

**Chapter : Introduction**

Goodness will lead one to respect and honor. Those who excel in upholding their own ethical standards are celebrated as the model of conduct and morality.

Every profession comes with its own set of ethical rules, and actions that go against these rules are seen as disgraceful. However, there isn't always a clear-cut answer to what these actions are, it might be because it's up to those in the profession to decide for themselves whether their choices are right or wrong.

"A....Ah..."

It's already the fifth time that she has already cum, with those warm nails... never felt bored or lost her excitement. Those slender nails always make her feel a new sensation every time she gets fingering.

*No more.* *She can't take it anymore.*

She has this thought for the fifth time. but it would be because these intense emotions do not let her stop yet. Just a little bit triggered, this body is ready to allow the action to continue in the next round. And finally, she gets what she has been waiting for.

A feeling of intense longing spread throughout the small body after the crazy moaning. The body of the young woman, with shimmering light brown, shoulder-length hair, could no longer maintain balance on the lap of the person with long, sleek black hair beneath her.

Her body would have to collapse onto the bed, utterly exhausted, if she doesn't get someone who recently released nails from her beautiful flowers to help carry her with the same arm side.

The air conditioning in the bedroom still couldn't cool the burning heat that spread throughout her body after reaching orgasm multiple times. Sweat continued to pour down relentlessly, soaking the hands of the person carrying her.

Multiple rounds of climaxing are more dangerous than one might think.

'**Khemjira'** is enough of this. She would not get to climax multiple times again.

"Hey, Auntie? Heart attack?"

Perhaps because she sees Khemjira struggling to catch her breath for a while in her arms, the tall woman beneath her, with bright red lips, feigns shock.

She then leans in as if to get closer, but her actions seem annoyingly insincere. She even makes an ugly pout and leans in again, completely ruining any sense of romance.

"Come here, I'll give you CPR. Mwah!"

"You're disgusting!"

She's just out of breath, not dying! At her age, she's far from having a heart attack over something like this. A woman in her thirties is much stronger than someone in her twenties might think.

This kind of exhaustion doesn't even compare to her morning runs, even though her current state might suggest otherwise.

Another person sees this and becomes even more conceited. Khemjira wants to smack that annoying smirk right off that face to pass out on the bed.

However, she doesn't deny that the person grinning at her is the same one who is bringing her so much fun and joy tonight. She even allows the other person to leave hickeys mixed with bright red lipstick marks all over her body.

**'Dao Nuea'** nails' style makes Khemjira head over heels.

*Damn it.*

"One more round?"

"Let's take a break"

"Does 'take a break' mean we're done?"

"Take a break" means take a break."

"So, that means there's more later?"

"....."

"Let's be honest, Auntie, young people hate unclear words."

"The fact that you still dare to call yourself 'young'-yours truly."

"Well, I'm younger than the aunties around here, that's for sure."

Dao Nuea is very proud of being a 23-year-old 'young person'. Women like Khemjira, who are 31 just wouldn't understand.

"Has anyone ever told you that your mouth is really sharp?"

"...."

"With a mouth like yours. I doubt you'll make it to old age."

"That's harsh, Auntie!"

Dao Nuea feigns a look of guilt, though it's clearly fake. Every time they meet, the two of them end up trading barbs. She hands a blanket to cover the other's bare body before getting up from the bed herself.

"I'm done talking to old folks."

"Are you leaving already?"

"No, not leaving yet. It's only 10 pm."

"Then?"

"I'm just going to stand on the balcony and play a music video."

"Are you going out to vape again?"

Khemjira sees that rectangular device in the other's hand and immediately understands the meaning behind going out to "play a music video" on the condo balcony.

It's a habit of hers to go out and vape after they finish their activities. Well at least Dao Nuea has the courtesy to step outside to vape, avoiding any rudeness towards someone she just shared a bed with.

But then, why does the person on the bed suddenly look so upset?

"Ah, right. Why?"

"Vaping isn't good for your health. You're still young and strong, but this stuff will ruin your health before its time."

"Oh, so I'll end up old like you?"

"Go to hell."

Khemjira throws a pillow at Dao Nuea. She really shouldn't bother worrying about that young person.

"Yes, ma'am, yes, ma'am."

"I wouldn't want a daughter like you. You'd drive me insane."

"Then I call you 'teacher'. You nag like an old teacher anyway."

Dao Nuea sways her hips and walks out of the bedroom. Yeah, Khemjira is such a complainer. She doesn't need Dao Nuea to tell her, she knows herself well.

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*Ding!*

**Maviz: Khem, have you finished grading?**

It's just a typical habit of professors, including herself.

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Great. In Khemjira's fridge, there are cans of beer for Dao Nuea to steal and drink.

There's both regular chilled beer and jelly beer to choose from. Being the greedy person she can be, she grabs one of each and sips them while standing on the balcony behind the living room of the condo, vaping her favorite peppermint-flavored e-cigarette.

The view from Khemjira's balcony stretches out as far as the eye can see if it weren't for the PM2.5 dust in Bangkok being so high, a high-floor room like this would have great air to breathe in deeply.

But for now, Dao Nuea just goes ahead and inhales that cancer-causing air. Soon enough, everyone in Bangkok will probably be dropping dead anyway.

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*Buzz! Buzz!* **"Helloooooo."**

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Dao Nuea greets the friend calling her with a cheerful voice. just before getting an earful from her fellow student. The friend berates her for ignoring nearly twenty missed calls.

A moment ago, Dao Nuea was having so much fun that she didn't even notice her phone ringing.

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**"Sorry, I just finished some business.... Business with which girl this time? Do you think my life is all about girls or what?"**

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*Yeah, but I'm really with a girl....*

Dao Nuea thinks to herself as she takes a sip of her beer slushie. After all, girls are the only thing that truly makes her feel energetic. But lately, she hasn't had as many different girls as before. She no longer spends most of her free time switching from one woman to the next. Now, she has chosen to give all her time in bed to just one person.

The only woman now who Dao Nuea calls *'Auntie'* is the one who makes her feel more excited in bed than anyone else before.

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**"Huh? We have to go to uni again?"**

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Dao Nuea can't believe what her friend just told her over the phone. The news she just heard ruins the taste of her last can of beer. She reaches down to slip her vape into the pocket of her shorts, leaving only the can of beer in her hand, which she quickly chugs before continuing her rant.

"Ugh, this is so annoying. That professor just loves scheduling thesis meetings, doesn't he?"

Dao Nuea complains with a weary tone. As it is, their internships are already killing them, and now they have to deal with the added pressure of their thesis.

She isn't sure whether they'll graduate or drop dead first. Her friend on the other end continues to vent, so she cuts in,

**"Yeah, yeah, whatever. But hey, we'll be done soon, anyway."**

**"Our time as students is almost up, after all."**

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**"Go ahead, Mawin. I'm opening the laptop."**

Khemjira struggles to drag herself to the desk in her bedroom to grab the laptop, feeling as though it's taking everything out of her.

Each step requires all her strength, and her legs keep trembling, making her almost collapse several times. As soon as she reaches the bed she quickly throws herself onto it and pulls the blanket over her naked body.

She rests her head and back against the headboard, with the laptop now resting on her thighs, separated by the blanket.

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**[You can send the file now. I'm sending mine over ]**

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Khemjira sees the email notification indicating a file has arrived in her inbox. She quickly sends an Excel file titled *"Midterm Exam Scores"* to '**Mawin**', her colleague who teaches financial accounting in the other two sections out of the four they share.

They've agreed to exchange and review each other's scores after grading the exams and entering them into the Excel file today. Mawin must have noticed his friend's sudden disappearance and decided to check in.

She's gotten so caught up in her own fun... It's a good thing she finished grading the exams two days ago.

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**"Your section's students scored high as usual."**

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Khemjira scrolls through the midterm and coursework scores of the students in her colleague's section. Most of the students in his classes have performed well on the midterms, with only a few failings, but even they managed to collect enough participation points from in-class responses to scrape by until the final exams.

It's gratifying, though not surprising-just like Mawin doesn't seem surprised when he sees the scores of the students in Khemjira's section.

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**[Your students aren't much different from before-low scores across the board, looks like a lot of them are on track to fail.]**

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Mawin already predicts what the overall scores will look like after just reviewing the midterm exam Khemjira prepared the day before.

At their university, only final exams are standardized, while midterms can have different sets of questions. As a result, the performance of students in his classes and hers often differs drastically.

The difficulty level of their midterms is so different that they can't even be compared Mawin can only imagine holding his head in his hands if he had to sit down and take her exam himself.

It's not that the exam content is off-topic or that Khemjira is a poor teacher who sets impossibly hard questions. In fact, she is far superior to him in teaching skill.

The only issue is that her students often have to grapple with applicationbased questions which she favors, rather than simply writing standard answers. This makes her exams much more challenging.

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**"Don't worry, I still have quizzes to help boost their scores."**

**"[Do you mean those insanely difficult quizzes, right?]"**

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Mawin immediately retorts. He understands Khemjira's desire for her students to truly apply the knowledge she's taught them, which is why she always designs her quizzes and exams in this challenging way. But it also means some students might end up failing because of her tough approach.

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**"[You could make the exams a little easier, you know.]"**

**"If they were easier, what would the students learn? They'd just coast by with an A from rote memorization, like in your section."**

**"[Whoa, no need to get harsh.]"**

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Mawin responds, bewildered by her sharp reply.

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**"Every student who takes my class must be able to apply what they've learned to real-life situations, which is far more difficult than anything on the exam."**

***"I am a teacher."***

**"The responsibility of producing quality individuals-that is the duty of teachers like us."**

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Every time the conversation circles back to this topic, Khemjira can't help but get irritated. Mawin is used to it by now, but she plans to apologize later for rudely hanging up on him in her frustration.

Make the exams easier? No way. She's already lowered the difficulty as much as she can without compromising the integrity of the assessment.

It's not about ego-she despises those who cling to their own superiority and is determined never to become like them. If there were genuine issues with her teaching or exams, she'd be open to feedback and ready to make improvements. But this isn't one of those cases.

If her teaching and exams were truly problematic, she would have been called in for a discussion long ago. Even the senior faculty members recognize that her exams are more beneficial than harmful.

lExams should effectively measure students' knowledge, proving that they truly understand what they've learned and can apply it in the real world.

The duty and ethics of imparting knowledge are responsibilities that a "***teacher***" like her always keeps in mind.

*Creak-the door opens.*

"Auntiee, are you taking a break?"

"Whoa, I can smell the beer from here."

The smell isn't that strong, but Khemjira's keen sense of smell picks up the faint scent of canned beer. It's the same beer she had chilled and ready, knowing it would be stolen, as usual, by someone else.

Dao Nuea, the culprit, shows no sign of guilt, true to form as the one who regularly raids her room for beer and snacks. With a carefree grin, she saunters back to the bed, where her presence could have easily irritated Khemjira.

Irritated?

Not at all. In fact, the moment she walked in, all her frustration from her earlier conversation with Mawin vanished completely.

"Hey, feeling better?"

To say she feels better the moment Dao Nuea walks in wouldn't be an exaggeration, but it's too embarrassing to admit.

So, Khemjira chooses not to respond with words. Instead, she leans in and meets Dao Nuea's freshly lipsticked red lips with a kiss.

They aren't in a relationship, but they aren't just casual hookups either **"Friends with benefits"** best describes them-friends who can be both good companions and great partners in bed, despite their eight-year age difference.

Their connection is surprising, especially how well they click physically. This relationship binds Dao Nuea and Khemjira together, even though neither knows the other's true self.

Khemjira never realizes that the professional ethics she upholds so strictly might be compromised by someone with the status of a fourth-year studentthe very same person she is now being buddy on bed with.

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**Chapter 01**

**"Please help me, Professor Khemjira."**

"...."

Khemjira hates hearing pleas for a second chance.

But she has to face it every time the university is about to enter final exam season. There are always students coming to her with pitiful expressions, begging for her help.

However, she has never been someone who easily feels sympathy for others. And now, as a professor, when confronted with these pleas for a chance, she must steel herself even more.

The young woman in front of her is a fourth-year student in the Faculty of Business Administration. She's currently enrolled in the Financial Analysis and Modeling course with Professor Khemjira this term.

This course has no midterm or final exams, and the professor doesn't take attendance. Most of the grades come from individual assignments and a final project that must be submitted at the end of the term.

It sounds simple, but it can be incredibly challenging when the professor is known for giving out A's to only a handful of students each semester.

This course is also one of the hardest in the Finance major and consistently ranks among those with the highest number of students failing.

The student in question is one of those who failed and is now behaving like many other students who find themselves in the same situation-pleading with the professor to bump their grade from an F to a D.

She has already calculated her scores from past individual assignments and the major group project, for which she just received the results after her presentation earlier this session.

It's not yet time for professors to submit students' final grades into the grading system, but this is the last chance for the young woman to appeal for mercy.

Adding just a few more points shouldn't be that difficult, right? But it doesn't mean the professor has to follow what the student wants.

"I can't give any student special treatment over others."

"But if I fail, I'll have serious problems at home. My family can barely afford my tuition, and this semester's fees are the last they can cover. If I fail your course. I won't be able to intern with my friends next term. I'm really in a tough spot."

"Well, if you're having financial difficulties, you might want to consult with the registrar's office about applying for a scholarship."

"......"

"Try again next semester, okay?"

When the professor shows no signs of relenting, the student's initially pitiful demeanor quickly turns aggressive.

"And what about Manaow!"

"Manaow?"

"Yeah, Yanavee! She never attends class and always submits her assignments late, but you still helped her pass. You can help her, but why won't you help me?"

At first, Khemjira doesn't recognize the nickname, but when the student used the real name, she recalled Yanavee, a student in the same section as the girl in front of her.

Yanavee rarely attended classes, often submitted assignments late and didn't even help her group during the final project presentation Based on these facts.

Professor Khemjira seems unlikely to let someone like Yanavee pass the course.

"And are you the primary breadwinner for your family, skipping classes to work and earn money to care for your mother and support your younger brother?"

"....."

But that would only be true if she is a professor who judged students solely on what she saw in the classroom.

Khemjira knows Yanavee's situation far better than this student. She has spoken with Yanavee personally and even visited her living conditions. Yanavee's mother is ill and requires hospitalization, while her younger brother is still very young and needs close care.

With her father, the family's primary breadwinner, having passed away, Yanavee has to earn money to support her family and fund her own education. Sometimes, she submits assignments late because she has to balance caring for her mother and working to make ends meet.

Despite the delays, it's clear that the work she submits is done with genuine effort.

Just today, her mother's condition has worsened, leading to an emergency surgery, and Yanavee's group members have personally requested Khemjira to consider giving her a passing grade, even though she couldn't attend the final presentation.

Khemjira can't justify giving Yanavee a high grade, but at least she can ensure she doesn't fail. This is a stark contrast to the student standing before her now.

This student submits work late, puts in minimal effort, and has even been accused by her group members of not contributing to their projects or attending classes simply because the professor doesn't take attendance.

Khemjira doesn't want to emphasize the lack of attendance, but it's clear that this absence leads to the student's poor understanding of the material, which is reflected in the subpar work she submits.

"If you choose not to attend class just because 'the professor doesn't take attendance', then this is the consequence of that decision, and you need to accept it."

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"Hey, Nuea! Are you awake yet?"

A guy in his early twenties, dressed in kit as his pajamas, opens the door and returns to his room after heading out to buy brunch-a box of chicken basil with a fried egg from the convenience store below their dorm.

He brought back two boxes. one for himself and one for his friend who is still buried under the covers on the bed. He hadn't seen his friend all morning, even though he had been up for a while.

The previous night, he had been so drunk that he crashed on the sofa instead of making it to his bed. He couldn't even remember whether he got back before or after his friend.

It's normal for them to come back late and sleep in, but it's already almost afternoon, and his friend isn't usually one to sleep this late.

"Aren't you up yet? Weird. Was it that rough last night?"

*Whoosh!*

"...."

"......"

Underneath the blanket, there should be Nuea, his friend and chemistry major fellow student-not a naked woman lying there. Who the hell is she? The girl shrieks loudly, as if she's encountered some creep pulling the covers off her while she's lying there exposed.

"Ahhhh!"

"Ahhhh!"

"Ahhhhhhhhh!"

"Hey! Why the hell are you screaming. Nuea?"

Max yells, confused and panicked. It's bizarre enough that he's screaming, but the fact that Dao Nuea, who just walked out of the bathroom, is also screaming makes the situation even stranger.

Max should be the most shocked-there's a random naked woman in *his* room, after all.

"Ahhhh! Ahhhh!"

"Wait, hold on!"

The woman quickly grabs her clothes from the floor and bolts out of the room, still half-naked. Max, the room's rightful owner, doesn't even have a chance to ask her anything before she disappears.

To make matters worse, Dao Nuea calmly walks back into the bathroom as if nothing unusual is happening.

"Let her go, man. She's been wanting to leave for a while now."

"Da-Nuea! I told you not to bring girls into *my* room!"

"Geez, Pale lips, let me touch up my lips first."

"Don't you dare change the subject!"

Without red lips, there's no strength to walk. Dao Nuea holds the belief that whether she's awake or asleep, her lips must always be beautifully red. She considers applying lipstick more important than answering the questions of the room's owner.

*This will be the last time Max lets Dao Nuea stay over at his dorm.*

It's the millionth time he's decided this, but he knows he'll soften up again when his friend uses her charm to ask. It's not about the fact that Dao Nuea was once the girl he had a crush on back in their freshman year.

Now, they're just good friends, and he can't see her in any other way, especially after revealing everything to each other throughout their time as classmates. But he's still uncomfortable with the idea of his friend staying over at another guy's place. Those guys might not be as trustworthy as he is. Drunk men are dangerous.

But Max has come to realize that his friend is the real danger. How many times has she brought girls back from the bar to do things in the room while he's passed out on the sofa?

The whole dorm now thinks this once-innocent guy is a womanizer. The image he tried to maintain is long gone. Even now, after finishing her lipstick, she still shows no remorse.

"Why are you taking it so seriously? I didn't even intend to bring her here. It's just that she couldn't find the key to her room. And at that moment, things were getting intense. Doing it right at her door wouldn't have been very classy."

"So, you decided to do it in-but wait,"

Max starts to catch something suspicious in his friend's story.

"Where exactly were you getting so intense that you ended up here?"

"Oh, just downstairs."

"....."

"Her room is right below yours."

"You bastard, Nuea!"

Max clutches his head in disbelief.

"What am I supposed to do if I run into her now?"

"You probably won't run into her again. Honestly, I don't think she was that great. Once was more than enough."

Just thinking about last night made Dao Nuea shudder, remembering the fake moans the girl tried to make sound like a Japanese porn star.

Since waking up that morning, she couldn't help but grimace at her bed partner, forcing her to retreat to the bathroom to play on her phone. It is a relief when Max returned, so she could finally excuse herself.

"I'm out of here."

"You bastard, Nuea! You piece of shit!"

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Dao Nuea should take a break from her obsession with beautiful women.

Although this hobby is the only thing that helps her reduce the risk of a stroke from being a fourth-year chemistry student, dealing with her thesis and internship can drive her insane. But lately, the thing that used to relieve her stress isn't working as well as before.

She's starting to lose interest in sharing a bed with different women. No partner can make her feel truly excited anymore. At best, she admires their style and the sight of them being in her embrace, but once it's over, there's nothing left to discover.

So, few beautiful women ever get the chance to share a bed with her more than once. Finishing with one beauty, she moves on to the next, like constantly switching up her menu.

"Let's see which beautiful ladies are worth checking out."

Opening the dating app on her phone is the first thing Dao Nuea chooses to do after getting home. She's already taken care of herself-showered, washed her hair, and taken a puff from her vape.

Her body should be exhausted from hanging out with friends at the bar and bringing a girl home to spend the night. But just seeing so many beautiful women appear for her to swipe left or right, her eyes are wide open, too alert to sleep.

Definitely worth the money she spent upgrading the app to premium.

To avoid any copyright issues. Dao Nuea won't reveal the name of the dating app that's been her faithful companion for so long. But it's the best dating app ever, having led her to meet many gorgeous, high-quality women.

As everyone knows, dating apps aren't just for finding a partner. Whether you're looking for someone to chat with, a one-night stand (ONS), or friends with benefits (FWB) it all depends on what you write in your bio.

Dao Nuea has clearly stated in her bio that she's interested in ONS and FWB. Anyone who swipes on her hoping to develop a relationship has been blocked more times than she can count.

The app allows users to choose matches from both men and women, or just one gender, depending on their preference and comfort.

Naturally, Dao Nuea has set her preferences to show only women. Men, in her eyes, are nothing more than orangutans.

There are plenty of beautiful, high-quality women swiping right on her. The paid premium feature has made things much more convenient, so she no longer has to anxiously wonder if the other person will swipe back.

Dao Nuea scrolls through the profiles of women who liked her profile picture, which is of her cosplaying as a male anime character during a trip to Japan with her family several years ago. She looks both beautiful and handsome at the same time.

Not to brag, but she really is good-looking.

"Hmm?"

Among the hundreds of profiles filled with pretty faces, one stands out catching Dao Nuea's eye. Her eyes sparkle, just like they always do when she spots a girl who fits her type perfectly. But this time is different-this girl ticks every single box.

"Damn, she's hot!"

Short hair, curves like a queen, fair skin, and an enviable figure... though, the specifics aren't what matter most. The real point is that she's a knockouta spicy mature beauty that every younger girl dreams of.

Even though her face isn't visible in the photo, the way she sits sipping coffee like a lady of high society deserves a perfect score, a million out of ten.

Swipe right, why does Dao Nuea have to wait?

*Ding!*

And just like that, the spicy queen messages first, fast enough to make the young person pleased.

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**K: Interested?**

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Of course, interested, how could not be, if Dao Nuea has swiped right so hard the phone screen almost broke.

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**DN: And I'm even more interested now that you've messaged me, beautiful lady.**

**K : Don't you have a clearer picture of yourself?**

**K : Could you send me a clearer picture of your face?**

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The language is very formal, which probably fits the thirty-one years of age this woman has written in her bio. She's asking for a picture of someone else's face, yet her own photo hides hers. But that's okay, Dao Nuea doesn't mind such minor things.

Oh, right, the picture she's using as her profile photo is the one where she's doing a pose covering her face, mimicking her favorite male character.

Besides one eye, the rest of her face isn't visible. But she remembers having a picture where she's clearly visible, flashing a peace sign.

Scrolling through her photo gallery almost gives her a cramp before she finally finds the cosplay photo set she took. She selects a clear shot and sends it to the person asking to see her face.

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**DN : Sent a photo**

**DN : Would something like this work?**

*Read.*

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Silence. Dao Nuea is feeling so uneasy that she has to get up and sit on the bed is the attractive woman really going to break up with a cute girl like Dao Nuea? That's so cruel!

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**K : Are you free to meet this Friday?**

**K : At the XXX coffee shop in the XXX Art and Culture Centre at 6**

**PM.**

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As expected, all the hot sisters are kind. Dao Nuea is as excited as a dog getting meat.

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**DN : Sure.**

**DN : Should we exchange contact info?**

**K : Let's decide on that after we meet.**

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If the other side says so, Dao Nuea can only press like on the message because she doesn't know how to respond. She'll just wait to meet this hot sister on Friday.

And so, Friday quickly arrives.

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"Dao Nuea, you seem to be in a hurry to leave today."

"Heh heh, I have some errands to run, P'Na."

Dao Nuea been approached by her senior at the internship while taking off her lab coat, getting ready to leave the lab. Even though she knows the older woman is just asking out of courtesy, as seniors do with students interning there, she still feels a bit flustered.

It's as if she hasn't just finished clearing the tasks assigned to her, helping check the standards of the chemicals in the brand's new cosmetic line.

Although she's well-loved by all the seniors for being a quick learner and a diligent worker, Dao Nuea, in the role of an intern, doesn't have the same confidence as she does when she's in the role of a casanovy.

But there is one major perk of interning at a renowned cosmetics company: free makeup. Naturally, someone who loves wearing lipstick as much as Dao Nuea does wouldn't miss the chance to pick out a red shade to boost her energy.

After cleaning up the lab equipment she used, the student quickly freshens up by applying her favorite red lipstick before bowing to P'Na and slinging her backpack over her shoulder.

"Alright, take care on your way home. Make sure to rest up this weekend."

"Thank you!"

Today, Dao Nuea tries to leave work early, but by the time she finishes clearing her tasks, it's already well past the company's usual end of day, even though it's still earlier than when she usually leaves.

Sometimes, Dao Nuea thinks to herself that if life as an intern is already this tough, she dreads to imagine how much harder it will be when she becomes a full-fledged chemist.

Late nights, traffic jams, and all this chaos causes Dao Nuea to arrive at the XXX Art and Culture Centre five minutes late. She quickly hurries up to the coffee shop where she's supposed to meet, determined not to be any later.

She's not someone who likes to be late, especially for important meetings. And meeting the hot sister is that important to her-Dao Nuea is not exaggerating in the slightest.

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**K : Sent a photo.**

**K : I'm sitting here.**

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The coffee shop, which is the meeting place, isn't very big. As soon as Dao Nuea walks through the door she spots the person she's meeting sitting at a table in one corner of the shop, without needing to look at the photo sent by the other person again.

**Unfashionable dress**-a long-sleeved shirt and a long skirt-that conceals the beauty of this woman, even though the aura of the hot sister sitting there, legs crossed, reading a book, doesn't diminish in the slightest despite the outdated clothes.

Dao Nuea is visibly excited and even checks the color of her lipstick using her phone's front camera before approaching the person she's meeting from behind.

"Excuse me, are you K?"

"...."

"You are.... right?"

Dao Nuea asks again, trying to confirm. The woman's face, as she glances at Dao Nuea out of the corner of her eye, is so expressionless that it's terrifying.

She must be upset that Dao Nuea is five minutes late. Looks like she's run into someone who's extremely punctual.

"I'm sorry! The traffic was really bad this evening, so I....."

"You're a woman?"

"....."

"I thought you were a man."

"P-Pardon?"

Khemjira's face clearly shows her frustration. She rushed to drive out of the university right after finishing her lecture, not to mention arriving early, only for the person she's meeting to be five minutes late.

She had secretly hoped she might meet a new lover that would suit her tastes, but just seeing that it's a woman causes her to lose interest before they even have a chance to talk.

Dao Nuea looks utterly confused, like a deer in headlights, while Khemjira speaks with a hint of irritation, though she still maintains her composed demeanor.

This petite woman has never been interested in women, the idea of sleeping with someone of the same sex has never crossed her mind.

"Why didn't you say you were a woman from the start? What a waste of time."

"But I wrote in my bio that I'm a woman."

"....."

Bio? A woman? Upon hearing this explanation. Khemjira grabs her phone and reopens this girl's bio page to check it again.

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***DN (23)***

***Find ONS, FWB***

***Women***

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Well, this is embarrassing, Khemjira thinks. She made such a big fuss, only to realize she's the one at fault. But she did set the app to show only men, so what's going on?

Is it a bug, or was Dao Nuea's face just too handsome? Either way, it's her mistake for not reading the other person's bio carefully. She'll just have to learn from this and do better next time.

"Then I'm the one who misunderstood. I'm sorry for wasting your time."

"...."

Dao Nuea stands there, confused. Her hot sister is packing up her things, looking like she's about to leave.

"Aren't we going to talk about that anymore?"

**"I'm not interested in women's."**

Khemjira is only interested in having sex with men. It's always been that way, and she doesn't plan on changing to be with a woman. She firmly believes in this.

**"How could women compare to men?"**

"...."

To be clear, Khemjira isn't the kind of person who would rudely blurt out such a statement in someone's face, but she accidentally mutters her thoughts in a low voice, barely audible.

Unfortunately for her, Dao Nuea hears the words loud and clear.

Wait a minute.

What did she just say?

Even after the hot sister has walked past her. Dao Nuea remains frozen in place.

No, this can't be.

This isn't a hot sister, this is-

"Ooh, come on, ***Auntie***!"

"....."

Someone like that is just a narrow-minded, old-fashioned person who can't see past the idea that sex only happens between men and women!

Dao Nuea's shout is loud enough to make Khemjira turn around with wide eyes. The younger woman's demeanor is completely different from a moment ago.

Someone like this doesn't deserve to receive any sweet words from her, they deserve nothing but a harsh lecture for living in a bubble.

The statement that women can't have sex as well as men is the ultimate insult to Dao Nuea's pride.

"What did you say? That women can't compare to men in sex? Oh, don't even try to mumble it. Say it loud and clear! Wo-men can-not com-pare-tomen!"

Go ahead, let everyone in the shop hear exactly what they're arguing about. Dao Nuea is bold, cool, and special by nature.

"Oh, I can't believe people with such outdated ideas still exist in this era that's supposed to be filled with educated people! What's the matter? Did your parents happen to be Triceratops and a Sauroposeidon? Grew up eating nothing but plants, but no nutrients ever made it to your brain to help it develop, huh?"

Even though Dao Nuea's rant is long and loud, Khemjira doesn't care. She isn't embarrassed by the fact that people in the coffee shop are staring because of the loud argument. She's focused on one word. Just one word.

**"A-auntie?"**

"That's right! Auntie!"

Still not hearing it clearly? Then Dao Nuea will make it clearer.

"Watch my lips... **Aun-tie!"**

**"You brat!"**

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**Chapter 02**

Khemjira is thirty-one years old, but she's confident she looks younger than her age. Everyone tells her so. Her face doesn't seem a day over someone in their early twenties.

The most she's ever been called is "big sister," or occasionally "aunt" by her relatives, but that's the worst of it.

But today, for the first time, someone calls her "Auntie"-a word that can wound any woman's soul in ways she never imagined. The sting of it cuts deep, shattering the confidence she's always had in her youthful appearance.

She's left wondering if she really looks old enough to be defined by such a dreaded word.

*Auntie?*

And to make it worse, it's not just anyone who calls her that-it's a younger brat she's meeting for the first time. The more she thinks about it, the angrier she gets, her fist clenching involuntarily. Khemjira swears she's never felt this level of irritation before.

*Whack!*

"What are you sitting here sulking for?"

"....."

Khemjira's head nearly snaps to the side from the force of the slap. She's been sitting quietly on the sofa, minding her own business, not bothering anyone.

Yet, somehow, she's become an eyesore, an annoyance to someone who decided to stride over and smack her on the head with a slender hand.

The owner of that hand, Parnward, stands there glaring at her, as if Khemjira's mere presence on the sofa is an offense as if she's nothing more than a bothersome nuisance in this house.

To Parnward, Khemjira is just an unsightly stain on her world.

This sofa is the only one in the house, meant for the family members who truly belong here-not for someone like Khemjira, who moved in after her parents passed away, to sit around with a scowl on her face, irritating anyone who passes by.

Parnward has just returned home only to find her cousin making herself comfortable, and it grates on her nerves. If Khemjira could kindly take her sulking elsewhere. Parnward would be very grateful.

But Khemjira knows her place-she's an outsider, and it's only natural for her to defer to the true mistress of the house. "This place isn't yours, Khemjira. Get out-"

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*Smack!*

"Ouch!"

But the relationship between Khemjira and Parnward isn't anything ordinary.

"Shut up, Parnward, because I'm in a really bad mood right now. But if you want to be my punching bag like always... so come on!"

"Khem! You...."

There's no such thing as the resident bowing down to the host.

Their 'normal' is trading insults until it escalates into a full-blown fight.

"Kids, I'm going to the market. Do you want anything?"

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*Smack, smack, smack!*

*Thud, thud!*

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The elderly woman cheerfully asks her daughter and niece, who are in the middle of a heated fight on the sofa. Her face is bright with a smile, embodying the most cheerful spirit in the house.

It's the weekend, and since her beloved daughter and niece are both home, she sees it as a perfect opportunity to go to the market and buy fresh ingredients to cook their favorite dishes.

This includes Khemjira as well. The notion that she's somehow an outsider in this house is utterly ridiculous.

Khemjira moved in with her uncle and his family when she was twelve. They took her in as one of their own after both her parents passed away, treating her with love, warmth, and care, just like a daughter.

Even though the eldest daughter of the house often picks fights with her cousin, it always ends the same-with them pulling each other's hair and fighting.

It's been that way since they were kids, and even now, as university professors, they still manage to brawl like children every time they see each other.

To Khemjira, this house is her family. She sees her aunt and uncle as her second parents, even calling them mom and dad. The only person she'd rather not acknowledge as a relative is Parnward, who constantly annoys her to the point of getting smacked every time.

Parnward can never hit back, always ending up as the punching bag beneath Khemjira, who won't stop until there's blood.

Today is no different, until 'Pantat', the youngest son of the family and a graduate student in chemistry, decides to report to their mother while playing a game at his computer.

"Mom, P' Khem and P'Wad are fighting again."

"Oh my, my two girls are as close as ever. That's good. You should love each other as family."

The mother smiles at Khemjira and Parnward, who are still wrestling on the sofa, before turning to her husband, who's meticulously cleaning his beloved stag beetle.

"Honey, I'm going to the market."

"Have a safe trip."

"Pantat, if you're free, could you come to the market with me?"

His mother asks.

"Sure, Mom."

Pantat replies, getting up from his computer and following his mother out the door.

"Tat! Help me first!"

Parnward screams for help as Khemjira pulls her hair viciously. But her brother decides to pass.

"I'm tired of watching you two fight. I'm going to the market with Mom instead. Hey Mom! I feel like having some fried pork today."

"Tat!-Agh! Khem!"

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*Smack! Smack! Thud!*

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The fight continues without hesitation. Scenes like this are a regular occurrence in their home. Their mother simply sees it as her daughters expressing their love and heads off to the market.

As for Pantat, he no longer cares, unlike before when he used to cheer for one sister or the other. Their father, even less concerned, is busy tending to his most beloved children, meticulously cleaning their cages one by one.

"Alice, you're as beautiful as ever today."

Khemjira and Panward fighting? That's just another day in the family, everyone can vouch for that.

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It's not just Khemjira who's losing her temper-there's someone who seems even more furious.

"Auntie! Auntie! Aaaah!"

Dao Nuea herself is so frustrated she could almost die wanting to slap that old-fashioned woman. But since she can't, all she can do is scream into her pillow on her bed at home.

It's been two or three days since the encounter with Khemjira, yet her anger only seems to be multiplying.

Dao Nuea hates those who think women can't match men in bed. If someone prefers one gender over the other, that's tolerable, but saying one gender is better in bed than the other is downright insulting there were many women who have slept with her and even said her skills were better than any man they had been sleep with, so Dao Nuea is confident that her prowess is second to none.

With such outdated thinking, there's no way she'd ever share a bed with someone like that. She hopes she never has to see Khemjira's face again. Annoyed and angry, she decides it's time to relieve some stress. Because of that, she picks up her phone and opens the chat group with her best friends.

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**The MVP is mine (5)**

**Dao Nuea: I need a drink. Anyone?**

*Ding!*

**Pleng Phin: Pass Pleng Phin: Waste Money**

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It already looks like the hang out trip is going to fall apart... Pleng Phin' is the first to decline, with a reason that perfectly fits her reputation as the stingiest in the group.

*Ding!*

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**Grand: I'm pass toooo**

**Grand: I already have a VERYYY special date with P' Ram.**

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'Grand, the only spicy girl in the group who isn't single is the second to decline. Ever since she got a boyfriend. P'Ram, she's been completely MIA, never showing up to see her friends.

Her mind is always on her handsome boyfriend, and they're practically inseparable, as if they'd die without each other. Hmm... with just these two declining, the trip is already doomed from here.

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**Dao Nuea: Your life now revolves only around him, sis.**

**Grand: Cuz my bf is so CUTE!**

**Grand: You wouldn't get it without one.**

**Dao Nuea: Kkkkk**

**Dao Nuea: So, I ask other else.**

**Dao Nuea: Hey Wanna Drink? @Khun Ther**

**Grand: You're still tagging them?**

**Grand: she hasn't checked Line in** **ages.**

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Grand is right. There may be five members in this group, but these days, only three of them are talking. Khun Ther' is another close friend of Dao Nuea in the group. She used to be the one who always chatted and went out with everyone.

No one in the group could respond to messages as quickly as she could. If there were plans, you could count on her to join. But ever since 'that incident. Dao Nuea's energetic friend has mysteriously disappeared-not in the sense of being unreachable, but it's been a long time since she last checked the group chat.

And if Khun Ther's situation is bad, the last member's case is even more concerning.

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**Dao Nuea: Jic she will respond**

**Dao Nuea: Let's tag this one too @Yai Mai**

**Grand: This one doesn't respond too lol**

**Grand: It's not too late if you tag her after she wakes up.**

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Yai Mai the softest and youngest of the group, is the one least likely to check the group chat, and it's almost impossible to contact her seriously.

Meeting this girl is actually very easy and can be done at any time, except during non-visiting hours. However, you can only find her in a deep sleep, completely unconscious.

She has been in this state ever since an accident turned her into a 'sleeping beauty a few years ago, with very little chance of recovery.

The possibility of her waking up to reply to Dao Nuea's invitation for drinks is next to impossible.

In conclusion, the other two members of the group are considered missing. One has disappeared, and the other is lying in a vegetative state in the hospital. Still, Dao Nuea hasn't given up on getting all the members to reply to the group chat. She loves when the group is lively, and everyone is together.

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**Dao Nuea: Well, Jic she turns 20 and wants to broadens the mind.**

**Dao Nuea: Wake upppp, Yai Mail.**

**Dao Nuea: I'll take you out to experience lights and sounds.**

**Pleng Phin: You seem lonely, huh?**

**Dao Nuea: Of course I'm SOOO LONELY!**

**Dao Nuea: I wanna drink!**

**Dao Nuea: DRINKK!!!**

**Pleng Phin: Alright...**

**Pleng Phin: Just BBQ? I'm not in the mood for alcohol.**

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She'd rather drink, but fine, whatever Barbecue is one of Dao Nuea's favorites too. At least she'll have someone to rant to about that old hag while they eat.

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**Dao Nuea: Kk Dao Nuea: Just BBQ**

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In a group where everyone is already close. Dao Nuea and Pleng Phin are a particularly tight duo, likely because they are around the same age and in the same year of university, even if at different ones.

The group is formed by Dao Nuea, who is stuck at home with nothing to do after having to take a year off due to a broken leg from a motorcycle accident after buying a big bike.

She is forced to sell the bike and stay home until she heals, and it is a long and boring time. During this period, a popular MOBA game is the only thing that keeps her entertained, and through this game, she accidentally meets her current close friends.

Dao Nuea meets Pleng Phin because they are frequently matched together in ranked games, leading her to reach out and invite Pleng Phin to play together.

She meets Khun Ther because Khun Ther asks to join her team after seeing a post from Dao Nuea looking for teammates, and their playstyles match well, so they form a group.

Dao Nuea meets Yai Mai, a newbie, when Yai Mai opens her mic to ask her teammates for help learning how to play the game. Dao Nuea and Khun Ther offer to teach her which leads to their friendship Yai Mai then becomes the next member of the group.

The last member, Grand, is a bit of an exception. Dao Nuea and Grand initially clashed on Twitter over whether the most appealing game characters are those who are handsome or those with the best skills.

One screams over male characters and only chooses to play those she finds attractive, while the other argues that picking characters without considering their skills is a burden on the team.

After several posts of back-and-forth insults, they eventually bond over jointly roasting a troll who claims that women can't play games as well as men. In the end, this man-crazy woman becomes the final member of the group.

They are a close-knit group of gaming friends, despite their age differences, with Dao Nuea being the one who brought everyone together. She secretly feels bad that the group she loves isn't the same as it used to be, but there's nothing she can do about it, so she just tries to brush it off to avoid feeling down.

Today, Dao Nuea is waiting to pick up Pleng Pin for a barbecue near CAU University. She parks her car at a nearby public park because she doesn't want to drive around looking for a parking spot, which is as scarce as if the parking lot had been built on a tight budget.

Pleng Pin also suggested Dao Nuea to park there since she only needs a quick chat about her thesis, and her science faculty isn't far from the park.

Not wanting to wait in the car, Dao Nuea decides to find a seat at one of the marble tables in the park It's not easy to find a park in the city center that's both shaded and not too hot-perfect for someone like her who hates the heat to sit and wait for a while.

"Eat!"

Oh, Dao Nuea is secretly surprised that kids these days still gather to play checkers. Using soda bottle caps as pieces is so nostalgic. She thought they'd be grouping up to play games at the computer shop or just playing on their phones.

"They're so noisy, kids these days."

Hey, it's a public park, not a prayer room And when you play checkers, there has to be some shouting and excitement, right? And listen to how kids talk these days. That lady who just spoke is so old...

A familiar long skirt, the same short haircut.

Dao Nuea is even more certain when she sneaks a peek at the face of the young woman reading a philosophy book. That person is sitting with her back turned at the marble table next to the group of kids playing checkers.

Oh wow, very confident. Very clear.

"Hey! Auntie!"

"You brat!"

Dao Nuea vividly remembers this old-fashioned woman. Destiny? No way. It's karma, and that sounds more believable.

Khemjira had gone out of her way to find a quiet place to read while waiting to teach her evening class, even leaving the university to avoid running into students and fellow lecturers. But it seems fate has a twisted sense of humor, leading her right back into the path of that rude-mouthed kid from days ago.

The irritation suddenly resurfaces in both of them. Dao Nuea, now realizing who was complaining earlier, dares to snap back,

"Oh, I was just wondering who was ranting about "kids these days' like an old person. Turns out it really is an old person."

"Watch your mouth. I'm only thirty-one."

"Wow, so old."

The word "old" hit with such force that it almost felt like spitting blood. Just wait until she's at Khemjira's age and get called an "auntie."

This brat is quick to call others old and outdated, but still thinks thirtysomething is ancient.

"Well, try to live as long as I have without getting eaten alive by all the dogs from your mouth first."

"What did you say?!"

"Eat!"

"Shut up! People are about to start slapping each other!"

"Who's going to slap who?"

"Hey there! Yeah, eat!"

The kids, having too much fun, completely ignore the shouting around them Khemjira can't stand how rude kids these days are and sits there, rubbing her temples in frustration.

Dao Nuea, ready to roll up her sleeves and start a fight, decides to walk straight over to the group of boys. They all look up at the tall woman with long hair in unison.

"Hey, can I borrow your checkers pieces?"

"But we're playing right now."

"Here, take this and go play games at the computer shop instead."

Dao Nuea hands a 500-baht bill to one of the boys in the group. As expected, the kids quickly pack up the soda bottle caps into a box and hand it to Dao Nuea without hesitation.

"We'll just give them to you, big sis. We're done playing anyway."

They dash out of the park in a hurry. It seems like they didn't have enough money to go to the computer shop, so they gathered to play checkers after school instead.

Dao Nuea returns with a box full of soda bottle caps and places it on the marble table where Khemjira is sitting, reading her book.

"Done."

"Using money to solve problems."

"And did it work? Look at the results."

Dao Nuea shrugs, ready for round two.

"Now we can have our fight."

"I'm not as uncivilized as you. An intellectual doesn't act like that."

"An intellectual, huh?"

An intellectual who still upholds patriarchal values? Now, that's a joke.

However, instead of picking a fight. Dao Nuea does something that makes Khemjira, who was reading her book, look up with a furrowed brow.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm annoyed. I'm going to play checkers."

Dao Nuea begins to arrange the soda bottle caps on the black-and-white checkered marble table. She carefully places the caps on her side of the board and then moves to place the pieces on the side where Khemjira is sitting.

Not only is she rude, but Khemjira also has no desire to share a table with someone she can't stand.

"Go play somewhere else I'm sitting here."

"Are you sitting on the checkered board?"

"I mean go play by yourself at another table."

"Who plays checkers alone? You need someone else to play with."

"...."

"Come on, play with me I've got nothing else to do."

Dao Nuea doesn't have any ulterior motives. She's just waiting for Pleng Phin and has nothing to do. Since fighting isn't an option she figures playing checkers might help her blow off some steam.

But this is too strange.

Khemjira thinks this woman is odd, and anyone else would probably think the same. She's always been a bit crazy Just the other day, she was insulting her, calling her an old hag.

Today, she's repeating the same insult and even challenging her to a fight. And now, out of nowhere, she's inviting her to play checkers as if they're good friends?

"No."

This is just ridiculous. Plus, it's wasting her time and disrupting her reading. "Didn't they have checkers back in the dinosaur era?"

"...."

"Or is it that old ladies like you only know how to play jacks or banana stem horses?"

Now this brat is really crossing the line.

Let's reading the book after finishing class-Khemjira slams her philosophy book down on the marble table.

She's going to teach this brat how a real checkers pro play. This kid dares to challenge someone who once dominated the entire school by collecting all the soda bottle caps?

Dao Nuea makes the first move, placing a soda bottle cap on the board.

Khemjira quickly counters, making her move with speed and precision.

Neither of them takes more than two seconds to decide their next move.

The game between then turns into a fast-paced battle, with no one willing to slow down. The pieces start disappearing from the board in rapid succession as they "eat" each other's pieces.

"Eat."

"Eat."

Each piece lost isn't due to a mistake or carelessness, they're calculated sacrifices, planned exchanges to gain the upper hand. Soon, both sides are down to fewer than five pieces each. The outcome is nearly in sight-who will the goddess of victory favor?

They've had their fun, but Khemjira is ready to end this game.

"Eat! Eat! Eat!"

"Ahhhh!"

There it is-the legendary three-piece capture move. This was Khemjira's signature move back in her senior school checkers champion days. She always kept this strategy in reserve to close out a game, and it never failed her. Dao Nuea lets out a shriek as her side is reduced to just one piece of bottle cap, while Khemjira still has four remaining.

So, this kid thought she could belittle her checkers skills?....But why does Khemjira feel the urge to smirk in satisfaction?

*What on earth am I doing?*

Khemjira, who's always kept her emotions in check, shouldn't be grinning like a child who's just won a game. Acting like a competitive kid is ridiculous, especially if any of her students see her now-her image would be completely ruined.

She checks her watch and sees that it's almost time for her class. It's best to hurry back and prepare.

"I've won, so I'll be on my way,"

Khemjira says, not bothering to finish the game. She grabs her book and gets up to leave. The pieces left on the board can be forgotten-after all, it's clear who the winner is.

But what's with that smirk on Dao Nuea's face?

A bad feeling creeps up on Khemjira just as she notices something on the board-oh no!

"Eat! Eat! Eat! Eat!"

Beyond the three-piece capture, there's a four-piece capture!

Dao Nuea has been setting her up for this from the beginning. By luring Khemjira into making that three-piece capture, she strategically positions her pieces so that her last one clears the entire board.

*The war isn't over until all the battles are won*-Khemjira knows this truth well, yet she lets her guard down. Now, the one who should have lost is the one gloating with even more satisfaction.

"Woww woww shocked, are you?"

Dao Nuea teases Khemjira, who's now frozen in disbelief at the outcome she was so confident about.

"Surprised? Stunned? You were so sure you'd win, huh? Oh, look at that sour face-holy sh-!"

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*Thud!*

*Splash!*

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Unable to contain herself, Khemjira instinctively kicks out at Dao Nuea, sending her plunging into the park's pond with a loud splash.

And yes, she doesn't help her out. She leaves the annoying kid in the water and walks away.

***"Damn! auntie! you old hag!"***

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**Chapter 03**

"Did you fall into a tank of poop or something?"

That's the first sentence Max chooses to greet his close friend, who just sits down at the table. The strange stench coming from Dao Nuea, mixed with the scent of perfume, makes him automatically cover his nose.

The smell is far too pungent to be just a regular body odor or sweat, and it even manages to overpower the sharp perfume, which seems to have been sprayed in no less than half a bottle.

Tonight is another packed night at a famous bar in Thonglor, filled with several drunk people gathered for a Dao Nuea's classmate's birthday party.

Though, admittedly, most of them doesn't come to genuinely congratulate or celebrate the birthday owner, they're just here for free drinks and the chance to pick up a girl to take back to their rooms.

Dao Nuea is well-known among her friends. She's always the first one to leave with a girl, and never attends a friend's birthday party without ulterior motives.

She's confident in her good looks, sure that there's always have many women will want to leave with her-except for today, when that confidence suddenly disappears after Max's greeting. Despite trying to shower and wash away the pond's mud stench multiple times, she's still anxious.

