

6: Phlai Kaeo goes into Saithong's room

[I/100]

After returning from Siprajan's house, Khun Chang pined and lamented for little Phim from morning to night without break.

He would not eat or sleep. He felt he was burning with love, his heart would break, his mind would not rest, his breathing would almost stop, and he would die. For many days, he could not stop thinking of her.

He stayed in his room. Whatever time of day, he lay sighing, sobbing, sighing, and simpering. 'What must I do to be close to my gentle Phim?

On that day she went to bathe with her servants and I went hide and peep at the landing, what a pity she did not see me making eyes. She turned her face away without looking!

After she came up from the river, I followed her home and went to talk with her mother, Siprajan. Nothing is changed. It should work out, definitely.

Tomorrow I'll go to humor Siprajan and ask for Phim's hand. I'll use all the tricks at my disposal. I'll offer silver, gold, and other things. Even if I look awful and have a bald head, she should be considerate.'

He continued in this agitated state until dawn came, the sun rose in the sky, and he opened his eyes to the brightness. He washed his face and got dressed.

He picked up a mirror to look at himself and his head made his heart sink. He got some soot and darkened his pate with it. He powdered all over the rest of his body.

He put on a yok, and an upper cloth with glittering gold thread. He left his room and called to his young servant boys to come along with him en masse.

He reached Siprajan's house and went up in a merry mood. Siprajan saw Khun Chang coming and welcomed him in.

She pushed over the betel tray, inviting him to take some, and chatted with him like neighbors. 'What have you come for? Don't stand on ceremony. Is your mother well?' [101]

Khun Chang grasped the opportunity to reply. 'Please let me be your humble servant, to serve you any menial way you wish.¹ My mind is full of thoughts but I'm too nervous.

¹ Literally, to use as shoes or as bowl. This phrase signals he is asking to become a son-in-law.

It's because I'm in love with gentle little Phim, sincerely. Please settle her with me, my dear lady. If she is mine, I'll bring gold equal to her body. I'm not afraid. I have piles of silver and gold.

She will walk only inside a house. Even moonlight will not be allowed to touch her body. Why be in fear of poverty and hardship? Please accept me as your son.'

Siprajan listened to everything Khun Chang had to say with a beaming smile. She would be very happy to have a rich man as a son-in-law.

She said, 'My dear Chang, whatever merit and karma decrees. If the horoscopes match, you can take my daughter into your house immediately.

Phim, oh Phim, where are you? Why don't you come out to greet the gentleman. Why not come and get to know one another? Come quick, my darling.'

Phim had seen Khun Chang arrive. She had hid behind a screen close to the wall, and listened to his story. She was furious.

'It was because of this guy I couldn't listen to the recitation and the teachings on that day!' She called back to her mother, 'I'm not coming, however much you call me.'

She pretended to call out to one of the servants and abuse him: 'Hey, Ai-Phon! You baldie, where are you off to? How come you think you're such a big shot? Can a pandan flower disguise itself as a phayom?'

You're so puffed up, boasting about money. You louse, I don't have any desire for that. You're the laziest of all the workers. The water jars are all empty because of your slacking.

What a great lover! You take too many liberties, you numbskull. You swagger about dragging your tail and courting dogs. Yech! All that powder and sandalwood oil, and your hair parted on two sides like pigtails!

Maybe a dog wanted to be born but you popped out instead. Go to hell, you cheapskate! With a face like that, who'd want to marry you? You don't know your place, you dog-licked mango! [102]

You're like a dragon-fly boasting you can race Garuda across the ocean, a little rock that thinks it's mighty Mount Meru, a forest firefly that wants to rival the sun.

You look terrible. You're like a bald crane wanting to embrace a swan that would rather play on Mujalin lake.³ You think so much of yourself but really you belong in the swamp.'

² The pandan (*toei*) reed has an insignificant flower while the phayom is a rather rare forest tree with spectacular yellow flowers.

³ A lake in Himaphan forest where the *hongsa* mythical swans live

Khun Chang understood this abuse was meant for him. He felt ashamed in front of the servants and had to get away. He took leave of Siprajan, and went down from the house immediately.

Now Siprajan was furious. She got up, grabbed a stick, chased after Phim, and beat her. 'You're uncouth, terrible, too much.

You think all that eloquence was nothing.' Thwack! Thwack! 'If you're like this, who will have you?' She beat her again and again until Phim's back was soaked in blood, and her face bathed in tears,

and her body covered in bruises. 'I'm afraid now. I won't say it again.' With her whole body in pain, she fled into the kitchen,

closed the door, shot the bolt, and sank down on the floor whimpering. 'I'm so hurt and ashamed!' Blood flowed down her back, and tears down her face.

She cried out to Saithong through her tears: 'Come and look. Where have you got to? Why don't you help me? I've been beaten almost to death. Saithong, please help me.'

Saithong heard Phim's distress and went to find her in concern. She saw the door closed and bolted, so came close to the wall and asked, 'What did you call me for?'

'Dear Saithong, I'm so upset. Mother is going to give me to that half-headed guy that I don't like, against my will. Let's run away from her and go to the wat right now.

I'll tell the novice and see what he thinks. If I hang around here much longer, I'll be destroyed for sure.' She opened the door but was still too scared to come out.

Seeing other people, she ducked back inside. She waited, popping her head out to look, until the coast was clear. Then she crept out, and went off with Saithong.

They hurried along a short cut with Phim still in tears. [103] 'Oh dear, it hurts and it's too shameful. Why is my mother so unkind?

