THE CURSE BETWEEN US

English Translation Sample

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PROLOGUE

The click of a computer shutting down came right on time.

As she did every day, Phimphachii glanced at the analog watch on her left wrist. Office life was probably the same everywhere. You clocked in. By eleven in the morning, you were already thinking about what to have for lunch. By late afternoon, you stretched both arms over your head, leaning first to one side, then the other, and considered it a small victory if your back cracked loud enough to hear.

Then came the obligatory trip to the pantry, where the company kept an endless supply of snacks as part of its employee benefits.

Phimphachii was a frequent visitor. She loved tea, though she always carried her favorite blends with her. And when evening finally arrived, everyone in the office would inevitably glance at the clock mounted above the entrance, hurry to finish whatever work remained, then shut down their computers.

Just as they were doing now.

Phimphachii's slender hand reached for the bag on the desk reserved for the team leader. Smiling as usual, she passed her coworkers' desks and dipped her head to each of them, a gesture that meant both goodbye and see you tomorrow.

She was twenty-four, only a few months shy of twenty-five. She had joined the small processed-food company straight out of university and, in only a few years, had gathered enough experience—and proved herself convincingly enough—to become a team leader faster than anyone else.

“G! G!”

The familiar voice stopped her in her tracks.

Her pointed heels came to a halt. She turned her slim figure toward the caller with her usual smile.

“Na?”

“I brought you something from Chiang Mai.” Na held out a package. “I know you like tea and things like that. The second I saw it, I thought of you.”

Phimphachii broke into a delighted smile and accepted the tea with a grateful laugh. Na was one of the coworkers she was closest to, although, to be fair, Na seemed close to practically everyone. Phimphachii suspected it was because the woman possessed an almost excessive amount of friendliness.

“They say tea from the North is really fragrant. I want to open it already.”

“Try it when you get home. Message me on MSN and tell me what you think.”

Phimphachii shook her head at once.

“Let's open it now. I'm going to pour it into my tea tin anyway. I just ran out.”

“Huh? Won't Khwan be waiting forever? She must've been downstairs for half an hour already.”

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“Let her wait a little longer.” Phimphachii put on her most charming expression. “Come on, Na. Let's open it.”

The older woman didn't dare object. She knew the younger woman's personality too well. Once Phimphachii announced she was going to do something, she almost always did it. Even now, she might have sounded as though she were asking Na's opinion, but her fingers were already poised to tear open the package.

“All right, all right. I'm curious too. The seller said it smells incredible.”

They tore open the vacuum-sealed pouch.

A rich fragrance immediately bloomed into the air, brushing the tip of Phimphachii's nose before flooding her lungs. She had inhaled a little too enthusiastically and promptly sneezed.

“G! Easy!”

Na laughed, watching her without looking away.

“Hahaha! Maybe I got too excited.” Phimphachii wiped the tears the sneeze had brought to her eyes. “But it smells amazing, Na. I've never smelled tea like this before.”

“I think they said it was blended with flowers from China. I don't remember exactly.”

“What? Then it must've been expensive. No, no. How much was it? I'll pay you back.”

The two women batted each other's hands away, arguing back and forth until Na finally surrendered and allowed Phimphachii to pay for half. The younger woman plainly refused to take no for an answer, and after another glance at the clock, Na realized the argument could drag on indefinitely. Letting her have her way was clearly the fastest solution.

“Okay, I really have to go now. Thanks again for the tea, Na. See you tomorrow.”

Phimphachii clocked out, pushed through the barely open door, and slipped through the narrow gap. She was tiny, almost delicately so, though not thin enough to look frail.

“G.”

Again.

She sighed.

“What shampoo have you been using lately? Your hair—”

“Sorry, Ging. Can we talk tomorrow? I'm in a hurry today. Khwan's been waiting for ages.”

She left the cleaning woman staring after her.

The staff here could turn absolutely anything into a conversation. Shampoo? Seriously?

The parking lot beside the building was their usual meeting place.

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A new pearl-white car sat there with its engine running. Its driver knew perfectly well that if the cabin was even slightly warm, her special passenger would complain. The seat had to be adjusted just right. The air-conditioning could not blow directly into her face.

Everything had to be arranged precisely to her satisfaction.

“Have you been waiting long, darling?”

Phimphachii's sweet smile served as an apology.

