Preface

Excerpt from Sunthorn Phu's epic poem, Phra Aphai Mani

Anyone who lived during the Black May era would remember the "Democracy Day gold theft case" very well. On May 20, 2002, many political activists came out to mourn and show their stance on the tenth anniversary of the people's struggle at the Democracy Monument. People crowded all over Ratchadamnoen Road, which became an important phenomenon for the country.

Even though that time was known as the most flourishing era of democracy, when the number of people who came out to mourn increased, it created pressure for government agencies. They were afraid that there would be an incident that was too difficult to control, so they had to mobilize police from all nearby areas to maintain order, allowing them to demonstrate but in a limited area. It is estimated that more than ten thousand people came out to light candles to mourn the deceased heroes that day, from Saphan Phan Fa Lilat, stretching all the way to Khok Wua Intersection.

Only five hundred meters away from the center of the country's major rally, shops in the surrounding communities were still open as usual. No one thought that the rally would escalate. Thanon Dinso, Thanon Mahachai, the walkway along the canal of Wat Ratchanatdaram, at a building just a few meters from the back of Phlap Phla Maha Jessada Bodin, there was a gold shop where the story started.

Around five in the evening, just a few minutes before the shop closed, four armed robbers broke into the gold shop and ordered the owner to close the shop as the last one, sweeping all the gold into a bag that he had prepared. The robbers pointed their weapons at their target calmly, so the victim could do nothing more than comply with the order. In less than fifteen minutes, the four robbers, holding the bag containing a huge amount of gold, ran away along the alley parallel to Ratchadamnoen Road.

The shop owner immediately called the police, but the police in the station had already gone to control the crowd. It took so long for them to coordinate and arrive at the scene that it was hopeless. But even though they could not catch them immediately, the police tried their best to hunt

them down, requesting to check all the CCTV cameras around them from both government and private agencies that cooperated.

After the robbers left the gold shop, the four ran in different directions. The first ran back to Dinso Road, the next ran along the alley of the art gallery, the third ran back to Wat Ratchanadda School and turned left, and the last ran straight to connect to Mahachai Road before everyone ran to Ratchadamnoen Road where the rally was taking place and disappeared into the crowd.

The police in charge of the case rushed to follow them but it was almost a waste of energy. There were so many people scattered all over the road that it was impossible to catch anyone and smell them. In a few hours, the rally would disperse and people would disperse to go home. Even if they had the power to detain all the protesters, they didn't know how many police officers would be needed to interrogate the tens of thousands of suspects.

The gold shop robbery case was therefore quiet on the first day before it became a national focus the following day. This heinous case was nicknamed by the media as the Democracy Day gold robbery because the robbers had planned everything out very well. The weapon used was later found at Saphan Phan Fa Lilat. When it was checked, it was found to be fake and no fingerprints were found. It seemed that the real weapon that was successfully used was the crowd.

According to the victim, the stolen gold weighed about one thousand baht, and was valued at more than six million Thai baht in the year of the incident. If compared to the current price of gold, it would be worth more than thirty million Thai baht. A huge amount of gold was lost, but the case did not progress at all, no matter how many good police officers were used to help, until all parties had to give up because there was no hope in this case anymore.

This news will be published again in the newspaper on the 20th of April 2012 or before the case expires in another month. There has never been a case where criminals have mocked the peacekeepers so painfully. Four thieves with fake weapons stormed a gold shop, robbed all the gold in the shop, and ran away. And to this day, not a single suspect has been named.

The four robbers seemed to disappear without leaving any traces... Sergeant Jessada, who was in charge of the case, gave his opinion to the reporter as a citizen. We should question the security system of the people in the country. Will we allow criminals in such serious cases to get away with it? Where did the gold worth more than thirty million go? And why have we never heard any

real information about the case from the police? *...Did the culprit disappear and escape from history or are the police trying to erase the truth from the people's memory?!*

PART I

Act 1

The sky was shifting again. From the vibrant orange that had enveloped the city, darkness gradually crept in, rendering it nearly pitch-black. Time moved on relentlessly, indifferent to anything or anyone trying to halt or capture it. As night descended, the sky deepened into a somber black, heavy with unshakable sorrow. Even though stars decorated the expanse, they were lost in the overwhelming darkness.

