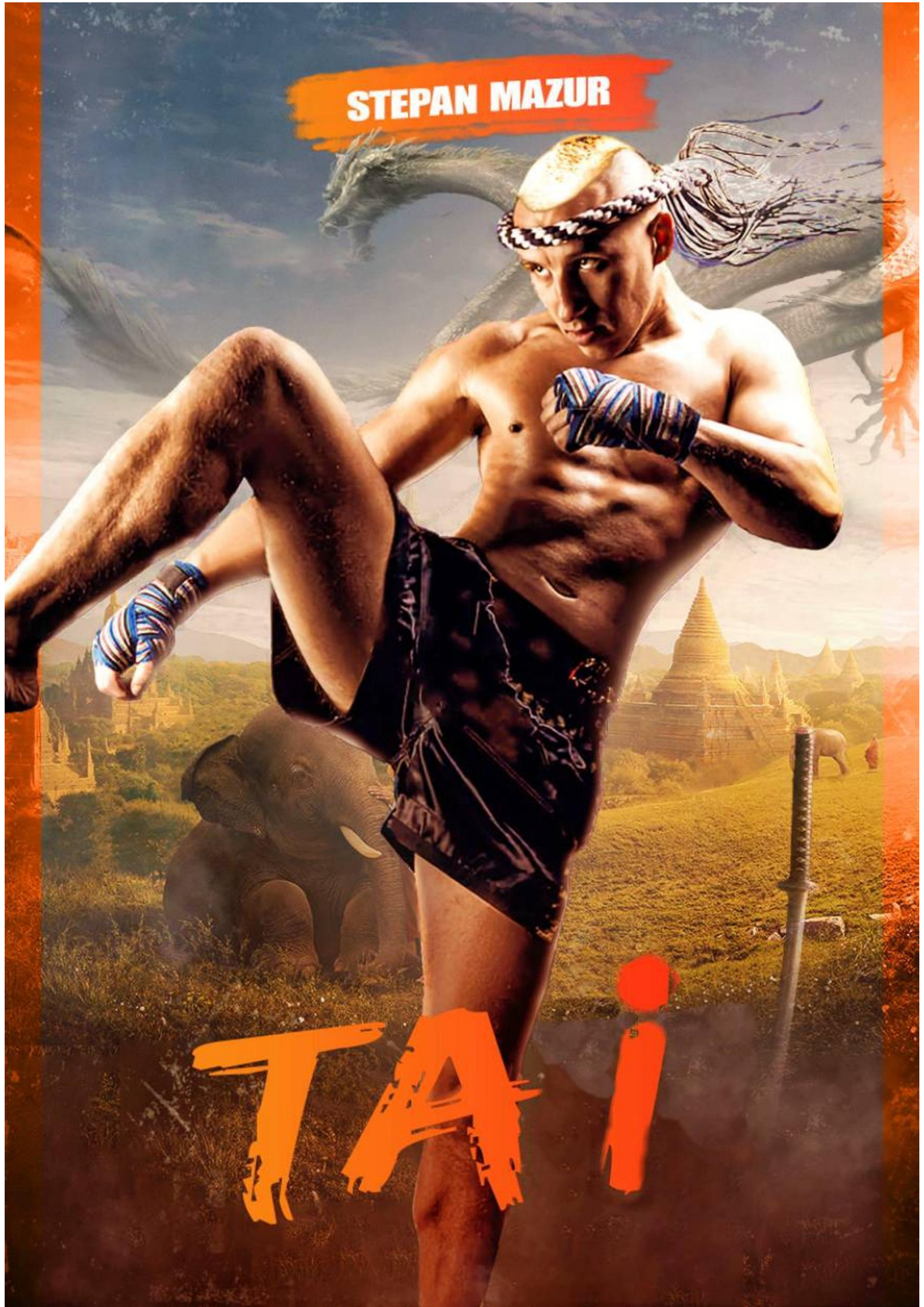


STEPAN MAZUR



TAI

Тай

Степан Мазур

Tai (*in english, 28 illustration)

«Автор»

2026

Мазур С.

Tai (*in english, 28 illustration) / С. Мазур — «Автор»,
2026 — (Тай)

Slava Demchenko was just a boy when a monstrous wave swept through Phuket, taking his loved ones and leaving his world in ruins. But from the depths of tragedy, something extraordinary emerged. Slava discovered he could see and communicate with the otherworldly—a gift born of loss. Reborn as Tai, he sheds his past and begins a journey into the unknown. The mystical secrets of Thailand beckon the young foreigner, but to uncover them, he must first conquer his inner demons. As he trains his body in the art of Muay Thai, he strengthens his spirit, walking the razor's edge between the physical and the supernatural. To fully embrace his destiny as an exorcist, Tai will need to face not only the spirits that haunt him but the truths buried within himself. With brutal training, ancient rituals, and the weight of the unseen world pressing down on him, Tai's path is as perilous as it is exhilarating.

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Степан Мазып

Tai (*in english, 28 illustration)

Chapter 1 – Sṽ nā mi

Phuket Island, Thailand

December 2004

International Hospital

Mother's voice comforted Slava. Nothing bad could possibly come to him with her by his bedside.

"So you stay here overnight, Slava," she told him. "It's not that bad. You're big enough to manage. We'll come in the morning and take you home."

A boy of ten, Slava felt chilly from the burn ointment over his itching skin. As the medicine they'd given him was taking effect, he was overcome by an urge to sleep.

For the first time since their family had come to Thailand, he made no attempt to argue. That surprised Alyona, his younger sister, so much that she stared at him with pitiful eyes.

His stern father forced out a smile and ruffled the boy's hair. "Hold on, trooper. Tomorrow you'll feel better, and by New Year, it will fully heal. Why the hell did you have to get into that pool? We *told* you to stay in the room. We're almost broke now—because of you. Our insurance doesn't pay for sunburns. Sometimes you behave worse than Alyona."

"Why me?" the seven-year-old girl protested. "It wasn't *me* who got sunburned. Serves him well."

"I stayed under the umbrella," Slava mumbled, licking his blistered lips.

Over the hour he'd spent in the outdoor pool in the afternoon, he'd got sunburned to the point of his skin peeling off. As his parents and sister had been off to Phuket Town to get some stupid silicone pillows from the local mall, he'd hit the pool. The water was incredibly warm, clean, and transparent. A pure blessing to swim in. So much better than any pool he'd been to in Russia: indoor, cold, and overcrowded.

He just couldn't get enough of that warm water in the hot sun.



“I just got distracted for a moment,” he added in his smallest voice.

It took as much as briefly closing his eyes to doze off—and miss the moment when the umbrella shadow was gone, exposing him to the sun. And here he was, badly burned without even hitting the beach. So unfair.

They'll pay the next time they refuse to take me to the mall. I'll throw a worse tantrum than Alyona.

“And please, Dad. I'm not Slava. I'm Tai.”

Tai was the new name he'd given himself two days ago, abbreviating the name of the country they'd come in for vacation. But none of the family seemed to care. They just kept using his old name.

Mother planted a kiss on his cheek and shut the curtain, separating him from another patient in the room.

Father looked around with a sigh. A stay in this large two-bed hospital room was to be paid by family money. All tourists coming to Thailand were warned their insurance didn't cover sunburns.

The hospital treatment was anything but cheap, but it was their only option. The local shops didn't have any sour cream, a Russian folk remedy for sunburns. And even if they had, it might've been useless against the harsh Thai sun.

The old Thai man on the other bed was no nuisance, but Slava could become exactly that upon recovery. He could come up to the stranger and shower him with lots of questions that the old man

wouldn't even understand. But, out of the particular respect that many Thai people had for small children, he could still try to answer them, smiling at Slava and making small gifts.

Slava was adept at getting strangers to like him, regardless of what language they spoke.

He'd begun to practice his English while still on the bus taking the family from the airport to the hotel. In less than an hour, he'd made friends with a sociable Dutch man, getting him to promise to accept the family as his guests once they came to Amsterdam. The bus stopping at their destination had come as a great relief to Slava's parents who were not up to taking any other trips that soon, for financial reasons.

The family members left the ward, closing the door behind them. The air conditioner was working quietly, lulling Slava to sleep. He put his head down on the pillow and soon fell asleep on his belly. No way to turn over to his back as his nape and shoulders still hurt from the burns.

His last thought was a regret that he'd have to spend the rest of the vacation without ever taking his tee off. Or even grounded in the hotel room. No palm trees and ocean for him.

A loud noise from the hallway woke him. Slava had no idea how much time he'd slept; the hospital ward had no clock.

He heard many anxious voices outside the door, speaking English and Thai. Some even spoke Russian. He realized that something out-of-the-ordinary had happened, causing people to speak that loud in a hospital.

"What's happened?" he cried out in Russian. Then repeated his question in English.

The curtain was open; it must've been the nurse coming in at night. He saw the impassive face of the old man who took the remote control unit and clicked the TV on.

Slava turned over to his side, overcoming pain, to see the screen.

It was a news broadcast, the presenters speaking Thai, but the big letters under their anxious faces read DISASTER HITS PHUKET in several languages, including English.

Looking for familiar English words in the news ticker, Slava felt his heart sink into the pit of his stomach, bringing a cold wave of sticky fear all over his body. He broke into tears before even realizing the gravity of the situation. The words he knew—*tsunami, beach, missing, killed, destroyed*—came together to form a bitter, heartbreaking picture.

"MOM!" Tai screamed. Where was his mother? His father? He had no idea whom to ask these questions to.

The screen was now showing destruction filmed from a helicopter. Swept-away houses. Destroyed hotels. Overturned cars. Uprooted lampposts and palm trees. As though by purpose, the camera took the familiar red-tiled roof of the hotel where Slava's family had stayed, with its cozy balconies, a water tower nearby, and the conspicuous flag with the hotel name.

"NO!" the boy screamed and buried his face in the pillow, crying loudly.

The door swung open. Slava was about to run up to the doctor, begging him to reach out to his parents, but shrunk back at seeing the bloodied, half-naked male body on the trolley. The man's arm was blue and black, a broken piece of wood stuck in his biceps, his face blue and swollen the same.

Only for a split second had Slava seen that, but it was enough for the sight to get engraved in his mind.

Closing his eyes, he buried his face in the pillow, struggling to contain his sobs. He was too big to cry aloud in front of the old man, but not big enough to pretend everything was all right. He wasn't that good at self-deception.

The world seemed to become less real, more of a horror movie.

That was how Slava Demchenko became one of the many thousand international tourists in Thailand whose hopes of a happy New Year 2005 celebration in this country were swept away by the giant wave hitting the island of Phuket and then the coast.

While the day of December 26th was breaking in Thailand, the small waves raised by a strong earthquake at the bottom of the Indian Ocean went rushing for the nearby coasts, slowing down as

they approached the land but swelling up to the size of multi-story buildings to crash their million-gallon weight of seawater down on the beaches of Phuket, Krabi, Phi Phi, Similan, Ko Chang, and Phang Nga, wreaking chaos, death, and destruction.

Almost all large beaches in the Western Phuket were hit by the tsunami, with Kamala, Patong, Karon, and Kata taking the worst of it. Many hotels close to the water were swept away by the wave, including the one where Slava's family was staying.

Back at that moment he, and the old Thai man, just got rolled out in their beds into the crowded hallway of the hospital where all rooms were now freed to accommodate the disaster victims, many of whom were seriously injured.

In the cramped hallway filled with injured people and bustling medical workers, the boy—for the first time in his life—saw human grief come out through screaming, tears, moans, prayers, and curses.

Within the hour following the earthquake, the island had been warning its inhabitants. The animals were running away into the jungle and climbing the mountains, the birds leaving their nests. The sound of the surf stopped suddenly as the tide went out and far away. The thrilled observers came out onto the exposed sea bottom to collect shells, crabs, shrimps, and small fish.

The oncoming wall of water had remained unnoticed until it was too late to escape. The wave had no foamy crest, being transparent and invisible against the azure-blue backdrop of the calm sea and the sky merging in the distance.