The tall woman behind the wheel smiled back.

“Not at all. I don't mind waiting.”

Once the passenger door closed, Khwandao took the bag from Phimphachii's lap and placed it on the back seat, just as she did every day.

“Hungry? What do you want to eat tonight?”

Phimphachii tugged Khwandao's arm toward herself, wrapped both arms around it, and rested her head against the woman's shoulder like an affectionate kitten.

At least, that was what she probably thought she looked like.

To Khwandao, Phimphachii was closer to a temperamental cat whose mood could change at any moment.

“You choose, darling.”

That was unusual.

Was G letting her choose because she felt guilty for making her wait?

If so, Khwandao wasn't about to complain. She had grown thoroughly tired of steakhouses and Chinese restaurants, especially dim sum.

“How about sukiyaki tonight?”

“But the smell gets in my hair. I just washed it this morning.”

Here we go.

“Ramen, then?”

“Darling...” Phimphachii sighed as though the suggestion were unbearably disappointing. “The noodles splash everywhere.”

Ah.

Too difficult to eat, apparently.

“Sushi?”

“Mmm! Sushi.”

Khwandao released a breath of relief.

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Only three suggestions tonight. That practically counted as a miracle.

Waiting for Phimphachii after work had trained Khwandao to spend part of every afternoon mentally compiling dinner options. She did this nearly every day of the week. On particularly fortunate occasions, Phimphachii had already decided what she wanted.

Those were the truly blessed days.

The sushi restaurant at the mall wasn't very crowded. Most people probably considered it too heavy for dinner.

One person at their table clearly disagreed.

Phimphachii continued eating with obvious delight long after Khwandao had become so full she could barely imagine swallowing another bite.

“Darling, order me some more.”

Apparently, this too had become one of Khwandao's responsibilities over the past two years.

Every dish on the table had to be ordered in her calm voice.

Every meal.

Every restaurant.

Every single thing.

“If you eat too much, you'll get a stomachache.” Khwandao took a tissue and wiped a smear of food from the younger woman's mouth. “We'll be going to bed in a few hours. You won't have time to digest it.”

Phimphachii pouted with visible regret, but she did listen and refrained from ordering anything else.

She finished the meal with a watermelon smoothie before calling for the bill, which she insisted on paying herself.

And really, looking at everything on the table, she ought to.

Khwandao ate like a sparrow.

“I'm soooo full.”

Phimphachii patted her stomach, looking absurdly pleased with herself.

“Recline your seat and rest, sweetheart. I'll wake you when we get home.”

The pearl-white car crawled through nearly half an hour of traffic before the sun finally began to sink.

Without its warmth, the air inside the car suddenly felt much colder.

And there was something else.

A strange smell that kept Phimphachii from falling asleep.

“Do you smell something, darling?”

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She wrinkled her nose and sniffed the air.

It was here.

Somewhere around her.

“What smell? I don't smell anything.”

How could she not?

Irritated by her girlfriend's complete lack of observation, Phimphachii shook her head.

It smelled as though some small animal had died inside the car and dried there—a stale, rotten odor that made her stomach turn.

All four windows came down.

Even though Khwandao still couldn't smell anything, she let the outside air flood the cabin in an attempt to clear whatever was bothering G.

By the time they pulled into their usual parking space beneath the condominium in the city center, the smell seemed to have faded.

“Can you still smell it?”

Phimphachii shook her head, lips pursed in disgust.

“Let's hurry upstairs. I want a shower.”

The smell had made her feel sticky and filthy, as though it had somehow clung to her body. She felt as if she might catch another trace of it no matter where she turned.

Her first destination was the bathroom attached to their bedroom.

Khwandao hung their bags and jackets in their usual places. Keeping the condo immaculate had become second nature to her. She even handled G's clothes without complaint.

Phimphachii often teased that she deserved a Girlfriend of the Year award.

Two sets of pajamas had already been folded in the dressing room. Their discarded clothes went neatly into the laundry basket.

Then Khwandao, naked, stepped into the bathroom where her girlfriend was already showering.

“Let me wash your back.”

She wrapped Phimphachii in an embrace from behind. The smaller woman's body yielded willingly against her.

Khwandao pressed a soft kiss to her shoulder.

Heat surged through Phimphachii at once.

“Shower first,” the taller woman whispered beside her ear.

