

# Chapter 01: Disappeared in a Blink of an Eye

**Everything in life is impermanent.**

**What we once had could one day vanish entirely.**

As humans, we must always be prepared to face change.

*Nonsense.*

I scrolled past the profound-sounding message that randomly popped up on my Facebook app without a second thought. Whenever I came across these so-called philosophical musings, I couldn’t help but find them laughable and utterly baseless. I hated it, this habit of making empty, hypothetical statements.

Why do I think it’s nonsense? Because my life, as it stands, couldn’t be better. Everything feels perfectly aligned, like I’m living the dream life everyone aspires to.

“Good morning, P’Whale!”

“Morning, Nong Fon.”

“Good morning, Khun Whale!”

“Good morning, P’Nid.”

“Khun Whale, good morning!”

“Morning, boys!”

“Khun Whale, you’re as beautiful as ever today.”

“Oh, stop flattering me! Don’t worry, there’ll be snacks waiting for you later.”

*Sigh*... This is what it’s like every morning when you’re the company’s resident celebrity. It comes with a bit of exhaustion, being known by everyone—from the security guard to the cleaning staff, from the young engineers to the accounting interns, the HR team, and even the higher-ups in the executive suite.

My job position makes me the face of the company, and let’s just say nobody wants to get on my bad side.

My name is **Tharnthara**, but everyone calls me **Whale**. I’m currently the personal secretary to the company president, a role that’s undeniably the most influential in the entire organization.

Why? Well, try messing with the boss’s right-hand person and see how smoothly your work life goes. From handling crucial documents to ensuring seamless communication, I’m the one pulling the strings behind the scenes.

If you want your documents signed by the boss immediately, instead of waiting until the afternoon of your next life, I’d recommend staying on my good side.

"Wow, P’Whale, I’m so jealous! You’re still so beautiful at this age and even have a hot boyfriend!"

"Watch your words—what exactly do you mean by at this age?"

I shot a glare at the junior HR staff who dared to tease me during lunch, my tone far from pleased.

"P’Whale, don’t be mad! We meant that you’re stunning, that’s all!"

Another quickly chimed in, clearly worried about missing out on any treats I might share from the boss.

"Exactly! And somehow, you ended up with Chon—the hottest guy in the company—as your boyfriend!"

"Well, things like this come down to destiny, don’t they? It just so happens that I’m gorgeous!"

I said proudly. I couldn’t help but feel lucky that life seemed to favor me in every possible way. My career had skyrocketed at a young age, and my salary had grown exponentially. At 34, I still considered myself youthful!

And landing a hot boyfriend? That was a small victory that earned me plenty of envy from other women. Being in a relationship with him only amplified my reputation in the company.

**Chonlathee**, my boyfriend, was admired by everyone. As the head of engineering, he was a perfect match for me, the personal secretary to the company president. Even our names, Chonlathee and Tarathara, harmonized so well together—it was almost poetic.

This enviable life of mine should have lasted forever...

"Whale! Something juicy is happening outside the company entrance—you **HAVE** to see this!"

Mesa, my gossip-loving friend, came rushing over with a posse of curious onlookers in tow, her eyes sparkling with excitement (the sparkle of craving workplace drama, of course).

"You guys go ahead. Aren’t we supposed to be working right now?"

I waved her off, uninterested.

The truth is, office life always comes with its share of gossip—day in and day out. And as the saying goes, if you have the right friend, you’ll stay updated on everything happening in the company without having to dig for news yourself. Mesa was exactly that kind of friend.

If Mesa knew it, the whole world would know it.

"Come on, Whale! You’ve got to see this. Look around—the office is practically empty. Everyone’s gone to check it out!"

I glanced around at her insistence and, surprisingly, she was right. The place was eerily quiet—no one in sight. Where had everyone gone?

"Exactly as you’re thinking, P’Whale!"

"They’ve all gone to see what Mesa’s talking about! Come on, it’s bound to be the talk of the town."

If I’d known what was about to happen next, I wouldn’t have followed Mesa’s invitation.

...and definitely not with those juniors around.

When my group and I arrived at the scene, crowded with our gossip-loving coworkers, we saw a petite woman arguing with the company’s security guard at the lobby entrance. It wouldn’t have been such a spectacle if not for one glaring detail—her stomach was noticeably swollen, making her look unmistakably pregnant.

Oh, something juicy was definitely brewing.

Mesa wasn’t lying; this was exciting. I was glad I came down to watch.

"Uh... may I ask what your business here is?"

The security guard asked politely. Of course, this was one of the country’s top companies, and the woman didn’t appear to be a customer or someone on official business. As soon as the question was asked, her eyes welled up with tears. She dabbed at them briefly before her face crumpled, and she burst into loud sobs, completely unbothered by the crowd gathering around her.

**"P’Chon... Where is P’Chon? I need to see him!"**

The moment she spoke, the crowd erupted into a murmur of speculation.

After all, there was only one Chonlathee in this entire company.

**"Whale, her P’Chon has the same name as your P’Chon!"**

Mesa leaned in to whisper, her voice trembling with excitement.

"Yeah, I noticed. I’m not deaf,"

I replied, narrowing my eyes at her, shooting back a biting retort.

"Oof... That was harsh."

Mesa didn’t seem to take offense, though. The situation before us was far too intriguing to worry about minor jabs.

And there he was—the man of the hour. A clean-cut, well-dressed guy came rushing out, half-running, half-walking, to support the crying woman with a protective arm around her. Something about him felt unnervingly familiar.

"Hey! That’s your Chon, isn’t it?"

Mesa’s voice cut through my thoughts, loud enough for the entire lobby to hear.

And just like that, all eyes shifted to me. Fantastic.

"Oh no... Our P’Whale is about to become the center of attention,"

One of the juniors whispered, but loud enough to twist the knife of humiliation.

I blinked rapidly, my mind momentarily going blank, my body feeling numb. The man holding that woman... was indeed Chonlathee. My Chonlathee. The one who’s supposed to be my boyfriend.

Chonlathee must have realized I was standing there too. How could he not, with Mesa practically shouting loud enough for the entire building to hear? His face twisted in shock as he locked eyes with me. The crowd parted like a scene straight out of a soap opera, directing their attention toward me as if choreographed.

*What is this? A low-budget drama or my actual life?*

"Hey! Why are you recording this?"

I started to panic as coworkers whispered around me, some blatantly pulling out their phones to film the scene.

"Stop recording!"

Mesa and some of the juniors tried to intervene, while I stood frozen, caught off guard by the unexpected drama. It’s always entertaining when it’s someone else’s story, but when it’s your own? Not so much.

"What are you doing here, Kwan?"

Oh, so now he wants to act all cold and distant? Just moments ago, he was practically cradling her like she was a delicate vase. And now, after seeing me, he lets go and starts talking in a harsher tone?

"Chon... are you going to abandon me?"

Kwan wailed as she began to sob even harder, her small fists weakly hitting Chonlathee’s chest.

"Is it because of her? Is she the reason you’ve grown cold toward me… toward the baby we’re about to have?"

Hold up! Stop right there! The more Kwan cried and carried on, the more intense the crowd’s judgmental stares toward me became.

Let me describe myself quickly for context. I’m a tall woman by Thai standards, with fair skin thanks to my Chinese heritage—I call my parents “Papa” and “Mama,” after all. I’m considered pretty; of course, we all need a bit of self-praise. However, I do have one glaring flaw: my face. It’s naturally stoic, paired with sharp eyes that make me seem distant or even cold to people who don’t know me well. That kind of face doesn’t exactly help in a situation like this.

Now imagine you don’t know any of the context here. You see a petite, sweet-looking woman sobbing her heart out and a tall, stoic woman standing there silently. Who would you assume is the villain?

*Exactly. Ding, ding, ding! It’s me.*

"I’m pregnant... Please don’t take P’Chon away from me and my baby."

Kwan pleaded desperately, trying to lunge toward me. Chonlathee caught her just in time, holding her back.

"Please, let me stay with P’Chon. My baby needs a father. I love him so much!"

I stood there, paralyzed, not saying a word. What was I even supposed to say? Did I have any authority to make decisions here? The situation had spiraled so far out of control.

"Whale... let me explain,"

Chonlathee finally spoke, his voice hesitant.

"There’s no need,"

I cut him off sharply. I didn’t even let him finish, severing whatever he was going to say with the cruelty of my words. His face, already pale, somehow managed to turn even whiter. He looked like a boiled chicken at this point. I wasn’t going to give him a chance to explain or excuse himself.

Why would I? The evidence was staring me right in the face.

"You,"

I turned my attention to Kwan, who was still sniffling.

"Your name is Kwan, right?"

She nodded hesitantly, her tear-streaked face softening as she looked at me.

Even though I felt a burning rage from being deceived, I didn’t want to take it out on her. She wasn’t the one at fault here—it was him. The one who couldn’t keep himself in check.

"Yes..."

"May your child be born healthy. Don’t worry, I won’t have anything to do with this man anymore. I’ll take my leave now."

"Whale..."

Chonlathee looked at me with pained eyes.

"Chon, please. Don’t drag me into this mess. Go take care of your wife and child. As for us, I forgive you."

With that, I turned and walked away from the scene, feeling a strange sense of triumph.

Damn, Tharnthara, you’re so cool—ending a relationship with such finality and grace. Yet, deep down, it stung. Even though I wasn’t dreaming of marriage yet, being cheated on like this hurt.

So this is what it feels like to be a fool, huh? Why is my vision so blurry? Oh, right, it’s because tears are streaming down my face. No need to hold them back—just cry it out. Let it all out for this pathetic love.

Office gossip was always entertaining, especially scandals involving affairs. News spread faster than wildfire, from the security guard to the cleaning lady, and probably even to the stray dog outside the office. By now, the entire company knew about my ordeal. A week later, it was still the top story, with rumors so exaggerated they bordered on fantasy.

Some said I slapped Chonlathee so hard his mouth bled. Others claimed I yanked Kwan’s hair and smashed her head into a wall. Seriously? Have you seen my height and build? Or has everyone been watching too many soap operas?

"Whale, what took you so long in HR?"

Mesa asked during lunch, her voice filled with concern.

"It’s about Chon..."

I replied wearily, glancing at my watch and sighing. The HR meeting had eaten up most of my lunch break. Can I get injury time for this?

"It’s so unfair. None of this is your fault, but Chon just up and resigned, leaving you to deal with the fallout,"

Mesa ranted, voicing the exact frustrations I felt.

"Not to mention, your clip has gone viral,"

A junior chimed in, sheepishly showing me her phone before quickly pulling it back.

Great. I’m now a lead actor in a scandalous drama about fighting over a man. How glamorous!

"What else can I do? Ugh, I don’t feel like eating anymore. Just give me grass instead!"

I shouted in exasperation. Moments ago, I had just been reprimanded for *"inappropriate behavior in the workplace."*

It’s like Mesa said—it wasn’t even my fault! And yet, the one responsible had already bolted, leaving me to bear all the consequences alone.

I’d heard the saying, **"Choosing the wrong partner is a regret you’ll carry for life,"**

But I never thought I’d experience it firsthand.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Mesa asked, trying to help me figure out the next step.

"Forget it. People will move on soon enough. Thais forget things so easily," I replied, trying to sound unfazed.

Honestly, I had enough work piling up already. Plus, my performance reviews had always been great. Surely the company wouldn’t be so harsh over something like this… right?

Okay, maybe I was being too optimistic.

Unfair situations happen to everyone. No matter how much we demand justice, the real world isn’t as pretty as it is in the movies. It’s frustrating— infuriating, even—but what can I do?

Usually, gossip and scandals like this blow over in a week or two. But this time? This time, I really was out of luck. I resigned myself to my fate. After all, my position as the president’s secretary wasn’t just a job; it was a representation of the company itself. Being the face of the company meant carrying its reputation wherever I went.

Now, with a scandal like this—especially one involving infidelity—it’s no wonder I was asked to leave. I might have brought shame to the company.

And so…

I signed my name on the resignation papers.

*Yes, that’s right.* ***Tarathara****, the former secretary of the company president, is now officially unemployed.*

# Chapter 02: Got More Than This

"Ugh."

[To summarize: you meddled so much that you lost your job, is that what you mean?]

"Sorry, Noey. How did you even come to that conclusion from what I said?"

[Hey! I was just using the skill of picking up key points that I learned from lecture classes... Don’t be mad; you know I joke like this often, right?]

"Well, was it even the right time? I’m hurting, you know,"

I complained to my friend on the call with a frustrated voice. The person on the other end was **Naraluck**, nicknamed Noey, a close friend of mine since high school. Although we aren’t as close as we were during high school or college, a close friend is still a close friend. Even though time and distance have changed things, when we reconnect, everything feels as familiar as ever.

[And so what? You only started thinking of me after losing your job and getting dumped?]

Although Noey’s tone didn’t imply that she was mad, I still felt guilty about having been too caught up in my own happiness. By the time I realized it, the only remaining friend I had was Noey.

"Do you regret it yet? Let’s not get into arguments right now; I’m still hurting,"

I complained with a sulking tone to my best friend. Noey is, after all, the Noey I know well—always forgiving and understanding.

[Let’s go eat and celebrate being single, shall we?]

See? That’s how I cheered myself up a bit.

"Celebrate being single because of losing my job too... Ugh, things really couldn’t get any worse,"

I said, my voice laced with defeat. Ending things with Chon was already difficult for me. Calling it sadness would be an understatement; it felt more like emotional pain. But losing my job was even worse. My salary was gone. Though I received severance pay, the economic downturn made finding a new job uncertain.

[Aww, you’re so good, Whale. Mom would be proud, you know, as the shining star of the group.]

I laughed at my best friend's exaggerated praise.

"Not as good as you, Naraluck the lawyer. Your legal arguments are extraordinary,"

I returned the compliment. Naraluck laughed happily at the praise.

Noey is a skilled lawyer, completely dedicated to her work—so much so that when it comes to love, she pays almost no attention at all. I even remember teasing her once about whether she might consider opening her heart to someone.

[Why should I bother with love? If problems arise, they’ll just interfere with work. It’s a waste of time.]

Naraluck responded succinctly, clearly and directly, leaving me with no choice but to stop pressing the subject.

"Ugh! That’s right. At least if I’m going to end up single forever, I still have my close friend stuck on the same path as me."

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***Rrrr***

The overlapping sound of the phone interrupted, along with a phone number that looked unfamiliar, making me ask Noey to hang up first.

What was I doing at that moment? I was busy sorting through items I no longer used, pulling them out of three large cardboard boxes that surrounded me.

Everything happened so suddenly that I barely had any time to prepare for leaving my job. So, I simply took everything out, planning to sort through and discard what I didn’t need later.

The result of grabbing everything from my space was three big cardboard boxes... To be honest, I couldn’t say they only contained work-related items. They also included gifts that Chon had given me.

I didn’t want to keep them lingering around as a reminder... I’d better answer the call first.

Lately, I had found myself daydreaming more than usual. Even though I told myself that I had come to terms with everything, that was merely selfdeception. Losing both my partner and my job at almost the same time felt like the cruelest thing that could happen.

"Hello?"

[Hello, is this Abeluga?]

"Huh..."

I frowned at the unfamiliar accent and the rare way of addressing my name. Who even calls me that anymore?

"Who is this?"

[It’s me, Uncle Lee. Abeluga, hurry back home! Your dad's in bad shape!] Hearing the voice on the other end in such a panicked and urgent tone triggered a memory. It was the voice of Uncle Lee, a friend of my father whom I had met when I was a child. But wait... How did Uncle Lee even get my number? That was something to ponder later because what Uncle Lee said just now seemed far more urgent.

"What’s going on, Uncle? Dad is okay, right?"

[Just hurry home now.]

"Calm down, Uncle. Take a deep breath and think for a moment. What’s wrong with Dad?"

After hearing Uncle Lee's words on the phone, I made the decision to abandon whatever I was doing and grab my car keys immediately. Before leaving the room, I didn’t forget to switch the cutoff switch, as it seemed likely that I wouldn’t return to the room for a while.

The words from Uncle still echoed in my mind...

*[Your dad..... Heart failure..]*

...I’d take back the earlier thoughts I had about being unlucky because things could still get worse than this.

Amidst the dark ahead, lit only by the headlights of my car illuminating the way, I glanced at the speedometer. It was creeping closer to 120. Okay... I’d better slow down a bit before I end up with a speeding ticket in front of the condo. But honestly, it didn’t matter much. After all, I’d be disappearing for a while. Let the ticket pile up if it had to—it didn’t matter anymore.

My destination was my own home—the house where I was born and raised. Even though I knew that no matter how fast I drove, I wouldn’t make it in time, who could stay calm and drive leisurely in a moment like this?

I forced myself to stay focused, to keep my attention on the road ahead and not to find myself in a ditch or wrapped around a tree. I didn’t want to rush to Heaven just yet.

*Dad and Mom probably wouldn’t be too pleased...*

Finally, I reached the hospital.

*Sigh*... That’s why I kept saying, no matter how fast I was, it wouldn’t be enough.

I stood there, staring at the lifeless body of my father, my emotions difficult to articulate... According to the nurse, my father passed away from a sudden heart attack in his sleep.

Fortunately, Uncle Lee, a close friend of my dad’s, had come over that day for a social gathering. She noticed something strange and called the emergency services to help break the door down and help my father.

Otherwise, my father would have been left alone to face this tragedy.

What I saw before me was the face of an elderly man, resting in peaceful slumber, forever asleep...

After arranging all the ceremonies and reaching the final day, I drove to my own home. I unlocked the gate and used my small hand to push the iron door, struggling to open it. I hadn’t been back here in such a long time.

Was this iron gate always this heavy? The last time I remembered helping Dad open it, it didn’t feel this way.

I looked around the house, reminiscing about the past. My home had been a grocery store since before I could remember. Dad had told me that my grandfather, who was my great-grandfather from China, had come to Thailand by boat and fell in love with my grandmother here. They pooled their efforts to open this grocery store, and Dad had taken over the business from them.

My childhood memories consisted of sneaking snacks off the shelves to eat, sometimes even sharing them with my school friends. Of course, it always ended with me being scolded in the end.

The shelves were dusty, and much of the inventory was no longer appealing to buy, as it looked neglected. It seemed like Dad’s health had never been particularly strong, and cleaning had become too much of a burden for him

In my memories, Dad was always kind and indulgent toward me, but he was also very neat and orderly. Despite the hardship in his life, why had he never shared his story with me?

I stood, staring at my own offering, which I had set up beautifully on the shrine with satisfaction.

“No more loneliness, Dad. Now you can go live with Father in Heaven peacefully,”

I whispered to the photo of my bald-headed dad with his kind smile. Next to it was a photo of a woman with a gentle smile—my mother.

My mother had passed away when I was very young. Thinking about it brought a wave of sorrow as I realized that the house, once filled with shared family memories, was now truly empty, with just me left.

Although bad things had happened to me in the past—too much for me to bear—I had managed to survive them thanks to the encouragement of my dad. Even though the things that had happened to me recently were heavy enough to make me want to come and complain to him to soothe my loneliness...

*Sniffle...*

Tears ran down my face without me bothering to wipe them away.

“Hey... Dad, listen to me, please. My life... My life is like... well... no, wait. Listen to Abeluga first. Abeluga is willing to call myself by this name... the name you gave me, Dad. So... *sniffle*... So that means... if Abeluga thinks this is a nightmare, will you still be here for me when I wake up tomorrow?”

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My real nickname wasn’t Whale, but how could I explain it? When I was a child, my skin was very pale, and I used to smile widely all the time. Dad, who loved the sea and had a very creative and unique way of thinking, had given me the nickname Abeluga, after a whale with a smile that always seemed to be there.

Despite my constant objections and protestations, she had insisted on calling me Abeluga.

What was the outcome of such a strange nickname? I was teased endlessly until it became unbearable. I could still remember the day Dad was scolded severely because of my nickname before I became known as "Whale" like I am now.

Dad always thought my nickname was the coolest thing ever, though, and loved telling his friends that he had a daughter named Abeluga.

Because of this, I had to constantly correct people whenever I heard it.

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I cried bitterly without shame. Why should I be ashamed? This was my own house. Now that I had no one left, I wondered why fate had chosen to be so cruel to me. Was I just unlucky? Should I try to do some good deeds to improve my fortune?

“My life is terrible, isn’t it? Terrible enough that I want to follow my dad and my mom and join them.”

“Why didn’t you wait for me, Dad? Were you really going to let our final words, parent and child, only revolve around the words, *‘Whale is busy’? Really?”*

“Why didn’t you tell me if you were sick? Why endure it? If you felt unwell, you could have just called me. Why did you have to... *sniffle*... sound so cheerful, pretending to be fine when I never knew otherwise?” “I’m sorry, Dad. If I had known things would turn out this way, I would have tried harder to come home more often. I would have stayed with you. At least if I were here, maybe you wouldn’t have died.”

After I had been rambling to myself in front of my father’s and mother’s photos until I felt somewhat satisfied with venting all the pent-up emotions, crying my heart out had surprisingly cleared my mind.

Although I didn’t want to get up, allowing myself to stay buried in my tears and despair wasn’t a good idea either. So I decided to wash my face and try to freshen up a bit. But when I looked at myself in the mirror, I was shocked. My eyes were red and puffy to the point that I looked like a zombie.

*Ugh...* I felt like crying again. I wish I could cry beautifully, like a K-drama heroine...

The problems I was currently facing had come too suddenly and too harshly, catching me completely off guard. From having plans to quickly find a new job, I now had to completely change my mindset.

Despite the sudden departure of my dad, he had prepared all the necessary documents, wills, and property arrangements so well—something I could truly respect and admire as a proud daughter.

I tried to gather my thoughts, taking a deep breath. Constantly being lost in sorrow wouldn’t change anything. I had inherited a substantial sum of money and... this house, or rather, the grocery store that had belonged to my family.

I looked at the store’s condition, mentally trying to process everything. But the more I looked at it, the blurrier my vision became as tears welled up again.

I couldn’t take it anymore. The more I stared at the present reality, the more the memories came flooding back, tearing at me.

I needed a break. Today had already been too much for me to handle...

I wished everything could have been nothing but a nightmare.

*But miracles probably weren’t that easy to come by.*

# Chapter 03: Rebirth

I woke up to the sunlight piercing through my eyelids, groping around aimlessly for my phone by the bedside to check the time.

**11 a.m.**

Well, I guess I got a decent amount of rest… so much rest, in fact, that I must have turned off my alarm without even remembering it, then decided to sleep on.

Honestly, though, waking up at 11 a.m. on my own is something I should pat myself on the back for. Back at the condo, I’d pull stunts like this only to find myself waking up late in the evening, completely losing track of time and forgetting what day it was.

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***Rrrrr***

The ringtone startled me. Glancing at the screen and seeing Noey’s name pop up made sweat inexplicably break out on my back, despite the air conditioner being on full blast. I had a pretty good idea why Noey was calling.

I hadn’t told anyone about my dad. None of my friends were at the funeral; the attendees were mostly Dad’s old pals. And it wasn’t until recently that I’d posted anything on social media about it.

I’m gonna get scolded for sure… I don’t wanna answer this call.

“Hello…”

I greeted cautiously.

[Don’t even try using that guilty little voice on me. Why didn’t you tell me?]

Noey’s sharp tone cut straight through, making me wince reflexively.

“Well… I didn’t want to bother you…”

My attempt at sounding nonchalant was pathetic. There went my composed secretary persona. I was completely cowed by my best friend.

[Seriously, are we even friends? That hurts, you know.]

“Okay, okay! I’m sorry!”

I quickly backpedaled, trying to pacify her. Whenever Noey started swearing, it meant she was genuinely upset.

[Are you doing okay? Want me to come over?]

Her voice softened with concern, and guilt pricked at my conscience for not telling anyone about my dad.

“No, no, it’s fine! I can handle being alone. You go focus on work. We’ll meet up soon.”

[If you say so…]

As the tension eased, I found myself letting out a relieved sigh.

"Crazy! You're an adult now, so please be polite, Ms. Lawyer."

[Alright, alright. Take care. Let me know if you need anything. I'll help however I can.]

Noey quickly hung up the call because it seemed like my best friend was in trouble again. The more we earned from our work, the less free time we had.

Even though Noey was so busy, she still made time to call me. Thinking about it made me sad. When I lost my job, my friends and colleagues disappeared as if we were never close.

To distract myself, I opened my Facebook app, but it only made my negative feelings grow. Seeing photos of the work gang happily posted on social media without me in them was painful.

I used to be someone important, someone everyone valued. But now, not even a single supportive message came my way when I faced hardship.

This is how work relationships are—they’re based on benefits. Once you're no longer useful, being discarded is normal. *Sigh...*

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Before working as a secretary, I graduated with a degree in the arts and had decent English skills, which made working as a secretary smooth. I never thought running a small shop alone could sustain me, so I needed side jobs. Translation work was a good option—it didn’t require going anywhere, just using my brain and hands, while still being able to manage the shop.

At least it gave me something to keep my mind occupied. But for now, I decided to take a break and recharge.

When I decided to take a break, I really rested—living lazily for over a week. My daily routine mostly involved eating, sleeping, watching series, and staying at home. But now it felt like the time had come for me to start sorting out my life again.

Just thinking about it made me feel exhausted. Could I just give up now?

Standing there, holding a dustpan, I looking at the condition of the items inside the shop with resignation. Maybe I was too used to living in a small condo with limited space, which didn’t require much cleaning. Serious cleaning wasn’t my thing.

But since my goal for today was a major cleanup, I couldn’t give up before even starting!

I’ve dealt with overly demanding bosses, annoying customers, and brutal meetings. How could I give up on something like this? That would be disgraceful!

*'So... Please proceed to the counter to make your payment, dear customer!'*

*'Paying by credit card, please.'*

*What am I doing here?*

*Well, I’ll buy machine to make my life easier!*

They say pride doesn’t pay the bills, but money sure can solve problems. Deciding to buy tools to make life easier isn’t a bad idea, right? And yes, aside from the vacuum cleaner I drove back to my condo to get, this cleaning robot was another solid choice. Well, I already bought it—there’s no turning back now.

Since it’s my first time stepping out of the house in a week, I decided to make the most of it. My beloved car probably felt neglected by its glamorous owner who barely drive out to have fun. Driving around aimlessly and letting my thoughts wander turned out to be a pretty good way to relax.

My evening ended at a mall near my house. After having food delivered every day, eating out for a change felt refreshing. Besides savoring delicious food and drinks, I had another goal: buying books.

Although my dad’s will stated that the house and the small convenience store were left to me as an inheritance, it didn’t specify that I had to continue running the shop. Still, I could almost hear him saying,

“Do whatever makes you happy.”

In the past, I would have decided instantly. No way would I stay cooped up running a shop in the suburbs! Or, I might have solved the issue by selling the house altogether. But now, I think it’s a good thing to return here for a while, to rest and escape the harshness of the world.

After my dad’s sudden passing, I wasn’t ready to reopen the shop. So, for now, the convenience store remains sadly out of business. When I eventually reopen, I want to do it grandly—a proper grand opening. That’s why I wanted to learn more about branding.

Unfortunately, the bookstore at the mall had such a limited selection that it left me feeling disappointed.

As I was sulking, I remembered that there’s a newly opened university not far from my house. That’s how I ended up at its massive bookstore, hoping my outfit wouldn’t stand out too much. Now surrounded by fresh-faced college students, this 30-something woman couldn’t help but feel a bit out of place.

“Can I get along with you kids?"

I thought, chuckling at myself.

After teasing myself enough, I refocused on the towering shelves packed with books. Wow, so many—it’s overwhelming. Truly a treasure trove of knowledge.

But having too many options can be a curse too.

Which one should I choose?"

“Uh… Am I looking for a book on marketing?”

As I was about to look something up on my smartphone, a voice interrupted me.

“Can I recommend something?”

It was a woman, smiling so warmly that her eyes curved into thin lines. She was casually dressed in a plain T-shirt and shorts, with her hair tied up in a cute bun. Despite the simplicity of her look, there was something endearing about her...

Wait, hold on! She’s a stranger! What does a stranger want with me? How creepy. What if she’s a scammer or something?

"......."

I instinctively stepped back to maintain distance and stared at her to confirm that her words were indeed directed at me.

“I noticed you’ve been standing here for a while. What kind of book are you looking for?”

Her genuine smile didn’t seem to have any hidden agenda, but sorry, I still don’t trust strangers.

“No, thank you.”

I rejected her kindness and quickly grabbed a book with a Best Seller sticker, then briskly walked away, feeling a bit uneasy. To be honest, I’m not used to talking to strangers, let alone having one randomly recommend a book to me. It just felt... suspicious.

“Uh… Miss?”

She continued following me, trying to talk again, which only made me even more paranoid.

“No, thank you. I’ve already found the book I need. Excuse me.”

I declined firmly, looking at her with clear distrust.

“W-Wait—”

I didn’t let her finish, quickly striding away. I wasn’t about to stick around to hear whatever she wanted to say.

The rest of the day passed peacefully—until later, when I was organizing books at home. The memory of the incident at the bookstore came back to me. I found myself wondering if I had walked away too quickly. Maybe she could’ve recommended a really good book.

Not that the book I grabbed wasn’t good, but still... That woman didn’t seem threatening at all.

No, no, stop it, Whale! You can’t just trust strangers like that. Even people you think you know well can stab you in the back.

That cute-faced woman? Nope. Nobody can be trusted—not her, not anyone.

# Chapter 04: Never Afraid of Seven Elephants

Today, I decided to renovate the shop. After spending over a week living at home, I became aware of global warming and the greenhouse effect impacting the world. These changes threaten polar bears' habitats, melting ice, and starving penguins.

The effects on the climate have been significant, especially in Thailand, where we used to have three seasons: winter, summer, and rainy. Now, we have three seasons as well: hot, hotter, and hottest.

Oh... it's unbearably hot!

. .

Because my dad belonged to the Baby Boomer generation, he believed that anything worth preserving should be preserved, like the shaky ceiling fan that seemed ready to fall and chop my head off at any moment. But no, my dad didn't die because of the fan!

No one dies from a fan decapitating them! It's as if I could hear my dad's voice from heaven, but sorry, Daddy. This house is now legally mine, and I'm changing everything!

*Watch me, Daddy! I'll turn our shop into the most magnificent spot in the area!*

The first step was installing an air conditioner. Please understand, I simply cannot survive in a shop without air conditioning in this weather. I gave the ancient ceiling fan a chance, even adding a standing fan as its partner, but it didn't help cool me down. I'm sorry, but the fan failed its probation period. I have no choice but to terminate its position.

Farewell, dear fan, and welcome, air conditioner!

If you ask what the most exhausting part was, it had to be supervising the workers installing various equipment. But finally, everything was done. I stood back and admired the results with pride. The once-open doorway was now a glass door, and stepping inside, I was greeted by a blast of cool air. I also installed an intercom camera at the front for added security and convenience.

I did a quick survey of the surrounding area since it had been a long time since I was last home. Many things had changed over the years. Some familiar shops from my childhood had closed, and others had been sold and converted into something else. For instance, the university not far from the shop was built and officially opened about 5-6 years ago.

Two or three streets over, there are a few new condos and apartment buildings. Luckily, our shop is located near residential areas, which I hope will bring in a steady stream of customers. Moreover, there's a major convenience store chain just a short distance away. This situation fills me with both pressure and hope.

Pressure, because I have to compete with a large, modern store that offers convenience. But hope, because if I can make my shop unique and provide excellent customer service, I might attract a loyal customer base.

Surveying the area gave me ideas for further improvements, like stocking items that cater to university students nearby-stationery, dorm essentials, or affordable snacks and drinks. And if I dream bigger, I'd like to set up a small café corner in the shop to attract the younger crowd.

But before I get ahead of myself...

There doesn't seem to be any other grocery store around here.

*Wait a minute...*

Does that mean I'm about to monopolize the customers in this area? Everyone will come to my shop. That means I could get rich without having to work too hard, right?

I tried to stay optimistic, thinking that owning my own business is the perfect way to achieve financial security and independence. Maybe this is my chance to break free from being part of the middle class in this country.

Hello, upper class! Who's going to be the next millionaire?

**Me, Whale-Tharathara!**

Although a grocery store might not seem like the most glamorous business (I'm already doing my best to improve its image), if we're talking about a monopoly in this area, there's only one store-the only reliable place for the people around here in their times of need!

**"Hungry? Stop by anytime!"**

With that, my plan to relax and let the profits roll in seemed pretty solid. I felt at ease and casually scrolled through my phone, just as Noey sent me a Line message.

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**Noey:**

Found a horoscope and thought of you. Sending it your way. [Photo attached]

.

Curiosity got the better of me, so I clicked on it to read. Well, who doesn't like checking their horoscope now and then? It's not like I believe it completely, but it doesn't hurt to take a peek, right?

**Leo Horoscope:**

"Things might not go as planned during this period. Obstacles may arise,

but trying to shift your perspective and adjust your approach could help you overcome challenges."

**Love**:

"You may encounter someone younger who takes an interest in you. Be open-minded; they might have more to offer than you think."

.

I couldn't help but roll my eyes after reading the horoscope Noey sent. Haven't I been through enough already? How much more can go wrong? I absolutely don't believe this! This horoscope must be nonsense!

**Whale**:

Hah... it's not accurate at all.

**Noey**:

It's about the future.

**Noey**:

And it's just the weekly horoscope... It's only Monday!

**Whale:**

No way! I don't believe it!

.

Even though I texted her back with skepticism, I found myself reopening the picture to read it again. This time, my eyes were drawn to the part about love:

**"You may encounter someone younger who takes an interest in you..."**

What?

*"Can I recommend a book for you?"*

**Snap!**

Why did the image of that woman with the bun hairstyle suddenly pop into my mind?

Whoever that was, she looked strange-maybe even a creep. *Ugh...*

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Honestly, being single again has thrown me off balance quite a bit. When you're used to having someone by your side and then suddenly find yourself alone, it's unbearably lonely.

So lonely, in fact, that I impulsively downloaded a dating app-something I swore I'd never do-just to swipe right and see if my soulmate might be hiding in there.

Turns out, hiding with ghosts!

The very first profile the app recommended was none other than Chonlatheep. Seriously? Ugh, I wanted to curse both my ex and the app simultaneously! What a lousy suggestion. That scumbag-didn't I hear he has a wife who's about to give birth? Yet here he is, leaving his profile on a dating app like some clueless fool.

After venting my frustration and cursing the app to my heart's content, I deleted it. Forget trying to find a connection through an app; I'll leave it to fate. Oh, and about the horoscope image Noey sent earlier-yeah, it's totally nonsense.

They say you don't have to believe in fortune-telling, but you shouldn't disrespect it either...

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***BANG! CRASH! THUD!***

"Ugh... Shut up!"

I groaned, my patience snapping as the loud noises pierced through my peaceful slumber. At first, I tried to ignore it, intending to just sleep through it, but the incessant racket eventually forced me to get up.

I stumbled out of bed, dragging my feet as I went to see where the apocalyptic noise was coming from. Outside, I was met with a cloud of dust so thick it obscured everything. Squinting, I managed to make out a construction crew hard at work on an abandoned property about a block away. My curiosity kicked in immediately-could it be a new store opening?

I hope it's a cosmetics shop or maybe a bookstore, I thought excitedly.

As I got dressed, my mind couldn't help but wander, imagining what kind of store it might be. A coffee shop or a cozy little café would be nice. Brimming with curiosity, I decided to head over and investigate.

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**[Construction Plan: Seven Elephants Store]**

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My eyes widened in shock as I read the sign. No, this can't be right. Maybe I misread it? I read it again and again, but the words on the paper stayed the same no matter how many times I looked.

Staggering back into my shop, I sat down on my favorite chair, trying to take deep breaths to calm my nerves. But seriously, who could stay calm in a situation like this?

*Noey... I'm sorry for doubting that horoscope you sent yesterday. -Whale*

"So accurate it's scary,"

I messaged Noey, sending crying whale sticker to sum up my frustration before flopping back into my chair with a resigned sigh.

Seven Elephants Convenience Store-better known as Seven Eleven-is a name recognized worldwide. Its key selling points include the sheer number of branches springing up like mushrooms and its comprehensive range of services that fulfill nearly all basic human needs. I could recall countless news articles about their offerings: paying phone bills, in-store cafés, even laundry services, all available 24/7.

In a world dominated by capitalism, with its ever-expanding reach, how on earth can my small mom-and-dad store possibly compete?

But I can't just throw in the towel. After all the effort I've put in, I have to give it a shot. Seven Elephants? Bring it on. Let's see what you think of my revamped corner store!

Despite my attempt at self-motivation, deep down, I knew I was backed into a corner. With a competitor like that so close by, there was no way I could match their services.

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**Creating My Own Unique Brand Best Seller**

Desperate for a solution, I turned to the self-help book I'd bought. Maybe the answers to my struggles were hidden in its pages. Skimming through the table of contents, I clung to a sliver of hope.

"Creating a Story for Your Brand"

The text explained that in today's market, customers have more choices than ever, so businesses must stay up-to-date. A product's quality alone isn't enough to secure sales; customers are often drawn to the unique story, identity, or innovative edge a brand offers. Big global brands all have distinctive, compelling backstories that captivate their audiences.

I let the words sink in slowly. But what kind of story could my humble convenience store possibly have? I barely know the regulars, and Dad isn't around anymore to provide any insights. Every time I visited him in the past, it was during long holiday breaks, when the store was always closed.

How am I supposed to know anything about this place?

It's ironic, isn't it? Here I am, inheriting this shop, yet I don't know the first thing about running it. I don't even know where my dad sourced his inventory from. My only option now is to dig through his old accounting books for some clues.

Can I really do something to save this little store?

*Novelty... or uniqueness... can draw customers' attention.*

It felt like a light bulb went off in my head. Speaking of novelty, a unique shop name might be just the thing to catch the eye of people passing by my store. And I already had an awesome name in mind. Once the idea came to me, I wasted no time. I immediately called a sign-making shop, and before long, it was done.

I stood there proudly, admiring the results.

This little shop of mine now has a great, unique name that will surely grab everyone's attention!

*Click.*

I flipped the sign hanging on the glass door to say "Open" and took a picture of the finished storefront to commemorate the grand reopening. Of course, I sent the picture to my close friend to show it off a little.

Oddly enough, Naraluk read my message right away. But what was even stranger was the reply from Noey, which made me blurt out, "Huh?" in confusion.

**Noey:**

Is it still possible to take down the name sign right now?

# Chapter 05: The Haunted Grocery Store

**SEAL POV**

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The bookstore might not seem like a particularly exciting place, but I often wander through it to update my knowledge. It's said that just looking at book covers can be calming. For me, books have always been magnetic.

And the person standing in front of me was strangely captivating too...

Even though I could have walked past, I found myself intrigued by the petite woman who stood there with a serious expression, staring intently at the bookshelf as if lost in thought.

Her strikingly beautiful face felt oddly familiar, though I couldn’t place where I had seen her before. Driven by my inner Good Samaritan, I offered to help her pick a book. After all, I’m quite the expert in this area!

“Uh... no, thank you.”

Unfortunately, my goodwill seemed worthless to her. I could only watch as she hurriedly walked away, as if afraid I was some kind of robber.

*Wait! Come back! I’m genuinely a nice person!*

If I insisted on following her, I’d probably end up being labeled a creep. But I really felt like I knew her from somewhere. What a shame... I wish I could meet her again someday.

It’s happened once more—meeting someone intriguing, only to have the connection end before it even begins. Though I secretly hoped that returning to the bookstore would let me see her again, I was met with disappointment.

It’s now the third day, and there’s no sign of her. I guess it’s time to give up.

Under the blazing heat, so intense it felt like my skin might ignite, I couldn’t decide if my plan to find a new restaurant was a smart one. I should have just stuck to eating at the university cafeteria.

Why did I have to complicate things? I craved the famous barbecue place, but now it feels like I’m the one being grilled into A-grade wagyu on the fire.

“I told you this was a bad idea! I even said to wait until the evening, but no, you all wouldn’t listen. Ugh... now we’re stuck smelling like smoke and sweat,”

Complained Chompoo, who was walking beside me. “How was I supposed to know it would turn out like this?”

Tonmai retorted, unwilling to back down.

I could only manage a weak smile, not daring to argue since it really was my fault. Back then, I was just too hungry. Plus, we had a ride on the way there, so...

Who would have thought that our senior would suddenly have an urgent matter, leaving us stranded and forced to walk back to the university in this heat?

"Don’t you dare flash that guilty smile, Seal. And you too, Tonmai! If I get gossiped about by the students in my afternoon class, what am I supposed to do?"

Chompoo continued her endless complaints. Neither Tonmai nor I dared to argue back with her. Honestly, just walking in this heat was exhausting enough—opening our mouths to speak would probably drain the last of our energy, leaving none for the afternoon classes.

Despite bickering like children, we’re actually university lecturers responsible for shaping the minds of the future generation. That’s right— the three of us teach at the same university and faculty.

Chompoo is a lecturer in the Accounting department, Tonmai teaches Logistics, and me, the beloved lecturer in Business Management. Or, as Chompoo just called me—Seal.

The nickname “**Seal**” has a story behind it. Originally, my nickname was "**Darling**,” but it caused way too many misunderstandings. Sometimes, it even led to unnecessary conflicts. “Darling, could you please…”

“Darling, could you explain…”

Hearing it made me shudder every time.

Eventually, everyone started calling me **Maewnam (Seal)** instead. I can’t quite recall who gave me the name, but I vaguely remember a sisterly figure from my childhood saying,

“Don’t like your weird nickname? Let me think of a new one. How about Maewnam (Seal)? It’s cute!”

I was so thrilled that I went around announcing it to everyone. Over time, my original nickname was completely forgotten.

The three of us became close friends, partly because we were around the same age and started working here around the same time. So why were we trudging through this unbearable heat? It all started around 10 a.m. this morning.

. .

Since I woke up late, I decided to skip breakfast to make it in time for my morning lecture. This decision, however, left me starving by mid-morning.

Tonmai seemed to share the same fate, having missed breakfast due to a makeup class he had to teach.

*Growl...*

The loud sound of a stomach growling echoed through the staff room.

"Maewnam, Chompoo, want to grab some food? I’m starving,"

Tonmai suggested while still sorting through his paperwork.

"It’s only 10:30 a.m.!"

Chompoo exclaimed, glancing at her watch.

"Come on… I’m thinking of trying that barbecue place. I heard from the students that it’s amazing,"

Tonmai tried to convince her. Chompoo turned to me with a pleading look, silently begging for help.

Sorry, Chompoo... I want some beef too.

"Let’s eat quickly so we can come back and finish our work. I think Tonmai’s suggestion is a good one,"

I sided with him, barely able to contain my hunger. Honestly, I was so ravenous that I felt like I could devour an entire cow. My desperate expression must have softened Chompoo’s resolve.

“Sigh… so where exactly is this barbecue place? If it’s too far, I’m not going.”

“Heading out for lunch? Mind if I join in?”

A voice chimed in just as the door opened, making the three of us turn abruptly to bow respectfully.

“Of course, Professor Tik! It would be an honor to have you join us,”

I replied courteously. How could I not? The speaker was none other than our department head, Professor Doctor Lady Pannika, whose name alone could make students sweat bullets as they tried to write it correctly on their report covers.

“Only if you don’t mind us heading to a barbecue place,”

I added tentatively.

“Oh, Maewnam, you know I’m quite down-to-earth. Let me treat you all this time,”

She said with a warm smile.

When someone senior offers their generosity, there’s really only one acceptable response: agreement. Everything seemed smooth from there— Professor Tik even volunteered to drive us in her luxurious car. However, taking someone of her stature to a run-of-the-mill barbecue joint near campus felt inappropriate, so Tonmai quickly switched plans. He upgraded the destination to a fancy barbecue restaurant farther away.

We know what you're up to, Tonmai. You’re hoping to indulge in a high-end free meal, aren’t you?

But as they say, “blessings are often overshadowed by misfortune.” While we were eating, Professor Tik suddenly received an urgent call. From what I could catch, it was about her beloved son. She had to leave abruptly but kindly covered the bill before departing. It was a shame she barely had a few bites before she had to go.

Having enjoyed a feast without spending a dime, it was time for us to head back to work. The three of us agreed to hail a taxi back to campus, but no taxis passed by. To make matters worse, when we tried booking a ride via an app, no vehicles were available either. In the end, we had no choice but to walk back, hoping to make it in time for our afternoon classes.

“Have you heard about the rumors of the haunted convenience store?” Tonmai broke the silence.

“Haunted? A convenience store?”

I chimed in, intrigued. Just walking endlessly could make anyone lightheaded—having a conversation would at least help pass the time. “The convenience store near your condo, Seal. It recently shut down,” Tonmai explained.

“Closed down? That’s ridiculous! I shop there all the time. The owner, Uncle Ah-Pae, is one of the nicest people I know,”

I argued, skeptical. If it’s the convenience store near my condo, there’s only one it could be—the one owned by Uncle Ah-Pae, who always had a cheerful demeanor. I had just bought tissues from his store the other day! How could it possibly have closed down so suddenly?

“Maewnam… when was the last time you actually shopped there?”

Tonmai asked, his tone unusually serious.

"Why? Hmm, I think it was last Friday,"

I replied, puzzled as to how the timing of my shopping had anything to do with this.

"Uncle Ah-Pae has passed away,"

Tonmai said in a low, ominous tone.

"What? I didn’t know!"

"You probably didn’t notice. Ugh... I’m pretty sure he passed away just last week."

"Wha... but last Friday we didn’t have class, so I told him I’d visit him this week,"

I said, a mix of sadness and shock washing over me.

"Wait... does that mean Uncle Ah-Pae became a ghost?"

"That’s right... The rumor says people have heard a woman crying from that abandoned store at night!"

"But... Uncle Ah-Pae was a man, wasn’t he? Why would the crying sound like a woman?"

I countered, trying to apply logic.

"That’s not the point you should focus on, Seal!"

"Uncle Ah-Pae was so kind... Why would he haunt people?"

I argued, still not understanding. My memory of Uncle Ah-Pae was of a cheerful, kind old man who loved chatting. That kind of personality didn’t seem like the type to become a vengeful ghost.

"You don’t know. He might have had some deep-seated grudge, and when he passed away, that grudge turned him into a spirit, causing him to haunt people everywhere!"

"And why are you trying so hard to set the mood, Tonmai? Have some pity on Maewnam. That’s her usual way home. And that haunted store you’re talking about... we’re about to walk past it, aren’t we?"

Chompoo, who had been quiet for a while, finally burst out in frustration.

"It just came to mind,"

Tonmai said defensively.

"Good thing it’s broad daylight. If it were nighttime, I’d definitely take a detour,"

I joked to lighten the eerie mood Tonmai had created, though it didn’t seem to work on Chompoo. Her face showed genuine fear.

"Maewnam, Tonmai, should we take a detour?"

Uh-oh... Chompoo’s expression made it clear she wasn’t joking.

"Are you crazy? If we take a detour, Maewnam might collapse from exhaustion! Look at her—her face is so red it’s about to burst,"

Tonmai countered Chompoo’s suggestion. Wait, why was I dragged into this? Still, for the sake of my well-being, I decided to play along.

"Yeah... I don’t think I can make it. Otherwise, you and Tonmai would have to carry me back to the department," I said.

Seeing that both Tonmai and I made a convincing case, and considering it was broad daylight—where ghosts would presumably prefer to stay out of the heat—Chompoo reluctantly gave in.

"Hurry up then! If you see or hear anything, don’t say a word—just keep walking. Got it?"

"Got it / Okay!"

As soon as we agreed, the three of us walked with our heads down, as if herding buffalo somewhere. The closer we got to the troublesome convenience store, the more I subconsciously held my breath.

*This is so nerve-wracking... Uncle Ah-Pae, please don’t scare me, considering how often I used to shop at your store.*

"Hey... Maewnam, look at that,"

Tonmai said, startling me so much I flinched.

"Ton! I told you not to say anything!"

Chompoo immediately shouted in panic.

"No, no, it’s nothing scary! I was just curious about the store's name," Tonmai quickly clarified after being scolded by Chompoo. His comment made me stop and look at the store sign he mentioned.

How did I not notice this before? The store in front of us had changed quite a bit. Originally, this convenience store was part of a two-story house with the ground floor converted into a store. The once open-front design now had a glass door installed. And then there was the name of the store:

**"Chumlae (Butcher) Store"** "Did someone take over and turn it into a butcher store?"

Tonmai joked, amused by the name.

"Probably still a convenience store. Look, there’s an *'Open'* sign hanging there,"

I replied. The name was odd—okay, very odd—but judging by the exterior, it still seemed like a convenience store, not something else entirely.