"Yeah right, like I fell into a poop tank, although I showered and sprayed myself with perfume several times!"

Dao Nuea doesn't think she smells bad anymore, but after Max's comment, she immediately starts sniffing herself again.

"It's not *that* strong. My nose just got quick to know."

"You're stressing me out, damn it!"

Dao Nuea must admit, though, that the pond mud smell really clings to her. It's been several days since she was kicked into the pond by that auntie, and after that, her friend Pleng Phin made her miss out on a barbecue, kicking her out to go home and shower because no one wanted to eat barbecue with a stench lingering in the air.

Dao Nuea knew it too well and had lost her appetite even before her friends did. This whole ordeal only fuels her anger further, and she vows to get revenge.

Just wait. On the next time, Dao Nuea will surely pour that mud all over that's auntie head!

"Dao Nuea, you're finally here, my dear friend! Today is my birthday party, so no leaving early with a girl again!"

Dao Nuea's arrival prompts 'Bank', the birthday boy, to come down from the third floor of the bar, which has been reserved for the night, to personally welcome his dear friend. Even with the loud music from the DJ blaring through the venue, it's no match for Bank's booming voice as he calls out to her.

Now, everyone in the bar. including their friends from university, knows who Dao Nuea is the one who never leaves a bar without a girl in tow. But she's never embarrassed to be the center of attention, and she responds to her wealthy friend with just as much volume.

"Of course, Bank, my dear friend! As long as you're not drunk yet. I'm not going anywhere."

The freshly 22-year-old smiles and pats Dao Nuea on the shoulder.

"That's what I like to hear! Order whatever you want, it's on me-no limits!" "Alright, my dear friend! In that case, I should mix a drink for the birthday boy You up for it?"

"Of course, I'm in! Bring it on!"

In Bank's eyes, Dao Nuea is probably one of his best friends. He drops himself into a seat at the table with her and their group, eagerly waiting for the drink his dear friend is mixing for him.

Max, on the other hand, is still puzzled about what Dao Nuea has ever done for Bank to make this rich kid, who never mingles with people of lower social status, call her his "dear friend" and invite her to celebrate his birthday at a high-end bar in Thonglor, even reserving a VIP table for her and letting Max tag along.

Dao Nuea is carefully mixing the cocktail in a highball glass using her secret recipe, confident that it will not only please the birthday boy but also knock him out cold. However, Max doubts whether her signature cocktail receipe can get Bank drunk.

How does Max know her intention without even asking? He never believed for a second that Dao Nuea would sit idly by and wait for Bank to get drunk on his own before she went off to find a girl.

"Do you really think you can wait? Bank's a heavyweight, you know."

"No matter how strong, it won't beat my drink. Just wait-he'll be done in less than an hour."

This cocktail has been tred, tested, and perfected by Dao Nuea after several versions of tweaking and enhancing. The drink she's mixing now is strong enough to knock out an elephant. Some elephants might be more resilient than others, but when combined with her persuasive skills...

"Bank, if you finish this glass, you're a legend."

"Bank, if you finish this bottle, you're amazing."

"Bank, if you finish this keg, **you're a god**."

"Ugh."

"You guys, Bank's knocked out!"

*Knockout,* as expected. Her drink has taken down the so-called toughest drinkers in Thonglor time and time again. Dao Nuea sets the mixer down on the table and gives Max a thumbs-up while he sits with his chin in his hand, looking unimpressed.

"Bank's down. Now, it's my time."

"You're a real piece of shit, Dao Nuea."

Dao Nuea never claims she is a good person. The birthday day is already knocked out and has been carried home by his friends. So now all the delicious drinks, both expensive and cheap, in the bar belong to her alone.

She wastes no time ordering the most expensive bottles in the bar, trying a variety of types and flavors-something she rarely gets the chance to do unless someone's treating.

Afterward. she starts clinking glasses with all the beautiful women around her, as if she were a politician canvassing votes in the Thonglor district.

Max, after finishing just one glass of liquor, watches as his close friend already finds a girl to take back with. He doesn't know who she is, but she's attractive-her pale skin practically glows under the bar's spotlight, and her large chest looks like it's been inflated with balloons. She clings to Dao Nuea's arm, calling her "sister" in a sweet, pleading tone-the exact type of girl that Dao Nuea enjoys.

"Wowww Dao Nuea Wowww."

Max is the only one who is so sick of his friend, while the other guys cheer and tease as usual. Dao Nuea winks at her less experienced friends, knowing that once he's gained a little more expertise he'll also have beautiful women ready to leave the bar with him, just like her.

Now that the free drinks time at her friend's birthday party is over, it's time for Dao Nuea to enjoy her night to the fullest with the beautiful girl by her side.

. .

Max already told for the first that his room tonight isn't available for someone to bring a girl over. His room has become no different from a brothel lately.

However, this girl following Dao Nuea back seems to have deep pockets. She's generous enough to book a five-star hotel room so they can have fun tonight. And if Dao Nuea can please her as much as the price of the room, it seems this girl will become another one hooked on spending the night with the red-lipped woman.

Dao Nuea has always been confident in matters like this, and always will be. This beautiful woman will never forget what happens between them.

"Mmm..."

"Mmm, can I have the key card, please?"

At this critical moment, Dao Nuea wants to continue the story inside the room, but the girl, her face flushed from alcohol and holding the key card in her hand, still refuses to give it to her as requested.

"No."

"Come on, pleasee."

"Why don't you take it out yourself?"

So *troublesome*... Dao Nuea tries to hide her true feelings under a waxed smile with her red-painted lips, but a smirk forms as she sees the unexpected action of the girl she's about to sleep with.

How bold does one have to be to do something like this? It almost makes Dao Nuea look as if she's seen a ghost.

The room's key card is placed between the cleavage of the girl's ample chest, and she even arches as if inviting the taller girl to search for it. Dao Nuea doesn't really want to do something embarrassing like this right outside the door, but she decides to reach out for the key card inside that, to get into the room as quickly as possible.

Poof!

The hallway lights abruptly go out, causing the actions in front of the hotel room to pause for a moment out of panic. It's a five-star hotel, yet they don't have a backup generator for sudden blackouts like this. The big-chested woman panics, dramatically throwing herself into Dao Nuea's arms with an exaggerated look of fear.

"I'm so scared, sis Dao Nuea!"

"It's okay. I'm right here."

.

*Creak...*

.

"Let's just get inside the room first, okay? Now, about that key card-"

What the hell are you doing with my wife?!"

.

*Wham!*

*Poof!*

*.*

"Ouch!"

Dao Nuea asks for the key card but instead gets a fist thrown directly into her right cheek. The hallway lights flicker back on all at once as Dao Nuea is knocked to the floor from the punch. Just as she's about to be pummeled further by the massive man, built like a wrestler, the big-chested woman stops him, seemingly well-acquainted with him.

"Calm down, babe!"

"I'm not calming down! She was all over my wife!"

Well, that's clear now. Dao Nuea is in serious trouble. Dao Nuea is in serious trouble. She would be beated to a pulp right outside the room, or else she's probably going to end up in the hospital for sure.

"Why are you here with her in a hotel?!"

"And what about you? You said you were working out of town today."

"....."

Dao Nuea clutches her mouth before slowly using the wall to help herself up. But before she can steady herself, the huge man still can't come up with a response for the woman. His suspicious silence only fuels her growing curiosity.

"What Are You. Doing HERE?"

She starts to press him, stressing each syllable, though this man had plenty of strength to crush Dao Nuea in a heartbeat.

"I-um..."

**"Are you going to continue?"**

The big guy jumps in shock and turns to look at the room he'd just walked out of. A woman, her shirt half unbuttoned as if she had hastily thrown it back on, pokes her head out to check on what's happening. Seeing her. Dao Nuea is more shocked than anyone else.

It's the same woman again-this is the third time Dao Nuea has run into her by coincidence.

Khemjira seems to be the only one not keeping up with the situation outside her hotel room. She is just poking her head out to check on her partner, who is so afraid of the dark that he can't continue with her in bed.

He tells her he's going to step out to see if the power in the hallway is out too. But instead, she ends up seeing that foul-mouthed brat from before and a beautiful woman glaring at her and her man, furious.

"So, what the hell are you doing here?"

The words are laced with hostility. completely at odds with the innocent look she gave Dao Nuea earlier. The man, now reduced to a cowering figure, looks like he wants to disappear as he faces his furious wife.

"B-babe, you're misunderstanding me-"

"Misunderstanding my ass! Who the hell is she?!"

The woman loses it, her voice screeching as she smacks her husband even harder than he punched Dao Nuea. Then she turns to glare at the woman with her husband, even though it's clear that the stranger has nothing to do with the situation.

At this point, the wife is behaving like a rabid dog, ready to bite anyone in her path. Without asking the woman any questions, she lunges at her fully intending to attack.

Khemjira is about to get slapped for sure if not for the tall girl-whom she pushed into a well just a few days ago-rushing in to stand in between them. The expression that usually carries a smile is now replaced by a cold, disdainful look.

"Leave others out of this. Go deal with your husband somewhere else." *Disgusting*.

A match made in hell.

Dao Nuea despises people like this. Married, yet still sleeping around with others. Women like that will never be seen as beautiful in her eyes, and she certainly won't lower herself to sleep with someone so filthy.

"Y-you, come here!"

The wife, likely shaken by Dao Nuea's glare, gives up on Khemjira and drags her husband into the hotel elevator. It's over now, and Khemjira admits that she is frozen in fear when the woman charges at her. But the brat she insulted so many times is the one who steps in and protects her.

*Terrifying*. Khemjira feels no different from that man's wife when she looks at the tall girl's expression and eyes. But once it's just the two of them left the girl returns to normal. She quickly clutches her cheek with a pained look. It hurts-hurts like hell.

That punch landed square on her face with such force that the guy must know some boxing Her molars even feel like they might be loose.

Khemjira sneaks a glance at the other girl's swollen cheek who now looks at her as if inviting another punch. How does someone manage to always look like they're asking for a slap?

"Meeting three times... Some people call that destiny."

"Ridiculous."

Khemjira says, turning to walk back into her room. But what she sees on the tall girl's face makes her freeze, her expression suddenly alarmed.

"Y-your nose...."

*Drip.*

"Shit."

A thick stream of dark red liquid drips from Dao Nuea's nose. The punch from earlier must have burst a blood vessel. The key card to her own room is still lodged between the cleavage of that man's wife, and the blood is now flowing too much. If she tries to find a bathroom elsewhere, it'll be too late, and the hallway will be covered in blood.

"Can I get inside your room for a bit?"

"What? no, you can't."

"I'm not going to do anything to you. Who in their right mind would be turned on by elderly people?"

Dao Nuea ignores the refusal and heads straight for the bathroom in Khemjira's room. She quickly turns on the faucet to wash the blood off her hands and face, but the bleeding from her nose doesn't stop. She plans to stand there and let the blood drip into the sink until it stops.

However, someone seems unable to tolerate the sight of her bloody nose and forces her to tilt her head back, pressing tissue against her nose to stop the bleeding.

"You're going to choke on your own blood like this,"

Khemjira says, as if scolding her. Even for something as simple as first aid for a nosebleed, kids these days can't seem to do it right. If she keeps leaning forward like that, she'll probably faint soon enough. Khemjira decides to pull Dao Nuea out of the bathroom and sit her on the bed.

She still doesn't allow the tall girl to lower her head, helping her keep the tissue in place to stop the bleeding. Since Dao Nuea is considerably taller, Khemjira has to stand while holding the tissue in place.

"There's no ice or cold towels, so we'll probably just have to wait for the bleeding to stop on its own."

With Khemjira's method of first aid, it doesn't take long for the bleeding to subside. She checks to make sure everything is fine before finally letting Dao Nuea lower her head. Dao Nuea never expected Khemjira to help her stop the bleeding.

She should probably thank her, but seeing the face of someone who insulted her so harshly before makes it hard for her to be kind in return.

"Were you going to sleep with that guy, didn't you?"

Dao Nuea doesn't thank her but instead asks about Khemjira and the man, as if that's a more appropriate topic. Khemjira, who had high hopes that this girl might have leamed some manners from her family, feels disappointed. In the end, she's just another brat.

And what's that? Accusing her of sleeping with someone? It's such an irritating thing to hear.

"Yeah, but it's not happening now I don't have sex with people who aren't single."

Khemjira sighs, clearly fed up.

"It's so tiring, always running into married men."

How many times has she encountered this to look so exasperated? Dao Nuea frowns but doesn't ask Khemjira must have planned to sleep with him, not knowing he was married.

"So, how's it going? All those men you praise so much-was sex with a man really better than with a woman?"

"Not your business"

"What!"

"Seems like you're begging me to kick you again,"

Khemjira retorts, still annoyed by the lack of gratitude. She then notices a strange smell.

"What's that awful stench? Smells like you fell into a poop tank."

"And whose fault do you think that is, you ancient homophobic dinosaur!"

"You're getting out of line, you little brat. I'm not homophobic"

Khemjira says.

That accusation feels like slander. How could she be homophobic, as she also has a colleague gay friend. Her patience is running thin with this foulmouthed kid. It's as if her parents fed her dog meat, and now a dog's grown in her mouth.

"What is it with you, anyway? Every time we meet, all you do is insult me."

"You started by insulting me first, and you still expect me to be polite?"

"Who insulted who? That day, I was talking to myself, not expecting you to hear it. And besides, it's just my personal preference. I have the right to choose who I want to have sex with and for what reasons. If my thoughts offended you, then I apologize."

Khemjira wasn't lying-she hadn't meant for her thoughts to be overheard. She knows her opinions might not sit well with everyone, but they don't warrant the constant insults as if she'd killed this girl's parents.

"More importantly, that day, you could've calmly corrected me, but instead, you chose to call me 'old lady' 'auntie' and constantly be sarcastic on me."

"...."

"So don't expect me to be polite when all you've done is provoke me."

Why is it like this? Dao Nuea wants to argue more, but every word is stuck in her throat. She feels like this woman had indirectly insulted her before and deserved to be put in her place, but now, thinking it over, Dao Nuea realizes she never even tried talking to her nicely, not once.

People often choose to confront others and throw hurtful words at them, even though humans are supposed to be intelligent beings, capable of resolving conflicts peacefully. Dao Nuea herself doesn't like it when someone hurls insult repeatedly without giving her a chance to explain.

She tries to calm down and give this woman a chance to explain before continuing to argue. After all, there's no harm in waiting to hear the reasoning first before she continues with her insults.

"So why does you think that sex with men is better than with women?"

"..…"

"This's already my formal language, so you should speak up."

If Dao Nuea have to use more formal language than this, Khemjira and Dao Nuea are on the same page, finding it a bit much. The red-faced girl seems to be speaking seriously this time, not with the sarcasm she used before.

Khemjira is satisfied with that but still finds the reasoning behind her bias against same-sex sex to be.

"I don't know."

"What?"

"It's just personal feeling."

Khemjira says, feeling uncomfortable continuing with her reasoning.

"But can you imagine? Between fingers and a man's... well, just the size alone isn't comparable."

"Size isn't always a measure of quality, you know. There are men with small ones who still have great technique."

After Dao Nuea says this. Khemjira covers her ears, her face flushing with embarrassment, as if embarrassed on behalf of Dao Nuea for discussing such an intimate topic so casually.

"Why cover your ears? It's a normal topic."

"You can talk about embarrassing things so casually."

"It's a normal topic."

Dao Nuea emphasizes again.

"Personally, I think sex between women to be more nuanced. Women understand each other's bodies and know what will feel good."

Hmm?

Khemjira cannot hide her interest in Dao Nuea's words. She has never thought about sex between women in that way before. She only thinks that women do not have the natural organs for sex like men do. Fingers alone probably cannot substitute for what men have.

But fingers might offer a fluid motion that can complement their shortcomings. Even though size might not compare, it could be just right for emphasizing internal sensations better than a man's.

The male organ may only provide thrusts driven by the performer's desires, while women might connect with each other more, aiming to bring pleasure to their partner. Sex between women can be gentle and artistic. Dao Nuea believes this, even if it might not always be the correct perspective.

"If it's just kissing. I'm think I can."

"....."

The thought intrigues Khemjira, making her curious and interested in trying it out.

"Maybe.... just kissing."

Khemjira says, uncertain. She suddenly sits down beside Dao Nuea on the bed, hiding her blushing face, uncomfortable with how she is speaking. "I've never tried kissing another woman. Sex-"

**"Why don't we try it once?"**

"..…"

"Just kissing."

Dao Nuea clarifies, understanding that the intention might be misunderstood. She doesn't think much of kissing someone; after all, she's been with beautiful strangers regularly. She finishes speaking and looks at Khemjira, who meets her gaze without blinking.

"But it's up to you, though."

Dao Nuea will not share a bed with someone unwilling, but if given permission, she is ready to make every beautiful woman in the world happy. *It's just a kiss. Trying it out won't hurt.*

Khemjira gathers her courage and leans in. Dao Nuea can tell that Khemjira has never initiated anything before, even a kiss. Yet, she accepts Dao Nuea's lips and presses them against her own.

The kiss starts slowly, but their lips meet with practiced precision. Neither of them is inexperienced, though this is Khemjira's first kiss with another woman. It surpasses her expectations and is much better than the clumsy kisses from men she has experienced.

The warm tongue that invades her mouth stirs her desires effectively.

Their first kiss is over, but it does not feel as bad as Khemjira thought it might. They pull away, locking eyes to communicate silently. Their faces are close, less than a hand's breadth apart. There is no refusal or sign to stop. Khemjira gives a slight nod, allowing Dao Nuea to continue.

The once-empty bed now has Khemjira's body adorned by Dao Nuea's graceful form. The red lips invite attention, enchanting anyone who gazes upon them. Dao Nuea's lips press down on Khemjira's again, increasing the stimulation.

Dao Nuea's red lips move to Khemjira's neck. Khemjira tilts her head responding to the touch. Dao Nuea's hands move to undress Khemjira, starting with her loose shirt, then her shorts, and underwear.

She skillfully unhooks Khemjira's bra with one hand, sending a seductive glance before their bodies press closer together on the soft bed.

Dao Nuea lowers her hand, ready to begin the next step.

"Is this okay?"

Dao Nuea asks to ensure everything is alright. She knows it might be difficult for someone who has never had sex with a woman before, but so far. Dao Nuea's actions have not made Khemjira uncomfortable.

"Mm-hmm."

The curiosity and excitement build as Dao Nuea want to get another person to know the sensation of sex between women.

She doesn't rush; instead, she gently touches Khemjira's intimate area, coaxing moisture and making her body writhe on the bed. When she is sure Khemjira is ready, she inserts her middle finger into her.

It doesn't hurt like the first time with sex, but the pleasure quickly replaces the initial discomfort of something unfamiliar. Dao Nuea hasn't started moving in and out yet, choosing to explore the new flower delicately.

Each flower has different care requirements. Some prefer firm touches, while others respond to gentleness. There are specific spots that need special attention to bloom beautifully. All flowers are beautiful, but they only reach their full potential with the right touch.

**And Dao Nuea finally finds it.**

"Ah!"

Dao Nuea finds the spot that makes Khemjira bloom. She lifts Khemjira onto her lap and holds her with one hand, beginning to bring her to full bloom Khemjira, who has never made a sound of pleasure in bed, now struggles to keep her moans suppressed, raising one hand to cover her mouth.

It feels incredible. Dao Nuea's fingers hit every spot that makes Khemjira feel good. Where the pleasure is most intense, Dao Nuea adjusts her movements to increase the sensation Khemjira can't hold back and kisses Dao Nuea fiercely seeking a way to release her feelings. Eventually, she reaches a climax. It'.... It's a....

"How is it?"

Dao Nuea asks, pausing when she notices Khemjira's body twitching. She looks into Khemjira's eyes.

"......"

"No answer?"

Unable to respond with words. Khemjira answers with a passionate kiss. Surprisingly, this is the first time she has ever reached such a peak in her life. Dao Nuea starts to caress Khemjira's bare back expertly.

"Are you hooked now?"

"Stop talking."

It seems she will continue to have fun with this auntie all night.

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**Chapter 04**

"How was it?"

"....."

The passionate session between Khemjira and her partner, a successful young businessman, has just ended in the suite room of a luxury hotel.

With his muscular physique, as if he hits the gym daily he seems confident that she must be impressed with his supposedly expert-level skills in bed. And who else could open such an expensive suite in a hotel he's in construction with just for a night of pleasure?

He expects Khemjira, like all the other women he's been with, to praise him and crave more.

"And how about you?" she asks.

"It was amazing! I'm hooked. I can't wait for our next time-"

**"There won't be a next time."**

"...."

But Khemjira is different. She couldn't wait to finish the night with this man, and she's not joking. She slips out of his embrace and begins collecting her clothes scattered across the room. The man's expression falters, as her blunt rejection clearly bruises his ego.

"Wh-why? We had fun, didn't we?"

Fun? Khemjira almost laughs out loud in pity.

"You were only interested in your own pleasure. You didn't care about me. Your sex was boring and selfish."

"....."

Maybe that was harsh, but she means every word. He had boasted so much about how unforgettable his sex was, and unforgettable it truly is-leaving her sore and in pain from all his aimless thrusting, completely ignoring her pleas to slow down, telling her she would enjoy it soon enough.

He's lucky she doesn't blacklist him as one of the worst partners she's ever had. In fact, it's almost a blessing that she doesn't. But here he is already begging her to give him a chance.

"I'm sorry. But maybe we can try again-."

"I don't make a habit of giving second chances to things that don't suit my preferences."

Khemjira has made up her mind. She has classes to teach at the university soon, so she hurries to dress and gather her belongings. It's time to bid farewell to her temporary lover, who's left sitting on the bed in shock.

"There won't be a second time. Goodbye."

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. .

From being picky about who she sleeps with, Khemjira now finds it nearly impossible to find a partner who can bring her any satisfaction. Reaching the point of climax? Not even close.

The baring, one-sided sex she's encountered lately hasn't even stirred a hint of arousal. It's always the same-a lack of finesse and a selfish rush to fulfill only their own desires.

That red-lipped girl is still the first and only person who ever brought Khemjira to the edge. The memory of that night still lingers, stirring a craving for it again. That was the best sex she had ever had-fluid, artistic, unforgettable.

Even though she had been the one to escape from the hotel room immediately after sunrise, she found herself in shock at her condo. She had a class that same morning and stumbled through the day in a haze from the lack of sleep.

She never has a thought to sleep with another woman, but being with a woman turned out to be more satisfying than any man she'd been with. But it's not just about being with a woman-it's that the red-lipped girl's technique is unmatched. Khemjira knows this because she's tried, no one else can make her feel that same excitement.

Wanting that kind of pleasure again is inevitable. She's frustrated-not just because she's had dull partners, but because all the tension she should have released is bottled up It's affecting her mood, and even her students have noticed.

Rumors are spreading that Professor Khemjira has become stricter since the semester started. She knows it's not her job that's mainly causing the stress, as she sits at her desk, closing her eyes and letting out a deep sigh between classes.

For the sake of her work and mental health, Khemjira realizes she needs to do something. She's not just doing it for pleasure... at least that's what she tells herself.

She knows what the solution is, and it's time to take action. Hopefully, her favorite partner would not blocked her on the app yet.

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"Dao Nuea, time to eat."

"You can go ahead. I'm putting on my lipstick."

The lab door is left open as usual during lunch breaks, allowing a male intern in uniform to peek in, looking for someone. The person he's searching for is a female intern still sitting at the lab desk. He calls out to her Dao Nuea responds to Max without taking her eyes off the mirror, carefully applying lipstick to her lips. Max has known his friend for years but never quite understood why she's obsessed with lipstick, seemingly terrified that anyone might see her natural lip color.

"Why are you putting on lipstick just to go eat?"

"Mind your business. Shoo."

Dao Nuea waves him away. She can't concentrate on getting her lips perfectly red and shaped with someone staring at her. Max follows his senior colleagues down to lunch, leaving the woman alone, sitting and checking her lipstick in the small mirror on the desk. She's beautiful. She's perfect. Her red lips are bold. second to none.

The thought of anyone seeing her pale lips is worse than death itself.

She takes off her lab coat, leaving her in a simple black long-sleeved shirt and jeans. Her senior colleagues aren't as strict about her attire as they are with Max, so she doesn't have to wear the uncomfortable student uniform for her internship. She grabs only her wallet from her backpack to head down for lunch with her friend. Max already told her they'd be having lunch at a Korean restaurant in an outdoor mall, just a short walk from the office.

By now, Max and the rest of the group are probably waiting for her there. With only her wallet and phone in hand, she's ready to go.

"Hm."

She picks up her phone, intending to slip it into her pocket, but a new notification catches her eye on the lock screen. It's from Dao Nuea's go-to hookup (dating) app.

The message isn't from someone she just matched with but from someone she's spoken to before, someone with whom she recently shared a fiery night together.

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**K. Hey, you.**

.

Oh, someone unexpected is reaching out. Dao Nuea thought this woman had disappeared from her life. The same woman who left quite an impression on her in bed. Dao Nuea's standards are high, and this older woman passed them with flying colors.

The last time they talked, they came to an understanding-which meant no need to argue (one-sidedly). It's amusing how the older woman reacts when teased.

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**DN: What's up, auntie?**

**DN: Miss me?**

**K. : Ridiculous**

**DN: Then why message me?**

**K. : But something like that, I guess**

**DN: Huh?**

.

The woman pauses just long enough to stir Dao Nuea's curiosity. She wants to go to lunch, but she's stuck waiting for this reply, feeling a little anticipation build up inside her. She tries not to get too ahead of herself, brushing off the silly idea forming in her head. It's absurd, especially with this woman...

.

*Ding!*

What?

.

Dao Nuea blinks once, then twice. Her vision goes blurry, and she rubs her eyes. Maybe her hallucinations? But no. She reads the message again, and it's not a hallucination.

Not blurry. Not Hallucinations.

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**K: I wants to be your Friend With Benefits**

The message is really sent from her!

"Shittt!"

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*Ding, ding, ding!*

. .

Max is already messaging her, asking if she still wants lunch. Both he and the others are almost done eating. But who's in the mood for food right now?

Definitely not her. Ever since she got that shock, her appetite's gone, replaced by a craving for something else. Her friends' constant chat notifications are nothing but background noise on Dao Nuea's phone.

She places her wallet on the table and sits down, ready to start the conversation. But it seems like she isn't quick enough for the other person, who's already pressing her for a reply.

.

**K: Don't just read and not reply.**

.

So impatient. She's about to answer but would it make her seem evil if she's smiling wickedly at her phone, her mind filled with mischievous thoughts?

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**DN: Well...I haven't really been craving any FWB recently anyway.**

**K: Don't think too much. Just answer Yes, or no?**

**DN: Decisions like this aren't that easy to make, you know.**

**DN: It's a FWB!**

.

When did you become the type to overthink about agreeing to sleep with a gorgeous woman, Dao Nuea?

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**K: If you don't want to, just say so. It's not like I'm desperate to be your FWB.**

**DN: You sure about that?**

**DN: You wouldn't be messaging me, if you didn't want me this badly, right?**

.

*Read.*

*.*

Dao Nuea's got the game all figured out. How many women have begged her to come back to bed with them again? Only a few ever got a second charice to share her bed. Who'd want to go back to boring, bland sex? But this latest one isn't in that category. Dao Nuea has never met anyone who made things as fun as her. Auntie has reignited the spark of sexual excitement she hasn't felt in ages.

Still, she decides to play a little hard-to-get. What's more fun than sex?

Watching someone as proud as this auntie get toyed with, of course.

.

**DN: Alight, alright**

**DN : But if you want to be my FWB that badly...**

**DN: Let's continue this chat on LINE.**

**DN: Dao Nuea**

**DN: Here's my ID**

**K: Let's just chat here.**

**DN: But we're almost at the chat limit here.**

**DN: in case you forgot this app has a limit**

**DN: on how many messages we can send.**

**DN: Just five more messages and we can't chat anymore.**

**DN: Oops, now it's four**

**DN: Three**

**DN: Two DN: One**

.

*Ding!*

.

Dao Nuea bursts out laughing when the other person gives in and follows her game, unlike the one who just added her on LINE and is probably not laughing along. Judging by the profile picture, it's the same as the one on the dating app.

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**Khemjira: You're so frustrating.**

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A greeting that suits her perfectly, making Dao Nuea laugh until she's almost out of breath.

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**Dao Nuea: (sends a cheeky laughing sticker)**

**Dao Nuea: Let's meet at the same café at 6 PM today, okay?**

**Dao Nuea: Oh, and no need to reply saying we can just chat here.**

**Dao Nuea: This is too important for that.**

.

*Read.*

Dao Nuea: I'd much rather talk face-to-face, my beautiful auntie.

.

.

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"That kid is so frustrating."

Khemjira *hates* being played like a pawn, as if she's got Khemjira wrapped around her finger with no choice but to wait for her former one-night stand at the same cafe they met previously. Today, Khemjira has arrived even earlier than their first meet-up, making it crystal clear that she's eager to see her. But the one who scheduled this meet-up is late, obviously toying with her on purpose.

.

**Khemjira: When you will arrive?**

.

Her hand trembles as she types, struggling to suppress her growing imitation. She's trying her best not to explode in the middle of the café. She is considering pulling a book from her shoulder bag but isn't in the mood for reading. The hot latte she ordered sits untouched growing cold. Khemira despises tardiness, but this girl seems to enjoy pushing her buttons.

.

**Dao Nuea: Oh come on, auntie, don't act like an impatient teen.**

**Dao Nuea: I'm in the parking lot now.**

**Dao Nuea. Are you that eager to see me?**

.

*You little....*

.

**Dao Nuea: Just putting on some lipstick first.**

**Dao Nuea Sent a photo Dao Nuea: Am I pretty?**

**.**

*Snap!*

Without hesitation, Khemjira presses the call button. After just a few rings, the other side-who'd just asked her that teasing question in the chat-picks up with overflowing energy, happy as ever. If she wants an answer, she'll get it.

Khemjira's voice rings out, loud and clear for everyone in the cafe to hear.

**"Stop messing with me, you little brat!"**

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"Heh heh heh."

"....."

"Oh, come on, don't frown like that. You'll get wrinkles faster!"

Khemjira's expression makes it clear she's not amused. She doesn't want to come across as a woman throwing a tantrum-it clashes with the composed image she's cultivated as a professor.

Yet here she is, chasing down someone who's late, all the way to the underground parking lot of the art gallery.

She sits in the passenger seat, legs crossed, arms folded, eyes rolling in annoyance. Meanwhile, Dao Nuea, in the driver's seat puts her hands together in a mock apology, her smile a bit forced.

"Let's get to the point. Do you want to be FWB with me or not?"

"Oh. Auntie, don't act like an impatient teen! That's supposed to be *my* role!"

Still teasing, still pushing. If she keeps this up. Khemjira might just smack her head against the steering wheel.

"We're talking about being FWB, and we don't even know each other's names yet! Come on, introduce yourself. Your name is-"

"Hey!"

Khemjira is the only one getting flustered here, and Dao Nuea is enjoying every second of it. That sly, fox-like grin on her face screams satisfaction at seeing Khemjira unravel.

It's like watching a proud swan forced to look up from the water, while Dao Nuea perches smugly on a mountaintop. Khemjira hates that grin-hates it with every fiber of her being. She loathes being looked down on, mocked but she grits her teeth, silently chanting a mantra to calm herself.

She tightens her jaw so hard it creaks, her left hand digging into the seat beside her, imagining it's Dao Nuea's head she's clawing at.

She does everything in her power to regain some composure. Fine, she thinks. Just say the name and move on.

"Khemjira"

"And I'm Dao Nuea."

Dao Nuea flashes the very smile that Khemjira despises. Now that they've exchanged names they're no longer strangers. As for becoming friends with benefits? Khemjira already has an answer in her heart. But before diving into that she decides to address the question that's been nagging her since before she came here.

"Can I ask first why you want to be FWB with me?"

"....."

"Didn't you once say sex with women couldn't compare to men?"

Dao Nuea 's tone isn't sarcastic or teasing this time, and Khemjira knows the question is valid. After all, it is strange for someone who once insists on having sex only with men. She lifts both hands to cover her face, closes her eyes and musters the courage to say something shameful. It's hard for someone who prides herself on her self-control, but...

"I take it back."

"...."

"Just part of it."

Khemjira hesitates before continuing.

"I can't fully change my mindset just from having sex with one woman. But I haven't been able to feel anything with men for a while now-no matter how many."

"Then why don't you try being with other women-"

"Don't you get it yet? I don't want to have sex with anyone else. It's not about men or women anymore. I just want to be with you."

"....."

"No one makes me feel as good as you."

Dao Nuea should appreciate this rare confession. Khemjira never compliments anyone about sex-not even men. Her face feels like it's about to burst from embarrassment. She doesn't want to talk about this shameful subject anymore. Dao Nuea, who's received her fair share of praise for her skills in bed, can't help but smile, genuinely happy.

"I'm so glad to hear that."

"I answered. Now it's your turn to-"

Before Khemjira can finish her sentence, Dao Nuea leans in, her lips meeting Khemjira's in a soft yet firm kiss. Their lips press and retreat, repeating in a steady rhythm.

Khemjira catches the scent of Dao Nuea's freshly applied lipstick. Though she doesn't resist, she's surprised by how quickly the girl in the driver's seat is escalating things.

"W-Wait."

Khemjira stammers as her shirt's buttons come undone, knowing the clasp of her bra is next on Dao Nuea's mischievous list. She only came here to discuss their arrangement as friends with benefits...

"No waiting."

Dao Nuea's voice is confident, as if she's had Khemjira figured out from the start. Khemjira didn't come all this way just to talk about being FWB.

"Your eyes are practically begging to be in my lap already."

The driver's seat reclines into a flat position, giving Dao Nuea more space as she pulls Khemjira onto her lap. Khemjira notices how the car's tinted windows shield them from view, and the parking lot is almost empty.

She can't deny it-she wants this badly.

"Or am I wrong?"

Dao Nuea asks, her hands skillfully removing the last of Khemjira's clothing. That smile-the one Khemjira claims to hate-is stirring something deep inside her that she hasn't felt in days.

"Stop talking"

"You always answer the same."

Fine, they'll talk later For now, Khemjira just wants to finish-at least once.

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**Chapter 05**

"First of all, please sign this document."

"......"

Khemjira always has surprises to Dao Nuea.

At first, the red-lipped woman thought the conversation about being *Friends With Benefits* would just be a casual talk, like. From now on, *we can be friends who share a bed*.

But when the time comes the petite woman meets her at the same coffee shop, bringing a written contract and placing it on the table, clearly titled *Friends With Benefits Agreement*.

This makes the arrangement of their relationship as bed partners seem much more serious.

Even someone like Dao Nuea, who has quite a bit of experience in this area, has never encountered anyone who takes things this seriously by presenting an official contract.

The written agreement outlines the details of their *Friends With Benefits* arrangement, specifying the terms and prohibitions during the relationship in a clear manner.

The contract would have legal consequences if any rules were violated, such as fines or even jail time, depending on the court's discretion. Is Dao Nuea really going to end up in legal trouble over something like this just because she accidentally breaks one of the rules?

"Please read all the rules before deciding to sign."

"What!?"

Reading through all the rules before deciding is ridiculous! It's not like this contract only has two or three rules

"There are fifty rules, ma'am! Who's going to read all of them? And look, some of the rules even have subclauses."

"But you have to read them to protect our interests, especially your own. Didn't your parents ever teach you to read contracts carefully before signing?"

"I didn't have parents to teach me that. They both passed away before I could even remember them."

"....."

Silence falls between the two women at the table. Even though the person sitting across from Khemjira continues to sip her blueberry smoothie without any thoughts about her parents, she realizes she has brought up a potentially sensitive topic.

"Sorry."

"Hey, chill. No need to be serious."

Dao Nuea isn't bothered, as her words suggest. She doesn't feel sad about discussing parents she doesn't even remember thee faces of. She grew up just fine, with a wonderful brother and two lovely nieces.

Instead of dwelling on that, she focuses on skimming through the document. Some rules are clear, while others make her furrow her brow, prompting her to ask,

"What's this rule number thirty-five about not asking each other for personal information?" "It means just that."

"No asking about things like addresses or work?"

"Everything. Because I'm not comfortable sharing personal details with anyone. It could affect my life and work."

If word got out about her preference for casual partners, it would directly impact her professional image as a professor. While *one-night stands* or *FWB* relationships aren't wrong, her teaching profession is so fragile that even the smallest issue could shatter it. She has to protect herself from anything that could harm her.

Her teaching career is more important to her than anyone might think.

Another reason for this rule is to keep away people who might want more than just a bed-partner relationship with her. Khemjira has dealt with many people who were granted the privilege of a causal relationship but then tred to use it to pry into her personal life instead.

If agreeing to just being sex partners, then it shouldn't go deeper than that.

Personally, Dao Nuea has no problem with this rule. She shrugs as a sign of agreement, while at the same time, the older woman lifts her hot latte to take a sip.

"This rule is easy to agree too. Honestly, I don't like being asked personal questions either."

"Good, then."

Dao Nuea has also encountered people who wanted to know more about her than just being a bed partner, even though she made it clear from the beginning that she only wanted to sleep with beautiful women and didn't want anyone meddling in her personal life.

The worst was when someone she had slept with waited to ambush her in front of her faculty because she had blocked them after they asked too many intrusive questions. The red-lipped woman understands the feeling of

having her privacy violated, and she would never do something she herself disliked.

The last gulp of the blueberry smoothie is swallowed down by the person who ordered it, just as she finishes reading the details of the final clause of the contract. She places the tall glass of blueberry smoothie down before putting the contract sheet on the table.

Then she reaches into her backpack and pulls out a blue ballpoint pen. The tip of the pen is aimed at the signature line of the agreement, which, if she signs here, will initiate the contract of being sex partners between her and Khemjira.

"Sign here?"

"Mm."

Khemjira nods slightly, and Dao Nuea quickly signs both copies of the contract, identical in detail, one for Khemjira, who prepared the document, and the other for Dao Nuea to keep, just in case it might be needed in the future.

"You keep one copy."

"Uh, okay."

"Next.."

"Huh? what else?"

Dao Nuea shows that she's tired of talking about trivial, complicated things.

The two of them have been sitting in the coffee shop until it's almost closing time. The person across from her extends a hand, palm open, as if asking for her hand-if the red-lipped woman were a dog, that is.

But she's a person, and what Khemjira wants is far more important. It's the most reliable way to prove someone's honesty. something everyone living under the law has with them.

"Let me see your ID card."

"What! You need to see my ID card?"

"Yes, I need to."

"Didn't we agree not to ask personal questions?"

"That doesn't count when it's about something illegal I need to be sure you weren't lying about your age I don't want to end up in jail."

Khemjira is very serious about this. She absolutely won't risk ruining her career or being condemned by society.

"You can cover your name and address I just want to see your birth year."

Why would she lie about her age, especially when she's old enough to be interning? But fine, for peace of mind, Dao Nuea takes out her ID card and places it in Khemjira's hand.

She can read it as much as she likes: there's no need to hide anything on the card. The short-haired woman doesn't care about any other information on the ID except for the birth year if she calculates the birth year and subtracts it from the current year..... twenty-three years old.

**So, she's a recent graduate?**

She mentioned being late to their first meeting because she got off work late, so she's probably already working. Khemjira doesn't want to ask too much about her job since she's also not comfortable revealing details about hers.

**At least she's not a minor or a student. That's good.**

"And here's my ID card."

"I don't need to see it. Just your face already guarantees you're well over twenty."

"You little brat."

"So, is that everything?"

Hopefully, all the trivial matters are done. The coffee shop is closing, and it looks like they'll have to change locations. Dao Nuea suggests continuing their conversation in her car, as it's more convenient for talking-and for doing other things.

The small table they're sitting at brings their legs close together, so close that Dao Nuea can reach over and stroke Khemjira's thigh. They both know that the quick session in the car earlier wasn't enough for someone who's been deprived for days. The small-framed woman smiles.

*Grab*

But Khemjira has to stop the younger woman's hand from roaming further because there's still something important, they need to take care of.

"There's one more thing we have to do."

"What now? Can't we do it later?"

"This is important for both of us, for our safety and to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted infections."

"....."

Dao Nuea's face tums pale as she guesses what the other woman is referring to.

"Don't tell me..."

**"We're going to the hospital."**

"....."

Getting tested for STIs is something that should be done before sleeping with someone. in their case, it's a little late, considering they've already done it twice. So, if they're serious about becoming regular partners, they should get tested soon.

Since Dao Nuea is in such a hurry to get to bed, they need to hurry to the hospital before it gets any later. Khemjira stands up, ready to leave the coffee shop, but Dao Nuea is still glued to her chair. This isn't giving a needle-phobic person any time to prepare. The red-lipped woman is not okay with this.

"What are you waiting for? Hurry up."

"No."

"Come on."

"No."

"If you don't get tested, then nothing's happening."

**"Nooo!"**

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The hospital is nearly filled with the sound of Dao Nuea's wailing as the nurse draws her blood. Khemjira can't believe it when the younger woman cries out, saying she has never had her blood drawn for an STI test before, even though it's such an important thing that many people overlook.

There are several sexually transmitted infections that, once contracted, have no cure. That's why Khemjira always gets tested with anyone she plans to sleep with beforehand.

As far as she can remember, Khemjira had never slept with anyone before confirming they were free of STIs. Dao Nuea is the first person she sleeps with before sorting this out.

Fortunately, the test results show that both of them are perfectly healthy. The red-lipped woman, acting like she's at the end of her patience, practically drags Khemjira back to... in the car in the hospital parking lot almost immediately.

What is it with them and cars? They seem to have a thing for having sex in cars.

And speaking of Dao Nuea, Khemjira seems particularly fond of her new "Friend With Benefits."

So much so that they end up heading to a hotel to continue. Dao Nuea quickly becomes Khemjira's new favorite sex partner, someone who impresses her more than anyone she's been with before.

Being a professor while also doing research to build up her career feels like a cursed life she has chosen herself. Even though she loves her job. it's still stressful work that requires some kind of release. and having sex proves to be a very effective outlet.

With the university semester winding down, she finally has a little breathing room, but she's still burdened by the pressure of her beloved research, made worse by the cramps from her period.

She hasn't even prepared her teaching materials for the upcoming semester. The weekend is supposed to be spent clearing her workload according to the schedule she has set, instead of getting the chance to relax in her condo like others can on their weekends.

So, this evening, she plans to unwind by going to buy a new book. She finished the last one she bought just the night before. There is another way to relieve stress but no, she doesn't like crossing the line during that time of the month.

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**Dao Nuea: It hurts**

**Dao Nuea: Auntie, doesn't it hurt for you? This really hurts a lot.**

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The wound was as small as a bug bite, but she complained as if it were a stab wound Khemjira rolled her eyes at the notification that popped up on her laptop screen.

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**Khemjira: I'm used to it.**

**Dao Nuea: Are you free today, auntie?**

**Khemjira: I already told you that I have my period this week.**

**Dao Nuea: No, no, no.. I mean, are you free to hang out and do something together?**

**Khemjira: ?**

**Dao Nuea: What are you doing today?**

**Dao Nuea: Wanna grab something to eat? How about barbecue?**

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Khemjira has never told Dao Nuea that she absolutely hated barbecue. Especially those places where she has to grill the meat yourself outdoors, which only makes her sweat and leave with smoky-smelling hair-so annoying. But that isn't the point.

She stares at the chat window, expressionless. She doesn't even need to think long before replying.

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**Khemjira: I'm not available**

**Dao Nuea: Oh, okay. Maybe another time then.**

**Khemjira: There won't be another time.**

**Dao Nuea: What?**

**Khemjira: I'm not available to meet you unless it's for what we agreed on.**

**Khemjira: If it's not something necessary or related to that, please don't message me.**

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*Read*

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That might have been too harsh, but so be it. Khemjira needs to draw a clear line from the start. Their status is just that of "friends with benefits." Going out to eat or hanging out like close friends isn't part of the deal. She doesn't want to get close to Dao Nuea in any personal way.

Just as she was about to move her mouse to close the chat and return to her work, Dao Nuea responds with an annoyingly cheeky energy.

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**Dao Nuea: Wow.. does Auntie even understand what FWB means?**

**Dao Nuea: We're not NSA, you know.**

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*NSA?*

Khemjira isn't about to embarrass herself by asking what that meant. It takes her less than a minute to search the term and figure out the meaning. She hasn't realized this type of relationship existed. All she knows is *onenight stands* and *friends with benefits*.

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**Dao Nuea: If you just want to hook up without getting to know each other. I think you'll need to draft a new contract for me to sign.**

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Khemjira feels slightly embarrassed. She doesn't mind having sex without really getting to know each other, but she usually avoided becoming too close to her FWB partners because of past experiences where people had hidden agendas. But what the kid said...

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**Khemjira: Did you do this with your previous FWBs too?**

**Dao Nuea: Huh? Yeah, of course.**

**Dao Nuea: Being FWB means we're friends. Friends should talk and get to know each other, right?**

**Dao Nuea: You're my friend now, Auntie.**

**Dao Nuea: Even if you are a bit older than my usual friends.**

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The age gap is only eight years, but this kid sure likes to remind her of how old she is. Khemjira now understand that Dao Nuea doesn't mean anything by it. The red-lipped girl is just friendly, and what she said about getting to know each other made sense.

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**Khemjira: Understood.**

**Khemjira: I'm going to buy a book this evening. Want to join me?**

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Khemjira is particular about everything she consumes. The food she eats has to be nutritious and balanced, her exercise routines must work out her entire body, and books are her way of accumulating knowledge.

After all, humans are only able to elevate themselves to beings of wisdom through the knowledge they acquire. For this reason, most of the books she reads are those that offer some form of learning, directly or indirectly it doesn't have to be finance or business, her areas of expertise, she enjoys reading any book that can teach her something.

Recently, she's been especially into political philosophy, which is why she's buying another book in that genre today.

To Khemjira, true books are those that impart knowledge that's her belief.

"Have you ever read this comic? It's good,"

Dao Nuea chimes in, a stack of comic books in her basket as she returns from the manga section to find Khemjira in the philosophy aisle. Khemjira looks at the young woman's grinning face and then at the pile of comics in her basket. Fictional stories like those, popular among kids and teens, have never been on her radar.

"I don't read comics."

"What?"

"I don't read anything that doesn't offer knowledge."

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Dao Nuea's face instantly drops, much like when someone insulted the idea that women's sex couldn't compare to men's.

"Comics don't give knowledge? Don't you know how many kids have passed exams just because they read comics?"

"Why are you shouting?"

Khemjira can't stand loud, noisy people. From the way Dao Nuea looks, she wouldn't have guessed she could be this irritatingly loud. But she is, though she doesn't know that her success in life partly stems from reading science comics as a child.

"Because you just insulted comics! You insulted the masters who've helped save half the country's youth."

"Comics are just shallow fiction. Besides. I've always read books like these."

"You're always judging things before you've even tried them-whether it's about books or it's about the thing on bed."

"H-Hey!?"

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Dao Nuea seems to be getting to know her older partner a bit better. Khemjira has a habit of elevating herself above others, using her own beliefs to judge things she's never even tried. Besides never having had sex with a woman before, it seems she's grown up reading nothing but dull, intellectual books without ever picking up a comic.

Does this woman even know how to have fun like äveryone else?

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"For real, we don't really know each other that well."

"I'm not answering any personal questions."

"I didn't ask for personal stuff."

Dao Nuea reminds her of their agreement.

"I mean, we can learn more about each other without getting into deep personal details. Like, what food do you like? What hobbies do you enjoy? Or what books do you like reading? Sharing general likes and dislikes shouldn't be such a big deal that we can't talk about it."

"....."

"Alright, let's do this."

"What are you doing?"

Khemjira frowns as Dao Nuea snatches the political philosophy book she was about to buy. In return, she hands her basket full of comic books.

"Let's swap."

Dao Nuea says, thinking it's a great way to get to know each other better.

"I'll read the kind of book you like, and you can try to understand the journey to becoming the King of the Demon King."

But it seems like Dao Nuea is bringing trouble upon herself.

"How does anyone understand a book this difficult....?"

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Hours after parting ways with Khemjira and as bedtime approaches. Dao Nuea still can't manage to finish the first chapter of the legal philosophy book she's swapped with her. Finishing it? That's out of the question. She's struggling just to comprehend what's written on the pages in front of her.

