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พิเศษ

Cranium

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□ Episode 01 □

"The 16-seater chartered plane, bound for Paris, crashed into an area of rice fields that has now been turned into wreckage. Officials presume that all fifteen occupants, including pilots and crew, died. They are currently investigating the cause of the accident."

The neutral voice of a young reporter speak into the microphone in front of the crash site. Although the area was cordoned off so as not to interfere with the work of the police and aviation safety officers who were tasked with determining the cause of the accident, several media outlets were continually trying to get close and disrupt their work.

A young woman dressed in a collared shirt with rolled-up sleeves and dark pants exuded a confident aura. Although her eyes are visibly tired from the trip, she's looking at the scene of the accident through square-rimmed glasses.

Dr. Busaya, or **Bua** as she was known, arrived at the crash site after receiving a direct call from her supervisor that morning. A few hours later, Bua was talking to the officer in charge of coordinating the scene of the plane crash.

"Just a moment, please. I need to check the list of names first."

Bua nodded as she adjusted her glasses on her nose and brushed aside a small strand of short hair that fell over her face to improve her vision.

"I am replacing Professor Dr. Nissara."

Bua explained, handing over her PhD student ID card, which had not yet been returned to the Graduate Studies Directorate, to identify herself.

"At the moment, the professor is abroad."

The officer responsible for registering the people involved at the accident site looked down to consult the documents and check the list of names again.

"Here it is. Professor Dr. Nissara from the Institute of Bioanthropology."

Then she looked at the list until she found Bua's name, which was right below the name of the advisor, listed as the professor's replacement.

"Yes, the professor is my advisor. She is attending a seminar in Panama, so she asked me to come in her place."

"Please sign here and we will provide you with your identification badge."

The officer said in a calm voice.

"If you have any problems or need additional equipment, please let me know, Dr. Busaya."

The coordinating officer added, handing over the registration documents for signature.

"All right," Dr. Busaya said as she handed back the signed paper.

"Thank you very much for coming to help us. This way, please."

The coordinator said.

"The operations center and your work tent are on this side. Later in the evening, someone will take you to the accommodation. We are preparing everything. This night may still be a little turbulent."

"No problem, thank you very much."

Busaya positioned herself in front of the access to the crash site. It had been about twenty hours since the small passenger plane crashed in a rural area in the central province of the country. Estimates were that all fifteen

passengers, including the pilot and crew, had died, but the search for survivors continued unceasingly.

She watched the rescue dogs actively patrolling around the site, and firefighters in fluorescent orange uniforms spread out around the area to be prepared in case new fires broke out. About four hours earlier, Bua had received a call from Professor Dr. Nissara, her advisor, asking her to go to the scene immediately to help the police identify the victims.

Victim identification is a field of anthropology, or more specifically forensic anthropology, that is usually performed by forensic anthropologists or identification specialists.

This field of anthropology studies human evolution since prehistoric times, including ancestors and close relatives of humans, such as primates and mammals, and sometimes other animals, to understand the evolutionary sequence.

Bua's specialty is physical anthropology, which examines humans and primates in terms of structure and morphology, especially central bones and upper and lower limbs, and interprets how life and society evolved for the survival of the species, also using insights from social anthropology to investigate structure and context. In addition, physiological structure can be interpreted in relation to evolution prior to the modern human form.

"Please come in."

Said the police officer in charge of the crash site, as he lifted the yellow tape that cordoned off the area of the rice field, now containing the wreckage of the plane, whose fire had already been brought under control. About five hundred meters ahead, several people were working hard, and some of them were still searching for possible survivors.

Bua noticed about ten rescuers ready in the area, but they had not yet had the opportunity to start their work, as they had not yet found any survivors. It was an extremely distressing moment. Another young police officer led her to the tent, which Bua assumed was where she would carry out her work.

"Later in the afternoon, there will be a meeting with everyone involved. If you are ready, you can start working now. Thank you very much for coming."

"It is my pleasure." She replied.

Busaya looked around the tent, which is equipped with six stainless steel examination tables. She's not sure how many victim identification experts have been called in, but experts in physical anthropology or forensic anthropology are not easy to find. Perhaps she's the only one.

Bua did not consider herself an expert, she was still far from achieving that title, especially compared to her advisor, Professor Dr. Nissara, one of the respected leaders in the field. The professor had worked in all areas and had already assisted in several agencies.

In the field of victim identification, both nationally and internationally, she was a respected authority in the area, who had assisted several national and international organizations in more than ten countries. In terms of academic publications, although this field is not very well known, the professor has at least thirty articles published in specialized journals. She is, without a doubt, one of the prominent figures in the field.

And Bua was just a PhD student, in fact, she had graduated about three months ago and had recently received final approval from the institution, with the dean's signature stamped on the cover of her dissertation. She could already be called "**Dr.**", but she was not yet completely accustomed to the title; she had taken some time to relax after more than five years of intense study in preparation for a research position at the research institute her advisor had founded.

Bua packed her things, including a silver tool bag and a backpack full of clothes and essentials, and propped them on the side of the examination table, thinking that someone would soon take her to her accommodation, which would probably be a tent. Working in the field is like that; you often sleep in tents more than in hotels.

She positioned herself next to the stretcher where the first bones were, brought in by the rescuers. The bones were piled up without being separated, due to the rush. Some were whole, some were broken, and some were burned. The sight made Bua exhale a long sigh before she began to search for the necessary equipment, which included gloves and a face mask.

She immediately got to work, the first bone she picked up was a collarbone, still with some tissue on it since it had not been cleaned, and separated it from the pile. Piling up bones like this made her job a hundred times harder, as normally the process would follow the principles of forensic evidence collection: isolate the area, photograph the items, collect them in parts, and then begin identifying the victims.

By delimiting the area of the accident, taking photos of the evidence and organizing them in parts, the process of identifying the victims could begin.

"But look who I found here?"

About forty-five minutes later, a voice dripping with sarcasm sounded from the entrance of the tent, making the young doctor's concentration break .

"I really thought you wouldn't come."

It's a voice that Bua recognized immediately, even after some time without hearing it. Although it's soft and pleasant, it's full of sarcasm and irony. As she looked up at the visitor at the tent door, she couldn't help but sigh for a second before looking away, wondering why she could recognize this woman's voice and how much it bothered her.

Pinya, dressed in a light-colored rolled-up sleeve shirt tucked into dark pants, leaning against the tent entrance. With her hands in her pockets, her long, dark brown hair swayed gently in the wind, and her gaze is piercing, as if she's about to devour.

"Welcome." Bua said disinterestedly.

"Really?"

"Feel free to interpret it however you want... I can't believe they asked you to help."

Bua replied before bending down to focus on her work again.

"If I had known before, I wouldn't have even come."

Pinya had also been a doctoral student of Professor Dr. Nissara, just like Bua. However, one chaotic day, she had caused a huge commotion by accusing the advisor of favoritism, which consequently affected Bua. After that, Pinya resigned and Bua learned that she had gone abroad to continue her studies, and she had not heard from her since.

"Where is your mommy?"

Pinya asked about Bua's advisor.

"In Panama." Bua replied in a dry tone.

The two had always been at odds for as long as Bua could remember. Pinya would often tease her, calling her the teacher's "**sweetheart**," which made Bua try not to care, thinking it was nonsense. In addition, there was Pinya's habit of stealing seminar topics to present to the teacher, which left the two almost unable to look at each other. Until one day Pinya made a fuss and resigned, leaving her classmates perplexed.

Bua's disdain made Pinya approach the examination table full of charred bones, probably the result of an intense collision and fire. Bua couldn't help but look up again, unconsciously moving her glasses with the back of her hand.

"Don't cry just because your mommy isn't here," Pinya said.

"What do you want from me, Phinya?"

"Me? What would I need from you?"

"Then go play with your bones, dear. I have work to do."

"Go Play with Your Bones, Dear."

"...."

"Aren't you glad to meet an old friend?"

The question made her stare at Pinya's long face through her square-framed glasses, and a sarcastic smile appeared on the corner of Bua's lips.

"Friend?" That's an interesting choice of words."

Bua said as she picked up a skull from one of the victims and held it, still keeping her gaze fixed on the woman in front of her, who had just called her a friend, although in reality...

Then she continued:

"You know, there's a theory that says that modern humans have a larger frontal lobe, which leads to more complex emotions, and the ability to think and analyze logic and reason more detailed than ancient humans. So, please, act like a modern human, Phinya."

These words make Pinya immediately grab Bua's wrist and come closer.

"You're going too far, Bua!"

"If you have nothing else to do besides tease me, then help with the work. And then we'll fight."

Bua replied, pulling her wrist back and putting the skull back in place while she searched for a glove in the toolbox to give to Pinya.

"Separate this pile on the other table."

Pinya shrugged, take what's offered and started working without saying anything else. She thought back to the old college days, when the two of them would argue all day long to the point that Professor Nisara had to separate them. Bua also used to do her research at times when Pinya wasn't in the building. The situation made her find it almost comical that they

would suddenly find themselves in such a tragedy, a disaster that no one would want to see.

Their work was just beginning. Some of the passengers' parts were scattered across the area, covering a field and the edge of the forest for about three lanes. Besides, the Aviation Department still hadn't come to a conclusion about what happened and was working hard with other authorities to find answers.

"Do you have a magnifying glass I could borrow?"

Phinya asked, normally this time.

"Why come prepared, right?"

She still searched through her toolbox and handed over the magnifying glass.

"I arrived from the airport three or four hours ago and came straight here. I was expecting you to find one for me."

"So they couldn't find anyone else and had to call you?"

Bua couldn't help but comment.

"Still got the same sharp-tongued, huh? Be careful with that."

Phinya said, picking up the magnifying glass and examining the first bone.

Bua listened, let out a sigh, and returned to focusing on the important work in front of her.

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□ Episode 02 □

Busaya sighed for the umpteenth time that day, not having a moment of rest after years of sleepless studying was karmic punishment enough. But having to share a tent with Pinya? The universe was really collecting debts from the past. It didn't see her as a friend, nor did it see her as an enemy. In fact, the term "personal karma" seemed more appropriate.

Bua stood there, looking at the sign in front of the green tent made of a material resistant to the sun and rain, which served as a dormitory for the employees involved in the operation. The tent was about two hundred meters away from the accident site, in a separate area, where there were seven other tents arranged in a line. On the tent where Bua was, there was a white sign with black letters that said "Dr. Busaya Methin". However, what really bothered her was the sign just below, which displayed the name "Dr. Pinya Thananon".

Judging by the title "Doctor" in front of Pinya's name, Bua could tell that she had finally graduated. After their last fight, Pinya had disappeared without a trace, and no one knew what had happened.

Like Bua, she was a physical anthropology major. However, her professors often sent her out into the field, especially to archaeological sites and studies of ancient civilizations, which gave her additional experience in historical human civilizations.

Bua let out a resigned sigh, accepting what seemed to be her fate, when she heard the sound of footsteps approaching from behind. Pinya, who was carrying a large backpack, walked past her, deliberately bumping Bua's shoulder. For a brief moment, Bua felt a strong urge to reach out her foot to trip Pinya, but she restrained herself with great effort.

"You studied so hard and still managed not to evolve into a vertebrate animal? You disappeared and came back worse than before, without any manners."

Although she had managed to get her foot out, her mouth was faster than her thoughts. The words made Pinya turn quickly, her eyes shining with anger as she reached out to grab Bua's collar, but Bua quickly slapped her hand away in time.

"It seems that the specialization has made your mouth especially sharper, Dr. Bua."

Pinya said, with a mischievous smile appearing at the corner of her mouth, keeping her eyes fixed on Bua's lips.

"Be careful with that pretty little mouth, Dr. Bua. Who knows, one day some superior member of an inferior creature might hit you when you least expect it."

And with that, Pinya turned around.

"I'll sleep in the bed near the entrance. You take the bed inside."

It sounded more like an order than a suggestion, given Pinya's tone that made Bua irritated at the time, but she didn't answer, she didn't want any more trouble.

Bua crouched down at the entrance of the tent and picked up a handful of loose soil, holding it firmly in her hand. She closed her eyes and said a short prayer, asking for everything to go well. Slowly, she released the soil she was holding in her hands, as a gesture of respect and asking permission from the spirits of the place so that she could work and rest there. This was a ritual she always performed when visiting a new place. However, this time, it seemed that luck was not on her side from the beginning. Pinya appeared again, passing by her.

"I'm going to eat something, Bualoy."

Pinya said, in a sarcastic tone, using the nickname she had given Bua during her college days, without even looking back, and then left the place.

Bua decided not to fight back, it would only waste time and get in a bad mood. She knew Pinya's temperament well: erratic and volatile, as if he suffered from a nervous disorder or had an underdeveloped prefrontal cortex, which affected his ability to process logical reasoning. Pinya rarely listened to what others said, she was stubborn, obstinate and had a habit of constantly complaining.

As soon as Pinya was out of sight, heading towards the temporary cafeteria, Bua went into the tent to organize her sleeping place. Of all the activities, sleeping was undoubtedly her favorite.

Since it was the first day, progress was still minimal. The work became even more difficult when the people in charge decided to pile up parts of the bones that had been found. When Bua saw this for the first time, she almost lost her breath. She had to intervene quickly, asking that the bodies of the victims be left at the crash site, in their original positions.

Each body should be marked with stakes and tape, separating them, so that identification could be carried out more easily and quickly, instead of trying to separate the piled bones piece by piece. Separating the bones on the left side from the right would be a difficult task..

The bones that had already been piled up would need to be organized, categorized, and then it would be necessary to calculate how many bones each passenger should have, separating them by type. After that, the height would be calculated using specialized software and analyzed to determine which victim they belonged to, so that the bodies could be separated and then handed over to the police.

The records of all the passengers were being collected and would be sent as soon as possible. At the same time, the aviation department was searching for the black box to find out what really happened to the plane that was now nothing more than wreckage. Bua had heard from Pinya, in an exchange of barbs during work that afternoon, that the plane had simply lost contact and disappeared from the radar. It was only when local residents called to report

a deafening explosion, and when they arrived at the scene, they found the wreckage of the plane and parts of the bodies scattered throughout the area.

Fortunately, no nearby residents were injured or killed, and there was no significant material damage, which prevented the tragedy from being even greater. Everyone was working intensely to discover the cause of this disaster. But what intrigued Bua the most was why Pinya had appeared at that particular time.

"Forget it."

Pinya was none of her business, it didn't matter when she had appeared, it was best to keep her distance, Bua thought....sighing again.

It was something that had always intrigued her: what could she have done to hurt Doctor Pinya so much, to the point that this rivalry would never end? Professor Nisara had never shown favoritism, at least not that Bua could see. In fact, it seemed that she liked Pinya more, since she always sent her on field missions abroad.

In fact, Pinya had much more experience in the field than Bua, perhaps a hundred or a thousand times more, even though they were the same age, thirty-four. Pinya had already faced adverse terrains and situations, no matter how difficult or extreme they were.

So why did Pinya insist on picking on someone ordinary like Bua? However, she knew that thinking too much about it would only give her a headache without bringing any concrete answers.

Bua decided to take a shower before looking for something for dinner. She didn't want to wait for Pinya to come back, because just thinking about seeing her at dinner time was already taking away her appetite. Besides, after sunset, the air was starting to cool down, with a soft, cold breeze that promised a more comfortable night to sleep. Bua knew that the work there would be long. However, after her first shower of the day, she ended up not going to the mess hall as she had planned.

"One of the officers left a meal for you. I think they noticed that you were taking too long to come to dinner and are closing the kitchen. They also asked to let you know that the meeting has been postponed until tomorrow morning."

Upon hearing this, Bua immediately looked in the direction of the voice, which was coming from someone sitting on the canvas bed. Her eyes then turned to the box of food and the two bottles of water on her bed, next to the badge that she would wear during operations there. Pinya was already starting to unpack her suitcase, while Bua grabbed the food box and went out to look for a quiet place to eat and relax before facing the next day.

Identifying the bodies was not an easy task, especially in a scenario like this, where the remains were scattered, damaged by the explosion and impact, and some burned by the fire. In fact, Bua knew that it would not be possible to send everyone back home, and not all the body parts could be recovered so that the relatives could perform the funeral rites. Some bodies would be so damaged that it would be impossible to identify them. She estimated that the work would take at least two weeks to complete.

She hoped that she could finish sooner, but she knew that was unlikely. However, she would do her best to speed up the process, because deep down, she also wanted to avoid having to see Pinya every day and this began to affect her mental health. It was as if being in the presence of Dr. Pinya, her long-standing karma, drained her energy, something that had been happening since her college days.

Almost every day, Bua heard Pinya's name echoing through the hallways, disturbing her peace of mind. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why the teacher sent Pinya so often on missions abroad, something that made her classmates jealous. Even Bua felt this, but she understood that the teacher recognized Pinya's talent and wanted to encourage her.

In the country, there were not many talented anthropologists to do this kind of work. The pay was low, the work was hard, there was no prestige, and the area was practically unknown, always relegated to the background. In fact, not even in the background, in the crime scenes they investigated, the remains left behind were only fragments, incomplete skeletons or isolated

bones. Few people were interested in these remains, but for them, these bones were like silent teachers for the anthropologists.

They were excited by the opportunity to study ancient human remains or even primates, such as the tailless monkeys (Ape), considered distant relatives of humans in the evolutionary line. In fact, few people had the chance to see these remains firsthand, until Professor Nisara recognized the importance of collecting and preserving these fragments of prehistoric and historic humans. She was the one who pushed for the creation of the Institute for Research in Bioanthropology, a collaboration between the public and private sectors, which received both national and international funding, with Professor Nisara taking on the role of chief director.

At this institute, a large collection of real skeletons and replicas were assembled to serve as study material for students and interested parties. Professor Nisara worked hard to make this institute a reality. Bua began working at the institute as a student and eventually took on responsibilities in collaborative research projects, as well as assisting in teaching as a teaching assistant. And now she was there to represent her teacher. But that didn't mean that the teacher cared more for her than for others.

Bua left the tent, not wanting to argue with anyone at that moment, so she decided to find a quiet place to eat. As the night wore on, the temperature dropped, bringing a sense of calm, almost as if she were on vacation after graduation. However, the wreckage of the plane and the remains of the victims made any sense of serenity disappear. The sound of footsteps nearby made her look up from where she sat, leaning against a seven or eight meter tall rubber tree. When she saw who was approaching, she snorted deeply.

Why couldn't fate let her rest for even an hour? The whole day had been a rush of sorting through jumbled bones until her brain was about to spill onto the floor. All she could think about was lying down and letting exhaustion consume her until she fell asleep.

"Please... I'm tired. And sleepy too."

Bua said, anticipating what the other person wanted, as she stopped in front of her.

"Let me rest first. If you want to fight, fight alone, I don't even have the strength to talk to you."

"I just came to warn you to be careful."

"Does it have to be now?"

Bua replied as she begin to eat her simple meal of rice with dried vegetables. The tiredness of the day had made the taste bland and she barely felt hungry. Arguing with Pinya now would certainly be a losing battle.

"That's all I wanted to say." Pinya said.

"Don't stay out too late."

Those words make Bua frown. As soon as she finished speaking, Pinya, who seems to be trying to be kind, walked away from the area. Bua watched her little karma walk away, but the darkness make it difficult to see clearly.

She sit there for a few more minutes after she finished eating. This was the first time she had gone out into the field outside the research institute building since she had graduated a few months ago. Although it was an urgent task sent by her teacher, she considered it a good opportunity to see the outside world. The only thing that really bothered her was that she had unexpectedly run into her "leftover."

In truth, Bua wasn't sure who had called Pinya back. She suspected it wasn't the teacher, because otherwise she would have mentioned something earlier. Or maybe the intention was to surprise her. However, a small sense of relief came over her when she thought that Pinya's presence could speed up the work, thanks to her experience and the fact that she was now there by her side.

Whoever had called Pinya back had chosen wisely, because if there was anyone who specialized in anthropology besides the people at the institute - who were all busy with organization and other work - it was unfortunately Pinya. Bua just hoped that her former classmate wouldn't irritate her too much during the process.

She sit there for another ten minutes, seeking peace of mind, before deciding to go back to the tent, since she will have to wake up very early to start work the next day. She hoped that her first night in the field as a physical anthropologist would be a peaceful one.

But perhaps she was sadly mistaken.

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□ Episode 03 □

The sound of footsteps outside made Busaya, who was about to fall asleep, to open her eyes in the darkness. She raised her arm to check the clock that read 2:28 am.

Everyone knew that, in addition to being an expert in her field of study, she was also an expert in the art of sleeping soundly. However, being in a strange place made it difficult to fully relax. She needed to sleep at this time because she knew that if she didn't rest, she would wake up tired the next morning, possibly delaying her work. However, the sound of footsteps continued to bother her.

Who would be walking around the place at this hour?

Perhaps it was some local spirit, she thought. She had already made the necessary offerings and requests for permission to the spirits earlier in the evening. Couldn't they wait until she fell asleep to appear in her dreams? On the very first night, they were already trying to disturb her. The doctor turned to the side, her back to her personal karma, trying to ignore the uncomfortable presence outside.

Since the beginning of the night, Phinya had tried to provoke her in several ways, but Busaya decided to ignore it and not fight back. She valued her sleep too much to let herself get involved in unnecessary arguments that would only serve to irritate herself. She had even thought that, if Phinya continued, she would simply sleep in the command tent and get it over with. She noticed that Phinya also moved, before slowly reaching under the pillow.

"Don't turn on the light."

Phinya whispered in the darkness.

"Don't make a noise. If you hear something, don't come out."

Her voice is as soft as a sigh before Busaya heard a click in the darkness.

Even though she didn't know what was happening, her intuition told her that it wasn't good. She decided to follow her advice and barely dare to move. She could feel Phinya carefully creeping out of the front of the tent, and she tried to unzip the entrance as quietly as possible, just enough to peek in.

"On the first night, the spirits around here are really harsh."

Phinya muttered before disappearing from the tent completely. All Busaya could do is lie still and pray that everything would go smoothly.

However... the situation isn't as she had expected.

Bang!

It seemed that the situation would not be as peaceful as she had expected. A second gunshot rang out quickly, followed by more shots, totaling more than ten. Phinya had just run out... Was she in danger?

Even though she didn't like her, it wasn't like she wanted Phinya to get hurt. Busaya felt like all she could do was lie there, holding her breath and jumping every time she heard a shot being fired. Within five minutes, Phinya snapped out of her thoughts of Bua and ran back to the tent, which was lit from within by a flashlight.

"We're safe now."

This caused Busaya to sit up quickly, her face and eyes still showing a state of shock. Phinya quickly turned on the orange field light that hung in the center of the tent.

"Are you okay, Bualoy?"

Phinya asked, kneeling down in front of her.

"I'm... fine."

Busaya replied, though her expression is still full of concern.

"It's okay, they've already left."

"Who?"

"I think they are thieves trying to steal something to sell."

Phinya replied, placing a hand on Busaya's shoulder.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

She simply nodded before Phinya grabbed a bottle of water that's next to the bed and handed it to her.

"Drink some water first."

"Are you okay, Phin?" She asked back.

"I'm fine. The police officers on duty at the scene shot them and they ran away."

She said and then get up.

"Let's go to sleep, there's nothing else to worry about."

She said to Busaya, who didn't respond right away.

"I didn't know you carried a gun."

"For emergencies only."

Phinya replied and turned over to sleep.

"Sleep, Bualoy. You have work to do tomorrow. If anything happens, I'll wake you up."

That order disguised as advice made Busaya slowly lie down again, trying to force sleep back. She notices that her old colleague also lay down, but Busaya, exhausted, soon fell asleep. Meanwhile, Phinya lay down quietly, but spent the night between naps and wakefulness.

Although it was difficult to fall asleep due to the events of the previous night, Busaya ended up falling asleep from exhaustion. In fact, the next morning, she wanted to thank Phinya, who at least made her feel safer by being there with her. However, when she opened her eyes at dawn, her colleague had already gotten out of bed.

After the morning meeting to align the guidelines and limits of the work between the identification experts and the forensic officers of the police department, there was not much more to be discussed. The main task was to identify the passengers so that the remains could be returned to the relatives for religious ceremonies.

The police were also responsible for returning them. It was concluded that there was no chance of finding survivors in the incident, and the rescue teams that were in the area were allowed to return, with only two units remaining in case of emergencies.

As for the disturbance the previous night, the officers reported that it was an attempted robbery, something that was unfortunately not uncommon in situations like that. Fortunately, nothing was lost, as the thieves were driven away in time. That day, two other forensic officers from the police department joined the team, which eased the workload somewhat for both Busaya and Phinya.

Half an hour later, the young doctor stood in front of the body of a victim whose lower body was missing. The body had been found that morning, and officers had marked the site with stakes and yellow tape, covering the remains with separate cloths for each body. She crouched down and closed her eyes.

Then she took a deep breath and looked up at the sky.

"May you rest in peace."

Busaya whispered to the wind, before taking another deep breath to regain her composure. She rarely had the opportunity to work on-site, and this was one of the few times she had been directly involved in an accident scene, and in an event as devastating as this, it was her first time. She was not yet prepared to face something like this.

She tried to focus and see what was before her as just work. In fact, the closest she had ever experienced such a thing was volunteering at an exhumation in an abandoned cemetery. There, she was not only demonstrated an unexplainable ability to predict where bodies were buried, but also excelled at driving stakes into the correct places, something she could only attribute to the supernatural.

During this experience, she learned to use hoes, shovels, and other tools, helping to dig graves and exhume bones. These remains included recently deceased bodies, others already in advanced decomposition, and even those that had been dead for a long time. It was there that Bua acquired much of her skills in skeletal anatomy, in an almost mystical volunteer work.

This was one of the reasons Busaya felt Phinya had an advantage and was more experienced than she. Phinya had plenty of opportunities to work in the field, and she was rarely stuck in a classroom. The young doctor began to search her tool bag for her gloves and tried to focus on getting started on the day's work. Files with the list of names and photos of the passengers were being organized for comparison with the remains in order to identify the victims-this was Busaya's job.

She was, in words, the link between the other dead and their families. Although she mentally wished she didn't have to do this kind of task as often, she would rather be observing monkeys and studying primate extinction than dealing with such a tragedy.

Her eyes fell on the charred remains before her, only a few recognizable parts. She then placed a yellow marker with a number next to the fragments

and used a square to measure the parts before raising the camera hanging around her neck to take the necessary photos. The photographs needed to be taken before any of the remains could be collected or moved. The night before, she had found a right leg submerged in a drainage ditch, below the knee, about 500 feet from the site.

In addition to identification, the remaining tissue fragments could be taken for genetic analysis, an additional way to confirm the victims' identities. This task was the responsibility of coroners and forensic experts. Busaya's role was to help confirm whether the parts found matched the physical characteristics of any of the passengers.

Carefully, she grabbed a plastic evidence bag and began collecting the small ribs that had been scattered about. The biggest challenge was that in explosion cases, the fragments were so scattered that it was often impossible to collect all of the body parts. This was the most strenuous part of the job. Some of the officers began marking the spots where they had found fragments with small stakes, and enclosing these areas with yellow tape so that recovery could be done later.

Busaya glanced at Phinya, who had arrived today with a toolbox, probably requested from one of the officers. Phinya was about fifteen meters away, focused on her own work. When she noticed Busaya's gaze, the young doctor quickly looked away, returning to what she was doing. When she finished examining the first body, she moved to another area, further away.

"Dr. Busaya."

Called an officer who was in charge of logistics and who Busaya had met as soon as she arrived at the scene. She had been sent by the Aviation Department to coordinate the actions between all the teams involved.

"The list of names and photos of all the passengers has already been sent. It is now in the process of verification."

Busaya stand up upon hearing the news.

"If you need to use this data, you can request it at the command tent."

"Thank you, officer."

"Oh, please let Dr. Phinya know too."

Added the officer before walking away.

'And he didn't even ask if I wanted to let her know.'

Busaya thought to herself.

She looked for her small shovel and, finding it, walked over to where Phinya was crouched in front of the body of another passenger, who was surprisingly not too badly damaged and appeared to have died face down. Phinya observed the surrounding area, preparing to take photos before the officers came to remove the body.

"Will you hit me in the head with that shovel?"

Phinya asked, without taking her eyes off from her work.

"Self-defense."

"I would really love to attack you."

Phinya muttered as she pressed the camera button.

"Who knows?"

"What do you want?"

Phinya finally asked, still focused on her photos.

"An officer informed me that the list of victims and the photos are already in the command tent. If you need them, we can go and get them.

Phinya looked at her blankly, before nodding slightly.

"If you go, bring a copy for me too."

How lazy

"Sure..."

Busaya replied, dragging out her words wanting to be sarcastic.

"What did you find today?"

Phinya asked, changing the subject.

"Two arms and a completely mangled body. I'm not sure if it was because of the explosion or the fall, I haven't examined it in detail yet, but at least it's a complete body."

She explained, making Phinya let out a sigh.

"This is horrible." Phinya muttered.

"I never liked working in disasters or explosions, especially because of this."

She looked up to meet Busaya's, who looked exhausted.

"Did you get any sleep last night?"

"Maybe an hour. And by the way... thank you for last night."

She said, and without waiting for an answer, she walked away. She wasn't sure if Phinya had accepted her thanks, but at that moment, it didn't matter and she didn't care.

However, Phinya, who had listened, looked at her from behind, and then a faint smile appeared on her thin lips for no apparent reason.

After that, the two of them didn't talk anymore, each of them sped up their work to finish as quickly as possible. It was already the third day, and there was one more thing to worry about: praying for the weather to cooperate.

Although Bua didn't like strong sunlight, in fact, no one likes sunlight so intense that it makes their eyes burn during the day - the last thing she wanted right now was rain, until all the bodies were recovered.

Not to mention that, in the next 24 hours, the bodies or their fragments would start to be infested by worms and insects. Then, the natural process of decomposition would begin. Of course, the unpleasant smell would be something she wanted to encounter as little as possible, but she couldn't avoid it.

The tent for storing the bodies recovered from the plane wreckage was set up not far from the work tent. Bodies and fragments that had not yet been identified would be taken there, separated into complete and fragmented parts, and then identified one by one. She was focused on working when she raised her head from the mound of dirt carefully removed by hand for the evidence items and when she realized it was almost one o'clock in the afternoon.

She decided to go out to get lunch while her stomach growled. Even so, she still felt like she didn't want to waste time even eating. She walked slowly to the command tent to request two sets of name documents, hoping that if she found Phinya, she could hand them over at once.

When she reached the temporary hut area that had been hastily built to serve as a dining hall for the personnel involved in the incident, she noticed that Phinya was talking to an imposing man dressed in a black suit not far away. Both of them had a tense expression on their faces. She assumed that they were discussing the incident from the previous night. She just hoped that there wouldn't be any more unexpected events like the previous night.

For a brief moment, a thought flashed through her mind, making her heart feel strangely warm.

She felt strangely comfortable and safe in Phinya's presence during this time.

□□□□

□Episode 04□

Dr. Busaya was about to have one of those headaches...

The scene before her was desolate. The young woman with a PhD in forensic anthropology was leaning back and forth in front of a skull on the side of the plane wreckage, which was now in pieces after the severe impact. The wreckage was scattered everywhere, with almost no trace of the plane left.

However, what presented in front of her was surprising. Bua leaned over and used the magnifying glass in her hands to examine and reexamine, not sure what she was looking for. In fact, she needed to gather the fragments she had found and put them in bags or wrap them in cloths before proceeding with a more detailed analysis to identify the characteristics and compare them with the information on the list of deceased passengers to identify who was who.

Then, she would prepare a summary report, one by one. But in this case, she felt that this fragment should not be there and that was certainly something strange...

She looked around. There was no one else around. Except for her personal karma that always wore out her patience every time they talked.

In fact, Bua did not know exactly what was the cause of the fight between her and Phinya. Maybe it started because Phinya chose a seminar topic almost identical to hers, or rather, a topic that seemed to be a copy, or maybe it was because Bua passed the Qualifying examination and the PhD Proposal before her, even though she had applied later. Phinya might have felt uncomfortable without Bua knowing.

Or maybe it was because she looked prettier, considering the ethnic categories she and Phinya specialized in. If we look at it from the perspective of physical anthropology in the classification of humans according to major ethnic groups, we generally speak of three main groups: Asian, Caucasian and Negroid. Or, to be more specific, Bua was simply prettier according to the ethnic characteristics of the region where she lived, to be exact, Southeast Asia.

She was only slightly prettier than Phinya. In fact, there was a reason to support this hypothesis and, when looking objectively, she was a little shorter and smaller than Phinya, with a relatively round face and a younger appearance, despite being the same age. Her hair, which was black and straight, despite having been cut and dyed, and her dark brown eyes, were longer and smaller. Her almond-shaped eyes, her nose not so prominent but harmonious with her face, and her thin and almost straight lips formed a proportionate figure. This is a typical feature of the Asian group, which has its roots in Southeast Asia.

However, Phinya had a taller, more robust body, with broad shoulders that widened to the hips, but with a waist that was not as narrow.

Although her face was a little more elongated, with features similar to those of the Mongoloid, her large, round, brown eyes that were often half-closed, her fine, long hair, the same color as her eyes, and her lighter, yellowish skin, made Phinya not look like the typical inhabitants of the region. Her nose was prominent and her lips were a little thinner than Bua's.

Phinya did not seem to be as Asian as Bua.

Therefore, it is possible to conclude that Bua seemed more in line with the local ethnicity, according to the anthropological classification of the region. It is possible that Phinya disliked her for this very reason. However, this did not seem to be the crucial point at the moment. What really worried Bua was the skull burned by small flames that lay before her. This was the real problem that made her adjust her glasses and observe the skull repeatedly for about ten minutes.

The problem was that the skull should show signs of rupture of the skin, muscles or tissues due to an explosion, impact or burning. However, the motionless skull before her showed dry skin attached to the bone, something that should not occur in someone who had just died or had been through an event as severe as a plane crash. Furthermore, when searching for other parts of the body, the limbs that should have presented similar characteristics were not found in the area.

"What are you doing, Bua? Are you going to sleep on the stretcher?"

"If you don't mind trying to talk in a normal way, that would be great."

Bua replied in an irritated tone. There were already enough problems to worry about without having to deal with Phinya's sarcasm, which was getting tiresome.

Busaya decided to put work aside for a moment, while other issues, such as slapping her fellow doctoral student in the face, would be left for later.

"Since you're here, could you help me out?"

Bua asked, seeing Phinya cross her arms and smile.

"Did the stars misalign today, Dr. Busaya, asking for my help?"

"If you can't help, go somewhere else, or I'll throw alcohol at you until you disappear."

"You get angry so easily, Bua. So, what is it?"

Bua pointed to the skull fragment in front of her, which was making her so disturbed.

"I... I'm not sure how to ask."

Phinya, upon hearing this, crouched down next to Bua, who noticed that she's narrowing her eyes.

"Let me take a look. Go take care of something else."

She's expected an answer, but instead Bua received a direct order.

"This is mine. I found it."

"You're the one who asked me for help, to help you I need you to let me take a look."

The firm voice repeated the same answer.

"Do you still have this habit of wanting to steal other people's threads, Phinya? I thought that with age you would have given up on that."

"I've never stolen anyone's thread. Don't come with those lies to me. You're the one who likes to steal, aren't you, "teacher's pet". Teacher's pet gets everything she wants whenever she wants."

Phinya replied back, with a defiant look. Still looking at the skull, she asked:

"Take a picture for me?"

"As if you were in charge of me."

Bua placed the yellow evidence identification plate and the square to mark the size before lifting the camera and starting to press the shutter button, following the instructions or rather, the orders.

"And I'm no one's pet."

"Oh, no? You were the one who sat pretty, full and comfortable in the office while I crawled around in the field, weren't you? Give me a bag of evidence."

"Well, the teacher wanted someone who was good at field work, and I'm not as good as you. I can barely sleep, I probably would have died the first night."

With one hand she handed over the requested bag along with the sticker to seal the bag and write the details of the evidence collection.

"I'll take care of this one myself."

Phinya said before taking the bag from Bua's hand.

"Go do your job."

"Your face may not look anything like your mommy's, but you're just as bossy, right? Why is that?"

Bua continued to mutter, pushing the lenses of her glasses up her nose in irritation, before getting up and going back to work as she had been told, or rather, ordered.

"I already told you that, you don't boss me around, right?"

"So, what's so important?"

Dr. Busaya asked Phinya who was standing looking at the fateful skull, which had been collected around nine in the morning and was now on the autopsy table. They had only completed about twenty percent of the work, even though they had worked during the day and stayed up all night. By this time, some of the bodies or some body parts had started to give off an unpleasant odor and were decomposing over time.

This made the work more difficult, as they had to fight against the smell that constantly affected their nose, and even wearing a mask didn't help much. The black box was still being searched for with no sign of being found."

"If I don't tell you, you'll keep annoying me like this forever, won't you, Bua?"

Phinya asked, irritated.

"It's not like I want to keep talking to you, Phinya. I just want to understand. Curiosity must be a genetic trait of my ethnicity."

Busaya justified, looking to the side.

"I don't have that... trait of curiosity."

"Then you must be of a different ethnicity than me."

Bua replied as she approached to examine the skull more closely.

"Did you find anything?"

"You tell me, Dr. Bua."

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking you, Dr. Phinya."

Bua retorted.

"So tell me, what did you see?"

"A skull."

"Really? With such a clear description, I think it looks more like a kneecap, don't you think?"

Phinya gave an irritated look and a sarcastic comment upon hearing the answer.

"Well, considering the condition, the appearance of the dry and dark, almost black skin makes me wonder, but I'm not sure why it's here..."

Busaya looked closely before falling silent to reflect.

"It looks like an undecomposed body."

"What do you think?"

"Mummification process "

Bua answered quickly.

"It's not natural, because the skin is smooth and adhered to the bone evenly. If it were natural, it wouldn't be so perfect."

"That's interesting. With just one look and seeing just one piece, I already knew it was artificially made."

Phinya commented in admiration, before seeing Bua raise her hands in a gesture of reverence.

"What are you doing?"

"I've never seen an artificial mummification."

Busaya heard a long sigh accompanied by an expression of disdain.

"I've seen a case of natural mummification once, while helping to clean a cemetery."

"Is your job in the field to clean cemeteries?"

Phinya said, looking at Busaya with an expression of disbelief.

"Why not? I'm good at digging, okay? And I'm quite skilled with shovels and hoes."

Bua replied, proud of her skills.

"Where else would you find a complete sample of bones, divided by different ages, if not in a cemetery? Besides, it's important to understand the process of decomposition in different stages: three days, five days, two weeks, a month, even ten or twenty years."

She continued to speak while still holding her hands together, as if in prayer.

"Put your hands down now, Bua." Phinya ordered.

"That's why Professor Nisara tried to found an institute, so she could get these samples then that students can learn from real material."

Bua said, with a frustrated tone.

"But how did this one get here? Who's the crazy guy who did this?"

Bua asked, shrugging.

"And what should we do now?"

"I don't think this is normal."

Phinya opined, her eyes fixed on the mummified skull that seems to be in the wrong place.

"It looks new."

"New... what does that mean?"

"It means it's not old."

The answer make Bua widen her eyes in disapproval.

"Very funny, isn't it?"

Phinya continued, not hiding her sarcasm.

"Look, a joke?."

Bua made a sarcastic comment.

"Come on, answer me properly."

"Well, it's still new. It's in great condition, with only a small burn in the region of the temporal bone on the left side. The jaw has fractures that radiate from the center point at the bottom, all the way to the base. One of the fractures has not yet healed. This could be a cause of death."

Phinya explained, pointing to the slight burn mentioned earlier.

"I think the burn could have been caused by the accident. The teeth are still quite intact, although some are missing."

She indicated the dark area on her left temple.

"But I can't say for sure without knowing the exact age of the old object. I'm still at the "new" part. Bua replied, with a confused expression.

"Can you explain more?"

"Judging by the condition, if we disregard the burn, it is intact and does not appear to be deteriorated to the naked eye."

Phinya clarified.

"It is quite well preserved, with no age-related deformations. The deformation in the jaw could have occurred at the time of death or it could have been the cause of death. Deterioration occurs over time, for example, deformations or changes in time are visible when wrapped in preserving substances such as resin for hundreds or thousands of years, a skull wrapped in preserved resin would begin to show air cavities and deformation or even fractures. But this one here is in excellent condition, as if it had just gone through the mummification process, but we need to use an X-ray to check for internal cavities or date it more accurately."

"Just gone through a process"?

"You mean it was done recently?"

Bua's expression showed surprise.

"I'm not sure..."

Phinya replied, her tone of indecisive.

"Some items can be well preserved after hundreds or thousands of years if they are well preserved and not disturbed. But this is too good. Normally there would be signs of gnawing by insects, damage, deterioration or even fungus. I'm not sure because I haven't seen other materials to compare, such as linen used to wrap the body, jewelry or other items. The type and age of the fabric and the method of weaving can give a rough idea of when it was made, but we need to determine the exact age first."

"And why does it still look so good after falling from that height?"

Bua asked, perplexed.

"I assume it was put in a safe."

Phinya answered, with a tone of certainty.

"Is that the procedure? I don't know much about it."

Bua admitted honestly.

"Also, I noticed signs of resin applied to preserve the condition, which caused the skin to become rough, stiff and dry."

Phinya said, touching the top of the skull.

"But perhaps it didn't go through the final wrapping with fabrics, so the bony parts of the skull are not deformed because they weren't wrapped tightly. In any case, we need to find out the origin and the legality, because if it's not legal, we'll have to find a way to return it to the owner."

"It's up to you. You know more about these things than I do."

Bua commented, shrugging.

"Have you find any other parts with similar characteristics, like linen, jewelry or something that might be related?"

Phinya asked.

"I didn't find any." Bua shake her head.

"Just that one piece, and even if there were more, would it have survived the fire?"

"That's why I asked if you found more."

Phinya replied, making Bua frown.

"I didn't find any. And if I did, I wouldn't tell you either."

"If you keep annoying me, I'll torment you all night and you won't be able to sleep in peace."

Phinya threatened, with a serious tone.

"Okay, okay, if I find anything, I'll let you know immediately, Detective Phinya."

Bua replied, joking.

"Go to work now." Phinya ordered.

"Did I tell you today that you don't look anything like your mommy, but are you just as bossy?"

"Go quickly!" Phinya insisted, firmly.

□Episode 05□

That afternoon, Busaya managed to recover a few more body parts from the passengers who had died in the accident. Among the finds were a wrist, an arm, and a right ankle. These parts were almost intact, if not for the fact that they were completely separated from the original bodies and belonged to different people. She, Phinya, and the forensic officers from the police department had to face the arduous task of reassembling these disconnected parts to their respective bodies.

The dilemma was to join a leg to a torso, only to discover that they belonged to different individuals. The complexity of identification in disasters and accidents lies precisely in this point. The discovery of the mummified skull the previous morning still disturbed her, to the point that she could barely concentrate on her work all afternoon. It was intriguing that something like that was there, probably brought by someone who had no idea that this would be his last flight.

However, when she looked through the passenger files, she noticed that some seemed to have some connection to the antiques trade, which explained a little of the strangeness of the situation. Despite her desire to delve deeper into the victims' stories, the most urgent task at that moment was to recover as many fragments as possible as quickly as possible.

Bua remembered a rumor that circulates in the archaeological community about how some mummified bodies or sarcophagi have curses that affect those who disturb the eternal sleep of the deceased. Although it was not scientifically proven, she never underestimated the forces that cannot be seen. There are phenomena that science cannot explain. As a physical anthropologist, who studies the history of humanity from prehistoric times to the behavior of certain animals, she knew that there are many things that science cannot answer or that cannot be seen and explained through the

eyes of science, especially when it comes to ancient times, before the emergence of science.

Nature and humanity have existed for much longer than the first scientific theories, which were only developed and recorded later. For this reason, Bua has never closed herself off to stories that seem to have no concrete explanation. There are so many things in the world that are still unknown, and the curse of the mummies is one of them. It's a good thing Phinya was there when it was discovered. Otherwise, she wouldn't have known what to do.

Another question that arose was: how did that skull get there? Busaya had heard teachers talk about the antiques trade, where the older the piece, the more valuable it would be. The process of mummification has long intrigued and fascinated archaeologists. In addition to the method itself, which preserved the bodies in an era without chemicals, this knowledge was developed through the wisdom of the time and the resources available. Naturally, ancient relics like these would be highly valuable.

In this world, there are many strange people who want to own these relics, instead of leaving them as cultural heritage and a source of educational value. Over time, these items end up being lost, without ever bringing any significant benefit. Busaya was well aware of this reality, as evidenced by a case that had recently made the news. A skull of *Homo erectus*, a distant relative of modern humanity, had been stolen while being transported to another country for an exhibition on evolution.

The search was still ongoing, and it was almost certain that it would be lost over time, representing a great loss to anthropology. But that is precisely why they are important. Because specimens like these are extremely rare. Finding an extinct human fossil is like looking for a needle that has been dropped into the ocean. *Homo erectus* is one of the human species most closely related to *Homo sapiens*, modern humans. The name "*erectus*" refers to the upright posture, perpendicular to the ground.

But why did they become extinct? This is a fascinating question for anthropologists, and these fossils could help understand, explain, or even

answer that question. But unfortunately some people prefer to display these relics in their homes, like trophies.

"Where should I put this?"

The young voice made Bua raise her head and look towards the entrance of the tent. She's alone at that moment, as Phinya had left about ten minutes ago to inspect a body found at the edge of the forest, about six hundred meters from the wreckage of the plane.

"Put it on that empty stretcher, please. I'll finish this here and I'll check it out."

"Ok."

Replied the forensic officer, who seems to be about seven or eight years younger than her, before placing the newly recovered body, still wrapped in a cloth, on the bed.

The officer placed the body in the place indicated by Bua.

"Thank you very much." She said.

Bua continued to work for several hours. Initially, she intended to check the newly arrived body, but, realizing that almost two hours had passed since dinner time, she decided that if she didn't finish soon, she would end up going without food.

The deadline for the work was fifteen to twenty days, due to the need to clear the area and make it available for local agriculture again. Twenty days to locate all the bodies and identify the fifteen victims with only five forensic experts and investigators was clearly not enough. Just putting the body parts together correctly was already an extremely complicated task.

There was still a lot of work to be done, and if the Police Department requested assistance, the research institute would still have to deal with the remaining parts. And Bua knew that was exactly what would happen. At this point, they were reviewing passenger records to speed up the

identification of the victims and to investigate anyone who might be related. Not to mention the mummy, which should never have been there in the first place.

In the last five or six days, Bua and Phinya had only managed to gather and identify two complete bodies. The process of walking the area, photographing, and then placing the remains in plastic bags took almost half a day. The department's forensic team officers were in charge of collecting tissue samples and sending them to the lab for genetic analysis, which would be compared with the families' samples to confirm the victims' identities.

When Bua finally returned to her tent, it was almost nine o'clock at night. After sitting down to eat and discussing the progress of the investigation into the cause of the accident with the director of the Aviation Department, and curiously enough he hadn't mentioned anything about the mummified skull that had been found, she assumed Phinya hadn't informed him yet. Although she found this odd, she decided not to question it.

Phinya had offered to take responsibility, and she wasn't interested in prolonging a conversation with her pet stress. In fact, that conversation was probably the longest and most productive they'd had without one trying to fly at each other's throats.

Perhaps maturity had softened past rivalries, Bua thought. The heated arguments of before now seemed insignificant. In truth, she had nothing against Phinya. Bua saw this mission as a job opportunity, but also as a chance to contribute to the common good. In her opinion, that made it worthwhile.

She wasn't sure who had asked Phinya to do this, or if Professor Nisara knew about it, but since the professor didn't mention it, she figured she probably didn't know. If that was the case, Phinya would already be known outside of academi cicle.

When she entered the tent, she found it empty. She decided to write the day's report before getting ready for bed. She didn't have much time to rest, and the time she did have was more sacred than anything else. She

sometimes wondered if this intense need for rest was genetic or an evolutionary trait.

As a theorist, Bua was an expert on the evolution of primates and mammals, especially humans and apes. Her interests focused on the evolution of human beings from prehistoric times to the present day, whether in body structure, behavior patterns or the development of the central nervous system. She studied how these changes were connected to the more refined perception and movement of modern humans, who originated from primates. The transformation from a horizontal walking posture to an upright position, perpendicular to the ground, altered the structure of the spine and the change in the structure of the human body over time, adapting to gravity, raises a central question: how modern humans evolved, both in terms of physical structure and survival behaviors, to ensure the continuity of their species.

In addition, Bua had an exceptional ability to analyze the physiology of mammals, primates and humans. Her extensive studies in evolutionary research gave her great expertise in identifying and classifying different body structures, such as skulls or bones of various animal species. However, the only aspect that Bua regretted was her lack of experience in the field, something that Phinya easily surpassed.

After about fifteen minutes of rest, her irritable behavior returned. They didn't exchange a single word, and Bua was certain that Phinya wasn't interested in talking either. She heard her pacing for a while before finally lying down. In the middle of the night, Bua was awakened by a noise, the same kind of sound she had heard on the night of the robbery. She noticed Phinya moving, but this time, she didn't leave the tent.

"Don't turn on the light."

Phinya whispered, as the sound of gunshots echoed.

"Stay quiet."

Even without understanding what was happening, Bua decided to follow the instructions.

She heard a familiar click and recognized the sound of a gun's hammer being cocked. The gun then pointed toward the entrance of the tent, while Phinya, who was holding it, lay down. The sounds of footsteps coming from outside continued, making her hold her breath.

The noise from outside made Bua's heart race, followed by gunshots that broke the silence. Then the footsteps began to move away quickly, each running in a different direction.

"Fire!" Someone shouted outside.

"Don't go out, no matter what you hear."

Phinya ordered in a firm voice.

"And don't turn on the light until I come back."

Phinya said quickly before running outside.

The shouts from outside instructed everyone to put out the fire as quickly as possible. Several times, Bua thought about going out to help, but Phinya's orders kept her where she was. She knew that if she didn't obey her orders, she would probably make a fuss and be looked down upon, very badly.

'If she doesn't come back in ten minutes, I'm going out.'

Bua thought, feeling her anxiety grow. Fortunately, about eight minutes later, Phinya came back and finally turned on the light. Bua sat up in bed, anxious for answers.

"What happened?"

"Someone tried to find or destroy something."

Phinya replied.

"When I ran outside, the main tent was on fire. The work tent was also searched and was about to be set on fire, but the officers managed to prevent the worst. But those responsible managed to escape."

She sighed, sitting forward on the makeshift bed.

"Change of plans, Bua. Maybe we should collect the bodies and take everything somewhere else. It's not safe here, there are too many thieves, and the place is too open to be properly protected."

"Are you okay?"

Bua's voice came out hesitant, without her realizing it, as she nervously adjusted her glasses and looked to the side, trying to disguise her concern.

"I'm fine."

Phinya replied, with a surprisingly soft tone.

"You said the work tent was searched?"

Bua asked again after a brief pause, frowning.

"What should we do now?"

"Tomorrow, call the professor."

Phinya suggested quickly.

"Ask for permission to use the research building to store the remains while we wait for identification. It's safer and more practical there."

"And you, Phinya?"

Bua asked, still uncertain about what would come next.

"I need to take care of a few things first before heading back."

Phinya answered directly.

"Okay, that's a deal then." Bua agreed.

"Rest, Bualoy. There's nothing more to fear."

Phinya said, with comforting firmness. Bua simply nodded before lying down again.

"Does this happen often when you go out in the field?"

"In this world, there are greedy people everywhere, wanting what doesn't belong to them."

Phinya answered in a calm voice.

"I think so too..."

"Rest, Bua. We'll deal with the rest tomorrow."

"Okay..."

This time, Bua couldn't resist and remained silent.

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What the hell!

The already difficult job had just gotten even harder. Bua was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Which meant she would have to start the job all over again!

The things inside the work tent were completely disturbed from the previous night. Some bones that had been carefully stored in bags or wrapped in cloth were all out of place. And the paperwork, where she had recorded the identification of only three bodies, had also been messed up. All of the work of more than a week had been destroyed.

Luckily, nothing had been stolen.

'As soon as I finish this job, I'll put a curse on those bastards myself!'

Bua thought furiously.

Phinya's idea of collecting the remaining bodies and taking them to the research institute seemed sensible. It was better to follow through with this plan before someone came back to rummage through and destroy all the hard work they had done so far.

More than a week had passed, and Bua was feeling exhausted.

“You have no idea how hard it is to separate each individual bone from each side of the body.”

Bua thought in frustration. And on top of that, there was the pressure of making sure no parts were mixed up.

Even though she wanted to take some time to cool off, Bua knew she didn't have that luxury. In fact, this particular mission was taking up too much of her life. Before this, she had asked her advisor for some time to prepare for her full-time research job. She also had to start writing lesson plans for her teaching position, since she had previously been just an assistant. Not to mention the research project she had been assigned as the leader of, and now, this special assignment. There didn't seem to be any time for Bua to rest and make the transition from PhD student to full-time researcher.

She sighed deeply before searching for her gloves in the toolbox and getting to work with a tired head. She bent down to pick up a forearm bone, the ulnar bone, from one of the victims that had been thrown on the floor, and carefully placed it on a cloth. Then she picked up a male skull, about forty years old, which still had fragments of tissue attached.

Bua's day was still very long...

She concentrated on her work for about an hour, until the clock struck eight in the morning. Then she got up to call her counselor, as she had agreed with Phinya. Although she had not been very happy to see her at first, she now felt a certain relief to have Phinya around. At least she felt like she had someone to help her think of solutions, even if she couldn't exactly call her a friend.

Phinya had been through situations like this many times before, which made her more capable of dealing with it. Perhaps that was why, during her studies, her teachers often sent her to the field. Maybe it was so that she could learn how to deal with these situations that were certainly not in the textbooks. There were thieves interested in stealing the wreckage of the plane or the belongings of the deceased passengers to sell them.

Another possible reason could be that the teacher had to keep Bua and Phinya apart, to prevent them from killing each other in the laboratory, where there were several objects that could easily be used as weapons, such as the arm or thigh bone, which were large enough to break a head, or even hammers and chisels. For Bua, modern humans were a constant source of headaches.

This thought made her sigh with relief that Phinya was around, even if her arrogant habits and sharp tongue had not changed. Bua went out to call her teacher. At this time, it must still be daylight in Panama, and she could see Phinya outside, crouched down and hurriedly collecting remains in bags. Their work that day would definitely not end so easily.

Bua decided that in the afternoon she would go out to explore and collect evidence outside the work tent, since she had spent most of the morning inside. She was walking aimlessly, carrying her toolbox and a small shovel in her left hand, when she passed what was left of the plane's tail, which was now in such a deplorable state that it was barely recognizable.

She crouched down next to the wreckage and began working immediately. Despite her concentration, the question of the mysterious skull still lingered in her mind. Carefully, she began to remove pieces of the plane from the area that the police had cordoned off with stakes, where they had found parts of the victims' bodies. Without moving anything yet, she spotted a bone that appeared to be the sternum of one of the victims.

Someone whose body had been so destroyed by the explosion that there were barely any bones left was trapped under a metal structure that Bua had just removed. After sighing a few times, she began taking pictures and collecting evidence, doing her duty.

As she prepared to move on to the next collection point, something about two meters away caught her attention. Bua immediately moved closer, using her hands to brush away the metal debris, dust, and dirt from the object she saw. It was a silver box that appeared to be a shockproof safety box, about forty by eight centimeters. It was turned upside down, and the lid, which had been locked with a small key, was open. This caused Bua to tilt her head in puzzlement. She lifted the camera hanging from her neck, snapped a few photos, and slowly turned the box over, remembering Phinya mentioning a similar box the day before.

Inside the box was a roll of paper, tied with a black ribbon, in very poor condition. The paper appeared to be pulp, with some of it torn, though Bua could not tell if the damage had occurred before or after the plane crash. In addition to the tear marks, the paper was soiled with dirt and dust, and had been crumpled. From what Bua could tell, it looked very old. She tentatively touched it with her fingertips before reaching for an evidence bag to store the artifact, following standard procedure.

However, something made her hesitate. Thinking for a moment, she decided to grab the radio attached to her waist and call Phinya. In less than three minutes, Phinya arrived at the scene.

"Is there anything I can help you with, Dr. Busaya?"

Phinya's sarcastic voice caused Bua, who had her back to her, to let out a long sigh of frustration.

"Why do you always make me feel like I'm wrong when I talk to you, huh?"

Bua's tone of voice revealed her tiredness.

"I was just joking around a bit."

Phinya replied before crouching down next to Bua.

"What did you find, Bua?"

"Well...I found something that I don't even know where to start asking."

Bua replied hesitantly.

"It seems... strange."