"So, this store isn’t abandoned like you heard,"

Chompoo pointed out, addressing the rumors Tonmai had brought up.

"I did say it was just a rumor. Never claimed it was true,"

Tonmai defended himself with a sheepish smile as Chompoo’s sharp comment hit its mark. If you’re asking whose side I’m on, it’s definitely Chompoo. Picking the right side means you’re halfway to victory, you know.

"Don’t try to backpedal. Do you know how scared you made Maewnam and me?"

"I already said I didn’t mean to! You’re taking this too seriously."

Chompoo and Tonmai kept arguing as they walked ahead, leaving me trailing behind alone. I felt a pang of sadness thinking about Uncle Ah-Pae.

He seemed so healthy—how could he be gone so soon?

I unconsciously slowed my pace and glanced into the store.

There’s someone inside... I thought I saw a woman hiding toward the back of the shop. Was I imagining it?

"What are you looking at?"

"It looked like there was... someone in the store,"

I turned to say to Chompoo, trying to explain that I thought I saw a woman earlier—probably the new owner. But when I looked again toward the spot where I thought I saw someone, it was empty. "I don’t see anyone. Are you hallucinatining ?"

Tonmai added, trying to ease the tension.

The hair on my body was standing on end. I definitely thought I saw her—a woman with hair...

"Maewnam, are you okay? You’re really pale. Is it just the sun or the wind?"

"Let’s hurry, Ton!"

This time, I was the one walking faster, pulling my two friends along without really paying attention.

I had never, in my entire life, thought or dreamed I’d be haunted by a ghost in broad daylight! Uncle Ah-Pae always told me that I was his most loyal customers. So why on earth would he scare me like this? Huh...

. .

Once the noise in front of the shop settled down, I, the humble grocery store owner, peeked out cautiously from behind the curtain. I had been nervously observing the situation from the back of the store when a group of people passed by and seemed curious about my shop’s sign. But in the end, not a single one of them came inside.

*Why is that?*

To be honest, I’m quite inexperienced when it comes to running a shop. I feel too shy to stand outside and call for customers, so I thought I’d hide behind this curtain and only come out when someone walked in.

But why does every customer look so uneasy?

I know my shop's name, **"Chumlae" (butcher/dissect)**, might be a bit too unique, but I didn’t think it’d scare people off completely!

.

# Chapter 06: Friday the 13th Customer

The late night was quiet, after the clock had struck 8 p.m., the silence was almost palpable. Thankfully, the grandfather clock in the store could be set to specific time. Otherwise, I might have had to consider retiring the old clock for good. Once I was certain there were no signs of more customers showing up, I decided to close the store for the day.

The strategy to give the store a memorable name seemed like a complete failure. All I could do was sigh at the meager number of customers, a number you could practically count on one hand. I thought the name was quirky and innovative-why wasn't it working? Thankfully, I had a side job; otherwise, this business would be shutting down soon, leaving me penniless.

Speaking of strange occurrences, something unusual happened recently, something I can't seem to explain. The only person who might have had answers isn't in this world anymore.

I picked up a pack of instant noodle cups to inspect it. If you're wondering what's so suspicious about instant noodles, here are three points to consider:

1. This flavor isn't available in the store.
2. Why was it hidden in the drawer?
3. Most baffling of all, the sticky note on it.

.

"**For the customer on Friday night,**

**At 11 p.m."**

.

I turned the sticky note over repeatedly, scrutinizing it as if shining it under a light might reveal a hidden treasure map. The handwriting was my dad's, no doubt. As I mentioned before, my dad was meticulous-he had a habit of jotting things down to avoid forgetting. That habit was a blessing, as it made it easier for me to gather information about the store.

Sent Photo: A whale image

**Whale**:

Here it is. This is what I told you about.

.

**Noey**:

Whale... I'm a lawyer, not a detective!

.

I frowned as my best friend scolded me instead of helping. I didn't message her just to get berated!

**Whale**:

Can you just help me think this through?

**Noey**:

You're really interrupting my drama binge, you know!

**Noey**:

Then why don't you stay and wait?

**Noey:**

It's Friday, after all.

**Whale**: You're right, it's perfect timing. .

Come to think of it, tonight is Friday. How oddly coincidental.

.

**Noey**:

And not just any Friday...

**Noey**:

It's Friday...

**Noey**:

The 13th.

**Noey**:

Good luck, my dear friend.

**Whale**:

You...!

.

I sent my best friend a long rant, but there were no signs she'd read it. Noey had probably gone off to binge her drama series like she said earlier. So rude! And leaving me with a bombshell like that before disappearing? I hope the lead actor in your drama dies!

I'm not afraid of ghosts! If I meet one, I'll ask for the winning lottery numbers-either the two-digit or the jackpot prize. That'll show them!

I glanced again at the sticky note and the pack of instant noodles, letting out a heavy sigh. No new useful clues at all.

"Daddy, could you drop by my dream to explain this? Leaving things this mysterious is frustrating. Even if I think until my head explodes, I'll get nowhere."

Finally, I decided to let it go and get back to work.

For me, night time is the best time for deep thinking. Its silence provides unmatched focus, and everything seems to flow more smoothly.

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***Thud.***

A sudden noise echoed from the front of the store, snapping me out of my rhythm. I reached for my smartphone and opened the app connected to the intercom camera at the storefront. The live feed showed nothing but a fallen potted plant and darkness-no signs of life anywhere.

Adjusting the camera's angle to locate the source of the noise, I spotted something that made me nearly drop my phone.

A person... that's definitely a person.

I instinctively glanced at the clock. The time displayed only made my limbs feel weaker.

**11 p.m!**

***Is this the Friday night customer at 11pm Dad mentioned?***

I swallowed hard, feeling a chill in my hands and the hair on the back of my neck standing on end. With a mix of fear and curiosity, I stared intently at the mysterious figure on the screen. Though the view wasn't clear-it was far too dark outside-I could make out the silhouette.

"I should have replaced that broken light ages ago. Procrastination always gets me!"

From their build, it looked like a woman, crouched down and facing the ice cream freezer.

**"Daddy didn't tell me this-our shop has ghost customers!"**

Fear gripped me, but curiosity was stronger. The figure seemed particularly fixated on the ice cream freezer. Could ghosts crave ice cream? And what about the instant noodles dad had prepared?

As I debated whether to wait and see if the ghost would leave on its own, the mysterious figure remained firmly in place, mumbling something indecipherable.

*Oh, crap! Is this a curse?*

It's clear now-absolutely clear! Daddy left those instant noodles as an offering, didn't he? Why didn't he leave me a manual for this kind of situation? If I don't give it the noodles, it's going to curse the shop, isn't it?

Panic overtook me as I darted my eyes around, trying to figure out how to deliver the offering. Would lighting incense inside the shop work to let it know?

No, no, bad idea! Lighting incense might be like sending an invitation: Hey, we've got food in here, so don't just stay outside-come shop inside! Just imagining that scenario sent shivers down my spine.

Do I really have to open the door and face it? It's a ghost! Do I really have to go out there? Despite my nerves, the looming shadow outside the shop left me no choice. Was it just my imagination, or was it creeping closer?

"Daddy, Mommy..."

I muttered nervously.

"I know this might sound strange, but... please protect me! You're definitely stronger than that ghost outside. If anything weird happens, please take care of it!"

I turned to the framed photo of my parents, raising my hands in prayer, begging for their protection.

*Who would've thought managing a grocery store would involve ghostbusting? Amazing Thailand indeed.*

After a moment to gather my courage, I prepared my ghost-battling kit: a piece of sacred thread-well, okay, just regular white string (it's close enough, right?), one stick of incense, and a pack of instant noodles. Originally, I considered offering just a single cup of noodles, but then it struck me-if I gave only one, the ghost might show up every Friday! So, I grabbed an entire pack, hoping it would stay away for at least a month or two.

And if this works, I'll prepare a whole case next time! Enjoy it and never come back!

I silently lifted the blinds, only to startle when I realized the figure was right within arm's reach. My grip on the ridiculously colorful rainbow feather duster tightened. It was Dad's trusty duster-don't ask me how it was supposed to help against ghosts, but somehow, having it made me feel a little braver.

*Just open the door, put down the instant noodles, and that's it. You can do this, Whale.*

I repeated the plan in my head like a mantra. My spirit was ready to face the challenge, but my hands were trembling like leaves in the wind. Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I slowly unlocked the door and opened it, as quietly as possible. The ghost, still crouched by the ice cream freezer, continued mumbling to itself.

*"I am not scary... Come on..."*

I heard the ghost's voice loud and clear. Did... did it just say it wasn't scary? Seriously? Sitting in front of my shop, whispering that it's not scary-was that supposed to comfort me?

Nope. It was terrifying. I was so scared I wanted to cry.

With trembling hands, I cracked the door open further and slid the pack of instant noodles toward the ghost's back. The figure remained engrossed with the ice cream freezer, paying me no attention.

*Yes! You did it, Whale!*

I clenched my fist in silent victory when the noodles landed perfectly behind the ghost as if by divine precision. Mission accomplished. I sighed softly, thinking I could finally relax.

Or so I thought.

The ghost didn't even glance at the offering. It stayed focused on the freezer, mumbling in that eerie tone.

"Turn around! I gave you food, okay? A whole pack!"

I silently willed the ghost to notice, but my effort was in vain. Did I mess up the process somehow?

My eyes fell on the incense stick in my hand, and I let out a defeated sigh. How could I forget? You're supposed to light the incense when offering food to spirits.

Now I was in trouble. The noodles were already behind the ghost, and I didn't have a backup plan. That left me with no choice-I'd have to step outside, light the incense, and plant it in the ground.

Carelessness leads to ghostly encounters! Why did I only think of this now? I had the incense in my hand from the start!

I cracked the door open a bit more and squeezed my way out. The ghost didn't seem to notice me yet. I silently vowed that if I survived this night, I'd replace the broken light outside the shop. Not just any light-I'd install a full-on LED spotlight that could light up the entire street!

But back to the terrifying present. The pitch-black night was lit only by the moonlight, highlighting the crouched figure of the woman. The scene sent chills down my spine.

This was full-on horror movie material.

I tightened my grip on the feather duster and the incense stick, ready to smack the ghost with all my might if it turned around. At the very least, I hoped the blow would stun it long enough for me to make a run for it back into the store.

Step by cautious step, I crept up behind the ghost, careful not to make a sound. When I was close enough, I clutched the incense stick tightly and jabbed it into the target area with all the determination I could muster.

The sharp sound of the incense stick piercing through the tightly stretched plastic caught the ghost's attention. It whipped its head around toward the source of the noise with unnerving speed.

Oh no...

*SCREAM!*

"AAAAHHH! Grocery store ghost!"

**Wait a second... Why was the ghost screaming with me?**

**.**

# Chapter 07: Friday Night's Ghost vs.The Grocery Store Ghost

Who knew ghosts could be just as startled to see humans?

"Ahhh! Don't hurt me! I'm scared!"

The ghost in front of me, upon turning to see me, didn't charge like I'd feared. Instead, she collapsed to the ground like someone whose knees had given out.

"Uh..."

Why does this ghost look more terrified than I am?

"I'm a loyal customer! Please don't haunt me!"

Wait, why does this feel like we've switched roles? I stared at the ghost, who nervously pressed her hands together in a pleading gesture.

Shouldn't that be me instead? Why is the ghost afraid of someone as gorgeous as me?

"It's all your fault!"

She suddenly snapped at the ice cream freezer, sounding oddly indignant.

"I shouldn't have come here!"

"Wait... who are you talking to? Is there another ghost here I can't see?"

I asked nervously. While I was wondering who she was referring to, her eyes suddenly locked on the offerings I had just set down.

"That wasn't there before!"

She exclaimed in shock.

Of course not-it's new! I just put it there! I thought, annoyed. Watching her back away from the offering like it was something terrifying, I couldn't help feeling a bit offended. I'd risked so much just to put it there!

"It's for you to eat..."

I muttered, starting to doubt my own actions. Was I seriously trying to sell my offering to a ghost?

"I don't want it! Don't try to share it with me!"

She yelled, loud and clear.

"Wait, what?"

I tried to interject, but she ignored me.

"Don't invite me! You eat it yourself!"

The ghost kept backing away until her back was pressed tightly against the ice cream freezer.

I was starting to feel like I'd stepped into some strange alternate reality. She looked up at me with sheer terror and shouted,

"Go back to where you came from! Don't show yourself here again!"

Wait. Hold on. Something isn't right. Why is she talking as if I'm the ghost here?

"Uncle, oh Uncle! You've passed on, so why didn't you fight for this place? Why let a new ghost take over your store!?"

Her words made me frown. Was the "Uncle" she mentioned referring to my Daddy? And this "new ghost"...

Was she talking about me?

What's going on?

***"So, Am I the ghost?"***

I blinked repeatedly, pointing to myself in confusion. What kind of situation was this?

"Ahh! You didn't know you were dead? Stay away from me! Ghost of the grocery store, get out!"

"Whose grocery store? You're the Friday Night Ghost!"

I retorted, frustrated at being called a spirit.

"I'm not a ghost! You're the ghost! You should stay in your ghostly space and stop bothering me!"

"Calm down,"

I said, slightly concerned for the woman who seemed overly frightened. Without thinking, I reached out to touch her shoulder.

*"Don't touch me! AHHH!"*

***Click.***

Just as chaos unfolded, the store's front light flickered on. Technology can be unreliable, but at least the sudden illumination lit u the area, revealing the face of the supposed Friday Night Ghost clearly.

**"You're the one from the bookstore..."**

I gasped as recognition dawned. The woman sitting there, eyes squeezed shut, was the same person who'd tried to recommend books to me before.

What a coincidence... or was it?

But the person in front of me was definitely terrified. Her round cheeks were puffed up as she mumbled a chant with her eyes still shut.

"You..."

I tried addressing her, but it seemed her nerves were completely shot.

"Namo... Namo... Oh no, I forgot the chant! Grocery Store Ghost, please don't haunt me! Just tell me what you like to eat, and I'll make merit for you!"

I couldn't help but smile wryly at her reaction. So she really thought I was a ghost too, huh?

"Open your eyes. I'm not a ghost,"

I urged her gently, trying to get her to calm down and talk. But as they say, people handle stress and fear differently. Luckily, I seemed to be the more level-headed one, or I wouldn't have dared step out to offer a "ghost" tribute earlier.

"That's not true! Don't try to trick me!"

She cried, her voice shaky.

"I'm sorry for badmouthing your store and calling it the weirdest name ever! Who even names their shop like that? Is this revenge because I insulted it?" I stared at her in shock. Was the name "Chumlae Store" really that strange?

"And during the day, you came to haunt me too! Please let me go home. I shouldn't have looked at you..."

I was left dumbfounded, unable to process her accusations. When had I ever haunted this woman? Or... could she mean the times I peeked at people walking past the back of the shop?

"Oh, come on! How could someone as beautiful as me be a ghost? Are you seeing things with your eyelids or something?!"

I felt a little irritated that a stranger suddenly scolded me in such a longwinded way. In my mind, I thought about playing a trick on the other person to shock them.

How could they think I was a ghost with looks like this? It was such a blow to my dignity. But then again, I decided it was better not to do anything. After all, I didn't want this crazy woman to get so scared her heart would stop in front of my shop. If that happened, I would likely be haunted instead.

"Ah!"

The other person exclaimed as I lightly tapped their head with a feather duster.

"I'm not a ghost. Open your eyes and let's talk first,"

I said in a calm and persuasive tone.

"What kind of ghost would carry things or grab you like this? Open your eyes quickly."

I tapped the feather duster on their head rhythmically.

It seemed my reasoning was convincing enough. The frightened person cautiously opened their eyes little by little, hesitantly. This time, I squatted down to bring my eye level closer to theirs.

"Not a ghost, right?"

I suppressed a laugh as the other person still had tears in their eyes. Her face looked stunned for a moment before she fully opened her eyes and looked into mine. **"Beautiful..."**

"Huh?"

"Ah... no, hahaha, you're not a ghost after all."

The other person laughed nervously after seeing my face clearly. She also looked a little embarrassed. Well, I could understand the misunderstanding. It was easy to mistake me for a ghost, and her awkward words only confirmed it.

"My shop sells tin cans, in case you're interested."

"...."

"So, what are you doing sneaking around here?"

I asked with a pointed gaze at the now-flustered stranger.

"Stop being so shy; I'm not teasing you."

Even though I had cleared up the misunderstanding that this woman was alive and not a ghost, it was still strange for someone to just randomly come and sit by the ice cream freezer like this.

"The truth is, I didn't really want to be here either, but there's a reason..."

The stranger looked as though she wanted to say something important.

"And what's that?"

I pressed, narrowing my gaze at them.

"What's the reason?"

"I heard a cat's meow coming from here."

She looked downcast and pointed toward the area behind the ice cream freezer. I looked over skeptically, unable to believe that anything could possibly be in such a small, tight space.

*Meow.*

The sound came just at that moment, confirming my doubts quickly.

"See? I wasn't lying! You heard it too, didn't you?"

The other person said excitedly. That made me put my doubts to rest. After all, the life of the mysterious cat whose meows I'd heard was clearly far more important.

"Alright, alright. Could you help me move the fridge a bit? I'll shine the flashlight in there,"

I said, trying to cover up my earlier slip as I looked at the person in front of me with suspicion. But I wasn't wrong, was I? Who would've thought she'd come to help a cat? I thought she must have come to ask for a share of merit instead.

I turned on the flashlight application and shone it into the narrow gap behind the freezer, while the other person tried to slide it further aside to make the small opening bigger. And there it was-a small, round, murky gray thing, shivering a little in the corner.

What on earth did you get into that deep, little one? I could only think to myself, contrasting the other person, who was already preparing to squeeze into the gap. They even wore a clean white shirt...

Even though she looked timid, she weren't afraid to dive right in, huh?

"Hey, could you hold my bag for me for a moment?"

The other person handed me a handbag, which I took confusedly. Before I could say anything, she had already squeezed into the narrow gap, leaving me standing there, nervous and anxious from a distance.

"Wait! Let me unplug this first!"

I suddenly remembered, calling out as I quickly pulled the power plug.

After all, safety came first. If something happened to her from an electric shock, I'd be in trouble too.

I looked at her squeezing into the small gap without a care about the dust on her shirt. I couldn't help but be amazed.

"Don't worry. I'll help you,"

She said in a soothing voice, presumably to calm the little gray bundle trembling in her arms. It didn't take long before she emerged with a beaming smile on her face.

"Is it a kitten?"

I asked, trying to get a glimpse at what she was carrying.

"Yes, I'm not sure why it was hiding here. Where did its mother go?"

She replied, speaking gently to the kitten in her arms, who was shivering.

"It has a wound here,"

I exclaimed in surprise when I noticed a bloodstained area on her elbow. But she seemed to misunderstand my words.

"I think it must've been hurt. Even though the bleeding has stopped,"

She said, mistakenly assuming I was talking about the kitten's front leg.

"I wasn't asking about the kitten. I was asking about you,"

I clarified, pointing at her elbow.

"Is it very painful?"

She noticed her own injury then but didn't seem very shocked.

"Oh, it's just a minor scrape. Don't worry about it. The kitten's leg seems to be in worse shape... We'll take it to the vet ourselves. As for the ice cream freezer, we'll move it back to its place later."

"Forget the ice cream freezer. It's already so late. How are you planning to get back at this hour?"

I asked, stopping her as I realized it was the middle of the night. She was already worried about the kitten and, on top of that, showing concern for my ice cream freezer.

"I'll drive you. The parking lot is close by, so it's no problem at all."

"But I have a problem."

"You wait here,"

I said with an authoritative tone, and she nodded uncertainly. I went inside to grab my wallet and car keys before coming out to lock the door securely.

"Get in,"

I said as I parked in front of the shop and called to her.

"Is it okay...?"

She still hesitated, looking at my car with uncertain eyes.

"Look at the situation. Just come on."

"But... but I'm dirty. Very dirty."

"Can you stop asking so much? I said get in, so just get in already,"

I cut her off, my gaze sharp and disapproving. That finally made her open the car door and sit next to me.

*In the end, I didn't get to meet my usual Friday-night customer, but I did meet a sweet person and a kitten instead.*

# Chapter 08: VIP Customer

It was now 2 a.m.—the perfect time to rest. But why did I have to stand here dealing with this impulsive person who never thought things through...

Luckily, since it was the middle of the night, we were the first to use the veterinary clinic's services. It didn’t take long for the little kitten to be checked, treated for its front leg wound, and cleaned up. But the problem didn’t stop there.

"So, what you’re saying is... your condo doesn’t allow cats?"

I asked, looking at the kitten now clean and pristine in the other person’s arms. I hesitated, unsure of what to do next.

The words hit a little too close to home, and the other person looked even more lost and uncertain. She seemed to tighten her grip on the kitten slightly.

"Even though you’re completely unprepared, you still went and got yourself into this situation, huh?"

I added, voice laced with just the right amount of frustration.

"If you were me, you’d probably do the same, too. I couldn’t just leave it like that—the kitten is so helpless, poor thing. Don’t you see?"

She tried to emphasize the cuteness of the little white kitten in her arms.

At first, the tiny thing had a dusty, dirty coat, but the nurse cleaned it up thoroughly. That’s when I realized the kitten wasn’t gray but had fur that bore a slight resemblance to a Siamese cat—almost like a mixed or "fake" Siamese variety, though, nothing special.

Don’t try that innocent look on me. I’m not falling for it!

I scrunched my nose at the cute little thing, even though I felt a little awkward as I met the gaze of its owner, who was now staring at me intently.

What is this, a staring contest with a cat?

"So... what should we do about this?"

I asked, trying to break the odd, tense mood. Despite knowing I was pretty, being stared at so much was starting to make me uneasy.

"We’ll take responsibility ourselves. But... could we leave it here at the shop until tomorrow?"

She asked, her voice hopeful as her eyes sparkled with both anxiety and pleading.

I hesitated at her request. She and the kitten both looked so vulnerable, so desperate that I couldn’t bring myself to say no. Those puppy-dog eyes were more effective than I wanted to admit.

"...Fine. Just for one night,"

I said with a deep sigh, finally giving in.

"Thank you so much. You’re so kind,"

She said with a bright smile, clearly relieved.

I looked at the small items I got from the veterinary clinic for taking care of the kitten at the initial stage—things like a cardboard box, a towel, and a milk bowl—and decided that I would have to let this strange person come into the shop to put everything in order.

After arranging the cardboard box, laying down the towel, and letting her place the kitten inside, everything was set.

This kitten is so well-behaved—no meowing, no scratching, no squirming at all.

"*Sigh*... Finally, this is over,"

I sighed, stretching lazily to relieve my tiredness.

"So, see you tomorrow—"

*Growl...*

A loud growling sound from her stomach interrupted the words she was about to say. Her face turned red with embarrassment.

"Since we’re already here..."

I said with a drawn-out voice while examining the person in front of me. She was taller than me, with healthy white skin, chubby cheeks, and a cute, innocent face. She looked harmless, like a genuinely good person, especially since she threw herself into helping the stray kitten.

"How about... we eat together for a bit first?"

(The kitten meowed softly.)

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**SEAL POV**

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The ticking of the clock competed with the sound of my heartbeat, which felt loud in my ears. I felt completely unsure of myself.

Seeing her face this close, my heart was almost about to give out—not from fear of ghosts this time, but because she was so beautiful. Her silky black hair gleamed, her skin was radiant, her round eyes and moist, pink lips— everything about her was stunning and hard to put into words.

Being with someone you feel so strongly about... It made it very hard to act normal, and my stomach wasn’t on my side either, growling out loud and making me feel even more awkward.

"Are you going to eat something?"

Her voice brought me back to my senses, pulling me out of my thoughts.

"Yes, let’s eat," I said quickly.

"Okay, choose anything. I’ll pay for it,"

She said with a friendly smile.

"Wait... how could I forget about your wound?"

She suddenly frowned as she noticed something. She came toward me and...

"Ouch."

She grabbed my arm firmly, making me realize I had a wound on my elbow.

"You care about the cat but not yourself, huh?"

She said in a slightly scolding tone.

"But... it didn’t hurt... until you brought it up just now," I muttered.

"Let’s put some medicine on that wound first," she said.

"Does it sting?"

I automatically asked without thinking, and the response was the amused face of the shop owner looking at me.

*'Why? Are you afraid of the sting!'*

"It won't sting at all."

"Don't lie to me."

Although I allowed this beautiful lady to apply the medicine, seeing the Betadine in her hand made my previously strong composure falter so easily.

"D-don't worry, I'll apply it myself,"

I tried to find an escape for myself. At least if I did it myself, it might sting less than if she applied it.

"How can you apply it yourself when you can’t even see it? I’ll do it for you,"

And just like that, I was rejected without any consideration, forced to give in and let her handle it.

Because the wound was on my elbow, it was a bit awkward to apply the medicine, and I didn't know where to direct my gaze. Right now, her face was so close as she focused on applying the medicine that I felt completely uneasy. Her beautiful face, intent and focused as she worked, only made her more charming, and I couldn’t help but stare...

"Alright..."

I flinched as the medicine touched the wound—it stung more than I expected.

"Wait, you said it wouldn't sting! You're lying to me, aren't you?"

"It's just a little sting, hang in there,"

She said, seemingly aware that I was grumbling in my mind. She then added, as though to soothe me,

"Good job,"

And finished by putting the bandage on me as though I were a child.

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"Ah, this is the taste I like,"

I exclaimed as I noticed a package of instant noodles sitting on the worktable in front of us. It still had incense sticks stuck in it from earlier...

"This? Oh, My dad wrote a post-it note to set this aside for regular customers,"

Explained the shop owner. Hearing her explanation brought tears to my eyes unexpectedly.

"Oh, you know... I'm so tired. Fridays are always late. I eat pizza every Friday until I feel like I’ll roll away,"

I complained, rambling while shopping for odds and ends.

"Then come to the shop on Fridays; I'll prepare food for you when you’re hungry,"

The kind old shopkeeper said casually.

"Really? I really work late, you know. I usually don’t get back until almost 11 p.m.,"

I laughed in disbelief.

"Alright, since you’re working late, how about we start this Friday? I’ll open the shop to welcome our special customer on Fridays." "This Friday I don’t have classes, so how about next Friday instead?"

I requested.

"Hey, why are you crying?"

The shop owner asked, startled, and that’s when I touched my face and realized tears were streaming down without me noticing.

"Oh, I feel so sorry for you, Uncle. You're so kind to us. You even prepared food that we wanted to eat..."

I took the tissue offered by her to wipe away my tears.

"I'm sure my dad would be happy to have such a good customer like you,"

She said.

"I'm sorry about Uncle..."

I spoke sadly.

"Mm... I’ve come to terms with it already. My dad was very old, too. Thank you."

"Eat this. I’ll boil some water for you,"

The shop owner cut the conversation short, as I noticed her eyes starting to glimmer red with unshed tears as well.

"So... you must be Uncle's daughter who’s taking over the business, huh?"

While eating instant noodles, I casually tried to chat with her, looking around the shop. My eyes caught sight of a graduation photo prominently displayed.

The shop owner's graduate attire looked familiar and brought memories from a faint, blurry past. My heart swelled with emotion.

Why had I never noticed this photo before? I had been searching for it for so long that I almost gave up several times... but now, I finally found it! The beloved older sister of the meat shop I cherished so much...

"Yes, and the regular customer on Friday night that my dad mentioned is you?"

She asked, nodding.

"If you mean the customer that comes at 11 p.m. on Fridays, then yes, you’re right,"

I said, feeling confused and a little happy at the same time, which made it hard for me to stay composed.

"My Friday class ends in the evening, so I finish late," I added to clarify. She nodded in understanding.

"Thank you, and sorry for misunderstanding you earlier,"

I said as I prepared to leave, grateful for the kindness the shop owner had shown by treating my wound and offering me a meal. I felt guilty for having lashed out at her so strongly earlier.

"Consider everything settled, then. I also thought you might be a ghost at first,"

The shop owner said casually, not taking it too seriously.

"But it was funny, though. You looked so shocked when you saw me, didn’t you?"

She teased as I turned to look at her and screamed, falling awkwardly to the ground.

"Who would’ve guessed? I thought you were going to perform some kind of ritual and drag me into it,"

I tried to explain, embarrassed but trying to sound rational.

"Funny. Your imagination is pretty creative,"

She said, smiling.

"Come on, put yourself in my shoes. If you were looking at a strange shop with a strange name with no customers, and suddenly saw a woman with long hair, wouldn’t you think she was a ghost?"

I hoped my reasoning would at least make my words sound a little more credible.

"By the way, just out of curiosity... the name '*Chumlae*'—is it really that strange?"

The shop owner asked, triggering my urge to explain. This was a weakness tied to my profession as a teacher—once I got into an explanation, I couldn’t stop.

Please, don’t let this lead to a debate... My mind heated up at the thought.

"Well, it's not that strange. This is the result of not believing me earlier. If you had trusted me from the beginning, when I first opened the bookstore, things wouldn’t have ended up this bizarre."

"Are you implying that my shop name is weird?"

"N-no, that’s not what I meant,"

I tried to defend myself, but it didn’t seem to work. I’d heard of the proverb that says *"words can lead to trouble,"* but today, I might actually find myself in trouble because of my own mouth.

"Well, you could be anyone, and I can’t just trust you without being cautious. I can’t help it," she said.

"Maewnam," I said firmly.

"Uh?"

"My name is Maewnam. Now we know each other’s names,"

I added, even though she gave me a look as if to say, *'Why are you telling me your name? I wasn’t interested in knowing'.* I wasn’t giving up, though.

"It’s not that I want to know at all,"

She said, her voice sharp. It hurt a little... I didn’t expect such a sharp response from someone with such a pretty face.

"Well... it wouldn’t be fair for you to know my name while I don’t know yours,"

I pressed on, smiling slyly as I thought of what Uncle often bragged about regarding his daughter.

"Your name is Abeluga!"

"I’m Whale," She said firmly.

"Eh? But Uncle told me that his daughter’s name was—"

I tried to argue back, but she cut me off.

"It’s Whale," she said flatly.

"....."

"My name is Whale. Okay?"

The shop owner’s face had turned a deep shade of red.

"Okay, Khun Whale,"

I said quickly, closing my mouth shut when she emphasized it again. I’d never expected this. Well... Whale or Abeluga, or whatever else that name was... I’d erase it from my mind entirely.

I’d pretend I’d never heard it before, for my own safety and peace of mind.

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# Chapter 09: Somharuthai

I don’t know if it was because I was exhausted or because so many things had happened all at once, but the moment my head touched the pillow, I fell asleep immediately.

It was an ordinary morning, just like every other day. I woke up, dressed simply in plain clothes—well, when running the shop, there wasn’t much need to dress up or create unnecessary fuss.

"You're waking up late, Whale,"

Dad greeted as I came down the stairs casually.

"It’s you who woke up way too early, Dad,"

I greeted back with my usual tone. But wait... hold on a second. Why is Dad sitting comfortably, sipping coffee and reading the newspaper? Shouldn't he...

"Daddy... how come you're here? You already passed away, didn’t you?"

I asked bluntly, even though it was strange to hear myself say that. Despite knowing that my father had passed away, I didn’t feel scared in the slightest.

Dad was my father, after all. What would I fear about him? "You’re calm, aren’t you? Aren’t you at least a little shocked?"

Dad sighed and spoke to me in a light-hearted manner.

"Nope. I know this is just a dream, you see. Plus, you came looking good— not all disheveled or anything. Why would I be scared?"

Even though I knew it was a dream, it felt strangely comforting.

"You’re sweet with your words, aren’t you, kiddo?"

"Of course. I’m your only daughter, after all. But wait... is there something you want to tell me, Dad? Or is this some kind of lottery number visit? Oh my god! If it is, then my prayers have been answered! I’ve always loved you, Dad!"

I couldn’t believe how this situation might turn out. I had to memorize the numbers as soon as I woke up.

*"Sigh..."*

"What? You’re not here to give me numbers?"

I asked Dad in a disappointed voice. I’d really thought I was about to become a millionaire.

"I just see you’re doing fine, and that makes me happy,"

He said with a gentle smile before finishing his coffee, standing up, and preparing to leave his chair.

"Wait a second, where are you going? Stay and talk with me for a while!"

I ran toward him with shock in my voice, but strangely, no matter how fast I ran, he seemed to drift farther away.

"What is this? If you’re leaving now, it feels like you’ve already gone too far. I've been waiting for you for so long!"

The smile on Daddy's face always reflected happiness whenever he spoke about the horse, but that also made me feel like I was being abandoned.

"Daddy, are you going to leave me alone? No way..."

My voice started to break as I tried to chase him with trembling legs.

"We have that little one... she chose our shop as her place of refuge. She chose us, Whale."

"But... but..."

"Daddy is leaving now. Take care of yourself."

"Daddy! Wait, Daddy!"

Daddy's figure seemed to grow more and more distant until I ran out of strength to chase him, but I still tried to shout with all my might, hoping that my voice would reach him.

"Daddy!"

The sound of my own voice startled me awake. I felt the dampness on my cheek—my tears...

*Is this a dream? It's very realistic dream.*

"Ahh..."

I jumped again as I felt the wet sensation behind my hand.

Turning my gaze, I found the little kitten lying beside me. It had come to sleep here because of the air conditioning in the room, which must have felt much better than being outside in the heat.

"Are you here to comfort me?"

I asked the kitten, knowing it wouldn’t understand me.

*"Meow..."*

It let out a small sound, almost like a response.

"You understand me when you meow, huh?"

My voice softened without me realizing it as I gazed at the little kitten’s round blue eyes staring back at me.

Why did I suddenly feel so emotionally vulnerable? At first, it didn’t look this cute... or was I about to become your slave? *"She chose our store as her place of refuge, Whale..."*

Daddy's words lingered in my mind.

Having a pet had always been something I vowed never to do, as it felt like unnecessary trouble. But when a small injured kitten came seeking help like this... how could I possibly reject it? "Ahh, don’t cry that cute little sound at me!"

Ugh, fine... I give up...

"I’ll let you become a new member of this house. Are you satisfied now?"

I let out a long, tired sigh as if I had surrendered to the kitten’s irresistible charm. My heart felt strangely vulnerable as if my walls had just crumbled under the little creature’s gaze.

"And then?"

The little kitten responded so knowingly that I couldn’t help but scratch its head out of sheer amusement.

"What should I name you, hmm?"

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**SEAL POV**

The final exam period for students is approaching, it can be seen from the crowded library filled with students preparing for their tests. Some even likened this period to a simulation of going to hell.

But who could ever know that the ones writing the test questions felt like they were in hell just as much?

"You..."

"Tonmai... don’t talk to me right now. I feel like I’m about to die..."

I interrupted my friend, who was about to chat, my eyes still fixed on the laptop screen with exhaustion weighing me down.

"I'm hungry,"

Tonmai lamented.

"But if I eat, I won’t finish the test questions. I can’t stop writing the questions now,"

I gently refused him.

"I’ve stopped, but you’re still at it."

"I’m not Onkulimal. I’m not stopping."

"Hell is going to eat your brains!"

A voice came from Chompoo, who had her head resting on the table.

"Take a break Maewnam. Look at Chompoo, she’s taking a break,"

Tonmai pleaded for sympathy. Honestly, I thought Tonmai was probably just lonely and didn’t want to sit alone eating.

"Tonmai... Chompoo isn’t resting. What she’s doing is called nocked out." I glanced at the woman with her head down on the table as if completely worn out. Between conducting academic research and writing test questions, how could she is not knock out?

"But you’re insane. Absolutely insane. Three hundred questions. How can you even do that?"

Tonmai continued to try engaging me, but I stayed focused.

"I’ve been writing this many questions every semester. It’s standard for me."

"I’ve seen students come out of the exam room after taking your test and run to vomit,"

Tonmai said, his face filled with horror.

"Minimized errors, you know."

"No wonder students call you *Teacher Seal Leopard*."

"Talking nonsense again. When have I ever been cruel? I’m actually very kind,"

I laughed at the nickname the students had given me. Seal Leopard is one of the most ferocious subspecies in the entire Seal family. It could tear apart penguin flesh in an instant. How could someone as kind as me ever be a Seal Leopard? Not this Seal—this one doesn’t eat penguins... it's better to eat whale.

"Three hundred questions and three hours of time? I wouldn’t call that kind at all. This is horrifying."

I laughed at Tonmai’s words. My course content was dense, and although I could make the test essay-style with three to four questions worth 50 points each, I felt sorry for the students who spent their time studying only to discover they weren’t quite prepared for the actual questions.

I’d been through that experience back in my university days—spending countless hours reading until laziness took over, and then finding that the exam questions came from a random page I barely glanced at. That was frustrating as hell.

When I became a teacher, I didn’t want any of my students to experience the same kind of pain I went through.

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"So, in the end... you’re really not going to eat with me, huh?"

"Would you prefer instant porridge instead, Tonmai?"

I suggested, giving my persistent friend an alternative. Honestly, I wanted to tell him to just go eat alone by now, but I knew if I did, I’d risk making him sulk for days, so it was better to pick another way.

"You! We’re doctors, you know!"

Tonmai protested while Chompoo was busy picking a flavor of instant porridge for herself.

"Spicy shrimp porridge is delicious. I have cheese too. Interested, anyone?"

Chompoo turned to show her cheese slice to the group.

"Cheese? Then I’ll go with the seafood flavor,"

Tonmai chimed in quickly. This was classic Tontree. He was so easily swayed. I couldn’t help but enjoy how predictable he was.

"Hey... Tonmai, Chompoo. Does anyone want to adopt a cat?"

I asked as we waited for the porridge to cook. Both of them fell silent in response, which was all the answer I needed.

"Wait... is it me?"

"The silence is the best answer, Maewnam,"

Tontree said without looking at me.

"Where did you go to hide again? You kind-hearted person an honour to society."

"Not at all. He came to asked for help, and because of him, I got to meet the older sister at the grocery store."

I explained.

"What is that?"

Chompoo looked at me with a puzzled expression.

"You don’t know about Maewnam's older sister at the grocery store, right?" Tonmai asked, and Chompoo shook her head.

"I’ll tell you myself. Chompoo, you should pay attention. Anyone who’s friends with Maewnam has to know this legend."

"I've only just joined your group not long ago,"

Chompoo complained but remained seated, listening intently to the story from Tonmai.

"Alright, the story goes like this. Back in 9th grade, our beloved teacher was still teenager. One day, she saw the older sister rejected by her friends at the barbecue meat shop and decided to cheer her up by treating her to meat,"

Tonmai shared smoothly, which made me feel a little annoyed. He spoke with such ease as though it were his own story. He was so attentive to his friends’ affairs.

"Fiery, fiery,"

Chompoo muttered dramatically as she listened to the story, adding flair to Tontree’s narration.

"Want fiery stuff?"

"That’s a bad joke. Shut up."

"Harsh."

I closed my mouth, as my friend advised, and started heating the porridge. Fine, it was better not to share my own story anyway.

"In simple terms, she liked her. But at the time, Maewnam was a bit dumb and forgot to ask for her contact details. So, she missed her chance and had to eat bitter melon instead. But you know... our beloved teacher was still very hopeful that she would meet her again someday."

"Yeah... Idealistic. It’s impossible now. By now, she’s probably married with six kids or something,"

Chompoo nodded in agreement, and they both burst into laughter. Their laughter was so loud that I began to feel a little annoyed.

My friends were getting off track from the original purpose of the story. They were laughing without taking the story seriously. They had no idea that I had just revealed something important about the big sister at the grocery store.

Perhaps it was better to keep that story to myself for now. I’d share it with them later when the time was right—perhaps when I could win her over.

. .

Getting off work on time had become a distant concept ever since I became a salaried office worker. University teachers were also salaried workers, except without overtime pay.

I hurried back to my condo to check myself in the mirror. I applied the same powder and touched up my lipstick to make sure I looked my best for meeting someone I liked. There was no way I’d show up looking disheveled and worn out.

The truth is, my condo didn’t allow pets, as I’d mentioned to Khun Whale last night. I initially planned to find a home for the kitten or drop it off with a friend, but as expected, nobody wanted to adopt a kitten. Tonight, I’d likely have to sneak the kitten back into my room without the security guard spotting us. Otherwise, I’d have some serious explaining to do!

It wouldn’t be good to break my promise to Khun Whale. A person like Maewnam always keeps her word.

And once again, the situation felt familiar—just like yesterday. Except this time, I wasn’t crouched nervously mistaking myself for a ghost. Standing awkwardly in front of the *Closed sign* wasn’t much different, though. Before I could do anything, the intercom speaker blared suddenly, startling me.

"I'll wait right there. I'll come open the door for you."

Before I knew it, the white curtain that had been closed was lifted, and there stood the beautiful shop owner—the sight of whom always made me lose my composure. I couldn’t help but force a nervous smile, awkward and unsure. Not very cool at all, Maewnam.

"Working late again, huh?"

"I'm so sorry. It’s just that exams are coming up, and—"

"No worries. I understand. Preparing for exams is good for college students,"

Khun Whale said with an understanding nod. Wait... did Khun Whale just mistake me for a university student?

Should I be happy that I still looked young enough to give off that impression?

"I mean, I—"

"Come inside first. I have something to discuss with you,"

Khun Whale said, leading me into the shop. I hurried to follow her without hesitation. Ahh... so much for confessing the truth that I wasn’t actually a student. She’d already assumed it... Well, in a way, I am a university lecturer, not just a student.

"What is it?"

I asked as curiosity grew about what Khun Whale wanted to tell me.

At that moment, the kitten from last night appeared, rubbing affectionately at Khun Whale's feet.

"Are you trying to be cute again, huh...?"

I muttered, watching Khun Whale lean down to interact with the kitten in the most natural and tender way. Miss Whale picked it up effortlessly, and I couldn’t help but admire the sight.

*Wait... did I miss something up here?*

"I've decided to adopt this little one. Maewnam hasn’t found a home for her yet, right?"

"No, not yet,"

I replied, observing the clean fur and the collar around her neck. No wonder she looked so well-groomed today. She wasn’t in that dusty, rough condition from last night anymore.

"So... if I were to adopt her, would you mind? Of course, I’ll make sure everything's alright."

Khun Whale smiled softly as she spoke, her voice light with laughter as she tried to evade the kitten’s tiny, eager tongue.

I couldn’t help but gulp nervously as I watched her graceful, smooth neck exposed for a moment. I was dangerously close to losing my composure again.

Why is this so tempting? I thought to myself. I could never...

But now I had to consider this—Khun Whale was already so well-prepared with everything: a litter box, grooming supplies... If I were to insist that I’d already found a home for this kitten, would that make me a bad person?

"If you say that, Khun Whale, then... I’m okay with it too,"

I said with a hesitant smile, trying not to let my nervousness show.

"Thank you."

"By the way, what’s the kitten’s name?"

"**Somharuthai**,"

I said hesitantly.

"You mean Somharuthai?"

Khun Whale repeated with a curious look, as though she were trying to confirm my words because my face might have betrayed my surprise.

"What inspired you to choose that name?"

"Well... because it’s a nice name. Somharuthai is a really good name. Why do you make that face? You don’t think it’s nice?"

I said quickly, attempting to change my expression before she could catch on.

"No way! Your sense is amazing, Somharuthai is adorable. Everything you name is cute, after all."

I noticed Khun Whale frown slightly but seemed to accept my words in the end. Sigh... lucky little kitten, living with a beautiful girl like her. She would live a good life—hopefully she’d never forget me.

"Now go on and be a good kitty in Khun Whale’s home, Somharu-thai,"

I said, watching as the kitten turned its head away from my hand and walked off. I stood there, staring at my hand in surprise, feeling suddenly awkward.

Had I just been dismissed by a cat?

"Hey, Somharuthai, come back here!"

Khun Whale called as she followed the little kitten to the back of the shop without even sparing me another glance.

The kitten I’d held so tightly just last night was now walking away from me like we were strangers. Wait a second... had I just been abandoned by the very cat I tried so hard to help?

And then... I remembered that old saying.

"Three days from a woman, and you're becomes a stranger."

But this was just one day. How could Somharuthai feel like stranger cat already?

# Chapter 10: Bribery

**SEAL POV**

I covered my mouth, which was about to yawn excessively and breach the boundaries of proper lady-like manners. Honestly, I didn’t care that much, but this condo is relatively close to the university, so I had to maintain my image a little. Otherwise, the students in my class might lose respect for me.

Normally, on weekends, I would sleep in to compensate for the stress and heavy workload. But not today. I had a great mission waiting for me:

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**Mission: To Conquer the Heart of N' Somahiruthai**

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Yes, I’m not mistaken. I did mean it—intentionally referring to her like that. N' Somharuthai. That troublesome little cat… I couldn’t help but feel a little annoyed. I swore that I was the one who saved her, yet she barely even seemed to acknowledge my existence. Or maybe it was just in my head?

Last week, while I was shopping at the store and about to chat with Khun Whale to strengthen our relationship, that little furball, Somharuthai, kept appearing and getting in the way. I guessed that due to her being a novice cat owner, Khun Whale probably hadn’t noticed the cunning schemes hidden behind the cat’s adorable and innocent eyes.

Ugh... it annoyed me so much. But as they say,

"Love you, love your cat."

Because I liked Khun Whale, I had to find a way to make that little devil, N' Somharuthai, love me too. I hoped that the gift I had prepared today would win her over…

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***Ring-ring.***

I opened the glass door but saw no trace of Khun Whale... Hmm? Where had she gone? Almost forgot that my mission wasn’t about Khun Whale today. My real goal was:

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**The little white ball of fur that looked so haughty and proud.**

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This had become intense...

“Hey, N' Somharuthai, meow meow.”

*“Meowwww!”*

Oh no... she didn’t play along at all. She even hissed at me! Why? Why couldn’t I like her?

I wasn’t trying to steal her owner or anything... but every time I saw her licking Khun Whale like that, I couldn’t help but think...

*Her cheek must feel so soft.*

“Hey, kiddo!”

I jumped when the little furball came trotting out, claws outstretched. She swiped at me, and I barely managed to pull my foot away in time.

Otherwise, I would have bled!

Wow... she was so protective. Why? Why couldn’t I like her? Khun Whale was such a charming and sweet person!

And now… I would have to find a way to win over N' Somharuthai's heart.

This was my great and challenging mission.

*Is she just yours alone?*

"Do you really think she is just yours alone? Keep in mind that I met Khun Whale years before you did. Back then, you were probably just a starry chick floating in the sky somewhere. Don’t try to act possessive on me, you little thing!"

We locked eyes in a silent battle of dominance—neither of us willing to back down. If anyone had seen this scene, I would have no idea how I would face them again. Here is a 29-year-old university teacher in a full-on battle with a kitten... Haha... But let it be known that these things come down to experience.

Prepare yourself for this special item!

*“Meow...”*

Bet you’re wondering about the wrinkled, long envelope I’m holding, huh? This is just the beginning, inexperienced N' Somharuthai. My hand tore open the envelope, and the scent that wafted into the air immediately sent the kitten into a frenzy.

“Do you know this? It’s cat treats... Smells good, doesn’t it? I know it does.”

I waved the treat bag in front of Somhathai, whose little eyes were now riveted and unable to look away.

*“Meow.”*

“You want this, huh? Well, I won’t just give it to you easily. Let’s make a deal first.”

I pulled the treat bag toward me, even as she tried to shove her little face into it. Her tiny tongue swiped the air in protest, making her all the more adorable.

"Listen here. I know you understand me. So, what do you say?”

*“Aww...”*

Eventually, curiosity won. The little one came toward me, nuzzling her tiny head affectionately. She was clever in her ways, for sure.

“Okay. You won’t bother me or Khun Whale again, okay? We can exchange one treat a day for an agreement.”

*“Meow...”*

“That’s a good kitty. Eat up, all right?”

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I grinned triumphantly as I fed the cat. The one who had caused me to lose my composure and turn to bribery with cat treats emerged from the back of the shop. She was beautiful as ever, her cheerful smile lighting up her face while she casually spoke on the phone.

"Yes, yes. Could you ask Noey to look after this for me for a bit? Would that be too much trouble?"

She glanced at me, noting my presence but showing no surprise. She merely arched her brow slightly before returning her attention to her conversation.

"Hmm... Missing me? I miss you too. When will you have time to come visit?"

"I miss you as well."

“Sure. Let’s meet soon, okay?”

Who was Khun Whale talking to?

I tried to stay focused and maintain my composure, not wanting to appear overly invested in the private matters of the beautiful store owner.

However, my mind was racing. When she said I missed you... did that mean that person was planning to visit soon? Or what be like?

Come to think of it, I still don’t know if Khun Whale has a boyfriend. She’s so beautiful; she shouldn’t still be single…

“Oh? Maewnam. What will you buy today?”