It's crazy to think anyone could read these kinds of books without their brain exploding. Dao Nuea is convinced-Khemjira isn't human!

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*Ding!*

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**Khemjira: Hey**

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Just as she's about to vent her frustration, Khemjira messages her, giving her the perfect opportunity to complain about how inhuman it is to understand such a book.

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**Dao Nuea: Auntie**

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*Ding!*

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**Khemjira: Sent a photo**

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Dao Nuea's planned rant is cut short by the image Khemjira sends. It's a photo of around twenty comic books, all unwrapped from their plastic covers and neatly laid out in order on a table. These are the comics Dao Nuea bought earlier that day and swapped with Khemjira. She's clearly read all of them, from the first to the twentieth volume.

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**Khemjira: Do you have the next volume? Also, how much did all of these cost? I want to buy more.**

**Dao Nuea:....**

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Dao Nuea hasn't even finished the first chapter of the political philosophy book, but Khemjira, her FWB, has finished reading all twenty of her comics. And as for that legal philosophy book, it's never going to be picked up by its original owner again.

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**Chapter 06**

"Khem.."

"Hmm? What's up, Mawin?"

"You're really into comics these days."

Mawin says this because he often sees Khemjira picking up a comic book to read during breaks in the faculty lounge. He grabs the comic that his friend, a fellow teacher, is absorbed in and flips through it briefly, recognizing the story.

"Oh, this one? Ek reads it too."

"Your boyfriend reads this pointless stuff too?"

Khemjira remarks, referring to her friend's boyfriend while her eyes remain glued to the pages. Sitting back in her office chair, with one leg pulled up under her for comfort, her relaxed posture clearly shows how at ease she is during this break from teaching.

"Pointless? That's ridiculous. The author is a doctor, you know."

It doesn't matter to her that the author is a doctor, but Khernjira admits the author of this comic is smart. The story is about a protagonist who dies in an accident and is reincarnated as a humanoid black cat.

His life begins as a slave, but he leads a rebellion to free himself and other slaves of various species. They embark on an adventure to find a new home, battling strong enemies along the way and raising funds to build their own kingdom.

The plot seems like a typical reincarnation fantasy, but what sets it apart are the unique and memorable characters-not just the protagonist but also the companions and even the enemies. Khemjira's favorite is the protagonist's right-hand. an elf who was once an assistant to a traveling merchant before being enslaved.

She becomes the adviser to the protagonist and other main characters on business strategies, likely inspired by real-world business theory. Another character she likes is a half-demon doctor, clearly modeled after the author's own medical knowledge.

Khemjira's FWB, Dao Nuea, recommends this comic, knowing that Khemjira prefers reading something with substance. She trusts Dao Nuea's suggestions, as that girl's never steered her wrong.

After buying the comic and reading it, she finds it full of depth and insight. The current volume she's reading is particularly intricate, focusing on the group's efforts to establish a trade association to raise funds Khemjira finds this part especially gripping.

"The way the group strategizes to start a business selling dragon horn products in Mabala City is actually a solid business plan."

Khemjira notes, impressed by the author's business knowledge, enough to make even a business professor appreciate it.

"If I go over it again and list out the theories, I could probably use it in my lectures. It could make great teaching material What do you think?"

"...You've changed, Khem."

"Huh?"

"You never used to care about using music or comics as teaching material. Didn't you once say that comics were just pointless fiction?"

"...."

*Creeeak*

As usual, when someone opens the door to the faculty lounge, Khemjira quickly sits up straight and shoves the comics under her desk. A professor must always maintain a professional image to ensure that students or anyone else who enters finds her credible. The person who enters is a staff member from the business administration building.

"Professor Khemjira, someone is here to see you."

"Yes?"

"...."

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"Miss Darika, what should I do with you?"

"...."

Dao Nuea's situation right now couldn't be worse.

She feels like she's shrinking to just three inches tall as she stands in front of her thesis advisor. The professor is giving her a cold smile that says she's not joking about what's coming next.

"Don't think I'm too afraid to fail you."

Dao Nuea knows full well that her professor isn't bluffing, so she immediately scrambles to apologize.

"Wahh, **Professor Parnward**!"

At this point, Dao Nuea would kneel before the other if she could. And since there's no one else in the faculty office, she feels bold enough to grab Parnward's leg and whine.

Parnward is her chemistry professor and thesis advisor. It's entirely her fault for forgetting today's meeting to review the first chapter of her thesis, but she has a reason to justify her slip-up.

"Just give me until next week. No, wait! Just until this Friday. I'll finish the first chapter for you to review. I swear I'm not slacking, it's just that I've been super busy with my internship lately."

"Busy with your internship or busy chasing girls? You think I don't have eyes on you?"

Pamward shakes the leg that the young student is clinging to like taffy, speaking to the person who looks like they're about to cry, as if she wants to devour the head of the one who dared not submit the first draft of their thesis for her to review.

"Do you actually want to graduate, Dao Nuea? Or do you want to redo your thesis with next year's juniors?"

Parnward and Dao Nuea are close enough that they can speak to each other informally. The young professor has known Dao Nuea since this girl was a sophomore, and they've even had a few drinks together during breaks.

Let's not even get into how many times Parnward has seen Dao Nuea leaving bars with beautiful women, or how she's had to drag the drunk girl back home herself more than once.

They know each other inside and out, which is why Parnward is frustrated that Dao Nuea's habit of sleeping around with pretty women is now interfering with her thesis work. She can't use the internship as an excuse.

Even Max, her friend, managed to get his first chapter submitted on time. Parnward is seriously tempted to fail her. That pitiful, pleading face won't make her go soft.

"Come on, Professor. You know I'm already graduating later than my high school frends."

"Then take things more seriously! Just because you're smarter than others doesn't mean you can slack off and still expect to graduate easily."

Parnward feels frustrated on Dao Nuea's behalf. This girl could easily graduate with first-class honors, but her obsession with girls has caused her to miss out on both first and second-class honors. And now, she's on the verge of not graduating at all.

Just because they're close doesn't mean Parnward will go easy on her. She's perfectly willing to fail any student who doesn't take their work seriously.

"This time, I'm giving you a verbal warming. But if you keep messing around, **I'll tell your brother**."

"Huh? You talk like you know my brother or something."

Dao Nuea looks up at Panward, who suddenly seems flustered, which only makes her more suspicious. But before she can say anything, Parnward changes the subject quickly.

"A-Anyway, I don't know anything about that. Just finish the first chapter and bring it to me by Wednesday."

"Wait, Professor! Give me until Friday."

"Wednesday. Otherwise, you're getting an F."

"Professoor!"

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Panward is definitely serious. Her closeness with the students does not affect the equality she maintains with everyone. Dao Nuea already knows her fate if she doesn't have the thesis ready for her advisor by Wednesday. If she dares to tell her brother that she needs another year of study, she's likely to get a major scolding.

Rome wasn't built in a day, but the first draft of a thesis can certainly be completed by the deadline. Dao Nuea is currently working on her thesis at a table in the lobby of a condo she's visiting for the first time.

This condo doesn't belong to any of her friends, but it isn't exactly a stranger's either-it's the condo of a friend, or rather, her **favorite friend with benefits.**

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**Dao Nuea: Auntie, I've arrived Dao Nuea: Come down and get me.**

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Ever since becoming friends with benefits with Khemjira, Dao Nuea has lost interest in sleeping with other women. There's no written rule forbidding her from being with others, but she simply doesn't feel like it anymore.

Being with this woman is far more enjoyable. She has quickly become the favorite plaything of this red-lipped girl.

Dao Nuea wants to sleep with Khemjira every night, but there's one problem she's just a fourth-year student. Her internship doesn't pay, and the allowance her brother gives her has already been spent on alcohol and thesis costs.

Her daily expenses are barely covered by the savings she accumulated from doing pre-orders for Korean cosmetics during the break. Now that the semester has started, she's too busy with her internship and thesis to earn extra money like she used to.

These days, she's meeting with Khemjira almost every day, usually at hotels.

Her own house, where her brother and two nieces live, is not a convenient place to host guests. But constantly splitting hotel costs with Khemjira is straining her finances.

With so many meetings, some complaints have slipped out in front of Khemjira. Hearing complaints about being broke during intimate moments affects Khemjira's mood. If it were another partner, she might have ended it easily, but this is her favorite friend with benefits.

Khemjira doesn't really want to make this offer, but it's the only way to help the red-lipped girl save money.

*"Well, next time, let's meet at my condo."*

Khemjira suggests, considering it a way to repay Dao Nuea for lending her comic books and recommending good series. Since younger person likely don't have the same savings as someone who's been working for years, she offers her condo for their next meeting. Today is the day they planned to meet there.

But by now, it's getting so late that Dao Nuea feels like she's about to grow roots waiting in the lobby. She's already finished 80% of her thesis draft. At first, she waited calmly, but not anymore-her face now shows her irritation, and even passersby are glancing at her.

Why doesn't that aunite just come down tomorrow instead? She thinks, as her messages go unread and her calls unanswered.

"Sorry for making you wait."

"....."

Khemjira doesn't come to meet Dao Nuea from the elevator but enters through the front door, signaling she's only just arrived Dao Nuea turns with an annoyed expression, but Khemjira seems indifferent and waves her to get up from the chair she's been sitting in for a long time.

"Let's go, let's head upstairs."

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*Creaaak....*

"Come in. Leave your shoes over there."

Khemjira points at the shoe rack by the door, instructing her guest to place her sneakers on it. Meanwhile, she heads off to change out of her work clothes. Wearing a long-sleeved shirt and knee-length skirt at home is just too uncomfortable.

After putting her shoes away. Dao Nuea still can't shake off her sour expression as she scans the spacious apartment. It's large enough, with a central living area and two separate bedrooms.

Dao Nuea slumps onto the couch facing a massive TV, flanked by tall bookshelves on either side. It seems Khemjira is an avid reader. Dao Nuea had already noticed one of the other rooms open which had been converted into a reading room.

The walls were lined with countless books, both Thai and foreign. In the future there will probably be a separate shelf just for storing comic books, judging by how this avid reader has already started investing heavily in buying and collecting multiple series.

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*Creak....*

The bedroom door opens, and Khemjira steps out in her new outfit.

*Ten out of ten*-her at-home outfit looks a million times better than her work attire. Even though it's just a plain white t-shirt and black shorts, the saying that *clothes look better* on the *right hanger* really holds true. Even Dao Nuea is tempted to give her a thumbs-up, but now's not the time to show her admiration.

"I don't really keep much around for guests. Ever since I moved in here. I've lived alone."

"....."

**"You're the first person I've had over."**

Dao Nuea refuses to let herself feel special. She's not about to be happy just because she's the first to visit Khemjira's place. She hates how casually the older woman pours her a glass of water like it's nothing. Dao Nuea doesn't want a glass of water to sip on while sitting on the couch.

"Are you seriously not going to apologize? You were an hour late, and you didn't even bother to send a message or call."

"Alright, I'm sorry."

"...."

"I got held up with something and couldn't make it back on time."

"What was it?"

"Something personal."

"...."

Khemira places the glass of water on the table. Dao Nuea isn't interested in drinking it, which is just as well. The less time they waste, the quicker they can get to the point.

"So, should we get started? I'm ready."

"Ugh!"

Dao Nuea's patience snaps. Who could be in the mood for sex after this?

"Forget it I'm going home"

"Wait, no."

Khemjira's nonchalant expression slips when she sees the younger woman stand up from the couch. It's clear that Dao Nuea isn't joking about leaving.

"Yes, I'm leaving."

Dao Nuea insists, offering a polite farewell before heading toward the door.

"Goodbye."

"Let's talk this out like adults, okay?"

"You didn't even try to talk to me first!"

Dao Nuea yanks her arm away in frustrationm

"You left me waiting downstairs for an hour, then gave me a half-hearted apology. I get it if you don't want to share personal stuff, but at least don't leave me hanging like that. It's really disrespectful."

Despite her love for sleeping with beautiful women, Dao Nuea respects each one of them. Mutual respect is something everyone should remember to give one another.

She hates being treated like she's disposable, someone to be used at someone else's whim. And Khemjira is treating her exactly that way Dao Nuea knows her worth, and she's not about to stick around for someone who doesn't see it.

"Look. I'm sorry, but I'm really not in the mood today. Let's reschedule."

A reschedule that might not happen. Honestly Dao Nuea feels disheartened by the whole thing. Just because someone's good in bed doesn't mean she'll stick around if they make her feel unappreciated.

"Hey."

"Huh-?"

"Are you really not in the mood anymore?"

"...."

Is she really not?

Dao Nuea makes the mistake of turning around, only to freeze at the sight of Khemjira's now-naked body lounging on the sofa. The white t-shirt and black shorts are gone, tossed somewhere out of sight.

Her legs, which had been walking out, now feel as if they're glued to the floor, giving Khemjira the chance to step closer, running her fingers along Dao Nuea's arm and eventually tracing her lips.

She even wipes away a bit of lipstick smudge with her thumb-only for Dao Nuea to instinctively nibble it.

One hand doing its job, Dao Nuea's own hands are betraying her as they start exploring Khemjira's body. As much as she wants to stop, she can't make herself stop admiring the beautiful naked figure in front of her.

Her hands travel upward until they meet her lips, and Khemjira does the same, gently nibbling her fingers-only to go further, teasing them with her tongue.

"So are you still mad?"

"...."

"One..."

"...."

"Two.."

"....."

"Three done--"

How could she possibly stay mad now?

After pulling her in for a kiss, the taller woman swiftly initiates her next move. The lone couch in the living area becomes the setting as Khemjira is pushed down to lie flat, with Dao Nuea soon following, lying on top of her. Their lips shift into a more comfortable angle, making it easier to deepen the kiss.

Their tongues intertwine, further heightening the heat between them. Dao's hands roam freely across Khemjira's body, exploring until she is satisfied. Her hand then drifts down to caress her favorite flower.

***Wet-***that's the first sensation Dao Nuea feels, understanding immediately just how much the person beneath her desires her touch. If she doesn't act soon, the one beneath her would surely suffer from unfulfilled desire.

Unable to resist feeling sympathy for the pitiful sight beneath her. Dao knows leaving now would be cruel. Thinking this, she slips her fingers inside Khemjira. A moan escapes from Khemjira's lips, forcing her to pull Dao closer, burying her face into her chest to stifle the sound.

"Ahh..."

Today, Dao Nuea won't let Khemjira take control like she prefers. This ungrateful woman needs to be taught a lesson-to know who's truly in charge in this dance of passion.

**Let's reach the peak while being beneath her.**

With Khemjira's deep-rooted longing and the expert rhythm of Dao Nuea 's fingers, it doesn't take long before her body frembles uncontrollably. Dao Nuea smirks but refuses to withdraw her fingers from the beautiful flower just yet.

After all, she has managed to stir Khemjira's desire enough to bring her back into the game. Dao Nuea is confident that the person beneath her wouldn't want her to stop so soon either.

Perhaps a change of location to somewhere more comfortable than the couch-like the bed in Khemjira's bedroom-would make more sense. That sounds like a good plan.

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There's something so satisfying about taking a puff from a vape after sex.

Even better, doing it while admiring the beautiful view makes it all the more liberating. From here, Dao Nuea can see the sunset, and she's starting to get quite attached to the view from Khemjira's balcony. It's a good thing she didn't leave earlier.

After all, she stayed in bed with Khemjira until late at night. And although she has no intention of being rude and overstaying her welcome, she plans to ask Khemjira for permission to leave soon.

Dao Nuea steps back inside from the balcony. walking towards the living area before peeking into the bedroom to say her goodbyes.

*Creakkk..*

Dao opens the door and sees Khemjira, who's sitting at her vanity brushing her hair after having a shower post-sex.

"Auntie."

"Sorry about earlier"

"...."

Out of the blue, Khemjira apologizes while looking at Dao Nuea through the mirror. Dao Nuea, being the younger one, didn't expect to hear another apology. But this time, there's a stark difference in the tone of Khemjira's words-they're sincere.

"Someone came to see me at work earlier. Persistent, annoying, demanding.... I was so exhausted from trying to get away from. I didn't even have time to check my phone and didn't think of you until I got back to the condo."

Perhaps it's a bad habit she developed from having her former partners spoil her. Khemjira tended to look down on everyone she shared her bed with unconsciously believing that whoever she slept with had to submit to her whims. No matter what she did or how she treated them, they had to be the ones who yielded-not her.

But Dao Nuea made it clear from the beginning that she wouldn't let herself be pushed around in every situation. She would walk away the moment she felt there was an imbalance in their relationship. And for that, Khemjira was grateful, Dao Nuea had made her realize her own shortcomings.

"I should've treated you with more respect. I'll take this as a lesson and work on myself."

She should treat Dao Nuea like an equal-like a true friend with benefits.

Dao Nuea wants to respond with, *It's good that you realize that, Auntie,* but she's afraid it'll come off as sarcastic. She was about to excuse herself and head home but changes her mind.

"When you make a mistake, you need to be punished."

Dao Nuea steps forward, kneeling before Khemjira, slipping her hand beneath Khemjira's nightgown from behind Khemjira feels something teasing her sensitive peak as Dao Nuea continues her advances.

"I just took a shower."

"And?"

"...Nothing."

Khemjira has no intention of letting Dao stop there anytime soon, that's for sure.

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**Chapter 07**

The reason Khemjira returns to meet Dao Nuea at the condo late is because someone comes to see her at the university.

**That person is 'Phavin, her former Friend With Benefits.**

Anyone who follows the port business news might be somewhat familiar with the man who owns a large port in Rayong Khermjira, however, doesn't know much about people in this business circle, so she doesn't realize at first who he is or where he comes from.

She just happens to meet him while sipping wine at a luxury bar. At first, they talk out of politeness, as there are only the two of them at the bar counter. But they eventually hit it off because of their shared interest in similar books. Somehow, it all ends with them in bed at a hotel.

Their sex life is compatible, so they agree to become friends with benefits.

At that time, Khemjira thinks Phavin is a decent guy. He is polite and treats her with respect, which makes her comfortable talking to him about various **personal matters**.

She sees him as a good confidant whenever she has issues troubling her.

They remain friends with benefits for quite a while until she hears that Phavin already has a family. To make matters worse, she finds out that his wife is *Professor Dr Rattana*, the vice president of her university.

Of course, she has to end things. Even without the last detail, Khemjira doesn't want to share a bed with someone who is unfaithful. She cuts all ties with him as soon as she learns the truth. However, Phavin continues to harass her, using dirty threats.

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'*You wouldn't want my wife to find out about us, would you, Professor Khemjira?"*

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The agreement not to ask personal questions about each other stems from this man. Khemjira regrets ever telling him about her work, as he now uses her trust against her.

She is forced to have dinner with Phavin, who claims to miss her, before finding an excuse to slip away and return to her condo. Only then does she remember that she also has plans with Dao Nuea that same evening.

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"That's all for today."

On days she finishes teaching early, her former friend with benefits harasses her. On days she finishes late, she's completely drained, much like the students in her class who seem to have their spints sucked out of them during her Portfolio Management course. It's a common sight every semester in this class.

"Don't forget there's a quiz next session. Please don't come late."

The whole class groans in unison. To be honest, Khemjira feels like groaning, too. She doesn't like this subject. Although she knows it's useful, it's a required course, and her job is to teach it, even if she never quite enjoys the overly complicated material for undergraduate students.

Midterms are approaching, and today she has a meeting about this with her co-instructors in the online meeting platform. She needs to hurry home, eat, and shower. There won't be time for anything else.

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*Ding!*

**Dao Nuea: *I want you.***

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Khemjira sees the new message notification just as she leaves the lecture hall. The stress from work piles up, and now she has to deal with her needy "F" girl, too. But she can't really blame. It's true that she has never met Dao Nues several days ago.

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**Khemjira: That's inappropriate Dao Nuea: Why? I really do want you.**

**Dao Nuea: Are you free at 8?**

**Khemjira: Not free.**

**Dao Nuea: Oh, come on!**

**Dao Nuea: We haven't seen each other in days!**

**Khemjira: I'm really busy.**

**Dao Nuea: Not free at all? What about tomorrow? Please, just one day.**

**Khemjira: I'm working.**

**Khemjira: Don't be difficult.**

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*Read.*

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**Khemjira: Maybe next time.**

**Dao Nuea: Okay**

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The polite tone is something Khemjira isn't used to from Dao Nuea. She doesn't like being pestered, so she may have snapped.

Is Khemjira about to upset another younger person again?

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Dao Nuea finally figures out why she desperately wants to have sex with Khemjira. The reason she's curled up in bed, unable to stand, sit or walk without groaning in pain, is her period.

Why does she have to be one of those women who get excruciating period every single time?

Her symptoms are always the worst on the first day of her period: diarrhea. intense abdominal pain that makes it feel like her uterus is about to fall out. When she was in school, she always had to take the day off.

Even now, during her internship, she has to call in sick just to lie curled up on her bed, with her electric whale-hot water bag pressed against her lower abdomen.

It's not like she wants to miss work, but there's no way she could go in feeling like this. She wants to keep working on her thesis, but it's so frustrating. At least she has two more weeks before Professor Panward schedules their next discussion about it.

Dao Nuea thinks she'll need to take another menstrual pain pill, which means she has to eat something first. But in this state, she can't even manage to boil water for noodle cups. Living in such a remote area with no delivery options, she'll have to ask someone to buy her lunch.

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**MVP is mine (5)**

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**Dao Nuea: I have period cramps.**

**Dao Nuea: Someone, please get me pork congee with a soft-boiled egg.**

**Pleng Phin Not free, I'm working.**

**Grand: Not free, I'm on set.**

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The replies are exactly as expected. It's a weekday, so of course, people have to work. One friend is still interning, just like Dao Nuea, while the other is fully employed, working as a makeup artist on film sets.

There's no point waiting for a response from the other two in the group. By the time her brother gets home, she'll probably have starved to death.

Right now, Dao Nuea feels utterly abandoned-crippling period cramps, and no one seems to care. None of her friends love or worry about her at all.

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**Dao Nuea: Why is no one free to buy me someee?**

**Dao Nuea: I want pork congee with an egg!**

**Khemjira: You want it with a soft-boiled egg?**

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"....."

Dao Nuea stares at her phone in disbelief, her vision blurry from the pain.

Did she just send that message to the wrong chat? Khemjira must be confused now, wondering why she suddenly texted her a complaint, almost as if asking for help.

There's no way Khemjira, of all people, would be kind enough to do it It's just a silly dream.

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**Dao Nuea: Sorry, wrong chat.**

**Khemjira: Aren't you going to work?**

**Dao Nuea: I took the day off because of period cramps.**

**Khemjira: I can buy it for you.**

**Khemjira: Where's your house?**

**.**

*Read*

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Dao Nuea is shocked

What spirit has possessed Khemjira?

She must've been lying there, staring at the screen for so long that Khemjira misunderstood her silence as a sign of displeasure at the sudden intrusion into her personal life by asking for her address.

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**Khemjira: Sorry.**

**Khemjira: Didn't mean to ask something so personal.**

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Read

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**Dao Nuea: [Sent location]**

**Dao Nuea: Please get me pork congee with a soft-boiled egg.**

**Dao Nuea: Thank you!**

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"Hot!"

"Then blow on it first."

Khemjira has just placed the freshly microwaved congee on the table, but Dao Nuea doesn't wait and scoops a spoonful straight into her mouth, only to burn her tongue and lips.

She grabs a glass of water, barely managing to cool the burn in time. Still, she realizes that Khemjira is the reason she's not starving right now, even though she never expected her to bring the congee to her house.

It's surprising. considering Khemjira doesn't usually come off as someone particularly generous.

This whole incident teaches Dao Nuea not to judge people too quickly.

"So, aren't you going to work? It's still afternoon."

"...I finished early today."

"Finished work by the afternoon?"

"Forget about my work. Eat the congee before it gets cold."

Khemjira only has classes in the morning today, and she decides to rush home, partly to avoid running into Phavin again. More importantly, she wants to check on Dao Nuea herself, who doesn't seem to be in as much trouble as Khemjira had worried about since yesterday.

"You look fine."

"Fine? I'm dying from period cramps."

Dao Nuea mutters as she blows on the congee before taking another bite. Meanwhile, Khemjira leans back on the sofa.

"I thought you were mad."

"Huh?"

"Weren't you mad at me?"

"Mad about what? You're ridiculous"

Dao Nuea isn't being sarcastic-she genuinely doesn't know why she would be mad at Khemjira.

"I've been lying in bed with cramps all day. When would I have time to be mad at you?"

"I thought you were mad about the chat."

"...."

"You've been quiet, not being your usual annoying self."

Apparently, not even being annoying is a problem. Khemjira just isn't used to the silence-no constant notifications from Dao Nuea pestering her. Although it's not the first time Dao Nuea has gone silent, she doesn't usually text Khemjira daily anyway.

Dao Nuea has forgotten about the whole incident from yesterday. Sure, she admits she felt a bit hurt by Khemjira calling her "So difficult," but now that Khemjira shows concern, Dao Nuea decides to let it go.

"Why are you laughing?"

Khemjira asks, hearing the soft giggle from Dao Nuea at the dining table.

"I'm laughing at you, you worry too much."

"What's wrong?"

"Your lips look pale today."

"Ahhh!"

"Ouch! My ears!"

Apparently, being told her lips are pale is more infuriating than any insult Dao Nuea is actually mad!

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The bowl of pork congee with egg empties quickly. Khemjira, always kindhearted, takes the spoon and bowl to wash them for the person lounging on the sofa. After tidying up the sink, the woman, dressed in her usual long skirt, walks over to the sofa.

"I'm heading home now," she says.

"Why are you leaving so soon?" comes the reply.

"Well, I've finished what I came for. What else is there to do?"

**"You know what we usually do when we meet."**

Dao Nuea pulls Khemjira down onto the sofa with her, recalling the time they did something similar in her condo. But this time, it's the smaller one lying on top of her. Khemjira doesn't resist as Dao Nuea pulls her close, embracing her, though she doubts if the other's body is up for it.

"You've got cramps.

"It's not so bad I can't move a little, is it?"

After taking some medicine and having a bit of food, her cramps gradually ease, and her strength starts to return. In fact, she has more than enough energy to start massaging Dao Nuea's chest through the fabric of her shirt.

"Mm.."

A soft sound escapes from the other's throat, and Dao Nuea smiles at the reaction. Her hands move swiftly, unclasping the bra with ease as they slip under the shirt and trail along her back.

Their eyes meet once more, and with her arousal building, the smaller one silently gives permission for the taller woman beneath her to continue.

Their lips inch closer, drawn together by an undeniable pull.

**"Aunt Dao is kissing a girl!"**

"!!"

"Aunt Dao is kissing a girl, Dad! Aunt Dao is kissing a girrrl!"

Dao Nuea and Khemjira quickly pull away from each other, startled, as the high-pitched voice of a little girl in an international school uniform breaks the moment.

One of the girl's hands is holding a milk-flavored ice cream bar, while the other is pointing directly at her aunt and the unfamiliar woman beside her.

And because of the loud screams of the young girl, it draws the attention of a well-dressed middle-aged man who quickly runs to the door to check on his youngest daughter. He is followed closely by another girl in a school uniform, wearing headphones, who walks in right behind him.

The man freezes at the sight before him.

'Saeng Nuea' had never expected his younger sister to bring another girl into the house and engage in something inapprociate on the sofa in the middle of the living room.

His paternal instinct tells him to quickly cover his youngest daughter's eyes.

It's too early for a five-year-old to witness something like this. Meanwhile, 'Thanya', his eldest daughter hasn't yet looked up from her phone. She only turns her head after being nudged by her father, taking off one side of her headphones.

"Thanya, please take Miya upstairs to wash her hands and change clothes for me."

Saeng Nuea says to his eldest daughter, gently pushing both of his kids toward the stairs. After they're out of sight, he turns back to his younger sister, clearly fuming, ready to scold her.

"Dao Nuea! I told you not to bring girls into the house for this!"

"It's not what you think, P'Saeng Nuea! I swear, it's just..."

Dao Nuea quickly stands, waving her hands to stop him from knocking her on the head like he usually does. She hadn't planned to break their agreement-she knew better than to risk Thanya and Miya seeing something inappropriate.

She uses her body to shield Khemjira, who hurriedly clasps her bra back together, as she scrambles for an excuse that might satisfy her brother. "Just what?"

"Sh-She's a coworker!"

Dao Nuea stammers, her voice full of nervousness.

"P'Kem is my senior at work. She was just outside the office, so she dropped by with some congee for me."

"...Really?"

"Really!"

"Is that true?"

Saeng Nuea asks, leaning forward to look at Khemjira, who is still sitting awkwardly on the sofa, trying to adjust her clothes. Her hands, just moments before, had been under her shirt.

"Y-Yes, it's true."

"...."

"...."

"...."

"Ah, I see."

Saeng Nuea finally sighs in relief, realizing he had misunderstood.

"Sorry about that. Khemjira I guess I jumped to conclusions. Thank you for taking care of my sister all this time."

"No need to thank me, it's just part of my job as her coworker."

Khemjira replies, still flustered.

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"Heh, sorry about earlier."

Dao Nuea grins sheepishly.

"You really are something."

Dao Nuea walks Khemjira to the front of the house. From the driver's seat of the parked car, someone glares at Dao Nuea with mild irritation.

Dao hadn't expected her brother to pick up his daughters from school so early, and she almost got into big trouble. Thankfully, Khemjira had played along with her little lie.

"Oh, I almost forgot to pay you for the congee,"

Dao says, reaching for her wallet, remembering the pork congee with a softboiled egg she had asked Khemjira to buy.

"No need."

"Come on, don't make me feel bad."

"Just lend me that special edition light novel, *Reincarnated as a Black Cat* next time we meet."

"Hah, are you turning into an otaku now?"

"What's an otaku?"

Dao stifles a laugh and dodges the question, pretending to ignore it.

"Alright, drive safe, auntie. And don't frown so much-you'll age faster."

"I'm not even frowning."

"Really?"

"...."

"You won't admit you're a little annoyed?"

"I'm going home now."

"Wait a sec."

"What now?"

"Consider this a little thank you and an IOU for next time, Auntie."

Dao Nuea smiles, giving Khemjira a quick kiss on the cheek-a rare gesture that Dao Nuea usually reserves for intimate moments. Khemjira, caught off guard, touches the spot where Dao Nuea's lips had been, then quickly pushes her away.

"You are so cheeky brat."

As the car window rolls up and Khemjira drives away from the two-story house where they had spent most of the afternoon, Dao Nuea watches her go. Her eyes, as quick as her lips and hands, catch the last glimpse of her partner's flustered face before she disappears. **"When embarrassed, that auntie looks kinda cute."**

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**Chapter 08**

*Sigh....*

Today, Dao Nuea is being scolded by a senior colleague. It's not really a big deal, nothing that should make her sit here sighing deeply and acting all withered like a flower deprived of sunlight.

It's just a mistake she made on an assigned task, causing a new cosmetic product to be rejected for failing to meet market standards.

*"I'm really disappointed in you, Nuea."*

But, in truth, the product not meeting the standards isn't entirely Dao Nuea's fault. Most of the blame should fall on that same senior, whose job is to ensure the standards of the product, but instead, they pushed the responsibility onto an inexperienced intern.

That senior probably just taking out her frustration after getting scolded by her own superiors. Even though P'Na. her mentor, keeps telling her it's fine, but Dao Nuea can't seem to let go of her thoughts.

On top of that, her thesis has just been heavily critiqued by Professor

Parnward. Her thesis advisor is always strict about the quality of work, and Parnward likely wants the theses under her guidance to be of the highest standard.

*Sigh.....*

But she can't help feeling like a complete failure.

"I wasn't late today."

"....."

With a sigh that long, how could Khemjira not think that Dao Nuea is sighing at her just as she's returning to the condo? This time she's back on time, so the younger girl has no reason to be upset with her.

But today, Dao Nuea seems even gloomier than usual.

Frustrated, Stressed, and Upset.

She's eager to let it all out.

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Khemjira, upon returning to her room, just wants to change into something comfortable before doing anything else. But before the door even fully closes or shevcan take off her black pumps-

"Umpf."

Her bed partner tums her around and kisses her, not giving her a chance to ask questions or say anything Khemjira's small frame is just the right size for Dao Nuea to lift and carry to the soft bed in the bedroom.

Khemjira lies there, confusion evident on her face, but Dao Nuea, who is now straddling her, doesn't utter a single explanation.

"Wait-"

Dao Nuea doesn't listen to Khemjira's half-hearted protest. Instead, her lips silence any further words. Her hands grip Khemjira's silky short hair, and in no time. Khemjira's work clothes are being removed and tossed aside. Before she can even react or enjoy the moment, Dao Nuea's fingers slip inside her, causing her back to arch unexpectedly.

As their lips press together fervently, sounds of wetness begin to emerge from below. Khemjira, lying beneath, turns her head to the side it doesn't take long before Khemjira's body convulses in satisfaction, succumbing to the stimulation of Dao Nuea's nails. Dao Nuea nails withdraws from the another Khemjira physically pleased, **but...**

*Slap!*

*".....*"

"I'm not your outlet....to vent your feeeling however you please!"

Khemjira's hand remains in the air as Dao Nuea's cheek turns a shade of red from the hard slap. The naked girl, breathing heavily with anger, pushes Dao Nuea away, nearly sending her off the bed. She hates this. Her body isn't there for someone to use to vent their emotions on a whim.

The slap wasn't strong enough to burst any blood vessels, but it was hard enough to stun Dao Nuea into silence. For so long, she sits still, unmoving, that even Khemjira's initial anger starts to wane. Feeling something strange in Dao Nuea's behavior, Khemjira, now confused, tentatively moves closer.

"Hey?"

But just as Khemara gently taps her shoulder-

**"Hah."**

"...."

"H-Haaah!"

"....."

"Haaah! Haaah!"

Dao Nuea, after sitting silently for so long, suddenly bursts into tears, crying uncontrollably. Khemjira jumps in surprise, completely thrown off by the drastic change in Dao Nuea's behavior.

Now, Dao Nuea is hugging her knees, wailing at the foot of the bed, and her sobs are growing louder by the second.

Khemjira, unsure of what to do, gets up from the bed to gather their scattered clothes. She even grabs a fresh set of clothes for herself. But despite getting dressed and returning to sit on the bed.

Dao Nuea still doesn't stop crying Khemjira, however, doesn't feel irritated enough to yell at her.

Khemjira knows she's partly in the wrong for slapping her so why does she feel guilty now? Should she comfort her? But Khemjira's never been good at comforting people.

Still, she's been wondering for a while now"Doesn't crying this much hurt your throat?"

"...."

"Hey, I'm not teasing you."

Khemjira says, realizing her words only make Dao Nuea cry harder. She's terrible at this, always has been, but she tries anyway, awkwardly continuing.

"I mean, if you keep screaming like that, it's not good for your vocal cords, right? And you might choke on air or something, so maybe it's better if you stop? Okay?"

Even her attempt at a comforting hug is clumsy, but at least Dao Nuea doesn't push her away and instead tightens the embrace. Dao Nuea clings to Khemjira, afraid she won't be forgiven, even though she already regrets her actions.

"I'm sorry, Auntie. I'm really sorry,"

"...It's okay. I get it."

Khemjira says, her heart softening at the sight of the crying girl. No matter how angry she was, she can't stay mad when Dao Nuea cries like a child. Unable to resist, she gently strokes her head, still holding her close.

"There, there. No more crying. Look at you-so not pretty when you cry like this."

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Food always helps to improve a girl's mood, and it's the same for the two girls lying beside each other. They haven't had dinner yet.

Around Khemjira's condo there are plenty of open restaurants, including several places offering *moo kra ta* (Thai BBQ), which the younger one loves.

However, Khemjira doesn't like grilling pork on a hot pan, especially in the heat since most of the restaurants are open-air. Besides, she doesn't really like barbecue or buffet-style meals.

But if she had to choose, she could tolerate *shabu*.

She knows that young people, like the university students, often gather to eat at buffets, and both *moo kra ta* and *shabu* are particularly popular with this age group.

The *shabu* restaurant that Khemjira drives Dao Nuea to is quite nice, and there's a decent crowd. They arrive just in time to avoid having to wait in line, but the only available tables are by the wall, with seats only on one side. So, Dao Nuea and Khemjira have to sit next to each other, sharing a pot of black-broth shabu.

The older one carefully places slices of pork collar into the pot one by one, in stark contrast to her companion, who dumps a whole tray of pork belly in at once.

"Cook them slowly. Dumping them all in like that is ungraceful."

"People usually dump them all in. If I cooked them piece by piece, we wouldn't finish before the buffet time runs out."

Not only does she eat messily, but she also doesn't bother to eat the vegetables. Still, whatever was worrying Khemjira seems to be less of an issue now.

Suddenly, Khemjira grabs Dao Nuea's cheek.

"What is it?"

"You're making a mess."

Pretending to wipe the taller girl's cheek with a tissue, Khemjira gently strokes it, the same cheek she had lightly slapped earlier.

Dao Nuea probably doesn't even realize she's being comforted.

"Feeling better now, right?"

"...."

"Are you stressed? You don't seem like yourself today."

As she adds cheese tofu and some dolly fish into the pot. Dao Nuea is asked about her unusual behavior. Normally, the Dao Nuea Khemjira knows is talkative and enjoys teasing the shorter girl to make her mad.

But she's always respectful, never taking out her emotions on others like she had earlier that evening. Khemjira isn't upset anymore, so there's no point in bringing it up again.

Khemjira really wants to know what threw Dao Nuea off so much. It's probably just concern for her as a companion.

Thinking about what happened, Dao Nuea almost wants to cry again. But she remembers Khemjira's threat that she'll have to pay for the buffet herself-699 baht per person-if she cries a second time.

So, Dao Nuea manages not to cry, but it's obvious she's still down. She stirs the broth and mumbles.

"Yeah, I messed up a lot at work today. I feel like such a failure."

"Mistakes are a normal part of being human, aren't they?"

"I know, but I made mistakes I shouldn't have."

"There's no such thing as a mistake you shouldn't make. Every mistake helps us grow. But it's up to you how you look at it. You can either learn from it, or you can let it drag you down. Sometimes, when someone points out your mistakes, they just want you to be careful not to make the same ones again. But if someone only criticizes you without offering anything constructive, then don't bother giving them any value."

"...."

"I teach kids.... at work like that all the time."

Khemjira almost lets it slip that she's referring to her students. But from what she's heard, these are the kinds of problems every recent graduate faces. She doesn't want to judge whether Dao Nuea's problem is big or small, but she doesn't want to see her sulking like a sad puppy, either.

"So don't be sad. You're much better when you're smiling."

"...."

Khemjira can't stand seeing Dao Nuea only eating meat without touching the vegetables. She picks up some cabbage and carrots and places them in Dao Nuea's bowl.

Dao Nuea doesn't like vegetables, but she smiles anyway, earning a glare from Khemjira. And no, it's not because she's forcing herself to eat what she dislikes.

"Why are you smiling? Eat it."

"Thank you."

Khemjira really does have a warm side, doesn't she?

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"Buckle up, so we can head back."

"I don't want to go home yet."

"...."

"Can I stay with you a little longer?"

Dao Nuea surprises Khemjira by suddenly refusing to buckle her seatbelt, whining instead. Khemjira thought that after enjoying a free shabu meal, Dao Nuea would be eager to go back to her condo and relax.

But instead, she gives Khemjira a pleading look, hoping to stay together a bit longer.

Without spending the night, there's no real reason for Dao Nuea to stick around. She isn't the first casual partner to ask for more time, but Khemjira had always rejected them with a cold stare. She could do the same now, but something about Dao Nuea's pleading gaze softens her resolve.

"What do you want to stay for? We're not doing anything."

Khemjira isn't refusing outright, just questioning why Dao Nuea wants to stay. Her mood had already faded since earlier, and she's not the type to reignite it easily.

"Are you sure about that?"

"...."

"....."

Dao Nuea clearly wants another chance.

If Khemjira allows it, this time she swears to treat her like royalty. Just locking eyes with Dao Nuea, whose beautifül gaze Khemjira can't resist, starts to rekindle a spark that she thought was gone. She doesn't pull back as Dao Nuea leans in closer, their faces moving toward each other.

*Bzzz! Bzzz!*

Who could be calling at a time like this? Dao Nuea had just about lured Khemjira back in, but the sudden buzzing of the phone disrupts everything. Khemjira turns away as her focus snaps back, while Dao Nuea, irritated, pulls out her phone and answers with clear annoyance. The name on the screen only makes her more frustrated.

They never call, so why today?

"Dammit, Pleng! You jerk."

[Hey!]

"What's your problem?"

Dao Nuea starts by angrily greeting her friend, but her expression quickly changes as she hears the panic in Pleng's voice-so unlike her usual calm tone:

[Get over to sis Grand dorm right now. She just got dumped by her boyfriend.]

[She's going to **jump**!]

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**Chapter 09**

"Hey, Pleng! Where is she?"

"Are you blind, Nuea? Come help me, quick!"

Despite being the strongest in the group, Pleng Phin was also the smallest. Holding Grand back to prevent her from jumping off the balcony alone was too much for her. Grand was even stronger, especially while sobbing uncontrollably.

The little girl needed help restraining her older friend. Just in time, Dao

Nuea ran through the unlocked door. Without hesitation, she rushed to grab Grand. Pleng Phin held her left arm and leg, while Dao Nuea took the other side.

Even with both of them holding her, Grand still had enough strength to resist. Khemjira, who had followed them into the room, stood watching.

Dao Nuea had already explained on the way what had happened and had come prepared with words to calm their heartbroken friend.

"Grand, I'm here now. Let's talk, okay?"

"I don't want to live anymore! If Ram isn't here, I don't see why I should stay."

"Don't say that! You still have us!"

"I already told her, Nuea, but..."

"How many times have I been left? Every guy leaves me the same way

because of her... That woman ruins my life!"

"...."

"That P'Sita, that bitch!"

"Hey, hey, calm down!"

No matter what they said, it didn't help. Being abandoned again only reinforced the same old story: every guy Grand dated left her for a woman named Sita. It was as if this woman, named after a character from the Ramayana, had left an unforgettable scar on Grand's heart.

What did that woman have that Grand didn't? Every one of her boyfriends ended up falling hopelessly in love with Sita and leaving her behind. It had been this way since university, and now, even as an adult, she could never keep a man.

But at this point, reason didn't even matter. She simply couldn't compete with the woman that every man chose over her. She almost regretted posting a dramatic farewell on her

Instagram story, which had prompted Pleng Phin to rush over and stop her.

And on top of that, she had dragged Dao Nuea along to help calm her down.

"Just let me die! I have no reason to live!"

"Are you really going to die over a man? Think about it first!"

"I've thought it through! My life is meaningless and terrible. I want to die, so don't try to stop me! My death has nothing to do with anyone else."

"How dare you speak so selfishly?"

Khemjira had intended to stay out of it, but that last statement made her snap. The three people on the balcony, including Dao Nuea, turned to look at the person who had just shouted furiously.

The stranger who had come with Dao Nuea grabbed Grand by the hair. The strength she used far exceeded that of Dao Nuea and Pleng Phin combined. "How dare you be so selfish toward your parents and friends who love you? And you have the audacity to be selfish toward the building owner and all the people who live here too? Think for a second: if you jump, how many people will be affected? Your parents will be heartbroken, your friends devastated, and the owner of this place will lose tenants scared of ghosts, now and in the future. Do you want to become a ghost haunting this place and have everyone curse you forever?"

Grand couldn't even cry anymore. The shock of being grabbed and scolded by a stranger left her stunned and silent. She hated being lectured by someone she didn't know, especially when they had never spoken before. It annoyed her and made her angry. She braced herself to respond.

"Stop! I'm not done!"

The intensity in Khemjira's voice made Grand shut her mouth immediately. Goosebumps spread all over her body. Khemjira pointed a finger at Grand's tear-streaked face, silently ordering her to stay quiet unless she wanted her fate sealed. Then she turned to the two girls holding Grand.

"You two are in the way. Move!"

"Y...yes, ma'am."

"....."

Dao Nuea quickly release her. Although Pleng Phin was confused, she followed suit without protest. Khemjira managed to restrain the struggling woman all on her own, her grip so strong that Grand didn't dare move a single inch.

Now she sat motionless like a statue on the edge of the balcony, her eyes wide with fear as Khemjira's demonic gaze locked on her.

Khemjira was tired of dealing with stubborn girls, but someone like Grandwho planned to throw her life away over a man-deserved a special lecture from a teacher who had plenty of experience in disciplining wayward students.

When Khemjira decided to scold her, no one dared to oppose her. Even Dao Nuea probably wouldn't challenge her in this mood.

"Your parents raised you with so much care, and you want to throw it all away over a man? As if there's only one man in the world? And why would you die for a useless guy who left you for someone else? Why do you value yourself so little? You need to learn to see the worth of your own life!"

"....."

"Get down from there! Sit here!"

At that moment, Khemjira's words were law. Grand immediately climbed down from the balcony and knelt in front of the smaller woman. Dao Nuea brought a chair for the woman, who sat down in front of her best friend. At that moment, even Dao Nuea couldn't help her.

It was only fair. No matter how much they had tried, Grand wouldn't listen. So now, Khemjira would take it upon herself to teach her a lesson.

"I'll teach you the value of life myself, in the name of your parents!"

It had been over an hour since Khemjira started lecturing Grand. She covered everything-from the importance of showing gratitude to parents for giving them life to the consequences of suicide from all religious and moral perspectives.

Grand sat without moving She didn't dare move a finger, her head bowed as she absorbed the constant reprimands from the woman in the chair. Meanwhile, her two closest friends watched from the bed, feeling a mix of pity and relief.

"She's been preaching for an hour now,"

Pleng Phin murmured.

"Yeah, her legs must be numb by now," Dao Nuea replied.

Dao Nuea suddenly felt lucky that Khemjira had only slapped her. It seemed like she had still been in a gentle mood with her. However, Pleng Phin had just now seen the beautiful woman who was Dao Nuea's companion.

Dao Nuea had been bragging about Khemjira, calling her the best friend with benefits she'd had in a long time, and now Pleng Phin could believe it. Khemjira was just as impressive as Dao Nuea had claimed, though she seemed like an overly strict teacher.

"Is that your new girl? She's pretty hot."

"Hey, watch your mouth."

"What? I talk like this about all your other girls,"

Pleng Phin defended herself.

She was just saying that Khemjira was truly beautiful-not being rude like Dao Nuea usually was.

"But actually..."

"What?"

Pleng Phin had been staring at Khemjira's face for a while, and something about it felt strangely familiar.

"I feel like I've seen her somewhere before."

Hearing that, Dao Nuea turned to her friend.

"From where? An ex of yours?"

"Are you crazy?"

Pleng Phin replied with a laugh.

"But seriously, she looks familiar."

"Oh, really?"

Was that auntie-like face really that generic? Dao Nuea thought to herself. She ignored it, convinced that Pleng Phin was imagining things.

After all, how could those two have ever crossed paths?

After what felt like an eternity, Khemjira finally stopped lecturing-just as Grand burst into tears for the second time. She sobbed, not because she wanted to die, but because she was heartbroken from being abandoned.

At that moment, it was up to her two friends to comfort her, while the one who had been scolding her finally fell silent.

Having said enough, Khemjira sat down and waited before excusing herself to leave.

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Khemjira wasn't particularly good at driving at night, nor did she feel comfortable driving anywhere other than her usual route between the university and her condominium.

Grand's apartment was quite far from her usual area, and the streets were poorly lit. Dao Nuea, who was more skilled behind the wheel, took over the driving duties once again, just as she had before.

She handled the car with ease-something Khemjira herself could never achieve.

For the record, she had never let anyone else drive her car before.

"Auntie."

"Hm?"

Khemjira turned her head toward Dao Nuea, noticing how focused she was on the road. She had to admit, somewhat reluctantly, that the girl was a good driver-good enough for her to trust her beloved car in her hands.

"Can you help me with something?"

"What is it?"

"Take my phone and find the number of someone named Me'ar. The password is XXX XXX."

Dao Nuea's phone was in the compartment behind the gear shift. Khemjira nodded, retrieved it, unlocked it, and searched for the contact named Me'ar.

"Should I call?"

"Yes, go ahead."

