THE MOON RABBIT

กระต่ายหมายคุณ

by Freaky

ENGLISH SAMPLE

Chapters 1-2

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Chapter 1

The PE Teacher Has a Past

"Didn't get enough sleep again, Teacher Khwan-Oei?"

The familiar scolding voice of the beautiful dance teacher jolted Khwan-Oei out of her drowsy haze.

It was Friday morning, and the young PE teacher sat on an old bench beneath a tropical almond tree. She had been nodding off there for almost half an hour, trying to force herself fully awake, but the fog in her head refused to lift.

She had dreamed of Rakniran again.

Dreamed of eight years ago, back when she had still been Rakniran's "Oei."

"What are you doing all the way out here, Wa?"

Khwan-Oei rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand and looked up at Pimwa, her best friend and the school's beautiful dance teacher, who stood over her with a stern expression and an expensive pair of heels beneath a sun umbrella.

Nan Nathi Witthaya School was a public secondary school in Phitsanulok Province with roughly twelve hundred students. Between periods, children streamed through every corridor and walkway, but this spot beneath the tropical almond tree stayed quiet and nearly deserted. It was strange that Pimwa, of all people, had crossed the grounds beneath a parasol to find her here.

"I heard the students saying Teacher Khwan-Oei was asleep under the almond tree again, so I came to see for myself." Pimwa sat beside her, sounding like a parent preparing to discipline a child. "How many hours did you sleep last night? Answer me."

Khwan-Oei gave an awkward laugh and scratched her cheek.

"I don't know. Probably less than four. Every time I fell asleep, I kept dreaming about the same things."

"Which same things?" Pimwa asked. "That Khun Rak of yours, or what happened at the football club two weeks ago?"

"Both... taking turns."

"That's not a nightmare anymore, Oei. That's a full-blown hell dream."

Pimwa had been Khwan-Oei's friend since university. They had both studied education, though in different majors. Pimwa had been famous across the faculty for dancing so beautifully that every university event fought to book her. Now, in the age of social media, she posted casual traditional-dance clips on TikTok and had amassed hundreds of thousands of followers, earning the affectionate nickname "the beautiful lady" from her fans.

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In reality, her tongue was sharp and her temperament fiercer than a warrior charging into battle.

"I heard she's coming back to Thailand," Khwan-Oei said, rubbing her honey-brown hands together. Dark shadows lay beneath her eyes from lack of sleep.

"Who?"

"Rakniran."

Khwan-Oei could no longer remember the last time she had been able to say that name aloud.

But she remembered perfectly how often she repeated it in her dreams, almost every night.

"Don't tell me you're still waiting for her." Pimwa was so shocked that profanity slipped out. "It's been eight years, Oei. Why are you still waiting?"

"I just..."

"I've told you a million times to forget her. She isn't a good person, understand? She made you fall head over heels for her, then threw you away when you stopped being useful." Pimwa let her parasol drop from her hand and grabbed both of Khwan-Oei's shoulders. "Back in university, every time we drank, you'd get drunk and keep saying her name. By the time we graduated and ended up teaching at the same school, I thought you'd finally managed to forget her."

Khwan-Oei did not know what to say.

Nor did she dare tell her friend that she had never once intended to forget Rakniran in the first place.

Longing was like rain.

Like the winter wind.

No one ever chose for it to come, but once it did, there was no one in the world who could stop it.

"Are you angry with me, Wa?"

"For what?"

"For still loving Khun Rak."

"No. I'm used to it." Pimwa opened her bag and pulled out a tissue to dab at her own sweat, then generously wiped Khwan-Oei's face too. "So why is she suddenly coming back? You told me that after she finished high school, she ditched you to study in France and never came home. Why now? Has France finally had enough of her?"

One of Pimwa's most admirable qualities was her loyalty. To her, friends were comrades in arms, and she guarded those closest to her with extraordinary zeal. Anyone who tried to court Khwan-Oei tended to be driven away before they got very far.

So Khwan-Oei had never had a proper girlfriend.

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Then again, even if Pimwa had given them a chance, Khwan-Oei probably would not have chosen anyone anyway.

Every night, after showering and dusting herself with cooling powder, Khwan-Oei would sit and stare at a photograph on her phone.

A photograph of someone who had remained lodged in her heart for eight years.

"I heard Khun Rak is coming back to take over the football club. Her father wants to go into politics full time, so he won't have time to manage it anymore." Khwan-Oei closed her eyes while her best friend wiped away the sweat on her face. "And there's another reason. She's coming back to deal with the case too."