"...."

“Is Maewnam still here?”

Khun Whale's voice snapped me out of my thoughts.

“I just stopped by to bring some treats for N' Som,”

I said, trying to sound casual.

“I noticed you weren’t here, so I waited to talk to N' Som for a bit.”

“You don’t have to go out of your way like that.”

When I saw her smile, my heart, already fragile from overthinking, sank even further. It wasn’t just my imagination… the signs were pretty clear.

“I... did I bother you, Khun Whale?”

“Huh?”

“Did I make you uncomfortable?”

I asked, trying to bring it up now so I could retreat, stop myself from digging too deep. After all, the chance to meet her again like this couldn’t end with disappointment, could it?

“What’s wrong with you, Maewnam?”

Khun Whale looked at me with an expression of confusion.

“Nothing…”

How could I admit that I was discouraged? That, even though we weren’t even anything yet, the smile Khun Whale gave me could very well be the kind she gave to every customer, and not just to me…

“Don’t lie. You’ve definitely got something on your mind.”

“Well... did I disturb you while you were talking to your boyfriend?”

I asked hesitantly, with an uneasy smile. Even though I was brave enough to ask, a part of me didn’t want to stick around to hear the answer.

I didn’t want the person in front of me to have a boyfriend, but that was probably just a fading hope…

“Boyfriend?”

Khun Whale repeated the word, and I nodded, at least trying to stay composed.

But then she burst into laughter, leaving me even more confused.

“Haha, wait a minute! You’ve got me laughing so hard my stomach hurts. Oh man, you started this with such a serious tone, huh, kiddo?”

“I’m not a kid...”

I muttered, feeling slightly defensive.

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***Ding-Ding.***

“Feel free to look around first if you’re interested,”

She said as another customer entered the shop, interrupting our conversation just as I was about to explain.

How annoying... I was just about to tell her that I wasn’t a kid but actually a university lecturer. But now, I just had to let her return to her duties.

“So… are you curious?”

She continued, her attention back on me as the other customer left the shop.

“Curious if I’m single?”

"I think you’re so beautiful, Khun Whale, so I couldn’t help but wonder if someone as beautiful as you already has a boyfriend,"

I said teasingly, trying not to show any nervousness.

*Don’t sound suspicious, Maewnam!*

When Khun Whale heard my compliment, she froze for just a moment.

"What if I don’t have a boyfriend, what would you do, Maewnam?"

She asked in return.

"Well... I just wanted to know, that’s all. I guess it’s just a habit of mine to care about other people’s business,"

I admitted, fully aware that I had just labeled myself as nosey.

I looked at her, waiting anxiously for her response.

"Nope, I’m not telling you."

"Huh...?"

"Why? If I were single or not single, how would that bother you,

Maewnam?"

"Well, because... because I do want to know. Khun Whale got me curious but won’t tell me. That’s a sin, you know. You’re committing a sin by not telling me!"

I rambled on, realizing I’d dug myself into a hole without admitting the real reason: because I wanted to thank her properly.

**"You’re so persistent. I’m single and I’m fine with it,"**

Khun Whale said with a voice tinged with mild annoyance, though I nodded with a big smile.

"You really are strange,"

I muttered, watching her complain while checking the stock in the store.

Today was enough. I’d take things slow and steady—one step at a time. After all, I had N' Som as my ally now...

. .

The afternoon of grading assignments was the most sleep-inducing thing. Even though grading student homework could be mentally taxing, thinking of Khun Whale's face brought me an unexplainable happiness. My heart felt lighter—like a battered fried fish.

Ugh... by the way, I was hungry now.

It seemed like Khun Whale really thought I was just a student. Every time I tried to reveal the truth, something would always come up.

Maybe it wasn’t so bad. Honestly, her misunderstanding was fine with me because it made her interact with me more casually. Maybe I’d reveal the truth later as a fun surprise.

"Maewnam, you’re creeping me out. You’ve been smiling to yourself for half an hour now,"

Tonmai interrupted, breaking the quiet of my pen scribbles.

"Oh, Tonmai, it’s just that I’m happy, so I smile. What’s so weird about that?"

When he heard my answer, his expression turned more skeptical.

"Smiling because you’re happy, or because you’re remembering something funny, right? Look, I’m not judging you, but you’ve had that smile stuck on your face for like thirty minutes. Honestly? It’s a bit unsettling."

His words hung in the air as I tried to process what he meant. I couldn’t help but chuckle nervously.

"You’re overthinking it, you know. We’re friendly to people, animals, and objects."

"By the way... you represented the department meeting in place of P'Tuak the day before yesterday, didn’t you? Anything to update?"

Chompoo opened up the topic of conversation.

"Not much. Do you remember the higher-ups mentioned wanting to open a new branch? Well, that’s the gist of it. In short, they’re considering having special lecturers teach in the new courses they're planning to open,"

Tonmai explained when he saw Chompoo and me nodding.

"They’re thinking of starting it next semester."

"Let’s just hope the new people can get along with us,"

Chompoo chimed in, adding her opinion. After all, finding good coworkers who fit in well was sometimes harder than the job itself.

"Our group would become four people then,"

I added jokingly.

"Hey... Maewnam."

"Hmm?"

I looked up to see Tonmai suddenly speak in a serious tone.

"I heard the students gossiping about that haunted shop we passed by the other day. Apparently, the owner is very pretty. And her cat is cute, too."

My hand froze mid-write the moment I heard Tonmai’s words. "It’s a shame that we walked past it that day. I didn’t even notice," He said with regret.

"How about next Wednesday we try walking by your condo and grab something to eat nearby? It would be a nice change of atmosphere, and we can check out whether the gossip is true or not,"

Tonmai suggested with enthusiasm.

"Oh! This sounds fun."

"I will not going. It’s too hot. Eating right by the faculty is fine for me,"

I said flatly, not interested.

"But... wait. You like going out to eat elsewhere, don’t you?"

"I don’t anymore. I love the faculty cafeteria now,"

I replied to Tonmai with a stern face.

"Ton... you’re really something,"

Chompoo cut in after having been quiet and buried in paperwork. "Chompoo, help me out here. Suddenly, Maewnam is acting strange."

"Ugh... Men are all the same, aren’t they? No, I don’t like going far away. Eating here is comfortable enough,"

I said, exasperated.

"Aw, you’re really not going, huh? You’re serious about not joining in?"

Tonmai tried to persuade Chompoo, but it seemed like he was forgetting that Chompoo and I were on the same team. She let Tonmai wear himself out talking while ignoring his attempts to get her on board.

"You’re so mean... Oh! Wait, Maewnam's condo is in that area, right? You must pass by that shop all the time. Cheater. I want to see the shop owner’s face too,"

Tonmai continued pestering until I started to get annoyed.

"She isn't a single!"

"Okay, what’s with you?"

Tonmai looked startled as I suddenly blurted out in an irritated tone.

"I already told you that the shop owner isn’t single. Don’t meddle, or you might break the third precept and fall into hell, you know."

"Wait, okay, okay. Are you angry about something? I won’t interfere anymore,"

Tonmai backed down easily, leaving me to catch my breath like Godzilla in a fit of frustration.

*"Hmph..."*

"What... what is it?"

"Nothing..."

Chompoo’s smile had an oddly mischievous undertone that unsettled me.

But I wasn’t wrong, and I didn’t violate the fifth precept either—not by telling a lie! I had crossed my fingers behind my back as a sort of symbolic nullification. That doesn’t count as lying, does it?

So, you want to know if Khun Whale is single? You want to chase after Khun Whale, huh? Fine, first learn her name properly, then we’ll talk!

And let me say this: I already know her nickname.

*I’m already one point ahead of you.*

*Keep that in mind!*

# Chapter 11: Friends Eating

Brand Loyalty means loyalty to a brand or product. Loyalty, in its literal sense, refers to customers who won't switch away from your product even if competitors offer similar or better alternatives.

For a brand to sustain itself in the long term, besides occasional customers, it also needs loyal regular customers. Hmm... can such regular customers be considered brand loyal?

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Since meeting the "Seal" (a nickname or metaphor), more than a week has passed. The tall person has been dropping by the shop every day, sometimes to make a purchase, sometimes to bring snacks for Somharuthai (the cat), and occasionally to act as a life coach by teaching me how to attract more customers.

Surprisingly, the advice worked wonders! Attractive product signs and small promotions noticeably increased the number of customers visiting the store.

But where have you gone today?

Am I paying too much attention to this customer? Nonsense! It's because she has been supporting my little shop daily and consistently offering helpful suggestions. Remembering them isn't strange at all. What's odd, though, is that there's no sign of the familiar face today.

Without realizing it, I absentmindedly checked the intercom camera to glance at the area in front of the shop. Usually, the store closes at 8 p.m., but today it's nearly 8:30 p.m., and I'm still open. Not because I'm waiting for someone, of course.

I just don't feel like closing the shop early today, that's all. Even so, that person never showed up.

"Well, no snacks today, huh? Never mind, I'll give you some treats tomorrow,"

I said, turning to Somharuthai. The little cat meowed back as if it didn't care much about missing out on its favorite lickable cat treat.

Realizing there's no point in waiting any longer, I decided to close the shop and finally tackle the translation work I'd been procrastinating on.

. .

The rhythmic clicking of my fingers on the keyboard harmonized with the stillness of the night. Yet, why does this silence feel so lonely? Maybe it's because I'd grown used to the round, chubby-cheeked face that used to appear every day.

Now she's gone, I can't help but miss it.

**Wait, what? Did I just say I missed that strange person?**

Perhaps I've been working too hard and letting my thoughts wander. That must be it. Better stop for now; there's still plenty of time before the deadline.

I closed my laptop, stretched to relieve the stiffness from sitting and typing articles for hours, and decided to call it a night.

Time for Bed....

***Growl.***

The sound of my stomach interrupted my drowsiness. I hesitated, wondering if I should ignore the protest from my stomach and just go to sleep. But in the end, I couldn't resist the hunger. I suppose this is one of the perks of owning a grocery store-I can grab something to eat anytime I want.

"Whenever I'm hungry, just drop by my own store,"

I mused wryly.

Come to think of it, do I have to pay when I eat something from my own shop? Just kidding... of course, I do! Otherwise, the stock system would go haywire. After standing around and browsing for a while, I finally decided on a 3-in-1 Milo as my late-night snack.

Normally, I'm very disciplined about maintaining my figure, so indulging in a late-night snack like this is rare. If I made a habit of it, my flat stomach would soon turn round like a ball.

---

***Thunk!***

A strange noise from the front of the store pulled my attention away from the warm Milo in my hands. Who could it be at this hour?

*Could it be... a ghost again?*

Ugh! Honestly, Noy warned me to spend my free time on something other than listening to ghost stories. But no, I didn't listen-ghost stories are just too fun and captivating. And now, I'm left constantly paranoid.

I set my cup down on the table and quickly opened the intercom app on my phone to check the front camera. What I saw on the screen made me almost throw my phone.

*Eyes!*

I screamed instinctively. This house, being an old structure, doesn't insulate sound well. My scream likely carried outside, startling the owner of those mysterious eyes. They moved away from the camera, and I finally got a full view of the midnight intruder.

"Seal?"

["Hello, Khun Whale!"]

Hello, my foot! Do you even know what time it is?! I fumed silently, my appetite for Milo completely gone.

"What do you want?"

I asked the other person, who stood there looking clueless as if they'd done nothing wrong. Could you stop acting like a ghost and scaring people already?

["I came as we planned."]

Planned? When did I ever make plans with you?

I stood there, confused, but luckily, Seal didn't leave me wondering for long. She explained herself right away.

**"Our Friday Night Plan."**

Our? Whose "our"?

I almost forgot that my dad had promised something to the person standing in front of me. But wait-wasn't that his promise? Why do I have to take responsibility for it? I wanted to snap back,

*"See the door chained up over there? Maybe your eyesight is failing because the shop's front light is out, but there's a 'CLOSED' sign hanging there too!"*

But instead, I calmly said,

"The shop's closed."

In my mind, I raged at the wasted electricity, but I wasn't brave enough to lash out at this clueless late-night customer. After all, she seemed like a student from the nearby university.

If I scolded her and she got upset, she might complain to her friends, and they might all boycott my shop. That would be the end of me-especially since I barely get customers as it is.

In fact, the reason I've seen more customers lately is largely thanks to this cheerful young girl. Should I consider her a benefactor?

["But we had a promise!"]

Who promised you that?!

I screamed internally as the tall girl stubbornly refused to give up. Ugh! I shouldn't have installed an intercom system that allows two-way conversation!

["I even brought pizza! Are you sure you don't want I share it with you?"]

As she spoke, Seal held up a large pizza box right in front of the camera. Even though I was inside the shop and couldn't possibly smell it, my imagination conjured the tantalizing aroma, making my mouth water.

"I... I'm not that hungry. You can eat it by yourself,"

I tried to decline, resisting the temptation she so gleefully dangled in front of me. Seal nodded in understanding, and I thought the ordeal was over.

Despite occasionally missing this regular customer, showing up at my shop at nearly midnight was another story. Relieved that she was gone, I prepared to finally enjoy my hot Milo and head to bed.

But just as I brought the cup to my lips, the intercom buzzed again.

I sighed and opened the feed, only to narrow my eyes at the strange sight. This time, Seal wasn't talking-she was standing there, munching on her pizza with an infuriatingly relaxed expression. Her round face, mid-bite, gave me an exaggerated eyebrow wiggle that was anything but subtle.

"Why haven't you left yet?!"

I nearly screamed at the screen.

["Eating alone is lonely!"]

She replied nonchalantly.

["It's Hawaiian, you know. Come help me finish it, Khun Whale! I bought a large. Pizza isn't as good the next day."]

I couldn't tell if Seal was deliberately trying to provoke me, but her innocent-looking face and earnest eyes seemed to say, "I brought."

Let's skip the Milo and go straight to the pizza! After all, someone's already tempting me with it right in front of the shop!

Let's eat pizza at midnight, yeah!

I wasn't sure if I'd made the right decision when I unlocked the door to let Seal into the shop at nearly midnight. The moment she stepped inside, the rich aroma of cheese and tomato sauce filled the air, immediately activating my stomach's hunger sensors.

Seal's face beamed with happiness, making it impossible for me to stay annoyed. So instead, I just let it go.

"Come sit and eat here,"

I said, leading her into the kitchen. Seal followed without hesitation, placing the large pizza box on the dining table. I went to grab two plates and glasses, noticing her setting a giant soda bottle on the table as well.

"Thanks for letting me in,"

Seal said before diving into the pizza with evident delight.

"You don't need to ask at this point, do you?"

I quipped sarcastically. Seal, however, seemed entirely oblivious to my tone.

"Is it good? I wasn't sure what toppings you'd like, so I went with Hawaiian-it's a basic choice everyone likes."

I couldn't deny it-eating hot pizza late at night was one of the best feelings in the world.

"It's fine..."

I muttered, refusing to admit I actually liked it. Seal didn't seem bothered by my response, but her constant smiling was starting to irritate me.

"What are you smiling at?"

I asked, unable to hold back my curiosity.

"Nothing... I just feel happy seeing you happy,"

She said simply. Her words were casual, yet they made my heart skip a beat for a moment.

"Just eat and go,"

I snapped, trying to hide the strange fluttery feeling her comment had stirred in me.

"Sure!"

She replied cheerfully.

The aroma of pizza seemed to wake up my little shop cat, Somharuthai, who wandered in to join us.

"What's up, Som? Hungry?"

Seal bent down to greet my cat as though they were old friends.

"Don't let her eat that!"

I exclaimed in panic, worried Seal might give my cat some pizza.

Somharuthai, with her big, pleading eyes, looked up at Seal, hoping for a treat.

"You're so strict, Khun Whale. Don't worry-I brought something special just for her,"

Seal said with a gentle smile, pulling out a pack of cat treats from her bag.

I watched as she carefully fed Somharuthai the treats, feeling a bit guilty for snapping at her earlier. It was just reflex-I was startled, that's all. And seeing Seal's slightly flustered reaction to my outburst only added to my guilt.

"Does Som like it? Great! I'll bring more next time,"

Seal said, gently petting my cat, who was happily licking up the treat.

"Don't spoil her. She'll get too used to it,"

I muttered, but my voice lacked its usual edge.

Seal turned to me with her ever-present smile, one so bright and innocent it was almost childlike.

"You're so kind, Khun Whale."

"Kind? That was me scolding you,"

I replied flatly, though she didn't seem to catch the sarcasm.

The kitchen fell into a peaceful silence, broken only by the sound of Seal munching on her pizza and Som happily enjoying her treat. Watching the two of them, I sighed softly.

As much as I wanted to be annoyed by this late-night disruption, the warm, cozy atmosphere made it impossible to stay upset.

Before she even had the chance to do anything wrong, I already felt worse. It seemed like she noticed the shift in my mood and asked gently, "Is something wrong? Or do you not want Som to eat snacks this late?"

She completely misunderstood, her optimism shining through as always.

"It's nothing. Sorry for raising my voice earlier-I was just startled," I decided to apologize. Seal didn't seem bothered by it at all.

"Oh, it's fine! You were just worried about Som, right? I understand."

I nodded slightly and, to steer the conversation away, asked something random-like her nickname.

"I've been meaning to ask-'Seal' is a pretty unusual nickname. I've never heard it before."

"Unusual but cute, right? Everyone says my nickname is adorable," She replied confidently, trying to sell the charm of her name.

I looked at Seal, feeling slightly annoyed by her confidence. But those chubby cheeks and her sparkling eyes... I couldn't deny it-she really was cute.

Well, it's good I only thought that to myself. If I accidentally said it out loud, she'd probably get even more full of herself.

"So, do you finish this late every Friday?"

I decided to change the subject, asking about her studies.

"Yeah, Fridays are evening classes at the university, so they end pretty late." "You're so diligent, Seal,"

I said, genuinely impressed by her dedication to learning.

"It's not that impressive-it's just something I have to do,"

She replied modestly, though her tone seemed a little hesitant. I didn't think much of it, but why did she sound so uncertain when talking about school?

On second thought... maybe there's something personal she doesn't want me to know.

"How do you get home? Is your condo far from here?"

After finishing our meal-and with Somharuthai curled up and sleeping in her cat bed-I walked Seal to the shop's entrance, casually asking about her living situation.

"Are you worried about me?"

She teased, flashing me a mischievous grin.

I glared at her for turning everything into a joke. Why couldn't she just answer the question properly? Before I could say anything, though, she spoke up again.

"My condo's just over there-the orange building,"

She said, pointing to a large condo just one street over from my shop.

"We live this close to each other?"

I asked, surprised.

"Yup," she replied cheerfully.

"Well... get home safely,"

I said simply, unsure of what else to say now that I knew we were practically neighbors.

Seal smiled at me, her eyes squinting with delight, before heading off. Her bright smile lingered in my mind as I watched her walk away.

"Thanks a lot! So... I'll leave next Friday night's menu up to you, okay? Good night and sweet dreams!"

Seal waved at me cheerfully, her boundless energy shining through.

All I could do was wave back, feeling a little dazed, as my brain began replaying her words.

**Next Friday night's menu...**

**Wait a minute! When did I agree to meeting her every Friday night?**

# Chapter 12: The Light That Guides Life

**Habits are scary because they often start from small, unnoticed points. Before we know it, they become a part of our daily lives.**

Inside the kitchen of the small convenience store—which, as usual, should have only me, the owner, eating alone—there was, of course, Somharuthai (my little daughter) trying to send pleading looks for a taste of food and another one. But it shouldn’t be her sitting across the table laughing like this...

"Hey, seriously... Does Maewnam have any friends?"

I asked curiously. When she heard my question, her face contorted as if I had hit a nerve.

"Oh, come on! With a face this friendly—toward people, animals, and objects like me—I must have friends!"

Maewnam complained dramatically while scooping some kimchi soup into her mouth, chewing away. The corner of her mouth was covered in sauce, and I couldn’t stand it anymore, so I handed her a napkin.

"Oh, thank you!"

She said with a smile as she took it.

"Left."

"Here?"

"Up a bit more."

"This one?"

"*Sigh*... stick your face out here."

I let out a heavy sigh when I realized this person had zero sense of direction and wasn’t capable of wiping her own face properly. If left to her own devices, she probably wouldn’t be eating anything else ever again. So I grabbed a napkin and wiped the mess off for her as she leaned forward.

"What are you smirking at?"

I asked, somewhat irritated. I didn’t like the mischievous smile on Maewnam's face—it made my chest flutter in a strange way.

"Nothing. Just thinking that if you’d wiped it off for me from the start, it would’ve been over by now."

Maewnam said lazily, making my annoyance double as she smirked at me. I should’ve just left her with the sauce-covered mouth and let her learn her lesson!

"Are you a three-year-old or something? Ugh, thanks anyway,"

I retorted, trying to come back with a sharp comment. But I stopped as she handed over my full bowl of kimchi soup. Maewnam never let me leave my bowls unfinished, no matter how annoying she was. If she wanted to act mischievous, could she at least not act overly caring at the same time?

Ugh! I just couldn’t handle her.

"Why do you think I don't have any friends, Khun Whale?"

Maewnam still wouldn't let the topic drop so easily.

"Well... Maewnam (Seal), you should go hang out with friends sometimes.

Eating with me so often isn’t it boring?"

I explained a little more when I noticed she still had a furrowed brow.

At first, Maewnam was the one who invited me to late-night meals every

Friday, brought food for me sometimes, or prepared things for me as well. Lately, she would often show up during the times I was having dinner...

How could I not wonder? Why did this smiley, friendly person—who seemed so kind to people, animals, and things—always show up this often?

Was it possible that she didn’t have friends or that we were going to become two lonely people together?

"No..."

Maewnam said with a tone so serious that it surprised me.

"I'll never be bored with you, Khun Whale."

Her words and gaze, so earnest, mixed with my own stare, made me feel awkward. How could such a simple question lead to this kind of tension?

"...."

"Khun Whale... Are you bored with me?"

Her voice held a tone of sadness that I couldn’t quite place, making me unsure how to respond.

Sometimes Maewnam would bring up these sorts of questions, but they were never direct or serious… Why was this coming up now?

"No..."

I blinked nervously at Maewnam, who looked like she was waiting for my response.

"You hesitated and so long before answering. Khun Whale, you must bored with me."

But Maewnam still seemed dissatisfied with my answer and spoke in a reproachful tone.

*"Complaining while chewing fried chicken at the same time."*

I thought to myself… So, Maewnam is actually angry, huh? Or is this somehow my fault?

Have you ever felt like you are not wrong but you had to be the one to apologize? Even though I wasn’t sure, her pouty, troubled expression made my heart melt. So....

"Hey... here... Stop being upset, okay?"

I handed her a cold can of soda, and when she saw it, her face lit up with a wide grin.

"I only have you, Khun Whale. I don't need any friends."

Maewnam said seriously after she finished drinking the soda in one quick gulp.

"No need to be so dramatic,"

I laughed at Maewnam's words and ignored her sulking expression, which seemed to want to argue back.

"Aw... Khun Whale."

Her voice brought the atmosphere back to a softer tone, but I wasn’t sure if Maewnam was being serious or just joking. Either way, I couldn’t help but smile.

"Watch out for the stuff in front of the store when you walk back, okay? I still haven’t changed the lights yet,"

I said as I accompanied Maewnam to the front of the store. I warned her to be careful in case it got dark and she accidentally kicked the ice cream stand. On top of that, I had been telling myself for a while that I really should change the lightbulbs in front of the store.

*Tomorrow! I would definitely change tomorrow!*

"Yes, sure,"

Maewnam replied cheerfully with her usual bright smile.

"Good Night Sweet Dream, okay?"

"Good night."

Saying good night to the other person that had become such a routine for me that I was used to it by now.

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Damn it... How could I let myself this far?

I decided to weigh myself again.

I glanced at the numbers on the scale, anxiety gnawing at me. Maybe the machine had messed up last time, and this time it would show different numbers?

The numbers were still the same... I wondered, If I took my clothes off, would my weight go down? Piece by piece, I started pulling off my clothes and tossing them on the floor.

"Yikes..."

One shirt flew off and somehow landed over Somharuthai’s head as she was walking by.

"Oh no... I’m turning into a pig,"

I groaned at Somharuthai as I looked at the scale. Somharuthai could only let out a soft, comforting noise in response.

After the heartbreaking events of last night, I had resolved to start exercising and fix things early rather than letting them snowball. I decided to wake up early this morning, grabbing my favorite pair of shorts and tank top along with my tiny AirPods so that my run would have some music to keep me motivated.

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## Click clack

The strange noise coming from the front of the store made me furrow my brow in suspicion. I quickly checked the intercom camera to put my mind at ease but frowned harder when I saw a woman climbing a multi-purpose ladder.

Who the hell is trying to climb my front yard mango tree? Wait, but I don’t even have a mango tree...

"What are you doing?!!"

I shouted as I flung open the door, and the result was:

"Khun Whale! What the heck!"

It was Seal, who seems so shocked by my sudden appearance. She looked like she was about to lose her balance and fall from the ladder. The situation was tense, but my reflexes were faster than my thoughts. I immediately dove forward to catch this strange person before any accident could happen.

*Smell good...*

That was the first thing that came to my mind. I tightened my arms around the other person to ensure that I had truly grabbed her in time.

"Uh... Khun Whale, I'm fine now. Let go of me, please,"

Maewnam said in a trembling voice, snapping me back to my senses after I had been shocked by the earlier situation.

I blinked a few times as I realized I was looking directly at Maewnam's crumpled shirt, a result of my own grip.

*This hug..., it’s not a hug! This is about safety!*

I argued with myself, a mix of embarrassment and panic flooding through me. I pushed myself away from the person in front of me and tried to calm myself.

"Almost there, huh....? What are you doing with something suspicious again?"

No matter how hot my face feels, I have to keep a straight face first, or else all the good looks I've put up will disappear.

"Light is the guiding light to life,"

Seal said as she scratched her cheek shyly, responding to a question I still didn’t quite understand.

*Wait... is she meditating on philosophical teachings?*

I wondered.

"I came here to change the lightbulb for you. I’ve heard you complain about it for a while now—about the light in front of the store being out,"

She added, looking up at the ceiling. I followed her gaze and saw a brandnew lightbulb installed in place of the dead one.

I looked back at Maewnam, who was smiling with pride, and my heart softened despite myself. I had just called her strange moments ago. Could you stop being so nice?

"Thank you..."

"I did it with pleasure, a lot of pleasure,"

Maewnam said warmly, her gaze meeting mine. I felt awkward and looked away from those tender eyes.

"And you know, Khun Whale, letting the light at the front of the store stay out for so long can affect the shop’s Feng Shui. It might result in fewer customers coming into your shop—"

"Stop, stop! Okay, I get it,"

I interrupted her quickly, attempting to pull her out of her "nerd mode" before she continued into a lecture about difficult theories that I couldn’t keep up with.

"I just stating facts that are useful. You keep cutting me off,"

Maewnam pouted in a mockingly dramatic way while putting the used lightbulb into a box.

"Luckyly, you hugged me so tightly earlier that the lightbulb wasn’t harmed. I was so scared!"

"Who? Who hugged you? That was life-saving, okay? You should be thankful I kept you from falling!"

I quickly defended myself against her accusation.

"Alright, if you didn't hugged me. So, are you going to exercise now, Khun Whale?"

She asked, pretending to change the subject and making me a little annoyed, though I answered her question without much fuss.

"I'm going for a run."

"You’re so pretty and has good shape, Khun Whale."

"But I’m fat now because someone I don't even know keeps inviting me to late-night meals,"

I said with sarcastically at the person in front of me, who remained unfazed by my words but still smiling.

"So do you have morning classes today?"

I asked Maewnam back, noticing that she was dressed in a rather formal manner. At my question, Deal had a strange expression on her face.

"Well..., yes, but I’ll head back to my condo first," she replied.

"Oh? Why?"

I asked, seeing Maewnam avoid my gaze. Her pale face was now flushed pink. What’s going on? It’s not even hot outside, and it’s still the early hours of the morning.

"Because with stain shirt like this, isn’t appropriate go to university,"

Maewnam explained, pointing at her shirt. When I looked, I couldn’t find the words to respond.

"Khun Whale, you’re so red in the face—your blood must be rushing really well today,"

Maewnam teased, not missing an opportunity to bother me. I couldn’t bring myself to argue back and could only shout in frustration to cover up my embarrassment.

"Fine. Go wherever you want to go!"

"By the way, Khun Whale, you don’t have to go running. Because just now, when we hugged, you were so tiny and light...hehehe..!"

Maewnam laughed, clearly enjoying my annoyance. Before I could retort, she quickly darted away from in front of the shop with impressive speed.

I stood there, flustered, staring at her retreating figure. My thoughts lingered on the white shirt with the unmistakable lip gloss stain on it—clear and bold.

What kind of person is she, always teasing me like that?

How annoying!

**Just you wait. I’ll triple the price just for you!**

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# Chapter 13: Looks Unqualified

Mascot branding involves designing a mascot (a cartoon symbol) to act as an ambassador, creating a sense of familiarity and closeness between consumers and the brand.

Of course, the grocery store has its own mascot as well. What could symbolize a store better than a white cat with a striped pattern similar to the kind of Siamese cat breed, with bright blue eyes and adorable look could easily catch the attention of passersby.

I don't want to boast, but isn't there an adorable, lucky cat mascot at the Seven Elephant store under construction nearby? Somharuthai is the signature of this grocery store—unique and unmatched!

I owe my gratitude to Somharuthai... and to Maewnam too, for suggesting that I place Somharuthai's cat bed in front of the store. This small addition allowed people passing by to notice the cute kitten, creating a lively atmosphere for the store that had never been seen before.

Just as customer activity started to taper off, a LINE notification chimed on my phone as if on cue. I looked down at my screen and smiled when I saw the sender—Noey.

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**Noey**:

How’s it going, businesswoman?

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I quickly typed my reply.

**Whale**:

It's okay."

**Noey**:

"Okay" means not okay, doesn’t it?

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I stared at the message in shock. This was Noey, my best friend who usually serious and stiff. Is this really her? Has she really started joking like this?

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**Whale:**

If I said "Okay" mean is okay.

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I realized that I needed to update her with news about my new family member. Noey would definitely like little Somharuthai. She'd always wanted a pet but, being a busy lawyer, she doesn't have free time.

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**Whale**:

I have news to share with you.

**Whale:**

I have a new family member to introduce to you.

**Whale:**

My little daughter....

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As I scrolled through my gallery to find the cutest picture of Somharuthai to send to Noey, my phone suddenly rang. It was Noey herself. Huh? Why would she call when we were already texting?

"Hello..."

I answered, curious, but at the same time unsure why she was calling.

[Are you pregnant? Is it Chonlathee's baby?]

Noey's voice came out sharp and angry, startling me into quickly clarifying the misunderstanding. The "baby" in question referred to Somharuthai, not that kind of baby!

"Hey, wait, wait, you've got it all wrong!"

[You don’t have to defend it, it’s fine, Whale. I’ll help raise your baby myself.]

"Calm down, okay? I’m talking about a cat. I adopted a cat. The 'baby' I’m referring to is little Somharuthai."

I said as quickly as I could, nearly rapping the words out to ensure she understood. Why was Noey so stubborn and refusing to listen? Why was she so angry?

[Oh... uh... oh, okay]

She said, seemingly softening.

"You’re worried about me this much? Aw, so sweet."

I teased her a little as things seemed to settle.

[You’re ridiculous. You bring this up and I’m not talking with you anymore. Don’t forget to send me pictures of your 'baby,' okay?]

I smiled as I sensed her attempt to change the topic to cover her embarrassment. Aww, I was nice enough not to let her feel awkward for too long.

"When you have time, you should come and play with little Somharuthai."

[If I have time, I’ll come visit.]

Her tone revealed a hint of exhaustion, indicating she might be dealing with a lot right now.

"I’m not in a hurry. Let’s just meet whenever you’re free, alright?"

[Okay, I’ll try to make time. If I call you, you’d better be available, okay?]

Noey’s words came across as a bit bossy, making me shake my head with mild exasperation. And this is why I always end up accommodating her whims...

"VIP treatment, huh? Okay, dear friend."

"....."

"Hello, Noey. Are you listening to me?"

I paused, trying to make sense of the unclear signal. Something felt off. Maybe the call wasn’t connecting well.

"Alright... okay, bye!"

I hung up, staring at my phone in slight confusion. It didn’t make much sense, but oh well. People with busy lives have mood swings, right? I’d try to be understanding of my best friend's peculiarities.

Since my breakup with Chonlathee, Noey had been contacting me more often. When I brought this up, she said that she hadn’t wanted to bother me before because I had a boyfriend. Now that she thought I might feel lonely, she made an effort to text and call more often.

*Maybe she was just glad to have me back as a friend again.*

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Being stuck at the store without going out anywhere was so boring...

I couldn’t help but complain to myself. But then again, wasn’t this part of being a business owner? If I didn’t keep an eye on the store, who else could I hire to guard it? Or maybe I should just hire Somharuthai instead?

*"Meow!"*

A cheerful meow came from Somharuthai, as if she were suggesting,

*“You could hire me instead, but I don’t guarantee the goods will still be safe here.”*

I couldn’t resist reaching out and scratching her round little head in sheer amusement.

"Somharuthai, if you act cute counts, then I'll consider you helping the store."

But staying at home all the time is getting too boring. I think I need to get out and go shopping for a bit to clear my head. So today, the store’s closing unexpectedly because of my birthday... or should I say, because I want to go shopping."

I couldn’t help but chuckle at how impulsive it felt to shut the shop just for a casual day out. Still, my daily profits weren’t that much anyway. Calling the shop my way to kill time might not be so far from the truth.

After driving into central Bangkok to spend some time at the mall, I wandered aimlessly to kill time while waiting for the restaurant I had reservation to call me back. I happened to come across a small miscellaneous goods store. I wasn’t sure what to call it, but the shop seemed to have everything, from perfumes to household items.

I started looking around the store in an attempt to pass time. Cute pens, charming doormats, slippers, even seat cushions… there were a lot of odds and ends here. I entertained myself by imagining what it would be like if my shop sold everything like this. But no, that would be a surefire way to go bankrupt.

I stood at the section of the store with plush toys, looking at the cute assortment. My attention stopped when I saw one particular stuffed animal. A cute, chubby, smiling little seal with shrimp-like features. I stared at it for a moment and felt a tug at my mind.

It made me think of the frequent visitor to my shop: ***Maewnam*** *(****Seal)*** Wait... why would I buy a stuffed animal for a customer, anyway?

I quickly placed the little shrimp-like seal back on the shelf and tried to refocus. But then doubt crept into my mind. Why not buy one for Somharuthai instead to play with? While I was having this internal debate, footsteps approached.

I wasn’t alone anymore. Someone had entered the same area of the toy section. As I turned toward the sound, I froze. Standing not far from me was a tall woman wearing a white shirt and black slacks, looking very focused as she studied the stuffed animals.

At first glance, I almost didn’t recognize her. Her hair was long and straight, and her makeup—slim eyeliner, sharp features—made her appear much more polished and mature than I’d seen her before.

**It's Maewnam.**

I hadn’t believed in the idea that the world was small or "meant to intersect" until I ran into her here. My heart caught in my chest for a moment. Was this coincidence? Or fate?

Why was my heart pounding as I stared at the woman gazing at the blue whale plushie so intently? It was just Maewnam, the same "Maewnam" I saw every day, looking at a stuffed animal with gentle interest. I shook off the strange, nervous feeling. It seemed Maewnam was too engrossed in her observations to notice me.

I decided to approach her to say hello.

After all, coincidences like this deserved the chance to turn into opportunities. Maybe if she were free, I could invite her to a casual meal or something. Eating out wasn’t such a bad idea after all...

“S-”

“Teacher Maewnam!”

Before I could finish, a student appeared out of nowhere, interrupting me.

The voice was so loud it completely drowned out what I was about to say.

Teacher? What did that student just call Maewnam?

I froze in surprise.

“Wait, I was studying with the teacher's class.”

The student’s voice was filled with curiosity as they spoke to Maewnam.

“Oops... Oh, did you forget me, Teacher?”

The student, dressed in casual university attire, appeared a little disappointed, folding her arms.

“Ah... sorry, but I have so many students that it’s hard to keep track sometimes.”

“Don’t you remember me at all?”

The student’s tone was teasing, yet it revealed an unspoken familiarity.

“I... I think you look familiar,”

Maewnam said hesitantly, her voice soft,

"But I can’t remember your name.”

“I’m Lemon,” said the girl.

“You know, the one who answered your questions in Principles of Management class almost every session!”

The mention of Principles of Management and the name Lemon clicked in my mind, and I put the pieces together. All this time, I thought Maewnam was just an overworked student struggling through her classes. But it turned out she wasn’t a student at all—she was a teacher at the university!

It explained her nervousness and hesitation when I brought up academic questions before. All those late-night study sessions and tired expressions now made sense. She wasn’t just a struggling student but someone with a full professional role here at the university.

“Oh... oh, I remember now,”

Maewnam said, her smile wavering slightly as if embarrassed.

“You were the one always participating. I must’ve overlooked your name. Sorry about that.”

“Next time, teacher, don’t forget my name again, ok?”

Lemon continued teasingly.

“My name is Lemon.”

Maewnam smiled faintly, trying to cover her awkwardness.

“Of course. I’ll remember next time.”

The tension shifted as the interaction unfolded. I could sense my own misunderstandings evaporate as I pieced together this revelation.

Maewnam was much more than just a mysterious figure in passing; she was a university teacher, intelligent, composed, and thoughtful—a whole different layer than I had assumed.

The conversation was fascinating, but I found myself wondering: What would happen next between the two of us?

"Why did she have to hug Maewnam's arm after telling her name?"

I frowned as I watched Lemon cling to Maewnam arm with her pouty, needy expression. What was worse was that I couldn’t shake off this sudden wave of irritation. Why did this scene make me feel so on edge?

"Ah... okay, Lemon, I'll remember that,"

Maewnam said, nodding with a smile that looked innocent to the point of being a bit stupid in my eyes.

"Next time I see you in class, I’ll test how well you remember me. Hehe,"

Lemon teased in her sing-songy voice.

Ugh. My mind churned. This girl... so persistent. Teacher deal with hundreds of students every semester, and here was this girl, armed with her name Lemon, trying to entrench herself in her mind.

How could Maewnam even handle this?

"A teacher’s memory is sharp, you know. Test me anytime, and I’ll be ready,"

Maewnam responded, still smiling with that gentle, unbothered expression that made my irritation spike.

.

I accidentally punched a seal doll's face that closest to my hand.

Why was I so upset? My emotions felt disproportionate, but the frustration bubbled over anyway. I couldn’t help but take it out on the smiling plushie.

I suddenly felt no desire to look at or buy anything else. My shopping trip had lost its purpose, the irritation gnawing at me like a storm. At just that moment, my phone buzzed. I answered absentmindedly, relieved for the distraction.

Okay, thats good! Forget about inviting Maewnam and little Lemon to lunch. Forget this entire shopping trip. My mood was completely ruined anyway.

Even though I thought I would come here for shopping and eat something delicious to relieve my stress.

No matter how much I shopped or ate expensive food, I still unable to shake the image of Maewnam—the university teacher with her calm and approachable demeanor—and the relentless, eager little Lemon with her smile and teasing remarks.

Think again, or should I return to the store to buy that stupid, smiling *Seal doll* and give it another punch or two.

Maybe venting my frustration on it would help me feel better.

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# Chapter 14: Naughty's Robert

Have I ever told you that there is a very efficient housekeeper at this little grocery store? Since he started working here, it has made sweeping and vacuuming the store so much easier for me.

**He is Mr. Robert.**

Mr. Robert is a hardworking and patient person who can work continuously for over an hour without taking a break. Even in difficult-to-reach areas, such as under shelves, he can clean them exceptionally well.

It was the right decision to hire Mr. Robert...

But come to think of it, I haven’t heard Mr. Robert working this morning.

I walked over to check near the power outlet but found nothing. Normally, after finishing his work, Mr. Robert would always return to rest in the corner by the wall. But now, there’s not even a trace of him. This has started making me anxious.

“Mr. Robert! Where are you?!”

I shouted his name in a panic. How could I not be in a panic? After all, I had just recently purchased Mr. Robert, and I still haven’t paid him off completely!

*“Meeooowww”*

“That’s not you, Somharuthai. You go eat your food over there first, okay? Let me find Mr. Robert right now. I’ll come play with you later, sweetheart.”

I turned to Somharuthai, who had come over looking so sweet and clingy. But right now, I really wasn’t in the mood to play with her. Where could Mr. Robert have gone?

Could it have been something that happened yesterday?

. .

I replayed the events in my mind after returning from the shopping mall. Aside from all the items I had carelessly bought—since it had been so long since I had gone out—Somharuthai seemed particularly interested in the stuffed seal doll that I had been holding.

“Don’t play with this, sweetheart. This is my punching bag. Do you want me to take you to the store to pick one of your own?”

I held the smiling stuffed seal out of Somharuthai’s reach just in time to save it from her merciless claws.

**The only one who can mess with this little thing is me!**

I grinned slightly and delivered two satisfying punches directly to the smiling face of the stuffed seal. Somharuthai stared at me in shock and surprise, her wide eyes focused on my behavior.

"Somharuthai, the good little child, please let Mommy relieve stress for a moment.... I just met someone with bad manners who had caused me to become extremely angry.

*Let me make this clear: even if she came to apologize, my anger wouldn't disappear easily.*

And as I expected, someone was now clinging to the glass door of the shop. She was practically testing whether she could become a city lizard by holding onto the glass that way. She could cling there all day if she wanted.

If I didn’t open the door for her, there wasn’t anything she could do about it.

*And no, I didn’t want to deal with those pleading eyes either!*

I acted as though I wasn’t interested in the person outside, pulling my laptop open to block out the noise and the annoyance. If she could wait, let her wait.

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***Crack.***

The strange sound made me lift my head in curiosity. My heart sank in shock as I realized that this clever little Seal was using cat treats to lure my precious child! That crack sound was the sound of Somharuthai scratching at the glass door!

“What are you doing?”

I had no choice but to open the door before Somharuthai could scratch the glass even more.

“Well, you didn’t open the door.”

Maewnam said with an innocent face that made me even angrier.

“This store is closed today. Go home,”

I said coldly, but it seemed that Maewnam wouldn’t take no for an answer. I had forgotten that the person in front of me was stubborn, self-centered, and difficult.

“Are you angry at me, Khun Whale?”

“No. Who would dare get angry at Teacher Maewnam?”

I said sarcastically, and at the sound of my words, Maewnam's expression soured immediately.

“That time at the mall... it really was you, wasn’t it, Khun Whale?” Maewnam groaned, but it didn't make me feel any sympathy.

“I really didn’t mean to hide it, really.”

“Didn’t intend to? So if I hadn’t happened to bump into you today, I wouldn’t have known, huh? You think this is funny, don’t you? Or do you think I’m just a joke to you?”

“I...I'm really sorry. I really didn’t mean it,”

Maewnam said, its expression showing regret as it listened to my words. But I wasn’t ready to listen to any of its excuses just yet. My anger was still too fresh, too strong. I didn’t feel like forgiving so easily.

“This store is closed today. Go home.”

"...."

“Why?”

I asked when Maewnam gave me a pleading look.

“Please give this for little Som. I already shown it to her. And if I don’t give it to her, she’ll be sad,”

Maewnam handed me the cat treat, which I merely looked at with an indifferent stare.

“Thank you, but next time, don’t bother about Somharuthai. I can take care of my own things,” I said coldly.

“Alright then...”

This time, Maewnam didn’t push or persist at all. Its face looked noticeably sad. But because anger still clouded my thoughts, I let her leave without trying to stop it.

Even though I felt strangely empty, as if something was missing— Somharuthai even gave me an odd look—I still felt that my actions this time weren’t wrong. Not wrong at all...

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**Noey**:

And... what right do you have to be angry at her?

**Whale**:

Huh? Why? She fooled me.

**Noey**:

That’s ridiculous. She’s just your regular customer, you know.

**Noey**:

You don’t even need to know her personal information.

.

I frowned as I tried to process the messages that Noey sent me.

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**Whale**:

It’s not like that.

**Noey**:

Then what is it like?

**Noey**:

Let’s put it this way.

**Noey**:

You have hundreds of customers who come to buy from you.

**Noey**:

You never care what they do for a living.

**Noey**:

You can’t answer that.

**Whale:**

Hold on, I’m still typing right now

**Noey**:

Never mind, I’m not waiting anymore. Go think about it yourself.

**Noey**:

Ask yourself why you’re so angry to such an extreme degree.

**Noey**:

I’m going to bed.

**Noey**:

Sweet dreams, Whale.

**Whale:**

Ugh... Sweet dreams, Noey.

.

I blinked a few times, staring at the chat where my friend suddenly ended the conversation with a simple goodbye and went to bed.

Thinking about what Noey had said, it didn’t make much sense. I didn’t usually care about what other customers did for a living or what their personal lives looked like... So why did it bother me this time?

What's the matter? And why am I so angry at Maewnam like this? But now I’m already angry at her, I have to stay angry at it to the fullest. How could I just be angry halfway? That wouldn’t be intimidating at all.

Right now, I’m angry at Maewnam. Even if she comes to apologize, I’m not going to just give in easily.

**And what if... Maewnam never comes back again...**

. .

Oh..wait a minute. I’m trying to recall how Robert disappeared from the store. This isn’t the time to be thinking about that smiling-faced girl. I must have left the door open while I was talking to Maewnam.

Robert must have taken advantage of the loophole and escaped. Out of nowhere, my legs suddenly felt weak... utterly drained. Now that Robert has disappeared like this, where could I even find him? “Robert... can you come back to me?”

“Khun Whale, are you looking for someone?”

“I’m looking for Mr.Robert, of course...”

I answered absentmindedly, only realizing what I had just said after the question came out. Wait a second, who just asked that?

“Hey!”

“!!!”

“Don’t act so surprised! When did you come in here?”

I exclaimed in shock, startling the other person in the process. I must have answered the question without thinking, and now the other person looked just as startled. No need to guess who this was. You can probably figure it out by now.

“I just walked into the shop as usual, but you didn’t notice me, Khun Whale. You were too busy calling for Robert,”

Maewnam said with an innocent expression. It was dressed in full work attire today, showing no hesitation or pretense anymore.

You don't need to hide it anymore, do you. And I must admit that in this suit, Maewnam looks good—very good. But wait... why am I admiring this person in my head? I should still be angry!

“Who allowed you to come in?”

I snapped, still not forgiving her for entering so brazenly.

“I'm a customer... can't I come in?”

The way Maewnam tilted her head while asking this question irritated me even further. Her innocent questioning had a tone that felt way too provocative.

After revealing her true intentions, the attitude shifted into a whole new level of provocation.

“You didn’t answer me, Khun Whale... Are you going to chase customers away?”

Maewnam's clear sparkling eyes stared at me, trying to corner me with its attempts at charm.

“You... seriously. Huh... do whatever you want,”

I said, exhausted from arguing. I was still so angry, but I didn’t want to bother with the fight anymore. Yesterday, you're still dejected Maewnam. Why has the person in front of me changed so much just in one night.

It was tiring. And strange.

“But... you still haven’t answered me, Khun Whale. What about Mr. Robert...?”

“It’s Robert. You’ve seen Robert vacuuming and cleaning the floors here often enough. And, importantly, the reason Robert ran away from home was because of you. It’s your fault, so you should know that.”

I complained at the person in front of me, my voice long and pointed. I knew I was being unreasonable, but what could I do? I couldn’t pretend not to feel sad about having to pay for something that was already lost without ever using it.

“Robert... oh... wait a minute, Khun Whale. Did you give your vacuum robot a name?”

Maewnam said, dragging its words uncertainly.

It paused for a moment, as if understanding something, and then asked me with a half-smile:

“So why would it be?”

“Ugh...never mind. If Robert wants to go out and have adventures in this wide world, I’ll let him live his happy life. Don’t worry, I understand.”

I said, my voice heavy with resignation. I had to give up.

“Would you like me to help?”

“It’s impossible,”

I said. Yes, it really was. At this point, Robert must have wandered off somewhere far, or worse, gotten dragged away by a stray dog and turned into a snack. Poor Robert.

“You never know unless you try, you know. Despite how I look, I’m actually quite resourceful.”

Maewnam smiled.

“That’s true... you’re a teacher, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t resist throwing that jab at her.

“Khun Whale... please forgive me. I didn’t mean it.”

“Hmph... find Robert first.”

“What..?”

