

Chapter Prologue

In a dimly lit hotel room, there was a large king-sized bed, now messy and scattered. Under the wrinkled thick blanket, a bare leg was sticking out, as bare as the delicate body hidden beneath the blanket. **Maanfan** was gazing at the ceiling, as if trying to find a flaw somewhere on it.

"Are you still thinking about that?"

A sweet voice broke the silence, pulling the slim figure on the bed out of her thoughts. Maanfan turned to look at the short-haired woman with sharp and alluring features, who had just stepped out of the bathroom.

Her tall, slender figure drew every eye to her, especially in the black lace lingerie that accentuated her fair skin. A small towel draped over her shoulder was being used to dry her damp hair. The fragrance lingering around her made it clear that she had just taken a shower.

The sweet-faced girl sat up and talk to the short-haired woman, who was now sitting cross-legged beside the bed, drying her hair.

"You know I like to look, so you're teasing me even more,"

Maanfan sighed, trying to force herself to look away from the beautiful sight in front of her. She composed herself before answering the other woman's question.

"Yes, **P'Araya**... it's just one thing."

That one thing had nearly ruined her and her family's lives, dragging everyone around them into trouble as well.

When a famous brand sued her father's small tailoring shop for copyright violation, it caused him so much stress that he suffered a stroke, leaving him in a vegetative state. The heavy responsibility fell onto her shoulders, just a fresh graduate with no experience.

As if that wasn't bad enough, she also had to think about the livelihoods of the shop's workers, who were like family to her. Most of them were older and unlikely to find work elsewhere.

The gloomy expression on the 23-year-old woman lying on the bed, who had carried an overwhelming burdened with far more than she could handle, prompted Araya to set aside her towel and walk toward her client.

The tall slender figure gently lifted the younger girl's chin before placing a comforting kiss on her soft lips, now slightly bruised from their earlier activities.

Although Maanfan was just a client she had met through the *Girly Shopping app,* a platform designed to connect women who shared romantic interests in other women, and even though this was only the second time Maanfan had "*booked*" her, she couldn't help but feel a certain affection for the other woman.

What began as a tender and soothing kiss gradually deepened, turning into something more intense. The thin lips of one pressed and tugged on the full lips of the other, who lay under the blanket, concealing her bare form.

Maanfan's breath hitched as a sweet tongue slipped in to tease and explore, drawing a soft moan from her throat as she responded eagerly, her tongue tangling with the other in return.

After a while, the thin lips pulled away, leaving the long-haired girl to huff in frustration.

"You said you had good news, didn't you?"

The one delivering the kisses asked softly before pressing her lips to the curve of Maanfan's neck, tinged with a faint trace of sweat. Yet, that subtle scent only heightened her desire even more.

"Mm... yes... A company just contacted me... They said they want to work with my factory... A big company too... It might help... with my factory's situation..."

Maanfan responded in a breathless voice, her words breaking periodically as the other woman's wandering hands explored her body. Combined with the lips that kissed and sucked everywhere they could reach, her body trembled with each sensation.

"Then stop worrying. It's a good opportunity, isn't it?"

The other replied, planting a kiss on her soft, full chest.

"Ah... P'... but I'm scared... They have conditions too. Tomorrow I have to negotiate the contract... I'm not good at things like this. You know that,"

Maanfan murmured, her voice tinged with unease as she tried to express her fear.

The sharp-eyed woman raised her gaze, noticing the worry reflected in her client's eyes. Her thin lips curled into a reassuring smile before she pulled the blanket away, uncovering Maanfan's bare body completely.

The curvaceous body she admired so much was now fully visible, causing the younger woman to raise her hands in embarrassment to cover herself. "Even though we've done this before, it's never any less embarrassing!"

"P'! Don't tease me! I'm really worried, okay? I have to meet their CEO too, it's terrifying!"

Maanfan's sweet voice protested, unable to hold back. But the look in her companion's eyes...

"If you're going to look at me like that, just do it! I give up! My smart girl can definitely do it. Everything will be fine. But... let's keep going, shall we?"

The short-haired woman replied, chuckling softly before planting a firm kiss on the younger woman's forehead.

"B-but... do I need to pay you extra? I didn't bring much cash..."

Maanfan murmured quietly, lowering her head. Despite wanting to agree, her financial limitations weighed heavily on her.

The clear worry on Maanfan's face made Araya smile gently before shaking her head.

"This time, I'm doing it to wish my smart girl good luck. Not charging a single baht,"

Araya said with a soft smile before pressing her lips to Maanfan's soft, talkative ones, slipping her tongue inside to tangle with the smaller one, savoring the sweet taste of the woman beneath her.

Araya gently pulled away the hands Maanfan was using to cover her curvaceous figure, then leaned down to taste the soft, fragrant skin she loved so much.

The young woman, now subjected to Araya's exploration of nearly every inch of her body, could only clutch the bedsheet tightly, her face twisted with bliss as she succumbed to the fiery sensations coursing through her.

As the morning light filtered through the thin curtains, Maanfan's curvy form stirred from slumber. The aching pain throughout her body, especially around her waist, made it impossible not to recall the events of the night before.

*"I thought it was going to be just one round. But she wore me out until I fell asleep on her chest... now my whole body is sore!"*

She muttered to herself.

Even though she complained a little about the one who gave her so much pleasure the night before, she had to admit how willingly and passionately she had responded. Not a single word of protest escaped her lips, instead, her moans were so intense that her throat ended up sore.

With a long sigh, Maanfan grabbed the pillow Araya had been using, hugging it close and inhaling deeply to fill her lungs with that unique, lingering scent.

Her soft lips curved into a small smile. As for the owner of that scent? She had disappeared before Maanfan woke up, just like the last time. So mysterious. If someone told her Araya was a ghost, she might believe it, except for the soreness left as evidence of her existence.

After lying down a while longer to ease the lingering aches, Maanfan finally got up and went to the bathroom to prepare for checking out of the hotel.

*'I hope little Maanfan will use my services again next time .'*

"What is this?!"

Just a pastel-colored sticky note with a message stuck on the bathroom mirror, accompanied by a lipstick kiss left on the glass, was enough to make the sweet-faced girl smile uncontrollably.

Her delicate hand carefully picked up the sticky note, and she mumbled to the mirror, knowing the other person couldn't hear her, but feeling the need to complain anyway.

*"Why didn't you kiss the paper instead? Now I can't take it with me... what a pity."*

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After checking out of the hotel, Maanfan picked up her phone and called

Aunt Suay and Uncle Chom, two long-time employees who had been

caught up in the fallout of the lawsuit against her family's company. They were like family to her, having cared for her since a child.

"Aunt Suay, I won't be coming to the company today. I have to go meet with the company I told you about last time to discuss the contract."

"Today's the day, huh? May everything go well for you. May the blessings protect you, my dear! Chom! Come here and wish Maanfan good luck!"

Aunt Suay's loud voice echoed through the phone, making the sweet-faced girl smile warmly.

"I'll do my best, Aunt. I promised Dad I'd take care of you and Uncle. Don't worry about going hungry, okay? I'll save the company myself,"

Maanfan replied with determination.

It might have sounded like an overstatement coming from someone who had graduated in fashion less than a month ago, but those words were meant to bolster her shaky courage as she faced the daunting path ahead.

"My dear child... do your best! You can do it!"

Aunt Suay encouraged her warmly.

Having someone by her side during tough times, someone who never abandoned her, was enough for Maanfan to hold deep respect and love for Aunt Suay and Uncle Chom as if they were family.

"Thank you, Aunt! Let's celebrate tomorrow, my treat!"

After ending the call with Aunt Suay and Uncle Chom, Maanfan headed straight back to her condo to prepare for the meeting with the CEO, who would determine the fate of her family's company.

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The sweet-faced girl looked up, almost bending her neck, to see the very tall building with 50 floors in the middle of the city.

Maanfan took a deep breath to calm herself and stop her hands from shaking because she was nervous. She looked down and fixed her light brown suit, her tight skirt, and her white shirt to make sure she looked as neat as possible.

She carried a folder and an iPad with pictures of what she thought were the best products her family's company had made. These were high-quality copies that looked so real, it was very hard to see the difference between the real and the fake.

Some were so good that even touching them would not reveal they were copies. Maanfan hoped that today something good would happen.

She also brought her graduation project and design portfolio. She had prepared these for her master's degree, but her plans were ruined when her family's company was sued. Now, she carried them, hoping they could help save her company.

Feeling she was as ready as she could be, Maanfan walked into the big building of the fashion company, WTT Group. When she stepped through the large doors, she pressed her lips together and took another deep breath, getting ready for what was going to happen.

'This is my last chance, my last hope. I will grab it, no matter what! Just watch me!'

Maanfan thought as she kept walking forward with determination and focus like never before in her life.

**"I'm Maanfan. I'm here to meet Mr. Issara,"**

She said to the receptionist. The receptionist looked down to check the schedule and appointment time.

"Your appointment is at 10:30. Please go to the 49th floor,"

The receptionist said politely, gesturing toward the elevator. Her professional behavior showed she had been trained very well, what high standards this place has, Maanfan thought.

After thanking the receptionist, Maanfan stepped into the elevator and went up to the 49th floor.

The decoration of the floor was simple but very elegant and clearly expensive. The kind of expensive that made Maanfan swallow hard, trying to hide her excitement that was rising again.

She closed her eyes for a moment to calm her nerves. Then she opened them again, feeling a bit more confident.

*'Go for it, Maanfan! You've come this far. Just go all in! You can do this!'*

She could only think this to herself, trying to build up her courage. Luckily, she didn't accidentally shout it out loud and embarrass herself.

Maanfan walked up to the secretary sitting in front of Mr. Issara's office.

"I'm Maanfan. I have an appointment with Mr. Issara at 10:30."

"Please wait a moment,"

The secretary said with a smile before gesturing for Maanfan to sit on the guest sofa in front of the office. She then brought over water and snacks. Maanfan politely thanked her.

Her big round eyes glanced at her watch.

*'Almost half an hour to go? It's better to be early than late.'*

She thought.

Now, all she could do was sit and wait for her appointment time. Maanfan was so nervous that she didn't even touch the water or snacks prepared for her.

The folder she brought was opened as she checked everything one more time. The words she had practiced repeated in her head over and over. The tension on her face was obvious, anyone could sense it with just a glance.

At exactly 10:30, the phone on the secretary's desk rang. Moments later, the secretary walked over and invited Maanfan to meet the **CEO of WTT Group.**

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As soon as she stepped through the door, a faint scent filled the room, brushing against Maanfan's senses.

*'This scent... it smells just like...'*

In an instant, vivid images began flashing through her mind.

The sharp eyes that stared at her as if they wanted to devour her.

The beautiful, short-haired woman with fair skin glistening with beads of sweat. The thin lips tightly pressed together as they moved against her, intimately connecting with her in the most intense way.

**The image of... P'Araya.**

Maanfan's heart raced as she tried to gather her scattered thoughts, shaken by the familiar scent that hit her unexpectedly.

'*No... focus, Maanfan. It's just perfume. You're thinking about P'Araya way too much. Finish this first, and then you can meet her again,'*

She thought, shaking her head vigorously to regain her focus.

Her eyes wandered around the room, taking in the modern decor. The exterior had been impressive, but the interior... it was so pristine she hesitated to even touch the desk for fear of leaving fingerprints.

Her gaze eventually landed on the desk by the large window, offering a panoramic view of the bustling capital city. It was chaotic yet captivating. A large chair stood behind the desk, facing the window, with only the backrest visible.

Whoever was in the room was turned toward the window, seemingly admiring the beauty of the vibrant, chaotic cityscape. **"Hello, I'm Maanfan from Petchpaiboon Textiles,"**

She said, her voice steady but her heart pounding.

The voice, small yet filled with confidence from her careful preparation, caused the person in the chair to slowly turn around.

It was as if time almost stopped.

***Those eyes...***

***That smile...***

***That scent...***

A chilling sensation spread through Maanfan's entire body, freezing her in place. Sweat began to bead all over her despite the icy coolness of the airconditioned room. Her heart sank the moment she saw the person she had hoped would save her small tailoring shop.

Maanfan trembled, unsure if this was real or just a hallucination her mind had conjured.

Her hands, suddenly weak, accidentally threw the folder and iPad she had prepared so carefully, sending them tumbling onto the thick carpeted floor. Her mind went blank, frozen with shock, and she nearly forgot how to speak.

She could only ask herself the same question over and over in her mind.

"Hello, Ms. Maanfan,"

The voice greeted.

Wha... why?

**"I'm Issara Thewathiamchan,"**

The person introduced herself.

*Why? How could the person standing before her... was P'Araya?*

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Chapter 01 : The Boss

**"P'Araya..."**

Maanfan softly murmured the name of the person who had been with her last night, now sitting in front of her. What was going on? Was this some kind of dream? How could she be here? And why did she introduce herself as Issara?

Sharp nails dug into her palm as her hand clenched tightly, trying to stop herself from trembling. The pain that shot through her palm confirmed that this was no dream.

*Why? She didn't understand. Not at all.*

In the silence that filled the elegant office, her large round eyes reflected confusion. Her neatly arched brows furrowed so tightly they almost touched. The expression on her face made it clear just how lost she felt.

The person sitting behind the stylish desk noticed this and let out a soft sigh. Such an open book, unable to hide her emotions at all.

"Which Araya are you talking about? Maybe you didn't hear me."

She said, stopping for a moment before speaking again, slowly and clearly.

"I am Issara. I just told you my name."

Her full lips curved into a smile as she leaned back in her chair, looking calm and relaxed. She crossed her long legs. That smile was so powerful it made Maanfan feel like her spirit had come back into her body.

Maanfan blinked her big, round eyes, feeling confused as she tried to understand what was happening.

The short laugh from the woman made Maanfan feel even more nervous. Her face became hot, and her cheeks turned red. Her brain, which had stopped working for a moment, started to think again.

She realized she had been acting silly in front of the person who could save her company. She looked away from the woman, whose smiling eyes seemed to see everything. Quickly, she bent down to pick up her folder and iPad from the carpet, moving clumsily.

"Did you mistake me for someone else, or do I just look like a lot of other people?"

The woman said with a playful smile.

A sudden voice from in front of her startled Maanfan so much that her curvy figure jumped slightly before quickly looking up at the person helping her pick up the scattered items from the floor.

The slender hand reaching out to grab the fallen folder was so close to her body, wasn't it too close?

Being this near, Maanfan could clearly sense the familiar scent of perfume she had loved inhaling from the other woman's neck. How could she not recognize it?

The person who kissed her, held her, and gave her so much pleasure last night...

It was definitely P'Araya.

Her big, round eyes scanned the beautiful face in front of her, the tall and slender figure, the long legs that anyone would envy. She couldn't count how many times she had looked at this person since stepping into the office.

"It really is P'Araya,"

She muttered without thinking.

For a split second, she thought she saw a hint of amusement in those sharp eyes before the woman handed back the collected items, placing them into Maanfan's hands. Without a word, the tall woman returned to her desk.

"Please have a seat, Ms. Maanfan."

She said, her tone calm and composed.

The inviting words from the person who had just sat down at the desk pulled Maanfan forward in an awkward shuffle.

"Huh? Oh... yes,"

She stammered.

Are you avoiding the question? Changing the topic? So, are you P'Araya or not?

So many questions swirled in her head, but she didn't dare ask any of them. The composed and serious demeanor of the woman sitting behind the desk, casually twirling a pen in her fingers, suppressed her courage completely.

Maanfan sat down on the chair in front of the desk, trying her best to gather her scattered thoughts.

How many times have I lost control today? This is a disaster. Am I even going to survive this meeting? But... wow, her fingers are so slender and graceful. And... she's so skilled with them too.

Who knew just twirling a pen could look so... sexy.

Maanfan couldn't help but watch the pen spinning between those long, elegant fingers. Her eyes followed the motion until the pen was tapped lightly against the desk, as if to pull her back to reality.

She quickly shifted her gaze from the fingers to meet the sharp eyes now looking straight at her.

"I'm sure you still remember why you're here today, don't you?"

The woman said, her voice calm but firm.

The question was delivered with a smile that reached only her lips, not her sharp eyes. That piercing gaze didn't hold even the faintest trace of warmth, making Maanfan shudder.

She had completely forgotten, too caught up in the shock about P'Araya.

Realizing this, she took a deep breath, slowly exhaled, and tried to focus again. Right now, it didn't matter who the person in front of her might be. What mattered was why she was here.

"I remember. I apologize for being rude to you earlier... Ms. Issara," She said, her tone polite and formal.

The formality of her words made Issara raise an eyebrow slightly, her expression betraying a hint of displeasure. She wasn't used to being addressed so stiffly, it felt oddly out of place.

"Good. Let's get started then,"

Issara said smoothly.

"I'll be honest with you, I'm looking to form a new team, and your company is my choice."

With that, she slid a contract across the table toward Maanfan, inviting her to review it. Maanfan carefully flipped through the pages, reading each line with focused attention.

"Why my company?"

She finally asked, her voice steady but curious.

"Someone like you must have plenty of other options."

Even though Maanfan knew it might be risky to ask, her curiosity was stronger. She couldn't stop herself from speaking.

"A 30% preferred share without management rights, after completing the project? Isn't that too much? It feels suspicious,"

She said carefully.

The CEO's calm response made Maanfan look up from the contract. She looked at the CEO's face, trying to figure out if this was true or if there was something hidden.

"Yes, you could say that,"

The CEO replied with a small smile.

"But I want something simple, with no interference or connections from anyone else."

Maanfan thought carefully before speaking again.

"If you don't explain more to me, it will be hard for us to work together. My company can't take big risks anymore, you must know that."

The CEO smiled a little, clearly impressed. Smart, careful, and thoughtful, just what she had expected.

"It's just a competition to find the best person for the next president position,"

The short haired woman explained casually.

"New team, new project. It's a fashion competition where each team launches a clothing brand and competes. The team that makes the most revenue after four quarters wins and gets the president's chair. Honestly, I'm impressed with the precision of your company's work. Your designs are pretty good too."

The short-haired woman continued flipping through Maanfan's portfolio, speaking as if these details weren't a big deal.

*Confidence? One million out of one hundred! Absolutely sky high!*

"And what about saying no connections and no interference?"

"Well... A company with lawsuits and lots of debt, who would want to get involved? Also, this competition is probably not very clean. I don't want a spy from another competitor. Even though it's a bit risky... I like taking risks."

The female CEO spoke with a laugh. Turning the truth into a joke, it's hard to deny what she said. It was so straightforward that it made me sigh. Are we really discussing the future of a top company in the country?

"You're probably right, Miss Issara. And what about the shares?"

"Oh, you will only get the shares if I win. But if I lose, you'll still get paid. You only gain, see? Whether it's a lot or a little depends on your skills."

Her words were like a professional salesperson's pitch, making Maanfan's lips twitch slightly. It made her want to smirk.

But the payment is worth the risk. There's work, there's cash flow, there's money for lawsuits, and money to pay debts. My father's company can survive this crisis.

This isn't just interesting, but it's...

"Very, very interesting."

The contract was opened and read again very carefully. The person in front of her sat, resting their chin on their hand, watching her without any hurry. But it was so annoying, especially with that smile, as if everything was under their control.

"The next question I want to hear from you is, '*When should we start working together?*' I hope that's the one,"

Issara said after seeing the other person close the contract. A sigh and a slight frown on the eyebrows made a soft smile appear on her lips. So adorable, really.

"When should we start working together?"

"As soon as you sign your name on that contract, Miss Maanfan. And there's a meeting this afternoon. Here are some documents you should review briefly,"

The sharp featured woman smiled at the wide-eyed person in front of her.

"What?! ...!?"

"Too fast! This is so rushed!"

"Are you ready? Do you remember what I asked you to read?"

The tall female CEO asked, glancing at her watch. The meeting was scheduled for 3 PM, as her secretary had reminded her.

"I remember! But not all of it. Maybe about 70%,"

The wide-eyed woman replied, throwing her a sideways glance. She had memorized it like it was a final exam, cramming everything into her head with so much focus that she nearly forgot to eat.

It was a good thing the new boss ordered her secretary to bring food into the office. Otherwise, there was no way she would have eaten anything.

At first, she didn't want to eat. But the boss said,

"You'll probably faint during your first meeting."

That would be quite embarrassing. In the end, she agreed to eat with the boss.

"It's just to introduce you to the other two teams, basically a meeting to show off the team members. Nothing too serious. You can handle it,"

Issara said, leading the way to the elevator, followed by Maanfan and her secretary.

The nervousness and excitement made Maanfan fidgety. Today had been such a heavy day for her.

She came for a job interview and met someone who looked like the woman she knew. She got the job, far beyond her expectations.

And now, she was being dragged into a competition for the company president's chair. Not to mention having to prepare for a lightning fast meeting...

Right now, it felt like all the energy had been drained from her body. But fine, bring it on. She could handle it. She was Maanfan, after all. She could do this!

Even though she tried to cheer herself up, it didn't really help much. It was probably too overwhelming for her. Her slender shoulders drooped, her eyebrows furrowed deeply, and she let out a long sigh.

Her changing expressions, one moment pale faced, the next with sparkling eyes, and then back to frowning, were reflected in the elevator mirror. The short haired woman couldn't help but chuckle at the sight.

Even her secretary didn't dare look, turning to face the elevator wall instead, likely afraid of laughing and shattering Maanfan's confidence. But Issara didn't want to pressure her any more than she already had.

After all, Issara had thrown way too much at Maanfan today. Truth be told, there was no need for Maanfan to attend this meeting. It was just a progress update on team recruitment. But, well...

*Who wouldn't want to tease someone so adorably easy to fluster?*

Who could resist keeping someone like her close? The sweetness and charm of this gentle faced girl had truly been a big help to Issara.

"Why are you so nervous, Miss Maanfan?"

Issara couldn't help but start a conversation to ease the girl's anxiety.

"It's all so sudden. I wasn't prepared. It feels more like a dream than reality. I'm just a recent graduate. Can I really handle this?"

Maanfan confessed softly, her sweet face lowered as she stared at her hands, now damp with sweat. The elevator's numbers slowly ticked down, as if it were taking her to an execution ground. Everything felt so suffocating.

"I never misjudge people. Not once,"

Issara said with a confident smile spreading across her sharp features. That expression made the younger woman burst into laughter.

Wow, such over-the-top self confidence...

Things were starting to fall into place and getting better.

It didn't take long for the elevator to stop at the meeting floor.

The doors opened, and they walked a short distance to reach the large conference room, exuding a modern and sophisticated atmosphere. The meeting table and walls were pristine, as if brand new. The polished stone floor sparkled, and a projector on the far wall was already turned on, ready for use.

As they entered, Maanfan scanned the room and couldn't help but admire the interior design. It truly fit the standard of an executive level meeting room.

The tall and elegant figure of the female CEO strode through the door and headed straight to her designated seat.

All eyes turned toward their team, the last to arrive. Maanfan couldn't help but flinch, startled by suddenly becoming the center of attention. She instinctively glanced back at the others.

The two teams were seated separately in spots marked with nameplates. Her wide eyes grew even larger when she spotted one of the partners from the two teams.

**Iris!!**

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The memories came rushing back, the beginning of her father's company's downfall.

"Don't worry, Fan. Just copy it. Shining Star is my mom's brand. If there's a problem, I can talk it out."

"Are you sure, Ai? I'm scared there'll be trouble."

"Of course it's fine. Trust me. My mom's designs are gorgeous-they'll sell easily."

"Alright... if you say so."

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"Iris!! Why is my dad being sued? You said you'd handle it! You have to help us, your mom's brand is suing my dad!"

"Did I ever say I'd clear it up? Sorry, Fan, but copycats deserve to be sued."

"How could you do this, Iris? You told me to-"

"Where's your proof? Don't go making things up, Fan. Anyway, thanks! Your company's knock-offs are really well-made. They made me earned a lot of money, I'm impressed."

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**Iris!! The ex, the ultimate Bi\*ch!**

Chapter 02: Araya

**"Iris!"**

A soft cry, mixed with anger and pain, slipped from her lips. Her big round eyes narrowed, staring at the person who once knew her heart but used her and threw her away like trash.

No matter how much time had passed, she could never forget this face.

Sharp and elegant, with upward tilted eyes and a sweet smile on a bright, confident face. Dressed in a neat black suit with long pants and an offshoulder neckline, showing her collarbone. This person always made sure to look perfect.

Her long hair, curled softly at the ends and left to fall down her back, looked so delicate. She hadn’t changed at all—not even a little—from the person in her memories.

The person who once seemed so kind. She used to give her a smile.

That bright, harmless demeanor… It was only later she realized it was just a mask, hiding the cruel nature that would stab her in the back every time she let her guard down.

It was hidden so well. By the time she noticed, she had almost been destroyed by this woman’s malice.

Even though her words were spoken softly, in the silence of the meeting room, they sounded loud enough for the owner of the name to notice. Iris decided to walk toward the person who hadn’t stopped staring at her without blinking.

Every step Iris took felt like it was stomping right on her heart.

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“Fan, what are you doing here?”

That sweet smile, paired with her familiar way of addressing the new recruit, made Issara freeze in her tracks and turn to look.

Maanfan gave no reply, only stepping aside to avoid the confident woman’s hand that was reaching out to touch her arm—a silent response to the greeting.

Her big round eyes, clouded and narrowed, stared silently at the person walking toward her. That expression, so easy to read, made the boss ask without hesitation.

“Do you know each other, Miss Maanfan?”

Before Maanfan could reply, her ex spoke up instead.

“Yes, we know each other. Very well, in fact. Let’s talk later, Fan. Miss Issara, excuse me for now.”

Before the sweet-faced woman could say anything, the sharp and elegant Iris answered for her, then quickly excused herself to return to her seat as the meeting was about to start soon.

A smile Issara’s lips as she nodded, allowing Iris to return to her place as requested. She turned back to look at her own team member, who now had her fists clenched so tightly that her hands were trembling. It seemed she had forgotten all the pep talk before entering the meeting room...

“Let’s go.”

“Yes.”

A short response, followed by her steps toward the seat beside Issara, brought a faint smile to the boss’s thin lips. Still composed, even if a bit shaken, but managing to separate personal matters from work—just barely passing. The female boss silently gave her new team member a mental score.

“You know that girl? Issara’s partner...”

As soon as she sat down, the deep voice of the man seated in the team leader’s chair asked, pulling Iris’s attention toward him. Though he didn’t look directly at her, his question was clearly aimed her way.

“Yes, Khun Tara. I know him very well.”

The tall, well-built man, sharp-featured and dressed in a sleek gray suit tailored to perfection, exuded wealth and prestige. Tara, one of the three team leaders competing for the company’s president seat, had just as much of a chance as Issara.

With an equal share of company stock and exceptional managerial skills, they were practically neck-and-neck.

“Oh, really? And how well do you know him?”

The thoughtful expression on the young team leader’s face made Iris chuckle. She knew he was intrigued by the person she had just greeted. After all, the one with the most information is the one who can control the business game. And when it comes to details about the competition, his curiosity was practically buzzing.

“I’d say I know every corner, every little detail,”

She replied, emphasizing the words with a playful sparkle in her eyes, clearly enjoying herself.

The man turned his chair to face his partner, locking eyes with her.

“Every corner, like the way I know you?”

His sharp eyes roamed over the elegant woman’s body with a boldness that bordered on intrusive. The target of his gaze casually flipped her hair back, exposing her pale shoulders, allowing him to take in the view without any effort. A smile curved her full lips, painted a vivid red, as his gaze grew more intense. She nodded lightly in response to his question.

“Wait... Don’t tell me…”

*“Yes, she’s my ex,”*

Iris said with a smirk. “Ha! That fool, huh…”

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Tara lost interest in Issara’s team member almost instantly. What was Issara thinking, bringing someone so foolish into her team? Was she planning to give up and just threw together a random team? If that were the case, good!

A satisfied smirk tugged at the corners of Tara’s lips.

When the meeting ended, the participants began to leave, returning to their work or heading off to plan their next moves.

Issara’s team also started to gather their things. The tall CEO, however, took her time collecting the documents on the table, moving deliberately slow to ensure everyone else had left the room first.

It seemed she had something to discuss with her partner, who currently looked far from okay.

Issara turned and handed some documents to her secretary for a summary of the meeting. She always treated this particular secretary with a neutral demeanor, consistent and unchanging.

However, the secretary's skill and meticulousness earned Issara’s respect, allowing her to overlook the odd quirks of this person.

“Miss Maanfan, from the meeting earlier, do you have any questions? Do you understand everything?”

She directed the question to the wide-eyed woman, who had finished packing her things and was now standing there, waiting for her. The overly calm demeanor made Issara unsure whether Maanfan had truly separated personal matters from work.

“Yes,”

Maanfan replied shortly, causing the short-haired boss to turn and glance at her.

“Looks like you’re worse off than I thought,”

Issara muttered to herself as Maanfan appeared lost in her own thoughts.

Truthfully, Maanfan hadn’t caught much of the details from the recent meeting. She only understood the general agreement about the competition rules, which were thoroughly explained and supported with documents. Her mind had wandered, caught up in thoughts about past mistakes.

“Oh, and don’t forget to treat your wounds, Miss Maanfan.”

“Huh?!...”

The shocked expression on the young team member’s face made the female boss gently pull her hand, loosening the tight grip.

“The wound on your hand, go and treat it.”

'She really noticed… I thought I hid it well. But the greenish bruises and scratches, caused by gripping my hand so tightly that my nails dug into my skin, were still visible.'

The warmth of the tall woman’s hand holding her wrist made her relax, slowly opening her tightly clenched fist. The sight of blood-stained nails caused the boss’s eyebrows to furrow with concern.

“Miss Maanfan, can we talk?”

The voice came from someone still waiting at the door. They had been waiting so long that they finally walked back to find her. The hand that had just relaxed clenched tightly again as she tried to twist her wrist free from the grip.

“So stubborn, little one…”

The file that had been in the female boss’s hand was shoved into the bigeyed girl’s hands.

“Hold this for me, Miss Maanfan.”

Her clenched hand loosened to take the file she was handed. A faint, satisfied smile appeared on the boss’s lips as she gently pulled her team member along, guiding her back to the office.

Before leaving, she turned reluctantly to the person who had called out to Maanfan and spoke with slight hesitation.

"Sorry, but Maanfan and I have another meeting to attend. We can't afford to waste any more time. Excuse us, Miss…?"

Iris tried to smile, but it didn’t quite reach her eyes. She had been standing and waiting for so long, only for the other person to rush her off, saying they were too busy to stay.

The awkwardness lasted only for a moment before she quickly suppressed it, forcing a polite smile back onto her face.

However, before she could even introduce herself...

“Oh, never mind. It’s not important to me anyway.”

Iris’s expression, a strange mix of a forced smile and furrowed brows, looked so odd that it made Maanfan stifle a laugh. Her boss really had quite the sharp tongue.

“But I think you should remember her, Issara. She’s practically the cupid that brought you and me together,”

Said the deep voice of the tall, sharp dressed man in a perfectly tailored gray suit, breaking the tense atmosphere.

“What nonsense are you talking about, Tara?”

Issara replied, her tone carrying a hint of irritation.

Maanfan glanced at the newcomer, studying him carefully. His sharp, cleancut face and well-groomed appearance, combined with his fit and tidy physique, gave him the air of a polished gentleman.

However, the way he looked at her felt odd, so unsettling that her instincts warned her to stay away.

“Let me officially introduce you,”

The man said with a smooth tone.

“This is Iris, the person who will help me win the presidency and get you as my wife, as promised.”

“Your wife? Sorry, but I have no interest in a man who’s likely to lose the battle for the chairman’s seat and end up packing his bags for a subsidiary company,”

Issara replied sharply.

The cutting exchange between the two team leaders left their team members wide eyed and speechless.

“Ouch! Be gentle, please.”

Maanfan flinched, pulling her hand away from the person trying to treat her wound. They were in the oflfice where she had spent the morning handling meetings.

“I really like your voice.”

The mischievous smile and sparkling eyes sent a rush of heat to the big eyed girl’s cheeks. That playful demeanor reminded her of someone else.

“P’Araya…”

“It’s Issara, Miss Maanfan. Get it right.”llll

The slightly stern tone, as if scolding a stubborn child, made Maanfan avert her gaze.

“What’s this? Just a moment ago, you were all playful. Now you’re scolding me?”

“I’m sorry…”

She murmured softly.

The soft apology and the downcast demeanor of her partner made the shorthaired woman want to reach out and ruffle that silky hair. So endearing, as always.

“Good girl.”

Issara held back the urge, instead walking back to her desk. She picked up a small notebook and brought it over to the girl still sitting gloomily on the sofa.

“Here, this is your notebook. From now on, you need to carry it everywhere and write down anything you think is important for work. Understand?”

“Yes, Boss,”

Maanfan replied flatly, accepting the order. Did her boss even know about iPads, notebooks, or smartphones? What era was this? But if it was an order, all she could do was follow it.

“Now you won’t be able to claw at your own hand anymore.”

“Pardon? What did you say?”

She thought she heard something just now but couldn’t quite catch it.

“Nothing. Why?”

Maanfan looked confused but didn’t press further. The boss walked back to her desk and motioned for her to sit down. It was a clear signal: Pay attention! Without saying a word, Issara’s actions made it obvious.

“You probably understand by now how important the competition for the chairman’s seat is to me.”

The big-eyed girl nodded. After witnessing Issara’s heated argument with Tara earlier, which had left her sweating nervously, she had grasped at least part of it.

“This competition is also tied to marriage arrangements. Well, you know how these decisions from the older generation go.”

“That sounds terrible,”

Maanfan said, her worry immediately apparent.

“As long as I win, isn’t that all that matters? Don’t you agree?”

Issara’s sharp gaze seemed to seek her confirmation.

The explanation from the short-haired woman, delivered with a serious expression, confirmed what Maanfan had suspected: Issara and Tara were engaged because their families wanted to form an alliance.

“Do me a favor. I don’t want to marry a man like him,” Issara said firmly.

Still feeling a bit unsure, Maanfan nodded seriously, which earned her a smile from her boss.

“Alright... now back to work. You already know the rules. Let’s start with the basics—do you have any ideas for the brand name?”

The sudden change of topic caught the big-eyed girl off guard. She froze for a moment before starting to think hard.

A brand name? What should it be?

Maanfan thought deeply while Issara sat beside her, waiting patiently without pressuring her. And then, a flicker of determination appeared in Maanfan’s eyes.

The corners of Issara’s lips curved up slightly.

“Seems like you’ve thought of a good name, haven’t you?”

Maanfan nodded.

“What is it, Miss Maanfan?”

It was as if she needed to gather some courage before her small lips could form the words.

**“Araya… the name is Araya.”**

Issara’s eyes widened slightly in surprise.

“Araya. That’s the name of the brand,”

Maanfan repeated.

Her subordinate’s answer left Issara, the poised executive, momentarily stunned. Then, a satisfied smile spread across her face.

Goodness, this girl…

"That's a good name. I'm not disappointed in you, Maanfan."

Chapter 03. One More Time

In a small factory on the outskirts of the city, Maanfan, dressed in a dark Tshirt and shorts, sat intently in front of a computer running basic design software.

She was sketching with a well-known brand’s pen tablet, one she had bought for herself when she first graduated. However, the tablet’s condition now seemed far from the quality promised by its brand name.

Her slender hand moved back and forth, sketching designs on the screen. Her boss had tasked her with creating two dress designs for the debut collection of the brand Araya.

Sure, there was a team of designers available to support her, but her respected boss had decided she wanted fresh ideas from someone outside the design team for a change.

She gave her only one week. Which would’ve been great… If there weren’t only three days left!

'*How unique does she want it? She didn’t even say! Should I make it cut from the chest to the heels? Ugh, I can’t think of anything!'*

Frustrated, Maanfan pushed the pen tablet away from her and removed her glasses, the ones she only wore when reading or using the computer. She placed them carelessly on the desk.

“None of these look good,”

She muttered, rubbing her temples.

“I think I’m out of ideas.”

She had been drawing and erasing for hours with no progress. She admitted this work matched her field of study, but when she signed the contract, she thought she would be in production—just taking orders and making products from designs.

But this? Designing the clothes herself? They were working her to the bone!

“I didn’t major in design, did I? Ugh!”

Grumbling and whining to herself for a while, the big-eyed girl finally let her head fall onto the desk with a heavy sigh. Her sweet face looked shiny with exhaustion, her long hair tied messily into a bun, with stray strands sticking out in every direction. Dark circles under her eyes showed how many late nights she had endured.

She was completely drained, with no energy left to dig through her mind for anything her professors might have taught her.

“Maybe taking a break will help. Maybe I’ll clear my head and think of something…”

With that thought, Maanfan dragged herself to the sofa in the corner of her office. She walked past the mess of scattered papers, remnants of her hard work and brainstorming all day.

She tossed the fashion magazines she had been using for reference onto the floor near the sofa to make space for herself to lie down and sneak in a quick nap.

But as soon as she closed her eyes, a loud knocking—almost pounding—at the door startled her. She jumped up from the sofa, exhausted and frazzled. “Miss Fan! Miss Fan, please open the door! The printer isn’t working!”

The voice and pounding grew louder and more frantic, coming from Aunt

Suay, one of the factory workers downstairs, who was working overtime tonight. The knocking and shouting were so noisy that, no matter how tired Maanfan was, she quickly dragged herself to the door to open it.

If she was too slow, she feared Aunt Suay might actually break the door down.

“Yes, yes, Aunt Suay, I heard you! What’s wrong?”

She asked as she opened the door.

In her current state, far from looking presentable, Maanfan startled Aunt Suay, who had come knocking.

“Oh my! Did I disturb your nap, Miss Fan? It’s just… the printer isn’t working. I followed everything you taught me, but it still won’t print. And the job is urgent, so I…”

Aunt Suay stammered, apologizing nervously for interrupting Maanfan’s rest. She hadn’t meant to, but the urgency left her no choice.

“It’s fine, Aunt Suay. The shirt pattern printer, right? Give me a moment. I’ll come down and check.”

Aunt Suay nodded and headed back downstairs to the factory. Maanfan turned to grab the glasses she had left on the desk, putting them on as she followed. She didn’t bother fixing herself up.

They’d known each other for so long—some of the workers had been there since she was a child running around half-dressed. It wasn’t the first time they’d seen her in such a state.

The factory downstairs was a clothing production facility. In the past, it had been a hub for high-quality replicas. Now, it only took custom orders, though sometimes simple design jobs were added to the workload.

In the factory, there were still three or four male and female workers, all around their fifties. Each was a skilled artisan, meticulous and consistent in maintaining the factory's standards.

Back in the day, before Maanfan’s father was sued, these issues never reached her because there were always technicians to handle them.

But after the lawsuit drained their finances, things changed. Some employees started resigning due to delayed salary payments, while others were let go as part of budget cuts. Many were even poached by other factories.

The only ones who remained were those unwilling to start over elsewhere— people who had been there since the early days, working alongside her father.

Even though the overtime pay wasn’t much and often not worth it, their loyalty kept them working together through thick and thin. Maanfan respected and appreciated them deeply, feeling a strong sense of duty to lead the factory out of its current crisis.

“Here, Miss Fan. I pressed it like this, but nothing happened, so we couldn’t keep working,”

Aunt Suay explained, demonstrating how the buttons on the machine stayed unresponsive.

Maanfan looked at the production line, now stalled. The large fan that dried the shirts after printing was silent, the heat press stood idle waiting for the next shirt, and the completed shirts ready for packing sat untouched.

Everything had come to a halt. She turned her gaze toward the remaining unprinted shirts, about 200 more to go. It would take the whole night, and with the deadline approaching, calling a technician was out of the question, they wouldn’t arrive until morning, and it would cost a significant amount.

There was no choice but to rely on makeshift repairs using her limited knowledge.

Maanfan approached the printing machine, a flatbed printer about 90 centimeters wide, capable of both computer-based printing and screen block printing. The blinking light on the machine caught her attention, prompting her to pull out the manual.

“Ink absorber full!”

She sighed. She had just cleaned it at the beginning of the month, and now it claimed to be full again. She wanted to roll her eyes so hard they’d reach Mars.

Maanfan understood the basic mechanics of the machine. The ink absorber referred to the sponge that collected excess ink during startup, test prints, or regular operation.

There wasn’t a program to accurately measure when the absorber was full; instead, it was estimated based on the number of prints made. This was often a sneaky trick by some companies to force users to send their machines in for servicing.

This time was no different. The reason the machine stopped working was likely because it had reached the preset print limit programmed into it.

Maanfan was sure the ink absorber couldn’t possibly be full. Why?

“No way it’s full. I just cleaned it myself. Ugh, guess I’ll have to do it again.”

“Time to use some tricks,”

She thought, reaching into the pocket of her shorts to pull out a flash drive. The drive contained a program to unlock the printer and stop it from saying the ink absorber was full—a program that had been incredibly hard to find and get working.

Ever since her father got sick and had to stay in the hospital, leaving her to manage the factory, Maanfan had started researching ways to fix thing sherself. This program was one of the solutions she found to cut costs and handle the machines on her own.

But getting the program hadn’t been easy. She had to remove countless viruses, reinstall Windows three times, and test many programs that didn’t work. In the end, though, it was worth it. The money saved on technician calls was significant, and she could now fix many problems herself.

Maanfan plugged in the flash drive and ran the program to reset the printer’s job count. Even though she knew it wasn’t exactly the “right” thing to do, every penny was crucial for her company right now. Within moments, the printer was back to working, and the stalled production line could finally start moving again.

“Done!”

Her cheerful voice echoed her relief as she successfully got the machine working again, even if it meant using her little “trick.” Her hands, stained with ink and smudges from inspecting the printer and cartridges, were raised to wipe the sweat from her forehead.

The action left a long streak of ink across her skin, prompting chuckles from the workers watching her repair the machine.

“Miss Fan, dear, your face is all dirty now…”

The older woman who had called Maanfan to check the machine spoke with warmth in her voice. She had been working at the factory since she was young, long before the current boss was even born. Now, seeing Maanfan

handle everything herself, she couldn’t help but feel a mix of affection and pity for the young woman taking on so much responsibility.

Carrying so much on her shoulders, the older worker knew she didn’t have much education to truly support her young boss. All she could do was remain loyal and do her job to the best of her ability.

After being teased, Maanfan tried wiping the stain off her forehead, but the more she wiped, the worse it got. The single smudge turned into a full mess, smearing across almost her entire forehead.

The older woman gently grabbed her hand to stop her and sent the other workers, who were laughing affectionately at their boss’s antics, back to their stations.

“Miss Fan, I’m sorry for bothering you, dear. Are you tired? Lately, I’ve seen you sleeping in the office all the time,”

The older woman asked kindly, her wrinkled hand lightly squeezing Maanfan’s smooth one, offering comfort and encouragement.

Maanfan’s big eyes burned with unshed tears. She hadn’t felt tired when she was alone, but being asked that question suddenly made her realize just how exhausted she truly was.

Still, she forced a smile, knowing that as a leader, she couldn’t afford to show weakness. She had to be strong for the many lives in the factory depending on her to keep moving forward.

“Yes, I’m tired. But I can still manage. There’s still a long way to go… a long way ahead.”

“It’s okay, dear. We aunts, uncles, and everyone here will never leave you! Right, everyone?”

Aunt Suay’s voice rang out as she turned to shout at the workers who had been eavesdropping on the conversation. They responded with enthusiastic shouts of agreement, cheering Maanfan on.

The lump in her throat grew heavier, and she had to quietly swallow back a sob. She thanked everyone for standing by her, even in these tough times.

“Thank you… We’ll get through this together. I promise.”

Maanfan was about to head back to her office upstairs when Uncle Chom, Aunt Suay’s husband, called out to her after finishing a phone call.

