# THE SOULBOUND CHARM

*รางปกปึกษ์*

by Samha

*English Sample • Chapters 1–2*

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# Chapter 1

*A Man Nearly Two Hundred Years Old*

*Bangkok, 2026*

A tall figure strode down the corridor of a university building. The heels of his genuine-leather Oxford shoes struck the floor in a steady rhythm, and the slight lift of those heels made the long legs beneath his sharply tailored slacks look even longer.

People here called him Professor Sen. The title helped him remember who he was supposed to be in this era. He had chosen to kill time by teaching history at a university. That was all it was: something to kill time.

He had lived far too long.

Next time, he thought, he really ought to change careers. His true age had stopped at twenty-seven. He had remained twenty-seven for one hundred and sixty years. His fabricated records claimed he was thirty-five, but the problem was that some of his students looked older than he did. Teaching might not be the best occupation for him after all.

What should he do next?

In truth, he had no need to earn a living. The fortune he had accumulated over more than a century was enough to let him live comfortably for the rest of eternity. Besides, even if he went without food or water, he would not die.

He had simply been alive too long.

It was unbearably boring.

Sen entered the classroom precisely when class was due to begin. He acknowledged the students who raised their hands in a wai with a slight nod and walked to the lecturer's desk without much interest. This was an elective course, so there were many unfamiliar faces from other faculties. He saw them only once a week. One more semester and it would be over.

A brain nearly two hundred years old had little reason to remember every student's face. If he happened to see one of them outside class, he might feel vaguely that they looked familiar. Once the grades were submitted, that was that. Given enough time, he forgot almost everyone.

Sen glanced at the monitor.

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This era was wonderfully convenient. Vast quantities of information fit inside a computer. Teachers and students no longer had to carry thick, heavy textbooks. Most students came to class with nothing more than a tablet and a stylus, and that was enough for an education.

"Suppose you or I had been born in the Rattanakosin period," he began. "If the king made a decision concerning affairs of state, do you think ordinary villagers would have known about it?"

He never took attendance. Once the teaching materials were ready, he simply started talking. Or, as he privately described it, rambling until the class ended.

Even without attendance checks, his elective was always full. Most of the students were women. It was not as if Sen had never heard his fellow lecturers tease him that students registered for his course because he graded generously-and because they wanted to sit there looking at Professor Sen while he lectured.

At his question, he saw several students nod, apparently believing ordinary people would have known.

Sen sighed into the microphone.

"How would villagers have known? Sometimes even officials who weren't directly involved didn't know. There was no television back then. No Instagram. No X for you to scroll through. People learned about things through palace announcements. That's why you're sitting here studying history in the first place. Turn to slide one hundred and nineteen. Today we're talking about Thai-Chinese communities, Chinese tax farmers bidding for liquor monopolies in the Rattanakosin era, and official proclamations on how to deal with drunkards."

A few students giggled. Then his surprisingly entertaining lecture carried on for another two hours.

When the two-hour class ended, Sen considered it perfectly natural that, despite being the last person to enter the room, he should be the first to leave. In an age when lecturers did not have to haul books around-and were certainly not allowed to carry canes to discipline students-there was nothing to pack up. He finished teaching and walked out empty-handed.

He had not gone far before he patted his trouser pocket and stopped.

His phone.

How had he managed to forget something that important?

There was nothing for it. He turned back. It was probably still sitting on the lectern. No one would steal it, but the students had already started filing out, and each time they saw him approaching they

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stepped aside to let him pass. Walking against that stream of students, all of them making way for him, felt oddly conspicuous.

At the classroom door, a group of female students stopped and waited for him to enter first. Sen dipped his head in acknowledgment and walked past them. At first he did not really look at any of them.

Then, merely from passing close by, a soft warmth swept through the left side of his chest.

It was followed at once by grief.

Old grief, long settled like sediment at the bottom of his heart, suddenly stirred and clouded everything again.

Sen stopped and turned, searching for the source of that warmth.

Who?

Who was it?

His gaze met a pair of bright, clear eyes. A small, delicate face was framed by loose brown hair.

No.

Impossible.