“Find Robert and bring him back. Then maybe I’ll calm down and forgive you,”

I said, putting forth a challenge that I knew would be difficult. I wanted this person to prove herself—if she wanted forgiveness, she could try finding Robert. But, let’s face it... by now, Robert had probably ventured all the way to Mars or something. I should just let it go.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Do you think I’m lying to you? Rest assured, I’m not like you.”

“Aww...”

Maewnam's expression became noticeably sad, and it seemed my words had come out much harsher than intended.

“I’m sorry... I didn’t mean to sound so harsh.”

“What if... I find Robert, what will you give me in return?”

Suddenly, she changed the subject, leaving me momentarily confused.

“Huh?”

“A reward, of course, Khun Whale. Even people searching for lost pets usually offer rewards. We have a rough idea that Robert might be worth several tens of thousands, right?”

“Still haven’t found him, though,”

I said, dismissing Maewnam's confidence. I couldn’t believe how bold this person was—asking for a reward before even finding Robert.

“I'm confident we’ll find him, though, so let’s just see,”

Maewnam said with such an air of overconfidence that it was honestly annoying.

“So... what are you going to give me if I find Robert?” I asked.

“What do you want? If it’s money...”

“I don’t want money,”

Seal cut me off abruptly.

“Uh...”

Now I was growing frustrated. What could this person possibly want if not money? I thought.

Seal smirked faintly.

“I just want your LINE ID, Khun Whale. If I find Robert, that’s all I want.”

“Hmph... go find him first,”

I challenged, returning a sly smile.

“Alrighty then! Don’t go back on your word, Khun Whale!”

Seal smirked back at me, its confidence radiating as it turned and walked out of the store with an air of superiority.

I found myself wondering why it seemed so confident. Finding a lost vacuum robot that escaped from the store the previous day felt like a task with a 0.01% chance of success. There was no way she would find Robert that easily, right?

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Just as I was deep in thought, the sound of the door opening brought me back to reality.

“Khun Whale! I brought Robert back for you!” I nearly leapt out of my chair.

“Wait! You were only gone for ten minutes!”

“Well... Robert was at our condo. The management office had announced it this morning,”

Maewnam said casually, holding Robert in her hands.

I froze, staring at the exhausted, lifeless robot now in Maewnam's grip. My mind was a whirlwind of confusion. What are the odds of this? Robert had managed to escape from my store and somehow end up at a luxurious condo nearby?

I stared at the lifeless vacuum robot with shock.

***“Robert... you naughty little thing!”***

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# Chapter : 15.New Seal

**MAEWNAM (SEAL) POV**

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I was grading exams with a distracted mind, replaying the cruel words from Khun Whale earlier this afternoon. My eyes felt hot and prickly, and I wanted nothing more than to retreat to my room and wallow in self-pity. But my important duties held me back.

I wanted to smack my own head a hundred times. What was I thinking at the time that I refused to tell Khun Whale the truth? I must be completely crazy...

"Seal, you look like someone heartbroken,"

Chompoo suddenly said without raising her voice. But I was already used to her blunt nature by now. Chompoo was truly sharp and intelligent. Tonmai, Chompoo, and I were all intelligent, of course. Otherwise, we wouldn't have made it as teachers here. But if it came to long-term thinking, Chompoo would easily win the gold medal.

"No..."

I kept my eyes and hands focused on the stack of exams in front of me, unwilling to say anything further.

"You're lying. You're a sinner,"

Chompoo said calmly and firmly.

"Chompoo..."

"Stop the melodrama. It's about that shop owner, isn't it?"

I froze and dropped my pen immediately, spinning my chair to face her. My heart pounded as I met her gaze.

"How do you know?"

Chompoo gave me a smug, confident smile and spoke in the most casual manner possible.

"You've been so obvious about your feelings for her-so obvious that even from Mars, anyone could tell you liked the shop owner."

"But... Tonmai doesn't even know yet..."

"Tonmai is too clueless. But seriously... Am I right?"

I stayed silent for a moment, considering my options.

Even if I denied it, Chompoo would just keep probing until she got the answer. It would be easier just to confess and put an end to this.

"You're smart. Do I look that bad?"

"You look miserable."

Chompoo's words cut straight through me. Even she noticed how much I must be suffering.

"Alright... just tell me everything."

Chompoo was staring at me, her gaze unyielding. I knew I could try to fight against it, but I'd already lost. I gave in and braced myself to confess everything.

"But... I have work. Look at this mountain of exams, Chompoo-it's huge,"

I tried to change the subject by pointing to the towering stack of student exams in front of me, hoping Chompoo would take pity and stop pressing the issue.

"You can talk and grade at the same time. You're just filling in scores and cutting grades anyway because the exams are all multiple-choice. There's no need to keep avoiding this."

"I really hate people who think they know everything..."

I muttered under my breath, resigning myself to telling Chompoo the story about the beautiful shop owner and the mischievous little Som. I also mentioned how I had become a university lecturer and how this misunderstanding had escalated due to her initial assumption that I was merely a student.

I couldn't help but hope for Chompoo's comforting words of advice, even though my heart kept telling me that it was all over. I'd messed everything up on my own, and Khun Whale looked like she was really angry.

However, Chompoo didn't seem to care much or show any urgency. Instead, she appeared calm and relaxed, as if she were listening to a bedtime story. "Have you finished grading the exams yet? I'll give you a lecture,"

Chompoo said as she moved her chair over to my desk. Fortunately, today there were just the two of us, so I hoped that the story I shared with Chompoo would stay a secret. If the others found out, the entire world would soon know.

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***Thud!***

"There you are! I was looking for you at our regular dining table but couldn't find. I sent a Line message, and no one replied,"

Tonmai suddenly barged into the room, startling me so much that I nearly choked on my own saliva.

*"Cough!"*

But Chompoo actually did choke a little.

I quietly handed her a tissue.

"Don't you have class today, Tonmai?"

"Oh, I forgot my research file. By the way... what are you two doing? You look like you've just seen a ghost."

*You're the ghost here, Tonmai... I thought to myself.*

"Seal and Chompoo, are you two free this evening? Let's grab dinner together. It's been so long since the three of us ate together, and especially you, Seal-you always seem to run off. This time, I'm not letting you escape,"

Tonmai said, half-joking but also half-demanding. His words meant that there was no way for me to refuse.

If I didn't go, Tonmai would probably sulk for sure, and Chompoo and I would be too lazy to try and smooth things over. I thought to myself: I've got enough problems of my own. Don't add more to this mess, please...

. .

Eventually, the three of us ended up at a famous sukiyaki restaurant. I wasn't particularly in the mood to eat, but there was only one person at the table who seemed to be enjoying the meal. It wasn't difficult to guess who that was, right?

"You guys look so down at dinner. What's wrong with you two?"

Tonmai asked, eyeing Chompoo and me as we poked at the pork and fish on our plates sluggishly.

"So why are you so cheerful, Tonmai? Did something good happen?"

I asked in return, and Tonmai's smile widened with obvious delight at my question.

"I think I've found my soulmate."

"Huh?"

"That shop owner, of course."

*"Cough cough cough!"*

I grabbed the water bottle that Chompoo handed me and took a quick sip, only to choke on the spicy sukiyaki broth. It burned my throat as the soup and glass noodles threatened to come out of my nose.

"What did you just say, Tonmai?"

"Well, the shop owner. I've been to her store several times. She's as beautiful as the kids say. Her smile is adorable, and her cat is cute too."

"When did you go there? I didn't know anything about this."

"Do I need to ask for your permission every time I go to the shop, Seal? That's so silly. I can go whenever I want, can't I?"

I could only grit my teeth in response to Tonmai's answer.

"I think I'll try flirting with her sometime."

"Wait, Tonmai. She has a boyfriend, you know,"

Chompoo interrupted, likely trying to save me from getting my hopes up. But Tonmai continued rambling about how wonderful Khun Whale was, and my heart was a mess. It was hotter than the pot of sukiyaki simmering in front of me.

"I think I'll try talking to her tomorrow."

"Tonmai!! I forbid you to!"

I blurted out suddenly, a mixture of anger and fear welling up inside me. My hands trembled with emotion-anger at Tonmai for having designs on Khun Whale and fear that I might lose Khun Whale to someone else.

Both Tonmai and Chompoo looked at me, startled. Tonmai laughed and smiled, further confusing me.

"So you finally admitted it."

Tonmai's smile was victorious, like he had won some kind of personal battle, as he observed our stunned expressions.

"You were trying to hide it from me, weren't you, girls? But it was way too early for that."

The group chat notification on my phone broke my attention from the conversation as I hastily checked the message. A robot vacuum had somehow escaped the house? What was going on?

I opened the LINE app and scanned through the previous messages. One of the neighbors mentioned finding a robot vacuum with a dead battery in front of the condo. They had brought it to the condo management to try and find the owner.

Apparently, this model wasn't cheap at all. The whole situation felt oddly amusing, and I couldn't help but smile to myself as I read the ongoing chat thread.

Yesterday, I had been listening to a lecture from Tonmai and Chompoo that stretched for nearly two hours. The first half hour had been spent on attempts to placate Tonmai, who had been sulking over the issue with Khun Whale. I had tried to bring this up from the very beginning, but no one seemed to listen to me!

"It may have been a foolish move, but I won't make things harder for you, Seal,"

Tonmai said, patting me on the shoulder with a sad, almost theatrical expression.

"But the principle of business, Seal, is that if we make a mistake, we don't let ourselves get taken advantage of. You must separate the idea of making a mistake from the goals you aim to achieve,"

Tonmai said in a serious tone, and Chompoo nodded in agreement.

"Let me give you an easy example,"

Tonmai continued.

"Suppose you accidentally send too many items to a customer, and the customer scolds you. You've made a mistake, right?"

"But if the customer says that because you made this mistake, you remain buried in guilt and decide never to work with this customer again, do you think that's the right thing to do?"

"That would be wrong,"

I interjected, and Tonmai smiled proudly as if I were his top pupil.

"That's right! This situation is the same. You did make a mistake with Khun Whale, but that doesn't mean you've lost your right to pursue her. You just need to apologize for the mistake, move forward with your goal, and not wallow in despair as if there's no hope left,"

Tonmai said earnestly.

Chompoo and I exchanged a glance, our admiration for Tonmai evident.

"Wow... I think I need to look at you differently, Tonmai. Seriously, that was impressive,"

Chompoo said.

"Yeah, I can't even put it into words... that was amazing, Tonmai,"

I added.

"Heh... and you won't regret consulting with me, your most handsome advisor,"

Tonmai said with a grin.

. .

Both Chompoo's and Tonmai's advice reignited my self-confidence. I felt restored and ready to move forward. But, of course, my bravery only lasted until I saw the name of the shop again. My courage felt like it had diminished to a mere two fingers as soon as I laid eyes on it.

***Ding.***

The LINE app notification pinged again, pulling me back from my thoughts. I opened it and saw:

**Chompoo**:

"If you still a coward, I'll push Tonmai to flirt with Khun Whale."

I froze as the message settled in my mind.

**Tonmai**:

I am always ready, Seal.

I widened my eyes in disbelief as I read Chompoo's and Tonmai's threatening message. This wasn't just a harmless teasing message anymoreit felt like a calculated threat. The timing was just too perfect, as though they were stalking and observing me.

How terrifying. This wasn't just a casual threat; this was a form of manipulation and intimidation. And worse-why should I allow Tonmai to mess with Khun Whale? Absolutely not.

"Mr. Robert! Where did Mr. Robert go?"

I froze as soon as I heard the voice calling out from the shop. It belonged to Khun Whale, and it sounded anxious-so much so that she didn't even notice me coming in as a customer. Instead, it seemed like only the little cat, Samharathai, noticed me and was there to greet me.

"Hi Nong Som, Who is Khun Whale calling?"

I asked Somharuthai cautiously. The little cat mewed in response. Of course, who could actually understand cat language? Still, judging by Somharuthai's uninterested stare toward her owner, I could already guess that Khun Whale must've gotten herself into some kind of trouble again.

"So I'll go take a look. Oh, let's eat this first. Wait, when I can reconcile with Khun Whale? I'll bring some cat treats."

I handed a few fish-shaped biscuits to Somharuthai, who mewed happily and accepted them without hesitation. I decided to move toward Khun Whale, who was sitting at her desk with her head in her hands.

She looked stressed.

"Mr. Robert... Can you come back..."

Her voice sounded dejected, and I couldn't resist asking:

"Khun Whale, are you looking for someone?"

She turned toward me, startled, and it made me jump, too.

"!!!"

"There's no need to act shocked. Since when did you come?"

Khun Whale's voice was sharp, her gaze unwavering. There was no kindness in her tone, but I wouldn't let it shake me. I had my own confidence, thanks to Tonmai's coaching. I could handle this.

"I walked into the store as usual. But Khun Whale didn't notice. You keep calling out to Mr. Robert."

"Who allowed you to come in?"

She growled back at me, her voice sharp and defensive, much like a protective cat defending its territory.

"I am a customers... Can't I come in?"

I kept my tone casual, trying to remain non-confrontational. I applied Chompoo's advice from earlier-take things easy and don't let Khun Whale's attitude intimidate me. Surprisingly, when I did so, she didn't look so terrifying anymore.

When angry, she looked just like a little kitten growling at the wind.

*So cute.*

"Khun Wan didn't answer me at all... Khun Whale, are you going to chase away customers?"

"I want to do whatever I want. *Sigh..*."

Her exasperation was evident, and she stopped arguing with me. I took this as a victory. Maybe I had won this round. I leaned into my curiosity, determined to ask more.

"Khun Wan... who are you looking for?"

My voice was light but persistent, and I could feel her hesitation as she looked at me again.

What was going on with Khun Whale and this mysterious "Robert" person? My mind swam with questions.

"But...Khun Wan hasn't answered me yet. About Mr. Robert..."

I probed further, curious about this mysterious "Robert" that Khun Whale seemed so attached to.

"Well, Mr. Robert. You saw Mr. Robert vacuuming. Mop the floor often and that's important. The reason that made Mr. Robert run away from home it's you. It's your fault, you know that."

Khun Whale vented her frustration, her voice stretching into a long tirade. I could barely keep up with her words. Robert... was a robot. A vacuum robot.

"Mr. Robert... Oh... wait a minute, did Khun Whale give a name to the vacuum cleaner robot?"

The thought struck me, and I couldn't help but voice it.

"And why would it be?"

She shot me a sharp glare, her eyes cold and unyielding.

".. No, Mr. Robert, well, Mr. Robert."

I stammered, trying to backtrack. Despite the peculiarity of Khun Whale's naming preferences, I had to admit-I already liked her. Even her odd taste seemed endearing.

"*Sigh*... Never mind, if Mr. Robert wants to go on adventures in the wide world, I'll let him be happy. May his life in this world be happy and you don't have to worry. I understands..."

Her words carried an air of melancholy, and they triggered a memory from earlier that morning: the condo group chat. An announcement had gone out about a lost vacuum robot-someone reported it had escaped from its owner's home. My heart leapt. This had to be related.

"Do you want me to help you?"

I offered, smiling warmly.

"It's impossible."

Khun Whale was unconvinced.

"If you don't try, you won't know. Seeing this, we are quite spacious."

I pressed on with a confident smile. I knew where Robert might have gone, and I could leverage this opportunity.

Her skepticism didn't bother me; in fact, I found it advantageous. If she doubted me, I could use that doubt to my advantage.

"**I'm asking for Khun Whale's Line. If I can find Mr. Robert."**

Thank you Mr. Robert. I will take you to a robot vacuum cleaner spa as a reward.

# Chapter 16: A Fair Exchange

The sound of Robert working diligently could be heard, but that didn't mean I would stop being angry at his actions! Coming to work to atone for his mistakes? No way. What Robert had done was far too serious.

**Maewnam**:

Good Morning, Khun Wan

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I cast a wary glance at my phone screen. Look at the aftermath of Robert running away from home! Not only did it make me lose face, but now I had to give my LINE ID to that annoying girl as well.

I wanted to punish him by cutting his battery, but if I didn't let Robert recharge, there would be no one to help me sweep and vacuum the shop.

The phone screen still displayed the next message from Seal, but I chose not to read it immediately. If I replied too quickly, he would probably get cocky.

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I decided to make a cup of coffee to refresh myself. The thought of the rich, sweet aroma and the caffeine's effect immediately improved my mood. I hummed lightly as I prepared the coffee with my capsule coffee machine.

"Hmmm... the scent of espresso is so good."

"Why aren't you replying to my LINE message, Khun Wan?"

A whisper near my ear startled me, and I nearly dropped my coffee into the machine.

"Ahh!"

Why did she always sneak up on me like that? Worse still, she chuckled mischievously whenever he saw my startled reaction. I was just lucky I hadn't accidentally flung coffee at her... Oh, my God.

"Mmm, coffee smells amazing,"

She whispered with a pleased tone.

"But you smell even better than coffee, Khun Wan."

She punctuated her words with a mischievous grin.

"You're crazy... I nearly flung coffee at you, you know. Thank God I managed to stop myself in time."

I said that sharply, but her grin seemed to fade a bit before returning to that teasing smirk. Why did she smile so much? And why did she keep looking at me like that?

I felt uneasy...

"Khun Wan..."

I hesitated, unsure how to continue. My voice lingered in the air for a moment as my heart raced uncontrollably.

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I had no idea what was going on with me.

"What is it now?"

The sweet voice of Seal sent shivers down my spine. I was about to lift my cup to my lips, but I glared at the speaker with displeasure.

Interrupting someone trying to drink coffee was just wrong.

"I'm so hungry for caffeine,"

Seal said, her eyes looking pitiful. She didn't need to act all cute like that. Wearing a suit like that, she wasn't cute at all.

"You drink coffee too?"

I asked anyway. Just imagine: trying to eat or drink something while a dog or a cat stood there glaring at you. If it were Seal staring at me like that, it would feel the same. Drinking coffee with her stare in place? Ugh.

"Mhm, every morning."

"And...?"

"I don't feel like going to buy it at the university today. I want to drink it here at your shop, Khun Whale."

Seal concluded her own decision. But wait-had she even asked for my opinion?

"Well, if you want coffee, I can suggest going to a café. Complaining here won't help, you know. I don't have coffee for sale here. Oh... do you want instant coffee?"

I thought of the instant coffee packets in my stock and offered it as an option.

"You're so stingy, Khun Wan."

Seal pouted in mock anger.

"You have good coffee, but you won't share it with me. You're stingy and selfish, drinking it all by yourself."

"Huh? Well... wait a minute. How did I become the bad guy here?"

"I've seen it, you know. There are always cups of coffee sitting on your table. And they don't look like instant coffee either."

"That's mine. Not for sale or anything like that."

I told the pouty, child-like. Her expression grew even more dramatic after hearing my words, which made me feel like I was about to grab my head in frustration.

I decided to end the back-and-forth by making her a cup of coffee. Hopefully, this would stop her from complaining.

"This is delicious."

"100 baht,"

I held my hand out in front of her as a symbol that this coffee wasn't free.

"Wait, Khun Wan. Why is it so expensive?"

Maewnam protested, demanding fairness.

I shrugged.

"Everything has a cost. Look at the flavor-this tastes like something from a professional café. Whatever you ask for, I can make it for you as a custom order. Prices like this are fair for a customized order."

"But... but you only put a capsule into the machine and pressed a button."

Maewnam face looked distressed, which made me laugh a little. I enjoyed teasing her-especially after she'd been so fussy a few moments ago.

"Are you going to pay or not?"

"Not paying,"

Maewnam replied sharply, her voice suddenly cold and fierce. This abrupt change in tone startled me.

"But I'll pay you with this instead."

Seal's voice shifted again as she pulled something out of a cloth bag and handed it to me. It was a bright blue whale plushie-exactly the same one I had seen her eyeing in the shop that day.

"Why are you giving this to me?"

I asked, a little confused.

"Well... I thought your face looked like this little one's, so I bought it for you as a gift,"

She explained. This made me stare at the plushie again, trying to figure out what she meant by that. The big round eyes on the whale didn't look anything like me, did they? And besides, what kind of deal was this? Trading a stuffed animal for coffee? I wasn't buying that.

"I don't see any resemblance. Pay me the money, hey."

I was still grumbling when I looked up, only to find Maewnam practically sprinting toward the shop door with her triumphant smile.

"I'm going to work now. See you this evening, Khun Wan."

Leaving me standing there all alone, struggling. I don't dare to hit the little whale with my own hands. Hitting the whale is like doing yourself a favor. The best thing to do is go up to the room and get the seal doll on the bed and smash it 2-3 times.

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After sending Seal back to her condo, I spent the evening in peace. She brought so much food with her that by the time we were finished, I was stuffed. If I gained weight, I'd blame her for it.

I took a shower and started preparing for bed. While drying my hair in my bedroom, I suddenly remembered that I hadn't told Noey that I had reconciled with Seal yet...

Was I perhaps too quick to forgive her?

While I was lost in thought, my phone buzzed with a LINE app notification, breaking my train of thought.

**Maewnam**:

Hello! My name is MaewNam. My real name is...

I frowned at the text message. Was she trying to reintroduce herself? Why send me a message this long? After all, curiosity is a devastating weakness for any human being. Even Eve, the first mother of humankind, succumbed to her curiosity when she bit into that forbidden apple.

So... I tapped the message.

I couldn't resist. I had to know.

**Maewnam**:

Hello! My name is MeawNam. My real name is Dr. Suthirak, a teacher at ABC University, Faculty of Business Administration and Accounting, majoring in Management. I'm 29 years old and an only child.

**Whale:**

What is this nonsense?

**Seal**:

Fair exchange!

**Whale:** What!

**Maewnam**:

I've shared my personal information with you, Khun Whale. You have to share your personal information with me as well!

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What kind of logic is this? And why should I even bother adhering to this whole "fair exchange" rule that Maewnam has imposed?

**Whale:**

Why u tell me?

**Whale:**

I don't want to know anyway.

**Maewnam**:

Or are you trying to make excuses? Well, the truth is, Khun Wan, you don't need to tell me anything-I already know. Your real nickname is Abeluga.

**Whale:** Stop

**Whale**: Wait

**Whale**:

Just a second

.

I stared at the message with wide eyes, my fingers frantically typing and sending a reply in a panic. My mind drifted to my father and his constant habit of sharing unnecessary things about me to others.

Dad, seriously? Why do you love selling your kid to other people so much? And you always sell just the worst stuff about me... I wish I could just bury myself in the sand like an ostrich!

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**Maewnam:**

This is your last warning, Khun Abelu-uh, I mean Khun Wan. Send me your personal information right now.

**Whale**:

Real name is Tharnthara. My occupation? I think you already know that.

**Whale:**

Age? Let's just say I'm your older sister.

**Maewnam:**

What did you say, Khun Abeluga? Sorry, I can't read very well.

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I grabbed a nearby pillow, buried my face into it, and let out a muffled scream to release my pent-up frustration. Ugh, this annoying little troublemaker!

**Whale:**

Age 34 :

**Maewnam**:

That's about it... So, Khun Wan, what kinds of food do you like?

**Whale:**

Playing 20 Questions, huh?

**Seal**:

Khun Abeluga, what kinds of food do you like?

**Whale:**

!!!

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This was getting ridiculous. Playing around with my weak spots like this wasn't funny. I had managed to avoid this ridiculous nickname for as long as I could, and now this pesky Maewnam was calling me by it so frequently?

*Ugh.*

Fine. I gave in. If she wanted to ask questions, let her have at it. After all, I felt an odd sense of clarity afterward-like some kind of mental cleansing, as though I had been scrubbed and disinfected from the inside out.

If she weren't a university teacher, I'd probably think she belonged in some kind of investigative police unit instead.

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## Rrrrr

"What else..."

I pressed the phone button to answer with a weary tone, feeling drained as if my energy had been zapped from all that texting.

"Oops! I dialed wrong! I didn't think you'd actually answer, Khun Wan,"

What the heck? She just finished chatting with me moments ago, and now she was calling me again?

"Okay, I'll hang up now if there's nothing else."

I pressed to disconnect, but before I could, her voice rang out loudly.

"Wait, wait! Don't hang up! It wasn't a mistake, actually. I wanted to call you. Look... Khun Wan... I'm sorry for not telling you earlier that I'm actually a university teacher. I just wanted to keep it as a surprise. But honestly, I don't know what I've gotten myself into. Please forgive me. I promise I'll never lie to you again."

I listened to her rambling apology, surprised by how serious it sounded. I glanced at my reflection in the mirror and-why the hell am I grinning like that, Whale? Stop smiling, seriously.

"Khun Wan, forgive me, okay?"

Seal's voice was still so hopeful on the other end of the line.

The silence stretched on for a bit, and realizing she might still think I was upset, I quickly chimed in:

"Fine. I forgive you."

"Great! This Thursday, let's have dinner together. My treat!"

Her voice was now bright and cheerful, as if all was well again.

"It's like you don't usually come eat with me, you're here all the time." "Come on, let's go out for dinner tomorrow, just the two of us, please?"

She sounded so excited that I found myself hesitating.

"But I have to watch the store. Don't forget that,"

I protested. Though I was tempted by her tone-she sounded so eager, it tugged at me-I couldn't forget my responsibilities. Despite my seemingly freelance way of life, I still needed to act responsibly about my shop.

"I'll take care of everything,"

She said, confidently, as if it were no problem at all.

That was it. I felt both overwhelmed and amused at this stubborn force of nature on the other end of the line. How did I always get roped into these situations?

"I'll buy you dinner and pick you up at 6 p.m. Normally you close your shop at 8pm. Tell me the cost as your fee, Khun Wan,"

Maewnam declared in a determined voice.

The words sounded utterly ridiculous. But somehow, coming from her, I believed her. She was a force of nature, and if she said she was going to do something, she would.

"W-wait-"

"See you at 6pm o'clock, Khun Wan. Goodnight."

I tried to protest, but before I could say more, the call ended.

I stared at my phone in disbelief. She had just hung up on me.

**Maewnam was weird. I mean, really weird.**

The kind of weird that you can't help but wonder about, but at the same time find fascinating.

But why did my heart have to flutter when it came to this particular kind of weird?

I remembered that just moments ago, she mentioned she was a doctor. Not just anyone, but a Doctor. There were theories I'd heard before that suggested people who were exceptionally intelligent tended to behave in unusual ways. Could this be one of those situations?

Today, I got to experience it firsthand: she was strange. But strange in an oddly endearing way.

I looked over at the two plush toys on my bedside table: the blue whale with big, round eyes and the smiling cat-like seal. Just looking at them made a mix of amusement and irritation bubble up inside me.

I reached out and pinched the doll cheek, stretching it as though it were the university teacher's face .

"Goodnight, Seal."

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# Chapter 17: Who is Noey, Khun Whale?

**SEAL POV**

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It is said that when people are happy, they often emit an aura that lets those around them know they're happy without needing to say a word. This can be seen through their expressions and actions.

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**Tonmai**:

This world is pink. Making peace with her now, huh?

**Chompoo**: Amazing.

**Maewnam**:

Thank you, thank you.

I smiled at the messages in the group chat sent by the "Tree" gang as they teased me. It was now a break period between classes, and I had a moment to scroll through my phone.

By the way, students had mentioned this morning that I seemed happier than usual. My heart as a teacher truly felt content sharing my happiness with the students.

If I sent this kind of message, I guessed the students would probably run to throw up because it was too sweet... Today, my class had run a bit longer due to the topic being extended. Sigh...

I was hungry and ready for lunch. My stomach felt as though it would give out at any moment. I wasn't sure if Tonmai and Chompoo were still waiting for me, but I sent a message in the group chat hoping they were still waiting.

"I'm hungry... what should I eat?"

I opened the door to the teacher's lounge but stopped mid-sentence... Both Chompoo and Tonmai weren't here, but instead, there was a strange shorthaired woman I didn't know sitting at the vacant desk reserved for new teachers coming at the semester's start. But this was still summer break...

"Hello!"

When she saw me, she stood up and came over to greet me with a friendly smile.

"Hello... you are...?"

I returned her smile.

"Maanmook. You can just call me Mook. I'm sorry to intrude here. I hope we can get along."

"You don't need to be so formal. It's fine. Nice to meet you. I'm Seal," I quickly bowed slightly to show respect.

"Seal, today we have a new teacher here. Oh, so you have meet. This is P'Mook,"

Said Tonmai, entering the room and announcing as if it were no big deal.

"Hello again,"

The woman beside me smiled and greeted again.

"Hello, P'Mook. I'm sorry to intrude here,"

I said this time and bowed again.

This time, I was the one showing respect, and it was clear that Tonmai calling her "P'Mook" meant she was older than me.

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Meeting "Maanmook" left me with questions and uncertainty. This woman seemed like she might have some role in my future or life somehow. How that might affect me... only time would tell.

"I was just planning to introduce you."

"Too late now, Ton,"

I turned to look at the young man with a pouty expression.

"And you two went to have lunch without waiting for me, huh? Right..."

"Who said we went for lunch together?"

Chompoo spoke in a voice tinged with annoyance.

"Yeah, the two of us were unlucky because we had to stay and wait for the instructor, which is why we got called to help with work,"

Tonmai complained.

"Oh, really? Should we go have lunch together now, then? I wasn't planning to teach late anyway; it couldn't really be avoided."

I tried to explain myself in response to my friend's complaint.

"Sure, I'm starving. P' Mook, come with us too, okay? We'll treat you. Let's welcome the new teacher,"

Tonmai said warmly to the other person. Chompoo and I didn't have any objections, especially since it would make the newcomer feel less awkward. "That would be too much of a burden for you. Next time, I'll treat you back,"

P'Mook said. "It's nothing, hahaha."

. .

Once we came to an agreement, Tonmai went to call the restaurant to make a reservation while Chompoo excused herself to go to the restroom to tidy up her hair and clothes.

I packed up a few things since I planned to drive myself. After dropping off my friends, I'd go straight back to my condo because I had a meeting with Khun Whale at 6 pm.

"Dear teacher, let's go,"

P'Mook's voice came as she popped her head into my area where I was putting my laptop into my bag.

"P' Mook, wait for me by the faculty entrance. I'll drive by to pick you up,"

I said, and upon hearing that, Maanmook nodded and walked away. I headed directly to the parking lot.

While starting my car, I had a sudden thought:

"Wait... when did I give my real name to P' Mook earlier?" But I shook the thought off.

"Ah, forget it. I should hurry before my friends wait too long."

Maybe I had given my real name by accident and forgot about it. Either way, it wasn't important.

It was fortunate that Maanmook seemed like a kind and approachable person, enthusiastic about her work. She was supposed to start working at the university during the new semester, but she wanted to experience the atmosphere of the workplace beforehand, so she asked to come in and familiarize herself during this summer break.

She might have seemed a bit quiet, but that wouldn't be a problem in collaborating or working with others.

Lucky in Game, Lucky in Love. Truly happy... next stop would be... picking up Khun Tharathara, the beautiful convenience store owner, for a date.

I took one more glance at my reflection in the car mirror to check my appearance. In my mind, I wondered if I should take the beautiful shop owner to that barbecue restaurant we used to visit in the past. Would Khun Whale like it?

"Khun Whale, I'm here to pick you up,"

I said as I opened the door and stepped into the shop, spotting the beautiful shop owner still absorbed in her laptop. When she looked up and saw me, she let out a small complaint, her slender fingers still focused on typing something with full attention.

"I should've trusted you... Do I really have to go eat with you? I have to mind the store, and there's other work to do as well."

I walked further into the store and couldn't help but almost laugh when I saw how she was dressed. She looked like she was genuinely busy, but her outfit gave her away. Fortunately, I managed to suppress my laughter just in time.

Khun Whale claimed that she had to stay at the store, but really, was this the type of outfit one would wear to guard a shop? Not to mention the fragrance of her perfume-it was so noticeable it lingered in the air. Khun Whale's words didn't match her actions. She was definitely a tsundere, and deep down, she probably wanted to join me.

"Khun Wan, you look beautiful today,"

I said sweetly, trying to flatter her. I noticed that even though she pretended not to care, the tips of her ears had turned a soft shade of pink.

"It's just a regular shop uniform. Nothing special,"

Khun Whale said, refusing to acknowledge the compliment. But I thought her reaction was cute-it showed that she was trying to show consideration for the fact that I invited her out for a meal.

"Let's go then. We already agreed that for the next two hours, I'm buying you dinner,"

I said as I touched her arm and smiled. If I left her sitting there, I knew she'd remain at her laptop for much longer.

"You're so demanding,"

She muttered as she reluctantly stood up, closed her laptop, and prepared to leave with me. I stopped by to give a small gift to N' Som before we left. Since I was borrowing the beautiful shop owner for dinner, I figured it was the least I could do.

I was standing holding Khun Whale's bag as I waited for her to lock the door properly. I thought that I have to change my plan. A barbecue might not be the best choice. After all, she had put so much effort into her hair and outfit. The thought of those white shoulders getting splattered with grill oil was not a good one. I even imagined finding a shawl to cover her up a littleit felt like the better choice.

She is beautiful-so beautiful that I didn't dare stare for too long. My heart might just stop...

"Wait, do I look weird or something?"

I must have been staring too long because Khun Whale looked at me.

"No, no. You're very beautiful, Khun Wan. I just like looking at you,"

I said simply and honestly.

The result, her face turned a lovely shade of pink-adorably so. I didn't think it was just from makeup. No, I convinced myself that she was blushing because of me.

"You look good today too,"

She said, trying to maintain composure, even though my heart swelled at the compliment coming from Khun Whale. I had intentionally chosen a blazer-and-shirt set for the occasion because I thought it looked fine, but her words sent my spirits soaring.

"Thank you! Let's go,"

I said cheerfully as I grabbed her hand without hesitation, and she didn't pull away.

As we were about to step out toward the car parked outside the shop, another car pulled up next to mine-grabbing both of our attention.

**"Surprise!!!"**

I didn't recognize the woman stepping out of the sleek Benz, but it was clear that Khun Whale know her. The two of them seemed very familiar with each other, possibly even close.

"Noey! What are you doing here?"

I glancing at Khun Whale as she seemed startled, pulling her hand away from mine quickly before eagerly rushing toward the other woman with excitement. I watched them embrace tightly, confusion welling up in me.

Khun Whale had just called her *"Noey."*

Could this be the same person she spoke with on the phone all the time?

"I drive here and you ask me such silly questions?"

Noey responded playfully, her tone sharp but accompanied by a teasing smile that eased the tension.

"Noey always has a way of scolding me,"

Khun Whale said with a smile as sweet as honey, her eyes narrowing as she laughed. I'd never seen her smile like that before.

"Because you're so much fun to tease. Come here and hug me again. I missed you!"

"I missed you too, Noey."

I stood there watching the two women embrace each other in front of me, an overwhelming and inexplicable feeling of resentment bubbling up. Not jealousy... maybe. But I couldn't help but wonder: Why didn't Khun Whale smile at me like that? Why hadn't she hugged me like that?

*What was I even doing standing here?*

I watched as Khun Whale eagerly caught up with Noey, talking about her life in great detail. I couldn't help but feel forgotten-completely sidelined.

"Ah... sorry, I got carried away,"

Khun Whale said, as if just noticing my presence. I could almost feel her apology hanging in the air, even as I remained rooted to the spot.

"It's okay,"

I said with a tight smile, trying to remain composed,

"I can wait."

I tried to brush off the bitterness as I watched the two of them standing so close, their hands still intertwined as they spoke.

"This is the regular customer you mentioned often, right? Don't tell me the name yet. Let me try and guess first,"

The voice next to me broke into the conversation. It came from the woman standing beside Khun Whale, who seemed intent on understanding the connection between us.

I looked at Khun Whale with curiosity. Did Khun Whale told this person about me? And judging by her calm, indifferent reaction, I wasn't sure how she felt about this-or if it was even supposed to matter.

I glanced at Whale again, uncertain. Her friendship with Noey seemed close, easy, natural, and I felt my heart twist in ways I couldn't understand.

"I guess she's harmless enough... though her words are a little sharp, she seems like a good person,"

I thought, trying to stay neutral as I processed the interaction.

"I remember now! Nong Rotten Cat."

She said followed by a teasing grin.

"It's Maewnam."

I turned to argue with the other person who was smiling happily at the thought. Who said it was harmless? This is a venomous snake. She's definitely a venomous snake. I can tell that she deliberately called it by the wrong name. What kind of crazy person would called a rotten cat!

"Oops, sorry. I must've remembered it wrong,"

Noey said with mock innocence, her eyes sparkling with a teasing glint.

"My name's Noey, by the way. I'm Whale's close friend."

I could see the playful nature of her words, though she tried to sound apologetic. There was no real remorse there. I could practically see the grin behind her words as she looked at me.

"You can call me a rotten cat, go ahead. I allow it,"

Khun Whale who spoke in a sarcastic tone, laughing.

"Khun Wan..."

I said in a small voice, hurt.

"I'm just kidding, relax. Don't pull that pouty face like you're upset. Come on, smile a little,"

Khun Whale added sweetly, her soft hand reaching out to nudge the corner of my mouth.

I found myself breaking into a reluctant smile despite my feelings. Khun Whale always knew how to disarm my emotions, and as much as I tried to stay upset, I couldn't hold a grudge.

But then I felt Noey's gaze resting on me, unspoken and steady, and I could feel the competition in her stare.

"Whale... you're really close with Maewnam, huh?"

Noey commented casually, narrowing her eyes a bit as though evaluating me.

Khun Whale immediately pulled her hand away from my face as if it had burned her. That made me a little pain.

"Not exactly... just a casual thing,"

Khun Whale said in mumble but her words felt sharp to me. All these months of trying to get close to her, only for her to act as if I were just another casual acquaintance.

I swallowed my feelings as Noey turned her attention back to Khun Whale.

"So... what's the plan? You're dressed so nicely. Where are you two headed?"

Noey asked, her tone curious.

Khun Whale hesitated. I could tell she wasn't sure how to answer. I too was holding my breath, waiting for the response.

*Would she admit that she had date with me?*

"Oh, nothing special. Just Maewnam invited me out for a meal. Noey, do you want to join?"

The words felt like a dagger to my chest, slicing through my hopes. I tried to tell myself it was fine, but hearing her voice say it so nonchalantly hurt more than I expected. It felt as though everything I had built up in my mind had just crumbled in an instant.

I felt my heart sink deeper, but I kept my composure.

"Khun Whale, I think you should go with your friend. I just remembered I have some urgent work I need to attend to,"

I said with a bright, forced smile.

My words came out quickly, and I could hear the tremor in my voice, trying my hardest not to let the tears fall.

I could feel Noey's curiosity lingering as she watched me, and I knew she could sense that I was trying to hide my feelings. But I couldn't stay there. Not now. I needed to step back and regain my composure. "Wait a minute... but you said you were free today, Maewnam?"

I could feel her trying to pull me back.

I turned away without answering, forcing my voice to stay steady as I said,

"I actually have some urgent work that came up. I'm really sorry."

Before she could respond further, I closed the car door behind me. My heart clenched as soon as the door shut, and I allowed the tears I had been desperately holding back to spill.

Well done, sweetheart. I scolded myself quietly, bitterly. You're so good at pretending you're okay...

I had no idea if I should keep fighting for a place in her life or let this all fade into nothing.

**Should I keep going or is this enough ?**

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# Chapter 18: Scars of the Past

Comfort Zone doesn’t mean a soft and cozy place. Instead, it’s a metaphor for a state of safety for ourselves—a condition where everything in life seems perfectly balanced, allowing us to live comfortably and stress-free without feeling the need to change anything.

*Yes… everything feels just right and happy as it is.*

*There’s no need to develop further.*

*If you go too far, the road ahead might bring pain.*

*Stopping here should be enough...*

*. .*

Inside a semi-luxurious Japanese restaurant and bar, the soothing music paired with the pleasant ambiance didn’t do much to excite or cheer me up. I sat with my chin resting on my hand, staring blankly at the variety of dishes on the table.

My hand moved unconsciously, dragging a piece of salmon with my chopsticks through the soy sauce over and over again.

“You’re marinating that salmon in soy sauce for so long it’s going to turn into pickled salmon,”

Teased Noey, who was sitting across from me. Her words snapped me back to reality, and I quickly stuffed the salmon into my mouth.

*Too salty.*

“Well, that’s what you get for soaking it that long,”

Noey said, laughing as she watched me gulp water repeatedly to wash away the salty taste lingering on my tongue.

“You don’t seem too thrilled to be out having dinner with me.”

“That’s not true…”

I quickly denied her claim, worried I might hurt her feelings. I tried to focus more on the food in front of me, but my eyes kept straying to my phone, lying motionless on the table.

*No response at all…*

“You’re staring at your phone like a stranded whale,”

She remarked.

“I’m not…”

I muttered under my breath, annoyed by her comparison. A stranded whale? Does that mean lying lifelessly with hopeless eyes? It sounded pitiful.

“Are you worried? About Maewnam?”

Once again, Noey’s question struck a nerve as though she had direct access to my thoughts, leaving me unable to deny it.

“I don’t know…”

I mumbled, unconsciously opening the LINE app again to look at the last message I sent to check in on Seal.

Not only was there no reply—there wasn’t even read.

I understood why Seal might be angry after what I told Noey, but what was I supposed to do? I couldn’t just leave Noey, could I? At the very least, Seal should’ve stayed to listen to my explanation…

“Give me a clear answer. If you keep this up, I’m going to settle the bill and head home right now. You’re ruining the mood.”

Noey’s stern tone cut through the air, her irritation evidently sparked by my lackluster response. Was everyone just determined to be cruel to me today? “Why are you so grumpy? Did you eat a wasp’s nest or something?”

I tried to defuse the tension with a weak joke and a dry smile. However, it didn’t land, and I realized I needed to get serious before she actually stormed out.

“Fine, fine. The truth is… Maewnam asked me to have dinner today.”

“I had a feeling.”

Noey’s sharp glare made it clear she wasn’t letting me off the hook.

“So why didn’t you say anything earlier? Honestly, I just came here to meet a client nearby and thought I’d drop by since it’s close to your place.”

“You came all the way here to see me, though! I see Maewnam every day, but you? Not so much.”

I tried to look as pitiful as possible, hoping she might show some sympathy.

“And yet, you decided to come out with me only to sit here sulking and poking at your food like this? Really?”

I’d forgotten that Noey was still Noey—pragmatic, meticulous, and obsessed with fairness. Sympathy wasn’t exactly her strong suit. Instead of consoling me, she was more likely to point out every misstep I’d made, leaving me defenseless.

“I didn’t think Maewnam would be so upset as to leave altogether…”

“To be honest, ever since you asked for advice about Maewnam suddenly turning out to be a university lecturer instead of a student, I’ve been curious. How did Tharnthara manage to surprise you like that? Care to enlighten me?”

Her gaze—one that only a best friend of nearly a lifetime could give— pierced through me, leaving no room for pretense.

I gave in and spilled everything.

I recounted Maewnam's antics in full detail: the small gifts she’d drop by with, the dinners we’d shared, and even the times she’d help stock up my shop with supplies, offering business tips without hesitation. Her kindness towards me was boundless.

“Honestly, I don’t know how to deal with it. She’s so… generous and considerate, way too much for me to handle.”

“That’s called courting, in case you hadn’t noticed,”

Noey quipped, her words hitting me like a punch to the heart.

“I know… I’ve always known.”

At first, I’d only felt slightly uneasy, baffled by her whims and selfish streak. But over time, her thoughtfulness began chipping away at the walls I’d unknowingly built around myself. Before I realized it, I’d already fallen for that grinning lecturer. “So why are you still hesitating?”

Noey pressed.

“I don’t even know if I actually like Maewnam. Maybe it’s just because we’ve been spending so much time together lately,”

I admitted, staring down at the empty plate in front of me. Deep down, I knew I had let myself be swayed by Seal’s kindness, but I’d been fighting against it, telling myself not to fall too deeply.

“And another thing... I just don’t want to open my heart to anyone anymore.”

“And is that because of your awful ex or... because of what happened back then?”

“Both, I guess.”

I sighed. I wasn’t willing to give my heart away just to have it broken again.

“But that’s all in the past now, isn’t it? You—”

“Noey, please. Can we not talk about that?”

I cut her off, pleading as I saw her about to dredge up memories I had long since decided to bury.

“Sorry...”

Noey looked genuinely regretful, quickly attempting to steer the conversation in a different direction to ease the tension.

“I read about this theory once. If you’re not sure whether you like someone... Oh! **I remember now. It said that if you hug them and your heart races, then you probably you like them.”**

I blinked in disbelief at the absurdity of her theory. It was so unlike Noey to say something so outlandish.

“Really?”

“Don’t ask me; that’s what the book said.”

“Well then, let’s test it out,”

I declared, a mischievous glint in my eye. Fueled by both amusement and the slight haze from the cocktails I’d been sipping, I got up from my seat and moved to sit next to Noey. Before she could protest, I pulled her into a tight hug.

I felt her body stiffen in my arms. What’s she so tense for? Fine, I’ll squeeze her tighter until she can’t breathe!

“Hug me back!”

I demanded, pouting. I heard Noey sigh heavily before she reluctantly returned the embrace.

“How do you feel?”

She asked softly as we pulled apart and sat back in our seats.

“Well...”

I paused to think, gazing into her eyes for a moment longer than necessary. My alcohol-clouded brain searched for the right words to articulate my feelings.

“Your body’s softer now. Have you gained weight?”

I teased, unable to hold back a grin.

“Ugh, you’re impossible!”

Noey’s palm came down on my shoulder with enough force to make me yelp.

“Hey, take it easy! What if I dislocate my shoulder?”

I protested, laughing as I dodged another playful whack from her.

“I don’t know why I even bother expecting anything from someone like you,”

She grumbled, shaking her head.

Her exasperation only made me laugh harder. Victory was mine—for now.

“Come on, don’t be mad. Let’s make up,”

I coaxed, noticing Noy’s pout after my teasing. Despite her initial annoyance, my pleading seemed to work as she finally shook her head with a small smile and clinked her glass with mine.

“You’re always like this,”

She said, half exasperated.

“Thank you, Noey. You really are my best friend,”

I said sincerely. Honestly, during times of sadness, having a close friend who listens is one of the greatest comforts in the world.

“Yeah... You’re my best friend too,”

She replied. For a moment, I thought her smile looked a bit sad, but perhaps it was just the dim lighting or my imagination.

. .

Noey had been busy with work lately, and I resolved not to burden her with my petty issues anymore. After all, we should handle our own problems, right?

Still, her words earlier seemed to strike a chord, and that night I dreamt about it again—an event from the past I had tried so hard to forget.

.

It was during high school, a time when I was surrounded by friends of all kinds. Among them, two were my closest companions.

“Whale, are you done packing yet?”

A voice called from outside the classroom. I hastily shoved my books into my Jacob bag and hurried out, afraid to keep my friends waiting.

“Coming!”

I yelled as I ran toward the two figures waiting for me. Though we were in different classes, it never affected the bond we shared.

“You’re quick as always, our good girl,”

One of them teased, tousling my hair lightly, making me feel a bit flustered.

“Don’t mess with my hair! It’ll get all messy,”

I protested, swatting their hand away as I tried to avoid their playful attempts.

“What’s this? Is little Whale shy? Come here and let me tease you properly!”

They laughed, clearly enjoying my flustered reaction.

“Stop teasing your friend,”

Noey scolded, her voice firm as she reprimanded the taller one, who finally relented with a sheepish smile.

I took the opportunity to put some distance between us, fearing they’d come after me to ruffle my hair again.

“Alright, alright, I’ll stop. Come back here, little Whale. Let’s walk together,”

They called out, still grinning.

“Bad habit, always teasing,”

I muttered with a pout but eventually rejoined the two of them.

As we walked home, we chatted about various things—how difficult homework was getting, secrets about classmates, and who had a crush on whom. Every story was a reason to laugh together.

Yes, our group consisted of three people: me, Naraluck, and her. The three of us were incredibly close despite our polar opposite personalities. Naraluck was a star basketball player at school, She was a well-mannered class president, and I, Tharnthara, was just a nerd who had nothing to rival the other two except my academic achievements that placed me in the top ranks.

We were inseparable, doing everything together even though we weren’t in the same class. We were supposed to be best friends forever—until that event happened.

And it was all because of me.

**“I… like you.”**

My hands were freezing from nervousness as I mustered every ounce of courage to confess. I waited for a response from my best friend, but the silence that followed made my heart sink.

“Alright… How about we try dating?”

She replied with a gentle smile.

“Really? You mean it?”

It felt as if my little heart was being filled with air, swelling with joy. I was over the moon that she accepted my feelings so easily. The time we spent as a couple was blissful beyond words.

“Whale… I’m so tired,”

She whined, leaning against me. I couldn’t help but smile, half amused and half exasperated.

“You can’t give up! If you want to get into your dream faculty, you have to study hard. I’ll help tutor you,”

I offered, and she readily agreed.