Then the tsunami came into view, sweeping several miles into the island and destroying everything in its way like Poseidon's rage, or like the Grim Reaper's scythe.

Then the flood seemed to retreat, but it was a deceptive move. The tsunami rolled back just to crash down again, with greater strength, washing away and into the ocean those who'd survived the first wave.

Humans and animals were thrown onto the buildings, grinded with a mixture of earth and concrete, pierced through by exposed fittings and sharp wood, smashed on billboards and cars, or killed by electric shock from the torn high-voltage cables until electricity was cut off. The crazy water spared no one.

It was Phuket's blackest day.

After the tsunami left, there were the ravaged beaches, cars on the trees and hotel walls atop the hills. Boats were found in the jungle two miles away from the coast. No coastal building was spared. The remains of houses and streets were covered with sand, scum, seaweed, and earth, the flood carrying pieces of furniture, local merchandise, clothes, and food. The street vendors' overturned carts could be seen on the balconies. But the worst thing were the dead human and animal bodies scattered everywhere, among dead fish and seafood.

Playing that over and over again in his mind, Tai felt like losing his sanity. His soul was consumed by grief and pain as he realized that his entire family was probably dead. This tide of emotion was so overwhelming that it turned his hair gray.

In a nervous breakdown, Tai pulled out a clump of his hair. As he stared at the gray, curly strand, he realized he could no longer stay in the hospital.

"I must go," he whispered to himself.

He was seeing double.

The people around him all had glowing doubles of different colors, mostly dark-red, violet, or navy-blue. These doubles were fluttering around their bodies, stretching up to the ceiling or shrinking to the size of a pea as they constantly changed shape.

Dismissing that as a hallucination, Tai removed his blanket and stood. No one seemed to pay any heed in this crowd of people requiring urgent medical assistance as he put on his shorts, then his tee, clenching his teeth as his nape, shoulders, and back ached to the touch of the fabric. Then he covered his gray hair with a baseball cap, slipped his feet into sandals, and walked off toward the exit.

The pain filling Tai's body reminded him that he was still alive.

Following this pain, he walked and walked, leaving behind the tumultuous hallways flooded with pain, the no-service elevators, and the stairs, slipping through the space like a water drop would slip through sand.

But out in the street, things were even weirder.

Chapter 2 – See What Is Hidden

Slava passed around the pile of bottled water packs brought in by the emergency service people. Next to it, the members of some NGO were putting up another pile. More and more water was brought to the hospital yard by all sorts of vehicles with local numbers: local businesses and ordinary people stepping in to help.

He looked around. Groups of volunteers were unloading the vehicles, rushing the packs to the hospital stairs and putting them down with care. As he stepped out into the sun from beneath the cover, he pulled his cap down over his eyes and winced, moving his shoulders. The burn ointment had formed a crust over his skin, painful even to the slightest touch of the tee fabric. But Slava hardly paid any heed. His world had suddenly become overcomplicated, flashing its new faces at him and pelting him with surprises, his mind playing a game he couldn't fathom.

No one there to explain him the rules of this weird daydream. Or had he died with everyone else and that was the afterworld he was seeing, with rainbow-wrapped passerby being a common sight?

A Thai man muttered hasty apologies for hitting Slava with his elbow; he hadn't seen the boy because of all those boxes he carried. Slava recoiled; not as much with the impact as with astonishment at the man's carrying *a snake*. A big, eyeless, white snake coiling around his neck and most of his head.



Is he a conjurer? Why would he bring his snake to the hospital at a time like this?

Tai blinked quickly, then turned back to the snake-carrying man, but he'd already disappeared into the hospital.

"What's he doing? What the shit?" Slava whispered and pinched himself.

The pinched spot hurt. The sun was already high in the sky, baking the asphalt and suffocating Tai with heat, a strong thirst reminding him of all the water he'd lost with sweat. *I must be seeing things through dehydration*, Slava thought as he came up to a vehicle.

"Water, please. I need some water to drink," he asked in English.

His burned nose and cheeks were such a sorry sight that one carrier stopped and took a bottle out of the pack. "Here you are."

"Thanks," Slava said and walked away to hide in a palm tree's shadow.

The hospital grounds were extremely crowded, becoming some semblance of a refugee camp: a sprawl of ambulance cars, vehicles, trolleys, and tents. But the worst were the black bags forming long lines—and then being put up on top of each other as there were just too many of them.

Slava was old enough to guess there were dead bodies inside those bags. Some dropping bottles were dragged outside to treat the survivors. On the faces of some, Tai could read they were breathing their last. Their half-transparent doubles were dried and thin, almost drained of glow and color.

Tai wished he couldn't see any of that, but he could. He could even tell how many minutes each man or woman had to live.

The injured were treated right in the open air. All trolleys, benches, and lawns were occupied by bodies of those struggling for their life, locals and tourists alike. No one was asked about their medical insurance. No one kept count of the medicines being spent. In the disaster aftermaths, the hospital opened its doors to everyone.

Slava took a gulp of water, looking around. Next to the main gate, a field headquarters was organized in a NATO military tent. It was where the newcomers were asked for their names and the deceased were identified.

Across the headquarters, a field canteen was cooking hot food for the frozen survivors, its pipe belching smoke.

There will be fire and smoke for the dead, too, Tai realized suddenly. For the weeks coming, the local crematoria would be working overtime to burn all the bodies.

"Poor things," he whispered, tears running down his cheeks. He wiped them with a burned hand, never minding the tingling sensation. Cold was spreading inside his chest—and a thought about parents gave him an instant lump in the throat.

"No. No. They must be alive. They could've been away to the mall. They could take a tour. At night. Why not? Just... just don't stay in the hotel. Please. Please," he muttered as his mind struggled for sanity through denial.

Next to the hospital entrance, another vehicle was unloaded. One box got dropped, and Slava saw the smaller, elongated boxes inside: field rations. As he stared at their bright wrappings inscribed in Thai, he finally realized that the whole thing was very real. It happened to him in the real world.

But there was *another* world pulling itself over the real one.

Among the bustling hospital staff, victims, and volunteers, he could see large, brightly colored animals.

Why are they even here? Have they run away from a zoo?

He probably needed to see a shrink. Just like everyone in the affected location.

"I just need some sleep. When I wake, everything will be fine," Tai told himself as he sat down on a free patch of grass, taking small sips of water to contain an urge to vomit.

His whole body was limp. He could barely stand, let alone walk. And where would he go, anyway? His parents had died by the wave. He was alone. Alone in this world. Half-crazy from

everything he'd been through. All those animals—they just had no place here, among the busy crowd. And those life-indicating doubles of human bodies? *Like in some stupid video game.*

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he realized just how lone and helpless he now was.

All those disaster-struck people with pain on their faces—they couldn't help. In this world, he could only rely on himself. And this realization somehow kept him together.

I must be strong. I'm not a baby like Alyona.

As his sister's image came to mind, the dam of his composure broke. He dropped the bottle and wailed. "Mom! Mommie!"

An elderly Thai woman put her box down and came up to Slava to put her arm around his shoulders. The touch was painful, but Slava made no sound. With the void spreading inside, he craved every little bit of human warmth, even from a stranger.

"Poor thing. He's gone all gray," she said in Thai at seeing the boy's hair as his cap slipped off.

Slava didn't understand a word. He swallowed, but the lump in his throat just wouldn't go away. Forcing himself away from her arm, he put his hands together in the *wai* gesture used by the Thai people to mean "hi", "thanks" and "goodbye" alike.

"Thank you," he said in English.

"What's your name?" she asked back in English, with a strong accent.

"Tai," he said and looked away. He didn't want to abuse the kindness of this elderly woman who found a moment to comfort him, a complete stranger, putting her own grief aside.

Pulling the cap back over his eyes, he hurried toward the gate. No one stopped him. Too many people were coming in and out at the same time; several sections of the hospital fence had been removed to prevent jamming. The fence was light in weight and easy to dismantle, just as the nearby buildings: mainly wood, very little concrete or stonework. In this hot climate, no one needed thick, strong walls.

But after the tsunami, all new buildings on the coast would be much stronger, designed to withstand another attack by the elements. This reinforcement would be mandated by law.

Smaller streets were jammed by abandoned bikes and vehicles, but the main approaches to the hospital were cleared to make way for ambulances and military trucks. When someone left their vehicle in the middle of the street, hurrying to carry their injured to the hospital, it was removed by a tow truck, or even by a group of people who carried it aside. No distinction was made between cheaper and more expensive vehicles, and no concern for possible damage to them; the pass had to remain clear.

He walked down the street with a tongue-twisting name of *Chalermprakiat Road*: it was written on a plate in English alongside Thai.

He took one step after another without really knowing where he was heading, and why there. But he couldn't stop; that felt like death. Had he stopped, giving in to his grief and pain, more locals would be taking pity on him, like that woman did.

His father had told him that pity kills. So he wasn't going to give himself any pity, neither accept it from others.

Slava was dead. The survivor's name was Tai. He was resilient as hell and totally crazy; he was still seeing animals and rainbow-colored people everywhere he looked.

...but not now. Where are they?

Then he saw a group of Buddhist monks.

Standing at the crossroads in their orange robes, they sang prayers, gave comfort to those who needed it, and burned incenses to keep evil spirits away. There were many candles down on the asphalt, dripping their wax like tears over the scattered photos. The strong wind was blowing the candles out, but the monks would light them again, bowing and praying. Several monks were tapping on drums or ringing small bells. These sounds were probably meant to drive evil spirits away—or to drown the wails of grief from the passing crowds.

Tai was surprised at not seeing a single animal around the monks. The animals seemed to avoid the smoke of incense, or maybe the monks' chanting and ringing bells. Or maybe they were intimidated by the monks' appearance? None approached them, whatever the reason.

Then Tai saw blue flames around one man's head. The boy closed his eyes and touched his forehead. *I must be having a fever.*

But the burning man wasn't screaming or trying to put the flames off. He was sitting in lotus on the ground, counting his beads, his eyes closed, his lips moving in a quiet prayer. He was dressed in a monk's robe, but black, not orange. The other monks pretended he wasn't there.

"Mister?" Tai called to him. "Are you an outcast?"

The monk opened his eyes.

Chapter 3 – The Monk

Tai had no idea the monks in orange robes were from the Wat Chalong temple located not far away to the south, next to Rawai Beach. And the man in black robe came from a remote and little-known temple: Wat Ko Sirey.

The boy walked over to the solitary monk, squinting at the blue flames dancing over his mourning-black robe. The sight was captivating. And not as scary as wild animals freely walking in public.

Could those flames be his soul?

“Savatdi cap. Hung cheu ar rai?”

Tai understood that the first words were a greeting, but the question escaped him. Was the man asking his name? Guessing that, he made a *wai* and then punched himself in the chest. “Tai.”

“Tai,” the bald monk smiled and suddenly said in Russian, with a strong accent, “A name I least expected. Just as your hair. But it suits you.”

“You speak Russian? How?” Tai screamed in delight, pulling the cap over to hide his recently grayed hair. It was too long to be hidden completely, but he had no scissors to trim it with.

“It has much in common with Sanskrit. I learned many languages at university. Russian was the most difficult.”

“Yes, English is much easier,” Tai agreed. “Can’t you feel that fire?”

The monk stared at him. “What fire?”

“You look like you’re blazing.”

“Tai, what are you seeing?” the monk asked, his eyes following Tai’s gaze as it slid over his head and shoulders. At times the boy seemed to be staring through the monk’s body; then his eyes focused on something behind his back. It didn’t look like he had impaired sight. This boy knew exactly where to look, and what he was seeing.

“A blue glow around your head. It’s dancing like flames. Like cold fire. Does it hurt? Many people were hurt today.”

“No. It doesn’t. It’s the *agni* of perfect soul.”

“Agni?”

“Yes. I forgot the Russian word for it. Ah! Incarnation. That’s it.”