Then why had his heart reacted to her?

"Professor? Is something wrong?" the young woman asked when she realized he was staring.

Her voice pulled him out of his daze.

"No. You just look familiar."

That was all he said. He went to the lectern, picked up his phone, and slipped it into his pocket. Yet his eyes continued to follow the student as she walked away. She looked puzzled, but she left without glancing back.

The warmth in his chest left with her.

What remained was only the murky ache of old sorrow.

Pain like this was familiar. He had long ago grown numb to it.

But that warmth-the warmth she had brought him only to take away again-he did not understand.

The precious heart buried in the left side of his chest seemed to yearn to follow her.

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Sen had always lived alone in the old Thai house by the river, though over the years it had been renovated into a contemporary interpretation of traditional architecture.

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it over the back of a chair. Bare-chested, his body lean and tightly muscled, he stopped in front of a mirror and pressed his fingers lightly to the left side of his chest.

A glow appeared beneath his skin near his heart.

Within his body, a clear, round crystal became visible.

Sen watched it for a moment. When he lowered his hand, the glow vanished.

He walked deeper into the house, entering a room that served both as a shrine room and as the repository for the Anantayot Charm. The amulet there was also a round, translucent crystal, much like the one embedded inside him-except the Anantayot Charm was a deep crimson rather than the pure, colorless clarity of the crystal in his chest.

He had possessed both charms for a very long time.

The Anantayot Charm had existed first, long before Sen himself was born.

Anantayot had been the name of an ancestor who wanted to continue protecting his descendants after death. Before he died, he performed a ritual to consecrate himself into an amulet. The rite demanded unwavering resolve: the spirit had to be purified, the mortal body sacrificed, and the soul confined within the charm. Upon death, the maker's final wish was to bestow fortune and protection upon his descendants.

Yet the Anantayot Charm's power was not equally strong for everyone. Its influence weakened over descendants who were farther removed from the direct bloodline.

In the old days, once every year, the entire extended family had gathered according to the family lineage to perform offerings for the Anantayot Charm. All branches of the family came together and shared in its sacred power. Afterward, the amulet was returned to the custody of the direct descendant-who, in Sen's time, had been his father.

The relatives must have been jealous. The closer one remained to the charm, the greater one's prosperity seemed to become.

No wonder people had fought over it in the past.

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But now, who would dare try to take it from him?

Inside Sen Anantayot's chest rested another charm of the same kind-one that had been created specifically for him.

Apart from Sen himself and one old master of the esoteric tradition, the man his father had entrusted with the ritual one hundred and sixty years ago, no one had ever seen this second charm. Its crystal was startlingly pure, and its power far exceeded that of the Anantayot Charm. It was because of this crystal that Sen had once been able to reclaim the ancestral charm.

It sounded like a blessing.

No one knew what he had lost in exchange.

So much time had passed that he had stopped wondering how much longer he would have to endure this existence.

He carried grief enough for several lifetimes, yet he could not die.

Something in the ritual had gone wrong. The clear crystal inside him was too powerful. The charm that imprisoned the soul of the woman he loved would not allow him to die.

Her soul was here.

Then who was the young woman whose presence had warmed his chest? Why did both the charm and his own heart ache to reach for her?

"Nuan...is that you?" he murmured. "But how could it possibly be you?"

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"Professor Sen is taking attendance in his elective."

The message passed quickly among the students.

It was strange. Professor Sen never took attendance. Why had he suddenly decided to start now-and in a general elective, rather than in one of the core courses for students in his own department?

Still, once the rumor spread, everyone showed up.

The classroom was packed. Nearly every seat was occupied.

"Is my class normally this crowded?" Sen asked by way of greeting when he walked in.

His course had never exactly lacked students, but apparently the threat of attendance had turned a popular class into a full house.

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Fine. Anyone who wanted to learn could come. Anyone who did not want to learn would gain nothing from occupying a chair anyway. Grades were based on exam scores. If they could do the work, they passed. If they could not, he graded them accordingly.

But grades could wait.

The moment he entered, Sen's sharp gaze swept across the room in search of the real reason he had decided to take attendance today.