They reached Wat Palelai. 'As I remember, the novice's kuti was *that* one.' Saithong crept up and saw the kuti was empty. Their hearts sank further.

She whispered to some other novices who were around there, 'Is Novice Kaeo still here? If not, where's he gone?' They replied, 'The abbot beat him. He ran away to stay at Wat Khae.'

'Really? Or are you trying to deceive us?' The novices assured them Kaeo had been beaten and run away. 'Karma, karma! Bad news multiplies. Sorrow piled upon heartbreak.'

Her back hurt, and she worried about the novice. She wilted into depression, tears, and gloom. She went down the stairs and asked around.

‘Does anyone have news of Novice Kaeo? Even just a word. Even if he’s at the end of the earth, I’ll go looking for him.’ They went to Wat Khae and asked the monks, ‘Please, where is novice Kaeo?’

At the sight of women, the monks crowded around and gawped. Some greeted them. Others shouted out, ‘Are you court ladies?’ ‘Where did you come from?’

Heads poked out of windows and doors. ‘We’ve never seen these two ladies before.’ They called others to come and look: ‘There, over there. See. Women. Come and look!’

After the midday meal, novice Kaeo was making dinso powder,⁴ and diligently practicing writing (*patthamang*)⁵ formulas for his teacher. Hearing the commotion, he poked his head out and saw the two ladies.

‘Oh, that’s Phim and Saithong. Come over here. You took the trouble to come looking for me? Why this sad face? What made you come?’ Seeing Phim’s swollen eyes, he was taken aback.

At the sight of Novice Kaeo, Phim managed to break into a smile. She came up the steps with Saithong, sat down close to him, and started speaking.

‘Hm! What is all this, novice? You seduce me then you run off. I want to think you have a good heart. So what about all those things you said to me?’

You gave all sorts of promises about everything. I’m a woman, what can I do? You said you’d go and ask for my hand, but I’m still waiting. Now, something big has intervened. [104]

Khun Chang asked for my hand, and my mother agreed. I was so cross I could die. I objected, and she beat me until my back nearly caved in.

This is the mother who raised me from childhood and never once before left a mark on me with a stick. But now she has no feelings. I’m pleased you have a good heart.

I want to think you would not go back on your word, on all those things you said to me. What do you have to say? Speak up, right now. Or else I’ll tongue-lash you until I feel better.’

The novice saw Phim’s bad mood. He stroked her hand soothingly and wiped away her tears. ‘That Chang is terrible. A menace. Because of him, you were abused and beaten.

This is no trifle. You’re covered in bruises. Did she tie your hands up

⁴ Novices studied Pali by writing words with this white powdered clay on a black board while simultaneously pronouncing them. The words could then be erased, and the powder collected for reuse. (Red 656)

⁵ Same word as *pathom*, primary (Red: 58).

against the wall?⁶ Is that why you're marked all over? My god, even your little finger is bruised.'

He felt devastated by what had happened to his darling Phim, and broke down in floods of tears. 'My dear darling, don't be disheartened.

After the abbot beat me, I fled to my mother. She doesn't want me to leave the monkhood because we're poor. I'm at a loss what to do. Where could I find the money for a nest egg?

So I don't dare disrobe. But I'm fed up and miserable. My love, it's not that I lack feelings. You're never out of my mind whether I'm eating or sleeping,

Raise you face, dear Phim. Your cheeks are dirty. I'll wipe the tears for you. Don't be so miserable. My heart doesn't forget my promises.'

Phim responded: 'How come you're so slow? Why can't you get some money? I'm afraid it means you don't really love me.

Oh, this is my karma! Why was I born to be a woman? I fell for your sweet words, and now it looks as if I've really fallen. I'm afraid you'll throw me away with nothing but sorrow and heartbreak.

This evening come to the house, please, novice. I'll find some money to give you. But maybe not. Maybe I shouldn't go back home. I fear mother will beat me again. [105]

Whatever will be will be. I won't go. I'll stay at this wat. I feel enormously hurt and resentful. If I stay with you, what could happen?'

'Oh jewel of my eye, it's a pity but you can't stay here. You can't eat from the alms.' He tried to cheer Phim up but she still cried, complained, and vented her anger.

'This evening I'll take leave of the abbot and disrobe. Late at night, I'll come to your house. If I pay my respects and take leave, but the abbot stands in my way, I'll run away to come to you anyway.'

With these words, he shifted so his body touched Phim's. 'Your skin is so soft and lovely. You look so beautiful, like something made in a mold, like a lotus bud bursting out behind a leaf.

Raise your face and give me a little kiss, Phim. I'm only a novice, it's not against the rules.' 'What is this! You make me feel terrible. Soon you'll be chased out of here like that other wat.

The more someone tells you not to do something, the more you do it. What is this! Someone will come and make a fuss, and we'll have to jump out of the kuti. But this one is too high, and I'm too lazy to jump. You're so uncouth, and other people are watching.

I'm going. I can't stay here. If mother finds out, things will get blown out

⁶ An old practice when beating children.

of proportion.’ She got up but still felt reluctant to leave, and turned back to speak to the novice again.

‘You must disrobe and come this evening. No more lies and messing around.’ With that, she strode out and returned home with Saithong.

They hastened along a short cut to the house, then detoured round to hide at the corner of the wall. Once they were sure Siprajan was not looking, they crept up into the house.

