

Kalki's "Ponniyin Selvan"

Part 1-B [Chapters 31- 57]

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New Floods

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List of Principal Characters

Glossary

[Note: Ponniiyin Selvan means "Beloved of the Ponni". Ponni is the ancient Tamil name for River Cauvery. Prince Arulmozli Varma was popularly known as "Ponniiyin Selvan" or "Beloved of the Cauvery".]

Chapter 31 -- "Thieves! Thieves"

Our gallant Vandiya Devan looked at the portraits of the Chozla monarchs beginning from Vijayala to Paranthaka II Sundara Chozla and enjoyed them.

Ah! How capable each of them was! What brave men! What great deeds they accomplished, considering their very lives to be trivial! I have not read about such people even in the stories and epics! Surely, this Chozla nation is fortunate to have such a ruling dynasty and all the territories under the sway of their empire are truly fortunate!

Vandiya Devan noticed another important fact in the history of the above Chozla monarchs: every Chozla king was helped considerably by a chieftain of the Pazluvoor clan. The chieftains had performed several deeds of bravery while helping their kings.

During the siege of Tanjore, when it was under the control of the Muthu-arayas, it was a Pazluvoor chief who first entered the conquered fort. When the lame warrior Vijayala entered the battlefield at Thiru-puram-biyam, it was a scion of the clan of Pazluvoor who lent him his shoulders to carry him to the front. It was another chief of Pazluvoor who placed the golden crown upon Aditya's head and anointed him as an independent king. He was the same Lord Pazluvoor who lent his shoulders for Aditya to step on and jump upon the war elephant to kill the Pallava Aparajita. The chieftains of Pazluvoor had carried the tiger-flag and led the victorious Chozla armies in the various campaigns of Emperor Paranthaka I. A Lord Pazluvoor had picked up Raja-aditya who lay slain in the battlefield; shouting "The Rashtrakuta's are thwarted!" he turned the defeat into victory. The present day chieftains had similarly served Arinjaya and Sundara Chozla in various ways.

Vandiya Devan who saw all these incidents depicted in the art gallery was immersed in boundless surprise. He realized that there was justification in the present Lords of Pazluvoor, the two brothers, enjoying such prestige and authority in the Chozla Empire. There was nothing remarkable in Sundara Chozla consulting their opinion in every matter of state.

But, I am now caught in a huge dilemma; that much is sure. The Commander feels some suspicion about me for some reason. If the Elder Lord returns, the suspicions will be confirmed. The truth about the signet ring will be unveiled and after that my situation will become defenseless!

He had heard details about the infamous dungeons -- Tanjore Prisons -- under the supervision of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor.

Perhaps they will throw me into those underground prisons -- it will be impossible to escape from there. Even if it was possible for a fellow to escape, he would emerge as a mere bag of bones and skin, a fool who had lost his mind. Aha! How am I to evade this

terrible menace? I must concoct some hoax and get away from the fort before the Elder Lord Pazluvoor returns.

He even gave up his wish to meet the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor once again. All that he wanted was to escape from the terrible fate of the dungeons, save his life and get away from the fort. Even if I don't have the letter, I can meet the Princess Kundavai personally and explain things to her. It's fine if she believes me; if not, it cannot be helped. But how am I to get out of this fort?

Suddenly he began to wonder about the old clothes he had worn in the morning. What could have happened to them? They gave me all these new garments and showed me consideration just to examine my old clothes! The letter to Kundavai must have fallen in the Commander's hands. There is no doubt about that now! I now understand why he caught hold of me in that vise-like grip and did not let me leave with the bards. That is why he sent, not one but three men to serve me here. Ah! What can I do? Some strategy, some trick is needed! I must find a way before the Elder returns. Yes an idea occurs to me ... let me try it ... I must not hesitate any more ... thought Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan.

He looked out at the road through the decorated window of the art gallery. The Commander was coming down the street, seated on a horse, surrounded by his retinue. Yes! This is the perfect opportunity, I must not hesitate.

The three men who had been playing at dice while seated on the doorstep now stopped their game and stood up. They too had heard the noise of their master returning. Vandiya Devan approached the doorway and asked those men, "My dear brothers! Where are the old clothes that I had been wearing this morning?"

"Why do you ask about those dirty clothes now? According to the master's orders haven't we given you new silken raiment?"

"I don't want these new clothes. My old clothes are enough. Bring them back quickly!"

"They have been sent away for being washed. We shall give them back when they come back from the wash."

"Nothing doing! You are all thieves! I had some money in my old pouch. You have taken away my clothes to steal that money. Bring it back immediately. If not..."

"If not .. What will you do Thambi? Will you chop off my head and send it to Tanjore? But this is Tanjore! Don't forget that!" laughed the man.

"Hey fellah! Are you going to bring back my clothes immediately or not?"

"I can bring them back only if I have them! We threw those dirty old clothes into the river. How can we get back what has gone into the innards of a crocodile?"

"Thieving knaves! Are you playing tricks with me? Here, I will report you to your master!" saying this Vandiya Devan tried to cross the doorstep. One of the three men came forward to block his way. Vandiya Devan bunched his right fist and delivered a well placed hit upon the fellow's nose! That was it; the fellow toppled to fall heavily to the ground. Blood began gushing out of his nose.

The other fellow now ran forward with outstretched arms as if to wrestle with Vallavarayan. Vandiya Devan caught hold of both the outstretched arms; he thrust his

foot between the legs of the enemy and gave a sudden twist... .. then ... the fellow sat down shouting painfully "Ammma...!" The third man had come closer by now. Vandiya Devan stepped aside and kicked with his left leg, aiming at the knee cap of the man. He too fell roaring with pain! None of them had expected this sudden attack!

But all the three men recovered almost instantly and came rushing towards Vandiya Devan. Now they came more carefully and slowly. By now they heard the hoof beats of the horse stopping outside the palace courtyard.

Vandiya Devan used all his strength and shouted loudly, "Thieves! Thieves!" He began attacking the three men furiously. They tried to catch hold of him. He was continuing his shouts. "Thieves! Knaves!"

The Commander, Younger Lord Pazluvoor, now entered the hallway asking, "What is the commotion down here?"

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Chapter 32 -- Examination

Upon seeing the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor, Vandiya Devan stopped fighting and walked towards him. By now the guards had come up to hold him tightly.

Without being bothered one bit by their hold, he walked up a few steps saying, "Commander! You have come back at the right time. These knaves have not only stolen my clothes but they are also trying to kill me. Is this the way to treat guests? Is this the custom of Tanjore? I am not merely your guest. I am also a guest of the Emperor, you must have heard the words of the Empress! I am the messenger who brought letters from the Crown Prince. These fellows who treat me like this will not hesitate at anything. I am surprised that you keep such knaves as servants. In my Thondai country we would first hang such fellows and then do other things!" He did not stop the tirade.

The Commander was still in the grip of astonishment about the youth who had single handedly tackled three of his strong men. His eagerness to recruit such a youth in his personal corps of guards increased. He replied in a calm voice, "Be patient Thambi, be patient! I don't think they would have done anything like that! Let me enquire."

"That is my request also! Question them and then dispense justice! Please arrange for the return of my clothes and belongings."

"Hey you! Let go of him and come here! What were my orders and what have you fellows done? Why did you start a quarrel with him?" asked the Commander angrily.

"Master, we followed your orders explicitly. We took him to the luxurious bath with unguents and then gave him the silken robes and new ornaments. We then served him a six course meal and led him to this art gallery. For some time he was enjoying the paintings. We do not know what happened or what he thought suddenly: he came out asking for his old clothes and began attacking us!" the servant replied carefully.

"Three of you louts were beaten up by a single youth!" snarled the Commander with fiery eyes.

"Master! We were hesitant because he was the palace guest! Permit us now; we will take care of him."

"Enough of these boasts of your bravery! Stop it! Thambi, what do you say?"

"I too say that you give them permission. Permit me also. It has been quite a while since I fought Chozla enemies. My shoulders itch. Let me give them a lesson on how to treat palace guests."

The Commander smiled, "Thambi, restrain your itching shoulders to fight with Chozla enemies. It is my order that there shall be no duelling or commotion inside the fort when the Emperor is in ill health!"

"If so, please ask them to return my clothes and other belongings."

"Where are they, you fellow?"

"Master, we have stored them in a safe place as per your orders!"

"Commander! See how they lie! Just now they declared that they had sent my clothes to be laundered. Now they say that you asked them to store it in a safe place. If we give them time they may declare you to be the thief!" Vandiya Devan spoke without hesitation.

The Commander now looked at the leader of his guards: "Fools! My orders were to give new clothes to this young man. I did not say anything about his old garments... These fools are blabbering nonsense, Thambi! Why are you so concerned about your old clothes? Did you have something valuable in them?"

"Yes. I had some gold for expenses on my journey ..." before Vandiya Devan could finish he was interrupted by the Younger Lord Pazluvoor: "Don't worry about that. Whatever gold you need for your expenses, I shall give you."

"Commander, I am the messenger from Prince Karikala. It is not my practice to seek alms from others!"

"Then I will make arrangements for the return of your clothes and belongings, don't worry! There was no other valuable in your pouch, was there?"

"There was one other important item in my waist pouch. I think that your men would not have touched that. If they had done anything like that ..."

"Ah! How angry you sound! You forget whom you are talking to. I forgive you because of your youth. What is that precious item?"

"Commander! I cannot reveal that; it is a personal secret."

"There can be no secret unknown to me in Tanjore."

"It is a personal matter placed in my responsibility by Prince Karikala."

"The Prince is the Commander of the Northern Forces. His authority prevails north of the Palar. Here, it is the authority of the Emperor."

"Commander, wherever the tiger-flag flies, it is the authority of the Emperor. Is there any doubt about that?"

"That is why there can be no secrets unknown to me inside this fort. I am thinking of the welfare of the Emperor."

"Commander! This Chozla nation is beholden to you and your brother the Elder Lord Pazluvoor, for guarding the Emperor so carefully. Today, I personally heard the Emperor praising your effort. The Emperor declared that even the Lord of Death is afraid to enter Tanjore because of you. How significant those words were!"

"Yes, Thambi. If we had not asked the Emperor to move here from Pazlayarai to be guarded more carefully, who knows what untoward thing would have happened? Perhaps the intentions of those Pandiya conspirators might have succeeded."

"Oh! You also agree! So, what I heard must be true!"

"What did you hear?"

"I heard that there was a conspiracy against the Emperor and that there was another kind of conspiracy against the esteemed sons of the Emperor."

The Younger Lord Pazluvoor bit his lower lip with his strong teeth. He realized that he was not faring very well in this discussion with the youth. He was more or less in a situation where he had to defend himself from the accusations of the youth! He decided to cut the conversation short.

"Why are you concerned about that? We are here to break any conspiracy and guard the Chozla Dynasty! What is your request? All that you want is the return of your old clothes .. is that all?"

"I want my old clothes back and I also want all my possessions that were inside my pouch to be returned."

"You have not yet said what those things were!"

"If you insist, I have to tell you. The responsibility is yours. Besides the letter meant for the Emperor, the Prince had given me one more letter ..."

"One more letter! For whom? You never told me that."

"I did not tell you because it was a personal matter. I am telling you now because you insist. The Prince had sent a letter for the Princess at Pazlayarai, the Younger Pirati Kundavai."

"Oh! Is that so? That means you cannot go back to Kanchi immediately tomorrow, taking the reply from the Emperor! What was the urgency now, for the Prince to send a secret letter to his sister?"

"Commander! It is not my practice to read letters meant for others. I have no objection to your reading this letter also, just like you read the letter meant for the Emperor. It is your responsibility. All that I want is the return of the money and letter which were in my waist pouch."

"Don't worry about that. I will see to it personally."

The Commander began walking in towards the palace. Vandiya Devan was ready to follow him. Seeing that, the Commander made a sign with his eyes; one of his footmen noticed it and blocked the way of Vandiya Devan. About five footmen carrying lances surrounded Vandiya Devan. He too stopped and waited thinking that there was no use in fighting with those men.

The Younger Lord Pazluvoor returned after some time. A man followed him carrying a heavy, large platter. Vandiya Devan's old clothes and waist belt came on that platter as if some tribute was being presented.

"Thambi, here. Your clothes are safe. Examine them carefully and make sure that all your belongings are there!" said the Commander.

Accordingly, Vandiya Devan searched carefully. He found more gold coins than what he originally had in his waist pouch. The letter meant for Kundavai Devi was also there. How did these extra gold coins come here? How did the letter which he had not found on his previous search come back? The letter must have fallen in the hands of the Commander of Tanjore. He must have read it and put it back in the waist pouch when he came back now. Why has he done this? Why has he placed the extra gold coins in here? He is a very dangerous fellow. In what other manner will he examine me, I wonder! I must be very careful in dealing with him!

"Is everything alright, Thambi? The gold and other items you had?"

"Please, give me one moment..." Vandiya Devan counted the gold coins he had. He separated the extra coins and placed them in front of the Commander, "Sir, I am born in the noble Vaanar clan. I am a messenger from Prince Karikala. I do not covet the possessions of others," spoke the youth.

"I congratulate you on your integrity. However, you can keep this extra money for your expenses on the journey. When do you wish to leave? Today itself? Or, would you care to stay tonight, relax, meet my elder brother and then go?" asked the Commander.

"I surely wish to stay on tonight and meet the Elder Lord before I go. But please warn your men not to touch me or my belongings." After saying this Vandiya Devan picked up the extra gold and secured it in his new waist pouch.

"I am glad. You will have no further trouble here. Ask freely for whatever you wish."

"Sir, I have a desire to go around sightseeing in this large Tanjore City. I can do that, can I not?"

"Surely! Here, these two men of mine will come with you and guide you and show you all the places in the city. My only request is that you don't leave the fort. The fort doors will be closed after sunset. You cannot reenter tonight if you go out! Roam around as much as you wish inside the fort!"

The Commander then made a sign to two of his men and whispered some instructions to them. In a way, Vandiya Devan was able to guess what those instructions were.

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Chapter 33 -- A Beauty Among The Branches

Vandiya Devan departed for sight-seeing in Tanjore, with the two men sent by the Commander following him on both sides. He had no doubt about the fact that they followed him to prevent his escape. Surely, orders would have been given to stop him if tried leaving the fort by the gates.

Nevertheless, I must escape before nightfall. Escape may become impossible after the return of the Elder Lord of Pazluvoor. My very life may be in danger. Therefore, while he roamed here and there looking at the sights of Tanjore City, Vandiya Devan's mind was active trying to formulate a plan of escape.

First, I must escape from these messengers of death and then I must get away from the fort. How? That is the question. It is not a big deal to escape from these two men ... I can attack suddenly and overpower them and then run away. But where can I run away? The whole world knows how well fortified this fort is, under the guard of the Lords of Pazluvoor. People say that even the breeze cannot enter without their permission. This morning, the Emperor himself declared that even death cannot enter! How am I to escape from such a fortress?

I must handle these two louts; they may immediately start shouting for help. The next instant, I may be thrown in the underground prison. Or, I may lose my life. There is no use in attacking these two men. Not attack, but trickery is needed for escape. After I am free of these men I must ponder about a way to get out of the fort. However strong the fortification, it must surely have some secret outlets or underground passages. How am I to find one such passage? Who will know about it? Even if they know will they let me into the secret?

Thinking various such thoughts he walked around. Suddenly he recalled the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. Ah! If anyone would help me in this fort it is likely that she would! Even that is doubtful... But I can try some hoax in the name of Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. If I am to meet her, I must first find out the whereabouts of the palace of the Elder Lord Pazluvoor. Even if I find the palace these louts must not know that I am meeting the Young-Queen. If they know, they will report the incident to their master. Who knows the consequences of that? Moreover, what will happen if the Elder Lord returns when I am inside his palace? It will be like deliberately thrusting one's head into the lion's cave.

While thinking such thoughts, his eyes and lips did not keep quiet. His lips kept questioning his guides, "What is that?" "Who is that?" "Whose mansion is this?" "What building is there?" "What is this tower?" His ears were eager to hear something like "That is the mansion of Lord Pazluvoor" or "It is the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor's mansion" -- but nothing like that was said. His eyes searched and noted details in all directions.

One thing was revealed in this examination. He noticed that though the two wide, main streets inside the fortress were busy and crowded, there were several side-streets which were quite empty. Alleyways, and lanes abounded. One could enter those lanes and by-ways and escape into the thickly wooded parks; hiding in there would not be difficult even for a couple of days. But he must hide unnoticed by anyone and no one must search for him. Hiding was not possible if the Commander ordered a search by all his men.

Or, I must seek asylum in someone's house. Who in this fort will give me asylum? The only possibility is the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. I must use all my imagination and make up some story to force her into believing me. Before that I must free myself of these two men. Oh! What is this cheering and shouting? Such commotion! -- Who are all these men marching by? Oh God! I now have no doubt about you being on my side! Here is the opportunity -- here I see the strategy for escape...

When they had turned into one side-street, Vandiya Devan had seen the large group of men walking past the intersecting main street. He recognized that crowd to be the men of the Velaikara Battalion. As usual they had presented arms to the Emperor and were leaving the fort by sunset.

If only I could mingle into that crowd of men. There will be no better opportunity to escape.

The men following him would not let go of him so easily. If he mingled into the procession, they too would follow him. Then it would not be easy to exit from the gate. The gatekeepers would not be easily fooled. They would be able to easily stop him. Still I must try. There is no other way .. God has given this opportunity, I must make use of it ... If I don't, there is no greater ignoramus than me!

As usual, he looked at his guides and asked, "What is this crowd?" They replied, "Velaikara Battalion of Velirs." He showed an eagerness to learn more details of that battalion. He declared that he too wished to enlist into such a brave battalion, therefore he wished to examine the procession more closely. While conversing in this fashion he had approached the marching men. Declaring a wish to look at the men in the front who were beating the kettle drums he quickly mingled into the procession.

As the procession marched on, he did not stay in the same place for he too moved up and down the column, here and there along the line. He cheered more lustily and loudly than the enlisted men. Some of those men peered at him with suspicion. Others looked at him thinking he had drunk more than his share of country liquor! But none held him back or stopped him.

The footmen of the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor who were guarding him, did not have the courage to mingle with the men of the Velir Battalion. They felt confident of catching him when he emerged from the procession once again. Trying to keep an eye on their quarry they walked on, along the sides of the procession.

At that moment, a woman who was selling dairy products came down the street. Trying to avoid an encounter with the rough soldiers of Velir, she attempted to move into a side-street. One soldier, accosted her asking, "My dear, I am thirsty. Give me some sour buttermilk to drink!" The maid replied pertly, "No milk to drink; if you want, I can give you two slaps on your cheeks."

Another soldier, hearing her words, stepped out saying, "Why don't you give me at least that?" he tried to take hold of her hand. The milkmaid began to run in fear; the two men followed her. The running men shouted something to each other. No one could understand what was happening. Everybody thought that some prank was afoot. Vallavarayan noticed the episode. He made up his mind in one second! We already know that determination and execution are one and the same to our hero. So, with shouts of "Go", "Catch", he too began following the other two men -- running into the alley behind them. The milkmaid ran into an alley and turned into a tiny by-lane. When the men following her turned into the path, she had disappeared. The man chasing her, now gave up. He and his friends turned back to rejoin the parade. But Vandiya Devan did not turn back. He ran further into the by-lanes and alleyways leading off it. He ran down a few such streets and then slowed down to a steady walk.

Was it not usually sunset, by the time the Velaikara Battalion exited the fort? The side-streets through which he walked were now covered in darkness. In one street he noticed towering walls enclosing both sides. Tall fences abutted the street in some parts. Thicket fences hid the grounds beyond the street in some places. Vandiya Devan kept walking without stopping anywhere, unconcerned about the direction.

If I avoid the main or larger streets and wander through these lanes, I must finally reach the outer walls of the fortress. Once I am there I can decide about what to do. I have the whole night to think of some scheme. Very soon it was night and darkness encompassed everything. The path on which he walked dead ended into a towering wall. Walking in the darkness he collided lightly into that wall; but, he could not make out anything about what that wall was or how high it was.

Perhaps this is part of the outer ramparts. Then it is best to sit right here. The moon will soon rise and cast some light. There can be no safer place to hide than this dead end! By now the men would have gone back to report to their master. The Commander would have sent his men in all directions in search of me. Perhaps he will suspect that I have escaped and gone outside with the parade of the Velir men. They will search for me inside as well as outside the fort. Let them search; search very well. If I don't fool all those men and escape from this fortress, my name is not Vallavarayan of Vaanar family.

After moonrise the light will help the searching men also. They may even show up in that dead end in search of him! Let them come. So what! If they come, I will jump across the wall and hide in the woods. Then, who can find me?

The gentle breeze, the swishing sounds of tree branches rubbing against each other and his tiredness after the long day compounded together to make Vandiya Devan sleepy. He sat down leaning against the wall -- and soon was asleep.

When he woke up after some hours, he saw that the moon was riding the low skies. Moonlight filtered through the leaves of the thick trees and cast shadows on the ground. He could make out the outlines of the buildings around him. He tried to recall his situation. He was incredulous about having fallen asleep like that. Even more, he was astonished at awakening suddenly like that. What was that noise that woke him? Some voice had called to him ... Was it human or was it the call of some beast? Or was it the call of some night bird that startled him? -- Did he really hear something?

Vandiya Devan looked up above him. In the half light of the moon, he saw the high rising wall. Ah! this cannot be the fortress wall. The fort will have thicker and taller ramparts. Perhaps it is an inner wall encircling the city inside the outer ramparts. Or, could it be the outer fence-wall of some mansion?

He stood up, examining the top of that brick-wall more closely. For a second his heart stopped beating. His intestines rose from his stomach to come and choke his throat. Such terror possessed him!

What is that figure, on the wall hiding amongst the tree branches? He had read and heard too many stories about ghosts and vampires that dwelt in trees.

But, can ghosts talk? Will the vampire call out softly? That too in the sweet voice of a woman? This vampire seems to be talking, saying something?

"What Sir? Did you fall asleep leaning on the wall? How many times am I to call you?"

Oh! this was no vampire. It was a beauty of the human kind. She was talking. It was a beautiful maid seated amidst the branches of the tree and speaking. Was this some dream? Or reality, happening truly?

"Quite nice! Your sleepiness has not fully cleared, it seems. Here, I am going to let down the ladder. Climb carefully and come up. Don't fall down and vex me."

While saying this the girl had pulled up a thin bamboo ladder from inside the wall and let it down on the outer side. Vandiya Devan did not understand anything. But will he let go of such an opportunity -- an opportunity that came in search of him? Let what may come, come! Let whatever happens, happen! Let me go up this ladder onto the top of this wall. I can find out the details later.

When he was half way up the ladder, the girl spoke again, "What a tardy fellow you are! the Young-Queen is waiting out there. Here you are asleep against the outer wall!"

In the astonishment of hearing these words Vandiya Devan almost fell off the ladder! Luckily he caught hold of the top of the brick wall and climbed up.

Young-Queen -- it can only mean the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor! How did she know about me coming and sitting here in this alley? She must know some magic or sorcery! Why does she have such an obsession in meeting me? Perhaps, perhaps I am going up the ladder meant for some other fellow! So what? -- I am not going back now. I can find out everything soon enough.

The girl lent her hand and pulled him up onto the wall. The shining moonlight almost revealed his face. But the girl did not say anything. He was now ready to accept any astounding happening that was about to take place.

"Umph! Why are you sitting and gaping like that on the wall? Pull up the ladder and throw it inside; jump; quickly." With such quick orders the girl climbed down the tree deftly.

Vandiya Devan followed her instructions. He realized that he was now in the grounds of a large garden. In the distance he could spy the lighted windows, turrets and balconies of a mansion, as if in some dream world. He cleared his throat to ask whose mansion it was. Immediately the girl placed her index finger upon her sealed lips and hushed, "Ushh!" She walked ahead down a garden path. Vandiya Devan followed her.

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Chapter 34 -- Garden Gazebo

The maiden walked briskly down the garden trail winding through a thick grove of mango trees. Vandiya Devan followed as quickly as he could. It was quite difficult to walk in that darkness without running into some bush or creeper. Once, when he hesitated, almost colliding against a flowering bush, the girl looked back to ask, "Why do you stop? Have you forgotten the way? Are you not the fellow who can see in darkness?"

In reply, Vandiya Devan imitated her earlier action and placed his finger upon his lips saying, "Ushh!" They could now hear some noises outside the garden wall and they could hear the presence of some men. They walked on further. Vandiya Devan laughed lightly

when they had gone some distance. The girl looked back and asked, "What did you see, to laugh at?"

"I didn't see anything -- to laugh at. I heard and laughed."

"What do you mean?"

"Did you not hear the footsteps of the men who came in search of me? I laughed thinking of them being fooled."

She now asked with some fear, "What? Is someone looking for you? Why?"

"Otherwise why should I be sitting in this pitch darkness, leaning against the wall?"

The breeze parted the upper branches to throw a moonbeam on Vandiya Devan's face. The girl now looked at him with some surprise and incredulity.

"What are you staring at?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"I wondered if you were you!"

"If I am not me, who else will I be?"

"When you came last time, did you not have a big moustache?"

"What a question! How can fellows like me who have to come in by jumping over walls not change their disguise?"

"You look younger than the last time!"

"Youth comes with enthusiasm!"

"Why the enthusiasm?"

"Why lack enthusiasm when I have the patronage of a great queen like yours?"

"Don't jest! Today my mistress is merely the Young-Queen. One day she will surely become The Great Queen!"

"That is what I said."

"Is that all you can say! Perhaps you will declare that she became the Queen because of your magic and sorcery. Perhaps you will even demand half the kingdom."

Vandiya Devan now guessed half of what he wanted to find out. He did not talk further but walked on in deep thought.

Whom am I going to meet? It may be the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. Or, it could be the Princess who married Prince Madurandaka, who is the daughter of the Commander. This maid is leading me on, thinking I am some magician or fortuneteller. How should I behave when I meet that Young-Queen, whoever she is? -- Dear heart! Do not give up your courage! Courage will lead to victory. Some idea will occur at the right moment. I have survived all sorts of tricky situations so far .. How can I loose in front of a woman?

They neared a large mansion. But they did not go around to the front porch. Neither did they go towards the back doorway. They walked towards a creeper laden pathway that connected to a flower laden bower -- a garden gazebo.

Upon coming closer he saw that the flower arbor was situated in the middle of two mansions and connected to both by covered walkways. The mansions connected by the gazebo differed from each other in one important way. The mansion on the right was shining with brilliant lights that could be seen through its windows. They could hear the noise and activity of several persons inside it. There was not even a tiny lamplight in the building to the left. He could see its tall walls in the moonlight. But silence and darkness dwelt in that mansion.

Upon reaching the steps of the gazebo, the maid made a sign for Vandiya Devan to wait. He stood on the steps. His nostrils now realized the fragrance of the blooming flowers around him. What aroma! What a heady fragrance! They filled his nose and made his head swim.

The maid entered the gazebo; he could hear the noises of her talking to someone else with a pleasant voice. "Ask him to come in instantly! Why ask? Haven't I been waiting here all this while?" the words filled him with dizziness! It was the voice of the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. No doubt about it: It was Nandini Devi.

I am going to stand in front of her this next minute ... How am I going to manage that situation? What will she think upon finding the man who dashed against her palanquin, instead of the soothsayer she was expecting? Will she be surprised? Show anger? Perhaps be happy? .. Or maybe, appear emotionless?

The maid who had led him there made a sign from the doorway. Vandiya Devan went up and looked into the flower arbor. In one second, the scene before him was registered by his eyes to be embossed in his mind.

The light burning brightly in the tall metal lamp spread a golden glow. The lamp must have contained some unique fragrant oil. The burning light spread a heady fragrance all around in that bower. A beauty was reclining comfortably on the soft pillows of a swinging couch spread with multicolored fragrant flowers. She was the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. In the daylight inside the ivory palanquin she looked ravishing. Now in the night, in the glow of the golden lamp she looked like beauty personified.

The fragrance of the flowers, the smell of the incense and the enchanting face of the Young-Queen intoxicated Vandiya Devan.

Vandiyā Deva! Be careful! You have drunk intoxicating liquor before. At that time you realized the confusion to your intellect and after that you took an oath to never touch liquor -- remember that now! Do not lose your intellect in this mesmerizing power more intoxicating than liquor! warned his mind.

Upon seeing Vallavarayan, the Young-Queen Nandini stared at him with surprise: slightly parted coral lips revealing tiny sparkling pearls. Her speechlessness helped Vandiyā Devan.

He laughed lightly and said, "My Lady, your maid had a sudden doubt! Whether I was the magician or not! Do you know how she expressed her doubt? 'Are you, you?' she asked!" Vandiyā Devan laughed again.

Nandini smiled. Lightning flashed in front of him. It showered honey and nectar!

"She gets such sudden doubts quite often! Vasuki! Why are you standing here like a pole? Go to your place. If you hear any footsteps bang the door shut," said Nandini.

"Yes my Lady!" said Vasuki as she ran out of a doorway towards the right of the Gazebo. She went down the covered walkway and sat down on some steps leading down to the lighted mansion.

Nandini lowered her voice as she spoke, "Did that foolish girl doubt you being a magician? Half the fellows who declare themselves as "sorcerers" and "magicians" are utter fools and liars. You are a true magician! What magic and sorcery did you employ to arrive here now?"

"My Lady, I did not employ any magic trickery to come here. I climbed a ladder leaning against a wall to come here," declared Vandiya Devan.

"That is obvious. I asked about what magic you employed to fool my girl."

"I smiled at her in the moonlight. That's all! If she had not been charmed, I was planning to use the signet ring you gave me."

"Oh! You have it safe -- don't you? You could have come here openly in broad daylight when you have that. Why this intrigue in darkness?"

"My Lady! Do you know your brother-in-law, the Younger Lord Pazluvoor? His men are complete knaves and scoundrels. First, they tried to steal my clothes and possessions. Then they followed my shadow without parting even for one second. It took great effort to part from them. After cutting loose from those fellows I entered the lanes and byways around your palace walls wandering aimlessly. At that time when I saw the ladder leaning against the garden wall I thought of you and your kindness in making this arrangement in consideration of this poor fellow. Now I realize my mistake. Please forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive."

"How is that My Lady?"

"Your expectations were not very wrong. Do you know why I called for the Sorcerer?"

"I don't know, My Lady. I know no magic or sorcery; nor do I know any astrology."

"I have been thinking of you since I met you yesterday morning. I wished to find out why you had not come back to see me. That's why I summoned the magician."

"Very surprising."

"Which?"

"What you said just now. Since meeting you yesterday, I too have been thinking about you."

"Do you believe in the bonds of previous incarnations?"

"Meaning?"

"People say that if two persons had been friends or had some relationship in a previous birth, they would have a similar relationship in this birth also. That's what I am talking about."

"I had no such belief till recently. That belief was born in me yesterday!"

When Vandiya Devan uttered these words, outwardly he was lying. But, when he said those words his inner heart thought of the lady he had seen in the house of the Astrologer of Kudanthai. However, Nandini had no way of knowing that! She thought he was talking about her!

"But, ... you have not come here to see me because of that! You talked about some message sent by Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi ..."

"Yes, My Lady. At first I wished to meet you mainly to deliver his message. After seeing you once, all those old reasons flew away."

"Where did you meet Mr. Azlvar-adiyan? What was his message?"

"I met Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi near Veera-narayana-puram. He was using the powers of his wooden staff to prove that Vishnu was the greatest among Gods. At that time the retinue of the Elder Lord Pazluvoor came by in procession. Your palanquin followed him. Perhaps to see what the commotion was about, your golden hand parted the silk curtains. Recognizing you at that time Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi wished to send a message to you. Since, I too was staying at Kadamboor that night, he made me his messenger. But I could not meet you in Kadamboor. I could only meet you on the road near Tanjore. Even that was possible only because your palanquin dashed against my horse!"

