai shakes his head amusedly.

"I'm fine with that."

"Prim and I aren't. She got pressured even more than me," he grumbles in exhaustion and locks his eyes on his brother's face in contemplation.

Khun-Yai, his brother, is a perfect man, with his wealth and a stable career. His looks are beyond discussion. He has always been handsome and gets more charming as he gets older. And yet, he has remained single until now. He remembers the first years his brother was back from England. At that time, Khun-Yai, Kritsada Palatip, the eldest son of Phraya Nitiphumthamrong, was exceptionally popular in the Capital. All the

daughters from several families hoped to marry the eldest son of the Palatips, the family with a promising future. His assets were plenty, and he had a tendency to go into politics like his brother-in-law.

His brother also didn't hold back. His handsomeness exuded like an aura, spreading his charm at full max. He lived his life like a star in the high-class society in Bangkok. Wherever he went, a spotlight shined on him. Yet, that was all there was. Kritsada Palatip never handed his flower garland to any woman. He treated them equally, polite and respectful. Many of them had a chance to get closer to him, but they would end up being just friends or sisters. No one could ever take his heart, as if he had given it to someone already.

'I give up. Who would be able to put up a fight? I don't even know who my rival is. She could be a ghost with no existence.'

Those are the words Khun-Lek heard from a woman, a relative of Khun-Sak, his brother-in-law. She was one of the women Khun-Prim tried to match with Khun-Yai so she could be her sister-in-law, but the plan failed as the feelings were unrequited. The hope to become the daughter-in-law of Lady Kae got even dimmer when Khun-Yai moved out of Bangkok to serve as a judge in another province. It was of his volition to be stationed in the city in the north, specifically Chiang Mai.

"I have no clue why he's so attached to that place. He goes there whenever he has a chance. If the servants hadn't reported to me that he never brought a woman there, I would have thought Yai had a secret wife in the city."

Lady Kae always complained this way. This place was where his family lived when Luang Thep Nititham, the leader of the family, was stationed in Chiang Mai. When his father was bestowed the ranks, 'Phra' and 'Phraya', respectively, and coffered the title, 'Phraya Nitiphumthamrong', he needed to move back to Bangkok.

Several years after that, this house became more like a vacation home where his family occasionally visited, especially in the pleasantly cool winter. Khun-Yai's wish to be stationed in the north upset Lady Kae to a certain extent, but she didn't make a fuss. Her eldest's son resolution was too steely to oppose. Even Phraya Nitiphumthamrong couldn't bring himself to oppose his eldest son as he had accepted his son's visionary since before World War II. Back then, Khun-Yai founded a sugar factory with Khun-Sak,

his brother-in-law, which exasperated many relatives. Even Lady Kae couldn't keep quiet about it.

"My family has always been doing a merchant business. We're thick-skinned. I'm more worried about your father's side of the family. They'll think we have gone broke, or maybe the judge's salary is not enough, so our son has to do farming."

Even so, it couldn't waver Khun-Yai's ambition. Besides partnering with Khun-Sak to found the sugar factory, he managed Lady Kae's lands in Nakhon Pathom, turning them into paddy fields and fruit gardens that must be strictly tended to. Who would have thought that one day, what his brother had initiated would save their family and relatives from the predicament the others suffered? World War II lasted for several years and put loads of households in difficulty. Moreover, there was a big flood in the Capital and Thonburi, which extensively caused damage to the houses and farmlands in the area, resulting in the prices of everything shooting up.

Nonetheless, his family survived the crisis. Rice and sugar were distributed to their relatives. As to the amount they divided for sale, Khun-Yai firmly insisted they sold it to other people in moderate quantities. Every family must not stock it. If they were found out that they sold it in the market at a higher price, they would be forbidden to purchase goods from the Palatips.

"What a blessing...May you thrive and prosper. Ugh.. you prepared everything like you could predict the future."

Khun-Lek smiles when he remembers how some people's offenses turned into praises later. The war has been over for more than a year. The country is finally at peace. Those who took refuge from the bombs in the suburbs and the other provinces have returned to their hometowns, yet his brother refused to move back to Bangkok as his family suggested.

Khun-Lek rests his chin in his palm and asks.

"Seriously, Yai, who are you waiting for?"

Khun-Yai turns his head to his brother, a grin on his face.

"Someone."

"Goodness...my brother. I guess your feelings aren't reciprocated. That's why you're still single. So, won't you tell me her name or which family she's from?"

"You will know when you see that person. If you don't get the chance, just keep in mind that there is someone. As simple as that."

"What a witty way to put it, brother."

Khun-Lek sits up and stretches.

"I'll go and take a bath now. I feel sticky. Don't forget to have dinner with us at the great house, or the kids will ask for you, especially Ueam Duean."

Khun-Lek rises and steps towards the door. He halts when his eyes catch the wall occupied by framed drawings, every single piece penciled. There are rough sketches and detailed pictures.

Most capture this place from different angles-the little house, the great house, the water front pavilion, the garden, the view of the Ping River, and some locations in Chiang Mai.

"Nai-Jom's drawings," Khun-Lek mumbles.

"You framed them so nicely. I thought they were lost. Beautiful pictures. He sure was skilled. What a shame that he suddenly..."

Khun-Lek stops there.

What happened to 'Nai-Jom', his brother's former majordomo, was utterly mysterious. He disappeared without a trace as though he simply ceased to exist in this world, a puzzle no one has been able to solve. The police concluded that he ran away since they couldn't find his family, his body, or any clue.

"Will you continue to keep these drawings?"

"Of course, they will stay here until the next generations."

Khun-Lek cracks a small smile. He doesn't understand why exactly his brother is so attached to numerous things here, but he believes his brother must have a reason that he prefers to keep to himself.

Khun-Yai watches his brother descend the stairs at the balcony to the lawn below, then he turns his eyes to the drawings on the wall. Each one holds a story he regularly recalls. The penciled lines on the framed pictures fade from his mind, replaced by a man's flawless face.

...Poh-Jom.

Khun-Yai's expression softens, his heart full of this overwhelming longing. He recalls the fair complexion, the raven eyes he thought were pretty and clear like stars, the clever remarks he tried to conceal under his humble manner, his scent, his warm skin, the body shivering as he engraved his love deep inside of him, and the soft, moist lips that made him want to kiss whenever his eyes fell on them. Everything is vivid in his memories, never fading away. They feel so clear in his feelings as though it all has just happened at this moment, though it has been over a decade.

He steps out of the door into the balcony. The spacious wooden balcony is shady and cool under the great trees extending branches. The lawn below is grassy, carefully tended. The ivory Lantoms speckle the grass. He thinks of the first days he came back from England and stood in this place again. It was the time his heart was disturbed by the unbearable frustration. He thought years would alleviate his feelings that got stuck with someone here, but it wasn't the case.

Years had shaped a boy into an adult armed with intelligence and a wise way of life. As to love, however...it was the only thing unchanged, as if it had fully grown way before. His heart still yearned for 'Poh-Jom', his first and only love in this life.

Those profound feelings kept him lost in the exitless pain. Waiting without a clue if they would meet again was endless torture. But then, one day, he discovered that he still had hope.

It was one morning in winter during his stay here on holiday. He woke up early. The weather was incredibly refreshing that he felt like taking a stroll around the place. He stepped out into the balcony and dropped his gaze to the garden below. There was fog swirling above the ground.

And he saw it...

A slim figure stood on the lawn near the stairs of the little house, a sketchbook and a pencil in his hands.

Though the man had his back on him, he recognized who that person was with confidence.

...Poh-Jom, the person he missed the most.

A few seconds after the stupefaction, he rushes towards the stairs and shouts.

"Poh-Jom...!"

The figure froze, hearing someone calling his name. He turned his flawless face reluctantly. Before he turned his head enough to see Khun-Yai's face, he decided to spin and march away in a hurry.

Khun-Yai sprinted down, feeling like his heart was about to fly off. Unfortunately, the sight disappeared after a couple of his steps down the stairs! He flopped on the last step, his heart pounding in his chest, his eyes fixed on the foggy lawn in a daze. He knew it wasn't a dream. It was real. The smell of heat faintly lingered, implying the portal to the other world had opened here seconds ago.

The hope that soothed his heart took shape like rain in the drought. He realized by then that he would undoubtedly meet that person again someday, though he had no idea when it would be.

It could be in the next month, next year, or next lifetime.

The wind carries the scent of Lantoms with the cool air, blowing the past memories to the present time. Khun-Yai heads to the bench on the balcony. He settles there and leans against the backrest, his chest strangely warm. It feels like the wind has brought the longing and the word of love from that person to him.