*“You’re the best girlfriend ever.”*

“Don’t flatter me,”

I said, trying to hide my shy smile as she pulled me into a hug. I thought we were doing well and that the future I dreamed of with her would come true.

But nothing turned out as I had hoped.

**“Let’s break up, Whale.”**

“W-why? But…”

My remaining words caught in my throat. We had both passed the entrance exams for the universities we wanted to attend. It should’ve been a day of celebration.

“Well… wasn’t it a win-win? You helped me with my studies, and I became your girlfriend. It was fair, wasn’t it?”

She said, her face devoid of any guilt or remorse, leaving only my shattered heart behind—a heart broken into countless irreparable pieces like a glass vase smashed to the floor.

*So, it was all a lie?*

*It hurt… It hurt so much.*

*.*

*.*

***Gasp!***

I jolted awake, sitting up in bed, breathing heavily. My hand instinctively reached to rub my face, trying to calm myself. It was just a dream.

It’s all in the past, I kept repeating to myself. I grabbed my seal doll and hugged it tightly, feeling utterly confused.

*After everything I’ve been through—nothing but lies and deception—how can I trust in this love now?*

# Chapter 19: Completely Black

There’s a saying that kind people are the scariest when they’re angry. I truly understood it today. At first, I thought the university teacher was just being slightly upset—just sulking like usual. Maewnam is a kind-hearted person and never stayed mad at anyone for long. Even when I teased her harshly, she never seemed to take it to heart.

But I might have been too optimistic...

After that night, when I tried to ask her about the “urgent work” that she claimed she had to rush home to do, Maewnam finally replied to my messages. Even though it was past midnight, her response was the longest and most irritating text she had ever sent me.

She explained that she might go off for a while because her faculty was organizing annual academic seminar.

A clear excuses. She’s just angry because I went to dinner with Noey!

That’s what I told myself, but there was no way I’d type it out and risk losing face.

Yes, I was wrong, but she didn’t have to avoid me completely! I wanted to deny that I didn’t care about not seeing Maewnam. With someone like her, I was sure she’d pop back up within two days. There was no need to overthink it...

Even though I really think about her.

But it’s been too long now...

Yes... it's been longer than it should have been.

Maewnam has been out of sight for a whole week. It’s not like she’s completely disappeared—technically—but I would’ve preferred if she had. The way she’s been acting makes me feel worse than if she had just vanished entirely.

*“You are not here in person but still messing with my head? Really?”*

I muttered under my breath when I rolled up the blinds at the shop and saw a bag of rice porridge along with a pack of cat treats hanging on the door handle. The temperature indicated the person who left it just recently.

There wasn’t a note, but I knew exactly who it was.

.

**Maewnam**:

I’ve never seen you eat breakfast. Do you usually skip it?

**Whale:**

Just coffee is enough.

**Maewnam:**

Should I start bringing you some? Or maybe I’ll join you for breakfast instead.

**Whale:**

Don’t trouble yourself.

**Whale:**

I'm bored.

**Whale:**

Are you planning to make me see you morning, noon, and night?

**Maewnam:**

T^T If I could, I’d love to visit you during lunch too.

**Maewnam:**

By the way, are you really bored of me? Lying will make your face wrinkles, and no mask will fix it.

**Whale:** ...…

**Maewnam:**

Just kidding. I’ll bring you breakfast next time.

**Maewnam**:

Don’t you dare refuse, or I’ll start calling you Abeluga instead.

**Whale:**

Always threatening me.

**Whale:**

Do whatever you want.

.

The conversation with Seal from previous nights replayed in my mind. Even though she was angry, she still kept her promises. Not only did she think about me, but she also thought about Somharuthai...

I scooped a spoonful of porridge into my mouth, guilt weighing heavily on my heart. The deliciousness of the shiitake mushrooms and fish didn’t make me feel better. On the contrary, it made me feel worse.

*If you’re angry, could you at least act like someone who’s actually mad?*

*Why do you care so much about everything that involves me?*

*What am I supposed to do now?*

. .

[And why did you had to call me at midnight for this?]

Noey’s tone over the phone made me regret calling her for advice. I’d planned to handle things on my own, but I couldn’t figure it out, so here I was. Since I’d already made the call, I had to endure the scolding that came with it.

“I didn’t know who else to ask. I don’t have many friends—I only have you,”

I said, pulling out my best guilt-trip card. Noey never could resist it.

[Fine... Go ahead.]

See? Noey caved, as expected.

“Seal hasn’t come to the shop for a whole week.”

[Even after you apologized? She still hasn’t forgiven you?]

I went silent. Noey had hit the nail on the head, so much so that I wanted her to buy a lottery ticket and become a millionaire.

[Why are you quiet? Don’t tell me... you still haven’t apologized?]

"You, the ever-intelligent, stunning, and absolutely perfect Miss Noey,"

I said, trying to evade responsibility for my mistake with unnecessary flattery.

[Cut it out with the compliments! I'm tired! Whatever you're trying to say, make it quick, okay?]

Noey snapped irritably. Her sharp tone left me no choice but to comply. Calling her this late at night was already risky; I didn’t need to make things worse by provoking her further.

“Yes, ma’am! Whatever you say, Miss Noey. Here’s the situation…”

I began recounting the entire sequence of events without leaving anything out, from the start of the issue to the current moment, where Seal had read my Line messages but still refused to reply.

[Whale, I swear, do you want me to kill you? Just type 'I'm sorry.' Is that so hard?]

“Noey, please stop snapping at your poor friend. I'm delicate, you know. Can you tone down your harsh words?”

I said, trying to sound as pitiful as possible. Though her advice was spot-on, her delivery was as brutal as ever.

[Oh, please. I’m just being real here. You’re a grown adult now, Whale. If you’ve done something wrong, apologize. Why cling to your pride and make things worse for everyone?]

“Noey... you're scolding me so harshly I feel like burying my head in a pillow and dying,”

I muttered dejectedly, clutching my Seal doll for comfort.

[I’m just trying to snap you out of it. Don’t act all sad now, or I might feel sorry for you again.]

Noy let out an exasperated sigh.

“I miss the kind, gentle version of you, Noey.”

[Whale, you already know what you should do. The fact that you called me, even though you already know the answer, is exactly why I'm frustrated. Anyway, that's it. I'm going to bed.]

.

Noey cut me off abruptly, clearly eager to end the call.

I’d already been scolded to the point of enlightenment, so I decided not to push my luck by keeping her on the line.

“Thank you, Noey, for always giving me such great advice.”

Noey paused for a moment before replying,

[Yeah, well, I’m your best friend, aren’t I?]

“Thank you,”

I said again, staring at the phone screen as Noey hung up. A strange feeling lingered in my chest. Was it just my imagination, or did Noey seem a bit irritable when I mentioned Seal? Maybe she felt a little neglected because I’d been paying more attention to Seal lately.

I’d find a way to make it up to Noey later. Right now, I had someone else I needed to apologize to before I lose that person forever.

Then come and cause trouble to the villagers.

“Noey... Noey scolded me so much that I wanted to bury my head in a pillow and die,”

I said in a depressed tone while hugging the fat seal doll with both hands.

With a careful hand, I started typing out a message in the Line app. It took longer than usual, as I kept deleting and retyping the words repeatedly. All I could do was hope Seal would stop angry.

Alright… I’ve already put this much effort into it. Let’s hope this works.

.

**Whale:**

Sorry... for saying our dating was just about having a meal together, Seal.

.

I typed nervously.

.

**Whale:**

I’ll give you free ice cream for a week as an apology.

.

I added, trying to lighten the mood.

.

**Whale:**

Somharuthai miss you so much.

.

I wrote, pouring my feelings into the message.

.

**Whale:**

Me too.

. .

I felt a sense of relief as I typed out my apology, thinking that finally getting this off my chest might allow me to rest well. Yet, my eyes betrayed me—they were wide awake, brighter than anything.

After all, it was past 1 a.m. when I sent the message. Seal was likely already asleep, and that was okay. Still, I couldn’t stop staring at my phone screen, repeatedly reopening the chat and shutting it again, as if my nervousness could be undone by the motion.

Finally, I set the phone down and turned my attention elsewhere. I really couldn’t sleep, and I knew that the best way to calm my restless mind was to immerse myself in work. With a sigh, I decided to finish translating the remaining articles that I had due by their deadline.

Looking across at Somharuthai, who was curled up peacefully on the bed, I couldn’t help but feel envious of her serenity. Cats had the easiest lives. No deadlines. No emotional conflicts. Just eating, sleeping, and being pampered.

I forced myself into work mode and began typing away at my articles with unwavering focus. Hours passed as I worked without a hint of drowsiness. My hands moved steadily across the keyboard, one word at a time.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, though, I kept wishing for the sound of Seal's text message notification. Just a little ping would suffice—something to reassure me.

.

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*Ding-dong.*

The sudden chime of the intercom startled me, breaking my concentration. I jolted upright, suddenly on edge. I didn’t even check the camera on my phone. I knew who it would likely be.

Pulling the curtain aside with trembling fingers, I spotted someone standing outside the shop. I couldn’t help but smile before quickly wiping my expression clean and forcing myself to look neutral.

"Is the academic seminar over already?"

I said casually, pretending to avoid the person in front of me.

"Khun Wan..."

"I'm sorry... for saying something that might have hurt your feelings,"

I was the one who spoke first before the other could finish. Before the other person could say anything, I quickly walked to the ice cream cabinet in front of the shop, opened it, and handed the most expensive vanilla ice cream coated in chocolate to the surprised teacher who was still trying to compose herself.

"I'll let you have this... for free for a week as an apology,"

I said, stammering without daring to meet her gaze.

"I'm not angry at you anymore. After you made the effort to make up and apologize, how could I being mean to you any longer, huh?"

The words came from the other person, biting into the ice cream while looking at me with those innocent, shining eyes. It nearly made me choke on my own saliva.

I turning my head away to avoid those sparkling eyes.

"Ah, good morning, Nong Som,"

She said.

*"Meow,"*

Somharuthai greeted the other warmly, clearly having missed her and rubbing up against her in a very affectionate way while I was busy with other things in the store.

"By the way, you opened the shop late today, didn't you? Is something wrong?"

The other person asked with a voice that sounded serious.

I blinked a few times as I processed her question. My brain finally caught up with itself. Oh no... the effects of not sleeping must be catching up with me.

Looking at the clock... 9 a.m.! I opened the store an entire hour late?!

It seemed like the other person had noticed my startled expression.

"You opened the store late today, Khun Wan. What happened?"

Her voice sounded as if she were questioning a child about their mistakes. However, I wasn't a child, so why should I be scared? Still, her stern gaze sent a shiver through me.

"I went to bed at the usual time. I just got caught up cleaning the shop and lost track of time,"

I said in the most natural voice I could muster.

However, her piercing stare only made my hands feel more clumsy.

"You've got really dark circles under your eyes, you know? You look like a panda,"

She said bluntly.

Upon hearing this, I immediately grabbed the nearby mirror to check myself. Although I looked exhausted, I definitely did not have panda-like dark circles as she had claimed.

"That's a lie. It's not that bad,"

I said defensively.

"So you admit that you’ve been staying up late, huh? Wait... don't tell me you haven't slept at all?"

She said as she glanced at the two coffee cups sitting on the counter that now only had coffee stains in the bottom. Her look of shock only made me feel worse.

"Well... maybe just a little bit,"

I admitted nervously, trying not to make eye contact.

"Ohhh nooo..."

She sighed dramatically, giving me a knowing smirk that made it clear that she wasn’t going to let this go easily.

"You need to take care of yourself, Khun Wan. You should sleep sometimes, you know,"

She said, genuinely concerned.

And as I listened to her words, my mind was swirling with thoughts. I needed to figure this out and solve it quickly... before she scolded me any harder.

"I... *sigh...*I guess I got a little carried away with work,"

I decided to tell the truth because I didn’t see any reason to keep lying. I didn’t want the person in front of me to worry any more than they already had.

"Are you closing the store today?"

Seal asked with concern.

"Are you crazy? No need. I'm not that tired,"

I quickly denied her concern, not wanting her to overthink it. Back in university, I often pulled all-nighters, so this was nothing for me at all.

"But you look very pale, Khun Wan,"

She said.

"You're overthinking. Despite how I look, I'm actually pretty strong,"

I assured her.

"If you say so, Khun Wan, then it's okay..."

Seal seemed to give up, but again, I assured her not to over-worry. This was nothing.

I picked up a coffee cup, ready to wash it, when the image in front of me suddenly blurred a little. I had to blink a few times to get rid of the overlapping visual effects.

"Khun Wan, are you sure you're okay?"

Seal still seemed concerned.

"I'm fine. Seal, you should head to the university now, or you'll be late,"

I said, lightly trying to push her along while my hand busied itself wiping the shelf with a feather duster.

It was strange. Suddenly, the image of the detergent bag turned completely black...

I heard Seal calling me from a distance.

*I told you, I’m fine...*

# Chapter 20: Don't Know or Pretend to Be Dumb?

"Ugh..."

I woke up, but my eyelids felt so heavy that I could barely open them. Where the hell am I? My eyes scanned the familiar ceiling. The smell of fabric softener and the warmth of the blanket…

This feels like… my room, wasn't it?

How did I end up sleeping on my own bed? I tried to think back to my missing memories. As I moved to get up, a cooling gel pad slipped off my forehead due to gravity.

*Did I… faint?*

The images of a detergent bag falling and the voice of Seal came back to my mind. It seems like the person who brought me here must have been Seal. She wasn't that much taller than me, but she able to carry me. I have to commend her.

Before I could contain my curiosity any longer, the door opened.

"Are you awake?"

Seal asked, stepping into the room.

"Did I faint?"

"Yes, Khun Wan. You fainted. Oh, don’t get up so quickly!"

Maewnam answered and run over to support me as I tried to sit up, but I failed because I still felt dizzy. The view in front of me was spinning.

"Thank you so much. Seriously, how did you manage to carry me up here? You’re only a little taller than me."

I said, thanking Maewnam and teasing her a little.

"Hmph, I’m very strong, you know. I can carry you, Khun Wan!"

Maewnam pouted when she heard my insults.

"Really? That strong, huh?"

I teased again, unable to resist since Maewnam was so fun to provoke.

"Hmph. I can carry you again if you don’t believe me!"

Maewnam said and, without warning, scooped me up.

"Wait, wait! Let me go! Ahhh!"

I yelled in surprise.

Because Maewnam didn’t properly prepare, and I squirmed in her arms, the result was that we both ended up tumbling onto the bed together in a heap.

Fortunately, Seal managed to stop itself in time, avoiding any injuries. However, the situation still felt quite precarious.

"Get out off me..."

I said, trying not to look at Seal that was on top of me. But instead of moving away, she even leaned closer!

“Khun Wan...”

*Why are you whispering like that?*

“What... what?”

“Do you really not know how I feel about you, Khun Wan?”

Seal stared into my eyes, as if trying to send a message. It’s not that I didn’t know. I’m not stupid at all. Who would be free enough to sit and eat with a grocery store owner every day, even bring food and snacks for the cat at the shop. I just didn’t want to get too involved.

It's good like this every day...

“I don’t know, just get off!”

I tried to change the subject.

“Khun Wan really doesn’t know, or are you pretending to be stupid?”

Huh... this kid is teasing me. Seal still had a serious face and wouldn’t move from that dangerous position.

“Just move away first...”

Before I could finish my sentence, Seal's lips press against mine.

**“I like you...”**

The other person confessed her feelings with loving eyes.

“Wait...”

I shout in surprise, embarrassed and not knowing what to do. I couldn’t run away because she held my wrist tightly.

“Khun Wan, you can’t escape from me. Today, Khun Wan will be mine.”

And Seal kissed me again. A deep kiss that made me almost melt from the tingling sensation. My stomach began to contract when I felt Seal's hand caressing me slowly.

“Oh, Seals.”

"Khun Wan,"

Seal's voice whispered softly in my ear, making my heart beat even faster.

“No...Stop it,”

I tried to push back with my little strength, but I couldn’t resist Seal’s strong desire.

"Khun Wan... Khun Wan!"

"Ah!"

I opened my eyes again because Seal’s voice that had just whisper in my ear suddenly got louder. Wait... I recognized the familiar ceiling. And the person shaking me was...

"I was so worried... Were you having a nightmare?"

Seal seemed relieved when I woke up.

Wait..... Seal just said...

*A dream?*

. .

The scene of the dangerous situation kept playing in my memory like it just happened.

Did I really dream about it so clearly?

*Oh no! So embarrassing!*

“Khun Wan, your face is all red. Are you still feeling dizzy?”

“No... but maybe I am still a bit dizzy,”

I avoided looking at Seal, who asked with concern. Who would dare say they just had a naughty dream about her?

“Khun Wan keeps moaning and mumbling. I don't know what to do."

Seal said with worry, not knowing that her words were making me even more nervous.

“!!!”

“I tried calling you many times.”

“Thank you...”

I said softly. I wasn’t really thanking her. I was just so embarrassed!

I wanted to hide my face with a pillow and disappear!

“Wait! What about your work?”

I asked in surprise, suddenly remembering that Seal had a class to teach. Why was she here with me? Seal smiled calmly when she heard me.

“Don’t worry. I've already taken care of it. I had something more important to do,”

She said while looking at me with meaning.

“I was worried about you, Khun Wan. Don’t push yourself like this again, okay?”

.

**Thump, thump, thump.**

.

My heart was beating so fast I thought it would jump out of my chest because of Seal’s kind words and actions.

Can I blame the crazy dream for making me feel this way? It was making me lose my balance.

“I didn’t mean to... I used to stay up all night a lot when I was in college,”

I said, trying to explain while looking away from her concerned eyes.

“But you’re not young anymore,Khun Wan,”

Maewnam said seriously. Was she calling me old? Or saying I don’t know my limits?

“Oh, and... I made porridge for you. Eat something warm so you’ll feel better,”

Maewnam said, holding out a paper cup of porridge. It looked strangely familiar.

“Instant porridge? Where did you get it?”

*Don’t tell me—*

“I got it from the store,”

She said with a big smile. Her answer made me want to hit my own head. Or maybe I should hit her head instead. That might help me calm down.

*No wonder it looked familiar! I clean it every single day!*

"Hehe, this shop is really convenient. It has everything,"

Maewnam laughed awkwardly in the most annoying way. Using stuff from my shop to take care of me? I feel like hitting her with a feather duster.

"Come on, I’ll feed you,"

Maewnam said while pulling a chair from the desk to sit beside my bed.

"I can eat by myself."

I was just dizzy, not sick. There’s no need to take care of me so much.

"What if your hands get weak again?"

Seal’s reason made sense, and I didn’t want to change the bedsheet right now.

Fine, I let her feed me... It’s not because I wanted to be pampered. It’s just because I was afraid of spilling it myself.

"Actually... I’m upset with you,"

Maewnam said suddenly, out of nowhere.

"But the reason I disappeared was because I wanted to know if I’m important to you or if I was just imagining it all by myself."

"...."

**"I’m really happy that you see me as important too."**

The genuine smile from Maewnam made me feel so shy that I grabbed the cup of instant porridge and started eating it myself. Maewnam didn’t mind, though.

I ate the porridge quietly, looking down and avoiding eye contact, while Maewnam scrolled on her phone. When I finished eating, we moved to the living room to watch a movie instead. Staying in the bedroom didn’t feel right anymore.

I couldn’t focus on the movie because my attention kept drifting to the university teacher on screen.

*'Is Seal really flirting with me? Even though I was 90% sure, I was still afraid that I might just be imagining it.'*

"You must have something you want to tell me,"

Seal’s voice startled me, pulling me out of my thoughts. Our face was so close, and she was looking at me with a worried expression. Does she has to be this close?

.

**Thump thump.**

*And why is my heart beating so loudly!?*

"It’s nothing. And move your face away,"

I said, trying to keep my face calm. I hoped she couldn’t hear my annoying heartbeat.

"Are you embarrassed by me?"

Instead of moving back, Seal leaned in closer.

"Stop being silly."

"But your face is red,"

Seal teased. Seal is acting strangely, she seems bolder than before, which I didn’t like at all because it was dangerous for my heart. And now I’m sick!

“Go away, it’s uncomfortable,”

I tried to push Seal’s face away. Since Seal started bringing Somharuthai treats every day, the little one had been acting more polite toward her. Maybe the tasty treats had bought her loyalty.

It’s fine to be polite, but right now, please help me! I’m being teased by this shameless person!

Can’t you care more about my well-being than the treats?

*“I want clear answers,”*

But my words probably didn’t reach Somharuthai, who was still sleeping soundly in her cat condo.

I looked at Seal, who seemed to be talking about something complicated.

“W...What...?”

“You know it, don’t pretend you don’t understand,”

Seal’s eyes conveyed something, but I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know.

“W-what are you talking about?”

“It’s not moving forward because you keep avoiding it,”

Seal sighed, her disappointment clear on her face, and I was left speechless.

“I...”

“But I’ve decided not to rush you. But just so you know, if I don’t say it directly, nothing will ever be clear. I don’t want to do something without it being clear first,”

Seal’s face was serious, more serious than I’d ever seen her before, and I knew I couldn’t avoid it anymore.

**“I like you, Khun Whale.”**

Seal’s confession almost made me choke on my breath. Her determined face, despite her ears turning bright red in a cute way, made me realize how much courage it must have taken for her to say what was in her heart.

*But... I wasn’t sure about my own feelings yet.*

*Am I really ready for a new relationship?*

When Seal saw me remain silent, she sighed deeply.

“You don’t have to answer me now. When the time comes, I’ll ask again.” “I’m sorry...”

“You don’t need to apologize, Don't make the face. It make me feel like I'm pressuring you, Khun Wan.”

Seal said, trying to smile at me, but I could tell she was trying hard to hide her feelings. I still couldn’t handle the situation.

In the end, the silence between us became even more uncomfortable.

“Well then... I’ll go now,”

Seal said. I didn’t have the courage to stop her. I just watched as she walked out of the store.

"Yeah, have a safe trip home, and thank you so much for today."

"Just so you know, from now on, I’m flirting with you, Khun Wan. I won’t be just a younger sister, a regular customer, or anything like that. I’ll be your Seal. Good night!"

I watched her slim figure appear at the entrance of the store before she quickly spoke with a flushed face and hurried out of the shop. I couldn’t help but smile a little at how brave she was.

After that, I fell into my thoughts, feeling confused. The thing I had feared the most had happened.

When she confessed that she liked me and asked if I was happy, I was happy, but at the same time, a heavy feeling filled my heart.

*Maewnam likes me. But what about me?*

*Do I like Maewnam that much?*

# Chapter 21: First Aid

**SEAL POV**

.

Luckily, I noticed the exhaustion clearly showing on the Khun Whale's face and eyes. I tried to keep an eye on her in case anything unexpected happened. And, just as I thought, it did...

"Khun Wan! Khun Wan!"

I called out anxiously to the beautiful shop owner, but she didn't respond at all. I placed my hand on her forehead and immediately felt an abnormally high temperature.

This is bad... I need to give first aid right away!

*"Meoww,"*

Somharuthai cried out worriedly and tried to climb up to her owner, making me turn to calm her down.

"I'll take care of Khun Whale. Trust me, Som."

Somharuthai settled down after I gently petted her head. Alright... the first step in first aid for someone who has fainted, from what I can remember from my training, should be this:

**Step 1: Lay the person down flat.**

"Where am I going to lay Khun Whale down..."

I muttered, feeling troubled. Looking around, I saw there was no space in the shop big enough for one woman to lie down.

*"Jaew."*

While I was still pondering, it was Somharuthai who nudged my attention.

When I bent down to look, I saw the little one running ahead of me, up the stairs, calling me to follow.

"Are you showing me the way? Should I take her upstairs?"

*"Jaew!"*

Somharuthai cried again, almost urging me to hurry.

"After this, I'll reward you with three bags of treats,"

I said, amazed by Somharuthai's unusual cat intelligence.

As I carefully supported Khun Whale, the goal was to get her upstairs, where I assumed her bedroom was. On the way, I passed a picture of the shop owner's father and another of the woman beside him-presumably Khun Whale's mother.

I bowed my head slightly to the photo of Whale's father, as a sign of respect, silently asking for permission to take Khun Whale upstairs to her room.

As soon as I finished silently asking for permission, I... did I just imagine it?

*Did Uncle blink at me?*

I blinked and looked at the picture again, not quite trusting my eyes. The hair on the back of my neck stood up.

Oh no... there's no way I could do anything to harm the beloved daughter of Uncle! I swear, as a woman!

I followed Somharuthai, though it wasn't too difficult since Khun Whale wasn't heavy enough to make it a struggle, but the scent of her... that distinct fragrance made my heart race uncontrollably, as if it were going to leap out of my chest.

She smells so good... I want to be close to her like this again, but only when Khun Whale is awake!

I didn't have time to admire Khun Whale's bedroom, though, despite wishing for another situation where I could be there. Gently, I laid the unconscious person down on the bed.

**Step 2: Observe breathing.**

I placed my hand near Whale's nose and felt that her breathing was normal and steady. The air from her breath tickled my palm.

Was I really this embarrassed by someone who was unconscious?

*Some people... they look beautiful even when they're passed out.*

**Step 3: Loosen tight clothing.**

I swallowed hard at the thought of what I needed to do next. Khun Whale's shirt was already an oversized loose fit, with shorts, so it wasn't too tight, but... should I undo a button or two to make her more comfortable?

My trembling hands tried to undo Khun Whale's shirt while I tried to calm myself down.

**Focus, focus, focus. Oh no, her skin is so smooth and...**

Wait! I felt my face burning up. If I stared at her skin for any longer, I might faint instead!

After resting in a well-ventilated room, Khun Whale's condition seemed to improve visibly. I opened the freezer and smiled when I found the cool pack (the gel ice pack).

Though Whale's temperature wasn't dangerously high, resting would likely make her feel better. However, using the cool pack would speed up her recovery.

"Get well soon, Khun Whale,"

I whispered as I gently placed the cool pack on her forehead, then headed downstairs to avoid disturbing her while she rested. I quickly called someone who might be able to help me in this situation.

"Chompoo... I need your help,"

I said, getting straight to the point as my friend answered the phone.

[What's up? Your class is about to start. Where are you?]

"Because of your plan, you two! Look, my Khun Whale just collapsed. See? Is Ton with you? Turn on the speaker!"

As I heard Ton's loud voice on the other end, I immediately started complaining to both my friends. In fact, if I said I could stay strong enough not to meet the gorgeous shop owner for an entire week, it seemed impossible. But here we are. Thanks to the advice, or rather the encouragement, from Ton and Chompoo.

[How can you blame us? You agreed to cooperate. Anyway, where are you now?]

"It doesn't matter where I am. Can you please teach my class for me?"

[Tell me quickly and I'll handle it for you.]

"I know, I know. Well, Khun Whale fainted, and I stayed to help with first aid. Wait, no, that sounds bad, it's not what it sounds like!"

I almost shouted into the phone, forgetting myself as Ton teased me, leading to some misunderstandings. My eyes couldn't help but glance at Uncle's picture, instinctively.

*I swear, I didn't do anything to the shop owner's daughter!*

I still felt uneasy with Uncle's smile in the picture, like he was watching me all the time...

"Please take care of my homework, it's on the table."

. .

After some relentless questioning, Chompoo and Ton finally agreed to help.

I felt like they were extracting every piece of personal information from me. Why do those two enjoy digging into others' private lives so much? *Sigh...*

With my tasks handled, I was now left with nothing to do. I could sit and stare at Khun Whale as she slept until she woke up, but I felt awkward under Somharuthai's gaze.

What's wrong with me looking at someone I like?

"Mmm... Ugh..."

I quickly went to check on Khun Whale, who was mumbling and shifting uncomfortably, clearly having a bad dream. But... she looked so sexy, with her shirt undone, exposing her smooth, pale shoulder.

*Oh no... my heart couldn't take it anymore!*

"Khun Wan..."

I whispered, hesitant but determined to wake her.

"No... stop it..."

Khun Whale's body language showed she was in discomfort, so I rushed to her side.

"Khun Wan, Khun Wan!"

It seemed like my voice and the touch on her shoulder finally got through because she started to stir and wake up.

Khun Whale's eyelids slowly fluttered open, her eyes still drowsy, but her condition was much better than earlier.

"I was so worried... Were you having a nightmare?"

I asked her, concerned.

Whale stared at me with wide eyes, her face suddenly turning red.

"Is your fever back?"

I asked, worried.

"Khun Whale, your face is so red. Do you still feeling dizzy?"

I asked again, but Khun Whale avoided making eye contact with me. She seemed a little confused, so I figured she was still disoriented. I decided to continue taking care of her, though the whole experience felt exhausting, almost like I'd run a 100-meter race.

My heart was racing as well.

.

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After Khun Whale ate all her porridge, her fatigue seemed to vanish, and we moved to sit downstairs. I couldn't help but notice that she seemed a bit different, almost like she was embarrassed.

I felt like this might be the perfect time to confess my feelings, especially with the words of Chompoo and Ton from that day they took me to the barbecue restaurant echoing in my mind.

"Do you dare bet, Seal?"

Ton had teased me.

"What are we betting on? It's obvious Khun Whale doesn't feel the same about me."

"That's why I'm telling you to bet. If Whale doesn't care about you, even if you disappear, she won't be bothered."

"True... If I disappeared, she probably wouldn't care,"

I had murmured to myself, recalling Ton's words as I stared into my cup of water, feeling the sting in my chest.

"Aw, come on! Chompoo, give me a tissue. I said it to cheer her up, not to make her cry!"

Ton joked, seeing my state. Chompoo quickly handed me a tissue, which I used to wipe away the tears that had started to fall.

Ton glanced at me, clearly frustrated with my tears.

"You're making me look bad here, making a girl cry," he muttered.

"Come on, let's call it a clean break. Are you in or out?"

Chompoo added, trying to cheer me up.

"Alright... We've got nothing to lose anyway."

With the encouragement from my close friends, I decided to go along with the plan to test Whale's feelings by distancing myself.

As expected, Khun Whale sent me a message to apologize and even offered me free ice cream for a week. It seemed like things were going well...

Although Khun Whale didn't respond right away, I interpreted the flushed face and the awkwardness as positive signs-signs that perhaps there was hope after all.

*But it didn't matter. If, in the end, Khun Whale didn't return my feelings, at least I could say I tried my best. And that was enough for me. I wouldn't regret it.*

*.*

# Chapter 22: Return the Flashlight Battery

Recently, I feel like I've been acting a bit badly. Or maybe, I'm actually acting very badly. I don't even dare call Noey for advice because I'm afraid she'll scold me for 3 days and 3 nights.

The thing is after Maewnam confessed her love to me and officially announced that she would court me, it's been over a month now. Nothing much has changed. The only difference is that he's been paying a lot more attention to me.

Which I actually find comforting.

I don't think I'm in the wrong, though. Maewnam hasn't asked for an answer, so why should I feel guilty about just going with the flow?

[Khun Wan, are you really not going to change the day?]

"I already decided to go today. It's fine if you've suddenly got work to do,"

I told Maewnam, trying to ease her worry. Today, we had planned to go buy stock up at a wholesale store, but Maewnam got caught up in an urgent meeting.

[Alright then, I'll come to see you as soon as I'm done.]

"Let's just meet at the shop. No need to rush, okay? See you later,"

I said to comfort her. Maewnam takes great care of me, and I genuinely appreciate how attentive she continues to be.

. .

By the time I returned to the shop, it was already late afternoon. I decided to open the shop right away since there might be a few customers passing by. While sitting at the counter, I scrolled through my phone to catch up on the news. Recently, there have been many robbery cases on the news-some targeting gold shops and others small convenience stores.

Due to the struggling economy and the government's failure to manage things, the income gap has widened. The rich continue to live comfortably, while the poor face suffer even more.

I guess I'll have to be more careful.

I reminded myself to be more cautious as I glanced at the CCTV monitors placed around the shop. I furrowed my brow slightly when I noticed something unusual display.

A man, whom I remember seeing enter the shop about 10 minutes earlier, was still lingering even after other customers had come and gone. Just as I started to take action, he approached the counter.

"10 baht, please,"

I said, giving him the price for the gum he placed on the counter.

I accepted the money from him. It was odd, though-he kept pulling his cap lower, as if trying to hide his face. Maybe he just wanted to avoid drawing attention, or perhaps...

Maybe he's just shy, I tried to think positively.

But just as he was about to leave the shop, I noticed the edge of a piece of cardboard sticking out of his oddly bulging pants pocket.

"Excuse me, sir! Wait a moment!"

I called out loudly. When he turned around in shock, the items stuffed awkwardly in his pocket fell to the floor.

It's a flashlight battery.

"Flashlight? A thief!"

I exclaimed in surprise. Realizing he'd been caught, the man immediately bolted for the exit. My mind went blank-I could think of only one thing: I had to get back what he stole.

I darted out from behind the counter and ran after him.

"Give back the flashlight batteries!"

I yelled as I got closer to him. But then..

"Ah!"

I was shoved hard by the thief, causing me to crash into a vending machine. As I tried to push myself up, a sharp pain shot through my right wrist, bringing tears to my eyes.

Seeing that I couldn't chase him any further, the thief turned to run again, only to stop abruptly. Someone was blocking his path.

"What did you do to her?"

The calm but firm tone of the voice revealed the speaker's anger. Still shaken, I screamed out,

"Seal, run away!"

My body was aching, and I was utterly helpless. I didn't even know if the thief had a weapon. Seal was just another woman-I couldn't bear the thought of her getting hurt.

*Take whatever you want-just leave Seal unharmed.*

"Didn't you hear me? Get out of the way!"

The thief barked, glaring at Seal, who stood calmly in her path. He raised his hand to strike her, and I could only scream in panic.

But Seal swiftly grabbed his wrist mid-swing, expertly twisting his arm and pulling him forward. In the blink of an eye-so fast I couldn't even process what happened-the thief was lying on the ground, immobilized. Seal pinned his arm behind his back and held him down.

"Ow! Let me go!"

The thief yelled as his wrist bent at an alarming angle. Any more force, and his bones might have snapped. A few bystanders nearby quickly came to help Seal restrain him.

It took me a couple of seconds to gather myself before I called the police. Finally, the nerve-wracking situation was brought to an end.

"Are you okay, Khun Wan?"

Seal asked me with worried eyes as I stepped out of the clinic. I shook my head lightly, smiling at how concerned she seemed.

"It's just a minor sprain on my wrist. Thank you for helping with the police and for driving me back to the shop."

I said, glancing at my right hand, now wrapped securely in a bandage to prevent further strain.

"It's nothing,"

She replied briefly, her tone calm, as she continued driving. She seemed tired, so I decided not to engage her in much conversation.

When we got back to the store, Somharuthai immediately walked straight to me, rubbing her round little head against my legs as if to comfort me. I crouched down and patted her gently, grateful for her warmth.

I was relieved she hadn't come out during the incident. I didn't even want to imagine what I'd feel if she had gotten caught up in the chaos.

Seal was unusually quiet, and the silence started to feel a bit heavy. I tried to break the odd mood by striking up a conversation.

"You're really impressive,"

I said, still amazed by her quick reflexes and skills during the encounter.

*Is there anything else I don't know about the person in front of me?*

"It's just basic self-defense,"

Seal replied, her expression clouded with sadness and guilt. Her tone made me feel uneasy-I didn't understand why she felt so bad when everything had turned out fine. The thief had been caught, and no one was seriously hurt.

"Hey, you don't have to feel that bad,"

I said softly, using my uninjured hand to gently pat her head. Seeing the pained look on her face tugged at my heart.

*Your face is more suitable for a smile, you know?*

"I was scared,"

Seal said, her voice trembling. Her hands clenched tightly as if trying to hold back her emotions.

"I was scared that if I had arrived any later and he hurt you, Khun Wan... what would I do?"

" ...."

"I was so worried about you, Khun Wan, you know that?"

"...."

"I'm sorry. If I had come to you sooner, you wouldn't have gotten hurt.."

"....."

"I... I'm so sorry,"

She said, her voice breaking as tears threatened to spill.

"It's okay,"

I said gently, trying to reassure her.

"You were there when it mattered. That's what's important."

"......"

"Hey,"

I said softly, cupping Seal's tear-streaked face and turning it toward me. Her eyes, once always so bright and full of life, were now clouded with fear and guilt, tears brimming and spilling over.

"Why are you blaming yourself? You were amazing, you know that? You caught the thief when I couldn't do anything,"

I said, brushing away the tears running down her cheeks. Even though she was, someone strong enough to take down a bigger, stronger man, yet crying like a child because she was afraid that I'd get hurt.

"I was scared too, you know?"

I confessed, my voice trembling slightly.

"I was terrified what would happen if you got hurt. I wouldn't have the ability to do anything."

"...."

"Next time, don't do that, okay? If someone wants something, just let them have it. Don't put yourself at risk like this,"

I said, trying to reason with her. But she didn't stop crying, her sobs still shaking her tall frame.

"Don't cry, or your eyes will swell,"

I teased gently, hoping to lighten the mood.

"Then you... you can't do something like this again either,"

She stammered through her tears.

"I promise," I said softly.

"...."

"I won't act recklessly like that again."

But despite my words of comfort, Seal still couldn't stop crying. She kept mumbling about how she had seen the thief push me and how she couldn't reach me in time.

"I was so angry... so helpless,"

She whispered, her voice breaking as she cried harder.

Not knowing what else to do, I pulled her into a hug. I hoped that the warmth of my embrace might calm her down.

"You don't have to cry anymore. You're the one who saved me."

I said, holding her close. And it seemed to work. Slowly, she began to calm down, her sobs fading as she leaned into my arms.

"Can we stay like this for a while?"

She murmured, her voice muffled but steady now.

When I nodded, she tightened her embrace.

Out of nowhere, Noey's old words echoed in my mind:

## 'If you hug her and your heart races, you probably like her.'

My thoughts were interrupted as Seal's hug grew even tighter, as if she was afraid I might disappear. And maybe, just maybe, my heart started to race too.

.

*Thump....*

*Thump....*

*Thump....Thump*

***This might be bad.***

***Why is my heart pounding so hard it feels like it's about to burst out of my chest?***

*.*

# Chapter 23: Prove

***"If you hug her and feel your heart beating fast, maybe you like her.***

*Thump, thump.*

*Thump, thump, thump.*

*This is might be bad...*

*Why is my heart beating so fast that it almost feels like it will jump out of my chest?*

*.*

Maewnam had stopped crying... but my heart beat hadn't stopped either. And because we were so close to each other, I was worried that the sound of my heart echoing in my chest would leak out to the other person. It was not that I hadn't never had my heart beat for this person before, but this time it was more intense than ever before.

I slowly pulled away from the hug and stepped back from Seal, who seemed calm now. But I was surprised when her tear-stained face no longer looked sad but was instead full of a strange smile, as if she was trying to hold back a shy smile.

*Could she have heard?*

I wasn’t sure how the situation became like this. Just a few minutes ago, this crying child was asking for comfort, and now I was the one who couldn’t look her in the eye. “Why are you smiling?”

I asked, raising my voice to the person in front of me who was smiling like she was really happy. Where did the person who was crying just now go? Why could she change her mood so quickly?

Did she go see cannabis?

“I wasn’t smiling. By the way, your face is really red. Do you want me to turn the air conditioner up for you?”

Maewnam said teasingly with a grin, and it made me want to grab a feather duster and hit her head a couple of times.

There's no doubt now that the person I just hugged must have heard my heart beating uncontrollably!

Because judging from Seal’s expression, it can completely answer all the questions.

*This crazy heart, you don't even care about your owner at all. You stupid heart, you’re making me look bad!*

I could only curse in my mind, feeling embarrassed and not knowing what to do. Every time I saw Seal's smile, my heart kept beating faster. This is so bad... I can’t control myself.

Since when did Maewnam have this much influence over me? I never knew that just a hug could make me feel like this.

"Where are you going, Khun Wan? Are you embarrassed. I won't tease you anymore?"

Maewnam quickly grabbed my arm as I was about to walk away.

"I’m not embarrassed!"

I said, but even though I said that, my face felt so hot, almost like it was burning.

"Hey... do you want to go back to the condo?"

"What?"

"Do you want to go back to the condo? I just want to rest."

When I didn’t know how to get out of this situation, I decided to get rid of the cause of my racing heart. If it was the old Seal, she would have just agreed without any problem. But this was the new version of Seal, the "Hard Mode" one. She was harder to handle.

"Do you want to go to our condo?"

Maewnam pretended to misunderstand, clearly teasing me.

"No! Please, stop teasing me!"

I shouted, seeing that the one who was supposed to be more in control in this situation was still teasing me. Am I still the one who got hurt? Why doesn’t she show any sympathy at all?

It seemed like Maewnam realized I was about to reach my limit, so she stopped teasing me. If she kept pressuring me, I might have run off to my room and thrown the shop keys at her and Somharuthai to help close the shop for me.

"Can I have something hot to drink? I’m really tired,"

Maewnam asked, her face looking soft with her eyes still a bit red from crying. Who could say no to that? But did she forget something? I pointed to my right hand, which was wrapped with a bandage.

"Oopss... sorry, I forgot you were hurt,"

Maewnam said with a dry smile, and I couldn't help but laugh a little, feeling a bit fond of her.

"I’m just joking... Go make it yourself! Eat whatever you want,"

I said, laughing. Since Maewnam seemed familiar with everything in the shop, I gave her the freedom to pick whatever she liked.

In the end, she made hot cocoa and even kindly made an extra cup for me. I blew on it to cool it down a little before tasting the perfect balance of sweetness and bitterness.

*It's delicious...*

When I looked up, I met Seal’s gaze, waiting for an answer.

“It’s okay.”

There’s no way I’ll praise her more than this.

“That’s not true. I’m the number one at making cocoa, you know? You’re teasing me,”

Maewnam puffed her cheeks in a pout, making me try really hard not to grab her chubby cheeks.

“You already knew it tasted good. Why ask me again?”

“Because I want to know… if you like it.”

I felt like Maewnam really emphasized the word “*like*,” which made it harder to swallow the cocoa I was drinking. Especially when I looked into her eyes, the awkwardness that had gone away before started to come back.

I tried to look away and answered.

“It’s good…”

“Do you ***like*** it?”

I glared at her. She was really pushing it, wasn’t she?

“I think I don’t need to ask how you feel about me anymore, Khun Wan.”

Maewnam said, seeing that I avoided answering and giving up quickly, which surprised me.

“Well, sincere the answer is clear.”

“Clear about what?”

I frowned as I saw Maewnam trying to figure out if my silence meant I agreed.

“Or are you going to deny it? That you don’t like me?”

She was really too confident in herself. I looked at Maewnam, who was smiling in a way that made me feel annoyed, and walked over to sit down beside her on the couch.

“Huh? What are you doing, Khun Wan?”

Maewnam looked at me, confused, as I stayed silent.

“I’m going to prove something. You just stay quiet.”

Maybe I was shocked earlier, or maybe I wasn’t ready, but this time I was prepared. Alright! I took a deep breath, then hugged the tall girl, who kept quiet as I asked her to.

The soft, familiar scent of Seal, the warmth and softness, slowly absorbed into me.

***Thump, thump, thump...***

With my heart beating so fast, there’s no need for any more confirmation—I really like the person in front of me.

Then, I pulled away from her, lowering my head because I couldn’t look her in the eye.

*I lost completely...*

But then, just as I was about to gather the courage to speak, Seal, who had been quiet for a while, gently lifted my chin so we could meet each other's gaze. Then, her face came closer until I could feel her breath, and before I knew it, my lips were stolen by hers.

The touch was soft and light, like a feather, but it left a lasting impression in my heart...

“You...”

I could only touch my lips in shock, while the person who had done this just smiled, unaware of the effect she was having on me.

“If you want to prove that you like me, it’s much faster than the method you tried earlier,”

Seal said, giving me a subtle smile. A smile I never thought this innocent girl could make.

*Stop stealing kisses like that and then smiling at me so sweetly!*

She’s getting too bold, way too bold.

I screamed inside, but on the outside, I was frozen in place. My face was burning. I think I might actually overheat from embarrassment.

“Or are you still not sure, Khun Wan? Do you want me to try again?”

Seal asked, her innocent eyes still fixed on me as her face came even closer.

“Stop! Stop right there!”

I pushed her face away, not wanting her to come any closer.

“Ouch! Why are you pinching my cheek?”

Maewnam cried out as I grabbed her soft cheek.

“And who told you... to...”

I couldn’t finish my sentence. It was too embarrassing.

“Well, you looked like you wanted me to kiss you, so I did...”

Maewnam said, looking at me with a straight face, making me even more embarrassed. How could she say something like that and act like it was no big deal?

“Say that without any shame,”

I said, still flustered. She was blaming me, like it was somehow my fault. But where did I ever make it seem like I was asking for this?

“So, do you like me?”

Seal asked, rubbing her cheek where I had pinched it.

“I don’t know, I won’t tell you.”

At first, I was going to tell her, but after all this, I decided to keep it to myself. If she’s so desperate to know, let her wonder until she can’t take it anymore.

“Khun Wan...”

Maewnam said in a sweet voice, making me sigh in defeat.

“Are you sure?”

I looked the person in front of me seriously.

“I’ve been sure for a long time. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have confessed my love. What about you, Khun Wan?”

“I...”

I couldn’t continue. The feelings I had for her were real, but I was still scared. I was scared of starting something new, only for it to end the same way as before.

*If it’s going to end the same way, maybe it’s better not to start at all.*

“If you’re still not sure, can I have a chance?”

Maewnam reached out to hold my hand.

**“Please be my girlfriend.”**

"....."

“Do you agree?”

"....."

“If you don’t answer, I’ll kiss you again.”

“What a bad habits! Who taught you to do this?”

I snapped, as Maewnam kept getting closer. This was before I even said yes!

“Well, you’re just too cute, I couldn’t resist... Can I blame it on you for being so cute?”

She made a sad face with her eyebrows furrowed that made me feel cute. The words I was about to say got swallowed back.

“No... you’re really...”

“So, what’s your answer?”

She looked at me with such pleading eyes that I couldn’t bring myself to say no. But if I had to speak, I was so embarrassed I couldn’t get the words out.

“From now on, can you please let me take care of you?”

I nodded slowly, agreeing with my feelings. When Maewnam received the answer she wanted, she smiled widely, nearly splitting her face, and hugged me again. This time, I hugged her back, willingly.

It wasn’t just me whose heart was racing so loudly.

I could feel Seal’s heartbeat race as well...

.

.

“By the way... can I prove it again?”

Out of the blue, Maewnam spoke up, leaving me confused at first.

What was she trying to prove?

But her teasing smile made it easy to understand her hidden meaning.

“The store is closed. You need to leave now!”

I said firmly.

I’m not sure if I made the right decision agreeing to be Seal’s girlfriend. It feels like she’s become more mischievous... or maybe she’s been hiding her claws all along, pretending to be a busy, harmless creature to make me trust her.

“Hey, do you need help? With your hand like that, you probably can’t do much.”

Seal’s round face appeared again at the shop, teasing me with a mischievous grin.

“For example... taking a bath...”

I could only make a squeaky sound, my face turning red.

“Get out!”

# Chapter 24: Rainbow Somharuthai

**SEAL'S POV**

.

The general store has become quite a well-known shop because of the many marketing tricks I tried to present to the store owner, which she then applied. As a result, this store has become more interesting.

It might also be because the construction of the Seven Elephants Convenience Store was delayed, so this is the only general store in the neighborhood, and customers keep coming here nonstop.

*Or maybe it's because...*

"Thank you for shopping with us!"

"You're always welcome."

I rested my chin on my hand, watching the young customer who took the bag from the hands of the beautiful store owner with a somewhat clouded mood. Just buy your stuff and go!

Why do you have to smile so much when you’re looking at her?

The store owner doesn't need to smile so sweetly either, that guy is already in a daze, walking into the glass! Oh, he really did hit the glass.

I couldn't help but smile a little smugly when I saw that man rubbing his head and walking out of the store with a dazed look.

*Serves him right!*

Seeing the customer leave, I decided to let out all my frustration on the beautiful girl who was still typing away on her laptop, completely unaware that she was casting charms on everyone around her.

"Ah... I'm working. Don’t disturb me, go play with Somahiruthai instead,"

The store owner said, turning her face away from my embrace.

"Khun Whale, can you stop smiling at the customers?"

I said to her in a whining tone, but I didn't release her from my arms. I secretly inhaled her scent for a moment...

The light, fragrant smell that always made me feel dreamy when I was close to her.

"Well, how can I not smile? You taught me that a smile is the best way to show sincerity to customers."

