THE CURSE BETWEEN US II

ENGLISH SAMPLE

By 1Thunwa

Amarin Coporations PCL.

CHAPTER ONE: FOUR YEARS LATER

"Whose event is it, Aunt Tal? The one we're going up North for tomorrow?"

Phimphachii asked while bending over a large wicker basket, carefully arranging the supplies that would be taken on the journey. Most of the ingredients were locally sourced, with fresh produce and dry goods separated into different baskets.

All this preparation was necessary because her lover had apparently decided that being generous meant volunteering half the household to help cater an enormous gathering.

The hosts, she had heard, had no one to cook for the guests. Worse, the venue was somewhere deep in the mountains, surrounded by forests and miles away from anything resembling civilization. And so the perpetually stern woman upstairs had taken it upon herself to help.

"It's a ceremony hosted by a spiritual master in Chiang Mai, dear," Aunt Tal replied. "I've never been there myself."

"How exciting! I've never been to Chiang Mai before."

"I hear it's way up in the mountains, near an indigenous hill-tribe community. Things aren't nearly as convenient there as they are here. That's why we've been running ourselves ragged preparing food for all the guests. And there's still so much left to do."

"This is enough to feed everyone in our house for weeks!"

Phimphachii glanced at the supplies and made a rough calculation. There were only twenty or thirty people living on the estate. Even the enormous pots they used for daily meals seemed insignificant compared with the amount of food being prepared. Perhaps the host was someone important, she thought. Someone with an extraordinary number of guests.

"Mae Khru is still worried there won't be enough," Aunt Tal said.

She wiped the sweat from her temple as she counted the baskets, which had already exceeded ten by a considerable margin. It was a grand wedding, and they were responsible for feeding guests throughout the day and evening. There had to be savory dishes, desserts, soups, stir-fries, curries, and fried dishes. Just thinking about it made her bones ache. Tomorrow, young and old alike would probably work themselves half to death.

"You should go back upstairs, dear," Aunt Tal said. "If Mae Khru sees you working here, she'll scold us."

Taen hurried over and gently tried to steer her beautiful employer away from the kitchen. The young woman had good reason to be nervous. The last time Mae Khru Pikharn had found Phimphachii lingering around the kitchen, she'd looked as furious as a bear whose nest had been disturbed. Every servant in the household had been subjected to her displeasure. Nobody wanted a repeat of that experience.

"Why don't you go pack Mae Khru's things?" Taen suggested. "Krateng, Aunt Tal, and I can take care of the fresh and dry ingredients. I'm sure she'd be much happier if you prepared her luggage yourself."

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Taen had a point. But before returning to the main house, Phimphachii decided to make her usual visit to the backyard. There was someone she needed to see.

Samsi.

Three years earlier, she'd taken pity on a tiny kitten whose eyes had barely opened and brought her home. That kitten had since grown into a spectacularly fat female calico with a short, crooked tail that looked almost comically misshapen. Samsi enjoyed wandering around the estate and greeting the younger household members, although she didn't always appreciate their attempts to play with her.

"Samsi! Come and eat!"

The cat hopped down from the bamboo platform behind the house. She stretched her front legs, arched her back almost to the ground, and opened her mouth in an enormous yawn. Her predominantly white face, splashed with orange and black, tilted up toward Phimphachii.

"Meow."

"Good girl."

Phimphachii crouched and affectionately stroked her head. A bowl of boiled fish mixed with rice was placed before the plump customer. As usual, Samsi gave it a brief sniff before selecting the most delicious morsels of fish.

"While I'm away, don't be naughty and sneak upstairs. Understand?"

"Meow."

"That's my clever girl."

It was precisely because Samsi seemed so intelligent that Phimphachii adored her. The cat usually stayed behind the house because the shrine residence received a constant stream of visitors seeking spiritual treatment during the day. With so many strangers coming and going, no one could predict who might accidentally step on her. Besides, Samsi had an unfortunate habit of sprawling across the stairs. Pikharn had scolded her for it more than once, sending the poor creature fleeing for her life.

Phimphachii continued stroking the cat until she finished eating. Then she took the bowl away, washed it, and placed it upside down in its usual spot. She should have gone back upstairs. Instead, she returned to the bamboo platform. Just a few more minutes with Samsi wouldn't hurt.

"I'm going to miss you so much."

"Meow."

