

*The world is in constant trouble
because of the selfishness in each of us,
in each of the different factions.
It is due to this uncontrolled selfishness
that war is fought when nobody
wants to fight a war.
It becomes a disease when people
succumb to its power.*

Buddhadhas Bhikku
Buddhist Teaching

1933

The sun was like an oven radiating enough heat to melt all things on earth. The scorching wind at the end of April 1933 kissed the parched leaves with a final death sending them floating down to carpet the cracked earth. There in the middle of the plain populated by dead grass, one man stood. His massive six feet two frame motionless as if the heat had turned him into a statue of an ancient warrior. Rivulets of sweat travelled down his dark, weather-roughened face. The hot breeze barely touched his skin before it blew on, as if his being there made no difference whatever.

Police Second Lieutenant Tui Pankem gently touched the ancient revolver at his side, his eyes never wavered from a small opening at the fold of the hill ahead. A barn owl screeched somewhere. He was waiting... for Yoi, the bandit... who he was sure would be coming through here before long.

He had already spent a night and a day hiding around there waiting for Sua¹ Yoi ever since he arrived at the Laotian border from Bangkok three days ago. His information came from the Director General of the Police himself whose order to him was to capture Yoi by whatever means came to hand. He decided right after his arrival to lose his motorbike in the tall grass field nearby and come on foot to this place on his own.

A private matter awaited final settlement between the two of them.

Once more he checked that the ancient revolver was as it should be. The piercing eyes showed no emotion as he looked at the old gun that had seen years and years of service. His right hand held the butt in a firm warm grip. The same hand that had shaken with the alcoholic delirium that plunged his life into hell for five whole months. The police officer put the gun away in its holster just as a cobra glided past without stirring his interest. His glance swept the area. Sua Yoi must be nearing the spot. The scene of his dueling with Yoi a year ago flashed into his memory. Then as now he was waiting. Would the outcome be the same. He didn't know.

He didn't want to know.

¹ *notorious bandits in Thailand were given the title of 'sua' meaning tiger*

Five days ago, Second Lieutenant Tui had been recalled from his upcountry post by a top secret command straight from the very top. He was ushered into the presence of Phra¹ Komon Pipat, the Director General of the Police Department the moment he arrived in Bangkok. That was on April 23, 1933, eighteen months after *the Boworadet Rebellion*.

Phra Komon Pipat was approaching sixty. He was tall and thin, with grey well spread in his hair. His constantly smiling face denoted a sweet temper. He had once taught at the military academy and counted among his former students many a young man who later formed the People's Party, Lieutenant Colonel Phra¹ Prasart Pittayayuth, Lieutenant Colonel Luang² Pibul Songkhram, for instance. Several years ago, he switched his career to policing, and had since attained the top rank of Director General.

"Have you ever heard of Sua Yoi, Second Lieutenant Tui?" It was the first question which the man who was approaching sixty put to the young man standing in front of him.

"Would it be the same Sua Yoi who terrorised Petchburi, Rajburi and Supanburi sir?"

"It would."

"I've met him twice sir, and one of those times, we had a duel."

"I've heard of your duel, and that was the reason I recalled you from upcountry." The Director General's words came slow, but assured. "When did you meet Sua Yoi last?"

"About five or six months ago sir. About a year after my father's death."

The old man paused briefly. "Your father was a soldier, was he not? I seem to recall that he died in action."

"That's right sir. He did not have a very high rank, but he was a good soldier all his life."

"I knew something of your father, and even though I never met

him, I respect his bravery at that fiercely fought battle."

"Thank you sir."

"Right. Now from your two meetings with Sua Yoi, what sort of man would you say he is?"

"Without prejudice sir, he's a very able bandit. He took up thieving not that long ago, but he made a quick name for himself because of his deadly marksmanship. I heard that his was not a bad bloodline at all. It is said that he was from the capital, that his father was a senior officer in the Ministry of Interior, forced to resign because of some unfounded accusation and who eventually died brokenhearted, leaving him alone with his mother. That was only a couple of years ago."

