

The Student Split in Half on the Balcony

Every night, someone in this condo must have seen her.

At the very least, the new night guards—rotating almost every evening. The outsourced security company has reported many times that no guard is willing to take the night shift in this condo, not even when tempted with triple pay.

Every guard spoke with one voice: she was too terrifying to risk their lives for. One elderly guard collapsed and had to be rushed to the hospital to have his heart revived. At least eight others bolted from the condo and never returned to the company. Two fled straight back to their hometown still in uniform, and one of them swore to become a monk for life, never to disrobe again.

Was she really that terrifying? Yes. Everyone in the condo said she was.

Children are hurried into bed before dusk. Every window is drawn shut, every curtain sealed. Anyone returning late from work or nightlife avoids the condo between one and three in the morning, when some claim to see her lower body wandering through the halls.

A clueless Chinese tourist once rented an illegal daily room and stepped into the elevator—only to find himself riding alongside the pleated skirt and legs of a student. The CCTV footage of him screaming uncontrollably and wetting himself on the empty elevator floor went viral online.

The rice porridge vendor across the street swore she too had seen the wandering pleated skirt and legs of a student. It began with a pair of limbs dumped in the condo's trash bin. By one in the morning, those passing the alley by the fence would hear bangs and the clatter of bins toppling. No one dared step outside to find the source of the noise—not even the guards at their booth.

One of the ghost-seers in the condo once wrote in the building's group chat: those legs keep trying to climb back up to the 38th floor, to the balcony of room 3807—where the rest of her body still hangs. Every night. Every night since the night she chose to jump.

The longtime residents had their own tales about the hopeless girl. Some said she was addicted to vaping, sneaking puffs where it was forbidden. Others whispered of the men she brought home, never the same face twice. A few even claimed to have glimpsed a satanic tattoo etched on her left shoulder. Rumors grew out of prejudice, filling in the gaps of what no one had truly seen. For when she fell, most were already asleep. Her room on the 48th floor lay tucked against the blank wall of the automated parking tower—no vantage point, no witnesses. That is why no one noticed her body left hanging from the balcony, left to rot until her lower half snapped off and crashed into the bins below.

She was a dental student from a prestigious university. Everyone came to know her history in detail only after reporters and netizens dug into her life—after the sanitation worker reported finding a scrap of pleated skirt and a mysterious leg jutting from a bin of wet garbage.

Officials and the merely curious alike crowded in when the upper half of her body was discovered on the balcony—her head twisted grotesquely, her eyes bulging from their sockets. She was only 21, a third-year dental student, not yet even granted her white coat. Every news outlet followed with infographics showing dentistry students leading suicide statistics, speculating on crushing coursework, toxic hierarchies, suffocating family pressure, or the burden of being a daughter in a middle-class Chinese household. Interpretations varied wildly, each one projecting their own story onto hers.

There was no note, no farewell post, no profile picture turned black. No record of psychiatric treatment, no hint of illness—unless she herself had not known. Her father looked angry in the news photos but offered no words. Her mother wept, insisting she had been a good girl. Friends said she was sweet. Professors said she was cheerful. Her handsome boyfriend sobbed that there had been no signs at all. But that is what everyone says after the troubles have already happened. In the end, everyone only cares for themselves.

No one was even sure how many days and nights she had hung from the balcony of room 3807. The unit belonged to a wealthy property investor who left it empty, waiting for prices to rise. A neighbor above once complained of a stench, like sewage or a dead rat. A neighbor below reported yellow stains dripping onto their balcony. Yet life in the city center meant windows sealed against PM 2.5, doors shut tight against the dust. Nobody dared lean out to look. She hung there in plain sight, and no one saw her.

If her decision was meant as a cry for attention, as some sneering keyboard cynics claimed, then she failed. Perhaps she was angry. Perhaps she was hopeless. Or perhaps she truly did want the world to notice. And so her legs wander the condo at night, her footsteps dragging, her groans echoing from the 38th-floor balcony, every night between one and three, whispering the same lament.

“Help me.” “Please, help me.” ...Classic.

Maybe she truly wanted help. But help for what? No one ever heard her say more. The police, the coroners, even the monks and the cleaners—they had all taken her down from that balcony long ago. Her legs and skirt sewn back to her torso, cremated months before. Or did she want a burial instead? Gossip whispered that her father's side had no ancestral tomb, so she was burned under her Thai mother's rites. She should have moved on, shouldn't she? So why—

THUD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Right on time.

Prakit jolted awake at the sound of something massive slamming onto the balcony outside. The neon green digits of the clock read 1:00 a.m. The air conditioner, set to eighteen degrees, did nothing to ease the

heavy, suffocating heat pressing down on him. Sweat seeped through his tank top and spread across the sheets. Each breath felt dragged down by molten lead in his lungs. From the streetlight outside, the shadow of a dangling figure swayed, its outline bleeding through the lace curtain. The infamous horror clung to his balcony. A brittle cracking sound followed, louder, sharper, until suddenly—the shadow snapped in two. The legs vanished into the night below. The head—

THUD!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

A heavy thud struck the balcony again. The shadow crept closer, inching toward Prakrit. The scraping sound grew relentless. He realized—she was moving. On the curtain, the outline of hands and arms clawed upward, desperate, frantic. She was trying to get inside.

Impossible. Prakrit was certain he had locked the sliding glass door.

He had read every review, every viral post about her before deciding to sleep in this infamous room—Room 3807, notorious for its curse. They said no one ever lasted the night. By 2.00 a.m., tenants fled down the fire stairs screaming. TikTok was filled with mashups of the humiliation, synced to pounding DJ mixes. But Kit had no choice. Tonight, he had no money left. He had to save every last baht for food until the end of the month. So even if the ghostly student came to torment him, he would endure. He had no other option.

Click.

Shit. How did she unlock it from the outside?

Damn it. Don't. Don't come in. Kit yanked the blanket over his head, praying she wouldn't notice him lying there on the bed. Praying the night would pass quickly. Praying she would vanish at three a.m. like the posts online claimed she did. The rusted frame of the sliding door groaned as it opened inch by inch. A foul, rotting stench gusted in with the night air, choking the room until Kit's throat burned and bile rose hot in his chest. He curled tighter beneath the blanket, though sweat drenched him, soaking his undershirt and the sheets beneath him. He tried not to move. Tried to shrink small, smaller still. The ghost must not know he was here.

He just had to hold his breath and endure until morning. That was all he asked for. He wanted no quarrel with anyone—neither the living nor the dead.

The blanket that once shielded Kit slid past his ear, inch by inch. A stench so foul it overwhelmed his senses flooded in first. He couldn't take it anymore. He couldn't breathe. Then she ripped the blanket away, exposing his sweat-soaked body in its pajamas to the eyes bulging from her near-bursting sockets. Kit squinted at the ghastly form looming over him—the student ghost glaring with murderous contempt, as if to condemn him for daring to exist in her space.

"Help me... help me..."

Her rotting mouth split in a grin, every tooth decayed, as she repeated that grotesque phrase like a slogan worn into her tongue. She looked ready to leap and sink her teeth into Prakrit's throat—if only she had legs left to leap with. The twisted ruin of her head and neck told the story of the balcony's fatal impact.

Does she really have to be this terrifying? Prakrit finally understood why everyone feared her. Her half-body dragged itself across the floor with only her hands, leaving her entrails trailing behind in a grisly line. Smears of blood, pus, bile, and the waste from her intestines stained the ground in a long streak, seeping into the fibers of the expensive carpet Kit had just bought from Ikea, filling the air with a stench that made one's stomach churn.

That was the final straw that made Kit lose his temper; his emotions snapped.

"Help... please help me!"

"Shut up!!!!"

THUD!!!!

Kit leapt forward and kicked her rotten mouth once. The broken neck twisted back into its original position.

"What's wrong? Never met someone who kicked a ghost in the mouth before, huh? You annoying bitch. Stop repeating yourself like some B-movie ghost. You think that makes you scary?"

Kit cursed furiously, leaving the ghostly student stunned like a chicken in headlights. Seizing the moment, he flicked on the bedside lamp. As the harsh light flooded the room, the half-bodied ghost girl no longer seemed all that terrifying.

"Why the hell couldn't you just show up nicely? I know damn well you could. And this stinking rot—what the hell did you eat before you died, huh? Speak!" Kit scolded furiously, grabbing an air freshener and spraying lavender mist straight onto the ghost's guts in sheer exasperation.

"Papaya salad with crab and fermented fish, durian, and then..." the ghost girl mumbled shyly.

"Liquor—I can smell the liquor. Who the hell taught you to eat durian with alcohol? And you're supposed to be a dental student. How can you not know something this basic? You weren't depressed or having some life crisis, were you? I'd bet you got drunk on the balcony and slipped to your death. Isn't that right, you damn ghost?"

The ghost girl nodded shyly while Kit kept lecturing nonstop, his finger pressing the button to switch on the air purifier at the same time.

"Still not taking back your proper form? Why the hell are you clinging to your corpse body, stinking up my room? What the fuck are you waiting for?"

"Just give me a moment for my legs to come up, mommy," the ghost girl murmured, pressing her palms together in a shaky wai, not daring to meet Kit's eyes.

"Fuck's sake! Can't even sleep 'cause you wake me in the middle of the night—now I've gotta sit here waiting for your damn legs? I've got work in the morning, you stupid ghost!"

"I'm sorry, mommy. Once my legs come, I'll disappear right away."

"No. You're not going anywhere. Not until you help me haul out this shit-stained carpet and scrub the damn floor first."

"What...?!"

"What the hell do you mean 'what'? You made the mess, so you damn well clean it up." Seizing the moment, Kit strode out to the balcony, grabbed a mop, and tossed it at the ghost girl. She caught it, looking baffled—when suddenly, a loud thud pounded against the door in rhythm.

"Mommy, my legs should be here by now. Could you open the door for me, please?"

Kit, irritated, hurried over to open the door. A pleated schoolgirl skirt swished as two rotting legs, clad in filthy socks, limped into the room.

"Ugh, those legs reek like a trash can," Kit snapped. The cursed limbs quickly reattached themselves to the upper body. The ghost girl gripped the mop to brace herself, finally squaring up to Kit in full form. The corpse slowly transformed into a beautiful young college student. The stench of entrails faded a little, though it did not disappear completely.

"That's better. Clean up everything before two a.m. If you try to run, I'll curse you so that you'll face something far worse than being trapped in this half-existence," Kit ordered harshly. The student ghost quickly rolled up the foul-smelling carpet and tossed it over the balcony, where it landed squarely by the trash cans beneath the spot her legs had fallen earlier. Then she hurried to scrub the stains of blood and pus from the floor as commanded.

"And why the hell are you haunting me?" Kit demanded, arms crossed, glaring at her.

"I have nowhere else to go. I don't know why I haven't moved on or why nobody has come for me. This room is the only place I can exist. But every night at one o'clock, I have to climb out onto the forty-eighth-floor balcony and fall to my death again and again. Only when my legs return to me can I go back to normal. I didn't mean to scare you, ma'am. It's just that when someone else is in this room, I feel suffocated. I'm more at ease when I'm alone."

"So that's why you drove everyone else out, you bratty ghost kid? Don't you realize people pay rent here, spend money and time moving in, and end up losing their sanity too? You've got no empathy, no concern for anyone's mental health—just thinking about yourself, huh?"

"I'm sorry, mommy. You're the only one who's ever talked to me. Everyone else just sees my shadow and runs screaming. But tell me, why were you able to kick me in the mouth?"

"None of your business. Why should I tell you?"

"You won't drive me away to another place, will you, mommy?" the ghost girl asked glumly.

“Fine. I don’t know how to banish a ghost, and you’ve got nowhere else to go. Even if I drove you out, you’d just end up falling onto my balcony again every night. Just don’t bother me, alright? If you need something, knock on the door like a normal person. If you didn’t have manners when you were alive, then learn some now that you’re dead.”

“Yes, mommy.”

“This condo’s got two bedrooms. You can have this one. I’ll take the master. At first I thought the smaller room’s AC would be cooler, but it’s broken anyway. As for your midnight stunt of climbing and falling every night, I’ll figure out a way to help. I’m going to bed—I’ve got work early tomorrow.” With that, Kit grabbed a blanket and pillow and moved into the other bedroom.

“Oh, and since you’re living here now, you’d better help me make some money. You’re not staying here for free,” Kit added, pointing at the ghost girl.

“How am I supposed to make money? I’m a ghost,” she asked.

“I’ll tell you tomorrow. I’m too tired now. We’ll talk then.”

That night, Kit fell asleep dreaming up a dozen different schemes to cash in on the ghost girl.

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A Ghost Sees a Ghost

Several Years Earlier

“They say people like us are born with special powers.”

“Uh, I don’t... I haven’t...”

The boy in his school uniform quickly denied it. He didn’t want the person in front of him to misunderstand, and he certainly didn’t want this stranger to think he was the same.

“Oh, that’s fine. You don’t realize it yet, that’s all. Just haven’t accepted it. Don’t be upset with me, child. From my experience, the sooner you accept it, the sooner you’ll find happiness. Life doesn’t give people like us much time to be happy.”

The old man—who insisted on calling himself ‘auntie’—let out a deep sigh, exhaling a stream of cigarette smoke into the vivid orange glow of the sunset sky, the same shade as the bright-orange suspension bridge where the boy and that despairing aunt stood, teetering on the edge. The Orange Bridge at Ban Sing Chai pier, known to everyone in Lampang. It was September, the monsoon season, and this year the Kiew Lom Dam had released water far beyond capacity. The Wang River beneath the bridge was surging violently, the perfect stage for the act the boy feared this strange auntie might be about to carry out.