The statement made the doctor who had just arrived from abroad narrow her eyes, observing the crumpled roll of paper in the direction Bua indicated. Phinya, wearing gloves, picked up the curious object and began to examine it. After a few moments, Bua noticed that Phinya's eyebrows were furrowed in an expression of deep concentration.

"It really is strange. To say that this is out of place is an understatement, considering what we found yesterday."

"Now in Thai, please." Bua replied.

"I don't quite understand what you're trying to say."

This made Phinya look up and give Bua an irritated look, before returning her attention to the object in her hands.

"This is an ancient scroll with hieroglyphics. I remember seeing something similar during a field expedition."

Phinya explained.

"It's an excerpt from *'The Book of the Dead.'*"

"Oh," Bua exclaimed upon hearing this.

"The Book of the Dead' and a mummy... that makes sense, considering the context."

The mention of the 'Book of the Dead' brought to Bua's mind the time she had visited a museum and seen one of these texts. It is said that in early times, the 'Book of the Dead' was carved into stone and reserved only for the pharaohs. Later, when it became more common, it was written on papyrus, a flexible and weather-resistant material.

"The 'Book of the Dead' contained spells and prayers, and was placed in tombs with the deceased, as it was believed that the knowledge contained in the book would help the soul of the deceased navigate the underworld. This book was used to overcome obstacles and fight demons on the way to the underworld, ensuring safe passage. It was a belief about the afterlife of the ancient Egyptians."

"Exactly." Phinya agreed.

"Can you read this?"

"I'm not exactly fluent, Bua." Phinya replied.

"But I recognize the writing style. Hieroglyphics use images and symbols to convey meaning, so I can understand the general message. I'll decipher this more calmly in the tent."

Then she asked for a ziplock bag to store the roll of paper as evidence.

"Ok." Bua replied promptly.

"Thank you very much, Phinya."

Bua notices a glance directed at her for a brief moment before nodding in response.

"I'm at your disposal."

She replied, before moving away from the area.

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□Episode 06□

"The Professor said there's a problem."

Bua, who was approaching Phinya from behind, announced:

"She also said that if there was any urgency or if we couldn't get in touch, I was to act as I thought best."

This made the other Doctor turn around, looking away from the aviation officers who were recovering the wreckage of the fuselage, broken into two parts and scattered about fifteen meters away.

"Great, then do what you think best."

Phinya nodded.

"I've spoken to the director of the center in charge. He will coordinate with the police department and help transport the victims remains. We're asking for three or four vehicles, and they've requested that the institute help identify the remaining bodies."

"No problem. I'll call to prepare the place in advance."

"So, we're set," Phinya stated firmly.

"What did you find out about the Book of the Dead we found?"

Busaya asked.

"Have you managed to decipher it yet?"

"Well..." Phinya paused, thinking.

"From what I've observed, I'm not sure if it's authentic or fake. The text of the prayers written there seems to be from someone wealthy, since the content is extensive, the hieroglyphs are elegant, clear and organized. It must have been written by a scribe who had knowledge or studied a lot about the afterlife, which means it must have been someone well-educated for the time."

Phinya explained in detail.

"It could have been a student, a priest or an astrologer, someone who would certainly have a good level of education. This makes the cost of writing the Book of the Dead quite high. I believe that the owner of this book we found must have been someone very wealthy or perhaps even from a high class."

The doctor frowned thoughtfully before continuing:

"Actually, it is necessary to examine the fibers of the paper to determine what they are made of, since each era used different materials. The type of ink and the content can also indicate what period the document is from. I took some photos and sent them to a friend, but I am not sure when I will hear back."

"This is getting weirder and weirder,"

She commented worriedly.

"Some things seem out of place."

Her eyes moved, considering the situation.

"Mummies and the Book of the Dead, those two items should not be here. I have heard that these things are cursed."

As for these curses, I prefer not to comment, as I do not know much about the subject."

Phinya replied in a neutral tone.

“But even if they existed, over time they probably lost strength, or people simply no longer fear them. After all, we see looters digging up tombs and robbing the graves without worrying about curses or anything like that.”

"Greed conquers everything."

Busaya agreed, nodding in approval.

"Do you know what's missing?"

Phinya asked, raising a question that make Bua raises her eyebrows.

"We have a mummy and the Book of the Dead, but there's something missing."

"What?"

Bua answered with another question, unsure of what she should say, before stopping to think for a moment.

"The resin used to embalm the body, which would be the final step."

“Clever,”

Phinya commented, praising, which made Bua smile a little. The other, watching, couldn't help but smile too.

"What do you think about this?"

"I'm not sure," Phinya replied hesitantly.

“What's really strange is that the signs of time on the skull have disappeared. As I said before, if it was an ancient artifact, there should be stains, deterioration, or mold marks. We need to confirm the age of the object first."

"I understand."

"Maybe if we know more about the victims of the plane crash, we can connect the pieces and find out how the skull and the parchment ended up here."

Phinya said, looking into Bua's dark eyes through her square-framed glasses.

"We'll have to wait for the police to investigate the history and question the witnesses to see if we can get more information."

"Alright, for now, let's continue with our work."

Bua replied calmly, not sure what to make of the situation. This was one of her first fieldwork assignments, quite different from Phinya's experience, who seemed to know much more and have a better ability to deal with the circumstances.

"I'm going to hand the parchment over to the police, in case any relatives of the accident victims come looking for it. If it's authentic, it has considerable value, but I'm going to suggest they consult an archaeology expert to investigate further, perhaps it will reveal something new to us."

"I need to include this in my report to Professor."

Bua said, breaking the silence.

"No problem."

Phinya replied, before the conversation faded away.

"Um... Phin."

Bua suddenly called, causing the other to raise her eyebrows in question upon hearing her name.

"When this work is over, are you leaving?"

The question made Phinya turn around slowly.

"There's no reason for me to stay here, is there?" Phinya replied

"Oh... right"

"Especially with you around, no way."

Phinya joked, but Bua didn't let it go and quickly retorted in a firm voice:

"And have you ever wondered if I want to continue working with you?"

The comment made Phinya laugh out loud.

"Aaaaaah, I would love to continue working with you... but no. But anyway, thank you. That's it, Bua."

Phinya concluded, leaving the tent, leaving Bua watching her through her glasses, while contradictory feelings begin to arise in her mind.

After the unexpected incident, it took another five days to complete the recovery of the victims' bodies, without any other unforeseen events, thanks to the increased security in the area, which now covered a larger area.

Bua sighed in relief when the last bone was placed in the black bag. During this time, she and Phinya didn't talk much beyond what was necessary for work. However, the atmosphere between them, which had been tense before, began to improve, at least they were not exchanging barbs like before. Maybe it was because they were focused on the work at hand or because their responsibilities had increased, leaving them less time to think about the past.

"What are you going to do with the mummy's skull?"

Bua asked as they both stood in the tent, organizing the last details before they began to transfer the material to the research building.

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The next morning, at the institute.

"Leave it to me. When I get back, we'll talk." Phinya said.

"When? I don't have much experience with this, so I can't make all the decisions for you."

"Leave it to me." Phinya repeated.

"In the meantime, check the artifact. I want to know how old it is."

"I'm not an expert in this." Busaya replied.

"At the institute, no one specializes in historical civilizations, and we've never seen an original artifact of this kind. Besides, we don't have the necessary tools."

"You're a researcher, so open a book and do your research."

Phinya suggested impatiently.

"I'm afraid of messing it up."

Busaya admitted.

"Then don't mess it up."

Phinya retorted, irritated.

"It's exactly the same as when you take any other skull to analyze."

"Talking is easy when you already have experience. I've never done it."

Busaya replied.

"And we don't have the necessary equipment either."

"Then light some incense and say a prayer first."

Phinya said, mixing sarcasm with frustration.

"Leave it to me. I'll tell you what to do."

"And where are you going? Aren't you going to come back to stay here?"

"Stay where? I'm not a CLT like you, no." Phinya replied.

"Talk to the Professor. With your skills, you could easily become a professor."

Bua suggested.

"Or maybe work as a researcher at the institute."

"Work with you? No way."

Phinya quickly denied, shaking her head.

"We don't have to work together."

Bua replied.

"We can have separate research projects. Your office can be on another floor; I can move to the floor above yours."

"Are you that worried that I won't have anything to do?"

"Even if we don't like each other, that doesn't mean I want you to be a failure."

Bua replied, making it clear that, despite their differences, she didn't wish Phinya any harm.

"Alright then."

Bua replied with a slightly hesitant voice as she adjusted her glasses on her face, trying to hide her nervousness.

"Do as you wish."

She said, ending the conversation abruptly.

"Actually, I wasn't worried, I just like to meddle in other people's lives."

She concluded, turning quickly and heading towards the door.

"Leave the skull with me, I'll come back to analyze it later."

"Deal."

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A black seven-seater SUV stopped in front of Dr. Busaya as she waited for the Department of Aviation's transport to return to the capital. That would be her last day at the crash site, as the recovery work was finally complete. The remains of the fifteen victims, although incomplete, would be taken to the Bioanthropology Research Institute for identification. As for the enigmatic mummified skull, it was carefully stored in a large bag that Bua carried over her shoulder.

To most people, carrying around a dead person's skull might seem bizarre, but for an anthropologist, it was almost routine.

During her college days, during basic anatomy classes, it was common to take anatomical specimens back to the dorm to study, in case she didn't have enough time during class. However, in recent years, the landlord of the apartment commented that he sometimes noticed strange and unexplained events, which made Bua avoid taking these objects home so often.

In addition to the mummified skull, which was duly recorded in the accident site investigation report, Bua also brought back to the institute other fragments of nearly unrecognizable bodies, with the help of the police. As for the papyrus, Phinya handed it directly to the police, considering it essential evidence.

"Come on, Bua. I'll take you."

Said the driver of the SUV, which had been rented from a local company at the airport. She rolled down the passenger side window, making Bua hesitate for a moment, but then nodded and opened the door, climbing into the car.

"Thanks," she murmured in a soft voice.

"But let's stop for something to eat first, I only had a cup of coffee this morning."

"Okay. Wake me up when we get there. I'll take a nap first."

"Besides being an Uber driver, am I an alarm clock now?."

Phinya commented sarcastically.

"I've spent the whole week without sleeping properly, let me rest a little, please, for the love of God."

Replied Bua, closing her eyes and settling into the seat. Phinya, upon hearing this, made a comment:

"You're still as sleepy as ever."

But Bua was already too far away to respond, too exhausted to continue the conversation. She only woke up about thirty minutes later, still groggy, moving to straighten up.

"Baibua, we won't stop for food, okay?."

Phinya's voice sounded slightly strained, and Bua noticed a worried expression on her face.

"What happened?"

"I'm not sure."

Phinya replied, looking at the rearview mirror repeatedly.

"But it seems like a car has been following us since we left the accident scene."

Bua immediately turned to look. She sees a black two-door pickup truck following at a reasonable distance, but not too close.

"A black pickup truck?"

"I don't think it's safe to stop now."

Phinya justified.

"Okay."

Bua replied, trying to hide the tremor in her voice, but Phinya noticed the slight hesitation.

"Don't worry, Baibua. Maybe it's nothing."

Phinya said, trying to calm her down. Bua looked at her, feeling the car accelerate a little, while the truck also increased its speed.

"Take a deep breath, Baibua. It's going to be okay."

Phinya said, noticing that Bua's breathing was getting faster.

"Uh-huh."

Bua replied, although her voice didn't sound as confident as she would have liked.

"I'll try to lose them."

Phinya said, tightening her grip on the steering wheel.

"Open the map and see where the nearest police station is. Let's stay on the main road; no shortcuts or alleys, it's too dangerous. First we'll look for the

police, then we'll see what to do. If you get the chance, write down the license plate of the car."

Phinya continued, while Bua took out her cell phone, her hands shaking. At this point, she was pretty sure that the car was really following them.

"It's about ten kilometers from here."

"Guide me there, okay?"

"Oh, okay."

"Don't be afraid, Baibua. I won't let anything happen to you."

Phinya said firmly, trying to reassure her.

"If someone is going to do something to you, they'll have to go through me first."

Bua knew that was an inappropriate joke, but at the same time, it was a form of consolation in Phinya's typical style, always with a touch of sarcasm. However, this time, Bua couldn't muster a smile. She didn't even have the strength to respond as usual. Her heart began to beat faster, and her hands were sweating as she looked at the map on her phone.

Her voice was shaky and uncontrollable, and she took deep breaths every few moments, trying to calm herself down. In her mind, Bua just prayed that all her years of study and effort wouldn't be wasted here, on a deserted road next to a forest, in the middle of nowhere.

"We'll be fine, Bua."

Phinya said, more to herself than to her friend, as she keeps her focus on the road ahead.

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□Episode 07□

"We'll be fine, Bua."

The firm voice was an effort to comfort her. At this point, Bua felt a hard lump in her throat and tried to swallow it. Maybe this hard lump had a name: *fear*.

Besides, she felt a deep gratitude for whatever, or even karma, that brought Phinya to her. If she had to face this alone, she might have already lost her mind.

She notices that Phinya looked at the side mirror frequently, although she isn't speeding up any more than before, she still isn't sure.

Besides, the car that was following them had done nothing but continue in the same direction. When they reached the police station, everything should be resolved.

As fast as Bua's thoughts, the black pickup truck suddenly accelerated and passed on the left. As it passed Phinya's car, they both looked at the mirror, as if they had agreed, but they couldn't see who was inside due to the dark film. Then, the car passed them.

She could feel Phinya easing off the accelerator to slow down, as she was unsure whether the car was simply overtaking or had other intentions. The answer came within a few seconds, as the car suddenly pulled in front of her, forcing Phinya to slam on the brakes. If she hadn't eased off the accelerator earlier, the car would probably have flipped over.

"How far is it to the police station?"

"Five kilometers."

"Okay, please give me directions."

Phinya swerved into the left lane and sped up. She didn't know who these people were or what they wanted, but they could be the same people who had tried to steal a certain item a few nights ago and disappeared due to the increased security in the area. Or maybe they were interested in the valuable papyrus scroll, if she still had it.

One of the solutions that crossed her mind was to take these pursuers to the police station. At least if they saw that the situation had been reported to the police, and if the police were notified about the possible attempt to steal ancient artifacts, it could help prevent unexpected events. Bua saw Phinya look at the camera mounted on the front of the car, checking that it was still working properly. It was a good device for recording evidence before speeding off again.

"Phin..."

"It's okay, Bua."

Phinya said in a firm voice.

"Don't be afraid."

Phinya, who was behind the wheel, took advantage of the moment to accelerate and overtake, while the opposing car swerved. She knew she shouldn't stop until she reached the police station. Fortunately, the road was a main road, which made it easy to escape. The cars were far enough away and there was room to maneuver and escape. Every time she noticed Bua's breathing quicken, Phinya tried to calm her down.

"Everything will be okay, Bua."

And it was just as Phinya had said. They finally reached the police station in less than ten minutes. They filed a report before hurriedly heading back to the city that afternoon. Ever since the strange incident, Bua had remained silent the entire trip back, with an expression of slight fear still visible.

"Are you hungry, Bua?"

"I'm not hungry."

Bua replied neutrally.

"I feel like I'm still having trouble breathing."

"So let's find something to eat and rest a little."

Phinya decided.

"Then, when you calm down, you'll feel hungry."

Bua just nodded.

"Do you know who these people were?"

"I have no idea."

Phinya replied, as she turned the steering wheel to enter a restaurant she saw on the road.

"They could be the same ones who came looking for things before. The victims could have had valuable items, like the papyrus scroll we found. They must all be businessmen and we don't know anything about them."

"But we don't have anything."

"But they don't know that, do they? Maybe they are people who know what was on the plane and followed us because they saw us leaving the place. Maybe they just wanted to find out who we are or where we're going. It's a good thing we realized in time and managed to lose them before."

Phinya said.

"But, anyway, now that the skull is with us, we need to find out where it came from and then think about what to do. You take care of the papyrus"

scroll with the police. And besides... please make one or two models of the skull."

"What are they for?"

"Just in case."

"I understand. I will do that."

Bua replied, although she did not completely understand what Phinya was asking.

"I need to talk to professor about this."

"It's up to you."

Phinya said, starting to get out of the car.

"But now let's find something to eat."

The two of them spent about twenty minutes eating. Bua barely managed to eat anything due to the shock of the recent event. She did not know exactly what was happening and when the police questioned her, she could barely answer because she was confused. It was Phinya who provided the information for about an hour before they finished.

"I will drop you off at the institute. Leave your things in the building and then I will take you home."

"Don't worry. Just drop me off at the building." Bua said.

"You've helped me a lot these days."

"Don't be scared, Bua." Phinya assured.

"I'll charge you back."

"So come find me when you want to charge me."

Bua, now a little calmer, couldn't help but make a scathing observation.

"And how am I going to contact you if I need to?"

"I'll call you back."

"Why this mystery?"

Bua's voice started to get irritated.

"I still have to decide." Phinya explained.

"I'm not sure whether to come back here or stay there for a while longer. My work there isn't completely resolved yet."

"Is that so?"

The young rookie police officer nodded.

"I thought you were done."

"And I am. I received approval last month."

The calm voice replied.

"But the research isn't finished yet. There are documents that still need to be reviewed by the professor."

"Okay, then I won't do anything until you get in touch again. I'm going to see where that skull came from."

"Can you do it as fast as possible?"

"I'll try to speed it up, but it won't be that fast, I'm not an expert."

"Okay... I trust you."

Phinya replied, which made Bua immediately look at her.

"Even with your sharp tongue, your brain's knowledge of "modern human" is acceptable."

Phinya continued, noticing Bua's narrowing gaze. Bua opened her mouth to respond, but ended up saying nothing. The black SUV stopped in front of the research institute building about an hour later.

"Thank you so much, Phinya, for everything."

Busaya said, feeling it was time to say goodbye, as she reached out to grab the bag with the mummy's skull.

"In two hours, I'll come back to pick you up."

Phinya replied promptly.

"Don't look at me like that, I'm not done with you yet. Keep this in a safe place and don't tell anyone yet."

Busaya just nodded, a little hesitantly, and got out of the car. Phinya waited until she passed the security guard and entered the building. She let out a sigh of relief. In the past two weeks, a lot of events had happened, especially between her and that woman. No matter what she called her—Baibua or Bualoy—they were nicknames Phinya had created because she had not liked her since the time they were studying together.

How could she's not feel that way? Suddenly, the woman appeared out of nowhere as a scholarship student of Professor Nisara and passed the quality assessment and defense of her doctoral project in less than a year, while it usually took at least a year and a half or two years to pass. Some time later, Busaya started writing her first research paper; she wanted to finish her doctorate in three years, while most people took four or five years.

Then the professor began to take her to help with research projects, clearly intending for her to take on more responsibility, since the position of principal investigator at the institute was being decided.

It wasn't just Phinya who felt uncomfortable with Busaya. Many of her classmates also envied her, even calling her "*the teacher's pet.*" Meanwhile, Phinya was sent abroad, carrying crates and sarcophagi, walking ten or twenty kilometers at a time, not to mention the constant danger of thieves or bandits who stole antiquities to sell them, as happened at the recent crime scene.

Until one day the professor was planning to send her on a mission to Portugal, where there was news of the discovery of the oldest mummy in the world, with a preservation process different from that known in Egyptian methods.

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"Why don't you send Bua this time? I just got back."

Phinya suggested, trying to keep her voice neutral, as if it were an ordinary conversation.

"Bua is still developing her research."

Professor Nisara's deep voice replied.

"Besides, no one is as expert as you, Phinya."

"But I wanted to stay here for a while."

Phinya, still a doctoral student at the time, replied,

"You send me to other places all the time. When will I be able to finish? My colleagues are already way ahead."

Then, Phinya was faced with a question that left her speechless.

"Do you just want to finish it quickly or do you really want to be an anthropologist, Phinya?"

This simple question made her fall silent. Even though she was a doctoral student, with considerable knowledge in her field, she... didn't understand.

"If you just want to finish it, we can publish your work now and I'll schedule your defense so that you can finish it quickly. Is that what you want?"

The professor's voice remained calm, but Phinya felt as if a stone had lodged in her chest, causing an inexplicable discomfort.

She didn't know why the professor was asking her that question... Had the teacher already asked her "darling" that same question?

"I don't know what kind of answer professor expects from me.

"No, Phinya. That's a question you should answer for yourself, not for me."

"I don't see how this relates to the professor sending me around."

She continued, not giving in.

"Listen carefully, Phinya. If you're studying just to get a degree, that's what you'll be: a person who's graduated. When you leave here, you can add 'anthropology major' to your resume. Anthropology is the study of human origins in various dimensions, but I hope that what you'll gain as my students is the ability to see the value of humanity in a deeper way than others do."

The professor then looked away from the student.

"Think about it, Phinya, and next week, we'll talk again."

The professor's words stayed in her head all that week. Someone with a stubborn personality like Phinya couldn't understand the purpose of that question. Was this an additional test of ethics or morality? It didn't seem like it, she'd already taken that subject in her first year of studies. To be a real anthropologist? See the value of humanity?

Someone like her would probably never understand that. There was no answer in any book, and what did that have to do with her desire to finish her degree early?

The following week, the professor called her for another meeting. As she walked to the office, Phinya still didn't have an answer to that question. She had spent the entire week reflecting, searching for information on the internet and in books. However, all the answers she found were so confusing that she couldn't draw a clear conclusion.

However... the first question the professor asked when Phinya sat down in front of her was:

"Have you heard about the stolen Homo erectus bones, Phinya?"

The then PhD student just nodded slowly.

"If you had to give a price, how much would you estimate the nearly one million-year-old human bones to be worth?"

"I don't know." Phinya answered simply.

"If our ancestors or distant relatives had known that their descendants had gone so far as to steal even their bones to sell, they would probably have caused sapiens (modern humans: Homo sapiens) to become extinct sooner. They wouldn't have let evolution continue to see this, what do you think? Or maybe they became extinct sooner because they didn't want to be around to see these things."

The professor let out a light laugh as she finished speaking.

"Reaching this era, everything has a price, including humanity."

She concluded.

"As an anthropologist, I must say that I'm quite disappointed."

Phinya just nodded, although she still didn't understand the point her teacher was trying to make.

"So, do you want to graduate or not?"

"I... I'm not sure."

"Then I'll decide for you. Tomorrow, you should apply for a transfer and send your credits to the graduate department. I'll transfer you to study with a colleague of mine abroad with a full scholarship that I had already reserved for you. There, you can graduate in two years. The research work you left unfinished here will be continued by Bua."

"I don't understand."

"You want to graduate fast, so I found a way for you."

Phinya didn't answer anything, she was completely confused. She left the room without understanding why, all of a sudden, her teacher wanted her to transfer to a university abroad and leave the research work to someone else. At that moment, Busaya, who was a third-year doctoral student, crossed Phinya's path in the opposite direction. Upon seeing Phinya, Bua immediately turned her back.

"Baibua!"

Phinya shouted, making the other turn around again.

"I heard that you're going to continue my research."

"Yes." Busaya replied, in a calm voice.

"You're going to get the finished work, aren't you? I've already done half of it."

The professor said that you won't be here, so I agreed to continue. Bua replied.

"Isn't that right?"

"You really are the sweetheart."

Phinya said in a sarcastic tone.

"Think what you want."

Bua quickly cut the subject short. She didn't want to prolong the conversation. She didn't want to argue, she didn't want to fight. In fact, it was a good thing that the teacher had arranged a scholarship for Phinya to go study abroad. Whenever Bua arrived at the building, she felt like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, because every time they met, Phinya would always try to provoke her with some sarcastic comment.

She never understood why Phinya had such a grudge against her, since they had hardly ever spoken. At work, they usually communicated through the professor who was her advisor or Bua's close friend, Fang. In the case of the research that Phinya was accusing Bua of "stealing," it was also the professor who called Bua in and asked her to take over the project, something Bua accepted because she knew she couldn't refuse a request from the professor.

Now, however, the owner of the project was there, confronting her. Maybe this was some kind of karma. Maybe Bua hadn't done enough good deeds lately.

"If you want it back, you can have it. It's yours, after all. I would never take something from someone without their permission."

"I don't want your name on my work. And I'm not interested in selling the credits of the names."

In published research, the first name is the main researcher's and the second and third are the collaborating researchers'.

"I don't want your name on my work, do you hear me?" Phinya said.

"Well, don't think I want your work."

Busaya replied.

"Talk to the professor directly, then. Then, let me know what you decided, or let someone else do the work. I'm really not interested in something that's yours. If the professor hadn't asked, I wouldn't have gotten involved in this.

And even if the work is published, I'll have to do a purification ritual with the monks because you'll definitely come back to haunt me."

"Baibua! Enough! You want to take my work and you still have the audacity to talk to me like that!"

Phinya's voice was raised so high that the people around her started to come closer, but no one had the courage to intervene.

Someone bring Fang to calm this down here, someone whispered in the background. Fang was Bua's close friend, who had known her since their master's degree.

"You're the one who's exaggerating, Phinya. Know that if the professor hadn't asked me to, I would never get involved, especially in something that's yours. It bothers me. All this drama, shouting and confusion is just a waste of time. I need to sleep."

Bua replied before quickly turning to leave.

"You'll pay for this, Baibua."

Phinya muttered. But Bua didn't care, nor did she turn around to answer. She left there irritated, feeling even more sleep deprived. And now, this fight only worsened her mood. The next day, Phinya handed in her resignation letter and disappeared from the university.

A week later, Busaya received a notice from the graduate school informing her that she would be investigated for academic and ethical misconduct, accused of misappropriating work. This was the height of it. It was not impossible that she would be expelled for this.

Phinya had left a giant bomb for her to deal with. If she had the chance, she would certainly seek revenge.

But if she never got that opportunity, she would at least wish Phinya would go far away.

□□□□

□Episode 08□

Phinya kept her promise, picking up Busaya by car two hours later. Bua soon found herself sitting in a restaurant not far from the research institute building. Up until that moment, she had been sitting in silence and eating peacefully, she seemed much calmer than Phinya had imagined.

"Haven't you recovered from shock yet, Buakong? You're quieter than usual."

However, Phinya only received a nod in response.

"I don't know how I should feel."

Busaya replied ambiguously.

"Are you scared?"

"A little. I mean, it was the first time I've ever experienced something like this."

Busaya paused, taking a deep breath to regain control.

"So, I really don't know how I should feel."

"Take a deep breath." Phinya advised.

"And you'll be fine."

"How do you deal with these things?"

This time, Bua was the one who asked.

"Or how do you accept these situations?"

The question made Phinya smile slightly, her eyes shining for a brief moment before quickly erasing the expression.

"When I first started doing fieldwork, there was a time when I was sleeping at the dig site, next to a campfire in Guatemala. Back then, we found fossils of *Australopithecus* (an ancient species of human). Suddenly, in the middle of the night, there was a big commotion, followed by the deafening sound of gunshots, like the ones we just heard."

"And what did you do?"

"My brain was telling me to find shelter,"

Phinya said.

"But you know, at that moment, I remember being completely paralyzed, like I was completely paralyzed. All I could do was turn over on my stomach and drag myself along the ground with my arms and legs. I was so terrified that I couldn't even stand up. My breathing was labored, and after moving only a few meters, I became motionless. I thought my life would end there, in a foreign country. I only managed to survive because a friend came and dragged me to shelter."

This was the first time Phinya had spoken to Bua in such a simple way, as if they really knew each other, a conversation that seemed more like an exchange of words between old friends who hadn't seen each other for a long time.

"You'll be fine, Buakong. Trust me,"

Phinya said, with a softness that Bua had never heard before. At that moment, their eyes met, Phinya's eyes shining with trust, while Bua's were still full of fear. She bit her lip before nodding and looking away.

"When are you going back overseas?"

"Why? Are you tired of me yet?"

"I'm just asking." Busaya replied.

"I mean, when I want to treat you a dinner to thank you for helping me."

"I need to talk to them first."

After that, the meal continued with few words exchanged between the two. Bua only glanced discreetly at Phinya from time to time, with a mixture of admiration and surprise. Phinya, who was usually talkative, now seemed quite calm and ordinary. In fact, Bua thought that Phinya seemed much more mature, perhaps due to the many experiences she had during her time away.

"So, you're not really going to come back to work here, Phinya?"

"They've already reserved a position for me there."

Phinya replied in a calm voice,

"But I haven't given my answer yet."

"What a pity, Phinya's rival said,

"The professor would probably like you to come back to help us here."

Those words make Phinya raises an eyebrow.

"The professor already has you."

Phinya replied harshly.

"You saw that I'm not much of a person."

Bua said.

"When I panic, I get completely lost."

"You just got scared, Bua."

It was as if those words were meant to comfort Bua, something she wasn't prepared to hear, making her look directly at Phinya through her square-framed glasses.

"Everything will be fine."

"I would feel much calmer if you're helping the professor."

"Why would I come here just to reassure you?"

Phinya shake her head, letting out a smile without realizing it.

"No, thank you."

"The professor has high expectations for you, Phinya. I'm telling you this in case you didn't know." Bua said seriously.

"But the professor always sends me to other places and insists on not letting me finish anything."

Phinya replied, not really believing what Bua had said.

"Look at you now. If I was the professor..."

Bua looked directly at Phinya.

"Of course... I would be proud."

Those words make Phinya's hand, which is holding a spoon, stop in the air for a moment. She looked up and meet Bua's eyes, full of sincerity, which caused a strange feeling of gratitude in the left side of her chest.

Before this, she had always wondered why classmates, seniors, and everyone around her seemed to like Bua so much. Bua seemed to be the teacher's favorite, often being called upon to help with important tasks. Among the seven classmates, five always sided with Bua when conflicts arose between them, while the other two preferred not to get involved. Now, Phinya was beginning to understand a little more why.

“I’m sorry if I said something wrong,”

Bua said, noticing Phinya’s silence.

“Did I say something that offended you?”

After that, the conversation fell silent.

“Don’t forget the work you promised. I’ll come back to check it.”

"Okay, but don’t be mad if I take a while. I need to take care of identifying the victims of the plane crash first. That's a mess and it's more urgent." Bua justified.

"Besides, I'm not very good at archaeology."

"You already have a doctorate, you know? Why do you keep saying that?"

"It's normal for people not to be good at everything or not to master certain areas."

"Your area of expertise is complaining about sleep, Bualoy."

"That's true." Bua replied immediately.

"I haven't been sleeping very well lately."

"Does your mommy know you’re working so hard?"

"So far, I’m the only one who’s graduated. Some have dropped out, others haven’t passed their thesis defense yet, and Fang is still in the Netherlands.”

Bua mentioned, referring to another PhD student she was close to.

“It might take her another year or two to finish. And if she stays there like you, I’ll call for help.”

"The professor’s favourite has to bear a heavy burden, Bua."

A mischievous smile appeared on the corner of Phinya's lips, and she then shrugged.

"There's nothing you can do about it."

"I'm not the favourite."

Bua retorted this time.

"Stop talking like that. You've received way more scholarships than everyone else, and you still say I'm the favorite?"

This time, Phinya didn't answer. She just kept smiling until the meal was over.

"Also, I almost forgot."

Phinya's calm voice sounded as they waited for the restaurant employee to bring the bill.

"During this time, try to avoid going back to the building. Luckily, we managed to lose whoever was following us before we got back. According to the rules, in situations like this, the names of the specialists or those involved are not disclosed. They probably don't know who we are, but it's better to be careful, you know?"

"So you're not going to tell me what happened, but you want me to do all this?" Bua asked.

"I'm not telling you because I don't know myself." Phinya replied.

"Okay."

Bua nodded easily.

"This time, I'll just accept following you. I'm not in the mood to argue."

"I'd like to see you try to contradict me, Bua."

"So now you're going to be my mother too?"

Bua replied with a slight irony.

"You love to give orders, huh?"

"Being the favourite is hard work, Dr. Bua."

"If you're not going to stay to help, you'd better keep quiet, Phinya."

After dinner that night, Phinya disappeared, as if she had never been there. Bua, meanwhile was completely absorbed in the work of identifying the victims of the plane crash, a task that came on suddenly and overwhelmed her so much that she could barely breathe, to the point of almost completely forgetting about the problematic mummified skull. Until, about a week later, she finally found some time.

Bua contacted a laboratory that had the necessary equipment for dating ancient objects, since the research institute where she worked was waiting for the budget to acquire the essential instruments. In fact, she had some knowledge and experience in this area, but the problem was the lack of adequate equipment, which in this case forced her to hire the services of another laboratory to carry out the tests.

However, the laboratory in question was already overloaded with other projects, which extended the deadline for dating the mummified skull. Bua was informed that the process could take about a month, but that they would do everything possible to speed it up, if possible. In addition, Bua was busy preparing the bone cleaning procedures for the next stage of identification, not to mention the classes she had to teach in place of her advisor, who was still in Panama for a technical visit and to develop a curriculum for cooperation between the two institutions.

A week after Phinya's disappearance, Professor Nisara returned from an anthropology conference abroad, but asked for about ten days to finalize the documentation for the cooperation project. During this time, Bua took responsibility for all the tasks.

"How are you, Bua?"

Bua's advisor, a woman in her fifties with a kind face, a robust body, short hair, and wearing a dark suit and pencil skirt, asked as she called her to a meeting a week after her return to the country.

"I'm fine, Professor."

"You look tired."

Commented Professor Nisara, noticing her former student's exhausted look.

"I saw the field report you sent me by email. Thank you very much."

"You're welcome, Professor."

Bua replied, thinking that it was something the advisor should know.

"And Phinya, how is she?"

"She looks fine." She replied.

"From what I know, she finished."

"Of course she finished. She wanted to finish quickly, and I helped her with that."

Commented the advisor.

"Is there anything specific you would like to discuss with me?"

"Actually, I wanted to inform you that I hired a new researcher."

Said the professor, observing her former student closely .

"He will help you with the classes. I would like you to focus more on your research. Besides, he will be the main researcher."

Upon hearing this, Bua immediately bowed in thanks.

"Thank you very much, Professor."

Said Bua, feeling relieved.

"He just finished his studies in England."

Informed the professor in a calm voice.

"Oh, I see," Bua replied simply.

"When does it start?"

"Probably within a week."

"Understood. Thank you very much, Professor."

"Bua, I need you to speed up the work related to the plane crash. The Aviation Department reported that the police, in charge of the case, mentioned that there might be something suspicious. They want to know if there are any anomalies in the bodies of the victims," The advisor explained.

"I don't think we can examine much more." Bua observed.

"I only brought back some parts of the bodies that we were able to recover. The bodies of the victims that were in better condition and that allowed identification were taken by the police to the Forensic Medical Institute. Unless there are injuries that affected the bones before the crash, we can examine that."

"Did you find anything suspicious during the inspection of the site?"

The teacher asked.

"Apart from the mummy's skull and the scroll of parchment that I mentioned to you, and the fact that there was an attempted robbery, I didn't find anything else."

Nisara's student replied.

"I am now sending the skull for antiquity analysis."

"I looked at the photos of the skull and the parchment in the report you sent. They look strange." Nisara commented.

"Phinya thought so too." Bua agreed.

"But we can't draw conclusions without knowing the exact age."

"Currently, antique collectors have shown more interest in these items. I heard that prices on the black market are rising. The older and more authentic the piece, especially if it is from the early eras when traditional methods were used, the higher the value. If the pictographic text is from a time when the 'Book of the Dead' was still restricted to the upper classes, the price may increase even more."

Associate Professor Nisara observed, interested in the conversation.

"Did Phinya mention anything else?"

Bua shake her head negatively.

"I couldn't get in touch with her."

"You two are still the same."

Nisara said, making Bua smile awkwardly.

"I tried, Professor, but I think Phinya really isn't okay with me." Bua admitted.

"I see. Well, if Phinya gets in touch with anything new, please let me know."

"Of course, Professor."

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One night, as Busaya was about to go to bed, a message notification popped up on the right side of her laptop screen before she could turn it off.

[How's the work I asked you to do going?]

'A demanding message from the professor?'

Bua, still sleepy, squinted as she adjusted her glasses and looked at the laptop screen. It was 11:33 p.m., and she was about to go to bed, getting ready to wake up at 5 a.m. to go to the research building the next morning.

But when she saw the name in the notification, Bua sighed deeply before adding the contact and starting to type a reply.

"I only have one mommy who can demand me."

The reply came quickly:

[So you've already recovered from the shock, huh? Are you brave now?]

"It's been almost two weeks."

Bua typed quickly in response.

[How's the work I left for you going?]

Phinya repeated the question, insisting.

"Which one? Between identifying the remains of the plane crash, the classes and the research, which one do you want first?"

Bua replied with a mixture of frustration and tiredness.

[Bua, stop annoying me, or I'll come back and rip your head off]

The message was loaded with a playful threat.

"Then you better come back soon."

Bua replied.

"If you take any longer, not even my head will be left."

[Being the favourite gets tiring, doesn't it?]

Phinya on the other end typed with a clear irony that Bua could almost hear in her mind.

"I was going to tell you, but I haven't gotten anything yet. The x-ray was installed and calibrated today. Tomorrow I'll try to use it, and then I'll send the skull to another lab to calculate the age. But it will take a while, the line there is long."

[I disappeared for so long and you still haven't solved this?]

"Don't rush me."

Bua, now an experienced researcher, typed quickly

"I'm doing it as fast as I can, but the work on the plane crash got in the way. Without the professor here, there was no one to take care of things. And this age analysis can't be done alone. I barely had time to breathe. I only managed to start identifying the victims of the plane crash two days ago. If you're in such a hurry, come back and you can follow up on this yourself. And bring money to send the samples, because I had to pay out of my own pocket. They still haven't managed to release the emergency budget, and the employee who approves this just returned."

[Bua...]

Phinya's frustration was evident.

"I'm serious."

Bua replied.

"If you're going to insult me, screw me. I'm going to sleep. I'll read what you sent me tomorrow morning. Good night."

With that, Bua left the chat and went offline.

“Next time I see you, Bua, I’m going to kill you!”

Phinya yelled at the computer screen in frustration.

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The next morning, however, Phinya didn’t leave any more messages than that. Since they had last had dinner together, Phinya had disappeared for two weeks, without giving any news. Bua didn’t know if she was still in Thailand or another country, and with all the workload, she didn’t have time to find out, since the two of them didn’t have each other’s contact information or social media.

It was strange to think that they had gotten to this point. The truth is that Bua and Phinya had never been very close friends, and even now, even after everything they had been through, the sarcastic words still slipped out every now and then. It was as if they couldn’t help it, even though Bua had already gotten over most of the resentment. After all, with Phinya already having finished her studies, what else could matter?

Back then, Bua was just an ambitious student, but not really sure why she was trying so hard. But then, she just wanted some peace. Her life had been entirely consumed by her studies, and it seemed like the rest of her days would also be swallowed up by books, lab work, and scientific papers.

Unlike Phinya, who had the opportunity to travel and see many places, Bua felt buried under a mountain of work, stuck in the same building every day, suffocating under her responsibilities. She couldn’t help but feel a pang of envy towards Phinya.

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□Episode 09□

The black zip-lock bag containing the bones of one of the victims of the small chartered plane crash that crashed in the central area of the province was placed on the stainless steel table in front of her. Busaya wasn't lying when she told the annoying Phinya that she barely had time to breathe, sleep, or even look away from the computer screen, let alone other tasks.

Although the advisor had returned from Panama, she was still busy with the paperwork for the cooperation with the Graduate School, which prevented her from returning to full-time classes for two weeks to a month. In other words, all the work and responsibilities fell on Bua, who had to take care of everything during that period.

"Phi Bua, the professor asked me to let you know again that the new researcher will start this week, but the date and time have not yet been announced."

"Ok, I already received the email about it this morning."

Bua replied, without looking up at her colleague.

"The students are already waiting."

"Let them come in in about ten minutes. I need to get ready quickly."

Busaya replied to the secretary of the research institute, a young woman of twenty-seven. In a few minutes, Bua would need to change roles, from researcher to professor in charge of the Physical Anthropology course of the first year of the university's master's degree, where the students were coming for a workshop at the institute.

And Phinya still had the audacity to send messages demanding the work. If she wants it done quickly, she should go back and do it herself. This thought made Bua let out a long sigh. Why did the 'dearest' insist on appearing in her thoughts now, when before she had barely remembered her existence, having almost forgotten her completely? However, after the plane incident, the mysterious mummified skull and Phinya's disappearance, Bua found herself thinking about her frequently, to the point of getting irritated by it sometimes. She herself did not quite understand why; sometimes.

Bua felt as if she was waiting for Phinya to return, not knowing for sure if she would decide to continue living abroad. Soon, Aon took the eight students to the laboratory, where Bua was already, keeping them in a separate area from the one containing the bodies of the victims of the plane crash. After twenty-five minutes of explaining the purpose and procedures of the workshop, Bua, now in her role as teacher, returned to her work, letting the students begin the activities as initially instructed, with Aon supervising.

She would still be stuck with these victims for quite some time. At the moment, only two bodies had been identified and confirmed. Meanwhile, the officials in charge were rushing to find the cause of the accident, which, according to the reports, could take a while longer, as they were still trying to locate the black box since returning from the crash site. In addition to Phinya, who was constantly on her mind, Bua also couldn't stop thinking about the problematic skull and the papyrus that accompanied it.

Carefully, she placed her hands on the sternum (Sternum), which still had some ribs attached, of one of the victims, slowly removing it from the zip bag before carefully placing it on the stainless steel table, along with the other bones that came in the same bag. Gently, she placed the newly removed bones in a glass display case, which was approximately five feet long and two feet high.

After arranging all the bones in the display case, she retreated to the workroom, which was reserved for the staff, and brought out a round glass jar about a foot in diameter. Bua opened the lid and carefully poured the contents of the jar into the display case. Thousands of fly larvae, often used to clean bones in museums, fell into the display case. This was the safest

method of removing the tissue attached to the bones while causing the least possible damage. She then let the larvae do their work, which would take about a week.

"Eat plenty, little animals. There's no need to rush, but it would be good if you finished soon,"

She said, almost as if she were talking to children.

About three hours later, after she had finished teaching the students, the lab was empty and quiet. Bones, one after another, were placed in the glass display case, followed by the fly larvae, which would remove the dead tissue and leave the bones completely clean. Although this method took longer, it was the safest way to preserve the evidence. The bones would not show any damage, unlike the boiling method, which was faster but strictly prohibited, or the use of corrosive substances such as bleach or hydrogen peroxide, even when diluted in a small percentage, these chemicals could still cause damage to the pieces. Although the mummified skull had already been sent to the lab to determine its age after undergoing x-ray examination, its origin was still uncertain. If one were to ask why someone would take an ancient relic, the body of a person who had undergone a mummification process, the answer would probably include at least two or three possibilities.

First, antique collectors who sometimes resell these items on the black market, as Professor Nisara mentioned.

Second, a more sophisticated hypothesis could be that the skull was used for worship. One of the concepts raised by archaeologists is that mummification was not just to preserve the body awaiting resurrection, but to create a divine statue for veneration. In fact, these two reasons alone would be enough to disturb anyone.

Although black magic and occult rituals are practiced in the country, mummification is something extremely far removed from everyday life. Therefore, the idea of using the skull as an idol for worship or as an amulet seems unlikely, not to mention that the flight was leaving the country, bound for Paris. However, the papyrus found with the skull could be more

understandable if the intention was to sell or auction it for profit. The whole case seemed disjointed and it would probably be necessary to wait for information from the black box to shed more light.

For now, Bua could only continue identifying the remaining victims, hoping to find some additional clue. She was almost certain that she wouldn't like the answers to these questions in the end. A plane crash, dead people, a mummified skull, and an ancient papyrus... Was this something normal? She wasn't sure.

Some parts were still missing, without any definite shape, and then there was Phinya... She had left her work behind like that... If Phinya didn't come back... Bua promised herself that she would go after her and wouldn't let her have a moment of peace. Phinya realized that she was sitting in the driver's seat of her black sedan, after more than three weeks of being missing.

She also realized that she was driving towards the building of the Bioanthropology Research Institute, after having returned home, taken a shower, changed her clothes, and packed her things. She herself didn't know why, but instead of resting to relieve her fatigue, she found herself driving towards this specific place.

"If I were the teacher, I would be proud of you..."

Those words echoed in her mind during the three weeks she was away, and even all the way back to Thailand.

Bua had said she was proud of her. The Earth must have been spinning backwards. The moment those words reached her ears, Bua, who Phinya had always considered a rival, suddenly... for a brief instant, when she heard that sentence coming out of her mouth... The only thing Phinya felt was that she had completely lost to Bua.

Those words circling around in her head made her restless. In fact, she almost didn't hesitate to refuse the academic position that the teacher had found for her. But then again, it was Bua who deserved a good lecture, because when Phinya texted her, she acted like she didn't want to reply and

even told her to swear, to leave a message that she would read when she woke up. Bualoy cared more about sleep than about her... or about work.

She had known about Bua's reputation as a sleepyhead since college, but from what she remembered, it wasn't that bad back then. Just being able to fall asleep in five minutes when they were in the field together was impressive enough. But now... Bua couldn't even have a conversation before running off to sleep. Phinya just wanted to check on the progress of the work and even gathered the courage to send a message saying she was coming back, but she didn't even have time to tell her, she cut the conversation short.

"If I find you, Bua, I'm going to kick your ass, for real this time."

Despite this, one thing the young doctor couldn't understand was why she couldn't wait until the next day to go after Bua, who had just landed less than three hours ago. Phinya thought about this the whole way there, and she also couldn't understand what she was feeling. It was as if she didn't want to wait, because even if she tried to sleep, she wouldn't be able to. She kept remembering the last time they worked together, Bua's scared face, and even though it had been almost a month ago, she could still remember it clearly. In the five years they had known each other, this was the first time Phinya had really looked at Bua differently.

Bua was still Bua, the same Busaya Phinya remembered from the first day of her doctorate until today. Five years had passed, and even though she had a doctorate degree, she still had the same nerdy face with square glasses, as always. But her eyes looked tired, exhausted by the research work and the lack of rest. Bua was more concerned about sleeping than anything else. Whenever she had a free minute, Phinya would see her hiding and looking for a place to sleep, as if she had been sleep deprived for a long time.

Although she still remembered what it was like to have Bua as a classmate, it seemed that her feelings towards her had changed. Changed in such a way that even as a doctor who had studied humans from different eras, Phinya could not define this human feeling. What was happening to her that she could not stop worrying about Bua? During the whole time she spent abroad, she could hardly find peace. She wanted to send a message, but

hesitated for a long time, until the last day, when she finally decided that she would pretend to ask about the progress of the work and suggest meeting for dinner.

However, this plan backfired because, as soon as Bualoy realized that she was trying to demand the work, she cut the conversation short and left her in the dark. Phinya tried to convince herself that she was worried about her job, but after promptly turning down the academic position offered and deciding to return, she still wasn't quite sure why. Maybe... it was because she missed home. Although, deep down, she knew that wasn't the only reason. Because every time she felt homesick, someone's face always popped into her thoughts.

The more she remembered Bua's frightened look that day, the harder it was to get that image out of her head. During the more than two weeks she was away, she dedicated herself to finishing her doctorate and taking care of all the pending issues before returning to the country. Interestingly, even though her professor told her that she could go back there whenever she wanted, the idea of going back never crossed her mind. Phinya was sure that Professor Nisara would be happy to hear of her decision.

Although anthropology wasn't a new field in Thailand, it wasn't something that generated much interest. It would be great to have another expert in the field. During the whole time she spent finishing her pending tasks, she couldn't concentrate on anything. All she wanted was to get back as soon as possible. She wanted to see Bua's irritating face and imagined that, when they saw each other, she would be surprised and start teasing like they always did with each other and this thought made the young doctor smile without realizing it.

She was determined to get revenge on Bualoy for daring to run away from her, preferring a bed to her company. If Bua didn't respond to her messages, she would look for her personally. That wasn't wrong, was it? As she thought about it, she stepped on the accelerator to increase the speed a little. In her mind, the image of the face with square-framed glasses that, before, always made her turn her face and get irritated appeared. But now, everything had completely changed...

'The teacher must be proud of you'

Phinya, however, felt that those simple words came from Bua's own feelings, and that warmed her to the bottom of her heart.

□□□□□

□Episode 10□

Busaya, who had spent almost half the day with the bodies of the victims, finally left the Research Institute building, exhausted. It had been almost a month, and the police had still not obtained any significant new leads, as the plane's black box had not been found. This was delaying the investigation process more than expected, except for the testimonies of the witnesses, which included the company that operated the plane rental service.

As she stood there, undecided about what to do next—whether to go back to her dorm or go get something to eat at the market near the institute—a familiar black sedan pulled up right in front of her. Bua felt a strange feeling, and although she didn't recognize the car right away, for some reason she had the feeling that she knew the owner of the vehicle. Then the passenger side window rolled down, revealing the driver's face.

"I knew it..."

"Why didn't you reply to my messages?"

The familiar voice made Bua snort.

"And why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

Busaya replied with another question.

"So I wouldn't come."

"Get in the car."

"Can I do it another day? I'm sleepy today."

"And is there ever a day when you're not sleepy, you sleepyhead?"

Bua just shrugged before walking away in the direction of the market, where she planned to buy something for dinner that day and then do what she wanted most at that moment.

Sleep...

Everyone knew Bua's reputation for sleeping. Dr. Busaya was known as someone who could sleep at any time and in any place. She herself wondered where she had inherited this habit from. Her first hypothesis was that it could have come from primitive human ancestors, who perhaps had nights longer than days, which made her spend more time sleeping than living like modern humans.

Or perhaps, in fact, Bua had simply been accumulating fatigue since her college days until the beginning of her career. She valued her sleep time more than anything else. If someone or something interrupted the moment she had planned to rest, she simply ignored it. But there was only one person Bua allowed to interfere in this moment: her advisor. As for the others... no way.

Phinya get out of the car and stand in front of Bua and said:

"Get in the car."

The voice insisted, now closer.

"Can it be tomorrow? Or send me a message complaining and I'll answer right away, I promise."

Said Bua, exhausted from spending the whole day in the lab, while pretending to pick up her cell phone to answer the messages.

"If I'm going to talk tomorrow, I would come tomorrow." Phinya said.

"I wanted to come today."

"Okay, okay."

Hearing this, Bua couldn't help but respond with a slight irony:

"And when did you get back?"

"I just arrived, three hours ago."

"Leave thinking about me for last, you don't need to come running to see me"

Bua said.

"The work you left isn't that advanced, no, it's just what I already told you."

"Who said I missed you?"

"Okay, then... if that's all. I'm going to leave, I'm going to find something to eat"

Bua quickly cut the conversation short and started to walk away, but is interrupted before she could leave.

"Get in the car. I'll take you to eat and then you can rest."

"No, thank you, thank you very much."

"Bua, why don't you listen to me?"

Phinya exclaimed.

"Get in the car, or I'll keep annoying you anyway."

"You're not my mother, stop giving me orders."

Bua grumbled, but ended up giving in, because she knew that, otherwise, Phinya wouldn't leave her alone.

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"How long will you stay this time?"

"Why...? Did you miss me only during the little time we didn't see each other?"

"No, I just wanted to know if you're going to stay for two or three days to finish YOUR work." She replied.

"You're not going to put that responsibility on me, no."

"I wonder how you managed to survive until now, with that sharp tongue."

Phinya commented as they waited for the food they had ordered.

"And your mouth really is a blessing, isn't it." Bua replied.

"If you don't finish the work, I'm going to hand the skull over to the police to continue."

"Bua... " Phinya replied irritably.

"Or you can do it yourself."

"I'll talk to the advisor so she can give you access to the lab and the equipment. But bring money to pay for the tests."

"Baibua, this is important, can you do it in a hurry, please?"

"No one said it's not important."

Bua's voice is harsh.

"But I'm doing it as fast as possible. The work is piling up to the point that I'm going to end up buried. If you have nothing to do while you're in Thailand, help me work instead of pushing work onto others."

Phinya getting ready to argue, but Bua cut her off.

"And if you dare call me 'sweetie' again, I'll shove that fork down your throat myself."

Bua's expression is one of pure hatred, and her tone heavy with sleep, barely disguising the tiredness she felt at being disturbed in her precious moment of rest. This make Phinya burst out laughing.

"It's not funny, it's not funny, and there's no need to laugh."

Bua retorted, frowning.

"The Civil Aviation Department called you back just so you could appear pretty on the scene and then run away, leaving all the work to me?"

"Why do you complain so much, Bualoy?"

Phinya teased her.

"Even when you're sleepy you can complain non-stop. Doesn't it get tiring?"

"If you don't want to hear me complain, go work." Bua said.

"Otherwise, you'll have to put up with me because I'll keep complaining."

"Okay, okay, I get it. But can't you wait for me to sort out my personal stuff first? I just got back."

"Again?" Bua replied.

"Why all the drama?"

"Hey, Baibua, I was away for a long time. Now that I'm back, of course I have stuff to sort out."

"So you've decided to come back for good? Didn't I say you had a job offer there?"

Bua asked, as she watched the restaurant staff serve the food on the table.

"I'll be here for about six months and then I'll decide. Who knows, maybe I'll find something interesting here."

"What's an anthropologist going to do here besides being a teacher or researcher?"

Bua commented, leaning back in her chair and pinching her nose in a sign of tiredness before taking a sip of water.

"So, do you want me to help you or not? Didn't you say you were going to talk to the professor?" Phinya asked.

"If you're going to work with the institute, the professor will definitely give you a position."

"....."

"Right now, I'm the only main researcher here and I need a vacation. If Dr. Phinya can help, I'll be able to travel for a while, and you'll even earn points for it, it's a win-win."

"I don't want any benefit, I want to irritate you." Phinya said.

"I won't leave you alone."

"So, please go back to when you hated me?" Bua asked.

And no one ever told you that I definitely don't like your face?"

Phinya replied, with a tone that made Bua feel as if she had been slapped in the face and looked away to the side.

"Really?"

Bua's voice trembled a little, trying to swallow the uncomfortable feeling.

"Well, and I'll remember that from now on."

"Bua..."

Phinya started to speak, but Bua didn't continue the conversation and diverted her attention to the meal in front of her, with her mind already

thinking about her bed in the room. Phinya remained silent, watching her eat. For a moment, she felt a pang of guilt for the words she had said earlier, something she had never felt before during an argument.

"Lately, there haven't been any unusual incidents, have there?"

"No, actually, most of the time I sleep in the building, so nothing happened"

Bua replied, shrugging.

After that, the two continued to eat in silence. Bua ate calmly while Phinya begin to realize that something is wrong. Shortly after, a black car stopped in front of the building, not far from where they're. The institute is silent.

"Thank you for dinner. I hope we don't have to meet again anytime soon."

After speaking, Bua started to get out of the car.

"Bua."

Bua's hand is hold by Phinya.

"Let me take you there."

"It's my apartment, I can get back by myself."

Bua replied, adjusting her glasses on her nose.

"I need to talk to you."

"Can it be tomorrow? You said that after eating I could go to sleep."

"It'll only take a minute"

Seeing the nod, she parked in front of the building and followed Bua, who walked with her head down, in silence.

"What is it about? I'll only give you ten minutes. After that, I'll probably be too tired to listen to you."

Bua said, as they entered the apartment and she invited Phinya to sit on the couch. Phinya started to look around the room, she's seeing Bua's apartment for the first time.

The interior looked organized, as if no one spent much time there. Everything was in its place, with a large bookshelf that took up almost two meters of width and went all the way to the ceiling. The bookshelf was filled with books and volumes on history, world civilizations, anthropology, anatomy, and a variety of other books arranged neatly. In one corner, there was a desk with a computer, and next to the keyboard, a pile of research papers was piled up.

"Bua."

Phinya called, standing up.

"I... I..."

This make Bua look at her with a curious expression.

"Okay, stay there and think, I'll be right back. Bua then walked away, went to the kitchen, and take two bottles of water from the refrigerator. Then she come back and handed one to Phinya.

"Here... "

Bua, now with a softer tone of voice, asked back.

"Are you okay? Your face doesn't look so good."

"It's nothing."

"If it's nothing, then I'm going to sleep. The lock is automatic. Good night."

"Bua..."

Bua didn't hear and went into the room. About fifteen minutes later, after taking a shower and changing her clothes, she went out again to see if Phinya had left, but Phinya still sitting on the same sofa.

"Phinya."

Bua called out when she heard her name.

"Is everything okay?"

Bua approached with a worried expression.

"I don't know."

Phinya's voice full of hesitation.

"Did I upset you in any way at the restaurant?"

"You always upset me."

"It's true."

"Anyway, don't worry about it.

Bua said, trying to comfort her.

"I assure you that I won't hate you anymore."

"I'm relieved to hear that."

"That's how I feel when you talk to me too. So I'd rather not prolong the discussion."

Bua..."

Phinya's serious tone make Bua narrow her eyes and look at her through her rectangular glasses.

"Is something wrong?."

Bua approached and Phinya seems indecisive.