"Right. That case." Pimwa shuddered. "People at school still won't stop talking about it."

"They should talk about it. It's serious. Chiwin, the boy who was attacked, is still in a coma. He was a striker at the club too. I heard people saying he was a genuine national-team prospect. If he loses his future because some awful person attacked him, I'd be heartbroken for him."

Two weeks earlier, something terrible had happened at Song Khwae River FC.

It was a Saturday. Training had been cancelled because the field was under repair. At nearly seven in the evening, the club building was quiet and almost empty. Khwan-Oei had gone there carrying a gift basket, hoping to find Anan, Rakniran's father, and thank him personally for the sports equipment the club planned to donate to her school.

Her grandfather had once worked there as a caretaker, so Khwan-Oei had always been allowed to come and go freely, even though he had retired years ago.

On the first floor, near the lockers and players' changing rooms, Khwan-Oei was silently rehearsing the speech she had prepared for Anan when a scream ripped through the building.

A scream of pain.

A man's scream.

Khwan-Oei startled so badly that every word of her carefully prepared speech vanished from her head. She sprinted toward the sound as fast as a PE teacher's legs could carry her.

But she was too late.

The attacker was gone.

All that remained was Chiwin, an eighteen-year-old boy lying unconscious in a pool of blood, a utility knife buried in his abdomen.

Blood.

There had been blood everywhere.

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Blood spreading across the floor.

Blood soaking his body.

Blood coating Khwan-Oei's hands.

She had screamed until her voice broke, sobbing and calling for help, feeling as though she were choking on his blood with every chest compression she gave him.

She had reached him in time.

And yet, in another sense, she had not.

The boy survived, but he had lost an enormous amount of blood because the blade had struck a critical area. He fell into a coma, and no doctor could predict when he might wake.

"And how are you doing?" Pimwa asked, gathering the used tissues into her palm. "You happened to be at the scene and had to see all that. I really think you should talk to a psychiatrist, Oei."

"I'm okay, Wa. It's already been two weeks. I don't wake up in the middle of the night anymore like I did at first."

"But I think--"

Before Pimwa could finish, the bell rang for the next period. Khwan-Oei seized the opportunity and sprang up from the bench, escaping her friend's worried insistence.

"I have class now. I should go. The students will be at the field any minute."

"Wait." Pimwa's voice dropped ominously. "Don't go yet."

"What?"

"Did you put on sunscreen?"

Khwan-Oei rubbed her own arm. "I... did."

"I'll give you one chance to answer again."

"I did," Khwan-Oei said softly. "Yesterday."

Pimwa cared deeply about beauty and skincare. Her own face and body were never without some protective or nourishing product. Nothing irritated her more than seeing Khwan-Oei running around beneath the sun kicking a football without so much as a dab of sunscreen.

"Give me your arm."

And so Khwan-Oei's face and both arms were thoroughly coated until they gleamed with a generous layer of colorless sunscreen.

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Khwan-Oei had no mother. Growing up, she had only her grandfather and father. As a child, she had sometimes felt sorry for herself because of it.

She did not anymore.

Pimwa mothered her more than enough for any one person.

Khwan-Oei's class that period was Grade 10, Room 3. She and Queen, a biology teacher, were the class advisers.

The room followed the science-math track. Most of the students were far more comfortable with numbers than athletics. There was only one exception: Apo, a girl who loved football so much that some afternoons she stayed after school to kick a ball around alone, still wearing her school skirt.

"You all look half asleep. Come on, wake up a little. This is PE!" Khwan-Oei laughed as she looked at all forty students. "Pair up, please. Today we're learning how to pass the ball."

Before long, half the school's football field had been claimed by Grade 10/3.

Most of them looked exhausted from having just survived basic mathematics. They had finished exercising the left side of their brains and were now being asked to exercise their bodies instead.

Khwan-Oei held her favorite football, her name written across it in permanent marker. She explained the basic theory first, then demonstrated a few passes. Her dark eyes lit with unmistakable happiness every time her foot met the ball, whether she was playing for fun or teaching for work.

Once the demonstration was over, the students practiced on their own. Forty students made twenty pairs. Most of them looked awkward and unfamiliar with the ball.

One pair stood out immediately.

"Slow down, Po!"

Hongyok, the class president, had paired with Apo and was shrieking because she could never receive Apo's passes in time. She kept having to chase after the ball, already panting for breath.

Khwan-Oei smiled as she watched her students and slowly walked from pair to pair, checking their technique.

