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Hyakki Yagyō
The Night Parade
of a Hundred Phantoms

เชื่อกกึกาเก็ว
ขบวนแห่ร้อยผีแห่งเดือนเพ็ญพิศวง

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การอ่านเรื่องราวที่สืบทอด



Foreword

I might very well be among the first few people in the world to have read *Hyakki Yagyō The Night Parade of a Hundred Phantoms*.

I first met Kantachat through a young writer incubation program organized by the Office of Contemporary Art and Culture in collaboration with OKMD. I was there as a mentor, and Kantachat as a participant. It wouldn't be an overstatement to say we first met as "Teacher and Student"—provided, of course, that he considers me one!

During our first meeting, I invited everyone in my group to sit in a circle and discuss the outlines of the novels they wished to write. I remember Kantachat sharing the framework for *Hyakki Yagyō*. As I listened, I found myself stunned by the sheer intricacy and the endless, interlocking details of the story. Once he finished, I fell silent for a moment, unsure of what to critique—for the work was already remarkably complete within itself.

This piece is constructed with every essential element of great writing.

First is the "Grand Idea"—the concept of a Hundred Phantom Parade intertwined with Thai historical narratives.

This is what I love most about the book. I remember murmuring to myself as I listened: *Brilliant. Impressive. Sharp.* I even caught myself wishing I had come up with such a stunning idea myself.

Beyond the concept, the writer has executed every part of the craft flawlessly. The plot is sophisticated—layered enough to be rich, yet balanced enough to remain gripping—pulling my attention from the very first page to the last. The characters possess profound depth; though seen through the eyes of a child, it is a child who serves as a vessel for the bruised maturity within. Most importantly, the theme is so poignant that I urged him to protect it at all costs, to never let it be diluted.

After we discussed fine-tuning the smaller details, Kantachat returned to write the full novel. Upon reading it, I could only say one thing: **“He truly knows how to write.”** I had no further notes other than to tell him to submit the manuscript for publication. It was complete. It was ready. It was time for readers to see it.

Now, I meet this novel once again, this time as a book

prepared to meet the world. I am prouder than words can say to have played a part—however small—in this journey (though the writer deserves the credit for his immense talent).

Hyakki Yagyō The Night Parade of a Hundred Phantoms is saturated with the patience, effort, and unyielding spirit of a writer who polished and refined his work until it reached this pinnacle.

I believe that you, the reader, will not be disappointed. You will feel the full weight of the writer's dedication. Perhaps...Kantachat might just become one of your new favorite authors.

Kittisak Kongka

Publisher's Foreword

Long before the arrival of Buddhism, Brahmanism, or other faiths, the people of Thailand held spirits and the afterlife as their core beliefs. We tell newborns they are “ugly” to trick phantoms into leaving them be. We prepare the spirits of the departed for the next world through ritual baths and dressing the deceased. From the womb to the funeral pyre, Thai life is inextricably bound to the supernatural.

A society so deeply intertwined with the spectral naturally produces stories about it—whether consciously or not. Thai horror masters—from Hem Wejakorn and Sorajak to Phakinai—have reflected this multifaceted society in their works. Their stories were born from a culture accustomed to ghosts, and in turn, that culture was shaped by their hauntings. As consumers, we lean in, ears pricked for tales of terror, driven by an insatiable curiosity.

“ไทยเล่า-ไทยหลอน” (Thai Tales, Thai Terrors) is a project launched to scout, develop, and publish horror manuscripts from new voices. We believe that Thailand harbors talents ready to serve chills that rival both the legends of the past and the masters of other nations, opening a new dimension of macabre storytelling. The time has come for Thais to tell

their stories, so that Thailand may truly be haunted.

Hyakki Yagyō The Night Parade of a Hundred Phantoms by Kantachat Chavanaviraj was selected for publication because we believe this thrilling yet emotionally resonant work blends Thai and Japanese folklore with breathtaking creativity. Beyond the scares, it lingers on human emotion with sincere, delicate prose.

The “Thai Tales, Thai Terrors” project still has many more tales of terror to leave a lifelong impression on our readers. No story is a winner or a loser, for this project is not a competition; it is a collective retelling of the dark, intended to chill our readers to the very bone.

The publisher wishes to thank every writer who granted us the opportunity to consider their manuscripts, and every reader who picks up a work from this project to join us in this haunting journey.

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Author's Foreword

I have always been captivated by legends.

There is something magnetic about local folklore passed down through generations—vibrant histories that preserve the many facets of the human experience. One legend that has long held me in its thrall is “Hyakki Yagyō”—Japan’s Night Parade of a Hundred Phantoms. When I first encountered this tale, I found myself envisioning a procession of Siamese spirits—Krasue, Krahang, Phi Pob, Phi Ka, Pret—marching together under the silver glow of the moon. It was a vision as haunting as it was magnificent.

