

Kalki's "Ponniyin Selvan"

English Translation by Indra Neelameggham

Part III : A Killing Sword

[Chapters 1-22]

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A Guide To Pronunciation

More or less phonetic spelling is used for proper names, places and literary works. Tamil words are used when inevitable. English spelling for place names use the more popular anglicized version -- Tanjore instead of Tanjavur -- when applicable.

The letters zl are used to denote the Tamil alphabet/sound "ழ". There is no known way to symbolize this in English. Thus the name `Chozla' is written as Chozla. It can be pronounced with the Z silent as in Chola, Paluvoor etc.

It was felt that this style may be more comfortable than more traditional spellings such as Chozha or Chozhla.

A Note on the Chozla's

The Imperial Chozla period is considered a Golden Age in South Indian History. The Chozlas ruled between the 9th and 13th century. The heartland of their nation was the fertile Cauvery delta with the Rivers Kollidam and Agniaru as its northern and southern boundaries. The territories considered as that of the Pallavas in the north as well as the Pandiya lands in the south comprised the beginnings of the Chozla Empire.

One of the earliest Chozla kings was Karikala (c AD 150) who was son of Ilan-chet-chenni `Who had wonderful chariots drawn by Arab horses.' He ruled from Kaviri-pattinam and had well established trade with seafaring Yavanas (Greeks-Romans), Arabs, Egyptians and Chinese. Karikala built several dams across the Cauvery. In the Cauvery delta `The space on which one elephant could lie down produced enough to feed seven.' Ship-building and temple architecture were established arts. Foreigners were numerous in sea-ports. Yavanas were employed as palace guards and to police the streets. Curiously wrought iron lamps, wine, gold coins and horses were important imports. Food grain, cotton cloth, black pepper, other spices, timber, gemstones and perfumes were exported. The practice of erecting `hero-stones' as memorials for warriors who died on the battlefield was common during this Sangam Period, and it continued for several centuries.

By the ninth century, the delta region of the Cauvery basin was already densely populated; nevertheless it was still in the process of being cleared of forest and being settled. Politically the Cauvery delta was still a frontier region between the settled lands of the Pallavas in the north and Pandiyas in the south.

Imperial Chozla's began their expansion under Vijayala (AD 850-870). He captured Tanjore (AD 850) and built a temple for the Goddess Nishumba-sudini (Durga). He was at that time a feudatory of the Pallavas. His son Aditya I, gained complete independence after the battle (AD 885) of Sri-puram-biyam near Kumbakonam . He captured the Pallava territories after a battle in AD 903. His son Paranthaka I, ruled for 48 years (907-955). The dreams of these monarchs suffered a setback due to the invasion by Rashtrakutas from the north: the Chozlas were crushed in the battle of Takkolam, North Arcot (949 AD). The next thirty years were a period of confusion. Gandara Aditya (AD 949-957) and Arinjaya (AD 957) ruled for short periods. Sundara Chozla (AD 957-973) did regain a large extent of his territories. His last years were crowned by tragedy and internal strife; Uttama Chozla (AD 970- 985), son of Gandara Aditya conspired to murder the crown Prince Aditya II and forced the father to recognize him as the heir in preference over the younger son Arulmozli (later Raja Raja I). Raja Raja I (985-1014) recovered vast territories including Lanka and began an unchecked expansion lasting for centuries. Conquest beyond the seas was achieved by Rajendra I (1012-1044) who went as far as Bengal, Burma, the Islands of the Malayan Archipelago and the Siamese Peninsula.

Kulottunga I is said to have established embassies with Imperial China. Several hundred years later, during the last years of Kulottunga III (1178-1218), Maravarma Sundara Pandiya I, entered the heartland of the Chozla country. After that the empire struggled for its very existence; with the death of Rajendra III (1279) the Chozla territories were once again absorbed into the Pandiya Kingdom.

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The Story So Far.

Ponni's Beloved Part I -- New Floods

About the year AD 970 Chozla's of the Tamil Nation ruled an empire spreading from Cape Comorin to River North Pennar. Paranthaka II who was more famous as Sundara Chozla of Pazlayarai ruled that Empire. His capital was Tanjore City which had been captured from Muth-araya Kings by Vijayala Chozla an ancestor. Vanamadevi of Thirukovalur was married to Sundara Chozla. They had two sons and a daughter. First was Aditya Karikala; then came Princess Kundavai; and last was Arulmozli who later achieved historical fame as the great Raja Raja I.

For some time now, Sundara Chozla was bed ridden with paralysis of his limbs. He was in Tanjore, unable to travel or be very active in the affairs of the state.

Two brothers, the minor kings of Pazluvoor: Ambalavan the Elder Lord Pazluvoor and Kalanthaka, the Younger Lord Pazluvoor were very powerful in the Empire. The Elder Lord was in charge of taxation, treasury and granary. The younger brother was Commander of Tanjore Fort.

Aditya Karikala had won fame as a brave soldier who had entered battle fields by the age of sixteen. He was anointed as the Crown Prince and now stationed at Kanchi as Commander-in-Chief of Northern Armies. Arulmozli who was elected the Commander-in-chief of the Southern Armies had gone to Lanka with a large army against Mahinda the Lankan King. Kundavai and her friends, as well as some other royal womenfolk lived in Pazlayarai the old Capital.

People were concerned about a comet that had been appearing in the skies. They felt that some terrible danger was imminent upon the royal family. A wild rumor was spreading all around the country. The rumor claimed that vile conspiracy was afoot. Treason against Sundara Chozla and his offspring was being plotted. Pazluvoor noblemen and their cronies, including the chieftain of Kadamboor were present at the mid-night meeting of treason.

Madurandaka, the son of Gandara Aditya, had been immersed in practice of Saiva devotion till recent times. His attitudes changed after he married a daughter of Younger Lord Pazluvoor. The plotting nobles decided to crown him after Sundara's death.

Karikala in Kanchi heard these rumors. He wished to free his father from the influence of Pazluvoor nobles and bring him to Kanchi City, where he had built a Golden Palace. He sends his confidential retainer, Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan of Vallam, as a messenger to his father and sister with some letters.

In his younger days, Karikala had been in love with a girl named Nandini who was raised by a priest. His Grandmother Sembiyan Madevi forbids that love, saying that it was not suitable. All the Chozla families held Sembiyan Madevi in great regard. Aditya Karikala bowed to her orders, but, he could not forget Nandini.

The Elder Lord of Pazluvoor marries young Nandini after he was past the age of sixty five. Nandini begins to rule all powerful from the palaces of Pazluvoor. She seemed to have a mysterious past and even now trafficked with sorcerers and assassins plotting against Chozla royalty. She had the power to enchant and mesmerize anyone who approached her. At one time she had cast her spells on Aditya Karikala. She had asked him to kill Lord Pazluvoor, imprison Sundara Chozla, marry her and ascend the Chozla throne with her as consort.

Karikala refuses to obey that horrible request. Even then, he was hesitant about going to Tanjore; he did not wish to meet Nandini again; she might weaken his resolve.

Vandiya Devan overhears the secret meeting of conspiracy at Kadamboor. He chances to meet Nandini near Tanjore and gets a signet ring from her. With the help of that ring, he manages to enter Tanjore fort and meet the Emperor. While he tries to warn the Emperor about the conspiracy, Younger Lord Pazluvoor walks in and intervenes.

In the course of his adventures, Vandiya Devan happens to enter Tanjore's treasure vault. Lord Pazluvoor tries to arrest him. But, Vandiya Devan escapes from Tanjore and reaches Pazlayarai. He delivers Karikala's letter to Kundavai. Vandiya Devan had met Kundavai unknowingly at Kudanthai and on the banks of River Arisil and lost his heart to her. He was now ready to obey her every command. "Ponniyin Selva, danger threatens the Empire. Come home immediately!" writes Kundavai to her beloved brother in Lanka. She asks Vandiya Devan to carry the message and bring back her brother. Meanwhile both Pazluvoor brothers proclaim Vandiya Devan to be a spy and announce a reward of thousand gold-coins for his capture.

Earlier during his travels, Vandiya Devan had met a man named Azlvar-adiyan Nambi who was masquerading as a fanatic follower of the Vaishnava faith. Azlvar-adiyan was a spy who traveled all over the Chozla territories. Who was his master? This was not clear. Vandiya Devan was unable to trust him.

Karikala the Crown Prince was concerned. He had no news from Vandiya Devan or from his sister Kundavai. Depressed by his love for Nandini, he wishes to crown his younger brother and abdicate. He then plans to sail away to distant lands so that he could spread the name and fame of Chozla's. He wants his brother Arulmozli in Kanchi. Karikala shares his concerns with his other friend, Parthiban Pallava and orders him to Lanka to bring back his brother immediately.

Ponnis Beloved Part II -- Whirlwind.

When Arulmozli was a child of about 5 years age, he accidentally fell into the River Cauvery while on a pleasure boating trip. An unknown woman rescues him from the swirling floods and places him back on the boat and vanishes. No one knew who she was - hence they surmised that she was the Divine Mother Cauvery herself who had rescued the little Prince. Because of this the royal household began to call him the beloved of the River Ponni -- Ponni's Beloved [Ponniyin Selvan.]

Vandiya Devan reached the sea shore at Kodi Karai and is befriended by a girl named Poonkuzlali. With her help he crosses the sea and manages to travel across northern Lanka and meet Prince Arulmozli. He safely delivers Princess Kundavai's messages. From the instant they met, Prince Arulmozli and Vandiya Devan become steadfast friends.

During his stay in Lanka Vandiya Devan becomes cognizant of some surprising secrets.

Before he came to ascend the Tanjore throne, Sundara Chozla had been shipwrecked and had chanced to live in an island offshore from Lanka for some time. At that time a girl had rescued him from an attacking wild bear. She was a born deaf-mute. Sundara Chozla fell in love with her. However, very soon he had to part from her. That deaf-mute was the same woman who had some years later rescued Prince Arulmozli from the Cauvery floods. This Mute Queen had rescued Arulmozli from several other dangers while he was garrisoned in Lanka. From pictures she drew, Ponniyin Selvan realizes that she was his Elder Mother [i.e his fathers chosen companion of long ago.] Arulmozli also makes some surmise about the fate of the twins that were born to her. The young Prince was anxious to meet his father quickly and share this knowledge with him.

Vandiya Devan had come with a message from Kundavai and was anxious to take him back to Pazlayarai -Tanjore. At the same time, Parthibhan Pallava came with messages from Prince Karikala and wanted Arulmozli to go back to Kanchi with him. Parthibhan insisted that going to Tanjore was dangerous and it was essential that he come to be with his brother the Crown Prince.

While Ponniyin Selvan was debating about these conflicting messages, Poonkuzlali the boat girl from Kodi Karai came to him with a strange piece of information. She announced that Lord Pazluvoor's men had come in two large ships with apparent orders from Emperor Sundara Chozla to arrest him and take him back to Tanjore. The young Prince came to an immediate decision, "I shall go and surrender myself to those men immediately!" The Lankan Commander, Elder Lord Velir of Kodumbalur and Parthibhan Pallava were intent on somehow obstructing this intention. Their efforts were of no avail - the Prince was steadfast in his plan. Taking Poonkuzlali as his guide he departed.

One of the Chozla ships accidentally became mired in the sand dunes near the northern Lankan shores and sank in the sink holes. The other ship had been captured by Arab pirates. Thinking that Prince Arulmozli was in that ship, Vandiya Devan somehow managed to go aboard the ship controlled by pirates. The pirates tied him up to the mast and were intent on their own affairs. Sorcerer Ravidasa and his gang who had also boarded that ship manage to overpower the Arab Pirates and kill them all. They abandon the ship with Vandiya Devan still tied to the mast and leave in the only boat, intent on escaping from the approaching whirlwind. A horrible and terrifying whirlwind soon enmeshed the ship on the open sea.

Realizing that his friend Vandiya Devan was on the pirate ship, Arulmozli boards the ship brought by Parthiban Pallava and tries to follow the other ship. This ship too was enmeshed in the whirlwind; since it was manned by trained sailors, it somehow manages to survive intact.

Lightning strikes and the mast to which Vandiya Devan was tied catches fire. In the midst of the storm, because of the light from the burning mast, Arulmozli recognizes the man bound to the burning ship. Deciding to rescue him they lower a boat into the stormy waters and the young Prince insists on going to rescue his friend. He manages to rescue the rash young Vandiya Devan from the burning ship. However the small boat is struck by floating debris from the capsized ship and is overturned. Both men manage to get hold of a large floating log and survive the stormy sea. As they float closer to the shores

of Ghost Island, they are rescued by Poonkuzlali who was rowing her boat near that shore.

Now Read on to Ponniyin Selvan Part III - A Killing Sword.

Kalki's Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Ponni's Beloved

Part III - A Killing Sword

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Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 1 -- At Kodi Karai

The whirlwind which rose over the sea entered land along the Coramandal Coast and continued its swift journey. Like a ravishing barbarian, wherever it went the wind wrecked havoc. The handiwork of the Lords of Wind and Storm were evident all along the coast from Kodi Karai to Kaviri Pattinam. Several ancient trees were uprooted and lay with broken branches. House roofs had been swirled away into the distance, shattered into pieces. Cottages and huts were in ruins.

Everything around Kodi Karai was flooded. Perhaps the sea had boiled over and enclosed the land! The white sandy beaches bordering the waves proved otherwise. All the sinkholes and mudholes along that beach were now brimming with clear water. If man or beast chanced to fall into those holes they were sure to attain instant salvation!

Elder Lord Pazluvoor and his retinue arrived at Kodi Karai two days after the storm. The ivory palanquin followed: however, this time, Young Queen Nandini sat in it and journeyed. There was no need anymore for transporting Lord Madurandaka secretly. Moreover, only if he took Nandini along sometimes would it be convincing and convenient to take Madurandaka if the need arose again. Nandini had explained this and Lord Pazluvoor had accepted readily with joy. The old man enmeshed in his love for a young wife was eager to travel in the company of that beauty.

They had come to Nagapattinam even before the storm. Lord Pazluvoor was busy with his official duties as the Officer of Taxes. Nagapattinam was a very important sea-port of the Tamil Nations. All kinds of goods were carried into that port by large ships sailing in from distant lands. Thousands of small barges loaded those goods and brought them ashore. They carried back other goods to reload those ships. There was much trade and commerce. Several officials at the port were in charge of collecting levies and duties on such activity. Lord Pazluvoor had the power to inspect the activities of such officials.

After his work at the port was done, Lord Pazluvoor paid a visit to Choodamani Vihara - the famous Buddhist shrine and monastery of Nagapattinam. The monks welcomed him appropriately with all honors. He enquired about their welfare and if the monastery was in need of help. The monks were happy to express their thanks to their monarch Emperor Sundara Chozla.

Some weeks ago two monks from this monastery had journeyed to Tanjore seeking an audience with the Emperor. They conveyed greetings and prayers for his speedy recovery on behalf of all the Buddhist congregations in the Tamil lands. They had also expressed their happiness about the service being rendered on behalf of Buddhists in Lanka by Prince Arulmozli Varma. The monastic congregations of Lanka were very happy about the Prince's orders to rebuild all the ruined Buddha Viharas (temples) and monasteries. "My Lord Emperor! We bring you further happy news. A large congregation of Buddhists in Lanka are eager to offer the ancient throne of Lanka to your younger son Prince

Arulmozli, selecting him as their monarch. We are very happy that such honors are being given to your son!" said the monks.

Lord Pazluvoor who was present during this audience had a brilliant idea. After the monks had left, he expressed his thoughts to Emperor Sundara Chozla.

"My Lord who rules the entire known world, your rule encompasses all directions. There is none in these lands who dares to disobey your orders. But, your two beloved sons seem to be exceptions. Some men who give them ill advice hold high office in this empire. Aditya Karikala refuses to acknowledge your wishes and come here; instead, he writes that you should go over to Kanchi! The person who gives him such ill advice is none other than your father-in-law, Malayaman of Thiru-kovalur. You have asked several times that young Arulmozli from Lanka should come home. I am tired of sending messengers to that effect. That fellow, the Elder Lord Velir prevents our messengers and letters reaching the Prince. Otherwise, would your son hesitate coming home even after knowing your wishes? In this situation, I have an idea. If you order it, I shall explain."

Upon the Emperor agreeing, Lord Pazluvoor spoke these words: "Let us declare that the Prince conspired to capture the throne of Lanka to crown himself and therefore order that he be arrested and brought here. Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari the Velir cannot obstruct such an order. Also if we somehow manage to deliver the orders to the Prince, he is sure to come here willingly!"

Sundara Chozla smiled upon hearing this peculiar idea. "Unusual! But, why not try it? I am eager to see my son Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III. My days on this earth are numbered. I do wish to share my thoughts about this empire with my sons. Arulmozli would accept without hesitating if I tell him about wanting to give away the Kingdom of Tanjore to Madurandaka. He would also help to convince Karikala." Sundara Chozla approved of Lord Pazluvoor's plan.

After this, royal orders to arrest Prince Arulmozli were given. The ship's Commodore was also given strict directives that no harm should befall the Prince in any way. Two ships sailed to Lanka with the above order.

Lord Pazluvoor became concerned after the ships had sailed away. He realized the immense blame that would rest upon him if anything untoward happened to Arulmozli. He decided to personally go to Nagapattinam Port and await the Prince; perhaps personally escort him to Tanjore under the safe protection of Pazluvoor men. There were some other reasons too: Sembiyan Madevi or Kundavai must not be allowed to meet the Prince before he meets his father. Those two women had much influence over the Prince; those women hated the men of Pazluvoor. They would make up all sorts of stories and turn the Prince against Lord Pazluvoor. Till the appropriate time, that is till Sundara Chozla dies, nothing should go amiss and harm his larger plans.

And then there was the matter of the footman who had been attacked in the treasure vault. Lord Pazluvoor was troubled by all sorts of doubts. Who was hiding in that vault? Could it be that same youth, Vandiya Devan who escaped Tanjore? If so, he knows many more secrets! How could unauthorized persons enter the treasure vault? And, like my brother Kalanthaka says, could that Sorcerer who visits Nandini have something to do with this? I must find out.

He was further annoyed by the information that Kundavai had sent letters and messages through Vandiya Devan to Prince Arulmozli. What message could she have sent? Could it be possible that she knows about our plans, Sambuvaraya's and mine, to take hold of Tanjore's throne? Would she have said something about that in her message?

Anyway, it would be best for me to meet Arulmozli as soon as he sets foot on Chozla mainland. I have given orders that Vandiya Devan should also be arrested and brought here. I must see that youth also. Find out what he knows.....

With such thoughts in mind, Lord Pazluvoor decided to go to Nagapattinam and wait for the ships from Lanka.

Nandini had more reason than him to wait for news from Lanka. She was very eager to meet Vandiya Devan again and find out what was in the letters given by Kundavai. Moreover, how successful was Ravidasa the Sorcerer? Therefore, she insisted on accompanying Lord Pazluvoor to Nagapattinam. Who would need incentive to chew sweet sugar-cane? The old man agreed. He began to dream of pleasure cruises along the coast with Nandini by his side. Perhaps, his burning physical need and desire would be finally fulfilled!

Nandini enjoyed the cruel dance of the whirlwind as it crossed land at Nagapattinam. She delighted in the sight of waves that rose as tall as the swaying coconut palms. However, Lord Pazluvoor's dreams of pleasure cruises were drowned by the storm! After the storm had died, Lord Pazluvoor made enquiries about the safety of ships and boats out at sea. Everyone along the coast had taken appropriate precautions knowing that a whirlwind was approaching. There was not much damage to the port or the surrounding area. Some fisherman who had been out on their catamarans, said that in the sea between Lanka and the mainland, two ships had been compromised in the storm; one had caught fire and capsized.

Lord Pazluvoor was worried. What if they were the ships sent to arrest the Prince? What about the fate of Prince Arulmozli? If anything happened to him, I would be blamed and held accountable. Arulmozli is the beloved Prince of the entire Chozla nation. How can I explain to the people? How would I console the Emperor? I must find out for sure! Perhaps I can find out more at Kodi Karai. Some survivors from the sinking ship might have come ashore over there....

When he told Nandini about his thoughts of wanting to go to Kodi Karai immediately, she approved, "My Lord, I have never been to Kodi Karai. I have heard that it is very beautiful. This would be an opportunity to see that place," said Nandini.

There were two ways to reach Kodi Karai from Nagapattinam. One was a canal, a little inland from the coast. Or, there was a road along the coast. Since Lord Pazluvoor's retinue was large, they went by the road. Nandini was not too keen on the canal. If they were to go by boat, she would have to suffer the privacy of being with Lord Pazluvoor, who may once again start his passionate declarations. If they went by road, they could question the fisher folk along the coast. But, enquiries along the way did not reveal anything further. They seemed to confirm that one ship was struck by lightning while it was caught in the whirlwind.

Upon reaching Kodi Karai, the Lighthouse Keeper, Mr. Thyaga-vidangar welcomed them. He was ready to place his own humble cottage at their disposal. There was no other place to stay in that remote coastal village. But, Nandini refused his offer. She wished to stay in a tent pitched on the beach. Tents were pitched for her and her Lord. Their men too were housed in other tents a little away from them. Even before these activities were ended, they sighted a large ship over the horizon. It came closer and anchored as close as possible to that shallow coast.

Lord Pazluvoor was quite perturbed by the sight of the ship. Its main sails were torn and the mast seemed broken. It was obvious that the ship had survived the whirlwind. Who was in that ship? Perhaps Prince Arulmozli? It is no surprise that it does not fly our Tiger Flag... Flags would have been torn away in the storm....

Lord Pazluvoor ordered the only boat on that shore to go towards the ship and bring back news. The people on the ship seemed to be waiting for the boat. Some men climbed down into the boat. One of them was Lord Parthiban Pallava.

Prince Arulmozli Varma who had gone to save his friend Vandiya Devan had never returned to the ship. Parthiban was immensely worried and agitated by this. At daybreak, after the storm had moved away, he sailed here and there searching the sea for survivors. One of the seamen who had gone with the Prince was rescued in a weary condition. He told them about the fate of Prince Arulmozli and his friend Vandiya Devan who were hit by the floating mast-pole.

Parthiban's distress grew tenfold. He had a faint hope that they might have washed ashore at Kodi Karai. Deciding to find out, he had sailed near the coast of Kodi Karai. On the boat rowing back to the coast, he found out that Lord Pazluvoor accompanied by his Young Queen Nandini was camping near the lighthouse. This news irritated him.

He remembered everything that Prince Karikala had said about Nandini. A temptation arose in one corner of his heart to meet that famous beauty who had bewitched that valiant champion, turning him into a fainthearted fool. The temptation soon grew into a powerful yearning coupled with anxiety that he may not be able to meet her after all.

As soon as the boat reached shore, they led him towards Lord Pazluvoor's tent. Lord Pazluvoor himself was standing in front of the tent, an imposing figure. Parthiban Pallava realized that it was a mistake to refer to that tall, awe-inspiring, fine figure as an 'old-man.' He appeared like a lion in his prime, in fighting fettle, much more fit than many so called youth. As he was thus measuring him up, a young maid stepped out of the tent behind them. She shimmered in beauty like a glittering stroke of lightning flashing from storm clouds. She came to stand a little ahead of Lord Pazluvoor, like a creeper clinging to the towering trunk of a strong teakwood tree. She cast her eyes on Parthiban Pallava who was completely dazed by her beauty, and said, "My Lord, who is this brave man? I have not met him before, have I?"