Samsi pressed her head against the warm palm, demanding another round of affection. Her favorite spots were beneath her chin and along her cheeks. Unfortunately, her human preferred rubbing her belly. The one place that made her squirm with irritation.

"The fattest little tummy!"

Phimphachii clenched her teeth, overwhelmed by the urge to squeeze the adorable creature.

"MEOW!"

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Without warning, Samsi sprang away. Her back arched. Every strand of fur stood on end. Phimphachii flinched.

"What now?"

The cat looked as though a dog had suddenly charged at her. She usually reacted like this whenever one of the household dogs tried to tease her. But there was no dog.

"There isn't anything here, Samsi. You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

The cat continued hissing. Her teeth remained bared, her fur bristling. Phimphachii turned and examined the surroundings. Nothing moved. There were only thick clumps of thorny bamboo, rows of climbing acacia grown for its edible leaves, and a jujube tree covered in sharp thorns. The thorny plants had been placed there, she'd been told, to keep evil things away.

Samsi's eyes widened. She could sense something her human could not. Not something visible. Something felt through instinct alone. A presence steeped in malice. And resentment.

Phimphachii shook her head at the cowardly cat. After several reassuring strokes, she left for the shrine residence. As always, she washed her hands and feet carefully before sprinkling herself with holy water from the earthenware jar nearby. Pikharn had prepared that water for everyone in the household. Ever since the events of four years ago, her lover seemed determined to protect every person living under her roof.

"Madam."

Phimphachii paused on the steps. She turned toward the voice. Several people were moving around behind her. Her eyes went first to Taen.

"What is it, Taen?"

"Hmm? Do you need something, Madam?"

"No. I heard you calling me."

Taen froze. She had not called her. Not once. The young woman struggled to keep her expression perfectly composed. She must not panic. Not in front of her employer. She simply shook her head.

At that very moment, a powerful gust of wind swept across the courtyard. It was so cold that Taen shivered. Goosebumps rose across her entire body.

"Well, I'll head upstairs, then."

"Yes, Madam. Once we're finished, we'll come and inform Mae Khru."

Phimphachii hurried inside. That sudden wind had been freezing. Winter really had arrived. She would need to pack some thicker clothes for the trip, particularly something warm enough to sleep in. The wedding was being held deep in the mountains, after all. It would surely be much colder there than at home.

The upper floor had grown quieter as sunset approached. Over the past four years, Phimphachii had learned that people in the countryside tended to go to bed early. She had also learned that, whatever the season, the nights here could feel terribly cold.

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Pikharn had a different explanation.

Your body's elements are out of balance. Tell me, sweetheart, do you feel bloated? Is there too much wind in your stomach?

Who would willingly admit something so embarrassing? Still, Pikharn had insisted on preparing a special diet for her. To Phimphachii's surprise, it had worked remarkably well. No more bloating. No more uncomfortable pressure in her stomach. And, most importantly, no more unpredictable gurgling sounds in the middle of the night.

A thunderous bang echoed through the teak house.

"YOU STUPID FOOL! DIDN'T I WARN YOU LAST TIME? YOU WENT BACK AND ATE THE VERY THINGS I FORBADE, AND NOW YOUR SYMPTOMS HAVE RETURNED! DID YOU THINK YOU COULD JUST COME BACK HERE AND I'D CURE YOU AGAIN?"

A heavy staff slammed against the wooden floor. The medium possessed by Grandfather Saming Phrai was clearly furious with the patient kneeling before her. The young man had ignored every warning, disregarded every instruction, and done exactly the opposite of what he'd been told. And this was hardly his first visit.

"Boon! Drag him out of my house! NOW!"

"Grandfather! Please, Grandfather!" The boy's mother sobbed, raising her clasped hands above her head. "My son is still young. I've warned him. This will be the last time, I swear! I won't let him eat anything forbidden again!"

She bowed repeatedly, desperate for her son's recovery. Her son, however, remained defiant. Even under the furious gaze of the spiritual medium, arrogance lingered in his eyes.

"This is ridiculous, Mom. I'm just sick. I can go to a hospital, take some medicine, and get better. Why are you being so superstitious?"

His mother immediately struck him, desperate to silence him. This was no time to show off his cleverness in front of Grandfather Saming Phrai.

"Shut your mouth! Apologize to Grandfather right now, Por! You ungrateful little—"

"I don't believe any of this. And I'm not apologizing."

