

four reigns

KUKRIT PRAMOJ

TRANSLATED FROM THE THAI BY MARCEL BARANG

UNDER TRANSLATION

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FIRST REIGN

Chapter 1

‘Phloi!’ Mother’s voice was calling as the boat, coming out of the Bang Luang canal into the Jao Phraya river, headed straight for Tha Phra*. ‘Phloi, remember this: when the time comes, find yourself a faithful husband. Don’t settle for a man collecting wives or you’ll be distressed like your mother!’ Mother was silent for a while then added, ‘And never be anyone’s minor wife. Remember this.’

Phloi turned to look briefly at her mother then went back to gazing from under the awning at the boats paddling upstream and downstream, at the waterside houses and houseboats full of goods for sale on display, at the people on the banks and inside the boats going by, gazing in excitement and at a loss for words, because this was the first time she ventured so far from home and before they left Mother had told her they were leaving for good, for the rest of their lives they’d never set foot on the threshold of that house again.

* Royal Pier

Phloi's home was by the Bang Luang canal. It could be said it was a big estate, with a brick wall topped with an iron fence running the length of the grounds on the waterside. The landing place had a big pavilion made of wood. From the landing stairs, you walked across a wide courtyard to reach the building which was the residence of Phloi's Honoured Father. That mansion was considered modern in the 1880s, during the reign of His Majesty Phra Phuttha Jao Luang the Great* in Rattanakosin**, with white stuccoed brick walls and a roof of corrugated Chinese tiles. The front twin stairways merged to form a modest open veranda and from there a straight flight of stairs led to the upper part of the building. A veranda with dark green ceramic balusters shaped like elongated grapes ran around that floor. The three large rooms at the front were where Honoured Father dwelled. There was another, smaller room for Buddha images and the ashes of Honoured Grandfather and numerous previous ancestors. When Phloi was still a child of six or seven, she had gone up one afternoon to see Honoured Father. She was especially afraid of this room because it was always closed and silent. It would be opened once a year when Honoured Father made merit, and on such an occasion, Phloi had seen the urns lined up on a set of votive tables. She had been called upon to light joss sticks and candles and prostrate herself in front of Honoured Grandfather, Honoured Grandmother and several other Honoured Ancestors. From that time on she had been especially in awe of that room. The veranda at the back of the house was a place to relax for Honoured Father. When he was at home, he would usually be there, have his meals there and rest there, and there he would receive visiting acquaintances. The floor of the upper part of the house was made of large boards turned shiny by decades of diligent polishing. Honoured Father would sit on a small rug, with before him the customary betel tray, water pot, dipping bowl, spittoon, cigarette box and footed tray with implements for

* Rama V, King Chulalongkorn

** The old royal city of Bangkok

lighting up. On the day Phloi was to leave the house, she went there to take her leave of Honoured Father, Mother having told her to go there alone. By then she was ten years old, old enough to have a sharp sense of observation. In years to come, whenever she thought of him, she would still see Honoured Father as he sat cross-legged on the rug that day. He wore a casually draped length of nutmeg-dyed chintz round his loins. She would still remember how he scanned the face of his youngest daughter, scrutinising her features as if to learn them by heart. Yet he didn't open his mouth in greeting or dissuasion, merely stared at her until she crawled back and went down.

So, in 1892 Phloi was ten years old. Had someone asked her then who her father was, she would have answered that his name was *Phraya** Phiphit and her mother's Chaem. Mother was Phraya Phiphit's Number One Wife but didn't have the status of *Khunying* (Dame), because his first wife and thus khunying was Ueam. A native of Amphawa, Khunying Ueam didn't live with Honoured Father but had returned to her hometown since before Phloi was born, leaving in the care of her husband their three children: Khun Un, Phloi's eldest sister, aged nineteen; Khun Chit, Phloi's elder brother, aged sixteen; and Khun Cheui, her other sister, two years older than she was. Phloi had an elder brother from the same mother, *Phor* (Young) Pherm, older than her by a little over one year, and a younger sister from another mother – Honoured Father's Number Two Wife Waeo – named Wahn and two years younger than Phloi. Of all these siblings, besides her full brother Pherm, Phloi got along especially well with Khun Cheui, as they were almost the same age and Khun Cheui was a child who liked to romp about everywhere, which agreed with Phloi's disposition. Khun Un, the eldest sister, Phloi considered as an adult to be held in awe, because she lived upstairs with Honoured Father. Khun Un was the only one to have the key to another large room where the silver and gold were kept. All

* A high-level nobility title for men in royal service, addressed as 'Jaokhun'

outgoings in the house were overseen by her. Honoured Father trusted her as his eldest daughter. As for Phloi's mother, whom everyone in the house called Mother Chaem, Honoured Father had had a wooden house of five rooms built for her to stay in next to the main house within the compound. The meals for the three of them, mother and children, were brought in from the kitchen. When the meal was over, Phit, a servant Mother had taken into her service at the cost of twelve *tamlueng**, would eat what was left and do the dishes. Sweeping the house, taking out and laying out mattresses and pillows and doing the house's laundry were Phit's other duties.

Phloi's two elder brothers were Khun Chit and Phor Pherm. The first, she hardly knew at all. By then Khun Chit was a young man of sixteen. At times she saw him in the early evening, wearing a coloured sarong and a short tight-fitting blouse with straight long sleeves of glazed silk, his hair slicked back, a round patch to cure headaches on each temple as was the fashion amongst young men in those days, walking to and fro near the landing pavilion. As soon as it was dark, he would stealthily cross the canal to slip into town with some of Honoured Father's young menservants. Once, Phloi remembered, he disappeared for days, but on his return there was a big fuss, as Honoured Father gave him and the menservants a whipping in the courtyard there and then. Their shouts resounded throughout the compound. Phloi went to spy from behind one of the Chinese box-trees around the house with Khun Cheui, who was delighted that her brother got whipped and remarked to Phloi it served him right. Another time, Phloi saw Khun Chit lying, gaunt and in pain, in the house where he lived with menservants of the same age, and saw them boiling pots of potions for him to take. Khun Cheui came over and whispered to Phloi, 'Mae Phloi, I'll tell you something. Don't repeat it. Khun Chit is clapped out. If you tell anyone I'll be very angry.'

* A unit of 60 grams of silver

Pherm, Phloi's big brother, seemed to give his allegiance to Khun Chit more than to any other sibling, but he had to visit him without Mother knowing, because if she found out he was associating with Khun Chit, it was a thrashing every time. As for Wahn, her half-sister and Mother Waeo's daughter, she was too young for Phloi to pay attention to her.

One day, Phloi asked Mother about her siblings: how was it that people called Honoured Father's children *Khun Un*, *Khun Chit* and *Khun Cheui* but called the other children *Phor Pherm*, *Mae Phloi* and *Mae Wahn*. Mother glanced at Phloi and then laughed. She answered, 'Because you're children of minor wives. They are the children of a khunying, so they have to be "Khun". Just be thankful they're not calling you "Ee Phloi" like they would servants!'

