

27: Phlai Ngam volunteers

[III/1]

Since bringing the princess to his capital, the King of Chiang Mai had never stopped thinking of his enemy. He realized there would be war before long,

because both Lanchang on one side and Ayutthaya on the other were enraged. 'If both sides bring an army at the same time, it'll be difficult to compete.

I must concentrate on defeating the Thai first, and get it over with quickly. If I can defeat the Thai on the southern side, Lanchang should be too scared to come.'

He pondered quietly until the sun was high in the sky, and then went to the Rojana audience hall where all the lords made obeisance.

He asked the senior officials in audience, 'How do you feel? The Ayutthaya king has unjustly come to seize my intended wife.

Our people were ordered to ambush them. They seized the princess, and captured their people. If the news reaches the Thai city, they'll bring an army.

Should we prepare to repel them here, or should we go down and attack them first? Consult together and decide how we should deal with them.'

The senior Lao officials consulted together and then addressed the king. 'On the issue of war, the Thai enemy is strong.

If we go down, we don't think we'll win. But if we're slow in making preparations and they bring a big army, we can't hope to compete either.

We need to think up a stratagem. We must challenge and infuriate them so they rush up here unprepared. Then we can smash the Thai army easily.'

The King of Chiang Mai agreed that this approach achieved his aim. He had a deliberately insulting missive prepared to incite them to anger. [2]

It was placed in a cylinder and given to Saen Kamkong and Tri Phetkla to take with a hundred conscripts on horseback and deliver to the border post of the Ayutthaya territory.

Tri Phet and Kamkong took the royal missive, and called up the required number of conscripts. They mounted their horses and set

off in file,

with dried rice in bags slung across their chests. Their harness, bright red shirts, and tasseled spears looked dazzling in the forest. They forded the river to Lamphun,

and crossed the Mae Tha stream¹ to reach Nakhon.² Without halting, they galloped through the forest, and reached the Thoen region in the evening. Moonlight lit the sky.

The horses and riders were becoming tired, hungry, out of breath, and weary. They ascended the hills, passed through a defile, and descended again into the forest. When the sun grew hot, they stopped to rest and allow the horses to crop the grass and recover their strength.

As soon as their tiredness passed, they mounted and set off, cracking the whip and making long strides without looking back. After three days without a break, they reached the border post of Ban Tha Kwian.³

Nai Bun, who had the title Khun Krai, saw the Lao coming and suspected it was an enemy army. He summoned the old conscripts on guard duty to stand across the road at the gateway,

holding arms at the ready. 'That's a group of Lao on horseback coming for sure. They've dressed in pink and wrapped their heads in pink. There's red all over the place.'

Some closed the gate of the outpost, and scrambled to load big guns, and raise them to the shoulder ready to shoot. 'Who goes there? Hey! Answer immediately. Friend or foe?

If friend, advance with just two horses. If foe, come on, we're not afraid.' Some came out and stood with swords raised and guns ready, while the rest prepared for a full attack.

The Lao saw the outpost detachment boldly standing to block the highway. They reined in their horses and spoke back.

'We're just little people bringing a missive. We'll come to tell you at the outpost about it.' Phetkla and Kamkong alone advanced to deliver the missive and tell [3]

¹ Amphoe Mae Tha is located where the Lamphun-Lampang road (route 11) crosses this stream.

² Lampang.

³ Cart landing village. On the watershed between the Wang and Yom valleys, now in the south of Sukhothai province. Apparently this was the frontier between Lanna and Ayutthaya. Where the modern route 1048 crosses the watershed, over a slight rise and through a rocky outcrop, there is still a sign marking the border of Lanna (actually the border between Lampang and Sukhothai provinces). They are following the Thung Saliang route, which is used several times in the story, and appears to have been the major overland route between Ayutthaya and Chiang Mai.

about Phra Thainam and his conscripts being imprisoned in Chiang Mai. ‘Our king is sending a missive to the Thai city. Forward it to the king quickly.’

The outpost guards took the missive. They went out to the forest to look at the group of horsemen, saw there was no army, and returned. Nai Phun, a corporal,⁴ was assigned to remain and keep guard.

Khun Krai took the missive, and mounted his horse. Cracking the whip, he galloped with long strides into the forest, and across Thung Saliam,⁵ making straight down to the local headquarters.

Reaching Sangkhalok, he dismounted and hurried along, leading his horses. The nobles and local officials were sitting in the court, discussing the case of I-Mei Thong.

The old Chinese offered no defense and agreed to pay a fine, saying ‘I’m ready to accept the guilt.’⁶ Seeing someone from the outpost, the officials called out, ‘Why are you standing out there looking? Come on in.’

Khun Krai went into the central hall, pushed his way through, prostrated, and crawled up to deliver the cylinder with the sealed letter. Then he explained the whole affair.

The governor⁷ and all the officials of the city – palace, treasury, and land departments⁸ – discussed together. ‘This is a major incident that has arisen.

Seizing a princess, and capturing soldiers to boot, is bold and aggressive. And the missive is rash, like a midge flying unawares into a flame.

But the first thing to get trampled will be the grass.⁹ An army will have to be raised and that will cause trouble for the conscripts. Don’t treat this lightly. We must forward it quickly. If we do nothing, there’ll be trouble, maybe fatal.

Those damn Lao have done it. Write a report and seal it straight

⁴ *Nai muat.*

⁵ The plain reached on descent from the watershed between the Wang and Yom valleys, now in the west of Sukhothai province.

⁶ This is written to have a jek accent, and we don’t really understand it. This section is interesting, because it is the first which mentions the Chinese, and it’s up in Phichit and Sangkhalok. Perhaps they were a novelty in this area at this time.

⁷ The text says ‘chaophraya’, though the city governor would have been only a Phraya as Sangkhalok was a second-class city. Below, the governor is called by his full title with the correct rank of phraya (Red: 349-50)

⁸ The ‘four pillars’ in the central government were replicated in the major provincial centers (Red: 349).

⁹ Alluding to the saying, when elephants fight, the grass gets trampled.

away.’ When the report was ready, it was put in a cylinder, tied round with string, closed with hot wax, and fixed with a seal.

Phan Mano was placed in charge of taking the report to the capital along with twenty-five conscripts to carry the package bouncing along on shoulder poles. They boarded an 18-meter *kanya* boat,

untied the bows, and rowed away from the landing with each oar pulling strongly. They churned up the water like white foam in the moonlight, and hollered loudly. [4]

At dawn they reached Tha Kasem where they cooked a meal and ate happily, both officers and men. Once full, they hurried briskly onwards. Phan Mano, the commander, sat swaying.

They passed Wat Mai, Ban Tru, and Tha Kong,¹⁰ then went down the Phing¹¹ to reach Phichit Wang Jan where the water flow drove them along. Someone sang out, ‘Hey! The prow has hit a Chinaman’s boat.’

‘Ah! The boat’s selling liquor. Let’s get some.’ ‘Hey! Give us a few scoops.’¹² ‘Pass us over a pitcher, and not a small one.’ They pushed off the Chinaman’s boat with their feet, shouting loudly.

‘A glug for you and a glug for me. Pass it on.’ The prow of the *kanya* boat collided with a bamboo. To cut a long story short, in seven days they arrived at the landing.

As soon as the boat moored at the landing, Phan Mano hurried off, followed by his servants and conscripts. He spotted a young palace lady and took a liking to her.

He clicked his tongue and smacked his lips. Smelling her scent, he raised his face like a staring buffalo. He swaggered along, glancing at her with twinkling eyes. He wandered about, flirting and forgetting himself,

until he stumbled across the porch of the Din Gate. Ta-Tin, the gatekeeper, grabbed his cloth. The waistband became loose. The gatekeeper laughed, ‘You mad dog! Sauntering along with something under your cloth.

Oh dear. It’s a country bumpkin bringing a report. What are you hiding under your front cloth? It looks like a basket of birds eggs. You dirty northerners are hopeless.’

He paid a salueng to be released. With a pale face, he went back with his men and asked for the inner court sala. It was pointed out

¹⁰ Now Amphoe Kong Krailat, on the Yom river in southeast Sukhothai.

¹¹ A waterway which crosses from the Yom River to the Nan River where the two rivers are only 3-4 kms apart, just below Phitsanulok. The Nan is a bigger river with a stronger flow. The Yom does not join the Nan until Nakhon Swan, much further south. (Red: 350-1)

¹² Again, this is supposed to be Chinese accented and we don’t understand it.

to him straight ahead.

Seeing the *hua phan*, duty officers, and reserve governors,¹³ Phan Mano sat down right at the entrance. When the duty officer came out of the hall, he promptly prostrated and presented the report.

The duty officer cracked open the cylinder on the back of a chair, and extracted the report and the royal missive. He read the message of the royal missive, and hurried off to tell the inner officials.

When the senior minister, Chaophraya Jakri knew about the royal missive, he was troubled, and ordered a copy¹⁴ made quickly to present to the king. [5]

The almighty king, the most excellent, was in a room of glittering crystal and lapis lazuli, enjoying perfect content all the time,

because the gods were ever-present to protect the righteous king. But he did not yet know about the royal missive which would greatly disturb his mood.

