

Kalki's "Ponniyin Selvan"

Part 2-A [Chapters 1 -26]

Whirlwind

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List of Principal Characters

Glossary

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

Ponniyin Selvan : Part II -- Whirlwind - Part A

Chapter 1 -- Poonkuzlali

The twilight of dusk was calm. Sea waves had become quiet along the shores of Kodi Karai. Catamarans and boats turned shorewards. Seabirds which had gone in search of food were coming home to their nests. White sands stretched for a distance along the shores; beyond was forest and dense jungle spreading far into the distance.

Forest trees did not move; leaves did not quake; silence reigned in all directions. The red-rayed God was descending quickly towards the line where the sea and sky met. Cloud groups tried to hide the red-lord and gleamed with a new radiance.

A small boat floated on the sea near the shore. Tender, flower-petal waves swayed and pushed the craft gently as if it were a baby's cradle. A young maid was in that boat. When we see her, we remember Sendan Amudan describing his cousin. Yes; she must be Poonkuzlali. Befitting her name, a thaazlai (fragrant cactus) petal acquired beauty by gracing her beautiful tresses. Long, dark curls danced on her rounded shoulders. She had made a necklace of sea shells and cowries found on the beach and worn it around her neck. But, these gained allure by being on her body; one cannot say that they added to her beauty. If beauty itself takes form, what ornament can embellish it?

Poonkuzlali was leaning back stylishly in her boat and singing. Even the sea seemed calm, listening to her song. Perhaps, even the wind did not blow but floated gently listening to her. The distant forest trees stood still, engrossed in her melody. The sky and earth were enchanted into silence. Even the sun hesitated to vanish, lingering in the horizon, listening to her.

Let us also listen to that honey-sweet lyric, drifting in the breeze:

When wave-filled seas are still,

why does the inner ocean seethe?

When the earth maid sleeps,

why does the heart feel so hopeless?

Birds in the forest looked for their nests;

the hunter and his woman go homeward;

The sky and the shore are shrouded in silence;

sea waves stop quietly, a breeze crawls softly.

In the mind of that doe-eyed maid,

why does this storm rage?

In the heart of the wayside waif,

why does a whirlwind swirl?

When the sea is ever so quiet,

and a breeze crawls ever so softly,

When the Earth maid is at rest,

why does her heart fill with such sobs?

When ocean waves are quiet,
why does the inner soul overflow?

In the heart of that maid,
why does a whirlwind blow?

What is the anguish that dwells in the heart of this young maid? No one knows! What is that pleasant-sorrow that mingles in her melodious voice? Who knows! Perhaps they wrote the words of that lyric with tears! We do not know; but, when we listen to her song, our heart is filled with a nameless grief, a sweet-melancholy that is barely contained.

Poonkuzlali stopped singing and pulled at her oars a few times. The boat reached the shore, she jumped out and pulled it up. Some catamarans were lying about in a group on the beach. She lifted the boat to rest on these logs and leaned back to survey the scene around her.

Over there, the fire had been lit atop the light-house. It fire burned brightly and will do so all night long. It will warn all ships out at sea, "Do not come near!" The sea was not deep along the shores of Kodi Karai. Only small craft and catamarans could come ashore along its beaches. If ships and sailing vessels came near, they would run aground to be buried in the sands. In fact, if a ship happened to strike against those dunes, it would break into smithereens. Thus, the light-house at Kodi Karai served a very useful purpose. On the opposite side, a spire could be glimpsed amidst the short trees of the nearby forest. Lord Shiva, Kuzlagar of Kodi Karai was enshrined under it. About two hundred years ago, Saint Sundara Murti had visited this shrine and worshipped the Lord dwelling alone in the forest temple. "Oh! Dear Lord! Why are you alone like this in the midst of a forest on this sea shore? Do you have no other dwelling? When there are so many cities where pilgrims come to sing your praises, why have you come to this frightening forest in Kodi Karai to dwell in such lonesome splendor? Did this wretched sinner have to see this sight?" sang the devout Saint.

What penance is this to dwell here in frightening solitude,

In this forest where the harsh sea-wind blows?

My wretched eyes did see you, Lord Kuzlagar,

Who is your companion in this wilderness?

Multitudes in magnificent forts surrounded by moats,

Many devout pilgrims await to sing Your praises, dear Lord!

Enclosed in this untamed forest fortress of Kodi Karai,

Why do you live in seclusion, dear Kuzlagar, My Lord?

Lord Kuzlagar of Kodi Karai was in the same solitary state even two hundred years after Saint Sundara had visited him. The forest had grown even more dense around the temple. Owls and kites sang from hollows in forest trees. Only hunters and frightening tribals lived here and there in isolated huts in the forest.

Yes; there is one difference. There was no light-house here when Saint Sundara Murti had visited. Only a few years ago, during the reign of Paranthaka the First, was the light-house built. A few cottages to house the workers who had been appointed for the upkeep of the light-house were built around its base. The priest who conducted services at the temple also came to live in this tiny village.

Poonkuzlali leaned back on her boat by the sea shore and looked around. She spied the light-house and wondered if she should go that way. Just then she glimpsed the cupola and spire; she made up her mind upon hearing the cymbals from the temple. What was the point in going back home so soon? Go to the temple, ask

the priest to sing some Thevaram songs and then go home after partaking the sacrament-offerings. Having made up her mind, she began walking towards the temple.

She danced and hummed; she leaped and skipped as she walked. On the way she spied a group of spotted deer crossing the sand dunes and going into the forest. A small, baby deer was leaping and jumping, swiftly with seven or eight adult deer. Upon seeing them she became excited. She began following swiftly, with leaps and bounds as if to catch them. How could she, however swift she was, compete with the spotted deer? The group was far ahead. On reaching a particular spot near the forest edge, those beasts lifted their fore-paws and leaped across. All the older animals were able to cross the spot in one leap and reach the opposite side safely. But, the calf could not cross in one leap. Its hind-legs were caught in the mud near the far side. It gripped the bank with its fore-legs and struggled as much as it could. But, its hind-legs began to sink more and more in the mud. The mother doe stood on the bank and gazed at its calf with worry. It could do nothing to help its calf.

Poonkuzlali summed up the situation instantly; she scrutinized the land and found where the quicksands ended and firm ground began. She ran around the muddy sinkhole and leaped across to a firm trail on the opposite shore, close to the spot where the deer calf was caught. The doe panicked at first, but stood nearby, hesitantly. Perhaps Poonkuzlali knew the language of the deer; she spoke some words softly as she knelt beside the calf. She stretched out her hands and took hold of the baby deer's fore-legs. With one swift, strong, pull she freed the beast from the quicksand. For some moments the tiny deer stood with shivering limbs on the bank. The mother doe approached close and nuzzled its nose. The next instant, both mother and daughter had leaped away into the forest.

"Chee! Thankless beasts!" said Poonkuzlali. But, she consoled herself, "They are no worse than humans!" She walked towards the temple.

After crossing the stretch of sand dunes, she had to walk through a forest trail bound by thick creepers and encroaching bushes; she had to climb knolls and go down dales. One could say that this forest was one of nature's unique creations. There were no rock mountains or granite hills in that region. Everything was sandy. The sea sand had formed dunes here and there. Bushes and creepers growing on the dunes had transformed them into tiny hillocks. Steep valleys were interspersed between such overgrown dunes. It was not easy to find a way through this forest. It would seem like one had walked very far; but one would be coming back again and again to the same spot. Poonkuzlali walked through this forest quickly and reached the temple. Flowering trees and bushes bloomed around and inside the temple quadrangle bound by a wall.

Poonkuzlali walked into the temple, where the priest welcomed her happily. Very few people came to worship at that temple; therefore, it was natural that the priest looked happy about this solitary visitor. The priest gave her the sacrament-offerings and coconut from the evening service.

"Amma! Will you wait a while? I shall also come home with you as soon as I lock up here," said the priest. It was somewhat difficult to walk back home through that forest after nightfall. But, one need not worry if Poonkuzlali was the guide.

"I can wait Sir! I am in no big hurry! You can finish your chores slowly before we leave," said Poonkuzlali.

She stepped out into the quadrangle surrounding the temple. Taking hold of a low tree branch she jumped onto the compound-wall encircling the temple. The corner where the wall turned was decorated with a large sculpture of a bull. She leaned back on the bull and stretched out her legs along the wall. Reclining comfortably, she bit into the coconut with her teeth and began to eat with relish.

As she enjoyed the wonder of darkness creeping up from all directions, she heard the gallop of horses. She looked out towards the direction from which the noise arose. The sound of trotting horses raised all sorts of memories and drew her into some dreamworld. Some unexplainable grief came to fill her heart. Who could

be coming now? How does it matter to me, whoever it is? For some days now, these comings and goings have indeed increased. People claim to be coming on government affairs; going on state missions. Even yesterday, two men had come. Their very sight was quite revolting. They forced my brother to row his boat and take them to Lanka. Of course they paid considerable money. May lightning strike their money! Who wants money? What can one do with money in this wilderness? But, my brother and his wife are very fond of money! I wonder why they hoard it like this?

The hoofbeats are coming closer and closer. Not one horse; two horses seem to be approaching. I can see them now; they are climbing up, slowly, very tiredly from the hollow, up the sand dune, coming this way. The horses appear tired as if they have travelled over a very long distance. A man is seated on each horse. The fellow on the first horse seems young; looks quite attractive and well built; some dignity in his posture. But, nothing compared to the charm and distinction of the face that dwells in the secrets of my heart. In fact, if one examines him closely, this fellow looks owlish with a flat face!

The first horseman was our old friend Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan. The man behind him was the Doctor's son. Both were worn and weary by the time they had reached this place from Pazlayarai. Even so, Vandiya Devan's face brightened upon seeing the young girl lounging atop the temple wall. When he realized that she was looking at him, his naturally enthusiastic spirits revived. He stopped his horse and stared back at her eagerly. Perhaps he may not have been so happy if he had known that she was comparing his face to an owl. How useful it is that one cannot know the thoughts of another!

Poonkuzlali perceived that the young man was looking at her. She realized how uncouth she might appear, biting into the coconut with her teeth ... Suddenly a certain bashfulness came from somewhere and enveloped her. She jumped down on the soft white sand outside the wall and began running along its boundary.

When he saw this, Vandiya Devan also felt like dismounting and following her. He jumped off and ran behind her, chasing her.

Who can reason with such meaningless behavior? One could say that the instinct of humankind which had come down over thousands of generations had made Poonkuzlali run like that; that very same instinct made Vandiya Devan chase after her, urging him to catch up with her.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 2 -- Mudhole

Vandiya Devan ran behind that girl following her across forest and dune; across thicket and thorn. She was visible for some time and then she would disappear. When he was almost sure that he would not be able to catch up with her, she would appear once again. He remembered the story of Rama chasing after the elusive golden deer. But, this girl was neither illusion nor magic deer. Of course she had the swiftness of a forest creature. How quick she is! Why am I following her like this? What foolishness is this? Immediately he found some excuse.

As they neared Kodi Karai he had remembered the girl described by Sendan Amudan. This must be that Poonkuzlali. If I make friends with her she will be helpful in my mission. Perhaps she can guide me to reach the light-house. They had seen the light-house from quite some distance. But, it was not easy to approach. Once they had entered the forest, the light-house vanished from view. They went around in circles but found no trail or path. It was in such a situation that he has seen her on top of the wall near the temple. When he had intended to accost her and ask the way, she had run away swiftly like a deer. "I better go back!" he decided. But, how could he accept defeat while competing with a mere girl?

Oh! Here comes an open stretch of beach. I can see the ocean beyond. How beautiful it looks -- the blue expanse of the calm sea. I can even see the light-house; a fire is now burning brightly on its top. The flames spread a unique glow all around, creating an enchanting scene.

I must abandon my chase and go towards the light. No! Never! I can easily catch up with her in this open space. In fact this region is not all that sandy. Grass and creeper have firmed the soil. Mud patches have dried and formed crusts in some places. I can run fast without any obstruction and catch her easily. Moreover, she is running towards the sea; she has to stop when she reaches the water. Perhaps this peculiar girl will disappear into the sea! Oh! How foolish of me to not bring my horse. I could have caught her in a trice if I had been mounted on my steed.

Why is she hesitating? Why is she turning right instead of running forward to the sea? Is she planning to escape by vanishing into that forest on the right? I can never catch her if she gets into the woods. All this chase is one big waste! Vandiya Devan was tired by now. He was quite breathless.

She seems to have changed her mind again. She had abandoned the idea of entering the forest; she had circled back like a spinning top -- is she going towards the light-house? If I quicken my pace I can easily catch her now ... I must get hold of her and ask, "Hey girl! Why are you running scared like this? I have brought you news from your beloved." How surprised she will be! Sendan Amudan had not sent any message; but who cares? Can I not dream up some message?

He used all his remaining energy and sprinted forward. Suddenly he screamed, "Aawwh!" At first he was not sure of what was happening to him. It was clear very soon: both his feet were being dragged into the quicksand. Both feet were buried first; next went the ankles. Soon the mud rose up his limbs.

Oh dear! How foolish of me! The surface seemed hard and crusted. The mud is quite wet inside. Vandiya Devan had heard of muddy sink-holes that never dried completely. Sheep and cattle, horses, even elephants caught in such mudholes or quicksands would be slowly buried till they were completely swallowed without a trace. Is this one such sink-hole? Why, even my knee-caps are buried ... How much further will I go down? Very soon I will be waist deep. Will this sink-hole which can swallow horses and elephants let go of me easily? Dear God! Is this my fate? Should all my dreams be buried in this mud? The only recourse is that peculiar girl; she must surely help me. There is no other savior!

Vandiya Devan began calling loudly, "Oh! Oh! Dear Lord! I am dying! I am drowning in this mud; is there no one to lend me a hand and save me?"

Poonkuzlali heard his cry for help. She stopped running, hesitantly. She understood his predicament in one second. She looked around and spotted a broken dugout that lay half buried in the mudhole and half on firm ground. It must have been a log-boat used long ago when the sink-hole had been filled with water. She pulled it out and jumped in, pushing it forward with wood poles. How astonishing! The log-boat is skimming across the mudhole like a swan gliding over a placid lake! She soon reached the further shore and jumped on firm ground. She planted her feet firmly and reached out to take both Vandiya Devan's hands. Using a monstrous strength she dragged him out of that sink-hole. Oh dear Lord! What strength in those delicate hands! Her hands seem even more firm than the iron grip of Lord Kalanthaka, the Commander of Tanjore Fort.

Once he was on firm ground, Vandiya Devan laughed blithely. Only his legs continued to shiver.

"You think you saved my life by pulling me out! Did you think that I could not come ashore if you had not helped me?" he asked.

"Then why did you holler 'Help! Help!' like that?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"Only to make you stop running."

"Then, I'll push you back into this mudhole. Get back by yourself!" She took a step to push him in.

"Oh! No! Noo!" Vandiya Devan moved back.

"Why are you yelling?"

"I am not afraid for my life. I fear the mud! Already it has dirtied my clothes up to my waist!"

Poonkuzlali smiled as she looked at him head to toe. "Look at the sea over there! Go wash up."

"Please walk ahead and guide me."

They walked towards the sea shore, making sure to go around the mudhole.

"Why did you run helter-skelter like that when you saw me? Did you think I was some terrible ghoul or ghost?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"No; I didn't think you to be a ghoul. I thought you were an owl. You have an owlish face."

"There is nothing wrong with my owlish face when compared to your monkey face." He mumbled under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"Nothing. All I asked was why did you run like that on seeing me?"

"Why did you chase after me like that?"

"I came after you to ask you the way to the light-house."

"There! Can't you see the light-house? Why ask directions?"

"I could not see it in the forest. Why did you run like that?"

"All men are wicked. I never liked any man!"

"Even Sendan Amudan?" asked Vandiya Devan softly.

"Who? What did you say?"

"I mentioned Sendan Amudan of Tanjore."

"What do you know about him?"

"I know that he is your dearly beloved lover."

"What!? What?"

"Are you not Poonkuzlali?"

"Yes, I am Poonkuzlali. What did you say about Sendan Amudan? About him being my ..."

"Is he not your beloved?"

Poonkuzlali laughed mirthfully. "Who said that?" she asked.

"Who else? Sendan Amudan told me."

"Tanjore is very far away. That is why he could say it and escape. If not ..."

"What, if not?"

"If he had said that here in front of me, I would have thrown him into that quicksand!"

"So what? There is plenty of water in the ocean to wash off the mud."

"The sink-hole in which you fell has swallowed cattle and horses. It can bury an elephant easily."

Vandiya Devan shivered with fear. He remembered the feeling of being sucked into the hole slowly. If this girl had not come to my rescue ... by now I ... He shivered again.

"What else did Sendan Amudan say about me?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"He said that you were his cousin. He said that there was no beauty comparable to you even in the world of Gods."

"Perhaps he has personally visited the world of Gods, to make such statements! And then, what else?"

"He said that you sing very well. If you sing even the sea would calm down to listen to you. Is that true?"

"You can find that out for yourself! Here comes the sea."

They came to stand on the sea shore.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 3 -- At Midnight

Stars twinkled up above. The crescent moon was strolling across the low skies like a silver ship gliding above the waves. The wind had become more brisk and the sea roared. White waves came rolling out, trying to pull in those standing on the shore.

"What are you waiting for? Wash away the mud quickly. I have to go home soon, or I won't get any food today; my sister-in-law will lock up the kitchen!" said Poonkuzlali.

"Is the sea very deep here?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"I have never met a coward like you! The sea is not at all deep for quite some distance here. Even if you go half a league into the sea, the water is only waist deep. That is why we have to light the fire on the light-house every day."

Vandiya Devan stepped into the water hesitantly. He washed away the mud from his clothes and cleaned himself. As he stepped back from the water he saw the Doctor's son riding down towards the beach. His own horse followed behind.

"Oh dear Lord! What if the horse steps into the quicksand?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"It won't. Horses are more intelligent than human beings," said Poonkuzlali.

"But, there is a man on one of the horses! And he is dragging my horse behind him!"

"Yes; that is quite dangerous. Go run up and warn him."

"Stop! Stop!" shouted Vandiya Devan as he ran to warn the Doctor's son. Poonkuzlali walked up to join them. All three began walking towards the light-house.

"Why don't you ride your horse?" she asked.

"No matter; I'll walk with you."

She went up to his horse and caressed its face. The horse seemed happy; it twitched its mane and neighed.

"My horse seems to like you. That is good!"

"Why is that good?"

"I have to go on to Lanka. I was thinking of leaving this horse in your care. Will you take care of it?"

"Sure! I can look after him. All animals make friends with me easily. Only humans don't like me ..."

"Why do you say that? Did you know that Sendan Amudan thinks the world of you?"

"I love animals; hate men!"

"What did men do to you?"

"Men are wicked; full of lies and falsehood; wickedness is their work."

"You cannot say that about every one! Sendan Amudan is good! Here, this Pinakapani, the Doctor's son -- he is very good..."

"How about you?"

"I am also good. How can I sing my own praises?"

"Why have you both come here?"

"Don't you know that the Emperor has been ill for some time now? The Doctor needs some medicinal plants for the treatment. I believe this forest has several rare herbs and plants. This man and I have come for them."

"You said that you were going to Lanka, just now?"

"Any herb that is not available here has to be brought from Lanka. Don't they say that Hanuman's medicinal mountain is still in Lanka?"

"Yes; it is still there! That is why thousands of people are dying there of the poison fever."

"Oh! Oh! Is that so? I did not know. The palace Doctor who sent us does not know it."

"I have never seen such liars like you men! Two fellows came here two days ago. They too said something like this. But, their tale was a little more believable ..."

"Who were they? What lies did they speak?"

"They claimed that some sorcerer had sent them. They declared that they were going to Lanka to find tiger-claws and elephant-hair for making an amulet to protect the Emperor. My brother has taken them to Lanka in his row-boat."

"Oh! Is that so!" said Vandiya Devan. He remembered Ravidasa the terrible sorcerer. He recalled the horrible experience in the night when he had rested in the wayside pavilion. Oh God! Why am I caught up in such dangerous missions? There is valor in fighting face to face with one's enemy in the battlefield. There, I can express my true strength and bravery. Why do I get caught up in such sorcery and treachery? Who are those two who have gone to Lanka before me? How far can this girl be trusted? Perhaps she is also part of that treacherous group. No! No! She seems innocent. I must somehow make friends with her.

"Poonkuzlali, I shall tell you the truth. Remember what I said just now? That I came here to collect herbs and medicinal plants; that is false! I am going to Lanka on a very important, secret mission. I can tell you if ..."

"No need. Don't you know that you should not share important secrets with women? Don't tell me anything."

"They said that about ordinary women. There is nothing wrong in telling you the secret."

"How did you know that I am not an ordinary girl? It is not even half an hour since you met me."

"Poonkuzlali, I liked you the instant I saw you on that temple wall. Can I ask you something, will you answer truthfully?"

"Try asking."

"Is it true that Sendan Amudan is not your beloved? Are you not going to marry him?"

"Why do you wish to know?"

"Amudan is my friend. I don't wish to do anything against his interests. But if you really do not care for him ..."

"Say it. Why are you hesitating?"

"I am thinking of trying my luck in that matter. Poonkuzlali, you must not underestimate love! There is nothing in this world more divine than love. All those saints, Appar, Sundara and Sambanda fell in love with God and sang so many lyrics. Kalidasa has sung about love! Even Krishna was enslaved by his love for the milkmaids of Brindavan."

"Sir! I shall say something, listen carefully and remember it!"

"What is that?"

"I too liked you when I saw you first. I did not feel the revulsion I felt about the two men who came some days ago."

"Ha! I am truly fortunate!"

"But, do not start any such nonsense about love and passion with me."

"Why?"

"I do not love Sendan Amudan. But, I have several other lovers!"

"Dear me! Other lovers! Who? How many?"

"I will walk out from my house at midnight. If you follow me then, I will show them to you. You can know for yourself!" After saying this, Poonkuzlali roared with loud laughter, "Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha!"

Her laughter disturbed Vandiya Devan's heart. Poor thing! This girl must be daft! It is useless to expect any help from her on my mission. It is better that I do not discuss my affairs with her.

They approached the largest house near the light-house. An elderly gentleman and gentlewoman came out of the house. He seemed stunned on seeing Poonkuzlali leading a horse followed by two men.

"Poonkuzlali, who are these men? Where did you find them?" he asked.

"I didn't find them, Father! They found me!"

"It's all the same. How many times have I told you to get back home before nightfall? You never listen! You brought two other men the day before yesterday. Now you have brought two more men! Why have these men come here?" asked the woman.

"They have come here to collect medicinal herbs for the treatment of the Emperor," said Poonkuzlali looking at her father.

"Why Sir? Is this true?" asked that gentleman of Vandiya Devan.

"Yes Sir. Here is the official letter." Vandiya Devan drew out the palm-leaf roll of letters from his waist pouch and handed them to the elderly man. Just then, another roll fell to the ground from his waist. He quickly bent down and picked it up to hide it away in his pouch. "I am truly asinine; I haven't learnt even after one bad experience!" he mumbled to himself.

The gentleman unbound his roll of letters and began reading in the light from the fire on the light-house. His face cheered up and he looked at his wife, "The Younger Pirati has sent this letter. We must feed these men. Go warn your daughter-in-law; she might empty the rice-pot!"

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 4 -- The Open Seas

Vandiya Devan met the light-house keeper in privacy after the night meal and told him that he had to go as quickly as possible to Lanka. That gentleman who was named Tyaga-vidangar expressed his regrets. "Once upon a time there were several boats and rafts on this shore. Now all of them have been sent to Sethu. They have been commandeered as supply vessels for our armed forces in Lanka. Though I personally own two small boats, my son took one of those boats yesterday, and went to Lanka with those newcomers. I do not know when he would return. What can I do?" asked Mr. Tyaga-vidangar the light-house keeper.

"Who were those men? Your daughter mentioned that they were somewhat disreputable."

"Yes; I did not care too much for them. I really do not know who they were or why they were going to Lanka. They had the palmtree signet of Pazluvoor. Even so, I would not have permitted my son to go with them. But, my daughter-in-law is very avaricious -- when those men promised a bag of coins in payment she insisted that her husband should go."

"Sir! What is this peculiar behavior? If an inexperienced woman orders it, should your son obey?" asked Vandiya Devan. He then added after hesitating a bit, "Forgive me. It is your family affair."

"My son! There is nothing wrong in your question. We have a family curse; my son is ..."

"Is your son speechless, a mute?"

"Not exactly.... why do you ask?"

Vandiya Devan explained how he had stayed with Sendan Amudan and his mother in Tanjore.

"Aha! Are you that man? We already have news of you here. They are looking for you all over the kingdom!"

"Maybe; I know nothing about that."

"Now I understand your urge to go to Lanka in such a hurry."

"Sir, your surmise is not correct. I am taking a very important letter to an important person in that island. If you wish I can show ..."

"No need. The Younger Pirati has described you and written about you. That is enough for me. But, I am unable to help you on your venture."

"You said that you had another boat?"

"Yes, there is a second boat. However, there is no one to row it. I can give it to you, if you and your friend can handle it."

"Oh! Both of us have no knowledge of row-boats or sails. In fact I am somewhat afraid of water. And in the open sea ..."

"Even if you know rowing, you cannot take a boat out to sea without experience. After a while, the coast will vanish from view and you would be lost in the open seas without any sense of direction."

"Anyway, I cannot take the man who came with me to the island. I have to leave him here to collect the medicinal plants. You must think of something to help me."

"There is one way; it is not easy. You can try, if you are lucky ..."

"What should I do? I can surely try!"

"There is no one in these parts who is comparable to Poonkuzlali in handling boats. She has crossed the sea to Lanka several times and has been even farther. I can tell her; you can also ask her," said Mr. Tyaga-vidangar.

"Sir! Please call her immediately. We can ask her," said Vandiya Devan without patience.

"No. She is very stubborn. If we ask her now and she refuses, we can never change her mind. I will talk to her tomorrow when she is in a better mood. You can also ask her when she is alone with you."

Mr. Tyaga-vidangar then went away to the light-house tower. Vandiya Devan went up to the front porch to lie down. The Doctor's son who had come with him had gone to sleep much earlier. Vandiya Devan was also extremely tired after the exhausting journey and was soon asleep.

Suddenly sleep was gone. The noise of a door opening. Vandiya Devan made an effort to open his tired eyes. Somebody emerged from the house and walked out. He recognized the figure as a woman. The light-house fire cast some light on her; it was Poonkuzlali, no doubt about that. What had she said? "Follow me at midnight. I'll show you my lovers!" I thought it was a joke. Now, she is really walking out at midnight. Where is she going? If she is really going to meet a lover or lovers, will she tell me about it? There is some mystery about this. Or, is she ... why should I not follow her? I have to talk to her tomorrow and somehow convince her to take me to Lanka in her boat. Following her now might be useful. Suppose some danger befalls her! And if I can save her from that! She may be more open to my suggestions.

Vandiya Devan got up quietly and followed Poonkuzlali. He had not forgotten his experience of the evening in the mudhole. He did not want a similar thing to happen again; therefore, he followed her quickly without losing sight of her. It was vacant beach for some distance around the light-house; he could see her clearly for some time. He quickened his steps intending to catch up with her; that was not possible. She seemed to go faster and faster. She did not seem to even notice him following her. Soon they had reached the edge of the forest full of overgrown dunes and valleys. She walked around the towering sand dune and reached a rocky finger of land extending out into the marshy sea side. Poonkuzlali turned a corner and walked even more rapidly. Vandiya Devan, following far behind, felt "At least I have not lost sight of her!" Suddenly he could see her no more!

How could she vanish so quickly? What magic was that? Is there some depression far ahead? He ran up quickly to that spot and looked all around. She could not have walked away in three directions: it was flat marshland and she would be visible if she had walked that way. He took a few cautious, but firm steps and made sure that there were no sinkholes in that area. She must have climbed up this dune and gone into the forest. He found the traces of a trail winding through the short bushes on that dune. Vandiya Devan began climbing that trail. His heart beat could be heard loudly. Even the light from the light-house was not visible here. The crescent moon had already set. He had to find his way by the twinkling starlight. After a while even the faint trail was gone. The bushy shrubs and short trees began to take monstrous forms. Their shadows turned in to ghouls and ghosts. Shadows moved when leaves shook in the breeze. Every movement sent a shiver through Vandiya Devan. What dangers lurk around what dark corner? Poisonous reptiles and horrible beasts can pounce on me from anywhere. Danger can fall from above; or strike from behind. Why am I caught in this quandary? How foolish, I did not even bring my spear!

What is that noise? Is that a shadow on the branch? Two spots of light, gleaming from that dark bush -- what are they? He could not control the trembling in his limbs. Fine! There is nothing for me here. How foolish of me to come here and be frightened, let me go back ... As he was about to turn back, he heard a voice. A girl sobbed; then a soft song:

Even as the wave-filled sea is quiet,

why does the inner ocean seethe?

Even as the Earth maid sleeps,

why does my heart fill with sobs?

Vandiya Devan abandoned the idea of going back. He began climbing higher towards the voice. Soon he reached the top. She stood there; Poonkuzlali. She was singing; she was singing to the stars, looking up at them. She considered those heavenly bodies a rapt audience and sang to them. Those astral bodies shivered on hearing her sad lyric. One of those stars was Dhoomaketu, the comet. The comet's tail was long and spreading like a fan. The silhouette of the young girl at the peak, the dark sky, the bright comet, her voice and sad melody -- all these made Vandiya Devan lose his sense of perspective. He had reached the top of that hillock. Now, he stood in front of her; facing her. Behind her, very far away, he could see a faint light -- the light-house. Like a fence keeping the sea within bounds, white waves rolled languidly along the shore, as far as the eye could see.