Taking a closer look at the boy, the monk saw his burns and dried blood on his tee. “Do you have a place to go?”

“N-no. Not really,” Tai mumbled as his eye was caught by another group of monks approaching the crossroads, followed by a crowd carrying bodies on stretchers. But it was not the bodies that got his attention; it was a snake-like dragon on one monk’s head. A white, wingless dragon.

“A dragon. It’s white,” the boy blurted.



“*Mangr Khav*,” the monk said. “You’re right. It’s the animal spirit of the Wat Chalong temple’s abbot. His family totem.”

“Totem? I want a totem, too. A *Mangr Khav*. How can I get one?”

The monk smiled. “*Farangs* don’t have dragons. You have your northern totems. Just as strong as ours.”

Tai knew that *farang* was the Thai word for white tourists. “Ours? Like Zmei Gorynich?” he guessed.

“Zmei Gorynich,” the monk said with effort, struggling over the unfamiliar words. “What does that mean?”

“A dragon with three heads.”

“Three heads? I know you Russians have a double-headed eagle. But a three-headed dragon? Why?”

“I don’t know. And... and what’s your name?” It was not until then that Tai realized he didn’t know it. Why was he even talking to a stranger? His parents would’ve told him off.

Would have. Not would.

“Oh, I totally forgot my manners. *Kho thod*¹. My name’s Dalai Tisein.” He made a *wai*.

¹ Sorry (in Thai)

Tai gave a hasty nod—and winced at the tee collar cutting into his neck. The monk frowned at the brown spots all over the fabric and shook his head. “Bad. You need a doctor. Have you been to the hospital?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you leave it?”

Tai looked away. “It was too busy. Too crowded.”

“A disaster. South Thailand. Many died. We need time. Big, big grief.” The monk spoke slowly, struggling for words. He probably hadn’t practiced Russian in a long while—or maybe he never knew more than a few words. But at least he knew them, and he understood whatever Tai said. That made him the best company Tai could possibly find here.

“No time helps that!” Tai cried out. “My parents are dead. And my sister. And I’m officially nuts.”

The monk probably didn’t get the idiom. He just continued to listen, paying no heed to the scream, despite the Tai people’s strong dislike for open display of emotion.

The tears welling in the boy’s eyes said more than words.

“I’m crazy. You understand?” Tai said in English just in case.

“All we can do now is pray,” Dalai Tisein said with compassion and took Tai by hand—the only part of his body that wasn’t sunburnt.

“What are you doing?” Tai protested, preparing to break free and run away before the man would pull him somewhere.

“Feeling your pulse,” the monk replied serenely. “It’s racing. You’re excited. Please calm down.”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?” Dalai Tisein made a small move of shoulders, as though to show off his blue flames. “You’re not crazy. Come with me.”

“Come where? Why?”

“Food. Water. Treatment. A temple where Buddha can hear you. A relief to your pain.”

“I can’t go with you. I don’t know you,” Tai said in both Russian and English, but still followed the monk.

“You do,” the man objected. “I’m Dalai Tisein. A monk.”

His eyes had compassion. And patient wisdom. He inspired trust. Tai’s body followed him as though at its own accord.

The boy was surprised to see what the monk brought him to: an old Japanese motorbike that stood in the shadow, leaning against a building in a line of other bikes. An old shabby helmet was dangling from the handlebar. The transport was probably unattractive for the local crooks; or maybe they feared the wrath of Buddha.

“Come, Tai.” The monk jumped on easier than could be expected from someone of his age. He started the engine—and handed Tai the helmet.

He could accept it. Or run away. He pondered over this choice for a few seconds.

The monk’s age was hard to tell. He could equally well be in his forties, fifties, or sixties. A lean man, smiling with a full row of obviously false teeth, shaved-headed, he had the eyes of someone who’d seen the world. That was all Tai could tell from his appearance. But this old man wasn’t scary. His presence—and this steady blue light coming from him—was calming.

“Where are we going?” Tai asked, taking the helmet.

“Wat Ko Sirey. Temple of Buddha. Treatment. Food. Shadow. Sleep. Rest.”

Tai climbed on behind the monk, squeaking at how hot the seat was. Even in the shade, the motorcycle couldn’t escape the scorching sun. Thailand had over three hundred sunny days in a year; and each such day was as tropical as it could get.

“Put up with that. It will cool down.”

Tai clasped the helmet. The motorcycle took off at a leisurely pace, entering the heavy traffic on Chalermprakiat Road, unusually crowded as people were making their way to the hospital: to get their wounds treated, to recognize the dead, or to offer their help as volunteers.

Dalai Tisein often had to ride on the sidewalk to bypass the jams. Left-hand traffic was one of the things Tai still hadn't got used to in this country, but the monk seemed to know what he was doing. The motorcycle was slipping deftly through the jams formed by the vehicles making way for ambulances and military trucks.

Soon Tai's head began to swim—on top of the itching skin, dry mouth, and nausea he already had. In fear of falling off, he tightened his grip around the monk's waist and closed his eyes, no longer watching the road or thinking about their destination.

Chapter 4 – Old Temple, New Life

Dalai Tisein took Tai to a temple that looked abandoned and shabby. Not a tourist attraction, it was mainly used by local people. The temple stood on a separate island, Ko Sirey, connected to Phuket by a pedestrian-only wooden bridge.

The two of them had to leave the bike to cross it on foot. Spotting a parking lot next to the bridge, Tai guessed no vehicles were allowed onto the smaller island. Not even two-wheelers.

The walking distance of about a mile drained much of Tai's strength. But that was not the final ordeal. The temple stood on a hill, clearly visible from a distance. To reach the main entrance, the boy had to climb a crazy lot of stairs, each broad enough for two riders to pass by each other without touching. No real riders or horses there, though; only stray dogs sleeping on the stairs that would often turn left or right, following the shape of a stone dragon's snake-like back. The dragon's head greeted the boy at the beginning of his climb, while its once-splendid tail was topping the stairs. Now the giant statue was a puny shadow of its former glory; not painted in a long while and losing pieces of plasterwork.

Ascending the stairs, the boy felt like he was about to drop dead from exhaustion. Dalai Tisein was not even puffing, as if he'd soared to the top like a bird. "Easy, boy, easy," he said, giving Tai an encouraging clap on the shoulder. "You'll get used. Breathe. Just breathe."

He showed Tai the example of proper breathing: inhale through your nose and exhale through your mouth, working your lower belly.

Tai looked around. The temple entrance was guarded by once-gilded, almost life-size human statues. A long time ago, these things probably used to look like golden Buddhas warding evil spirits off this place, but all gold had been eaten away by rains, winds, and lack of maintenance, exposing the grayish-white stone beneath.

Nonetheless, Tai could see a faint glow come from the figures. As if they were night lamps.



“They... they’re glowing,” he said, startled.

The monk smiled. “Oh, really? Good. It means they’re still working.”

“I thought only people had glow.”

“No. Some... some things have it, too. They acquire it through rituals and prayers.”

Tai looked up at the monk. “What things? Dragons? Totems? Why are they here?”

“Just guards. Nothing more. When we have enough money, we’ll put a warrior statue between them. And perform proper rituals to give this place the power of healing and protection.”

“Protection? From whom?”

“From evil. This world has a lot of evil that never sleeps, unlike the good that must be awakened. That’s why we need a warrior.”

“A warrior, wow. That’ll be cool.”

“Why mind the statues?” Dalai Tisein dismissed. “Real dragons live inside humans.”

“Inside? How do they even fit in?”

“Later, Tai,” the monk said, smiling. “Now have rest.”

While climbing the stairs, Tai was surprised by the complete absence of tourists in the temple area. The place seemed abandoned by everyone but the stray dogs sprawling in the shadows cast by mangroves and palm trees, and on the benches. *Why is this place so unpopular? Because the way’s so long and hard? Not that it really matters. No tourists will be coming any time soon, anywhere.*

There was no one but an elderly sexton meeting Tai and the monk on top of the stairs. The sexton was selling the sacred lotus flowers—a proper sacrifice for Buddha. Like in many Thai temples, you didn’t have to pay to enter the building, but you could buy lotus petals or incense sticks to offer them as a sacrifice if you wished.

Tai’s legs gave way. He grabbed at the dragon’s tail to keep balance. Seeing the boy’s exhaustion, Dalai Tisein squatted down to remove his shoes.

“No, please,” Tai protested. “I can do it myself.” He even bowed his head, but it went so dizzy he barely avoided a fall. His fever, physical strain, and the tropical sun were a strength-depleting combo.

“Breathe,” the monk told him, then removed his own shoes.

As they entered the temple, Tai’s eye got caught by a large bell. He couldn’t help but ring it, producing a melodious sound. He turned to the monk hastily, realizing he hadn’t asked for permission, but Dalai Tisein’s face showed approval. “Good. It drives evil spirits away. The sexton’s too old to ring it every hour as he should.”

“Then I can do it.”

“Good idea. But first have rest. You’ll need your strength.”

Once shielded from the scorching sun by the roof, Tai wiped sweat off his forehead. The temple’s inside was pleasantly cool, the mountain wind fanning its walls. He saw many altars with sacrifices. The temple had no crematorium and hence performed no funerals. An occasional visitor would only come here to pray, or to take some nice photos from the height.

“One day,” Dalai Tisein said, “we’ll have many monks here. We’ll drag a big stone up here and cover it with gold to attract tourists.”

“An ice cream tray can serve us better. It’s so hot here.”

The monk smiled. “Yes. We can use that, too. But a temple’s purpose is not to make money. It’s to serve.”

“Serve who?”

“Buddha.”

Half-lying behind the altars was a golden statue of Buddha. Certainly it was not made of pure gold; just painted in that color, and quite a long time ago. The paint was peeling off in places, with deep cracks webbing all over the statue’s heels and toes.

The figure was rather large, and glowing much brighter than the stair dragon, or the statues outside. Tai walked up and down along the Buddha, struggling to fathom where that glow was coming from. He discovered that the figure was about fifteen feet long and nine feet tall, but no source of light hidden behind it.

“This one’s glowing, too. Even stronger,” he told the monk who looked back at him closely and then spoke.

“Objects of prayers have their own auras. Like trees. Like plants. Like animals. Like any living thing. Sacred places, sacred statues, sacred objects. Many things have more life to them than people think they have.”

“Why can I see it?”

“Because you... you’ve come to have more life than other people.”

Dalai Tisein’s accent was almost gone as he said these words that got carved into Tai’s memory, never to be forgotten.

The temple’s inside was full of Thai religious symbols. Elephants. Flowers. Buddhas. Small paintings portraying the glorious deeds of Buddhist heroes. Old, dusty, and webbed, these colorful pictures still reminded Tai of his favorite comic books. But before he could make sense of the story, his contemplation was interrupted.

A young novice approached Dalai Tisein with a tray that had two cups of steaming liquid. Tai knew just too well how different the local tea was from what people drank in Russia. He hated the violet-blue stuff the hotel would try to pass off as their morning tea. The hot liquid in these cups also looked nothing like green or black tea.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Herbs. Rest. Cool,” Dalai Tisein said slowly as if he struggled to remember the words.

Tai took the cup without arguing. The smell was weird, but he was really, really thirsty, so he gulped the herbal drink down. The hot liquid burned his lips, gums, and the inside of his cheeks, but he didn’t care as long as it quenched his thirst. He felt like his dried body was about to crumble to hot, squeaky sand—if it weren’t for the drink washing it to keep it together.

The novice bowed to the monk and spoke in Thai. The boy could barely make out a handful of familiar words, so he stopped listening.

On the long flight to Thailand, he’d read a magazine article telling that every Thai man had to spend some time—at least several months—at a monastery. Thai people believed this period of solitary reflection and withdrawal from mundane affairs was what made a man.