"Teacher Oei, catch!"

A ball came flying toward her. Khwan-Oei trapped it neatly with her right foot, flicked it up, juggled it once with her left, then sent it back.

The school's Health and Physical Education Department had five teachers in total. Khwan-Oei was the only woman and the youngest by far. At twenty-five, she had only become a government teacher at the beginning of the previous year.

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"You're impressive. A civil servant already at your age."

Teacher Phong, the head of the department and its most senior member, had once praised her like that. Everyone in the department was kind. Most were older, and those who no longer had the energy for strenuous sports had moved on to teaching ballroom dance or pétanque. That left only Khwan-Oei and Teacher Somkid, who was in his forties, to handle football and volleyball.

"Khwan-Oei."

She turned toward the voice and smiled so widely her eyes nearly disappeared when she saw another close friend from school.

"What's up, Lin?" Khwan-Oei walked to the edge of the field and looked at Lalin with round, curious eyes.

"Am I interrupting? The admin office asked me to come get you."

Lalin taught home economics. She was quiet and avoided socializing unless necessary, preferring to spend her time arranging flower garlands or making simple Thai desserts in her classroom.

She had probably made the mistake of walking past the admin office and gotten drafted into doing an errand.

"Why are they looking for me?" Khwan-Oei asked, tilting her head.

"Someone's waiting to see you in the admin office."

Her eyes widened. "Who?"

"I heard it's the owner of Song Khwae River FC."

Khwan-Oei let out a small sound of understanding.

There was only one owner of Song Khwae River FC: Khun Anan, Rakniran's father. She could not imagine why Anan, who was busy preparing to run for parliament, would come to see her. Still, she nodded quickly to Lalin.

"I'll tell the students first, then I'll go right away."

Khwan-Oei half ran, half walked back toward the middle of the field. The twenty pairs of students were still passing footballs back and forth. She was just opening her mouth to say, "Everyone, listen--" when a ball shot diagonally toward her from the left.

Fast as a meteor.

Hard as a bullet.

Wham!

The meteor-bullet smashed straight into the PE teacher's face.

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"Khwan-Oei!"

Lalin screamed from the edge of the field, louder than Khwan-Oei had ever heard the gentle woman speak in her life.

Oh no.

Khwan-Oei toppled backward and landed hard on the grass. Half her face went numb with pain.

All she could think was that this was what happened when you spent your whole life kicking a ball around alone: you never learned the reflexes needed for one you had not expected.

All forty students rushed toward her, shouting in alarm. The boy who had kicked the ball pressed his palms together in apology, tears filling his eyes as he repeated over and over that he had not meant to hit her.

"It's okay, sweetheart." Khwan-Oei could barely feel one side of her face. "It's okay. Don't cry."

Half of that reassurance may have been meant for herself.

The admin-office door swung open, spilling cool air and the distinctive smell of paperwork over Khwan-Oei. The left side of her face still felt almost immobile, but she forced herself to smile. She did not want Anan to think she was a rude teacher.

"I'm sorry I'm late, Khun Anan. I was--"

Teaching.

The rest of the sentence vanished when she lifted her head.

What she saw stole her breath away.

Khwan-Oei felt as if her foolish heart had leapt straight out of her chest. Begging, stumbling, crawling back toward the hands of its rightful owner.

The owner of Khwan-Oei's heart.

Rakniran.

She wore a fitted white suit with sleek trousers in the same shade, and in her ears were the same diamond earrings she had worn the first time they met eight years ago.

Her beautiful face tilted slightly upward. Amber-brown eyes fixed steadily on Khwan-Oei.

Then that familiar, even, sweet voice spoke.

"What happened to your face, Oei?"

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Chapter 2

PE Teachers Hurt Too

Khwan-Oei served as co-adviser for Grade 10/3 with Queen, the biology teacher.

That meant she often found herself spending time around the Science Department.

Queen's close friend Pring taught astronomy and was hopelessly romantic. She adored the stars. On her desk sat a moon-shaped lamp that Khwan-Oei secretly admired every time she visited. She had once considered buying one for herself, but decided it would be wasteful when the old lamp she had used since lower secondary school still worked perfectly well.

Once, with a dreamy look in her eyes, Pring had told Khwan-Oei that the moon took approximately 27.3 days to orbit the Earth.

Meaning one had to wait 27.3 days before seeing the moon return to the same shape again.

But this moon--

Khwan-Oei's one and only moon--

"I asked you a question. Why aren't you answering me?"