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Her hands, however, continued gliding over G's smooth stomach. Shower cream made the skin soft and slippery beneath her palms.

One wandering hand moved higher, squeezing her breast under the pretense of helping her wash.

“Darling.”

Phimphachii dragged the word out in warning and smacked the offending hand.

Khwandao laughed.

Later, the scent of body lotion filled the bedroom.

Phimphachii threw herself onto the luxurious goose-down mattress they had splurged on when they bought the condo. Soft as a cloud, it sank beneath her weight and gently lifted again.

It had cost an outrageous amount of money.

Worth every baht.

“How was work today?”

“Well...” Phimphachii wriggled comfortably against the arm beneath her head, as she did every night. “Nothing special, I guess. Na brought me some tea today. I'm going to try it tomorrow.”

“You must be happy.”

She nodded.

Then, lying on her side, she tipped her face up toward Khwandao. Her large round eyes caught the bedside light. Her lips parted slightly, making her intention perfectly obvious.

The larger prey leaned closer.

Khwandao began with a kiss to her smooth forehead.

It felt warm.

Warmer than it should have.

“You're running hot again.”

This happened often after sunset. Phimphachii always claimed it was probably the same allergies that had troubled her since childhood.

She said it confidently enough that Khwandao suspected she simply didn't want her to worry.

“It's nothing.”

The same answer as always.

Phimphachii caught Khwandao's hand and placed it over one of her breasts.

She pressed down, silently instructing her what to do.

Khwandao understood.

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Their mouths met.

Tongues brushed, teased, and tangled between slow kisses.

Khwandao ran her tongue across her girlfriend's lower lip, savoring the response. The teasing made it very clear how much Phimphachii wanted her.

The satin pajamas Khwandao had carefully prepared for her ended up tossed carelessly aside.

“Mmm...”

A moan escaped the smaller woman beneath her.

Her breath was feverishly hot, whether from whatever heat burned inside her or from the mouth now traveling over her skin, Khwandao couldn't tell.

“G...”

Phimphachii's fingers slid into the hair at the nape of Khwandao's neck. Her body arched instinctively toward her lover's touch.

Her breathing quickened.

Khwandao's hand moved lower.

Phimphachii parted her legs for her without hesitation.

The younger woman's entire body tightened at the intimate touch.

“Darling...”

Her voice broke into a breathless plea.

Khwandao knew exactly what she was asking for.

Phimphachii tangled her fingers tighter in her lover's hair, overwhelmed by the mixture of pleasure and unbearable sensitivity.

Khwandao finally lifted her head, intending to watch G's face the way she always did.

But the face above her was not Phimphachii's.

She blinked.

Once.

Twice.

Trying to make her eyes adjust to the dim bedside light.

Then she looked again.

A grotesque smile stretched across the face.

The mouth had been torn open all the way to the ears.

Blood poured from it, filling the room with the metallic stink of fresh gore.

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“Fuck!”

Khwandao threw herself backward.

She scrambled away so violently that she fell from the bed.

Her scream rang through the room, frightening Phimphachii in turn.

“What the hell?” G snapped, already irritated. “What are you doing?”

She started toward her.

Khwandao recoiled.

“Don't come any closer!”

Her tall body stumbled backward until she fell again.

She stared at the face before her, squeezing her eyes shut and opening them in terrified intervals.

It was still there.

Not G's face.

That hideous smile remained stretched from ear to ear, blood dripping onto the floor in thick drops.

The smell made her want to vomit up everything she had eaten.

“Khwan! This isn't funny. What are you playing at?”

The voice seemed to move closer.

Worse—it seemed to surround her.

Khwandao's back hit the wall. She no longer knew which direction the thing was coming from.

All she could do was clutch the Buddha amulet at her neck and mumble half-remembered prayers.

That was not human.

She was certain of it.

“Khwan.”

A hand touched her trembling arm.

Khwandao jerked violently.

Her face had gone white. Sweat soaked the hair around her temples. Phimphachii had never seen her look this frightened before.

Maybe Khwandao was pretending because she no longer wanted to have sex.

But why go this far?

Crawling all the way across the floor until her back hit the wall?

And G had called her name several times now, yet she still refused to open her eyes.

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Irritation began to overpower concern.

Slap!

Phimphachii struck her hard.

“Are you finished messing around?”