"Stop smiling, I’m jealous. My girlfriend is so beautiful, and the more she smiles, the prettier she gets,"

I said irritably. Even though she was wearing just a T-shirt and shorts, so many people were trying to flirt with her. I wanted to make a sign for her to wear saying,

## "This beautiful girl has a girlfriend. Her name is Seal. You should know that!"

"Okay, okay, that's enough, don’t act so coy,"

Said the store owner as she shifted out of my embrace.

"Heh heh, just a little bit,"

I said, smiling faintly. Even though Khun Whale was shy, but she looked cute. That's good, but she has been shy with me too long now. We've been dating for two months. I am a human with emotions, I also want to cuddle my girlfriend and kiss her sometimes.

"Please take the food to Somahiruthai,"

I said, taking the cat food can from Whale, who was trying to look serious, but it didn't match at all with her fair skin, which was turning a soft pink. Alright, I should let Whale handle her own feelings before she explodes from embarrassment, so I stepped back willingly.

Honestly, I thought it was all a dream. I never imagined I would end up with Whale. It felt like a vague hope and my first love as a child, but when it actually became a reality, I was incredibly happy. Whale, my version of a boyfriend, is the cutest in the world. Do you know that? I still get shy thinking about what happened last week.

"Seal, pass me the spoon."

*"Me?"*

I turned to look at Whale, who was focused on making dinner. What did she just call herself... I couldn't hear very clearly.

"Well... calling me that sounds a bit blunt. Just call me ***'Phi'***, okay?"

Even though Whale was pretending to focus on measuring water from the rice cooker and asking for my opinion, her little ears turning bright red clearly showed she was blushing. Her adorable actions made my heart skip a beat.

"Don't you like it?"

Don't look at me like that, not with that expression. Is it okay for me to feel this way? My heart might stop!

"I like it..."

*If it’s Whale, I like everything about her...*

I hummed a soft tune as I walked around the store looking for Somharuthai.

By the way, I haven’t seen Som’s face today. It's been almost half a year since I first met that little kitten. From a tiny little kitten, it has grown into a more agile cat. Of course, the mischievousness has increased too.

"Where did Som go?"

I searched the store but couldn’t find it, so I went to check inside the living room. The sound of scratching from the cat condo caught my attention. I noticed a dark gray tail swishing out of sight, and I couldn’t help but smile fondly.

"Found you, Nong Som!"

"Nong Sommm, come out and eat quickly!"

But my call was ignored. Somahiruthai was still doing something inside the cat condo. So I tried calling again.

"Nong Som, come out quickly!"

But Somharuthai still didn’t respond. I decided to bend down and see what he was doing. It looked like he was playing with something... I couldn’t just leave it like this because right now I had a duty to make sure Som get her food. That's it

"Alright, come out now!"

I grabbed Somahiruthai around the torso and gently pulled her out of the cat condo.

*"Meow!!!"*

"Ouch!"

Suddenly, whether out of irritation or something else, Somahiruthai turned and swiped his claws at me immediately. The sharp pain made me cry out in surprise, and my scream caused Whale to rush into the living room.

"What did you do to Somharuthai?"

Hearing this question from my girlfriend made me pout in frustration.

"Khun Whale..."

I could only say her name while holding my hand, which was starting to bleed from the scratch. It seemed like Somharuthai realized she had done something wrong, so she started to try to make up to me. It didn’t take long for Whale to understand what had happened.

"Wait a minute! Did Somharuthai misbehave?"

When Whale understood what happened, she knelt down and grabbed Somahiruthai, forcing him to admit her mistake. However, the sight of Somharuthai made both Whale and I burst into laughter.

The white fur of the little cat was now dyed in various colors—yellow, blue, and pink. Somharuthai had no idea she was being so funny. She looked puzzled as she saw both humans laughing uncontrollably.

*"Meow?"*

"Som turned into Rainbow Somahiruthai..."

I exclaimed as I saw the fluffy cat covered in colorful dye.

"This must be her doing,"

Whale said with a troubled expression as she pulled out a box of chalk from the cat condo. I don’t know when Som managed to sneak it out, but this mess was quite something...

"Haha, oh my..."

I couldn’t stop laughing, but then the pain from my hand made me wince.

"Does it hurt a lot? Let me see your wound."

Whale took my hand gently to check, then turned back to scold the little cat again.

"I'll come back and settle the score now."

That made Somahiruthai look even more dejected.

*"Meow."*

The little one rubbed her round head against my legs, almost as if asking for forgiveness for the earlier scratch. That gesture made my heart melt, and I couldn’t help but soften immediately.

"Come on, Phi Whale, Nong Som is apologizing."

"No way, if I let him off now, he’ll get used to it. There will be a punishment—no cat treats for two days,"

Whale refused to reduce Som's punishment, showing no mercy. This made Somahiruthai more upset, and I couldn’t do anything to help.

*Sorry, Nong Som, but I’m too scared to go against Phi Whale...*

*"Meow."*

"Even though you come and act cute, I won’t give in."

Whale's firm response made Somahiruthai accept her punishment. The rainbow-colored cat walked away to eat in silence, looking quite cute. I followed Whale, who lightly tugged on the hem of my shirt to signal that I should follow without hesitation.

Before leaving the living room, I noticed Som taking the box back into her condo, probably thinking, "If I’m going to be punished, I might as well play all I can... If I get no cat treats for a month, don’t say I didn’t warn you..." "Does it hurt a lot?"

I was about to respond that the wound was just small when I flinched as a cotton ball soaked in saline was gently dabbed on the edge of the wound to clean it.

"It hurts. Som’s claws are quite dangerous,"

I admitted. Som's claws really were something. But Whale’s face remained serious. She seemed focused on treating my wound, her brows slightly furrowed. Still, it didn’t take away from the beauty of her face.

*She’s so cute...*

"I didn’t mean to accuse you of hurting Somahiruthai earlier, it’s just... I was just shocked,"

Whale said in a soft voice, making me feel even more touched by her care. I thought she might have forgotten about it...

She’s so adorable, I just want to tease her until she loses her composure.

"But I’m really upset. Whale accused me first,"

I pouted, acting sad. My performance seemed to be too convincing, because Whale looked even more guilty.

"I’m sorry..."

"I won’t forgive you until..."

I said in a serious tone, enjoying the awkwardness that Whale displayed. Finally, I revealed my condition. "Phi Whale, you have to kiss my cheek."

***Smack!***

"Ouch, Phi Whale... that hurts."

"Bad behavior, teasing me like this."

The shy one exclaimed, slapping my shoulder a little too hard. Her fair face turned a soft shade of pink.

"My offer is very simple."

I smiled, pleased to see Whale pressing her lips together, deep in thought. Even though her face was nearly red with embarrassment, she eventually leaned in and gave me a quick kiss on the cheek, leaving behind a faint warmth and a lingering smile on my face.

"Good thing I already took Somahiruthai for a check-up and vaccination. Otherwise, she'd be the one getting the shot,"

Whale muttered, avoiding eye contact as she packed up the first aid kit, clearly trying to escape the embarrassing situation. But suddenly, she froze, as though she was thinking of something.

"Phi Whale?"

I said, confused, as she unexpectedly grabbed my arm.

"Let’s go to the hospital."

Her tone was so serious, it didn’t sound like a joke.

"Wait... calm down," I stammered.

"I'm not calm! You need to get a shot and have the wound cleaned right now!"

"I won’t go! Phi Whale, don’t!"

I tried to stay put as best I could.

"Don’t be stubborn. I read a post online where someone got scratched by a cat, just like your small wound, and it got infected so badly that they almost had to amputate the leg!"

Whale spoke urgently.

"Phi Whale, you're overreacting. It’s not that serious."

My strength was enough to resist, so Whale couldn’t drag me as she wanted.

"Are you going willingly, or are you going in tears?"

I flinched when Whale grabbed a feather duster and waved it threateningly.

"I’m injured! Are you going to hit me, Phi Whale?"

"Then what’s the big deal? It’s just a trip to the hospital."

Whale seemed annoyed by my resistance. Suddenly, she spoke again,

"Are you scared of needles?"

*That hit me right in the heart...*

"Are you crazy, Phi Whale? At this age, who’s scared of needles..."

Whale kept staring at me, and I couldn’t avoid her gaze, both of us locked in a silent battle.

"Seal.."

"Fine, fine! But you have to stay by my side the whole time. You can’t leave me,"

I finally gave in, agreeing to go to the hospital, but only if Whale promised to stay with me.

"I won’t leave you for a second. Now, can you get in the car?"

Whale waved the feather duster in the air, teasing me with her playful threat. Hah... As soon as she knew she had the upper hand, she wasn’t afraid to tease me.

"Phi Whale, you're not gentle at all,"

I pouted but reluctantly opened the car door and got in.

I was only giving in because of her concern. Even though I was afraid of getting a shot, with Whale holding my hand, it didn’t seem so scary anymore...

After Whale drove off, heading toward the hospital, someone stepped out from behind a electric pole, and neither of us noticed.

"Phi Whale..."

# Chapter 25: High School Friends

Sometimes, when life is going smoothly and everything seems perfect, problems suddenly appear out of nowhere, almost as if life itself is trying to play a trick on you. It’s as if the gods in heaven grow bored with the peace and tranquility of human life and decide to send something unexpected your way just to shake things up a bit.

It was an afternoon that made me feel half-asleep, just like every other day. I grabbed a strangely shaped ceramic mug filled with strong black coffee and drank it without hesitation, hoping the caffeine would wake me up. And it seemed to work because I couldn’t help but smile at the funny look of the mug.

"What is this?"

I asked my girlfriend, who was urging me to open the small gift box she had bought for me. When I asked what occasion it was for, she casually replied that it was for my birthday and that **she just want to spoil her girlfriend**.

The answer was so cheeky that I almost wanted to pinch her round cheeks. *So cute!*

When I opened the box, I found a strange ceramic mug. If I had to describe it, it looked like a chubby cat, and the tail of the cat turned into the handle. It was both cute and bizarre, making me laugh uncontrollably.

"So you think this mug is cute, right?"

My girlfriend asked with a proud smile.

"It’s funny. Look at its face, it’s hilarious,"

I said as I continued laughing when I looked at the mug’s smiling face.

"Here…Phi Whale,"

She said, her voice soft and affectionate.

"Hmm?"

"Keep this mug to drink coffee with, so you’ll feel like I'm always with you."

She held my hand and gave me a squinty-eyed smile. It felt like an oddly romantic gesture, and even though it was unusual, I couldn’t deny that my heart skipped a beat. Or maybe it was me who was the odd one, after all.

As I sat there reminiscing with the mug in my hands, I suddenly felt a strange shiver run down my spine. Lately, I had been feeling like someone was watching me while I was at the shop. Whenever I looked around the front of the store, it was always empty...

*Okay, I just hope this isn’t something supernatural.*

I secretly clasped my hands together in prayer. Even though I’d encountered fake ghost stories in the past, I had enough experience to handle it. Come to think of it, the ice cream box I first encountered had now evolved into...*A Spirit Following in the Form of my Girlfriend.*

If I encounter something supernatural, should I send Seal to chase the ghost away? They say crazy people aren’t afraid of ghosts. Just kidding…

Who would dare send someone so easily scared to do that?

By now, the female teacher might be sneezing in class.

.

**Seal:**

Are you free, Phi Whale?

.

The phone screen lit up with a message notification from Seal, almost as if she knew I was gossiped about. I lazily picked up my phone and responded with a smile. Huh…someone who is free and watches over a shop like me, wouldn't be free? This well-mannered Seal.

.

**Whale:**

What’s up?

**Seal:**

Tonight, Tonmai and Chompoo invited me to dinner.

**Seal:**

At XY restaurant.

**Whale:**

Sure, go have some fun with your friends.

.

I gave her permission, though Seal didn't really need to ask. It was her right to go anywhere with anyone. But, the teacher had told me she wanted me to feel comfortable, so she preferred to keep no secrets between us.

**Seal:**

Can you come with us too?

**Seal**:

I want to bring you along.

**Seal**: Sent Sticker

.

Looking at the sticker of Seal acting cute, I couldn’t help but press my lips together to avoid smiling. There’s no need to be so cute; I was going anyway, it’s just dinner. Actually, I already knew Seal's close friends— Tonmai and Chompoo, who were both teachers in the same department as Seal.

Tonmai was a friendly young man, and even though Seal sometimes acted possessive in front of him, it was a bit too obvious. As for Chompoo, she was very organized but had a playful side. Seal was lucky to have such good friends and colleagues.

.

**Whale**:

Okay, I’ll meet you after closing the shop.

**Seal**:

I’ll come pick you up. That way, we can go together.

**Whale**:

Alright, see you then.

.

I finished the conversation and focused on clearing my translation work, wanting to close the shop a bit earlier.

After all, I was going to meet Seal's friends, and I wanted to dress up a little. It's not like I was rushing to close the shop for no reason!

.

. .

The restaurant wasn’t far from my shop, and it only took a short drive to get there. The atmosphere was relaxing and romantic, with delicious food too— I'd secretly checked the reviews beforehand.

Once we parked, Seal led me to the table where the others were waiting. But besides Tonmai and Chompoo, there was someone I didn’t recognize sitting there too.

“Here they are! Has everyone ordered yet?”

Seal greeted everyone with a cheerful smile.

“We’ve ordered. Oh, by the way, I invited P'Mook to join us. We ran into each other.”

“Oh, you could’ve said that before P’Mook sat down. No need to tell us now.”

Seal laughed and teased, but behind the unfamiliar face, I felt an unsettling sense of familiarity. What was it? “Can P'Mook join us too?”

“Sure, the more the merrier!”

Seal, as usual, remained calm and unbothered.

When I finally sat down and got a clear look at the stranger’s face, my heart nearly stopped. My hands went cold instinctively. The face I hadn’t seen in almost 20 years was still vivid in my memory—the bad memories that I wanted to forget.

Why didn’t I realize it sooner when Seal told me about her new colleague? But who could have known? Fate really does seem to bring people together to make trouble!

“Oh... you two haven’t met, right? Phi Whale, this is P'Mook, a new teacher I told you about. P'Mook, this is Phi Whale. She is my girlfriend.”

“Oh... nice to meet you, Khun Whale.”

The other person emphasized the words deliberately. I looked at the hand of the short-haired woman who extended toward me.

MaanMook's smile hadn’t changed a bit, but that didn’t make me feel anything anymore. The terrible things Mook had done to me before had left scars so deep that even her face didn’t stir any emotion in me. I didn’t even want to hear her voice or touch anything related to her!

“Nice to meet you too.”

I responded, ignoring the hand she had extended in a gesture of goodwill, making MaanMook pull her hand back with a forced smile. Luckily, Seal turned to chat and tease the others, so no one noticed what had happened.

The meal that should’ve been enjoyable turned sour right away. No matter how beautiful the restaurant was or how delicious the food was, just seeing MaanMook's face killed my mood completely.

*I really want to go home.*

“Is it not tasty?”

Seal noticed that I wasn’t enjoying myself, so she leaned in to whisper with concern.

“I’m just not feeling well, a little.”

I chose to lie. The food was delicious, but seeing the person sitting across from me, the spaghetti in my mouth suddenly tasted bitter.

“Excuse me, I’m going to the bathroom. You guys can eat, don’t worry about me,”

I got up from the table. I wanted to relieve my discomfort, but at the same time, I felt guilty for ruining the atmosphere for Seal and the others. If I hadn’t agreed to come, I would have been more at ease, not knowing that

Seal's coworker was MaanMook. That way, I would feel more comfortable.

Come on! Be an adult, Whale. You just need to endure for less than 2 hours. Don’t let MaanMook see that she has any influence over your feelings. You can do it!

After sitting alone in the bathroom for a while, trying to calm myself down, I decided to face MaanMook again.

“It’s been a while, huh?”

But before I could return to the table, the voice of the last person I wanted to face called out to me as soon as I reached the hallway. The restaurant had air conditioning, so the bathroom area was separated and located outside the main dining area.

*Why is she following me around like this?*

“I didn’t know you moved here,”

MaanMook said.

I tried to walk away, not wanting to argue, but she kept following me, relentlessly.

“That shop... is yours, Whale? The one you told me about before?”

“How did you know about the shop?”

I unintentionally responded to MaanMook's question. And all the doubts I’d had over the past week were finally answered. That suspicious look from her—it all makes sense now. I felt disgusted.

*At this point... what does she want from me?* “Are you really not going to talk to me at all?”

MaanMook continued following me.

"....."

“Don't go yet, Whale.”

"Hey! If I don't go, will you know what it means when someone behave like this?"

I turned to face her, and she grabbed my arm without permission.

"......"

"Stop pretending to be close, can you? I don’t like it."

I shook my arm free from her grasp and wiped the area she touched with a handkerchief, clearly showing my disgust.

"Even after all this time, you're still as cold as ever,"

She said with a bitter smile.

"...."

"Are you still angry?"

"No, not really. I just don’t want to share the same world with you."

The anger had faded long ago. What remained was pure disdain.

"Come on, Whale, why are you so upset? I only gave you what you wanted back then,"

She replied as if it was all justified.

"Whatever."

There was no point in continuing this conversation. After all these years, MaanMook still had no idea how much her actions had hurt me or scarred me emotionally.

"Don’t look at me like that. I came in peace. I didn’t think you’d still hold such a grudge."

"....."

"Alright, alright. I hope you and Seal are very happy?"

My cold attitude must have finally made her back off, but something about her wide smile felt off.

There was an underlying intent in her words, and her final, louder-thannecessary comment left me feeling uneasy.

"Who's hiding there?!"

I called out after noticing the reflection of a familiar plaid shirt in the wall’s glossy surface. The person wasn’t hiding well at all. Slowly, the figure stepped out, their expression blank.

"Seal?"

I exclaimed, startled. I turned to glare at MaanMook, my anger flaring. No wonder she kept trying to prolong the conversation—this was her plan all along.

"I was just coming to find you and P' Mook, but I saw you two talking and didn’t want to interrupt,"

Seal mumbled awkwardly.

"I didn’t know you two already knew each other."

"It’s nothing. We were just high school acquaintances—not that close,"

I quickly replied. Then, grabbing Seal's hand, I said,

"Let’s go home. I want to leave soon."

Seal nodded, seemingly willing to go along with whatever I wanted.

"Wait,"

MaanMook interrupted once more, stopping us in our tracks.

***"Why didn't you finish saying that we were high school friends and that I was your first girlfriend."***

# Chapter 26: The Academic Position

**SEAL POV**

.

Running through a lavender field or living in a dream world—these were phrases I had been hearing since childhood. Back then, I’d respond with a retort or two, but as I grew older, I learned to stay silent instead. My belief has always been that if I treat others with kindness and sincerity, surely no one would repay that with cruelty, right?

.

Since coming back from the restaurant, the atmosphere in the butcher shop has been heavy. Whale, the owner, has been radiating an aura of gloom so intense that I didn’t dare approach her. Yet, the curiosity that had been eating away at me finally pushed me to speak.

“Phi Whale...”

I said hesitantly, only to falter when I saw her take a large sip of her tea and let out a deep sigh. My next words were swallowed back into my throat.

“What is it?”

She asked, her eyes clouded with sorrow and pain. I could only shake my head slightly. Forget it. If knowing the answer would cause Whale pain, then I didn’t need to know.

“It seems like you want to ask me something, Seal,”

She said, breaking the silence.

“There’s nothing,”

I replied, deciding not to press further. From what I had gathered earlier, it seemed things hadn’t ended well between Whale and MaanMook. There was no need to dredge it up.

Still, I couldn’t help feeling a pang of hurt in my chest. It was only natural for someone as beautiful as Whale to have had past relationships. Why should I dwell on it, though? After all, I’m the one she’s chosen now.

“This is about MaanMook, isn’t it?”

Whale’s voice interrupted my thoughts, her question direct. I hesitated, unsure whether to confirm. But when I saw the sincerity in her expression, I finally nodded.

“As your girlfriend, I don’t want you to have lingering doubts,”

She said firmly, her gaze steady.

“Ask me anything you want to know. I won’t hide anything from you. Don’t make that face, okay?”

Her urgency and resolve gave me some comfort, so I mustered the courage to speak.

“Why are you so angry at P'Mook? Can you tell me what happened?”

“Sure... here’s the story,” she began.

I sat quietly listening to the story of a past heartbreak, spoken by the person recounting it. I couldn’t help but feel angry at MaanMook for her poor behavior toward Whale back then. Even though Whale insisted she no longer had feelings for MaanMook, I wondered if anger could still be considered a lingering connection in some way.

“It’s good that you broke up with her,”

I said softly, resting my head on Whale’s shoulder. My words seemed to leave her slightly confused.

“Because if you hadn’t, we wouldn’t have met and become a couple,”

I explained, making her smile despite herself.

“Are you feeling better now?”

She asked gently.

“Thank you,” I replied.

“Next time, let’s go to that restaurant again, just the two of us.”

I suggested, hoping to cheer her up even more.

“Alright,”

She agreed, her response making me feel relieved that I had managed to ease her worries.

Honestly, I wanted to text TonMai and give him a piece of my mind. How could he invite MaanMook without asking first? Still, it wasn’t entirely his fault—there was no way he could have known that Whale and MaanMook were exes. What an unfortunate coincidence...

.

. .

The next day, I went to work at the university as usual. What wasn’t usual, however, was MaanMook approaching me as soon as she saw me. Although I didn’t want to judge her based solely on what Whale had told me, I couldn’t help but feel defensive. Sorry, MaanMook, but when it comes to Seal's heart, my loyalty lies with Whale.

“Seal, can I talk to you for a moment? It’s about yesterday…”

MaanMook’s discomfort was evident, but I firmly believed in keeping work and personal matters separate. So, I responded politely.

“I don’t hold any grudges. Let’s leave the past where it belongs,”

I said. After all, MaanMook was just a colleague, and avoiding conflict seemed the best course of action.

“If that’s all, I’ll be heading off to work now,”

I added, ready to excuse myself. But before I could leave, MaanMook called out to stop me.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“I’d like you to help me take a look at this,” she said.

I received a piece of A4 paper that had been stapled roughly in the corners with confusion. It was a research topic for use in applying for an academic position. For being a lecturer at a university, the first qualification that we have. A doctorate degree is required first. After that, to advance in the career path, there are academic ranks, and various works are needed to apply for them.

Looking at Maanmook's title, which is still “Doctor” like mine, it's easy to guess that she is probably applying for an academic promotion to become an assistant professor.

The research topic: Grocery stores that are dying out from this era.

"I actually want to consult Whale about the research data, but as you know, Seal, Whale doesn’t really like me."

I gave a faint smile when I heard Maanmook’s complaint. But this research topic doesn’t sound promising at all. It’s good that she hasn’t mentioned it to Whale. If she does, there might be chaos at the restaurant for sure. "But I’m not that skilled. I’m just a doctor like you, P’Mook."

"Don’t put yourself down, Seal. I heard from Chompoo that she successfully submitted her work on the first try because of your advice."

I silently decided to hold Chompoo, the gossip queen, accountable. Next time she eats instant noodles, I’m charging her 10 baht for each meatball in the fridge—just wait and see!

"It’s not like that. Chompoo is talented on her own. I didn’t help much,"

I tried to dodge the topic, but it seemed like Maanmook saw right through me.

"Then can you help review my research draft? Please?"

Her way of requesting was almost unbelievable. To call it a request would be odd—it felt more like she was forcing it on me.

I could’ve refused, but maybe my sense of decency kicked in, so I reluctantly accepted the stack of documents.

I’ll review it when I have time.

. .

And I completely forgot about MaanMook's research until I got back to my condo and unpacked my bag. When I opened and skimmed through the documents, after two or three pages, I started feeling drowsy. I decided to shower first to clear my head before coming back to it.

***Rrrrr***

After stepping out of the bathroom, I noticed my phone vibrating intensely.

Who could be calling so urgently? When I picked it up, I was surprised.

It was Khun Whale.

"Hello?"

I answered the call. Why was my girlfriend calling? We had only just parted ways a few hours ago.

“Seal, are you free?”

A hesitant voice came through, making me, as I rubbed my wet hair with a towel, even more curious.

*What’s wrong with Phi Whale?*

“I’m free, always free for you. Is something the matter?”

Normally, we’d chat on Line or have a quick video call before bed—just normal couple stuff. But calling my phone directly at this hour? That’s usually reserved for something urgent.

*What could be so urgent at midnight?*

“I hope I’m not bothering you?”

She asked again. I wanted to yell through the phone, You could have all my time, forever!

“Not at all. What’s wrong?”

[Could you come help me? I’m scared...”]

Her trembling voice sent alarm bells ringing in my head. I hastily toweldried my hair, grabbed my keycard, and rushed out of the condo.

“Take your time, but hurry up a bit.”

As if I could stay calm after that! In less than two minutes, I was standing in front of the Whale Store. I sent a Line message letting her know I had arrived. Moments later, the white blinds were raised, the sound of the lock clicking open echoed, and I was promptly pulled inside by Whale, who grabbed my hand urgently.

“Wait upstairs outside my room, okay? I’ll lock up first,” she said.

Still baffled, I nodded and obediently made my way up the stairs.

What’s going on with Whale? No... What happened here?

“Ah! Sorry, I forgot to turn on the light,”

She said, flipping the switch.

When the room lit up, what I saw almost made my heart stop. Standing before me was a petite woman with porcelain-white skin, dressed in an oversized shirt that revealed her slender legs. Her makeup-free face looked even more youthful, with big round eyes and soft pink lips that made me take a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

Alright... now is not the time to be distracted and mentally writing poetic praises for my girlfriend. She clearly needed help, or she wouldn’t have called me at such an hour.

“What’s wrong, Phi Whale?”

I asked, trying to piece things together. She stood before me clutching a broom in a strange way, almost like it was a baseball bat.

“I saw Peter,”

She said, her voice trembling with fear.

"Peter?"

I repeated, utterly confused by the unfamiliar name. **What’s Peter? A new rice cooker Whale bought, perhaps?** But judging by her terrified expression, Peter must be something much more serious to make her react like this.

“Peter! He’s huge...”

Whale muttered, looking utterly unhinged. She kept rambling,

“How did he even get in? My house is spotless! And Somharuthai is here too!”

It started to dawn on me what Peter might actually be. Humans often avoid naming the things they fear, as if speaking their name might summon them.

Alright, I won’t call this thing a *“cute little one,”* because Whale might knock me out for sugarcoating it. Let’s just call it it. This creature has a long, oval-shaped body, usually dark brown or black.

Its head hides beneath its thorax, and it has long thread-like antennae. Its spiny legs and adult forms with or without wings make it an unwelcome visitor in dark or dirty places.

Most people fear Peter, though some might not. But Peter has one infamous move that no one can handle.

“Ahhhh! Seal, it’s flying!”

Whale’s shriek pierced my ears just as the brown creature zoomed past my face. Even though I wasn’t afraid of Peter, I couldn’t help but flinch at its sudden flight.

“Whoa, whoa! Whale, calm down!”

I yelped, dodging as she swung the broom wildly around the room.

“Got it!”

She shouted triumphantly as the broom smacked Peter with full force, sending it flying—right under the bed.

“Seal!!! It’s under the bed!!!”

Whale screamed, her panic causing me to rush over and move her bed aside in a frenzy.

I braced myself for a showdown, but... there was nothing. Just empty space.

“Where did it go? You saw it when I hit it, right?!”

“I did, I did! B-but, Phi Whale, you hit it so hard. I think... it might have, um, gone to heaven already?”

I tried to comfort her, but Whale wasn’t having it.

“I didn’t see the body. I can’t stay calm without proof!”

She whispered, her voice shaky as her wide eyes scanned the room like a hawk.

Wait a second... I have something perfect for this!

“Phi Whale, wait here. I’ll grab my ultimate weapon and take care of this once and for all!”

“Hurry back!”

She said, her tear-filled, fearful eyes locking onto mine, nearly making me swoon. There was no way I’d leave my scared girlfriend waiting! With my heart set on rescuing her, I bolted out the door, ready to sprint the equivalent of a 4x100 relay back to my condo.

"And here is my secret weapon! Ta-da!"

I proudly held up a small cardboard box shaped like a tiny house to show Whale. Yes, it was a cockroach trap!

"I have these in my room too,"

I explained, demonstrating how to use it.

"For the smaller ones, like the German kind, this little house works wonders. Just tear the bait packet, place it inside, and the tempting smell will lure Peter in. Once he's in, there's no way out."

"All done!"

I set the trap in the middle of Whale's room.

"Come on, Peter, take the bait!"

"But... I still have to sleep in the same room as Peter."

Whale murmured, her face still clouded with worry, even though her cat Som had already curled up on its bed, peacefully dozing off without a care in the world.

"If you’re still uneasy,"

I offered gently, "how about staying over at my place tonight?"

"You probably won’t get any sleep here anyway, not with Peter on your mind,"

I added, hoping to coax her.

"You can bring Som too, if it'll help you sleep better,"

I teased lightly, which seemed to hit the mark.

"No way! It’s just one night at your place. Why would I get homesick?"

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If you're wondering just how easy it is to convince someone like Whale, the answer is very easy.

"Maybe I should just head back,"

She muttered hesitantly, as if realizing too late that she'd already fallen into my trap. By then, she was already standing in my room, clutching her shrimp-shaped stuffed toy tightly to her chest.

I couldn't hide my grin as I discreetly slid my key card into the drawer.

*The fish has willingly jumped into the seal's mouth—there's no way I’m letting it go now, even if the fish happens to be a whale!*

# Chapter 27: Leopard Seal

Fear can make us make decisions without thinking. By the time we realize it, it's too late.

*This is all because of you, Peter!*

I could only pray that by morning, when I returned home, Somhiruthai and the cockroach trap would be able to handle Peter. But before that, I needed to deal with the current risky situation.

The fear had clouded my mind, causing me to agree with Seal's coaxing words. By the time I realized it, it seemed like I was already trapped.

"Phi Whale, are you going to sleep now?"

Seal asked as she was setting up the bed.

Her room wasn't very spacious, but it was organized and tidy. The problem was the queen-sized bed, which looked so comfortable and inviting.

Calm down! It's just sleeping in the same bed. Don't lose your composure!

Even though this was the first time in my life I'd ever shared a bed with someone I was in a relationship with!

"Alright, I'm tired too,"

I said, mentally preparing myself. I nodded back cautiously. But once I slid into the duvet, I could feel the smile and gaze of the person beside me.

"Stop smiling..."

I muttered, embarrassed, not knowing how to act.

"When my girlfriend came to sleeps over, so I have to smile, Hehe,"

Seal giggled before settling down next to me with a contented smile.

Lying next to someone you love really does feel warm and comforting. The scent of fabric softener and the warmth of the duvet made everything feel so soothing, perfect for falling into a peaceful sleep.

*But... sorry, I couldn't sleep at all!*

No matter how hard I tried to close my eyes, my heart kept pounding, racing with excitement from having someone next to me. It seemed like I wasn't the only one who couldn't sleep, as I could hear Seal fidgeting next to me.

"Phi Whale... are you not able to sleep?"

"Yeah..."

I turned to meet her gaze. Well, since neither of us could sleep, we might as well talk for a bit.

Even though I thought we'd talk, no words came out. Seal and I just lay there, staring at each other silently.

"Can I... hug you?"

I don't know if it was because of her sweet voice or the atmosphere, but when Seal bravely asked, I had no reason to refuse.

"Come here."

I opened my arms to welcome my girlfriend, who was playfully coaxing me to let her snuggle.

"Phi Whale, your heart is still racing."

".... "

"If you keep being shy like this, we won't even get past a kiss,"

Seal said in a soft, somewhat sulking voice. However, she didn't rush or pressure me. Seeing her face in the dim light made me suddenly want to kiss the person in front of me. But if I gave in to my desires now, I wouldn't be able to turn back.

*Do I really know this person well enough...?*

*Am I ready to give everything to Seal without regretting it later...?*

In the end, my heart won. I pulled Seal's face, who had been complaining softly, and gave her a kiss, selfish as it was. At first, she seemed confused, but soon enough, Seal responded very well. When I pulled away, I could only avoid her gaze, my face burning with embarrassment.

At first, I was the one worried that spending the night in her room would go too far... But now it seems like I was the one who started it.

"Can I... give you happiness, Phi Whale?"

Seal asked, now on top of me, speaking softly.

"Give me happiness?"

I repeated in confusion, needing to clarify what she meant.

"You mean... like that?"

Seal blushed deeply as she tried to explain, which made me laugh uncontrollably.

"Haha... Oh..."

"Are you laughing at me, Phi Whale?" Seal pouted slightly when I chuckled. "Seal, you're funny. Is this your way of asking for something? Oh, Dr. Seal, such a good girl,"

I teased, amused by her quirky behavior. Her odd habits made me both laugh and feel fondness for the younger person in front of me. And I couldn't deny that part of why I fell for Seal was because of this side of her.

"Come on, I give you permission."

Once the words left my mouth, the second kiss began, long enough to nearly take our breath away.

"You can push me away anytime, Phi Whale, if you're not comfortable,"

The tall person said, her face nuzzled into my neck, her breath tickling my ear, making me squirm from the sensation.

"Ugh... that's cheating,"

I mumbled as her hand lazily stroked along my spine, clearly trying to stir my emotions. I shifted uncomfortably at the new sensation but before things could go any further, I realized I needed to tell Seal something important.

"Wait... I have something to tell you, but promise me you won't tease me."

I grabbed Seal's hand that was caressing my stomach and told her in a serious tone.

"Sure, I promise."

Even though she seemed a little confused, Seal agree without hesitation.

"I... I, I've never been...."

I said in a soft voice that was almost swallowed by the air.

"... Even though it sounds unbelievable, but..."

I didn't know how to explain it to Seal.

Even though I've had many boyfriends, I've never done anything like that. I'm not really protective of myself, but there was a reason we had to break up first. It wasn't that important, but I wanted to let Seal know so that the other person wouldn't be disappointed in my inexperience.

"I believe you, Phi Whale."

The other person's voice and face showed that they believed in my words without any argument.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Yes, hmm..."

Before I could finish my sentence, Seal's lips pressed against mine again. This time, it was more intense and passionate than any other time we'd kissed, as if we were being robbed of our breath. The other party's small tongue invaded my mouth, biting and sucking willfully.

"Huff."

It was the first time I'd ever experienced a kiss that made me unable to breathe like this. I tried to squeeze air into my lungs when the other party pulled away.

"I'm sorry, Phi Whale. I can't hold back anymore. Give me all of yours Phi Whale."

And when the young teacher's hand that was in my shorts directly touched my sensitive spot, I couldn't stop my trembling. Although it was embarrassing, I had to admit that it felt really good. I had to thank Seal that seemed to know that I was shy, so she didn't say anything but did it quietly.

I hugged her tighter and tighter, following the force of my emotions that had erupted until I reached the peak of my desire.

"What are you smiling about..."

When I adjusted my breathing rhythm, I could only ask my girlfriend, who was still smiling so sweetly that I felt embarrassed.

"Phi Whale has turned pink all over. So excited."

I accidentally looked down at myself after hearing Seal's teasing words. I realized that I had been stripped of by the other party since I don't know when. The buttons were all undone and the lower half was bare.

"Am I still little kid in your eyes, Phi Whale? Am I good?"

I glared at the shameless question coming from the mouth of a younger person who seemed to be proud of herself.

"It's not that bad."

I was annoyed and accidentally said something sarcastic.

"Oh... I'm still not that bad in Phi Whale's eyes, huh?"

And that made me realize that Seal's hand was still in an unsafe area for me.

Oh!

*Whale... You're definitely dead...*

"Hey... Get your hand out."

I groaned, forgetting to move away from the teasing person who was still using her fingers to caress my flower petals until the emotions that had calmed down started to erupt again uncontrollably. Oh girl....and wait!

"Ah... Don't... Insert,"

I shouted incoherently when I felt the invasion into the channel and couldn't move away because Seal's other hand locked my hips.

"I didn't mean to. It slipped in by itself..."

The clear eyes of Seal, which looked like a lie, were sparkling like a predator staring at its prey.

"I was just kidding. Let us continue, Phi Whale, you are so ready."

"It's uncomfortable..."

I protested softly.

"I'll do it slowly, Phi Whale, it won't hurt. Trust me."

I nodded reluctantly. Playing with such a pleading face, I had to give in. It was natural, but the situation was too embarrassing for me to face Seal directly. So I decided to close my eyes and let the other party do whatever she wanted.

Even though I tried to control my breathing and embarrassing voice, it seemed extremely difficult. The young teacher's hands were caressing all over and seemed to like my chest area in particular.

"Ahhh..."

I jolted when I felt the wetness and the sucking force attacking my breasts.

While the other party's fingers were still moving in and out of my passage.

Oh no...

"Enough.... enough."

I could only stutter and plead with Seal who was still intoxicated by the taste and touch until the other party looked up and met my eyes.

"...Are you happy, Phi Whale?"

Seal suddenly asked out of nowhere. But the mischievous face of the other party probably couldn't help but find a way to tease me again.

*And why would I let the other party tease me!*

"It's okay, ah..."

"Phi Whale's face looks happy. More than just enough,"

Seal smiled wickedly, as her slender fingers found the spot that made me let out a shrill cry.

I pursed my lips in an attempt to suppress my embarrassing voice.

*Yes... But Seal was still a playful Seal.*

When she saw that I was trying, she did not cooperate and instead intentionally aroused me even more.

"Huh, Seal? Hmm, slow down,"

I said in a croaked voice, barely making any words, because the teasing girl's slender fingers continued to deliberately hit my inner weak points, not giving in even a little bit.

"Sure,"

One person said, suddenly slowing down their rhythm in a deliberate way, leaving me catching my uneven breath, filled with lingering emotions.

"Seal, faster!"

I begged, tears of both pain and overwhelming feelings welling up in my eyes.

"You're so demanding, Phi Whale. First, you want me to go slow, and then you ask me to go fast. I can't keep up with you," Seal teased, leaving me completely at their mercy.

Alright, next time I shouldn't tease or challenge Seal.

*How did I end up in her hands like this?*

"Don't tease."

I said, my vision blurry from tears. I tried to give her a stern glare to pressure, but it was useless. The person in control didn't seem fazed at all and even made another unreasonable request.

"I won't tease, but Phi Whale, please call me by my name. Please do it nicely."

The other party's selfish offer didn't give me a chance to refuse or even think about it.

"....."

What else could I think of when the slender fingers Seal did not show any mercy?

"I'm waiting."

The evil smile made me clench my teeth in reproach, trying to compose myself so that I would not let out a moan first.

"My darling Seal...please let me reach. I will, oh...."

Before I could finish my plea, Seal sped up its pace, sending me to the edge unexpectedly. I felt the tightness of the channel so intense that I accidentally let out a shriek in my throat. My breath was so rapid that when the other party pulled her finger out, I still couldn't stop screaming.

It took a while for my breathing returned to normal, and I had to receive another sweet kiss from Seal without warning.

"Do you know that at a time like this, you smell even better, Phi Whale? I want to eat you whole."

Seal's eyes were filled with passion, causing me to feel a strange shiver down my spine when she leaned down and hugged me tightly.

*It must be just a hug, right? I thought to myself with relief.*

"I want to kiss you, Phi Whale."

And the whisper and the warm breath on my neck made me shudder.

"I want to kiss you all over."

And that request seemed like a floating request that didn't wait for my permission. Before I could catch it, I felt her breath hit my thigh.

"Seal, I need a break!"

My cries of protest were too late as Seal starts to kissing my sensitive part affectionately. And it would not cause me to almost die if the other person had just kissed me.

"Yeah ... I can't take it anymore and let go of me. Let go!"

I started to sobbing because of the other person's tongue that attacked my flower bud hungrily. It's too much for my feelings to handle. My sensitive part is still sensitive to touch because just reaching the peak of my emotions. When stimulated again, it caused me go crazy.

And it looks like Seal, intoxicated with the taste, seemed to have lost sight of my pitiful cries. I couldn't remember how many times I had screamed in pleasure. And Seal herself is ready to begin the next lovemaking, tirelessly.

That night, just the word "giving happiness", can't describe the feelings that I have received ...

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"Phi Whale ..."

Seal tried to call me with a sad tone, while I turned my back, so I had to turn around and glare at the other person, complaining loudly.

"What?"

"Phi Whale! Are you angry?"

"I thought I was going to die."

I muttered quietly, turning my face away with a frustrated feeling.

Who said eating by children makes you immortal? I want to protest that I've been drained of all energy by this greedy Seal. "I won't let Phi Whale die. I love you so much."

Seal moved closer, cuddling me affectionately.

"I love you, Phi Whale.'

I sighed softly when I heard the confession from the other person. Seal was soft and caring, always making sure to understand how I felt, so I might not be angry anymore.

"I love you too, Seal."

"...."

"Stop! Go to sleep!"

I pushed the other person's face when I saw that look of affection moving closer, intending to kiss me again. If this goes on, I won't be able to walk tomorrow!

"Phi Whale."

Seal whined annoyingly.

"Just hug!'

"Selfish. So selfish,"

I complained, but the other person still pulled me into a hug, holding me close.

"Why are you being stingy?" She muttered.

"....."

"Give until there's nothing left."

# Chapter 28: Betrayed Again

In the morning of the next day, the constant sound of the air conditioner and sunlight streaming through the curtains brightened the bedroom. However, that didn’t make me, who have been sleeping with exhausted, feel like waking up at all.

*"Don’t tease me, sweetheart..."*

*"Wait... just a moment. I’ll call you back, my love."*

The familiar voice on the phone pulled me out of my sweet dreams. Honestly, calling it a “sweet dream” might not be entirely accurate, as my body now felt sore all over, as if I’d just finished an intense workout.

Well, I really had been working out—a kind of exercise that made me blush just thinking about it.

"I’ll be back soon, Phi Whale,"

Seal’s voice whispered softly, as if not wanting to wake me. The sound of the door unlocking followed. After a moment of silence, I lazily opened my eyes and took a deep breath to fill my lungs with oxygen and fully wake myself.

I decided to get up. Staying in bed any longer might invite Seal to come back and smother me again. Glancing at the faint rose-colored marks scattered across my chest, I felt a sudden flush of embarrassment. Thankfully, it was Saturday, so the store could open in the afternoon instead.

*Seal is no joke.*

Sitting at the edge of the bed, I let my thoughts wander. Who was she talking to on the phone earlier? She sounded unusually flustered and even used terms I didn’t recognize. Why didn’t she let me hear the conversation? Speculating wouldn’t help, so I figured I’d wait until Seal returned to ask her directly.

As I got out of bed, I noticed a neatly folded dress at the foot of the bed— probably Seal’s—with a small note attached:

*(For Phi Whale)*

The little Post-it made me smile unintentionally. She even prepared clothes for me. So thoughtful...

By the time I finished showering and changing, she still hadn’t returned. To kill time, I wandered around the room, looking at random things, until my eyes landed on a document left on the desk. Highlighted sections and a bold title immediately caught my attention:

**Research Topic: Grocery stores that are dying out of this era.**

I opened the cover of the report. The handwriting scattered across the pages —some crossed out, some circled—made me frown. I recognized my partner’s handwriting immediately. I didn’t want to jump to conclusions, but the name on the report’s cover… wasn’t it Maanmook’s?

Before I could think further, the sound of a keycard unlocking the door startled me. I quickly placed the report back on the desk, just in time as Seal stepped inside.

"Phi Whale, you’re awake?"

Seal asked, surprised. She didn’t seem suspicious of my act, as I pretended to be engrossed in my phone.

*Very realistic to me.*

"Yeah, I’ve been up for a while. Where did you go? I texted you, but you didn’t reply."

At my question, Seal’s face briefly showed a flash of panic before she quickly masked it and replied,

"Oh, there was a sudden meeting with the condo management. I had to leave in a rush."

Does she realize how bad she is at lying? That hesitant expression of hers gave everything away, making my small doubts grow even larger.

"By the way, Phi Whale, you look stunning in this outfit."

Seal changed the subject, complimenting my dress instead. I decided to go along with it to avoid starting an argument so early in the day.

"It fits so perfectly it surprised me."

"Actually, I didn’t buy it for myself. I thought it would suit you, so I kept it until the right moment to give it to you. I didn’t expect to give it so soon,"

Seal confessed, blushing. Her thoughtfulness made my heart flutter again, even though I was still annoyed.

"You’re so sneaky."

"But someone like you, Phi Whale, doesn’t need clothes to look beautiful,"

She teased with a mischievous grin.

"Hey! You're so naughty!"

I snapped, embarrassed. Her playful smirk and cheeky remark made my face flush, and I instinctively raised my hand to swat at her. But before I could, she caught my wrist and expertly pulled me into a hug.

"I’m so happy. Let’s go grab lunch, and then we’ll come back to open the shop this afternoon,"

She said, nuzzling into my neck playfully. I tried to push her away, feeling both flustered and annoyed.

"Let go! You’re so clingy when you get the chance!"

It took a bit of effort to escape her octopus-like embrace, leaving my hair slightly messy.

"I’d do it more than once if I could,"

She quipped with a wink.

"Seal!"

Seeing me start to get more upset, Seal finally gave in and let go of my hand. I glanced down at my hand in hers, sighing softly. My suspicions hadn’t gone away, but I decided to set them aside for now. We were having a good moment—I didn’t want to ruin it with unnecessary stress.

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But no matter how hard I tried to overlook it, her suspicious behavior was becoming harder to ignore.

“Hey, what do you think about adding this to our stock?”

I asked, holding out my phone for her to see. Seal, however, seemed unusually distracted, staring off into space.

“Huh? What did you say, Phi Whale?”

She finally responded after several seconds.

“Never mind...”

“Oh! Well, I’ll just step out to work on something for a bit,”

Seal said hurriedly, standing up and heading for the door. Wait a second—it was Saturday, wasn’t it?

“You’ve been working a lot lately. There aren’t any university events happening, right?”

“Uh... well... just a small task, that’s all,”

She replied with a nervous laugh.

It might as well have been written in bold letters across her forehead: Lying. She probably thought I wouldn’t notice, but her awkward demeanor gave everything away. Fine. I’ll pretend not to know—for now. I already had a plan in mind.

Seal had been acting strangely lately, always glued to her phone or lost in thought. It wasn’t hard to follow her unnoticed. She was so distracted it felt like her spirit had left her body.

Even though I was imagining the worst—wondering where she might sneak off to—it turned out she hadn’t gone far at all. She walked just one block over to a construction site for a “Seven Elephants” store. I’d heard from her friend Tonmai that the project had been put on hold due to franchise issues. I’d secretly been relieved—goodbye, my competitor.

*So, what was Seal doing here?*

I didn’t have to wait long for an answer. It practically smacked me in the face. A woman I didn’t recognize suddenly appeared, and it wouldn’t have been a big deal—except she leaned in and kissed my girlfriend on the cheek.

“Stop it! Someone might see us. And don’t kiss my cheek!”

Seal protested weakly, barely putting up a fight. The worst part? She let the stranger leave a bold red lipstick mark on her cheek.

“What’s the matter? Getting shy now? You didn’t mind before,”

The woman teased with a laugh, as if casually kissing my girlfriend was the most normal thing in the world.

“Let’s talk somewhere else. This place isn’t convenient,”

Seal said before grabbing the woman’s hand and heading to a parked car nearby. I stood frozen, unsure of what to do, until a stroke of luck arrived— a taxi drove by right at that moment.

“Uncle, follow that car, please. Don’t let them notice. I’ll pay you a thousand baht plus a tip,”

I urgently told the driver. He looked a bit confused but quickly nodded in agreement, clearly enticed by the offer.

“Chasing a cheater, are you? Don’t worry, you can count on me,”

The taxi driver said confidently as he turned the wheel. Wow, uncle, you’re perceptive—maybe you should be a detective instead of driving a taxi.

“Focus, uncle! If you start chatting, we might lose them!”

“Even a pretty girl like you still your partner’s off fooling around? What a shame...”

“Uncle! Stop it! I haven’t been dumped yet, okay? Don’t rile me up—I’m already stressed enough that I’m practically aging on the spot!”

I snapped, unable to keep my patience. He finally quieted down but couldn’t resist mumbling something about wanting to help out.

Nosy people always find others’ business fascinating, don’t they? I get it, uncle—I’ve been there too.

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The chase ended at a small café. I handed the driver a gray and a purple banknote as a thank-you for his cooperation.

“Thank you so much, uncle.”

“I’ll wait here,”

He said with a kind smile.

“Are you sure? I don’t know how long I’ll be,”

I replied, feeling a bit guilty since I couldn’t predict how long this mission to uncover the truth would take.

“It’s fine! There aren’t many cars around here. It might be hard for you to find a ride back. Besides, I already got 1,500 baht—it’s worth the wait.”

“Thank you so much, uncle. I’ll be back,”

I said, bowing my head in gratitude.

“Good luck, miss!”