“So you’re at the ghost dance at the Clock Tower intersection? Strange, isn’t it? This year they even closed the roads to hold it right at the five-way. Never before has it been this grand. Such a shame I couldn’t join this year.”

The boy wanted to deny it but chose instead to stay silent, watching the strange uncle lift a cigarette to his lips. The glow at the tip lit up the wrinkles and sorrow carved into his face. Black mascara streaks ran from under his eyes down to his cheekbones, proof of heavy weeping not long ago. Traces of white powder and red lipstick smudged and half-erased, like a failed attempt to cover flaws that could never be fully hidden. Thick, arched tattooed brows framed his eyes in outdated fashion, and a bright red sarong wrapped over a silk short-sleeved shirt in the same shade, matched with a sash and headscarf. A garland of gardenia jasmine hung around his neck, while a large dark-green bay leaf was tucked by his temple under the headscarf.

“Uncle... uh, Auntie, are you a horse-rider for the Meng spirits?” the boy asked, referring to one of Lampang’s shamanic traditions.

“I used to be. Not anymore. The god won’t mount me again. I was just cast out of the ceremony by another horse-rider. I broke the vow to my master.” Tears welled and spilled from his eyes, mascara running thicker down his cheeks.

“You broke the vow? So badly they couldn’t forgive you, or even fine you with a token offering? What did you do? Can I ask?”

“So you know your stuff. I broke every vow to my master. Most often it was sneaking watermelon, pumpkin, or food from a funeral house—that could be forgiven with a ritual apology. But my guardian spirit hated that I broke the Five Precepts. Every spirit has its quirks. Other mediums could drink, but me—I was forbidden. I tried to resist, but in the end I became an alcoholic. I drank hard to forget my ex-husband. That’s what life is for Pu Mia (A term for “lady boy” in Lanna dialect) like us: tricked into handing over every cent until nothing’s left. I gave him money for booze, money for his motorbike payments, just to hear him say he loved me, that I was his only one. And I was foolish enough to believe it. My guardian spirit couldn’t forgive me for breaking the third precept. I became another man’s mistress. He already had a wife and children old enough to perform the ghost dance themselves.”

“Wait—your lover, he was a ghost dancer too?”

“Yes. His wife found out and cursed me in public. Truth is, I knew from the start this would happen. The moment that man danced to court me, I knew he’d be my downfall. But I played dumb, because I was already in love with him. Love, child—it’s the one thing that makes Pu Mia like us the biggest fools. I was blessed with a gift, chosen to be a vessel for the guardian spirit, respected across Lampang. Every dance brought in offerings, not much, but enough to live on. The spirit never let me suffer. But in the end, I was the one who let a man strip me of everything. His wife, his parents—they cursed me, slapped me, drove me from the ceremony. The guardian spirit turned away, refused to mount me again. And I had seen it all coming.”

“Wait—what do you mean, you saw it coming?”

“Pu Mia like us are born with gifts. Old palm-leaf manuscripts describe us. That’s why the spirits choose us as their vessels. I don’t know what your gift is, child, but mine... mine is to see the future.”

“You can see the future? Really, Auntie?”

“Don’t believe me? Give me your hand, and I’ll tell you what’s to come.”

The boy obediently held out his hand. There was something strangely trustworthy about this auntie that put him at ease. Maybe it was the mascara streaming down her cheeks, the smeared powder and lipstick she hadn’t fully wiped away, or the gaudy garb she had piled on. Or maybe it was simply that the boy saw a glimpse of his own future written on her body, or even on this suspension bridge over the raging Wang River in flood season. A small part of him just wanted the woman who claimed she could see the future to confirm when the end would come, and what he had to do to escape it.

“There is no escape...”

The auntie shouted so loudly the boy flinched. Her pupils vanished, her eyes rolling back until only the whites showed, glaring at him through streaks of black mascara that now reached her chin in a grotesque mask. The boy wanted to yank his hand away and bolt, but her red-painted nails dug deep into his soft skin, holding him fast. Her raspy voice was like a chorus of ancient crones, all speaking at once.

“...Your fate is sealed. There’s no escape. The spirits have chosen you as their vessel, to carry on the line. If not, all of Lampang will fall into ruin. If that mad ghost gets your body, you’ll be bound here as a medium until the day you die. You’ll earn nothing more than scraps from the dance, never rising, never breaking free. And in the end, like every Pu Mia before you, men will abandon you, deceive you, and you’ll find yourself on this very bridge, leaping into the Wang River like I did—sinking into the muck and silt, trapped as a servant to the Phee Sue Phee Mueng (guardian spirit of the city) for hundreds, even thousands of years. Ha ha ha... ha ha ha ha...”

The boy recoiled, wrenching his hand free from those red nails. The auntie seemed to snap back, her pupils rolling down into place, chest heaving as though she hadn’t been in control of what she’d just spoken.

“Child, run. Get out of Lampang. Find work in the big city. Here, there is no future, no love for people like us. What I saw—it was terrifying. That shadow, it waits for you. This bridge—it will claim you just like it claimed me. No, no, I’ll go back and beg the guardian spirit’s forgiveness. I won’t jump. Compared to your future, my past gives me hope. I won’t jump.”

“It’s too late, Auntie. You already jumped.”

“What do you mean?” She snapped out of her frenzy, turning to him in confusion.

The boy pointed down at the Wang River. Beneath the raging current, a bright red headscarf bobbed to the surface.

“The ghost dance at the Clock Tower ended yesterday. They closed the street on Sunday. Today is Monday. I was just walking home from school when you stopped me to talk.”

The auntie followed his gaze to the red headscarf drifting downstream in the muddy Wang. The setting sun painted the sky in deep shades of orange and crimson as it slipped beyond the horizon, leaving only the falling dark to blanket all of Lampang. One by one, the orange lamps along the Orange Bridge flickered on, and the faint gray figure in the red sarong slowly dissolved into their glow.

“Seems they were right. Pu Mia like us are born with special gifts. So, child, your gift is...”

“I can see ghosts,” the boy admitted, his voice shifting to match his true self within.

“Good. Then remember this. Leave Lampang. Find honest work. Build a good life. Find real love. Don’t let yourself become a vessel. Don’t end up leaping from this bridge like me.”

The red sarong climbed onto the railing and then toppled into the black shadow of the Wang below.

The boy stepped off the bridge, his head filled with doubt upon doubt. But one certainty had taken root: He would flee Lampang as fast as he possibly could.

Middle-Class, Midlife, in the Heart of the City

“Congratulations, Mr. Prakit. You’ve officially been appointed as a government officer.”

Uncle Chamnan from HR delivered the good news to Kit one afternoon. At last, his precarious life as a contract worker with no benefits was coming to an end. After four years of relentless effort on the civil service exams, today there was finally a vacancy that Prakit can step into.

Goodbye to month-to-month contracts. Farewell to the meager fixed salary. Hello to pay raises every six months based on performance. Hello to paid sick leave, personal leave, and vacation days to his heart’s content. Oh, and there was even a housing allowance. Though admittedly, it was only...

“1,500 baht, Mr. Prakit. Newly appointed staff in the service division are entitled to a flat housing allowance of 1,500 baht per month, for single occupancy. Or, if you’re sharing, it’s 850 baht each, totaling 1,600. Do you perhaps have a roommate, a partner, or a spouse... I mean, a life partner?” the meticulous and kindly HR officer asked.

“Uh, no, nothing like that, Uncle. I’m single, so I’ll be living alone.”

“Oh, I see. Well, it should at least ease the burden a little. You’ll have to cover the rest of the rent yourself.”

“No problem at all. Just being officially appointed is good enough for me. Having 1,500 baht toward rent is still a big help. Rent out in Nong Chok isn’t too high anyway. I should have enough left over to live comfortably.” Kit brimmed with hope. He would use his extra income to finally buy the luxuries he had always longed for from afar. First on the list was a jar of retinol cream from the mall—farewell to convenience store sachets. Second, he would install Wi-Fi in his room—no more scraping by on stingy mobile data packages. And of course, he would finally subscribe to a streaming service. He was sick of skipping through endless ads. For the upcoming long weekend, Kit planned to binge uncut BL series to his heart’s delight.

“Um, if I may, as someone who’s worked with you a long time, Mr. Prakit, you might want to budget your housing costs more carefully. Or if you don’t move, you’ll have to set aside part of your salary for commuting. I just worry it’ll be harder on you,” Uncle Chamnan said with genuine concern.

“Move? Commute? My dorm’s right next to the district office, Uncle. I walk to work every day. Rent’s only three thousand a month.”

“You haven’t checked your assignment yet, have you? You don’t know which district you’ve been placed in.”

The words “which district” echoed through Kit’s mind, suddenly hollow. He thought back on his four years of civil service exams. Nong Chok district had almost never had openings, which was why he’d never been appointed there. And if there were, higher scorers always beat him to it. In his desperation, in his hunger for the

position, he had ticked the box for “any district available.” If Uncle Chamnan was this worried, it must mean a district with sky-high living costs, far from Nong Chok. Please don’t let it be Pathumwan, he thought.

“Not Pathumwan,” Uncle Chamnan said to ease Kit’s fears.

“Oh, thank God. I nearly had a heart attack, Uncle.” On his salary, there was no way Kit could survive in Pathumwan. He’d rather be shipped off to faraway Bang Khun Thian.

“Not Bang Khun Thian either,” Uncle added, as if reading Kit’s mind.

“Gyaaaaaaaaah!”

Kit finally lowered his eyes to read the assignment letter. The appearance of that dreaded letter “R” made the hair on his arms stand on end. Any district starting with “R” was more terrifying than seeing a widow ghost lift her skirt in broad daylight.

Please, let it be Ratchaburana. That would still be better. Please, don’t let it be that other district. It couldn’t be.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Prakrit. Your posting is to Ratchathewi.”

“Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah!”

Prakit felt as though his very soul had slipped out of his body. His heart pounded so wildly he thought it might have already stopped. Beads of sweat sprouted across his palms, down his back, and over his forehead, while a sudden icy shiver crawled up his spine to seize his hollow frame. The terrifying emptiness before him was nothing less than the corpse of his own future.

“Ra... ra... Ratcha... Ratchathewi?” Kit’s lips trembled as he forced out the word that frightened him most.

“Yes, right in the heart of the city. Are you all right, Mr. Prakrit?”

“Y-yes, I’m just a little shocked. When do I start?”

“October. The new fiscal year. You still have time to prepare, maybe find a new place to live. I can’t say whether rent or commuting costs will be worse.”

The word “worse” rattled his bones like a death knell, sending another chill down his spine.

“Okay... I’ll manage. I’ll be all right, won’t I, Uncle?” Kit asked nervously.

“You’ll be fine. But first, why don’t you comb your hair a bit?” The HR uncle handed him a comb.

With trembling hands, Prakrit took it and smoothed down the strands that had been standing on end, though the hairs on the back of his neck still bristled uncontrollably at the thought of the looming expenses just weeks away.

...

“Tilt your head a little to the left. Raise your right shoulder. Perfect. One, two, snap.”

The flash burst against the auntie in her silk dress, Farrah Fawcett hair teased high, and makeup laid on thick. Everyone had come prepared for the big day that would be immortalized on government records for the next eight years. Social media reviews said to ask for Prakrit from Nong Chok, with one rising female rapper gushing in her post: “Photos by Prakrit are drop-dead gorgeous, mind-blowing, magazine-cover beautiful.” That endorsement had made the line for ID card photos stretch longer than the queue at a Michelin-starred transwoman’s papaya salad shop.

Even after transferring to Ratchathewi without warning, Prakrit’s afternoon queue was still overflowing, nearly to closing time. He had forgotten to tell the receptionist to cut the line short. Nothing at this new workplace felt settled yet; Kit had much to adjust to.

His new boss already didn’t seem to like him. His new coworkers eyed him strangely, from head to toe—maybe because of his faded white shirt, washed to a dull blue, or the sagging socks that slipped to his ankles, sparking whispers and side-eyes. Kit longed to buy new shirts and socks, but the cost of commuting from his old dorm to Ratchathewi was already eating up his budget.

The stench of poverty clung to his skin, making others uneasy to come near. Kit knew it well. But if he looked on the bright side, it meant nobody bothered him, nobody invited him to waste money on lunch at the market outside the army flats. Even donation envelopes skipped past him without the awkwardness of refusal. Solitude came cheaper than friendship, and new connections were surely too expensive for someone of his standing.

“Mr. Prakrit, is my photo pretty?”

“Oh, it’ll show up on the screen in a moment. By the way, how do you know my name?”

“Of course I know. The internet’s full of reviews about you. I came here today just to have you take the last ID photo of my life.”

This auntie must have been nearing seventy. Kit understood people her age well—many prepared months in advance, making themselves as beautiful as possible for that final ID photo. On picture day, they would show up perfectly made up, hair set just right, because this was the last ID card they’d ever have, marked to expire “lifetime.”

“So, has the photo come up yet? Why can’t I see it?”

“Hmm, I already took the photo. No problem, let’s try again. Ready, Auntie? One, two, snap.”

Kit pressed the shutter in rapid bursts, just like the previous attempt. The flash illuminated the auntie’s face in her most dignified pose, yet on the screen appeared nothing but an empty backdrop.

“Is the monitor broken, Mr. Prakrit? I can’t see myself on the screen,” the auntie asked sadly. Kit understood at once.