On the terrace, Phim bumped into a door. They ducked behind the doorway going up to the main ruean then, tiptoeing and glancing around, darted into the room.

The heat faded as the sun slid behind the hills and the world slipped into darkness. As the twilight sun was about to set, the forest was alive with the calls of animals.

Roaring and crashing sounds echoed around. Deer cowered with hair standing on end. Novice Kaeo too felt frightened and lonely.

He was so concerned for gentle Phim, he sighed and grieved. His chest trembled as if it would break open. [106] He felt he had been pierced by an arrow.

Unable to find any peace of mind, he went to see the abbot. He knelt to pay his respects and said, ‘I’m enormously unhappy. I feel there’s a bonfire raging in my chest. It’s making me sluggish, lonely, and heartbroken.

Because of past sins, I have no more merit to continue in the monkhood. The yellow robe is too hot for me. I beg the soles of Your Honor’s feet to allow me to leave. Without your blessing, I’ll be burned to death in this blaze.’

These words made the abbot sore at heart. ‘I’m very attached to you, beyond description. I was hoping you’d look after my funeral. Now you want to run off in the middle, leaving me with nothing.

As a lay person, life will be tough. Do you want to disrobe and get yourself tattooed?⁷ Once your wrist is black, it’s all hard times – carrying a hod on your shoulder until you collapse.

If the overseer likes you, things are a bit easier. He can look after you and find work that’s not too heavy. But if he hates you, he’ll use you until you ache – sawing wood, dragging big logs, everything.

With a body like yours, slender as if molded, do you think you can do all that? Or are you disrobing in the hope of being a chaophraya? Listen to me. Don’t rush to disrobe and leave.’

‘Your Honor, my beloved patron. You’re absolutely right. I can’t argue. But don’t stop me. My attachment to here is finished. Please choose the best

⁷ Phrai, subject to corvée labor, were identified by a wrist tattoo.

auspicious time.’

The abbot saw he was beyond stopping. He picked up his slate and checked the time according to the phase of the moon. He wrote in the day, month, and year of Novice Phlai's birth, and made calculations according to the manual.

He entered the results and saw the meaning as certainly as with Indra's eye. ‘Your fate is to be a soldier. But I can also divine that you've been lying to me.

I understand now why you're in such turmoil. You, my lord, have been playing at being a lover. Listen to my words and remember them well. After disrobing, you'll marry as you intend.

You'll set up house, gain some wealth, live and eat, but you won't achieve stability. You'll be separated from her and kept far apart. She'll discard you and have a new husband.

When you reach the critical age of 25,⁸ there'll be an unfortunate event. You'll be clapped in irons and locked away. At the age of 40, things will improve.’ [107]

The words of Abbot Khong made novice Kaeo's heart sink. He knelt to pay his respects and left, shaking with fright and trying to fight back despair. He entered his kuti, prostrated three times, and disrobed.

He tied on an subduing ball⁹ and a mercury amulet. He dressed in a yok with kanok-and-vine pattern¹⁰ and a flying Garuda stepping on Wasukri.¹¹

He flung across his chest a tasselled black silk cloth infused with fragrance. He put on a belt cinched good and tight, and inserted a kris with a crow's head handle.

He arranged a special set of sacrificial offerings, and cast a powerful spell for courage over rice. Then he set off with victory candles in his hand. The moon lit the way.

It was the second watch. The sky glittered with stars. In the middle, brighter than the others, shone the moon with an aura like a royal umbrella.

He hastened to the graveyard and built an eye-level shrine with a white cloth as a canopy. He lit candles which flared brightly in the darkness. He walked around the shrine making a circle with sacred thread.

⁸ *Benjaphet*, a Pali word, *benja*=5, *phet*=20.

⁹ *Luk sakot*, a round amulet made from metal leftover from casting a Buddha image, threaded on a string tied round the waist (Noranit: 17; Mat:782)

¹⁰ *Kreowan*.

¹¹ A mythical snake used for churning the ocean of milk in the creation of the world.

He entered the circle, sat in a meditation pose,¹² and summoned up the powers. All around, the lofty forest began to tremble. A storm wind thrashed through the bushes. Trees cracked and crashed down.

A great thunderbolt exploded like the thump of a giant pestle. Lightning flashed and wind whistled. The earth swayed as if it would collapse into fragments.

The ground on which he sat quaked as if being rocked by someone to break it apart. A swarm of spirits rose up – spectrals¹³ and spirits,¹⁴ which all ran towards him, their bodies transforming.

Once close, they were in awe at Phlai Kaeo's mantra and could do no harm. They all bowed, prostrated, and beseeched him, 'Lord, what do you desire here?'

The chief spirit arrived last, in a rage. He jumped up and down shouting 'Who is this? If you don't get out of here, I'll come after you, beat you, pulverize you!'

Phlai Kaeo scattered rice and yelled so loudly the sound echoed around the forest and sky. The ghouls reeled, and shrank as small as a bee's fang.

Phlai Kaeo by now was expert with magical power. He asked, 'Hey, are you the big guy? Is there anyone else in this graveyard, or is there nobody in charge here?' [108]

As if they were listening to a command from Indra, the spirits quailed and wanted to disappear into the ground, 'I'm lord of this graveyard,' said the ghoul, 'I'm the boss of these spirits, the demon-in-chief.

Wesawan¹⁵ gave me this territory as a servant of the fearless god-king.¹⁶ I've been here a long time. As for you, what business brings you here?'