His voice was firm. His eyes reddened as he glared at the young woman dressed in white. She looked about his age. Why should he bow to her? She wasn't older than him. She wasn't a relative. She wasn't some grand, important person. Why should he put his hands together and lower his head before her?

"Why should you bow to me, is that what you're thinking?"

The medium spoke the very words that had been running through his mind. Por flinched. He hadn't said any of that aloud.

Slowly, he turned to face the woman in white, a sash draped across her shoulder. Her eyes were strange. Pale, almost colorless. Her long hair reached the middle of her back, and her mouth was drawn into an unmistakably displeased frown.

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He wanted to look away. But he could not move. His hands began rising of their own accord. Some invisible force seized them, lifting them from his lap. His palms pressed together in a wai. Then his head began to lower. Terror swept through him.

"Grandfather! Grandfather, please stop!" his mother begged. "Have mercy on him!"

She knew immediately that her son was no longer acting of his own free will. He struggled violently against whatever controlled him. His breathing grew harsh. The other patients scattered in alarm.

From Pikharn's perspective, another figure stood over the young man's back. One foot pressed down upon his head, forcing him to bow, while unseen hands held his palms together in an apology.

Por choked.

"My son! Por!"

"Boon," Phimphachii whispered urgently, leaning toward the servant. "Take a tray of flowers, incense, and candles to them. Tell his mother to apologize properly."

She knew how this would look. If Pikharn kept intimidating patients like this, the consequences could be disastrous. From a business perspective, good word of mouth was invaluable. But imagine what would happen if someone went around telling people that Mae Khru Pikharn had become so furious she forced a patient to bow at her feet. Other spiritual practitioners would seize the opportunity to discredit her.

"Yes, Madam," Boon whispered. He moved forward on his knees, picked up a ceremonial tray, and offered it to Por's mother.

"Please, Auntie. Apologize to Grandfather before things get any worse."

"Por! Hold this!"

The frightened woman thrust the flower offering into her son's hands. Covering his hands with her own, she forced him to extend the offering toward the medium's feet. Both mother and son trembled visibly. Neither could withstand the terror Pikharn inspired.

"I'll help you this one last time. After that, your son's fate is his own."

A large, pale hand reached down and accepted the offering. In exchange, the medium handed the woman a small packet of powdered rang jued leaves, a traditional herb used to counteract toxins.

"Mix a single pinch with rice-washing water. Give it to him once a day, no more. Any more than that and his stomach will swell."

The elderly woman raised her hands repeatedly in gratitude. She accepted the packet and bowed low, touching the medium's feet in reverence. Then she passed her hands over her own head and her son's, as though drawing blessings from the sacred contact. Pikharn did not object.

Por was still shaking. The woman before him no longer resembled the person he had first seen. Her once-pristine skin seemed covered in overlapping sacred script and mystical symbols, even across the backs of her hands. Those unnaturally pale eyes regarded him with cold displeasure. He bowed hurriedly beside his mother and withdrew.

"Next patient, please," Boon announced.

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Phimphachii shook her head at her lover. How many times had she told Pikharn to be patient with difficult clients? She worried that people would eventually speak badly of her, lose faith, and take their business to one of the rival shrines that seemed to be appearing everywhere.

Returning to the bedroom, Phimphachii laid several pieces of clothing across the bed. Pikharn's usual wardrobe consisted mostly of white garments worn for spiritual work and thin pajamas suitable for the mild nighttime weather.

Had the taller woman ever attended an event like this before? Or did she spend her entire life working within the shrine compound? A quick inspection of her wardrobe suggested the latter.

Phimphachii searched for something appropriate to wear to a formal gathering and folded it into the suitcase. Some of the clothes she'd bought for Pikharn had clearly been preserved with care. She decided to pack a few of those as well.

Time passed. The cooler winter weather made Phimphachii unusually sleepy. Combined with the quiet of the bedroom—if she ignored the occasional footsteps on the veranda—it was enough to send her drifting toward sleep.

And into a dream.

She found herself in her old condominium in central Bangkok. She had sold the place after the terrible events of four years earlier. The apartment was filled with memories. Some clear. Others fractured or missing entirely.

In the dream, she was living her old life again. She still worked at Nai's company. And as though guided by habit, she walked into the parking lot, opened the passenger door of a familiar car, and settled comfortably into the seat.