“The monitor isn’t broken. But you, Auntie—you’re gone.”

Kit closed the lens and began packing up, leaving the auntie staring into the screen, clinging to the last emotion that had carried her all the way here. It wasn’t his place to tell her where to go or what to do next. By now, his coworkers had surely seen the whole thing, and the office group chat—one he hadn’t been invited into—would soon be circulating clips of him taking photos and talking to thin air.

He would have to be more careful with his ability, the strange gift that couldn’t be written on any job application and couldn’t earn him a single baht in this city. Prakrit powered off the display as the auntie faded quietly from sight.

His workday was finally over, another day that had drained him to the bone. Even if his main duty was only snapping photos, he was constantly asked to prepare slideshows, serve and clear refreshments, set up meeting rooms, check office supply stock, photocopy project documents, and even queue up for coffee and fried bananas for his boss. All the chores nobody wanted somehow fell on the shoulders of the newest hire.

The workload at Ratchathewi wasn’t half as heavy as back in Nong Chok, and yet Kit couldn’t help missing Uncle Chamnan. If he were here, each day would surely pass easier, with at least someone to consult, someone to share his burdens.

Kit packed up and left the district office, heading toward Victory Monument to catch the bus. He prayed the queue wouldn’t be too long in the sweltering heat, where pressing shoulder-to-shoulder with strangers was far from pleasant. He bought watermelon from a street cart, hoping the sweetness would refresh him. As he passed a young woman in white waiting to cross, a motorbike barreled into her. Her body flew, blood blooming across her blouse until it soaked through, her limbs jerking against the hard asphalt, trapped in a haze of rage and agony.

No one paid her any mind—neither then, nor now. Heads were bent to screens, eyes fixed on the shoes of the person ahead, marching forward on their invisible conveyor belt. Kit had noticed her the first time he saw her, but today he simply let her fade without thought. Silence, perhaps, was the etiquette of this city. When in Rome, do as the Romans do. For this place, keeping quiet is a good choice.

Kit often saw what others ignored—or pretended not to. At the Victory Monument bus stop, he stepped over the head of a young man, skirted the arm of an old one. Ears, fingers, scraps of flesh were scattered across the pavement, remnants of the New Year’s Eve bombing during the coup year. Whoever the perpetrators had been, the wounds still cut deep into the city. Everyone else acted as if it had never happened, willfully forgetting.

Rain hammered down over the throngs below. Kit raised his battered umbrella like many others, beneath a canopy of mismatched colors blooming under the gloomy sky. But then he noticed a long-haired woman sobbing openly in the downpour, no cover over her head. Her sobs wracked her body as though she might shatter from the weight of unseen grief. Kit wanted to shelter her under his umbrella, to shield her, but before he could move she dissolved into rainwater, leaving only puddles of tears at his feet.

One by one, children, elders, men and women of every age materialized in the storm, crying soundlessly before fading away into the torrent. How many had wept in this city, Kit wondered, for the heavens to unleash such a deluge of sorrowful tears?

Smog and poison fumes hung thick in the air, as constant as death. People toppled from rooftops like raindrops from the sky.

An old woman in a surgical mask sat coughing in the front row and hadn't stopped since Kit boarded. She vanished when he transferred to the second bus, the free ride funded by taxpayers. Passengers packed in like sardines, crammed into welfare they had to fight over.

A boy clung to his mother, crying over and over that he couldn't breathe. The mother's eyes darted past Kit, wary of a vocational student with a knife lodged in his neck, just as his rival from the back of the bus shoved through the other passengers—including Kit—to brawl near the terrified pair.

The boy was knocked to the floor, trampled under the boots of the raging youth as he turned his face to Kit in a desperate plea for help. His mother pushed forward, clawing her way to reach her son.

Then a gunshot rang out. Kit jolted violently as the mother collapsed over her child. Both lay still, and slowly their forms faded away—along with the uproar of the fighting students.

No one else had heard the gunfire. Only Kit. Every other passenger remained glued to their phones, smiling faintly into their little glowing rectangles.

Weary and drained, Kit boarded a shared minibus. The cramped vehicle wound its way through narrow alleys where young women in skintight outfits loitered under trees. Sedans and pickup trucks pulled up to the curb, deals struck quickly, business concluded right there.

The only inheritance they'd received from their parents since birth had been hawked away for next to nothing, bargained down further at the whim of buyers. Nights spent breaking their backs just to scrape together enough to survive another day, circling endlessly in this vile cycle. Kit was glad for those who managed to escape this street, yet disheartened to see others still trapped there, never leaving, even after they had no life left to sell. He dug up spare coins to pay the grumbling minibus driver, while the motorcycle taxi gang at the alley entrance eyed the green bills in his wallet like wolves. That narrow lane was the final stretch to his bed for the night. He could have walked another kilometer to save the fare, but the way was lined with beggars and the homeless. He could no longer tell who among them were living and who were dead, as they swarmed around him, palms out, begging for money—or for merit—of which he had neither to give.

To avoid that unbearable awkwardness, today he simply handed a green bill to one of the riders and hopped on without a word. The driver knew his destination well; lately, Kit had been using him often, his face growing wearier each time. The daily commute from Nong Chok to Ratchathewi at a price Kit could still afford was

no easy feat. It drained most of his strength, leaving him to waste his energy on the road more than on his actual job.

The motorcycle driver knew Kit's destination by now; lately, Kit had been riding with him often, his face growing more exhausted each time. The daily commute between Nong Chok and Ratchathewi at a price Kit could still afford was no easy matter. It drained most of his energy, leaving more of himself wasted on the road than on the job.

Just as Uncle Chanan from HR had warned: if Kit kept living like this, soon he'd fade away like the ghosts he saw along the way. People who didn't even realize they were dead, doomed to replay their deaths day after day in the same place, at the same time—like the boy on the bus, or the woman at the crosswalk.

Kit didn't want that to be him. He shoved his key into the lock and stumbled into his tiny room. The glowing clock by his bed read 10:30 p.m. Tomorrow he'd have to wake at 4 a.m., battle traffic, and push through the morning crowds of city phantoms, all to make it in by the 8 a.m. fingerprint scan.

He couldn't take it anymore. Dropping the bag of watermelon he'd carried from Ratchathewi, he collapsed fully clothed onto his bed, reeking of sweat, smog, and rain. He longed to turn on the air purifier, to fill his lungs with clean air, but remembered he hadn't had money for a new filter this month. The old one, just a few months in, had already flashed its warning light. His lungs must have been as clogged with PM 2.5 dust as that filter.

Kit drifted into exhausted sleep, the light still burning overhead, plunging into nightmares that returned night after night. A grin split wide before him, teeth blackened with tartar and gums oozing foul-smelling blood. "Why suffer here, child? Come back to Lampang with me," a raspy voice whispered, a withered hand beckoning him closer.

Kit jolted awake in terror, drenched in cold sweat. He clawed the nightmare from his head, knowing instantly what it meant. That ghost from home could only enter his mind when his body and spirit were completely worn down. It wanted him—had always wanted him. That was why he had fled Lampang in the first place.

He sprang from bed, stumbled to the mirror, turned on the tap, and splashed water over his face. He glanced left and right until he was sure it hadn't followed him here. He had cut ties with his family long ago, changed his number, blocked chats, blocked every trace on social media. There was no way it could know where he lived now. He couldn't let it prey on him again, not in his dreams, not in his weakest moments.

As he brushed his teeth, Kit thought hard. What he needed most now was a place to stay near work.

He needed to rent a room in Ratchathewi.

Five Gray Bills, Change Given

“Twenty thousand baht? Really, Sis?”

Kit asked again, and the middle-aged broker nodded eagerly. He felt oddly at ease with her, thanks to the chatty big-sister energy she radiated. Never mind that she was decked out in brand names from head to toe, while he wore nothing but clearance-bin fast fashion. She'd doused herself in a perfume typical of women her age, cloying but signaling status and sophistication. Still, it was better than the smell of smoke and bus rust Kit had carried with him from Nong Chok. Her too-much was still far more than his nothing-at-all, which she politely pretended not to notice.

“This is the going rate around here, sweetie. But look at this place—so spacious, so grand,” she sang, stretching out the words. “High ceilings, a view of Victory Monument, a closed-off kitchen with a vent, all new fixtures, brand-new furniture, a sixty-five-inch TV, fridge, washing machine—all included! And the landlord's throwing in free Wi-Fi too. You won't find another deal like this around here, darling.”

To Kit's eyes, it wasn't much larger than his old crash pad in Nong Chok. Just neater, more orderly, better decorated, and yes—the view was nicer. But was that really enough to make the price jump from a few thousand to twenty thousand? No. What made it expensive was the location. Ratchathewi was dead center in the city, with multiple train lines crisscrossing it, easy access everywhere, Siam's economic hub just minutes away on foot. Shopping malls everywhere, business opportunities at every corner.

If only Kit weren't just a lowly government clerk. Maybe he should try working in a mall or hotel instead—something to consider later. He'd come to view this condo first because it was just across the street from his office. He'd expected it to be pricey, but not this outrageous.

“Uh, do you have any cheaper rooms to recommend, sis?”

“Oh sis, this is the cheapest unit in the building. Since COVID, foreign buyers have snapped up almost everything. It's all that tax exemption policy. Rent prices around here have tripled or quadrupled.” The big sister explained with a cheerful smile, her designer brands no doubt funded by the boom.

“Well, there's one place, but I wouldn't recommend it. Too many stories. Why don't you check the alley behind that hotel? There might be some hostels. Could suit you better,” she added kindly.

Kit thanked the broker and trudged out of his dream condo. He had already researched online, but thought seeing the atmosphere in person might help him decide. It did—he instantly knew it was beyond his reach.

He wandered into the alley behind the hotel as she suggested. The luxury façade along the main road gleamed like heaven itself, fleets of supercars ferrying wealthy tourists from around the world. Kit had heard the cheapest room in that hotel cost the same as his entire month's salary. He could only imagine how rich those guests must be, to toss away that kind of money for just a few hours of sleep.

But the moment he stepped past the hotel into the alley, Kit understood why the broker had pointed him here. The same sky suddenly looked darker, heavier. The hairs on his neck bristled before he even saw it: squat buildings streaked with moss, facades cracked and peeling with rust stains running down their faces. Balconies sagged under laundry that would never see sunlight, blocked by the towers all around. A black hole in the heart of the city, a shelter for the poor who rose each day only to serve those who could buy pieces of their lives.

A young man with sunken eyes and weary skin shuffled past Kit on his way out. He wore the same bargain-bin fast fashion Kit did, only his was more yellowed, more tattered. Greasy sunscreen stains streaked the back of his collar, deodorant marks seeped under his arms.

And that smell—worse than any rot or corpse—musty, suffocating fabric clinging to his body. The man surely smelled it too, but he had no choice except to wear it. Just imagining him enduring that stench all day sent a chill down Kit's spine. Never. He would never let himself live like that. If even one shirt began to reek, he would haul the whole basket to the nearest coin laundry, scald it with the hottest water, blast it dry on high heat. He'd sacrifice his next meal if it meant affording the strongest fabric softener, the longest cycle, anything to erase that smell he feared more than anything.

And it wasn't just him. Everyone Kit passed in that alley carried the same musty odor. How could they stand it? Every balcony above sagged with sour clothes swaying in the air. He couldn't take it. He couldn't breathe. Yanking the surgical mask from his pocket—the same one he'd worn on the bus that morning—he strapped it over his face to block out the suffocating stench that saturated the alley.

No way. He couldn't live in this alley—it was too terrifying. Just then, he passed a boarding house with a sign reading Room Available. Holding his breath as he stepped past the overflowing garbage bins, Kit forced himself to ask the owner for the price.

"Twelve thousand baht? Really, Uncle?" Kit repeated in shock. What he wanted to add was, Twelve thousand for a stinking rat hole like this? But he was afraid the old man might kick him in the face.

"This is the cheapest room you'll find around here. You won't get this price anywhere else," the landlord said flatly.

"This is already the cheapest? And what does that price include?" Kit asked, hoping for some hidden perks.

"That's just for the room. Utilities not included. Internet's wired, but you'll need to pay six hundred baht a month for the password. No furniture either, but I can rent you some—five hundred each for a bed, wardrobe, TV, fridge. Whatever you want, I've got, but you'll pay extra." The landlord's repeated pay extra sent another shiver down Kit's spine.

"Any air purifier included?" Kit asked, though he already knew the answer.

"No. You'll have to buy your own."

"I can't, Uncle. I can't afford that. Can't you lower it just a little?"

"No discounts. If I cut the rent, how would I eat? Prices here are already high. A bowl of noodles barely big enough for an ant's piss is eighty baht. Ever since the malls and hotels came in, everything's gone up. Word is in a few years they'll buy up this whole block to build condos. My place is right in the middle, so I won't get as good a price if I sell. Better I keep it and save up for my retirement by the sea."

Kit was stunned. His attempt at bargaining had ended in a melodrama about an old man crushed by capitalism. Truth be told, Kit was a victim of capitalism too—just not as theatrically.

The landlord shouted after him in Teochew as Kit declined politely, words he couldn't understand but a tone and scowl that surely weren't blessings for his future.

What struck Kit most was the absence of any spirits. Normally he'd glimpse a tutelary god or two, but here, not even the local shrines had guardians. Despite the red soda offerings and incense wafting in the air, he saw nothing. No spirits, good or evil, dared set foot in this alley so choked with humanity. The musty stench alone could drive any ghost away. Kit hurried his pace, desperate to escape the place, when he collided with someone.