That female student had disturbed him badly.

Disturbed his mind, more precisely.

Both the crystal inside him and his own heart had been behaving strangely ever since.

There she was.

Today her delicate face looked bright and lively. Large round eyes. A small mouth. A neat little nose. A petite frame. She looked, he found himself thinking, like someone who ought to be cherished.

She was attractive, certainly.

But no matter how he looked at her, she was not Nuan.

And from this distance he felt none of the sudden warmth he had experienced before.

The student seemed to sense his attention. She met his eyes, watched him for a moment as if to make certain he really was looking at her, then looked away.

Sen did the same.

Before class began, he had one other task to complete.

He laid a printed class list on the desk and began calling names.

"Kotchakon."

The first student on the list.

"Here."

Sen looked up.

"Just raise your hand. You don't need to answer aloud."

Then he continued.

"Kornkanok. Kittiphong. Kewalin..."

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The list seemed endless. No matter how many names he read, he never seemed to reach the one he wanted.

"Patcharamon. Phromwisut. Phimphima... Phimphima."

The student whose name he had called twice thrust her hand all the way into the air. She looked faintly puzzled. Professor Sen had clearly seen her the first time. Why had he repeated her name?

"Phattharawee."

Sen dragged his eyes away from Phimphima and continued down the list. If he wanted to avoid attracting suspicion, he supposed he had better read every single name on the page.

Of all the names printed there, only one lodged itself permanently in his memory.

Phimphima.

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No one from the early Rattanakosin period could possibly have done what he was doing now.

Inside his renovated riverside Thai house, Sen sat at his desk and typed rapidly, searching for information.

The ancient man had become a social-media detective.

With a full name, Facebook and Instagram were not difficult to find.

...Private account.

That was hardly an obstacle. He created an anonymous profile, sent a follow request, and waited. In the meantime, he browsed what little public information he could see on her Facebook page.

Was what he was doing appropriate?

Obviously not.

He was snooping. Invading her privacy. And on top of that, he was her lecturer.

So what?

He had lived for centuries. He had killed people before. Compared with that, secretly investigating one young woman who had somehow unsettled his heart-and might have some connection to the crystal inside him-seemed almost harmless.

While waiting for Phimphima to accept the follow request, Sen let his thoughts wander.

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Perhaps he had not felt that warmth in class today because they had been too far apart. If he wanted confirmation, he would have to get closer to her.

But first...

When was she going to accept his request?

It took the man born in early Rattanakosin an embarrassingly long time to realize Phimphima had simply ignored a follow request from a stranger.

That was not really a problem.

Sen Anantayot possessed two powerful sacred charms. Fortune, rank, wealth, influence, loyal subordinates-he had no shortage of any of them.

One phone call and a few sentences accomplished more quickly than waiting for her to approve his request ever would.

Soon, a file containing Phimphima's information from birth to the present sat in his hands.

He read it from the first page to the last.

Nothing in it suggested any connection between her and him.

Yet his instincts whispered something terrifying.

Why did he think Phimphima might be his wife reborn?

How could that be possible when the soul of the woman he loved was inside his chest, imprisoned within the crystal? Rebirth should have been impossible.

That was precisely why the instinct frightened him.

He had mourned and loved one woman faithfully for more than a century. If Phimphima was not Nuan, then was he beginning to give his heart to another woman?

That, too, was impossible.

Then why did his chest become warm when she came close?

Warm and soothing, like a mother's hand comforting a child.

Warm like an embrace from someone loved more dearly than life itself.

What, then, was Phimphima's connection to the charm inside his body?

Could something in her be linked to the soul sealed within the crystal?

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Could it be possible that, somehow, he would be allowed to meet his beloved wife again?

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# Chapter 2

*The Fine Arts Student*

Early Rattanakosin Painting.

Phimphima stared at the topic assigned for her graduation project and sighed.

There had been so many possible subjects. Naturally, she had drawn this one.

It was 2026. What exactly did her professor expect her to do-go back in time and sketch the early Rattanakosin period from life?

The subject felt impossibly remote. Difficult, too. She knew almost nothing about it. The second semester of her fourth year had started two weeks ago, and she still had no progress worth reporting.