"You seem to know quite a lot about him."

The young policeman hesitated briefly. "I have some personal reasons that urged me to find out all about him sir."

"And what led to that duel that you had with him?"

"Three years ago when I was a sergeant I took up my post at Baan Haodong³, a little community near Laos. As the name implied the place was really full of cobras. It was also nicknamed Bandit's Way because they seemed to congregate around there. A day never passed without murder and mayhem. I remember well my first week there. Sua Tong and his gang raided the house of the village headman, Pui, killing him brutally and got away without any police willing to give pursuit. I found out later that it was because of his reputation as a deadly shot. I took off after him by myself on my motorbike. I followed him for a day and a night and caught up with him at the edge of the jungle. We had a duel and I killed him with one shot right through his forehead."

"And that was how you came to be known as *Sergeant Tui of the Deadly Gun*."

Second Lieutenant Tui nodded. "Yes sir. In the following months I challenged six more murderous bandits to duels, Tom, Wang, Porn, and the rest, and managed to kill all of them each with a bullet

¹ *Phra* is an old-fashioned title, ranking above *Luang*, but below *Phraya*, approximately equivalent to a baronet

² *Luang* is an old-fashioned title, ranking below *Phra*, approximately equivalent to a knight

³ *Baan* is short for *moobaan* which is a village. *Baan* is often used as a prefix for a village name. *Hao* is a cobra, and *dong*, a jungle.

through his forehead. After that no bandits came near the place, and it made me pride myself as the fastest gun in the area, until the day I met Sua Yoi.”

The narrator lapsed into a short silence. “That was last April. One day we had news of a robbery at Baan Bang Phra village, and it was later established that it was Yoi’s gang. We surrounded them in the jungle and killed all his men, but Yoi escaped. I was familiar with that terrain, and decided to go after him myself. You might say that I was after the glory of being the one who singlehandedly dealt with Sua Yoi. I waited for him in front of one of the caves. The place was overgrown with big trees, and was a lair of cobras. He certainly did not expect any pursuit, and when he emerged from the cave, my gun was trained on his back. That was our first encounter.”

“Stop right there,” I shouted to him, “throw down your gun and turn around slowly. You are under arrest.”

The bandit threw down his gun as I came out of the dark shade behind a big tree reaching for the handcuff.

“Sergeant Tui, is it?” came his calm query.

“It’s me all right.”

“The Sergeant Tui who killed Sua Tom and Sua Wang?”

“The same.”

“But those two were really low class gunmen.” His voice was laced with contempt. I looked at him searchingly. His black outfit was dirty and badly creased. I could see a fearsome black panther tattooed on his big broad chest, and his face sported an unruly growth of beard. His eyes however were not only sharp but concealing a glint of unmistakable power. It was certainly unlike the faces of any bandits I had formerly encountered. His lips were pressed together into a straight line of absolute self confidence. I told myself, this is not your ordinary bandit.

“Are you thinking of challenging me to a duel?”

“Yes,” came his reply clear-as-bell, “I heard that Sergeant Tui took pride in face to face duels with villains. I don’t need bullets in my gun. And if I win, I ask only my freedom.”

Another one of them. I thought and sneered as I threw him his

fully loaded gun. He caught it and emptied out all the bullets, putting just one back into the chamber. That impressed me, and I imitated him. I had no fear at all. Did I not gain my sobriquet of *Sergeant Tui of the Deadly Gun* from countless duels like this? We stood three feet apart, arms relaxed, eyes on each other unwaveringly. Time had stood still. There was no counting, no rules, no seconds. One bullet would decide all.

In a blink, my gun was out.

Yoi’s gun barrel was already pressed against my head.

I was startled into standing still for a long while before I put my gun back in its holster and the bandit too lowered his weapon.

“Go. I’ve lost.” I said, and the tall figure clad in black simply moved away quietly.

“Wait.” I called out. Yoi stopped. “How long have you been using a gun?”

“Not very long.”

“How many years?”

“Five years.”

Second Lieutenant Tui whose path had crossed that of Sua Yoi interrupted his narration with a long pause as if his memory needed revising.