"Hey, watch where you're going! Don't you see—oh my, sweetheart, what happened? You're pale as a sheet."

It was the same broker from before. Kit really had come running out of that alley in terror.

"Big sis, I can't live in Ratchathewi. It's too expensive. I'll ask my boss to transfer me back to Nong Chok. I'm done here."

"What are you saying? Didn't you just tell me you spent four years on the exam? You finally got appointed, and now you want to go back? Do you think they'll give you your post if you quit?"

"I don't know. It's too expensive here. But I can't handle commuting back and forth every day either. If I can't get a placement, I'll just resign."

"Calm down. Okay, there's one room. But I wouldn't recommend it. Rent's only in the low thousands. Interested?"

The moment Kit heard low thousands, his ears perked. It was as if the broker had turned into an angel, swooping down to save him.

"Really, sis? It exists?"

"The owner's asking five gray bills with change. Plus, there's even a promotion—stay seven nights, get one year free."

"Huh? That sounds sketchy."

"Exactly. That's why I don't recommend it. I've heard stories..."

"It's fine, sis..." Kit cut her off. "...I don't care about anything else. As long as it's close to work, as long as I don't have to travel far, that's enough. That's all I need now." And he meant it. What could be worse than the life he already had?

To his surprise, the broker led him back into the same condo building, this time riding the elevator up to the 38th floor—twenty stories higher than the first unit she'd shown him. Surely a room this high up wouldn't be some ordinary studio.

"That's right. We're going to see a two-bedroom," she answered his suspicious glance.

"But sis, you swear it's really in the low thousands? You're not scamming me, right?" Kit pressed.

"Five gray bills with change, I promise. No tricks about the price. But about other things... I can't say." Her smile held something back.

The elevator slowed and stopped at the 38th floor. She strode ahead with practiced ease as she searched through her folder for the keycard. Soon, the two of them stood outside unit 3807.

Kit looked around the hallway, at the decorative plants, the fine fixtures—it was clearly a floor for the wealthy. Hard to believe a place like this could have a room renting for only a few thousand baht. There had to be a catch. He braced himself, senses sharpened. If it was what he suspected, it would be suffocating enough if there were just one spirit inside. But if there were many, if he opened the door to a whole crowd waiting to welcome him into their ghostly family reunion—that would be unbearable. He should've researched the unit first. Who would've thought a luxury condo like this would have a room going for only a few thousand?

"Welcome. If you like it or not, just let me know, sweetie. I'll wait outside," the broker said. There it was—proof she knew more than she was letting on. This room definitely had ghosts. But what kind? Kit needed to see for himself. He took the keycard, tapped it to the reader, and slowly pushed the door open.

Nothing. No one inside. He felt nothing at all, only the sight of an empty room.

But what a room. The living space alone was twice the size of the first unit he'd seen. The open Western-style kitchen gleamed, fully stocked with appliances, a stove and range hood still sparkling new.

And there—a double-door fridge. Kit had never owned one in his life. A bar counter, dining table with six chairs, a leather sofa that looked impossibly soft, and a sixty-five-inch wall-mounted TV. Oh, watching a BL series on that screen—he'd see every bead of sweat, every detail of the actors' bodies in high definition. The floors weren't just laminate; they were some expensive hardwood, firm beneath his shoes like a life that no longer needed any support. Facing north, the room offered a clear view of Victory Monument, unblocked by anything. Sheer curtains filtered the sunlight to a perfect glow, warm but not harsh. The air was cool even without the AC—but then he saw it: central air, embedded in the ceiling, sleek and luxurious.

Only now did Kit notice that most of the furniture was built-in, nothing jutting out, every color, style, and angle in harmony as though woven together seamlessly. The tiles, the wallpaper, the light fixtures—it all matched

so perfectly it felt like the work of a nationally renowned interior designer. And this place was really going for five gray bills with change?

“Well? Do you like it?”

Kit startled. It wasn't the broker's voice behind him but something older, weightier, commanding—and accompanied by a heady, cloying scent. Jasmine, ylang-ylang, marigold, and... incense smoke.

He turned to see an elderly woman, draped in a silk sinh, carrying an enormous Hermès bag, a Patek Philippe gleaming on her left wrist, diamond-studded bangles on her right. Light shimmered so fiercely off her jewelry that Kit had to squint. And around her neck—no, not a necklace, a golden chain coiled like a serpent.

The foundation on her face might have been a shade too light, making her features stand out almost garishly in the room, yet Kit couldn't deny the aura of wealth she radiated. It made him feel safe. Not a ghost, he told himself. Ghosts didn't haul jewels and precious metals into the afterlife. Only the living did that, all the way to the grave.

“Um... Auntie Oonjai, how did you get in?” the broker hurried to fuss over her with excessive deference.

“Oh, you must've been on your phone when I came in, dear. Don't be alarmed.”

If Kit hadn't thought about the explanation too hard, he might have believed she'd slipped in like a phantom.

“So, young man... oh no, young lady. Forgive me, darling, the terms are so confusing these days. My generation's still catching up,” Auntie Oonjai chuckled warmly. And in that laugh, Kit felt a flicker of kinship, as though she were some benevolent elder of his own.

“Call me whatever you like,” Kit replied. “Even I get confused about myself sometimes. I think of myself as a woman, but I like my male body, too. I've no plans to transition—mostly because I can't afford it. Men's clothes are cheaper anyway, saves me a bundle.”

Kit didn't know why, but in front of Auntie Oonjai, everything spilled from his mouth unchecked—thoughts he had never voiced to anyone, not even to himself. Why? Why did he feel so at ease confessing to her? Something about this auntie was stranger, deeper than what he could see.

“Well now, you'd be handsome as a man, darling, and adorable as a woman. Just look at that skin...” Auntie Oonjai's fingers, jeweled rings glittering on every one, clasped Kit's arm and lifted it close for inspection. He was startled at how easily he allowed her touch. “...Back in my day we called this milk-white skin. A pretty face like yours—surely you've had your share of lovers?”

“I did have one, back in Lampang. A biker boy,” Kit blurted out. Had he really just told Auntie Oonjai about an ex? Why? Was it the floral perfume clinging to her? Or the sheen where she gripped his arm? That was it—she had rubbed some kind of oil into his skin. He knew it, and yet... he didn't resist. He didn't feel angry at all. If anything, he felt calm. The faint trace of incense reached him again, and all will to resist dissolved.

“Let’s get back to the room. Do you like it, then?” Auntie Oonjai asked, her voice reverberating oddly, as if she spoke twice at once.

“Yes. Very much,” Kit’s mouth answered on its own. He hadn’t even thought about it.

“Good. And I’ve got a special offer just for you. Stay seven nights, and you’ll get a year free. Are you interested?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he replied. Ma’am? Kit never used that word unless he was at work.

“Perfect, then let’s sign the contract. The promotion is one year free, provided you stay seven nights. Leave before that and you lose your deposit and security fee. Oh, and I forgot—the deposit is three months’ rent, plus a ten-thousand-baht security fee. Altogether, a nice round twenty-five thousand. Shall I give you the QR code to scan?” Auntie Oonjai rattled off details Kit barely heard. All he could think was how pleasant her voice sounded.

“Yes, scan it now,” he replied.

The auntie turned to the broker, who held up a tablet displaying the code. Kit raised his phone, opened his banking app, and transferred twenty-five thousand baht without hesitation. He didn’t even register that his account balance had just dropped to mere hundreds.

“Oh, and just sign here and it’s all official,” Auntie Oonjai said, passing him a pen.

Kit set pen to paper obediently. Floral fragrance filled the room, his heart hammering wildly. As the nib scrawled the final stroke of his name, the room shuddered. It was as if he were plunging down a roller coaster, his gut flipping with a violent drop. A gust of wind swept the floral perfume away, leaving only the faint curl of incense. Then the room stilled, colors sharpening back into place.

He looked up. Auntie Oonjai no longer seemed so kind; her face was stern, eyes sharp, lips curled with cunning. The wrong shade of foundation stood out harshly against her skin.

What had he done? What had she made him do?

“Remember, if you leave before seven nights, no refund of deposit or security fee. Don’t think you can get away with it—there are cameras everywhere,” she warned. Her voice, once soothing, now grated harshly.

And suddenly it struck him: she’d never introduced herself. He’d simply assumed she was the owner. And now he’d signed the lease. Foolish Kit—snared by Auntie Oonjai’s trap. And that bizarre promotion... The room wasn’t haunted at all. So why was she so certain he wouldn’t last seven nights? Would she hire thieves to rob him? Or worse, send maniacs to assault him? God, what a wicked woman. Could he still cancel the contract? Twenty-five thousand gone—the entirety of his savings and his first month’s salary. What had he done?

Auntie turned and walked toward the door. After a few steps, she glanced back at Kit again, the acrid scent of incense wafting from her body until it stung his nose.

“Oh, I almost forgot. The rent is five gray bills with change. You already paid three months in advance. Hold out your hand—I’ll give you the change.”

Auntie Oonjai and the broker left without another word. The heavy incense smell faded with them, leaving Kit staring at three baht coins resting in his palm, from late afternoon until the sun dipped beneath the horizon.

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Ghosts Are Their Own, the Ant Spirits Dwell in Meng

“So Auntie Oonjai drugged you, huh?”

That was the observation of the half-bodied ghost girl, who later told Kit her name was Angoon, after he recounted how he ended up in this room.

Over time, Kit and Angoon had grown closer. Where she once called him ‘Mom,’ she now addressed him as ‘Sis.’ She taught him how to set up an account on a web novel app. Kit wrote stories about the half-bodied ghost from Angoon’s perspective, attaching photos of the condo as illustration. With the legend of the condo ghost already a viral sensation, the added details and authentic images sent readership soaring. Tens of thousands of views per chapter within days. Popular ghost story shows had even called asking him to phone in, but Kit wasn’t confident in his own voice yet.

Still, he was now earning enough to buy premium durians and fine imported liquor as offerings for Angoon, never failing to set them out with incense for her.

“But you’ve been in this room for over a month already, so you’ll be living free for a year. Fabulous!” Angoon clapped her hands, stuffing the ghost of a ripe durian into her mouth.

“Good. Time to start saving again. My last bit of savings went into the deposit. At least I’ve earned something from writing about you. Never thought people would love your story this much.”

“I didn’t know I was famous. Too bad I don’t show up in photos—otherwise I’d be posting dance clips on TikTok by now. Bet I’d have millions of followers.” Angoon pouted.

“Sure, superstar. Maybe ASMR food videos would suit you better, the way you never stop eating. Ate yourself right off a balcony, didn’t you?”

“Oh, please. We’re in the food capital of the world, with something delicious on every corner. Of course I’ll take advantage. Anyway, can you order Michelin-star pork leg rice for me tomorrow? I saw it online and now I’m craving it. Light the incense for me, then you can eat too. Don’t act so shocked—you always eat with me.”

“Yeah, and now my paycheck’s gone. Every coin I made from your story went to buying you durian and liquor.”

“Then hurry up and write a new one. You still haven’t written about the suspension bridge ghost you told me about. With all the spirits you’ve seen, you’ve got plenty of material. Write one of them.”

“Seeing them isn’t enough. I don’t know their lives well enough to tell their stories.”

“Then write about the person whose life you know best.”

“And who’s that supposed to be?”

“You, of course. You’ve never told me why you can see ghosts—or how you can kick them in the mouth. Title it The Man Who Kicks Ghosts in the Face and people will click till the site crashes.”

Kit had to admit Angoon's idea was pretty good. If any story deserved to be locked behind a paywall, it was his own. His life could rake in coins almost as well as the half-bodied ghost's. So he let Angoon enjoy her durians and liquor while he turned to his old, battered laptop, a twinge of envy hitting him that sugar and alcohol no longer affected her body—because she didn't have one anymore.

Shaking off the thought, Kit focused. If this piece sold well, he could finally afford a new computer. He had Auntie Oonjai to thank for the year of free lodging. She probably thought he'd bolt like all the other tenants. Wrong target, Auntie. She didn't know he was descended from one of Lampang's oldest ghost-dancing lineages. Spirits and Kit went way back—he'd even corralled wandering ghosts to play make-believe as a kid. Drawing on those memories, he began typing steadily, one keystroke at a time.

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The Man Who Kicks Ghosts

He had been tied to ghosts since the day he was born.

His mother told him that the year he was born was colder than any other. He came into the world on the winter solstice, in the middle of a great ghost-dance festival where every spirit in Lampang was mounted on their chosen mediums. His wails as a newborn drew the attention of every ghost present. They crowded around the bamboo cot where his mother gave birth. He slipped into the world effortlessly, two weeks before the doctor's due date, as if summoned.

That day, his mother was there as a horse for Chao Chanta, the Healer, one of the most revered spirits among the dead and the living alike. She told him that Chanta was there but refused to mount her, knowing he was about to be born. Chanta only descended once other Meng spirits lost control and lunged, ready to lap up blood, devour the placenta, and tear the entrails from the infant's body. Chanta shielded the newborn's life, a debt of protection Kit would forever owe.

From that moment, he was marked to inherit the role of horse for the family.

His family had always known they were unlike others. They were a bloodline of mediums, serving noble spirits since the era when Lampang was ruled by Mon lords. His grandmother told him so. They were an old servant lineage, once bound to lords as numerous as their slaves, but their true patrons were nameless in history, known only through possession, through the times they chose to mount their horses.