“Miss Fan, I just got off the phone with Mr. Pok from Pattaya. He wants to order 1,000 tank tops each of Nike and Adidas, grade-A quality. Should we take the order?”

"Fake goods again…"

Maanfan stopped, her foot still on the staircase. She held the banister tightly and let out a deep sigh.

"No. The factory is still in a legal case. I don’t want to take the risk."

Her eyebrows pulled together. She knew this order could bring in a lot of money to help the factory. But with the contract she made with Issara, it was important to make the factory look better and stay away from anything illegal. She had already put her boss in enough risk.

"Miss Fan, just take the order,"

Said an older man in the factory, holding up a packed shirt.

"Mr. Pok has been a client for a long time and has never caused any trouble. You know that just making charity run shirts isn’t enough to survive."

His words hit Maanfan hard. She understood the factory’s situation well. Some workers supported her, but others stayed only because they had no choice. Many still doubted her ability as the new owner.

Maanfan pressed her lips together tightly and closed her eyes for a moment to hide her hesitation. Then she opened her eyes again, showing firm determination.

"No!! I won’t take this order. Uncle Chom, please let Mr. Pok know,"

Maanfan replied firmly, her eyes filled with determination. She turned and walked back upstairs to her office, leaving the older man who had questioned her decision to face his wife’s scolding.

"You, keep your mouth shut!"

"Ow! Let go, woman! I was just saying the truth..."

"Oh, still talking, are you?!"

Their bickering echoed faintly upstairs as Maanfan closed the door to her office. She couldn’t help but sigh deeply. Her eyes scanned the messy office, cluttered with papers and books scattered everywhere.

Carefully stepping over the mess, she headed straight into the bathroom.

Inside the bathroom, Maanfan washed the stains from her hands and forehead. She looked up, catching her reflection in the mirror above the sink. Her tired eyes and weary expression stared back at her, the exhaustion clearly visible.

"Tired… stressed… How much longer can I endure this? Hang in there, you’ve got this…”

She muttered softly to herself.

After staring at her reflection for a moment, the big-eyed woman finally returned to the same sofa, ready to rest at last. Forcing herself to work wouldn’t help, she was too drained to think clearly.

Just as she was about to drift off, a familiar notification sound from an app she had downloaded a while ago pulled her attention. Half-asleep, she squinted at her phone, only to fully wake up when she read the message:

**Girly Shopping:**

*"Girly Shopping wants to treat our loyal customers! Use code:*

*ShopWithYourBestie to get 20% off. If you're interested, apply the code on the Girly Shopping app. Thank you for supporting Girly Shopping!"*

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Her drowsiness vanished instantly.

*'****My old shopping buddy, P’Araya.'***

Maanfan’s face flushed red as she thought of the stunning and stylish P’Araya, who always greeted her with warm smiles and affectionate eyes.

Her cheeks grew even hotter as she recalled their shopping trips, often filled with unspoken undertones and hidden meanings.

But just as those thoughts came to mind, another image flickered in.

'*Miss Maanfan, I’m Issara Thewathiamchan.'*

The boss—elegant, confident, and commanding—her presence radiated power and authority. Issara was a picture-perfect twin of P’Araya, yet their personalities were polar opposites. If judged by appearance alone, they could easily be mistaken for the same person.

Maanfan’s thoughts became a tangled mess. Work weighed heavily on her mind, and now her personal life refused to give her a moment’s rest.

Considering her current financial situation, spending money on stress relief like shopping with P’Araya wasn’t a smart decision. She needed to cut back and focus on saving every baht. With a heavy sigh, Maanfan placed her phone back down.

But then…

**Girly Shopping [Araya]:**

"Maanfan, are you interested in using the code?"

Even though she had carefully calculated her income and expenses, a single sentence from P’Araya was enough to make Maanfan type in the code and her credit card number into the Girly Shopping app. All the while, she grumbled to herself in frustration.

'So easy, Maanfan. Just one message, and you’re already running to her. Looks like I’ll be eating instant noodles at the end of the month again.'

Just thinking about the credit card bill coming at the end of the month gave her a headache. If that was the case, she thought, she’d better make this worth it.

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Maanfan made up her mind as she knocked on the same hotel room door— P’Araya’s room, which had never changed. How P’Araya always managed to book the exact same room every time was a mystery, but that wasn’t important. What mattered was the person inside.

With that thought, she slid the keycard she’d received from the reception desk into the door. After informing the reception who she was meeting, Maanfan received the keycard to the room.

Although she was surprised by the luxurious setting, she understood it was likely because the app partnered with the hotel. That’s probably why

P’Araya could always book the same room at such a surprisingly low rate.

“Maanfan, I’ve been waiting for you!”

The sweet greeting came from the six-foot white bed in the center of the room. Above the bed’s headboard was a perfectly placed framed painting, complementing the cream-colored walls.

The short-haired woman looked up from the English book she had been reading and gave a syrupy smile to the wide-eyed girl who had just arrived.

She placed the book on the bedside lamp table, while the open curtains revealed a peaceful view of the Chao Phraya River, a stark contrast to the confusion and exhaustion written all over Maanfan’s face as she walked in.

Maanfan removed her long-sleeved jacket, draping it over the sofa near the bed. Her eyes wandered to the person lounging comfortably, legs tucked under the thick, luxurious bedding. The crisp white long-sleeve shirt, with sleeves rolled up to the elbows, reminded her of someone else, the person who had handed her such a tough workload.

"Miss Issara…"

Maanfan’s wide eyes, clearly reflecting her confusion, were enough to draw the slender figure out of bed. The woman tossed the blanket aside, revealing long, bare legs as she gracefully stepped onto the floor and walked toward her.

The sight of those fair, model-like legs made Maanfan gasp audibly, her chest rising sharply as heat rushed to her cheeks. Her heart pounded so hard and fast she feared the other woman might hear it.

As she approached, the thin long-sleeve shirt she wore glowed almost translucent under the bedside lamp, revealing that she wore nothing underneath except for a small piece of fabric below—a quick flash of red as she stepped down, a color Maanfan instantly recognized as her favorite. “You look so tired. Why don’t you take a bath? I’ll help you,”

The short-haired woman said, leaning close to whisper against Maanfan’s ear. Her arm looped gently around the sweet-faced girl’s, pulling her forward before Maanfan could even respond.

The two walked toward the bathroom, where warm water was already waiting in the tub. The short-haired woman had clearly prepared it ahead of time, knowing Maanfan’s punctual nature.

“Uh… um… I already took a bath,”

Maanfan stammered, her senses finally snapping back to reality. She felt overwhelmingly uneasy.

*Could it be? Was P’Araya and Miss Issara the same person after all?*

Why was this happening? Work stress was already overwhelming, and now she had to deal with something like this too.

The thought of her physical outlet being her boss was too much.

They needed to talk. At the very least, Maanfan had to confirm if P’Araya and Issara were the same person. It was the only way to stop feeling like she was some kind of plaything, being toyed with for someone else’s amusement.

P’Araya tried to coax her, but the girl in her arms stubbornly refused. Why did she always have to be so difficult? The tall woman ignored her protests and pulled the smaller girl into the bathroom anyway.

“Yes… I already took a bath,”

Maanfan began, trying to protest again.

“But if you bathe me… again… You might feel more relaxed.”

P’Araya whispered close to her lips before claiming them in a firm kiss, not giving Maanfan another chance to object. Her wide eyes opened in shock but slowly closed as the taller woman’s warm tongue softly but skillfully sought hers. The taste, familiar and addictive, was something she could never seem to get enough of.

No! This isn’t right! We need to talk first! Maanfan’s mind screamed, but her body betrayed her as the kiss deepened.

The sweet-faced girl turned her head away to escape the warm, almost burning lips pressing against hers. But it only gave the other woman access to her delicate, fragrant neck. As soon as those lips touched her sensitive skin, Maanfan flinched sharply.

The short-haired woman slid her hands under Maanfan’s brightly colored Tshirt, running them across her back before effortlessly undoing her bra with a single motion.

The sudden relief from the tightness around her chest made Maanfan push against the taller woman’s shoulders, trying to stop her. The taller woman pulled back easily, but not without tugging the T-shirt over her head, leaving Maanfan’s upper body bare under the light.

The sight made the other woman’s sharp eyes gleam with satisfaction, a small smile forming on her lips.

“You’re so selfish! This is just like Issara. You’re the same person, aren’t you? Do you enjoy messing with me like this?”

The sharp-eyed woman saw the confusion turn into anger in Maanfan’s big eyes, those eyes that revealed every feeling, every emotion. She couldn’t help but think to herself, She’s so bad at hiding her feelings.

Maybe I’ve pushed her too far this time.

“Let me help you take a bath, okay? I’ll massage your shoulders too. You look so tired, Maanfan. I’m just worried about you… please?”

She said softly, trying to soothe her.

The soft, coaxing tone came at just the right moment, causing the sweetfaced girl, who had been covering her chest, to let her anger fade.

Though her eyes still held traces of confusion and doubt, Maanfan allowed the other woman to remove the rest of her clothes. She stepped into the warm water of the oversized bathtub, large enough for two, and closed her eyes, trying to sort out her thoughts.

The promise of a shoulder massage lingered in her mind when the sound of fabric rustling against skin made her open her eyes.

The elegant woman was unbuttoning her white shirt, one button at a time, before letting it fall to the floor. This was followed by a lacy red underwear, which she slowly slid down her long, slender legs in a deliberately seductive manner, her eyes and movements teasing Maanfan with every step.

**“Beautiful…”**

The word slipped from Maanfan’s lips before she could stop herself, her eyes locking onto the sharp, intense gaze that now shimmered with delight. The other woman had figured her out, she knew exactly what would make Maanfan weak.

Her heartbeat quickened again, and her swirling confusion started to melt away under the growing flame of desire ignited by the stunning figure now stepping into the tub.

Her breath came faster, heat rising to her cheeks and spreading throughout her body. She blamed the temperature of the water and the soft, smooth hands pressing into her shoulders. The firmness yet softness of the body pressing against her from behind only heightened the sensations, making her lose herself in the moment.

Maanfan leaned back, letting her weight rest in the embrace of the person holding her.

“Tired, huh? Your shoulders are so tense,”

The soft voice asked with concern, whispering near her ear before planting a gentle kiss on it. The touch drew a quiet moan from Maanfan, her body heating up as her breathing grew heavier. Araya’s lips curled into a satisfied smile.

“Yes... I’m so tired, so stressed... I just want to rest. Kiss me,”

Maanfan admitted, letting out the feelings she had been bottling up. Then she turned and gave a commanding request to the woman she had paid for tonight. She tossed aside all her confusion and hesitation, she paid, and she would get what she wanted.

The short-haired woman’s lips pressed down in a fiery kiss, obeying Maanfan’s demand. Her slender hands explored her partner’s body, kneading and massaging her soft curves. Maanfan arched her back, responding to the pressure of the other woman’s touch.

Under the warm water, Araya’s smooth hands roamed over every inch of the sweet-faced girl’s body, leaving no spot untouched, except for one sensitive area below, which she deliberately avoided.

“P’Araya loves hearing you ask,”

She whispered with a teasing tone,

“Just as much as she loves hearing you give orders.”

Maanfan turned to face the person holding her from behind, rising onto her knees until her chest emerged from the water. The sight captivated the taller woman, her gaze fixated and unguarded.

“Kiss it. You know what I like,”

Maanfan commanded, her sweet voice carrying authority.

The moment the words left her lips, Araya leaned in, her soft lips capturing Maanfan’s sensitive peak. She alternated between firm strokes, quick flicks, and deep, deliberate pulls, her free hand kneading the other side with strong yet delicate fingers. The room filled with trembling moans, echoing off the bathroom walls.

“Ah… yes… just like that, P’Araya. I like it. M-more… don’t stop… why are you stopping?!”

Maanfan’s breathy cries were accompanied by her fingers pressing firmly into Araya’s shoulders, releasing the tension building inside her. Her hips instinctively pressed against the other woman’s thigh, grinding against the smooth surface.

The movement caused the water in the tub to ripple and splash over the edges, soaking the floor beneath them.

Araya’s intense breathing matched the rising heat in the room, her voice breaking as she exclaimed,

*“Maanfan, you’re too sexy!”*

“Let’s go to the bed,”

She said, her voice soft but firm.

“You’ve been in the water too long. I don’t want you catching a cold.”

Araya stood up, pulling Maanfan along by the arm, guiding her toward the bed in the middle of the room. Their damp bodies left water droplets on the bedding as they reached it.

Araya straddled Maanfan, pinning her wrists above her head while pressing a fiery kiss onto her lips, deep and demanding, until they burned with heat.

Her kisses trailed down Maanfan’s jawline, neck, and to her chest, far from gentle, as her desires took over.

Her selfishness overwhelmed the one beneath her, prompting a breathless protest.

“W-wait… Miss Issara…”

The name Maanfan uttered made Araya pause, lifting her head to meet the eyes of the woman lying beneath her.

**“Today, the name Issara is forbidden,”**

Araya replied firmly, her words carrying a playful but serious tone.

Maanfan’s displeasure flashed briefly in her eyes before her lips curved into a sly smile. Taking advantage of Araya’s moment of surprise, she flipped their positions, pinning the short-haired woman onto the mattress.

“If you’re P’Araya, you have to do what I say, right?”

Before Araya could respond, Maanfan swung a leg over her, straddling her face.

“Kiss me. I want to cum with your tongue,”

Maanfan commanded, her voice breathy yet filled with authority.

There was no verbal response from the person beneath her, only a fleeting glance of surprise before it shifted into a satisfied smile. Hands firmly guided her hips downward, inviting her closer as the woman below began tasting her.

Sweet moans filled the air as Maanfan’s slender waist moved instinctively to match the rhythm of the skillful tongue beneath her.

Eyes tightly shut, lips biting down occasionally to muffle her sounds, only to let them escape again. Every movement in the luxurious room turned the cool air from the conditioner into a blazing fire, consuming them both with unbearable heat.

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Maanfan jolted awake in the middle of the night. She must have fallen asleep after their third passionate encounter had finally ended. Underneath the blanket, her bare body lay alone once more. Her wide eyes scanned the room, but no one else was there.

As she had expected, P’Araya had already left. Or perhaps… it was Miss Issara who had left?

From last night, Maanfan was fairly certain now—P’Araya and Miss Issara were the same person. Even though the other hadn’t admitted it outright, their actions and expressions had provided all the answers she needed.

But what should she call this kind of relationship?

**With P’Araya, she was the employer.**

**With Miss Issara, she was the employee.**

**It was all so confusing.**

What exactly did the other person want from her to act this way?

Maanfan let out a long sigh. Thinking about it felt like rowing in circles— it led nowhere. She wasn’t a mind reader. Giving up, she buried her face in the pillow again before pushing herself up to search for her phone. The screen showed her that dawn was just a few hours away.

She needed to leave. Dragging her tired body to the bathroom, she noticed that all the scattered clothing and remnants of last night’s emotions were gone. In their place were neatly laundered clothes, folded and ready for her to wear. Maanfan couldn’t help but smile, she was always well taken care of.

On the mirror in the bathroom, a sweetly colored note was stuck:

*“I hope Maanfan will call me to go shopping again soon. ”*

Maanfan felt completely torn. She knew she should be angry at being toyed with, but the small acts of care and attention made her feel strangely good.

She raised her hand to gently touch the note on the mirror before carefully pulling it off and keeping it, just like every other note left by the same person.

She smiled, bittersweet, at the lingering emotions left by the other’s actions. After freshening up and getting ready to leave the hotel room, the pangs of hunger hit her hard. Of course, she hadn’t eaten since running straight here upon receiving P’Araya’s message.

On top of that, her body had been put through an exhausting ordeal, and dinner was completely forgotten. By now, it was almost breakfast time.

She decided to put all the confusion aside for now and focus on taking care of herself. She had to thank P’Araya for at least letting her sleep so soundly that she woke up feeling refreshed—even if her body ached a bit from last night’s intensity.

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The sweet-faced girl stepped into the elevator, keycard in hand, ready to return it to the reception desk. As she descended, her mind wandered, thinking about where she might find an early-morning restaurant open at this hour.

“Looks like I’ll have to rely on 7-Eleven again. *‘Hungry? Stop by anytime.’* Their slogan is just too perfect,”

Maanfan muttered to herself, quickening her pace toward her usual fallback option.

But her steps came to a sudden halt when she spotted a familiar, elegant woman sitting nearby, casually checking news on an iPad. As if sensing her gaze, the woman looked up and locked eyes with her.

“Oh, Miss Maanfan, what are you doing here?”

That’s my question to you, Maanfan argued silently. Usually, this woman disappeared without a trace like a ninja. So why was she sitting here now? And dressed in a full business suit no less...

*A full suit at 4:30 a.m.?*

“But never mind that. I just finished a meeting with a very important client, and I’m starving. Join me for breakfast, will you?”

The request, wrapped in a tone that almost sounded like pleading, startled Maanfan. There it was again—no outright confirmation or denial, but something about her hinted at being the same person. The gentle sweetness in those sharp eyes reminded her of the woman who had let her take the lead last night.

"P’Araya..."

Maanfan’s soft, almost dreamy call brought a gentle, affectionate smile to the sharp, elegant woman’s face. The tall figure stood up from the sofa and

walked toward her, taking the keycard from Maanfan’s hand. She leaned in close, whispering something softly in her ear before walking off to return the keycard to the reception desk.

Maanfan stood frozen, blinking in confusion, replaying the words she’d just heard.

“From now on, the name Araya is forbidden.”

"That’ll be 358 baht,"

Said the cashier in a green uniform, breaking her thoughts as they rang up the microwavable meal, milk, and snacks she’d placed on the counter.

"I’ll pay for it,"

The tall woman said, handing a purple bill to the cashier. She then turned to flash a sly smile at Maanfan, who was still fumbling with her wallet, unable to grab her money fast enough before the other had already paid.

"Let’s just say... I came into a little fortune recently."

"You’re awful. Always making people blush,"

Maanfan retorted, turning away to avoid the teasing gaze. She tried to hide her now undoubtedly red cheeks—she didn’t need a mirror to know her whole face was burning up.

That so-called "fortune" was exactly why she was starving right now! After maxing out her credit card, she was lucky she could even stand on her feet. Even with the discount, her wallet felt noticeably lighter.

"Let’s sit on the bench out front,"

She said, trying to distance herself from the playful smirk directed her way.

Maanfan walked ahead, leaving the taller woman behind, and headed to the long bench outside the convenience store. She opened the bag and began picking through the food she had bought, which was far more than her hunger really justified. It was a wonder she hadn’t bought out the entire store, considering how weak she felt from hunger.

As Maanfan was picking through her food, the elegant boss casually sat down on the same bench, placing a large bag of snacks between them.

Maanfan couldn’t help but glance at her boss. Even sitting outside a convenience store, the woman radiated grace and confidence, outshining the simplicity of the surroundings.

She drew so much attention that everyone passing by couldn’t help but steal a glance, some even craning their necks to keep looking.

Maanfan couldn’t resist imagining what it would be like to take this poised woman to a roadside som tam or larb restaurant, sitting cross-legged on the floor. The thought made her chuckle to herself.

“What are you smiling at? Just eat already. No need to stare, I know I’m beautiful,”

The boss teased, her tone dripping with confidence.

Maanfan almost rolled her eyes into the next galaxy. Confident, isn’t she? But… well, she was as beautiful as she claimed.

Maanfan’s playful glare nearly made the short-haired woman laugh out loud. Instead, she handed Maanfan a large steamed bun, her eyes twinkling with amusement as the sweet-faced girl accepted it with a small smile.

“Eat up. I picked this for you. No complaints, okay? I didn’t know what you like to eat,”

Maanfan said, handing over the food.

Issara took it quietly. She wanted to reply with something cheeky, like, The thing I like to eat is sitting right next to me.

But if she said that, the other woman would probably get hangry and mad at her.

The little thoughtful gesture, choosing food for her without knowing her preferences, warmed something in Issara’s chest. Maanfan had picked neutral flavors, not realizing Issara could handle spicy food. Well, this was only their second time eating together, even if it was just from a 7-Eleven. And it was the first time Maanfan had chosen the menu.

The effort made Issara feel oddly touched. “Don’t you like it? You’re barely eating…”

Maanfan asked, noticing her hesitation.

“I’d rather have your kua kling... And, well, sorry I didn’t take you to a fancy meal. The food at that hotel is too bland. I prefer something spicier.

You do too, don’t you?”

Issara’s words, loaded with playful double meanings and attempts to find common ground, made Maanfan blush even more. The teasing just wouldn’t stop!

The kua kling that was only half-eaten was practically shoved into Issara’s hand after her comment. The rest of the food disappeared quickly, along with the vegetable juice and dessert.

Once everything was finished, Maanfan got up to throw away the food containers and returned to her seat.

“The presentation is in just a few days. How’s the progress?”

The question from her boss made Maanfan jump slightly.

Well, there was progress… if you measured it in inches instead of feet.

“Um… it’s not going as well as I hoped, but it’s moving forward!”

She stammered, avoiding eye contact.

Her fidgeting and shifty eyes made Issara smile with amusement. I should help her out a little, she thought.

“Miss Maanfan, what do you think the ‘*Araya*’ brand should be? What kind of identity do you want to express through it?”

“What Araya should be… and its identity?” Maanfan repeated, pausing to think.

Araya… the Araya I know… Wait! That’s it!

“Where’s my notebook?”

She muttered, frantically searching for it.

Issara watched as Maanfan pulled a small notebook and pencil out of her handbag, her head bent as she quickly jotted something down.

Hmm...looks like she’s had an idea, Issara thought, noting with satisfaction that the notebook she had insisted Maanfan use was finally being put to good use.

The tall woman waited quietly, her sharp eyes wandering to the bustling street outside. The traffic was already heavy, even before dawn, as people hurried about their routines. Always in a rush, so chaotic, she mused to herself.

Her gaze eventually landed on a family nearby. A little girl in a kindergarten uniform was crying and fussing, clearly upset about going to school. Her parents had brought her to the convenience store for breakfast, much like Issara and Maanfan.

“What are you looking at?”

Maanfan’s sweet voice broke through her thoughts, pulling Issara’s attention back to her companion.

“Over there… that little girl crying. She reminds me of myself when I was a kid—fussing and refusing to go to school,”

Issara said, pointing at the girl climbing into a car, still holding her breakfast and sniffling.

Maanfan followed her gaze, spotting the child.

“What? You cried because you didn’t want to go to school?”

She asked, her tone filled with disbelief and curiosity.

Maanfan’s surprised, high-pitched reaction made Issara laugh softly.

“When I was little, I was so attached to my mom. I’d throw a tantrum every time I had to go to school, almost tearing the house apart. But I never got my way—not even once.”

Her words were lighthearted, but she kept the deeper truth to herself:

Being an heir to the Thewathiamchan family was far from enjoyable. Her path had been predetermined, a rigid framework she had to follow, leaving no room for her own dreams or desires. Her future had been mapped out for her before she even understood what the world was.

To pursue her own ambitions, she needed enough power to take control of everything, and that power was the company’s chairmanship.

“That’s so different from me! I loved going to school,”

Maanfan replied, her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm.

“At home, everyone was so much older than me. School was the only place where I had friends to play with!”

Her bright tone and lively expression made Issara chuckle. She felt both fondness and envy for Maanfan’s freedom, the ability to choose her own path, her own way of living. “And how’s your father doing?”

Issara asked casually.

But as soon as the question left her lips, the sparkle in Maanfan’s big eyes dimmed, replaced with sadness. The shift in her expression made Issara immediately regret asking.

“My dad is stable now,”

Maanfan said softly.

“They’ve taken him off the ventilator, and he’s been moved to a regular room. But… he still hasn’t woken up. It’s like he doesn’t want to face the problems I’ve caused.”

She visited her father every other day, ensuring he had round-the-clock care with a nurse to prevent bedsores and move his limbs to keep his muscles from weakening.

Every time she saw him—her childhood hero—lying there, she couldn’t stop herself from crying. She had to fix everything: the factory, the legal case, everything.

If she could set it all right, maybe, just maybe, her father would open his eyes and smile at her again.

It was a small hope, but she clung to it tightly.

“I see… Here, take this,”

Issara said, handing Maanfan a white envelope, pulling her out of her somber thoughts.

“What’s this? The work’s not even done, and you’re already giving me a termination letter?”

Maanfan joked, trying to lighten the mood, though her voice wavered slightly.

Maanfan’s teasing comment made Issara smirk. Good try at masking your feelings, Issara thought, but not quite as good as me.

“Open it and you’ll find out,”

Issara replied simply.

When Maanfan pulled out the paper inside the white envelope, her eyes widened in shock.

It was a check, made out in her name. The amount written on it was so large that she had to count the zeros three times just to be sure. Wait… did I count an extra zero? Or two? This is way too much!!!

“What… what is this for?”

She stammered.

“It’s your bonus for when I secure the chairman position,”

Issara answered casually.

Hearing the explanation, Maanfan swallowed hard. Her throat felt dry, and her nerves shot through the roof. This is definitely meant to pressure me, she thought. What if we lose? How would I ever repay this? Even selling all my organs wouldn’t be enough.

“Isn’t this… too much? We haven’t even won yet…”

“It’s not too much,”

Issara said firmly.

“If it means I won’t have to marry that lunatic, then it’s worth every baht. Don’t you believe we can win?”

Issara’s gaze locked onto Maanfan’s eyes, her confidence and unwavering determination making it impossible for the sweet-faced woman to look away.

“But… it’s too much. I can’t accept it,”

Maanfan said, finally breaking eye contact as she declined.

It wasn’t because she didn’t trust or believe in her boss, far from it. The problem was the weight of the commitment, and more than anything, her own lack of confidence. She didn’t trust her abilities. The first task she was given had been shaky enough; if Issara hadn’t pushed her, would she have even made progress?

“Are you sure you want to reject it?”

Issara asked calmly.

“You need the money, for your company’s liquidity, for your father’s care, and to pay for a lawyer.”

Maanfan snapped her eyes back to meet Issara’s. The frustration in her gaze was unmistakable. She investigated me.

Maanfan had suspected that Issara knew something about her, but she hadn’t imagined it would go this far.

Yet, despite her irritation, she couldn’t deny the truth in every word Issara had said. It was all painfully accurate.

"If you’re still hesitating, just think of it as me buying your peace of mind,"

Issara said in her usual assertive tone.

"That way, you can focus all your energy on me and my work."

Her words, so characteristic of Issara’s domineering nature, made Maanfan let out a deep sigh. She wasn’t given any room to refuse. “Fine, then. I’ll make sure to use every single baht wisely,” Maanfan replied, her acceptance laced with sarcasm.

The short-haired woman’s lips curved into a satisfied smile.

“Oh, by the way, did you know your case still has hope? You just need a really good lawyer. Here,”

Issara said, pulling a business card from her wallet and handing it to the slightly annoyed Maanfan.

Though irritated by the way she had been cornered, Maanfan took the card. She couldn’t afford to let this opportunity slip away.

“This is my friend’s firm. Just tell them you’re my woman, and you’ll get a special rate.”

Maanfan tucked the card into her wallet and nodded silently, but as she processed Issara’s last comment, her head shot up, her expression shocked.

“Wait… what did you just say?”

"....."

“What did you just say!?”

Maanfan exclaimed, her face full of shock.

Issara couldn’t help but laugh at her reaction.

“I said, tell them you’re a subordinate of Issara, and they’ll give you a special rate. Honestly, Miss Maanfan, it’s way too early in the morning for you to be hearing things wrong,”

*She teased with a playful smirk.*

Chapter 04: Two Hands that Hold Together

In the upstairs office of the factory, Maanfan sat in her scruffy, laid-back style, rushing to meet the looming deadline in less than 36 hours.

Sketches of dress designs were spread chaotically across the desk, alongside an empty coffee cup and a laptop running 3D design software for creating outfits.

“The sketches are done... now for the hard part,”

Maanfan muttered, focusing on her work.

As soon as she had parted ways with Issara, Maanfan had gone straight back to the factory. A small sticky note marked the deadline on her desk calendar. For twelve straight hours, she buried herself in her work, only getting up for bathroom breaks.

Ideas had been pouring in ever since her boss’s few words earlier. Many designs had emerged, some satisfying, others not. With clear goals in mind, her workflow had become smoother and quicker. She eventually settled on two designs she liked the most and began rendering them into 3D models for presentation.

“Miss Maanfan, please eat something,”

Said Auntie Suay, appearing with a gentle voice.

“I had Chom run out to buy food for you…”

When Auntie Suay knocked on the door and entered with a lunchbox, she stopped short upon seeing Maanfan slumped over the desk, fast asleep. The older woman quietly placed the food on the small guest table, cleared the empty coffee cup, and tiptoed out of the room without making a sound.

She couldn’t help but feel a mix of fondness and concern for her hardworking young boss. Maanfan had always been like this, ever since she was a child, so focused on her tasks that she forgot everything else, even herself.

Auntie Suay recalled the old days when the late master would have to cut the house’s power just to force his daughter, who was studying for exams, to go to bed. Otherwise, the girl would keep pushing for more time, reading endlessly.

“Done! Six hours before the deadline… I can submit this!”

Maanfan muttered to herself, her words half-cheering, half-reminding. Her mind was completely drained, her eyes dry and aching from staring at the screen for so long.

After sending an email with her work sketches, 3D renderings, and the concept details to her boss, the exhausted young woman dragged herself to the sofa and collapsed onto it. She was fast asleep within moments, as if someone had flipped her power switch off.

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Not long after…

"Miss Maanfan, someone is here to see you. Excuse me,"

Called a voice outside the door, followed by a knock. When no response came from inside, the person outside opened the door and led Maanfan’s visitor into the room.

“Oh, she’s still asleep. Should I wake her up for you?”

Auntie Suay offered, looking at the sleeping Maanfan.

“No need. I can wait. Does Maanfan always leave the door unlocked like this?”

The short-haired visitor, who had introduced herself as the one who made the contract with Maanfan’s boss, asked in a tone that sounded slightly scolding.

Auntie Suay hesitated at the sharpness of the question but quickly explained,

“Not usually. I asked her to keep it unlocked. I’m worried that if she locks the door, she might work too much, forget to eat or sleep, and faint. This way, I can check on her.”

“I see. Does she do this often?”

The visitor asked again, her tone softer this time, showing concern.

Auntie Suay noticed the sudden warmth in her voice and couldn’t help but wonder. Do bosses usually care this much about their employees? Maybe, but she herself couldn’t help worrying about Maanfan. After all, she had known her since before she was even born.

"That’s just how Maanfan is,"

Auntie Suay explained with a chuckle.

"She won’t stop working until it’s done. But sometimes, it stops her instead, like when she works herself sick and ends up in the hospital. That forces her to take a break automatically."

She reminisced about the time young Maanfan had worked so hard on her thesis that she collapsed and had to be rushed to the hospital, causing chaos at home.

Since then, Auntie Suay had taken it upon herself to ensure Maanfan ate properly and got some rest. Perhaps out of respect, the young woman listened to her and didn’t put up much of a fight.

"Wow... to the point of needing a hospital visit,"

Issara said. Her tone sounded casual, but her eyes didn’t reflect amusement, making the room feel noticeably colder. Auntie Suay suddenly wondered if the air conditioning was broken, it felt like the temperature had dropped by two degrees. She shivered slightly.

"Thank you so much, Auntie. I’ll wait here for Maanfan to wake up," Issara said, her words politely signaling the end of their conversation.

"Y-Yes, of course. Would you like something to drink? I can bring you some water,"

Auntie Suay offered, eager to excuse herself.

"No, thank you,"

Issara replied politely but curtly, making Auntie Suay nod and leave the room.

Maanfan’s boss is quite something, so beautiful and strict. I hope my dear Maanfan will be okay, she thought to herself.

But it should be fine. They’re just boss and employee. It’s probably not personal, she reassured herself as she returned to her work. Recently, Maanfan had been very good at bringing in jobs for the factory, enough to keep everyone busy every day.

Auntie Suay didn’t quite understand the online advertisements Maanfan mentioned, but work coming in was always a good thing in her book.

As soon as the door closed and Auntie Suay left, Issara walked over and locked it before returning her gaze to the person still fast asleep on the long sofa.

It’s only been two days since I last saw her, and she already looks thinner, Issara thought with concern.

She must be exhausted. She didn’t even take off her glasses. And what kind of work outfit is this, short denim and a long-sleeved T-shirt?

The boss sighed at her subordinate’s lack of awareness, carefully removing Maanfan’s glasses and placing them on the coffee table. With a playful smirk, she lightly poked the soft, full cheek of the sleeping woman.

Her hair’s such a mess, and those dark circles under her eyes… Issara thought as her fingertip trailed along Maanfan’s jawline. The sleeping woman instinctively turned away, burying her face into the sofa’s backrest as if seeking refuge from the teasing.

Issara chuckled at Maanfan’s childlike reaction. Standing up, she slipped off her suit jacket and draped it over Maanfan’s exposed legs, which peeked out from her short denim. Her gaze wandered across the office before stopping at the cluttered desk, littered with scattered papers.

With the click of her high heels, Issara walked over to the desk and picked up one of the papers. Written at the top were labels like Araya01 and Araya02.

This naming system… really creative, she thought, smirking again.

She examined one design: a white dress with a simple, elegant base that exuded sweetness but carried a bold edge with deep cuts and lace fabric.

*Not bad…*

Her attention was drawn to a crumpled ball of paper that hadn’t made its way to the trash bin under the desk like the others. Curious, Issara reached for it, unfolded it, and studied the design.

It was a fitted halter dress with a sleeveless design, open back, but modestly covered with lace, suggesting exposure without revealing too much. The knee-length skirt featured a side slit for a subtle hint of allure. Silver chains adorned the neckline, adding a striking detail that balanced elegance with modern sophistication.

This one’s gorgeous. Elegant in the front, sweet yet daring overall. Why toss this aside?

And it hides a touch of sexiness too. It’s beautiful—why didn’t she choose this one to submit?

Issara glanced at the messy handwriting in the corner of the sketch and spotted the label, Issara 01. A satisfied smile spread across her sharp, elegant face, and a faint blush rose to her cheeks.

So this is how Maanfan sees me?

The boss raised her phone and snapped a picture of the discarded design, saving it for herself. She then returned to the sleeping figure on the sofa, sitting down so close that her presence practically filled the space. With a teasing tone, she spoke as if to herself.

“When you designed that black dress, you were thinking of me, weren’t you, Maanfan?”

Unexpectedly, the sleeping beauty mumbled a reply, breaking the stillness.

“I can’t eat anymore...”

Wait. Eat what?

“Huh!?”

Issara blurted in surprise.

Issara was startled, thinking she had accidentally woken Maanfan from her sleep. But on closer inspection, Maanfan was still fast asleep, though she seemed to be mimicking the act of chewing.

Goodness, you scared me, you little puff-cheeked troublemaker. Feeling mischievous, Issara grinned and whispered,

“Eat some more… it’s delicious, isn’t it?”

Leaning in closer, the short-haired woman spoke softly near the ear of the still-sleeping Maanfan, who had her back turned to her. Maanfan stirred slightly, then rolled onto her back, her eyebrows beginning to knit together in response.

“Eat… yes… eat… eat what?”

Maanfan murmured in her sleep.

“Eat me, Araya, of course,”

Issara teased with a sly grin.

“Ahh! What!?”

Startled awake, Maanfan bolted upright from the sofa, only to bump her head directly into Issara’s chin with a loud thunk.

***Thud!***

“Ouch!”

“Oww… Boss! How did you get here? Are you okay? Does it hurt? I’m so sorry…”

Fully awake now from the pain, Maanfan turned to see her boss sitting on the floor by the sofa, holding her chin with tears welling up in her sharp eyes. Panic-stricken, the sweet-faced girl quickly helped her boss up to sit on the sofa, completely forgetting the ache in her own forehead. Her apologies tumbled out in a soft, guilty tone.

I haven’t even been working for a month, and I’ve already injured my boss! Am I going to get fired? Oh no!

“Let me see, take your hand off, please,”

Maanfan said as she gently pulled Issara’s hand away from her chin. The other woman didn’t say a word, only glaring at her with sharp, annoyed eyes.

“Oh no, it’s so red! Should I go get some ice to help with the swelling?”

Maanfan offered nervously.

"No need! Why don’t you wash your face first?"

The boss said before secretly wiping away tears from the corner of her eyes. She was so stubborn, hitting her head so hard that she saw stars, but the other person didn't show any signs, even though it hurt.

"Oops, just a second, boss..."

Maanfan remembered the situation she was in and quickly moved to the bathroom inside, leaving the boss sitting on the couch, gently rubbing her chin.

"Why did the boss come here? And what about the work I sent..."

Maanfan asked cheerfully after she made herself look better. The boss was back to looking perfect, just like before. But just now, Maanfan remembered that the other person was only wearing a sleeveless V-neck shirt. Where did the suit jacket come from?

"I was passing by here and stopped to do some business, then I came to check on the progress. As for the work, I already replied in the email, check it yourself. I don’t like to repeat myself."

She spoke in a deep voice, like she was still angry, making the sweet-faced girl shrink her neck in fear. After getting hit that hard, it's crazy not to be angry, so better run away from danger...

"Okay, I'll check it quickly,"

Maanfan said.

Maanfan walked to her desk and opened the email from Issara, who had replied. The content made her smile.

...It’s good... I like it...

By the time she read this, Maanfan smiled brightly and continued reading.

...But it would be better if you improve 1...2...3...4...5...

After finishing reading, Maanfan felt down, thinking she had done well, but the other person pointed out so many details. Everything was ruined, no good at all. The girl with big eyes sighed and looked at the other person, who was staring at her quietly with a slight smile on their face.

What, does she like seeing her sad?

Such a bad person...

"I'll fix the work and send it as soon as possible..."

"I'll wait, now you can sit here so we can talk about work."

She called the other person, who looked at her with an annoyed glare. What did she do wrong? She was just sitting and smiling. The girl with big eyes walked over to her.

What’s going on? This is her office, but the other person acted like it was their own. The boss’s aura was shining brightly. Maanfan made a mental comment before sitting down beside her as requested.

"Your concept in the email looks good to me. Let's stick with that. And here's the design for the shopfront that I just picked up. Which one do you like? I want your opinion."

She asked and handed the iPad to her assistant. The girl with big eyes took it, scrolled through the pictures, and then handed it back to her boss.

"I don’t know much about interior design. They all look beautiful. As a fresh graduate, I can’t really choose much. You decide, Miss Issara," She said with a dry smile.

Unexpectedly, the boss with the sharp features sighed and frowned.

"I don’t know, but I have a perspective,"

She said with a faint smile, then continued in a sweet voice.

"These days, anyone can graduate. Anyone can have work experience. But not everyone has a good perspective from working at home for many years, like you do. Do you understand?"

Maanfan heard this and thought about it. The images of the past slowly came back to her: the times she helped her father manage the factory's budget, helped lighten her father's load, solved problems with missing materials, and found markets for leftover stock.

Before the owner of the office could think of anything else, the girl with short hair added again.

"Don’t underestimate yourself, Maanfan."

Hearing this, it seemed like Maanfan had an idea.

"I understand, Miss Issara," but then...

"Huh? What did the boss call me just now?"

Maanfan’s face turned red as she stared at her conversation partner, her voice starting to tremble slightly. All of this made Issara feel a bit grateful, but then she sighed and with a slightly reproachful tone said

**"I called you Maanfan... Are you so tired that you can’t even hear what your friend said?"**

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"Arriving ten minutes early? Hmm, I’m really a professional."

Maanfan walked into the WTT Group office, carrying a bag with a notebook inside, which contained design patterns.

Thank you to modern technology for creating programs that make designing clothes accurate, detailed, and easy to work with.

In her other hand, she carried a fabric folder for Pre-Production, to present to Issara.

The shirt design had been revised and met the standards set by her boss two days ago, so she had to come to work at the office to keep things secret and discuss the target audience or customers they wanted to sell to.

The employee ID card around her neck made it easy for her to pass through the front counter. The girl with big eyes entered the elevator and pressed for the 49th floor without hesitation, thinking about the office that Issara had set up on that floor.

She clearly remembered that on her first day here, the entire floor was empty and just a regular guest room. But a few days ago, she received the order to come to the company to get the employee ID and see the office where she would start Pre-Production. The fully-equipped new office left her in awe.

The space was so large it felt almost eerie since she was working alone, which made her feel out of place. It took a while to get used to the new office, and she was scolded by her boss several times before she did.

Maanfan arrived at the office in the late morning because Issara hadn’t set a specific work time. As long as the work was progressing and on schedule, she could come in at any time. The girl with big eyes clearly remembered her boss’s words.

*2nd floor 3rd floor 4th floor 5th floor*

“My shoulders hurt so much,”

She rotated her shoulders to ease the tension, her eyes showing signs of fatigue.

The elevator had only one passenger and continued moving up, stopping at the fifth floor.

As the elevator doors opened, and as soon as her eyes landed on the person who stepped into the elevator, Maanfan immediately tensed up. She shifted, pressing herself against the elevator wall to stay as far away as possible from the person who had just entered.

A wave of disgust and revulsion surged, making her feel bad. Breathing felt difficult, and her free hand began to clench tightly, starting to hurt.

"Fan, we haven't seen each other since that day, even though we work at the same company,"

The greeting from the stunning and confident former lover made the person who had entered the elevator press themselves further against the wall.

Maanfan didn’t respond. She looked away, acting as if she were alone in that space. An uncomfortable silence filled the air as the elevator moved to its destination.

The pain in her palm reminded Maanfan of someone else. Her slender hand quickly unzipped the front pocket of her laptop bag. She pulled out the small notebook she had been ordered to carry with her and clutched it tightly, seeking comfort.

"Now I can’t even hurt myself anymore."

The image of the person who once treated her wounds, that smile, the care Issara had given her—Maanfan used those memories as a refuge. Her previously frantic mind began to calm down, at least now she didn’t feel so bad that it was hard to breathe.

"Come on, Fan. Can’t you just let go of the past?"

Iris tried to start a conversation, but her careless words made the person standing at the other side of the elevator glance at her, their eyes fierce with anger, causing the confident girl to almost immediately avert her gaze.

*"Of course, it's easy for you to say. Someone who has everything and never loses anything. But what about me? What about the factory that closed down in several areas because we couldn't afford to pay employees? My father almost died from illness, and our house almost went bankrupt because of lawsuits demanding damages..."*

*"Let the past be the past, right? It's easy for you to say."*

These thoughts remained unspoken because there was no point in saying them. She had done it all before, pleading, begging, almost groveling for help, but the other person had just brushed her off as if she were an old, useless rag.

The time for weakness was over.

Maanfan no longer needed to beg anyone for help. Only she could solve this problem. Only she could pull herself out of the lowest point in her life. Only she...

"Are you sure you want to refuse? Do you need money?"

The image of her boss flashed through her mind again. Once again, the other person had helped her, even though she hadn’t asked for it. That hand would always be extended to her.

The sparkling eyes that only looked at her, the two hands that lifted her, someone as worthless as she was, telling her she had value as long as she didn’t look down on herself.

Her delicate hand gently brushed the cover of the notebook, feeling the rough texture it had gained. It pulled her out of the painful past, the past created by the person who was trying to engage her in conversation now.

The pain faded away. There was no point in dwelling on it, especially when the solution was right in front of her. It was on the 49th floor, with work waiting for her to do.

Once again, she was ignored. Once again, silence took over the space. But Maanfan’s expression had changed, as if she was someone the girl with big eyes didn’t recognize. Iris thought, her gaze shifting to the numbers on the elevator panel, which showed they had reached the 30th floor.

"Fan... I’m serious. We need to find time to talk."

Maanfan watched as the elevator doors closed. The voice from the other person... It sounded like regret? Like sorrow...? Regret, really?