“What happened next?” The Director General prompted.

“Sir, my father had taught me to handle gun ever since I was six. I practiced shooting everyday, come rain or shine, for eighteen years. He’d been shooting for five years and he was faster, fast as lightning. I couldn’t guess how many more years of practice I would need to attain that speed. There was not a chance in hell to beat him, not a chance. In that case what was the use of my holding a gun anymore. From that day and its disillusion I abandoned my grip on guns, and grabbed the bottle instead.”

The Director General nodded his sympathy. Only those who have been defeated totally know the bitter tastes of vanquish.

It is more bitter than liquor.

“For five whole months after that incident, I drowned myself in the bottle. I was drunk from morning to night. The picture of Yoi’s

quick draw haunted me and kept me disheartened. I who had prided myself as the fastest gun and the deadliest shot was thrown into utter despair with just one defeat. Even now I couldn't understand myself."

"But you're recovered now, aren't you?"

"Yes sir. And it was again due to Sua Yoi."

The Director General raised an eyebrow in query. "How did it come about?"

"One evening I was at my usual place in this drink hole. I forget how many glasses of fiery liquid had gone down my throat, but my swimming vision still caught someone walking into the place. He was a big strong fellow dressed all in black, with uncombed beard, and a very hard look about him.

"Sua Yoi," the old liquor pedlar croaked out the name before running for his life behind his shack.

Yoi looked at my state of dissipation and shook his head, "I see that Sergeant Tui now totes liquor instead of guns. What a sorry spectacle."

I automatically reached for my gun and pulled it out with a hand that trembled from the alcohol surging in my veins. Sua Yoi laughed, "So you can still hold a gun, sergeant?" I dropped the gun and it clattered on the floor. Yoi yanked me up by my shirt collar and crashed me against a table. He sent his fist jabbing into my stomach which doubled me up like a sack on the floor. I vomited alcohol copiously before he emptied a whole bucket of water on me.

"I loathe the people who are afraid to fight life, especially those who are scared by defeat. Turned into a drunk did you, and they called you *Sergeant Tui of the Deadly Gun*, the ace law enforcer? I spit on you."

He threw me my gun. "Here. Our true friend is the gun. Pick it up and come for another shoot out with me. I will wait. And if you still can't get the better of me, then go and reincarnate as a dog, why don't you."

He then walked away into the falling rain. I lay on the floor, my senses slowly returning to me in full force with my gaze fixed on the direction into which Yoi has disappeared. Red hot anger gradually boiled up from inside me, until, eventually, I reached for

the gun.

After that evening, driven by the desire to avenge the insult, I rose from my wreckage, and have never touched another drop of alcohol since. I practiced shooting, adding more and more mutilated empty milk cans to the mountainous pile behind my lodging. And that was the last time I saw him."

The two men from different age groups fell silent. Phra Komon Pipat sat thinking quietly before walking over to the window. The big Fortune tree (wasana) outside was in bloom showing off clusters of white flowers. The warm April breeze carried its heady fragrance into the room.

"Thank you for sharing your private life with me and with such a wealth of detail. I find it extremely useful." The older man broke the silence. "It's my turn now to tell you something about Sua Yoi which is known to very few people. I believe you must have heard about the *Boworadet Rebellion*?"

The policeman from upcountry nodded. "Yes, sir."

"What do you know about it?"

"It was an attempt at a coup d'etat by a group of people who wanted to bring down the government of Phraya Pahon Pol Payuhasena, and take the country back to the monarchy. It was led by Prince Boworadet. The rebels called themselves the Nation's Restorers. Their tactic was to bring upcountry forces into town, using Nakhon Ratchasima as their headquarters. It was called *Operation Deer Stalking*, the government was taken by surprise, and there were several days of heavy fighting."