Khemjira put the call on speaker so that Dao Nuea could talk while driving. Although she wasn't sure if this was a personal matter, she was ready to disconnect if necessary. The line rang briefly before someone answered in a polite yet familiar tone.

[Hello, Miss Dao Nuea.]

"Hello, Miss Me'ar. I'd like to speak with Khun Ther for a moment,"

Dao Nuea said, addressing someone who seemed to be her friend's secretary. They had spoken many times before and had become almost friends.

When she mentioned wanting to speak with their mutual friend, there was a brief silence on the other end, followed by some shuffling noises, before the person responded.

[You may leave a message.]

Why would they say that? Shouldn't they just call Khun Ther to the phone?

But she ignored it, already used to this kind of interaction, and went on with what she needed to say.

"Hey, Ther, Grand just got dumped and almost jumped off a balcony, but Pleng and I stopped her in time. I just wanted to let you know, in case you didn't see her Instagram story where she posted a farewell message. I just didn't want you to worry. If you're free, maybe go see her and give her some support. Oh, and Yai Mai's birthday is coming up. Pleng and Lare are planning to celebrate at the hospital with her. You're welcome to join us."

[Message received.]

"Alright, thanks. Goodbye."

After hanging up, Khemjira remained silent, her expression unchanged.

"There's no need to make that face, Auntie. My friend is just... a little weird."

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"Why are you still standing there? Hurry up and come in."

Khemjira said, urging Dao Nuea into her room. It was already late, and standing in the doorway talking might disturb the neighbors. However, Dao Nuea didn't enter despite the invitation.

She shook her head slightly, even though earlier that night, she had insisted she wanted to spend more time with Khemjira.

"No, I'm leaving. I just walked you to your room, that's all."

"You're not staying?"

"It's really late."

"..."

"I'm going now."

Dao Nuea's car was parked in the underground garage. Even though she was feeling a bit tired and mentally drained from driving all day, she planned to take a quick nap in the car before heading home. She waved goodbye and turned toward the elevator.

Dao Nuea didn't want to inconvenience Khemjira, knowing it wasn't polite to impose. But still...

"You can stay the night here if you want."

"..."

"Driving back so late is dangerous. You can leave in the morning."

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"What a soft bed."

"Move over a little. I can't sleep."

Khemjira felt like a giant dog was taking up her entire 1.5-meter-wide bed. Girls these days were so tall, as if they had been drinking gallons of milk while growing up.

The pajamas she gave Dao Nuea-the longest ones she had-were still too short, turning them into short pajamas on her.

Khemjira's bed was incredibly comfortable, almost as if it could suck someone's soul away. Dao Nuea wanted to stay in it forever.

Up until that moment, she had used the bed for everything except sleeping. If she had known how comfortable it was, she would have spent all her time rolling around in it.

However, she knew that if she tried, Khemjira would probably kick her harder than the push she had just given her to make her sleep on the other side.

As Khemjira settled into her side of the bed, she reached out to turn off the bedside lamp and pulled up the blanket to keep warm in the cool, airconditioned room. The thick blanket was enough to keep the cold at bay, but Dao Nuea scooted even closer to snuggle against her.

"What are you doing?"

"Let me hug you. I'm cold."

"I can't breathe."

Even though she saying that, Khemjira still let Dao Nuea hug her.

"Thank you for everything."

Dao Nuea had bothered Khemjira with so many things. She had even made her angry at one point....

Honestly, Dao Nuea felt really grateful to her. She used to think Khemjira was like any other old-fashioned adult who, after hearing young people's problems, would dismiss them as minor issues or accuse them of making a big deal out of nothing.

Khemjira admitted that she had some old-fashioned views, but one thing she disliked was when people trivialized others' problems. Everyone's problems were big to them, and strangers had no right to judge.

Except in Grand's case. Maybe Khemjira had been a bit harsh, but she did it because she could tell that someone as stubborn as Grand wouldn't listen if spoken to kindly.

Years of dealing with all kinds of students had given her a good sense of how to approach people-some needed gentle words, while others needed a sharp sting to get through to them.

"You don't need to thank me. I probably got into some wrong paths. But I don't know... I just can't help stepping in when I see someone heading down the wrong path. It's just a bad habit of mine."

"You really act like a teacher."

Because she was one... That was probably why she couldn't help but lecture someone who was almost the same age as her students.

"Thank you for helping knock some sense into my friend."

"..."

-"You did really well today, you know?"

Without Khemjira, Grand might have gone through with her reckless act. Dao Nuea wasn't sure if she and Pleng Phin would have been able to stop her in time.

And besides helping Grand, Khemjira had also comforted Dao Nuea, making her genuinely admire her for it. As she spoke, she reached out to stroke Khemjira's hair, a small smile on her lips.

Letting someone younger touch her like that could be seen as crossing a line. Khemjira usually didn't like people overstepping boundaries, which was why she hadn't gotten along with Dao Nuea at first.

But now, for some reason, this gesture felt warm and comforting. It was a good thing the room was completely dark-this way, Dao Nuea wouldn't see that Khemjira was smiling to herself.

Dao Nuea's phone, tucked under her pillow, vibrated with an incoming call. Since she wasn't asleep yet, the late-night disturbance didn't bother her. She grabbed the phone casually and answered, putting it on speaker.

"Hello, Miss Me'ar."

[Hello, Miss Dao Nuea. I have a message from madam.]

"Go ahead."

*Madam*? Khemjira thought she would only hear terms like that in soap operas. So Dao Nuea's friend must be someone from high society. She expected the message to be formal, but her expectations were about to be shattered.

[Oh my god, is it true? I haven't even checked her story! Yeah, yeah, when I have time, I'll try to go cheer her up. I mean, how dumb is she to want to die over a guy? Ugh. Also, I probably won't join Yai Mai's birthday party, but I'll contribute the cake and gifts as always. Alright.]

"..."

[That's the full message.]

"Uh, okay... Thanks. Bye."

"..."

"..."

**"See? I told you, my friend is weird."**

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 10**

"That's enough, Professor Khemjira, Professor Mawin!"

People at the university had a talent for being loud—both students and professors alike. Khemjira, who didn’t like loud noises, always showed an irritated expression when she heard someone raise their voice.

That was, unless her own name was involved—especially when it came from the furious mouth of the older man who had just stormed into her office. This man, a senior professor in her faculty, was none other than Professor Jatuphat.

"Could you wait outside, students?"

Khemjira asked, her voice polite but firm.

Jatuphat’s outburst had interrupted her conversation with a group of students who had come to ask about the material they had just studied, and now was not a good time for them to witness this kind of scene.

"Y....Yes, ma’am,"

The students respond, quickly leaving the room.

The last thing Khemjira wanted was for her students to see their professors arguing. It was unprofessional and immature.

She didn’t quite understand why Jatuphat couldn’t approach her more calmly. Judging by the look on his face, it was clear he had something urgent to discuss with her… and possibly with Mawin as well. "Professor Mawin is teaching right now. If you’d prefer to speak to both of us together, perhaps you might—"

"I can speak to you alone, Professor Khemjira," Jatuphat interrupted.

"After all, you were the one who instigated this."

"The one who instigated?"

The meaning behind Jatuphat’s words became clear when he placed an A4 sheet of paper on her desk. It was a list of professors responsible for creating the midterm exam questions for each subject.

"How dare you suggest that my name be removed?"

So that’s what this was about. Khemjira had expected something like this to happen. Mawin had already warned her.

Jatuphat was absolutely right—it was Khemjira who had suggested removing his name from the list of professors responsible for creating the midterm exam questions.

At CAU University, the process for midterm and final exams varied. While the final exam required a standardized test created jointly by all the professors teaching a particular subject, the midterm allowed for more flexibility.

Professors could collaborate on a unified set of questions or opt for separate exams, depending on their preference.

However, there was one exception: the subject *Financial Statement Analysis*, which Khemjira taught alongside Mawin and Jatuphat. This subject required a standardized midterm exam due to the large number of sections.

As for the difficulty level of the exam, Mawin was known for making relatively easy questions—so much so that even Khemjira, his friend, often scolded him. But his questions were always fair and within the faculty’s standards.

Jatuphat, on the other hand, preferred to use real-world practical problems, something that Khemjira, as his younger colleague, actually appreciated.

However, there was one particular aspect of Jatuphat’s behavior that Khemjira simply couldn't overlook, unlike Mawin’s softer approach. That was why, with Mawin’s support, she suggested that Jatuphat take charge of a research project. The department head, who was also responsible for research coordination, approved the suggestion.

But Jatuphat took it as an insult, as if being removed from his duty of preparing the midterm exam was a matter of life and death.

He was already upset that his name had been mentioned without his consultation. To him, it felt like she was overstepping—especially since she was just a junior professor under his supervision. However, Khemjira showed no regret for her actions, especially when compared to his past misconduct.

"I just want the midterm exam to be fair and transparent for all students. After all, exams are the best way to measure their knowledge."

"If you have something to say, just say it directly."

"What I mean is that we, as professors, should remain impartial toward every student. But I’ve observed that you lack that particular quality, which could be a problem."

"Impartiality? That’s a bold accusation coming from a junior. I’ve been teaching this course for years without any issues. You, on the other hand, have only been here for one semester and are already acting out of line— disrespectfully suggesting that I am biased."

Indeed, he was as stubborn as Mawin had described the infamous Professor Jatuphat to be.

Khemjira hadn’t planned to go into details in their shared office, but since they were alone, she didn’t have many options. If Jatuphat wanted answers, she would give them to him.

She turned to her desk and retrieved a set of A4 documents that she had obtained from the secretary’s office last week. She placed these papers on top of Jatuphat’s exam list.

"The grades of one student—Miss Wanida, to be specific—are significantly higher than the rest of her section. It’s quite strange, don’t you think?"

CAU University’s grading system wasn’t based on a curve but followed a curriculum-based criteria approach, often referred to as *grading by the book*. Each student’s score was derived directly from exam and assignment results and was judged based on quality and understanding. While it wasn’t always a perfect measure of a student’s knowledge, occasional score discrepancies were normal.

However, some discrepancies pointed to something more concerning—like the case of the student under this particular professor’s supervision.

As a faculty member, Khemjira had the right to access student records, and the papers in front of her contained information about the courses Jatuphat had taught and the ones Wanida had taken.

The results were obvious—she had scored nearly perfect marks in all of Jatuphat’s courses, while other students barely reached half of the maximum score.

"This student has received an A in every course you’ve taught, Professor Jatuphat. However, in her other subjects, her grades are significantly lower,"

Khemjira pointed out. Her senior colleague should be grateful that she hadn’t yet reported this anomaly to the department head.

Wanida’s unusually high grades were suspiciously inconsistent, making it hard to believe that she was simply a talented student—especially when compared to her results in similar subjects taught by other professors.

"I could escalate this matter to Professor Wimanee for further investigation. But I’d rather not make this a bigger issue, as your *favorite student* might also face consequences as well."

"You... You have no proof."

"Would you prefer photographic evidence or voice recordings?"

Khemjira never made accusations without solid proof. She was confident that what she had could bring the man standing before her to his knees.

Jatuphat only had himself to blame—he had entrusted his classes to her during his recent leave of absence, and that was when she started hearing rumors about him and Wanida from other students in the same section.

She could have ignored those rumors, but curiosity got the better of her, and she began digging deeper.

To her disbelief, her senior colleague had the audacity to engage in an inappropriate relationship with a student under his care. This was not only morally reprehensible but had also led to blatant favoritism, with grades that should have reflected objective knowledge instead tainted by a selfish and illicit relationship.

It had taken countless sleepless nights to gather this evidence—tracking their behavior on social media and observing them on campus. Yet, she still chose not to send it to higher authorities, which would have forced Jatuphat to face an ethical investigation by the dean.

Even so, she wouldn’t trust him with the responsibility of creating the midterm exam along with her and Mawin.

Jatuphat, who had stormed in furiously moments before, now stood there in shock. The anger that had driven him here dissipated as he faced Khemjira’s piercing gaze, feeling like a subordinate standing trial.

“You…”

“I never intended to overstep my bounds as your subordinate, but I have a duty to ensure fairness for all students. When an injustice like this occurs, as a professor, I simply cannot turn a blind eye.”

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Lately, Pleng Phin seemed different—she had been reaching out to Dao Nuea more often in the past few weeks.

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**Pleng Phin: Hey, Dao Nuea.**

**Pleng Phin: I figured out where I’ve seen your girl before.**

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“Huh.”

Pleng Phin wasn’t the type to meddle in other people’s affairs.

When she mentioned recognizing Khemjira’s face that day at the Grand dorm, Dao Nuea thought that was the end of it. But her friend had apparently gone out of her way to track down the source of that familiar feeling.

Dao Nuea herself had already forgotten about it, assuming it was something simple—perhaps someone from Pleng Phin’s internship or a friend of a friend.

Dao Nuea picked up her phone to check her chat with her best friend.

Meanwhile, she took another puff from her favorite vape, the fruityflavored vapor escaping her lips and drifting into the night sky from the balcony. As the smoke dissipated, she used both hands—vape still in one— to type a response.

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**Dao Nuea: From where?**

**Pleng Phin: From my university.**

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*Her university?*

Pleng Phin studied at CAU in the Faculty of Agriculture. Could Khemjira have been a senior when her best friend was still in university?

But their age gap didn’t quite match. However, there was another possibility —maybe Khemjira seemed familiar because she was someone from the university.

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**Pleng Phin: sent a link.**

**Pleng Phin: She’s a professor in one of my friend’s classes.**

**Dao Nuea: A professor?**

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The link Pleng Phin sent led to the faculty directory of the CAU Faculty of Business Administration and Accounting.

Dao Nuea frowned at the screen and slipped her vape back into her pocket. She waited for the page to load and scrolled through the list of names, starting with the department head.

It took a moment before her eyes landed on the image of a woman dressed in the university’s formal attire, shoulder-length hair, and an aura of elegance that reminded her of a white swan.

This face was too familiar to be just another acquaintance. Her grip on her phone tightened as her gaze landed on the name she desperately hoped wouldn’t be there.

***Associate Professor Dr. Khemjira Pinchan.***

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**Pleng Phin: So, what are you going to do? Pleng Phin: Is this going to be a problem?**

. .

A problem? Dao Nuea wasn’t sure, but she was already in shock.

She admitted that she had always been a little curious about her friend with benefits' job, but she never imagined it would be something as significant as being a university professor.

**Associate Professor Dr. Khemjira Pinchan.**

**Professor Khemjira.**

**Professor in the Department of Finance, Faculty of Business Administration and Accounting at CAU.**

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. .

No wonder Pleng Phin recognized her face—her friend’s friend studied in the same faculty. Dao Nuea, who attended a different university, would never have known. But now that she knew…

Did this mean she had been sleeping with someone who essentially held the same position as her own professor?

*Was that wrong?*

*Would people see it as inappropriate?*

Dao Nuea had no idea. It wasn’t like she had ever been in a relationship with a professor before.

Besides, she wasn’t sure if it was as taboo as a relationship between a high school student and a teacher.

After all, she was already twenty-three and legally an adult by law.

To see it more clearly, Dao Nuea tried to imagine herself sleeping with Parnward, one of her own professors. No, no, that was too much. Just the thought of it gave her chills.

Sure, Parnward was beautiful, but there was no way Dao Nuea could sleep with her own professor.

*Absolutely not.*

Considering the basic facts: Dao Nuea was a senior university student, and Khemjira was a university professor. Their relationship could be seen as inappropriate if they continued as friends with benefits.

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"Haven't your lungs given up yet? You've been vaping for years."

Khemjira didn’t need to guess who had just opened the bathroom door. Even though the glass shower door was fogged up, making it hard to see outside, she knew exactly who it was.

She wondered why the owner of those red lips had taken so long to finish vaping on the balcony. As usual, she made a sarcastic remark, but the person she was teasing was startled in surprise.

"I... I am sorry."

"Have you been vaping so much that you're paranoid now? What’s with the sudden politeness?"

*What...?*

"So, being polite is wrong now, huh? You’re so weird."

Acting suspicious would only make things feel even stranger, so Dao Nuea forced herself to act normal. The voice from outside the bathroom door competed with the sound of the shower, making it a little hard to hear.

Dao Nuea, who had just finished washing up, reached out to turn off the shower before stepping out through the glass door to face the person standing there.

Beautiful... She had seen that naked figure countless times, yet Dao Nuea never stopped admiring this masterpiece of a body. Even with red marks from their earlier activities scattered across her smooth, pale skin, Khemjira was careful not to leave any marks in places that would be visible outside of her clothing.

After all, that would ruin her image as a university professor—an image that, like any professional, she had to maintain.

"You smell like sweat,"

Khemjira said. At first, she had planned to walk past Dao Nuea, but the smell hit her. It wasn’t from the person who had just spent all that time scrubbing in the shower. No, it was from the one who had been vaping on the balcony.

"Well, I sweated a lot earlier."

"It stinks,"

Khemjira replied with such an exaggerated look of disgust that the other woman almost wished she’d get permanent wrinkles out of sheer pettiness.

"Fine, then ignore me. I brought perfume. I’ll put it on before we go out."

"Do you want to join with me?"

"H... huh?"

"Rinse off before getting in, okay?"

And with that, the naked woman walked toward the rectangular jacuzzi next to the shower. She slowly sank into the water, which was at just the right temperature, having let the faucet run before her shower.

She turned on the jacuzzi system, and the water began to swirl, massaging her body and helping with circulation. It was perfect for relieving the day’s fatigue, which was why Khemjira loved relaxing there so much.

Dao Nuea was the first bed partner Khemjira had ever invited to bathe with her, but Dao Nuea had certainly been invited before. This wasn’t the first time someone had asked her to share a bath, so she really shouldn’t be blushing like a ripe tomato.

It only took Dao Nuea about five minutes to rinse off under the shower. She swore she had scrubbed every inch of her body, but the woman relaxing in the tub gave her a look that seemed to say otherwise.

*How could she have reached every nook and cranny so quickly?*

Khemjira had never seen Dao Nuea naked before. The younger woman always insisted on being in control and never allowed anyone to touch her. She never removed a single piece of clothing in bed. But seeing her like this, Khemjira had to admit—the girl's figure was enviable.

"Do you want me to wash again?"

Khemjira decided to let it go, her posture indicating it was fine. Dao Nuea, who had been standing there shivering for a while, finally slid into the warm water. The jets felt so good that she leaned back against the opposite side of the tub, directly across from Khemjira.

"You even work while you bathe?"

Dao Nuea asked, noticing the laptop placed on a foldable table beside the tub, in front of the other woman.

Khemjira nodded slightly, her eyes still glued to the midterm exam she was preparing before the deadline with Mawin.

"When there's a lot of work to do, you have to take it home."

"I've never taken work home."

"Because you don’t have much work?"

"No. It's because I work in a lab. If I tried to take it home, the whole house might explode—bam!"

"Idiot,"

Khemjira muttered, though there was a hint of amusement in her tone, followed by a soft chuckle. She hadn’t asked what kind of work Dao Nuea did, but she could guess it was something related to science or medicine— one of those lab-based professions.

*She was a professor in one of her friend’s classes.*

This was a chance to talk about work. If she was careful enough, she might be able to...

"So, what do you do? Do you get paid overtime?"

"Are you trying to get information about my job?"

"We agreed not to ask personal questions."

She failed on the first attempt.

Dao Nuea thought her playful approach would work, but Khemjira’s sharp gaze said otherwise. Dao Nuea knew very well how strict Khemjira was about her privacy. She had made it clear from the beginning, handing her a contract for their arrangement. Dao Nuea was afraid of breaking that unspoken agreement.

Khemjira was annoyed, but only for a moment. Seeing the other woman shrink like a scolded puppy quickly melted her frustration. Her sharp eyes —ones that usually didn’t need eyeliner—shifted from the younger woman back to her laptop screen, her fingers tapping lightly as she worked on her exam questions.

**"I work as a professor at a university."**

"....."

"That’s all I’ll say."

Revealing only her job wasn’t a big risk. She hadn’t mentioned which university, so it should be fine.

Dao Nuea, on the other hand, sat up in shock, leaning closer to look at Khemjira’s laptop.

"W-what?"

Khemjira instinctively leaned back, confused by Dao Nuea’s expression of astonishment, as if revealing her job was the most shocking thing in the world.

Which, for Dao Nuea, it was.

Did she take the wrong pills? How could she reveal that so easily?

"Why did you suddenly tell me that?"

Their agreement wasn’t a joke. Khemjira had been very clear about it when she handed over that contract. She wasn’t the type to act on impulse, so why?

It couldn’t be called a carefully thought-out decision, but if she had to answer why she said it…

"Maybe I feel comfortable enough with you."

People often get excited when they realize they’re in someone’s comfort zone.

Dao Nuea realized that was exactly how she felt at that moment, though she tried not to show it. Her heart raced—a feeling she had never experienced before because of anyone’s actions or words.

For Khemjira, this was a first.

Dao Nuea was the first person she felt comfortable enough with to share even a small piece of her personal life.

Pleng Phin’s question seemed to have an answer now—one that Dao Nuea had already figured out. She pulled out her phone, opened the chat with her best friend, and started typing.

**Dao Nuea: I’m a student. Khemjira is a professor, but... It’s fine, I guess.**

**Dao Nuea: After all, I’m not one of her students.**

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 11**

"Students."

"Yes, Professor Khemjira."

"I need to talk with you for a moment."

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It wasn’t often that Professor Khemjira called her students for a private talk unless there was something important, like now. When she did, it was usually about classwork or sometimes personal matters that needed to be addressed individually after class.

Instead of heading to the cafeteria for lunch together, the two or three girls who usually hung out as a group stopped in their tracks the moment they heard their professor’s voice.

She waved her hand at them from her desk, and although the gesture was barely noticeable but enough to make their legs move quickly toward her. They lined up in front of her desk.

After shutting down her computer and retracting the projector screen, Khemjira turned to them and began speaking.

"So..."

"Professor Khemjira, I swear I didn’t copy May’s homework! I just didn’t know how to do the last assignment, so I borrowed hers to look at it!"

Guilt made itself known. The student looked nervous, clearly afraid that the professor would accuse her of plagiarism. But in reality, Khemjira hadn’t even taken the assignments out of the submission basket in her office yet.

She hadn’t had a chance to check for any copying. And yet, here this student was, panicking. Her warning about grade deductions for copied work must have scared them more than she thought. "Next time, if you don’t understand something, ask,"

Khemjira sighed.

"I didn’t even call you here for that."

"Oh."

"Patharee has been absent for several days. Does anyone know why?"

Khemjira wasn’t concerned about the homework. What she really wanted to know was whether these girls had any idea why their friend hadn’t been attending.

She had pulled them aside because Patnaree, a normally diligent student, had been missing for days. One more absence and she would be disqualified from taking the midterm exam.

Khemjira didn’t want any of her students to lose their eligibility without knowing the reason, especially Patnaree, who was always early to class and eager to participate. Her unexplained absence felt strange.

The students whispered among themselves.

"Should we tell her?"

"I don’t know… She told us not to tell anyone."

"You should tell me. It could affect whether or not she can take the midterm,"

Khemjira interrupted, catching their whispers.

"Have you talked to her? Does she even know she’s about to lose her eligibility?"

"Um..."

"This could be a serious issue, you know?"

"It’s not a big deal, Professor."

"Not a big deal?"

Khemjira blinked, confused for a moment. Losing eligibility for the midterms was a serious problem—it wasn’t just a few points lost.

But just as she was about to say more, one of the students blurted out an unexpected truth.

"Patnaree had to go home to get married."

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***Click, click, click!***

"An angel!"

"Aww, Miya, my sweet niece!"

Miya, Dao Nuea’s youngest niece, was like a little angel who had descended from the heavens. Every time Dao Nuea thought about it, she felt like crying tears of joy, grateful that such an adorable child had been born into her family.

As an aunt, she was determined not to let this cuteness fade with time. Her camera was her tool to capture the charm of this five-year-old girl, dressed in a pure white dress with angel wings.

The camera shutter clicked continuously as the little angel posed on the school auditorium stage, right after the annual performance had ended.

"Dad, Aunt Dao, isn't Miya adorable?" Miya asked, spinning in a full circle.

"Adorable! My sweet niece is the cutest!"

Dao Nuea responded, turning away from the camera’s viewfinder. One hand rested on Saeng Nuea’s shoulder bag. He stood beside her, watching his younger daughter.

"Miya, are you hungry? Your aunt will give you some money."

"Hey, hey! That’s my money."

"Yes, but it’s still money, isn’t it?"

Not far away, Thanya, the older niece, was checking her phone. At ten years old, she wearing a black T-shirt and jeans—the typical outfit of someone working backstage at her class performance.

"Thanya, come take a picture with your sister and your aunt."

"No."

Ah, the rebellious phase... Most kids go through this stage between twelve and fifteen, but Thanya was already showing signs at ten. She was glued to her phone, probably ruining her eyesight, and Saeng Nuea knew his daughter never listened to his scoldings.

Dao Nuea just forced a smile, trying to understand kids' habits these days. At least Miya’s sweetness was a daily dose of emotional healing.

"Aren’t you going to the party with your coworkers tonight?"

Saeng Nuea suddenly remembered that his sister had a celebration for finishing her internship. The company had promised unlimited food and drinks, and knowing his sister, she wouldn’t miss that—especially not the drinks.

Yet, there she was, still taking pictures of Miya, showing no sign of rushing to the party.

"No. I took the day off for this."

"It’s just a school performance. I could’ve come alone."

"No way."

Dao Nuea emphasized each word as she turned to her brother.

"I can party and drink whenever I want, but Miya will only have one kindergarten third-year performance."

"But..."

"For me, family always comes first."

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Sure, she would have loved to enjoy the free drinks, but she couldn’t go to the party after taking the day off to watch her niece perform. That was also her last day of internship, and starting next week, she could focus entirely on her thesis.

After taking so many photos, it was time to go home. Dao Nuea took Miya’s hand—the little girl’s other hand was busy holding a Hokkaido milk-flavored ice cream bar—and led her to the car.

Once there, she lifted Miya, placed her in the car seat, and fastened the seatbelt. After closing the door, she was about to sit in the passenger seat when her phone vibrated with a notification.

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**Khemjira: Do you want to come to my apartment today?**

**.**

Wow, Dao Nuea must be pretty popular—another beautiful woman inviting her over. But hadn’t Khemjira mentioned she had work to finish at the university?

"Get in the car, or I’ll leave you here,"

Saeng Nuea shouted, rolling down the driver’s side window.

Unexpectedly, Dao Nuea gestured for him to go.

"Take Thanya and Miya home."

"And where are you going?"

"I’m not telling you."

Saeng Nuea raised an eyebrow, watching her closely.

"You said family comes first."

"Yeah, yeah."

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**Dao Nuea: I'm on my way.**

**Dao Nuea: I'll be there soon.**

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Dao Nuea truly loved her family, but she also appreciated spending time with beautiful women. Khemjira, the sharp-tongued woman, was someone Dao Nuea affectionately called beautiful.

After all, she often invited her to her apartment and kept the fridge stocked with unlimited cans of beer.

Lately, Dao Nuea had earned extra privileges as Khemjira’s lover. She now had a spare access card to Khemjira’s apartment.

Some days, the older woman, who was a university professor, would come home late, and instead of making Dao Nuea wait in the lobby, she decided to give her the spare key.

None of Khemjira's previous partners had received this kind of trust. Dao Nuea was the first.

*Again.*

"I'm here, Auntie... Wow!"

The moment Dao Nuea stepped inside, before she could even close the door, Khemjira, the owner of the room, rushed toward her. The smaller woman kicked the door shut and grabbed the taller girl by the collar for a kiss.

Though surprised, Dao Nuea responded without hesitation. She even managed to clumsily take off her shoes while Khemjira, impatient as always, clicked her tongue in frustration.

"You're late."

A fifteen-minute taxi ride was apparently still too slow for Khemjira.

"Traffic."

"Stop talking and get to work."

The buttons of Dao Nuea’s shirt were undone before she even realized it. Her light gray shirt fell to the floor by the door. The two quickly made their way to the bed—the usual place for their shared activities.

Sitting on the bed, Dao Nuea leaned in to kiss and tease Khemjira. Her fingers brushed over the bra clasp, undoing it. But before Dao Nuea could continue at her usual pace, Khemjira grew impatient, took off her bra herself, and tossed it aside.

There was a flicker of irritation on her face. As she pulled Dao Nuea closer, she straddled the younger woman and urgently tugged at her long hair.

This intense physical connection should have drowned them both in desire, leaving no room for doubt. Dao Nuea, who found Khemjira irresistibly attractive, should have been completely absorbed. But something felt... off.

Just as things were heating up, Dao Nuea stopped. She pulled away from the kiss and frowned.

"Auntie, is something wrong?"

Dao Nuea noticed that Khemjira was acting differently. She usually wasn’t this forceful, jumping straight into things. Even when Dao Nuea gently pushed her away, Khemjira stubbornly climbed back on top, still halfdressed. After several attempts to push her back, Khemjira let out a frustrated huff.

"Just keep going."

"I'm not here for you to take out your frustrations on me."

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Khemjira was the one who had said those exact words once. Would she really go back on them now?

Dao Nuea's tone wasn’t angry, but it was firm enough to snap Khemjira back to reality. She stopped what she was doing. Dao Nuea picked up the discarded bra and shirt and handed them back to the older woman.

Once Khemjira was dressed, both of them sat against the headboard, legs stretched out, the air between them thick with discomfort.

Something was definitely going on.

But would Dao Nuea seem intrusive if she asked? She didn’t want to pry too much and risk violating their agreement.

She had lost interest in anything physical a while ago. But just sitting there in silence didn’t feel right either.

Dao Nuea decided to speak, concerned.

"Do you want to talk about it? If not, that’s fine too."

"No."

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It wasn’t that Khemjira didn’t want to share or that she wasn’t ready. She let out a deep sigh, realizing she had almost used Dao Nuea as an emotional outlet for feelings she didn’t even like facing herself.

But if Dao Nuea was offering another way to help, Khemjira would appreciate it.

"Just consider listening to me as a way to vent."

Khemjira didn’t know who else to trust, so maybe… this would do.

A teacher shouldn’t reveal personal matters about their students, but Khemjira justified it to herself by thinking she wasn’t gossiping.

Instead, she was genuinely worried and deeply disturbed by what she had just discovered about one of her students.

Patnaree, one of her students, was about to lose her right to take the midterm exam. Her parents were forcing her to return home to marry a powerful district chief—who also happened to be the family’s creditor.

Patnaree's parents had borrowed money from the man to repair their house after it was struck by lightning. But the loan came with high interest rates.

The district chief, who had long been interested in Patnaree, saw this as his opportunity. He granted the loan with the hidden intention of marrying the young woman as payment.

With their meager farming income, Patnaree's family couldn’t keep up with the loan’s interest. In the end, their only way out was to marry their daughter off to the creditor—a man in his forties who wanted to wed a woman barely in her twenties.

Patnaree had no choice but to sacrifice her future, drop out of university, and fulfill this obligation in Mukdahan.

Hearing the story, Dao Nuea felt so disgusted she wanted to vomit. She was also furious at Patnaree's parents for selling their daughter’s future to pay off a debt.

"What kind of parents force their daughter to marry just to repay a loan?"

"When you have no money, it can be scary."

"Hmph."

As a teacher, Khemjira was fully aware of the limits of her role.

Technically, if Patnaree missed another class, she would have no choice but to deny her the right to take the exam. Without taking the exam, Patnaree would automatically fail the course.

And considering the circumstances, there was no guarantee she would have the chance to return next semester after her forced marriage.

Yet, Khemjira couldn’t bring herself to ignore the matter.

She felt deeply conflicted—something Dao Nuea picked up on. The younger woman wanted to know what Khemjira planned to do. Would she find a way to help, or would she simply let things unfold as they were?

"And… what happens next?"

"If she misses class again, I’ll have to mark her as ineligible for the exam." "That’s not right!"

Dao Nuea exclaimed, reacting as if she personally knew Patnaree.

"Isn’t there any way you can help her?"

"..."

"..."

"I'm thinking."

"Thinking about what?"

Dao Nuea wasn’t exactly curious, but when asked, Khemjira started feeling uneasy about sharing her thoughts. Still, ever since she had heard Patharee's friend's story, she had been turning it over in her mind. After considering it carefully, she finally reached a decision.

"I'm thinking of going to Mukdahan to talk to her."

She wanted to hear Patnaree's story directly before deciding on a solution together with her student. This wasn’t an approach most teachers would normally take.

Dao Nuea was visibly surprised that Khemjira was willing to travel all the way to Mukdahan—a province far from Bangkok—just to talk to Patnaree.

"Are you serious? What if she tells you to mind your own business? Don’t you have classes to teach?"

"I don’t have any on Friday, and my Monday class is in the afternoon. I should be able to go and come back in time."

"How are you planning to get there? By car?"

"I’m not great at driving. I was thinking of taking a bus."

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Khemjira didn’t waste much time packing the essentials in her travel bag.

She planned to take an early bus from the station, hoping to leave by 6 a.m.

But when she stood outside her condo at 5:30 a.m., she realized how unusually quiet the street was. Finding a taxi at that hour might be difficult. If she missed the bus, her whole plan would be delayed.

A car pulled up right in front of her. It wasn’t a taxi—it was a car she knew very well. When the window rolled down, Dao Nuea’s familiar face appeared behind the wheel.

"Get in, or we’ll get stuck in traffic."

"You?"

"Come on, I’ll put your bag in the trunk."

This was the earliest Dao Nuea had woken up all year. Fortunately, she arrived before Khemjira could catch a taxi. Since there weren’t many cars around, she had been able to park temporarily by the roadside.

Without hesitation, Dao Nuea got out and helped the petite woman load her bag into the trunk.

Khemjira hadn’t even agreed yet; she was still trying to process why Dao Nuea was here at this hour.

It was the result of Dao Nuea spending the whole night thinking about it— she had decided she would drive Khemjira to meet the student in Mukdahan. Now that her internship was over, she had plenty of free time.

Still, Khemjira hesitated, not wanting to trouble anyone.

"Don’t you have work or something?"

"Don’t worry about me," Dao Nuea replied.

"Besides, who would let an old lady like you travel alone?"

"I can go by myself."

"I’m not letting you go alone."

"Why do you care so much?"

"Because I care about you. It’s that simple."

"..."

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Dao Nuea would never allow Khemjira to travel alone to an unfamiliar place. From the way Khemjira behaved (someone Dao Nuea teasingly called "Auntie"), it was clear she had never taken a bus or traveled alone to a faraway province.

Even within Bangkok, a woman traveling alone was already risky. But going all the way to Mukdahan, a border province, would be even more challenging, especially for someone visiting for the first time. Without her own car to get around, the trip would only become more complicated.

Dao Nuea simply couldn’t picture Khemjira handling all that on her own.

Her eyes didn’t lie, and Khemjira could see from Dao Nuea’s gaze that she was genuinely worried about her. No one had ever looked at Khemjira like that before.

The petite woman was speechless.

"I, for one, am not letting you travel alone to a place you don’t know. Call it meddling if you want, but, well, turns out I’m both gorgeous and kindhearted."

It was almost sweet—until she added that last part, making Khemjira roll her eyes.

"Ugh. I’m going to throw up."

"Or maybe you don’t want me to come? Fine, I’ll just go home then."

"..."

"..."

"You drive, and I’ll pay for gas."

"Deal."

This nosy little girl brought trouble on herself, so she better not complain about getting tired from driving.

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 12**

The distance from Bangkok to Mukdahan was about an eight-hour drive, but with restroom and meal breaks, the travel time increased slightly.

Dao Nuea and Khemjira's trip ended up lasting nearly ten hours, mostly due to multiple stops at gas stations for bathroom breaks.

They didn’t waste much time looking for food since they had bought some snacks from a convenience store in Bangkok. Even though they left at five in the morning, it was well into the afternoon by the time they finally arrived in Mukdahan.

It was past noon, and evening was approaching, but....

"Ugh, it’s so hot!"

"Stop yelling."

The climate in northeastern provinces like this was scorching at any time of day. Even though Mukdahan was a province by the Mekong River, being close to such a large body of water didn’t seem to help lower the temperature in the city’s outskirts.

Sure, there were trees around providing some shade, but Dao Nuea was still drenched in sweat as she trailed behind the smaller woman glued to the GPS on her phone.

When they finally reached the local market, she couldn’t take it anymore. The taller woman started complaining—not just about the heat, but also about being exhausted.

After all, this was the longest trip she had ever taken, and all she wanted was to sit down and rest for a moment.

Her legs were sore and numb, shaking from the effort of simply standing still.

"I'm so tired... and hot... Yeah, I’m complaining, so what? I’ve been driving for hours, of course I’m exhausted."

"Nobody asked you to drive."

Khemjira barely spared her a glance before focusing back on the GPS. Just stopping for bathroom breaks had already delayed them too much. She wanted to hurry and meet Patnaree, following the address she got from the records office.

There was no time to waste sitting around after being stuck in the car for so long. Even though she understood that the woman who had volunteered to drive was tired, Khemjira wasn’t willing to wait any longer.

Dao Nuea dragged her feet a little longer before her eyes lit up at something that could help with both her exhaustion and the heat.

"Hey. There's a shaved ice shop over there. Can I sit and have some?"

"Do whatever you want,"

Khemjira replied calmly, hiding her relief that the other woman had found a place to rest.

"I’ll be back."

After following the GPS for so long without reaching her destination, Khemjira decided to ask the locals for directions. Luckily, in this community, everyone seemed to know each other—and they knew the house of a girl named Korya.

They told her to keep walking straight out of the village until she found a small house with a tin roof, standing alone in an open field.

When Khemjira finally arrived, she saw a single-story house, clearly damaged by a recent fire. The path leading to the house, lined with fruit orchards, was a mess. Dry leaves had fallen everywhere from the dead trees on the barren land, and the dirt ground made it difficult to walk, especially in her flip-flops.

She carefully made her way toward the house with its rusted tin roof.

In front of the house, someone was sweeping the dry leaves with a coconutleaf broom, probably gathering them into a pile to burn later. The sheer volume of leaves seemed overwhelming for one person to handle, but that wasn’t Khemjira’s concern. She approached the person from behind.

"Hello, is this Korya’s house?"

She used the nickname of the student she was looking for.

The person stopped sweeping, then slowly removed a straw farming hat and turned around. A young woman with long, slightly wavy black hair spilling out from under the hat looked at her in surprise.

"Professor Khemjira?"

"Patnaree?"

"Who’s that, Korya?"

A voice called from inside the house.

Patnaree—or Korya, as the locals called her—seemed slightly startled by the voice coming from within the tin-roofed house. She glanced between the house and the professor standing in front of her.

"Just someone asking for directions, Mom."

If she told the truth and said it was her professor, things would only get more complicated. Patnaree knew that well, and Khemjira didn’t seem to mind the small lie.

Korya quickly set aside the broom and her straw hat by the doorway— where there was no actual door—before returning to her professor.

She seemed surprised to see Khemjira, though it wasn’t hard to guess why she was there.

Still, Khemjira couldn’t help but notice that Patnaree didn’t look like someone about to get married. If anything, she looked like someone who hadn’t slept in days.

"Hello, Professor Khemjira,"

Patnaree greeted her formally with a wai.

"Did you hear about me from Merin and the others?"

"Yeah, your friends mentioned it."

"If you already know… why are you here?"

"I think you know why."

"…"

"I'm here to talk to you about coming back for your midterms."

Without wasting time, Khemjira got straight to the point. Patnaree already seemed to know what the professor wanted to discuss.

In truth, they should probably find a more comfortable place to sit and talk, but Khemjira didn’t think standing in front of the house was much of an inconvenience.

She only planned to speak briefly—to encourage Patnaree to reconsider throwing away her right to take her midterms.

"You still have the right to return and take your exams if you come back to class. Your eligibility still covers certain subjects, including mine and the ones where you haven’t missed too many lessons."

"..…"

"You could even wait until after your wedding if you want."

Khemjira had said everything she needed to say. Now, it was Patnaree’s turn to respond.

The student had already guessed that this was what Khemjira wanted to talk about, but she still couldn’t believe her professor had traveled so far just to discuss something like this.

She was too tired to keep up the act of being the sweet and diligent student. Her eyes flickered rapidly from side to side, revealing her irritation.

"That’s impossible, Professor. Do you even understand what getting married means?"

"Yes, I do."

Khemjira took a deep breath before continuing, trying to keep her voice calm. She was only trying to help Patnaree for her own good.

"I just don’t want you to lose your chance to take the exams."

"I'm not going back to university."

"But if you don’t, you won’t graduate. You won’t get your degree, and that

means—"

"Why do you care about my life, Professor? You’re just a university professor. You have no right to interfere in your students' lives like this!"

"…."

Patnaree’s outburst shook Khemjira.

The anger in her voice made it clear that she didn’t want her professor meddling in decisions she had already made.

Patnaree understood everything Khemjira was saying—she had known it all from the start.

But what choice did she have?

What did a degree matter when, starting tomorrow, her life would no longer be her own?

"If my personal issues are causing such a big problem for the university, I’ll deal with it once everything is settled. I’ll handle the paperwork to withdraw from the program. But for now… please, just leave."

"….."

Khemjira might have seemed though, but she felt incredibly depressed after having her good intentions rejected.

Normally, Patnaree was a very sweet, even shy, student—rarely daring to speak up. She was known for being diligent, always writing down questions during class to ask Khemjira afterward.

Sometimes, she had so many that Khemjira had to take them home and write out the answers to give to her the next time.

In general, Patnaree was a hardworking and polite student—not someone you’d expect to yell at you.

However, Khemjira understood that stress could make people act differently than they usually would.

Still, she couldn’t help but feel frustrated. She didn’t want to return to Bangkok with this unresolved.

Was there really nothing she could do to change the situation?

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"Want a drink? The old man at the grocery store gave me some extra cans of beer."

"….."

Khemjira wanted to go there, but Dao Nuea seemed to be enjoying their trip to Mukdahan far more than she was.

Dao Nuea’s friendly nature and her red-lipped smile had already won over the entire community in short time—especially the elders, who had a great affection to the girl from city.

Dao Nuea returned to the hotel room after going out to eat at a local food stall.

The food in the area was surprisingly good, exceeding her expectations. She liked it so much that she bought an extra box to take back.

One box was for herself, but the other was for her roommate, who had been lying in bed in a bad mood, refusing to come down for dinner.

"I’m leaving the food here. Eat when you’re hungry,"

Dao Nuea said, setting the foam containers down on the dresser.

As she did, she remembered hearing some gossip about Khemjira’s student while she was out.

"That girl, Patnaree—she’s getting married tomorrow, you know?"

"How do you know?"

"Oh, come on, Auntie. Walk through the market for five minutes, and you’ll hear it from everyone."

Khemjira was deeply worried because her student wasn’t marrying just anyone—Patnaree was about to become the second wife of the district chief, a man twenty years older than her.

The locals didn’t find the age difference unusual, and the wedding was set to be a grand event, held at the district chief’s mansion with the whole community invited, not to mention the dignitaries from the groom’s side.

Imagining how to stop such an elaborate wedding seemed impossible.

Khemjira sighed in frustration, sinking further into her thoughts.

"I'm going out for a smoke."

Dao Nuea had a real soft spot for vaping. She grabbed her vape and headed for the balcony, sliding the glass door shut behind her. Normally, this would be the point where Khemjira would start lecturing her about the dangers of vaping, listing all the negative effects as if she had memorized research articles just to scold her.

*But this time was different.*

*Khemjira didn’t say a word.*

Instead, she got up from the bed and followed Dao Nuea onto the balcony, standing silently and watching her like a cat watching a fish.

With Khemjira staring at her like that, how was she supposed to keep smoking? This is weird. She's not complaining? At least say something!

"…"

"…"

"What?"

Dao Nuea finally asked, glancing at her while removing the vape from her lips.

"…"

"…"

"Let me try it."

"Huh? No way."

"Why not?"

"You’re a professor."

"And is there a rule that says professors can’t vape?"

Khemjira countered quickly, dismissing Dao Nuea’s reasoning.

She grabbed the vape from Dao Nuea’s hand, examined it for a moment, then took a puff, mimicking what she had seen her friend do countless times.

But it didn’t go well.

Instead of relieving her stress, the vapor hit her lungs too harshly, making her cough.

"See? How was that?"

Dao Nuea teased, snatching the vape back. She wasn’t surprised at all—no one got it right on their first try. It was obvious from the start that Khemjira wasn’t suitable for smoking. Besides, vaping wasn’t healthy. "No more of that, okay? It’s not good for you." "If it’s not good, then why do you put it in your lungs?"

Dao Nuea fell silent and shoved the vape into her bag.

They each popped open a can of beer. Even though Khemjira didn’t like beer as much as red wine, it lifted her mood a little and helped shake off the sadness. She didn’t want to sulk all day—it wasn’t a good look for someone traveling with a friend.

Not that Dao Nuea saw her that way. She had already figured out the answer to Khemjira’s dilemma from the start.

"That girl isn’t coming back with you, is she?"

"How do you know?"

"It’s written all over your face, Auntie,"

Dao Nuea teased, noticing the gloomy expression on Khemjira’s face.

She hadn’t planned to interfere, but seeing Khemjira so down, she couldn’t ignore it. Playfully, she ruffled her hair.

This somber, lecture-free version of Khemjira didn’t quite match the auntie she knew.

"Come on, you did your best, right?"

"…"

*Did I really do my best? Or maybe… too much?*

*You have no right to interfere in your student’s life like this*

*Is that what I did?*

"Don’t you think I overstepped?"

"Huh?"

Dao Nuea tilted her head, confused.

"Not really."

"Why not?"

"Because teachers aren’t just here to pass on knowledge from textbooks." "…"

"It might seem strange because most professors don’t do what you do, but

that doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing. In fact, it’s something to admire. It makes you much more… charming."

"....."

"Anyone can be a teacher, but not everyone can be a good one."

"....."

*You shouldn’t go beyond your duties.*

*You’re just a professor, not their parent.*

*I think you’re taking your job too seriously.*

*.*

No one had ever told Khemjira that her actions were admirable. Everyone always said she was dedicating too much of her life to being a professor.

Even her past lovers, once they learned about her career, thought she took her job too seriously.

But was it wrong to dedicate her life to something she cared about? She had asked herself that before. The belief she had clung to for so long had almost crumbled under the weight of people’s words.

A teacher’s job was simply to impart knowledge. What happened outside the classroom shouldn’t matter. Why take on her students’ problems as her own?

No one had ever agreed with her decision to extend a helping hand to her students.

And yet, for the first time, someone had praised her actions. She never expected to hear those words, but hearing them now, she couldn’t help but feel a rush of warmth.

But… could a simple compliment really make her heart race like this?

"Hmmm, but I’m still a little confused,"

Dao Nuea mused, turning inward in thought.

She had never met a professor like Khemjira before. Even the best teacher she had known, Parnward, probably wouldn’t go as far as to tracking a student down in Mukdahan.

"Why go through so much trouble to come all the way here just to convince your student?"

"I just thought…"

"Thought what?"

"I just thought that if it were my parents, they would’ve done the same."

"Eh? Were your parents teachers too?"

"Not just my parents,"

Khemjira said with pride, warmth in her voice.

"My whole family, actually. Everyone in my family is a teacher or professor in some field."

"Wow, that’s amazing. A family of educators."

"Not as great as it sounds."

"So, what kind of professors were your parents?"

"They were both university professors, like me. My mother taught business, and my father was an architecture professor."

"My brother graduated in architecture. Wait, could he have taken a class with your father?"

"The world isn’t *that* small," Khemjira chuckled.

There were too many architecture faculties in Thailand for that to be a real possibility. But Dao Nuea’s imagination was endearing, and the conversation flowed easily between them. Even the usual rule of keeping personal details private seemed forgotten for the moment.

"Speaking of family…"

"?"

"You once said your parents passed away and you don’t remember them. So… was it your brother who raised you?"

"Yeah. When we were little, my grandmother took care of us. After she passed away, my brother raised me,"

Dao Nuea said, admiration filling her voice.

"He worked really hard, made sure I grew up healthy and strong… like a buffalo!"

"*Pfft*—"

"What are you laughing at? My brother, Saeng Nuea, is *really* amazing!"

"You’re such a silly girl."

Khemjira reached out to ruffle Dao Nuea’s hair. The way she spoke about her brother was so endearing.