Nandini was staring at the roof as she reclined on the couch, while Vandiya Devan talked. Therefore he could not surmise anything from her face or its expression. In the end, when she heard his words, she looked at him with a dazzling smile.

"Yes, my palanquin is a very mischievous palanquin!" she said.

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Chapter 35 -- A Sorcerer

In the distance the booming of large drums could be heard. Cymbals sounded and men raised cheers. They heard the fortress-gates close shut with a bang; hoof-beats of horses and elephants. Vandiya Devan realized that those noises had distracted Nandini's attention. The maid sitting on guard came up, "My Lady! it seems that the Master has returned."

Nandini said, "I know. Go back to your place." She then turned towards Vandiya Devan, "The Finance Officer is entering the fort. He will go to the palace to enquire after the health of the Emperor. Then meet and talk with the Commander and then come here. You must depart before he comes here. What was the message from Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi?" she asked.

"My Lady! That fanatic Vaishnava fellow declared that you were his sister. Is that true?"

"Why do you disbelieve that?"

"Can I easily believe, if someone says that the jeweled parrot and the wild ape are born of the same mother?"

Nandini laughed, "In a way what he said is correct. We grew up in the same house in the same family. He loved and cherished me as his own sister. It's a pity! I disappointed him greatly."

"Then it is alright. The message from Mr. Nambi is this: God Krishna is waiting for you. All the ardent Vaishnava devotees are waiting anxiously to see you wed the holy Lord Krishna!"

Nandini signed loudly. "Ah! He has not forgotten those foolish dreams. If you see him again tell him this from me: Ask him to completely forget me. Tell him that I am in no way deserving to become a great apostle like Andal."

"I don't agree with that, My Lady."

"What don't you agree with?"

"I don't agree with your saying that you cannot become another apostle like Andal! Andal had to immerse herself in devotion and worship, sing verse and psalm -- shed tears and weave flower garlands before she could marry the Lord. But you will have no such difficulty. All that is needed is that Lord Krishna see you -- He will forsake all those divine maids like Rukmini, Bhama, Radha and the mystic milkmaids. He will seat you on his throne besides him!"

"Sir! You are an expert in flattery. I have never liked that."

"My Lady, what is the meaning of flattery?"

"Praising someone to their face."

"If so, please turn around a little and show me your back."

"Why? ..."

"To praise you, without looking at your face. That's why. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"You talk very cleverly."

"Now, you are flattering me!"

"Why don't you also turn around, and show me your back?"

"Great Queen, it is never my habit, be it in the battlefield or in the presence of women, to turn my back. You can freely flatter me."

Upon hearing this, Nandini laughed loudly, gleefully. "You are surely a magician. There is no doubt now. It has been a long time since I laughed so joyously."

"But My Lady, it is very dangerous to make you laugh: the lotus in the pool bloomed in joyous laughter; the honey bee fell swooning down!" said Vandiya Devan.

"You are not only a magician; you also seem to be a kavi!"

"I am not afraid of flattery; nor do I fear scolds."

(The Tamil word kavi has two meanings: 1. poet 2. monkey.)

"Who scolded you?"

"Did you not call me `kavi' just now?"

"So?"

"When I was a youngster, some of my playmates used to call me 'monkey face.' After many years, I have heard that nickname uttered by your coral red lips!"

"You were called 'monkey face!' Who were those scholars?"

"None of them are alive now."

"I didn't call you that! I said you seemed like a poet able to compose verse!"

"Oh yes! I can also compose verse; but I usually sing in front of my enemies. Those who do not die by my piercing arrows can die by my piercing words!"

"My dear Sir! Oh you bravest lion among poets! You have not yet told me your name?" asked Nandini with laughter.

"My given name is Vandiya Devan. I also have the title Vallavarayan."

"Of a noble family?"

"I come from the ancient and famous Vaanar clan."

"These days ... Your kingdom ...?"

"The sky above me; the earth below my feet; now I am the sole emperor of all the known worlds!"

Nandini examined Vallavarayan from head to toe for sometime.

"There is nothing impossible. You can get back your ancient territories."

"How is that possible? How can anything swallowed by the tiger come out again? Can I get back my kingdom swallowed by the Chozla Empire?"

"I can arrange to get it back!"

"My Lady! Please don't! No need! I never had any wish to rule a kingdom. Whatever tiny wish I had, it totally vanished today, after I saw Emperor Sundara Chozla. It is better to remain a free pauper without knowing where my next meal comes from than be a prince beholden to everyone."

"That is my opinion too." Nandini spoke again as if she remembered something that she had forgotten. "Why are the Commander's men looking for you?"

"Like your maid, he too had a suspicion about me!"

"What suspicion?"

"About how I came to possess a signet ring with the palmtree symbol."

A tiny shade of fear engulfed Nandini's face. "Where is the ring?" she asked in a shaken voice.

"Here it is my Lady. Will I lose it so easily?" saying it, he took out the ring from his pouch and showed it to her.

"How did he know that you possess this?" asked Nandini.

"For a long time now, I had the wish to meet Emperor Sundara Chozla. I used this signet ring to fulfil that ambition. After being presented to the Emperor, the Commander asked me about how I came to possess this ring ..."

"What reply did you give?" asked Nandini in a frightened voice.

"I did not bring up your name, My Lady! I said that the Elder Lord Pazluvoor had given it. I said that he gave it to me at Kadamboor"

The fear on her face and voice had now disappeared, "Did he believe you?" she asked.

"I don't think he believed me fully. That's why he must have sent those guards to follow me. He might have intended to place me before his elder brother and find the truth when he returned."

Nandini said with a smile, "You don't have to fear the Elder Lord. I shall take care that he does not chew you out."

"My Lady! The whole world knows of your influence over the Finance Officer. But I have some urgent chores outside the fort. That's why I seek your help in escaping."

"What are those urgent chores?"

"I have several. For example I have to meet Mr. Azlvar-adiyan and give him your reply. What shall I tell him?"

"Tell him to completely forget that he had a sister known as Nandini."

"I can tell him that; but it may not be possible."

"What?"

"Forgetting you completely. I who have casually met you twice cannot forget you. How can he who spent his lifetime with you, forget you?"

A trace of victory and pride dwelt on Nandini's face. Her lance like eyes pierced through Vandiya Devan's heart as she looked at him. "Why were you so eager to meet the Emperor?"

"What is so surprising about my wanting to see that world famous, handsome personality? Most monarchs on this world wish to establish the fame of their bravery, their prestige, and the grandeur of their empires for ever. Their subjects pray for such fame. But do you know what the buddhist monks in the monasteries pray for?"

... May Sundara Chozla

grow in prosperity, benevolence, and in good looks and health; ...

I had a long time urge, to see this modern day Cupid, the God of Good Looks. ..."

"Yes; the Emperor is quite proud of his good looks. His darling girl is even more proud"

"His girl? ... Whom are you talking about?"

"She who lives at Pazlayarai. That arrogant, proud and prejudiced female -- I am talking about that Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi!"

Vandiya Deva! You are fortunate! The tool you were searching for has come to you, here it is in your hands. Use it well! Vandiya Devan's mind advised him thus.

Nandini, who had been reclining languorously all this time, now sat up suddenly. "Sir! I shall tell you one thing. Will you agree?"

"Tell me, My Lady!"

"Let us, you and I make a pact. You will help me and I shall help you. What do you say?"

"My Lady! You are the Queen of the all powerful Finance Officer of the Chozla Empire! You have the power to translate thought into deed. I am a nobody with no authority. In what way can I be of help to you?" he asked.

Nandini wishing to find out if he was sincere or if he was merely mouthing words of courtesy, looked at him with piercing eyes.

He stood undisturbed.

"I need a confidential retainer. If I find you some such job in this palace, will you accept?" she asked.

"I have already agreed to serve another Lady in such a fashion. If she refuses to accept me, I shall surely come back to you."

"Who is she? In competition with me?"

"You talked with great affection about her a little while ago, that very same Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi."

"Lies! Lies! It can never be possible! Are you jesting with me ..."

"Great Queen, several persons have already stolen and read this letter. There can be no harm in you also reading this." Saying this, Vandiya Devan extended the letter given by Aditya Karikala to Kundavai.

Nandini held the letter under the lamp light and read it. As she was reading, the lightning darts that jumped out of her eyes seemed like the forked, darting tongue of a king cobra to Vandiya Devan. Unconsciously, his body shivered.

Nandini looked at him with great dignity, "Sir! You intend to escape from this fort with your life, don't you?"

"Yes, My Lady, that is why I sought your help and came here."

"Only on one condition will I help you escape from here."

"Tell me the condition, My Lady."

"Whatever letter Kundavai gives in reply to this, you must bring that and come back to me. Do you agree?"

"A very dangerous condition!"

"You boasted some time ago about not minding any danger."

"Being courageous in such danger should merit an appropriate reward? ..."

"Reward? You want a reward? You will get a reward beyond your wildest dreams. You will get a reward for which, the all powerful chief of this Chozla Empire, the Elder Lord Pazluvoor has been yearning for years. Such a reward will be yours!" saying this, Nandini once again threw her weapons of enchantment at Vandiya Devan.

Poor Vandiya Devan! His head swam in dizziness. He muttered to himself: "Dear heart be courageous, don't loose your reason."

In that moment, as if to help him, the horrible screech of an owl could be heard in the garden. Once, twice, thrice -- they heard the hoot.

His body shivered. Nandini looked towards the garden -- from where the hoots were heard -- saying, "The real sorcerer has come."

She looked at Vandiya Devan again and continued, "I don't need him anymore. But let me say a few words to him before sending him away. Perhaps he will be useful in helping you escape. Please step aside for a while and hide yourself in that darkness!" She pointed in a direction quite opposite to the doorway in which her maid sat guarding the path.

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Chapter 36 -- "Do You Remember?"

Nandini came out to stand near the doorway of the gazebo and clapped her hands thrice. One could not say if it was the shadow of darkness or the trace of fear that covered her face. For some distance one could see the huge trees and creepers that climbed their thick trunks; beyond was pitch darkness. The Sorcerer emerged from behind one such tree, cleaving the darkness, pushing aside creepers.

Nandini went back to recline on her flower-laden couch. Her face now appeared calm and composed. The Sorcerer entered the gazebo, and the golden light of the lamp now fell on his face.

Haven't we seen this face before? Who is he? -- Oh yes! He is one of the conspirators who met near Thiru-puram-biyam at midnight. He was the one who threw the tinkling gold coins on the ground from a bag; he is Ravidasa who urged, "Kill Azlvar-adiyan instantly, wherever you see him."

Even as he stepped inside, his face seethed with anger. On seeing Nandini, reclining calmly on her swinging couch, rage filled his cat-like eyes. He sat down on the wooden bench in front of the couch and stared at Nandini. His lips muttered some incantations like, "Hoom, kreem, hareem, haraam!"

"Enough! Stop it! My maid, the idiot must have gone to sleep on the doorstep. Say what you have come to say and leave quickly. I think he has returned to the fort." Nandini spoke with authority.

"You degenerate fiend!" snarled Ravidasa, like a hissing king cobra.

"Whom do you mean?" Nandini asked quite calmly.

"Thankless Nandini; Young-Queen of Pazluvoor; I mean you!" Ravidasa pointed at her with one finger.

Nandini kept quiet.

"You woman! You have forgotten the incidents which you should remember, I shall remind you."

"Why those old stories, now?" asked Nandini.

"You ask why? Why now? I will tell you -- I will first remind you of those incidents and then tell you ..." Ravidasa spoke with fury.

Realizing that there would be no way of stopping him, Nandini sighed and turned her face away.

"Hey Queen! Listen, three years ago, one midnight, a corpse was burning in the cremation grounds beside the Vaigai River. No final rites according to the sacred texts were offered and no priest officiated. They had built the pyre with dried leaves and deadwood from the forest. They threw a body hidden behind trees onto that pyre. Then they set fire to it. The dry wood of the forest caught fire easily and burned bright. At that time some men dragged you out of hiding in the forest. Your hands and feet were bound and your mouth was stuffed with cloth. Your lovely tresses, which you have beautifully dressed with flowers today, those tresses were unkempt, sweeping the dust, that midnight. Those men intended to throw you in that burning pyre and roast you alive. One of them said, 'Let the fire burn a little more furiously.' They threw you on the ground as they sat a little apart. Each of those men, individually, took a terrible oath. You were listening. Though your limbs and mouth were bound, your eyes and ears were free. So, you watched and listened. After they had all sworn their oaths, the men approached you again. You, who were quiet till then, tried to make some signs -- trying to free your hands from the rope, rolling your ravishing eyes. One of the men noticed, 'She seems to wish to say something,' he said. 'Must be the old story, throw her into the fire,' said another. 'Wait, before we throw her into the fire, let us at least hear what she wants; remove the cloth from her mouth,' spoke a third fellow. Because he was their leader, the other men removed the cloth stuffed into your mouth. Do you remember the words you said at that time?" asked Ravidasa and then stopped.

Nandini did not reply. Neither did she turn around to look at him. Her face reflected the disgust and terror in her heart as well as the firmness of the terrible oath she had taken. Two tiny teardrops glistened at the corners of her dark eyes.

"Woman! You do not talk! Never mind. I can tell you. You declared that you too, would take the oath and observe the vow just like those men. You maintained that you had more cause for vengeance than those men. You swore to use your beauty and intelligence for their cause. You said that you would help them as much as you could. You also swore, repeatedly, that once the vendetta and vow were fulfilled you would readily give up your own life. None of the others believed you, but I was convinced. I trusted you, and prevented them from throwing you into that burning pyre. I saved your life. Do you remember all that?" asked Ravidasa.

Nandini turned towards him slightly, "Are you asking me, if I remember? Those incidents have been burned with fire upon my heart."

"After that night, one day we were all walking along the banks of the wide, South Cauvery. Suddenly we heard the pounding noise of a cavalry coming down the path. We decided to hide in the forest, each on their own, till those horse-men had gone past. But you broke

the pact, forsook us and stood on the road side. Those men caught hold of you. Their leader, that fellow of Pazluvoor, fell victim to your charms: Later, you married him. All my men taunted me, saying that you had betrayed us. But I did not let you escape. Somehow, one day I managed to meet you. I intended to kill you, a betrayer, with my knife. Again you employed your wiles and begged for life. You maintained that you came here, merely to fulfil our oath. You promised to remain in this palace and arrange for all sorts of help for me and my men. Is all this true?" Ravidasa finally stopped.

"Yes, everything is true. Who refuted it? Why do you keep repeating that story? Why did you come here now? Tell me that."

"No, wretched woman! No. You have forgotten everything. You have become engrossed in these comforts and luxuries of being the Queen of Pazluvoor and forgotten your oath. Eating six course meals, enjoying silken garments and new ornaments, reclining on silken couches and sleeping on soft beds, travelling in ivory palanquins -- you are a queen now! How will you remember those old happenings?"

"Rubbish! Who wants these soft couches, rich clothes and jewels? You think I live for such luxuries? Never!"

"Or, you have been charmed by the handsome face of the wayside youth! Perhaps you have forgotten the old oaths in the light of this new love?"

Nandini was slightly startled. But she overcame her feelings to shout, "Lies! Lies!"

"If it is false, how come that even though I had sent you word that I was coming, you had not sent your servant girl to the usual place?"

"I did send her. Some other fellow came up the ladder meant for you. That stupid girl thought that he was you and brought him here. Is that my mistake?"

"How does it matter whose mistake it was? For a few minutes my very life was in danger! The soldiers searching for that youth would have imprisoned me. I hid myself in the pond near this garden -- immersing myself by holding my breath -- till those men left and then emerged from the water to come here. See I am dripping wet!"

"You deserve it. You suspected me! You atoned for your thoughts by immersing yourself in the pool."

"Woman! swear the truth -- are you sure that you haven't been seduced by that youth's beauty?"

"Absurd! What do you mean? Will anybody praise the `beauty' of men? It is only in this shameless Chozla country that the people celebrate their Emperor's `beauty'. The beauty of men lies in their valor, the battle scars on their body!"

"You say it well. If you speak the truth, then why did the young stranger come here?"

"I told you earlier. Vasuki thought that he was you and brought him here."

"Why did you give him your signet ring -- which you have not given even to me?"

"I gave it to bring him here and talk to him. I am now going to take that signet ring back from him."

"Why did you want him here? About what were you drooling with him?"

"I was chatting with him for an important reason. He will be very useful in fulfilling our intentions."

"You wretched female! In the end you showed your tendency? You disclosed our secret to some unknown stranger..."

"You get perturbed unnecessarily. I didn't tell him anything. I discovered his secrets."

"What did you discover?"

"He is a messenger taking letters from Kanchi to Pazlayarai. He is carrying the letter for the tigress at Pazlayarai, he showed it to me. I was trying to convince him to bring the letter given in reply back here to me. You came in at that time."

"Damn the letter; damn the message; what is the use of all that to us?"

"That shows the limit of your understanding. We have sworn an oath to destroy the tiger clan and its very roots. But you men have been thinking only of the male tigers, you forget that clans will also thrive because of female tigers. Moreover, who do you think really rules this Chozla Empire? Is it the old man lying on his sickbed without any strength or use of limbs? Are they the Princes in Kanchi and Lanka? ..."

"No; it is that Lord Pazluvoor who is fortunate to have you as his queen. The world knows it."

"Even that is inaccurate. The world may think so; this old man may also think it and feel self-satisfied. You too have been misled. In reality, that female tiger-cub at Pazlayarai is ruling this nation. That arrogant female sits in her palace and pulls the strings to make everyone dance. I shall put an end to her exploits. I shall use this youth for that purpose."

Surprise and even respect now replaced the rage on Ravidasa's face. "You are a truly capable female! No doubt. But how am I to believe all this as truth? What is the proof?"

"I shall deliver that youth to your responsibility. You lead him through the underground passage and take him outside. Bind his eyes and then lead him. Go with him till Pazlayarai and wait. Bring him back here with Kundavai's reply. If he tries to escape or hoodwink you, kill him!" said Nandini.

"No way! You and he can go to hell. The Commander's men are now searching for him inside the fort. Very soon they will begin to look for him outside the fort. If I go with him, I too will be in jeopardy. What do you say about the matter on which I have come?"

"You have not yet told me why you have come."

"Arrangements have already been made to send men to Kanchi and Lanka. The plight of those going to Lanka is very difficult, they have to be very cautious over there. ..."

"What am I to do about that? Do you need more funds? There is no end to your demands for money!"

"The gold is not for our personal use, it is for completing the task we have undertaken. Why do you think I have left you alive, here? Those going to Lanka cannot use Chozla coins. It would be good to have some Lankan funds."

"You took all this time to say that! I have made arrangements even before you asked."

Nandini then bent down to look below her couch. She pulled out a bag and placed it in Ravidasa's hands. "This is full of Lankan gold coins. Take it and leave quickly. He may return any time now."

Ravidasa took the bag and was about to leave. She stopped him with the words, "Wait a bit, lead that youth and at least leave him outside the fort. He can then go his own way. I don't wish to show him the secret passage."

She then stood up and went towards the doorway leading to the darkened mansion. She could not see anything outside. Her fingers made a sign of beckoning, she even clapped her palms lightly. But there was no use.

She walked down the walkway leading to the darkened mansion, with Ravidasa. They came up to the steps going to the huge mansion clothed in darkness. But Vandiya Devan was not to be found. He was nowhere nearby, anywhere near that vicinity!

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Chapter 37 -- Lions Clashed!

The people of Tanjore had a special affection for the two brothers of Pazluvoor. Were not the Lords of Pazluvoor the ones who brought a new prominence and prestige to that old city? Tanjore folk always enjoyed parades of elephants, horses, camels and footmen. That too if the Elder Lord Pazluvoor, the Officer of Finance, left the fortress of Tanjore or reentered it, the people would gather to stand on both sides of the street to watch, to cheer and praise. Oftentimes they would shower flower petals along with their well wishes.

Normally, if the elder brother returned from a journey outside fortress, the Younger Lord would come outside the main gates to welcome him back and lead him home. The two brothers would embrace each other in greeting upon such occasions; it would appear like the Nilgiri Mountains hugging the Vindhya Range. Both would go down the streets in procession side by side, on horseback or atop elephants; ten thousand eyes would not suffice to see the sight.

Some persons compared the two brothers of Pazluvoor to the demon kings of myth -- Hiranya-aksha and Hiranya-kasipu; others referred to them as the brothers Sunda and Upasunda of the fable. They had been compared to the ideal brothers Rama and Bharata (of the epic Ramayana); or to those best among brothers, Arjuna and Bhima (of the other epic Mahabharata).

But today, when the Elder Lord Pazluvoor entered Tanjore, though the footmen and retinue accompanying him raised the usual cheers and announced the usual honors, there was not much of the usual enthusiasm and cheering among the crowds that lined the streets. In fact there was not much of a crowd. The Younger Lord Pazluvoor had not come to wait outside the fortress gates to welcome his brother.

The Officer of Finance did not mind this too much. Once inside the fort, he went directly towards the palace of his brother. He thought that his brother must be engaged in some important matter.

Perhaps the Emperor's health has taken a turn for the worse. Or, .. Or, the `Big thing' has happened! He worried. Therefore, his procession hurried through the streets quicker than usual and soon neared the portals of the Commander's mansion.

The Commander who had stepped outside his mansion to welcome his elder brother, seemed quite worried and restless. He greeted his brother and heartily embraced him. Both entered the mansion. They went directly to their private conference chamber. When they were private, the elder brother asked, "Thambi, Kalanthaka! Why do you seem out of sorts? Is there any special news? Is the Emperor well?"

Kalanthaka, the Younger Lord Pazluvoor, replied, "The Emperor remains as usual. His health has neither improved nor worsened."

"Then why do you look so crestfallen? Why did you not come to the gates to meet me? Even the city seems quiet, not much activity?"

"Anna! A minor incident happened; nothing very important. I'll tell you about it presently. How about the affairs on which you journeyed?" asked Kalanthaka, the Commander.

"The affair on which I ventured was completely successful. All the persons invited had come to Kadamboor. All of them unanimously agreed that your son-in-law Madurandaka is the rightful heir to the throne. They approved with cheers. All of them are ready to establish the right, with swords if need arises and if justice is not obtained. There can be no obstruction to our intentions. Even Kolli Mazlava-raya and Munai-raya agreed. Sambuvaraya is ready to extend the use of all his resources, his fortress, forces everything for this cause. His son Kandamaran is even more eager. We don't have to worry about the central provinces or Thiru-munai-padi. Chozla lands are now under our control. Why think of anything else? The only three persons who may oppose us are Thiru-kovalur Malayaman, Pallava Parthiban and Kodumbalur Velir. Amongst them, the Kodumbalur fellow is not here; he is in Lanka. What can the other two do? We have to disclose everything to the Emperor, very soon, and come to a decision." Lord Pazluvoor spoke with enthusiasm.

"What you say is fine about all the chieftains, but the people? What if the people dissent?" asked Kalanthaka.

"Ah! Who is going to ask the people? Are all affairs of state conducted with the approval of the people? If the people are emboldened to object, we should ensure that they do not interfere in such things anymore. I don't think anything like that will occur. If we declare it as the Emperor's wish, they will keep quiet. Moreover, fortunately Arulmozli is in Lanka. If he is here the people may try to demonstrate their blind loyalty. People do not have any such fondness for Aditya Karikala. It is easy to turn their loyalty towards Madurandaka. He already has a name for being `Religious' and `Good natured'. You know that your son-in-law has a more charismatic face than even the sons of Sundara Chozla? It would be surprising if the witless people who consider that `Inner beauty reflects on the face' do not start cheering `Long live Madurandaka'. Whatever happens why do you worry when I am here?" spoke the Elder Lord Pazluvoor.

"But, what about the Velaikara Battalion? How do we handle them?"

"The Velaikara Battalion has sworn blood oaths to protect the person of Sundara Chozla; not his sons! Even if they interfere what happened to your Guard Corps in this fort?"

Within a few hours you should be able to round up their leaders and throw them in the dungeons?"

"Anna, the main opposition will be from Pazlayarai. We do not know the machinations of those two -- the old and the young woman. We must watch for that..."

"Thambi, Kalanthaka! Are you telling me to be afraid of two women, after all this? I have a good rejoinder to all their schemes, don't worry."

"The Emperor has ordered that I send messages to both his sons, asking them to return to Tanjore immediately."

"Aditya Karikala will never come. Arulmozli may follow orders and come back. If he tries to come back we must stop him. Those two can return only after we have placed Madurandaka on the throne as Crown Prince with all due honors and powers. They should not come back before that. Leave this matter to me -- I can handle it. Apart from that you said that there was some incident here, what was that?"

"A youth came here from Kanchi. He brought one letter for the Emperor and another for Kundavai."

"What did you do with him? Hope you have confiscated the letters and thrown him in prison?"

"No, Anna! He said that he had met you at Kadamboor and that you asked him to see the Emperor and deliver the letter. Is that true?"

"Oh! Utter falsehood! An unknown youth -- calling himself Kandamaran's friend, did arrive at Kadamboor. But he did not tell me anything about bringing letters! I suspected him when I saw him. I hope you have not been duped by him?"

"Yes, Anna! I have been deceived by him. I was fooled because he mentioned your name."

"You fool! What did you do after that? Did you give the letter to the Emperor? Did you at least read it?"

"Yes, there was nothing in it. All it did was invite him to Kanchi. After delivering the letter the youth was saying something about danger ..."

"Didn't you suspect him at least after that? And throw him in the dungeon?"

"I did suspect him, but I didn't arrest him."

"Then? What did you do?"

"He said that he wanted to go sightseeing. I sent him with two men. He tricked them and escaped from their observation. I was making arrangements to find him. That why I couldn't come to the gates to receive you. I have also warned the city ..."

"You idiot! Are you a man? Fooled by a youth without whiskers? I must blame my own foolishness in nurturing you and making you the Commander of this fort. Aren't you ashamed to say that a wastrel has fooled you in my name?"

"He didn't merely mention your name, he showed me your signet ring. Did you give it to him?"

"Never! Am I foolish like you to be deceived like that?"

"He had the signet ring. That is true. He showed it to me and also to the gatekeeper before entering the fort. If you didn't give it to him, he could have obtained it only from one other source."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Can you not guess? I mean the Young-Queen ..."

"Damn you! Be careful! I shall cut off your tongue!"

"Cut off my tongue if you want; chop off my head if needed. I shall tell you something that I have been intending to say for some time. You have brought a poisonous snake into the house thinking it to be beautiful. One day it will surely strike. Avoid that! Throw her out before you do anything else!"

"Kalanthaka! I too shall tell you something that I intended saying for a while now. You can freely tell me your opinion about any other matter; you can bravely criticize my activities if you do not like them. But if you utter even one word belittling the maid who is wedded to me, it will be enough. I will kill you with these very same hands that raised you. I who taught you to use your sword, will pluck that very same sword and cut your throat. Be careful!"

That wordy duel, full of rage, between the brothers, seemed like a battle of roaring lions clashing against each other. Their voices rose like the roar of lions. Even though they were in their conference chamber, their voices could be heard like the sound of thunder by those waiting outside. No one knew the cause; all of them shivered wondering what the `trouble' was about.

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Chapter 38 -- Nandini's Sulks

When the Elder Lord Pazluvoor finally returned to his palace, it was well past midnight. The storm in his heart raised more dust than a swift breeze that blew upon a dusty field swirling the dust again and again. He was slightly sorry for having been so harsh with his dear brother. There was no measure to the affection that his younger brother showered upon him.

He said something because of his affection for me. But still, a suspicious fellow! Why must he unnecessarily find fault with Nandini? It must be human nature. It is natural that one should try to escape the consequences of ones own mistakes by throwing the blame on someone else. But, why does he stoop to that lowly practice? Is it commendable of him and his courage to let go of the culprit in his hands and then blame a woman, that too his own sister-in-law? It's alright! He did beg forgiveness for his words. Why should I keep thinking of it?

Nevertheless, could there be some atom of truth in his words? Perhaps in my old age I am enslaved by a madness for womankind? For the sake of some female whom I picked up on the wayside, I had to be harsh with my dear brother who stood beside me in several battles; a brother who has guarded me with his very life! Anyway what is so great about her? I have no idea of her antecedents. Her behavior and talk often raise suspicions. Damn it! My brother's words have raised confusion even in my mind!

How unjustified? She loves me dearly; she behaves with such reverence towards me! Such enthusiasm she has, about my affairs. Sometimes she even gives me great ideas! Must I not consider her courage in marrying this sixty-six year old-man? Her beauty would evoke the jealousy of even divine nymphs -- if one were to hold a competition for her hand, even the king of the heavens would come running ... Which king on this earth will not covet her? Ah! If this fellow Sundara Chozla had only seen her! Why should I doubt such a person?

I have heard that old men who marry very young girls give in to useless doubts and worries, making their lives hell. I have seen such instances. Should I subject myself to such mockery? Even so, I must find out certain truths from her. She often borrows the signet ring. Why? She goes and sits alone in the gazebo, why does she do that? I hear rumors that some sorcerer visits her frequently; in fact she herself agreed to it -- but why? What does she have to ask a sorcerer or magician? Who does she have to seduce with sorcery? And apart from all this, what about this fate of mine: how long do I have to remain like this, a celibate bachelor ever after the wedding? She keeps putting me off by talking about some vow or penance -- never explaining what the vow is or what the penance is about. Her methods seem like the tricks of some cunning heroine in a fable! I must not let this continue! Tonight I must talk firmly about it and decide once for all.

When Lord Pazluvoor returned to his own mansion, other womenfolk living there, clansmen and servants came to receive him in the outer courtyard. His searching eyes did not find the Young-Queen whom he was eager to see! Upon query, he found that she was still in the garden gazebo. What is she doing out there after midnight? he wondered if she was being indifferent. He walked down to the garden with some rage.

When he neared the covered walk-way he saw Nandini and her maid walking towards him. She stopped upon seeing him. But, instead of looking at him, she turned her face away, peering into the darkness that shrouded the garden. The maid waited a little behind. She did not look up at him, even after Lord Pazluvoor had come very close. Now, he had to forget his intentions of scolding Nandini; instead he had to soothe her anger!

"Nandini! My darling! Why this anger? Why don't you look at me?" asking this he placed his iron hard palm softly on her silken shoulder.

But Nandini pushed his sturdy, battle hardened hand away with her flower like fingers. Oh! can gentleness and softness have such strength?

"Dearest! You push me away with your silken hands! That itself is my good fortune. You achieved what could not be accomplished by warriors from the Tricone Hill to the Vindhya! That is my good luck! Still, shouldn't you tell me the cause for your anger? My ears thirst to hear your nectar sweet voice." That great warrior of the battlefield begged in front of her.

"How many days is it since you parted from me? Isn't it four full days?" spoke Nandini with a tiny sob in her voice. That sob melted Lord Pazluvoor's heart which had withstood the assault of several swords and spears, like wax thrown in flames.

"All this anger for that? Couldn't you bear to be parted from me for four days? If I have to go on a battle campaign what will you do? We might have to be parted for months together!"

"My Lord! If you have to go to the battlefield do you think I will remain content to be parted from you for months together? Forget the thought! I shall follow you like a shadow and come with you on the campaign."