Khwandao groaned.

Slowly, cautiously, she opened her eyes.

“G...”

“Yes. G.” Her voice was sharp.

This time, the face had returned to normal.

Khwandao's pounding heart began to settle.

For a moment, she cupped Phimphachii's face between her hands.

The younger woman immediately knocked them away.

Her expression made her displeasure perfectly clear.

“If you don't want to do it, then don't.”

She climbed back into bed and turned to her own side.

The long bolster pillow was pulled between them.

Whenever Phimphachii was angry, it became an excellent border wall.

Tonight was no exception.

But what Khwandao had seen had been terrifyingly real.

That face remained seared into her mind.

And the blood—

She looked down at the floor.

Nothing.

Not a single drop.

She wasn't drunk. She barely drank at all these days.

She could have sworn that horrible face had been superimposed over Phimphachii's.

Perhaps the pillow barrier was a blessing tonight.

If she saw that thing again, she might actually die of fright.

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CHAPTER ONE: CHEATING

“I'll probably be working late for a while.”

The sentence had been tormenting Phimphachii since that morning.

By lunchtime, she was still irritated.

Last night had already put her in a foul mood. Khwandao had suddenly stopped what they were doing halfway through for no apparent reason.

And now this.

I'll be working late.

Wasn't that simply another way of saying they wouldn't be sleeping together?

Her frustration was written all over her face and body language. Everyone on her team noticed.

No one dared ask.

They all knew Phimphachii hated being pestered. If she wanted to talk about something, she would talk about it herself.

Until then, everyone sat stiffly around her whenever she sighed.

“Can I ask you guys something?”

Every fork and spoon at the lunch table stopped moving.

Everyone listened.

“Has your partner ever suddenly looked at your face and freaked out? Even though they see you every day?”

Na volunteered first by bursting into laughter.

“My husband does that all the time. Especially after I wash my makeup off.”

The joke didn't satisfy Phimphachii.

She was entirely confident that her bare face did not look drastically different from her made-up one.

Besides, Khwandao had known her since before she'd even learned how to apply makeup.

Why would she suddenly be horrified by her face years later?

She turned to another coworker.

“What about you, Ying? Ever happened?”

Ying, who was only a little older than Phimphachii, shook her head immediately.

Her husband wasn't playful or expressive like Na's. He was a serious man. If he ever got tired of looking at her face, Ying suspected he would simply tell her.

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Fortunately, he still told her he loved her every day.

“No. He's not much of a talker. Doesn't show much emotion either.”

“What happened, G?” Na asked. “Did Khwan do something?”

Phimphachii exhaled again.

“It's not exactly that she did something. Last night...” She paused, hurriedly searching for an acceptable version of the truth. “She turned around, saw my face, and suddenly freaked out.”

“Maybe Khwan was teasing you,” said Dear, who was the same age as G. She had been listening quietly until now. “My ex used to do that too, like Na's husband. Every time I took my makeup off, he'd pretend to be shocked.”

No.

That wasn't what Khwandao had looked like last night.

She had looked terrified.

Phimphachii simply didn't understand of what.

Even the way she had clutched the Buddha amulet around her neck made no sense.

“It wasn't like that. Khwan looked really scared. She actually tried to get away from me and fell over. You'd think I was some kind of ghost. She was squeezing her amulet like her life depended on it. And then this morning she told me she'd be working late for a while. It sounded like she was indirectly telling me we wouldn't be sleeping together.”

“Unless...” Ying elbowed Na, silently asking whether she should say what she was thinking.

Na gave the slightest nod.

Ying went ahead.

“Maybe Khwan has another woman.”

Bang!

Both of Phimphachii's hands slammed against the table.

“Khwan!”

“G-G, calm down.” Na hurriedly rubbed her arm.

Everyone else in the cafeteria was staring at them now.

“Sit down,” she whispered, gesturing urgently toward the chair.

“Don't jump to conclusions,” Dear said. “Maybe Khwan saw something else and that's why she got scared.”

The atmosphere around the table changed immediately.

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Dear was obsessed with the supernatural. She watched every ghost program she could find and absorbed the stories as though they concerned people she personally knew.

Everyone at the table knew this.

Naturally, they all leaned closer.

“What?” Ying demanded impatiently.

“Maybe she saw...a ghost.”