It comes with the wind, the grass, the rustling leaves, and everything around him. He closes his eyes, taking in the warm sweetness spreading in his chest as if he is embracing that person at the moment.

His beautiful lips part and let out a whisper.

"I will always wait here...Poh-Jom."

Special Chapter 2: Yai

Never once in the life of Kanthorn Palatip, or 'Yai', has he wanted something and not gotten it.

He is the adopted son of Lady Ueam Duean, the oldest daughter of Gp. Capt. Keerati Palatip (Lek), the descendant of Phraya Nitiphumthamrong, the forefather of the Palatips, the family that has been wealthy since before the democratization. His biological mother is Ueam Dao Palatip, the youngest child among the four siblings, the heirs of Gp. Capt. Keerati.

His father is an American man who runs a business in Thailand, so his physique and features are a combination of two races. He is well-built, fair-skinned, with curly hair and brown eyes.

'Your son sure is something. He's so stubborn that I don't know what to do with him. When he sets his mind to something, he's unstoppable. He would act calm and not argue but never listen to anyone.'

He once heard Lady Ueam Duean complaining to her sister, his biological mother, when they met up.

'Oh, I've given him to you, so he's your son,' replied Ueam Dao, or 'Mother Dao', unfazed.

'Right.' The lady scowled.

'And I'm sure he doesn't take his stubbornness from me.'

Kanthorn smiled at what he had heard. He calls his biological mother 'Mother Dao' and Lady Ueam Duean 'Mother'. It all started when he was born. Back then, Ueam Dao gave birth to male-female twins, the heredity from his grandmother's side. It was her second pregnancy, which was so many years after the first one. Ueam Dao hadn't expected to conceive again. Both babies had low birth weights. Even the doctor in charge couldn't guarantee they would survive. The infants must be under close medical care, and the doctor couldn't specify the date they could be discharged.

The incident worried the mother a great deal. Eaten up by the distress, besides mainly counting on the medical science, Ueam Dao sought help from the holiness in the hopes that the supernatural being would create a miracle. Ueam Da decided to ward off bad luck by stating her prayer to give

her twins to someone else as a tradition. And so, Lady Ueam Duean, her sister, bound holy threads around the babies' wrists as a gesture of accepting them as her children. A few weeks later, the infants gradually grew stronger, to their parents' and relatives' delight. When they were healthy enough to be taken home, Lady Ueam Duean told her sister her wish.

'Dao, since you've given your children to me to drive off bad luck, let's not make it only a tradition. Would you give one of them to me for real? Thawat can't have a child. Moreover, he seemed to adore his nephew very much.'

"You also seem to adore him dearly,' her sister said, understandably and sympathetically. Her big sister had been married to a high-rank officer in the army for years, but they never had an offspring. Later on, they found out that Thawat, her husband, was sterile.

'I feel a strong connection with him.' The lady brushed her nephew's cheek in her arm. 'Look at him. He got some Caucasian traits from his grandmother's and father's sides, but only his skin tone. His facial features are sharp and charming.

The longer I look, the more similar he is to Uncle Yai. He will be just as handsome when he grows up. I probably don't have a chance to have my own children. If I can treat your child as mine in this life, it will be such a blessing. I won't take the mother's job from you, of course. An adoptive mother is incomparable to a biological mother.'

Ueam Da pondered it. No mother would easily let her child get legally adopted by someone else, even her beloved relatives. The twins were discharged at the same time. The daughter got fatter and bigger by the day, whereas the son wasn't as healthy. He regularly fell sick. The mother's heart couldn't help but feel concerned and think back to her prayer.

With determination, Ueam Da finally signed the adoption papers, giving her son to her sister and brother-in-law. It deeply moved Lady Ueam Duean. Her perpetually nonchalant expression of a prideful woman turned into a bright smiley face every time she cradled the baby in her arms.

'Dao, I will give all the estate I inherited from Uncle Yai to him. Now that I have him as my heir, I am relieved. The will and the promise I made to Uncle Yai will for certain be carried out successfully. Otherwise, I won't be able to rest in peace.'

Everything went on with satisfaction on both sides. And the 'I won't take the mother's job from you' was basically a lie. The first thing Lady Ueam

Duean did as an adoptive mother was nickname the baby 'Yai' after her uncle, whom she loved and respected greatly. He was also the baby's grandfather.

The lady raised her adopted son with love and care, fully devoted. Ueam Da had another daughter to take care of, and her husband was busy with work all day and subsequently came home late. Thus, her sister's involvement in taking care of the children during the daytime was more of a support than interference.

Yai and his twin sister, Thanya, spent their childhood in Thailand. When they turned eight, their father decided to move back to the US for business reasons.

'I will send them to Thailand every summer to be with you.' That was the promise her sister made to save her from the devastation. The twins visited Thailand every six months. The lady herself also flew back and forth from Thailand to the US regularly. A few years later, the lady permanently moved to the US to be with her sister. She was heartbroken because her husband had a mistress the age of their child and even openly took her to social functions.

The lady bought a house a few blocks away from her sister. Having received her love and care since young, her adopted son eventually moved in to her place.

'The older you get, the more similar you are to your elder grandfather. People in the past would have said he was reincarnated in your body.' Kanthorn or Yai often got this remark from his relatives.

He admitted he resembled Judge Kritsada or, as his mother called, Uncle Yai. He looked like him more than Gp. Capt. Keerati, his paternal grandfather. Regardless, he knew what their differences were. Uncle Yai was known for his calmness and resolution, both in his character and appearance, unlike him. Under his composure, his chest was constantly troubled by some sort of emotion. It was a feeling of something missing from his life, which made no sense. What could a person who had everything have missed? The feeling was overwhelming to the point of tormenting.

It pushed him to search for what he thought was what he wanted that would fill the peculiar emptiness in his heart. He studied hard and also played hard. He drove cars like a storm and played sports like an energized maniac, especially basketball and surfing. He would spend all day hunting

for big waves in the sea and soaring above them. Those resulted in both positive and negative ways. He was an honor student and college athlete, but he occasionally worried the lady about some of the things he did.

Kanthorn consoled her by graduating with honors. Those things were his family's pride, yet it wasn't his answer. He had no clue what he wanted. His love life was no different. Kanthorn had been in many relationships, but having lovers was not the same as loving someone. He treated his lovers well, trying to open his heart and hoping love would eventually bloom. It was all a waste of time. Liking differed from loving. It was as though his heart wouldn't allow him to fall in love.

At last, he stopped. He didn't want to hurt anyone anymore. Pretending to love someone was worse than breaking their hearts. If his heart wouldn't fall for anyone, he had to let it be. After graduation, he poured his attention into his family's hotel business. It eased some of the restlessness in his heart, but not all of it. Sometimes, when he was alone and had time with himself, his heart would yearn for something he had no idea what it was.

One day, he chatted with Lady Ueam Duean in the living room. It was two months before they departed to Thailand after years. Lady Ueam Duean in old age was still as slim as she was when young, her white hair tied up in a bun. Her eyes behind those glasses were still keen and stern, which made people who weren't close to her nervous. That day, they talked about the renovation of the ancient houses in Chiang Mai, where Kanthorn visited from time to time when he was a kid.

'Why this architect?' Kanthorn asked with a smile. He found it amusing how the lady insisted they hired the architect of this company even if there were companies in Chiang Mai ready to take this job. His adoptive mother acted like a fan supporting her favorite artist.

'I have my own reason.'

The lady replied briefly, but it was enough to pique his interest. He picked up the magazine and flipped through the pages. The renovation of the old Thai house in Khlong San was gorgeous and very creative, but it wasn't so extraordinary that his mother should be this determined. But when Kanthorn flicked his gaze to the two architects in charge of the renovation, he was stunned. Something bloomed in his chest, a speck of tiny blazing fireball. It grew bigger and fanned its flames brightly in another moment. One of the architects was a man around twenty-four to twenty-five years old. He was tall and slender, his face flawless. He looked like a half-

Chinese man, judging from his skin tone and the upward slants of his eye tails. He wasn't strikingly handsome. His appearance was rather cute and clean, but it locked Kanthorn's eyes and shook his feelings violently. His chest was swarmed with a wave of emotions. This time was different from before. It felt like he had found something he had been waiting for. a while, then she said.

The lady looked at her adopted son in contemplation for.

'I have something to tell you, and something I want you to do for me if I can't take care of it myself.'