"Wonderful! If I take you on the campaign what war can I fight? My darling! My shoulders and chest have borne the piercing sharpness of several swords and lances. The world praises me for having sixty-four scars from such wounds. But if your soft flower like body is pierced by even one thorn, my heart will split open. The tiny thorn which hurts your small foot will achieve that which could not be done in several battles by swords and arrows. How can I take you to the battlefield? Even this -- you standing here on this granite walkway -- hurts me! Come here, come and sit on you flower laden couch! Let me gaze upon your divine face. You think that this parting of four days was difficult only for you? Every second away from you was like an eon for me! At least now, let me look at your face and satisfy my longing."

He took hold of Nandini's hand and led her to her couch. Nandini wiped away her tears and looked up at him. He looked at that pearly smile on her shining face in the golden light. Ah! I can give her all the three worlds for such a smile! I don't possess all the three worlds, so let me offer my life, my soul all my possessions to her! But she does not ask anything of me! So ran the thoughts in that powerful chieftain's mind. He had completely forgotten all his intentions of questioning her or being harsh with her. He was reduced to a state of executing every whim and fancy of Nandini with all his resources. All forms of slavery are evil. But there is nothing that makes a man lose his spirit like being enslaved by a woman!

"You returned after staying away in distant parts for four days! Why did you not come back here immediately upon your return? Your brother is more important to you than me!" asked Nandini. She then glanced at him sulkily.

"It is not like that my dear! My heart wished to fly to you like a swift arrow from the expert bow. But I had to tarry in my brother's mansion to make sure that the foolish Prince -- Madurandaka, had returned safely through the secret underground passage."

"My Lord I am interested in all your undertakings. I wish success for all your efforts. But, I feel uncomfortable at the thought of you taking a young man in a palanquin meant for me. People think that you are taking me along with you wherever you go. ..."

"You think I am happy about this? Never! But our effort is important. I am tolerating the situation for the sake of the important undertaking. Moreover, it was you who gave me that idea! You told me to take Madurandaka in your closed palanquin. Didn't you give me the idea of conveying him in and out of the fort by way of the secret passage?"

"I merely did my duty. Is not the wife bound to help in the efforts of her husband? Somehow, I merely expressed some idea that occurred to me. Because of that, you ..."

"Was that all? Think of this fellow Madurandaka -- wearing ashen marks on his forehead, shoulders draped with holy beads, forever immersed in worship and devotion, going from one temple and holy place to another, proving himself to be his mother's son! We had tried several times, to interest him in affairs of the state, in ruling; but, we could not shake his resolve. But, you met him twice and he changed completely! Now, no one can contain his eagerness to rule. His dreamland now stretches from Lanka to the Himalayas!

From the earth to the skies! He is more restless than any of us, waiting to ascend the Chozla throne! Nandini! I don't know what magic you used on him! But you yourself are such a sorceress, why do you seek the counsel of some other sorcerer? People talk unnecessarily about that ..."

"My King! It is your responsibility to cut off their tongues and punish anyone who talks loosely about that! I have told you earlier, about why I consult a sorcerer. Shall I remind you if you have forgotten? It is to milk the poison of that female snake in Pazlayarai. You are all men, you would enter the battlefield and confront other men. You think it disgraceful to fight with women. But one woman can create more havoc than a hundred men. A snake knows its own kind! You know nothing about the cunning of that Kundavai. I know her. You might have forgotten about how she humiliated both you and me. I cannot! She asked me in the midst of a hundred women, 'That old fool in his death bed has gone woman-mad and lost his senses, where did your sense go? Why did you go and marry that old man?'-- can I forget that? 'You look ravishing, shining like a heavenly enchantress! Didn't any prince garland you and take you as his queen to place you on his throne? After all, did you have to stoop to marry that old buffalo?' She asked that! How can I forget those words? I can never forget it as long as I live." Nandini spoke these passionate words and began sobbing. Tears overflowing her eyes cascaded down her cheeks to wet her heaving breasts.

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Chapter 39 --The World Swirled

Lord Pazluvoor had heard that people talked with derision about his marrying a young girl in his old age. That Kundavai was one such person had reached his ears. But no one had told him explicitly till now, about what exactly Kundavai had said. Now, when he heard the words from Nandini's lips, his heart burned like the furnace in a smithy. "Puff, puff," came fiery sighs from his nostrils. Nandini's tears added further fuel to the fire in his heart.

"My dearest! Is that what that wretched fiend said? Did she call me an aged buffalo? Wait -- let her, let her ... See what I shall do to her! I will trample her and throw her out just like the water-buffalo which tramples a lotus vine! And then, watch ... she ... I will, I will ..." Lord Pazluvoor could not talk because of his rage.

Nandini tried to calm him down. She picked up his iron-hard palm and twined her flower-soft fingers with his. "My dear Lord! I knew that you could not tolerate any insult offered to me. But the powerful lion which is capable of breaking the pate of a rogue elephant and drinking its blood, cannot pounce on a mere cat. Kundavai is a female cat and a powerful witch. She controls and orders everyone with her witchcraft and sorcery. She makes this Chozla Empire dance. Her sorcery can be overcome only by sorcery. If you don't like it, tell me. I shall leave this palace this very day." Her voice was still sob-laden.

Lord Pazluvoor's angry rage subsided and passion took its place. "No, no! Never. Call a thousand sorcerers if you wish and talk to them, but don't go! You are all my life! Why 'all'? You are my life! And if life departs what can this body do? ... Even now, your keeping me away, is killing me alive! You know so many magic spells -- can you not teach me one such spell?"

"My dearest Lord! When you have a sword and spear in your hands what need for magic spells? Leave the spells and sorcery to a hapless female like me. Why do you need witchcraft or sorcery?"

"Darling, when you open your coral lips and call me 'Dearest', my very being is filled with happiness. Your golden face makes my head swim. Yes, I do have a sword and spear in my hands. But, I can use them only against my enemies in the battlefield. What can I do with such weapons in this flower laden bower? I have no arrows against Cupid's darts! You have them! You ask me why I need magic spells! This fire of passion that burns constantly, consuming my very life and body -- I need spells to quench it. Do you have any spells for that? Teach me, if you know them? If not, let me have the fortune of touching your flower like body and enjoy that happiness. Save my life, darling! It is more than two and a half years since we have been man and wife as per the laws of the land and the sacred texts. But still, we do not lead a normal wedded life. You put me away with excuses of vows and penances. You are torturing your husband who took your hand in marriage. At least, once and for all, give me some poison with your own hands...."

Nandini covered her ears, "Dear dear me! Don't utter such cruel words! If you say such things again I will do as you say! I will drink poison and die. Then you can live without worry!"

"No, no! I won't say anything like that again. Forgive me! How can I be at peace if you drink poison and die? Now I am half mad, then I will become totally deranged."

"Dear Lord, why should you become mad? On the very day we wed, we became one soul in two bodies. Your soul and mine became one; heart and heart mingled. Every heartbeat of yours echo's in my heart. Every thought that rises in your mind is reflected here in my vision. When you frown, my eyes fill with tears. Thus, when we have become one heart and soul, why bother about mere bodies? This body is made of dust for one day it will burn to ashes, turn to dust again..."

"Stop! Stop! My ears burn with your cruel words." Lord Pazluvoor continued, without letting her talk: "Are you saying it is made of dust? A lie! An untruth! It can never be so! There are several women in this world -- the creator might have made them of dust or dirt, stone or lime; coal or ashes. But, do you know how Brahma, the creator, fashioned your divine form? He collected delicate mandara flowers from the gardens of heaven and came to this Tamil land and collected the blushing lotus from our creeks. He threw the flowers in a golden bowl full of nectar from paradise. He then took that mixture and added moon-beams to it. He called for the bards of ancient times and asked them to play the veena, blending their melody into his mixture. With that unique mixture he created your divine form..."

"My Lord! You talk as if you stood besides the creator and watched all this! Am I the only person available to you for such descriptions? You have several other queens in your palace -- nobly born women. You have lived with them for several years. It is merely two and a half years since you met me..."

Before Nandini could finish, he intervened. Perhaps he wished to express his desire at least with words. He perhaps wished to quench the fire of passion at least with a shower of words!

"Nandini, you talk about those other women in my palace. I married them only to establish the ancient line of the Pazluvoor clan. Some of them remained barren and the others merely gave birth to girls. I accepted it as God's decree and remained tranquil. I had forgotten a desire for women for a long time. Affairs of the state occupied all my attention and time. There was no place in my heart for anything but the welfare of this Chozla Empire. Then we fought the final battle with the Pandiyas. Even though the campaign was led by several younger generals, I could not remain behind. Anyway, if I had not entered that battlefield, our forces would not have won such a decisive victory. My skill and strength helped. After destroying the Pandiya forces completely and occupying Madurai, I went to the Kongu Kingdom. I was returning from there along the banks of the Cauvery.

"On the way, beside a forest path, I saw you. At first I could not believe that I saw you; I blinked my eyes to make sure. You were still there. 'She must be a forest nymph; she will disappear if I go closer,' thought I. But, I came closer and you did not go away. I decided that like in myths, you must be some heavenly nymph who came down to this earth because of some curse or misdeed. 'She may not know our language,' I thought as I asked, 'Girl, who are you?' You answered in sweet Tamil: 'I am an orphan; I seek sanctuary with you; please protect me.' I carried you back in my palanquin, with all sorts of wild thoughts. I felt that I had seen you somewhere, sometime long ago. But the more I thought about it, the less I could remember. Suddenly the veil of deception that covered my mind was lifted. Truth dawned. I realized that I had never seen you before in this birth, but I had seen you in earlier births several times! I recalled all those previous births easily.

"You were born in this world as Ahalya; I was Indra. I gave up my kingship over paradise and braving the curse of the learned ascetics, I came down in search of you. Much later, I was born as the Emperor Santhanu. I went along the banks of the Ganga on a hunt. I saw you -- you were divine Ganga in the guise of a earthly woman. I loved you then. Much later, several eons later, I was born as Kovalan in Kaviri-pattinam. You were Kannagi. For some time I had forgotten you, because of the cloak of maya that covered my eyes. The cloak fell and I realized your worth. I took you to Madurai and left you in the farmhouse to go into the city, to sell your anklet. I lost my life because of treachery. In revenge for that, in this birth, I destroyed the Pandiya clan and came back to find you once again. You were that same Kannagi whom I had seen several hundreds of years ago"

(Note: The myth of Ahalya and Indra is from the epic Ramayana. The story of Santhanu and Ganga is from the epic Mahabarata. Kannagi and Kovalan are from the romance Silappadikaram.)

As the Elder Lord Pazluvoor was recounting the tales of his past births, Nandini had turned her face away looking into the darkness. Because of this, Lord Pazluvoor did not notice the changing expressions on her face. It is doubtful if he would have continued talking in the same fashion if he had seen them.

When he stopped to take a breath, Nandini turned back to him, "My Lord! Your examples are not very appropriate. Everything is slightly inauspicious. If you want, call yourself Manmatha (Lord of Beauty and Love) and me Rathi (Goddess of Beauty and Passion)!" she smiled once again.

Lord Pazluvoor's face brightened with pride and happiness. Which man will not feel happy, however ugly he may be, if his sweetheart calls him Manmatha, the God of Love and Beauty? But still, he spoke as if he did not wish to praise himself.

"My dearest, it is quite appropriate to call you Rathi. But can we compare me to Manmatha? You call me so because of your love for me."

"My Lord, in my eyes you are Manmatha! Bravery is beauty for menfolk. The world knows that there is no warrior who is your match in this land. Men acquire allure because of their kindness to waifs like me. You gave sanctuary to me, an orphan girl, without questions about my past. You protected me and showered all your love on me. I will not make you wait for long. The time for ending my penance and fulfilling my vow is drawing close," spoke Nandini.

"Dearest, tell me clearly what that vow is and what your penance is about. I will complete it for you as quickly as possible."

"None of the descendants of this Sundara Chozla who thinks he is the handsomest man in this world, should ascend the Chozla throne. The pride of that prejudiced female, Kundavai, must be wounded"

"Nandini, think them done. Aditya and Arulmozli will not get the throne. All the chieftains of this nation have agreed to crown Madurandaka as the next Crown Prince."

"Have all agreed? Truly?" asked Nandini sharply.

"Except two or three, all have agreed. That fellow of Kodumbalur, Malayaman and Parthiban will never join us. I have no worry about them."

"Nevertheless, we must be careful till the deed is done."

"No doubt about that. I am taking care of everything. Mistakes may occur because of the foolishness of others. Even today such a mistake happened. A young messenger from Kanchi who arrived today, duped Kalanthaka and met the Emperor to deliver a letter and message."

"Ah! You keep praising your brother all the time. I always maintain that he is not capable enough."

"Yes, he was misled in this affair. He was saying something about that youth showing our signet ring."

"Those who have been duped will try and find some excuse like that! Haven't they made any efforts to arrest that youth?"

"Why no effort? the search for him has begun -- inside and outside the fort. They will find him. This will not hinder our plans in any way. After the Emperor, the throne is surely for Madurandaka."

"My Lord, the time has come for me to reveal the aim of my penance..."

"Dearest, I have been asking you to tell me that ..."

"My vows will not be fulfilled by placing that foolish youth, Madurandaka -- he who shows his teeth to smile at every woman -- that idiot, on the throne."

"What will fulfil your vow? Tell me your desire. I will accomplish it."

"My King! A famous astrologer read my horoscope when I was very young. He said that I would be troubled by various incidents till my eighteenth year."

"And then what did he say?"

"He said that my luck would change after my eighteenth year. He said that I would achieve an incomparable position of prestige."

"Ah! He said the truth. Who is that astrologer? I will shower him with gold coins."

"My Lord!"

"Dearest!"

"He said one more thing. Shall I say it?"

"Surely, you must tell me!"

"That astrologer said, that the man who takes my hand and weds me will sit upon the throne of a large empire and kings of all the fifty-six nations will come and bow to him as he sits on the throne of an emperor. That's what the astrologer said. Can you fulfill that?"

When Lord Pazluvoor heard these words -- Nandini, the couch on which she was sitting, everything, swam before his eyes. The flower laden gazebo swirled; its pillars twirled. The dark garden in front began revolving. Treetops bathed in the moonlight began turning. The mansions on both sides revolved. The world swirled!

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Chapter 40 -- Dark Mansion

Let us now consider Vandiya Devan who had disappeared. Remember he went towards the dark mansion to hide from the Sorcerer? At first, he tried to listen to the conversation between Nandini and the Sorcerer. But he could hear nothing clearly. In fact he was not particularly eager to listen to their talk. He realized that while talking with Nandini he had lost control of his faculties and he was now in a state of semi-intoxication.

It would be best if I can escape without meeting her once again. It is more dangerous to be caught in the wiles of this Young-Queen than it is to be arrested by the Lords of Pazluvoor. In the midst of those men, my intellect functions sharply; my arms feel strong and my hand is always upon the hilt of my sword. I can manage with my mind as well as my hands. But all my senses are dulled in front of this enchantress and my hands lose the power of handling weapons. Who knows what may happen if I stand before her once again? To top it all, she seems to have some liaison with some sorcerer! Lord knows what spells they may contrive in each other's company. Dear me! What a hatred she has against Kundavai Pirati! Her hatred and rage burn like sparks in her eyes. Perhaps she will change her mind and give me up to Lord Pazluvoor! The fickle nature of women is well known and it would be better if I can escape without meeting her once again. But how? Let me go into this garden and find a way out. Maybe I have to jump over the wall. What if the men who are searching for me are waiting outside the wall? ... Is there no other way? Dear me! What happened to the good fortune that was helping me all these days? Let me think. Let me use my brain and think! Let me also use my eyes and look all around here. Why is this

mansion lost in darkness? What is there inside? If I enter this dark building where will it lead me? Maybe I should explore in here. If not now, it will come in useful some day. Who knows? But how is one to enter this mysterious building? What a huge door! My Lord! Such a strong lock on it! Well ... What is this? ... a wicket gate embedded on the huge door! Ah! My good fortune has not abandoned me, this tiny door seems to open easily if I push it in.

Vandiya Devan entered the mansion by pushing open the tiny doorway hidden cunningly in the larger door. As soon as he was inside, the first thought that occurred to him was that Nandini should not find out that he had gone that way. So, he gently pulled the door shut. It latched close with a click and drowned him in total darkness. The darkness seemed to grow deeper because even the glimmer of light from the garden was now gone. In that one second as he stepped inside, his eyes had glimpsed several huge pillars. Not even those pillars were now visible. Pitch black, unimaginable darkness!

Idiotic! I stepped in from comparative light, that is why my eyes can see nothing. After a while, I shall be able to decipher shapes as my eyes get adjusted to this darkness. Why should I fear this darkness? Let me walk ahead instead of standing here like a pole. I can grope with my hands and walk forward. Where could the pillar I just saw disappear?

He groped with his hands like a blind man and took a few steps. His hands found a pillar. It was a huge, granite pillar. His hands felt along its circumference and he went around it. Few more steps ... another pillar. Still, he could see nothing.

What is this? Have I suddenly become blind? How foolish! How can I suddenly become blind. Why is this ... my hands are not finding any more pillars ... Ah! Am I stepping into some pit? Oh! here is a step ... Luckily he steadied himself and started down the steps feeling with his foot before placing it down. How long was he to grope in the darkness like that! An unexplainable terror took hold of him. He could not go any further.

Let me go back. Let me go back to the gazebo through the wicket gate. It is better to face Nandini and somehow overcome here wiles than face this utter darkness. I can promise whatever she wants for now and manage later.

He turned around and tried to climb back, up the steps. Once he was back on the level floor he was not sure of the directions. His groping hands found no pillar or post. In fact they found nothing for a while. After he had taken several steps his hands found a wall, but he was totally lost. O Lord! Am I to wander in this mansion all through the night till I become deranged? What a predicament! Hey, what's that noise? Are they bats beating their wings? No, this is not that kind of a noise ... sounds like footsteps. Somebody is walking. Are they human beings or ...?

His throat felt parched and his tongue stuck to his mouth. Somebody was brushing against his face! He used all his strength and with a bunched fist he struck out. "Awwwh." He felt as if his hand was pulled apart. In the darkness he had struck a granite pillar! He would have laughed loudly if he had not been in such great pain. But, the pain made him forget his fear. He could now hear the footsteps growing louder, coming closer. Sometimes they seemed to be moving away from him. Sometimes they came closer. He waited and listened carefully. His eyes stared in to the direction from which the footsteps came.

Ah! Some light! It's slowly becoming brighter and also coming closer. Smoke along with light! Is someone coming with a lighted torch? Maybe Nandini is coming in search of me. Then it is good. But, if it is somebody else? Anyway let me hide and watch.

In the light of that distant torch he could make out that he was in a huge vestibule like chamber full of huge pillars. All the pillars were carved with frightening gargoyles and demons. Towards one end, he could see a flight of steps rising out of the floor and curve around as it rose to reach an upper storey. The light was coming from the stairwell.

It cannot be Nandini coming from down below. Is this the entrance to those infamous dungeons of Tanjore? Is someone coming from there? Is that why this mansion is clothed in darkness? Vandiya Devan had heard quite a number of tales about the tortures and horrors of the dungeons of Tanjore. The very thought of them made his hair stand on end with fright. He was drenched in sweat and he could taste fear in his mouth. He hid himself behind one of the pillars. Every limb and bone in that courageous warrior's body shivered with fear.

Three figures came up the steps. All three were human: men. One of them held the lighted torch; another had a spear in his hand and the man in the middle held nothing. In the light, Vandiya Devan could clearly see their faces. His fear disappeared without trace and fright was replaced by surprise. The first man was none other than his dear friend Kandamaran. The face of the man in the middle gave rise to a strange impression for one second: it seemed like the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor dressed up like a man. But the impression was dispelled within a second for he recognized him to be Prince Madurandaka whom he had seen in the half light of the courtyard in Kadamboor. Vandiya Devan had never seen the third man who was holding up the torch. He seemed to be some kind of a guard or palace servant.

Vandiya Devan's brain functioned rather efficiently and he was soon able to deduce why they were coming up the steps from the underground passage.

The Young-Queen of Pazluvoor had come back in the palanquin yesterday itself. The Elder Lord Pazluvoor had come back openly by the main gates some hours ago. But no one must know that this Prince had left the fort or that he had come back! Therefore they were making use of this secret passage. Ah! This is the mystery of this dark mansion! Kandamaran must have met Lord Pazluvoor somewhere along the road after he parted from me at Kollidam. Lord Pazluvoor has employed him on this secret mission sending him as an escort for Prince Madurandaka. Oh yes! I now remember Kandamaran saying, 'I too have some affairs in Tanjore. I might come there.' What will he say if I suddenly appear before him now?

Vandiya Devan abandoned the idea as soon as it occurred. Kandamaran might even kill him in view of his secret activities. Or I might have to kill my dear friend if a skirmish results in view of these circumstances. Why cause unnecessary problems?

By now the three men had ascended the steps and gone up. The light was growing dimmer and dimmer every minute. Vandiya Devan wondered if he should follow them and abandoned that idea also.

I am sure they are going to the palace of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. What's the point in going back there? I have escaped from the lion's den and why should I go back to its lair?

There is no point in going back to the gazebo and finding Nandini. Lord Pazluvoor must surely be back there now. In fact it may be dangerous to go back ... What can I do? Why shouldn't I go down these steps and see where they lead?

With these thoughts our heroic youth began walking down the steps.

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Chapter 41 -- The Vault

Vandiya Devan walked along the dark underground passageway, carefully placing each step firmly one after the other. The steps went down for a while and then a level floor; steps again after some distance. Another length of level ground. He stretched out his hands to find some grip but could find no wall. The passage must have been fairly wide. After some time the steps began going up once again. They began to curve around and wind upwards. How long must I grope in this utter darkness? What can I do? What is this ... am I seeing some light, very faint light...

He could not find the source of the light which reduced the darkness in that passage. Perhaps it was a hidden window or a light hidden in some alcove. He stepped over some ledge.

Oh no! Not at all! What is this wondrous thing? Is this real? Is what I see true? Or, is it some hallucination of a deranged mind?

It was a fairly large, well proportioned chamber. A vault, carved out of the subterranean rocks. It's roof was rough and low, almost scraping his head as he stood erect. But the dim glow was not moonlight shining from outside! There was neither a window nor an opening in the ceiling. The light came from the stuff lying in mounds scattered all around on the floor of that vault! The stuff glowed and shone like moonlight! There, in the corner was a heap of jeweled crowns, embedded with diamonds and rubies. And here was a mound of pearl necklaces -- how many strands! Intricate necklaces and bracelets studded with gemstones... ruby, emerald, coral, lapis, sapphire, topaz and diamond! What was that in that huge cauldron? It overflowed with pearls, perfectly formed, shining pearls; each like the fresh buds of jasmine flowers. Big, heavy pearls! There, in those pots placed in a row ... filled to the brim with shining coins of yellow gold. Here, these little mounds all over the floor are bars of pure gold!

Oh! This must be the treasure vault of Tanjore! It is not surprising that the vault is next to the mansion of the Chozla Finance Officer, the Elder Lord Pazluvoor! Dear Lord! How did I manage to enter this underground vault! Is it my good fortune? The Gods of good luck and wealth must have brought me here! What a fantastic secret, what a fortunate secret I have discovered without any effort! How am I to make use of this good luck! Will I have the heart to leave this chamber?

He felt that he would know no hunger or thirst if he remained amidst all those riches. Neither will he need sleep amidst all that wealth collected by the Chozla armies in their campaigns over hundreds of years. The fortune of Kubera, the God of Wealth, was laid before him. Why should he go away, leaving all that?

Vandiya Devan wandered round and round that vault. He touched and felt everything. He thrust his hands deep into the pots of pearls and let them trickle through his fingers. His

hands picked up the shining gold coins and showered them on his head. He threw the ropes of pearls and jewelled necklaces around his shoulders and took them off not enough, the other ones seem richer... He saw something else shining in the far corner and walked towards it eagerly. At first he did not understand what it was, but then he realized! He bent low and touched it with his fingers. Oh God! It is a skeleton! It is the skeleton of a man who was a living being with flesh and blood, skin and hair, eyes and lips, with life and strength once upon a time.

The skeleton seemed to move and make a rattling noise just like the trickle of gold coins. Was it sending some message to Vandiya Devan? Every hair on his body stood upright with fear! He felt that he had gone mad! Stupid! Idiotic! The skeleton is not rising. A rat was running out from the rib cage! See it ran over my feet ... look, the skeleton is still there in the corner. But, it is definitely giving me a message! "Go away! Don't hesitate! Run away from here!" It is warning me. I must get away from this vault and escape ... if I hesitate, my fate will be the same as it's own ... once a living, flesh and blood creature...

Vandiya Devan decided to leave that vault, but, there seemed to be no way out! He could not find the opening through which he had stepped into that chamber. Along one edge of that vault was a deep precipice. He could see no floor in the darkness when he looked down the side. The steps by which he came up must be somewhere. He tried to find them, wandering here and there felling every inch of the wall on the opposite side. While he searched in this fashion, he saw in one corner, a pile of old gold coins. A spider had spun a cobweb to cover the pile. The cobweb made him think.

The learned ancients often compared the greed for land, women and gold to a spider's cobweb. A spider spins it's web and waits patiently. Insects fly in from somewhere and fall into that web, unable to escape the spider slowly, slowly draws the insect close and eats it up. All the three greeds, the lust for land, women or wealth was like that. Man wanders into the wrong path of desire and falls into the web of avarice.

Today, I have experienced the nature of all three types of lust. Nandini, a woman, the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor, tried to entice me into her wiles. She tried to seduce me with promises of attaining the lands of my Vaanar forefathers. And finally here in this dark dungeon, the demon of lust for wealth tried to swallow me! I have escaped from the first two temptations and must overcome this Why do I need all this? Why do I need a kingdom? Lands? Why wealth? Why want the company of women? The earth with the sky as its roof is my palace. All the world is my home and all men my kinfolk! My life is to wander from place to place; to look at the new floods in rivers and creeks; to enjoy the new buds blossoming on trees and shrubs; to climb the sky high mountains and cross thundering rapids; to gaze upon wonderful birds and beasts. I eat when hunger gnaws; rest when sleep beckons. That is a carefree life! Why should I give up this pleasant existence and seek a life of treachery, passion and danger? I must get out of this vault and escape from this Fort of Tanjore. Never again should I become embroiled in such complications.

Suddenly, piercing the silence in that vault, he heard a door open and shut somewhere ... far away. Footsteps once again! There was no end to the mysteries and surprises of that night. No dearth of wonders as well as dangers! This time, the footsteps seemed to come

from very far away. They seemed to approach him from two different directions. Vandiya Devan listened carefully. In a short while he was spectator to an astonishing scene!

The scene he witnessed was like the happenings on a stage, as might appear to an observer seated very far away from the stage in a theater. The scene seemed to take place on a ledge high above him, far away in the distance. One side of the vault seemed like a picture window capturing a theatrical skit. A torch entered the stage from one side. Another torch entered from the opposite side! The torches moved closer and closer... the light of the first torch revealed two tall figures. The other torch also shed light on two forms. One was tall, dark and dignified with a recognizable headgear; the other was a rather short, dainty figure. Both parties were nearing each other. Vandiya Devan stared at this spectacle and recognized the persons. The two tall figures coming from the left were Kandamaran and the palace servant. The two coming from the right were the Elder Lord Pazluvoor and his Young-Queen Nandini.

What will happen when they meet? Will there be an incident? Or, will each group let the other pass and then go on their way? Vandiya Devan held his breath and watched.

They met. From the way Kandamaran stood -- awkwardly, hesitantly, moving from one foot to another, he surmised that the meeting was unexpected. But, nothing untoward happened. Lord Pazluvoor seemed to ask something of Kandamaran and he replied something. Vandiya Devan could not hear either the question or the reply. Then, Lord Pazluvoor made a sign with his hand and pointed towards some steps descending to the underground passage. Kandamaran bowed low with reverence and walked towards that direction. Lord Pazluvoor made a sign with his hands to the palace guard behind him. That man with the torch, bowed his head in understanding, with his palm covering his lips and followed Kandamaran going down the steps. Lord Pazluvoor and his Young-Queen walked on, towards the left.

All these took place like a puppet show lasting a few minutes. Vandiya Devan realized that they were near a fork in the underground passage. How fortunate that I did not tarry anywhere in that passage, but wandered into this hidden vault. I must have accidentally taken another secret path and come down into this chamber. Oh God! If I had encountered any of those two groups, what would have been my fate! Luckily I escaped ... and now, to get out of here, what next? I am sure that Kandamaran is going out once again by the same passage through which he had led Prince Madurandaka. If I follow Kandamaran, I will surely find the exit from this maze. And then I can escape outside the fort. Perhaps I may be able to even seek the help of Kandamaran by concocting some story. If he does not cooperate I can always handle him and his servant with my sword! Let me follow him.

For a few minutes, the torch light seemed to approach the treasure vault. Vandiya Devan waited with bated breath. Then the light appeared to move away. By then, Vandiya Devan had looked around and found the narrow opening through which he had stepped into the treasure vault. He quickly squeezed his way out of the opening. From there, in the faint light he could barely see the entry way. He walked silently, quickly following the torch light, neither moving too close nor staying too far behind. He could never have found his way through that twisting, turning, narrow passage which went up, down in all directions.

Long live Kandamaran! How am I going to repay him for this help he is extending unwittingly?

Vandiya Devan did not realize that he would soon have the opportunity to do that. The passage came to an abrupt end at a heavy, roof-high wall. None could guess that there was an exit or doorway in that wall. But there must be a way. The secret underground passage must surely have an exit!

The servant changed his lighted torch from his right hand to his left. He placed the palm of his right hand on some spot on the wall and did something. Perhaps he was turning some mechanism. A thin line appeared on the wall to slowly widen till it became a narrow, alcove-like opening. Soon it became wide enough to accommodate a man. The servant pointed with his torch towards that opening. Kandamaran spoke some words to him and stepped into the opening. One leg was across the threshold of the opening and the other was still in the passageway. Only his back was visible as his body blocked the narrow exit.

Ah! What was this? What was the servant doing? He removed his palm from the mechanism on the wall and quickly drew a curved dagger from his waistband. Oh Lord! He has plunged the dagger into Kandamaran's back! Dastardly, scoundrel! Knave who strikes from the back!

Vandiya Devan ran up from hiding in the darkness behind. In one swift leap he pounced upon the servant who turned on hearing the noise. As the torch fell to the ground, the servant could clearly see the angry, rage filled face of Vandiya Devan.

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Chapter 42 -- "Is This Friendship?"

Vandiya Devan's first thought was to somehow or other save the life of his friend Kandamaran. But, Vandiya Devan realized that in that attempt his own life would meet a similar fate. Therefore, he decided to tackle the horrible servant before looking at his friend. When he pounced upon the startled man, he hooked his right arm around the fellow's neck and at the same time kicked away the fallen torch with his left foot. The light began growing dim and smokey. Using all his strength, Vandiya Devan squeezed his arm around the servant's neck and threw him down. The man's head dashed against the granite floor. Vandiya Devan picked up the fallen torch and looked at the fellow's face. He seemed to be senseless, dead. But, as a precaution he tied his hands together behind his back, using his upper scarf. All this did not take more than a moment.

He then ran towards his friend and saw Kandamaran lying with a knife stuck on his back, half outside the exit and half inside the passage. Kandamaran's spear had fallen on the floor inside. After picking up the spear, Vandiya Devan stepped outside the passage. Once outside, he pulled his friend's body out. The doorway closed shut automatically when the obstruction was removed. The wall hid its secret and stood tall and impregnable, shrouded in darkness. There was a swift breeze and the smell of water. Vandiya Devan realized that he must have come outside the fortress. Dense tall trees and the high, curving walls of the fortress hid the moon. Only a dim light was visible.