--had taken eight long years to complete her orbit and return.

"Oei..." She had already forgotten what Rakniran had asked.

Khwan-Oei rubbed her still-numb left cheek. The ache there seemed to travel all the way down into the left side of her chest. The moment the first tear slid to her chin, the three other teachers in the admin office began moving about in visible panic. One fussed with paperwork. Another pressed the print button on a computer and sent a blank page through the printer. In the end, they exchanged glances and fled the room together.

Leaving behind only the moon in a white suit and the rabbit in a tracksuit.

A red mark spread across Khwan-Oei's cheek, still throbbing from the football. Bits of dirt clung to her face as an added souvenir.

The PE teacher drew a breath, trying to gather herself, but it came out as a wet sniff instead. She floundered, then hurriedly dragged over a chair.

"Khun... Khun Rak, please sit down."

"Oei."

"When did you come back to Thailand?"

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"My flight landed last night." Rakniran reluctantly sat in the chair. "I came to see you as soon as I could because I want to talk about what happened at the club."

Khwan-Oei had clearly lost all sense. She had transformed into a full-fledged startled rabbit, pacing around the office while tears streamed down both cheeks. Her mind could manage only one thought: she had to be a good host.

She grabbed the nearest thing she could find, which turned out to be a large bag of fried bananas left on Teacher Chalermsri's desk.

"Please have some snacks, Khun Rak."

"Oei."

"Water too. I'll go buy you some water--"

"That's enough, Oei." Rakniran's sweet voice carried the authority of an absolute command. "Come here."

Khwan-Oei obeyed without question.

Her feet stopped at once. Her frantic wandering around the admin office ended instantly. She hurried back and stood on the floor in front of Rakniran's chair.

Khwan-Oei had always been like this.

What mattered was never the command itself.

What mattered was who gave it.

Then she realized standing over Rakniran was probably improper, so Khwan-Oei quickly lowered herself to the floor and knelt before her former young mistress, looking as meek as a soaked rabbit.

"So what happened to your face?" Rakniran asked again. "You're a teacher now and people are still bullying you?"

Khwan-Oei had not seen Rakniran for eight years.

No contact.

No conversations.

Countless things had happened during those years. Khwan-Oei finished high school, entered the Faculty of Education, suffered through exams, celebrated graduation, passed the assistant-teacher examination, and eventually became a government teacher.

Yet throughout all eight years, she thought every day about the time she had spent working for Rakniran.

Cleaning her bedroom.

Massaging her feet and legs.

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Even lying still at night so Rakniran could hold her whenever she was too afraid of the dark to sleep.

Khwan-Oei had been paid for the work, though she never knew how much because Rakniran had always given the money directly to her grandfather.

More importantly--

Khwan-Oei remembered every detail about Rakniran by heart.

Her extraordinarily fair skin. Her flawless face. The proud, reserved way she carried herself.

"I was teaching football and there was an accident," Khwan-Oei explained through a trembling, tearful voice. "A student kicked the ball and it hit me in the face."

"I see." The young woman in the chair nodded. "As long as no one was bullying you."

Besides being taller and wearing her hair longer, the most obvious thing that had changed about Rakniran was her scent.

Eight years ago, she had worn perfume that smelled like cherry candy.

Now she smelled clean, like freshly laundered linen.

Khwan-Oei supposed that was proof Rakniran had truly grown up.

At only twenty-six, she seemed composed and unmistakably adult.

Khwan-Oei, meanwhile, still thought of herself as the same grubby little rabbit from years ago--the one Rakniran had found beneath the bus shelter outside the temple and illuminated with a flashlight.

"What did you want to talk to me about, Khun Rak?"

She was probably the first rabbit in the world capable of crying while wagging its tail, simply because Rakniran had sounded concerned about her.

"In your current state, I doubt we'd get very far." Rakniran took out her phone. "What's your current number?"

The PE teacher, still kneeling miserably on the floor, sniffed loudly and hurriedly wiped her tears with the sleeve of her tracksuit. Then she accepted Rakniran's expensive phone with both hands and entered her number.

"Here... Khun Rak."

Once that was done, Rakniran rose from the chair.

Her sharp eyes dropped to the bedraggled rabbit on the floor. Only then did she notice that Oei's honey-brown complexion was a little lighter than it had been eight years ago. Perhaps she had finally learned to apply sunscreen.

Or perhaps someone was applying it for her now.

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Rakniran sighed and took a pristine white handkerchief from her bag.