"If I were your brother, I’d be walking on air hearing you say that."

"Just like your parents, huh? I bet they’re proud of you."

"....."

Proud?

*You’re going to be a great professor.*

Khemjira knew she would never hear those words directly from her parents again, but she hoped they would be proud.

Proud that she had carried on the legacy of being an educator, just like they had.

But one thing she was certain of—Dao Nuea’s words felt different from anything she had heard before.

"Hey."

"Hmm?"

Dao Nuea turned to meet her gaze.

"Can we kiss?"

"....."

It wasn’t a surprising request. In fact, it was a perfectly normal one.

Dao Nuea was Dao Nuea, as always. When Khemjira asked, she simply leaned in, and their lips met.

Khemjira’s racing heart had to be from the joy of having Dao Nuea by her side. Now she had her answer.

**She wouldn’t let all her efforts go to in vain.**

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 13**

"We're running late."

"I came as fast as I could. Could you drive that faster if you tried?"

Dao Nuea wondered how fast Khemjira expected her to go-she was already driving at 130 kilometers per hour! Not everyone could zip in and out of the city as quickly as she could.

But for the woman in the passenger seat, who had barely leaned back since they left the hotel at six in the morning, no speed seemed fast enough.

They were on a mission to pick up something essential and then change into their best outfits for the upcoming wedding.

Dao Nuea adjusted her semi-formal attire-a button-down shirt and the best pair of trousers she owned-while taking in the grand celebration around her. They were here for the wedding of Khemjira's student and the city's district chief.

It wasn't hard to figure out where the wedding would be held. Since the groom was the district chief, well-known to everyone in the area, it was natural for the location to be widely announced so the entire town could come and celebrate.

His grand house easily accommodated a large number of guests. Just looking at the entrance, packed with attendees, perfectly showcased the groom's influence and impressive status.

The two young women who had just arrived seemed almost tiny compared to the countless people heading into the event.

"Wow... this wedding is huge."

Dao Nuea murmured, her jaw slightly open. She had expected it to be grand, but seeing it in person felt surreal. Her simple outfit seemed out of place compared to the extravagant six-figure ensembles many guests wore.

Khemjira, on the other hand, remained unbothered. She had attended events like this before and knew how to keep her composure.

"Well, it's the wedding of a district chief."

"Your student is marrying someone so powerful... are you sure about this?"

Khemjira understood what Dao Nuea meant by 'are you sure about this?' With the scale of this wedding, the high-profile guest list, and the groom's powerful position, even her own certainty wavered. However, she still hoped her carefully laid-out plan would succeed.

"I guess we won't know until we try."

At this point, Khemjira knew turning back was no longer an option.

Due to the event's size and its open nature, with no strict limit on attendees, entry control wasn't very strict. This allowed the two unfamiliar women to blend in with the other guests and slip easily into the event, which was held in a garden in front of the massive house.

Food and drinks were being served, available for guests to pick up and enjoy. Every dish looked tempting, which would have drawn Dao Nuea in if Khemjira hadn't been dragging her along, insisting they keep moving.

They had arrived early, before the official start of the event. The bride and groom were still getting ready in their respective dressing rooms inside the house. Soon, they would come out to take pictures with the guests, so the two women had little time to carry out their plan.

There were many guests around, but few were near the dressing rooms, except for those directly involved in the preparations. The bride and groom's dressing rooms were separate and there were guards standing in front of each door.

"Excuse me, we'd like to see the bride."

Sneaking in or waiting for the guards to leave didn't seem possible in this situation. The only option left for the two women was to ask for direct permission to enter.

But Khemjira's straightforward request made the woman guarding the dressing room frown in confusion.

*Do you even know what tact is?*

Dao Nuea thought, already feeling a headache coming on.

"Seeing the bride is restricted."

"Oh, we're just some friends from her university."

Dao Nuea quickly interrupted, stepping forward and gently taking the guard's hand. The lie slipped from her lips flawlessly, impossible to detect.

With years of experience flirting with beautiful women, she knew exactly how to speak, smile, and carry herself to charm someone and make them let their guard down.

"Our friends in Bangkok wanted us to attend on their behalf. We promised we'd make a video call with the bride so they could send their congratulations. Could you let us in for just a minute? Please?"

The guard hesitated, flustered by Dao Nuea's dazzling smile and sincere gaze. It was just a quick video call-there was nothing wrong with that, right?

Sighing, she finally opened the door.

"Alright, go ahead."

"Thank you!"

Dao Nuea smiled, then turned to Khemjira.

"What are you waiting for? Let's go."

The master bedroom had been turned into the bride's dressing room for the wedding day. The furniture remained untouched, but the bed now served as a surface for clothing and empty bags meant to store the wedding dress. An old t-shirt and a pair of worn-out pants, showing signs of years of use, lay on the luxurious bed.

In a corner of the room, the dressing table had become a waiting spot for the bride, who sat patiently as her makeup artist worked. Not that she needed much enhancement-her natural beauty shone effortlessly.

She was the same person who had worn those faded clothes in bed, but now, she had shed the image of a farmer's daughter. Her radiant skin highlighted the elegance of her gown, and her dark hair, styled and adorned with floral clips, added a touch of grace.

She hardly resembled the quiet student who used to sit in the front row of classes, unnoticed by most-including Khemjira, her professor.

This poised and beautiful woman truly looked like a bride. Anyone who saw her would undoubtedly say the same words:

"She's so beautiful."

"....."

But it wasn't Khemjira who spoke those words-it was Dao Nuea, who unknowingly voiced her thoughts. Her admiration for the stunning bride left her frozen in front of the mirror. At that moment, the bride caught a familiar reflection and turned around in surprise.

"Professor! How did you get in here?"

"What's wrong, Korya?"

Her parents asked worriedly as they followed her into the dressing room to see their daughter ready for her wedding. They only wanted to check if she was dressed and prepared for the ceremony. Instead, they found not only their daughter and her makeup artist but also two unfamiliar women.

"Who are you?"

Her father asked, dressed in his best but worn-out suit. He frowned at the two women.

"You're not Korya's friends, are you?"

"....."

With just a glance at each other, they knew the answer. Although they were strangers, they managed to intimidate the bride's parents enough that the couple turned toward the door.

Unfortunately for them, the speed of two middle-aged adults was no match for a woman in her early twenties.

Dao Nuea would never allow them to reach the door and call someone to drag her and Khemjira out.

"You can't leave yet. Not until you hear what my aunt has to say."

"You're trespassing on private property!"

"Well, you can call someone to throw us out after you listen to her."

"There's something I need to tell you, Patnaree."

"...."

It was believable, really. No one with a trivial matter would go so far as to seek out the bride in her dressing room. They knew that speaking up at that moment might not change anything-it could end up being a wasted effort, a meaningless intrusion into someone else's life.

Maybe Khemjira was getting involved in something that wasn't her concern, just as the other woman had suggested the day before.

But still, there was something she needed to say to this young woman, a former student of hers. She didn't want to spend her life wondering and regretting leaving Bangkok without seeing the bride before the ceremony began.

"If you say that marriage will stop you from continuing your studies, then, as your teacher, I have to oppose you going ahead with that."

She knew she had no right to oppose the wedding, nor even to be there uninvited. She was interfering in matters that weren't hers.

"I understand you're getting married because of debt."

"...."

But she couldn't help showing her concern-she couldn't just stand by and watch her student sacrifice her future, forced into marriage as compensation.

"If you truly wanted to get married, I wouldn't interfere. But I can't ignore it if you're being forced to marry someone you don't love. A marriage like this doesn't mean everything will end smoothly after the vows."

"...."

"Can you really bear spending your life under the control of someone you don't love?"

She already knew. Patnaree was old enough to understand exactly what was happening. That was why her lips pressed tightly together as she listened to her professor's warning.

She had always known, but hearing someone else say it only deepened the pain, as if pressing on an old wound.

"I already know, but does my family really have another choice? I don't want to marry that disgusting old man! But there's no other way!"

No bride should feel so angry on her wedding day. The truth was, Patnaree felt no happiness in her beautiful wedding gown or in the thought of tying her life to someone else's. The groom knew it. Her parents knew it.

She had no desire to get married. But there was nothing she could do, and she refused to let a mere university professor make her feel even worse about the painful choice she was being forced to accept.

"Professor Khemjira, I told you yesterday not to interfere in my life anymore. You're just my teacher. We're practically strangers. My life is none of your business."

Everything Patnaree said was true. She was just one of many students, no different from the rest. In her professor's eyes, no student stood out above the others. Professor Khemjira valued fairness in her profession and refused to let personal feelings compromise the justice she stood for.

It was for this very reason that Khemjira had made this decision.

"Because this is your life, I have to get involved."

"..."

"As a teacher, simply calling someone a 'student' means being part of their life."

Even if it were another student, she would do the same. She could not dismiss her students' struggles as someone else's problem. It was not in her nature to look away.

"If parents cannot guide their children with words alone, then teachers cannot foster quality students with just textbooks alone."

Khemjira said, her eyes fixed on the bride.

"We interfere because we want to help, even if that means being labeled as meddlesome. No real teacher can watch a student stumble without offering a helping hand."

"..."

"Or maybe... I'm just meddling to help you."

Yes, you are meddling. Patnaree wanted to say it out loud with all her heart, but as the bride, her lips remained tightly sealed, pressed even firmer than before.

No one could force themselves to say something they truly didn't want to. Patnaree was not the type to hurt others with her words.

Besides, the other person was a teacher she deeply respected and cared about.

But she had to act this way. She had to try to push away someone who only wanted to persuade her because...

"There's no other choice, Professor. My family can't pay that huge debt."

Patnaree didn't even have the right to negotiate in this semi-forced arrangement with the groom's side. He was the creditor-holding power, wealth, and influence that her farming family could never reach.

One hundred thousand baht might not seem like much, but it was still more than what many families could ever dream of. Who knew how long it would take a provincial farming family to earn that sum?

The crushing interest alone was so high that her parents had no hope of repaying it, forcing them to give up their only daughter as payment. No good parent would want to force their daughter into marriage for such a reason.

The bride was not the only one who felt powerless in this situation.

Someone else actually felt even worse.

Accepting this reality was all she could do.

If there were another way, Khemjira would surely guide her naïve student.

Run away from the debt? Impossible.

Earn enough to pay it off? Even more out of reach.

"I know."

"....."

"That's why I went to the city bank this morning."

"What?"

There might still be another way-one she believed would offer the best solution for her troubled student.

After speaking, the teacher turned to look at the person standing with her by the door. Dao Nuea saw the stunned faces of the bride's parents, their expressions frozen in shock.

Khemjira was certain these two wouldn't call anyone to drag her and the bride away, so she stepped away from the door. Dao Nuea walked toward Khemjira and handed her the envelope with the document they had entrusted earlier.

Both had to wake up before dawn to drive to the city, not to mention the time spent waiting to complete the bank transaction.

The 200,000 baht inside the brown envelope had been withdrawn from Khemjira's personal savings. Now, she was offering this significant amount to the young woman in the wedding dress.

"Take this money to pay off the debt instead of going through with the wedding."

"..."

"I withdrew 200,000 baht for you. But if you need more, let me know."

There was no need for further explanation. Khemjira already had a rough idea of how much the family owed. However, since she wasn't sure of the exact amount, she decided to withdraw a little extra.

Before Patnaree could check inside the envelope to confirm the amount, she was speechless. Accepting this money would mean changing her debt from the lustful district officer to Khemjira.

Behind the teacher, her parents still shook their heads, firmly refusing.

"No, Professor. I can't. This is too much money."

"Why not?"

"My family can't repay you."

"Did I ever say you had to pay me back?"

"....."

"This amount doesn't even compare to the value of your entire life. I can't let your future end here over some money,"

Khemjira said.

She had thought carefully before deciding to withdraw the money. She had more than enough to offer-this amount or even more-if it could help the young woman standing before her.

"Your life is too precious to be taken away from you unfairly. Your life is yours to shape and choose. If the money in this envelope can help you, then please, take it and reclaim your life back."

"...."

She couldn't understand this at all.

Especially since it wasn't even the professor's problem.

She had already lost hope that anyone would come to her aid, let alone thought that someone would listen to her problems. Much less a university professor who simply taught her courses under the scholarship program. She knew she was just another student in every class she took.

Before returning, Patnaree had thought about confiding in each of her professors or even asking them for advice or help. But her friends told her it would be useless.

"Do you really think a professor would help? They're just here to teach us and grade us. They have their own problems. They don't care about our lives."

And at that moment, she agreed. She could never have imagined that a professor would go this far for her.

*"...Huehhh...sob."*

A bride shouldn't shed tears on her wedding day, but for her, it was too overwhelming to hold back. The bodice of her dress wrinkled as she gripped it tightly, her head bowed in an effort to muffle her sobs.

The kindness she never thought anyone would show her had finally opened her carefully guarded heart.

Khemjira knew she had made the right decision. After speaking with her student, she turned to the parents. Seeing the expression on their faces, Khemjira knew they didn't want their daughter to be burdened by the debt they had caused.

As a teacher, Khemjira wanted them to know something, so she respectfully bowed to her student's parents, her eyes filling with tears.

"Sir, Ma'am... Korya is an exceptionally talented young woman. She is hardworking, determined, and more ambitious than most. Did she ever tell you that she wanted to have a good career, buy you a house, and ensure the family had a better life than it does now?"

*"Hue, hue...sob"*

The crying came from the bride and her parents.

It was a dream she once shared with her friend during her second year, a conversation that had taken place at the wrong time. Both Patnaree and her friend had been scolded by Khemjira for talking in class, but that didn't mean the professor hadn't heard or couldn't remember the young woman's aspirations.

She knew her students well, and she knew that Patnaree was not someone who should be stuck spending her life solely in service to a husband.

The thought made her cry.

As parents, they couldn't protect their daughter's dreams. It was painful, but this woman... she could.

And there was one more thing that both the parents and the professor knew well.

"Your daughter is going to achieve her dreams, I am sure of it. Her dreams should not be crushed by anyone's hands, but fulfilled by her own. Korya is one of the students under my care. As her professor, I will support her to the fullest."

Khemjira's offer of help was a bit sudden, so in the end, the student's family decided they needed to discuss how to proceed.

As a teacher, she had done everything she could, though she still left the big house with a somber expression, followed by Dao Nuea.

"Do you think I did the right thing?"

"....."

"Do you think I can really help Patnaree?"

"I don't know if you did or not. They said they would talk about it."

"....."

"But you did the right thing. Don't feel bad if it doesn't turn out the way you hoped."

Whether the outcome was good or bad, Dao Nuea didn't see Khemjira's actions as useless. She did the right thing and looked admirable. There weren't many professors who went to such lengths for their students.

"What's going on over there?"

Dao Nuea wondered, hearing murmurs throughout the venue. Near the photo booth stood the groom, dressed in a cream-colored suit, listening anxiously to an assistant whispering urgent news.

"What happened?"

There was no time to read lips before another guest shouted loudly. The wedding was about to become insignificant.

"The bride has run away!"

With that, the wedding collapsed as the bride successfully escaped from the dressing room.

"What?!"

The groom, the district chief, shouted-not out of concern for her safety, but in shock, as if his pet dog or cat had run out the back door. It was obvious that he had been eagerly waiting to take the bride to his suite, but his carefully laid plans were now falling apart.

"What do you mean she ran away? Through where? Why did you let her go?"

"It looks like she and her parents climbed over the back fence, sir. The back camera is broken... but they left some cash and a note in the dressing room."

The first to find the note was one of the bridesmaids standing outside the bride's door. Upon hearing a noise that sounded like a window being forced open, she rushed into the room, only to find it empty, with a bundle of cash in an envelope and a hastily written note left on the bed.

The district officer snatched the paper and crumpled it furiously almost as soon as he read it:

*"Who would marry an old pervert like you? Go die!"*

Anyone would be enraged by that. The woman had dared to make this powerful man lose his composure.

"I told you to fix the cameras before the wedding day! I spent hundreds of thousands on this damn wedding-I won't give up until she becomes my wife! Send out a search team; I don't care if you have to drag her back by force. She will return here and marry me!"

His words were practically begging for a punch, and Dao Nuea was tempted, but Khemjira grabbed her arm to stop her, disapproving of her outburst. By the way he was taking his anger out on his employees and the decorations, it was clear he wasn't joking. He was ready to turn the whole city upside down if that's what it took to find her and her family.

"You little brat, there's no way I'll let you escape. I'm coming for you, Korya... Ouchh!"

"Shut your mouth, you damn husband!"

"....."

Just a moment ago, the young district officer was losing his composure so badly that it seemed no one could stop him. But then, a woman his age managed to bring him under control with a single slap to the head, leaving him off balance.

The wedding, which had turned into chaos, suddenly fell silent.

Dao Nuea and Khemjira were the only ones unaware of what was happening, as everyone else present immediately recognized the figure standing before them.

No one outranked her, not even the district officer himself. He didn't dare respond to the woman who had made him the powerful man he was todayhis wife.

"Look at your age and hers. It should be clear she didn't want to marry you."

"But her parents gave her to me, dear. They can't pay their debt, so she must...."

"Shut up. Don't even try to tell me you didn't plan on making that girl your wife from the very beginning."

She knew him too well to believe his excuses. He had never even thought to ask her, his legitimate wife, what she thought about the matter.

"You wanted another wife for your own sick pleasure without asking me even once!"

The sound of blows from the woman filled the air. At this rate, the wedding was likely to turn into the groom's funeral. His wife slapped him mercilessly while the gathered staff hesitated, unsure whether to intervene.

"Stay out of this! This is between my husband and me!"

"...."

"The bride has run away, and good luck with that. This wedding is canceled! Everyone, get out!"

She ordered, dragging her husband away for a private talk.

The bride had escaped, and the groom was getting beaten.

With that, well...

"Is this the ending you expected?"

Dao Nuea asked Khemjira, who was still processing what had just happened.

"I... don't know."

Khemjira's only wish had been to help Patnaree. The ending was certainly unusual, but could she say it was what she expected?

...Maybe.

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 14**

"Hello, Professor Khemjira."

"Hello, Patnaree."

It was quite a coincidence that Khemjira ran into Patnaree after leaving the faculty office. The young woman, dressed in her student uniform, greeted her respectfully.

With her messy hair and dazed eyes, Patnaree looked like someone who had just finished a midterm exam—probably the last one, since it was the final day of exams.

However, overall, she seemed to be in a better mood than on the day of her ruined wedding. Khemjira noticed the difference easily.

"How are you?"

"I'm doing well. It's just the midterms stressing me out a little."

"Keep studying, but don’t overwork yourself."

"Yes, Professor. And... thank you so much."

No one really knew how many times Khemjira had received words of gratitude from Patnaree. Ever since she was given the chance to return to university, she never forgot to express her gratitude whenever they met.

Both of them fully understood why she was thanking her. The professor had told her countless times that she didn’t need to keep saying it. But for Patnaree, Khemjira’s help was invaluable—a kindness she would never forget for the rest of her life.

And for Khemjira, simply seeing Patnaree studying again was the best way to be thanked.

"Do your best on your midterms."

"Thank you."

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Since the wedding day in Mukdahan, Patnaree and her family had moved from their hometown to live with relatives in Bangkok. Her parents received help from these relatives, who arranged jobs for them as security guards and cleaners at a canned fruit factory.

Patnaree, on the other hand, took on part-time jobs on weekends to help support the family as well.

A story about someone running away from their own wedding shouldn’t have ended this well—especially when the groom was a district chief with enough power and connections to find her and her parents easily.

But the fact that nothing had happened so far suggested that his wife had him firmly under control.

With the situation settled, Patnaree was able to return to her studies. Thanks to Khemjira’s involvement, even her other professors came to understand her situation, including those whose exams she had failed.

However, the compromise was that she wouldn’t receive a grade higher than a C in those subjects—a deal she accepted if it meant she could graduate that semester.

From that moment on, Patnaree was responsible for her own studies.

"Oh, Professor!"

"Yes?"

Khemjira turned to Patnaree, who had just called out to her as they walked side by side.

"If it's not too much trouble... could you thank that woman for me?"

"...."

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. .

Dao Nuea looked like she was about to drop dead. Her eyes were exhausted, and her skin was dull.

Even a zombie would have looked more human than she did at that moment.

Which senior told her she’d have more free time after finishing her internship? Dao Nuea hadn’t even moved from her laptop in days.

How long had it been since she last slept properly in her bed—just inches away from her desk? She didn’t even bother counting. The little mental energy she had left needed to be saved for one thing: her thesis.

She ate while working, her eyes burning with exhaustion as she forced them to stay open against the screen’s glare. The only time she allowed herself to get up was to stretch next to her desk.

Parnward, her advisor, kept piling on deadlines as if saying: '*If you don’t finish the thesis before the deadline, you might as well settle for a low grade'.*

Looking back, Dao Nuea regretted not choosing another professor. Perhaps anyone else would have been better than the one she knew too well.

She missed her old life.

She missed the carefree days when she spent nights with beautiful women.

She missed the nights she spent with Khemjira.

Dao Nuea hated this thesis for robbing the last bit of joy out of her life!

"Auntie Dao! Come play with me!"

"I can’t right now, Miya. I’m working."

"But Miya is bored! Miya wants to play store… Come play, come play!"

"Oh, Miya..."

As if the thesis wasn’t exhausting enough, now Dao Nuea had to deal with her young niece barging into her room, demanding that her aunt come downstairs to play.

Dao Nuea wasn’t annoyed—she loved spending time with Miya. On any other day, she would drop everything to play with her. But not today. Her body was drained, and she felt nauseous. Silently, she begged her niece to stop shaking her.

"Auntie Dao, someone’s here to see you."

Thanya knocked on Dao Nuea’s door just in time. The older niece stepped in, her ears still covered by headphones. The pop music from a Korean boy band playing through her phone wasn’t loud enough to keep her from hearing what her aunt had to say.

"Uh… it’s probably my friend."

Dao Nuea looked at Thanya helplessly, hoping she would help get the little monkey off of her. With a resigned sigh, the older niece pulled Miya away, though not without a struggle.

Despite being in kindergarten, Miya had an impressive grip and wasn’t much smaller than her sister. It was a challenge for Thanya to drag her out of the room.

"Come on, Miya."

"But I want to play with Auntie Dao!"

"Miya. Shut up."

"... ..."

"... ..."

"Waaaah!"

"...."

Well, Dao Nuea couldn’t blame her. Miya’s tantrum left her no choice but to rely on Thanya to handle the situation. Thanya wasn’t as patient as her father or her aunt.

*I am sorry, Miya. Once I finish my thesis, I’ll take you to the ball pit. I promise.*

"I thought you said no one would be home today."

The voice belonged to the visitor Thanya had mentioned earlier.

Not many people came over, especially not during this hectic time. It was easy to guess who it was. Lately, meeting at the condo had become impossible, so Khemjira decided to stop by Dao Nuea’s house after work, bringing her a teriyaki chicken bento as requested—since Dao Nuea hadn’t eaten since noon.

However, Dao Nuea herself looked worse than her messy room.

She had been too preoccupied with Miya to clean up. Instead of tidying up before Khemjira arrived, all she managed to do was shove her things under the desk and shut her laptop.

It wasn't like this room was suitable for any... activities anyway, and

Khemjira certainly wasn’t interested in doing anything with kids still in the house.

"The girls’ school closed unexpectedly today."

She wasn’t quite sure why, but she heard something about preparations for an important person visit. It seemed ridiculous to inconvenience all the students just to accommodate one person.

Most parents didn’t have the luxury of taking weekdays off to look after their children, though Dao Nuea could manage... barely.

Khemjira nodded, understanding the situation as equally urgent.

"Well, I guess that means we can’t do anything."

"Unless you’re okay with being overheard."

"Be considerate for once."

"I was just joking..."

"... ..."

"....."

"Hey..."

Suddenly, Dao Nuea froze in place, slumping into her chair.

Khemjira set the bento bag on the desk and approached her. Dao Nuea wasn’t just dozing off—she was completely asleep, her head hanging down.

With dark circles like those, it was obvious she hadn’t slept in days. She even fell asleep in the chair without realizing it. Just how intense was the workload at this younger girl’s company? Hopefully, she wasn’t working for a Black Company or something like that.

Even though they had known each other for a while, Khemjira still didn’t know the details of Dao Nuea’s job—only that it was related to laboratory work.

The scattered papers under the desk were probably work-related as well.

Khemjira hesitated—she didn’t like looking through other people’s things. But she also couldn’t leave the mess as it was. While organizing the papers, she made sure not to look too closely at their contents.

After all, it was her idea to set boundaries between them—a rule about respecting privacy. Even though the situation gave her a tempting opportunity to snoop, Khemjira stuck to the agreement.

Still, a few glances here and there caught her attention—just research documents on chemistry... though something about them felt familiar.

The way the references were cited almost looked like a thesis. Maybe she was just imagining things. After all, research papers and theses had similarities.

Once the desk was tidied up, Khemjira decided not to dwell on that thought. She turned to put the bento in the downstairs fridge since it looked like Dao Nuea wouldn’t be waking up anytime soon.

As she picked up the bag, something dusty caught her attention.

She hadn’t expected to find that in Dao Nuea’s room.

"Uh… huh."

"Are you awake?"

"Shit!"

"You wouldn’t let go of me, so I couldn’t even get up to go to the bathroom."

Believe it—when Khemjira had dragged Dao Nuea to lie down properly on the bed, she had nearly run out of breath.

She couldn’t even sit comfortably against the headboard because she couldn’t move—there was a massive monkey-like figure lying there, hugging her tightly and preventing even the slightest movement.

Finally freed, the person who had been asleep for so long woke up with a startled expression, realizing what she had been clutching instead of her favorite body pillow.

The captive quickly made her way to the bathroom, located right in the bedroom, leaving the newly awakened person sitting alone and confused on the bed.

Normally, no matter how beautiful a girl was, Dao Nuea never fell asleep hugging anyone.

She usually sat against the headboard in the same position Khemjira had been in before.

Then, as her eyes cleared up completely, they landed on something left on the bed—something she couldn’t have placed there while she was asleep.

Something that had been gathering dust in the corner of her room since she graduated from high school.

"Sorry for using your things without asking,"

Khemjira said as she stepped out of the bathroom.

Dao Nuea had already picked up the drawing board left on the bed, but she didn’t seem upset. Her attention was on the sketch clipped to the A3-sized board—a familiar face in deep sleep. A face she knew better than anyone.

"You drew me?"

"Yeah."

Khemjira sat beside her and pulled the drawing paper free, handing it over.

"Here."

"Hmm?"

"It’s for you."

"For me?"

"As a thank-you."

A thank-you not just for being her model while she brushed up on her old skills, but also for all the help Dao Nuea had given her when they traveled together to Mukdahan.

Honestly, Khemjira thought her sleeping face was pretty cute, though she doubted she had captured all the details perfectly in the sketch.

Dao Nuea studied the drawing, thinking it looked much better than anything she could attempt. It was certainly better than the sketches Khemjira had done back when she dreamed of getting into architecture school—before she gave up on that path to study chemistry instead. That decision had left the old drawing board gathering dust in the corner of her room.

"I didn’t know you could draw."

"I just remembered what my dad taught me. I’m not that good."

"But better than me! You could teach art classes."

"Better not."

Khemjira let out a dry laugh. It wasn’t that she particularly enjoyed drawing —it was just something she picked up from listening to her father teach his students while she sat in on his classes. A skill learned along the way, nothing more than a casual hobby when she had the tools for it.

Dao Nuea’s compliment was flattering, but she didn’t take it seriously.

'*If it’s not too much trouble... could you thank that woman for me?'*

"By the way, Patnaree wanted me to thank you."

"Thank me? For what?"

"Probably for flirting with that girl outside the fitting room."

"Oh, come on! That didn’t deserve a thank you!"

"That’s not it."

Annoyed, Khemjira twisted her ear.

"Is your brain only filled with thoughts of pretty girls?"

"Ow, ow, okay, I get it!"

"And I want to thank you too."

"Huh?"

"For everything. You’ve helped me a lot."

"....."

"Thank you, really."

"Come on, don’t make it sound like I’m some stranger or something." Dao Nuea playfully patted her shoulder.

"It’s no big deal. If I can help, I want to help. I like helping people."

"So… does that mean you help every pretty girl you meet?"

"Yes! I just like helping people."

"....."

"But I haven’t helped anyone as much as I’ve helped you."

"....."

"You’re more special than all the pretty girls I’ve met, you know that?"

Khemjira had already been confused before, irritated by how easily Dao Nuea charmed every girl around her. But now, she was even more bewildered—because she felt happy.

It was the first time she cared if someone saw her as special.

Before this, she never thought about what her lovers thought of her. She only cared about the thrill of the moment. She never wanted anything beyond that.

*Until now.*

"I’ll go heat up some food for you."

Khemjira blurted out, unable to hide the blush creeping up her cheeks. She fled the room, hoping to avoid the smug grin that would surely appear on Dao Nuea’s face. That brat clearly enjoyed making her flustered.

Even though it might have sounded like typical flirting, Dao Nuea’s words carried more weight this time. Even she was surprised by how genuine they felt. Normally, she only used sweet words to attract conquests, playing for fun and nothing more.

But this time was different.

She recalled a conversation from long ago with her best friend, Pleng Phin.

*"Wouldn’t you want a real relationship someday?"*

"No. I love beautiful women, but I hate being tied down."

Even her closest friend had wondered if the day would come when Dao Nuea let her guard down.

Her answer had been simple, completely shallow—she had no intention of settling down with anyone. She didn’t want to lose her freedom or give up the fun she was having.

"I don’t want to see anyone’s face more than three times. Seeing the same person every day sounds boring as hell."

For her, women were only special because she didn’t see them often. The more she saw someone, the less beautiful they became in her eyes. She never wanted to look at anyone like that.

There was only one woman who had never been anything less than beautiful in her eyes.

Dao Nuea never got tired of looking at her. She was the most beautiful, the most captivating.

The more she saw her, the closer they got, the deeper she fell.

Feelings she had never had for anyone else—feelings she never thought she could have.

But in that moment, Dao Nuea was sure of her feelings.

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**Dao Nuea: Pleng Phin**

**Dao Nuea: I think**

**Dao Nuea: I think I like her.**

**.**

**.**

**sunyan**

**Chapter 15**

Midterms exams at CAU University had ended some time ago, and now the final exams were approaching. Typically, the period between these two major exams wasn’t very long, so some professors chose to prepare questions for both at the start of the semester—especially if they were the sole instructors for their courses.

However, as previously mentioned, the final exam used a standardized set of questions created collaboratively by all instructors teaching that course.

Every instructor was required to participate in creating the final exam questions for their subject.

*"I can’t take this anymore!"*

But there were exceptions—such as when an instructor was deemed unqualified to contribute to the exam.

In the Financial Statement Analysis course, for example, two instructors had concluded that one of their colleagues should be excluded.

Removing an instructor's name from the final exam committee was not as simple as it was for midterms; it required approval from the department head.

This situation had escalated, leading the department head and the three Financial Statement Analysis instructors to hold a private meeting.

The instructor facing exclusion, Professor Jatuphat, was visibly furious. If not for the intervention of Professor Wimanee, the department head, he might not have limited his anger to simply slamming the table while glaring vengefully at his two younger colleagues.

"Professor Jatuphat, please calm down and take a seat."

"Have you seen what these kids are doing to me, Professor Wimanee?"

He snapped.

"Kids? Be careful with your words, Professor Jatuphat,"

Replied Mawin, one of the younger professors.

"We’re your colleagues. We are your equals."

"Mawin, stop."

"Khem, but—"

Although Khemjira appeared calm, sitting with her legs crossed, she was boiling with frustration. However, she held back from escalating the situation—she didn’t want Professor Wimanee to see her as immature.

No one wanted to be reprimanded, but keeping their composure was wiser than engaging in a heated confrontation. They had to let Jatuphat rage on his own, ensuring that they weren’t seen as unable to control their emotions.

"These two are obviously trying to get back at me. You didn’t let me participate in preparing the midterm exam, and now you’re cutting me out of the final too!"

"We’re not trying to harm you. We have valid reasons."

"Reasons? What nonsense is that? Speak clearly."

"We heard you broke things off with Miss Wanida, didn’t you?"

Khemjira was the one who got straight to the point. She had previously hinted at this issue with Professor Wimanee, but now she wanted to address it head-on.

Everything revolved around Jatuphat’s past relationship with a student— Wanida, his former favorite student, to be precise. After the midterm exams, Khemjira had discovered that Jatuphat had ended his inappropriate relationship with the young woman.

He had no reason to deny it and admitted it without hesitation, given that only the four of them were in the room.

"Yeah, it’s over. I have a conscience, you know? We ended things on good terms."

Khemjira and Mawin could barely contain their disbelief at how smug Jatuphat looked. He seemed proud of breaking off the relationship, as if he had done something praiseworthy.

"I stopped seeing her. Now we’re just professor and student. What more do you want from me?"

"Are you absolutely sure you were the one who ended things?"

Mawin pressed, emphasizing his words.

"Of course I am."

"Then how do you explain giving her a low score on her exam, despite her answers deserving more points?"

"....."

"How do you justify that, Professor Jatuphat?"

Khemjira had seen the unfairly graded exam, and she knew. The student, tears in her eyes, had shown her the paper, and even Khemjira—known for her strict grading—believed Wanida deserved higher marks.

She had compared Wanida’s answers to those of her classmates who had written the exact same thing but received better scores.

Jatuphat’s unfair treatment had started after Wanida had decided to end their relationship—a relationship she had felt uncomfortable with for some time. Her midterm grade had barely passed, and now she feared she might fail the final.

Knowing that Khemjira was the one who had excluded Jatuphat from the midterms, Wanida had sought her out for help. That was when Khemjira realized just how little Jatuphat had learned from the situation.

Even Wimanee, who had tried to remain neutral, closed her eyes and let out a deep sigh.

In truth, she hoped this meeting would remain private and that the issue wouldn’t escalate into a formal university investigation. However, if Jatuphat didn’t change his behavior, she might have no choice but to take official action.

"Professor Jatuphat, you have talent."

"...."

"Our faculty values professors like you, but if you can’t correct this behavior, I’m afraid I’ll have to escalate this to the university."

"You can’t do that!"

No one in that room had ever faced an official ethics review from the university.

For any instructor, being subject to such an investigation meant they had seriously violated academic ethics. Almost no one who had undergone an ethics inquiry had ever returned to their teaching position.

It was no surprise that Jatuphat was terrified—but Khemjira felt no sympathy for him.

"I can. Because we have all the evidence."

"You…!"

"Please, Professor Jatuphat,"

Khemjira said firmly.

"As a fellow educator, I ask you—don’t disgrace our profession any further."

When would Khemjira finally stop having to deal with problems that weren’t even hers?

The whole situation with Professor Jatuphat had been giving her headaches since midterms, and Khemjira could only hope this would be the last time it bothered her.

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She had wanted to leave the stress of university behind, but somehow, it followed her back to the condominium—just as it always did. Maybe she would have to resort to her usual way of relaxing again tonight.

However, when she arrived at the condo, much later than usual, something felt off.

There was no sign of Dao Nuea waiting for her in the room.

Dao Nuea had never missed one of their meetings without notifying her in advance. That wasn’t like her. Could something have happened?

“Where are you?”

Khemjira asked over the phone, her voice calm but laced with concern. Although there was no irritation in her tone, the worry beneath her words was unmistakable. But just from that simple question, the young woman on the other end of the line sounded strangely nervous.

[Ah! I’m sorry, Auntie. I’ll be there soon, I’m still at the hospital.]

“What?”

Khemjira’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. People only went to hospitals when something was wrong.

“What happened? Are you okay?”

[No, no, it’s not—]

Khemjira had no patience for the hesitation in Dao Nuea’s voice. The anxiety she could hear was enough to stop her from asking more questions.

“Stay there. I’m coming to get you.”

“You?”

“Y-Yeah.”

Neither here nor there. Khemjira checked every part of Dao Nuea’s body but found nothing unusual.

“Are you okay?”

The smaller woman asked again, mostly to herself. She had rushed to the hospital and headed straight to the patient’s room as directed, expecting something serious.

But Dao Nuea seemed fine—not even wearing a hospital gown. The younger woman looked surprised and took a step back, not expecting Khemjira to care so much.

Dao Nuea wasn’t sick. In fact, she was at the hospital for a completely different reason.

“I told you, I’m fine.”

“Then why are you here?”

Khemjira felt like her worry had been in vain. Didn’t Dao Nuea realize she had never been this concerned about anyone else? Just as Dao Nuea began to answer, Khemjira’s gaze caught something—or rather, someone—lying in the bed in the middle of the room.

“Hm? Who’s that?”

It already felt strange that Dao Nuea was in a long-term patient ward, and now the answer was right in front of her.

A young woman with reddish-brown hair lay unconscious in the bed. A vase of fresh flowers sat on the bedside table, contrasting with the wilted ones beside it.

Tubes and wires surrounded the girl, their purpose unclear unless you were a medical professional. The steady beeping of the heart monitor matched the soft rhythm of Khemjira’s footsteps as she approached the bed for a closer look.

“Who is she?”

She asked as Dao Nuea pulled up two chairs for them to sit beside the bed.

Khemjira remembered meeting two of Dao Nuea’s close friends before, though one remained elusive. The unconscious girl was clearly another cherished friend.

“This is Yai Mai, the youngest of my closest friends,”

Dao Nuea introduced her to the sleeping girl.

“She had an accident years ago, and now… well, she’s in a coma.”

At least once a month, Dao Nuea found time to visit Yai Mai, changing the flowers beside her bed and chatting about life’s ups and downs—though it was more of a one-sided conversation with someone who had been in a deep sleep for years.

Yai Mai was the heart and light of their gaming group. If fate hadn’t led her into this long sleep, their beloved friend group might have been in a very different place.

Dao Nuea missed the days when all five of them could be together.

Now, Khemjira understood why Dao Nuea came to the hospital. She studied Yai Mai’s face thoughtfully. Being in a coma meant lying still in bed, with little chance of recovery by default.

What should she say next?

She worried about unintentionally saying something that might hurt Yai Mai’s friend.

“…Has she been sleeping like this the whole time?”

“Well, she’s in a coma, Auntie. Were you expecting her to wake up, stretch, and go back to sleep?”

Right. Khemjira realized she had asked a stupid question.

“Isn’t she adorable? Yai Mai was always the youngest and gentlest in our group,”

Dao Nuea said proudly, describing Yai Mai as a little bird among a flock of monsters.

But Khemjira only raised an eyebrow and replied,

“More or less.”

“Oh, come on!”

“I’m much prettier.”

“….”

At that moment, the door creaked open, revealing another visitor.

It was Pleng Phin, who had warned Dao Nuea she might be late after finishing her internship. She entered the room and was surprised to see the professor sitting beside her best friend.

Pleng Phin tried to act natural, though she had told Dao Nuea to keep her relationship with Khemjira a secret.

After a brief moment of hesitation, she offered a polite greeting.

“Uh… hi.”

"Hi," Khemjira replied with a slight nod.

At that moment, her phone rang—it was a call from Mawin. She glanced at Dao Nuea.

"I’ll be back in a minute."

"Alright."

As soon as Khemjira left, Pleng Phin turned to Dao Nuea with a piercing gaze.

"How is the professor… how is she here?"

"It’s a long story," Dao Nuea said.

In truth, it wasn’t that long, but she was too lazy to explain. She had really just been waiting for Pleng Phin to take over and chat with their younger friend so she could finally go back to the condo with Khemjira.

"Good timing. You’re here now, so go talk to Yai Mai. I’m heading back."

"....."

"What?"

Dao Nuea felt uncomfortable under Pleng Phin’s intense stare.

"When are you going to tell her the truth?"

"....."

"She’s the first person you’ve let into your world this deeply, you know?"

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"By the way…"

"Hm?"

"Where did you park your car?"

They were walking toward the parking structure where Dao Nuea had left her vehicle. She assumed Khemjira had parked nearby, but it turned out that wasn’t the case.

"In front of the hospital."

"What? Then why did you come with me to the parking lot?"

"I just wanted to walk you to your car first. Then I’ll go back to mine." "..."

It didn’t take long to escort someone safely to their car, even if it meant returning to the front parking lot alone. When they reached Khemjira’s car, Dao Nuea prepared to say goodbye, but it wasn’t like Khemjira would let her walk back alone after being considerate enough to see her off.

"Get in. I’ll drive you back to the front."

"..."

"..."

"Aren’t you going to start the car?"

Dao Nuea asked, noticing that Khemjira hadn’t pressed the ignition button.

But the other woman didn’t move. She sat perfectly still in the driver’s seat, making Dao Nuea wave a hand in front of her as if trying to pull her back to the present.

Khemjira wasn’t usually this tense—her behavior felt too strange to be normal.

"If you have something on your mind, just say it."

"..."

Caught off guard, Dao Nuea stammered.

"What? No, I…"

"It would be a lie if you said there’s nothing to say. Your eyes give you away."

"..."

"So? Spit it out."

Why was Khemjira rushing her?

Dao Nuea struggled to find the right words. Khemjira, unaware of what was coming, seemed impatient, while Dao Nuea felt the weight of what she was about to say. It was a difficult topic but not something she could keep bottled up forever.

She exhaled deeply, gathering the courage to speak honestly.

"Auntie."

"Yes?"

"I think… we should stop being friends with benefits."

"Why?"

Even Khemjira, who rarely showed emotion, couldn’t hide her surprise. This wasn’t a conversation she had ever expected—especially not at that moment.

"I… I don’t really know how to say it."

"Did I do something to upset you?"

"....."

"Tell me. If I can change it, I will."

"No… it’s not you. It’s me."

"What’s wrong with you?"

"Don’t pressure me like this,"

Dao Nuea said, guilt washing over her.

It hurt even more now that Khemjira seemed genuinely concerned about her feelings.

"Just say it already. Stop wasting time."

Because of that, Dao Nuea hesitated to bring it up. Khemjira wasn’t like anyone she had been with before, which made it even harder to walk away from their relationship. But it wasn’t boredom or the desire to be with someone new that had brought her to this moment.

It was something much more complicated.

People always say that *friends with benefits* are only fun until one person falls in love.

And once that line is crossed, things usually fall apart—sometimes beyond repair. Dao Nuea didn’t want to admit she could feel this way about anyone, let alone Khemjira. But here she's, with no choice but to tell the truth.

"Auntie… you know how friends with benefits work, right? We’re supposed to be friends who sleep together, nothing more."

"Yes."

"But…"

"But?"

"..."

"..."

Dao Nuea sighed again, trying to explain as clearly as possible.

"Friends with benefits works because neither of us feels anything more than friendship. But when one of us starts feeling… something more, it can’t just stay as a friends-with-benefits arrangement anymore."

"....."

Khemjira listened in silence, but Dao Nuea knew she understood. She's too smart not to understand what Dao Nuea is trying to say.

It wasn’t Pleng Phin’s meddling that made Dao Nuea realize her feelings. She had known for a while, and it had been eating away at her. Khemjira deserved to know the truth, no matter how she felt about it.

Dao Nuea couldn’t keep pretending everything was fine. Khemjira had the right to know. She had the right to decide what to do next.

**"I don’t want a relationship."**

"...."

"I already have too much on my mind. Between teaching and everything else at university, I barely have time for myself. I don’t need the additional headache of being in a relationship."

Dao Nuea’s heart sank. He knew this was a possibility—no, rather, a certainty.

When one side starts feeling something more than friendship, the Friends with Benefits agreement must end immediately.

This was the first rule of their agreement, emphasizing its importance. It seemed their contract was destined to break. After all, Khemjira was the one who wrote it, so it had to be respected.

"But there could be exceptions for some people."

"...."

There was never a rule stating how Khemjira would choose to proceed.

"Like everything in life, there’s always an exception."

Khemjira murmured, her face flushed.

"It’s true that I’m not exactly looking for a relationship. But I’m open to it —with someone who makes me feel good, someone who makes me feel safe and comfortable… someone with whom I can be myself."

"And… if that someone is me, Khem?"

"....."

"Could I be that person for you?"

With rising hope, Dao Nuea decided to lay all her cards on the table.

Khemjira had former friends with benefits who had confessed their feelings before, but she never felt inclined to pursue anything more with them.

However, this time, things felt different.

"Stay at my place tonight."

"...."

"If we want to see if this could work… we should get to know each other better. Not as friends with benefits, but simply as Dao Nuea and Khemjira."

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 16**

"Miss Khemjira."

"Mr. Phavin."

"This is for you."

After being out of sight for a long time—long enough for Khemjira to feel relieved—it should have been another quiet day for her after finishing her university classes. But Phavin appeared at her faculty once again, holding a large, beautiful, and undoubtedly expensive bouquet of flowers.

Why did people have to spend so much money on flowers?

Khemjira had never appreciated receiving bouquets; she considered them a waste of money. However, Phavin had never noticed her disinterest, not when they were friends with benefits and certainly not now. He had never truly understood anything about her.

"I’ve reserved an Italian restaurant. Let me take you there."

Before inviting her to his car, had he even asked if she liked Italian food?

She didn’t like flowers.

She didn’t enjoy Italian food.

She didn’t like anything Phavin did or offered—except for one thing.

But staying silent and hoping he would eventually stop bothering her didn’t seem to be working. Maybe today was the day she would finally say what was on her mind.

"Enough, Phavin."

"What?"

"I know you’ve been using sneaky ways to pressure me, but let me make something clear—I’ve been playing along because I didn’t want to cause any trouble."

Khemjira spoke firmly, not even bothering to take the bouquet from his hands. Maybe she had made a mistake by entertaining him for so long, letting him believe he had a chance.

"But if you keep pushing me like this, I won’t hesitate to draw a clear line."

"What line?"

"We only slept together, Phavin."

"....."

"I never cared about you beyond satisfying my desires. Not even a little."

She emphasized those last words, making it clear how insignificant he was to her. Khemjira looked him straight in the eye, ensuring he saw that she felt absolutely nothing for him.

There was nothing about him that she liked—except maybe his skills in bed, which had briefly pleased her. But that was all in the past. Now, he was nothing more than a nuisance to her.

Phavin looked stunned by her bluntness. Deep down, he had always known she never returned his feelings, but he had still believed that persistence would win her over.

"Aren’t you worried that my wife will find out about us?"

With no other card to play, Phavin resorted to his usual threat. He had used it so often that Khemjira already had a response ready.

"Go ahead and try, Phavin. Let’s see who faces worse consequences—me, a stranger, or you, her husband."

"....."

"Or do you really want to test it?"

She won the confrontation. Her words made it clear she was serious.

Phavin’s confidence faltered; he had never actually intended to tell his wife. It was just a tactic to manipulate Khemjira into keeping him in her life.

"Please, Khemjira. I just want one more chance. I’ll make things right. My wife and I will be getting a divorce soon."

"That’s your problem."

"Can’t you give me just one chance?"

"You want a chance from someone you’ve been blackmailing with your marriage? What are you even thinking?"

"....."

"I can’t give you that chance. And more importantly… I already have feelings for someone else."

Khemjira hoped this conversation with Phavin would be the last. After being hit with so many painful truths, if she were in his shoes, she wouldn’t dare show her face at her faculty again.

Even though she managed to say everything firmly, the truth was that she wasn’t as brave as she seemed. Deep down, the young professor was terrified that her past could reach the ears of his wife—especially because his wife was none other than the vice president of the same university where she worked.

While casual relationships weren’t inherently bad, there was no denying that such entanglements could harm a professor’s image—especially when they involved someone who was already married.

His wife, with her powerful position, could cause serious trouble for Khemjira if the affair became public. So the idea of her brief fling with Phavin getting exposed scared her more than anything else.

She feared losing her career as a professor above all else. A fear that many probably wouldn’t understand.

"Have you been waiting long? Did you order anything yet?"

"No, I just got here."

In truth, Dao Nuea had arrived at the udon restaurant quite some time ago.

Life after surviving another round of thesis storms had given her some free time. After waking up at noon and getting ready, she decided to leave home early to line up at the trendy restaurant, knowing it could take a while to get a table.

She had waited for over an hour before finally being seated—just in time for Khemjira, who had rushed over from the university.

Dao Nuea had no intention of telling Khemjira how long she had been waiting; she didn’t want her to feel guilty for arriving exactly on time.

