TIGER HEART

ดวงใจสมิง

English Translation Sample

By Destinies1

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CHAPTER ONE
THE GIRL LOST IN THE FOREST

At the hour when the sun hid behind the clouds and the last light of evening gave way to dusk, twelve-year-old Bua Tong remembered something Father Rueang had always told her: the hour when ghosts hung out their washing was no time for a child to be wandering in the woods.

She had been born in a village tucked into a mountain valley. She had grown up surrounded by the forest. Yet in all her twelve years she had never quite learned to be comfortable with it. By day, sunlight passed through the leaves and made the trees seem friendly. At nightfall, the same forest became another world altogether. Darkness crept through the branches of the tall trumpet-flower trees, swallowed their slender leaves, and sank slowly toward the ground, until it seemed ready to swallow her as well.

She had come to gather medicinal plants for her father, as usual. Collecting herbs was part of the family's modest livelihood, and she had volunteered for the task herself. She was twelve now, practically grown up. Grown-ups were supposed to help support their families.

Her parents were not wealthy. What they knew was the forest and the healing properties of its plants. They worked hard and taught their daughter to do the same. Father Rueang was an accomplished hunter, or so the village headman, Elder Prae, had once told her. In his younger days, gentlemen had come from distant towns asking for him by name. Rueang, and no other guide, was the one they wanted. Whether those stories were true, Bua Tong could not say. They belonged to a time before she was born.

"Father Rueang says that if you get lost, you should follow the stream," she told herself aloud.

Ordinarily she was not the sort of girl who spoke every thought that entered her head. Tonight, however, silence was unbearable. Her imagination had begun filling the shadows with things she could not see. People always said you should never mention tigers or other dangerous animals while walking in the forest. She had not spoken of any such creature, but the mere thought of them made her lips clamp shut and her legs turn to water.

Ahead, a great tree with fragrant white blossoms swayed in the breeze. Beneath its branches, two red eyes gleamed in the weak moonlight.

The eyes were looking directly at her.

She stepped left. They followed. She stepped right. They followed again.

Whatever owned those eyes, it could not be human. Human eyes did not shine like that in the dark.

Bua Tong dragged a breath into her lungs, gathered what little courage remained, and ran.

A decent pair of shoes was a luxury in her village. Her own white rubber sandals had long since turned brown with dirt, and one broken strap had been repaired by her mother with a sliver of wood. The makeshift repair had served well enough while she was walking carefully. It was no match for a desperate sprint through the undergrowth.

Snap.

There went her only pair of sandals.

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Her collecting basket bounced heavily against her back. Barefoot now, she fled over roots and fallen branches, silently cursing her luck. Was this really how the life of a twelve-year-old girl was going to end? What about her ambition to graduate from university, find a well-paid job, and send money home to her parents?

Mountain nights were bitterly cold. Running made her sweat, yet the thin air left her gasping. Without realizing it, she abandoned the stream and plunged farther from the familiar path. The ground changed beneath her feet. Thick moss and algae made the earth slick, cold, and unpleasantly wet. She had never been here before.

At last she looked behind her.

Nothing seemed to be following.

She lowered herself onto a damp log crowded with fungus and crawling insects, trying to force enough air into her lungs. Her calves were scratched; blood clung to her bare feet. She wiped her cheeks, pressed a hand over her mouth, and tried not to sob.

It was hopeless.

"Father Rueang... Mother Dao..."

The words dissolved into tears. She wished they would come and find her, then take her home. She had no idea where in the immense forest she had ended up. Even if she could still walk, which direction should she take?

"Please," she cried into the darkness. "Somebody help me!"

The girl did not know that her plea had been heard.

For almost an hour, a tall woman had been watching her. She had first noticed the child entering the forest and had kept track of her through the eyes of the creatures living there. Every animal in her territory could become another pair of eyes for Phoprak, the tiger spirit who ruled these woods.

One such pair belonged to an exceptionally fat owl perched on a flowering tree. It had noticed a little human staring at it in terror. Then, for reasons the owl could hardly understand, the child had begun screaming and running as though she had seen a monster.

Phoprak found the misunderstanding rather funny. It was only an owl. An unusually plump owl, admittedly, but hardly a creature capable of devouring a human child.

Unfortunately, the girl had frightened herself so badly that she had run in precisely the wrong direction. And now her cries were disturbing the whole forest.

Phoprak could not simply ignore a plea for help within her domain.