As he remembered that, it suddenly dawned upon him, *What if it’s time for me to become a man? To serve my time. At a monastery, not in the military. At least they have tea and clean clothing here. It’s better than roam the streets in dirty rags and sleep on a bench with dogs.*

He remembered there was no cap on the time one could live in a monastery. It was up to that person to decide. Not only a Thai man could become a novice, a *samanera*, but any foreigner as well; there were no ethnic restrictions, only a long-term visa requirement. Many Thai people viewed their monastery time as a rite of passage. Others did that to atone for their sins.

“But what are *my* sins? Have I done anything wrong?” Tai whispered to the Buddha—and remembered all the dishes he’d leave unwashed in the sink. The mess he’d make of his room. The homework undone. And the math test skipped. And those chocolate candies he’d gobbled down and then smeared some chocolate across baby Alyona’s lips to prove *her* guilty instead of himself.

The glow around the statue seemed to grow brighter for a moment, scaring Tai. He suddenly remembered Dad’s magazine with naked women; he’d stolen a glance at every single picture before putting it back.

“So... so I have sins to be atoned,” he sighed, realizing he hadn’t lived his short life properly.

Tai looked down at his bare feet, then up at Dalai Tisein. He was itching to confess all his sins to this man and then ask him about becoming a monk. The boy was yet to learn that Dalai Tisein was the abbot of this small temple—and one of its three remaining residents.

But it was beyond him to tell about the magazine. He heaved a sigh.

“I must go home,” Tai said, taking his eyes off the Buddha.

“Do you have any family left?”

“No.”

“Then where’s your home?”

“I... I don’t know. Nowhere?”

“Tai,” the monk mouthed. “You’re lost for this world.”

“Why? How?” the boy protested. He’d just been told he had more life than anyone.

“Don’t think about it. Just breathe.”

“But I... I don’t know what to do.”

“And what would you like to?”

“To put things right.” He would do his chores every time. Obey Mom and Dad, whatever they asked him to do. If only he could reunite with them.

“Our temple is a good place to start doing that.”

Dalai Tisein couldn’t tell whether this prematurely grayed boy would stay at the temple, but one thing he knew for sure: over the coming days and weeks, the adolescent would be developing his astral vision under Tisein’s guidance. No one would come here looking for him; not any time soon. Too many other things to sort out for both governments. Enough time for Tisein to heal the boy’s body and soul, and to nurture his mind.

How can I help someone who lost everything at once? Everything but the light in his heart. A resilient light holding up to the winds.

Any tourist or Thai person deciding to become a *samanera* at this temple would’ve been told to sleep in a dormitory with two other novices. But not Tai. Dalai Tisein gave the boy his own bed, in a separate bedroom in the main building, and put up a hammock in the corner for himself.

There were two reasons for that. The boy’s sunburned body needed soft bedding, but his soul was in an even greater need for heartwarming conversations. None of that could be provided by the novices; they spoke no other language but Thai, which the boy hardly knew at all.

“Everything we lose is given back to us. Just in a different way,” Dalai Tisein told Tai while rubbing an oil-and-herbal mixture into his skin.

“I lost all my family. I’m alone. And I’m going crazy,” Tai said. His back itched so badly he barely contained an urge to rub it against the old man’s fingers. *Why are you barely touching my skin? Scratch it. SCRATCH IT!*

“I’m seeing things,” he finished and clenched his teeth before he’d beg the monk to scratch him.

“You’re seeing more than other people because of your pain. It opened a hidden room inside you. Now you have a *Gift of Loss*.”

“A Gift of Loss?”

“A blow that accelerates your heartbeat, and your whole body, giving you strength. The strength you didn’t know you even had.”

“What do you know about Gift of Loss? Have you... have you lost your family, too?”

“It’s not the first tsunami hitting Thailand,” the abbot said, his voice suddenly painful as if the visions of the past were coming up to torment him. “But this one was the strongest I ever heard of. I hope our people will learn from it.”

“Why? Why did we have to face it? Why did I have?” Tai said, his eyes welling with tears.

The monk gave no answer. As he finished applying the ointment, Tai sat up—and saw the sea taking Dalai Tisein’s family in his sad eyes.

This old man had survived the same grief as himself. He really wanted to help. He could be trusted.

“No pain, no gain,” Dalai Tisein said. “But when you’re not ready, an impact like that can break you. And send you to the next lesson earlier than your soul was planning.”

“Why?”

“What happened to you... happens when you have a special destiny to live up to.”

Tai didn’t get it, but asked no more questions. He couldn’t come up with any. His head felt empty, his body pleasantly heavy. The itching sensation was gone. His eyes were closing with an overcoming urge to sleep. He was down on his belly, sprawling over the bed, fresh and smelling of aloe vera (the monks used it to disinfect the bedding).

Dalai Tisein dipped the bandages into the healing potion and applied them to Tai’s sunburned back, neck, and shoulders. Then he pulled a blanket over Tai’s body. “It’s a heavy load. But if you can pull it, you get great strength.”

“Strength,” Tai said sleepily, his ribs feeling the hard wooden planks forming the abbot’s bed. The wood was soaked in oil to repel insects, the scent mixing with that of aloe. His ribs were only separated from the planks by a thin layer of strange material feeling like rough felt. But Tai was too exhausted to care.

He dropped off to sleep.

...and saw giant waves in his dream.

Chapter 5 – First Practice

A calm voice reached him, soft, and measured like a whispering surf. “Tai. Tai.”

Had the ocean not been that brutal less than twenty-hours ago, Tai would’ve loved it. But its calm was deceptive, hiding violence underneath. With his serenity supplanted by anxiety, he had to wake.

His eyes wouldn’t open. Feeling his neck badly stiff, he raised his head slightly. He’d slept the whole night in the same pose, face down and pressed into the thing that used to deserve the name of a proper pillow some years ago. Now it was only a finger-thick.

Thai people would not use the tourist-craved silicone-filled pillows themselves, knowing just too well how bad those were for your neck. After being used for a month, such a pillow would become too hard, constricting your veins and causing headache.

“Tai,” the old monk said. “You’ve slept a day and a night. Get up. You need exercise and food.”

“Yeah. I will.”

But his eyes just closed again. It was not until Dalai Tisein began to rip the stuck, crusted bandages off his back that Tai woke up for real.

“Hey! It hurts!”

Tai turned his head to look at the monk who now had a regular orange robe on, not the mourning-black one. *He looks like a tangerine. A good one, not old and wrinkled. You can’t tell if it is soft or hard unless you touch it. Looks are deceiving.*



Looks?

Tai looked around—and took joy in seeing no animals next to the monk. His lay brothers also had none. The animal spirits were probably scared off by prayers, incenses, or by the bell that Tai made a mental note of ringing every time he passed by.

Dalai Tisein removed the last bandages. Tai clenched his teeth to contain a scream.

“If you feel pain, you’re alive,” the monk said, putting fresh bandages over Tai’s burns. Then he helped the boy put his tee on. After being laundered by the lay brother, it smelled of aloe vera, like the bedsheets. The aloe vera plants were abundant in the location. Having a knife or a pair of scissors, you could easily collect a full basket of leaves. When boiled with water, they killed all harmful bacteria and bad smells.

The lay brother brought in a tray with two soup bowls. The smell told Tai it was *tom yum*, the traditional Thai hot and sour soup with prawn he’d come to love in this country. He immediately felt starving and, taking the spoon, began to eat. “*Tom yum*, yeah? Mmmmm. Love it.”

“*Tom yum nabe*. With coconut milk,” Dalai Tisein said, taking his spoon, too. He sipped his soup unhurriedly, smiling at Tai’s good appetite. “Gatun’s a good cook. But most of the time we just eat boiled rice.”

“Why?”

“We got few gifts this year. And no tourists will come here for the rest of it. We’re in for hard times. But we’ll put our faith in Buddha and brave them.”

Tai said nothing, just slowed down his spoon.

“You see, my lay brothers go to the local villages to collect food and other things. We’re almost wandering monks, although we have a temple. This is the path Buddha meant for us.

“Your lay brothers? Are you... the abbot?”

“Abbot. Philosopher. Professor at the Prince of Songkla University,” Dalai Tisein listed casually, apparently caring about these titles no more than a tortoise cared about sea breeze. “But on Phuket, I used to be mostly known as a martial artist.”

“Muay Thai?”

“No. Muay Boran. I’m White Tiger. Or rather I was. Now I’m just an old monk at a forsaken temple where I can teach my art without too many eyes watching. This is my path.”

“Teach fighting? That’s cool,” Tai said. “But why are you calling it Muay Boran and not Muay Thai? And... and I see no white tiger by your side.”

Dalai Tisein smiled. “You’re right. My tiger’s not here. It’s asleep. And you don’t want to wake it. And Muay Boran—it does exist. It’s much older and more brutal than Muay Thai. The art of eight limbs is for one-to-one combats, but Muay Boran is for war. For facing many enemies at once. It’s also known as the art of nine weapons.”

“So you can defeat a crowd with it?” Tai was so engrossed in listening that he even chewed at the lemongrass, which he never did before. The herb tasted as something between lemon and onions. “Eight are for the limbs, I see. But what’s the ninth weapon?”

“Your head,” Dalai Tisein explained, pointing at Tai’s forehead but avoiding a touch.

In Thailand, it is generally considered rude to touch a person’s head, even if they are a child. Many Thai people believe it can harm their soul. Although the monk had no bad intention, a touch could speak more than he meant.

“Who would you even fight with your head?” Tai considered what he’d just heard.

“You *always* fight with your head, first and foremost. Even more so when you deal with Birman invaders,” Dalai Tisein said and stood up. “Let’s take a walk. But first go wash your face. If you see any animals, tell me.” Walking away, he muttered under his breath, “No white tiger by my side, huh. Small wonder you can’t see it. It’s been ages. Better let it lie.”

Tai came out into the yard. The day was breaking, the sun barely showing up from behind the horizon, damp stairs descending into wet grass. It must’ve been raining at night. A novice was sweeping his broom through the puddles, the water tanks full to the point of brimming. The harvested rainwater in those elevated tanks was warmed by the sun and supplied to the monastery by pipes; a way to have hot running water without paying any utility bills. The temple had no electricity either; only candles for light and outdoor fire for cooking. And no land tax for a sacred place. That took the temple’s expenses down to zero, but still the building was a sorry sight. Located far away from tourist routes, it attracted very few visitors. No visitors, no income. The temple only survived on the abbot’s unbridled enthusiasm and resourcefulness.

Running the tap over the outdoor sink, Tai washed his face and took a look around. The stair dragon was still glowing; nothing else to report.

As he turned to look at Dalai Tisein, he saw that the abbot was exercising. Lifting his foot easily over his head and resting it against the wall, he was kneading his inner thigh. Dalai Tisein had taken a walk around the temple while Tai was washing his face; now he stood on the sandy practice ground next to the building.

When Tai approached the ground, Dalai Tisein was already striking the rough wood of a ground-mounted pillar with his bare feet, fists, knees, and elbows.

Wow. He’s hitting with full force.

The pillar would've long been destroyed by the impact if it weren't for the thick, oiled rope coiled all around it to protect the wood underneath.

"Doesn't it hurt?" Tai asked with surprise. Coming up, he punched at the pillar—and immediately pulled his hand away. The coiled rope was almost as hard as wood. Tempered by oil and sweat, by drenching rains and drying winds, it was long beyond restoration to its former softness.

"Pain has many faces. Many levels. By increasing your pain tolerance, you can stop feeling it at all. The worst pain is that from inside, Tai. Don't you know it?"

Tai nodded, feeling sad. *Like hell I don't. I lost my parents. That's real pain. Nothing else matters.* He hit on the makiwara. The impact made him wince, but he hit again. And again.

Dalai Tisein watched Tai smash his fists. He only stopped the boy when he swung so broadly the impact would've dislocated his wrist. "Don't hurry. Your knuckles need time to adapt."

"Why?"

"By hitting a hard thing repeatedly, we make our bones stronger."

"Make bones stronger?"

"Yes. But it takes months of regular practice before you can try to land a really strong blow. Be patient."

