

## 8: Phlai Kaeo is called up for the army

[I/137]

King Chiang In ruled the royal city of Chiang Mai. He had a full complement of officials and royal poets, and abundant consorts in his inner palace.

In wealth, he lacked nothing. His reputation spread far and wide among the people. Smaller cities submitted with no objection and presented tribute of gold.

One day he appeared in audience before his nobles, lords, generals, Lao<sup>1</sup> chiefs, and troops, prostrate all across the palace courtyard. He was pleased to see his principal officials.<sup>2</sup>

At that moment two Lao brought a missive that Chiang Thong,<sup>3</sup> unmindful of the king's power and merit, had switched allegiance to Ayutthaya.

It had sent tribute to the southern city, adding to the glory of the Thai capital. 'This is too much. Not proper. It will bring the Thai to attack our city.'

The King of Chiang Mai was as angry as burned by fire. 'Mm!

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<sup>1</sup> Chiang Mai was a kingdom in its own right until absorbed into Siam at the end of the nineteenth century. Ayutthaya referred to the peoples of both Chiang Mai and Lanchang/Vientiane as Lao.

<sup>2</sup> *Mukamattya*.

<sup>3</sup> As is obvious below, the site is close to Thoen, Rahaeng, and Kamphaeng Phet. Sujit: 96-9 argues that Chiang Thong is Chomthong, but that cannot be right because it is too far from these three places. Sup:60 says Chiang Thong is Lamphun, but that is impossible as Lamphun appears by name at the end of this chapter. Chiang Thong is mentioned several times in the Ayutthaya royal chronicles in the sixteenth century. King Chairacha (1534-47) camped there on a march from Kamphaeng Phet to Chiang Mai (RCA: 20). Around 1574, Naresuan moved from Kamphaeng Phet through Chiang Thong, Kumtamo, and Khrang/Khraeng en route to Pegu; and returned via Chiang Thong (RCA: 87-8, 91-2) to Sawankhalok. Two years later, the King of Chiang Mai led an army south through Chiang Thong to Nakhon Sawan (RCA: 102-3). Then another couple of years later, the King of Pegu marched through Chiang Thong to attack Kamphaeng Phet. These mentions suggest Tak/Rahaeng, as it is the point where all these routes intersect. In 1909, King Vajiravudh wrote on his travels to Sukhothai, "Found an old city about 200 *sen* [8 kms] north of Kamphaeng Phet, of medium size with wall and moat. Local people called it Thoen Thong or Kong Thong.... Probably this is the Chiang Thong mentioned many times in the chronicles and in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*." *Thieo muang phraruang*, cremation volume of Prasuthi-athonrimon (Sut Lekyanon), Bangkok, 1938, pp. 19-20. However the chronicle mentions all date from the sixteenth century. By the time *Khun Chang Khun Phaen* took shape, the name may have gone out of use and the location be unknown (as it is today). The authors of this chapter may be using a known 'old' name for effect, not to refer to a specific place. The next chapter suggests the location meant is north of Thoen. As elsewhere in *Khun Chang Khun Phaen*, the geography is accurate in the central region, but becomes vague or fictitious further afield.

This Chiang Thong is arrogant. He has no fear and wants to side with the Thai.

Before, he was subject to us. Now, he's puffed up like a two-headed bird. Hey! Conscript ten thousand fighting men.

Requisition big guns, small guns, and all other weapons. Have everything assembled within seven days. Get moving with the preparations from today.

Prap Mueang Maen will be commander of the vanguard army with five thousand conscripts and Saen Kamkong as his deputy to crush them and put them in their place.

Falan will be chief of the main army and in overall command. He has fought well in the past. Saenbadan, as his deputy, will expedite the conscription of five thousand troops.

Let them appoint a full complement of junior officers for the left and the right wing,<sup>4</sup> and many quartermasters,<sup>5</sup> a commissariat, ambush units, and scout units.

Arrange food and other supplies, including elephants and horses for transport.<sup>6</sup> After issuing the orders, he left the audience and went up to his resplendent golden residence. [138]

The lords and chiefs were in charge of conscripting troops. They beat, bribed, and badgered people into the army. If a man could not be found, they took his wife and children.

They arranged supplies of food, lances, swords, guns, elephants, horses, cattle, and buffalo in large numbers. The units were all lined up in order.

On a day calculated as auspicious for victory, the main army moved out with great fanfare, bristling with swords, lances, guns, flags of victory, and pennants<sup>6</sup> inscribed by monks.

The elephants and elephant troops marched packed together. The cavalry hastened into the forest. The four divisions<sup>7</sup> moved rapidly ahead with the shouts of the troops echoing around the forest.

When the column halted to rest and eat, the liquor jars were raised immediately. At night they camped with bonfires burning. They marched through the forest for many days.

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<sup>4</sup> This assumes there is a misprint in the original (*khaw* not *khwa*).

<sup>5</sup> *Yokkrabat*, a name for several officials of the department of the palace. Here it means officers in charge of equipping the army.

<sup>6</sup> *Thong chan*, triangular pennants flown at the head of an army. The inscriptions would be mantra.