Dear's face was completely serious.

“I've heard stories about people seeing another face covering their partner's face. It can happen when somebody's put black magic on—”

“That's ridiculous,” Phimphachii cut in.

As much as she hated admitting it, Ying's theory seemed far more plausible.

If Khwandao really had someone else, G would catch her red-handed.

She would begin with the obvious places.

The car.

Her phone.

The condo.

“I'm going back to my desk. Think I'll take a nap.”

She walked away with her usual confidence, but fatigue dragged heavily through her body.

She had been getting sick on and off since the end of last year. Some nights she had strange dreams in which she couldn't breathe.

Phimphachii had always assumed her allergies were responsible. If she dreamed of suffocating, it was probably because congestion was making it difficult to breathe in the real world.

Her restless sleep also caused her to wake several times throughout the night.

Khwandao was always the one who drew her feverish body into an embrace and stroked her back until she fell asleep again.

Strangely enough, whenever Khwandao held her, even the fever seemed to subside.

And the nightmares often changed into gentler dreams.

For the final half hour of her lunch break, Phimphachii rested her head on her desk.

The room was quiet. Even the large ceiling-mounted air conditioner seemed silent.

Exhaustion pulled her into sleep almost immediately.

And once again, she found herself dreaming.

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A petite woman sat before a large dressing table.

Something about her was familiar.

She lifted a comb and began brushing her hair.

In the mirror, the reflection of her lips curved into a faint, contented smile.

She hummed a melody Phimphachii didn't recognize.

G could feel herself moving closer.

Closer.

The strange tune seemed to swell until it echoed around her.

Then the woman raised her eyes.

Their gazes met through the mirror.

Phimphachii gasped and pressed a hand against her chest, desperately trying to quiet the pounding of her heart.

Fear flooded her.

She was terrified the woman might hear it.

Because the woman in the mirror—

was her.

The other Phimphachii extended the comb toward her.

G hesitated.

Eventually, still frightened, she took it.

The identical eyes in the mirror seemed to command her.

So Phimphachii began brushing the woman's hair.

Not because she wanted to.

Because somehow, inside this dream, she could not make herself stop.

Black strands began gathering in the teeth of the comb.

One strand became a clump.

One clump became a fistful.

Soon whole handfuls were coming away.

Bald patches opened across the other woman's head, revealing raw red scalp beneath. Blood seeped from the places where the hair had been torn free.

Yet the face in the mirror only smiled wider.

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Then it laughed.

A hand shot out and seized Phimphachii's wrist.

It squeezed.

Harder.

Harder still.

As though the other woman were furious with her.

The familiar face began to change.

The skin decomposed before her eyes.

The smile tore outward toward both ears in a hideous wound, the lower portion of the mouth sagging toward the middle of the throat.

Phimphachii screamed for help.

She cried and struggled desperately to escape.

But a blackened, foul-smelling hand dragged her back.

The other closed around her throat.

She choked.

Her mouth opened uselessly as she fought for air.

Saliva ran down her chin.

Her windpipe narrowed beneath the crushing fingers.

Her eyes widened.

Her pupils dilated as her heart hammered harder and harder.

I'm scared.

It was so terrifying that tears streamed down both cheeks.

Clack. Clack.

That sound again.

Clack. Clack.

The hands gripping her body suddenly released her.

Phimphachii collapsed, gulping air into aching lungs, dizzy after being deprived of oxygen for so long.

Clack. Clack.

Again.

Like high heels striking hard against the floor.

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The sound was coming closer.

Then another set of footsteps followed—bare feet against concrete.

Something lightly touched her left shoulder.

A moment later, it pulled her around.

“G.”

Phimphachii jolted awake with a gasp.

“Ging.”

She looked at the hand resting on her left shoulder and immediately understood.

Ging must have touched her while she was asleep.

The sensation had simply slipped into the dream.

“Sorry, sorry. It's almost afternoon. I thought I'd wake you.”

“Thanks, Ging.”

The middle-aged cleaning woman smiled and returned to her work.

This department had been giving her a peculiar amount of trouble lately.

Hair constantly littered the floor around Phimphachii's desk.

Ging would sweep up a large handful in the morning, only to find just as much by afternoon, as though the floor had never been cleaned.

By evening, it happened again.

“Hey, Ging. What were you going to ask me yesterday?”