"Well, not entirely by surprise. In fact we knew about the intended coup two days in advance, and that was by sheer coincidence. One day, the Prime Minister, Phraya Pahon, was visiting the army camp in Rajburi where Phraya Suraphan Seni was governor. During his visit, an airforce plane flew in very noisily, and landed at Rajburi airport. The pilot whose name was Kun¹ Sawai Munyakad walked straight to Phrya Suraphan and handed him a letter, announc-

¹ an old-fashioned title ranking below Luang

ing that it was from Prince Bowaradet. Phraya Phahon who was standing right there went pale. He guessed right away that Prince Bowaradet was asking for the Rajburi troop to join him in a coup.”

“How could that pilot be so careless, delivering a letter from the coup leader in front of the government leader?”

“I don’t know. Maybe he didn’t know Phraya Phahon.”

“Incredible.”

“It is, but that was fate interfering to indicate a defeat for the rebels.”

“So what did the Prime Minister do sir?”

“He returned to Bangkok the very next morning by train in time to order a defence by the government side, appointing Lt. Col. Luang Pibul Songkhram as commander of the troops to put down the rebels.”

The young policeman asked, “Why did Phraya Suraphan not hold on to Phraya Pahon that day, since the cat was already out of the bag?”

“I think Phraya Suraphan was caught unaware, or he may never have intended to join the rebels. But whatever the truth, he ended up in jail.”

“And that was how the government was alerted?”

The Director General took a drink of water before continuing his story. The eyes that had seen many a summer and winter looked inward to the picture of a civil war. That October the flood water came down from the north with the first of the cold wind of winter, but it completely failed to cool down the people of both factions.

“On the evening of October 11, the rebels moved the Ayutthaya Engineering Corps of the First and Second Battalion, altogether six companies, by boat to land at Rangsit. They reached the Bangkhen area between the airport and the first canal at Don Muang before dawn and were deployed to seize the Bangkhen, Laksi and Rangsit railway stations. And the next day, the troops from Nakhon Ratchasima and Saraburi joined them at Don Muang.”

“I heard that a lot of soldiers joined up with the rebels.”

“That’s right. There were also the noblemen of the old regime who were royalists. These people believed that the change effected

by the People’s Party in 1932 was simply a transfer of power from the King to another group of people, that it was only a coup d’etat, not a revolution, that it was not real democracy. These people were all arrested in the aftermath.”

The Director General gazed out of the window. “The troops poured in from upcountry, but we were more than a match for them with our 7th and 8th Battalion. The rebels sent three officers namely Phraya Vehasayan Silpasith, Phra Teves Wora Amnuayrit and Captain Sanoh Raktham, to demand that we comply with six conditions which of course were refused. The shooting went on for days. Eventually we put our anti-aircraft artillery trucks onto rail platforms and ran them into the battlefield. The rebels were beginning to lose heart from the heavy bombardment, but then Luang Krisda Winit, one of their officers, came up with a solution. He fired up a Harnomac engine before jumping off and let the engine run straight into the train carrying the anti-aircraft artillery, crashing into it at top speed. The two trains toppled into a swamp with heavy casualties on our side. Major Luang Amnuay Songkhram lost his life, while Commander Luang Kad Songkhram was badly wounded and lost one of his ears.”

“It’s hard to believe how madly courageous that Luang was.”

“Luang Krisda Winit was a young officer of your age. He was the son of a friend of mine, Phraya Krisda Winit who had served in the army since the reign of King Rama VI and was a hard core royalist. He disagreed with the 1932 democratic revolution. He felt that it was too early for Siam. Malicious rumour had it that he was against the People’s Party, and he was made to retire. It broke his heart and he fell ill and died not long after. That caused the resentment which was the main motivation for his son, Luang Krisda, joining the rebels.”

“Resentment against the People’s Party?”

“Yes, and in particular, against Luang Pibul Songkhram who was the commander of the troop that defeated the rebels so absolutely. In his own estimation, his family had, for generations, served the monarchs with unwavering devotion. When the democratic revolution took place a few years ago, they did nothing to oppose it even though they had their reservations, adopting a *laissez faire*

attitude. But he was really upset when Phraya Pahon and Luang Pibul Songkhram staged a second coup on June 20, 1933 to wrestle the government away from Phraya Manoprakorn. He felt then that the power that was the King's was now invested in a handful of military people. And when a mere citizen dared to apply for criminal litigation against King Rama VII, that was the last straw. He joined the rebels without any hesitation."