Well, of course she didn't. Hiding in her dorm room wasn't going to give her any ideas.

She needed inspiration.

As soon as the thought occurred to her, Phimphima grabbed her phone and searched for somewhere that might help her finally make progress on this cursed graduation project.

She chose an exhibition about the Rattanakosin period.

There were pictures. There were guides explaining the displays. Yet the words early Rattanakosin still seemed impossibly distant from her imagination.

Rattanakosin covered such a long span of time, from the founding of Bangkok all the way to the present. There was information about the early period, certainly, but after walking through the entire exhibition she still had almost no idea what she wanted to create.

Maybe she could paint some grand historical event from the era.

Someone had definitely done that before.

But she could not think of anything else. If her final project had nothing distinctive about it, would her adviser tear her apart? Worse, she had no inspiration at all. How was she supposed to finish an artwork she felt nothing for?

While brooding over the project that would determine whether she graduated, Phimphima glanced across the exhibition hall and spotted a familiar-looking young man.

He was walking directly toward her.

"Professor Sen."

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She called out before she could stop herself and immediately gave him a polite wai.

He stopped.

And stared at her.

Without saying a word.

For a moment Phimphima wondered whether he had forgotten who she was. But she had just called him Professor. Surely he could infer that she was one of his students. He could simply acknowledge her greeting and move on. Why was he standing there staring at her face?

"I'm one of your-"

"Students," the young man finished for her.

He had fallen silent because the moment he came close, that warmth had bloomed inside his chest again, washing through his heart.

"Yes, that's right. I'm a student. Um...I'm in the Faculty of Fine Arts. I only take your class as an elective."

She explained in a rush.

Her professor merely nodded, wearing the same calm, unreadable expression his students were accustomed to.

"You came to see the exhibition?"

Apparently he intended to stop and talk. Phimphima smiled and nodded.

"Yes."

He taught history. Seeing him here was hardly strange. She probably did not need to ask whether he had come for the exhibition too.

"Are you interested in history?" he asked.

Phimphima was surprised he continued the conversation, but when an older person asked a question, basic manners required an answer. When that person was also one of her lecturers, answering felt even more necessary.

"I drew early Rattanakosin painting as the topic for my graduation project. So I came here to look around and see if I could get some ideas."

Her voice faded slightly toward the end.

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"And have you? Found the idea you were looking for?"

Phimphima gave an awkward smile and shook her head.

"Not yet, Professor."

His handsome face remained cool and expressionless.

"I know a little about the early Rattanakosin period. I also collect art and objects from that era. And I have some free time. Is there any information you need that I might be able to help with?"

"Pardon?"

Had an angel descended to rescue her project or something?

"It's exactly two o'clock. Let's talk over coffee."

And somehow, Phimphima ended up being led into a cafe by her history professor.

Now she sat nervously across from him-and the man who had offered to help with her project had even bought her drink.

Nervous.

Very nervous.

Professor Sen was young and ridiculously handsome. She was so self-conscious she had no idea what to do with her hands.

"What do you want to know about early Rattanakosin?" Sen asked first.

The warmth in his chest stirred memories of long ago. At the same time, that soothing sensation softened some of the grief those memories brought with them.

The closer he was to her, the more comfortable he felt.

It was pleasant enough that he did not want her to leave too quickly.

"Well...I want to know more about what everyday life was actually like. Exhibitions and textbooks mostly record major political events or things connected to kings and the royal court. Maybe I just haven't found the right exhibition yet, but I want to know more about culture, decorative patterns, daily life, games, music, and the kinds of art people actually used in ordinary life. If I'm going to create something, I want it to feel different. I want it to be approachable, but still clearly rooted in the art of that period. And right now, to be honest, I don't know where to begin."

Phimphima gave another embarrassed smile.

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Professor Sen listened from beginning to end without changing expression.

She felt as though she were being interviewed.

"I understand."

He lifted his coffee and took a sip, appearing to think.

"The exhibition doesn't show enough detail for what you need, does it?"

"Exactly."

She nodded quickly.