"Are you tired from the flight? Do you want to sleep a little before going?"

Seeing that Phinya standing still, Bua stopped in front of her, timidly raised her hand and brought her fingertips close to Phinya's face.

The moment her fingertips touched Phinya's cheek, she quickly withdrew her hand, afraid of what Phinya might do.

While Phinya remained silent, Bua approached and gently placed her hand on the right side of Phinya's face.

"Are you okay? Are you feeling sick?"

"Ever since I came back, I've been feeling strange,"

Phinya raises her left hand and placed it on Bua's,

"So strange."

What seemed strangest was that when she came back, even when Phinya spoke to Bua rudely, as she usually did, she felt as if she was being slapped in the face. During her time abroad, she had often wanted to send a message to Bua, typing and deleting it several times, until she decided not to send it. She only contacted her recently, using work as an excuse.

It was even more painful to see that Bua didn't seem to care at all, and even had the audacity to ask her to leave a message before going to bed. In truth, Phinya shouldn't feel anything. She shouldn't feel pain. However, deep down, it felt different, as if a new feeling was emerging, something that even she couldn't define.

She should hate Bua like she always did. Her mind told her so, but a part of her heart was beginning to disagree. And it's unbelievable that, after only three hours of arriving, she went to Bua almost without thinking. That's what Phinya found strange... Too strange for her.

"If you don't explain what 'strange' means, I won't be able to help you, Phinya."

Actually, I run here because I wanted to talk to you.

"I think you're sleepy."

Bua concluded with the authority of a sleep specialist.

"Come, rest. I'll get you some clothes to change into. Take a shower and go to sleep. I'll sleep in the living room."

"There's something I don't understand. Why am I here instead of... I'm going back to rest."

"You're really strange."

Bua replied, without giving a clear answer .

"How can I know what's happening to you?"

"The whole way driving, I wondered why..."

Phinya tilted her head down.

" ...why am I feeling this way? I wonder what's happening to me."

She leaned her forehead against Bua, almost touching her nose to Bua's.

I wonder why, even during the whole time I was there, I only thought about being here."

"Phinya..."

"During the five years we've known each other, I've always wondered why the people around you seemed to admire you so much. Everyone around you has always supported you."

Bua could barely hear what Phinya saying at that moment. All she could see, Phinya's lips approaching, and more importantly, she didn't back away. Bua should have pulled away, but instead, her lips moved towards Phinya.

"If you want to know, you might have to open your heart to me."

"Is that so, Dr. Bua?"

"It might be so, Dr. Phinya."

Then, the last feeling Bua experienced before closing her eyes, the soft touch of Phinya's lips against hers. The drowsiness she felt instantly disappeared, and her mind seemed to explode at that moment. It's frustrating that she hadn't thought to refuse to move away from Phinya.

"I must have fallen asleep without realizing it and now I'm dreaming."

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□Episode 11□

"What are we doing, Phin?"

Despite having asked the question, all Bua could see at that moment are the full lips getting closer and closer, so close that it almost made her breathless.

"Tell me, is this what they call 'opening your heart'?"

Phinya get even closer, and the space between their lips is almost nothing. Bua, half lying down and half sitting on the sofa in her own living room, felt Phinya's left arm gently resting on her back.

"We are just two people who can't stand each other..."

Bua murmured, as if she's trying to convince herself.

"And how can someone who can't stand me want me to stop?"

There was a moment of silence on Bua's part.

"No."

The answer come, and the tone of her voice is not just a denial, but rather an permission. And then, before Bua could react, she feels Phinya's burning and eager lips press against hers, leaving her completely without the strength to resist. Within seconds, Phinya slowly pulled away.

"I'm not sure what I'm doing."

This time, it's Phinya who seemed hesitant, as if for a brief moment she stopped to think about what was happening, almost stepping back, but Bua's

hand on the back of her head stopped her from going.

"Not yet..."

Bua whispered with a trembling voice

"I haven't kissed you back yet."

The previous hesitation is broken by those words.

This time, Phinya let Bua do whatever she wanted. Her body and lips moved towards Bua as if she has lost control.

Even though she isn't sure what that mean, she just followed what her heart asked. They had always been rivals, always teasing each other... But why, after that last meeting, where one couldn't stop thinking about the other, did things get to this point? Bua was kissing... Phinya, the same temperamental and loud Phinya that before she could barely bear to look at or get close to, because she irritated her so much. And it seems that the situation would only get worse, as neither of them seem to want to hold back. One of Phinya's hands begin to slide under Bua's favorite pajama shirt.

For a moment, she wanted to stop Phinya, surprised by what's happening, but in the next second, she let herself go and even stand up slightly, allowing Phinya to take off her shirt voluntarily.

"Are you sure, Bua?"

Phinya's husky voice whispered the question.

"And you?"

Bua returned the question.

"I want to try."

Phinya's nose brushed Bua's neck, followed by a soft kiss. She lightly rested her hand on Bua's left shoulder before lifting herself up a little to look at her colleague below.

"Anyway, we won't like or hate each other more than we already do."

Phinya's lips come down again, gently touching the side of Bua's face, as if she could no longer contain herself.

"And since we've come to this point, why don't we try... doing something different together? Who knows, at the very least... it's a win win."

Phinya's words make Bua stare into those dark eyes.

"Fair enough.

She replied after a brief pause.

"I still don't like you."

Phinya said, without taking her eyes off Bua.

"I still want to hit you with a shovel.

Bua replied hoarsely.

Then Bua see a strange smile appear on the corners of Phinya's lips for a brief moment, before she leaned her body forward again, starting with a kiss that soon moved to her neck. At this point, she just wondered why she's allowing her body and mind to surrender so completely to Phinya's intense touch, as if she has lost all strength to resist.

And it seems that the answer to the question of why Phinya chose to go there, instead of returning home, beginning to emerge, little by little. Maybe the answer is simple: she missed Bua. That's all.

She had feelings for Bua, there was no doubt about that. Although she didn't know what would happen after that night, Phinya was ready to accept anything. Five years of knowing each other, two of them wanting to hit each other over the head with a shovel or exchanging barbs incessantly. Until that moment, Phinya realized that she had wasted all that time. All because of rivalries, of a fight for recognition at work. Now, those things seemed meaningless.

Bua was always there, right in front of her. Their work desks were only a meter apart, but Phinya chose to ignore Bua countless times, leaving her hurt each time. Now, ironically, Phinya was the one who felt hurt by her own words.

"Phin."

Bua's deep voice caught her attention again. In truth, Phinya wasn't sure what was going on between the two of them. Ever since the plane crash, all the time she had been back to sort out things at university, she had found herself thinking about Bua almost all the time. And the first person she looked for was Bua. Maybe she was losing her mind. But despite that, she felt like she had made the right choice by coming here.

"If I had known you tasted so good, I wouldn't have wasted so much time arguing with you, Bualoy."

Bua's hands gripped the collar of Phinya's shirt, her eyes asking for permission. Seeing her nod, she began to unbutton the shirt with her hands trembling slightly.

"Calm down."

Phinya said, unable to contain her smile when she notices the slight blush on Bua's face, caused by embarrassment.

"It's just... I don't have much experience in unbuttoning someone's shirt."

"Okay, take a deep breath."

It wasn't long before the dark shirt was slid back, while Bua stood up and gently pushed Phinya to lie down. Taking advantage of the moment, she quickly took off Bua's glasses and threw them hastily on the coffee table. With her fingertips, she brushed away the stray strands of hair that were falling over her shoulders, so that she could look straight at her without any obstacles.

"What we're doing seems... beyond what I expected,"

Bua murmured, which make Phinya laugh when she heard it.

"If you want to stop, there's still time, Bualoy."

Phinya's voice is soft and slightly shaky, something Bua has never heard before, and it make her heart skip a beat. Besides, at that moment, when she heard her name being called, the word "stop" barely existed in her mind. She leaned over and kissed Phinya's neck, who responded to the gesture by moving closer.

"Do you want to continue?" Bua asked back.

"Do whatever you want, Bua. I still want to hit you with a shovel. Well, after tonight, you might want to save my mouth for something more useful."

Bua only realized that her shorts are on the floor when it's too late. And suddenly, she feels her body pressed against the white sheets of her bedroom bed. Her sharp-tongued karma has make her lose control. Now, stopping... was the last thing she would ask for. Their naked bodies responded to each other's touch in a way they could no longer contain.

Kiss after kiss, there was never a moment when Bua did not respond with enthusiasm. She only realized at that moment that, besides the biological purpose of perpetuating the human species, there are other reasons for this activity. One of them was... she could no longer ignore the feelings she never thought she would have for Phinya.

She had never liked the annoying Phinya from the beginning. Even if it wasn't enough to use the word "hate", it could be said that she definitely couldn't stand Phinya's presence. And almost every time, Phinya managed to irritate her. However, on the other hand, she admired the skills of the Doctor, now her... bedmate.

Bua's classmate was anything but ordinary. Phinya had gone through all the possible levels. She was able to, with a simple glance, tell the ethnicity, gender, and even estimate the age of a found human skull. Except for

Professor Nissara, only Phinya was able to do this, among all the people Bua had ever met.

Furthermore, if we consider the physical structure, Phinya, despite not having exactly the typical appearance of her ethnicity, had an incredibly balanced body. About 1.80m tall, with a large frame, an oval face with a broad forehead and dark brown hair as soft as silk, her round eyes shone brightly. And going even deeper, her wide waist, combined with her broad shoulders, indicated, according to the principles of physical anthropology, an ideal structure for motherhood and the perpetuation of the species.

Oh my God... She was going crazy! What was she thinking about Phinya? Two people who had never gotten along, always exchanging barbs, and now, suddenly, they found themselves together, in bed, without a single piece of clothing covering their bodies. Bua's life was clearly turning upside down.

Her hand, almost without realizing it, rested on Phinya's chest, who was on top of her. Her eyes are filled with fascination and desire.

"Don't stand there admiring my pectoral muscles or my humerus, Buakong. If you start reciting some anatomical classification now, I swear I'll kill you. This is not the time for this.."

These words make Bua bite her lips. Phinya seems to read her thoughts... Bua did not answer, her mind was completely lost when Phinya begin to kiss the pectoral muscles she herself had mentioned. Bua's fingers go down Phinya's right arm, squeezing it lightly, while she shivered when she felt Phinya's teeth on her neck. And at the same time, the words Phinya had said the day they met came back to her mind.

In the past few years, what seemed like a basic rule of caution regarding the lower body parts of animals was something that seemed so distant.

Now, the extremities of these limbs were moving towards the desired area, more than anything else. Before the owner of these extremities stopped and looked at the person lying below.

"Are you ready, Bua?"

"Yes..."

The answer come half-drowsily. At this point, Bua, with her eyes closed, still unsure whether she's dreaming or not, but she's no longer as tired as she had been when she returned to the room.

"If you feel any pain or want me to stop, you need to let me know immediately, understand?"

Bua just bit her lip and nodded in response.

"I don't have much experience with this.."

Phinya said, looking away, a slight blush appearing on her face.

"I may not be so good at practice, but I'm quite confident in theory."

"Really, Baibua?."

Her bedmate whispered and laughed

"So, in practice, let's forget the theory and respond to what you feel."

"Speak as if you were an expert."

"In a few minutes, you'll find out for yourself."

Phinya's touch on her body is softer than Bua had imagined. In fact, she has thought about what Phinya would be like in bed, whether she would be aggressive or gentle. Even though she knew it was a somewhat inappropriate and somewhat disrespectful idea. But now, she's getting an answer she never expected to discover for herself.

Bua isn't sure what it mean to be good at this, but her mind disappeared. The moment she felt Phinya, it was a mixture of sensations so varied that it confused her brain. Not to mention the kisses that spread throughout her body with a desperate hunger. At that moment, she didn't notice anything

other than the desire she felt and the hands that moved inside her body. She could do nothing but respond as Phinya told her, not only with her body, but also with her mind. Her fingers moved with a gentle rhythm.

"Phin..."

"Is everything okay?"

The husky voice whispered.

"Does it hurt?"

"No, I just..."

"You're doing great, Bua.

Phinya whispered again, but Bua couldn't understand anything else at that moment.

"Don't tense up, relax. Bua's nails dug into Phinya's back involuntarily. The only thing she feel is a growing heat manifesting in the lower part of her body, due to Phinya's touch. It's a long and endless period, just as Bua had dreamed. During this whole time, it felt like a combination of pleasure and urgency at the same time. Bua's breathing was quickening with each passing second. The only thing she could feel was Phinya's touch on her body.

"Phin.."

"Calm down, Bua. You'll be fine."

"Oh... Yes..."

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Unbelievably, Phinya had made that night one of the most pleasurable in Bua's life.

Dr. Busaya is standing up, putting on her shirt in front of the mirror, and she notices that there's another person lying in her bed. Someone she had never liked. Someone she used to argue with, to the point of wanting to hit him with a shovel. Someone who is now sound asleep, having only rested for two hours, just at the time Bua used to wake up every morning.

This morning felt strange, and Bua still felt tired from the activities she had done with Phinya. Thinking about it, she couldn't help but look at Phinya sleeping, her features are calm and serene in a way she had never seen before.

The same feeling as the night before. Her pet karma, who used to be so loud, was more serene than Bua could ever imagine. Whenever Phinya addressed her, it was with soft, whispered words close to her ear:

"Bua, are you ready?"

"Does it hurt?" Or...

"You're doing great."

It was only after a while that the two were able to rest. At this point, Bua no longer knew which Phinya was the real one. She just gave a subtle smile towards the bed before turning back to organize and prepare for the day. As she thought about the time they spent together, Bua's body was...

A hug coming from behind someone who is still naked.

"I still don't like you. Even now, knowing that you can have something better than just your pretty little mouth."

Phinya teased, saying the same sentence as before, before they both ended up in bed. However, the difference was in the tone of voice, which was so soft that it made Bua want to turn around and kiss the owner of that voice. Furthermore, the owner of the voice pressed her lips to Bua's neck, who is getting ready.

"I know." Bua replied.

"Then why are you in such a hurry? Aren't you going to get some rest?"

"I need to go to the lab."

Bua replied in a dry tone, before turning to face Phinya, whose hair still messy. She couldn't help but raise a finger to smooth her long hair back and then run her hand along the distinct structure of her face.

"Phin..."

Bua's voice trembled a little as she called the name, as she looked at the face in front of her with a look of deep concern.

"We haven't seen each other for two years. Are you okay? I think you look a little thinner. Are you overworked to the point that you can't eat or sleep properly?"

The question made Phinya bite her lip before meeting Bua's gaze. Suddenly, tears begin streaming down her face, and Bua quickly raises her hand to wipe away the tears.

"Bua... I've actually wanted to ask you this several times, but... well, you know that whenever we start talking, we end up fighting. I think now is the right time to ask."

Phinya's dark eyes moved from side to side, hesitating, not knowing how to answer this simple question. At this point, Phinya finally understood why everyone around her seemed to be easily enchanted by the Lotus Flower.

"Don't start crying now."

Bua said in her small voice, while still using her fingertips to dry the tears under Phinya's eyes.

"You're making me lose my self-confidence, crying after just going to bed with me, Phinya."

She continued, raising her hand to wipe Phinya's tears, and then she's pulled into a hug

"I already told you last night that I'm not very confident with these things."

"If you're not confident in something, you need to practice more, you know?"

Phinya's voice murmured in the doctor's neck.

"You say it like it's a joke. How am I going to practice on my own? These things can't be learned just with theory."

The observation made Phinya laugh, before moving away a little.

"So stay with me a little longer."

She said with a pleading tone and look.

"I want to get to know you better..."

"We've known each other for three years. If you count the time you disappeared, five. We had the same advisor, we studied in the same room, we took exams together, and our lab tables were only a meter apart, but back to back, until you freaked out and disappeared. Now, out of the blue, you want to get to know me better, please, okay? You won't be able to get to know me today, I have to go get the chimpanzee bones that I got with so much effort from the zoo, I had to humiliate myself to get them."

"Then have dinner with me tonight."

Phinya proposed, making Bua raise an eyebrow.

"Pleeease, Bua. I don't promise anything, because I don't know how long it will take you there."

Bua refused, while grabbing a pair of pants to wear.

"Would you rather be with the chimpanzees than with me?!"

"Chimpanzees don't irritate me."

The doctor answered quickly.

"They don't fight, they don't freak out and they don't cause trouble."

"But I only did that once."

Phinya protested.

"And that was enough, the trouble you caused was huge. Phinya, you made me be investigated for ethics. I did everything I could to avoid being fired."

The words made Phinya back away. Raising her hand in a gesture that resembled a vow, Phinya said:

"From now on, I'm going to try to behave with you."

"You're just saying that because we just went to bed." Bua replied.

"No..." Phinya quickly objected.

"Trust me."

Bua stopped to look at Phinya's face for a moment, thoughtful.

"I'm going now. If you want to talk, we'll talk later."

□□□□□

□Episode 12□

"Phi Bua, I'm just looking for you!"

Aon called hurriedly.

"What's wrong?"

The Doctor replied as she walked down the hallway, distractedly reading the documents about the chimpanzee bones she was waiting to receive.

"Can you welcome the new researcher in place of the professor for a moment? The Professor on her way, but she's already arrived before."

"Oh, really? I didn't even know she was going to arrive today."

Bua replied in surprise.

The professor just called me, it isn't something official.

Aon explained quickly.

"Hmm, no problem then. Just hold this for me, please."

Bua handed the documents to Aon, while adjusting her hair, fixing her glasses and straightening the collar of her shirt, preparing to receive the visitor.

Bua had known beforehand that a new researcher would arrive this week, but she hadn't expected to be the one to welcome her, since the professor hadn't given any clear instructions about it. It wasn't something official, but leaving the visitor waiting alone in a room definitely didn't seem like a good idea.

"How do I look?"

Bua asked as she run her hands through her hair, trying to tidy it up.

"Phi Bua is beautiful as always! Today you even seems more cheerful than usual."

Aon replied with a smile.

"Which room?"

"The small one, the meeting room upstairs."

"Okay, I'll go. Aon, please prepare some water and come later, okay?"

"Yes, Phi Bua. Thank you!"

"You're welcome."

Busaya headed to the door of the meeting room, which had been prepared to welcome the important visitor. The research institute didn't receive distinguished visitors often, and even less so to collaborate on the work. The institute had been in operation for less than two years, and there were days when even the local cemetery seemed busier.

The research team consisted of less than ten graduate students under the supervision of professors, and, counting the rest of the staff, the total number of people was no more than thirty. Bua raised her right hand and knocked on the door a few times before entering.

"Excuse me."

She caught sight of the visitor, with her back to her, wearing a black suit. Something about her figure seem strangely familiar. She's looking through the window at the small canal that run behind the eleven-story building of the institute. At that moment, the visitor turned to her.

"You..."

Bua could barely finish the sentence, her eyes widening in surprise.

"Hello, Doctor Busaya."

The visitor said with a slight smile and tilting her head, as if making a joke.

"We meet again, don't we?"

And then she walked over to Bua and hugged her. Phinya leaned against the edge of the table, leaning over and leaving a kiss on Bua's cheek, a familiar touch from the night before, while Bua remained with an expression of astonishment.

"How did you end up here?"

Bua asked, still being hugged, with Phinya resting her forehead on her shoulder and tightening her embrace around her.

"Someone invited me and of course, I came."

Phinya murmured softly against Bua's neck.

"Tonight, come sleep with me, Buakong."

"You're crazy! We're at work, and you invite me to spend the night?"

Busaya exclaimed, raising her hand to hit Phinya's arm, which made Phinya let out a loud squeal and pull away. Soon after, she lightly touched Bua's chin with her fingertips and leaned closer.

"Baibua..."

Hearing her nickname, Bua closed her eyes instinctively, as if she's ready to receive the approaching kiss.

"Last night... Did I do something that didn't please you?"

Phinya whispered when their lips were a breath away.

"No."

Bua answered briefly, and that made Phinya smile.

"You made me feel... very good."

"Let's have dinner together tonight... yes?"

Just then, the sound of a knock on the door caused both of them to quickly move away.

"Professor!"

Professor Nisara, in her usual formal attire, entered the room with an expression of relief. Upon learning from Aon that Busaya was receiving the visitor alone in the meeting room, she feared that the two would end up punching each other before she arrived.

Bua watched as Phinya bowed respectfully to her former advisor, before running to hug the fifty-something professor who had once signed Phinya's resignation letter affectionately. The other student, watching the scene, completely confused.

"Are you okay, professor?"

Phinya asked, after pulling away from the hug.

"How are you?"

She asked with a smile.

"You're still strong and as beautiful as ever." She replied sweetly.

"You and your idle talk, it's no wonder that both women and men fall in love with you, is it, Phin?"

"Men? Where did you see that? I think they're more... women."

Phinya turned to look at Bua, whose face and gaze behind her square glasses are still a mix of confusion and disbelief.

"Women, for sure."

Hearing this, Bua looked away, pretending not to understand.

"Thank you for coming."

Nisara said, addressing her former student.

"I'm your student, professor. All you have to do is ask, and no matter where I am, I'll always come back "

Phinya replied, taking a step back. Bua, on the other hand, just watched the scene through her glasses, absorbing the words in silence.

As she watched, Bua's mind wandered, remembering the last time Phinya caused a commotion before resigning. Her former colleague, who was once a close friend, now seemed completely different. In the past, Phinya had always bothered her, believing that Bua was the teacher's "protégé". Now, however, that didn't seem to matter anymore...

"Actually, I should have come back a long time ago." Phinya muttered.

"What did the professor say about that?" Nisara asked.

"She didn't say anything."

Phinya replied before the director of the institute gestured for her to sit down.

"Who would dare criticize a student of the queen of anthropology like you? As for the report of the two years I was away, I will do my best to deliver it as soon as possible."

"Do it in your own time. We are grateful for your contribution to the institute, Phinya. Thanks to you, we were able to obtain support funds from abroad."

"I am happy to help, professor."

Phinya replied calmly. Meanwhile, Bua remained seated, listening to the conversation, without making any comments.

"From now on, you will finally stay in the office and let Bua go out into the field for a while."

Both the professor and Phinya turned to Bua, who remained motionless, still trying to understand the whole situation.

"Maybe I have gotten used to working in the field..."

Bua said, with a slight smile.

"Oh, Professor, I sent my graduation documents here, as you requested."

"Perfect."

Nisara replied with a nod.

"Welcome back, Dr. Phinya."

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That night, Bua didn't want to go out to dinner with Phinya but Phinya insisted until she couldn't take it anymore. In fact, she ended up getting tired and went, but the dinner that was on the table had barely been touched.

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"Phin.."

Bua's trembling voice called Phinya, her entire body filled with panting breaths, while Phinya's fingers moved inside her. They both knew that the night wouldn't end with just dinner.

"Does it hurt?"

Phinya asked in a soft whisper.

"N-no... I just...."

Bua's words come out jumbled, and she hugged Phinya even tighter with one arm.

"Phin.."

"I love it when you call me that. Do it more often."

Maybe, just maybe, she's starting to fall in love with Dr. Busaya.

"How many times?" Bua murmured.

"As many as you want."

"Phin..."

"Ah.. Yes."

And then, Bua lost it again, for the second time that night.

"Thank you." She whispered, regaining her senses.

"Thank you for what?"

"You make me feel good, like I'm unloading something."

Bua confessed, her voice soft.

"If you practice often, you'll get the hang of it."

Phinya replied with a teasing smile.

"You mean... practice only with you?"

BAM!

"You like violence, do you?"

Bua exclaimed loudly, surprised by the sudden slap.

"What do you mean by that? Of course it's only with me, Baibua!"

Phinya retorted in a firm voice, visibly irritated.

"What if you did this to someone else?."

Bua asked, defiantly.

"I don't need to do it to anyone else. I'm already good enough."

Phinya replied confidently.

"I didn't know you were so conceited, Dr. Phinya."

"And isn't that true? Or am I wrong? Didn't you like it? Just now you even thanked me."

"Do you want the truth or do you want me to lie?"

"Choose your next words carefully, Bualoy."

Phinya warned her, her voice carrying a subtle threat, before pausing thoughtfully.

"I think... I wouldn't want to do this to anyone else. I mean... someone else."

"Phin, listen to me."

Bua raises her face, staring into Phinya's deep brown eyes, which shine with an almost childlike innocence.

"I don't want you to close yourself off to other opportunities."

Bua said sincerely.

"I don't know exactly what to say... I still don't understand these things very well, nor do I know what to do, but I also don't want you to... well..."

"Then stay with me longer. Maybe, that way, you'll start to understand better."

Phinya suggested, still lying naked next to Bua.

"Or go out and see the world, instead of spending so much time with chimpanzees."

She joked, leaning on her elbow.

Maybe that was the first truly mature conversation they were having, without fights, without harsh words. Looking at Phinya at that moment, Bua realized that, despite everything, she's charming. Besides, she's finally acting like a civilized person.

Maybe it was working...

"Now that we're so open, there's nothing left to hide."

Bua commented with an impassive expression.

"Don't you think?"

Phinya didn't answer right away. She just lay there, staring at her, while Bua stared at the ceiling. Slowly, Phinya reaches out and placed the back of her fingers on Bua's cheek.

"What's wrong?"

Bua asked, turning to her.

"It's strange... I've never seen you like this."

"It's because you've never really seen me."

Bua replied, her voice containing a slight hesitation.

"You've always chosen to see what you wanted, and I was never in between."

"It may be true."

Phinya admitted hoarsely.

"But now... maybe that's changed."

Bua isn't sure what Phinya mean, but she doesn't try to interpret her words. Maybe, after the activities, the chemicals released in her brain are making Phinya a little confused, or maybe she's just saying whatever necessary to keep Bua as bed companion.

"At least now we're not trying to hit each other over the head with shovels,"

Bua said, changing the subject and laughing, trying to hide the sudden acceleration of her heart after Phinya's words.

"Come to think of it, it's funny, don't you think? Before, I thought the professor favored was you," Phinya confessed.

"She always sent me away, while you stayed comfortable at the institute. In the end, we received the same diploma, but I was exhausted, almost without strength."

"Did you know I was jealous of you?"

Bua revealed.

"Why?"

"I was the student who was stuck at the institute, never going anywhere, afraid of not being able to get by. I never saw anything real, while you had already been to so many places," Bua explained.

"The experience you had... is something that can't be compared to."

"You?... Jealous of me, Bua?"

Phinya asked as she leaned her face closer to Bua. Before she could answer, Bua held her face with one hand, and Phinya lowered her lips, kissing her passionately. After a brief pause, she returned to the kiss.

"I finally heard that Dr. Busaya is jealous of me... I think my life is really worth living."

"I'm serious." Bua reaffirmed.

Soon after, she felt Phinya put a leg over her body and rest her forehead on her shoulder.

Bua responded to the gesture by raising her right hand and placing it on the back of Phinya's neck. She slid her hand gently down her spine, which made her let out a soft moan in response.

"You say you don't have much practice, but you seem to know exactly what to do to please a woman, Bualoy."

"I study the sensory system and movements related to the erect posture of the spine in primates, so I thought it would be useful to apply it here. Otherwise, why would I have studied it?"

Bua replied, feeling Phinya lower her head and lightly bite her neck.

"If you want to practice more, just come to me, Bualoy." Phinya said.

"It's not easy to find someone to teach such specific practices, like the spine aligned with the ground."

Bua replied in a low tone.

"Especially when the instructor has..."

Her fingers slid down Phinya's arm.

"A physical structure like yours which is hard to find."

She then placed her hands on Phinya's hips.

"What kind of physical structure?"

Phinya asked with a smile.

"Considering your hips, which align perfectly with your broad shoulders..."

Bua paused to think about the best way to continue, and Phinya laughed, realizing exactly what she's talking about.

"Not counting the ten, twenty kilometer walks carrying equipment."

"Maybe you should thank the professor for providing you with such an... attractive structure." Bua teased

"I mean... balanced and suitable for perpetuating the species, in the style of the Homo genus."

Phinya couldn't handle Bua's words and let out a loud laugh again.

"You really know how to choose your words so as not to make the conversation sound too suggestive, but honestly, I can't stop thinking about something else."

Phinya still had a big smile on her face.

"And I'm the type who believes easily, so, okay, I'll believe you."

"You'd be a great case study, you know?"

Bualoy continued.

"Dr. Bua is always keeping an eye on waistlines, is that it?"

"Don't forget that I'm a physical anthropologist." Bualoy retorted.

"It's kind of... automatic... for me to look at the waistline first, like when we analyze the structure of primates or monkeys and make assumptions

about why their populations are decreasing or why some species are extinct. Modern primate females have smaller pelvises that seem less suited to carrying a pregnancy, because of the narrower angle. After looking at the pelvis, the next step is..."

She hesitated, and her face began to blush slightly.

"Yeah... well..."

"The breast."

Phinya finished, knowing exactly what Bua was thinking.

"Because it has to do with milk production, right? As mammals, we pay a lot of attention to that area first..."

"Stop being perverted, Phinya, I see this as a case study."

Bua argued in a serious tone, frowning, clearly not agreeing with the joke. This made Phinya lean in to nibble affectionately on the tip of Bua's nose.

"I mean, it's a quick and unpretentious glance... but... I end up getting distracted."

She admitted, a little embarrassed.

"If I see you looking at another woman the same way, I'll get back at you, Bualoy."

Phinya warned.

"How absurd, who would look at another person like that? That's invasive..."

Bua quickly denied.

"Besides... you're only saying that because you're in bed with me."

She added, as if she already knew what the other was thinking.

"Soon, when you get tired, you'll stop being so possessive, like a territorial animal at the beginning of mating or something."

"Why do you always turn everything into animal behavior?"

"Humans are primates, they're part of the ecosystem."

Bua replied with impeccable logic.

"I'm starting to go crazy being in bed with a newly graduated woman full of energy like you."

"So, what do you think about us going to eat something? At dinner, I barely ate anything and then... I used up a lot of energy. I already knew that if I gave in and came with you, I wouldn't be able to eat dinner properly."

"But at dinner, you were the one who started it all."

Phinya replied, trying to defend herself.

"Really?"

Bua asked in a carefree tone.

"I wouldn't even remember that if you hadn't mentioned it."

She said as she began to get up from the bed.

"I'll go find something to eat first."

"Bualoy, HOW could you abandon me halfway like this?!"

Phinya exclaimed, indignant.

□□□□□

□Episode 13□

"Bua... do you feel uncomfortable with Phinya coming to work here?"

The question made Busaya look up at her advisor, who had returned to work after returning from abroad and completing the cooperation documentation. Phinya, in turn, would take on the role of principal researcher at the institute, in addition to being the postgraduate supervising professor.

"Uncomfortable... Me?"

Surprise slightly evident in Busaya's voice.

"I agree with whatever you decide, Professor."

"I'll try to keep the research projects separate, then. Each of you does your work, and if you need anything, come talk to me directly. You don't need to go through Phinya."

"I have no problem with that. Whatever you decide, it's fine with me."

She answered calmly.

"Hearing thst make me feel at ease."

Said professor Nisara, smiling with clear relief on her face.

"So, regarding the position of vice-principal, which we discussed before your graduation... have you decided whether you're going to accept it?"

"Vice-principal?"

Bua repeated the question, with a slight hint of hesitation. She had almost forgotten about this offer her advisor had mentioned before her graduation. Advancing so quickly in her career had its benefits, especially considering that she was about to turn thirty-four, thirty-five. If she accepted the position, accumulated teaching hours and published research quickly, she could soon apply for a more prestigious academic position.

But... what for? She still wasn't sure what the purpose of it's. She didn't see anything so special about taking the position beyond what she was already doing. More importantly, Bua valued her time off more than anything.

"Besides you, Bua, I don't see anyone else for the position."

The Professor argued. Without a doubt, among all the students, Bua's name always came to mind first when it came to such an opportunity. She was the professor's favorite student and trained with dedication, besides, of course, Phinya.

"You are the most qualified. I had already prepared the documents before I even went to Panama. All that's left is for you to accept."

"I just graduated.."

The doctor replied, divided,

"I don't think it would be appropriate, I still have little experience. I think the professor is forgetting someone..."

Busaya paused, observing the confused expression of her advisor.

"Phinya."

The professor's expression indicated surprise at what she had just heard.

"But Phinya graduated after you."

"Just a few months. I think Phinya would be more suitable. If you want to attract more attention to this area, I believe Phinya would be a better representative than me, who just stays locked in the laboratory. Besides, she

played a bigger role than I did in creating the institute. In fact, I think the professor should have thought of her first."

"You're exaggerating. At that time, Phinya hadn't decided to come back yet, so I put you as the first option."

Replied Nisara, trying to encourage her.

"You and Phinya have different specialties in prehistoric physical anthropology, I believe you are my first option. As for Phinya, she is more focused on the historical period."

Said the female advisor,

"That's how I had planned things."

"Let Phinya take this position, Professor. It doesn't matter if she graduates earlier or later. And I'm not as good at coordination as she is. I think she's better suited."

Bua replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Bua's voice was firm and confident.

"Besides, Phinya just got back. For those who are new or don't know the environment well, it will be easier to respect Phinya as someone you trust. I, on the other hand, already know everyone here, so that's not a problem for me."

"If you think so, I'll respect your decision, Bua. In that case, you can take over as head of the lab."

"Lab head?"

Bua repeated, surprised. She had just avoided one position and already being pushed into another.

"Is that a good idea?"

"Of course it is.

Her advisor replied with conviction.

"It's decided then."

And this time, she didn't wait for Bua to refuse.

"I... okay."

Bua said reluctantly. Given her insistence, there was no way around it. She just wanted to be a simple researcher with time to rest every now and then, but currently, her responsibilities were eating up all her free time.

Before she could say anything else, there was a knock on the door of the institute's director's office, followed by Phinya's entrance, who closed the door behind her.

"Come in, Phinya."

Said the director. Upon seeing her, Bua stand up.

"Excuse me, Professor, I'm going.."

She clasped her hands in a gesture of respect, bowing to the advisor and starting to leave. As she passed Phinya, she feels her colleague approaching, until their hands lightly touched. This make Bua look at her, their eyes meeting through the square lenses of Phinya's glasses, which are shining.

Embarrassed, Bua quickly lowered her head and in doing so, she stumbled, almost falling over her chair, but quickly adjusted the chair next to the small coffee table near the door.

"Sorry,"

Bua said to her advisor, as Phinya moved even closer.

"I just... I couldn't sleep well last night."

"Are you okay, Bua?"

Phinya asked in a whisper, dressed in a smart black suit.

"I am,"

Bua replied shortly, and then hurried out of the room.

"Professor, did you call me for something?"

Phinya asked as she closed the door behind her.

"Yes, I have something to talk to you about," The Professor replied.

'Phinya, you're the reason I haven't been sleeping much lately.'

Bua thought. 'From now on, if there's any more trouble, you'll be the one to take responsibility.'

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A few minutes later, a knock on the door of the future vice-principal's office interrupted Dr. Phinya Thananon's concentration, who is immersed in reading a recently published scientific article. She looked up and called the visitor to come in. It's Professor Nissara, her advisor and now her direct superior, who come in with a brown envelope in her hands.

"Appointment documents."

Said the middle-aged woman, placing the envelope in front of Phinya, who stand up and bowed politely.

"You could have called me up, Professor."

"My legs are still fine, don't worry. I can still come down and meet you,"

Nissara said with a smile, which make her former PhD student laugh lightly.

"Officially welcome, Dr. Phinya."

"Thank you very much, Professor,"

Phinya replied with a grateful smile.

"I'm glad you come back to help us. I thought you would stay there forever, especially with the professor wanting to keep you as long as possible."

The advisor said as she sit down, and Phinya did the same in her office chair.

"No, Professor," Phinya replied, now officially vice-principal.

"I always knew that my home is here."

Those words brought a sincere smile to the advisor.

"It's good to hear that from you,"

The professor said with an affectionate look.

"I confess that at first, I thought you would give the position to Bua."

Phinya commented, noticing her boss's appraising look for a brief moment.

"I won't hide anything from you."

She said, looking at her former student.

"I talked to Bua, but she refused."

"Really?" Phinya replied in surprise.

"Yes." Professor Nissara nodded.

"Bua said you would be more suitable."

That revelation made Phinya smile involuntarily, feeling her face heat up for no apparent reason.

"But I graduated after her." Phinya argued.

"She said it doesn't matter. She thinks you represent the institute better and have more capacity to attract new generations to this area."

"I had no idea Bua thought that way about me."

"I have no doubts about either of you. You both have always worked hard, and for me, it doesn't matter who holds the position. I trust both of you completely. In fact, you are students of whom I am deeply proud."

Those words brought to Phinya's mind something Bua had said when they had met for the first time in two years, during dinner. Now, hearing the same thing from her advisor's mouth, Phinya's heart raced.

It was exactly as Bua had said...

"Since Bua sees things that way, I respect her decision ."

Said the advisor.

"I'm glad to know that she thinks so, we all know that you two had a troubled past."

"Don't worry, Professor. I don't hold any grudges anymore." Assured Phinya.

"I'm sure Bua doesn't either. In the past, we were just young people competing to stand out in the field, nothing more."

"You two really stood out."

Praised the teacher.

"And now, how are things?"

"For me, these issues are no longer important."

Phinya replied sincerely.

"There are much more important things now."

"I am relieved to hear that."

Said the advisor, standing up, and Phinya followed her.

"Congratulations once again, Phinya."

"Thank you very much, Professor."

She thanked her, bowing with a smile.

"Then, excuse me. I have to go now."

After the advisor left, Phinya went to the institute's secretary:

"Aon... where is Phi Bua?"

"Phi Bua is in the laboratory. Today, the master's students are participating in a workshop on how to clean bones that will be exhibited."

"Okay."

Said Phinya, placing the coffee on the secretary's desk.

"I bought coffee and some sweets. I have something for you too. And please keep Bua's in the fridge."

"Do you need anything urgent, Phi? I can call her for you."

"No, you don't have to. I just wanted to leave the gifts."

"Oh, congratulations on the new position!"

"Thank you very much," Phinya said.

"As soon as things calm down, I'll arrange a celebratory dinner."

The secretary smiles and nod in agreement.

"Actually, I wanted to discuss something with Phi Phinya."

Aon said, causing Dr. Phinya to raise an eyebrow.

"What is it?" Phinya asked.

"I plan on applying for a PhD next year. Would it be possible to have you as my co-advisor? Would that be a problem?"

"Have you spoken to Phi Bua about it?"

"Yes, I did a few days ago. She suggested I talk to you to see if you might be interested and mentioned that you might be a better fit for the role."

"So Phi Bua said that?"

Phinya asked, and Aon nodded in response.

"Phi Bua mentioned that you have more experience, better connections, and perhaps could send me to a field trip to gain practical experience. And also that she is more rigorous."

Aon explained.

"She said that if I had Phi Bua as my advisor, it might take me more than five years to finish, as you don't usually rush your students."

'So she's trying to pass the work on to me...' Phinya thought.

"How many years do you intend to take to complete it."

"I'm not in a hurry, I already have a job here."

Aon explained.

"But also I don't want to take too long. Seven, eight years would be too much.

"Then send me a study plan for review."

Phinya said in a serious tone, lifting her coffee for a sip.

"Specify how many years you intend to take to complete it, the type of research you want to do, if you intend to go to the field or to which country. I'll check if there are any vacancies available for you with my colleagues. And if you're thinking about doing a post-doctorate, include that as well."

"Of course. But I'm thinking about doing the post-doctorate right here." Aon replied.

"Do you have any suggestions of a field where I could go?" She asked.

"Hmm..."

Phinya seems thoughtful.

"If you go to desert areas, you'll have to walk long distances...or if you go to burial areas, you might face a lot of bandits. If you really want to go, it's good to prepare your body and learn how to defend yourself or even use weapons

"Bandits?" Aon asked, curious.

"Do you know how much a well-preserved mummified body of a nobleman is worth? Not to mention the adornments or treasures that may be inside."

Phinya explained.

Aon's eyes widened, and her face showed surprise.

"There are more rich people obsessed with these things than you can imagine."

"Why would anyone keep bodies at home?"

Aon asked, perplexed.

"To bring good luck and prosperity. It's a belief from ancient times.

Said the new vice-principal.

"But to make things even more macabre, some people used these bodies to make medicines."

Aon's expression was one of disgust when she heard this.

"I'm serious." Phinya confirmed.

"But I recommend that if you are interested in primate behavior, evolution, or anatomical structure of the genus Homo and prehistoric humans related to adaptation or migration for survival, Phi Bua is more specialized in these subjects. I... I'm more in the historical field. Even though I work in ancient anthropology, I'm not as specialized in prehistory or extinct ancestral species as Phi Bua,"

Phinya suggested.

"Phi Bua must be a species of Homo erectus or reincarnated Neanderthal,"

Phinya joked, and Aon laughed lightly at the joke.

"Think about it."

"Okay," Aon said,

"When you decide, write a plan and send it to me. I'm willing to be your co-advisor. Now, I have to go."

Phinya said before leaving.

“Yes, thank you very much!”

Aon replied, nodding before walking away. However, less than five minutes later, Busaya walked in through the opposite door.

"Phi Bua, Phi Phinya was looking for you just now," Aon informed.

“Oh, really? I was about to borrow your phone to call her,” Phi Bua replied.

“Is there a problem?”

Aon asked, noticing Bua’s worried expression, who had already picked up the phone and started dialing before waiting for the call to be answered.

"/Dr. Phinya, please come to the lab on the third floor. There was a problem with the equipment."

Bua hung up after that.

"Here's the coffee Phinya brought for you."

She said, holding out the coffee cup. Busaya frowned as she looked at the cup of coffee Aon offered her.

'What could have put Phinya in such a good mood today?'

Busaya asked, bringing the coffee cup to her lips. The bitter taste seems to bring a sense of freshness.

"I'm going to leave now. I have urgent work. When she gets here, ask her to come after me. Thank you very much."

□□□□□

□Episode 14□

"Phin, come down to the lab on the third floor, I need help."

The voice on the other end of the line on the office phone made Phinya's heart race.

"There's something about the plane crash case."

Five minutes later, Dr. Phinya appeared in front of the main lab of the Bioanthropology Research Institute. She walked in and see Bua, dressed in a long white lab coat with blue gloves, standing with her hands on her hips in front of a 65-inch screen. The screen is connected to a twenty-fold magnification camera and high-intensity lights. Bua stared at the screen, her eyebrows furrowed in concentration.

"What's wrong, Baibua?"

Phinya asked, stopping near a stainless steel table, where part of a rib cage was exposed. Bua pointed to the television screen.

"Look at this, what do you think of these marks?"

Phinya looked at the monitor and see a sharp mark on the plane crash victim's fifth left rib.

"This mark is recent."

"Have they identified this person yet?"

"Not yet. But I found this and called you to take a look first."

"Are there any other marks elsewhere?"

"Not yet." Bua replied.

"What do you think of these marks?"

"I'm not sure. Phinya said.

"From the shape of the cut, I don't think it's a bladed weapon. The mark is too wide and rounded. If it were a blade piercing, the cut would be narrow, like a slit or triangular. But this mark..."

"A bullet." Bua interrupted.

"Could it be that?"

"It's possible." Phinya replied.

"Considering the effect of the bullet's spin when it hits the bone, it could cause an injury with this type of cut. Or any object long and rounded enough to penetrate and cause damage. In that case, it would have to be used with considerable force."

"Do you think this happened before or after the accident?"

Phinya didn't answer right away. She just moved to adjust the camera's zoom, magnifying the image forty times, examining the mark more closely.

"It's hard to say, but the mark is recent."

"...."

"If it happened before or after the accident, it was in a short space of time. There are no signs of healing, and even though it's rounded, the injury is still very clear."

"I knew something was wrong with this case." Bua exclaimed.

"A plane crash victim with a bone injury caused by a weapon? The more we investigate, the stranger it gets."

She looked at the screen for a moment before picking up the camera and taking photos to send to the forensics team.

"None of this is normal since this skull appeared on the scene."

Phinya agreed.

"By the way, how is the dating process going?"

"I called yesterday. They said there are still two cases left in the queue. They'll probably start the analysis next week."

Bua replied.

"Right." Phinya replied.

"And about the skull X-rays you mentioned, have you gotten them yet?"

"I did, but I haven't opened the email yet. I'll open it later and send it to you."

"Since I'm here, I can help." Phinya offered.

"Thank you, Dr. Phin, you're always so kind."

Bua replied, causing Phinya to tilt her head slightly, which she followed with a soft smile.

"I'm kind to everyone. But with you, of course I always want something in return."

Phinya said with a mischievous tone.

"How cruel." Bua immediately retorted.

"If you want me to stay nice, come to my room tonight."

Phinya whispered, leaving Bua uneasy, quickly looking around to see if anyone had heard.

"Please, I just want to sleep,"

Bua replied in a soft, almost pleading voice, which made Phinya's heart race.

"Please..."

"Don't think I'll give in so easily, but I'll take pity on you."

"Dr. Phin, you're always so kind."

Bua joked again.

"If you say that again, I'll stick an L1 (first lumbar vertebra) down your throat."

Phinya threatened, laughing, as she reached out to grab the bone, but Bua faster and take it out of her reach.

"Bring the list of victims so I can take a look."

"Go get it, it's on my desk."

Bua said, nodding to the desk in her office, which was in the next room, separated by a large glass window. Phinya gave her a disapproving look before going to get the papers. When she came back, Bua asked,

"Are you looking for something in particular?"

"I don't know for sure. Most of the information says that almost all of the victims worked in private businesses."

Phinya replied, frowning as she thought

"They probably rented a private plane to travel and discuss business at the same time."

"Do you recognize anyone's name?"

Bua asked, still focused on photographing the bone in front of her.

"How would I recognize anyone? I don't watch the news." Phinya replied.

"I'm just curious about how one of these individuals managed to own a mummified skull."

"Some of them probably have strange beliefs." Bua agreed.

"Actually, I have a hypothesis, but I prefer not to jump to conclusions. It's better to follow the evidence to avoid any assumptions interfering with the work."

"I think the same as you, Bualoy."

"And how do you know what I'm thinking?"

Bua teased, making Phinya look up at her, while still focusing on the bones in front of her.

"Having strange things like that in someone's possession is already weird, but it's even weirder for them to end up in the wreckage of a plane."

"The anthropologist working on the case is also weird." Phinya joked back.

"You're so normal, aren't you?"

Bua immediately retorted

"Hey, Phin..."

"What?"

"Do you think this has to do with..."

Bua lowered her voice, almost whispering.

"Some mummy curse or something? Like, could the Book of the Dead have a curse or something like that?"

"Why are you whispering? You know that even if you speak softly, ghosts can hear, right?"

"Do you think this has something to do with mummy curses?"

Bua repeated in a normal voice.

"How many mummy movies have you watched?"

"Not many, I usually sleep more than watch."

Phinya let out a long sigh, clearly mocking, while Bua laughed.

"I know that, you sleep with me."

"You have class this afternoon, right? First class since you got back, right?"

Bua quickly changed the subject after the provocation.

"Yes." Phinya replied calmly.

"About the spine and extremities of mammals. I borrowed the bone from a chimpanzee."

Bua, who is now the head of the lab, nod in approval.

"You borrowed it and you're only telling me now?"

She replied, giving her a sideways look, mocking her again:

"You can take it, Dr. Phinya, feel free. Oh, can I watch your class? I'd like to review some concepts."

"I can review it with you personally, Buakong. Any part you want."

"Better leave it alone."

Bua replied hurriedly, declining the offer.

"If you have so much free time, I'll ask the professor to find you some work,"

Phinya said, watching Bua as she picked up the radius (forearm bone) and begin measuring and photographing the bone.

"So, do you think this has to do with a curse or something?"

Bua returned to the question curiously.

"I heard that some archaeologists opened the tomb of a pharaoh, but there was a curse warning them not to disturb his eternal rest, so one by one, they started dying mysteriously, out of nowhere."

"We still don't know who the skull we found is or where it came from," Phinya observed.

"To be honest, considering the skull, it doesn't even look like someone from that region. If we're assuming it's Egyptian, the truth is that the ancient Egyptians were a very diverse ethnic group, both in the north and south. Most had mixed ancestry of African, European, and even Middle Eastern. But the mummified skull we found has a rounder face, a narrower lower jaw, and the brow ridges are not as prominent as theirs. The forehead is also narrower, I am more inclined to think it is Asian."

"Asian?"

Bua repeated, intrigued. Phinya just nodded briefly.

"Ancient Egyptians cannot be categorized ethnically in the same way we do today." Phinya explained.

"There were many mixtures of races. Some regions had light skin, others were darker or tanned, and many people were mixed race. So, when we look, there is a very large morphological diversity, it is not possible to classify as clearly as we do today. At first, I was skeptical." Bua commented

"But now I agree with the hypothesis that it was Asian."

"The doctor continued.

"When I first saw the skull at the accident site, the upper and lower jaw, the cheekbones and the shape of the teeth, both in condition and size, reminded me of when I helped excavate a cemetery. But then, I saw the papyrus, I thought it could be something acquired at auction or in trade, since I heard that the sale of mummies is something that still happens."

"Yes, it still happens, but less frequently, and clandestinely, because it is illegal."

Phinya commented, providing more details.

"That is why these relics are difficult to find, and newly discovered tombs are often looted because of this."

"I heard something about this about five or six months ago, that a tomb had been looted. But, Phinya..."

Bua speak as if something had just occurred to her.

"What if the skull is not from an Egyptian mummy, but from someone from here?"

"It's possible, but remember what you said, that it seems to have been modified?"

Phinya observed.

"What if... it was modified by someone from here?"

"We can't draw that conclusion without knowing for sure how old the skull is or finding more concrete evidence about the facial features."

"I'll call to speed up the test results."

Bua said excitedly.

"Oh, I almost forgot."

Phinya commented, as if she had just remembered something.

"When is Fang coming back? Maybe she can help us with this case."

Referring to a colleague from the doctorate who was doing research in bioanthropology in the Netherlands. Fang was a close friend of Bua and also quite close to Phinya.

"Probably in a week or two. She said she was already looking at the tickets to come back."

"When does she finish her doctorate, anyway?"

"She mentioned in passing that it would be next year, after publishing another article, when she would ask to do the final defense."

"That's great, that way she can help out." Phinya said.

"Oh, but she's still not sure if that's what she wants to do." Bua replied.

"After five years of studying, she's still not sure? Don't you think it's a little late for that?" She teased.

"At her age, she's still thinking about changing careers?"

"If her heart isn't in it anymore, what's the point? She won't be happy." Bua commented.

"You're right."

Phinya nodded without looking up from the documents.

"Why haven't we gotten any information about the victims?"

"Because the company didn't want to provide it, they don't even want to give a statement. They're afraid of tarnishing their reputation."

Explained Bua, who was crouched down in front of the autopsy table.

"Another possibility is that they rented the plane for something illegal and that's why they're not saying anything."

Phinya suggested.

"Oh, I need to call the police and send them the photos of the mark left by the brooch to see if they need any more information." Bua said, offering.

"You can leave that up to you."

Phinya replied, in an almost authoritative tone.

"Of course!" Bua promptly retorted.

"Dr. Phinya just walks around the place acting all elegant and hot and then leaves, I already know how it is."

"I look beautiful just by standing still and existing, don't I?"

Phinya replied, making Bua frown immediately.

"Am I wrong?"

"I won't even comment."

Bua replied in a mocking tone.

"You should know that better than anyone, don't you, Buakong?"

Phinya winked at her.

"Or am I wrong?"

"If you're that beautiful and have nothing else to do..."

Bua sighed dramatically when she saw Phinya raises her chin, proud of herself.

"Come and help me work."

□□□□

□Episode 15□

"Alright, everyone is here, right?"

The advisor's voice echoed around the room as she watched that it's time to start the monthly meeting at the beginning of the month.

Dr. Nisara, currently as the position of an Associate Professor and Director of the Institute for Research in Bioanthropology, take her place in front of the rectangular table of the meeting room. The institute had been founded about a year ago with support from both the public and private sector, as well as collaborations with several universities. It was the first institute of the region focused on concrete research in the area of anthropology and other related disciplines. The institute also offered postgraduate programs for master and doctorate.

The veteran professor in the room swept her look at the researchers present, most of whom had already been her postgraduate students. With a slight smile, she surveyed the twenty -six participants of the meeting, which included both researchers and other team members in various functions.

At the Research Institute, the meeting continued.

"Today, I would like to officially introduce the new Vice-Principal of the institute."

Professor announced before giving a light nod towards to the person who is sitting on her left. Next to Phinya, is Aon, the institute's secretary, and alongside Aon, is Bua.

Phinya, wearing a light collar shirt under a black suit combining with pants of the same color, she get up and make a gesture of greeting with her hands.

"Sawadee Ka, it is a pleasure to meet all."

"Dr. Phinya Thananon will officially start her work here from this week."

Continued The Director of Institute,

"But I believe many of you already know her. In addition to the position of Deputy Director, Dr. Phinya will also be the main researcher and teacher of graduate students. If anyone has not yet chosen a co -advisor, you can talk directly to Phi Phinya."

The meeting participants nodded almost in unison, and soon some begin to exchange looks with each other. Those who had been doctoral students at the same time, or with a difference of up to three years, certainly they knew the complicated past between Phinya and Busaya. All they were aware that there was a tense history between the two and suddenly Bua, who had always been considered the favorite by many, saw her position be taken in front of everyone. No doubt something interesting was coming.

The looks of some colleagues and alumni who knew the story well between the two they turned to Busaya, who was leaning in her chair, looking a little sleeping, as if they expected some kind of dissatisfaction reaction from her. Even Phinya watched her friend and rival carefully.

However ... Bua just remained there, with her head down, ignoring the eyes around her. She focused on keeping her spine straight, holding a cup with her right hand, and keep holding her coffee all the time. After all, what no one knew was that Bua herself had been responsible for putting the position of deputy director in the hands of Phinya.

At least, people would finally stop saying that she was the "favourite" of the professor, which for Bua was extremely annoying.

Phinya was more competent than her, had more experience, was more presentable and better represented the institute. Bua could not deny these truths. In addition, she herself had little experience and would not be able to deal with the workload or such an important position. She had graduated in the doctorate less than a year ago. Although Phinya had just graduated, her

field skills were incomparable, they were simply not at the same level. Another important reason was that Bua did not want the responsibility of being a director.

Currently, she's involved in two government -funded research projects, with more on the way. Not to mention that she had, occasionally, to teach physical anthropology and basic anatomy classes for master and doctoral students. And besides all this ... there was the work of identifying the victims of the plane crash, which was still far from completed. She had delegated part of this work to Phinyaa as a way to compensate for the ethical investigation that Phinya had faced after accusing her of plagiarized her research topic, which had delayed Bua's graduation in almost a year.

In fact, she was seeking all the possible reasons to justify herself for giving the position I to Phinya. She is convinced that her decision had nothing to do with her recent physical attractiveness or anything else. It wasn't like she's so delighted by Phinya. She had simply decided to give the position to someone who was truly more competent. She swore ... that her feelings for Phinya were nothing more than...

"Bedmates"

"In addition, Dr. Busaya will also be responsible for the position of principal researcher, as well as head of the laboratory. If anyone needs to use the physics laboratory, they must notify her in advance."

The Professor's voice reaches Bua's ears, who, still sleepy, nodded her head.

The meeting continued, while Bua, exhausted from a bad night's sleep, tried to stay awake. The night before, she had spent hours preparing lesson plans and working out the details of the research project that Professor Nisara had just secured funding for. It was her first project at the institute, and that day she still had to discuss with the sales representative the scientific equipment that would be purchased for this project.

Just thinking about the amount of tasks she would have to face every day made her head start to throb. So she let Phinya take on other

responsibilities. She needed some time to breathe and regroup.

An hour and forty-seven minutes later, Dr. Busaya practically dragged herself out of the conference room, an empty coffee cup in her hand. It was her second coffee of the day. Her laptop was propped up in her other arm.

"Bua, are you okay?"

Fang, who had just returned from the Netherlands after her research, asked as she walked beside her. Fang was a young woman of the same age as Buaband Phinya, petite, with short hair and a slightly lighter skin tone than Bua's. She's Biomolecule specialist, the most experienced in this field in the entire institute.

Fang's work mainly involved the study of human genetic sequence, especially historical periods, to identify trends and analyze the migration and settlement of peoples. In simple term, she was looking if people from different countries could actually be genetically related.

"I come back after a week and I am greeted with a such surprise."

Fang commented with her serious voice.

"It's Okay!"

Bua responded with a sharp tone of voice, unintentionally, still sleepy for the tiredness and cold of the air conditioning in the meeting room.

"Everything is okay."

"I will buy you lunch to compensate, "said Fang.

"Compensate? Compensate for what?"

"For Phinya getting the position."

"And why would I need comfort for that?"

"I saw you quiet the whole meeting."