What the lady told him emerged from the worry towards their trip to Thailand in the next two months. Though the lady was healthy, considering her age, it was difficult for her to travel as her bones had become weak and brittle with time.

The ten- hour trip on a plane could cause her to be ailing. If that was the case, Kanthorn had to go to Chiang Mai to accomplish the lady's task in her stead.

He had to deliver a key to someone. This story was so bizarre that Kanthorn and the lady couldn't pinpoint the explanation. Judge Kritsada, his elder grandfather, made a will to have his heir deliver a key to a close relative of Mr. Ravit Pitayanan on a specific date.

How could his grandfather know the name of this architect when he had passed away before this person was born? It amazed Lady Ueam Duean as well. She had been looking for this person until she found someone with this full name for real, but he had no connection with her family. Uncle Yai passed on his fortune and numerous properties to her. However, Uncle Yai specifically noted that she couldn't sell the place in Chiang Mai and had to keep some things there. From then on, Kanthorn started to see the scenes...

They weren't the scenes playing in the air or his dreams. Those sights showed themselves in his head. At first, they were faint and dim, like he was dreaming while awake. They flashed in his mind one by one and evaporated like smoke. As time passed, those scenes got more vivid and appeared his consciousness more often. They narrated the breathtaking stories of him and the other man, whom he clearly remembered as the architect he saw in the magazine.

Kanthorn was extremely confused. He wasn't sure if it was all his imagination he created. As time went by, those stories got clearer in his mind, as though they had been in him all along and waiting for the day to

surface. He wasn't an audience. He was in the story, experiencing everything with his eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and heart. He felt his existence in the past lifetimes. He had lived those lives with a man he deeply loved to the point he had waited to reunite with him in all lifetimes.

Poh-Jom...

The words uttered from his mouth clung to his tongue, the fragrance of Lantoms, the wind on the road lined with rubber trees, the sweet scent of that person's hair and cheeks, tears in the moonlight. Even the sting of his wounds oozing blood in the rain stuck to his skin. The rumbling thunder, and his pledge.

I will love only Poh-Jom in all lifetimes...

What he saw wasn't his imagination. It had lied under his subconsciousness until it was awake in his consciousness. If the spirit of a human never disappeared from the world, it must have traveled through time, recording everything, and now dwelled in his body. Kanthorn no longer hesitated. Reincarnation used to sound like nonsense to him, but not anymore. It had been proved with the will of his grandfather, in other words, him from a hundred years ago.

He decided to go to Thailand immediately, two days earlier than the original departure date. He was too impatient to wait. Kanthorn asked Lady Ueam Duean to permit him to hand over the key himself. The lady neither rejected nor demanded a reason. She would follow him in two days with his twin sister.

Kanthorn or 'Yai' showed up at the hospital in Chiang Mai the day after the architect in charge of renovating his ancient houses drove his car into the Ping River last night. Ravit Pitayanan, or Jom, as the foremen and builders called, wasn't fully conscious.

He slipped in and out of consciousness. When he was awake, it lasted only briefly, as if he would rather sleep than wake up. It felt like his long-lost dearest had returned to his grip.

Kanthorn offered to pay the medical bills and the damages of the accident. The company that the architect worked for didn't have to take responsibility. When an officer in the hospital asked about his relation to the patient, he firmly answered that he was his client and lover. After the physical examination, the patient was moved to a single room to recover. The second Kanthorn stepped into the recovery room and saw the man on the bed, his limbs went weak. His heart softened like it was about to melt.

The sleeping man on the bed looked terribly broken. Not his body, but on the inside. He slightly pressed his lips together before loosening them, his eyelids shifting like he was dreaming. Kanthorn wanted to pull him into his embrace and shower his face with kisses in longingness, but he just sat next to the bed and touched the man's arm gently, afraid he would vaporate in the air if the touch were a bit too strong.

The immense love and longing surged in this chest.

He slid his hand to the man's palm on his side and held it to share his warmth. The raging storm that had swirled in his chest for years finally calmed and became the breeze blowing the pleasant coolness to his heart. It was pleasing and serene as though this was where his heart belonged.

His heart had never allowed him to fall for anyone because he loved this man... Kanthorn ran his fingers gently over the misty gemstone that was once his. He observed the flawless, fair face with eyes stubbornly shut. He wanted the man to open his eyes and know he was right here. He wanted to tell him how much he loved and missed him. He wanted to ask if he felt the same.

He leaned down and left a soft kiss on the man's hand before whispering.

"Wake up, Poh-Jom. I've come to you."

[NC] !! Special Chapter 3: Us

"Yai, what kind of picture will be exhibited in the gallery? Which artists?"

I stand under the tree in front of the little house, writing down the details of the expansion. The space under the little house has been renovated into a glass room to serve as a gallery. Beside me is a tall man with defined facial features of a half-Thai, half-American man.

...Yai.

It has been a month since I drove my car into the Ping River. It was a month full of...How do I put it? Heartbreak, pain, amazement, profound joy, and utter fulfillment.

"You only."

I turn to him. Yai is over a palm taller than me, so I have to tip my head up a little. His deep brown eyes staring my way make me avert my gaze.

"Let me ask you one thing. Who would pay to see my drawings or purchase them? I'm not a famous artist."

I am not being humble about my skills or anything.

I am pretty skilled, but not that extraordinary. Why would he display only my pictures in the gallery, anyway? Does he think I am Picasso?

"I'm not going to show them to anyone, and I won't sell them either."

"Hmm...."

"I'll keep them to myself."

Ugh... My limbs suddenly go weak as heat rushes up my cheeks. Is he serious? A gallery of my drawings only for him? Isn't he embarrassed if the house spirit sees?

"I like it when you blush,"

Yai says with a soft smile, and it makes me lose my balance even more.

"Please don't tease me too much. I'm working right now."

I act serious, though I know I am not that unwavering. If he starts flirting for real, I won't have the strength to reject him.

"Let's take a look inside. If you want to adjust anything, I'll talk to the interior designer again. That way, the work will be fast and smooth."

We walk on the flagstones on the path across the lawn. Our shadows stretch on the ground side by side, and I can't help but recall the past. From everything we both have gone through-joy, pain, love, and the most painful thing: being apart-to our reunion, there has never been a day I am ungrateful to what I have today. Yai is the precious person who gives me utmost happiness.

I glance at his side profile. The pale green stubble lines his jaw. My heart oddly flutters. I want to do everything for him to make up for how long he waited for me. I will do anything... as long as he feels happy as I do.

Yai turns his head to me. Now he knows I am looking.

"You're peeping at me again, Jom."

"Yeah," I admit sheepishly.

There is no use lying since I have already gotten caught.

"You'll be punished. You know that?"

"Yeah."

I look away so he can't see I am trying to stifle a smile. This Yai of mine is an ultimate angel, handsome, adorable, and kind. In his early thirties, he is mature. However, there is this burning fire inside of him at the same time. He is gentle yet quite possessive. And when he expresses his ownership over me...it is beyond imagination. It feels like there are three people in one body.

Each night we shared our bed felt like picking a card from a pile. I had to guess how it would go every night. Gentle, rough, or thrilling? I don't want to think of the details right now. It will distract me from my job.

"What do you want for dinner? I'll drive you there."

I change the distracting topic to something else. Yai has been in Thailand for around one month. He has been going back and forth between Bangkok and Chiang Mai because Lady Ueam Duean, his adoptive mother, stays at her house in Bangkok with Thanya, his twin sister.

I met Lady Ueam Duean when she arrived at Chiang Mai. She was a dignified woman. She had a slim figure, but her eyes were sharp and unyielding despite her old age. Many must be nervous when conversing with her. So was I. Regardless, the nervousness was overpowered by my genuine admiration and respect towards her.

Lady Ueam Duean was the person Khun-Yai in B.E. 2471 trusted and chose her as his heir. She was the one passing the key to me. I will be forever grateful for that.

"Pick the place for me. No spicy food, though."

"How about crab noodles? There is a good place near the moat. I'll take you there after work."

After that, I am busy with my job. I have to ensure precise results with the ceiling installers and electricians. Ya heads to the backyard to have an international call about his business. In the evening, after I have gotten off work, I drive Yai to the crab noodles place as promised. Though I didn't grow up in Chiang Mai, I have to act like a local by default as I know about the area more than he does.

"Jom, you have to eat a lot."

He passes a big piece of crab meat from his bowl to mine.

"You've spent a lot of energy, so you must eat a lot."

"Two bowls aren't enough for me? I'll be fat."

"You won't if you work out."