"Was Luang Krisda arrested after the rebels' defeat?"

"He disappeared after the defeat when the rebels were retreating to their headquarters in Nakhon Ratchasima. Our troops were close behind them, but then the rebels fell out among themselves."

"Fell out, sir?"

"That's right. The Commander-in-Chief of the Ubol Rachathani Battalion switched to our side, and took Nakhon Ratchasima, destroying the railroad between Pak Chong and Korat, cutting off the rebels' retreat route. The Ubol soldiers left a trail of disasters behind them as they pulled away from Nakhon Ratchasima. The railway and all the bridges including the one across Chee River were totally demolished which practically stranded the rebels. On top of that, we defeated their vanguard in Korat in fierce fighting that killed Phraya Srisithi Songkhram, one of their senior officers, and a friend of Luang Krisda's father, most tragically. The rebels suffered great casualties as our side pursued them with bombers."

The Second Lieutenant of the police shook his head in sad contemplation. All wars were the same. The survivors fared no better as they were left bearing cruel scars. His own father had been killed in that war. The government decorated him for valour posthumously, the medal still hung in his own bedroom, but what was the use of that as it served only as a bitter reminder.

"It is such a pity that Thai people should be killing each other," he murmured.

"Yes. When the end came, most of the rebels simply decided to abandon the base. They escaped out of the country leaving their wives and children behind. Among them was Luang Krisda Winit. No one has seen him since. There was a big price on his head, and we thought that, along with other rebel leaders, he had taken

refuge in Indochina. But not long after the end of the rebellion, a new bandit started operating around Supanburi and Petchburi, committing wide-spread robbery."

Second Lieutenant Tui interrupted excitedly, "Sua Yoi! Luang Krisda Winit is Sua Yoi!"

"That's right. You're quick. From that point on Luang Krisda spent his life as a fearsome outlaw, robbing to fund his next revolution."

"It's incredible that someone of his background and education should turn outlaw."

"I don't think he meant to be a real bandit. But it certainly is a lifestyle that serves his underground activities very well. Had he stayed in town, he'd be arrested and executed for certain. Anyway, as far as I can make out, he only robs the dishonest rich. We've been hunting him on the quiet these many months because we believe that he still has a few tricks to play against the government. But we haven't been successful. He has excellent intelligence and always manages to escape. For all we know, the assassination attempt against Luang Pibul Songkhram at the Phra Meru Ground¹ last February could be his handiwork. We know for certain though that he keeps in touch with a group of military officers to whom he sends the proceeds of his robberies to help buy weapons."

"What do they want the revolution to achieve? To restore the monarchy or to usurp the power themselves?"

The Director General answered firmly, "I know his family. They have never been ambitious. And yet I'm not sure how they intend to chart the future of this country should they become successful."

"Does anybody else know about this, sir?"

"No one. I put this story together from all the available information. At the moment, only you and I are in the know. I told you about it because both you and I have our different reasons for wanting to meet Sua Yoi."

The Director General pulled up a chair and sat facing the young policeman.

¹ a public park in Bangkok where royal cremations take place

“Second Lieutenant Tui, you must have guessed by now why I sent for you. We want to capture Sua Yoi or Luang Krisda Winit because he is one of those who possess information about the rebels. We must have him.”

“Dead or alive, sir?”

“Alive.”

“He’d never allow himself to be caught alive.”

“For that reason I need you. You’re the only person who has had a duel with him. Even though you’re just a small upcountry policeman, I’ve heard of your reputation as a competent and resolute lawman, and especially your prowess as the fastest and deadliest shot in the entire police department.”

“But I was not faster than Sua Yoi.”

“Tell me frankly Tui, do you think you can beat him if you have another chance to take him on?”

The young policeman took his time answering. “I’m sure I could. I underestimated him that first time.”

The Director General smiled with satisfaction. “You are still angry with him, aren’t you?”