Vandiya Devan picked up his friend and draped his body over one shoulder. He had Kandamaran's spear in one hand as he took one step. He felt the ground under his foot break loose and cascade noisily down a slope. Quickly, he steadied himself with great effort and looked around. In the shadow of the wall and trees, he could see flowing water down below. The flow seemed rapid, with swirls and whirlpools.

Oh God! From the frying pan into the fire! Death awaits every step I take! My guardian angel saved me. That wretched scoundrel of a servant! What's the point in blaming him? -- he was merely following his master's orders. He must have intended to kill my friend as he stepped across the doorway and then throw his body down into the flood water below. If my foot had slipped some more, both of us would have fallen into the ravine. I might have been able to swim and escape, but Kandamaran's fate would be sealed.

Vandiya Devan knew that the River Vadavaru encircled the fortress of Tanjore on three sides. This must be it. The river itself may not be deep, but here around the fort the current may be fast. Who knows?

He pushed the spear into the water to feel its depth. Even after all its length was immersed in water, he could not feel the floor. What horrible, merciless killers these men are! But there is no time to think about them now. I must escape and also take my friend to someone who can treat his wound.

Vandiya Devan walked along the bank carefully, without slipping into the flood. Kandamaran on his shoulder and a spear in his hand. His friend moaned lightly once or twice. This revived his spirits and gave him hope. After he had walked in this fashion for a while he realized that the fortress walls were moving away from the river bank. Thick groves of trees appeared. The way became thorny and seemed overgrown. It was rather difficult to walk. He then saw that a large tree had been toppled by the rising flood waters washing away the soil around its roots. The big tree-trunk was now in the water almost spanning it like a bridge to the opposite shore. He stepped on it and walked across, wobbling unsteadily.

The tree was being tossed about by the swift water below. Its upper branches were being tormented by the torrent; the wind was swishing noisily all around. When he could find no more footholds on the tree, he once again felt the depth of the water with his spear. Luckily, Lord Muruga saved him! It was not too deep. He stepped into the water steadying himself with the spear and walked across to the shore. His courageous heart tackled the swirling flood and blowing wind. His strength helped him walk with the burden of his wounded friend. By now his whole body was shivering with the cold and fear. Twice, Kandamaran almost slipped off his shoulder. But somehow he climbed up the bank. With all his clothes dripping wet and the heavy, tall body of Kandamaran on his shoulder, he staggered like a ghost and soon sought cover under the grove of trees on the bank.

He stopped under a mango tree and eased his friend slowly on to the ground. He needed to rest and catch his breath. Also, he wanted to make sure that his friend was still alive. What would be the use of carrying a dead body in this dangerous night? He might as well leave it near the river!

No! No! He seems to be alive, for I can feel his breath. I can feel his quick pulse and heaving chest. What should I do? Should I pull out the knife from his back? If I pull it out

the blood would gush out and he may die! His wound must be cleaned and bound with medicines. I cannot do that ... who can help?

He suddenly remembered Sendan Amudan and recalled that his house was amidst the gardens on the banks of the Vadavaru. It must be close by somewhere near here. I must somehow carry him to Amudan's house and treat him there. Let me try. When he tried to lift him up again, Vandiya Devan was surprised and happy to see that Kandamaran's eyes were open.

"Kandamara, do you recognize me?"

"Yes! I can see very well! You are Vallavarayan. How can I fail to recognize such an exceptional friend as you? Can I forget you? Are you not my dear friend who would strike me from behind my back?"

His words fell like whiplashes on Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan.

"Dear me! You think it was me, who struck you with the knife on your back ...!" Thinking of something he stopped suddenly.

"You didn't strike me. Your knife gently caressed my back! You thankless sinner! It was for your sake that I came hurrying through the secret passage at midnight. I wished to meet you before those men of Pazluvoor arrested you. I wanted to prevent them from harming you. I had sworn a promise that I would find you and recruit you into the Guard Corps of the Commander of Tanjore! You have betrayed me, your good friend with good intentions towards you! Is this friendship? How many times have we sworn loyalty to each other? Promised to help each other? You have forgotten all that! I wanted to tell you and warn you about some important changes in Chozla politics that were about to take place soon. Oh dear! Who can I trust in this world anymore?" He groaned and fainted once again.

"Aren't there men to trust? Why not trust the Lords of Pazluvoor?" mumbled Vandiya Devan. But his eyes brimmed with tears. He decided that it was best that he had not revealed the real culprit to his friend. He lifted his friend's body once again on his shoulders and began walking.

Very soon he could smell the fragrance of the night blooming flowers. He soon found Sendan Amudan's gardens. Oh! What a sight they were! What a difference between their appearance yesterday and tonight! The garden now resembled the garden Ashokavana destroyed by Hanuman or like the gardens of Madhuvana torn apart by the horde of monkeys.

Oh! Pazluvoor soldiers have come here in search of me. They have committed these atrocities and destroyed this garden! Oh dear, how much effort Sendan and his mother must have put in to establish this garden? And all that is destroyed?

Immediately he remembered the danger surrounding him and forgot the sympathy he felt for the ruined garden. What if those soldiers and spies are still waiting for me here? I may have to confront them ... but, there, my horse is still tied to the tree in front of the house! Perhaps they have left it there to lure me here to arrest me ... Anyway what can I do now? I can leave this friend of mine with the folks in the house and escape on my horse. Maybe I can somehow reach Pazlayarai.

He walked as silently as possible and reached the front door of the house. He tapped on the shoulder of Sendan Amudan who was sleeping on the porch. Amudan sat up startled; Vandiya Devan covered his mouth with his palm and spoke in a soft voice, "Thambi! You must help me. I am caught in a big scrape. This man is my dear friend, Kandamaran, a son of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya. I found him on the way, someone had stabbed him on the back. I carried him here."

"Oh what scoundrels! They have stabbed him on his back! What courageous warriors they must have been!" said Amudan.

He then said, "I can look after him to the best of my ability. Since this evening, several groups of soldiers have come in search of you. They have totally destroyed my garden! But that's all right if you are safe. Luckily they did not confiscate your horse. You must ride away immediately."

"That is my intention. But we must somehow save this fellow's life."

"Don't worry about that. My mother is skilled in such matters. She can doctor him." Sendan then rose to open the front door and step into the house. He woke up his mother. They carried Kandamaran to the inner room in the house. Amudan's mother had brought a lamp. He talked to her making signs with his hands. She seemed to have understood him clearly. She examined Kandamaran and the knife which was still stuck on his back. She went into the kitchen and came back with a bunch of herbs and some clean rags. She then signed to her son.

Amudan held down Kandamaran tightly and asked Vandiya Devan to pull out the knife in one quick stroke. When he pulled it out, blood gushed out of the wound and Kandamaran roared in pain. The woman deftly stuffed the herbs and cloth into the gushing wound. She bound it tight with another cloth. Vandiya Devan covered Kandamaran's mouth and tried to keep him quiet. They heard the sound of footsteps outside.

"Go! Go quickly!" said Sendan Amudan.

Vandiya Devan picked up the blood stained knife and the spear, and hesitated. "Thambi, do you trust me?" he asked.

"I trust in God and I like you. Why do you ask?"

"I need your help. I am not familiar with the roads in these parts. I need to reach Pazlayarai as quickly as possible. I am carrying messages to Kundavai Pirati. Can you come with me as a guide?"

Sendan Amudan immediately stood up and made some signs to his mother. She did not seem too surprised and signed back saying that he could go. She also promised to look after the wounded man. Sendan Amudan and Vandiya Devan walked out of the back door and circled back to the horse. They climbed on its back. Vandiya Devan held the reins and guided the horse to walk silently out of the garden. Once they were out, it galloped quickly down the road.

By now five or six soldiers had come up the front porch of the house. They were banging loudly on the door. Amudan's mother opened the door and stood in the doorway.

"There was some noise here. What was it about?" shouted one man.

Amudan's mother tried to say something. It came out as garbled un-understandable sounds.

"What is the use of talking to this dumb woman? Let us go in and look."

"But she is blocking the entrance!"

"Where is that flower seller?"

"Push her aside and go in."

Amudan's mother was now loudly saying something in her garbled sounds. She had pushed away the man who was trying to go past her and was trying to bolt the door. All the men converged upon her and pushed upon the door; she quickly let go and two of the men toppled into the doorway. The others stepped across pushing her aside. She began moaning and screaming even louder.

"The man is here!" shouted one of the soldiers.

"Is he found?" asked the other.

"He might try to run, hold him and bind him," ordered another.

The dumb woman was crying and moaning and trying to kick at the men holding her back.

"The whole place seems a bloody mess!" said the leader.

"Bae bae" said the woman.

"Hey! This fellow seems to be somebody else!"

"Bae bae."

"Did this man come here yesterday?"

"Bae bbae bae."

"Where is your son?"

"Bae bbbbae."

"Dumb female! Shut up! Hey you ... examine him! Does anyone recognize this fellow?"

"Not him."

"It is the same fellow."

"No, no. This is not the man."

"Bae bbae ba."

"Whatever you say. This fellow is another stranger. Lift him up. Let's take him."

"Bae bbae baaa." She tried to prevent them.

"Wretched fiend! Keep quiet."

Four men lifted up Kandamaran. Amudan's mother was now wailing even more loudly.

"Hey what's that? A horse galloping?"

"Two of you can carry him. You others run out and see."

"Throw this fellow down. He won't go anywhere. Let's all run and see."

They dropped Kandamaran down roughly and ran out. The woman's incessant wails followed them.

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Chapter 43 -- Pazlayarai

We welcome our readers to visit Pazlayarai City even before Vandiya Devan arrives there after overcoming several mishaps and dangers.

Let us stop on the southern banks of River Arisil and gaze upon that city. Ah! Is this an ordinary city? It is the gem encrusted head-jewel of Mother Tamil! It is like her jewelled forehead ornament, netri-chutti, studded with rubies, pearls, emeralds and sapphires. Rivers, streams, creeks and fields are filled to the brim with fresh water. Coconut palms and punnai trees spread cool shadows. The greenery is emphasized by the strings of golden yellow flowers on konnai trees. Piercing all the greenery are tall towers and turrets of temples and palaces crowned with golden cupolas rising sky high.

Ah! How many townships are enclosed in this great metropolis called Pazlayarai! Nandipuram, Thiruchatti Mutram, Patteesuram, Mazlavarpadi, Arichandra-puram -- all these towns and their respective temples were part of this Chozla capital. The four Shiva temples known as West Tali, East Tali, North Tali and South Tali were situated on the four borders of the city.

The Padai Veedu areas (army encampments) known as Aariya, Puduppu, Manappu and Pambai providing housing for the various battalions of Chozla armies and their families were spread out in one direction. The Chozla Maligai or Chozla Palace was found in all its splendor rising majestically in their midst. The Chozla Palace was not merely one single building. Before the times of Vijayala Chozla it was a single mansion. But since his times, every prince and princess of the Chozla Dynasty had built new mansions and palaces thereby adding to and extending the complex that was now know as the Chozla Maligai. A thousand eyes would not suffice to gaze upon its magnificence and beauty. The imagination of ten thousand poets will not be adequate to describe its splendor.

With ochre-red streets packed by jewelled chariots is Pazlayarai,
a city of long lasting fame in this world.

The poet Chekkizlar wrote the above lines about this city two hundred years later. Therefore, our readers can guess how great it must have been during the times of Sundara Chozla. Still, when we are entering this ancient city for the first time, we are not fortunate to see it in all it's splendor. We did not have the opportunity to come here when Sundara Chozla was seated on the throne in the Chozla Maligai and ruling from this city.

After the Emperor had taken to his sickbed and moved to Tanjore, the regional chieftains, provincial kings, councilors and ambassadors from foreign lands stopped coming to Pazlayarai. The retinue and supporters who surrounded such dignitaries also stopped coming here, for they had all moved to Tanjore. The soldiers who used to live in the army cantonments were now engaged in the front in Lanka and were part of the peace keeping

forces in Madurai and Kanchi. So, these neighborhoods were now mostly empty except for the womenfolk, the elderly and children.

The families of the Velaikara Battalion of Velirs who had lived in the township of Mazlavarpadi had moved to Tanjore; consequently that neighborhood seemed lifeless with locked houses and unkempt streets. Most of the government officials and ministers had relocated to Tanjore with their families.

In spite of all this, there was no dearth of people on the streets of Pazlayarai. These days its streets were filled with architects, stonemasons and temple builders; poets, religious ascetics, singers of Thevaram and priests thronged the streets. Palace servants mingled with crowds of out-of-towners who had come to worship at the various temples and participate in the several street festivals.

Today seemed to be the day of some carnival. Men, women and children were dressed in beautiful clothes and jewels as they wandered about the streets. People gathered in groups here and there at street crossings. In the midst of such groups one could glimpse players in vivid costumes performing some mime or play.

Let us watch. Yes; these actors seem to be dressed and made up like Krishna and his cowherds. Who is that in the middle of that group? It seems like Lord Krishna standing there with a mountain lifted up in his hand! Look the King of Deva's, Lord Indra is coming up and bowing to him! Look over there! Brahma with four faces seems to be talking to little Krishna! Oh! It's clear now: today is Sri Jayanthi, the birthday of Lord Krishna! The people are celebrating that holiday with all these festivities and enthusiasm.

Tall slippery poles had been setup in street corners; pots containing treasures were tied to their tops. Young men participating in the game of uriyadi tried to climb the slippery poles or hit the mud pots with sticks to collect the treasures and the butter.

The merrymaking seemed to be more colorful in the streets surrounding the Vinnagara (Vishnu Temple) of Nandipuri. What is this?

We saw, we saw, we saw

We saw things pleasing to our eyes.

Who was singing? The voice seems familiar? Here he is, our old friend Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi in person. He is singing! A group gathers around him; some listen with religious devotion while others are heckling. We are concerned about whose head will suffer from the wooden staff in his hands.

Some disturbance outside the portals of the Vinnagara Temple. Chariots and palanquins parked in the street come closer. Some noblewomen are coming out of the temple. Yes, these are the noblewomen and royalty living in the Chozla Maligai of Pazlayarai.

First comes Lady Sembiyan Madevi, revered by one and all as the Elder Pirati. She is a daughter of the Mazluvoor chieftains, the Queen Consort of King Gandara Aditya the Devout. Even in the garb of an elderly widow, how attractive and majestic she looks! The daughter of Vaithumba Kings, Queen Kalyani, the widow of King Arinjaya is walking behind her -- even at this age how beautiful and enchanting she appears! Her face shines with radiance. How great she must have looked in her youth? There is nothing surprising about her son Sundara Chozla being famous for his good looks. The Chera Princess, who

was another wife of Sundara Chozla, was walking by her side. Behind these older women came a group of young maids: they looked like heavenly nymphs who had decided to pay a visit to beautiful Pazlayarai. They are the noblewomen we had met earlier on the banks of River Arisil. Princess Kundavai Pirati with Vanathi Devi of Kodumbalur and their other friends.

The families of the Chozla Dynasty after Vijayala Chozla had worshipped Shiva and Durga as their clan deities. Even though they espoused the Saiva faith they had nothing against Vaishnava teachings or in worshipping Vishnu in all his incarnations. Because today was the festival of Krishna's birth they had come to worship at the Vishnu temple.

When the Elder Pirati, Sembayan Madevi was about to step into her palanquin, she heard the song of Azlvar-adiyan. Perhaps he was singing so loudly so that she would hear him. She made a sign to her retainer, to bring him to her. Azlvar-adiyan came up with humility and reverence and bowed before her.

"Thirumalai, I have not seen you for some time. Have you been on some journey or pilgrimage?" asked the Elder Pirati.

"Yes, My Lady! I had been on a pilgrimage. I went to Thirupathi, Kanchi, Veera-narayana-puram and several other places. I saw several astonishing things wherever I went!"

"Come to my palace tomorrow and tell me about all that you saw and heard."

"No, Madam! I am leaving again, tonight on another journey."

"Then come and see me this evening itself."

"As you wish, My Lady! I shall be there."

All the palanquins and chariots now moved down the street towards the Chozla Maligai. Kundavai pointed a finger at Thirumalai Nambi Azlvar-adiyan and said something to her friends. They burst into merry laughter. Azlvar-adiyan turned around to find the cause for their laughter. Kundavai's eyes talked with his eyes in some secret language. He bowed his head slightly, indicating that he had understood.

Lady Sembayan Madevi's palace was situated in the middle of the Chozla Maligai complex. She was seated on a jewel-encrusted, golden throne in the audience chamber. She seemed to have followed the tradition of the great ladies, Karaikal Ammai and Tilakavathi, in being a devout follower of the Saiva faith. She was dressed in simple white silk, with sacred ashes adorning her forehead and holy rudraksha beads around her neck. She seemed to be confirming the possibility that one could live like an ascetic in the midst of all riches and splendor. Though she wore neither crown nor any other rich adornment, her very posture and radiant face proclaimed her royalty. There was nothing surprising about the fact that each and every member of the Chozla clan, without exception, revered her and almost worshipped her as a Goddess and did nothing against her wishes.

But, there was a flaw to such devotion and veneration. Her son, Prince Madurandaka Deva had acted against her wishes, disobeyed her orders and married a daughter of the Pazluvoor family. Not only that, she had been hearing vague rumors that he was coveting the Chozla throne. All these had given rise to a wrinkle of worry in her life.

The courtyards of her palace were always teeming with visitors of various kinds. Groups of musicians who were experts in singing the Thevaram, religious savants from distant lands, poets and artists, sculptors and temple architects, priests bringing sacraments from holy temples -- all such folk gathered in the courtyards of the Elder Pirati's palace.

That day there were delegations of temple trustees and architects from the towns of Thirumudu-kunram, Kurangadu-thurai and Mazlapadi: they had come with petitions for grants to renovate in granite, the temples in their respective towns. They carried bundles of drawings and small models to show the proposed changes.

She agreed to provide funds for the temples in the first two towns and then asked, "Mazlapadi? Which Mazlapadi?"

"It is that same Mazlapadi which has a temple that is the abode of the Lord who called out to Saint Sundara Murti and made him compose a song for Him!" said the leader of the delegation from Mazlapadi.

"O! What is that story?"

The man retold the following tale in reply to her question:--

"Saint Sundara Murti was on a pilgrimage visiting all the Shiva temples in the Chozla Kingdom. Once he had to ford a river and as he stepped into the water he heard a voice call out, `Sundara, Sundara! Have you forgotten me?' Sundara Murti was startled, for he realized it to be the voice of the Lord calling to him. He turned to his disciples following him and asked, `Is there any Shiva temple nearabout here?' They replied, `Yes sir! There is a tiny temple of Lord Shiva in that grove of konnai trees which belongs to the village of Mazlapadi.'

"Sundara Murti turned back immediately to enter the grove and found a beautiful little brick temple of Lord Shiva amidst all those konnai trees burdened with golden yellow flowers. He worshipped at the shrine and composed a verse in praise of the Lord, recalling His grace and benevolence in taking care of His devotees.

O Lord of golden hued body with a tiger skin draped around the waist;

Upon matted locks, burnished red, you wear the shining crescent!

My beloved King! My Jewel who dwells in Mazlapadi,

Of whom but you will I think, at all times henceforth?

"My Lady, that temple remains tiny, hidden in the flower grove even to this day. We are asking permission to enlarge and renovate that temple."

"So be it! I shall arrange for funds," said the Elder Pirati.

Thirumalai Nambi and another man had now entered the chamber and come forward.

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Chapter 44 -- "All Her Doing!"

An expert architect in the tradition of the master builders of Mamallai came forward. He had brought a model for a large granite temple complex he had designed in a new fashion

using all his imagination. He was now explaining and showing all its innovative features to Lady Sembiyan Madevi.

Her Majesty examined all its details and was greatly impressed. She turned towards the gentleman standing next to Azlvar-adiyan and said, "Mr. Bhattar, do you see this unique design for a temple tower? My heart brims with an eagerness to renovate all the Shiva Temples in our country in this remarkable fashion!"

"Thaye! There is nothing to stop your wish being fulfilled. All Shiva Temples mentioned in the Thevaram psalms can be renovated in this new fashion. Then people will immediately recognize the place as being sanctified by being mentioned in the psalms." Mr. Esanya Bhattar of Pazlayarai spoke with enthusiasm.

"Yes, yes! We must collect all those poems written by the saints Appar, Gnana Sambanda and Sundara Murti and make an anthology of Saiva devotional poems. All those pilgrim centers hallowed by their presence and sanctified by their divine poems must be renovated in granite, possibly with this new design of towering entry-gates for the temples. These two wishes are my dreams. I am doubtful if they will ever be fulfilled. If only my dear lord had not journeyed west and reached the abode of Gods in such an untimely fashion, if only he had lived longer ... all my dreams would have been fulfilled."

"Thaye, even now, nothing is lacking. Has not the Emperor ordered that your every wish must be fulfilled and your every order executed? His sons, the two Princes, are ready to undertake and execute your every whim and fancy even before you can think of them. When such is the case ..."

"Even so my heart feels no happiness. I hear all kinds of rumors. Some persons are apparently complaining that I am emptying the state treasury by my temple building and renovation activities. They ask `Why so many temples for Shiva?' I am not concerned by the questions raised by someone or other. Even Prince Karikala in Kanchi ..."

While the Elder Pirati was talking, Azlvar-adiyan Nambi had come forward. He now interrupted her by saying, "Thaye! I am also one of the persons asking such questions."

She turned to look at him with surprise. The others in the audience chamber stared at him with an expression of disquiet that asked, "What is this impropriety?"

Azlvar-adiyan Nambi continued with a rage filled voice, "My Lady, my heart burns. Can there be such injustice? How can you who are said to be an incarnation of justice tolerate such atrocities?" He spoke with anger.

Mr. Esanya Bhattar, standing next to him spoke in a soft voice. "My brother often babbles such nonsense; he suddenly becomes possessed of an unexplainable fanaticism. Please forgive him and pardon us."

In those days persons of the Saiva faith and those of the Vaishnava faith were not separated by strict caste demarcations. Persons who espoused both sects often hailed from the same family. The same priest offered services both at the Shiva Temple and the Vishnu Vinnagara. Esanya Bhattar was one such broad-minded person. Thirumalai was his step brother. They loved each other dearly except on this matter of their faith. That's why he begged pardon on his brother's behalf.

The Elder Pirati smiled and asked, "What is the injustice? Thirumalai please talk a little calmly."

"My Lady! Why does Shiva, a ghost ridden ascetic, a beggar who wanders with a broken skull for his begging bowl, need so many temples? Why so many sculpted mansions? Such lofty granite towers? Isn't there at least one tiny temple for the great Lord, Sri Maha Vishnu who is guardian of all living worlds? At least shouldn't one of His old abodes be renovated?" wailed Azlvar-adiyan.

"My Lady! The Lord who dances for the welfare of all the worlds (Shiva-Nataraja) needs a stage, an audience chamber, a golden temple and walled mansions. Isn't a small place sufficient for Thirumal who sleeps constantly? All he needs is a darkened bed-chamber without any light. Why does he need mansions or granite towers?" asked Mr. Esanya Bhattar.

"Anna, the Lord who sleeps constantly is the Perumal who measured all the worlds. He is the Great God who pushed the tyrant King Mahabali to the netherworld." Azlvar-adiyan retorted in a self-righteous voice.

Mr. Esanya Bhattar replied with disgust, "Such a great Lord who measured the whole universe had to dig up all the earth to go in search of our great Shiva's lotus feet. Even in the netherworld he could not find them!"

"All I ask is this: why does your Shiva, if he is so great, need so many places to stay? If he is so big, all his temples will come crumbling down as he enters their portals!" said Azlvar-adiyan with impatience.

Lady Sembiyan Madevi asked with laughter brimming in her eyes, "Can you both put an end to your bickering for some time? Thirumalai! What are you saying? Did anyone here say that there should be no temples built for Lord Vishnu? Which Vinnagara do you wish to be renovated? Why don't you put in a petition in the normal manner?"

"My Lady! Your father-in-law was the world famous Emperor Paranthaka. I had been to Veera-narayana-puram, the town established in his name. Lord Veera-narayana-perumal of the Vinnagara in that town is awake day and night to guard the ocean like Veera Narayana Lake and shower his grace upon all the country-folk. But in His temple even the brick walls are crumbling. The people believe that if the temple falls down, even the lake will break its shores and drown hundreds of surrounding villages. I request that the Vinnagara of Veera-narayana-perumal be renovated in granite."

"Fine! It shall be done! Tell me all the details of that place after these people are gone."

Understanding her wish, everyone including Mr. Esanya Bhattar left the chamber.

The Elder Pirati lowered her voice and asked, "Thirumalai, where have you been? What have you seen and heard? Tell me all the details. You have some important information. That's why you intervened in that hasty fashion. Is it not so?"

"Yes, My Lady. I have brought much important news. Even so I would have waited patiently for your pleasure. But you were about to say something about the Prince in Kanchi; that's why I interrupted. Who knows if there was a spy among the people who were here some time ago? All sorts of discord is rampant in the nation. No one knows who will turn traitor or when they would betray us."

The Elder Pirati sighed. "Clansmen of the same family, blood brothers have started suspecting each other! Once upon a time how devoted Aditya Karikala had been towards me! He used to love me and shower me with hundreds-fold more affection than what he has for his own mother! Even he suspects me now. Thirumalai, it would have been good if I too had left this blessed earth in the company of my dear lord. He did not take me with him! He left me behind to fulfil so many tasks! How unfortunate I am!"

"Dear Lady, your husband was a saint who knew the past and the future. In this modern age he ruled from the Chozla throne like King Janaka of the myth. That you have remained behind is the good fortune of this empire. It has now become your responsibility to ensure that this Chozla nation which has been growing in strength for the past hundred years is not destroyed by a quarrel among brothers. Only you can do that."

"I don't know. When my own son fails to obey me, how can I persuade others? But that apart, you talked about spies. Who could have sent spies to my court? Do you think Aditya has spies in my palace? Why does he suddenly distrust me?" asked that pious lady.

"I heard it with my own ears, My Lady. If not, I would never have believed that the Prince was suspicious of you."

"What did you hear Thirumalai? What did you hear with your own ears?"

"I sat behind one of the sculptures on the sea shore in Mamallai and heard them talking."

"Them means who?"

"First was Prince Aditya Karikala; second was Malayaman of Thirukovalur and last was Pallava Parthiban. Those three were talking. I was hidden in the darkened shore temple and listening. Malayaman and Parthiban were quite enraged. They claimed that your son had conspired with both the Lords of Pazluvoor and imprisoned the Emperor in Tanjore. Malayaman felt that you must be involved in that conspiracy. The others concurred. Parthiban suggested that they should invade and take Tanjore by force, free the Emperor and take him to Kanchi. The other two agreed with this also. But the Prince felt that he must make one more attempt to bring the Emperor to Kanchi without any conflict. Upon that, they decided to write a letter and send a messenger to the Emperor. I also found out who that messenger was. He is not an ordinary fellow. That messenger is a very capable, courageous and intelligent man. Besides being a messenger he can also be a spy. I tried talking to him. If I tried to jump across the stream, he leaped across the river! Without disclosing anything he tried to pry secrets from me. Even the Astrologer of Kudanthai tried his tricks on him. Nothing worked. After that, I heard that he had somehow entered Tanjore and delivered the letter to the Emperor."

"Then what happened? What was the Emperor's reply?"

"Apparently he had promised to write a reply the next day. However, by then, the Commander of Tanjore had some suspicion about the messenger. But, he overcame all his guards and somehow escaped from Tanjore."

"He really must be very capable. Then what did you do? Where did you go from Kanchi?" asked the Elder Pirati with some anxiety.

"I had intended coming back here directly. But I stopped on the way at Veera-narayana-puram to worship at the temple. And when I stopped there, with the grace of the Lord, I was able to uncover a great secret."

"What was that? Another secret?"

"Yes My Lady! I found that there was a big banquet at Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's fort that night. The Elder Lord Pazluvoor has come to that feast. His Young-Queen's palanquin had also come."

"Thirumalai, all this is her doing! All these dangers surrounding this Chozla nation are caused by her. Were you able to meet her and talk to her?"

"No; I could not do so, My Lady, I could not do so. Upon your orders I raised and nourished that snake as my own sister for several years. How I wandered all around the country, teaching her all the holy scriptures! When I think of all that, my heart is filled with rage. After she became the queen of the Elder Lord Pazluvoor, she has refused to even see me."

"What is the use of being saddened by that? That is human nature. We think of one thing and something else happens. Then, what happened at Kadamboor?"

"I went to Kadamboor because I was sure that Nandini was in the palanquin. I intended to meet her somehow or other or at least write her a note, warning her... Braving grave danger, I jumped over the outer wall of Kadamboor Fort. It was then that I came to know that surprising, mysterious great secret."

"Thirumalai! This has become a bad habit with you! You keep arousing one's interest but never tell the news. What is that mysterious secret ..?"

"You must pardon me My Lady. I hesitate to even speak of that secret. The person in that closed palanquin was not Lord Pazluvoor's Young-Queen. All of us who have been thinking that Lord Pazluvoor takes his Young-Queen wherever he goes, in her closed palanquin, all of us are totally mistaken."

"Then who was in that palanquin? Is there no end to that old man's craze for women?" asked the Elder Pirati with impatience and disgust.

"My Lady, there was no woman in that closed palanquin."

"If it was no woman, which man would go around like that? Hiding in a closed palanquin?"

"Forgive me My Lady! The person who came hidden in that closed palanquin was none other than your divine son, Prince Madurandaka."

For a while Lady Sembian Madevi was shocked into silence. Then she muttered to herself, "Oh God! Such a huge punishment for an offense I committed!"

After that Azlvar-adiyan told her the details of the secret meeting of treachery which took place in Kadamboor. Upon hearing those details, there was no limit to the distress felt by the aged Queen.

"Oh Lord! My Son! I tried to raise you as a pious follower of Shiva. Is this the result? Should you be the cause of such dishonor to the Chozla clan? Should you be the cause for such grave calamity for this empire?" she moaned in this fashion for quite a while.

Finally, wiping her tears, she spoke, "Thirumalai, come back and talk to me again before you go on your journey. By then I will consult Kundavai and think of some solution to overcome this danger!"

Azlvar-adiyan spoke hesitantly, "My Lady, it may be better if you do not disclose this information even to Kundavai."

"Why? Do you suspect even her?"

"Why not Thaye? She is the dear sister of Aditya Karikala."

"So what? Thirumalai, I can believe you even if you maintain that the sun rises in the west and sets in the east. But I cannot accept it if you blame Kundavai. Do you know this? On the day she was born, the palace midwife picked her up and brought her to my arms. From that day I have raised her with my own hands. She is more precious to me than any daughter that could have been born to me. She considers me more revered than her own father or even mother and loves me dearly."

"My Lady, let me ask you one thing. Did Kundavai discuss with you about having been to meet the Astrologer of Kudanthai?"

"No; so what?"

"Did she mention that she had seen a youth of the Vaanar clan in the Astrologer's house and that she met him once again on the banks of the Arisil?"

"No. What is all this? What is the meaning of your questions?"

"The Princess seems to be guarding it as a secret that she does not share with you. That's what it is. He was the youth about whom I mentioned earlier; Aditya Karikala's messenger, the spy ..."

"Thirumalai, stop this nonsense. Whatever it may be. If Kundavai did not share a secret with me, there must be some good reason. I would rather give up my very life than suspect her!" spoke the Queen Consort of Gandara Aditya the Devout.

"Pardon me! Don't even think of it. I sincerely hope that your trust is justified. The Younger Pirati had signalled to me saying that she wished to meet me. I will personally tell her that you wish to speak with her." Azlvar-adiyan was ready to take his leave.