That venomous snake? No, she wouldn’t believe it anymore. Every word from that person was just a lie.

**Liar, the biggest liar!**

As soon as she arrived at the office, Maanfan placed everything down and grabbed the pattern paper to continue her work. She selected the fabric for the outfit, but the incident in the elevator had made it hard for her to focus on her work.

She kept making mistakes over and over again. She understood the process, but had never done it herself. She had seen it before, but mostly she worked in managing production and selecting raw materials to control costs.

The shirt design had come from Iris, and the sewing was done by the factory workers. She had never done it herself. This project was her most challenging task yet.

She knew well that she wasn’t capable of handling all the work assigned to her. She wondered why Issara didn’t have any other team members. Was she really expected to do it all herself?

It was bound to fail... She felt bad for not meeting her boss’s expectations.

Maybe the other person valued her too much. She felt both uncomfortable and frustrated, unable to do her work the way she wanted. Even though she had a clear mental picture of what to do, her hands couldn’t follow her mind.

When her emotions reached their peak, Maanfan swept everything on the desk onto the floor, scattering it everywhere. She then moved to the window to calm herself, distancing herself from the pattern before tearing it into pieces and starting over from scratch.

Maanfan breathed heavily, tears welling up in her eyes. Her hand gripped the window frame tightly. She was relieved that she was alone in the office; otherwise, this emotional outburst would have surely embarrassed her.

"Why can’t I do this? What am I missing? What do I still lack? What do I need to do to be better... What do I need to do to be the person she expects? I just want to repay what I’ve been given... Why is it so hard?"

There were many questions but no answers. Tears continued to fall, revealing her own sense of inadequacy. After crying until she was satisfied, Maanfan wiped her tears and returned to clean up the mess made by her outburst. She then sat down and resumed her work.

Even though she was stressed and pressured, this project was everything she had.

Her father had been moved to a special room, and the factory had started hiring more workers to reopen the closed sections, with old workers helping to teach the new ones. The lawsuit was entering the settlement phase.

Everything was starting to resolve in a positive direction.

She couldn’t give up here. Even though the path was full of thorns, she had to keep going. Hours passed by, and finally, the pattern was ready. It entered the sewing process to create the outfit as designed.

She sighed deeply. Even simple work had taken her so long. Now all that was left was to wait for Issara to check it. She needed to go and remind her. As she thought about it, she left her office to meet her boss, who, whenever she checked work, would transform into the most polished and meticulous person, perfect in every detail.

In short, she was *"a lot!"*

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"Phimanee, is Miss Issara in?"

She asked the secretary, who sat quietly at the front desk typing so fast it was almost impossible to keep up with. Phimanee was very skilled at her job and could be called Issara’s right hand, even though she was a bit quiet. A smile from this secretary was rare, unless it was the one she used to greet guests.

"Miss Issara is in a project meeting. She’ll be back in the afternoon,"

The reply took Maanfan by surprise. Why hadn’t Issara called her to the meeting?

"Huh? Why didn’t you call me to the meeting?"

"It’s not a project under your responsibility, Maanfan. There are many other projects that Issara is in charge of."

That’s true. Issara was so busy. Even though they worked on the same floor, it was hard to find a chance to meet. You had to schedule ahead to see her. Being an executive was definitely not easy.

Maanfan lifted her wrist to check the time, it was almost noon. Should she just sit and wait? She hoped her work would be checked today so she could either continue working or make the necessary corrections immediately.

"Can I sit here and wait?"

The slender hand pointed to the guest sofa outside the office. The secretary nodded in agreement. The girl with big eyes walked over and sat on the sofa, picking up her phone to kill time, catching up on the latest fashion news to update her knowledge.

As for social media and friends, as soon as news spread that her family was being sued and almost went bankrupt, they all disappeared, like a graveyard. She didn’t care much about that; there were other things on her mind rather than socializing with friends.

"Maanfan, I’m going to have lunch now."

Hmm... The secretary referred to herself as "Pee," which means we must be getting a bit closer.

"Okay, Phimanee. I’ll wait for Miss Issara here."

The secretary seemed like she wanted to say something but just nodded and left when it was time for lunch.

"Sigh, I’m so tired... Work is hard enough, but dealing with the traffic this morning was just as tough."

Once she was alone, Maanfan stretched out along the length of the sofa.

The shirt and pants she wore made it easy to relax without worrying about anyone seeing anything.

She looked completely at ease. The progress in her work, the exhaustion from traveling, and the cold air conditioning made her mind slowly drift away.

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***Slap!!***

"Ow!!"

The pain from her forehead made Maanfan jolt awake, only to see her boss sitting on the sofa, looking at her from almost an elbow’s distance away.

She must have been worried that Maanfan would headbutt her again. She was sitting so far away. Didn't anyone tell her that when wearing a short skirt, she shouldn’t sit like that? It was riding up...

"Are you awake, Maanfan? Is the work done?"

The calm, cold voice asked, pulling Maanfan’s gaze, which had been fixated on her own legs, back to her face. She quickly sat up from her lying position and gave a dry smile.

"The pattern is finished and ready for inspection, in the office, Boss."

She said it quickly, almost stumbling over her words, trying to push the thought of the boss's white legs out of her mind.

"Good. But I’m not inspecting it right now."

She said this while standing up, adjusting her black strapless dress with a fitted skirt, layered with the same-colored suit jacket. Around her neck, she wore a silver necklace adorned with a small diamond pendant. Her sharp face was enhanced by high-quality makeup. Beautiful, elegant, and sexy, along with the familiar scent of her perfume.

It made Maanfan's cheeks heat up immediately. She thought of P'Araya.

"Wh-why?"

She stammered, trying to pull her eyes away from that enticing figure.

"This is lunchtime, Maanfan. Would you like to go... have lunch?"

At first, the stunning woman planned to come by in the afternoon, but the secretary called to say someone was waiting to meet her. So she changed her plans and came directly here to take the stubborn girl out for lunch.

"Okay, Phimanee... I mean, Miss Issara."

The response, accompanied by a bright smile, made Issara feel a sense of fondness for the girl. Was she really being charmed by food, this little one of hers?

"You look beautiful today, Miss Issara."

The compliment made Issara turn to look at the girl, whose cheeks were flushed as she avoided her gaze. It was just a simple compliment, one Issara had heard many times before, but it felt different coming from this sweetfaced, long-haired girl.

"Thank you... Go wash your face. I'll be waiting here for five minutes,"

Issara said as she sat down on the sofa, acting as though she didn’t notice the warmth spreading across her own cheeks. She crossed her legs, showing off her long, white legs, making the younger girl stare in awe.

"Three minutes left."

"Ah... Wait? Oh, just a second, boss!"

The full figure ran into the office, causing the boss to laugh softly with a hint of amusement.

Maanfan swallowed hard, struggling to breathe properly. Her hands clenched tightly, and her body tensed as she looked at the person sitting behind the large desk.

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It had been more than half an hour since she had submitted the shirt designs and the second set of work reports for her boss to review. After the first two prototype designs barely passed, the order for the second batch followed quickly. Today was the day for submitting the shirt designs.

“.....”

The judge's eyebrows furrowed tightly as she looked over the designs laid out on the desk and the documents she was carefully reading. There was not a single word spoken.

The only sounds were the rustling of paper being turned and the rhythmic tapping of a pen on the desk as the beautiful, sharp-eyed boss deep in thought. Every time the tapping echoed, Maanfan felt her heart slow down.

The tension grew tighter and tighter. The frown that remained between her boss’s eyebrows was a clear sign that things were not looking good.

Finally, the reports and designs were gathered together, signaling that her boss had finished reviewing them.

"So, how is it?"

"There are many questions about this report,"

Issara said in a flat tone, tapping her pen on the report in front of her.

"The shirt designs are nice, but they're all the same style."

The response made Maanfan swallow hard, before trying to explain her work.

"Yes, I tried to make them follow the same theme "

"It’s not a theme,"

Issara interrupted.

"It’s the same style."

Before she could finish explaining, her boss interrupted with a voice that was more subdued. The sweet-faced girl took a deep breath, her face paling.

"Look at the designs."

The report on the table was slid across to her, and Maanfan pulled out the shirt designs she had drawn.

"If you remove the fabric and color choices, the shirts you submitted are less than 20% different from each other."

Even without being told, Maanfan knew well. She had taken the two sets of designs that had passed earlier as templates and made small adjustments.

All the designs submitted this time were nearly identical. And her boss knew everything just by looking at her work.

"Yes, you're right..."

She admitted softly, putting the designs back into her portfolio, not wanting to face her own inadequacy, laziness, and lack of creativity. She was the worst. Maanfan silently cursed herself in her mind.

"It's not that it's not beautiful. It is beautiful, but it's only at the standard level found in the market. If you want the brand to succeed, you need to have a unique identity that can win over customers. You have to make it different."

The short-haired woman explained to the girl who kept looking down, telling her the purpose of this project. She had to be strict because business is not a game. It requires attention to detail, creativity, and flexibility.

The other person was still lacking in this area, and it was her job to point it out so the other person could improve.

"I understand, Miss Issara. What do you want me to fix?"

"Everything. I won’t accept this design. Start over."

Before Maanfan could say anything, her boss gave her final judgment on the work. Maanfan felt her eyes burning but tried to hold it in. She understood the reason for this decision.

"Did... did I not do well?"

The soft, trembling question from the younger girl made Issara frown.

Maybe she had spoiled Maanfan too much. Issara sighed deeply and then answered.

"It's not bad. It's just not good enough."

"Sometimes, I feel like I might not be suited for this project."

The big, round eyes filled with tears looked up and met the sharp gaze of the person sitting across the desk, speaking what had been weighing on her heart for days.

"What are you saying, Maanfan?"

The confession from the younger girl made Issara angry. Why was Maanfan, someone who never gave up on anything, saying this? She raised her voice without thinking, making Maanfan jump. The sharp, angry look in her eyes made Maanfan feel scared. She had never seen Issara like this before.

But... the hand holding the report tightened before she spoke again. She needed to tell the other person. She couldn't handle it anymore. She had to say it...

"I’m scared... I’m scared that my failures will cause you trouble."

Issara closed her eyes, rubbed the bridge of her nose, and leaned back in the soft chair, trying to calm herself and understand what the trembling girl was trying to tell her.

"Go on. What are you thinking?"

It felt like permission. Maanfan’s heart poured out, along with the tears that started to fill her eyes, blurring everything in front of her.

"If I’m not good enough and make you lose, then you’ll have to marry him..."

She hated it. She hated the look in the eyes of the man who was supposed to be her boss’s fiancé, but she couldn’t do anything. She couldn’t protect her, couldn’t stop it. She didn’t even know what to do. She wasn’t in a position to stop it.

"Are you going to give up then?"

Issara opened her eyes, resting her chin in her hand, looking at the girl who was holding back sobs and tears, her cheeks and nose red. Maybe she had pressured Maanfan too much.

"No!! I won’t give up... but I don’t know how to beat him. I’m not good enough..."

And then the clear tears fell down her smooth cheeks. She lifted her hand to wipe them away, not wanting to show weakness, but she couldn’t stop them.

"You don’t know the way. But that doesn’t mean there’s no way. If you don’t give up, you’ll find a way."

She handed the tissue to the girl who was crying, her sobs making her whole body shake. There was no response. Issara sighed, then took a deep breath before asking her assistant.

"You want to quit, right?"

The younger girl shook her head rapidly, her ponytail swaying as she looked up, her face flushed, confirming that she would not quit.

"Then what are you planning to do next? Tell me."

Issara’s sharp gaze softened as she looked at the girl trying to hold back her sobs. She leaned back in her chair, trying to ease the tense atmosphere in the office, wanting to hear her assistant’s perspective on solving the problem she had pushed her toward.

"This project is too big... too much for me to handle alone... No matter how hard I try, staying up late and not eating to finish it on time, it feels endless.

I have to keep working on it. I understand what I need to do, how I need to do it, but... I can’t express it. Even something as simple as writing a report on what I’ve done, I don’t know how to explain what I’m thinking. It’s all a mess. I want to finish it on time, but it feels like time is never enough. There’s too much work..."

She poured out everything, all the frustration she had been holding in from the beginning of the project until now. The tears that had dried up started to well up in her big eyes again. Admitting her own shortcomings and failures in front of her boss made her hesitate. She couldn’t even look up, afraid... that she might disappoint the other person.

“If what you said is the problem, then how are you going to fix it?"

Her assistant was silent for a long time, making Issara worried. Would the girl be able to get through this challenge?

"Team... I need a team,"

Maanfan said quietly.

"I want more people, but... I don’t know where to find them. I don’t know anyone."

She had been stuck in the problem for so long, thinking about it over and over again. She thought of many solutions, discarded them, and kept rethinking. If there was too much work, she needed more people to help.

It was the basic solution she had learned since she was a child at her father’s factory. But no matter how much she waited, Issara never added anyone. So all the work piled on her. The workers at the factory were skilled, but they lacked design knowledge. She didn’t know who else to turn to.

"Do you know why I chose you?"

Maanfan was confused by her boss’s answer. Why did her tone sound like she was happy? Instead of answering the question, she turned it into a question of her own. Maanfan remembered asking this very question the first time she met Issara.

Back then, the answer was different, and she knew today’s answer would be different too. Maanfan shook her head in response. Issara sighed deeply but smiled as she answered.

"Because I know you’re the one who will help me win."

From the background information about the sweet-faced girl that Issara had gotten from a private investigator, she immediately knew that the person in front of her was a diamond that hadn’t been polished yet.

How many new graduates could run a business to keep a family’s struggling company going? The answer was none.

No one else could do what Maanfan had done. Even though part of the factory had to be shut down, she was able to generate profit and find money to pay for her father’s medical expenses, which were not cheap.

But Maanfan did it. That proved that the young girl understood the business very well and was able to maintain her father's connections. Her father had likely paved the way for her from a young age.

Even though he was too ill to do anything, he left a path for his daughter to follow. Unfortunately, a wrong decision had caused problems.

The most important thing was that she never gave up. She knew she wasn’t good enough, but she found ways to improve herself.

Issara thought that it was for survival. Maanfan had to struggle, but that showed her that Maanfan could adapt and solve problems well. Someone who understands their potential and constantly works on improving themselves is someone who will succeed in the future.

She had tested Maanfan by giving her a large sum of money. Instead of spending it like a typical young person would, seeking personal pleasure, Maanfan used it to grow the business.

She managed to revive almost eighty percent of the factory and reopened the sewing department that had been closed. She also earned the loyalty of skilled workers who were dedicated to her.

Issara was thrilled when she had someone like Maanfan join the team. If possible, she would have liked to teach her slowly, but the project’s short timeline forced her to push Maanfan hard.

She needed her to learn through hands-on experience, to understand every step, every problem, every action. She needed Maanfan to understand her own limits, and then break those limits over and over again.

Maanfan didn’t even realize how much she had developed since starting this job. The methods might have been harsh, which made the sweet-faced girl blush and feel embarrassed in front of her now.

There was a problem, Issara knew, because she intentionally created it from the beginning. She allowed the younger girl to face the challenges. She hoped Maanfan would be able to solve them, and she did. Her little one knew how to fix things.

She used everything she had to solve the problems. In management... Maanfan was very skilled in that area. Now, the sweet-faced girl understood every work process that Issara had put her through.

The diamond sparkled beautifully, ready to step into the competition for the real position of president. Her job was to find the best weapon for Maanfan to face the battlefield, with herself as the defender.

"And yes, Maanfan, you need a team to help share these problems."

"But the contract says I have to use my own team, who should I find? Also... I don’t have money to hire anyone."

Maanfan couldn't argue. Wasn't her boss making it too easy? The workers at her factory weren’t suited for this project, so who should she find?

Where would the money come from to hire anyone? The person who had been arguing with her earlier had stopped crying, which made Issara laugh.

"You’ll use the project's funds. There’s no rule against adding more team members. As for where to find them..."

Issara finished speaking, then picked up the phone to call her secretary.

"Phimanee, please bring the resume I prepared for Maanfan."

As soon as she hung up the phone, Maanfan stared at her boss, feeling like she couldn’t keep up. It was as if she were just following the plan the other person had set up.

"The resume is here, Maanfan,"

Phimanee said as she handed over the document.

The secretary handed the prepared documents to the sweet-faced girl, whose eyes were still red from crying, with her nose and cheeks flushed. Her eyelashes were still wet from the tears, making the secretary shoot a sharp look at her boss.

"You're bullying the kid!"

"I didn't. She cried on her own."

Issara shrugged in response, and the secretary walked out of the room, not believing a word. Maanfan, who was bent over looking at the file, didn't even acknowledge the exchange happening around her. Her eyebrows were tightly furrowed.

"Can you explain this to me, boss? You knew from the start that I wouldn't be able to handle it, right?"

She spoke in an irritated tone, holding the file with the resume as she spoke.

Issara raised her hands in surrender but quickly offered a calm explanation. "Not exactly. I prepared it so that my partner could choose the team members from the start. But... you didn’t ask."

Issara watched Maanfan quietly as she chose her team. The power to decide who to pick for the team was completely in Maanfan’s hands. No one understood the "Araya" brand better than Maanfan.

When they had discussed it, Issara thought her harsh methods might have stressed Maanfan out to the point of quitting the project. She admitted, without shame, that she had been very worried.

But... Maanfan never disappointed her. The sweet-faced girl fought with all her heart. She was scared... but she didn’t give up and never thought about quitting. Issara realized she had pushed her too hard, and now everything was falling into place as she hoped. It might be time to let Maanfan relax a bit.

"Hey... Maanfan, haven’t you been getting enough rest lately?"

The sudden question caught Maanfan by surprise, but she nodded in agreement. The work that had been going well had turned into a mess, and she hadn’t been sleeping.

"How about taking a break? I’ll treat you."

Once again, Issara casually invited her, making Maanfan confused and curious.

*"Huh? What are you treating me to?"*

Chapter 05 : The Team

A warm cup of tea with a soothing aroma was lifted to her lips. The faint sweetness lingering on her tongue brought a sense of ultimate relaxation.

Soft music played in the background, blending with the faint scent of essential oils diffused from the corner of the room. Dimmed lighting created a cozy ambiance, complemented by the gentle sound of a waterfall from the pool in the central hall.

It felt like stepping into an entirely different world, far removed from the chaos of the bustling city. The moment she entered, the atmosphere shifted so dramatically that it was almost disorienting.

The atmosphere? Perfect. The decor? Perfect.

The service? Perfect.

But it would all have been so much better if her boss hadn’t abandoned her!

After her boss mentioned she would "*treat her,"* Maanfan immediately asked what kind of treat it was. The only response she got was that it would be something "*relaxing*."

That’s how she ended up at a luxurious Lanna-style Thai spa, elegantly decorated with traditional Thai patterns and fabrics. The grandeur, sophistication, and politeness of the staff made everything feel absolutely perfect, but it left Maanfan, who had never set foot in a spa before, feeling awkward and out of place.

Her boss took care of all the arrangements. All Maanfan had to do was fill out a small form and choose a scent for the essential oils. She sipped on her welcome drink while waiting.

“Have you picked a scent yet, Maanfan?”

The sharp-eyed beauty who had dragged her here asked after finishing a discussion with the receptionist. The tall, elegant woman sat down beside her on the guest sofa with a grace that felt almost intimidating.

“Um… I think lavender,”

Maanfan answered hesitantly. Other scents had caught her attention, but she figured it was safer to choose one she was familiar with.

“The agarwood scent is interesting too,”

Issara suggested with a smirk.

“It’s this spa’s signature blend, Thai herbs. But the most intriguing part is its benefits.”

Issara picked up a sample bottle and handed it to Maanfan, letting her smell the unique scent. The fragrance was distinct, making her second-guess her choice. Maybe trying something new wouldn’t be so bad?

“What benefits does it have?” Maanfan asked curiously.

“It helps with relaxation and…”

Issara paused for a moment, then continued in a softer voice that seemed to echo in Maanfan’s heart,

“Stimulates sexual desire.”

“No! Lavender! I’ll stick with lavender!”

Maanfan quickly refused, her face flushing bright red. Her reaction must have been amusing because her boss couldn’t hold back a soft laugh.

“Alright, alright, lavender it is,”

Issara said, still chuckling.

Maanfan shot her a glare, her cheeks still glowing.

“And what scent are you choosing, boss?”

Maanfan quickly asked a question to change the topic and avoid being teased further by her mischievous boss. If she didn’t, she feared Issara would continue her playful attacks like a combo move.

“I’m not getting a massage,”

Issara said with a smirk.

“I’m here to review the accounts.”

“Huh?! What do you mean by that?”

Maanfan asked, startled, her voice almost panicked.

“It means you’ll be getting the massage alone, Maanfan. This is my spa, and today I’m just here for work, not relaxation,”

Issara replied nonchalantly.

Noooo… Why are you doing this, boss?! This is clearly abandoning me! Maanfan’s heart sank, her eyes threatening to fill with tears.

By the time Maanfan came to terms with the fact that she’d be entering the aromatherapy massage room alone, Issara had spent plenty of time teasing her, comforting her, and laughing at her complaints.

Finally, Issara left to handle her business, leaving Maanfan to follow the staff to the assigned room with a defeated and gloomy look.

The aromatherapy massage rooms were named after flowers of Thailand.

The innermost VIP room was called Bungasari. The doors were designed for maximum tranquility, double-layered to block out any disturbances. The outer door was made of glass, while the inner one was a solid wooden door, ensuring a serene environment.

The doors were push-style, and outside each room hung a carved wooden plaque shaped like a flower.

As soon as Maanfan entered, she noticed the spaciousness of the room. It didn’t feel cramped at all. The dim lighting was perfect for relaxation. In the center of the room was a massage bed, while by the window was a jacuzzi tub. From the window, there was a view of the garden outside.

If privacy was needed, there were thick curtains to close completely. On the right side of the room, there was a dressing room and a bathroom. The entire room was decorated with wooden accents and Thai-style flower paintings. Soft music played faintly from hidden speakers.

Maanfan admired the luxurious Thai design with great appreciation.

“This way, please,”

Said an older woman, the massage staff, dressed in a traditional Thai outfit with short sleeves and a patterned wrap skirt. Her hair was neatly tied into a high bun. The lady explained the preparation steps, guiding Maanfan to take a shower and change into the provided attire.

Maanfan walked to the wardrobe in the dressing room. Inside, she found hangers, a prepared bathrobe, and a small safe for storing valuables. Next to the wardrobe was a vanity table. On the table were a brush for combing and tying hair, while the drawer contained a shower cap and disposable underwear.

At this point, even though I want to run away so much, I want to try just once in my life. Maanfan took a bath, dried her body, tied her hair, and put on a hair cap to keep her hair from touching the oil used for the massage. Then, she picked up the last tricky piece to look at.

"A... G-string? Really?"

The back part was a T-shape string, which made her swallow hard. But, okay, just wear it. The auntie must be used to it and wouldn’t care about a body like mine.

The open top under the bathrobe made Maanfan take some time to prepare herself before walking outside.

“Please sit this way, ma’am,”

The staff said.

At first, it felt strange to be called this way, but in the end, she understood they were being polite and respectful. She walked to the chair where the auntie had prepared a foot-washing tub.

It felt weird and unfamiliar to have someone wash and scrub her feet, but it felt nice, too. She started to feel relaxed. Maybe it was because of the lights, the music, the atmosphere, and the auntie’s skill in massage that made her feel this good.

“Please lie on the bed, ma’am. Could you take off your bathrobe, please?”

Maanfan felt shy and moved nervously, but the professional masseuse quickly understood. She spread the towel without looking as the sweetfaced woman removed her bathrobe and lay face down on the bed neatly, her cheeks slightly red.

“Is it too cold, ma’am? Are you cold? Should I increase the air conditioner’s temperature?”

The auntie asked while placing a towel over her hips.

“I’m not cold. It’s okay…”

The massage began from her neck, moving down to her shoulders. The auntie asked if she preferred a strong or gentle massage, according to Maanfan’s liking, before falling silent.

The muscle-relaxing massage applied just the right pressure on her back, hips, thighs, and calves, making the sweet-faced woman feel so relaxed she almost fell asleep. The scent she chose was perfect and made her even more comfortable.

“Please turn over, ma’am. Next, we will do an eye spa. This is a special promotion from our shop.”

When she turned over to lie on her back, a towel was placed over her chest and hips again. She didn’t know much about the promotion since her boss had arranged everything.

Whatever they told her to do, she just followed. A gel was applied, and a machine was used to massage around her eyes, pressing gently.

A point near her forehead was gently pressed, ending with cool cucumber slices placed over her eyelids. It felt so relaxing that Maanfan almost drifted off to sleep. The massage then continued on the front of her body.

But… was it her imagination, or did the auntie’s hands feel softer?

“Would you like me to massage your chest as well, ma’am?”

Maanfan jumped slightly at the sound of a familiar voice. It sounded like Araya’s… but that couldn’t be. She shook off the thought, assuming it was just her mind playing tricks on her because she’d been thinking about her too much, even in her dreams.

“Yes, please,” she replied.

She paused for a few moments before deciding to answer. By this point, there was no point in feeling shy. The auntie must be used to this kind of thing. Since she was already here, she decided to go all the way.

As soon as she gave her permission, two warm, soft hands coated in fragrant oil slipped under the towel that was draped over her chest. They gently cupped her soft curves, applying firm, even pressure as they massaged.

“W-Whoa… so this is how they do it…”

Maanfan flinched in surprise but quickly adjusted the small towel to keep her chest covered. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment. Even though the masseuse was a fifty-something auntie, being touched like this still made her shy. She tried to calm herself internally.

Although the pressure on her chest was firm, the movements over her sensitive peaks were light and delicate, making her breathing uneven. She could feel her body responding to the touch, and her face and ears grew even hotter from embarrassment.

Despite the awkwardness, she couldn’t deny how comfortable it felt. Just when she was about to ask for it to stop, the hands shifted down to massage her stomach, allowing her to let out a quiet sigh of relief.

The warm hands glided over her smooth stomach, applying light pressure before moving to her sides. The softness of the touch, combined with the warmth of the hands against her skin, made Maanfan’s heart race.

She reminded herself repeatedly, She is just an auntie in her fifties!

She tried to focus on the massage, but once certain feelings were triggered, they were hard to suppress. With her eyes covered, unable to see anything, her sense of touch became even more sensitive.

The hands moved down to massage the inner thighs, brushing lightly past a sensitive spot. Maanfan flinched in surprise, her heart skipping a beat.

However, it seemed to be accidental, as the hands moved on to her shins and feet. Still, a strange, unsettling feeling began to grow inside her.

Since the chest massage, Maanfan had been trying not to overthink. She reminded herself that physical contact like this was normal during a massage. She tried to stay calm and let herself relax, starting to enjoy the soothing scent and the comforting touch.

But then the soft hands returned to her thighs, massaging around her hips, inner thighs, and the sensitive areas nearby. The touch felt dangerously close to places that made her heart race, and occasionally, the hands brushed against spots that shouldn’t have been touched, leaving her feeling uneasy.

‘Am I… being harassed by a fifty-something-year-old? This feels so wrong! No, I can’t let this happen, I need to fight back,’ 😁

She thought, her frustration boiling over. Determined, she pulled off the cucumber slices covering her eyes and, with a firm voice, told the person to stop. She was ready to complain and report this to Khun Issara.

“Stop it! That’s enough! No more massage!”

But as she opened her eyes, she froze. The person massaging her thighs wasn’t the auntie she expected.

Instead, it was a familiar face, wearing the uniform of the massage shop. That sweet, gentle smile and sparkling eyes, she recognized them immediately.

It was someone she knew. Her heart skipped a beat as shock flooded through her.

"How… How did you get here? Why are you doing this?!"

"....."

“K… Khun… How did you get here?!”

Ignoring the stunned reaction of the woman, who was so shocked she couldn’t even form a proper sentence, the sharp-eyed, short-haired woman simply smiled sweetly at her bewildered face.

Her voice, unexpectedly soft and sweet compared to her usual tone in the office, followed.

“Oh… it’s you, Maanfan. I was wondering why this figure seemed so familiar.”

. .

The bedroom door closed behind her with a soft click, and a handbag was carelessly dropped to the floor. Not far from the door, the owner of the room dragged herself toward the thick, soft bed. Her pastel-colored bra was unclasped and discarded beside the bed, even though she hadn’t yet removed her outer clothes.

The curvaceous figure flopped face-down onto the mattress, letting out a long, exhausted sigh as if finally relieved to reach the sanctuary of her room.

*“Relaxation? What relaxation? I’m even more exhausted now.”*

The murmured complaint was directed at the fiery short-haired beauty who had insisted on dragging her through the so-called relaxing massage session.

“Geez, Araya… you call this relaxation? Feels like you were just indulging yourself.”

As she felt the ache in her waist intensify, she grumbled more about the insatiable person who had pushed her to her limits. If it weren’t for the fact that they had work in the morning, she was sure it would have turned into an all-night marathon.

What on earth does she eat to have that much stamina? She really wanted to ask.

But she couldn’t deny the thrill of the out-of-the-ordinary experience, one that went beyond the bedroom walls. Her heart had raced, half with fear of being caught and half with excitement.

The unfamiliar scent of massage oil lingered in the air. The sharp-eyed beauty in her Thai-style uniform, piece by piece, shedding her attire, revealed soft, smooth skin.

The smooth massage oil stayed on her skin, making every movement slide effortlessly. The more she moved, the stronger the scent grew, wrapping around her senses. It wasn’t just the fragrance that made her feel lightheaded, but also the touch of the woman who had suddenly become her massage therapist.

The other woman used every corner of the room, the massage bed, the bathroom, even the changing area…

And then there was the soaking tub by the window.

Because the curtains were slightly parted, she felt a mix of fear, embarrassment, and excitement, making her heart race like it would burst.

In that moment, she had to admit she felt pure bliss, so much so that her body burned, and her mind went completely blank. She could still remember how loud her voice had been.

Thinking about it again made her feel embarrassed all over. Lying on the bed, she wriggled and kicked her legs, trying to shake off the feelings she couldn’t quite put into words. Her cheeks, ears, and neck were flushed red.

Even so, she couldn’t stop feeling shy about the kind massage lady. She must have known what they were up to, being gone for hours like that. Even though the sharp-eyed woman had assured her the room was soundproof, and that even if someone guessed, no one would dare mention it, it was still mortifying.

She didn’t think she could ever set foot there again. To fall in love with an aromatherapy massage but feel too embarrassed to go back, it was so frustrating, it could make her cry.

“And why is it, only during times like that, she acts like she’s really Araya?”

After calming herself down, she began to reflect on the complicated relationship she had with the woman who had just dropped her off at the front of her house.

Ever since she realized that the person she once thought of as just a casual partner was actually her boss, she had been filled with doubt and confusion. However, the heavy responsibilities on her shoulders forced her to set those feelings aside. Besides, her boss had helped her significantly and provided countless benefits.

*What should she call this? A mutually beneficial relationship? A boss with benefits? Ugh, it’s all too confusing.*

Issara made her a key player in the race for the CEO position, while she received help from her boss to resolve various issues, especially those related to the factory. No matter how she analyzed it, it still didn’t make sense.

She tried to suppress the sweet feelings that occasionally surged up, pushing them deep into her heart. No matter how tempting they seemed, she knew they were like honey-coated poison, delicious but deadly. "Never mind. Maybe good things were never meant for me,"

She muttered to herself.

Maanfan sneered at her own emotions as she forced them down and brushed them aside. She turned her attention to other matters, distracting herself entirely. Her eyelids slowly shut, heavy with exhaustion.

She needed to save her energy to face the challenging work awaiting her the next day. She left her confusion and turmoil behind, letting the darkness of the night swallow them whole.

. .

The next morning, in a small meeting room on the 49th floor, sharp, piercing eyes focused on Maanfan as she went through the résumés of the candidates called in for interviews that day.

Her diligent subordinate was deeply engrossed in the documents, re-reading them multiple times.

Issara started to question the situation. Why so much focus? It was just résumés for job applicants, not some game show where answering correctly would win you a dunk tank prize.

And she was certain it wasn’t her imagination, Maanfan was avoiding her gaze and keeping a noticeable distance. To put it simply, she was being ignored.

She wasn't used to this kind of coldness. It was unsettling. What had she done to make the sweet-faced woman upset? Was it about the massage parlor incident last night?

Hmm... probably not.

After all, it had been a while since they'd crossed those boundaries. Maybe she'd just lost control because the little one was too adorable to resist.

"What's wrong, Maanfan? You're unusually quiet today,"

Issara finally asked, unable to bear the silent treatment any longer. She hated unresolved tension.

The question startled Maanfan, who flinched and glanced at her briefly before pretending to dive back into reading the documents in her hands.

“It’s nothing… I guess I’m just overly excited about the candidates we’re interviewing today,”

Maanfan replied.

That's it!!!

The formal tone and distant choice of words were obvious. And she was trying to play it off too, acting so composed. Maanfan was definitely getting better at putting on a poker face—was she learning that from Issara? “Really? But I don’t think that’s it, Maanfan…”

“The candidates are almost all here,”

Maanfan interrupted, turning her head away.

“Let’s start the interviews now. Otherwise, it’ll take too long. I’ve invited quite a number of people.”

Before Issara could finish speaking, her subordinate interrupted her. Issara frowned, clearly unhappy. No one had ever dared to interrupt her before, let alone brush off her words like that.

She decided to let it slide for now. This tension wasn’t about work, and she’d address it after hours. It was obvious there was something deeper causing this sudden distance.

"Exactly, Project Leader,"

Maanfan replied curtly.

Issara quickly pushed down the rising irritation and composed her face into its usual calm expression. Years of running a business had taught her to mask emotions swiftly. Feelings were a luxury she couldn’t afford, especially now. She wasn’t Araya, the emotional and passionate persona she sometimes embraced—she was Issara, a successful and respected businesswoman.

She picked up the internal phone and issued clear instructions to her personal assistant.

"Khun Manee, call in the first applicant. After each interview, wait three minutes before bringing in the next one."

Hanging up, Issara opened the evaluation sheet in front of her, mirroring her subordinate. Both of them prepared for the task at hand: finding the perfect addition to their team for Project Araya.

The search began.

"I have ten years of experience working in the fashion industry,"

The first candidate confidently began.

The first candidate introduced themselves with focused determination. While there was a hint of curiosity when their eyes lingered on Maanfan, they quickly brushed it aside and maintained their professionalism. Their responses were confident, demonstrating strong problem-solving skills and making them a promising option.

It wasn’t long before the second candidate entered.

“I graduated in fashion design from Italy,”

Said a petite young man with a neat appearance. Though his experience was limited, his ideas were fresh and highly creative.

Next came another applicant.

“I’m ready to resign from my current job to start working with you immediately, Khun Issara,”

Declared a confident woman, her gaze fixed on the project leader. Her enthusiasm and unwavering confidence in Issara caused Maanfan’s heart to tighten unexpectedly. She couldn’t help but glance at Issara, seated beside her in a perfectly tailored suit, maintaining a calm and composed demeanor.

And so the interviews continued, with candidate after candidate presenting their case.

“This was the last candidate, right? Here, take this,”

Issara said as she handed over the evaluation forms she had filled out during the interviews.

“Decide who you want to hire and how many. Make sure to include reasons for your choices.”

Maanfan accepted the documents with a tired smile. The interviews had dragged on for the entire afternoon, and she could feel her energy draining. However, she understood the importance of this decision, especially since it would directly impact the success of the Araya project.

“Yes, Khun Issara,”

She replied, her tone calm but tinged with exhaustion.

Issara leaned back in her chair, crossing her arms as she observed Maanfan.

“Remember, this is your project. I’ll back whatever decision you make— but I expect you to be thorough.”

Maanfan nodded. Despite the fatigue, she appreciated the trust Issara placed in her. After all, this was her chance to prove herself not only as a project leader but also as someone who could handle responsibility and deliver results.

"Thank you. I'll finalize everything and send it over,"

Maanfan said, accepting the documents as she prepared to leave. It was already far past the end of the workday, and she was eager to go home and recharge.

"Alright,"

Issara replied curtly, her brows furrowed in mild annoyance. The formal and distant tone from Maanfan was grating on her nerves. It wasn’t like they were strictly discussing work anymore—surely they could talk more openly now, right?

"Excuse me, I'll take my leave,"

Maanfan said politely, gathering her belongings and turning to leave.

But before she could step out of the interview room, Issara followed her swiftly and grabbed her arm firmly, her presence commanding and impossible to ignore.

"Let's talk first,"

Issara demanded, her voice firm but not loud.

Maanfan froze for a second, startled by the sudden move. Regaining her composure, she put on a neutral expression and replied,

"What do we need to discuss, Khun Issara?"

“Is this about choosing team members? Boss, it would be better if you waited for the finalized report,"

Maanfan replied, her tone carrying a hint of defiance.

Issara felt her patience being tested for the first time. She hadn’t realized her subordinate had this side to her, and hearing "boss" in that distant tone irked her more than she cared to admit.

"You know it's not about that,"

Issara said, her voice calm but firm. She reminded herself to stay composed Maanfan was younger, probably upset, and the last thing she wanted was to push her away further by losing her temper. Stay calm, Issara. Don’t let this escalate.

"Then what is it about, boss?"

Maanfan asked, her tone deliberately formal and detached, as if putting up a wall.

"I was hoping you could tell me why you’re suddenly keeping your distance from me like this,"

Issara responded, her grip on Maanfan's wrist firm but not aggressive. The intensity in her gaze made Maanfan pause.

She hesitated, caught off guard by the directness of the question. Looking into Issara's eyes, all she could see was her own reflection staring back.

What is she thinking? Why is she holding onto me like this? As a subordinate? Or as something... more?

"If we don’t talk about this,"

Issara added, her voice steady but tinged with frustration,

"Don’t you think it’ll affect the work?"

When her subordinate remained silent, Issara decided to press harder, bringing up the topic that Maanfan cared about the most. She wanted to coax her into revealing what was really on her mind.

“I can separate work from personal matters!”

Maanfan blurted out, her tone sharp but defensive. “That response clearly shows it’s personal, doesn’t it?”

Issara countered smoothly.

Maanfan froze, falling right into the trap Issara had set for her. She couldn’t refute it. As she replayed Issara’s words in her mind, doubt and hesitation weighed heavily on her. Her brows furrowed tightly as she looked down, trying to hide her expression.

It was a futile effort—she knew Issara always saw through her. Every time. No matter how hard she tried to conceal her feelings, Issara could read her like an open book.

“Just tell me, Maanfan. I want to know. What made you upset with me? Was it about last night? Or the team?”

Issara’s voice softened, her tone gentle and persuasive, her choice of words deliberate.

Maanfan felt herself losing ground completely.

She had no defense against the sweetness in Issara’s voice, the way she spoke with a closeness that disarmed her. It wasn’t the commanding Issara in front of her now—it was Araya, the side of her that always made Maanfan’s resolve crumble.

That voice, soft and honeyed, felt like poison she willingly drank, even knowing the cost.

“No, it’s not about last night,”

Maanfan began hesitantly, her voice trembling.

**“I just don’t understand… why, every time we… are together… you call yourself Araya?”**

A heavy silence blanketed the room. The quiet was so intense that Maanfan could hear her own heartbeat, racing with fear. She had asked the question that might shatter this already fragile and complicated relationship. The possibility of it all ending badly loomed over her. Yet, she had asked anyway—and now regret and fear consumed her.

The elegant hand that had been gripping her arm slowly released, leaving her free. It made her look up, meeting Issara’s eyes, only to see a flicker of emotion she couldn’t interpret.

Her chest tightened at the sight of her boss’s unreadable expression. What was that look? Why was she staring like that?

Issara’s lips moved slightly, as though trying to form a reply, but no sound came out. Maanfan couldn’t even make out what she was trying to say.

What was your answer, Issara? she wondered, her anxiety growing.

Unconsciously, Maanfan stepped closer, concern overriding her fear.

“Khun Issara?”

She whispered softly, her voice laced with uncertainty.

At the sound of her name, Issara flinched slightly. She caught the concerned look in Maanfan’s eyes and immediately shut her own, taking a moment to compose herself. When she reopened them, her gaze had transformed into something cold and unfeeling.

The icy glare made Maanfan instinctively step back, her heart sinking further into uncertainty.

**“Don’t ask about this again,”**

Issara ordered, her voice devoid of warmth. She turned on her heel and strode out of the room, leaving Maanfan standing there, staring at the retreating figure.

So this is what you get, Maanfan, she thought bitterly. Once the sweetness fades, only poison remains. Poison that seeps through you, killing you slowly. How does it feel? Painful, isn’t it?

You chose to drink it yourself. Accept the consequences. Know your place. She lowered her head, staring at the floor with a self-mocking smile. No comforting words came to mind—only a bitter acknowledgment of her naivety. How could she be so foolish to fall for someone who would never see her as anything more than a subordinate?

"That's all I am,"

She muttered to herself. A subordinate, clear and simple.

Pushing her emotions aside, Maanfan turned her focus to the documents in her hand. She had a report to finish today—work that demanded her full attention. After all, she was still the subordinate of that cruel, cold-hearted boss.

Issara sat alone in her office, the outside world enveloped in darkness and silence. The only sound was the faint hum of her thoughts, with Maanfan's question echoing endlessly in her mind:

“Why do you always refer to yourself as Araya whenever we… have something together?”

“Because I don’t want to be Issara,”

She whispered softly into the void, her words dissipating into the emptiness where no one could hear them.

. .

A thin plume of white smoke curled into the air, illuminated by the faint red glow at the tip of her cigarette. She held it delicately between her fingers, taking a slow drag. The cool, minty taste of menthol filled her lungs before she exhaled it slowly, watching the haze linger briefly in the dim light before fading into nothingness.

Issara leaned back in her chair, her expression distant, the mask she wore for the world slipping in the solitude of the night. A flicker of vulnerability crossed her face as she stared at the ashtray on her desk.

It was easier to be Araya, Araya didn’t carry the weight of expectations, the crushing responsibility, or the endless loneliness that came with being Issara. For just a moment, in the fleeting intimacy with Maanfan, she could escape.

But even now, alone in the silence, she couldn’t outrun herself. The question still lingered, pulling at her resolve, demanding an answer she wasn’t ready to face.

She felt like the woman’s presence was real, almost close enough to touch. But in just a moment, it disappeared into the air.

She couldn’t help but think—it felt like her own life.

Issara looked up at the dark sky with no stars, standing in the quiet backyard, far from the lights of the house. It was just her, the darkness, a cigarette in her hand, and all her confusing thoughts.

“Miss Issara, your father asked me to call you. He is waiting in the dining room,”

A voice from behind said, pulling her back to reality.

She took a deep breath, inhaling the smoke from the cigarette, before dropping it on the ground and crushing it with her shoe.

Issara put the thin phone she was holding into her pocket and walked back to the brightly lit mansion. Even though it looked warm and full of life, to her, this place didn’t feel like home anymore.

The old butler, who worked both as a secretary and house manager, sighed deeply. He bent down to pick up the cigarette butt from the ground. As he cleaned it up, he felt a wave of sadness. He remembered a promise he made to Issara’s late mother, the woman who once ran this home.

“You deserve better than this, Miss Issara,”

He whispered softly to himself. The heavy feeling in his chest came out as a deep sigh.

“Madam, I think Miss Issara must be really stressed. That’s why she came here to secretly smoke. Forgive me for not being able to help her.”

All he could do was hide the evidence of her disobedience. The cigarette butt left behind openly challenged the rules of the house. The master of the house didn’t like Issara coming to this corner of the garden, and he hated it even more when his daughter smoked.