He would remain inside the palace until 3 o'clock when the gong sounded for him to go to the audience hall. He went to bathe

in fragrant rosewater, and was anointed with floral scent. Lady attendants crawled in bringing his splendid attire.

Once dressed, he took up a short sword with brilliant diamond inlay. Loyal inner lady attendants presented the betel tray and prostrated.

Then, followed closely by his inner ladies, and looking as splendid as the lord of the swans,¹⁵ he walked elegantly up to the Banyong Rathanat throne hall.¹⁶

The curtain was drawn back. The audience was so crowded with prostrating senior officials, nobles, and teachers on their knees that

¹³ These are all Mahathai officials. There were four posts of *hua phan*, sakdina 400; four posts of duty officer (*nai wen*), sakdina 200; and four posts of reserve governor (*ken mueang rang*), sakdina 400, posted temporarily to minor cities. Phya Manu probably dealt with *Nai khuan ru-at*, a duty officer with responsibility for correspondence. (*KTSD*, I, 225, 227; Sup:332-3; RI:138)

¹⁴ The letter from Sangkhalok was addressed to Chaophraya Jakri, so the procedure was to make a copy before presenting to king (Suphon:333).

¹⁵ Phraya Ratchahong.

¹⁶ Built by King Phetracha at the start of his reign (1688). 'Then the King manifested His holy compassion by commanding the Seat of the Jeweled Chair Holy Throne Hall be constructed on a spot within the rear of the [quarters of the] ladies-in-waiting, and by commanding a pool be dug to form a moat around the Seat of the Jeweled Chair Holy Throne Hall. Then, a glass basin having been constructed on the edge of the pool, a glass basin was constructed on the edge of the river, a water wheel was built and pipes were laid down to let water flow on in and make a fountain in the second glass basin on the edge of the Seat of the Jeweled Chair Holy Throne Hall. And the rear of the [quarters of the] ladies-in-waiting was reversed to become the front.' (RCA: 324; Red: 358)

the place looked about to burst.¹⁷

The horn and conch sounded. The nobles prostrated in rows and groups. Palace guards drove away people waiting around the doors to see what would happen as a result of the report.

When Chaophraya Jakri had the floor, he bowed his head and addressed the king. ‘My life is under the royal foot.

Chiang Mai has sent a royal missive, delivered to the outpost guards at Tha Kwian to forward onwards. Phraya Kaset Songkhram Ramnarong¹⁸ ordered Phan Mano to bring it here.

The matter concerns Phra Thainam who has been captured by Chiang Mai but not killed.’ Before the missive could be read, the king flew into a rage.

He stamped his foot hard enough to shake the royal palace. ‘Mm! These arrogant, uppity Lao. What do they have to say? Tell me.’ [6]

‘My liege, the missive states as follows. The great king, ruler over the territory of Chiang Mai, who cleaves to truth, honesty, and the teachings, a monarch of great splendor,

with power over all regions of the realm, before whom enemies quail and submit, who in a royal household text inscribed long ago on a golden sheet

is called a king-warrior with an unequalled reputation in the world, like an avatar who destroys all enemies so he may be without any irritation.

An envoy was sent with a missive to request for the hand of the gracious Princess Soi Thong, daughter of Lanchang, according to ancient custom,

in the expectation she would be consecrated in marriage as a wife of the first rank. Since she is still young and unfit for lovemaking, she was not received to be close to the royal side.

In the past, the Thai city was honest. But it has changed because its heart has been carried away by power. Phra Thainam was sent with troops to cross the forest and infringe on our territory,

with no respect for us as ruler. This was insolent and imprudent. In addition, he took the Princess Soi Thong, our love.

Hence an army was conscripted and sent in defense. It was able to defeat the enemy and seize the princess. The army commander, Phra

¹⁷ Can't find ๓๓๓ in any dix.

¹⁸ The official title of the governor of Sangkhalok (here, correctly given the title of phraya), who appears in the Three Seals Law as Okya Krasat Songkhram Ramarat Ratchasaenathibodi Sisatchanalai Aphaiphiriyapra Kromphahu, sakdina 10,000. (KTSD, I, 320)

Thainam, and his Thai men have been imprisoned but not killed.

If we did not inform you, you might suspect that we had spirited this gracious princess away, but in fact she has been received in a sandalwood residence.

If you desire the princess to leave this abode, bring an army without fear. I invite the King of Ayutthaya to a one-on-one duel on elephant back.

Whoever wins gets Princess Soi Thong to marry and enjoy with no hindrance. In the meantime, Phra Thainam will remain in prison as surety for the Ayutthaya side.

At the end of three months, all five hundred will be killed. We await your response. Whether you stake your glory to be known forever, or shirk coming from fear, is up to you. [7]

This war will be decided according to past examples. The princess will not be joined in love until the battle with the king of the Thai city shows whose power is ascendant.

Then the marriage will take place, and the honor of he who fought on elephant back and won a queen will spread far and wide.' After reading the missive, he prostrated.

The king was choked with fury. He felt as heated as if an eternal fire would reduce his life to ashes.

After a moment, he roared like a lion, stamped his foot so the hall shook, drew his sword, and waved it above his head. All those in audience shrank back

in alarm, faces pale and bodies trembling. Some could not stop betelnet spilling out of their waistband. Some hid crouching and curled over behind the pillars of the audience hall. The whole palace trembled with agitation.

Some were so afraid they wanted to worm their way into the earth. Some scrambled to crawl out backwards. The consorts huddled together in alarm. The king again roared like thunder.

'Mmm! This Chiang Mai is evil. He captures my troops, and insolently challenges me to a fight. Such bluster is not proper.

This piffling country makes bold to fight with *me!* It's like a single young deer come to die fighting a lion.

Me, the pillar of the city, whom no country dares oppose. This fellow is confused and ignorant. His karma has made him think badly.

Chiang Mai is no bigger than one handful. It's not fitting for a Thai army to engage them. His whole clan will be wiped out. He boasts he will fight an elephant duel with me.

He makes up stories that he asked for the princess' hand and they gave her to him, so he doesn't look shameful. But it's generally

known that the envoy came to give the Lanchang princess to me.

If he had the power that his missive claims, they would have feared his authority and not resisted. But because they knew he was evil, they presented the child to this city. [8]

Seizing the princess in the forest was shameful. He has captured Thainam in order to kill him. Why leave this as a burden on the earth.¹⁹ Hey, Phraya Jakri! Prepare an army immediately.

In three days, I'll lead it to Chiang Mai. If I can't take the city, I won't return. Conscript troops from the tributary cities, large and small, every one of them. Squeeze them to the last man.

Don't let this Chiang Mai get away with this. Wherever we engage them, chop them to dust, until their city is deserted and abandoned. Raze even its walls and forts.'

The four pillars²⁰ felt as if they were pierced by an arrow. Trembling, they nudged one another, and got Chaophraya Jakri to reply.

'My liege, almighty king, pinnacle of the city, great monarch, whose abundant barami enhances the royal authority.

If your majesty is thinking of war, there is no thorn that stands in the way. But I crave your majesty's pardon, that it will be damaging to your royal authority in the long run.

For something no more than this, it is not fitting that the king should go to battle with the forest Lao. Are there no officers for such purpose?

Your royal reputation may be besmirched, while Chiang Mai gains in glory by saying this is a duel between the kings of the world. It is not fitting to bring the sky down to the earth.

At the time of King Rama, Hanuman volunteered, and accomplished the dispelling of the demons and the restoration of Sida to the city.²¹

Suppose on this occasion, the king were to go to Chiang Mai and lose all the capital's troops. I beg the victorious king to preserve his honor by replicating the time of King Rama.'

The almighty king, pinnacle of the world, pondered quietly, and then asked the officers and those in audience, 'What do you think? Now they have come to challenge me, who will volunteer to

¹⁹ Literally the goddess of the earth, *mae thorani*.

²⁰ Literally, the four leading ministers of city (Yommarat), palace (Thammathibodi), treasury (Kosathibodi), and lands (Kasetathibodi). But here it is used loosely to mean 'ministers' as Jakri is not one of the four.

²¹ This is the plot of the Ramakian in summary form.

go? Tell me.' [9]

The senior officials were at a loss because they had no volunteer. They did not know how to answer the king, so remained silent and prostrate with their heads bowed.

The king angrily stamped his foot and roared like thunder. 'When I want something important, you just sit in stunned silence with no answer. You're all chatter and no substance.

You're good only at cheating your own men out of money by using your clever tongues. I don't have to support you with allowances.²² Your property and rank is a burden on the realm.'

Still angry, he went into the inner palace. All the nobles went home feeling tarnished from hearing the king's accusation.

Phlai Ngam was clever, courageous, diligent in acquiring knowledge, and equipped with all the special powers. His fearless aim was to go to war.

He served with Phrameun Si for over a year, making efforts to be of service so that Phrameun Si liked him and supported him like a son to be happy and comfortable in every way.

On the day that news came of war, he hoped this was his chance to achieve his aim. He would ask Phrameun Si's favor to maneuver for him to be accepted as a volunteer,

and somehow find a way to address the king on behalf of his father. This thought made tears well up in his eyes. 'Oh, what karma did you make, father, to have to bear such terrible hardship?

You've been jailed since I was in the womb. Somehow mother Wanthong is not concerned. She took pains to share your hardship for a long time, but then went home and paid no attention.