Just as our ancestors adopted India’s *Ramayana* and reimagined it into the uniquely Thai *Ramakien*, I have “stolen” this Japanese legend to reimagine it anew. I wondered: *What if the Night Parade were to march across Thai soil?* (If this story captures even a fraction of the wonder found in the *Ramakien*, I shall be content.)

As this is my debut published novel, my excitement is matched only by my gratitude. I must thank Mr. Tas Parinyakanit and the editorial team at Prism Thai for providing this opportunity and for their guidance in refining *Hyakki Yagyō The Night Parade of a Hundred Phantoms* into its final

form—a bowl of “Tom Yum Goong Ramen” prepared especially for you, my dear readers.

My heartfelt thanks go to Mr.Kittisak Kongka for his invaluable mentorship since this story was a mere plot and treatment in the 6th Young Writer Incubation Program. Thank you to Teacher Namphueng Mangkang for igniting my passion for writing; to KCS who has served as my unofficial editor since high school; to Hia Maew for always checking in on me; and to the members of the “Suk See Sao” house for supporting my dreams.

Lastly, I cannot forget to thank you—the reader—for picking up this book (and for lingering long enough to read this foreword to the very end). It is a pleasure to meet you. I hope our paths cross again.

Sawasdee krub,

Kantachat Chavanaviraj

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As a child, Yuri was always electric with excitement whenever Grandpa stayed over. He was a far cry from her parents, who would simply mutter a “goodnight” and kill the lights. Grandpa arrived armed with bedtime stories—sometimes fables, sometimes life experiences; some hilarious, others heartbreaking, but never once boring. Yuri would usually drift off mid-tale, stitching together her own endings in the realm of dreams. And like all dreams, the moment she fully woke, they would fray and fade into a thin mist.

Yet, there is one story that remains burned into her mind even now. She had heard it while shivering with fever. Her parents were out of town, so Grandpa and her older cousin, Prok, had come to watch over her. She remembers every detail: the velvet softness of Grandpa’s voice, the icy touch of the damp cloth on her forehead, and every single word of that bizarre chronicle.

“See that Japanese shrine at the end of the canal? Back in the Ayutthaya period, the Japanese settled a village here along Khlong Ruea Yao. It lasted until the reign of a king who grew suspicious of a certain Japanese nobleman. He had the man assassinated and drove his countrymen out. The village fell into ruin, but they didn’t just leave behind shrine pillars

and paper walls... they left something else behind too.

“They say that not long after the Japanese departed, a parade emerged, marching through the forest line toward the canal. They appeared under the shroud of night, performing strange songs and dances. There wasn’t a single human soul in that procession.

“Instead, there were grotesque creatures with swollen, lumpy heads; degenerate monks hiding hideous faces beneath woven bamboo hats; and coal-black cats with eyes of burning crimson. Even those who appeared human were clearly devoid of life, merely following the blue lantern held by the hideous monk like a hundred puppets moving in unison. Anyone unfortunate enough to witness this foul parade... would soon find themselves forced to join the march for eternity.”

The final fragments of the story became an echoing refrain in her dreams after she succumbed to the fever. When she jolted awake at 2:00 AM, the sky was pitch black—no moonlight, no starlight, not even the thrum of cicadas. In the room, only Prok remained, fast asleep...Grandpa was gone. Yuri looked for him, and that’s when she heard the music drifting in from outside the window. She couldn’t understand

the lyrics, but she hated them. She dragged herself up to the windowsill to peer outside.

She saw a blue glow shimmering at the end of the road. The music was emanating from that light... and Grandpa was walking toward it.

Yuri threw open the window and cried out, "Grandpa!"

Grandpa froze. He turned back, and upon seeing her, he offered a smile before vanishing into the darkness of the street.

Yuri never saw him again.

The Night Parade of a Hundred Phantoms



1

The face of the spirit crouching beneath the streetlight was drenched in a black liquid, its body riddled with the writhing tracks of maggots. It lingered at the three-way junction in front of the bustling market, where the roar of passing cars was deafening. People swarmed the area to shop or carouse at the local bars; others strolled along the canal, pointing out the decorative lights that had flooded the night with light. Yet, no one saw the wandering spirit—save for a fifteen-year-old boy who had been watching it since sundown.

Ack saw it every day from behind the kitchen window bars of Lim Peng Pochana. Every day, there would be a small leaf-tray with a single ball of rice. The spirit would savor it slowly before vanishing. But today, the tray was gone. The village headwoman had been so preoccupied with preparing for the Loy Krathong festival that she had forgotten to set the food out. It wasn't just her; everyone in Khlong Ruea Yao always grew restless with excitement as the full moon of the twelfth month approached—Loy Krathong festival, when the canal would glow with drifting lights.

Khlong Ruea Yao was a small sub-district tucked away in a valley. Being off the main highway, it remained desolate year-round, except during Loy Krathong. Suddenly, the silent town would ignite with the shimmer of electric bulbs. Artificial flowers would bloom over the ugly concrete walkways flanking the canal. Each community would pour

their funds into decorating parade floats, painstakingly choosing their most beautiful girls to compete for the title of Lady Noppamas. It was a seven-day burst of revelry for this middle-of-nowhere community. It was no wonder the headman's wife had forgotten to set out the offering for the life that had been extinguished at this very junction eight months ago.