The air-conditioning was perfectly adjusted. Cool enough, without blowing directly into her face. Just as she liked it.

"What would you like to eat tonight, G?"

The voice was not Pikharn's. Phimphachii stiffened. She knew that voice. She knew exactly who was sitting behind the wheel.

Khwandao. Her former lover.

"Or shall we go to that restaurant you like?"

The voice continued, gently suggesting dinner options as it had done countless times before. But the dream was no longer comforting. Fear began to overwhelm her. She could not see the driver's face. Or perhaps she could, but some part of her refused to recognize it.

Phimphachii reached for the door. She had to get out.

"Where are you going, G? Didn't you say we'd have dinner together tonight?"

A hand seized her arm and pulled her back into the seat. The voice had changed. Now it sounded furious. Phimphachii didn't understand why Khwandao was angry.

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"Let me go."

The grip around her wrist tightened.

"You're living quite comfortably now, aren't you, G?"

The words reverberated around her. Phimphachii jolted awake.

She was in Pikharn's arms. The taller woman held her close, one hand resting protectively against her chest. Concern darkened Pikharn's expression.

"What's wrong, sweetheart? I've been calling you for ages."

Phimphachii blinked repeatedly, trying to recover her senses. She sat up and turned toward her lover. Should she tell her? Would Pikharn be angry if she mentioned Khwandao?

"I just...had a nightmare."

Pikharn sighed in relief. She stroked Phimphachii's hair, tucking the soft strands behind her ear. Then she leaned down and kissed her damp forehead. The weather was cold. Yet Phimphachii's face was covered in sweat. The dream must have frightened her terribly.

"Come here, my brave girl. Let me turn that bad dream into a good one."

For once, Phimphachii obeyed without argument. Her heart was still racing. She couldn't forget Khwandao's face in the dream. Those eyes, red with fury. The final words, delivered as though through clenched teeth.

"I'm scared," she admitted quietly.

Pikharn cupped her face in both hands and tilted her chin upward. Phimphachii loosely caught the hem of her lover's shirt, suddenly unsure what to do with her own hands. There was something deeply reassuring in Pikharn's gaze.

The taller woman recited the traditional invocation of the Triple Gem three times. Then she began the protective chant:

Yan dunnimittang awamangalanycha, yo chamanapo sakunassa saddho, papaggaho dussupinang akantang, buddhanubhavena vinasamentu.

When the incantation ended, Pikharn blew a gentle breath across Phimphachii's forehead. It was a familiar protective ritual, a prayer intended to drive away nightmares and transform ill omens into something harmless.

A faint smile touched Pikharn's crimson lips. She suppressed a chuckle. Phimphachii had already puckered her lips expectantly. Her wide, pleading eyes made her look remarkably like Samsi. The two were equally stubborn. Neither listened when told what to do. Neither could be trusted to behave. And yet both were far too adorable to scold.

"Hurry up," Phimphachii demanded.

Pikharn continued smiling. Really. Four years together, and this woman could still be impossibly slow on the uptake. Wasn't it obvious what she wanted?

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"Darling, hurry! Kiss me!"

At last, Pikharn relented. She leaned down—and planted a cool kiss on Phimphachii's cheek. Just to tease her. Then she kissed the other cheek, lest it feel neglected. Her nose brushed gently against the younger woman's skin.

Only then did she tilt her pale face and give Phimphachii the kiss she had been waiting for.

"Come back to me, my darling," Pikharn whispered, invoking the old blessing that calls a frightened soul safely home.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE LOGGING CAMP IN THE FOREST

Surely nobody considered two in the morning an appropriate time to start the day. At least, Phimphachii certainly didn't.

She stood outside the house, yawning so widely that her eyes watered. Still half-asleep, she pulled her favorite shawl tighter around her shoulders.

A large suitcase stood beside her. She was waiting for Boon to carry it to the truck with everyone else's luggage. There was simply no way she could lift something that heavy above her chest. And even if she could, why should she bother trying? Four years had done very little to cure her tendency to get her own way.

The courtyard was already bustling. People hurried back and forth, their arms laden with supplies. Wicker baskets, cooking equipment, and luggage were steadily loaded into the pickup trucks, then secured beneath tarpaulins to prevent anything from falling out along the way.

The journey from Grandfather Saming Phrai's shrine to Chiang Mai would take six full hours. The northern roads were winding, full of sharp bends, and frequently blanketed in thick fog. At this hour, there would surely be plenty of dew as well.