<sup>7</sup> *Chaturong*, meaning elephant troops, chariot-born troops, cavalry, and infantry.

When they reached the region of Chiang Thong, the villagers trembled like stricken fish. They did not wait to show their faces, but closed up their doors and windows, and scattered in panic into the forest.

Neither big villages nor small put up any resistance. Some hid, some fled, tumbling over, and scrambling up again. The Chiang Mai troops gave chase, firing their guns, so that villagers fell and rolled in the dirt.

At Chiang Thong, they set up camps surrounding the whole city, and fired guns constantly to induce fear. 'We'll capture the ruler to see his face!'

Every gate was blocked by units of guard. 'If anyone comes out, seize them and chop them dead. Don't let anybody escape.'

Seeing the Lao chiefs in such force, the Phraya of Chiang Thong sat and wept. 'They have set up camps to surround us. We cannot get out. We'll die for sure.'

He trembled and lost heart. 'We cannot match them in anything. There's nobody we can call on for help. All Chiang Thong will be felled and seized.'

They discussed and agreed that they would pretend to submit without any resistance, wave the white flag, ask for conciliation, request to pay respects, and offer silver and gold flowers.<sup>8</sup> [139]

They would beg forgiveness and plead that the lives of the small people should be spared without need to run away. If Chiang Mai planned to attack and annihilate the southern city,<sup>9</sup> they would volunteer to fight alongside them until death.

'This should convince the Chiang Mai people. Then if the Thai army comes, we'll join with them and pulverize this lot. We'll fool them so our troops survive.' Having agreed on this tactic, they all mounted the walls,

waved flags, bowed, and shouted to the army officers: 'We cannot match you, sirs. Don't be suspicious. Please inform your superiors.

We beg you not to rush to slaughter us. We volunteer to help you pulverize the Thai. Allow us to make amends this once. Please be merciful and don't put us to the sword.'

The Lao chiefs and their troops were glad. They escorted the Chiang Thong people to inform Phraya Falan.

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<sup>8</sup> Among the traditional forms of tribute which a subordinate ruler presented to his overlord were models of trees, made of gold and silver and usually one to three feet high. The practice probably began in the Malay world. The reference here signifies subordination.

<sup>9</sup> Meaning Ayutthaya.

Phraya Falan heard their proposal and accepted it. 'If Chiang Thong begs forgiveness this one time, and wishes to submit and become subject to the Lao,

the city ruler and officials must come out and drink the ceremonial water of allegiance again. They must open the city gates and allow us to come and go at will.

They must draw up a complete inventory of all arms and hand them over. They must deliver all necessary food and supplies for our army. Then we'll trust in their loyalty.'

The officials of Chiang Thong accepted these conditions and took leave to return to the city and pass on the orders.

The Phraya of Chiang Thong made no objection. He ordered the city gates opened, and led his officials out.

After the water oath, the Lao officers and men ceased being suspicious of the Chiang Thong people. They traveled around freely all over the place.

Some went to court country girls. Some toured around looking for things. Some swaggered about, singing and dancing. Others got boisterously drunk on liquor. [140]

The Phrayas of Thoen and Rahaeng heard that the Chiang Mai army had come in force and taken Chiang Thong easily. They were incensed by the news that the city's ruler had not put up a fight,

but defected to Chiang Mai and agreed to stand and fight against a Thai army. They had all the details written up and sent in the early evening by horse messenger

to Kamphaeng [Phet] so Phraya Ram<sup>10</sup> was informed of the whole affair.<sup>11</sup> He understood this was a critical matter for government, and thus dispatched a fast boat downriver.

At Ayutthaya, the messenger promptly presented himself at the sala where the officer on duty broke open the message cylinder<sup>12</sup> and cross-examined him about the details.

When senior officials arrived, the duty officer informed them of the matter, and they immediately went in anger to the audience hall.

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<sup>10</sup> The title of the governor of Kamphaeng Phet was Okya/Phraya Ramronnarong Songkhramphakdi Aphaiphriyaphaha, sakdina 10,000 (indicating a first-class city) (*KTSD*, I, 320).

<sup>11</sup> This sequence suggests that Thoen, Rahaeng, and Chiang Thong were all cities subordinate to the provincial centre of Kamphaeng Phet, a strategically placed and heavily fortified place on routes between Ayutthaya and both Burma and Chiang Mai.

<sup>12</sup> Messages were sent in a wooden or bamboo cylinder, closed with clay and marked with a seal for security.

Nobles of all ranks and departments from all the various ministries were gathered waiting in front of the audience hall. They entered at the appointed time.

The almighty king came to sit on the jeweled throne at the front. Ministers and subjects attending the audience prostrated to pay their respects.

At an appropriate time, a senior official opened the message and read it out. 'Recently, Falan and Sanbadan, Chiang Mai soldiers, brought an army

and set up camps surrounding Chiang Thong. The city's ruler did not fight but submitted and agreed to drink the water of allegiance. This amounts to rebellion.