Well...it is easy for him to say that. He exercises seriously every morning. That is why his physique is ravishing. His shoulders are broad and fit. His abs are beautifully shaped, not ripped like a bodybuilder. I once saw him swimming the butterfly stroke at the condominium and couldn't take my eyes off him.

It was impressive and powerful, especially when he got out of the pool... Wow. What about me? Running a few times a week is considered good enough.

Besides that, I sometimes work out in my apartment, doing push-ups and sit-ups, lifting weights, and jumping rope when I want to. I am not that active but also not that sloppy. I can't afford to be careless about my health. Having a strong, healthy boyfriend, I need to take good care of myself.

After the meal, we drive to his place at the condominium by the Ping River. He bought an apartment on the top floor as his accommodation during the renovation of the ancient houses. My car has been in the parking lot of the condominium since

I crashed at his place the other day. Yai doesn't stay here every day since he still travels back and forth between Bangkok and Chiang Mai.

Therefore, I mostly stay at the apartment my company has rented and sleep over with him at times. I enter the lobby with Yai and wait in the elevator hall, a stack of his documents in my hands. Yai is talking to someone in the US on the phone. I wait until he is done and comes to me before holding out the documents.

"I'll come here again in the morning." I smile at him.

I have planned to wrap up some work tonight so I can start working on Monday smoothly. Yai doesn't seem to hear me. Not taking the documents, he tugs my arm, pulling me into the elevator with him before whispering.

"I'm so tired today. I want someone to scratch my back."

...Really?

But he doesn't give me a chance to argue. Yai grips my arm like I am a prisoner with a tendency to run away. When the elevator door opens on the floor of his apartment, I step into the spacious living room with a dining room farther inside. I turn my direction to his office on the opposite side of his bedroom.

I place the documents on his desk and walk over to the giant window overlooking the city and the Ping River at night. I push the switch to turn the window from translucent to opaque for privacy. There is not much stuff in his office as it is served as his temporary workplace. Aside from the large desk beside the glass wall, there are built-in shelves and a couch set in the center of the room to rest or read on

Yai follows me into the room. He takes off his watch and unbuttons his collar. I glance at him and speak.

"Why don't you take a shower first and wait in your bedroom? I'll scratch your back there."

"I want you to do it here."

...Good grief. I throw another glance at him. Yai has unbuttoned the three top buttons, and I catch a glimpse of his chest under his shirt.

I step back by instinct.

"What are you scared of?" Yai says with a laugh.

"You're acting like I'm a tiger about to devour its prey."

"I'm not scared."

"Then why did you step back?"

I gulp. Yai steps closer to me until I can smell his aftershave. He rolls his sleeves with his eyes fixed on me. His arms are firm, veins bulging on his skin... This is crazy. Why does he have to be so sexy rolling up his sleeves?

"I was going to get a towel to shower. I thought you didn't want to shower right now, so I figured I'd go first."

Yai gives me a slight nod. I march past him towards the door, feeling chills from his gaze. With that soft smile on his lips, I get feverish as though my life and body are in danger.

Before I go far, Yai grabs my arm and hurls me into his embrace.

"I haven't hugged you today," he says softly.

"That's not true. You hugged me this morning. You also kissed me."

"I don't remember. Care to remind me?"

...How unfair.

But if I don't kiss him, he won't let me go. I tilt my head and press my lips on his. As we kiss, it hits me that he actually won't let me go if I kiss him. Did my brain go dead? The more we kiss, the more intense it gets. His embrace is too tight to escape from now.

I don't know which lifetime he inherits this trait of being easily aroused from. He begins caressing my skin. One of his hands slips into my shirt, fondling, playing with my nipple.

"Hmm..."

I push his chest away as his fervent kiss starts to hurt a little. I don't even know why I resist.

"You're naughty."

"I'm not."

"Why did you give me the eye today?"

"I didn't," I object again, unable to find something else to say. My mind runs wild.

"I warned you, yet you still did it."

His voice is stern like he is scolding a child. Undoubtedly, I will receive some kind of punishment, though I am unsure what I have done wrong.

A moment later, I get the answer. Yai is on the big black tufted leather chair with me on his lap. My back leans against his chest and my legs spread on his knees. My pants have been taken off and lain on the floor. I tip my head up and rest it on his shoulder in pleasure. Beads of sweat form on my temples from the blissful and tormenting sensations.

My sensitive part is in his palm, growing bigger from the stimulation, nearly ejaculating, but he won't let me reach there. His fingers clench around the root to halt the orgasm. My back entrance is loosened and wet from the lubricant gel.

"Y...Yai." My voice comes out in a stutter.

"Please...let...me come."

I beg in a voice that doesn't sound like mine, my eyes brimming with tears in this painful desire. My back entrance aches and my balls feel tight.

Yai cocks his head to kiss me, so long, like he wants to drive me crazy. He withdraws his lips and changes my position.

"Stay still and wait for me," a hoarse voice whispers in my ear.

...I can't believe I am doing this.

I bend down on Yai's desk, my cheek pressed on the back of my hand, my legs spreading wide. Even if the glass wall behind has turned opaque, some light can still seep through. My naked backside is exposed in the dim yellow illumination from the light

hidden on the ceiling. The slippery stickiness from the clear gel coats my back entrance and drips down my thighs. I hear him unzipping his pants but don't turn around. All I can do is press my lips together tightly and close my eyes as if waiting to be executed. The shifting sound behind excites me even more.

"Ah..."

I let out a moan as his warm part squeezes inside. Yai pushes his enlarging firmness all the way in with a few hip thrusts. The moan in my throat is wimpy and quivering. The intense desire aroused by the previous stimulation sends a tremendous impact. I move my hips to take in the pounding, my hands reaching for the edge of the table and clutching it, my ears hearing the sound of flesh hitting flesh.

My body twitches as I am about to reach the climax. I have a strong orgasm, my warm liquid spurting on the floor. My thighs shake so hard that I have to beg him.

"Um...h. hold up."

Yai doesn't stop. He keeps slamming his firm part inside of me, pinning me in this position until he climaxes. I pant weakly. Yai drapes his arms around my waist and props his face on my neck. He kisses it to comfort me, but I hiss, still irritated that I got smashed out of the blue on his desk.

We are a few steps away from the soft couch. Couldn't he do it there? Yai doesn't mind. He supports me up and kisses my cheek.

"Now, we can take a shower."

I feel so annoyed that I want to elbow him, but I can't bring myself to do it because he leans his handsome face to me with a smile. His eyes are clear and pretty, and his curly hair makes him look like a cupid. And a cupid makes us fall in love and chases away our discontent.

It is my common blindness. Despite being screwed repeatedly, I have never learned my lesson. In the morning, I open my eyes on his bed with a

sore body, feeling like my energy has been sucked out dry. The two pieces of crab meat he gave me yesterday evening were useless. It was like I bit his bait and got bitten by him again... How wicked.

So, I was done three rounds last night. I suppose I don't have to remind you how sore I am right now. The first round was at his desk. The second round was on the bed. The third round was before dawn. The pleasure was to the point that I almost begged for my life.

Fortunately, today is Sunday (but unfortunately, he knew and served me a full-course meal), so I don't have to drag myself out to work. I flutter my eyes at the soft sunlight casting on the blanket, too lazy to get up and go to the bathroom.

"Are you up? Have some breakfast."

I turn to look. Yai is entering the room in his white robe, carrying a tray of food. I sit up and take the neatly folded robe on the nightstand to put on. Yai sets the tray on the table flanked by two chairs beside the window. I stand up and walk over to sit on one of the chairs.

The breakfast contains two eggs, ham, broccoli, grilled potatoes, and aromatic coffee. I stare at his face intently. In the faint sunlight shining through the window, Yai's face glows like a person who has slept and eaten well. On the contrary, I can barely keep my eyes open and my hair is all disheveled.

It annoys me so much that I can't stop myself.

"Did you have to be so hard on me last night? I wouldn't run away from you."

"Tell the person inside me," he says levelly.

"Are you blaming Commander Yai?" I look at him in disbelief.

"No, I mean the other one."

"I've endured it for a hundred years. Be sympathetic."

"Khun-Yai!"

"Come on. Don't be grumpy this early in the morning," he says, chuckling.

"Eat first to light up the mood."

After the meal, Yai carries the tray out and returns with a warm towel to clean my hands. I smile at how caring he is. My irritation has vanished. It feels kind of weird to be taken care of by him. It is funny and cute.

"Let's take a shower," he asks.

"Carry me. I'm drained. I don't have enough strength to walk."