It's many years since she took an interest. She doesn't seem to think of the past with you, father. Even I almost died because of that devil, Khun Chang.'

As he sobbed, his thoughts turned to the Buddha. 'I pray that through my honesty, I may think up a way to ask pardon for father.

May I achieve what I hope. May my keen desire not be disappointed.' He prayed and made obeisance. At dusk, lighting-up time, [10]

he found Phrameun Si in the central hall, with his wife and children crouched all around, amid bright candle light. Phrameun Si was unhappy.

He was relating the matter of the king's anger over the army. 'The

²² *Biawat*, annual allowances paid to members of the royal family and senior officials.

king finally gave orders for call-up papers to prepare a royal army, officers and men. The city is in uproar.'

Phlai Ngam hid listening to Phrameun Si. When an opportunity came, he crawled in, chanting a formula to gain mercy. He made obeisance and asked,

'You seem unhappy. What's up? I hear the whole city's in uproar. They're conscripting people. It's chaotic. I'd like to know what's going on.'

Phrameun Si said, 'Oh, Phlai Ngam, we're not used to war. Today the king asked everybody.

Total silence. No volunteer. He was thunderously angry. He'll come to audience tomorrow. We're at a loss. It's up to our merit and karma.

If nobody volunteers, I think it'll be terrible. Total chaos and death. Everyone's face is black.'

Phlai Ngam knew this suited his aim. He crouched close to Phrameun Si and responded, 'Don't be worried. Please make a petition on my behalf in the proper way.

I'll volunteer to crush Chiang Mai to dust, and capture this good fellow, the King of Chiang Mai, so the troops don't have to be put to any trouble.

All I've studied from teachers at great effort hasn't been put to use. Let me volunteer to fight this once so my name may be known throughout the world as the valiant descendant of a military line.'

The astute Phrameun Si was dubious about Phlai Ngam daring to volunteer. 'I cannot agree.

You're still a very small kid. To address the king about you volunteering would not be appropriate. I've never seen what powers you've acquired from study. [11]

Oh son, warfare is a deep matter. You can't fight with fine words alone. If you were like your father, than I could have faith in you. Did he give you his manuals to study?

If I petition the king and it turns out well, then we gain face. But if it's unfavorable, we'll be taken off to be flogged. You'll suffer a setback and imperil all your study. Failure is almost like dying.

Consider well, beloved child. Making a bold petition is not a simple matter. I care for you as if you were my own son, and I intend to establish you to be something.

I'm not standing in your way because of prejudice. I just fear you'll go and not survive. Don't be so fearless that you're careless. Please look at this from all angles.'

Phlai Ngam humbly answered. ‘You oppose me out of love, because you don’t yet know my ability. I’m not speaking rashly.

I’ve been the student of teachers with authentic knowledge who are unequalled in prediction. If you want evidence, I’ll demonstrate so you can see for sure with your own eyes.’

With these words, he raised his hands to pay respects to teachers and summon their powers, then chanted a formula. Immediately, in full view of everyone there, his body disappeared.

Phrameun Si took a moment to recover himself, and then laughed heartily. ‘Oh that’s good! You’ll do well. No blight on the lineage. Release the formula so we can talk.’

Phlai Ngam released it and reappeared, then turned himself into an ageing striped tiger, drawing its body up into an awesome pose as if about to pounce on the people there.

Phrameun Si’s wife and children fled in fright, but Phrameun Si knew the artifice and was bent over with laughter.

Phlai Ngam relaxed the power of the mantra, transforming himself back into human form. He sat down and wai-ed. Phrameun Si smiled broadly, while stroking Phlai Ngam’s back and shoulder.

‘You’ll succeed for sure, my son. You’re better than a common ruffian,²³ have no fear. At first I had my doubts and so didn’t agree, but now I’ve seen your knowledge. [12]

Like this, the king should be pleased, and not get enraged a second time. All the officers and nobles will gain face because you alone will get them off the hook.’

The two of them talked until dawn came and the sun caught the hill-tops. They prepared to go to audience without any sleep, and at the time, walked away from the house.

Phrameun Si got into a palanquin, and Phlai walked behind him to the inner court sala. The senior officials were all there.

Chaophraya Kalahom, Chaophraya Jakri, and the four pillars were engaged in discussion. The astute Phrameun Si led Phlai Ngam over to greet and tell them the news. ‘This good fellow will volunteer. He’s the son of Khun Phaen and grandson of Khun Krai. His name is Phlai Ngam. He’s skilled and brave.

He’s accomplished in the military disciplines. He can make himself completely invisible.’ The ministers brightened up when they heard this. Chaophraya Jakri said, ‘Excellent!

He has the bearing of a brave soldier, definitely. There are signs this can work. He’s the son and grandson of two soldiers, and

²³ *Nakleng*. The meaning at this time, as recorded in Pallegoix’s dictionary, was: Blackguard, professed gamester, vagrant, rascal (Pal:554).

probably his special powers are good.

He's good-looking like his father, Khun Phaen, including the same brave heart. If you enter royal service and you're as expert as he says, you've nothing to fear.

We'll help to raise you to have rank and a reputation known everywhere. If you take Chiang Mai, you'll get lots of families, cattle, and buffaloes to make you comfortable.'

After their discussion, it was almost time for the king to appear in audience. The ministers prepared to enter in rank order at the time.

The king stayed in a shining jeweled spire. At the dawn light of the sun, he bathed and dressed.

With his mind full of anger at his foes, he went out to the Sutthasawan hall.²⁴ The sound of horns echoed around, and the nobles prostrated. [13]

The king looked at his officials, his face pale with anger almost to distraction. 'Why are you quiet? I'm waiting to hear who will volunteer. Or is there nobody?

Perhaps some slaves from the outer or inner departments will volunteer, and I can get rid of you lot to make room for giving them appointments in your stead.'

Phrameun Si Saowarat-rat made obeisance to address the king without any fear. 'My liege, righteous king, my life is under the royal foot.

I went out to make enquiries and found Phlai Ngam to volunteer. He's the son of Khun Phaen, and has studied to be expert in knowledge.

I had my doubts, so I tested him, and he is indeed accomplished, able, bold, and good with knowledge. His forebears went to war in the past.'

Hearing Phrameun Si, the king brightly said, 'Where is he? Summon him quickly so I can see if I like his face.'

Phrameun Si turned to pass on the summons. Phlai Ngam, who had been paying attention, promptly crawled past the head of the

²⁴ Name of a building in the Bangkok Grand Palace, built at the start of the Third Reign, facing on to Sanamchai Road, and known as *phlabphla sung*, the tall pavilion, after an earlier building used for viewing processions and other entertainments. Renamed as Sutthaisawan in the Fifth Reign. In Ayutthaya, the space used in a similar fashion was between the Chakkawat throne hall, which was on the palace inner wall, and the outer wall. The author appears to use the Bangkok-era name, Sutthasawan, but to locate the entertainment inside the palace wall, requiring entry through a gate, which was true of the Ayutthaya location but not true of the Bangkok location. The use of the name, Sutthasawan, hints that this chapter was written in the Third Reign. (Red:357-8)

royal pages²⁵ as duty officers cleared his way.

In front of the royal throne, he prostrated and composed his mind to chant a formula to gain royal mercy. He remained prostrate, praying in his heart.

The mighty king looked round and liked what he saw. He roared, 'Hey, Phlai Ngam, my bold young fellow!

Your lineage are soldiers. Try to acquit yourself on royal service. If you can fix these Lao as wished, your reward will be silver, gold, and rank.

Can you do this or not, tell me. I see your face is handsome, and your character is like your father. Why are you quiet? Speak out.'

Phlai Ngam responded, 'My liege, almighty king, my life is under the dust. [14]

May I volunteer, under the protection of your royal power, to capture the impetuous king of Chiang Mai so that the royal troops need not be disturbed.

May I request a royal pardon for my father so he may accompany me as partner, so I may consult him and draw on his assistance in case of difficulty to counter the tricks of the enemy forces.

If I can join forces with my father, may I request to volunteer until death. If I fail against this Chiang Mai force, may I offer my life and those of my male line.'

The king was wreathed in smiles and clapped his hands loudly. 'Oh, you present yourself well!

It's a pity that Khun Phaen was unlucky, fell on hard times, and virtually died. He's festered in jail for many years. It was wrong of me to forget him.

Did something block me thinking of him? Only when Phlai Ngam came with this request, did I recall him. When he asked for Laothong, I was angry and imprisoned him for a long time until today.

Look here, all you nobles. It's not right for you all to be so quiet. He's suffered for fifteen years because not a single person liked him enough.

Because he had no wealth, his case lay hidden, isn't that so? If he were rich rather than poor, all you fellows would be asking on his behalf every single day.

²⁵ *Hum phrae*, 'silk wrap.' When pages joined a royal procession, they walked in file holding a manila rope to ensure they looked orderly. The head of the pages used a piece of silk to guard his hands against chafing by the rope, hence this name. (Kukrit:243)

We're looking for the right kind of person to go to war, but nobody thought of him, because you're jealous that your own knowledge does not equal his, and because he attacked you when you went with Khun Chang,

and you all ran off in fright, heads nodding like flowers. You know his skills but you didn't seek him out. Phraya Yom, you heard. Why delay? Have Khun Phaen released and brought here.'