A great striped tiger moved silently through the ferns toward the crying girl. Behind a screen of leaves, the animal's body changed. Four powerful paws became two long legs; striped fur withdrew into smooth, pale skin. A dark-blue northern-style shirt appeared over her shoulders, paired with loose traditional trousers that stopped above her ankles. Black rubber sandals covered her feet.

At nearly six feet tall, she resembled a woman from another age. She walked toward the log with an old storm lantern held in one hand.

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"Father Rueang... Mother Dao..." Bua Tong sniffled. "Help me..."

"Whose child are you?" the stranger asked in the local northern dialect.

Phoprak raised the lantern, intending only to give the girl a little light and warmth.

Bua Tong shrieked and toppled backward off the log.

She scrambled through the mud, certain that some dreadful being had emerged from the trees. Her basket was becoming an obstacle. Perhaps she would have to abandon it to save her life.

Phoprak watched the child struggle with an expression of discreet amusement. She had been raised to have good manners; laughing at a frightened girl would be rude.

"I'm asking whose daughter you are," she explained. "If you tell me, I'll know where to take you home."

Bua Tong took refuge behind a large tree, shivering. Who wandered through the forest after dark carrying a lantern? She peered out cautiously. The stranger looked like a woman and wore a collecting basket much like her own, but she had something Bua Tong did not: a light.

"W-who are you?"

"A person," Phoprak replied.

She hoped the answer would reassure the child. It was certainly better than announcing that she was a saming, a supernatural tiger capable of taking human form. That might make the girl faint on the spot.

Instead, the child looked offended. What sort of answer was that? She could see the woman was a person—or at least she hoped she could.

"We should go home," Phoprak said. "It's no good being out here after dark."

Bua Tong emerged halfway from behind her tree, watching the stranger with wide, suspicious eyes. Phoprak lifted the lantern closer to her face so its soft yellow glow would reveal her features.

"I told you. I'm a person."

They stopped beside a cold stream. The sound of running water eased the oppressive quiet. Bua Tong washed mud and dried blood from her legs and feet, and soon realized with considerable embarrassment that she had run deeper into the forest instead of out of it.

"You're hurt," Phoprak said. "Let me see."

The girl pulled her knees to her chest. Her parents had taught her not to let strangers touch her, and her body expressed its refusal more clearly than words could have done.

Phoprak understood. Yet leaving those cuts untreated would make the journey difficult, and one wound on the girl's calf was deep enough to leave a scar. She found herself worrying about that possibility more than she should have.

The little face reminded her of a younger sister who had died long ago. Perhaps she wanted, in some impossible way, to make up for what she had failed to give that child.

She set the lantern close enough to warm Bua Tong, crouched, and gently drew the injured leg toward her.

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"Ow!"

Phoprak's thumb had brushed a particularly painful cut, made when the girl fell from the log.

"I'm sorry. I'll be gentle."

This time she spoke clearly in standard Thai. Her concern sounded sincere, and Bua Tong reluctantly let her continue. Many languages were spoken in the mountain villages; hearing a different accent was not so remarkable.

Phoprak began with the traditional homage to the Buddha, recited three times. Then she whispered a healing incantation, pressing her thumb over the bleeding wound. Bua Tong gritted her teeth as the pressure hurt, but she could not look away.

The blood stopped.

Phoprak murmured the incantation again and breathed softly across the girl's legs. The cuts closed before Bua Tong's eyes, leaving her skin smooth and unmarked.

For the first time in decades, Phoprak had used the spell on a human. She often healed animals wounded by hunters, provided their natural time to die had not yet come. But tonight was different.

Bua Tong snatched her leg back and stared. Who was this woman? Was she a sorceress? How could a wound disappear in a heartbeat?

"Don't be afraid," Phoprak said, perfectly serious. "It's only a simple healing charm. Anyone can do it."

Somehow, the calm expression made the explanation convincing to a twelve-year-old girl. When Phoprak stroked her head, warmth and safety washed over Bua Tong. It felt almost like being looked after by an older sister.

They resumed their journey, with one important change. Bua Tong was now wearing Phoprak's sandals, and Phoprak herself was walking barefoot. The tiger spirit could have conjured another pair in an instant, but the sudden appearance of new shoes might raise questions she preferred not to answer.

"If you are lost," she instructed, "follow the stream downstream. Don't run against it."

Bua Tong looked at the ground. She hadn't told the woman what she had done, yet somehow the stranger had worked it out. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment.