"Hey, new kid! Don't slack off!" A shout from behind forced Ack to tear his eyes away from the spirit. He lowered his head and resumed scrubbing dishes, though his eyes darted around. The head chef was busy barking orders at another employee. Amidst the sharp-eyed supervisor's chaos, the kitchen was too frantic for anyone to notice Ack. Seizing the moment, he scooped some red pork rice from a washbasin into an empty coffee cup and hid it away. When his shift ended, he swapped his kitchen uniform for his high school whites and crossed the street toward the junction.

"Here...no incense, but it'll do," Ack murmured, placing the coffee cup near the spirit's feet. At first, the spirit looked dazed, then leaned down to sniff the cup like a dog inspecting a bowl. It began to devour the rice with frantic relish. Ack sighed and crouched down.

"Ever since I was born, I've seen people crash and die on this curve. But why is it only you?" he asked. The spirit merely shook its head. Ack had forgotten exactly how old he was when he first sensed them. For as long as he could recall, he had heard whispers in silent rooms, screams from

the ‘Hundred-Corpse Curve,’ or indistinct murmurs carried on the wind. It started as a faint sound, barely distinguishable from a breeze, before gradually sharpening over time. Lately, his senses had grown strong enough that he could see them as blurred outlines. Still, his hearing remained his most powerful faculty.

Ack let out a sharp, cynical smile. If he could choose, he’d rather see nothing at all. Especially living in Khlong Ruea Yao, a ‘gift’ like this was nothing but a nuisance.

The boy used to think encountering spirits at every street corner was normal, until his parents took him to Chiang Rai when he was eight. It was then he realized how peacefully quiet the world of the living could be.

The spirit stopped eating, then slowly held the cup out to him.

“Gross,” Ack grimaced. “You keep it. Not really my taste...”

“Well, well, Ack, my dear friend. What are you doing out here, grazing by the roadside?” A grating laugh rang out from behind him. Ack looked up to find himself surrounded by a group of teenage boys. A chill raced down his spine. Though many faces in the group were unfamiliar, everyone in school knew the starting lineup of the football team—the pride of this backwater town after their provincial victory. Armed with that glory, these boys looked down on everyone, unless they were looking for a victim for their entertainment. Specifically, Jack, the team captain, whose hand was currently pressing

down on Ack's shoulder.

To Ack's misfortune, Jack had been his classmate since primary school...and nothing entertained the captain more than 'having a chat' with his old pal. Ack tried to stand, but he couldn't fight the weight on his shoulder.

"Where's the rush, friend? Oh, or are you full already...?" Jack eyed the coffee cup in front of Ack. "Can't do that. You can't just ditch your date after a meal."

"What date?" one of Jack's lackeys asked.

"Oh, didn't you know? Eight months ago, some biker crashed and died right here...must be just Ack the Clairvoyant's type. He doesn't go for the living." The group erupted in laughter. Ack bit his lip. He hated being the center of attention, especially as the 'Boy Who Cried Wolf.' Back in fourth grade, Ack had gone to the Loy Krathong festival with his older sister. The town's main canal originated from a cave in the forest, flowed through the center of the district, and ended at the downstream estuary. While waiting for his sister to send her krathong drifting out among the other glowing offerings—tiny flames dotting the black river like fallen stars—Ack had spotted a cluster of lights in the distant treeline.

At first, he thought they were krathongs drifting toward the forest. But he was old enough to know that objects float downstream. These lights, however, were moving against the current, gliding toward the source cave. Entranced, Ack tried to show his sister, but she saw nothing. It was then Ack understood what he was seeing. The next morning, he rushed

to tell his friends at school. That was his mistake.

The story spread like wildfire, twisting until people claimed Ack had seen Krasue—the floating, viscera-trailing ghost—at the edge of the woods. Several children were so terrified they cried; some were so shaken they had to go to the infirmary. The teachers stepped in, investigating until they declared ghosts weren't real and that Ack had made it all up. This tactic calmed the children, but it turned their fear into resentment. Before he knew it, Ack was branded a liar who scared people for attention. Many believed a villain deserved punishment, and the most dedicated executioner was Jack.

“...He wasn't a street racer...”

“What was that? Speak up, dammit!” Jack barked the moment Ack started mumbling.

Ack immediately hunched his shoulders, drawing a wave of raucous laughter from the group. “Come on, speak! What, did you suddenly go mute?!”

“I said...the guy who died here wasn't a street racer. He had a stroke...”

“I say he's a racer, so he's a racer. Why...you think you know better? Or can you actually see his ghost?” Jack sneered.

Ack kept his head down low. If he told them the truth—that the unfortunate man was currently staring at Jack with pure resentment from right behind his back—the jocks would only find more reasons to torment him. Ack had always been at Jack's mercy. Since starting high school, he had done everything to avoid him, and now, he could only

pray that his silence would eventually bore Jack enough to make him leave.