Minister Yommarat prostrated in delight, and left the jeweled audience hall. He sent orders to the prison governor

to release Khun Phaen and bring him quickly in time for the royal audience. The prison governor hurried away [15]

to the jail and had the warden release him immediately. He brought Khun Phaen back to the palace, sat down, and wai-ed the nobles.

Phraya Yommarat greeted them and explained matters to the bewildered Khun Phaen. 'Phlai Ngam asked the king on your behalf as a favor, and the king graciously granted a pardon.

It's a pity your hair is right down to the ground, and your appearance is changed and pitiful. But go into the audience. Don't be late.' He took him in on all fours.

The mighty king beckoned with his hand and called Khun Phaen to come closer. Khun Phaen crouched down in front of Phlai Ngam and prostrated three times.

The king spoke, 'Eh, Khun Phaen, this isn't right. You particularly have suffered a bad fate for many years. Today that's ended because of your son.

We currently have a war on the Chiang Mai side. Your son will go to attack for me. He requested for you to go as a bosom friend and someone to advise him on how things are.

I found you reliable in the past. Nobody can counter your skills. It was wrong of me to keep you in jail. It was forgetfulness not anger.

How many thousand of troops do you want? I'll have them conscripted day and night from the capital and provincial cities, without any bother, and send requisition orders for oxen, elephants, and equipment.'

Khun Phaen prostrated and answered. 'My liege, mighty king. You have graciously allowed me to go on campaign with Phlai.

I, as father of my son, request to volunteer to take Chiang Mai and present it to the king. There's no need for many conscripts. The call-up will be troublesome and create delay.

May I request only enough military conscripts to transport food

supplies. For battle troops, may I request some convicts from the jail.

There are thirty-five men, all tough, invulnerable, capable, and brave. They have studied everything about war and have every kind of knowledge from various teachers.' [16]

The mighty king heard Khun Phaen through to the end, and found it amusing. 'Hey, the Chiang Mai territory is big, with lots of people from many cities.

You want to take just these few? Even though they're good and proficient and will fight and kill to their utmost, I think you'll come back defeated.

The day after tomorrow, bring them to test how good and skilled they are before our eyes. Phraya Yom, what d'you think? Don't delay. Release all thirty-five to him.'

With this order, the king returned inside in a good mood. The nobles all dispersed. Khun Phaen wai-ed everybody.

Some greeted him and chatted as a friend. All praised him in various ways. They gave him moral support, blessings, and advice. 'Your bad fortune and unhappiness are now over.'

Minister Yommarat called them over. Father and son went with Phrameun Si, and gave him a list of names of the convicts granted by the king.

A courier was sent to gain their release and bring them over. They drew up for inspection and roll-call in front of Khun Phaen, and gave testimony on their background in turn.

'I'm Phuk from Luk-kae. My wife's name is Tae, sir. I was convicted for robbery, **dancing in the forest, and making Ma dance on her own.**'²⁶

'Next!' 'Mi from Ban Yilon,²⁷ wife's name Phon. I robbed Ta-Khieo, and stabbed Chang while he was pissing. He screamed and fell flat down spluttering.'

'Next!' 'Ban from Ban Chi-hon, wife Son. I robbed Bang Plakot,²⁸ tied Ta-Jai and Yai-Rot by the neck, and singed off their hair.'

'Next!' 'Jan Samphantueng, wife Eung, from Ban Muang Mai,²⁹ in the gang that robbed Khun Siwichai and shoved a stick up his anus

²⁶ This is probably slang for something.

²⁷ In amphoe Samko, Ang Thong.

²⁸ Catfish village, just outside Pa Mok, Ang Thong province.

²⁹ New mine village, there is a place of this name in Amphoe Amphawa, Samut Songkhram.

to kill him.³⁰

‘Next!’ ‘My name is Khong Khrao, wife’s name Tao, from Ban Nong Wai.³¹ I robbed Ban Bang Phasi³² last year and got property and several buffalo.’ [17]

‘Next!’ ‘I’m Si-at, wife Kongrat, sir. I fell in with some Thai and robbed a Lawa village, then murdered Ta-Ban from Ban Tan-en.’³³

‘Next!’ ‘Thong from Chong Khwak,³⁴ husband of Mak. I killed a Lao called Thao Sen. I went up to burgle, took an almsbowl and novice robe, thumped an old monk, and on top had a wrestle with the head nun.’

‘Next!’ ‘Chang Dam, from Ban Tham.³⁵ I burgled a tax collector and took all his gold, silver, and possessions – good stuff and no small amount, including gems and diamonds.’

‘Next!’ ‘Bua Hua Kalok, convicted for robbing Chi-Khok at Pak Kret,³⁶ hitting Ai Duk with the flat nose, and stabbing Ta-Sai the duck vendor at Ban Tuek Daeng.’

‘Next!’ ‘My name is Taengmo, wife To, from Ban Chumsaeng.³⁷ I robbed nun That Khanon, taking all I could carry, and killed Khun Thipsang, the owner of the property.’

‘I’m Sua Luang from Chainat, wife Pat from Ban Khanai.³⁸ I’ve robbed and killed about a hundred persons, and stolen buffalo to kill and eat.’

‘Mon Meu-kang from Bang Chalong,³⁹ wife’s name Khong, a northerner. I’ve stolen everything including robbing boats, mortars and pestles, anything.’

‘Next!’ ‘Thong from Nong Fuk,⁴⁰ wife Duk, daughter of Ta-Jop.

³⁰ See chapter 2. Presumably he is the same as Janson in that chapter, and must by now be over 50 (Phlai Ngam is 16; Khun Phaen was around 23 when Phlai Ngam was born; Janson must have been at least 18 when he killed Khun Krai, while Phlai was 5; $16+23+18-5=52$).

³¹ Rattan pond village, of which there are several. Most likely is in Amphoe Bo Phloi, Kanchanaburi.

³² Tax village, in Amphoe Bang Len, Nakhon Pathom.

³³ Leaning sugarpalm village, in Amphoe Bang Pahan, Ayutthaya

³⁴ There is a Ban Khwak in Amphoe Samchuk, Suphanburi.

³⁵ Probably Meun Han’s lair from chapter 17.

³⁶ An island in the Chaophraya River, now just to the north of Bangkok, famous as an old settlement of Mon potters.

³⁷ Amphoe in Nakhon Sawan.

³⁸ There is a Ban Wang Khanai in Amphoe Tha Muang, Kanchanaburi.

³⁹ There is a Bang Chalong in Amphoe Bangphli, Samut Prakan.

⁴⁰ Kapok pond, not found.

In day time, I kept the house closed like a female ghost,⁴¹ but at dusk went off alone to burgle.’

‘Mak Saklek. I robbed the Chinaman Gua and his wife named Sao with the slit eyes.’ ‘Next!’ ‘Kung from Khung Tapao.⁴² I stabbed Mao’s husband and seized her as my wife.’

‘Song, husband of Khong, from Kongkhon. I killed a Mon and stole cloth.’ ‘Next!’ ‘Krang from Ban Hia. I couldn’t find a wife so I robbed boats.’

‘Kling, husband of Klak. I blockaded the road, stole buffalo to sell, and robbed boats from the north.’ ‘Phao, husband of Phan, from Ban Naklua.⁴³ I poisoned Luang Choduek⁴⁴ and cleaned out his house.’

‘Jua, husband of Prang, from Bang Namchon. I went up to burgle Meun Thon and picked him clean.’ ‘Maeo, husband of Ma, from Tha Kwian.⁴⁵ I robbed everything in Ban Phitphian.⁴⁶ [18]

Under questioning, I put the blame on someone else. Then I took things from Thong Kramip.’ ‘Next!’ ‘Man, husband of Janthip, from Namdip.⁴⁷ I robbed Luang Chi Phao,

but did not stab him as accused. Police examination found it was an old wound.’ ‘Jan, husband of Jan, from Ban Kaphrao. I was convicted of robbing an old Chinaman and burning his shop.

I fired a gun and shouted out loud, then hit the head of a child with the back of a big machete.’ ‘Next!’ ‘Sa Noklek, from Khung Talunglek,⁴⁸ husband of Di.

I barricaded the road and robbed cattle traders around Khorat, and stabbed Chua, husband of Pat, who fell down dead.’ ‘Mak with the moustache, husband of Khua, from Bang Phli.⁴⁹ I was convicted of daylight robbery in Doembang.⁵⁰

‘Koet Kradukdam, husband of Khamdang, convicted of burgling

⁴¹ Spirit of a woman who dies in the forest and becomes a *pisat* (Red:681-2). Spirits do not like to go out in the daylight.

⁴² Fieldrat bend village (*khung* means the outer bank of a river bend). Now called Khung Samphao, in Amphoe Manoram, Chainat.

⁴³ Saltfield village, of which there are many, but none in the probable region.

⁴⁴ The official title of the head of the Chinese community in the capital, usually a very rich and influential person.

⁴⁵ On the route from Sangkhalok to Thoen. See earlier in this chapter.

⁴⁶ In Amphoe Maharat in the north of Ayutthaya.