"Have we got everything, Boon?"

"Should be everything, Mae Khru. Except for Krateng and Taen. Those two disappeared as soon as they finished loading the supplies."

Boon shook his head, scanning the courtyard for the missing girls.

"Tal! Where have those nieces of yours run off to? If we leave any later, we won't have enough time to prepare the food for their guests!"

Pikharn exhaled into the cold air. Her breath turned into a small cloud of white mist. Her eyebrows drew together as she surveyed the household.

"I'll go find them, Mae Khru," Aunt Tal offered.

"No need, Aunt Tal. I'll go."

Phimphachii straightened her shawl. "I want to check on Samsi anyway."

Nobody dared contradict the lady of the house. Only Pikharn's gaze suggested that she was considering an objection. But Aunt Tal knew. Boon knew. Everyone knew. Even if Pikharn ordered her wife to stay where she was, Phimphachii would simply ignore her and do as she pleased.

And so Mae Khru Pikharn wisely remained silent. She sighed once more. Her troublesome little wife was going to be the death of her.

Phimphachii made her way toward the back of the kitchen, following the familiar path. She called for Samsi several times. Before long, the fat calico appeared from beneath the old bamboo platform and hurried toward her.

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The cat rubbed her side against Phimphachii's legs, then flopped dramatically onto the ground, meowing sweetly. As though she knew her beloved human was leaving.

"Samsi, remember what I told you. Behave yourself. No sneaking upstairs."

"Meow."

"Good. And make sure you wake up for breakfast, all right?"

"Meow."

The cat answered as promptly as though she understood every word. Phimphachii couldn't resist crouching beside her. She squeezed the round belly several times and ruffled the soft fur until Samsi finally objected. The cat wrapped both front paws around her hand and delivered a small bite.

"Let go! Let go!"

Phimphachii scolded her. Although, considering how often she deliberately provoked the cat, one might suspect she'd become rather fond of being bitten.

Before leaving, she stroked Samsi's head and scratched beneath her chin. The cat made no attempt to follow her. Not even a farewell meow.

Phimphachii had secretly hoped Samsi might walk after her, perhaps cry a little at the prospect of being separated. But Samsi was a cat. Which meant the human was expected to do all the chasing, pleading, and apologizing. How tragic.

She shook the ridiculous thought from her head and went to find Taen. Neither Taen nor Krateng was in the servants' sleeping quarters. Phimphachii wandered around for some time, eventually growing tired of searching. She turned back toward the main house.

"Madam."

She stopped. And turned. There was nobody there.

Perhaps she simply couldn't see whoever had called her because of the darkness. That was the explanation she offered herself. Entirely for her own peace of mind.

The surroundings were pitch-black. Insects chirped and shrieked in the trees, their irritating cries filling the silence. The atmosphere reminded her uncomfortably of a horror movie.

Get back. I need to get back.

She muttered the words beneath her breath and quickened her pace. Then she heard something else. Footsteps. They sounded almost identical to her own. As though someone were walking directly behind her, matching every step. Like a shadow. Or an echo.

Except there were no walls or enclosed spaces nearby that could have produced one.

The fine hairs around her face stood on end. Her heartbeat slipped out of rhythm. Why did she keep hearing people call her name lately? Was she imagining things?

"Madam."

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Again. This time, she heard something more than a voice. Breathing. Someone behind her was breathing at a different rhythm from her own.

"Madam!"

Phimphachii jumped as something touched her right shoulder. Fingers squeezed gently and tried to turn her around. She resisted instinctively, twisting away.

"Madam, it's me!"

Taen hurried in front of her. A flashlight illuminated the girl's face. Unfortunately, she was holding it beneath her chin. The light cast grotesque shadows upward across her features. Phimphachii nearly screamed.

"Taen! You scared me half to death! Why couldn't you call me properly?"

"Huh? But I did call you, Madam. Several times. I thought you couldn't hear me. Ask Krateng!"

"That's right," Krateng confirmed. "You were walking so quickly, we thought you were in a hurry. We ran after you because we were afraid Mae Khru would scold us for being late."

Phimphachii released a very long breath. Apparently, she'd been frightening herself with imaginary horrors. How was she supposed to know that the mysterious voice calling Madam belonged to these two? And the darkness certainly hadn't helped.