To distract her, Phoprak kept talking. She spoke of the forest and its creatures with the intimate knowledge of someone who belonged among them. Bua Tong found herself listening rather than fearing the dark.

"Don't be so frightened of the animals," Phoprak said. "They have far more reason to fear dangerous creatures like us humans."

Once, Phoprak had shared the ordinary human belief that crocodiles, eagles, tigers, and elephants were the things to fear. Becoming the ruler of the forest had changed her mind. Animals harmed others to survive and to defend themselves. Humans, with their weapons and their cruelty, were often more frightening.

"B-but..." Bua Tong began, then stopped. The animals still seemed terribly dangerous to her.

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The lantern swayed, revealing only the lower half of the stranger's face: a graceful chin, bright red lips, a small smile. Bua Tong imagined that a woman with such a beautiful voice must be beautiful too.

"We're here."

They stood near the girl's home. Phoprak urged her to go inside and never wander through the forest after dark again.

Bua Tong remained where she was. She had lost her own basket, her sandals, and nearly all the herbs she was meant to gather. Father Rueang would be furious. The last time she had sneaked away to swim at the waterfall with Tongnual and Saengla, he had marched there carrying a tamarind switch and punished her in front of her friends. The memory was mortifying.

"Afraid of being scolded?" Phoprak asked.

Bua Tong nodded, tears returning.

Phoprak almost reached out to wipe them away, then restrained herself. This was a traveler who had lost her way, not her dead sister returned to life. She must not encourage an attachment that could only hurt them both.

"Here," she said instead. "I'll teach you something. Repeat after me."

She recited a traditional charm invoking kindness, mercy, compassion, and affection. Bua Tong repeated the syllables carefully. Phoprak showed her how to say the preliminary prayers, blow into her cupped palms, and pass her hands over her face.

"It may help people look on you with kindness," Phoprak explained. "But you must behave sweetly as well. No stubbornness."

Bua Tong nodded obediently.

"Take this, too." Phoprak handed her a basket. "There are plenty of forest plants inside."

The girl turned to settle the unfamiliar straps across her shoulders.

"Thank y—"

When she looked back, the woman was gone.

Not a twig snapped. Not a leaf stirred beneath departing footsteps. Crickets sang in the wet darkness, and the scent of rain approached. When had her rescuer vanished?

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?"

Father Rueang came running down the steps as his only daughter entered the yard. He swept a flashlight over her from head to foot, checking for injuries.

"Why are you home so late?"

"I... I went looking for herbs."

It was not exactly a lie. She had gone looking for herbs. She merely omitted the part about losing everything and being rescued by a mysterious woman.

"Come upstairs and eat. Your mother made dinner hours ago. It's gone cold waiting for you."

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Bua Tong removed the oversized sandals with great care and placed them neatly beside the steps. She rinsed her feet at the washing place before entering the house.

During dinner, she stole nervous glances at her father's face. He neither scolded her nor reached for a switch. Perhaps the stranger's charm really did work. At least she had survived another day.

Elsewhere, Phoprak lay back on her wide bed, weary after her unusual evening. A saming was a supernatural being, not some tireless hero from a comic book. Human form came with human fatigue.

She had spoken more that night than she did on most days. Aside from the animals and the people who worked for her, she had few companions. Forty years ago she had stopped allowing herself to grow close to strangers. Parting hurt more than a hunter's bullet through the chest. It left wounds no medicine and no healing spell could mend.

Yet tonight she had met someone new: a girl barely as tall as her chest, with bright eyes, shining black hair, and a face that reminded her painfully of the sister she had lost.

What would the child look like in five years? In ten? Would she reach Phoprak's shoulder? Might she grow taller still? The sister who had died had never been given that chance.

For the first time in a long while, the difficult-to-please tiger smiled to herself.

Several days later, a great tiger began following Bua Tong through the forest, placing its paws as silently as possible behind her footsteps.

Phoprak was curious. Even supernatural beasts, it seemed, were capable of curiosity. She guessed the girl was collecting herbs again and wanted to make sure she was safe.

Then a twig cracked beneath her paw.

After more than half a century in the forest, to be betrayed by a single twig! Phoprak cursed her own carelessness as Bua Tong hurried toward the sound.

There was only one thing to do. She transformed into a tiny tiger cub.

Surely the child would be frightened enough to retreat, but not so terrified that she would injure herself running away.

"Ah!"