⁴⁷ Freshwater. Perhaps the most likely of many places with this name is in Amphoe Mae Sot, Tak.

⁴⁸ Ban Talunglek, (Ironsmelt village), just west of Amphoe Khok Samrong, Lopburi.

⁴⁹ In Amphoe Bang Sai in the south of Ayutthaya.

⁵⁰ Now Amphoe Doembang Nangbuat, in the north of Suphanburi.

the department of elephants with mahout Mun, and robbing a forest Lawa. I'm invulnerable with twisted testicles and groin (inguinal) glands of copper.⁵¹

The thirty-five requested convicts were daring, strong, invulnerable to sword and spear, capable of withstanding anything.

For their karma, they had been imprisoned a long time. But now that karma was over and their life changed for the better. Phlai Ngam asked the king for the release of his father, and as a result all of these were pardoned too.

After the inspection, the thirty-five were entrusted to Khun Phaen. Phraya Yommarat gave his blessing.

'Defeat the demons and kill the enemies so the king's reputation spreads far and wide. And son, Phlai Ngam, take the city of Chiang Mai as we hope.'

Then he turned to order the *thanai*.⁵² 'Select some patterned cloth from the storehouse,⁵³ along with oranges and other fruits, and distribute them to all the war volunteers.'

The *thanai* carried over piles of things, and Phraya Yommarat invited them to choose. Khun Phaen organized the distribution to all the men,

who immediately changed and threw their old cloths away. 'Tst! It never covered my arse. I shamed my wife.' Some took off strange-looking clothes made from sacking. They were incredibly poor until this escape from hardship. [19]

They invited one another to eat, and whooped for joy. 'From now on, times will be *good!*' 'If you hadn't asked for our release from prison, we'd have festered in jail until death.'

'We'll be your servants until the end of our days, to be of use in whatever way you want.' Khun Phaen paid respects to the senior officials and took leave.

Phrameun Si rode his horse home.⁵⁴ Khun Phaen followed on foot with Phlai Ngam behind him, and then the big crowd of thirty-five men.

Phrameun Si arranged a place to stay, and had food prepared. The

⁵¹ Only twenty-six are listed here, but another four names appear later in this chapter when they select weapons, and another five names in chapter 29 during the release of Phra Thainam, giving the total of 35. Some versions have slight variations on the names, but none have more than twenty-six named at this point. (Red:356, Kukrit:262-5)

⁵² Pal:1016: procurator, attorney, substitute, servant agent

⁵³ The original says *ตี*, *tuek*, meaning a building of durable materials, most likely brick.

⁵⁴ In other versions, it is specified that Phrameun Si's house is at Khan Landing, near the northeast corner of the palace. (Red:361)

thirty-five made merry in high spirits until the sun dropped down at dusk.

Kaero Kiriya, who had remained beside her husband when they stayed in the shelter at the inner gate, was now ten months pregnant and big.

When her husband was able to leave the jail, their house was strewn with piles of pots and pitchers, and lots of raggedy cloth. Now that they were parting from people who had been their friends in hardship,

she donated all this as alms to the other convicts, and cheerfully set off after her husband. Phrameun Si kindly said, 'Live with us. Don't worry that your husband is going off to war.'

He invited Khun Phaen and Phlai to sit together with him, and called the minor wives to serve the three of them with food. When they were finished, Phrameun Si pointed out,

'My friend, your hair is such a mess it's shameful, like a ruffian. You don't look like a Jek, and I doubt you're a Thai. You look suspiciously like a Lawa. It's comic.'

Khun Phaen laughed. 'Sir, you're very eloquent.' He got up, enchanted some water in a bowl, wet his hair, cut it in the Mahatthai style, and oiled it. Then he bathed himself clean,

applied powder, and dressed neatly in a cheerful looking patterned cloth. He came back to the front of Phrameun Si's hall, and the three continued chatting.

Khun Phaen made a request to Phrameun Si. 'This lad was determined to volunteer. I'm concerned over my mother. She's getting older and ricketier every day. [20]

Back home in Kanburi, she'll be miserable thinking about her son and grandson. If we could bring her to live together, though we go off to war, we'll have some peace of mind.'

Phrameun Si replied, 'Happy to be of service. Bringing her here is no problem. I'll have her fetched tomorrow.'

The three talked until late. At midnight, they went into the house and all slept until dawn.

King Phanwasa summoned Laothong. 'Phlai Ngam bravely volunteered, and asked for his father to be released from jail.

You've suffered for over ten years. I can see you're not happy here. I'm pardoning you to end your suffering. No more embroidery. Leave quickly.'

Laothong was exultant at the king's pardon. She prostrated to take leave immediately, and went to take leave of **Mom Big Aunt.**

Her close friends cried out she'd had a stroke of luck. Others

whispered that she'd found a loophole. She said farewell to her many good friends including Si, Phrom, and Mae Som-O,

and then to the **Jao Khrua Nai**. She went into her own room, combed her hair in the mirror, put on oil, and doused herself with krajae sandal in the hope of being attractive close up.

She wore a lower cloth with aporosa flowers, upper cloth in light purple, and another with an elegant votive-deity⁵⁵ pattern over the top. She bent over to look at herself with her mind racing. Then she set her mind, and walked away, looking beautiful.

She packed chests with betelnut sets in nak and gold, trays, and water bowls made for palace ladies. She put in all her sparkling jewelry, then went out the side door and through the Din Gate.

I-Thueng hurried along behind carrying chests, with five others to lug the rest of her things. Friends greeted her, but she did not hear them. She reached the house and went up the stairs.

Khun Phaen could scarcely recognize Laothong, but worked it out. He called out happily, 'Don't you recognize me? Why not come in?' [21]

Hearing his words, Laothong could remember the voice. Going closer to him, she recognized his face. She clasped his feet, brimming with tears. 'I just heard the king gave you a pardon,

so I came to find you. You looked so unfamiliar that I couldn't recognize you, so I was standing there not daring to come in the door. You look so wasted and different.

Oh, my dear husband, meeting again is like having died and been reborn. Ever since I was confined in the inner palace, I've cried all the time without missing a day.

At mealtimes, I couldn't eat a mouthful without forcing myself to swallow tears of sorrow. At night, I'd sleep thinking of love. I almost held my breath to die.

I embroidered silk endlessly. I didn't know when it would end. I was miserable always, and it's been a long time.'

While speaking, she looked over and then asked, 'Who's that sitting behind there?' Khun Phaen said straight away, 'Her name is Kao Kiriya.

I got her as a wife when I fled away with Wanthong. While I was in jail, she looked after me. That's my son who asked the king for my pardon. His name is Phlai Ngam. His mother is Wanthong.'

He took her into the ruan, and piled up her belongings in a room. They all talked together in their own ways, getting on without jealousy.

⁵⁵ *Thep-phanom*, a pattern with a deity sitting with crossed legs and hands in wai (Mat:437, pix).

Khun Phaen came to sit in front of the room, and commanded the thirty-five soldiers to have their hair cut and prepare upper and lower cloths to look smart.

If they needed anything, they should ask Phrameun Si. On the following day they would go to see the king. Khun Phaen, his son, and Phrameun Si talked until the night

At dawn, they ate and hurried over to enter the palace just before audience time. On that day, word had spread around the city

that the knowledge of the volunteers would be put to the test. Everybody came in a raucous stampede – Thai, Chinese, Mon, Burmese, Kha, Lao, and Lue – dragging along many kids by the hand. [22]

As they squashed through the gate, breasts were slyly pinched and squeezed. Young lads, puffed up with excitement, clutched at the young girls and larked about.

Some tugged an upper cloth and grabbed a breast. The guards whipped as hard as they could. Anyone caught was put in chains, pale-faced. Those who could dodge, escaped into the palace.

Outside, the crowd was packed. At the appointed time, the conches and horns sounded, the king came out, and everybody prostrated together.

The almighty king went to sit on the Sutthasawan throne. When the curtain was drawn back, he looked like the sun god in his chariot.

He called Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam. All thirty-five soldiers entered and crawled up to make obeisance to the king at the front of the palace courtyard

The boxer-guards⁵⁶ made a circle by stretching a leather cord around the fore courtyard in front of the throne. Officials sat inside the circle, and ordinary people outside.

The noisy crowd of all ages sat jammed together. Some squatted on their heels, glancing around. Some shifted, fidgeted, and poked one another.

Around the whole field, lines of guards carrying canes kept order. The king commanded Khun Phaen to bring the first man on.

Nai Bua Huakalok from Khok Kham prostrated and come out front. He lay face up, chanted a mantra, and had someone hack at

⁵⁶ *Thanai luek*. Boxers selected as guards of the king (Red:682). Mc:395, a committee of umpires.

him many times with an axe.

The axe bounced off while he lay there winking. Uninjured, he got up with a bright-red face. Nai Khong Khrao came in, sat down, and entered meditation. He was struck with a lance

point full in the chest many times without even bruising. He sat nodding his head and laughing until the lance's handle gave way and broke.

Nai Mon lay down naked while a saw was brought. They sawed at him but the teeth bent and broke. They changed the sawing team many times, but after several tries had made no impression at all. [23]

Nai Chang Dam, strong as a great elephant, prostrated and crawled in with no fear. He high-jumped six meters with his eyes shining, showing off his strong black muscles.