When Issara walked into the dining room, she saw the master of the house sitting calmly at the head of the long table. His face, marked with wrinkles from age and experience, turned toward her. His sharp eyes, full of authority, stared at her, releasing a faint sense of pressure. His posture showed leadership that was deeply rooted in his character. His black hair, streaked with bits of white, made him look even more intimidating.

“Sit down,” he said.

The deep voice spoke, almost like a command, telling his daughter to sit down on the nearby chair. He raised his hand to signal the staff and chef to serve the prepared meal.

“Have you eaten yet? If you want anything, tell the chef.”

“I’ve already eaten, sir.”

Her cold and distant tone made her sound more like a subordinate than a daughter. This made his sharp eyes glance up at her, but the calm, emotionless gaze she returned seemed to amuse him slightly. His lips curved into a faint smile, too subtle for anyone to notice.

"Araya" quietly finished her meal.

After taking a sip of water, she signaled for the dishes to be cleared and for the servants to leave the room.

For nearly fifteen minutes, Issara sat silently at the table, staring blankly as if she were just another piece of decoration.

“I called you here because I need to talk.”

“Please, go ahead, sir.”

The response from his so-called daughter made the head of the house clench his jaw lightly. Still, he chose to overlook it and get straight to the point. He wasn’t in the mood to argue with her now.

“About the competition for the president’s position, step back and let Tara have it. You know this competition is designed to give Tara the status to match yours, to make him a suitable business partner for marriage.”

After secretly monitoring his daughter’s work and comparing it to his future son-in-law’s, it was clear Issara’s progress in planning promotions, setting up shops, and achieving perfection far exceeded Tara’s. The only missing piece was the final product, which he couldn’t track down no matter how hard he tried.

“I refuse, sir. I will never step back for him.”

“I’ve already made agreements with their family. Don’t complicate this any further!”

His sharp tone and stern words, meant to intimidate, did nothing to Issara. She met his gaze with icy determination.

“I said no. I won’t let someone so incapable drag me down.”

"What do you mean by that?!"

He snapped back quickly, his fists clenched as he glared at his younger opponent.

"Rebuilding my entire team? Isn't it clear you're just trying to cut me down, sir? But I regret to inform you, my new team will be even stronger than my last one, and far superior to the team you've assembled for Tara!"

Her firm response, bordering on defiance, stunned the man. His daughter had always known he was secretly supporting her future fiancé, yet she chose to fight fairly.

The unwavering determination and confidence in her eyes shook him to his core. Issara was fighting with all her might and wouldn’t back down for anyone—not even him.

"How dare you defy me, Issara!"

He roared, his voice echoing throughout the room. His face flushed with anger and humiliation from being openly challenged and exposed for cheating. But even with his interference, Tara still trailed behind the formidable figure before him.

Could it be true that Tara was truly incompetent?

"Have I ever simply obeyed you before, sir?"

A cold smile appeared on his lips, making Isara shiver. He had created the other person to continue running the family business. But now, his daughter was opposing everything. No matter how much he forced or pressured her, she kept moving further away and acted more like an opponent. Why? What had he done wrong? He had only planned to build a stable future for his daughter.

"I... I will remove you from the inheritance! You won’t get a single penny from me. Don’t even think you can defy me!"

The short, angry words came out as he stood up and pointed a finger at his daughter sitting at the table. Isara was unmoved by the threat. She stood up without fear of the man whose face turned red one moment and pale the next, losing his usual aura of power. She smiled with satisfaction before responding in a calm voice.

"I don’t need your wealth. Just the shares of WTT Group, which are my mother’s inheritance, are enough for me. You can save your money for the other family you’ve been hiding."

After saying this, she turned and walked out of the room, leaving the man, who was her father, to collapse weakly into his chair. Even about that secret, Issara already knew...

The tall, slender woman walked out of the mansion she once called home when her mother was still there. But now, it no longer felt like home. She quickly drove away in her luxurious car, tears she had been holding back finally streaming down her face, unable to be stopped.

Even though her father didn’t deserve it, her tears kept falling and wouldn’t stop.

. .

In a pub with music playing and pretty lights, there weren’t many people because it wasn’t very late yet. Maanfan, a woman with a full figure, was sitting at the bar.

She held a pink drink called the Pink Lady. It was made from orangeflavored alcohol, sweet syrup, and lime juice. The drink tasted sweet and sour and was easy to drink, but it could make someone drunk quickly if they weren’t careful. Maanfan lifted the glass to her lips and finished it all in one go.

"One more, please,"

She said, her voice sounding a little unclear. Her cheeks were red. The woman working at the bar looked worried. Maanfan was drinking very fast. Even though the drink didn’t have much alcohol, if she wasn’t careful, she could get drunk easily.

But the bartender just nodded silently and made another drink for her. Maanfan took the drink and kept sipping, trying to relax and enjoy the atmosphere of the bar.

"Stressful work? Is that why you're drinking alone like this?"

A voice from someone sitting two seats away caught Maanfan’s attention. She turned to look, knowing for sure the man was talking to her since they were the only two people sitting at the bar counter.

A chubby man raised his glass in greeting, but Maanfan didn’t reply. Her quiet demeanor made him awkwardly take another sip from his glass.

"You...?"

Maanfan felt like she had seen him before. Her alcohol-dazed mind worked slowly, trying to remember where she might have met him. The way she frowned in confusion looked so endearing that it gave the man the courage to move a little closer.

"I'm Ophas. We’ve seen each other a couple of times in the meeting room, but we never talked."

"Huh!?"

Her puzzled and surprised reaction made him chuckle before he explained further.

"I'm on the other team competing for the chairman position,"

He said with a cheerful tone, smiling warmly. His round cheeks turned red as he introduced himself, leaving Maanfan unsure how to respond. He was a competitor, but why was he boldly trying to get to know her? Even though she was tipsy, she could still sense his attempt to get closer.

"I'm Maanfan, from Issara's team,"

She said in a slurred voice, trying to sound firm, which only made the smiling man look at her with even more fondness. He barely managed to lift his hands in a polite greeting when she, despite her hazy state, showed impeccable manners. He held back laughter as she beckoned him closer, erasing the distance between their chairs.

"Come, come... You, my... colleague... I'll treat you. It's great to have a drinking buddy. Cheers!"

"Calling me 'you' clearly means you don’t remember my name,"

He teased but still raised his amber-colored drink to his lips, sipping while watching her down her red drink in one go. Her dreamy eyes and wide smile lit up the room. If he weren’t sitting with her, there was no doubt others would keep coming to toast with her non-stop. She was far too charming to ignore. "When will it be?"

"Drink, please drink."

He raised his glass to toast with the person who was already swaying. While he just drank half a glass, the other person was already starting her third.

Her consciousness seemed almost gone, bold enough to pull the tie hanging around his neck for a closer look.

"Work ended a long time ago, so why... are you still wearing a tie? Let me take it off for you."

"Ahh!..."

The pull felt more like trying to choke him to death than to help remove the tie. He quickly took off the tie from his neck himself, freeing it from the hands of the tipsy lady. He then stuffed it into his shirt pocket before he could pass out from her well-meaning but dangerous action.

Laughter from a group of women passing by made the young man’s cheeks burn red. He raised his amber-colored glass and took a sip, trying to ignore the scene around him.

"You are very drunk now. How about drinking warm water or lemon water instead?"

Ophas tried to calm the drunk person while signaling the female bartender to stop serving alcohol to Maanfan, who was now almost slumped over the counter.

"I'm... not drunk at all, just not the same as before,"

She replied with a slurred tongue, turning to face him defiantly. She tried to sit up straight to prove her "not drunk" state, but her body swayed and almost fell off the chair.

Ophas, startled, reached out instinctively to catch her, but Maanfan managed to steady herself just in time. Despite being slightly annoyed when the bartender slid a glass of warm water and a cold towel toward her, she accepted them without protest, knowing it wasn't in her nature to make a fuss.

"Ah... yes, yes, not the same as before,"

He replied, playing along.

"So... you said you work in the same place. Which team are you on? Definitely not my team, that's for sure,"

She giggled softly, her words slightly jumbled. The man sighed and reintroduced himself.

"My name is Ophas. I am one of the three candidates for the WTT Group chairperson position."

*“Phewdddddddddd”*

Out of shock, the moment Ophas finished speaking, the drink Maanfan had in her mouth was spit out directly onto the face of the third candidate for the WTT Group chairperson position.

Chapter 06: Another Level

Inside the bar, in a corner deep inside the room, under dim lights and soft classical music, two young men were talking happily. The alcohol in their blood made the conversation even more lively.

"We must be crazy to open a cosplay shop in a mall like this."

Kitti, a big guy wearing thick glasses and a Japanese anime shirt, laughed loudly.

"We are not crazy. I never wanted the chairperson position anyway. I only own the third-most shares in the company, so they made me get involved."

The chubby guy in a full suit said this while sipping his amber-colored drink.

"But... just because you love Kumi-chan so much, you made her the brand's mascot?"

Kitti spoke with amazement at the sheer madness of his friend's bold idea. This guy was the ultimate otaku!

"Just getting more fans for Kumi-chan is the greatest goal ever. Chairperson position? That’s nonsense!"

He laughed heartily and clinked his glass with his friend's, clearly in a good mood.

"Another glass, please!"

A loud voice came from the bar counter nearby, not far from where the two men were sitting, pulling their attention away from their drinks.

Kitti's eyes widened in surprise.

"Wait, hey!! Isn't that Maanfan? The staff from Ice-cold Boss Isara's team?"

Kitti recognized Maanfan instantly. Her adorable look, resembling a Japanese girl, caught everyone's eyes. Not to mention, she looked just like an anime heroine he once watched.

"Hey... how can you even remember that? Are you sure it's her?"

Ophas asked, doubtful of his friend’s overactive imagination, especially when it came to identifying someone from Isara's team.

"I'm sure,"

Kitti thought to himself confidently.

"Someone this much my type? I’d recognize her even from her shadow."

"She’s that cute, and on top of that, she radiates this yuri energy everywhere. No wonder Ice-cold Isara is so protective of her. This is like a lily field in full bloom. No way I’m wrong."

"You're just making stuff up. Every time you see a cute girl, you act like you know them all, you creep."

"I'm not making it up!"

Kitti adjusted his glasses with absolute confidence.

"If you don’t believe me, just take a picture and send it to Ice-cold Isara. That’s her favorite staff for sure. Try me."

The chubby guy even dared Ophas to take a picture and confirm it with Isara herself. That’s how confident he was, this was definitely one of Isara’s favorites.

"Favorite staff, my ass. We just worked together on one project, and Icecold... uh, I mean Miss Isara, almost killed me with all her demands. She's crazy strict."

Ophas immediately protested.

"Just a colleague who gets picked on a lot, that's all."

"Fine, fine, if she's not your 'favorite,' just take the damn photo already."

"Alright, but if you’re wrong, I'll kick your ass for this."

"If I'm right, though, you're buying me dinner."

After bickering like they were about to start a full-blown fight, the chubby guy finally raised his phone and snapped a picture of the adorable girl who was drinking heavily at the bar counter.

**OPHAS**:

[sends picture]

Hey, is this your staff?

Before he could even lock his phone screen, the message was already read, and a reply came almost instantly.

Isara WTT:

Yes. Send me the location. Is that Maanfan drunk?

Ophas turned to give Kitti an awkward smile and let out a deep sigh.

"Looks like I’m paying for dinner again,"

He muttered under his breath.

Just as he was about to put his phone down, it buzzed repeatedly with a series of urgent notifications.

Isara WTT:

Send it now. Are you looking to die?

If you don’t send the location in 3.5 seconds, your beloved Benz will be on fire, Ophas.

Wait, wait! Ophas screamed internally. What’s with sending a flood of messages without giving him a chance to reply?

OPAS:

Sending location.

P-please spare my car, ma’am!

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The response he got from someone infamous for being cold and ruthless almost made him drop his jaw in shock. Whoa... why the rush? This feels so... yuri-like. Yep, no doubt about it.

Kitti, noticing his friend’s reaction, burst out laughing. Looks like I’m getting free drinks tonight, he thought to himself.

Isara WTT:

Stay there and watch her. I’m coming right now.

The moment she forced the location out of him, she immediately put him to work without giving him any chance to refuse. She was so authoritarian that Ophas almost shook his head in disbelief. Still the same old ruthless boss.

“Kitti, you can head back now. I’ll stay here and watch her for a bit.”

“Alright… I’m already happy with the free drinks tonight,”

Kitti replied with a grin.

“But next time, you owe me a round!”

Kitti added as he walked off, leaving Ophas to approach the drunken lady sitting at the bar.

This is the worst, can’t enjoy the prize, don’t get the credit, and still stuck with the burden.

He pulled out a handkerchief with a Kumi-chan print and wiped his face, still soaked from the “holy water” the sweet-faced girl had accidentally sprayed on him.

“Sorry... here, here! I’ll wipe it for youuu! I didn’t mean to, really didn’t think you’d fall for the jokeee!”

She slurred as she clumsily tried to reach for his face.

The slurred apology and clumsy attempt to help, despite barely being able to stand straight, made the young man immediately decline. The last time she tried to help remove his tie, she nearly choked him to death.

Letting her wipe his face now could very well end with her accidentally headbutting him into a bloody mess.

“No need, no need! I… I’ll do it myself. It’s fine, really.”

“Reaaally? Okay, but don’t pull that kind of joke again, okay? The person who’s going to be chairman has to be suuuper mean. You’re way too nice to sit here keeping me company. No way you’re a candidate! I’m sure of it!”

The sweet-faced girl didn’t believe for a second that he was one of the candidates for the WTT Group chairperson position. No matter how drunk she was, she remembered clearly how cold-hearted her “boss” was.

“Cold-hearted, huh? Sounds like there’s more to this,”

He muttered, intrigued.

After carefully wiping his face clean, he tucked the Kumi-chan handkerchief back into his pocket, treating it like a precious item. Isara’s protectiveness was written all over her actions. Are they really just boss and subordinate? Ophas couldn’t help but reflect on this repeatedly.

“Well… I’ll head back now, okay? Need to… uh… submit the report. Otherwise, the mean one will scold me again. Thanks for the drinks!” She said, swaying slightly as she turned to leave.

Maanfan spoke while bowing clumsily, almost collapsing onto the floor. The awkwardness left Ophas unsure whether he should return the bow or rush to support her.

Ugh, this drunk. Just go home already. Wait... it felt like he’d forgotten something.

Oh... Wait a second! Isn’t Ice-cold Boss making me watch her? I can’t just let her leave!

“W-wait! Maanfan!”

Ophas called out in panic before running after the swaying figure making her way toward the exit.

“Damn it, how is she walking so fast? Isn’t she drunk? Where did she go?!”

He muttered, glancing around frantically.

The curses and flustered demeanor of the chubby young man, combined with his face that kept switching between pale and flushed as he hurried along, caught the attention of late-night partygoers. Yet, none of those reactions registered in his mind. His thoughts were solely focused on the drunken lady he was ordered to keep an eye on.

But just a moment of distraction while squeezing through the crowd at the club’s exit, and she was gone.

Shit...

Shit, where did she go?!

He quickened his pace, almost running, toward the side parking lot of the bar. His heart lightened slightly at the sight of a swaying figure in the distance—a familiar back that he recognized immediately. Without a second thought, he called out.

“M-Maanfan!”

Relief filled his voice, but in the split second she turned to face him, his relief turned into utter shock.

It wasn’t Maanfan.

“Ha... that pick-up line won’t work on me, kid. If you want to flirt, go learn some better lines first!”

The stranger’s bold misunderstanding left Ophas completely at a loss.

“S-sorry, I mistook you for someone else...”

He quickly excused himself and walked away, his mind screaming, I’m not flirting, dammit! I’m looking for someone!

“You’re cute, though! But maybe hit the gym a little, and you’ll be perfect,”

The woman shouted after him, making him quicken his pace even more.

Hit the gym? It cost me a fortune to get this perfectly round belly! Why would I waste all that effort?! He grumbled internally, ignoring her voice as it faded behind him.

His thoughts churned in turmoil as he recalled the terrifying threats from Ice-cold Boss Isara.

“Maybe she went the other way... yeah, that’s got to be it!”

Realizing his mistake, Ophas quickly ran to check the other side of the bar.

But no matter how much he scanned the area, there was no sign of Maanfan. Sweat began to soak through his shirt, the weight of his own body and the frantic running taking its toll.

Maanfan didn’t call a taxi and leave already, right?

“I’m so dead. I’m totally dead. My beloved car won’t survive this. What do I do now?”

Despair washed over him as he realized he had failed miserably to follow Ice-cold Isara’s orders. Standing frozen in front of the bar, he felt utterly lost.

Then, out of nowhere—

A hand on his shoulder made him jump, his entire body freezing as a chill ran from the tips of his hair to his toes. Slowly, he turned to see who had just touched him. “P-Phi!!”

“Where is Maanfan?”

The low, icy tone of her voice sent a shiver down his spine, and he swallowed hard, his throat dry and his nerves rattled.

“I… I couldn’t keep up, P’Issara,”

Ophas confessed in a trembling whisper, his hands clasped together so tightly it hurt. His heart pounded with fear, and the image of his beloved car engulfed in flames haunted his mind. The sharp, narrowing gaze and furrowed brows of P’ Isara before him made his knees weak.

“What do you mean by that?”

“It was just a few minutes—no, less than three minutes! I only looked away for a moment, and… and Maanfan disappeared. I searched everywhere, I really did, but I couldn’t find her.”

Ophas stammered out his excuse quickly, but the piercing stare of the shorthaired woman in front of him didn’t soften in the slightest. He felt on the verge of tears.

“Is that so? Such a simple order… and you couldn’t manage it,”

Isara said flatly, her tone cold and unbothered. Her eyes swept across the area, ignoring the young man whose face had gone pale as he sank to the ground, his expensive suit crumpling against the dirty pavement.

It’s over. My beloved car… it’s done for… Isara frowned, thinking hard. Her eyes stopped at the bar across the street. There was a security camera at the front of the bar, and it made her relax a little. But getting the footage needed a lot of steps, and she didn’t have time for that.

To make things worse, Maanfan’s phone went straight to voicemail. Maybe her phone battery was dead, or maybe she turned it off on purpose to avoid her. The thought made Isara feel even more annoyed.

*If I find you, I’ll punish you! So stubborn, sneaking out like this!*

She promised herself silently before crossing the road to the bar. If it was that bar, she didn’t need to ask for any paperwork. It was part of the WTT Group, which she managed. One phone call was all she needed to get the footage.

“Move aside, please,”

She said firmly.

She gave the order in a calm, steady voice, her eyes fixed on the monitor showing the security footage.

“Y-yes, ma’am,”

The store manager stuttered, sweat dripping from his forehead. The atmosphere around the woman sitting beside him was so intense it made him nervous. Who would have thought he’d meet someone from the executive level at this hour?

The moment he received the call, he rushed straight to the store—luckily, he hadn’t gone to bed yet. Hopefully, this overtime would pay off.

“Stop there!”

The moment she spotted the person she was looking for on the screen, she gave a sharp order. A faint smile appeared on her thin lips. Let’s see how you’ll disappear now, she thought. That smile, despite being faint, sent chills down the manager’s spine. Why is her smile so scary?

“From here, I’ll handle it myself. You can go rest now,”

She said firmly.

“Yes, ma’am,”

He replied quickly, eager to escape the intense atmosphere.

Once she got what she needed, the manager quickly excused himself and left the room without delay.

Her slender fingers moved deftly over the control panel, rewinding and reviewing the footage. She spotted Maanfan stepping out of the door before quickly turning to the side and collapsing to the ground.

Feeling nauseous, maybe?

The footage then showed Ophas exiting the building, but he failed to check the area by the door and completely missed her. As he walked away, another woman in a tight, short dress appeared and found Maanfan.

"Who is that!?"

Isara’s brows furrowed deeply as she saw the woman helping Maanfan up before leading her to the roadside to hail a taxi. Her thin lips pressed into a tight line as she focused on the footage. Maanfan was clearly unconscious.

Judging by how the woman half-dragged her, Maanfan couldn’t have resisted. Isara ignored the footage of Ophas running back and forth on other cameras. She rewound the video and zoomed in on the scene to figure out who exactly had taken her subordinate.

As the image sharpened and expanded, her focus intensified. Isara clenched her fists so tightly that it hurt.

“Iris!!”

“Stop on the left, please,”

The sweet voice instructed the taxi driver.

“Wait for me for a moment, I’ll just drop my friend off.”

“Alright,”

The elderly driver replied politely. When the taxi stopped in front of a building located on the edge of town, he didn’t mind waiting. The fare was a flat rate, so there was no rush. He considered himself kind enough to allow a drunk passenger into his car in the first place.

Iris, half-dragging and half-guiding the drunk Maanfan, reached the front of a building with a roller shutter door secured by a padlock at the bottom. It was a place she had often visited in the past when she was still in a relationship with the person now in her arms.

“Stand properly, okay? I’m tired, Fan,”

Iris said, panting from the effort of dragging someone her own size to the factory.

“Uh… okay,”

Maanfan mumbled.

Iris sighed and propped Maanfan against the wall to stop her from sliding to the ground while she searched her purse for the keys. Luckily, the drunk girl cooperated and stayed still, though without Iris’s hand holding her shoulder, she would have fallen by now.

“You still keep your keys in the same place, huh?”

Iris muttered with a sigh.

Taking care of a drunk person wasn’t something she usually did. But if she had left Maanfan outside the bar, someone might have taken advantage of her, and it could have been tomorrow’s newspaper headline. Iris wasn’t cruel enough to let her ex-girlfriend suffer that kind of bad luck.

She’s already been through enough bad things, and some of it was her fault.

“Ha! Look at you now, Fan. You’re such a mess. Maybe I’ll charge you for all this trouble later,”

Iris said with a slight smirk.

Dragging the drunk girl into the factory was finally successful. Iris laid Maanfan’s limp body on a long bench meant for employees to rest. She was sweating heavily and let out a long sigh while looking at the unconscious girl.

Iris gently brushed the stray strands of hair away from Maanfan’s cheeks, her fingers lightly touching the soft skin.

“No… mean person… hick… mean person,”

Maanfan mumbled in her sleep, shaking her head to avoid the touch.

The words stopped Iris’s fingers mid-air. She pulled her hand back, her expression unreadable, a neutral mask hiding her feelings. Without another word, she turned away, closed the factory door, and headed back to the waiting taxi.

“Take me back to where you picked me up, please,”

She told the driver as she got in.

“That’s the opposite side of town,”

The older man replied.

“Can I charge you 200 baht extra for the trip?”

Iris sighed but nodded in agreement. As the car started moving, her phone rang. Glancing at the name on the screen, she answered with the sweet, playful tone she always used.

“Yes, P’Tara. I’m stuck in heavy traffic, really heavy. I’m on my way, please wait for me…”

Iris spoke sweetly into the phone as she continued her call.

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The loud alarm clock kept ringing, pulling someone out of deep sleep. A delicate hand reached out, fumbling for the phone to check the time before silencing the annoying sound.

“My head hurts… and I feel like throwing up. Why did I drink so much?

Ugh…”

Maanfan woke up feeling terrible, a classic hangover taking its toll. She wanted nothing more than to call in sick, but her sense of responsibility forced her to drag herself out of bed.

“How did I even get home? Oh no! I haven’t finished the meeting report yet!”

Even though she had already listed the names of the shortlisted candidates, the summary report Isara had requested was still untouched.

This is bad. Why did I let myself slack off like this? Maanfan scolded herself repeatedly in her mind as she dragged her tired body toward the bathroom to get ready for work.

“Khun Fan, may I come in?”

A familiar voice called from outside the door.

“Come in, Aunt Suay!”

Maanfan replied.

The door opened, revealing her kind aunt carrying a tray of steaming hot soy milk and crispy fried dough sticks that looked absolutely delicious.

“I brought this for you. I figured you might not have much of an appetite, but some warm soy milk should help. Please don’t drink so much again next time. It’s dangerous, especially for a young lady like you.”

Her aunt’s scolding, filled with genuine concern, made Maanfan smile. She took the tray and thanked the older woman with a bright, cheerful face.

"I’m scolding you, and you’re still smiling? Hurry up and eat. You’ll be late for work,”

Aunt Suay said firmly.

“Yes, Aunt Suay. By the way, how did I end up sleeping in my room?”

Maanfan asked, trying to avoid directly asking how she got home, fearing it might lead to a long lecture.

“Well, I found you sleeping on the long bench downstairs, so I brought you up here. Otherwise, the mosquitoes might’ve carried you away. You were so drunk, but at least you made it home safely,”

Aunt Suay replied.

“Heh heh… yeah, I think so too, Aunt,”

Maanfan answered sheepishly, avoiding eye contact as she sipped the warm soy milk.

She had no memory of how she got home last night. The last thing she remembered was sitting alone at the bar counter. Maybe I flagged the right taxi… she thought, still unsure.

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After freshening up, Maanfan headed to work. There was a lot to do: introducing the workplace, presenting plans and concepts, and plenty of other tasks. As for the summary report… it looked like she’d have to work overtime to finish it.

With a rough plan in her mind, she sighed quietly. With all this work, maybe I can avoid seeing Khun Isara for a while. At least long enough to sort out everything in my head.

As soon as the elevator doors opened on the floor where the wide-eyed young woman worked, a cheerful greeting immediately brought a smile to Maanfan’s face. She brushed off all lingering worries—work time was for giving her best effort.

“Good morning, Khun Maanfan. You’re early as always!”

The greeting came from a tall, thin man with thick, dark glasses—Anek, a member of her team.

“Good morning, Khun Anek. You’re early too! It’s not even work hours yet.”

“I’m here to prepare documents for the new team members. This way, we can start smoothly. I want everything to go perfectly for ‘Araya,’”

Anek replied with enthusiasm.

Anek was an exceptionally skilled salesperson sent by her boss, and his efficiency made her workload much lighter. His work on documents had lifted a huge burden off her shoulders. Truly, he was a testament to P’Isara’s knack for finding the best people.

"Alright, I’ll go prepare the information for the briefing first so I can assign tasks and give proper introductions,"

Maanfan said with a smile.

“Sure, I’ll get back to my work. Let me know if you need any help,”

Anek replied before they both went their separate ways, focused on their respective tasks, but with a shared goal, the success of the Araya brand.

Before 8:30 a.m., all the new team members had reported in. Maanfan conducted introductions and shared essential details during the briefing.

Despite the slightly rushed preparation, everyone managed to adapt quickly and began their work. Many questions about the job were raised, and Maanfan patiently addressed them one by one, ensuring everyone gained a clear understanding of the Araya brand.

At first, there was some hesitation from the team. Her young age, coupled with the fact that her name was relatively unknown in the fashion industry, made some people doubt her capability as a team leader.

However, as the day progressed, her efficiency, deep knowledge of the brand, and clear communication gradually earned their respect. By the end of the session, the team was fully engaged and focused on their work.

It had to be admitted that this sweet-faced team leader truly understood the essence of the brand. Although the team wasn’t fully in sync yet, her attention to detail, fresh ideas, and speed of execution had significantly improved the workflow. Maanfan felt satisfied with the progress they were making.

“Khun Anek, work hours ended a while ago. Why haven’t you gone home yet?”

Maanfan asked, noticing her diligent colleague still at his desk.

“Oh… I just want to finish the purchasing documents first. It’ll help the team stay on schedule. By the way, the supplier you contacted gave us an excellent deal compared to others,”

Anek replied with enthusiasm.

“The quality is great too. My factory sources fabric from them as well.

Alright, I’ll head home now. I’ve just finished summarizing the report.”

“Alright, see you tomorrow,”

Anek responded with a polite nod.

However, just as Maanfan was about to leave the office, the phone on her desk rang, causing her to pause and turn back. She hesitated for a moment before picking it up.

“Calling after hours? Must be urgent. If I had already left, what would I do? Ugh… I’m so tired, I just want to rest.”

“Hello, this is Maanfan,”

She answered, trying to sound composed despite her exhaustion.

“Maanfan! Oh, thank goodness. I thought you had already left. Khun Isara is asking to see you,”

Said Phimanee, the secretary, sounding relieved to find Maanfan still at the office. All day, her boss had been in such a foul mood that Phimanee could hardly face her. If she hadn’t been able to locate Maanfan, she didn’t want to imagine what might happen.

“I was about to leave, but I’ll go see Khun Isara right away,”

Maanfan replied before hanging up. She changed her route, heading to the elevator and turning instead toward the office of the person she’d been avoiding for the past few days.

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“She’s inside. Oh, and… Khun Isara isn’t in the best mood. Be careful,” Phimanee warned with a sympathetic look.

Maanfan nodded, recalling the day she walked in and found Isara sitting with red eyes and flushed cheeks. She appreciated the heads-up—it was better than walking in unprepared.

“Thank you, P’ Phimanee. Maanfan here. May I come in?”

She said after knocking softly on the door.

Opening it, she found Isara sitting at her desk, frowning as she spoke on the phone. The air around her radiated a sharp intensity that made her seem entirely unapproachable.

Uh… is it too late to run away? Maanfan thought nervously, frozen in place for a moment.

Isara signaled for Maanfan to sit and wait while she turned to face the window, continuing her phone call. Maanfan dragged her feet to the chair, as instructed, wondering what she might have done wrong this time.

The report had already been submitted, so what could it be?

“That’s it, Ophas. I have to go now. Next time, it won’t just end with your car losing a wheel,”

Isara said coldly before hanging up.

Maanfan caught the faint sound of a tearful "thank you" from the other end of the line. Ophas? That name sounds familiar... And what does she mean by losing a wheel?!

A strange chill ran down her spine as Isara’s sharp gaze flicked toward her briefly. Is the air conditioner colder than usual, or is it just me?

When Isara finished her call, she turned toward her desk with an unnervingly calm demeanor. The sheer authority radiating from her presence made Maanfan sit up straight instinctively, swallowing nervously in the tense atmosphere.

“How was your day?”

Isara asked in an even tone, her eyes fixed on Maanfan, watching her subordinate’s uneasy body language.

“Uh… um, it was okay. The team isn’t fully in sync yet, but… everyone is very skilled, so things are progressing quickly,”

Maanfan stammered, trying her best to answer.

Before the wide-eyed girl could finish her sentence, the person in front of her interrupted.

“I mean, how was today? You were really drunk last night, weren’t you?”

“Huh… w-what!?”

Maanfan stammered in shock.

The tall, elegant boss, seated in her chair, slowly stood up. Her sharp, beautiful face couldn’t hide the irritation brewing beneath her calm demeanor. Isara stared at her subordinate silently for a moment before turning around, reaching out, and slowly pulling the curtains closed.

“So… you went drinking last night, didn’t you?”

She said, her voice low but firm.

Isara spoke in a calm tone, but her words made Maanfan freeze for a moment. She couldn’t help but wonder how her boss knew about last night.

Before she could even think of a response, Isara continued.

“How much did you drink?”

The tension in her voice made it clear she wasn’t pleased. Maanfan could only imagine how angry Isara would be if she knew she had been so drunk she couldn’t remember anything from last night.

“You must have had a great time, Maanfan.”

Isara’s slender fingers slowly tugged at the curtain ties, her sharp eyes gazing out at the Bangkok skyline one last time before pulling the expensive curtains shut.

She turned back to face Maanfan, her expression unreadable yet intense.

***Gasp!***

The petite woman swallowed hard, startled by the intense gaze locked on her. That piercing look made her too afraid to even breathe deeply, fearing it might make her boss even angrier.

Isara narrowed her eyes at the slender figure in front of her, like a predator sizing up its prey. She found amusement in the nervous and panicked reactions, clearly enjoying how flustered Maanfan was as she struggled to find an answer. A soft chuckle escaped Isara’s lips before she started stepping closer, pressing her subordinate to respond.

With every step Isara took forward, Maanfan instinctively took one step back. Not knowing how to reply, she kept retreating until her back hit the door.

*Oh no… no more space to back away.*

Seeing this, Isara smirked with satisfaction. She leaned in, placing both hands on either side of the doorframe, effectively trapping Maanfan in place.

“P-please calm down, I can explain…”

Maanfan stammered, her voice trembling as her cheeks flushed bright red.

She had to admit she was nervous, and she felt shaken. After all, the person in front of her was P'Araya, the one she had turned to for company during lonely nights. The look in P'Araya's eyes that she was so familiar with—a mix of sweetness and seduction—was now different.

The way P' Araya looked at her now felt bold and intense, like she wasn’t the same person she knew. This made Maanfan feel scared. She didn’t know what P' Araya was thinking, and she feared making her angry.

Isara leaned closer, so close that they could feel each other's breath. Maanfan shut her eyes tightly, embarrassed, not daring to imagine what might happen next.

***Click.***

“Is that all? Just locking the door?”

Maanfan sighed softly, feeling both relieved and disappointed at the same time.

“Explain yourself. I’m waiting,”

Isara said, her slender finger brushing Maanfan’s soft, red cheek. Her sharp eyes locked onto Maanfan’s lips before glancing up to meet her gaze.

I lose... again... P' Araya knows exactly what I like. It's not fair... I'm always the one losing, Maanfan thought, feeling defeated. “I just had a little drink alone... and then went home,”

She said, her voice hesitant.

The truth was, she didn’t remember much of what happened last night either. But waking up at the factory was enough to confirm that she must have made it home safely, right?

Isara shook her head lightly. It couldn’t have been that simple, especially since what she saw and what Maanfan was telling her didn’t match up. “You didn’t just have a little drink.”

At least she had sent Ophas to watch over her. Otherwise, someone might have taken advantage of her. Maanfan probably didn’t even realize how attractive she was.

“Yes, maybe I drank a bit more than usual.”

“And are you sure you drank alone?”

"Yes,"

Maanfan replied, her voice shaky, showing she wasn’t very confident in her own answer.

"You didn’t drink alone."

"Huh? But I was alone,"

She replied, trying to recall, but nothing came to mind. If she didn’t drink alone last night, then who did she drink with?

"Think again,"

Isara said softly.

As soon as those words left her lips, Isara leaned in closer, the familiar scent of her perfume filling the air. It was the same fragrance P’ Araya always wore, and the touch, the same touch, that made Maanfan’s heart race every time.

No matter how hard she tried to remember, she couldn’t. Last night, she had been stressed and just wanted to drink alone. She didn’t invite anyone, so how could she have been with someone?

"Think again."

Isara’s voice still echoed in her mind, pressing her to answer the question quickly.

“Uh…”

No matter how hard she tried to think, the answer wouldn’t come. Wait!...

"Give me a chance..."

Why did that sound so familiar? Oh... oh...

"Chance..."

O...Ophas!!!

She remembered now! The person she drank with last night was Ophas!!!

*"My name is Ophas. I am one of the three candidates for the WTT Group chairperson position."*

It was as if the events of last night replayed in her mind.

After that, she really did throw the Lady Drink at him full force. This was bad. Maanfan was in deep trouble now.

Her future? Gone. Completely ruined. All because of her drunken mistake.

“I... Did I throw up on the CEO of the company last night...? It's over. I’m definitely getting fired,”

Maanfan whispered, looking down, her eyes filled with tears. She felt so guilty. Even though Isara had given her a chance, she ruined it herself. What should she do now? Her factory... and Isara... She would have to marry... **No way. P' Araya is hers. She wouldn’t let her marry anyone else.**

When Isara saw the young girl in front of her with teary eyes, looking so pitiful, how could she possibly resist? Maanfan was someone she had personally chosen, someone she had taken care of all this time. How could she be fired over something like this?

Isara pulled Maanfan into an embrace, her hand gently stroking Maanfan’s head as if to comfort her. Her sharp, beautiful face lowered close to Maanfan’s ear before whispering something softly.

**“How could I fire you? You’re my girl, not Ophas’s.”**

Embarrassment was the only feeling Maanfan had. If anyone else had said this, anyone would have blushed too.

And when it came from P' Araya, the one she liked, Maanfan felt even more embarrassed. She was so shy that she wanted to disappear from the spot, not wanting P' Araya to know how much influence she had over her.

P' Araya was P' Araya, the one woman she could never refuse. But wait...

*If this was just about talking, why did she have to close the curtains and lock the door?*

Chapter 07: The Unexpected

"Huff...huff..."

The sound of heavy breathing mixed with the clack of high heels hitting the marble floor loudly, signaling the rush of the person wearing them. The one who was out of breath was none other than Maanfan, the "favorite employee" of the executive director, Isara, who had just been punished by the very person she was now running from.

Phew... I made it out! Maanfan thought to herself, glancing back at her boss's office. She had thought she wouldn't make it, but luckily, she took the chance when Isara turned her back, and she managed to run away.

In front of Maanfan was a straight hallway. At the end, there was a turn, the secretary's desk, and then the elevator. Though the hallway wasn't very long, to Maanfan at this moment, it felt like an endless path stretching far ahead.

She studied the hallway in front of her, mentally calculating the distance, the time it would take, the speed, and the acceleration. It was as if she was pulling out all the math and physics knowledge she had learned to use at once.

It seemed that her high heels were becoming an obstacle to her escape. Realizing this, Maanfan bent down, preparing to take off her heels.

*"Those shoes are nice. I like them,"*

Isara's voice echoed in her head. It was yet another moment where Maanfan let Isara's influence affect her thoughts. Her hand moved away from the heels, abandoning the idea of removing them. No matter how many obstacles lay ahead, she and her beautiful shoes would overcome them!

Once she made up her mind, Maanfan sprinted forward at full speed. From her calculations, it would take no more than eight seconds to reach the intersection from the office. But when she ran, it only took five seconds.

"Good timing!"

Maanfan thought to herself, her sweet face breaking into a smile. The escape was within her reach.

Strangely, Isara didn't come after her like Maanfan had expected, which was a relief. This would make her escape easier. However, she still couldn't let her guard down. She had to get out of there as quickly as possible.

Maanfan turned right at the intersection and found the elevator not far ahead. She lifted her hand to wipe the sweat off her face and glanced back at the path she had just run.

A chill ran down her spine.

Suddenly, she felt an eerie sense of unease, as though someone was emitting a dangerous aura nearby.

"I need to hurry!"

Making up her mind, she rushed towards the elevator. The digital numbers on the screen showed that the elevator was currently on the lowest floor. It would take some time for it to reach her floor. Maanfan pressed the triangular button pointing down repeatedly. Even though she knew it wouldn't make the elevator go any faster, she couldn't stop pressing it.

*23... 30... 35... 40... 46...*

Finally, the numbers on the screen changed to 49.

The elevator bell rang as the doors began to open. Before the doors could fully open, Maanfan quickly slipped inside, reaching out to press the close button rapidly.

"Huh? Why isn't the door closing?"

She looked down at her hand, pressing the button, and her eyes widened in shock. The button she thought was for closing the door was actually for opening it.

Maanfan cursed herself inwardly. Even though she was in a rush, she should have been more careful. If not, the elevator would have already gone down by now.

The elevator slowly descended from floor 49, passing 48, 47, 46 in order. Maanfan silently prayed for the digital numbers to change to 1 quickly.

She sighed with relief.

Finally, she would escape from her strict boss. All she did was drink a little, why did Isara have to get so angry? And then punish her with extra work. She could handle the work, but after giving her tasks, Isara had actually lifted her up and sat her on the desk. Maanfan knew exactly what was about to happen next. If she didn't hurry and get away, she would definitely be punished for real.

Thinking about what happened earlier, Maanfan's face turned bright red. The more she looked at her disheveled clothes, the more embarrassed she felt. She quickly fixed the buttons that had been undone by the taller person earlier, trying to make herself presentable again.

For a brief moment, she found herself thinking about P' Araya. It had been a while since she last bought services from her. To be honest, she didn't really feel comfortable doing so anymore.

She regretted not taking the chance earlier. Usually, she had to wait for a promotion from the app before she could afford to buy it, or sometimes, she had to save up a little money to treat herself.

But this time, Isara had started it first. She didn't have to pay a single baht. If only Isara had been a little gentler earlier, she probably wouldn't have run away like this.

Maanfan's thoughts were interrupted when, suddenly, the elevator, which had been moving, came to a sudden stop.

The lights inside went out, replaced by complete darkness.

"Ah!" she cried out in shock.

The eerie silence around her made her feel uneasy. Her hand quickly pressed the emergency button, but the power in the elevator was down, and the phone signal was nonexistent. She realized that it might be hours before she could get out.

Maanfan didn't mind tight spaces, but she wasn't exactly comfortable either. What really worried her wasn't being stuck in a small space, but rather being trapped in an elevator with the power out.

She had often seen news stories about people getting stuck in elevators. Her biggest fear was the elevator falling. With a building this tall, if the elevator really did fall, there was no way she would survive.

Suddenly, the lights in the elevator came back on, and it began moving slowly upwards. Maanfan's eyes widened in shock, and she quickly ran to press the down button repeatedly, but nothing happened. The elevator continued to ascend.

It finally stopped on the 49th floor, and the doors slowly opened, revealing her boss, Isara, holding the phone to her ear.

"Okay, if I don't give the order, no one is allowed to use the elevator. Understand?"

Isara said, giving her final instructions before glancing over and noticing Maanfan standing there, shocked.😅

Realizing that everything was orchestrated by Isara, Maanfan was left speechless. She didn't expect Isara to go this far to catch her.

Did she really order the elevator staff to do this? How could anyone escape like this?

"Don't try to run away. I haven't even punished you,"

Isara said with a smile, her eyes scanning Maanfan's body. The sight of Maanfan looking so scared seemed to please her a great deal.

Upon hearing those words, Maanfan froze in place, her face turning a deep shade of red from embarrassment. In the end, she couldn't escape Isara's grasp...

"What are you daydreaming, Maanfan? Eat more ? Aren't you tired being punished?"

Isara's voice broke through Maanfan's thoughts.

Maanfan blushed once again, feeling embarrassed just by Isara's words.

She quickly turned her face away, pretending to focus on the atmosphere of the restaurant, trying to hide her discomfort and prevent Isara from noticing anything unusual.

It wouldn't exactly be right to call this a restaurant, since around her were old plastic blue tables and chairs, lined up along the sidewalk. It was hard to believe someone like Isara would come to eat at a street-side rice porridge stall like this.

Isara was more suited to dining at a Michelin-star restaurant. But for Maanfan, she actually preferred the atmosphere here much more than dining at a fancy hotel. At least here, she didn't have to dress up, pose, or do all the things she wasn't good at. She believed that whether food was good or not didn't depend on the restaurant, but on the people you ate with.

And this meal... is very delicious...

"This place is only for a few people I've brought them here before,"

Isara said, as though she could read Maanfan's mind.

"Why's that?"

Maanfan asked.

Isara paused for a moment before meeting Maanfan's gaze. Her eyes seemed to carry some hidden meaning, but Maanfan couldn't tell what it was.

"You'll understand one day..."

Without waiting for Maanfan to say anything, Isara immediately brought up the topic of work.

"How's the new team? How's the progress so far?"

"Everything is going well,"

Maanfan replied.

"That's good. Because in a month, the first big test will be here,"

Isara said. Maanfan, holding her spoon of rice porridge, froze in mid-air, shocked.

"The first test?"

Seeing the reaction, Isara immediately furrowed her brows.

"You didn't pay attention during the meeting, did you?"

Maanfan silently cursed herself. It was because she had been too focused on Iris, her ex, during the meeting. Worse still, she had let herself get lost in memories from when they were still together, making her feel all confused and distracted, unable to concentrate on the details of the meeting.

"Next month, all three brands will open their first stores in the same mall. The locations are just as good, right in the heart of Bangkok."

"Is it really possible to get locations that good?"

Maanfan asked, puzzled. Isn't it already hard enough to just book a space in the mall? Aren't the prices usually negotiated with intense bidding? But to get such equally great locations... Isn't that a bit unbelievable? "Of course it is. Our company is the major shareholder in that mall,"

Isara replied confidently.

Maanfan had always thought her company was large, but never imagined it had this much power and influence. It made sense now why the candidates for the chairperson position were so determined to win.