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Chapter 45 -- The Spy Who Committed A Crime

About two thousand years ago, a famous Chozla monarch named Karikala Valava built banks all along the River Cauvery. The banks remained in good repair for a long time and kept the flooding river within bounds. Later (about the seventh century AD) the power of Chozla monarchs diminished and their enemies, the Pallavas, Pandiyas, Vaanars and Kalabras became powerful. In those times the river which had no guardian crossed its bounds by breaking its banks. This happened several times. Sometimes when the floods

were unusually heavy, the very course of the river changed. A new course would replace the old river and later the old river could become the new course.

If the river changed direction completely for long periods, the old river bed would become fertile farmland tilled by the farmers. Sometimes the old river became a shallow lake or pool of stagnating water. Some lakes would grow to be rather large with splashing waves during the rainy months.

There was one such creek or lake to the south of the Chozla Palace in Pazlayarai. Chozla monarchs had deepened the old river bed and connected it to the new river by a canal. Because of this, the lake was always filled with fresh, flowing water. The large body of water was in some ways a protection to the palace complex, particularly to the mansions of the Chozla women. None could enter the palace complex from that direction easily. Only the officials closely connected to the palace complex were permitted to enter the lake by boat or otherwise. Beautiful gardens and orchards were planted along the banks of this lake. Womenfolk of the Chozla Maligai wandered without care in these gardens. They would gather in groups to spend their days in pleasure and merrymaking. They would dance and sing like the peacocks and nightingales in the gardens. Sometimes they would swim without care or hold boat races on the lake and compete with each other.

When one king died and the next came to power, the new monarch of the Chozla clan usually built himself a new mansion and went to live in it. The old king's widows and his other children continued to live in the old palace. The Chozla Maligai complex was full of such palaces. In that complex, Kundavai's palace excelled in beauty and dignity next only to the grand palace of Lady Sembiyan Madevi. Was it not the palace in which Sundara Chozla had lived while in that city? After the Emperor had moved to Tanjore, Kundavai became the sole mistress of that exquisite palace.

The garden behind this palace was exceptionally beautiful. Kundavai had filled it with rare flowering shrubs and trees. Her garden had tall, spreading banyan trees with their roots reaching for the earth. Lofty teak-wood trees were covered with fragrant creepers. Ashoka-cypress and mango mingled with tiny flowering bushes. In the midst of pleasing groves were beautifully carved marble gazebos, and creeper laden arbors. Kundavai and her friends spent most of their evenings in the garden. They would gather together teasing each other; telling stories, recounting tidbits of news. They would sing and dance and show off their learning to one another. Sometimes they would break away in small groups sharing secrets with each other. For some time recently, Kundavai and Vanathi were wont to go away by themselves.

That evening, Kundavai and Vanathi were enjoying themselves in the long swings hanging from the branches of the banyan tree. They could hear the pleasing sounds of birdsong mingled with the chatter and laughter of women. But Kundavai and Vanathi were not laughing. They were not even smiling; in fact they did not particularly seem to like the mirth of their friends. They could hear one of the girls singing from the gazebo. She was singing about Lord Krishna because it was the day of Krishna's birth.

The maid hears the melody of the divine flute in the moonlight. The maid who is in love with Krishna, is tortured by the sweet music. She talks to her pet parrot about her yearning. The parrot consoles her.

Maid: Who is that wastrel who plays the flute in this moonlight that tortures me? What pleasure does he have in tormenting me, a maid parted from her lord?

Parrot: The lord plays a sweet melody, pleasing all earth and sky. How can it torment you dear maid? Never have I heard such a thing!

Maid: Darling bird, I adore you; I will dress you in garlands of fragrant flowers. Have you come to console me in this hour when my soul is in agony?

Parrot: O Beauty, I have come to tell you of dear Kannan who suffers for love of you, He says, from the day he parted from you, even fresh butter tastes bitter!

Kundavai who had been listening to the song now spoke up. "Fantastic Kannan -- who has come to this Tamil country to be revered by all! If he spends all his time in eating butter and playing the flute to enchant the milkmaids, what about all other things?" she said.

She then looked at Vanathi who had not replied and asked, "What my dear? Have you also become enchanted with Krishna's beguiling flute?"

"Akka, what did you say?" asked Vanathi.

"What did I say! Where has your mind gone?"

"Nowhere. It's right here, with you."

"You thief! Why do you lie? Your heart and mind are not here at all! Shall I say where they have gone?"

"Tell me if you know." Vanathi smiled.

"I know very well. It has gone to the battlefield in Lanka. Your mind is conniving more tricks to enchant that blameless youth, my brother who is there!"

"One half of what you say is true, Akka. My heart and mind often wander to Lanka. But I don't think of ways to enchant him. All I can think of is how he must be suffering in the battlefield. Perhaps he is wounded, perhaps he has to face other hardships. Where does he sleep? What does he eat? Who dresses his wounds? When he is suffering in such ways, here I am -- comfortably enjoying the luxuries of this palace, eating six-course meals and sleeping on silk beds! The very thought distresses me. If only I had wings, I would fly away this very minute ..."

"Fly away! What would you do there in Lanka? More hinderance to him?"

"Never. Like Subadra for Arjuna and Bhama for Krishna, I shall be his chariot driver. I will bear all the arrows aimed at him on my own chest and ..."

"You think he will keep quiet, watching you receive those arrows?"

"If he does not care for that, I will wait for him in the camp. When he returns from the front, I shall clean and anoint his wounds. I shall spread a soft bed for him to lie upon. I shall cook a tasty meal and wait for him. I shall play a melody on the veena to soothe him."

"Impossible! Such things can never happen. Vanathi, the Chozla men don't take their women to the battlefield."

"Why Akka?"

"They are not concerned about wounds. They are more afraid of women."

"Why? What can women do to them?"

"They cannot do anything to them. But if they take beautiful women like you to the battlefield, the enemy kings might be mesmerized into surrender. Then our men cannot display their bravery. Chozla men don't wish to become famous for having conquered with women."

"Is that possible? Can enemy men be so foolish? To be charmed by beautiful women?"

"Why not? Dear Vanathi! Do you remember, we saw a youth in the Astrologer's house and later on the river bank?"

"Yes; what about him?"

"Do you remember how he stood spellbound when he saw all of us?"

"I remember that too. But, you are wrong in saying `All of us'. He stood spellbound looking only at you. Akka, in fact he did not even see any of us standing nearby!"

"Vanathi! What lies you tell! Are you teasing me?" asked Kundavai.

"No, No! I'll ask you something. Will you answer truthfully?"

"Ask and see."

"Why did you suddenly remember that youth now?"

"You have become a real chatterbox. What is wrong in remembering him?"

"Who said it is wrong? No one said it is wrong. It's natural. Even I have been concerned. I wonder what happened to him afterwards?"

"Why should you be concerned about what happens to him?"

"Why not? If one had met someone and if one remembered that someone often, it's natural that one should wish to find out more about that someone!"

"Excellent nature! My dear, we should not let our mind wander like that. We should control our senses.... Oh! listen. What is that sound Vanathi? It sounds like the drummers proclaiming something. Come let us listen."

Yes; in the distance they could hear the rumbling sounds of the proclaimer's drums. The drumbeats were followed by a loud voice announcing something. They hurried towards the mansion, ears sharpened to catch the proclamation.

An announcer was declaring in a loud voice:

"An enemy spy entered Tanjore Fort by showing a false signet ring. He entered the fort and escaped after spying inside the palace. He escaped after fatally wounding two men. He is young and well built. Capable and cunning like a magician. His name is Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan. Anyone who protects him or gives him asylum will be subject to the death sentence. A thousand gold coins is the reward for anyone who finds him. This is by order of the Commander of Tanjore, Lord Kalanthaka the Younger Lord Pazluvoor."

After the announcement, the drums rolled like thunder, once again. For some reason, Kundavai shivered.

A maid came up to them and said, "Devi, a gentleman of the Vaishnava faith has come to see you. He says his name is Thirumalai Appan Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. He says it is urgent."

"I'll see him," said Kundavai as she walked quickly into the palace.

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Chapter 46 -- The People Murmur

Azlvar-adiyan left the presence of the Elder Queen of the Chozla clan and walked towards the mansion of the Younger Pirati. On his way, the sights he saw on the streets of Pazlayarai gave him much joy.

These folks are celebrating the festival of Krishna's birth with such enthusiasm! There is no doubt now that the Vaishnava faith will become well established to thrive in this Chozla nation. Oh yes! There are several reasons for the Saiva faith to prosper; Chozla monarchs have been building newer and bigger Shiva Temples for the past hundred years. The Thevaram psalms sung by those three saintly poets are made popular by being sung in those temples. Chariot festivals and other carnivals are being held with much pomp in those temples. In spite of all this there is no lack of respect or faith in Thirumal. The ninth incarnation of Vishnu has captivated the hearts of the common folk, for the deeds performed by the Lord in North Madura, Brindavan and Gokula have enchanted these men and women. Good Lord! Look at the number of music groups and bards! How many troupes of street players! What costumes and masquerades! They seem to be many more of them than what I saw a few hours ago!

The festivities and crowds in the streets around the temple had indeed increased. More and more groups of players from the villages surrounding Pazlayarai kept coming in. In one such group of performers there were several actors who were dressed to play the parts of Vasudeva, Devaki, Kamsa, Balarama and Krishna. The dialogue, music and dance of these players seemed to be much more lively than any other company. Therefore, a large crowd had gathered around them to watch their antics. Thirumalai Nambi also lingered to watch them. They were acting the scene of Krishna challenging the Demon Kamsa to a duel.

Krishna called out to Kamsa, "Come fight with me!" Kamsa replied to the challenge in a loud thundering voice, "Hey you Krishna! All your tricks will not hold water against me! Here I come to kill you right now! I am going to kill your brother Balarama and your father Vasudeva. And I am also going to kill that fellow standing over there -- the fellow who has covered his body with namam marks of sandal paste!" When the actor uttered these words, all the crowd turned to look at Azlvar-adiyan and laugh. Some moved closer and began to heckle and clap their hands. Thirumalai became very angry. He considered using the wooden staff and teaching them all a lesson! He particularly wanted to pound the head of the actor playing the part of Kamsa. But, there would be no use in hitting Kamsa's head, because the actor had hid his own head behind a huge wooden mask carved grotesquely with big mustaches and sharp teeth. Azlvar-adiyan decided that it would not be profitable to use his staff in the midst of such a large crowd and tried to slip away. But the voice of Kamsa called out, "Hey you fat fellow! Are you running away from me in fright?" The crowd burst into cheering laughter. Azlvar-adiyan felt that he had

heard that voice -- the voice of the actor playing Kamsa -- somewhere before. Trying to remember who it was or where he had heard that voice, he walked on slowly.

There seemed to be a sudden change in the joyous mood of the people. As he walked down the street he sensed that the festive mood was becoming more and more subdued. Why the sudden change? Why are the crowds dispersing so quickly? Drumbeats and the sounds of dancing seem to have stopped! The people seem to be collecting in small groups at street corners, whispering to each other ... What are they murmuring about? Why do they walk away so quickly? Why are the house doors being banged shut? Azlvar-adiyan was intrigued. There was cause for the change -- the drummers's proclamation about the spy -- the same announcement which had made Kundavai Pirati shiver, had frightened the people. The drummed proclamation had affected the festive crowd greatly and spoilt their mood. Those who walked alone were peered at suspiciously. Unknown faces were subject to hesitant scrutiny. Some even looked at Azlvar-adiyan with doubt as they walked on quickly.

Azlvar-adiyan soon realized the cause for the disquiet and murmuring among the people. The people talked about the unjust rule of the Lords of Pazluvoor. It was but natural that the citizens of Pazlayarai and the country folk from surrounding villages disliked the Lords of Pazluvoor. Those Lords had taken away their beloved Emperor to Tanjore. And since that day, the greatness of Pazlayarai had started to dwindle.

If only the Emperor had been here in this city, on this festival of Krishna Jayanthi, how much more colorful it would have been! All the groups of street players would have finally met in the square in front of the palace after performing in various neighborhoods. The Emperor would have honored and awarded gifts to the best among the actors, dancers, singers and players. It would seem as if the whole nation had converged into Pazlayarai. Trade and business in the market place would have been hundredfold! And in the night how fantastic would be the display of fireworks as the carnival procession of the Lord emerged from the Vinnagara! How fantastic would be the dancing and singing and the competitions in martial arts! All this was no more because of those fellows of Pazluvoor!

The people of Pazlayarai were disgruntled for another reason also. Their darling Prince, beloved Arulmozli Varma has crossed the sea to battle in the island of Lanka. Ten thousand men from the four army encampments of Pazlayarai had followed him to the war. They were fighting in the wild forests and mountains of Lanka to establish the honor and bravery of the Tamils. Did not the Lord of Kodumbalur lead that campaign earlier and depart to the heavens meant for the gallant by receiving the deathly spear upon his chest in a battle? And did not all the men who followed him fight bravely till the very end, till death claimed them too? Prince Arulmozli was in Lanka to avenge the souls of those dead soldiers and to establish the victorious tiger-flag of the Chozlas in that island kingdom. Apparently these insufferable Lords of Pazluvoor are refusing to send supplies of food and arms to those brave men fighting for a just cause! What injustice is this? How can this be tolerated? Have they not filled the granary in Tanjore to overflow with grain? What is all that for? What is the point of collecting all that wealth for hundreds of years in the treasury at Tanjore? Why is that wealth not used for our brave men now? What are these Pazluvoor fellows going to do with all that wealth and grain? Are they going to carry it with them to the realms of Lord Yama of Death when they die?...

Azlvar-adiyan had known about such disquiet among the people for some time. He felt that it was natural that the people of Pazlayarai were more disgruntled than others. The womenfolk and families of the ten thousand men who had gone to Lanka continued to live in Pazlayarai and it was natural that they should be concerned about the lack of payment and supplies for their men. In such a situation, when the drummers proclaimed under the orders of the Lords of Pazluvoor about a spy amidst them, they did not like it. The proclamation became a focal point for them to express their anger against the men of Pazluvoor.

Spy! They proclaim about a spy! From which country will a spy come into our midst? Doesn't the tiger-flag fly from Cape Comorin to the North Pennar? Which foreign king is so powerful to send a spy into the Chozla heartland? If these fellows from Pazluvoor dislike someone they will accuse him to be a spy and put an end to his story! Or they may throw him into the dungeons of Tanjore! But ... why should we bother? They have the power to act with justice or injustice. But, if they accuse a fellow to be a spy, they need not hold a fair trial by calling a panchayat (court of community elders).

Azlvar-adiyan heard all these murmurings and understood the unrest. He wondered what it would all lead to as he neared the mansion of Kundavai.

The Younger Pirati always had a fondness to chat with Azlvar-adiyan about the affairs of the world. He wandered throughout the country and brought back news from various places. The Princess was always eager for such news. Moreover, she liked to listen to him as he sang the devotional songs composed by Azlvar saints. She welcomed him eagerly whenever Thirumalai Nambi sought her presence and would enquire pleasantly about his welfare. But today, Azlvar-adiyan noticed a change in the countenance and words of the Princess. Her face indicated that her mind was occupied somewhere else with something else; an unnatural agitation in her words. A certain uncertainty in her manner.

"Thirumalai! What is new? Why have you come?" asked Kundavai.

"There is nothing particularly new My Lady! I thought that you wished to talk to me as usual about the happenings in the country and came here. Forgive me if I came at a wrong time. I shall take my leave."

"No! No! Wait for a while ... I, it was I who summoned you ..."

"My Lady! I almost forgot ... I was with the Elder Pirati just now. She wishes to convey some important news to you and wants you to come and see her."

"Fine; I too have been meaning to see her. Where had you been on this journey? Tell me all!"

"I had travelled from Cape Comorin in the south to Venkadam in the north."

"What do the people speak about in all the places you visited?"

"They speak of the greatness of the Chozla monarchs with pride. They feel that in a short time the empire will spread to reach the banks of the Ganga and the foothills of the Himalayas in the north."

"Then ..."

"They also praise the bravery of the Lords of Pazluvoor and their men. They think that the Chozla Empire has attained such glory mainly due to the courage and ability of the Lords of Pazluvoor"

"Enough. What else do they say?"

"They speak fondly about both your brothers. And particularly, I cannot describe adequately, the fondness that people have for your younger brother Prince Arulmozli."

"There is nothing surprising or new in that. What else do they say?"

"They wonder why the great Chozla Monarch's divine daughter is not yet married. In fact some men even asked me..."

"What was your reply?"

"I said that a Prince qualified to marry our beloved Younger Pirati has not yet appeared on this earth."

"Wonderful! Such a fellow must be born after now! By the time he is born and attains manhood I will become an elderly old woman. Forget my affairs Thirumalai, what other talk did you hear? Is there nothing else?"

"Why not? Everybody is quite surprised about the Young Prince Madurandaka suddenly entering into the course of matrimony after he had been declaring that he would always follow the path of Saiva asceticism."

"How is your darling sister who used to declare that she would become the best among the devout -- like Saint Andal, ... how is she?"

"What does she lack, My Lady? She rules like an empress in the mansions of the Elder Lord Pazluvoor."

"Only in the mansions of Lord Pazluvoor? I hear that she is the all powerful force even behind the Chozla Empire ...!"

"Some even say that, My Lady! But why talk of her on this festive day? I remembered something when you mentioned Saint Andal. I had been to the town of Sri Villiputhoor and learned some of the songs composed by Vishnu-chittar. Listen to this song about the birth of Lord Krishna,

Gokulam full of beautiful houses sparkles on this day of Kannan's birth;

Shining oil lamps and white lime powders decorate the dark streets.

They run and jump with joy; they search and ask where is our Lord?

Aayarpadi is filled with joyous singers and dancers to gleeful drumbeats.

Today even our Pazlayarai is full of festivity like Aayarpadi of Gokulam."

"It is quite festive, I agree. But some time ago I heard a different kind of drum. What was that about Thirumalai?" asked Kundavai.

Azlvar-adiyan had been waiting for some such question. "Apparently it is about some spy! A spy who escaped! They have announced a reward for anyone who captures him. What would I know about such things My Lady?"

"Do you know nothing? Have you no suspicions about who it might be?" asked Kundavai.

"I have a doubt in my mind, but it is dangerous to express such doubts. When I walked down the streets of this city, people looked at even me with suspicion. Somebody might even arrest me and throw me into the dungeon."

"That somebody must be exceptional to be able to capture you. Tell me if you think you can express your doubts freely to me. I hope that you do not think that I will accuse you!"

"Oh Lord! No! Nothing like that! I met a brave young man at Veera-narayana-puram. He said that he was going to Tanjore but did not reveal his purpose. In fact he questioned me about many things..."

Kundavai interrupted with some haste, "Describe him!"

"He seemed nobly born; attractive of face. Seemed brave and enthusiastic."

"What did he ask you?"

"He asked me about the Emperor's health. He asked about who was likely to ascend the throne next. He even asked about the Prince who is in Lanka. Later I heard that he had questioned the Astrologer of Kudanthai similarly," said Azlvar-adiyan as he peered at her.

"Oh! Had he been to the Astrologer's house?"

"I remember now, apparently he created a big commotion and entered the house even while you were at the Astrologer's house! Fortunately he had not recognized you."

"My guess is confirmed!"

"What did you guess, My Lady?"

"I felt that the rough youth might soon get into some trouble."

"Yes, you are correct. I suspect that young man to be the spy. The Lords of Pazluvoor have proclaimed a reward for his capture."

"Thirumalai! Will you do me one favor?" asked Kundavai.

"Order me, My Lady!"

"If you happen to see that youth anywhere ..."

"Shall I arrest him and claim the reward?"

"No! No! Bring him here to me. I have something important to discuss with him!"

Azlvar-adiyan looked at her for a minute as if he was surprised. He then bowed his head and said, "There will be no need for that My Lady! I will not have to go in search of him. He will seek you and come to you all by himself." With those mysterious words Azlvar-adiyan took his leave.

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Chapter 47 -- Mr. Esanya Bhattar of Pazlayarai

After visiting the Princess, Azlvar-adiyan went towards the house of his elder brother Mr Esanya Bhattar. The house was very near the Northwest Shiva Temple, about half-a-league from the Chozla Maligai complex. If one walked towards the Shiva Temple from the

palace complex, one could appreciate the extensiveness and greatness of Pazlayarai to some extent.

Azlvar-adiyan recognized that the festive celebrations had become somewhat quiet. In the residential neighborhood, several groups of women had gathered in street corners talking angrily about something. These were the women who had adorned the shoulders of their beloved brothers and husbands with garlands of vanji flowers and enthusiastically sent them to the battlefields of Lanka. Each and every household in that street could claim to have at least one brave warrior who was a veteran of the several Chozla wars. Thirumalai Nambi Azlvar-adiyan now noticed the women from such households mumbling in a disgruntled fashion. He worried about the consequences of such discontent.

By the time he neared the Shiva Temple, darkness had descended completely. It was one of the temples celebrated in the song of songs composed by Saint Appar. During the times of the Saint, followers of the Jain faith had raised large brick edifices around the temple. The brick constructions comprised of several cave-like chambers in which Jain monks sat in meditation and prayer. These artificial caves were known as muzlai's. Even today, as if to remind us of that past heritage there exists a small village called Muzlai-oor near modern Tanjore.

When Saint Appar came to that Shiva Temple to worship the Lord, he found the place completely hidden by these cave complexes of the Jains. Appar lamented the sorry situation and appealed to the chieftain who ruled the province at that time. The chieftain arranged to demolish a part of the brick ramparts and make a path into the Shiva Temple. Saint Appar sang about that incident with ecstasy. Later Chozla monarchs renovated and enlarged the temple with granite. But the Jain caves remained like a fortress wall surrounding the temple. There was only one narrow entrance marked by a tower to enter the temple complex. No other way existed.

Mr. Esanya Bhattar's house was situated inside this brick fortress outside one corner of the Shiva Temple. The quickest way to reach his house was by way of the entrance between the Jain caves though there was a more roundabout access from the other end of the town. Thirumalai entered the temple through the short-cut. He noticed some devotees standing about in the inner corridors and recognized some of them as the men who had been costumed like Krishna and Balarama in the street-pantomime. Before he could wonder about their presence in that place, he noticed his elder brother walking hurriedly out of the inner sanctum. Mr. Bhattar quickly took hold of Azlvar-adiyan's hand and dragged him out of the temple.

"Anna! what is this?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"Listen to this Thirumalai! Henceforth let our relationship exist only outside the temple. You are an atheist; a disbeliever who ridicules Lord Shiva; Don't enter this holy temple anymore! Do you understand? I have been patient too long. I could not tolerate your behavior in the presence of the Elder Pirati today. If you want, feel free to come home and fill your large stomach! But do not enter the premises of this temple! If you come here I cannot be responsible for the consequences!"

With these words Mr. Bhattar pushed Azlvar-adiyan outside and pulled the entrance door shut. He did not spare even a moment to listen to Thirumalai who was trying to say

something ... He firmly drew the bolts and locked the entrance door and went back into the temple.

"Aha! Is that the matter!" muttered Azlvar-adiyan as he dusted himself off. He stood about for a while and then walked around the temple two or three times. He went around the Jain caves, anti-clockwise, making sure that his perambulations would not be misconstrued as those of a worshipper. (The devout offered prayers at temples by walking around the sanctum in a clockwise fashion.)

He noticed that all the doors to the Jain caves were tightly shut. Finally he entered the portals of his brother's house. His brother's wife was quite fond of her jovial bother-in-law. He chatted with her even more merrily than usual and satisfied his hunger with extra helpings of the food from the Shiva Temple before coming to lie down in the front porch. He remembered something he had seen along the banks of the River Kudam-urutti the previous evening.

Azlvar-adiyan had hidden himself hurriedly in a copse of bamboo canes by the roadside when he had heard the hoofbeat of quick horses along the road. The first horse was galloping as if it was out of control. The horse appeared dripping wet; was it sweat or had it crossed a river? This was not clear. A youth was seated on that horse; in fact he was tied with ropes binding him to his steed. The youth's face was full of fear mingled with a certain determination. Four to five horses followed a little behind. Men bearing lances and other weapons rode those horses. They were soon nearing the first horse. Soon they would catch up. A soldier lifted up his lance and took aim; he was about to throw it ... another man stopped him. The frightened youth now passed close to the bamboo canes. A thorny branch caught in his hair. The cane tugged him back as the horse tried to drag him forward. The soldiers caught up with him.

The men looked at the youth with surprise, shock and anger. They questioned him harshly and he answered with hesitation. Nothing was clear. "Where is he?" "Where is he?" -- the question was repeated again and again. The youth answered tearfully again and again "He fell into the river." "He drowned in the water." The men went down the riverside taking the youth with them.

At that time Azlvar-adiyan had not understood the meaning or significance of the incident. Something was appearing to make sense now. Meanwhile he remembered the group of street players. He particularly recalled the voice of the man who had mimed Kamsa, hiding his face behind the large wooden mask. He felt that he could recognize the voice of the man who had played the part of Kamsa. Things were beginning to make sense.

Esanya Bhattar had returned home after the midnight worship. He saw Azlvar-adiyan sleeping on the thinnai, (raised front porch.) "Thirumalai! Thirumalai!" He called angrily.

Thirumalai pretended to be fast asleep. Bhattar closed the front door noisily and went into the house. Thirumalai heard him loudly exchanging words with his wife. He realized that the quarrel was about himself. In the morning Mr Bhattar came up to Thirumalai and asked, "When are you about to embark upon your wanderings again?"

"I shall leave again after your anger is gone, Anna!"

"Don't call me Anna anymore! I am no longer your elder brother; neither are you my younger brother; you are an agnostic; a disbeliever who criticizes the Lord; a rogue; a knave."

Bhattar's wife spoke up on Thirumalai's behalf, "Why do you curse him like this? What is it that he said newly -- that which he has not uttered before now? It is you who have become a fanatic Saiva!"

"You know nothing! Do you know what he said in front of the Elder Pirati? `Why does Shiva who wanders the burning grounds clad in ashes need a temple?' That is what he asked. It was like molten lead in my ears! I Believe the Elder Pirati could not sleep a wink last night!"

"He will not say such things anymore. I shall advice him and correct him. He would listen if you talked calmly to him."

"Enough of this calmness and quietness! Let him go to Rameshwaram immediately. Let him worship at the Shiva shrine where Lord Rama prayed to overcome His sins; that is his penance. Till he does this I shall not even look upon his face."

Azlvar-adiyan's lips trembled with agitation to reply in kind. But he held his silence, thinking that impatience would only ruin the situation.

Bhattar's wife intervened once again, "Why not? If we tell him to go to Rameshwaram, he will surely do so. Perhaps we should also go along with him. Even after all these years we have no children. I wonder what sins we may have committed in our previous births.... Thirumalai, shall we all go to Rameshwaram?"

(Some devout Hindus believe that a visit to Rameshwaram will reward childless couples with children.)

Mr. Esanya Bhattar looked at them both angrily and left the house. He returned after some hours and addressed his younger brother calmly.

"Thambi! The elders have said wisely that anger is a wretched sin! I gave room to anger unnecessarily. I hope you are not too upset?"

"Oh! No!" said Azlvar-adiyan.

"Well then, why don't you stay here itself for some time? I wish to know your opinion on several important matters. I have to talk to you; hope you can stay for a while here itself?"

"I shall not go anywhere Anna! I have no intention of parting from you so soon!"

Mr. Bhattar went away once again. Azlvar-adiyan's lips trembled, "Ah! Is that so!" Soon he too left the house quickly without even telling his sister-in-law. He went round and round the brick cave ramparts several times. If he heard any unusual noise he quickly hid himself and watched. He was not disappointed. Soon one of the doors to the Jain caves opened silently. Mr. Esanya Bhattar came out first after looking in all directions! Behind him came another man. Who was he? The face was not clear. His build resembled that of the actor who played Kamsa's part. Who is he? I shall not rest till I find out! All that anger and fury was because of this; all that pretence and deceit was for this man?

The two men who emerged from the cave went first; Azlvar-adiyan followed silently and secretly. Soon they reached the banks of the lake. It was that very same lake which lapped on the garden banks of the Chozla Maligai. But they were on a wharf quite far from the Palace Complex. Azlvar-adiyan hid himself in a grove of thick trees on the bank. He thrust his head between the branches and watched.

A boat danced softly on the gentle waves; it seemed like a boat from the palace. The boatman stood on the shore. Upon seeing Mr Bhattar and the man following him, the boatman dragged the boat ashore. They climbed into the craft and it began to gently float downstream. As the boatman began rowing vigorously, the fellow who had come with Mr. Bhattar turned to look back.

Azlvar-adiyan could see his face clearly. Nothing surprised him. It was the same fellow he had expected. The same youth whom he had encountered in Veera-narayana-puram and on the banks of the River Kollidam. There was no doubt that he was the same fellow who had acted the part of Kamsa. Where are they going in the palace boat? I must find out! That is, I must confirm my suspicions.

In the main street of the Chozla Maligai complex the very last mansion was locked shut. It was the dwelling of the Prime Minister, the Honorable Anirudda Brahma-raya. The Prime Minister was now in Madurai to straighten the administration of the newly conquered Pandiya Territories. His family lived in Tanjore. Therefore his mansion in Pazlayarai was locked shut.

Azlvar-adiyan quickly made his way to this mansion. Upon seeing him, the watchmen respectfully welcomed him. He ordered them to open the main door and let him in. And following his orders they locked the door shut once again after he had entered. Thirumalai walked through the three courtyards and reached the gardens at the back. A foot-trail cut a path through the trees and creepers along the lake shore. Azlvar-adiyan followed the path and soon reached Kundavai's garden. He hid himself in a gazebo and waited and watched. His troubles did not go unrewarded. A scene that could have been dramatized by the great romantic poets such as Kalidasa, took place there.

The boat soon came to the bank. Mr. Esanya Bhattar and Vandiya Devan came ashore. They began climbing the steps leading up from the wharf.

Kundavai was seated on a marble garden seat atop the steps. When the two men had reached the top, the Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi stood up.

It was only then that Vandiya Devan looked up to gaze into the Lady's face. And he stood looking. A tendril of a flowering creeper stretched its gentle arm between the two of them, barring the path. A beautiful butterfly -- a multicolored butterfly flew in to sit on a flower of that creeper. Kundavai had slightly lowered her face to look at that butterfly. Vandiya Devan kept looking at her without blinking an eyelid.

The soft waves on the lake became quieter. Birds stopped singing. The whole universe stood still! Several eons passed.

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Chapter 48 -- Swirling Pools And Flashing Eyes

Early Man lived in a valley. The mountain cave protected him from rain and wind. The forest gave him food. Beasts of the wild feared him. He lived freely without care or concern just like the birds in the sky. Yet, in his heart of hearts he had a yearning; an unexplainable longing was his constant companion. Some powerful force seemed to be drawing him. His heart and soul desired some unique entity -- some unseen, unexperienced pleasure. He fantasized about it in the day and dreamt of it in the night. "When will I see that unique thing created just for me? Where will I meet the fantastic force that attracts me thus?"

At the same time God created Early Woman. She lived in another valley on the other side of the mountain. She had food to satisfy hunger, spring waters to quench her thirst and mountain caves to protect her. She lacked nothing, but her heart burned with an inner flame of desire. Some powerful force was enticing her. Where was the force that lured her, where was it pulling her -- nothing was clear. A huge mountain rose high between Early Man and Early Woman, an obstacle preventing them from meeting each other.