Her cooing words intoxicated Parthiban Pallava as if it were liquor drunk from golden goblets.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 2 -- Seduction

Some men past their youth, who marry young maids, always dwell in the illusory world of jealousy. They feel a natural dislike and disgust for any stranger or newcomer. Lord Pazluvoor had more than enough reason for such feelings. He did not like Nandini coming out in front like that and starting a conversation with a young man; nor could he chide her for it.

Therefore, he answered Nandini with some scorn, "My Dear, there are several people on this earth unfamiliar to us. We cannot know everyone; we have nothing to lose by that!"

Parthiban Pallava replied to this, "My Lord, the Consort of this empire's Tax Official has nothing to loose by not knowing me. The loss is really mine own. Therefore, let me make my own self known. My Lady, I am known as Parthiban Pallava."

"Oh! Is that so? I have heard of your name!" said Young Queen Nandini of Pazluvoor.

"Parthiban why have you forgotten all the titles and ranks? When did you turn so humble and modest? Nandini, he is not merely Lord of the Pallavas. He is Parthiban Pallava who conquered Vengi and Kalinga and He who took the head of Veera-pandiya!" said Lord Pazluvoor with more contempt.

Nandini's face clouded like skies crowded by gathering storms. Lightning strokes flashed from her dark eyes and vanished in a second. She laughed lightheartedly. "Sir! How many men bear the title `He who took the head of Veera-pandiya'? Is there no account of that?" she asked.

"My Lady, Lord Pazluvoor gives me that title because of his esteem for me. In truth, I really have no claim to that title. The only person who can truly own that title is Prince Aditya Karikala."

"Why do you say that Sir? Don't you want a share in the reputation of killing a dead snake?" asked Lord Pazluvoor with a thundering laugh.

"No My Lord, no. Aditya Karikala did not kill a dead snake. When he raised his sword, Veera-pandiya was a fully alive serpent. A maid more divine than a heavenly nymph stood before him with folded palms, begging for his life. If it had been me who was there with the raised sword, I would have immediately thrown the sword away; Veera-pandiya would have escaped with his life." Parthiban Pallava was answering Lord Pazluvoor, but, his eyes were peering at Nandini's face.

Nandini realized that the talk was turning towards dangerous shoals. She turned her face around, "My Dear Lord! Why rake those old stories now? Perhaps we should question why this young man is here now?"

Upon that, Lord Pazluvoor asked with some urgency, "Yes, Sir. Forget that old story. What is your story? When did you leave Kanchi? Where are you going and why have you landed here?"

Parthiban Pallava who had been captivated by Nandini's charm, recalled why he had come to Kodi Karai. "My Lord, forgive me. I have been digressing. I have come with some very important news. It is news that will drown all of the Chozla Empire in sorrow. Prince Arulmozli Varma who left Lanka on this ship, with me, jumped into the sea in the

whirlwind storm. I do not know his fate. I came here with the hope that he has perhaps reached this shore."

Even before he had finished, Lord Pazluvoor roared, "Oh! What did you say?" He fell to the ground like a palm tree uprooted by the storm.

Parthiban ran forward to hold him, when Nandini stretched out her hand and stopped him. She then knelt on the ground, lifting Lord Pazluvoor's head onto her lap. "Water, water!" she shouted.

A maid ran out from the tent with some water. Some footmen and the Lighthouse Keeper and his family also ran forward. Nandini imperiously ordered them all to go back. She sprinkled some water on Lord Pazluvoor's face. "My Dear! My Dear!" she called softly. Soon, the old man opened his eyes; consciousness returned immediately and he sat up.

"Nandini, the words I heard just now, are they true? What did this fellow say? Did he say that the ocean took Ponninyin Selvan? Oh! When that brave young man was a child, I carried him with these hands of mine and enjoyed him riding on these shoulders mine! Oh! And with these same hands I sealed the orders to arrest him! Oh! What will the Chozlas think of me? What will Tamil Nations think of me?" He knocked his forehead with his palms and began wailing.

Nandini had never seen him in such a state! No one had ever seen him like that!

"My Lord, do not be distressed, he has not given us all the news. Let us listen to all the news and decide on the next action," said Nandini with a clear head.

"Yes, you are right. Parthiban, speak quickly. You said that Arulmozli drowned at sea. Is it true? Are you making up stories with some evil intent? Do not play with a hungry tiger! Be warned!" growled that old soldier with anger brimming eyes.

"My Lord! Forgive me. I did not say that the Prince died. I cannot believe that the Tamil Nations would suffer such a grave loss. All that I said was that, during the height of the storm, he jumped into the sea from my ship. With God's grace he must be alive. He must have been washed ashore near this beach. I came here with that hope, looking for him.... "

"He jumped into the sea during the whirlwind? Why? Why did he jump? Why was he in your ship? What were you doing when he jumped?" asked Lord Pazluvoor in some agitation.

Nandini intervened, "Sir, let him explain in detail, from why he went to Lanka."

"Yes; explain everything. Speak the truth, if not, you shall not live to...." Lord Pazluvoor ground his teeth.

"My Lord, I have no practice in speaking anything but the truth. Even if I intend to speak falsehood, my tongue will not utter it. Please listen to me! News reached Kanchi that you and Sambuvaraya and other nobles were plotting treason against the Chozlas."

"Lies! Utter lies."

"Let the news be a lie! That is what I wish. I merely repeated the news that came to Kanchi. Upon that, Prince Aditya Karikala and Thiru-koyalur Malayaman sent me to Lanka. Asking me to accompany Arulmozli Varma back to Kanchi." Parthiban Pallava then

told them to the extent he knew, about everything that had happened since he landed at Lanka.

Finally Lord Pazluvoor said, "Oh Good Lord! Evil times have befallen the Chozlas and this empire. All because of me! I ordered that the Prince be arrested! I sent those ships!"

Nandini tried to calm him down, "My Dear King, it is not your fault. Even if you had not given any orders, the Prince would have set sail for Kanchi in this man's ship. Do not be distressed unnecessarily. Fate is more powerful than our human intentions. Moreover," at this point Nandini lowered her voice and whispered into Lord Pazluvoor's ears.

His face brightened a little, "Yes, yes. I did not think of that!" He turned towards Parthiban Pallava saying, "Sir, I need to board your ship and search it. Till I finish, I command you to stay right here on shore. Do not try to escape. I shall order my lancemen to kill you instantly if you try to escape. Do not die with wounds on your back! You have a brave lineage!"

"Thank You My Lord! I have no intention of trying to escape. If I do try none of your men can really stop me. I have no intention of being wounded on my back."

"My Lord, do not worry about this man. I shall watch him. If he tries to escape, here this knife will pierce his heart. You can go without worry and examine that ship. Question the sailors carefully, ask if he speaks the truth," saying this, Nandini drew a small knife from her waist belt.

"My Dear! Why do you concern yourself in this. You go into the tent and wait. Or go to Mr. Thyaga-vidangar's house. Our men will watch this fellow. Or I could take him with me..."

"Sir, I prefer not to accompany you. If I come with you, your doubts will never be cleared. You will think that the seamen spoke for me. I promise not to move from this spot. You may go without concern."

"My Lord, I too shall remain rooted to this spot till you come back from that ship. My eyes shall follow you wherever you go." she further whispered in Lord Pazluvoor's ears, "Who knows if he has not come here to spy out something? Moreover, till you come back none of the others should hear the news he has brought back."

Lord Pazluvoor agreed and boarded the boat. The boat man began rowing towards the ship. Nandini stood with her eyes fixed on that small boat for some time. She recognized that Parthiban Pallava was watching her face without blinking an eyelid. Quickly she turned her face to him, expecting him to turn away with a blush. But, will a bee which had spotted a honey bearing flower, turn away? Nandini twirled the sharp knife in her hand and spoke softly, "Careful, do not try for an escape!"

"Lady, why frighten me with that knife? Escape? From you? How can a fish caught in the nets escape? You have spread the net.... catching"

"Sir! Are you demeaning me? Calling me a fisherwoman? If Lord Pazluvoor were to hear it...."

"I am not bothered. Neither do I mean nets that catch fish. I speak of your darting eyes that cast their enchanting spells...."

"Chee! How dare you! It is not bad to think of me as a fisherwoman. Do you call me a whore who spreads her amorous nets at all men?"

"Forgive me! I do not mean any such offense. Do you have to cast nets intentionally? Does the spider weave its web with malice? It spins its own dwelling and flies fall unwittingly..."

"You call me a spider... am I that frightful?"

"No, no! I should have spoken of the lamp. It does not burn for the fireflies. A lamp burns and spreads light around itself; foolish insects are attracted to fall into a burning death..."

"A tiny breeze can instantly turn that light off. A puff of breath can blow the lamp away; it is powerless."

"A lamp can be blown off; who can turn off the brilliance of the full moon? A moon does not rise for the Ocean King. It rides the skies because of its nature, spreading its cool beams on heaven and earth. But, look at the foolish ocean; it stretches its hands noisily trying to reach for that unattainable prize."

"I have heard a lot about Pallava nobility; their love for art and poetry. Their creative genius... now I know it to be true."

"I never believed anything that I read in the myths and poems till this day. I now believe them all."

"What do you mean?"

"I have read that some spirits in the form of women could enslave all the earth and sky. When the Asuras and Devas churned the ocean of milk and obtained divine nectar, they were fooled by the beauty of Mohini. The brave brothers Sunda and Upasunda of the myths killed each other for a woman named Tilottama. Vishwa-mitra the great, lost his ascetic powers to Menaka's beauty. Kovalan was entrapped by Madhavi's allure. Dasaratha sent beloved Raama to the forest because of his love for Kaikesi. The great Roman Empire is said to have begun its decline because of Egypt's Queen....."

"Oh stop it, Sir! Why do you speak of such things?"

"Do you not know? Do you not understand of whom I speak?"

"If you speak of me, you cannot be making a bigger mistake!"

"There is no mistake. Your powers are in no way less than that of all those women."

"Your speech is your enemy!"

"Why My Lady?"

"I sent Lord Pazluvoor away intentionally. I have need to ask you something."

"I understood your wish. That is why I stayed back, instead of going with him."

"You spoke of a girl who tried to save Veera-pandiya's life and that Aditya Karikala did not heed her prayers."

"Yes, I did."

"Do you know that foolish girl?"

"She is Young Queen Nandini Devi who now shines in the palaces of Pazluvoor.

"If I really had the power like those women you described just now, would I not have saved the life of one man I wanted to save? Why could I not do that?"

"Yes, Aditya Karikala who was lost in the bloody rage of war did not heed your wish. But, I know how he is tormented by those memories for all these three years."

"How do you know that? Did he speak to you about that?"

"He buried it in his heart for all these three years and tortured himself. I knew that some distress troubled him. About ten days ago, the day before I sailed to Lanka, he opened his heart to me. Since then..."

"Since then?..."

"My heart was also gripped by the desire to meet the Young Queen of Pazluvoor."

"Do you remember saying that if you were in the position of Aditya Karikala at that time, you would have let Veera-pandiya live?"

"Yes, I do remember saying that."

"Is that true?"

"I swear it, My Lady. You can test me if you wish."

"Sir I have a concern; shall I speak of it?"

"Any word spoken in your pleasing voice will fill my ears with happiness; permeate my heart with joy."

"I suspect that you speak such words to test me. You speak of amorous nets that I cast and try to enmesh me. You are trying to learn my secrets."

Parthiban Pallava was taken aback. He had started speaking to Nandini with such an intention; but his intent was soon forgotten. The sly conversation treacherously threw him into a sea of real passion. He was concerned, "Lady, if I try any such deceit and spy upon you, let lightning strike me down."

"Sir, please do not swear such things," said Nandini hastily.

"Why not My Lady?"

"That other fellow who came from your Prince, that man... what was his name now....?"

"Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan?"

"Yes, him! He tried to spy on me very cunningly. From what you say, am I to surmise that lightning truly struck him?"

"Unfortunately, lightning did not strike his head. It struck the mast of the ship on which he was standing. Because of that, the danger which plagued him has enmeshed the younger Prince also."

"Pitiable! I feel sorry for that Princess of Pazlayarai. Two men she loved the most on this earth have died at the same time. How unfortunate!"

"Lady, two men? Who?"

"The two you spoke of. The Younger Pirati has a special love for her younger brother."

"The whole world knows that. Who is the other recipient of her affection?" asked Parthiban Pallava.

"Why ask? It is that messenger sent by the elder Prince."

"Do you mean Vandiya Devan?"

"Yes."

"Chee! Princess Kundavai of Pazlayarai who has the power to influence every segment of this Chozla Empire -- she and that insignificant, boastful, impudent youth...."

"Yes; she fell in love with that youth. That is why she tried to help him escape the wrath of Pazluvoor nobles; sending him away to Lanka with letters. Poor man, my old man thinks he is responsible for the misfortune of the Prince. In truth the Younger Pirati is the real culprit. If she had not sent that letter..."

"Yes, it is true! This misfortune would not have occurred."

"When my husband returns from the ship, you must explain this truth to him. If you do that, I shall be very thankful to you."

"Madam! Is that the only way to earn your thanks? Do you have no other orders for me?"

"Sir there are several hundred ways in which you could earn a poor girl's thanks."

"Tell me now... Aditya Karikala had an opportunity, which he let go. And now he suffers for that by day and night. I shall never make that mistake."

"Do you promise that, Sir? Are you a man who will do anything to fulfill the desires of a woman?"

"It depends on who the woman is. My Lady, till today, I would not have done anything for any woman I had met till now. If anyone had asked I would have laughed about it. But, now it is not so. Tell me.... If I have a hundred lives, I shall offer them all in your service. If they say that I shall have to forfeit my soul and conscience for that, I shall readily do so. I will forgive my worst enemy, if you ask. I shall bring the head of my dearest friend to lay it at your feet if you wish...."

Parthiban Pallava was speaking as if he were possessed of some rage; his whole body shivered from head to toe. His words were confused and unclear; lips trembling, eyes bloodshot, hairs standing on end and breathing much strained.

Our readers may be very surprised by this sudden change in Parthiban Pallava. Why? If anyone had said that he would change like that, he himself would not believe it. It was a most surprising thing even for him!

But, that is the nature of human emotions. Men dwelling in the deepest pits of sin and debauchery will one day turn into saints. They earn the grace of God and serve humanity with limitless devotion. On the other hand those that have led a blameless life will one day slip and fall into the pits of perdition. Much research has gone into the secrets of human behavior; but, none know all the secrets.

Nandini stopped Parthiban Pallava's passionate words, "Enough Sir, enough! I shall never ask any such atrocious deed of you. I shall ask you for a favor that will bring us both happiness."

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 3 -- Owl's Hoot

Nandini gazed towards the sea. The boat with Lord Pazluvoor in it was nearing the ship. Nandini heaved a heavy sigh; it blew into Parthiban's heart like a storm. "Devi tell me! Tell what I must do. You need not differentiate between something giving happiness to you and me. Your happiness is mine," said that valiant young man of the Pallava clan.

All sorts of outlandish thoughts rose in his mind. There is no doubt that this delightful girl is caught in the vicious grip of that vile old man and she suffers like a caged parrot. I must surely free her from that wild cat. Let her express her desires -- I can imprison him in that ship and abandon him in some distant land. Devil incarnate! How dare he take for wife a girl young enough to be his daughter, even grand-daughter!

Nandini continued to look at the boat and the ship. She watched Lord Pazluvoor clamber up the sides and get on the ship.

"Thank the Gods! He has climbed up safely. However capable, he is grown old! I was worried that he should not stumble while getting into boats and ships," she said.

Parthiban was disappointed. Why is she so concerned about that old man? What if he tumbles into the sea? Good for the country; freedom for her -- why does she show such regard?

"Only today did I realize his affection and regard for the Chozlas. See how disturbed he was on hearing about the fate of Prince Arulmozli! Sir! Is it not possible that the Prince might have survived? His death is not confirmed, is it?" asked Nandini.

"No; it is not confirmed. But, it is unlikely that anyone who jumped into such a whirlwind would survive. What can we do about the whims of fate?" replied Parthiban.

"Fate is not to blame in this matter. The greed of that fiend of Pazlayarai is the cause. Did you know this Sir? Kundavai has much faith in astrology and palmistry. She studied her brother's horoscope and palm lines and believed that he would one day rule the entire world as an emperor. Poor thing, how she must suffer when she hears what has befallen her darling brother! I wish I could be by her side at that time; perhaps offer my condolences!" Nandini's voice was filled with glee as she spoke these words.

Parthiban was astounded. He decided that he must be mistaken, "My Lady, why should you console her? This accident is a result of her greed; she must suffer the consequences."

"How is that Sir? If a tear drop glistens on her eyelid, a thousand men will bleat in distress in the Chozla country. She is the darling daughter of the Emperor! A world renowned beauty!"

"I too believed that once upon a time; till I met you."

"What do you think... after meeting me?"

"Kundavai's beauty is not equal to the grace of your little toe! That is what I think," said Parthiban Pallava.

"You say such words now; however, when you meet her next you will completely forget my existence."

"Never, My Lady, never. You are welcome to test me. Give me your orders this very minute."

"I have no authority to give you orders Sir. I can beseech you. People blame me; saying discord entered the Chozla Empire after I married Elder Lord Pazluvoor. I wish to prove them wrong. I need your help for that," spoke Nandini with a sudden change of mood.

Parthiban was truly baffled. He had presumed that she would ask him to do some difficult personal favor. He had intended to fulfill that favor and make her happy. But, she speaks of political affairs. "Tell me Madam, tell me whatever it is."

"Sir, it is Kundavai who destroyed the peace in this Chozla country. Her pride angered the nobles and officials of the nation. Her desire was to somehow place her younger brother Arulmozli on the Chozla throne and rule through him. That is why she obstructs negotiations for peace. Now, her interest is lost; peace is easy. Sir listen to this: you said it yourself. The ministers and nobles wish to crown Lord Madurandaka after Sundara Chozla's death. Even the Emperor has agreed to it."

"Is that so?" asked Parthiban Pallava with some surprise.

"Yes Sir. Otherwise, would he have given orders to arrest the Prince? I personally think that it is not right. There is scope to end this affair amicably. Why don't they divide the kingdom: lands north of the River Vellar for Aditya Karikala and the lands south for Madurandaka? Your ancestors, the great Pallava monarchs, were they not happy with ruling just the Thondai regions? Even the ancient Chozla's were content with the land between the delta rivers...."

"My Lady, why do you speak of such things to me? Why should I bother about such kingdoms? How does it concern me who rules where?"

"Sir, I thought that you were a faithful confidant of Prince Aditya Karikala."

"I have spent all these years being faithful to others, dependent on their mercy, on their whims and fancy, working for their glory and greatness. Henceforth, I wish to live for myself. My Lady, listen to this: I had often wondered why I was born on this earth; what was the purpose of my living? My ancestors ruled large kingdoms. They created dream worlds like Mamallai. I wondered if I was born to regain that past glory. Somehow I had no mind for such things. I had no eagerness to earn kingdoms. I was satisfied in striving for the greatness of the Chozlas. I delighted in the friendship of Aditya Karikala. I had decided to spend the rest of my living years in such fashion. But, today my eyes are opened. I now realize why I was born. Look, the waves are approving of my decision with their roar. The birds call sanction. Do not talk to me about dividing the Chozla Empire. Talk of other things. Do you wish me to bring you priceless corals from the distant Coral Islands? Do you want lustrous pearls from the deepest oceans? Do you want the herbs of eternal life from the tallest mountains? Do you want me to pluck the stars from beyond

the cloud cover and string them into a garland for you? Shall I get the shining moon and fashion it into a looking glass for you?"

"Oh stop it Sir! Stop this babbling. That fiend in Pazlayarai has already labelled me a 'lunatic'. Do not make me go really crazy."

Parthiban Pallava was somewhat ashamed, "I am the one who is going crazy; forgive me. What is your wish?"

"I wish to atone for the ill will against me all over the Tamil country. I need your help for that. People accuse me saying that because I married this Lord, the whole nation is in turmoil. They say that it was me who turned Madurandaka's mind making him interested in the throne. They think that the nobles have begun to support him because of me. I do not wish to die with such ill fame."

"Why do you talk of dying? Are you trying to hurt me?"

"Lord Pallava do you know any palmistry? Do you believe in such things?" Nandini asked an unconnected question.

Instead of giving a direct reply, he said, "Here, show me your palms!"

Nandini extended her right palm. He peered into it for some seconds and said, "Amazing lines! Quite unusual. Show me your other palm please."

Nandini gave him her other palm. "Madam, has anyone read your palm lines before and said anything to you?" asked the youth.

"Yes; once Kundavai read my hands..."

"What did she say?"

"She said that I will die an early death."

"That is true!" said Parthiban Pallava.

"Oh! You too say that!"

"But, it is clear that she is only half-read. One of these lines do indicate an early death. But here, there is another line which rises beyond that. In that new life you are likely to travel to distant shores beyond the seas; enjoy a life of greatness not enjoyed even by kings. All this will be yours because of the real love of a youth whom you meet on the sea shore. Your palms say that he will willingly sacrifice his life to fulfill even your tiniest wish." Parthiban suddenly took hold of both her palms and brought them to his face.

She pulled away her hands in a hurry, "Chee! what have you done?"

"Forgive me. I forgot that they were your palms. I thought they were two lotus buds." He babbled.

"If Lord Pazluvoor had seen you, you would surely be gracing his spearhead."

"Devi! I am sorry that I have only one life to give you."

"And why waste that single life in this foolish fashion? Save yourself to help this orphan girl."

"What am I to do?" asked Parthiban Pallava pathetically.

"We must save the Chozla Empire from destruction by civil strife between cousins. I need your help in that matter."

"How?"

"Bring your friend Aditya Karikala to Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's fort. Sambuvaraya has a daughter. If I wed her to Aditya Karikala my desire will be fulfilled."

"All this stratagem for this trifle? I shall promise to bring Aditya Karikala to Kadamboor. Then what else?" asked Parthiban.

"If Sambuvaraya's daughter Manimekalai is wed to Aditya Karikala, half the discord will be solved. If we divide the kingdom into half, the north for Karikala and the south for Madurandaka the rest of the strife will be gone."

"Then..?"

"The dishonor attached to my name will be gone. Later, I will take care of my own destiny. Perhaps drown in the deep seas..."

"I shall follow you and save you. A new life shall begin for us both. We shall journey to distant lands across the ocean. I shall establish a great empire for you."

"Sir, do not speak in this fashion. I am born in the tradition of chaste Tamil women. Lawfully wedded wife of Lord Pazluvoor..."

"Madam, tell me the truth. Why did you marry this old man? Did you fall in love with him? Or was it because he forced you into it?"

Nandini sighed deeply; her eyes were glazed and for some moments she wandered into some distant dream. "Poor man. Do not blame the old man. I married him willingly."

"Why? What did you see in him?"

"Nothing particular. I wished for the pleasures and comfort of a life in palaces and married him."

"I cannot believe that."

"Unbelievable; but, true. Even from childhood, I was teased for being poor, humiliated for being an orphan. I was told that I had no right to even play with royal children. One woman was responsible for that; I could bear it no longer."

"Who humiliated you in that fashion?"

"Do you not know? Can you not guess?"

"Younger Pirati Kundavai."

"Yes."

"I shall teach her a lesson one day." Parthiban Pallava was sure in his declarations.

"If you fulfill my earlier request, she will surely be punished. Her desire to rule all powerful in the empire will be destroyed."

"I shall fulfill your wishes. What will be your reward for me?" asked Parthiban eagerly.

"Whatever you ask. Whatever you ask that shall not impede the chastity vows of Tamil culture."

"My Lady I have heard that there is a new faith which is popular in the western worlds. It is practiced in the lands of Arabia, Baghdad and Persia. According to that faith, married couples could go separate if they so wish it; there is a special ceremony for it. Even women could remarry."