"The sales figures for the first quarter of each brand will decide who gets the best locations in other malls first."

It seemed like this competition was more serious than she had anticipated.

"I thought it was just about sales,"

Maanfan said.

"Location can determine the winner immediately. The competition will be judged over one year, and there are many factors involved. But a store's location can already determine a lot. If you're not good enough, you won't get a good location."

Just from listening to what Issara said, Maanfan could already tell that this first battle was very important. The result would decide the future of the Araya brand. Araya must not lose.

"In that case, the Araya brand must win this first round!"

Issara couldn't help but smile when she saw how determined her subordinate was. She, too, hoped that the Araya brand would win this first round.

Her slender hand reached out in front of her.

"Let's work hard together."

Hearing these encouraging words, Maanfan quickly reached out to hold

Issara's hand. The warmth from her hand spread to her heart. As long as Issara was by her side like this, she felt confident that she could defeat any competitor.

"Yes, let's work hard together."

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This morning might be a bright and cheerful one for many people, but not for Maanfan. The young employee hurried into the company with a piece of bread in her mouth, a coffee cup in one hand, and a thick file in the other.

"Late again," she muttered.

Seeing the elevator about to close, she sprinted at full speed and rushed inside just in time.

The office atmosphere today was chaotic. Everyone was running around frantically due to Issara's orders. As soon as the elevator doors opened,

Maanfan was shocked by the mountain of documents piled up on her desk.

Even from afar, the stack was so tall that it made her feel completely discouraged, almost wanting to go back home right then and there.

"Good morning, Miss Maanfan."

As Maanfan appeared, her colleagues paused their work to greet their young supervisor.

"Please don't bow to me. We're just coworkers. You don't have to call me Miss Maanfan," she said.

Maanfan felt a bit uncomfortable when her colleagues bowed to her and called her Miss Maanfan, even though she was younger, less experienced, and, honestly, seemed less professional than them.

She asked a few questions about the progress of their work before excusing herself to tackle the pile of documents on her desk. Most of the papers were quotations, along with fabric details and other material specifications.

***Thud.***

Another stack of documents was placed on her desk.

"Again? Isn't this too much?"

She could only groan internally. How far was Issara going to push her to work?

"What are these documents?"

She asked.

She turned to ask Anek, the one who had brought her the stack of documents.

"Today, there's a store inspection. Miss Maanfan and I need to visit the first branch of Araya together,"

Anek explained.

"Oh no! I completely forgot! Let's go then, but give me a moment to proof the collection we're launching for the store opening,"

Maanfan exclaimed, startled. If Anek hadn't mentioned it, she would have completely forgotten. The new collection wasn't even finalized yet.

"Alright. I'll meet you in front of the company in half an hour. I'll bring the car to pick you up."

"Okay," she replied.

With that, she quickly searched through the documents, hurrying to finish proofing the work within the given time.

In a perfectly decorated office, every item carefully selected to match the taste of its owner, the CEO sat sipping her morning coffee as usual. One hand turned the pages of a newspaper, scanning for economic news.

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***Rrrrr***

Just then, the phone on her desk rang.

"Miss Issara, Mr. Ophas is requesting to see you,"

Came the voice of Manee, her secretary.

"Alright, let him in,"

Issara replied.

After ending the call, Ophas quickly hurried into the CEO's office. The moment he saw the woman who was essentially his boss, Ophas bowed his head repeatedly in respect.

"Thank you so much, ma'am, for returning the car wheels to me."

Issara smirked slightly.

"If I didn't return them, you'd probably be heartbroken. I heard you bid for them, and there's only one set in the world?"

The confident woman chuckled softly, her eyes still focused on the economic news in her hands. "Yes, it's the only set in the world,"

Ophas replied.

Hearing his answer, Issara suddenly came up with an idea. She never invested in anything without gaining something in return-this time was no exception.

"I didn't return them for free. I have something I need your help with."

Hearing this, Ophas sighed inwardly, I knew it. But no matter what it was, he had no choice but to agree.

"Just tell me what you need," he said.

Sunlight streamed through the window, casting light on the room's owner. Her striking face lit up with a smile that radiated triumph.

Maanfan wouldn't have minded if Anek had let her wait inside the company or, at the very least, walked with her to the car. But instead, Anek left her standing in front of the company under the scorching midday Bangkok sun.

Her sweet face flushed red, and beads of sweat slowly formed on her forehead. She had been waiting for about ten minutes now, and there was still no sign of him.

"When is P'Nek going to get here?"

She murmured softly.

She glanced at her watch again and realized it was already past the agreed time. If Anek didn't show up in five more minutes, she'd go back inside the office for real.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sound of a car engine slowly approaching.

"Whose car is that? So fancy,"

She muttered to herself.

The young woman pondered silently as the sleek Benz came to a stop right in front of her. Maanfan quickly stepped aside to give way, but no one got out of the car. She could only wonder who the driver was there to pick up.

Never mind. But where is P'Nek? When is he going to get here?

After looking left and right several times, she decided to go back inside the company to wait for Anek. But just as she was about to turn around, a voice stopped her.

"Miss Maanfan, get in."

Anek rolled down the window and called out to her. Maanfan flinched slightly in surprise before turning toward the voice. Her eyes widened in shock, not expecting the owner of the Benz to be Anek.

Seeing another car closely trailing behind, she hurriedly got into Anek's car without asking any questions. Inside, the car was even more luxurious than she had imagined. She couldn't believe that an ordinary company employee like Anek could own such a luxury car.

Anek discreetly observed the woman sitting beside him. Since stepping into the car, Maanfan had been looking around, seemingly excited by the lavish interior. He smiled faintly to himself. Back when he first got the car, he had been just as thrilled. It took him over a year to get used to it.

"Miss Issara gave it to me as a gift when I hit the sales target at one of her subsidiary companies,"

Anek said with a small smile, answering what he assumed Maanfan was curious about.

"Actually, I was one of the founders of a small company, but later on, the company faced liquidity problems and was on the verge of collapse."

"And what happened to the company?"

Maanfan asked eagerly.

"Luckily, Miss Issara stepped in and bought the company. She also injected more funding, which boosted our sales to heights I never imagined. Because of that, Miss Issara gave me this car as a reward and even gave me shares in the company."

After hearing his story, Maanfan couldn't help but feel both shocked that Anek held shares in the company and impressed by Issara's capabilities.

"Then why did you join my department, P'Nek?"

She asked curiously. "Miss Issara called me in,"

Anek explained.

"Actually, it's not just me. She's brought in top talents from various companies she trusts."

*P'Nek is exaggerating, isn't he?*

Maanfan thought to herself. Looking at her team, everyone seemed pretty ordinary. Whenever she gave orders, no one ever challenged her. If they were as talented as Anek claimed, how could such high-level people take orders from someone as young and inexperienced as her?

Her concern, evident on her face, didn't escape Anek's attention. He understood how pressured his junior colleague must feel, especially since this project was so important. It was only natural for Maanfan to feel a bit anxious.

"Miss Issara specifically emphasized that all decisions for this project should ultimately come from you, Miss Maanfan. As long as you don't ask for opinions, we won't offer any,"

Anek explained.

"That's not good. Honestly, I want to hear everyone's thoughts,"

Maanfan responded, her discomfort growing even more.

"We just don't want to influence you too much,"

Anek said gently.

"It seems... Miss Issara wants you to gradually grow into your role."

Anek spoke honestly. If his guess was correct, the boss likely wanted Maanfan to develop herself as quickly as possible to prepare for the upcoming battle for the company's presidency.

Ah... the boss's beloved really is privileged, Anek thought. Maanfan was learning through real-world experience and might even get an accelerated training directly under Issara herself.

"Miss Issara shouldn't have done this..."

Maanfan spoke softly, her sweet face lowered, too shy to look up, fearing that Anek might notice her special feelings for her boss.

"If this project fails, it means Miss Issara will have to marry someone she doesn't even like. Why would she do this?"

The young woman began to voice her frustration.

She admitted she was scared-not scared of losing, but scared of losing Miss Issara.

"Maybe it's because Miss Issara trusts you, Miss Maanfan,"

Anek replied gently.

Maanfan promised herself that she would dedicate all her abilities to win this major battle, proving herself worthy of Miss Issara's trust.

*"Please cheer me on, P'Araya,"*

She whispered.

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Inside the Araya clothing store, which was still under construction, Maanfan, dressed in casual clothes, was focused on going over every detail of the store. It was clear this task was more challenging than she had anticipated.

"Please help clean up the details over there,"

She said, pointing to the dusty ceiling. She nodded firmly as she heard the workers acknowledge her request.

"Hmm... it looks like only the floor is left now,"

She murmured to herself before marking a check on her checklist.

Seeing that Maanfan was deeply focused on checking the storefront details, Anek didn't want to interrupt her. He waited patiently until she finished inspecting the ceiling before gently tapping her shoulder to report an issue.

"Miss Maanfan, would you mind checking the mannequin display area again?"

Maanfan thought to herself, I already checked that area, didn't I? But given Anek's experience, she decided not to take it lightly and went to recheck as he suggested.

"The sizes, quantities... everything seems fine,"

She said, frowning. With the pen in her hand, she pointed to the document detailing the specifications of the ordered items.

"But if P'Nek noticed something, could I have overlooked it?"

Anek smirked slightly, observing her from behind, waiting to see if she would spot the problem on her own.

And then, in that moment-

"Ah! Wait a second!"

She exclaimed.

She exclaimed in alarm, her eyes suddenly wide with realization. Maanfan looked at the mannequins, then quickly pulled out her phone and opened the collection of clothing intended to be displayed on them.

At that moment, she let out a deep sigh and jotted something down.

"The color of the mannequins under the store's lighting makes the clothes look dull."

That was it. During the planning stage, Maanfan had overlooked how the warm white lighting in the store would interact with the color of the mannequins.

While she had initially noted in meetings that this soft lighting would make the clothes appear more appealing, she hadn't considered how it would affect the appearance of the mannequins' skin tones.

"Thank you so much, P'Nek,"

She said, expressing her gratitude enthusiastically.

The rest of the day was a whirlwind for Maanfan. She spent hours running back and forth, meticulously fixing every detail of the store. She gave orders to correct one thing here, another thing there-again and again-to ensure everything would turn out perfectly.

This must have been the hundredth time Maanfan turned to Anek for his opinion. The young man could only give a dry smile and nod in agreement with whatever she suggested.

Maanfan was meticulous in her work, and ever since the lesson about the lighting that Anek had subtly pointed out, she hadn't overlooked even the smallest detail. Even Anek himself couldn't help but admire her sharp eye.

Being thorough with the work was great and all, but Anek's stomach had started growling.

"Miss Maanfan, please finish this inspection soon. I'm pretty sure we haven't eaten anything since morning, and now it's already evening."

The smell of spaghetti reached Maanfan's nose before she even stepped into the restaurant. The place Anek brought her to was one recommended by Miss Issara. Most of the dishes were Western-style, and the restaurant was decorated in a simple and minimalist way.

The warm tones made it feel cozy and relaxing. Soft classical music played in the background, and in the center of the room, there was a white piano. It seemed like there would be a live piano performance later in the evening.

Maanfan couldn't help but think, Oh my, how romantic would it be to come here with Miss Issara, just the two of us?

As soon as they reached their table, Maanfan slumped onto it, exhausted. Then she realized that all her actions were being watched by Anek. She quickly straightened up and gave him an awkward smile from across the table.

"I've opened a store in a mall before,"

He said.

"Well, it was a small shop in a suburban Lotus mall, but it wasn't this tiring!"

Anek chuckled.

"That's normal. The scale of this store is massive. Even I feel a bit dizzy."

Maanfan rolled her eyes internally. P'Nek still looks so calm and collected, she thought.

"What calm? I've seen P'Nek being so professional and capable,"

She said aloud.

Anek could only laugh nervously.

Professional? I'm just tired and hungry but hiding it well, he thought. With Maanfan inspecting every detail so thoroughly, anyone would be exhausted.

"Miss Maanfan, you're really skilled too. Your sense for details is excellent,"

He said sincerely.

The two of them complimented each other back and forth for a while until the waiter brought over the menu. Most of the menu items were in English, with some names being hard to read and others so strange that Maanfan couldn't believe they were food names.

She flipped through the menu, but there was no sign of prices anywhere. Still, she understood-many restaurants have fixed prices and don't list them in the menu to keep the design clean. Considering this was a minimaliststyle restaurant, it wasn't surprising that they didn't include prices.

"P'Nek, you go ahead and order. I'll treat you this time as a thank-you! Don't say no, okay? My salary just came in. I can afford it!"

Anek shook his head and laughed, finding his junior's sincerity endearing.

They ordered three or four simple dishes, and it didn't take long for the food to arrive. Maanfan was stunned by the presentation. Even though the dishes were simple, the plating turned ordinary food into something extraordinary and beautiful.

"Don't eat yet!!"

Anek's hand froze mid-air, startled by her sudden outburst.

"Why?"

Anek asked.

"I just want to take some pictures for Instagram,"

Maanfan replied.

Anek chuckled awkwardly again and let his junior arrange the perfect angles for her food photos. Only when she was satisfied did they finally start eating.

Both of them ate in silence, perhaps due to a mix of hunger and how delicious the food was. It didn't take long before their plates were completely empty. Anek then raised his hand to call the waiter for the bill.

**"F-F-Four thousand!!!"**

Maanfan stared at the receipt with wide eyes, utterly shocked. The number printed on the small piece of paper nearly made her faint.

How could it be this expensive? Did they accidentally add an extra zero or something? she thought to herself.

But since she had already promised to pay, there was no turning back now. Seeing her reaction, Anek couldn't help but burst into laughter.

"The prices here are usually like this,"

Anek said casually.

Before Maanfan could pull out her wallet, Anek quickly handed his credit card to the waiter.

"I'll pay for it myself!"

Maanfan insisted firmly, determined to treat Anek. But Anek just laughed and shook his head gently.

"Actually, Miss Issara already mentioned this. She said she'd take care of the food expenses. She also wanted me to tell you that this is part of the benefits for working outside the office."

Hearing this, Maanfan let out a sigh of relief, raising a hand to wipe the sweat from her hairline. She gave Anek a sheepish smile.

That was close, Maanfan. Really close.

Night had fallen, and darkness had replaced the daylight. Office workers were heading home, but the lights on the 49th floor remained brightly lit.

Inside the luxurious office, the boss, dressed in a fitted shirt, sat twirling a pen in her hand, her eyes scanning the details of the documents in front of her. Issara couldn't help but sigh at the massive stack of paperwork piled on her desk.k

Will I even finish this tonight?

No, forget tonight-can I even finish by tomorrow morning?

She groaned internally, rolling up the sleeves of her shirt for more ease as she began tackling the documents again.

***Ding!***

The notification sound of Line broke the silence. A message from her petite subordinate appeared. Issara immediately set aside the documents and grabbed her phone to open the Line app.

"Thank you for the meal! It was so delicious."

How could someone so petite eat that much? She's quite the eater, Issara thought to herself, her thin lips curling into a small smile.

Her slender fingers typed a reply and sent the message:

[You owe me.]

Maanfan frowned at the message, confused. But didn't P'Nek say Miss Issara planned to treat us from the start? What debt is she talking about?

"Uh... wasn't it part of the benefits?"

Maanfan quickly typed and sent her response. Issara couldn't help but laugh softly at Maanfan's reply.

[It is]

Issara replied simply. But as soon as she sent the message, the read notification popped up almost instantly, showing that Maanfan had been eagerly waiting for her response.

"Then why did you say I owe you?"

Maanfan couldn't help but chuckle softly. She felt like Issara was making her out to be a strict boss bullying her own subordinate.

Issara replied,

[Because I knew you'd try to show off and treat us. That's why I told Anek from the start that I'd pay, but I told him not to tell you until the bill arrived.]

Wait.

What kind of layered scheme was this, tricking Maanfan into falling into a trap she unknowingly set for herself?

And, as Issara said, it was true. Once again, Issara had accurately predicted her behavior. Miss Issara, you can't just know everything about me like this!

When Maanfan fell silent, the boss assumed it was her way of conceding.

Issara's elegant face broke into a sly smile, clearly enjoying teasing Maanfan.

[You're still in debt to me]

Issara concluded.

The few words sent to Maanfan made her cheeks flush and stirred a strange sense of unease in her heart.

Maanfan was at a loss. After all, it was Miss Issara's money-she could do whatever she wanted with it. There was no way Maanfan could argue back. Clever! Too clever!

[I guarantee you, I'll make you repay this debt for sure.]

The message from Issara sent shivers down Maanfan's spine. Something about it felt... off.

"I'll hurry and withdraw the money to pay you back, then,"

Maanfan typed quickly.

[I won't accept money as repayment.]

Issara replied.

Issara stared at the message she had just sent, a slow smirk curling on her lips as she licked them lightly. Her sharp eyes gleamed with mischief and amusement.

***You're in trouble now, Maanfan.***

I'm so screwed....

This thought echoed in Ophas's mind the entire way to the abandoned warehouse, following Issara's orders. He had no idea what his boss wanted, but a sense of impending doom lingered all the same.

Nah, there's nothing to worry about. I'm just overthinking things, he tried convincing himself. Or rather, he wasn't convincing himself-he was praying.

Just then, a voice broke the silence from the person beside him.

"Hey, why are you so quiet today?"

Thankfully, his best friend, Kitti, had agreed to drive him here as requested. At least he wouldn't have to face this alone.

The two of them opened the car doors slowly and got out. In front of them was the empty warehouse. It looked scary and quiet.

"Uh... but why do we have to dress like this? We're just here to pick something up, but we look like we're about to commit a crime,"

Kitti grumbled.

Just look at them-Issara had them dressed in all black, complete with dark sunglasses and balaclavas. "She gave me three rules,"

Ophas said nervously.

"One, no one can recognize us. Two, no one can know that she's the buyer. And three, we're not allowed to look at what we're picking up. If we fail to follow these three rules... we're dead."

Ophas's face was filled with fear. Just mentioning their terrifying boss made sweat bead on his forehead for no apparent reason. His hands were clammy, and he quickly wiped them on his pants.

"Wait a second,"

Kitti said, breaking into a cold sweat himself.

"Rule two... no one can know, right? Then why did you drag me along to pick this up? Doesn't that break the rule?"

***Ding!***

It was as if a light bulb had just flickered on in Ophas's head.

Oh no, I completely forgot!

I'm doomed! Why did I have to open my big mouth and drag Kitti into this mess? I'm so screwed.

Seeing Ophas's face, which looked like he was about to cry, Kitti immediately understood. His panicked friend had brought him along out of fear something might go wrong. That way, at least he wouldn't face disaster alone.

*Damn it, Ophas! You idiot friend!*

Kitti shook his head in frustration, giving Ophas a pat on the shoulder as if to say, 'Let's just get this over with'. Then, he took the lead and walked toward a corner of the warehouse-the meeting spot to pick up the item.

As soon as they reached the spot, a man dressed in a black suit and wearing a face mask stepped out from the shadows. His mysterious demeanor only made the atmosphere feel even stranger. "Hurry up. I still have other deliveries to make,"

The man said curtly.

If someone told them they were here to pick up drugs, they'd probably believe it. The whole situation was way too suspicious and secretive.

Both Ophas and Kitti kept their suspicions to themselves. At this point, even if it really was drugs, there was no turning back. Having made up his mind, Ophas stepped forward and reached out to take the large bag from the... agent? Despite its size, the bag was surprisingly light, much lighter than he had expected.

"The buyer said there's no need for you to open the bag to check its contents. So... goodbye,"

The mysterious man said curtly before disappearing into the darkness, leaving Ophas and Kitti standing there scratching their heads in confusion.

*That's it? The delivery is this simple?*

The two of them walked back to the car, feeling relieved. At least the task they were assigned was now complete.

"What do you think the boss bought?"

Kitti asked, breaking the silence. He was certain that whatever was in the bag wasn't ordinary. Otherwise, why all the secrecy?

"I have no idea,"

Ophas replied, still puzzled.

"But it's weird, isn't it? Why didn't she just send one of her regular employees to pick it up?"

"I know, right? I'm starting to really want to know what's inside this bag,"

Kitti said.

"Me too," Ophas admitted.

Kitti glanced at the bag sitting on his friend's lap and then made his next suggestion.

"Just open it, man."

"No way!"

Ophas quickly hugged the large bag tightly as if it were a priceless treasure. Just mentioning it to Kitti was already risky enough. If he disobeyed the boss's orders and opened the bag, he'd be in for way more than just a scolding.

"Just a quick peek. I won't say anything, you won't say anything-how would she ever find out?"

Opas started to waver. Kitti had a point. If no one said a word, how could the boss possibly find out?

Gathering his courage, Ophas slowly unzipped the bag to take a look inside. "What the..."

The moment they saw what was inside, both of them shouted in shock, their eyes practically bulging out of their sockets as they stared at the item.

Without needing to say a word, the same thought ran through both of their minds.

W-what the heck is this?

Why would the boss buy something like this?! Am I seeing things? This can't be real!

***Did the boss really order this?***

***For real?!***

Chapter 08: The First Battle

**Buddho... Dhammo... Sangho...**

This must have been the hundredth time Ophas tried to calm himself, pretending like nothing had happened. And yet, just thirty minutes ago, he had experienced a terrifying event that still haunted him.

The bag, which should have been light, now felt as heavy as if it were filled with stones. Perhaps it wasn't just the contents inside-it also carried the weight of Ophas's fate.

A single glance was all it took for the two of them to understand each other. No words were necessary; their eyes said everything. After coordinating their story, they found themselves standing in front of their boss's office.

Despite the freezing air conditioning in the office, beads of sweat trickled down their foreheads. Just standing there, they could feel the ominous aura radiating from behind the door.

Let's leave, Kitti pleaded silently with his eyes.

Leave, my ass! We're already at the door, you idiot! Ophas glared back, his eyes wide with panic.

Once again, Ophas found himself hurriedly pulling out a handkerchief to wipe the sweat off his face, hoping not to raise any suspicion. He stepped forward, ready to knock on the door, but his trembling hand made it impossible. It became Kitti's job to knock instead.

"Come in."

Before Kitti could even knock, Issara's voice rang out, startling both of them into stiff, panicked silence.

As they entered the office, Issara, who had been sitting with her back turned, slowly swiveled her chair around to face them. Her sharp gaze fell on the two men, and her brow furrowed with displeasure.

"Why is he here?"

She asked coldly, tilting her chin toward Kitti.

***Oh, crap.***

Ophas suddenly remembered that he wasn't supposed to bring Kitti with him. But it was too late now. How could he have thought of that earlier when the bag's contents had left them both too shocked to think straight for a good while?

"Uh... I found him on the side of the road... so I picked him up,"

Ophas blurted out nervously.

It was a completely irrational excuse, but at that moment, it was the only thing Ophas could think of.

To Issara, however, it was obvious-both of them were lying through their teeth.

"Didn't I tell you not to tell anyone?"

She said, her tone sharp.

Ophas nodded quickly, while Kitti stood frozen, trembling with fear.

"But I can guarantee that Kitti won't say a word!"

Ophas added in a desperate attempt to defend his friend.

Hearing this, Issara let out a sigh. She could only hope that they hadn't peeked inside the bag. To be sure, she asked pointedly,

"You didn't open it, did you?"

**Thump-thump..**

**Thump-thump..**

Both of them nodded furiously, their heads moving so fast it looked rehearsed.

"Why are you nodding so fast?"

Issara narrowed her eyes, suspicion clear on her face.

"I was afraid you wouldn't believe me, Miss Issara,"

Ophas said with a nervous smile.

Issara's sharp eyes clearly showed she didn't believe a word he said, but she decided to drop the subject, nodding dismissively and moving on.

"If this leaks out again, it won't just stop at your car this time, Opas. It'll include Kitti's car as well."

Her piercing gaze swept over Ophas before shifting to Kitti. The look in her eyes made it clear that she wasn't bluffing-she was dead serious.

"Kitti doesn't even care about cars,"

Ophas blurted out, trying to soften the situation.

Issara paused for a moment before a sly smile spread across her face, clearly amused by her own thought.

"Then your house will burn instead."

If Kitti could cry, he probably would have. He hadn't asked for any of this and was only dragged into it by his idiot friend.

"Alright, you two can go now,"

Issara said, dismissing them with a wave.

The two wasted no time and quickly left the room, their suspicious behavior leaving Issara scratching her head in confusion. Once they had escaped the clutches of their terrifying boss, Kitti and Ophas collapsed into chairs, completely drained.

Issara's threats still echoed in Kitti's mind. He knew there was nothing she couldn't do. Burning down his house? That'd be a piece of cake for her. One phone call and his house would be reduced to ashes, leaving nothing but the pillars.

*My house...*

Ophas glanced at his best friend sitting beside him. Kitti's eyes were so vacant that Ophas couldn't help but feel concerned. As Ophas sat lost in his own thoughts, Kitti suddenly pulled out his iPhone and began dialing a number in a hurry. Seeing this, Ophas asked, confused.

"Who are you calling?"

"I'm calling to increase my fire insurance coverage... and to start preparing for asylum in Dubai,"

Kitti replied with a deadpan expression.

That response made Ophas realize something.

Uh... maybe I should buy more insurance too, Ophas thought to himself.

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In a small, quiet bedroom, free from any outside noise, the only sound was the steady, soft breathing of someone peacefully asleep on the bed. The cool air from the air conditioner made Maanfan instinctively snuggle deeper under her blanket. Everything about the atmosphere invited restful sleep.

Even so, Maanfan shifted to her right side, reaching out habitually to turn off her alarm clock-only to find that it wasn't time yet. Her long lashes fluttered as her eyelids slowly opened, adjusting to the early morning darkness. She glanced at the clock, its hands pointing to five.

She had woken up almost an hour earlier than usual, likely because of her excitement.

Today is an important day for me, she thought as her wide eyes turned to look at the calendar on her bedside table.

The words "Store Opening Day" were written in pink glitter pen, highlighted with small red asterisks above it, standing out against the soft white background of the calendar. Finally, the day had arrived-the grand opening of Araya.

Today, Maanfan took extra care in dressing up. She chose a designer dress that paired perfectly with her favorite high heels. Spinning in front of the mirror for a final check, she ensured every detail was flawless.

She spritzed a light mist of perfume on her neck and wrists before heading out of the house while it was still dark. After waiting for a taxi on the street for a while with no success, she gave up and opted for a ride-hailing app instead. Not long after, a taxi pulled up right at her doorstep.

With the early morning traffic being light, the ride to the luxurious mall in the heart of the city was quick.

Even though she had been to this mall many times before, Maanfan couldn't help but be in awe of its grandeur. She made her way to the side entrance, where a stern-faced security guard stood.

Quickly pulling out her staff badge, she hung it around her neck and flashed it at him.

Seeing the badge marked "STAFF," the guard allowed her inside before the mall officially opened.

Maanfan walked past numerous shops, all closed and waiting for opening time, before finally stopping in front of the Araya store.

The atmosphere inside the store was bustling with workers busy decorating and checking every detail to ensure everything was perfect before the grand opening. The scene in front of her made Maanfan forget her exhaustion for a moment, and a small smile appeared on her lips.

"Are you ready?"

Anek walked up, holding two cups of coffee. He handed one to Maanfan, who thanked him and took a sip of the hot coffee.

"You're even earlier than me, P'Nek,"

She said with a light smile.

The two of them began inspecting the finer details around the store. Today's work was a valuable learning experience for Maanfan, especially when it came to solving last-minute problems. There were several aspects she had planned one way, but they turned out differently and had to be adjusted on the spot.

"What time are the media arriving?"

Maanfan asked, turning to Anek, who was walking beside her.

"They'll be here thirty minutes before the event starts. Shouldn't be a problem,"

She replied calmly.

Maanfan nodded silently and didn't ask any further questions. She glanced at her watch again, silently wishing for time to move just a little faster. She couldn't wait for the store's grand opening!

Before she knew it, the clock's short hand pointed to 10, the official opening time. Feeling restless, Maanfan looked left and right anxiously.

It's time to open the store. When is Miss Issara going to arrive? she wondered, groaning inwardly. Today was such an important day-Miss Issara couldn't possibly be late.

Her train of thought was interrupted by the sight of a luxurious car slowly pulling up in front of the mall. A man in a suit quickly ran to open the back door, standing politely and waiting for the passenger. Maanfan craned her neck, eager to see who could possibly be in such an expensive car.

Her eyes widened in shock when the person who gracefully stepped out of the car turned out to be none other than... Miss Issara!

Issara stepped out of the car in a sleek black fitted dress that accentuated every curve of her figure. In one hand, she held a small handbag adorned with a luxury brand logo. Her flawless face was enhanced by carefully applied makeup, each detail adding to her already striking beauty.

The moment she emerged, all eyes turned toward her, including Maanfan's. The young woman could only stand frozen in place. Miss Issara was already beautiful, but dressed like this, she was absolutely breathtaking-so stunning that Maanfan felt as if she'd forgotten how to breathe.

**Thump... thump...**

The only sound Maanfan could hear now was the beating of her own heart, echoing loudly in her ears.

Among the crowd of people, Maanfan's gaze remained fixed on Issara as if entranced. At the same time, the look Issara gave her back made Maanfan's heart race out of rhythm.

It felt as if, in that moment, the world around them disappeared, leaving just the two of them standing there, lost in each other.

The more Issara's gaze swept over her entire body, the harder Maanfan's heart pounded. For the first time, Maanfan realized just how deep her feelings for Issara truly ran. In the past, she had admitted to feeling possessive, to liking her.

But back then, she thought it was because Issara represented Araya. Now, for the first time, she understood that the person standing before her was neither just Issara nor Araya-it was someone far more important, someone she couldn't bear to lose.

Every feeling she had in that moment screamed one undeniable truth: she had fallen in love, so deeply that there was no way out.

It's already a joy to look at the person she want to see. But how wonderful would it be if that person looked back at her too?

Today, Maanfan learned just how wonderful it could be. Because right now, Issara was staring back at her.

**Beautiful...** Issara thought.

Maanfan today was more beautiful than ever. Issara's eyes scanned her from head to toe, clearly pleased to see how the outfit Maanfan had chosen suited her so perfectly.

She really does look amazing in pink...

She glanced at Issara's face and was met with a longing gaze in return. It wasn't as though she didn't know how the other felt, but now simply wasn't the time...

Issara had already looked away long ago, yet Maanfan still couldn't tear her eyes away from her.

Photographers and reporters from numerous outlets swarmed toward Issara, eager to capture the perfect shot of the CEO who was the star of today's event.

"What's going on? Why are so many people taking pictures of Miss Issara?"

Maanfan couldn't help but turn and ask Anek, who had somehow appeared beside her without her noticing.

"Miss Maanfan, you might not know this, but Miss Issara's mother, Khun Pimpa, was a superstar in her era. When she was the number one leading actress, Miss Issara often appeared in the media alongside her. Even though Khun Pimpa has passed away, the media still views Issara as the 'heir of the number one actress.'"

Maanfan nodded in understanding. She had no idea Issara carried such fame and legacy.

"During her time as a leading actress, Khun Pimpa built strong relationships with both actors and directors. So, no matter how many times Issara appears in the media, people are always interested,"

Anek explained.

The more Maanfan learned about Issara, the more she realized how much she didn't know. A sudden pang of insecurity hit her. Someone like Issara, so far above her league, could never truly notice someone as ordinary as herself.

As Maanfan stood chatting with Anek, Issara walked past them, leading the reporters into the mall without even glancing their way. That small action made Maanfan feel even smaller and more insignificant.

The golden letters spelling out **'ARAYA,'** crafted from rose gold, gleamed against the black-and-gold patterned wall, exuding an air of luxury and power. This was the store 'Araya'.

Everyone present, from the media to the guests, was awestruck by the store's elegance. Compliments for Issara poured in nonstop, praising the store's breathtaking design. Maanfan, who had worked tirelessly behind the scenes to make it a success, couldn't help but smile with pride, quietly basking in her small, hidden victory.

As Issara settled herself into the luxurious Louis sofa inside the store, the interview began. The reporters started with general questions, asking about her life as a businesswoman, her inspirations, and the story behind the Araya brand.

Most of the questions were pre-screened, so Issara answered smoothly without hesitation.

"Khun Pimpa must be so proud that you're continuing her clothing business like this. The name Araya-is it the same as your mother's original store name?"

Suddenly, a reporter shot this question. Unsurprisingly, Issara's brows furrowed in annoyance. However, she quickly composed herself, masking her irritation, and replied in a roundabout way.

"Well, you could say that. But this kind of thing-"

Issara paused intentionally, making the reporters lean forward with anticipation. Her sharp eyes flicked toward Maanfan, who was standing nearby, before she rose from her seat and pulled the stunned young woman into the interview.

Maanfan's sweet face turned to the reporters, her mouth agape in shock. She hadn't expected to be dragged into the spotlight like this.

*Wait, wait...*

Why am I being pulled into the camera? At least let me touch up my lipstick first! This wasn't planned at all!

**"This is Maanfan, my brilliant partner,"**

Issara introduced warmly, her arm loosely wrapped around Maanfan's waist.

"Without her, I would've been much more exhausted."

Maanfan stood there, flustered and unsure of what to do. Her nervous expression betrayed her lack of preparation as camera flashes bombarded her from all directions. She squinted instinctively at the sudden brightness, and she could already tell the pictures were going to look terrible.

"You two seem very close,"

One reporter remarked, trying to tease a response.

Issara couldn't help but laugh. She glanced at Maanfan, noticing the faint blush spreading across her face. Smiling slyly, Issara pulled Maanfan closer into a light embrace. To outsiders, the scene probably looked like two close girlfriends sharing a sweet moment.

But deep down, both Issara and Maanfan knew there was much more to it than that.

"How close are we? Well, I think you should ask Maanfan. So, Maanfan, how close are we?"

The gaze Issara gave her was one Maanfan hadn't seen in a long time-a soft, affectionate look. It was a gaze that made her heart race, the gaze of P'Araya...

Issara leaned in slightly, her elegant face drawing closer. A sly smile tugged at the corners of her lips, her expression mischievous yet paired with the sweet intensity of her eyes that now bore down on Maanfan. Her gaze drifted momentarily to Maanfan's lips, and unconsciously, Issara ran her tongue over her own, as though revealing her unspoken intent.

Maanfan immediately understood the implication and felt her cheeks burn. She lowered her head shyly, unable to meet Issara's gaze, and answered in a soft voice,

"We're... quite close."

Issara let out a quiet chuckle at Maanfan's response, her amusement clear.

Maanfan, on the other hand, shot her a small glare, frustrated by the teasing.

What did she expect me to say?

**That we're close enough to have slept together before?**

"Uncle, can I have today's newspaper?"

Every morning, Maanfan would go jogging and stop by this newsstand to buy a newspaper. She had been doing this for years, believing that news from printed publications was more reliable than the fast-paced updates from social media.

However, today, even if she wanted to read the newspaper, it seemed she could only hope.

"Uh... it's all sold out,"

The shopkeeper said, scratching his head awkwardly.

"What?"

Maanfan, in the middle of taking a sip of water, nearly choked.

"What do you mean, sold out?" "The newspapers. I sold them all,"

The shopkeeper replied.

Maanfan frowned, looking around. Hmm... but there's no one here. And it's so early. There's no way it could've sold out this fast.

The shopkeeper, as if reading Maanfan's thoughts, quickly explained further.

"Someone bought them all,"

The shopkeeper said.

Maanfan's jaw dropped.

In this day and age? Someone still buys all the newspapers? What for?

It was hard to believe that, in this digital era, someone would purchase an entire batch of newspapers.

What the shopkeeper didn't know was that the person who had bought all the newspapers was none other than a petite young woman.

And that woman? None other than Maanfan herself, now carefully placing the massive stack of newspapers onto a sofa with delicate hands.

"Are there any other shops around here that sell newspapers?"

She murmured, racking her brain.

The entire morning, she had been running around, hunting down every copy of the newspaper that featured her.

On the entertainment page was a huge picture of her and Issara together, and just seeing it made Maanfan squirm with embarrassment. Who would've thought the reporters would blow up their picture and dedicate such a large space to it? And the pose! Issara had been pulling her in close.

Hugging in front of the cameras too!

The more Maanfan looked at the picture, the redder her face became. She was growing curious about what the article had written about her. Her eyes scanned from the photo up to the bold headline:

"Inheriting the legacy of a late superstar, reviving the brand 'Araya.'" Wait... Miss Issara's mother had her own clothing store before?

This question lingered in her mind, so she turned to Google, the allknowing helper, and searched for more information.

"Aha, found it!"

Digging through old articles, she came across a news piece from ten years ago:

"Pimpa Opens 'Araya,' a Premium Imported Clothing Store."

Alongside the article were pictures of Khun Pimpa and a young Issara. Without hesitation, Maanfan zoomed in on the photo.

The Issara in her childhood looked completely different from the composed woman Maanfan knew. In the photo, little Issara was beaming a wide, toothy smile, holding a snack in one hand.

When she was a kid, she was so cute. Why did she have to grow up!

Maanfan chuckled softly. It was true-childhood Issara was absolutely adorable. So adorable that Maanfan couldn't resist saving the picture to look at privately later. She continued searching for more information until she stumbled upon a news article about Pimpa's passing, followed shortly by the closure of the Araya store.

After finishing the article, Maanfan scratched her head in confusion. She couldn't understand why Issara would use a fake name, Araya, identical to her mother's store name.

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At the **Tevatiumchan Mansion**, Issara, dressed in a crisp shirt and tailored trousers, stepped gracefully out of her luxury car. She waved at the family chauffeur, instructing him to park the car properly, before making her way inside the grand estate-a place she hadn't considered her home in a very long time.

As soon as the boss arrived, the butler wasted no time rushing over to open the door for her. Issara gave a slight nod in thanks before heading straight to the dining room, where her father sat at the head of the table, his face clearly showing displeasure.

**Iyarat Tevatiumchan**, a billionaire and Issara's biological father, sat with an air of authority. Yet, he received no look of admiration from his daughter-not even a hint.

Issara spoke with a voice as cold as ice:

"If you're here to convince me to marry Tara again, don't bother. It won't work."

Instead of a polite greeting, Issara chose to voice her discontent, which made Iyarat sigh in exasperation.

"Come here,"

He said, beckoning her with a wave of his hand.

Issara rolled her eyes in slight annoyance but complied, walking over to him. The father stood slowly to face his daughter directly.

But who would have guessed, at that moment...

***"Pwaahh!!!"***

Iyarat struck his daughter hard across the face, the force of the slap so strong that Issara's head whipped to the side, and she collapsed onto the floor.

Red liquid began to pool on the floor, drop by drop.

No matter how strong or resilient she was, her body was still that of a young woman.

Issara lay still for a moment before slowly pushing herself up. She spat the blood from her mouth onto the floor and glared coldly at her father with piercing eyes.

Iyarat's voice thundered through the room, filled with rage:

"So, you want to challenge me, is that it? Your store's name is Araya? Why would you name it something so cursed?"

The word "cursed" made Issara's brow twitch in anger.

"Cursed? How cursed is it, Dad? Cursed enough that after Mother died, you gave her store's prime location to your mistress for a jewelry shop?"

Issara retorted, her tone sharp and biting.

Iyarat's face twisted with anger, and he raised his hand again, ready to strike his daughter once more.

But this time, Issara wasn't going to stand there and take it. She shifted her body to dodge his hand and delivered a punch straight to his jaw.

The punch landed perfectly, sending Iyarat's head snapping back. The force caused him to stumble and fall to the floor. The sound startled the butler, who came rushing into the room with a look of alarm.

"I'll tolerate it only once, Dad. That's it. If you called me here just to say such nonsense, then I'll be taking my leave,"

Issara declared, her voice resolute and filled with disdain.

Her fierce gaze bore down on her father, showing no sign of concern for his condition. If he had initiated this confrontation, she saw no reason to hold back.

Without a second glance, Issara turned on her heels, ready to walk away. But just as she was about to leave the room, Iyarat's voice bellowed after her.

"You'll regret this, Issara! I'll make sure you pay for what you've done!"

Iyarat shouted furiously. Issara paused mid-step, her back still turned to him.

"Do whatever you want. You think I'm scared?"

She shot back, her voice dripping with defiance. She didn't even bother turning around, a mocking smirk playing on her lips.

What a wretched house, she thought to herself before striding out of the room, ignoring Iyarat's angry shouts trailing behind her.

Iyarat clenched his teeth in rage, muttering curses under his breath. When the butler, worried about his injury, approached to tend to him, Iyarat shoved him aside in frustration. He grabbed his phone and immediately dialed someone.

The line picked up after a few rings.

"Hello, Tara? I need to talk to you,"

Iyarat said, his voice heavy with anger. His eyes burned with a fiery determination for revenge.

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Inside the luxurious office, only Maanfan and Issara were present. One of them was sitting at the desk, deeply focused on the pile of documents in front of her. The other couldn't stop pacing back and forth, her face betraying her anxiety. Her brows were furrowed tightly, and her thin lips were pressed together in worry.

Issara lifted her eyes from the documents, glancing at the petite woman pacing around her. The repetitive motion was distracting her, making it hard to focus on her work. The more she noticed Maanfan's troubled expression, the more her concern grew, leaving her unable to concentrate.

***Cute.***

The word popped into Issara's mind unexpectedly. Watching Maanfan's little pout made her think it was adorable in a way she rarely saw. It was a sight that was truly special. Once again, Issara found herself staring at Maanfan, her pen frozen mid-air, completely forgetting about the documents in front of her.

As if sensing the gaze, Maanfan turned and locked eyes with Issara. Her wide eyes flashed with annoyance as she gave Issara a quick glare before turning her head away sharply and walking to the other side of the room.

***Grab!***

Of course, Issara wouldn't let the petite woman ignore her like that. She strode closer, grabbing Maanfan's soft arm and spinning her around to face her.

Maanfan tilted her head, looking at Issara with curiosity. The innocent reaction only made Issara think the person in front of her was even more adorable. So adorable, in fact, that she couldn't resist lifting her hand to pinch Maanfan's soft, pale cheek with playful affection. Satisfied, she gently took Maanfan's hand and led her to sit on the sofa.

"Calm down. Anek will be here soon,"

Issara said softly, her hand reaching up to gently pat Maanfan's head like she was soothing a child. Her slender fingers trailed down to the nape of Maanfan's neck, rubbing it lightly.

The tender touch made Maanfan shiver slightly, her entire body tingling with goosebumps. Her face gradually turned a deep shade of red.

"Y-Yes, I understand,"

She stammered in a faint voice, her head bowing as she stared down at her hands clasped tightly on her lap.

Just as Issara had said, not long after, a knock came at the door. The sound was followed by Anek entering the room, carrying a stack of reports and files, slightly out of breath.

*Am I interrupting something? Did I come at the wrong time?*

Anek silently questioned himself as he observed Issara sitting cozily with her junior on the sofa, completely ignoring the presence of a third personhim.

Issara accepted the file Anek handed over. It contained the sales report for Araya, the brand that had just launched the previous week. The first week's sales figures were critical for shaping future marketing strategies, and Maanfan had high hopes for the results as well. "Our numbers look good, compare with Tara's DVA,"

Issara announced.

Maanfan let out a sigh of relief, feeling a weight lifted off her shoulders. Weeks of hard work and sleepless nights felt worth it. Issara, too, couldn't stop smiling, feeling both joy at the sales performance and pride in the junior she had personally chosen for the task.

Anek watched the reactions of the two women with a knowing smile. He understood how much effort both Issara and Maanfan had poured into this project, especially Maanfan. She was new to the industry but had exceeded all expectations.

Wait... is there a mistake in the numbers? He thought, suddenly noticing something odd as his eyes darted back to the report.

Issara frowned.