The displays of homes and everyday life felt so simplified that she could barely see any artistic personality in them.

She did not believe life could really have been that plain. Human beings had always lived alongside beauty. When something became fashionable, people copied it. Even the mannequins and paintings in museums showed ordinary people adopting the clothing and hairstyles popular in their time.

Women wore the puk hairstyle. Men wore the center-parted mahadthai style. People blackened their teeth because everyone else did it too.

Thai people had always cared about beauty, appearance, and presentation. Surely ordinary people, not only aristocrats, must have left behind some kind of everyday art.

Were certain patterns fashionable? Designs painted on house pillars? Patterns on bowls and plates?

Anything would do. She just needed material she could actually turn into a final project.

"At my house I have objects from the reigns of Rama II and Rama III, both part of early Rattanakosin," Sen said. "Some were made by servant families who lived on the estate. Some were purchased from Chinese merchants. They might give you a better sense of ordinary life in that period. There are also royal gifts-dishes, embroidered cloth, jewelry. Put simply, I have more objects than this exhibition does. Would you like to see them?"

"Yes."

Phimphima nodded immediately. Everything he had described sounded fascinating.

"The objects are carefully preserved. Some are too fragile to move, so I can't bring them out. And none of them may be photographed."

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"Ah...all right."

What exactly was he implying?

"If you want to see them, you'll have to come to my house."

Phimphima neither agreed nor refused at once. She only accepted Professor Sen's business card. If she decided she wanted to see the collection, she could call and arrange a time.

Would that really be appropriate?

Going to a professor's house?

Sen, however, very much wanted her to come. He was almost certain she would call. A man blessed with Sen's uncanny fortune could reasonably expect to say, Lucky she agreed to come.

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In the end, something-or perhaps fate itself-brought Phimphima to a stop before the towering gate of a vast Thai-style residence.

She hesitated for a moment, then called the homeowner.

"Hello, Professor. This is Phimphima. I made an appointment to see your collection. I've arrived. I'm outside the-"

Before she could finish, the enormous gate began to open.

She glanced around for the electronic mechanism. A traditional Thai house like this had made her imagine some old-fashioned servant coming out to open the gate by hand.

"Just come in," his deep voice said through the phone.

Then he ended the call.

Phimphima obediently followed the path inside.

The contemporary Thai house was surrounded by lush greenery. Mature trees, shrubs, and ornamental plants had all been meticulously cared for. The property sat along the river. She could still tell that the original house had once been raised on a high undercroft, as traditional homes were, but it had clearly undergone several renovations. The open space beneath the house had been enclosed, and the whole structure had been transformed into something modern without completely losing its Thai character.

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Despite the renovations, the owner had preserved many traditional details. The covered walkway stretching ahead of her, the carved wooden ornamentation, even the patterning on the chairs placed along the path-everything blended warm-toned wood with occasional elaborate motifs.

Old.

Elegant.

And one look was enough to tell her Professor Sen came from old money.

Apparently the old-money part was still doing very well. He was a university lecturer who drove a European luxury car to work, after all.

While she walked toward the main house, entertaining herself with those thoughts, the homeowner emerged to greet her dressed casually.

A linen shirt and linen shorts made Professor Sen look completely different today. Add sandals and unstyled hair, and Phimphima-who immediately raised her hands in a polite wai-could not help wondering whether he was truly over thirty.

Then again, he was already an associate professor. He had to be reasonably old.

Better not to think about it.

Sen acknowledged her greeting with a nod and led her inside.

The house was full of contradictions, yet somehow every element worked together as though the designer had nearly broken their brain achieving the balance.

The first entrance was a huge, beautiful wooden door-old-fashioned, heavy, and requiring actual effort to open. Beyond it was a foyer. Phimphima saw Sen remove his sandals, so she took off her shoes too.

"Slippers are over there," he said, pointing.

He himself went barefoot.

Then he raised a hand to a sensor and a glass door slid open, giving access to the true interior of the house.

Phimphima quietly looked around as she followed him. Highly polished wooden floors somehow matched the modern glass doors. What period was that painting from? And that porcelain jar?