“So, let’s wrap this up. Who was the guy who died?”

“...A street racer,” Ack whispered faintly, not daring to meet the spirit’s eyes.

“Good boy. Knows how to listen,” one of the football players remarked. “Hey, Ack! Tell us a ghost story. What have you been seeing lately?” The others chimed in with eager agreement.

“Nothing...I haven’t seen anything,” Ack answered in a small voice.

“Oh, come on! Don’t you see ghosts? Back when we were kids, you used to claim there were dead people all over Khlong Ruea Yao. Can’t you just make something up on the spot, Mr.Star Writer?”

Jack continued to mock him. Ack remained silent, praying for them to lose interest. Then, suddenly, it seemed as if his prayers had been answered.

“Fine, fine. I’ll stop bugging you,” Jack said. Ack let out a breath of relief, only to nearly choke on his next breath when he heard what came next. “I’ll just ask Jin instead. Jin, you’re with Ack all the time, you must’ve heard some ghost stories from him.”

Ack snapped his head up and discovered a thin young girl huddling behind the group of athletes. She looked terrified, her face pale with a desperate urge to escape the situation. Ack’s heart sank. Why on earth was Jin with these people?

Jin's eyes met Ack's for a fleeting second, a silent plea for help.

"Alright, Ack. Get lost. I've got someone else to do your job now." Jack released his grip on Ack's shoulder. When he saw that Ack didn't budge, he snapped, "Go on! Get out of my sight!"

Ack slowly stood up, his heart pounding against his ribs. The boy began to walk away from the circle of players, his eyes glued to the ground, but his sixth sense could feel the weight of Jin's disappointment.

"Damn, what a coward. Letting a girl get bullied in his place," one of the players muttered.

Ack gritted his teeth. They were trying to bait him into a rage. Bullies hated it when a victim didn't fight back. Even though he felt a crushing guilt toward Jin, he knew that when an opportunity to escape appeared, he should take it. He was too weak to help her. Yet, he felt a surge of self-loathing. Jin had been his classmate since primary school too, but she had never laughed at his sixth sense like Jack did.

To be honest, Jin was the only person who ever believed him.

But he was the one who had pushed her away. Back then, it was out of necessity, but now, he was pushing her away simply because of his own powerlessness...

That was when Jack spoke up. "Don't be so hard on him. Ack can't stay and hang out with us. If he gets home late, who's going to watch his sister to make sure she doesn't

overdose in the bathroom?”

Jack's provocation finally hit its mark.

The football captain smirked as he saw Ack turn around. That scrawny brat could pretend not to hear all he wanted, but his sister was the one thing Ack could never ignore. Jack had known him for a long time; of course he knew exactly how to make him dance.

But even with his arrogance, Jack never expected that the coward—the one who nearly fainted at a raised voice—would dare to charge and swing at him. When Ack's fist collided with Jack's eye socket, no one was fast enough to stop it. Even the boy who took the punch stood there, stunned for several seconds, before letting out a roar and swinging a heavy right hook back.

Ack looked up at the sky. A distant roll of thunder echoed through the air as the crescent moon shone brightly above. In seven days, the Loy Krathong festival would arrive.

He hadn't blacked out, but he couldn't quite piece together what had happened. All he remembered were the shouted insults and the searing pain radiating across his body. He had a vague memory of Jin screaming, "The police are here!" and then the football team vanished like ghosts.

Ack scanned his surroundings. He found himself slumped against a lamppost at the three-way junction. Above his head hung a crude sign that read: STOP! DON'T DEMOLISH THE HISTORICAL SITE - JAPANESE SHRINE.

A young girl and a wandering spirit sat before him, staring.

For some unknown reason, the first thing Ack said was, “Jin...I’m sorry...”

“It’s fine...happens all the time...” Whether that answer was meant as comfort, sarcasm, or just an observation, Jin let a small smile quirk her lips. “Funny, isn’t it? The first time we’ve talked in six months, and it’s because of Jack.”

Ack turned his face away. Had it really been six months since they last spoke? They used to be inseparable.

He had always been a loner. The kids who weren’t afraid of him simply thought he was crazy. Jin, however, had chosen to be his friend for one simple reason: “Your eyes look honest. I don’t think you’re a liar.”

Jin could always tell when someone was lying. That was probably why, six months ago, when Ack told her he was fine and that everything was normal, she didn’t believe a word of it. Ack had been forced to avoid her after that; he couldn’t let Jin find out the truth.

“Why were you with the football team?” Ack asked softly.

“The Loy Krathong festival. They were decorating the Noppamas parade float. After they finished, Jack saw you and dragged me along. Said he wanted to invite you to work with them.”

“You were decorating the float?” From what he remembered, Jin couldn’t even draw a straight line.

“Do you even care?” The answer made Ack flinch.

Jin let out a sigh. “Are you still hurting? Can you make it home?”