"Anek, do you know why Ophas's Kumishop sales are so low?"

"It seems like there's an issue with the supplier,"

Anek replied.

"I see..."

Issara nodded, not saying anything further.

Whatever. Ophas isn't even serious about competing for the chairman's seat anyway. He's only in the race because his father forced him. It's not like he actually wants to win.

.

In front of the two men sat beautifully presented dishes, meticulously crafted by the hotel's top chef. The soft sounds of a live piano and violin performance created an atmosphere perfect for a relaxing meal.

Yet, neither man looked at ease. Their faces were tense, and they hadn't even touched the food on the table in front of them.

"What does Dad want to talk to me about?"

Tara broke the silence, prompting Iyarat to let out a weary sigh.

"It's about Aek... my son. Tara, do you have any updates about him?"

For the first time, Iyarat swallowed his pride and asked with a voice tinged with sadness. "Aek is doing fine,"

Tara replied calmly.

"I've had my men on the inside watching over him. Actually, I happen to have the phone I use to communicate with him right here. Would you like to talk to Aek, Dad?"

"Yes, of course!"

Iyarat's voice brightened slightly at the prospect. It had been so long since he'd heard the voice of his beloved son. He wondered how Aek was doing after all this time.

Tara glanced at Iyarat's eager expression, then pressed a few buttons on his phone, making a call.

"Let me talk to Aek,"

Iyarat said, leaning forward with anticipation.

Tara spoke briefly into the phone before handing it over to the middle-aged man seated across from him.

"Aek, my son, how are you?"

Iyarat's voice was filled with concern, his usual stoic demeanor softening noticeably. His expression, often stern and cold, was unrecognizably tenderso different from how he interacted with Issara.

Tara watched the scene unfold, quietly plotting something in his mind. He intended to use Iyarat's vulnerability to his advantage.

He had to defeat Issara and secure the chairman position for himself.

"Don't worry, son. I'll get you out of prison as soon as possible. Just hold on,"

Iyarat reassured. The call didn't last long before it was abruptly cut off.

"Hello? Hello? Aek!"

Iyarat shouted into the phone, his voice raised with urgency, but there was no response from the other end.

"In the prison, I do have my men keeping an eye on things, but sometimes the line gets cut,"

Tara explained, his tone calm yet calculated.

"You know... other ears are always listening. I hope you understand, Dad."

"I understand."

Hearing this, Iyarat grew even more worried.

"Tara, you must get Aek out of prison, no matter what it takes. I'll pay whatever it costs,"

Iyarat said, his voice trembling with desperation.

In Tara's eyes, the once-powerful Iyarat now appeared utterly stripped of dignity. If it weren't for the fact that Tara still needed Iyarat's help to defeat Issara, there was no way he would risk helping the man's son like this.

"I'm sure you understand, Dad,"

Tara said, his tone turning mocking.

"There are some things that even money can't buy. For example... forged evidence in your son's case. Or... the chairman's seat, which I've been wanting for quite some time."

Tara's words dripped with smugness. At this moment, he held all the cards. Any advantage he could exploit, he would take.

Iyarat's face faltered for a brief moment, but he quickly tried to mask his unease, maintaining his composure.

"Can't you help Aek first, Tara? I promise I'll do my best to convince Issara to step down,"

The older man pleaded, trying to bargain.

"I'm afraid that's not possible, Dad. I really do want to help, but I need to secure the chairman's seat first."

Tara smiled as he spoke, his tone seemingly polite.

"By the way... has Issara shown any signs of softening lately?"

Although Tara's face carried a friendly smile, the cunning glint in his eyes betrayed his true intentions.

Behind his seemingly polite demeanor, there was a ruthless determination.

**Both Issara and the chairman's position, they had to be his, and his alone!**

Chapter 09: Worried

Inside a conference room on the 49th floor, the sales department of the ARAYA brand was presenting a graph showing steadily rising sales. This success was due to the advertising and promotional plans recently launched. Just one month remained before the first-quarter sales report.

Everyone in the meeting room seemed pleased with the performance of the new brand, which had launched beautifully and met its goals. However, one person was still frowning, staring intently at the projector screen at the front of the room. This made the presenter's hands tremble under the pressure.

"It's good... but not good enough to make ARAYA number one in the first quarter,"

Said a calm voice. It belonged to a beautiful, short-haired woman who owned the brand. Her words quickly silenced the lively atmosphere in the room.

"I want to be the leader from the start. Bring me your plans to boost sales,"

She said. The room fell into silence. However, the experienced team, carefully selected for their skills, began to propose ideas, one after another, though none seemed to satisfy Issara much.

"Uh... What if we run a promotion? That might help increase sales. Everyone loves good products at reasonable prices,"

A young marketing officer suggested.

"I disagree. Launching promotions in the first year isn't appropriate. It will lower the value of the product, especially our premium-grade items,"

Anek immediately objected. Promotions are a good strategy, but not for products that have been on the market for less than three months.

"I also think it's too soon,"

Maanfan added.

"How about we send limited-edition items to celebrities to wear at events? It could expand our connections with celebrities and their fanbases to boost sales."

She believed in the quality of the well-designed products. They could sell themselves with just a little push to get them noticed.

"Yim... let's go with Maanfan's idea. Choose celebrities with a good image. If they refuse to wear the items, try offering them the role of ARAYA brand ambassador as part of the deal. Send me the list of celebrities to review. As for promotions, it's a good idea, but not for now. I want our brand to stay in the market for a long time, not just shine brightly for one year and then fade. Understand? Meeting adjourned. Report the progress of the next project in three days,"

Issara concluded the meeting. Everyone left to get to work, especially the marketing team, now carrying a major task on their shoulders.

The big-eyed girl gathered her belongings. She still had unfinished work on the new collection for the second quarter. Her desk was piled high with pieces waiting for her review, leaving her overwhelmed with tasks. However, Maanfan remained seated silently in the empty meeting room.

A faint smile lingered on her full lips. Issara wanted this brand to last forever, not just win a competition. The same was true for her - she wanted ARAYA to last forever. It was a grand gift the other person had intended to give her, even if they lost the competition.

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At the same time, on the floor just below Issara's meeting room, Tara's team was deep in a tense meeting after being harshly scolded by the project owner.

"Is this all you're capable of? Is that why we can't beat ARAYA's sales? I just received the raw data. How are you even working?!"

The young man shouted, slamming a stack of documents onto the table in anger. His frustration made the team jump, exchanging helpless glances as if silently pleading for a hero to come to their rescue.

"Good! Nobody has anything to say? Fine, I'll think of it myself. Use your brains when you work, make it worth the money I'm paying you! I want outstanding sales figures. Plan a promotion-come up with something brilliant,"

He snapped, his biting tone making several people clench their fists in frustration. But no one could do anything, as the man raising his voice was the one signing their paychecks.

"B-but that might not be good in the long term,"

One brave soul raised a hand to offer a differing opinion.

"I don't care about the long term. Just one year, just enough to win. Do as I say. Dismissed."

With that final order, everyone reluctantly dispersed to work, carrying their unease with them.

The sound of hurried footsteps echoed across the floor, growing louder as someone rushed toward the room. The door was pushed open swiftly, as if the person feared those inside might vanish.

"Dad!"

The moment she received the call, Maanfan took the afternoon off and rushed back to see her father. After waiting for so long, never giving up hope, her patience was rewarded. Miracles do exist.

Tears welled up in her beautiful round eyes, and soft sobs began to escape continuously.

"I just slept a little too long, and now my daughter has turned into a crybaby, huh?"

His weak voice teased gently, causing the weeping daughter to collapse into his lap, burying her face against him.

"Dad... this isn't a dream, is it? Dad... you've... woken up..."

She stammered, her sobbing voice barely coherent. Her father, who had been bedridden and weak, tried to lift his trembling hand to place it gently on his daughter's head, stroking her hair softly.

"I'm back... my dearest."

After a while, silence fell over the room. Maanfan noticed how exhausted her father looked, clearly forcing himself to talk with her. The young woman said her goodbyes to let him rest, allowing the nurses to take over his care. Maanfan, meanwhile, went to discuss with the doctor about her father's rehabilitation process.

Though he had regained consciousness, it didn't mean he was fully recovered. His recovery would depend on proper care, physical therapy, and the strength of his own willpower.

"Maanfan..."

The voice of Aunt Suay snapped Maanfan out of her daze, bringing her attention back to the present after spending the entire day lost in thought.

"What is it, Aunt?"

The young woman reached out to take the letter from the elderly lady with a puzzled look. As she opened it, her heart sank, and a chilling sensation washed over her from head to toe.

"This just arrived," Aunt Suay explained.

It was a court summons.

The money she had recently received from Issara had just been used to settle copyright fees, but the issue hadn't been resolved. The other party had rejected the proposed settlement price, and to make matters worse, there was now a criminal case attached to it.

Maanfan took a deep breath to steady herself, trying to gather her courage as her wide eyes scanned the document. Her gaze landed on the name of the person being sued-it was the name of the frail, elderly man who had only just escaped death less than a day ago. The man who had been her pillar of strength her entire life.

Maanfan clutched the court summons tightly in her hand, her heart heavy with worry and determination.

There was no way she would allow the man she called "Dad" to take the blame for something he did not do-a mistake she had created with her own hands.

"It's me. May I come in, Mr. Tara?"

A knock sounded on the door before she entered the office after hearing the owner's permission.

"Oh... busy lately, gorgeous? It feels like we haven't seen much of each other. Come, sit here,"

Tara said.

She had no choice but to move toward the chair he pointed at. Tara patted his lap to signal where she should sit, leaving the sharp and stylish young woman no choice but to force a faint, awkward smile.

"Well, I've been busy trying to boost sales, Mr. Tara. That's why I've been caught up with the shop. Ah! Don't do that!"

The young woman explained, pushing away the hand that had slipped under her skirt. This was an office, and she was in no mood for such things right now.

"Hm... refusing me now, are you? Where has my good little girl gone? Oh, I see... now you're Ms. Iris, the head of Team Dva, grown up and bold,"

Tara sneered, a menacing glint in his eyes as his lips curled into a twisted smile. His hands gripped her small arms tightly, with no hint of restraint, making her realize that the man in front of her was in a bad mood, and extremely dangerous.

In this moment of crisis, she stammered,

"N-no, Mr. Tara, why would you say that about me?"

Her sweet voice tried to soothe him, attempting to get herself out of danger.

"Is that so? Just don't forget that I can destroy your rotten family and leave them bankrupt in a single day. Don't you dare betray me, Iris,"

He warned, his words both a threat and a reminder. The sharp woman quickly nodded, understanding the seriousness of his statement.

"Good, as long as you understand... But why is the case against Issara's little team member taking so long? Huh?!"

The forceful shake made her delicate body sway uncontrollably, and tears began to well up in Iris's eyes out of fear. This wasn't good, this was very bad.

"It's... there are just a lot of steps involved, so it's taking longer than expected. I've been following your instructions, I swear! Ah! Please!"

She cried out in pain.

As soon as the words left her mouth, her beautiful face snapped to the side under the force of his slap. Her slender body crumpled to the floor, her delicate lips split, filling her mouth with the metallic taste of blood. Tears streamed down her cheeks, a mix of pain and despair.

"Liar! You deliberately slowed it down. I've already sent people to push the case forward. Why, Iris? Why would you do this?"

Tara's voice thundered, his figure towering over her. Iris's wide eyes stared at the man above her as she inhaled sharply in shock. He knew.

"This one... please, can I have her? There are so many others I've handled for you, and you've made so much money from them. Please, just spare Maanfan. I'm begging you,"

She pleaded desperately, clutching her reddened cheek.

"When did you get so kind-hearted, Iris? But let me tell you... that girl is in my way. Do you really think I'll let her go?"

Tara's fingers dug into her hair, yanking her head up to force her to meet his eyes. The sharp pull made her wince in pain.

Little did she know, her sobbing and tears only fueled his twisted desires. His lips crashed down on hers, hungry and rough, tasting the blood from her split lips, which deepened the wound even further.

"If you like her, how about I make her my toy too? She can be your companion."

A burst of triumphant laughter echoed as he noticed the displeasure in the eyes of the person below him. He loved to dominate, and even more so when he could break someone who had never admitted defeat with his own hands.

The punch to her stomach made Iris bend over in pain. Hell was about to begin again. She tried to hold back her crying. The more she cried, the more violent he became. The sound of her thin shirt being torn made her close her eyes and wait for it to end.

"Cry, Iris! Cry more! Why are you silent?!"

A slap to her face and the painful force from below made the woman bite her lip in pain. The grip on her neck made her unable to breathe, forcing her to struggle to escape the monster in front of her.

"Good, very good. Struggle more, Iris. It feels so good. Ah... I'm almost there,"

He said, moaning with satisfaction. His movements became faster and harder. Iris closed her eyes to escape the scene in front of her. Soon, this nightmare would be over.

The big-eyed woman shifted her position on the chair in the meeting room restlessly. Soon, it would be time to announce the first-quarter sales results of each brand. That amusing gesture made Issara laugh.

Look at her, arriving at the meeting room so early. She thought she was early herself, but when she opened the door and saw someone already waiting, she laughed in surprise.

There were still thirty minutes before the meeting started.

"Are you excited?"

Asked the short-haired woman sitting at the head of the table, teasingly.

"Veryyyyy excited!"

The big-eyed woman dragged her voice, making the older woman smile fondly. The tall and slim boss walked over and placed her hand on the employee's head.

"We'll be fine. There are a lot of customers."

"Miss Issara, I'm not a kid! Don't do that,"

Maanfan said as she slapped the other woman's hand away while it played with her long, silky hair. She lightly protested, which only made Issara laugh more. Then she returned to her seat as the meeting time approached.

The meeting began, leaving the younger woman pouting before fixing her messy hair back into place.

The once lively meeting room fell silent as the projector screen displayed the boss's presentation. The summary of sales figures appeared clearly on the screen:

Rank 1: Dva achieved 44% of total sales.

Rank 2: ARAYA achieved 39% of total sales.

Rank 3: KumiShop achieved 17% of total sales.

*In the first quarter, Dva is the winner.*

The 5% sales gap made Issara frown deeply. She didn't expect the difference to be this big. If they couldn't catch up, the total sales summary at the end of the next three quarters would be disastrous.

"Hmm... In one week, we'll revise the marketing plan again. Marketing team, come up with more ideas. Design team, submit a new collection for review. We need to boost sales. Production team, ensure strict quality control on all products, don't let anything slip through. A 5% gap is still manageable. Let's work hard and do our best. Alright, everyone can leave now,"

Issara concluded.

After the meeting, once all tasks were assigned, the team members dispersed to their work, feeling somewhat disheartened but still determined not to give up.

"Miss Issara... um... can I talk to you for a moment?"

Maanfan approached Issara with a concerned look. Seeing Issara's troubled expression made Maanfan worried, but the older woman quickly packed her things and declined.

"Not now, Fan... I have other things to do,"

Issara said hurriedly, leaving Maanfan to simply nod in acknowledgment before returning to her office. Frustration, sadness, and disappointment made it hard for Maanfan to focus on her tasks. She eventually decided to set her pencil down and take a walk to clear her mind before making a mistake.

She dragged her feet along until she encountered a familiar figure wearing a face mask and a hat, trying to hide their identity.

"Iris..."

She called softly. The person, who seemed lost in thought, stopped and turned to look at her. The faint bruises around her eyes made Maanfan quickly approached to pull down the mask covering the person's face.

"What are you doing, Maanfan?!"

Iris exclaimed in shock, her voice sharp. She tried to turn her bruised face away from Maanfan's hands, which had lifted her chin. She wasn't ready to face anyone's sympathy yet.

"Did your father hit you again? Has he still not stopped hurting you?"

Maanfan asked worriedly, ignoring Iris's attempts to pull away. This wasn't the first time Iris had shown up in this condition-there had been a few instances before, dating back to their school days. But this time seemed worse than ever.

"Stay out of it, Fan!"

Iris pushed Maanfan away and quickly pulled the mask back over her face, avoiding the gaze filled with concern. Iris knew that Maanfan cared, but she didn't think she deserved that care.

"Iris... about the case... I know no matter what I say, you won't drop it, but can you at least delay it for a bit? Just until the competition is over."

Maanfan's pleading, tired voice made Iris let out a heavy sigh.

"I can't. This is beyond my ability to interfere with anymore."

"Why, Iris? I don't understand. That's your family's brand, isn't it?"

Maanfan asked, her voice desperate and full of confusion. Iris didn't meet her gaze.

"I'll excuse myself, Fan. I have work to do,"

Iris said before quickly walking away, leaving Maanfan behind to do nothing but watch her go.

As Maanfan stood there, trying to collect herself, she was met by a plump man, Ophas, and his otaku-like friend waiting for her. Feeling disappointed and dragging her feet, Maanfan returned to her office. But before she reached her desk, she was interrupted.

"It's a shame, isn't it? Coming in second place, and by quite a margin too. The gap is pretty big. But keep trying; you can still catch up. As for my brand, well, it's hopeless now. We're completely left behind,"

Ophas, the plump man, said in a cheerful tone, as if he didn't care much. Maanfan wasn't sure whether to thank him for the encouragement or to comfort him instead.

"Ah... yes, it's unfortunate. So, Mr. Ophas, do you have any business with me?"

Maanfan quickly changed the subject.

"Oh, well, I was thinking of expanding production to focus entirely on cosplay outfits. But... all the factories I've contacted have refused. They don't want to take on small-scale, high-detail work. In simple terms, they said it's not worth the cost. I heard you have a lot of connections in this field. Could you recommend a factory that might take on this kind of work?"

Ophas spoke at length with a wide smile, his eyes nearly closing as he grinned. Maanfan swallowed hard, feeling the weight of the hopeful look he gave her. Don't look at me like that, as if I'm your last hope, she thought. And who told you I have connections in this field? All this, while their sales numbers were so low!

Still, they don't think about changing the marketing strategy? I just don't understand people in high positions.

"Uh... well... if you need it so suddenly, I probably can't find it right away. But I'll look into it,"

Maanfan replied hesitantly.

"Oh, thank you so much! Then I'll take my leave now. I won't bother you at work anymore,"

Ophas said happily, shaking her hand enthusiastically before leaving as quickly as he came. Maanfan was left standing there, confused by how fast everything happened. What kind of day is this? Why does it feel like everyone is walking away from me?!

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In a quiet corner of a large Christian cemetery, there was a lonely gravestone, far away from the others. A tall woman with short hair and sharp features leaned against the gravestone. Her face was red, showing that she had been drinking alcohol.

After parting ways with Maanfan, her disappointment led her to a bar to drink and calm herself. Now, she was sitting by her mother Pimpa's grave, talking to her like she always did.

Issara's mother, Pimpa, was once a famous actress. During her prime, she had a close working relationship with Iyarat to promote products. One careless night together led to Pimpa becoming pregnant. Iyarat, not wanting the news to become public, agreed to marry her.

His father, who admired Pimpa greatly, also supported the marriage. However, the union wasn't built on love-it was a decision made to protect their reputation.

Less than a year later, Issara was born, becoming the eldest granddaughter of the family.

Iyarat, tired of being with someone he didn't love, went back to his former lover, and together they had a child, only a year younger than Issara.

However, the man couldn't divorce because of the marriage contract his father had set up, which granted half of the company's shares to Issara and her mother to manage. The family appeared perfect on the outside, but inside, it was cold and distant-a reflection of being a daughter unloved by her father.

"Mom, I lost today,"

Issara said, her voice soft.

"It was shocking, honestly. Maybe I expected too much. But my team is amazing-they're so talented. I may have lost this time, but I'll win next time. Just watch me, okay?"

The frequent notification pings from Line drew Issara's attention. She picked up her phone and saw a flurry of messages from Maanfan.

*"Where are you? You suddenly went quiet."*

*"Please pick up your phone, okay? Please?"*

*"I'm worried about you. Can we talk?"*

"..."

"..."

The short-haired woman could only smile at the messages but didn't reply.

"This is the one I told you about, Mom. My talented team member. I must have accidentally made her worry again."

The messages eventually stopped coming.

Then, a distinct notification sound, set specifically for just one app, chimed. Issara's face lit up with a wide smile as she saw the notification-Maanfan had *"purchased Araya's service*."

All her stress vanished in an instant, replaced by warmth in her heart from the other woman's gesture.

"Sigh... never giving up, huh? This kid..."

Chapter 10: Yearning

The wide-eyed girl stood still in front of the same room number at the same hotel. The only difference now was the fear. She was afraid that the person inside would be angry at her selfishness, afraid that she had crossed the line, and that their already complicated and fragile relationship would shatter completely. She wasn't ready to deal with ending things when nothing was clear.

The ambiguity of the person inside, and her actions, sometimes seemed mysterious and intriguing, but at other times, they were terrifying.

She feared that if she wanted to turn back now, it would already be too late.

Maanfan glanced at her phone to check the time again. Five more minutes, and she'd be late, and she'd never once missed or been late to an appointment. She took a deep breath, trying to bury her fear beneath a composed expression, and then raised her hand to knock on the door. It wasn't long before the person inside opened it and welcomed her.

"Come in, Maanfan. Almost late today?"

The calm demeanor of the short-haired woman, as if nothing had happened, left the wide-eyed Maanfan unsure of how to react.

"Come here, let me take off your coat. Oh my, you came straight from work in your work clothes, didn't you?"

The elegant short-haired woman said while hanging Maanfan's outerwear, which she had just removed.

"Um... Miss Issara, are you okay? I mean... I was worried, so..."

Before Maanfan could finish her sentence, a slender finger gently touched her lips, signaling her to stop. The message was clear, she still didn't have the right to intrude on Issara. The person before her wasn't Issara in that moment but Araya, the beautiful woman whose service she had purchased. "Do you want to take a bath first? I've prepared warm water for you,"

Araya said with a bright smile, changing the subject. Maanfan gave a faint smile in return, neither agreeing nor refusing, but instead, she gently pulled Araya's hand and guided her to the sofa in another section of the room.

"I want to talk to you first. Can we?"

Maanfan's pleading tone, paired with her head resting on the older woman's shoulder, made Araya smile affectionately. She intertwined her fingers with Maanfan's and gently stroked her palm.

"Go ahead. What do you want to talk to me about?"

"I'm sorry for being selfish, but this was the only way to reach you... I'm really worried about you,"

Maanfan apologized, though she couldn't help justifying her actions. The older woman chuckled softly and nodded in acceptance.

"I'm not angry, just... not ready to see anyone or talk to anyone right now."

"And now? Are you feeling any better? Should I leave?"

The wide-eyed woman pulled away from the shoulder she had been leaning on and turned to face the other directly. Her eyes, full of concern and worry, made the person she was looking at feel warm all over.

"You spent so much money to see me, and now you're leaving after just a short talk? What are you, a big spender or something?"

The teasing tone and mischievous smile caught Maanfan off guard, leaving her unsure of how to respond. She ended up making a face that looked like she wanted to roll her eyes.

"Come on,P' Araya. I'm being serious here. Are you really okay?"

Maanfan pushed the older woman's shoulder lightly, only to yelp in surprise when the short-haired woman suddenly leaned in, hugged her tightly, and pressed her nose firmly against her cheek in a playful gesture.

"I'm not okay at all,"

Araya said softly.

"Can you just let me do what I want for today? Please comfort me."

The pleading tone, one Maanfan had never heard from Araya before, left her wide-eyed. Without saying anything, she buried her face in Araya's shoulder once again.

"Just asking is enough, and I'll give it to you. But if you act like this, I might die from the shock. Being beautiful is bad enough, don't go adding cuteness, okay?"

Maanfan's grumbling, muffled as she pressed her face against Araya's shoulder, made the older woman laugh with delight. She gently tried to push the embarrassed younger woman, who was now avoiding her gaze, away.

"Let me see your face, Maanfan,"

Araya said playfully.

Maanfan shook her head vigorously and resisted Araya's push, instead tightening her arms around the older woman's waist. Araya burst into loud laughter, the worry, fear, and negative emotions she'd been carrying seemingly evaporating in the air whenever she was with this young woman. Araya hugged her back, smiling at the warmth.

"Let go now. I'm going to take a shower..."

Maanfan seized the moment when Araya was caught off guard and slipped away, quickly darting into the bathroom. Her cheeks burned with embarrassment, she didn't know how to handle it. It had been so long since Araya had been this affectionate that Maanfan felt completely unprepared.

"Want me to help you shower?"

Araya teased.

"No way!!"

Maanfan shouted back, her voice echoing through the door. The sound of Araya's laughter followed, making Maanfan slam the bathroom door shut, more out of flustered irritation than anger. Still, she felt a wave of relief wash over her. At least Araya was smiling, laughing, and in a much better state than she'd expected. That alone was enough to make her feel better.

. .

As soon as she stepped out of the bathroom, the dim lighting in the room made the wide-eyed woman freeze. Her body was only covered by a towel, stiffened as a bad feeling crept over her. The atmosphere, the sensation-it all felt wrong. Maybe she should just retreat back into the bathroom.

"Ah! P'Araya, what are you doing?"

She exclaimed as she turned around, only to be caught in the waiting arms of the person standing by the bathroom door. The embrace pulled her into a firm hold.

"I've been waiting for so long. Why are you going back into the bathroom again? Didn't you promise to go along with me tonight? Are you backing out now?"

Araya's voice, playful yet teasingly reproachful, was accompanied by a kiss planted on Maanfan's bare shoulder, just outside the towel. The soft touch made her flinch, her heart racing, blood rushing to her cheeks. The warmth of Araya's lips contrasted with the coolness of her damp skin fresh from the shower.

"I'm not backing out... I just need a moment to prepare myself..."

"You ran out of time to prepare the moment you stepped out of the bathroom,"

Araya replied stubbornly, nipping at her small earlobe with teasing bites. The sensation sent shivers down Maanfan's spine, leaving her unable to think clearly, her breath caught as the gentle bites played with her resolve.

"Don't... not yet, please,"

Maanfan tried to stop the other woman, asking for a moment to steady herself, while grabbing the mischievous hand that had slipped down to squeeze her firm, rounded backside.

"But I don't want to wait anymore, can't I?"

Araya replied, her voice soft and pleading. Knowing full well how Maanfan couldn't resist her tone, Araya played it up with exaggerated eyes and a dramatic pout, making the younger woman completely give in, allowing her to continue her touches.

"*Sigh*... Fine, but at least let's go to the bed. I've been walking all day,"

Maanfan said, resigning in defeat, overwhelmed by Araya's persistence. As soon as Maanfan gave permission, Araya leaned in to press a deep kiss on her lips. Her tongue slid in, tangling and exchanging breaths. The towel fell to the floor, discarded without care, and Araya gently pushed Maanfan backward toward the bed just a few steps away.

Araya's hands worked on unbuttoning her own shirt but quickly lost patience, slipping under the fabric to cup and knead Maanfan's soft breasts, unrestrained by any bra. Her lips moved from the heated kiss down to Maanfan's neck, lightly licking and tasting her warm, fragrant skin. The soft moan of satisfaction came from Araya as she gently pushed Maanfan's now completely bare body onto the soft mattress.

"Don't resist, okay? Today you have to let me do on my way,"

Araya said as she climbed onto the bed, her hands quickly undoing the remaining buttons of her shirt. She discarded it carelessly onto the floor, revealing her radiant, fair skin. Maanfan's wide eyes sparkled as she watched.

The younger woman's chest rose and fell with excitement as Araya's gaze roamed over her. The blush on her cheeks only fueled Araya's desire, making her eager to hear those sweet sounds again.

"Lie on your stomach, Maanfan,"

Araya commanded softly.

She gently flipped Maanfan onto her stomach, brushing the silky hair away from her back. Her hands traced the curve of Maanfan's sides before her tongue lightly touched the center of her back, running along the spine from the middle to the nape of her neck. She alternated between gentle licks and teasing nips, causing the body beneath her to tense in response.

"Ah! Phi..."

Maanfan gasped sweetly, taking a deep breath as her body trembled. Araya smiled with satisfaction, her tongue continuing to explore the soft, fair skin of Maanfan's nape, ears, and shoulders. Her hands slid under Maanfan's body to knead her full breasts, pressing her weight gently onto the younger woman.

Unable to move, unable to see, Maanfan could only feel the sensations Araya delivered. Her body writhed in response as she gripped and tugged at the pillow, letting out soft moans of pleasure. Araya's hands, leaving her chest, began to trail down to the inside of Maanfan's thighs, leaving the wide-eyed girl trembling with anticipation.

She immediately parted her thighs, making way for the other woman.

"So ready, huh? Such a naughty girl..."

The teasing words from behind came as fingers lightly touched the sensitive spot below, already damp and prepared.

"Don't say that, it's embarrassing..."

Maanfan protested shyly, her voice trembling, but she gasped sharply as a fingertip pressed down on her sensitive spot, gliding back and forth.

Her curvy body trembled uncontrollably, waves of heat coursing through her as the intense stimulation continued. Moans, mixed with heavy breaths, spilled out, stirring up the desire of the one teasing her.

"Please, I can't take it anymore. Just come in already,"

Maanfan pleaded sweetly, her voice filled with longing as her desire overflowed.

"You're so passionate today, my dear... I've got a gift for you. I picked it out myself. You're going to love it,"

The short-haired woman whispered into Maanfan's ear, pressing a kiss there as she spoke.

"A gift... what is it?"

Maanfan, now in a dazed state, asked curiously, biting her lip tightly as the other woman traced her fingertip along the soft, damp entrance.

Watching Maanfan tightly close her eyes and clutch the pillow as if for dear life, Araya whispered,

"Let me use it on you first, and then I'll show you... okay? Just go along with me."

She negotiated while her fingers teased the sensitive spot.

"I... I... mmph..."

Maanfan's moans, soft and restrained, gave Araya the impression that she agreed. The taller woman pulled away from the embrace and walked to the corner of the room to retrieve something. Maanfan propped herself up, confused and slightly annoyed at the interruption, but her eyes widened in shock when she saw what Araya brought back.

"Wait... hold on, is that...?"

"You already gave me permission, didn't you? Are you going to take it back now?"

Araya teased, her hopeful gaze locking onto Maanfan, who panicked internally. When did I agree to this? she thought, her mind a blur. But facing that pleading look, she couldn't find the words to refuse.

"I... I've never used that before... and... it's scary. Can we not use it, please?" Maanfan stammered, her voice trembling.

The wide-eyed woman tried to softly refuse, but in the other woman's hand was a pair of underwear fitted with two fake male organs. One was positioned inside to be inserted into the wearer's body, while the other was outside to penetrate the partner.

"Don't be scared, I picked a size that's just right for you. It won't hurt at all. It'll just add a new kind of excitement. Who knows? You might even like

it,"

Araya said, her persuasive words leaving Maanfan flustered and hesitant.

"B-but..."

"Here, touch it. It's not as scary as it looks,"

Araya said, pulling Maanfan's hand toward the item, encouraging her to explore something unfamiliar. Fear often came from the unknown, but this was just a tool to add spice to intimacy, an accessory to enhance their pleasure.

Maanfan inspected it with a mix of fear and curiosity, hesitating but intrigued. The soft texture of the object in her hand made her squeeze it experimentally, surprised by how flexible it felt. As she grew more comfortable, it didn't seem as intimidating as it had at first.

While Maanfan was engrossed in examining the new addition Araya had brought into their intimacy, the older woman slid behind her, caressing her body gently. Araya's fingers traced over her skin, reigniting the passion that had briefly paused. A playful pinch on her sensitive peak made Maanfan flinch and turn to glare at Araya, who chuckled softly.

"Wow, you're really getting into it, huh? Ready to give it a try?"

The younger woman lowered her gaze, making Araya's heart sink slightly. If Maanfan rejected her again, she wouldn't push further, though she felt a tinge of disappointment at not being able to try this with the person in her arms.

"I... if I agree this time, then next time you have to let me use it on you, okay?"

Maanfan said hesitantly. Araya raised an eyebrow in surprise but then smiled softly when the younger woman didn't outright refuse.

"Of course... but for now, you'll have to let me take the lead,"

Araya replied, pressing a gentle kiss on Maanfan's lips. The shy yet curious expression on the younger woman made Araya's heart melt. How adorable, my little one.

Breaking the kiss, Araya removed the small panties she was wearing and tossed them aside. She then picked up the toy and a bottle of lubricant, preparing for what was to come. Carefully, she applied the lubricant to the inner shaft, the part intended for herself, and gently inserted it. Once it was secure, she fastened the harness firmly.

Maanfan lay on the bed, watching Araya's actions with a mix of curiosity, excitement, and a hint of nervousness.

"Hmm... it feels strange, doesn't it?"

Maanfan murmured softly as Araya began to press the toy against her most sensitive spot, using its moisture to ensure smooth movement. Each press against that spot made Maanfan shudder slightly, her body responding involuntarily.

Meanwhile, Araya leaned forward, trailing kisses and playful bites down Maanfan's chest, fully immersed in the moment, her passion growing stronger with every soft sound Maanfan made.

"Spread your legs a little more, Maanfan,"

Araya said softly. Maanfan, breathing heavily, obeyed without hesitation, giving more access to the other woman. The size of what entered her, larger than a finger, made her tense up from the tightness.

"Ah... it's tight, Phi,"

Maanfan said, shifting her hips to escape the discomfort.

Araya didn't force it, pulling back slightly before pressing forward again. Each time Maanfan felt uncomfortable, Araya would ease back before gently pushing deeper, gradually opening the narrow passage of the woman beneath her.

"Ahh! Wait, don't move yet, Phi,"

Maanfan pleaded, clutching tightly onto Araya's body as the tightness filled her completely.

The snug sensation as the object reached its full length and pressed against her deepest walls made Maanfan tremble. It felt uncomfortable, but there was also a strange pleasure that came with it.

"If you keep tensing up like this, it'll hurt more. Try to relax, okay?"

Araya said, struggling to hold back her own rising desire to move. Each small movement caused the object inside her own body to rub and create an equally intense sensation.

"Mm... kiss me, please,"

Maanfan murmured in a pleading tone. Her words broke Araya's selfcontrol.

With a swift movement, Araya pulled her hips back and thrust forward with force, unable to hold back any longer. Maanfan flinched at the sudden sensation, gasping and clinging tightly to Araya's body.

"Phi... slowly... I... ah!!"

"Araya moved rapidly and selfishly made Maanfan's body shiver. The tightness flowed smoothly due to continuous stimulation, and the tip pressing deeply drained her strength, leaving her to accept the strange, intense sensations."

"Hmm... Does it feel good, Fan? Do you feel good?"

The curvy body moved rhythmically, eyes opening to look at the person above. With fiery eyes, a flushed face, beads of sweat forming along the hairline, and trembling breaths mirroring her own, it stirred emotions deeply.

Unable to resist, she pulled the other person into a tight embrace, her fingertips digging into their back to release the overwhelming emotions within.

"Yes... I feel good. Please... a little faster. Ah!"

The sound of skin meeting and the sweet scent of their intense activity filled the air. Soft moans mixed with heavy breathing grew faster with rising emotions. The person beneath wrapped their legs around the other's waist, pulling them closer for deeper and quicker movements.

"I'm almost there... It's so good."

The slender figure on top spoke as their movements became tighter, making the person underneath shut their eyes tightly.

Biting her full lips, she tilted her head back and released soft, sweet moans, spreading her legs to meet the movements below.

"Ah... ah... ahh!!"

Her body, slick with sweat, trembled and tensed as she reached her peak, causing the person above to quicken their pace to reach their own climax.

"Ah... stop, please. I just... I just got there... ah... I can't... I can't take it!"

Her sensitive body, overwhelmed by repeated touches, tried to pull away. But the hands gripping her hips kept her in place, forcing her to endure the sensation she could no longer handle.

"Just a little more, sweetheart... just a little more... ah... ah... ahhh!"

Not long after, the body above her tensed and shuddered as they reached their own release. Their arms wrapped tightly around her trembling frame, tears welling in her eyes, her breathing rapid and shallow from the overwhelming sensation.

"Enough!! Araya, you're crazy! I almost couldn't take it. What if I passed out? Take it away now!"

The voice of the person below, laced with frustration, protested as she squirmed and tried to escape.

"Hmm... If you keep squirming like this, I might do it again. Don't forget, it's part of me too, you naughty girl..."

The person embracing her teased while playfully nuzzling her soft cheek.

"Enough already, take it out..."

Maanfan lay there stiffly, not daring to move. She was still catching her breath, her body hot and pulsing, while the inside of her thighs felt damp. "Alright, I'll take it out,"

Araya said, removing the toy from Maanfan's body obediently, then pulling her into a tight embrace from behind, allowing Maanfan to breathe a sigh of relief.

"But... let's try another round from behind, okay?"

"Araya!! Don't do that! I'm still so tired, Ah! You're crazy, so selfish!"

In the luxurious hotel room with dim lighting, the silhouettes of two women entwined on the large bed could be seen. Maanfan rested her head on Araya's slender arm, secretly stealing glances at her face. It had been so long since she had seen Araya... and every time they met, her heart would flutter uncontrollably.

Noticing that she was being watched, Araya turned to make eye contact with Maanfan.

"Are you okay, Araya?"

As Maanfan thought back on her own question, her face turned bright red. That wasn't what she had meant at all!

"I'm fine, really fine. I liked it a lot,"

Araya replied with a smile, glancing at the beautiful neckline that peeked out from under the blanket. Maanfan followed her gaze before quickly pulling the blanket up to her chin.

"I didn't mean that!"

Maanfan pouted.

"I was talking about the competition. We already lost the first round,"

She clarified.

"It's just the first round, right? The competition for the chairman's seat is judged based on total annual sales, you know? Even if you lose some rounds early on, if the overall numbers are higher in the end, you'll still win."

It seemed like the other person was trying to comfort her, but even so, Araya's words made her feel more at ease.

"It doesn't really make sense,"

Maanfan argued.

"Why would the chairman's position be decided by just the sales of a new brand in one year? If all three candidates hold equal shares, it should be judged based on overall performance, don't you think?"

She was confident that if it came down to overall performance, her boss would undoubtedly come out on top.

"Logically, it should be like that-if my father hadn't voted to hold this ridiculous competition for the chairman's seat."

Issara, in Araya's guise, replied in a calm voice. Though there was some dissatisfaction in her tone, there was no point in getting upset about something that had already been decided.

"Your father? Why would he do something like that?"

Maanfan asked in confusion, though on second thought, she realized it might have been a bit intrusive.

Seeing the other person's uneasy expression, Issara gently raised her hand to pat Maanfan's soft head.

"Never mind, as long as I win, that's all that matters."

Issara's words made Maanfan smile. If even Issara refused to give up, how could she let herself feel discouraged? She had to make the Araya brand the number one brand, no matter what!

*Of course.*

"By the way... where did you go earlier, Phi?"

The smaller woman couldn't stop herself from asking the question she was most curious about. Now was the perfect moment, surely Araya wouldn't refuse her.

"Today... it's the anniversary of my mother's death. That's all you need to know."

Once again, Maanfan wished she could slap her own mouth. She hadn't meant to pry, it was just curiosity about where Araya had been.

"Are you okay, Araya?"

Maanfan asked gently.

"Earlier, I wasn't okay at all. But now... I'm feeling much better."

Issara sharp eyes glanced up to meet Maanfan's gaze.

*It was because of you, Maanfan...*

And it seemed Maanfan understood the meaning behind her boss's words. She leaned in to hug Issara, hoping her embrace could heal Issara from the pain of the past.

Maanfan silently promised herself that from now on, Issara wouldn't have to face those hardships alone. She would overcome them together with Issara.

No rest was given to the candidates for the chairman's position. Just a few weeks later, the second quarter of the competition began. As expected, Dva secured all the prime locations, while the Araya brand ended up with average spots, not great, but not terrible either.

Inside the large meeting room, the atmosphere was tense as the meeting proceeded. Each brand had prepared thoroughly, including Maanfan's brand. Issara had stayed up late preparing all the documents by herself. No matter how much Maanfan wanted to help, all she could do was offer her support and assist with minor tasks.

She admitted she was tired. She admitted she felt discouraged. But seeing the determination of everyone around her gave her the strength to keep going. Managing a single branch had been manageable, but now overseeing a larger organization brought new challenges. Thankfully, Anek stepped in to help fix the gaps in the process.

"If you'd like to learn more about management, I can recommend a short course from a reputable institution,"

Anek suggested. "Please do, P'Anek,"

Maanfan replied.

From then on, Maanfan began attending short courses every weekend. She gained a wealth of new knowledge and ideas to improve the brand further. Everything seemed to be moving in a positive direction.

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***Ding!***

Her phone rang. Maanfan turned to give an apologetic smile to her colleagues, who had looked up at the sound. When she saw the name saved on the screen, she quickly answered the call.

"Yes, Dad?"

"Fan, the lawyer your boss recommended is really skilled. I won't have to go to jail anymore. But... I still have to pay a fine."

The young woman sighed in relief. At least she had managed to help her father avoid imprisonment. Maanfan talked with her father for a while before ending the call. She then hurried straight to Issara's office.

"I really wants to thank you, Khun Issara, for helping my dad," she said as she opened the door, bowing deeply in gratitude.

"A good lawyer is part of it, but most of the time, if you confess and it's your first offense, you usually only have to pay a fine,"

Issara replied calmly.

"Even so, I have to thank you again. Without your help, I don't know what I would've done,"

Maanfan insisted, her voice filled with sincere gratitude.

The young woman thanked her boss again, tears streaming down her face from the overwhelming gratitude she felt. Seeing her small subordinate's emotional reaction, Issara couldn't resist walking over and gently patting her head.

"Now, all that's left is paying the fine, right?"

Maanfan nodded.

"How much is it?"

The petite woman hesitated for a moment, stunned. But when she saw Issara's insistent gaze, she finally gave in and answered.

"About 600,000 baht."

Issara nodded and turned back to her desk. She opened a drawer, took out a checkbook, and began writing something down. Once finished, she handed the check to Maanfan.

Maanfan immediately recognized it as a check and refused it frantically.

Issara had already done so much by arranging the lawyer; she was deeply grateful for that alone. There was no way she could accept 600,000 baht.

"It's a loan,"

Issara said firmly.

Even though Issara said it was a loan, Maanfan still felt hesitant about accepting such a large sum of money.

"It's okay. I'll sell part of the factory. I need to take responsibility for my own actions. Besides, you've already helped me so much, Khun Issara. Thanks to you, I have a job now and can manage to pay it off myself," Maanfan explained at length.

"If you don't want to borrow, that's fine. Just repay me in a small way,"

Issara replied casually.

"Repay?"

Maanfan raised an eyebrow slightly.

"If you agree, come see me in my room tonight. Got it?"

Issara said with a playful smile, her tone light but with an undertone that made Maanfan blush furiously. Embarrassed, she quickly fled the room without another word.

***Slap!***

The sharp sound echoed as Iris's face was jerked to the side from the force of the slap. A crimson streak of blood began to seep from the corner of her mouth. Her current state was so pitiful that Tara almost felt a pang of guilt. But the moment the thought of the competition resurfaced, the fire of ambition reignited within him.

"That's enough. I've done my best,"

Iris pleaded, her voice trembling, halfway between begging and trying to reason.

However, her words only seemed to further anger the man. He raised his hand high and struck her pale face again, sending her collapsing to the ground.

"You call that trying?"

Tara roared.

"I told you to get that kid's father sent to jail. Why did he only get fined 600,000?"

"It's how the law works,"

Iris replied weakly.

"Besides, the nine people I prosecuted on your orders all got fines around the same amount."

Hearing her response only made the man angrier. Nothing was going according to his plan. He began piecing together the events in his mind, convinced that Iris must have gone soft on Maanfan. His rage boiling over, Tara's foot struck her stomach with full force, causing Iris's slender body to curl up in pain. Both hands clutched her abdomen as she gagged up her breakfast.