"I'm just sleepy, Fang ... very sleepy, if I lie down now, I'll fall asleep ..."

"Is there ever a time that you are not sleepy, Bua?"

- Dr. Bua, please follow me to the room."

Phinya said, passing by the two as she speaks.

-"Yes, of course..."

Bua replied, dragging her words, exhausted, before exchanging glances with her colleague and following Phinya.

.

"What's wrong?"

Busaya asked as she throw herself into a chair, watching Phinya close the door and sit in her large work chair.

"I saw the x-rays of the mummy's skull that you sent me.

"And what did you think?"

"Not good, I'd say,"

She said, a worried expression on her face.

"It's not as old as we thought. The bones show no signs of erosion or deterioration, at least on X-rays. If it were anything very old, there would be evidence of wear and tear, and the interior would be full of air cavities where the bone mass has degraded. But that's not the case. It's in a surprisingly well-preserved state. I'd say the person died relatively recently."

Bua, hearing this, just bit her lips before asking,

"And what do you think we should do now?" Bua asked.

"Wait for the results of the dating tests to confirm this hypothesis first."

"Okay" Bua replied calmly.

"In the meantime, let's leave this issue aside until the final results. We have other more urgent work to do."

"Deal, boss."

Bua said, nodding, getting up to go back to work.

"Baibua."

Phinya called, making Bua raises her eyebrows.

"What is it?"

"I heard you talking to Fang just now."

"And...?"

"The Professor mentioned that you were the one who suggested that I take over as vice principal."

"So what? Do you have a problem with that? Because I'm telling you right now that I'm not going to change my mind."

Bua replied quickly.

"I just want to thank you. I never knew you trusted me so much."

"You are better than me." Bua replied simply.

"I cannot deny that. But if I were your boss, would you really obey my orders?"

"Bua... you must have noticed that lately I've been... more... how can I say... willing to make it up to you and compromise, right?"

Phinya said, trying to argue.

"That's only in bed, Phin."

Bua replied with an air of knowledge.

"But at work, it's different. Anyway, I have to admit that you have more experience than me and deal with situations better. Just look at what happened on the day of the accident scene."

"I never thought so, Baibua, but then, consider this as compensation on my part."

"Compensation? For what? You're the one who got the position at the Institute."

"I mean, because I almost broke your head once. I'm still upset that you were able to divert. And also for the time when, unintentionally, I chose a research topic similar to yours. And of course, for when I threw the shovel into you, back in Ayutthaya."

"So that day, did you do it on purpose?"

"Of course not ..."

Phinya answered quickly, in a loud tone, denying.

"Let's consider that I've already... made it up to you for that... and, well, there are several other things too, if we're going to talk about it..."

She concluded with a somewhat forced smile, which was soon followed by a soft smile on Bua's face. Phinya then stood up and approached, stopping in front of her. With a gentle gesture, she run the back of her hand over Bua's face, caressing it lightly, while her eyes shine charmingly.

"Let's have dinner together tonight."

"When you start saying 'tonight', it never ends with just dinner."

Bua replied with a slight provocation.

"So let's have dinner tonight."

"Okay... if I can finish reviewing the cooperation plan with the university in Panama. The professor is putting a lot of pressure on me, she wants the document ready in two or three days. Unless you want to help me with that."

"You can send it to me, send it to my email."

Phinya replied promptly.

"Go there and finish the job, at night, I'll come down to meet you."

"Deal..."

Bua take a step back, but was stopped when Phinya grabbed her arm and gently kissed her cheek.

"Phin..."

"Just a little bit more," Phinya said, repeating the gesture.

"Oh, one more thing, I almost forgot."

Said Bua, whose face is already starting to get slightly flushed, as if she had remembered something important.

"There are still seven bodies brought from the plane crash that we haven't identified."

"And why are you telling me this...?"

Phinya asked, curious.

"Doctor Phinya, do you happen to have an hour or two free?"

Bua asked with a touch of irony, making Phinya laugh.

"I have the student lab manual to finish, as well as a meeting with the equipment sales representative today."

"For you, Baibua, all you have to do is ask, and I'll give you all my time, the whole day and night if you need it."

"Today alone is enough. Seven bodies... if my boss would be so kind as to take a graceful walk into the lab and look at the victims' bodies, separate the bones, take pictures, measure and input the data into the program and write the report..."

Phinya, with a playful smile, replied:

"Leave it to me, I'll go down and take a fancy walk around there."

"Actually, I didn't want to bother you.."

Bua smiled broadly when she heard Phinya's answer.

"But, thank you very much... Dr. Phinya is always so kind and charming...."

She said jokingly.

"You have to be careful not to fall for Dr. Phinya's charm."

"You've been back for a while, have you managed to win anyone over? Not that I want to know, I'm just asking for the sake of asking."

Bua teased, trying not to seem genuinely curious.

"I sincerely hope that this charm you mention is enough to conquer someone here."

Phinya responded with a subtle smile.

"Ah, another thing!"

Bua quickly changed the subject, seeming to not forget what she needed to say.

"I already warned the police about the marks we found in the ribs. They will send an agent to review and attend the meeting to discuss the progress of the case."

"Yeah, you really are the boss in the lab. When the agent arrives, please let me know. I want to attend the meeting too."

"Agree! I will get on with what I need to do."

"Wait, Baibua."

Phinya called her, approaching before stealing a kiss on Bua's lips. Without hesitation, Bua returned the gesture naturally.

"I'm going down to make my fancy walk now."

Phinya whispered as she pulled her face away, leaving only the space of a breath between them.

"And the rest I solve everything at once tonight."

She whispered again, before planting a kiss on the neck of Bua, making the heat of Phinya's breathing cause a shiver on her skin, while bluar slightly leaned her head, trying to dodge.

"This includes the part where you put me as a coordinator of Aon."

"She was very lucky to get someone as talented as you to mentor her."

Bua said with a hoarse voice.

"You are really good at finding justifications for everything, aren't you, Dr. Bua?"

Phinya answered, joking, while wearing her fingertips to straighten her glasses on top of her nose. Then she leaned in to give her a soft kiss on her

cheek.

"I wanted to solve everything right now."

She whispered in Bua's ear before watching with a smile as she quickly left the room, visibly disconcerted.

□□□□□

□Episode 16□

It was another busy day for Dr. Busaya. The reason? The forensic officers from the Police Department were coming to photograph the bones, after Bua had reported an anomaly found in the fifth pair of ribs on the left side of the still unidentified victim, which showed gunshot wounds. In addition, a meeting was called to update the progress of the investigation into the plane crash, in order to ensure that everyone was on the same page in understanding and taking the next steps in the case.

The officer in charge of the case sent a female officer to work, equipped with her tool kit. Bua did not interfere with the officer's work, only reporting what she had discovered and sharing the progress.

The victims had been identified, but there were still seven bodies to be identified.

Up until that point, the police had not been able to gather much more information. The fact that the victims were reduced to fragments or skeletons made it difficult to obtain substantial details about the case. Sure, the bones could accurately reveal the victim's sex, age, or ethnicity, but as for the injuries... Death by an unnatural means could not be caused without clear signs or obvious injuries, and that was precisely the case.

Bua watched the officer dressed in a black lab coat, with the words "P: Uj Luckthan" (Forensic Expert) emblazoned in white on the back, as she moved, crouching and standing up in the forensic room to take photos of the evidence. Bua watched her from the other side of a large glass window that separated the room from her work area. Despite noticing the door opening, she didn't turn around, continuing to pay attention to the officer.

From the sound of the footsteps, Bua knew immediately who it was. The figure, about two inches taller than her, stopped right in front of her, blocking her view as she leaned on the table, looking out the window, whose curtains were open. Phinya. She handed her a piece of toilet paper, in a teasing tone:

"To wipe the drool," Phinya muttered, her voice acidic. This made Bua, distracted, automatically bring her hand to her mouth, as if she were wiping something.

"You're joking, right?"

Bua replied, defending herself.

"I wasn't drooling or anything."

"I almost saw your ears flapping. Please try to control yourself so you don't embarrass the teachers,"

Phinya replied, her eyes fixed on what she was holding: a clear glass about a foot long, with a pink daisy inside and water halfway up.

"Ear movement is common in mammals, a leftover ability from when primates were still evolving into the genus Homo."

Bua replied, with a mischievous smile.

This made Phinya sigh deeply, Bua interpreted everything as animal behavior, and sometimes it was annoying. Even though she knew that, in many cases, she was just trying to provoke her. Phinya couldn't find the words to retort, because, most of the time, the theories Bua mentioned were quite consistent with anthropological hypotheses. Arguing with Bua was often frustrating.

"I know..." Phinya said.

"Don't forget that we studied together."

Bua just nodded, before looking at what Phinya was holding in her hands.

“This place is as dry as the lab chief. Some flowers will bring some life.”

Phinya placed the glass with the flower on the lab chief's desk, whom she had just mentioned.

This made the owner of the desk cross her arms and twist her lips in displeasure.

“Do you prefer someone else's pelvis to mine, Doctor Bua?”

"I wasn't looking at that."

Bua quickly replied.

"And I've never seen anyone's pelvis better than yours, Phin."

Bua replied, with a slight smile.

"I've told you before..."

From where she was, leaning against the table, Bua moved away and sit on the work chair.

"That your structure is perfectly in accordance with the theory of survival of bipeds that walk upright on Earth. And your 'S' shaped spine is also impressive.

She looked up, with a curious expression.

"It really is..."

"Really?"

"I was just taking a look as a case study... looking at your face. If I looked at anything below that, I know it wouldn't be appropriate."

"Case study of what area? Anthropology in general or specifically about the evolution of species?"

"It's been a while, and you're still attached to something so simple? Friend..."

When she heard 'Friend' even though she knew it was sarcasm, something strange stirred inside Phinya. Maybe it was karma... in the past, she had always been a rival with Bua, but now, everything seemed to have changed in a surprising way.

She knew very well that she was completely enchanted by Bua, to the point where she could hardly shake off this feeling. However, what made it worse was the fact that she wasn't sure what Bua thought about what had happened between the two of them. She didn't like that look. The look Bua gave that young agent, even if for a brief moment, irritated her deeply. She felt like dragging her 'karma friend' to bed and fixing this once and for all. Maybe, after resolving this mess, the two of them needed to have a serious talk.

"Don't call yourself 'simple' in front of me."

"You know it's true. I'm just a newly graduated doctor, stuck in my own little world, with no one interested."

Bua argued.

"What's wrong, Doctor Phin?"

Busaya asked in a deliberately formal and sarcastic voice.

"Nothing. I just come to see how things are going."

"Everything's fine." Bua replied.

"Everything is under control."

"Are you sure? Just now you were almost drooling."

"No, Phinyô..."

"You don't call me 'Friend' in bed."

Phinya immediately replied, unable to resist the provocation, with a mischievous look, making Bua laugh out loud.

"We're already adults, and you still behave like a jealous child."

"I'm not jealous." Phinya retorted, making Bua shrug.

"Well, if you say so."

Bua replied, standing up.

"I'll get some water. My mouth is dry from swallowing so much saliva... "

And she left the room without hesitation.

'Be careful, Bua...'

In a matter of two or three minutes, Phinya felt her hatred rise again when she went out and found Bua talking to the young agent. The doctor's eyes met Busaya's, who was offering a bottle of water to that same agent from before. And she even had the ability to say that it was just a case study, but it really wasn't.

"Dr. Bua, if you're done here, come to my office, please."

Phinya's voice echoed before she walked between the two, going straight to her office, on the fifth floor. She heard Bua saying goodbye to the agent and walking away.

"Did you get her number?"

"Her... shoe size?" —

Bua replied with an expression of false innocence.

"Our species has adapted to survive and evolve to the point of having skulls large enough to accommodate 1.35 kilo brains. It shouldn't be that difficult to understand my question."

Busaya couldn't help but laugh, because Phinya had used a sarcastic criticism based on the theory of evolution, something that Bua often used to provoke her. This time, the spell had turned against the witch, 1.35 kilos is the average weight of the human brain, much larger than that of other primates.

"My brain must be as small as a bean, because I'm a primate from the ancient era that loves to keep its body parallel to the ground. The skull looks big because it's full of sawdust."

Bua said with a smirk.

"And a big brain doesn't necessarily mean being more intelligent."

"Bua!"

"Oh, the hot agent's number? I got her card this morning."

She replied, pulling the card out of her pants pocket

"Want it? You can keep it."

And she placed the small card on Phinya's desk, feigning indifference.

'Bai-bua."

Phinya said through gritted teeth.

"If we were dating, my 3-pound brain would think you were jealous, Phinya."

Bua approached with a teasing smile, while Phinya visibly seethed with anger.

"It's nothing, trust me. But even if I told you, you probably wouldn't care, right?"

Bua concluded on her own, without giving Phinya a chance to respond.

"And don't forget to call her, okay?"

She said, pointing to the business card before leaning in again, clearly intending to tease .

"She whispered to me a little while ago that she's interested in you, so I gave her your card."

Bua winked playfully through her square glasses, making Phinya's heart almost skip a beat.

"Dr. Phinya, always so charming..."

Bua turned around, ready to leave, but was quickly grabbed by Phinya, who wrapped her in a hug from behind.

"Baibua... what's this about taking another woman's card for me and giving mine to her?"

"Well..."

Bua replied as she turned to face her.

"It's in case you want to study a new case."

"What kind of case?"

"Think of a topic on your own, don't come to me with silly questions."

Bua said in a light tone.

"Research from the same institution can't have the same topic. And please don't copy my study on the pelvis. It took me a while to think about it..."

"Baibua..."

She was really annoying, in a way Phinya had never imagined. It was like trying to catch the wind: impossible. Bua played with words, feigning innocence, leaving Phinya completely confused. It made her want to bang

her head against the wall, because she didn't really know what Bua thought or felt about her.

And worst of all... she was still handing out cards and suggesting another woman to her with the utmost ease. Didn't Bua see Phinya as something different from a simple bedmate... and workmate? Or was Phinya the one going crazy on her own?

"Are you going to accept this?" Phinya asked.

"If the reason is for the advancement of anthropology, fine."

Bua's voice rose a little.

"I can't stop you, right? But look, my friend, you're just having fun, aren't you?"

"Stop calling me that."

"Call what?"

"Friend."

"Okay, boss."

Bua answered promptly.

"Or should I call you vice-principal? You haven't even started and you're already using your position to pressure me..."

"Come to my room tonight."

"Is that an invitation or an order, boss?"

"An order... for reasons of advancement in anthropology."

"Hmm... that makes sense."

Bua nodded, as if accepting.

"But, sorry, vice-principal, I already have an appointment."

"With who?"

"It's definitely not with you. If there's nothing else for me, I'll go, Dr. Phinya."

Bua wasn't committed to anyone, but she wasn't lying. She just needed some time to regroup and be with herself.

A lot had happened since the plane crash that made her meet Phinya for the first time in two years. It didn't seem like anything more than a reunion between people who didn't get along. Phinya wasn't much different from before, she was still as arrogant as Bua. Maybe even more so, since now they both had their doctorates and changed jobs.

However, before she knew it, she found herself lying in the same bed as Phinya, without a single piece of clothing on her body, and wondering how they had gotten to this point. She had been sleeping next to Phinya almost every night. Some of the nights, they were dressed, but many others, they weren't.

Bua tried to convince herself that it was nothing more than a physical relationship. Two people who used to hate each other, who competed fiercely in seminars and research, always wanting to be one above the other. The way they had looked at each other in the past was almost contemptuous, and Phinya had even stormed off in anger, leading to Bua being investigated for ethical reasons. What else could there be other than... A case study on physiological structure.

She had repeated this like a mantra since the first night they were together, and the jealousy she felt was just a childish reaction, a typical possessiveness of someone who doesn't know how to handle a new toy. Eventually, Phinya would get bored and lose interest.

With one hand, Bua raised a white can to her lips. That night would be dedicated to writing reports and self-evaluating. As for the problematic

mummified skull, she would need to wait for a more precise date before making any decisions.

The slight bitterness of the alcohol cleared her mind as she swallowed. After emptying half the can in one go, she set it aside and picked up another. The doctor leaned back on the long sofa, where folders and documents were scattered, with her laptop folded up; she had not yet started working as planned. Then she closed her eyes.

The image of Phinya's face and irritating smile immediately appeared in her mind. It was so vivid that it was almost like she could hear her whisper calling her name next to her ear. The scent of her perfume hung in the air, almost touching Bua's nose.

"Hmph..."

Bua exclaimed, frustrated, because the last person she wanted to think about on that quiet night was her 'personal karma', or friend, as the nomenclature was still being defined. In addition to getting carried away, it seemed like she was losing control of her feelings. Would Phinya really care about someone like her?

Thinking about it, she let out a deep sigh, feeling a weight on her heart. She picked up the can of drink next to her and opened it, just as a knock on the door interrupted her. With her mind starting to get foggy, Bua frowned and walked to the door. She peeked through the crack, trying to figure out who it was, especially a certain someone she hadn't told her before. She hadn't ordered food for dinner, because she wasn't hungry. When she saw who the visitor was, she let out a sigh and put on the glasses she had propped on her head before opening the door.

"There's no one here," she drawled in a sleepy voice.

"Bua, are you drunk or are you sleepy?"

Phinya asked, noticing the faint smell of alcohol coming from her.

"I brought food."

"Leave it at the door, delivery man."

Bua's answer made the visitor look at her with disdain.

"Phinya, is it that tonight..."

"I didn't come for that," the new board replied.

"I just brought food. Your favorite pad thai."

Hearing this, Bua kept her gaze fixed on Phinya for a moment.

"Okay ."

Then, she opened the door for her to come in.

"What's on today's agenda?"

Phinya asked as she walked in and noticed the cans of white beer, half a dozen in total, with two already opened and consumed.

"Organize the documents for you."

"So to write the report, do you need to drink a beer to cheer yourself up?"

"Your face irritates me. Besides... tomorrow is my day off, I want to put some alcohol in my bloodstream. That way my liver will be stronger... Do you have something important to say? Can you call me, or did you leave it on silent?"

"I said I just came to bring food."

Phinya put the things she was holding on the table, along with a large bag that she left on the small sofa.

"You're the type who worries about sleeping and forgets to eat."

After that, she picked up a can of beer, opened it and sit down.

"Make yourself comfortable, okay."

Bua couldn't help but tease her, as was her way.

"Am I bothering you?"

"Why don't you wait and ask when you're leaving?"

"I'm not thinking about leaving."

"Phinya..."

"That's why I came, seriously."

She stated firmly.

"I just wanted to see if you were okay. I noticed that your face wasn't looking so good since you drooled during lunch."

"I'm just tired. You know these past few days have been hectic."

"Actually, I was planning on asking to stay here."

Phinya revealed her goal.

"With all my clothes in place, I promise."

"Are you needy, do you want someone to talk to?"

"Something like that." Phinya replied.

"It seems like we haven't talked about random things in a long time."

"Seriously, we never talk, except about work."

Bua commented, before letting herself fall on the couch and looking at Phinya, thinking it was a good idea to have someone to keep her company on a tiring night, even if that person was the reason for most of her tiredness.

"It's true."

"Thanks for the pad thai."

Bua thanked her, feeling hungrier when she mentioned the food.

"Go take a shower first, I mean, if you're really going to spend the night here."

This comment made Phinya stand up and start taking off her jacket. Bua moved back and picked up the piece, placing it over her arm.

"I'll hang it up for you."

The soft voice said as Phinya turned to look at her. Then, the face of the (un)wanted visitor slowly approached.

"You didn't say no..."

"Just a kiss."

Bua decided not to refuse what she also wanted. Her body was pulled closer by Phinya's arms, and she felt the familiar lips, but they soon moved away in just a few moments.

"That's enough for now."

This time, it was Phinya who pulled back, leaning her forehead against Bua's neck.

"I don't want to break my promise."

"Thank you, and I'll make it up to you."

"Don't worry, Bua. I just want you to be honest with yourself. If you ever feel unwell, just tell me, okay?"

Phinya said before pressing her lips gently against the other.

"I'm going to take a shower now."

Then, she went to the table to grab her bag and went into the bathroom.

Bua sighed silently as she watched Phinya disappear. How long could she deny the feelings she had? A feeling of fear quickly appeared in her left chest, accompanied by uncertainty about what she would do when the day came when Phinya wanted to leave.

□□□□□

□Episode 17□

Phinya come out of the bathroom about twenty minutes later, wearing a T-shirt and shorts. She glances at Bua, who still sitting on the couch with her eyes closed, as if she is exhausted and without strength. The things Phinya had been kind enough to buy earlier were piled on the small glass table in front of the couch, along with two sets of bowls and plates.

“Have you eaten yet, Phin?”

Bua asked, without opening her eyes.

“I was waiting to eat with you,”

Bua heard, getting up to serve the food on the plates. The ‘uninvited’, in turn, threw herself on the couch, picked up the can of beer that was no longer cold, and took a sip. Phinya keep her eyes fixed on Bua almost the entire time.

“What’s wrong? What are you thinking about?”

Bua asked, still not looking at her.

“Remembering the old days.”

“Back in the old days, when we used arm bones to hit each other?”

Bua replied, finally looking at her.

"Thigh bones."

Phinya corrected with a smile.

"That's right, femur.

Bua said, moving the plate of pad thai towards Phinya, who had brought the food to her with such consideration.

"Too bad you managed to dodge it."

Bua added, with a touch of humor.

"If I hadn't dodged it, I would have cracked my head." Phinya replied

"Baibua..."

"Why are you so serious?"

Bua interrupted, frowning.

"I don't like it when you talk like that."

"Don't you want me to be serious?"

"I remember how seriously you take your work. But right now, I don't want to talk about work."

The statement make Phinya raises her eyebrows.

"I didn't know you were so observant."

"Besides having keen eyes and a good memory for anatomical structures, I also pay attention to other things."

Bua replied, leaning relaxedly against the small sofa. Actually, Phinya was right. The two had never had the opportunity to talk about trivial matters like normal people. They always ended up arguing or talking about work.

"Maybe it was the first time that this had happened."

"I've known you for five years, Baibua. We're already entering the sixth."

Phinya said, taking the plate of pad thai and starting to eat without adding any seasonings.

“But at the same time, it feels like I don’t really know you.”

“Because maybe I’m not that interesting after all.”

“Who said that?”

“Myself,”

The newly graduated doctor replied.

“Someone who spent so much time studying, without even lifting her head to see how the world is moved forward, it can't be that interesting.”

"You just don't care about the world."

Phinya said.

"Maybe you're right."

Bua take the plate, looking at Phinya before silently putting some pad thai in her mouth.

"The world doesn't interest me much. People don't either."

"But you study people's ethnicity, you should take your eyes off the books and really look at what you're studying." Phinya said.

"I see that you're not very good with people, but you're amazing with animals."

"And don't you find animal behavior interesting?" Bua asked.

"I never imagined I'd hear that from an anthropologist who studies human social behavior based on their anatomical structure and adaptation for the survival of the species."

"If you believe in the idea that we are part of an ecosystem and evolved from animals." Bua justified.

"But you can't interpret all behavior as if it were animal."

"Why?"

Bua replied, pulling the conversation back.

"Because that could make the professor withdraw her diploma."

"Again... Detective Phinya using her positions to intimidate me."

Bua said playfully, while her mouth was full of pad thai, making her cheeks look even chubbier. That scene made Phinya smile, watching Bua struggle to swallow the food.

"You really like using your pack leader behavior to intimidate me, don't you, Phinya?"

"Hey, Baibua, I'm not a wolf."

"Did I say that?" Bua hurried to say.

"When I said that, I wasn't thinking about wolves..."

And she prolonged the last word in a provocative way.

"But dogs also have this behavior, they like to dominate, to protect their territory and their objects."

"Instinct and reason cannot be compared." Phinya commented, unconcerned.

"Are you saying that possessiveness is justified?" Bua frowned

"Okay, I don't want to know."

"I'm not trying to say that either."

"Okay, I really don't want to hear it..."

"Baibua."

"Outside of working hours, you can't intimidate me."

"I can intimidate you even without my position." Phuinya replied.

"Do you want to see?."

"I give in." She countered

"No matter how many years pass, sometimes I still want something to make you shut up."

Phinya's eyes sparkled for a brief moment as she said this. Bua, listening, let out a sigh and shrugged, putting her dinner aside.

Phinya was struggling not to fly at Bua. Sometimes, Bua's carefree attitude made her irritated. If it were before, she would have certainly thrown sharp words or ironies. But now... in her mind, all she could think of was the image of having that woman under her control, doing other things.

However, tonight, she herself decided that she would not act like that. Phinya did not like to force anyone in this regard, especially Bua, and she had every intention of not doing anything. But sometimes, Bua was so... She noticed that Bua was sitting there, frowning as if she was deep in thought.

"Is everything okay, Bua?"

"I can't stop thinking about the plane crash." Bua replied.

"It's been going through my head since morning. The police said this might not be a common case."

"Of course it's not common." Phinya commented.

"There are bullet marks on the victims' bones. How could it be normal?"

"That skull gives me a strange feeling."

Bua continued, with a worried expression.

"It must be ancient and very valuable."

"I wouldn't bet on it."

Said Phinya, who was a doctor specializing in archaeology.

"It doesn't look much like what I usually see at excavation sites, it looks new and in good condition." Phinya continued.

There are no marks of wear, cracks, or signs of rodents or anything else that indicates the passage of time, even though the external appearance, like the dry skin stuck to the bone, is very similar.

"Are you saying it's fake?"

Bua exclaimed, her eyes wide.

"It would be more appropriate to say that it could be a new piece that was made recently. I looked at the photos you took, and the more I look, the more convinced I am of this idea." Phinya said.

"Speaking of which, did you manage to make the model I asked for?"

"I already did."

Bua answered quickly, and Phinya nodded.

"Why would anyone make a new mummy these days?"

"Do you believe in the hypothesis of making quality copies?"

Phinya said enthusiastically.

"These days, these cult items are quite valuable. If you had to guess the selling price of an original, could you imagine? Do you know who else goes

there besides the thieves who go there every night?"

"Who?"

"The rich people who like to collect these things, who get in touch to buy directly on the spot."

Phinya's words left Bua's eyes wide.

"Really?"

"They come, look at them and ask to buy them before they are taken to the registry office, or if they are exhibited in a museum, that's it. Some pieces are so desired that people almost hold an auction in front of the grave"

Phinya explained, as she put her plate of pad thai aside and took a sip of her beer. She realized that talking to Bua without fear of being pinched, kicked, hit or suspicious made her happier than she could have imagined in years.

Maybe it was because they no longer needed to argue, which made the atmosphere between them more relaxed. Phinya felt that all the irrational anger she felt before, at that moment, seemed to be the biggest mistake she had made in her life.

She looked at Bua, who is listening attentively to what being said. The sparkle in her eyes through her square glasses is captivating.

"So, they sold it?"

"In this world, there are people who value money more than justice. Even those with a lot of knowledge sometimes give in to the power of money."

Phinya said, causing Bua to sigh.

"Even I have received underhanded offers of prices several times. In the museum, there are many items that have not yet been registered and displayed in showcases. These rich people know this very well. Some even have catalogs in their hands to choose from."

Phinya explained.

"Really?"

"An Irectus skull was stolen from a back room and sold. Do you know how much was paid for it?"

Bua shake her head.

"What do you think,;earned in ten years would be just a fraction. If we consider the entire body, it would be multiplied by two."

"Irectus' skull is worth much more than Dr. Busay's salary."

Bua joked, letting out a dry laugh.

"My teacher once told me that, nowadays, humanity's value has been reduced to numbers."

Phinya continued, remembering what happened clearly.

"In a short time, I realized that this is true and I can only wonder how our species evolved so much physically, but it seems that our mental evolution has regressed."

She paused to catch her breath, and her gaze seemed a little tired.

Bua just watched her with a sparkle in her eyes and a soft smile, before listening to Phinya continue.

"Our brains are capable of analyzing more, but it seems that we are using this in a search for an advantage, even in relation to our extinct ancestors." The doctor said.

"Our fingers evolved to be able to bend and handle objects with precision, but we ended up using this to hurt each other. And even with our erect body, which allows us to see further and we have developed a nervous system that allows us to see the world in three dimensions, we ignore those who are closer."

Busa just nodded, agreeing with Phinya's words, while paying attention to the conversation.

"It may be that all this evolution of millions of years was in vain. We have a more complex structure, shape and brain to cause harm to our own species or harm others," Phinya continued.

As she finished, she feels Bua's gaze, shine brightly under the light of the room. The wide smile that appeared on the lips of her former rival made Phinya's heart warm.

"Is everything okay, Bualoy?"

"Yes"

Then why are you looking at me like that?

"Because right now, you make me feel grateful to have met you, Phin."

Those words make her smile widely, a smile she couldn't contain. Her face suddenly feel hot, and her heart raced with excitement."

"You really didn't make mistakes about people."

The compliment make Phinya look down at the floor, while she run her hand through her hair nervously. It's unbelievable how Bua's simple words could make her so embarrassed, and this is the second time her words has left her speechless.

"I'm going to take a shower first."

Bua said, standing up. However, as she tried to walk past Phinya towards the bathroom, her body was grabbed and pulled into a tight hug, followed by a smacking kiss on the cheek.

"Phinya!"

"I'm starting to understand why everyone seems to like you, Bualoy."

Phinya lightly pressed her nose into Bua's neck.

"Phinya, I haven't showered yet."

"I know, you didn't want to shower with me today."

Then, she tightened her grip around Bua's waist even more and looked up to meet her.

At that moment, Bua leaned in to kiss Phinya's lips, which are waiting there. Her hands wrapped around her neck, moving towards her impulsively.

"Bua."

Phinya said hoarsely, as she removed her lips and looked over her glasses.

"I don't want you to regret meeting me."

Then, she give Bua a quick kiss and releases the hug.

"Go take a shower. I told you that today you're going to sleep."

"You're always so kind, Dr. Phinya."

Bua joked before disappearing into the bathroom.

'Bualoy...'

She was really falling for her '*sleepy karma*' disguised as a friend.

Friend?

□□□□□

□Episode 18□

Even though good things had been happening in the last few days, it still couldn't be said with full conviction.

In fact, Bua considered what was happening between her and Phinya to be one of those rare events that happened once in a lifetime. Even though she knew deep down that someday it would end, she preferred to wait until that time came to deal with it later.

However, today is not a good day for Bua.

Dr. Busaya finally had time to open and print the results of the dating test on the mummified skull found in the plane crash, which had just been sent by email two hours earlier, after a long wait for the analysis.

The report was printed on an A4 sheet that trembled in her hands. She reread it several times, scanning the paper, while calling the laboratory that had performed the test, which confirmed the same result. The analysis had been repeated three times, following standard procedure: the accuracy was confirmed at ninety-five percent.

It was not old, as Phinya had assumed when looking at the X-ray. The dating results confirmed this. This was not a mummy... In fact, it was a mummy, but not as old as a mummy usually is known. The analysis performed with the correct equipment and procedures proved it.

Busaya looked at the result once more, for the umpteenth time at that hour. She hurried out of the lab with the report paper in her hands. She walked so fast that, in a few minutes, she was already running towards the fifth floor, where the assistant director's office was. Deep down, she expected her

friend to have already arrived; she was in such a hurry that she didn't even knock on the door before entering.

""Phin!"

Phinya is sitting, facing the window, staring out, reflecting on everything that has happened up until that moment. Of course, she's also thinking about the events between her and the person who had just invaded her desk.

The noise make Bua turn around quickly, she stand up and walked towards her.

"What's wrong? Are you missing me already, Buakong? I told you we should go together."

"The lab sent the dating results. See if I got it wrong,"

Bua said, agitated, as she handed the paper to the other, who, frowning, take the sheets to read.

Phinya is silent for a moment, as if she's processing what she read. Her thin eyebrows are completely furrowed.

"I knew it!" Phinya exclaimed.

"You checked if they did the analysis three times, right?"

"Yes, they checked three times. The result is ninety-five percent reliable. They couldn't determine the age," Dr. Busaya said.

"Tell me what's going on?"

"It's not old enough to calculate the age." Phinya replied.

"It's 2023. For the carbon-14 dating method to work, the object needs to be older than 1950, that is, older than seventy-three years."

"So, it's a fake mummy."

"Does it look fake to you?"

Phinya asked, as her eyes remained fixed on the words in the table on the white paper she had just received.

"Not really."

"Exactly."

"And what do we do now?"

"Let's get the skull back, and then we'll figure out the next step."

.

Bua was pacing in circles around the stretcher where the skull of the troubled mummy was, for the hundredth time that hour. Finding it at the site of the private plane crash was already strange enough. Now, finding out that this skull was less than seventy years old and could not be considered an ancient relic was even more intriguing. The next question was: what was the true origin of this skull?

The situation became even more disturbing when thinking that someone could be playing at making a mummy using ancient methods on a person from the modern era. And the horror multiplied when imagining that this person's death could have occurred unnaturally.

Tampering with the body of a deceased person was already illegal, but in this case, it was not the entire body, only the skull had been found. The question that now arose was: where was the rest of the body?

"Are you going to keep walking around in circles for long, Buakong?"

Phinya asked, glancing at Bua.

After a while, Phinya asked:

"It's making me dizzy."

"Then don't look." Bua replied quickly.

"Turn the other side."

"I let you look at my pelvis, why can't I look too?"

Bua notices that Phinya's gaze dropped a little, in a playful tone.

"My pelvis isn't something worth looking at."

Bua replied, slowing down and using the height of the autopsy table to hide from Phinya.

"Are you going to be embarrassed now? Don't you think it's a little late for that?"

"Phi... speak more quietly, someone might hear and misunderstand."

Bua said quickly, looking from side to side cautiously.

"I'm not afraid of someone hearing. And frankly, I don't care if they get it right or wrong."

"Shut up."

"Then stop walking." Phinya threatened.

"Let's focus on figuring out what to do now."

"You always push everything onto me." Bua retorted.

"Don't come at me with that."

She replied, clearly anticipating the comment.

"Is there any other work you haven't thrown at me yet, lazybones?"

"You've been away for two years and abandoned all your work, now it's your turn to do some work. If you want to publish your research, take it. I

haven't had time to write it and send it to the professor to review, so you can keep the main name. The one I did while you were away, I'm not going to charge nothing." Bua said.

"I remember that back then you kept it like a treasure."

"You can publish it yourself, I don't want it anymore."

"Oh, really? Last time you looked like a snake protecting its eggs, hissing and still trying to bite me."

"I should have changed from biting to... what would be good? Helps me think. Anyway, now I have something more valuable to protect."

Phinya smiled, watching Bua's expression, who looked away to the autopsy table where the problematic skull was.

"Don't you want to know what I'm protecting so carefully?"

Phinya asked, teasing.

"No." Bua answered shortly and dryly.

"Let's work."

She said, pretending to look for tools, avoiding looking at Phinya, who was on the other side, arms crossed, with a satisfied smile on her face.

"Then let's work. That way we can finish soon and we can do other things later."

Phinya's smile widened even more when she saw Bua's face start to blush, the blush spreading from her cheeks to her neck and ears.

"D-do what?" Bua asked hesitantly.

"You know very well. Tonight I'll show you," Phinya replied.

"Tonight what? Who said you're going to sleep with me?"

Bua's voice sounded small and she avoided looking directly at Phinya.

"Then I'll sleep at your place," Phinya suggested casually.

"But you said I was going to sleep tonight," Bua retorted.

"But you will sleep, yes. I didn't deny that at all," Phinya replied without missing the chance to tease.

"Doctor Phinya, can you explain again how mummies are made? I'm confused. What exactly happened?"

Busaya quickly changed the subject, realizing she is losing the argument.

"What era do you want to know about?"

Phinya asked, crossing her arms again.

"If it's from the early days, they would place the bodies in the sand under the sun. If it was in an area near a river or where there used to be a lake, the sand would have salt mixed in, which would help the process. With the heat of the place, after about forty days, the water in the body would be completely removed. In fact, in the early days, there was no deliberate technique. Someone from the time noticed that when the bodies buried in the sand were exposed to the wind, the sand would be blown away and reveal a dry and preserved body, without decomposition. That's when they started thinking of ways to preserve the bodies."

"So, the main factors are the sand, salt, sun and dry air that remove the water from the body. Furthermore, burying in sand makes it difficult for bacteria to proliferate, insects cannot bother or decompose the body, which prevents the deterioration of the skin, which ends up drying out and sticking to the bones."

"Exactly, Dr. Bua." Phinya confirmed.

"That was in the first era. Later, they began to develop a more elaborate technique."

Phinya continued the explanation.

"They used natron, a mineral composed of different types of salt found at the bottom of lakes, to preserve the bodies. The first step was to open the body and remove the internal organs. Then, they applied natron to both the body and the organs, and buried the body in the sand for at least forty days. After that, they covered the body with a resin made from tree sap. Finally, they wrapped the body with several layers of linen soaked in this resin. But do you know what the most intriguing part was?"

"What?" Bua asked curiously.

"When they used a stick to make the brain run out of the nose. Imagine that!"

Phinya said, making Bua frown and adjust her glasses uncomfortably.

"And what about this case here, what do you think?"

Bua asked as she sees Phinya putting on gloves and picking up the problematic skull, turning it from side to side, examining it closely.

"It was a good job." Phinya replied.

"The body must have gone through a very well-done preservation process, similar to the ancient techniques. But the fact that the lower jaw is deformed makes me suspect that the person may have been injured before death."

Busaya, who has been listening attentively, nod as Phinya continued to explain.

"The technique was very well done. At first glance, it looks like a legitimate mummy, even if it is more recent. The person who did this clearly had some knowledge. This makes it difficult for us to accurately assess the time of death."

"Because the body was turned into a mummy first."

Bua concluded, watching Phinya frown.

"Analyzing the x-ray, the bones are still new and have not deteriorated. He must have died recently." Phinya commented.

"And what do we do now?"

This time, it was Bua who asked the question.

"We continue to do what we can do."

"We can start to find out who he is... from the forehead and the brow ridge, which makes me believe he may be a man, we need to know who he was and how he died.'

"The first point is easier than the second."

Bua commented, with a worried expression, adjusting her glasses on her nose as she thought about how to solve the problem Phinya had just proposed.

Typically, the remaining parts, such as a skull or bones, can indicate sex by the shape and size of the skull, observing the angle of the lower jaw, the brow ridge and the shape of the nose. Age can be estimated by the fusion of the bony plates of the bones of the limbs or fingers and toes. Height is often calculated from the length of large bones, such as those of the leg.

In some cases, it is possible to identify previous bone injuries or certain bone diseases. In the case of death, there must be some type of visible trauma, such as a fractured skull, broken bones or wounds caused by sharp objects that exerted enough force to damage the bones.

These details can help infer the cause of death, even if not precisely.

In general, forensic anthropology work is only a small component of events or cases, and must be supported by physical evidence or testimonies. You can't conclude much just by analyzing the bones. But in this case... all they had was a skull.

"We need to see what the only organ we have can tell us."

"Where do you want me to start?" Bua asked.

"You already know and you still ask," Phinya replied.

"You know, Bua, that I trust you more than anyone else here."

"Don't pressure me like that," she replied, grimacing.

"If you knew, you would have bought a hologram," the small voice grumbled regretfully.

"The hologram won't solve anything. We have to do this ourselves."

Phinya teased, with a smile on the corner of her mouth.

"Dr. Bua, the disciple of the goddess of anthropology."

"Yeah, if the stress continues like this and I have to do this alone, I'll freak out and run screaming down the lab hallway."

Bua promised, with an irritated expression.

"If you need help, just let me know."

"I just need a camera and pins to mark the points on the bones, that should be enough. I'll try to create a 2D model on the computer first and let the program calculate, it'll be faster and more accurate."

"I thought you were going to make a 3D model, I wanted to see it up close."

"I've only done this a few times. Besides, it'll take a while and I've already forgotten how to model facial muscles." Bua explained

"I'll save this for later when I have no other choice. In the meantime, I need some time to review the facial musculature."

The two of them were talking about a method called forensic facial reconstruction, which is a forensic anthropology technique. This technique creates a facial representation from an anonymous skull, either in two or three dimensions, to show what the person looked like when they were alive, or, more specifically, what the owner of that skull looked like.

However, before the era of three-dimensional modeling machines or two-dimensional computer reconstruction, the technique consisted of molding the shape with clay or modeling clay.

"Using manual modeling. But to be able to make a mold of the face, you need to have knowledge of the anatomy of the facial muscles, of which there are more than fifty, to observe the patterns of how the muscles connect to the bones of the face, as well as the depth and thickness of the important tissues, to make the mold as realistic as possible."

"So, I need to remember everything. That way, next time, I can look at your face, and not just your pelvis. If you don't let me, I can look for other faces." Bua replied.

"Baibua, wait!" Phinya exclaimed.

"Finding someone with the same proportions as me is not easy."

"Oh, but Dr. Phinya is so beautiful!"

"No, wait, what do you think?"

Phinya said, smiling, trying to explain herself.

"Ask the person who sleeps with me every night and you'll see."

"So, tonight you're going to sleep alone."

"Bua."

Phinya's smile disappeared instantly, as she dragged her voice in a pleading tone.. no...

"About the facial molding, if you find Dr. Wan, let me know." Bua commented

"If he has any ideas, he can help."

"Okay, I'll talk to him."

□□□□□

□Episode 19□

"Male."

“Hm?”

Phinya, who was focused on the laptop screen, mumbled the question. She turned to look at Bua, who was standing next to her. In the researcher’s hands were a tablet and a white pen.

“Who?”

Upon hearing the question, Bua held out the tablet to Phinya. On the screen was a two-dimensional facial reconstruction of an anonymous male skull. He had a rounded face, small but relatively deep-set eyes, thick lips, and a wide nose.

“That skull,” Bua begin to speak.

“It is a male, adolescent to middle-aged. The age was estimated from the X-ray, observing the already closed cranial sutures and calculating the average of the points in each area. The age range is between thirty-five and sixty-five years.”

Age assessment based on cranial sutures usually covers a relatively wide range. From adolescence to middle age, the sutures tend to close completely. However, in adolescents and young adults, assessment by cranial suture is less accurate, since the bones are almost fully developed.

In newborns, the bones of the skull are not yet fully fused together. This explains the old saying that babies have a "soft spot," because the bones of the head are still cartilage and have not fused into a rigid structure, as they do in adults. The bone cells are still developing, and when x-rayed, the

sutures (the lines of connection between the bones) can be clearly seen separated. As a person ages, these sutures begin to close, indicating bone maturity.

In adults and the elderly, the bones of the skull are already completely fused and begin to show signs of bone degeneration, visible as porosity in the bones after the age of sixty-five. Forensic anthropologists use this knowledge to estimate the approximate age of anonymous bones found. In addition to the skull, bone development in other parts, such as the femur, humerus, and bones of the hands and feet, can also provide clues.

"Rounded face, oval nasal cavity, eye sockets slightly deeper than average."

Bua continued.

"The x-ray showed that the lower jaw is fractured, which has deformed the jaw by about one centimeter to the right, compared to the midsagittal plane.

She paused to think before continuing,

"Based on all this information, we can conclude that..."

"Asian." Phiny interrupted her.

"I already suspected it."

"I adjusted the angle of the deformed jaw millimeter by millimeter." Bua explained.

"From working so hard, my pen got completely worn out. Can I ask to buy another one?"

"Besides being lazy, you still complain," replied Phinya, who was responsible for authorizing the institute's budget.

"How did you manage to do this in five days?"

"It wasn't me," Bua said with a dry smile.

"The program does the calculations. The license for this software costs the equivalent of five months of my salary. So, it needs to be more efficient and faster than I could do it manually."

She sighed before continuing.

"But it took so long that my shoulders started to hurt. And drawing the muscle fibers was a challenge, in addition to having to adjust the depth of the key points on the face. I didn't want to let the program generate it automatically, afraid that it wouldn't be accurate."

"Still, I would love to see a hand-made reconstruction," Phinya commented.

"I believe you have a talent for delicate work."

The compliment made Bua give a slightly irritated look.

"You should know that very well..."

"Which part exactly? About the hominid thumbs, which evolved so that modern humans can hold objects and perform delicate work?"

Phinya asked, with a hint of irony.

"Yes... after all, we studied together." Bua replied.

"You were in the front row while I slept in the back."

"When it comes to the structure of Homo, I'll never be able to compete with you," Phinya admitted.

"If we tried manual reconstruction, it would take us at least a month to get something that resembles a face," the doctor pondered.

"For now, I think that's enough. What do you think?"

"I'm still stuck with the idea that he's Asian," Phinya replied calmly.

"He's definitely not Negroid or Caucasian, which have smaller skulls."

"The program's database confirms this," Bua explained.

"I tested the comparison between Asian, Negroid and Caucasian, based on the morphological characteristics of the skull: the shape, size, width of the frontal bone, the adjusted angle of the mandible, the shape of the supraorbital arch and the zygomatic process. All this, considering the skull in its correct anatomical position, in the Frankfurt horizontal reference plane."

"The horizontal plane is parallel to the ground, using a horizontal reference line that goes from the lowest point under the skull (inferior orbital margin) to the external auditory canal,"

Bua explained, as she slid her finger across the screen, indicating the mentioned points. She then continued her explanation.

"I adjusted the 3D calculations and applied the muscle layers based on the average depth of the tissue in relation to the bone positions of each ethnic group, using at least sixteen reference points (osteometric markers) on the skull," she said, pausing to take a breath.

Phinya just nodded. She knew that when it came to theories in physical anthropology, especially about the morphology of primates and the various species of Homo, she could never match the level of knowledge Bua was demonstrating now.

"After that, the program calculated the comparison between the characteristics of the skull and the depth of the tissues in relation to the database. The result was: 89% Asian, 62% Negroid and 37% Caucasian."

Bua was talking about the three main ethnic groups into which Homo sapiens are divided.

Asian are the ethnic groups originating and residing in Asia, especially Southeast Asia. The general characteristics include a smaller stature, yellowish skin and dark brown to black eyes. Negroids are the ethnic groups originating from Africa, comprising populations with dark skin. And

lastly, Caucasians are the people living in Europe and North America, with light skin.

However, as Phinya had previously mentioned, ancient civilizations that thrived for thousands of years tended to have much greater ethnic diversity than today, due to migration and mixing of peoples. Population diversity makes it difficult to distinguish ethnicities or racial groups as we do today. To be certain, genetic analysis would be required, a process that can take decades.

So the fact that the analysis indicated more than 80% Asian characteristics suggests that the owner of this skull was not an ancient Egyptian, as initially assumed, but rather someone who lived in modern times and may have died recently. Comparing with the recently received age test, the skull is less than 75 years old.

Then Bua continued:

“And I also did the additional calculations that you suggested, about some ancient Egyptians having mixed ancestry. I included variables for Europeans, Americans, Africans, and Middle Easterners. However, the results were below 20% for each of these groups, so I ruled that out. I can confirm that this has no connection with Egyptian mummies. Based on the X-ray, dating, and facial reconstruction, the preliminary conclusion is that this skull is recent, and the person was probably from our region, if not our country, then from a neighboring country.”

“Since we saw the mummy and the Book of the Dead with it, we focused on that and didn’t consider other factors,” Phinya said, and Bua nodded in agreement.

“Who would have thought something like this could happen? Just finding a mummy in a plane crash is strange enough,” the lab chief commented, pushing her glasses up her nose with her finger.

The newly revealed information made Phinya let out a heavy sigh.

“This is terrible,” she said, looking at Bua.

“Don’t panic yet. I’ve barely started...”

Bua replied softly, which made Phinya turn to face her.

"I had a bad feeling, so I added a few more variables to better characterize it, I used the ethnic characteristics of our region: the average angle of the jaw, the arch of the eyebrows, the cheekbones, the depth of the eye sockets, the shape of the nasal cavities. I also added the characteristics of hair, eye color and skin color. Then, I calculated it back, comparing it with the data of the Southeast Asian population stored in the database and in comparison with the skull found. Do you know what the significance value was?"

“Zero point zero five?”

Phinya asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Really?”

If the significance value of a calculation or experiment is equal to or greater than 95%, it means that the experiment is acceptable, with a margin of error of 5%. This result is usually called a significance level of 0.05. However, Bua shook her head and slowly replied, “Zero point zero one.”

This meant that the confidence interval for the test was 99%, with only a 1% margin of error. Phinya let out another sigh before Bua continued.

“I think you were dealing with an unusual case. If we look at the facial reconstruction we obtained, although it is not 100% conclusive, this unknown man is probably someone from here, from our own region. There is no Egyptian mummy involved.”

Phinya shuddered when she heard this.

“So, I came to tell you that I will send the image of this unidentified man’s face to the police. Maybe they can release it or compare it with the missing persons database. If he is not from our country, he could be from a neighboring country, based on the characteristics of the skull,” Bua concluded.

“Send it now!”

Phinya replied, agreeing.

“Have the police given any news about the plane crash?”

“What do you think about that?”

Bua's face showed concern.

"Now, the airline that offered the charter flight service has been closed for an indefinite period."

"Damn." Phinya exclaimed.

"And now we have this situation." She sighed.

"I'll talk about it with the professor this afternoon. Will you come with me?"

"Deal, Dr. Phin."

Both Phinya and Busaya were standing in front of the desk of the director of the institute, who was watching them with an expression that was difficult to decipher. A slight smile appeared on the lips of the one they both respected and who could be considered the person who guided and molded them since the beginning of their doctoral studies.

Phinya, wearing a formal suit, held a document folder in her right arm, pressed against her body. Bua, in turn, held a tablet with her left hand.

“I never imagined I would see this scene,”

Professor Nissara said in a relaxed manner, looking at her two former students as she leaned back in her chair.

“Sit down.”

They both obeyed, but the teacher frowned in surprise when she saw Phinya pull out a chair so Bua could sit down. Bua murmured a ‘thank you’ and

looked up at her taller colleague, with a smile and eyes shining behind her square glasses.

“I still remember the time Bua held a shovel and Phinya a hoe, ready to fight in the middle of field work,”

The principal commented, making her two former students laugh.

“If I hadn’t run to stop them, someone would have ended up with their head split open.”

“Back then, I was just a rebellious girl, professor,” Phinya said first.

“And now?”

“Professor Nissara.”

Nissara raises an eyebrow and asked, as she sees Phinya look at the person sitting next to her.

“Whatever,”

Phinya replied, and soon heard the teacher chuckle softly. Meanwhile, Bua just stared at the table, listening to the conversation without making eye contact with anyone.

“So, what’s today’s topic? You two came to see me together,” the teacher asked.

“The plane crash case,”

Bua, who had been silent for a while, was the one to answer.

“What happened?”

“I’ve already talked to you about it before, when I was still in Panama...”

Busaya begin.

“We found a mysterious skull that shouldn’t have been there.”

"Yes, I remember."

Confirmed the supervising teacher.

"You asked for permission to use the lab and requested extra emergency funds."

"That's right." Bua nodded.

"The problem is that the result showed that we couldn't determine the age, because the sample is too recent."

"I see. And you, Phin, what do you think about that?"

"When I first saw the X-ray, I also thought it wasn't old..." Phinya begin to speak.

"So, I waited for the final results to know for sure. If it was an ancient relic, I would have tried to return it to the owner, but the result was that we can't date the skull as an antique because it's too new."

She sees the teacher nod.

"So, I don't really know what to do now."

"Do you remember what we discussed about this before you went abroad? Remember what I said about the commodification of humanity? People who, even after death, can't rest in peace?"

"Yes."

Phinya replied firmly, before looking at Bua beside her.

"And I was even more intrigued because it seems that the buying and selling of these remains is done as if it were something legal."

The young doctor explained:

"But, since I don't have concrete data, I didn't dare to draw any conclusions."

"You did well. An assumption should remain just an assumption until it is proven."

"Until there is reliable information to confirm it.

The director stated in a deep voice.

"In theory, that's how it should be."

"That's why Phinya asked me to do a facial reconstruction." Bua added.

"Initially, we were inclined to believe that it was from an Asian person before we started."

"We were", was it?" the teacher asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes."

The two answered almost at the same time, exchanging glances without meaning to, and then looking away.

"And what happened next?"

The teacher asked, smiling.

"So, I used the parameters of an Asian man to make the facial reconstruction in two dimensions and then I added the calculations in three dimensions. The result was that there were 89% Asian features."

"Oh... really?"

The director's tone revealed some concern.

"So, I adjusted to represent someone from Southeast Asia, taking into account the width of the forehead, the angle of the jaw, the depth of the eye sockets, the shape of the nasal cavities and the depth of the facial muscles. I

also added independent variables, such as thick, dark hair and black irises. The result was that the margin of error dropped to 0.01."

"That's not good."

Commented teacher Nisara after hearing the explanation.

"Actually, I made a considerable mistake."

Phinya admitted in a calm tone.

"Although I had my suspicions, I did not think that this skull could have originated in our own country. I also cannot say for sure that it is a forgery."

"Forgery or not, that is another question — commented the principal."

"The main question is: who is this unknown man?"

"And how far have you gotten with the investigation?" Asked the principal.

"I am about to send the reconstructed image to the police, in case anyone recognizes him."

"We were going to report missing persons, but Phinya said it was better to talk to you first."

"Okay, you can take care of it, Bua."

"And if the skull of this unknown man was really produced here? What should we do, teacher? I do not like this feeling, I am really scared, because this might not be the first time."

Phinya's calm voice was filled with concern.

"I've seen negotiations like this before, but I've never felt this bad."

"That's why I'm trying to get you to go to the field, because this isn't just an academic goal. The experience you're going to have will teach you how to deal with this kind of situation."

The teacher argued, smiling proudly at her student.

"Did you see how these things are closer to us than we think?"

"I think I'm starting to understand."

"I already imagined that you might encounter a situation like this in the country."

"Really?" Phinya asked

"As anthropologists, this affects us emotionally."

"That's true."

Busaya replied, after listening attentively for a while.

"And now, what should we do, teacher?" Phinya asked again.

"First, let's send the case to the police and see what they can find out. In the meantime, I'll try to ask if anyone else has any questions about this."

The two former PhD students nodded in agreement.

"As for identifying the victims of the plane crash, we've managed to identify eight so far, but there are still seven left,"

Phinya said.

"One of them seems to have signs of aggression, but the police haven't made a report yet because they haven't found the weapon."

"Okay, I get it," Professor Nisara confirmed.

"If they need anything and I'm not there, Phinya is the one in charge. Otherwise, Bua will take responsibility."

"Okay, teacher." Bua replied, while Phinya nodded in agreement.

"We don't want to bother you anymore, thank you."

□□□□□

□Episode 20□

Busaya slumped down on the long, soft gray leather sofa, exhausted. She had spent the entire day meticulously reviewing the accuracy of the facial reconstruction and trying to input other variables to see if she could get any different results, but nothing new had emerged. Luckily, there are now programs that speed up and make this work much more accurate. Even though it was only a two-dimensional model, it saved a lot of time.

Phinya, stubborn as ever, insisted that they should create a three-dimensional model manually, which Bua thought was unnecessary at this point. However, the stubborn Phinya kept pushing until she started to get irritated. Bua was one step away from ordering Phinya to do the job herself if she made one more peep.

The daily workload had Bua almost crawling back to her room, but she felt that fate was still on her side by bringing Phinya from somewhere far away. She vaguely remembered hearing her casually comment the day before that the last country she had been to was probably Spain. She was back from carrying crates and transporting corpses from the last field operation, traveling to Madrid, while sprawled on a four-star hotel bed in the capital. A country that had once had a prosperous civilization.

It was during this trip that Phinya received a call from her former advisor, asking her to return to Thailand after having been absent for two years. Furthermore, Professor Nisara surprised everyone by appointing Phinya as the vice-director of the institute, leaving everyone confused.

In any case, the decision was the sole prerogative of the founder of the institute, and Bua never questioned her advisor's decisions. In fact, in the end, this also benefited Bua, as she was able to pass on more than thirty

percent of the responsibilities that would previously have been hers to Phinya.

The position of vice-director, which Bua had not wanted from the beginning, included sharing classes with undergraduate and graduate students, as well as having Phinya help supervise research projects and mentor new graduate students who were about to arrive.

Busaya then had more time to breathe. Why should she worry about other matters?

Many at the institute were well aware of the history between her and Phinya, especially her classmates and younger students, who had witnessed the conflict between the two for the position of the advisor's favorite. At that time, Bua was still ambitious and determined. She was a recognized expert in the theory of human evolution, particularly in the study of primates of the order Homo, which was the heart of the field. In terms of both morphology and social dimensions, it was difficult to find someone with as much knowledge as she did. Although she tried to keep a low profile, it was impossible not to be noticed due to the vastness of her knowledge. But Phinya was no slouch.

She, in turn, was the student of a renowned expert in historical human civilizations, and had had numerous opportunities to participate in field missions abroad even before enrolling in her doctorate, in the same program as Bua. Phinya had previously lived in another country that had experienced a genocide, where she participated in the recovery of human remains to identify the victims. As a result, she had much more practical field experience than Bua.