Ack nodded. Jin followed up with, “Want me to walk you back?”

“No!” Ack blurted out, immediately regretting how harsh he sounded. He appreciated his old friend’s kindness, but the thunder signaled that rain was coming soon. If he let her walk him back, he’d have no choice but to let her take shelter from the storm at his house. And even if he refused, his sister would surely force him to let Jin in.

He couldn’t let anyone into that house. No one.

Jin looked at Ack’s face with a blank expression. “Okay. See you around then,” she said flatly before walking away.

Ack watched his old friend until she vanished, leaving only him, the wandering spirit, and the rain beginning to drizzle down upon the three-way junction.

2

The first rains trickled through the dense foliage as Ack trekked along the muddy path, leaving the streetlights behind and heading into the darkness of the forest.

Before long, a light appeared ahead—a glow from a lamp hanging over a wooden fence. The chain on the gate wasn’t locked; his sister must have opened it for him. He pushed through and quickly wound the chain back to secure the gate before dashing through the rain, past a pickup truck and a

brown motorcycle, toward the solitary two-story house. His father had been a recluse, which is why he'd bought a home so far from the main road.

As Ack stepped into the living room, water from his soaked clothes dripped onto the floor. A strange, pungent odor hit his nose. He raised an eyebrow and followed the scent up to the pitch-black second floor. Pale smoke drifted from the back window, and there, silhouetted against the pane streaked with raindrops, he saw a figure staring out into the dark.

She was a frail woman, her arms little more than bone, with wild, matted hair. The cherry of the cigarette between her lips illuminated a gaunt, sallow face, though you could still tell she had once been beautiful.

As if sensing his gaze, the woman turned to look at Ack. She stared at him in silence for a long moment before standing and walking slowly toward him. She reached out and gave his forehead a sharp, resounding flick.

"Ow! That hurts, Sis!" Ack cried out.

"I left a towel out for you, and you didn't even use it," Anyarin said listlessly. She snatched a towel from the rack in front of the bathroom and began rubbing it vigorously over her brother's body.

"Stop treating me like a kid. I can do it myself," Ack grumbled, snapping the towel away from her.

"Just get in the shower, or you'll catch a cold," Anyarin ordered. But before Ack could head into the bathroom,

she caught his arm. “Wait.”

Anyarin flipped on the hallway light. Her eyes widened as she saw the bruises on her brother’s face.

“What happened to you?”

“I tripped.”

“Tripped, my ass. You don’t get an eye that swollen unless you’ve been punched,” Anyarin pressed, leaning in so close the tip of her cigarette nearly brushed his face.

“I thought you were going to quit smoking,” Ack said, trying to change the subject.

“I only quit when you’re around...Now answer me. What did you get yourself into?”

Ack stammered. Anyarin fixed him with a hard stare. He couldn’t hold out against the pressure from his sister, even though deep down he hadn’t wanted her to know any of it.

“I...I ran into Jack.”

“That spike-haired striker?”

Ack nodded. “He came looking for a fight. I tried to run, but he started trash-talking you, Sis, so I hit him...”

Anyarin went still. “Who won?”

“I lost on points.”

“Nah, I bet he knocked you out cold.” The young woman sighed and opened the mirror-fronted medicine cabinet, searching for the first-aid kit. “I taught you to fight, but you’ve got to learn to size up a situation. If you know you’re going to lose, don’t fight.”

“He said you’d overdose and drop dead on some

bathroom floor—of course I got angry!” Ack protested, yelping as his sister dabbed antiseptic-soaked cotton against the cut.

“Whatever he wants to call me—a junkie, whatever—it doesn’t wear a thing off me...Really, Ack. You’re usually so level-headed. Why is it that the second you lose your temper, you act without thinking at all?”

Ack bowed his head and took the scolding. He knew his own weakness too well, which was why he always lived by one rule: run first. Whenever he forced himself to confront a problem far too big for him, he only ended up battered like this. But the moment he’d heard Jack mocking his sister, it was as if he’d gone blind—able to think of nothing but making that foul-mouthed dog hurt as much as possible. Once he cooled down, the regret crept in. From now on, Jack would surely have it in for him, and would never let him live in peace.

“They were ganging up on Jin, too...” Ack mumbled.

“Well, that makes a little more sense,” Anyarin said softly, tossing the cigarette and the cotton into the trash.

“No...” He didn’t want to lie to her about this. “I didn’t hit him because of Jin. At first they were all taunting me—then they turned on Jin instead... I used the chance to get away.”

Anyarin glanced at her younger brother. Ack could feel the disappointment on her face.

“I’m not tough like you,” he offered weakly.

Anyarin was five years older than him, but she had always made time to play with him. Back in his primary-school days, she was already in secondary school, and she

would come and watch over him at the playground after class. So she had seen plainly how the other children feared her little brother—how some went as far as bullying Ack because of his *delusional* senses. Anyarin always stepped in to protect him. For a small, powerless boy like Ack, his sister seemed able to crush any enemy, every single time—from the younger troublemakers to the grown-ups who told him to stop spouting nonsense. When the rumor of a Krasue outbreak was spreading and a teacher accused Ack of lying for attention, Anyarin caught wind of it and marched up to challenge the teacher at the front of the class.