“Oh.” Ging stretched the sound out. “I wanted to ask what shampoo you've been using. You've been losing so much hair. I was going to recommend an herbal shampoo. Works really well.”

“Hair loss?”

“Look.”

Ging held up the dustpan to show her the huge clump she had supposedly just swept up.

Except—

there was nothing inside it.

Not a single strand.

“Oh.”

“There's nothing there.” Phimphachii laughed. “You've been working so hard you're seeing things.”

She gave it no further thought.

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Ging cleaned several departments. It wasn't strange for her to confuse one area with another.

In the afternoon, the pantry filled with employees searching for sweets and caffeine to keep themselves awake.

Phimphachii joined them.

She prepared the new tea in an enormous mug, although to a tea addict like her, even that was barely enough.

A few gulps later, it was already gone, and she was waiting for the dispenser to refill it with hot water.

“G, Nai wants to see you in her office.”

“Me?”

Na nodded.

“She called the desk a minute ago. Give me your cup. I'll fill it for you.”

Phimphachii handed it over.

Another woman had already been summoned to the manager's office.

She sat with her arms folded and gave Phimphachii an annoyed look.

G remembered perfectly well when those eyes had once been friendlier.

That had been before the two of them found themselves competing over the same project.

“Hello, Nai.”

Phimphachii gave her manager a respectful wai.

Nai returned the greeting with the familiar fond smile she had always reserved for her.

Phimphachii was almost like a niece to her. G was the daughter of an older university friend Nai deeply respected, and something about her polite manners and small, pretty face always reminded Nai of her father.

“How have you been? Haven't seen you in ages.”

“I'm good. How about you?”

“Surviving.”

They laughed together.

“So why did you call Gaew and me in?”

Gaewalin was the name of the other woman, who was roughly Phimphachii's age.

“We're launching a new product at the end of the month. Your assignment is to come up with ideas for what kind of product it should be.”

“Isn't that a little broad?” Gaewalin objected.

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“You're not wrong. The economy is still unstable, so I want both of you to think carefully before submitting your proposals.”

“Yes, Nai.”

Phimphachii had no problem with an open-ended brief.

She preferred it, actually.

Freedom meant she could take pieces from here and there and combine them however she liked.

Gaewalin was the opposite.

She needed structure, rules, and an existing framework to follow.

Put less generously, she wasn't particularly creative.

No wonder she looked irritated when they stepped out of Nai's office.

“Perfect assignment for you, huh?” Gaewalin began immediately. “Wouldn't surprise me if she invented it just for you.”

Phimphachii folded her arms and waited until the other woman finished.

Then she released a long sigh.

“What fight are you trying to start now?”

“If Nai were even slightly fair, we wouldn't have to waste our breath having conversations like this.”

Gaewalin folded her own arms and exaggeratedly copied Phimphachii's sigh.

“Ridiculous.”

Not only had Gaewalin cost her precious tea-drinking time, she was now wasting minutes of her life on a pointless argument.

Phimphachii turned on her size-thirty-eight heels and walked away, leaving the unreasonable woman to stew by herself.

Internally, she laughed at how narrow-minded Gaewalin could be.

A message arrived on her phone.

Only thirty minutes until the end of the workday.

Khwandao sent almost the same message every evening when she reached the front of the office.

“Khwan's here already?” Ying poked her head over the partition between their desks. She must have heard the notification.

“Yeah. She's probably waiting downstairs.”

The older woman crooked a finger, telling G to come closer.

She did.

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“You should check the car carefully. See whether anything new has appeared—or anything is missing.”

Phimphachii understood immediately.

They had talked about Khwandao possibly cheating on her at lunch.

Khwandao was exceptionally attractive and kind to practically everyone.

Merely imagining that she might have to share that smile—or half of Khwandao's love—with some unknown woman was enough to make Phimphachii irritated all over again.

Because she loved her.

Because she was terribly possessive of her.

Inside the car, nothing smelled unusual.

Khwandao leaned over to fasten G's seat belt, then moved her bag to the back seat just as she always did.

At close range, her skin looked perfectly clean as well.

No suspicious marks.

At least none that Phimphachii hadn't put there herself.

Then she saw it.

“Whose hair is this?”

She picked up the strand with visible disgust.

It was straight, long, and thick.

Not hers.