"Well, hurry up, then. Everyone's waiting for us!"

She scolded them to conceal her embarrassment. The two young women, no longer the little girls they had been four years earlier, immediately hurried after her.

Once every person and every piece of luggage had been accounted for, the vehicles finally departed for the North.

"Madam, Mae Khru, you can rest for a while. I'll wake you when we're almost there."

Taen fastened her seat belt, barely containing her excitement. She had rarely traveled far beyond the household grounds. The longest trip she'd ever made was to the provincial hospital four years ago, when Madam Phimphachii had persuaded Boon to take her.

"Drive on, Boon!"

"Well, well. Listen to you giving orders!"

The older, heavyset man chuckled. Taen giggled in response. He could tell how excited she was.

In fact, the reason she and Krateng had disappeared for so long was that they had been busy putting on makeup. Phimphachii had taught them how to use it and even given them some of her expensive cosmetics. They had wanted to look their best.

The road ahead was dark and full of dangerous curves. Taen tried to stay awake to keep Boon company while he drove. She chatted about anything that came to mind. Eventually, her thoughts returned to the previous evening. She lowered her voice.

"Boon, can I tell you something?"

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"What is it?"

"Yesterday, when Madam Phimphachii was going upstairs, she suddenly turned around and asked why we'd called her. Aunt Tal, Krateng, and I were all confused. We thought she was joking."

"Was she?"

Taen shook her head. She still remembered her employer's expression.

"She didn't look like she was joking. That's what made me nervous. So I asked whether she wanted something."

"Maybe she just misheard someone."

"That's what I thought. But after she turned around to go upstairs, we all felt this strange chill."

Taen rubbed her arms at the memory.

"I still get goosebumps thinking about it. And there was this enormous gust of wind, too. Do you think we should tell Mae Khru? I'm worried."

"It's winter. Of course there's wind. Don't go worrying her over nothing. She'll probably scold you for imagining things."

Boon had a point. Maybe it really had been a coincidence. The wind. The strange timing. Madam turning around. Taen tried to shake off her anxiety.

She turned toward the window, rested her elbow on the frame, and propped her chin on her hand. With a sigh, she pushed the frightening thoughts away and tried to concentrate on happier things.

Before long, the first light of dawn appeared. The air grew slightly warmer. The gray landscape slowly filled with color, revealing the endless curves ahead. Taen's excitement began to give way to nausea.

"Hang in there. We should arrive soon," Boon assured her.

"How much farther?"

"Almost to Fang. It's up in the mountains."

"Right at the top?"

Taen looked ready to give up. If she'd known the road would be this terrible, she would have gone to sleep instead of keeping Boon company.

"Not quite. Somewhere halfway up, near the foot of the mountains."

Soon afterward, she turned toward the back seat.

"Madam? Mae Khru? We're almost there."

Her voice woke the passengers. Phimphachii stretched, trying to relieve the stiffness in her limbs, before immediately burrowing back into her lover's embrace.

She had spent most of the journey sleeping there. It was warm. And Pikharn smelled faintly of incense blended with fragrant wood. Phimphachii loved that scent.

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"Mm."

Pikharn acknowledged Taen's announcement and tightened her arms around the sleepy woman. She could let G rest a little longer.

Before the thought had fully formed, however, Boon began sighing at the wheel.

"What is it now, Boon?" Pikharn demanded. "You're sighing loud enough for the entire village to hear."

He sighed again.

"It's the fog, Mae Khru. Ever since we turned onto the road you told me to take, it's grown so thick I can hardly see."

"Taen, call Dam. Tell him to slow down before the trucks collide."

"Yes, Mae Khru."

Taen immediately reached for her phone. The other vehicle was experiencing the same problem. Its driver could barely distinguish a straight road from a curve. Both trucks slowed.

"What's happening?" Phimphachii asked, sitting upright.

"Fog," Pikharn replied curtly.

But she did not believe it was ordinary fog. There was nothing natural about it. Boon had already switched on the fog lights. The white mist hadn't thinned in the slightest.

Pikharn closed her eyes. She focused her mind. Within moments, the warmth of her body faded, replaced by a cold so intense that it felt as though dew were collecting directly on her skin. The faint smell of incense drifted around her.

Exactly as she had suspected. This fog was not a product of nature.

This car is not allowed inside.

A young girl's voice floated through the air. It repeated the warning again and again.