Bua Tong promptly fell backward.

Phoprak flattened her ears and tucked her tail, pretending to be a frightened cub. Rather than flee, the girl brushed the leaves from her clothes and crept closer.

"Kitty, kitty."

The cub looked barely a few weeks old, hardly bigger than an overgrown kitten. Even its attempts at growling sounded absurdly small.

"Will you bite me?"

Bua Tong reached out, then hesitated. What if the animal's mother rejected it because it carried a human scent? Perhaps it was best not to touch.

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Phoprak seized the opportunity to scamper away. Forming attachments frightened her more than claws or teeth ever could.

But she did not stop watching the girl. Sometimes she let Bua Tong glimpse the cub among the trees. She did not understand what drew her back. Loneliness? A desire for friendship? Or the impossible wish to watch a little sister grow up?

Soon Bua Tong began bringing snacks into the forest. She named the cub Som—Orange—without a moment's consideration. A child assumed another young creature would enjoy treats, and Phoprak had once obligingly eaten a piece of grilled rice cake from her hand.

The tiger's eyes were unusual. The right eye was the yellow of a great cat; the left seemed almost human. Bua Tong decided that Som must have been born with a defect. The thought made her even more protective of the animal.

For years, the tiger remained beside her as she grew. Som grew larger too, and gradually allowed the girl to touch her more often.

There was only one rule Bua Tong had learned never to challenge: the tiger did not like being touched on the head or face.

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CHAPTER TWO
THE GIRL WITHOUT STARLIGHT

Three Years Later

The little tiger cub had become a magnificent young tiger, many times larger than when Bua Tong had first discovered her. Phoprak had used her supernatural powers to make her tiger form grow as an ordinary animal should. She could finally behave like a proper tiger instead of pretending to be an innocent kitten.

The bond she had resisted had tightened around her like climbing vines. It had become something mutually beneficial: Bua Tong no longer lost her way, and Phoprak could keep watch over the forest while accompanying her.

The girl had grown as well. She was now fifteen and formally known as Miss Buabucha, though those who loved her still called her Bua Tong. Her bright smile remained the same, and her features had become more striking with each passing year. She was as lovely as Phoprak had imagined.

Her height, unfortunately, had hardly changed. She still came no higher than Phoprak's chest.

"You've got so big lately, Som," Bua Tong complained, patting the tiger's flank. "Look at you! And then look at me. Mother Dao says girls can keep growing until they're twenty, but I've only got five years left. I don't think I'll get any taller."

She sighed, remembering that her friend Tongnual was already taller. Saengla, the boy who completed their small circle of friends, had grown rapidly too, eating enough for several people and brimming with adolescent energy.

Phoprak watched her with affection. She could have told the girl that height was largely inherited and that there were probably only a few more centimeters in her future. Instead the tiger gave a low, gentle rumble.

"I should go home," Bua Tong said. "I won't be able to visit much for a while. I've got entrance examinations to study in town."

A painful emptiness opened in Phoprak's chest.

This was precisely why she disliked forming connections. Sooner or later came separation.

And she could not simply follow the girl. A terrible curse confined Phoprak to the boundaries of her territory, an invisible chain that tightened whenever she tried to escape. She had tested it repeatedly, without success. Important business visitors had to come to her logging camp, or deal with her trusted secretary, Rosarin.

Lately, moreover, Phoprak had been too occupied to visit Bua Tong every day. Something disturbing was happening in the forest. Animals were dying long before their natural time, killed by a hunting party led by someone who knew the occult arts. Phoprak watched over her creatures from dawn until dark. Even the animals who once served as her eyes had gone into hiding. The plump owl that had frightened Bua Tong years earlier dared not venture near the danger.

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At the logging camp, Phoprak turned to the person she trusted most.

"Handle the paperwork for Naruepanat Group. They want to see me. If they refuse to come here, we'll have to decline their request for assistance. Tell them I regret it. But if they agree to visit, make certain we receive them ourselves."

"Of course, Khun Rak."

Rosarin had known her employer's secret for years. She understood what being a saming meant, and she knew the many restrictions governing Phoprak's life. Even food required special care. Rosarin was responsible for every meal, from selecting ingredients to supervising the cooking. Certain gourds, climbing vegetables, and eels were forbidden within the camp.

Others might have found these rules exhausting. Rosarin simply learned them. She had first met Phoprak as a new graduate. Almost eight years later, she was indispensable—the tiger spirit's right hand.