'Me? A big matter.' He slashed at the ghoul with a *tamyae* vine¹⁷ and bellowed, 'Will you go with me or not? Answer quickly!' The spirit prostrated and consented to take him.

He enchanted a spirit-cloth¹⁸ with a Trinisinghe¹⁹ formula, and called the

¹² นั่งพับเพ่ง, an old word for a crossed-leg pose, now surviving in the name of Wat Phananachoeng, Ayutthaya which was originally a massive, outdoor Buddha in such a pose (Noranit:17; Kukrit: 71).

¹³ *Khamot*, A spirit with an internal source of light, which disappears when approached, rather like will-'o-the-whisp. (Phya Anuman, *Phi sang thevada*, 400.)

¹⁴ *Phrai*, a spirit with both land and water variants.

¹⁵ Vaisravana, a name for Kubera, guardian of the north, king of the yaksa (Iam, Hindu Myths 119; Phya Anuman has a picture in *Essays*, 278.)

¹⁶ Devaraja, perhaps referring to Wesawan.

¹⁷ An itchy vine.

¹⁸ *Pha yan*, a cloth inscribed with mantra in Khmer lettering and mystical diagrams with power to subdue spirits.

spirit who staggered towards him. Phlai promptly placed the spirit-cloth over the spirit's head, and slung his things on the spirit's back.

He jumped up onto the spirit's shoulder, and they glided away as if borne by a strong wind. They flew through the open woods, crossed grasslands, and cut through dense forest, aiming straight into Suphan town.

The spirit soared speedily to the house of Siprajan, crossing the fence and landing in the flower garden. The wind wafted a fragrance of white pollen.

Phlai Kaeo got down from the spirit's shoulders. 'I'll be around here. You stay in the garden until I come back.' He walked quickly to the stairway.

Phim and Saithong were both feeling unhappy. As the rays of the sun were hidden by the forest, little Phim's heart yearned and grieved.

She felt sorry for herself. She regretted giving herself away. She feared the novice was deceiving her. She worried about the shame. Her eyes welled with tears, her mind swirled, and her chest felt tight as a drum.

Night came and there was still no sign of Phlai Kaeo. 'See. He's tricked me. If he doesn't turn up tonight, I'll say farewell to Saithong by hanging myself to death.'

Saithong was hugely worried about her. She chatted away in an attempt to cheer her up. 'He's despicable, this Novice Phlai. It's late and there's still no sign of him.'

Maybe he's come and is lurking around outside for fear someone will see him.' She opened the door. 'I'll nip out to look for him.' [109]

She soon came upon him. 'Mm! A rich fellow. What did you wander off for? Phim has been waiting until late. I want what you promised me.'

Phlai Kaeo smiled and replied to Saithong: 'Please let me postpone a little. Take me to her for one more night. Tomorrow I'll give it to you, honestly.'

Saithong spread out her seamed silk upper cloth²⁰ to hide Phlai, and he walked eagerly up into the house behind her. Pretending it was accidental, he felt for her breast.

When she did not react, he grasped with his full hand. Saithong felt ticklish and embarrassed. She pushed him away. 'Hey! You're not worth helping. This is a breast, Phlai. It's not proper.'

Phlai saw she was angry. 'I only touched it a little. Forgive me. I thought it was Phim. Soft, nice and soft. May I have a kiss? Oh, I forgot.'

¹⁹ A mystic diagram. One square with another square positioned diagonally inside it, and numbers written in the chambers so they read as mystic numbers. An all-purpose tool for subduing or countering the power of other spirits. See Anuman, *Essays on Thai Folklore*, 310-1, for a diagram and a short explanation.

²⁰ *Phrae phlo*, see Mat:632-3.

'Hey! Mistaken, huh, Phlai? You think you're really good. Who've you had and where? If you create a scandal here you won't get what you want. You're too full of yourself. Be quiet and stop taking liberties.

That's her room. Creep in yourself. I don't want to see her. I'd better go to sleep.' She snatched back her upper cloth, tossed her head, and flashed him an angry look.

After Saithong left, Phlai Kaeo wasted no time. He crept to the bedroom, found the door open, and went in.

He carefully parted the curtains and mosquito net and peered in. 'Poor thing!' She was sitting with head bowed. In the glow of the oil lamp, her complexion shimmered as fair as the moon.

Pretty curls framed her sad face. Her figure was beautiful and graceful. Her skin looked golden. Everything about her overwhelmed him. He could barely restrain his desire to rush in and hug her.

Instead, he teased her by clearing his throat, 'Ahem.' Phim looked up and walked forward with her eyes still lowered. Her cheek collided with his nose, and his hand with her breast. Phim jumped away, stumbled, and uttered a squeal of shock.

She glanced round and saw Phlai Kaeo. 'Oh! You've come. What are you skulking around for? Just now I thought it was a ghost. You scared me. Haven't you had enough of horsing around?'

Phlai Kaeo doubled over laughing. He hugged her and guided her into the room. [110] They sat on the bed side-by-side, fondling. 'Eh, were you waiting for me, huh?'

'So what if I was waiting? I was miserable from thinking about you. If you didn't come tonight, I was going to say farewell to Saithong and hang myself to death.'

'Oh Phim, how come your heart could toss me away so easily? I'd have to stay in the monkhood until death, with no one else from here onwards,

just praying every evening and counting my rosary to make some merit for you. It wasn't that I was never going to come. It was because I had to take leave of the abbot.