Luckily for me, that Seal and the woman didn’t realize they were being followed. The café had a Japanese-style décor, with tables and thin partitions that made it the perfect spot for eavesdropping. I pretended to be absorbed in texting on my phone, but my ears were wide open, carefully catching every word of their conversation.

“Why do you have to be so secretly, my love? I don’t get it,”

The woman said, her tone laced with curiosity.

“Well… never mind. There’s a reason for it. But are you serious about this?”

Seal replied hesitantly.

“Of course, I am! I’ve already signed the contract. Isn’t it great? I wanted to surprise you—Seven Elephant Store, yours and mine!”

I nearly choked on my chocolate shake when I heard the woman’s words.

“You didn’t even ask for my opinion,”

Seal said, sounding annoyed.

“Darling, don’t be like that! You’ve graduated already, haven’t you? Isn’t it time you helped me with the business?”

The words hit me like a punch to the face. That’s right… A franchise like Seven Elephants is obviously a step up from my small grocery store. And the way she called Seal “darling”… I’d never been addressed like that before. This beautiful woman must be someone special to Seal.

*Whale… stay strong…*

*“So… is that why you’ve been visiting me so often? Gathering information?”*

“Yes… I just happen to have some work to do,”

Seal answered vaguely.

The scene in front of me blurred as tears welled up in my eyes.

“And this research… What about the grocery store?”

“Well, I already have enough data about the grocery store, so I needed additional information from you.”

“Then this meal is on you, darling. It’s been so long since we’ve had a date like this,”

The woman said, giggling in a way that pierced my heart.

I couldn’t bear to listen anymore. All this time… I’d been deceived. Seal had only been close to me to gather data for Seven Elephants research. And Seal already had someone to build a future with—a future that didn’t include me.

“So, what’s the deal with Seven Elephants? Are you joining me?”

“Uh…”

“Just say yes! What’s there to hesitate about?”

I interrupted sharply, my patience completely gone.

Seal froze, visibly startled by my voice. Taking that moment, I stepped out from my hiding spot.

“Phi W-Whale…”

“Surprised? I am surprised too, so this is the university event you were talking about?”

I said, my voice trembling despite my efforts to stay composed. Tears streamed uncontrollably down my face as I looked at Seal.

“Phi Whale, I can explain—”

“Explain? Don’t bother. Was it fun? Fooling me over and over like this?”

“Phi Whale, please, you have to listen to me—”

Seal pleaded, reaching out to grab my wrist.

“Let go!”

I snapped, glaring at her hand with icy disdain.

“I said, let go!”

My raised voice, fueled by anger, made her flinch. She finally let go, her face contorted in regret.

*Are you sad? Why are you looking sadt when I’m the one who’s been hurt…*

“I’m the fool here. I’ve been so stupid. Go on, stay with your someone special,”

I said bitterly, my voice rising enough to draw the attention of the other customers in the café. The murmurs and curious stares made me feel like a spectacle, so I turned around and stormed out, not wanting to endure the humiliation any longer.

“Phi Whale, wait!”

Seal’s voice followed me, desperate, but it only made me quicken my pace to escape the situation.

“Uncle, start the car now.”

# Chapter 29: Best Friend

**NOEY POV**

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**Sometimes, friendship is too important to let go of feelings.**

Even though it was my day off, I had to go to the office to handle some urgent cases. Luckily, I didn't have to stay late. After finishing work, I stopped by to buy snacks and drinks, preparing for a relaxing Saturday night of binge-watching series.

It was supposed to be an ordinary Saturday night, except for the white car parked in front of my house. That car... its license plate looked oddly familiar.

"So... why do you look all frazzled, greasy-faced, and show up at my house with a cat in tow?"

I handed a glass of orange juice to my dear friend, who was slumped on the couch. Honestly, she just stared at the juice as if it would magically absorb into her system on its own.

"If you're not drinking it, give it back,"

I said, snatching the glass from her and drinking it myself. I glanced at Tharnthara, who seemed to want to say something but kept holding back.

"Nothing... I just missing you."

I looked at her face skeptically. Yeah, right. Her disheveled state made her look like a runaway. I hadn't seen her like this in ages-not since the day Maanmook broke up with her.

"Fighting with your girlfriend?"

"I don't have a girlfriend,"

She retorted instantly.

"Fine, fighting with your girlfriend,"

I concluded, ignoring her denial. As expected, she let out a soft whine.

"Noey..."

I ignored her whining and walked over to the fridge to check what I could cook for dinner for one person and one cat. Thankfully, I'm always a prepared person with a stocked fridge for unexpected events like this.

A heartbroken friend seeking refuge definitely counts as unexpected, doesn't it?

"Since you've dragged yourself here, eat something first, and then we'll talk."

"I'm not hungry,"

She immediately rejected my kindness, making me a bit annoyed. I didn't hesitate to reply coldly,

"If you're not eating, go home."

"Why are you so mean..."

Her voice was pitiful, but I just sighed.

"I'm not mean. But if you're going to sit there moping and starving yourself, how can I let that happen? Eat something first, and then we'll talk." She glanced at me, sighed heavily, and finally nodded reluctantly.

"Fine, but make something simple... I don't want anything fancy." "Alright, good choice. I'll make fried rice with eggs-quick and easy,"

I said, smiling faintly as I walked to grab ingredients from the fridge.

While I cooked, Tharnthara sat silently on the couch, occasionally playing with the cat she brought along. She seemed lost in her thoughts, her expression still clouded with sadness. I noticed but chose not to say anything for now-better to let her calm down first.

In no time, a hot plate of fried rice was ready. I placed it in front of her.

"Eat first, then we'll talk."

"Okay..."

She mumbled softly, starting to scoop small bites into her mouth. The aroma of the food seemed to distract her from her sorrow for a moment.

I sat beside her, watching her eat quietly. Then I asked gently,

"So, what happened? Tell me when you're ready."

Tharnthara looked up at me, her eyes glistening with unshed tears, and murmured,

"It's just... everything feels so messed up, Noey..."

I nodded, signaling that I understood and was ready to listen. A true friend is always there, even in the darkest moments.

I might have spoken too harshly this time, or maybe Tharnthara's mental state just couldn't handle anything too intense. When she spoke in a trembling voice and I noticed tears welling up in her eyes, my anger faded and was replaced with concern.

"Don't cry. Your face will be a mess, and you won't be pretty anymore. I care about you, that's why I want you to eat,"

I said, trying to comfort her in a more conciliatory tone. I didn't want my house to flood with her tears-I was too lazy to mop them up.

"Yeah... sorry for being so difficult,"

Whale said, still wiping her tears. Her pet cat, Somharuthai, who was sitting in the cat bag, looked sad too, as if mirroring its owner's emotions. Did I have to console the cat now as well?

Being me is exhausting...

"Come on, don't cry. Even your cat looks miserable now," I said.

"Her name is Somharuthai,"

Whale corrected me.

"Yeah, yeah, Somharuthai. She looks all stressed out,"

I laughed, noticing that even in her sadness, Whale still had the presence of mind to correct me about her cat's name.

"Let her out to stretch her legs if you want. I'm fine with it."

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Once dinner was ready and everything was served on the table, I took my seat and glanced at Whale, who was eating like she had lost the will to live. Honestly, it was ruining my appetite. But if she didn't eat, she wouldn't have the strength to get through this, and I was confident my cooking was delicious. I decided to enjoy my meal and let her sulk her way through hers.

"Alright, I'm ready to play life coach now,"

I said, opening the topic after we finished eating. It was time to hear what was weighing on Whale's mind. This time, she finally let it all out, venting the pain and frustration she had been bottling up. I rested my chin on my hand, quietly listening to everything she had to say.

"Don't you think everything just seems too coincidental?"

I asked when it seemed like Whale had been hit by one storm after anotherMaanmook suddenly reappearing, the research project, and Seal sneaking off with another woman.

"I don't know... but I feel terrible,"

Whale replied, her face looking utterly defeated. Her swollen, tired eyes seemed ready to burst into tears again at any moment.

"So, after yelling at Seal, you just ran away?"

"Yeah... I saw it with my own eyes. What else was I supposed to do?"

"Well, you jumped to conclusions without hearing the kid's side of the story,"

I suggested, hoping it might help her see things differently. But Whale just shook her head over and over.

"I don't know... I really don't. It just hurts, Noey."

It seemed my best friend really couldn't handle this situation anymore.

"How about taking a break? Stop thinking about this for a while. You can sleep here tonight, and tomorrow things will feel better. Is that okay?" Whale quietly nodded in agreement to my suggestion.

Well, there goes my Saturday night chill plan. Forget the series, I'll just hang out with this friend of mine instead...

It took so much energy to calm her down before she could sleep. Sigh... In the end, I ended up getting involved in my best friend's heavy heartache, even though I was trying to avoid it as much as possible. Because in the end, it's me who ends up hurt.

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"You know... Noey, you're my best friend."

"Don't start bragging. When we get to high school, you'll forget all about me,"

I said, pushing Tharnthara's forehead, causing her to fall back with a grumpy face. She then threw herself at me from behind, nearly making my fried chicken with sticky rice fall to the ground.

"Hey, that chicken and rice is expensive!"

I complained.

"Noey, you're so cruel! I'll never forget you! Even though we're in different rooms, we can still meet up during lunch break!"

Tharn chirped. Because of our different academic tracks, she and I were separated into different rooms, which made me worry that we wouldn't be as close as before.

"Don't worry. Tharn will probably just make new friends,"

I said, still complaining. I wasn't buying into the sweet talk. I've seen it all before.

"I love only you, Noey. There's no way I'll replace you with anyone else. Come on, give me a hug!"

Tharnthara said, sounding cheerful.

"Go away, it's too hot!"

I said, trying to shake her off.

"Why are you so clingy?"

Tharn gave up on her teasing, sat next to me, but still muttered under her breath.

It's not that I don't want to be protective of myself...

*But if this little one hugs me, my heart might start racing uncontrollably...*

"Hey... How long have we been friends now?"

Tharnthara asked as she leaned on me, like she was looking for something to hold onto.

"About three years, I think. Why?"

"You've put up with me for three whole years, so now, help me put up with me for the rest of my life, okay?"

"Hehe."

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The sight of my best friend getting all clingy with me like that made me laugh. I don't know when this feeling started... but before I knew it, I couldn't take my eyes off my best friend's bright smile anymore...

But being best friends has its boundaries.

"Noey... What did I do wrong? Why is this happening to me?"

I rubbed the back of my best friend, who was crying so hard with anger.

Even though the three of us were close, and I was the one who introduced Mook into our circle, I wasn't as hurt as I thought I'd be when my best friends became a couple. It didn't make me this heartbroken.

It was because of me that Tharn's heart was shattered...

"Don't cry. I'll handle this for you."

"No! Noey, you don't need to fight with Mook because of me. This is between Mook and me. I don't want things to get worse,"

Tharnthara stopped me.

"Okay... I understand."

I tried to calm myself down after hearing my best friend's plea, but my heart couldn't help but ache. No matter how much I tried, in the end, I was just the outsider, wasn't I... Even when Tharn was ranting, I wasn't even part of the picture...

I guess I have to stop now...

(Noey... Why have you gone so quiet? The sad tone at the end of the line made me sigh.)

"It's nothing, just busy with school."

I lied, trying to move on from Tharnthara. I decided I would gradually distance myself from her. Even though we were in the same university, we were in different faculties, so I could easily find reasons to avoid meeting her.

(Why are you being so cold, Noey? Are you mad at me?)

"No, it's just that school's tough. You know how it is in third year, so much work."

I had to try hard not to let myself soften toward my best friend.

(So, are you free this Saturday? There's this café I want to go to.)

"Go with your boyfriend. Why are you inviting me?"

I answered, trying to sound indifferent.

(Heh, well, um...)

"I'm not going!"

(Noey... I'm not treating you as a backup. I really meant to go to the café with you, it has nothing to do with breaking up with my boyfriend...)

"I'm not going."

I ended the call with a frustrated mood, and no matter how many times Tharn called or texted, I just didn't care anymore.

But I didn't expect the little one to chase after me this much.

"Noey..."

The hesitant voice of the person waiting for me by the stone table in front of the faculty spoke up.

"What is it?"

I replied with a cold tone, walking out only to see Whale running to intercept me. So persistent...

"Let's make up,"

Tharn said, holding out a large iced cocoa to me. She must have intended to buy it as a peace offering.

"I'm not angry,"

I said, but I still chose to walk away, ignoring the big cup of cocoa.

"You're obviously angry! I came all this way to apologize!"

Tharnthara intercepted me again, this time speaking with a more frustrated tone.

"I didn't ask you to apologize! Stop interfering!"

My irritation took over, and I snapped back, frustrated. Why couldn't she just leave me alone?

"Ugh... Noey, you're so cruel, the cruelest!"

Tharn seemed shocked by my outburst, and she pouted in complaint.

"Do you not want to be friends anymore? Just tell me, Noey. If you don't want to be friends, I'll never bother you again,"

Tharn said, grabbing my sleeve, her voice trembling.

I looked at my best friend's face, her large eyes red from trying to hold back tears. If I cut ties with Tharn right now, I wouldn't feel hurt anymore. My heart wouldn't have to go through this pain anymore.

But...

Sigh... If anyone was to blame, it was me. I couldn't cut her out of my life.

"I'm sorry... This Saturday, let's go to the café you want to go to."

I stood by the bed, staring at my sleeping best friend with eyes full of meaning. The familiar face, covered in tears from childhood.

Tharn was close, yet so far... too far to hold onto.

"If you need anything, just run to me."

I spoke softly, almost a whisper, to the person in front of me.

"I'm really good, huh? Keeping this secret so smoothly that no one ever suspected... and I'm probably the luckiest person for having met you and becoming your friend."

*"I want to be the person you see too."*

Being the one who's always overlooked hurts so much... but I'm too scared to tell you how I really feel.

"It was never meant to be in the first place."

I gently tucked my best friend's hair behind her ear, because you never noticed that I could take care of you just as well as anyone else.

Since you want me to be your best friend who understands you the most, I will be your best friend...

"You'll never know, Tharn."

I'll never betray your trust. Naraluck is the best friend of Tharnthara...

***"I'll keep my secret forever..."***

# Chapter 30: I'll Be the Selfish One

**NOEY POV**

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If anyone loves you more than I do, there's probably no one left in this world.

I let out a deep sigh, feeling exhausted in my chest, while holding a garland and heading to Tharnthara's house. I really didn’t want to go to my best friend’s house—it's far, after all—if not for the fact that she asked me to.

"Did you forget your laptop at home?"

[Can you go get it for me...?]

"Give me a reason that actually makes sense,"

I picked up the phone to answer Whale's call, already feeling the irritation rising. I do like her, but sometimes her clueless actions make me want to knock some sense into her.

[Maewnam must be waiting for me.]

There it is... If she is within reach, I'd probably accidentally hit her with a punch. For sure.

"Why don't you just go clear things up and be done with it?"

[I'm not ready to clear things up...]

Well, that's just great. And now I have to clean up your mess. I sighed heavily and walked over to grab the car keys.

"Omakase..."

[Noey, are you serious?]

"Omakase...."

My tone became firmer, signaling that I wasn’t kidding. If you're going to make me work this much, I deserve to be compensated properly.

(Okay..okay... You're so shameless one.)

Whale finally agreed to my terms in exchange for me going to get her laptop from her house and delivering it to her at her condo. When we meet again, I needed to have a little talk with this troublesome friend of mine. Who told her to bury the spare key of her house in a flower pot? Is it really my job to dig it up?

Maybe it's this pothos plant... I'll try digging here first. If I knew I was going to spend my time digging like this, I wouldn't have agreed to "omakase." But since I was already here, I might as well dig.

"Hey, what are you doing with someone else's plant?"

The unfriendly voice made me look up, and I couldn't help but whistle softly when Whale's assumption was spot on.

"P' Noey!"

The young university teacher greeted me in surprise. When I saw her face clearly, I couldn't help but laugh. The area around her eyes was so dark and worn out that it almost looked like the same symptom as my close friend's

—

*Symptom of love...*

"Are you free? Can we talk?"

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I thought to myself, after this is all over, I might try opening a counseling office. Who knows, I might make a lot of money unexpectedly. 'Siranai Khun Noey', the name sounds much better than Chumlae.

"You did this to yourself, it’s no wonder Whale would think that far."

I sipped on my green tea smoothie while listening to the story from the other side.

"I just want to clear everything up and make sure everyone is happy."

The other person looked so sad that I couldn't help but feel a little sympathy. They were just too good of a person.

"Did it end happily?"

I asked, and the silence from the other side was the answer.

"....."

"Let's clear things up between you two. I don't want to get involved in your personal matters... If you can't protect your partner’s feelings and instead care about someone else... then, think for yourself,"

I said. After I spoke, the other person became even sadder.

"I want to explain... but Khun Whale ran away from me. I'm afraid that if I go after her, she'll just chase me back."

"Here, take this, and tell Whale I sent it. You probably already know where to find her."

I decided to give the notebook I was tasked with delivering to the person in front of me.

"Thank you so much, P' Noey,"

The person thanked me with a sincere voice.

Well, Whale chose this person, and I couldn’t just stand by and watch my close friend sulk when I had the chance to help. Even though it hurt, I had to accept that people have their own paths.

"If this happens again, I won’t help."

"There won’t be a next time,"

The person promised firmly.

I watched as the teacher's car drove away. My heart ached a little, but I understood. Tharn had found someone good, and I would have to stay here, quietly supporting them from a distance.

"Sigh... I wonder if drinking gotu kola juice and eating popcorn while watching a series tonight will go well together."

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**WHALE POV**

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he more you give your heart to love, the more it hurts when you face disappointment. There’s never been a time I felt this hurt after a heartbreak before.

People are funny, aren’t they? Never learning from the pain. Hurt, and then we remember it. Hurt, and then we endure it—like fools, right? So, what kind of fool should I be? Should I be a nosy fool?

It’s a bit lucky that I didn’t sell this condo before, otherwise, I wouldn’t have had a place to run off to and clear my mind.

Running off, huh?...

I’m not running away, I’m just not ready to face it yet. This sucks... Even though I’m heartbroken to the point of almost losing myself, I still ended up holding the little smiling seal doll in my arms. Even though I want to resolve things with the other person, like Noey advised, if it’s the truth, then it’s better to end it like this than to let Seal mock me.

Should I apply for a new job? Maybe once I get the notebook from Noey, I can upload my resume to some job search site.

"Hey, Somharutai!"

I called out to the cat who came over and rubbed its head against me, offering comfort as I hugged the little creature, venting my sadness. As I thought about the cat, my tears of sorrow started to flow again.

"Why do I keep having to go through this?"

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## Ding dong

The doorbell rang, making me quickly wipe away my tears with my hand and go to peek through the peephole to see who it was at this hour. It wasn’t Noey, because she had just texted me saying she’d bring the notebook tomorrow. So, who could it be?

And when I saw the person standing outside with a nervous expression, I was so shocked I almost gasped. It was Maewnam! How did she get here?

I am not ready to face her right now…

"Khun Wan, please don’t go!"

And I was shocked again, nearly biting my tongue when Seal called out in a trembling voice just as I was about to walk away from the door. Did she see me? Should I pretend I'm not home?

It’s no use... I hesitated for a moment before finally deciding to open the door, but that didn’t mean I was going to let Seal come in.

"Khun Wan?"

"How did you know I was here?"

"I saw you through the peephole..." Seal answered with a sad voice.

"I brought the notebook for you."

I looked at the notebook in Seal's hand. That means Noey must have been involved in this somehow. Didn't she say I was an important friend in her life? Noey, why would you betray me like this?

"Just put it down there."

"Khun Wan..."

"Go back. I’m not ready to talk."

"I... I need 10 minutes! Please give me a chance, Khun Wan!"

Maewnam's face, which seemed on the verge of tears, made my heart soften

again. I wasn’t moved by her red eyes or the sniffles, but by her determination to come all the way here to my door.

I let out a deep sigh and opened the door for Maewnam to come into the room.

"Say it then,"

I said, allowing her in while picking up my phone and opening the timer app. When she saw this, she looked startled and flustered.

"Y-You’re setting a timer?"

"There’s only 9 minutes and 50 seconds left,"

I reminded her. I wasn’t going to make it easy on her if the time ran out. "Can I use that space over there?"

Maewnam asked, pointing to a small Japanese table in the middle of the room. I paused for a moment, considering, but seeing how burdened she looked, I finally allowed her to use the space she asked for.

"I came to apologize to you, Khun Wan!"

When she sit down across from me, she said it clearly, and I couldn’t help but look shocked for a moment before quickly returning to my cold, indifferent expression. I didn’t want to lose my composure in front of her, especially in this kind of situation.

"If you hadn’t met Noey, you wouldn’t have come, right?"

I said, a bit sarcastically, feeling hurt.

"I really did come to apologize to you, Khun Wan! But meeting P' Noey helped me make decisions faster."

"Decisions about what?"

*Please don't tell me you're planning to break up with me to be with that woman...*

"Well... You’re mad at me, so I need to figure out the best way to apologize to you."

To be honest, I was really angry with Seal, but seeing her determination like this made me feel eager to listen to what she had to say. Being a teacher, does it give someone the skill to speak and persuade like this? I had to be careful not to fall into Seal's trap.

"This is the family tree of our family,"

Seal said, spreading an A3-sized paper in front of me. It showed... uh... a Family Tree. I hadn’t seen a chart like this in so long. I think the last time was in middle school when a teacher gave us a homework assignment to do it...

The paper didn’t just have names; the teacher had even included pictures for me. She put so much effort into it that I briefly thought about how she might win an award for the best teaching materials.

"This is Chaa. Chaa is the daughter of my aunt and is my cousin, but because we’re close in age, I just call her Chaa."

Seal pointed to a picture of a woman, the owner of the Seven Elephants Store. Comparing their faces, I could see some resemblance between the two.

"Chaa went to study in Australia, so she tends to be very direct when greeting people."

I tried to quietly listen to the

explanation to make the most of the 10 minutes, but when I had the chance to clear things up, the confusion that had built up inside me since the day Seal disappeared from the room exploded like a balloon that had been overinflated.

"So why did you have to lie... about going to some legal meeting and then zoning out all the time?"

"I was stressed..."

Maewnam confessed without hesitation.

"Suddenly, Chaa called and said she just bought the Seven Elephants store from her friend, and I also had to divide my time to help with Mook’s research project."

"....."

"I was afraid you’d worry when you found out the owner of the Seven Elephants store was a relative of mine... so I didn’t dare to tell you. As for the research, Mook asked me to help, and I just couldn’t refuse because I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. I have no excuse."

Maewnam handed me Mook’s research report as proof of her sincerity.

"I’ve been trying to clear things up because I didn’t want you to worry, but I made everything worse. I was foolish. I cared about others, but I never cared about your feelings, Khun Wan... I’m sorry."

Maewnam's face was full of sadness, her eyes red, looking like she could cry any second but was trying to hold it in.

"Can you forgive me? I promise I’ll never make you sad again."

I looked at Maewnam with a deep sense of sympathy. Even though she had acted in a confusing and suspicious way, everything had spiraled out of control because I had never listened to her explanation in the first place.

*I almost lost someone good...*

"I... I never thought to ask you about it either. I just kept thinking about it on my own."

"Please don't cry, Khun Wan."

Maewnam's gentle hand wiping away the tears from my face only made me cry harder.

"I'm sorry... for running away and making you worry."

"Can I hug you?"

Maewnam asked for permission. Even after everything, she was still acting so kind. I could only nod through my tears, allowing myself to be pulled into her embrace. The familiar scent of her perfume made me realize just how much I longed for her touch.

"I missed you so much, Khun Wan."

"I missed you too."

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I looked at Seal, who had started making up with Somharuthai using cat treats, and felt warmth in my heart.

I might need to message Noey. If I treat her to an omakase, will she stop being mad at me?

I hope my best friend won’t complain about me too much when we meet...

"Let’s go home tomorrow... And from now on, I promise! I’ll stop being overly nice,"

Maewnam said, hugging me from behind and speaking sweetly. I had no reason to refuse.

"Okay... no, wait, I’m a mess with all these tears,"

I turned my face away from Seal, who was nuzzling me. Come to think of it, I was pretty disheveled right now, and Seal wasn’t much better.

"You’ll always be the most beautiful to me, Khun Wan... I’ll care only about you from now on. Even if Mook has no one to look at her research or if Chaa needs advice, I won’t care anymore,"

Maewnam promised earnestly.

"You don’t have to go that far. Just, if something’s bothering you, don’t keep it to yourself, okay? I want to share things with you too,"

I said, shaking my head with a smile at her words.

*You don’t have to be enemies with the whole world, just as long as you share things with me—that’s enough...*

"Huh... Khun Wan..."

Suddenly, Maewnam's face turned strange. Her cute face closed her eyes as if she was trying to hold something back.

"What’s wrong?"

"I'm about to... uh, if I don’t, I’ll end up kissing you right now."

"No kissing... that’s a punishment for making me sad, but tonight, how about I'll let you cuddle with me?"

I laughed at Maewnam silly reaction as she nodded apologetically.

"Thank you... for making up with me,"

I hugged her again, feeling a sense of relief.

*"I won’t let you go, Khun Wan."*

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# Chapter 31: The Lucky Person

Maewnam is very serious about her promises. After that day when we cleared things up, everything seemed to go smoothly. I met Arocha (or Chaa), Maewnam's cousin, who kept apologizing to me for causing trouble, and even scolded Maewnam a couple of times for acting suspiciously.

Seeing Maewnam being scolded like this actually entertained me...

The heavy burden of the Seven Elephants store was also cleared up. Maewnam promised me sincerely that she would help ensure my store wouldn't lose to the Seven Elephants store. Since she made such a strong promise, I decided to trust my girlfriend a little more.

But then, one afternoon, I encountered an unexpected problem when my old rival... MaanMook, showed up at the grocery store out of nowhere, catching me off guard. She looked so irritated that I wondered if she had eaten a beehive.

Oh... maybe she hadn't eaten a beehive, but had gotten her research paper rejected instead...

"How can I help you?"

Yes... and I wasn't the same Whale anymore who would feel awkward meeting her.

"What did you say to Maewnam?"

Maan Mook's tone was far from friendly.

"I don't remember. I talk to Maewnam about a hundred things a day, I can't remember them all,"

I replied casually, with a hint of annoyance in my voice.

"Don't pretend you don't know. Otherwise..."

She trailed off suddenly, as if afraid she was about to slip and reveal something.

"Otherwise what?"

I pressed her, because Maan Mook had stopped speaking abruptly, as if she was scared of saying something.

"It's because of you, right? Maewnam refused to help me review my research,"

She blurted out in a blunt, almost shameless way.

"You don't like me, so you make her act like this."

I was quite irritated by MaanMook's words. What kind of person was she...

with such a terrible attitude? Did time not help her learn anything? She never took any responsibility for her mistakes. How could she blame everyone else?

I could separate work from personal feelings! Just because I hated her didn't mean Maewnam had to hate her too.

But the reason Maewnam didn't help her with the research had a different explanation...

"Can you stop taking credit for yourself and throwing blame on others."

I can't stand this person's actions anymore.

*Want to pick a fight? Sure, let's do whatever today is.*

"What did you say?"

I glanced at the CCTV screen casually. Luckily, there were no customers in the store at the moment. It seemed that Maanmook had chosen the perfect time to come in. Or maybe she had waited for a time when the store was empty.

I quietly slid a rainbow feather duster within reach, just in case things escalated. If she tried anything, I'd be ready to defend myself.

Alright, weapon ready! Time for Whale to fight!

"I don't want to get involved in your personal life, but you should do your own work. Copying someone else's work is wrong, and you know that."

"How do you know? Or..."

Maanmook looked visibly shocked at my words.

"I didn't mean to find out, but let's just say I know. Maewnam knows about this too, which is why she stopped helping you with your work,"

I said, slightly evasive, before cutting to the point. The truth was, Maewnam hadn't intended to tell me. She wanted to let the matter quietly pass out of respect for Maanmook as her senior. But I had pressed the young teacher for the truth. In the end, Seal got back at me, leaving me utterly drained.

Okay, focus, Whale! Maewnam isn't here-this is your fight now!

"Stop lecturing me!"

Oh? That's a bold tone.

"I'm warning you because I care, Mook. Copying someone else's research is a serious offense,"

I said, trying to keep my tone calm while facing her bad attitude.

"What proof do you even have? All this is just your girlfriend's baseless

assumption. Don't accuse me without evidence."

I looked at Maanmook, who was furiously defending herself, and felt pity. An ordinary person might not have noticed, but Maewnam, who is almost a genius, remembered even small details in research papers.

That's why she became suspicious of Maanmook's report and eventually found the original in the library. Seal had shared this with me, and as her partner, I couldn't help but remember it clearly.

"I've said what I needed to say. Whether you believe me or not is up to you."

Maanmook looked frustrated, like she was angry but didn't know where to direct it. Just don't take it out on me! My hand was already gripping the feather duster behind the counter, ready for action.

"What a waste of time talking to you. You're boring and annoying."

I stared at her with a mix of disbelief and anger. What? How is this my fault? I was minding my own business when you came in to pick a fight! And to think I once liked her.

How could I have been so blind? I even cried over her when she dumped me. Was love really that blinding?

It was time to end this pointless conversation.

"You're the one who walked up to me here. But whatever... If you're not going to buy anything, just leave. I don't have time to argue with you. I'm trying to make a living,"

I said, throwing the words right back at her with a cold, indifferent look on my face.

"You...?"

MaanMook gritted her teeth, clearly annoyed, when she was at a lost for words to fight me.

"I'm not accepting anything from you. This is a grocery store, not a pawn shop,"

I added, taking full advantage of the situation now that I had the upper hand.

"You've changed, Whale,"

MaanMook stared at me with surprise look.

"Yeah... I've changed, but you haven't changed at all. Maybe you should try changing yourself,"

I shot back, holding her gaze without fear. It was MaanMook who looked away first and walked out of the store. I let out a long, relieved sigh, feeling like I had overcome some fear.

From now on, I would be the new Whale who would no longer run away...

"U-um... Excuse me, dear."

"!!!"

I jumped in shock when a voice suddenly came up close to me. Wait, I just checked the shop's security camera... this person wasn't there! Where did this lady come from?

*So... does this grocery store really have ghosts...?*

"Sorry, dear, but could you tell me about..."

"Who are you?! And... where did you come from?"

I asked the woman, my eyes wide with panic. I instinctively backed away until I hit the wall behind me, trying to keep a distance from this stranger.

"Me? Oh... I'm sorry to startle you like this. My name is Tik, or my full name Professor Doctor Khunying Phannika. I am the Head of Department in university. As for where I came earlier, I've actually been here the whole time. Nong Somharuthai is very well-behaved,"

Tik said, pointing to a corner of the shop. When I looked over at the security camera, I almost cursed aloud. That's the blind spot!

Normally, the camera covers that area, doesn't it? Or maybe I turn to looked over at Somharuthai, who was pretending to be very interested in the fabric softener on the shelf... She didn't seem suspicious at all.

Wait, I felt like familiar with this lady's name...

"Tik... Phannika... Tik!"

I exclaimed loudly, as a lightbulb suddenly went off in my head. Tik was the wealthy sponsor of Seal's gang...

"It seems like you already know me. I bet Maewnam told you about me. Yes, I'm Tik, and I'm the head of her department,"

She confirmed, smiling knowingly.

"Hello,"

I could only raise my hand and greet Khunying Phannika, the noblewoman, with a confused expression.

"Since we know each other now, would you mind telling me about MaanMook's research?"

Her tone suddenly became more serious, and I couldn't help but swallow from the pressure.

"...."

"This is a request from auntie. Will you help me?"

I apologize in advance, Maanmook, but I didn't mean to spill the beans! It's just that I was pressured by the Head of Department, Professor Doctor Khunying Phannika!

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The store closes every Sunday, which I consider a day for rest. Usually, I sleep in to make up for lost sleep and engage in relaxing activities like binge-watching Netflix or going out to eat and watch movies with Maewnam. But today was different. Maewnam woke me up early and told me to dress nicely because we were going somewhere.

When I asked where and what we were doing, Maewnam hesitated and refused to answer. So, I gave up and just went along with it. Fine, you want me to dress up, I'll dress up. Whatever, just don't trick me into going somewhere to get beaten up...

"Where are you taking me?"

I asked the person next to me, who was happily driving with a cheerful hum, her round face grinning.

"Do you want to know? I won't tell you!"

"Ugh,"

I muttered, frustrated, and I put the meatball I was holding into my own mouth, chewing it with annoyance to vent my frustration.

*Why is she so annoying?*

I took out my irritation on the poor meatballs by chewing them up and swallowing them.

After a while, Maewnam must have sensed the anger emanating from me because she said,

"Khun Whale, can I have some meatballs too?"

"No, you can't."

"I wasn't trying to annoy you. I just wanted to surprise you. Please stop being mad at me,"

She said in a pitiful tone, her eyebrows furrowed.

When I saw Maewnam looking so sad, all I could do was give her a meatball too.

"Fine... you'll find out when we get there." "If it's not a surprise, I'll be really disappointed,"

I said, half-joking but also warning her.

After several naps, stopping by to eat here and there, and visiting various tourist spots along the way, I still wasn't sure where Maewnam was planning to surprise me.

The route she was driving was completely unpredictable until, just as the sun was setting, the car finally stopped in a place I was very familiar with.

"This is my school..."

I muttered in confusion. My high school was well-known for being located next to the river, near the riverside bridge, which made it a popular landmark.

"Let's go down and feel the wind."

I followed Maewnam and stopping at the riverside bridge. I was just as confused by her actions, but I didn't want to ask. While the person beside me gazed out at the vast river, I let myself relax and enjoy the cool breeze and the natural surroundings.

"Khun Whale, look! There's a swan!"

"Where?"

I turned to look in the direction Maewnam pointed, but before I knew it, her soft lips quickly touched mine. Seal tricked me into a kiss!

"What are you doing? We're outside!"

I whispered, embarrassed and frustrated by the boldness of her actions.

Thankfully, the school was closed today, so there were no students around. Otherwise, I would have been so embarrassed if they had seen us.

"Khun Whale, I'll always stay by your side,"

Maewnam said, taking both of my hands in her and speaking with a serious tone.

"I don't know what to think anymore. What are you trying to do?"

I said, confused. What exactly does Maewnam want to do?

"P' MaanMook's actions have always been a wound in your heart, Khun Whale. I just want to erase those bad memories. I don't want the person I love to be sad."

"...."

"If we could go back in time, it would probably be the same time that P' MaanMook broke up with you. That day, we can't turn back time, but I want to write a new memory. Today, Khun Whale, you're here with me, and I'll always be with you forever. I'm not going anywhere."

"...."

"Khun Whale... you're crying."

"It's just dust in my eyes, the wind is strong,"

I tried to cover up, but the joy and the tears in my eyes couldn't lie.

"Thank you so much. I'm so lucky to have met you Maewnam."

"We're lucky. We're lucky to have met each other,"

Maewnam gently wiped away my tears.

"But I wasn't lying earlier. There really was a swan, see?"

"How cute... there are two together,"

I remarked.

"Yes, and now I'm hungry and craving roasted duck..."

"Ugh, can we have 3 minutes of sentimental time, please?"

I playfully hit Maewnam's shoulder, feeling frustrated. The moment was ruined.

"I want to be sentimental too, but..."

Maewnam grabbed her stomach, which was growling in protest, looking sad. I couldn't help but burst into laughter at her expression.

"Okay, okay, let's go eat," I said.

"Yay! I get to choose the restaurant!"

I held her hand and walked side by side with my lover, looking out at the vast river one last time. When I thought about that day, the day Maanmook broke up with me, it was strange that my heart didn't hurt anymore.

It felt as though the bad memories that had been buried deep inside me had faded away. The warmth of the hand holding mine tightly seemed to tell me that no matter what happens,

Maewnam would stay by my side, never leaving.

The person next to me has actually written a new memory that has already been completed.

# Chapter 32: The Grocery Store

When the storm passes, the sky always clears. I looked up at the bright sky, stretched lazily a few times to shake off the stiffness, and flipped the store's sign from "Close" to "Open."

The store, Chamlae, was now ready for business.

"We now have a promotion: spend 100 baht and get a sticker for points collection!"

I informed the customers who had just entered the store. But when I saw who they were, my smile grew even wider.

"We've got a new section-homemade products! Feel free to take a look. Everything's fresh, clean, and supports the community,"

I introduced the newly launched corner to my friends. Yes, today's customers were Tonmai and Chompoo.

"Hey, P'Whale, have you thought about accepting utility bill payments? It might boost sales!"

I couldn't help but laugh at Tonmai's joke when a familiar voice interrupted.

"That's enough, Tonmai, don't overdo it."

"Overdo it? Do you mean P'Whale will be too tired?"

"No, I mean you're overdoing it!"

It was Maewnam, my girlfriend, who showed up at the store looking a bit out of breath, her face shiny with sweat.

"Seriously, I drove all the way to drop you guys off, told you to wait at the lobby, and you ditched me to visit P'Whale first?"

"Chompoo, come see how jealous this greedy Maewnam is over here!"

Tonmai laughed as he handed me a tissue to calculate the price.

"One hundred baht,"

Maewnam quickly stepped in, taking over my spot.

"A hundred baht? For tissue?"

"Yes, one hundred baht. Got a problem?"

"Chompoo, come see this unfair person right here!"

"Don't worry, Chompoo, it's on me. Everything you pick will be free,"

Maewnam said smugly.

"Cheater!"

I moved to sit nearby, watching the three of them bicker lightheartedly. Their energy was contagious. "Oh, I almost forgot to tell you,"

Tonmai suddenly said.

"In today's meeting, they mentioned that the new teacher will start next Monday."

"Found out so quickly,"

Chompoo murmured with a sigh of disappointment.

"I thought P'Mook seemed like a genuinely nice person,"

Chompoo added, her tone tinged with regret.

"I didn't expect it either, but P'Tik is really sharp. They managed to dig up everything,"

Tonmai chimed in.

"P'Tik does have a wide network, but P'Mook has already faced the consequences of her actions. Let's just let it go. Now we just have to worry about the new colleague coming in," S

Maewnam tried to console his two friends with a weary smile.

Meanwhile, I pretended to busy myself with checking stock, avoiding eye contact.

The conflict between Mook and me was something only Maewnam knew about. I believed it was best to separate personal issues from work. In the end, Mook had to take responsibility for her actions, especially as someone who committed fraud.

Maewnam later whispered to me that P'Tik had suspected Mook for a while but didn't have concrete evidence. Once Maewnam's side provided proof, it was easier to resolve everything.

I silently wished this lesson would make Mook truly change.

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"Next week, I have a lunch date with Noey. Want to come along with me?"

I asked Maewnam while preparing to close the store.

"No, thanks. You should have fun with your friend,"

Maewnam replied with a relaxed expression. Ever since the big drama, both Maewnam and Noey seemed to get along better. That made me so happy.

What could be better than your partner and best friend getting along effortlessly? I must be truly blessed!

"I guess it'll be fun, but I have to treat Noey this time,"

I grumbled, remembering her persistent reminders about my promise to take her for omakase. I had hoped she'd forget, but her memory was sharpespecially when it came to freebies.

"Here, use my card instead,"

Maewnam said, handing me her black card with a smug smile.

"Consider it a thank-you for helping me reconcile with Khun Wan. Omakase is nothing!"

I looked at the black card with playful annoyance.

"I'll swipe it so much you'll be in debt!"

"Go ahead. I'll just collect the debt with interest later,"

Maewnam teased.

For some reason, her words felt oddly ominous. Or maybe I was just overthinking it.

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Finally, the Seven Elephant Store, which seemed to be a competitor to my business, officially opened for full operations. However, it didn't cause as much trouble for me as I had feared.

"That's so unfair, darling!"

Today, my store was lively once again, thanks to the loud complaints of Arocha, who had stormed into Chamlae to confront the supposed culprit behind the silence at the Seven Elephant Store. The accused simply looked up from the counter and smiled nonchalantly at her cousin.

"I just gave P'Whale some suggestions, Cha. Don't go throwing accusations around."

"It's because of you! Your store has great campaigns and Somharuthai attracting customers. How am I supposed to compete?"

"If you ever want to declare bankruptcy, just let me know. I'm ready to take over anytime,"

Maewnam replied without a care.

"Come to think of it, a second Chamlae branch across from yours doesn't sound too bad."

"We're family, Maewnam!"

"You should know. Between family and my girlfriend, you can probably guess who I'd prioritize, right? Isn't that right, Sam?"

Maewnam added, turning to the cat, who purred in agreement (or so it seemed).

"You're so cruel! I'm going to tell Uncle!"

"Be my guest!"

I watched Arocha storm out of the store, muttering under her breath after giving me a quick farewell bow. Since that day Maewnam made her promise to me, she had changed noticeably.

She was more decisive, so much so that the nickname *Leopard Seal* her students gave her felt entirely fitting.

"Wasn't that a bit harsh on Cha?"

I asked as I walked over to Maewnam, who was playing with Somharuthai using a cat toy, utterly unbothered.

"She deserved it. Always causing trouble. Franchising isn't something you just dive into without proper planning. Let her learn the hard way."

"You're being strict today,"

I teased, tugging gently at her cheek. The scowl on her face reminded me of her rare but terrifying temper.

"Strict with others, but never with you, P'Whale,"

Maewnam replied with a sweet smile that immediately eased my concerns. Her temper could be scary, but she always had a soft spot for me.

"You're so sweet-talking."

"Want a taste?"

"Go play with Somharuthai. I'll get back to watching the shop."

I pushed my girlfriend's face away, feeling shy. Why does she keep bringing up stuff like this all the time? Could she be a little less addicted to me?

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This afternoon was unusually quiet, leaving me with so much free time that I had to find something to keep myself awake. Reading a book to kill time seemed like a good idea.

"Reading a book?"

Maewnam asked as she approached.

"Yeah, I've barely touched it since I bought it,"

I admitted with a laugh. The book, which was about creating a unique personal brand, had been forgotten in a drawer ever since I met Maewnam. Remembering it now, I decided to give it some attention. But before I could finish even one page, my companion had already started to pester me.

"Read this one instead! The author is amazing, you know,"

She said, grinning as she handed me another book.

"You're so full of yourself,"

I teased, glancing at the cover, which proudly displayed the name Asst. Prof. Dr. Sudthirak-her name-bold and clear.

"Of course, I am!"

She replied, puffing her chest out as if my comment were a compliment.

"The real question is whether this person is as infatuated with me as I am with myself."

"Hey, come look at this part. I think there's a typo,"

I said, swiftly changing the subject. Maewnam, unsuspecting, leaned over to inspect the page.

Seizing the moment, I quickly pressed a kiss to her cheek.

It worked like a charm. She froze, completely stunned.

"Not sure if I'm infatuated with you or not, but your cheeks are definitely soft,"

I teased, pretending nothing had happened while trying to suppress my own embarrassment. My boldness had caught her off guard, but now I was the one blushing like mad.

"P'Whale..."

"Stop right there! It's broad daylight!"

I pushed her face away as she leaned in, clearly intent on reciprocating.

"But you kissed me first!"

She whined, pouting like a child denied her favorite toy.

"I'm the older one! I'm allowed to kiss!"

I protested, my face burning. All I did was kiss her cheek! She, on the other hand, was ready to go straight for a full-on kiss. What if a customer walked in? I'd have to hide under a bucket for three days! "Is that how it works? This feels like an unfair system,"

She muttered.

"Go over there! I'm reading,"

I said, waving her away. Thankfully, she relented and moved aside.

"You'll be back to scrolling on your phone in three minutes," She taunted as she walked off.

"Don't underestimate me! I'll finish this book in one sitting!"

I shot back, determined to prove her wrong-though I wasn't entirely confident I could resist the lure of my phone.

"Cheered you up, didn't it?"

"Go play with Somharuthai. I'm going back to tend the store,"

I said, pushing her face away playfully, feeling slightly embarrassed. Why does she always steer the conversation back to this?

Could she maybe tone down her obsession with me just a little?

As Maewnam had predicted, I didn't last five minutes with the book before my hand instinctively reached for my phone to chase away the boredom. Scrolling through Facebook aimlessly, I stumbled upon a post that made me smile.

"What are you smiling about, P'Whale?" Maewnam asked, curious.

"Nothing. Come here, I need a hug,"

I replied, brushing off her question as I stood up and wrapped my arms around her waist with a grin.

"Nong Som! P'Whale must be sick today! She's been cuddly all day! Look at this!"

Maewnam exclaimed in mock alarm, causing me to lightly smack her shoulder for her theatrics.

*"Meow!"*

Somharuthai chimed in, as if supporting Maewnam's declaration.

"Ridiculous! Come here, and let me hug both of you!"

I said with a laugh.

I hugged Somharuthai in one arm and pulled Maewnam close with the other, holding them both tightly in a moment of lighthearted affection. Meanwhile, my phone lay forgotten on the table, its screen displaying the Facebook post I had shared moments before:

**"Nothing in life is permanent.**

**What we once had, oneday we may lose.**

**Therefore, we humans must always prepare for change.**

**But believe this: when we lose something, We'll gain something better in return."**

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**-----THE END-----**

# Chapter Special 01 : Soulmate

**SEAL POV**

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Valentine’s Day is widely known as a day of love. On the surface, it sounds romantic, doesn’t it? But isn’t its real origin about Saint Valentine, who was martyred for his faith? Should we really celebrate the death anniversary of someone so joyfully?

That’s exactly what I thought when I read about it in the library. Ever since then, I stopped being excited about Valentine’s Day, even though the chocolates I got every year were pretty delicious.

By the way, “Sudthirak” is my name. Cool, isn’t it? My parents gave me this name because I was their beloved child. Honestly, their love for me might have been a bit too much sometimes—not that I’m complaining! My friends, however, think otherwise.

For instance, my parents always came to pick me up right on time after school, and they never let me go out with friends, saying they were worried that someone might kidnap me because of my cute looks. While I appreciated their care, I sometimes felt a little lonely.

But today, Sudthirak, their obedient child, was going to break the rules for the first time! I was so excited!

Why? Because today was the last day of finals for 9th grade, and it was only a half-day exam. My friends had invited me to join them for a barbecue at a newly opened restaurant in the trendy Siam area.

Of course, I didn’t tell my parents about this plan. My genius strategy was to sneak out, enjoy the meal, and return to school on time so they wouldn’t suspect anything.

*Pretty smart, right?*

“We’re in trouble!”

Namsai, one of my close friends, ran up to us, looking panicked.

“What happened?”

Asked Lookmai, another friend in our group.

“The restaurant *Soulmate* is running a promotion! If you come as a couple, you get a 50% discount!”

Namsai exclaimed with regret.

“Really? Well, should we check out another restaurant then?”

Lookmai suggested. The others agreed, but things didn’t go as planned.

Actually, it wasn’t everyone who faced disappointment—it was just me.

*Why?*

Because all the other restaurants were full, and the waiting time for a table was at least one to two hours. It was 1 p.m., and if we waited, it would be 3 p.m. by the time we got a table. Add in the eating time, and we’d be way past our planned schedule.

It was already clear that if we waited until 4 or 5 p.m., there was no way we’d make it back to school before the day ended.

But someone like Sudthirak wouldn’t give up so easily! It wasn’t every day I got a chance to go out without my parents tagging along.

“We’ll go back to the first restaurant. Maybe they’ll let us in,”

I suggested, immediately dashing toward Soulmate without waiting for my friends’ objections.

I vaguely remembered the restaurant being on the 4th floor. But where was the escalator? And the elevator? Why was this Siam Two shopping center so confusing? Was the designer a pyramid builder trying to hide a pharaoh’s tomb?

Ugh, forget the pyramids and pharaohs. Let’s just say I was lost. Still, someone like me, Sudthirak, would never call for help over something this small. I had to figure it out on my own!

And in the end, persistence pays off! I stood in front of Soulmate, feeling triumphant.

“You guys were the ones who planned this! And now you’re ditching me?”

The loud, angry voice of someone on the phone caught my attention. I turned to see who it was.

*Beautiful.*

Absolutely stunning. (Oops! Forgot I shouldn’t use slang like that.)

Wow, this older girl—she looked like a college student—was so gorgeous. Even though she had an annoyed expression on her face, she was still breathtaking enough to hold my gaze.

What was she so upset about, I wondered? But wait, my parents always taught me to respect other people’s privacy.

Then again, what if she was in trouble?

I stood there debating with myself for a moment before coming to a conclusion:

*The path to becoming a hero is to meddle in other people’s business!*

Once I’d made up my mind, I quietly inched closer to the beautiful girl so I could eavesdrop on her conversation.