Not allowed. Not allowed inside.

As though determined to make certain Pikharn understood that she was not imagining it.

Then the engine died. Boon barely managed to pull the handbrake in time.

"Mae Khru! The engine—"

"Shut your mouth, Boon."

The sharp command silenced everyone in the vehicle.

"Taen. Call the house we're visiting."

"Y-yes, Mae Khru."

"Stay inside. None of you are to leave the car."

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Pikharn's voice was cold and commanding. She opened her door and stepped into the dense fog. The air carried a dreadful energy, something that made the hairs on her body stand on end. Powerful magic had been used to conceal the true road.

"Who the hell are you?"

She struck her staff against the ground. The sound rang through the mist. A young girl's delighted laughter answered her.

"I ASKED WHO YOU ARE!"

Pikharn had a suspicion about the being's identity. What irritated her most was the creature's refusal to let them pass.

Khun Rak says you can't come inside.

"Don't use her name to justify your insolence. She has no reason to deny me entry."

Pikharn slammed the staff down again. There were no footsteps. No breathing. Not even the smallest indication of where the creature was moving. Yet it seemed extraordinarily agile.

What exactly was it?

Inauspicious! Khun Rak forbids it!

A freezing wind swept toward Pikharn, carrying a heavy scent of incense. Her long hair whipped across her face. She turned toward the direction of the gust.

And there she was.

A girl no taller than Pikharn's shoulder. Long hair obscured much of her face, falling to the middle of her back. She wore a traditional indigo-dyed northern outfit. Her eyes were red. Not the eyes of a human being.

"I'll speak to your master myself."

Khun Rak says you're not allowed!

The girl sprang forward. As she leaped, her body transformed. The small figure became a black cat with coarse, bristling fur and glowing red eyes. It was far larger than any ordinary house cat. Almost the size of a dog.

A chakla? A monstrous cat spirit.

Its teeth were vicious, its jaws open wide as it prepared to attack. Any ordinary person would have been paralyzed by terror. Pikharn was not ordinary.

"Daeng!"

The moment she shouted the name, the pounding of hooves erupted from the fog. A horse charged toward them at terrifying speed. Not quite as agile as the ghostly cat, but fast enough.

Just before the creature reached Pikharn, Daeng intercepted it. The small guardian spirit brandished his trusted sword. His duty was simple. Protect his master. Even from a monstrous black cat.

"GET BACK!"

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Daeng roared. His horse reared, raising both front legs to drive the creature away. The animal's furious cries echoed around them. It snorted, stamped its hooves, and threatened to charge again.

The black cat refused to approach. Its fur remained puffed out in warning. Clearly, it was just as willing to fight.

"Mae Khru! Mae Khru!"

Boon's voice came from the vehicle.

"The people at the house said they're sending someone to collect us!"

At once, the black cat vanished into the earth.

Pikharn clenched her jaw. If she encountered that damned creature again, she would gladly knock some sense into it. The insolent thing seemed afraid of absolutely nothing. Perhaps it was because it considered this forest its own territory. And, of course, it had a master who fed it and supplied it with magical power.

Pikharn swallowed her anger. The vehicle was utterly silent when she returned. Only Phimphachii moved. She immediately threw herself into her lover's arms and went back to sleep, entirely unconcerned.

She had never been particularly afraid of such things. Not when Pikharn was there. She knew her lover would never allow anything to harm her.

They did not have to wait long. A beam of light appeared in the thick fog. Slowly, the outline of a large yellow Jeep emerged. Its oversized wheels rolled to a halt beside their vehicle.

A tall, middle-aged woman stepped out. Strangely, as soon as she emerged, the troublesome fog began to clear.

"Khun Rak sent me to escort you," the woman said briskly. "Just follow my car. It isn't much farther."

She seemed eager to complete her assigned task as quickly as possible. Rosarin returned to the driver's seat and set off again. The vehicles followed her through a shortcut in the golden teak forest.

Before long, faint music from the wedding venue drifted toward them on the breeze.

The surroundings were lush and beautiful. The air was considerably colder than at Grandfather Saming Phrai's residence. Perhaps that was because they were so close to the mountains. Aunt Tal had mentioned that there was a waterfall nearby. Everything about the place suggested that the weather might remain cool and refreshing throughout the year.

"An elephant!"

Phimphachii suddenly sat upright.

"Darling, look! A white elephant!"