I told him all sorts of lies, but he knew. A real teacher can see the truth. He told me not to leave and made lots of objections. So it was late by the time I could come.'

While speaking, he caressed her, stroked her hand, kissed her left cheek, then the right one, hugged her tight to his chest, pressed his face to hers, and gently guided her to lie down.

Hearts thumped. Desire pulsed through the veins. Chaos approached. On the ocean, winds whipped up waves which crashed on the shoreline, recoiled, and crashed, over and over again.

A Hainanese junk sailed into the small canal. The sky shook with thunder

and the rain drizzled down. The captain lost his way and turned the helm. The ship faltered, grounded on the shallows, and broke apart.

Phlai Kaeo sat up and said, 'My love, it's very hot. Let's go and bathe.' Phim did not hesitate. She took his hand and led him out.

As they crept along, the boards creaked. Siprajan called out, 'Who's there?' Phlai Kaeo nudged Phim to reply. 'Just me. I'm going out to bathe.'

They went to the bowl placed on the verandah and sat happily on the low bench beside it. She turned the tap and water sprayed and splashed from the lead nozzle.

He tugged at her sabai. 'I'm shy about my breasts. Hey, don't play around. I've never bathed with nothing on. People will see. Don't embarrass me, please.'

'Go on. There's only you and me. There's nobody to see, dear Phim. Bathing with your clothes on is not as cooling.' With those words, he peeled the cloth away from her breasts. [111]

In the light of the moon floating through the hollow sky, her breasts were full and fair. The water splashed on them like a shower of diamonds.

Phlai smiled. 'Darling Phim, you look wonderful in the moonlight. Let me wash you. You'll like it. I won't be rough. Soft as a spider's web.'

Phim sat close to him with a smile and stretched out her arms. Phlai hugged her tight to him and caressed her gently with his hand.

'Hey, what's this! Didn't you have enough just now? You're supposed to be washing me not crushing me. I'm very ticklish and you're annoying me. Take your hands off. You never give up, do you?'

'Forgive me. I got a bit lost. You keep getting huffy and make me beg forgiveness for everything. Please don't take offence and chew me out so easily. It's chilly. That's enough bathing.'

They got up, dressed, and powdered. Phim poured krajae water for him. 'Give me a little kiss. What fragrance is this?' She was shy, hid her face, and did not speak.

'Turn your face here. I'll powder it for you. Why should we be shy of one another. It's not necessary. Your right cheek needs to be powdered just so.' 'Don't be so fussy about my cheeks. They belong to a poor person.'

'Oh Phim, you're always hurt so easily. You keep finding fault about everything.' He guided her gently down onto the bench where they fondled and canoodled.

Phlai Kaeo began to think about the reward Saithong had asked for. 'I could find the money for her somehow, but that would be a waste of my talents as a lover.'

There's an old saying that hits the nail on the head: if a thorn pricks, use another thorn to pry it out. That's the way. Silver and gold are not what *she's*

after.' With these thoughts, he turned to Phim with a broad smile.

'I'm really worried, my gentle darling Phim,' he said pretending to pour out his innermost thoughts. 'I'll come to ask for your hand from your mother. If she refuses, I'll almost die.'

Phim had no idea of the ruse he had in mind. She turned and bantered with him. 'Don't worry. I won't make you ashamed. [112]

If our horoscopes don't match, I'll run off with you. I couldn't stay here. Whether that's for better or worse, I'll think about that later. What I'm really afraid of is that you won't ask for me.'

'Eh? How so? Why do you say that? You always pick at me in advance about everything. Please don't feel hurt so easily. But tell me really, dear Phim, what's your birth year?

Then if I'm asked, I can tell them a year which is a good match, just one single naga.²¹ I don't really believe that stuff in the manual about predicting whether we'll be good or bad for each other.

There are lots of people who elope. Do they look at their horoscopes, dear Phim? What counts is the merit we've made from the past. If there's karma, don't mention it at all, Phim.'

'Me, I'm the year of the rat. This year, I'm sixteen, just blooming.' 'Younger than me by almost two years, Phim. How about Saithong? How much older?'

'She's the year of the snake, twenty-two, as I remember.'²² Why are you asking for her year? Are you in love with her and hoping to marry her too?'

'Oh Phim, you always say such odd things. What a shameful idea. Enough of that. There's no way she's going to be my lover or wife. You're always having a dig at me.'

With these words, he encircled her again and pressed her tightly to him. He kissed her, smelling her krajae powder. Her breasts felt taut and proud enough to burst. He caressed her to sleep in no time.

Once Phim was asleep, Phlai Kaeo's turbulent thoughts turned to Saithong. He had in mind to go and start an affair with her.

'She's neither old or young. Youthful enough. Okay to look at. I felt her breasts just now and they're alright. Not flabby yet. Nice and firm. She's only four years older than me.

²¹ Need to understand this.

²² The Thai sequence of animal years is: rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, cock, dog, pig. Phim was born in a rat year and is now 16. Saithong was born in a horse year and is now 22. This matches. But Phlai says he is 18, which means he would have been born in dog year, but chapter 1 (p. 8), states Phlai was born in a tiger year. In chapter 3 (p. 9), the Mahachat festival was held in the year of the cock. But this works with neither age sequence. If Phlai was born in a tiger year and now 18, the current year is a goat year. And if Phim and Saithong's details are correct, the current year is a hare year.

Fine. I'll sneak out to find her. Even if she doesn't respond and calls me a bully, she dare not cry out and make a noise because she herself let me into the house.'