Certainly not Khwandao's, either. Khwan dyed her hair brown.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what? I asked whose hair this is.”

“Huh?”

Khwandao took the strand and examined it, then compared it against G's.

“Isn't it yours?”

“It's thicker. Blacker. Longer. My hair is finer and shorter, and it's dark brown because I dye it. So whose hair is it?”

“What? I haven't had anyone else in the—”

“You're lying!”

Phimphachii cut her off before she could finish.

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She whipped her face toward the window and stared at the passing road for the rest of the drive.

There was no usual question about dinner.

What do you want to eat tonight?

Which restaurant do you feel like?

Nothing.

That alone nearly made Phimphachii cry.

It felt as though Khwandao no longer cared about her.

Not the way she used to.

“I really haven't had anyone else in the car.”

Khwandao explained patiently.

She had spent almost the entire day alone in her office and had barely spoken to anyone.

“When I finished work, I came straight here to pick you up.”

A sob escaped Phimphachii.

“Then whose hair is it?”

She rubbed the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand and asked the same question again.

“It could've gotten stuck to the bottom of someone's shoe.”

Phimphachii had to admit the explanation sounded plausible.

All she needed was for Khwandao to explain things.

Silence was worse.

Silence gave her imagination room to torture her.

The thought of losing Khwandao to someone else returned with painful force.

Her chest tightened.

She couldn't bear it.

If Khwandao really did have someone else...

Maybe G would simply pretend not to know.

As long as Khwandao stayed beside her.

“Mmm.”

“What happened to your arm?”

“My arm?”

What a strange way to change the subject.

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Phimphachii examined both arms and discovered what Khwandao had noticed.

A large reddish bruise circled her wrist.

“I-I don't know.”

Her voice softened.

The dream from lunchtime came back to her as she gently rubbed the mark.

“We'll put a cold compress on it when we get home. What do you want to eat tonight?”

Phimphachii shook her head.

“I want you to cook for me.”

She took Khwandao's warm hand and placed it in her lap.

It always comforted her, especially when she was frightened.

As long as Khwandao was nearby, she felt safe.

The trembling in her own hand slowly stopped beneath that warmth.

That evening, Phimphachii showered alone.

Water struck skin and tile like soft rain while she hummed beneath her breath.

The sound cleared her mind.

For a little while, it helped her forget the nightmare.

Then, while she was washing her hair with her eyes closed, another pair of hands seemed to join hers.

Kind hands.

Helping massage shampoo through her hair.

Phimphachii laughed.

Khwandao must have come in to shower with her, as usual.

“Finished cooking already, darling?”

She tilted her face into the spray, squeezing her eyes even more tightly shut.

No answer came from behind her.

Instead, slippery hands glided over her stomach.

Phimphachii squirmed.

Ticklish.

She burst out laughing and spun around, ready to get revenge.

There was no one there.

Her heart thundered.

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For a moment, it drowned out every other sound in the room.

She caught hold of the faucet for support.

She suddenly felt as though she might faint.

What was that?

She had felt those hands.

She knew she had.

The nightmare rushed back into her mind.

Fear tightened around her body.

Her left hand closed over her right wrist.

Khwandao had noticed the red mark there earlier.

Now the skin ached beneath her fingers.

The pain felt disturbingly similar to what she had experienced in the dream.

Outside the bathroom, the condo was filled with the smell of food Khwandao had prepared at her request.

But seeing it brought Phimphachii no comfort.

If anything, it confirmed something she did not want confirmed.

Khwandao had been in the kitchen.

The entire time.

From when G entered the shower until the moment she came out.

“Perfect timing. I just finished.”

Phimphachii barely noticed the food.

She walked straight to the taller woman and inspected her body for any trace of moisture.

There was none.

“Darling.”

Her voice trembled.

Slowly, she looked down at the floor, searching for the wet footprints that should have been there.

“You've been out here...the whole time?”

“Yes. Did you call me? I'm sorry, I didn't hear—”

The rest of Khwandao's words disappeared.

Phimphachii walked away from the truth standing in front of her and retreated into the dressing room.

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Her mind frantically searched for another explanation.

She hadn't slept enough.

That was all.

Or she was overthinking things.

Yes.

She was just imagining it.

And the bruise around her wrist?

She must have slept on her arm during lunch.

Of course.

That was all it was.

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