The sound of sobbing drew the young man, who had been quietly gazing at the sky, back to the world around him. A young woman in a black dress sat at the reception desk of the Sinclair Detective Agency, her body shaking as if the very ground beneath her had crumbled. Tears streamed down her face, smearing her makeup like a porcelain doll shattered by grief. Letting out a long sigh, Tiwakorn returned to his seat as a detective.

"Please, stop crying," he said softly, handing her a tissue box. She took it with slender hands, dabbing at her tear-stained cheeks.

"My husband died, Mr. Tiwakorn. I can't accept it. We haven't even been married for a year. Even if he cheated on me, I never wanted him to die like this."

Her words trailed off into another round of sobs. Tiwakorn's gaze shifted to the photographs spread across the table. They were categorized into two groups: one set depicting evidence of the husband's infidelity, which she had hired him to investigate, and the other containing clues related to his death. He had consumed poison in a bedroom that was locked from the inside. It was accurate to say that the room had been secured.

"Your husband didn't commit suicide," Tiwakorn stated calmly. His assertion hung in the air like an invisible hand, halting time within the confines of the room.

The young woman in black looked up, her eyes a tumult of curiosity, confusion, agitation, and strength. The fragile figure, resembling a porcelain doll, seemed to come alive with her question. "What do you mean, detective?"

"Your husband was murdered," Tiwakorn replied, sliding a photograph of the poison bottle toward her. "People who commit suicide by mixing poison in their drinks typically finish the entire contents. But in cases of poisoning, most don't. They might feel unwell before it fully takes effect, or they may not expect the poison to work as quickly as it does. In most instances, there's still liquid left in the container." He gestured to the picture showing the bottle and the spilled liquid on the carpet.

"How is that possible? My husband was alone in the room. Who would have put poison in his drink?" Her eyes flickered with a whirlwind of emotions, but the most prominent feeling was a sense of disbelief. Tiwakorn noticed her hands beginning to shake, her face creasing with concern. Beneath the surface, he sensed a deep well of guilt and anxiety.

"Imagine I mix poison in a bottle of water and leave it in my wife's room, knowing she'll take her medication before bed. When the time comes, she'll grab that poisoned water and drink it. Even if I didn't administer the poison directly, I'd be guilty of intent. In court, the prosecutor would likely have a strong case against me," he explained.

The young woman's expression wavered. "But how can you be sure?"

"The forensic officer found a syringe puncture mark on the beverage bottle. After examining the house, they discovered a syringe with a similar notch on the tip," Tiwakorn added.

"Aren't there syringes in every home?" she countered, defensively.

"If this crime happened in my house, and the syringe had my fingerprints on it, I could argue that it was simply a tool I used. It wouldn't be strange for it to be there," he said, his tone firm.

He leaned closer, letting the weight of his words sink in. "But if the syringe was found here, in your home, with fingerprints from someone else—someone who intended to frame your husband—it changes everything."

The young detective's gaze drifted to the small balcony, where the clear sky unfolded before him, unobstructed and serene.

"But the syringe found in this case was different," he continued, his voice steady. "The forensic team discovered that there were no fingerprints on the needle, suggesting the culprit wiped it clean to eliminate evidence. However, they neglected to clean the plunger, which did yield fingerprints—an unusual oversight." He fixed his eyes on her, searching for any flicker of understanding.

"According to the Criminal Code, Section 78, if there are mitigating circumstances, the court may reduce the penalty by up to half. This applies whether the penalty has been increased or decreased based on the provisions of this Code or other laws," Tiwakorn explained, pausing to let the weight of his words sink in. "Mitigating circumstances can include the offender providing information that benefits the court's consideration."

He leaned forward, his tone earnest. "Please turn yourself in and confess to the police. I won't inform them until you do. The court will see that you feel remorseful, rather than simply contesting the circumstantial evidence." For a brief moment, hope flickered in her eyes, but it quickly faded into a deep sadness, as turbulent and directionless as stormy seas.

"He is the one at fault. He was unfaithful and deserves to be sued for divorce. He physically and emotionally abused me," the woman said, her voice trembling, stuttering with conflicting emotions. "Do I deserve to go through something like this? You know the truth—you saw it for yourself. You were the one who investigated his mistress. If you could just bring me that evidence quickly, he might not have died like this."