It is my turn now. I will make him pay. And he carries me, on his shoulder, straight to the bathroom. I protest but don't struggle too much in fear that I will fall.

We soak in the bath together, pouring out the shampoo and making bubbles, taking turns washing each other's hair. Yai massages my feet as I lean on the edge of the tub in relaxation.

"This is heaven. It'd be nice if we could do this every day."

"Quit your job and stay here, then."

"Ugh. It's easier said than done. How am I going to get by if I quit my job? I'm not rich like you."

"Quit your job at your company and work with me."

"You're running a hotel business. I'm an architect.

What position will there be for me?"

"I can find a position for you."

I open my eyes, my face tensing up despite myself. I know his intention is good, but I am not okay with this. I say.

"Yai, I appreciate your kindness, but I'm not fond of the idea. I don't want to be granted a position I don't have the skills for. I don't want to be a sugar baby or sponsored by you."

He is stunned for a moment.

"That's not what I mean."

"But you're making me feel that way."

I regret what I say instantly. He meant well, and yet, instead of politely rejecting his offer, I spewed those harsh words without thinking about how he would feel. Silence envelops us. I want to apologize, yet the word somehow won't come out. Yai furrows his brow slightly, pondering something.

A moment later, he says.

"Are you free next week? I want you to go to Bangkok with me."

"Why?" I ask in a soft voice.

"I have an important business, and I want you there."

I press my lips together a little. I actually wish for more explanation, but I don't want to oppose or upset him any more than this.

"Okay," I reply.

Yai smiles softly, and it melts my heart so much that I shift forward to hug him. A week later, we are traveling to Bangkok as agreed. We are in a

limousine with a partition between the driver and the backseats for privacy. Yai is gorgeous today. He is in a black shirt with the sleeves rolled up and denim pants, dressing casually on the weekend but still looking expensive. I think it is his face that looks expensive.

My boyfriend is so handsome that I wish to hang a sign 'Mine. Don't look,' on his neck.

As we are on Sukhumvit Street, Yai asks.

"Do you have some cash in your account?"

"Yes, I have," I answer. My last bonus is still in my account with all my save-up money. I have been saving up to see the Northern Lights if a change occurs.

"Why did you ask?"

"Am I good enough to be with you forever?"

Hmm..? I blink and look at him in confusion. How did the topic about money turn into how he is good enough or not?

"Your answer?"

"I...ah." I am at a loss for words, stuttering as I can vaguely guess how this is going to go. Yai narrows his eyes and asks in a deep voice.

"Or would you rather have someone else in your life than me?"

Whoa...How fierce...So fierce. I have finally understood. I bite the inside of my cheek, both amused and irked.

"Are you proposing to me?"

Yai holds my hand. His voice is pleasingly resonant.

"I love you. I want to be with you. Will you be my life partner?"

My heart is gone, melting into liquid at his feet. There is no need to mull over it because the answer has always been in me. I lace my fingers with his, hold his gaze, and reply with a smile.

"Yes."

Later, I have discovered why Yai asked me to go to Bangkok with him... He has brought me to the jewelry store to pick the rings.

..He has it all planned out, huh? I walk across the thick smoky carpet laid along the floor in the jewelry store on Sukhumvit Street with Yai. Apparently, he has booked an appointment because a staff member rushes in to welcome him and addresses him with his real name. I am relatively nervous since I have never chosen a wedding ring for anyone before.

"You have to buy it yourself because rings are supposed to be given to each other."

"Sure,"

I answer in a daze, feeling like I am walking on a cloud, not the floor. Even if Ya robbed me of all my money and left me with a few coins, I wouldn't protest.

"What kind of ring do you prefer?" I sweep my eyes over the rings in the glass display cabinets glistening in the light. They are frighteningly sparkling. Just a glimpse and I suddenly feel poor.

These tiny diamonds are over a hundred thousand baht. But when I cast my eyes on Yai's finger and imagine my ring on it, my heart swells with vigor.

All right! If I am going to have a husband, I must be willing to go all-in!

"Do you like a smooth ring or one with a diamond?" I ask.

"I like a smooth ring."

Yai chooses a smooth white gold ring with no diamond. I smile when I see it. It is breathtakingly stunning despite its unfancy design. Perhaps it is because it is a wedding ring, and that is its meaning.

After Yai has selected his ring, it is now my turn. Yai touches my waist and speaks gently.

"Pick the one you like."

I shake my head.

"I have the ring that I love and suits me. I want to wear it as my wedding ring."

I lift my hand to show him the lion-head ring ornamented with a misty gemstone, an ancient ring no one has ever used as a wedding ring. His beautiful lips break into a bright smile. His eyes gleam, filled with love.

"This one is the best choice," he says.

"Yes."

In the afternoon, Yai takes me to pay respect to Lady Ueam Duean together. She stays at the old houses she resided in before moving to the US. His sister is also there. She resembles Yai but has more Caucasian features. Yai doesn't bring up the wedding rings or our plan to live together, but he treats me attentively and gently. I feel a bit flustered when the lady's keen eyes land on the ring on Yai's ring finger. However, she asks nothing.

We fly back to Chiang Mai together in the evening and celebrate our delightful love on the rooftop of a hotel.

I warned him not to be over-the-top, like booking the whole restaurant or

spreading rose petals from a helicopter in the sky to show his great love. I wanted a typical celebration as it is special in itself.

Deadpan, Yai told me he couldn't afford a helicopter, so he booked the nicest table on one side of the rooftop and requested the hotel to decorate the zone with Leelawadee trees, or 'Lantom,' and barricade us with a row of flower bushes for privacy.

I sip on the wine and listen to sweet jazz music played by a band. The evening breeze is pleasantly cool. The smog shrouding Chiang Mai last month has disappeared. The sky tonight is bright with the luminous full moon. Our table is adorned with a vase of fragrant ivory Lantoms. They are all Lantoms. No roses or other flowers. I run my fingers along the petals before asking a question.

"Do you think the lady could tell?" I drop my gaze, afraid of the answer.

"She's an adult who has seen the world for ages. Why wouldn't she be able to tell?"

I press my lips together. This is what I am worried about the most. I admire and respect the lady. I don't want to be the cause of her distress.

"Do you think she can accept it?" I ask in a whisper.

"Give her some time," Yai says plainly.

"But I believe she will try to understand and accept it one day. She loves me dearly, and she sees you as someone special."

"Really?" I raise my eyes at him.

Yai smiles at me. He reaches out and touches my cheek.

"Yes, I'm positive about this."

Yai's answer soothes my heart and gives me courage.

I need to show her my sincerity to her son. I flash a smile at Yai and add a shrimp from the shrimp cocktail on his plate.

"What about my family? Aren't you nervous? Are you afraid my family will build the walls between us?"

Yai and I have agreed to visit my parents together in Chonburi. We intend to tell my parents we are going to spend our lives together. My parents know I am into men. They will probably be a bit shy because they suddenly have a son-in-law, but they will be happy for me.

"No," he says in a firm voice.

"If I'm going to ask for their blessings, I have to show them my sincerity. If I were afraid of something like this, how would I assure them I can take care of their son?"

I smile, my cheeks bulging. I feel so shy that I have to keep forking more food into his plate to hide my shyness.

Our next plan is to invite my family, the lady, and Yai's twin sister to make merit together at the temple instead of holding a wedding ceremony. That is all I want, for people I love and care to know and congratulate us. I have no desire to announce it to the world.

"Now, never bring up the sugar baby thing again."

"Huh?" I blink stupidly.

"And don't limit my expenses. We are lovers. We are together as husbands, and a husband has the right to spend as much as he wants on his spouse."

...Unbelievable!

Did he wait a whole week to say this? Did he wait to claim his right to spoil me without my disapproval?!

My mouth and hands are itching. He didn't act nonchalant that day because he was upset I rejected his offer. He was planning to trap me.

...What a freaking cunning man!

"Why don't you just build a company and start a business for me?" I can't hold it anymore. Yai locks his gaze on me. Those sharp eyes framed in long lashes display his determination. I quickly wave my hand to stop him.

"Don't do that. I'm joking. It's not that I'm too prideful to accept your kindness, but I want to work at a company like this for a while to gain more experience. When I feel confident enough, I will open my own company. I prefer to start from a small company first. I might rent a floor in some building."

"Taking it slow, huh?"

"Yes."

"How do I help you?"

"Give me your encouragement. I want that from you the most."

"I can do that for you, of course."

His voice is incredibly pleasing. It spreads warmth to my heart.