‘If Ack says he saw it, then he saw it. Were you there, teacher? How would you know he’s lying?’

Anyarin had been standing beside him the night Ack saw the strange lights. She didn’t see them—but she believed him.

Anyarin sighed and put the first-aid supplies back in their place. “Hurry up and shower, then come down and make dinner. I’m craving *Gaeng Som*.”

Even though she remembered her mother’s recipes by heart, Anyarin couldn’t cook. Instead, she acted as a director from the sidelines, guiding Ack to season this or mix that. Ack, however, possessed absolutely no culinary talent. He had once served his sister undercooked grilled pork alongside a charred fried egg; luckily, the heavens hadn’t been too cruel to her stomach that time. His skills had gradually improved

over the past few months, and now, Anyarin no longer had to sacrifice three hours of sleep to wage war in the bathroom.

The *Gaeng Som* Ack had just finished surpassed even his sister's expectations.

"It tastes just like Mom's," Anyarin praised after taking a bite.

Ack, sitting across the dining table, grinned widely. "I've been sneakily watching the head chef at the restaurant make it."

"A self-taught thief, I see. You should have asked him to teach you properly from the start. Before this, your *Gaeng Som* was practically *Gaeng Fa*."

"Do you ever stop talking crap, Sis?"

Anyarin picked up a beer can and took a long swig, letting out a low grunt of satisfaction. "So...what's the plan? Regarding that Jack kid."

"What do you mean, Sis?"

"Picking a fight with a type like that once means they'll never let go," she said. Ack's face went pale at her words. Anyarin sighed. "Want me to go handle it for you?"

"Handle it how?"

"Some civilized conversation. And if he doesn't listen... I'll make him." Ack flinched, knowing his sister meant exactly what she said.

"Don't, Sis. He's huge, and he's got a whole crowd with him."

"True...These days? I can't even lift a pan." Anyarin

spoke with a hint of bitterness, glancing down at her skeletal wrists.

“Besides...to do that, you’d have to go outside.”

“Right,” Anyarin murmured, her expressionless face momentarily clouding with sorrow. Seeing his sister’s mood, Ack immediately decided he would run from that football team for his life—or at the very least, ensure his sister never found out about his problems again.

Because no one else could ever be allowed to see Anyarin. Not ever.

While scrubbing dishes in the kitchen, Ack heard the sound of a piano drifting in from the living room.

Ack didn’t know the name of the piece, but he knew it was his sister’s favorite. Every note rang out clear and gentle, harmonizing into a brilliant melody that seemed to bathe the forest home in warmth, dissolving the chill brought by the relentless drizzle.

The boy offered a small smile. Who would have thought that someone as abrasive as Anyarin could play the piano with such tenderness? His sister always had a way of surprising him—like the time he found out she had chosen to major in Music Education.

Anyarin’s reputation preceded her throughout Khlong Ruea Yao as a “troubled kid.” She was brilliant but skipped classes constantly, loved to roar around on her motorcycle late at night, and never missed a chance to talk back to her

elders. She never feared snapping back at the village gossip. A rebel like her didn't seem the type to become a music teacher, yet she had made it to her third year. The title "Teacher An" still sounded like a fairytale. Whenever she came home, she would sleep like the dead until noon, start drinking beer in the early afternoon, and become a fixture at the local sub-district office's smoking area.

Because of that, the rumors about her being a junkie didn't come as much of a surprise to most people.

Six months ago, a friend of a classmate of Anyarin's—a local from the area—reported that she had called to drop out. Her reason was that her parents had to go work abroad, leaving Ack home alone, so she was taking a semester off to care for her brother. Later, however, when it came time to register to maintain her student status, she failed to do so. She had officially lost her student status months ago.

Anyarin's excuse didn't hold water. Unlike her reclusive husband, the siblings' mother was a social butterfly who loved mingling with the neighbors. If she were really moving abroad for work, she would have certainly made her rounds to say goodbye. Instead, she had simply vanished into thin air.

In July, during a heavy evening downpour, someone spotted Anyarin holding an umbrella, waiting for her brother at the *songthaew* stop, where the local passenger trucks gathered. Her appearance left onlookers stunned. Though she had never been one for self-care, Anyarin was undeniably

beautiful. Now, however, her skin was sallow, she was as thin as a twig, her eyes were sunken and dark, and some noticed scars on her upper arms that looked like knife cuts.

Nosy neighbors followed the siblings back to their house. While ringing the bell, they peeked inside and saw a dilapidated mess, with a musty stench wafting out. After a while, Ack emerged, fearfully pleading for the villagers to leave.