This situation resulted in Professor Nisara having two brilliant students in the same room.

Perhaps this was why they were always fighting. Although their desks were just a few steps apart, they rarely spoke without ending up arguing. Each was excellent in her field and had a unique perspective... until eventually it became better for both of them not to talk anymore. When the advisor realized that things were not going well, she decided to separate the two,

offering Phinya scholarships to do fieldwork abroad frequently, while leaving Bua in charge of research and paperwork at the institute.

This situation led the other students to consider Bua as the advisor's favorite, and many believed that she would become the star of the field in the future. However, Bua secretly felt a certain envy of Phinya.

Although she never mentioned it, she wished, at least once, to go out in the field like Phinya. Still, she knew that her calling lay more in theoretical research.

It was then, in the third year of her doctorate, that Phinya unexpectedly accused Bua of stealing her research and resigned. In addition, she filed a formal complaint, which led to Bua being investigated by the postgraduate ethics committee, under suspicion of plagiarism and misappropriation of academic work, disappearing shortly after causing all this commotion.

When Bua realized, she's lying on the long sofa, in a room that is not hers.

“Reviewing facial muscles all day has made my eyes sore,”

She mumbled, almost sleepily, before lifting her legs onto the sofa and closing her eyes.

“If you’re going to sleep, at least take a shower first,”

The owner of the room said firmly as she speaks.

“Just a quick nap... please, boss.”

Within minutes, Bua already fast asleep, overcome by exhaustion.

Phinya went to the next room to get ready, and when she returned, she found her friend sleeping peacefully, the rhythm of her breathing indicating a deep sleep.

"Baibua..."

Phinya murmured, with a soft smile on her lips. She sit down next to the sofa, placing the bottle of water on the small table next to her. Then, she rested her chin on the sofa, watching Bua sleeping.

Almost unconsciously, Phinya raises her hand and begin to play with the strands of hair that fell on Bua's face.

"What did you do to get so exhausted?"

She gently removed Bua's glasses, placing them next to the bottle, which was already half empty. Then, without resisting, she leaned over and placed a soft kiss in the middle of Bua's forehead.

"Phin..."

Bua murmured, sleepily, trying to open her eyes. Instinctively, she moved her face towards Phinya, gently capturing the other's lips for a brief moment, while her left hand went up to hold the back of Phinya's neck, pulling her closer.

"Sleep."

Phinya whispered as she pulled her lips away, but Bua's hand still holding the back of her neck, pulling her back in for another soft, lingering kiss.

"We'll leave today for another day..."

Bua fell asleep again soon after. Phinya remained seated, watching her for a few moments, absentmindedly playing with her hair. As she stared at Bua, she couldn't help but wonder why she had never looked at her so closely before. Bua had always been right in front of her, but Phinya had let time pass, wasting all those opportunities.

The back of Phinya's hand slid gently across Bua's cheek, and she couldn't resist leaning in to gently brush her nose against her skin.

"Sleepyhead,"

Phinya murmured, before settling herself on the couch, which seemed too small for the two of them. As she pressed herself against Bua, she instinctively turned around, nuzzling her face into Phinya's chest.

"You smell so good," Bua murmured, her voice sleepy.

"I took a shower, right?"

Phinya replied, in a casual tone.

"Now go to sleep."

"I'll make it up to you later, I promise..."

Bua said, in a whisper.

"Just sleep. Stop talking."

"Uh-huh..."

Bua snuggled even closer, and Phinya couldn't help but smile, putting her arm around Bua, closing her eyes too.

In a brief moment of reflection, Phinya felt that this was where she really belonged.

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"So... you weren't really bothered, Bua?"

"Bothered?"

Bua repeated the question, looking up from the cup of black coffee that was resting next to a stack of documents on 3D facial reconstruction.

"Bothered by what?"

Fang looked at her in disbelief, while Bua take a slice of bread from her breakfast box. There is still a long day ahead.

"With the fact that the Professor had appointed Phinya as vice principal in her place.

"And why would I be bothered?"

Bua answered casually, biting the corner of her bread.

"Phinya just appeared out of nowhere... and took your position, that's all. Not bothered at all? Really?" Fang insisted.

"Not me. I'd rather sleep."

Bua answered simply.

I respect the Professor decision, whatever it may be. It doesn't matter to me."

She shrugged and took a sip of her coffee .

"I'm just sleepy."

"And since when have you been friends with Phinya?"

"Of course not!"

Bua answered hurriedly.

"Did you happen to see anything that indicated that I get along with her?"

Her voice gained a defensive tone, while firing off a series of questions.

"Or did you see something?"

"I didn't see anything, I'm just curious. Because, before, you would have definitely complained or made a fuss."

Fang said, with a provocative smile.

"If complaining doesn't solve anything, then it's better to let it go, I'm tired of fighting. As long as she leaves me alone, I'll even appreciate it."

Bua replied with an air of acceptance.

"Do you still want me to buy you that lunch to comfort you?"

Fang asked hesitantly.

"You really don't seem upset at all."

"If you want to pay, I'll accept. I won't refuse anyone's generosity."

Bua said quickly.

"But it doesn't have to be to comfort me, you know?"

"To be honest, I came back thinking I'd see you two killing each other, like before...."

Fang continued, now with an amused tone.

"If, with this level of education, my IQ wasn't accompanied by an increase in EQ, I would have given up studying, it would be a waste of time."

Bua replied with a hint of irony.

"I think P'Phinya is really cool."

Said Aon, who is sitting eating a plate of sticky rice with grilled pork for breakfast.

"When I asked her to be my advisor, she didn't even hesitate. She's polite, speaks in a soft voice, gives great advice... and she smells nice."

"Smells nice?"

Bua repeated the last part, narrowing her eyes suspiciously.

"Oh, you mean her perfume. I don't know what brand she uses, but I'd like to buy some too."

Aon explained with a shy smile, as she picked up a skewer of meat and put it in her mouth, handing another to Bua, who mumbled a thank you.

"And have you already talked to her about the orientation?"

Asked the head of the laboratory.

"What did Phinya say?"

"She asked me to prepare a study plan, indicating which direction I will follow."

Replied Aon, excited.

"Bioanthropology is difficult, P'Fang."

Aon asked curiously, while looking at Fang.

"Run away while you can..."

Fang answered seriously.

"I'm serious."

"Don't scare her like that, Fang."

Bua scolded her friend, laughing a little. Aon then turned her attention to Bua.

"And your area, physical anthropology, P'Bua? What is it like?"

"As we discussed briefly before, in this area you need to be very creative."

Bua answered in a playful tone.

"In the theoretical part, you need to have a good imagination, especially when writing articles. But when you go out into the field... Well, all you do is dig holes. It's not as exciting as it seems, unlike that one."

She finished, making a slight reference to Phinya.

"P'Phinya said she'll find a good field of work for me." Aon continued.

"But I'm scared."

"Don't worry, Aon. Just don't waste your energy trying to compete with your future co-adjunct." Bua said jokingly.

"She has so much energy that the Professor told her to carry crates and do heavy work, otherwise she would complain all the time."

Bua concluded with an ironic smile.

"But historical anthropology is interesting. Phinya's line of research deals with the development of body structure, larger skulls and brains, while the human body decreased in size. This is all linked to environmental factors that influenced migration, sedentarization, the formation of societies and cultures, the emergence of language and changes in the way we live. Ancient civilizations went through many transformations and in the midst of all this, our species has changed in many ways. P'Phinya is really good at this subject."

"I think I just heard you praising Phinya?"

Fang interrupted in a surprised tone.

"And you called her P'Phinya instead of 'annoying Phinya'."

"And what's wrong?"

Bua asked with a defiant expression.

"You look different, Bua," her friend commented, intrigued.

"Before, you could barely look at her face."

"We're growing up, Fang,"

Bua said, shrugging, as if she was torn between her old feelings and the new ones.

"And that girl... She's really good at what she does, and I can't deny that," Bua admitted with a reluctant shrug.

"Don't go that way,"

Fang, with furrowed eyebrows, warned Aon once more seriously.

"Follow Bua in physical anthropology or go into historical research with P'Phinya."

This area is not for staying locked in the lab all the time.

"You're exaggerating a bit. Nowadays, molecular biology in our area is quite popular," Bua objected.

"And that's exactly why I told her to run away," Fang replied, joking.

"Then I think I'll go with P'Phinya anyway,"

Aon decided, starting to stab the sticky rice on her plate with a fork and bringing it to her mouth.

"But... Is she really that strict? I heard the others saying she had problems before she left."

The question made Bua and Fang exchange glances immediately, without needing to agree.

"Ah..." Bua pretended to chew the pork skewer, even though there was nothing in her mouth.

"Ask Bua, they're old rivals. They've even thrown shovels and hoes at each other until the teacher ran to separate the two."

"Seriously?" Aon quickly turned to Bua, her eyes wide.

"P'Bua?"

"That was a long time ago."

Bua replied, trying not to sound uncomfortable.

"Phinya probably forgot about it... or at least I think so." She muttered uncertainly.

"Uh huh"

A discreet cough interrupted the conversation. Phinya, wearing a black dress shirt, appeared at the entrance to the researchers' break room. The sound make everyone in the room jump in fright. Bua quickly picked up her coffee cup and take a sip, trying to hide her surprise, exchanging a quick glance with Fang, who is now silent.

"P'Phinya, Sawasdee ka."

Aon quickly put her fork aside and give a formal salute to her future advisor. Phinya nodded in response and entered the room, walking over to the coffee maker and grabbing a white ceramic mug for herself.

The room fell silent immediately, so heavy that even Aon, who is focused on her food, feel the room suddenly freeze, as if the temperature had dropped without warning. No one dared to start a new conversation. The atmosphere in the room so tense, and Aon hurriedly packed her things in silence, deciding it's best to leave.

Phinya, who had prepared her coffee, turned around and leaned against the table. Fang had her back to her, while Bua sit facing her. With the coffee cup in her hand, Phinya raises it to her lips, pointing a finger at Busaya, who is doing her best to hide any hint of discomfort.

For Phinya, it was better for others to think that she and Bua still didn't get along. In reality, Bua didn't feel comfortable with it, but she accepted that if Phinya didn't say or show anything beyond friendship, they could be considered just friends. It was a fragile friendship, sustained by mutual interests but not by real bonds. What led her to tolerate Phinya's presence was, well, a physical need.

'Oh, what a pain, Bua,' she thought.

"I'm going out for a quick run, I'll be right back,"

Fang announced before leaving the room, leaving Bua and Phinya alone, as if two predatory beasts were trapped in the same cage.

As soon as Fang was out of sight, Phinya approached Bua, her gaze shining like that of a tiger stalking its prey.

"Why did you leave so quickly this morning?"

The vice principal asked, making Bua look around nervously, searching for other people. She adjusted her glasses hesitantly as she met Phinya's eyes.

"I saw you sleeping and didn't want to wake you up,"

Bua replied, her voice shaking slightly.

"I thought you were coming with me."

"I... didn't mean to disturb you,"

Bua said, watching Phinya sit at the next table, very close to her coffee cup. The atmosphere is tense, and Bua feels the pressure of Phinya's presence as if she's being analyzed.

"Sorry about that,"

Phinya said, leaning closer to Bua, causing her long brown hair to almost touch Bua's face. With a gentle touch, she lifted Bua's chin, forcing her to look into her eyes.

“Then come meet me in my office, sleepyhead.”

“Sure!”

Bua’s tone sharp, almost ironic, but in truth, she had never shied away from Phinya, much to her own surprise.

“I need to discuss a few things with you.”

“Yes, boss.”

As Phinya walked away, Bua still looked a little groggy, even though she had slept better than most the entire night. Suddenly, Bua's absent-minded hand hit the coffee cup, causing it to fall to the floor, where it shattered and the black liquid spilled out.

"Sorry, sorry!"

Bua hurriedly bent down to pick up the shards of glass.

"I have so much."

Her eyes searched the room for a cloth or broom to clean up the small pieces of glass.

A moment later, someone who had heard the noise rushed in.

"How clumsy," Phinya commented, clearly enjoying the situation.

"Where did you get this lack of sleep?"

At that moment, Fang also run in, calling out,

"Hey, you two! Split up!"

Fang's words reminded Phinya of old arguments, when she would use that expression whenever the tension between her and Bua began to rise.

"I didn't do anything! The sleepy Bualoy knocked over the cup by herself."
Phinya said

"Let me take care of it, P'Bua."

Aon said, in a helpful tone.

"It'll only hurt your hand."

She added, already holding a broom and a dustpan.

"Thank you, Aon. I've been a bit distracted lately, I'm sorry."

"Do you want to ask for permission so you can sleep?" Phinya interrupted, her voice firm.

"Can I ask you directly?"

Bua asked, a little hesitantly.

"Ask your mom."

Phinya replied, already moving away.

"When you're done here, come to my room."

With that, she left quickly, holding her coffee cup.

"Wasn't everything okay between you two?"

Fang asked, trying to understand the situation.

"No, it's not."

"I thought everything was okay, I was just gone for a minute."

"No, and now I still need to go talk to her about work."

Bua replied, turning to Aon.

"Thank you, Aon."

□□□□□

□Episode 21□

"Bua, please come in."

From inside the small meeting room, the voice of the advisor Ajarn Nisara called her student. Nisara was talking to someone Bua recognized immediately, along with them, a young woman was sitting next to him. Phinya was on the right side, next to the chair of the institute director, and next to Phinya was Aon.

"Nong Bua!"

A man who appeared to be about 39 years old stand up.

"Long time no see! How are you?"

"Phi Phon!"

Busaya exclaimed happily.

"Sawadee ka."

She said, clasping her hands in a gesture of respectful greeting. Plakorn, or Phon as he was known, had been a PhD student of Ajarn Nisara almost ten years ago. When Bua started her studies, he graduated the same year. After that, he took a teaching position at a state university in the south of the country. Bua had met him several times during his final year of studies, while he was still involved in a research project for Nisara. He had finished it about a month before taking up his position as a professor in the Department of Social Anthropology.

That day, Phon had brought his coworkers and students to visit the institute. Bua heard his advisor mention that Dr. Phon's colleague, Dr. Kulnida,

wanted to do postdoctoral research there, which was promptly approved by the institute's director.

Phon then took the opportunity to introduce Dr. Kulnida, Cream as they called her, whom he had mentioned.

"If Dr. Cream and I could visit the lab, would that be convenient for you, Ajarn?"

Phon asked, referring to the short-haired woman who is sitting next to him. She's dressed in a formal, dark suit, and seem to be around Bua's age. Dr. Kulnida is a professor in the same department as Phon.

"I'll ask Bua to take you."

In a few minutes, everyone went down to the lab.

"When I graduated, this place wasn't fully set up like this yet,"

Phon said, looking around the lab room.

"Today, in addition to being very well structured, the institute has gained young, energetic talents like Phinya and Bua to help out."

His look expressed satisfaction with his words.

If Phi Phon wants to come back, I think Ajarn would be happy to welcome him.

Bua commented.

"We still need a lot of people here."

"Let me stay at my post in the south, it's better this way." Phon laughed.

"To be honest, I've never been that good at lab work."

"Neither have I."

Phinya herself commented, smiling.

"That's more up to Bua or Fang."

"Phinya is from the field area."

Phon commented, already aware.

"Ajarn told me a long time ago that they needed someone strong on the team, and they ended up choosing you." He laughed.

"If Dr. Cream wants to work in the lab, I'll entrust her with that mission."

"For now, it's just Phinya and I who are taking care of everything." Bua replied.

"Fang hasn't graduated yet. If anyone wants to come to the bioanthropology area, they'll have to wait for Fang to finish or come train with her first, but she's not fully available yet."

"Cream hasn't decided which area to pursue yet."

Phon continued, turning to her coworker who is with them.

"But it seems that she's leaning towards the physics area, isn't she, Doctor?"

"I'm not sure yet."

The woman replied in a calm tone, looking alternately at Phinya and Bua.

"I want to try several things before making a decision. Anyway, I'm counting on you two."

"Count on us for what?" Bua said.

"We're all from the same generation, both Phinya and I just graduated."

"You can consider me the youngest in the lab, then ."

The visitor replied with a smile.

"If I stay, I'll be the first post-doctoral student here."

The head of the lab intervened:

"But for the history area, you should talk to someone else."

She said, nodding to the other doctor.

"That's beyond our skills. She added.

Bua looked at Phinya, who narrowed her eyes back, as if she wanted to strangle her for passing on the work.

You're throwing everything at me again, Baibua! Just wait...

Phinya's look said it all.

'Who threw it? I didn't throw anything.' Bua thought.

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"Dr. Cream is quite nice, don't you think?"

Bua commented absently.

"Hmm..."

Phinya answered without much attention, nodding her head disinterestedly as she continued to stare at the paper in front of her.

"So what?."

"Do you like her, perhaps?"

This question make Phinya, who is reading a research paper, raise her head and look at her.

"Why would I have to like her?

"I'm just asking out of curiosity." Bua justified.

"She seems more inclined towards the history area."

"And archaeology too, like you. I thought you two could get along."

"I already like someone."

Phinya replied irritably, cutting off the conversation, already foreseeing what Bua is trying to insinuate.

"Ah..."

Bua replied in a low voice.

"Then, it's better if I don't interfere."

She said, before turning around and trying to leave the room. However, she's pulled back and sit on Phinya's lap.

"Don't you want to know who it is?"

"No."

"Why?"

"If you want to tell me, tell me. But if you don't, I won't force it"

Phinya pressed her lips gently against Bua's neck.

"I know what you're thinking. Don't come with that idea of encouraging me to flirt with every woman who enters the institute. And also, don't give me anyone's business cards anymore."

"I was just about to give you her card."

Bua said, feigning regret.

"Oh, what a shame..."

"Baibua..."

"Just in case you're interested." Bua continued.

"I found her very cute, polite, and she speaks so well."

"I've met people much more charming than her." Phinya replied.

"But I'll tell you right now, I'm not interested."

"Okay, I'm sorry for meddling in your affairs."

"You can meddle all you want, I don't care."

Phinya said, resting her chin on Bua's shoulder.

"But if you're going to try to push me into five or ten more people, I'll tell you now: I'm not interested. You don't have to try."

Her tone was firm.

"Okay... I'll remember that."

Bua said, moving slightly away from Phinya's face, who is getting closer.

"I'm not interested in anyone else because you're already enough of a problem."

"I didn't say anything like that."

Bua replied immediately.

"I understand that protecting your territory and what's yours is part of your instinct..."

"I'm not a dog."

"I wasn't talking about a dog." She retorted.

"It's the instinct of most mammals."

She continued, looking smug.

"As soon as the levels of certain chemicals in the brain stabilize, possessive behavior disappears. The body gets used to it and boredom starts to set in, so you look for something new to stimulate the release of these chemicals."

"Do you think I get bored easily?"

Phinya nuzzled Bua's shoulder.

"Who knows?" Bua dodged.

"You said yourself that you've met a lot of people, but so far you haven't been with anyone. I can only assume that you get tired quickly."

"You're making things up. For you, I'm always the villain."

Phinya speak against Bua's neck.

"Because you're the villain, Phin. I know you better than anyone."

"And why don't you ever think that maybe I'm just not interested in anyone?."

"Oh, don't come with that... I remember very well that, in college, you were super popular." That made Phinya laugh.

"Dr. Phin has always been irresistible."

"It might have something to do with my body structure and morphology, as you like to say."

Phinya commented, with a hand sliding around Bua's waist.

"After all, you yourself said I'm attractive."

"Who said that?"

Bua retorted, hiding her blushing face in Phinya's shoulder.

"You must be getting confused."

"If I'm getting confused, then so be it."

Phinya laughed.

At that moment, they heard a knock on the door, which make Bua get up quickly, and Phinya straightened her wrinkled clothes, trying to look presentable.

"Come in."

It's Fang who entered the door first, glancing at Bua, who is looking out the window, avoiding eye contact.

"What's up, Fang?"

"I came to talk about what we discussed the other day."

Their doctoral colleague said, sitting down on a chair.

"I want to go to the lab in Germany."

"You just got back, do you want to go again already?" Bua interrupted.

"Before I went to Holland, I already wanted to go to Germany."

Fang explained.

" But the Professor couldn't find a place for me."

"You should get some rest. Why is it that only the two of you travel and I can never go?"

Bua complained with a hint of irritation.

"Now, if you want to go, just ask Phin to send you."

The doctor suggested, nodding her head in the direction of Phinya, who is sitting silently.

"Staying here is fine. Where else would you?" Phinya replied.

"There won't be time for you to turn your body 180 degrees parallel to the ground."

"Then I don't want to go anymore."

Bua replied immediately, quickly rejecting the idea.

"What do you mean, you gave up so easily?" Fang looked at Bua.

"Just because you won't be able to sleep there, right? That's good."

Bua's friend commented.

"But why is your face red? Didn't you sleep well?"

These words make Bua raise her hand to cover her face, while she glared at Phinya, who just smiled discreetly, keeping her expression serious.

"So, are you really going? The Bioanthropology department here is short-staffed. The professor has already planned to open more courses in the next one or two years, who's going to teach? Me and this lazy girl here can't handle it. I gave the Cell Biology back to the professor the moment I got out of my master's exam."

"You just want to travel and play, how are you going to finish your doctorate like that, friend?" Bua added.

"That's right." Phinya agreed.

"If your research paper is published..."

"You could take the final exam right now."

"I'm still undecided. If I go, I might end up extending it another year."

"Are you going to study for seven years? Or eight, I'll prepare incense and candles to venerate you as the obsessive spirit that guards the institute." The lab head joked.

"That way, you won't even have to get married anymore."

"I don't even plan on getting married." Said the other.

"When I finish, I'll start planning on having a child."

"Having a child... with who."

It was Phinya who interrupted.

"With my boyfriend, of course."

"Boyfriend? Since when do you have one?"

"I'm not like you two."

She answered quickly, making her friends exchange glances.

"You work too much. Be careful, they say that those who fight too much end up together."

"Who said that?"

The two speak almost at the same time.

"Seriously, be careful, you two, okay."

"I don't want to carry any more karma in my life."

Bua answered, looking around, adjusting her glasses nervously.

"Don't involve me in this."

"You talk as if you know what we're going through, Fang."

Phinya answered sarcastically, pursing her lips slightly.

"Do you think you're that smart?"

"By the way, Bua, speaking of which... what about that guy who was flirting with you? Did he disappear?"

"Who?"

This time it's Phinya who asked, casting a sideways glance at her friend, who seem to be trying to hide next to the file shelf.

"No one!"

Bua answered, her voice raised, shaking her head quickly.

"Who would want someone who only sleeps, like me?"

She said, picking up the documents she had left on the vice principal's desk.

"I'm going. I'm going to get some coffee, I'm sleepy..."

Fang watched as Phinya keep her gaze fixed on Bua until she left the room.

"Has anyone actually tried to flirt with her, the way she is?"

The vice principal's firm voice asked, trying to keep a neutral expression.

"She said that before I went to Holland." Fang replied.

"But nothing came of it. They only went out for dinner once. She doesn't care about anyone, she just wants to sleep. Anyone who disturbs her sleep, she cuts them off."

"To flirt with that one, the person must be sleepwalking. Who would risk that?"

"Why do you want to know? You don't even like her." Fang asked, curious.

"It's just that natural curiosity of the human species."

Phinya replied, repeating the excuse Bua used to use with her, while shifting uncomfortably in her chair, which made Fang narrow her eyes in suspicion.

"I keep that to tease."

"You never stop teasing her, do you, Phin?"

"I can't help it. Sometimes, your friend is annoying." Phinya replied, relaxed.

- "So, who was it?"

"He was a professor in the sociology department, I think. They met at an academic seminar, it must have been last year."

Fang said. Phinya nodded, pretending to look at the papers on the table, as if it were a trivial conversation, without giving it much importance.

"It seems he invited her to do research with him, but at the time she was rushing to finish her doctorate, so she must not have kept in touch. Besides, if she had any free time, she would spend it sleeping. Who could stand that? Sometimes it takes her days to respond to my messages."

"True," Phinya agreed, nodding.

"Luckily, she's very good at what she does. If she weren't, I wonder if she would finish in ten years. Honestly, I don't know how she finds time to do

research or write papers. I lose sleep myself, working all day, and I still can't keep up. But her? You send her a message and she's asleep, but she can finish her PhD in five years. I think that's why her professors never send her abroad. She wouldn't be able to manage, it's too dangerous."

"Yes, I think I understand.

Phinya agreed. Of course she knew how much Bua slept, after all, sometimes Bua slept next to her in bed.

"So, what do you think of Germany?

Phinya asked next.

"What do you think I should do?"

Fang returned the question.

"Stay and help the teachers here.

The vice principal suggested again

"Things haven't been so good lately, and I might need your opinion. Publish it soon, defend your thesis and finish it so I can start planning to have children."

"I could study and get pregnant at the same time, raise the baby while it's still in my belly." Fang joked to herself.

"And you?" She returned the question to Phinya.

"Me... what about me?"

"Haven't you ever thought about having a family?"

"No." Phinya replied, refusing the idea.

"My way of being, doesn't suited to being a mother, even though they tell me that my body structure would be perfect for it."

"If I decide to go to Germany, could you find me something there?"

"Hmm... I don't know anyone there, but I can try to find out if you really want to go. Using Professor Nisara's name might make it a lot easier."
Phinya offered.

"But I can't promise anything."

"You're actually nice." Fang commented.

"I've been nice for a while, but you always have this wrong impression that I'm mean." The assistant retorted.

"But if you change your mind and go to England, it'll be fine. The professor is desperate for someone, since I refused."

Phinya said before taking a sip from the paper cup of black coffee that was next to her.

"By the way... I wanted to ask. Why didn't you stay there, Phin?" Fang asked curiously.

"I thought that by going back, I would have more things to do, you know? And also, I didn't want to bother the Professor."

Phinya replied, still hesitating.

"And it was the right decision, for sure. That's why I came back."

Phinya said, showing a soft smile on her lips.

"But it was good to come back, the Professor appointed me vice principal right away."

"I think it suits you."

Commented Fang, who had also studied with her.

"When are we going to celebrate the promotion?"

"After we finish the plane crash case, we will definitely celebrate." The doctor replied.

"Great, I'm looking forward to it."

Fang agreed as she stand up.

"I'm going now. If I decide anything, I'll come back to consult with you. Thank you very much, friend."

"Sure, anytime. I'm available."

□□□□□

□Episode 22□

The image of the troubled mummified skull loomed large on the sixty-five-inch television screen to the left of the physical anthropology lab room. On the screen to the right was the face of an unknown man, the owner of the skull, which had been reconstructed by a 2D modeling program. The lab manager sat, alternating between looking up and down, in front of the autopsy table, preparing to separate the bones of the plane crash victims.

There were seven other victims who had yet to be identified and analyzed. While some of the victims could not have all of their remains taken home, there was uncertainty about the completeness of the remaining pieces. When assessing the situation, the number of bones available seemed insufficient, due to the damage caused by the explosion and the fall, which resulted in many of them being severely compromised.

However, when it came to her role as an identification expert, Dr. Busaya could say that she had done the best she could. Bua stared at the pile of bones on the table, alternating her gaze between them and the image on the television. She had barely been able to concentrate on her work these past few days. The story of the mysterious skull had been spinning in her mind incessantly, making her feel the need to display it on the screen, in the hope that something might be revealed.

Phinya didn't seem bothered, but Bua knew that she was probably thinking of ways to get more information, besides waiting for the help of the police.

She didn't want to think about the worst-case scenario:

What if someone had intentionally done this, and the origin of the body was unknown? Since there was only one piece, there was no answer to that. But what if... the body of this unknown man had been stolen from somewhere?

Or, in the worst case scenario, if it had been brought in an unnatural way, considering the state of the lower jaw, which had a significant deformity?

Normally, fracture or deformation of the jaw does not occur easily. Without an impact or blow of considerable force, a fracture or dislocation would be unlikely to occur, as it is quite resistant. When she used the facial modeling program to calculate and create the image of the face, she noticed that there was a deviation towards the right, originating from the fracture on the left side, with about a centimeter of deviation in the lower jaw. This could indeed have occurred during transportation, but it was also possible that the person had been assaulted before death. Busaya let out a deep sigh at the thought...

Whatever the purpose for which this mummified skull had been created, it seemed clear that it had been obtained illegally in some way. This could be a reflection of her teacher's words, who used to say:

"Even the peace of those who depart is stolen. What kind of species are we? Have we evolved more than others to do this to each other?"

It was truly regrettable...

The head of the laboratory tried to concentrate again, preparing to work on identifying the victims of the plane crash. She reached out and picked up a pelvic bone, which she had not yet been able to find.

Before starting to measure, Bua positioned the bone. By carefully observing the subpubic angle on both the left and right sides, which were greater than ninety degrees, she was able to conclude that it was a female body. On the fateful flight, there were three passengers identified as women. One of them had already been recognized at the scene.

The accident, as her body was not badly damaged, and her face was still usable for identity confirmation.

There were only two left, and they remained unidentified. The problem was that the pelvic bone found appeared to be that of a woman, but there was only one piece recovered from the crash site. This meant that there would

be a young woman who would return home without all her fragments, a reality that Bua did not like at all.

However, she also understood that this was the kind of work that forensic anthropology does. Sometimes the truth that is revealed through work can be heartbreaking. After measuring the angle and dimensions, and taking photos of the pelvic bone, Bua moved on to the arm bone. Its size seemed large and robust, and from visual assessment, she thought it belonged to a man of quite a tall build.

Why that mummified skull was on that plane still remained as the biggest of her questions, perhaps as big as the question of why that charter flight to Paris had ended in tragedy. The next question was: Why was only the skull on board the plane, and where were the other parts?

Phinya had already said that in many cases, if there was a sale, the entire body would have a much higher market value. The price could go up ten to twenty times if entire piece was sold. Furthermore, no one who sold it would be interested in separating the parts, as the value would drop drastically. But who would be crazy enough to transport an entire body on an international plane to sell? The more she thought about it, the more questions popped into her mind.

After a few moments, the owner of the thought Bua had just remembered came through the door with a tense expression, holding some documents. Phinya didn't even look up at the hallway, concentrating on reading the contents of the paper in her hands.

"What brought you here, boss?"

Bua asked.

"Have the police sent any news?"

Phinya asked, still not looking.

"There's nothing new." Bua replied.

"But anyway, they probably can't say much since they're still in the process of investigating. As for the face of the unknown man we sent, we don't have anything concrete yet. Besides, I already had to send the mummified skull to the police. It's now evidence in the missing person case. Do you need anything to check? If not, I can ask the professor to hold it until we can send it back along with the last body found."

"You've already done the reconstruction, but you can keep it in case you need to check anything." Phinya said in a neutral voice.

"I'm still puzzled by the ribs that have impact marks. What happened on the plane before it crashed? Bua asked.

"Have you found similar marks on other bones?"

"I haven't seen anything yet."

"I'm starting to wonder about our mummified skull too. It's here, but where are the other parts?" Phinya commented.

"That's right." Bua agreed.

"This morning I tried to find more information about the passengers on the internet. I found some interesting people."

She said. Then she handed the documents to Bua, who read them excitedly for about three or four minutes."

"Wow... there are both businessmen and antique dealers here." Bua observed.

"I'm seeing if a friend can see if there was any exhibition or event in Paris the week of the accident." Phinya replied.

"Do you know what I think when I see these names and profession along with the evidence we found?"

Phinya asked. Bua just shake her head in response.

“The black market,”

Phinya continued, leaning against a shelf of tools behind her.

“When I was there, the first person to contact you was always a middleman. These people catch up on news faster than anyone else and contact you behind your back to make deals. Sometimes, they even end up getting to know the workers there. If they stay in the same place for months, they end up seeing these faces every month.”

Bua listened carefully, before looking at Phinya.

“Maybe what disappeared from the workplace wasn’t a robbery. If any worker disappeared along with the items, it’s this guy.”

“If the remains that are being bought and sold are still breathing, that’s no different than human trafficking,” Bua commented.

“But the world is funny... When you die, the price is higher than when you’re alive. People’s lives have reached a point where they seem to have no value at all.”

Bua let out a heavy sigh.

"Not even the dead are spared... That reconstruction was done, wasn't it?"

Phinya gestured to the skull, which she had asked Bua to make the reconstruction of, and the misshapen jaw was adjusted.

“What did they use to make it?”

She asked, noticing that the replica was cleaner and whiter than the original.

“Latex molding rubber,”

Bua replied, as Phinya nodded.

“And why is it on a stand?”

“I put it up there in case anyone feels inspired to shape their face,” Bua replied

“Ha ha...”

Phinya laughed, her eyes shining.

“I want to see it!”

"Just in case, Dr. Phinya. We don't have time now." Bua replied.

"Don't get so excited, you've seen so much that you must be tired."

"Who said?" Phinya defended herself

"Making a 3D face from a skull is not something easy to find, because they use holograms now. Skill and patience make them have different values."

"I studied a little, but I'm not an expert. In practice, I've only done it once."

Bua commented modestly.

And I haven't done it for a long time

"Let's see." Phinya replied.

"Hey... I heard that in ancient Europe they used to eat mummy remains as medicine. Is it true?"

Bua started a conversation, while continuing to work in front of her.

"It's true. But I've never seen anyone actually eating it. I've only seen pictures of recipes on preserved walls in museums."

"And nowadays, does it still exist?"

"No, because tea is rare. If there were tea available for sale like before, I don't think there would be any left."

"Humans are a strange species.

Bua commented nonchalantly.

"They even eat the tea of the dead."

"Look at the Homo lineage, you'll see."

Phinya said, as she stand next to Bua and begin to put on gloves.

"Where has our species come from and where will it end up?"

"The human species? Where will it end? It won't end, not while we continue to be so greedy. Evolution follows greed. Millions of years ago, we could only grab branches with both hands, our thumbs weren't flexible. Look at us now, doing math, precise calculations!"

Bua said, continuing.

"We started as animals, primates, we weren't far behind single-celled beings. In the beginning, we walked on all fours, supporting only our knuckles on the ground, spine parallel to the ground. Then, we adapted and became bipeds, walking upright, running fast, with three-dimensional vision. The brain and nervous system have evolved so much that somehow, our species will not disappear so easily. Even if an extinction happens, another even more advanced one will soon emerge... In fact, I think that ambition is what drives and makes the species constantly evolve and adapt. As you said, the brain has developed and become more intelligent, but also more exploratory." Said Bua.

"Like I said, right?"

Phinya laughed, unable to deny it.

"Actually, that's why I understood the teacher and decided to come back."

Phinya's words make Bua look at her carefully behind her square-framed glasses.

“If she knew, she would be very happy,” Bua said, smiling.

“Knowledge can be acquired, but it’s rare to find people who value experience more than academic recognition or money. These days, that’s pretty hard to find.”

Then she turned to Bua:

“Actually, there are other reasons too.”

“Thank you for coming back, Phinya,” Bua suddenly said, smiling.

“I’m glad to be back.”

The sound of the door opening caused the two women to refocus on the work in front of them. It's Fang, who walked through the door with a folder of documents in her hand.

“Phinya!” she called.

“I saw you are here. The Professor is not here, I need your signature.”

She handed the documents to Phinya, who had already taken off the glove on her right hand and accepted the papers.

“Are you going to apply for a loan or something?” Bua commented.

“With Phinya’s signature, you can even get a guarantor for the loan.”

"That's funny, Baibua."

Fang immediately replied.

"What about the Germany trip? Or do you want to go somewhere else? I can take a look."

Phinya asked Fang as she examined the documents, and soon remembered that she didn't bring a pen. So, she raises her hand and touched Bua's shoulder, making her turn around.

"Can I borrow a pen?"

Phinya asked, waving at the pen that was attached to the pocket of Bua's white lab coat.

"I'm wearing gloves, it'll get dirty."

Bua said, as the pen owner walked away. Phinya approached and take the pen from the back pocket of her lab coat, making Fang raise her eyebrows at the familiarity between the two friends.

"Next time, bring your own." Bua joked.

"It's just a loan, no need to be jealous."

Phinya said, looking around before finding a suitable place to sign the documents. Fang watched the two curiously.

"I'm not going anymore. My boyfriend wouldn't let me."

She answered the previous question.

"So I'm thinking about choosing between Germany or my boyfriend."

Fang said this in an almost provocative way, but her expression wasn't funny.

"Then choose Germany and find a new boyfriend there." Bua suggested.

"Good idea, Bua! What useful advice. That'll make the two of them fight."

Phinya commented, distracted.

"Fang isn't like you." Bua retorted.

"Who's been to a lot of places and hasn't managed to win anyone over."

"Really? You haven't managed to win anyone over? Think carefully before you speak."

"At least I haven't met anyone."

"I'd rather stay and be like you guys."

Fang said, listening to the conversation between the two friends.

"What does it mean to be 'like us'?"

Bua asked, as she accepted back the pen Phinya had taken and put it in the back pocket of her white coat.

"Beautiful and single."

"Don't include me in this, no."

Bua answered quickly, before she turned around, almost breaking her neck to look, while giving a warning look.

"If you let this one go, I think you'll lose the chance to have children, Fang. You're already getting old."

Phinya, who speaks with the best of intentions, tried to correct:

"I mean, if you plan on having children."

"Having children is good, but in this day and age not having children is also good."

Bua said, shrugging.

"If you don't want to have children, it's no problem." Fang said.

"I already told you not to include me in this."

Bua repeated the same sentence.

"And why are you talking like that?"

Phinya may simply not have anyone interested in her.

“Really?” Phinya replied defiantly.

“Do you really think so, Bua?”

Bua’s teasing and Phinya’s response make Fang look at them, intrigued by the dynamic between the two.

“I’m just saying what I see.”

Bang!

“Hey, wait a minute!”

Bua scream as Phinya hit her in the shoulder before she could dodge. In response, she used the tip of her foot, a round-toed shoe, to lightly kick Phinya in the shin.

“Bua!”

"You started it!"

Then, Bua picked up the rubber mallet that's next to the stretcher and pointed it at Phinya, who is standing with her hands on her hips, pointing back at her.

"Hey! Back off!"

Fang, who had always been the mediator since college, quickly intervened.

"Bua, back off!"

"But that idiot started it first!"

Bua argued, turning to face her rival.

"You provoked it first, Bua!"

"You fight all the time. Be careful... soon you'll end up together!"

Fang's calm voice commented, before noticing that her friends are looking at each other with hatred.

"Be careful, Doctors."

"What? Who's going to end up with who? I told you not to include me!"

Bua shouted, as Fang walked away from the laboratory.

"Shut up, Bua!"

Fang heard Phinya's voice echo as she left the room.

□□□□□

□Episode 23□

Dr. Phinya stopped in front of the laboratory head's office at the Institute of Biological Anthropological Research before knocking on the door a few times, but she got no answer. When she realized this, she decided to open the door and go in. She found the owner of the office fast asleep in her chair, her face resting on a pillow on top of the laptop table. Her square glasses were next to her, and she was still wearing her long white lab coat.

Phinya smiled before closing the door. Then she walked over and crouched down in front of Bua who was sleeping peacefully. And she was very tired, it was already close to the end of the day, and she had just finished a class for the students about fifteen minutes ago, after a long day of work dedicated to identification.

One of Phinya's hands rested on Bua's shoulder.

"Sleepyhead.

She said in her deep voice, calling.

"The shift is over."

But she received no sign of an answer.

"Bualoy."

"Uhm..."

The sleepy voice was heard, turning her face to the opposite side while still resting her head on the table.

"I just need a minute to rest my eyes."

"Go back to sleep in your room."

"You can go first, I'll meet you there."

Then she reached into her pants pocket and handed her class card to Phinya, who accepted it and left it on the table next to the notebook.

"You can go first."

"Hey... how do you hand over your class card like that, Bualoy?"

"Uhm." And then it's silent again.

"Bua."

This time, her tone of voice sounded firmer.

"Go back to your room, eat something and then sleep."

"Uhm"

After agreeing, she sit down and keep her eyes still closed, looking sleepy.

"Go ahead! I already ordered food through the app."

"Tonight, I want to sleep."

Bua said, looking up and looking at Phinya who is standing with a pleading look.

"And tomorrow, I want to come with you."

"I'm not ordering you to do anything."

Hearing this, Bua quickly stand up and begin to undo the buttons of the lab coat, which she's wearing awkwardly.

"Come."

Phinya offered to help, while Bua raises her hands to rub her eyes, making a sleepy sound.

Phinya gently lifted Bua's blouse and take it off, placing it on the chair. Then, she lifted her fingers to brush a few strands of hair from her face and placed her glasses on her nose. Her thin lips gently touched her forehead, which made a soft murmuring sound. Phinya gently pulled away a moment later.

“Are you tired?”

“Uhm...” Bua replied in her usual way.

"I'm more sleepy than tired."

“I know, you're always sleepy.”

“Lately, someone have been making me sleep less.”

“So tonight, I'll just hug you to sleep.”

“Who said I want to hug you?”

Bua asked in a sleepy voice.

"Are you sleepy and still want to start a fight?"

"If you want to hug me, just say so."

"I never wanted to just hug you, Bualoy. I want to do much more than that."

"Uhm"

After saying that, she let herself fall, leaning her forehead on the shoulder that supported her.

"Phinya."

Bua's voice sounded against her shoulder.

"Huh?"

"Thank you."

Although she seems a little confused because of sleep, Bua said clearly.

"No matter what your role here is, I really want you to know that I'm grateful."

This make Phinya wrap both arms around her.

"No matter what role you give me, I accept it, Bua." Phinya said

"Come on, let's go to the bedroom. We'll talk about this tomorrow."

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"Bua"

Phinya's voice make Bua turn her head. Fang joined them in the hallway, heading towards the workroom on the third floor. Bua is reading research papers on the morphological structure of the tail and limbs of tailless monkeys, while holding a gorilla skull that seem to be showing its teeth.

"What are you doing, friend? New toy?"

Fang commented when she sees what Bua holding.

"Did it just arrive?"

"Yes," Bua confirmed.

"I'm teaching a class on it this afternoon, so it'll be good to have it here."

"The students are watching. What's wrong with you?"

"Why did you come with Phinya today?"

The question make Bua stop abruptly and turn her face to look at her friend behind her square glasses, her expression a little pale. The sleepiness she feels before disappeared in an instant.

“Who came with Phinya?”

She retorted, trying to keep her expression neutral.

“I’m the one asking you! Why are you asking me back?” Fang said.

“I saw you get out of Phinya’s car in the parking lot.”

Fang had seen her, even though she had tried to be discreet.

“You might have seen her wrong. That idiot might be with someone.”

“Bua.”

“And why couldn’t I be with Phinya?”

This question make Fang narrow her eyes at what Bua retorted.

“I think you two have been acting strangely, like you are suddenly close and looking at each other differently.”

“Looking differently?” The doctor asked back.

“In what way?” Explain to me, please.

"I notice Phinya has been looking at you."

"That idiot might just be staring at me because she's looking for a femur to beat me up with."

Bua defended herself in a low voice.

"I don't think that's it." Fang hurried to say.

"Her gaze seems more like she wants to devour you."

"Devour... my head?"

"Devour doesn't exactly mean eating the head or the food." Fang explained.

"It's more like... taking a bite."

"Didn't you get enough sleep last night, or haven't you slept yet?"

After saying that, Bua made a gesture of taking off her glasses and offering them to Fang.

"You're getting old. You spend all day reading A-T-C-G DNA sequences, and now your eyesight is getting weak. Here, borrow these."

"And you have a sharp tongue."

Fang said, pushing Bua's hand that's holding the glasses away.

"I'm the same age as you, and you're already wearing glasses."

Fang continued to look at her suspiciously.

"Is there something you're not telling me?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"That you're coming to work together."

"You're thinking too much. Phinya just saw me coming here and gave me a ride."

Bua's tone of voice became slightly high-pitched, revealing her agitation. She wasn't ready for anyone to know about her relationship with Phinya yet, as she wasn't sure what she thought of her.

It would be hard to say that she wasn't confused about the situation. In fact, she still wasn't sure where all this was going. If she declared herself too much... she didn't know how this would end.

"But if it were the old Phinya, she would have stepped over her foot,"

The future doctor said, as if she already knew everything.

"Since when did you two become so close?"

"Who's close to whom?"

"Fang!"

The subject shouted behind them. Then Phinya approached.

"The money to send the samples to the lab in Japan has already been approved by the professor. I'll send the documentation by email."

"Finally! It's taking a while because Dunk hasn't shown up. It's going to take a month until I can send them and wait for the results,"

Fang exclaimed happily, looking at the two colleagues alternately.

"So, you two aren't having anything with each other, right?"

"Is there something wrong?"

Phinya's voice expressed confusion upon hearing the previous question.

"What do you mean?"

"It's nothing!" Bua replied, with a higher and more suspicious tone of voice

"If I said there isn't, then there isn't!"

Then she reiterated:

"Today, Dr. Phinya was nice and gave me a ride."

"If in this life I can see you two getting along, even if I don't have children, I can die peacefully."

Fang said, placing her hand on her chest, showing relief.

"Who?"

Bua asked, looking at the vice principal who's still there, trying to understand the conversation.

"No, we're not getting along. Anyway, I'm going now. I need to review the gorilla skull before class."

With that, she quickly left the room.

"What's going on?"

"Now it's Phinya who asked Fang

"I told Bua that I saw you two together when I arrived."

"Did you see?" Fang nodded.

"Yeah, I saw it in the parking lot in front of the building."

"So?" Phinya asked.

"I just wanted to know if you guys have anything you haven't told me."

"And what did Bua say?"

"She said there's nothing."

"So there's nothing."

"So, what's going on between you two?"

Fang asked again.

"If you're getting along, then great. That way I don't have to feel uncomfortable in front of you anymore, because I don't know which side to take when you start fighting. I'm tired of having to separate you two."

"And weren't you on her side from the beginning?" Phinya asked.

"Anyway, I always end up being the villain."

"Before, yes." Fang admitted easily.

"But now you're my boss, so it gets complicated. And another thing, Phinya..."

Fang lowered her voice to a whisper.

"Haven't you ever noticed that when you're with Bua, you act differently?"

"Different how?"

"Even though I graduated later than you, I've seen a lot of life."

Fang said, smiling proudly at herself.

"And I've known you for years. Before, when we went to the countryside, we ate and slept together."

Then she reaches out and touched Phinya's shoulder.

"If it's nothing illegal, I assure you that I'm a good friend. If you need help, just let me know."

"Can we continue this conversation in my office? It's not very convenient here."

Fang just nod and followed Phinya up to the fifth floor.

"I want your opinion on something."

The owner of the office sit down on the chair and gestured for Fang to sit down.

"Hmm... how do I start talking?"

"You like Bua, don't you?"

However, it's Fang who get straight to the point.

"Is it that obvious?!"

This make Phinya exclaim loudly, with an expression of disbelief.

"You devour her with your eyes practically every day. You two don't get along, but I see you together all the time, I see her following you around."

"You're not going to attack her, are you?"

Fang asked.

"The problem is... I don't know what Bua thinks. I have no idea." Phinya replied.

"I noticed... She changes the subject so quickly when I caught her in the act."

The future doctor commented.

"But that's understandable. Let me tell you, friend... that woman will never open her mouth to say anything unless she's sure."

Fang commented, knowing Bua well, more than anyone else in her class.

"Besides being excellent at sleeping, she's more stubborn than anyone I know."

This make Phinya nod, letting out a sigh of concern, before Fang continues.

"And it's you, Phinya, the person she's always competed with, Bua always thought you are better than her. Who would have thought that someone like that would want something serious? Trust me, even if you tell her this directly, if she's not ready to believe it, she simply won't believe it."

"I know that things started to go wrong between me and Bua."

Phinya said with a tone that showed her insecurity and a slight nervousness.

"You were competing to see who was the favorite, everyone knows that."

Phinya nodded when she heard that

"It's a common thing among nerds."

"I don't know what to do."

"And where have you guys gotten to?"

Fang asked in a neutral tone, but Phinya just looked at her before biting her lips, not knowing how to answer that question without exposing Bua.

"It seems like you've gone too far."

Fang said, knowing the truth, before seeing Phinya nod slightly.

"And how much time do you spend together? Well... it must be more than before."

Fang replied ambiguously.

"Hmm" Fang nodded thoughtfully.

"Since you came back, I've seen you two together a lot, compared to before, when you worked at desks separated, and when there was an argument, you were like boxers waiting to get back into the ring. But now, even though you're on different floors, I almost always see you together and never far from each other, in the lab, in the workroom, in the meeting room, you keep looking at each other, especially you, Phinya."

"Why are you noticing this so much?"

"If I wasn't noticing, I wouldn't know."

Fang replied.

"But I feel like Bua is closer to me than before, but when I start talking about it, she changes the subject and doesn't talk to me. If it were before, when I tried to provoke her, she would stand on the other side of the room and stare at me, answering me right away."

Phinya let out a long, heavy sigh.

"If she give me a shovel and hit me right in the face, I will feel better than when she pretends she doesn't know anything, as if she's pushing me away.

Her face showed sadness as she said these words .

"I don't know what to do."

"Do you intend to take this seriously?"

"I don't dare think too far, because I'm afraid the final choice won't be mine."

Phinya's voice became low, almost like a whisper.

"What do you think I should do?"

"If you want to develop the relationship, I say you have to take risks and show your commitment." Fang suggested.

"Take care, give support and..."

She stopped to think.

"I don't know if you've thought this far... but if one day that happens... love a lot."

"Love?"

"Yes" Fang confirmed.

"Understand, trust, and most importantly, accept, especially regarding her abilities, because she always thought she's inferior to you in that aspect."

This made Phinya look at Fang.

"I already accept that." The vice principal said.

"Even back then, I never doubted her abilities. That's why I was afraid she would stand out more than me."

"So you've been looking for trouble with her all the time?."

"That's more or less it." Phinya agreed.

"So, don't just talk about it and show her. You need to remember that you didn't start out knowing each other like normal people, or as friends, but as if one was holding a hoe and the other a shovel, ready to attack and provoke each other, competing to be the star of the field. In this... between you and Bua, everything started with distrust and fear from the beginning, especially for those who think they are inferior. Bua has always thought that way. She may even think you're being nice to her because you're waiting for the opportunity to attack her behind her back, as if you were just going to make her feel good and then leave her behind. Do you understand that?"

"That's it!" Phinya exclaimed.

"Bua always says that I'm just a spoiled girl, and that when I stop being spoiled, she thinks I'll leave, because she suspects that one day I'll leave her."

"This girl is sleeping so much, she's going crazy." Fang nodded.

"If she's not looking for a place to sleep, she spends the whole day memorizing theories like a crazy person. I really have a headache because of you two. Before you were almost killing each other and now you're eating each other. Why did you come here? To swim and die on the beach?"

Fang complained in a low voice.

"I already suspected, I saw you two looking at each other several times. And did you see? When I asked her directly, she still dodged, didn't want to admit it and just beat me up."

"Don't tell Bua that I'm talking about this with you."

"Why not? Are you afraid of her or something?" Fang asked back.

"You're in love, right? I can tell when you look at her."

The previous words left Phinya's face red.

"Phinya... Phinya, this is what we call karma. You tied a knot with Bua and now you can't untie it. So be careful. Don't tie it any tighter and take the solution of this knot seriously. This is the price you have to pay for what you've done to her. So try hard, be honest and give her time to gain her trust."

Phinya nodded attentively as she listened, until Fang continued:

"And seriously, as a friend, are you thinking of getting revenge on her, Phinya?"

"I admit that in the past I may have acted very badly."

Phinya's voice was full of sincerity.

"But now it's not like that anymore, and I feel bad every time I think about the things I've done to hurt her."

"If you feel guilty, have you apologized to her?"

"Apologies?."

Phinya repeated the word, frowning.

"Yes, apologize for everything that's happened so far. Apologize to show that you are no longer the Phinya you used to be. Apologize to show that you are willing. Don't forget that you had Bua investigated by the faculty."

You know that accusations of plagiarism or copying work are a serious violation of ethics and are unacceptable in academia, especially at our university. The punishment is severe because, if she were found guilty, she could even be expelled. It's already great that she can still at least look at you."

Fang explained.

"By apologizing, you are acknowledging, no matter what she is like, and understanding that her feelings are more important than yours. Do you understand that?"

"I think I can understand, thank you very much, Fang,"

Phinya replied. Now that she thought about it, she had never apologized to Bua even once.

"So, why did you come back to mess with her of all places? You traveled to so many places."

The question made Phinya let out a soft laugh.

"Wasn't there any woman who pleased you out there?"

"I don't know, I didn't like it.

The doctor said, shrugging her shoulders.

"My English isn't that good."

"And you end up liking the girl who only sleeps, don't you? The Professor will scream with joy! You two are her favorites, I'll tell you that!"

Fang said enthusiastically.

"If you need anything, just let me know. Don't disappoint me or the Professor."

"You're exaggerating. The teacher takes care of all the students."

"It's normal for the teacher to have favorite students to continue the work. And the teacher chose the right people. I myself don't know if, when I finish, I'll continue down this path. Sometimes, I feel like I've had enough because I've been doing this for a long time and I want to do other things."

"Don't abandon me, okay? The Bioanthropology course is the best there is!"

"New students will soon appear to replace me."

Fang said as she stand up.

"So, don't forget to send me the approval document for my budget, Dr. Phinya. I need to get something to eat. Today I'm going to have a long day, between lab and progress report."

"Okay, thank you very much, Fang."

"Hang in there, okay? If she gets too tangled up with you, you'll find a way to resolve it soon, I'm rooting for you two. It really had to be this way, I still want to see the day when you two are ready to tell the Professor. Just imagining her face makes me laugh."

□□□□□

□Episode 24□

Phinya entered the physical anthropology laboratory room inside the research building and see the head of the laboratory standing in front of a platform with a mummified skull, made of latex rubber and molded in a clean white, while Bua, did not turn to look at the visitor.

In the center of the skull's forehead, there was a white pin with the number 8 written on it, stuck in a single place. This area was known as the Glabella point, which is the most prominent point on the face where the line between the eyebrows meets the vertical line in the middle of the face. She needed to mark all of these points, at least sixteen in total, to determine the depth of the tissues and muscles before beginning the impression.

The reference points Bua was marking were known as osteometric markers, which are used to define the thickness and depth of the muscles and tissues in each bone. Just like the skull, the other bones in the body, such as the bones of the arms, legs, or any other bone, also have these markers as reference points.

Each bone acts as a support and attachment point for muscles, as well as tendon tissue, which has visible marks on bones that have been properly cleaned. When an unknown skull is found, facial reconstruction becomes necessary. These landmarks must be used to determine the placement of the different muscle groups, in order to ensure that the reconstruction is ethnically accurate and that the resulting face is as realistic as possible.

Particularly in cases where a face may be needed to identify the criminal, each landmark on the face varies between different ethnicities. Next to the skull platform was a tray of modeling clay.

"Have you started yet?"

Phinya asked from behind, before Bua turned and nodded.

"It will take a few weeks, I want to do it gradually, I don't want it to affect the work time, because we already have a 2D cast anyway. Otherwise, it will just be double the work. For now, I will focus on the deeper muscles," Bua explained.

"Do you have something in mind?"

"I had something to discuss, but I can wait another hour until the end of the workday. I'd rather just watch you model."

"No, I don't want anyone watching. It makes me nervous."

Bua replied, as she pressed the tablet she had in her hands. Soon, the image of her facial muscles appeared on the screen of the monitor mounted above.

"You can talk."

"Can I just watch in silence?."

The question make Bua raises an eyebrow before she use the back of her hand to adjust her glasses absently.

"It's just that I like watching you work."

Then Phinya jumped up to sit on top of the waist-high storage shelf behind her.

"We've been working at the same desk for three years, Phinya."

"That's right." The vice principal confirmed.

"It's strange that I've never seen how fascinating you are."

The compliment, said in a deep tone, made Bua's heart race, and she felt a sudden heat on her face.

"Maybe I just took a while to realize it."

"Then I won't do anything else. I'll just tidy up and call it a day."

Bua pretended, changing the subject as if she's afraid Phinya would say something she isn't ready to hear or respond to yet.

"With the boss here watching, I can't think of anything."

"But this is your lab. Here, you're the boss."

"Do you want to take on the role of lab chief too? Are you interested?"

"Don't put that responsibility on me."

"Who's throwing responsibility at you? It's not me!"

"What else do you have that you haven't thrown at me yet, Baibua?"

Phinya asked, as she jumped down from the bookshelf and supported herself, putting her hands in her pants pockets.

"Ever since you became the boss here, you promised to help with the projects and publications, and now you still want me to take on the role of lab chief?"

"You need to make up for the time you were away, I couldn't sleep because of it. Besides, now you're messing up my sleep again."

"In order for me to work, I need something in return." Phinya replied.