His grandmother had been the horse of Chao Usa, the great lord of all spirits in Lampang. His mother carried Chao Chanta, Usa's younger sister, who healed all illness, of spirit and of flesh, through dance. The lineage of spirit-riders was passed only through the women of the family. His grandmother had wanted to pass Usa to his older sister, but she had been too wild, too unfeminine. And it wasn't only that—Usa had spoken through his grandmother to say the sister was unfit. Too ordinary. Both Usa and Chanta had already marked him instead, declaring in one voice that he had been born with a gift.

He knew he was different from the moment he could remember.

His earliest memory was lying in a cradle, and he still wondered how he could recall it so clearly, so far back. Everything around him felt familiar, as if he had lived it all before in some previous life. He wasn't sure about that, but he was certain that his mother and grandmother were speaking somewhere out of sight. His eyes, his mouth, his tiny body were not yet fully formed. He was frustrated that he couldn't lift his head or sit up as he wished. His babyish gurgling was too annoying to gather into words. His blurry eyes could only catch fleeting, colorless shadows swaying with the motion of the cradle. His mother must have tied a rope and was rocking it from somewhere else.

He saw two adult figures leaning over the cradle. They were hazy, so much so that he wasn't sure if they were real or his imagination. But they appeared in color—he was sure of it. While his half-formed vision only captured the black-and-white shadows of everything else, these two glowed with hues that seized his attention completely.

One figure shone gold, radiant like the first light of dawn. The other gleamed white, soft as the full moon. He somehow knew they were teasing him affectionately. Then the golden one pointed at him and said, "This one's mine."

It took him a long time to learn how to tell the dead from the living.

In those early years, the boundary between life and death was so faint it hardly seemed to exist at all. Death was no different from his mother leaving for the market in the morning—those who had died would simply return, just as he had returned. The living, like his mother and grandmother, were simply those who hadn't left yet. At least, not yet.

As for ghosts? They were just people who should have gone to market but stubbornly lingered at home instead. Spirit-lords were only another kind of stubborn soul—not so different from him, his mother, or his grandmother.

He didn't realize death was frightening for other people until he was old enough to read and write. Before that, he would go play make-believe shops with the ancestor ghosts in the shrine next door. They adored him. His mother and grandmother weren't surprised; they too had long known of the ancestors' presence. What shocked them was the day he accidentally kicked a wandering ghost in the mouth—one that had crawled up begging for offerings outside their home. That single kick terrified everyone, living and dead alike. No one had ever touched a ghost before. No one had ever harmed one. Now, everyone feared him. Every ghost feared him.

He was raised to become a pu-mia, a spirit medium.

It was the rule and custom of his family that possession by spirit-lords passed only to daughters or granddaughters. Yet Chao Usa had marked him since birth, visiting often though his grandmother never allowed possession. No one in the house ever saw Usa, except him. Usa was terrifying—not because she was a ghost, but because she was Usa. A high-born spirit, volatile and willful. Even in life, she had been the sort of person he would have avoided at all costs. Her unblinking stare pressed down on him until he squirmed. As a child, he had sobbed when she scolded him for no reason—for eating watermelon, for ducking under laundry lines, for nibbling food at funerals.

The more he feared Usa, the more his mother and grandmother tried to placate her. She didn't want her horse to be male, so they dressed him as a girl at home, wig and all. Only at school did he wear the boys' uniform. Two worlds, two rules, two genders—enough to tangle his young mind. He liked the dresses, the makeup, the pretty hair. But he also liked school, studying alongside his friends. Some teased him as a pu-mia, a ghost-horse

boy, but wasn't that what his mother, his grandmother, and Chao Usa all wanted him to be? All except the one person he cared about most. That person wanted him to be a boy.

The more he feared Usa, the more his mother and grandmother tried to appease her in every way they could. Usa didn't want her horse to be male, so his grandmother and mother dressed him as a girl at home, wig and all. Only at school did he change back into the boys' uniform. Two worlds, two rules, two genders—it was enough to confuse him deeply. He loved putting on dresses, makeup, and hairstyles, but he also loved going to school, studying alongside his friends. Even though many of them mocked him as a ghost-horse boy, wasn't this exactly what his mother, his grandmother, and Usa wanted him to be? Everyone wanted it—except the one person he cared about most, who wanted him to be a boy.

He found his first love.

Tom was the only friend at school who always stood up for him when others teased him for being a ghost-horse boy. From primary school all the way into high school, their bond grew closer when their grades placed them in the same class. They sat side by side, worked on projects together, ate together, rested their heads on each other's laps to memorize the periodic table, and strolled the walking street at Kad Kong Ta. Kit found himself falling for Tom more and more.

He was sure Tom felt the same. Tom offered him rides home on his motorbike, Kit's arms wrapped tight around his waist. Each evening, Kit saw the troubled look in Tom's eyes when he dropped him off at home. Tom knew what Kit went through at school, and that school was only rehearsal for the larger society ahead. He worried for Kit, didn't want him bullied at home the same way. Tom hated how Kit's mother and grandmother forced him into girl's clothes.

Tom even offered to talk to them himself if Kit didn't want to keep dressing as a pu-mia. He didn't want Kit in women's clothes. He didn't want Kit to be Usa's horse. He didn't even want Kit going home. So Tom pulled him into the company of the local bikers. Kit clung to Tom's back as they roared through the night, from dusk until dawn, sometimes not going home at all through the whole school break.

His arms clutching Tom's waist, his chest pressed against Tom's strong back, the wind carrying Tom's faint sweat and musk, intoxicating his senses. The hazy images of ghosts he had seen since childhood no longer troubled him when he was with Tom. The crushing weight of Usa and his family's expectations slipped away with his discarded clothes. He lay himself bare for Tom, letting Tom pour his desire into him—by the roadside, in the grass, against milestones. That night, he tasted what it meant to be human. That night, he tasted manhood for the first time.

He didn't want to be a horse serving the spirits anymore.

That night with Tom changed his mind. He began to refuse dressing as a girl at home, cut his hair down to a close crop, and joined Tom in doing all the things ordinary boys did. They played soccer, tore down the

streets on motorbikes, sneaked sips of liquor, even got tattoos. Tom cheered him on when he got his first—just a small design above his knee. It was only the beginning. Gradually, his legs filled with ink. Tom told him that in the old days, every man in Lanna bore tattoos.

That night with Tom changed everything. He began to refuse dressing as a girl at home, shaved his head down close, and did all the things ordinary boys did with Tom—playing soccer, racing motorbikes, sneaking liquor, even covering his legs with tattoos. Tom cheered him on for his first, a small design just above the knee. It was a beginning. Gradually, he inked his way up until his legs were full of tattoos. Tom said every Lanna man once bore such marks.

Tom believed that once Kit's thighs were covered with every design, the spirit-lords would lose their hold over him. He would no longer be a horse bound to serve them. Kit agreed. The more he made himself into a man, the less he saw of Usa and the other spirits. They faded with every step.

But was that truly what he wanted? Each time he looked in the mirror, a stranger stared back. He stopped daring to look. Tom bolstered him with touches, with embraces, with joining their bodies together—yet even then, even with Tom inside him, Kit felt the divide. He no longer knew how to name himself. Woman, man, ghost-horse, gay, kathoey, or simply wife—but never husband. His confusion was complete.

He was forced down by the spirits.

His gift had vanished, his masculinity etched deeper with every tattoo. He thought he had escaped Usa forever. He no longer saw her. She no longer intruded on his life. Nor did any other ghost. His mother went along with all his choices. Only his grandmother seethed with fury.

Grandmother warned that Chao Usa would take his life if he refused to accept the tray and become her horse. He understood her well enough. She stood to lose the most from both her grandchildren turning fully male. His sister had already saved up enough money to leave for Bangkok, where she had her breasts removed. She even had a girlfriend. Grandmother nearly fainted when she announced at the family dinner that she would transition. She would become a trans man.

Grandmother worried that without someone to inherit, Usa would never allow her to die. She was ninety-one years old, but still walked with the vigor of someone in her sixties. Perhaps that was because Usa still hadn't found her successor. Even Usa must have known it wasn't right to prolong grandmother's life any further, and so she came to torment his body instead.

Suddenly, he was stricken with strange symptoms—his chest burned as if a fire smoldered inside, sweat poured down his body, tremors shook him until he convulsed, leaving him unable to live normally. His mother summoned Chao Chanta to dance a cure several times, but Chanta refused to mount him. So his grandmother and mother took him to Lampang Hospital. Every doctor there was baffled. His lab tests and x-rays all came back normal. Even the psychiatrists prescribed him countless medications, yet still he did not recover.

Grandmother warned him that if he didn't accept the tray, Usa would surely take his life. He grew furious, shouting challenges to fight Usa one on one, echoing through the hospital halls. But he had already lost his ability to see spirits; he could do nothing against Usa or any ghost. All he could do was lie there, breathing shallowly, waiting for death to come.

He became a monk to escape the ghosts.

An ailing elder monk in the ward told him the best way to flee spirits was to flee into the temple. If the power of medicine could not heal him, then he must rely on the power of the Triple Gem. And indeed, the moment the car crossed the monastery gates, the burning pain in his body subsided. By the time his head was shaved and his body wrapped in saffron, he felt whole again. Perhaps this was the answer.

In those days, he could not deny he longed to remain in robes forever. The deep calm he felt was unlike anything else. No ghosts, no Usa, no restless feelings about Tom or anyone else. Only the taste of Dharma filled him. The abbot forbade him from leaving the monastery grounds; no one knew what might happen if he stepped outside. But grandmother and mother were still allowed to bring offerings and visit.

His mother seemed to accept his decision, but grandmother continued urging him to disrobe and accept Usa's tray. She tried to tempt him with promises of honor, of wealth and followers. Even a novice, even a monk, she said, could not gain as much as serving a spirit-lord. But he refused her again and again. He had had enough—enough chaos, enough torment. At last he had found true peace. Eventually, grandmother and mother stopped visiting the temple altogether.

He believed the monastery was safe.

Because he was confined to the monastery grounds under the abbot's orders, he was excluded from every alms round or ceremony villagers invited the monks to. That left him the sole caretaker whenever the others were away. During one rains retreat, a young monk from Bangkok came to stay. Unfamiliar with Lampang, unable to understand the dialect, the elder assigned him as caretaker. The young monk was pleasant to look at, easy to talk with, and soon they grew close.

One night, when the entire monastery had been invited to preach at a funeral, only the two of them remained behind. Had they both been laymen, he might have consented to whatever the monk wished to do with his body. Mutual desire might have led to shared pleasure. But they were in the monastery, wrapped in saffron. The robe was torn from him piece by piece as the monk forced himself inside against his will. Agony tore through him. This monk who mounted and violated him was no different from the spirit-lords he had tried to escape. Worse, his own cries for help and the monk's moans of pleasure drew the others back early from the funeral, where they witnessed the entire vile act. The scandal spread across Lampang like wildfire.

He became the talk of the town.

The monk defended himself, claiming he had been seduced. Unbelievably, everyone chose to believe him. Perhaps it was his looks, perhaps it was Kit's own reputation, the lingering memory of how he had once painted his face and adorned himself as a ghost-horse bride. In every villager's mind, it seemed obvious. He was the lustful pu-mia who had enticed an innocent young monk into sin.

The abbot forced both him and the young monk to disrobe before the scandal could spread further. The abbot told him he could remain in the monastery as a temple boy, but he was too ashamed to face anyone there—especially the one who had just violated him. Without saffron or precepts to shield him, the lecher would surely never stop.

He fled the monastery without telling a soul. The moment he crossed beyond the temple's boundary, heat flared inside him, fever returning, muscles twitching again. He recited the Triple Gem to suppress it, and though the symptoms eased, they did not vanish. That was when he saw Tom and his gang of bikers drinking whiskey with raw meat salad by a shack outside the monastery. Tom's eyes held contempt and disappointment. He wanted to call out, to explain himself, but the rest of the gang only laughed at him, jeering like he was some vile clown. His heart broke when Tom joined their laughter.

He had to run far away.

He thought of going home, but the very thought of what awaited there made him abandon the idea. With each step closer to home, the fire in his chest grew until he staggered back. Usa must have already known he had left the robes. His grandmother must already have prepared the banana leaves for the acceptance ritual. He thought of his mother, but what help could she offer, bound as she was under Usa's sister, Chanta. There was no choice left. He had to distance himself from home as far as possible. His feet carried him to the bus station, where he used the share of offerings the abbot had given him upon disrobing to buy a second-class ticket on the next departing bus.

Unbelievably, the farther the bus carried him from Lampang, the more the burning fever subsided, until by the time he reached Mo Chit, he felt completely free of the ancestral spirits from his hometown. The spirits of Lampang could no longer follow him.

Yet his ability had returned. He could once again see and touch ghosts, just as before. But here in Bangkok, a city teeming with countless restless souls, those millions of spirits became a strange kind of shield, protecting him from the terrifying spirit Usa. The high spirits would never lower themselves to mingle with the common dead that crowded the city. And so, he finally had the chance to start a new life—a life that belonged to him, at least for now.

...

"Whoa, I thought it would be scary, but it turned out all dramatic. You didn't say you were born into a witch's clan," Angoon reacted after finishing the story.

"Witch? No, mid-spirit," Kit corrected.

"So this is all real?"

"Who cares if it's fiction or not? As long as it earns coins on the platform, that's enough. Was it fun?"

"More fun than my story."

"Fun as in...?"

While Kit and Angoon were chatting away, a white envelope slid under the door.

Huh? Kit, what's that? Angoon pointed at the mysterious envelope.