Hearing of this matter, the Phrayas of Thoen, Rahaeng, and Kamphaeng Phet have promptly dispatched this message. Whatever your lordship desires. Our life is beneath the royal feet.'

The king was enraged. He spoke to the lords and subjects in audience, 'Discuss this matter today.

Will we send a major army? Who will volunteer? Return here tomorrow to report.' With this order, the king left and returned to the palace where he slept. [141]

Both sides, military and civilian, left the audience together and went to sit in the sala to discuss the war as ordered.

The four pillars,<sup>13</sup> the departments of the capital, the treasury, and lands, discussed and argued vociferously, but nobody volunteered and no full agreement was reached, so the meeting broke up.

The nobles went home. The army chiefs were highly disappointed. Because of their position, they feared punishment arising from the lack of any volunteer.

The King of the Dvara<sup>14</sup> city of Ayutthaya, a world like heaven, sat on a brilliant jeweled throne surrounded by all his consorts and court ladies,

like Lord Amaret<sup>15</sup> of mighty power residing in the resplendent

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<sup>13</sup> *Jatsudom*, the four major ministers of the city, treasury, lands, and palace.

<sup>14</sup> Dvara, meaning gate in Sanskrit, refers to the kingdom of Dvaravati which may have existed in the Chaophraya basin before the Ayutthaya era. Reference to this kingdom was incorporated into the official title of Ayutthaya as a claim for historical depth and continuity. Historical sources on Dvaravati are scant, and there is no agreement where it was, or whether it truly was a state.

<sup>15</sup> An appellation of Indra.

Wechayan,<sup>16</sup> surrounded by heavenly angels, and regaled by the booming drums of Indra.

He pondered about the border regions and the provinces surrounding the sacred city of Ayutthaya. ‘Chiang Mai has sent an army to trample the ground up to Chiang Thong.

The ruler of Chiang Thong put up no fight but went over to Chiang Mai just like that. He has become insubordinate and seems intent on rebellion against the holy city.

Kamphaeng Phet, Thoen, and Rahaeng acted with appropriate loyalty in sending the information. Officers and troops will be sent to attack and recover Chiang Thong.’

With that resolve, he went out to preside on the resplendent golden throne surrounded by his leading officials.

The four pillars, various other departments, ministers of all ranks, subjects, and court poets, all prostrated flat and raised their hands in wai.

Amid the thunder of gongs and drums, and the fanfare of conches and horns, the king looked as sublime as the Lord Amarin seated on his immense glittering throne,

Bantukamphon,<sup>17</sup> the seat of stone, with all the goddesses arrayed around, under the resplendent Parichat tree<sup>18</sup> and the many-tiered ceremonial umbrellas of Amarin. [142]

The king spoke with the roar of a lion.<sup>19</sup> ‘Officers of all ranks. I am enraged because Chiang In has acted in an insolent and contemptuous manner towards me.

Chiang Thong belongs to Ayutthaya, yet they brought an army to besiege Chiang Thong and convert it into our enemy. We know because of information from the three cities.

Will we sit and take this quietly? No! They will exult and become yet more insubordinate. They will believe I fear their power, as if we had no soldiers in Ayutthaya.

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<sup>16</sup> Pali: Vejayanta. A name for Indra’s chariot and palace which was 1,000 leagues high and ‘covered with the seven kind of gems, that are gloriously beautiful beyond anything that can be conceived.’ (Three Worlds, 223-4).

<sup>17</sup> Pali: Pandukambalasilasasana. In Hindu mythology, it is yellow marble. In the *Three Worlds*, ‘The color is deep red like that of the flower called *sa-eng*, and it is soft as a cloth cushion or the comb of a royal golden swan. Whenever Indra sits on this stone slab, it is soft and he sinks down to his navel; but when Indra gets up and leaves the stone, the stone just fills in just as it had been before.’ (Three Worlds, 233).

<sup>18</sup> Pali: Parijata, Parichhattaka. A tree of great beauty in Indra’s Dawadeung (Tavatimsa) heavenly garden. In Hindu mythology, Krishna stole it because his wife liked it, prompting a massive war between Krishna and Indra. In the *Three Worlds*, it is a wishing tree which shelters the Pandukambala throne (Three Worlds, 233).

<sup>19</sup> A metaphor for a royal command.

Such things have happened in the past, and we used Khun Krai who has now been dead and gone for many years. This time, who will go?

I ask you officers here in audience whether or not Khun Krai had children. The directors<sup>20</sup> of the six volunteer units<sup>21</sup> should know because Khun Krai was in that department.'

Phraya Ram Jaturong<sup>22</sup> prostrated and spoke without delay: 'My liege, righteous king. My life is under the royal foot.

I have information on these matters. At the time Khun Krai lost his life, he had one son recently born, aged almost five years.

Thong Prasi fled from Suphan with the little child and disappeared. I do not know whether they are alive or dead, but I heard they are in Kanburi.'

Hearing about Thong Prasi, the king immediately asked Khun Chang, 'Your home is in Suphan.

You should know about Thong Prasi. Is her son still alive or dead? Tell us whatever you know quickly. Can he be sent to Chiang Thong?'