"Besides, you didn't come down to help identify the victims of the plane crash, you know? You were hired just to act like a hottie at work, weren't you?"

"Didn't you know that you're the boss here? You're an expert in physical anthropology. The job of identifying victims is yours." Phinya replied quickly.

"When the accident happened, the Professor called me just to help."

Those words made Bua frown.

"Wait a minute!"

Bua exclaimed, surprised.

"So the Professor knew you were coming back?"

"Yes"

"I don't understand." Busaya's soft voice said.

"Did the Professor always know where you were?."

"I got in touch about a year after I went to England. To apologize and to help raise funds here to make up things to us."

"Why didn't the teacher ever say that?"

"She must have thought you didn't like me very much, that's why she didn't say anything."

"So you decided to tell me everything when you invited me to be a researcher? It was a surprise to celebrate my graduation, right? Wow, no pressure. You didn't say anything about the accident either."

"And I should talk to your shovel, is that it?" Phinya joked.

"You didn't even want to look at my face."

"You said you only came to help on that specific occasion."

"Yes. At first, I really only came to help because I didn't want to upset the Professor."

She then met Bua's gaze.

"But I'm glad I made that decision."

A subtle smile appeared on her face.

"I thank you too, because if it weren't for you, I would be screwed."

"See? So I'm not here just to look pretty at the institute. After all, just by standing still, I'm already beautiful."

"If you think so, then sleep well and have sweet dreams."

"The lab chief said, waving her hands.

"Pack your things and wait for me in the office. As soon as I finish cleaning the instruments, I'll call you and you can come down to help."

"Okay."

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"Have any old things or antique items arrived here lately, the unofficial kind?"

Phinya asked on a quiet evening, after dinner at Bua's apartment, as she leaned on the long sofa next to the room's owner, who's preparing her classes for the next two days.

"What kind of unofficial things?"

"Like the ones the institute hasn't registered yet. Is there anything the teacher asked for help with?"

"Nothing special. I just asked them to register when things arrive here. We have the Homo habilis skeleton from Kenya that should arrive within two weeks and a replica of a monkey's skull that is being made. I don't know when that will arrive, we've been waiting for almost six months."

"Is it the real Homo habilis?"

Phinya's voice sound a little surprises, and her eyes widened. Bua nod and take a sip of water.

"He comes from the University of Nairobi, we have a partnership, the Professor has a friend there. I heard that next year they will start sending students to observe Southeast Asian culture, but they haven't sent anything yet."

"And what do you have now that hasn't been registered yet?"

"There's a Neanderthal skeleton. I'm waiting for the number to put in the display case. Why are you asking?"

Bua narrowed her eyes, looking suspiciously.

"What are you planning?"

"Don't you want to know about the mummy?"

But the answer was just a question.

"And does that have anything to do with these things?"

"I want to lend it to sell."

"Lend it to sell? What does that have to do with the mummy you mentioned?"

"You don't trust me?"

"Are you trustworthy?"

Bua's direct question make Phinya hesitate, remembering the conversation she had with Fang the day before.

Phinya couldn't deny this truth. And the situation wasn't anyone's fault. As she told Fang, the beginning between her and Bua had always been turbulent. Ever since they met as doctoral students more than five years

ago, until this moment, the relationship between the two could be called a rather peculiar beginning.

"She had never imagined that the story between them would take such an unexpected turn. More than that, the feelings she had for Bua were also complicated. Who could have predicted that one day she would fall in love with someone who had always been her rival, the same person who stood out as the professor's "favourite", the one with whom she competed to be the star of the field, who exchanged victories and defeats in research and seminars without giving in an inch.

Although they had never fought seriously enough to break off relations, they often attacked each other with words, throwing tools at each other, and exchanging barbs that were intended to make the other feel defeated.

Even though the beginning of their relationship was strange, their last encounter was even more chaotic, ending in a bed and without clothes. She knew that there was something more than friendship between her and Bua, but nothing beyond that, except for the feelings she carried.

Phinya didn't know what Bua thought about what had happened between them, and perhaps she didn't want to know. For her, the fact that Bua hadn't rejected her was enough. She herself was beginning to realize that the person who had once fought to win Bua over had now become extremely modest about their relationship.

If Bua still didn't trust her, as Fang had suggested, it was inevitable. Phinya had caused a lot of hurt, especially by making Bua face an ethics investigation for allegations of plagiarism and appropriation of research. If the paper were published, this investigation could prevent the publication.

In addition, the fact that she would be suspended from the course and late in submitting her work for the completion of her doctorate was a big risk. If the dean considered the situation critical, Bua might not become the Dr. Busaya she was today. Phinya's actions were coming back to haunt her, and Bua still felt distrustful and paranoid.

She didn't know how to solve the most difficult equation in her relationship with Bua. Maybe time would be the best answer. Time would prove that she was no longer the Phinya obsessed with beating Bua, but rather a Phinya willing to give in, if only Bua asked her to. She was trying to show that, and she hoped, from the bottom of her heart, that Bua would notice.

"I didn't mean to say that,"

Bua's soft voice said hesitantly. Even if she said she wasn't thinking of anything other than friendship at that moment, it would be a lie. She didn't want to hurt Phinya's feelings with words that the two of them used to use against each other before.

"I mean..."

"Bua."

The name left her lips with palpable seriousness, making Bua look into Phinya's eyes.

"Listen to me."

Phinya's left hand rose to hold the other side of her face, while her thumbs gently touched below Bua's eyes.

"I'm... sorry for everything that happened."

"I also need to apologize for feeling this way,"

Bua replied, trying to look away by lowering her head, but she's interrupted by Phinya's hand that hold her face.

"It's my fault for not trusting you... and yet acting like this with you, leading to all this. It feels like I'm manipulating you, Phinya."

"You don't need to worry about whether you're manipulating me or not. And you should also give yourself time to understand, okay?"

Phinya's words are soft and reassuring, and the small smile on her lips make Bua's heart race.

"I'll wait until you're ready to decide."

"I don't want you to wait. Because I don't know when this feeling will go away. If you ever want to go, Phinya, you can leave here at any time."

"Feeling distrustful towards me is your thing, but staying here is my choice. I'll decide that on my own."

"Phinya..."

"I'm serious, so stop trying to find me a woman." Phinya's voice was firm.

"Because I don't care about that."

"I'm sorry, Phinya."

Tears started to slide down Bua's face, but quickly wiped away by Phinya's fingers, who seem to be waiting for this moment.

"I didn't want to feel like I couldn't trust you."

"I've done a lot for you, so I understand."

Then, Phinya's thumb gently descended on the thin lips that she knew so well, followed by a kiss.

Bua let herself fall on the couch, surrendering to the feelings she had. Although she knew that she had already thought of the person in front of her as something more than a friend for a long time, perhaps since that first night, a certain distrust still lingered in her heart.

It was a feeling generated by old memories between her and Phinya, making Bua feel uncomfortable holding her back. Or even if she did love her, it was a form of love that wasn't entirely happy or fulfilled.

She needed to eliminate those feelings first, needed to erase the distrust before sharing her own feelings. Whenever Phinya tried to broach the subject, Bua would usually deflect, hoping that Phinya would get tired and go away on her own. Sometimes, it was hard to believe that someone like Phinya would be interested in someone as insecure as her, who had always felt inferior compared to someone so capable.

"If I wanted to borrow the Neanderthal, would you?"

The teasing request whispered in her ear made Bua laugh until she cried, but she didn't wait for an answer before kissing Phinya again.

"Ask your mom to lend it to you. I can't authorize it, because it's not up to me."

Before Bua could finish speaking, Phinya leaned over and kissed her chin.

"What are you thinking of doing?"

"I just want to know if, besides the victims of the plane crash, there are more people involved in this. If we wait for the police to act, I'm afraid it will take too long. So, maybe we need to do something. After all, the information we found involves both businessmen and antiquities traffickers. We can investigate if these people have anything to tell us. In fact, if they are relics related to Ancient Egypt, I think that might make it easier to attract their interest."

"But is that a good idea, Phinya?"

"I'm trying to think of the best strategy. If we think about the worst-case scenario, looking at that skull we found, if there was someone who was hurt or, even worse, used to"

"I don't even want to think about it."

Bua interrupted, before Phinya's lips pressed against hers again, a few times, softly.

Phinya then sit down.

"But we can't deny that it's a possibility. Doing something like that to a corpse is illegal, anyway."

"It's complicated because to do a mummification you need a body that has recently died. That's why I don't want to leave this question open for too long."

"I think there's something that could be useful if you borrow it. But you'll have to ask the teacher." Bua suggested.

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"Where did you get it from?"

The archaeological anthropology specialist asked.

"The scarab isn't easy to find."

"It must have been something someone sent as a souvenir when this place was founded."

Said the head of the laboratory.

"It's very beautiful."

The scarab was an insect with a shape similar to a beetle, used in various amulets. The Egyptians believed that it was related to the sun god (god Ra). They are always seen in Egyptian paintings and can also be found in funeral texts, linked to rebirth. Sometimes, these scarabs can be found positioned in the heart, which is removed during the mummification process.

"It's just a suggestion, it doesn't mean I support this idea, Phinya,"

Bua added, knowing full well what she was thinking of doing.

"It's just a possibility. For now, let's wait and see if the police can identify that unknown man. If we know who he is, maybe we can get some

information. Let's hope luck is on our side."

"I think so too. Don't act without thinking, or I'll report you to the Professor,"

Bua said, narrowing her eyes.

"Are you 5 or something to still run off to tell mommy?"

"No matter how old I am, I'll report you."

"I don't want to have a third mother."

"As you wish,"

Bua said, shrugging, but she had to let out a scream when Phinya's arms pulled her closer.

"I want to have other things," she said, placing her lips on Bua's cheek.

"Hey... Bua."

"Huh?"

"I'm not the Phinya you knew anymore."

Those words make Bua look up and meet Phinya's eyes.

"I'll try to believe you, Phin. I want you to know that I'm trying to erase the bad feelings I have towards you."

Phinya slowly rested her head on her shoulder and said,

"Then I'll wait for you."

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□Episode 25□

"Look... Today Dr. Phinya arrived early at the laboratory."

The mocking voice of the head of the laboratory of the Bioanthropology Research Institute rang out as she saw the vice director enter through the door, wearing a long white lab coat, which, as promised, would help identify the victims of the plane crash that had already occurred more than two months ago. So far, nine victims had been identified

"Why don't you go do plant a banana tree, huh?" She said playfully.

As she passed by, Bua pretended to follow her suggestion and leaned forward as if she were going to turn upside down. Phinya, realizing the joke, quickly stretched out her leg so that Bua would trip, but then caught her before she fell. Bua, agile, managed to dodge it by jumping in time.

"Phinya! If I fall and hit my head, what would I do?"

"Simple, don't fall on your head. Try falling on your mouth. Maybe that way you'll stop talking for a while."

Phinya replied, before heading to the stainless steel bench, where several bones were still arranged. She looked around before picking up the humerus and starting her work.

She measured the length of the bone to use in calculating the height, which would be compared with the victims' records.

"You can enter the numbers into the program."

Busaya said, who is facing a table where she's preparing a simulated skull for facial reconstruction.

“I’ve already entered the formula to calculate the height.”

“Are these formulas accurate when calculating using a single bone? I haven’t used them in a while,”

Phinya commented, as she watched Bua, leaning over, examining the skull and the tablet screen, where the points for facial reconstruction are displayed.

“The most recent studies have a smaller margin of error. Calculating height based on bones results in a difference of, at most, eight centimeters, but I still think it’s a large margin. I wish it were only five centimeters. Before, with a single bone, the margin of error was ten to twelve centimeters. Now, they’ve narrowed it a bit. The good thing is that there are more studies with Asian samples. But the accuracy varies between men and women. For Asian women, the most accurate calculation is the humerus, and for men, the tibia (Tibia) is the most accurate.

“Thank goodness there are only a few victims left to identify.”

Bua nod and then take small white pins, the size of a phalanx, measured them, and with a scalpel cut them to the desire size. With a black permanent ink pen, she write the letter — H— and positioned the pin in the center of the eye socket, on the line that demarcated the nose.

The next bone Phinya take is the left scapula (Scapula) of one of the victims, completely clean, since the larvae had consumed all the tissue. A hole near the center of the bone caught her attention.

“Bualoy, have you looked at this batch yet?”

“Not yet, I was waiting for you,”

Bua replied, turning to meet Phinya’s steady gaze.

“This batch was cleaned by the larvae yesterday.”

I asked Aon to remove it from the chamber and give it a final cleaning, but I haven't checked it yet.

"Then come and see this."

Phinya called, waving for Bua to come closer.

"I'm sure there was some kind of aggression before the plane crashed. And I think we can confirm that the mark on the rib bone is what I was thinking, even though we didn't find the weapon."

"Gunshot,"

Bua said immediately, understanding what Phinya was talking about. She narrowed her eyes and examined closely the small hole in the bone Phinya was holding, clearly visible.

"If something was strong enough to pierce the scapula and make a round hole like that, I can't think of anything else."

"It's possible that a firearm was used up there."

"Let's calculate the height now. I want to know who this bone belongs to."

That statement made the vice principal move quickly. Phinya measured the bone again to be sure before entering all the numbers into the computer. After pressing 'Enter', within a few seconds the height of the victim, owner of that bone, appeared on the screen.

"181 centimeters, with a margin of error of up to 8 centimeters. This means that the height varies between 173 and 189 centimeters."

Bua explained, as she went to get the file with the victims' data. She quickly leafed through the dossier, examining the information.

"We have two possible candidates. One is a male passenger, 45 years old, 177 centimeters tall. The other is the main pilot, 183 centimeters tall, and he was 33 years old."

"Let's put the bone through an X-ray to see if the bone plates have closed or deteriorated. That way we can calculate the age and get a better idea of who it is. Now we can start to understand what happened."

"There was a shootout before the plane crash." Phinya added.

"The pilot may have been injured or the aircraft may have suffered damage that caused it to lose its life control. We need the police to investigate who had a gun and how they managed to get it on board. But these bullet holes don't tell us the caliber, so it's hard to confirm without the gun at the crash site."

"At the meeting there was no report that weapons were found either." Bua said.

"But if we found two bullet holes like that, we can conclude that it was a shooting. I'll ask one more time to be sure."

"This flight is getting scarier and scarier."

Phinya commented thoughtfully.

"And everything seems extremely suspicious."

"Have you talked to the teacher about the beetle?"

"Not yet." Phinya replied briefly.

"I'm still deciding what to do."

"I don't agree, just to be clear."

Bua said quickly, worried.

"For me, it's too dangerous to take that risk. Do you remember what happened when we found those people at the crash site?"

"I'm afraid the risk isn't worth it."

"I understand." Phinya replied.

"Give me some time to think of another solution."

Bua just nodded, relieved.

"What do we know so far?"

"The plane crashed possibly due to a fight on board, with gunshot wounds on two bones, one of which may be the pilot's. We have the mummified skull, made from an unidentified male skull." Bua summarized.

"And this mummy was created for a specific purpose and taken on the plane to be transported to Paris."

"I'm waiting for information from a friend to find out if there was an event in Paris at that time."

Phinya added, before returning to focus on the work in front of her.

If no new work came up for Bua, the bodies of the victims of the plane crash would be sent to the police so that those responsible for the cases could continue their investigations, and soon, they would be returning home. However, there was one person whose identity Bua prayed the police would be able to uncover: the unknown man who owned the face recreated from that skull.

Busaya stared at the mummified skull that she herself had reconstructed. A feeling of sadness invaded her, difficult to explain. In her mind, a question echoed:

Who would be capable of doing something like that to another human being? Has humanity reached such a low point?

When human life is assigned a monetary value, and even corpses are traded, instead of being left to rest in peace for all eternity.

Busaya sighed deeply, exhausted, as she realized that there were strange people out there, willing to turn corpses into mummies. She didn't even want to imagine where they had brought those bodies from. She placed another white pin, marked "M," at the lowest point of the mandible, known in the field of facial reconstruction as the "Menton."

She breathed heavily, feeling uneasy, as she concentrated on adjusting the reference points to ensure that the facial recreation was as accurate and complete as possible. At the very least, this would be one last service for the deceased.

Phinya's cell phone ring, catching Bua's attention. She sees her frown as she stared at the phone screen for a moment.

"There was an antiques exhibition in Paris around the same time as the plane crash," Phinya said thoughtfully.

"I'm not really surprised." Bua moved closer.

"Is something wrong?"

"My friend sent me information that there was an antiques exhibition at that time. It was an exhibition."

"It was a private event, for invited guests only. But of course there were a lot of millionaires showing off their collections."

Phinya commented authoritatively.

"The guests were all VIPs."

"Have you ever been to any of these events?"

"Yes, once or twice. Some people wanted to introduce me to the world of the black market, so they invited me to be an expert." She replied.

These events are like a gathering of children showing off their toys. And, of course, that's not all. In addition to the exhibition, there are exchanges, sales or auctions. Money flows freely there.

"And did they manage to hook you?"

Busaya asked jokingly, until Phinya looked at her directly.

"What do you think?"

Phinya asked back, narrowing her eyes. She knew that Bua still maintained a certain level of distrust towards her, and rightly so, considering what had happened between them in the past. Phinya didn't blame anyone but herself.

"I don't know, that's why I asked."

"I'm a person who doesn't let money buy me."

She paused to take a breath.

"Unless it's a good amount."

"I knew it!" Bua exclaimed.

"I imagine it."

"Hey."

Phinya answered seriously this time.

"If I was interested in money, I wouldn't have come back here, Bualoy. Do you know how much they offered me to get involved in this? The commission for each piece sold? Some pieces were worth more than this entire building."

"Then why did you come back?"

Busaya asked without thinking much. However, Phinya didn't answer right away. She just stared at Bua, with an unreadable expression.

"I hope, Bua, that one day you will find the answer to that question within yourself. Because even if I told you, you wouldn't believe me."

"I already told you that you can leave if you want, didn't I?"

Bua's calm voice broke the silence that followed for a few moments. Phinya was quite certain that Bua had understood the meaning of her previous words.

"I want you to go to a place where you can be happy, without depending on the happiness of another person or something external."

Bua looked directly into Phinya's eyes, noticing the hesitation in them.

"I won't give up."

Phinya suddenly declared firmly.

"I will show you that I am no longer the same Phinya as before. If I leave now, it would be like admitting defeat."

"You still see this as a competition. Feelings are not a matter of competition or comparison, Phinya. There are no winners or losers in this."

"Of course there are. I am proof of that myself. If it were the old Phinya, I would have given up a long time ago."

"True. And before I left, I would have made a scene, as always."

She laughed lightly.

"You've changed, I know. You've changed a lot. You're more skilled, more mature, you think more before you act. You don't freak out like before."

This made Phinya lift her chin a little, proud.

"You better not end up falling in love with this new Phinya." She teased.

"You can keep dreaming."

Bua replied, joking.

"What do you think we should do now?"

"Wait for the police and see what they find out." Phinya suggested.

"About the gun or the unknown man."

"It will probably be like that." Bua nodded.

"In the meantime, we will continue with our work."

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Hi guys and gays! With today's news, a copy of the translation is being made available in PDF format. Don't worry about it, don't worry about it. I have authorization to do the translation and Wattpad has already been notified by Nalan Lek herself. So rest assured, and enjoy reading. Thank you all for your kindness

A kiss.

Pfahl

□Episode 26□

“Hi, Bua!”

Phinya’s voice echoed on an afternoon of a random day. The two had just returned from the institute and were preparing for dinner in Busaya’s room, who was holding research documents to review the content before submitting them for confirmation and publication in an academic journal. This research was her first to be accepted after completing her studies.

Upon hearing the call, Bua, who was already seated and starting to open a beer, looked up over her glasses and arched an eyebrow, asking:

“What?”

“Where do you find time to write your research?”

When you have some free time, you sleep. When you get back to your room, you're tossing and turning then you're already asleep again“

Phinya replied, determined to tease.

“I write while I dream” Bua said teasingly back.

“I have the raw file of the experiment results saved. It's been a while, but I haven't had time to write it down.”

“How about I help you? If you want, you can send it to me by email Bua made the proposal If you want, you can send it to me.“

“But Dr. Bua is so helpful, right? You're anxious to publish it for the vice-director of the Institute, aren't you? “ Phinya commented,

“You'll be the third author, the professor will be the second“

“Then let me do it alone“

Busaya replied, bending down to read the content of the paper in her hands.

“Seriously, when do you have time for this? “

“The time when I'm not sleeping. While I'm listening to lectures or in progress meetings. Sometimes, there are meetings all afternoon and I take advantage of those moments.“

“I'm going to report you to the professor for not paying attention in the meeting.“

“I listen with my ears and type with my hands. They are different nervous systems, you can't separate them.“

Bua defended herself,

“If I stay still, without moving my hand, I fall asleep. The air conditioning in the room is very cold. And since when did you become a X9?“

“I learned from you“

“So, you're going to sleep in your own room tonight.“

“Buaaaaa!!“

The voice with a sly tone that she had been using more often lately sounded immediately,

“No! Dont force me.“

As soon as she finished speaking, she got up and went to sit next to her, resting her head on her shoulder.

“If I don't sleep with you, I can't sleep.“

“You're exaggerating“

Bua felt that her former colleague, who was now more than that to her, rested her forehead on her shoulder.

“Is something wrong, Phinya?“

However, Phinya only made a low sound of inquiry before Bua heard a deep sigh.

“I just... I never thought that the two of us would get to this point.“

“Why are you being dramatic all of a sudden?“

Bua asked, turning her gaze to look at the person's face.

“Or do you mean you regret what happened between us?“

“Yes... “

Phinya replied, before remaining silent for a moment, reflecting on the words she wanted to say.

“I already told you that you can get out of this situation at any time. I feel bad that our beginning was like this“

This made Busaya put the paper she was holding aside.

“And now? Do you feel bad? “

The firm voice asked the question and received a shake of the head in response.

“If you don't feel good now, don't think about what happened anymore.“

Bua spoke seriously.

“Because if we had started differently, maybe we wouldn't be like now.“

The words made Phinya look into Bua's eyes.

“Do you really think so?”

“Listen to me, Phinya.”

Bua continued, smiling, making the other unable to resist returning the gesture.

“My jealousy is not your fault. I just wanted to clear it up before we decide what to do next, So stop feeling guilty.”

Phinya looked at Bua for a moment before leaning over and kissing her on the cheek. Of course, Bua had never rejected this gesture, not even once.

“You sleep with me every night. It's not just sleeping most of the time, so what are you still worried about?”

“I'm sorry, Bua, for acting like that. “

“You weren't that bad“ Bua replied.

“Why am I comforting someone who almost got me dropped out?

“It's true Bua“ said, letting out a laugh.

“Why was I so clueless all this time?”

The speaker's hand rose to touch Bua's face before leaning in for a kiss.

“One more thing...”

Phinya said as she pulled away, then pressed her lips together again.

“Hurry up and ask for an assistant professor title.”

“You're crazy!” Bua exclaimed.

“How can you just hand over your work to someone else like that?”

She complained, though her words were softened by the smile on her friendly face that was just a breath away.

“If you want anything, just tell me and I’ll give you whatever you want.”

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Bua, who had entered Phinya’s office in the morning to discuss the research documents, hesitated as she raised her hand to knock on the door. She heard the doctor’s voice, who was behind the door, talking to someone in English, so she listened for a moment. Before she could understand the conversation, it ended, and Bua decided to knock on the door.

The office owner gave permission to enter.

“Who were you talking to?”

Bua asked as she approached. She placed the folder of documents on the table before dropping into the chair.

“A friend.”

The answer was brief, while her eyes remained fixed on the computer screen.

“Is something wrong, Dr. Bua?”

“Of course there is. If there wasn’t, I wouldn’t be here.”

“Oh, I shouldn’t have asked...”

Phinya replied sarcastically, dragging out her words as if Bua was mocking her.

“So, who were you talking to?”

Bua repeated the question.

“A friend. “

“If I ask you again, you'll answer 'a friend' again, right? “

“Yes.“

“Who were you talking to?“ then she asked the same question again.

“Ah... Bualoy!“

The office owner exclaimed, clearly irritated.

“Is that how you're going to ask me?“

“If you don't answer, I'll keep asking. Who were you talking to? Who? Who?“

Bua's questions flowed quickly, almost forming a melody.

“It was a woman, with a very beautiful British accent. So, who were you talking to?“

“A friend... who's from England.“

The answer made Bua raise an eyebrow.

“I already knew that because I just said it with a British accent.”

“Ugh... “

Phinya let out a deep sigh, visibly worried.

“What were you talking about? “

“Why do you want to know? “

“At first I didn't want to know, but I ended up listening to the end of the conversation and didn't understand. That's why I asked, it's easier to ask straight away.”

“Is curiosity coded in your DNA or something?”

“No, it's just my personality,”

Bua replied indifferently.

“So, what were you guys talking about?”

“I won't tell.”

“If you don't answer, take this work.”

With that, Bua slid a thick stack of A4 paper, almost half a ream, towards her.

“Review the thesis outlines for two Masters students from Professor Nissara. Two theses, about 300 pages.”

“I was talking to a friend in England about mummies.”

The answer Bua wanted to hear appeared in a blink of an eye, as Phinya slid the documents back to her.

“And is your friend pretty?”

“So do you want to know about the mummy or about the friend?”

“Both.”

The answer made Phinya's eyes widen.

“Let's start with the mummy.”

“Then you'll have to give me half the work, because I'm not going to answer whether the friend is pretty or not.”

“Just tell me if she's pretty or not”

Bua tried to negotiate.

“Give me the documents.“

Phinya said, reaching out to take the papers again.

“Okay, besides these papers, please attend two students rehearsal for their thesis proposals, It will be on next Monday, at nine o'clock, in the meeting room on the second floor. And ask them a few questions.”

”If I answer your previous question, will you come with me? I'm worried that during the presentation, the questions will be too difficult. If the students can't answer them, they'll lose confidence, you know?”

”If you tell me whether she's pretty or not, you don't have to review anything and you don't have to go, So, what were you talking about with your friend?”

”She's an expert on Egyptian civilization, the one I sent the contents of the scroll we found. Since I haven't heard from her for a long time, I followed up.”

Phinya finally answered.

“And what did she find?”

There was nothing but the Book of the Dead. As I said before, this probably belonged to someone wealthy, because the used paper was expensive, the writing is clear, structured, and detailed. Another addition was a hymn praising the Egyptian god of life, death and the afterlife, Osiris. Ordinary people would not include this, because the cost of writing it was high.”

“And what do you think of the roll paper we found?”

“Considering the evidence and information we gathered, I would say that the two items are related to trade or auctions” Bua added.

“But then this incident happened first.’

“So whoever took the mummy's skull to the event didn't know that it wasn't a mummy from ancient Egypt?”

“It's possible,” Phinya agreed,

“At first, we weren't sure about it yet, but the thing is, there's a chance this could turn into a homicide case due to the fracture in the lower jaw, which seems like the bone hasn't healed yet.”

Hearing this, Bua couldn't help but sigh.

“That's what I was afraid of, I figured it would be like that.”

She said worriedly.

“That's why I didn't want to wait for the police. But, for now, we haven't gotten much. We're trying to find information from people we think might know something.”

“We've done everything we could, Phin. I really believe that.”

“I want to do better than this. I don't like knowing what's going on and not being able to do anything, or having to wait for someone to tell me what's going on something.”

“Don't you like waiting?”

Bua commented, her expression full of questions.

“Except for you.”

Phinya said quickly, afraid of being misunderstood. Bua's hand reached out to touch the back of Phinya's hand, trying to encourage her, and they exchanged comforting glances for a moment.

“I have to go now.”

Bua said, picking up the documents that were on the work table.

“Leave it there, I'll review it for you.”

“No need,” Phinya's voice replied.

“I’ve already reviewed it. Actually, I brought it to use as blackmail to get you to open your mouth.”

As she finished her sentence, she raised the documents that were in her arms.

“It seems to have worked.”

Then she left the room with a smile, before hearing the voice of the owner of the room shouting behind her.

“Bualoy, be careful! I’ll get my revenge!”

□□□□□

□Episode 27 □

A brown wooden box with a clear glass lid a little bigger than the palm of a hand was sitting on the desk in front of Doctor Phinya, who had been sighing for ten minutes. What was inside could be worth more than a mansion. Her advisor had given it to her a few days ago.

At first, Phinya thought that the professor would forbid her or refuse to give her such an expensive gift. However, she just gave her a smile that, no matter how many times she saw it, always conveyed a sense of comfort, as she opened the cabinet and handed it to her without hesitation.

"I'm glad you're worried about it. Take it, you can have it. I just hope you know how to use it well."

The professor said that before sliding the box to her. Inside was the scarab that Bua had mentioned, though she didn't know that it had come from the coffin of an ancient pharaoh, was worth far more than the scarabs found in ordinary tombs, and was adorned with precious stones and had beautiful gold carvings on the top.

When she said that the price was equivalent to that of a mansion, Phinya wasn't exaggerating. In fact, she felt herself getting more and more involved, knowing that this was no ordinary case. Someone was trying to make a mummy for some purpose that she knew was not good, and she also knew that Bua probably felt the same way.

She soon received confirmation from a friend that her suspicions were correct. As an anthropologist, she was unsure whether or not it was right to pretend that she didn't know anything about this, since it wasn't her or Bua's responsibility. Phinya had been struggling with this dilemma for days. Should she do what she could?

Something was very wrong, right in front of her. This case was disturbing and also shaking the anthropological community. What should she do? Even though the police were already aware of the case, she couldn't predict where or when it would end. Maybe it was time to make a decision. The ringing of the phone on her desk interrupted her thoughts, making her sigh deeply before answering it.

"Phinya."

A familiar voice sounded on the other end of the line. Phinya was also unsure who was really the boss in this relationship, since Boss Bua seemed to have a special talent for convincing her to work, or rather, to throw the responsibility on her shoulders, and of course Phinya never refused.

[If Dr. Busaya calls, tell her that Dr. Phinya went on vacation.]

Phinya said.

[That's as funny as a seashell fossil telling a joke, it's almost funny to you]

The voice on the other end answered seriously.

[The Professor is stuck in class. Can you come down to sign for the habillis?]

[Have you arrived yet?]

[No]

She answered provocatively.

[I probably called you by accident, because the line went dead in your office to get your signature and receive the seashell fossil]

"If you miss me, just say so. No need to be funny or pretend not to understand".

Phinya answered quickly, also sarcastically.

"And since you're the head of the lab, sign it yourself, since it's yours."

[Oh, whatever. If it's that hard to call you, stay there stuck in the office, boss]

Bua, on the other end, answered brusquely before hanging up.

"Hey, you sleepyhead! I didn't understand anything you were saying!"

The vice-principal quickly hung up before leaving the room.

She went down to the area in front of the laboratory in a few minutes. During this time, Bua and the security guard were helping to push a wooden box large enough to contain a human body, about two meters long, to place it next to the large table.

"Sign it for me!"

The head of the laboratory shouted when she saw Phinya. For her, seeing the remains of a primitive human that was almost a million years old was something impressive. These fossils always carried hidden stories. The long journey of humanity's ancestors had always been fascinating to study, even though she knew well that today the human race could be lost. As Bua said, this long journey would probably not have an end.

If an era of humans were to become extinct or disappear from this world, a new species would need to evolve, just as our ancestors or close relatives had already experienced. The world kept turning, just as time kept moving forward, and of course, neither did humanity. It was still going on.

Phinya joined Bua, where Aon and a few PhD students were waiting excitedly. The security guard, Man, who was about thirty-eight years old, was dressed in a light blue uniform and held a drill in his hand.

Bua raised her hand and saluted the wooden box, muttering something that made Phinya frown. Then she smiled. Although the fossils inside the box could not hear, it seemed like a way of asking permission or, to make it more solemn, a way of respecting the professors by bringing the body for

study. If there were no such remains or fossils to study, knowledge and science in various fields would remain stagnant.

“Open it, Man,”

Bua said as she lowered her hand. At that moment, no one spoke, just waited anxiously to see what was inside. Soon, the four sides of the wooden box were opened, revealing a transparent acrylic box that contained a skeleton of a over a million years old. Of course, it was not complete, but it was well protected inside the package, arranged in a way that simulated the resting position.

“Here are the verification documents, Phi Bua,”

Aon said, handing Bua the papers to confirm that the amount of bones corresponded to what had been mentioned. The students began to move, approaching to observe with interest. In the life of an anthropologist, there are not many opportunities to see something real like this.

This was definitely one of the first and most complete discoveries in the Southeast Asian region.

Homo habilis was a species of primitive human, but its appearance was quite different from modern humans. This species still had morphological characteristics and stature similar to Australopithecus or chimpanzee, and was recently reclassified, being removed from the genus Homo and transferred to Australopithecus. Most still knew it as Homo habilis.

In the name Homo habilis, the word "habilis" means "skilled" or "agile" in the use of hands. In addition to their ability to handle tools, they were also known for making stone tools.

"Wow!"

Bua exclaimed excitedly, her eyes shining through the lenses of her glasses.

"This is really amazing," Phinya commented.

"I've only seen fragments, some skulls and finger bones."

"This is the first time I've seen something real. Most of the time, I only see models and pictures in books."

Bua replied, as she bent down to check the list.

"There are forty-seven pieces. Where else would I find this? I'm almost fainting, I can barely breathe."

Bua looked at the fossil, which was undoubtedly impressive for an anthropologist, especially for someone in the field of physical anthropology like her, who was finally seeing a real primitive human body, something she had studied for so long. Such specimens were not easy to find, most of them were kept in museums abroad. Bua wasn't sure how the professor had managed to negotiate for them to send an item of that size.

"Take a deep breath, don't faint yet," Phinya said, giving a loving smile.

"Take out the list and I'll check the pieces for you."

Then, she took the documents from Bua's hand.

"I'm going to stay awake tonight."

"Are you crazy?!"

Phinya's voice sounded louder than usual, shocking everyone present.

"Why can't I?"

"Why not?"

"Hey, you guys!"

Fang's voice intervened between the two friends.

"Are you going to start fighting again?"

"Dr. Bua wants to sleep here tonight just because she's in nerd mode."

"Leave her alone," Fang commented.

"Let her freak out, Phinya."

"See? Fang agrees."

"Who said I agree?"

The future doctor turned around and said.

"I'm just a good friend, and I support you both. If you want to stay awake, stay awake. It's good that I take advantage and stay with you. I have to collect the samples from the lab at two in the morning.

"But the lab is on another floor, Fang, we won't be together."

"You can come up and stay with me up there.

"No, that's not enough."

Phinya replied, looking at the transparent display case and writing it down on the checklist.

"Why do you have to collect samples tonight?"

"It seems that the equipment's timer was set wrong, so it will generate the results at two in the morning. That's why I have to collect them at one in the morning."

"Will you be able to do that, Fang?"

This time it was Bua who asked, but she didn't wait for the answer before returning to her focus on the Homo habilis fossil.

"I can't let that crazy woman stay with you. You're the one who needs to stay with her because she's going to faint."

That made Fang come closer.

"Are you jealous or something?"

Her friend whispered, trying not to be heard.

"Who?"

Phinya asked, answering in a brusque tone.

"You!"

Fang replied, with a satisfied smile

"You're jealous of her, aren't you?"

"What are you whispering about? Did something happen?"

Bua then approached, curious.

"It's none of your business."

The vice-principal replied, looking down at the documents in her hands.

"Fang?"

Bua turned to ask her friend.

"It's nothing."

Fang replied with a smile on her lips, making Phinya roll her eyes.

Bua watched closely.

"If you don't tell, you'll be alone in the lab." She said.

"I already knew." Her friend replied.

"Did you know? What do you know?"

"I know you're not normal, Bua."

Fang said and then turned to Phinya, touching her shoulder, who just remained silent.

"I'm rooting for you, Phinya."

And left the lab room with a soft chuckle.

"What's gotten into her?"

Bua turned to Phinya who was still there.

"She didn't get enough sleep, she looks like a zombie, just like you."

"Better not make me talk about who kept me up at night."

"That's exactly what I was going to ask... Has the professor talked to you about the press conference?"

Phinya immediately returned to serious mode the next second.

"He mentioned it, but they haven't set a date yet."

The two were discussing the date of the press conference for the creation of the institute, which would be a way to publicize it for academics, students and interested parties, and which would open for visitation in two months.

"I think it could be next month. So, I can start drafting the invitation for the academics."

"Let Aon do it." Bua suggested.

"You need to prepare for the speech in front of the cameras."

"Just the invitation? I can do that myself. Why use Aon?"

"I can do that."

Aon offered upon hearing.

The professor asked me to draft the invitation for the press.

"And the syllabus, how is it going, Aon?"

Bua asked.

"Have you decided how you're going to do it?"

"I'll stay with Phi Phinya." Aon replied.

"Great!"

Bua exclaimed, causing Phinya to look at her with a glare.

"Having Dr. Phinya's name as your advisor will be a great thing honor and pride for the dissertation. Just seeing her resume and experience is enough to impress anyone!"

"Pretending not to understand."

Phinya replied, noticing Bua's tone.

"According to the rules, you can't include the resume of consultants in the dissertation. Did you really graduate, Bua?"

Choose where you're going to do the field research."

Bua suggested excitedly.

Phi Phinya can contact you in advance.

"I'd like to go to England." Aon replied.

"Perfect." Phinya said.

"If I make a few calls today, you can go tomorrow."

"Besides the invitation, do I need to prepare anything else for the press conference day?" Aon asked.

"Don't worry." Phinya replied.

"I'll ask the head of the lab to take care of the rest."

"Great, the vice-director just needs to pose pretty for the cameras, really."

Bua immediately retorted, with a sarcastic tone.

"It's my job... you told me." Phinya replied.

"But I think Phi Phinya looks pretty in front of the cameras."

Aon commented.

"Oh, don't compliment her, no. She's already stuck up enough."

She complained.

"And there are already too many people sucking up to her."

Bua's words made Phinya shrug.

"I can't do anything about it."

"Just think about what you want to say during the press conference, so I can prepare myself."

Bua said, with an irritated tone.

"We'll show off the habilis, of course. To highlight the Institute."

She nodded, looking at the fossil that was on the table.

"If you have anything cool, just bring it."

"Ok... boss."

□□□□□

□Episode 28□

Dr. Phinya's eyes swept across the main conference room, located on the top floor of the Institute of Bioanthropology building. The room was currently packed with professors, academics, students, and over one hundred and twenty members of the press.

It was the day of the press conference to officially inaugurate the research institute, with Professor Dr. Nisara as director, and Phinya serving as vice-director. She was seated at the head of the conference table, while Busaya, standing at the corner of the stage, took care of the organization and security of the event.

Shortly after the press conference, the tour began, with participants being guided through the laboratories, distributed across the different floors.

Some groups went down to the first and second floors, where there were exhibits on anthropology and the origin of early humans, as well as fossils, many of which were replicas of over thirty ancestral species from different eras.

There were also skeletons of short-tailed macaques, including a chimpanzee that Bua had obtained with the help of from a zoo, as well as other mammal species, all explaining the evolutionary connections back to modern humans.

"This specimen is *Homo habilis*."

Phinya heard the lab chief explain to a group of attentive visitors.

"We just received it."

"Is it real?"

A young man in a suit asked, his eyes widening when Bua nodded.

"I've been in this field for eleven years and this is the first time I've seen one."

"It was a generous donation from an institute in Nairobi. They were very kind. In two or three years, we'll have an exchange program for students to work in the field there."

"...."

"You accept PhD students too, right? We've just started accepting master's students. As for PhDs, we accept them in two-year intervals, as we're adjusting the curriculum."

"If we want to send students to the labs, would the institute be available?"

Asked the young man again, who Bua assumed was a professor of the same age as her.

"My department has a great interest in bioanthropology."

"This area will be ready in two or three years. We are waiting for one of our researchers to finish his doctorate. We are not sure if he will do his postdoctoral studies abroad. But, if it is for physical anthropology, get in touch. I can take a look. And we have Dr. Phinya, a specialist in the historical era, who can also help." Bua replied.

"You have many specimens here, professor."

Commented a young woman in the group, praising Bua.

"We are trying to gather as many as possible."

Bua replied, after being called a professor.

"Several institutes have helped us with this. Feel free to explore."

Then she walked away and disappeared into the back, returning shortly after with two bottles of water and approached Phinya, who was holding some objects nearby.

"Doctor Phinya looks so elegant today."

Busaya joked gently, handing her one of the bottles of water.

Phinya handed the wooden box she was holding to Bua before accepting the bottle of water and opening it to drink.

"Isn't that right?"

Phinya lifted her chin, with a slight smile, and adjusted her hair behind her ear with her fingertips.

"Just don't fall in love with Dr. Phin, okay?"

"No way!"

Bua replied promptly, lowering her voice so that no one else would hear.

"Buakong!"

"But he can't even compliment you a little without you getting all cocky... huh?" Bua teased.

"Oh, screw you, you sleepyhead!"

Phinya replied, but in an almost whispered tone, casting a sidelong glance at the other.

"It seems like there are a lot of people interested. It must be good for the teacher."

"You sure are proud now."

Phinya commented, as she took a soft sip of water.

"I told you, you are very good."

Busaya gave a big smile, which made Phinya get lost for a brief moment, observing her. If they were alone, Phinya would certainly have gone to hug Bua and squeezed her until she took her breath away.

At this moment she had no doubt that she had really fallen in love with her old friend, the same friend who was her rival in the past.

"Why are you looking at me like that? Are you pale?"

"I'm naturally pale. Are you wearing makeup? You don't wear makeup, Buakong."

"Today I did. After all, I can't look bad on camera."

"Don't worry, I don't look at your face too much."

"I didn't put on makeup so you could look at me."

"Buakong!"

"What?"

Bua replied, still teasing.

"I'd better go."

She pretended to leave in another direction.

"Then take this and keep it for me, please. I'm afraid I'll lose it and I won't be able to find another one like it."

Phinya asked, referring to the box she had given to Bua.

Phinya nodded towards the beetle in Bua's hands.

"I was going to show it off, but on second thought, it's better not to. What if someone hides it in their pocket and takes it away, that would be a

problem."

"Let me take it to your office."

Bua said, holding the box in her hands.

"Congratulations, Miss Bua."

A deep man's voice caught the attention of both of them.

"Hello, Professor Songwut."

Phinya saw Bua greet the man, who was dressed in a white shirt and black pants, with a smile.

"How are you?"

"I'm going, as you know."

He responded to the greeting, returning the smile, which made Phinya narrow her eyes, watching the interaction between the two.

"I sent you a message, Bua, but you never replied."

"I was very busy at that time."

Bua replied, trying to balance the answer.

"But I already told you that I rarely reply messages. Sometimes, if I'm teaching, I leave my phone on silent. If it's something urgent, it's better to call."

'This must be the guy Fang mentioned before, the one who was trying to win Bua over.'

Thinking about it, Phinya took the opportunity to examine him more closely. He was, in fact, a very handsome man, with a respectable posture, probably because he was a professor, which gave him an appearance of authority.

His skin was fair, he was not much taller than Phinya, his eyes were small, and his hair was short and neat. His face almost always wore a smile.

"Phin, this is Professor Songwut,"

Bua said, introducing him.

"Professor, this is Doctor Phinya, The Vice principal."

"Nice to meet you,"

He replied to Phinya's greeting, who returned the gesture with a bow.

"Nice to meet you," He said briefly, before turning his attention to Bua.

"What are you holding?"

"Oh... it's a scarab beetle."

Bua said, lifting the wooden box in her hands before showing it to him.

"I just received it."

"It's very beautiful." He commented with a smile.

"Is it original?"

"Yes, it's authentic." Bua answered briefly.

"Would you happen to have time for lunch today, Bua?"

The question made Phinya, who had been silently listening to the conversation, turn her attention to him. And Bua, visibly nervous, glanced at Phinya quickly.

"Do you have something in mind?" Bua asked.

"I would like to talk about sending senior students to intern here. Do you think we could discuss it during lunch?"

"Um... Oh, uh..."

Bua scratched her head, somewhat embarrassed.

"I think the professor should talk to the teacher directly, because I really can't make that decision."

She gave the excuse, clearly trying to escape.

"You can talk to Phinya too. She's the one who takes care of this matter."

Hearing that, Phinya looked at her with an incredulous expression.

"Since when am I the one responsible for this?"

Phinya's gaze conveyed that exact question.

"Phin, can you take care of this?"

Bua asked, pulling Phinya's arm towards her.

"I need to see something over there."

She said before quickly disappearing, as if she had evaporated into thin air. Her ability to escape from situations was truly impressive, Phinya thought.

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"So this is the guy who tried to win you over?"

The question made Bua, who was sitting in her office drinking coffee, almost choke as she tried to swallow hurriedly. She had hidden there after having escaped the conversation with the professor moments before.

"Who?"

"Professor Songwut."

"Who said he tried to win me over?"

"It was Fang who said that day, that he was trying to win you over."

"Who would try to win me over?"

The owner of the room shake her head quickly in denial.

"No one."

"There's no point in raising your voice."

Phinya said, realizing the lie.

"I'm just asking."

"Who would want something with someone who just sleeps all the time like me?"

Bua replied as she picked up a cold toast with butter and took a bite to satisfy her hunger. There was still more than an hour until lunch, not to mention that she planned to let the guests finish their meals.

Eat before going downstairs, fearing that Professor Songwut would come and disturb her again.

"If you pay attention, you'll realize that there are people who want something from you,"

Phinya said casually, while Bua took a white rabbit pillow with a zipper, which turned into a blanket, from her work chair and placed it on the table, laying her head on it.

"You're sleeping in front of your boss, Dr. Busaya!"

Phinya teased her, pretending to scold her.

"And isn't it her fault that I didn't sleep? I'm just going to rest my eyes for a second."

Phinya, in turn, pulled up a chair on the other side of the table and just watched her friend in silence, as she usually did. When she saw that Bua seemed to be motionless, she raised her hand and began to fondly play with her colleague's disheveled hair.

Suddenly, Bua jumped up.

"What day is it?!"

Phinya recoiled, almost falling off her chair in shock.

"Today is the presentation of the progress report... Oh my God, I'm screwed!"

Bua said, turning to the computer, adjusting her glasses with her fingertips hurriedly before starting to type on the keyboard.

"It's today, isn't it? Today?"

She asked to confirm.

"Yes," Phinya replied.

"Why didn't you remind me of this yesterday?"

"You were sleeping."

"You do this every week and forget every week."

"I don't forget every week, I just forgot that today is Thursday."

"Haven't you ever been mad at yourself, Bualoy?"

"If I get angry, I sleep."

"Oh, sure."

"Oh my God, I'm screwed... I-I-I'm screwed!"

Bua seemed to pay no attention to Phinya's provocations and focused on the computer, searching through the documents to find the weekly progress report that needed to be delivered and presented at the afternoon meeting, every Thursday, so that the professors could monitor the progress of the research.

"And you, have you finished yours yet?"

"It's been a while." Replied the other doctor.

"Do it for me?"

"Again with this? As if I understand your research project? Why do you always try to use me? I'm the boss here, remember?"

"You complain about everything."

Bua muttered, still focused on the screen, while her fingers continued typing on the keyboard.

"If you're hungry, you can go have lunch, Phin."

"No, I'll wait."

Replied Phinya, taking the toast that Bua had left and taking a bite, before sitting down in silence to let her colleague work. Soon, she grabbed Bua's pillow and used it to take a nap. Thinking about it, it seemed like she was only there to take care of the girl she liked.

"Don't stare at me, I can't concentrate. Close your eyes."

Bua said in a sullen voice.

"How was your conversation with Professor Songwut?"

She asked, making conversation as she continued to type the report.

"Oh, it was nothing major, he just wants the fourth-year students to come and do an internship. Bualoy... He's interested in you, not me."

"But I don't like him, okay?"

Bua replied, making Phinya smile.

"You don't have to smile, it irritates me."

With those words, Phinya come closer, hugged Bua from behind and give her a big kiss on the cheek.

"Phin!"

Bua exclaimed, surprised by the sudden attack. She quickly rubbed her face where she had been kissed, embarrassed, and turned to find Phinya's lips still very close, who had not pulled away.

"And who do you like?"

"Phin, I have to work. I'm going to be late."

"Answer me first."

"I don't know!"

Bua shouted, pushing Phinya's face away.

"If I don't finish this report on time, you'll be sleeping in your room tonight."

She threatened. The threat made Phinya immediately release Bua and sit down, picking up her phone to look at it again.

"He's an expert on ethnic migration in this region."

Phinya commented after reading the resume for a moment.

"He's not a good fit for you."

"You don't know anything about migration at all. What you know is about sleeping in the same place."

"Oh, if you hadn't told me, I would never have known."

Bua replied, closing the computer screen.

"Let's... let's eat. I'm hungry... I can't work anymore, I can't concentrate."

And with that, the previous conversation was completely forgotten.

□□□□□

□Episode 29□

[Miss Bua, are you interested in selling that Scarab?]

Bua read the message over and over again that night, unsure of how to respond. Songwut must not have known that the Scarab was not her. She read it again in surprise before starting to type a reply.

“Is anyone interested to buy it?”

The man replied within moments, so excited that Bua could almost feel it through the message.

[I can find a buyer for you. It's authentic and very beautiful. The price is very good. Where did you get it, Bua?]

“From Phinya.”

[Really?]

He replied.

[Someone once asked me about the scarab, but I could never find it.]

“Oh yeah?”

Bua typed quickly on her phone.

“I don't know. I'm not really familiar with this kind of thing.”

She typed before hitting send.

‘Is this really a good price for this item?’

[How about we have dinner together, and I'll tell you.]

He offered through a message.

[I guarantee you'll be surprised,]

Bua could almost feel his confidence.

[Or if there's anything else you want to sell, let me know. That Habilis stuff is also interesting, if you have more.]

Bua began to feel a little strange about this man. She didn't know Songwut had a side business like this. People these days must have a hard time surviving with just one job. Bua wasn't sure how to respond, but deep down, she wondered if the scarab was really as valuable as it claimed.

However, if she agreed without telling Phinya, she was sure she would be furious. Her feelings for Phinya had gone far beyond just liking, Bua knew that very well.

But there was always a suspicion that held her back. Every time Bua wanted to express her feelings to Phinya, there was a part of her heart that held doubts, and she felt it was unfair if Phinya loved and distrusted her at the same time.

So, Bua is not concerned if Phinya wants to leave this unclear relationship. Even though she knows that when that day comes, she will still be heartbroken.

She tried to believe that Phinya was no longer a troublesome woman. And Phinya had tried to show her that. However, it was Bua herself who couldn't erase the lingering feelings.

Maybe because everything that happened between them changed so quickly, catching her off guard. Who would have thought that one night... Bua would end up sharing a bed with someone who once made her so angry?

Even though she knew deep down that Phinya wasn't a bad person, the more they went through, the more Phinya turned out to be the exact

opposite of what Bua thought. Phinya was a good friend, whether as a classmate, a coworker, or even a bedmate.

She was someone who always gave Bua advice and helped her whenever she needed it. She was someone Bua was willing to let into her room to hug her from behind. She was someone who made Bua very happy about her.

At this point, if Phinya approached her with a knife in her hand, Bua would probably let her stab her into her heart. These are the reasons that made her hesitate to accept the dinner invitation from Songwul, even though she didn't have any romantic feelings for her.

Instead, she was worried about the feelings of the person who was now standing in front of her.

“Why are you frowning while looking at your phone? What happened?”

Phinya, who had just finished taking a shower, asked as she came out of the bedroom, noticing the furrowed brows on Bua’s face.

"Phin. "

The person in question felt something unusual in Bua's tone, so she dropped her onto the sofa beside her.

"What's wrong, Bua?"

“Someone asked me out to dinner,”

Bua wasn’t sure why, but she felt that accepting Songwut’s invitation without telling Phinya was something she shouldn’t do, even if their relationship was nothing more than sharing a bed.

“Is that Songwut?”

Phinya, the assistant, asked knowingly before Bua nodded in agreement,

“I thought so.”

"What do you think I should do?"

Phinya just stared at her with an unreadable expression.

"Phin, don't just stay silent."

"What can I say?"

Phinya's tone was very curt before she stood up.

"Answer whatever you want, but don't tell me about it."

She then started to walk away, but Bua grabbed her arm and pulled her back to the sofa.

"Are you still jealous?"

Bua didn't get an answer because Phinya just sat there, her expression tense,

"Look at me, Phin."

When Phinya didn't answer, Bua put her hands on the sides of Phinya's face and gently turned her towards her.

"What kind of answer do you want?"

"Jealous or not?"

"Even if I wanted to be jealous, I don't have the right because you didn't give me that right,"

Phinya replied with a complaining tone in her voice,

"I don't dare to demand anything because I know I've done a lot to you in the past. So, I won't say anything."

"I've never seen you sulk before,"

Bua said with a gentle smile.

"You usually makes a fuss."

"I'm not sulking,"

Phinya argued.

"If I wanted to do something behind your back, I would have done it already,"

Bua said.

"You didn't have to do it behind my back. You did it right in front of me, didn't you?"

Replied Phinya, which made Bua laugh out loud.

"I ask for your permission."

"And if I don't allow it, will you still go?"

"I will go."

"Actually, I was planning to ask you to come along,"

Bua replied.

"Honestly, do you really think I'm the type of person who would do something like that?"

"Then why bother asking? I don't care what type you are,"

Phinya replied casually, shrugging before gently tapping her fingertips on Bua's hand that was on her right cheek.

"I like it like this."

"Phin..."

"I'm serious," Phinya said firmly.

"I know it may sound unreasonable or even weird that I feel this way about you. You can laugh at me all you want, Bua, but I'm going to wait here until you're ready to decide."

"Who will laugh at you?"

Asked Bua, who had just been told she was liked.

"I will try to stay in my own place and not disturb yours, wherever you put me."

"..."

"You let me take advantage of you, Phin."

"Why? I don't care,"

Phinya replied, indifferently.

"How lucky am I to know you?"

"Do you realize how adorable you are?"

Asked Bua smiling,

"I told you before... that from now on, you wouldn't be disappointed,"

Phinya said, sitting up a little straighter. Although she tried to maintain a serious expression, she couldn't help but smile when Bua laughed.

"I trust you, Phinya."

Maybe this was a good sign that Bua was starting to trust her a little more.

"So, what about the sociology guy?"

Phinya asked, her tone much lighter now.

"He asked me about the scarab,"

"Hmm?"

"So I wanted to talk to him, in case he knew something useful."

"Then why didn't you say so from the start?"

"Well, if I told you, I wouldn't see you acting all cute and pouty like this, would I?"

"You are so cunning, Ma'am! Just go then,"

Said the English doctor firmly.

"So you gave me permission, right?"

Bua asked, confirming.

"Yes, Bua,"

Phinya answered with a smile, she felt an indescribable happiness, feeling that Bua was starting to open up to her more. Of course, she knew she couldn't erase what she had done in the past, but she vowed not to make the same mistake again.

"Don't be so possessive,"

The physical anthropologist said as she began typing a message.

"No matter what happens, I can't let go of you."

"Maybe it's just mammalian territorial instinct. I can't help it."

"Don't make it up,"

Busaya replied.

"Territorial behavior is for group leaders. Do humans really have group leader behavior?"

"Maybe it's hidden in our ancestral DNA. Who knows?"

"You're good at finding excuses, huh? I don't think I'll ever be able to keep up with you,"

Busaya said with a smile.

"Sorry, Phinya, for taking advantage of you like this."

"Don't worry, sleepyhead,"

Phinya replied.

"Take a shower so you can sleep."

"If you're sleepy, go to bed first," Bua suggested.

"I still have to revise the research document for the professor to review tomorrow before sending it to Noon."

"So, you're really going to submit it for publication?"

Phinya asked, turning to Bua, who nodded.

"You're rushing things; it's only been five months since you graduated, and you already have a publication,"

"When I have time, I have to do it. I'm afraid I'll forget,"

The anthropologist explained,

"To be honest, I don't really care anymore. If it gets published, great; if not, that's fine too. It's strange how that ambition from back then has completely disappeared in just two years."

"Same here, me too," Phinya said with a laugh.

"I don't want fame or confession again. I'm tired... the fire is out."

"Don't let the professor hear you say that,"

The lab head advised.

"The professor is trying hard to send you here and there to groom you to be her successor."

"Don't push all that on me, Dr. Bua,"

Phinya replied in a fake serious tone pretend, clearly seeing the intent of the joke.

"The professor has always been close to you."

"Do you know why the professor likes to keep me close?"

Bua asked, Phinya shook her head in response,

"Because I'm a sleepyhead, Phinya. If the professor didn't force me, do you think I would have graduated in five years? I could have extended it to eight years, but who wants their students to take eight years to graduate? The professor would lose points in her evaluation of the graduate school."

Phinya stared at her in disbelief.

"Oh, come on," Phinya said.