"Any news?" Phoprak asked.

"There are rumors of a tiger attacking people in the village."

"A tiger? Are you certain?"

"Yes."

Rosarin adjusted her glasses. Her expression remained composed, but the stories worried her. If the workers were frightened, the rumors might soon cause real trouble.

When there was nothing more to report, she bowed slightly and left to contact the important visitors.

Phoprak considered what she had heard. She was not the only tiger in the region. There were others deeper in the mountains. But those animals did not ordinarily leave their territory to attack villagers. Something was wrong, and she would have to investigate for herself.

The mountain village was much larger than it had once been. People of several ethnicities and from different regions lived there, their families building a community where a small Chinese settlement had originally stood. A rough road now connected the market to the outside world, and development had followed it into the valley.

Phoprak dressed in the northern clothes she preferred: an indigo cotton shirt and loose traditional trousers. She pinned up her long black hair with an intricately worked silver hairpin, straightened her back, and set out for the market.

She believed the outfit would help her blend in.

She was mistaken.

At nearly six feet tall, with the striking features of a Thai-Belgian woman in her apparent late twenties, mismatched eyes, and an air of distant authority, Phoprak attracted attention everywhere she went. Stallholders watched her pass. Shoppers turned their heads. She ignored them.

The market's familiar smells gradually softened her mood: steaming sticky rice, freshly cooked northern dishes, and grilled food sizzling over charcoal. She remembered eating such things as a child, long before the forest had claimed her.

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"Would you like some food, madam?" an elderly vendor called with a black-toothed smile. "Still hot!"

Phoprak walked on.

"Northern sausage, madam?"

Still she walked on.

"Grilled eggs, big sister?"

That voice belonged to a little girl no older than ten. Her grin revealed two missing front teeth, and the neighboring teeth had been damaged by decay. Phoprak could not suppress a smile.

"How much are they?"

"Three for ten baht!"

"And what if I want just one?"

The child lifted her fingers and counted very seriously.

"One... ten baht!"

Phoprak laughed. Three for ten, but somehow one for ten as well. A remarkable business strategy.

"Very well. I'll have one. Would you peel it for me? I'll pay another five baht for the trouble."

She placed fifteen baht in the child's palm. To Phoprak, it was a trifling sum. To the delighted vendor, it was a small fortune.

"Yes, madam!"

While she waited, Phoprak listened to the voices around her. If you wanted to learn the secrets of a community, there were three places to go: the market, a teahouse, and a brothel. That had been true for generations.

Today the talk was of a tiger. It had entered settled areas, attacked villagers, and killed smaller forest animals. Some believed it was not a natural tiger at all, but a saming—a man-eating spirit tiger.

Who would dare trespass in her domain? Did the intruder not know who ruled these mountains? What kind of creature killed animals and people alike? A wandering beast—or a practitioner using dark magic to flaunt his power?

Anger surged through her. She deliberately steadied her breathing. If she lost her composure and abandoned the moral discipline that restrained her, the tiger nature hidden beneath her human form might take control. That was a danger she could never afford to forget.

"Your egg, madam!"

The little vendor presented a neatly peeled grilled egg in a folded banana-leaf cup. Phoprak smiled in thanks and walked toward another group of gossiping shoppers.

"Oh!"

Someone collided with her. The cup fell, and the egg rolled into the dirt, only to be crushed under a passerby's foot.

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Phoprak sighed and turned, ready to express her irritation.

A young woman had fallen onto the dusty ground at her feet.

"I'm so sorry," the girl said in the northern dialect. "I wasn't watching where I was going."

Her name was Tongnual. She had noticed the tall stranger earlier and had been looking at her like everyone else. Now she was terrified that the proud-looking city woman might demand money she did not have.

"Mm," Phoprak acknowledged.

She made no move to help Tongnual up. Touching strangers was something she avoided whenever possible. The region was full of people who experimented with charms and curses. Some dangerous spirits, it was said, could mark their intended victims through bodily contact. Prudence was better than regret.

"You're partly to blame too," another girl said. "Why did you stop so suddenly?"

Phoprak knew that voice.

She would have known it anywhere. For three years she had listened to it in the forest.

"Bua Tong! Tongnual! Why didn't you wait for me?" a boy called from behind them.

"Help Tongnual up first," Bua Tong told him.

She bent to assist her friend and shot the stranger a reproachful look. Surely even a visitor could show some kindness when someone fell.