Khun Chang had been a page at court since childhood<sup>23</sup> and was fluent at talking with royalty. He saw a way to possess Phim Philalai as he had long intended.

He would make sure the king sent Phlai Kaeo off to war, and then he would court Phim again. With this thought, he addressed the king: 'My life is under the royal foot. [143]

The son of the late Khun Krai is called Phlai Kaeo, a brave fellow. He has a wife and lives in Suphan, but his mother is in Kanburi.

He is strong, brave, and skilled. He can raise spirits, everything. He is about seventeen years old. Let me inform the dust under the royal feet.'

The almighty king heard Khun Chang out and said: 'You, Chang,

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<sup>20</sup> *Jangwang*, the official immediately below the minister.

<sup>21</sup> *Asa hok lao*, a collective term for six units of guards, namely: the guard of the left and right (*asa sai, asa khwa*), golden shields of the left and right (*khenthong sai, khenthong khwa*), and golden spears of the left and right (*thuanthong sai, thuanthong khwa*), *KTSD*, I, 280-2.

<sup>22</sup> One of the two heads of the six volunteer units, often called Phraya Decho (*KTSD*, I, 280).

<sup>23</sup> At the end of chapter one, Khun Chang's father presented his son at court, but the king said he was too young and should be brought back later. Here we learn that this did indeed happen.

go and fetch him here. The duty guards will go with you.'

The head of the department of royal guards took the order and backed out immediately. He assigned junior officers and gave orders that Khun Chang would be in command.

They left Ayutthaya and arrived in Suphan at sunset. Without speaking to anyone, Khun Chang went up into his house to wash and make himself comfortable.

Then he went to the house of Siprajan and called out, 'Who's there? Light a torch!' Saithong saw the palace guards. 'Hey, why did Khun Chang bring them here?'

In trepidation, she informed Siprajan who invited the guard officer up into the house. 'Officer, please come up to sit and have a chat. Please take some betel – this is what we have.'

The guard officer told Siprajan the details of the royal order: 'The king wants to attack Chiang Thong.

He is looking for a good person with knowledge. Khun Chang said that Phlai Kaeo is very capable and suitable for what the king needs. So we have to find him and take him to court.'

Siprajan trembled with fear at this news. She got up, left her house in a fluster, and went straight to her daughter's residence.

She sat down and collapsed sprawling against the couple with tears flowing. Her chest heaved with deep sighs, and she cried, 'Oh, my dear children!'

Phlai and Phim did not know what all this weeping was about. 'Has someone dropped dead? One of our relatives? Who has a problem? Is that why you're crying?' [144]

Siprajan beat her breast. 'That Khun Chang could do something like this! He told the king that Kaeo is brilliant, good at knowledge.

And the king has ordered him to war, to catch and kill Lao. **What do you know about such things**, about going to war to fight enemies?

Your waist is as slim and elegant as a painting. Just a flick would shatter you into little pieces. You look in need of care. Where did this idea come from?'

Phim's chest felt so tight she would lose her mind. She wiped away her tears and angrily cursed Khun Chang: 'The villain!

The interfering, uncouth, troublemaker! Has he no fear of sin and karma? Because he's frustrated in love, he's going to do us in, truly.

He wants to separate us and send you off to suffer in the forest. From now on, we'll be far apart. In a few days, you'll be gone, my darling!'

Phlai saw his wife crying and his heart went out to her. He forced himself to speak. 'Why get worked up, curse, and cry. It's no use.

This is about royal service, army work. It's been like this since my father's time. If we take an army up there, we should be able to attack Chiang Thong successfully.

Listen to me. Don't cry. The guard has come all the way to our house. Calm down and make some food. If they don't have anything to eat, they'll say hurtful things.'

He gave orders to the servants. 'Saithong, you're in charge of the main kitchen.' He went out to sit with the guard officer and Khun Chang

He greeted them and led them out of the main hall, along the terrace and the central walkway, up to Phim's residence.

The three dropped their bottoms on a mat, and Phlai Kaeo called for the betel tray. Phim was so angry she would not go out, but pushed the betel tray in through the door. [145]

Seeing her hand, Khun Chang raised his head, and gazed at her little finger with the snake ring. Though a mosquito bit him, he did not brush it off.

Saithong and the servants found everything to make prawn patties. With chili, lime, galangal, and lemongrass, they cooked aromatic *kaeng-om* and tomyam.

When ready, the dishes were set out alongside. Women dashed in and out. Phim found Khun Chang hateful and vile. She called bald-headed Ta-Phon

to carry the rice and savories over. As old Ta-Phon walked in front of him, Khun Chang stared angrily. 'Not this bastard again.'

Phlai Kaeo smiled innocently and invited them to eat. 'This is all we have, sirs. It's dark now, not day time, no time to do anything.' Khun Chang picked up a metal drinking cup and went to wash his hands.

The food was eaten and cleared away. They chatted together in a friendly way. 'I'll truss up the Lao and bring them back. Make a name for myself.' Khun Chang saw he was serious, and made agreeable noises.