Kit picked it up and tore it open. Just one glance at the letterhead and the numbers printed at the bottom of the page, and he already knew what it was. His blood boiled. He crushed the vile paper in his hand and hurled it to the floor, shouting furiously, his voice echoing through the room so loud that even Angoon flinched.

That damn Aunt Oonjai! Didn't she say it was free for a year?!

Amarin Corporations PCL for review only

Not Free, Not Owed, Not Escaping, Not Paying

“Didn’t you say it was free for a year, sis?”

Kit asked the real estate agent over a video call, surprised that he was still able to stay in the room.

“Honestly, I shouldn’t have recommended that room to you,” the agent replied, touching up her makeup as she spoke.

“But you were the one who brought me here, weren’t you? You took the commission, so you should share the responsibility too.” Kit’s voice rose sharply with anger, though he tried to calm himself, seeing from her expression that his sister already felt quite guilty.

“The thing about Khun Oonjai’s room is... I didn’t get any commission or cut from it at all, dear. The only reason I helped her sell it was because...” The broker sister’s eyes darted nervously around the room, still clutching her eyeliner mid-stroke.

“Because of what?” Kit pressed. He had already guessed that Auntie Oonjai must be hiding something.

No, better not say. Let’s just put it this way: I once foolishly had my fortune read by Khun Oonjai, and she kept my fate chart. Whatever she commands, I have to obey. If I don’t, well... let’s just say things won’t end well. The agent’s eyes darted nervously, a flicker of terror visible even under her bright red eyeliner. She glanced around at the empty air as though something unseen might strike her from behind. Krit understood instantly.

Oh my, then you must’ve already run into the half-bodied student ghost, the same one the last tenant saw. And you’re not scared? I read about her on that paywalled blog. Terrifying stuff! How can you be okay with that? The agent rubbed her arms as if shivering from goosebumps, her performance a little too dramatic to be real. Still, Krit felt a tiny surge of pride knowing she’d read his blog. But that wasn’t the point.

“I’m fine with her, like, I’m not really scared of ghosts...” Kit mumbled, but quickly got back to the point. “...but what I’m not okay with is the promotion you and Auntie Oonjai told me about. Didn’t you say if I stayed more than seven nights, I’d get to live here for a year free? So why is there a rent bill sent to my room?” Kit’s voice rose again with anger, while the agent on the screen looked thoughtful.

“Honestly, neither I nor Auntie Oonjai ever thought anyone could last more than seven nights in that room. Most people run away on the very first night. If they’re a little tougher—or maybe just clueless—they might last two or three. But no one’s ever made it to seven nights. You’re the first one.”

“So that means...” Kit began piecing things together.

“That’s right, sweetie. Auntie Oonjai knows exactly how haunted the half-bodied ghost on the balcony is. That’s why she put out this cheap rent promotion—to lure anyone into signing the lease. The whole point was to forfeit the deposit—25,000 baht—when tenants fail to last the full seven nights. You know how expensive apartments in that area are. Two hundred thousand baht a month, at least, for a room like yours—some even go

for four or five hundred thousand. Auntie Oonjai is... well... a businesswoman. Do the math. If every tenant bails before seven nights, how much do you think she makes per month on this one room?" The agent explained, all while carefully applying false eyelashes.

Kit did the math. One month had roughly four weeks. Seven days per 25,000 baht meant in four weeks, that added up to...

"100,000 baht!!!!!!!" Kit screamed at the top of his lungs, so loud that Ghost Angoon's head nearly popped off her shoulders. His blood boiled at the thought of that conniving old hag making a fortune out of ghosts—and out of poor people like him—through such a scheme.

"That's the bare minimum, sweetie. Think about it. If she manages to rent that room out every single day, and no one lasts past the first night, how much would Auntie Oonjai be raking in per month?" The agent brushed blush onto her cheeks, bright as a monkey's ass.

Ghost Angoon punched numbers into a calculator and held it up for Kit to see: 30 times 25,000.

"750,000!!!!!"

"775,000. If that month had 31 days and ten new tenants, that's how much she'd rake in. I was surprised last month—after I closed your contract, the agent chat went quiet. No new listings for Room 3807. I thought maybe Tua-Toy the rival agent snatched all the clients for herself. Never did I imagine you'd last this long. Aunt Oonjai must be furious. That room makes her a fortune."

Kit, not Aunt Oonjai, was the one who should be furious. That bloodsucking hag profited off bleeding people like him dry. He didn't even want to think how many tenants before him had fled with 25,000 baht drained from their accounts. No matter how you looked at it, that amount was obscene for a single night.

That kind of money could buy a ticket abroad. Or a premium facelift package. Or, for some people, it might be their lifeline—kids' tuition, parents' medical bills, or clearing a crushing student loan to finally breathe free. The desperate struggles of many reduced to a neat monthly profit margin for one woman.

Aunt Oonjai. That merciless leech. She was about to meet her match—Kit.

"My advice? Don't try locking horns with Aunt Oonjai. She's got money and influence in this city. If it's in court, she's got top lawyers. If it's outside of court, she's got..." The agent's voice faltered, just like before. "Forget it. I shouldn't say. Anyway—what's the bill say you owe?" She asked while carefully lining her lips with rouge.

"Five thousand. Plus two thousand for utilities. But we had a deal. I'm supposed to live here rent-free for a year, aren't I?" Kit's anger hadn't cooled one bit.

"Eh, it was never free in the first place, my dear. Didn't you read the contract? Let me send it to you again."

The agent forwarded the file, and Kit opened it to see his full name and signature boldly printed in the corner of the paper.

He didn't even remember signing with his full legal name. Normally, he only used a stylized signature crafted by a fortune-teller. That might have been one reason to argue against Aunt Oonjai. He zoomed in on the contract clause by clause, looking for a loophole, but no matter how many times he read it, there was nothing to hold against her.

Not a single line mentioned that he could stay free for one year. The contract was far more airtight than he had expected, leaving no room to maneuver. It was clear: he had to pay rent if he didn't want to be kicked out. Everything looked correct, complete, and legally fair. But in the reality of being tricked, it was anything but fair. Kit felt stupid for falling for it, and that only fueled his anger.

"But she said it herself, didn't she? That I could stay for a year if I lasted seven days. You were there too. You can testify for me, right?" Kit pressed, trying to cling to any scrap of defense.

Ugh, no way. If I had to pick a side, I wouldn't go against Auntie Oonjai. She's one terrifying woman, in every sense of the word... Look, sweetie, zoom in on the tiny letters in the bottom left corner of the page and read them out loud for me, the agent said with an annoyed tone.

Krit squinted at the lower left corner of the paper. At first glance, the faint line there looked like nothing more than a stray mark, something even the most careful eye would dismiss. Following the agent's instructions, he pinched the screen to zoom in. That single line slowly revealed itself as text in a font smaller than an ant's footprint. He read it aloud for himself, for Angoon, and for the agent on the call.

"Condition of one-year rent-free residency applies for advertising purposes only."

The room fell into stunned silence after Krit finished reading. Angoon's jaw literally dropped, her ghostly lower jawbone clattering onto the floor.

"That's what I was trying to tell you."

"No way. I'll sue—the Consumer Protection Office, the Department of Internal Trade, every damn government agency I can find!" Krit shouted.

"Do you even have money to hire a lawyer, sweetheart? Let's be real—you signed the contract yourself. Or you could just move out." The agent's voice was flat as she dabbed glitter onto the corner of her eye.

"I'm not moving out. If I move out, what the hell am I supposed to eat? Where am I supposed to live? I'm not going anywhere. I'm not paying. I'm not running. I'm not budging. Got a problem with that?" Krit snapped back, while Angoon pumped her fist in the air as if to cheer him on.

"My advice? Just pay her and end it. Seven or eight thousand, that's all. But honestly? Seven hundred thousand or seven thousand, Auntie Oonjai won't let you keep renting at that price forever. Something's off. I'm telling you..." The agent darted her eyes around nervously again.

"What do you mean? Is she going to send people to kick me out? I won't let her. I've got no money left anyway," Krit muttered, piecing it together. If he were in Auntie Oonjai's shoes, he wouldn't settle for pocket

change either. The simplest option would be to kick him out. Or worse—he didn't even want to imagine. He had seen enough mafia dramas and gangster series to know how bad it could get. Still, in real life, surely no one could be that ruthless... right? At least, not within the moral compass of ordinary people.

But one must not forget that someone like Aunt Oonjai was not an ordinary person like Prakrit. The framework of morality weakened in the face of hundreds of thousands of baht. Was Prakrit's life worth so little in Aunt Oonjai's eyes? His yearly income couldn't even compare to a fraction of a single month's rent she used to earn.

"Darling, if Aunt Oonjai sends men or thugs after you like any normal landlord, that would be the best-case scenario..." the agent's voice faltered, dropping to a near whisper.

"Don't tell me you mean..."

"That's right. Aunt Oonjai is not ordinary like us. I don't just mean she's rich or influential. She has many followers she keeps around specifically for things like this. She won't keep you around. I'm warning you—get out of that room as fast as you can. If you don't want to—"

At that very moment, Prakrit saw a black hand emerge from nowhere and grip the agent's throat out of thin air.

She flailed, her gel-painted nails scratching desperately at the hand to pry it loose. Yet it was clear she couldn't see what was happening to her neck—Prakit could see it all through the screen, but she could not. Her face darkened, turning an ashen shade beneath the thick layers of makeup.

It all happened too fast. Prakrit didn't even manage to shout out in time. The gel-painted hands made one last desperate swipe, knocking cosmetics and the phone across the table. The screen toppled over with a heavy crash. Then, from behind the blackout screen, Prakrit and Angoon heard the agent's final, piercing scream.

At the very least, that hand must have released her throat so the agent could breathe and scream again. But then something else picked up the phone. It revealed a bloodshot, pus-filled eye bulging from charred, blackened flesh. The eye locked onto Prakrit through the screen, glaring as if it wanted to devour him alive. And then the video call was cut off.

Prakit and the ghost Angoon were left staring, shaken and uncertain.

Had any emergency service gotten to the agent in time?

Migrant Worker Burned Alive in Factory

- Prakit:** Let me start like this: I was evicted by a ghost that the landlady kept in the condo.
- Host:** Huh? What do you mean? Are you saying the landlady sent a ghost to drive you out?
- Prakit:** Yes. It was terrifying. Even now, just talking about it gives me chills. I never thought I'd go through something like that. I'm lucky I made it out alive.
- Host:** Wow. I think our audience really wants to know more. Could you tell us what happened?
- Prakit:** It all began about two months ago. I had to move into the city center for work, so I needed a new place nearby. I ended up signing a lease for a condo that was within walking distance of my job. At first, I was surprised the rent was cheaper than similar places in the same location, but I didn't think too much about it. The price fit my budget, so I signed the contract with this older woman—the landlady.
- Host:** This landlady, the one you mentioned, was the owner of the condo, right? From the very first meeting, did you feel like something about her was... unusual?
- Prakit:** Well, how do I even begin? First of all, the auntie used the wrong foundation shade. Haha.
- Host:** Oh! Then let's just call her Auntie Wrong Foundation, shall we? Hahaha!
- Prakit:** Sure, because her foundation really stood out, like you could spot it from across the street. But that wasn't the real issue. The real issue was that she offered me a promotion: stay for free for one year if I managed to spend seven nights in the room. At first, I thought it was strange, but during the COVID period many condos had weird deals like "stay free" promotions. I assumed it was just a marketing gimmick in the rental business. So, I signed the contract with Auntie Wrong Foundation. But then... I really encountered something. I lived in a room haunted by the ghost of a female student torn in half, who came to me every single night.
- Host:** Oh! That's right, isn't it? You're the guy who wrote that famous blog post. No wonder it was so scary! I've read it myself—that's how you had all those photos from inside the room.
- Prakit:** Yes, I wrote that blog myself. Please, everyone listening, go check it out. But the student ghost isn't what we're here to talk about today.
- Host:** Huh? Wait—you mean, besides the student ghost, there are other ghosts in that condo? Oh, is this the part about the Floating-Faced Auntie that the landlord supposedly sent to kick you out?
- Prakit:** Yes, that's the ghost I want to talk about today. I don't really have a problem with the student ghost—it's like, how do I put this, our energies sort of aligned. That's how I managed to stay past the seven nights. And according to the contract I signed with the floating-faced landlady, that meant I was supposed to get to stay for a whole year rent-free, right? But it seems like she

assumed I'd leave within seven days like everyone else before me. At first she just sent me the bill, claiming the whole "free stay" thing was just an advertising gimmick, and the contract clearly stated I still had to pay. I could accept that; it was my fault for not reading carefully before signing. But then she kept piling on more and more pressure—suddenly there were extra charges in the bill every month, or she'd sneak into the room while I was at work to take pictures of stains or scratches, then add those as petty fines. I tried to keep up and pay every charge, because I didn't want trouble. That room fit my life perfectly—it was close to work, right by the skytrain, super convenient, and the rent was still within what I could afford. I didn't want to move again, especially since my new job hadn't settled yet. So I clenched my teeth and paid every month according to the bills. But she didn't stop there. My rent must not have been enough compared to the fat deposit she'd collect if a tenant broke the seven-night rule. So she sent ghosts into my room to drive me out, every single night.

Host: Oh, so it begins. After all that build-up.

(Silence)

Oh, just kidding, sorry. Go ahead, people are waiting.