Since they had broken off their *“friends with benefits”* agreement and become “something more,” many things had changed between them.

"What do you feel like eating? Nuea, I can’t decide."

"....."

**"Nuea?"**

"Why are you calling me just Nuea?"

Just like the shift in using a new pronoun, this small change took Dao Nuea by surprise. Khemjira had never called Dao Nuea by her name before, but now she was calling her 'Nuea.' It felt strange yet pleasant, making her cheeks heat up.

Meanwhile, Khemjira didn’t find it strange at all.

"Well, since you’re Nuea, I thought I’d call you that. Is it weird?"

"Not weird, just... I thought you’d call me 'Nong Dao Nuea' since you're 'Phi'."

"It feels too weird to call you Nong Dao Nuea. And by the way... I don’t want to be your Phi, Dao Nuea."

Calling herself *Phi* (an older sister) felt strange, especially with Dao Nuea. And the idea of calling herself *Auntie* was out of the question.

In her mind, being someone's person shouldn't involve a hierarchical dynamic like that of an older and younger sibling. Khemjira wasn’t talking to Dao Nuea just to be a sister or a friend—she wanted to be something more.

Some of Khemjira’s actions might seem unusual, mainly because she was figuring things out as she went.

After all, this was the first time she had someone to talk to like this. Her genuine effort, reflected in the way she thoughtfully looked at the udon menu, made her even more endearing.

"How about we order two dishes and share, Nuea?"

"Sure, Khem. Pick whatever you feel like eating."

When did Dao Nuea start finding everything Khemjira did adorable?

Is this what it feels like to be in love every day? Having someone to talk to about everything and a space where it’s just the two of you?

Khemjira’s apartment had become a second home for Dao Nuea. Sometimes, Saeng Nuea even joked that her little sister now had a favorite beautiful girl—and it was true.

In fact, this favorite might be more cherished than all the beautiful girls that came before, combined.

Dao Nuea was only just beginning to understand the meaning of love. Even though she hadn’t known Khemjira for very long, she couldn’t imagine wanting to be with anyone else.

"Khem, I’m going outside to take a call."

Dao Nuea lifted her head from Khemjira’s lap as they rested on the couch, scrolling through their phones.

Khemjira, engrossed in reading a new comic, barely paid attention, too absorbed in the story.

"You could pay attention to something other than that comic, you know?"

"It’s your fault for buying it for me."

Well, that backfired.

Seeing how much Khemjira liked the comic, Dao Nuea didn’t push the conversation, not wanting to interrupt her. Instead, she stepped out onto the balcony to answer a call from Pleng Phin, her lifelong friend.

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[You look really happy in your stories.]

"What happiness? Don’t be ridiculous,"

Dao Nuea replied, a little surprised by the call.

But she figured Pleng Phin must have seen her Instagram story—the one with Khemjira’s hand at the udon shop.

Dao Nuea had also wanted to post a picture showing Khemjira’s beautiful face, letting the world know just how stunning she was. But Khemjira had asked her to keep things private, at least for now. Dao Nuea still felt regretful about that.

[Have you told her the truth yet?]

"Of course, I’m honest about my feelings. If I like her, I say I like her."

[Is that all you told her?]

"Yeah, that’s all."

[.....] .

There was a brief silence on the other end, and Dao Nuea almost called out to check if Pleng Phin was still there.

But before she could, a sharp reprimand came through the speaker.

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[Idiot.]

"What?" Dao Nuea was stunned.

[I’m not talking about the whole friends-with-benefits thing. I’m talking about the *status* between you two.]

"....."

[Do you think it’s okay for a student to be in a romantic relationship with a professor?]

Dao Nuea froze.

She hadn’t even considered that until Pleng Phin pointed it out.

She was still a student, and Khemjira was a professor.

And it wasn’t just about moving from a casual relationship to something more—it was about whether it was *appropriate* for a professor and a student to be dating at all.

"I... I don’t know," Dao Nuea stammered.

She hadn’t even talked to Khemjira about what their relationship really was.

"But I think it’s fine... I mean, she never taught me or graded me. We go to different universities, after all."

[So, just because she never taught you, that automatically makes it okay?]

"....."

[It’s your decision, but I think you should be honest with her.]

"I know. Thanks, Pleng."

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Dao Nuea knew her friend well.

Pleng Phin acted indifferent and distant, but she always looked out for the people she cared about in her own way.

If it weren’t for her bluntness, she’d be the perfect mix of smart, beautiful, and caring.

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"You should worry about yourself and find someone to date already."

[Who said I don’t have someone?]

"Eh... wait, what? Pleng? Hello?"

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The call disconnected abruptly. Dao Nuea rolled her eyes but decided not to call back.

She returned to the living room and found Khemjira sprawled on the couch, completely absorbed in the latest volume of the comic series she had just started reading.

"Wow, you really like that, huh?"

"It’s really good,"

Khemjira replied just as she closed the book with a satisfying thud.

"Is there another volume? The ending is a cliffhanger."

"I’ll bring it next time."

"....."

"Khem?"

"Hm?"

"Even if it’s just me, you’ll still love me, right? You won’t leave me... right?"

"....."

Dao Nuea’s question stemmed from Pleng Phin’s earlier remarks. It wasn’t that she wasn’t worried about her friend’s warning—if anything, it made her even more anxious.

The thought of having to reveal the true nature of their relationship only stressed her more. She wasn’t even sure how Khemjira would react to the fact that Dao Nuea was technically still a student.

Even though part of her thought it was just a temporary status, Khemjira had never taught her, nor had she ever been involved in grading her during her four years at university, since they attended different universities.

So what was there to be afraid of? Dao Nuea herself didn’t even know. She was just scared—scared that if she told the truth, Khemjira wouldn’t stay by her side, no matter the reason.

Dao Nuea didn’t want to lose another place where she felt she belonged.

Khemjira was about to get up to grab her laptop and continue working after placing the new set of comics on the shelf.

But when the person who had just returned to sit on the couch asked her that question—with its hidden meaning—she found herself walking back and sitting beside her, thinking it over.

However, before she could answer, she realized just how unsettling the question sounded.

"Isn’t it a bit early to talk about love? We've only just started talking."

"I don’t know what else to call it."

Dao Nuea blurted out the thought as soon as it crossed her mind, only to end up looking as dejected as a scolded puppy when she heard Khemjira’s response. But she understood.

They had only just started talking. They were barely at the beginning stages —so why was she already asking about love? They weren’t even an official couple yet, able to discuss love so freely.

Even so, that gloomy expression softened when Khemjira leaned in and pressed her lips against Dao Nuea’s, bringing them together.

This time, both women froze in place on the couch for a moment before the smaller one pulled back to look at the face before her. In truth, Dao Nuea had only asked because she wanted to make sure things weren’t moving too fast.

"I guess so."

"....."

"As long as you’re not a bad person, I’ll keep loving you."

But Khemjira could hardly believe just how much she already loved Dao Nuea.

She didn’t want to lose this red-lips woman either.

Since they had stayed up late the night before with their *activities* (whenever one round ended, one of them always asked for another), Khemjira woke up later than usual and nearly missed her morning class.

Luckily, Dao Nuea had rushed her there, driving like a pro, and dropped her off safely in front of the Business Administration Faculty at CAU University.

Even though Dao Nuea was still in her pajamas, she managed to get Khemjira there on time.

"Just let me out here."

"Are you sure? Don’t you want me to walk you in?"

"No need, parking spaces are hard to find."

Besides, Khemjira didn’t want Dao Nuea attracting any unwanted attention.

It wouldn’t look good if people saw someone walking around campus in pajamas. And with Dao’s youthful appearance, misunderstandings could easily arise. If anyone assumed she was dating a student, it would be a disaster.

"By the way, you don’t seem surprised at all."

"Huh?"

"This is the first time I’ve told you where I teach, and you don’t even seem curious."

Dao Nuea felt her heart race.

Had she accidentally revealed too much by acting indifferent when she saw the faculty?

"W-What? I was surprised! I’m just... still half asleep."

"See you tonight, then."

"Yeah, see you."

Dao’s heart sank. She had barely avoided getting caught. But this secret wouldn’t stay hidden for much longer. She had made a decision—when she picked Khemjira up later that night, she would finally tell her...

"!!!"

As she shifted gears and prepared to pull away from the front of the Business Administration building, something caught the corner of Dao Nuea’s eye.

And it froze her hand on the gear shift, her face struck with shock. Others might not have been startled. But Dao Nuea certainly was.

She couldn’t help it—seeing Khemjira get slapped by a stranger, right in front of the faculty like that.

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 17**

The incident in which a female professor from the Faculty of Business Administration was slapped by the Vice Dean of CAU University in front of the department became a major scandal that quickly spread across campus.

Multiple witnesses recorded the event from various angles, capturing the moment when the professor fell to the ground from the force of the slap, followed by the enraged middle-aged woman standing over her, pointing and shouting angrily.

"Shameless woman, completely lacking decency! You're a professor, yet you're someone’s mistress!"

The vice Dean didn’t bother to clarify whose mistress the young professor was, as it was clear to everyone that this was a classic case of a wife confronting *"the other woman".*

Even though she and her husband were in the process of divorcing, that did nothing to calm the legitimate wife's justified fury. No decent person would get involved with another woman's husband.

The nightmare that Khemjira had prayed would never happen crashed down on her without warning.

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"Do you have anything to say in your defense, Professor Khemjira?"

"....."

It was almost ironic, really, this situation. Just the day before, Khemjira had entered this same room as a witness. Now, she found herself being interrogated for inappropriate behavior in relation to recent events.

Even Wimanee, who was conducting the investigation, found it hard to believe that she had to sit here questioning this young professor—an ideal educator, seemingly incapable of such scandalous acts.

Deep down, Wimanee still hoped that Khemjira was not involved as the mistress of the vice dean’s husband. It couldn't be true. Why would Khemjira be so foolish as to get caught up in something so risky that it could ruin her life?

And, of course, it wasn’t like she could explain the true nature of her relationship with Phavin. Besides, the fabricated accusations against her reputation seemed, in a twisted way, more convincing than the real truth.

"It’s just a misunderstanding."

"You know that's not what people think now, right?"

"....."

"This situation has gone too far to be seen as a simple misunderstanding."

"Do you really believe I’m the Vice Dean’s husband’s mistress, Professor Wimanee?"

"Personally, I don’t think so."

Wimanee replied,

"But I have to remain impartial. Therefore..."

She hesitated, knowing that this was the last thing Khemjira wanted to hear.

But as the head of the department, Wimanee needed to act decisively.

"I need to temporarily suspend you and forward this case for ethical review."

"Professor Wimanee!"

"You may leave now."

Wimanee didn’t give Khemjira a chance to respond. The professor had no choice but to leave the meeting room. Outside, Dao Nuea waited anxiously, worried about the disciplinary actions that might be taken. The moment she saw Khemjira emerge, she quickly rushed to check on her.

"Khem, how did it go?"

"....."

Apart from Dao Nuea’s worried gaze, Khemjira felt the weight of the stares around her—from both students and teachers. But there are only one pair of eyes made her shudder, and she quickly turned to see Professor Jatuphat standing nearby, saying nothing. Smirking at her.

A mocking smile? Why? Could this all be his doing? In that moment, she didn’t need proof; the expression on his face was evidence enough. Khemjira felt her anger boil like never before.

"You…!"

"Khem, come here."

"Let me go, Dao Nuea!"

If the taller woman hadn’t quickly pulled her away, the professor probably would have rushed forward to confront Jatuphat, worsening the situation even more.

Khemjira didn’t understand why Dao Nuea insisted on dragging her away— this should be something she herself understood better than the younger woman. Acting impulsively would only further damage her reputation.

Despite her small frame, Dao Nuea had remarkable strength. Panting heavily, she finally managed to shut the car door. She wasn’t even sure whether she had just dragged Khemjira or a full-grown elephant from the Business Administration Faculty building to the parking lot.

Fortunately, she was quick enough to press the lock button on the driver’s side door, preventing Khemjira from getting out. She couldn’t let her go back to the faculty building, or else there would be another viral video— this time of a professor slapping a colleague.

"Let me go! I need to go back and settle this."

"I know you want to talk, Khem, but even if you do, right now, no one will listen to you…"

"But I didn’t do it! I really didn’t do it, Nuea! Why am I facing an ethics investigation for something I didn’t do? Why does no one believe me?!"

"Khem, please, calm down first."

Dao Nuea lowered her voice, but her eyes widened in shock when she saw an expression of terror on Khemjira’s face—so unlike the normally composed professor. Khemjira’s eyes trembled, her face pale, and her hands restless as she gripped Dao Nuea’s shoulders tightly.

The driver was speechless, unsure how to handle this unusual behavior from the person sitting beside her.

The idea of potentially losing her job as a teacher was terrifying enough to make Khemjira tremble with fear.

"No, Nuea, I can't accept this. I won’t lose my job over something I didn’t do. I can’t lose this job, I... I…"

"It’s okay, it’s okay! I believe you, Khem."

Dao Nuea hugged Khemjira tightly, holding her close. Even with her strength, she felt overwhelmed by the trembling fear of the smaller woman.

Khemjira’s ragged breathing was loud and clear next to Dao Nuea’s ear, a reminder of her distress.

Gently, Dao Nuea ran her hand over Khemjira’s back, trying to calm and comfort her, helping her find peace in the safety of her arms.

"I don’t want to lose my job, Nuea. I’m scared."

From the beginning, Dao Nuea had been convinced that Khemjira would never stoop so low as to become the mistress of the university vice dean’s husband, Phavin. But even if she told everyone the truth—that their relationship was nothing more than casual—it would only lead to more accusations of being involved with a married man.

Whether she revealed the truth or not, there would be consequences, big or small. Such a scandal would tarnish the reputation of her profession. In the worst-case scenario, Khemjira could lose this important job—one that was more than just a livelihood or a passion. For Khemjira, teaching was everything.

It was the one thing she would rather die than lose.

It had been a while since Dao Nuea had taken Khemjira out of the university. Returning to Khemjira’s apartment didn’t seem like the best option in her current state. Judging by her behavior, she probably needed to escape somewhere quiet, somewhere away from prying eyes, where she wouldn’t be the center of attention—a place with just Dao Nuea and Khemjira.

"If you need anything, you can call our resort staff at any time."

The employee said.

"Yes, thank you."

Dao Nuea responded as she closed the door of her private villa in front of the resort staff. She felt lucky to have had a voucher for a one-night stay at this luxury resort in Khao Yai hidden in her car.

Dao had received it as a gift from a client but had never found the time to take her nieces on a trip. So, she figured she might as well use it rather than let it expire.

The villa was styled like a European countryside home, with separate rooms for the bedroom, bathroom, living area, and a private terrace by the pool. The amenities exceeded expectations, fitting for a place that cost several thousand baht per night. Under normal circumstances, Dao Nuea would have been delighted to indulge in the luxury surrounding her, but tonight, her mood was more somber.

The red-lipped woman walked from the door to the bedroom, where a luxurious six-foot bed sat in the center. There, curled up since their arrival, was the smaller woman who had come with her. Dao Nuea turned on the bedside lamp, bringing a little light into the dark room. She couldn’t stand seeing Khemjira like this, looking so withered.

There was a large jacuzzi there; maybe a warm bath would help Khemjira feel better.

"Do you want to take a bath? It’s been a long day."

There was no response. Her mind must have been wandering somewhere else.

Dao Nuea didn’t like seeing Khemjira like this. Maybe she didn’t fully understand her—she was just a student who had never experienced working life or had a career she cherished.

Even her brother had never shown such intense dedication to his career in architecture. If he lost his job one day, he’d probably feel down for a while and then just move on.

To Dao Nuea, a job was just something that kept you going; work was just work. But still…

Gently, she moved closer.

"Khem."

"...."

"Everything is going to be okay. Trust me."

At those words, accompanied by a comforting squeeze on her shoulder, Khemjira finally lifted her tear-filled eyes to look at Dao. Slowly, she moved, wrapping her arms around Dao Nuea’s waist and burying her face into the taller woman’s back.

Khemjira had never let anyone see her vulnerable side. She hated being seen as weak. But with Dao Nuea, she knew she wouldn’t be judged. Even if Dao Nuea didn’t fully understand, she was willing to try. Maybe she was the only person Khemjira could reveal her pain to.

"I’m scared... Nuea."

'You don’t have to be. Everything will be okay. You haven’t lost your job yet."

Dao Nuea said, lifting Khemjira to face her. She gently wiped Khemjira’s tears away with her slender fingers.

"Normally, you’re the most sensible person I know, Khem. There has to be a way out of this."

The Khemjira that Dao Nuea knew was most beautiful when she smiled. Seeing her tear-stained face felt out of place. Dao Nuea only wanted her happiness and to be to see her smile, free of sadness. She hoped that, somehow, her comfort would ease Khemjira’s pain.

Their lips met, the kiss deepening as their upper garments slowly slipped away. Khemjira pressed forward with a fierce kiss, pulling Dao Nuea into her embrace. Dao Nuea hesitated for a moment as Khemjira’s hand guided her, the shirt she had tossed aside now forgotten.

"Are you sure?"

"Mhm... I need you, Nuea."

"...."

"Please, help me."

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 18**

People find it difficult to separate sex from emotions. Even though they say it’s just a way to release feelings, only a few can truly experience intimacy without emotions getting involved.

Dao Nuea considered herself lucky to be part of that small group who could separate feelings from fleeting pleasure. This ability allowed her to enjoy the company of many beautiful women without complications.

Beyond pleasure, she felt nothing—these beautiful women were just a fleeting visual delight, and once it was over, their faces faded from her memory.

No one had ever been engraved in her mind like Khemjira. No one had ever made her feel anything during sex. She didn’t just want to enjoy it; she wanted to cherish that body, to make every action full of love.

The short-haired woman, who had initially been lying on the soft mattress, sat up and adjusted her position to match that of the other person. Khemjira placed one hand on the bed, enduring the intensity of Dao Nuea’s passionate mouth exploring her, while using the other hand to help remove her long skirt.

Now, Khemjira’s body was clad only in lace lingerie although oldfashioned, but looked incredibly sexy on her.

Dao Nuea cupped Khemjira’s face to deepen the kiss, while her other hand playing with every part within reach. The rhythm of her movements sent shivers down both their spines.

The smaller woman felt especially vulnerable to emotion, her confused feelings offering a brief escape from the troubles in her mind, just as the growing heat in her chest reached the point of bursting.

Dao Nuea moved behind the woman in lace, leaving a trail of kisses along her shoulder, occasionally nibbling, alternating with gentle bites on her neck.

Her playful hands held Khemjira’s full breasts, caressing them through the lace fabric. Dao Nuea teased her sensitive nipples with a light touch. Khemjira’s head tilted under the intensity, and her heart pounded.

"Nuea... I can’t take it anymore."

Khemjira whispered, her words urging Dao Nuea to grant her desire. Dao Nuea removed her lace bra and matching panties, then looked at Khemjira again. Dao Nuea had a particular fondness for her lover’s delicate nipples— sometimes caressing them, sometimes grasping them firmly, sometimes squeezing them for more.

At the slightest touch on her sensitive spot, Khemjira trembled, instinctively gripping Dao Nuea’s arm, where her partner’s hand was fully focused on her pleasure. When Dao Nuea’s fingers entered, Khemjira’s warmth welcomed them, almost playfully.

With each gentle thrust, waves of pleasure coursed through her, intensifying until she instinctively wrapped her arms around her partner.

"Ahhh... I love you, Nuea."

The slender figure trembled, releasing a sweet sound along with the name of the person she professed to love—just like others had once called Dao Nuea’s name with affection. But this time, the words were different.

"I love you too, Khem."

Khemjira was the only person she had ever chosen to return those words to with sincerity, with a truth that resonated deeply in her heart.

The sensation overwhelmed her, leaving her mind in blissful emptiness. But it was only temporary, as all the memories and feelings inevitably resurfaced—they were never completely erased from her mind. Deep down, Khemjira knew she couldn't let go. She never could.

"Khem, you can be a good teacher."

Teaching was the only thing she had left, the only legacy that remained.

*I can't lose this job. I can't lose something important ever again.*

She refused to experience that kind of loss once more. *Never!*

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***Whoosh!***

The thick blanket was pulled away, allowing light to replace the darkness. Dreams faded as reality took over. Morning sunlight streamed through the large bedroom window.

Her tightly shut eyes squeezed even more in response to the brightness. A hand reached out to the bed, only to find that the person who had been lying there, naked the night before, was gone. She slowly opened her eyes and saw the blanket tossed on the floor.

A long-haired woman stood beside the bed, wearing a gray robe provided by the resort. It served as a substitute for sleepwear, though it seemed too short for the person wearing it.

"Good morning."

"...."

"Since you're awake, get up and let’s find something to eat."

Khemjira had woken up later than usual—it was the first time in a long while that she hadn’t started her day with her exercise routine. Unlike Dao Nuea, who was known for sleeping in but somehow managed to wake up at dawn today, take a shower, get dressed, and even sit down to finish the work she needed to submit the following week.

*Work.*

Normally, Khemjira would be getting ready to teach at the university. But not while she was suspended, awaiting an ethics review.

Khemjira was secretly worried about her students in the class she was supposed to be teaching. Though her close friend Mawin had assured her that he would take responsibility and cover for her, she knew she was caught up in this mess because of another man.

Mawin wanted nothing more than to punch Jatuphat, but he held back because Khemjira insisted he stay calm.

All she could do now was wish her luck and promise that he would do everything he could to help her. When the day of the ethics hearing came, she planned to bring evidence that would shock everyone.

*"You weren’t actually the mistress, so why be afraid, Khem?"*

*"Easy for you to say, right, Mawin?"*

But admitting to her habit of finding casual partners wasn’t exactly something she could say out loud.

Besides, clearing her name from being accused of being the vice-president’s husband's mistress was one thing, but the alternative was asking Phavin to answer for their relationship... and that was even more impossible. That selfish man would never tell the truth if it meant getting into trouble.

Who knows? He might even be in cahoots with Professor Jatuphat.

Is there any way out of this mess without bringing more misfortune upon myself?

Khemjira hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in a while, and her mind was so exhausted that her body felt drained as well. She hadn’t eaten anything since the night before, yet she still didn’t feel the urge to taste the luxurious breakfast from room service.

The resort offered guests the chance to enjoy breakfast by the pool, surrounded by the beautiful Khao Yai landscape in the early morning.

Seeing that Khemjira wasn’t touching her food, Dao Nuea tried to encourage her to take a bite of the French-style breakfast in front of her.

"Try a bite."

"You don’t have to worry. I just can’t eat right now."

"It's not that This food is expensive—it’d be a waste not to get our money’s worth."

"...."

"Think about the farmer who worked hard to bring us the wheat for this croissant. Think about the pig that gave its life to become bacon. Think about the chicken that sacrificed an egg for our sunny-side-up…"

"Then you can eat all of it yourself."

"Arrgh."

Dao Nuea ended up stuffing the croissant, bacon, and eggs into her mouth all at once, nearly choking.

Her attempt to lighten the mood turned out more comedic than inspiring, thanks to her mischievous antics. But it worked—Khemjira couldn’t help but smile.

She realized that staying sad wouldn’t solve anything. Finally, she took a few bites of her breakfast, much to Dao Nuea’s relief. The morning atmosphere lightened slightly, but after taking a sip of her black coffee, Khemjira decided to explain why she had been up at dawn.

She confessed to Dao Nuea, who was cutting another piece of bacon.

"This morning, Professor Wimanee sent me the details about the ethics review."

"...."

"The hearing is next Monday. The committee will include the department head, the university president, and a few other officials. Normally, the vicepresident would also be there, but in this case... it's just the others.

Each university had its own measures for handling internal issues, like CAU’s protocols for addressing professors who violated university or professional ethics. Hardly any professor at CAU wanted to be summoned for an ethics hearing.

Only a select few, if their actions seriously violated ethical standards, would face such scrutiny. Khemjira never thought she would be one of them.

Dao Nuea didn’t know much about the inner workings of universities or even the academic regulations of her own institution. To her, it sounded similar to when a company investigates an employee over a scandal.

"So, what does this ethics review involve?"

"They question the facts, investigate, and then decide on penalties if there’s an ethical violation."

"What kind of penalties?"

"Various: warnings, salary cuts, suspension, even dismissal.

"...."

"I’m worried it’ll be the last one."

Even imagining the worst-case scenario—where the ethics review had the worst possible outcome—made Khemjira wonder what she would do with her life.

Being fired over a scandal was almost equivalent to being labeled as someone who had severely violated professional principles, a mark that society would place on her. It would make it nearly impossible for any university to hire her as a professor again.

Khemjira’s academic career could come to an end as soon as next Monday. Worse still, her entire professional life as a salaried employee in any field could follow suit.

It was fair to say that her life was hanging by a thread; though she was still standing, the risk of falling loomed over her. Realizing the gravity of this terrible situation made Khemjira lose her appetite once again.

Dao Nuea didn’t know if there was any way she could help, so she could only offer words of encouragement, urging Khemjira to stand up and keep fighting.

"Khem, you won’t be punished, I’m sure of it. We’ll find evidence to prove your innocence."

"What evidence could there be?"

"...."

"Should I stand on the rooftop and shout that Phavin and I are just… friends with benefits?"

"T..There has to be some proof. You’re a good professor. The good you’ve done has to count for something."

"I hope you’re right.

Relying on a miracle wasn’t something Khemjira wanted to put her slim hopes on, especially when that hope felt even less reliable than pure chance. Did her years of being a good and dedicated professor really matter at this point?

Dao Nuea spoke as if someone was going to suddenly appear and offer a better way out of this mess.

Suddenly, the sound of a ringing phone broke the silence. Who would be calling Khemjira this early in the morning from an unknown number?

"Hello."

Khemjira answered. The voice on the other end sounded familiar, but she couldn’t quite remember who it was, so she asked,

"Hmm, who is this?"

However, the moment the caller continued speaking, Khemjira’s expression changed noticeably. Dao Nuea frowned as she watched the woman sitting across from her at the breakfast table end the call and focus on her phone’s inbox.

She opened her mouth to ask about the mysterious call, but Khemjira raised her index finger to stop her before she could say a word.

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After checking out of the resort, Dao Nuea used her advanced driving skills to get Khemjira back to Bangkok as quickly as possible. Their destination was a café where Khemjira urgently needed to be. The crucial evidence that could clear her name in the upcoming ethics hearing was with someone waiting inside.

When the car stopped in front of the café, Khemjira quickly unbuckled her seatbelt and prepared to step out.

"The tank is almost empty; go fill it up, okay?"

"Are you sure you don’t want me to come in?"

Dao Nuea asked before Khemjira could get out. But Khemjira remained firm in the decision she had made from the start.

"I don’t want you to get involved, Nuea."

Khemjira wasn’t sure if Phavin or Jatuphat had planned any kind of ambush, and if she wasn’t careful, Dao Nuea could get caught up in the mess. Even so, the taller woman’s expression fell.

"But I want to be here for you."

"You’ve always been here for me, Nuea. But this is my fight. I have to finish it myself." "Alright."

"Dao Nuea."

"Yes?"

"When all of this is over, let’s stop ‘*talking*’." "What? Why, Khem? Did I do something wrong?"

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To be fair, Khemjira couldn’t help but laugh at the worried look on the younger woman’s face. It was obvious that Dao Nuea was jumping to the conclusion that Khemjira wanted to break things off. But in reality, it was the exact opposite.

Khemjira had thought about it for a while and had finally made her decision.

"What I mean is, we shouldn’t just be ‘*talking’* anymore.

"...."

It seemed like a waste of time to stay in that undefined state. Khemjira believed it was time for their relationship to take a step forward.

Dao Nuea, surprised, looked momentarily stunned, but her expression quickly shifted to one filled with joy. Many had asked Dao Nuea for that commitment before, but Khemjira was the first person she had decided to say yes to.

"Wait for me just a little longer, okay?"

And the answer? She wouldn’t give it just yet.

"Yes, I’ll wait for you."

Dao Nuea would make sure Khemjira was the first to hear it.

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 19**

"So, from this moment on, we will begin your ethical review, Professor Khemjira."

And so, the day of truth had arrived for Khemjira. Whether she would continue to be recognized as a professor depended entirely on this ethical review.

The largest conference room at the university, located in the president's building, had been prepared for the investigation. The professor, accused of having an inappropriate relationship with Mr. Phavin—the legal husband of the university's current vice dean—sat in the center of this room.

Among those attendance were the university president, high-ranking officials, and the head of her department, Professor Wimanee. Each had taken their seat around the lone chair positioned in the middle of the room, reserved for the person under scrutiny.

Additionally, the alleged victim—the vice dean—and her husband, Phavin, had also come to witness the proceedings.

This was, indeed, a formal proceeding, as the issue at hand was not something the university could simply overlook.

The investigation began with a summary of the incident and the controversy on social media surrounding it. There was no need to speculate—more than ninety percent of public opinion was negative, with only a handful defending her, likely students she had taught in the past.

Even so, many were quick to believe the content of the leaked video without question, hurling crude insults at her and demanding her firing.

Someone with such a lack of moral integrity, they argued, should not be entrusted with teaching anyone. Khemjira’s continued presence could tarnish the university’s reputation.

"Professor Khemjira, do you have anything to say in your defense?"

Professor Wimanee gave her the opportunity to respond, though she knew most of the committee members in that room were inclined to find her guilty. The suspicions of an affair with the vice president’s husband were one factor; another was the administration’s desire to protect the university’s reputation.

Whether she had been a good professor in the past was irrelevant. The validity of the accusation was not the focus; the attendees simply wanted to prevent the institution’s name from being stained by a faculty member. Supporting the vice president carried far more personal benefits.

Khemjira, reflecting on the nature of these high-ranking officials, sighed. She seemed calm, more composed than others who had sat in that chair before her. She crossed her legs and lifted her chin, meeting the gaze of the review committee without the slightest hint of avoidance.

"I have nothing to defend against accusations that are not true."

"But the vice dean has witnesses who claim you indeed had an affair with Mr. Phavin."

"And who might these witnesses be? Do they even know me?"

"......"

Khemjira’s sharp remark, seemingly indifferent to the gravity of the situation, almost made the president lose his temper—but he held back.

Witnesses? There certainly were. Someone had provided evidence to the vice president and had insisted on serving as a witness for the alleged victim. It was preferable to conclude this investigation swiftly with an undeniable verdict.

"In that case, we will call the witness to clarify the matter."

The witness entered the room, and although Khemjira did not turn around to look, it was as if she had eyes in the back of her head—she knew exactly who would dare to accuse her of something serious enough to justify this ethical review.

Professor Jatuphat was the cause of this turmoil.

He had come with the intent to destroy her and ensure she was expelled from the university forever.

Surprising? Not to her. She had known from the start… and had prepared everything before this investigation even began.

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The scene took place an hour before the ethics review was set to begin.

Jatuphat had just finished teaching his morning class and was the last to leave the lecture hall. He was preparing to testify against Professor Khemjira, looking unusually cheerful. After all, soon he wouldn’t have to deal with that bothersome woman who stood in his way anymore.

"Professor Jatuphat, I need to speak with you."

"Oh, hello, Professor Khemjira."

Jatuphat responded, surprised to see her waiting outside the lecture hall. He wouldn’t have recognized her immediately if she hadn’t spoken. She was almost completely disguised—wearing a mask and a hat that covered most of her face.

Clearly, she didn’t want anyone to recognize her, given that she was currently suspended. Jatuphat almost felt sorry for his younger colleague.

"You must be feeling very pleased with yourself,"

Khemjira said, lowering one side of her mask to speak more freely. She despised that smug smile on Jatuphat’s face, which so openly hinted at his involvement in her current predicament.

"I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Professor Khemjira."

"You don’t know? What a shame. I thought you’d know exactly what I meant."

"Well, if I did, what could you do about it?"

He asked, his smile widening.

"And what if I can?"

"Then go ahead. The university might find out about your responses to a barely veiled threat—unless you’re afraid of all your conversations with Mr. Phavin."

The implication was clear, though Khemjira wasn’t sure how long Jatuphat had been monitoring her interactions with Phavin. If it had only been occasional lunch meetings out of courtesy or the acceptance of a bouquet of flowers, it was unlikely that the vice dean would be furious enough to confront her in person.

But perhaps it was because of their last conversation.

*"We only slept together, Phavin."*

Maybe it wasn’t only Phavin who had heard those words.

That damning statement had brought her a world of trouble.

Whether through rumors or a recorded clip, those words alone made it far too easy for Jatuphat to accuse her. No doubt, he believed he had the upper hand. If she denied it, it wouldn’t carry much weight; if she spoke openly about her personal life during the ethical review, she would only create more problems.

She was trapped between two unattractive choices: losing her job or damaging her credibility as a professor.

*Would she choose this or that one?*

*No.*

*Khemjira would choose neither.*

*Absolutely not.*

She would not allow her teaching career to suffer any consequences.

"Professor Jatuphat, do you ever think that being a teacher comes with so many rules, some of them completely absurd?"

Khemjira asked, her tone calm, almost casual.

"Some rules are so petty that even the smallest mistake turns into a scandal. To be honest, I find it exhausting."

Khemjira’s unexpected behavior caught Jatuphat off guard. She even mentioned the rules of being a teacher, leaving their colleagues frowning in confusion. She wasn’t hysterical, nor was she begging for forgiveness.

Instead, she remained remarkably calm—more than she should have been— and simply stepped closer to look him in the face, which was nearly a hand’s width taller than hers.

The petite woman tilted her head back to meet his eyes directly, showing no trace of fear about the possibility of losing her teaching position.

It was strange how unconcerned she seemed. Or did she have some kind of advantage over him? No, that was impossible. She was just playing with his head, nothing more.

"Making a mistake is one thing, but the effort it takes to hide it—that’s another. In fact, I admire you, Professor Jatuphat, for keeping your mistakes hidden for so long."

"You can’t use my past against me."

"If you mean Wanida… yes, you’re right. But then again… which mistake are you referring to?"

"Hah?"

To be completely honest, Khemjira truly meant what she had just said. At that moment, she was no different from Jatuphat, who also despised the absurd rules of being a teacher: one must be a role model for students, must avoid inappropriate behavior at all costs, must be virtuous and flawless.

But if someone had to be so perfect, they might as well become a monk instead of a teacher.

Being a good teacher should be about teaching effectively and not causing harm to society. That should be enough to educate others. However, this society demanded that teachers be models of virtue, strictly adhere to moral codes, and never stray from their pristine image of goodness—even though teachers were human beings like everyone else.

Khemjira didn’t understand why she had to go to such lengths to hide her personal preferences when it came to relationships. After all, her actions hadn’t harmed anyone. She still refused to admit that she was wrong for sleeping with Phavin without knowing he had a wife. She simply hadn’t known. That was completely different from what that man had done.

Now, it was her turn to strike back—with something that would leave him speechless. She raised her phone and invited him to witness something extraordinary on her screen.

Jatuphat stared at the small rectangular screen she held up before him. The stunned silence wiped the smile off his face. His expression froze, and his eyes darted quickly between her and the screen as if he couldn’t believe what he was seeing.

Impossible. There was no way Khemjira could have that.

How? How did Khemjira have that folder from his Google Drive on her phone?

Khemjira’s Google Drive had always been filled with work-related data. She had never added any unrelated files to her university email drive. But this special folder she had just received—it was very important. As important as her work, so much so that it had to be stored in the university’s Google Drive.

The university email—it was the fastest way for her to send emails to everyone in the university at once.

Just thinking about it made her excited until her body jumped. The moment they all opened the email and found this secret folder.

Photos of naked schoolgirls.

Secretly recorded clips of underage girls.

And many more...

If this problem hadn't occurred, Khemjira would never have found out about his senior colleague's incurable taste. But the professor still couldn't understand the situation. He had never saved the folder to the online drive.

And that folder was only on his home computer. The woman didn't even know his residential area. His fellow professors had never visited his home. The only acquaintance from college who had been to his home was...

The lump on the man's left chest almost stopped working.

The realization left him in shock.

The person who had been to his home, the person who knew the folder's location, and the person who could make him careless enough to steal his secret folder, was his favorite former student who decided to lend a hand against the professor he hated the most.

The girl had thought about exposing him when he bullied her about her exam grades, but eventually abandoned the plan.

Khemjira's help was a favor she had promised to return. She had to search for the file she had secretly copied from the professor's computer before she broke into his room until she found the USB she had copied so long ago.

She had forgotten where she had saved it. And then, that USB ended up in the hands of someone who could use it to its full potential.

Khemjira still remembered Wanida's terrified expression, who was afraid that Jatuphat would find out that they had agreed to meet in secret to deliver the USB drive—and helping to plan stabbing him in the back.

But the professor in question hadn’t seen any of this coming. He felt his blood rush to his face and violently snatched the phone from Khemjira’s hand.

"Feel free to smash it; it’s just my backup phone,"

Khemjira said, her voice so cheerful and calm that she didn’t even seem fazed by Jatuphat’s violent act of slamming the device to the ground. Instead, she let out a soft laugh, deepening the crimson hue of his already enraged face. It was hard to tell whether he was angrier at her or at his former favorite student.

"Wanida is such a lovely student, isn’t she? It’s a shame, though—she really shouldn’t have wasted her time being deceived by someone like you."

"You...!"

It was time to unveil the hidden face, to remove both the hat and the mask, revealing to everyone exactly who Jatuphat had grabbed by the collar—the vice dean’s husband’s mistress.

Anyone passing by could easily assume that the professor was furious on behalf of the vice dean, enraged by his colleague’s disgraceful conduct, angry enough to raise his hand, ready to slap the same cheek that the vice president herself had once struck.

However, only she could see the tremor in his eyes—the unmistakable flicker of panic.

And at that, Khemjira laughed. A laugh that bordered on madness, the kind that could drag anyone down with it.

"I wonder—between me, the vice dean’s mistress, and you, with all your vile secrets—who is going to lose more here? A single slap left my cheek numb, but you… how many feet do you think will trample over you?"

"You’re crazy! You pervert!"

"Oh, I can be much crazier than you think. You’ve crossed the line on something that matters more to me than anything else. But if you’re so determined to ruin me… then I’m not going down alone."

"….."

"Our department is about to be suffer with a massive scandal. Just thinking about it is thrilling, isn’t it?"

As the time for Khemjira’s inevitable dismissal approached, it aligned perfectly with the exact moment the university staff received an email—one with Jatuphat’s hidden folder attached.

The explosive contents of that folder would bury any rumors about Khemjira beneath the weight of an even greater scandal.

She might lose her job, but Jatuphat?

He could lose everything. He should choose his words carefully before answering any of the committee’s questions in that room.

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"Well, Professor Jatuphat?"

"You were aware of the relationship between Professor Khemjira and Mr. Phavin, weren’t you?"

Come on, answer them. Tell them she was the one having an affair with Phavin. Lying with a straight face is supposed to be your specialty.

But his lips remained frozen. Instead, his jaw tensed, his fists clenched tightly, and beads of sweat formed as his eyes darted to his junior colleague, who sat comfortably in the center of the room—legs crossed, meeting his gaze with cold composure.

He had never liked Khemjira. Not even once. Since her very first day as a professor, he had hated her to his core. Everything about her irritated him— her gaze, her voice, that air of superiority she had.

But worst of all was that sneer she had at that moment, as if she were above him, as if he were small and insignificant in her presence.

Especially that smile. He despised it so much that it took everything in him to maintain his composure.

He had been so sure he would finally get rid of that meddlesome woman.

"I… I made up the whole story. I’m sorry."

"..…"

"I didn’t think it would go this far… I apologize."

No one in the room had expected such a confession from Jatuphat. Bowing deeply, he held his posture, as if trying to take responsibility for all the trouble Khemjira and everyone else had been put through.

Of all the people present, Khemjira was one of the few who showed no reaction to his words. After all, this outcome didn’t surprise her in the slightest.

"So, you're saying you fabricated everything?"

Professor Wimanee asked, relief shining in her eyes as hope grew that her esteemed colleague was innocent.

"Y...Yes. Professor Khemjira and Mr. Phavin are just… friends. There’s nothing more between them. I made everything up because of personal issues between Professor Khemjira and me."

"No!"

"Mr. Phavin?"

Phavin was visibly upset by Jatuphat’s confession, which only confirmed Khemjira’s suspicions about the connection between the two men. In an instant, the image of a brave hero arriving to save the wronged woman shattered.

She regretted that she had to be the one to disrupt his plan, but even if she lost her job, she would never accept being with him.

She didn’t know what punishment Jatuphat would face for this, but it would probably be nothing more than a warning for making false accusations—a light sentence compared to the consequences if the confidential folder in her hands ever saw the light of day.

For now, Khemjira was no longer the accused; she was the victim—her reputation publicly tarnished, her dignity damaged. If the university didn’t handle this carefully, there would be consequences.

"So, is there anything else you need to ask me?"

She asked, her voice calm and steady.

"…"

"No, nothing."

"Madam Vice Dean?"

The Vice Dean, who had started as one of the accusers in this hearing, rose from her seat and looked at Khemjira. Her expression no longer held any anger; it seemed that Jatuphat’s confession had cleared Khemjira in her eyes.

Slightly inclining her head, she acknowledged her own role in causing unnecessary trouble.

"I acted too hastily, relying on unfounded rumors, and this has been a great learning experience. As a Vice Dean, I apologize for the trouble this has caused you, Professor Khemjira, and I will take full responsibility for what happened."

Everything in the room was unfolding exactly as Khemjira had expected, just as the Vice Dean realized the direction events were taking.

The plan she had made together was going perfectly.

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Khemjira had no regrets about meeting the Vice Dean privately to settle things.

At first, when she had ambushed the other woman outside the administrative building, she had to endure a barrage of harsh words—being called shameless, vile, a disgrace as a professor.

If she hadn’t quickly responded with her true feelings about Phavin, she might have even received a slap.

"I would never lower myself to be your husband's mistress. He’s a piece of shit."

"What did you just say…?!"

After hearing her husband insulted like that, one would expect the woman to be furious. But she wasn’t. Not at all.

Khemjira had simply spoken the truth—one the Vice Dean already knew deep down. Otherwise, why had she decided to divorce him in the first place? The root of everything was that Phavin was a despicable man who had completely shattered her trust.

Khemjira wasn’t even the first woman he had cheated with.

She had been angry herself when she found out her husband had been unfaithful. But now, with a cooler head and a bit of humility, maybe Khemjira could finally do something about it.

The conversation moved to the Vice Dean’s car, where Khemjira explained her own preferences—something that had led to misunderstandings regarding her relationship with Phavin. She also revealed the tangled mess involving Jatuphat and the countless indiscretions that had piled up into this current scandal.

"A man cheated on his wife countless times. Another person blatantly violated professional ethics and displayed dangerous behavior. And I’m just a professor who chooses casual relationships. Which actions do you think are the most disgusting?"

"How do I know you’re telling the truth?"

"Why wouldn’t you believe me? You’ve known your husband for years. You should know him best."

Khemjira’s response left no room for doubt. Jatuphat’s confession had already made it clear who was truly at fault.

In the end, she had made the right decision—leaving Phavin was far better than staying in a pointless relationship.

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She didn’t even wait for the final decision. Soon, she would receive a formal apology from the university. But before leaving the room, she decided to approach the man she had supposedly had an affair with.

There was one last thing she wanted to do.

"Vice Dean, I hope you don’t mind."

"Go ahead, Professor Khemjira."

"...."

"...."

***Thud!!***

With a powerful kick, Phavin’s chair crashed to the floor. The impact would leave him sore for weeks. He might not have admitted to the affair, but she had no problem confirming that she had just thrown the Vice Dean’s husband off his chair.

Goodbye, idiot. Fortunately, both she and the Vice Dean were finally free of these useless men.

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"Professor Parnward, here’s the final chapter of my thesis."

"Wow, those dark circles under your eyes are as black as a panda’s!"

Parnward watched as the soul of her student practically drifted out of her body. Dao Nuea dragged her feet into the room like a zombie. It was obvious she had stayed up all night to submit the last chapter on time.

"I need alcohol… I need it to circulate in my system."

"Alright, alright. Just a little more, and you’ll be done."

"I just want to graduate already! I hate my thesis!"

"Oh, come on, Dao Nuea. It can’t be that bad."

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Oh, but it was. It really was.

That thesis had been draining Dao Nuea’s life force for weeks. She had pulled so many all-nighters that she had even fallen asleep standing up a few times. She just wanted to be done with it and forget about the upcoming presentation.

Of course, it was partly her fault for pushing back the deadline after her getaway to Khao Yai with Khemjira… But she wouldn’t blame her lover. Khemjira had her heart and could easily steal her attention.

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**Khemjira: The Investigation has ended.**

**Khemjira: It went well.**

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"Hey, hey! Look at that big smile! Talking to your girlfriend?"

"Oh, come on, Professor! She’s not my girlfriend or anything!"

Her denial couldn’t have been more obvious. Dao Nuea blushed and squirmed with embarrassment, unable to hide her happiness at the good news. She wasn’t shy—just overjoyed.

It was the kind of news that made her want to scream in excitement right then and there, but she held back. She would save it for when they met in person—so she could shout it straight into Khemjira’s ear.

Girlfriend, huh?

Well… maybe not yet. But now that Khemjira’s problems were over, it was only a matter of time before she could make things official.

Besides, it was probably time to finally tell her professor the whole truth about her situation.

"Hold on a second, Dao Nuea,"

Parnward said, momentarily setting aside Dao Nuea’s final thesis chapter. It seemed someone she had been expecting had arrived early.

Parnward got up from her desk and went to open the door, greeting the person outside.

"Come in and wait. I’m almost done talking to my student."

"Oh, that’s okay. I can wait outside."

"Come in. It’s hot out there."

Parnward was talking to someone at the door. That voice… Could it be?

Dao Nuea, who had been facing away from the door, heard footsteps entering the room along with Parnward. Curiosity took over, and she turned around—only to see the very same person who had just texted her, saying she couldn’t celebrate tonight because she would be at her cousin’s birthday party at home.

Both Dao Nuea and the petite woman standing next to Parnward were equally shocked to see each other. Only Parnward seemed completely unaware of the sudden tension in the room.

"Dao Nuea?"

"…?"

**"Huh? Khemjira, do you know my student?"**

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**Chapter 20**

"Khem! Khem, wait for me!"

For Dao Nuea, the situation was absolutely desperate. Not even the final chapter of her thesis or Professor Parnward could stop her from running to the faculty parking lot, chasing after the woman she loved.

She grabbed Khemjira’s arm just as she was about to open her car door, holding on tightly—though her grip nearly slipped when Khemjira turned to her with an icy gaze.

"Let go of me."

"K-Khem, please, listen to me."

Since the day they met—even before they had warmed up to each other, before they became friends with benefits—Khemjira had never seemed so terrifying to Dao Nuea.

Her heart sank as she faced Khemjira’s coldness. The love that once sparkled in the smaller woman’s eyes whenever she looked at her was gone. Or maybe Khemjira was hiding it.

It was shameful for a professor to look at a student that way, but Dao Nuea couldn’t use formal contract rules to justify their relationship. Khemjira would only give her one chance to explain herself.

"Why didn’t you ever tell me about this, Nuea?"

"I was planning to, Khem, but… but I didn’t know how to say it."

Dao Nuea had no idea how to start or how to reveal the truth without knowing what the consequences would be. She never imagined they would be this bad.

"But it shouldn’t matter, right? You’re not my professor, and I’m not your student. We were never involved in that way—you’ve never even taught me."

Khemjira was too committed to her role as a professor. Dao Nuea wanted her to see that maybe this wasn’t as big of a deal as she feared. After all, they never saw each other as professor and student—just as two people, one of whom happened to be a professor and the other a student.

But Khemjira thought Dao Nuea was too naive.

"Nuea, you said it yourself, didn’t you? A professor isn’t just someone who teaches in the classroom."

The bond between a professor and a student…

"In the same way, a professor isn’t only responsible for their own students."

"...."

***This relationship could never be right. It never would be.***

Dao Nuea’s body stiffened at those words, allowing the smaller woman to pull her arm free. Khemjira almost hesitated when she saw the fear in Dao Nuea’s eyes, but she turned away. She didn’t want the other woman to know that she was just as miserable.

Khemjira never wanted to lecture anyone outside of the classroom. It made her seem toxic, like someone who was always trying to teach others a lesson.