They talked till it was late and then yawned. Mattresses and pillows were arranged for the two officers to sleep comfortably. Phlai Kaeo went into his bedroom and bolted the door.

He hugged Phim tenderly with his heart breaking into fragments. They whispered together lovingly. Khun Chang craned his neck in frustration.

He shifted to lie close to the wall, and heard the sound of boards. He clapped his hand to his face and kicked his feet in the air. Sweat ran down his face and his eyes bulged.

Phlai Kaeo hugged her tightly and would not let go. They kissed, caressed, and nuzzled. 'When I'm gone, you'll be very miserable. We won't see one another for many days.'

Phim's tears fell on his chest. 'I fear you'll fall fighting the Lao.' Phlai Kaeo soothed her, 'Don't worry.' He caressed her breasts tenderly, and kissed her passionately.

Khun Chang heard the kiss and rolled over face down. 'A spirit has possessed me! Oh my god! The spirits of this house are very fierce. I'm new here and they've come to possess me!' [146]

By sunrise, Phlai and Phim were more troubled. They washed their faces and went to see Siprajan, trying to swallow their grief.

'The king has sent for me. Whatever the outcome, I first have to go to the city to find out.' Phim found clothes for him to take.

Phlai Kaeo and servants went down from the house. The guard officer warned, 'Don't be late.' By afternoon they reached the forest edge, and entered Ayutthaya. They went straight to the sala

and met with royal officials. Phlai Kaeo paid his respects and chatted. They found him good-looking with signs of being capable.

He talked well and used words appropriately. He had round, black eyes befitting a soldier. 'If you go, conclude the war, and return, it should be good for you. You'll be able to enter royal service.'

The king was pondering the affairs of the realm. When golden rays lit the sky, he walked to appear in the hall of victory.

A director of the six volunteer units bowed, prostrated, and addressed the king. 'We have the son of the late Khun Krai.

His name is Phlai Kaeo. We have talked and he will volunteer. He seems a good man with knowledge who speaks boldly and fears nobody.'

The king said, 'Bring him here quickly.' An inner guard called Phlai Kaeo to crawl in and pay his respects.

The king stared at him for a while. 'Appealing. His appearance is appropriately good-looking. Eyes round and bright. Skilled in knowledge and magic (*akhom*).'

He called out, 'Phlai Kaeo! You were born to a line of soldiers. Do not spoil the honor of your deceased kin. Perform royal service in succession to your father.'

If you gain victory over Chiang Thong, I will give you gold, silver, and cloth. Ponder carefully and be certain. Yes or no, say it!' [147]

Phlai Kaeo replied, 'My lord. The almighty one over my head. My life is under the royal foot. I volunteer, oh victorious king, to attack Chiang In and Chiang Thong and fulfill your wish without fail. As long as I live, I will not shrink from battle.'

The almighty king slapped his thigh. 'Eh! Crush them to dust. Make sure they're annihilated. Don't let the arrogant Lao come to fight the Thai!'

Rapid conscription was ordered of both soldiers and civilians in various departments, to be fully completed within the time.

The king bestowed money and clothing on Phlai Kaeo to instill the spirit of a soldier. He received the royal gifts, prostrated, and addressed the king.

'I will return home first to enchant my saddle and harness, and will return in three days.'

'Mm! Go home but don't stay long. I'll arrange the troops to wait for you.' Nai<sup>24</sup> Phlai prostrated and took leave. His servants wrapped the money and followed him out.

A senior official received a royal order to come and sit in the inner court sala and summon Phan Phut<sup>25</sup> to conscript soldiers and civilians.

'Issue call-up notices by ministries. Royal conscripts are plentiful. Tell them to round up conscripts both on and off this month's rota<sup>26</sup> and bring them in.

For those who flee and disappear, reprimand their parents and overseers. The sick can hire a replacement for cash. Get masses of elephants and horses.

Requisition guns, other weaponry, and various war materiel. Have the food supplies lined up all together. In three days, they leave for Chiang Thong.'

Arriving home, Phlai Kaeo saw Phim's face but walked straight into the house without even a smile for her. The servants deposited

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<sup>24</sup> The author here gives him a title, *nai*, for the first time.

<sup>25</sup> See note on p. 1 of ch. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Phrai were organized on a rota system. Here the order is to conscript both those due for *corvée* service this month, and those due on other months (*nok nai duean*).

the money and cloth in piles. Phim saw her husband was gloomy and distracted. [148]

She followed him headlong into the room. Kaeo saw her face and jumped up. Wearily he hugged her with tears welling. 'King Phanwasa is sending me to war

because Chiang Thong is in revolt. It has conspired with Chiang Mai and switched sides. If I disobey the king's order, my back will be crushed. So I've steeled myself to volunteer.

They told the king specifically that I'm invulnerable and strong on magic (*akhom*). If I go, they don't have to fret. The enemy will be pulverized in the blink of an eye.

I'm not so anxious about the fighting, but I'm worried about missing you. Every night I'll be remote from my love. Till I return will be almost a year.