Phoprak was momentarily speechless. Never in three years had Bua Tong looked at her like that. The accusation in those familiar eyes stung in an entirely unexpected way.

In truth, Bua Tong had no reason to recognize her. When they had met three years earlier, the moonless night and the weak lantern light had concealed most of Phoprak's face. Ever since, the girl had known her only as a tiger.

"It's all right," Tongnual said hurriedly, dusting her white traditional clothes. "I was the one who wasn't looking. The lady didn't do anything wrong."

The village's unmarried girls usually wore white; married women wore other colors. Tongnual and Bua Tong were still schoolgirls, with no desire to start families despite their parents' teasing.

"Then watch where you're walking," Phoprak said coolly.

Her standard Thai was sharp enough to attract the attention of nearby shoppers. Tongnual lowered her eyes. Bua Tong, however, continued looking offended.

Saengla, now sixteen and fiercely loyal to his friends, clenched his fists. He had not witnessed the collision, but he disliked the stranger's condescending manner.

"At the very least, you could apologize," he said.

"Did you see who walked into whom?" Phoprak countered.

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Saengla had no answer. Tongnual quickly stepped between them, afraid his temper would escalate matters. Village elders had always urged their people to welcome visitors courteously.

"All right," Phoprak said at last. "I suppose I can apologize too. Let us say half the fault is mine."

She conceded not because the argument persuaded her, but because Bua Tong's disapproving gaze had become unbearable. It felt almost like being rejected by the younger sister she had once loved. Phoprak knew the comparison was unfair. In this human guise, they were strangers to one another.

"You're not from here, are you?" Tongnual asked, attempting to ease the tension.

Phoprak gave a soft laugh. "I belong everywhere."

"How irritating," Bua Tong muttered.

She frowned openly. The apology had been offered with such a blank face that it hardly sounded sincere. The woman was infuriating.

"What is your problem with me, little girl?" Phoprak asked. "Such a sharp tongue. Keep speaking like that and you'll grow old without finding anyone willing to marry you."

"You!"

Bua Tong pointed an accusing finger at her, too outraged to find a reply.

Phoprak leaned down, lowering her voice enough to sound almost confidential—though all three young people heard every word.

"Pointing at your elders? Have good manners disappeared from this village along with its old ways?"

Her chuckle made Bua Tong's cheeks flush crimson.

"You've gone too far! Even if you are a tourist—"

"Enough, Bua Tong," Tongnual interrupted, stepping between them. "I'm sorry I wasn't looking, ma'am, and I'm sorry for the way we spoke. We're young. Sometimes we say things we shouldn't."

Phoprak accepted the apology without comment and looked away. To the three friends, she was simply an arrogant city woman they were glad to leave behind.

Back at Wooden & Supply Chain Logging Camp, a knock sounded on the office door.

"Come in."

The door creaked ominously as Rosarin entered. She disliked that noise. The building already felt eerie enough without a door that sounded as though it belonged in a haunted house. She made a mental note to have one of the workers oil the hinges.

"Well?" Phoprak asked, still irritated by the encounter at the market.

"Mr. Athit will come the day after tomorrow," Rosarin reported. "He intends to bring his wife and child as well. He says he'd like to place them under your care."

"Under my care?" Phoprak repeated with a humorless laugh. "Does he mean to bury his family here—or bury me under his obligations?"

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These businessmen were never satisfied with asking for help once. They wanted favors for their children and grandchildren as well. If there were no worthwhile benefits in return, she would have refused outright.

"And the saming tiger?" Rosarin asked, changing the subject.

"I don't know yet. We'll have to watch. The rumors are spreading. If it is a saming, it may be deliberately challenging me." Phoprak's face hardened. "And if that is what it is, I will have to find it and kill it."

There were two kinds of saming in local lore. One was a human who used powerful magic to take the form of a tiger. The other was a tiger that had devoured so many people that it absorbed their spirits and became something unnatural. Phoprak did not yet know which kind of creature she faced. But it had allegedly eaten two people, and the killing had to stop.

"Shall I prepare anything?" Rosarin asked.

"Take care of the camp. I'll be spending some time in the forest."

Deep in the mountains, Phoprak approached a watering place where the animals usually gathered. The pool was fed from the heights above and served as a drinking place for gaur, deer, tigers, and elephants.

Tonight there were no hoofprints. No deer tracks. Nothing. The animals had gone into hiding.