When the little PE teacher did not dare accept it, she crouched and placed it directly on Oei's lap.

"I'll call you this evening and tell you where to meet me."

After the lunch bell rang, Khwan-Oei carried her stacked lunchbox to the biology room to eat with Queen. Lalin happened to be dealing with a problem with her electricity bill, and Pimwa had assumed her usual role as everyone's mother and accompanied her to the electricity office. That left Khwan-Oei with no lunch companion except her co-adviser.

Queen was half Thai and half French, though there was not a trace of anything visibly French in her face. Two years older than Khwan-Oei, she was a senior teacher Khwan-Oei deeply respected. She could control a classroom effortlessly, and she was also unusually good with plants.

Golden pothos vines decorated all four corners of Queen's biology room. Everything else was arranged in restful shades of green, which somehow made Khwan-Oei's lunch of pork panang curry over rice with an omelet taste even better.

"I heard the daughter of Song Khwae River FC's owner came to see you this morning."

News certainly traveled quickly at school.

"Yes." Khwan-Oei smiled awkwardly, her cheeks puffed with rice and omelet. "But she only stayed a little while before leaving."

"How does she know you personally? Why would she come all the way here to see you?"

Khwan-Oei swallowed before answering. "When I was younger, I used to work for her. Sometimes I cleaned her bedroom, sometimes I massaged her legs and feet, sometimes I made late-night meals. Whatever Khun Rak asked me to do."

"That sounds like a lot of work." The half-French woman nodded thoughtfully. "How old were you then?"

"Seventeen."

"Child labor, then."

"But I wanted to do it." Khwan-Oei smiled sheepishly and spooned some of her panang curry onto Queen's plate. "Khun Rak was very kind. She paid me, and she bought me lots of things too. Even real gold earrings."

Apparently the last part sounded strange, because the biology teacher propped her chin on one hand and frowned.

"Why does this sound like something halfway between a devoted girlfriend and a rich employer showing off?"

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"N-no, not a girlfriend." Khwan-Oei nearly inhaled a grain of rice. "Khun Rak didn't like me back."

Queen, the plant expert, now looked as if she wanted to pick up a scalpel and dissect Khwan-Oei's thoughts. A spark appeared in the half-French woman's sharp eyes.

"If you're saying she didn't like you back, that means you liked her."

Khwan-Oei scratched her cheek. Her round eyes were painfully sincere as she confessed the whole truth.

"I still do. I... I've never tried liking anyone except Khun Rak."

"That's some dedication, Teacher Oei." Queen's mouth curved. "Sugar or no sugar, I wonder?"

"For what?"

"Centella juice. I'll boil some and keep it ready in case a crybaby like you gets her heart broken again."

"P'Queen..." Khwan-Oei pouted miserably.

In the end, she could not argue. Aside from football, Khwan-Oei's greatest talents were crying and loving the same woman for the rest of her life.

"I'm teasing." Queen laughed. "I'm single myself, so I can't exactly give good relationship advice. Let's just say I'm cheering for you."

Khwan-Oei packed away her lunchbox after finishing her meal. She reached for a tissue to wipe her mouth, but when she put a hand into her trouser pocket, the only thing she found was the handkerchief Rakniran had given her that morning to dry her tears.

"Actually, Khun Rak is meeting me this evening to talk about Chiwin's case. But I'm still scared to be alone with her." Because she was certain she would start crying again. "If I ask Pimwa to come, I feel bad for Khun Rak because Wa will definitely snap at her. And Lin... she doesn't like meeting strangers."

Queen listened and nodded. She thought for only a moment before saying,

"I can go with you."

That evening, a call from Rakniran's unfamiliar number directed Khwan-Oei to a Thai restaurant not far from the school. Rakniran apparently knew Khwan-Oei did not own a car--her only vehicle was a secondhand bicycle given to her by one of her students' parents--so she sent a van to wait outside the school.

Khwan-Oei was so nervous her palms were damp. One hand clutched the hem of her tracksuit jacket while the other held her phone tightly. She still had not decided whether she should save Rakniran's number. Would Khun Rak dislike it if she did?

Fortunately, Queen was with her. From the van ride all the way to the restaurant entrance, the older teacher kept rubbing Khwan-Oei's back in reassurance.

"You really like her that much, Teacher Oei?" Queen laughed, looking at her fondly.

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Rakniran was already seated at the table. When Khwan-Oei approached stiffly with Queen beside her, Rakniran looked up.

A faint flash of surprise entered her light-brown eyes.