*“I’m already broke this month! I left campus because you guys made plans a week ago, and now you’re ditching me? How can I not be mad?”*

*“What? So it’s my fault for not asking first?”*

*“A plan is a plan! Sure, I’m busy with schoolwork, but you can’t expect me to check our group chat all the time. It’s unreasonable!”*

*“Yeah! Are you happy now? Whatever, I’m fine on my own. If they want to hang out with their partner, that’s their problem!”*

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I swallowed nervously when I heard the escalating anger in her voice, and I almost wanted to fold my hands and apologize to the gods around here. I could imagine how her curse words had scattered them all. I knew swearing was normal for some people, but maybe I’ll wait until I’m older to understand it better.

I kept watching the beautiful girl as she continued to swear into the phone, her words probably aimed at the person on the other end. She seemed so mad! Let me summarize the situation quickly:

It looked like she was angry because her friend had broken a promise, leaving her alone, and it seemed like she must have been feeling lonely. She had mentioned that she was “broke this month,” so it sounded like she was really struggling financially.

If there was someone who had kept a promise even when they didn't have much money, but was left alone, I couldn’t stand to see her suffer. As a future good citizen, I, Sudthirak, had to help this poor girl!

I still had plenty of pocket money left this month, and if it made her happy, I’d do whatever it took!

“Hello, guys, I’m going to head out now. No, no, it’s not that I’m mad at you. It’s just that I have an important mission to take care of. If my mission fails, I’ll meet you at the same place later. But if I don’t come back, see you on Monday!”

I quickly told my friends so they wouldn’t worry, before following through with my plan. I was incredibly lucky because there was a promotion happening just in time!

“Um, excuse me,”

I said, gathering my courage.

“Huh?”

The beautiful girl turned around, glaring at me with an unfriendly look.

“Uh... are you here alone?”

I asked hesitantly.

“Why? If you're trying to sell me something, I’m telling you right now, I’m not buying.”

“No, no, it’s not like that,”

I quickly explained,

“It’s just that my friends ditched me, but I still really want to eat here. And I saw you standing here alone, so if you don’t mind…”

I stammered, trying to explain myself. I wasn’t trying to lie—I just wanted to help this beautiful girl!

When she heard my explanation and saw my sad face, her cold expression softened immediately. Phew, I made it!

“Oh? You got ditched too? Ugh, why are there so many people with bad attitudes? Well, it’s fine. Since we’re here, let’s eat.”

“Ah!”

I was a bit surprised at how easily she accepted my offer. My nervousness must’ve made her curious.

“Are you surprised? Shouldn’t you be more surprised that someone randomly invited you to eat?”

“Well, we don’t know each other, but you seem so easygoing,”

I said, speaking my mind. When the other person heard that, she chuckled softly.

Why? Did I say something wrong?

“Sutthirak, we’ve met before,” She replied.

“Really? We’ve met before?”

I felt both excited and confused. When did we meet? I couldn’t remember at all!

“You’re a strange one. Look here.”

The beautiful girl smiled as she pointed to the area above my chest.

“Your name’s clearly written here, with the school logo too. If you were a bad student, I’d just report you to the school authorities right now.”

“Ah, you’re just teasing me!”

I made a sad face, but she ignored it.

The beautiful girl led the way to the front of the restaurant, leaving me to follow behind her. “Two, please.”

“I’m so sorry, but right now we only have seats available for couples,”

The staff member said apologetically.

“And what about regular customers? You don’t care about them?”

The beautiful girl’s mood started to shift again.

Oh no, she was about to get upset again!

“We’re a couple!” I suddenly said.

“Huh? What?”

Both the beautiful girl and the staff member said at the same time.

“I said, we’re a couple!”

I replied confidently, and both the staff member and the beautiful girl looked stunned. It seemed like the beautiful girl was playing along with my little game.

“Don’t joke around like that,”

The staff member said, still not believing me.

“Ugh, I told you, Sutthirak,”

The beautiful girl said slowly,

“The world is not ready for this yet. People still don’t accept things like this. It’s really sad. Maybe I should post this on Facebook? With my 500k followers, everyone will know that this restaurant doesn’t accept diversity in gender.”

She said it so nonchalantly, and both I and the staff member were left openmouthed in shock.

“Dad, Mom,”

I thought to myself,

*“Sutthirak is getting involved with someone with not-so-nice intentions!”*

As expected, after she finished speaking, the staff member hurriedly offered us the couple’s promotion. It wasn’t long before we were served beautiful marbled wagyu beef, along with a delicious aroma filling the air.

The table next to us made my mouth water.

"Come on, let's eat,"

The beautiful girl said, and I just nodded eagerly before digging in.

"Ah, I forgot,"

She suddenly spoke up as we were enjoying the delicious food. She seemed to have remembered something.

"What is it?"

"Well, you're not even 18 yet, and you said you’re my girlfriend, and I played along. Good thing the staff was so shocked; if this were real, I’d be in jail for statutory rape."

She looked seriously shocked, which made me feel startled too.

"You would… what to me?"

"Ugh, talking to you makes me dizzy. It’s a legal term, never mind. Just go Google it later. Let’s eat before the meat gets cold."

I couldn't help but notice how beautiful she looked while eating. Everything about her was perfect—the way her hair fell, the way she ate—it was like she was beautiful in everything she did.

But suddenly, a piece of meat was being offered right in front of my mouth. Just as I was about to speak in surprise, I noticed her glance at a group of staff members who were watching us closely. People with bad intentions!

What could I do? I had to open my mouth and accept the meat. It was so delicious, melting in my mouth. The sweet smile of the beautiful girl only made the meat taste even better.

I looked at her smile, not quite understanding. Maybe it was my confused look that made her explain herself.

"Feeding you is like feeding a little calf or lamb on a farm. It's cute."

*Wait, was the beautiful girl teasing me?*

But she did think I was a cute kid, so maybe it was a compliment! I guess I could take it as one.

"You weird kid, calling you a calf and still smiling," she teased.

"Hehe, are you happy?" I asked.

"Why?"

"Because I heard you argue with your friends."

"Did you overhear me? Or were you eavesdropping, you weird kid?" Her playful tone made me feel a bit flustered, unsure how to react.

"No, I really did overhear, but it's because I got ditched too. So when I heard what you said, I just..."

I started to explain.

"Ah, I see. Well, I'm not really that happy. But hey, don't look so sad like a calf that's been abandoned. At least we're enjoying this grilled meat together, right?"

The beautiful girl seemed a little flustered when she saw the change in my expression. "Really?"

"Really."

"You’re not just saying that to make me feel better, are you?"

"Hey, I'm serious. I’m really enjoying this. Look, I’m smiling!"

When I heard her say that, something inside me swelled up with happiness. I didn't quite understand what I was feeling, but I knew one thing for sure— I wanted to have meals with her every day, all the time.

But then, just like that, the warm moment ended as quickly as it began. The sound of my phone alarm broke the peaceful atmosphere. Oh no, it’s already 3:30 PM?

"Hey, I need to go."

"Why? What happened?"

She seemed confused, not expecting me to suddenly get up and grab my bag.

"I don’t have time to explain, but... I had so much fun today. Thank you for eating with me."

I said, quickly placing a gray bill on the table and grabbing my school bag, running out without listening to her calling after me.

On the Grab ride back, I felt a sense of pride for having helped someone, especially someone so beautiful.

I hope she has good memories this Valentine’s Day.

And my plan was a success! I made it back to school just in time for dismissal. Thanks to the restaurant’s air purifier, I didn't even smell bad. As I sat and reflected on the day’s events, I felt happy.

She was beautiful and kind, even feeding me.

Wait, when she fed me, was that an indirect kiss?

I thought about it and quietly blushed to myself in the backseat, replaying the memories of her in my mind.

By the way, what’s her name?

“Oh no!”

"What's wrong, dear?"

"Dad, Mom, I think I made a mistake,"

I said to my parents with a sad tone, and they both assumed I was talking about the exam from earlier.

But what I really meant was—forgetting to ask her name.

Since I couldn’t go back in time, I had to swallow my disappointment as I made my way back home.

Why am I so forgetful? Ugh!

*Beautiful sister, if destiny really exists, I hope we’ll be soulmates.*

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The sound of premium grilled meat sizzling on the grill made my mouth water. I watched the person carefully tending to the meat with a fascinated gaze that I couldn’t hide.

"Why are you smiling all by yourself, hmm?"

It seemed like the beautiful girl noticed I was staring at her, so she asked, and she didn’t just ask. She fed me a perfectly grilled piece of meat.

I opened my mouth and chewed happily.

"Hey, do you want to hear a fun story?"

"Tell me later when we get home."

**Beautiful sister, I’ve found you, and I’ll never let you slip away again.**

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# Chapter Special 02 : Release

Often, novels or dramas end with the hero and heroine getting married and living happily ever after. But in real life, marriage or agreeing to be in a relationship is just the beginning of a new chapter as a couple.

Right in front of me is a house. No, calling it a mansion would give a clearer picture-a huge house with a vast lawn, like a mini public park placed right in front of the house.

"Wow..."

I couldn't help but exclaim in awe. But honestly, I wouldn't have reacted this much if this weren't the house of someone who told me she'd visit her family during this Songkran holiday.

"Did you fall into a rice bin?"

I turned to look at Maewnam (แมวนํ้า) with disbelief. I already had an idea that she was well-off based on her clothes and belongings, but I didn't expect this level of luxury.

So, this is what luxurious home feels like...

"Gladly so,"

Maewnam smiled, her cheeks puffed with delight.

"Please fall deeply, and don't ever climb back out."

"Yeah, yeah,"

I replied casually to her teasing. While Maewnam seemed relaxed, I started feeling a growing wave of nervousness rising inside me.

"Let's go. I've missed home so much. I haven't been back in a while," Maewnam grabbed my hand firmly, leaving me no choice but to follow her.

Maybe I shouldn't have agreed to this in the first place.

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"Darling!"

The moment Maewnam opened the door, an older woman ran towards us, her face beaming with joy that she couldn't hide.

From her tone, it was clear she missed Maewnam, who stood smiling beside me, so much that it seemed like she was ready to check if Maewnam was injured anywhere.

"Darling, have you lost weight? You look thinner!"

Wait... is she the housekeeper, or should I call her the maid?

"Oh, Auntie Ram, you're overreacting! It's not that bad. I visit often, don't I?"

Maewnam hugged the housekeeper affectionately, showing their close bond.

"And this person?"

Aunt Ram's tone changed immediately when she mentioned me, sending a chill down my spine.

*"I didn't hurt your precious young lady! Don't look at me with that suspicious glare!"*

I quickly defended myself.

"This is P'Whale, my girlfriend. Isn't she beautiful?"

Maewnam introduced me with pride, her tone cheerful.

"Hello, Aunt Ram,"

I greeted her with a polite wai (pressing hands together and bowing slightly) to make a good impression. However, it didn't seem to work much. "Why are you so quiet, Aunt Ram? Don't you think P'Whale is beautiful?"

Maewnam asked her with an adorably curious expression, her eyebrows slightly drooping. Honestly, who could say no to that face?

"She's...beautiful,"

Aunt Ram finally replied, but her tone wasn't exactly convincing. I could sense the tension building in the air.

"The master is waiting in the living room,"

Aunt Ram added before leading us further into the house.

As we walked through the hallway, I couldn't help but admire how beautiful and warm Maewnam's house was. But at the same time, a growing pressure inside me made it hard to breathe.

"P'Whale, why do you look so pale? Are you feeling unwell?"

Maewnam asked, concerned.

"I might be a bit carsick, but I'm fine. Don't worry."

I lied without thinking. In reality, my stomach was tied in knots from stress. I hadn't considered how Maewnam's family would react to her only daughter dating another woman-one who was five years older, no less!

*What exactly did Maewnam tell her family about me?*

Knowing Seal, who's as straightforward as they come, she probably didn't lie. Just earlier, when Aunt Ram asked about her "darling," Seal loudly and proudly declared that we were dating, as if she wanted the whole world to know. My stomach churned again, stress gnawing at me.

When we entered the living room, Seal's parents were already waiting. They looked just as I'd imagined-dignified and commanding, even with their age showing.

"Hello,"

I greeted them with a wai, feeling the weight of their presence. Seal's mother wasn't as intimidating; her face was full of smiles, making it clear where Seal got her cheerful personality. But her father...he was a different story. His expression was unreadable, his stern gaze making my palms sweat.

"So, this is your girlfriend?"

Seal's father broke the silence after acknowledging my greeting. "Yes! Isn't she adorable? Just like in the pictures I sent you, right?"

Maewnam replied enthusiastically.

Why did his response feel so...quiet? The silence was so unnerving it sent chills down my spine.

"I've missed you so much, Dad and Mom."

I watched the heartwarming sight of Maewnam hugging her parents tightly, feeling touched. But at the same time, I couldn't help the pang of sadness in my chest as I thought of how quickly my own dad had left this world.

"Dad missed you too, Darling. Seeing you reminds me of your cookies. Can you make some for me?"

Seal's father said suddenly, after embracing his daughter.

"Right now?"

Maewnam blinked, confused by the request.

"Yes, now. I want to eat them fresh. Take Mom to help you, okay?"

"You're so demanding, Dad. But okay! Let's go, Mom."

Despite her complaints, Seal-ever the cheerful and dutiful daughter-grabbed her mom's hand and happily headed to the kitchen.

And just like that, it was only me and Seal's father left in the room.

This is definitely a setup. I suspected something like this from the start. But seriously, couldn't Maewnam notice it at all? Who craves cookies this badly, especially after sending everyone else out of the room?

"Shall we talk while waiting for the cookies to bake?"

I gave him a strained smile.

*No, thanks! I'd rather go home!*

"Sure," I replied reluctantly.

"As you've probably noticed,"

Seal's father began with a smile,

"Our family is an old and traditional one."

"Yes," I replied, swallowing hard.

"Maewnam is a good kid."

*"I couldn't agree more,"*

I thought to myself but nodded politely.

"I want Maewnam to have the best, to be with good people."

His words made my eyebrow twitch. The best? Good people? What's that supposed to mean? Am I not good enough for her?

"Um, sir...what exactly are you trying to say?"

I decided to ask outright. It was better than enduring this veiled criticism any longer.

"I've heard about you from Maewnam. How serious are you about her?" His tone was calm but firm, his gaze piercing.

"I have no problem with Maewnam's partner being a woman. But as her father, I don't want to see my only daughter get hurt."

His words carried so much weight that I had to take a deep breath to steady myself.

I took a deep breath to steady myself before answering confidently.

"I love Maewnam. I truly love her and am serious about this relationship."

"But I won't give anything to Maewnam,"

Her father said bluntly, making me feel a twinge of annoyance.

"I'm not with Maewnam because of her family's wealth,"

I replied firmly.

"I can take care of myself, and I'm confident I can take care of Maewnam too."

I looked him straight in the eye with determination. To be honest, I'd just learned about her family's prestigious background a moment ago.

"I heard you own a business called ChumLae, right? If I sent a team of experts, say, seven professionals, to help your competitors, do you think your little shop could survive?"

He asked with a cold smile.

Was he planning to attack my business now?

No way!

"Feel free to try,"

I shot back, staring him down.

"I won't give up so easily. I'll prove to everyone that I'm worthy of

Maewnam."

"You're that confident?"

"Dad, are you done teasing Whale yet?"

Seal's mother's voice suddenly interrupted us from close by. I'd been so focused on Seal's father that I hadn't noticed her return.

"Oh, come on, dear. If I accepted her too easily, it wouldn't be fun,"

He replied to his wife with a relaxed smile, as if his earlier intimidation had just been a joke.

"You're so mean, Dad,"

Maewnam said, pouting as she appeared next to me, holding a rolling pin in her hand. Her face had traces of flour, suggesting she'd rushed back midbaking.

"I didn't know what was going on, but when I found out, I came right back to help P'Whale."

"Keeping a serious face for so long is exhausting too,"

Seal's father admitted without an ounce of guilt.

"So this was all planned?"

I asked, feeling utterly baffled.

"Not entirely, Whale,"

Seal's father replied with a faint smile.

"When my daughter introduces her partner, I can't just accept them right away. I had to test you a little."

"Dad, don't bully my P'Whale!"

Maewnam scolded, her tone half-serious, half-playful.

"Alright, alright. I just wanted to know if the person my daughter chose really matches all the wonderful things she's been telling me over the phone. And I must say, I like you, Whale. You've got spirit,"

He said with an approving nod.

"Thank you,"

I said, though truthfully, I was just trying to keep my cool. If Seal's father had truly intended to make things difficult for me, it could have turned into a much bigger problem.

"Don't pout like that, darling,"

Seal's father said with a teasing grin.

"Thanks to my little test, you got to hear Whale's promises to me loud and clear. Isn't that great?"

"Dad! I told you not to watch too many soap operas. Start watching Netflix instead! There are so many good shows, and I even bought you and Mom a new TV!"

Maewnam huffed, clearly frustrated. Meanwhile, I could only offer a sheepish smile at the lively and unusual family in front of me.

Honestly, I'd almost braced myself for an all-out confrontation. Thankfully, it turned out to be just a test of character.

"Let's go eat. I'm starting to get hungry,"

Seal's father said casually, trying to escape before his daughter could properly scold him.

"Wait! Dad, come back here!"

"Whale, welcome to the family. Please take good care of my Darling,"

Seal's father said, turning back to smile warmly at me. It was a stark contrast to the intimidating smile he'd shown earlier, and it genuinely put me at ease.

"Of course. But no more tests like that, okay?"

I replied, relieved but still shaken. I'd nearly considered going out to buy stress-relief medication.

"Haha, can't make any promises! Teasing you is too much fun."

"Dad! Don't you dare tease my beloved P'Whale again!"

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# Chapter Special 03 : Our Bathroom Has a Big Bathtub

After surviving the family’s initiation, everything finally returned to peace. Seal’s dad had put on quite the performance... Even Aunt Ram and everyone in the house were in on it, acting cold and distant toward me.

I almost thought I had to go back and start over. Thank you for passing the test.

When it was time to rest, Maewnam led me to her bedroom. Aunt Ram had already brought my suitcase there earlier in the day.

“This is my room! Isn’t it pretty?”

Maewnam proudly presented her bedroom to me. The elegant décor and spaciousness made me nod in agreement, still a bit dazed.

“It’s very pretty.”

“We’re sleeping here tonight, okay? Ah, I missed this room so much,”

Maewnam said as she flopped onto the large bed, looking completely at ease.

Meanwhile, my eyes wandered around the room until landed on a thick photo album on the shelf.

“Is this a photo album?”

“You can take a look if you’d like,”

Maewnam said casually.

With her permission, I picked up the album. It was full of photos of Seal, including pictures from her university days. The pleated skirt she wore back then suited her so well—she looked absolutely adorable.

But one thing stood out: a girl who appeared in nearly every photo with Seal.

“This person in the photos seems really close to you,”

I said, pointing at a picture of Seal and the girl smiling together.

“Oh, that’s Tee, my best friend,”

“Best friend?”

I asked, flipping through the album. The girl appeared in nearly every group and pair photo with Seal. This didn’t feel like a normal friendship.

And my suspicion was confirmed when I came across one particular photo.

“Do best friends really celebrate anniversaries?”

I pointed at a picture with the words *“Happy Anniversary 3 Months”* written boldly across it.

Seal’s eyes grew wide immediately when she heard my calm tone. Still as bad at lying as ever, this one.

“An ex... I’m sorry! I just didn’t want you to feel bad,”

She quickly confessed with a sad face, worried that I’d be upset.

“You said you’d wait for me,”

I teased, keeping my tone steady.

“Well... back then, she confessed her feelings, so I just tried dating her for a few months. But we broke up after 4–5 months because I only ever thought about you,” Maewnam explained.

*An ex, huh?*

“No wonder you’re so experienced,”

I said, a tinge of irritation in my voice. Seal gave a sheepish smile, realizing her slip-up had caused trouble.

“That was in the past! Now I love you only.”

Seal tried her best to appease me.

“I’m not talking to you.”

“Let’s make up, okay?”

“No hugs,”

I said, pushing her away to make it clear I wasn’t giving in easily.

“P'Whale...”

Seal looked at me like a sad puppy. As adorable as her actions were, there was no way I’d let her off without a bit of punishment.

“I’ll forgive you, but I’m the only one who gets to hug you. And you’re not allowed to touch me. Understand?”

I smiled smugly at her. Seal hesitated for a moment but eventually agreed.

“Fine...”

“Liar deserves punishment.”

I said as I pulled her into a hug and whispered softly in her ear.

“P'Whale...”

*Slap!*

I smacked her arm lightly when she looked like she was about to disobey.

She quickly pulled her hand back, and I rewarded her with a fiery kiss. Watching her, normally the one in control, now leaning against the headboard with her flushed face was incredibly satisfying. Having full rights to touch and kiss her wherever I wanted only made me happier.

“Ah... You're so submissive. You must be angry.”

Maewnam said softly as my hands roamed over her.

“Quiet. Endure it until I’m done. Then you can start making demands.”

I said with a commanding tone. Maewnam, hearing this, silently accepted her punishment without complaint.

When I saw that the young teacher was ready to move on to the next step, I slowly inserted my slender fingers to gently explore the other party's passage. I felt Maewnam's body tighten a little, but the other party didn't resist.

She's really a good and easy-going child.

"Mm, P'Whale...P'Whale, I feel so good."

Maewnam's moist eyes looked at me affectionately. The young teacher probably wanted to hug me so bad, but because our agreement was still valid, her slender hands could only wrinkle the bed sheet to vent her feelings.

"Can you kiss me, please?"

It was too bad. Because of the tall person's cuteness, my original intention of punishing and teasing her to my heart's content ended up being that I could only give in to the cunning person. Who taught you to act cute with such a face? My heart is already weak!

"Ah, there, please, there."

Maewnam begged in a sweet voice when I found the spot that made the other party felt good.

“P' Whale, can you love me more?”

"....."

“Can you go a little faster? I can’t take it anymore.”

So sexy. My face was so hot that it was almost burning. I accidentally followed Seal’s request without any struggle. When Seal’s body twitched slightly, the other party leaned in to kiss me affectionately. Am I really in control of the game? Why do I feel even more embarrassed?

“Can we.... hug?”

Maewnam asked with expectant eyes. I could only nod and let her hug me obediently.

"...."

“Wait for P' Whale to punish me again.”

That sweaty face full of smile made me feel even more awkward.

“Ah, if Seal misbehaves, I won’t let it go.”

I could only say that to make up for the embarrassment.

“Let’s go take a shower.”

It’s unbelievable that Maewnam recovered her energy incredibly quickly. The other party got up without any signs of being out of breath even though she had just finished a sweaty activity.

Am I imagining it? Seal’s face looked even more radiant than before.

And without warning, I let the other person lead me to the bathroom connected to the bedroom.

“Wow!”

That Jacuzzi looked so luxurious and magnificent that I couldn’t help but scream out in excitement. It was a bathroom that was almost as big as a room.

“We bought this too, little Bath Bomb.”

Maewnam showed me the bright blue bath bomb in her hand. The teacher looked excited like a child showing off a toy.

But I couldn’t because I’ve never used this Bath Bomb before.

“Can I just put it in?”

I asked the other person with uncertainty, but Maewnam nodded in support. So I dropped the bright blue ball into the hot tub. It didn’t take long for the water in the tub to turn bright blue, as beautiful as the sea.

I carefully stepped into the tub. The faint scent and warm water that surrounded my body made me feel good. It felt like I was soaking in the fragrant sea water. This wasn’t bad.

“Let me give you a massage.

While I was letting myself go and enjoying the atmosphere, Maewnam unexpectedly approached me. The force of the massage on my shoulder made me automatically relax.

The good massage was able to relieve my fatigue so well that I groaned softly with happiness. But wait a minute. At first, I was massaging my shoulders well. Why did the other person’s hand… The other party continued to massage gradually go lower and lower...

"Seal!!"

I tried to stop the other party's octopus hand, but it was too late.

"Additional service."

The cheerful tone of Seal, even though I couldn't see the other party's face, I knew immediately that she would definitely smile widely and slyly.

"This is cheating."

What kind of crazy massage is this? It doesn't help me relax at all, it only makes me feel more uncomfortable.

Am I getting my payback from earlier?

"P'Whale likes me to touch you, don't you? Just a little bit and you're ready like this."

Seal whispered in my ear happily when her slender fingers intentionally touched my sensitive part.

I only let her fingers touch me as I tried to suppress my emotions that the other party was trying to instill in me.

"Why do you like to say such embarrassing things?"

I complained in a soft voice when she said something embarrassing without a care in the world.

"You said it, P'Whale seems to like it.

"Who likes it? I don't like it at all... Ahh."

I let out a cry when the other party took advantage of the moment, when I was argued and secretly inserted her slender fingers to explore the sensitive passage without warning.

“Tsundere.” [\*Japanese culture]

“Um… What does that mean?”

My breath was ragged because of the temperature of the warm water and the fingers of the teasing person who started to move, but I still asked what I was curious about.

“It means that the mouth does not match the heart.”

Seal seemed happy to answer the curious student's question.

"No."

"P' Whale likes me to do it, but you always refusing,"

Seal concluded to herself without even asking for my opinion.

"No, huh!"

"Are you done yet? Faster than usual. That means that when you punished me, P' Whale also had a feeling."

Maewnam spoke in surprise, to which I could only tell her the truth.

"Well, you're pretty. So it's not strange for me to be aroused. Ah, stop..."

I replied softly and tried to twist away, even though I had just reached my peak. But the other party's mischievous fingers still followed, teasing me endlessly.

"Yeah... And you always say cute things to make me lose control,"

Seal's words seemed to blame me for everything.

"Because P' Whale is too cute."

You're cheating, aren't you? Don't blame me when you're bullying me!

"Ah, slow down, huh!"

Before I could even ask the other party to slow down, my wicked body tensed and unexpectedly reached my peak. As a result, my whole body went limp. Like someone who is instantly exhausted.

"Wanna go up first? I feel P'Whale's hot breath. I might get dizzy."

It's hot because of who?

I wanted to argue so badly, but I was too tired to listen. Just controlling my breathing rhythm was enough for me.

Maewnam helped me sit down next to the beautiful hot tub. But after a while, I felt the soft hands of a sly person touching my waist and starting to lightly caress it.

I was tricked! Didn't you say you wanted me to come and rest? Rest at your place!

"You're tricking me,"

I yelled at Maewnam who was kneeling at my feet.

Oh, I'm starting to wonder if Maewnam is too cunning or if I'm too stupid.

"P' Whale is easy to trick and easy to tease."

I tried to close my legs to prevent the bully from advancing any further. But what can I do to resist? My normal strength is already no match for Seal. And it was drained even more by the previous incident.

"Let me love you, P'Whale, okay? Please? I’ll let you relax in the water properly and won’t tease you anymore."

The other person’s cheerful face made me suddenly feel like I’d rather faint than deal with this. What choice did I have? Resigned, I nodded in agreement—it was better than resisting.

Being bullied by the other party like that would be even worse.

"Why do you always cover your face and mouth? Can’t you let me hear your beautiful voice, P'Whale?"

Seal asked while gently nibbling at the inside of my thigh, leaving me staring at her with a face burning so hot it felt like it might catch fire.

I’ve never been able to get used to being pampered like this. I’m so embarrassed I’m about to melt. But I can’t deny that it feels good.

“No, it’s so embarrassing....”

And before I could finish my sentence, Seal’s naughty tongue intentionally started exploring my sensitive part.

“Ugh!” It was too intentional.

“P'Whale’s voice is so sweet. You can sing it out loud. Our bathroom is soundproof.”

I think the reason the person in front of me wanted to invite me to visit her house was partly because of the bathroom that the owner.

"You're so sly....ah."

"You're so sly... Ah!" I accidentally let out a startled cry as both my hands were suddenly grabbed by Seal. I couldn’t resist—it wasn’t like I had the strength to fight back right now.

I was barely able to keep myself composed, let alone stop the sounds threatening to escape my lips.

"Don't Abeluga like to sing? Why don’t you sing for me, P'Whale?"

"I'm not singing! You’re such a tease—so mean—ah!"

I protested, but with the other’s skillful knowledge of my body’s weak points, it didn’t take long before I couldn’t hold back and cried out, overwhelmed by the sensations.

"P'Whale, are you crying?"

Maewnam asked in surprise when she noticed tears streaming down my cheeks.

"No... The tears just flowed on their own. You're always teasing me."

I quickly wiped my tears and replied with a mix of shyness and pout.

"Okay..okay..I won't tease anymore. Come on, let's soak in the water."

"Are you sure? If you breaks your promise again, I'll be really angry."

I looked at the other party with suspicion. My legs were still trembling slightly.

"I won't do anything, I promise.If you faint, my mom will scold me." Maewnam came to help, gently supporting me into the bathtub.

“Hearing this makes me feel relieved. Ah...soaking in warm water is so relaxing.”

I sighed, leaning back against my lover.

“P'Whale.”

“Hm?”

“Can I have another round?”

“Oh my gosh. If I really faint, I’ll beat you up.”

I turned to shout at my lover.

“Okay, okay. I’ll let P'Whale rest.”

“You can only hug!”

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By the time I finally made it to the bed to rest, I was completely drained.

When Maewnam gets into full-on "loving mode," it’s really overwhelming. I’m honestly afraid one day I might just pass out from it.

"We’ll do it again sometime, okay?"

Maewnam said, smiling as she looked at me in the dark.

"I’ll think about it,"

I replied, hesitant, since this whole trip felt like I’d been tricked into something... But when I saw Maewnam downcast face, I couldn’t help but take back my words.

"I’m just kidding... Sure, we’ll do it. You should visit your parents more often, though. They really miss you."

Since I had no family left, I wanted the person in front of me to spend as much time with her family as possible...

"Our family might be a bit chaotic, but we’re happy. We’d love for you to be a part of it,"

Maewnam said, her voice full of warmth.

"I feel like I’m being proposed to or something,"

I laughed softly, but I was taken aback when Maewnam grabbed my hand and gently slipped a small ring onto my left ring finger.

"Maewnam..."

"Sorry it’s not very romantic,"

Maewnam said with a shy smile. Giving a ring before bed didn’t seem very romantic, but somehow it made me feel incredibly warm inside.

"Seriously... How am I supposed to sleep with this?"

I gazed at the small ring in the dark, a smile spreading across my face.

"It’s a deposit, I want to be more prepared. Will you wait for me?"

"Of course. I’ll wait no matter how long it takes."

"I’ve already reserved you, P'Whale. You’re mine, and only mine."

"And you, Maewnam, are mine, too."

I shifted closer, nestling into the arms of my love.

**"I love you."**

**"I love you too, Maewnam. Thank you for becoming part of my family."**

I closed my eyes and let myself drift into sleep, the rhythm of our hearts beating in sync. The warmth of the embrace around me made me feel safe, and for the first time, I wasn't afraid of what the future might hold.

I didn’t know what obstacles lay ahead, but with Maewnam by my side... No matter how heavy the problems might be, I was sure we could overcome them together.

*But then... Maewnam had snuck in and given me the ring first! Such a trickster.*

*It’s time for me to surprise Maewnam in return...*

# Chapter Special 04 : Whale and Seal

"Wow, it's huge, Dad!"

I scanned the area at the new amusement park located inside a department store. It had been advertised as massive and extravagant, taking up a whole floor of the building.

At first, I thought it was just bragging. But when I saw it with my own eyes, it was truly amazing!

"See? I told you it wouldn't be boring."

Today, I had to follow my dad to the shopping mall in the city. He had some business to discuss with clients. I had told him I could stay home alone, maybe even manage to sell some things. There was no need to drag me along as a burden. But my dad wouldn’t hear of it.

"My daughter is so cute. How could I let her out of my sight."

Well, with Dad shouting so loudly, I guess I couldn't argue.

"Dad will be busy for a while. Can you wait for me here, Abeluga?"

"Dad, stop calling me that! I've told you so many times not to call me by that name in public, it's embarrassing!"

I said to my dad, annoyed. I had asked him countless times not to call me Abeluga, but he kept doing it!

"Abeluga is cute. Why be embarrassed?"

*I'm embarrassed because Dad is the one who calls me that.*

I pouted while Dad seemed so proud of the nickname he had come up with. I guess it had become a daily joke at this point. My dad seemed to enjoy calling me "Abeluga" too, and I had to yell at him every time. The gods in heaven must be laughing at me. Even after I changed my name, my dad would still call me by my full nickname.

"Go ahead, Dad. I'm 10 years old now. I can take care of myself. If a stranger talks to me, I'll scream loud enough to break the mall."

I waved goodbye to my dad after buying my ticket for the ball pit.

"Meet me at the entrance at 3 p.m., okay?"

Dad pointed to the amusement park's mascot, a rabbit wearing a tall hat, standing proudly with a big smile.

"Okay, Dad."

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Once my dad disappeared from my sight, I relaxed and looked at the ball pit with excitement. What 10-year-old wouldn’t feel excited about a colorful ball pit and fun games?

It was so exciting! With two whole hours ahead of me, I decided to make the ball pit my little kingdom.

After enjoying the rides in the ball pit, I planned to find a secret spot to sit and read the comic book I had brought along to pass the time. A small house nestled in the sea of colorful balls seemed like the perfect place for that.

If it weren't for the round thing sitting in the corner of the house...

"Hey, why aren't you playing with your friends?"

"...."

"Hello..are you still alive?"

I called out to the small girl who looked to be younger than me, out of concern. But there was no response.

Should I just leave her? After all, if she were a stone in the garden, it wouldn't really bother me much.

Just as I was about to walk away, I felt something tugging at me. I managed to stop myself in time, otherwise, I would have ended up face-first in the pile of plastic balls. The culprit was none other than the round thing I had tried to talk to earlier.

"Again... I'm being teased... Waaaahh!"

Suddenly, the little bun started crying uncontrollably, and I was at a loss for how to react.

Hey, I didn’t do anything wrong! I hadn’t even done anything to make her cry! I just asked because I felt some sad energy coming from her, and was wondering if everything was okay.

But wait... this was my territory! I shouldn’t let some sad blob occupy it. Besides, you're even pulled my shirt, almost causing me to fall into the balls.

"Can you stop crying? People are going to think I made you cry,"

I tried to comfort the crying child, but it didn’t seem to help. The louder she cried, the more I didn’t want to be blamed for it, being accused of bullying her.

"Waaa!"

The louder the child cried, the more I felt like screaming in frustration myself. But then I realized that wouldn't help either.

*Since I couldn't get her to stop crying, maybe I should just scream along with her?*

Well, not really. I'm 10 years old, after all. I’m not going to cry like a helpless bun just because someone ignored me. I rummaged through my unicorn-patterned bag to find something to distract this crying child. It didn’t take long before I found what I was looking for.

"Here, take this."

I held out a lollipop with a smile.

And it worked!

The little blob stopped crying and looked at the lollipop with interest. But before I knew it, her small brows furrowed, and she turned her face away.

“Daddy told me not to accept anything from strangers!”

The little one said in a firm tone, causing me to break into a sweat. Parents these days really teach their kids well—maybe too well!

"Uh, then... I'll eat it first to show you there's no drug in it,"

I quickly tore off the plastic wrapper and popped the candy into my own mouth to prove my good intentions. But the little dumpling in front of me scrunched up her face in disgust.

"Gross! You're dirty! Do you want me to eat your saliva?"

"Well, then take this one instead."

I pulled out another candy from my bag—lucky for me, I had a few stashed away. Ugh.

"But what if you put something in this one too?"

"If you don’t want it, fine. I’ll eat both of them myself!"

I was getting fed up with the picky little kid, but I tried to stay calm.

"Waaa..."

And the moment I stuffed the candy back into my bag, the little dumpling pouted again. And of course, my heart softened.

"Fine. You're so picky... didn't you said you didn't want it?"

I sat down next to the crying child, who was now trying to hold back tears, her face turning red.

Oh....kids.

"Hey, I won’t put anything weird in there, don’t worry. I'll stay here with you, okay"

I said, offering the candy once more. This time, she didn’t reject it. Her small hands carefully peeled back the wrapper, and when she popped the candy into her mouth, she gave me a smile that was just too cute.

"But, just so you know, we’re not supposed to bring food in here. Keep it in secret."

I whispered to the happy little one, who nodded vigorously.

"Good girl."

"....."

"Then why are you sitting all alone here? Why not go play with the others?"

Now that the little one seemed to be in a better mood, I decided to ask what had been on my mind.

"You're sitting alone too. Do you have the right to criticize me?"

"Wow... you’re eating other people’s candy, so now you’re being cheeky!"

I teased, looking at her with exaggerated wide eyes. She glared back at me, and I decided not to be angry.

"I'm like a lone wolf, okay? I don’t need friends,"

I said, trying to come up with a reason, but she just shook her head.

"That means no one wants to be friends with you?"

"Hey, that’s not true! Wait, I was going to ask you something earlier... ah, I remember now!"

I exclaimed when I realized we had gotten sidetracked.

"Hey, come on, tell me what happened. Did someone teased you!"

"They said my name, 'Terak,' was funny, and my parents were weird for calling me that. So I slapped them and ran here,"

The little one finally admitted, her face slightly flushed and her voice trembling with frustration. It was clear she was very upset.

Well, at least this kid doesn’t let things slide.

"How about I help you come up with a backup name? You can’t go around slapping everyone, you know. What if you run into someone bigger and lose? What would you do then?"

I suggested, trying to offer a peaceful solution. The little one listened for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

"Alright, big sister, you can suggest a name first. If Terak thinks it's good, Terak will accept it."

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"Went out with one, cames back with two?"

My dad's eyes widened when he saw me holding another child’s hand.

“Dad, stop teasing! I’m already stressed about this,”

I snapped at him, feeling irritated. It was enough work looking after this little troublemaker. Don’t joke around right now! It’s not like I wanted this responsibility—it just happened. If I let go of this kid, they’d probably burst into tears!

“What’s troubling my little princess so much?”

“Well, the kid’s parents said they’d come to pick them up, but they’re not here yet,”

I explained. I brought the child with me because I couldn’t leave her alone.

“Terak was naughty, so Mom and Dad abandoned Terak,”

The little one said gloomily, but there was a hint of mischief in their words.

"Terak is a sad child. Can't depend on big sister, and even Mom and Dad don’t love Terak.”

“Oh, stop being so dramatic! Don’t cry!”

“I like this kid,”

My dad said playfully.

"Let me talk to her for a bit."

Not amused, I rolled my eyes. Sure, the kid’s cute, but they’re a little too sassy for my taste.

“Fine, take her,”

I said sarcastically.

“If you like her so much, take care of her yourself. I’m going to get some snacks.”

Of course, I didn’t really leave. I stayed and watched my dad interrogate the little one. Their confused expression was kind of funny. Eventually, the topic shifted back to the backup name. No matter what names I suggested, this picky kid didn’t like any of them.

“How about '***Seal'***?”

My dad suggested cheerfully.

I nearly rolled my eyes out of my head.

There he goes again! What kind of crazy naming sense is this?

“What’s Seal? Terak doesn’t know…”

"You don’t need to know what they look like! That’s even weirder than naming them 'Terak'!”

I tried to stop my dad, who pulled out a handkerchief with a seal and a whale pattern to show the little one what a seal looked like. Of course, Terak looked very interested.

*No way! Don’t fall into his trap!*

“It matches perfectly with 'Whale'! Did you know your big sister’s name is 'Whale'? If your name is 'Seal,' you’ll make a perfect pair!”

Dad kept advertising his idea enthusiastically.

“Seal, right? Terak wrote it down! On my hand and in my notebook!”

The idea sold successfully. Terak grabbed my dad’s pen and wrote "Seal" in big letters on their palm and then again in the small notebook they were carrying.

“Oh, that's my dad! I have to go now. Bye-bye, big sister and kind uncle. Dad! Dad, over here!”

The little one dashed off excitedly when she spotted their father.

I was about to stay and watch the touching reunion, but before I could react, my dad scooped me up suddenly, almost making me scream.

“Let’s run, Abeluga.”

“What? Wait, Dad!”

I shouted in surprise as my dad whisked me away to a food court, far from the amusement park.

“Listen, Abeluga,”

Dad said with a serious expression while I was still trying to process what had just happened.

“What...?”

“Giving someone else’s kid a new name is super rude, you know. If her dad had found out, I might’ve been in trouble.”

He whispered this to me like it was some big secret, though he didn’t seem worried at all. My dad is something else—completely fearless.

“And yet, you still gave her a name?” “Well, the kid seemed so happy about it!”

“Unbelievable,” I muttered.

“Alright, Abeluga, what do you want to eat? I’ll treat you!”

“Ice cream!”

I replied cheerfully and followed him, feeling happy again.

“If you see that kid getting bullied again, don’t forget to help, alright? She's so small, you’ve got to protect her,”

Dad suddenly said while we were eating ice cream. He seemed to really like that little seal kid.

“If I see her again, sure,”

I replied half-heartedly, sounding bored.

See her again? By then, I probably won’t even remember that crybaby anymore.

*But if I get the chance to meet her again, this Whale will take care of you, the baby seal with bun-cheeked!*

# Chapter Special 05 : I am Somharuthai

In the early morning, the air in my bedroom felt so cool and refreshing. The sound of the air conditioner hummed steadily, but it didn’t disturb my rest at all.

*Growl...*

What really disturbed me, though, was the sound of hunger growling from my little stomach.

I lazily opened my eyes and stretched a few more times. Ah, today is another peaceful day, just like always. I glanced at the lazy ones still sound asleep on the bed.

Unbelievable! I always have to be the one waking them up.

With that thought, I jumped onto the bed to carry out my daily duty.

I looked at the two humans deeply lost in their dreams and thought about who I should wake up to feed me. Well, since we’ve gotten this far, I guess I don’t need to introduce myself anymore. But in case anyone is confused, I’m the beautiful one with the melodious name, **Somharuthai**.

I don’t remember much about my childhood—only that it was a time full of despair and fear. But then, a kind human saved me, and I became part of their family, just like I am today.

Of course, every pack has its hierarchy. I’m willing to let my mommy be the leader of our pack. That’s right, my beautiful mommy’s name is **Tharnthara**, though I prefer calling her **Mommy Whale.**

As for the other one—the annoying one who dares to hug my Mommy Whale with such a smug expression—that’s the **Seal Servant**. And naturally, the one responsible for feeding me is the Seal Servant, right?

“Wake up, Seal Servant!”

I lightly patted the Seal Servant’s face with my paw. Honestly, I wanted to leave a love mark or two, but I couldn’t risk Mommy Whale getting angry at me.

I’ll let it go this time for Mommy Whale’s sake.

“Wake up!!”

I shouted louder and added more force to my wake-up call. Finally, the deep sleeper started to stir.

“Sommm...”

“I’m hungry! Seal Servant, go get my food right now!”

I continued my rant, but the human just kept lying there, smiling lazily. So annoying!

“There’s an automatic feeder, isn’t there? Can’t you just eat from that for now, Som?”

The Seal Servant muttered, finally opening her eyes.

“Ugh, just go pour the food!”

Freshly poured food is a must! That automatic feeder is only acceptable when they abandon me at home.

“Get up and pour it now!”

"Be right back,"

The Seal Servant whispered to Mommy Whale, who was still peacefully asleep. Ugh, such an annoyingly sweet gesture!

"Hurry back. I’ll miss you."

And could Mommy Whale stop smiling like that? If the Seal Servant gets too carried away, I might not get my breakfast on time!

"Always lingering. You sure love fawning over Mommy Whale’s face, don’t you?"

I growled irritably at the two humans, whose pink, lovey-dovey aura was suffocating me.

"Alright, alright, I’m going!"

Grumbled the Seal Servant.

"You’re quite the bossy one, aren’t you?"

I hate to admit it, but the Seal Servant and Mommy Whale are a couple. I don’t want anyone else getting close to Mommy Whale, but I guess I’ll make an exception for the Seal Servant.

After all, they were the one who rescued me and have been spoiling me with delicious snacks every day. They’re a decent servant, always ready to serve. Fine, I’ll tolerate them—for now.

After finishing my meal, my next duty was to oversee the shop's operations. Honestly, part of the reason the grocery shop is so busy is because of me. You don’t believe me? Come and see for yourself—I’ll demonstrate my skills today.

Since it’s Saturday, the Seal Servant was helping Mommy Whale run the shop.

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As I strolled around inspecting the shop, I noticed two customers browsing. It wouldn’t have been an issue if each of them wasn’t holding just one measly bag of snacks. That’s far too little! It’s time for me to step in.

"Hey, are you really just buying that much?"

"Oh! It’s Som! You’re so cute!"

"That’s right. I am cute. So, why don’t you stay and play with me a little longer?"

I chatted warmly with the two women. Humans love attention from me— seriously, who wouldn’t? Even they couldn’t resist me. Weird creatures.

"Aww, Som’s so friendly! Look, she’s coming closer!"

"See? Feel the irresistible pull? Why not buy a bit more?"

I flashed my sweetest smile and struck a pose I knew was adorable. It worked like a charm. The two women squealed with delight and ended up buying more.

Not only did I boost sales, but I also got rewarded with an abundance of cat treats, brought to me as tributes. My charm always wins.

**"Please play gently with Somharuthai."**

The cute sign accompanied by cat toys and treats, an idea from Seal Servant, actually brought in more customers to the shop. I won’t deny it— it’s wonderful to have people playing with me and enjoying themselves while I get delicious snacks. To add to my charm, I decided to use a little beauty accessory for the day.

"Somharuthai..."

"What now, Mommy Whale? Don’t you know how much people love this look?"

I retorted, annoyed, as Mommy Whale fussed while Seal Servant sat there, useless as ever. This colorful powder on me? People love it! Look, even Seal Servant is snapping pictures. Why is Mommy Whale the only one against it?

"Let’s just give Som a bath this evening, okay?"

"Why do you like rolling in chalk dust so much?"

Mommy Whale asked, looking exasperated. Sigh, she’s so out of touch with fashion trends.

"Is today *'Rainbow Somharuthai'* day? So cute!"

"See, Mommy Whale? The customers love it!"

I called out to her, triumphantly pointing out the overwhelmingly positive reactions from everyone who saw me today.

*Who wouldn’t love Rainbow Somharuthai, right?*

"Stop trying to look so cute!"

Mommy Whale grumbled from behind the counter as more customers gathered to take pictures of me.

"Don’t push! I’ll pose beautifully so everyone can get a shot,"

I announced to the crowd of amateur photographers who treated me like a celebrity.

"Oh my gosh! Som is sooo kawaii!" *Ah, the life of a star is tiring sometimes.*

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By the end of the day, I’d spent a good amount of energy entertaining my fans. Ultimately, though, Seal Servant carried me off for a bath. How could they not understand how beautiful I looked? A bath would only ruin all my hard work, and I’d have to start over with my makeover.

Why won’t they listen to me?

I’ve been on this earth for almost two years now. I’d say I’ve grown into a fairly mature and understanding individual. I’ve learned a lot about human society and behavior. But sometimes, humans still leave me utterly baffled with their actions.

*For example,*

Even after taking a bath, cats still groom themselves by licking. Cleanliness is our top priority, after all. But sometimes, I notice humans like to "clean" each other in a similar way—like what I’m witnessing right now.

"Hold still, Seal...."

Mommy Whale’s voice sounded oddly suspicious, prompting me to lift my head and sneak a peek at the scene on the bed. And yep, it seems Mommy Whale is once again being “cleaned” by Seal Servant.

That doesn’t look very clean, nor does it seem particularly comfortable.

"Seal, Somharuthai is watching."

Mommy Whale’s voice sounded awkward, almost embarrassed.

"Som is just a cat. She doesn’t understand. You don’t have to feel shy around her, P'Whale,"

The Seal Servant replied, attempting to reassure her.

*Well, I do understand.*

I might not know why you’re doing it, but I definitely see everything you’re up to.

Part of me wanted to keep staring just to make things more awkward for them. But then again, why waste my precious nap time watching humans engage in their odd grooming rituals?

*What a waste of time.*

Fine, I’ll leave them to their "private activities." Or should I find someone to help groom me instead? Maybe it’d be worth trying for the experience. With that thought, I padded back to my cozy little bed.

Ah, how lucky I am that my bed is dome-shaped and soundproof, keeping out the noises of Mommy Whale and the Seal Servant's bizarre grooming sessions.

I should hurry and sleep—I'll need the energy to wake them up in the morning.

That was my last thought as I closed my eyes. Another peaceful night passed, and I drifted off.

It had been such an exhausting day.

**If you're free and want to see my beautiful appearance,**

**you’re welcome to drop by anytime.**

**I’ll be waiting to greet you at the grocery store.**

**Then let's play a lots together**

**-----END OF SPECIAL CHAPTERS----**

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**HAPPY NEW YEAR 2025**