In the hot months, by course of nature there arose a large forest fire that grew rapidly encompassing the forest all around the mountain. Man and Woman realized the danger of going into the blazing forest. They began climbing the steep mountain slopes. At the peak they saw each other. They gazed at each other without blinking an eyelid. The forest fire was forgotten. Hunger and thirst was forgotten. They forgot why they had climbed the mountain. Intuition said that they had lived all their lives only for that meeting. They realized that this was the powerful force that nagged them all their lives. What each lacked could be fulfilled by the other. They were sure that there was no power in creation that could separate them, now that they were together.

God the Creator watched this remarkable meeting and was happy that his task of creation was progressing so well.

At that moment in time, our Vandiya Devan and Kundavai were like this Early Man and Early Woman. Their intuition declared that the very purpose of their birth and life on this earth was for this moment, this meeting! But unlike Early Man and Early Woman they were civilized people living in a civilized world. They could not forget the differences in their station. They did not let their feelings take total control. For one moment they would look at each other gazing into each others eyes, in the next instant they would look away at the flower, the tree, the butterfly or the lake.

Only after Mr. Bhattar cleared his throat did they remember that they were meeting on those steps to talk about some important matters.

"Is it true that you told Mr. Esanya Bhattar that you wished to meet me in privacy?" asked Kundavai in an abrupt voice.

The stern, masterful tone of her voice steadied Vandiya Devan.

"I can answer your question only if I know in whose presence I am in. I suspect that Mr. Bhattar has brought me to the wrong place."

"I too have such a suspicion. Whom did you wish to meet?"

"The light of the Chozla Dynasty, Emperor Sundara Chozla's darling daughter, beloved younger sister of Prince Aditya Karikala, the cherished elder sister of Prince Arulmozli, the Princess Kundavai, the Younger Pirati... I wished to meet her... I asked Mr. Bhattar ..."

"It is me who bears all those honors and responsibilities," said Kundavai with a smile.

"Then you cannot be the Lady whom I met at the Astrologer's house in Kudanthai and on the banks of River Arisil, can it be?" said Vandiya Devan.

"Yes, yes! It is I who behaved in such a discourteous fashion with you in those two places. You would not have expected to meet that uncivilized woman once again so soon."

"My Lady! It is incorrect to say that we are meeting once again!"

"Why?"

"Only if we had parted can we say that we are meeting again ... You have not left my thoughts even for one moment..."

"I did not expect the people of Thondai to be such experts in conversation."

"Will you reserve all expertise only for Chozla men? Will you not let any other nation claim any greatness?"

"Yes; I have such a fault in me. Why? Do you not like our Chozla lands?"

"Like it? Why, I like it very well. But there are two great dangers in this Chozla land. When I consider them I am filled with fear!"

"Yes the lances and swords of Chozla men are very dangerous weapons. Foreigners should enter our borders with caution. Particularly fellows who come in to spy upon us ..."

"Princess! I am not referring to those two dangers. I too have a sword and a spear. I am an expert in their use ..."

"Oh yes! I have seen your dexterity with a spear on the banks of the Arisil the other day! How swiftly your spear did pierce a dead crocodile's back! In one throw it pulled all the stuffing out."

"My Lady! I did not know that Chozla womenfolk were brave young women who trembled with fear at the sight of a dead crocodile. Neither did I know that Chozla men were fearless warriors who attacked dead reptiles. I thought it was alive and threw my spear. It was not my fault; neither was my spear at fault."

"It was the fault of that foolish crocodile! It died without waiting for brave Mr. Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan of the noble Vaanar family to arrive with his lance and spear. It deserves that disgrace. What are the two dangers that you fear?"

"The swirling whirlpools in the fresh floods of the Chozla territory are dangerous; one should never trust those waters. They made me strain and struggle."

"How did you get caught in the whirlpool? You seem to be a brave man who would never step into water!"

"Having caught the vampire how can I refuse to climb a moringa tree? Because I entered these Chozla lands, I had to drown in floods and get caught in whirlpools. It happened

because of a foolish youth who came with me as a guide. Listen to this My Lady! That youngster refused to utter one small lie. It was the consequence of his behavior."

"You are talking riddles. It would be better if you explained clearly."

"I shall do so. I came as a messenger carrying letters from your dear brother; but, the Commander of Tanjore, the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor accused me of being a spy and sent his men to capture me. I did not like being arrested before my assigned task was completed. Therefore, I requested the youth who was my host in Tanjore to be my guide and left the place."

"In whose house did you stay in Tanjore?"

"I stayed in the house of a flower seller outside the fort. The woman was a dumb-mute.... "

"Oh! Her name?"

"I do not know her name. But I know her son's name. He is Sendan Amudan."

"Yes! What I surmised is correct. Please go on."

"I placed him also on my horse and rode towards this Pazlayarai. By then some of Lord Pazluvoor's men were nearing us. I did not want to be caught before I met you. When we reached the banks of the Kudam-urutti, I told the boy `Thambi, I am going to get down here. You stay on the horse. They will think that you are me and follow you. If they catch up with you they will be disappointed. If they question you about me say that I drowned in the river.' That youngster seems to have descended from King Hari-chandra who never told a lie. `When you did not drown how can I tell a lie?' he said. Because the youth did not want to tell a lie, I had to jump into the floods and pretend to drown after binding him to my horse. Oh dear God! What swirling whirlpools in the rapids of these Chozla rivers, that too so close to the bank! Caught in those swirls I suffered a lot! Somehow I grabbed a tree root and pulled myself ashore and saved my life. My Lady! Do you know what I recalled when I was being tossed about in those swirling whirlpools and losing my mind?"

"How will I know? Perhaps you thought of Gajendra's deliverance (Lord Vishnu saving the Elephant from a Crocodile)."

"No! No! In those swirls of water I saw some beautiful fish caught helplessly, just like me, being tossed here and there. Those darting fish reminded me of the flashing eyes of Chozla women.... A fellow caught in the whirlpool can somehow or other escape; but a fellow enmeshed in the flashing eyes of Chozla women has no escape. That is what I thought."

"Some men think it is fashionable to find fault with women in this manner... It is common for men to blame everything on women for the mistakes they make"

"I too followed that tradition. Is anything wrong?" asked Vandiya Devan.

The melodious notes of a flute floated down from the palace. The tinkle of ankle bells and booming resonance of hand-drums mingled in the air. The soft voices of young maidens floated down to them. They were singing the milkmaid's song from the romance Silappadikaram.

When that enchanter who gathers fruit to feed his calves comes into town dear friend,
Can we listen to the melody of a reed-flute playing on his rosy lips?

When that cowherd who lived in the gardens as a baby comes home with the cattle dear friend,

Can we hear the ballads on his beguiling flute?

Kundavai and Vandiya Devan were engrossed in the melody as they stood listening till the song was over. Drums sounded again indicating that the dancing was about to begin.

"Those sounds from the palace ... seems to be the gypsy-dance. I saw a kuravai-koothu at Kadamboor; it was quite unusual!" said Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

"Yes. My friends are practicing the dance. They will soon come looking for me. What is your business with me?" asked Kundavai.

"This is my business: here is the letter from your brother. I bring it to you after escaping several dangers -- overcoming swirling pools and flashing eyes I have brought it to you," said Vandiya Devan as he gave her the letter.

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Chapter 49 -- Surprise of Surprises

Kundavai Pirati accepted the letter given by Vandiya Devan and read it. Her face which had worn a slight frown until then, now brightened. She looked up at Vandiya Devan and asked, "Sir, you have delivered the letter. What do you plan to do now?"

"I have delivered the letter to you and my commission is discharged. I must now return home."

"Your assignment is not over; it is just about to begin."

"I do not understand, My Lady!"

"The Prince has written that I can entrust any confidential matter to you. Are you not going to follow his orders?"

"Yes, I did agree to serve you as a confidential assistant. But, I beg you My Lady, please do not delegate any important responsibility to me."

"I don't understand you Sir! Is it the tradition of the Vaanar clan to break their promises?"

"The Vaanar clan does not sing its own praises; neither is it their tradition to break a pledge."

"Then why the hesitation? Is it a hatred for womenfolk or is it that you dislike me?" asked the Princess with a smile.

Aha! What a question? How can the deep ocean dislike the moon? Does it not reach out for the full moon with thousand fingered waves? Who can say that the blue skies dislike this divine earth? Doesn't the inky sky gaze all night long at beloved earth with thousands of twinkling star-eyes? How can the cloudburst dislike a flash of lightning? Does it not hug the piercing flashes to its heart? Can anyone say that bees dislike flowers? Do they not constantly buzz around them and drown in their enticing honey?

Can anyone believe if one says that a moth dislikes the flame? Does it not fall into that very flame and give up its very life? What a question My Lady! If I dislike you why would your glance reduce me to such speechless fervor? Why does the smile playing on your lips drive me crazy? -- all these thoughts raced through Vandiya Devan's mind. But, not a sound did he utter.

"Sir! Why do you not answer me? Do you hesitate because you think it demeaning for a gallant of the Vaanar clan to serve a mere female? Didn't the Prince tell you all the details when he wrote this letter to me?" asked Kundavai once again.

"My Lady! I knew about the contents of that letter and had accepted the assignment wholeheartedly before I left. But, I think I had not begun my journey in an auspicious moment. I have acquired foes all along the way. I have made an enemy of my dearest friend. My adversaries are looking for me in all directions. In such a situation how can I promise to complete any task you assign to me? I hesitate because your business should not be thwarted because of me."

"Who are these enemies? Can you tell me?" asked Kundavai in a worried voice.

"The Lords of Pazluvoor have sent men in all directions to arrest me. My dear friend Kandamaran thinks that I tried to stab him in the back and kill him. An imposter called Azlvar-adiyan Nambi masquerading as a fanatic Vaishnava devotee has been following me everywhere. Nandini, the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor has sent a sorcerer to kill me. I do not know when and by whom I will be captured ..."

Vandiya Devan recalled his encounter with the Sorcerer on the night he had escaped drowning. Realizing the danger of traveling during the day he hid himself in bamboo groves and plantain orchards. In the night he walked swiftly along the river bank. He was tired after walking for a long distance; in the early hours before daybreak he reached a dilapidated old building on the wayside. Moonlight threw some light on the structure and brightened the entryway. Vandiya Devan walked in, past the bright spot, and lay down to rest in the dark corner. Just as he was about to fall asleep he heard the hideous screech of an owl somewhere nearby. He remembered hearing a similar sound while he had been talking the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor in her garden and was startled awake. Two spots of sharp light peered at him from the dark interior of the ruin. He took a few steps intending to walk out, when heard footsteps coming inside. He held on to a broken pillar and hid behind the tumbled stones.

A moonbeam threw some light on the newcomer's face. Vandiya Devan recognized him as the Sorcerer who had visited the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. The man kept walking towards the pillar. Vandiya Devan hoped that the fellow would not know that he was hiding behind the pillar and that he would walk inside. But, the fellow walked with soft cat-like steps till he neared the pillar and then pounced upon him with a horrifying shout. The Sorcerer squeezed Vandiya Devan's throat with one large palm and said, "Give it! Give me the palmtree signet ring! If you don't, I'll strangle you to death!"

Vandiya Devan felt that his neck was about to break; his eyes were ready to pop out; his breathing was choked. He steadied himself by tightly holding the broken pillar. He lifted one leg and kicked back with all his strength. The Sorcerer fell down with a roar of pain. At the same instant the old pillar collapsed. Stones began tumbling down from the roof. A bat flapped its wings and flew out. Vandiya Devan followed swiftly. He neither stopped

nor turned to look back for quite some time. He stopped running only after he was sure that no one followed him. He shivered with fright when he recalled this incident.

In the midst of these thoughts Kundavai's voice steadied him. She was asking, "Sir! How long is it since you left Kanchi?"

"A week and a day."

"It is quite astonishing, a surprise among surprises, that you have acquired so many foes in such a short period! How did you accomplish this feat?"

"That is a long story, My Lady."

"Doesn't matter! Tell me. Only after I hear your story will I be able to disclose your next assignment."

After saying this, the Princess beckoned to Mr. Esanya Bhattar and asked him, "How about the boat-man?"

"He is totally deaf; even a thunderstorm will not disturb him."

"Very good. Come, let us go in this boat for some time. I wish to listen to this gentleman's complete story."

Vandiya Devan was enthralled. Was it a common fortune to ride in the same boat with the Chozla Princess? I must have done penance in seven births to obtain this opportunity. Once I am in the boat I must prolong my story as much as possible. What is the hurry to finish quickly? Why should I miss this chance?'

Vandiya Devan was not in a hurry; but, as the boat floated down the lake and he began his narration of the incidents in Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's mansion, Kundavai became more and more agitated and restless. She hastened him with questions such as, "Then what happened?" "What next?" He prolonged his tale as much as he could. But the longest story must come to an end! By then the boat had returned to the wharf. As they walked back to the garden they heard ankle bells and dance beats indicating that the dance practice was still going on in the palace.

The following song from The Silappadikaram could also be heard:-

What eyes are they that do not gaze upon the Great Lord,

The dark-hued Lord whose navel bears the mystic lotus

Which encompasses all universe,

What eyes are they that do not unblinkingly gaze upon His lotus feet,

His long arms and divine coral-lips?

What tongue is it that does not sing the praises of the dear Lord,

Of Him who took revenge on the foolish Demon, Evil-hearted Kamsa,

Of Him the praiseworthy messenger to the evil-hundred from the five-brothers,

What tongue is it that does not sing the praises of Narayana, Narayana!

Upon hearing this song, Vandiya Devan said, "Kamsa may have been an evil-hearted demon, but, he helped me a great deal yesterday." He then retold the following story.

Vandiya Devan suspected that Lord Pazluvoor's men would have come to Pazlayarai even before he reached the city. He knew that they would be waiting at all the entrances. They were sure to arrest him on suspicion. "How am I to enter the city without being arrested by them?" with this worry he stood on the banks of the River Arisil, a little away from the city. He saw a band of street-play actors walking down the road. They were variously costumed as Balarama, Krishna, Kamsa, Devaki etc. Kamsa alone was wearing a wooden mask. Vandiya Devan had an idea. He mingled with their group and struck up a conversation with the actors. He then declared that the actor playing the part of Kamsa did not look very convincing. Upon hearing his words the Kamsa-actor became enraged. Vandiya Devan enraged him further by saying "Even I can act the part much better than you; you look drunk and incompetent." He grabbed the wooden mask and bound it to his own face as he began dancing. Some of the youngsters in the group began supporting him saying his steps were more lively than that of their villager. The old actor became angry and refused to go on with them. Vandiya Devan was waiting for this. "Let him go; I will come with your group to the city and dance for you and win the prize" he declared. The group gladly accepted him and led him into the city.

After all the street plays were over, Vandiya Devan parted from his group and as per the instructions of Prince Karikala, went to the Northwest Shiva Temple to meet Mr. Esanya Bhattar. That gentleman hid him in one of the Jain caves and after informing Kundavai about his arrival took him to the palace by way of the lake.

After hearing all these details, Kundavai looked at Vandiya Devan with eyes full of surprise, "The good wishes of Kottravai, the Goddess of Victory must be completely in the favor of Chozlas! That is why you have been sent to me in these difficult times!" she said.

"My Lady! You have not given me any orders. There has been no opportunity so far to use all my capabilities."

"Don't worry about that! I am going to send you on a mission that is so dangerous, compared to which, your past experiences are nothing."

Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan stood with a brimming heart and ardent enthusiasm. He was ready to accomplish any task assigned by her; if needed he was ready to swim across the seven seas, battle a thousand lions without any weapons, climb the tallest mountain to pluck the heavenly stars from the skies.

There was a tiny marble pavilion in the midst of the garden. Kundavai walked towards this structure. Mr. Bhattar and Vandiya Devan followed her. From inside an alcove Kundavai took a palmleaf and a writing instrument made of gold. She wrote the following sentence on the palmleaf:

"Ponniyin Selva! Come immediately upon seeing this letter. The gentleman bringing this will give you all details. You can trust him completely."

At the end she drew a tiny symbol of a fig-leaf. Giving the letter to Vandiya Devan she said, "Take this letter and go to Lanka without any delay. Give it to Prince Arulmozli Varma and bring him back here with you."

Vandiya Devan was engulfed in waves of happiness. One of his life-long ambitions was already fulfilled. He had met the famous Chozla Princess, the Younger Pirati. Through her, his second ambition also was about to be fulfilled. He was soon going to meet Prince Arulmozli!

"My Lady! You are assigning a pleasing task. I shall depart immediately with this letter." He extended his right arm to receive the letter. When Kundavai placed the letter in his palm, her flower-soft fingers touched his lucky hand. He was over-whelmed with happiness. Thousands and millions of colorful butterflies fluttered around him! A million nightingales sang for him! Mountains of fragrant flowers showered on him! He looked up into Kundavai's eyes. His heart brimmed with an eagerness to say all sorts of words. But, mere words had no strength to express his feelings.

His eyes spoke all that was meant to be said. There was no comparison to the poetry that his eyes composed in that moment. Even Kalidasa the Great had not written such romantic verse; even the ancient Tamil bards who composed the poems of Mu-ttholl-ayiram had nothing comparable!

Somewhere outside the pavilion, the wind whistled through some dry leaves. Mr. Esanya Bhattar cleared his throat. Vandiya Devan came back to this world.

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Chapter 50 -- Paranthaka Infirmary

In the morning the Sun God rose to cover the whole world with light. His reddened rays fell upon the cupolas of the palace and made them shine like burnished gold. A large, well decorated elephant with a howdah came to stand in front of Kundavai's palace. Kundavai and Vanathi came out of the palace and climbed up some steps to get into the howdah atop the elephant.

The elephant began walking with a ponderous gait towards the Paranthaka Chozla Infirmary situated in the Padai Veedu neighborhood. The elephant keeper walked beside the animal making it go slowly. On hearing elephant bells, women-folk hurried out of their homes. Upon seeing the two royal ladies their faces brightened as they bowed in greeting.

The elephant walked through the streets of the army encampment. The very appearance of those streets was remarkable. Well nourished fighting cocks wandered in and out of the alleyways. Huge rams with sharpened horns stood about as if asking "Who is coming to lock horns with me?" Hunting dogs were secured with leather straps and leashes to the front porches of the houses. Youngsters practiced martial arts -- silambam, with short bamboo sticks. The silambam sticks rubbed against each other raising sounds like "chata chata pata pata!"

Front porches and walls were decorated with various drawings made with kaavi (red-ocher dye). They mostly depicted the exploits of Lord Muruga and incidents from the history of the heroic Chozlas. Most were war scenes. The picture of Lord Muruga severing the heads of Demon Surapadma one after the other and of Goddess Durga killing the Demon Mahisha were depicted in horrifying detail. The battlefields of Thellar, Tanjore,

Kudamooku, Thiru-puram-biyam, Velloor, Thakkolam and Chevoor had come alive on those walls showing the exploits of Chozla soldiers.

When the elephant entered these streets, everything became even more lively. The fighting cocks flew up to the rooftops with noisy wingbeats and began crowing. Children called to each other and came running up. They knocked upon the doors of neighbors and announced the news. People stood in front of their houses and raised slogans in praise of Kundavai. "Long live Younger Pirati Kundavai! Long live Sundara Chozla and his dear daughter!" they shouted with happiness. Some began following the elephant. The crowd began to grow larger.

As mentioned earlier, womenfolk and elderly relatives of the men who had gone to the Lankan war lived in that neighborhood. Kundavai had established an hospital for their welfare with grants from her personal income. The Chozla royalty had a tradition of honoring their forefathers. Among her ancestors, Kundavai's great-grandfather, Paranthaka the First, was distinguished; in his honor, she had established the Paranthaka Infirmary. With an excuse of inspecting the hospital she would often visit the community and enquire about their welfare.

The elephant stopped in front of the Infirmary. It folded its forelegs and then its hind legs and lowered itself to the ground. The two noblewomen descended. After the elephant had moved away to one side, the people, particularly women, surrounded the ladies.

"I hope the hospital is useful to you all. Are the doctors coming regularly and giving medicines to those who need them?" asked the Younger Pirati.

"Yes Thaye! Yes," replied several voices.

"I had an annoying cough for over three months. The doctor's medicine has cured me," said one woman.

"My Lady! My son broke his leg while climbing a tree. The doctor set his bones and bound it up. He is fine now; and is in fact running and climbing once again!" said another.

"My mother felt that her eyes were getting dimmer day by day. She has been coming here for treatment for the past forty days and is feeling much better."

"Look Vanathi! How knowledgeable and learned our ancestors have been! I wonder how they know about which herb has the medicinal value to cure which ailment?" asked Kundavai.

"They must have had magical foresight! That's how they found use for all those herbs. How else could it have happened?" replied Vanathi.

"Yes, it is quite true that they have several exceptional herbs for curing illness. But they have found no medicine to cure the mental illness of a person like you! What can one do?"

"Akka! I have no mental illness. Please do not say things like this. My friends tease me ceaselessly about it."

"You deserve it my dear! You have intruded upon and bewildered my bother who lived without a care in this world. Every time he sends a messenger from Lanka, he asks about your health!"

"Make way for the Doctor, make way for the Doctor!" rose the shouts. Footmen parted the crowd. An elderly gentleman, the Chief Doctor of the Infirmary came to receive the Princess and her companion.

"Mr. Doctor! You had mentioned that several rare medicinal herbs and plants were available in the forests of Kodi Karai. I had sent you a youth who could go there to gather those herbs for you, did he meet you?" asked Kundavai Pirati.

"Yes My Lady! That smart young man did come and meet me last night with Mr. Esanya Bhattar. I am sending one of my sons also with him. My son will return after collecting the herbs at Kodi Karai. Your agent says that he will be going to Lanka before he returns"

"Does he have to collect medicines from Lanka also?" asked Vanathi with surprise.

"Yes My lady! According to the myth, Hanuman carried the Sanjivi Mountain full of life saving herbs to treat Lakshmana via Kodi Karai before he went to Lanka. At that time some herbs from the mountain fell into the forests of Kodi Karai. That is why even now we get good medicinal herbs from there. The herbal mountain itself is in Lanka. So we are likely to find even rarer medicines in the island. If only I could lay my hands on some particular plants, I can surely cure the Emperor's illness"

"With God's grace it may be possible. Where is that young man now?" asked Kundavai.

"He is waiting inside My Lady. They are getting ready for the journey and are waiting to take leave of you."

The two noblewomen walked inside led by the Chief Doctor. They saw the patients in the hallways and chambers waiting for treatment and medicines. When these patients saw Kundavai their faces brightened with pleasure and they came up to talk to her with words of praise. Two men waited in the chambers of the Chief Doctor. Kundavai smiled at Vandiya Devan disguised in the robes of a Doctor. Somehow Vanathi also recognized him. She whispered into Kundavai's ear, "Akka, this man seems like the person we met in the house of the Astrologer at Kudanthai."

"I too think he looks like that. He has come to see a doctor after visiting an astrologer! Perhaps he also has some psychological problem, just like you!" said Kundavai; she then turned to Vandiya Devan and said, "Sir! Are you the gentleman who agreed to go to Lanka and get the medicinal herbs for treatment of the Emperor?"

Vandiy Devan's eyes spoke a different secret language. But he said, "Yes Princess, I am going to Lanka. Perhaps I may be able to meet the young Prince over there. Is there any message for him?"

"If you see him, give this message to him without fail. The Lady of Kodumbalur is not keeping good health at all. She often falls down in a faint. If he wishes to see Lady Vanathi alive, he must return immediately to Pazlayarai. Tell him that!" said Kundavai.

"I shall give him the message exactly." Vandiy Devan looked at Vanathi.

These teasing words of Kundavai covered Vanathi with a shyness which made her face even more beautiful. Somehow she overcame her shyness and bashfully uttered these words, "Sir! Please don't give him any such message. I beseech you! Just let him know that Kodumbalur Vanathi is very well under the care of the Younger Pirati, eating four times a day and sleeping well."

"I shall deliver the message exactly," said Vandiya Devan.

"Fantastic! You said 'I shall deliver the message exactly,' to my message. And you agree to deliver her message also 'exactly'. Only one of these messages can be true?" asked Kundavai.

"So what My Lady! I shall deliver the messages of both parties. Let the Prince be the judge of the truth."

"But, please do not deliver the message of one as coming from the other!" said Vanathi.

Kundavai wished to put an end to this conversation. She asked the Doctor, "Did these men get the letters of permit from the Palace Officer?"

"They have the letters My Lady! 'These men are travelling on official business to collect medicinal herbs for the treatment of the Emperor's illness. One and all are ordered to help and aid them in their journey,' says the general letter of permit. There is a separate letter for the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai."

"Then, there is no reason for delay. Let them start."

"Yes! We must depart!" said Vandiya Devan. But leave taking was not easy.

They came out of the Infirmary. The decorated elephant waited to carry the Princess and her friend. Two swift horses from the palace waited restlessly to carry Vandiya Devan and the Doctor's son on their journey. Vandiya Devan had several sudden doubts. Kundavai had several last minute instructions. She warned him repeatedly to be careful of the several dangers along the way. Finally, the two women climbed onto the elephant. Vandiya Devan and his companion mounted their steeds.

The elephant did not move. Kundavai signed and indicated that those leaving on the longer journey must depart first. Vandiya Devan turned his horse reluctantly. He turned his head to look at the Princess, eagerly once more. Then he struck his horse as if in anger, the steed galloped forward swiftly. The Doctor's son had a tough time catching up with him.

The elephant turned back towards the Chozla Maligai and Kundavai was immersed in thought. How capricious is this nature of my heart! Why am I, who rejected kings and princes, so concerned about the welfare of this wandering cavalier? Why am I so anxious that he should return safe and victorious?...

"Akka, what are you thinking about?" Vanathi's voice brought her back to earth.

"Nothing Vanathi. I was thinking about the arrogance of that young man. I am wondering if I should have sent a message to my brother through him."

"Yes Akka! He is quite artful! One could even say a clever bandit."

"What is this? Why do you think he is a bandit?"

"An ordinary thief would burgle ordinary things like silver and gold. I am afraid that this young gallant would loot the very guardian deity of the Chozla Empire. You will not let that happen, will you?" asked innocent Vanathi.

"You rogue! Do you think that I am also like you! I will never let any such thing happen."

She saw a group of women gathered on the wayside and signalled for the elephant to stop. "Why have you all gathered here? Do you wish to speak with me?" asked the Younger Pirati.

One of them came forward and spoke, "Thaye! There is no news about our menfolk in Lanka. We hear that those Lords of Tanjore are not even allowing the shipment of foodstuffs for them. How can they fight a war My Lady, without enough food?"

"Do not concern yourselves about such matters. Enough supplies are being shipped to them from Mamallai Port. What ever the intentions of the authorities in Tanjore, your Prince will not keep quiet. He will not let the brave men of our Chozla nation die of starvation."

If it had been some other day, Kundavai would have tarried a little longer and soothed their worries some more. Her heart was now filled with a disquiet of another kind. The elephant walked back towards the palace.

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Chapter 51 -- Mamallai

We welcome our readers to Mamallai Port. More than three hundred years have passed since the times of Mahendra Pallava and Mamalla Narasimha who had made this port town into a dream world with spectacular sculptures and rock cut temples.

The town appears somewhat dull and this does not delight our hearts. Mansions are in ruin; palaces appear dilapidated. Not much of a crowd in the streets or in the port. There is not much trade now. Nor are there many large warehouses. Export and import goods are not piled into mounds in market streets.

In those early years, the sea had come inland as a deep channel, a safe, natural harbor for sailing ships. Now the channel is silted, shallow and filled with dirt. Only tug-boats and small rowboats could now go in that shallow sea channel. Ships and sailboats had to anchor far away in the deep sea. Tug-boats or barges must carry goods to load and unload those ships.

But, in these past years Mamallai had acquired several new attractions. The beautiful stone-cut temples along the shoreline particularly captivate our attention. They are not like the temples excavated from boulders and rocks during the times of Pallava Mahendra and Narasimha. They were built of stone quarried from rock-mounds. They seem like beautiful crowns adorning the Ocean King's forehead. How is one to describe the beautiful architecture of those temples?

A Vinnagara for the Perumal who measured the three worlds, Lord Vishnu, can be seen in the midst of the town. It is a temple built by Parameswara Pallava who nourished both Saiva and Vaishnava sects equally, considering them his own two eyes. Thiru-mangai

Azlvar had visited this holy place and worshipped the Lord in Eternal Repose and sung several sacred psalms in sweet Tamil. Even during the times of that saint, the Pallava Empire must have existed in splendor; the following psalm attests the fact:

Worship Him with all your mind,
Oh! worship Him my foolish heart,
Worship Him the Lord in Eternal Repose,
Him of Mallai Port,
Where ships come ashore to be loaded,
With wealth from far lands,
Trumpet handed elephants and gemstone mounds.

A Hundred years after Thiru-mangai Azlvar's time, the sun had set on the glory of the Pallava Empire. The greatness of Kanchi, 'A City without equal for Learning,' had diminished. Trade in the 'Mallai Port where ships anchored,' has dwindled.

But, there is no decline to the magnificence of the astonishing art treasures in that town which brings undiminished fame to Tamil culture. The intricate sculptures carved on rock-faces and the delicate art work on stone towers remain fresh even after three hundred years. The town was filled with tourists who came to enjoy these art treasures rather than with traders who came to import or export goods.

A beautiful chariot yoked with twin horses ran through the streets of Mamallai. The trimmings of the decorated horses, the jewelled embellishments on the chariot and the gilded canopy which shone like another fiery sun in the evening light declared its occupants to be of noble birth. Yes, three noblemen were seated inside the spacious, golden chariot.

One of them was the bravest among brave, Aditya Karikala, the eldest son of Emperor Sundara Chozla. This Prince had entered gory battlefronts at a very young age and performed several remarkable deeds of valor. In the final battle he had killed Veera-pandiya of Madurai and won the title, 'The Valiant Prince who wrung the head of Veera-pandiya.' Sundara Chozla had fallen sick only after this victory over Veera-pandiya which had brought all the Pandiya lands under Chozla rule. In order to establish without doubt that Aditya Karikala had all rights to ascend the Chozla throne, Sundara Chozla coronated him as the Crown Prince. From then the Prince also had the right to issue edicts on his own under the title Parakesari, as well as record such edicts in stone inscriptions.

Later, Karikala journeyed north to free the Thondai Territories from the rule of Kannara Deva the Rashtrakuta. Here too, he performed several deeds of daring. He drove the Rashtrakuta armies north of the River Pennar. Before he went further north, he had to consolidate the strength of his forces. Therefore, he came to Kanchi: to collect a larger army and equip it with the necessary armaments and supplies for a northern invasion. In this situation, the Lords of Pazluvoor began to raise objections to his endeavors. They said that the northern invasion should be attempted only after the campaign in Lanka was concluded. All sorts of other rumors began floating around. It came to be known that

adequate supplies and food was not being sent to feed the forces in Lanka. Because of all this, Karikala's brave heart was filled with rage and anger.

For about three hundred years before and after the times of our story, several brave men, comparable to the great heroes of the epics, were born to serve at the lotus feet of Mother Tamil. Warriors comparable to Bhima, Arjuna, Bhishma, Drona, Gatotkacha and Abimanyu appeared in the Tamil Kingdoms. Their deeds of bravery astonished the world. Each victory in the battlefield gave them added vitality. Old men had the strength to move mountains. Youth had the capability to fly across the skies and gather stars from the heavens. Two such brave men were seated in Karikala's chariot along with him that day.

One of them was Malayaman of Thiru-kovalur. His mountain stronghold was popularly known as 'malai-nadu' or 'miladu' country. Therefore he had the title Milad-udayar. Sundara Chozla's second wife, Empress Vanama Devi was his daughter. Thus, he was Aditya Karikala's grandfather. In age and experience he was comparable to Grandfather Bhishma of the epic Mahabarata. Though Karikala had a great regard for his grandfather, sometimes the older man's advice irked the Prince's patience.