Second Lieutenant Tui clamped his jaws together in response.

“Why do you think he insulted you in that bar?”

“To make me so angry that I’d pull myself out of that alcoholic stupor. And he did it too.”

“But why would he want to do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“I guess that he’d wanted to do you a good turn because you’d once let him go. That would be just like Sua Yoi. He is that kind of man.”

“So what do you want me to do, sir?”

“I want you to go and challenge him to another duel.”

The young lawman raised his eyebrows in surprise, “Sir, I don’t understand.”

“Some news has filtered through that Sua Yoi is in contact with a Chinese soldier called Lao San in Laos. This Lao San is a Vietnamese national and can be found at the Laotian border near your Haodong village. Yoi may be buying weapons from him or

consulting him about bringing communism to Siam, we can’t be sure. I want you to waylay him there, and when I say I want him alive, I don’t mean that you can’t wound him first before dragging him in.”

Second Lieutenant Tui broke into his first light smile, “I’m sure he wouldn’t let me shoot him that easily.”

“I am very familiar with Luang Krisda Winit’s character. The two of you have one thing in common, and that’s pride. He will never kill you because you once let him live. He may be a dangerous man, but ingratitude is not in his make up. I have often regretted that the country should lose the service of a brilliant young man just because of a difference in ideology. He is clever. He’d figure out that if you were there waiting for him alone, you’d want only the chance to prove yourself faster. And that will give you the opportunity to wound him and bring him in. It is of course also your last chance for a personal vengeance.”

Was it personal, or was he just following orders? He didn’t know for sure, but it was certainly the reason why he was waiting there these one night and a day.

Duty and personal vendetta merged into one this time.

The hot wind of April kept him alert. Second Lieutenant Tui touched the gun in its holster. He was very calm. A cobra slithered past, he paid it no attention. He looked around him. Sua Yoi must be approaching by now. Vengeance would be his.

He had no consciousness of how much time had passed when that black clad figure suddenly appeared. He waited until it came to a halt in front of him.

Half a year had not changed the bandit. He had lived through crises after crises, with his eyes as sharply focussed as ever.

“How long have you been waiting?” The notorious outlaw asked, his eyes mocking and yet sympathetic.

“A day and a night.”

“You want another duel with me?” The rebel leader went straight to the heart of the matter.

“Yes.”

“Your hands are pretty steady now?”

“Yes.”

“Then, you’re ready.”

“I’m ready, Luang Krisda Winit.”

Yoi was taken aback. He laughed softly. “That’s not bad. What else do you know?”

“I know that you drove that engine into the aircraft artillery train, toppling it into the water, drowning many soldiers fighting on the government side.”

The noble bandit answered without emotions. “War is war. A lot of my friends died that day too.”

“But you were the traitor.”

“Losers become traitors, and winners rule the country. What is the difference? If traitors staged the coup d’etat of 1933, traitors too formed the People’s Party of 1932. The difference is simply which side you choose to fight with.”

Anger flashed into his eyes very briefly before they calmed down again. The former Khun¹ Luang turned bandit continued in a very quiet voice, “The two of us are standing on opposite sides, supporting different ideologies. We stand on a parallel, with no rights, no wrongs, no whites, no blacks. If you want a shoot out with me in order to protect the interest of your ideology, then just shoot me. Why bother with the noble idea of a duel.”

The lawman took time to think before asking, “Wasn’t your father one of the noblemen, just like many others, who lost his privileges because of the People’s Party’s revolution?”

“He was. But he disagreed with the People’s Party not because of what he lost, but because he thought most of the Siamese too ill-educated to understand what democracy was all about. Most of the soldiers who helped with the take over had no idea either. They were just conned into being instruments in a revolution.”

“Conned?”

“That’s right. Did you know that on the day of the revolution

most soldiers had no idea what was happening? An illegal command was issued for them to muster in front of the Throne Hall in Bangkok. Some companies were told that there was a rebellion and for them to move in quickly. Once there, the cavalry corps, the artillery corps and the navy were all told to disband and mingle, making it difficult for their officers to issue command. And then the instigators started reading the People’s Party’s announcements. Meanwhile the royalties in various palaces were taken hostages. Even Prince Nakhon Sawan was dragged away still in his pyjamas. They were all forced to leave the country immediately. Do you call that democracy?”