"I have heard of that faith."

"Let us sail away to those lands. Join that faith."

"Sometimes I dream of such things. Mere daydreams. It cannot happen," said Nandini.

"Why should it not? It is surely possible. All we need is your willingness. I shall sail with you to those distant ports. I shall win a kingdom for you with these swords of mine. I shall place you on a jeweled throne; crown you with a diadem of priceless diamonds. I am born to do this. I survived several battlefields to do this."

"Sir, my husband is returning. There, the boat is nearing this shore. Calm yourself please. We shall talk later."

"When, Dear Lady?"

"Come with us to Tanjore. If you have no invitation to come as a guest, come as a prisoner."

"Your invitation is enough for me!" said Parthiban Pallava.

Lord Pazluvoor's boat came ashore. He strode like a rage filled mountain towards them. Nandini and Parthiban turned towards him. His eyes brimmed with anger; rage filled him when he thought of them engaged in intimate conversation for such a long time. He had no way of expressing his anger, which grew tenfold.

Nandini asked in a cooing voice, "My Dear Lord, did you examine the ship completely? Did you thoroughly question all the sailors? Did this man speak the truth?"

Her voice calmed Lord Pazluvoor's rage. "Yes My Dear. This man spoke the truth. The darling Prince of the Chozlas, beloved child of the Chozla clans, the best among Tamil princes, Arulmozli is gone!" He then turned to Parthiban Pallava, "And this murdering devil is the cause for it!"

"Oh My Lord! I am not the culprit! Do not blame me. A female ghoulish which bewitches all the Chozla nation is the cause for the Prince's drowning death!" said Parthiban Pallava in some hurry.

Lord Pazluvoor interpreted his words as referring to Nandini; his anger crossed all bounds. "You sinning devil! What did you say?" with these words he picked up a sharp spear from the ground and aimed it at Parthiban Pallava.

Nandini ran up to hold his hands and stop him. "My Lord, what is this? Why should your spear that has slain countless enemies be tainted by the blood of our guest?" she asked.

"This fellow our guest! Queen, did you not hear the words he uttered about you?"

"Did he speak about me? Ask him to clarify! If it is so, I shall revenge myself with my own knife. I shall not trouble you."

"My Lord, I am not a crazy fool to speak in such fashion about the Queen of Pazluvoor! I meant that female ghoulish who dwells at Pazlayarai! The Younger Pirati gave secret letters for the Prince through that youth Vandiya Devan and sent him to Lanka. The Prince jumped into danger to save that impudent youth. That is why I said that Kundavai was responsible for the death of the Prince," said Parthiban.

Lord Pazluvoor was somewhat ashamed of his hastiness. Recovering quickly, "Do not try to cover up! You are also responsible for the Prince's untimely death. Why did you agree to his getting off the ship in the middle of a whirlwind? Get lost! Move away from my sight!" he said.

Nandini spoke again, "My Lord, will it not be good to take him also to Tanjore? It may be better if he explains personally to the Emperor. Otherwise, those that wait to blame us will readily add this to the rest. They may even accuse us saying we drowned the Prince."

"Let them accuse! I am not bothered by such pettiness. I shall cut off the tongues of those who dare to say such things. But, it may be a good idea to take him with us. Parthiban, what are you gaping at? Are you thinking of escape?" Lord Pazluvoor then beckoned to his men standing further away. Four men came running. "Bind him up!" ordered Lord Pazluvoor pointing at Parthiban Pallava.

The men approached Parthiban, who remained quiet till they came closer. In one instant he used his hands and all four scattered in different directions, falling hither and thither.

"Sir, if you wish to arrest me, there is no need for footmen. I am ready to be bound by the bravest among men, he who bears sixty-four battle scars from thirty-six campaigns. I shall not allow any other to even approach me."

Lord Pazluvoor's face somewhat blossomed by these words. "You are a scion of the brave Pallava clan. There is no doubt in that! Are you willing to come to Tanjore with us? Say it if you agree. There will be no need to bind you."

"I wish it too. I must meet the Emperor and explain things as they happened. No unwarranted blame should attach to my name."

"Then let us leave immediately," declared Lord Pazluvoor.

At that moment they heard the hooting call of an owl from the nearby forest. Nandini turned her face towards the forest. The two noblemen did not notice the peculiar change that came over her.

"These forests of Kodi Karai are unusual! Owls hoot in daylight!" said Parthiban Pallava. The owl called twice, again.

Nandini asked, "Do we have to leave immediately? Should we not wait here for one more day and see if anything happens? Prince Arulmozli might have caught some log or boat and might come ashore here."

"Parthiban look at the intelligence of my Young Queen. It did not occur to us! We must wait here for one more day. We shall place our men all along the coast and search more thoroughly," said Lord Pazluvoor.

"I have no objections Sir. But, I have no faith that we will find the Prince. If you had been in the stormy sea during the whirlwind, you too would think like me."

Lord Pazluvoor did not accept that. He placed his men at short intervals all along the coast and personally involved himself in the search.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 4 -- Cactus Grove

The boat rocked like a cradle happily on the waves at mid sea. It was difficult to imagine that two days ago, waves as tall as palm trees had risen in that place. Prince Arulmozli Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III, Vandiya Devan and Poonkuzlali were in that small boat. Poonkuzlali's hands held the oars; but, she was not pulling at them. She was listening keenly to the discussion between the Prince and Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

They too were engrossed in their own conversation, unconcerned that the boat was not going forward. They were arguing about what must be done after the boat reached Kodi Karai. Vandiya Devan insisted that the Prince should not go to Tanjore but go with him to Pazlayarai. He gave several arguments in favor of that course of action.

"Your sister wishes to see you about something important. I promised to bring you back to her. I must keep my promise," said Vandiya Devan.

"Do you want me to disobey my father because you have to keep your promise?" asked Prince Arulmozli Varma.

"They were not your father's orders. It must be Lord Pazluvoor's," Vandiya Devan continued, "Moreover, If you must meet your father the Emperor, is it not better that you meet him as a free man rather than as prisoner of Pazluvoor noblemen? Listen to me Sir! If only the news that 'Pazluvoor noblemen have arrested Ponniyin Selvan' were to become public -- the whole nation will rise in revolt. Your beloved motherland will become a cradle of bloody unrest. Consider it -- is that good? God in his grace must have sent that whirlwind to prevent any such disaster. Do you wish to cause trouble in the Chozla country, against God's wishes?" asked Vandiya Devan using every argument he could think of.

These words made an impression on the young Prince's mind. Yes, the nation is sure to be plunged in riots if the news that Pazluvoor nobles had ordered his arrest becomes public. He was very well aware of the adoration the people had for him. So he was lost in thought for some time. "Even if I agreed to your wish, how can we do so? Pazluvoor's men will be waiting for me on shore at Kodi Karai," said Arulmozli

"This boat girl will help us in that matter. However many guards wait on the beach, this girl can hide us and spirit us into the forests behind the beach. Poonkuzlali did you hear me? Can you do that?" asked Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

Poonkuzlali was in the seventh heaven of happiness because she had saved her beloved Prince from the open sea and taken him into her own boat. The sad thought that she must part from him when they went ashore bothered her in the midst of this bubbling joy. If only she could help him in some other way, there could be no fortune greater than that!

"If we go somewhat west of Kodi Karai along the coast there is a canal which enters the sea. The canal mouth is surrounded by marshy forest and jungle. We can take the boat into that canal. Marshlands surround the canal banks. None can approach us easily from land," said Poonkuzlali.

"Can you leave us there and walk to Kodi Karai to gather information?"

"Yes; I can. There are several places to hide the boat on that canal."

"Sir, did you hear her?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Yes, My Friend, I did. You ask me to enter my homeland like a thief; hide like a thief."

The Prince broke the silence once again, "Ocean Princess, why have you stopped the boat?"

Poonkuzlali turned to look at Vandiya Devan and began to pull at the oars. "Poor girl! How long can you keep pulling at these oars. You must be tired. Here let me try and help you," Vandiya Devan tried to take an oar in his hands.

"My Friend, your conniving is useless. I am neither going to Pazlayarai nor to Tanjore. God is going to take me directly to the heavens of Kailasa!" said Arulmozli.

Startled by these words, both Poonkuzlali and Vandiya Devan turned to look at the Prince. They noticed him beginning to shiver from head to toe. Vandiya Devan moved closer to him, "Sir, what is this? Why is your body shivering like this?" he asked.

"This is the shivering fever. Don't you remember? I told you that this poison plague was rampant in Lanka. It is rare that a man gripped by this fever survives!"

Vandiya Devan had not panicked even when his ship's mast had caught fire: now he was filled with a dreadful fear. Poonkuzlali's hands went limp. Life drained from her limbs. Her piercing eyes examined Arulmozli's face. More shivers began to shake the Prince's body. Soon he was tossing in delirium.

"Sir! What can I do? Tell me! I do not understand? Where shall I take you? Poonkuzlali, is there a doctor at Kodi Karai?" asked Vandiya Devan with anxiety.

Poonkuzlali had gone mute! Suddenly the Prince jumped up. His shivering body was staggering dangerously. "Take me to my sister. Take me to the Younger Pirati now!" said his garbled voice.

Vandiya Devan was overjoyed to hear these words, but, was not able to decide on a course of action. The Prince continued to stagger precariously, "Akka! here I come; I come to see you. I will not heed anyone who stops me." He was about to topple overboard.

Vandiya Devan had realized his state and moved closer; with two strong arms he hugged his royal friend and held him back. But, the Prince's strength had been magnified by the fever. He tried to struggle free. Vandiya Devan called for help, "Poonkuzlali, Poonkuzlali, come help quickly!"

Poonkuzlali came back to life. She scrambled forward to put out her hand and touch the Prince's fevered brow. Suddenly, the Prince crumpled, like small child he mumbled, "Akka! I'll keep quiet like you asked me to. Don't be angry with me! What will happen to me if you do not care for me?"

Poonkuzlali and Vandiya Devan carefully lowered the Prince, trying to make him comfortable at the bottom of that small boat. The Prince was lying down quietly. His eyes were out of focus and his lips mumbled confusing words.

Vandiya Devan realized that it was futile to consult with the Prince. It had now become his responsibility to save Ponniyin Selvan from the terrible predicament of the shivering sickness. But, this intelligent girl will help me. She is devoted to the Prince. And God who stood by my side in worse situations will surely help me.

"Poonkuzlali can you row quickly?"

The boat skimmed forward swiftly; Poonkuzlali's hands gained strength from the wind. Vandiya Devan sat beside the Prince holding his hands. What if he tries to jump overboard in the delirium of fever? His mind swiftly considered different alternative courses of action.

"Poonkuzlali what do you think? Shall we venture into Kodi Karai? Will your family help to safeguard the Prince?"

"Sir, in these days who can say anything about who could be trusted? I have a sister-in-law; she is very greedy for money. My father is paid from the coffers of Pazluvoor."

Poonkuzlali continued, "And then, those men who followed you, those Pazluvoor men may still be at Kodi Karai. More men might have come too."

Vandiya Devan was impressed by her forethought. He was glad of having her to help in these difficult times. "That means you think it to be dangerous to go directly to Kodi Karai?"

"Look over there!" pointed Poonkuzlali. In the distance towards the horizon, a ship seemed to be in anchor. Behind it, the tower of the lighthouse could be glimpsed.

"Oh! That is a big sea going ship. Wonder whose it is? Perhaps it is Parthiban's ship. Perhaps it is better to take our Prince to Kanchi when he is in this state!"

"It may be Lord Pazluvoor's ship. Sir, can you see anything behind that ship?"

"I can see the top of the lighthouse at Kodi Karai."

"Notice anything particular about it?"

"I do not see anything particular!"

"I can. People are crowded at the top of the lighthouse, examining the sea."

"Would they be able to see us from there?"

"Not yet, if we move any closer, they might."

"Perhaps it is better to be cautious. You mentioned that canal to the west of Kodi Karai; shall we take the boat there?"

"We must do that. We can reach the canal mouth by dusk. Sir, do you remember that leopard's den where you were hiding before? The canal goes very near that place. If you can stay there with the Prince, I can go into the village and find out about things and come back quickly."

"Poonkuzlali, does the canal stop there? Where does it end?"

"That canal goes from Kodi Karai to Nagapattinam."

Ponniyin Selvan was beginning to babble once again in delirium. "Yes Akka, yes. What you said about the news from the Buddhist monks of Nagapattinam is true. The Maha-thero of the Buddhist congregation of Anuradapura offered me Lanka's throne and diadem. I refused, Akka. I have no interest in ruling kingdoms; I shall listen to whatever else you say, but do not thrust the burden of a kingdom on me! We could be much happier on a boat on the seas. Listen to this Akka, there is a girl at Kodi Karai..."

Every inch of Poonkuzlali's body was filled with ecstasy when she heard these last words. Vandiya Devan was very irritated. Both waited with bated breath for the next word. However, the Prince seemed to gain his senses. He asked faintly, "Haven't we come to Kodi Karai yet?"

"There is the shore," said Vandiya Devan pointing with his finger. Before he could ask him anything more, the Prince slipped back into the disturbed drowsiness of fever. The wave of emotions that engulfed Poonkuzlali when the Prince had begun to talk about her made her very bashful. She began to concentrate on rowing. The boat now turned towards the southwest.

Under the cover of dusk, the small boat entered the mouth of the canal surrounded by marshy jungle. The canal bank on both sides was high. Dense bushes and tall trees covered the sandy banks. She pulled close to the bank and said, "Sir watch the boat." Then quickly she jumped on shore and climbed up a tree. Very soon she clambered down and came back to the boat. "It is good that we came here. There are men guarding the beaches for several leagues along the coast. A noisy crowd is milling around the lighthouse."

"Who could they be?" asked Vandiya Devan eagerly.

"I am not sure. But, they must be Pazluvoor men. Who else could it be? Anyway let us go to the hiding place. After nightfall I shall go to my house and find out more."

"What am I to do if someone sees you or if something happens to you? Our fate is in your hands!"

"Sir I never bothered about myself till now. Today I am concerned. Nothing will happen to me till the Prince is in safety," said Poonkuzlali.

The boat moved silently over the canal. She paddled softly trying to avoid any noise. Shadows of the tall trees on the bank fell on the water and turned it darker. Stars peeped from the patches of sky that darted between tree branches. They twinkled with as much concern as Vandiya Devan's.

After more than an hour on the canal, Poonkuzlali pulled to the bank. She walked up to the forest and stepped on the trail, leaving her heart behind in the boat. She walked quickly, not bothered about the stones and sand or the thorns and branches. She walked towards the Kuzlagar Temple of Kodi Karai. When she reached the temple door, she found the priest pulling the door shut, ready to lock it.

Making sure that no other was about, she went and stood before the Priest as he turned around. He was surprised to see her at that time even though he was used to her independent ways. "Is it really you Poonkuzlali? I thought it was someone else! Kodi Karai is busy with all sorts of persons. Where have you been girl? I have not seen you for a while."

"I had gone out of town Sir. There seems to be much activity near the house. That is why I came here to ask you about it. Who are all those men standing on the beach?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"Don't you know anything? Did you go home at all?"

"I went there. But, all sorts of people were standing around. You know that I dislike newcomers. Who are the visitors?"

"Elder Lord Pazluvoor is here. His Young Queen is here. And all their retinue. Also some nobleman from Kanchi City, I believe he is the Lord of Pallavas. He did not come emptyhanded, but, with a horrible news. Don't you know even that Poonkuzlali?" asked the Priest of Kuzlagar Temple.

"What is the horrible news? I don't know anything."

"I believe that Ponniiyin Selvan was with him in that sinner's ship when it was caught in a whirlwind. The Prince jumped into the sea to save someone and was not found after that. Perhaps he might come ashore here. Lord Pazluvoor and his men are searching for him along the coast. Even his Young Queen is anxious. That noblewoman came even here sometime ago. Poonkuzlali, people spread all sorts of rumors about her. I think they are all mistaken. Do you know how worried she was about what happened to our Prince?"

"Is that so Sir? I am happy to hear you speak well of the Young Queen of Pazluvoor. But, why did she come here now?"

"She came here to pray, that the Prince must somehow survive and come home. Is everyone as stone-hearted as you? You don't seem much bothered even after hearing this terrible news about our Prince?"

"What is the point in my being worried? Everything happens according to fate. You told me that! Anyway forget all those things, I do not like to go back home when such important people are there. Give me all that food you hold in your hands. I shall eat that and spend the night here itself in this temple."

"You are a most unusual soul, Poonkuzlali! If important visitors come to a place, everyone will be eager to make their acquaintance. You seem to dislike such people. What can they do to you? Why do you avoid them? Why do you wish to stay alone in this forest?"

"Sir, do not chide me if you do not care to give me the food that was offered to the God."

"Oh Gracious Lord! Why should I chide you? I was thinking that these fruits and coconut will not satisfy your hunger. Take them anyway." He gave her the few bananas and coconuts which had been offered to the Gods in the evening service. Poonkuzlali took them and bound them up in her saelai folds.

"Yes these will not satisfy my hunger. Such a big God and you offer him such few sacraments! Why Sir? Anyway, what have you in that jug? Is it water?"

"No, it is the milk which had been offered to the Deity. I am taking it home for my baby."

"Today, I shall be your baby. Give that to me and God will shower his favors on you."

"What a funny girl you are! Here, take it; bring back the jug safely."

As he handed her the jug of milk, somewhere in the distance an owl hooted. Poonkuzlali was startled, "Sir, what was that?" she asked.

"Can you not recognize that! An owl hooted! There is no dearth of owls and kites in this forest."

Again the sound came from the forest. "Yes, It sounds like an owl," said Poonkuzlali without conviction.

"The owl will not harm you. Close the door from inside and stay in the temple, I must hurry home." The Priest began walking towards the village and after he had gone from view, Poonkuzlali turned around. She began to walk towards the direction from which the owl had called.

Soon she had to cross a stream. Groves of fragrant cactus bushes covered the shores of that stream. She walked along that stream, through those groves, unmindful of the thorns that scratched her bare arms and legs. Thazlai flowers had bloomed in those cactus bushes, spreading their intoxicating fragrance everywhere. Poonkuzlali was in no mood to enjoy their heady perfume. She walked softly trying to make the least noise. Her ears were sharp for any unusual noise. There -- soft whispering voices: one a man and the other a woman. Poonkuzlali hid herself carefully and listened.

"Sorcerer, everyone believes, like you, that the Prince drowned in the sea. Lord Pazluvoor is distraught. But, I do not believe it," said the woman's voice.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 5 -- Raakammal

Nandini remained alone for some time after Parthiban Pallava and Lord Pazluvoor had wandered away along the beach. She was lost in thought watching the waves. She turned around when a voice called softly, "My Lady, Queen!"

The daughter-in-law of the Lighthouse Keeper, Mr. Tyaga-vidangar, stood there. "Who are you?" asked Nandini.

"My name is Raakammal."

"Why are you here?"

Instead of replying, the woman stared at Nandini's face. "What are you looking at, you dimwit? What is there in my face to stare like that?" asked Nandini.

Raakammal collected herself and said, "Forgive me, Amma, When I saw you, I remembered another face. But, it cannot be so."

"What are you blathering about? What cannot be so?"

"There can be no connection between yourself and that crazy Mute."

"Who is that? The Mute?"

"She is in Lanka; my father-in-law's uncles daughter. Sometimes she comes here."

"What about her and me?"

"I said that; there can be no relationship."

"Then, why did you think of her when you saw me?"

"Something wrong with my eyes. Your face ..." Raakammal hesitated.

"Does it look like her face?"

"It seemed to, at first."

"Raakammal, is the Mute here, now?"

"No, Amma. She comes rarely."

"When she comes again, will you bring her to me?"

"Why My Lady?"

"I wish to meet someone who has a face like mine."

"But, I think my eyes must be mistaken."

"Why are you saying that?"

"Lady, are you not from the Pandiya Country?"

"Yes; you?"

"I am from Pandiya Country too. The Mute I mentioned is a Chozla woman. That's why...."

"That is not important. Others like you have told me about her. Will you bring her to me? I will reward you well if you bring her to me."

"My Lady, finding her and leading her is like catching a whirlwind! She never remains in the same place for any time. She will never listen to anyone. I told you that she was crazy."

"Anyway, why did you come here now?"

"Amma, some days ago, two men came here mentioning your name."

"My name?!?"

"They swore that they have to go to Lanka on your business. I sent my husband to row the boat for them," said Raakammal.

"Has he come back?"

"No; he is not back and I am worried, if something happened to him...."

"Nothing would have happened; don't worry! If anything is the matter, I will take care of you. Do you know anything about the men who went in the boat?"

"They have come back. Did you not hear the owl just now? You must have noticed the screech!"

"I did; so what?"

"Did you not recognize the Sorcerer's voice?"

"How did you know that? Are you one of them?"

"Yes, My Lady." After saying this, the woman drew a sign with her finger on her palm.

Nandini looked at her with surprise, "Do you know where they are now?"

"The Sorcerer is waiting to meet you."

"He can come and meet me. Why wait?"

"The Sorcerer does not wish to run into that Pallava nobleman who was here just now. I believe they had met in Lanka. Moreover, he does not wish to be seen by your husband."

"Did you talk to the Sorcerer?"

"I did; just now, when I heard the owl's hooting call. He wants to meet you. He said that he would wait by the banks of the stream near Kuzlagar Temple. Will you come, My Lady?" asked Raakammal.

"How can I go just like that?"

"We can say that you are going to the Temple."

"Good idea; don't we need some guards?"

"No need; if you wish, we can take Sendan Amudan with us."

"Who is he?"

"The Tanjore Mute's son."

"Good Lord! How many Mutes?"

"This family is cursed. Some are born mute. Some become speechless. My husband is like that. He has a good voice; but, I have made him stay speechless."

"Does the Lankan Mute have children? Do you know?"

"Apparently she gave birth to twins long ago. No one knows what happened to those children. I have been trying to learn the secret of that for some time now, without any success."

"Why has the Tanjore fellow come here?"

"He came in search of his cousin Poonkuzlali. She is not here; so he is waiting for her."

"Where has she gone?"

"I meant to tell you that. The day after the Sorcerer left with my husband, two other men came here. Pazluvoor soldiers followed in search of them. My sister-in-law took one of those men in her boat and left for Lanka by night."

"Does she know the way of boats?"

"That is her only pastime. Or she will wander in these forests of Kodi Karai. There is no nook or cranny in these regions that is not known to her."

"If she has not come back yet.... what do you think of that?"

"All these men are worried about someone drowning in the open seas. I am not so sure about that. Only after Poonkuzlali comes back can we confirm that news."

"She might have drowned too."

"She can never drown. The sea is her cradle. Also..."

"Also, what?"

"I was looking out from the lighthouse tower sometime ago. There seemed to be a boat in the far distance....."

"And?"

"And it did not come to this shore."

"What could have happened?"

"Seeing the activity on this sea shore, the boat might have gone into the marsh canal."

"Can that be done?"

"Nothing is impossible for Poonkuzlali. The Tanjore youth was watching with me. He too felt the same way."

"Well; that may be for the good. Let us now go to the Kuzlagar Temple," said Nandini Devi.

"Shall I ask Sendan Amudan to go with us?"

"No need; let him look for his cousin. Let's not hinder his search!"

They began walking towards the temple. Raakammal was also very familiar with the forests of Kodi Karai. She led Nandini carefully, avoiding the mudholes and sinkholes. Soon, they reached the temple where the Priest was surprised to see them at that time. "Gracious Queen! What is this? You have come here alone like this at this time? Where are the footmen? You could have sent word. I would have been ready to welcome you with proper honors" he chattered in confusion.