"You have come! I thought you were sleeping like Kumbakarna on the porch."

"I woke up on hearing the door open. You walked so fast; without even looking back. It was very difficult to follow you."

"Why did you follow me?"

"What a stupid question! You asked me to follow you! Have you forgotten?"

"Why did I ask you to follow? Do you remember?"

"Why not? You promised to show me your lovers! Where are they? Let me see them -- your lovers!"

"Over there! Look behind you!" said Poonkuzlali.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 5 -- Insanity

Vandiya Devan turned, and looked. His intestines rose from his abdomen and blocked his chest. They rose even higher to choke his throat. A thousand shafts of lightning shot through his body. A million red-hot needles pierced his every pore. Such a horrifying sight appeared before his eyes.

In that darkness which spread endlessly, ten, twenty -- a hundred fiery furnaces took form; they had neither smoke nor light. Neither were any embers rising from burning wood. They were pure shafts of fire; somehow they rose from the ground and stood upright. Suddenly some shafts vanished. Other fiery columns rose to take their place. It was a giant monster of dark hue; a gargantuan demon with an immense mouth in his headless torso. He did not have merely one mouth; he had several orifices which opened and shut slowly one after the other. When he opened a mouth the shaft of fire rose in an ethereal glow. When he shut a mouth the light was masked.

When Vandiya Devan saw this sight, he felt as if every pore in his body oozed blood. He had never experienced such terror. He had not been this petrified even in the dungeons of Elder Lord Pazluvoor. He heard demonic laughter, "Ha, ha, ha, ha!" behind him and turned back to find Poonkuzlali. If it had been any other circumstance, that laughter itself would have given him a fright. Now, that very same laughter gave him courage. The fact that a human being, a girl made of flesh and blood stood next to him acted as a pillar of support.

"Did you see my lovers!?" asked Poonkuzlali. "These fiery ghosts are my lovers. I come here at midnight to make love to them!"

There was no doubt about this girl being completely deranged! How can I depend on her to take me to Lanka? Some other thought struggled to emerge from his subconscious mind. What was it? What was it? Something about these fiery ghouls...

"Can your friend Sendan Amudan compete with these lovers of mine?" asked Poonkuzlali's voice from some deep well. He was trying to remember something. Finally after much struggle and mental conflict he recalled: --

Such apparitions are natural in marsh lands formed by water stagnation over soils rich in sulphur! When sulphur gasses spring forth from the earth, such phosphorescent columns arise at nighttime. The steaming sulphur appears like fiery shafts shooting from the marsh. Some columns last a long time; some come up in short bursts of steaming liquid. Ignorant country-folk fear this natural phenomenon thinking it to be ghosts and phantoms. He remembered reading about these facts; about the discussions with elders and childhood tutors. Reason and fear tussled; reason won. There was no point in explaining all this science to this foolish girl at this time. Somehow, I must calm her down and lead her back.

"Girl! Your lovers won't go away anywhere. They will stay here. We can come back tomorrow and see them, can't we? Come let us go home."

Poonkuzlali did not reply; she began to sob ceaselessly. Vandiya Devan wondered how to handle this new nuisance. He waited for some time and finally said, "Girl! can I go back?"

The sobbing continued. He felt useless. "Fine, do as you wish. I am sleepy, and am going back!" he declared as he started down. Poonkuzlali stopped crying immediately. With a few quick steps she went down first and stood back. Vandiya Devan ran down to join her. They walked towards the light-house. How can I trust this insane girl and get into her boat? Cross the ocean? But, no other option seems to exist. What soothing words can I say to make her feel more friendly?

Poonkuzlali asked, "The comet Dhoomaketu can be seen in the sky. What do you think about it?"

"I have no thoughts about it; a comet can be seen -- that is all!" said Vandiya Devan.

"They say that disasters will occur if a comet appears on the sky."

"Yes, some say that."

"What do you say?"

"I have not studied astrology. I know people say such things."

They walked silently for some time. Again Poonkuzlali spoke, "They say that the Emperor is not keeping good health. Is that true?"

She is not all that deranged, sensed Vandiya Devan. He felt a little more confident. "I saw him personally. The Emperor is bed-ridden. He has no sense of feeling in both his legs. He cannot even take a single step. Have I not come to gather medicines for his cure? Woman, will you help me in one thing?"

She gave no reply, but asked, "They say that the Emperor is not likely to live too long, he will die soon; is that true?"

"If you don't help me now, it may happen. I believe that there are some rare medicinal plants in Lanka. They say that the Emperor can be cured if we bring those medicines to him. Will you row your boat for me and come to Lanka?"

"Suppose the Emperor dies, who is likely to ascend the throne after him?" Vandiya Devan was stunned by this question from Poonkuzlali.

"My dear girl! Why should you and I worry about that? How does it concern us whoever gets the throne?"

"Why shouldn't we be concerned? Are we not subjects in this empire?"

This girl is not at all insane! I have to be very careful with her. There must be some reason behind her peculiar behavior.

"Why are you quiet? Who will ascend the throne next?" she asked again.

"Aditya Karikala has been coronated as the Crown Prince. By law he must ascend the throne next."

"Madurandaka -- does he not have any rights?"

"Has he not declared that he does not want to rule?"

"He said that before. Now, he apparently wants his kingdom."

"Is it enough if he wants it? Don't people have to approve?"

"Many big-wigs are said to be in his favor ..."

"Yes. I heard that too. I am surprised that such news has reached even your ears."

"What will happen if Sundara Chozla dies suddenly?"

"There will be confusion all over the nation. That is why I need your help now, to prevent any such thing ..."

"How can I help?"

"I told you earlier; I have to go to Lanka urgently, to bring some medicinal plants. Can you row your boat and come with me to the island?"

"Why do you need me? Are you not ashamed to ask a girl to row her boat for you?"

"Your father said that there was nobody else. I believe even your brother left yesterday."

"So what if he is gone? Don't you have two hands? Doesn't the fellow who came with you have two hands?"

"We know nothing about boats..."

"There is nothing magical about boats. If you pull the oars it will glide by itself!"

"Shouldn't I know navigation? What if I am lost in the open seas?"

"If you are lost, drown in the deep sea! What am I to do about that?"

They had reached the light-house. Vandiya Devan wanted to end this fruitless conversation. He did not wish to provoke her further and confirm her refusal. Even though she seemed to refuse, her tone and words gave him some hope.

He could not sleep when he went to bed the second time. Like that earlier night in Kadamboor, all sorts of thoughts jostled his mind, greatly confused by bits and pieces of information. He was able to sleep only in the late hours of the night.

He was in some dreamworld. He was seated in front of Poonkuzlali in a small sail boat. The sea was around them on all four sides; water everywhere. A pleasant breeze. The boat was floating on that breeze. Poonkuzlali shone with a radiant beauty. Black curls danced on her forehead. Her saelai folds floated in the wind. He had forgotten where he was going or why he was going. He felt that he had journeyed this far

merely to go sailing with Poonkuzlali. Something was missing. What was it? Oh! It is Poonkuzlali's song. Hadn't Amudan praised her song?

"Dear girl! Can you not open your coral red lips and sing me a song?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"What did you say?" asked Poonkuzlali with a smile. Ah! That smile is worth a thousand worlds!

"Open your sweet lips and sing me a melody!"

"If I sing you a melody, what will you give me?"

"I will come near you and on your soft cheeks ..."

Poonkuzlali drew a sharp dagger from her waist. She raised the weapon with her hand. "Watch out! If you take even one tiny step beyond that sail-post, I will use this knife. The sea fish are very hungry!" she said.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 6 -- Hidden Lair

Vandiya Devan was aroused by bright, red rays of the rising sun. Even after sleep faded, it took him a while to regain all his faculties. It took a few minutes to differentiate between the rays of the sun and the fire-light from the light-house. Which incidents of the previous day were real and which were dreams? -- nothing was very clear.

Only the light-house keeper's wife and her daughter-in-law were to be found in the house. They said that the old man had gone to collect flowers for the service at Kuzlagar Temple. Vandiya Devan was hesitant to ask those women about Poonkuzlali. His eyes surveyed all the rooms, but, Poonkuzlali was to be found nowhere. After he had eaten the morning meal provided by them, he decided to look for her near the temple. Instead, he found her father. The old man was gathering flowers from trees and bushes surrounding the temple wall. He said that on some days, Poonkuzlali would come with him to help him weave flower garlands; but, she had not come today.

"She must be somewhere in the woods, chasing after deer or wandering along the seashore. Go find her and ask her," he said. "Thambi, but, be careful about one thing. She can be very dangerous. Don't think of romantic poems you have read and venture into dalliance with her -- she will turn into a veritable demon. Your life may not remain yours!" warned the light-house keeper. Vandiya Devan shivered thinking of his dream of the previous night. He then walked into the forest looking for that peculiar girl.

Where was he to look for her in those woods? Tiring quickly, he felt like getting out of the forest; presently, he began walking along the sea shore. Though he had walked quite some distance, there was no sign of Poonkuzlali. He turned back thinking, "Anyway she must come back home for the midday meal. I can get hold of her at that time." A sudden urge came upon him to get into that shallow sea and bathe in its cool waters. The sea seemed calm without too many waves; Poonkuzlali had said that it was not deep along this coast. Then, why hesitate? It was important that he get rid of his fear of the sea. Particularly, now that he was to travel across oceans on boats and ships, he must surely overcome this fear.

He removed his waistband, pouch and scabbard and placed them on the beach. Slowly he took a few steps into the water. As he walked further, the depth did not increase beyond his knees. When small waves dashed against him, the water rose up to his waist -- that was all! "What a ludicrous ocean this is?! There is no depth even to dive into?" muttering such words he walked some more. Oh! Dear me! I seem to have come away quite far thinking that this sea is not deep. Suppose the tide rises suddenly? What if the waves increase in size? As soon as this thought occurred, he turned to look back at the shore. It was true, that he had come away quite far from the beach; however, the sea cannot rise suddenly!

Oh! There comes Poonkuzlali! I must go back and talk to her. I must talk pleasantly and try to gain her favor. Perhaps she is coming this way to meet me. She is walking this way, making some sign. Oh! Oh! What is that? Why is she bending down over my clothes? Why is she picking up my waist pouch? "Hey girl! Don't touch that! That is mine!" She can't hear me ... over the noise of this sea.... Ah! she did hear me; what is she saying ... "Poonkuzlali don't take that, it is my pouch... Here you! Wont you listen? Why are you walking away with my waist belt and pouch? Stop! Stop!"

Vandiya Devan began running towards the shore. Poonkuzlali turned back once, to look at him. She too began running. She was running away from the village and light-house, towards the forest. Ah! This is a wretched girl! Or insane! How am I to recover my pouch from this mad girl? I must do it somehow... He stumbled into the waves once or twice and even swallowed some salt water in his hurry.

Finally, he came ashore and began running after that girl. As he followed, her steps hastened. In the distance he could see a group of deer prancing away. What a beautiful sight it was -- spotted deer jumping and leaping away in fright! Even this girl is leaping and flying ... in no way is she less graceful than those four legged beasts. There is nothing comparable to the grace of these girls raised in the wilds.... Ah! But, I should not utter such nonsense to her. If I prattle such compliments, the whole venture may be jeopardized. I must remember her father's warning. But, why is she running like this? Like one possessed? If she disappears in the forest it will be difficult to find her ... Oh dear! She has run into the trees. There can be no fool comparable to me in this whole world! Can a garland caught in the hands of a wild monkey remain intact?

Soon, he too was in the forest wandering here and there. In his hurry he was careless about parting the bushes and branches properly; his whole body was bleeding, scratched thorny creepers and bushes. "Poonkuzlali! Poonkuzlali!" he shouted. In his agitation he began asking things like, "Hey Tree! Did you see Poonkuzlali? O Crow, did you see Poonkuzlali?"

What is this? Am I turning insane myself? Just as he was loosing hope, something fell in front of him, from the tree above. Yes, it was his waist band and pouch. He went up and eagerly opened his pouch. The roll of palmleaves, the bag of gold coins -- everything seemed intact.

"Is the money safe?" asked a voice from above him. He looked up to find Poonkuzlali sitting on a branch above him. Vandiya Devan was weary and dripping with sweat; with some rage he said, "I have never seen a monkey like you!"

"And I have never seen an owl like you! Dear me! How you stare at one!" said Poonkuzlali.

"Why do you vex me like this? If it is money that you want..."

"Chee! Who wants your money!"

"Then, why did you run away with this?"

"If I hadn't done it, you wouldn't have followed me into this forest. You might have gone back to my house."

"What if I had returned to the house?"

"Come, climb up this tree, you will see."

"What will I see?"

"You can see ten or fifteen horses; shining swords and spears."

Her face indicated that she was speaking the truth. Nevertheless, Vandiya Devan wanted to make sure; so he climbed the tree. He bound his pouch tightly around his waist before climbing -- perhaps she had dropped it accidentally and this is a trick to get it back, who knows? He stood on a branch and looked towards the light-

house. Yes; she had spoken the truth. There were ten or fifteen horsemen near the village. Who were they? Pazluvoor soldiers come to arrest him -- who else could they be?

Poonkuzlali had saved him from significant danger. Why? With what intention? -- something is not clear ... Both climbed down to the ground. "Poonkuzlali, you have saved me from great danger. Many thanks to you." Vandiya Devan spoke sincerely.

"Total lies! Do menfolk ever feel thankful?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"Don't equate me to all men!"

"Yes! You are not like all men; quite unconventional."

"Woman! Can I ask you something?"

"You are welcome! Answering you is my wish and will."

"Why did you think of protecting me? Why this sudden concern for me?"

Poonkuzlali was silent; her face showed that she was slightly unnerved. She thought of something and finally said, "I am always partial to fools."

"Thanks! How did you know that those soldiers had come in search of me?"

"Can't I comprehend by seeing your face? -- It is obvious that you are escaping and hiding from something. I suspected it yesterday. This morning, your friend -- that Doctor's son -- confirmed it."

"What did he prattle?"

"As soon as he woke up this morning, he said that he had to look for herbs in the forest. I agreed to guide him and brought him here. Soon he began making a pass at me. I said, `You friend is ahead of you...'"

"Why did you say that!?"

"Oh, be patient! Listen to me. I said that you were in love with me. He began expressing his doubts about you. Apparently he suspected that you were escaping from fear of some royal censure; several incidents on the way made him feel that way. `Don't trust a fellow like him and waste your life. Marry me!' he said. `You seem to be in such a hurry? Don't we have to ask the elders?' I said; your dear friend replied, `Let us follow the ancient tenets and consummate our relationship in secrecy!' How is this story?"

"That despicable sinner!" said Vandiya Devan.

"By then I heard the sound of galloping horses. I climbed a tree to confirm my suspicions and then told him to look. Even now I feel like laughing if I think of how his legs shook as he stood on that tree branch..."

"Enough of this joking; what happened afterwards?"

"He climbed down and said, `See! What I said is true! Those soldiers have come to arrest him.' I then said, `That means they are likely to arrest you also for having come with him. Go run and hide yourself somewhere!' He left me and did exactly what I expected of him"

"Why? What did he do?"

"He said that he was going to hide and ran directly into their midst; and was caught by those men"

"Oh dear! Poor fellow!"

"Don't feel too sorry for him; keep some sympathy in reserve."

"Why do you say that?"

"Listen to the rest, you will understand. He walked into their midst; they looked at him with surprise. They examined him and talked amongst themselves. 'Who are you?' he asked them. 'We are hunters; we have come to hunt deer.' said one of those horsemen. This fellow said, 'No! No, you have come to hunt me, I know!' They were even more surprised as they provoked him further. Finally this fellow said, 'You have all come in search of Vandiya Devan. If I expose him to you, will you let go of me?' They agreed. He then led them to my house."

"Traitor! Sinner!"

"When those horsemen had gone ahead, I came in search of you. You were bathing in the sea."

"Why did you not tell me all this on the beach itself? Why did you run with my waist belt?"

"Would you have followed me so quickly if I had not done that? You would have said that you would deal with those soldiers and walked towards them! Perhaps you would not have even believed me. By the time I explain all this, those soldiers might have spotted you"

Vandiya Devan felt ashamed to have thought that she was insane. I must trust her completely. Without her help, I cannot cross the sea and go to Lanka. All my journey this far will be wasted; I will be arrested by those soldiers of Lord Pazluvoor. "Woman! I cannot tell you how much you have helped me. But, you must help me some more ..."

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"You saw the nature of my friend -- there is no point in trusting him. You should row your boat and take me to Lanka."

Poonkuzlali was silent.

"Can you believe that I am not likely to do anything wrong. Dear girl! I have to go to Lanka on an important mission as quickly as possible. You must help me in this regard ..."

"If I help you, what will you give me in return?"

For the first time her face showed signs of shyness. Cheeks dimpled and a playful smile increased the radiance of her face. Vandiya Devan remembered her asking a similar question in his dream of the previous night. He also recalled the reply he had been about to give. He was about to reply with similar words; but, he bit his tongue and stopped himself.

"If you help me this time, I shall not forget till I have life in me. I shall remain beholden to you for ever. I do not know how I can return your favor. If you want me to do something in return, I shall surely do it."

Poonkuzlali became lost in thought. It seemed as if she was hesitant to say something.

"If I can do you a return favor, tell me. I promise to do it..."

"Is it a promise?"

"Yes; it is a promise."

"Then I'll tell you when the time comes. You won't forget, will you?"

"Never; I shall wait for you to ask the return favor; till then I will remain beholden to you."

Poonkuzlali continued to think for some time. "Fine! Come with me. I shall take you to a place in this forest. You must remain there till dusk today; perhaps go without food."

"Don't worry about that. This morning your sister-in-law served me day-old rice and I ate more than my fill just to annoy her. I do not need any food till nightfall."

"I don't know if there will be any food even by night. I'll try and bring something. Anyway, you must stay in this place till nightfall. After darkness, I shall come back and call for you. Have you heard the nightingale call `koo kooo'?"

"Sure; I have heard it's call. Even otherwise, I can recognize your voice."

"On hearing my call, you must come out of hiding. We should be in the boat and ready to leave within one jamam (three hours) after nightfall."

"I'll wait for the call of the nightingale."

Poonkuzlali led Vandiya Devan to a sand dune in the middle of that forest. The other side of the sand dune was covered more thickly with shrubs and creepers than the rest of the surrounding area. She pushed those creepers aside easily with her hands and stepped into a hollow beside a tree. Vandiya Devan followed her. He saw the roof-edge of an old ruined building in that depth. Overgrown forest and sand had covered it completely; except from that one point, none could even spot a building in that place.

"A leopard used to live in this place. After it, I live here. It is my own personal hideout. When I don't wish to see any human being, I usually come here to hide. There is water in that mudpot. You must spend the rest of this day here. Don't come up even if you hear voices, horses galloping or any other kind of commotion. Don't come up on the dune to see what is happening," said Poonkuzlali.

"Do you want me to stay in here even after sundown? What if some forest creature -- a tiger or leopard comes? asked Vandiya Devan.

"No tiger or leopard lives here anymore. Only jackals and wild boar might come. You are not afraid of a jackal or wild boar, are you?"

"I am not afraid! What if they come and fall upon me in the dark? I don't even have my spear with me. I left it in your house."

"Here, take this weapon," said Poonkuzlali as she picked up a weapon from the floor of that lair. It was a curious instrument. It was long and curved like a sword -- studded with sharp thorns on both sides. The thorns seemed stronger than steel. Perhaps Lord Indra's thunderbolt was fashioned like this!

"What weapon is this? What is it made of?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"This is the tail-bone of a fish. When the leopard that lived in this lair came to pounce on me, I killed it with this fish bone!" said Poonkuzlali.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 7 -- Ocean Princess

Vandiya Devan was able to spend that day easily; more than half the time went in sleep. Hours of wakefulness were spent in contemplating the peculiar character of Poonkuzlali. What an astonishing girl! What a pleasing, lilting name! But such a severe attitude ... Not merely `severe' -- mixed with some sweetness too! How nonchalant she was, when mentioning about her killing the wild leopard! Such intelligence and forethought! But, sometimes she behaves like one deranged -- I wonder why? Something perturbing must have happened in her life. Was it unpleasant or pleasing? Either could have made her unbalanced like this. Perhaps there is no cause ... she was born like this with a peculiar nature ... There seems to be nothing wrong with her parents. They seem to be pleasant, calm folk! Who cares about her character! Why is she so concerned with my affairs and why has she done so much to help me escape those soldiers from Pazluvoor? She has also promised to take me to Lanka ... is everything some vast intrigue? No! But,

why did she change her mind? What favor does she expect in return from me? She declared that she would ask me later ... What could it be?

While he was immersed in such thoughts, the forest around him was filled with turmoil, just as Poonkuzlali had predicted. Horses galloped, men ran about in pretentious bravado, small forest creatures screamed in panic and birds called with fear. All this created a great commotion. Soon everything quietened into silence. He discerned that all the noise was in search of him. He thought about the treachery of the Doctor's son. Fool! Did he think that he had fallen in love with Poonkuzlali so quickly? Idiotic, like the stagnant creek falling in love with a roaring lava flow! It is like that story of the country mouse that wished to wed a lioness! How cleverly this girl made use of his foolishness. What jealous flames has she fanned in his heart! Within half an hour she turned him into a traitor! The powers of womenfolk is tremendous!

Vandiya Deva, you must accept one thing: you thought that you were very clever; you were proud that none is your equal in cunning and craftiness. But, this unsophisticated country girl has outwitted you. Consider the trick she employed to bring you, who were swimming in the sea, to this hidden lair. If she had not run away like that with the waist-band what would have happened? I would have been arrested by those soldiers from Pazluvoor. And the whole mission would have been wasted. I should never be careless like this again.

The sun sank into the western sea. It was a remarkable sight in Kodi Karai. The coastline which went southward suddenly turned at a right-angle to stretch westward. Therefore, if one viewed from atop a dune in Kodi Karai they could see the ocean in all three directions: east, west and south. In some months one could glimpse the full moon rising from the eastern sea in splendid light while the sun sank with fiery glory into the western ocean. Vandiya Devan felt an eagerness to emerge from the sand dune and view the sunset. He controlled his desire with much effort.

Darkness came quickly to envelop all directions. The dim light which dwelled in the hidden lair become pitch dark. He could not remain there any more. He came out and climbed upon the sand dune which covered the pavilion. In the distance he could see the fire from the lighthouse. Diamonds shimmered brilliantly in the sky. All sorts of curious sounds rose from the forest. There was quite a difference between the daytime noises and these night-sounds of the woods. These mysterious nighttime sounds created a terror in his heart and a shiver in his limbs. By daylight, even if one comes face to face with a tiger, reason overcomes fright; in the night, even if a mouse scrambles through the underbrush, the heart is gripped by horror!

Here comes the call of a nightingale, "Koo kooo!" It sounded like divine music in Vandiya Devan's ears. He walked towards that sound to find Poonkuzlali standing there. She signed, "Come with me without making any sound!" He realized that the sea shore was not too far away.

The boat was ready on the beach. A mast, sail cloth and ropes to hoist the sail were placed neatly in the boat. Two long poles extended outward on one side and a large flattened wooden log was bound to the ends of those poles. (Note: It was a catamaran. From the Tamil kattu-maram meaning bound logs.) Vandiya Devan tried to help her push the boat the water. "You keep quiet!" she signalled. She pushed the vessel expertly and it slid into the water silently.

Vandiya Devan tried to climb into the boat. She said in a soft voice, "Shhh! Wait a little! You can climb in after we have gone a little further." She dragged the boat behind her as she waded into the sea. Thinking that he would help, Vandiya Devan pushed from behind. The boat stopped. "It's better if you just come quietly!" said Poonkuzlali. After they had crossed the wave line she said, "Now you can climb in," and jumped into her boat. When Vandiya Devan tried to leap into it, the boat rocked dangerously. It seemed as if he would fall back in the water. Somehow he managed to sit down. He could hear his heart beating loudly. "Can I talk now?" he asked.

"You are welcome. If you have stopped shivering, you can talk!" said Poonkuzlali.

"Shivering? Who is shivering? Nothing like that!"

"Then, it's alright!"

"Don't we have to raise the sail?"

"If we raise the sail, those on the shore might be able to see us. They might catch up with us."

"If they come, I can handle them. You need not worry." Vandiya Devan started to sing his own praises.

"The wind is blowing shoreward now. If I raise the sail it will push us back to the beach. The wind will change after midnight. A sail might be useful after that."

"Oh! You are well aware of all these things. Perhaps, that is why your father asked me to take you as my guide."

"My father! Whom do you mean?"

"I meant your father, the light-house keeper Mr. Tyaga-vidangar."

"He is my father only when I am on the shore. If I am on the sea ..."

"What? Would even a father change if you are on the sea?"

"Yes; here the Ocean King is my father. Didn't anyone tell you that my other name is the Ocean Princess?"

"Nobody told me. Why that curious name?"

"Don't people refer to the younger son of the Emperor as Ponniiyan Selvan, (Ponni's Beloved)? It's like that!"

On hearing this, Vandiya Devan felt his waist band and made sure of his waist-pouch. Poonkuzlali noticed his concern and asked, "It is safe, I hope?"

"What are you asking about?"

"I am talking about that thing you have in your waist- pouch."

Vandiya Devan was shocked; a tiny apprehension crept into his heart. Poonkuzlali was pulling at the oars as she talked. The boat was gliding forward. "When will we reach the island of Lanka?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"If two persons row, we can reach by daybreak; if the wind is on our side."

"I too can pull the oars and help you. I wont let you down."

Vandiya Devan picked up the oars on his end and pulled. Ah! This is not an easy task! It requires much strength! The boat swirled and stopped completely.

"What is this? When you pull the oars the boat glides. If I take up the oars, the boat stops?"

"I am the Ocean Princess. That is why! It is enough if you can just keep still. I'll somehow take you to Lanka. Is that alright?"

He felt a bit ashamed and kept quiet for a while. As he looked around he caught sight of the poles and logs extending from one side of the boat. He asked, "Why these poles?"

"To keep the boat stable, so that it does not rock too much."

"Oh! Will the boat rock more than this? Even now it seems to be dancing and I am beginning to feel queasy."

"You call this rocking! You must see it in rainy season when the Monsoon Winds blow!"

When viewed from the shore, the sea seemed calm like a placid silver platter; he realized it was not so. Foamless waves rose and fell. They rocked the boat like a cradle.

"What happens to these logs when the big wind blows?"

"Depends on how strong the wind is. Normally these logs will stabilize the boat and prevent it from overturning. If a whirlwind blows and the boat capsizes, we can unbind these logs from the boat. We can float by holding onto these logs and hope to be rescued."

"Oh dear! Can this boat capsize in a big wind?"

"Even huge sailing ships will break into smithereens if caught in a whirlwind. What can one say about this tiny boat?"

"What do you mean by a whirlwind?"

"Don't you know even that? When the winds blowing from one direction encounter the gusts blowing from the opposite direction, a whirlwind takes shape. During the months of Thai and Maasi (January to March) the Kondal Breeze blows in these parts. There is nothing to worry then. We can easily cross between Kodi Karai and Lanka. In fact we can go and return in one night. By Vaikasi (May-June) the Chozla Winds will start. It is a little difficult to go to Lanka from here on the Chozla Wind. Now it is the season between the Chozla Winds and Monsoon Winds. Sometimes, on the open seas, strong winds will encounter swift gales blowing from the opposite direction. Like a butter churn swirling milk, the whirlwind will churn the water. Waves will swell into mountains and fall down. Deep chasms will be created on these waters. The sea will swirl into great whirls in those chasms. If a boat is caught in the midst of all this ... that is the end!"

Suddenly panic filled Vandiya Devan's heart. A new doubt arose in his mind. "Oh dear! I won't come! Take me back to the shore!" he shouted.

"What are you blabbering about? Keep quiet. Close your eyes if you are afraid. Perhaps it is better if you go to sleep!"

His doubt now appeared to be confirmed. "You are a wicked double-crosser! You have brought me here to drown me in this sea. You think your task will be easier if I go to sleep!"

"What nonsense is this?"

"I am not foolish! Are you going to turn back or not? If you don't, I'll jump into the water!"

"You are welcome! But, before you jump, give me that letter you are carrying for Ponninyin Selvan."

"Oh! How did you know about that letter?"

"I came to know about it upon examining your waist- pouch! Would I have agreed to take you to Lanka in my boat without making sure of who you are and why you are going to Lanka? This morning when I was sitting on the tree branch, I opened your pouch and examined its contents..."

"You deceiver! I trusted you and came here! Are you going to turn back the boat or not?" His fear and doubts increased tenfold. He began shouting in panic as he stood up, "Turn back! Turn back!"

"If I had been the Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi, I would not have sent such an important letter through such a fickle minded messenger like you!" said Poonkuzlali.

"Oh dear! You even know who sent the letter. There is no doubt now: you are a double-crosser. Turn back or I will jump!"

"Jump! You are free to jump!" said Poonkuzlali in disgust. Fear-crazed Vandiya Devan jumped into the sea thinking that the water would be shallow like the beach near the coast. He had not seen that the boat had come far into the deep ocean. He realized that he could not swim after he had jumped into the deep water; he began shouting with fear.