The other man in the chariot was Parthiban. He was the scion of a minor family of the ancient Pallava Dynasty. He was somewhat older than Prince Aditya Karikala. Since he had no kingdom to call his own he wished to gain fame as a brave warrior of the battlefield; he sought the company of Karikala and functioned as a right arm to the Prince in the various campaigns. He had gained the confidence and personal friendship of Aditya Karikala by helping him in many combats. Since the victory over Veera-pandiya they had become inseparable friends.

As they rode in the chariot, the three of them were discussing the vague rumors that came to them from Tanjore.

"I cannot tolerate the insolence of these Pazluvoor nobles anymore, not even for a second! Day by day they cross the limit. How arrogant they must be, to accuse my messenger of being a 'spy'? I believe that they have announced a reward of one thousand gold coins for his capture. How can I tolerate all this? The sword in my scabbard shrinks with shame! And you advise me to be patient!" spoke Aditya Karikala.

"I am not advising patience. But, I did warn you even before, that you should not send Vandiya Devan on important missions like this. I knew that he, an impatient youth, will mess up any assignment. Is it enough if he is proficient in the use of his sword and spear? A messenger on political affairs must be sharp of mind also," said Pallava Parthiban.

Parthiban had never liked the affection shown by Prince Karikala towards Vandiya Devan. He would always find some fault with that noble youth of the Vaanar clan. He would find some impropriety in his every act. He did not miss this opportunity now.

"You have started again, your old story! You cannot pass the time of day without finding fault with Vandiya Devan. If he is not sharp of mind, who is? I had ordered him to somehow or other deliver my letter to the Emperor; he has fulfilled his assignment! Those Pazluvoor fellows have become angry because of it. How is Vandiya Devan at fault?" asked Karikala.

"Oh, he wouldn't have stopped with the assignment you gave him. He would have interfered in other irrelevant affairs," said Parthiban.

"You keep quiet for a while! Grandfather, why are you silent? What is your opinion? What is wrong if we take a large army and invade Tanjore, free the Emperor and bring him here to Kanchi? How long are we to watch these Lords of Pazluvoor guard the Emperor like a prisoner? How long are we to fear these Pazluvoor fellows?" spoke an enraged Aditya Karikala.

Malayaman of Thiru-kovalur, Lord Milad-udayar, who had the experience of over sixty battlefields in his lifetime, cleared his throat as if to reply. But, catching a glimpse of the sea shore ahead of them, he said, "Let us first get off this chariot. My son, let us go and sit down in our usual place and talk. I am too old, it is not easy for me to talk in a moving chariot."

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Chapter 52 -- An Old Man's Wedding

There were several small boulders strewn about the sea shore of Mamallai. Sometimes the tide would rise to cover those rocks with furious waves. At other times, the sea would recede and allow those boulders to dry completely. The great sculptors of Mamallai had not forgotten even one tiny rock face along the shore: they had used their imagination fully and carved each stone-face with large and small sculptures.

Aditya Karikala and his two companions walked towards two such boulders which were facing each other on the sandy beach. Treating the two rocks like two thrones, Malayaman and Karikala sat down. Parthiban stood a little apart. Waves came up to wet their feet now and then. Sometimes the spray of water caused by the waves dashing upon the rocks showered droplets of pearls upon them. In the far distance they could see barges loaded with goods cleaving the waves and riding towards the distant horizon. Men were loading the goods from those barges onto ships anchored far away.

"I am filled with anger to think that all the supplies that we had collected for the northern invasion are being diverted to Lanka," said Parthiban.

"What can we do? The best trained Chozla battalions are in Lanka, winning battle after battle. They have captured Anuradapura, the ancient capital from which Lankan Kings ruled for a thousand years, and raised our victorious tiger-flag. How can we let such brave men starve?" asked Prince Karikala.

"Who said that we must let them starve? Of course we must send food supplies. But, they could be sent from Chozla Territories via Nagapattinam Port. Or they can be sent from the Pandiya Kingdom from the port at Sethu. Where is the need to send food supplies from these dry deserts of Thondai? I am saying this because we must consider the setback to our plans for a northern campaign because of this."

"I am also enraged by that thought. I wonder what those wretched Lords of Pazluvoor intend to do. How long am I to tolerate this? Grandfather! Why are you still keeping quiet? Why don't you say something?" asked Karikala.

"My son! These sea waves are roaring incessantly. Your friend Parthiban with his ceaseless chatter is competing with them. What can I say in the midst of all this din? I have grown feeble in my old age."

"Parthiba, You keep quiet for some time. Let Grandfather express his opinion."

"Here, I shall shut my mouth. Poor Grandfather has come down here, so far from the fort, with great difficulty in this weak old age. I shouldn't have opened my mouth in front of him. This sea also has no sense; it is roaring incessantly! There is none to control it. The Ocean King seems to have no fear for our Mountain Lord!" Parthiban spoke with scorn.

"Thambi! Parthiba! Once there was a time for that too. All the kings of this land would tremble; the Chalukyas of the west, Vaanars of Vallam, Vaithumbas, Gangas and Kongu chieftains -- all of them would quake upon hearing the name Malayaman (mountain chief), like serpents hiding from the roar of thunder. Even the Ocean King used to be quite timid. Now that I have grown feeble, they have all raised their heads. These westerners who have come recently, these commoners of Pazluvoor are now questioning me of ancient lineage! They are trying to put an end to me! It can never happen. Karikala you said that you could not understand the intentions of these Pazluvoor upstarts. I shall tell you what their intentions are. Listen to this. They wish to separate you and your brother and weaken both your strengths. They want your brother Arulmozli to loose his battles in Lanka and face disgrace. Here, you must be provoked into anger against your brother. The two of you should quarrel with each other; and this old man must die of shock upon seeing that! This is their secret aspiration, ..." as Malayaman was speaking passionately, Karikala intervened.

"This intention of their's will never succeed Grandfather! None can separate me and my brother from each other. I will give up my very life for Arulmozli. Do you know what I think sometimes? -- I should sail away, to Lanka perhaps. I wonder what hardships he faces over there? Here I am comfortably sleeping away my life in these palaces. Each minute is like an endless eon. I hate staying here. Grandfather, tell me, shall I sail away in one of those ships to Lanka?" asked Karikala.

"Fantastic idea, My Prince! I too have been thinking along similar lines for some days now. Come let us go. There is no point in asking Grandfather. If you ask him he will merely advice, `No. Wait!' Come let us leave tomorrow itself. Let us take half our forces from here in Thondai. We will put an end to the war in Lanka once for all and then land in Nagapattinam. From there we can march to Tanjore and teach a lesson to those Pazluvoor men...." came the tirade from Parthiban.

"Look at this Karikala? Did I not warn you? Did I not say that I can talk only if he keeps his mouth shut?" asked Malayaman.

"I shall shut up, Grandfather, I shall shut up. You say whatever you wish to say." Parthiban covered his mouth with one palm.

"Karikala, you are brave. There are not many men of valor like you in these Tamil lands. I have seen many wars in my eighty years. But, I have never seen a brave youth like you who single handed entered the enemy field and fought with such courage. You were not even sixteen during the Battle of Chevoor. I have never seen a combat like yours, when you swiftly entered the enemy formation, swirling your sword left- and right-handed,

toppling enemy heads all along the way! That scene lingers before my eyes even now. Your friend Parthiban, is like you, quite great in valor.

But, both of you are rash youths. Impetuous in anger. Both of you lack the capacity to think clearly. You tend to do the exact opposite of what must be done."

"Grandfather you have said such things several times ..."

"Yes; I have. But, there was not much use? Are you asking me to go back to my country?"

"No! No! Tell me what must be done now."

"You must somehow, get your brother Arulmozli to come here immediately. You and your brother should never be physically separate. ..."

"Grandfather what counsel is this? If Arulmozli comes here what will happen to the war in Lanka?"

"Oh, the Lankan campaign is now at a standstill. Our men have captured Anuradapura. Now the rainy season begins in Lanka and none can do anything for four months; all we can do is safeguard the captured positions. The other generals can do that quite capably. It is important that Arulmozli is here at this time. Oh! What is the use of hiding the truth from you Karikala? There is grave danger to the Dynasty of Vijayala Chozla and the Empire established by him. You and the ones near and dear to you should all be at one place now; you should all safeguard yourselves with much care. We should also consolidate all our strengths. No one knows what danger is likely to strike, when ..."

"Grandfather, why are you frightening me with such talk? What do I fear as long as I have a sword in my hand? What danger can stalk me? I can manage, tackle whatever it is ... I am not afraid ..."

"Son! Do you have to remind me of your courage? But, consider these lines of Valluvan:

It is folly to not fear the frightful;

The way of wisemen is to fear the fearful.

When you confront an enemy in the battle field there should be no room for fear. One who is frightened at that time is a coward. If such a coward is born in my family, I will personally chop him to pieces which this old hand of mine. But, we must fear secret conspiracy, treachery and unseen danger. Fearing such threats, we must take adequate precautions. Those born in royal households, those with a right to ascend thrones must not be negligent in such matters. Such heedlessness will spell doom for the whole kingdom."

"Grandfather! What secret conspiracy do you expect? Only if you explain can we be careful."

"I shall explain; some days ago, a secret meeting took place at midnight in Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's Fort. The Elder Lord Pazluvoor had come to that meeting. Apparently, Munai Raya, Mazlava-raya, the Chieftain of Kunrator, Muthuaraya, and Rajali of the Double Canopy had come. These are the names I heard. Others may have been there."

"Let them have come; so what? All of them would have dined till their stomachs burst, watched the dance and frolic till midnight, drunk kegs and kegs of liquor and gone to

sleep. Why should we be concerned with that? What would those old men with greying beards achieve by meeting at midnight?"

"When you have such a good opinion of old men, what is the use of my saying anything to you? I am also an old man! In fact much older than all those fellows."

"Grandfather, don't be angry. Will I equate you with those useless old fools? What happened there, tell me?"

"Again you refer to them as useless old fools! Their chief, the oldest man among them was married only recently; don't forget that! Understand that there is no youth more dangerous in the whole world than an old man married to a very young maid."

When the conversation turned to a discussion of the old man's wedding, a peculiar expression covered the face of Aditya Karikala. His eyes suddenly turned bloodshot like those of some horrible pagan deity demanding blood sacrifice. Lips trembled; and teeth crunched in anger.

Malayaman did not notice these changes; but, Parthiban took note.

"Why talk of that wedding now? Sir, tell us what happened at Sambuvaraya's Fort after that." The Pallava nobleman intervened again.

"That is what I was going to speak about. I have grown old and am loosing track of what I say. Listen Karikala! Parthiba! You too listen. That midnight meeting was not convened merely by old men. Some young blades were also there. One youth was Sambuvaraya's son Kandamaran. Another was ..." When the old man hesitated, Karikala asked with haste, "Who else Grandfather? Who was the other youth?"

"Your Elder-grandfather Gandara Aditya's divine son -- your uncle --Madurandaka Deva, who else?"

On hearing this, both Karikala and Parthiban began laughing loudly.

"What mirth is this? What is the meaning of this senseless laughter? Are you mocking me again?" asked Milad-udayar of Thiru-kovalur.

"No, Grandfather, no! We are laughing because you called Madurandaka a `young man!' Is he not the oldest among old men?" laughed Karikala.

"Haven't you heard of youth returning in old age? Like that, youth has come back to Madurandaka. Till recently he had been saying, `I'll become an ascetic; I shall follow the path of Saiva devotion.' -- Now he has embarked into matrimony not once or twice but thrice."

"Let him; if he wants let him get married several more times! So what?" asked Parthiban.

"Thambi, Madurandaka's marriages are not ordinary marriages. They are political alliances. Organized by the secretive treachery of the Pazluvoor noblemen."

"Grandfather, you continue talking in riddles. Why don't you explain clearly? What do the Lords of Pazluvoor really want? What is their intention in convening such meetings in every town? What are they going to achieve with Madurandaka Deva?" asked Aditya with some impatience.

"Nothing. They are trying to declare that you and your brother have no rights to the Empire and place Madurandaka on the Chozla throne. They are trying to obtain your father's consent for this. That is why they guard him in Tanjore Fort like a prisoner," said Lord Malayaman.

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Chapter 53 -- Malayaman's Anger

Of course Aditya Karikala did not faint on hearing the shocking words uttered by Thirukovalur Malayaman who was capable, intelligent and experienced. Nevertheless, he was stunned into silence for a few moments. Parthiban was also shocked into wordless silence. Even the roaring sea seemed quiet. By then even the `elelo' songs of workmen loading the ships had stopped.

Aditya felt ashamed to have shown his shock. He quickly looked up at his Grandfather's face and said, "I too heard of such talk in the countryside and cities. I dismissed them as mere rumors. You seem to be convinced. Are you sure? Is it possible?"

"Why is it not possible? Didn't your Elder-grandfather Gandara Aditya rule this Chozla Kingdom before your Grandfather Arinjaya? Doesn't his son have more rights to this Empire than you two brothers?" asked Lord Malayaman Milad-udayar.

"Never! That fool who cannot utter four words clearly, who has never touched a sword in his life, he who should have been a woman but was by accident born a man -- he has a right to this Empire!? What of the rights of our Prince who entered warfront at the tender age of twelve, who has never seen defeat, who bears the title, `Valiant Prince who took Veera-pandiya's head,' the bravest lion Aditya Karikala -- what of his rights? Sir, have you lost your senses in your old age?" screamed Parthiban in rage.

Karikala silenced him and then turned to Malayaman, "Grandfather, this Empire is not a big thing for me. If I want, I can establish an empire ten times larger than this with the help of my sword. But what is the justice in this? I would not have cared if they had declared in the beginning itself that the Kingdom was for Madurandaka. With the consent of countrymen, citizens, chieftains and the people they declared that I have a right to the throne and anointed me as Crown Prince. How can that change now? How can you support that?"

"I do not support it and never will I do so. If you ever concede and agree to give up your throne to Madurandaka, I will chop you to pieces with this sword of mine. Then I shall cut your dear mother to bits. After that, I who gave birth to your mother shall hack myself to death with that very same sword. Till I have life in this body, I shall not let the Chozla Empire slip from your hands." When the old man roared with passion, his eyes shone with a bright anger; his aged body shook with emotion.

"Say it like that Grandfather, say it like that," shouted Parthiban as he ran up to embrace old Malayaman. Even his eyes were filled with tears of passion.

Karikala kept gazing at the deep sea for some time. "If this is your opinion, why hesitate? Grandfather, why should we not gather our armies and immediately march towards Tanjore? We can easily overcome the Lords of Pazluvoor and Mazlavarayya, Muthuaraya, Sambuvaraya, Munai Raya and all the other chieftains who support them; we can capture

Tanjore Fort. We can imprison Madurandaka, free the Emperor. If I have your blessing, if I have Parthiban at my side, who on this earth can overcome us?" asked the Prince.

"True; none can win you in warfare. But what can you both do against conspiracy and treachery? Even as you approach Tanjore with your army, they will declare that the son has declared war on his father. They will announce that unable to bear the shock, your father, the Emperor gave up his life. And people will believe that. What will you do in such a situation? You too will lose courage. My son! Can you tolerate an accusation of declaring war on your own father?"

Aditya Karikala covered his ears and said, "Oh Lord God! It is horrible, disgusting even to hear!"

"That is why I have been cautioning you from the very first: grave danger surrounds us."

"What is the solution, Grandfather? What is the solution?"

"We must first send a trustworthy messenger to Lanka and make him bring back Arulmozli with him. Your brother will not easily leave the battlefield, abandon his men and come. We must send a capable man who can convince him, change his mind and make him come here."

Parthiban stepped up and said, "Sir! If it is agreeable to you, I can go and bring him here."

"That depends on Karikala's wish; and your will. Whoever it is, the messenger should not get involved in extraneous affairs like Vandiya Devan."

"See! Remember what I said!" spoke Parthiban.

Karikala asked, "Grandfather, did you get any news of Vandiya Devan?"

"In the beginning I even had some suspicions about him. I wondered if he had joined our enemies; but, later my doubts were cleared."

"Listen Parthiba!"

"Let him finish, My Prince, let him finish; you are so hasty! Sir why did you suspect Vandiya Devan?"

"I found that he was at Kadamboor on the night of the treacherous meeting. But, later I came to know that he had no involvement in that conspiracy."

"Grandfather, how do you know all this?"

"I did not get an invitation to the banquet at Kadamboor. That itself raised my suspicions. After that, I imprisoned the Chieftain of Kunrator who was returning home from that get-together and took him to my mountain fort. I learned of everything that took place at Kadamboor from him. Apparently Vandiya Devan is a dear friend of Kandamaran..."

"Yes; we know that. They were both in our army garrison near the North Pennar. I knew that they had become good friends from those days."

"Anyway, Vandiya Devan was at Kadamboor that night. It was not clear if he was part of the plot or not. Soon I found the answer! When I heard that he had stabbed Kandamaran on his back at Tanjore before he escaped ..."

"Grandfather! I can never believe that story. Vandiya Devan may do anything, he would never stab someone in the back to escape. That too he is not so wretched as to stab his own friend." Karikala spoke for his friend.

"If he had found that his friend was involved in treason against his master? If that friend had tried to recruit him also into that treason?"

"Whatever it may be; he would have fought face to face; never would he stab someone in the back."

"I am amazed by your confidence in your retainer. Who knows the truth? Lord Pazluvoor has accused Vandiya Devan of having stabbed Kandamaran on his back; they are looking for him; that is all I know. We can surmise that there was some kind of a quarrel between Vandiya Devan and Kandamaran; and that he was not involved in that scheme against you."

"We need not look for such involved proof of that. If Vandiya Devan joins forces with my enemies, this earth will turn upside down! The deep ocean will dry up! The sky would shatter and the sun will rise in the night. The Chozla Dynasty will face utter destruction." Aditya spoke with intensity.

"I agree with the Prince. Vandiya Devan will never betray us and join forces with the enemy. I find only one fault with him. If he sees the face of a beautiful woman, Vandiya Devan will turn dizzy; he will lose his senses."

Aditya smiled upon hearing these words of Parthiban. "Don't I know that nature in him! That is why I ordered him to first deliver my letter to the Emperor and then meet my sister, the Younger Pirati. If he sees my sister once, he has no escape; he has to be her slave!"

Malayaman now asked with surprise, "Is that what you told him? I didn't know it! Did you get any news from him after he left Tanjore? Did the Younger Pirati send any information?"

"I am expecting some message every minute. Nothing has come so far."

"After Arulmozli comes here, we must get your sister also to come here. Then we do not have to worry about anything. We can leave all thinking to her and follow her orders. That will be enough!" said Malayaman of Thiru-kovalur.

"You are worse than Vandiya Devan in this, Grandfather!"

"Yes Karikala! Your sister has picked up the mace of authority ever since she was two years old! She would rule over us -- me, your grandmother and your parents -- and make us dance to her wishes when she was a child. Even now nothing has changed as far as I am concerned. Her rule is law for me! Karikala, don't think that I am demeaning you by praising your sister. It is added honor for you that you have such a sister. I have not seen a man or woman so far, who is possessed of an intelligence comparable to your sister's. You know how capable our Prime Minister Brahma Raya is? He himself consults Kundavai's opinion on certain matters. What other endorsement do you need?"

Parthiban had not overcome his rivalry over Vandiya Devan. He asked, "All that is fine, who disagreed? But, what are we to do if Vandiya Devan has met some other woman and

fallen prey to her enchantment before he has met Kundavai? For example, if he had met that enchantress called the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor?"

He had uttered the last few words in a soft voice; the old man did not hear them. Karikala had heard; he turned to look at Parthiban with eyes brimming with fire. That look petrified Parthiban.

Malayaman stood up saying, "Parthiba! I hope you intend leaving for Lanka tomorrow itself. You two young men may have much to talk about. I am old; I shall slowly walk back to the palace. You can both talk about everything and come back slowly."

After he had walked away a little, Parthiban looked at Karikala and said, "My Prince, My Master! There is some turmoil in your mind. Some sadness engulfs your heart. I think it has something to do with the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. Your very appearance is transformed if there is any mention of old man Pazluvoor's wedding or his Young-Queen. Your eyes redden and spit fire. For how long are you going to bury this sorrow in your heart and suffer? You have called me your dearest friend at least a thousand times. Why don't you share your secrets with me, your friend? What is your anguish? Why don't you tell me? Why don't you give me an opportunity to wipe out that melancholy? How long am I to keep quiet, watching you suffer like this?" Parthiban asked in an impassioned voice.

Aditya Karikala sighed deeply, "My Friend! My heart ache has no cure. It is a sorrow that will die with me; it has no soothing solution. It is nothing that I cannot share with you. I'll tell you tonight. But, let us go back to the palace with Grandfather. It is not correct to let him go back alone."

The Prince stood up.

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 54 -- Venomous Fiend

The three noblemen spent that night in one of the old Pallava palaces in Mamallai. After the night meal, Malayaman walked back to the shore temple to listen to the Story-teller recount the tale of Aravaan. Aditya Karikala and Parthiban went up to the terrace.

Karikala kept gazing at the nighttime view of the Mamallai coast for some time. A few lights burned indifferently here and there. Silence prevailed in the streets. They were closing temple doors after midnight services. The roar of the ocean could be heard as a melancholy background drone. The expert villu-pattu (folk-song) maestro and his group were retelling the story of Aravaan, in the courtyard of the shore temple; town-folk gathered around them, to listen to their story, could be seen as dim shadows in the light of torches.

"Look at this old man, he has gone to listen to the Story-teller at this ripe old age! Whatever you say, there is something commendable about these old timers. Who in these days has the will of mind and strength of purpose like them?" asked Karikala.

"Prince! You too have started talking of the glory of ancient times and oldmen. What have we not achieved in our times that has been done by these old-timers? I have not heard of

anyone even in epics and fables performing such brave, daring deeds like you, at such a young age," said Parthiban.

"Parthiba! You are pure of heart; I know that you will not conceal something in your mind and speak something else. If you didn't do that you will not be my friend but, my worst enemy. You flatter me too much. There is nothing like flattery to hurl a man into the deepest abyss."

"Sir, if one makes up untrue stories about a person and recounts them with a selfish motive, such tales are flattery. Consider Madurandaka, who is slave to those Pazluvoor fellows in Tanjore; if I go and praise him saying, 'You are the bravest among brave!' it is flattery. If you ever find me doing anything stupid like that, you must kill me immediately with the sword in your hand. Not a single word of excess have I uttered about you. Which warrior of ancient times has achieved so much at such a young age? Perhaps we can consider your great-grandfather, Raja-aditya who 'Reposed atop the elephant,' as comparable to you. But, I cannot say he was greater ..."

"Stop this Parthiban, stop this! How can you compare me with Raja-aditya? We are not qualified even to talk about Raja-aditya who reached the heavens meant for the brave, after wrecking havoc on the huge Rashtrakuta forces with a tiny battalion. How can we compare ourselves to him? Forget this Chozla Dynasty. Consider the great heroes of the Pallava clan in which you are born! Will we ever see men equal to the great Mahendra Pallava and Mamalla Narasimha in these lands once again? Think of valiant Narasimha Pallava who established his victory pillar in Vatapi, the capital of Chalukya Pulikesi who had ruled all the lands from Tungabadra to Narmada under one canopy! You and I are nothing compared to him! Can anybody in our times or after us, create a dreamworld like this exquisite Mamallai? ... Oh! Look around you in all directions once more! Look over there where the Story-teller is holding court! Do you think they are ordinary men who gouged granite boulders to build those exquisite chariots of stone? My whole body quivers with elation to think how splendid this Mamallai must have been three hundred and fifty years ago. Don't you feel anything like that? When you think of your forefathers don't your shoulders swell with pride?"

"My Prince, sometime ago you accused me of flattering you. You forgot that I often point out the faults in you. This foolishness of wasting a lifetime with sculpture, art and music has taken hold of you too. It is because of such a madness that all the victories won by my forefathers became useless. What did Narasimha do after establishing his victory pillar in Vatapi City and coming back? He sat here sculpting stones and gouging boulders! And what was the result? Within a few years the Chalukyas rose back to power. They came back with large armies bent upon vengeance; destroyed Kanchi and Uraiyoor and went as far as Madurai! If Nedumara, the Pandiya had not faced those Chalukya hordes at Nelveli and defeated them, all these southern lands would be under Chalukya rule even to this day!" said Parthiban.

"No, Parthiba, no! We have not heard of any ruling dynasty lasting for ever in this world. Even the Ishvaku line of Rama came to an end. Rashtrakutas appeared to overthrow the Chalukyas. It is natural for empires to achieve glory at one time and shrink to nothing at other periods. Some empires last with splendor for long times and then disappear without trace. Think of my own ancestors -- Karikala Valava and Killi Valava of Sangam

Times ruled with such pomp! What do we know about them now? Because some bards wrote about them and their times we at least remember their names! Who knows if those bards sang the truth or let their imaginations run wild in a drunken stupor? But Mahendra and Mamalla created this world of sculpture. This will last for thousands of years and proclaim their fame to all the world. What have we done, comparable to their creations? We killed thousands of men in battlefields and raised mounds of dead bodies; made rivers of blood flow! What else have we done to establish our fame in history?" asked Karikala with some despair.

When Parthiban heard these words, he wondered if it was Aditya Karikala talking; he was stunned into silence for some minutes. After some time he sighed and spoke up, "Prince, if you yourself talk in this fashion about combat and war, what can I say? Your mind is not steadfast today, that is why you are rambling in this fashion. Sir, why don't you share the sadness in your mind with me? Open up your austere heart to me?"

"Parthiba! If I open up my heart and show it to you, what do you think you will find inside? Whom do you think will be inside?"

"That is what I would like to know, My Lord!"

"My mother and father who gave life to me will not be there. My sister and brother, more dear than life, will not be there. My closest friends, you and Vandiya Devan will not be there. A woman, the embodiment of deception will be found there. The Young-Queen of Pazluvoor, the personification of all sordid sins will be there. All these days, I have not spoken to anyone about this torture by that venomous fiend, Nandini who dominates my heart. I have told you now." When Aditya Karikala spoke, the fiery heat of a furnace rose from his words.

"Prince, I could guess this somewhat. Whenever the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor was mentioned, your face darkened and eyes turned bloodshot exhibiting some unbearable pain. How did this undeserving passion take hold of your heart? You are born in a tradition which considers every alien woman as a mother. The nobles of Pazluvoor are blood relatives to you over several generations. Lord Pazluvoor is old in age. Though he is enemy today, it was always not the case. You father and grandfather showed such regard for him. Such a man's legally wedded wife -- however wretched and sinful she is -- how can you even think of her in this way?"

"I should not! I know I should not. All this mental torture is because I realize this. But, she did not take possession of my heart after she became the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. This poison of passion for her had gripped my heart much before, much much before that. I have not been able to get rid of this unworthy obsession, however I try. I speak as if everything was her fault. Only God knows whose mistake it was. Perhaps all the blame should be cast upon the Creator who brought us into this world. Or, we must blame Fate, which made us meet and then separated us!"

"My Lord! Had you met Nandini before she became the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor? Where, when and how did you meet her?"

"That is a long tale. Do you wish to hear it today?"

"I surely do! I shall have no peace if I do not know the details. You are asking me to leave for Lanka tomorrow; I cannot do my duty properly over there if I leave you like this. I must know the situation and offer you some solace. Only then will I find rest."

"My Friend! Are you going to comfort me? There is no solace for me in this birth. I am not sure if I will find peace even in my next birth. Anyway, I will tell you; for your peace. I do not want you to go away thinking that I have secrets from you. You should not depart for Lanka with such thoughts."

After saying this, Aditya Karikala hesitated for some time. He then began disclosing his story.

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 55 -- Nandini's Lover

"I met Nandini for the first time when I was twelve years old. One day in Pazlayarai, I, my sister Kundavai and my younger brother Arulmozli were playing on the lake behind our palace, holding boat races. After playing for a while we were walking back through the garden. We heard the voice of our elder-grandmother Sembiyan Madevi. All three of us were fond of our grandmother who spoilt us with her affection. We wanted to immediately tell her about our experiences with the boat and so we walked into the garden pavilion where we heard her voice. Besides our grandmother, three other persons were in that building. One of those three was a young girl, about our age. The other two appeared to be her parents. They were saying something about that girl to my grandmother. When we three children walked in, they stopped; all of them looked at us. All that I can recall is how that young girl's beautiful eyes widened with surprise and watched me. I can see that look clearly, even now"

After saying these words, Karikala became silent, gazing at the stars in the sky above him. Perhaps he could glimpse the face of that young girl in those light clouds which floated across the sky, veiling the stars. Who knows?

"Sir! What happened next?" asked Parthiban, bringing Karikala back to this world. The Prince continued:-

"My sister Kundavai told my grandmother all about our boat. After listening for a while, the Elder Pirati asked her, `Darling, did you meet this girl? See how smart she is? They have come from the Pandiya country to the house of our Mr. Esanya Bhattar. They will be here for a while. This young girl is Nandini. Why don't you make friends with her and play with her? She will be a good companion to you!' But, I soon found that my sister did not like this. The three of us left the pavilion and walked back towards the palace. At that time Kundavai asked me, `Anna! Did you see that girl there? Wasn't she awful looking? Such an owlish face! Why does grandmother want me to play with her? I cannot stand her face, what am I to do?' When I heard this, I realized an important truth. That is, women are born with envious minds. However beautiful a girl is, she cannot stand the sight of another pretty face. Among all the women of my clan, my sister is renowned for her beauty. She could not stand the sight of another attractive girl! Otherwise why would she make such a comment about that new girl? But, I did not let my sister off easily. I teased

her often and praised the comeliness of the new girl just to anger her. We often got into petty arguments and quarrels because of this. Arulmozli who was too young, did not understand this bickering and was quite bewildered. Very soon after this, I left with my father to the war in the Pandiya Kingdom. We engaged in several combats against the Pandiya forces as well as the troops from Lanka which came to help them. All our engagements were victorious. Finally, Veera-pandiya abandoned the field to run away and hide. At that time we did not know if he had gone into hiding or whether he had died in the battlefield. But, the Lankan forces which had come to help him, began retreating towards the coast. We followed those retreating men till the Port of Sethu. All survivors of that Singhalese Battalion escaped to their island in small boats and rafts. My father wanted to teach a lesson to those Lankan kings who often helped the Pandiyas against us. He decided to send a large army under the Command of the Younger Lord Velir of Kodumbalur to Lanka. It took us some months to collect supplies and organize the ships for this expedition. We camped at Sethu, organized the campaign and sent off our army in the ships; only after we had news of their safe landing in Matottam did we return. By the time I came back to Pazlayarai, more than two and a half years had passed.

"I had completely forgotten the priest's daughter who had come from Madurai. When I came back to Pazlayarai, I found that both my sister and that girl had grown unrecognizably. I found them both to be great friends. Not only had Nandini grown more beautiful, but she shone with silken garments and jewels. I found that this was due to my sister's generosity. Unlike the earlier time, Nandini now hesitated to see me or talk to me; she seemed bashful. I tried to make her overcome her shyness. I found incomparable pleasure in talking to her and spending time in her company. At that young age, this attraction for her surprised me no end. Like the fresh floods of the Cauvery, a new emotion, a fresh experience was flooding my heart, filling my soul with an ambiguous enthusiasm. However, I soon found that none of my near and dear ones liked this new interest of mine. Since my coming back, Kundavai began to dislike that girl. One day, my grandmother Sembian Madevi talked to me in privacy, 'Nandini is from a priest's family; you are the Emperor's son. You are both no longer young children. This intimacy between you two is no longer appropriate,' she advised. I, who revered my grandmother like a Goddess became angry with her and disregarded her words. I forsook her advice and began meeting Nandini in secrecy. But, that did not last too long. Suddenly one day, Nandini and her parents left Pazlayarai and went back to their village in the Pandiya Kingdom. When I found out, sadness overwhelmed me; anger and rage were uncontrollable. I buried my sadness and showered my rage upon my sister. Fortunately, I had to soon leave and go north. I came away with the battalion sent to fight the Rashtrakuta forces which occupied Thondai and Thiru-munaipadi. It was at that time that I met you; we became inseparable friends.