Tonight I can still hug and caress you. But in two days, misery. The side pillow will replace me. When you think of me, you'll clutch it close.

At times for chatting, who'll there be? You'll have to tell your troubles to Saithong, woman to woman, because talking truly can help relieve misery. At times for sleeping, you'll sit and mope,

your eyes awake at midnight, beating your breast. I'm worried about little you a hundred ways. Not sick but heart-sick, you'll waste away, lose your figure and your fairness.

At times for eating, you'll turn but I won't be there. Even water will be hard to swallow. The old happiness will be lost. Every night will leave a trace of wrinkle.

Your hair won't know the tweezers.<sup>27</sup> A hundred days won't see mirror or comb. The *krajae* powder will dry up in its pot for a full year. Turmeric will go unused even if your face is dark.

The soft warm pillows will be cold to lie on. Your chest will crack from longing. Your lovely smiling cheeks will be dull and sunken.

Your heart will imagine all sorts of disaster. The more you think, the more massive the sorrow. Pining so much will make your proud breasts droop. I'm worried about you.'

Phim too was distraught about her husband leaving. She lost her composure completely. She doubled over on her chest, sobbing and sobbing so the tears splashed down. [149]

'Can you walk to Chiang Thong? Your soft feet will be sore all over. They'll swell up and collapse. And my heart will collapse along with my beloved.

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<sup>27</sup> Meaning she won't bother to pluck her hairline.

My pining will go beyond heartbreak. Who will help take out thorns in your flesh? If I went along, I could do it. I pity you sleeping in the forest.

You're used to a soft mattress, not the hard earth. The forest dust will make you itch. Who'll help scratch your back? I think about these things.

My darling, I used to make the food, morning and evening. You don't eat like other people, just a little fish and vegetables.

Even with three full meals a day, you don't put on weight, even a little. Now all you'll have will be plain and insipid, like forest roots and yams.

You won't be full and satisfied. With your slender figure, you'll hunger and weaken. Thinking about it makes me so concerned about the slight frame of this wife's one and only.

Late at night you'll think of little me. Far apart from the wife you used to have you're your arms around, you'll be sad, lonely, and randy. Wherever you look, you'll see only men.

In the dawn chill, when the gibbons whoop, you'll worry it's my voice. The sun and wind will make your body sore. You'll be so tired, you'll sleep bathed in sweat.

You'll bathe in the stream water so cold you shiver all through. Who will put on the *krajae* powder whose scent used to refresh you?

Oh, Phlai, my heartstring, you're not used to being far from love. You came to sleep with me in the bridal house twice a day. You'd talk with me

about this and that, chatting playfully, teasing, and not letting me stray from the pillow. You let me use your left hand as a cushion. When you saw I was hot, you fanned me.

You'd whisper sweet nothings, hug me, lift my chin to kiss, run your fingers through my hair, without a break all through to dawn without sleeping, too blissfully in love with me to sleep apart.

You held me so close, so loving. You didn't even roll over with your face turned away, or ever say you were a little tired. [150] When you're gone, who will hug me to sleep?

When eating, you always waited for me to sit with you. If I didn't eat, you'd plead, place the rice in my mouth, and try to please me.

I see many other couples but none loving like you loving me. Now our love is being broken in two. How to get it back again?

No way out. We fear punishment if you don't go. At least take your blanket to hug in the forest. You'll toss and turn in loneliness.

How will I sleep alone? Who will hug me to sleep against the cold? You used to be so close beside my body. Husband, lord and master, your wife will die.'

Phlai Kaeo stroked and soothed her. ‘Don’t be so sad. You’ll waste away and lose your figure. All that crying and sighing will make you weak, listless, and irritated.

Being forced apart is heartbreaking. But nothing can be done about a troubled karma. If it were possible, I’d take you along to see the forest in bloom.

You could pick the flowers you like. Those up high, we’d haul down. We’d bathe in the streams and ride horses through the forest.

Though tired, seeing your face close beside me would lift my spirits on the way to Chiang Thong. If a Lao army mounted an attack, we’d dress you as a man

with a tight shirt to flatten your chest, and a farang hat to hide your hair under the brim. You would ride carrying a sword with magnificent power, and a kris tucked in your waist.

I’d mix herbs<sup>28</sup> to make you invulnerable to all weapons. The Lao would be chopped down and crushed to dust. If you could go, I’d take you.

But it’s beyond my power to imagine getting away with it. I can’t stay here to hug you to sleep either. I’m gutted and desolate.’ A cock crowed loudly.

He opened the window a crack to glimpse golden rays lighting the sky. ‘Oh, dawn is here, darling.’ He hugged her with his face against hers, [151]

caressing tenderly, warming her against his chest, kissing long and passionately. ‘Please kiss me again to give me heart.’

Dawn lit the world. Neither could overcome their grief. Phlai Kaeo soothed her. ‘Let’s go and tell mother.’

They crept across, still locked in one another’s arms, and walked out of the room leaning on one another, tearful cheek to tearful cheek. By the time they reached mother, both were sobbing uncontrollably.