The lay brother brought oil-soaked bandages. Dalai Tisein wrapped them around Tai's knuckles and showed him how to strike the pillar without getting his hands bruised. "You can't see the bone transformation. But getting your flesh blue and swollen can put you off practice. And if the wound gets infected, it will be really, really bad for you."

"I get it."

Tai's legs had always been weak. He strongly preferred video games over running around or playing football. He saw no point in striking at the pillar with these *lame sticks* as Dalai Tisein called them, when his arms were so much stronger. However, the monk insisted on practicing his kicks as well. With his feet taped, the boy would merely touch the makiwara, watching his breath. Nonetheless, it took only fifty swings to leave him gasping for air.

Dalai Tisein stopped him again. "You have perseverance. A warrior spirit. That's good. But your body's still too weak. Never forget to warm up. Your heart and lungs need it to work well. And stretching. You must stretch and warm up before you strike."

"Warm up? How do I do that?"

"Running. It's best for you. When you can't run, do sit-ups."

"Sit-ups. Okay."

"Come. Let's do it on the beach. Air's better there."

Dalai Tisein ran off and Tai followed, although his tired feet would barely move. The elderly abbot was a surprisingly fast runner. After him, the two novices dashed off, dropping their brooms, with no one but old Gatun remaining in the temple.

They never left the temple all at once.

"Hey, wait for me!" Tai screamed on the run, the wind whistling in his ears. He ran as fast as he could, on the verge of falling, the impact of his feet hitting the hard wood of the deck shooting through his knees. His muscles were itching, but he made himself run another hundred feet. Then another. And another.

When Tai ran out onto the beach (the rocky dirt road giving place to wet sand), his sandals slipped off, and he stopped to pick them. As he reached the three men, they were in the thick of the fight, striking their limbs at each other as though to kill.

The novices whose names Tai didn't know were attacking the old monk in turns. One brother was mostly using his feet, and another his hands. The boy nicknamed them Hand and Foot.

Dalai Tisein used elbows to protect his head. When Foot lifted his weapon of choice too high, swinging too broadly, the abbot caught his foot and tossed it up into the air. The novice collapsed and rolled on the sand.

Hand attacked. But White Tiger made no move to defend himself. Instead, he counter-attacked with lightning speed, punching the novice's chest. Hand sank onto the sand, his face pale as he gasped for air.

"Breath. It's all about your breath, Tai." Dalai Tisein walked around his defeated apprentice. "Those who breathe too fast always run out of their time. And for slow breathers, life is hard, for they're too slow and always come late. Seek a middle ground. Watch your breath. It can decide the outcome of your battle. Attack as you exhale. Defend as you inhale. Relax your muscle for the air to come in freely."

"Is that why they call you White Tiger?"

"What do you mean?"

"You make your opponents' faces white."

Dalai Tisein laughed and hit Hand's back with three fingers. The novice took a hasty breath as his diaphragm relaxed at the impact.

Dalai Tisein whispered him a few words. Hand made a *wai* and walked back to the temple, still clutching at his chest. Foot followed him, limping.

A long way to come, both of you.

"You have a quick mind and a good eye for detail. Smart boy. Now repeat after me," Dalai Tisein told Tai and began to show him the moves.

The abbot stared at the turbid waves rolling over the coast. The tsunami had robbed the Andaman Sea of its transparent azure, mudding the water with sand, seaweed, and silt. Somewhere in Phuket, the steel-gray waves were casting ashore dead bodies, stunned fish, and pieces of furniture. Fortunately, the coast where the Wat Ko Sirey Temple stood wasn't affected that badly.

"What have you told him?" Tai asked as he repeated the monk's slow moves. Dalai Tisein now seemed to breathe slowly, barely moving his limbs. That allowed him to show Tai the moves in a slow fashion while practicing them.

"That it's not yet the time for him to get a *Sak Yant*."

"*Sak Yant*? What's that?"

"A life-changing pattern on your body."

"A pattern? Do you mean a tattoo?"

"You may call it that. It has protective power. And makes you stronger when you believe in its power."

"Cool. I want it."

Dalai Tisein turned his back to the boy, showing him leg strikes, so Tai couldn't see a light smile on his teacher's face.

He who is wishing is anything but dead. The little survivor was apparently coming back to life, taking his first steps, which were the hardest.

"I want a tattoo of my family," Tai said in a smaller voice. "To see their faces so I don't forget them."

Dalai Tisein's smile faded. He turned to the boy. "Tai. *Sak Yant* has magic. It's not a way to keep dear memories. It's a way to pump strength into your body. For it to have power, it should be only made by a monk who reached nirvana. *Sak Yant* is a sacred gate of truth. A door into..." The abbot paused, struggling with a choice of foreign words, when Tai suddenly froze. His eyes opened wide with terror as he stared at something behind Dalai Tisein's back.

At something on the shore.

Chapter 6 – An Otherworldly Encounter

Dalai Tisein spun around, bracing for anything from a blow to a gunshot, but found himself alone, the sea calm. The waves gently lapped at the shore, betraying no signs of the recent devastation they'd wrought—though no one had seen that deadly wave coming either. Could the boy have seen more than him?

Horror filled Tai's eyes. Unlike the monk, he watched a towering wave hurl ashore a large, weather-beaten ship. With its torn sails and mast, the wooden vessel seemed adrift, with no one steering it. The sea ejected it with a violent thrust, smashing it against the sand and coastal rocks.



The impact with a boulder pierced one side of the ship, tipping it over. Its mast plowed into the sand, and the ship came to a sudden, precarious stop, nearly capsizing. One mast snapped; another leaned dangerously. The torn side spilled its cargo: barrels and crates were strewn across the beach, heavy wooden boxes shattered and embedded in the sand.

Several people got tossed overboard. They were oddly dressed in long, buttonless shirts tucked into loose pants belted at the waist, wide boots with rolled-up shafts, their heads adorned with bandanas and ribbons tied through long, unkempt, greasy hair.

As Tai moved closer, he noticed one man's misfortune: a sharp board had sliced open his abdomen. He crawled across the sand, leaving trails of dark blood behind.

Another passenger from the mysterious ship was luckier and more agile. He got up, shook off the sand as if it were routine to be flung dozens of feet into the waves or onto the beach, and walked straight toward Tai.

The boy looked into his eyes but saw only two bottomless black abysses. As if a demon disguised as a pirate was advancing towards him. A demon armed with a real pirate's saber—or was it a rapier, or a cutlass? Tai couldn't tell for sure, but it was clear the armed figure had no intention of playing games.

Fear rooted Tai to the spot. He couldn't move. The pirate continued his advance, leaving his wrecked ship behind. Drawing his saber, he swung and... plunged it into his struggling companion's back.

He relieved him of his pain, Tai realized, but then the pirate swung the blade at him.

"Stop! Leave him alone!" came a voice Tai painfully recognized.

It belonged to a little girl. Stunned, Tai looked past the pirate to see his little sister in her light sundress standing behind the fearsome, bearded man.

"He's mine!" she declared firmly.

The pirate saluted Alyona as one might salute a ship's captain, and vanished into thin air. With him disappeared the wrecked vessel of the late Middle Ages.

On the sand next to Tai, only Alyona remained. She stood as an ethereal spirit directly across from him, looking into his eyes. She was still seven, dressed as he'd last seen her in the international hospital two days ago: sundress, sandals, two braids. Except now, the sea shimmered through her.

"Will you accept me?" she asked, sounding alive.

"I... I don't know," Tai replied, bewildered, adding quietly, "I miss you, Alyona."

"Tai. What do you see?" his mentor's voice came from behind, sounding as though it traveled down a long corridor, although the monk stood only a score of feet away. For Tai, the sounds and visions of the spirit world were now much sharper, more tangible than those of the reality.

"There was a pirate. Now, my sister," the boy replied. "Did you not see the ship?"

Dalai Tisein retrieved a set of prayer beads from his inner pocket and settled into the lotus position on the sand. Closing his eyes, he immersed himself into the ethereal realm. "What does she want, Tai?" he inquired.

"She's asking if I will accept her."

"Is she alive?" the monk asked unexpectedly.

Of course she is, Tai wanted to say, but then he remembered the events of just a day ago. He couldn't wrap his head around that. Alyona stood right there, in front of him.

"I... I'm not sure," Tai answered, snapping his eyes open. He wished he could blink it away, yet something urged him to focus on what he was seeing.

Tai's pupils dilated when, instead of disappearing, Alyona smiled at him and touched his hand. Her touch was icy-cold.

This chilling contact made him see even more. Tai suddenly noticed his sister's neck was unnaturally twisted, the vertebrae stretching the skin in a way that showed they were clearly out of place. Her head looked as if it had been rotated and then set back incorrectly.

"Her neck is broken," Tai murmured softly, careful not to hurt his sister's feelings.

"Her soul is not at peace, Tai," Dalai Tisein added with a calm that belied his racing heart, feeling a spiritual presence. "Ask her what she wants. What can she give you for accepting her?"

"Why should I charge her?" Tai was confused.

"That's the way of the spirit world. A favor for a favor. Worlds only come in touch when they need something from each other."

Meanwhile, the spirit crossed her arms and protested, “Slava, why are you listening to this old man? It’s me—your sister!”

“You... you drowned. The tsunami. Remember?” Tai managed to say, his voice stumbling.

He longed to stay here with her, to hug her, to spin her around and share his stories of weird animals and glowing statues. Yet he knew that only the wet sand under his feet, the sea before him, and the old man sitting behind him were real.

And everything else... what was it? A different world? An overlap of realities?

“Yes, I drowned,” Alyona admitted easily. “So what? Do you think life ends there? No, brother. It just becomes different.”

“What kind of different?” His curiosity spiked about what lay beyond.

“Now I can be anywhere in the sea,” she explained cheerfully, as if recounting thrilling adventures. “I can swim among the reefs. Play with dolphins. Or even roam around ships and make friends with pirates.”

“Why make friends with pirates?” He remembered the armed man who’d mercilessly finished off his companion.

“Because they’re all here, in the sea. Forever.”

Tai’s eyes widened as the spirit twirled around him, adding, “Do you realize how important I am now? They all accept me. Will *you* accept me, brother?”

Tai had a lot questions, but he focused on asking the most pressing ones. “Accept you? What does that mean?”

“It means that you will keep my soul and I’ll protect you from any danger coming from water. You will never drown. Never choke on water. You’ll never be afraid of depths. Keeping my soul, you’ll be a friend to all seas and rivers and lakes. Water will be your family, dear brother.”

Tai smiled, though it was a sad smile, with tears brimming in his eyes.

Alyona returned a warm smile, showing off her pearly teeth. “Just agree already. What’s there to think about? I’ve discovered so much. I can tell you so many things. It’s so much more fun than going to school. We can play together as much as you like. I mean it, Slava.”

“Tai, what is she saying?” the mentor’s distant voice reached the boy’s ears. “What is she giving you?”

“She says I’ll be a friend of the sea and all waters,” the boy relayed. “She’s asking me to keep her soul.”

“Do you like this idea?” the monk asked, carefully choosing his words so he wouldn’t disrupt the fragile connection between the two worlds. A family bond isn’t easy to sever, but a careless word, gesture, or thought could make the spirit angry.

“She’s my sister. I can’t feel any other way,” Tai replied as he took in all the familiar details on his sister’s clothing: the brooch on her sundress, the hair clip shaped like a Thai flower. It was definitely her. Their mother had bought that clip at a store near the hotel the first day they arrived.

His sister looked as if she was ready to go shopping with their parents, just as he’d last seen her in the hospital ward.

Was it yesterday? No, the day before. Can our parents still be nearby? Can they come here too? They have to. They must. We’re a family. But... they’re dead! Dead. Dead.

“You’re all dead!” Tai screamed out, about to yell at Alyona to go away and stop confusing him.

He knew spirits were cruel. Every tale, movie, and book warned to stay away from them. Nothing good ever came from these interactions.

“Worlds shouldn’t come in touch. This one and that one—they should keep apart!” Tai exclaimed.