Her words poured out in a quivering rush, her pale face revealing her distress as she clasped her hands tightly to keep them from shaking. Tiwakorn, the detective and also a professor of medicine, studied her closely, sensing a deeper turmoil within her. There was a possibility she was struggling with a mental illness. He remained silent as she picked up a photo of her husband and the other woman, gesturing defensively.

"While I was investigating your husband's infidelity, I uncovered several facts," Tiwakorn said calmly, locking eyes with the young woman, who struggled to conceal her rising anxiety.

She met his gaze for a brief moment before looking away, as if unable to withstand the weight of the truth. "Just say what you need to say. Stop being so ambiguous," she replied, her voice harsh yet tinged with heartbreak.

"I found something interesting. I spoke with a woman who frequently interacted with your husband. She didn't seem to have a close social connection with him. After I offered her a lump sum, she revealed that she was an actress in a short film. The director wanted her to play the role of your husband's wife, who was suffering from amnesia. She needed to find ways to approach him."

"She isn't the mistress as it appears," Tiwakorn continued, pulling another set of photos from a brown envelope. The images showed him conversing with the woman, along with pictures she claimed to have taken during a camera test at a small studio. He also presented a receipt from the studio and a voice recorder, indicating that he had solid evidence of their conversation.

The beautiful woman, like a porcelain doll, listened blankly, her gaze fixed on the vast sky rather than the array of new evidence laid out before her. For a moment, Tiwakorn felt as if she were a small bird trapped in a cruel cage, daydreaming of freedom and her purest aspirations.

"That's just the first point," he said, gently bringing her back to the conversation. "While I was about to give up and consider canceling the job, I met another detective. During our conversation, I discovered that he had been hired by your husband to investigate your behavior. Initially, he thought I was your male lover, but once we talked, he realized I was also a detective." The young woman remained silent, her expression indicating that she was ready to hear more.

"The husband knew every behavior of his wife in detail, from stealing things in the house to sell, gambling, cheating on him with her first husband, having a secret stepchild, trying to kill him by cutting the car's brake lines multiple times, or even hiring someone to pretend to be his mistress so that she could file for divorce and get her shares of property," the young man said, looking into the eyes of the person he was talking to, searching.

"But the husband didn't try to change anything. He slept beside the woman who tried to kill him, convinced that an old man like him wouldn't last much longer. With no children or relatives, he welcomed her presence each night, grateful to have someone there to keep him from feeling lonely. No matter how she treated him, he was ready to forgive her, believing that one day his goodness would change her heart."

Her expression transformed into a calm, peaceful ocean—still and devoid of waves. She sat in a daze, as if drained of all energy. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. The tumult of guilt raged within her, a chaotic blend of evil and love. This young woman had killed the person who loved her the most.

Recognizing that the conversation had reached its conclusion, Tiwakorn picked up his phone to call the police. But in an instant, the young woman stood up. He thought she was merely stepping out to gaze at the night sky, but he was mistaken. Lost and adrift, she walked to the balcony, stepped onto the cold iron railing, and jumped into the abyss of the unknown.

The body of the young woman in the black dress was found in front of the building housing the detective agency. From the height of several dozen meters, she died instantly. The young man rushed down but found nothing more than despair. Blood splattered everywhere. People began to gather, murmuring and criticizing in various ways. The killer had left in unrest. Her eyes wide open and filled with tears. The pain of loss permeated the air with the scent of tragedy.

The young detective felt as if he was the one who pushed the girl down from the balcony with his own hands.

Act 2

The atmosphere in the small, narrow wooden chapel was serene. The sound of chanting in Pali, some phrases familiar and others less so, filled the space, creating a comforting backdrop. Six monks sat around a man in prominent white robes at the center. This modest structure resembled a humble wooden house, designed for simple use.

The young detective, having decided to abandon his lay status, recited the request for ordination with conviction. His hands clasped together, he held onto the monk's robes. Occasionally, a trembling note crept into his voice. His eyes, bright yet fearful, betrayed a mix of confusion and

lingering memories of blood that he couldn't shake off. Tiwakorn bowed respectfully to the preceptor, in accordance with the ceremony, before accepting the yellow robe and putting it on.