Vandiya Devan knew a little swimming. But, his natural fear of water made his limbs weak. In a lake or river, the shore within view had given him courage. This was the open sea; water everywhere, in all directions. The waves were very mild; still, they lifted him high and pulled him deep down as they rose and fell. When he rose with the wave, he could see the boat. "Aahhh!" he shouted, senseless with fear and doubt. When the wave pulled him down in a trough, only the high wall of water could be seen. His tongue lost the sense to even shout for help. By the third time he was tossed up, the boat appeared to have moved away. The thought, "This is it! I am going to drown in this sea!" gripped his mind. Kundavai Devi's face floated before his mind. "Oh! What have you done?" asked her face!

Ah! What dream castles had I built! What fantasies I had thought up! I had envisioned that I would win back my ancient Vaanar Kingdom and be crowned on a jewelled throne with the Younger Pirati seated by my side! Everything is a waste! This wretched girl has ruined everything. She is not a girl -- she is a ghoul in female form! An agent of the Pazluvoor men. No, she is a retainer of that enchanting sorceress Nandini. It does not matter if I drown, If only I could catch hold of her ... If only I could strangle her ... Oh! What foolish thought is this? Why can't I think of good things when I am about to die? Let me think of God! Oh Lord God! Oh Master of the Universe! Oh dear Perumal who reposes on the primeval ocean! Dear Kundavai Devi! forgive me, I am unable to complete the assignment you gave me. There goes the boat. If only I could lay hands on her....

Poonkuzlali remained indifferent for a few minutes after Vandiya Devan had jumped into the sea. She felt that he would somehow manage to keep afloat and climb back into the boat. Thinking of teasing him she moved the boat away from him. Soon she realized her mistake: this fellow does not know how to swim! Moreover, he is gripped by panic. He is not joking when he shouts for help, "Aaahh! Ohh!" He is really frightened. Very soon he will start swallowing salt water and start to drown, and it will be difficult to even retrieve his body. "Chee! I have made a mistake; my teasing has turned into disaster. I should have shut my mouth till we reached land. I should not have disclosed that I knew his secret ... I was too hasty. But, who knew that this fool would do such a thing?"

When Vandiya Devan was thrown up with the next wave, she quickly moved the boat close to him. She called, "Come, come! Get into the boat." But he could not hear her and he did not seem capable of getting into the boat by himself. All he was capable of was to lift his head up and scream in panic, "Aahh!" Poonkuzlali recognized his wails as the last calls of a drowning human being. In that dim light of the crescent moon she could catch a glimpse of his face. It was the fear crazed face of an idiot. "He will never swim back and get into the boat! I have to rescue him ... why did I create this unwanted predicament? I have proved the truth in the saying 'A woman's mind is a foolish mind!' What should I do?"

She did several things very rapidly. She pulled up the ropes meant for binding the sails and tied one end to the logs extending from the boat. She bound the other end around her waist and jumped into the water. With quick easy strokes she swam near him and stopped at arms length. Vandiya Devan had seen her. His face and eyes were filled with a horrible killer instinct. Poonkuzlali seemed to know the thoughts of drowning men. If anyone came to their rescue the drowning man or woman would get hold of the rescuer in a death grip. The panic of approaching death would give them elephantine strength. They would get hold of the rescuer and try to drag them down too! It would be quite difficult to escape that deathly grip; and it would be impossible to swim. Both were likely to drown in the depths!

Such thoughts flashed through Poonkuzlali's mind at lightning speed as she came to a decision. She swam closer to him, approaching from his back as she made a tight fist with one hand. She punched him hard with her fist. Her hand, strengthened by several years of rowing boats, landed like a thunderbolt on his face. His head split into a thousand pieces as his eyes saw a million slivers of light. Several million lightning shafts darted before his eyes. Ocean Princess appeared in each shaft of light, roaring with ghoulish laughter. The horrible laughter of a million ghouls deafened his ears. He could neither hear nor see; he lost control of his senses; endless darkness! Infinite silence!

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 8 -- Ghost Island

The Sky Goddess must be very human by nature! Humans let the all pervading light of God escape from the skies of their hearts; later, they light a million lamps in dark temples and sanctums in search of that eternal light! The Sky Goddess was also engaged in such an eternal search every day! She lets Lord Surya, the sun, the lord of light, escape from her embrace and sink into the sea. She then worries about the whereabouts of her chosen lord! She lights a million lamps to look for him. She fills the skies with countless, brilliant, lamps and keeps vigil throughout the night waiting for her lord.

When Vandiya Devan regained his senses and opened his eyes, he saw several thousand lights twinkling around him. He wondered, which temple is thus decorated with so many thousands of oil lamps? He then realized that they were not temple lamps but twinkling stars that filled the night skies in the open sea. He was lying down, staring into the sky. His clothes were wet and a rope was wound around his waist. A soft cool breeze caressed his body, comforting him, calming him. The drone of the tranquil sea gave rise to an extraordinary peace in his heart. A song in the midst of that drone. What song was that? Where had he heard it before?

... the sea is ever so quiet,
and a breeze crawls ever so softly,
In the heart of this doe-eyed maid,
why does a whirlwind blow?
When wave-filled seas are still,
why does my inner ocean seethe?

Oh, that peculiar girl Poonkuzlali! He sat up and looked around. Yes it was her: she was rowing the boat. She was singing that sad lyric as she pulled the oars. He remembered all the incidents of the early night in a flash -- his struggling and drowning and Poonkuzlali coming towards him. He could not recall anything after that. The girl must have rescued him and pulled him into the boat. She had bound him to the floor board with a rope to prevent further mishap. She had wound the rough rope over his waist cloth so that it did not bite into his skin ... such kindness... He felt for his waist-pouch and made sure that it was intact with the money and roll of letters. Ah! How foolish of me to doubt this girl? If her intentions were not right, she would not have saved my life. She must have struggled to pull my heavy body into this tiny boat. How did she manage? What an extraordinary girl she is!

Why is she walking towards me? Did she see that I am awake? What will she do? No, she is doing something else! She is raising the mast and unfurling the sail. Such a skilled task; and she is handling it all by herself!

"Poonkuzlali, Poonkuzlali!"

"Oh! You are awake?"

"Free me from these ropes, I'll help you."

"It will be a great help if you just keep still. You can unbind yourself; the rope is just wound around your waist. But, please don't jump into the sea again."

Vandiya Devan sat up and unwound the rope. Poonkuzlali straitened the mast; she unfurled the sail cloth and let it catch the breeze. The boat skimmed on jauntily, swiftly.

"Ocean Princess!"

"What?"

"I am thirsty."

"You drank the salt water, you will feel thirsty!"

She picked up a gourd and came closer. "I had brought some food for you. When you jumped, the bag fell into the sea. Somehow this gourd escaped." Saying this, the Ocean Princess removed the stopper and gave him the gourd. He took it and drank the sweet water. Vandiya Devan cleared his throat and said, "I mistook your intentions. I am sorry."

"It does not matter. Who cares about who you are and who I am? We are merely acquaintances who will part at daybreak."

"What time is it now?"

"Look at the sky and estimate it. Look at the Seven sages (the dipper)," said Poonkuzlali the Ocean Princess.

Vandiya Devan looked at the horizon towards the north. Since he had embarked from the beach, the Seven sages had completed half a circle. Look, how the star Arundati sticks so close to the star Vasishta! But, Dhruva, the pole-star has not moved from its position. It stays firm in the horizon where sky and sea meet, for eons and eons, helping ships and guiding sailors over the years! The pole star! Someone compared somebody to it... Who? Whom did they refer to? Yes, I remember ... The Astrologer of Kudanthai had mentioned it. He had compared the young Prince Arulmozli Varma to this pole star. Am I really going to be fortunate enough to meet that Prince? Is this boat-girl going to help me do so?

Poonkuzlali had gone back to her seat. "Did you find the time? It is the second half of the third Jaamam (about 2.00 am). The wind has changed and we can reach Snake Island by sunrise."

"Snake Island?" asked Vandiya Devan with some dismay.

"Yes. There are several islands along the northern coast of Lanka. One of those is Snake Island. If you land there, you need not cross water again. You can walk by a land bridge to the main island."

"What are you planning to do after you put me on shore?"

"Why are you bothered about me?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"You have helped me this far. Don't I have to thank you properly? You said that you might ask a return favor of me. What is that?"

"I have changed my mind. I am not going to ask any favor of you. You are a thankless man."

He felt that her accusation had some truth. Once more he felt inside his pouch and made sure of the roll of palmleaf letters. "Ocean Princess! I am ashamed of my behavior early in the night. I am sorry that I did not trust you. Forgive me please ..."

"Fine. You too can forget that incident. Think about the future. What are you planning to do after you reach Lanka? How do you plan to find the Prince?"

"The good Lord God who helped me cross this sea will help me in that matter too."

"You seem to have a lot of faith in God. Do you think that God takes any interest in the affairs of ordinary mortals like us?"

"I have not contemplated on such deep philosophy. If I have some trouble or worry I pray to the good Lord. And God often gives me timely help. Did not the Lord send you to row this boat for me?"

"Don't be so proud and confident. I did not come to row the boat for you. Neither did God appear in my dream and order me to help you"

"Then why did you help me escape yesterday? Why are you in this boat now?"

Vandiya Devan was lost in silent thought. An idea arose in his proud mind. He wondered if the girl had fallen in love with his brave, charming personality. He gave up the thought immediately. Her words and actions did not justify such a thought. There seems to be some other mysterious reason. I must talk to her and find out. "Yes, I am a bit concerned when I think about one thing..." he began.

"What is that? Do you also have worries?"

"People say that Lanka is full of forests and mountains."

"Yes, more than half of Lanka is dense jungle and mountain forest."

"They say that those forests are full of wild animals."

"Wild elephants roam in herds. Sometimes a rogue elephant may come out from the forest."

"I heard that the people of Lanka are uncivilized tribals."

"That is utter falsehood."

"If you say so, it must be correct. I must explore such forests and find the Prince."

"Just now you said that it will not be too difficult!"

"Yes. I did say that because I thought that there will be no problem in finding a brilliant sun."

"Why have you changed your mind?"

"Clouds may hide the sun; or it may be hiding under the sea."

"No cloud or sea can hide this sun. Even the cloud that tries to eclipse Ponniyin Selvan will become brilliant. The sea will shimmer with light."

How enthusiastic she becomes when she talks about the Prince? Just like all the common folk of Chozla lands, this girl also considers him a divinity. What is that special attraction, the charisma that Prince Arulmozli possesses? Vandiya Devan asked, "So, you think that it won't be difficult to find the Prince in Lanka?"

"If you enquire about the whereabouts of the Chozla army and go there, you can automatically find the Prince."

"How? I heard that more than half of Lanka is occupied by the Chozla army."

"Yes; I too heard that the Chozla army has occupied all lands from Mattotam to Pulastiya City."

"So? Where would I find the Prince in that vast land? It may take many days to travel through all those forests and find the Prince. I have to deliver this letter to him immediately. You saw the seals on the letter, you know how urgent it is."

The Ocean Princess did not give any reply, but remained silent. Vandiya Devan continued to talk, "If I definitely know the whereabouts of the Prince, I can meet him without wasted travel."

"There is a way," said Poonkuzlali.

"I was sure of it, that's why I asked you."

"Remember, I said earlier that I would drop you on Snake Island?"

"Yes."

"Near Snake Island there is a Ghost Island."

"The very name is frightening."

"Don't be afraid. In ancient times the island was called Gautama Buddha's Island. When Lord Buddha first came to Lanka, he is said to have landed there. He is said to have preached a sermon from under a fig tree on that island. That is why it was called Gautama's Island."

"In later years the name became corrupt to Ghost's Island..."

"Yes. Men like you are scared just by the name Ghost Island. Normally, no one goes there. Only those who are not afraid of the ghost go there."

"You mean courageous folk like you who are not afraid of fire breathing ghouls. What were you about to say?"

"If you can wait for half an hour on the beach of Ghost Island, I can enquire about the whereabouts of Ponnii Selvan."

"Whom will you ask on Ghost Island?"

"A ghost lives on Ghost Island. I will ask that ghost." Poonkuzlali said this with a smile.

"Can I meet that ghost?"

"That is impossible. You must not follow me into the island. Only if you promise to wait on the beach near the boat, will I go in and make enquiries."

"Fine. Do as you wish." Vandiya Devan agreed.

The breeze was pleasant. The sail caught the wind and the boat skimmed across the waves. The drone of the ocean continued in the background. Sleep struggled in his eyes. Slowly he slipped from wakefulness to sleep.

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Ponnii Selvan part 2 : Chapter 9 -- "This is Lanka!"

When Vandiya Devan woke again, he was astounded by the scenes around him. The sun was rising towards the eastern horizon. The sea shimmered like molten gold in that direction. Dawn Goddess was scintillating in golden silks. Ahead, the boat was approaching an emerald isle veiled by the deep blue sea. Towards his right he could glimpse another land mass, equally green. He could not discern if it was an island surrounded by the blue sea or if it was a larger land mass. In the distance, between both these emerald wonderlands, he could see several more islands in various hues of green. As he looked around from the boat, he glimpsed all the seven colors of the rainbow and all the seven thousand hues of those various colors. On the whole, nothing

seemed real. Some expert, divine, artist had declared, "Here, I'll show you paradise," and painted some fantastic masterpiece. Vandiya Devan was lost in this dreamlike beauty when Poonkuzlali's voice dragged him to reality. "It is not paradise; this is Lanka!"

"Yes, I wondered if it was paradise," said Vandiya Devan.

"This is not paradise; but it is a land like paradise. Devils in human form have been trying for many years, to turn this heaven into hell!" said Poonkuzlali.

"What do you mean by devils?"

"Men like you; who make war their life's work."

"Even Ponninyin Selvan?"

"Why do you ask me about him?"

"You promised to make enquiries about the Prince."

"I said that I would find out where he may be. I didn't say if I could find out if he was human, demon or God!"

The boat neared the island. The drone of the deep sea was replaced by soft lapping sounds of waves dashing against sandy beaches.

"What have you decided? That island in front is Ghost Island. The land on the right is Snake Island. Where shall I go? Shall I leave you on Snake Island? Can you find your way?"

"No; let us go to Ghost Island. Even if there is a delay it is better to go on after knowing the whereabouts of the Prince."

"Well, remember your promise."

The boat came ashore on the sandy beach of the tiny island. After ordering Vandiya Devan to guard the boat, she walked into the emerald island. He stood gazing at her, as she disappeared into the trees. For a while he contemplated about the island and how its name had changed over the course of time from Gautama Island to Ghost Island. After that, he thought about the nature of the ghost which lived on the island now. He then wondered about the mystery, the secret in the heart of the strange boat-girl. As promised, Poonkuzlali came back in half an hour. She got into the boat and ordered him to do the same. The boat glided towards Snake Island.

"Could you find out anything?"

"I believe that Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya has come to Mattotam to meet Ponninyin Selvan. The Prince would have arrived in Mattotam last night. It is not clear how long he is likely to remain there. You can go there and find out."

"How far is Mattotam from here?"

"About five or six leagues; forest all the way. Don't think that it will be like the forest of Kodi Karai. The dense jungle is full of trees reaching the sky. Some spots will be pitch dark at mid-day. Elephant herds and wild beasts are aplenty. Be careful when you go."

"If only I had a smart girl like you to guide me through the forest"

"Then where is the need for a messenger like you? Give me the letter, I can deliver it! Never... I cannot .. I am crazy! I can never do that. You made a promise to the Younger Pirati. You finish your assignment."

"It's alright Poonkuzlali. I can do it myself. Even if you beg for it, I will not give up the letter. You have already helped me a great deal. That is enough."

The boat was nearing the shore. Poonkuzlali's hands were pulling the oars. But, her expression clearly showed that her heart was wandering in some dream world. When Vandiya Devan called, "Ocean Princess!" she returned to earth with a shock.

"What do you want?"

"You said that you expect some return favor from me. Tell me now, we may not get another chance."

She did not reply for some time. She seemed to be debating with some conflicting thoughts. He continued to talk, "You have been a great help. You did not merely help me; you have been of immense service to this great Chozla Empire! You have helped the Chozla Emperor and his family. I will not feel happy unless I repay this debt in some way."

"Are you saying the truth? Or, like all men, are you uttering deceitful lies?"

"I promise in the name of this Ocean King."

"Are you saying that your words are written on water, to be wiped out instantly?"

"I promise in the name of the sky and the earth and the guardian angels of all the eight directions."

"I do not trust your oaths and promises. How can liars be bound by oaths they make? The first time I saw you, I felt that you were a good man. So, I'll tell you this ..."

"First impressions are always the best. Don't change your opinion."

"When you meet Prince Ponniiyin Selvan, after giving the letter, after delivering all the messages, after all the discussions, after exchanging all the news, when he is relaxed, ask him this: 'Do you remember the Ocean Princess?' If he replies, 'Yes, I remember!', tell him, 'She was the one who rowed the boat and brought me to Lanka.' Tell him that!"

Poonkuzlali! Are you aiming to fly that high? Can a house-sparrow declare to court the Eagle, the King of the Skies and try to fly like him? There is no good in this ... Vandiya Devan wondered about this; but said, "You hesitated this much just to say this? I thought that you were about to ask some impossible favor. I will surely tell him. Even if the Prince does not remember, I will tell him."

"No. You must not tell him anything if he does not remember."

"Nonsense, I'll definitely tell him everything."

"What will you say?"

"I will recount everything just the way it happened. 'Prince, Ponniiyin Selva! Do you remember the Ocean Princess? If you don't, please recall her now. It was she who saved me from those murdering wretches of Pazluvoor. It was she, all by herself, who rowed the boat and brought me safely to Lanka. It was she who saved me from a drowning death! If it was not for the help of the Ocean Princess, I could not have been alive to come and meet you. I could not have delivered these letters and messages to you.' That is what I will tell him. Is it alright?"

"So far it is correct. Don't add anything more to it. And don't tell him that I told you to say all this."

"Never! Did you think I was a complete fool?"

"If the Prince says anything in reply, you must come back and repeat it to me exactly. You must not change a syllable of what he says."

"Where will I see you again?"

"What is so difficult about finding me? I can be found at Kodi Karai or on this Ghost Island; or in my boat on the sea between."

"On my way back home, if I happen to come this way, shall I look for you on Ghost Island?"

"You must never enter that island for any reason, whatsoever! It may be dangerous. Look for this boat on the beach. If it is there, call me with some signal ... do you remember how I called like a nightingale last night? Can you call like that?"

"I cannot call like you. But, I can scream like a peacock! Here listen to this..." He covered his face with his palms and screeched horribly like a peacock! On hearing that, Poonkuzlali laughed merrily. The boat had neared the shore. Both disembarked. Vandiya Devan waded onto the shore and turned back to say farewell. He wished that she would change her mind and say, "I'll come with you." But, she was not even looking at him! Her face showed that she was already lost in her dream world.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 10 -- Honorable Anirudda Brahma-raya

For some time now we have neglected our old acquaintance, Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi, of the early days of this story. We beg forgiveness of Mr. Nambi and our readers for this lapse. It is particularly essential that we beg forgiveness of Mr. Nambi right now! Azlvar-adiyan is very angry at present. His top-knot is flying in disarray in the seaside breeze of Rameswaram. His wooden staff is swirling in earnest above his head! He is surrounded by several men of the Saiva faith -- ascetics and novices. We are slightly concerned about Azlvar-adiyan's welfare: those men seem to be quite belligerent. However, Nambi's rage filled incarnation and swirling staff reassures us!

Azlvar-adiyan left Pazlayarai the very night he had overheard the conversation between Princess Kundavai and Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan. He travelled south as fast as he could go. On the way, he refrained from entering into any disputes on the relative merits of Saiva and Vaishnava faiths. He controlled his instinctive behavior to prevent any impediment to his mission. He tarried for a few hours in Madurai City and after confirming some news, left for Rameswaram, the coastal town. On the very night that Vandiya Devan set sail for Lanka with Poonkuzlali, Azlvar-adiyan had reached Rameswaram.

The very instant he set foot in that holy city, all the fanatic Vaishnava rage he had bottled up, burst forth in earnest intensity. The numerous followers of the Saiva faith who populated the holy city fanned his fanatic zeal even further. The holy men of that sacred city were prone to take charge of newcomers and pilgrims, guiding them to the various hallowed ponds and lakes for a sacred bath, helping them offer services in the numerous temples and shrines. Newcomers were often mobbed by such diehard priests and novices looking for a new client. Azlvar-adiyan was not spared.

"Dear man! Come, come! Come bathe in all the sixty-four sacred waters of this city and wash away those sinful symbols of Vaishnava faith you wear all over your body. This is the holy city where Lord Rama atoned for his heinous sins and found salvation. You can also repent for the sin of having worn these vile namam symbols of the wretched Vaishnava faith!" spoke a priest with ridicule.

Another intervened, "There are several sacred waters -- Rama's Pool, Lakshmana's Lake, Hanuman's Pond. They had bathed in those waters to make amends for their various sins! You come with me, I shall first take you to the Hanuman (monkey) Pool. It is the appropriate place for a fellow like you!"

A more elderly man spoke up, "Do not listen to these novices! I shall take you directly to the place where Rama made an image of Lord Shiva with beach sands and worshipped Him to atone for the monstrous sin of killing King Ravana."

Embers of rage sparked in Azlvar-adiyan's eyes. "Stop these words of slander immediately. You should all go to these sacred pools and wash your tongues for uttering such sinful words."

"Ah! Are you saying that we have sinned because we uttered the names of Rama and Lakshmana (sacred deities of Vaishnava faith)? Don't worry, the name of this very place is Rameswaram! This is the place where Lord Rama worshipped Eswara who is none other than Lord Shiva. Therefore, there is no sin in the name Rama in this holy city."

"Oh you ignorant dimwits! Why do you utter such nonsense? Don't you even know the real meaning of this city's name?"

"Do you know? Can you enlighten us?"

"Because Shiva had plucked one head of Lord Brahma he was seized by the sin of killing a brahmin. He had to come here, to this holy city hallowed by the divine feet of Lord Rama, the true incarnation of the Great Vishnu, to pray for forgiveness! This is where Eswara worshipped Rama! That is why the city is called Rameswaram. Do you idiots know it now?"

"Hey! Who is this fellow to call us idiots? You scoundrel! Do you have horns on your head to say such things about us?"

"No Sir! No. I have no horns, but I do have this wooden staff in my hand! Do you wish to know who I am? Listen to this: I am the slave he who serves those who serve Saint Nammazlvar of Gurukoor who wrote the holy scriptures in divine Tamil. I am Azlvar-adiyan Nambi who breaks the pate of morons with my staff!"

"Hey Nambi! Why do you wear a tuft on your forehead? Why don't you shave it off like the rest of your head? The inside will then match the outside of your bald pate!"

"Yes, I did think of coming to this sacred city and shaving my head. Thanks for reminding me ..." explained Azlvar-adiyan.

"Well said fellah! Hey you there! Go to the street of barbers and fetch him a barber. Tell him to bring an extra sharp razor. Let us remove the very roots of this lout's top-knot!"

"Why call a barber? We can do this worthwhile task ourselves! Bring me a sharp knife!"

"Wait! Let me finish! Once upon a time my head was covered with thick curls. I took an oath that every time I break the head of a foolish Saiva follower, I would remove one strand of my beautiful locks. Thus most of my head is clean shaven; all that remains is this tuft on my forehead. I can now shave it off here; come help me. Let me break your heads!" saying this, he began swirling his staff.

"You are impertinent, young man!" said an elderly priest. A novice behind him came up saying, "Can you break all our heads? Are you sure?"

"How do you think that three-fourths of my head is clean shaven? Come let me show you!"

"Catch him!" "Kill him" "Finish him off!" The crowd shouted with hostility; but, none dared to come in the way of his swirling staff. Suddenly, their attention was diverted by the announcements of a herald.

"Emperor Sundara Chozla Paranthaka's trusted Prime Minister, Most Honorable Mr. Anirudda Brahma-rama is announced. Make way! Make way!"

The startled crowd of priests turned away. Azlvar-adiyan was startled more than anyone else. He tucked his wooden staff under his arm and looked around. They had been disputing in one corner of the outer walls of Rameswaram Temple. The wall turned a corner towards the open sea. The scene around the corner was breathtaking. Huge sailing ships, large wooden vessels, small yachts, barges, tug-boats and catamarans filled the harbor as far as the eye could see. Huge, white, sails flapping in the wind hid distant, hazy islands in the blue horizon. Nearby was the sea-canal.

Heralds came first in a row boat. Then came the barge in which the famous Prime Minister of the Chozla Empire, Mr Anirudda Brahma-raya of Anbil Town, was seated with dignity, surrounded by liveried footmen and guards. He noticed the fracas beside the temple wall on the shore. He signalled with his hand and summoned Azlvar-adiyan, who was standing most innocently in the midst of the crowd, with folded hands and staff tucked away. Azlvar-adiyan walked up to the barge and stood on the shore with great humility.

"Thirumalai! What is this farce?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Sir! My Teacher! Everything is a divine act of Lord Kannan, that deceiving actor on this stage called the world! I am not sure if I can trust my own eyes! Am I dreaming or is everything one great illusion?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"Thirumalai, I thought that you were a devout follower of the Vaishnava faith. When did you become a philosopher who calls the world a mere stage?"

"My Teacher! When you, born and raised in the strictest Vaishnava traditions, adopt the dogma of Saiva custom, why should I not embrace Advaita philosophy? I shall change my name and henceforth call myself the slave of Sri Sankara the Teacher."

"Stop! Patience! Who said that I converted to the Saiva faith?"

"The symbols dressing your divine body proclaim it Sir!"

"Oh! Thirumalai, you have not changed at all! You give too much importance to outward symbols. Does it matter if the sandal paste on my forehead is drawn vertically or horizontally?"

(Note: Followers of the Vaishnava faith wore vertical marks on their foreheads, while those of the Saiva faith were identified by the horizontal stripes of ash marking their forehead.)

"Sir, I am an ignorant fool. I do not know what is important and what is not. Please adopt me and enlighten me."

"I shall surely do so. Come to my court. See that tiny island out in the sea? Come to the pavilion on that island."

"Sir! These quarrel-mongers should first let me go." Azlvar-adiyan pointed to the group of priests standing by the side.

One of them came forward and spoke, "My Lord! This fanatic threatened to break our heads. You must punish him appropriately." All the others began to talk and complain.

"I shall take care of this fellow. You can all disperse for now," promised the Prime Minister.

They were not satisfied, "Why can't we punish him ourselves? We wish to shave his head and wipe away all the namam marks on his body and throw him into the well to anoint him ..."

"What did you say?" Azlvar-adiyan jumped with rage filled eyes.

Mr. Anirudda Brahma-rama interrupted, "Priests, you cannot handle this ruffian. I shall arrange for that. Please leave now." He then turned towards his retainers and ordered, "Eight of you get down and bring this fellow to my chambers."

Eight footmen jumped down and surrounded Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. The barge moved on. Nambi, encircled by the soldiers, followed. The crowd dispersed commenting on the rough behavior of the stocky fellow with the top-knot.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 11 -- The Well-known Kaikola Battalion

Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-rama held court in one of the ancient mansions on a tiny island next to the larger island of Rameswaram. The instruments and symbols of his office were in evidence. Accountants, writers, clerks, messengers, haughty guards and liveried servants waited for his orders. The Prime Minister entered his court and seated himself. After a few minutes of contemplation, he called for his visitors.

Five men entered first. They appeared to be wealthy merchants. They placed a gem encrusted jewel on a platter and presented it to the Prime Minister. He accepted gracefully and ordered, "Enter this into the temple-building accounts meant for Lady Sembian Madevi's charities." He then turned to his guests and asked, "Who are you? How may I help you?"

Their leader spoke, "We have come on behalf of the Merchant Guild of Five-hundred from Many Nations In a Thousand Directions."

(Note: Historical records indicate that a wealthy, merchant guild with this rather long name conducted trade among the island kingdoms of South-east Asia, Bay of Bengal, Arabian Sea and South India for several centuries, under the patronage of Chozla monarchs.)

"I am glad to hear this; how is trade in the Pandiya Territories?"

"It improves day by day."

"What do the Pandiya people say?"

"The people say that Chozla rule is much better than Pandiya rule. Particularly, they are full of praise for the courage and generosity of young Prince Arulmozli. News of his activities in Lanka has spread in these parts."

"How is trade these days, in the countries of the South-east Sea?" asked the Prime Minister.

"We lack nothing under the just rule of Emperor Sundara Chozla. All our ships which sailed last season have come back with profits. We did not lose even a single vessel."

"Did you have any problems with pirates?"

"We had no problems this last year. After the Chozla Navy captured and destroyed their retreat near the island of Minicoy, we have no fear of pirates on the South Seas."

"Good. What arrangements have you made about the letter I had sent you?"

"We have followed your orders. We have collected a thousand sacks of rice, five hundred sacks of sorghum, and a hundred sacks of thuvare beans for the campaign in Lanka and brought them to this island. Please make arrangements for their transport to Lanka."

"Can you not convey them in your ships?"

"We can, if you order it. We are eager to know when the Lankan war is likely to end."

"Who Knows! Your Guild must have an official astrologer; why don't you ask him? Perhaps you can let me also know!"

"Sir! We ourselves are unable to believe everything that our astrologer predicts!"

"Ah! What does he say? What is so unbelievable?"

"He says that Prince Arulmozli will embrace victory wherever he goes. He says that the Chozla Navy lead by the Prince, would cross all the oceans and capture distant lands. He says that the Tiger-flag would fly over distant kingdoms."

"It means good fortune for you merchant-men!"

"Yes; our sea trade will do well. That is what our astrologer predicts."

"I am very glad. With the grace of the Lord who reposes in Srirangam, all this may happen. Every month, till the war in Lanka ends, I suggest that you procure food supplies just like this. You may leave now."