“But a revolution is bound to happen sooner or later.”

“Absolutely. When the majority of people are ready for this form of government. This hasty change only meant that power fell to a handful of people, and how was that different from the old system? Power had simply moved from the King to a group of dictatorial soldiers. You mark my words, twenty years from now, Siamese democracy will still be struggling to stand upright, because it had such a bad start.”

“I will remember that.”

The lawman and the outlaw fell silent.

“I was ordered to ambush you”, the lawman stated.

“So why didn’t you? You’ve had your chance,” the outlaw replied.

Second Lieutenant Tui kept quiet, spurring the Khun Luang who had left a life of ease behind to take up political banditry to continue, “I take it then that you want to prove that you can beat me. Well, are you ready?”

The lawman nodded. And that very moment when they both drew their guns, his mind was not on politics or ideology at all, his mind was completely blank.

And once again, Yoi’s gun was at his head before his came out of its holster.

“I lost again...”

“You tried too hard to win, and that was distracting. Sometimes the determination to win adds to the stress.”

“You should have killed me.”

¹ a title used in front of people’s names, both male and female, when addressing them politely. It is sometimes used in front of a title or rank such as Luang.

“Why? Is your life so meaningless as to depend only upon this winning or losing? I failed in my coup attempt. I was hunted all over the country. Yet I never thought of suicide.”

“You and I owe nothing to each other. Even if you don’t kill me today, one day I shall have to kill you.”

“Let’s wait until that day comes around, shall we?”

With that, the bandit who was once a Khun Luang walked off. The young policeman sighed. Something was happening between the two of them. It arose from gratitude and respect for each other’s ability, a bonding. But friendship was unthinkable, it could not be allowed. His duty was to kill this bandit, and this was his best chance.

The broad back of Sua Yoi as he walked away made a perfect target. Conflict played havoc in his heart. You cannot have two lions in one den. Not when one is a policeman and the other a notorious bandit, and a rebel who caused death and devastation to government troops. Most importantly, he could not allow this feeling to develop. He must end it right here and now.

He silently pulled his gun out of its holster, took aim at Yoi’s back, all his nerves concentrated on this one shot.

The shot reverberated in that hilly terrain. Yoi’s body rolled down the slope as Tui ran towards it, smoke still drifting from the barrel of his gun. Two pairs of eyes clasped in silence. He saw a pool of blood spreading on Yoi’s chest. Yoi’s lips pressed in a grimace.

“Can you doubt my desire to exact vengeance?” The policeman asked, but he got no answer.

“It wasn’t because you defeated me or insulted me.”

“Why then?”

“My father was aboard that aircraft artillery train.”

Silence reigned in that deserted prairie. Yoi’s voice when it finally came was as dry as dust.

“You wanted a duel with me to avenge your father, not to prove your shooting prowess?”

The young policeman nodded. “There was no need to prove anything, I could never be your equal.”

“Did he drown?” Yoi whispered.

“He did.”

The former rebel with a price on his head closed his eyes in sorrow.

“It is fate, isn’t it. We should have been friends instead of being on opposite sides like this. We are both proud... it is such a pity, you should have let it...”

The bandit coughed slightly before levelling himself up slowly. The policeman returned his gun to its holster and offered his hand in friendship. Suddenly two pairs of eyes, once harsh, mellowed into gentleness. Both alive and full of feelings.

Yoi was gone showing not the slightest sign of injury.

The upcountry policeman bent his gaze down to the termite hill beside the path, and stirred with his foot the carcass of an enormous cobra that had nearly killed Yoi a few moments ago. It was shot down from the top of the termite hill spraying red blood widely just as Yoi was walking past. A smile played at the corner of his lips as he walked back to retrieve his motorbike, leaving the carcass behind. His single bullet had smashed right into the middle of the cobra’s head, tearing it apart.