Nai Si-at, who had escaped injury before, had seven lances thrown at him, but they just slid off and fell to the ground. Nai In⁵⁷ held his breath and disappeared.

Nai Thong had a gun fired and caught the bullet. Nai Jan amazingly lifted an ox. Nai Bua transformed himself into several people.

Nai Taengmo made himself grow to giant size, then leapt around goggling his eyes and screwing up his face. Nai Jua with the funny-looking head showed he could withstand a flaming fire.

All thirty-five displayed their respective disciplines to the king in order. Then they all came to crouch down in a row for the king to present rewards

of five tamlueng each in cash, a tray of cloth, and bonuses according to whether their skill was first or second class.

'There's still Phlai Ngam, the volunteer. Is he really good or just boastful? His body doesn't look big, so his heart must be huge. Hey, Khun Phaen! Show us a contest with your son, the two of you.'

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam prostrated in turn. The crowd got to their feet to watch the father and son test each other's skills.

Phlai Ngam asked forgiveness from his father Khun Phaen, then picked up a spear and stood with arms stretched, looking funny. Khun Phaen stood with a sword in each hand, struck a pose, and then advanced to engage with the spear.

Indian drums pounded out a rhythm. They clashed and strutted through several rounds, with neither giving ground and backing off.

⁵⁷ This name does not appear in the list of names. Also, the name Bua appears twice in this passage, but only once on the list above. These are probably inconsistencies introduced when Damrong's editors were reconciling various versions in which these names are different.

They exchanged maneuvers of equal proficiency.

Phlai Ngam looked the more agile, but Khun Phaen had the style and strength. When one gained the advantage and attacked violently, the other returned with a thrust, and they exchanged slashing blows, one after another.

The blows did not penetrate. Phlai turned and walked away as if retreating, but as soon as he was some distance apart, put his spear down on the ground, gave a salute with hands on chest, and chanted the formula for permanent fire. [24]

A blaze exploded in the middle of the arena in an echoing whoosh of licking flames. As the fire spread, people ran away in crowds.

Everybody was struck pale in alarm. Khun Phaen chanted a mantra, and rain poured down, dousing the fire in a flash. From the audience, the sound of 'aaah' echoed around

in appreciation. 'This father and son are the real thing!' 'Superb skills!' 'Unmatched.' Khun Phaen made yet another formula and instantly turned into a snake, rearing up and swaying,

a big fellow with a hood as large as a tree-trunk, and eyes as red as red lead. As he slid along, around two thousand snake attendants appeared, swarming around on top of one another,

slithering everywhere. The audience chaotically looked for somewhere to hide. Women ran off in all directions, pale-faced, shuddering, and shrieking.

Their cloths slipped, and they tripped over, trampling one another underfoot, and shitting themselves. Phlai Ngam promptly threw a takrut amulet, which turned into a big *kot* bird and chased the snake,

clutching with its talons, and pecking with its beak. The snake writhed and struck. The bird pecked back. People crowded around to watch. The bird lifted the snake in its bill and flew away.

All the attendant snakes totally disappeared. Phlai Ngam enchanted a lump of earth, and the bird disappeared, transformed into an elephant

with two long white tusks, ears flared, trunk raised, and secreting oil. The elephant raised its head, swayed, and trumpeted. Khun Phaen stood in front in a defensive pose.

Then he stepped on the end of a tusk, and climbed astride the beast's neck. The elephant reacted violently, but he hacked with the goad, slashing at its forehead until it collapsed and fell back onto the ground with eyes closed.

The elephant disappeared but Phlai Ngam leapt up with still some knowledge in reserve. He meditated to transform his body into a buffalo.

Khun Phaen disappeared and became a tiger. He bounded over with curved fangs bared, and then drew back,

enticing the buffalo towards where the king sat. The tiger slapped with his paws, and the buffalo went to gore with its horns. [25]

They thrashed around in a tumult with the tiger pouncing, and the buffalo lunging, slashing at each other without backing off until they were bathed in sweat. Then both transformed again in the same instant.

The father became a squawking parrot, and the son a mynah. They flew up to a tree, perched beside one another, and displayed their ability to speak many human languages.

The audience loved it, and praised them all around. ‘What powers!’ ‘No enemy will be able to stand up to them!’

The king smiled broadly, laughed, and loudly clapped his hands. ‘These two fellows are alright! No slouches. Equal in their powers.’

I’d like to see that Chiang Mai! He boasts about his powers, but I’d like to see him fight with my guys. Before a day is out, he’d flee into the forest.

Is this the end of your repertoire?’ The parrot and mynah replied to the king, ‘My liege, mighty king, we haven’t reached the end of our teachers’ manuals.’

The two relaxed the mantras, returned to human form, and crouched at the front of the courtyard. King Phanwasa elatedly had the royal gifts moved closer, then said,

‘Hey, Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam, you had a good fight. Your faces look hungry and tired. Have something to eat to recover your strength.’

Then he ordered the special treasury⁵⁸ to arrange foreign *mot*⁵⁹ cloth in *kanyaeng* pattern, Chinese silk in hibiscus pattern,⁶⁰ red wool,⁶¹ and *sombak* for the post of inner nobles.

He also had the Great Treasury⁶² arrange five chang in cash which the king presented them. ‘You two are to use this until you receive rewards⁶³ when the war is over.’

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam prostrated in the middle of the

⁵⁸ *Khlang wiset*

⁵⁹ โทมด, a cloth of Indian origin woven with silk, silver thread, and gold thread (Suphon: 347). Formerly made with strips of gold paper woven with silk, later with both gold and silver paper and colored silk thread (RI:1313-4).

⁶⁰ *Duang phuttan*, probably hibiscus mutabilis (RI:795)

⁶¹ *San*, Suphon:347 says this is Indian and expensive, so probably cashmere. RI:1175 says made from animal hair and from Persia.

⁶² *Khlang mahasombat*, the main royal treasury, responsible for collecting taxes, headed by Phraya Ratchaphakdi, sakdina 5000 (Woraphon, J.Hist.Soc., 27, p. 30-1)

⁶³ *Bamnet*, money discretionally granted by the king as reward for some action.

arena, happy to be in the king's good graces. The place was overflowing with spectators.

King Phanwasa summoned the astrologer and commanded him to look at the forces and find a day to march. [26]

The astrologer sought an auspicious time then addressed the king. 'The seventh of the waxing moon is the fifth fraction, an auspicious time to open a campaign, at 4:09 in the morning.

It's free of both the Great Spirit and the daily circle.⁶⁴ This was the time when the rishi became enraged and tied the hands of the terrible monkey.⁶⁵ If you go to attack a country, there will be victory.'

The king immediately commanded that the army be ready on this day, with no delay. 'They've requested military conscripts for portering only. Conscript seventy for them.'

The king went into the palace. The nobles got up in a tumult. They were so weak from hunger it was almost unbearable, and rushed off home in a happy mood.

The spectators – Thai and Chinese, child and adult, all mixed together – chit-chatted loudly. 'They're really good!' 'Best in the capital!' 'They can transform their bodies like gods.'

'Nothing like this was seen in my parents' time.' 'I've watched lots of fighters in my time, but what we saw today was a feast for the eyes.' 'It was worth being born for this.'

Khun Phaen returned to Phrameun Si's house. In the morning he went to pay his respects and report he had news from a servant

that his mother Thong Prasi had come from Kanburi and was at their house. 'By your grace, sir, my wife, son, and I will take our leave.'

Phrameun Si kindly ordered his servants to carry their belongings over. The father and son took their leave and left, followed by their wives and servants,

and then the thirty-five soldiers. Walking along, they filled the street to overflowing. People in the market who saw them and did not know about them whispered to their friends, 'Who's that?'

Others replied, 'That's the lot pardoned to go to fight Chiang Mai.' Khun Phaen came to the house at Wat Takrai,⁶⁶ went in, and

⁶⁴ The march should not set off in a direction currently occupied by the great spirit (or the iron lance), and during one of the time 'circles' considered inauspicious. (Red:682)

⁶⁵ Presumably Ramakian, but no idea where from.

⁶⁶ This must be the house where Thong Prasi lived before her marriage (see chapter 1).

wai-ed his mother.

Thong Prasi was very happy to see her son. She stroked him back and front with tears flowing. 'Oh, meeting is like being born again. [27]

I appreciate you, Kaeo Kiriya, for making the effort to follow your husband. You must be sisters with Laothong. Don't dislike one another and cause trouble.

Oh dear, here's cute young Phlai Ngam. You managed to petition the king for your father. There's an ancient saying: to be a man, don't look down on any man.'

Then she turned to Khun Phaen. 'Now I've seen you I'm even more concerned and upset. You look so thin, wasted, and changed. Since you didn't die in jail,

your bad fortune and sad troubles are now at an end, my jewel. From now on, have only joy for a hundred years, no suffering for a thousand years, and stay happy until you enter nirvana.'

Khun Phaen received his mother's blessing. He went out and gave orders to fix the house. The belongings were carried up to the ruean and piled on the terrace. A bamboo shelter was built for the soldiers to sleep.

The old ruean was rickety and about to collapse, so they shored it up temporarily with timber. They worked together until dusk and then rested, happily forgetting their past suffering.