"A person like you will graduate in five years, no matter what. You can sleep soundly and still finish."

"Yes, that's right," Busaya joked.

"Oh, well..."

Bua let out a deep sigh before lying down on Phinya's lap.

"I'm so lucky to have you with me. Thank you, Phinya,"

She said, closing her eyes. The person sitting there subconsciously began to stroke Bua's hair.

"Where do you think this mummy skull thing will end up?"

Bua suddenly asked with her eyes still closed.

"I don't know," Phinya replied.

"I don't even know how it all started, so I can't guess how this will end."

"Every day I wait for the police to call and tell me they have find the name of the unknown man,"

Bua said in a voice full of anxiety.

"Every time I prepare the clay to mold his face, I just pray that someone can tell me what happened, why he ended up in this condition. Although

sometimes, I don't even want to know the answer."

"We do what we can, Bua,"

The gentle voice of the person stroking her head said to convince her.

"I know,"

Replied the other,

"But I can't help but wonder... how our species could it be like this?"

"Sometimes knowing too much about the origins of something can be stressful..."

They ended with a bitter laugh.

"I think so too,"

Bua agreed.

"Prehistoric man's life depended solely on basic needs. But as the population grew, with better physical structures and bigger brains, many things developed, but it seems that our minds experienced decline. It's a good thing I won't live past a hundred because I don't want the Quran, luckily I won't live to see a hundred years because I don't want to see what happens to our species after this"

"You're so resigned to life," Phinya joked,

"Let's just be together for now."

That made Bua put the paper she was reading on her lap before looking at the other person, who was staring at her.

"Unbelievable, Phin. At least I'm glad I have you, otherwise my life would be a lot more boring."

"Do you have time to be bored, as a busy professional?"

Her assistant teased,

"How about I take you out this weekend?"

But Bua just shook her head.

"Let me sleep in my room," She said.

"But if you want to go somewhere, go ahead."

"No,"

Phinya replied,

"I want to be with you... that's all."

The simple statement made her listener smile.

"Have I ever told you that you're adorable, Phin?"

“You already told me, but you can say it again.”

"You're so cute, and you smell so good,"

Bua said as she moved over and hugged the person.

"I might copy your perfume."

"Really?" Phinya chuckled.

"By the way, please help identify the remaining victims tomorrow, Dr. Phin,"

Bua said as she rubbed her face against Phinya's shoulder.

“Naughty Bua, praise hariya for getting help.”

"Please, my adorable friend."

"Okay,"

Phinya agreed quickly, hearing a pleading tone she rarely heard.

"I'm not giving in to you, I just feel sorry for you."

"Doctor Phin is always so kind," Bua teased.

"Doctor Phin promised to be a good girl for Bua, remember?"

That made Bua pull away and stare at her intently.

"You have kept your promise very well, Phin,"

She said, with her gaze full of warmth.

□□□□□

□Episode 30□

"It's too bad Phinya couldn't join us,"

Bua said with a sigh.

"She must have can talk to you better than I can."

"Can you arrange a meeting with Dr. Phin for me?" Songwut asked.

"I'll ask her, but I don't think it will be a problem," Bua assured her.

"Good news... Professor Songwut is interested in you."

"Huh?"

That statement made the other person, who was sipping a golden yellow alcoholic drink from a white can in Busaya's room, look up after returning from a night of makari with Songwul.

"She's interested in you and asked me to set up a meeting for you,"

Bua repeated before sitting down and picking up another can of drink to open.

"Dr. Phin is always charming. without even saying a word, someone already asked her out to dinner,"

She teased, flashing a bright smile.

"Shut up, Bua!"

Phinya scolded, frowning at her.

"What? Did I say something wrong?"

"What did you say that made him ask me out?"

"I didn't say anything."

"Every time you raise your voice, it means something is going on."

"That's right,"

Bua quickly defended herself, her tone now high but normal.

"I only mentioned that you brought a lot of stuff from Mesit."

"Oh. Bus! This is it,"

The British female doctor exclaimed.

"It's always like this."

"What?"

"If you raise your voice one more time, I'll kiss you until it turn into a soft moan,"

She said, causing Bua to immediately raise her hand to cover her mouth.

"I just tweaked your profile a bit,"

A small voice said, her eyes still twinkling through her square-rimmed glasses.

"Like... she already picked a date because you looked good, I just made you sound better."

"He asked me out because he thought I had something to sell, Bua. And come to think of it, I don't really have anything to sell, which I don't. So what am I supposed to do?"

"As a Ph.D like you, shouldn't you be able to find something?"

"You're going to get me in trouble, Bualoy!"

The assistant exclaimed.

"And do you get any other information?"

"Nothing, just dinner."

"What! Then why did you go then?"

Shouted another.

"I let you have dinner with him for almost two hours, but you got nothing. In that case, I might as well ask you out. You're not interesting at all!"

"How could you say that?" Bua denied.

"Like you're very beautiful or something something like that."

"Don't talk about that."

"Yeah, don't,"

Bua said before the other person could glare at her.

"So, are you going or not?"

"Come with me. I'm curious to see how impressive the man who wooed you is."

"He might change his mind and come after you," Busaya suggested.

"Take it easy, Bua,"

She muttered the last part to herself.

"Don't act sweet, Bua."

"What did I say? I haven't even said anything yet," Another replied,

"Don't think you can get rid of me that easily," Phinya replied.

"Not at all,"

Busaya shook her head.

"I've never tried to get rid of anyone, but I don't hold anyone back either. If being together brings comfort, I won't stop you from staying."

The statement made the listener turn to look at her for a moment without saying anything.

"What? Why are you looking at me?" Bua asked.

"You said if I wanted to stay, I could stay."

"Whether you stay or go, I won't stop you," The other said calmly.

"In a situation like this, I don't want to take advantage of you, but I have to say, I don't want anyone else to take your place either."

That made Phinya smile widely before Bua leaned back on the couch and gently placed one hand on the side of the other's face.

"No matter what, I just want you to be happy, Phin."

"And how do you know I'm not happy?"

Phinya answered.

"If your presence here is about guilt for what you did to me, please stop thinking like that,"

Bua said.

"There may be feelings of guilt," Phinya said softly,

"But there are other reasons beyond that."

"Because you were staring at my back, or what?"

Bua asked, though her question held a hint of suspicion. She then laughed softly, indicating that she was just playing along.

"Your back should be protected for something other than getting beaten,"

Phinya replied.

"Thank you for everything. You almost made me forget about that Phinya."

"Don't remember that guy,"

Phinya from England immediately advised.

"It's not a big deal."

Bua interjected,

"Phinya made you who you are today."

"Bua."

"I'm serious,"

Bua said firmly.

"Although I wanted to slap Phinya in the face for involving me in a crime investigation, people may have times when they don't like someone in their lives."

"Did you know that I was jealous of you at that time, Bua?"

"Hmm... jealous of what?"

"Because the professor always calls you," Phinya explained.

"And before I left, the professor even handed over my research to you to continue."

"Probably not anymore, right?"

"Now, my feelings are different."

"Is it true?"

Phinya just nodded in response.

"I'll tell you when you're ready."

"Agreed. When I'm ready to listen, I'll tell you too," Bua said.

□□□□□

□Episode 31□

"I can find a buyer if Dr. Phin wants to sell it."

"Is that so?"

Phinya found herself sitting with Songwut. Beside her was Busaya, who was eating without paying attention to the conversation going on. In fact, Busaya didn't really understand antique trading.

Although she had heard a little about it, she didn't pay much attention to it because she had never considered entering this somewhat gray industry. Although some transactions might not be illegal, they might not be entirely right either, which she never wanted to do. Just dealing with her daily work was already giving her a headache.

She wasn't sure how Phinya felt about this matter. Although she said someone had invited her to join the industry, she had turned it down.

However, Phinya probably knew these people better than she did, since she spent more time in the lab, so it was better to let Phinya discuss this matter on her own. She was also unsure where this conversation was going since Phinya had no intention of selling anything in the first place.

Then again, the item in question belonged to their professor, and even if permission had been granted, it wouldn't be entirely appropriate to just sell it off. It was almost unbelievable that the mysterious skull had brought them to this point.

"Yes,"

The man answered calmly with a smile,

"I never knew there were people interested in this kind of thing here. In England, it will be another story."

"People aren't interested because it's rare," He explains.

"If you can find it, someone will pay for it."

Phinya nodded and glanced at the person next to her, who was eating in silence. What she had said about the previous dinner was not an exaggeration. Songwut continued to stare at the female assistant before continuing.

"Normally, the buyer's name is not disclosed. I will tell you the price they offer. If Dr. Phin is satisfied with the price, just let me know, and I will arrange a meeting to finalize the price, transfer the money, and ship the rod."

He outlined the process in detail.

"Don't buyers need to inspect the goods first?"

The female doctor asked understandingly.

"In my experience... well... there will be an inspection before completing the transaction."

"Is that so?"

He said, raising an eyebrow.

"I didn't expect Dr. Phin to know about this."

"Well, a little,"

Phinya nodded before realizing that Busaya had turned to look at her. She paused for a moment before turning away.

"Actually, it depends on the buyer,"

He replied, seeming more relaxed after hearing that Phinya had some experience in the black market.

"I thought there would be some checking before agreeing to the price."

"It depends on the wishes of both parties,"

Songwut replied.

"If Dr. Phin agrees to sell, I can find a buyer for you."

"Um,"

She said, looking at Busaya through her square glasses.

"Can I think about it and give you an answer later? The price is quite high."

"No problem," He said.

"Whenever you decide to sell, just let me know."

"What do you think we should do?"

Busaya asked Phinya as they stood in front of the mysterious mummified skull, which had just been carved, still featuring the upper left side of the face. Busaya was in no rush.

A two-dimensional model had been created and they were now waiting for information about the missing person, hoping that police might find a useful clue. However, there had been no updates that showed anything that could help identify the man. Everything seemed to have reached a dead end.

The charter company has been closed indefinitely. The retrieval of the black boxes did not provide much new information, other than confirming that two shots were heard before the plane lost contact about eight minutes later. This is consistent with previous assumptions that there was a gunfight on board the plane before the tragic event occurred.

Eleven of the fifteen deceased passengers were identified. No additional details about the identity or purpose of the anonymous skull were found, although the passenger list and destination suggest it was related to an auction or trade. The crucial questions, beyond the identity of the skull's owner, are who did this?

Why? And how the body was prepared? This field is not broad, especially the niche market of ancient Egyptian artifacts. So how could they track down such a rare individual. Although he is an anthropologist, his knowledge is limited compared to Songwut.

"I was thinking,"

Phinya answered flatly. The conversation with Songwut from two days ago was still fresh in her mind. She wasn't sure if continuing this investigation was worth the risk, but as an anthropologist, just leaving it alone without any action didn't seem right. Or maybe there will be more deaths.

The female doctor from England sighed with a worried expression while using a ruler to measure the length of the rib, which was incomplete due to the impact or explosion.

"It's a shame I just got back and don't know the area very well," Said Phinya with worry.

"We have tried our best."

Busaya, who is shaping clay to form the muscle structure on the left forehead of the mysterious skull, spoke up. After that, they didn't talk about anything anymore. Both of them were lost in their own thoughts and responsibilities.

Busaya occasionally glanced at Phinya, trying not to make her notice, she didn't like her friend's anxious expression and quiet and uncomplaining attitude. After living together for some time, she knew clearly that Phinya was under significant stress, as everything seemed to be at a dead end.

Although she invited to help identify the victims of the incident as experts, both were fully aware that their role was limited to that of consultants and did not include conducting an investigation.

For now, they could only wait to see if the police would be able to find any information about the unidentified man. They knew full well that the longer they waited, the worse the situation would become, potentially leading to more deaths.

The disturbing aspect is that both she and Phinya believe that the appearance of the skull in this mummified state indicates an unnatural death. This is the most pressing issue today.

Examination of the lower jaw bone, which was fractured, ruled out deformation due to damage from wrapping or transportation. The only remaining hypotheses were an explosion or impact, and most importantly, injuries before death.

The fracture, which ran from the top to the bottom of the jaw, was four centimeters long. If the damage was caused by an explosion or impact, it seemed too small. Therefore, Busaya leaned towards the theory that the individual was injured before he died. She knew Phinya was thinking along the same lines, which explained her worried expression.

Apart from the plane crash, it doesn't seem to be an accident or a disaster... Furthermore, the mysterious mummy skull may also be a case of murder.

The ringing of the telephone broke the silence and cold air in the laboratory. Phinya, who was close to the phone, answered the call. She saw the light on the fourth number button of the phone.

"Yes, it's Doctor Phinya speaking,"

She replied, causing Busaya, who was busy smoothing clay with a small spatula, to look up,

"Alright, we'll be on our way."

She then hung up.

"The professor is calling."

"Okay,"

Busaya answered, quickly taking off her gloves and throwing them in the trash. Within ten minutes, the two of them were in the office of the Director of the Biological Research Institute, who was observing them closely.

"Professor is still not used to seeing this,"

Associate Professor Nissara teased her two students.

"I think I have to call you two more often to get used to it."

This remark made the listeners sitting side by side, smile and glance at each other automatically.

"Why did you call us?"

"The retired professor is something that might be useful,"

The middle-aged woman said, leaning back in her office chair.

"But I'm not sure how much it will help you."

Her gaze remained fixed on her former PhD student intently.

"Professor Ramesh just got back. By the way, do you remember Professor Ramesh?"

"Yes, I remember you asked me to consult on a research project,"

Busaya replied.

"I called him earlier, but the university said Dr. Ramesh is still away on a field trip. Is he back now?"

"Yes,"

The director confirmed,

"He sent an email saying his publication was accepted. He is listed as the fourth author."

"Really? Congratulations, Professor,"

Busaya said with a smile.

"By the way, my work is done. I will send it back to you for review and then submit it for publication,"

"Okay, thank you," The director replied.

"And when will Busaya take on the role of co-advisor?" The director continued.

"We need to get the Associate Professor's approval."

"I'm not in a rush. If anyone needs it before me, go ahead,"

Busaya replied quickly before hearing Professor Nissara chuckle softly.

"Actually, just by Ph.D. is enough for me,"

"What about Phinya?"

The director turned to the person sitting next to Busaya,

"Me?" Asked Phinya.

"You said you had finished your raw data collection."

"Oh, yes, Professor,"

Phinya replied.

"I am currently entering the data into the program. The results will be ready by the end of this month."

"Okay, if you guys want to talk to Professor Ramesh about anything, please let me know,"

Said the director.

"Yes, Professor,"

Both of them answered almost simultaneously, which made their supervisor, who was sitting across from them, smile.

□□□□□

□Episode 32□

"Do you know Professor Ramesh?"

Phinya asked as the two walked for coffee during their lunch. break after finishing a meeting with their academic advisors.

"Yes, I know him. He once asked our professor to be one of his advisors for a research project and a member of his PhD defense committee. I even attended his defense."

Busaya replied, slowly sipping coffee from the paper cup.

"He also asked our professor to write him a letter of recommendation when he went to do some work in Zurich."

"Really?"

Phinya nodded thoughtfully.

"What's his profile like?"

"He's really great,"

Another replied, gently picking up a piece of bread with a toothpick and taking a bite.

"He's one of the few people who studies ancient civilizations in an archaeological context. His focus is on the Mesopotamian era, something like that. I tried calling him yesterday, but he hasn't returned."

"Do you think we should talk to him?"

"I don't think there's anything wrong with it. Plus, since the professor recommended it, maybe we should. But I don't think he's like Songwut, who's a bit suspicious."

The young researcher gave her opinion.

"Come to think of it, I'm not sure what his intentions were when he kept bothering me all that time."

"You're lucky you didn't get too involved with him."

"Of course, I didn't respond. He keeps texting, and it's annoying,"

She said, watching the person in front of her smirk,

"Don't you dare smile. That's annoying too."

"Oh, come on, Bua Loy. Are you always this upset?" Phinya scolded,

"I can't even smile?"

"Your face is so annoying," Busaya cut her off.

"I'll call and make an appointment with Professor Ramesh. He knows me, so it shouldn't be a problem."

Dr. Phinya walked down the hall to the office of Dr. Ramesh, a professor of archaeology at a university, who had been recommended by Professor Nissara.

She suggested that they consult him, as he was one of the few experts on ancient civilizations in Thailand. Beside him was Bua, who still looked half-asleep, her eyes tired behind her square glasses.

"Hurry up, ma'am. Are you awake?"

"Hey, your long legs,"

Another complained, trying to keep up.

"Can you take shorter steps?"

"Oh, it's you!"

"Go ahead,"

Bua continued, while the other woman frowned at her.

"Which room?"

"The second to last the hallway."

Phinya walked a little further towards the door, with Busaya following her closely. She glanced at Bua, who nodded before knocking on the door.

"Come in,"

Came the deep voice of a young man from inside, giving them permission to enter. As the door opened and they stepped inside, Bua could immediately feel his scientific presence. Behind his desk, where a blackboard was mounted, were pinned research papers on one side, showcasing scientific experimental methods.

On the other side, were photographs of ancient relics, including stone platforms, laterite, and various archaeological sites, with about twenty to thirty images mixed together.

"Hello, Professor Ramesh. Do you remember me?"

Both of them greeted him with a respectful wai, and Bua was the first to speak.

"Of course, I remember you,"

He replied and stood up to greet the two guests.

"Please sit down,"

He said, pointing to the long living room sofa.

"This is Dr. Phinya,"

Bua introduced, sitting down as invited, while the man walked to the coffee table in the far corner of the room to get two bottles of water and clear glasses for them.

"It's been a long time since we last met, Ma'am. How is Professor Nissara?"

He asked.

"She's fine. She said you should visit the institute if you have time," Bua replied with a smile.

"I will definitely go and pay my respects to her,"

He promised with a smile. Meanwhile, Phinya took the opportunity to observe him closely. The man was slightly taller than her, with pale skin that suggested mixed Chinese ancestry. He wore a light-colored shirt with black pants, neatly matched. He appeared to be in his early forties.

"What brings you here today? Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Okay..."

Busaya hesitated, looking at her partner, unsure where to start.

"We are here to seek your expertise," Phinya took the lead.

"I have just been given a task by Professor Nissara..." She began to explain.

"Our institute is interested in opening an exhibition on the civilizations that flourished during the historical period."

The young doctor continued, though she refrained from revealing the true purpose of their visit, as it was classified information related to an ongoing investigation.

"Where do you think we should start, Professor?"

"Is there a particular era that particularly interests you, Dr. Phinya?" He asked.

"I was thinking something from Asia or beyond, besides the part that would focus on our own country's heritage, that's for sure,"

She replied, glancing at Bua, who nodded in agreement.

"If we talk about this region, it is most likely a Chinese or Indian civilization,"

He suggested simply, knowing that both countries have a long history, spanning thousands of years. Not to mention, there are many hypotheses regarding migration and settlement from thousands of years ago.

"I'm not very knowledgeable in this area," Phinya admitted humbly.

"When I'm abroad, they're more interested in civilizations like Greece, Rome or Egypt. In fact, for exhibitions outside Asia, I am more inclined towards Egypt."

"Egypt is interesting,"

Ramesh agreed in his calm voice.

"I thought so too,"

The young doctor said with a smile.

"It's well known, and I'm sure it will attract a lot of attention. Professor Nissara mentioned that you're quite skilled, so we wanted to introduce ourselves. If we need further assistance in the future, we might have to bother you more often."

"Actually, I wasn't interested in this field at first," Ramesh admits.

"One of my close friends was fascinated by it, and I got dragged into it."

"Is that so?" Busaya replied.

"And was that when you went to Zurich to research ancient mummies?"

"Yes, that's right,"

He replied politely.

"How much interest is there in this civilization in our country?"

The assistant director began asking broader questions, trying not to get too specific about the case they were working on.

"It's a pretty niche group," He replied.

"Not very well known. Most people can't even name the Egyptian gods."

"That's true," Bua added with a laugh.

"Egyptian mythology makes me dizzy when I read it."

"Exactly!" Joked Ramesh.

"Professor Nissara has great foresight. I think these topics might attract more attention from anthropology, as she had hoped."

"We agree," They said.

"Then what about ancient artifacts from Egyptian civilization? How much interest is there in our country?"

Phinya took the opportunity to ask.

"Not much, as far as I know,"

Ramesh replied.

"It's actually quite niche. But it's there; we just don't know about it because it's a small, niche interest group. They're people who share the same beliefs."

"Are we talking about something like a cult?" Asked the lab leader.

"Not really," He replied.

"Not that big, Just a group of people with a common interest. At first, it was mostly importing amulets or statues to worship."

"Because these items are rare, their value has increased significantly, and anything that is valuable will naturally attract those who want to sell it for more,"

Ramesh explains.

"I've heard something like that,"

Said the young woman sitting next to Bua.

"What about the trade market in our country?"

"Our market is very small," He replied.

"There is some activity, but rare items can fetch exorbitant prices."

"Is there any replica production here?"

Phinya asked.

"You mean high-quality counterfeit goods?" He replied.

"Something like that."

"In our country, I'm not sure, but in other places, there definitely are," He replied.

"I heard from Professor Nissara that you went to observe the mummification process. Is that true?"

Busaya asked this time.

"Yes," He said.

"The research institute there recently allowed experiments on animal remains- specifically the mummification process."

"Animal experiments,"

Phinya repeated, and Ramesh just nodded.

"That's a pretty big step forward,"

He explains,

"Because getting ethical approval for animal Testing is not easy."

"That's true,"

The British-educated doctor agreed.

"I've seen a lot of protests against it."

"It will give us some insight into the wisdom of ancient civilizations," The professor added.

"And in our country,"

Phinya hesitated before asking,

"If we wanted to do something like that, is it possible, and where can it be done?"

"Mummification has long been a field of interest, and research into it continues,"

He explains.

"In ancient times, they used natural processes like soil, wind, and sunlight. But today, there is technology that can imitate nature quite well."

He then glances at his watch,

"Humans have always excelled at imitating nature."

The two women nodded in agreement. Ramesh stood up, walked over to his desk, and pulled a blue folder from the shelf. He handed it over to Bua, who opened it with great interest. It includes the mummification process he mentioned, but it was done on animal specimens, or rather, animal remains.

Bua saw pictures of monkeys and gibbons, with their dry skin clinging to their bones and their skin darkening. Monkeys, so closely related to humans, are often the first creatures scientists think of for experiments, along with rats and rabbits.

"That's what I wanted to observe,"

Ramesh explained as he sat back down, and Bua handed the folder to Phinya.

"They can actually do this in the lab," Bua comments.

"This is a research project that has just begun. There is a lot more to be done,"

Ramesh told them.

"This should answer your question about whether it is possible or not. However, in our country, it is not possible, in this field here will not pass the ethics review. Also, very few people are studying."

"Is this a UV machine?"

Bua, a physical anthropologist, asked with interest, pointing to a device that looked like a stainless steel cabinet, about two meters tall, with nearly twenty light tubes inside.

"Yes, it's a UVB and UVC machine," He confirmed.

"It mimics natural sunlight. They tested to see the different effects of UVA, UVB, and UVC, based on the hypothesis that sunlight is a key factor in the mummification process."

"Amazing,"

Bua said in awe. The three of them continued their conversation for a while longer before Bua and Phinya took their leave.

"They had already started experimenting on animals,"

Phinya said, sitting down in a chair, exhausted, setting her things down on the coffee table in front of the long sofa.

"I had heard about it, but the ethical issues were still a major hurdle at the time."

"The important thing is that it can really be done,"

The owner of the room said to Phinya who was lying in a half-sitting and half-lying position.

"I really feel that I am too narrow-minded in this area."

She said that as she sat down next to Phinya and handed her a bottle of water.

"Regardless of whether you believe it or not, it is true."

"I told you to come out and open your eyes a little. I always see you cooped up in the lab all day."

"It's a safe zone," She replied.

"Some people are afraid of bones or samples, so not many dare to bother me."

Phinya nodded in understanding at the reasons given.

"Not only did I have to drag you out of bed, I also had to drag you out of the lab,"

The female assistant grumbled,

"You're a very complicated person, Baibua."

"Humans are complicated,"

The person next to her protested.

"Doctor Busaya once said that"

That made Phinya sigh in mock annoyance at her friend's teasing.

"Like humans trying to make mummies and giving us all a headache-it's pretty complicated."

"It's not complicated; they're just trying not to act like humans,"

The female assistant replied simply this time with a laugh.

"Maybe they're trying to act like invertebrates."

"To have such a powerful ability and then use it on a fellow human like this-what a waste,"

Baibua said sarcastically.

"It's funny to think about, but I can't laugh."

After that, the conversation fell silent. Phinya shifted to take a sip from her water bottle, while Baibua slumped onto the couch, exhausted. She couldn't help but glance at her friend through her square-rimmed glasses, at least feeling that she wasn't alone in this madness.

"Has Songwut contacted you?"

Baibua asked after a moment of silence.

"I thought he might have contacted you instead."

"I haven't seen anything from him."

"I think he might know something, but he probably won't let it out easily."

"I don't know,"

Said the assistant director.

"Sometimes he seems like a commoner whose income is not enough to cover his extravagant spending he seems stingy;"

"So, what are you going to do with the scarab?"

The room's owner continued, taking off her glasses and rubbing her nose.

"I need to rest my eyes for a while."

After that, she lay down on Phinya's lap.

"I should probably just go with the flow. Is that what you mean?"

Phinya replied, gently stroking the head of the person lying down.

"Where do you think this river will end?"

"If we don't try, we won't know, right?"

"That's true,"

She sighed and closed her eyes.

"Hey, if you fall asleep here, I'm leaving you here, I'm not carrying you to the bedroom,"

Phinya scolded as Bua seemed to fall asleep immediately after closing her eyes.

"My back is going to hurt."

"You're not that old, why does your back hurt?"

"Because I have to carry you,"

She replied with a laugh,

"How can someone sleep anywhere, anytime? It's a hassle for me to carry you to bed, isn't it?"

"Just let me sleep,"

Busaya answered weakly.

"Sleeping on the floor is not good, Baibua."

"No problem, whatever."

"You are really good at creeping."

"I'm just practicing how to stay parallel to the Earth's surface."

This girl is always looking for an excuse, isn't she? If it was before, with her old prejudice, Phinya would probably be annoyed and frustrated by the endless back and forth. But now, all she could do was smile, amazed at how this woman seemed to have absorbed the entire library into her brain.

Every word that came out of his mouth was so well thought out, even though sometimes it made no sense at all. Simply put, you could call it... making it up.

"Are you going back to the Stone Age, you sleepyhead?"

Still, Phinya couldn't help but joke back. "I know why you don't have a boyfriend,"

Baibua suddenly blurted out.

"Because you nag too much."

"I was just nagging at you."

"Doctor Phin, you really have no charm."

"Okay, then don't fall in love with me, Bualoy."

"Just make sure you don't fall in love with me,"

That response earned Baibua a light pinch on her arm from the person sitting next to her.

"Oh, Phin!"

"Tonight, I will make sure you can't say a single word. Just you wait."

"Although it's not a good thing, I have to say that without this craziness, I wouldn't have known this version of Phinya."

Baibua's hand gently touched the side of the person's face, her eyes sparkling.

"And I wouldn't have had the chance to know how adorable this fiery Phinya is."

"Say who?"

Phinya stroked Baibua's head gently.

"Maybe you made me this Phinya, Baibua. I want to be the kind of person you can trust completely, knowing that I will never hurt you."

"Thank you, Phin,"

Busaya said before closing her eyes slowly.

"Thank you very much."

□□□□

□Episode 33□

"A client bid twenty-five million."

The assistant director's casual voice sounded as she approached Busaya, who was sitting reading a newly published academic research paper. In her right hand, she held a red pen for corrections.

"Why are you still correcting after sending it?"

Busaya looked up through her glasses at the visitor who had taken a seat at her table.

"Just checking to see if I missed anything," She replied.

"So, what do you say about the twenty-five million?"

"Your boyfriend found me a client who offered twenty-five million," Phinya repeated.

"Too cheap."

"Whose boyfriend?" Busaya asked sharply.

"Since when did I have a boyfriend? You're making this up,"

She muttered, before returning to her paperwork.

"All I got from your long speech is that you don't have a girlfriend,"

Phinya said, crossing her arms and looking down at her.

"So, you're saying you don't have a girlfriend?"

"As far as I know, no,"

Busaya replied with a stern expression, avoiding eye contact,

"Is that true... Bua?"

Phinya dragged out her words in a sarcastic tone.

"Then who is the woman who sleeping in your bed this morning without a single pakalari?"

"I don't know. I don't remember,"

She replied nonchalantly.

"Maybe she's from housekeeping?"

"Keep making excuses. You'll miss me when I'm gone," Phinya teased.

"So, we're not selling?"

Busaya got back to the point.

"Twenty-five million."

"It's not mine to sell. How could I sell it? You're just talking nonsense."

"Pretend you're going to sell it. People like that wouldn't talk if they didn't get any benefits."

"To be honest, I don't think we'll get much out of Songwut."

"With someone like you, you should have some tricks up your sleeve to get him to spill the beans. I mean, you've been in this industry before," Bua said.

"Seriously, I don't know the market price or anything, so I can't say much. But if you think the price is too low, why not try negotiating? In the end,

we'll decide whether to sell or not, and you probably won't sell anyway, right? Right?"

The English-educated doctor nodded slowly, then took his cell phone to reply to Songwut's message.

"Is there anything to do this morning?"

Phinya asked as she put away her phone, unsure whether what she did was the right thing.

"Afternoon,"

Busaya nodded toward the pile of bones on the examination table. There used to be a lot of bone fragments, but today, only a few remained, and some had been separated.

"Three more bodies," The lab director said.

"I'll finish this one, then move on to the next one. But if Dr. Phinya doesn't have anything to do this morning, I need your help..."

"Okay," Said Dr. Phinya.

"Did the police find anything new?"

"They're in the final stages of clearing the internal debris to clean up the site,"

Another person said.

"But they still haven't found the weapon at the scene. I wonder where it went when it exploded."

"It looks like the rental company is going to lose its license and close down for good forever."

"That's possible,"

Bua agreed, glancing at Phinya, who grabbed a pair of gloves from a box on the corner of the table and began to put them on.

"I'll handle it myself," Said the assistant director.

"You can go ahead and check the work and start modeling."

"Thank you,"

Bua said, looking at Phinya who responded with a smile before heading to the examination table to begin her work. Less than an hour later, the notification sound from Phinya's cellphone, which was placed on the cupboard not far from the autopsy bed, rang.

"Your boyfriend,"

Phinya teased, reading Songwut's message.

"He said someone else bid thirty million."

"He has a lot of clients,"

Busaya said, turning to look at her.

"Did he tell you who they are?"

"No," Phinya replied.

"But I'll try my way."

Hearing that, Bua rushed over.

"What did you reply to?"

She asked as she leaned forward to read the message on her phone.

"I'm just playing with human greed,"

Phinya replied, turning to the woman whose face was now so close that their noses were almost touching. She then teased the top of Bua's head teasingly.

"Phinya, someone will see,"

Bua warned while looking around nervously.

"Why? Since when do I care?"

Phinya's words made Bua wrinkle her nose in reaction.

"So what do you reply?"

"I said, if the client is willing, I will negotiate directly and raise the commission from four to six percent,"

Phinya said, ending with a wink.

"Depends on how greedy Songwut is."

"Otherwise, I'll raise it to eight."

"Quite generous, Dr. Phinya," Bua teased.

"I just want to end this mess that's been bothering me," Phinya explained.

"Then after that, you and I can talk about us. How about that?"

The seriousness in Phinya's tone made Busaya look at her through her glasses, and she slowly nodded in agreement. Maybe it was time to explain her allegation, because Bua herself felt uncomfortable, feeling that she might be taking advantage of Phinya. It was not fair to both of their feelings.

"Agreed,"

The young researcher replied in a steady voice.

"Once this mess is over, let's talk."

At this time, Dr. Phinya was sitting in a semi-bar restaurant in the capital at around 5 p.m. Beside her was Songwut, and across from them was a man in his late forties, watching her intently.

"Nice to meet you, Dr. Phinya,"

Phanuwat said in a soft voice, accompanied by a smile that didn't quite suit Phinya.

"I heard from Mr. Songwut that you're in the inner circle," He added vaguely,

"Yah."

Dr. Phinya hesitated, unsure how to respond to his comment.

"That's it. I just work in the field."

"Not making enough money every month?" He continued.

"So, you're looking for more?"

He chuckled softly after speaking. Phinya narrowed her eyes, becoming more cautious. She had guessed that this man was not an ordinary person from his tone and behavior, but she wasn't sure how far from ordinary he really was. Is he just a suspicious person, or is he truly corrupt?

People are like that, no one is completely clean. Everyone has a dark side in this cruel world. Even he himself once had a reputation as a criminal in his generation. But as time went by, things changed. As someone who studies human evolution, Phinya feels fortunate because her field of study has taught her many things, including the difference between being a *'person'* and being a *'human'*.

Being a person is easy, but being a real human is much harder. One of the main traits that humans have, which ordinary humans do not have, is the ability to distinguish between what is pleasant and what is true.

Humans tend to prefer what is fun over what is right. Phinya used to be someone who followed her desires. She often chose to do whatever would give her what she wanted, without thinking much about what was right.

Perseverance and patience were not her strong points. She was stubborn, quick-tempered, and unwilling to accept defeat. Her mouth often worked faster than her brain, speaking without considering how it would affect others. Looking back, Phinya now feels very grateful to Professor Nissara, who always believed in her.

And there was someone else too someone she was now trying to show, that she was no longer become the impulsive Phinya. Unfortunately, her past stubbornness came back to haunt her, negatively impacting her life now. Although Phinya is starting to choose to do what is right over what pleases her, and although her quick tongue remains, her brain is finally starting to catch up. Life experiences have taught her invaluable lessons.

One is how easy it is to follow others, especially when it comes to doing what feels right. The problem is that often, what most people think is right is actually the opposite, and life is full of these pitfalls. This has been the case throughout history and will likely continue to be the case in the future.

We can't expect everything to go our way. Life is not that simple. Humanity has experienced many hardships over the centuries, but we have survived by adapting to change. Sometimes, we have to learn to do what is right, even if it is not what we want, in order to survive.

"Sometimes, it's not all about money,"

The young doctor replied calmly, a small smile forming on her lips.

"Is that so?"

The man chuckled, leaning back in his chair. In front of them was only a glass of water, and they had not ordered any food.

"I don't see any other reason, what about you? If not for money, then what?"

"Well, if money was my priority, I wouldn't be sitting here right now,"

She replied.

"But I don't blame anyone who works for money because, for some people, it might be the only thing left in their life."

"Life is hard without money,"

Phanuwat commented with a smile.

"I'm not going to deny it," Phinya admitted.

"But for me, dedicating my whole life to living for that feels a bit demeaning. I think life should be more than that."

He simply responded with a laugh,

"So, about my offer of thirty million. is that a done deal? I'll pay cash."

"Other people offered me a little more," Phinya smiled,

"But I haven't agreed to them yet because I want to talk to you first. If we hit it off, maybe price won't be the first consideration."

"Oh, really?" Phanuwat replied.

"Then, I am starting to believe that money is not your top priority."

"I want to find a partner for a long-term business,"

Phinya explains.

"I just came back from overseas, so I want to get to know people in the industry. That way, when something comes my way, I'll know who the right buyer is."

"I understand,"

His interlocutor nodded.

"Don't hesitate to contact me directly if something came up."

After that, he adjusted his position, reached into his coat pocket, and took out a business card, then handed it to Phinya. She read the business card: Phanuwat Sapwiboon.

"Don't worry, Dr. Songwut, about the commission,"

She turned to the man who had introduced Phanuwat to her.

"I'll take care of it. And for sales In the future, I will contact you directly." Phinya added,

"However, this item, I may have to choose the buyer carefully. To be honest, the person who offered it is quite attached to it."

"If you change your mind and want me to take care of it, just let me know," Phanuwat said.

"With pleasure, Mr. Phanuwat," She replied politely.

"May I ask who bid the highest for this item?"

The question made Phinya purse her lips in thought. Perhaps, if she answered carefully, it might give her some useful information. She felt that Songwut was staring at her, waiting for her response.

"Actually, this person did not come through Dr. Songwut," She said hesitantly,

"But through a friend of mine."

Then, Phinya saw him nod in acknowledgement.

"Mr. Pipat Chalyakit, do you know about him?"

Phinya realized that the question made her audience shift slightly in their chairs, because the name she mentioned was related to Pipat Chaityakit, the younger brother of Pichai Chaityakit, a famous antique dealer who had recently died in a tragic plane crash.

In fact, Pichai was one of the first victims to be identified and returned, because his body was not badly damaged, which made the identification process faster. Phinya mentioned Pipat's name because he thought it was the most plausible lead.

The world of Egyptian antiquities trade is not so vast here. By then, Pipat had taken over the business, as Phinya found out by calling the shop located in a well-known department store.

"Is that so?"

He said after a moment's hesitation.

"I heard his brother just died."

"Really?"

The young woman feigned ignorance.

"I don't know."

"I know Mr Pichai a little,"

Songwut, who had been silent throughout the conversation, added, "But not Pipat because he tends to lower his prices quite a bit."

Songwut smiled sarcastically.

"It's tough competition,"

Joked the young doctor.

"More or less like that,"

Songwut replied with a big laugh:

"That's why I'm more dealing with Pichai. It's a shame his life ended so soon. Right before the plane crash, I was actually still talking to him."

"Is he on that plane?"

Phinya adjusted her tone and facial expression to feign surprise.

"Yes,"

The young professor replied calmly.

"So, was it really an accident?"

The young doctor asked, curious. Songwut. seemed like an insider, though he didn't reveal much.

"I only heard the news when I got back," Phinya added.

"That's what I hear from antique dealers," He said.

"But you know how these stories go, you have to take them with a grain of salt."

"Well,"

Phanuwat interrupted,

"Now that we know each other."

He stood up after speaking.

"Please feel free to contact me anytime after you have made your decision. It was a pleasure meeting you, Dr. Phinya."

"You're welcome."

Phinya just watched the man leave the restaurant before glancing at the business card he had given her, reading the name again, and then slipping it into her pocket.

"So, did Professor Songwut hear that the plane crash was really an accident?"

The young doctor continued the previous conversation after Phanuwat left the restaurant area, she saw the young man nod in acknowledgement.

"Yes,"

The young professor replied.

"I was shocked when I first heard the news," He continued,

"I had just been discussing ancient mummies with him. I remember very well that he told me that the exhibition in Paris, which he was going to visit before the accident, would feature ancient human remains with over a hundred guests in attendance. He even invited me to join him, but I have a seminar here. Otherwise..."

This matched the news she had heard from her friend in England. The young assistant, who had originally planned to leave, decided to order a few more dishes to extend his conversation with Songwut. Maybe he knew more valuable information.

"Who else is on the plane?"

She asked as she waited for the food she had just ordered.

"Most of the people were from Mr. Pichai's circle. I think he chartered the plane because he wanted to make huge profits from commission fees, but unfortunately, tragedy struck first. From what I heard, all the passengers were wealthy antique collectors. The antique dealer community has suffered significant losses this time."

"And what about the mummy he talked to you about? How far has that gone in the our country?"

Songwut, who had been watching her, turned his attention to the waiter as they brought out the food,

“I’m trying to stay informed since I haven’t been here much,”

Phinya said, taking the moment to prevent him from becoming suspicious with her detailed questions.

"Mr. Pichai is very involved in this, but with Pipat, I'm not so sure."

"Really?"

Songwut just nodded in response.

"I plan to meet with Mr. Pipat. Would you be interested in coming along?"

"I'd rather not go,"

She quickly declined.

"If I find anything, I'll let you know. And if I manage to close the deal with Mr. Pipat, I'll give you three percent as a commission for your efforts."

"That's completely unnecessary, Dr. Phinya," He replied.

"I don't really care about that. I am grateful that you agreed to help with the student internship situation."

"That is a separate issue, Professor Songwut," Phinya said.

"I do not mix both of these things or change them to conditions. If I find anything, I'll let you know."

"Okay, whatever you decide, Dr. Phinya," He replied.

□□□□

□Episode 34□

"What are you doing, Bai Bua?"

Phinya leaned forward before plopping herself down on the long sofa beside the room owner after returning from the restaurant. She saw Busaya's face full of wrinkles, her gaze fixed on the computer screen in front of her. She didn't even bother answering the previous question.

"Hmmm,"

Came the short reply, indicating that she had heard Phinya's question.

"Hmm' is not an answer,"

Phinya commented jokingly.

"What do you see?"

"I've been feeling strange since we went to see Professor Ramesh at the university that day, so I decided to dig up some information about him."

"What do you mean by 'anch'?"

"I wasn't sure,"

Bua replied vaguely.

"So I started looking into published research."

"And did you find anything?"

"Nothing,"

She replied flatly.

"So, what exactly feels strange to you?"

Phinya asked in confusion.

"I don't know."

"Come on! What are you talking about?"

Phinya exclaimed, confused by her friend's vague response.

"I think it's the guy who seems to know something about Songwut customs. He knows Pichai too,"

Phinya said.

"Pichai, the deceased Kortian?"

"Yes,"

The young doctor from England answered in a low tone.

"So, what do you think? What should we do next?"

"I don't know right now, I'm stuck," Bua admitted.

"It feels like we're getting somewhere but also nowhere at the same time."

A long sigh followed, and she leaned back on the couch.

"What do you think we should do? Help me think about it."

"We have two clients. One is the younger brother of the person who died in the plane crash with a pristine skull, and the other, we are still not sure who they are. There is also a broker who also knew the deceased,"

Busaya concluded as she pushed her glasses up her nose with the back of her hand.

"I've been thinking about it since I left the restaurant, trying to figure out which way we should go,"

Phinya said, her voice sounding tired.

"Our only advantage is that they probably don't know that we were the ones who identified the crash victims and that we know about the skull."

"We have to keep it a secret. If the people behind this know that we know, everything will immediately turn against us,"

Busaya advised.

"If things get too difficult, we might have to hand it over to the police."

Phinya heard Bua take a deep breath.

"Now, we know from Professor Ramesh that mummies can be recreated with tools that are readily available for purchase,"

Bua said, and Phinya nodded in agreement.

"The big question is: if we assume the skulls we found in the wreckage were made here, where were they made?"

"Not much space,"

Busaya nodded in agreement with the person sitting next to her.

"Did you find anything from what you saw?"

"Professor Ramesh? Not much. Just a long list of published research papers."

"Is that so?"

The young assistant replied.

"And is there anything to do with mummies? or ancient Egypt?"

"And what I see, nothing,"

The woman replied, still focused on her laptop.

"Most of his work is in social anthropology. Maybe he's just starting out in it and hasn't published anything yet."

"Then we probably won't get anything good out of it," Phinya observed.

"I think so too."

"By the way, I plan to check out Mr. Pipat's shop tomorrow."

"Let's go this afternoon. I'll come with you,"

Said Bua.

"Aren't you going back to your room to rest?"

"Who would let you go alone?"

"Are you worried about me?"

"No,"

Bua immediately denied.

"Who would worry about you? No way!"

"If you keep talking like that, I'll kiss you,"

Phinya teased, causing the woman to quickly cover her lips.

"Come on."

Phinya then tapped the tip of Bua's chin.

"We haven't kissed today."

"Isn't it okay not to kiss every day?"

Bua said, pushing Phinya's hand away.

"Go take a shower and brush your teeth first. Otherwise, I'll never think about doing it."

"Bai Bua..."

Phinya said the name quickly before hugging Bua from the side and resting her forehead on the researcher's shoulder.

"Come on, don't sleep in the room if you smell. I let you have dinner-with me a man today. Don't be stubborn."

"You're better anyway,"

Phinya's nose pressed against Bua's neck, making her flinch.

"I mean, having dinner with you,"

Phinya muttered.

"Go take a shower,"

Bua said as Phinya's lips caressed her neck. However, Phinya pulled her into a hug and started kissing her entire neck.

"Just a moment."

"Phinya!"

"I told you, if you keep talking like that, I'll kiss you,"

Phinya said, following through on her threat before Bua could react.

"You don't have to keep this promise every time,"

Bua said, a little breathless after Phinya pulled away,

"It's better to take a shower,"

Phinya said lightly before kissing Bua's cheek again, then stood up and happily ran to the bathroom.

"You crazy girl,"

Bua grumbled as she watched Phinya leave, though she couldn't help but smile at the deliciousness of the kiss.

Bua was standing in a large antique shop, much larger than two rooms, in the afternoon. She looked around with interest, realizing that she had never had the opportunity to visit such a place before. In fact, she had not been out much at all, except between her bedroom and the research building.

In the past few months, she had spent more time outside than she had in the past ten years. Such was the life of a researcher. You often saw more of the walls of your laboratory than the walls of your bedroom. Often, your bedroom and your laboratory were the same. It was a sad thing.

Fortunately, Bua had not chosen to pursue molecular biology like Fang, who sometimes fell asleep reading the results of her experiments at two or three in the morning. But if she had followed a more action-oriented path like Phinya, she probably would not have succeeded, she would have been overwhelmed.

However, she is proud and does her best in the role she has chosen to play herself. Bua stood looking at a large wooden frame, about two by two meters, with a gold numit design on sides she didn't recognize. The price tag stunned her. '650 thousand baht.'

Meanwhile, Phinya also walked around with great interest, even though she didn't recognize more than ninety percent of the items in the shop.

That's almost the entire annual gap.

That made sense, since he wasn't particularly interested in such things, even when people tried to lure him into the antiquities trade by suggesting that he could secretly sell valuables from museums or newly discovered sites.

This was a significant source of income in his anthropology career, and the numbers were substantial despite the ease of the work she might prefer a more challenging job.

However, someone like Dr. Phinya has more pride. Spending time nearly twenty years of study only to be involved in such trivial matters would feel like an insult to her intelligence and soul. Or, if she chooses to stay in England, it might be the biggest mistake of her life.

She glanced at the culture, which was studying a painting on the wall not too far away, and felt grateful for whatever had made her decide to come back here.

Bua glanced at the large craft store and felt grateful for whatever had made her decide to come here. What had started out as a quick visit to clear her mind now felt more meaningful. Phinya, sensing this new purpose, joined Bua beside her and whispered,

"Is there anything that interests you?"

Bua adjusted her glasses to get a better look at the price tags on the paintings she was examining.

"Honestly, I don't recognize any of these works," She admitted.

"How can I appreciate their value if I don't know what they are?"

"That's true," Phinya agreed.

"Knowing more about something can definitely increase its sentimental value."

"Why do you sound like you're drunk?" Bua teased Phinya.

"Maybe it's being around you. You have a way of making things seem weird."

Bua rolled her eyes.

"Hey!"

Phinya continued,

"Did you find anything interesting?"

"Interesting?"

Bua echoed with furrowed brows,

"Well..."

She looked around, still not seeing anything interesting,

"Not yet,"

"Hello!"

A man with slightly yellowish skin and a small build appeared from the back of the shop.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, I was on the phone."

Both Bua and Phinya immediately recognized him from the police case file. His face was similar with a brother who died in a plane crash. Bua and Phinya had seen the photos when Mr. Pichai's body was identified and returned to the police station. Mr. Pipat was dressed in black, probably mourning the death of his brother.

"Hello,"

Phinya greeted him, nothing whether Pipat recognized her from the phone call she had made to ask about the shop a few days ago.

Whether Pipat recognizes it or not, Phinya plans to play her part to reveals whether Pipat knows something suspicious about the mysterious mummy skull that has been bothering her. However, the appearance of this shop does not indicate any direct connection to ancient Egyptian artifacts.

"Is there anything specific you're looking for?"

Pipat asked politely, as any good shopkeeper should.

"I just found this place interesting and wanted to check it out," Phinya explained.

"We were... looking for something to decorate the room with."

"Our shop has a lot of choices,"

Said Pipat.

"We have lamps, photo frames, vases, and antique tableware, mostly from Europe. Like, this lamp,"

He said, pointing to a tall inverted glass lamp with four transparent globes, each containing a ball the lamp, which hung slightly above Bua's head.

"This is from Austria, made in 1970."

Bua was captivated by the object she saw. It was a metal amulet in the shape of the Eye of Horus, known in Egyptian mythology as a powerful protective talisman. She had heard of it before, but had never seen it in person.

"That thing over there,"

She said, pointing to the amulet in the glass case.

"I feel a connection with it, even though I'm not very familiar with such things."

Phinya, who played along, added,

"I don't really know much about these things either. Is there anything else that can be seen?"

Pipat explained that such items were rare and only available occasionally, then took a file from behind the cashier's desk, which turned out to be an album documenting items previously sold in the store, including their origins and prices.

As Pipat leafed through the album, he detailed the history of the various objects. Bua and Phinya listened attentively. Although the visit was casual, they noticed that Pipat seemed open and honest, providing thorough information about each object.

Bua browsed through the album until she saw a particular photo. She called Phinya by name slowly pointing to a picture of a man holding a carved wooden frame.

"Phinya,"

Bua said with a slight tremor in her voice,

"Look at this, do you recognize this man?"

Phinya squinted at the photo, trying to remember where she had seen that face before. After a moment, she nodded with a hint of recognition.

"I really like this frame,"

Bua said, trying to control her nervousness.

"Do you have a similar one?"

"There is a similar one behind,"

Replied Pipat.

"I will get it for you."

As Pipat disappeared into the back room, Bua's mind raced. The man in the photo might have connections or information relevant to their investigation,

"This man," Phinya stammered,

"Tell me if I'm wrong."

"How could it be wrong? I am the one who created his face and it is currently doing his face,"

She replied. He is the nameless man, the mysterious skull! His picture is here. Phinya immediately grabbed her phone and took a picture with her shaking hands. Shortly afterward, Pipat came out carrying a frame and started talking about his background, but neither of them were concentrating enough to listen at the moment.

"Actually, I really like this piece,"

Phinya said, pointing to a photo of a man holding a frame.

"Can you contact this person for me? I want to negotiate with him in case he wants to sell it."

"I'll check it for you,"

The man said politely,

"And I'll take that eye of Horus too,"

Said the female assistant, barely bargaining to buy Pipat's trust.

"If you find anything, please call me back."

Bua then asked for a paper to write down her phone number. The two of them rushed back to Bua's condominium. Although they were sure that the man seen in the picture at Pipat's shop was the nameless man, the mysterious skull, they need to confirm it again by comparing it in a facial recognition program.

Bua immediately told Phinya to send the photo to her and then started what she wanted to do. The two didn't talk much after returning because they were still in shock and waiting for the results of the comparison.

"The verification results match ninety-one percent,"

Bua said after about two hours, still glued to the computer screen, with a tense expression.

"I thought so."

"You managed to create a perfect two-dimensional model," Phinya praised.

"So, what should we do next?"

"Now that we know he is involved in the antiques trade, we need to find out who he is. Let's just wait for Mr Pipat to contact us again with any information he may have,"

Phinya said.

"You seem confident we'll find something."

"Transactions like this usually involve storing some customer information," Phinya explained.

"If there is a further transaction or if the buyer wants to resell it. As I told him in the store, the store will receive a commission."

Bua nodded in understanding.

"And what about the amulet we bought?"

She asked, nodding at the amulet.

"Actually, the amulet was intended for this institution," The person who bought it replied.

"It's a new item, not too old, maybe less than fifty years old."

"Oh,"

Bua exclaimed.

"How can you tell which is new and which is old?"

"Stains, watermarks, signs of use, corrosion, and wear and tear over time," Phinya replied.

"This one has almost none of that. There's barely any rust; it's not even five years old."

"The land is empty."

"I have absolutely no idea."

"Well, I like looking at skulls,"

Replied another.

"So many bones fused together, with additional bones growing in to house the brain and accommodate the five senses. It evolved over millions of years. Isn't that amazing? Not to mention the various foramina through which the skull passes. Amazing."

"That's because you were too focused on studying the chimpanzee skull."

"The more I think about how we evolved and adapted to survive over millions of years to end up in the world we have today, the sadder it seems,"

Said the young female physical anthropologist, with a smug air.

"Crazy woman!"

"Why wasn't I an extinct species before?"

"Well, that would take us a long time to meet,"

Phinya replied, making the previous person. The talkative one hesitated upon hearing that and looked at Phinya through her small glasses.

"Why? Did I say something wrong?"

Phinya asked, noticing Bua's sudden change in expression, which left Bua momentarily at a loss for words.

"No."

"Then why stare?"

"What's wrong with me looking at you? Is there a problem?"

"Are you looking for trouble or something? Have you lost your mind from being too sleep a lot?"

Bua, who was about to argue, was interrupted by Phinya's phone ringing next to her computer.

"Pipat called. You just keep quiet, we'll argue later."

Then the young Doctor answered the phone.

□□□□□

□Episode 35□

"Okay... can I have his name and phone number? Just in case I try to contact him."

Busaya noticed the person talking on the phone, quickly took a pen and paper and wrote something.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Pipat. I will visit your shop again soon. Goodbye."

Phinya then hung up the phone, walked over, and sat on the sofa with a sigh.

"How?"

"He can't reach him. The number I was given is no longer active,"

The British doctor replied.

"Of course it's not active, he's gone, If we could reach him, we'd have a bigger problem."

"I heard you ask his name."

Phinya handed the paper in her hand to Bua, who took it and read it.

"Wisrut Amornwat."

"Try looking for him."

Bua quickly typed her full name in the search bar and hit enter.

"Oh no..."

Bua exclaimed after waiting for four or five seconds, then moving her mouse to click on first website that came up.

"He's an archaeologist. This information is from two years ago."

"And why did an archaeologist's bones turn up in a plane crash?"

"I don't know,"

The speaker shook her head, then scanned the webpage for more information.

"Care to guess what the field is?"

"Ancient Egypt."

"Yes... he went to the location in Cairo about five or six years ago."

"The police have no information. He disappeared, and there was no missing person report. Don't you think that's strange?"

"That's strange,"

Bua replied immediately.

"Someone's missing."

"Unless no one knows he's missing."

"Maybe he doesn't have any family, or he's not in touch with them at all?"

Busaya speculated, still staring at the computer screen.

"That's possible," Phinya replied.

"At least now we know his name."

"I'll do some more searching to see if I can find anything else on the internet,"

She said, picking up her phone to gather more information.

"I'll also send her name to the police. They might be able to find a lead quicker."

"Agreed. In the meantime, I'll start washing clothes."

"Go ahead, Dr. Phin,"

Bua teased,

"This room is practically yours now."

"Or would you rather come to my place? That can be arranged,"

Phin said as she stood up.

"Do you often invite people into your room like this?" Bua asked jokingly.

"You talk as if you've never been there,"

The British doctor replied, moving closer.

"If I told you, you were the first, would you believe me?"

She leaned in, gently placing her fingertips on Bua's chin, so close that their breaths were mingled.

"I want you to be the first and the only one."

"Stop saying things like that,"

Busaya replied, her face slightly red as she avoided eye contact,

"If you want to wash, go."

"How about your laundry?"

"I'll take care of my laundry later."

"I want to help, just put it in the washing machine."

"Phin, you're going to spoil me,"

Bua said, turning to give her a narrowed look.

"It doesn't matter, I want you close to me,"

Phin said as she turned around, humming the song she often used to tease Bua as she walked into the room,

"You'll miss me when I'm gone..."

Bua glared at her, but there was a hidden smile in her eyes.

"Bua,"

The owner of the name, who was busy cleaning chimpanzee bones for the exhibition, looked up. Fang came in, looking like she hadn't slept all night.

"Where's Phin?"

"How should I know?"

Bua replied, looking back at the bones in front of her.

"Maybe she's teaching?"

"Does Phin have class this morning?" Fang pressed.

"Why are you asking me? Ask Ann, she has the schedule."

"I thought you would know."

"And why do I know?"

"Because you two are always together,"

Fang crossed her arms and stared at her.

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, it's often suspicious," Fang added,

"Suspicious for two people who shouldn't like each other,"

"There's nothing like that anymore. Don't worry,"

Bua said, somewhat unconvincingly.

"When did you two reconcile?"

Fang asked, but the lab chief only sighed and didn't elaborate.

"It's been quite a while,"

Bua replied. "Bua,"

Fang's tone turned more serious.

"Is there something you want to tell me?"

"What do you mean by something?"

"I won't force you because I respect your privacy," Fang continued.

"But if there's anything, you know you can tell me, right?"

"Actually, there is..."

Bua hesitated. Since Fang was her best friend, she felt she had to tell her what happened between her and Phinya. After all, Phinya was also someone Fang had known for a long time. Moreover, Fang had always been the peacemaker between the two since their school days.

"I'm listening."

"Well, Phin and I..."

Bua stuttered, unsure of how to begin.

"Are you guys fighting again?"

"Do you think Phinya can be trusted?"

Bua asked uncomfortably. It was the only question on her mind, and she wasn't sure she knew the answer,

"Why? What is Phin doing?"