"But if there are rich clients," I resume.

"or if your wealthy friends want to build mansions or have big projects, you can recommend me."

"What do I get from doing that?" Yai seems like he is trying to stifle his smile.

"An eight percent referral fee deducted from the design fee. This rate is only for you. The others get only five percent."

"Interesting." He nods a little.

"Can I have a deposit first?"

"You haven't gotten me any job and already asked for a deposit. I think you'll scam me."

"Have I ever been sly to you?"

If I count from all three lifetimes, there are tons. I purse my lips at him before catching a sparkling object soaring in the sky.

"Oh..! Yai, a shooting star. Make a wish!"

I close my eyes and mumble my wish. I wish for my marriage life with Yai to be smooth and free from vital predicaments. When I open my eyes, I see him clasping his hands together like me. But I don't know what he wishes for since his face is blank.

Then, I notice that object moving in the sky, not shining and dying.

"Wait, was that the light of an airplane?"

"Yes."

I flick my eyes to him. Yai's expression looks very innocent... He knew it wasn't a shooting star.

I stare at his face, not sure if I should yell or laugh.

"Why did you make a wish with me instead of telling me it wasn't a shooting star?"

"Say the sea's a stream, I listen.*"

I can no longer hide my smile. A beam spreads to my cheeks. Why does he have to be so cute?

"What a poet. If someone heard, they'd think you're from a different era.' He smiles and says nothing more, tapping the table with his fingers in time with the music changing to the remixed old-style Thai song.

Resting my chin on my hand, I take in the sight of him. The traits of Commander Yai and Khun-Yai from the past are part of him and always reveal themselves through his eyes and actions. Every time he touches me, I can sense their hearts inside him.

I am glad and grateful to whatever made him remember me. Maybe our strong wishes are more powerful than we can imagine, and they might send some forces that originate all sorts of incidents. Commander Yai pledged to stay true to me in all lifetimes, and he is a man of his word, while I prayed that we would remember each other when we met again. Nonetheless, our

courses of time flew in different directions, like he went clockwise and I counterclockwise. Our next destination wasn't the same place in B.E. 2471, but now. Right now, I want to kiss him so much, but I have to contain myself. It will be better to wait and kiss him in the car or back home.

I gaze up at the moon, recalling the time ages ago when I asked the moon if it had ever stumbled upon me having a happy life. The answer is right here with me. My attention is drawn back to the present time when Yai turns my face to him with the Lantom in his hand. He brushes my cheek with the petals and casts a captivating smile.

I shoot a smile back at him with all of my heart. It must be so sweet because he shifts forward and kisses my lips. I kiss him back with my whole heart, not caring if anyone will see as we are hidden behind the flower bushes. The only witness is the moon in the sky, which happens to be covered by the thin clouds. Out of everything I have encountered and been through, those magical incidents must be unbelievable to everyone, except the man sitting beside me right now. The man who has given me his eternal love, no matter if 'eternal' means an endless time, the circle of time, or the jumble of time with inseparable pasts and futures, or whatever.

To me, time might be nonexistent as Khun-Yai, Commander Yai, and Yai, who sit beside me at this moment... None of them is the past to me.

The End

FYI

The author mostly use northern dialect in this novel , some word and idioms are hard to understand because the only exist in old eras.

Poh is a word used to address other males in Thai old eras.

'E' is a word used to address other females of the same or lower status in the old eras, usually used by lower-class people.

Oui is an old word used to address old people, such as grandparents.

'Ai' is a word used to address other males of the same or lower status in the old eras, us used by lower-class people. People in the past addressed their foreign bosses literally as 'The foreign boss'.

Chiang Mai was part of the Lanna Kingdom in the past. Therefore, the language, people, and other things influenced by the Lanna culture or arts were often referred to as Lanna.

Nan a province in northern thailand

Jek A derogatory term Thai people in the past used to call Chinese immigrants.

People in the era referred to the Central and Southern Regions of Thailand as Siam.

'luang' c5-6 thai civil service ranking

'khmu' one of the largest ethnic group in northern laos

'Khun' is a polite word used to address people of higher status or others in general.

'Nai' is an alternative word used to address male servants or other males in general, more polite than 'Ai'.

Doctor Onesk, or Dr. Marion Alonzo Check, graduated from a medical school in the US and departed to Thailand in 1875. He moved to Chiang Mai in the reign of Prince Inthawichayanon for evangelism. Doctor Check was loved by Lanna people in the era due to his expertise in medicine, neighborliness, and appealing looks. Later, he became the representative of the British forestry companies to ask for concessions over the forests in Northern Thailand,

Thai people in the past sometimes referred to Doctor Check as Doctor Chitt

The song is 'Poh-Leang-Chitt', sung by Peng Waneesorn in the 'Joi-so' style, one of the northern music styles. The lyrics were translated by W.S. Bristowe.

'Ai' is a word used to address older males or male lovers

'ai fak' the protagonist of the Judgement, Written by Chart Korbitti.

'ludti' A term ancient Thai people used to call roti.

the verse of food and dessert A verse in the royal Boat Poem written by King Rama II

tale of khun chang khun phaen * One of the most notable old folk stories in Thai literature.

"Even sober, I'm drunk with love's drink. What d'you think might put it aside? Mid-day cup dilutes morn' cup of wine, but love's wine keeps me drunk all the day" A verse in Journey to Phukhaothong by Sunthorn Phu,

translated to English by Mom Rajawo Seni Pramoj.

'phra' c7-8 in thai civil service

'khuns' C3-4 in Thai civil service ranking. The title 'Khun' is different from the 'Khun' used to address general people, e.g., Khun-Yai and Khun-Kae.

"The good hide in the alleys, the bad roam the streets" It basically means the good need to keep a low profile while the bad openly commit evil deeds.

kanom tian kaew Crystal stuffed dough pyramids

'a chicken sees the snake's foot and a snake sees the chicken's breast' A Thai idiom meaning both parties know each other's secrets.

A hero in the Javanese story, 'Enau', adapted by King Rama II.

'busaba' A female lead in Enau.

'laweng wanla' A foreign female character in Phra Aphai Mani, written by Sunthorn Phu.

'Unakan' is the male disguise of Busaba in Enau.

"Om, om, deities roaming the earth since the beginning of time, Souls of betrayers shall be clutched by the hands of the ghostly divine.." Translated modernly for better comprehension.

"Force feelings to stop, possible, But yearning's out of the question. Thoughts dismissed, crossed out one by one. Can't erase affection out of mind" A verse in Enau written by Sunthorn Phu

'Jao' is a word used to address someone you have affection for or are close to in the past

"Commander In, what if I use incorrect royal words*? In Thailand, royal words are spoken when one talks to or about the members of the royal family. Every word differs from the Thai language used in everyday conversations

'Great' means Yai in Thai.

Nang is an alternative word used to address other females.

According to Hindu mythology. Rahu is the god that gobbles the sun and the moon. which causes an eclipse.

'Han' is a word used to address the general soldiers of Lanna.

'San' is one of the Lanna bureaucratic ranks.

The Lee Chiang Phra Temple is the old name of the Phra Sing Waramahavihan Temple Chiang Mai, where the Phra Phuttha Sihing image has been enshrined since King Saen Muang Ma's reign until the present time.

King Kham was the ruler of Chiang Mai, descended from the king of Luang Phrabang. He ruled Chiang Mai during the period Myanmar was weak, which led to the rebellions of many cities in Lanna in successful attempts to declare independence. King Kham ruled Chiang Mai in 1727-1758, the longest period of liberty of Chiang Mai before being annexed by Myanmar again.

'Jaeng' means a corner in the Thai northern dialect.

Nu is a word used to address younger people. Younger people can also address themselves with this word

"say the sea's a stream , i listen"

From the verse written by Sriprat, meaning you are willing to agree with whatever the other person says.

!! NC !! [Special Spin Off Story] Parallel World

Chapter 1

I opened my eyes on the bed in the room with the white ceiling, my mind was filled with dizzying and confusion The last memory is When I was surrounded by a strange fog in the middle of the the rain poured near the wagon used to imprison me and Khun Yai. He turned to look at me for a moment, before the fog sweeps yanked me out of there. Before I had fully regained my consciousness, a familiar voice sounded nearby.

"P'Jom you're awake."

That voice seemed to be very happy. I turned to look. Somjeed, my sister "Jeed"

I let out a voice from my throat. It was hoarse and faintly whispered.

"Where is this place?"

"Asking like in the drama?"

"Wait Jeed, give me water to drink."