"You're useless,"

Tara said coldly before continuing to beat her mercilessly.

For over an hour, Iris's body was used as an outlet for Tara's rage. When he was finally satisfied, he ordered his men to drag her out. Without care, they carried her and dumped her unceremoniously at the entrance of the condo, as if she were a pawn no longer of any use.

Slowly, Iris pushed herself up from the ground, holding onto her injured body as she staggered toward the street, intending to hail a taxi to get home. But as she moved, her vision began to blur, and the world started spinning around her. She could no longer maintain her balance, her body swaying unsteadily as if she might collapse at any moment.

At that point, she had no strength left to keep standing. Her body began tilting backward, the moment unfolding in slow motion. She thought her head would surely hit the hard ground.

***Grab!***

But things didn't go as expected... Someone managed to catch her just in time, wrapping her in their arms as her consciousness faded.

"Miss! Can you hear me?"

And that was the last thing she heard before everything went dark.

"No! No! Stop it! Enough!"

Iris jolted awake, trembling with fear. Her breathing was ragged, and her heart raced. Looking around at the unfamiliar surroundings, she slowly exhaled in relief. Tara was no longer there. She wouldn't have to endure any more pain.

She glanced toward a large man standing with his back to her, speaking to a nurse. It seemed like they were talking about her. As the conversation stopped, both of them turned to face her, realizing she was now awake.

"You... Ophas?"

Iris said with surprise. Was Ophas the one who helped her?

"Yes, Miss Iris,"

Opas answered with a small smile.

"The police will come soon."

"Did you call them, Mr. Ophas?"

Her voice sounded a bit upset. Calling the police would make things harder for her. She wanted to tell them everything, but there was not enough proof to catch Tara. The more she talked about him, the more danger she would be in.

She was sure Tara would punish her for this.

"No, I didn't," Ophas said.

"It was the paramedics. They called the police when they took the case. It's the law."

"That's unfortunate..."

Before Iris could finish her sentence, three or four police officers entered the room.

"Hello, we're here regarding an assault case,"

One of them said.

After explaining the case, the officer began questioning her right away.

"Where were you last before the incident?"

"It's blurry... I think I was at a 7-Eleven,"

Iris replied, trying to avoid saying too much or mentioning anyone specific.

Even though the officers asked her several more questions, they didn't seem to get much useful information. In the end, a younger officer turned to Opas, who was an important witness.

"You're the one who found Miss Iris, correct? Can you tell us where you found her?"

Opas was about to answer truthfully based on what he had seen, but he changed his mind when he noticed Iris giving him a pleading look.

She shook her head slightly, signaling that she didn't want him to tell the police the truth. Reluctantly, Ophas decided to go along with it.

"I found her in front of the 7-Eleven at the corner of the street. It's close to the hospital, so I brought her here,"

He said.

Hearing this, the officers looked at each other and shook their heads in frustration. With so little information, how could they find the culprit? However, since both Iris and Ophas insisted it was the truth, the officers had no choice but to leave disappointed.

After the door closed, leaving just Iris and Opas in the room, Iris turned to him and said,

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. From the way you didn't cooperate much during questioning, I figured I should respect your decision,"

Ophas replied.

Iris thanked him again.

Seeing the visible injuries on her body, Opas couldn't hold back his curiosity any longer. With a serious tone, he asked her directly.

"Did Tara do it?"

Iris smiled but didn't answer.

"You don't need to close it. The wind is just right near the condo."

There was no reason for her to hide anymore, so Iris started to cry. She sobbed heavily, and her beautiful face slowly leaned down to rest on Ophas. Although he was a little surprised, Opas chose not to move away.

Seeing her in such a weak moment made him want to comfort her even more. When he rubbed Iris' head, the tears she had been holding back came out even more.

Iris hugged Ophas tightly, as if he was the only one she had. It was good that Opas was there. At least she didn't have to face this alone.

Maanfan today felt different from every other day. The small girl walked with a mischievous smile, heading straight to Araya's room. Today, she was determined to please Araya completely by wearing a nightdress, even though she hadn't planned to wear one.

The girl, with her big eyes, carefully chose a red dress, which was Araya's favorite color, and deliberately picked a style she thought Araya would like. Besides the sexy nightdress that would melt anyone's heart, she even sprayed a famous brand of perfume with a seductive scent, something she had never considered using before.

She was going all out to please Araya. Wait and see, this time she was going to control the game! She would make Araya submit to her at her feet!

The girl chuckled to herself at her wicked thoughts before heading to Araya's room at the end of the hall. She walked and hummed happily.

When she opened the door, the room was empty, with no sign of Araya. The girl furrowed her brow in confusion, then walked to find a note on the table.

"I have urgent business. See you later."

Maanfan read the message on the paper, along with a red lipstick kiss mark.

"What is this...?"

The young woman collapsed to the floor, feeling extremely disappointed. She had spent so much time looking for a dress, and the perfume too...

*Araya, oh Araya, when I see you next time, I will get you back for this!*

Chapter 11: Body Language

The long legs woman stepped down from the private helicopter. The young woman looked at the surrounding sea view before adjusting her black sunglasses. It was normal for Issara to travel by private helicopter, especially when she secretly met someone. She carried a large black bag and had two bodyguards walking beside her.

When they reached the large mansion, the two bodyguards at the door made a hand signal to prevent outsiders from entering.

Issara then ordered her bodyguards to wait outside and followed the maid inside. Finally, they arrived at the dining room, where a man with half a head of white hair, about fifty years old, was sitting and eating a fine steak.

The maid bowed to her and then stepped out of the room.

".....”

Even though there was a guest visiting, the man kept cutting the steak without stopping. No words came out from the mouths of either of them. Issara just stood there smiling without saying anything, while the owner of the house continued eating the food in front of him.

Time passed, about fifteen minutes later.

“Sit down, Issara.”

A strong voice, but not unfriendly, came from the older man.

“Yes, Uncle Kanes,”

Issara replied before sitting down across from Kanes. Kanes finished his food, leaving nothing, not even the decorative vegetables on the plate. Then he gathered the cutlery and stood up.

“I’ll excuse myself for a moment.”

“Yes,”

Issara responded.

Kanes took his own plate out of the room. Issara waited patiently for a long time. After a while, he came back with his hands a little wet.

“My father always taught me that if we eat, we must wash, clean, and take care of everything ourselves.”

The old man said this as he walked back to sit on the chair.

“My father taught me this way, and I taught Thara the same way. So… no matter what Thara has done, please, I don’t want to get involved.”

“Please let me talk,”

Issara said.

“It was very hard for me to find the day when you came back from Russia.” Kanes let out a loud sigh. He was tired of hearing about his son’s troubles.

“I already left everything in Thailand for Thara to handle. I don’t want to listen anymore. The business in Russia is already stressful enough. I don’t want to deal with small businesses in Thailand anymore.”

Issara shook her head slightly. What she wanted to tell him was much bigger than anything before.

"Tara is about to go to jail."

What Issara said made Kanes’ eyes widen slightly.

"Keep talking."

Issara sighed in relief. She lifted a large bag onto the table, opened it, and handed a photo of Tara to him.

"Tara went back to continue your business. He used old connections to create fake evidence and meddle in various cases."

Kanes slammed the table hard. His face couldn’t hide the boiling anger inside.

"It took me two years to pull myself out, but even that was too late. Now, I have cases on my record that force me to live in hiding. I can’t even return to my homeland easily. I explicitly ordered him to stay away from this business, why did bastard went back to this path!"

Issara had to endure listening to Kanes rant about his son for quite a while. "Issara, thank you for bringing this matter to me."

"...."

"But I don’t believe you came all the way to this remote island just to tell me this, right?"

It was as if Issara had been waiting for these words for a long time. She nodded and smiled slightly before words began pouring out.

In front of the young woman was a task board. She frowned and stared at it for a long time. The stress and worry made her let out a sigh of exhaustion. The board was covered with sticky notes with messages like,

*“Not good enough yet,”*

*“What skills do I need to build a clothing brand?”*

*“Should I pursue a Master’s degree?”*

*A*nd many other notes expressing the concerns weighing on her mind.

After staring at the board with a tense expression for a long time, in the end, Maanfan picked up a pen and wrote another note, sticking it onto the board: "Win this, for Issara."

At that moment, a slender hand suddenly reached past Maanfan and pulled the note off the board. The young woman turned to look at the person who had invaded her workspace, her eyes widening in shock.

"When did you get here, Khun Issara? You didn’t even knock!"

"I did call out, but no one answered, and the door was open,"

Issara replied with a smile, shrugging lightly.

"Can I have my note back?"

Maanfan held out her hand, like a child asking for something from an adult. "I think I’ll keep it,"

Issara said.

Not only did she not return the note, but Issara also tucked it into her suit pocket.

"So, where have you been all these days, Khun Issara?"

When she didn’t get what she wanted, the younger woman decided to ask what had been on her mind instead. Hearing the question, Issara smirked slyly and leaned in closer.

**“It’s a secret.”**

The tall figure said this while winking at Maanfan, making the smaller woman blush and unable to ask anything further.

“Are you very stressed? Feeling pressured, aren’t you?”

Issara changed the subject.

“Not really,”

Maanfan replied.

“Liar.”

It was obvious she was lying. Issara playfully knocked Maanfan’s head lightly with affection.

“Don’t stress out. Just grow slowly. Building a big brand isn’t easy.”

After knocking her head, Issara comforted her while gently patting her head.

“That’s not good! I won’t let you marry Thara!”

Maanfan's serious words and expression made Issara chuckle softly.

“Do you have to be this jealous?”

“I won’t accept it either,”

Issara replied with a smile.

“That's why I have to try harder. I won’t let you down,”

Maanfan said earnestly.

The boss smiled faintly.

“I only hope for your happiness.”

Suddenly, Maanfah couldn’t help but recall the other day when she had dressed up nicely to impress Issara. But she found only emptiness in the room.

“That night you told me to come to your room, but you weren’t there. Should I go again tonight?”

Maanfan spoke shyly, twisting and turning in her seat with embarrassment. Issara’s gaze slowly, a subtle smile appeared on her lips before she deliberately replied in a slow, teasing tone.

"You little perverted. Just focus on your work. I have business to take care of tonight,"

Issara said, flicking Maanfan's forehead lightly before walking out of the room with an amused smile causing Maanfah collapsed to the floor in disappointment. "I'm mad at you, Issara!"

***Such a tease….***

Maanfah grumbled to herself, slumping back into her chair after Issara flicked her forehead and said,

*"I'm not free tonight, I have business,"*

Subtly cutting her hopes and sending her home to sleep.

It felt no different from dangling her favorite treat in front of her and snatching it away. So unfair!

"Just wait and see. Next time if you call me to your room, I'll abandoned."

Maanfan mumbled to herself, firmly vowing to act like a rebellious kitten for a change.

However, at that moment, the memory of the alluring perfume on that seductive figure and those fiery eyes calling her back flashed in her mind.

*‘Good girl...’*

Her pale cheeks flushed a soft pink, looking adorably flustered. Her small mouth hung open, unable to finish her sentence.

"I’ll just…"

*What else could I do beside being a good girl and obediently follow?*

After grumbling and sulking for quite some time, Maanfan refocused herself. Her beautiful eyes landed on the empty space on the board where the sticky note had been taken by someone else. A small smile tugged at her lips.

It didn’t matter who had that sticky note now because she had already set her goal—to win, for Issara.

Maanfan piled up blank papers and several business books on the table. The fact that the competition had reached nearly halfway, and the secondquarter performance seemed to be heading towards another loss, pushed the petite figure to work several times harder.

It wasn’t just about designing new clothing styles but also developing marketing strategies, promoting the brand to gain customer loyalty, clarifying the brand’s identity, and even proposing suitable Brand Ambassadors or Presenters.

The tip of the pencil in her hand tapped rhythmically on the paper without her realizing it. Her delicate eyebrows furrowed deeply.

Sometimes there was just too much to do, everything felt urgent, and she couldn’t prioritize properly.

***Knock, knock, knock.***

While she was lost in thought, the sound of knocking on the door echoed. Her beautiful eyes glanced at the clock, slightly surprised that it was already late, yet someone was still at the factory.

“Come in... Dad?”

Her sweet voice rose in pitch at the end.

Ekkachai smiled as he carried a tray filled with warm milk and snacks.

"I saw that it’s late, and you’re still working, so I brought you some snacks.

Also, there’s something I want to talk to you about."

Maanfan nodded, setting aside her work and taking the tray to place it on the coffee table in another corner of the room.

"You could’ve just called me. Why did you have to get up?"

She muttered while eating the snacks, feeling strangely refreshed. Her father didn’t say much, only giving her a faint smile.

"You’re busy with work, and I’ve been feeling much better lately,"

The recovering man said, glancing at her desk, which was filled with neatly written papers.

He had seen a similar sight years ago. Maanfan often sat doing her homework or reading late into the night. It was the same now, except this time, she was working, carrying a heavy burden on her small shoulders instead.

"You’ve grown up so much. You’re not the little girl you were before,"

His deep voice broke the silence, making Maanfan, who was sipping her milk, raise her eyebrows in surprise. "I've already grown up for years now,"

Maanfan said.

Ekkachai chuckled softly and patted his daughter's head before pointing to his heart.

"Not on the outside, it's in the inside."

Maanfan smiled shyly.

"What’s gotten into you, Dad? Anyway, why did you come to see me?"

When the young woman brought up the topic, Ekkachai’s expression turned serious. The atmosphere in the room wasn’t as heavy as a meeting room but no longer as lighthearted as before.

"It’s about the case... Your boss’s lawyer suggested filing an appeal for now and holding off on paying the copyright infringement fine."

"Huh?"

Maanfan looked puzzled, not understanding what the lawyer, or rather, Issara, was planning.

"I don’t know either. That’s just their advice. I also think we should follow

it,"

Ekkachai said.

"But if we appeal, we might end up paying an even bigger fine,"

Maanfan replied.

"Dad thinks the same, but... I think we should trust your boss’s lawyer." Hearing her father say that, Maanfan fell silent.

Her little mind tried to find reasons to argue, but in the end, her feelings told her one thing:

***She trusted Khun Issara.***

"Alright, let’s do it that way,"

She replied softly, letting out a small protest when her father reached out to ruffle her hair.

"Go to bed, Maanfan. You can continue tomorrow,"

Ekkachai said.

"But I haven’t finished my work yet," s

She replied.

"If you can’t think of anything, just sleep. Your brain needs rest,"

Ekkachai insisted gently but firmly. In the end, Maanfah packed up her things and went to take a shower and sleep, as her father had ordered.

"Goodnight,"

She said, giving her father a light kiss on the cheek.

"Goodnight, my dear,"

Ekkachai replied.

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It's almost 10 p.m., but the shop along the road are still full of light.

The tall figures of Ophas and Kitti were walking along the sidewalk. Their destination a bar that was said to serve strong drinks and, according to insider info, was absolutely worth visiting.

A bar that plays anime songs? Just the thought of it was thrilling.

“The factory Maanfan recommended really does good work,”

Ophas remarked as they turned into a dim alleyway, leaving the main road behind and entering a narrow street lined with entertainment venues.

The nightlife atmosphere energized the two men, and they quickened their pace.

“I agree. Their work is so precise it’s hard to believe it used to be a factory for imitations,”

Kitti nodded, looking like a cheerful cartoon banana character from a morning show who always agreed with his partner.

“Exactly, because they made imitations, they had to make them look as real as possible. That’s why their craftsmanship is so good.”

“Their work is really impressive... so good it’s surprising they don’t just start their own brand.”

Ophas suddenly stopped walking, making Kitti turn to him with a puzzled expression.

“What’s wrong, man?”

“Have you never followed the economic news in our country? The local economy is terrible. And that’s not even considering the sales figures for new brands, which aren’t high enough to sustain a factory.”

“True, you’re right. But why stop walking just to explain that?”

Kitti repeated his question, annoyed because he was eager to get to the bar already.

“I know, I know!” Ophas replied.

Unfortunately, Ophas didn’t hear him anymore. His sharp eyes were fixed on the slender, familiar figure

disappearing into one of the bars. His brows furrowed, as though unsure about what he had just seen. Is that...

“Hey! Where are you going? The bar we booked is this way!”

“Go ahead without me,”

Ophas cut him off and walked into a different bar, leaving Kitti confused.

“What is it?”

Little did Kitti know that his friend was following a woman.

Her usually sharp, striking face now looked surprisingly soft and delicate, perhaps because she wasn’t wearing bold makeup—or maybe she was unwell. Her pale skin revealed faint bruises that peeked through the modest cardigan she wore.

The same went for the injury on her ankle, visible under her flowing long skirt, which made her look more like someone heading to a flower garden than a bar.

Ophas was puzzled but, after some thought, concluded that she must have been trying to cover up the marks left from being hurt.

“Bourbon, neat,”

The sweet voice ordered, followed immediately by a deep voice that seemed to deliberately follow her lead.

“I’ll have the same as the lady here,”

He said while quickly settling onto the chair beside her. Iris raised an eyebrow when she saw it was someone she knew well. But since he pretended to look away, the woman couldn’t be bothered to pay attention.

“Here you go,”

The bartender said, handing drinks to both of them. The amber liquid in the glasses gleamed under the lights.

Music played softly in the background as the slender lips met the glass, downing it all in one go.

Drinking so fast? No savoring the taste at all, Ophas thought to himself before taking a sip and grimaced.

*'Really strong.'*

“Another glass of the same, please,”

Iris requested.

*Damn it...*

Opas hurriedly finished his own drink in one go and ordered the same again.

"Me too," Ophas said.

“Are you trying to have a drinking competition with me?”

Iris finally started the conversation, resting her chin on her hand and looking at the taller man with sparkling, challenging eyes.

“Not.... Oh, Iris, is that you?”

Ophas feigned surprise and gave her a friendly smile.

She laughed, her voice bright and clear.

“Not convincing at all. Go practice and try again.”

“Aw, what a shame.”

“Here you go,”

The bartender interrupted before stepping away. The two exchanged glances, as if the easygoing atmosphere from moments ago had blown away with the wind.

Iris took her glass and sipped slowly this time, no longer downing it in one go. Opas did the same.

The two let the silence linger between them, accompanied by the music and the occasional rhythm of people getting up to dance.

By now, that useless friend of mine is probably cursing me out non-stop... Ophas thought to himself, having followed a woman in here. He silently prayed that Kitti wouldn’t be so mad that he’d lose temper.

“Thank you for taking me to the hospital that day,”

Iris said softly, breaking his train of thought. The words made him shake his head, his gaze softening noticeably.

“Are you okay now?”

“No,” she replied.

“Are you hurt?”

“It's just there's no one to take care of me,”

She said while pointing at her chest under the cardigan. The comment made Ophas, who had been considering dragging her to the hospital again, abandon the idea and order another drink instead.

Not worried at all...

The clear, bright laughter rang out again before her beautiful eyes dimmed slightly.

“Why do you care so much about me?”

She asked softly.

“A normal person would take someone who fainted to the hospital.”

Ophas replied casually.

“That’s not what I mean,”

Iris cut him off, locking eyes with the man who always seemed to go with the flow.

“I’m talking about how you instructed the doctor to take care of me and even covered the medical bills, claiming it was under accident insurance coverage.”

“Ohhhhhhh,”

Ophas drawled out dramatically.

“???”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,”

He said, feigning complete innocence, his expression deadpan as if to say:

*What are you talking about? I know nothing.*

***Crack***

Iris could almost hear the sound of her own composure shattering. By the time she managed to piece herself back together, the man had already crossed his legs and was sipping his drink casually, even raising his glass in a playful toast.

In the end, she fell silent again, letting the music and the taste of alcohol fill the space between them.

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Meanwhile...

In a luxurious, high-end condo, a group of people with exclusive invitations were enjoying a lively night party, complete with glamorous pretty ladies and some illegal activities.

The party was being held on one of the condo's floors—a private floor belonging to Thara. With the added advantage of soundproofing, no matter how loud he and his friends got while doing "whatever," no one outside would ever hear a thing.

"Oh my, don’t play like that~"

A woman’s voice chimed flirtatiously.

One of the guards glanced at his boss, who was laughing and joking with several women. Then his eyes shifted to another group injecting some kind of substance into their bodies. It was a sight he had grown used to. Although it had scared him at first, now he barely reacted.

“How much longer until this ends?”

He signaled with his eyes to his fellow guard, who immediately shook his head in response.

“Until morning, for sure.”

The man let out a quiet, resigned sigh.

“Again? Seriously...”

Suddenly, the elevator doors open.

Three large men in black suits stood in formation, shielding someone behind them. They all appeared ready to step out of the elevator.

The two guards instinctively moved to block their way and asked politely,

“Do you have an invitation card?”

The newcomers remained silent, giving no response.

“If not, we’ll have to ask you to leave,”

One of the guards added firmly.

The other guards in the room moved in to back up their colleagues, ready to draw their guns if things went south. The black pistols were prepared to fire at any moment.

The tension in the room rose quickly, but just as it seemed the situation might escalate, it all dissolved when someone stepped forward.

Though his age had advanced significantly, the imposing presence of this man had not diminished in the slightest.

His authoritative eyes swept over the party as he spoke in a cold, measured tone.

**“It’s me.”**

Just like that, the bodyguards, who had been blocking his way just moments ago, bowed their heads and stepped aside without a word of protest.

Even though they were Thara’s subordinates, this man was an exception.

With just a glance from him, the subordinates scattered across the room. One moved to the light controls, another to the sound system, while the last one remained by his side to protect him.

In the blink of an eye, the party was brought to a halt.

The abrupt brightness of the lights irritated Thara. He didn’t release the slender waist in his arms but instead turned to face the intruder who had interrupted his evening.

But he was left gaping in disbelief when he realized that the person who had crashed the party was…

“D-Dad!?”

**It was Kanes, his own father.**

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Ophas blinked once…

Still in shock, unable to process what was happening.

He blinked twice…

The heaviness in his head started to feel like a hangover.

He blinked a third time…

**Oh no… This isn’t even my place!**

Ophas was trying to piece together his scattered thoughts, which felt as disorganized as drifting clouds, before they started to form a blurry picture.

He remembered drinking with Iris at the bar last night. But why was he here, at this hotel? And—he glanced at his naked body under the blanket.

*Naked?*

The only thing covering him was the blanket shielding his skin from the cold air. Even so, it didn’t answer how he ended up here or who had brought him.

If this were a Japanese manga, Ophas would be the character with a giant question mark plastered on his forehead.

While he was still stuck in confusion, the bathroom door suddenly opened, making him flinch. Instinctively, he pretended to be asleep.

But… curiosity got the better of him. Just a quick peek wouldn’t hurt, right?

He cracked one eye open, just a little, to see who it was.

The slender figure was wrapped loosely in a towel, so precariously it seemed ready to slip at any moment.

Her wavy hair cascaded down her back, and her sweet face looked far brighter than it had the day before.

**Iris!?**

Ophas squeezed his eyes shut in panic, his heart pounding louder than when he had first seen Kumichan. Her bare shoulders seemed to trigger some faint, hazy memories.

*"Ah, harder… Ah, right there… Ah…"*

The vivid images of last night’s passionate activities flooded back as if summoned on demand. His face flushed bright red before turning pale in embarrassment, overwhelmed by a chaotic mix of emotions, leaving him utterly frozen.

He didn’t notice the subtle shift in Iris’s expression. Her previously relaxed face had lturned tense as she picked up her phone.

Her beautiful eyes showed clear displeasure, and she let out a sharp, annoyed scoff.

"Urgent meeting tomorrow? Huh! Didn't you said you wouldn't let me get involved with Dva anymore."

She threw the phone aside and sat down on the chair, feeling annoyed.

"Well..."

Ophas (who had prepared himself for this moment) slowly lifted his head from the blanket and slightly shivered when he made eye contact with the other person.

"Ah, you're awake."

"I-I will take responsibility!"

Ophas quickly interrupted, wanting to bow to her but stopped because he had no clothes on. He just lowered his head quietly, feeling nervous and thinking about the harsh lesson he had learned.

"Be a man. If you do something, you have to take responsibility. If you were with a woman and you pretend nothing happened, you will be in big trouble!"

Iris raised an eyebrow and touched her lips with her finger, thinking carefully.

"Take responsibility?"

The young man nodded.

"Ah! The room charge."

"!?!?"

Ophas froze while the woman laughed loudly.

"I’m out now. If you don’t want me to leave, can we split it?"

*S-split!*

Ophas stood with his mouth open, his confused look making Iris feel like something was wrong.

"Did I misunderstand?"

"Yes, you did!"

"Then what are you taking responsibility for?"

Iris moved to sit at the edge of the bed, crossing her arms and waiting to listen carefully.

"Well... um... last night... I... I owe you..."

Ophas answered hesitantly, raising his hand to apologize. He looked up, hoping to see some sign of anger.

But no. Iris just smiled.

A smile as if she was amused by something.

Oh... he misunderstood so much.

"Let me take responsibility, please."

"No need."

“...”

Her alluring body moved closer to his, wrapping her slender arms loosely around his neck. One hand tugged at the towel knot, leaving both of them nearly naked.

"!?!?"

Ophas was so shocked that his face turned bright red, while Iris’s eyes sparkled as she whispered softly in his ear.

"Think carefully... who really held and pressed whom?"

"Whoever held and pressed, should."

*Eh...wait a minute.*

Opas froze, as if the sounds from last night's events suddenly replayed in his head.

*"Ah... harder...*

*Ah... there...*

*Mmm... faster... Iris...*

*Na...*

*Nani!!!!! (What!!!!)"*

The young man's face turned pale, ot was even paler than when he realized he had unintentionally had sex with Iris.

*Nani Nani Nani Nani! Why does the image in his head show him lying below her, just lying there?!?*

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"Do you remember now?"

The sweet voice asked cheerfully.

Ophas didn't answer. He felt like something was wrong. He couldn't have been the one who was pressed down, no, it couldn't be!

*Not meeee...*

His face, looking as if he were about to cry and pitying himself, made the person above him amused. Her slender fingers traced his face, like a hunter playing with its prey before the kill.

"Looks like you don't remember, huh?"

“...”

"But it’s okay."

Her thin lips quickly moved in for a kiss.

"Because I’ll make you remember it yourself self"

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The meeting room in the morning was filled with tension.

It was a meeting after the sales summary and performance review for the second quarter, where

Araya’s brand was still behind Dva.

Despite that, the major investor in the project sat back, casually reading the brand's profit report without a care, unlike the team, who had tense faces, especially Maanfan.

She had to dig her nails into her skirt instead of using her palms, afraid someone else might see it later.

"This time, we still can't make more profit than Dva,"

The sweet voice spoke up for the first time, making everyone in the meeting stiffen.

However, what Issara did next was gently clap her hands.

"But the profit is much better than the first quarter. Thank you to everyone on the team for working so hard,"

She said.

The employees looked at each other and clapped. It was unavoidable to follow the person with the highest authority.

But no one clapped from the heart, especially Maanfan.

She felt like she hadn’t tried hard enough.

If she had tried more, maybe Araya's brand could have beaten Dva.

"I don’t want everyone to focus on the competition results because it’s not everything."

"..."

"What we should focus on is the long-term brand development plan. We don’t aim to invest in businesses that are short-term, like opening a store for just one year. Araya’s brand needs to grow, no matter what the competition results are."

Issara paused. She made eye contact with the meeting participants and gave a slight smile.

"But I still expect the concept for the brand campaign at the next meeting. Thank you for your hard work,"

She said.

Those words were like the closing sentence of the meeting, almost like saying "You’re dismissed" in a polite version.

Many employees sighed with relief, happy they weren’t being punished or criticized. But they all understood that Issara was expecting something more than just the competition results.

If by then they still hadn’t achieved it... they didn’t know what their fate would be either.

They could only exchange nervous glances before scattering to work. At least they had to start with a good promotional campaign or event first.

"Maanfan,"

The boss called out, addressing the last person who hadn’t left the meeting room.

"..."

"What's wrong? You haven’t said anything today."

"I'm trying to find a way to win,"

Maanfan replied in a tense voice, then snapped when she saw Issara shake her head with a smile.

"Why didn’t you tell everyone to focus on the competition results? You can’t just tell us to focus on the long-term plan."

"Have you been sleeping well?"

The older woman asked and lifted her cute face to look at her, frowning unhappily when she saw the dark circles under Maanfan’s eyes, which even concealer couldn’t cover up.

"Answer me, Maanfan."

Here we go again, back in boss mode... Maanfan thought as she answered quickly.

"Yes, I slept."

"How many hours?"

"Eight—ow, hey! (That hurts!)"

The smaller woman protested when Issara reached out and pinched her cheek, even squeezing it like she was pressing a soft mochi ball.

"Your lie isn’t convincing. Answer me again. How many hours?"

“...”

**"Nong-Maan-Fan,"**

Issara emphasized the name.

"Okay, okay... Three, three,"

Maanfan raised the white flag in surrender, rubbing her cheek that had been pinched.

Issara shrugged, but in the next moment, she licked her lips, lowering the volume of her voice until only the two of them could hear.

"But a liar must be punished."

"!?!?"

*Wait, it's not a big lie!*

Maanfan was about to protest when the next sentence made her immediately shut her mouth. "Tonight, come to my room,"

Issara said.

The listener nodded rapidly, without objection, without a sound. This behavior made Issara flick her forehead out of annoyance.

"Ow! That hurts, Khun Issara!"

"You little pervert. I have something to discuss with you. Now go back to work."

Being dismissed, Maanfan reluctantly stood up, but her eyes sparkled with excitement.

*When she heard "talk," she thought... this means using the body to talk.*

Chapter 12: The Wounds

**Iris thought that maybe she had misheard.**

"...What?"

"Mr. Thara has given you full control over everything related to Dva,"

The deep voice repeated. He was Thara's personal lawyer, who had arranged to meet with the woman at a coffee shop.

Of course, they chose to use a private room.

He just gave away Dva like that? Is he out of his mind? Iris narrowed her eyes, deep in thought.

After that scumbag sent her a message last night, his lawyer requested a meeting almost immediately. She wanted to refuse, of course, but she knew that with just a little effort, the other party could destroy her and her family in the blink of an eye.

It was really frustrating to think about.

"Is there a reason Mr. Thara changed his mind?"

"That is Mr. Thara's personal reason,"

The lawyer replied with an unappealing tone, handing her several contracts to read.

Iris glanced at them briefly before asking again.

"A person like him wouldn't just give it to me without reason. What are the hidden conditions?"

"There is only one condition,"

The lawyer's fingers interlaced, his face serious as he lowered his voice to a whisper.

"You must keep the business lawsuit over the copyright violation a secret, including destroying all related documents. Act as if that issue never existed."

*Keep it a secret...?*

Iris looked upset.

Something must have happened for sure.

Her lips pressed tightly together, but she finally agreed. Her slender hand moved to sign all the contracts, including the rights to the brand, and the contract that Thara had drafted to protect her from turning on him later.

But all that wasn’t the real issue.

A look of seriousness appeared on the wickedly beautiful face for a moment.

The real big problem was having to fix the issues that Thara had caused with Dva.

Just thinking about it gave her a headache.

*Damn it.*

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That evening, Maanfan walked into the store, a place she frequented often when she had a lot on her mind. With so much stress, she decided to take a break from work and go shopping for a change.

But, well, just a quick stroll ended up with her picking up a bottle of perfume.

The slender figure laughed quietly to herself before casually browsing through some clothes for inspiration. Her eyes then landed on a lingerie store.

It was a shop decorated in black and pink tones, with everything from simple styles to incredibly daring and intimidating lingerie.

I won’t say what I bought, but let's just say she felt a little embarrassed.

"Thank you very much,"

The female staff smiled as she handed the paper bag to the blushing woman.

Maanfan quickly left the store, avoiding the lingering gaze of the staff, and decided to stop by the supermarket to buy a few ingredients for dinner.

"What would P' Araya like to eat?"

The one pretending to be a housewife began choosing the nationality of the food in her mind.

Thai food would be nice, but Western food sounds good too... Hmm, but Japanese is also a good choice...

She remembered seeing bento (boxed lunch) made by Japanese girls, and it was so cute. She’d been thinking for a while that if she ever had the chance, she’d love to try making it too.

Well, since the opportunity’s here, why not take it!

"P' Araya will definitely be so impressed with me today,"

The small figure murmured cheerfully as she made her way home. She then opened a bento tutorial video online and carefully focused on making it with great attention to detail.

And even though it was her first time, the result came out flawless, showing how much effort and care had been put into it.

If P' Araya doesn’t appreciate me tonight, I don’t know when she ever will, Maanfan chuckled to herself as she carefully closed the bento box, making sure not to squash the bearshaped rice.

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"Wow, it's this late already?"

Her beautiful eyes glanced at the pitch-black sky outside the window, and she quickly went to shower and get dressed, not forgetting to wear the lingerie she had bought and spritz some perfume that smelled like Araya’s scent.

"Not pretty at all,"

She muttered in front of the mirror while adjusting the hem of her long skirt.

"Maybe I should change."

After taking off and putting on different outfits three times, Maanfan finally settled on an oversized off- shoulder top and a matching mini skirt. She applied makeup to her sweet face, accentuating her big, cute eyes and glossy lips.

Once she was done with her makeup and outfit, Maanfan grabbed the bento box she had made and headed out to meet her boss as scheduled.

She had more time than she thought, so the woman was able to enjoy a relaxed taxi ride without worrying about the traffic. But when she arrived at the location, she realized that she forgotten that there was still time left.

Suddenly, the young woman yawned.

"Should I grab a cup of coffee?"

She muttered, then immediately remembered,

"Ugh... I’ve been shopping all day. I’m not going to have enough money this month!"

Oh well, I’ll just get coffee from the stand near Araya’s condo. It’s only twenty baht, and it’s delicious. Plus, it wakes me up. What else can I do? I don’t want to get sleepy in the middle of doing something good that's about to happen. :)

The girl yawned widely as she walked straight into the alley. She ordered an iced coffee and stood waiting for a moment.

"Here’s your coffee, miss."

"Thank you,"

She replied, taking the cup and sipping a bit. After tasting the creamy milk and hidden sugar, a small smile began to form on her face.

But then, just as she was enjoying her coffee, her peripheral vision caught a familiar figure in the distance.

"P' Araya!"

Maanfan smiled as she walked toward her. The sweetness she had just tasted suddenly felt less sweet when she realized something even “sweeter” was about to happen any second now.

But the person she called out to had no chance to reply.

Maanfan’s eyes widened when she saw a van pull up beside her boss. The van’s door opened just as Araya’s body was forcefully pulled inside!

“P' Araya!”

The small figure cried out in alarm, rushing out of the shop. But the van had already driven away without a trace, and she couldn’t even see the license plate.

Her heart pounded out of rhythm. Maanfan’s hands trembled so much that she didn’t know what to do. It was late at night, the street was deserted, and she was the only witness.

What should she do? Her mind raced, and she quickly grabbed her phone to call the police.

Ring... Ring…

"Sorry, there is no response from the number you are calling."

"What is going on!"

The sweet voice exclaimed, worried about the kidnapped person. First call, second call, third call—she tried calling so many times, but no one ever answered.

"What is this? Why isn’t anyone picking up? What should I do now…!"

At that moment, the face of the last person she could rely on appeared in her mind.

"No choice then." "*I have to call "him."*

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Opas dreamed of spreading Kumi-chan’s “culture” all over the world.

He wanted to see people listening to her songs and saying,

“Oh, sugoi!” (Awesome!), or he wanted to see many Thai cosplayers dressing up as Kumi-chan. Of course, this inspired him to promote his brand through cosplay outfits.

Even though he hoped for something like that…

“Miss Iris, you said you had something to talk about, so why—”

But he never expected to see something like this!

“What do you mean ‘Iris’…”

The alluring figure in a Kumishop brand outfit was crawling slowly towards Opas. It was unbelievable how Iris could transform herself into Kumi-chan so perfectly. Her small face suited the twin-tail hairstyle perfectly, and her eyes were made to look big and round like a Japanese girl’s.

The stunning beauty smiled sweetly and seductively.

“This is Kumi-chan.”

C-cute! So cute! Opas screamed in his mind. He didn’t need anyone to tell him that his face was heating up. By now, it was probably as red as a tomato.

“Iris,”

Ophas called softly, hoping that the sexy version of Kumi-chan would stop snuggling against his neck.

“Hmm?”

“Could you get off for a second… Ah!”

He let out a small moan when her soft hand touched his sensitive area.

“I won’t.”

“Iris!”

“Do you really want me to move away when this part is already hard?”

The sweet voice teased, gently rubbing it. Damn it, he cursed inwardly.

But before things could go any further…

The phone rang like a heavenly bell (at least for Ophas).

He looked at Iris with pleading eyes, like a puppy asking its owner for permission.

“Can I answer? Please, please, please!”

“Sure,”

The woman sighed, not saying anything else as he picked up the phone. Even so, she kept on cuddling closer.

“Hello… Maanfan?”

Hearing that name from the man she shared a bed with made Iris pause.

“I’m a bit busy. Can we talk la— Wait, what? The fierce lady got kidnapped!?”

Ophas’s voice sounded alarmed, but he quickly regained his composure.

“Yes, I’ll head there right now,”

He said, hanging up and jumping off the bed to put on his clothes. He intended to excuse himself due to the urgent situation, but when he turned around, Iris had already changed into ordinary clothes.

"You."

"Is Khun Issara got kidnapped?"

Ophas could only nod silently while the woman tied her hair into a high ponytail.

"I’m coming along."

"....."

"Hurry up and get dressed,"

She snapped, making the young man snap out of it and follow her orders immediately.

The two of them left the hotel and got into the car. Inside Iris’s mind, a warning bell kept ringing. She had a strong hunch that her troublesome lover would definitely be involved in this matter!

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Issara regained consciousness in a medium-sized room.

It had nothing more than a chair, where she was tied up, and curtains that blocked the outside view completely.

Oh, there was also an old sofa, three muscular men, and an old-fashioned clock hanging on the wall. After checking the surroundings, Issara then examined herself.

Other than a broken high heel, her clothes were not torn. This showed that she had probably been captured and brought straight here, without anyone touching her.

Even so, what made Issara angry was the throbbing pain in her head from being hit hard on the back of her neck, likely to make her faint.

Don’t they know how to use sleeping gas or something? Stupid idiots, she cursed in her mind. The old clock kept ticking: *“tick-tock, tick-tock.”*

She had been awake for half an hour, but no one paid her any attention.

“So, why did you kidnap me? Isn’t anyone going to talk to me?”

Issara’s voice clearly showed how annoyed she was.

Being captured and hurt was bad enough. Another issue was that by now, who knew how upset Maanfan would be.

She vaguely remembered that when she was dragged into the van, she heard Maanfan calling. Yes, she was sure she heard it.

*Would that kid be freaking out too much?*

It was strange that she could stay this calm. Still, Issara wasn’t surprised that she wasn’t too nervous. The way those three men treated her—barely touching her—made it easy to guess that they were hired by someone.

And that meant there was someone giving the orders behind the scenes.

After all, since starting her business, it wasn’t as if Issara had never stepped on anyone’s toes before.

The young woman tried to piece together her thoughts. Who hated her so much that they would pay to have her kidnapped? But just then, a familiar voice she never expected to hear spoke up from in front of her.

“Already annoyed, Issara?”

The deep, familiar voice called out. Thara and his men entered, his face showing something different from his tone. He was angry. Very angry. So angry he wanted to strangle the woman before him to death.

***Thud!***

The young man tossed something about an inch thick onto the floor, then gave a cold order,

“Take your money and get lost.”

The muscular men who had been in the room since the beginning looked at each other with displeasure. But in the end, they quickly bent down to pick up the items and left the room.

All of his actions were in Issara’s sight. It made her even more disgusted with the fiancé her father had forced on her.

"Are you crazy for daring to kidnap me?"

She asked coldly.

Yes, is he insane or what? Does Thara not know how to act at a time like this, especially since she and his father have already made an agreement?

Thara laughed softly at first, then gradually louder, until it echoed throughout the room.

"Again!"

A large hand gripped the jaw of the kidnapped woman tightly.

"Don’t think I don’t know. Sit properly. You went and told my father about me!"

*Oh… so that’s it.*

Even though he shouted at her, once Issara understood the reason, she tilted her head up as if challenging him.

"Because of you, the business I worked so hard was completely dismissed by my father! And now

I’m being forced to move to Russia!"

"So what?"

Her calm demeanor made the young man’s hands tremble. Her eyes seemed to ask him,

*"What can you possibly do to me?"*

"You’re so scared of losing the race for the chairman’s seat that you ran to tell my father?"

"No."

Issara cut him off.

A stupid chairman’s position?

Someone like Issara could create something like that herself if she wanted to.

She looked at Thara with such disgust. Her gaze treated him like a worthless little mouse.

No, even mice serve a purpose in the ecosystem, while this idiot in front of her was useless to environment.

A worthless piece of trash that deserves to be burned.

The corners of her mouth lifted slightly, as if mocking him, while she spoke clearly:

**"I’m just making sure I won’t have a shitty husband like you."**

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***Smack!***

Issara’s sentence ended exactly when a sharp pain struck her cheek. It was followed by a painful yank on her hair, her scalp stinging.

"Don’t think that just because I didn’t get the chairman’s seat, I won’t be your husband!"

Thara shouted furiously, his eyes wide with madness.

On the contrary, the victim didn’t cry out. She stared at him with pity, which only intensified the man’s rage. He slammed her head hard against the wall.

***Thud!***

She felt something warm and liquid flowing down her forehead…

But the pain didn’t end there.

Her stomach was punched, her cheek slapped until it was bruised, and the taste of blood filled her mouth.

The disgusting cruelty of Thara was not beyond her expectations. Issara pressed her lips tightly together. Over her dead body would she scream.

“Think you’re so tough, you worthless woman!”

***Whack!***

The quieter she remained, the more berserk he became. Issara was kicked until tears flowed, but her stubborn pride kept her from making a sound, other than the noises of her body being beaten.

***Thud!***

“If it weren’t for you!”

***Thud!***

"If it weren’t for you, my father wouldn’t have shut down my business!"

***Crack!***

The pain spread through her body, worse than anything she’d ever experienced. The woman wasn’t sure if her bones had broken from the kicks, but her chest hurt so badly it was difficult to breathe.

By the time Thara grew tired and almost passed out.

"You guys, get out,"

The young man ordered, panting heavily. Tara looked at Issara’s battered state with satisfaction.

Now only the final step remained…

The tall figure stepped closer to the sharp-tongued woman, then tore off her expensive shirt. The sight before him was so provoking that it made him whistle softly.

"So, even though you don’t want to get married, you still dressed up to seduce me."

It was pale skin contrasting with black, sexy lace underwear.

The victim closed her eyes tightly, not responding.

"Then I’ll just help myself, ha ha!"

Thara’s laughter echoed through the room, making her feel so disgusted she wanted to vomit.

There wasn’t even the slightest positive feeling about this.

On the contrary, it made her think that perhaps dying would be better than being raped.

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***Take it… Take it.... Take it.***

"Why won’t anyone answer? Is there nobody working right now?"

Maanfan muttered anxiously. She paced back and forth, trying to call the police several times, but couldn’t reach them. If she was any later, who knew what might happen to Araya.

Her beautiful eyes looked into the darkness where Araya had been taken, and she gripped her phone tightly.

"You have to be okay..."

Suddenly, a beam of light passed over her body. The sound of an engine stopped, and help arrived.

"Maanfan!"

Ophas rushed out of the taxi. Next to him stood a woman Maanfan never thought she would see.

She froze for a moment, staring at the slim figure in disbelief.

It really was Iris… and she was dressed in Kumi-chan’s Kumishop outfit.

What happened here?

The person being stared at turned away, trying to avoid eye contact.