Rising, he donned the full monk's attire, his head and eyebrows freshly shaved since early morning. The atmosphere resonated with the emptiness and isolation of a remote forest temple. Only Ratipol, his twin brother, and Asi, his assistant from the detective agency, were present among the relatives.

Soon, the ceremony concluded, and the monks exited to allow the new monk to speak with his family.

"You don't have to do this. You didn't do anything wrong. That woman jumped on her own. We don't even know if she did it to escape punishment. Why feel guilty?" Inspector Damien, his twin brother, spoke bluntly, unconcerned with the gravity of life.

The new monk shook his head at the directness and replied calmly, "I ordained for personal reasons."

"You can lie to anyone, but you can't lie to your twin who crawled after you." Ratipol countered, not willing to accept it. Tiwakorn chose not to argue further. "If you want to ordain, that's fine, but why here, on this deserted island? There's no phone signal—it feels like another dimension."

The new monk smiled softly and replied, "All the answers are in your questions."

"What will happen to the Sinclair Detective Agency now? Without you, I can't handle the cases alone," Asi, who had been silent, finally spoke up.

"For now, close the agency. Think of it as a vacation. You've talked about wanting to go to America many times. Consider this a long break. Don't worry about your salary; I'll pay you as before."

Asi smiled widely and quickly clasped his hands in a wai.

"Is there a significant reason for ordaining at this temple?" Ratipol shifted back to the main topic, gesturing at the old temple sign on the building. "Do you think, like me, that the name Kasak

Kasian isn't a coincidence? Does it tie to the gold theft case on Democracy Day?" His gaze sharpened, searching for meaning.

Twenty years prior, a notorious gold theft had occurred on the anniversary of the Black May incident. Four criminals had used fake guns to steal over thirty million baht in gold and vanished without a trace. With less than a month until the statute of limitations expired, a newspaper published a mocking article about the police's incompetence, prompting other media outlets to dig deeper, leading Ratipol to consult Tiwakorn about the case.

The media had misunderstood the police's handling of the clues. After reviewing the case, Tiwakorn found that there was almost nothing the public didn't already know. Given the time elapsed and the lack of evidence from the incident, the case seemed shrouded in darkness. Even Ratipol, known for his keen instincts, couldn't detect anything amiss.

Ratipol's suspicion of the temple's name stemmed from its mention of "Kasak," which hinted at a crucial clue in the case. About ten years post-incident, a cryptic message surfaced on a well-known website, stating:

"...From Kasak to Kasak, the entire thousand baht of gold hasn't disappeared but is hidden safely in a distant place. Hurry and contact us before everything is revealed. From Kasak to Kasak."

This message was a slap in the face for the police; it suggested someone had crucial information about the case and threatened to disclose it unless the criminals cooperated. Much attention was drawn to the word "Kasak," a reference to a mythical bird. Many media outlets analyzed this reference, citing Sunthorn Phu's epic poem.

The police would not let the clue that floated down from the heavens disappear back into the clouds. The National Police Agency coordinated to investigate the source immediately, only to find that it led to a girl living in France. The girl explained that she had seen a job posting offering ten euros for a message, so she accepted it and posted the message to receive payment in an untraceable cryptocurrency. The only clue they had vanished as if it had never existed at all.

"Ajahn Prachim, if you've finished talking with the laypeople, let's go have breakfast together. Here, the monks only eat one meal at eight o'clock sharp," one of the senior monks reminded after

waiting for a while. Tiwakorn looked at his watch and realized there was not much time left, so their conversation had to come to an end.

His twin brother and the assistant took their leave, echoing the firm words of the novice monk, "I'll leave worldly matters to you."

Wat Kasak Kasian is located on an unnamed deserted island, but later everyone started referring to the island by the temple's name. This island is not on shipping routes, fishing paths, or tourist trails; it is a deserted island that can be described as completely cut off from the outside world. Boats only travel to and from this island when there is a specific reason to go. There is no cell phone signal here, and in case of emergencies, the monks on the island must navigate a boat to the shore themselves.