My sister hurriedly poured water into a glass and handed it to me.

"Last night, you drove into the Ping River, but someone saved you in time when the family heard the news, we hurriedly drive to Chiang Mai."

I took a sip of water from a glass and sipped my throat to make me feel a little better. But still dazed

"Hmm, I remember."

"Where do you hurt now? Where does it feel wrong? so I can call a nurse."

I shook my head slowly Looking around the room, everything indicated that this was my present day world. Both furniture, things, appliances and the outside view of buildings, houses, and all. The wormholes takes me back to my present day , by myself, right? I lightly massaged my temples.

"It's just confusing , just stay still ."

"If it's still bad, i will go out and call father and mother to come in. They are very worried about you, i went out to say that you had woken up, but..."

"What?"

I mumbled in exhaustion.

"Who is the man who helped you up from the Ping River, your new boyfriend? P'jom?"

"Find..who?"

"That handsome guy, he told me that his name was Khun Yai, he was.. uh, your husband, now standing and talking to our parents in front of the room."

"What!"

The gloomy mist that had covered his head just now exploded into dust. It's not too late for me to have more explanations. The door of the room opened and I stared until my eyes almost popped out of my sockets when I saw the figures of 3 people there. My father and mother and.... Khun Yai

"Jom"

Khun Yai stepped quickly and embraced me

"I'm so worried about you."

I don't know what to say and I can't act right, I can only look at my parents who step in while they smile at me with their eyes full of questions about who exactly is this person? Is it my new boyfriend? But the words are even more bizarre? Are you sure you want this person to be your boyfriend?

So I smiled. Even though every wave in my brain is not functioning well right now , What happened!!! I have returned to my current world. But I didn't come back alone. I brought Khun Yai across the world with me. After that, everyone was busy making a request for eviction from the hospital to return to recover at home , my parents, siblings and my boyfriend (in ancient military uniform) is standing talking to the doctor in the background, my tears are flowing. Does everyone find it strange? He didn't just come out off the screen , that kind of movie that everyone tries to tell themselves. And when the he turned to me I responded according to my condition, even though my heart cries out, the wormholes are real, I have found them. When the matter at the hospital is settled We talked and agreed. agreed that I should go back to recover at home in Sriracha with family because the company gave me a break from work time until i feel better In the meantime, another architect has been sent. Someone came to take care of the site in Chiang Mai instead of me for a while. As a result, everyone will spend the night in Chiang Mai today. Then tomorrow morning, let's go to Sriracha together.

I secretly pulled Khun Yai's arm to separate from me. then whisper

"Khun Yai must have been very shocked, right? You suddenly came here with me. My hometown is different from your city. Khun Yai Don't be afraid, I'll explain to you later, for now, follow me first."

But Khun Yai laughed loudly in his throat.

"What?"

I asked.

"I'm not afraid , you was also like this when you lost in my hometown , you are not afraid and can survive, so what should i be afraid of?"

I looked at his face. Well , I'm not afraid of anything. I'm so scared that he will pissed with me.

"Khun Yai, it's good that you don't panic. But now what are you going to meet now, it's called a car."

He furrowed his brows, but still looked stoic. might not be afraid I went on to explain,

"It's like a wagon, but it runs much faster and isn't dragged by animal labor. We'll ride it back to my house. Khun Yai followed me first."

He nodded slightly in acknowledgment. After that Somjeed drove me and Khun Yai to the room, we all sit together inside the car with my parents, the atmosphere.. it's kinda weird. I know everyone's got questions all over the place.

"Tomorrow i'll pick P'Jom at the hotel at 8 o'clock,"

my sister said when we got out of the car.

"okay"

My father moved closer and took my arm with concern.

"Are you okay?"

I don't know what he mean by my boyfriend. But I replied,

"This is very comfortable, Dad. Jom is better now."

Dad lightly patted my shoulder. Before turning to Khun Yai, the father gave a slight smile to his future son-in-law. before deciding to go back to sit in the car When my family drove away, Khun Yai and I entered a room with just the two of us. Instead of throwing questions at each other, we both hugged each other tightly. Khun Yai hugged me until I almost sank into his chest. His embrace was warm and firm. as if he would protect me no matter what Where is it or what will happen?

"How did you come to stay with me here?"

I asked muffled

"and get you out of the water."

I looked up at him.

"Khun Yai, do you know? This place isn't the same time that Khun Yai was in, now you are in the future, hundreds of years apart"

He stroked my cheek lightly

"You are a miracle. Exactly like what the royal doctor said."

I laughed even though there were a few tears in my eyes.

the miracle wasn't me but it must be something in this world or this universe. I have returned to the era where I was originally, but now Khun Yai is here with me. I will slowly explain to Khun Yai one by one so Khun Yai will gradually understand. That's it. If he can't understand anything, we can skip it first. It may be a bit difficult. But if I believe that Khun Yai can handle it, we smile at each other. I really mean what I said, this world is not easy for Khun Yai and it will take time to do it. knowing that he is smart and strong. I believe he will finally adapt well.

That night we lay in my bed cuddling together, talking about different stories. I'm glad to be able to return to my own home, but Khun Yai... he has to be separated from his city, his people and everyone he loves, which I hope that my love will be strong. Let him go through everything here.

The next morning, I meet my family waiting at the hotel to go back to our home in Sriracha together. I told my mom and dad honestly that I'm not ready to tell about Khun Yai's background now. Give me a little more time. Then everyone will know everything for sure. But now I can only say that Khun Yai is my lover. and he's good enough for me I will bring them to know his family. Do you know what is more fortunate than winning twenty million lottery? It's a family that loves us and is ready to understand us in everything.

today the weather is clear I drove along the hillside towards in the direction of returning home I pointed out the big city to him, look at the path that I thought may be the same path that we used to travel in the forest together when traveling from Chiang Mai to the city of Sihasingkhon He asked me if the city of Sihasingkhon still exists today, is it a province like Chiang Mai and Lamphun? I thought before deciding to answer him honestly that I had never heard of this city. Khun Yai was silent for a moment. before sighing and staring at complex mountain ranges with winding rivers flowing through The journey took us all day because we kept stopping at Park to buy something. That evening we ate at home. The same house where I was born and raised. It's a dish that's easy to make with

a few things, but it's so delicious when it mix together like this. My parents go to bed early because they are exhausted from traveling. Their bedroom and Somjeed are upstairs in the house, while my bedroom is downstairs towards the back of the house because I usually stay up late and play music. Listening in the middle of the night, in that corner, the music will not be loud enough to disturb other people.

After taking a shower and packing things up, Khun Yai and I had time to rest and be alone. He sat on the bed. I wore pajamas of a white t-shirt and baggy cotton pants that I stopped to buy on the way. He look so handsome but he looks confused. I smiled and sat next to him.

"I'll take you to the beach tomorrow,"

I said. We talked about this while at the dining table Khun Yai smiled at me a little. His solemn expression made me feel what he's thinking about. I rest my head on his shoulder, interlacing my palms.

"I am sorry about Sihasingkhon City Khun Yai"

He nodded slightly. but said nothing

"But I want Khun Yai to know one thing that Khun Yai still has me by your side and I love Khun Yai very much. Coming to my home maybe it is a bit strange, but it's not all bad, at least the good part is that we get together."

He looked up at me, his eyes showing affection.

"No matter how strange your country is, I will stay. If I do not return to protect my own country, I will ask to protect you instead."

"I'm so happy."

I kissed his cheek, Khun Yai smiles and he smells good. Did I mention that he's very handsome? Very provocative too. Look at his eyes, sharp and dark, his skin color is light tan, have such a broad chest, thick shoulders, beautiful abs, beautiful upper arm muscles. I shouldn't look at his muscles. Because now he sees what I'm looking at. Khun Yai's eyes changed immediately , the way I had to turn my eyes in the other direction for fear of melting for seeing him too long, Khun Yai moved his face closer, his palms interlaced loosely. Now stroking back and forth, I shouldn't have anything to do with him here. But... just a kiss wouldn't matter. I leaned my head towards him. Khun Yai placed his lips downwards, his thick palms sliding over my forearms. This is better Otherwise, it would be too risky. Hmmm... But he kisses really well. My body is weak. Accidentally gave him a little more time. Khun Yai kissed lingeringly, his palm began to crawl into my

hair. My eyelids are asleep He shouldn't have moved down to kiss me around the neck. It was very risky. I had to tell him to stop right now.

"Where would you like me to kiss you?"

he asked softly as lift up ghe hem of his shirt

"Here..."

Warm lips pressed against my chest.