"Priest, is this the time for such protocols? There has been such an immense disaster for our Chozla Empire! They say that the ocean has taken the beloved Prince of our nation! I came here to pray to Lord Kuzlagar beseeching him to save our Prince and return him to us," said Nandini Devi.

"Nothing tragic like that would have happened Honorable Lady. Please do not worry, the Ocean King will not harm Cauvery's Beloved, our Ponniyin Selvan," spoke the Priest.

"How are you so sure, Sir?"

"It is the characteristic of the star and sign under which our Prince was born. How could the sea claim one who is born to rule the world? Pray to our Lord Shiva and you will have nothing to worry. The Lord will surely protect our Prince."

After this, the Priest waved the camphor lamp in front of the God and offered service, while Nandini said her prayers. He then gave her sacraments of holy ashes, saying, "Amma! I am happy to see you in such an esteemed position."

"Did you know me before, Sir?"

"Yes, My Lady. I have seen you at Pazlayarai and also in the temple on Vaigai Island. Your step-brother Thirumalai, what is he doing these days?"

"He wanders from town to town singing psalms composed by Vaishnava saints. It has been a long time since I saw him," said Nandini Devi.

"Yes; he too feels a great deal about that. He was full of regret that you have refused to meet him after you became the Queen of Pazluvoor."

"What can I do about that Sir? The household I am married into, they are all devout followers of the Saiva faith. He is a fanatic Vaishnava who bears the name Azlvar-adiyan and picks quarrels with all devout Saiva followers. How could I maintain dealings with him? I have to follow the inclinations of the household into which I am married."

"Yes Amma, yes. It is most important that you do not go against the wishes of your chosen husband. Forget Azlvar-adiyan, let him go his way."

She took leave of the Priest and left with Raakammal. The Priest called back, "Are you going back alone? If you wait a minute, I can accompany you..."

"No need Sir. Do not hurry because of us. This woman seems to be familiar with the paths here. Anyway, tonight, Kodi Kari is busy with men. There is nothing to fear. We shall go," said Nandini Devi. The women came out of the temple gate and after they had moved away from the Priest's vision, Raakammal took hold of Nandini's hand and led her away behind the temple wall. Soon, they were beside the stream in the middle of the cactus grove. They walked along the stream's edge in the starlit night.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 6 -- Poonkuzlali's Fear

Poonkuzlali held her breath as she hid behind the fragrant cactus grove. Nandini and the Sorcerer were whispering very softly; but, everything they said could be heard clearly in that still night.

When Nandini said that she had no faith in the rumor about the Prince having been taken by the sea, the Sorcerer replied, "Queen, you never have any faith in what I say. Why do you not believe me now?"

"Have you not heard about the horoscope of the Prince? Even the temple priest was talking about it!" said Nandini with some sarcasm.

"Foolish idiot! My spells are more powerful than planets and stars. Do you know how I brought about the whirlwind when the sea was deadly calm? Even that spy from Kanchi did not believe me at first. Later, he would surely have believed when he drowned in those salty waters."

"Did you see him drown in the sea?"

"So what if I did not stay to witness it? I saw the ship catch fire."

"I heard that the Prince Jumped into the stormy sea just to save him from the burning ship."

"Did that Prince come back?"

"He did not return to the Pallava ship..... but, ..."

"So? I left Vandiya Devan alive on that pirate ship so that both enemies could drown together!"

"Whatever you say, my mind does not accept it. My heart tells me that they are both alive. Do you know a girl named Poonkuzlali?"

"Very well. She gave us much trouble in Lanka. She too must be gone in that whirlwind."

"No. Sometime ago, a boat was seen in the distance. Raakammal saw it from the top of the lighthouse. Suddenly, that boat disappeared. She thought there may have been two or three people in that boat."

"Then you better leave from here as quickly as possible; take the old man with you! I shall remain here and take care of them," said Ravidasa the Sorcerer.

"Why shouldn't we remain here?" asked Nandini Devi.

"If the old man stays back, he will offer royal homage to the Prince and take him back to Tanjore in his protection. Everything will be ruined."

"Ravidasa, let me ask you once again. Why should they die? If everyone agrees to crown Madurandaka"

"Woman! You reveal your stupid nature. The spy from Kanchi knows all our secrets. He would have shared it with the Prince. You should leave this place before daybreak. Raakammal! If Poonkuzlali saved them, where would she have brought them?"

"There is a hidden cave-pavilion. It is her favorite hiding place. She had hidden that Kanchi spy for one whole day in that place. I found that out much later..." said Raakammal.

"Good; I know that place. I'll go there and wait for them. Queen, how is the Emperor? Any news of him?" asked Ravidasa the Sorcerer.

"Which Emperor are you asking about?"

"My tongue will never refer to that sickly Sundara Chozla as `Emperor'. I ask about `our' Emperor."

"I had news ten days ago that he was well. Oh! How long it seems since I saw him!"

"Fine, fine. We better be quick. What is that idiot Pallava going to do?"

"We are taking him with us to Tanjore."

"Be careful with him."

"Do not worry about him! He is ready to obey my every whim with all his heart!" laughed Nandini.

"Even then, be careful. You were slightly outwitted by that Kanchi spy. Were you not?"

"Perhaps; that is why I must see him alive once again."

"Forget any such wish Queen!"

They had begun walking away from that spot as they spoke in this fashion. Poonkuzlali tried to hide more carefully. Fortunately, they began to walk away from her. What she had overheard made her feel very frightened. Her limbs began to shiver when she thought of all the dangers that seemed to gather around beloved Ponniiyin Selvan. She felt faint and her throat felt dry. She was becoming more and more confused. She must get back to her boat... as quickly as possible.... her feet began to quicken.

The Prince was in the grip of a poisonous fever. Lord Pazluvoor's men waited everywhere to arrest him. Assassins were hiding all over the forest to kill him. And this ghoulish enchantress in female form was helping all of them! Even Lord Parthiban Pallava seemed to have fallen prey to her witchery. Even the secret hiding place was no longer safe from them. Poonkuzlali realized that the responsibility to safeguard the Prince was firmly thrust upon her delicate shoulders. She was confused when she realized that.

Suddenly she felt an experience which had never happened to her before this. She wondered if she had lost her way in the forest! She felt that she was going round and round the same spot. What if I stumble upon any of the enemies? How shall I protect myself? No. No. I have not lost my way. Here is the canal bank. There is that spot where I had left the boat.... She ran towards that spot. Her heart skipped a beat and almost stopped... because.... the boat was not there, where she had left it! Oh dear! Where could it have gone?

Would Pazluvoor soldiers have found it? Would they have arrested the Prince and his friend? Even that is tolerable... as long as something more dreadful has not happened. Perhaps Vandiya Devan has carried the Prince to the hidden lair? Those assassins would be waiting there! Oh what horrible mistakes!

She began to run through the forest path towards the hidden pavilion. Again that same doubt ... have I lost my way? Am I going round and round? What is that? Footsteps.... Someone is following me! Who is it? Could it be that terrifying Sorcerer? Why should I be frightened of him, or anyone? Let me take out the knife from my waist band.

But, this is no time to pick a quarrel with anyone. I must run and escape. I have no strength in my hands now and I might miss the target. I must keep myself alive.... otherwise who will take care of the feverish Prince? Vandiya Devan warned me about it.... She ran deeper into the dense forest. But, the footsteps continued to follow her, closer and closer.

She no longer bothered to keep quiet. As she ran, she pushed aside creepers and undergrowth. Disturbed birds and small forest creatures began to scatter noisily. Even a fox ran out from its hole chasing wild boar near its path. Deer ran past her almost brushing her in their haste. In the midst of all this, the fellow following her did not give up.

She could now hear his footsteps and even his labored breathing as he tried to catch up with her. She was tired of running. Tiredness turned into anger. She drew out her knife and turned around deciding to take a chance with whoever was following her.

Ponniiyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 7 -- Songs Of The Forest

As soon as Poonkuzlali stopped running because of her anger about the persistent footsteps, a sweet melody rose from the darkness enveloping the forest.

O Lord of golden hued body, with tiger skins draped around thy waist;

On matted locks burnished red, you wear shining konrai flowers!

Poonkuzlali recognized it as Sendan Amudan's voice and laughed in relief. She did not realize that the footsteps had come from the other direction. "Cousin! Is it you?" she asked.

"Yes, Poonkuzlali."

"Where are you? Come out here!"

"Here I come!" Sendan Amudan stepped up in front of her, coming to stand very close.

"You frightened me! Why did you follow like that?"

"I journeyed several days and came here from Tanjore to see you and listen to your melodious songs, Poonkuzlali. Not finding you, I waited for several days. When I saw you accidentally, I began to follow. Come, let me hear you sing something sweet!" said Sendan Amudan.

"Ridiculous! You found the perfect time and place for me to sing!"

"If you don't, I shall sing another verse for you. See, I shall wake up all the sleeping creatures of this forest,

O lunatic divinity wearing the crescent moon,

O great Lord who art benevolence personified....."

"Stop! Cousin, can you stop singing?"

"Are you going to sing?" asked Sendan Amudan loudly and then added in a hurried whisper, "There is another fellow following you. I began singing to warn you. He and your brother's wife were sharing secrets earlier in the evening. Who is he? Would you know him?" He then continued loudly, "What do you say? Are you ready to sing or shall I start again? Shiva danced in the deserted cremation ground. Why can't we sing in this deserted forest land?" he was almost shouting.

"Do not be angry, I shall sing something, wait!

Oh dear birds of flight; Oh darling birds of song!

May I never forget Aaroor, that center of justice, favored by saintly souls,

Even as sleep leaves mine eyes

And bracelets slip through emaciated fingers."

She then added in a whisper, "Amudan, how did you know that I had come back?"

"I saw the boat approaching from atop the lighthouse. I thought it might be you and came here in search of you. Lord Pazluvoor's men also began looking in the forest. You were not at your boat. I saw my friend Vallavarayan and the Prince. When I told Vallavarayan

about the soldiers, he decided to hide. We carried the feverish Prince to the safety of the hidden lair...." he whispered.

"Oh dear! What a mistake! What about the boat?"

"We thought that the boat would arouse suspicion and drowned it in the canal --- Poonkuzlali why are you not saying anything. Sing the rest of that verse..." the last part of this was spoken loudly.

"I forget the rest Cousin; there is another psalm, about Lord Kuzlagar of Kodi Karai. Do you remember that? Can you sing that verse?"

"Oh yes; I remember that verse!

What misfortune to dwell like this?

My wretched eyes did spy,

On beaches irked by harsh winds blowing landward,

In utter solitude, with none for company,

Lord Shiva, Kuzlagar of Lands End."

When the song was done, Poonkuzlali whispered, "Cousin, the fellow who followed me, is he gone? Or, is he hiding anywhere nearby?"

"I did not hear any footsteps after we stopped here. He must be hiding somewhere close by. Who could it be? Would you know?"

"I know very well. You mean that song about the owls of Kodi Karai written by Saint Sundara Murti, do you not?"

I saw you Lord Kuzlagar, you art enshrined

Amidst dense forests and deserted jungle,

Where hooting owls and kites in their hollows frighten young maids;

With none to serve you,

But for those harsh woodsmen and evil hunters who wander freely.

Think of it Amudan, even during the times of Sundara Murti, owls and kites hooted in this forest; But, today even men call and screech like an owl in this forest. I heard such a call just now. Have you any idea who that evil huntsman could be?" Poonkuzlali kept speaking in a loud voice adding further, "Let me try if I can imitate that evil night-owl" She then hooted three times like an owl.

"You sound just like a owl. You have a melodious voice suitable for divine psalms; when did you learn to make such harsh sounds?"

"I learnt it from a Sorcerer. I believe we must know how to screech like this if spells are to work right."

"What? Are you familiar with sorcery and magic?"

"To some extent. Do you want some proof of my powers?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"Proof? What proof?"

"A fellow is hiding behind us listening to everything we say; that's what my power says to me. Search for him if you like..."

Before she could finish, the bushes behind them parted noisily and the Ravidasa the Sorcerer came out with a harsh laugh.

"Ha, ha ha! Girl! Is that true? I thought that you were merely capable of conniving and cunning; are you also familiar with magic and sorcery?"

"Oh! You fiend! It is you!"

"Girl, do you recognize me?" asked Ravidasa.

"You are that assassin who tried to kill the Prince in Lanka. You were not successful there; so you cooked up a storm in the open sea and drowned the Prince and his friend."

"How are you so sure that they drowned? Did you see them?"

"Their two bodies washed ashore. I buried them on Ghost Island. You fiend, may your spells go amiss!"

"Don't try to fool me, Girl! Didn't you cast a counter spell and revive them?"

"Oh Dear! How did you know that?"

"This Ravidasa has an inner eye that can see everything for a hundred leagues around him! My magic is powerful."

"Then why are you questioning me?"

"I was testing you. Where are they hiding now? Tell me or else I will burn you both to ashes." His eyes were glowing like hot embers when he said this. "Come, speak the truth, or else here is a spell -- OHM HREEM HRAM VASHASTHU -- you will soon see its power.

Poonkuzlali seemed to shiver with fright; she ran behind Sendan Amudan and hugged him tightly with both her arms, and said very softly, in his ear, "I am going to run; try and stop him here somehow." She called loudly towards Ravidasa, "Don't do anything to us! I'll show you where they are. Come with me," saying this she began to run away from the direction of the hidden lair.

The Sorcerer tried to follow her when Sendan Amudan pulled him back. With one swing Ravidasa pushed him down and followed her. Poonkuzlali was sprinting ahead like a swift doe. He was a hunter chasing after her. The path was difficult and he felt tired, wondering if he should give up the chase. She stopped suddenly and he quickened his stride.

Sendan Amudan was stumbling behind slowly. He considered going to the hiding place and warning his friend. But, he had no heart to abandon his cousin to that evil assassin. Poonkuzlali climbed a hillock and stood on top. The Sorcerer also ran up, panting somewhat. In his rage he wanted to slap her face. She pointed with her arm stretched out, "There, look at my lovers!"

He looked to see that same sight which had once frightened Vandiya Devan so many days ago. The marsh was filled with ghouls who rose suddenly in fiery columns and died just as suddenly. He knew what they were, but, the sight still frightened him.

"Sorcerer, if you are all that powerful, why don't you cast a spell to make these ghouls go away? They torment me all the time!"

His anger crossed all limits, "Foolish girl! You are trying to outwit me."

"Why should I try to fool you?"

"You dragged me here saying that you will show the hiding place of Vandiya Devan and the Prince."

"They are dead; you did not believe me. What can I do?"

"Is it true that the Prince is dead? Swear it!"

"Why should I swear? Look at the sky."

Ravidasa looked up and saw the bright comet. Poonkuzlali was saying, "Do you not know that comets's portend death for royalty? It has happened."

"Give me that jug in your hand. Is there anything in it? I am thirsty, running after you like this..."

She began to run again. Jumping to the side, skipping over there... towards the marshy plain filled with fiery ghouls. Ravidasa lost all sense of thought in the anger that rose to fill his mind: I must catch and choke her to death, wring her head and throw it to the hyena's.... He began to run after her. Poonkuzlali suddenly bent low and crawled a few yards to one side. Ravidasa, running with some speed could not stop where she had turned aside. He ran ahead a little and tried to turn around. But.... He could not turn, why are my feet cold, why is the cold rising up? What is happening? My legs are sinking! He looked down to find his legs sinking into the mudhole!

Soon the mud rose inch by slow inch up to his thighs. He tried to pull his legs out in vain, only sinking further into the mire. He realized what was happening; it seemed as if a big ghost hiding under the marsh was pulling him into the sinkhole slowly.

Poonkuzlali stood laughing gleefully, on firm ground. "Sorcerer, why are you gaping like that? You are caught in the grip of a big vampire! Why don't you try one of your spells on it?" she laughed.

Fright and anger mingled to dance on Ravidasa's face. He crunched his teeth saying, "You she-devil! What have you done?"

"You wanted to break my neck and kill me; now crack your knuckles and pray for help!"

He tried to control his anger, "Girl! I promise you, I meant you no harm. Give me a hand and pull me out."

Poonkuzlali continued to laugh mercilessly, "I cannot give you a hand. Call all the ghosts and spirits that obey your sorcery."

Ravidasa was now buried up to his waist; his face had turned horrible with fright. His eyes were burning red hot. He stretched out his hand and grabbed the firm ground. His

finger took hold of the long grass clumps on the shore. "Girl, have mercy and help me!" he cried.

Sendan Amudan came up to that spot by now. Poonkuzlali took his hand saying, "Come let us go."

"Good God! How can we leave him here like this and go away?" asked Sendan Amudan.

"Why? Do you want to wait till he is completely buried?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"No! No! If I leave him to this fate, this sight will haunt my thoughts all life long. Come, let us pull him out."

"Cousin, he was going to kill me!"

"God will punish him for his evil intentions. Let us help him now."

"If you feel so, give me your body scarf," said Poonkuzlali. She took that long-scarf and tied one end of it to a sturdy bush on the bank and threw the other end to Ravidasa.

"Sorcerer! Hold this scarf-end tightly. Don't pull too hard lest you uproot this bush. Be careful. Don't try to climb out by yourself. By day-break, someone will come this way and help you out," she said.

"O! Do I have to spend the whole night like this? I cannot; it is better that you kill me," he cried.

Poonkuzlali did not pay any heed; she turned and walked away. Till they had crossed the sand dunes, they could hear the distress filled calls of the Sorcerer.

Finally, she asked, "Cousin, you arrived at a good time and helped me. How did you come here? Why?"

"After my experience in the dungeons of Tanjore's prisons, I had no taste to remain in the capital. Pazluvoor soldiers and spy's often entered my garden and annoyed me. So, I went to Pazlayarai and met the Princess. Kundavai Devi sent me here. She felt concerned about the dangers threatening her brothers. She wanted Lord Vandiya Devan to take her younger brother to the Buddhist Monastery of Choodamani Vihara and find sanctuary for him over there. She sent me here to wait for them so that I could give this message. I was also eager to see you again and listen to your singing."

"You found the best of times for listening to my songs! But, the Princess is right. All sorts of dangers surround the Prince; the worst is that he has the shivering sickness in addition to being stalked by assassins."

"Yes; I could see that, when I and my friend Vandiya Devan carried him to the leopard's lair. We had a tough time in doing that, Poonkuzlali! Anyway, the monks at Choodamani Vihara are trained doctors. They will cure the Prince."

"How are we to take him to Nagapattinam?" she asked.

"By the canal, of course."

"How can we go by the canal? You men have lost the boat!"

"The boat is just buried under water. We can pull it out and empty the water!"

"Then, we should try and leave as soon as possible. But, we cannot all go in that small boat!"

"Don't worry Poonkuzlali. We, my friend and I discussed everything. Vallavarayan can go to Pazlayarai directly from here. You and I are to carry the Prince in your boat and go to Nagai Port (Nagapattinam)."

A shiver of thrill rippled through Poonkuzlali. Another journey in his company! On the canal, in my boat, till Nagai! They reached the mouth of the hidden pavilion. Sendan Amudan clapped his hands and made a noise. "Who is that?" asked Vandiya Devan's harsh voice.

"It's only me! Sendan Amudan."

"Who is with you?"

"My uncle's daughter."

Vandiya Devan came out from hiding, "Are you sure there is no one else?"

"No. Why are you worried?"

"Speak softly. The Prince is sleeping. Someone came here some minutes ago. I thought it was you and called out. But, it was someone else, looked like a Sorcerer I know."

"Then?" asked Poonkuzlali with some worry.

"Then I heard him sing and felt irritated that you found time to start singing! But the other fellow also heard it and turned away. Did you see him?"

"We did."

"What did you do with him?"

"I did not do anything with him. She buried him waist deep in the sinkhole and came away."

"I heard her voice too."

"Yes; she also sang a little..."

"The Prince woke up hearing her voice; he asked who is singing? I told him that it was you. He went back to sleep."

Poonkuzlali was even more thrilled when she heard this. "But, I also hooted like an owl."

"I heard that too and knew something was happening. Perhaps you two cousins had started to celebrate the festival of Eros, I thought!" said Vandiya Devan.

"Why this useless talk?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"What else are we to do? We have to spend this night somehow."

"No. If we stay here till day break, we can never escape. We have to leave now."

Somewhere in the far distance, jackals began to howl. The call of an owl mingled with those howls. Sendan Amudan shivered. His mind could see the Sorcerer, buried in the quicksand, surrounded by howling jackals, trying to shoo them away by hooting like an owl....

Vandiya Devan and Sendan Amudan carried the sleeping Prince on their shoulders. Poonkuzlali walked ahead to the canal. By now the moon had risen. They laid the Prince down beside a tree with Poonkuzlali by his side to guard him. Both men waded into the water and began to pull out the boat.

Arulmozli opened his eyes and said, "I am very thirsty." Poonkuzlali gave him the milk from the jug. He took a few sips. "Poonkuzlali, is it you? I thought it was heaven and some divine nymph was feeding me ambrosia," he said.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 8 -- Ghost! Ghost!

The pleasing words of Ponniyin Selvan intoxicated Poonkuzlali: a heavenly karpaka tree showered divine blossoms on her; divine kinnara instruments began to play symphonies; her very own nerves were strung into a harmonious yaazl playing celestial music. "Prince I am no heavenly nymph; merely a poor boat-girl. Neither did you sip ambrosia; merely milk from the temple," she said.

"I cannot believe you are not divine; you are a darling daughter of the Lord of Waters. Ocean Princess, you have saved my life so many times! How can I ever repay you?" asked Ponniyin Selvan.

"Sir, permit me to remain by your side for one more day and a night."

"How is that possible Poonkuzlali? I have to leave for Pazlayarai immediately."

"No; we have orders to take you to Nagapattinam Port."

"From whom?"

"From the Younger Pirati."

"Who is that other man with Vandiya Devan, helping with the boat?"

"My cousin Sendan Amudan. The Princess sent orders through him to take you to the monastery at Choodamani Vihara."

"Oh! Has my sister changed her mind? Has she forgotten her passion to see me crowned? For a long time, I have had a wish to join the Buddhist congregation! I shall become a monk and join their monastery. I will go on pilgrimage to distant lands -- Java, China, Mapalam, Mayooradikam I am lucky! Come with me Poonkuzlali!" He tried to stand up.

Poonkuzlali suspected that he was still babbling in the grip of fever; he is not in his full senses. A piteous wail sounded from afar. Arulmozli turned to her with some shock, "What was that?"

"It is an owl, calling."

"No; no! It sounded like a human being. Someone in the grip of some terrible danger! Come let us help that person before we go. Let us do some good deeds before we renounce this world." He began to take a few staggering steps and fell to the ground. Poonkuzlali prevented his fall with her hands.

The two men who had readied the boat, came running towards them. The Prince had lost consciousness again. They carried him into the boat and laid him down in it. The three

others were somewhat cramped as the boat began to move down the canal. Vandiya Devan said, "Poonkuzlali, it is difficult for four people in this boat. Anyway, I have to take leave of you. Let me get off here itself. You are both responsible for his safety; I need not tell you more!" His voice was choked with emotion. Moon beams glistened at his eyetips.

"Why don't you wait till we cross Kodi Karai forest? I have left my horse there. You remember the directions I gave, don't you?" asked Sendan Amudan.

"Yes; but, I'll get off here itself. I'll go back to the temple and sleep for some hours and start before daybreak. If I do not get any sleep, I shall not be able to ride tomorrow. Who knows what dangers I have to face tomorrow!"

Poonkuzlali took out the fruits and coconut secured at her waist. "Here, eat this and go to sleep."

"What about you? You have not eaten anything?"