Koh Kasak Kasian is circular in shape. The temple buildings include a set of huts for the seven monks residing there. Each monk is named according to the direction of their hut: Burapa (East), Akhaney (Southeast), Thaksin (South), Horradee (Southwest), Prachim (West), Payap (Northwest), and Udon (North), with the exception of Isan (Northeast), which has been converted into a central ordination hall.

At the center of the island, or midway between all the huts, stands a tall structure known as the Tower of Self-Reflection. This tower, which is locked from the outside, was once used as a space for monks who had committed offenses to reflect on their mistakes instead of facing punishment. However, this form of punishment was later abolished, and the Tower of Self-Reflection became a place for the seven monks to have breakfast together, with Tiwakorn participating as the last member to be ordained.

"Ajahn Prachim has arrived," the voice of Burapa echoed as the novice monk and Akhaney, who had guided him, entered the Tower of Self-Reflection. All the monks were already waiting. Tiwakorn recognized the faces of each monk well, especially Payap, who was his preceptor and the abbot. Also present was Udon, a strict practitioner of the Dhamma and the one who taught about ordination ceremonies, including the recitation of the ordination vows.

"Are you allergic to any food, Ajahn Prachim? Can you eat everything?" Thaksin, who acted as the temple's cook, whispered as they began their meal. Since there were no laypeople to go on alms rounds at this temple, the monks had to prepare their own meals. Burapa and Akhaney, still young

and agile, were the best at handling the boat and took care of the mechanical aspects. Meanwhile, Horradee, being meticulous, served as the treasurer, maintaining the accounts directly under the abbot's supervision.

"Today the sky is gloomy. Ajahn Prachim shouldn't have let the laypeople leave so soon; it would be better to wait for the skies to clear a bit," Horradee remarked, causing the young monk to furrow his brows in confusion. The sky was actually quite bright today. Akhaney whispered an explanation.

"Horradee is into astrology. He probably means today isn't an auspicious day for travel, but he can't say it directly. The abbot doesn't like the monks here indulging in ignorance."

"Ajahn Prachim, there's a big tree next to your hut. If you need help trimming it, just let me know," Burapa said, rubbing his nose with his finger. The young monk politely declined, his mind drifting to the tree that was so close to the hut that its branches almost touched the eaves. It didn't really obstruct anything, though. Once everyone had finished eating, the eldest abbot placed his spoon down as if signaling the end of the meal. The remaining young monks quickly finished their food and followed suit.

The monks dispersed back to their huts. Their routine mainly consisted of morning and evening chants, along with sharing breakfast. The remaining time was divided between cleaning communal areas and studying the Dhamma, allowing themselves to immerse in nature. The monks here didn't have to adhere to many strict rules, as their isolation from civilization enforced a kind of indirect discipline.

The investigative monk walked back to his hut alongside Horradee while Thaksin, who resided in the same direction, veered off to check the leftover ingredients. The young monk walked quietly along the natural path, as the island's landscape wasn't paved like concrete. The monks wore thin sandals to be mindful of each step instead of going barefoot. Footwear for city travel was kept in one place at the dock.

"It's interesting here, isn't it? The huts are oriented in eight directions, perfectly matching the number of monks, who are named accordingly. It's a shame the northeastern hut was converted into an ordination hall. Otherwise, there would be exactly eight monks for each direction," Tiwakorn commented to Horradee. This made the latter pause, looking up at the sky and searching for

directions, calculating something complex in his mind before turning away from the mentioned northeast.

"But there used to be eight huts here, and there were eight monks. The ordination hall was in the center," Horradee remarked as he continued walking. "But one day, the monk known as the 'Phra Isan' disappeared without a trace." His simple recount sent a chill through the listener's hands.

"Phra Isan ran away from the temple?" the newcomer asked.

Horradee laughed softly and replied, "Ten years ago, when Phra Isan disappeared, not a single boat came in or out."

"He's still here, but he may have changed form and hidden somewhere. The Tower of Self-Reflection was built not long after he vanished," the investigative monk listened calmly as Horradee seemed to gaze into the sky as if seeing something invisible. "Phra Isan was killed by someone on the island before being erased from memory. The history of this island is like the name of the temple, hidden beneath layers." Horradee spoke with a smile that was hard to interpret, as if everything here held a secret waiting to be revealed in due time.

"It's always present but cannot be seen—sacred and unwilling to allow anyone to question it."