Ophas had no idea what issues these two might have had before, and since he was more worried about the tough older sister (Araya), he didn’t notice their awkward behavior at all.

“What happened?”

Maanfan jumped slightly.

*Right, she needed to focus on Araya first.*

“Issara was taken right here. I’ve been trying to call the police, but I can’t get through.”

“Did you see the criminals’ faces or the license plate?”

The small figure shook her head firmly.

“I couldn’t see anything. They wore face coverings, and it was so dark that I couldn’t catch the license plate. I only remember it was an old black Toyota.”

Ophas glanced around at the surrounding darkness, understanding why she couldn’t see.

“Did you see which way the car went?”

“That way,”

Maanfan answered confidently, pointing to a road stretching into the darkness.

“And then it turned at the shoe repair shop.”

“Okay, at least we know the direction,”

Opas said as he took out his phone to call someone. Maanfan looked curious.

“Who are you calling?”

“Shh…”

He put a finger to his lips, indicating she should keep quiet.

Soon, someone answered on the other end.

“Hello, Mr. Asiwa? It’s Ophas. Sorry to bother you, but I have an urgent matter… Thank you. My sister has been kidnapped. Please send your men to help. I’ll send you the location… Someone here remembers a few details. Yes, thank you.”

Ophas lowered his phone and spoke to Maanfan in a soothing voice.

“The police will be here soon.” The small figure froze.

*Who’s coming? The police?*

“You called the police and they picked up!?”

*Did I dial the wrong number before…?*

“No, I called my father’s friend. He’s a police officer in this area.”

“I’ve been calling for so long and got no answer. You call once and the police are on their way,”

The young woman complained. Ophas let out a dry laugh.

“Now all we can do is wait,”

He said, then turned to look at the woman who had remained silent the entire time.

"You okay?"

Iris shook her head, hesitating whether to speak up or not. But when she met Maanfan’s eyes, she finally decided to say it.

“Today, Thara’s behavior was very strange. I’ve suspected since this morning that something might be going on… Could it be possible that he’s behind this?”

Opas fell silent in thought.

Thara… just a fiancé to his big sister, and Ophas wasn’t personally close to the guy.

“What’s his motive?”

“The chairman’s position,”

Maanfan answered right away, with Iris backing her up.

“That’s a good reason.”

The young man thought more deeply.

Kidnapping someone over a chairman’s seat… but it could be possible. After all, he had once beaten Iris nearly to death.

"Then I’ll try calling him."

But before he could dial, Maanfan’s soft hand grabbed his phone. She shook her small head, disagreeing.

"If Thara really did this, calling him would be like warning the snake that we’re onto it."

That's true…

Ophas agree, and then he was left speechless by her next idea.

"Instead of calling, let’s just go straight to Thara’s condo."

"…"

Iris sighed at Maanfan’s sudden impatience.

"If I were Tara, I wouldn’t bring Issara to my own condo. That would be too easy."

“...”

*"Then where would they be?"*

Maanfan asked herself.

A deserted place? There could be hundreds of such spots around. And if it’s not around here but in another province?

"Right, did anyone ever share their location with Issara?"

Ophas asked the group, only to feel downhearted when he realized that even he, her own brother, had never shared locations, so there was no chance these two had.

Maanfan’s eyes lit up. She remembered that in the Cakein app, which she used to buy Araya’s services, there was a feature!

"If the location is exact, it's not possible but at least it shows the distance,"

The young woman said, quickly opening the app.

"Khun Issara is definitely within a 9-kilometer radius."

"But that’s still too big of an area. We need more clues,"

Ophas said, contradicting Iris, who had started to analyze the given information.

*9 kilometers… 9 kilometers…*

"Eh?"

Maanfan’s small exclamation drew the attention of both of them.

"What’s going on?"

"If it’s just 9 kilometers… I think I know where Issara is."

And if she really was there, then the one responsible could only be Thara!

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"Right here."

In front of the three stood a medium-sized condo, neither luxurious nor shabby. In fact, it was a place Thara often visited sometimes.

The reason he came here was to see Iris, since this was her old condo from her student days.

"This way."

Iris guided everyone forward because she was familiar with the area. Maanfan frowned the whole way as they stood in the first-floor hallway, waiting for the elevator.

Very familiar, like I had been here before.

“You came here once to pick up something, a long time ago,”

Iris said, as if sensing her thoughts. The small figure jumped slightly before turning her head away, pressing her lips together.

Ophas looked at the two women, feeling the tense atmosphere, and decided to change the subject.

“Where are we going?”

“My old room,”

Iris said. She pressed the button for the top floor and leaned comfortably against the elevator’s railing.

Maanfan, on the other hand, stood waiting right by the door, ready to rush out the moment it opened.

“It’s still hard to believe… would Thara really dare go this far?”

Ophas muttered.

“From what I know, it’s very possible. He’s kind of a creep. I’m also worried that if he has weapons or guards, we’ll be in big trouble,” Iris said.

Hearing that, the young man began to think hard.

They came empty-handed without waiting for the police, and they didn’t have any weapons...

If Tara went crazy, they would need to find something else to use.

A chubby finger picked up a phone and sent a message to someone. At the same time, the elevator door opened, and Maanfan rushed out with Iris.

She was so anxious that she didn’t notice Ophas splitting off in another direction, holding the phone to his ear.

“P’Araya!”

The young woman shouted loudly. Finding the room where Issara had taken someone wasn’t difficult because there was only one room with two guards standing in front, just as expected.

“She’s not available to meet,”

Said one of the fierce-looking bodyguards, stepping forward to block them. Maanfan tried to push her way in but was easily shoved back.

"Step aside for us. I’m Iris, the caretaker of Dva, if you remember,"

Iris began to negotiate. She was someone familiar to these guards.

Their expressions showed that they recognized Iris, but they still shook their heads.

"I'm sorry, Miss Iris. You really can't go in."

“What? I just said—”

*“Tell that damn son of bitch to come out and talk to me right now!”*

The angry voice made all four people flinch instantly.

Maanfan turned to see Ophas holding his phone.

The two guards exchanged uneasy glances. The recent incident of someone crashing a party was still fresh in their minds.

*They were certain that the voice belonged to Mr. Kanes, Thara’s father.*

Without hesitation, they stepped aside.

"Please, go ahead."

Without waiting for them to finish speaking, Maanfan used her small frame to slip under the guards’ arms, pushing the door open and rushing inside.

The smell of blood immediately made her heart sink.

“Khun Issara...”

The sight before her made her beautiful eyes widen in shock.

It was the battered body of a woman. Her face was covered in wounds, both eyes bruised and dark purple from severe blood clots, looking horrifying. She was not wearing clothes; the only thing on her body was a torn black lace bra clinging loosely to her pale skin, which was marked with bruises from abuse. There were also bite marks and hickeys.

Standing in front of her was Thara, completely naked, his body ready for sex.

“Khun Issara!”

Maanfan screamed angrily.

She had never lost control like this before. The young woman rammed at Thara with full force, slamming into him so hard that he fell to the floor, partly hurt, but mostly stunned by the sudden appearance of an outsider.

Maanfan didn’t wait for him to get ready. Her overwhelming anger drove her to do something she had never done before.

***Thud!***

“Aaarrghhh!”

She stomped on the man’s private parts with full force.

Thara curled up in agony, his face turning shades of green and purple. His mouth hung open as he stared at Maanfan, who was now storming toward Issara with a look of pure rage.

Was Maanfan satisfied? No. She wanted to cut it off completely.

But she reminded herself that punishment was the responsibility of the law. Her sense of reason told her to hold back and consider her actions as selfdefense.

“Khun Issara...Khun Issara,”

She called softly, gently patting the face of the injured person to wake her up.

The weak, helpless gaze she saw, something she had never witnessed from her before, filled Maanfan with guilt.

If she had arrived just a little earlier… maybe Issara wouldn’t have been beaten.

“It’s okay now. I’m here,”

Maanfan murmured softly, trying to unlock the handcuffs that had cut into Issara’s delicate wrists, leaving trails of blood.

“You filthy whore!”

Thara growled through clenched teeth, struggling to stand. The veins on his temples bulged, and his eyes widened like someone who had lost his mind.

Maanfan flinched, her hands moving faster.

***Thud! Thud! Thud!***

The young man staggered toward them. At that moment, Ophas stepped in to block him, pressing the speakerphone button on his phone.

“You worthless son! I told you to get to Russia so I could clean up the mess you made! And now you dare to do this to Issara too?”

But even the furious voice on the phone couldn’t stop Thara.

The young man’s face turned pale for a brief moment before twisting into anger once again.

***Crash!***

Ophas was slapped so hard he fell to the side, his phone flying across the room, emitting static noises intermittently.

Maanfan still couldn’t unlock the handcuffs. She shut her eyes tightly, pulling Issara’s battered body close, determined to shield him with her own body from further violence. Her soft voice murmured over and over,

“You’ll be okay now. I’m here. I’ll protect you.”

“Go die, you idiots!”

Thara screamed, raising his fist, intending to strike Maanfan’s small head hard enough to cause a brain hemorrhage.

But suddenly, a shadow appeared behind Thara, eyes filled with rage.

***Whack!!***

The sound of a wooden object striking his head echoed loudly, but Maanfan didn’t feel any pain.

“Huh?”

When she open her eyes, she saw Iris standing there with a baseball bat with blood-stained .

The woman’s expression was filled with satisfaction as she laughed coldly.

“Well, how does it feel to get hit by the same baseball bat you used to smash my face?”

Her heeled shoe slammed down onto Thara’s broad shoulder with a loud thud!, grinding into it, causing a deep groan of pain to escape from him.

The sound brought a sharp, victorious smile to Iris’s strikingly beautiful face. She stomped on him a few more times before moving her foot to press down on the mad dog’s neck.

“Mr. Ophas, please call the police—wait, Khun Issara?”

Maanfan frowned as Issara, who had just regained consciousness, weakly murmured,

“Don’t...Take me back to my room...”

Her hoarse voice said.

“No way!”

Maanfan protested.

“Look at what he did to you! You’re hurt all over. You’re in so much pain already! He needs to be punished.”

“Maanfan, please... I’m asking you,”

Issara said, looking at her with pleading eyes.

Maanfan finally nodded. Ophas stepped in to help unlock the handcuffs using the key he found in Tara’s pants pocket, which had been carelessly discarded.

“Be careful,”

Maanfan said gently, helping Issara to her feet. Slowly, the two of them walked past Iris, who was busy restraining Thara to a chair. Her delicate hands seemed to be enjoying themselves as she smeared chili paste, found in the refrigerator, all over the man’s most sensitive area in thick layers.

“Hope it burns real good!”

She said, drawing a little heart as she cheerfully used a black marker to write a message on his inner thigh.

It was... terrifying. Maanfan couldn’t help but think so.

Since this room had once belonged to Iris, it wasn’t surprising that she knew exactly where everything was.

Issara paused for a moment, glancing at Thara. She tried to think of any possible reason to spare the man or keep him around, but nothing came to mind.

The only benefit of Tara was helping his mother save on sanitary pads for nine months.

“What are you thinking? Let’s hurry,”

Maanfan urged, worried about Issara’s condition. The boss lady walked out slowly, replying in a soft voice,

“I just thought... maybe his birth certificate was actually an apology letter from a condom company.”

Chapter 13: Healing

Inside the familiar hotel room, where every inch was well-known, it always ended up being this room whenever they met. Seeing the look of curiosity on Maanfan's face, it was impossible not to explain.

"I rented it long-term. It's almost like I've bought it already. I'm the only one allowed to use this room; no other guests are allowed."

The short-haired woman told the other before unbuttoning her shirt in front of the mirror near the bathroom. She hated the rough touches from Thara that had violated her. The many marks left on her fair skin only reminded her of the terrible, hopeless feelings of that time.

Her fingertips dug into her skin, scratching as if trying to erase those touches. The expression on her face made Maanfan step closer with concern.

"Don't hurt yourself... You've been hurt enough already."

Maanfan gently held the hand that was scratching the red, bleeding skin and spoke softly. Issara was just a woman who had been hurt physically and emotionally, not as strong as she tried to appear to the outside world.

She was just an ordinary person, like Maanfan.

"Don't touch me! I'm dirty,"

The slender, tall woman protested, twisting her wrist and struggling to escape the warm embrace Maanfan offered. But no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't break free. The image of that horrible man violating her body haunted her mind.

"Then let me help you take a bath, okay? Just like how you often bathed me before. To me, you're never dirty. Please, let me bathe you,"

Maanfan said with determination, holding Issara's hand tightly. Then, without hesitation, she leaned in and pressed a firm kiss on Issara's trembling lips.

“Mmm…… Fan… I…”

As she met Maanfan's eyes, the strength she had tried to build crumbled. Once again, she broke down in tears, right there in Maanfan's arms.

In this embrace, Issara was nothing but a fragile, ordinary woman. She cried, seeking protection from the one holding her tightly and offering comfort.

"It's okay. Come on, let's take a bath,"

Maanfan said softly.

She held Issara's hand and led her into the bathroom. The girl with big eyes full of care, she turned on the warm water, letting it fill the bathtub. Then she turned to Issara, who now stood quietly in the spacious bathroom, her eyes red and swollen from crying.

"Don't…"

Issara quickly grabbed Maanfan's playful hands, stopping her from unbuttoning her shirt. She spoke firmly, feeling uneasy about the marks hidden beneath her clothes.

"How are you going to take a bath if you don’t take it off, hmm?"

Maanfan teased, smiling mischievously at the sulking woman before planting a strong kiss on her cheek. Issara winced and turned away because of the pain—her lip was still swollen from being struck.

"But it’s…ah!"

Issara began, only to gasp in shock as Maanfan suddenly opened her shirt and ran her tongue over the bruised, bite-marked skin on her chest.

"Even if your body is full of marks like this, you’re always beautiful in my eyes. And these marks, I’ll erase them all for you,"

Maanfan said, her voice resolute. She couldn’t stop herself from thinking about how Thara had touched the delicate body in her arms. Maanfan herself had never been allowed to touch Issara in this way, despite Issara being hers. A surge of emotions pushed her to want to claim the woman before her.

"Alright… then erase them for me… all of them,"

Issara said, her words sounding like quiet surrender to the person holding her. Her tone made Maanfan smile faintly, her mood softening.

"Do you realize how good you are at teasing me? *Sigh*… Let me wash your hair first, okay?"

Maanfan rested her head on Issara's shoulder, calming herself. She heard a soft laugh escape from Issara, who was finally starting to relax.

"Take it off too. I want to hug you, skin to skin,"

Issara said as she pulled off Maanfan's wet clothes. How could it be fair that Maanfan had stripped her completely naked to wash her hair, soaking her own clothes in the process, and still refused to take them off?

"Stay in the water with me, okay? Please…"

The pleading tone, usually reserved for her role as Araya, was now coming from Issara herself. She was done pretending to be someone else. Maanfan obediently removed her wet clothes and stepped into the bathtub, extending her hand to help Issara step in as well.

"Does it hurt a lot? Let me put some ointment on for you later,"

Maanfan said gently.

"Fan,"

Issara replied softly as Maanfan's fingers lightly traced over her bare skin, brushing against the bruises with a delicate touch to avoid causing pain. Yet, instead of pain, it stirred something else within her.

Issara let out a heavy sigh, releasing all the tension and stress she had been carrying. She closed her eyes, letting her weight sink into the warm water and the arms that held her.

The silence between them was filled with peace and warmth, as time seemed to flow slowly around them.

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"Take your medicine first. We've been soaking in the water for so long; your skin is pale now,"

Maanfan said as she handed painkillers and anti-inflammatory pills to the beautiful woman in front of her, who was now dressed in a bathrobe.

"Short hair is great—it dries so quickly. Look at your hair, it's still dripping,"

She added with a teasing smile.

"Where did you get these medicines?"

The short-haired woman accepting the pills and glass of water without hesitation. Her gaze fell on a bag filled with various medicines, the logo on the bag clearly showing it had just been brought from a large mall.

"My secretary brought them while I was drying my hair. She came and went so fast,"

Issara explained with a nod.

"Yes, that's just how P'Pim is. I'm used to it,"

She said, acknowledging her secretary's peculiar efficiency.

"Come on, let me apply some ointment. Go lie down on the bed,"

Maanfan instructed, her tone firm yet caring. She carried the bag of medicine to the bed and began tending to Issara's injuries.

With gentle care, Maanfan handed Issara a cold gel pack to press against the bruises on her face caused by being slapped. She carefully applied ointment to the split on Issara's lip, her touch light and tender. Then, with focused attention, she treated the bruises and marks left by bites and kisses on Issara's skin, ensuring every spot was cared for.

"Hey... I have something to confess,"

Issara said softly as Maanfan continued applying ointment.

"What is it?"

Maanfan paused, looking up with interest.

"It's about... why I approached you. It was because I needed evidence... to deal with Thara. From the very beginning, I deliberately approached you through that app..."

Issara's voice grew quieter toward the end, filled with guilt, and she avoided making eye contact.

Maanfan stared at her silently for a moment before calmly resuming applying the ointment.

"I suspected that from the start. Hearing you say it now actually makes me feel relieved in a strange way. I kind of figured it out early on. Besides, wasn’t I the one who benefited the most from this? Don’t you think?"

Maanfan’s response left Issara wide-eyed with surprise. She had expected anger, maybe even a slap.

"Oh...is that so...?"

Issara stammered, unsure of how to respond to the big-eyed woman.

"Another thing... I’m happy, you know. At first, I thought I had fallen for someone who was, well... a service worker. And... why did you pretend to be Araya?"

Maanfan asked, her voice light, teasing even.

Issara’s face flushed slightly at Maanfan’s words, especially the part about her having a secret crush.

"Araya, huh? The first reason was because I wanted to disguise myself. The second reason is that Araya represents... the woman I wish I could be. Just an ordinary woman who doesn’t have to act strong all the time, carrying the weight of everything on her shoulders,"

Issara said with a small smile, explaining her reasons to Maanfan, who was still carefully applying ointment to her bruises.

"And lastly... hmm... I was always the one who made the choices, the one in control of the game. But being the one chosen for once—it was exciting. I was so nervous wondering if you’d pick me,"

Issara confessed, laughing at the truth she had finally revealed. Her playful tone made Maanfan feel both amused and slightly annoyed, so she pressed the ointment a little harder against Issara's smooth skin, causing the shorthaired woman to squirm.

"Did you sell yourself to anyone else besides me?"

Maanfan asked, a mix of curiosity and possessiveness in her voice.

"Some people did message me, but I blocked them all. I only ever responded to you,"

Issara replied sweetly, making Maanfan smile.

"And you? Before me, did you ever buy anyone else?"

"Before meeting you, yes… but after I picked you, I didn’t care about anyone else anymore. Oh, and do you know? You were way more expensive than anyone else. Buying time with you left me so broke that I had to eat instant noodles until the end of the month,"

Maanfan teased, lightly tapping Issara’s hand to stop her from squirming away.

"Why did you buy me when I was so expensive? You could’ve just ignored me,"

Issara asked, her smile carrying a mix of curiosity and teasing.

"I fell for those long legs in your profile picture and got curious. I wanted to see what made you so confident to set such a high price. In the end, I fell head over heels for you like this,"

Maanfan replied, her tone playful as she leaned in to plant a kiss on Issara’s sharp nose. Issara smiled brightly, her eyes sparkling with delight. What was she so happy about?

"But even so, I still feel guilty. I approached you because I needed a tool to beat Thara. How do you want me to make it up to you? Just tell me, and I’ll do it,"

Issara said softly, wrapping her arms around Maanfan in an affectionate gesture.

"Are you sure you want me to choose?"

Maanfan replied with a mischievous smile that made Issara flinch.

"Uh… I’m still hurt. I don’t have any strength left,"

Issara said dramatically as she let herself collapse onto the bed.

"Perfect, then. No strength is just right. Didn’t you say you wanted to be the one chosen? Well, now’s the perfect time!"

Maanfan said with a teasing tone before leaning down to press a series of kisses on Issara’s lips. She’d been provoking her ever since they were in the bathroom, after all.

"Wait… hold on—mmph!"

Issara tried to protest, but her slender body was pinned under Maanfan’s weight.

"Last time, I told you to surrender, didn’t I? But you kept escaping, taking control and leaving me hanging. This time, I’ll make it all add up,"

Maanfan said firmly as she held Issara’s wrists and pinned them above her head. With her big, determined eyes, Maanfan positioned herself between Issara’s legs, ready to take full control.

The short-haired woman gently pressed her weight down, holding the delicate figure beneath her in place.

Maanfan soft lips trailed kisses along the smooth, pale skin that peeked out from the loosely tied bathrobe, revealing just enough to hint at the form underneath.

Whenever her lips encountered the marks left by Thara, Maanfan kissed them softly, as if to soothe the pain, before pressing firmer kisses over each one. Along the way, she couldn’t resist leaving a few marks of her own.

Issara allowed Maanfan to do as she pleased, finding the experience of being on the receiving end for once both thrilling and different. She felt every touch and movement, from the tender lips brushing her skin to the heat of Maanfan’s tongue as it moved across her body, leaving her shivering from the sensations.

There was a slight sting whenever Maanfan applied pressure, but it only made her breath hitch and her body respond to the attention from the playful woman she secretly cherished.

Maanfan’s lips lingered, pressing and teasing, at the soft, perfectly shaped curves of Issara’s chest, focusing on the delicate pink peaks. As she flicked her tongue rhythmically over the sensitive area, Issara arched her back instinctively, offering herself more fully to Maanfan’s explorations.

"Ssss…Fan, I like this,"

Issara whispered, her voice trembling as her body quivered in response. Encouraged, Maanfan released one hand that had been holding Issara’s wrists and used it to cup and knead the soft curves of her chest.

Her fingers played with the untouched peak, gently pinching and rolling it, while her lips continued to lavish attention on the other.

The short-haired woman’s voice grew sweeter with soft moans as she trembled under Maanfan’s touch, her body reacting instinctively like a fragile bird unable to resist the care being offered.

Maanfan savored the fullness of Issara's chest until she was satisfied, leaving faint marks of possession scattered across her smooth, pale skin.

She trailed her lips downward to the flat, toned abdomen, where faint muscle lines revealed Issara’s disciplined lifestyle. Her figure was both strong and elegant, a perfect blend of allure and sweetness that was utterly captivating.

"Spread your legs a bit more,"

Maanfan commanded softly, her voice low but firm,

"Let me taste every part of you."

Issara’s cheeks flushed deeply at the words, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and anticipation. She raised her hands to cover her face, attempting to hide her emotions from those piercing, eager eyes. Yet, her legs instinctively parted, allowing Maanfan to explore further.

"Such a good girl,"

Maanfan murmured, her tone filled with affection.

"Now, answer me… Who are you right now? Are you Araya, or Issara? Who am I holding?"

Maanfan asked in serious tone as her hands gently caressed the center of Issara’s body, now heated with the emotions that had been stirred. Issara’s breath quickened, her heightened sensitivity making her shiver under the light touch. Her hips involuntarily moved in response to Maanfan’s teasing fingers.

"I’m Issara… I’ve always been Issara. Even when I used the name Araya… I was still Issara… and I’ve always been yours,"

She replied, her voice trembling yet sincere.

Maanfan smiled with satisfaction, knowing that it had always been Issara in her embrace since the day they first met. Slowly, she moved downward, her hands firmly holding Issara's hips in place as she positioned herself closer to Issara's most intimate area.

"In that case, Khun Issara... you’re quite sensitive. Do you feel this much," She teased gently.

After she finished speaking, she pressed a soft kiss on Issara’s most private area. Issara’s body trembled, her hips instinctively trying to pull away, but Maanfan held her firmly, leaving her with no escape as her long legs rested on Maanfan’s shoulders.

"Fan… that… ah… please… I…"

Issara's voice trembled, her words breaking into soft, breathless sounds as her most sensitive area was stimulated intensely.

"Here? It’s so beautiful… I really like it,"

Maanfan murmured playfully, her words making Issara lightly smack her shoulder in embarrassment.

"You’re so shameless… ah, slow down, Fan, slower..ahhh..!"

Issara gasped, her voice a mix of protest and surrender.

As if in response, Maanfan’s tongue moved with even more intensity on Issara’s most sensitive spot, teasing and pressing firmly in a way that sent waves of sensation through her body.

The intensity caused Issara’s long legs to tense and press into the bed, her breathing turning heavy under the overwhelming sensations.

The younger woman continued her intense attention, pushing Issara’s emotions to the peak, almost bringing her to the edge of release. But just as she was about to reach that point, Maanfan suddenly pulled away, leaving Issara furrowing her brows in frustration. It had been so close.

"Maanfan... why did you stop? I’m still…"

Issara started to protest, but Maanfan silenced her with a deep kiss, pressing their lips together. The taste and scent Maanfan had just explored now mingled in the kiss, pulling Issara’s focus entirely into the moment.

"Kneel for me. I want to savor you from behind,"

Maanfan said, half-requesting, half-commanding, as she walked over to retrieve an item she remembered Issara keeping nearby.

Issara's legs still trembling from the incomplete sensations, watched in silence. She had once told Maanfan that she would allow her to use it if she wished.

"Hurry up, Issara. I want to enjoy you now,"

Maanfan said with a calm but firm tone as she donned the item Issara had once used with her. This time, it was Maanfan’s turn to take the lead and explore their shared intimacy further.

The sight in front of her made Maanfan's heart race wildly. Issara's smooth, pale back now had a faint pink hue, caused by her quickened heartbeat. The light sheen of sweat on her skin was so tempting, making Maanfan want to touch it. Her curvy hips and perfectly rounded figure invited her to hold and squeeze.

***Smack!***

"Maanfan!!"

Issara exclaimed.

Maanfan’s hand had landed on Issara’s firm, rounded figure. It wasn’t a hard slap, just a playful one because she couldn’t resist.

"What? What did I do?"

Maanfan asked with an innocent smile. Her hands stayed on the spot she had just slapped, kneading and squeezing with both hands.

"You little brat! Little pervert! You’re way too much!"

Issara tried to scold her, but could only glare at her in frustration.

"Well, it’s your fault for making me feel like this,"

Maanfan said casually, shifting the blame without hesitation. Issara seemed like she wanted to argue, but Maanfan didn’t give her a chance.

She pulled Issara, who was kneeling with her back turned, around to face her and kissed her deeply. Their tongues met in a fiery kiss, exchanging heat and emotion, until they finally broke apart when they were both nearly out of breath.

"And... I need this overly eager girl,"

Maanfan responded, her voice teasing as she let her fingertips trail lightly down to the center of Issara's body. Her fingers brushed against the dampness at her inner thigh before lifting them to show Issara, clearly indicating the readiness of her body.

Issara's cheeks burned with embarrassment as she caught sight of the evidence glistening on Maanfan’s fingers. It was clear the younger woman was intentionally teasing her.

The moment Maanfan swept her tongue over her fingers, tasting the dampness, Issara's heart pounded wildly, as though it might leap out of her chest.

"Enough… stop teasing me already… Fine, Maanfan, I want you,"

Issara finally admitted, surrendering to the desires of her body. Despite her initial reluctance, the undeniable evidence left her with no choice.

Maanfan's smile widened with satisfaction as Issara’s quiet voice confirmed her consent.

"Ah! Wait… why didn’t you tell me first...ahhh...?"

Issara gasped, her voice trembling as the tip of the toy gently entered her most sensitive area without warning. Her entire body jolted at the unexpected sensation, her short arms trembling as if she might collapse onto the bed. The only thing keeping her upright was Maanfan’s firm grip around her waist.

"Why are you so cute?"

Maanfan murmured, her voice full of affection. Something about Issara’s flushed face, her soft body trembling, and the way she gritted her teeth while trying to hold back, only made Maanfan’s feelings grow more intense.

The older woman’s every movement, responding to her touch, seemed to ignite a fire in Maanfan, making her actions even more determined.

"Please, Maanfan, be gentler. I can’t take it… it’s too deep… I feel so tight.. aaah!"

Issara pleaded softly, her voice trembling. Yet, the more she asked for gentleness, the more intense Maanfan’s movements became. Issara could only let out sweet, breathy moans, unable to resist any longer as she rested her face against the bed.

Her energy was completely drained, leaving her to surrender to Maanfan’s rhythm. Her trembling breaths mirrored the sensations coursing through her body.

Every deliberate motion touched her most sensitive spots, the overwhelming heat blending pleasure with a hint of sweet torment.

"Are you really out of energy, Issara?"

Maanfan whispered teasingly in her ear, her playful tone sending shivers down Issara’s spine.

"But I love the way you sound when you moan like that."

"Ah… Maanfan… I’m close… I’m going to—ah!"

Issara cried out, her voice quivering as she neared her peak.

"So am I, Issara. Let’s finish together."

The rapid, intense rhythm that followed was so overwhelming Issara found herself holding her breath, unable to do anything but surrender.

"Ah…Fan, ahhh…"

When she finally reached her climax, her voice broke into a trembling moan. Her mind went blank, her body covered in a light sheen of sweat, and her inner thighs burned warmly as they trembled from the sensations. She lay there, completely spent, as if all her strength had been drained away.

The short-haired woman reached her peak, and the sight sent Maanfan's emotions into overdrive. Her body trembled as she tightly embraced Issara, holding her close as the intensity of the moment passed. In its wake, it left only disheveled sheets and a discarded toy, abandoned carelessly.

Issara lay with her head resting on Maanfan's arm, absentmindedly running her fingers along the bare skin of the younger woman, their legs intertwined beneath a thin blanket.

"Why were you so rough with me, hmm?"

Issara asked, her tone half playful, half exasperated.

"Ah… I’m sorry,"

Maanfan replied with a grin,

"But if I get the chance, I’ll do it again. You’re just too cute and irresistible, Issara. I can’t help myself."

Her wide smile and teasing tone made Issara roll her eyes fondly. She reached out and pinched Maanfan’s chubby cheek lightly, a mix of annoyance and affection.

"Well, I chose to date a younger girl, so I guess I have to deal with all this energy,"

Issara muttered to herself.

*"You better watch out. I’m going to get you back for this, just wait and see,"*

She added with a smirk.

Chapter Special

The sound of high heels echoed through the hallway as a slender figure in a tailored suit walked confidently, her face glowing with a bright smile. In her left hand, she carried a brown leather folder. Along the way, warm greetings greeted her from time to time.

"Good morning, Miss Maanfan,"

A group of interns said politely as they encountered her. Maanfan nodded and responded with a gentle smile. "Oh, Maanfan, would you like some coffee?" A colleague asked cheerfully.

"No, thank you, P’Tip. I’ve already had some,"

Maanfan replied kindly.

"Miss Maanfan, regarding the expansion of the Araya brand to international markets, we’ve successfully gained access to neighboring countries,"

Another colleague informed her with enthusiasm.

"Really? Is that true, P’Kit? Then, after the meeting, let’s talk more about this,"

Maanfan replied cheerfully.

With a bright tone in her voice, she took long strides toward the large meeting room, which was now filling up with people from various departments of WTT Group.

It was strange. Even though the path she walked and her destination, the meeting room had not changed much, the feelings she had now were completely different from before.

Back then, she barely knew anyone.

But now, many people greeted her with friendly smiles.

Back then, she was full of worry, nervousness, and hoped for things that seemed impossible.

But now, she was calm, confident, and excited about endless possibilities.

Back then, Maanfan didn’t believe she could do anything.

But today… she believed that if she stayed determined, anything was possible.

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"Today's meeting agenda…"

Maanfan attended the meeting as a representative of the Araya team. In truth, it wouldn’t be wrong to say she was there as the owner of the brand itself.

*"Maanfan, from now on, I’ll be very busy. The Araya store will have to be left in your hands, okay?"*

Since the end of those terrible events until now, Issara had barely been involved with the Araya brand. Not only that, but she had also firmly insisted that Anek return to work at his own company.

At first, this left Maanfan feeling quite overwhelmed. However, after a year of facing and overcoming various challenges, she had grown significantly. Even if she wasn’t able to solve every problem or make the sharpest decisions, Maanfan had become much more experienced in the market.

Still, she knew it would take several more years of learning and selfimprovement before she could rely solely on her own abilities to lead the Araya brand to success.

**But… one year had already passed.**

. .

And so, the competition for the chairman’s seat finally reached its conclusion.

**"Today, we will announce the brand with the highest profits. Please give a round of applause for… Kumishop!"**

The sound of applause thundered through the room as Ophas stood up, bowing graciously in thanks to everyone around him.

"Thank you! Thank you, everyone."

Maanfan couldn’t help but smile. Even she found it hard to believe that, in the end, the winner of this battle for the chairman’s seat was truly Ophas.

She thought to herself, If Iris hadn’t decided to pull Dva out of the competition, the results would certainly have been different.

Yes… ever since that day, Iris had removed Dva from the race for the chairman’s seat.

And Kumishop, somehow, had managed to skyrocket its sales out of nowhere. The sudden surge in revenue allowed Kumishop to overtake "Araya," the brand she and Issara had built together, and claim victory.

However, before the final announcement of who would become the chairman, Ophas suddenly asked to say a few words.

"Ladies and gentlemen,"

He began in a serious tone, which made Kitti, his close friend sitting beside him, suppress a chuckle.

"Before the results of this competition for the chairman's seat are finalized, I would like to say a few words."

The atmosphere in the meeting room grew quiet, almost as if time had paused.

Ophas cleared his throat and glanced at the notes he had written earlier. What was I supposed to say next? Gosh, this is nerve-wracking!

"From the beginning,"

He finally found his place and continued,

"I never thought that the third chairman of WTT Group should be decided based on creating a new brand and competing for short-term profits over just one year. WTT Group is a large corporation with a legacy that cannot be measured by short-term results."

He gestured toward the projector screen, and Kitti, knowing exactly what to do, brought up the next slide.

"What you see on the screen are the performance results and long-term operational plans for both Araya and Kumishop over the past year."

He paused briefly to give everyone a moment to review the data displayed on the screen.

"Although Kumishop currently has the highest profits after deducting costs, I would like everyone to focus on long-term operational plans,"

Ophas continued.

"Kumishop's success comes from a short-term cosplay promotion, whereas the Araya brand was designed to cater to the market in the long run. From what I’ve heard, this brand is already planning to expand internationally, isn’t that right?"

Maanfan nodded in confirmation, though she didn’t quite understand what Ophas was planning.

"Yes, that’s correct," she replied.

"Having a long-term vision and prioritizing sustainable investments is an essential quality of leadership,"

Ophas added, taking the opportunity to glance around the room at the meeting attendees—most of whom were major shareholders and key executives of the company.

"And for this reason,"

He announced,

"I would like to relinquish my candidacy for the chairman’s position and instead nominate Miss Issara for the role."

As soon as he finished speaking, a murmur of surprise spread among the senior executives in the room. Even Maanfan’s eyes widened in shock.

Unfortunately, Issara wasn’t present in the meeting room at that moment, just as the current chairman—who was facing legal proceedings and unable to attend—was also absent.

The meeting attendees exchanged glances. Deep down, they agreed with Ophas’s reasoning more than the results of the competition itself, based on the performance and vision they had observed so far.

The murmurs of discussion continued for a moment before someone finally spoke up.

"The board of directors will hold a separate meeting to discuss this matter and present the proposal to Miss Issara for her consideration."

"Understood. Thank you,"

Ophas replied, bowing respectfully before letting out a huge sigh of relief internally.

Finally, I’m free from becoming the chairman! He thought with immense relief.

"Let’s conclude for today. Thank you all very much,"

He said, wrapping up the meeting.

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Notifications kept popping up on Issara’s phone, with messages ranging from updates to congratulations. One message, in particular, stood out— Maanfan had sent it with a cute sticker attached:

[Congratulations, Madam Chairman!]

It seemed Ophas had officially stepped down, leading the board of directors to appoint Issara as the new chairman. There was no need to guess how excited her little protégé was, probably even more thrilled than Issara herself.

The tall and elegant woman stepped out of her car and made her way to a meeting with someone important.

Issara had entrusted the Araya brand to Maanfan for now, as she had pressing family matters to resolve.

The large doors in front of her opened, revealing an older man dressed in an expensive suit.

"Issara,"

Kanes greeted her, studying the young woman with a hint of guilt in his expression.

"Are your wounds better now?"

"They’ve healed quite well, thank you,"

Issara replied politely. She waited for the elder to lead her to the tea table before taking her seat. Without hesitation, she decided to bring up the topic at hand.

"I’m here today to ask for a favor,"

Issara said, her tone calm yet firm.

Kanes remained silent, his expression suggesting he was ready to listen.

"My father is currently facing legal charges for bribing officials and forging evidence,"

She continued. Of course, she was the one who had reported him.

"I’ve heard about that,"

Kanes replied casually.

Issara straightened her posture, her eyes shining with determination.

"Thara was also involved in this matter. However, I am willing to withhold any accusations against him if you agree to the conditions I propose."

Kanes smirked slightly. This wasn’t a request—it was a negotiation.

Keeping Thara out of trouble was clearly part of her strategy.

"Let’s hear it,"

He said, intrigued.

"Have Thara drop the lawsuit against Mr. Ekachai,"

Issara said as she handed over a thin envelope of documents. This condition was something she had been wanting to accomplish for Maanfan’s father for some time now. And after what Tara had done to her, perhaps this was the best way forward.

To state a fact, while Thara was indeed involved in forging evidence for business purposes, the lawsuit involving Maanfan and her father over copyright issues wasn’t entirely baseless. In fact, it was a relatively safe way for Thara to profit from legal battles.

Still, the penalty was only six hundred thousand baht—an amount insignificant to Issara. But the fact that Maanfan refused to accept any financial help from her had left Issara raising her eyebrows more than once.

*"Maanfan, if you won’t accept financial help from me, then I’ll make sure the case against your father is dropped myself,"*

Issara thought with a smile. Making sure her woman didn’t have to worry about money brought Issara genuine happiness.

"Thank you, Uncle Kanes, for helping me," Issara said with a polite tone.

Kanes glanced at her briefly, unimpressed.

He didn’t care much about the details of the lawsuit. All he wanted was to send his troublesome son off to Russia to live quietly, away from it all.

The answer came from Kanes's mouth without hesitation.

"Agreed."

. .

Not long after Issara officially took on the role of chairman, Maanfan found herself both overjoyed and puzzled when her father’s legal case was resolved smoothly.

Not only was he cleared of all damages, but the opposing party also vanished into thin air as though nothing had ever happened.

At home, her family was ecstatic. Their small factory, which had been struggling for a while, began to recover. Maanfan made it clear that there was to be no more production of imitations branded things, and everyone agreed.

Instead, the factory began exclusively manufacturing products for the rapidly growing Araya brand.

This shift soon brought financial stability back to both the factory and the business.

The factory no longer had to worry about lawsuits. It now had regular work all year, and the Araya brand saved money on production costs.

Everything worked out so well that Maanfan started to wonder if Miss Issara had planned it all along.

When Maanfan tried to press Issara for answers about her father’s case and the events surrounding it, Issara only smiled without giving a proper response.

Before long, she disappeared entirely, busy preparing for her new role as chairman.

Their chances to see each other became noticeably less frequent. These days, they only met briefly during meetings before going their separate ways to continue with work.

Issara was occupied with reorganizing the company, while Maanfan was busy expanding the Araya brand. Even so, the smaller woman still made an effort to find time to message or talk to her boss every single day.

"Have-you-eaten-yet?"

She typed out slowly while saying the words aloud, her cheerful voice matching the energy of her text. At the same time, she sent a picture of her lunch along with the message.

The reply came quickly but was short and formal, Not yet. Enjoy your meal

:)

That was it. After all the effort, she couldn’t help but pout.

*How annoying! Hmph.*

*.*

"Maanfan, could you please review the documents for this afternoon’s meeting?"

Someone called, pulling her back to reality.

“Just leave it here, I’ll take a look!”

Maanfan replied cheerfully.

“Oh, and Miss Issara will be joining to listen to the plans today as well,”

The colleague added.

“Huh… okay,”

Maanfan said, a bit surprised. Issara hadn’t attended any meetings about the Araya brand in a long time. Maybe it’s because today’s meeting is about market expansion plans? she thought.

“In that case, I’ll head to the meeting room early to make sure everything’s in order. It’s not every day the big boss herself shows up, right?”

She laughed sweetly while picking up her lunch plate to clean up, making the colleague smile warmly at her dedication.

“You work so hard, Maanfan. You should take your full break, don’t worry, I can handle this for you.”

“It’s okay,”

Maanfan replied, patting her flat stomach lightly. There was a reason she worked so hard, after all.

She didn’t want to disappoint someone, and working hard also helped her avoid overthinking and missing Issara too much.

Beside it might even help her feel less *“hungry for Araya.”*

But it didn’t seem to help at all.

Missing her? Well, she could always find an excuse to meet. But what about being “hungry for Araya”?

What could she do about that?

“Guess I’ll have to pay for it,”

Maanfan muttered with a small smile, her eyes glinting mischievously as she opened the same app and booked an escort.

In a dimly lit hotel room, a large king-sized bed was neatly prepared. A seductive figure leaned back comfortably against the pillows, the soft aroma of an essential oil lamp filling the air, creating an inviting atmosphere for someone special.

***Click…***

The door opened, and Maanfan stepped in, still in her work attire. Her face clearly showed how exhausted she was from the day.

The tall figure walked over and wrapped her arms around her *"special client"* affectionately.

“Maanfan, you’re so mean. You haven’t called me in so long. I thought you’d forgotten about me,”

The woman teased, her tone sweet and playful.

Maanfan didn’t reply. Instead, she nestled herself deeper into the embrace, inhaling the familiar perfume she adored.

*Ah… I missed this so much.*

They had booked the same room as always, at the same time as before. It felt as though everything had returned to the beginning, and the person in front of her was simply *"P’Araya*," the beautiful woman she couldn’t stop thinking about.

“You’re so clingy today. Rough day at work?”

The sweet voice teased her gently, earning a sharp glare from the smaller woman. After all, the source of today’s exhaustion was standing right in front of her, pretending to be innocent.

“Yes. My company’s chairman came to review our work today and left me with a ton of homework,”

Maanfan grumbled.

“Oh my, what a wonderful boss you must have,”

Araya replied with a teasing smile, leaning in to press kisses on her clear forehead, down to her pointed nose, and finally her soft lips.

One hand slipped beneath Maanfan’s skirt while the other began unbuttoning her shirt, prompting the smaller woman to let out a playful protest in response.

"Mm… I want to take a shower first,"

Maanfan murmured.

Issara kissed her soft, mochi-like cheek lightly.

"But I want to ‘eat’ you already,"

Issara teased.

"Nooo, I want to shower first!"

Maanfan whined in her small, petulant voice. The cool air and the calming aroma in the room did make her feel better, but that wasn’t a good enough reason to skip her shower before getting into bed!

"Alright, fine. I’ve already filled the tub with warm water for you,"

Issara said as she began helping the smaller woman out of her clothes, leaving her in just her underwear. Issara moved to sit on the bed, but she didn’t expect Maanfan to stop her with the most pleading, puppy-eyed look imaginable.

*"Will you help me shower?"*

Issara froze for a moment, surprised at how quickly her sweet, innocent little one had transformed into a sly little fox. Maybe I’ve taught her too well, Issara thought with a smirk.

The older woman let out a warm laugh and answered, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

"Anything you want, boss :),"

Issara said with a playful smile.

Maanfan grinned and led her beautiful "P’Araya" into the bathroom.

As the door closed, soft moans gradually began to fill the room, echoing throughout.

That night, P’Araya followed all of Maanfan’s requests and did everything her little Maanfan asked her to do.

And just as Maanfan reminded herself almost every day:

**At work, she might be a subordinate.**

**But in bed, she was the boss. :)**

**--------THE END-------**

***11 Dec'24***

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