"Nothing,"

Bua answered quickly.

"I just..."

She trailed off, not entirely sure what she wanted to ask.

"You feel like you can't trust her?"

Fang asked, and Bua nodded.

"Why?"

"I've tried to push this feeling away,"

Bua said, her voice sounding distant.

"I don't want to keep it, but I can't let it go."

"Why do you want to let her go?"

Fang asked as she pulled out a tall stainless steel chair and sat down, signaling that she was ready to listen.

"I don't want to feel awkward around Phin," Bua said hesitantly.

"Phin isn't the same as before, anyway, I feel like it's unfair to her if I keep feeling this way when she hasn't done anything wrong."

"Hmm..."

Fang hummed softly in response, now understanding why Bua didn't want anyone to know that she and Phinya were getting closer. Bua wasn't sure about her own feelings. Fang thought carefully about how to respond. The two had been at odds for years, with things getting worse to the point where Bua was almost expelled. Repairing Bua's lack of trust in Phinya would take time.

"You need to understand that this is normal,"

Fang finally said in a calm tone after a moment of silence.

"Don't deny it or push it away. It's normal to feel this way after everything Phin did to you."

"But, I don't want to feel this way anymore."

"Why not?"

Fang asked, even though she knew the story better than anyone.

"Besides, you don't like Phin. You're just working together, so why bother caring about her feelings... unless there's something more?"

The question made Bua pause for a moment before she looked into her friend's eyes, who was patiently waiting for an answer.

"There is,"

Bua admitted in a small voice, avoiding eye contact.

"There is something more."

"What's wrong?"

Fang pushed gently, but Bua remained silent again.

"If you don't tell me what's going on, I can't help you."

"Phin and I... well, it's complicated between us, I don't even know how to put it into words,"

Bua confessed, struggling to explain the unclear relationship.

"It's more than just friends"

"Just admitting it is a good start," Fang smiled.

"Now you realize, right?"

"We've been friends for almost ten years, Fang, and yes even with a glance, I can tell," Bua replied,

"What should I do?"

"If you like or love someone, just do it,"

Fang said, placing a reassuring hand on Bua's shoulder.

"You can trust that I will support you. If Phin does something wrong, I will be the first to confront her, okay?"

"Honestly, I was scared, Fang," Bua admitted.

"I was scared of being betrayed. I was scared that Phin would do what she did before. In the past, even though we didn't get along, I never thought she would mess things up so badly that I could barely stand it. When I received the ethics violation report, it felt like everything I had worked for was ruined. My life was almost ruined. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep for months. I was scared of being expelled."

"Do you like Phin?"

Fang asked directly.

"At this point, it's probably more than just liking it."

"Then you have to choose,"

Fang said thoughtfully.

"You can love her completely or let her go. You have to consider it carefully."

"I feel like... the more I fell for her, the more paranoid I become."

"You'll be fine, trust me. Trust yourself, Bua,"

Fang encouraged her.

"You passed the ethics committee investigation with flying colors. If you can survive, this should be easy. Give love a try. If it doesn't work out, at least you won't be left wondering."

"I feel pathetic," Bua said softly.

"It shouldn't be like this. When I don't trust her, I feel like I'm being unfair to Phin. I gave her every chance to leave, but she stayed."

"Then you should be able to guess why Phin is still here, right?" Bua's friend asked.

"The past and the present are no longer the same, and I'm sure someone like Phin would never hurt someone she loves. Don't let the past hurt the present, my friend,"

"Is that what you think?"

"Let's just wait,"

Another replied.

"Is Phin still acts like her old self? I swear I'll form a team to scold her. Agreed?"

Fang said half-jokingly.

"Yes thank you."

"Why did this happen?"

Bua's friend suddenly said.

"You ask like that, how should I answer?"

"Back then, you two were almost strangling each other. When I just stood still, someone would come and call me to separate you two."

"That was then, not like now."

"Exactly,"

Fang agreed,

"You said yourself that Phin is not the same person anymore."

Bua just nodded in agreement with those words.

"How did you do it?"

The woman lowered her voice to a whisper.

"No kidding, taking down your old rival like that."

"Fang!"

"Just kidding,"

Fang said with a hearty laugh.

"Next time, if something happens, just talk to each other, and you can quickly find a way to fix it. See? Because you two never talked, everything was messed up for years. When you finally started to feel like you were getting along, you became suspicious again. Now, if something happens, just talk it out and resolve everything so you can move forward with peace of mind."

"Phin has apologized to me," Bua said.

"But I am the one who still can't get over my own mistrust."

"Give yourself some time, Bua. I think Phin can wait,"

Bua's close friend said.

"And don't throw a tantrum at her too much,"

Fang added, stepping over to pat Bua's shoulders lightly as Phinya walked through the door.

"Phin's here,"

Fang said, glancing over before patting her friend's shoulder gently.

"Let me borrow her for a moment,"

Fang turned to Phinya.

"Phin, can I have your autograph?"

Although still confused by what she had just witnessed, Phinya nodded and took the paper to read.

"The professor is in her office, my friend,"

Phinya lowered her head before signing her name on the paper.

"No. If she sees me, she will ask for the task again. It is easier to ask for your signature,"

Fang explained.

"Thank you."

The person took the paper back, thanked Phin, then glanced at Bua, nodding before walking away. Bua moved to the other side and stood quietly leaning against a large pillar. Soon after, someone followed her.

"Is something wrong?"

Phinya, who stopped in front of Bua, asked,

"What's wrong? Why do you look like you're about to cry?"

"No,"

The person denied with a slightly trembling voice before looking at Phin.

"What's wrong? Did someone do something to you?"

The person in front of her just shook her head.

"You seem fine this morning. Did I do something to upset you?"

"No."

Then, Bua moved closer to hug her, her voice starting to shake.

"I'm sorry for taking advantage of you like this,"

Bua said into the man's shoulder.

"The better you treat me, the worse I feel."

"We've talked about this, haven't we, Bua?"

Phinya raised one hand to gently stroke Bua's hair.

"No matter how much you push me, I won't leave until you sort yourself out and are sure of your decision. At that point, even if I'm not your final answer, I won't be hurt. Do you understand?"

"Mhm."

"And you sure know how to pick a place to talk-in a lab full of chimpanzee skeletons smiling at us."

Phinya slowly stepped away, taking off Bua's glasses and tucking them into her own collar. Then, she cupped Bua's face in both hands to wipe away her tears.

"Enough. Stop being stubborn. Where is that slippery, never-give-up Bua? Bring her back, I need to talk to her."

"Okay,"

Bua quickly wiped her own tears, while Phinya brushed aside a strand of hair that had fallen from her forehead.

"Feeling better now!"

Bua took a deep breath, and Phinya pulled her glasses from her collar and put them back on Bua's face.

"What's wrong? Why are you here?"

"Your boyfriend called me."

"You said you had something to talk about, but you still tease me,"

Bua said, her tone annoyed.

"I can't help it. He's still stuck with you,"

Phinya explained, unable to resist a quip from Songwut, remembering how he had tried to woo Bua in the past.

"If you liked him back then, I would have been out of luck."

"But now, you sleep in the same bed as me every night, in case you forgot,"

Bua retorted irritably.

"Now, let's get to the point."

"Songwut called, saying that Mr. Phanuwat wanted to invite me to check his warehouse."

"Warehouse?"

Bua repeated, narrowing her eyes.

"That sounds fishy."

"Wait, I'm not done yet," Phinya continued.

"While we were talking, Songwut said that Mr. Phanuwat also knows Mr. Pichai."

"This industry is small," Said Bua, the lab head.

"What do you think?"

"I don't think we have much choice."

"I'll come with you."

"No."

"Phin."

"I'm serious, Bua?"

"But you can't go alone."

"Who said... I'm inviting Songwut," Phinya said.

"Who's going alone?"

"Can we trust that guy?" Bua asked with a sigh.

"I don't like this situation. It feels like we're getting closer to the truth but also taking a bigger risk."

"We still have the upper hand,"

The assistant commented.

"Because no one knows we know the skull."

"I hope you're right,"

Bua said absently, lowering her head and sighing anxiously again. Seeing this, Phinya walked over and put both her hands on Bua's shoulders.

"Are you okay, Bua?"

"Trying to be okay."

"I have to attend the student seminar rehearsal,"

Phinya said as she stepped closer and kissed Bua's forehead quickly.

"We'll be fine,"

She said before walking away.

"Thank you, Phin,"

Bua whispered, her voice slightly choked with emotion as she watched Phinya leave the lab.

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□Episode 36□

"It's truly amazing,"

Phinya commented, looking around the expansive area on the fourth floor of a building not too far from the city center, Surrounded by towering skyscrapers, the building looked ordinary from the outside, but inside it was filled with ancient artifacts from all over the place. Some were probably legitimately acquired, others not so much.

"Is there anything that catches your attention?" Phanuwat asked.

"Um."

Dr. Phinya hesitated, looking at Songwut, who wore a curious expression. He was standing not far from her, examining an oil painting that Phinya didn't recognize.

"Let me take a look around for a moment."

"Go ahead,"

He replied before joining Songwut. Phinya wandered around quietly, unsure of what she might gain from this visit. It seemed Phanuwat intended to entice her with these artifacts. In addition to the sarcophagus she was interested in, she heard Songwut hint that Phanuwat might want her as a broker or contact for international transactions and hoped Phirnya could help verify the items.

One shot, many birds caught. Phanuwat had taken him to see many of these items to persuade her, showing her the potential profits she could make from these transactions. But in reality, Phinya is not rigid; instead, she often

adapts to the situation. Although she is sometimes fussy, she has compromised with Bua to some extent.

Phinya picked up her phone to immediately text Bua about her location. At least that way, Bua wouldn't complain about not being allowed to come along. The relationship between her and Bua was almost like a couple, even though Bua was too stubborn to admit it. But since Phinya had said she would wait, she had to keep her promise.

She continued wandering, alternating between texting Bua and exploring, until she reached the farthest corner of the building. There, she looked up and saw something she didn't expect. Phinya was stunned by the sight before her.

A mummified human body, displayed in a clear glass case, lies horizontally on a table like a sarcophagus. Its skin, now brownish black and dry, clings to its bones. There is no wrapping, leaving every part of the body visible.

Phinya stood there, examining the mummified body with a strange feeling—similar to when she found the mysterious skull at the plane crash site. Her heart was pounding with a certain anxiety.

The longer she looked, the more her worry grew. The mummified body on display had dry skin similar to what Phinya had seen at the crash site, though darker and more intact. If her suspicions were correct, then there was more in the mummified body than just the mysterious skull.

She examined the intact dark brown skull, noting that it had not undergone significant aging, as there were no cracks or damage.

She scanned the pelvis to estimate gender, and it was clear from the skull features such as the prominent forehead, brow ridges, depth of the eye sockets, shape of the nasal cavity, and jawline that this person was male.

Furthermore, the general shape of the skull and bone structure suggest this person was most likely of Southeast Asian or Mongoloid descent. One of the striking features is the healed fracture of the left tibia.

"Interested in this?"

Phanuwat asked, stopping beside her. Phinya, trying to control her nervousness, put away her phone and hid her shaking hands in her black pants.

"Where did you get this?"

She asked, her voice shaking slightly.

"It was given to me,"

He replied casually,

"They said it was a replica."

"Replica?"

The word made Phinya turn to look at him.

"Yes,"

Phanuwat confirmed.

"It's a model made to resemble the real thing, meant to be displayed in a museum. The person who brought it to me said it was thrown away, so he brought it here to see if anyone was interested. It's basically just a replica for display purposes. I don't know if it's a good replica because I've never seen the real thing,"

Phinya looked at the body again.

"And I'm not going to sell it, I'm just keeping it because it was a gift from a client."

"Who owns it?"

Phinya asked excitedly.

"He's the one who bought from me a few times and then left it here. I kept it because it was in good condition and I wanted to maintain a good relationship with my clients,"

Phanuwat explained in a soft tone, causing Phinya to observe his indifferent expression.

"Mr. Phanuwat, may I make a suggestion with good intentions?"

"Please,"

He replied, Phinya did not answer immediately, but turned to the young man standing not far away and called out.

"Professor Songwut, can you come here for a moment?"

Not long after, the person she called joined them.

"What's wrong?"

Songwut asked, following Phinya's movements.

"This mummified body,"

Phinya said.

"Can you tell if it's a replica, Professor?"

Phinya asked, watching Songwut frown and shake his head.

"I don't know, I've never seen the original or any replica,"

He replied. "Okay,"

She said, turning to Phanuwat.

"I think you should call the police."

"Police?"

Phanuwat repeated, looking at Songwut, who was now examining the mummified body more closely.

"Doctor Phinya, don't tell me..."

Songwut began to understand Phinya's nod.

"Oh no," He cried.

"Mr. Phanuwat, call the police immediately."

He turned to Phanuwat, who still looked confused.

"I don't think this is a replica."

"The police are currently questioning Mr. Phanuwat,"

Phinya told the person sitting across from her.

"The police moved the body from the warehouse to the research institute, and they have asked the institute to take over the case. I have promised to handle it personally."

"This is a disaster, our worst fears have come true."

"It seemed like Mr. Phanuwat was completely unaware of what was going on, if he did, he wouldn't have shown it to me,"

The British researcher said.

"I asked him repeatedly, and he insisted that he thought it was a replica."

"Why does everyone seem to be clueless?"

The physical anthropology researcher said.

"Professor Songwut seems clueless too, and now we have found more bodies."

"Exactly," Phinya agreed.

"We are getting more information, but it is getting more and more unclear. Now we are not sure what's looking for. The police have not found anything either. Even though I gave them Wisarut's name, they could not find his relatives. What happened?"

"But I'm sure the person who left the body with Mr. Phanuwat knows something,"

The assistant director commented.

"The problem is we don't know who that person is. Mr. Phanuwat said he tried to contact him but couldn't reach him."

"When will the body arrive?" Bua asked.

"Maybe within the week,"

Answered another woman in the room,

"We need to wait for officers to collect initial evidence first."

"Okay, I need to get ready. I haven't had any time off from work lately,"

She said, her voice trailing off.

"I really want a real hologram."

"I will get money to buy it."

"Really?"

Her eyes lit up for a moment.

"Dr. Phinya is really kind..."

"Don't expect too much. I just want a new toy that keeps going up in price,"

Phinya said, noticing the comment. She then adjusted her tone to be more formal.

"Based on my initial assessment, this person is likely a Mongoloid male. The structure of the skull and pelvic bones suggests so. There is also evidence of a healed fracture on the left tibia, indicating the injury occurred before death due to the healing process."

"There are no obvious signs of cause of death, right?" Bua asked.

"I didn't see it," She replied.

"Did you take the initial photo?"

Bua asked.

"Just in case there are any broken bones or damage during the transfer."

"Yes, okay... I'll print them."

Phinya then focused on the computer to print the photos. Soon, more than thirty color photos from the initial shots were stacked on the table.

Bua took the photos and examined them. The dried, discolored skin of the body did resemble a skull from a plane crash, though it was darker in color. As Phinya had mentioned, there were visible signs of injury that would indicate the cause of death, other than a healed fracture of the left tibia, There was no decay or other damage.

"I really hope we don't find a third body,"

Bua said with a heavy sigh.

"Don't think about it, Ma'am,"

The assistant director immediately replied.

"Maybe the curse is too strong," Bua replied.

"The ancients used to say not to tempt fate."

"Stop, or that fate will come back to you," Phinya said.

"I know,"

The lab chief replied quickly.

"I'm putting together a report on the plane crash 10 case for the police. I'll send it over for review if you have any additional input."

"So, what's the latest on the accident?" Phinya asked.

"Just read it yourself," Replied the lab head.

"Bua, if one day you can't bother me, will you lose your appetite?" Phinya teased.

"No," Bua argued.

"But I'll get sleepy because my adrenaline won't be pumping if I don't bother you. I like seeing you get emotional. Lately, you've been too nice, not as fierce as before."

"And what if I'm not here one day?" Phinya asked.

"Then I'll go to sleep,"

Bua said, making Phinya fake a sigh.

"How can you find an excuse to sleep all day?"

"I'm just sleepy. If you didn't feel it, then you wouldn't understand,"

Bua replied before grabbing the skeleton photos and standing up.

"I borrowed these to look for something useful."

"What would you do?"

"I tried using a six-figure software program to create a 2D facial image from the photos, but it didn't seem to work,"

The physical anthropology researcher told Phinya, who was standing next to her. The two of them stared at a television mounted on the lab wall, which was displaying images from Bua's tablet.

"It didn't work well because there were too few variables. There was no depth or muscle definition, so the face looked too smooth, like it had been Botoxed."

"Have you ever had Botox?"

"I look naturally youthful, so I don't need it," Bua said, teigning pride.

"If you want to do it, you might start with your lips, just so you don't talk too much,"

Phinya teased.

"You yourself rarely talk?"

Bua replied before turning back to the television. A man's face was clearly visible on the screen, though his eyes, nose, and jawline were distorted by the lack of clear points. Using a 3D image of an actual skull would allow for more accurate depth and muscle definition.

"I will try to determine the points manually, but it will probably take more than a week because I need to enter the values myself."

"It's better than doing nothing. I'm really worried we might find more victims if we delay,"

Phinya said.

"Facial muscles always give me a headache."

Bua complained.

"I almost failed this section during the exam. I still don't understand why I chose physical anthropology when I'm not good with muscles or bones."

"That's what happens when you don't like something. You end up getting it,"

Phinya said, teasing Bua.

"Seriously... it's true. You get what you don't like,"

Bua replied, pushing her glasses up and emphasizing her point.

"Okay, Ma'am, that's enough!"

"If making a picture from a photo doesn't work out,"

Bua said, more serious now, pointing to the large television screen,

"... It feels good to know that the picture is not accurate."

The conversation then fell silent as they focused on their own thoughts. Phinya continued to stare at the photo of the skeleton she had taken from the warehouse, which was actually Mr. Phanuwat's building. Phinya's phone rang, breaking the silence. She glanced at the caller ID before answering, while Bua remained focused on the tablet screen.

"Yes..."

Phinya's voice was calm, then she listened.

"Really? Okay, see you tomorrow,"

She said before ending the call.

"The police have found Mr. Wisrut's address. They said someone recognized him from the announcement on social media. They want us to help investigate tomorrow."

"Finally,"

Bua said, glancing at the fake skull that now had about sixty percent of its face showing.

"Hopefully we can find something that will help us find out who did it."

□□□□□

□Episode 37□

Phinya found herself standing in a room inside a condominium not far from the city's economic district, on the 17th floor of a nearly 30-story building. The young doctor surveyed her surroundings while Bua stood outside, talking to two forensic officers.

They were providing information about the case, having been asked by the police to help as experts, as well as being the ones who discovered the mysterious skull at the crime scene.

Luckily they found more clues about Mr. Wisarut. Although a second mummy was found in Mr. Phanuwat's warehouse, no one knew any further details, making this strange case even more suspicious. Mr. Phanuwat claimed that someone had left the body with him, saying it was a replica.

This clearly indicated a deliberate lie, with Phinya concluding that it was likely an attempt to hide the body. What once seemed like a plane crash tragedy has now turned into a murder case.

The area where they were standing was in front of the bedroom of the owner of the unidentified. skull found at the crash site. Police had tracked down clues that led them here. Furthermore, the police revealed that the young man whose body was eventually mummified. had no family or close friends, as they were believed to have all died.

It was heartbreaking to hear this, which explains why no missing person report was filed after he disappeared, and was found only as a skeleton at the crash site. Bua joins Phinya.

"Did you find anything?"

Bua asked, to which Phinya shook her head. The two looked around the room, which was tidy enough but covered in dust and cobwebs, indicating that the owner had not been back for a long time. The building management said the maintenance fee had been overdue for more than two years, almost three. They had not been able to contact the owner of the room or anyone else involved. Before, Wisarut had not been very sociable, but there had been no conflicts that could have led to a tragic end.

Phinya stood in front of a desk with only a stack of documents on it.

Wearing blue gloves, she carefully picked up the papers and began to read them. Meanwhile, Bua looked for anything that might help the officers or provide further evidence.

"Bua,"

Phinya called while holding a document in her right hand that had just been opened from the white envelope that she had just finished reading. That made the person who was called come closer while frowning in question.

"Mr. Wisarut applied for an internship in South Africa two years ago,"

Phinya said as she handed over the internship acceptance letter to South Africa.

"Everyone probably thought he was in Africa, so no one knew he never got there. He even got sponsorship from the internship place there,"

"Right,"

Bua nodded in agreement.

"I get the police to help contact his internship location to see if we can find anything,"

She said, pulling a ziplock evidence bag out of a box and tucking the documents into it before walking away. Meanwhile, Phinya walked past the small kitchen to the back of the room, where there was a small balcony. She

saw a large black plastic bag containing dozens of empty plastic water bottles, which the owner of the room had never had time to throw away.

Next to the black plastic bag were seven or eight empty beer bottles, covered in a layer of dust. Nearby was a small yellow jar with a lid, about the size of a palm.

She glanced at Bua, who had already passed, before deciding to follow her. However, something made Phinya stop in her tracks. She turned and moved toward a yellow jar with a screw-top lid that caught her eye. She picked it up and tried to read the handwriting written in black marker on the label, but it was too faded to make out. Phinya examined it closely, frowning. She saw that there was still some clear liquid left in the jar, although some of it had dried along the sides.

"Did you find anything, Phin?"

"A jar with some kind of substance in it," Phinya replied.

"Why don't you send it to the authorities to get tested? We might find something."

Bua suggested. Then, Phinya lowered her voice to a whisper, she asked,

"Can we test it ourselves? I want to know if the substance is the same as I think it is."

"Of course. Fang just got a new chemical analyzer," Bua replied quickly.

"What do you think? Tell me," She asked eagerly.

"I won't tell you," Phinya teased.

"You'll have to find out for yourself until the results come out. If you guess right, I'll give you a reward."

"No, thank you. Your gift might be terrible,"

Bua replied, narrowing her eyes playfully, However, she quickly pulled out a small yellow jar to take a sample from her tool hay.

"Come on, let's get some so Fang can check it in the machine."

Phinya obediently poured some of the liquid into a jar, and Bua took it to the forensics officer working nearby. Three days later, Fang walked into the staff coffee room, where his two friends were chatting. He held a document in her hand.

"Hey, you two!"

Fang called out to her classmates, who immediately stopped arguing.

"Stop it,"

Fang said, waving the results in the air.

"The results are in. You guys owe me dinner. I had to stay up all night for this."

"Phinya will pay!"

Bua immediately quipped.

"Hey, why me?"

Phinya replied

"Because it was your idea, and you wouldn't even tell me what you were thinking. I've given up asking,"

Bua replied, turning to Fang.

"So, what was the result, my friend?" Fang handed over the test results.

"It's pine resin."

"Pine sap?"

Bua asked, sounding surprised.

"Yes,"

Fang confirmed.

"Usually, pine resin is solid, but this sample is liquid. It probably contains turpentine, which is used to dissolve the resin. What you brought is very pure, it has no other solvents used to keep it liquid."

"No wonder. At first, I didn't smell any thinner or solvent that was supposed to be used, so wasn't sure if it was pine resin or not,"

Phinya said thoughtfully.

"So what did he use instead?" Fang's close friend asked.

"He probably used high heat," Fang replied.

"And he kept it in an amber jar to protect it from the sun. If the turpentine didn't evaporate, the resin would return to its solid state more slowly. The sample you gave me is already starting to dry out because it's been so long. But I don't know what kind of pine it is the machine can't be that specific,"

She said with a playful glance, which Bua didn't seem to notice.

"Thank you very much, Fang,"

Phinya said, taking the document to review, even though she didn't quite understand the chemical details.

"What were you two gossiping about?" Fang asked curiously.

"Who wants to gossip with Phinya?"

Bua immediately replied, moving away and glancing at Phin.

"Shut up, Bua!"

Phinya ordered, making Busaya purse her lips. Phinya then turned to her classmate, who was watching the two of them with amusement in her eyes.

"I assure you, nothing bad will happen,"

She said firmly.

"I know,"

Fang replied,

"Just curious. But if you don't want to tell me, that's okay, I don't really want to know."

"We're investigating a murder case," Bua said suddenly.

"I mean... it's classified."

"You've got me so confused, Bua, that I can't tell what's real and what's not,"

Her friend teased.

"See? You didn't believe me even when I told you," Bua pouted.

"Seriously?"

Fang asked, wide-eyed, staring at her friend in disbelief. When she saw Bua's serious expression, she turned to Phinya, who nodded but said nothing.

"Murder investigation?"

"Something like that," Bua admitted quietly.

"I thought you were at the scene for a plane crash?"

"Well..."

Bua hesitated, lifting her nearly full paper cup of hot latte to take a sip. "A plane crash case that seems to have turned into a murder case."

"And that's what you two were whispering about?"

"We weren't whispering,"

Bua interrupted.

"We were just talking normally."

"Tell me the secret, girls,"

Fang said, pulling out a chair and sitting down. Bua glanced at Phinya, who nodded for her to continue and explain. Phinya then began to tell her story.

"It's not completely secret,"

Bua added after her explanation was over.

"There are parts the police know about and parts they don't."

"So you guys didn't tell the whole story,"

Fang commented knowingly.

"Does the professor know about this?"

"She know,"

Phinya replied this time,

"But not completely, I mean, I haven't reported it yet."

"Do the officers know that the evidence has been divided for examination?"

Fang asked knowingly.

"You two are really good for each other. There's no stopping anyone,"

A friend of Phinya and Bua said, watching the two look at each other without saying anything. She guessed the police didn't know about this.

"What do you think? Help me think,"

The female assistant director asked.

"I don't know,"

Fang replied shortly,

"I don't know much about mummies or ancient civilizations or murder cases. But if you want me to help you check this or that, I can do that," She said.

"But what do you think you can find out from the resin?"

"Resin is an ancient embalming substance. As you said, when turpentine evaporates, it will freeze again and can be used to coat and protect against insects and bacteria that will rot the body,"

Explained the female doctor from England.

"In ancient Egypt, resin was smeared as a liquid on the body before being wrapped in cloth and placed in a coffin."

"So, this is a traditional method," Fang commented.

"Phin,"

Bua exclaimed as if she had just realized something.

"Do you think... is the resin on Wisarut's skull the same?"

"It's possible," The other replied.

"We should collect them and examine them. Can you do it, Fang?"

"Why not? If we don't try, how will we know? Take a sample and take it to the lab."

The test results arrived on Phinya's desk two days later.

"So... you mean the resin found in Wisarut's room is the same as the resin found in his skull?"

Bua, who was standing confused in the lab, repeated what she had just heard.

"Fang said they were similar the molecular size was about the same, and it was pure resin, not dissolved. It probably came from the same source or at least the same type of pine,"

Phinya added.

"So, this was done by himself?"

"How can a dead person stand up and apply embalming fluid to himself? Can you, Ma'am?"

Phinya snapped back, glaring at the others.

"We're going around in circles, but we're not making any progress. There must be a curse!"

"I don't think so,"

The assistant director frowned, thinking hard before continuing,

"The person who did this must have known Wisarut. Resin is an ancient embalming technique that requires lime as a key factor. So, I think whoever used pure resin must have known a lot about mummification and did it intentionally."

"Someone who works in the field,"

They both nodded in agreement before Bua absentmindedly stared at the model skull with the reconstructed face.

"Have you called Phanuwat about who put the mummy up for sale?"

Busaya asked, as she remembered.

"Yes. He said he would check the records on the buyer-seller list first. I'm still waiting."

"Ahh,"

The female lab director said with a sigh.

"It's like trying to cut with a knife from all eight sides-every time we get close, we stumble, What's going on?"

"Then we'll find the ninth side," Phinya suggested.

"Phanuwat was very cooperative, so he probably didn't know much. He was probably just a middleman receiving and selling without checking anything. He might have to be investigated or even face legal action."

"In your opinion, were the bodies found in the Phanuwat warehouse and the Wisarut skull handled by the same person and method?"

"It's very possible, given the circumstances," Phinya replied,

"No one would do something like this all at once, especially with such a shortage. Plus, we already know the people involved must be working in the field, given their efforts to follow traditional methods."

"If that's the case, we need to check the body quickly, Phin. That corpse might be the ninth side we've been looking for."

□□□□□

□Episode 38□

The letter "C" marked with a white marker is placed at the junction between the forehead and the top of the nasal bone. The mummies from the Phanuwat warehouse had been moved here the previous morning. Now, Bua began her work.

Her job was to place identification markers on the skull, photograph it, and create a two dimensional reconstruction of the face. All he could do was pray that the police would be able to identify this unknown man. With each white marker placed, one by one, all she could do was sigh and hope there wouldn't be any more bodies.

Phinya stood with her back to Bua, examining the bones that had just been taken from the warehouse for any abnormalities. Bua knew that her friend was also burdened and would probably not sleep well until the person responsible for this was brought to justice.

Meanwhile, Investigators are interrogating Phanuwat to see if there were any other accomplices, but it seems as Phinya suspected he probably doesn't know anything, If he did, he wouldn't have shown her the body in the first place.

However, what surprised her was that when Phanuwat searched for information about the person who left the body, the name that came up was... Wisarut', the man whose skull was found in the mysterious plane crash.

The only hope now is that they can identify the second victim whose face Bua reconstructed. Maybe that will lead them to the perpetrator. This is the most confusing case Phinya has ever faced.

She saw Bua move towards the camera, adjusting her glasses before bending down to look through the viewfinder on the tripod. She began taking photos, the two of them working tirelessly without rest to track down whoever was responsible for this.

"I contacted the university in South Africa, based on the letter we found in Wisarut's room," Bua said calmly.

"They said he never came, and they weren't informed of any changes."

"Well, that's something,"

The other replied, turning to look at her.

"And the university where he works as a researcher?"

"I called them too. They said they thought he went to the location for field work, stayed long because they lost contact. People tried to contact him, but no one could."

"It was a mess,"

The assistant director muttered.

"Nobody reported anything because both sides thought he just left."

"So, he disappeared around the time he was supposed to go abroad, almost three years ago. His workplace thought he was abroad, and the people abroad thought he never came. That might have been when he died," Bua speculated.

"But someone must have taken his body and done something to it, and it's surfaced now."

"And the person who did it is the person we are after,"

The woman behind the camera said, nodding before returning to her work.

"Do you remember what Fang said about someone in the inner circle?"

"The person responsible is probably an insider, as Fang mentioned," Another person said.

"I don't think ordinary people would bother doing something like this unless there was some benefit or purpose."

"By the way, my friend just sent me a translation of the papyrus scroll we found,"

Phinya continued. "So."

"It's genuine,"

Replied the assistant director.

"How did the original scroll end up with a nearly authentic mummy!"

"I don't know,"

Phinya mused, her tone half-jokingly at odds with her serious expression,

"At first, we thought it was for sale or auction."

Bua nodded in agreement.

"I just hope the police can identify this unknown man. Otherwise, I can't think of anything else. It all keeps coming back to Wisarut. He's the key, but he's not here for us to find out who sent him to Pichai, And now Pichai died in a plane crash. When the police questioned Pipat, he didn't know anything either, because he had just taken over his brother's business."

"At least... I believe we did our best,"

The assistant director said, looking the other in the eye with an encouraging gesture.

"By the way, could you schedule a meeting with Professor Ramesh? I want to show him the message from the papyrus scroll. Maybe he can help

narrow down the context, or maybe he knows something. We have to work with whatever information we have."

"Sure, boss,"

The others replied with a nod before returning to their tasks. Meanwhile, Phinya turned her attention back to the skeleton they had taken from the Phanuwat storage facility. The skull was placed on a stand while Bua continued to take photos.

"There is a fracture to the left tibia, most likely occurring long before death, since the bone has healed,"

The assistant director noted as she measured the bone and prepared to photograph it for evidence.

"Other than that, there are no abnormalities or injuries to the other bones. From the skeletal remains, it is impossible to determine the cause of death."

"The X-ray machine will be available this afternoon," Bua chimed in.

"We need to calculate the age at death, and I'll use that once variable for the facial reconstruction, I'd rather do it all."

"Sounds good,"

Phinya agreed, hearing the rapid click of the camera shutter from behind her.

"I have class in ten minutes. Can you take the skin sample to Fang for chemical analysis? I'm sure it's the same resin."

Phinya glanced at Dr. Bua, who was preparing another marker to be attached to the skull,

"How long do you think this will take?"

"It won't take as long as the last one, because we know the ethnicity." Bua reasoned.

"The part that will take time is reconstructing the muscles."

"If it weren't for you, I would have been lost, Bua,"

Phinya said, making Bua look up in surprise.

"Don't start," Bua replied.

"I'm serious," Phinya insisted.

"Doctor Bua is great at other things besides working non stop."

Phinya saw the twinkle in Bua's eyes as she turned to look at her. Without saying anything, Bua turned away but quickly walked over to stand beside her, causing Phinya to glance at her curiously.

"That's why I trust you more than anyone,"

The assistant director said, looking her in the eye before leaning in to whisper,

"I'm proud of you, Ma'am. I'm glad I got to know you."

"Phinya,"

Bua's voice trembled, reflecting her heart.

"I have to go now. I have class,"

Phinya said, pulling away and smiling before walking out of the lab, leaving Bua standing there, touched by those words.

The two arrive at the building where they made their appointment with Ramesh. They head to the reception desk to exchange their IDs and ask to meet him,

"Professor Ramesh might be in the lab this afternoon," Said the receptionist.

"If he is not in his office, you can check on the third floor where the lab is."

"Thank you,"

Phinya said, heading up the stairs.

"I'll check the office,"

The assistant director said.

"You go to the lab. If I don't find him, I'll come looking for you."

Bua nodded briefly and left. Bua arrives at the lab, stopping in front of a glass door covered with curtains. He knocked several times and, getting no response, decided to enter. Inside, the lab was brightly lit by ceiling lights. This was Bua's first time in this lab, and it was very similar to her own lab.

Equipment and tools are arranged on the floor, in cupboards, and on shelves. The white walls are soothing to the eyes. She saw Ramesh wearing a long white lab coat, busy preparing equipment. He must not have heard the knock on the door.

"Professor Ramesh, hello. Am I disturbing you?"

Bua greeted him, raising her hand in a familiar gesture, which made the man turn and smile.

"Hello, Ma'am,"

He replied politely, apparently tidying up.

"Please give me a moment to finish. this."

He turned to put away some chemicals before saying,

"Please feel free to look around. Where is Dr. Phinya who wanted to show me something?"

"Phinya will join us soon,"

Bua replied calmly, her curiosity piqued. Visiting new places always excited her, especially the laboratories of various institutions with interesting and unfamiliar samples or equipment. Her attention was drawn to something inside a glass cabinet. It contained a white solution. Bua squinted through her glasses and furrowed her brows in curiosity.

She saw Ramesh go into another room, which seemed to be used to store documents and basic supplies like gloves and mask, to get something he needed. Bua took the opportunity to observe her surroundings. The lab wasn't much different from her own, but its novelty kept her interested.

Bua's mind raced as she connected the dots between the equipment and expertise in Ramesh's lab. The presence of large glass cabinets, UV radiation machines, and various chemicals suggested a deep familiarity with ancient preservation techniques. Ramesh returned to the room with a box of gloves and a large bottle of a greenish-brown liquid.

His smile was warm, but his quick steps indicated that he was still in the midst of preparations.

"Ma'am, make yourself comfortable. I just need a few more minutes,"

He said, pointing to the chair and continuing to arrange his ingredients. As Bua sat and watched, she noticed that the lab was well-equipped for mummification tasks. Large glass cabinets could hold human bodies, and the presence of a UV machine indicated an interest in replicating the conditions required for preservation. Jars of liquids ranging from yellow to yellowish white indicated experiments with different preservatives.

Among the most striking finds is a chimpanzee skull, carefully prepared and placed on a stand, similar to the arrangement Bua used for human skulls. Its dark color suggests that the skull had been mummified for some time, perhaps as an initial experiment before applying the technique to humans.

Bua was very clear about it: this was no ordinary laboratory. The methods and equipment showed a sophisticated knowledge of ancient mummification practices, suggesting that Ramesh, or someone with similar expertise, was deeply involved in the procedure.

The presence of sophisticated experimental materials and equipment reinforced the idea that this was insider Territory, as they were saying. Her thoughts were interrupted by Ramesh's voice.

"Is something wrong, Bua?"

"You..."

Bua said, her voice calm but her heart pounding.

"It's you."

"I don't understand what you mean,"

Said Ramesh, still arranging the ingredients.

"Don't deny it," Bua said firmly.

"You must know exactly what I'm talking about. Or perhaps, it would be better if the police came to investigate this place."

Ramesh's expression changed from curiosity to concern.

"What exactly are you talking about?"

He asked, his tone now serious. Ramesh's demeanor changed drastically, revealing a dark and disturbing side. The smile on his face was no longer warm, but instead sinister, as if he was proud of his actions. His gaze remained fixed on Bua, and the distance between them grew closer as he moved away from the glass cabinet.

"You knew about it, Dr. Bua?"

He said, his voice soft but cold,

"It's impressive that you knew about it right away. I was hoping the evidence would be destroyed before it reached you"

Bua's heart was pounding, but she forced herself to remain calm. She realized that Ramesh's attention was never diverted from her, and he kept scanning the room for anything that could be used as a weapon or an escape aid if necessary.

"So, the chimpanzee skull was an early experiment,"

Bua said, trying to keep the conversation going while assessing her options.

"What was the real purpose behind this experiment?"

Ramesh's eyes lit up with a mixture of pride and disturbing detachment.

"The process of preserving bodies over long periods of time has fascinated me for years. Imagine if you could preserve human bodies in a way that would stand the test of time. The technique I've developed could revolutionize the field."

"You talk about revolutionizing science, but it seems you have crossed every ethical boundary in the process,"

Bua replied, her voice calm even as she grew increasingly agitated.

"Science often advances at the expense of something,"

Ramesh argued.

"Some sacrifices are necessary for progress. Ultimately, it's about the greater good."

Bua shook her head in disbelief.

"You may see it as progress, but it is a despicable excuse to violate human dignity. You are not the one paying the price-someone else is."

Ramesh's expression hardened.

"It's easy for you to criticize from the outside, but you're not in my shoes. You don't see the potential I see."

Bua's mind raced. If Ramesh had gone this far in keeping his work a secret, there was a good chance he wouldn't hesitate to act violently to protect it.

Bua needed to stop him and find a way to contact the authorities before things got worse.

"Well, your grand plan is about to come to an end,"

Bua said, trying to sound firm,

"I'll make sure this gets investigated."

Ramesh's smile faded, replaced by a grim expression,

"You think you can just walk out here and reveal everything? it's not that easy."

As Ramesh stepped closer, Bua braced herself, her mind alert for any chance of escape or defense. The room was growing increasingly claustrophobic, and she knew she had to act quickly.

"Those two bastards deserve to die,"

His usually gentle voice suddenly changed.

"They both talk too much,"

"Let this end here, Professor. You can't escape," She said.

"How about we try it with you?"

He replied. She immediately ran forward, As he was about to approach her, Bua decided to push the equipment cart, causing Ramesh to stumble and collide with the storage cabinet, The cart fell, scattering items and making a loud noise throughout the area.

Phinya, who was walking towards the laboratory, heard the commotion, and immediately rushed in. She had a bad feeling that something must have happened.

Ramesh stood up and tried to run towards her again. Seeing this, Busaya grabbed a nearby chemical bottle and threw it to block his way, followed by the equipment scattered on the her.

A hammer hit him hard in the middle of his back, making him stumble for a moment. This made Ramesh turn around, his face red with anger.

The young man charged forward. As he raised his hand to swing his punch at Busaya's face, Ramesh felt himself furch forward. Towards the shocked woman, Phinya's right foot had hit his back with full force.

"Don't even think about hurting her, you piece of trash!"

The loud sound came as she charged towards Ramesh, grabbed the young professor by the collar and punched him hard on the left side of his face, making his own arm throb from the impact.

As he moved again, Phinya charged at him, and the two of them fell to the floor. Ramesh struggled to free himself, using his legs to push the young assistant's body, causing him to stumble backwards.

The young man tried to regain his footing and used his hands to support himself, though he was still dazed from the previous blow. However, he was met with another blow from Phinya on his right check, causing him to stagger towards the wall. He braced himself, knowing he would not be let off so easily.

"Give up. You won't be able to escape,"

She said, but Ramesh's hand hit Phinya's face, making it bleed.

"You still won't listen,"

Phinya said, attacking him again until they both fell to the floor. Phinya took the opportunity to climb on top of the doctor and continued to hit him until his hands were numb. He felt Ramesh use his foot to kick his right side before he fell to the floor. He was now at a disadvantage as Ramesh landed a punch to her face from above.

The two wrestled for a while. Phinya's vision started to blur before she felt Ramesh's body being kicked by someone she assumed was Bua, followed by the owner of the foot running towards her. Later, security personnel, called by those who heard the commotion, quickly entered and detained Ramesh.

"Phinya, are you okay?"

Bua asked as she tried to help her up. She saw blood flowing from the corner of Phinya's mouth. Ramesh was taken away by security.

"Dizzy,"

She answered hoarsely from the pain, and the person beside her quickly helped her.

"Can you stand?"

"Let me sit down for a moment."

She then sat down against the wall and roughly wiped the blood from her lips with her sleeve. The police arrived half an hour later with forensic officers. Ramesh was immediately taken to the police station for questioning, while Bua and Phinya remained there waiting for the ambulance to treat their wounds.

The forensic team collected all the evidence. One thing that was surprising was the glass cabinet full of salt. If they had been a little slower, someone else might have been victimized and placed in that salt cabinet..

"How are you today, Phinya?"

Bua asked as she entered the room the following evening, which was the day she had urged Phinya to take sick leave to recover from her injuries.

"Let me see your wounds."

Bua sat down next to her and motioned for Phinya to show her wounds without hesitation.

"How do you feel?"

"It hurts,"

Phinya answered shortly, wincing in pain. Bua looked at her worriedly. The corner of Phinya's mouth was swollen and red, and her left cheek showed the same symptoms.

"Have you eaten anything today?"

"Just a little. It hurts. I can't eat anything. I won't be able to use my mouth for a few days."

"But you're still trying to talk,"

Bua said, before getting up and going into another room, returning with a bottle of water, warm water, and first aid supplies.

"How was the meeting with the police? What did they say?"

Phinya asked as she sat back down on the couch.

"Deliberate murder and concealment of corpses."

"Is it true?"

"Yes," Bua confirmed.

"It has nothing to do with the sale of antiques. It's actually a little bit related, but not the main issue."

She then began to explain that the police had told her a few hours earlier that Ramesh had confessed.

"The body you found in Mr. Phanuwat's warehouse was Ramesh's ex-girlfriend who had broken up with him. Now, the forensic team is examining Ramesh's laboratory. It is suspected that it is the crime scene or... the place where the body was hidden. All the necessary equipment is there."

"Oh... this is interesting, What happens next?"

"His ex-girlfriend wanted his money back and threatened to expose him."

"Reveal it?"

"Something like his involvement in violence and his obsession with mummification, and he demanded hush money," Bua said.

"Apparently they couldn't reach an agreement and had a fight, which led to Ramesh killing him by strangling him. He then asked his close friend, Mr. Wisarut, to help him hide the body by embalming it and then asking Mr. Wisarut to take it to Mr. Phanuwat to sell it as a replica. If they were caught, Mr. Wisarut would be the one to blame."

"Wow People really have very clever plans,"

Phinya commented before groaning in pain.

"Killing and hiding them, then dumping the bodies and selling them."

"I wouldn't call it clever. It's evil,"

Bua said, prompting the listener to nod and chuckle.

"Ramesh is not normal."

"Why do you think so?"

"When he confessed to me in the lab, I didn't see any remorse from him. He seemed obsessed with the whole thing,"

Bua explained,

"He said that scientific progress requires sacrifice."

"Nonsense,"

Another female doctor interjected,

"But he actually did it."

"There are people like this in our fleid, it's temble," Bua added.

"And why did Wisarut suffer the same ending?" Asked Phinya.

"He tried to escape," Busaya replied calmly.

"He was afraid that one day he would be caught because he was the one who handled everything directly."

"So that's why he asked to be transferred to Africa,"

The assistant director chimed in, remembering the acceptance letter she had found in the room.

"Exactly. He planned to flee abroad, but Ramesh silenced him because who knows one day he might come back to expose everything."

Phinya took a deep breath.

"So, how did Wisarut die?"

"A hammer blow to the lower jaw, one blow to the chin, he died instantly. After that, his body was mutilated, Busaya answered."

"Of course,"

The person who asked the question replied.

"The crack ran from the center, like someone had hit it, deforming the lower jaw."

"The police are looking for the weapon and questioning where the rest of his body is!"

"I think he's doing it slowly, piece by piece,"

The foreign doctor commented,

"It wouldn't be easy to do it alone."

"Then Wisarut's skull was found with Mr. Pichai," Bua added.

"But no one knows how it got there because Mr. Pichai was no longer around to testify."

"They must have known each other,"

The assistant director said.

"Pichai probably got it from Ramesh without knowing anything, because he doesn't know these things. Just look at Phanuwat he thought it was a replica."

Bua nodded before continuing.

"That seems likely, because police said Mr. Pipat testified that his brother was going to show the skull to an Egyptologist to determine its era, perhaps planning to auction it off along with the scroll."

"Classic entrepreneur,"

The assistant director chuckled.

"Tomorrow, I will go to Ramesh's house. I think we might find the remains of Wisarut,"

Busaya added.

"The initial police search found the remains of animals like dogs and cats buried there. They will start digging tomorrow, and I will be there to help."

"Maybe it's the violent behavior that's going to come out," Phinya suggested.

"Before he did it to people, he probably started with animals or something."

"That's probably what happened,"

Another agreed.

"I saw his preserved chimpanzee skull in the lab, so I knew right away, he did it."

"Any updates on the cause of the plane crash?"

"After examining the black box, the aviation department suspects that there was a fight on board the plane, and that a weapon was involved,"

Busaya explained.

"However, we do not know exactly what caused the fight. There was a bullet hole on the side of the plane, and the pilot was shot, which we have confirmed. However, since the weapon was not found, we cannot determine what type of weapon it was. The company owner has been ordered to close down and compensate the victim's family, and they are prohibited from doing any aviation-related business in the future."

"Is there anything else we should do about the plane crash?"

"We still have to return the bodies of the three victims to the police," Bua replied.

"Finally, it's all over,"

Phinya sighed, before slowly closing her eyes.

"From the plane crash to the hidden murder... If the plane hadn't crashed, Ramesh might have gotten away with it, and the skull would have left the country. No skull, no Identity, and Pichai would be in trouble."

"Maybe it's because of the mummy's curse I mentioned earlier," Busaya joked.

"Do you want to take a shower or just clean yourself up?"

"Can you check this area? It hurts,"

The speaker said, holding out her face, especially her swollen, red lips, to Bua, she gently touched the area next to the wound with her fingertips.

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"Mmm."

"It might hurt more tomorrow,"

The owner of the room commented before moving her lips to the Injured area.

"Get well soon."

"Do it on the other side too,"

Came the pleading voice.

"Please..."

"Given a little, but ask for a lot," She said, though she did not refuse.

"Are you hungry?"

"No. I can't eat. Just do whatever you need to do,"

Phinya said, wincing in pain.

"And if I stay here, do you mind?"

The question made the listener open her eyes, then she tried to smile, even though it was quite difficult.

"You probably already know the answer."

"Phin."

"Hmmm?"

"Thank you. You helped me again when Professor Ramesh was about to hit me."

"Stop thanking me, you sleepyhead,"

She said, patting the woman's hair.

"Make me some porridge."

"Okay,"

The woman agreed. As Bua stood up, she bent down and gently combed the black hair of the man sitting there, kissed her forehead, and said,

"Eat a lot, take your medicine on time, be a good girl, and when you are better, I will give you everything you want."

"Really, Bua?"

Phinya's eyes sparkled like a child's, but Bua didn't answer. She just stared at the Injured person's reddened face, unsure whether it was because of the wound or something else, then walked away.

"You promised, you know."

"Yes."

"I will get well soon."

"Phin, have you received the police case summary email about the plane crash? I sent it about ten minutes ago,"

Bua asked as Phinya walked down the fifth-floor corridor towards her office.

"I saw it,"

She said, holding up her phone to show that she had received it.

"But I haven't opened it yet. I was talking to the students about their final exams."

"Another graduate?"

"Yes,"

The female assistant director confirmed.

"Another one will graduate next month." Phinya then asked,

"What did the police say?"

After asking, she led the way to her office, followed by Bua.

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□EPILOGUE□

Currently Dr. Busaya is standing on the balcony of her condominium on the fifteenth floor. Her arms rested on the balcony railing as she gazed into the distance through her square-rimmed glasses. The city life below was bustling, with several people just starting their night out.

She heard the bedroom door open but didn't turn to look, knowing who it was. Phinya, who had just taken a shower, came out and was now standing beside her, leaning on the balcony as well. Tonight was the time she promised to clear things up between herself and Phinya.

"Are you sleepy, Bua?"

Despite hearing the question, Bua did not answer immediately. Her eyes remained fixed on the scenery outside, lost in thought. Memories flooded her mind, especially those involving Phinya. At this moment, Bua was not sure how she should feel.

She knew her feelings for Phinya had long gone beyond mere friendship. It wasn't just about being bed partners, physical attraction, or whatever other reasons Bua usually said. It was far beyond liking.

She might have fallen in love with Phinya from the start, letting things progress to this point. The thought of Phinya one day saying she didn't want her anymore, or asking her to forget everything that had happened, made Bua unsure about what she would do next. But who else could she blame but herself?

Bua had to take responsibility for her own feelings. She clearly remembered the first intimate night she had with Phinya when Phinya asked her if

she wanted to stop. It was Bua who let Phinya have her way, and she then fell deeper than she wanted.

"It's still early, but if I lie down, I'll fall asleep."

"I believe that,"

Phinya chuckled before turning to face her.

"You're one of the best sleepers I know."

"Because I'm not good at anything else,"

Bua said with a wry smile.

"Is that right?"

"Who says it?"

Phinya approached and gently stroked Bua's face with her right hand.

"Don't you know how proud I am of you?"

"You just want to keep close, so you say that," Bua replied.

"But I will choose to trust you."

"I will make you believe it. Just wait and see, Bua."

"Phin..."

"I'm serious about you," Phinya interrupted.

"This isn't just about being possessive, as you might think."

She then looked into Bua's eyes, which were starting to fill with tears.

"But first, you have to listen to me."

Bua only responded with a hesitant nod, unsure of what Phinya wanted to say. She saw Phinya take a deep breath and offer a warm smile that touched her heart. Phinya then started to speak.

"I've said it before, but I'll say it again: I'm sorry, Bua. For everything, For all the times I hurt you on purpose."

Phinya lifted her fingers to brush the hair out of Bua's face, who looked like she was about to cry.

"I'm sorry for not seeing you, Bua, earlier. I'm sorry for wasting your time unnecessarily. I'm sorry for always picking on you or throwing rocks at you instead of giving you flowers. I'm sorry for not explaining our relationship sooner. It may have seemed like I was taking advantage of you."

"I was the one who took advantage of you," Bua replied.

"You tried to talk about this a few times, but I avoided it because I was suspicious of you."

She said, tears streaming down her cheeks, and Phinya, with compassion, reached out to wipe them away.

"You can trust me, Bua,"

Phinya said with a warm smile that Bua rarely saw.

"Trust me that I will not hurt you again,"

She then placed Bua's right hand on her own left chest.

"Trust me here."

"Phin."

"From now on, if you want to hit me with a shovel, I will stand still and take it,"

Phinya said, making Bua laugh through her tears and sobs.

"I will let you hit me until you are satisfied."

"Can I really do that? if you get hurt, do you think I won't get hurt too?"
Bua said.

"I might have fallen in love with you long before I realized it."

"If I make you doubt me, you have to tell me, okay? Don't just assume."

"After that night, you never made me feel unsure again, Phinya,"

Bua said with a smile,

"So now you know why I came back?"

Phinya asked, staring intently into Bua's dark eyes,

"Because of me... is it really because of me?"

"No one is more sensible and worthy than you, Bua,"

Phinya said clearly, wanting Bua to feel confident.

"Do you know that I was defeated by you a long time ago? It's hard to believe, but when I turned down the position in England, I didn't hesitate at all,"

Phinya said.

"And do you think I would go anywhere else? Even though I went far away, I chose to come back."

"Thank you, Phin,"

"Remember that I belong here, Bai Bua," The assistant said.

"And I'm not leaving so easily."

This time, Busaya nodded in agreement.

"So, you can trust me that I'm not a possessive child who only wants to be around you."

The teasing comment made Busaya laugh softly.

"But a possessive adult," Phinya continued.

"So, are you okay with my possessiveness now?"

"I can't go anywhere without you, Phinya,"

Bua said, before smiling faintly.

"You're probably the only one who can tolerate my laziness. The others complain after a few days without a reply."

"But you never ignore my messages. Just in case you didn't notice."

"Sometimes it's just a matter of priorities," Another person explained.

"The only person I reply right away is our professor because I get yelled at if I don't."

She laughed after saying this. Bua felt the other person's fingertips touch her chin..

"Does the professor dare to scold you? You are her favorite."

"Don't say that. You were never asked for a progress report, so you don't know,"

The lab chief explained.

"I was even chased for reports in my dreams."

"Is that so?"

Phinya said before her lips slowly moved to Bua's, biting her bottom lip playfully. This made Bua move closer to her,

"Phinya,"

Bua instinctively wrapped her arms around Phinya's neck before she tilted her face to receive the lips of the person in front of her.

"Tonight, I won't let you sleep."

And Phinya kept her promise. It was the first night for both of them. Even though it wasn't their first night together physically, it was the first night where they both accepted each other in their relationship. Especially for Bua....

She wasn't sure when her suspicions about Phinya disappeared. Maybe It never existed in the first place. Otherwise, how could she dare to let this woman freely enter and exit her bedroom? Besides, Phinya also had spare key cards for all the rooms and cars, which Bua had previously given her.

Perhaps the suspicion was just a lack of confidence in whether someone like Phinya would be serious about her, which was beyond Bua's expectations.

Bua's naked body was slowly pushed onto the bed, followed by her bedmate who was clearly not going to let her sleep soundly tonight. Phinya was on top of Bua, her eyes full of passion, staring at Bua without moving or doing anything.

"I regret the years I've wasted,"

Phinya said as she placed her hand on Bua's upper arm before slowly moving it all over Bua's naked body. On Bua's side, she could only stare at the other person while her body started to shiver from the touch of the exploring fingertips.

"Forget about that, Phinya,"

Said Bua. Bua's hand moved to the hips that she had previously admired for being so attractive, causing Phinya to move closer to her, as if not noticing anything,

"Your physique doesn't look like a Mongoloid," Bua said casually.

"Is that so?"

Someone else's lips on her neck asked, followed by a soft laugh.

"Why do I have to hear this almost every time we sleep together?"

"Because when I'm excited, I talk a lot,"

The female researcher explained.

"It's something I do unconsciously."

"Okay, is there anything else you want to say about body structure or the pelvis as a mammalian trait?"

"I can't think of anything right now, but I'll let you know when I think of something."

"Buw, do you think you should eat som tam instead of rice?"

Phinya teased while laughing even harder. Almost every time they slept together, Bua was always like this. Sometimes, she would ramble on about things she couldn't help but say. At first, Phinya found it weird, but over time, she got used to it and found it funny, even though it sometimes ruined the mood..

However, Phinya chose to ignore it and let Bua do the talking.

After all, if you sleep with someone as nerdy as her, this is what happens.

"So that I don't forget," Bua replied.

"As I said before, you are a good case study."

"Of course, and you even get hands-on experience too, Phinya said.

Then Bua only felt the warm touch of lips and tongues caressing her body. She could hardly imagine what she would do if Phinya disappeared one day.

Bua had probably fallen in love with her fierce friend since their meeting during the plane crash. Her feelings have changed since then. Moreover, hearing Phinya admit that she came back here because of herself was even more incredible.

Before this, Bua felt that she had always been inferior to the woman, especially in terms of ability. At this point, winning or losing probably doesn't matter anymore. What matters is that she accepts her feelings for Phinya.

Busaya could barely remember the anger she had once felt toward Phinya. Instead, something else was brewing in her heart she truly loved this woman. Her gaze met Phinya who was above her, and that gaze made Bua feel a warmth that spread deep into her heart.

"Trust me with your heart, Bua. You can trust me."

Those words, filled with conviction, made the listener purse her lips before looking into eyes that seemed to be waiting for an answer. Busaya decided to nod slowly.

"I trust you, Phinya."

Apart from love, Bua can't give anything in return other than her trust in Phinya.

"I trust you."

----- THE END -----

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