"As you wish, Sir. Permit us to leave now."

After the representatives of the Guild of Five-hundred had left, a courtier came up to announce, "The Commanders of the Well-known Kaikola Battalion are waiting for an audience."

"Ask them to come in!" ordered the Prime Minister.

Three distinguished men entered. The Goddess of Bravery seemed to dwell on their countenance. They seemed very gallant and fearless. Mr. Anirudda Brahma-rama enquired, "Are you from the Sundara Chozla's Well-known Kaikola Battalion?"

(Note: Under the Imperial Chozlas, a select group of specially trained men from the Vellala Community were organized into a special corps of personal guards by each ruler. This select company of skilled warriors were known as the Well-known Kaikola Battalion. Under each monarch the company incorporated the name of the current ruler in its name. The battalion often consisted of several divisions known as `hands'. In modern times, the men of this community have given up their warrior traditions and are often engaged as cotton-weavers.)

"Yes sir. But, we are ashamed to proclaim our name!"

"Why? Why is that?"

"We have been feeding on the Emperor's generosity and wasting our time for the past six months in these territories."

"How many `hands' do you have in your battalion? How many men in each `hand'?"

"We are a company of three `hands'. He is the Commander of the Right Hand Division. This man commands the Left Hand Division. I am Commander of the Middle Hand. Each division consists of two-thousand trained men. All are wasting time in eating and sleeping! Our weapons are collecting rust and shoulders are slouched in sloth. I think we will forget our craft of warfare."

The Prime Minister smiled as he asked, "Ah! What is your petition?"

"We request that we be sent to Lanka. We wish to join the army under the Commander-in-Chief of the South, Prince Arulmozli, and engage in war."

"Fine. When I return to Tanjore, I shall obtain the Emperor's permission and let you know."

"Sir, what if the war in Lanka is over by then?"

"Do not worry about that! It doesn't seem as if the war on that island will end so soon."

"Is the Singhalese army of Lanka so powerful? Send us there; we can give our men a hand..."

"Why one `hand'? You can extend all your three `hands'! Does one have to worry about enemy strength if all divisions of the Well-known Kaikola Battalion are pitched against them? The Middle Hand will pierce through the heart of the opposing formation; at the same time the Right Hand and the Left Hand will converge from the right and left, like pincers squeezing the enemy formation ..."

"Yes. It was with such a strategy that we overcame the Pandiya Army and destroyed it. We fought a similar war with Chera Forces."

"Pandiya and Chera forces fought face-to-face on a battlefield. You could attack them and conquer them. You can vanquish enemies only if you can see them."

"Why? Have modern Lankans become illusionists and tricksters, like the demons of Ravana's times? Do they hide behind cloud-cover to attack?"

"Yes those tricksters have gone into hiding; but, they do not attack. If they come to fight, we would be able to locate them. The whereabouts of King Mahinda of Lanka are not known. Neither can we find his army: They have gone into hiding in the jungles and mountains. Because of this, there has been no battle in Lanka for the past six months. What is the point of sending your men also over there?"

"Prime Minister, Sir! Please send us there. We can smoke out Mahinda and his men even if they are hidden in forests and mountain caves; we can find them even if they have disappeared into the cloud-world. We will force them to submit to our Prince. If not, we will change our name to `Battalion of Vellala Slaves!'"

"Oh no! Don't take any such oaths now! Who on this earth is not aware of the valor of the Kaikola Battalion? After I reach Tanjore, I will consult the Emperor and send you orders. Be patient till then. Continue your assignment as peace keeping forces in these Pandiya Territories."

"Sir, there are no more enemies to be overcome in these regions. People are happy about the peace and the end of war. They are once again engaged in their trade, industry and agriculture. All members of the Pandiya Dynasty have been annihilated."

"Do not be too sure of that! You think that with the death of Veera-pandiya, his dynasty has been exterminated. That is wrong; there are several others who lay claim to the Pandiya Throne. There are many who conspire in their cause ..." spoke the Prime Minister with caution.

"Oh! What conspirators? Where are they?"

"You will know when the time comes. The crown jewels of Pandiya kings -- the ancient pearl-studded diadem, ruby-encrusted necklace and diamond studded ceremonial sword -- are still hidden somewhere in the mountain caves of Rohana in Lanka. Till we recover these jewels, we cannot consider Pandiya forces vanquished."

"We look forward to that day: recovery of those crown jewels; crowning Prince Arulmozli at Madurai with that diadem and sword ..."

"Dear me! What are you saying?!"

"We are merely repeating the wishes spoken by citizens and soldiers."

"These are complicated political issues; let us not discuss it. Let me tell you something else that might make you happy..."

"We are eager to listen, Sir!"

"Don't think that war will end after this campaign in Lanka. Prince Arulmozli plans to embark on a campaign of conquest in all directions after this war. He intends to assemble a naval force of a thousand ships and sail to the kingdoms of the South-eastern Seas: Minicoy, Malaya, Mayuri, Lamuria, Java, Sri Vijaya, Sumatra. He will conquer all those lands and go south to seize the Laksadweep Islands. In the west, Kerala, Kudagu and Kollam will bow to him. Then he will turn northwards to Vengi, Kalinga, Rashtrakuta, Chakrakota, Anga, Bangala, Kosala, Gurjara and Panchala -- he will lead his army against all these nations of the north. Like Karikala Valava of historical fame, he will place the Tiger-flag on the snow-capped Himalayas. These are the plans of our young Commander-in-chief. Therefore, all the brave hearted, hot-blooded, young men of these Tamil lands will have plenty to do. You and your men must remain patient," said Prime Minister Anirudda.

All three Commanders stood up and raised these cheers, "Long live Emperor Sundara Chozla! Long live Prince Arulmozli! Long live Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya! Victory,

Victory!"

Finally one of them calmed himself and said, "Sir, we have one more concern. You are aware that we are called `Sundara Chozla's Well-known Kaikolas.' We..."

"Yes, your name is well known."

"We and our hand-picked men have sworn on enemy blood that we will give up our very lives in the service of Sundara Chozla."

"Yes, that is known too."

"Therefore, we will not serve anyone but the Emperor. We will not obey orders from any other person."

"That is what I expect."

"Several years ago our company was part of the huge army of Pazluvoor stationed near Tanjore. Because of that no one should distrust us ..."

"Ah! What are you saying? Who distrusts you?"

"We hear all kinds of rumors from Tanjore."

"Rumors should neither be believed or repeated."

"Those Velirs of Kodumbalur might try to discredit us."

"They will not; even if they try, no one will heed them."

All three Commanders now spoke one after the other, "Life is not eternal." "Even the Emperor has to one day reach the Lord's feet." "Our Emperor is not keeping good health." "The comet Dhoomaketu shines over the skies." "If anything happens to the Emperor, our men wish to join the guard corps of Prince Arulmozli."

The Prime Minister stopped their tirade decisively, "It is your duty to obey the Emperor's orders!"

"And it is your duty, Sir, to keep us informed of those orders! Please accept the responsibility of keeping us informed. Permit us to go to Tanjore and seek an audience with the Emperor."

"No. It is not timely; your going to the Capital now will create needless confusion. I shall personally take the responsibility to voice your concerns to the Emperor. You need not worry."

"Even as we speak to you, our worries have vanished. Permit us to leave, Sir!" All three Commanders of the Kaikola Battalion withdrew from the chamber.

The Prime Minister was lost in thought for some minutes. His lips murmured, "What is this power of attraction that Ponniiyin Selvan possesses? Even those who meet him only once become crazy!" He ordered in a louder voice, "Who goes there? Ask that rough Vaishnava fellow to come in."

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 12 -- Teacher and Disciple

Azlvar-adiyan entered the chamber of Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya. He then went around the minister three times, as if in prayer and bowed with much humility, genuflecting till he lay prostrate in front of the seat. He rose uttering the following words loudly: "Om haram hareem vashattu! Give me permission, O' Teacher!"

Mr. Anirudda smiled as he said, "Thirumalai, what is this farce? What permission do you seek?"

"My devotion to the Vaishnava faith, my name Azlvar-adiyan which means 'slave of saints' my good fortune of being in service to you -- all these I wish to sacrifice in this huge ocean. I would then to convert to the fanatic Saiva faith of Kalaamukha's. I would carry a dead man's skull in my hand and wander from town to town chanting spells like 'Om haram hareem vashattu!' I shall grow a long beard and matted locks; I shall break the pate of every faithful Vaishnava I encounter with this wooden staff of mine!"

"Stop it dear fellow, stop! Will my head also meet the same fate?"

"Sir, are you still a follower of the Vaishnava faith?"

"Why this doubt, Thirumalai? Who do you think I am?"

"Who are you? That's what I have a doubt about! Are you the great-grandson of noble Mr. Anantha of Anbil, who considered that his only mission in life was to serve Lord Ranga who reposes between two rivers, in the Temple of Srirangam?" asked Thirumalai Nambi.

"Yes; I am he!"

"Are you the cherished grandson of Anirudda Bhatta the priest of Anbil, who spread the greatness of the Lord's Name to all the world?"

"Yes it is me; in fact, I am named in honor of that great gentleman."

"Are you the beloved, eldest son of Narayana Bhatta who enchanted the devout with melodious renderings of saintly lyrics?"

"Yes, yes."

"Are you a son of that best among women, who lit everlasting lamps to worship the Lord and served nectar-like food on silver platters to pilgrims visiting the temple?"

"I am sure of it."

"Then, my eyes must be deceiving me. Are my eyes seeing truth? Are my ears hearing truth?"

"What do you mean? What has happened to make you doubt your own eyes and ears?"

"I heard that you had visited the Shiva Temple in this town and had offered worship ..."

"That is correct. Your ears did not deceive you."

"My eyes see the symbols of your visit to the Shiva Temple; that must also be true!"

"Yes it is."

"Are you not my revered teacher who counselled that the only God is Lord Narayana, the lyrics of Azlvar Saints are the only scriptures and the only way to salvation is chanting of the Lord's name?"

"Yes; what about that now?"

"You, my teacher, preach one thing and do something else. What can I, the disciple, do?"

"Thirumalai, are you upset about my worshipping at the Shiva Temple?"

"Which God did you worship in that Temple?"

"There is nothing to worry about that: it was the Good Lord Narayana."

"Ah! I had heard that the deity in Rameswaram Temple was in the form of a Shiva-symbol. That is why all those fanatic Saiva priests heckled me on the beach!"

"Thirumalai, is it true that you go by the name of Azlvar-adiyan, which means that you are a slave of Saint Sadagopa of Nagari?"

"That is very true."

"Do you remember this composition of Saint Sadagopa?"

Dear Lord, who embodies Godhead to followers of many faiths;

Those who espouse the name of Shiva, the Jains, the Buddhists and the philosophers debating varied causes ...

Why should I not see Narayana in Shiva's Temple?" asked Mr. Anirudda Brahma-rama.

"Aha! The divine sayings of Sadagopa are without equal! See how he equates these fellows of the Saiva faith with Jains and Buddhists."

"Your sarcasm will never forsake you! Listen to these next few lines of that same song:

You are the personification of water, of land, of fire, of time and of space;

Oh Narayana you are twin flames of the divine fire called Shiva and Hari;

Oh ascetic, Oh supreme spirit, Oh three-eyed Lord who stole my heart;

Oh priceless ruby with nectar-sweet lips and lotus-petal eyes;

Spirit of my lonely life, come shower me with thy divine grace ...

Did you understand Thirumalai? The Saint is calling Him the three-eyed Lord, asking Him to shower His divine grace! But, you take objection to my visiting a Shiva Temple."

"My Sire! Forgive me and my mistakes. I have wasted my time in useless quarrels because I had not studied all the scriptures properly. And I doubted you! Please grant me a boon so that I can make amends."

"What boon do you seek; I may consider granting it."

"I wish to take up abode in Gurukoor. I wish to collect all the thousand lyrics of Nammazlvar Sadagopa and popularize them in every town and dwelling."

"Why this sudden wish?"

"While returning from Venkatam, I stopped to worship the Lord at Veera-narayana-puram. I recited a few couplets of Nammazlvar's psalms in that Vinnagara. The priest Eswara Munigal of that temple was moved to tears on hearing my songs."

"Eswara Munigal is a very devout man; very learned."

"The priest's young son was also listening to my songs. His young face glowed like the full moon on hearing those lyrics. When that young lad asked me 'Do you know all the other psalms?' I felt ashamed to reply that I did not know all the songs. At that time I wondered why I should not devote my life to the service of the saints and their compositions. Today my intentions have become more firm."

"Thirumalai are you not aware of the teachings in 'The Lords Song'? To each his own duty!"

"Yes Sir."

"Great men will be born to spread the teachings of holy saints and to collect their songs into anthologies. You and I have accepted political service as our life's work. Have you forgotten that we have sworn to expend all our energies and intellect in the service of the Chozla Emperor?"

"I have not forgotten, Oh Teacher! But, doubts about that decision often nag my heart. Particularly, after I heard some gossip about you ..."

"What gossip?"

"They say that you have forgotten all loyalty to Vaishnava faith because the Emperor has rewarded you with a land grant of ten villages and confirmed it by a copper plate edict. You have forsaken your faith in the king's service, travelling hither and thither, crossing seas and nations ..."

"You should not heed such jealous gossip. Yes, the Emperor did reward me with a land grant. But, I had become his Prime Minister many years before that. Do you not know it?"

Azlvar-adiyan was silent.

"Do you know how the Emperor and I became friends? We had both studied under the same tutor in our younger days. We studied the literatures of Tamil and Sanskrit; we learnt the intricacies of mathematics, logic, astronomy and grammar. In those days, no one had an inkling that Sundara Chozla would become heir to the throne. Neither he nor I even dreamed that he would become the Emperor. Who could have known that Arinjaya would be crowned after the deaths of Raja-aditya and Gandara Aditya? Who would have thought that Sundara will ascend the throne because of Arinjaya's early death? When Sundara Chozla accepted the empire, he expected several complications. He told me that he would accept the crown only if I promised to stand by him, help him govern the disorganized nation. He was ready to forsake the Chozla throne if I was not willing to help him. At that time, I promised to help him administer this vast nation. I have kept my promise to him. I thought you knew all this?"

"I know all this, Sir! But, what is the point in my knowing it? The people do not know it. The gossips and courtiers in the city do not know it."

"You need not worry about such people. For a short time, even I was concerned about giving up my traditional, priestly duties and entering politics. Since the last two years, I have no such confusion. Anyway, Thirumalai, I think you know this: I came here not on a pilgrimage to Rameswaram, but, to visit Mattotam."

"I guessed it, O Teacher!"

"Mattotam on the banks of River Paalavi is just as beautiful as it was described by Sambanda:

Flower gardens full of humming bees singing symphonies;

Peacocks dance in Mango groves of Mattotam;

It is the abode of Lord Kedeswara, who showers his grace

Upon devout servants, the citizens who worship Him."

"Sir! Did you go to Mattotam to enjoy its scenic beauty?"

"No. I mentioned it because I intend sending you there. I went there to meet Arulmozli Varma."

"Did you meet the Prince?" asked Azlvar-adiyan eagerly. For the first time, his voice reflected a certain urgency.

"Ah! Even you show an eagerness! Yes Thirumalai, I met the Prince and talked to him. I was able to personally confirm the truth in those astonishing tales coming from Lanka. Listen to this my man! King Mahinda of Lanka had a huge army. There is no trace of that army now. Do you know that it disappeared like dewdrops before the rising sun? Mahinda's army included several units of Tamils from the Pandiya and Chera Kingdoms. When those men found that Arulmozli was the Commander of the Chozla's, they dropped their weapons and crossed over to our army. How could Mahinda fight? He vanished into hiding in the mountains of Rohana. Thus, our armies have no enemies to face in battle."

"Well! Then why doesn't our Prince return to his homeland with his army? Why does he tarry there? Why all this conflict about sending food-supplies for our men?"

"We can declare that there are no enemies and come back. But, our Prince does not wish it. Once our army comes back, Mahinda will emerge from Rohana and it is war once again. There is no point in it. We should either confirm the friendship of Mahinda and his people or make them accept the rule of our Tiger-flag. Our Prince is trying to achieve either of these objectives. Do you know what our soldiers are doing in Lanka? Remember, the whole city of Anuradapura was destroyed by the old wars? All the ancient mansions, palaces, mausoleums, temples and spires in that city were ruined. Our men are engaged in renovating all those structures, by orders of Prince Arulmozli."

"Fantastic! Do you think that the Prince will give up both Saiva and Vaishnava faiths and embrace the Buddhist creed? Will you approve of that also?"

"It does not matter whether you and I approve or not! Commoners like you and I can squabble saying 'our faith is the best.' But, a King should be patron of all faiths espoused by all his subjects. Our Prince knows this truth; he follows it with action when he has the opportunity. Perhaps you have heard that our Prince has the sign of the conch and discus on his palms. I have heard it; but, I have never examined his palms to confirm or deny that statement. Whether he has the sign of the conch and discus or not, I can assure you of one thing: If anyone on this earth has the qualification to rule as Absolute Emperor, it is Arulmozli. Some are born with such divine favor. Did you overhear any of my conversations with the merchants and Kaikola Commanders? Those merchants, who are so tight-fisted about money, become quite amiable upon hearing the name of Prince Arulmozli. Soldiers are eager to fight under his leadership!"

Azlvar-adiyan did not reply. The Prime Minister continued with even more enthusiasm:

"Some months ago, I met a seer on the Mountains of Podigai. Do you know what he said? 'If the elephant had its day, the cat is also likely to have its own day.' He said, 'The time has come for the glory of our southern lands. For a long time the great men of our holy land have appeared in the north. Prophets and emperors were found north of the Vindhya. But, an eclipse will soon hide the north. A barbarian horde will cross the Himalayas and come down to the plains of the holy Ganges to destroy the very fabric of northern society. The horde will demolish temples and destroy our divinities. The very existence of our ancient, vedic culture will be in jeopardy. Only the kingdoms of the south will be able to preserve the glory of our laws, scriptures, arts and lifestyle. Brave emperors will arise in these southern lands. Prophets and learned men will be born here!' That is what the seer told me. I now believe that his predictions will come true."

Thirumalai spoke hesitantly, "Sir! You are building dream castles! Here, they are trying to topple the very foundations of this empire. If you had seen all that I had seen and heard what I have heard, you will not be so enthusiastic. You will think of the danger surrounding this Chozla Empire and be filled with distress."

"Yes, Thirumalai! I have been side-tracked by my enthusiasms. I have not yet heard the details of your journeys. Tell me; however horrifying it is, let me hear the news."

"Sir, would you order me to speak here in this chamber itself? Even the Wind God would shiver if he hears my news; the Ocean King would stand still; birds will stop flying; the sky and the earth would scream in terror on hearing my news. Do you order me to speak of such things, openly, here?" asked Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

"No. I have a secret chamber in an underground cave on this island, where neither wind nor light can enter. Let us go there and talk."

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 13 --Ponni's Beloved

While Vandiya Devan had landed on Snake Island and was walking towards Mattotam, while Prime Minister Anirudda and Thirumalai were engaged in discussions about the state of the nation, Kundavai and her dear friend Vanathi were seated in a howdah on an elephant and travelling towards Tanjore.

For some years now, the Younger Pirati Kundavai had made up her mind not to visit Tanjore. There were several reasons for this decision. Tanjore still did not have enough palaces or mansions to individually house all the noblewomen of the Empire. Every noblewoman of the Emperor's household had to live in the main palace which housed the Emperor. All the other palaces and mansions inside the fort had been commandeered by noblemen and officials of the empire, like the Lords of Pazluvoor. Women of the royal household could live in unrestricted indulgence in the Chozla Maligai at Pazlayarai where they could go and come as they pleased, doing whatever they fancied. But, if they lived in Tanjore, they were subject to the protocols and rules imposed by the Lords of Pazluvoor. In Tanjore, it was not easy to exit or enter the palace and fort at one's whim and fancy. The Younger Pirati never liked all such controls and protocols. Moreover, Kundavai loathed Nandini's proud and haughty behavior since her becoming the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. In addition, the Emperor preferred that his close family should remain in Pazlayarai. Because of all these reasons, Kundavai had decided to live in Pazlayarai. She curbed her eagerness to visit her ailing father and help her mother in nursing his sickness.

After Vandiya Devan's visit, her heart underwent a change. She wondered if she had the right to indulge in the carefree life of Pazlayarai -- boat races and garden parties, song and dance -- when the Empire was facing such threat and turmoil from conspiracies and treason.

My brothers are far away in Thondai and Lanka. Is it not my duty to be concerned about the affairs of the nation when they are not here to look into matters? My brother Karikala had asked me to periodically send him news, through confidential, secret messengers, about the activities in Tanjore. How can I be aware of things happening in Tanjore if I enjoy life at Pazlayarai? The news brought by Mr. Vandiya Devan is quite alarming. Till now I disliked the noblemen of Pazluvoor merely because they wielded power beyond their station. Now they have started conspiring about the very throne of this Empire. They have enmeshed that foolish and naive Madurandaka in their wiles. They seem to have enrolled several chieftains and officials of this nation to support their cause. Who knows what can happen? How far will it go, this treachery and deceit by Lord Pazluvoor? Perhaps my father's life is in danger! Who knows if the traitors will spare his life? When both his sons are far away, if something happens to the Emperor, these traitors can easily place Madurandaka on the throne and declare him to be the new ruler. They are likely to do any heinous deed to achieve their

goals. Even if they do not think such thoughts, that sorceress Nandini will teach them! She will encourage them even if they hesitate! Considering all this, it is important that I remain beside my father in Tanjore. I can keep track of the intrigues and plots; I can also guard my father from danger!

Why are these noblemen trying to place inexperienced Uncle Madurandaka on the throne? Is it because of law and justice? Never! If Madurandaka is crowned, he would be a puppet in their hands, fulfilling their every wish and fancy. Nandini's word would become law in this Chozla Empire! Everyone would have to live in fear of her powers. Other noblewomen must bow to her wishes. Chee! I can never let that happen. As long as I live that cannot come true! Let me see how far she goes!

Living in Tanjore will surely be uncomfortable. My father and mother will chide, "Why did you come here now? Why did you give up the comforts of Pazlayarai?" I will probably have no freedom of movement. Everybody will begin questioning me about my marriage. I will hate that. I will have to meet and entertain Nandini. I'll be unable to tolerate her haughty display of power. But, I should not consider all these petty problems when such a great danger threatens this kingdom. I am also afraid for my father's life. I must go to Tanjore.

In addition to all this, there was another important reason. It was the eagerness to find out if there was any news about Vandiya Devan. Kundavai knew that Pazluvoor noblemen had sent their soldiers in pursuit of Vandiya Devan, knowing that he had gone towards Kodi Karai.

Will that smart and cunning young man be caught by these soldiers? If arrested, he would be brought to Tanjore. It is essential that I am in Tanjore if something like that happens! They cannot easily harm a messenger sent by Crown Prince Aditya Karikala. They will have to accuse him of some major crime and give him a fair trial. Ah! That is why they have accused him of attempted murder, saying Vandiya Devan tried to kill Sambuvaraya's son by stabbing on the back. I have no doubt that this accusation is totally false! But, it has to be proved false. It would be useful if I talk to Sambuvaraya's son Kandamaran, and know his mind.

While Kundavai's heart was confused by such complications and conspiracies, Vanathi, who rode beside her on the elephant, was engrossed with quite a different matter. Her pure, innocent mind had one and only one thought: Prince Arulmozli Varma! When would he return from Lanka?

"Akka! You said that you had written asking him to return immediately. When he returns, where will he come? To Pazlayarai or Tanjore?" asked Vanathi.

Vanathi's concern was this: What if the Prince went to Pazlayarai while they were in Tanjore! Kundavai, who had been thinking of something else turned to her friend and asked, "Whom are you asking about? Is it about Ponniiyin Selvan?"

"Yes Akka! It's about him. You have referred to the Prince as Ponniiyin Selvan several times though you never explained why he has that title. You excused yourself saying that you would explain later. Can you explain now? Tanjore Fort seems far away and this elephant is walking like a tortoise!"

Kundavai smiled, "If this elephant walks any faster than this, we cannot sit on its back. We and the howdah carrying us will fall to the ground. My Dear! Do you know what happened in the Battle of Takkolam?"

Vanathi was not ready to be diverted; she said, "Akka! Tell me the story about the title 'Ponniiyin Selvan'."

"You rascal! You won't forget that, will you? Fine, listen to this tale." Kundavai retold the old story.

In those early years after Sundara Chozla had ascended the Chozla throne, his family life was filled with happiness. He would often enjoy excursions with his family on pleasure cruises on the River Ponni (Cauvery). The royal barge would be filled with fun and merriment. Music of veena players and lyrics of the

bards would compete with the lilt of River Cauvery's flowing currents. Practical jokes and pantomimes would provoke mirthful laughter. The elders would pass hours in family discussions and chit-chat. Children would have great fun on the deck. Sometimes elders and children would gather together to enjoy the festivities.

On one such day, when the Emperor embarked on a boating trip with his queen and children, suddenly a cry arose, "Where is the baby? Where is the baby?" It was Kundavai's voice. At that time Arulmozli was barely five years old and Kundavai was just past seven. Arulmozli was the cherished darling of everyone in the palace. More than anyone else, his elder sister was fond of him. It was Kundavai who first noticed that the child was not on the barge. Everyone was stunned. They searched all over -- in the cabin and below deck. The servants ran hither and thither. It was not a large boat -- where else could they search? Kundavai and Karikala began crying. The queen was in tears. Footmen had already jumped into the water, looking for the baby Prince. Sundara Chozla had also jumped into the river, swimming across the currents, looking for his dear son. Where could they look? The current was swift; how far could the child have gone? Did anyone remember when the child had fallen into the water? Did he really fall into the river?

They searched aimlessly and could not find the child. Maids on the barge fainted. Their desperate wails, "Aai Oh!" drowned the lilt of Cauvery's floods. Even songbirds on the shore became quiet.

Suddenly, an astonishing vision appeared. It was in the middle of the river, a little beyond the royal barge. A female form was wading in the floods holding a child in her arms, raising him high above the water level. Sundara Chozla was the first to see her. He swam across and reached for his son. Soon, the servants took charge of the child and helped their monarch back on board the barge. As soon as the Emperor climbed back on deck, he fell down in a swoon. Everybody became engrossed in comforting the child and reviving the Emperor. No one noticed the woman who had saved the little Prince. None had seen her clearly to give a proper description. No one came forward to claim a reward saying, "I saved the child."

They unanimously decided that the River Goddess, Mother Cauvery, must have taken human form to save the darling Prince. The royal household made arrangements to worship Goddess Cauvery or River Ponni on that day every year. They believed that the cherished son of the palace was also the beloved child of River Ponni. From that day onwards, Arulmozli was known as 'Ponniyin Selvan' -- Beloved of River Ponni.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 14 --Two Full Moons

Tanjore City was filled with the hustle and bustle of excitement. Why shouldn't the citizens of the capital be happy? After a long time, their beloved Princess had changed her mind and honored them with a visit. There was not a soul in the land who had not heard of Princess Kundavai's beauty, intelligence, culture and generosity. Her name was on the minds of the people everyday, on some pretext or other. Their eagerness had been further kindled by rumors that the Princess would be in Tanjore to participate in that year's Navaratri celebrations, the nine-day festival of arts. When it was announced that the Princess would be arriving that day, a very ocean of people had gathered outside the fortress walls to welcome her. Just like the ocean in full tide reaching for the full moon, this sea of people rippled with excitement.

Soon, the full moon rose in the sky: In fact two full moons appeared at the same time! When Kundavai Devi and her retinue approached, the massive doors of Tanjore Fort were thrown open with a thunderous roar. Palace guards emerged from inside, to welcome the royal Princess and escort her into the capital. The two Lords of Pazluvoor were at the head of this entourage; in addition, behind them came an ivory palanquin embellished with pearls. Its screens parted to reveal the beautiful, enchanting face of Pazluvoor's Young-Queen, Nandini Devi.

Both ladies descended, Kundavai from the elephant and Nandini from her palanquin. Nandini walked up quickly with greetings welcoming the Princess. Kundavai acknowledged her welcome with a gracious smile. When they saw these two famous beauties of the Chozla Empire side by side, the massive crowd cheered with enthusiasm that broke bounds.

Nandini had a golden hued body; Kundavai had the coloring of a soft pink-lotus. Nandini's golden face was round, like the shining full moon of summer. Kundavai's divine face was slightly elongated, like that of an exquisite bronze statue, cast by a master sculptor. Nandini's jet black eyes, slightly reddened at the corners, were large: like fat, buzzing bees. Kundavai's blue-black eyes were elongated, almost touching her ears, like the curved petals of a blue-lily. Nandini's short nose, slightly flattened, was smooth -- carved out of ivory. Kundavai's nose was dainty like the long buds of some fragrant creeper. Nandini's slightly thick lips were coral-red shells filled with intoxicating liquor. Kundavai's slender lips oozed honey like delicate pomegranate buds. Nandini had bound her tresses into bunches decorated with fragrant flowers while Kundavai's curls were piled high on her head, like a crown proclaiming, "She is the Queen of Beauty!"

Of course, the people did not distinguish each feature of the two women like this, to compliment them; but, they were generally aware that both were incomparable beauties though differing quite markedly from each other.

Until that day, womenfolk of the city were slightly dissatisfied, even jealous of Nandini. Every one of them had a fondness for Kundavai, as if she were some family deity. That Nandini had emerged from the fort to welcome their beloved Younger Pirati Kundavai, made them more happy. While the citizens raised cheers to express their happiness, the conversation between Kundavai and Nandini was like lightning strike against lightning.