The heads of the department of rolls⁶⁷ busily sent out call-up papers to unit heads.⁶⁸ As the matter was urgent, they limited the conscription to villages close by.

In some cases, wives and children were tied up and dragged in.⁶⁹ Pleas for remission were not given attention. All seventy required were found.

The officers of the rolls⁷⁰ were ordered to deliver the whole crowd to Khun Phaen. Their wives and children rushed around to find rice and get organized within the day.

They asked people to give them however little or much rice they

⁶⁷ *Krom satsadi*, which had the responsibility of keeping the records for conscription, had left and right divisions each with a department head (*jao krom*), Okphra Thephathibodi and Okphra Sisurentharathibodi, sakkina 3000 (*KTSD*, I, 249).

⁶⁸ *Nai muat*.

⁶⁹ Meaning the conscript had gone missing so they captured his family to entice him.

⁷⁰ *Nai samuhabanchi*.

could. People trembled and gave what was demanded. Khun Phaen's house became packed. Everything was ready to go in three days.

Khun Phaen and his son had the idea of instilling their equipment with powers. They took everyone out to a graveyard,⁷¹

and had the soldiers build a shrine with three-level *baisi* on the left and right. Pig's head, duck, chicken, liquor and other offerings were arranged in rows. [28]

A white cloth was spread as a roof. They paid respects, lit incense and offertory candles, and made a boundary circle with sacred thread where only men could enter.

The father and son sat in the circle and chanted mantras and divine prescriptions to gather together all the gods of all channels. 'Indra, Brahma, Yama, *yak* giants,

the fire god, the wind god, Krung Phali,⁷² the powerful guardian spirits of the place, the spirits of the forest, Vishnu carrying the discus, Siva the sun god,

Ganesh of the left,⁷³ Phinai of the right,⁷⁴ we call on you to come down to give holy power. Also the supreme Three Jewels, our eternal fathers and mothers,

our teachers and preceptors, and the royal power,⁷⁵ please help give your blessing and spread your power into everything.'

Then they chanted the Mahawet formula to instill special power in all their equipment including auspicious headscarves impregnated with herbs, and powerful oil-filled *takrut* amulets.

The power of their expert incantations made their equipment move as if someone was turning it over. Then they made bonfires in all four directions, and placed their equipment in the midst of the fire.

The flames flared up, but the sacred thread did not burn. Then

⁷¹ A graveyard was where dead bodies were deposited temporarily before cremation, or left for other reasons, especially after epidemics (Suphon 353).

⁷² See note in chapter 2.

⁷³ The elephant-headed son of Siva, who appears in the *Ramakian* under the name Phinet or Phra Kanetkuman. Tripuram, King of Solot, has ambitions to overthrow Vishnu-Narai. Siva-Ishwara gives him special powers which he abuses to rape many heavenly ladies. Siva summons Indra, Brahma, and Vishnu to help in the attack. He transforms Vishnu into an arrow and shoots it at Tripuram but it fails because Vishnu falls asleep in this role. Siva then incinerates Tripuram with fire from his third eye. Phinet has a bit part blowing a trumpet when the attack begins. In the Valmiki version of the Ramayana, this episode does not appear, and Ganesh does not appear at all in the work. (Premseri Ramakian, 17-20; Olsson, 12; Suphon 353)

⁷⁴ See previous note. Phinai is another son of Siva who blows a trumpet alongside Phinet.

⁷⁵ *Phra ongkan*, a circumlocution used for referring to the king without using his name (Suphon: 353).

they brought a Phakhwam Buddha image,⁷⁶ placed it in an enchanted bronze bowl,

added fragrant oil, chanted a formula, and blew down on the bowl three times. The Buddha image promptly floated up. They applied the oil to make themselves invulnerable,

capable of invisibility, able to stun others, and equipped with all other tricks and artifices. Having enchanted their equipment, they paid respects, and chanted a mantra to summon up the spirits.

‘Spirits of those who died by lightning and plague, all the various spirits who live in holes and coffins, spirits who died in childbirth or from hanging themselves, officer spirits, and men spirits, hurry to come.’

All the spirits became hot and agitated, and could not hide away because of the powerful formulas. They arrived together at the ceremony in droves. [29]

The people sitting in the circle saw the spirits swarming all around. Phlai Ngam and Khun Phaen poured white liquor into a skull as an offering,

along with sliced meat and fish *yam* which they had prepared. The swarm of spirits came down to eat ravenously. Those spirits still sitting around outside were all invited to eat too.

Those which were starving until their lips were burning and guts felt bitter, happily feasted on the offerings. They gathered around the food, rolling up their eyes, opening empty mouths, swigging the liquor repeatedly, and enjoying it.

When they had finished, father and son commanded the spirits, ‘Today, all of you please volunteer to accompany us to war. Be ready to go at the auspicious hour of the noon-day feeding.’

The spirits were pleased. ‘Let’s go!’ ‘We beg to be your servants in your time of difficulty.’ ‘With an army of spirits, there’s no need to bother with things like conscription and who’s on duty.’ ‘We’ll do it!’

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam felt happy when they had done the ceremony. They distributed the enchanted equipment to all the soldiers and conscripts to gain their affection.

All the men were happy. ‘Knowing things are like this, sir, we’re very confident. We’ll go wherever you send us, and fight hundreds or thousands of men with no fear.’

They went back to the house, and Khun Phaen called the soldiers

⁷⁶ *Phra phakhwam*, a Buddha image in a seated position with all the body’s nine orifices (two eyes, two ears, two nostrils, mouth, urethra, anus) closed, including the hands covering the eyes, supposed to have great power in conveying invulnerability (Suphon 353).

over to choose their weapons. ‘Take whatever you’re good with.’

Some took swords and slashed around with them. Others picked up twin-edged daggers. Others took guns and stood leaning on them. Others asked for long lances.

Chei said, ‘I’m only used to a wooden stave.’ Ma said, ‘I’m good only with the javelin.’⁷⁷ Phet said, ‘A machete’s enough for a Lao throat.’ Thitsa took a pike and went off to try out his moves.

They milled around choosing their weapons until evening. Then cloths, medicines, water carriers, and food pouches were distributed.

The porters found wood to use as carrying poles, and organized their baskets and cases. Those appointed as **corporals** (*nai muat*) carried out inspections with a lot of boisterous laughing and joking. [30]

Thong Prasi bustled around from the morning noisily arranging food supplies – chili, salt, rice, fish, and everything. Anyone slacking got a tongue-lashing without any discrimination.

Kaeo Kiriya and Laothong packed utensils for their husband, chatting together happily and harmoniously for fear he might be upset.

A chest of betelnut and a nak set in a betel container,⁷⁸ a case of tobacco, a big bag packed with cloths, sleeping clothes folded up, mosquito-nets, pillows – everything

was carried out and piled up in front of the ruean. Servants milled around. As for Phlai Ngam’s belongings, Phrameun Si arranged everything.

In the morning, they went to take leave of the king. Khun Phaen and his son arranged a tray of incense, candle, and flowers, and went to meet the senior officials in the palace.

At four o’clock, horns sounded. The king came to the outer audience hall and sat on the royal throne. He asked many questions.

Chaophraya Jakri got his turn, bowed his head, and addressed the king. ‘My liege, I am governed by the royal foot.

These flowers, incense, and golden candles are offered by Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam who have come to take leave of the dust under the royal foot, and go to war in response to a royal command.’

The king smiled and laughed. ‘Hey, Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam,

⁷⁷ Literally, the music of the javelin.

⁷⁸ *ນ້ຳ*, *kli*, a container usually for betelnut, usually square, often divided into separate compartments for betel, pan, etc (Mc:62).

that you two volunteered pleases me. Thank you.

Go well and return victorious. Avoid trouble, thorns, injury, and fever. Make sure the enemy loses to your power. Take the city of Chiang Mai and return.'

He commanded attendants to present royal gifts of regalia, cloth, swords, sundry items, cash to be used for the war, good horses for each of them with saddle and bridle, and a tray of cloth for each of the conscripts. The king returned to the palace. [31]

After the king left, Khun Phaen and his son went home. They found incense and candles to put on a tray, crawled in, and prostrated to Thong Prasi.

'Your son and grandson have come to say goodbye. Please look after the house, and be good enough to take care of Laothong and Kao Kiriya.

If there's any problem before I return, there's someone you can depend on for sure. Phrameun Si and I are true friends. If you're sick, please go to him.

If the house collapses, I've left enough money to fix it. Just make sure you're happy, mother. Even if I go for a long time, don't be upset.'

Thong Prasi listened to this farewell with tears falling. She stroked him back and front, saying, 'Don't worry about things here.

Those wives of yours, leave them to me. I'll look after everything, including the house and possessions. It's good we can rely on Phrameun Si.

If I have any difficulty, I'll go to see him. Set your mind to it, my dear son. Avoid hardship, sadness, sickness, and danger. Be brilliantly happy all the time.

Defeat the demons and kill the enemies. Is there anybody who can fight you? Young Ngam, don't get separated from your father. You're still a kid, and your grandmother's concerned.

Don't be so brave in battle that you're careless. Your grandfather, Khun Krai, was a battle commander from his youth. He never looked down on an enemy, or got into a rage. Whether it's a big matter or small, think what you're doing.