Apparently he had not exaggerated when he said his collection was larger than the exhibition.

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A shiver ran over her skin.

Phimphima stopped and rubbed her upper arms.

Sen, walking ahead, turned and raised an eyebrow.

"What is it? Do you feel something?"

Did this house feel familiar to her?

"No. The air-conditioning is just cold."

Phimphima smiled.

Sen's expression went still.

She was only cold.

Nothing about the house seemed familiar to her at all.

What empty hope had he been entertaining? Why had he allowed himself to imagine Phimphima might be the person he had wanted more than anyone in the world to see again?

Absurd.

If she was not Nuan, then from this moment onward let there be no fate connecting them.

Let him not be deceived by this warmth into hoping for something impossible.

Sen looked at Phimphima and silently made a wish. By the power of the Buddha, or by the sacred force of his charms, let what he had resolved come true.

He knew perfectly well Nuan's soul was imprisoned.

How could he still fantasize that this woman might be her?

"Professor, do you live here alone?" Phimphima asked brightly, oblivious to every thought in his head.

"Yes. I don't like people interfering with me."

He resumed walking, then seemed to think of something and turned back to her.

"I invited you only to see the collection. You can relax. My house is safe."

Phimphima nodded automatically.

It took a second for his meaning to sink in.

He was talking about the awkwardness of a young woman being alone in a house with a man.

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The expression on her face instantly changed from agreeable to flustered.

"No, Professor, that's not what I meant. I only asked because the house is so quiet."

He was a university lecturer. Surely he would not risk his reputation by luring a student to his home for improper reasons.

When she had decided to come here, the possibility had never even crossed her mind. Now that he had mentioned it, she suddenly realized how bold she had been-and how nervous she ought perhaps to feel about being alone with him in such a huge house.

A residence this enormous looked as though it ought to be full of people.

Yet there really was no one else here.

Really?

It was hard to believe.

Sen did not pursue the subject. He simply continued leading her through the house, intending to let her settle in the sitting room first.

"Professor, do you collect old cameras and phones too? There are so many."

The question slipped out when Phimphima spotted a display cabinet crowded with cameras and mobile phones, some ancient-looking and some models she vaguely recognized.

"Those came later," Sen said, stopping beside her. "Cameras existed in Siam as early as the reign of Rama III, but some members of the royal family and aristocracy believed photography could draw a person's spirit into the image. Photography was also associated with occult practices. During the reign of Rama IV, the king helped change those negative beliefs among the elite, which is why we have numerous royal photographs of him. Even so, it took many more years before cameras became common among ordinary people. It's a pity..."

If the technology had arrived sooner, perhaps he would have had at least one photograph of them to keep and look at.

"Oh...and the phones?"

"Those are recent. They become more convenient every year."

"It must have taken a lot of work to build a collection this big. That's incredible. You have more than some vintage exhibitions I've seen."

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Phimphima almost gave her professor a thumbs-up. Fortunately, she managed to stop her own hand.

"A collection? It wasn't particularly difficult."

They were simply old things he had used and then put away. Whenever a newer, more convenient version appeared, he bought it. Technology was one of the few things capable of providing genuine entertainment in a life as long as his, so he paid attention to it.

In modern terms, perhaps he simply refused to fall behind the times.

"Professor, you really seem to like history and old things. No wonder you always have this vintage, classic atmosphere about you."

Sen was silent for a moment.

"What does that mean? Vintage? Classic? Are you saying I look ancient and outdated?"

"How did you get ancient and outdated from that? I said vintage and classic. How could that possibly mean old-fashioned? Although...if you really think about it, the meanings are kind of similar."

She muttered the last sentence under her breath and sneaked a glance at him to see whether she had offended him.

"Hmph."

Instead, a soft laugh escaped him.

A faint smile appeared on his lips. His eyes gentled for a brief moment before every trace of expression vanished again as he turned away.

When Phimphima saw him begin walking, she hurried after him, looking down at his bare feet while she padded along in house slippers.

She did not notice him glance back at her once more.

The way she spoke without realizing she was teasing people.

The cautious sideways glance afterward to see whether the listener was angry.

So very similar.

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