"Welcome My Lady! Welcome! We had wondered if you had completely forgotten us. Only now are we aware that the Younger Pirati's generosity knows no bounds," spoke Nandini.

"What is this, O' Queen? Does living at a distance mean that one has forgotten? Can I assume that you have forgotten me because you have not come back to Pazlayarai?" replied Kundavai.

"Honey bees would automatically find fragrant flowers; they need no invitation. Everyone will visit beautiful Pazlayarai City. It is your kindness that has made you visit this ugly, ungainly Tanjore Fort."

"How can you say that? How can you say that Tanjore is ugly? When beauty itself is imprisoned here?" Kundavai said with sarcasm.

"That is what I hear; that the Emperor was like one imprisoned in this fort. Now there is no cause for concern, for you have come to free him ..." lightning flashed in her eyes as Nandini spoke these words.

"Fantastic! Even Gods in heaven cannot imprison Emperor Sundara Chozla. How can mere mortals, commoners, do so? I did not mean him ... I refer to the Goddess of Beauty, Nandini Devi ..."

"Well said My Lady! Well said! Please repeat it so that My Lord can hear it. Lord Pazluvoor keeps me here in this city, like a prisoner. If you could speak on my behalf and recommend that I ..."

"Why do you need my recommendation? You are not in any ordinary prison, you are a prisoner of love. That too, the love of an ..."

"Yes Princess! If an old man's love becomes a prison, there is no escape. Some people talk of 'Tanjore's Dungeons.' Perhaps one could escape from those underground dungeons. But, ..."

"Very true, Young-Queen, very true! Particularly, if the shackles are of one's own seeking; if the prison is of one's own choosing; escape is difficult. Chaste maids following the tradition of women like Sita, Kannagi,

Savithri and Nalayini will not even seek freedom! Umh! What is all this commotion about?" asked Kundavai Pirati.

Yes; there was truly a great big roar from among the groups of women gathered outside the fortress gates. Kundavai and Nandini walked towards that group. The women called loudly speaking all at once; nothing was clear at first. It was obvious very soon: they wished to come and meet the Princess freely at the Palace. They wished that the restrictions about entering and leaving the fort should be removed for the nine days of the Navaratri Festival so that they could seek audience with their favorite princess while she was in Tanjore.

Kundavai turned to Nandini and said, "Young-Queen, why don't you submit their petition to your husband, or even your brother-in-law and recommend that it be granted? Why should there be such strict regulations about these womenfolk? What danger can befall this Empire because of these simple folk? Isn't the power of the Pazluvoor brothers well known in all directions, up to every coast?"

"Ah! Why have you stopped with the sea coast? Their powers extend even beyond the seas. There will be proof of that very soon." Nandini's smile pierced Kundavai's heart like a poisoned spear. The Princess wondered, what could be the real meaning of this wicked witch's words?

By now, Nandini had signalled and summoned the Elder Lord Pazluvoor to come closer. She explained about the petition by the women and the Younger Pirati's wishes.

"Who can say anything against the wishes of the Younger Pirati?" said the Elder Lord of Pazluvoor. With the cheering crowds following in procession, they entered Tanjore Fort.

For the next few days, Tanjore was immersed in endless festivity. It was especially great that the Navaratri Festival coincided with Kundavai's visit. Lord Pazluvoor kept his promise. Commoners were permitted to enter and leave the fort without any restrictions for the nine days of the festival. The fortress gates were left wide open day and night. Several celebrations and competitions were held in the fort and palace as well as in the townships around the city. People assembled in large crowds to enjoy all these entertainments. Two full moons rose often, in the midst of this sea of celebration. People cheered and the city was filled with a carnival spirit. But, the hearts of both the full moons were erupting like volcanoes spitting fiery lava.

There was constant competition and strife between the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor and the Younger Pirati. Their fierce duels were fought with arrow-sharp words and eyes that darted like lances. Flames rose when the caustic-sharp swords of this duel clashed. Venomous lances of words and action created havoc. Two flashes of lightning clashed on a storm cloud and wrecked havoc on each other. Two tigresses, possessed of vicious beauty, wrestled with each other with sharpened claws drawing blood. Two King Cobras of horrifying beauty, raised their hoods in a frightening dance, their thin red tongues darting, trying to swallow each other. They had a passionate elation in this bizarre conflict; and also an all suffering, heart rending, anguish.

Only one soul suffered in the midst of this conflict between two powers. Vanathi of Kodumbalur could neither understand them nor freely participate in the festivities in the city. Vanathi found it difficult even to get a chance to talk to Kundavai these days. She dressed well and went everywhere, attending all the ceremonies with her friend. But, her heart was not touched by anything that happened outside. She created a secret dream-world of her own and wandered silently in it.

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Ponniyan Selvan part 2 : Chapter 15 --An Anguished Call At Night

In those days, the arts of song and dance were well developed in the Chozla Country. Dance and drama had grown together. Tanjore was particularly famous for nurturing several famous theatricals and actors. Karur

Devar, a Saiva ascetic who lived in those times has written several descriptions of Tanjore city surrounded by the massive fort.

Young beauties, cocky like full blown peacocks,

Arched brows flash like lightning;

They practice dance and step across the theater stage,

In Tanjore surrounded by the great fort.

Several established play-houses flourished in Tanjore, attesting the popularity of theatricals and plays. The most famous play-house was within the palace enclosure of the Emperor. Imaginative writers who created new and popular plays lived in the city. It had been the tradition to portray stories from myths and religious fables in the form of plays and dances. For some time now, the players had turned their attention to a different kind of story. They had begun to write plays about historical figures, and famous heroes of the battlefield. The incidents of recent history, the brave deeds of the previous generation were very popular subjects of these modern plays. Stories of the Chozla warriors -- Karikala Valava, Vijayala the Brave, Paranthaka the First -- were the most popular subjects.

During the Navaratri celebrations, a historical play about the brave history of Chozla Kings was enacted for three days in the Emperor's Playhouse within the palace. The exquisitely constructed stage, embellished with curious decorations was located in front of a large open-courtyard which could comfortably seat more than a thousand persons. A separate enclosure to seat the noblewomen from the palace, was constructed towards one side; it was covered with a silken canopy and equipped with soft cushions and decorated pillars. Queens and Princesses, noblewomen and their maids could sit in comfort and enjoy the plays.

Often during these performances, Nandini came to sit beside Kundavai. Many of the other women disliked this; but they hid their resentment and could do nothing about it. Who could dare say anything against the all powerful Elder Lord Pazluvoor and his favorite Young-Queen Nandini? When Kundavai herself allowed it, what could anyone else do?

Of the three plays about the history of Chozla monarchs, the third, which told the story of Paranthaka was the best. There was some disturbance among the audience which viewed the play on the third day.

Among the Chozla's who ruled from Tanjore, Sundara Chozla's grandfather, Parakesari Paranthaka the First, was famous for his bravery. He had ruled for more than forty-six years. The Chozla Empire had grown extensive, covering most of the Tamil Lands, from Lanka to the shores of River Tungabadra, during his rule. He had fought several victorious battles. He bore the title, 'Ko-parakesari varma, the valiant who had taken Madurai and Lanka.' He acquired fame as the monarch who covered the tower of Chidambaram Temple with gold. Towards the end of his lifetime, he faced some setbacks; the Empire shrunk somewhat in size. But, his bravery and fame was not forgotten. He fought one last great battle at Takkolam, against Kannara-deva the Rashtrakuta King who came from the north with a huge army. Paranthaka destroyed the huge invading army. But, Crown Prince Raja-aditya who was the Commander-in-chief of the defending forces, lost his life in the battlefield as he fought seated on an elephant. Raja-aditya's body, pierced with enemy arrows, was brought back to the palace in the capital. Queens embraced the dead-body of the valiant Prince who gave up his life to protect the borders of his beloved country, and shed uncontrollable tears. Finally a voice from the skies, an oracle, spoke: "Don't weep! Don't weep! Sorrow not, you mortals! The Prince is not dead, for he lives in the heart of every man and woman of this brave Chozla nation." The play concluded with this final scene.

The audience immensely enjoyed this play depicting the incidents in the life of the generation before theirs. The cause for disturbance was this: Two chieftains, minor kings of the region, helped King Paranthaka in his exploits. They were the chieftain of Kodumbalur domains and the chieftain of Pazluvoor principality. Both

noblemen were bound to the Chozla monarch by blood ties and marriage alliances. Both helped Paranthaka like two extra hands in his exploits. Neither was greater or lesser than the other. Paranthaka favored them equally, treating them like two eyes, honoring them equally. How could one eye be more favored than the other? The Elder-uncle of the present day Lords of Pazluvoor was the Pazluvoor chieftain of those times. His name was Kandan-amudan Pazluvoor-arayar. The father of the Younger Lord Velir who lost his life in Lanka was Irukkuvel Ilango Velir the chieftain of Kodumbalur in those days (i.e. Vanathi's grandfather).

The actors who presented the Paranthaka Play were careful in their portrayal of both these famous chieftains. They did not give more prominence to one or the other. They depicted the great characteristics and contributions of both noblemen equally. They were particular in pointing out that Emperor Paranthaka had honored both nobles equally. But, the viewers who watched the play were not equally enthusiastic in their favors. Very soon it was obvious that some were fans of the Kodumbalur party and others favored the Pazluvoor faction. When the scene showed the bravery and exploits of the Kodumbalur man on the stage, one group in the audience cheered; when the Pazluvoor man came on stage another group raised applause. In the beginning this rivalry was mild. Later, it grew more hostile. Both, factions raised loud cheers and shouts, "Naavalo Naaval!"

(Like "Ra rah!" "Bravo!" "Golly!" and other cheers & shouts of modern days, "Naavalo Naaval" was the cheering cry of those days.)

This rivalry in the cheering crowd exhilarated Princess Kundavai. When the cheers from the Kodumbalur faction was loudest, she would turn to Lady Vanathi seated by her side and say, "Look Vanathi, your party is winning now!" Innocent Vanathi would smile happily. Kundavai would look at Nandini when the Pazluvoor faction was cheering, and say, "Young-Queen, your side is winning now!" However, Nandini's expression betrayed that this did not make her happy. Nandini's rage was kindled and made worse by everything: -- the very occurrence of such rivalry, people cheering and shouting openly about it, Kundavai encouraging such behavior, Kundavai equating that ordinary youngster Vanathi with herself and teasing them about it, -- none of these made her feel comfortable. Nandini wondered if she should leave the pavilion in anger. But, that would mean her acceptance of the incidence as something of importance, even conceding defeat. She bit her tongue and crunched her teeth to sit quietly till the end.

Kundavai noticed everything. The expressions dancing on Nandini's face were crystal clear, like reflections on a mirror. Except one thing, `This is a mystery which is unclear!' mumbled Kundavai to herself. One scene in the play depicted the following incident: The Pandiya King lost the battle and sought asylum with the Lankan King. When the Lankan King did not come forth with the expected support and help, Pandiya left his diadem and other crown jewels with the Lankans for safe-keeping and escaped to the Chera Kingdom. Everybody in the audience expressed equal elation at the end of this scene. Though, all factions applauded, Nandini's face showed extreme anguish and sorrow. This was the mystery that Kundavai could not understand.

Kundavai tried to pry Nandini's thoughts, "What a pity that the Emperor could not be with us to enjoy this wonderful play! In his time, even my father had accomplished similar brave deeds like my great-grandfather. If only my father was in good health..."

"He will surely recover. You, his beloved daughter have come to his side. The Emperor will surely be cured when the medicines from Lanka arrive." Nandini spoke softly.

"Medicines from Lanka? What is that?" asked Kundavai.

"You ask as if you do not know! I believe the Doctor from Pazlayarai has sent a man to collect medicinal plants. In fact I heard that you had assigned a retainer for the job. Isn't that true?"

Kundavai bit her lip. She had beautiful teeth like jasmine buds, but the bitten lip felt pain. Huge cries of "Naavalo Naaval!" interrupted the conversation.

With a final cheer of praise for the greatness and health of Sundara Chozla, the play came to an end. The crowd dispersed with happy thoughts. Noblemen and their women departed with their retinues. The Empress Vanamadevi and some other womenfolk of the palace made preparations to go to the Temple of Durga Nisumba-sudini, the family deity of the Chozlas. Vanamadevi had undertaken several vows, penances and prayers hoping for the recovery of her husband. She visited the Durga Temple often to offer prayers. The Temple had special mid-night services and programs during all nine days of Navaratri Festival. Special animal sacrifices had been arranged and the Empress attended the mid-night service without fail. Most of the other women in the palace accompanied her.

It was not the practice to allow young maids to attend services at the Durga Temple. Sacrifices were often frightening. The officiating priests would often become possessed of spirits and start dancing frightfully. They would retell gory tales of destruction and mayhem in honor of the Goddess of Destruction. Young girls were not taken to such shows because they would be frightened. But who had the courage to tell the Younger Pirati, "You will be frightened, don't come!" Who could stop her? Kundavai went with her mother to the Temple on all nine nights and offered prayers for her father's well being. Vanathi was left alone in the big palace during such times.

On that night of the Paranthaka Play, Vanathi's heart brimmed with happiness. She was filled with pride on seeing the greatness and bravery of her clansmen depicted on stage. And she did not forget Lanka. Thoughts about her father who had lost his life on that island and the young Prince who was there to avenge her father's death filled her mind constantly. She could not sleep wanting to stay awake till the Younger Pirati returned from the temple. "I must discuss the incidents of today's play with her before I can sleep." She felt like going for a walk on the upper terraces of the palace instead of lying awake uselessly. The panorama of Tanjore in the night can be seen from the terrace. Perhaps even the Durga Temple will be visible. She rose from her bed with such thoughts. Vanathi was new to that palace, but she was confident of finding her way through all the twisting hallways and courts. All the rooms were brightly lit with everlasting lamps and burning torches.

The passage turned and turned again. Galleries seemed never ending. Several oil lamps which had brightened the early night had now been turned off. Servant maids and others were lost in sleep in the corners and alcoves. Footmen had gone for the day. Vanathi felt shy to awaken any of the maids to ask the way. She wandered here and there and was soon lost in the never-ending hallways and balconies.

Suddenly a voice could be heard. It was a wailing, sorrow-filled voice. Vanathi was frightened and began shivering. She stood rooted to the spot. Again that anguished cry.

"Is there no one to help me?"

Ah! This sounds like the Emperor's voice! What danger is this? Is it some pain of ill health? Or, is it something else? The Empress and all the other elders have gone to the temple ... What can I do? Somebody must be there, by his bedside ... He couldn't be left alone ... let me see. She took a few steps further into that balcony. Cautiously she moved further. The voice came from down below. She looked down on a large, wide, chamber. Isn't this the bed-chamber of the Emperor? Yes; there he is, lying on his bed! All alone! He is moaning and wailing. What is he saying?

"You wretch! It is true, it is true that I killed you. I did not intend it; but, I am the cause for your death. What can I do about that now? It is more than twenty-five years now and why do you still haunt me? Don't you have any peace? Won't you leave me in peace? Tell me, how I can atone ... I'll surely do it! Let me be free ... Oh! Let go! Is there no one to free me from her clutches? Why are you all treating me with medicines for my

physical illness? Is there no one to treat this mental illness of mine? Help me Go! Go away! No! Don't move, stop! Tell me what I must do. Tell me how I can make amends. Why do you kill me like this with your silence? Can you not speak? Say something before you go ..."

These words fell into Vanathi's ears like molten lead. She shivered from head to toe. Quite unaware of herself, she looked around. Her eyes looked into all the nooks of the chamber, behind every curtain and pillar.

A figure stood before the Emperor, a little away, towards one side, in the shadows of a large pillar. A female -- half visible, half hidden by shadows and the smoke from the incense burner. It seems like ... Oh dear! It seems like the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor? Am I dreaming? Am I insane? What is happening? No, this is no dream ... Look carefully, who is that hidden behind that pillar? The Elder Lord Pazluvoor! I'm not mistaken, it is them! Is the Emperor crying in fear on seeing her? What is the meaning of his cry, 'It is true that I killed you!'

Suddenly, Vanathi felt faint; her head began to swim. No, the whole palace was swirling... Chee, chee! I should not faint now, not here at least ... She moved away with difficulty and turned into the passage. The return path seemed endless ... I cannot find my bedroom, I cannot go on ... not another step ...

When Kundavai returned from the temple with her maids, she found Vanathi, senseless like a wooden log, in a passage-way close to her bed-chamber.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 16 --Sundara Chozla's Hallucination

Sundara Chozla summoned his daughter to his bedside. He ordered the servants, nurses, doctors -- everybody to leave them alone. He made his daughter sit close beside him, holding her palms in his hand. Kundavai realized that he was trying to say something, unable to put his thoughts into words.

"Father, are you angry with me?" she asked.

Tears glistened in his eyes. "Why should I be angry with you, my dear?"

"I disobeyed your orders and came to Tanjore."

"Yes; you shouldn't have disobeyed me to come here. This palace in Tanjore is not good for young girls. You should realize that from what happened last night."

"What happened last night, Father?"

"I am talking about that girl from Kodumbalur; her falling down in a faint. How is she feeling now?"

"She is fine today, Father! She used to faint like this, very often, in Pazlayarai. She will be all right within a few hours."

"Did you talk to her, my dear? Did she say that she saw something, heard something?"

Kundavai thought for some minutes. Finally, "Yes Father! I believe she tried to go up to the terrace when we had all gone to the temple. At that time she heard someone wailing piteously. I believe she was frightened by those cries."

"That's what I thought! Don't you know it now, my darling? There is a ghost, a phantom wandering in this palace. You shouldn't remain here; leave immediately." When he said these words, Sundara Chozla was shivering from head to toe; his eyes were craze filled, looking into the distance. Kundavai noticed all this.

"Father, then why should you stay here? Why should my mother live here? Let us all go back to Pazlayarai. I don't see any improvement in your health since you came here."

The Emperor smiled sadly, "How can I get better now? I have no such wish anymore."

"Why should you feel dejected like this, Father? The Doctor of Pazlayarai says that he can cure your illness."

"And you believed him; you have even sent a man to Lanka to collect medicines for me. Yes, dear; I heard that! It shows your love for me!"

"Is there anything wrong in a daughter loving her father?"

"Nothing. I am fortunate to have such an affectionate child. There is nothing wrong in your sending a man to Lanka to collect medicinal plants. But, it does not matter if medicines come from Lanka, if herbs come from Java or even if ambrosia comes from the heavens; I am not going to feel better in this birth."

"Oh dear! Don't say such words Father!"

"You came here my dear, disobeying my orders! Actually I am happy about it. It has been my intention for some time now, to open the secrets of my heart and tell you the truth. This is the right opportunity for that. Listen to this: if it is a physical ailment, medicinal herbs may be able to cure it. My illness is not merely physical; what cure is there for a mental worry?"

"Father! You are the Emperor of the three worlds. What worries can torment you?"

"My child! You talk like the bards -- with wild imagination. I am no ruler of three worlds! I am not even Emperor of this one whole world. A small portion of a small corner in the world is my Kingdom. I am unable to bear even this burden."

"Why should you, Father? Are there not other capable subordinates to bear the burden of ruling this Kingdom? You have two exquisite sons. Two lion cubs; bravest among men; who could bear any burden ..."

"Daughter! It is that thought that frightens me. Your brothers are both incomparable warriors. I raised them with fondness, just as I raised you. However, I doubt if I am doing a good deed if I leave this Kingdom to them. Do you think it is right to bequeath a curse along with the Kingdom?"

"What curse can this Kingdom have? Sibi who gave his own flesh to save a dove and Manu who gave up his own son for the calf, are our ancestors. Karikala Valava and Perunar Killi had ruled this Kingdom. Brave Vijayala of the many battle-wounds sat on this throne. Aditya who raised one hundred and eight temples along the Cauvery and Paranthaka who gilded the temple at Chidambaram, created this Empire. Gandara Aditya the devout ruled this divine Empire. What curse can this Kingdom have? Father! You are hallucinating about something. If you leave this fort ..."

"Ah! You do not know what will happen the instant I leave this fort. Do you think that I am happy to forsake beautiful Pazlayarai and live in this prison like fortress of Tanjore? Kundavai, I am preventing the destruction and ruin of this ancient Kingdom by living here. Think of what happened last night, in the playhouse. I was watching everything from the terrace. At one point I even wondered if I should order the play stopped."

"Father, what is this? It was a very good play! I was proud to see the presentation of our clan's greatness. Why did you wish to stop it? Which act displeased you?"

"Oh, there was nothing wrong with the play. I am talking about the behavior of those who watched the play. Did you not notice the rivalry in cheering by the Kodumbalur faction and Pazluvoor faction?"

"I noticed, Father."

"They behave in this fashion even when I am here. Think of what can happen if I were not here. The minute I leave Tanjore, both parties will plunge into fights. Like that myth about Lord Krishna's clansmen destroying each other by infighting, these fellows will kill each other and in the process destroy this Kingdom."

"Father, you are the all powerful monarch of this Empire. Both, the nobles of Pazluvoor as well as Kodumbalur, are duty bound to obey your commands. If they cross the bounds, they seek their own destruction. Why should you be concerned?"

"My Daughter! Both their clans have given exceptional service to our family for the past hundred years. This Empire could not have grown to such strength without their help. If they are destroyed, it is a weakness to our Kingdom."

"Father, if it became known that among those two clans, one was committing treason, by instigating a conspiracy against you..." Kundavai spoke hesitantly.

Sundara Chozla looked at her with surprise, "What are you saying, Daughter? Treason and conspiracy against me? Who is instigating it?"

"Father, some who pretend devout service to you are secretly conspiring against you. They scheme to declare that your sons are not eligible to ascend this throne; they plan in secret to crown another..."

"Who? Crown whom? Whom are they trying to crown by declaring that your brothers are not eligible?" Sundara Chozla asked with some agitation.

Kundavai spoke softly, "Uncle Madurandaka, Father. They plan this treason when you are on your sickbed like this."

Sundara Chozla sat up a little, "Ah! If only their efforts are successful!"

Kundavai was shocked, "What is this Father? Are you enemy to your own sons?"

"No; I am no enemy to my sons! I wish them well; they do not need this curse ridden Empire. If only Madurandaka agrees..."

"Why shouldn't Uncle Madurandaka agree? He is very willing; ready to be crowned tomorrow if needed! Will you accept that? Should you not consult my brother the Crown Prince?"

"Yes; we must talk with Aditya Karikala. Not only that, we must make your Elder-grandmother agree to this."

"Will a mother disagree if her son is to be crowned?"

"Why not? You have lived with your Elder-grandmother for so long; don't you know her? It was because Lady Sembian Madevi insisted, that I accepted the throne in those days. Kundavai, your grandmother has great affection for you. You must talk to her and convince her to accept the throne for Madurandaka."

Kundavai was too stunned to say anything. The Emperor continued to speak, "Go to Kanchi after that. Tell your brother, 'You don't need this cursed Kingdom.' Make him refuse this burden. We will crown Madurandaka and be free of the curse."

"Father, you keep mentioning a curse. What curse?" asked Kundavai.

"My dear! They talk about previous births; do you believe in that? They say that one can sometimes remember the incidents of one's previous births; do you think it is possible?"

"Father, those are deep philosophical matters. What can I say about them?"

"They talk about the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. They tell tales about the previous births of Gautama Buddha. Don't you know those enchanting Jataka tales?"

"I have heard those stories, Father."

"When Gods and Prophets have such previous births, why not us mortals?"

"Maybe possible, that we too have many births."

"Sometimes, I can remember my previous birth. I have not talked about that to anyone till now. If I do, none will believe me; or understand. They will declare that along with physical disability, I am also mentally unwell. In addition to these doctors bothering me, sorcerers and exorcists will start coming in here."

"Yes Father. Even now, some say that. You will not be cured by medicine but you need to be treated by exorcists."

"See! But, you won't think so, will you? You won't laugh at me, when you hear my story; will you?" asked the Emperor.

"Dear Father! Do you have to ask me? Don't I know how hurt you feel? Will I ever laugh at you?" Tears filled her eyes as Kundavai spoke these words.

"I know you well my dear. That is why I plan to tell you secrets that I have not shared with anyone. Let me tell you some incidents of my previous birth."

It was a beautiful island surrounded by the sea. It was full of green palms swaying gracefully. Open areas were covered by thick bushes and creepers. A youth hid behind a bush on the beach. He was staring at a huge sailing ship, moving towards the horizon. He waited till the ship disappeared from sight. He stood up with a sigh, "I am safe!"

He was born in a royal family. He had no rights to any kingdom; neither did he wish it. There were three brothers elder to his father -- they had precedence. He did not even dream about ruling that kingdom. He went with an army which sailed across the sea to fight a battle. He had been given command of a small battalion. But, his army lost that war; countless men died; most men under his command had died. He was ready to give up his own life, as he performed various deeds of valor in the field. But, death did not embrace him. The remaining army of retreating men gathered on the beach. They made preparations to sail back to their homeland. The youth did not like to go back. He was not keen on going home after he had lost all his men on the battlefield. His clansmen were famous for their bravery; he did not wish to disgrace their name by his deeds.

While the ship was sailing, when he saw a tiny island in the distance, he jumped into the sea. None saw him. He was able to swim to the beach and hide behind the bushes. He waited till the ship had sailed away and came out of hiding. He sat on a low tree branch and surveyed the land around. It seemed deserted; but, he did not care. The island was beautiful. He was happy to lean back and loose his thoughts in dreams of the future.

Suddenly, a human voice, a female cry was heard. He turned around: a young girl was running as she screamed. A hideous bear was chasing her. The distance between the bear and the girl was quickly decreasing. There was no time to think about anything else. He jumped down to pick up the knife he had brought. The bear was about to place its fangs on the girl's shoulder. He took aim and threw the knife; it struck the bear. The beast turned with a deafening roar. The girl was safe; he was in danger now. The wounded bear pounced on him. Man and beast began to wrestle. Finally, he won.

The victorious youth looked around in all directions. The girl stood behind a coconut palm, leaning on its bent trunk with folded arms. She seemed surprised, happy. Her appearance, her clothes proclaimed that she was a girl of the forest, unaware of the civilized world. In beauty, she was beyond comparison to anyone on

earth. The way she stood, leaning on the swaying palm -- it appeared like a fine painting by a master artist. He wondered if she could be human! As he stepped closer, she did not disappear like some nymph. Unexpectedly, she began running, very swiftly. He tried to follow her for a while; but, he was too tired and he knew that he could not catch up with the girl who had pranced away like a deer. Moreover, it was not very civilized to run behind some unknown girl. "She must live somewhere on this tiny island. I am sure to meet her again." He walked down to the beach and rested.

Soon the girl returned. She brought an older man with her. The newcomer said that he was a fisherman of the Karaiyar tribe, living on the coastal islands of Lanka. An important truth also became obvious. The girl had saved the young man's life! A bear was stalking him as he rested on the tree branch. The girl had seen them. The bear, perhaps trying to protect its territory was about to pounce on him. The girl had distracted the beast by her cries. The youth was very grateful. He expressed his thanks to her in many words. But, her only reply was silence. The older man replied to all the questions posed by the youth. This surprised him; but, truth dawned on him soon.

The girl was a speechless mute; neither could she hear anything. His heart brimmed with pity. A sudden affection for her rose in him. The circumstance, the surroundings were conducive for the growth of that affection. Her inability to speak or hear were no obstacles. Her eyes spoke of countless inner secrets, of a thousand fantasies. Is there any language in this whole world comparable to the sweetness of those talking eyes? Why bother about other senses when two hearts became one?

The island became a paradise to that youth. Days, months even years went by. He forgot to keep track. One day, there was an end to this life in heaven. A ship came to anchor on the coast of that island. Several boats were lowered and many men came on shore. The young man went down to the beach to see who they were. They had come in search of him. Many unexpected incidents had occurred in his homeland. Two elder brothers to his father had died. The other brother had no children. A large kingdom awaited him.

The youth was filled with confusion. He had no heart to leave that beautiful island or that enchanting maid. But, an eagerness to meet his near and dear ones, to step on his beloved homeland -- new emotions tugged at his heart. He was told that danger surrounded his homeland on all sides. War drums sounded everywhere. He made up his mind. "I will come back; I will fulfill my duty and come back!" he promised a thousand times. That island girl, the deaf-mute maid refused to step in the midst of the newcomers from civilization. When the youth climbed into the boat, she was leaning on that old coconut palm, staring at him with tear filled eyes. He steadied himself and left.

"Kundavai, the sight of that Karaiyar girl gazing at me with tear laden eyes, it never left my memory. However I try, I can never forget it. But, another scene more poignant, in fact a frightening picture appears before my eyes constantly. In the night and day, in sleep and wakefulness, it worries me. Shall I tell you about that also?" asked Emperor Sundara Chozla.

The Younger Pirati spoke with a voice choked with emotion, "Tell me, Dear Father!"

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 17 --Can The Dead Return?

Sundara Chozla had been speaking as if he was narrating the story of some third person. Now, he began telling it like a history of his own life.

"My dear Daughter, today I am telling you things about which a father will not normally speak to his own daughter. I am telling you secrets which I have not shared with anyone. In this whole world, only my friend Anirudda knows these things; even he does not know all. He does not know this turmoil that rages in my heart. But, I shall tell you everything. Someone in our family should know everything -- I do not have the

courage to speak of such things with your mother and I cannot speak about it to your brothers. I had been intending to tell you all this for some time now. Today, I have the opportunity, the courage to tell you everything. You would not laugh about my situation; you will try to soothe the wounds in my heart; you will help me fulfil my wishes. I speak to you with such hopes ...