Also, if any of the troops going with you have any difficulty, help them, don't look down on them. Make an effort to treat them in a fine way, then they'll fight as if they'd follow you to death.

If you can unite them as one mind, at the very least you won't lose badly. They say a forest depends on its tigers, and a boat on its oarsmen. As a commander, you must depend on your troops.

Also, be grateful to the king. Think on this every morning and evening, and it'll do you good. Then you'll succeed with your powers and skills. You must remember and heed your grandmother's words.' [32]

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam happily received blessings from Thong Prasi, and prostrated to wai her. Khun Phaen went to give orders to his men, then entered the room of the two ladies.

'Laothong and Kaeo Kiriya, please try to get on well without any unhappiness. If there's dissension at home, it may be a bad omen for those who go to war.

Look after mother Thong Prasi's food and comfort. Don't let there be any problem. Kaeo Kiriya, your pregnancy makes you hugely clumsy. Please take care whatever you do.

And Laothong, after she gives birth, please look after her clothing, and making the fire for her. Get the servants to squeeze oranges and boil hot water. Bring the cradle and blanket for the child, and sing slow lullabies.

As for the ceremonies for the child's soul, leave those to grandmother as she's the senior and has done these things in the past. Also she understands everything about medicines.

Another thing I've thought of. On this trip, I'm likely to meet your parents, as we'll journey not far from Sukhothai, and must pass Chomthong on the way to Chiang Mai.

Do you two have anything to send? Would you like to leave anything with me? I'll take what you wish, and I should get a chance to see them.'

Laothong and Kaeo Kiriya listened with their hearts in turmoil. They feared that crying would be a bad omen for the journey, and so struggled to swallow their sorrow. Then one said,

'Don't worry about us. We'll get on. We love one another. We'll do whatever mother wants us to. We've made up our minds to behave properly.

If you meet our parents, just say their daughter is well.' Then the husband and wives talked with the love and intimacy of parting.

Khun Phaen woke at dawn. He rinsed his mouth, washed his face, and went to fetch his son to get the army ready

at Wat Mai Chai Chumphon⁷⁹ village, an auspicious place previously used according to the manuals. The place was packed. Khun Phaen and his son inspected the troops. [33]

⁷⁹ The troops assembled here in chapter 20.

Thong Prasi, Laothong, and Kaeo Kiriya followed to arrange the food supplies. The families of the conscripts had come to see them off, and were all over the wat courtyard.

Phrameun Si was truly good. He could not stay still, and took along his wife, children, and his mass of people. He provided various things that were lacking, and helped to arrange all the baggage.

Big items were put on the elephants, while the food supplies were loaded on oxen, and light materials needed along the way were carried by the accompanying conscripts.

When everything was ready, they waited for the appointed time. The astrologer paced out the sun's shadow to fix exactly the auspicious time after 4 o'clock for the column to move off.

Kaeo Kiriya had been rushing around since morning arranging the food. Her belly was now swollen beyond tolerance. The pains came and she screamed, 'I'm dying!'

Thong Prasi frantically called Khun Phaen, and went to support her shoulders. Khun Phaen quickly enchanted some water, and had her swallow it just as she gave birth to a boy,

right on the auspicious time for the army to march, the most excellent moment according to the texts. Thong Prasi lifted the child, hugged him close to her body, and gave him the name Phlai Chumphon Ronnarong.⁸⁰

Then she summoned a boat to take them home. She was concerned about the grandson and did not stay for the send-off. Phrameun Si said, 'Don't worry. Leave it to me to arrange things here.'

Khun Phaen saw the sky was bright and clear, right at the auspicious time by the texts. He ordered them to beat the victory gong.

They marched from Wat Mai Chai Chumphon with all the troops shouting, and monks chanting the Chayanto prayer, out to Three Bo Trees plain.

The gongs boomed, and the troops yodeled. Nai Jan Samphanteung led the vanguard, and Si-at Ratchana the rearguard. All the thirty-five soldiers marched.

Some hefted a sack of ganja on a shoulder pole, and a hookah in their bag, making the sweat flow. Some had a bamboo flask of liquor slung on their lance. Whenever they felt tired, they took a quiet swig. [34]

⁸⁰ *Chumphon* = the gathering of troops or concentration of forces; *ronnarong* = battle.

Some had packs of *kathom* leaves⁸¹ over their shoulder. If they craved the drug so much their faces felt dry and tight, they took enough *kathom* from the pack for a hit, and soon had the strength to catch up with their mates.

Khun Phaen and Phlai Ngam rode their horses in file across the plain towards the forest. They left the home territory as the sun went down, and rested at Ban Phitphian.⁸²

The kamnan got the villagers to carry lots of food over with no need for force. They all came to see the army, bringing firewood and candles.

The troops ate the food which the villagers brought. Then the kamnan arranged a place at the wat for them to sleep.

In the morning, more food came. Then they set off without delay across the plain and into the forest and upland. The heat of the hot-season sun made them weak and weary.

At the village of Dap Kong Thanu,⁸³ they rested in the shade. Father and son sat relaxing and enjoying the comfort of a cool breeze.

Khun Phaen called Phlai Ngam to walk over to the big banyan tree, taking along betel, pan, incense, and candles. He prostrated at the tree,

and said, 'My Skystorm sword is buried here since the time the Governor of Phichit sent us down. This sword has the power to win battles. It's buried by the branch on the east side.'

Phlai Ngam dug the earth and was very happy to find the sword. He passed it to his father and it flashed when he waved it. Khun Phaen raised the sword above his head with great love.

'I give this sword to be yours from now on, as your main weapon in battle. This Skystorm is superb. Tens of thousands of other swords are not as good.

Even the king's sword is not equal to ours. I'll teach you to get accustomed to using it.' They walked along, admiring the weapon.

They returned to the camp and rested until the afternoon sun fell into the forest. Then they woke one another up, had a meal, and left

⁸¹ *Mitragyna speciosa*, a narcotic from a plant of the coffee family native to Southeast Asia. It is usually taken by chewing the leaves, as an antidote to the stress of hard exertion, and to enable the user to last for a long time without food. Its use is found mainly in Thailand and a little in Malaysia (Mc:34; <http://www.murple.net/yachay/index.php/kratom>).

⁸² On the Lopburi river north of Ayutthaya.

⁸³ Where Khun Phaen buried his sword in chapter 21.

at dusk when the wind dropped. [35]

In the night, they halted at Lopburi, and left in the morning for another long haul. They passed Bang Kham,⁸⁴ crossed to Ban Pho Chai,⁸⁵ and entered the region of U-Tapao.⁸⁶

Straight ahead they came to the district of Phu Khao Thong,⁸⁷ and Nong Bua,⁸⁸ where a stream ran aslant down the side of the hill. They cut along the edge of the uplands, where it was rather hot, and reached Thung Luang⁸⁹ at dusk.

Khun Phaen gave orders to stop and rest. Those who were very tired collapsed asleep. All the soldiers lit a circle of bonfires. Some looked for a log to chop ganja, and sat smoking a hookah until their heads fell backwards.⁹⁰

Those who had only ganja sat taking turns to chop it, load the pipe, and light it. Those with none, asked to buy at three handfuls a salueng, then lit it and inhaled the smoke.

When smashed, they wanted something sweet, and bent over searching in their belongings for some plum⁹¹ paste.

The opium users stretched a cloth to screen themselves from view. They lay next to the fire, and busily filled their pipes. When the drug was all used up, they tried to save the dregs that were left.

Mates asked to share them at one baht a *fen*,⁹² but they refused to sell, fearing they would die when it was all gone. The real addicts moaned and groaned, until they got a couple of dregs to stave off death.

They tried to exchange their sword or lance, or even sell their

⁸⁴ In Amphoe Mi, Lopburi.

⁸⁵ On the Lopburi river near Inburi.

⁸⁶ Probably the place called Khung Taphao earlier in the chapter, and now Khung Samphao, Amphoe Manoram, Chainat (Red:364).

⁸⁷ Khao Thong, Amphoe Phayuhakiri, Nakhon Sawan (Red:364).

⁸⁸ In Amphoe Chumsaeng, Nakhon Sawan. The army seems to have swung eastward, away from the course of the river. Most likely this was because areas near the river were flooded. The huge wetland of Bueng Boraphet to the immediate north of Nakhon Sawan is probably the remnant of a much larger expanse in former times. The swing eastward takes the route up onto the fans beyond the edge of the floodplain. It is unlikely that the march would have been undertaken at the height of the wet season, because it would truly have been impossible. But this detour, and the description of the lakes in Phichit later in the chapter, suggest that the march may have been at the tail-end of the rainy season. The water was still lying in the this area around Nakhon Sawan. Some of the lotuses in the Phichit lakes were blooming, and some already seed-pods.

⁸⁹ The big plain. No sign of the toponym today, but it is rather generic. North of Nong Bua, is a fan plain which is still fairly arid, with a broken line of hilly outcrops to the east. This fits the poem's description.

⁹⁰ Literally, their throat curved.

⁹¹ *Phutra*, jujube *zizyphus*.

⁹² A unit of weight equivalent to 375 mg.

washing bowl for the opium dregs. Once their craving was satisfied, they were happy, and ate winged beans until they fell asleep.