"If we go a league from here, there are several villages. I, or my cousin can go into a village and find some food. But, you have to journey in secrecy till you reach Pazlayarai."

"Don't forget that the Prince is in the boat."

"Who will believe that the Prince is in this boat? Don't worry; it's our responsibility. None will remark upon this insignificant boat."

"Fine, set me down here."

The owl hooted again and again. Arulmozli woke with a start, asking, "What is that?"

Poonkuzlali stood up. "No, I cannot do this. If the Prince knows, he will never forgive me. Sir, wait here for some more time. I shall rescue that Sorcerer from the quicksand and come back. It is not far away, that place."

"I'll come with you Cousin. I cannot let you go alone to that evil fiend," said Sendan Amudan.

Vandiya Devan jumped ashore, "Amudan, you wait with the Prince. I'll go with her; I have some unfinished business with that Sorcerer." He began following Poonkuzlali into the forest. Poonkuzlali kept thinking again and again about that Sorcerer surrounded by jackals waiting to pounce on him. The Prince accusing her, "You murdering ogress!" Such visions gave her legs a swiftness. Very soon she was by that mudhole where she had left the Sorcerer. But, he was not there!

Vandiya Devan stood behind her asking what was the matter. "Perhaps it was some other mudhole. You have forgotten the spot," he said.

She pointed to Sendan Amudan's scarf which was still tied to the bush. She could not speak.

"You think that he is buried in the quicksand? No, no. Ravidasa cannot be killed so easily. He has a hundred lives! He must have escaped," said Vandiya Devan as he untied Sendan's scarf. He was trying to console Poonkuzlali, but in his heart he believed that Ravidasa was dead. What a horrible death!

They turned back towards the canal with heavy steps. On the high canal bank, they saw two figures holding a tree branch and peering at the water. One was a man and the other a woman. They were gazing at the approaching boat.

"There!" said Poonkuzlali.

"Yes, do you recognize them?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"The Sorcerer and my sister-in-law. She must have rescued him."

"All is for the best."

"It is not! They have spotted the boat." The woman turned around towards them. "Oh! They have seen us too!"

"Come with me; I will try a trick. Follow my lead and keep talking," said Vandiya Devan. They walked up the bank and went to sit near the water's edge. They could see the other two hidden behind the nearby bush.

Vandiya Devan began to speak, "Poonkuzlali, why do you worry? It is good that the Sorcerer is dead."

"But, what a horrible death!"

"You killed him -- why bother about it after the fact?"

"Me, a killer?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"Then? You pushed him into the quicksand. Why this sudden sympathy? You came back to rescue him; but, the mud had already swallowed him. Perhaps, you really came back to make sure that he was dead."

"Why did you come with me?"

"To learn your murdering secret."

"I am no murderer, like you."

"I never claimed otherwise. I drowned the Prince at sea. You drowned the Sorcerer in a quicksand. We are now equals. If you do not reveal my secret, I shall not speak of your crime."

"Did you really kill the Prince? You kept saying that you never saw him!"

"I will not utter anymore falsehood. Do you agree to our pact?"

"What if I refuse?"

"I will tell Lady Nandini about your murdering the Sorcerer. There are no witnesses to my crime. Your cousin was a witness to what you did; you will surely be punished."

"What can Lady Nandini do to me?"

"Nothing; she will order you to be buried head deep in sand and trampled to death by a rogue elephant."

"Oh! What horror!" Poonkuzlali covered her ears with her palms.

"Agree to my suggestion."

"What suggestion?"

"There, your cousin is coming in that boat. Get into that and go to Lanka with him. Don't come back here."

"Why should I go to Lanka?"

"If you remain here, you might give my secret away to Lord Pazluvoor and other noblemen. Lord Pazluvoor has much regard for the Prince. He will surely seek revenge for my deed. I wish to be alive for some more time."

"Why did you kill him anyway?"

"Because he and his sister conspired to take away the kingdom from my master Aditya Karikala. They were enemies of my liege lord the elder Prince."

"You cannot escape punishment for your vile deed."

"It is no worse than your deed; you need not be concerned about me. Go, get into the boat!" ordered Vandiya Devan. "Turn the boat towards Lanka, Don't try to go back to Kodi Karai. I'll be watching," he added.

"I agree, I agree. May a thousand hyena's tear you apart!" she cursed as she moved towards the boat after Vandiya Devan had given the sign. She was in the boat, spreading her clothes to hide what was in the bottom. The boat moved away quickly. Vandiya Devan continued to sit on the bank for about half a naazhi. The boat soon vanished around a bend in the canal.

"Ha ha ha!" laughter came from behind the bush. Vandiya Devan jumped around in pretended surprise. The Sorcerer was standing behind the bush.

"Ghost! Ghost!" shouted Vandiya Devan as he ran into the forest towards Kodi Karai temple.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 9 -- Three In A Boat

Day broke. The dark beauty called Night parted reluctantly from her Lord Earth. Her hands moved away lingeringly; she had gave him a last lingering kiss and hesitated a while longer. Earth said, we shall meet again by eveningtime; merely hours of parting; go happily! She went slowly. When Night went away, Earth shook himself up, like a wanton lover and cried, Freedom! A thousand songbirds cried happiness. Buds on bushes and trees, opened their eyes. Bees gathered from somewhere, raising a sweet drone as they played with the opening petals. Multi-colored butterflies danced a ballet. Gold filled the eastern sky and stars slowly dimmed and went out, one by one. The crescent moon hesitated, should I stay or not?

The boat floated gently down the canal. Poonkuzlali heard the sound made by rowing oars, and woke up with a start. Her eyelids flew open like two dark petaled buds unfolding on the same branch. The Prince by her side appeared to be still asleep. Sleep? Or, was he still drowsy with fever? Even in illness how charming he looks!

Sendan Amudan was rowing. "Why did you wake up, Poonkuzlali? You could have slept some more!"

She smiled; not merely with her lips but with every inch of her body. Poonkuzlali was born and raised in the forest. Even so, birdsong and daybreak had never appeared so joyous to her.

"Cousin sing a melody in the morning raaga," she said.

"Why would I open my mouth when you are here? You sing!" replied Sendan Amudan.

"You sang last night in the dark forest."

"Because of a reason. Now, you sing."

"I would like to. But, it might disturb the Prince."

"I won't be disturbed. Both of you sing together," said Arulmozli Varma.

Poonkuzlali turned away bashfully. "Where are we going?" asked Arulmozli.

"To Choodamani Vihara in Nagai Port."

"So, I was not dreaming last night!"

"Yes Sir. He is my cousin, who brought the message from your sister."

"What did the Younger Pirati say? Did my sister send word for me to join the monastery?"

Sendan Amudan did not know how to reply to this query when they were startled by a horse's hoofbeats on the bank. The Prince did not appear concerned. He asked, "Where is my friend, Lord Vandiya Devan of Vallam?" As if tired by this speech he closed his eyes once again.

Vandiyā Devan appeared on the bank, seated on a horse. The boat stopped and he dismounted. "Nothing in particular, I came to see if you were safe. There should be no danger from here."

"What about the Sorcerer?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"He has no suspicion that the Prince is in this boat. He believed everything I said."

"Did you see him?"

"Yes; but, I pretended that I had seen a ghost."

"I have never seen a fellow who utters lies like you!" said Sendan Amudan.

"Not lies; imagination! How is the Prince?"

"He wakes up every now and then and speaks a few words; then becomes unconscious again."

"That is the nature of this sickness."

"For how many days will this last?"

"Sometimes for months. Take him safely to the monastery. The monks may be able to cure him in a couple of weeks. Poonkuzlali I leave him in your care! Your cousin will wander away singing psalms, if he spies any temple tower."

"I am not likely to do any such thing. After I made your acquaintance, I have lost interest in devout service!" retorted Sendan Amudan.

"Is it because of me or because of this girl?"

Sendan Amudan pretended not to hear, "Did you find the horse where I said it would be?"

"The horse found me! This is the same horse that I had left with you in Tanjore."

"Yes."

"In that darkness in the forest, it recognized me and neighed. Amudan, I learned one thing when I was taken prisoner by those Arab pirates. It is a sin to ride horses without shoeing them. We must bind their hoofs with iron shoes. I am going to get this horse shod in the first iron smithy I come across. Anyway, there is no time to discuss all this. I do not know if I will meet you all again. When the Prince wakes, tell him that I am going to Pazlayarai and that I would send word from there as soon as possible."

Vandiya Devan turned the horse and rode away. The canal meandered through groves of fragrant thaazlai cactus. Golden ivory sheaths of the flower were strewn everywhere, intoxicating the air with their fragrance. Punnai trees grew up to the water's edge. Kadamba groves encroached at other spots. The white and red flowers of these trees carpeted the shore. To Poonkuzlali, it was like the path leading to heaven. Every now and then, they came across a village. Sendan Amudan went into these villages and brought back milk for the Prince and food for Poonkuzlali.

Poonkuzlali tried to move away whenever the Prince woke up. She was unable to face him; her eyes wandered everywhere but towards him. But, when he was asleep, her gaze did not move from his face. She talked of various matters with Sendan Amudan. Sometimes they sang together. Whenever Sendan Amudan went away in search of food, she smoothed the Prince's brow and tidied his curls; she was in some unearthly euphoria. She felt that she had done this for several previous births. A million birds flew with noisy wingbeats in her heart.

They were on that canal for one whole day and one whole night. Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali took turns to sleep and row the boat. On the second day when dawn was turning the skies golden, they neared Nagapattinam. The canal forked at this point and one branch went directly into the back courtyard of Choodamani Vihara. They guided the boat into that arm and went into the monastery. All three stepped out of the boat and stood on the steps going into the monastery.

At that time, some confusion was reigning in that famous Choodamani Vihara. A noisy crowd seemed to have gathered on the street, in front. Monks were running here and there hurriedly, in a panic. The inner courtyard near the canal was unusually empty of people. Sendan Amudan decided to step into the monastery and find out the cause for the confusion.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 10 -- Choodamani Vihara

After the sea had flooded Poompuhar which was also known as Kaviri-pattinam, Nagapattinam or Nagai grew in importance as the most important port city on the Chozla coast. Many foreigners were eager to trade with the Chozlas of the fertile Cauvery delta.

Goods were being brought by large, wooden, sailing ships. In addition to the pearls, jewels, coins, perfumes and iron-work, Arab horses were also imported.

Pleasing to the eyes are balconied mansions filling long streets,

Of the Port Town of Nagai where the Lord dwells.

Sundara Murti of Aaroor, described Nagai as a great town filled with multi-storied mansions. The Saint prayed to Lord Kayarogana Shiva asking for, in addition to gold and wealth, one high-bred horse. Having obtained these, he went back to Thiru-aaroor, says the Periyapuram, an ancient literary work in Tamil.

The Nambi of Aaroor did go that day to Nagai Port and sing,

For much gold and gem encrusted silks, and a quiet, well-bred horse.

Perhaps the Saint had a wish to go riding after he had seen the beautiful Arab horses being unloaded at the port. In addition to the literary references, there are several historical references such as stone carved edicts and copper-plate edicts about Nagai Port or Nagapattinam.

The famous Aana-mangalam copper-plates describe the port as large city filled with many temples, rest houses, water tanks and mansion lined streets. These same copper plates describe the famous Buddhist temple named Choodamani Vihara and give details about its history.

Modern day Malaysia was well known in those days as the Sri-vijaya Empire. Monarchs of the Sailendra dynasty ruled Sri-vijaya for several centuries from their famous capital city of Kaadaram. One of the most famous of these Sri-vijaya Emperors was named as Makaradwaja Choodamani Varman. Aana-mangalam copper-plates praise this monarch: An expert in political cunning; in wisdom a veritable Jupiter, the teacher of Gods; a patron of the learned like a sun to blooming lotus flowers; a giver without limit to those who sought alms. The copper-plates say that this famous king's son Maran Vijaya-thungan built the Great Meru-mountain like Choodamani Vihara at Nagai Pattinam in memory of his father.

Our readers may wonder why this foreign king came to build something in memory of his father in a Tamil port. The Tamil nations, particularly the seafaring Chozla's had a long standing trade relationship with the Sri-vijaya Empire. Many nationals from Sri-vijaya had come to settle in Nagapattinam. Others journeyed back and forth several times. The people of Kaadaram were followers of the Buddhist faith. That is why their king built a temple for them in Nagapattinam so that the emigrants could practice their faith. Moreover, the sub-continent was homeland to Buddhism. Tamil kings were usually tolerant of different faiths. They readily gave permission to build the Buddhist temple and monastery at their port. In addition, they supported this religious order by often giving grants and tax-free subsidies.

Several years after the times of this story, Emperor Raja Raja Chozla gave the village of Aana-mangalam and all its land and its produce as grant without any levy, completely free of all taxes, to Choodamani Vihara of Nagapattinam. This land grant was reconfirmed by a copper-plate edict by Raja Raja's son, Rajendra the First. This edict is enscripted in the famous Aana-mangalam copper plates, of such interest to scholars of

historical research. In all, they are twentyone leaves of copper, each being fourteen inches in length and five inches in width, bound together by a large copper ring. These plates are now housed in the museum of Leiden City in Holland. Some scholars refer to these as Leiden Edicts.

Chozla monarchs were devout followers of the Saiva faith. Raja-aditya, Paranthaka I and Gandara Aditya were devout Saivas who had built several Shiva Temples. But, they were tolerant of all the other faiths in the countries they ruled. Sundara Chozla even went one step further. He gave special privileges to Buddhist monasteries in his kingdom. Buddhists under Chozla rule were very content in those times. They were even more happy when Arulmozli had given orders to rebuild the Buddhist temples and Vihara's in Lanka.

In such a situation, why was there such a noise and confusion in front of the monastery at Nagapattinam on that day? Why were the monks so agitated? What was that noisy crowd on the front steps?

Not finding anyone in the canal courtyard, Sendan Amudan tried to find some help and wandered to the front steps of the building. The front courtyard enclosed a "Chaitya" or temple of Lord Buddha where lay public came to worship. Many had come that morning, with platters laden with lotus, champaka, jasmine and other flowers and fruit to offer worship. But they had apparently forgotten their purpose; monks stood on the steps crowding their way. A fellow standing in the courtyard was saying something with much waving of arms. The monks seemed to have tear laden eyes as they said, "Peace! peace!" The public was also lamenting with various cries of "Oh dear! What a fate!"

Sendan Amudan understood what was happening after he had listened for some time. The man gesticulating on the plaza was a seaman from Parthiban Pallava's ship which had come into port last night. When the sailors had gone ashore, they spread the news about the Prince being taken by the sea. The news had spread like wildfire all over town. The Abbot of the monastery had called for one of the men to hear the truth about the rumor. The seaman said, "The Prince jumped into the sea when the whirlwind was strongest. After that, he never came back!" The crowd roared with a sobbing cry on hearing this. Tears streamed down the faces of the Abbot and other monks. The chief monk turned away silently and climbed the steps to the Vihara. Other monks followed and Sendan Amudan mingled with them.

The Abbot was saying, "Is this the grace of Lord Buddha? Oh! I had various dreams..... When I met the Emperor in Tanjore recently, I spoke to him of the wondrous deeds of the young Prince in Lanka. Princess Kundavai was there listening to me. Later, when I had an audience with her, she promised to provide funds to build an infirmary attached to our monastery so that we could be of more service to the people in this town. She had said, 'Sire, there are all kinds of rumors afoot in the nation. Perhaps, the young Prince might have to seek asylum in your monastery. Can you safeguard him for a while?' She asked. I had agreed readily, saying that it was our fortune to guard such a gracious Prince. I promised to guard him as mine own eyelids guard my eyes! What is the use now? The Prince is drowned. The dreams of all good folk is shattered. The Chozla Empire is in ruin. Why was the Ocean King so cruel?" lamented the old monk.

The others were weeping silent tears. Sendan Amudan tried to make a path to get closer to the Abbot, when they noticed him, a lay-man amidst them. "Who is he? How did he come into our monastery?" they wondered.

"Sire, my name is Sendan Amudan. I need to speak privately with the Abbot," he said.

"There are no secrets among us monks. Speak!" ordered the Abbot.

"Sire, I have brought a patient."

"A patient? What sickness? Where have you left the patient?" asked the Abbot.

"In the canal court Sire...."

"How did you get in there?"

"We brought the patient by the canal. He has the shivering sickness. Can you come immediately....."

"Oh, Gracious Lord, the shivering fever is contagious! Why did you bring that person into our dwelling? And in such troubled times too...."

"Sire, I thought that Emperor Ashoka was of the Buddhist faith. Now, I realize I was wrong...."

"Why do you say that?"

"I have seen one of Emperor Ashoka's pillars near Kanchi. The edict on that pillar proclaims that one of the first duties of a good Buddhist is to care for the sick. But, you are reluctant to have us here...." said Sendan Amudan.

The monks began to whisper amongst themselves. The Abbot said, "All of you remain patient here itself. I will go and find out about this sick person. Come with me young man!"

When the Abbot saw a young maid and youth standing in the middle of the canal courtyard, he was shocked. "What have you dared? Women cannot enter this monastery. Even the nuns of our order have their separate premises..." on going closer, he recognized the youth. Shock, amazement, happiness mingled on his usually serene face.

"It is Prince Arulmozli Varma, is it not?"

The Prince began to reply, "No, Sire, no. I am no Prince. This youth and this maid are trying to dupe me. I am a boatman. I just asked this girl if she would marry me so that we could sail to distant lands. She began to babble nonsense saying that I was born to rule the world. She cannot marry me because she is of humble fisherfolk. All she seeks is my happiness. She will be content to hear about my great deeds of the future! What kind of a reply is that? Am I really going insane, or is she?"

Sendan Amudan was already whispering into the Abbot's ears that the Prince was in a feverish delirium. The Abbot also had recognized it within a few seconds. He remembered the promise he had given Kundavai about giving sanctuary to any of her brothers.

He beckoned the other monks, "This youth really has the shivering sickness. If we send him away, it will spread to thousands of others. Many have died of this fever in Lanka. I

shall take this man to my private chambers and care for him myself. He might babble nonsense while in the grip of fever. I wish that none of you should remark upon that."

The monk then came and held the Prince with a hand around the shoulder from one side. Sendan Amudan held him on the other side, as they walked up the few steps into the monastery.

Within fleeting moments, they had climbed the steps; the great door was opened and they entered without a backward glance. Sendan Amudan was asked to remain outside, while the Abbot said something to him. When the monks were inside, the doors closed shut with a bang that echoed in Poonkuzlali's heart.

I may never see him again in this life. Will I have another life in this earth and these times? Would I have the fortune to be of service to him? With such thoughts she stood gazing at the door through which Arulmozli had gone away.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 11 -- Iron Smithy

Vandiya Devan spurred his horse towards Pazlayarai. He remembered the way from his earlier journey, so he did not have to ask anyone for directions; he rode roughly in the general direction towards that city. The horse found it difficult in the rough terrain of the forest. He was also very very tired. It had been several days since he had slept well; he had caught a few naps as he sat nodding in some spot or other -- a good bed and comfortable sleep -- they were things almost forgotten.

Once I reach Pazlayarai, once I have given all the news to the Princess, my duty is done. And then, blissful sleep for a long time, to make up for all the lost sleep. How her face would brighten, when I give her the good news, that I have successfully completed the task she assigned me! What elation I would feel when I see her face blossom with happiness!

In the midst of such happy thoughts, he remembered something else. How many lies and fibs he had fabricated, from the day he set out from Kanchi City? He did it because of need; still, he felt ashamed when he thought of those lies. His whole attitude to life had changed since he made the acquaintance of Prince Arulmozli. He had presumed that those involved in politics should be full of artifice and cunning. He had hoped to regain his lost lands by the use of such ploys. But now, he had completely changed his mind: Prince Arulmozli's principles, his adherence to law and justice, his valor and bravery -- these had given him a distaste for lies and deceit.

I spoke such atrocities in the hearing of that Sorcerer, thinking that I was helping the Prince! I hope it would not lead to some unwanted calamity. What if somebody else had heard me say those things? What if they tell Princess Kundavai before I see her? She will not believe them, of course! Still! What a tangled mess! I should never again make up such stories full of untruth and falsehood. If the situation is difficult, I should manage somehow without uttering lies. Let Azlvar-adiyan and Ravidasa continue with spying and deceit. Why should I do such things? I must earn my glory with my sword and bravery! That is the way! Not craftiness and cunning....

Lost in such thoughts, he had not noticed that the horse had slowed its pace considerably. In fact, he had even nodded off for some minutes. The horse stumbled badly and he woke with a start. The horse seemed to have some difficulty in placing one of its forelegs on the ground. He dismounted and examined that foot. A small, sharp, stone had lodged itself in the hoof of that leg. He plucked it out. Fortunately, no great harm was done. He patted the horse and comforted it before mounting once again. He remembered what the Arabs on the ship had mentioned; the Tamils are a vile, barbaric and stupid race! They do not clad their horse's hoofs but ride them mercilessly. How long could such horses last? It would be better to not sell them any horses.

Vandiya Devan thought about their words. Soldiers entering the battlefield wear armor. Cladding a horse's feet with armor is something new! But, I have heard that other people in other countries do it. I must make enquiries about this at the first iron smithy I see. Perhaps, I should get some such armor for this horse itself. Fortunately, in spite of the storm and near drowning, in spite of all my travails at sea, my waist belt and scabbard did not come loose and I have not lost any of the gold in my pouch. If I do not do something about this horse, I will not be able to reach Pazlayarai. If this beast falls, how am I to procure another horse? Steal one? Never again!

He turned the horse away from the forest trail and soon reached a royal road. Whatever happens, I must take this well-kept road. Hopefully, no one in these parts will recognize me. Lord Pazluvoor and his men will surely come this way, but much later. The same thing goes for the Sorcerer and his men. They are not likely to reach these places so quickly. I am safe for a while. Moreover, I am likely to find a smithy only if I take this road. Let me see....

His expectations were not wasted. After a while he saw a wayside village and turned his horse towards the village street. There seemed to be some confusion in that small village. On the one hand, the people had decorated their houses with fresh bunting and new kolam on their front porches. Perhaps they were planning a reception for Lord Pazluvoor and his retinue. I must go away as far as possible before he arrives. On the other hand, the villagers -- men, women and children -- had gathered in small groups here and there, talking in an agitated fashion about something. What was worrying these people? Some of them saw the horse and rider and tried to come closer.

Vandiya Devan decided not to stop; he did not wish to embroil himself in some local problem; so, he galloped quickly through the street and went past the village. Once past the village limits, he saw an iron smithy by the wayside. He had no heart to go past that shop. He reined in the horse and dismounted in front of the smithy. Leaving the horse outside, he walked into the shop.

The smith was at work inside the smithy. A young boy was working the bellows and stoking the furnace fire. When he entered, Vandiya Devan thought that he saw some fellow leave hurriedly through the back door of that smithy. But, he did not dwell upon that: all his thought and attention was riveted to a beautiful sword upon which the smith was working.

It was a very unusual and curious sword. The smith seemed to be cleaning or sharpening it. The sword's hilt and handle were shining brightly like polished silver; it's long,

tapering length was glowing amber red. Perhaps, he had just pulled it out from the fire. "Oh what a beautiful, marvelous sword!" thought Vandiya Devan.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 12 -- "Feed Him To The Furnace!"

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The Iron-smith was busy with his work for a while. He looked up after Vandiya Devan cleared his throat three or four times. "Who are you Sir? What do you want? A spear? A sword? But, where is the need for spears and swords these days? Why would you have come for some such thing!"

"Why do you say that Ayya? You hold a sword in your own hands and speak in this fashion!"