But her role as a professor pushed her to guide her students not only in knowledge but in moral principles—to keep them from straying down the wrong path. She saw all students as her responsibility, whether she had taught them directly or not.

"It doesn’t matter if I’ve taught you or not, Nuea. This is about the appropriateness of our roles—professor and student. Can you see that?"

"...."

"Answer me."

"I’m sorry, Khem. I’m so sorry."

Dao Nuea gave up, not caring who saw her as she dropped to her knees, clutching Khemjira’s leg, begging. She didn’t care how pitiful she looked— if it meant Khemjira wouldn’t leave her.

"I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, Khem. It was stupid of me. Please, forgive me."

"...."

"P-Please, I made a mistake. Don’t leave me, Khem."

"This relationship isn’t right."

"...."

"A relationship between a professor and a student will never be right."

"But I’ll graduate in less than a month."

"I can’t keep taking risks, Dao Nuea."

"...."

"I can’t lose my job over something that should never have happened."

How lucky that a despicable person like Jatuphat never found out about their relationship. He would’ve used it against her even more than the Pavin case—something she would never have been able to escape, something that would have ensured she wouldn’t leave an ethics hearing unscathed.

She never imagined that the biggest threat to her career was so close.

Being a teacher meant everything to her—more than anything else. To protect the job she cherished above all, Khemjira was willing to sacrifice everything, even the woman she had once dreamed of being with—the woman who had taught her what it meant to love for the first time.

She didn’t know if she would ever feel this way again about someone. But being a teacher had to come first.

So, Khemjira decided to bear the weight of this guilt alone.

"K...Khem, you’re breaking your promise,"

Dao Nuea choked out. When she realized that her pleas wouldn’t be enough to make Khemjira stay, tears streamed down her face as she knelt on the ground.

She had thought they would be happy together once this was all over. Khemjira had even said she wanted to be more than just a fling—more than just friends.

But Khemjira wasn’t the liar here. Dao Nuea had been the one who hid part of the truth, knowing how much Khemjira loved her career.

"I’m not breaking my promise, Nuea."

"...."

"Let’s end this here and now."

From friends with benefits to something special, from something special to strangers—like they had never met.

Khemjira’s determination to end everything between them was harsher than Dao Nuea had ever imagined.

She was no longer allowed to be a part of the other’s life.

Just as Khemjira had warned her once, she disappeared from Dao Nuea’s life completely.

The smaller woman made the taller one feel as if the time they had spent together had never existed—as if their encounters, their relationship, had all been a story from a novel, an empty fiction that had never taken place in the real world.

The only thing that had ever been real was Dao Nuea’s feelings.

They were so real that she couldn’t accept what had happened.

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"Damn it, this room feels so suffocating."

"When was the last time you aired it out?"

It had probably been over a week since this room had been shut like a sealed tomb. If it were any worse, Pleng Phin and Grand might have actually believed there was a decomposing body inside.

They opened the door to let out the dust and stale air, then squinted as they saw a figure wrapped in a blanket, trembling.

"Khem... Khem..."

"N’Nuea."

"Dao Nuea."

"Wow, she's even worse than I thought, Pleng."

Grand murmured. She hadn’t realized how bad it was when Saeng Nuea called, asking her and Pleng Phin to check on her sister.

They dropped everything to go to their best friend’s house. They could barely recognize the vibrant Dao Nuea they once knew. Her eyes were darker than when she pulled all-nighters for her thesis, and the swelling around them spoke of days of endless tears.

Having her heart broken for the first time was hitting her much harder than when Grand had been dumped by Ram.

Once they closed the bedroom door, they sat on either side of the bed. Pleng Phin gently touched Dao Nuea’s shoulder, finally making her realize they were there. She turned to look at her friends, quickly wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

"Pleng... Grand."

"Hi.." Grand greeted.

"You look terrible."

Even though they had been friends for years, they didn’t know how to handle this situation. Normally, it was Dao Nuea who cheered everyone up when they were heartbroken, dragging them out for drinks to forget their sorrows.

She was used to supporting others but not being the one who needed support. Grand was usually the one needing comfort, and Phin wasn’t great at giving motivational speeches. But at the very least, she could offer a comforting pat on the shoulder.

*"Hic... hic..."*

"It’s okay. We’re here now."

They had drinks in the car. Pleng Phin tell Grand to grab them later. If Dao Nuea was still crying, it meant she hadn’t hit rock bottom yet.

They would be there to help her drink until the pain faded—until they all passed out.

As a student at CAU, Pleng Phin had heard everything about the scandal involving Professor Khemjira, along with the university’s official apology. The vice dean and the institution faced criticism for damaging Khemjira’s reputation. But after the incident, the professor never returned to teach at the university.

It probably had nothing to do with the romance rumors, but as for whether it had something to do with their friend... well, it most likely did.

Pleng Phin didn’t want to add to Dao Nuea’s pain. At that moment, she would focus on helping her friend return to her old self. At first, it was a mess—Dao Nuea cried all the time, forcing her friends to scold and comfort her in turns. It took her a long time to pull herself together and push forward until graduation.

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"Dao Nuea, come take a picture with us!"

"Where did you disappear to? We were looking for you all over campus.'"

"Sorry, I took my brother and nieces to get something to eat."

Dressed in her Faculty of Science graduation gown, Dao Nuea hurried over to join her friends for a group photo. Gathering everyone on graduation day wasn’t easy. After a few pictures, they had to split up to take photos with other friends and family members.

Graduation day was a celebration, a symbol of academic achievement after overcoming the hardships of university life. Max couldn’t hold back tears as he looked at his diploma and his reflection in his graduation gown.

"I can’t believe we made it. We graduated!"

Max exclaimed, hugging Dao Nuea. He once thought he would drop out or switch faculties, but there he was, graduating alongside his best friend.

"How many tears did we shed? How much money did we spend on alcohol?"

"The answer is uncountable."

"It's true!"

University life had been tough, but the fun moments outweighed the struggles. Now that they were stepping into the job market, both Max and Dao Nuea knew they would miss these days.

The two best friends parted ways and returned to their families. Dao Nuea walked back to Saeng Nuea and her two nieces at the faculty cafeteria. Miya looked much happier now, her earlier bad mood from hunger completely gone.

After waking up at four in the morning without a proper meal, the girl in the pink dress had finished her plate of fried chicken and rice. She jumped out of her chair, squeezed through the crowd, and hugged her aunt’s leg with a bright, joyful smile.

"Auntie Dao! Let’s take a picture!"

"Of course! Let’s take one together."

"Where are your friends?"

Saeng Nuea asked her sister as she returned to the table, glancing at her older niece, Thanya, who was sitting with her chin resting on her hand, scrolling through her phone, completely unaware of her aunt’s return.

"Grand went home to freshen up, and Pleng Phin is still looking for a parking spot."

"Just those two?"

"Don’t make it sound like I don’t have friends!"

She might not have had many friends, but the ones she had were quality friends. She felt a little nostalgic because Yai Mai and Khun Ther couldn’t come, but the ones who were there had shown her so much love.

Grand did her makeup for free, and Pleng Phin was acting as her personal photographer. Maybe someday, they would all get together for a group photo.

"Dao Nuea."

"Professor Parnward."

Dao Nuea hadn’t expected to see her professor there, but it seemed like Parnward had come to the faculty cafeteria specifically to congratulate her. Dao Nuea quickly went over to greet the professor who had played a crucial role in helping her graduate.

When she had struggled before her thesis presentation, it was Parnward who pulled her out of bed and took her to the university. Dao Nuea wanted to take a graduation photo with her.

"Congratulations."

"Thank you!"

Dao Nuea exclaimed. Suddenly, she remembered to introduce her professor to her brother. She turned to Saeng Nuea, who had been watching them.

"P’Saeng Nuea, this is Professor Parnward."

"Hello."

"Hello."

Why were they smiling like that? Dao Nuea wondered, looking back and forth between her brother and her professor. But before she could ask, Parnward handed her a large bouquet of flowers.

"Oh! Professor, you didn’t have to bring me flowers."

The bouquet was too large, and she waved her hand, politely refusing. She was worried that receiving such a special bouquet from Parnward might attract unwanted attention. But Parnward simply smiled.

"I didn’t buy it."

"...."

Parnward placed the bouquet in Dao Nuea’s hands and walked away, leaving her slightly confused. As she held the flowers, Dao Nuea noticed a small card hidden among them, written in a familiar handwriting. It seemed to be from her professor.

***Congratulations.***

How close must someone be to arrange a graduation gift on behalf of another person? It had to be someone Professor Parnward knew well, and only one person came to Dao Nuea’s mind.

Don’t think about it, Dao Nuea. Today is your graduation day. You shouldn’t shed any more tears. You’ve cried enough.

"*Dao Nuea."*

*"I love you, Nuea."*

*"Just wait for me a little longer, Dao Nuea."*

As that person had once told her. She had to leave it in the past and let it all end here.

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 21**

**Khem’s POV**

I think almost every child has probably been asked this question—whether by family members or by people outside the family:

*What do you want to be when you grow up?* or *What kind of person do you want to become?*

It’s such a simple and basic question, and answering it doesn’t seem to require much thought. It’s about the future a child imagines for the day they become an adult.

So, the answers to this question vary from child to child—some dream of popular careers, like becoming a doctor or a police officer, while others let their imagination run wild, wanting to be a unicorn caretaker or a lizard hanging from trees all day.

The question "*What do you want to be when you grow up?*" is often asked without expecting a serious answer. However, that doesn’t mean children are completely free from the expectations of becoming the kind of person others want them to be. Those "others" are usually their parents.

Many parents expect their children to follow the path they have laid out for them.

They want their children to grow up smart.

They want their children to grow up rich.

They want their children to have a good future—often so that the parents themselves can live comfortably as well.

Their children are expected to follow a path with no other options, and I find that detestable. I firmly promised myself that I would never grow up on a path I didn't choose, even if those around me expected me to follow the same route as other family members.

I was born into a family where everyone is an educator. Both of my parents were teachers. However, the people who had expectations for me did not include my parents.

As far back as I can remember, I was very close to my mother. She was beautiful, kind, and loved to hug me, which I adored the most. She was a professor at the Faculty of Business Administration and was deeply passionate about her profession.

But my mother never tried to instill in me that I should grow up to be a teacher like her, nor did she tell me to follow what she wanted. That’s why I loved her so much.

Unfortunately, she passed away too soon from breast cancer, which she had battled for a long time, when I was almost seven years old. Her death was a very sad event, and although I felt sorrowful, I couldn't cry for all seven days of her funeral.

Many people attended my mother’s funeral. From what I saw, most of them were students she had taught. Some looked like they were only in their twenties, while others were old enough to have young children of their own. Some, realizing that I—the little girl standing there—was their teacher’s only daughter, came up to me to offer their condolences. They all said the same thing:

***"Your mother was a very good teacher."***

All of my mother’s students said, in unison, that she was a good teacher.

I was very close to her, but I have to admit, I didn’t know much about her as a teacher or professor. Maybe I avoided learning too much about that part of her because I was afraid she might be one of those teachers I despised at my school—the kind who always complain, insist they’re right even when they’re teaching incorrect material, and demand respect from students without doing anything to earn it.

If one of my teachers died, I probably wouldn’t waste my time attending their funeral. But all of my mother’s students came, and they seemed to genuinely respect her. Their praise, saying she was a good teacher, wasn’t just a polite remark. My mother was truly a good teacher.

But what exactly makes a good teacher ?

My mother’s funeral ended, and with it, the chapter of her role as my guardian. I needed a new guardian, and the court-appointed one was my father. I was placed under his custody, even though he and my mother had separated before I was born.

*"My sweet little Khem, my Khem."*

"....."

*"You're the cutest little Khem that has ever existed!"*

Before my mother passed away, I could probably count on one hand the number of times I had seen my father. It wasn’t because my mother had forbidden him from seeing me (their marriage had not ended on good terms, but they had both moved past their issues).

My father simply had very little time to visit me—he was always busy with his never-ending and demanding job as a professor, which left him with hardly any time to see his daughter.

Every time he did visit, he always seemed to have a new injury, making it hard to believe he was a professor, just like my mother.

And, of course, I wasn’t very close to my father. But since it was just the two of us left, I had no choice but to live with him reluctantly. He, on the other hand, acted as if we had always been close, pampering me in such an over-the-top way that it gave me chills.

*"My beautiful angel, do you want a snack? What would my little angel like to eat?"*

*"Dad, you're so annoying."*

*"Oh, my sweet Khem."*

It took quite a while before I could tolerate his annoying behavior.

After moving in with him, I started seeing my paternal relatives more often. Occasionally, my father would leave me in the care of his younger brother’s family. Meeting his younger brother also introduced me to my cousins. One was a kind and sweet boy named Pantat, and the other was...

*"What are you looking at?"*

*"You’re the one staring at me."*

*"You wanna start something?"*

*"Go ahead."*

*"Khem!"*

Just an annoying girl. I’m too embarrassed to even say her name, so let’s just skip that part.

I was never the type of girl to worry my parents. I was always a wellbehaved child—I never caused trouble, excelled academically and in extracurricular activities, and was well-liked by both my classmates and teachers.

Even the strict teachers who often clashed with other students never seemed to have a problem with me; in fact, they always praised me whenever they got the chance.

*"Since Khemjira is such a good student, I bet you'll grow up to be a teacher like your parents."*

Unlike many children, I had more options because of my abilities. I could have grown up to be anything I wanted—including a teacher, like my parents. But as I mentioned before, I hated the idea of someone setting a path for me.

Why should I grow up to become something I knew nothing about, just because it was expected of me? Becoming a teacher had never even crossed my mind. I didn’t find it interesting at all, and I didn’t want my future to be tied to that role.

I didn’t want people to think that just because I was the child of a teacher, I should become one too.

If anything, the more someone tried to push me in a certain direction, the more I resisted with all my might.

My school had transportation service for students, which I took in the mornings. In the afternoons, I had to be dropped off at the Faculty of Architecture at CAU University, where my father worked as a professor. My mother had also been a professor, teaching at the Faculty of Business at the same university.

In the past, I rarely visited my parents’ workplaces, but now I was there almost every night, becoming a familiar face to both professors and students.

*"Khem is so smart! She can read these difficult books even at her age."*

*"Khem will be so beautiful when she grows up."*

I might as well have been the unofficial mascot of the Faculty of

Architecture. I liked sitting in the back of the lecture hall, doing homework or reading while waiting for my father to finish teaching. Often, some students would come over to chat with me, and some even brought me snacks. But then there were times when…

*"When you grow up, will you be my girlfriend?"*

*Thud!*

*"Ouch!"*

*"Hey! What are you doing, flirting with a kid?"*

*"Oh, professor, I was just joking!"*

Some of the male students would joke around with me like that—halfserious or just messing around—only to get smacked on the head by my father. He never missed a chance to step in, even interrupting his class just to protect his only daughter.

*"If I ever find out someone is flirting with my daughter again, you’ll get double the homework."*

*"Oh, come on, professor!"*

*"Alright, that’s all for today. Now I’m taking my precious daughter home."*

With his usual over-the-top, protective style, my father helped me pack up my homework and pencil case.

*"Come on, Khem. It’s time to go home."*

Every day, my father finished work at different times. On days he finished early, we got home early. On days he finished late, we left for home at night. Whether it was early or late, I always had to hold his hand while walking—despite having told him before that I didn’t like holding hands with anyone except my mom. But he insisted, saying it was for my safety.

If he was so worried about my safety, why didn’t he just let me go home first? Why did I have to stay there until he finished his classes?

*"Why don’t you let the school bus drop me off at home?"*

*"Well, there’s no one at home. Who would you stay with?"*

*"I’d stay by myself. When Mom was in the hospital, I stayed alone."*

I replied without much thought as we walked toward the parking lot. This environment, which had once felt so unfamiliar, had now become a familiar sight. Along the way, I saw students from different faculties passing by— some of them were even my father’s students.

Over time, these students graduated, replaced by a new generation. The ones responsible for preparing them to leave university with the right skills and knowledge for their degree were the professors, including my father.

He always seemed happy when he was teaching his students. My mother was the same—she always told me how much she loved being a teacher.

*What's so great about being a teacher? Why did my parents love it so much?*

“Dad.”

“Hmm?”

“What’s your job about?”

“My job as a teacher?”

“Yes.”

I probably caught him off guard by asking about his job as a teacher. He had been doing this for decades, yet I had never asked my mother about her job. And now, here I was, asking my father—who I wasn’t even close to.

It felt strange. He seemed puzzled but still tried to find an answer for his daughter. What was there to think so deeply about? Being a teacher just meant teaching, right?

“Well… being a teacher means teaching students. But since I teach architectural drawing, I mostly help students learn how to draw for their future careers as architects.”

“Just teaching?”

“Teaching is a teacher’s main job. Though there are other responsibilities, I don’t think a child like you would understand them yet.”

Just because I was a child, he thought I wouldn’t understand? That was so condescending. From what I gathered, it didn’t sound much different from what I had imagined a teacher’s job to be. Nothing particularly interesting, really. If anything, it sounded boring.

“Don’t you get bored teaching the same thing over and over?”

“It can get a little boring. But at the same time, it’s fun because I also learn new things.”

“Teachers still need to learn?”

“No one is too old to learn. And learning doesn’t just come from books.”

“What are you talking about, Dad? That’s confusing.”

“Yeah, I’m confused too. I’m not as good with words as your mother was. But anyway…”

He paused, thinking of an example that a seven-year-old like me could understand. Then he said,

“For example, I’m a teacher, but I’m also learning how to be a good father to you.”

“…..”

His clumsy words might have been hard for a child like me to fully understand, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t feel the effort my father was making. He was only now starting to take an active role in raising me, so there were many things we both had to learn from each other and ways we had to adjust.

*“Ugh…”*

*“How is it? What does it taste like?”*

*“Gross. It’s terrible.”*

*“Come on.”*

The one thing I could never adjust to with my father was developing the taste buds to tolerate the awful food he cooked. I had to learn how to cook for myself in first grade because I didn’t want him making my meals.

But I couldn’t deny that I felt closer to him as time went on. In the mornings, he would wait to send me off on the school bus, and at night, we would come home together from the university. During holidays, we often went book shopping or ate together.

We spent much more time together than before, so the wall I had built between us slowly began to fade. My father was kind to me and loved to spoil me with everything.

“Khem, we need to talk.”

“…..”

“Put the book down. I know you’ve finished reading.”

“Uh, Professor Kachorn, good evening.”

But when it came to being strict, he could be even scarier than my mother. Even the senior students who usually adored me had to rush out of the classroom when their professor finished class early just to talk to his daughter. The senior students rarely saw their professor in such a strict mood. I felt the same way.

I could no longer pretend to read my science book. My father’s gaze forced me to close the book and place it on my lap. It seemed like the phone call he had excused himself to take during class was about me.

It couldn’t be about my studies because I was still top of my class, as always.

It couldn’t be about trouble at school either, since I had always been a wellbehaved student.

“…Why didn’t you tell me there was a Father’s Day event at school?”

“..…”

Oh, right. I had completely forgotten about that. The homeroom teacher had even gone out of her way to ask if I was okay, even though the Father’s Day event at school had already passed almost two weeks ago.

That day, all the kids’ fathers had come to participate in the school’s Father’s Day activities. It was just me and a few other kids whose fathers hadn’t attended.

Some fathers had work, and mine had teaching duties at the university, so I didn’t tell him and just let the event pass. “Well, I thought you were busy teaching.”

“That’s something I can manage.

What you should do is tell me.”

“But you usually never go to Father’s Day events.”

"....."

“…This year, I thought you wouldn’t go… again.”

The sound in my throat got caught when I accidentally looked up and saw my father’s expression. We sat in silence, and I didn’t know how to explain anything else, so I picked up the book I had stopped reading.

But suddenly, my father knelt in front of me and took both of my hands in his, looking guilty. His eyes seemed on the verge of tears as he looked up at me.

“I’m sorry, Khem. I’m so sorry.”

“Hah?”

“I’m such a useless father to you. I’m really terrible.”

“W-Wait, why are you being so dramatic?”

“Because I…”

“Don’t be like that. You’re giving me goosebumps.”

“….”

“.…”

“You’re not angry at me, sweetheart?”

Angry? Angry about what? I almost didn’t understand what my father was asking—angry about what? But if I had to guess, it was probably about the Father’s Day event at school. If you asked me whether I was angry, I’d honestly say I didn’t even know why I would be.

My mother used to say that my father was busy with work, saying he didn’t have time to attend events. I never told my father about these activities myself—I always asked my mother to tell him. A long time ago, it used to hurt a little that, whenever there was a Father’s Day event, all my friends’ dads would go, while mine had never attended even once.

But seeing how anxious my father was now, realizing that he had missed the event at my school, well…

I sighed.

Mom, are you serious?

Mom once taught me never to lie, so this time, I decided to scold her in my mind. Once I understood the situation, I found no reason to be angry at my father. I didn’t see him as a bad father in this sense at all.

“I’m not angry at you, Dad. It’s just a school event. I understand that you have classes, and I want your students to gain knowledge from you in class more than I want you to stop everything just to come to my Father’s Day event.”

If this had been before, maybe I wouldn’t have thought this way. But now that I had been living with him for a while, I understood that my father was not a bad parent.

“I know you’re trying to be a good father to me. You don’t have to be perfect.”

“….”

I always saw his efforts. I liked watching him teach in the classroom more than having him sit there for me to honor at the Father’s Day event. My father looked better when he was in teacher mode. I didn’t want him to feel bad just because he thought he couldn’t fulfill his role as a father as perfectly as he did as a teacher.

He was trying. I knew that better than anyone.

And when I finished speaking, my father looked at me thoughtfully for a moment. It seemed like he had realized something. What had been uncertain before now became clear, and he spoke.

“You are more suitable to be a teacher than I am.”

“Hah?”

“Don’t you want to grow up to be a teacher like your parents?”

Wait, how did this conversation about Father’s Day turn into this? Or was I just deaf? No, I heard correctly.

I couldn’t help but show my disapproval on my face. Was he trying to convince me to be a teacher? No way that was going to work.

“No way, I don’t want to. You can’t force me, Dad.”

“Why would I force you? Your life is yours. So, what do you want to be when you grow up?”

“Well…”

I had firmly said I didn’t want to be a teacher, but when asked what I did want to be, I had no answer.

I had never thought about a career or what I wanted to be when I grew up. Even my father didn’t seem to expect an answer from me—after all, I was still in elementary school. He didn’t want me to take the idea of becoming a teacher like him or my mother too seriously. It was just a casual fatherdaughter question.

He reached out and playfully ruffled my hair like a loving dad.

“It’s okay. You’ll figure it out when you grow up. I only asked about being a teacher because I see that you’d be good at it.”

“….”

.

“Professor! There’s a big problem!”

My father’s students, who were supposed to have gone home already, suddenly burst into the room. A group of older male students rushed in through the door with alarmed expressions.

I, who was easily startled by loud noises, jumped in my seat, while my father—the professor—could already tell from their faces that whatever they were about to report was serious.

“What happened?”

“Vasuthorn is fighting with some vocational school students in front of the bus stop!”

Without needing more details, my father instinctively understood that he had to make a decision. I was the person he cared about the most, and he had to make sure he wasn’t leaving me alone.

As he rushed out, the senior students had to take on the task of watching over me.

“Students, please look after Khem for me.”

“Wait, Professor!”

I tried to guess what my father was about to do. Was he going to negotiate with the vocational school students to stop fighting with Vasuthorn—one of his own students—and ask them to settle things peacefully?

That would be a small insult to the former legendary leader of the architecture student gang in this area.

***Bang!***

“Who do you think you’re staring at? This kid is my student.”

“Get out of here! All of you, leave!”

If you called yourself a vocational student, then surely everyone knew who this professor from the Faculty of Architecture was.

Just by standing there and picking up a stick that had fallen near the bus stop to strike it against the ground, the group of vocational students ganging up on the male architecture student immediately froze and backed away from their opponent.

No one would be foolish enough to want a conflict with this older man— someone who wouldn’t be afraid to end up in jail if it meant spilling a little blood on these vocational students’ heads if they dared to keep attacking his student.

The vocational students, who numbered in the dozens, quickly fled from the architecture faculty’s bus stop.

The teacher ended up with a minor injury on his arm after stepping in to stop one of the vocational students from hitting his own student with a wooden stick. But in the end, the situation was resolved without anyone suffering serious injuries, which was a good outcome.

This allowed the professor to lift his battered student off the ground. It was a familiar sight—this wasn’t the first time this student had called a gang of vocational students to come and beat him up.

Vasuthorn was a habitual troublemaker, constantly causing problems for his professor and the faculty. This young professor was also growing tired of these fights.

“You’re always getting into trouble with vocational students.”

“..…”

“Khem! Don’t run!”

“Why is this little girl so fast for her size?”

“Dad!”

My below-average height should have made me less agile than other kids, but my legs were faster than the group of older students trying to catch me. They were the ones who ended up panting and out of breath while chasing me to the scene. My body moved before my brain even told me to follow my father.

I felt a surge of relief in my chest when I saw that my father wasn’t seriously injured, except for a bruise on his arm. When he saw me running toward him, he was unusually excited.

“Khem, my little Khem, you were worried about me, huh? Aww.”

*Ugh!*

There was nothing to be worried about! At that moment, I was actually more anxious about my own father.

After he finished enjoying the fact that his daughter was concerned about him, he shook his head in exasperation at the student named Vasuthorn.

This student’s reputation was well known to everyone in the faculty, and my father knew him better than anyone since he had been teaching him since his freshman year. Now, he was in his fourth year.

“You’re not studying at all. You just want to fight. Be careful, or you’ll graduate later than your friends.”

“What do you care?”

“Hey, brat!”

Normally, people expressed gratitude when they received help. Even I, an elementary school student, knew that. But this senior student lacked even this basic etiquette and even insulted my father, which made him furious.

He didn’t even bother to say goodbye to his own professor before walking toward the bus that had just arrived. What kind of education did someone have if they didn’t even know such basic manners?

Being scolded by someone should have made him reflect on himself. The group of older students who had followed my father to resolve the situation also seemed exasperated by their classmate’s behavior.

And that’s when I learned that it was quite common for my father to get hurt because of this particular student. He liked getting into fights with the university’s vocational students, and every time, my father had to step in and get hurt. He acted as if his body was still in its twenties, completely unaware that even a simple hit with a stick could cause injuries.

He was more stubborn than anyone. My mother once said that I had inherited this trait from him completely (Was that a compliment?).

I wholeheartedly believed it, especially when he stubbornly refused to go to the hospital despite his students’ urging and brought work home from the university, staying up late into the night.

Sometimes, I would wake up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom and still find him sitting at his desk, working.

“Oh, Khem.”

“Dad, you’re still not asleep?”

“I haven’t finished grading my students’ work yet, but I’ll go to bed soon.”

“Soon” wasn’t real for my father. I guessed he would probably end up sleeping at dawn, as usual, after staying up all night grading piles of sketches.

A teacher’s job didn’t end in the classroom, did it? How did my father manage to get through this mountain of work every day?

Still in my pajamas, I walked over to look at the sketches from his senior students that had already been graded. As an elementary school student, I didn’t understand the level of work that architecture students were doing.

But I could see what the assignments were about and what my father had to evaluate. Some parts had notes for students to correct, with detailed comments on what direction to take for improvement or what aspects of their work could be better.

It was clear that my father put a lot of care into grading each student’s work.

If he only graded by giving out scores, he would have finished and gone to bed long ago.

“Dad, you’re really focused on grading everyone’s work.”

“Well, they work hard so that I can grade their work.”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Am I tired? Yes, I am. But I’m a teacher.”

So being a teacher require so much dedication to work? Even though my father’s job was simply to grade the assignments submitted by his students, he seemed eager to help them develop their skills as much as possible. No wonder all his students seemed to care so much about him.

I flipped through each sheet of work until I came across a project that stood out beautifully compared to the others. I almost praised it, but then I looked at the name of the owner.

“Do you like that student’s work?”

“Him? The one who likes to get into fights?”

“Call him properly. His name is Vasuthorn.”

Why should I call him that? I felt more comfortable calling him the other way. If we didn’t talk about his personality and behavior, Vasuthorn seemed to have remarkable skills. It was hard to believe that someone like him rarely attended class. However, if we were talking about anything other than his work skills…

“No way.”

“Hah?”

“I don’t like him. He doesn’t talk to you properly, and he likes to hurt you.”

“Oh, is that what you think?”

My father paused for a moment when he heard that. Maybe it was because I rarely expressed my dislike for anyone in this way.

Good work was good work, but I still hadn’t forgotten how often this guy had caused my father pain. However, my father didn’t seem to hold any grudges. His tone showed no resentment when talking about this rude student.

“But you know, this student is one of my favorites.”

“What? Someone like him?”

I must have looked ridiculous with my wrinkled-up face because my father burst into laughter.

“You probably won’t understand now, but if one day you grow up… no, if you decide to become a teacher and manage to be a good one, you’ll understand what I mean.”

“..…”

I was still a child, and I didn’t understand. But I wasn’t willing to ignore it.

On the contrary, his words made me want to understand more. Instead of not caring at all, I became curious about the answer.

“Your mother was a very good teacher.”

What did it mean to be a good teacher, as my father often said?

What kind of teacher was my mother for all her students to call her great? What special qualities did she have that other teachers didn’t?

As my father had said, maybe I was too young to understand or find the answers to these questions.

But if both my father and my mother were good teachers…

“Dad?”

“Hmm?”

“Do you think I can do it?”

"...."

“Be a good teacher—do you think I can?”

I wanted to know if I could become a teacher like the two of them.

My father looked surprised, his eyes widening when I asked about his profession with such interest. So, I quickly shut down that train of thought. Just because I asked didn’t mean I wanted to be a teacher!

I felt nervous and panicked, and my father didn’t even respond.

After my mother passed away, my life revolved around my father.

Aside from school hours, whether it was after-school time or holidays, I often found myself watching my father teach from the back of the lecture hall. Seeing him teach students and walk around checking their sketches became something I got used to.

I never got bored or wanted to ask my father to leave me at a relative’s house instead of sitting there watching him teach.

I could clearly see my father’s dedication and commitment as a teacher.

He loved his job and loved sharing knowledge with all his students, so it wasn’t surprising that I had unintentionally come to see this man as a role model.

Then, one day, my teacher at school gave us a homework assignment: write a report about our dream profession.

**Dream Profession** Answer:

“…..”

This assignment had me resting my chin on my desk, fiddling with my pencil for almost an hour. It was already long past bedtime, but I couldn’t seem to pull myself away from the task in front of me.

The deadline wasn’t anytime soon, but I should have been finishing my math homework, which was due the next day.

Why was I so fixated on this assignment?

Maybe it was a question that had been lingering in my mind even before I got this homework. As the days passed and I grew older, the seriousness of needing to plan for the future also increased.

It was true that kids didn’t necessarily need to know what career they wanted to pursue at that moment. I could have written a report about any random job, just as I had done in previous years.

But I didn’t know. I felt that this time I couldn’t just write a half-hearted report. Maybe I would leave the answer blank until I figured out what I really wanted to say. Even though I thought I had an idea of what I wanted, I still resisted admitting it.

*"Ugh..."*

I couldn’t do my homework, but I also couldn’t bring myself to answer it carelessly.;What kind of assignment made a primary school student feel this stressed?

"Professor...! Professor Kachorn...!"

"Yes.."

My room was on the second floor, right next to the front door of the house, so I could hear the commotion and see someone outside in the dark. But when I squinted to look, I recognized the face of the person shouting. It was a student my father taught.

What was he doing in front of our house at this hour?

"Professor! Professor!"

The student calling for my father turned around to see me cracking the door open slightly to peek outside.

"Khem! Where’s your father?"

"Uh..."

And so, the loud shouting in our neighborhood echoed, waking my father from his sleep. He came down to see his student at our door, following behind me.

It was no surprise that he looked annoyed, given his lack of sleep. My father had finally finished his workload and was about to get some rest, only to be interrupted by a student who seemed desperate to avoid a lecture.

"Hey, why are you shouting in front of my house this late at night?"

"Vasuthorn got arrested!"

"What?!"

This was the first time in my life that I had to leave the house at night, and the first place I ended up was the police station.

It was my father’s responsibility to arrange bail for this guy, who had been arrested for getting into a fight with some technical school students.

To make matters worse, it was a late-night brawl with drunk students. Considering the condition Vasuthorn was in when he returned—barely alive after being attacked by the technical school students with weapons—he should have considered himself very lucky.

"Ugh, this boy..."

"...."

"Can you stop causing trouble already? You’re making things difficult for us."

"How many times does the teacher have to come and fix your problems?"

Vasuthorn would probably have spent the night in jail if his friends hadn’t happened to pass by and seen him being pushed into the back of a police truck.

They might not have been particularly close, but they certainly didn’t hate him enough to leave him there.

They expected some gratitude or at least an apology from their troublesome friend. But even then, he couldn’t resist being a complete jerk.

"Did I ask you to meddle in my business? You idiots are dumping your problems on me!"

"Hey! Watch your mouth!"

This wasn’t a situation a child like me should have been witnessing.

If the other students hadn’t held back the angry one, I was sure he would have attacked Vasuthorn in a fit of rage.

I understood their frustration.

After all, my father and his friends had gone through the trouble of coming to the police station in the middle of the night, while the one causing all the problems seemed completely unrepentant.

If I were my father, I would have been angry too. However, my father didn’t seem furious or overly concerned—just tired and eager to go back to bed.

"Enough! Don’t make me have to rescue you again!"

"Hey, Vasuthorn’s father is here!"

"...."

Just like my father, I wanted to get out of that police station and go home already, but my curiosity piqued when Vasuthorn’s father arrived.

He looked like one of those rich uncles from Thai dramas—big, flashy, and fond of showing off his wealth with rings and jewelry, even when coming to the police station to deal with his son.

The other students, both male and female, immediately bowed in respect to Vasuthorn’s father, though he didn’t acknowledge them. Instead, he marched straight toward his son without saying a word.

That man lowered his hand, adorned with a big diamond ring, and hit Vasuthorn so hard that blood dripped from the corner of his mouth.

I was shocked by what I saw, frozen in place. My father instinctively pulled me behind him, as if to protect me from the situation.

My father was usually calm, but this man was nothing like him. Vasuthorn’s father showed no concern for his son—only pure anger over the constant trouble he caused.

"Brat! You keep giving me headaches every day!"

He slapped him. Even with Vasuthorn’s already bruised face, he continued hitting him like his son was nothing more than a punching bag.

"If you’re going to cause this much trouble, there’s no need to waste money on your education."

Vasuthorn’s father’s words weren’t just empty threats. From that day on, neither my father nor any of the students ever saw him again at the Faculty of Architecture.

He rarely attended classes anyway, but his complete disappearance brought peace to everyone.

My father never mentioned this student in class again—until that fight in front of the police station.

Whenever this student’s name came up in class, the other teachers would always look around or ask:

"Did Vasuthorn skip class again today?"

"Yes, professor."

"At this rate, he’ll lose his right to take the exams."

"Well, his father doesn’t let him come to class anymore, Professor."

"He should have lost his exam rights a long time ago."

"Just let it go, Professor. Without someone like him, our faculty is much more peaceful."

That last comment was harsh, but I think everyone in the lecture hall secretly agreed. With Vasuthorn gone, both his classmates and my father no longer had to deal with a troublemaker.

My father no longer had to worry or get hurt because of him. Honestly, I also felt relieved about that.

.

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"Ouch! Khem! Ouch!"

"Mom! Khem and Parnward are fighting again!"

"I’ll leave Khem in your care for the day, okay?"

My father used the word "leave" as if he were asking his younger brother and his wife to look after me. But in reality, it was just to make sure I didn’t fight too much with Parnward on the couch.

Even though Pantat tried to tattle on us to his mother, she didn’t pay much attention and was more interested in talking to my uncle.

"Alright. Do you have urgent work?"

"Something like that."

It was rare for my father to leave me with Parnward’s family since he preferred to take care of me himself whenever he could. I also enjoyed going with him to the university—it had even become a kind of hobby.

But that day, on the way, he explained that this urgent matter required him to go alone. Being a well-behaved daughter, I agreed to stay at my relatives’ house and wait for him to pick me up at night.

Night came. The sky darkened, and my bedtime had already passed, but Dad still hadn’t come to get me.

Parnward and Pantat had already gone to bed at their usual time, leaving me sitting alone by the front door, waiting.

My father’s younger brother kept me company while polishing his beloved Volkswagen Beetle.

"Khem, sweetheart, if you’re sleepy, you can go upstairs and sleep with Ward and Tad."

"It’s okay. I’m not sleepy yet."

I couldn’t sleep well in unfamiliar places, and I didn’t feel sleepy at all with the growing unease in my chest.

I would wait for Dad right there until he arrived.

Then, the sound of a car horn came from outside. My uncle got up to check and saw a familiar car.

"Oh, looks like your dad is here. I’ll go check for you."

He went to confirm it was my father before coming back to get me.

I stuffed my things into my bag, trying to hide my excitement that Dad was finally there to take me home. But while I waited for my uncle to return, I felt something strange.

He had been gone too long. It shouldn’t take that long to check.

I quickly put on my shoes and looked outside, and what I saw made me run toward the person standing in front of the house. "Dad! What happened to you?"

"I’m fine, sweetheart. It’s just a cat scratch."

*A cat scratch?!*

His head was wrapped in thick bandages soaked in blood! That was more than just a small cut. How many stitches did he need for that?

I was clearly worried, and so was my uncle, though he didn’t seem too surprised—almost as if he already knew why Dad was hurt.

"Did that boy do this to you?"

"Shhh!"

"...."

"It’s late, Khem. Let’s go home now."

Dad quickly put me in the car and drove straight home.

On the way, he asked about my night and how much I enjoyed playing with Parnward. But I wasn’t in the mood to answer, staying silent the entire ride back.

Eventually, he read the atmosphere and stopped asking. We arrived home around ten, and as we got out, he told me to go wash up and go to bed.

Did he really think I would just ignore something this serious? No way.

"Dad, did you go see that student, Vasuthorn?"

"...."

I planned to get straight to the point as soon as we stepped through the door. Dad wasn’t going anywhere until he gave me an answer I was satisfied with. My intense gaze made even him, an adult, a little nervous.

I was very much like him in that way—when I got serious, I could be just as intense.

"Dad?"

"Ha ha, you look so serious—just like your mother."

"Why did you go see him? And why did he hurt you?"

Finally, Dad gave in. He sighed, preparing to tell me what had happened. "Vasuthorn didn’t hurt me. Actually, it was…"

I had guessed part of it correctly. Dad had gone to see Vasuthorn to try to convince him to return to school. Vasuthorn had to help his family at their gold shop and had been forced to drop out, but he hadn’t formally withdrawn yet.

That meant he still had the chance to go back and finish his degree. He was already in his fifth year, so Dad thought it would be a waste for him to give up now.

Dad also knew that Vasuthorn didn’t really want to leave school. And he understood why he often skipped class and got into fights with the technical students. Vasuthorn had a mouth like a dog, but he wasn’t completely disrespectful.

It was Vasuthorn’s father who had thrown the liquor bottle at my dad’s head, making him bleed.

He was furious that my father had tried to convince Vasuthorn to go back to school and even threatened to trade the bottle for a shotgun if my dad ever showed up at his gold shop again.

After hearing all of this, I didn’t know what to say. My hands clenched into fists, my chest felt tight, and my lips trembled. But Dad didn’t seem too affected. He even smiled, as if the cut on his head was nothing more than a scratch.

"Hmm, well, I should have been more careful. Next time, I’ll be—"

"No."

"K… Khem?"

Maybe he thought it was something insignificant, but to me, this was no small issue.

"I don’t want you to see that awful person again! *Hic!"*

Dad realized I wasn’t going to let this go when he saw me—someone who rarely cried—standing there with tears running down my face.

Over the past few years, I had come to understand him better and learn more about his nature. But this was the one thing I couldn’t accept.

I was angry at Dad and at Vasuthorn, who kept causing him pain. I was scared—scared that one day, Dad would end up seriously hurt.

"He keeps hurting you! He has a foul mouth, a bad attitude, and only causes trouble for everyone. Nobody likes him! Why are you trying so hard to bring someone like that back to school? Even his own parents won’t let him attend! Why should *you*, his teacher, get involved in his life?"

My father was a good teacher, but in the end, he was just a teacher. He should only teach those who *wanted* to learn from him. There was no need to get involved with those who caused problems and didn’t want to be there.

A teacher’s job is to teach—he didn’t have to interfere in his students’ lives and end up getting hurt.

I didn’t want him to have anything to do with Vasuthorn at all. After all, he was *just* his teacher.

But my father’s expression turned serious when he met my tearful gaze. He listened to every word I said and then used a gap in my reasoning to respond.

"Because I am Vasuthorn’s teacher."

"...."

"Since I am his teacher, I *have* to be involved. Whether it’s Vasuthorn or any of my students, I will treat them the same. Khem, you don’t have to understand it, but I just want you to remember… As a teacher, simply calling someone ‘student’ means being a part of their life."

My father had his reasons, and I had mine. And I also had the right to be a stubborn daughter and refuse to talk to him for days.

Did that make him apologize to me?

He apologized, at least for worrying me, but did he give up on trying to bring Vasuthorn back to school? Not at all.

"Are you really not going to talk to me?"

"...."

"Let’s talk about this. Today, I’m going to see Vasuthorn again."

"...."

"I’ve run out of ways to stop you from sulking. Will you be this moody when you have a boyfriend someday?"

"...."

—Heh.

A *boyfriend*? I had never wanted one. Love was pointless. Dad should have stopped acting like he knew me so well and focused on convincing his beloved student instead of wasting time trying to appease me.

At least he knew I was worried about him. This time, he let me go with him, though he made me wait at a nearby café, saying it was for safety reasons, while he went to see Vasuthorn.

"Wait for me here. Order whatever you want—I’ll pay when I get back."

At that moment, Dad underestimated me, thinking I would just sit there nervously, waiting for him to return.

Of course, I was going to follow him. I grabbed my bag and slipped out a few minutes after he left the café. I hadn’t walked far before I found myself standing in front of the largest jewelry store in the area.

But before I could even see the shop properly, I heard a loud argument coming from its entrance.

The shop owner, a large, burly man, was yelling angrily while his son tried to hold him back, stopping him from kicking the man who was bowing on the ground in front of him.

The man bowing was my *father*!

Wait, what was going on here?

"I won’t allow it. I won’t let him go back to school. Stop trying to take him back."

"Please, I beg you."

"Do you want another bottle smashed over your head? Is that all?"

"Stop, Dad!"

"Stay out of this!"

"I'm not staying out of this! He is my teacher! Isn't it enough that you've already hurt me and my mom?"

My brain told me to run toward my father, but my legs refused to move forward. Instead, they stepped back, hiding behind the corner of the building. Dad probably didn’t want me to run to him and get hurt either. I didn’t want to see him get hurt again, and tears started falling uncontrollably.

Since Vasuthorn's father could no longer hit my dad, he turned his anger toward his own son—the son he had never been proud of, the one who studied useless architecture and constantly got into fights, forcing his father to resort to violent punishments.

"You're a useless brat, trash, always causing trouble. You never make us proud like other people’s kids do."

Every cruel word a father could say to his son flowed from this man’s mouth.

"I don’t want to waste my money on a fool like you. If you want to go back to school, find the money yourself."

"I will cover all of Vasuthorn's school expenses myself."

"Teacher!"

"I'll make sure you don’t have to worry about Vasuthorn anymore. Just let him finish his education."

"You… you!"

Vasuthorn's father was speechless, furious at his son's teacher.

"Who do you think you are, meddling like this? You're just a teacher! Stick to teaching!"

"Dad."

I hated my own weakness. I hated that I couldn't help my father and just stood there crying. Somehow, my father stood up, facing Vasuthorn's father directly. His determined gaze made the bigger man start to sweat.

My father's eyes showed no hesitation—just like he had never hesitated in his commitment to being a teacher.

Why did he go so far to help Vasuthorn? The answer…

"For me, teaching isn't just about providing knowledge; it's about ensuring that students grow into good people. They can’t achieve that without the right guidance. No matter where they come from, all my students deserve attention and should never be abandoned. Vasuthorn is my student, just as valuable as any other."

"....."

"There's no good teacher would ever ignore a student's future."

"You… you!"

Unable to strike my father, Vasuthorn's father furiously smashed a flowerpot outside the store into pieces and stormed inside, showing no sign of following through with his earlier threats. That was a relief.

Vasuthorn ignored his own father completely, more concerned about his teacher’s condition. For once, the usually rude Vasuthorn was speechless.

"Teacher."

"Stop. Don’t say anything. Yes, I interfered in your life,"

My father said, clearly rejecting any sentimental words from his student. He would rather admit to being a meddler than listen to anything sappy. But he could no longer ignore Vasuthorn’s constant absences.

"And I'm using my authority as your teacher to tell you not to skip class anymore. I’ll hire a private nurse for your mother."

"....."

"Now go back to class tomorrow. If you skip again, I’ll make sure you fail." As soon as my father finished speaking, Vasuthorn—who was usually so bold—started crying. He probably never expected anyone to be so kind to him. Even his own father had only ever scolded and beaten him, hurting his mother so badly that she had to be hospitalized.

Vasuthorn spent most of his time taking care of his mother and constantly got into trouble with gangs because other guys' girlfriends liked him. As a result, people always saw him as a delinquent, even though he never wanted any of that.

My father was the only one who saw through him, recognizing that Vasuthorn wasn’t as bad as everyone thought.

I never thought I would feel this way about my father. It was embarrassing and awkward to admit, but this incident made me realize that my father was an exceptional teacher.

He was good. He was amazing. He was better than anyone.

My father was the person I loved and admired the most—a truly extraordinary teacher.

His relentless (or rather, stubborn) efforts paid off. Vasuthorn returned to school, attended regularly, and graduated, just as my father had hoped. My father’s encouragement and support during Vasuthorn’s final year, which also turned out to be my father’s last year as a teacher, had not been in vain.

His head injury gradually worsened until he finally had to quit his job to undergo treatment. At first, it was just mild headaches and nausea, but they became more severe. One night, he went into shock, and we had to rush him to the hospital. Fortunately, I knew how to call emergency services, so he narrowly escaped death.

The diagnosis was a brain hemorrhage. He was hospitalized, but his condition only worsened, reaching a point of no recovery.

During that time, I barely went to school. I didn’t care about losing my right to take exams, no matter how much the teachers scolded or threatened me. I sat by his side day and night, watching him suffer, seeing his condition deteriorate. He could do nothing but lie there, unable to move or speak, waiting for the end.

For most people, watching their parent die would be terrifying. But for me, my greatest fear was not being there in his final moments.

No matter what happened, I knew I could face it.

But in his last moments, my father—the man who should no longer have been able to speak—said:

"Khem..."

"......"

"A good teacher… You will be…"

"....."

"You will surely be a good teacher."

Those were his last words before he died.

Why did his final words have to be the answer to my question?

Why was I crying just because he told me I could be a good teacher? Why did he make his death even harder for me to bear?

I had never lied about how much I hated people who pushed others toward a future of their choosing. I despised parents who forced their children to follow the path they wanted. But my parents were never like that.

I deeply loved my mom and dad, and I loved the work they loved.

Now, I could finally answer the question about my dream profession.

**Dream Profession**

**Answer: I want to be a good teacher, like my parents.**

**.**

That answer to a simple assignment became my goal, and from that moment on, I held onto it, determined to make it a reality.

No one forced me to do this; I chose it myself.

I would be a teacher.

I had to be a teacher.

I wanted to be a teacher as good as my mom and dad.

It became my dream, and I did everything I could to achieve it. In the end, I grew up and succeeded, fulfilling my ambition to become a teacher.

Being a teacher wasn’t just my job; it was my way of remembering the two people I loved and admired most. I gave everything to reach this point, and I would sacrifice anything to keep this job.

Everything. Truly everything.

Even a woman who was once my first love.

No matter the pain, I would never let that relationship take my career away from me. **NEVER.**

**End of Khem’s POV.**

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**sunyan**

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her father is a terrible teacher...he choose his job than his daughter... i hate this chapter..

**Chapter 22**

**Two Years Later**

.

"You're late, aren't you? It's your brother's wedding, you know that!"