Prakit: It started one late night. I suddenly woke up because of a strange smell. At first, I thought it was smoke from a fire. I jumped up immediately and went to check the electric stove, afraid that I had forgotten something boiling or that a cardboard box had fallen onto the stove switch. But no—the stove was off, everything in the kitchen was normal. Nothing was on the stovetop, yet the smell of smoke and burning still lingered heavily in the room. I panicked, thinking if something really had burned, Auntie Facefloat would fine me a fortune. I turned on every light in the room, checked every appliance and plug, searched for any burn marks or sparks no matter how small. I unplugged everything, scanned the power strips and every corner of the room. But no matter how hard I searched, I couldn't find the source of the burning smell. The smoke detector stayed silent, gave no alarm or signal. Too many things just didn't add up, and I was certain of it.

Or maybe the fire was from the next room or outside. I panicked, so I opened the door to check the balcony, scanning around, trying to spot a fire truck, flames, sparks, or smoke. But there was nothing unusual, nothing that made sense at 2 a.m.—no one would be cooking at that hour, not even a street vendor. The stench of smoke just made me more restless. I scrolled through the condo's group chat to see if anyone had reported a fire or smoke. Nothing. No one posted anything since the evening. No one typed a single word about fire or smoke. Maybe they

were asleep, or maybe they'd already passed out from smoke inhalation. No. Everyone else was still sound asleep in their warm beds. I was the only one burning up.

Host: *(getting excited)* Hot? You suddenly felt hot just like that?

Prakit: Yes. So hot I started sweating instantly. It wasn't a gradual heat—it hit me in a wave, like standing next to a bonfire. I stripped down to just my underwear, drenched in sweat, standing alone in my room in the middle of the night. I turned on the AC, which I had kept off to save electricity, but even before that, or even the night before, it was never this hot. The thermometer on the AC panel didn't show anything higher than 25°C. Same number on my air purifier that had been running nonstop. I even checked the weather forecast app on my phone—if there had been a sudden heatwave from solar flares or anything out of the ordinary, I would have known. But no. Nothing. No unusual reports. Outside temperature was the same 25°C as inside. Everything outside the balcony was normal. So why was I the only one burning alive?

Host: And at that moment, aside from the heat and the burning smell, did you notice anything unusual?

Prakit: I was so agitated from the heat I couldn't focus on anything. I turned on every light in the room. I remember I was standing completely naked, airing myself under the bright lights, but I was still sweating and burning up. I didn't notice any distinct shape or figure at first. Oh... maybe I was imagining it, but it felt like wherever I looked, there was a faint gray filter over my vision. But I was overheating. No matter how much I cranked the air conditioner, I wasn't cooling down. I was so frustrated I took off my underwear and ran into the shower, blasting the cold water over my body.

Host: Oh, sounds like we're heading into mature-rated territory. Uh—sorry, sorry, please go on.

Prakit: The cold water flowing over my skin gave me some relief. But then, as I wiped the steam off the bathroom mirror, I saw them—red marks spreading over my body, like my skin had been pressed with something burning hot. They looked like handprints. Then, just as suddenly, they faded away. But they kept reappearing, one after another, crawling across my skin—arms, shoulders, chest, abs, thighs. At first, I thought maybe it was some kind of ghostly foreplay scene, something erotic. But then I saw it—through the mirror. A muscular dark figure, a young man's shadowy body, standing right behind me. His glistening hands were reaching forward, groping my chest.

Host: Uh... your description's getting pretty close to an R-rated scene.

Prakit: Yes. I almost gave in to whatever that thing was—if its hand hadn't burned my skin so fiercely. Its long nails started digging into my scalp as it locked its muscular arm around my neck. I could barely breathe. And then it leaned in, its charred, smoke-reeking face inches from mine, whispering in a raspy, broken voice: "Get out of my master's room now—or else." I knew instantly

this was the spirit sent by the landlady to drive me out. It squeezed my throat tighter and tighter. I thrashed, thinking I was about to suffocate, my hands flailing blindly. That's when I grabbed something—my tube of toothpaste. Desperate, I squeezed it with all my strength, spraying its face full of paste.

Host: *(incredulous)* Wait. You fought a ghost—with toothpaste?

Prakit: That's right. I didn't think it would work either, but its grip loosened instantly. It shrieked, a cry so piercing it shook the whole bathroom, clawing at its burning face. I realized it was the menthol in the toothpaste reacting with its scorched skin. The ghost shrank, collapsing onto the tiles, writhing in agony. I seized the moment and squeezed out a thick ring of toothpaste around it. Believe it or not, my thirty-baht tube of toothpaste worked like a magic circle—trapping it inside. The hulking figure trembled like a beaten dog, unable to step across the minty barrier. It even pressed its hands together, begging me for mercy. I brandished my toothbrush like a weapon, smearing paste in the air to keep it at bay. That's when it confessed: its master—the landlady herself—used toothpaste as punishment. Every time her servant spirits disobeyed, she'd slather them in toothpaste until they burned for days. That's why it feared the very sight of it.

Host: So what you're saying is... the landlady—the one with the mismatched foundation—is actually a sorceress who enslaves spirits with toothpaste?

Prakit: Yes

(Silence)

At first, I didn't want to believe it either. But that ghost confessed everything to me in the bathroom when it was just the two of us. It said it never wanted to scare or hurt me at all, but the landlady had bound its spirit inside a clay effigy. That old lady, before she was a real estate investor, came from the lower northeast and had studied black magic from a Cambodian sorcerer. She molded its ashes into a puppet that could trap its soul, forcing it to work dirty jobs for her. Sometimes it was scaring off rivals during bidding wars for construction projects, sometimes appearing around properties she wanted so she could buy them cheap. But most of the time, its main task was to drive tenants out of rooms they refused to vacate. The ghost told me that because it was so muscular in life, its spirit was dense and strong enough to move objects or even harm living people. But it insisted it never liked hurting anyone. Every time it resisted, the landlady would threaten it with toothpaste. Its final contract at the moment of death had been its fire-charred flesh, and when exposed to menthol from toothpaste, the lingering curse reacted, burning it with unbearable agony.

Host: Holy shit. You just explained that with science. Wait—so when you said he burned to death, you meant he really died in a fire?

Prakit: You remember the news about that substandard Chinese-owned steel factory on the outskirts of town that went up in flames a couple years back, right?

That's the one. You can look it up on Google. He told me the whole story after I pushed him hard enough, because I was just as curious as everyone else—how the hell did Auntie get his ashes to make a spirit vessel out of? And honestly, once I heard it, I couldn't help but feel sorry for him. I'll stop calling him "it" and start calling him "he." He was a migrant worker who'd fled civil war and military crackdowns from the other side of the border. I won't say the country's name, but basically, he had no future back home. He'd even finished medical school there, but when the regime changed overnight, there were no jobs for him. Sure, he joined protests with his friends, but bullets chased him into the jungle. He thought about joining one of the ethnic militias along the frontier, but they spoke a different language, practiced a different religion, and he couldn't bring himself to trade lives for politics. So he slipped across the border hoping for a fresh start. The problem was, with no documents, his work options here were almost nonexistent. He ended up at one of those underground factories, the kind barely legal themselves. He told me he knew how dangerous those machines were—no safety gear, nothing fit for humans. He saw friends lose eyes, ears, arms, legs. But everyone just clung to life the best they could. Then came that night: the grey Chinese boss ordered an overnight shift, forcing him to keep feeding the furnace past breaking point. By three in the morning, everyone else had slipped off to nap, leaving him alone with a blast furnace roaring beyond capacity. Molten slag started spitting, spilling, and within seconds it cascaded everywhere. Anything it touched burst into flame instantly, including his clothes. His co-workers tried to move toward him at first, but here's the truly horrific part: management shouted for the doors to be locked. Because if he survived, they'd have to send him to a hospital, and then the government would find out about hundreds of undocumented workers. So they left him sealed inside. He burned alive in that factory, tortured by fire until his body collapsed into ash.

Host: And how did the floating-faced landlady of yours get involved in all this?

Prakit: Eventually someone saw the smoke and called the fire department. They moved the surviving workers to another factory just in time. How much was slipped under the table, I'll never know. The factory only got charged with a registration mismatch and substandard equipment. Barely a slap on the wrist. The real owner had already flown abroad, leaving some Thai nominee to take

the fall. That deathtrap was shut down, and the land was sold back to the original owner—the floating-faced aunt who rents me my room.

Host: Ah, so if she couldn't evict you, wouldn't she be smeared with toothpaste herself?

Prakit: I helped her with that. Right after, I offered burn ointment and aloe vera gel in a merit-making ritual. Her wounds healed quickly. Honestly, her skin looks better now—radiant, glowing. I even tried rubbing toothpaste on her again, and nothing happened. So at this point, no matter how much toothpaste the landlady slathers on her effigy, he should be safe.

Host: Don't tell me... he's living with you in your room?

Prakit: Yes. I put him to work with odd jobs. He's strong, good at lifting heavy boxes. What choice do I have? I need to pay rent. Having a ghost help pack and haul boxes has been a blessing.

Host: Well then... that's all the time we have. What a wild ride tonight. Thank you, Prakit, for sharing your story with us. Even if it was more fiction than fact... and went off the rails a bit at the end. Alright then, let's wrap it up here. Bye-bye, everyone.

...

Prakit glanced from the Angoon ghost to the muscular migrant worker ghost called Losu. The jingle music faded after a few seconds, and the online podcast interview had already ended.

The host thought it was all made up," the Angoon ghost said, frowning in confusion.

Guess I'll need to work on my storytelling skills. How could they think it was fake? I told everything exactly as it happened. Right, Losu?"

The newcomer nodded quickly. He seemed introverted compared to the Gen Z Angoon ghost.

Never mind," she continued. "First time telling a story, maybe you got nervous. Next time will be better. Don't worry—Aunt Oonjai will send another ghost to chase you soon enough."

As soon as she said it, the shadow of an old woman with rotting gums and long gray hair appeared.

Ahh orr baii jarr hadd naii oi jorr diiii! (Get out of this room now if you don't want trouble!)"

Prakit snapped right back at the newcomer ghost. "Grandma, speak clearly. Fine, I'll even donate some merit and get you dentures."

The old woman's menace dissolved instantly; she rushed forward, eager to accept the offer of false teeth.

Great, another roommate," the Angoon ghost muttered, rolling her eyes. "Where's my privacy anymore?"

Kit turned to the old woman and laid down the rule: if she wanted dentures, didn't want to serve under Aunt Oonjai anymore, and wanted to stay here, there was only one condition. It was the same rule Prakit drilled into the Angoon ghost and Losu until they could chant it in unison without rehearsal:

Haunt if you want, but help pay the rent.

Amarin Corporations PCL for review only

No Escape Now

Prakit felt there was something uncanny in the air.

Another rent bill slipped under his door, unchanged as always—five thousand baht, no more, no less. Even so, Kit scanned and paid it on time every month, just as the perfume-drenched broker sister had instructed. He didn't want trouble, at least not legally. He didn't even know if she was dead or alive now (he hadn't asked her name, just saved her in his phone as "Perfume Sis").

Losu insisted that on that night, Aunt Oonjai had only sent him to silence the sister, not to kill. But when she resisted, he had grabbed her by the neck and flung her against the wall (with more force than he realized). At the time, he was too terrified of toothpaste to think clearly—he was sure Aunt Oonjai had only wanted him to stop her from telling Kit something. Angoon and Grandma Chamoi, however, sat gossiping at length that Aunt Oonjai must surely be plotting Kit's most violent end.

I say Aunt Oonjai plans to kill young Kit and seal his spirit to use like she does mine, declared Grandma Chamoi, the newest housemate, speaking clearly now thanks to the false teeth Kit had arranged for her with the help of an elderly monk dentist, followed by the merit-making ritual of pouring holy water.

"Seriously, Grandma, remember the acid-burnt ghost who showed up here last Saturday? That one melts everything she touches. Imagine if she'd touched me. Aunt Oonjai only sends the top-tier ghosts," Angoon fumed.

But Kit thought "top-tier" didn't quite capture the madness of the past month. Words like bloodthirsty, deranged, vicious, and flat-out insane felt more fitting. Each memory of the ghosts Aunt Oonjai sent to kill him rose up vividly.

There was the woman whose boyfriend threw acid on her, who scorched holes in Kit's brand-new IKEA carpet. The delivery rider whose head got flattened by a city bus, revving his massive motorbike up and down Kit's walls like a circus stunt. The preschooler locked in a van by her teacher, who locked Kit in his own bathroom for hours. The bedridden uncle who drowned during the floods of 2011, trying to drag Kit under when he soaked in the tub. The gang of druggie ghosts who kept slipping pills into Kit's takeout deliveries. The cat ghost, abandoned in an empty apartment after its owner disappeared (even though the condo was pet-friendly, Kit wasn't—he kicked it straight out the window before it could even meow. Don't worry, Angoon, a cat lover, snuck off to save it). And then there were the rest: factory workers overdosing on yaba, escorts overdosed on ice, teens who popped one too many ecstasy pills at a party, and terminal cancer patients still begging for morphine long after death.

Kit had to admit he had never encountered ghosts with personalities and deaths as complicated as Aunt Oonjai's.

The ghosts of Lampang were nothing compared to the ones in this city. Here, the final fragments of lives shattered by grotesque deaths drifted loose, even beyond Kit's imagination. Desperate spirits, cut from their anchors, wandered the narrow alleys beneath the concrete shadows, with no path forward, no place to rest. Their deaths had been too sudden, their journeys unfinished. With nowhere left to belong, they hovered between worlds. The city had not been built for the living—why would it show mercy to the dead?