"Oh, this is some rare job that I have got. They brought this old sword for cleaning. Oh yes! Some years ago when the Pandiya War and the North Pennar War were going on, my smithy was full of all sorts of weapons. There was demand for armor and weapon even recently when the Lankan war began. But now, no one has a need for any such stuff. They come to me to sell their old swords and shields. Perhaps, you too wish to do that?" asked the Iron-smith.

"No. I need my swords for some more time. Once my given assignment is done, I might pick up cymbals and wander from town to town, a mendicant singing devotional songs. Then, I might and give up my weapons to you."

"Then, why did you come in search of me now?"

"I have been riding my horse over rough terrain, rocky jungle and sandy riverbeds. And I have far to go. I have heard about cladding horse's hoofs with iron armor. Can you do that?"

"Yes; it is a practice among the Arabs and the Yavanas. Even here, some have started cladding their horses with iron shoes. I have some experience in that type of work."

"Can you make shoes for my horse?"

"It will take time. I can start your work only when this job on hand is done."

Vandiya Devan pondered upon this. He was tired and his horse was tired too. Maybe, it is better to wait a while and get the horse shoed before resuming my journey. "I can wait till your job on hand is done. Can you take up my job immediately after that?" he asked.

"Sure; I can."

Vandiya Devan stood for a while watching the Iron-smith work the sword. "This sword seems to have rare workmanship; The jewelled hilt proclaims it to be a royal weapon. Whose sword is this?"

"Thambi, a little far from here, there is a stream called River Arichandra."

"Yes, I know that river."

"It is my practice to go there and bathe in that river quite often. You must know that King Arichandra of the myths never uttered a lie."

"A good practice; it will surely help you in your afterlife, so what?"

"So, I have made a vow, that I would speak the truth as far as possible; never tell a falsehood."

"Who objected? Did I ask you to lie?"

"If you do not ask me any questions about this sword, I would not have to speak untruth."

Oh is that it! "Fine, I shall not ask questions and you need not forego your vows. Please finish the job as quickly as possible and take up my horse."

The Iron-smith continued with his work. Vandiya Devan stared at the sword. A stylized figure of a fish was emblazoned on that sword near its hilt. Why the fish symbol? Does it mean anything or is it merely a decoration? The Iron-smith used his tongs and lifted the sword, holding its hilt in the fire, till it was red-hot. Then he began beating upon the engraving with a flat hammer. He seemed to be intent on erasing the engraving. Why was he doing that?

Even as he was thinking about this new mystery, Vandiya Devan felt his eyes grow heavy with sleep. He had chased away the Goddess of Sleep for several days. She was no longer patient; her enticing arms were now holding him in a grip. The warmth of the furnace and steady sounds in the smithy made him sleepy. He sat down in the corner and was soon curled up in deep sleep, next to the furnace.

He dreamed of various things. One dream was about that beautiful, royal-sword. A man came back and asked the Iron-smith to give back the sword. The Smith gave it to him. 'What should you be paid?' asked the man. 'I do not wish for any payment. Let this be my tribute to the Queen of Pazluvoor,' said the Iron-smith.

'Be careful, no one should know anything about this. Particularly, do not mention the Young Queen's name. If you reveal anything, do you know what we will do to you?' asked that fellow.

'Why should I speak of her to anyone? I will not mention anything to anyone.'

'There, some fellow is sleeping near the furnace and you talk so loudly. Who is he?'

'He is deep in sleep; even a thunderbolt will not wake him.'

'Just in case, if he happens to know anything, do not hesitate to throw him into the furnace!'

After this conversation, the Iron-smith and the sword-owner began to drag him to the furnace. At that point, the dream changed. Messengers of death had dragged him to the presence of Yama, the Lord of Death. Yama asked about Vandiya Devan's activities on earth. The clerk of death, Chitra Gupta, looked at the death book in his hand and said, 'He was an expert in uttering lies and deception. There is no tally of the lies he has spoken!'

'No! No, I did that in service to the royal family of my Emperor. I had to complete my assigned task,' wailed Vandiya Devan.

`Whatever the reason, a lie is a lie. Throw him into the fiery furnace of hell!' ordered Yama. A thousand jackals and hyenas howled in approval. Death's messengers were leading him to the fire of hell. He looked at their faces and recognized them as the two brothers of Pazluvoor! Kundavai suddenly appeared before them, `He spoke those lies to fulfil my orders. Punish me in his stead!' she said. Somehow, Lady Nandini was also standing there; `Throw them both into the fire!' ordered that blessed woman. They were about to throw them both into the fire. "No! No!" screamed Vandiya Devan.

The dreams were so frightening that he woke up in a sweat. Though consoled that he was merely experiencing some nightmare, his body continued to shiver. Oh Dear! I should never utter any more lies! "Have I been asleep for a long time?" he asked the Smith.

"Not too long! Just a couple of jaamams. Only about six hours! Thambi, are you a descendent of Kumbakarna who slept through half his life? How can you sleep like this in broad daylight? How you must sleep at night time!"

"Gracious God! I have been sleeping for such a long time! Have you fitted shoes on my horse?"

"Not yet. What is the use of doing something for a sleepyhead like you? You are likely to loose the horse, or even your own self!"

Vandiya Devan was stunned; a sudden suspicion made him run outside the shop, to look for his horse. The horse was not there where he had left it! "Where is the horse?" he shouted, as he came running, with a hand pulling out his sword.

"Don't worry. Your horse is safe. Go look in the back yard," assured the Iron-smith.

Vandiya Devan walked to the back yard and looked. His horse was standing in a stall, roofed and enclosed on three sides with bamboo matting. The young boy who had been working the bellows was trying to feed some grass to the horse. The horse neighed in content when it saw Vandiya Devan. The boy said, "Sir, can you come and hold your horse a bit? I have to take measurements of its feet."

Vandiya Devan came and patted his horse and smoothed its mane. The boy took measurements. "Who led my horse here?"

"I did," said the boy.

"Why?"

"My father asked me to."

"Do you know why?"

"Lord Pazluvoor and his retainers went through our village some time ago. If they had seen your horse standing outside the smithy, those men would have surely seized it and taken it away."

Vandiya Devan remembered the old incident, near Lake Veera-narayana and Kadamboor. He was grateful to the smith and his son. Boy and man, both walked back to the shop. The Iron-smith was working on a piece of iron bending it to form a horse shoe.

"Thank you for safeguarding my horse," said Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

"It is my duty to safeguard the belongings of those who do business with me."

"How long is it since Lord Pazluvoor's entourage went past this town?"

"About an hour. And you slept through all that commotion; that is the most surprising part of it all!"

"That's right! I was asleep; but, you have wasted all this time too! You could have started on the shoes, at least after those men had gone past!"

"How could I have begun to work? Who will feel like working after hearing the news they brought? I steadied my heart for your sake and began to work. Thambi, where are you coming from?"

Vandiya Devan speculated about the news they might have brought, "I am coming from Lanka."

The Iron-smith examined him from top to toe. He lowered his voice and asked, "In Lanka, did you chance to see the Younger Prince, Ponninyin Selvan?"

"I saw him," said Vandiya Devan who had resolved to speak nothing but the truth.

"When did you see him last?"

"This morning."

"Are you teasing me, Thambi?" asked the Iron-smith angrily.

"No, Ayya, I speak the truth."

"Can you say where the Prince is, right now?"

"Yes; if you ask, I can say it."

"Where is the Prince? Tell me if you can!"

"At Choodamani Vihara, in Nagapattinam."

"Thambi, I have met many liars and knaves; but none who make up stories like you!"

Vandiya Devan laughed to himself. Everyone readily believes the imaginary stories that I make up; none want to accept if I utter the truth! That is the nature of my fate!

"When did you leave Lanka?"

"Four days ago."

"That is why, you do not know!"

"What do I not know?"

"The sea had claimed Lord Ponninyin Selvan. That is the news."

Vandiya Devan said with pretended shock, "Is that so? Who said that?"

"That has been the rumor since yesterday, in these parts. When Lord Pazluvoor came today, our village elders confirmed the news from him. May a thunderbolt strike that wicked nobleman's head."

"Why do you curse that old man?"

"This happened because of him. Our village folk say that he conspired some trick and drowned him at sea. We cancelled the reception we had readied for him."

"Are your villagers that fond of Ponniyin Selvan?"

"Do you have to ask? All our people are in tears! Why merely our town? All of the Chozla country is going to wail and curse the nobles of Pazluvoor. Already, our Emperor is unwell; how will he bear the shock of this news? Who knows what other adversity is about to strike? The comet on the skies surely portends evil that cannot be overcome!"

Vandiya Devan pondered upon the calamities that might strike. It is lucky that this man did not believe the truth I spoke. I do not have to speak the truth even if I do not utter lies. Princess Kundavai must have asked that he be taken to Choodamani Vihara because of some important reason. I must do according to her wishes after consulting with her.

"Thambi, what are you thinking about?" asked the Smith.

"I too was caught in that whirlwind at sea. I survived with God's grace. I am thanking him for that."

"Is there any such thing as God's grace?"

"Ayya! Why do you speak so bitterly?"

"If God really has any mercy, will the nobles of Pazluvoor continue with such atrocities? Would the Prince have really drowned?"

"Pazluvoor noblemen are powerful. Can we speak in this fashion about them? What if someone hears? Be careful Sir!"

"You have to be more careful than me! At least, I speak when I am awake. You prattle in your sleep!"

"Oh dear! What did I prattle?"

"You called the Pazluvoor nobles as Death's messengers. You said Pazluvoor's Young Queen was a female ghoul. Of course what you said may be true. But, what if any other than I, had heard you say such things? It was when you were prattling such nonsense that Lord Pazluvoor's retinue was passing through this street. I was petrified."

"What did you do?"

"I went and stood outside and closed the door to my smithy. My son had already taken your horse to the backyard."

"Did I say anything else in my sleep?"

"No dearth of your rambling!"

"Oh My Lord!"

"You were insisting that some Prince should go to Pazlayarai. He wanted to obey the orders of Pazluvoor nobles and be arrested. You mumbled all sorts of things. You even said something about the Younger Pirati at Pazlayarai. Be careful, Thambi, be careful."

Vandiya Devan was ashamed. Did I drivel anything dishonorable about her? Henceforth, if I must sleep, I must find some private room or some deserted jungle. The Smith was

continuing to work as he asked, "Thambi, how did you get caught in the whirlwind? How did you manage to save yourself?"

"A thunderbolt struck the ship on which I was standing. Its mast caught fire and the ship burned down. I was floating on the sea for a long time, clinging to the broken masthead. Some boat girl rescued me and brought me ashore."

"Perhaps the Prince was also rescued in a similar fashion?"

"If God's will was so, he could have been saved."

"Where were you last night?"

"At Kodi Karai. Pazluvoor men were crowding around the lighthouse and the beaches. So I slept for some time in the corridors of Kuzlagar Temple and left before daybreak."

"That is why you did not hear the news about our Prince."

"Thank you for letting me know. Sir, I have to reach Pazlayarai as quickly as possible, preferably without being seen by Pazluvoor men. Which is the best way to take?"

"Lord Pazluvoor and his men are taking the royal roadway. If you go along the banks of River Mullai, you can soon reach Pazlayarai."

"It would be good if you can finish the shoes for my horse as quickly as possible."

"Sure." He began beating the red-hot pieces of iron, bending them into shoes, saying, "This is for Lord Pazluvoor, this is for Sambuvaraya, this is upon Lord Mazluvoor's head!" as he struck the metal on the anvil with his hammer. Vandiya Devan recognized the anger felt by common folk against the powerful noblemen. Soon, shoes had been fitted on the horse's hoofs. Vandiya Devan tried to pay some cash for the well done job; but, the man refused payment. "I did it because you seemed like a nice fellow; I did not do this expecting payment."

Vandiya Devan thanked the man once again and was about to leave when the Iron-smith said, "Thambi, why are you going to Pazlayarai?"

"Sir, if you do not ask me any questions about that, I will not have to speak any lies."

The iron-smith laughed, "Young Man! You learn quickly! Be careful like this even when you sleep!"

The sun was already setting when Vandiya Devan resumed his journey. Soon, dusk would cover everything in darkness. He reached the banks of River Mullai easily. Now he had to follow the river all the way to Pazlayarai, no need to ask directions of anyone. It was an early night; the skies were bright with twinkling stars. There were not many trees along the banks of River Mullai. Small bushes were scattered here and there on sandy open meadows. The starlight was enough to find a way easily. Thousands of fireflies competed with the heavenly stars as they buzzed above the bushes.

Sudden elation filled Vandiya Devan's heart. When the whole world was drowned in sorrow about the Prince's untimely death, he alone knew that it was not true; the Prince was safe. He had come to realize how popular Ponniyin Selvan was, not only in Lanka but also on the Mainland. He was happy also because he had outwitted Ravidasa the Sorcerer once again. More than anything else, he was going to meet Kundavai again. This filled him

with joy. He was proud of his achievements: the assigned task was finished; successfully; in spite of all the obstacles! By evening tomorrow, I shall be with her!

The gentle river breeze, the softly lapping sounds of running water, a starlit sky and the buzzing fireflies somehow enthralled him. Everything seemed to fill with happiness. He remembered an old love song he had learned. This was the best place to sing that song, loudly, for there was no sign of any living being anywhere around. Even forest birds were gone to their nests... Need we say who that song was meant for?

Stars in the sky shimmer in modesty;

Stopping still, lost in amazement;

Looking at you,

Oh doe-like maid!

Honey sweet thine voice;

A cooling breeze thy speech;

A glimpse of thine eyes that dart like fish,

Why do they fill me with this enchanted passion ?

Even before he had finished, jackals in the distance began to compete with him, setting up a howling symphony! A man's hearty laugh mingled with those howls. Startled, Vandiya Devan turned his head, with his hand seeking his sword.

A figure emerged from the shadows of a Punnai tree.

"Thambi! Your song was wonderful; the chorus of jackals was even more wonderful!" said Thevaralan as he began to laugh once again.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 13 -- "Poison Arrows"

Vandiya Devan was stunned to see Thevaralan at that time in that place. He recalled Thevaralan's frenzied dance at Kaadamboor and the prophecies he had made at that time. He also remembered the frightening things that Thevaralan and his crony Ravidasa had spoken on the ship over the stormy sea. How much of it is true, how much is false? It would be difficult to confirm either way. One thing is sure: they are involved in some frightful, mysterious conspiracy. Oh why am I caught with one of them in this deserted place? Should I ride away quickly and escape?

In the far distance he saw a flame. A cremation ground where some human body was being fed to the funeral pyre... What wishes and dreams that body must have experienced when it was alive; what sorrow and happiness it must have felt? Within minutes all that will remain is a handful of ashes. Prince and pauper, everyone faces the same end! This thought flashed through Vandiya Devan's mind in seconds.

Fear vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Why should I fear this wicked masquerader? He has accosted me to say something. Let me find out what he wants to say. Maybe, he was the man who left the smithy in such a hurry. Perhaps that marvelous sword belongs

to him! The fish symbol was emblazoned near its hilt.... I might find out more if I talk to him.

Vandiya Devan slowed the pace of his horse which was finding it difficult to walk with unfamiliar shoes. He had no heart to hurry his horse. "Why Sir? How did you appear so suddenly over here?" asked Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan.

"I meant to ask that very question! We had bound you to the ship's mast and abandoned you at mid-sea. How did you escape and come here?" asked Thevaralan

"You think only you are familiar with magic? I too know some spells."

"Ah! I am very happy that you have faith in sorcery and magic. I found out by my magical powers that you would be alone, riding this way, at this time. I came here and waited for you"

"Why did you wait? What do you want from me?"

"Think about it. Or, find out by your magic."

"You shared your secrets with me out in the open sea. I do not know what part of it was true and what was not. However, I am determined to forget all those secrets. I will not repeat it to anyone...."

"I am not much concerned either. Even if you think of speaking about those secrets, your tongue will rot and fall off. You will become mute."

Vandiya Devan shivered. He thought of the mute women he had met at Tanjore and Lanka. Why is this fiend following me? What means have I to escape him? I wish there were quicksands here too, like at Kodi Karai. I could have buried him in a mudhole. Or, shall I drown him in this river? That will not work, this river is shallow. Perhaps, after all, I may have to use my sword...

"Thambi, I know what you are thinking. It will not succeed; do not try it."

Vandiya Devan needed time to think about a way to escape; he started a conversation, "Where is your friend, Ravidasa the Sorcerer?"

Thevaralan laughed, "You must know that. Where is Ravidasa?"

Vandiya Devan was dismayed; I should not have mentioned Ravidasa. This man might have met him; he might be testing me...

"Why Thambi? Why are you so quiet? Can't you tell me about Ravidasa? Forget him, what about that boat girl Poonkuzhali? Where is she? Tell me that at least." Vandiya Devan was stunned again, as if he had stepped on a snake; he was afraid even to open his mouth.

"So you will not say anything even about her. I know why you are trying to protect her. That love song you were singing just now, was it meant for her?"

"No. I promise it was not meant for her."

"Why this tension and passion?"

"I have no time to discuss such things with you. Let go of my horse; I have to go far and I am in a hurry."

"You have not asked why I wished to meet you."

"I can listen if you tell me."

"This river Mullai has some unique powers. Whoever makes a wish on its banks will find that wish fulfilled immediately."

"I had made no wish here."

"Wrong! She, about whom you were singing that love song, she wishes to meet you. If you like we can go to her."

"When?"

"Now itself".

"What tale is this?"

"It is no tale; look over there Thambi," pointed Thevaralan. Something was visible faintly in the distance. Vandiya Devan recognized it as a covered palanquin.

That palanquin... where had he seen it before? It looks like the palanquin of the Young Queen of Pazluvoor. Was Nandini in it? He was not able to control his eagerness to find out. He moved his horse near the palanquin and stopped. The curtains seemed to move and he dismounted. At the same instant, Thevaralan made a peculiar sound from his throat. About seven or eight men jumped out from the bushes around them. They fell upon Vandiya Devan and pinned him down. With ropes they bound his feet and hands. Another threw a cloth around his eyes and tied it, while his sword and knife were taken away. They threw him into that palanquin. Some men lifted the palanquin while others surrounded it forming a guard. One man walked the horse and they followed Thevaralan who led the way.

All this happened within minutes; almost within the blink of an eye. Vandiya Devan was overcome because so many men fell upon him so suddenly. He had never expected anything like this; in fact he could not even collect his thoughts till the palanquin had begun to move. The curtains were drawn shut and he could not find out what was happening.

Within a couple of minutes, his heart beat steadied and his thoughts were more collected. The cloth binding his eyes was loose; it was not difficult to wriggle free from it. He realized that they were crossing the river bed and going somewhere into the forest. It would not be too difficult to loosen the ropes binding his feet and hands. It would be quite easy to jump out of the palanquin. My horse is following, it would not be too hard to handle these men and gallop away. Should he do that? Something was preventing him from making a quick decision. Some strange fragrance seemed to pervade the interior of that palanquin. It made him feel euphoric; he had no desire to free himself from its clawing grip. Where are they taking me? It must be to Nandini.

Very soon, the slight desire to meet Nandini once again grew into an obsession in spite of the several objections his conscience raised. What can she do to me? Why has she asked for me? I am capable of fighting intrigue with counter intrigue. I will not get an opportunity easily to meet her again. I have no need to go back to Tanjore; in fact that city is dangerous for me. It is much better that I meet her like this on the wayside. Also

there is another reason for seeing Nandini once again. My feeling that the Mute Queen of Lanka looked like Nandini... was I correct or not? Even before he finished thinking such thoughts, Vandiya Devan realized that he was beginning to feel sleepy.

No; this is not sleep. I have slept long hours in the day. This fragrance in this palanquin is making me drowsy.... What new danger is this? I must jump out of this... He tried to wriggle his hands and free his bindings, but, could not move his fingers or legs. Eyes closed and he passed out into deep slumber.

When he regained consciousness, he remembered everything and tried to jump out of the palanquin... But, surprise of surprises: he was not in a palanquin. He was in a large bedchamber, well lit with several oil lamps. A different kind of fragrance filled the room; some sort of reviving incense. He sat up on the bed and looked around eagerly, noticing a door opening across the room.

Nandini entered through the open door and he looked at her without blinking an eyelid. Her beauty beyond description stunned him once again; meeting her suddenly like this.... the similarity between her face and that of the woman in Lanka. Perhaps it is the same woman well dressed like this, appearing here...

"Sir! You are a very good man!" said Nandini in a pleasant tinkling voice.

"Thanks."

"Is it the nature of good men to vanish without saying good bye? You disappeared from Tanjore without taking proper leave of me!" Vandiya Devan laughed.

"I helped you enter Tanjore Fort, giving you the Palmtree ring from my finger. You should have at least returned my signet ring."

He turned his head away in shame.

"Where? At least now, you could return it. Its use must be over. I am sure that you have no intentions to return to Tanjore." She stretched her hands towards him.

"My lady, Lanka's Commander, Lord Velir confiscated that ring. Forgive me. I cannot return it."

"You gave away my ring to my life long enemy! What a thankless man you are!"

"I did not give it willingly; it was confiscated from me."

"The bravest of warriors, born of the noble Vaanar family of Vallam, you were forced to do something against your will? I cannot believe that!"

"My lady, my presence here, at this time, like this, is it not by force? Your men..."

"Tell me the truth Sir. Look at my face and speak. Were you really forced to come here? Who prevented you from jumping out of the palanquin and running away? Did you not have the opportunity?" she asked, her words like poisoned arrows piercing his heart.

"Yes; I came willingly."

"Why did you come?"

"Why did you want me to come?"

"I wanted my ring back."

"Just that?"

"There is one other reason. That night, when you were in my husband's treasure vault." He could not hide the shock from his face. "You think I did not know? Goodness me! If I had not known, you could not have escaped with your life."

"Lady!"

"I knew, Lord Pazlavor knew. He ordered the footmen to kill you instantly there itself. I changed the order when he had gone away and you escaped, while your friend was left to face the danger. But for me, your skeleton would be decorating the pearl heaps in that vault."

Vandiya Devan was lost in a sea of surprise. He could not trust her to be speaking the truth. But, how did she guess that I was hiding in that vault? Perhaps, I should pretend to be thankful... "My Lady..."

"No. Do not speak things that you do not feel. Don't try to thank me."

"No, My lady," said Vandiya Devan with humility.

"Do you know why I mentioned about saving your life that day? Not because I expect thanks; because I warn you not to use that tunnel once again. There is a heavy guard at its entrance now Do you understand?"

"I have no intention to go back that way."

"Why would you? You have no thought for those who help you. Your friend was in danger because of you. I ordered him brought to my own palace and nursed his wounds before I sent him home. Are you happy about it? Or, is betrayal of friendship part of your character, just like the betrayal of trust?"

Each word uttered by Nandini pierced through his heart like a poisoned arrow. He was silenced by the pain they gave.

"Why don't you ask about that Doctor's son who came with you to Kodi Karai? You left him to be caught, and escaped out of the country? Don't you wish to know what happened to him?"

"I was going to ask."

"I'll tell you about him; but what about the Prince who left with you from Lanka? If you tell me about Arulmozli, I'll tell you about the Doctor."

A shock wave trembled through his body. She is torturing me like this to find out about the Prince. I should not be outwitted. "Queen, please do not question me about that matter."

"Yes, I must not question you about that! Even if I ask, you will not give a straight answer. How is your sweetheart? Tell me about her!"

Anger filled his eyes with fire. "Whom do you mean? Be careful!"

"Oh sure! I shall be quite careful. Don't dream that I mean that 'Empress' of Pazlayarai! She will not even look at you; she will treat you, an orphan, a pauper, like dust at her feet."