"Or..."

He descended even further into the abdomen.

"Here."

Ouch... I like everything. But no, we should stop before it goes too far.

"Ah..."

I startled as he lightly sucked on me on the surface of my stomach

"...turn off the light, Khun Yai,"

I told him in a raspy voice. His face and body were all hot. Khun Yai moved to the bedside table. He covered his mouth with his hand. then turn off the lamp that sits on the table . I slide my hand to turn off the light switch in the orher side.

"I will not make a sound, can you hold it in?"

"Wait, Khun Yai."

I moved and turned to look at the notebook placed near the head of the bed and Turn on soft music Not to create atmosphere, but to drown out other sounds. when turning back to the bed Khun Yai opened his arms and waited for me, and without hesitation, I approached him. Khun Yai is good at taking off quickly, in the blink of an eye, our clothes are not left, We huddles together naked, hugging, kissing, stroking each other's I groaned until my voice trembled as he hung around a very sensitive part of me.

"Khun Yai...don't do it. Ouch...Wait. It's like..it. Ah..."

The picture cuts to a flickering lamp, Rhythm next to the head of the bed The wind blows softly The curtain's edge blows before the side light Outside the window slowly It changes from dark to bright until the view outside indicates the morning has come.

I opened my eyes and woke up on the bed of the room downstairs. It took a few moments to acclimatize to be sure of where I was. And what events have i been through? I hurriedly turned to Khun Yai. and found that he was not in the room But before I panicked heard people Talking in the back of the house I got up and walked towards the window. The weather is bright today The sun was not hot because it was still early. In the backyard filled

with all sorts of plants that father with my mother planted it Khun Yai is diligently helping my father to cut plantain tree. What are they talking about? and i had to hold back a smile when i knew that both of them were Talk about nourishing the soil. Share fertilizer recipes I picked up a towel to take a refreshing shower. When he finished cleaning and arranged myself, i opened the door and walked out of the room. and then had to stop when he saw Somjeed My sister is standing The flower leaned against the railing like it was waiting for something. I was about to send out a voice to ask

"Oh...why are you standing here?"

"Tell me,"

said Somjeed, without any prologue.

I can't even tell she's really my siater or evil master, actually me and my sister are so close that we are almost have no secrets to each other, but about Khun Yai this is too special to her to easily understand.

"Khun Yai is not from this area"

I decided to say.

"Yes, that's weird."

"It's his house, He works in the military."

"Oh! P'Jom, stop talking nonsense and say The truth, Jeed doesn't have the patience to wait like father and mother, tell me about it."

I had a terrible headache, Somjeed was the person I trusted the most. She was the one who could argue for me in everything, even my parents, I met my younger sister eyes.

"It's a really long story. Jeed, I'll tell you about it tonight."

"Sure"

Seeing that I hadn't said anything yet, Somjeed gave up and walked out with me to the front porch. It turned out that Khun Yai was sitting and chatting with my mother. Having a good taste on the marble horse in the lawn, when I heard the conversation, I immediately thought of this, yesterday while driving car back together Khun Yai found out that my mother was me Civil servant working at the Revenue Department He spoke in astonishment.

"Your mother is a civil servant. Your country is amazing, here women are having the same power as men."

So now he's sitting on my mom's flattery, he still amazed after knowing a woman serving in the civil service and when My mother told him her age is 50 this year. Khun Yai was shocked and said that if it was a 50-year-old

woman in his era, it wouldn't be like this. If he had to guess, at most my mother was 35 years old.

Somjeed gulped. I could only smile dryly.

after eating breakfast I invited Khun Yai out. Driving through the city Plus stop by to buy a famous pearl tea for him to taste as well. Khun Yai frowns when he sees me paying for pearl milk tea. As we walked away from the milk tea shop, he said

"I need to find something."

"Oh, Khun Yai, what do you want to do?"

"I will enlist in the army. It's for the land, at least I want to protect your country instead."

My head hurts so I had to explain to him the system of our country now

"What's with the black and red card?"

He wasn't upset when I tell about this point Because the country uses the method of selecting soldiers by giving fight to see skill I explained a little more and ended by saying

"Khun Yai doesn't have to worry about expenses. I have a decent amount of savings, plus a salary"

Khun Yai sighed heavily.

"But I won't let you to suffer. Since I'm determined to raise children, wife and parents to live comfortable."

I even sprayed the bubble milk tea in his face.

"No need, Khun Yai. Don't waste your time!"

"But Jom"

"Stop it,"

I held out my hand.

"We'll get back to this later, Let's talk about this at home. because now we have to buy things from the market and give them back to mom."

I reached into my pocket for a piece of paper where my mother had a list of things. who asked me to buy

"Oh, I forgot the paper my mother wrote in the car. Let's walk back to the car."

"The weather is very hot. You wait here I'll go get it myself."

Khun Yai said as he gently wiped the sweat on my forehead. I'm embarrassed but I like it. So let him wipe until finished, then handed over the car keys.

"Press the button like you did this morning."

Our car was parked not far away. It's less than 20 meters from here. I look at the tall figure that walks that way and continue sucking on pearl milk tea. But then a sound broke the atmosphere.

"Hey, is that your boyfriend over there? If his hand is not available, you can borrow my hand to wipe it instead"

Tease me like a y2k teenager? I turned around and saw that the source of the voice was a group of men standing not far away. There were 3 of them, their faces showing arrogance. They must have seen when Khun Yai wiped my sweat, so that his mouth was brittle. I didn't want to deal with them now. I turned around and not paying attention to them. But these people again...

"A butt that is nice to rub"

"What do you say?"

Khun Yai's said angrily. I immediately turned to look.

"Bow down and apologize now. Otherwise, I'll teach you how to behave."

He commanded loudly and clearly. Do you think they will do it? No way. One person does it.

"Khun Yai, what are you going to do?"

I shouted loudly when I saw it. He went straight to them,

"Hey, no!"

but not in time The first punch was completely clear in the face of the person teasing me before that side smashed it back. The fight happened unexpectedly. I just yelled Being out of the hand without being able to do anything more than trying to sort it out, you know like an accompaniment in the old days where the protagonist and villain fight In the middle, there were other people who were bouncing around. It's like he's going to fight, but he doesn't , wrinkled and lumpy, Khun Yai stands In the midst of the opponents lying on the ground, I immediately rushed over him.

"You don't have to"

I hastened to stop

"Khun Yai, did you know what he had done?"

"His fiery mouth flirting with you like that, and will you be able to endure it or have to remove the blood from its mouth to make you remember it?"

"Does Khun Yai know? If we handle like this, they will report to the police and put us in jail."

Then a man appeared. I was so embarrassed when I saw many other buffy men following us , especially when they are walked together like this.

Later, I learned that his name was Chuvit, the owner of a boxing camp, and one of the people who Khun Yai punched and he fell was a boxer who is going to have a fight in the next few days.

"Let's put it this way,"

Mr. Chuvit said.

"Let your boyfriend fight for my boy."

"Hoy! No!"

I objected. He shook his head.

"My camp's kid was so humiliated, let alone the damage, I haven't even reported because we can settle and agree, I don't want it to be complicated. I'm so easy with you, even though I'm the victim. Is it difficult? Who am I going to punch instead?"

I can't argue with him at all.

"Then I need to take a moment."

I turned towards Khun Yai, making a face of disapproval at his side. I pulled him away before whispering

"Khun Yai, well, now things have become like this. Way.. heard that..."

he cuts off before blowing air through his nose. Then just smiled, fearlessly.

"But the boxing punch did not cross my hand at all."

"I know about that, but it's... it's a sport game, I'm going to say that there are rules for fighting. Will Khun Yai be okay?"

"You can tell them that I'm ok."

When we returned to Mr. Chuvit's table, I said

"OK, that's it. Because on my side, it's really too hard. As for the medical expenses, I'll take responsibility."

"No need,"

Mr. Chuvit waved his hand.

"Responsible for your own work. Let's go, bastard."

Even he sounded okay with my offering but his personality doesn't let him.

"One punch instead"

"Doesn't my face look untrustworthy?"

"No, it's not like that,"

I replied.

"Listen, brother,"

he leaned in closer.

"Even though I look like a gangster, you have to trust me , i am the man of mu word, if you don't trust me. What contract will be drafted? Let's sign each other."

"Ok, khun chavit"

Then Khun Yai and I walked out of there with chavit business card. I massaged my temples with my hands, i'm still an architect student but suddenly now I have to become a boxer's mentor, Damn it...how did it become like this!?