Kit was not surprised that Aunt Oonjai could bind such lost souls with ease. A spark of fear, a hollow promise, and a clay doll smeared with ash were enough to trap them. She gained servants without cost, and they kept her infernal machine turning, in life and beyond.

"Aunt Oonjai promised me dentures," admitted Grandma Chamoi as she ladled braised eggs onto Kit's plate. "I don't know why I wanted them so badly. I just went along. He told me to wait inside the clay doll, and I did. When he threatened to take back the promise, fear and rage crashed over me, and I couldn't stop myself. I did whatever he commanded." Freed now, she lingered in Kit's condo—not ready to move on, too attached to her false teeth. So Kit gained a new cook for the building.

Grandma Chamoi had told everyone her story from the very first night. She had once been Aunt Oonjai's neighbor, living alone after retirement, her husband long gone from lung cancer. One by one her teeth had fallen out until last year, when she lost them all. At the hospital she was told she couldn't claim new dentures yet—the policy required five years between sets. Her real teeth had decayed faster than the false ones, leaving her toothless and waiting. The appointment card they handed her said she could apply again in two years.

Loneliness gnawed at her. With no companion to share her days, she fell prey to the emptiness. Then, one dull afternoon, a tall, dark, handsome Nigerian man messaged her, saying her profile picture reminded him of his late wife. They began to chat. Her English was passable, his muscles impressive, and somehow she let herself believe. She wired him her entire pension to help his family escape a genocide. She only realized he was a romance scammer when he sneered at her over video call: how could a man like him love a wrinkled, toothless old woman like her? That was the final emotion she carried when she looped the rope over her rafters and let herself hang—betrayal, humiliation, and grief for dentures that would never come.

That was the final emotion she carried when she looped the rope over the rafters and let herself hang—resentment that her turn for dentures had not yet come.

"Mine too," said Losu. "My last feeling was fire. They threatened to smear toothpaste on my burns. I panicked. I couldn't control myself." He spoke while vacuuming the living room.

Angoon, usually chattering non-stop, suddenly froze, her silence stretching until Kit asked, "What's wrong, Angoon?"

“Nothing, boss. Just... every night I climb the stairs and fall onto that balcony again. Why? You showed me the news—my parents already performed the ritual to send me back. So why haven’t I gone? Why am I still stuck in this condo, in a room that wasn’t even mine?”

“You think Aunt Oonjai has something to do with it? From what Losu and Grandma said, maybe she bound you somehow. Your last thought, your final emotion—what was it?” Kit pressed, knowing that without bodies, ghosts’ memories frayed. Their final emotions expanded, ballooning until they grew into entire personalities, false recollections, whole selves made of nothing but the moment of death.

“Back then, I think... maybe I was stressed. Stressed about what exactly, I can’t even remember. But I do remember my latest grades. One subject came back with a D. That meant I failed. I couldn’t bring myself to call my dad. He’d be furious. No matter how hard I tried, nothing I did was ever good enough for him.

I remember shoving durian into my mouth. The yellow, sweet flesh, swallowing it down—and then washing it with liquor. No, not liquor. I only meant to drink water. But I grabbed the wrong bottle. It was lamp alcohol, the kind dental students had to bring home to practice dripping into wax molds for dentures. I’d been scolded in the lab before for never meeting standards. I couldn’t afford to fail again.

The bottle had been dyed so no one would mistake it. But I did. I didn’t check. I thought it was water. I swallowed it. The burning in my mouth crawled down my throat, and I remembered—it was methanol. Not drinking alcohol. Poison. I should’ve spat it out. But in shock, I gulped it down. The burn roared in my gut. The poison mixed with the durian immediately, reacting in some violent way.”

“That was when everything blurred. My head spun, and I blacked out. I tried to walk to the bathroom to make myself vomit, or to fumble for my phone and call an ambulance, but the world tilted. My feet staggered out of control. The next thing I knew, I was tumbling from the balcony. It was like slow motion. I reached for the rail—but I was too late.”

“Your last feeling was just wanting to grab the balcony,” Angoon concluded.

“And then I hit something, hard. Time passed. A long time. Until all the pain faded away. And then she appeared—the woman with the floating makeup mask—stepping out of the darkness with her promise. She told me I could stay on the balcony. That I didn’t have to go anywhere else. That was it... Aunt Oonjai. She said, ‘You don’t have to go anywhere anymore.’”

Rage replaced Angoon’s confusion. “So that’s it. ‘Don’t go anywhere anymore.’ Clever, Auntie. You bound her to this place, chained her to this balcony.”

Kit summed it up. Everyone could now see Aunt Oonjai’s cruelty clearly. But one question gnawed at him: if Angoon’s spirit had been chained here from the start, why had Grandma Chamoi, Losu, and all the others Kit had freed been able to enter his condo too?

“The condo’s guardian spirit allowed me in,” Losu confessed.

“What? Our condo has a guardian spirit? How come I’ve never seen it?”

“It’s been here since before the building was even finished. Hiding behind the weeds by the garbage bins. Aunt Oonjai brought me and all the ghosts here to introduce ourselves from the start, asking him to ‘facilitate things.’”

At that word, Kit saw red. He hated the phrase “facilitate” no matter how often he heard it. Too many times his boss had ordered him to “facilitate” some stranger’s request, forced to pull strings just because of a title.

He shoved aside his braised pork and eggs, stormed out of the unit despite the protests of the three ghosts, his footsteps pounding the hall, stabbing the elevator button with fury. He seethed in the crowded lift, his anger radiating so strongly that even the building manager shrank back at the lobby, not daring to ask what was wrong. Kit marched out toward the condo’s neglected spirit shrine, hidden behind trash bins and overgrown bushes, a place long forgotten.

And there it was, exactly as Losu had said: the decaying wooden shrine, its sanctity drained by modern neglect, draped with brittle garlands and bottles of red soda crawling with ants. No wonder no one cared anymore. The spirit itself lay drunk inside, sprawled in its shrine, with luxury champagne bottles—Dom Pérignon—stacked shamelessly in front, out of place among the ruins.

But Kit wasn’t surprised. He shouted at the shameless spirit loud enough for the whole courtyard to hear.

“Some guardian—you take bribes from developers.”

The shrine spirit, still drunk, only snored louder.

“High-class taste, too. Ordinary red soda isn’t enough—you demand Dom Pérignon. Was that bottle worth more than the safety of the thousands of tenants here? Is that why you let Aunt Oonjai’s ghosts slip inside? If you’re going to sell out to capital, then this condo doesn’t need a spirit at all. No more offerings, no more respect.” Kit’s voice burned with fury, but the spirit just rolled over, scratching its swollen belly.

“Fine. Drink your champagne to your heart’s content.”

Kit grabbed a bottle of Dom Pérignon and smashed it against the shrine roof. Glass shattered, fizz spilling in foamy streams. Before the spirit could even stir, Kit lit a match from the incense burner and tossed it inside. Flames roared, a blast shaking the air. Then Kit kicked the rotted wooden post, and the whole shrine toppled, crashing into the gaping trash bin—the very same bin that once caught Angoon’s lower half in the dead of night.

This time, in broad daylight, Kit slammed the metal lid shut with a clang. Fire and smoke churned inside, fed by expensive alcohol and rotting garbage. The spirit’s curses and screams faded as the city sanitation truck hauled the ruined shrine away with the rest of the refuse.

Kit knew the alcohol fire would burn out quickly. But faith, once set alight, would never be restored.

Neither would rage.

The Pinpoint Moment

Let's be honest—life in the city had never been easy for Praktit.

What stung more was learning afterward that the shrine he'd toppled was, legally, condo property—and suddenly, it had become the spiritual anchor for most of the residents. Pathetic. Half of them hadn't even known it was there.

The language in the warning letter was laughably overblown. Worse still, it accused him of “posing a severe threat to the community's peace.” As if he'd endangered anyone. He hadn't knocked anyone over, or gone around stabbing neighbors, or smashed doors with fire extinguishers like those illegal short-term tourists. Those were the ones condo management should've dealt with immediately.

Another condo group chat video. Everyone was up in arms instantly. There's always time for someone to wake up just to rage, to scratch their itch for moral superiority before going back to sleep, dreaming sweetly of being better than that lunatic who kicked over the shrine. Condemning him to pack up and get out, never to pollute their pristine community. Their crystal-clean harmony. Their stainless image. No blemish allowed.

Kit sneered at the notice, bold red type across the page. He crumpled it and tossed it in the trash, along with the damage invoice: two hundred thousand baht, signed in blood-red ink by Aunt Oonjai herself, the words “with deepest respect” printed above the signature. The pompous formality couldn't hide her true intent.

Kit could almost see the smirk at the corner of her lips as she pressed her pen down. No sane person signs their name in red. It was an omen. It was death. Back home in Lampang, the elders used red marker pens to write names of the dead on whiteboards, reserving space in the funeral hall. Aunt Oonjai wasn't cursing herself with that red ink—she was cursing him.

The letter gave him two choices: pay the debt until his back broke and leave, or rot in a coffin with his name scrawled on the funeral board in scarlet letters.

Aunt Oonjai pressed him from every angle—ghosts to hound him, neighbors to shame him, and a bill demanding two hundred thousand baht he had no way to pay.

The three ghosts who shared his condo could help with chores, sure, but not with that kind of money. What was Grandma Chamoi going to do, sell jars of ghost-recipe chili paste? That would need packaging and labels. Losu welding scrap metal into furniture? The smoke alarm would bring complaints down on them again. Or Angoon sneaking gold out of jewelry stores? The CCTV would catch her in an instant.

If there was one silver lining, it was that with the shrine gone, the ghosts were free to come and go. Angoon, freed from her binding to the balcony, had even taken Losu and Grandma Chamoi wandering to Banthat Thong to sample offerings laid out in banana-leaf bowls at trendy TikTok-famous shrines. That left Kit alone in the condo with time to think.

That night he lay in bed, staring at the ceiling, hand on his forehead. Should he move out? If he did, where would he even go?

“Come back to Lampang, lad. Why suffer here any longer?”

Kit bolted upright, heart pounding, eyes darting around the empty room. Empty—but how could it know where he was? He tried to calm himself, telling himself it was just stress. It only got inside his head when he was weak, like all the times before. He rubbed the tiny tattoo on his thigh. Maybe he needed to finish it, like Tom had once told him—get the full pattern inked across his skin. Maybe then it would let him go. But in the heart of the capital, where could he find a Lanna master tattooist?

Never mind. That wasn't the problem now. Deep down, Kit thought of Tom. If Tom were here, how would he comfort him? Even the faintest touch, light or heavy, might have carried Kit through another wretched night.

But then Kit remembered Tom's indifferent stare and the laughter around the drinking table. The stains of larb and raw blood pooled scarlet as Tom's friends gorged themselves, greedy jaws dripping fresh blood from lips and gums. Their grins bared blackened tartar-thick teeth, swollen gums oozing with rot. Kit remembered that vile mouth, all of them speaking as one—Tom's included—as they lifted their hands to point straight at him. Every eye bulged, every gaze locked on him alone.

“We'll let you join us, if you finish the welcome chant. Chant. Chant.”

Kit knew he was back in a nightmare. Tom and his biker friends rose from the drinking circle, closing in on him. Ten of them—no, twenty now—their numbers swelling beyond reason, heightening the horror. He knew what was coming. Every mouth split wide to the ears, so wide he could no longer see who was who. Rows of black, rotting teeth wobbled like waves, clattering in sync with the chant.

“Chant. Chant. Chant. Chant...” The mob of periodontal corpses pointed at him, shouting, their mouths vomiting blood the same shade as Aunt Oonjai's red signature. It spewed from a hundred, a thousand reeking mouths, closing the circle tighter and tighter around him.

“Chant. Chant. Chant. Chant...”

Suddenly, two withered hands with long, rigid nails shot out of a mouth, seizing Kit's hands and forcing them together in prayer. A yellow marigold was shoved between his palms, sacred string wound tight around his wrists until the sharp fibers cut into his skin and blood seeped out.

The flower's cloying scent was sickening, and Kit wanted to turn away, but he couldn't move. The harder he fought, the tighter the hands and string pulled, binding him with impossible strength. From behind the sea of countless mouths, the figure of an old woman in a cotton blouse and sarong appeared—someone Kit knew all too well.

“Chant. Chant. Chant. Chant...” The voices pressed on, relentless, forcing Kit to comply. Some mouths even bit into his flesh, leaving blackened teeth lodged in his skin. He felt the pain, certain it was more than just a dream—this was unbearable.

His lips began to move, ancient words spilling out, dragged from his throat by invisible force. He spoke in a tongue he didn't understand, words of surrender and submission. He tried to resist, but the old woman's ghostly presence soothed him with unnatural tenderness, as if comforting him even while binding him tighter.

“You can't fight her, Usha's power is too great. Surrender, child.”

“Grandma... please, help me!”

Kit screamed himself awake, drenched in sweat. The room was still empty. Angoon, Grandma Chamoi, and Losu had not returned. His skin prickled despite the oppressive heat. If that was truly the power of Usha, the same power he had glimpsed as a child, then it was a force to be feared.

His outburst that day had brought consequences far greater than he imagined. Two hundred thousand baht in damages. Warning letters from the condo board. Condemnation from the neighbors. And now, the dream revealed what he hadn't realized: the shrine spirit he had toppled and seen hauled away in the garbage truck had been shielding him all along.

Any place without its guardian spirit was like an open park, free for anyone—or anything—to wander in.

The sealed refuge was now marked, pinpointed, a beacon glowing in the middle of the city.

His family back in Lampang knew where he was.

And Usha knew where he was.