I mean that girl who took you to Lanka and brought you back. That boat girl, is she not your sweetheart?"

"No. It is not possible. She pointed out her lovers to me one night. She showed me the fiery ghouls that rise from the marshes and said that they were her lovers."

"She is lucky. Because her lovers are formed of light; appearing brightly before her eyes. My lovers are made of darkness; they are formless. Have you ever slept in a ruined jungle pavilion at midnight? Have you seen bats and owls fly silently, in the darkness of such abandoned buildings. Such soundless shadows haunt me constantly. They attack my heart and soul with their touchless wings. Their feathers caress my cheeks fleetingly. Where do those dark shadows come from? Where do they vanish? Why do they haunt me? Do you know Sir?" she began to stare around in a dazed fashion. Her eyes were without focus, deranged.

Even diamond hearted Vandiya Devan was touched. Pity on one hand and a meaningless fear on the other filled his mind. "My Lady! Don't! Please calm yourself!

"Who are you to ask me to calm myself?"

"I am a poor youth of the Vaanar clan. Who are you My Lady?" asked Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan

"You ask who am I? I do not know! I have been trying to find out. Who am I? A human being? A ghost? A ghoul? Are you asking that?"

"No, no, perhaps a heavenly nymph who lost her way, perhaps, come down to earth, cursed by divine beings..."

"Yes, there is some divine curse upon me. I do not know what it is or why. Who am I? Why was I born? But, God has given me an indication, a token. Look at this!" She then picked up a sword from a table by her and showed it to him. The newly cleaned and sharpened sword shimmered in the lamp light.

Vandiya Devan recognized the marvelous sword he had seen in the smithy. Nandini's poison arrows had thrown him in complete disarray. But, he steadied himself when he saw a real weapon made of polished iron. He was used to swords and spears from childhood, and had no fear of such weapons which had been his playthings. I don't care even if she tries to use that sword against me!

"My lady, I see a sword. A beautifully wrought sword. A jewelled sword meant for royalty. A sword to be handled by the bravest of men. Why is it in your delicate hands? Why did the divine ones give this token to you?" asked Vandiya Devan.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 14 -- A Flying Horse

Nandini hugged that shining sword, fondly, to her breast. Then she caressed it with her face, kissing it with her reddened lips. A dark lotus bud was kissing a tongue of blue-hot flame. Nandini's face was transformed: a pagan goddess worshipped by frightful Kaala-Mukha ascetics; a gory deity asking for human sacrifice. She dropped the sword on the table and her face became charming once again.

"Yes, this sword is the token given to me by the Gods. I do not know the meaning of this sign. I send this sword away to the smithy quite often to get it cleaned and sharpened. I guard it like a mother tiger guarding her cub. Wild buffalo with sharp horns should not mangle it before it attains manhood. I nurture this sword with as much affection as Arabs shower upon their horses. I take care of it just like Empress Vanama Devi cares for her sick husband, Emperor Sundara Chozla.

"But God has not yet shown me what I must do with this sword. Perhaps it is divine intention that I, with my hands used to weave garlands, must thrust this sword into some evil, wicked heart; or, maybe pierce my own heart and drench my beautifully dressed and jewelled body with the bubbling blood. I do not know. The divinities who gave me this word will soon let me know what must be done. Since I do not know when that time will come, I am prepared. Day and night, anytime, anyplace, I am ready. The country knows that Pazlavor's Young Queen, who is the most beautiful among women, is very fond of rich, fashionable clothes and jewels. I dress myself in all such raiment at all times and keep myself ready for the moment when the signal would come. Poor man, my husband! He happily thinks that I dress myself in this fashion and present myself with such dignity because of his position and prestige. He has no idea of the passion that burns in my heart."

Vandiya Devan who was engrossed in listening to this long speech spoke up suddenly, "My Lady, where is Lord Pazlavor?"

"Why? Are you afraid that you might meet that old man?" asked Nandini.

"No, My Lady. I am not afraid even to meet you. What fear do have for Lord Pazlavor?"

"Ah! That is the reason I like you so well. For some reason every one is afraid of me. Lord Pazlavor, who is such a brave soldier, who bears sixtyfour war wounds, he fears me. My brother-in-law, Younger Lord Pazlavor who is feared even by Death, shivers with fright in my presence. Madurandaka who wants to rule this empire approaches me with dread. Sundara Chozla who is already at Death's portals, shivers with paranoia if I go near him; sometimes he even falls down in a faint when he sees me! And that Pallava nobleman, Parthiban who came recently, I heard much about his courage and bravery. I knew him to be Aditya Karikala's undisputed confidant and friend. Do you know how he changed within a few minutes in my presence? He was completely enslaved. He totally forgot his mission to get back to his master and is following me to Tanjore. He is ready to obey my every wish and whim. Yet, even he hesitates to be alone with me.

"All this reminds me of a childhood experience. When I was very young, I was very fond of the forking tongues of flames in a fire. I would go very near the fire and stretch my fingers to grab the flame petals; and then pull my hands back hurriedly. I have done this several times. Parthiban Pallava's behavior towards me is like that: fascination that attracts and fear that repels. Why talk of him? That man whose letters you brought from Kanchi, that Prince, Aditya Karikala, he is the same. He was very fond of me even when we were children; but, love was seasoned with a foreboding anxiety. Oh! How our lives changed, because of that love and fear! Sir! When you met our Prince again, will you give him a message from me? Tell him that I said, 'I have forgotten all the past. Now, I am the Queen of Pazlavor, in relationship a grandmother to you. Do not be afraid to meet me.'

Tell him that I will not bite him and eat him. Will you give him that message?" asked Nandini.

"Lady, I am not sure if I will live to go back and meet Prince Aditya Karikala again. Even if I am fortunate to do so, there is much that I have to report to him. I cannot promise to remember and deliver your message. Please forgive me."

"Yes; among the men I have met you are the only one with courage. You speak without hiding your feelings. I like you very much because of this. Noble of Vallam, it is not my habit to meet many people. I do not ride in chariots and go out like the Princess of Pazlayarai. If I need to travel, I go by covered palanquin, with my drapes pulled close. I meet only those with whom I have some business. And those whom I meet are cowardly fools. They are afraid to speak their mind. You do not hide your thoughts...."

"I know there is no use in hiding anything; there can be no secret in any man's heart that cannot be uncovered by your keen eyes."

"It could be true, though I have not yet found the secrets in your heart. Anyway you asked about my husband; he and Parthiban Pallava have gone to the village square with our men to watch the Kannagi Play and Velan Aattam; they hope to find out something about the missing Prince from the oracle dancer. Fools, they do not find the person whom they must question, but go to consult soothsayers! They will be gone for a long time. That is why I asked my men to bring you to me. Sir! I ask you again. Do you know the truth about the missing Prince? Can you not share it with me?" asked Nandini in a very charming voice.

"No, My Lady. I cannot share it with you. I have made a resolve that I would not speak falsehood for any reason whatsoever. Today, I made a vow that I would speak truth as far as possible. I cannot tell you anything about the Prince. In fact I forgot my resolve just now and spoke an untruth. Forgive me!" Vandiya Devan was opening his waist pouch and taking out the ivory ring with the palm tree symbol etched on it.

"Madam, here is the ring you gave me. The Commander's men in Lanka did confiscate this. But, Lord Velir gave it back to me. Now, I return it to you; kindly take it back." He tried to give her the ring.

She looked at it carefully and recognized it as the ring she had given him. "Sir, it is not my practice to take back what I have given. I was merely testing you; and you have passed my test. I was saved from having you examined by my men. You may keep this ring in remembrance of me."

"Think about it My Lady. If I have it I may use it if needed."

"I don't care. You may use it as you wish. I'll ask my men to bind your eyes and take you back in my palanquin. They will take you back to the river bank."

"If I refuse to go in that fashion?"

"You cannot get out from this ruined fortress and palace. You will keep going in circles, coming back to the place you started from."

"Madam, this fort this ruined palace?"

"Long ago, this Chozla country was under the control of Pallavas. The Pallava kings built this fort and palace. Later the Pandiyas took over these lands. Pandiya kings came to live in this palace sometimes. During Vijaya Chozla's times, a big battle was fought near this place. The fortress was destroyed and the palace reduced to ruins. Forests encroached. We are in that old ruined palace now. This fort has many names -- some call it Pallava fort, others know it as Pandiya fort. There is truth in both names. But, only those who are very familiar with this area can find their way easily through the forest and ruined battlements. What do you want? Shall I ask my men to take you back or would you like to find your own way?"

"No, My Lady. I have no time to find my own way. Let them lead me back. But... before I go back..... Is there no other reason for your wanting to meet me? Is there anything that I can do for you? Tell me if I can do something."

"Fine; since you ask so kindly, I shall tell you. I want a flying horse. If you can, find one such horse for me."

"What? A Flying Horse?"

"Yes, A Flying Horse!"

"Do you mean a well bred horse that gallops very fast, as if it is flying?"

"No, no. I cannot even sit on a horse like that. I do not mean a horse that places its feet on the earth. I mean a horse that spreads its wings like a bird and flies across the skies. I have read in stories about such wondrous horses. I want one such flying horse."

"Why? Do you wish to fly to the heavens?"

"Do I look like someone who can get into heaven? I do not have that good fortune. I have committed too many vile sins."

"Have all those in heaven done good deeds? There too, they commit sins and then come down to this earth to atone for their mistakes. Once they repent, they go back to heaven."

"I have no wish to go to heaven. There is a desert in the Pandiya country. A bare rocky outcrop rises in the middle of that desert where not even a blade of grass grows. In that rocky mountain, there are some rough caves. Once upon a time, naked Jain Monks lived and meditated in those caves. Now, jackals and snakes have taken to those caves. I like those caves in the Pandiya desert much better than the pleasures of the heaven known as Amaravathi."

"Your wishes are amazing."

"I will go to that desert if I get my flying horse. From there to Lanka where people speak of mountain tops that crowd together, covered by trees that reach for the sky. People say that elephant herds roam those forests just like wild water-buffalo in this Chozla country. I will look at all those things. They speak of other mountains where snow never melts; they say that when the sun rises, those mountains shine like molten silver. I wish to fly on my horse to those mountains. They speak of deserts, thousand times larger than our Pandiya desert.

Those places are supposed to be like an ocean of white sand. At midday those places are supposed to burn like a furnace. I wish to be there at midday. And beyond that desert

they speak of a land and sea where the water is frozen for all the seasons, where man and beast can walk across the icy waters. I will go on my flying horse to that place...."

"I cannot procure a flying horse for you, My Lady. There are other easier ways of going to some of the places you have mentioned. If we take a good ship, we can reach Lanka in half a day, sailing ships can take"

"Sir, I know of such methods. But I am very afraid of the sea. I hate boats and ships. I am frightened when the boat rocks even when we cross our insignificant rivers. So your ideas are useless to me. You may go!" Nandini turned away abruptly.

"Don't you have anything else to say to me?" asked Vandiya Devan persistently.

"Nothing; but you seem to wish to speak of something. What is it?"

"I wish to ask one question; would you please give me a reply? Some days ago, were you Lanka?"

"No. I have never left the protection of Lord Pazlavoor's men or his palaces for any time. Why do you have that doubt?"

"Madam, some days ago in Lanka, I saw you. Or I saw an illusion like you. You have been talking about 'Flying Horses'; perhaps, you really possess something like that and came there to Lanka! But, you were not dressed like this, with silken clothes and decked in jewels and flowers. You wore a simple saelai, with no jewelry; your tresses were unkempt and unbound as you stood by the roadside. Was that woman you?"

"It was not me, Sir. Did that woman open her mouth and say anything?"

"No; she spoke a sign language. You have traffic with sorcerers. By the powers of sorcery, your spirit might have come there."

"What if that illusion was not my spirit or I?"

"She is a speechless mute whose face and figure is very similar to yours."

Nandini's eyes were focussed on something in the far distance. She sighed heavily. "Sir, you asked me if you could help me in any way, did you really mean it?"

"Yes"

"Then, do this for me. If you ever happen to see that woman again, take her and bring her to me. If that is impossible, take me to her."

Within half an hour, Vandiya Devan was back on the banks of the River Mullai. His horse was waiting for him. The men who led him there vanished in a second. Thevaralan had disappeared long ago. Vandiya Devan walked his horse slowly, and travelled all night long along the river. By the third part of night, the comet had risen in the low skies filling the horizon with its long tail. He wondered if that comet, which created such a fright in the hearts of common folk, really foretold a disaster; or, was it mere superstition. If it portends calamity, what kind of calamity?

And what about Nandini? And the thoughts that trouble her? He no longer felt the irritation or disgust he had felt about her in his first meetings with her. She has been troubled by some frightful sorrow; I feel nothing but pity for her. Though, what are her

real intentions? Her real story seems to be full of mystery. Her unearthly beauty is being aided by some mesmerizing power. I must not have any more dealings with her. It would have been much better if she had taken back her ring. Why did she refuse? Should I throw it away in this river?

He had no heart to discard something that might be useful in some later predicament! I'll throw it away after I reach Pazlayarai and after I have reported everything to Princess Kundavai. I am not going to undertake any more such dangerous missions.

By the last quarter of night, Venus rose in the sky. He had heard that it was not good fortune to travel against a rising Venus. He stopped the horse under a tree, dismounted and tied it to a branch. He laid himself down on the ground to catch some sleep

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 15 -- Kaalaa-mukha Ascetics

Red-gold rays of the rising sun fell piercingly on Vandiya Devan's face and woke him up. Sleep was gone though he did not feel like getting up. Opening his eyes, he looked around. In the distance two ascetics of frightful form were walking towards him. Their appearance --the matted locks piled high on the head, long flowing beards, a trident in one hand and a fire-pot in the other -- identified them as followers of the frightful Kaalaa-mukha faith, a fanatic sect of Saivism. He felt sorry that Azlvar-Adiyan was not present to start a wordy duel with them. He decided to pretend sleep till those ascetics had gone past. Even when he sensed them coming close and standing by his side, he did not open his eyes.

One of them cleared his throat trying to attract attention. "By Shiva's Grace! The youth seems to be a sleepyhead," said the ascetic.

"By Shiva's Grace! It will be good if we can find a young man like him for our cause," said the second ascetic.

"By Shiva's Grace! You are looking at his charming face and saying this. He is of no use to us. Very soon great danger will embrace him!" said the first man.

Vandiya Devan felt breathless; it was quite difficult to continue feigned sleep. If he woke up at that moment, his pretense would be revealed and he would not be able to listen to the rest of their conversation. They may explain the nature of the great danger that was to threaten him. Alas, his wish was not fulfilled.

"By Shiva's Grace! That is his fate. Let us go on!" They moved away. Vandiya Devan gave them some time to walk ahead and then sat up. Their words, "Great danger will embrace him" kept echoing in his mind.

*Kaalaa-mukhas came from the tradition of ancient Kapaalika ascetics of Saiva faith. They did not practice human sacrifice like the old Kapaalikas but followed all their other traditions. People believed that these Kaalaa-mukhas sat in cremation grounds and practiced frightful penances and therefore they had the ability to foretell the future; they were also believed to have the power to bestow curses on those who crossed their will. Most people were ready to please them and do their bidding so that they would not incur their curses. Chieftains and petty kings often endowed trusts and grants in temples and

rest houses, to provide free food and other alms for them. So far, Chozla monarchs alone refrained from encouraging this fanatic sect in any way.

Vandiya Devan was aware of all this. Let them say what they want; what new danger can threaten me now? He comforted himself with such thoughts and got ready to resume his journey. However, an anxiety to learn more about his future did not go away completely.

When he looked again, he saw them walking in the distance, near an old rest pavilion. There was an artificial hillock near that pavilion. It had a cave whose mouth was carved like an open mouthed lion. These artificial caves known as muzlai were used by old time Jain Monks for meditation. Now, Kaalaaa-mukhas had occupied those old Jain caves. Vandiya Devan decided to go there and talk to those ascetics. He left his horse tied to the tree and walked towards that Jain cave. As he approached silently, he could hear them talking.

"That youth was not pretending. He must have been really asleep."

"How are you sure?" asked the second ascetic.

"I have never met a person who was not eager to find out more if they were told, 'danger threatens you!' That is why I am sure."

"The youth seems very capable. If we take him into our cause, he would be very useful. What do you think?"

"Why worry about youth like him? In a few days, the very fellow that will ascend the Chozla throne, is going to join our order."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Who else? I mean Lord Madurandaka. Don't you know?"

"How can he? What bout the other two?"

"One is said to have drowned. The time of the other is narrowing down."

Vandiya Devan had no wish to listen to them any more. Neither did he want to talk to them. I must get to Pazlayarai as quickly as possible; report everything to the Younger Pirati and get back to Kanchi. My duty lies more with Lord Aditya Karikala than with anyone else. He is my liege lord and master. Danger seems to threaten him from everywhere; even Parthiban Pallava has fallen prey to Nandini's enchanting web. Who knows what danger will befall Adithya Karikala who is impatient and imprudent by nature. It is my duty to go back to him and guard him. I shouldn't be wasting time on the wayside like this.

He walked back quietly and got on his horse. He goaded it to gallop towards Pazlayarai. When he passed the Jain cave, he noticed the Kaalaa-mukhas peering at him. One face seemed familiar. He had no wish to tarry and find out.

He passed through several densely populated villages. The news about Ponniyin Selvan's drowning had not yet reached those parts. People went about their daily chores in a calm manner. So far so good. I must get to Pazlayarai before the news gets there. I must tell Kundavai everything before she hears news to the contrary. Something untoward will surely happen if she hears anything else. The younger Pirati will somehow manage, but,

that noble woman of Kodumbalur will surely give up her life! These thoughts made him impatient though the horse did not understand his hurry. The horse was not able to gallop with customary swiftness because it was not yet used to its new shoes. He was able to glimpse the gates of P`azlayarai Fort only an hour before sunset.

There I can see the Tower of the Durga Temple at the gates. How am I to gain entry into those gates? Several options flashed through his mind, to be discarded as useless. The palm tree signet will not work here. The guards are surely warned that a fellow would come with it. They will arrest him immediately and send him to Tanjore and the Lords of Pazlavor. I must not be arrested before I met Kundavai. With such thoughts, he slowed his horse to a walk, going towards the gate, when he noticed something.

A crowd was coming down a side road that joined the main road in front of the gates. Footmen bearing lances; others carrying banners and flags; a few men on horseback and amidst all of them a beautiful gilded chariot fashioned in the shape of an open lotus. Who is seated in that chariot? It looks like Prince Madurandaka! It is the same Prince who was seen in Kadamboor and in the treasure vault of Tanjore.

Vandiya Devan immediately thought of a ruse to enter the fort and felt enthused. He remembered the words of the Kaalaa-mukha ascetic, I have never met a person who was not eager to find out more if they were told, 'Danger threatens you!' Yes, even he was influenced by those words. Let me try that trick here. He goaded his horse to trot quickly towards that gilded lotus-chariot.

Madurandaka's men did not expect anyone to do something like that! So, before anyone could stop him, Vandiya Devan had come to stand beside the chariot. Vandiya Devan stood up on the stirrups and peered at the Prince then said, "O! Danger!" The next instant he fell tumbling to the ground. The horse sidestepped and moved away.

All this happened within a few seconds. The footmen had begun to draw their swords seeing the danger get close to their Prince; they sheathed their swords when they saw him fall and began to laugh at him. Prince Madurandaka also began to laugh. The chariot had already stopped. The Prince made a sign and two footmen went to help Vandiya Devan get up. He was already sitting up, and was able to stand without their help. He appeared unconcerned about his fall; instead he continued to stare at the Prince.

"Bring him closer," ordered the Prince.

The footmen led him closer even as he continued to gaze at Madurandaka's face.

"Who are you man?" asked Prince Madurandaka.

"I...I am me... My Lord Emperor! Don't you know me?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"What nonsense are you saying? Hey, you men! Move away!" ordered the Prince to his footmen, who moved away.

"Who did you think me to be?" asked Madurandaka.

"Forgive me Prince. I made a mistake and spoke. You, you... are not yet..." he seemed hesitant.

"Have you seen me before?" asked Madurandaka.

"Since yesterday I have resolved to speak nothing but the truth. Therefore, I am unable to say definitely."

"Oh! So you are a man who speaks truth since yesterday. What a joke!" laughed Madurandaka. "But, why are you not sure?"

"Who can be sure of anything these days? A person looks like another, one who was in a covered palanquin one day is in a chariot on another day..."

"What did you say?" asked Madurandaka somewhat shocked.

"Since one looks like another, I am not sure."

"Who am I like?"

"I have seen you twice. Or, someone like you. I am not sure if you are you or the person I had seen. That is why, just now, ... to find out, I ..." Vandiya Devan seemed even more unsure of himself.

"You stood up on the horse and peered at me to find out. Did you?"

"Yes, My Lord."

"What did you find out?"

"You could be the person I had seen. Or, you may not be that person."

Madurandaka's anger reflected on his face and words, "You are a rogue! You must be..."

"Prince, please do not be angered. I can tell you where I saw you, or the person like you. You can decide after that."

"Speak quickly.

"A large fort. Towering walls on all sides. Several brave men gathered together there. At midnight, they are arguing angrily, surrounded by the smoke from torches and oil lamps. A palanquin is near the wall. The leader of those men was being questioned. That leader became angry and he walked to the palanquin to pull the curtains apart. A handsome person stepped out of the palanquin. On seeing him, the brave men began to raise cheers. 'Long Life!' 'Long life to the Crown Prince!' and 'Long life to the Emperor!' they shouted. Sir, the face of that person who came out of that palanquin is very similar to yours. If I speak wrongly, forgive me."

Madurandaka who had been listening without interrupting, felt sweat gathering in beads in his forehead. Fear shaded his face. "Fellow who speaks the truth since yesterday, were you among those men?"

"No, Sir! I swear I was not among them."

"Then how do you describe it as if you saw it all?"

"I am not sure if I had seen that happening in a dream or if it was real. Listen to this other scene, My Lord. It is a vault filled with darkness. A winding tunnel underground. The path goes up and down, winding in every direction. Three men came down that way. One held a torch in front. Another was in guard at the back. In the middle, a handsome man - a person as beautiful as Manmatha, the God of Love --was walking. When the light fell on the floors and walls of the chamber, gems and jewels, gold encrusted armor, and piles of

silver, gold and pearls gleamed in the corners. It seemed to be some treasure vault of some emperor. The pillars were carved with fierce monsters. Among those men who walked in the frightening vault, the person in the middle seemed to resemble you. Is that true or not? You must tell me My Lord!"

Prince Madurandaka spoke in a voice quivering with fright. "Enough! Stop!"

Vandiy Devan maintained silence.

"Are you a soothsayer?" asked the Prince.

"No, My Lord; that is not my profession. But, I reveal the past; I can tell what is likely to happen."

Madurandaka thought about something. "When you stood up on the horse, you shouted something. What was that?"

"I warned of danger."

"Danger for whom?"

"For you!"

"What danger?"

"Many dangers surround you. At the same time, great fortune awaits you. I can speak of all that only at leisure. Why don't you take me with you into the fort? Your men have taken away my swords..."

"Let it be, you may come with me; we can discuss at leisure." Madurandaka beckoned to the captain of his footmen. He pointed out at Vandiy Devan and said that he should go into the fort with them. That captain was not too pleased with this order, but he obeyed and allowed Vandiy Devan to join their group.

The doors of Pazlayarai fort opened and Madurandaka entered with his entourage which included Vallavarayan Vandiy Devan.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 16 -- Madurandaka Deva

We have met Prince Madurandaka, an important character in this narrative, at the very beginning in Kadamboor Fort. We also saw him going to his palace, at midnight, through the winding tunnels of the Tanjore's treasure vault. Both those times were not very opportune for introducing our readers properly to Prince Madurandaka Deva who was to attain fame in later years as Parakesari Madurandaka Uttama Chozla, ruling for a long time from the throne of Tanjore. We will now remedy that lapse in introductions.