“Why shouldn’t they? Brother?” his sister asked calmly.

Instead of answering, Tai cried, his throat tightened. Bitter curses and demands stayed unspoken. He desperately wanted to hug her. But reaching out for her ethereal form, he felt the same cold.

Cold and emptiness.

She's shed her body like old clothing, the boy thought.

A pain in his chest made him long to become older and stronger, at least for his sister's sake. As her older brother, he should tell her not to mix with pirates. But how could he tell her that after driving her away?

Clutching his fists, Tai, the boy with gray locks peeking out from under his cap, summoned his courage and shouted, "I accept your soul, Alyona! I will be your keeper. I don't care what people or spirits say. I love you. You are my sister. I will protect you. I'm your brother!"

His sister smiled, revealing a noticeable gap where a baby tooth had recently fallen out, a detail she'd been self-conscious about, refusing to smile in photos. But now, none of that mattered.

I wonder if our digital camera could survive. I'd give anything for our family photos.

As Tai smiled back at the spirit, he suddenly felt drained of strength. His legs buckled. The sounds of the physical world assaulted his ears.

Consciousness left him, and darkness clouded his vision.

Opening his eyes, Tai saw Dalai Tisein's puzzled face. The old man was rubbing his forehead with coconut pulp, using oils to revive him. It didn't immediately make him feel better, but then a breeze blew, and something cold was applied to his forehead, refreshing his mind.

The monk pushed the other half of the coconut, filled with juice, to the boy's lips. Gently supporting his head, he allowed the recovering boy to sip a few mouthfuls.

"You're a keeper, Tai," Tisein declared.

Collecting the oily coconut juice with his parched lips, the boy asked, "What does that mean?"

"You see unrested souls," the monk explained. "You hear them, and you can respond. More importantly, they listen to you."

"What should I do?"

"Think of it as a game. But remember, only those who loved you in life will mean you no harm. Others might use you, or worse—harm you."

"How do you know all this? You didn't see the pirate. Or my sister," Tai remarked, draining the last of the coconut milk. The taste was overly sweet, but it quenched his thirst.

Dalai Tisein smiled sheepishly. "I must confess, I am more than a martial artist or a temple abbot."

"How so? This is your temple, and you... you fight."

"All these worldly clothes," the monk said with another peaceful smile, "are merely to fulfill my primary role. Some know me as a Buddhist liberator. In the West, people like me are called exorcists."

The boy had heard this word before, once or twice, but its meaning escaped him. "What exactly do you do?"

"I drive unrested souls and other demonic presences away from our world," the monk elaborated. "But I can only sense them. You can do more. You can *see* them."

"I can," Tai repeated, pulling his legs in and hugging his knees. It baffled him how the old man could discuss these topics so calmly—topics that, in another setting, would've landed him in an asylum. Yet, his questions only multiplied.

"Why can't you see them?" Tai squinted. "And you aren't going to drive Alyona away, are you? She's good. I've known her all my life."

The monk shook his head. "I don't know, Tai. I'm certain of one thing—we have much to learn from each other. I propose we work together."

"Work together? With me?" the boy was surprised. "But I'm ten years old."

“What does age matter? It’s ability that counts,” the monk replied, clearly having his own plans for him. “You’ll teach me to see that world. I’ll teach you to be a keeper.”

“Can you really do that? Is there even a manual for this sort of thing?”

“I learned to understand that world, Tai. After leaving professional sports, I read and studied extensively. I came across secret manuscripts and ancient books. I know things that aren’t typically spoken of, but since they exist, we must learn to deal with them.”

“Well,” Tai drew out the word, unsure what to say. “That pirate... So you’re going to teach me? And who taught you?” He squinted at the old man, guessing him to have been taught by another abbot.

“I’m self-taught,” Dalai Tisein responded. “This isn’t something that can be taught, Tai. It must be embraced. Stay in the temple, and we will learn from each other.”

“What about my home? What about Russia?”

“You said you have no one there,” the monk reminded calmly. “Where will you go? Your home is where you are.”

Tai fell silent, his mood darkening. Realizing his blunder, the monk added, “Grow stronger, and you’ll be able to decide for yourself where and who you want to be with. You can come back to your homeland whenever you wish. No one can take that away from you. But for now, it’s better to stay and learn.”

Tai gave Dalai Tisein a close look. The monk seemed uneasy, struggling to find the right words. “That other world is serious,” he tried to explain. “We can’t ignore it. But what do we really know about it? Not much, if you give it a thought. Take my offer, Tai. You have the freedom to choose your path, but it already took you to a temple of Buddha. That means you’re needed here, in the Kingdom.”

Thinking it over, Tai gave a nod. He’d never met his father’s family; his maternal grandparents had passed not long ago. His mother had no siblings; she’d inherited their house and, selling it, paid the family’s sea vacation.

He turned out to have no one but neighbors still remembering him back there. None of them would probably care to take him in instead of sending him to an orphanage where he’d rather not end up. But what other choice he had? This paradise island took away everyone who cared about him.

“I feel like a spirit myself,” the boy muttered. “Nowhere to go. No one waiting.”

“You’re not a spirit,” the old man countered. “You’re alive. More alive than ever. You’ll stay missing until the time is right. I’ll try to secure new documents for you, as a refugee.” The mentor stood and extended his hand. “Come.”

“Where?”

“It’s about to rain. It will distract you, and you need to focus. We’ll find a sheltered spot for meditation and discuss everything there.”

“Rain?” Tai looked up at the sky, which only had a couple of small clouds. The weather seemed pleasant, the sky tranquil. How could it rain?

The old monk smiled. “Trust my old bones. They’ve known many fractures. The rain will be heavy.”

Climbing the temple stairs, Tai caught his breath and gazed at the sky in bewilderment. The wind had quickly brought clouds, changing the scene as if flipping a slide in a presentation. Rain began to fall suddenly, like a wall of water. Extending his hand from under the roof, Tai watched the raindrops linger on his palm.

The abbot and the novices had disappeared. Alone, Tai rang the temple bell and watched the puddles quickly form in the courtyard.

His hands gravitated back to the bell. He felt an overwhelming urge to ring it, filling the air with its melodious sound. Tai dreaded the silence. It felt like it could rip him apart from the inside.

Touching his belly, he muttered quietly to himself, “So much void inside. It’s not noise the rain makes. It’s mourning all the dead.”

“Are they treating you okay here?” a squeaky voice asked from behind.

Tai turned around. Alyona stood there, playing with her braid, the flower-shaped clip securely in place.

“Yeah,” the boy replied, shaking his head.

He scrutinized his sister. His imagination conjured a scene of her being swept out of her bed by a massive wave, or caught by surging waters on her way to breakfast, then violently thrown against a wall, her neck twisting before she could comprehend what was happening.

Maybe she was still asleep and never understood what happened? Is that why she has no bitterness?

Yet, Tai resolved never to ask his sister if she remembered the moment of her death.

“I’ll come to you every time it rains,” Alyona added. “Is that okay?”

“Yes. I miss you. Please come,” he blurted out, then fell silent, tears welling up in his eyes. He struggled to hold them back.

“I miss you too. Don’t worry. I’m here for you,” Alyona declared and smiled again. “We’re family. A family sticks together.”

“Yeah.”

“Chin up, brother. When the sea’s calm, I’ll take you to the dolphins.”

“Okay,” the boy smiled through his tears, much like the monk often smiled.

“You can call me when on the seashore or by any water. I’ll come,” his sister promised and then vanished along with the fading rain.

Tai closed his eyes and wiped the tears away with the back of his hand. No, the rain wasn’t crying. It was his soul shedding tears. Where were they all coming from, that much water? How could he stop them?

The abbot reappeared in front of him, holding a small plastic basket filled to the brim with elongated, round, orange fruits. He pulled out a folding knife, expertly sliced open a ripe mango along its pit, and handed it to Tai. “Eat. These are mango fruit. Sweet. Juicy.”

Tai took the mango with a hint of reluctance and sniffed it. The mango even smelled sweet. When he tasted the ripe fruit, the sweet juice was better than honey.

He bit into the flesh, juice running down his fingers. The mentor smiled contentedly and quickly cut another fruit, handing it over. “Eat. You need to regain strength. Then wash your hands, and I’ll teach you to look within.”

“How do I do that?”

“We’ll meditate. You need to learn serenity. It’s multi-layered. Anxiety serves no purpose. What you need is silence. Peace of mind.”

Tai nodded and asked, “When will I have this peace?”

The monk sighed. “All in good time. Life and death walk hand in hand. They work together. You just need to learn to see it. Take our sexton Gatun, for example. He’s eighty-two.”

Dalai Tisein pointed to Gatun, who’d settled on a bench at the temple steps and dozed off, leaning against his broom. “He’s lived a long life filled with labor and responsibilities,” the abbot went on. “He’s experienced love, separation, loss, and joy. His mind isn’t as sharp as it used to be, but he remembers his dark days and cherishes bright memories. Gatun has found peace, forgiven everyone, and let everything go. Now he simply waits for the transition. He awaits it with a serene curiosity, filled with inner harmony.”

“Is he dying?” Tai realized.

“His joints ache with pain, and his eyesight is fading,” the old monk sighed. “He’s ready to go, eager to be free from this pain. Yet, he’s not rushing death. Gatun is ready to befriend it, to accept it as his guest. But you... you too need to accept that death walks alongside us. But there’s no need to fear it. Your sister...”

“Alyona isn’t death!” Tai declared firmly. “She’s kind. She just doesn’t want to leave without me. To go... go there.”

The old man nodded. “Tai. You need to bear in mind that neither she nor anyone else should be calling you There. As long as you’re breathing, you’re needed here. Your soul made this choice when it entered you with your first cry, or your first stir in your mother’s womb—depending on what you believe in. Which faith is closer to your heart. What do *you* believe in?”

“I don’t know.”

The old man gave another nod. “It was your own choice to come into this world to learn specific life lessons. Until you understand them, there’s no reason to leave. And until you make room for other souls, you have no right to leave. Souls are immortal. They are always journeying, but one soul gives a birth to another. This is the cycle. Not only your personal Samsara but the breathing and heartbeat of the Universe.

“Death is but a small segment of this path. As long as the wheel of Samsara turns, we live on. We get reborn to learn new lessons. But someday, we will all reach Conscious Emptiness and hear its Silence. For that is where everything began. And that is where everything will end.”

Tai nodded, unsure what to say to the old man. What could he know about the afterworld if he could only feel it but not see it? It’s like a blind man discussing mountains he’s never traversed.

“So, souls come into this world,” the boy repeated. “Do you have children? Did you give life to someone?”

“I had,” the monk said, his expression darkening.

“What happened to them?”

“The sea took them,” he replied, becoming somber.

Tai was curious for details, but the monk looked so sad the boy didn’t feel right pressing him.

“You know what? I’ll stay on this island,” Tai said firmly. “May the sea never take anyone again.”

“Let’s hope for the best, Tai,” the old man sighed. “Let’s hope.”

Two months later, in February 2005, as Phuket’s life began normalizing and most hotels were restored, Slava Demchenko would be declared missing.

The abbot of Wat Ko Sirey would check the lists and realize that without a body and international concern, there was no case. With no family interest or bodies to claim, the Demchenko would soon be forgotten. Slava wouldn’t be remembered during the internment of Russians. Marked as *missing*, the gray-haired teenager would live a quiet life at Wat Ko Sirey temple, dedicating himself to serving Buddha and assisting the old monk, Dalai Tisein.

Thailand would never again endure a disaster as crushing as the one in December 2004, but the Kingdom would learn its lesson and take action.

The collective grief was not in vain. The kingdom reviewed its mistakes and soon fortified its beaches by deploying twenty-two buoys. These would form a modern, advanced tsunami monitoring system. The buoys would become part of a national alert system for giant waves caused by undersea earthquakes. On the beaches, loudspeakers would be installed to warn tourists and locals about tsunamis well before the giant waves could reach the shore.

Thailand had learned from its mistakes, and corrected them.