"I left that island on the ship and came to Kodi Karai. I heard that my grandfather, Emperor Paranthaka was now living in this Tanjore palace and came here. When I came to Tanjore, the Emperor was on his deathbed. The Empire he had built over a span of forty years was now facing ruin and chaos. Raja-aditya the Crown Prince had died in the battle fields of Takkolam. My father Arinjaya had been very badly wounded in that same battle; they were not sure if he would live too long. Kannara-deva's Rashtrakuta armies had already captured our Thondai Territories and were quickly advancing towards the south. Rebel Pandiya's were already regrouping in the far south. Chozla armies in Lanka had faced defeat and come back. Many brave men of the Chozla nation had lost their lives in these various wars. Such news, coming from all directions, had devastated the aging Emperor. In such a situation, when he saw me, his face brightened with happiness.

"My grandfather had been very fond of me from my childhood days. For a long time he had raised me personally in his own palace; I was closer to him than to my own parents. He had permitted me to command the battalion sent to Lanka because I had been insistent. He was heartbroken when he found that I had not been one among the men who returned. Since none could confirm my death, he had been sending search parties looking for me. One such search party had found me. His wounded heart found some peace when I came back to Tanjore.

"For some reason, he had a hope that the Chozla Kingdom which faced such devastation towards the end of his rule, would once again achieve greatness because of me. Palace astrologer's had fostered that hope. As if to prove the point, though my grandfather had four sons, only I, his grandson, now remained to carry on the responsibility. Emperor Paranthaka called me to his bedside and embraced me with kisses and tears. 'My dear Child! After me, your Elder-uncle Gandara Aditya will sit on this throne. After him, this Chozla Empire is yours. Our clan is sure to regain its greatness during your times!' He spoke such words for a while. He made me promise that my only aim in life should be to establish the greatness of the Chozla people.

"I reciprocated my grandfather's affection for me with equal fondness and reverence. I promised to fulfil his wishes, his orders, as my life's mission. But, I had no peace of mind. What about the fate of that mute-maid of the Karaiyar tribe who had saved me from the bear? How can a mute, island girl, of the lower classes, sit on the noble throne of the Chozla Kingdom, as a queen? Will a palace life be to her liking? Will the citizens and countrymen mock me? ... Such thoughts confused me. There was another matter:- My Elder-uncle Gandara Aditya had remarried recently. You know that the fortunate maid who married him is your Elder-grandmother Sembiyan Madevi, the scion of the Mazlava-raya clan. His first wife had no children; but, what was the assurance that his new wife would not have any offspring? If my uncle had a male child, how would I inherit the Kingdom? -- Such questions were raised by many, even in those days. Perhaps that great soul, my Uncle Gandara Aditya, felt that none in the Kingdom should raise any such doubts. Gandara Aditya was coronated after Emperor Paranthaka's death. My uncle -- the new King -- made arrangements that I should be anointed as the new Crown Prince on that same day.

"My dear Daughter! You know how the people of this country are obsessively fond of your brother Arulmozli in these days. Similarly, in those days, people were excessively fond of me. During the coronation ceremonies inside the palace, thousands of people had gathered in the plaza outside. They waited patiently for the newly crowned King and Prince to appear before them. Bowing to their wishes, my uncle and I, stepped onto the viewing gallery of this palace, presenting ourselves to the crowds. It was an ocean of smiling faces below us. On seeing us, they raised a cheering roar. So many people are happy about my being

their Prince; why should I worry about a mute-girl living in the forests of some desert island? Is the happiness of these thousands important? -- or the life of a mute?

"I was looking into the happy faces of the people below me, with such thoughts racing through my mind. Men, women, the elderly and the youth, even children -- everyone seemed so happy. However, suddenly, I saw a face -- the face of a young girl, filled with sadness, eyes brimming with tears looking at me piteously. I do not know how her face attracted my eyes or my attention in the midst of that vast multitude. After that, my eyes never left her face. Her face became larger and larger; came closer and closer. That huge horde of people vanished; everybody standing by my side disappeared; the palace vanished; the decorated gateway and plaza, the viewing gallery, the city, the fortress, the sky and the earth -- everything vanished. Only her face was fixed before my eyes -- like the vision of a Goddess. I felt faint; my legs felt weak; I lost consciousness....

"Later, I heard that I had fainted and the soldiers by my side had prevented my fall. They thought that I had been tired out by the coronation ceremonies. They canceled the public appearances and took me to my bed-chamber in the palace. When I had recovered somewhat, I called for my friend Anirudda and spoke to him in privacy. I described what I had seen. I ordered that he should make arrangements to somehow find that mute-girl and bring her to me. Anirudda came back later in the night to inform me that he could not find any girl meeting my description, though he had searched every nook and cranny of Tanjore Fort and its surroundings. I was angry with him, 'If you cannot help me even in this, what kind of a friend are you? Look for her on all the roads leaving Tanjore. The coast road to Kodi Karai ...' Men were sent to look for her along all roads. The men sent to Kodi Karai came back with some news. They had found a mute-girl living in the house of the light-house keeper. She had appeared to be insane. Though they had tried by several signs and actions they could not communicate with her. They were unable to convince her to go back to Tanjore with them.

"When the men brought this news, I was stunned and confused. What should I do? Two days passed in such confusion. I thought of her day and night. Nights were sleepless. I left for Kodi Karai with Anirudda by my side. We rode as fast as horses could carry us. During that journey, my mental disquiet increased a thousand fold. What should I do with her, if I find that mute girl? Shall I take her to Tanjore and Pazlayarai and declare, 'She is my Queen!' My heart and body shrank with mortification upon that very thought.

"My darling Daughter! In those days I was recipient of an unwanted fame -- that I was incomparable in physical beauty and allure. I did not heed it much, but, everyone talked constantly about my attractive personality. They completely ignored my given name -- Paranthaka, in honor of my grandfather -- and called me Sundara Chozla, the Handsome Chozla. I, who was famous in this fashion, how could I, lead an uncivilized island girl into the palace? If not, what could I do with her? With such an agitated mind I reached Kodi Karai.

"That good woman solved all my problems. The news that awaited me at Kodi Karai was shocking. She had climbed to the top of the light-house on the day after my men had left. It was the night of a new-moon. Storm winds were blowing; the sea in high tide was turbulent as it raised high waves covering the rocks around the light-house. That girl stood for hours, gazing into the stormy sea. People were used to seeing her stand like that quite often; so they did not particularly bother about it. A loud cry rose above the roar of the waves. She vanished. A couple of fishermen on the beach had seen a woman fall from the light-house into the sea below. They searched the rocky shore with catamarans and boats but could not find anything. They decided that she had been claimed by the sea.

"This news filled me with pain and anguish; soon a peace overtook those emotions. I did not have to worry about what to do with her. I did not have to think about her ... I returned to Tanjore with this strange feeling, a mixture of sadness and peace. I became involved with the affairs of the Kingdom. I married... your mother ... had brave sons, and you

"But! my dear, I could not forget that wretch who died. Sometimes, nightmares of that scene -- a sight I had not seen, would torture me. My imagination recreated that horror of a girl with disheveled hair falling headfirst into the stormy sea, from the light-house high above. I would awaken screaming from nightmares about that scene. Your mother by my side would ask, 'What is it? What is it?' I never told her the truth. 'Nothing!' I would convince her. I would pretend to have remembered some horror of the battlefield. In some years, by the grace of passing time, those nightmares left me. She faded from my memory. I had forgotten her till recently. Yet, I think the dead are more cruel than the living. That mute-girl's ghost has not forgotten me. It has begun to appear once again to torment me! Daughter, do you believe that the dead can return?" Sundara Chozla, stopped with this question to his daughter.

He was staring into the distance, with a deranged look. There was nothing to stare at in that chamber! But, his whole body shivered. Kundavai felt an immense sadness for her father. Her eyes filled with tears. She moved closer and buried her face on her father's chest, shedding tears. Soon, he stopped shivering and caressed her head with his fingers.

Kundavai sat up and said firmly, "Father, you had buried these frightening details in your heart for all these years and were worried sick. Now that you have told me everything, you will soon feel better."

Sundara Chozla smiled on hearing this. His sad voice was mingled with a hopelessness, "Kundavai, you don't believe me! You don't think that the dead can return. But, I tell you that I saw it with mine own eyes -- her ghost stood there, next to that pillar behind the metal-lamp, last night... How can I not believe it? If I was imagining things, what about your friend? She fainted because she saw something, heard something. Call her now, Kundavai! I'll ask her myself!" Sundara Chozla spoke restlessly.

"Father! Vanathi is a timid girl. I do not know how she came to be born in the brave Velir clan of Kodumbalur! Even if she had seen a pillar in the darkness, she would have fainted in fright. There is no point in asking her. She wouldn't have seen anything or heard anything."

"You think so? Fine, forget her then. Listen to the rest of my story. I too had no belief in the return of the dead. At least, not for a long time. I was sure that such apparitions are merely figments of the imagination. Do you remember that incident of long ago? When we had all gone boating on the Cauvery and Arulmozli had fallen into the river when he was a child? When we had been shocked with distress, a woman had rescued the child from the river. She vanished after others had taken charge of the boy. We have talked about that incident many times; you could not have forgotten. Your mother and others decided that Goddess Cauvery had saved the child. But, do you know what I saw? That Karaiyar girl -- the mute -- had picked up the child. You might remember that I had fainted on that day also. Everyone thought that I had fainted because of the mishap to the child. That is not true! I am telling you after all these years -- I fainted because I knew that it was her ghost that had picked up the child..."

"My Daughter! Do you remember the Coronation Day of your brother? Do you recall that day, when Aditya Karikala came into the palace courtyard to receive the blessings of all our elders, after he had been crowned? I was by his side then. I saw the mute-girl's ghost stand amidst all those women and stare angrily at my son Karikala. I fainted on that occasion too. When I thought about it later, I had my own doubts. I worried about why her ghost should stare angrily at Karikala. I wondered if it was part of my imagination. Kundavai, now, in Tanjore all my doubts are clear. Once upon a time, when she was alive, I could read all her thoughts just by looking at her face. A tremble on her lips would tell me everything she wished. I have that skill once again! Kundavai! She has come before me four or five times at mid-night, to warn me... 'You killed me! That I forgive. But, do not sin again! Don't covet a Kingdom which belongs to another and give it to your own!' I understand this message of her's very well! Daughter! You must help me in this matter. My sons do not need this cursed Kingdom, this Chozla Throne! Let us give it to Madurandaka."

Kundavai stopped his tirade with these words, "Father, how can you say these things? Why should we change a decision approved by all the citizenry and nobility? Will the world agree even if you wish to change it?"

"I do not care whether the world approves or not! I must follow the law of justice. It is my duty! My mind was never at peace when I crowned myself as Prince and later King of this Empire. My conscience pricked me. It is not lawful that I, the son of a younger brother should ascend the throne when a son of the elder brother is alive. Now, I suffer for such sins. Why should my sons commit a similar sin? Neither Aditya nor Arulmozli needs this Kingdom. They do not need the curse that comes with this Kingdom. We must crown Madurandaka before I die. After crowning him, I shall go to live in peace in the Golden Palace which Karikala has built at Kanchi."

"Father! Will the Elder Pirati agree to this scheme?"

"Kundavai, that is where I need your help. Make up some reason or other and make my aunt come here. Oh dear! Why is she who is so knowledgeable about so many things, unaware of the legality in this matter? Why did she force me to commit this sin? Why is she angry with her own son like this? Why is she so adamant about this affair which is against the very nature of motherhood? Perhaps there was some justice as long as Madurandaka was involved in his devotions to Saiva faith declaring that he would become an ascetic. Now that he himself is interested in ruling this Kingdom, how can we crown anyone else?"

"He may wish to rule; but, is he capable?"

"Why not? How can a son born to the great philosopher Gandara Aditya and a scion of brave Mazlava-rayas not be capable?"

"Forget the capability! Shouldn't the people approve?"

"If we were to ask approval of the people, do you know what they will say? They will insist that we immediately crown your younger brother Arulmozli! Is that lawful? Will Arulmozli agree to any such nonsense? All this is wasteful argument dear Daughter! Ask your Elder-grandmother to come here as quickly as possible. Write to her saying that I am wrestling with the God of Death; tell her that she must come immediately if she wants to see me alive..."

"That is not necessary Father! The Elder Pirati has been intending to start renovation of the Tali-kulattar Temple in Tanjore. I'll mention that and write to her, asking her to come here immediately. Please be patient till she comes."

After this, father and daughter talked for a while. Kundavai then left for her chambers. On the way, she accosted her mother and said, "Amma! From now, do not be away from my father's bedside even for one moment! Let others worry about prayers and penances. Your duty is to be by his side!"

Certain doubts that had been worrying Kundavai were now clearer. A twinkle of light began to appear in pitch darkness. Her intellect warned her that some huge conspiracy fuelled by sorcery and cunning, was taking shape against her brothers and their rights. But, she was not sure about the details of that conspiracy, who was really behind it or how it was being organized. She knew that the Chozla Kingdom and her brothers who had rights to that Kingdom, were in danger. She was convinced that the responsibility of protecting them from such danger had fallen on her shoulders.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 18 --Which Is The Worst Betrayal?

Those who have read the history of ancient Tamils will be aware that in those days, womenfolk were in the forefront of social life. Women of the royal family were greatly honored. Women born in the Chozla family

and women who married into the clan had rights to have property in their own name. Noblewomen of those times often held title to villages, wetlands and drylands, cattle and other wealth. It is interesting to read how these women utilized their wealth. Several noblewomen, established trusts and grants in their names for renovation and maintenance of temples, public water-tanks etc. Women established trusts for public service activities like lighting of temple lamps, flower services at places of worship, feeding of the poor and travelers, maintaining rest-houses in pilgrim centers etc. Such grants were recorded by deeds and edicts engraved on copper-plates or carved on stone.

(Note: Land ownership in those days was usually confined to the nobility, wealthy landowning castes, community organizations, temples and trade guilds. Stone inscriptions were often embedded on temple walls or other public buildings and memorials.)

Usually, women of the royal household were involved with temple building and temple renovation projects. Kundavai Pirati utilized her wealth in a slightly different manner. Perhaps she was moved by the long-time illness of her father -- anyway, she undertook the establishment of free medical facilities all over the Kingdom. She had already established an infirmary in the name of Emperor Paranthaka at Pazlayarai. She was now involved in founding a trust to run an infirmary in the name of her father at Tanjore. A ceremony to inaugurate the free-hospital and engrave the edicts and grant deeds was organized on the tenth day of the Navaratri Festival.

Inauguration ceremonies for the 'Sundara Chozla Infirmary' were organized in the Garuda Pavilion opposite the Vinnagara Temple in the suburbs outside Tanjore Fort. She had chosen a location by the Garuda Pavilion for the new infirmary, because of the belief that Lord Vishnu of the Vinnagara was a God of Protection and Garuda the Eagle was the divine messenger who brought healing nectar.

People from Tanjore and surrounding villages were gathered together in large numbers for the program. Men and women, children and elderly -- all were well dressed in good clothes and ornaments as they came together in a joyous assembly. The Emperor's confidential ministers, senior and junior officers of the government, stone masons skilled in carving stone inscriptions, engravers experienced in the art of writing on copper-plates, palace officials, members of various guilds, accountants -- all such persons were gathered in large numbers. A contingent of the Velaikara Battalion came with members playing loudly on drums, cymbals and trumpets. Another large contingent representing Tanjore's Guard Corps came with flashing spears and lances. Both Lords of Pazluvoor came riding with dignity on two large elephants. Prince Madurandaka came riding uncomfortably on a smart, richly caparisoned, white-horse. Princess Kundavai, her friends and some elderly ladies from the palace came in their palanquins. Pazluvoor's Young-Queen Nandini Devi came from another direction in her richly embellished, ivory palanquin emblazoned with the palmtree emblem of Pazluvoor. A silken canopy shaded the enclosure reserved for the nobles and royalty. Kundavai, Nandini and others walked up to sit in the enclosure.

The ceremony commenced upon a signal from Elder Lord Pazluvoor. First, two professional singers came up to sing the Thevaram hymn which began with the words "Ashes that are healing talismans." People were mesmerized into silence as they listened to the melody of the beautiful lyric being sung to the accompaniment of lutes and drums. But, a murmur of conversation could be heard in the midst of the noblewomen seated under the silken canopy.

Nandini moved closer to Kundavai as she asked softly, "Princess! It is said that long ago Saint Sambanda sang this hymn and anointed the Pandiya King with holy ashes to cure the ailing monarch. Why doesn't this song have such healing powers these days? Forget the song, even holy ashes don't seem to have any healing powers! We are not able to manage in these days without medicines, herbs, doctors and hospitals. Why?"

"Very true, Young-Queen! In those days justice prevailed; and hymns had healing powers. These days, the world is full of vice and sinners -- The country abounds with traitors who conspire against the Emperor. We

never heard of such people in those ancient times! Perhaps that is why the powers of chants and talismans have decreased." Kundavai peered into the face of Pazluvoor's Young-Queen.

Nandini's face showed no change. "Is that so? Are there traitors who conspire against their kings in these days? Who are they?" she asked calmly.

"That is what I am not sure about! Some accuse one person; others point at somebody else. I intend to remain here for some more time till I find out the truth. In Pazlayarai we never get proper news of what happens in the world!" Kundavai also spoke calmly.

"A good decision My Lady! If you ask me, I would suggest that you take up permanent residence here at Tanjore. Otherwise the Empire will fall into ruin! I shall also help you as much as I can. Also, we have a guest in our house; he also may be able to help you." Nandini spoke with a slight sarcasm.

"Who is the guest?" asked Kundavai.

"Kandamaran; Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's son. Have you met him? He is tall, like a coconut palm and well built! He keeps babbling constantly about `spies' and `traitors'. You mentioned about treason just now; can you say what is worse than betrayal of one's king?"

"Sure. If a woman betrays the husband who took her hand in wedlock, it is worse than treason!" Kundavai once again peered into Nandini's face after saying these words. But, there was no expected change. Nandini continued with the same enchanting smile.

"You are of course correct; but, Kandamaran will not agree! He will declare that `The vilest sin is betrayal of friendship!' I believe that Kandamaran's best friend not only changed to become a spy but also stabbed him on his back before running away. Since that incident, Kandamaran has been babbling like this."

"Who is he? Who committed such a vile deed?" asked Kundavai.

(Note: The code of chivalry in those days said that men of equal strength would fight face to face with equal weapons. Attacking below the belt or from behind were not considered as proper. Being killed in battle was considered a mark of bravery. War wounds -- particularly on the chest and shoulders -- were borne proudly as marks of honor and bravery. Wounds on the back were signs of dishonor or marks of a coward who may have been running away from an enemy. Wounding another on his back was a cowardly deed, for the enemy was perhaps attacked without warning.)

"Apparently it is someone named Vandiya Devan! I believe he is from the Vaanar clan which ruled long ago from Thiru-vallam in the Thondai Territories. Have you heard of him?"

Kundavai bit her coral lips with pearly teeth, "The name seems familiar what happened after that?"

"What can happen? After stabbing Kandamaran on the back, his friend escaped. My brother-in-law has sent men to arrest that spy!"

"How are they sure that he is a spy?"

"How will I know if he is a spy or not? All that we know is what Sambuvaraya's son says. Perhaps you would like to talk to him personally and know all the details, would you?"

"Yes; I must meet Sambuvaraya's son. I heard that it is a miracle that he survived! Is he in the Pazluvoor mansion since then?"

"Yes. They brought him to my mansion the day after he was wounded. The responsibility of arranging medical care for him fell on me! Somehow he survived; his wound has not healed completely."

"I am surprised that he is not fully cured, with you at his bedside, nursing him! That's fine. I shall pay him a visit. Sambuvaraya's family is no new upstart clan. They are noblemen, well known for their bravery since the times of Emperor Paranthaka."

Nandini replied, "That's why I mentioned it to you. Perhaps you will honor my house with a visit, at least on the pretext of calling on Kandamaran."

The prayer song was over by now and the Officer of Records had begun reading the edicts of the grant deeds. First, the royal permit from Sundara Chozla was read. "Since my beloved daughter Kundavai Pirati has deemed to donate all her income from the village of Nallur Mangalam, which I had bestowed upon her with all rights to all income, resources and responsibilities, since she wishes to establish this trust for the upkeep of a public infirmary in the suburbs of Tanjore, I the Emperor, declare that the tilled wetlands and drylands of that village be free of paying tax to the royal treasury." After reading this edict loudly, the Officer of Royal Records presented the roll of palmleaf letters to the Elder Lord Pazluvoor who was the Officer of Finances. Lord Pazluvoor accepted the letter reverently, with both hands and handed it to his Chief Accountant to be entered in the records.

After this, details of Kundavai Pirati's grant was read. "The farmers of the village of Nallur Mangalam are permitted to enjoy the rights and resources of all the taxable lands of the above mentioned village. In lieu of being freed of paying just dues to me and in lieu of being declared free of the tax burden to the royal treasury, the farmers of the above mentioned village are duty bound as follows: Every year in future, they will provide resources for the upkeep of the 'Sundara Chozla Infirmary' in addition to providing annually, two hundred kalams of paddy for the Chief Doctor of this Infirmary and fifty measures of cows-milk, five measures of goats-milk and one hundred tender coconuts per day for the use of patients being treated at the Infirmary."

The full text of this grant was engraved on stone with a preface about the lineage of the grant giver, the identity and location of the village and its boundary, the location of the infirmary. In addition, the names of the stone mason who carved the deed and the officers who witnessed the correctness of the information, were carved on the stone. After the stone edict was read and verified, it was presented to representatives of the village of Nallur Mangalam, who had come to attend the ceremony.

Village Elders received the stones with respect and then placed them on a ceremonial elephant which would carry them to the village in procession. Loud cheers such as "Long life to Sundara Chozla the Rajakesari who conquered Madurai!" were raised. About a hundred drums announced the news with a loud din that filled the skies. The procession started with cheers like, "Long life to the Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi!" "Long life to Prince Aditya Karikala who vanquished Veera-pandiya!" "Long life to Prince Arulmozli who triumphed in Lanka!" "Long life to Prince Madurandaka the divine son of devout Gandara Aditya!"

Finally, slogans of praise such as, "Long life to Elder Lord Pazluvoor the Officer of Finances and Food Supply, the Officer of Taxes!" "Long life to Lord Kalanthaka the Commander of Tanjore!" were also raised. Towards the end, the enthusiasm in the cheers and responses was greatly reduced. The final cheers were raised mainly by Pazluvoor soldiers; the general public did not respond too readily.

Kundavai was eager to see Nandini's face when this happened; but, she was unable to catch a glimpse of her in the milling crowd. The Princess would have been very surprised indeed, if she had seen the Young-Queen's face when the cheers in praise of Prince Karikala were raised. In fact, even strong hearted Kundavai would have been stunned with fright by the expression on Nandini's enchanting face.

Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 19 -- "The Spy Is Caught!"

The incidents of the day had greatly irritated Elder Lord Pazluvoor. It had become an occasion for the people to display their affection and allegiance to the Emperor and the royal family.

"People! Commoners! Mindless cattle! All four thousand will walk the same path if four lead the way down to an abyss! How many have the capability to use their common sense?" -- He muttered in this fashion expressing his anger. "It is obvious that the Emperor will utterly ruin this Empire before he goes to heaven! He orders, 'Remove tariffs for this town. Free that village from taxes!' Very soon there will be no towns or villages paying taxes. But, we have to furnish food supplies and monies for countless battle campaigns. Where am I to send the supplies from?" He shouted at no one in particular. The clerks and servants in the mansion were slightly frightened by his anger.

Finally, Lord Kalanthaka had to come and preach patience, "Anna! What is the use of shouting in this fashion? We have to be patient till the time comes and show our powers in action."

When Lord Pazluvoor heard that Kundavai was about to pay a visit to his mansion, his irritation crossed the limit. He walked up to Nandini and asked, "What is this? I hear that she is coming here. Why should that ogress come here? Did you invite her? Have you forgotten how she insulted you?"

"I will never forget the good that one had done to me. Neither will I forget the insults heaped by another. Don't you know my nature by now?" asked Nandini.

"Then, why is she coming here?"

"Her wish, she is coming. Her arrogance in being the Emperor's daughter brings her here."

"Why did you invite her?"

"I did not; she invited herself! She said, 'Is Sambuvaraya's son in your house? I must visit him.' How could I say 'Don't come'? A time will come when I can say it. Till then I have to bear all such insults patiently."

"I cannot be patient. When she comes on the visit, I cannot remain in this mansion! In fact I cannot remain in this city. I have some work in Mazlapadi and I will go there."

"Do that My Lord! I had been meaning to suggest something like that. Leave that poisonous snake to me. I know how to control her. When you come back, if you hear some astonishing news, don't be too surprised."

"What astonishing news?"

"You may perhaps hear that Kundavai is planning to wed Kandamaran; or that Aditya Karikala plans to marry Kandamaran's sister Manimekalai."

"What nonsense is this? If anything like that happens, what about our plans?"

"Does mere talk mean that an act has taken place? You have been telling your friends that Madurandaka is the next King. Is that really going to happen? Are we striving like this to crown that effeminate fool Madurandaka?" Nandini blinked her large eyes and looked at the Elder Lord of Pazluvoor.

He was no match to her beguiling looks. He sat down beside her and picked up her hands, kissing them, "My Darling! Soon, you will sit on this Chozla throne as its all powerful Empress," he said.

Kandamaran was very agitated and restless from the minute he found that Kundavai was about to pay him a visit. Kundavai's intelligence, beauty and greatness were famous. The Younger Pirati was about to visit him. What a great honor it was! I would have willingly borne several more bruises and fallen even more sick for such an honor! Oh Dear! Why wasn't I wounded on my chest in such a situation? How admirable it would

have been if Kundavai had come to see me with such wounds. Instead of that, I have to once again repeat this wretched story of my friend's betrayal and his dastardly deed.

In the midst of such thoughts he recalled how his family was involved in schemes against her and her family; that mortified him. Kandamaran was an honest young man. He was not used to cunning and crafty conspiracies. Though Nandini's enchanting beauty had fascinated him, he controlled his passions with the thought that she was another man's wife. But, Kundavai Pirati was not married.

How should I behave with her? What should I talk about? Can I hide something in my heart and speak pleasantries with her? Or, will I become slave to her beauty and forget my promises to my father and his friends? I should not let that happen! Why does the Princess want to talk with me? Let her come, I'll say something uncivilized and obnoxious so that she never comes back...

All his resolve vanished the minute he saw Kundavai. Kandamaran lost his convictions when confronted by her polished manner, beauty, charm, modesty, dignity and pleasant words of solace. His imagination broke bounds and ran wild. He recounted all his deeds of bravery as if he was reluctant to talk about them, but was speaking upon her insistence. He pointed out his old war-wounds, the healed scars on his shoulders and chest, as if he was reluctant to show them.

"It would have been better if Vandiya Devan, that disloyal friend of mine, had struck me on my chest and killed me. I am embarrassed that he wounded my back before he escaped and that I have to tell you all this. I don't wish to become infamous as the coward who turned his back on a conflict. I would have readily forgiven him if he had wounded me on my shoulders or on my chest."

Kundavai felt that Kandamaran's emotional words had a ring of truth in them. She wondered if Vandiya Devan could have done the dastardly deed and if she had been mistaken about her brother's messenger. She asked Kandamaran to describe the incident in detail. Even Nandini was thrown into a sea of surprise by the imaginative tale told by young Kandamaran!

"My Lady, he fooled me even on that night he had stayed in my house at Kadamboor. He never revealed why he was going to Tanjore. He entered this fort by showing some false identity and even met the Emperor with falsehoods about bringing letters from Crown Prince Karikala. He did not stop with that. He even involved your honored name saying that he was carrying letters for you! That made the Commander suspicious about him. The Commander wondered if he was a spy and placed him under guard. Somehow, Vandiya Devan escaped. One has to give him credit for his ingenuity. When I heard this story, the only thing that I did not believe was this -- that my friend could be an enemy spy. He has certain defects in his character; I felt that this was some foolish weakness in him. 'I shall somehow find him and bring him to you. You must pardon him.' With such promises and conditions to the Commander, I left Tanjore Fort.

"At midnight, I was walking along the banks of River Vadavaru which surrounds this fort. I did not wish to take anyone with me thereby adding to the disgrace of my friend. A fellow escaping from this fort must emerge somewhere from the fortress walls; or, he must be hiding somewhere in the nearby woods. That's why I walked along the banks of the river. In the dim moonlight, I could make out the form of a fellow climbing down the outer wall. I went and stood in front of him and asked, 'Friend, what have you done?' That odious fellow punched me on my chest. I, who have borne the blows of an elephant was not affected by his punches. I hit him back with my fist because I could not tolerate his behavior in picking a fight with me who had gone there with good intentions. We wrestled for a while. Within minutes he was tired, begging my forgiveness. I forgave him and said, 'Tell me the truth about why you have come here. I may be able to help you.' He replied that he was tired, 'Let us sit somewhere and talk.' I agreed and led the way. I was walking ahead; suddenly, that fellow struck me from behind with a knife. Half a foot of that knife sank into my flesh; I fainted and fell to the ground. That betrayer of friendship escaped. When I regained consciousness, I found myself in a mute-woman's house."

Nandini laughed to herself on hearing this imaginary story of Kandamaran. Kundavai was not able to decide on how much of it could be believed.

"How did you come to the mute-woman's house? Who brought you there?" asked Kundavai.