The silver necklace at Phoprak's throat dissolved into smoke, which gathered in her palm and became her familiar storm lantern. She set it down and examined the soft mud along the water's edge.

There: the fresh impression of a large cat's paw. The earth had not yet dried.

The intruder had been hunting here recently. Smaller animals might be hiding close to the logging camp, but what refuge was there for the great beasts? The thought troubled her.

"Prajak. Come out."

A black cat appeared from the darkness and twined affectionately around her ankles. Its eyes glowed blood red.

Prajak was a *chakla*, a ghostly cat of Thai occult lore, sustained by its master's magic. Rosarin regularly left chicken and pig blood in the creature's feeding place, though she had never seen it herself. Those who glimpsed a chakla were said to be courting misfortune.

"Go and find out who it is," Phoprak commanded.

The cat rubbed its head against her foot, then sprang into the night and disappeared, leaving only a few coarse black hairs drifting in the air.

With the forest animals too frightened to serve as her eyes, Phoprak had no choice but to send her third eye—the ghost cat she ordinarily kept hidden. Though it could look as harmless as a house pet, its powers were far from harmless.

Meanwhile, Bua Tong had spent most of her recent days preparing for the examinations that would allow her to continue studying in town. Father Rueang had taken over collecting and drying the medicinal plants. Education was the one opportunity he and his wife had never enjoyed, and he wanted

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their daughter to have a better life. He could not bear to imagine his slight, delicate girl having to carry heavy loads for a living.

Now the examinations were over, and Bua Tong had volunteered to gather herbs again. This time Mother Dao accompanied her, since they planned to work until evening.

"We've collected plenty, sweetheart," Mother Dao said, adjusting her heavy basket.

"Then let's go home, Mother."

Bua Tong turned toward a shortcut that led almost directly to their house. She often took this path, escorted by Som until she reached the forest's edge. With the tiger beside her, even the dark had never seemed frightening.

But tonight the forest was unnaturally quiet. The crickets and cicadas had stopped singing. Perhaps rain was coming—but there was no smell of wet earth, no scent of an approaching storm. The silence reminded Bua Tong of the night three years earlier when she had mistaken a fat owl's glowing eyes for a monster.

And for some reason, she remembered the mysterious woman who had rescued her.

"Which way are you going?" Mother Dao asked.

"The shorter path."

Her mother hesitated. Rueang had warned them never to leave well-trodden trails. A path without footprints was a path best avoided. Their daughter had become alarmingly fearless lately, striding through waist-high grass as though nothing in the forest could hurt her.

Bua Tong pushed the grass aside and looked back to make sure her mother could follow. She wondered whether Som might be nearby. If so, she hoped the tiger would stay hidden. A creature that seemed gentle to her might terrify her mother, and wild animals could never be entirely predictable.

After a while, a swaying light appeared ahead among the grass.

"Mother, look. Someone's coming!"

"Good. Better to walk home with company."

They hurried toward the light, relieved. As they drew nearer, they saw a tall, slender woman with long black hair, wearing an indigo shirt and traditional northern trousers. A storm lantern swung from her hand.

"Excuse us," Bua Tong called politely. "May we walk with you?"

Surely the answer would be yes. In their village, neighbors treated one another like relatives. Helping a stranger on the path was the most ordinary kindness in the world.

The woman stopped. A faint smile lifted one corner of her mouth.

Then she turned.

In the lantern's light, Bua Tong recognized the face immediately.

The rude woman from the market.

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What was a city visitor doing alone in the forest at night?

Bua Tong did not ask. Their quarrel that afternoon was still fresh in her mind.

The deeper they walked, the stranger everything became. Not a leaf fell. No breeze moved the tall grasses. The insects remained silent, and an unfamiliar smell drifted through the air.

"Mother..." Bua Tong whispered.

Mother Dao felt sweat dampening the girl's hand. She was frightened too. The smell reminded her of dead animals, of bodies left to rot. But one never spoke carelessly of ominous things in the forest.

They held their breath and followed the stranger.

Bua Tong wished Som would appear. She would rather meet a tiger she knew than continue following this woman. At least with Som she knew where she stood.

Then she noticed the footsteps.

Three people were walking along the path, but she could hear only two sets of feet pressing through the fallen leaves: hers and her mother's. The stranger ahead made no sound at all.

"Mother, I think—"

"Let's go back the way we came," Mother Dao whispered quickly.