With these thoughts, he stepped down from the bed and tiptoed slowly away, glancing around. With the sound and tremor of his footfalls, Phim turned over. He edged back to her side.

He hugged her close to his chest, rocked her back and forth, and cradled her back to sleep. 'Don't you want to sleep, my Phim? Though we did it until the sweat flowed, still you're awake.' [113]

He opened a sandalwood fan and fanned her. 'There. Go to sleep, dear Phim. It's late now but you're still awake.' He caressed her back to sleep.

Once she had dropped off as he wished, he left the room and crept directly to that of Saithong.

He blew a formula for unlocking doors. The bolt sprung and slid out. He crept into the inner bedroom, sat down beside her, and embraced her.

He kissed her cheek and squeezed her breasts which lay round, proud, large, and exposed. He leant across her and blew a mantra while caressing her back to arouse her.

Saithong came to her senses immediately. She turned to see Phlai Kaeo. Her heart felt full of a craving for love.

She was touched by the God-of-Love mantra²³ which made her tremble with excitement. But her female modesty made her resist. She called out, 'Who is this?'

Phlai Kaeo smiled and replied: 'Please don't cry out. I've come to find you because I couldn't stop myself, couldn't swallow the love that's weighing down my heart. Forgive me. Don't think of yourself as Phim's elder sister.

You're not many days older than me. Making love together isn't wrong. There are lots of lovers older than this. Please don't stop me and make me disappointed.'

'This is embarrassing, Kaeo. You're a big bully. You're like a kid standing on tiptoe to chat up a grown-up. You're too used to getting your own way. No sense of restraint. You've come to wheedle me so you can take liberties.

You're a good person. You're thoughtful. So why are you giving me this trouble? If Phim finds out, it won't be pretty. She'll think I made a date for you to come here.

It'll be bad for you too, Phlai Kaeo. Coming to see me and making me upset is karma already. You may end up not tasting the cream. Think carefully. Please leave this room.'

²³ *Thepranjuan*, perhaps the god that excites.

‘What a pity. My heart felt you loved me so I dared to come, but you still chew me out. Even if Phim gets to know, don’t worry. I’ll patch things up so you don’t get any of the blame. [114]

You’ve already been kind to me. Please keep on being so. Don’t complain and make a loud fuss. I’m already this far in. You’re not listening even though I’ve got this upclose with you.’

‘You really don’t give up, do you? Do you want to raise a scandal all over the house, Mr Kaeo? You talk the talk and you come on strong. I don’t know. Here, I’ll scratch you so it shows, right now!

Eh, if I don’t get some help, who’d want to be in my shoes? All this pinching and teasing is uncouth and shameful. I thought you were a good person not a naughty one. Why are you sitting here bullying me?

Go, go! Please leave the room. If you stay, I’ll scream. I’ll make you get what you deserve for coming here to play around and seduce me. I’ll tell mother and she’ll catch you.’

Phlai Kaeo edged closer with a broad smile. He chanted a mantra and blew it onto her body, arousing her to passion.

He pleaded, ‘It’s a pity, Saithong. If you aren’t kind, you can be certain I won’t live long. I’ll probably hang myself. Just wait and see.’

With that, he teasingly picked up a cloth, tied it over a beam in the ceiling, and wrapped the end around his neck. Saithong shrieked, ‘Don’t do it, Phlai!

Come here. I’ve something for you to hear. Are you mad enough to kill yourself so easily? It’s very difficult to be born a man. Won’t you miss Phim?

She’s young and she’s got the figure of a kinnari. She’s the one you’re in love with. I’m old already and my figure is not what it was.’

Phlai Kaeo smiled. ‘You’re like Phim in every way – manners, talk, elegance. Your body and your breasts are just right. I’ve seen the lot.

Being a bit older, you must have more skill, more tricks. A full set of toys is not a bad idea.’ He edged up next to her and lightly touched her breast without squeezing hard.

They embraced and lay down side-by-side on the bed. He kissed her head very gently, and hugged her tight against his chest. ‘Please don’t be stubborn. Don’t resist and try to wriggle away.’ [115]

Saithong answered, ‘Don’t be rough with me. I’ll let you stay. I’m just worried you’ll play the loverboy act. Once you’ve had me, you’ll throw me away.

If what you’re after is love, don’t use force. And please give me your word on one thing. Be clear that you really love me. Then I’ll lie back, stay still, and let you do what you want.’

‘It’s a pity you want my word, Saithong. But I don’t object. I can swear: let

lightning strike me down. I won't lie to you and I won't cheat on you. I don't rock back and forth, really.'

With that, he blew a love-spell (*patthamang*) onto her heart. Saithong lapsed into a drowsy stupor. Her eyes fluttered and drooped. Phlai lay down on the bed.

Little by little, he shifted closer to touch her. Rain drizzled, lightning flashed, thunder rolled, wind howled. Waves battered the junk which heeled over, and sought refuge by slipping along the riverbank.

In the heavy storm, the sail was reefed to half-mast. Still, the ship wallowed and rolled heavily. Several times it had to throw anchor and heave to.

Making love with Phim was like being in the shallows at the river's edge with no waves, only some splashing ripples. With Saithong it was like being hit by a summer storm. As soon as the ship left the bay, it sank to the bottom.

Phim woke dozily and reached out for Phlai Kaeo. He'd gone. Her heart sank. 'What's going on?'

She sat up and saw the door standing open. 'Where has my love run off to? Maybe he's gone to find someone he knows. No, that's impossible here. And the time now is very, very late.