Seeing the two crying, Siprajan asked, ‘Darling, what’s the matter? What’s making you weep until your eyes are red?’

After you came back from the court last evening, you didn’t explain things to me clearly, only that Khun Chang knifed you with the king. Are you going off to war?

You didn’t say whether you’re going or not. Ever since you came back from the court, you’ve been crying. Look, this is very tedious. Both of you are stained with tears.’

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<sup>28</sup> *Wan*, a broad category of plants with medical and supernatural powers.

Phlai Kaeo told Siprajan the whole story from beginning to end. 'The king has ordered me to go to war against the Lao of Chiang Thong up north.

Right now an army is being conscripted and the capital is teeming with every kind of troops. I felt bad and took leave from the king to come home. But it's fixed that in three days the army will march.

I'm worried about Phim. When will the war be over and I return? In truth, your son's fate is bad – only three days in the bridal house.

I leave early tomorrow morning and go to suffer in the wilds. Don't count the days because it'll certainly be months. Who will be companion for Phim?

When I think about it, I'm furious at Khun Chang. He has been in love with Phim for ever. He intends to get her for himself, so he dug up a story to tell the king,

hoping I'll go and probably die. He's ingenious, silver-tongued, and smart. He'll gradually steal away soft, gentle Phim, I'm sure of it. [152]

Though my body goes, my heart stays here. I don't see anybody who can protect Phim except you, mother. Never mind. Look after her until I return.

If anyone says I've died, don't believe them and get confused. Investigate in the capital to be sure. Phim is like my own heart. Protect her well until I can return.

Humans are not sincere to anyone. They rock back and forth, in and out. Even if someone comes to talk with gold in their mouth, don't be carried away and say yes, mother.'

Siprajan watched them crying helplessly, eyes rubbed red, faces pale, sighing, sobbing, and speaking as if sleep-talking.

'Don't be worried about Phim, young Kaeo. When you're gone, nothing will happen. I've looked after my daughter for a long time, not letting even a beetle or spider touch her.

Prepare yourself to go. Don't worry about her, she'll be at home. Don't treat royal lightly. Don't stick your neck out when you shouldn't.

Make sure forts and moats are built securely. Don't be too sure of yourself and get lured into a trap. Hang back, play clever. At night don't think of sleep.

Sit guard. Set lights. Have gongs ready. Keep a unit hidden and waiting. May you win victory and take the city. Try to bring back cattle and buffalo for plowing.

Kids, come here quick! At dawn tomorrow, young Kaeo is leaving.

Go and mill some rice so it's white with no husk,  
and tie it up in sacks. Help one another to get it organized. Get a  
move on. Grind chili and salt. Make all kinds of sweets.

Where's Saithong disappeared to? May she be mauled by a tiger!  
When something's urgent, she hides or goes off somewhere. [153]

She hasn't done the betelnut, pan, and lime paste. They're  
scattered all over the place.' Siprajan harried the servants. Phim and  
Phlai went sadly back to their ruan.

I-Mi and I-Rak scooped out handfuls of fermented fish. It stank  
like maggot droppings. Siprajan scolded loudly: 'You lazy lot!<sup>29</sup>  
What's the matter with this fish? I put in the right proportions.'

I-Dam pounded and ground the chili with a ra-ta-tat sound like a  
chase. She added galangal, ginger, chili and salt, and mixed until it  
was ground fine and well blended.

Ai-Mi and I-Kuai took baskets to measure rice from the granary  
for milling. They pounded it and put it in sacks, lined up in rows.

Dried fish and huge red snakehead fish<sup>30</sup> were grilled with onion  
and garlic and put aside. Sugarcane juice and cake sugar were got  
ready. People bustled to and fro, in and out.

Different kinds of caramel<sup>31</sup> were cooked. Dehusked coconuts were  
broken open with a thwack, and shredded on a rabbit grater.<sup>32</sup> The  
coconut milk was squeezed out and put to sizzle in a hot pan.

Flour was mixed and sifted. Sugar was put in the bottom of the  
big pan. At first it was watery and easy to stir, but with heat and  
stirring it thickened.

People took turns to stir because their shoulders tired and arms got  
as stiff as if they had died. 'Like this, it sticks to the pan and gets  
messy. Use a paddle to scoop it onto a banana leaf.'

'You taste it from the edge of the pan. I'll taste it too.' 'Mmm,  
good and sweet, yummy.' When the edge had gone, they scooped  
the tastes from the middle. Half the pan disappeared. 'Really sweet!'

Siprajan said, 'Phim, why are you sitting doing nothing in the  
ruan? Your husband has to go somewhere, but you don't stir

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<sup>29</sup> Speculative. *I khi kruan*, kruan can mean truan, leg fetters, so maybe, 'You jailbirds!' Nothing else in dictionaries.

<sup>30</sup> *Chado*, ophicephalus/channa micropeltes, red snakehead.

<sup>31</sup> *Kalamae* which must come from caramel.

<sup>32</sup> A traditional grater was in the form of a stool with the grating teeth in front. These stools were often shaped like rabbits (or other animals), hence the name.

yourself. Come and help do something.