She tightened her hold on Bua Tong's hand, pulled the girl behind her, and began retreating one cautious step at a time. Whatever happened, she would stand between danger and her only child.

Two yards ahead, the stranger stopped.

A soft laugh floated back to them, accompanied by the nauseating stench of something decaying.

"Aren't you coming with me?" she asked. "I have a light."

Neither mother nor daughter answered.

"Aren't you coming with me? I have a light."

The words came again, precisely the same.

"I just remembered..." Bua Tong stammered. "I forgot my basket."

"Aren't you coming with me? I have a light."

Now there was no mistaking it. The repeated invitation was wrong, horribly wrong. They turned and ran.

"Aren't you coming with me? I have a light."

The voice pursued them through the forest as if its owner were running beside them, laughing at their terror.

Mother Dao's heavy basket dragged at her shoulders. She stumbled over a clump of grass and fell hard, rolling across the ground. Because she was still holding her daughter's hand, Bua Tong fell with her.

"Mother!"

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The girl scrambled up and tried to help her mother sit. Both were shaking and gasping for breath. The smell of rot was so strong it burned their throats.

"I asked whether you were coming with me," the stranger said, laughing.

Tears spilled down Bua Tong's cheeks. She stared at the lantern, then at the beautiful face behind it. Her lips trembled uncontrollably.

The woman stepped closer.

And closer.

Then the tall human figure changed.

A huge tiger sprang toward them.

Mother Dao threw herself in front of her daughter.

The roar shook the forest.

Outside the trees, Hunter Rueang knew something was terribly wrong. His wife and daughter had not returned. He checked his old rifle and ammunition, praying that both were safe. His father had taught him to mistrust a forest that fell unnaturally silent. No insects, no breeze, no birds: such quiet meant danger.

He had heard a tiger roar. He prayed it was only an ordinary tiger, not something conjured by black magic. He shouldered his old M1 rifle with the muzzle pointing downward, concerned that rain might enter the barrel, then hurried to the house of Elder Prae, the village headman. If they had to enter the forest, several people would be safer than one.

Fortunately, the elder was awake, drinking herbal liquor with his grandson Plong. At Rueang's news, he summoned several strong young men to join them.

"What did you hear, Rueang?" the elder asked once more.

"A tiger. I heard it roar in the forest."

"Could it be the one that's been attacking our people?"

Rueang could not answer. He was thinking only of his wife and daughter. Everything else could wait.

The trees at the forest's edge formed a roof so dense that almost no moonlight passed through. Even with torches, the ground beyond was difficult to see. Rueang raised an arm, stopping the men before they crossed the boundary.

The forest was too still.

He joined his palms and recited an invocation, then appealed to the guardians of the mountain and the woods to open a safe path to his family.

A gentle whirlwind stirred ahead. Grass and creeping vines parted to either side, creating a narrow passage through the undergrowth.

The men stared in astonishment. They had heard stories of Rueang's prowess as a forest guide, but none had expected to see the forest itself respond to his prayer.

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"Follow me," he ordered. "Stay together."

They hurried along the opening path. As they ventured deeper, the smell of carrion became unbearable. Animal carcasses lay scattered in the brush, thick with maggots and flies. Rain began to fall, worsening the stench.

"What do we do, Uncle?" Plong asked, his voice muffled behind his hand.

"Run. Follow me."

The men pressed on. Then Elder Prae spotted something glistening on a leaf. It was a dark, sticky liquid.

"Blood!" Plong cried after touching and smelling it. The metallic odor removed any doubt.

"Follow the blood," Rueang said.

His prayer never ceased. *Guardians of the forest, please protect my wife and child.*

He wanted this night to be a dream. He wanted to turn back and find his family waiting at home.

Saengdao, his wife, had come from the same community as he had, with a warm smile and bright, beautiful eyes. Their daughter was the very image of her mother.

Then the torches revealed the clearing.

Saengdao lay on the ground, her eyes open, a faint smile still resting on her face. Bua Tong, fifteen years old, held her mother's upper body in her arms. She was crying as though her heart were tearing apart.

The lower half of Saengdao's body lay some distance behind them.

Tiger tracks covered the earth.

The terrible silence broke beneath the sound of grief.

Rueang's calloused hand closed around the ritual blade at his waist. Rage made him tremble. Whether the killer was an ordinary tiger or a supernatural saming no longer mattered.

He would find it, no matter where it hid.

And when he did, he swore he would drive his blade straight through its heart.

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