"With the help of Malayaman, you and I fought the Rashtrakutas. We drove them beyond the River Palar and captured Kanchi City. At that time we heard the bad news from Lanka: our forces were defeated, the Younger Lord Velir had lost his life there. On hearing that news, Veera-pandiya who had been hiding in mountain caves, came out like a serpent emerging from its mound. He collected his army once again and captured Madurai to raise his fish-flag over that city. Remember how impassioned we became when we heard all this news? The two of us went back to Pazlayarai immediately.

"My father was already in ill health, losing the use of his limbs. Even so, he was planning the Pandiya campaign. I begged him to send me in his stead. I promised to destroy the Pandiya army and capture Madurai once again; I swore that I would not return home without Veera-pandiya's head. You were also with me at that time. My father agreed to send us on that campaign. He ordered us to go under the leadership of Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari, the Elder Lord Velir of Kodumbalur who had already been appointed the Commander for that campaign. We went gladly. On the way we met the Elder Lord Pazluvoor and his battalion. We learned that he was annoyed at not being appointed the Commander for the campaign.

"Seeing our enthusiasm, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari gave us important assignments in the conduct of that war. My Friend, remember? You and I performed the greatest deeds of daring and valor during those combats. There is nothing wrong in being proud of that! We defeated the Pandiya forces and captured Madurai, but were not satisfied with that. We wanted to destroy every unit of that army so that it could never regroup again. We ordered our men to follow every company of their retreating battalions and kill them mercilessly. We pursued the withdrawing Pandiya King with one compact detachment.

"A fish-flag flying high atop an elephant directed us to the path of that coward's retreat. We followed in that direction and caught up with that regiment. The Aabathudavi Battalion surrounded Veera-pandiya in all sides and guarded him like a fort. In a way, that Aabathudavi Battalion of the Pandiya Kingdom was much better organized than even our Chozla Velaikara Battalion. Each man of that Pandiya regiment had sworn that he would never retreat, and that he would guard the life of his king by giving up his own life if needed. If that became impossible and they were unable to save their king, those men had sworn to cut off their heads with their own swords and offer themselves as sacrifice. We fought against such invincible men. Those men fulfilled their oaths, for we killed every single one of them. Dead bodies rose in mountains. But, we could not find Veera-pandiya in their midst. We had been fooled by the fish-flag; the elephant stood there carrying the fish-flag of the Pandiyas; but, there was no sign of their king anywhere on it or nearby. Wasn't Veera-pandiya an expert in running away from the battlefield and hiding himself? We suspected that he had run away once again. We divided our remaining forces and sent them to search in all directions.

"You and some men went swiftly along both banks of River Vaigai. I too did not remain quiet. I stepped into the river bed and went southward. A single horse's hoofprint marked the sandy river bed; bloodstains accompanied the hoofprint on the sand. I followed the clue and entered a grove which was like an island in the middle of that river bed. A Vishnu temple was in that grove; a few cottages for housing temple priests were also nearby. That grove contained several flowering bushes and trees for use in the Lord's worship. A small lotus pond was brimming with delightful blooms.

"Dear Friend! You perhaps remember it. I had pointed out that grove and ordered that you or our men should not even accidentally enter it. The reason for my strict orders was not merely to safeguard the temple and the flower garden: that queen among women who had abducted my soul and taken abode in my heart, lived in a priest's house in that grove. Once earlier, when I rode into that grove, I saw Nandini. Her appearance was quite changed. She had bound her tresses over her forehead, into a coiffure like that of Saint

Andal's and wound flower garlands around it. More garlands decorated her shoulders! `What is this guise?' I asked her. She said that after she had been forced to part from me, she had resolved to marry no living man and that she was intent on marrying the Divine Lord Krishna, just like Saint Andal! It appeared to be utter foolishness to me. An ordinary human girl, marrying God!? -- Even so, I did not wish to argue with her about it at that time. `Let the war be over; we will see afterwards,' I thought. I asked her if she needed any help. `Arrange it that none of your soldiers come into this garden. Only my aged father and half-blind mother live here with me now. I did have a strong bodied brother, but, he is away on pilgrimage!' she said. I promised her that none of our men would go into her garden, and returned to our camp. I met her later two or three times. My old passion for her had grown tenfold; but, I remained patient. The assignment on hand must be completed first. I must go back to Pazlayarai with Veera-pandiya's head. As a reward for that I could ask my father for Nandini's hand.

"When I had been so resolved, when I saw the single horse's hoof-prints going into that garden, I became quite angry. On entering the grove, I saw a horse hidden behind the trees. The fellow who had escaped here must be in one of those cottages. I walked up to Nandini's house and looked in through the window.

"My Friend, the sight that met my eyes in that house remains in my memory like a sign etched with a hot branding iron. Veera-pandiya was lying on an old coir cot. Nandini was embracing him and giving him water. Her face shone with an unusual light; her eyes were filled with tears. She bound his wounds and soothed him. I had no control over my rage as I kicked the door open and walked into that room. Nandini who was binding his wounds, stopped upon seeing me and came towards me. She fell to the floor bowing to me and with folded palms begged, `Sir! In the name of the love you had for me once upon a time, I beg you! Please do not harm this man. Please do not kill this mortally wounded man!'

"Hesitantly, `What is the relationship between you and this man? Why are you trying to save his life?' I asked. Nandini replied, `He is my lover; my God; my benevolent lord who has promised to marry me!'

"Even the little pity I felt for Veera-pandiya on seeing his wounds, now vanished. That wretch, the sinner -- he had taken his vengeance on me! It would not have mattered if he had captured my kingdom; he had abducted the queen who ruled my heart! I could never show him any mercy!

"I kicked Nandini aside and went past her; with one swift blow of my sword I chopped down Veera-pandiya's head. If I think of that monstrous, horrible deed now, I feel ashamed, mortified. But, at that time the rage of anger mingled with the rage of war in me. In that passion, I killed Veera-pandiya; as I was about to step out of the house, I turned back to look at Nandini once more. She too was staring at me without blinking an eyelid. I have never seen such a look on this earth. All the emotions -- passion, anger, pride, prejudice, envy, love -- burned like bright embers in her eyes. I have tried to decipher the meaning of that look several times; till this day I have not understood it.

"By then, you and several of our men had come there in pursuit of me. Upon seeing Veera-pandiya's headless body and bleeding head, all of you raised cheers of victory.

Nonetheless, my heart felt crushed with a heavy weight, as if the Vindhya mountain was placed upon it."

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 56 -- A Palace Incident

Several hundred years ago, when Mahendra Pallava ruled from Kanchi, he had made arrangements for narrating the Great Bharata story at various places all over his kingdom. He arranged this in order to rekindle the spirit of bravery among the Tamils who had become peaceful in nature due to the spread of Buddhism and Jainism. He built several meetinghouses in many towns exclusively for the telling of the Bharata story. His arrangements continued, uninterrupted, in the Thondai Territories. People gathered in such meetinghouses or in open spaces to listen to the story of Mahabarata. Several singers who were experts in narrating the story of Bharata and the subplots of that great epic, who were maestro's in miming the heroic deeds of the epic warriors existed in the country.

When Arjuna, the epic warrior had been on a pilgrimage he went to the Kingdom of Manipuri, where he met Chitrangi and fell in love with her. An exceptional son called Aravaan was born to her. This son born to Arjuna and the Mountain Princess was a very brave youth. On hearing that the Bharata War was about to take place, he came down to the plains to join the Pandava's. Just as the war was about to begin, the leaders began looking for a perfect, brave youth for being offered as a sacrifice to the Deity of the Battlefield. Aravaan came forward saying, "Here I am; give me up as the Sacrifice to the Battlefield." Since no other young warrior was braver than him on the Pandava side, they had to give him up as the sacrifice.

This story of brave Aravaan, who came forward to give up his life for the victory of his party, caught the fancy of the Tamil people. The Story-teller had finished this tale of Aravaan at the shore temple of Mamallai that night. The musicians ended the program by raising slogans such as, "Long life to Sundara Chozla the Emperor of the three worlds!" "Long life to the Crown Prince Aditya Karikala!" These sounds came floating down the sea breeze. Town-folk who had been listening to the story rose to disperse.

"The Story-teller has finished. Grandfather Malayaman will be back in a short while," said Karikala.

"Aravaan's story is completed. But, your story is not over yet?" asked Parthiban.

"Look at the strength of Malayaman at this age. Even now he keeps awake till midnight and goes to listen to the Story-teller," said Karikala.

"There is nothing so fantastic about being alive till a ripe old age! There are many such old men in this town. They go and listen to the Story-teller because they cannot sleep at night!"

"Are you dismissing Thiru-kovalur Malayaman as one such ordinary old man? How many victorious battles he has fought? I wonder if we would even be alive till his age? Even if we are alive we may not be strong like him"

"My Prince, there is a reason for these old-timers being so strong."

"What is that?"

"They are not caught in the seductive wiles of womenkind. They do not lose their heart to a mere priest's daughter and go into a decline with desire for her. Even if some woman happens to tempt them, they do not hesitate to drag her by her tresses, throw her into their fortress and then continue with life."

"Parthiba, Nandini is really not a priest's daughter. There must be some secret about her birth ..."

"How does it matter whose daughter she is? Priest's daughter? Prince's daughter? Even if she is a nameless orphan, so what? Look at that other old man of Pazluvoor! He saw her somewhere along the wayside; immediately dragged her in, threw her in his palace, a ninth one after the other eight!"

"I am astonished by that, My Friend!"

"Astonished? About how that old man became enmeshed in her wiles?"

"No, no! About how she, who once swore that she loved me and then declared that Veera-pandiya was her lover and tried to save his life, how that Nandini willingly married that old man! That is what astounds me."

"I am not surprised by that. Sir, what surprises me is your behavior. How could you spare her, she who begged for the life of your lifelong enemy -- that greatest coward, Veera-pandiya who is famous for escaping and hiding from the battlefield, that greatest rival of your Chozla clan? That is what astonishes me the most when I think of it. For one thing, you could have chopped her to bits there itself; if you didn't like that, you could have at least bound her hands and feet and taken her prisoner. You did neither of these things! My Prince, I think I can remember now, you brought Veera-pandiya's dead body and threw it outside the cottage. We all shouted impassioned slogans of victory. In the midst of all that commotion I could hear sobs from inside the house. I had asked 'What is that?' You had answered, 'Some woman of the priest's family! She is already petrified by these killings. None of you need go in and frighten her further.' In the midst of the victorious enthusiasm we did not ponder on that incident. We all left that place with Veera-pandiya's head. You came back with us, though you did not participate too much in our revelry. You seemed apathetic. I questioned you about that and you pacified me with some reason. I remember now about wondering if you had been badly wounded or something!" said Parthiban the Pallava.

"There was no wound on my body Parthiban! But, a wound that will never heal festers in my heart! That sight - of her falling at my feet in front of Veera-pandiya's bed and begging for his life with folded hands, -- it has been etched in my mind. I tremble with the thought, 'Oh, why did I not grant her the one request she had?' If I could have given my own life and brought Veera-pandiya back to life, I would have done it! That is not possible; I blame myself, curse myself. Parthiban, we feel so proud of our capabilities and achievements; we think that nothing is impossible to us; we even believe the ancient writings that declare, 'Kings are Divine!' But, do we have the power to bring back life to a dead body? Can any royal personage do it? All that we can do is take life; no man has the power to bring back life..."

"It is good that we do not have such powers. If you had possessed that power, what a terrible impropriety would have been committed! You would have brought Veera-pandiya back to life; he would have once again hid himself in some desert cave; and the Pandiya war would still be going on! All this because of a woman's tears!" spoke Parthiban.

"Pallava, you are an unfortunate who dislikes womankind. You have no experience of love. That is why you say such things."

"Yes; it is true that I have never been enmeshed in the wiles of any woman; but your dear friend Vandiya Devan would be mesmerized into a grinning idiot by one glimpse at any made-up face. That is why you like him better than me, is it not so, My Prince?"

"Ah! In the end you have come back to Vandiya Devan. I wondered how you had forgotten him all this while!"

"Yes, it is distasteful to you if I tell you the truth about him. I won't mention it again. What happened after that, Sir? Did you never meet Nandini after that? Did you never ask her how she came to marry old man Pazluvoor when she claimed to have lost her heart to Veera-pandiya?"

"That night after the death of Veera-pandiya, after all the victory celebrations, you went to sleep in our camp. I could not sleep. Every nerve in my body trembled with an urge to see her again. I wanted to see her, console her, beg her forgiveness. At other times I wished to pour all my rage upon her. Anyway, I felt that I would have no peace if I did not see her again and that I could never return home without her. So, after all of you had slept, much past midnight, I stole out of the camp with my horse. I neared that grove on the river bed. With an agitated mind, shivering body and weakened limbs, I dismounted and walked slowly towards the temple. I found that all those cottages had burned down to ashes. An old man and a woman were sitting amidst that devastation and wailing. I recognized them as the two people who had brought Nandini to Pazlayarai long ago. Upon seeing me, their fear and sorrow increased. In the beginning they could utter nothing clearly. Slowly, I dispelled their fear and questioned them. Apparently their elder daughter lived in a village across the river. They had gone to visit her because it was time for her childbirth. Nandini had refused to go with them; since she had been adamant, used to doing her own thing from childhood, they had decided to go without her. They had not realized that a battle was taking place around them. On the way back, they had seen some rogues binding the hands and legs of some woman and throwing her into a funeral pyre in the forest. They had felt that such atrocities were natural in times of war and had hurried away from that place with fear. On coming back they saw that their houses were aflame and no sign of Nandini. After disclosing this much, the priest and his wife began wailing even louder; `Prince, where is our dear daughter? Where is she?' they asked. I had known even before that they were not Nandini's real parents. Now it was confirmed.

"If they were truly her parents, would they have left her alone like that in the middle of a war and gone away? Therefore, I felt neither pity or mercy for them. All I could feel was an ambiguous sadness about Nandini's fate. `Go find your daughter's funeral pyre and you too fall in it and die!' I cursed them and came back to the camp before daybreak. I don't think anybody knew about my leaving or coming back ..."

"Yes Sir! We never knew. I am surprised that you have locked up all these secrets in your heart for so many years after that. This is totally against the tenets of friendship. If I had been you, I would have shared all my feelings."

"But, you were not me Parthiban! No one in the world could be in my position. If you had been me, who knows how you would have behaved?"

"Why worry about what happened long ago? What happened after that? When did you see Nandini again? Was it before or after she became the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor?"

"If I had met her before, she would have never become Pazluvoor's Queen. When Lord Pazluvoor was married, you and I were not in Tanjore. Remember how disgusted we felt when we heard that news? Some months after that, I was coronated as the Crown Prince. My father, grandmother and other elders had made that arrangement so that there would be no confusion about the succession to the Chozla throne. Perhaps they feared that Madurandaka would be tempted by ill advice from someone or other. They anointed me as Crown Prince and gave me the title of Parakesari, with the right to issue edicts, and establish stone inscriptions on my own. My dear father blessed me wholeheartedly, 'Henceforth, the responsibility of ruling this Chozla Empire is yours!' All the citizens, people, ministers, generals and chieftains upheld it and raised cheers of victory. In those celebrations, I had almost forgotten Nandini. An incident which took place a few hours after the coronation proved that I could never forget her. My father led me, crowned with the antique, jewelled diadem of Chozla kings, to the inner courtyard of the palace to seek the blessings of my elder-grandmother, mother and other elderly women of our clan. My young brother, the Prime Minister and the Lords of Pazluvoor followed us. Along with the older women, my sister Kundavai, her friends and several other young noblewomen waited in the palace court to greet me. They all shone with silken garments and bright jewels; they welcomed me with bright happy faces. But, among all of them only one face caught my attention; it was Nandini's enchanting face. The angel of my heart, Nandini, who I thought had burned down to ashes! How did she appear in that court? How beautiful she looked, dressed in those wonderful clothes and jewels, shining like an empress among all those queens! What ecstasy and triumph on her face? How did her loveliness become tenfold?"

"Within a few seconds my heart built several dream fortresses. That day when I had been crowned as the Prince of the Chozla realm was truly the luckiest day of my life! Was the queen of my heart also going to be my royal consort? Is this becoming possible by some magic, some sorcery? as I daydreamed, my mother Vanamadevi stepped up to me saying, 'My Son! My Child!' and embraced me with kisses. In that same instant a totally unexpected incident occurred. My father screamed loudly, 'Aahh!' and fell down in a faint. Everything became confused. I and the others tried to revive the Emperor. All those women except my mother and my elder- grandmother Sembian Madevi left the chamber. My father regained his senses soon. I led my sister Kundavai apart and asked her, 'How did Nandini come here?' My sister said that Nandini had married the Elder Lord Pazluvoor and was now the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. Sharp lances pierced my heart!"

"My Friend, I had been wounded several times in battlefields, but the wound caused by my sister's words, 'Nandini is the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor,' has not healed to this

day." Aditya Karikala finished and held his chest with both his palms as if that pain still lingered in him.

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 57 -- Enchantress

Parthiban had been listening to the story of Karikala without much sympathy in the beginning; now, even he felt moved. He wiped away the teardrops brimming in his eyes.

"My Prince! I never dreamed that such sorrow could result because of the love for a woman. None of us knew that you had such an experience on the day of your coronation. Of course, we were all puzzled by your apathy. We teased and joked and tried to revive your spirits. I remember all that now!"

"Yes, you teased, joked and tried to revive my interest in things. You talked about the great things I was going to achieve during my rule. You and our friends had conquered all the lands from Lanka to the Himalaya's for my empire that day itself! In fact you captured empires across oceans! I remember all those boasts; I remember how painful all that teasing was.

"After that, one day, Nandini summoned me to her mansion, the Pazluvoor Palace. There was a struggle in my mind -- to go or not to go? Finally, I decided to go; I wished to question her and clear up several doubts about various incidents. I wanted to know the secret about her birth. I even suspected if there was any connection between my father's fainting spell and his seeing Nandini accidentally in the palace that day. You may perhaps recall that though the Emperor recovered quickly on that day, he never regained his health after that. I thought that some unsolved mystery would be cleared by talking to Nandini. I made up all these reasons as my excuses -- I really went to her because of that magnetic grip she had over me. I was merely fooling myself by other justifications. Lord Pazluvoor was not in town; there was no one to stop me in his palace. In fact none in Tanjore knew of my old liaison with Nandini. They thought that the newly crowned Prince was coming to their palace to seek the blessings of the elder women of Pazluvoor. I met Nandini in a flower laden gazebo in her garden. ...

"Parthiban! We have heard the tales of sailors who have gone across distant seas. They talk about swift, powerful ocean currents in uncharted waters; how ships caught in such currents would be smashed to smithereens. When I stood in front of Nandini that day, I was like one of those sailing ships caught in an unfamiliar ocean current. My body, heart and soul were all shattered into a thousand formless pieces. Even I was amazed by the words I spoke. One corner of my brain wondered, 'Oh dear! How can I talk like this?' but my tongue mouthed unmentionable nonsense at the same time. Nandini expressed happiness about my becoming the Crown Prince. 'I have no happiness in that,' said I. 'Why?' she asked. 'What question is this? How can I feel happy, when you have betrayed me like this?' I questioned. She pretended to not understand me. We continued conversing in that fashion for some time.

"I accused her of forsaking my love and of taking Veera-pandiya for a lover. I spoke sarcastically about her marriage to an old man. 'Prince! First, you killed the love I had for

you; then you killed the man who loved me in front of my own eyes; perhaps you won't rest content till you have killed me also. You don't even like me being alive; that is fine! Please kill me also now, and satisfy your desire!' saying this she pulled out a sharp knife hidden in her waistband and extended it to me. 'Why should I wish to kill you? You are the one torturing me to death!' I told her.

"In the end I spoke words about which I am now ashamed to even think. 'Nothing is lost even now. Say just one word! Promise to leave this old man and come away with me! I will give up my kingdom and come away with you. Let us both sail away to distant lands across the oceans.' I told her. Nandini laughed horribly on hearing my words. Even now my hairs stand on end if I think of that laughter. 'What are we to do by going away to distant lands across the seas? Shall we chop wood for a living? Or shall we raise a plantain orchard?' she asked with sarcasm. 'Yes you will not like such things. After living in a priest's house you have become the Queen of Pazluvoor now, haven't you?' I said.

"She continued, 'I don't intend to be satisfied with this. I intend to sit upon the throne of this Chozla Empire as an Empress. Tell me if you like the idea. Tell me if you will do this: Kill both these Lords of Pazluvoor, throw the Emperor in prison, become the Emperor and make me your consort!' she demanded. 'Oh! What horrible words you speak!' I retorted. 'Was it not a horrible deed to kill my beloved Pandiya who was wounded, right in front of my eyes, on his sickbed?' asked Nandini. This infuriated me further. I babbled some enraged words at her and rose to leave. She did not let me go easily, 'Prince! If you ever change your mind, come back to me. When your heart is ready to make me your Empress come back to me!' she taunted. I left her that day and have never seen her again," finished Aditya Karikala.

Parthiban, who heard all this was horrified and shocked. "My Prince, can there be a monster, a ghoul like this on the earth? It is good that you never met her again!"

"It is true that I did not go and see her again. But, she has not let go of her hold over me! She circles around me, day and night, torturing me. She occupies my thoughts throughout the day; fills up my dreams in the night. Sometimes she comes to me with an enchanting smile, hugging me, kissing me; at other times she comes with a sharpened knife, ready to kill me. Sometimes she comes with eyes brimming with tears, sobbing her heart out; at other times her hair is disheveled, long nails have scratched her soft cheeks, she is screaming in horror and fear. She comes laughing at me, like a maddened fiend; like a saint with a calm face, soothing my sorrows. Oh dear God! How can I explain how that wretch torments me! Do you remember what Grandfather said this evening? He gave all sorts of reasons about why I should not go to Tanjore. The real reason for my not going to Tanjore and my trying to bring my father here to Kanchi is Nandini."

"Prince! Are you avoiding Tanjore just because you are afraid of a mere woman? What can she do? Are you afraid that she will treacherously poison you and kill you?" asked the Pallava nobleman.

"No, Parthiba, no! You have not understood me even now! I am not afraid that she will kill me. I am afraid that she will make me follow her wishes. 'Throw your father in prison! Chase your sister out of this country! Kill this old man and place me on your throne!' If that sorceress says these things once more, if that enchantress orders me once more, I am afraid that I would feel like doing all those things. My Friend! Either Nandini should

die or I should die. Or, both of us should die. Otherwise there is no mental peace for me in this birth."

"What kind of speech is this? Why should you die? Permit me, I will go to Lanka later. I shall first go to Tanjore and kill her; doesn't matter if I commit the sin of killing a woman"

"If you ever dare to do anything like that, you will become my first enemy. If Nandini has to be killed, I shall kill her with these own hands of mine. After that I will kill my own self! I cannot tolerate anyone else harming even the tiny nail of her little finger. Parthiba! You forget Nandini; forget everything I said about her. As Grandfather advised, you leave for Lanka tomorrow itself. Somehow, convince Arulmozli and bring him here. He can stay here in Kanchi; grandfather and grandson can consult with each other and do what they want. We can both go away to Lanka. We can sail away in ships, with large armies to the island kingdoms in the southeast. We can go to Java, Srivijaya, Sumatra, Burma and Malaya. We can install our victorious tiger-flag in all those countries. After that we can turn westward: to Egypt and Persia; to the Arab worlds and Yavana Kingdoms. We can spread the fame of Tamils in all those worlds and raise our tiger-flag in all their cities. My Friend, did you know that in all those countries, they are not bound by restrictions of karppu (sanctity of married women)? Kings in those lands can want any woman under their rule and take her to their beds..."

Before a shocked Parthiban could to reply to this, Lord Milad-udayar Malayaman came up to them.

"There is no story more wonderful than the story of Aravaan! There is no hero like him in any of these countries you were talking about just now. Why are you both up this late? Parthiban, don't you know that you have to set sail early tomorrow?" asked old Grandfather.

"That is what we have been talking about, without sleeping," replied Pallava Parthiban.

Ponniyin Selvan

Part I -- New Floods is Concluded

Top

Principal Characters in Ponniyin Selvan

Aditya Karikala -Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire, Sundara Chozla's eldest son.

Amudan's Mother -A deaf-mute, garden keeper on the outskirts of Tanjore.

Anirudda Brahma-raya -The Prime Minister and confidant of Sundara Chozla.

Arinjaya Chozla-Sundara Chozla's father, King Gandara Aditya's younger brother, died after ruling for merely one year.

Arulmozli Varma -Sundara Chozla's younger son.

Astrologer of Kudanthai- An astrologer patronized by Kundavai, a spy of sorts.

Azlvar-adiyan Nambi, Thirumalai Appan - A follower of the Vaishnava faith, step brother of Esanya Bhattar, a spy.

Esanya Bhattar -A priest of Pazlayarai, elder brother of Azhvar-adiyan Nambi.

Gandara Aditya -Sundara Chozla's elder uncle, a devout follower of the Saiva faith, ruled before Arinjaya Chozla.

Idumban Kari -A footman from Kadamboor, a conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of a gang sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Kalyani of Vaithumba- Widow of King Arinjaya Chozla, a famous beauty, Sundara Chozla's mother.

Kandamaran- A young man, son of Sengannan Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor.

Kundavai, Younger Pirati - Sundara Chozla's daughter.

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Elder, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari - An important chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Commander of Chozla Armies in Lanka. Elder-uncle to Vanathi

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Younger, Paranthaka Vikrama - Younger Lord of Kodumbalur, Vanathi's father who lost his life in a battle in Lanka.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Elder, - Ambalavan An important and powerful chieftain, - Officer of Taxation, Food Supply and Finance for the Chozla Empire, elder brother of Kalanthaka, Nandini's husband, about 65 years old.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Younger, Kalanthaka - Commander of Tanjore Fort, Captain of the Guard Corps.

Madurandaka Deva -A Chozla Prince, son of Gandara Aditya and Sembiyan Madevi, a few years older than Aditya Karikala.

Malayaman Milad-udayar of Thiru-kovalur -A nobleman and petty chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Empress Vanamadevi's father and thereby grandfather to Karikala, Arulmozli and Kundavai.

Manimekala - Kandamaran's younger sister and daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya.

Mazlava-raya - A nobleman, Sembiyan Madevi's brother.

Munai Raya - A nobleman, not very confident in Lord Pazluvoor's schemes.

Nallavan Sattanar - Court poet at Tanjore.

Nandini, Young-Queen - An extraordinarily beautiful Pazluvoor woman with a mysterious past, Azhvar-adiyan's adopted sister, raised by a priest's family near Madurai.

Parthiban Pallava - A nobleman of the Pallava clan, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's confidant.

Poonkuzlali - Daughter of the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai, Sendan Amudan's cousin.

Ravidasa, the Sorcerer - Leader of the Pandiya conspirators, a former retainer of Veera-pandiya, had a mysterious hold over Nandini.

Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor - A nobleman and crony of Lord Pazluvoor.

Sembiyan Madevi, Elder Pirati - Widow of King Gandara Aditya, Madurandaka Deva's mother, fond of Sundara Chozla and his children, devout.

Sendan Amudan -A flower vendor of Tanjore, lived with his deaf-mute mother in the outskirts of the city.

Soman Samban - A conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of Ravidasa's gang, sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Sundara Chozla Paranthaka - Emperor of the Chozla Kingdom.

Vanamadevi of Thiru-kovalur - The Queen Consort, wife of Sundara Chozla, mother to Karikala, Kundavai & Arulmozli.

Vanathi Devi - A young noblewoman of the Kodumbalur clan, Kundavai's friend, in love with Prince Arulmozli.

Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan - A scion of the Vaanar clan of Vallam, Aditya Karikala's messenger.

Vasuki - Nandini's maid.

Veera-pandiya - Pandiya King vanquished and killed by Prince Aditya Karikala.

Glossary

Aadi A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-August

Aavani A month of the Tamil calendar, about August-September

Advaita A philosophy, belief in the non-dual nature of God

Akka Elder sister, a respectful greeting for an older girl

Amma Mother, a respectful greeting for women

Ankush A goad used by elephant drivers

Anna Elder brother, respectful address for older men

Araya, raya, arasa King, chieftain, Raja

Ayya Father, mode of address for an older man

Bharata Natyam Classical dance style

Chakra Discus

Champaka A fragrant flower

Chanakya A medieval personality of political cunning, Machiavelli

Devi, Deva Lady, Lord

Iruvatchi A fragrant flower

Jaamam A period of time 3 hrs long;

1 Jaamam = 7½ Nazli; 1 Nazli = 24 minutes

Jaggery Unrefined or brown sugar

Kaadal Love

Kaadam A league or about 10 miles

Kaavi Reddish, ochre dye

Kadal Sea

Kadamba A flower

Kama Love, Passion

Karadi 1. A musical instrument 2. Bear

Karagam Folk dance performed while balancing a decorated pot

Karppu Sanctity of a married woman. Chastity

Kavi 1. Poet 2. Monkey

Konnai A flowering tree

Kumkum Red powder, used to decorate the forehead

Kummi A folk dance of women circling while clapping hands

Kunrimani A tiny red-black berry or bead

Kural Ancient Tamil couplets

Kuravai Koothu Gypsy dance or dance by maidens

Malai Mountain

Mariamman A village deity, a pagan Goddess

Marudai A shade giving tree, a colloquial name for Madurai City

Mattalam Drum

Maya Illusion, Deception, unreal

Moringa A leafy tree

Mu-ttholl-ayiram A collection of romantic verse in Tamil

Muzlai Cave

Nadu Country

Nanam A vertical, make-up like, caste mark worn by followers of Vishnu

Nanal A sedge like grass

Nandavan Garden

Netri-chutti Forehead ornament

Padai Veedu Army Housing

Padinettam Perukku Eighteenth day flood

Palli Padai P Memorial temple

Panchayat Council of Village Elders, often five persons

Parai A kind of country drum, an announcement

Perumal Lord, God
Pirati Lady, Royal Princess
Pitam Monastic seat
Punnai A tree with yellow flowers
Rudraksha A multifaceted bead, a sacred berry
Saiva A sect of Hinduism, follower of Shiva
Salli A musical instrument
Selvan Beloved, Darling (masculine)
Selvi Beloved, Darling (feminine)
Silappadikaram A Tamil Epic
Sindhu Folk song
Puli- Tamarind A shade giving tree bearing a sour fruit
Thambi Younger brother, mode of address for young men
Thaye Mother, mode of respectful address for women
Thaazlai A fragrant cactus
Thevar-aalan, Thevar-aatti Divine man, divine woman, dancers
Thevaram Devotional Poems
Thinnai A raised platform in the front porch of a house
Thiru-vai-mozli Devotional Poems
Udukku Small palm held drum
Uriyadi Similar to the Maypole
Vaetti Loose lower garment of men
Vaishnava A sect of Hinduism, follower of Vishnu
Vamsa Dynasty
Veena A musical stringed instrument
Velan Attam A semi-religious dance, usually by a man
Villu-pattu Folk songs accompanying a string instrument, story telling
Vinnagara Vishnu temple