You haven't arranged the betel, pan, or tobacco. How long is the princess going to go on crying? You're like a water primrose<sup>33</sup> that puts out shoots but won't bloom. You're not paying attention to your clothes either.

Is this what you call loving your husband, just putting your face down and weeping? If I wasn't taking care of things, he wouldn't have even one piece of fish to eat. [154]

He'd be reduced to crunching on salt. You're sitting still there hugging your knees, while I'm doing everything as if I were the minor wife, not the mother-in-law.

The only noise from you is boo-hoo and oh dear me. You're not lending a hand at all, Miss Thing.<sup>34</sup> The more I scold, the more your eyelids droop. I'll have to slap you loud enough for all Suphan to hear.'

Phim was too pent up to lend a hand. She hugged Phlai and tried to swallow her tears but they flowed even more.

Her mother's scolding got to her. She left Phlai's side and began to peel the betelnut, put it into a bowl, roll and tie the pan leaf. She glanced over to Phlai as if her heart was torn.

She looked down, whimpering, her chest feeling cramped and her head in a daze. She tried to roll the pan leaf but could not. She forgot to put down the ball of cotton<sup>35</sup> which lay in her hand.

Phlai Kao moved to sit beside his despondent, sobbing wife. He stroked her soothingly and wiped away her tears. 'Don't cry so much, my darling.

I'm here with you. Please roll the pan so I can have it in the forest. Try to stop crying. Here, I'll help put the lime paste.'

He kept on stroking and fondling her until, with his closeness, her tears gradually subsided. He teased her playfully, 'There, Phim, your chest is so bruised it's swollen.'

Phim smiled and cried at the same time. 'Don't say bruised. It's completely crushed.' She quickly gathered up all the betelnut and pan into a betel box,<sup>36</sup> and put the leftover in a cloth bag with a

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<sup>33</sup> *Phaeng phuai* (*jussieua repens*).

<sup>34</sup> Literally, Lady Pendant, *nang yot sroi*.

<sup>35</sup> Cotton wool rolled between the fingers to make thread to tie the pan leaves.

<sup>36</sup> *Luam*, a cloth bag or small chest with compartments for carrying betelnut, pan, and tobacco (Red:665; Mat:764, pix).

drawstring.

‘Husband, lord, and master, come back to me before these pan leaves dry out and wilt, while the banana leaves wrapping your pungent Phetchabun tobacco are still green.’

She felt a little better after Phlai had cheered her up. Her sobbing subsided. She crawled over to fold his clothes into neat little pleats, and put them into a chest for going into the forest.

She packed a trunk with clothes, mirror, and comb as she could remember doing before. When she picked up his pillow and little mattress, the sadness returned. ‘Oh, you’ll be far from my bed, sleeping alone.’ [155]

Her pillow was embroidered in gold with a pattern of Garuda grappling intertwined with a naga. Thinking of it made her tremble in panic, and she lay down sadly on the bed.

As Phlai Kaeo’s wedding had only just taken place, his mother Thong Prasi was still in Suphan. She would see her dear son off to war,.

She summoned the servants to carry all the food supplies laid out in her house down to load onto the *kanya* boat. ‘I-Jan, don’t forget anything!’

Male and female servants bustled about. A woodstove and rice pot were sent down. Thong Prasi tottered up the stairway to talk with Siprajan.

‘Everything is ready, including the food. Are we all going, ’ Jan? Will you see your son-in-law off? Seeing his face will give you some peace of mind.’

Siprajan replied, ‘The house needs looking after and there’s nobody else. Things are still piled up outside. You take Phim to see him off.’

Thong Prasi ordered the servants to load the boat. Phlai Kaeo came out and wai-ed his mother-in-law, Siprajan.

He arranged for Thong Prasi to go and wait at a rendezvous. ‘Ban Maen.<sup>37</sup> Make sure you don’t miss it. I’ll go overland to the capital

to take leave of the king. We’ll meet on the following day. You go off by boat first, mother. Look out for the mosquitoes at night. I’ll follow tomorrow.’

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<sup>37</sup> Around 5 kms north of Ayutthaya, just south of Three Bo Trees.

Thong Prasi replied, 'Yes, I can remember the rendezvous.' She boarded the *kanya* boat with the servants. Phim went along too, sitting in the centre of the boat with her mother-in-law. The oarsman paddled the bow away from the landing, slapping their paddles and crying out, 'Long, long, short, short. What's up?

Ai-Dam, why are you turning the bows like that? I beg you.' The helmsman was not clever and turned too sharply. 'Hey, take a wider turn!' [156]

He could not correct in time. The prow hit a stump connected to the tiger's head. The whole hull was bashed hard. Some people fell in the water. Thong Prasi picked up a mat and covered herself in fright.

Phim crawled into a sack far enough to cover her head. The oarsmen looked frightened and helpless. The boat was holed by the stump and water poured in.

An oarsman dived in the water, pulled the boat free from the stump, scooped up mud, and pasted it over the hole. Everyone shouted at one another. By dawn, they were near Bang Lang.