Chapter 7 – The White Forest

On that day, Dalai Tisein woke Tai up before sunrise. Instead of the usual routine of exercise, breakfast, and prayer, the mentor led him to a motorcycle and handed him a helmet.

“What about practice?” Tai asked, already getting accustomed to the physical demands, the omnipresent fatigue, and the constant ache in his muscles—which, strangely, had become the most pleasant kind of pain.

“Today we’re going to practice at Mai Khao Beach,” the monk declared.

“Mai Khao?” Tai repeated, unfamiliar with the name.

“It means *White Forest*,” the old man explained. “Though there are hardly any white trees left there. If we earn enough money, I’ll show you the Sirinat National Park. You can still find white trees there.”

“Where is it? Is it far?” Tai asked with a yawn.

He’d explored the area around the temple over the last week, but the prospect of venturing to a new place was thrilling—a new adventure, new emotions, and new spirit animals, which he was beginning to accept as part of everyday life.

Tai had started to classify the astral animals and other creatures he noticed around people. A few days of observation had taught him that these creatures reflected either a person’s character or their mood. Sometimes, they even served as a person’s guardian spirit, often unbeknownst to them.

The only creature Tai had ever seen around the monks was a white dragon, spotted with the abbot of another temple. Dalai Tisein was probably right about it being a family totem.

But what does that mean? Is it like a guardian spirit, but better? Stronger? Tai pondered. But his mentor wouldn’t elaborate on that. Perhaps he didn’t know the answer either.

Tai yawned again, promising himself to explore this mystery later. The world was revealing its secrets to him gradually, one at a time. For instance, he’d noted that Phuket was less humid than the Russian Far East, making his sleep more restful, breathing easier, and exercise more enjoyable. Or was it just the tropical sun?

He wasn’t bothered by mosquitoes or gnats here, unlike during similar heat back home. He felt fully rested after just six hours of sleep, plus he’d grab an extra hour’s nap in a hammock by the temple at midday when the sun was at its peak and the abbot sent him to rest in the shade after lunch.

The monk had mentioned that the Kingdom did have mosquitoes but mainly in the north, which was farther from the coast, with more forests and swamps.

“The beach isn’t far. It’s on the northwest coast,” the old man finally answered. “We’ll get there in less than an hour. The northern beach was spared by the tsunami. It’s wild, with barely any... what’s the word you call it? Barely any amenities, yes. The coast is steep. That’s why the big wave hardly reached it.”

Tai frowned. “That’s good.”

Any mention of the tsunami dampened his mood. However, the monk couldn’t completely avoid this topic. As a compromise, he’d quickly shift the conversation to something more pleasant. “At Mai Khao, you’ll find mangrove trees and casuarinas,” he added. “They’re known as *Thai pines*. Europeans love setting up pines for Christmas, right?”

“Pines?” Tai perked up. “Wow! Of course, we love them. I wanna see them. Let’s go.”

Tai was already used to palm trees with green coconuts around the temple, nearby banana trees, and ginger plants. The bright plumeria flowers the monks used to decorate Buddha statues or give to tourists with blessings lasted a long time without wilting and were nearly scentless. Plumeria garlands were worn for beauty or given as offerings to Buddha. With added candles, these flowers served as the only source of light at night.

The *manat* bracelets, tied around the wrists, were particularly popular with tourists. These amulets, charged with protective energy, were given out at temples, meant to be worn until they naturally unraveled. Made from rough fabric, they often lasted several months. However, few tourists knew that after a month of wearing a *manat*, it could be removed and tied in a car or at home for good luck, or even hung on an item of clothing—but only above the waist.

With careful handling, *manats* could last for several years, but in that case they became hazardous. Due to frequent contact with skin, they collected dirt and became breeding grounds for bacteria, particularly in a hot climate. Hence, monks prohibited gifting them; they could only be passed on to those in immediate need of a blessing.

Tai had seen *manats* getting charged by monks, acquiring a glow—and probably a healing power.

Grabbing his helmet, Tai sat behind his mentor, wrapping his arms around the monk's waist. His hands were bandaged. The mentor had soaked boxing wraps in aloe, which turned them black, and wrapped them around the boy's hands to expedite healing on his scraped knuckles, preventing infection. Tai really shouldn't have struck the pillar with full force only a few days into his practice.

"For every punch, there are consequences," the mentor told the boy, instead of lamenting. He actually liked his student's perseverance; he'd only step in when Tai's effort began to harm himself.

Dalai Tisein started the motorcycle and immediately accelerated in second gear. The old man rarely shifted gears, probably fearful of losing his slippers to any abrupt foot movement.

Or maybe he doesn't want his robe flapping in the wind? Tai guessed. Unaware of the monk's exact reasons, he still resented the moped moving too slowly. His mentor could totally use a scooter with an automatic transmission and handlebar levers for gas and brake.

You don't even need slippers to ride it. You can do it barefoot. But the temple must be really strapped for cash if their abbot is working side jobs.

So the boy held back his scooter advice. Poverty isn't a vice.

They moved slowly along the designated two-wheeler lane, riding almost at the roadside, allowing anyone who wished to pass. In the early morning, these were mainly three-wheeled tuk-tuks, where a mobile mini-kitchen had been attached to a motorcycle instead of a sidecar, with a canopy stretched over it protected the vendor from rain and sun.

The canopy was stretched directly over the metal rods welded to the motorcycle and the makeshift sidecar. It was a home-built solution, yet no Thai police officer ever stopped them. They were neither a traffic obstruction nor a danger to their riders. Why fine those who worked and survived as best they could? The government preferred to stay out of it, lenient toward off-the-books incomes. Their earners did pay some taxes, after all.

The motorcycle moved unhurriedly, giving Tai plenty of time to take in the surroundings. Thailand was mourning its dead. The spirit houses, found near every café, restaurant, home, and office, were overflowing with candles and flowers placed as offerings alongside photos and prayer sheets. Temples were open around the clock. The overloaded island airport mostly received military planes. All charter flights were canceled, and local flights were diverted to the nearest airport of Krabi, two hundred miles away from Phuket.

Planes were continuously flying overhead. The arriving military and rescue teams were restoring order on the island, cleaning up the affected beaches, and clearing debris. Tai wasn't aware of these efforts but noticed that the locals' usual *sabai* lifestyle—laid-back, unhurried, and measured—had accelerated in recent days. In the disaster's wake, everyone moved more, prayed more, and made concerted efforts to help those affected.

The old monk knew that all locals had voluntarily shortened their daytime breaks. The tsunami aftermath had shifted their focus towards the salvation of soul rather than bodily needs, making the island's temples unusually crowded. All except Wat Ko Sirey, where two novices and the sexton were

in no rush to conduct proper rituals for everyone who came to pray to Buddha. Few were willing to take the long hike to get there.

As they traveled, Tai noted a lot of Muslims among the local commuters. Women in hijabs were a common sight, speeding along on motorbikes, browsing roadside shops, and riding pickup taxis. These pickups often had plank benches installed in the back to transport more people; some had a canopy shielding the passengers from the sun. Safety measures like seat belts were absent, but the police didn't interfere unless the driving was reckless.

Tai could've never distinguished Muslim women from Thai Buddhist women if not for their specific attire—the hijab. They worked, raised, and educated their children just like the local women. It was even harder to tell Muslim men apart from Thai Buddhist men since they wore the same plain clothing.

Just short of the Sarasin Bridge connecting Phuket to the mainland in the north, Dalai Tisein turned towards the coast. Exiting the island at that time was problematic; a checkpoint was set up checking documents of all non-military and non-police transport, causing a substantial queue. The monk was well aware of that, keeping in touch with various parts of the island during these tough times. He chose not to risk taking Tai, a foreign boy without ID, beyond Phuket's borders.

Parking his motorbike in a palm tree's shade, the mentor stood on the seat, picked a couple of coconuts from the tree, and briskly walked towards the sea. Along the way, he poked a hole in each coconut with his folding knife and handed one to his student, albeit without a straw.

"Drink. The Kingdom's sun will always dry you out. Whenever you get the chance, drink as much fluid as you can."

"Thank you." Tai accepted the gift reluctantly. To him, coconut milk tasted like soapy water. He only drank it because it was excellent at quenching thirst.

Tai loved scraping out the coconut flesh afterward, but reaching it was a challenge with the small hole the mentor had made. Asking for the knife to use with his bandaged hands felt awkward, so he decided to wait for a better time.

Mai Khao Beach stretched along the coastline for eleven miles. The first thing that struck Tai, after tossing his empty coconut into a nearby trash can at the parking lot, was the complete absence of tourists.

It wasn't just the early hour; the beach was deserted and wild, with no umbrellas or vendors. No jet skis zipping along for amusement. Along the sandy stretch to the rocks, as far as the eye could see, Tai only spotted a lone fisherman. He'd cast his rod into the incoming waves or throw a net into the receding waves, pulling fish into a basket at his side, or catch shrimp with a small, handy net and stuff them into the basket as well. The best catches would soon be delivered to nearby restaurants; the rest would make his breakfast.

As the sun began to rise above the horizon, the morning freshness dispelled the lingering gloom from the tsunami's aftermath. The mentor walked to the sea, wet his toes, and took a deep breath. "It's going to be sunny all day," he declared, then briskly trotted south.

Tai didn't even bat an eye. Dalai Tisein's weather predictions were better than those from the meteorological center.

"I'd rather take a walk," he dropped. "The national park is at the end of this beach, and we're at the very start. Let's test your endurance on the sand."

"Are we walking eleven miles?" Tai asked, not particularly thrilled by the challenge.

Trudging that distance in light sandals was unappealing. Tai had quickly ditched the sneakers he was accustomed to from his home country. Good for running, they became stifling and overheated in this climate, feeling like walking on hot coals. And without socks, sand got inside.

The mentor had trained him to get around the temple barefoot, or in sandals for longer distances. Tai accepted this local custom, but the temple had no spare footwear in his size. He had to wear sandals a size too large.

The markets these days were not well-stocked. Trucks loaded with goods often languished at military cordons. A state of emergency had been declared across the country, all entertainment events canceled as Thailand mourned its losses. The Kingdom entered a period of recovery.

“And the same distance back,” Dalai Tisein added with a smile. “I’m not about to waste extra money on park tickets for both of us. Funds are tight.”

“Are we sneaking in there?” the boy wondered.

The monk raised an eyebrow. “Sneaking in? I was born long before they cordoned this place off in 1992. What right do they have to charge for access to a public place? We’ll enter from the sea, through the back door. Of course, that’s if you still have the energy to marvel at the pines.”

The pines, right! Tai remembered and picked up his pace.

His attention was soon captured by a large military airplane, painted dark green, coming in for a landing somewhere at the end of the beach, near the cliffs. Tai realized the airport was very close to the beach. He’d never been into watching airplanes, but here by the Sirinat Park, they seemed to take off and land right overhead.

I wish I could hop on one and fly back to Russia to see the snow again, Tai thought wistfully.

But no one was waiting for him there. That dampened his spirits again.

His disappointment was immediate. The local pines were nothing like those back home. Instead of coniferous needles, these tall trees had deceptive horsetail-like *leaves*, so small they indeed could be mistaken for needles.

Approaching a casuarina, Tai inhaled deeply, hoping to catch that scent reminding him of the New Year celebrations. But the scent was different as well. Moreover, the tree didn’t look much like a pine because of its trunk shape and broad branches.



Losing interest in the fake pines, Tai noticed an abundance of hammocks. Made from fishing nets or rough, woven fabrics, these were a common sight, hanging from sturdy trunks by every café.

All Thai people, no matter where they worked, indulged in an afternoon rest on a hammock on any day that wasn't a mourning day.

The sun was already scorching early in the morning. Few were eager to work under such intense heat. Yet, no one was resting either. The Thais seemed to find a compromise; they worked at half their strength, spending more time in the shade and waiting out the heat.