"Heh, sorry! The traffic was terrible."

Dao Nuea replied while checking her wristwatch. She had arrived only fifteen minutes late at the grand wedding hall of a luxury hotel in the heart of the city, yet her friend, whom she had known since university, made it seem like she had been delayed for hours.

Since she started working as a research assistant at her alma mater, Max’s complaints had doubled. Didn’t he realize that many other guests had just arrived? Dao Nuea thought she had managed her time quite well.

She felt she had fulfilled her duty as a family member perfectly. She had woken up at four in the morning to attend the wedding ceremony, gone home to rest, then changed into a new outfit to be ready for the evening reception.

She had arrived on time, yet the true stars of the event—her brother, the groom, and his bride—were nowhere to be seen. They should have been at the photo booth, welcoming guests, but there was no sign of them.

After catching her breath and adjusting her light blue dress, Dao Nuea looked around, searching for any sign of the missing couple.

"The bride and groom haven’t come out yet?"

"I heard the bride isn’t ready yet. Maybe you should check on the professor in the dressing room."

"Of course, it’s always me."

"Well, she is your future sister-in-law."

"Alright, alright, I’m going!"

It had been two years since Dao Nuea graduated with her degree. Her life hadn’t changed much, except that she was now fully immersed in her career and could no longer casually ask her brother for money.

Working as a chemist testing substances in products had gone well at the same cosmetics brand where she had interned. Being a full-time employee was much more demanding than an internship, but it was a good job with a solid salary and daily growth in experience.

However, she wouldn’t be in this position for much longer.

Why? Well, that was a long story and not that important. She’d save it for later.

Dao Nuea just wanted to say that she had graduated, had a stable job to support herself, and was now earning enough to rent her own apartment.

For most fresh graduates, moving out of the family home was a common step. But for Dao Nuea, staying with her brother, Saeng Nuea, and her beloved nieces had been ideal. She had no interest in living alone and found joy in being with her family.

She never thought her family would grow, and she had no intention of adding anyone new. Her older brother also showed no signs of wanting to include someone else… but then, about a year ago, the man who was the pillar of their family shocked both his younger sister and his two daughters to the core.

It was a normal weekend when Saeng Nuea invited his daughters and Dao

Nuea out for dinner. They went to a French restaurant that Dao Nuea had wanted to try for a long time. The live classical music in the center of the restaurant created an elegant atmosphere, and the French cuisine was delicious.

Miya enjoyed the restaurant’s special macarons so much that she bought a box to take home, while Thanya took dozens of photos for her Instagram stories.

Everything seemed to be shaping up for a lovely family dinner—until her brother returned from what should have been a quick trip to the restroom, accompanied by a woman Dao Nuea knew well.

What was Parnward doing here? And why was she with Saeng Nuea?

Maybe it was just a coincidence, and her former professor had come to the same restaurant. But when Parnward sat down next to her brother, it became clear that this was no coincidence. Dao Nuea could only brace herself for the shocking words that followed.

**"Nuea, Parnward and I... we're in love."**

"...."

The shock left her frozen, her fork suspended in mid-air, unable to touch the duck breast on her plate. Thanya, old enough to understand what love between her father and this new woman meant, looked equally stunned, while young Miya didn’t realize she was meeting her future stepmother.

Of all of them, Dao Nuea was the most surprised—she hadn’t noticed any sign of this relationship before. Parnward, her former professor, had always been so reserved; she must have hidden her relationship with her brother well.

However, Dao Nuea held no resentment toward this surprising news. In fact, she was happy for them. She had thought her brother would never open his heart again after his painful divorce from his unfaithful ex-wife.

And Parnward, though a bit of a perfectionist in her role as a professor, was a good woman—someone who would be a great match for a kindhearted person like Saeng Nuea.

After some time to process it, she was genuinely happy for their relationship.

Now, on the day her beloved brother and her respected professor were getting married, there was a bittersweet feeling—but more than anything, she felt pure joy as her family grew.

**"Oh, Professor, you look stunning!"**

After checking on her brother in the groom’s dressing room, Dao Nuea stopped by the bride’s room. When she opened the door, she was stunned by Parnward’s dazzling presence.

They say every woman looks more beautiful on her wedding day, and Parnward, in her white wedding gown, was proof of that. She had looked radiant in her traditional Thai wedding dress that morning, but her evening gown was simply breathtaking.

It was hard for Dao Nuea to believe that this woman was in her mid-thirties.

However, Parnward frowned slightly at her former student's words. She wasn’t too thrilled about being called "Professor" anymore.

"Maybe you can stop calling me ‘Professor’ now, Dao Nuea. From now on, I’ll be your sister-in-law."

"I'm still not used to calling you ‘sister-in-law,’ haha."

"Just call me P'Parnward. That’s not too hard, right?"

"It’s because you’re…"

Switching from "Professor" to "Phi" was harder than she had imagined, but Dao Nuea was trying.

Satisfied, Parnward turned to look at herself in the mirror. She wanted to be the most beautiful bride she could be for Saeng Nuea, but insecurities crept in.

*Would she be perfect enough to stand beside him?*

She wondered.

"Do you think I look beautiful enough, Nuea? I’m really not sure."

"If you looked any better, you’d embarrass everyone else here."

"You’re just flattering me."

"You already outshine any beautiful woman I know."

"Even Khem? I heard she’s coming tonight."

"...."

"Well, I’d better go."

"Good idea. Don’t keep the guests waiting,"

Dao Nuea replied with a smile.

"I’ll go check on things outside then."

When Parnward quickly changed the subject earlier, it was partly because she didn’t want to dampen Dao Nuea’s mood on her wedding day. Another reason was that she didn’t want to reopen the emotional wound her husband's younger sister had tried so hard to heal.

Parnward’s cousin had hurt Saeng Nuea’s only sister far more deeply than most people could imagine. Just hearing that name made Dao Nuea’s heart tighten as old emotions stirred through her body—a physical response to memories that still haunted her mind.

To Dao Nuea, her last encounter with that woman was still vivid, as if it had happened just yesterday. She would never forget the one woman who had taken her love away before discarding her like a piece of trash.

The fact that this woman was attending the wedding as a guest was something Dao Nuea should have expected, even without Parnward reminding her. But just the thought of seeing her again… made Dao Nuea’s heart restless.

It wasn’t excitement or joy; she didn’t even know what she was feeling.

Dressed in a tailored suit, Dao Nuea left the bridal dressing room and wandered around the wedding venue, taking in the atmosphere of her brother and Parnward’s special day. Overall, the wedding seemed to be going smoothly, aligning perfectly with what the couple had spent months preparing.

Even though they had faced many disagreements—like choosing which flowers to decorate the stage with—the international buffet was now being served, allowing guests to enjoy unlimited food. Every round table was arranged according to the guest list.

Some tables were for high school and university friends, while others were reserved for colleagues. There was only one table at the front, near the stage, designated for the couple’s parents and close family members.

Dao Nuea, Thanya, and Miya were supposed to sit there alongside the parents and Parnward’s younger brother. That meant the bride’s cousin would most likely be at that table too.

Since she hadn’t seen Thanya and Miya with Saeng Nuea in the groom’s dressing room after walking through the grand wedding hall—now filled with hundreds of guests—Dao Nuea decided to head toward the family table near the stage.

As she made her way there, she almost bumped into someone. The taller person was just about to apologize, realizing it was their fault for not watching where they were going.

But before any words could be spoken, they got stuck in her throat when her eyes unexpectedly met a familiar, surprised gaze.

"...."

Dao Nuea swore she had imagined this moment before, but the image in her mind couldn’t compare to the reality before her.

She was now face-to-face with her first love—**Khemjira**.

This woman hadn’t changed at all from Dao Nuea’s memories.

Two years had passed. And now, at Saeng Nuea and Parnward’s wedding, fate had brought Dao Nuea and Khemjira together once again.

Just moments ago, Dao Nuea had secretly wondered how she should react if she happened to see the woman standing before her now.

Should she smile? Should she frown?

Yet, no matter which option she had thought of, the expression on her face right now matched neither.

However, for the sake of keeping the joyful atmosphere of her brother’s wedding, she forced a smile.

"Ah, hello."

The woman in the pastel orange dress noticed Dao Nuea’s polite greeting, which eased the tension that had been building up in her body. A small smile formed on her lips in response to the red-painted ones that hadn’t changed at all in two years.

Now or back then, Dao Nuea still looked fragile when her lips weren’t painted red enough.

"What’s up?"

"Did you just get here? Have you registered for the event?"

"I have. They told me to go in and sit with the bride’s parents."

"Have you visited Professor Parnward in the dressing room yet?"

"I was just about to go,"

Khemjira replied, showing no sign of wanting to cut the conversation short like she did with others. Her eyes made it clear—she wanted to talk to Dao Nuea.

"Are you okay?"

"I’m fine! What about you?"

"I’m fine. I just got back to Thailand."

"You went on a trip?"

"I was studying for my doctorate for the past two years."

"Ah, I see."

"Yeah."

"...."

"...."

"I’ll be going now."

"Alright, goodbye."

The entire conversation had lasted less than a minute, yet the discomfort in that brief moment was overwhelming. Dao Nuea, who was never good at starting conversations, had no way to handle the situation. In the end, she simply walked away from the other woman.

All she could do was respond, wave awkwardly, and pass by as if they had never had feelings for each other—as if they were strangers, pretending to be indifferent.

*She wanted to ask more questions.*

*She wanted to say how much she missed her.*

All she really wanted was to turn around and hug her tightly just once. But what right did she have to do that now?

"Now it’s time for the bride’s bouquet toss! All single ladies, please come stand in front of the stage!"

"Hey, Nuea, get up there."

That teasing yet persuasive voice didn’t belong to Max, who had left earlier to take care of his wife, who was close to giving birth. Instead, it was Pleng Phin pushing Dao Nuea toward the stage, following the emcee’s call.

"Wow, now that you’re no longer single, you’re quick to shove your friends up there,"

Dao Nuea joked, clearly irritated by Pleng Phin, even though her friend’s lover couldn’t attend the wedding due to work.

This table was meant only for the couple’s family, but Pleng Phin had insisted on sitting there, unwilling to sit with strangers.

She also worried that Dao Nuea would feel uncomfortable sitting with her ex-girlfriend… though, honestly…

Dao Nuea and Khemjira were sitting directly across from each other and hadn’t even made eye contact once.

"It’s tough being single, huh? Now, go on!"

"Pleng, you’re so annoying."

Since the emcee specifically called for single guests, Pleng Phin escaped from the bouquet toss. Meanwhile, Dao Nuea secretly wished that Grand wasn’t so busy with her overseas job as a makeup artist—she would have been far more excited about standing there waiting for Parnward’s bouquet than Dao Nuea herself.

There were quite a few single women among the guests, creating a small crowd in front of the stage.

Dao Nuea wasn’t interested in catching the bouquet. It was just a silly superstition—the idea that whoever caught it would be the next to marry.

"The bride is getting ready to toss the bouquet! One… two… three… now!"

"...."

"Two people caught the bouquet!"

No way.

Dao Nuea had absolutely no intention of catching Parnward’s bouquet. It had simply landed in her hand. And not just her hand—another hand had reached out at the exact same time.

A very familiar hand.

Their eyes met.

If this were a romance novel, people would think this was a cliché moment —Dao Nuea and Khemjira catching the bouquet together at a wedding like this.

"Take it."

There was only one bouquet; dividing the flowers evenly would be too much trouble.

Dao Nuea handed the bouquet to Khemjira, who smiled and walked up to the stage as the emcee invited her to introduce herself.

"My name is Khemjira. I’m single."

Why should Dao Nuea feel relieved? Was it just because the other woman was still single?

The one who caught the bouquet was supposed to be the next bride. But it was just a silly superstition.

There was no way Dao Nuea, who carried such a deep scar in her heart, could ever become her bride and risk being hurt again.

**sunyan**

**Chapter 23**

Several nights had passed since Saeng Nuea and Parnward’s wedding, and even more since Dao Nuea had last slept well.

Even though her brain was exhausted from work, it kept conjuring up images of Khemjira—the woman who abandoned her—over and over again. Someone who left her behind shouldn’t have this much control over her heart.

Oh, Dao Nuea, you’re crazy. You’re thinking too much about that heartless woman. You only saw her at the wedding, so why can’t you stop thinking about her?

After scolding herself enough, she finally managed to close her eyes and sleep until the next morning.

Luckily, it was her day off. Otherwise, as a chemist, she would have struggled to prepare for work.

When she finally went downstairs in her pajamas, she noticed there was no car in the driveway—her older brother, Saeng Nuea, had probably already left for work.

In front of the long sofa in the living room, the television was playing a morning cartoon show, with her little niece sitting there watching.

Her niece always managed to lift Dao Nuea’s spirits, and on a special day like today, as her aunt, she couldn’t afford to feel down. After all, it was Miya’s seventh birthday!

Dao Nuea immediately adjusted her expression into a bright smile, sneaked up behind her niece, wrapped her arms around her shoulders, and gave her a playful hug.

"Happy birthday, my beautiful niece!"

"......"

Silence.

What was wrong with Miya? Normally, she would be excited about her birthday.

Surprised by her niece’s unusual behavior, Dao Nuea pulled away from the sofa with a frown, scratching her head in confusion.

She glanced around the house and noticed a woman washing dishes at the kitchen sink.

Ah, right—she almost forgot.

This house was no longer just for her, her brother, and her two nieces. Parnward, now Saeng Nuea’s wife, had moved in after the wedding.

"Good morning, Professor!"

"......"

"Professor Parnward?"

"......"

"...P'Parnward?"

"Oh, good morning, Dao Nuea. You slept in today."

It was hard to tell whether Parnward really didn’t hear her or if she was just pretending not to. She finally turned around and greeted her husband’s sister, who had eventually given up and called her Phi.

Dao Nuea suspected her former teacher was a bit too sensitive about being called "Professor."

"Yeah, I didn’t sleep well last night."

"Well, are you hungry? Go sit at the table, and I’ll warm up some rice for you."

"It’s fine, really—"

"Don’t be stubborn. Go on."

After turning off the faucet, Parnward went to heat up some food. Dao Nuea, unable to refuse her sister-in-law, obediently went to wait at the dining table.

She still couldn’t shake off the respect and admiration she felt for Parnward, who had once been her university chemistry professor.

It was still strange seeing her former teacher bustling around, preparing meals three times a day for the household. Since quitting her job, Parnward had fully taken on the role of a housewife.

Dao Nuea sat down, resting her chin on her hand as she watched cartoons on the TV. Before long, Parnward placed steaming rice and a few side dishes on the table, then poured water into a glass for Dao Nuea.

Taking a bite of fried pork with rice, Dao Nuea asked while keeping an eye on her niece in front of the TV.

"What’s wrong with Miya, P'Parnward? She seems really serious."

"I don’t know. I asked her this morning what she wanted for her party tonight, but she didn’t answer."

Parnward agreed that Miya had been acting strange since early in the morning. Normally, her youngest stepdaughter was quite talkative, always eager to chat with her.

Dao Nuea knew Miya had also become good friends with Parnward. So what was going on with the birthday girl? She wasn’t even excited about her party.

Still, if there was one thing Dao Nuea was sure about, it was what Miya liked to eat.

"Cake. Miya loves chocolate cake. Did you get one?"

"No, I was planning to bake one myself."

"Wow, you know how to bake cakes?"

"I’m not just good at teaching chemistry, you know?"

Parnward said with a confident smile.

She took pride in her cooking skills—both savory and sweet.

But baking a cake required several ingredients, like cake flour and fresh butter. She had been waiting for Dao Nuea to wake up because she wanted to ask for a favor.

"Hey, you’re free today, right?"

"Yeah, I am. Why?"

Since Dao Nuea quickly responded that she was free, she ended up being sent to buy ingredients. She had never bought baking supplies before.

Even though Parnward sent her a detailed list on LINE, including specific brands for making a soft and rich chocolate cake with her special recipe, Dao Nuea, in her usual absentminded way, forgot her phone at home… If she bought the wrong items, she would definitely get scolded by her sisterin-law.

What was she supposed to do? The store was far from home, so going back wasn’t really an option.

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"Dao Nuea?"

"....."

Dao Nuea didn’t even want to know who had just called her name from behind. She wanted to ignore it and focus on choosing a brand of butter, but her body betrayed her instinct to stay still. She turned around and found herself looking directly at a petite woman, unsure of how or why she was standing there.

"Why do you look like you’ve seen a ghost?"

Khemjira tilted her head, laughing softly.

It was worse than a ghost, actually. Dao Nuea wouldn’t have looked this pale if she had seen an actual ghost. This situation was nothing like the wedding, where she had mentally prepared herself for an encounter. She wasn’t prepared for this, so she had to force a polite smile and say hello.

"H… hello. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you."

"....."

"You forgot your phone at home. Parnward asked me to bring it to you."

"Ah, right! Thank you so much!"

Dao Nuea felt a wave of relief; she had practically been saved. Though, in reality, she should be thanking Khemjira, who must have stopped by her house to see Parnward and ended up being asked to bring the phone over.

She quickly unlocked her phone and checked the brand of butter she needed to buy. After grabbing the butter, she planned to head to the baking aisle to buy flour. But instead of leaving after handing over the phone, Khemjira followed her, pushing her cart as they searched for flour.

"You’re shopping for Miya, right?"

"Yeah. We’re throwing her a birthday party tonight, and I’m also looking for a gift for her."

"I was thinking about getting her a birthday gift too."

"....."

"Do you mind if I join you?"

Dao Nuea couldn’t bring herself to say no to those big, round eyes.

Alright, alright. Just smile and let Khemjira tag along. After all, from now on, it seemed like they were bound to see each other more often.

Dao Nuea wasn’t sure if Khemjira had secretly glanced at her phone, because even without looking at the ingredient list, Khemjira managed to pick out the exact brand of flour Dao Nuea needed.

However, for some ingredients, like chocolate, Khemjira switched it to a different brand, explaining that it had a sweeter and more kid-friendly taste —perfect for a birthday cake. She even joked:

"Is Parnward baking a cake for a seven-year-old or a fifty-year-old with that bitter chocolate she chose?"

When Dao Nuea protested, saying that Parnward would definitely scold her for picking the wrong brand, Khemjira shrugged with a playful smile, suggesting that she could deal with it when the time came.

These two cousins had a strange relationship. They clearly cared about each other, but it seemed like they were ready to argue every time they met. "Professor Khemjira!"

"!!!"

The one who was surprised by the sudden call wasn’t Dao Nuea but the voice belonged to a group of teenagers approaching them, calling Khemjira by her former title,

“Professor.”

Khemjira smiled warmly, recognizing them as students she had taught in her first year.

"Hello. Are you here to shop?"

"Yes... We’re buying stuff for a group project."

Feeling like an outsider in the conversation between the teacher and her former students, Dao Nuea decided to go look for Miya’s birthday gift in the toy section.

Miya had often mentioned wanting a toy kitchen set, so Dao Nuea planned to surprise her with one at the party that night. Just as she placed the toy kitchen set into her cart, Khemjira walked over, pouting.

"You didn’t wait for me."

"Well, I saw you talking… Are they students from your university?"

"Mhm."

"You talked for quite a while."

"It was just polite conversation… they asked me when I’d return to teaching at the university."

Apparently, even after graduating, Khemjira hadn’t returned to teach at her old university. Dao Nuea knew from Parnward that Khemjira wasn’t planning to find another job and still felt loyal to her previous workplace.

Hearing Khemjira’s words now, Dao Nuea could tell she was serious about going back, despite what had happened at CAU. How devoted could she be?

"Do you really plan to go back to the same university?"

"The scholarship I received to continue my studies was from CAU."

Khemjira replied simply. She wasn’t interested in finding another job just to fulfill an obligation. Teaching was her passion, and the university meant a lot to her.

As they continued searching for Miya’s birthday gift, Khemjira seemed to want Dao Nuea’s opinion on what kind of toys Miya liked. But she was also curious about something else.

"By the way…"

"Hm?"

"You haven’t said my name since we met again."

"....."

"In the past, you loved calling me ‘*auntie*,’ remember?"

It was ironic—someone smart enough to be a university professor couldn’t understand the reason for that.

The past was the past; things weren’t the same anymore.

"I wouldn’t feel right calling you that ever again."

"You can still call me that if you want."

"What’s wrong with you? You used to hate being called that."

"I hated it, but… I also miss it."

"....."

"So, if you won’t call me ‘Auntie,’ what will you call me?"

Khemjira’s question was valid. Talking without addressing each other by name felt a little strange. Dao Nuea pondered, applying her sharp mind to the matter.

"Hmm… Grandma?"

"Brat."

Wow, even when she was being serious, Khemjira thought she was just being cheeky.

"Ouch, that’s harsh!"

Dao Nuea responded in an exaggerated tone, as if she were hurt, before going back to thinking deeply. However, she couldn’t come up with any other affectionate terms.

"Should I just call you ‘P’Khem’? … No, that sounds weird. What about Professor Khem, like I do with Parnward?"

"Not Professor."

"......"

"No ‘Professor,’ please."

Khemjira didn’t mind being called Auntie, or even Grandma if she had to, but she didn’t want to be called Professor. She was willing to be a teacher to anyone—except the person standing beside her. After hearing her serious tone, Dao Nuea didn’t dare call her that again.

"O-okay. I’ll think of something else later."

"Alright."

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***Bzzz… Bzzz…***

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Thank God, at that moment, Parnward’s call broke the awkward tension. Dao Nuea figured her sister-in-law was calling to check if they had finished shopping. She answered, ready with a long-winded excuse about why she had left her phone behind, just in case Parnward scolded her.

"Hello, P’Parnward. No need to rush me, I’m about to pay, wait… huh?"

But what Parnward said made Dao Nuea’s prepared speech fly out of her mind.

"Where are you, Dao Nuea? Is Miya with you?"

Something was wrong.

Dao Nuea realized it immediately—her younger niece, Miya, was missing.

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 24**

"Parnward, where is Miya?"

Saeng Nuea's first question as he crossed the door was filled with worry and panic. Parnward, sitting tensely at the table, shook her head in response to her husband. Her face showed even greater fear than when she first heard over the phone that Miya, their youngest daughter, had disappeared.

She had gone missing from the house around four o’clock while Parnward had briefly left her alone to use the bathroom. That brief moment was enough for the little girl to slip out of the house and disappear from sight.

Parnward was sure that Miya wasn’t just playing hide-and-seek inside the house. She searched every corner, almost tearing the place apart in her desperation to find her stepdaughter.

Checking the security cameras confirmed that Miya had left the house and gone into the street around four o’clock. Now, Miya’s aunt and cousin had volunteered to look for her while Parnward stayed behind with Thanya, who was sitting on the sofa, scrolling through her phone.

"Khem and Dao Nuea went around the neighborhood to look for her."

"Dao Nuea, Khun Khem, where is Miya?"

Saeng Nuea ran toward Dao Nuea and Khemjira as they returned home, anxiously searching their expressions to see if his little daughter might be following behind them.

Khemjira exchanged a glance with Dao Nuea, letting her deliver the disappointing news to her older brother.

"There’s no sign of her, P’Saeng Nuea."

Dao Nuea and Khemjira had searched every alley in the neighborhood, including the playground and swimming club where Saeng Nuea and Dao Nuea used to take Miya.

Fortunately, the guards at both entrances assured them that no children had left the neighborhood, so it was likely that their niece was still somewhere nearby. After all, a seven-year-old girl couldn’t get very far on her own.

But what if someone had secretly taken Miya away? Just imagining the dangers of the world made Saeng Nuea even more panicked. He quickly took off his suit jacket, placed it on the chair by the dining table, and grabbed his car keys with anxious determination.

"I’ll drive around the neighborhood again."

"Then I’ll go with you, Parnward offered."

This time, she and Saeng Nuea left while Dao Nuea and Khemjira stayed at the house with Thanya. However, Khemjira seemed to be the only one who noticed something odd about someone in the house.

There was nothing unusual about Dao Nuea, Parnward, or even Saeng Nuea, who was understandably worried about his missing daughter. The real exception in this situation was...

"You’re Thanya, right?"

Khemjira approached the twelve-year-old girl lying on the sofa, staring at her phone. She knew the names of Parnward’s two stepdaughters, and this was Miya’s older sister.

"Your sister is missing, but you don’t seem worried at all?"

Khemjira’s words caught everyone’s attention, and Saeng Nuea and Parnward paused, turning to look at their eldest daughter. Thanya finally tore her eyes away from her phone and met the gaze of her stepmother’s cousin.

Although Khemjira usually taught university students, she could also read younger children well.

"I don’t want to accuse you. I just want to ask... when you were sitting on the sofa with Miya…"

That morning, Khemjira had dropped by to deliver some things Parnward hadn’t been able to bring from her old house. Then, she was asked to take Dao Nuea’s phone to her at the mall when she returned to her apartment.

While Parnward went upstairs to retrieve the phone from Dao Nuea’s bedroom, Khemjira noticed Miya and Thanya sitting on the sofa. Miya was drawing and coloring in a sketchbook while Thanya sat beside her.

At the time, Khemjira hadn’t paid much attention to what the girls were doing, but she had overheard a snippet of their conversation.

"Are you serious, P’Thanya?"

"Of course I am. Why would I lie to you?"

"I hate her more than anyone."

Assuming they were talking about a character from a TV show, Khemjira hadn’t given it much thought.

However, given the current situation and the odd behavior surrounding it, Thanya seemed more suspicious—especially since she was the last person to have spoken to Miya.

It seemed almost ridiculous for an adult to suspect a twelve-year-old girl, especially Miya’s own older sister. Khemjira even found it a bit absurd to press Thanya for the truth, but she decided to ask anyway.

"Can I ask what you were saying to Miya before?"

Whether it was out of irritation or because she didn’t like being questioned by a stranger, Thanya rolled her eyes dramatically, got up from the sofa, and started walking toward her room.

Khemjira didn’t follow her. Someone else took on that task.

"Thanya, wait!"

Dao Nuea rushed forward and grabbed Thanya’s arm, curious about Khemjira’s question.

"Let me ask you too. What did you say to Miya?"

"......"

Khemjira remembered seeing Thanya and Miya sitting together, coloring— a rare sight in itself, given what everyone in the house knew about the relationship between the two.

Saeng Nuea, now aware of the sketchbook Miya had left on the sofa, felt a growing unease. He picked it up and flipped through the pages, only to find one with a handwritten message that seemed more mature than Miya’s age would suggest.

Miya had drawn her family, including her father, her sister, herself, her aunt, and her new mother. An arrow pointed to the last figure with a note beside it:

*"This woman makes Dad not love us like he used to."*

"T... Thanya!"

With the evidence staring her in the face, it was hard to make an excuse. Thanya, fully aware, rolled her eyes even more dramatically, showing neither fear at her father’s furious expression nor remorse for her actions, which had led her seven-year-old sister to run away from home.

In fact, she had wanted to say this for a long time, harboring her frustrations ever since *that woman* entered their lives. Dao Nuea and Miya might have accepted it, but Thanya never would.

"Or is it not true? Ever since she came into our home, you barely spend time with us."

"I've already explained it to you, Thanya. I'm busy with work right now. Besides, you have Aunt Parnward to take care of you now."

"You mean the random woman you brought in to take care of us? Are you crazy?"

Thanya couldn’t believe her father’s naïveté, thinking he could work late or take on extra assignments just because there was someone new looking after them.

Maybe Miya could adjust to having someone else around, but in Thanya’s eyes, the worst part was:

"You always ask Aunt Dao Nuea if she’s okay, but you never once asked *us*, your children, if we wanted someone to replace Mom or not!"

"......"

In Thanya’s mind, her father always underestimated her thoughts and emotions. Unlike Miya, who had no memories of their mother, Thanya remembered every moment, every memory, from the time her parents separated.

She remembered how her father refused to take her to see her mother or even try to make amends. Instead, he brought in a *new mother*—someone Thanya never wanted, no matter how kind Parnward tried to be.

For the first time, Saeng Nuea and Dao Nuea saw such anger and resentment in Thanya’s eyes—a gaze directed at her father’s new wife, now her stepmother.

"You will never replace my mother."

"......"

"Thanya! Come back here!"

It was too late. Thanya had probably already locked herself in her room.

Her defiance only fueled her father’s anger as he started toward her room, determined to confront her, but Dao Nuea stepped in to stop him.

"Leave her alone for now, Saeng Nuea. Right now, we need to focus on finding Miya."

"Ugh."

"I think I have an idea."

Khemjira, who had been silent, finally spoke, as an idea suddenly came to her. Parnward, determined to put aside the tension between her and Thanya, turned her attention to her cousin’s suggestion to find Miya.

"An idea? What kind of idea?"

Based on Khemjira’s observations, she suspected that the reason they hadn’t found Miya yet was that they hadn’t searched all the alleys in the neighborhood thoroughly.

Even the residents of the house weren’t familiar with every pathway in the area, and Miya was small enough to hide comfortably in narrow spaces. So, they needed to rely on someone more familiar with the neighborhood.

Khemjira decided to withdraw some cash to buy snacks as a reward for a group of local kids who loved riding their bikes around the neighborhood. She asked them to help search for Miya.

It reminded her of her own childhood when she and her friends would ride their bikes through narrow alleys, exploring every nook and cranny. These kids knew the neighborhood routes better than even the motorcycle taxis at the main entrance.

Meanwhile, the adults continued searching as well. At first, Saeng Nuea opposed this plan, as those kids were just children of construction workers —people he had previously forbidden Thanya and Miya from playing with.

His prejudice against the workers’ children blinded him to the fact that this idea might help him find his beloved youngest daughter.

"Miya!"

That was Dao Nuea’s voice, calling out for her young niece in the distance. She followed one of the kids on a bicycle, who had found Miya, with Khemjira right beside her.

The two women finally found the seven-year-old girl they had been searching for—curled up and crying in a small alley behind the neighborhood.

Khemjira was the one who stepped in to comfort Miya, quickly crouching beside her. Meanwhile, her aunt was filled with anger.

"Why did you run off like that? Do you know how worried your aunt and father are?"

"Dao Nuea, stop!"

"......"

Khemjira’s authoritative command stopped Dao Nuea from raising her hand toward her niece. She understood that Dao Nuea was worried and that Miya had done something wrong, but she needed to stay calm.

Miya was already sobbing uncontrollably, and using force—even out of love—would only make things worse.

The fierce look Khemjira gave Dao Nuea softened into a gentle expression as she turned toward the child, brushing Miya’s sweaty, tangled hair away from her tear-streaked face.

"Miya, I’m Auntie Khem. Do you remember? We met before."

"*Hic..."*

"You like cake, don’t you? I know a place that makes really delicious cakes.

How about we go have some together?"

A newly opened café had appeared in front of Dao Nuea’s neighborhood, offering a variety of drinks, snacks, and desserts. Saeng Nuea and Dao Nuea had never taken Miya there for cake before, so this was the first time the young girl tried her favorite chocolate cake from that café.

Khemjira and Dao Nuea sat beside her, watching as Miya, eyes still red from crying, slowly ate. Outside, the group of kids who had helped find Miya were happily enjoying their snacks. The moment Khemjira mentioned they could order whatever they wanted, they indulged without a second thought about the bill.

The news that Miya had been found was relayed to Saeng Nuea and Parnward. Her father and stepmother were desperate to go see her, but they were advised to wait at home.

Once things had calmed down, Khemjira and Dao Nuea would bring Miya back. Although Dao Nuea also wanted to take her niece home immediately, Khemjira’s words made her stay and simply watch her niece with a sigh.

"Is it good?"

Khemjira asked Miya while gently wiping some crumbs from the corner of her mouth with a napkin. She had become so affectionate and gentle with the child that Dao Nuea couldn’t help but feel a twinge of annoyance. Miya nodded in response, confirming her aunt’s kindness.

"When you’re done, we’ll go home, okay?"

But this time, Miya shook her head.

"I don’t want to go home. I hate my dad and Auntie Parnward."

Now it was clear what Miya truly meant earlier when she talked about hate.

Dao Nuea wasn’t sure if she should be angry at Miya for running away or at Thanya for filling her little sister’s head with troubling thoughts. Now she understood why her young niece had been so down all morning.

Miya adored her father more than anyone else in the world. Even without a mother, Saeng Nuea had given her all the warmth she needed. She was simply afraid of losing his love now that he had introduced a new mother into her life.

Dao Nuea couldn’t fully understand her niece’s feelings—she had grown up without parents herself. But Khemjira…

"Why do you hate your dad and Auntie Parnward, Miya?"

"Because Dad doesn’t love me anymore. Thanya told me so."

"But Miya, you’re such a sweet and wonderful girl. Why wouldn’t your dad love you?"

"Because now he has Auntie Parnward. He’ll love her, and he won’t love me the same way anymore. And Auntie Parnward will never love me because she’s not my real mom."

"But Miya, I saw that your dad and Auntie Parnward bought you lots of toys. Doesn’t that mean Auntie Parnward really cares about you? And today, your dad even rushed home to celebrate your birthday with you. He even bought fried chicken from your favorite place."

Khemjira said, using the word *toys* as bait.

Judging by the sparkle in Miya’s eyes as she looked up from her cake, it seemed to work.

"Miya, you’re lucky, you know? You have your dad to celebrate your birthday with you. As for me, I don’t have that. My mom and dad are in heaven now."

"......"

"But I never feel lonely because every year, I celebrate my birthday with

Auntie Parnward and her younger brother, Parntat. Especially Auntie Parnward—she may seem strict, but she actually gets really excited about birthdays. She even bakes cakes that are better than the ones in this café." "Really?"

"Really! Miya, you have to try them."

At that moment, Dao Nuea almost burst into laughter at the excited look on Miya’s face. It seemed like she had completely forgotten about all the anger and resentment she had been ranting about earlier.

Could a child like this *really* hate someone?

They would have to thank Khemjira for that. Her persuasive words had significantly lightened the atmosphere. Miya seemed much more relaxed than before, making it much easier to take this opportunity to reason with her.

"But if you want cake, you’ll have to go home, sweetheart."

"......"

"Running away like this isn’t good, Miya. You know that, don’t you?"

"Yes... but I’m scared."

Miya’s expression started to wrinkle, and tears threatened to return.

"I’m afraid that when I go home, Dad will scold me."

"He won’t scold the birthday girl."

Khemjira assured her.

"But if you refuse to go home, your father will worry even more. And Aunt Parnward too. They’re just as worried about you as Aunt Dao Nuea and I are."

"......"

"Don’t you want to go back and celebrate your birthday at home?"

After finishing her cake, Miya returned home safely. Saeng Nuea and Parnward quickly approached her, filled with concern and relief.

They gently scolded her, unable to resist teaching her right from wrong, and Miya, feeling remorseful, apologized to her father and everyone else for making them worry so much.

Everyone agreed that keeping a cheerful atmosphere for her birthday was the most important thing, so they focused on making it a celebration full of happiness, not sadness.

"Thanya, I left a piece of cake and your dinner outside your room."

Dao Nuea called out, placing a tray with chocolate cake and dinner next to her niece’s bedroom door.

As expected, Thanya didn’t come out to join her sister’s birthday celebration downstairs. Dao Nuea could see how her stubbornness mirrored Saeng Nuea’s, confirming once again that Thanya was truly her brother’s daughter.

She went back downstairs to help clean up, and Khemjira stayed to help in the kitchen while Saeng Nuea and Parnward tucked Miya into bed.

"How’s Thanya?"

"As silent as always, but I’m sure hunger will make her take the food eventually."

Dao Nuea shrugged, her hands busy at the sink.

"Or do you want to try talking to the older niece too?"

"No way, talking to a teenager is harder than talking to a seven-year-old, and..."

"And?"

"Actually, I understand how Thanya feels—about the belief that no one can replace her real parents."

Dao Nuea, who had never had parents, couldn’t fully relate. But Khemjira understood both Miya and Thanya, seeing surprising reflections of herself in the older girl.

Dao Nuea didn’t push for more details, knowing there were some things she might never fully understand.

What mattered was that Miya’s birthday had ended on a happy note—a victory largely thanks to Khemjira. She couldn’t imagine what she and Saeng Nuea would have done if something had happened to Miya.

"Thank you for helping find Miya."

"I didn’t find her, the kids did."

"Yes, but it was your idea to ask them for help."

"It was nothing. We’re practically family."

"......"

Dao Nuea turned off the faucet as they finished washing the last dish, though she remained by the sink, deep in thought. Khemjira finished as well, just as Dao Nuea asked:

"So, if we’re practically family..."

"Hmm?"

"Then, what are we now?"

"......"

Dao Nuea glanced sideways at Khemjira. She knew their relationship wasn’t the same as before, especially after seeing each other again after two years apart. She just wanted a clear answer—something that defined this new reality between them.

"What do you want us to be?"

Dao Nuea had never intended to be the one questioned in return, forced to be the one giving the answers.

Even if she asked again, it would only lead to more back-and-forth questions with no end in sight. In the end, it would always be Dao Nuea who had to give in. Whether it was then or now, this was the one thing that had remained constant between them.

But since this time, the question had been turned back on her, Dao Nuea already had an answer of her own to give.

Acquaintances, friends, or even…

Among all these options, there was one answer Dao Nuea knew felt right.

"Nothing at all."

"......"

"We shouldn’t be anything more than what we were."

She said quietly, looking down.

"So it’s better if we don’t get too close, okay?"

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**sunyan**

**Chapter 25**

"Here’s some water, P'Dao Nuea. Please wait a moment; the president will be with you soon."

"Thank you, Korya."

That day, Dao Nuea had some business to attend to at a well-known IT company. But it wasn’t because she wanted to apply for a job in IT, like a computer engineer. As a chemist, she couldn’t imagine fitting into a place like that. Her only purpose was to see someone important at the company.

Korya, a young woman working in the finance department, took some time from her schedule to bring refreshments for the guest in the lounge. She attended to Dao Nuea so attentively that it almost seemed excessive.

But in her opinion, it still wasn’t enough—because to Korya, Dao Nuea wasn’t just the person who helped her avoid a forced marriage. She was also the one who introduced her to the company president.

Korya would never forget the kindness shown to her by Khemjira, her former teacher. Though she didn’t know the full story behind the conflict between those two women, she often wondered about Khemjira, whom she hadn’t seen since she left for further studies abroad.

However, Korya had to excuse herself to return to work, as the person Dao Nuea had requested to meet had just arrived. Since her meeting ran a little long, the company president was slightly delayed in greeting the guest in the lounge.

"Dao Nuea."

"Hello, President."

"Oh, please, don’t call me that."

"What? But it sounds so cool to call you ‘President,’ P'Nub Nueng."

The person who entered the room was a tall woman with long hair, dressed in semi-formal pants and a suit made of comfortable fabric. Even so, it didn’t make her feel as relaxed as casual clothes would, and it was frustrating enough that she took off her jacket the moment she shut the door.

As the president, she had to maintain a certain image in front of other executives, but formal attire had never suited her. And with everyone calling her "President" one way or another, the last thing Nub Nueng wanted was for Dao Nuea to join in. "How have you been?"

"I’ve been fine. You too, right?"

"Yeah, fine... except for all this work."

After catching up, Nub Nueng handed Dao Nuea an envelope.

"Here, the money you asked me to exchange."

"Oh, thank you so much!"

"Thank to Korya. She’s the one who always finds the best exchange rates."

Nub Nueng was grateful to Dao Nuea for introducing her to Korya. The financial manager’s skills far exceeded those of the average recent graduate, and she had been a great help with both company tasks and personal ones— like exchanging this large sum of money that Dao Nuea had saved over the past two years.

Now converted to pounds, it was ready for her upcoming studies in the UK.

"Eh, P'Nub Nueng, it looks like there’s more money here than what I gave you to exchange."

Dao Nuea noted as she began counting the money and mentally converting it to Thai baht. She was certain it was more than what she had saved.

"Oh, I added a little extra."

"What? No, I can’t accept this."

Dao Nuea insisted that Nub Nueng tell her how much she had added so she could pay it back. She planned to work part-time while studying abroad to make up for it. She had only asked Nub Nueng to exchange the money because she knew she had been to the UK before.

But Nub Nueng simply put all the pounds back into the envelope and placed it in Dao Nuea’s hands.

"Just take it, please. Keep it for emergencies if you need it. Besides, I’m too lazy to exchange it back myself."

"Thank you. You’ve really helped me a lot."

"It’s nothing."

But Dao Nuea understood why Nub Nueng was so willing to help her.

"P'Nub Nueng."

"Hmm?"

"I don’t know anything, okay?"

"....."

"And I haven’t heard any news about Khun Ther."

"I see."

Dao Nuea didn’t mind at all. She didn’t think Nub Nueng’s help came with hidden motives; in fact, she understood completely. This sisterly figure deeply cared for her.

Although she could expect that Dao Nuea might know something about Khun Ther, the truth was that Dao Nuea felt the same curiosity about their mutual friend, wondering what her old friend was up to and where she might be.

However, her curiosity couldn’t compare to Nub Nueng’s; if anyone truly longed to find her, it was Nub Nueng, who cherished her above all others.

"If I hear anything about her, I’ll let you know right away."

"But don’t feel obligated to share anything she doesn’t want me to know."

Nub Nueng said gently. She didn’t want Dao Nuea to feel pressured, and she certainly didn’t want to make her feel guilty for losing contact.

"I’m sorry for making your friend turn out this way, Dao Nuea."

Nub Nueng was very aware that she was the reason they lost touch. Even though Dao Nuea and her other friends never blamed her, she hadn’t forgotten what had happened. "P’Nub Nueng..."

"Enough of this gloomy talk."

Forcing a smile, Nub Nueng brightened the mood so Dao Nuea wouldn’t worry.

"Let me know when you have your departure date. I’d like to see you off."

"Of course."

Nub Nueng wasn’t the first person to say they wanted to take Dao Nuea to the airport. Besides her family, everyone around her—Pleng Phin, Grand, and Max—wanted to say goodbye.

They all acted like it was a big occasion, which, in a way, it was. After all, Dao Nuea was about to leave for the UK to pursue a master’s degree for an entire year.

She was studying for a Master’s in Business Administration with the goal of expanding her own lipstick brand. She had been working on developing her own line since graduating, learning through trial and error, and it was shaping up to be a promising business.

Beyond her knowledge of cosmetic chemistry, which she had gained from her internship days, she wanted to learn more about business. She could have studied in Thailand, but she was worried about running into a certain professor at the business school. She wanted nothing to do with her.

*"It’s better if we don’t get too close."*

Dao Nuea didn’t want old wounds to reopen—not even by staying in Thailand, where she would probably see Khemjira often... just like today.

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"Hello, my family is seated inside."

"That’s fine, miss."

Said the restaurant host, allowing Dao Nuea to enter. She didn’t have to wait in line for hours like everyone else.

As she walked through the international buffet restaurant, she glanced at the variety of dishes along the way, planning what to eat. She wanted to get the most out of her money (1,999 baht per person) and eat enough to feel full until the next day.

Parnward had completely earned the title of Dao Nuea’s Best Sister-in-Law. She had invited her to this buffet to help her win over Thanya and Miya, since Parnward’s husband, Saeng Nuea, was away for work.

Lately, Parnward had been doing everything she could to strengthen her bond with her stepdaughters, and Miya seemed to be warming up to her more than Thanya. Dao Nuea understood her older niece—something like this simply took time.

Inside the restaurant, Dao Nuea wondered if she was walking in the right direction. As she searched for her table, she spotted a familiar back standing near the soup station. Just as she was about to surprise the person, she was shocked to see her sister-in-law’s disheveled appearance up close.

"What the—?"

"I could say the same! What are you doing sneaking up on people?

"What happened to you? Your hair is a mess, like you just fought a dog!"

Dao Nuea had every reason to react that way—Parnward normally wouldn’t go to a buffet looking like she’d been in a fight. The faint scratch marks on her face made Dao Nuea wonder, hopefully, if they were from Thanya or Miya.

"Yeah, a dog fight."

Parnward replied, clearly unwilling to give more details. She pointed to their table.

"Go put your stuff down."

"Alright."

Dao Nuea headed to their table without asking who was watching her niece. She knew it wasn’t just family here today.

"Auntie Dao is here!"

"Well, there’s my good girl! Have you been giving Auntie Parnward trouble?"

Dao Nuea smiled, hugging Miya as she jumped down from her big chair to greet her. Seated at the table with her was Khemjira, who had been invited by Parnward.

Apparently, Miya had wanted to see her aunt. Khemjira’s hair looked even more disheveled than Parnward’s. Had they both fought a dog?

"No! Miya was a very good girl today."

"Oh, really?"

Dao Nuea affectionately patted her niece’s head before greeting Khemjira.

"Hello."

Both Dao Nuea and Khemjira looked uncomfortable as they exchanged polite nods, each aware that their last conversation hadn’t ended well. Small talk between them was still difficult, so Dao Nuea decided to keep it to a simple greeting.

Now that she thought about it, she didn’t see Thanya at the table.

"By the way, where’s Thanya?"

"She didn’t come. She said she’d rather stay home and sleep."

"Ah, I see..."

"Go get something to eat. I’ll watch the table."

Khemjira offered.

Dao Nuea had planned to help watch Miya because she didn’t want to be a bother.

"No, you go get food. I’ll stay."

"No, you go."

"Both of you go."

"....."

Luckily, Parnward returned to the table just in time, so she could take care of Miya. However, having to walk together to the food station only made things even more awkward than before.

Suddenly, Dao Nuea wasn’t as hungry as she had been just moments ago, even though she had planned to pile her plate with food from every station. Instead, she decided to head toward the beverage section, hoping to find something to quench her thirst.

To her surprise, there was a bar with unlimited premium liquor and even draft beer on tap. Dao Nuea started wondering if she could turn this into a global liquor buffet instead of just an international food buffet.

Just as she was debating whether to grab some water or start the night with a light drink, a familiar voice called out.

"Aren’t you getting anything to eat?"

Khemjira approached with a plate full of a small variety of dishes, clearly wanting to try everything she hadn’t tasted before. But she noticed that Dao Nuea, who had walked up with her, hadn’t taken anything.

"I’m not that hungry yet."

"....."

"What?"

Dao Nuea stammered, startled by Khemjira’s piercing stare.

"Are you planning to drink?"

Khemjira easily read Dao Nuea’s expression, noticing how she was eyeing the beer tap.

"If you drink on an empty stomach, you’ll get drunk fast."

"I won’t! I can totally handle it."

"But doesn’t beer give you cramps? Don’t you remember that time you drank and ended up curled up in bed all night with a stomachache?"

"That’s my problem. You don’t need to worry about it."

"And why can’t I worry?"

"Because we’re not that close."

There it was again, that painful line Dao Nuea threw out so harshly. How did she manage to be so ruthless?

But in reality, Khemjira was the crueler one. Their relationship wasn’t what it used to be. If she could, Dao Nuea would have liked to pretend that the close connection they once had was nothing but a lie.

But since that wasn’t possible, all she could hope for was that they kept their distance and continued with their separate lives.

"Can we not do this?"

"....."

"Can we not?"

The defeated tone in Khemjira’s voice made Dao Nuea turn around abruptly, her composed expression faltering. Despite her best efforts, Khemjira’s words had shaken her.

"What do you mean? What is *this*?"

"I hate how distant you’re being."

*First strike.*

"I want to be able to worry about you."

*Second strike.*

"I don’t want us to be just acquaintances."

*Third strike.*

Her words hit Dao Nuea straight in the heart, nearly knocking the air out of her. Her chest ached as if she had been struck by three hundred bullets. She staggered, gripping the edge of the bar so hard that it startled the bartender.

"Something strong, please."

Beer, whiskey, cocktails, wine... Dao Nuea drank everything she could get her hands on. But even with all that alcohol, she was still completely awake, staring at the wall of her bedroom. She wasn’t even tipsy, not drowsy—just restless because of Khemjira’s words.

*That pleading voice and the look in her eyes.*

*Who could remain unmoved by that?*

Dao Nuea’s willpower felt ridiculously weak, especially when it came to Khemjira. It was frustrating. She had promised herself that she wouldn’t give her heart back to someone who had hurt her so deeply, no matter how many pleas or tears were involved.

But pretending she didn’t care was exhausting and difficult. She acted like she wanted nothing to do with Khemjira, but deep down, Dao Nuea knew that wasn’t true.

"Then don’t fight it."

"....."

"Just feel what you feel."

"***Khem!*"**

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