Maybe he's playing a joke on me.' She parted the curtains and looked around but could not find him. Her heart sank further and she began to cry. 'What a pity you didn't tell me where you were going.

Maybe you're angry at me for something, but I don't see I've done anything wrong. I'm surprised you've run off. Maybe you left word with Saithong. I'll go and ask.'

She crept to Saithong's room and heard the muffled sound of conversation inside. She hid behind the door listening and knew he was in the room where Saithong slept. [116]

Saithong was feeling depressed and full of uncertainty. 'Because you're strong, you tend to be a bully. I'm tainted now. You have to look after me. If you neglect me, I'll be shamed.

If Phim finds out, she'll bully me too. I'll be the minor wife and I won't be able to avoid paying respects to her, truly.'

'What's up? Why do you say that? I'll love you equally and not put one above the other. Raise your face. I'll tell you the truth about who I've loved for some time.

Remember when you came to talk about the reward for Phim? Because I loved you, I acted the part. If I'd tried to court you then, I was worried you wouldn't talk to me. I love you more by five to one.'

Listening behind the door, Phim felt gutted and burnt up with anger.

When she could stand no more, she pushed the door open with a bang, and stamped up to the bed.

She opened the mosquito net and peered in to find them in one another's arms. She glared at them in rage. Saithong jumped up from the bed. 'Kaeo forced me, dear Phim!

I tried to fend him off but he wouldn't budge. However much I protested, he just smiled. If I made any noise, I worried I'd get you into trouble. I felt blood was almost spurting out of my eyes.

Because I love you, I take what comes, bitter or sweet. Do you take me on my word? I didn't know this Kaeo of yours would be like this. Just thinking about it is degrading.'

She put on an act, lowered her face and burst into tears. Phim felt angry, bottled up, and disgusted. She spoke with acid and sarcasm.

'I thank you for having such a good heart. You're kind and considerate in every way – honest, really honest, more than Onarot.²⁴ It's all of *us* who are in the wrong.'

Then she turned on Kaeo. 'Do you think it was good to come and bully her? She's older than you but you have no qualms. She raised me from childhood.

You don't think carefully. You're just out for what you can get. It's like an adult bullying kids. It's beyond a joke, really. You're like a little monkey — like a pushy Chinese who's bent on riding a female elephant.

Good thing I came in time. Otherwise you'd probably have speared her again. It's like when Rahu swallows the moon. Only when people ring the bell does he spit it out.²⁵ [117]

'It's not like that my dear. Don't make so much of it. Please calm down. There's no need to be so angry and make things confused. Making noise will only bring shame and scandal.

The truth is I came to ask Saithong to let me postpone paying the reward that I'd promised her. Really. I'm not like that, my darling. It's a pity you're so cross with me.'

'I'm more hurt than you can imagine. My ears are full of it, everything. I heard it all. You're not telling but I saw the truth. Not just a reward, you tossed her the whole ding-dong bar of gold.'

Phim's sarcasm cut Saithong to the quick. She could not hold back and turned on her in anger. 'Struth! It's like we don't know what's going on here.

²⁴ Maybe a spelling of Anirut?

²⁵ According to the belief, an eclipse happens when the demon-god Rahu swallows the sun or moon. At that time, people ring bells and make other noise to frighten Rahu into releasing it.

It's you who has the whole bar of gold. Yes, definitely – enough of them to fill a chest. Probably over a hundred. But you don't want to share them with me, do you?

You're already thinking like a wife. You want him to go back on his promise, right? You're worried you'll lose the reward money to me. We both know what's going on here.

You've got a man falling for you for the first time. Now you won't have any use for me until the sky caves in. I busted my gut to bring you up, night after night. Is this how you repay me?

'Struth! You're not bad yourself, Saithong. You spin words like stringing a braided necklace. They sound wonderful. But laughable, ha-ha! You'd do anything to get him to fall in love with you.

And like this, why shouldn't he? Loved to stu-pe-faction. So I'm not the same. Inferior by five to one, because I can't match your pace and style.

I thank you for bringing me up – and bringing both me and an in-law into this room. There's an old saying: sisters don't share only one womb but everything else too.²⁶

Saithong shot back, 'You've so many gripes, no consideration. What will be will be, according to karma.

Your tongue is so sharp so keep going. Soon I'll thump you and knock you down. This is deep. Are you going to stand still and let me do it? Don't believe in sheer bulk. I may be small but I can be fearsome.' [118]

'If that's the way it is, you can hit me and I won't complain. I think of myself as the mistress of the house. You're the minor wife taking liberties and not knowing your place. I'll grab your hair and bash you with a coconut shell.'

'Struth! What a speech! I'm going to have to beat this sharp-tongued girl.' Phim's anger rose. 'Don't you dare hit me, Saithong!'

Phlai Kaeo was shocked and worried about the rising level of noise in the room. He jumped up and stood between them, spreading his arms to shield Saithong. 'Don't, Phim!

Hold off. Have a care for your elder sister. Noise will only create trouble, my gentle darling. Saithong, you're not sensitive to Phim. You're just throwing more fuel on the fire and making things worse.'

Three voices made even more noise. Siprajan woke from her sleep in alarm. 'What's that racket? Deafening. Like a gunshot. What are you all doing at this late hour?'

Saithong had a smart idea and called out, 'Phim's reprimanding me. I went to sleep and let a dog eat the fat.' Siprajan called out, 'Good. You deserve it.'