From that day on, rumors circulated that Anyarin had quit school due to depression. Others disagreed, pointing out that she was likely a drug addict who self-harmed; the latter fit her personality much better. Soon, it spread across Khlong Ruea Yao. The only remaining mystery was where the siblings' parents had gone.

By August, Ack applied for a job as a dishwasher at Lim Peng Pochana. Everyone knew how reclusive the boy was; if he was looking for work, it meant the family was surely desperate for money. Combined with the rumor that their father had taken out a massive loan for an investment before fleeing abroad, the conclusion was reached without any need for proof: the parents were drowning in debt and had abandoned their junkie daughter and hallucinating son to fend for themselves.

The irony was that many of these villagers had never even seen his face. The other day, Ack saw a middle-aged woman he didn't recognize telling a story to the Big-Headed Old Man at Lim Peng Pochana. She claimed she had seen

the state of the siblings' house—dirty, crumbling, littered with beer bottles, and frequented by junkies.

Ack looked around the house. When his parents first left, things were indeed that pathetic. But now, he had put effort into a massive cleanup. The house was spotless, filled with the scent of the incense he had used for decoration. Even though his sister tended to leave cigarette butts or beer cans lying around, Ack was always there to sweep them up. This house was perfect, and Anyarin's piano playing only made it more magical.

Most importantly, let alone a junkie—even if the most revered abbot came knocking on the door, Ack would never, ever allow anyone to step foot inside this magnificent sanctuary.

3

Ack opened the refrigerator and saw that his sister's beer supply was running low. He planned to restock this weekend. He crossed to the cabinet beside the piano and pulled out his ledger.

He smiled with satisfaction when he saw that the money set aside for groceries was more than enough. This Loy Krathong, he'd be able to buy something special to celebrate with his sister. Since their parents had left, Ack had been strictly managing the household finances. With no main income and no way to withdraw money from his

parents' accounts, the house relied solely on the rent from a cattle pasture near the main road. Though it was enough to get by, he had heard rumors that the tenant planned to sell the entire herd and move in with his son in another province. Whether true or not, Ack didn't want to sit around waiting for their only source of income to vanish. Negotiating for a new tenant felt like too big a task for a fifteen-year-old, so he took a part-time job as a dishwasher at Lim Peng Pochana, asking his sister (who was a former classmate of the owner's son) to call and pull some strings for the job.

Anyarin tried to find work as well. Since she could still work a keyboard, she took on English translation work for an online magazine, even though Ack didn't want her to exhaust herself. Anyarin insisted that since she was the only one consuming "luxuries" like beer, she couldn't let her brother earn money alone. The only other option was to stop buying beer—and that wasn't happening. He knew full well that the only happiness Anyarin possessed now was the piano and a can of beer.

After checking the expenses, Ack put the ledger away and headed upstairs. As he passed Anyarin's room, he heard voices from inside...no, it sounded more like an argument.

"...You're an adult and can take care of yourself, but think of your brother!"

"I'm taking care of Ack all the time. You don't need to meddle, Auntie."

"Learn some responsibility, An! Don't be like your

father.”

“You don’t know anything, so don’t you dare talk about Dad!”

Ack knocked softly on the door. “Sis, can I come in?”

The voices in the room went silent. Ack heard his sister mutter, “I’m hanging up now.” A moment later, Anyarin stepped out of the room.

“Who were you on the phone with?”

“Aunt On,” Anyarin muttered, her face clouded with a scowl. “She said she’s coming to visit next week.”

Ack’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“The neighborhood busybodies told her about Mom and Dad. As soon as she found out, she called and laid into me. She said she’s coming to see for herself if her niece and nephew are coping... and she might move in with us if necessary.”

“We can’t let Auntie come to the house, Sis!”

“I know that. I already told her Dad made sure we could manage on our own, but she doesn’t trust him.”

Perhaps it was because their father had a long history of doing exactly as he pleased—whether it was eloping with their mother, moving the family to start a new job without consulting anyone, or letting Anyarin grow up to be a ‘delinquent’ in the eyes of their relatives. It wasn’t surprising that even their father’s own sister felt uneasy about him leaving his children alone for months.

“But you can handle it, right?” Ack asked. “Just like

usual. You're so stubborn she eventually gets fed up and backs off."

Anyarin bit her lip. "Actually, Auntie mentioned one more thing... she wants to take you back with her."

"I already refused. That should be the end of it."

After finishing his first year of high school, Ack had set his sights on becoming a lawyer, inspired by his favorite movie protagonist from *The Rainmaker*. Following the family philosophy of going all-in on whatever you do, he aimed for a top-tier university. Hearing this, Aunt On grew worried that a rural school in a place like Khlong Ruea Yao couldn't possibly prepare her nephew for such a cutthroat competition. She planned to take him to study at a prestigious school in Bangkok. Ack had refused, unwilling to leave his home and his sister.

"Auntie sees that Dad isn't here, so she wants to take care of you herself."

"There's no need. You're taking good care of me already."