"That is an unexplained mystery to me! That dumb woman did not know anything. Even if she knew, she has been unable to explain. Apparently, she has a young son. He too disappeared on that night. No one knows his whereabouts. If that son returns, he might be able to shed some light on the matter. Otherwise, I have to be patient till the Pazluvoor soldiers arrest my friend Vandiya Devan."

"Do you think that he will be arrested?"

"How can he escape? He cannot bind wings and fly away! That's why, mainly to meet him, I am remaining here in Tanjore. I would have gone home otherwise. I am still confident of earning a pardon for my friend from the Lords of Pazluvoor."

"Sir! You are to be commended for your unselfishness," said Kundavai Pirati. But her heart said, Vandiya Devan should not be arrested ... even if he is a traitor.

A servant maid came running into the chamber, "Madam! The spy is caught! They are bringing him down the street."

Nandini and Kundavai -- both their faces were covered by an expression of wounded pain. Nandini controlled herself instantly. Kundavai could not do so.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 20 --Tigress Against Tigress

When a servant maid announced that the spy was caught and that he was being brought down the street, all three persons in the room felt a certain agitation in their hearts. Kundavai Pirati was more disturbed than the other two.

Nandini asked, "Princess, shall we go and see what that cunning spy looks like?"

Kundavai hesitated, "Why should we bother about him?"

"Fine; if you say so!" Nandini appeared nonchalant.

"I want to see; I'll go," saying this Kandamaran stood up unsteadily.

"Don't get up. You cannot walk; you will fall..." Nandini was by his side.

Kundavai seemed to have changed her mind. "Let us find out what he looks like ... this dear friend! Can we see the street from the balcony or terrace of this mansion?"

"We can see very clearly. Come with me." Nandini led the way.

"My Lady, if it is really my friend, please arrange with Uncle Pazluvoor for me to meet him and talk to him," said Kandamaran.

Nandini turned around, "How can we know if he is your friend?" She glanced towards Kundavai.

"Then, I'll come with you to identify him!" Kandamaran walked with faltering steps.

All three stepped onto a balcony on the upper story of the mansion. Seven or eight horses were coming down the street below, from a distance. Soldiers bearing arms were riding those horses. A man was walking in their midst. His hands were crossed behind him and bound with ropes. Two horsemen on both sides were holding

the ends of the ropes that bound him. A gawking mob was following behind this cavalcade. At first the face of the man walking amidst the horsemen was not visible to those standing on the balcony.

Silence prevailed on the terrace till the procession came closer. Kundavai's eager, worried eyes were fixed on the procession coming closer. Nandini was engaged in bending down to look at the street and glancing back at Kundavai's face. Kandamaran broke the silence that dwelt on that narrow balcony.

"No! This is not Vandiya Devan!"

Kundavai's face brightened. By now, the remarkable parade had come in front of that mansion. The fellow bound by the ropes and being dragged by the horsemen, looked up. Kundavai recognized him as Pinakapani, the Doctor's son from Pazlayarai. As if to say something, the fellow opened his mouth while looking up. But, the ropes that bound him dragged him forward.

Without disclosing her happiness, Kundavai said, "What foolishness is this? Why have they dragged him here like this? He is the son of the Doctor in Pazlayarai."

"Oh! Is that so? My brother-in-law's men are always like this. They will let the real culprit escape, arrest some innocent fellow and torture him," said Nandini.

Kandamaran was speaking again, "Ah! My friend Vandiya Devan won't be caught so easily. He is very crafty. He fooled even me; will he be caught by these men?"

"Why do you still refer to him as your friend?" asked Nandini.

"He betrayed me. But, in my heart, my regard for him has not changed."

"Perhaps these soldiers have killed your dear friend! I had been told that these men had followed two spies to Kodi Karai." After saying this, Nandini looked at Kundavai. She found that the word "killed" tortured the Younger Pirati.

You proud female! I have a weapon for revenge on you! If I don't utilize it fully, my name is not Nandini, the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. Wait! Just you wait!

Kundavai covered her disquiet with rage, "What spies!? Utter foolishness. As days go by, these old men seem to lose all their senses. They seem to suspect everyone! I had sent this man to Kodi Karai to collect medicinal herbs. Why did they arrest him? I must ask your brother-in-law immediately!"

"Oh! Is he the man sent by you, Princess? You talked about suspicion. I too have a suspicion -- now. Did you send just this one man to collect medicinal herbs? Did you send another fellow also?" asked Nandini.

"Yes, I had sent another man with him. I had asked one of them to go to the Island of Lanka if necessary."

"Aha! I understand everything now. It's just as I had guessed."

"I don't understand. What did you guess? What has happened?"

"I have no more doubts; everything is clear. My Lady, was the other man you sent with this fellow known to you? Or, was he a newcomer?"

Kundavai Pirati hesitated, "What newcomer? He is the same fellow who brought me letters from Kanchi; from my elder brother."

"It's him! It is him!" said Nandini bringing her palms together in glee.

"Who?"

"He... The spy! He had lied here also -- about bringing letters for the Emperor."

"Why did they suspect him to be a spy?"

"How will I know that? It's an official secret guarded by the men. As a matter of fact, that spy did act suspiciously. Why did he run away in the night? Why did he wound this poor gentleman on his back?"

"I cannot believe that he was the man who stabbed this gentleman. If he had stabbed with the knife, why did he carry this gentleman to the mute's house?" Kundavai asked.

"You speak as if you witnessed the whole incident, My Lady! Somehow, you seem concerned about that spy. He must be a magician. Even this gentleman still calls him a friend! Anyway, who cares? A lost life cannot be regained. If these soldiers had killed him..."

Beads of perspiration darkened Kundavai's face. Her eyes reddened and throat choked; heart beats became rapid. "It couldn't have happened. It cannot be..." she mumbled under her breath.

"... If that spy was as cunning as this gentleman claims..." Nandini continued her conjectures.

"Princess, I am sure. Vandiya Devan would never have been caught by these soldiers." Kandamaran spoke positively.

"If not now, another time. He is sure to be arrested." Nandini did not give up.

Kundavai crunched her teeth, "Who knows what can happen tomorrow?" She continued with anger, "Since the Emperor fell ill and took to his sickbed, the whole country has turned topsy-turvy! What powers do these nobles have to arrest men sent by me to collect medicinal plants? I will discuss this with my father at once."

"My Lady, why should you disturb your father about this petty matter? Why don't you question my brother-in-law? Perhaps he was not aware of your wishes. He will act suitably, if you let him know your intentions. None can dare to cross the wishes of the Younger Pirati in this Chozla Empire!" Nandini tried to soothe her rage.

In that conflict between two tigresses that day, Nandini was the victor. Several wounds afflicted Kundavai's heart. She had to make a tremendous effort to conceal her emotions.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 21 --Dungeons

There is nothing more enigmatic than life on earth. Who knows the why and whereof of comfort or sadness? The skies remain clear for long periods of time. Suddenly, dark clouds collect from all eight directions, plunging the world into darkness; thunder rolls, lightning strikes and rain drenches everything. Sometimes it would appear as if the very meaning of a breeze had vanished from earth. Even leaves on trees stand still. An unexpected whirlwind blows from somewhere, swirling and twisting. Large trees are uprooted in its path. Luscious groves which appeared pleasant till recently, turn into gardens ruined by monkey hordes.

Such a whirlwind was now swirling in Kundavai's life. Till recently she had no idea of worries. Life was an endless, happy carnival. Love and affection, song and dance, poetry and painting, jewels and adornments, garden parties and boating trips -- these filled her days. Everyone -- her parents, brothers, ministers, teachers, friends, servants and slaves thought of her as their cherished darling. She was aware of emotions like sadness and worry only through conjecture in poetry and drama. When misfortune came to her, it piled one upon the other.

Her father's situation was cause for concern. There was danger to the Empire. Her brothers were far away in distant lands. Astrologers and soothsayers had been cryptic in predicting some unexplainable danger that was about to befall her clan. Secret, treacherous meetings were being held in the Kingdom. People were gripped by an unfamiliar fear. Kundavai, born in a clan that gave birth to generations of brave warriors, had the

strength to face all such obstacles. She was confident of solving all these problems to her family and Empire with her sharp intellect. However, a minor incident, an unexpected meeting became the cause to disturb her confidence.

When Kundavai met Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan, a lotus bud that was her heart opened its petals gently and bloomed in full glory. How unfortunate! A dark-bee came to sit on that bloom, to bruise its soft petals with poisonous stings. The mere thought that the gallant of the Vaanar clan might have been arrested distressed her. Those harsh words -- he might have been killed -- they broke her heart! How difficult it was to hide those feelings! When she had so many who were near and dear to her -- her parents, siblings, close friends and relatives -- why was her heart so agitated about some wayfarer whom she had met casually, perhaps twice or thrice? But, there was no time now, to examine and pinpoint the cause and effect of such sentiments. Without much delay, without worrying about the right time, she must make the needed enquiries and act immediately.

She sent word to Younger Lord Pazluvoor that she would visit him that afternoon itself, perhaps view the Art Gallery... And she went. Womenfolk in that palace welcomed her eagerly; they showered her with affection and courtesy. The Princess spent some time with them, conversing pleasantly about this and that. She then walked to the Art Gallery. Lord Kalanthaka was waiting to welcome her; he led her to the gallery, acting as a guide pointing out the finer details of the paintings. Kundavai looked at every picture, listened to all his explanations, without uttering a single word.

Finally, when the last picture was seen, she turned to him. She looked at him from head to toe and said, "Sir! Nobles of the Pazluvoor clan have been of incomparable service to the Chozla family, over several generations!"

"It is our good fortune, My Lady!" Lord Kalanthaka bowed very low.

"There is no doubt ... that this Chozla Empire is an appropriate reward for such service..."

"Thaye! What word is this?!"

"But, you could wait till the Emperor's life is ended and he has reached his heavenly abode. Why such impatience to grab the powers of this Empire?"

Kalanthaka's face revealed that these words pierced like sharp arrows through his heart. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. The mustache drooped and limbs shivered with fear. Mopping his face with a scarf, he said, "My Lady! Why this rage? Are you planning to dispatch me to the world of Death with arrows of mere words?"

"Sir! You know that I have no such powers. Even the Lord of Death is afraid to approach Lord Kalanthaka and his domains. What can I, a mere girl, do?"

"My Lady, perhaps it would be better if you poured molten lead down my ears instead of such harsh words. What have I done, that the Princess has to bestow such 'royal mercy' on me?"

"Who am I to talk about your faults? You, -- tell me about my mistakes. Is it wrong for me to send men to collect medicinal plants for healing my father?"

"No, My Lady! It can never be wrong."

"Were you not aware that I had sent the Doctor's son from Pazlayarai to collect medicinal plants from Kodi Karai?"

"I knew of it, My Lady."

"This morning, I saw that man, bound with ropes, being dragged down the streets of this city by your men. Did you order it? Did you do it in spite of being aware that he was my retainer?"

"Yes, My Lady! No! Perhaps you had not known that he was a spy?" Lord Kalanthaka was rattled.

"The Doctor's son is a spy! What nonsense! Do you want me to believe this fable?"

"Thaye! What if he had confessed? Wouldn't you believe it then?"

The Princess was stunned for one moment. "He confessed! What did he confess? How?"

"He agreed that the other man who went with him is a spy. He said that the other fellow did not go on the journey to really collect herbs; that man was travelling with some letters for someone in Lanka."

"He is a fool; prattling nonsense. That other man who journeyed with him was also sent by me. I am sure you knew that also."

"I was aware of that My Lady. But, I also know that the other fellow misled you. That youth, named Vandiya Devan is really a spy."

"Never. He is the messenger sent by my brother from Kanchi, with letters for me."

"Princess he brought letters for the Emperor also from your brother in Kanchi. So what? Spies use all kinds of tricks to fulfil their mission."

"Sir, what proof do you have to declare that Vandiya Devan is a spy?"

"If he is not a spy, why did he travel along country roads and byways instead of going on the Royal Highway? He even stopped at an astrologer's house in Kudanthai, asking about the Emperor's health!"

"Even I discussed the Emperor's health with the Astrologer of Kudanthai. What is wrong with that?"

"You, a cherished daughter, asking about the Emperor is quite different from unknown adventurers asking such questions. Spies sent by enemy kings might ask such questions."

"That is your opinion. What other proof do you have?"

"He could have entered Tanjore Fort openly, after obtaining my permission. Instead, he entered clandestinely showing the Pazluvoor signet. He lied, saying that Elder Lord Pazluvoor had given him that signet ring with the palmtree symbol. Why did he do that?"

"Who gave him that signet ring?"

"I do not know; I must find out."

"What are your men doing, instead of finding out that information?"

"My Lady! My men are not magicians. We have to find the spy and arrest him before we can question him about how he got that ring."

"How can you be sure that he will speak the truth?"

"There are ways to make him tell the truth. We have the Dungeons of Tanjore. But, the spy seemed to know about our secret passages. That is why he was able to escape and leave this fort in that same night. He also stabbed Sambuvaraya's son."

"What proof do you have that he was the man who stabbed Kandamaran?"

"Kandamaran's statement."

"That is not enough! I state that he did not stab Sambuvaraya's son."

"My Lady, did you personally witness the incident?"

"No. But, I can examine a fellow's face and decide if he is at fault or not."

"That wicked spy is fortunate! Somehow, the spy has earned your good opinion. I have not been fortunate like him!"

"Sir, you continue to call him 'spy!' Why?"

"Thaye! If he was not a spy, why did he mingle with the street players and enter Pazlayarai covertly? Why did he disguise himself as a doctor and travel to Kodi Karai? If he was not a spy, why did he remain hidden for one whole day from my men in Kodi Karai? Why did he sail away to Lanka by nightfall?"

"Oh! Did he go away on a boat and escape to Lanka? Couldn't your men catch him?" Kundavai could not conceal the delight in her voice.

"Yes, My Lady. That magical spy fooled my men and escaped. These idiots let him go and arrested the Doctor's son."

"Sir, forget that spy; I don't care about him. I sent the Doctor's son and I am sure that he is innocent. You must free him immediately."

"My Lady, even if he is not a spy, he helped the real spy. He tried to confuse my men with all sorts of stories. He helped the spy to hide in the forests of Kodi Karai for one whole day and later escape in a boat."

"I don't care. You must free the Doctor's son."

"I am not ready to accept that responsibility. Danger surrounds our country from all directions. Enemies await to invade us. Veera-pandiya's bodyguards, the Aabathudavis, have sworn to destroy the roots of the Chozla clan. Conspiracies everywhere ..."

"Sir, if one were to throw all conspirators into prison, there will be no room in the prison."

"We can lock them up as long as we have room!"

"Reserve some room for locking up the real traitors. Sir, free the Doctor's son immediately."

"As I said, I cannot accept that responsibility, My Lady."

"Will you obey if the Emperor orders it? Or will you disobey him also?"

"Princess, I do not need the Emperor's orders for this. The world knows that the Younger Pirati's wish and will is gospel to the Emperor. Here, I am giving you these keys to the Dungeons of Tanjore. You may personally open the doors and free him. If you wish to free anyone else, you are welcome to do so. You are responsible for the consequences."

Lord Kalanthaka unbound a heavy bunch of keys from his waistband and presented it to the Princess. Kundavai controlled her rage and said, "Fine! I shall bear the responsibility for the consequences!" She accepted the keys.

"If any grave danger threatens this Chozla Empire, it is surely because of two women!" Lord Kalanthaka spoke with disgust.

"I am one; who is the other?" asked Kundavai.

"It is the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor, Nandini Devi."

Finally, Kundavai smiled wholeheartedly, "You equate me with the all powerful authority of this Chozla Empire! If he comes to hear of it, your brother the Elder Lord Pazluvoor will banish you from this land!"

"That will be perfect. I shall wait for it," said Kalanthaka the Younger Lord Pazluvoor.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 22 --Sendan Amudan In Prison

The Royal Mint inside Tanjore Fort where gold coins were engraved was like a mini fortress. It had guards and security just like the entrance to Tanjore Fort itself. Kundavai Devi and her friend Vanathi Devi went to inspect this mint, late in the evening that day. The goldsmiths had finished work for the day and were ready to leave. Security guards were ready to examine the goldsmiths and let them depart. They had all collected in the entrance hallway. It was at this moment that a chariot from the palace came to stop near the gate. Kundavai and Vanathi dismounted. On seeing them, guards and goldsmiths alike became very happy and began to raise cheers of greeting, "Long life to the Younger Pirati!"

The Headman of the mint came running to welcome them. He received them eagerly and led them inside. Furnaces for melting gold and other metals, molds used for minting coins, polishing and engraving tools, minted coins and blank forms -- all these were shown to them; every process was explained in detail. Gold coins, freshly minted on that day were heaped in a pile towards one side. The shining pure gold blinded their eyes. Each coin was engraved with a leaping tiger on one side and a sailing ship on the reverse.

(Note: Till the early years of this Chozla Dynasty, not much coinage was minted in the Tamil lands. Though coins were in free circulation and widely used in trade, the coinage itself was often imported. Coins minted in other nations, particularly large quantities of Roman and Greek coins, were imported for use as legal tender. Earlier, indigenous mintage was usually in silver, copper and other base metals. Cowrie shells were often used as money in remote areas and for petty transactions.)

"Look Vanathi! From times immemorial, gold was imported into our country from all over the world by land and by sea. Our womenfolk bore the burden of carrying all this gold till recent times. They converted the gold into beautiful ornaments and carried the heavy jewelry on their person. For some time now this heavy burden has been reduced for Chozla women. Our Finance Officer, Lord Pazluvoor has made arrangements to mint such beautiful coins," said Kundavai.

Vanathi asked, "Akka, what is the use of such coins?"

"Use? How ignorant you are, Vanathi! If gold is minted into such coins of standard weight, one can establish its value without weighing large quantities of metal. People can pay taxes to their king with these. When merchants trade in foreign ports, they do not have to be encumbered with complications of barter with cumbersome goods. They can buy goods for these gold coins; they can sell stuff in exchange for such coins. That is why merchants are full of praise for our Finance Officer... But, let me tell you another secret!" Kundavai explained all this and then lowered her voice before she continued, "The coins are very convenient for villains who conspire against the Emperor and his family. The most honest man can be turned traitor by these shining pieces of gold!"

The Headman of the Mint, who was standing close by heard these softly spoken words. He said, "Yes, My Lady. We hear such frightening rumors these days. That is why the security in this mint has been increased in recent days. The number of persons coming and going from the dungeons below this mint has also increased."

"I've heard of prisoners coming into Tanjore's Dungeons; are there people who leave it also?" asked Kundavai Pirati.

"Why not? We have such persons too! One man was brought in this morning; about half an hour ago, he was taken away."

Kundavai wondered about who that prisoner could have been. She had come here mainly because the access door to the underground dungeons of Tanjore which held political prisoners was situated in a inner court of the mint. Instead of using the separate street-side entrance to that antechamber, she came through the mint. After inspecting the various work areas of the mint, she walked towards this inner room. A small door was found on the farthest wall of this chamber. They opened that door and walked ahead. It was another wide courtyard with a low, vaulted ceiling and dim light. They could hear frightening growls from all four corners. A soldier stood with a lighted torch at the head of this passage-like room that sloped downwards on one end. When their eyes adjusted to the dim light, they could discern several cages along all the walls. They could see the beasts in those cages: growling tigers, lions and cheetahs. The big cats swished their tails as they walked to and fro, to and fro in their cages. Their eyes glowed like yellow embers in the dim light of that chamber.

Kundavai held on tightly to Vanathi's hand and said, "Are you frightened? Please don't fall down in a faint in here!"

Vanathi chuckled, "I am not afraid of tigers, Akka! Tigers are guardian angels of our clans."

"Sometimes guards can change sides to favor the enemy. Then it could be very dangerous."

"No, Akka. Human guards can become such traitors. These tigers won't do any such thing."

"We cannot be sure. These cats have eaten many political traitors. Their blood flows in the veins of these tigers, so..."

"Akka! What are you saying? Will they feed living human beings to these cats?" Vanathi who had just declared that she was not afraid, shivered.

"No. They won't do that! Remember, what I had told you? Tanjore's underground prisons are located below this mint. There is only one way to enter or leave those prisons and that entrance is from this tiger-room. Anyone trying to escape from Tanjore's Dungeons has to come through this chamber; then they would become prey to these tigers and lions."

"Oh, good Lord! What horror!"

"Government is like that. There is mercy as well as horror. Vanathi, a time may come when I myself may be thrown into this underground prison. If you had heard the conversation I had with Commander Kalanthaka..."

"Absurd, Akka! There is no power that can imprison you in all the fourteen worlds of this universe! If anybody tries to do anything like that, the earth will split open and swallow this Tanjore City. I am not worried about that; I am concerned about the son of our Doctor from Pazlayarai. I hope that innocent man did not try to escape."

"Innocent man! Who knows who will become a double-crosser or when they would do so?" said Kundavai a little bitterly.

As they walked onwards, the growl of tigers became louder. Kundavai looked at the soldier following them and asked, "The tigers seem very angry, why?"

The soldier replied cleverly, "No, My Lady! They are happily welcoming our beloved Emperor's gracious daughter."

"Good welcome!" laughed Kundavai.

"It is time to feed these tigers. They are growling for food."

"Oh! Let us finish and leave quickly. Where is the entrance?"

By now, they had walked to the end of that chamber. Some soldiers pushed one of the lion cages aside. A small doorway buried on the floor was revealed. Two men bent down and lifted the trap-door. The open door-way revealed a flight of steps. They went down those steps, one after the other in single file. It became darker; smokey torches held by two soldiers shed some light. Narrow passage-ways criss-crossed randomly. The room above ground had been filled with the frightening growl of tigers and lions; this room below ground was echoing with piteous wails and cries for help. The screams from various prisoners unnerved their hearts, making their limbs tremble. In the midst of all those wails, a surprise. An astonishing sound -- a pleasant voice was singing a song!

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

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

The cells in that prison were not arranged in straight rows. They were here and there; around corners and embedded in walls; randomly placed in that narrow space excavated by stone masons. The soldier stepped up to each cell and held up his torch. Some rooms held only one man; some housed two. Many cells were empty. In some rooms, the prisoner was chained to the wall with heavy metal bands embedded in the stone. When light fell on the faces of these prisoners, Kundavai shook her head and they moved ahead.

Vanathi asked, "What horror is this? Why are these people shut up like this? Is there no fair trial or enquiry?"

"Ordinary crimes are dealt with proper trial and justice. But, treason against king and government, foreign spies and those who aid and abet such spies are thrown into these cells. Once they have extracted the truth from them, they may be allowed to go. Sometimes, there is nothing to be learned from some of them. They can confess only if there is something to confess! Their lot is difficult."

They had now come closer to the voice that was singing the "Lord of golden-hued body" lyric. When the guard held up the torch to cast light in that cell, they could see a young man inside. He is an old acquaintance of ours; Sendan Amudan.

The Princess was touched by his pleasant, innocent, young face. Kundavai asked him, "Are you the one who was singing?"

"Yes, Thaye!"

"You seem happy!"

"I have no dearth of joy and happiness. The all pervading Lord is here with me."

"You talk like a big philosopher. Who are you young man? What was your occupation?"

"I am neither a big philosopher nor a small philosopher. Amma! When I lived outside, I strung flower garlands and offered them to God. Here, I sing lyrics for our Lord."

"You are not only a philosopher, but also a poet. Is this the only song you know? Do you know many other lyrics?"

"I know some other lyrics also. But, since I came here, I have been singing this same song."

"Why?" asked Kundavai.

"When I came here, I walked through the gold mint. I saw heaps of pure gold in quantities that I had never imagined. It reminded me of our Lord with the golden-hued body."

"You are blessed. People are tempted by various passions when they see wealth. Your mind was filled with thoughts of God. Don't you have any kith or kin?"

"Just a mother. She lives in the flower garden in Tanjore's suburbs."

"Her name?"

"Vaani Ammai."

"I shall meet her and tell her that you are happy and well here in this prison."

"It's of no use Thaye. My mother can neither hear nor speak."

Kundavai was astonished. She asked, "Oh! Is your name Sendan Amudan?"

"Yes My Lady! You seem to be aware of this poor fellow's name!" Sendan Amudan was equally surprised.

"Why did they bring you here? What crime did they charge you with?"

"Till yesterday, I did not know what crime I had committed. Today, I found out."

"What did you find out?"

"I found that I was arrested and imprisoned for the crime of helping a spy."

"How is that? Which spy did you help?"

"One day, I met a foreign traveler outside Tanjore Fort. He said that he was looking for a place to spend the night. I led him to my house, not even dreaming that he could be a spy."

"Do you know his name?"

"He said that his name was Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan. He said that he belonged to the ancient Vaanar clan."

Kundavai and Vanathi looked at each other. They seemed to agree about something. Vanathi spoke, "Please tell us all the details, Sir!"

Sendan Amudan told his tale. He described everything from the minute he had met Vandiya Devan outside Tanjore Fort till he had been caught on the river bank by Pazluvoor soldiers. Vanathi asked, "Why did you trust a strange adventurer like that and help him so much?"

"Thaye! Sometimes we take a liking to people just by looking at them. We are ready to even give up our life for them. Who can explain why we feel such emotions? Sometimes, if we see some fellows, we feel like killing them immediately. Today, one man was imprisoned in this same cell with me. The anger I felt against him was limitless! Fortunately for him, he was freed a short while ago by retainers of the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor."

"What?" asked Kundavai who could not control herself. She bit her lips and tried to keep quiet. Her eyebrows were knit in anger and nostrils trembling with rage.

"Who was that man? Freed in such a hurry? Do you know?"

"I know; apparently he is a son of the Doctor in Pazlayarai. His name is Pinakapani."

"What outrageous things did he say, that you wished to kill him?"

"My uncle's daughter Poonkuzlali lives at Kodi Karai. This man uttered dishonorable words about her. That's why I was so angry with him. But, he also gave me some good news; that's why I let him go free!"

"What is that good news, young man?" asked Kundavai.

"Apparently this man had gone to Kodi Karai with my friend Vandiya Devan. This wretch tried to betray my friend over there by trying to help Pazluvoor soldiers in finding him. But he could not succeed."

"Could not succeed? Did that spy escape?" Both Vanathi and Kundavai asked this question eagerly. They had come this far into the Dungeons of Tanjore only to find out this news.

"Yes, Ladies. My friend escaped. Apparently Poonkuzlali took him in her boat by midnight and they had gone away to Lanka. The searching soldiers were hoodwinked; this man was also fooled."

Both women looked at each other in happiness. Their faces reflected their joy. Kundavai turned back to Sendan Amudan and said, "Sir, how can you be so happy about a spy escaping from royal soldiers? Perhaps it is correct that you have been thrown in this prison."

"Thaye! If it is correct to imprison me for that crime, both of you must be placed in this cell next to me!"

The two women laughed. In that dark dungeon, their laughter was just as curious as the song of Sendan Amudan.

"You are very clever. Very tricky! You will corrupt every one else in this prison with your songs if we leave you here. I will ask the Commander of this fort to arrange for your release as soon as possible," promised Kundavai.

"Please do not do any such thing My Lady! There is a man in the cell next to me. Every day he begs me to teach him to sing. He repeats a hundred times, 'If you teach me one song, I'll tell you the secret of where the Pandiya crown jewels are hidden in Lanka.' Let me remain here till I find out that secret," said Sendan Amudan happily.

"Poor fellow! Are you ready to remain here till you also go mad like him? What about the fate of your mother Vaani, if you go mad like that?" With these words, Kundavai turned back. Within half an hour, soldiers came to release Sendan Amudan from the prison. They set him free outside Tanjore Fort.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 23 --Nandini's Letter

One evening, Nandini was seated in her garden gazebo, on the swing seat covered with a goose-down mattress. She was engaged in writing a letter. She wrote a few lines; while phrasing the message, her body shivered like a delicate creeper tossed in the winds. She sighed heavily and quite often. Her forehead was beaded with perspiration even in that cool evening, though her maid Vasuki stood nearby, fanning her mistress with a fan of peacock feathers. The letter included this passage:

"..... O' Prince, as I said, I venture to write this letter with much hesitation, much fear. I hear all kinds of rumors about the political situation. You don't seem to care about anything. Though your father, weakened by illness has asked you several times, you have refused to come back to Tanjore. I wonder, if I am the cause for it; I am tortured by that thought. If only I could meet you -- just once, I will be able to clear all doubts. Will you kindly indulge me? If you dislike coming to Tanjore, we can meet at Kadamboor, in Sambuvaraya's fortress. Today, I am a grandmother to you by relationship. Who can object to our meeting or talking? I shall ask brave young Kandamaran to bring this letter to you. He is Sambuvaraya's son and can be trusted completely. You can send any message you wish through him. I, the most unfortunate of beings -- Nandini, a sibling of all wretchedness in the world -- write these words to you"

She really hesitated a lot while she wrote the words. After quite some time, she completed the letter and sealed it. She placed the roll of palmleaves in a tube-shaped casket and sealed that letter-container also. At last she turned to her maid, "Go! Go ask the Young Lord of Kadamboor to come here immediately."

The maid led Kandamaran into the gazebo and stepped aside. Kandamaran balked to look at Nandini's face. He stood there looking at something in the garden.

"Sir, please sit down," said Nandini with a tremble in her voice. That made him turn back and stare at her face.

"There is nothing surprising that you do not wish to look at me with your eyes that have gazed upon Kundavai's face!" Nandini said this with a playful smile. His heart was split open by her words; her smile dazzled him into dizziness.

In a very flustered voice he mumbled, "A thousand Kundavai's cannot compare with one Nandini Devi!"