²⁶ Literally, enter the womb are hands and feet.

Phim smiled and helped the lie. 'I came to chase the dog away or else the whole jar of fat would've gone.' She glared at them angrily and went back into her room.

Phlai Kaeo could see how angry Phim was. He followed her, sat down beside her, and tried to make things up. He gently pushed her to lie down.

He kissed and caressed her, trying to soothe away her anger. 'Please forgive me, gentle darling.' Phim still felt hurt and pushed him away. 'Don't come and sleep in this room, my dear sir.'

Don't touch me. It's a waste of your hands. I'm not fragrant, not like Saithong. She's perfect. Is it true, you fell for her?'

'Oh what a pity, dear Phim. All the time now you don't believe me. You get at me for everything you can. Though I'm weighed down by problems, you don't see it.'

What if I come to ask for your hand tomorrow but your mother doesn't consent? My darling, that's the size of the problem. Because I felt unhappy, I went to talk the problem through with Saithong. [119]

I hadn't even chewed the betel into bits when you burst into the room. There wasn't enough time to get mixed up with Saithong. It's a pity because there's nothing. Don't be upset.'

'My, my! You're quite something. Strike a light! A real big liar. I was hiding there listening for a long time. Don't try to talk your way out of it.'

If things are like this, will we love one other in the future? You keep saying you'll ask for my hand but I'm still waiting. Even on something like that you can't stop lying. It's second nature to you to lie about everything.

I've fallen in love but it's all one-sided. You just tell me lies and give me the run-around. I made a mistake. The more I think about it, the more disappointed I am. Oh dear me, I'll be shamed.

I didn't listen to the sayings they teach us. I was too easily persuaded by a sweet tongue. They say real smart guys have about thirty-two tricks.

By comparison, this fellow has at least sixty-four. You speak as beautifully as a gamelan playing, but you don't love. I'll believe in prayers from now on.'

'It's a pity you don't believe I love you. Don't hate me. Don't think like that. I love you as much as my own heart. I want to hug and caress you all the time.'

The cry of a coel announced it was close to dawn and made them start. 'Oh! It's almost first light!' He got up, opened the window, and saw the early glimmers of light with the stars still shining.

The sun would soon chase away the darkness. The thought of leaving

made his heart sink. Sadness welled in his chest, and his eyes filled with tears. He felt his heart was being plucked out.

'I have to go. I'm so sad to leave you, my darling. Our jealous friend²⁷ has created a big problem. Look after yourself. Look out for danger and don't meddle with ruffians.

I'm scared your mother will give you to that creature. As her daughter you can't resist. She'll beat and abuse you and make you miserable.

Stay here, my lovely, light of my life.' The sun was fast approaching. They got up, already feeling the pangs of parting. Phim hung on to him not to go.

Her heart was breaking at the idea of being apart. [120] 'Late in the night I'll think back to you coming to me.

My bed will be cold at that chilly hour. I'm going to feel crushed and gloomy, like the Prince of Hell²⁸ is coming to annihilate me. It'll be nothing but tears from now on.

Will you make it all the way to Kanburi? The wild animals will give you lots of trouble. Walking on your own is lonely. Your poor feet will ache.

When the sun is high, it'll be unbearable. The more I think, the more I'm concerned about you in every way. I'm scared. Along the way it's all yang²⁹ forest. It's cold and you'll see nobody.

In the evening you'll hear only the gibbons. When they swing around and whoop-wheet, it sounds so lonely and desolate, like the cries of the spirits. Oh beloved, I'm desolate too.'

She got up with her eyes full of tears and opened a chest. She took out five chang of money wrapped in a ruby colored cloth. 'This is mine. Please take it.

Pay for an elephant to ride there. If they want ten tamlueng, just pay it. Believe me, don't walk.' Phlai took the money, his face flooded with tears.

He rested his chin on her shoulder and whispered, 'Take care of yourself. Stay in your room. Don't even poke your head out of the window. Don't go down onto the ground.'

On the point of leaving, the heartbreak seemed infinite. 'If I could divide myself in two, I'd leave one half here to keep you company. But that's beyond me. I don't have the power of Vishnu.'

Monks tolled a bell and a coucal cried in the forest, announcing it was almost dawn. Their hearts sank further. Phlai Kaeo's tears fell on Phim's shoulder.

He got up and moved to the window. 'Wait for me, my gentle darling. Within seven days, I'll come to ask for your hand.' He stood on the window

²⁷ Khun Chang.

²⁸ *Phra kan*, the black god, a name for *yom*, Yama, the king of the dead and the ruler over hell.

²⁹ *Dipterocarpus alatus*. Throughout the story, 'yang' or 'yang and yung' is used to refer to dipterocarp forest.

sill and called to the spirit.

He stepped onto the spirit's shoulder and tied the money round the spirit's neck. He turned back for a final aching farewell. 'My heart stays here, but I have to say goodbye.'

Phim raised her hands to wai him with tears streaming down her face. So pent-up she could hardly speak, she sobbed out, 'Safe journey.' [121]

Phlai Kaeo returned her wai. His tears fell on the spirit's shoulder. Both were already missing one another. The spirit whisked him away.

He kept looking back until out of sight. When he had finally gone, Phim's misery deepened. She closed the window, went into the room, and collapsed crying on the bed.

She ached and pined, softly sobbing herself into a stupor. 'Oh my Phlai Kaeo! When will you come back to lie on this pillow?'