"Are you sure? Don't you think you're carrying a bit much for a fifteen-year-old? Working yourself to the bone, finding food to feed me...You're almost at the age to enter university. Is living like this really okay? As much as I hate her saying I don't look after you, it's true that she could provide for you better than I can."

"No way!" Ack cried out.

No one could ever look after him better than Anyarin.

Who else had protected him when bullies came to torment him? Who else listened to his ghost stories without a shred of doubt? He had lived in Khlong Ruea Yao his entire life, yet Ack still felt that everything outside their front door was dangerous and unpredictable. The voices of spirits drifted everywhere, and the people looked at him with nothing but pity and contempt. And what of Bangkok? A metropolis where ten thousand were born and a thousand died every day—how deafening would the voices of the dead be there? How much crueler would the living be? Aunt On dismissed his ghost sightings as nonsense and had once suspected he might have a mental illness. Ack would have to face that city entirely alone.

And he would be leaving Anyarin abandoned in this house.

“Don’t you want me to stay with you, Sis?” Ack said, his voice laced with hurt.

The coldness in the young woman’s eyes flickered. “How could you say that?”

“Then why do you want to chase me away?”

Anyarin didn’t answer. The two siblings stood in the silence of the upstairs hallway for a long time. Finally, Anyarin sighed and reached out to ruffle Ack’s hair gently.

“I’ll call Auntie again tomorrow.”

Ack finally managed a smile.

The slender figure walked along the pitch-black, silent road. The rain had ceased, leaving behind a clear sky sparkling with stars and the fragrant scent of damp earth.

The smell after a fresh rainfall was the only thing that could substitute for the scent of a cigarette for Anyarin; it calmed her mind and offered an escape from all her anxieties.

It was fortunate the rain had stopped at midnight, allowing her to step out for some fresh air late at night. The villagers were all asleep; no one would catch a glimpse of her and start more bizarre rumors. However, Anyarin couldn't let her brother find out. When it came to the rules he set, Ack was terrifyingly stubborn.

She thought back to their childhood on a rainy day. An had promised her younger brother she would take him for a stroll to breathe in the earthy scent after the rain stopped. But by the time the downpour subsided, it was already three in the morning. Ack had woken her up, insisting she take him out as promised. Even though An told him it was late and the air was cold, her brother refused to budge. As always, Anyarin couldn't resist her brother's wishes. She had snuck him out, and he was delighted by the lush, refreshed scenery that day. The young girl had asked him why he liked it so much.

"...Because I like walking with you, Sis."

The next morning, Ack fell ill. He refused to tell anyone about their midnight excursion, except for Jin, who came to visit. An hid outside the room, eavesdropping on Ack's conversation with his friend.

“What were you thinking, going out so late that you got sick?” Jin asked.

“I promised Sis I’d go,” Ack replied. “She loves the smell after the rain so much. If she didn’t get to go out, she would’ve been sad.”

Anyarin allowed a faint smirk to touch her lips at the memory. Her brother always thought of himself as an orchid—that if he didn’t cling to a great tree, he would die... and because he thought that way, he could never take root and flourish on his own.

The thought made Anyarin feel a sudden chill from the rising dew. She decided to turn back, but at that moment, a sound erupted from behind her.

It was the sound of a *Klong Yao* (long drum) troupe. The hand drums were beaten in a thrilling rhythm, and the woodwinds played a jubilant melody. The voices of a vast crowd rose in song and cheer, much like a festive parade, yet the tones were raspy and devoid of life. This contradiction sent a shiver down Anyarin’s spine. No drum troupe should be out performing on a road at the edge of the forest at midnight. She froze as the lyrics began to grow clear.

*“Groo, Groo! Here we come, hoy! Here we are-wa!
Kong Koi hops along, bouncing to and fro, ta-la-la!”*

“The Big-Headed Old Man hobbles by, the red-eyed feline rushes out ahead. Old Teng sways side to side, The lantern held by The Monk with basket-head, ta-la-la!”

Those bizarre lyrics grew louder, drawing closer and

closer. Anyarin summoned her courage and slowly turned toward the source of the sound.

At the end of the deserted road, a brilliant blue glow, much like moonlight, was heading straight for her.

4

The inner panes were fogged with frost while the outer glass was beaded with raindrops. Morning light spilled into the room.

Through sheer force of routine, Ack always woke at five-forty-five. He had to prepare breakfast and water the garden before heading to school. Today, he rose five minutes late, feeling a slight dizziness. The boy stretched and dragged his swaying body out of the bedroom. As he went to open the bathroom door, he saw a figure curled up beneath the window frame.

His sister sat with her knees tucked against her chest, a cigarette held between her fingers. She seemed to be letting the fire slowly consume the tip without any intention of smoking it. Ack frowned; Anyarin never woke before seven.

“You’re up early, Sis,” Ack greeted her.

“I had a nightmare,” she replied, her eyes drifting as if she weren’t really speaking to him. “It felt so real... I can’t even remember exactly when I woke up.”

Ack sat down beside her and realized instantly that this nightmare must have been horrific. Anyarin had never