"Still, if Kundavai shakes her little finger, you will fly up to the heavens and bring back Lord Indra's throne! You won't even sit down by my side even if I beg you."

Kandamaran sat down immediately, "If you order it I shall go to the abode of Lord Brahma and bring his head for you if you wish!"

Nandini shivered. She looked away from him as she spoke, "Even after Lord Shiva had plucked one head, Brahma has been left with four heads. Even if you pluck one more, Brahma will continue to live!"

"My Lady, talk to me about anything you wish. Please do not mention Kundavai Devi's name or praise her; my blood boils to think that she is sympathetic to Vandiya Devan who betrayed my friendship."

"However, it is a fact that your imagination was incredible when you met Kundavai. What a fantastic description you gave, about that fight, the wrestling match you had with your friend!" These words of Nandini made him feel somewhat embarrassed.

"I had to say something to explain how I had met him. That's why I said it. But, it is true that he stabbed me."

"Sir, don't you think it may be wise for you to try and remember all the details of that incident, as it really happened?"

"Even you suspect my statement, My Lady?"

"I don't doubt you. But, you have forgotten some details. Vandiya Devan will surely be arrested one of these days. Then, this accusation by you must be proved correct, don't you think?"

"I don't really care. I still wish to forgive him."

"I congratulate you for your generosity. But, it is better that we make sure of the truth between us. Try and remember, once again, everything that happened on that night. When you came back through that underground passage, you met me and Lord Pazluvoor. Do you remember that?" asked Nandini.

"I remember very well. I can never forget that meeting as long as I live."

"Do you recollect the words you spoke at that time?"

"I do not remember the exact words. I know that I was mesmerized by seeing you."

"I remember your words very well. `Sir, I have heard a lot about the beauty of your daughter! Nothing that I heard compares with the reality before my eyes.' -- that is what you said."

"Oh, Good Lord! Is that what I said? Perhaps that is why he looked so furious. Even now, he does not like me much..."

Nandini laughed and said, "It does not matter, if he does not like you; I hope you like him? That should be enough!"

"My Lady, let me tell you the truth. There is no point in hiding it from you. I too, do not like him," said Kandamaran with some passion.

"Nothing wrong in that. I like him; that's what matters. I must have performed several penances to be rewarded a husband like him."

Kandamaran was completely confused by these words of Nandini. He did not know what to say.

"Forget that now. What did you do after meeting me in that underground passage?"

"That servant who held the torch went ahead showing the way. I followed, filled with thoughts of you. The servant opened the secret door and stepped aside. I stepped into the exit-alcove -- and immediately, someone stabbed me from behind. I lost consciousness. Vandiya Devan must have been waiting outside, after somehow knowing that I would come out there."

"No, Sir! Your surmise is completely wrong. I don't think he waited outside."

"You too have joined his party!"

"Why should I join his party? What do I gain by that? Or, what does he gain by that? I think, I know what must have happened..."

"Tell me My Lady. Explain it to me."

"Vandiya Devan was not waiting outside the fort..."

"Then, who was waiting?" asked Kandamaran, without any patience.

"Nobody. All I said was, Vandiya Devan was not waiting outside the fort. He must have been waiting inside that secret passage-way."

"What?! How could that be possible?"

"That day, he vanished like a magician. How could he vanish? Think about it -- somehow Vandiya Devan managed to enter the treasure vault and find out all the secrets of the underground chamber and its passages. He must have followed you in there. When the exit-alcove opened, he struck you from behind and escaped through the same door. After that his conscience must have pricked him. He carried you to that mute-woman's house before he ran away."

"It must have happened just like you describe it! I have no doubts now. All these days, my intellect did not recognize it. No one else realized it. If any one asks who is the most intelligent person in this nation, I'll say without any hesitation, it is you! There are intelligent people; and beautiful people. It is rare that one finds both qualities in one creation. You have both -- intelligence and beauty!" Kandamaran prattled with passion.

"Sir! Are you saying all this from the bottom of your heart? Are you merely flattering me like common men do with unfamiliar women."

"This is no flattery. I promise that I speak what my heart feels."

"So, you trust me completely? Will you trust me and help me with something?"

"I am ready to do whatever I can."

"You must journey to Kanchi on my behalf."

"I can go to Kasi on the banks of the Ganga if you want!"

"You needn't go that far. I shall give you a letter addressed to Prince Aditya Karikala in Kanchi. You must deliver it to him and then you must invite him to be your guest in your house at Kadamboor."

"My Lady! Do you know what you are saying? Are you not aware of the arrangements being made about this Empire by your husband, my father and other chieftains of this Kingdom?"

"I am fully aware of that. In fact, I know more secrets. Your family, my family and some other important families in this country are about to face some grave dangers. Do you know who is behind that trouble?"

"Tell me Dear Lady!"

"She who came to visit you in my house. That witch."

"Oh dear! Do you mean the Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi?" asked Kandamaran with some confusion.

"Yes. I mean that poisonous snake. One snake knows another. This Nandini knows the tricks and intrigues of Kundavai. She has sent your friend Vandiya Devan to Lanka. Do you know why? Collecting medicines is utter falsehood. She is not anxious that Sundara Chozla should survive. After him, neither Madurandaka nor Karikala should ascend the throne. Her wish is that her beloved younger brother Arulmozli should be crowned. If Arulmozli ascends the Chozla throne, she can rule him as she wishes. After that, Kundavai Devi is the Empress of the Chozla Empire! Do you know who will be Emperor? Your dear friend Vandiya Devan...."

"Oh! Is that possible? It must be stopped at all costs. We must inform my father and Lord Pazluvoor as soon as possible."

"There is no use in telling them. They won't believe us. We must overcome Kundavai's tricks with cunning. If you help me, we can do that."

"Order me, Dear Lady!"

"Here, carry this letter as carefully as you can and deliver it to the Prince in Kanchi. Can you do that?" Saying this, she extended her hand to give him the casket-tube of letters. Kandamaran who was completely ensnared in a net of passion lost his senses and grabbed her hand instead of taking the tube of letters. "I will do anything for you!" he babbled.

In that moment, a crunching noise was heard. Lord Pazluvoor was hurrying down the path that connected his mansion with the garden gazebo. The servant maid who was surprised by his sudden arrival ran aside. A parrot, bound by a chain, was perched on a metal triangle suspended near the doorway of the gazebo. In his hurry, without really being aware of it, Lord Pazluvoor had grabbed the parrot in his palm. The rage in his heart flowed through his hand: the bird flapped its wings in fright; the squeezing grip made the parrot screech!

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 24 --Wax In Embers

The sound made by the screeching parrot mingled with a fear laden cry of the servant girl and startled both Nandini and Kandamaran. When he turned around to find Lord Pazluvoor at the entryway, Kandamaran was completely rattled. He wondered if the old man would have heard the declarations he had just made; particularly the words, 'I too do not like Lord Pazluvoor.' More terrifying was the thought that he might misunderstand the intimacy between him and Nandini. He was petrified! Old men who married young girls were peculiar and suspicious. Was that the cause for the rage on his face? What will he do? I must be prepared for anything.

Such thoughts raced through Kandamaran's mind in a flash. However, on that day he had the opportunity to witness a most astonishing scene. The amazing scene happened contrary to all his expectations.

When Lord Pazluvoor stepped inside the gazebo, Nandini turned to him and smiled, blinking her large, dark eyes. She said, "My Lord! I was concerned that you may be delayed much longer in your journey. Fortunately, you have come back."

On looking at her and hearing her voice, Lord Pazluvoor's anger vanished. He melted like wax thrown upon burning embers. He laughed a foolish laugh and said, "Yes; my job was done; I came back." He then looked at Kandamaran, "What is this young fellow doing here? Is he composing love poems for you?" After asking this, he laughed at his own joke.

Kandamaran's face became red. Nandini laughed louder than Lord Pazluvoor and said, "He knows nothing about love or poetry. The only thing he knows is to fight and be wounded. Luckily, his wound is now healed. He was talking about returning home."

"What can one say about the bravery of modern youth! I have participated in more than twenty-four campaigns and have borne more than sixty wounds. I had never taken to a sickbed. He needed more than half a month to heal his single wound. But, all my wounds were on my shoulders, face, chest and head. This youth was wounded on his back! That's why it took so many days -- it's justified" He laughed mockingly.

Kandamaran was enraged, "Sir, you are akin to my father. I tolerate your teasing insults because of that."

"Really! What can you do otherwise, boy?" asked Lord Pazluvoor as his hand sought the hilt of the sword by his waist.

Nandini intervened, "My Lord, his wound is not merely physical. You are aware that his heart is also injured. The thought that a man he had considered a dearest friend could stab him like this on his back, wounded his heart. The physical wound had healed but the pain in his heart is still alive. We shouldn't hurt him further by our words. That night -- the night he was wounded -- Don't you remember what happened that night, Sir?" Nandini looked up into Lord Pazluvoor's eyes with a meaningful stare. Lord Pazluvoor's appearance was transformed.

"Yes; you are correct. He is an ignorant youth and his father is my dear friend. I should not be perturbed by his foolish remarks. Forget that. Nandini, I came here to give you some important news. He can also hear it. I believe a man has been arrested on suspicion as a spy at Mattotam in Lanka. Apparently he had a sealed letter addressed to Arulmozli. Based on the descriptions, I think it could be this man's dearest friend. That fellow must be really capable. See how he escaped our men and landed in Lanka."

Both men did not see the expression that flashed across Nandini's face for one second.

Kandamaran asked with some disappointment, "Did he escape? Has he gone to Lanka?"

"My Lord, I am not surprised about his escaping to Lanka. I have told you many times that your brother does not have the capability to command this fort. His men are just like him!" said Nandini.

"When you said that about him, I was not ready to believe you. Now, I am beginning to agree. Listen to another odd story. Apparently, a signet ring with our Pazluvoor symbol was found in the possession of the spy arrested at Mattotam. He refused to reveal anything about how he came to possess that signet ring..."

Nandini sighed lightly, "How odd! How did he get our palmtree signet? What does your brother say about it?"

"He.. If you hear what he said, you will laugh. Kalanthaka says that the signet ring must have gone to the spy from you." Upon saying this, Lord Pazluvoor laughed a thundering laugh. Bushes trembled and the gazebo shook.

Nandini joined in his laughter, "There is nobody as sharp-witted as my brother-in-law in the whole universe!"

"Do you know what else he said, your brother-in-law? It is even more funny! He said that once while you were outside Tanjore Fort in your palanquin, you met that handsome youngster; that charming young man had even come to this palace! So you must have personally given our signet ring to that young spy. If not, it

must have been given through that Sorcerer who comes to meet you so often. My brother tells me all these imaginary tales to hide his mistakes!" Lord Pazluvoor continued to laugh noisily.

"I should not cast aspersions on your brother's intellect. It is definitely as good as leaf buds on a pounding block. I am surprised that you kept quiet, listening to all these accusations." Her facial expression had changed once again; anger made her lips tremble and eyes sparkle with embers.

Lord Pazluvoor was one of the bravest men on earth, who had faced many lances and swords on the battle field; he could not handle this petty anger of Nandini. His posture and words seemed vulnerable. "My Dear, did you think I was listening to him passively? I scolded him for his incompetence and almost reduced him to tears. Even you would have felt sorry for him, if you had seen him."

Kandamaran who was listening to this interchange felt very uncomfortable. He was filled with a certain fear about Nandini and a certain pity and contempt for Lord Pazluvoor. He wished to leave before getting involved in this tiff between husband and wife. He cleared his throat and said, "Sir!"

Nandini looked around, "In talking about the talents of your brother, we completely forgot this young gentleman. He says that he wants to go home, can he go?"

"He is welcome. His father must be worried that he stayed back in Tanjore for such a long time."

"I wish to send a letter with him. May I do that?"

"What letter? For whom?"

"To the Prince in Kanchi."

Lord Pazluvoor looked at both Nandini and Kandamaran with distrust and asked, "A letter for the Prince! From you? Why?"

"The Younger Pirati has written a letter to her younger brother and sent it through his friend. Why shouldn't the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor write a letter to the elder brother and send it through him?" asked Nandini.

"Was that letter carried by his friend written by Kundavai Pirati? How did you know this?" asked Lord Pazluvoor.

"Why do you think I consult the Sorcerer so often? I found out by his spells. You are aware of the competence of your brother's men. Look at this, they found out and reported that the spy had our signet ring; but, they did not report that the letter was sent by Kundavai."

"Our men did not bring the report about the signet ring. Anbil Brahma-raya has just returned from Rameswaram. He brought that news."

"At least, did that brahmin tell you about Kundavai's letter?"

"No!"

"My Lord! You must take heed of my warnings. Every official in this Empire is gathering together and scheming against you. You must realize the truth now! I am not saying things just because of revelations by the Sorcerer. I summoned the Doctor's son who was arrested at Kodi Karai and brought here, and questioned him in detail. He confirmed the news that Kundavai had sent the letter to her brother."

Lord Pazluvoor felt lost, as if someone had bound his eyes and left him in a pathless forest. He was looking at Kandamaran with irritation. He did not like to discuss such secrets in front of the youngster.

Nandini recognized the cause for this irritation. "There is no end to our story. Why should this man's journey be delayed?" She turned to Kandamaran, "Sir! Please deliver this letter directly to the Prince at Kanchi. After

delivering this letter, if he gives any letter in reply, you must make arrangements to forward it carefully to me. Don't forget to invite the Prince to your fortress at Kadamboor."

"What should I tell my father? May I say that this is approved by the Lord of Pazluvoor?" asked Kandamaran with some hesitation.

"You can say that without any qualms. My wish is Lord Pazluvoor's will. Am I correct My Lord?" asked Nandini.

"Yes; yes." Lord Pazluvoor shook his head though he understood nothing. He was confused and he could not say anything against Nandini's wishes.

After Kandamaran left, Nandini turned her mesmerizing eyes on Lord Pazluvoor. She spoke with a honey sweet voice, "My Dear Lord! I think you have lost your trust in me. My brother-in-law's jealous slander has won."

"Never Nandini, never! I might loose trust in my sword and in my spear. But, I will not distrust you. I might loose faith in the heavens meant for the brave, but, I shall never loose faith in you."

"Then, why did you question me like that in front of that youth? I felt so disgraced!" Tears filled her eyes as she said this.

Lord Pazluvoor was bewildered, "Don't My Darling! Don't punish me like this!" He wiped her tears with his scarf and picked up her hands, consoling her with mumbled words. "But, I do not understand some of your actions. Don't I have a right to ask why or what?"

"You have that right; it is my duty to reply. Who denied that? All I ask is that you should not question me in front of strangers. Now that we are alone, ask me whatever you want."

"Why are you writing to Aditya Karikala? Why did you want him to be invited to Kadamboor? Is he not the first enemy to our plans?"

"No. Aditya Karikala is not our first enemy. That snake from Pazlayarai is our first enemy. I invited her to our house for a reason; I am writing to Karikala and inviting him to Kadamboor for that same reason. My Lord! Try and recall what I have said several times. I have told you that Younger Pirati Kundavai has some unique secret plan. I have found out that secret. She is determined to discard the claims of everybody and place her darling Arulmozli on this throne at Tanjore. That is why she has sent a messenger to Lanka. That is why she has come to Tanjore. We must destroy her plans with counter schemes. Now, do you understand why I am sending the letter to Kanchi?" Nandini's questioning gaze confused Lord Pazluvoor's intellect completely.

He mumbled incoherently, "Yes, I understand," though he understood nothing.

"My Lord, this Empire has grown in greatness and power because of the service by you and your forefathers. I cannot sleep even a wink, by night or day, till I have placed you on the golden throne of this Empire. Until that day, if you suspect me or distrust me for any reason, please kill me with one stroke of your sword."

"My Darling, do not torture me with such horrible orders!" said Lord Pazluvoor.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 25 --The City Of Mattotam

It has been some time since we parted company from Vandiya Devan, the hero of this tale. We have tarried too long in Tanjore City. During this time, our friend Vandiya Devan had walked along the north-west coast of Lanka and reached the great City of Mattotam on the banks of River Palavi. The city, situated on the

seashore across the channel from Rameswaram, was pleasing to the eyes with tall trees and green gardens. The coast was lush with groves of mango, jack, coconut, palmyra, areca, plantain and sugarcane. Monkeys played on treetops; bees hummed symphonies and parrots spoke baby-talk.

Sea waves dashed against the city's fortress walls and raised a roaring murmur. The harbor was filled with large ships and small craft. Goods from such vessels was piled in mounds on the waterfront. There were many changes since the times of Saints Sambanda and Sundara Murti. Now, the streets of Mattotam were not filled with many pilgrims going to the temple of Lord Kedeswara. Soldiers bearing shield and sword, men carrying sharp spears now wandered the by-ways and lanes which used to be filled with the devout who delighted in singing the Lord's praises.

In the past hundred years, the city had more or less transformed into a center for war. Armies coming for the Lankan war from the Tamil country landed at that port. Returning forces usually embarked from the same harbor. The city had changed hands several times. It used to be under the control of Lanka's Singhalese Kings for a while and later under Pandiya command. Since Paranthaka's times it was in the hands of Chozla forces.

Vandiya Devan arrived at the gates of this fort that was the headquarters for various army campaigns. He told the guards that he wished to enter the fort. The soldiers refused entry. Therefore, he tried the trick which he had used in Kadamboor long ago: he tried to surprise the guards and fight his way into the fort. But, these soldiers arrested him and took him before their captain. Vandiya Devan told that captain, that he was carrying important letters for Prince Arulmozli and he could discuss more details only with the Chozla Commander. They searched his person and belongings and found a sealed letter-roll addressed to Ponniiyin Selvan, with some covering letters for safe passage and also a signet ring with the palmtree emblem of Pazluvoor.

At that time, the Elder Lord Velir, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari of Kodumbalur was the Commander of the Chozla forces in Lanka. The Captain of Mattotam reported the incident to him. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama was in conference with Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-arya. He had been intending to go up to Rameswaram with the Prime Minister. Therefore, he said that would make enquiries after coming back from the mainland; the man was to be placed under guard till his return.

The Captain led Vandiya Devan to a mansion in disrepair and locked him up in one of its rooms. Vandiya Devan was tired by his long journey. In a way he was happy about being arrested. Perhaps he could get a day or two of rest from travel! On the first day he was able to enjoy such a rest. But, on the second day, a nuisance appeared.

He began hearing most peculiar noises from the next room. Some fellow was threatening another; his brave threats were quite remarkable! "Here you!" "Get lost!" "Don't move, don't come near!" "Chee!" "I'll kill you if you move!" "Careful, I'll smash you up!" "Your life is not yours! You will surely enter the world of death!" Some fellow was shouting in this fashion in the next room. The recipient of these threats did not reveal himself. There was no voice of reply. Vandiya Devan wondered if it could be some soldier who had gone mad. Oh Dear! Is he going to ruin my night's sleep? Even this little rest is threatened!

"Won't you listen? You won't go away! Fine, see what I'll do to you!" A few seconds after these words, a small bundle fell 'thud' in his room. Vandiya Devan who had been lying down, sat up with a startle. He peered at the bundle that had fallen in his room. He could not control his laughter and laughed merrily. The bundle thrown from the next room was a cat!

"Oh! You can even laugh! Laugh as much as you want but, don't come back!" said the voice from the next room.

Some mad fellow; no doubt about that! Who else will argue with a cat? Who else will think that a cat could laugh? Nonetheless, the voice seems vaguely familiar. I have heard it somewhere, sometime ago -- who could it be? Let me think.

Vandiya Devan went back to his corner to lie down. He closed his eyes and tried to sleep. Something tickled his toes. It was the cat -- nuzzling against his feet! Oh Lord! How am I to sleep with this bedfellow? He pushed it away and closed his eyes once more. Something touched his palms softly. The cat was purring by his side! He pushed it away once more, firmly. The cat walked away to the opposite corner. He rolled around and tried to go back to sleep. The cat came back to sit by his head and gently caress his face with its tail.

Vandiya Devan, who had bravely borne the sharp touch of arrows and swords could not bear this caress from the cat! He sat up and picked up the cat by its neck. There was a gaping hole at the top of the wall that separated his room from the next. He threw the cat into that hole made by fallen bricks. It was total commotion in the next room for some minutes. A man's enraged cries mingled with the caterwauling yells of the cat. Finally, "Get lost! Go!" said the man. Meowing cries from the cat could be heard for a while. Then silence. Vandiya Devan went to sleep. -- A pleasant dream: Kundavai Pirati was sitting by his side and caressing his face. What a difference between the cat's tail and the Princess's gentle fingers! -- He woke up with a start and felt dejected that the dream had ended.

Someone was gently rapping on the wall from the next room. It must be that mad man.

"Who is that? Who threw the cat in here?"

Vandiya Devan did not reply. He kept quiet and listened. A scratching sound like the cat. No. It was someone on the other side, trying to pry the bricks from the hole on the wall. Vandiya Devan listened without getting up. As a precaution his hand grabbed the knife by his side.

Two hands emerged from the hole on top of the wall. Then a turbaned head appeared. The face peered into his room. Aha! Isn't he Azlvar-adiyan Nambi? He looked different with the turban; but, it is him! Why has this fellow appeared here? How did he come here? Did he know that I was here? Is he going to help, or hinder?

Vandiya Devan called out, "Dear Mr. Nambi of the Vaishnava faith! Welcome! Welcome to this holy city of the Saiva shrine of Lord Kedeswara! Welcome!"

"Thambi, is it you? I should have guessed! Who else can sit quiet as a mouse like this?" Azlvar-adiyan jumped into the room.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Chapter 26 --A Sword That Wanted Blood

Vandiya Devan felt disquiet about how and why that fanatic Vaishnava had come there. He did not reveal his fears. "What a coincidence! I was just thinking about you. I look up and you jump down the wall! The saying, 'Good fortune will come pouring down the roof!' must be true."

"Dear Man! Were you thinking of me? Why? Why did you think of this mortal human being? There would have been some use if you had contemplated on the good Lord Rama..."

"I must really compliment you on your intuition; I was really thinking of Lord Rama. I could glimpse at the towers of Rameswaram Temple across the sea when I came here. I was thinking about Rama praying to Shiva in that holy town to atone for the sin of killing Ravana."

"Stop! Stop this immediately."

"No, Sir! No! I cannot! I have been quiet too long. My legs ache because of walking miles and miles along this coast. I am tired. Please sit down and listen. Like I told you, I was thinking of Lord Rama; I also remembered his devout disciple, Hanuman the monkey. When I thought of Hanuman, I remembered you! Just then, you jumped into this room! Did you merely jump across this wall or did you also leap across the sea like Hanuman the monkey?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Thambi, Hanuman is the best among the devout. Don't compare me with him. When Hanuman came to Lanka, he killed heroes like Akshaya and other demons. I could not handle a simple cat! See how the cat scratched me and wounded me." Azlvar-adiyan pointed out his bleeding limbs.

"Oh Dear! Is that what happened? But, why did you pick a fight with a mere cat?"

"I did not pick a fight. The cat came and picked a quarrel with me."

"How was that, Sir?"

"I came in search of you. I fooled the gatekeeper of this mansion and leaped across the garden wall. That foolish cat was deliberately sunning itself at the exact spot where I placed my legs! My foot merely touched its tail, but that ferocious cat attacked me with its claws. Thambi, listen to this: one can fight a tiger easily or even handle a rogue elephant. But, one should never tussle with a cat," advised Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

"Mr. Nambi, I know a secret..."

"What secret?"

"That cat had come here also, to visit me in this room. It caressed my forehead with its tail and nuzzled against my hands lovingly. It did not scratch me! But, it has attacked you. Do you know why? Because, it is a devout Saiva cat that does not like fanatic followers of Vishnu."

"Really? I did not think of that! If I had known that it was a foolish Saiva cat, I would have served it some hallowed hits with my staff."

"It's good that you did not bring your staff. Because, since stepping into this city, my blood has begun to boil with fanatic Saiva zeal. This sword in my scabbard has been begging for the blood of a fanatic Vaishnava. I'm controlling its urge because of the help you rendered me."

"Thambi, I don't remember helping you."

"Sir, didn't you tell me about your sister, Nandini Devi of Pazluvoor?"

"Yes; I had told you about her."

"Remember, you pointed her out when she was in her covered palanquin near Kadamboor and when she parted the curtains..."

"Yes. So what?"

"Listen. I saw that palanquin once again outside Tanjore Fort. The palanquin bearers came and deliberately dashed against my horse. I cried for justice and parted the curtains of that palanquin."

"Who was inside?"

"The Young-Queen of Pazluvoor, Nandini Devi herself!"

"You are lucky. Though I have tried several times, I have not been able to meet Nandini. You managed it somehow."

"Good fortune strikes unexpectedly, like that!"

"Then?"

"I mentioned your name. I told her that you had sent a very important message for her."

"Thambi, I have seen several fellows; but, never one for uttering lies like you."

"Sir, my ancestors were very fond of poets and bards. In fact many of them had composed poems..."

"What about that, now?"

"The blood of my poetic ancestors flows in my veins also. My imagination blooms and thrives sometimes. Commoners like you think that my creativity is lies."

"Fantastic! What happened with Nandini?"

"Nandini Devi was very pleased with my imagination and creativity. She presented a beautiful ivory ring to honor me. She even invited me to come and visit her in her palace."

"Did you?"

"Why not? I visited her immediately. Nandini Devi was made aware of my brave, courageous, dauntless gallantry by announcements made by my own capable self. Being impressed, she assigned an important task for me."

"What task?"

"Apparently, the Crown Jewels of Madurai Pandiyas are hidden somewhere in the mountains of this Lanka. She ordered me to somehow find those jewels and bring them to her! I did not realize that it was such a difficult task."

"People say that the jewels in Lord Pazluvoor's treasury can equal a thousand donkey-loads. All that is not enough for his Young-Queen. How is she going to reward you for bringing the Pandiya jewels?"

"She promised to dismiss Lord Kalanthaka from his duties as Commander of Tanjore and give that job to me."

"Very good Thambi. If you get the Command of Tanjore, I will have permission to enter and leave Tanjore Fort without any questions, won't I?"

"Absolutely! But, how am I to get that Command? I have been locked up like this, in this city." Vandiya Devan spoke with some dejection.

"Why did you get caught? Why have they locked you up? Do you know?"

"I was carrying the signet ring given by the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor. I thought that it may have magical powers in this city also. It was a mistake," said Vandiya Devan.

"Yes, it was a humongous mistake. Here, the Commander is the Elder Lord of Kodumbalur. Don't you know about the bitter rivalry between the clans of Kodumbalur and Pazluvoor?"

"I did not know that! I was caught and I do not know what to do..."

"Thambi, don't worry."

"How can I not worry?"

"I have come here to free you."

"Really!"

"Once upon a time I asked you to help me and you refused. But, I am going to help you. Get up and come with me. Let us escape from this prison immediately."

"Mr. Nambi, I suggest that you leave this room as soon as possible."

"Why, Thambi?"

"My sword has begun to cry again, 'I want the blood of this fanatic Vaishnava!' it says."

"Let it cry. I have plenty of blood in my veins. Chapter Let your sword drink it's fill. You come with me."

"No, I cannot come."

"Why not?"

"I am very sleepy; I have not slept for several nights. I have decided to sleep well tonight. That's why I threw the cat away."

"Thambi, why do you talk foolishly like this? Is this how you are going to accomplish the task that Kundavai assigned? Did you not agree to travel by day and night, without rest, till you deliver the letter to Ponniiyin Selvan?" Azlvar-adiyan now unbound his scarf and handed the roll of letters and some other things to Vandiya Devan.

Vandiya Devan accepted them eagerly. He had decided that Nambi was trying to trick him with cunning and learn his secrets by foolish chatter. He changed his opinion. "Mr. Nambi, how did you get these?"

"Commander Bhoothi Vikrama gave them to me. He asked me to return this Pazluvoor signet ring also. We can leave on a journey whenever you are ready."

"Sir, I submit my heartfelt thanks."

"Keep your thanks to yourself. You can give them to me at another time."

"Sir, do you know the whereabouts of Prince Arulmozli?"

"No one knows that. He has gone to the mountain country from Anuradapura. We have to find him. The Commander has ordered me to go with you as your guide. I'll come if you agree."

Vandiya Devan became suspicious once again, "Mr. Nambi, I would like to meet the Commander before we leave."

"Surely. We can leave only after you meet the Commander. We cannot leave before you have given him news of Lady Vanathi Devi!"

On hearing these words, Vandiya Devan wondered if that religious fanatic was a dabbler in magic or sorcery.

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Principal Characters in Ponniiyin 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-rama -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.

Azhvar-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 Sembian 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-roya - A nobleman, Sembian 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.

Sembian 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.

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Ponniyin Selvan part 2 : Glossary

Aadi A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-Aug

Aavani A month of the Tamil calendar, about Aug-Sept

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, a 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, ocher dye

Kadal Sea

Kadamba A flower
Kama Love, Passion
Karadi 1. A musical instrument 2. Bear
Karagam Folk dance with balancing decorated pots
Karaiyar Coastal, fisherfolk
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
Naadu Country
Naamam 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 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

Saelai Loose pleated garment of women worn with one loose end thrown over a shoulder

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, Divine man, dancers

Thevar-aatti Divine woman, dancers

Thevaram Devotional Poems

Thiru-vai-mozli Devotional Poems

Thinnai A raised platform or dias on the front porch of houses in South India. Often used like a living room; for family gatherings, seating visitors, and sleeping in the night.

Udukku Small palm held drum

Uriyadi A game to get the prize-pot tied to a pole 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

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