Heavy labor was reserved for early morning or late evening. At dawn, elderly owners of a beachside restaurant were already busy clearing debris around the trees, tidying up the area from fallen leaves and fake needles, and picking up stray trash.

"Maybe we should help them?" Tai suggested. "Will they pay us?"

"If you want to help, never ask about pay," the monk chided him, but then added, "But you're right, we're looking for paid work. These elders work for their own pleasure. They start it early, before the heat sets in. We shouldn't disrupt their enjoyment of life."

"Okay."

In the shade of the casuarinas, the heat felt more bearable. One could nap in a hammock here without getting sunburned. Silent, breezy, and tranquil, it was a perfect getaway spot. Yet, few indulged in this luxury while the nation mourned its dead.

Walking another mile along paths lined with pines, palms, and hammocks, Dalai Tisein stopped across from a swimming pool at the start of the hotel and bungalow grounds. The first tourists strolled into sight, eager to get some swim after breakfast, undeterred by the high, open waves crashing onto the steep shore, or the absence of lifeguards.

Even during an emergency, the Thai government wouldn't expel the foreigners, who generated a steady income flow for the kingdom. However, security was enhanced. Uniformed guards now patrolled the hotel grounds, while the military deterred potential looters in areas that were devastated by the giant waves but still had valuables to scavenge.

Tourists quickly adapted to the presence of guards, who didn't restrict their vacation activities or impose any bans. And the guards soon realized that many tourists were eager to swim in any weather, under any circumstances, and despite any mourning. For many, it was their first time seeing a warm sea, a dream they might've saved up for years to experience. Even after what the sea had done mere days before, nothing could stop these people from enjoying their well-deserved vacation.

Tai turned toward the hotel. A tightly strung net protected the pool from the sand and dust, sparing the pool filters extra work. The poolside was lined by cabanas and deck chairs. At the intersection of the sand, grass, and concrete pathways, there was a changing room and restrooms, and an outdoor shower spraying water from three sides at the turn of a tap.

There was also a separate foot shower, ideal for washing sand off feet or rinsing flip-flops after a beach stroll. The coarse sand could be tough on the skin, so many would rather get rid of it before stepping on clean paths.

The sand at Mai Khao was coarse and heavy; another reason the beach remained undeveloped and unpopular.

"I'll go get a job," the monk said.

"What kind of job?" Tai asked.

"There's always plenty of work, especially now," the mentor replied, looking for something to keep his student busy. "In the meantime, you can complete a small task for me."

Tai perked up. "What's it?"

"Catch a crab. There are plenty along the shore. Just look carefully."

"A crab? Easy!" Tai exclaimed and sprinted toward the sea, tuning out everything else.

Chapter 8 – The Crab

The pool was just three hundred feet away from the beach—a quick walk that all hotels on Mai Khao boasted as *prime beachfront access*. They could've all been swept away had the tsunami struck the island directly from the west. Luckily, this open beach turned out to be one of the safest. Those vacationing here were fortunate to have survived the fateful morning when a massive wave washed people away to the south and north.

On his way to the sea, Tai crossed a volleyball court where a local was already raking the sand to make it easier to walk on without sinking into sandy pits.



Tai stopped on a rise. Waves rolled ashore, up to five feet high, amusingly tossing bathers with or without inflatable rings ashore. The waves played with the swimmers, rolling them back into the water, or knocking them down as they tried to enter the surf.

Those using flotation aids, like inflatable rings, pillows, or arm floats, managed the waves best. You could only swim undisturbed by venturing far from shore, but today, few seemed willing to do so. Instead, yellow warning signs that prohibited entering the water lined the shore, but these were largely ignored. To solve that, the locals had stretched nets with buoys near hotels, at least marking a safe swimming area.

Tai squatted, touching the surf. His little sister had told him he'd be a friend to all waters; he had no reason to fear the sea. He spent some time listening to the surf and scanning the shore.

Crabs were all around, crawling out from small burrows scattering the beach from the trees to the water. They didn't care whether they hid two or twenty feet away from the water; moisture and sustenance were everywhere.

For a moment, Tai even thought he heard the crabs talking between themselves.

Can I understand crabs now?

He listened again. They definitely made some quirky, barely audible sounds. But no miracle had happened. He couldn't understand them, or the surf.

However, these sounds were soothing, relaxing him. He had no idea how many days he'd need to spend next to the waves to learn to talk with them.

Too bad Alyona hadn't told him everything. He could only talk to her again when it rains. But for now, he had a task. Remembering it, he jumped up and ran to the nearest crab to catch it on the spot. But the crab immediately retreated into the nearest burrow.

The young crab hunter began digging in the sand to extract the crab from its shelter. But it was no use. The burrow was very deep. His arms weren't long enough to reach its bottom. And how many branches could it have?

"What is this, an underground maze?" the gray-haired boy muttered.

The crabs didn't respond. Tai focused on another crab, approaching it from behind, but to no avail. The crabs' eyes could pop out and rotate in all directions, providing a 360-degree view. Using this, the crab immediately noticed his maneuver and vanished.

But the crab hunter wasn't giving up. Taking off his shoes, he made seventeen more desperate attempts to catch a crab until he collapsed on the sand, exhausted and out of breath. The crabs just kept escaping him.

"Whatcha doin'?" a Thai boy appeared before him, asking the question in English. Curiously, he looked at his exhausted peer with bandaged hands, who hastily pulled his cap over in a clear attempt to hide his prematurely gray hair, but it stuck out all around. Although Tai had become a novice at the temple, the monk hadn't shaved his head.

"Catching a crab," Tai replied, standing up.

They were the same height. The local boy had his hair cropped and ran around shirtless, in shorts and flip-flops. His skin was brown as coffee beans, well-adapted to the local sun tanning it all year round. "Why are you catching it?" he asked.

"I'm practicing."

"You should be practicing in a training camp," the local boy retorted, showing off a perfect leg stretch as he mimicked a head kick at an imaginary opponent. "You can't even fight," he noted, pointing to Tai's bandaged hands.

"I'll learn it someday," Tai promised, clenching his fist only to relax it immediately. As he dug, sand had gotten under the bandages, and now the granules irritated his wounds whenever he stretched his skin. It wasn't painful, but it was certainly uncomfortable.

"Will you learn to *think* someday too?" the local boy laughed.

"What do you mean?"

The shaved boy smiled silently and walked away toward the pool. Tai snorted and turned away, continuing his attempts to catch a crab. After two more failures, he nearly gave up.

Meanwhile, his peer came back with a large yellow plastic bucket. Scooping up some seawater, he approached the hole where the crab had hidden and poured the water in. Nearly a minute later, the crab reappeared. The local grabbed it as it peeked out of the water and proudly showed it to Tai. "See that?"

"But that's cheating! I can't do that," Tai protested, though his mentor hadn't specified *how* he had to catch the crab.

“Well, then keep chasing crabs all day until you collapse from heatstroke, Snow White,” the local mocked, pleased with himself for outsmarting the naive tourist.

“*You’re Snow White!*” Slava retorted. “I’m Tai.”

“Silly Tai,” the boy smirked, twirling the crab in front of his face.

“You’re the silly one,” Tai said, turning away. “If I want, I can catch a hundred crabs.”

“Then you’ll need a lot of energy,” the local boy added amiably. “And for that, you must eat well. Get it?”

At the mention of food, Tai’s stomach growled. He and Dalai Tisein had skipped breakfast that morning, having left before Gatun arrived. The sexton would usually prepare food for everyone, bringing fresh fruits. He was a terrific cook, making edible masterpieces from the simplest ingredients, such as rice, flour, and bananas.

“Where can we get any food?” Tai sighed. “There are only coconuts around.”

The local smirked, took the naïve foreigner by the hand, and led him towards the pool. As they walked, he lowered his voice, “I went for a pineapple at the restaurant’s garden, but the assistant chef chased me away. But they don’t chase away tourists. They take photos with the pineapples and leave. Do you know what else they do?”

“What?” Tai whispered back.

“They eat breakfast for free,” the boy pointed toward the restaurant building, surrounded by tables covered with metal-lidded dishes. “See, the dining hall? Go eat your fill. And don’t forget to bring me some.”

Tai took a close look. The smaller tables lining the walls were laid with teapots, coffee pots, stacks of clean dishes, a bread box offering loaves, buns, bread, and crackers, next to a conveyor toaster, a juice dispenser, and much more, all part of a buffet system. His mouth filled with saliva at the sight of the chilled, freshly squeezed juices. What could be better in the mounting heat?

“What are you waiting for?” the local grumbled. “You look like a tourist. Go on, help yourself. And bring me some food too. Just act like you belong here. Put on a serious face, no smiles. Tourists hardly ever smile. Go on, do it.”

“Okay. And you?” Tai snapped back to reality. “How did you even end up here?”

The other boy heaved a sigh. “I don’t look like a tourist. Our coach brought us to the beach to practice because our training camp was claimed by the military. They set up a temporary aid station there. And here, they already know me. I’ve become too familiar.”

Tai imagined a staff member dragging the boy out of the restaurant by his ear.

“Alright,” he gave in, his legs buckling as he walked to the dining area. He could barely muster any confidence, and even less audacity. Contrary to his peer’s instructions, he smiled timidly, his face turning red as a lobster as he tiptoed in. Glancing at a plate with utensils, he made his way to the tables, constantly looking over his shoulder.

“*Sawatdee khap,*” a tall staff member greeted him and gestured to an empty table.

“*Sawatdee,*” Tai replied, stumbling over the word, and shuffled away to get a plate, prohibiting himself to look back at his ambushing friend.

Grabbing a plate, he felt a surge of confidence and walked along the dishes, scooping a little of each with a buffet spoon until his plate was full. He skipped the salads with meat and chicken; they seemed too spicy. He wasn’t fond of unfamiliar soups either, but rice, puff pastries, fried bread with jam, sausages, and juices were a hit. He piled these up.

Then it was simple: a table and a fork flashing in front of him.

As Tai stuffed his face, he sneakily put rolls into his shorts pocket. Under his belt, he tucked a hot toast, and several cheesy balls found their way into his other pocket. These greasy snacks stained his clothing, but he was willing to sacrifice for feeding his accomplice.

Startled by a hand on his shoulder, Tai spun around. His heart sank when he saw Dalai Tisein standing there, looking disapproving.

Barely recognizable without his orange robe and instead dressed in a chef's apron and cap, the monk held a frying pan. Tai feared it might be used against him, but instead, the monk served him a helping of vegetable omelet, pausing to say in Russian, "Enjoy your meal. Just bear in mind that staff and their charges usually eat after the tourists, who leave plenty of food behind. Or have you caught that crab already?"

"I... I really wanted to catch a crab without cheating, but I got so tired... I promise I won't do this again," Tai stammered.

Embarrassed and feeling the monk's eyes on him, he expected a scolding, but Dalai Tisein merely said, "Don't disappoint me again, Tai. Meet me by the pool in an hour," and left without another word, surprisingly calm.

Relieved but still nervous, Tai gobbled the omelet, washed it down with fresh orange juice, and ran off to the beach.

Meanwhile, the monk silently cleaned up after Tai. The neighboring restaurant's manager, who'd been working since dawn with his staff, smiled at him. Known for learning foreign languages to chat with diners, the manager enjoyed making tourists feel at home by speaking their tongues. He knew a bit of English, French, German, Italian, Russian, and Chinese—initially just a few phrases, but each year he grew more proficient.

"This kid's full of energy. Are you taking care of him?" the manager asked in Thai, his native language.

"Someone must," Dalai Tisein replied with a hint of sadness. "He lost his parents."

"Poor boy," the manager empathized in English. "His hair turned gray."

"But he's determined," Dalai Tisein shifted to English as well. He spoke English less fluently than Russian, albeit it was more common on the island. "He trains hard, to the point of bleeding."

"He'll go far," the manager remarked in Russian. "What is that saying they have? Haste makes waste?"

"Mysterious are the ways of Buddha," the monk replied in Russian with a smile. He'd often help the manager practice his English and Russian, which was how they'd become close acquaintances.

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