Of everyone in the car, she was clearly the most excited. She had spent more than half her life in Bangkok. She had often seen elephants being led along roadsides by their handlers, who sold bananas and sugarcane to tourists and diners. The sight had always made her feel sorry for the animals. They had to endure the heat rising from the asphalt.

But she had never seen an elephant as beautiful as this one. Its skin was white with a delicate pink tint.

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"White elephants are extremely rare, Madam," Boon said. "Only people with great merit are fortunate enough to encounter one."

Even he was astonished by its enormous size. The elephant wore a beautiful decorative headpiece. Beside it stood an elegant white horse. The animals at this logging camp looked extraordinarily valuable.

Thump. Thump.

Someone knocked on the driver's window. The passengers turned. It was the same tall, middle-aged woman with red lips. She gestured for Boon to lower the glass.

"Yes, Madam?"

"We're here. You can park around the back. I'll send someone to help unload everything."

"Of course. Thank you."

The window went up. The engine was turned off.

Unsurprisingly, Phimphachii was the first person ready to get out. She checked her hair in the rearview mirror and adjusted it carefully before opening the passenger door. The mountain air swept against her skin. It was bitterly cold. But wonderfully refreshing. The scent of the surrounding forest filled her lungs.

"Ah, this feels amazing!"

She stretched both arms above her head.

"Darling, aren't you coming out? Taen, come on!"

She called for the others to join her. Only Pikharn stepped out immediately. For the first time in years, the pale woman felt the mountain cold against her skin. She had barely left the area around her own residence during that time. The one notable exception had been four years earlier, when she'd urgently ordered Boon to drive her into the city.

Now, standing on unfamiliar ground, she could feel something else beneath the cool air. Powerful magic. A protective boundary spell surrounded the property. It hummed with old, potent energy.

"Well, well. It's been years since I last saw you. Look how you've grown into a fine young woman."

A gentle voice came from somewhere near the animal enclosure. A soft laugh followed. The speaker sounded thoroughly amused.

Pikharn immediately turned.

"Elder Sister."

She brought her pale hands together in a respectful wai, her trusted staff held between them. Phimphachii stared. Then hurriedly followed her lover's example. She had never seen Pikharn show such respect to anyone except Buddhist monks.

"Mm."

The other woman acknowledged the greeting. Phimphachii discreetly studied her. The stranger was tall and looked surprisingly young, dressed comfortably in a short-sleeved traditional northern outfit.

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But her eyes were extraordinary. One was an ordinary shade of brown. The other shimmered gold. Its pupil was a narrow vertical slit, like Samsi's eyes in bright sunlight.

"And who's this?" the woman asked. "I don't believe we've met."

She clasped her hands behind her back and stepped closer.

"My wife," Pikharn answered immediately.

She moved between them. Though she was not quite as tall as the stranger, the warning in her face was unmistakable.

"Her name is Phim—"

"And what is your name, sweetheart?"

The stranger interrupted her without the slightest hesitation. She leaned slightly to one side, looking past Pikharn with a friendly smile.

"My name is Phoprak. You can call me P'Rak, just as your lover does. I don't mind."

"G..."

Phimphachii hesitated. For some reason, answering so casually felt impolite. Despite her youthful appearance, this woman carried herself with the unmistakable authority of someone far older.

"My name is G," she replied respectfully.

Phoprak smiled. She said nothing. But her gaze moved slowly over Phimphachii, from the top of her head to the tips of her shoes. The inspection made the younger woman uncomfortable. Even a little embarrassed.

"Elder Sister," Pikharn said sharply.

"Are you not going to invite your guests inside? You've left us standing in the cold all this time."

"Oh? And why are you still standing out here? The door isn't going to run away."

Phoprak sounded entirely unconcerned.

"I merely wanted to have a little conversation with...Miss G."

She paused before the name. Her gaze shifted toward the petite woman behind Pikharn. There was nothing visibly wrong with Phimphachii. Her face looked perfectly healthy. Her body showed no signs of darkness or decay.

And yet—

Why had Prajak refused to allow her into the logging camp? The guardian had not come back to report what had happened. He must have been too occupied carrying out his orders.

Which meant Phoprak still did not know what the creature had sensed. She had wanted to see the young woman for herself. To discover exactly what kind of inauspicious presence might be hiding within her.

END OF ENGLISH SAMPLE

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