More importantly, those beautiful eyes did not seem to be looking at Khwan-Oei at all.

"P'Queen? Key's older sister?" Rakniran stood and gave a respectful wai to the woman who was still rubbing Khwan-Oei's back.

Queen quickly returned the gesture and laughed softly.

"That's me. I came along to keep Khwan-Oei company today. I hope I'm not intruding, Rakniran."

"Not at all. I've only ever seen you in photographs. It's nice to finally meet you in person."

Khwan-Oei transformed from a bedraggled rabbit into a stunned chicken.

Her brain could not process what was happening.

"I've wanted to meet the famous Rakniran in person for a long time too," Queen said. "When Key was studying in France, every time he called me, he had to tell me about his friend named Rakniran."

Oh.

So P'Queen and Rakniran were not strangers after all.

"Please sit, P'Queen. Order anything you'd like."

Rakniran sat at the head of the table. Khwan-Oei hovered awkwardly, not daring to take a seat until Queen pulled out the chair beside the head of the table and pressed Khwan-Oei into it. The atmosphere reminded her of a parent-teacher meeting the previous year, when Teacher Khwan-Oei had been so flustered that Queen had ended up handling practically everything for her.

"P'Queen never told me," Khwan-Oei whispered, "that you already knew Khun Rak."

"You never asked," Queen whispered back.

The restaurant served refined Thai cuisine inspired by royal recipes and looked expensive enough to make Khwan-Oei nervous. She held the menu but did not dare order so much as a glass of water. In the end, Queen ordered Khwan-Oei's favorite dishes for her.

"How is Key these days, P'Queen?" Rakniran asked while they waited for the food. "When we were studying in France, Key and I were practically inseparable. But after graduation, Key came back to Thailand while I stayed in France, so we barely kept in touch. We message sometimes, but not often."

"He's fine." Queen smiled. "He worked at a company for a few years to gain experience. Now he's resigned and is taking some time at home. Apparently he's planning to start a business of his own."

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The two of them conversed so easily that Khwan-Oei, seated between them, began to feel like an unwanted third wheel. She lowered her head and stared at the table, her hands so awkward that she picked up a tissue and started folding it just to have something to do.

Before long, the dishes arrived, fragrant with Thai herbs and spices. The sight of food eased some of Khwan-Oei's tension.

Without thinking, she reached for the serving spoon and placed food on Rakniran's plate.

For one moment, she completely forgot this was a fine-dining table in a luxurious restaurant rather than the kitchen in Rakniran's house.

Forgot that it was six in the evening, not eleven at night or midnight eight years ago, when Rakniran used to bring her downstairs to prepare late-night meals.

When Khwan-Oei came back to herself, she froze.

The large piece of fish balanced in the serving spoon slipped and landed on the table.

"I'm sorry," Khwan-Oei said shakily.

She hurried to reach for a tissue, but Rakniran extended an arm to stop her and called a server over instead.

"Serve me another piece, Oei," Rakniran said evenly. "That one's fallen."

With permission from her former mistress, Khwan-Oei--who had apparently never quite abandoned her old servant mentality--carefully served another piece of fish.

This time, it landed safely on Rakniran's plate.

Her nonexistent fluffy rabbit tail began wagging wildly.

She was so happy to be able to serve Rakniran again that she nearly cried.

Most of the conversation over dinner belonged to Rakniran and Queen. Khwan-Oei had a few opportunities to speak, but spent most of her time placing food on Rakniran's plate and eating from her own only when Rakniran's was already full.

They had barely made a dent in the meal when Queen excused herself, saying she had family business to attend to.

"Oh, and congratulations in advance, Rakniran." Queen smiled gently. "I heard about it from Key."

"Thank you, P'Queen." Rakniran gave her a wai.

After Queen left, only Khwan-Oei and Rakniran remained.

Khwan-Oei's round dark eyes stole glances at the woman beside her. Her brows drooped nervously. She kept sneaking looks at Rakniran's beautiful face without saying a word until Rakniran finally spoke first.

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"If you want to ask me something, ask."

It sounded as if Khun Rak was beginning to lose patience with her again.

Khwan-Oei panicked and forced the question out in a trembling voice.

"What P'Queen congratulated you for just now... what was it about?"

Silence settled across the table for a long moment.

Then Rakniran picked up a tissue and calmly wiped the corner of Khwan-Oei's mouth.

Her expression remained unreadable.

Her voice was just as even when she answered.

"I'm planning to get married."

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