Sundara Chozla's elder uncle Gandara Aditya, ruled for several years before him. Gandara Aditya and his wife Sembiyan Madevi of the Mazlava-raya nobility were devout adherents of Saiva faith. They had devoted the major part of their lives to the building and renovation of Shiva temples. Gandara Aditya had a wish to collect all the poems of Saiva devotionals, the poems of Thevaram -- scattered in palm leaf notations all over the country, into a single anthology. Though he could not complete this huge task in his lifetime, he did initiate the work and manage to codify a large proportion of the songs.

Gandara Aditya also composed several Tamil verses in the tradition of these Thevaram poems. Some verses he had composed about the town of Chidambaram continue to be popular to this day, as part of the Thiru-isai-paa anthology. He mentions that his father, Paranthaka, had conquered Pandiya and Lanka territories. He refers to his own name and that his capital was Tanjore and his wish was to attain fame by composing poetry in sweet Tamil.

The Chozla of Kozli, wielding a just scepter, Sembiyan the descendent of Sibi
Conquered the southern king, Pandiya who wielded a guileless mace, and Lanka too;
That same Chozla did cover with gold, those cupolas of beautiful Chidambaram,
Where Our Lord with bracelets of bones, sings and dances.

Meditate thee upon Shiva, Our Lord God, that you may attain oneness with Him.

May he sing of Shiva who dances in those gold covered halls of Chidambaram where
justice prevails,

May he, Gandara Aditya, Lord of garden filled Kozli who rules from Tanjore,

Attain great fame and much pleasure too, In weaving garlands of choice Tamil verse!

King Gandara Aditya had no faith in waging war and expanding his earthly territories. He was touched by the suffering resulting from war; therefore, he tried to practice peace. As a result of this policy, during his rule, the Chozla Empire shrank in size and was reduced to a small kingdom.

In his old age, Gandara Aditya married Mazlava-raya's daughter. Their child was Madurandaka, a mere babe in arms during the aging King's last years. Enemies grew powerful everywhere in the kingdom. Gandara Aditya's younger brother Arinjaya was badly wounded in battle and was awaiting death. Arinjaya's son Sundara Paranthaka was a youth with experience of many battlefields; he was popular with the common folk, brave and capable. Therefore, Gandara Aditya decided that Sundara was the suitable successor to the throne after his own death; he announced his decision publicly. In order to avoid future family squabbles about the succession, he also announced that Sundara's descendants would have the rights to ascend the Chozla throne.

He asked his wife that she should raise their son Madurandaka to be engaged in Saiva faith, completely devoted to the service of the Lord, his mind turned to the path of devotion. All this was public knowledge during those times.

Sembiyan Madevi, the Elder Pirati obeyed the promise given to her husband: from a very young age she instilled Saiva devotion and aversion to worldly pleasures in her son. Till about his twentieth year of life, Madurandaka obeyed his mother's will and followed a life of religious devotion. He had no interest in politics or the affairs of the kingdom. In fact he did not even think that he had any rights to the Chozla throne.

About two years ago, he married a daughter of Kalanthaka, the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. Since that time, his mind changed. A faint interest in worldly affairs was fanned by Nandini, the Young Queen of Pazluvoor, to grow into a passion. A small ember soon became a raging forest fire. For various personal reasons, many nobles supported his

cause in a conspiracy against Sundara Chozla's family. These nobles awaited Sundara Chozla's death so that they could place their puppet Madurandaka on the throne.

Madurandaka, however, had no patience to wait for his cousin's death. He began to think that Sundara Chozla had no right to the Empire; it was his own -- by right and by law of inheritance. Particularly now that Sundara was bedridden, unable to be attentive to the details of running the kingdom, why should he not seize power by crowning himself immediately? Such was Madurandaka's craze for power.

It now fell to the lot of Pazluvoor nobles to control this new passion of Madurandaka. They had no wish to ruin the situation by haste. Sundara Chozla was popular; his two sons were brave and capable young men who had won the admiration, even adoration of the people. Two of the most powerful nobles of the kingdom, the chieftains Kodumbalur Velir and Thiru-kovalur Malayaman, favored the sons of Sundara Chozla. A large part of the army supported Sundara Chozla and his sons. Because of this, the brothers of Pazluvoor decided to wait patiently till Sundara Chozla's death.

Moreover, the Emperor himself showed signs of changing his mind. If the Emperor himself declares that Madurandaka was the rightful heir after him, there would be no problem. Only the two royal women, Kundavai Pirati and Sembiyan Madevi Pirati, were likely to raise objections.

Kundavai's conniving could be countermanded; but, if Sembiyan Madevi -- who was revered by all the Tamil's, almost as a goddess -- raised objections, it would be difficult to overcome them. It was popularly believed that the old Queen, the Elder Pirati, did not wish her son to ascend the Chozla throne. The people would never accept the son who crowned himself against his mother's wishes. There were only two solutions to this situation: either the old lady reaches the abodes of Shiva following her beloved husband or she changes her mind. Who but her own son would have the power to change a mother's mind?

Pazluvoor nobles were advising Madurandaka somehow to change his mother's mind. For some reason, Madurandaka showed no enthusiasm to meet his mother or convince her of his interests. The wish to rule was firmly entrenched in his heart; but, he hesitated to speak about it with his mother. In fact he was very reluctant even to seek out her company.

Sembiyan Madevi herself had sent word to Tanjore. She was intending to fulfil some important wish of her dearly departed husband; she wished for her beloved son by her side at such an important occasion. Younger Lord Pazluvoor asked Madurandaka to go to Pazlayarai and talk to his mother about his interest in Tanjore's throne.

Ponniyin Selvan - Part III

Chapter 17 -- "Mr. Nambi of Naraiyur"

Madurandaka entered Pazlayarai with his men and Vandiya Devan. His procession passed through the army housing areas; the arya, pambai, pudhu, mana and other padai veedu streets. Then, through the market streets and plazas; onwards through the residential streets, past temples, lakes and gardens towards the streets of the Chozla Maligai Complex. His men did not raise a noise and not many people noticed him going past. A

few stood on the doorsteps and gazed in surprise. Vandiya Devan noticed no undue enthusiasm amongst the people; they did not seem to remark upon the coming of the Prince. The last time Vandiya Devan had been here was in the middle of a festival; now the streets were deserted making him wonder if Pazlayarai had become an abandoned city. It was quite obvious that the people of Pazlayarai did not have any particular fondness for Prince Madurandaka Deva. In a way, this was convenient for Vandiya Devan. Hopefully, none could recognize his face and cause trouble!

When they were nearing the wide street of the Chozla Maligai Complex, another procession crossed their street from a side street. In the middle of that procession was an open palanquin. Though they could not see the face of the person seated in that palanquin, it was obvious that he was a young anchorite of the Saiva faith. There was a large crowd surrounding the palanquin. They raised a din with cymbals and hand drums that accompanied their singing and chanting. Now and then, cheers were raised: "Grace of Shiva!" "Divinity of Chidambaram", "Hara Hara Mahadeva!" and "Long Live Nambi of Naraiyur!" "Praise to he who has the grace of Naraiyur's Mischievous Pillaiyar!"

Madurandaka and his retinue had to wait till that procession had gone across the street. The Prince watched with envy, and questioned his captain. That man replied, "Yes, My Lord. It is Mr Nambi of Naraiyur who is in that palanquin."

"Still! What a commotion! None seem to bother about us in this town! Why are so many gathered about this mendicant?" asked Prince Madurandaka.

Vandiya Devan was away from that procession; even then he thought he recognized one of the men walking beside that palanquin. The man looked like that fanatic Saiva devotee he had met on the ferry at River Kollidam. Madurandaka and his retinue took a short-cut and quickly reached the front portals of Queen Sembian Madevi's palace. That gracious lady was waiting on the front steps, as if she was ready to receive someone. Madurandaka descended from the chariot and went up to his mother, greeting her with a low bow. Sembian Madevi kissed his forehead and placed a hand upon his head in blessing. "Son, you have come in time! Naraiyur Nambi is coming; go refresh yourself quickly, if you need to, and come to the audience chamber!" she said.

Vandiya Devan made note that Madurandaka's face lost its charm on hearing these words of his mother. Poor Prince, he must have presumed that his mother was waiting at the front portal to welcome him; what a disappointment! She was waiting to receive the youth in the palanquin... Madurandaka who was awaiting an opportunity to ascend the Chozla throne was very upset by this! They went towards the chambers set aside for Madurandaka and his men. The Prince took his time to wash and to change his clothes. He did not seem eager to go to the audience chamber. Man after man came with urgent messages from his mother, saying that she was waiting for him. Finally, the Prince was ready; he asked, "Where is that Soothsayer?" Taking him and a few others, he walked towards the audience chamber.

The reception was already in progress. Sembian Madevi, Kundavai and some other royal womenfolk were seated on one side. On a throne-like seat, placed in the middle, was seated a youth. He was dressed in holy ashes and sacred rudraksha beads. Several bundles of palm leaves lay scattered before him; he held one page in his hands. Another, Saiva devotee, dressed similarly in ashes and beads stood beside him with an enthralled

face. A large crowd filled that audience chamber. Vandiya Devan saw that the youth was the person who had come in the palanquin; the older man was the same one on the ferry boat.

Though his eyes wandered hither and thither, examining every face in that room, Vandiya Deva's eyes kept coming back to rest on Kundavai's face. Her eyes widened in recognition and surprise when she first saw him; after that, she did not seem to even turn towards him! He wondered if she had failed to recognize him.

When Madurandaka had entered, everyone except the royal womenfolk had stood up to honor him. When the Prince was seated, the others took their seats again. Sembayan Madevi said, "Son, this gentleman is from Naraiyur. He is fully blessed by the grace of the Lord of that town, that Mischievous Pilayar. He has found some rare manuscripts never found by anyone till now. You may remember this: long ago, a princess of our Chozla clan was married to become the Queen of the Pandiyas. That Queen Mangaiar-k-arasi invited Saint Gnana Sambanda to Madurai where he would debate with the Jains on theology and gain victory for Saiva faith. This Nambi has found some of the poems composed by Saint Sambanda at that time in Madurai. In those poems, the Saint has mentioned about our Chozla Mangaiar-k-arasi. My whole body tingles with happiness when I listen to those poems. If your father were here to listen to all this, he would have been overjoyed. At least you can listen to this!"

"I will listen Mother! Let him begin." His face did not show any happiness. His heart was elsewhere for he disliked these honors and this reception being given to a wayfaring friar. Placing an ash faced beggar wearing beads on a throne in the middle of the palace! What nonsense! He tried to be patient in order to please his mother.

Nambi of Naraiyur began to read from the page in his hands. They were the verses sung by Gnana Sambanda when he entered Madurai, "Is this not the blessed city where Mangaiar-k-arasi whose wealth is her devotion, lives?"

Mangaiar-k-arasi, the honored maid of the royal Chozla house,

Bedecked with well-wrought bangles, a veritable saint herself;

Lotus like maid, spreading benevolence nationwide

The Queen of the Pandiyas dwells here.

Lord of ghosts, splendid blue necked Shiva who gave us the meaning of scriptures

With his Meenakshi dwells he, here in this Alawai temple, in this same Madurai.

A daughter of Chozlas who wear jewelled crowns and rules all known lands;

Melodious of voice, Queen of the Pandiyas spreading humble generosity

She is in this town, where dwells Shiva who takes pleasure with

Uma in this same Madurai.

When Sembian Madevi heard this song, her eyes filled with tear drops of happiness. She was exhilarated to think that she had the fortune to marry into such a famous family that had given birth to Mangaiar-k-arasi. The only line that captured Madurandaka's attention was "Chozlas who wear jewelled crowns to rule all known lands." He was angry to think that another had taken away from him such a jewelled crown, meant to decorate his own head!

The Queen of the Pandiyas receives Sambanda. She is worried, "Oh! Dear Lord! How is this young boy to battle with the monstrous Jains, who are such experts at words and debates?" Sambanda understands her concern.

Doe-eyed Lady, Queen to the great Pandiya

Great Lady, listen;

Do not worry yourself that

here is this boy of tender years.

In all places from the foothills of Aanaimalai

those wicked ones (Jains) cause such trouble,

To them I am no modest foe,

for, the blue necked Lord of Alawai stands by me.

When Naraiyur Nambi sang this verse, Sembian Devi was lost in some happy dream world, where she imagined herself as Mangaiar-k-arasi and Nambi as Saint Sambanda. Madurandaka was thinking, "Yes I am a youth of tender years. But, I shall not fear the wicked nobles of Thiru-kovalur or Kodumbalur and the Emperor or his sons supported by them. Just as The Lord of Alawai stood by Sambanda's side, Pazluvoor nobles stand by me!"

None of this even entered Vandiya Devan's ears! His eyes and thoughts were concentrated on Kundavai. Perhaps the Younger Pirati has not recognized me? Or is she pretending not to recognize? Perhaps, she is angry that I did not report to her immediately after completing the assignment? He was worried in this fashion and at the same time trying to think of some way of meeting her privately.

After all the verses were sung, Sembian Madevi turned to the elderly Saiva mendicant and said, "Sir, when I see this young man, I feel Saint Sambanda himself is born again. Please go with him to all the towns and villages of this Tamil country. Collect all the devotional verses you can find. We have to compile separate anthologies of verses sung by Appar, Sundara and Sambanda. We should make arrangements to have those verses sung regularly in all Shiva temples. My late husband had wishes to do this; now, I hope to fulfil that wish before my days are ended. I will make arrangements for palanquins, guards, footmen and luggage-carts for your travels. I will get the Emperor's consent for this effort. In fact I will send word through my own son to the Emperor about this."

The loud cheers that greeted her announcement fell like molten lead in Madurandaka's ears.

Chapter 18 -- Soothsayer

When the reception for Naraiyur Nambi was over and people were dispersing, the Elder Pirati was saying, "My Son, I shall go till the front portal to see these people off. You may go rest in your chambers. Later, I wish to discuss something very important with you."

"Yes, Mother!" said Madurandaka and he turned and went away to his rooms. Rage and envy bubbled in his heart. What honors and accolades showered on a wayfaring friar of no significance whatsoever! My mother will ruin the very honor of royal dignity! I am not surprised that nobles of Pazluvoor are always complaining about my mother. It's enough for Mother, if some fellow appears with ashes smeared all over him and holy beads around his neck; all he need to do is sing some forgotten psalm! Or, one has to come and talk about some ruined temple or stinking water-pool. She will give away lavishly to such beggars and empty the royal treasury in no time! And to aid her and abet her is Princess Kundavai constantly by her side. Whatever is left after temple building will be given away by her for some hospital or resthouse! If these people are allowed to spend in this fashion, unchecked by anyone, what about my dreams? How am I to sit on the throne and order vast armies to go and conquer lands for my expanding empire?

My mother wants to talk to me! I wonder what she will say that warrants these urgent summons. Maybe she will start another silly discussion about the ways of devotion, the path of yoga and meditation -- about concentrating on the tip of ones nose, meditating and reaching salvation! Or she may start talking about some new meaning she has found for the Dance of Ecstasy by Lord Shiva! What does the Lord's matted hair denote? What is the meaning of the crescent moon on His head? She never tires of talking about such nonsense! This is how she made me into a half crazed fool, ridiculed by the world! I shouldn't let her do that anymore. If she insists on such talk, I must not listen....

Before Mother calls again, I must talk to that Soothsayer; I must ask him about my future. He knew about secrets not known to anyone. How did he know that! I am impressed! He must surely possess some unusual powers of seeing the future. He saw into the past and he must be capable of seeing the future. Let me ask him....

When he was leaving the reception chamber, Madurandaka had noticed the Soothsayer, hesitating in that hall, looking here and there. He had signalled an order that the man was to follow him. Vandiya Devan was trying to catch the eye of Princess Kundavai and tell her that he wished an audience with her. But, she did not even glance towards him as she went away with her grandmother.

Why? Has she forgotten me? Thousands come to meet her every day... perhaps, she does not remember my face, I have met her merely a couple of times... I am really a fool. I kept thinking of her through all my travails, through day and night. There is no reason for her to think of me! The bee looks for honey and buzzes around the flower; why would the flower worry about the bee? A lotus smiles at the sun. Who is the sun that will make Kundavai smile? However, I must report to her about the mission on which she sent me. What if someone else has already given her all the news? That is impossible! She is worried about something and she has not recognized my face. How is she to expect her confidential retainer appearing as a part of Madurandaka's retinue? How amazed she will

be when I tell her of the tricks that I employed to complete her mission and enter Pazlayarai! Her face will brighten with surprise and happiness! How am I to meet her... How am I to let her know?

"Soothsayer! What are you thinking?" asked Madurandaka. They had reached the private chambers of that Prince.

In those days there were several practitioners of the occult arts: fortune tellers, psychics, palmists, mind readers, soothsayers, those who looked at the future. Astrologers read horoscopes and made calculations based on the movements of planets and stars to foretell the future. Omen readers predicted based on the omens when a person came to consult them. Numerologists read meaning into numbers selected by the person. Palmists read the lines on palms. Fortune tellers employed various devices like reading cowrie shells, asking a parrot to pick cards, reading the omens etc. Soothsayers were supposed to have psychic powers of divination. They could look into the past and future with their psychic powers. Some would close their eyes and go into a trance and speak. Others would gaze into a flame and concentrate their powers to look into the past or future; some gazed into a mirror. Some were able to say things just by looking into ones face!

Vandiya Devan was startled when Madurandaka addressed him as "Soothsayer!" What will the Prince ask me? How can I answer cleverly if he asks me to foretell the future? Good God! How am I to escape from him and meet Princess Kundavai? "I was thinking about the reception, My Lord! It would have been much better if I too had become a religious mendicant like that Nambi, instead of being a soothsayer. I would then have received honors like him. That's what I was thinking."

"Who stopped you! Why don't you too start singing Thevaram psalms?"

"Whatever is written in one's fate is what will happen. What is the point of wishing for what cannot be!"

"What do you think of that youth who was singing those psalms? What about his fortune?"

"A very good fortune! A religious destiny mingled with royal destiny. Kings and queens will honor that youth. His name will remain in fame for years to come!" Vandiya Devan spoke this in some sort of a blind guess. But, his words stirred a great furor in Prince Madurandaka's heart.

"What about my destiny? Can you see and tell about that?"

"Your destiny also is similar to his; a religious fortune mingled with royal fortune! But, it is much better than his fortune."

"Speak a little more in detail!"

Vandiya Devan needed time to think up something, "You cannot hurry things in this fashion. If you want details, I must set up the lamp, meditate and look into the incense fumes. You will have to be seated in front of the flame. Then I can look into the future and say what will happen."

Madurandaka was very excited: he ordered his men to bring a lamp and embers for the incense. Two low-stools were placed opposite each other with a lamp in the middle.

Incense was thrown on the hot embers in a brazier. The Prince sat eagerly on one seat. Vandiya Devan took his place opposite, closed his eyes in meditation for some minutes. His lips mumbled some meaningless incantations. He shook his body in a shiver and pretended to be possessed of some spirit. With wide open eyes, he looked into the flame of the oil lamp. After some minutes he spoke:

"Sir, forgive me if I spoke without reverence about you. Yours is not an ordinary fortune; there is no similarity between your fate and that of the youth who was given the reception. His fortune depends on the favors given by princes and royalty. Your fortune -- what I see in this flame.... Ah! It astonishes even me!"

"What are you seeing in there? Tell me! Speak!" ordered Madurandaka impatiently.

"Ah! How shall I speak? I find no appropriate words! There... as far as my eyes can see, crowned princes are waiting in lines. Ministers and nobles line the opposite side. Beyond them, like the endless seas are commanders and armed men. The spears, lances, swords and shields carried by those armored men shine like a thousand brilliant suns. People are crowding everywhere; on mansions, on balconies, lining the streets ... cheering, cheering loudly about something..."

"Tell! Tell what they are cheering about!"

"Prince, they are all shouting together and their words are not clear. "Long life to the Scion of the Chozlas!" "Triple crowned Emperor" "Cheers to the Greatest of Kings!" that is what they seem to be saying."

"Then what?"

"The crowd, the mob is coming closer. Soldiers with spears and swords are trying to stop them. Everything is in a big confusion."

"Why have the crowds gathered? Look into that!"

"That's what I am trying! A Tiger Flag flies sky high in the middle of that crowd. Other flags, the fish, longbow, bull, boar, palmtree, lion, snake -- all are lower than the Tiger Flag. A beautiful jewelled, golden throne is in the middle of a large hall decorated like a heavenly palace. On the table is a golden platter on which is placed a jeweled crown that shines like a million suns. A large white canopy is unfurled over the throne. Heavenly nymphs seem to be holding white deer-tail whisks and standing on both sides of that throne. A hundred pots filled with waters from all the holy rivers are placed in a line. Prince, the preparations for a coronation are all ready....."

"Whose coronation? Say that Man!"

"Here, I will soon be able to see that too. The main doors of that chamber are thrown open. Heralds proclaiming loudly enter. An old man of brave-dignity walks in. Someone who looks like a brother to him, is walking behind him. After them is walking a young man, a prince who looks as handsome as the God of Love!"

"Who is he? Who is he?"

Vandiya Devan looked at Madurandaka before he looked back into the flame. "Sir, he looks very much like you. Why like you! He is you! The two noblemen are leading you towards the throne. "Victory, victory!" shout the crowds. A hundred hands showers

flowers and yellow-grain upon you. You are very near the throne..... Ah! What is this? Who is coming like a bad omen? A girl with unkempt, unbraided hair comes between you and the throne. "No!" she stops you. You are pushing her away... and Ah! What is this? Why is the smoke growing cloudy? I cannot see anything more..."

"Look! Look carefully. See what happens next."

"Prince, forgive me! A smoke screen hides everything."

"Peer into it again. Who is that woman? Have you seen her before?"

"Prince, that scene has vanished; the woman is gone; you are gone; so is the throne, the crown, the crowds --- everything is hidden again! There is someone with powerful magic in this palace. They have cast their spells and prevented me from seeing anything. Oh dear! My face is burning... my eyes are stinging!" Vandiya Devan buried his face in his hands. Only after several minutes he looked up.

Every blood vessel in Madurandaka's body seemed engorged. Rage and passion danced on his face. Eyes were hot embers. Vandiya Devan became a little worried. Have I provoked his greed too much?

"Look again! Tell me!" ordered Madurandaka.

"There is no use of that Prince. A scene that vanishes will not come back immediately. It will appear only after a few days. I will look into the lamp and see if there is anything else.

"Yes! Look and tell me whatever you can."

"It is another time; people are in some confusion; they seem angry; unhappy. A messenger comes and brings some news. He says that someone of the royal family has drowned at sea. Poor fellow; the people are about to lynch that messenger. Prince, if any such thing ever happens, you must not venture amidst the people. Be careful if you have to go out at such times."

"Who was it that drowned? Was there a name?"

"The name was not clear in the confused shouts. That scene is gone.... another place... a frightful gathering of men with garlands of skulls and bones. They seem like practicing ascetics of the Kaalaa-mukha and Kapaalika sects. One of them stands there with a frightening sword in his hand. A sacrificial altar in front of him. A prince, a handsome prince comes in their midst. The anchorites start dancing and stomping around him. My Lord, even by mistake, you must not venture amidst such men!"

Beads of sweat gathered on Madurandaka's face. He shivered. Vandiya Devan noticed, "My Lord, I cannot see anything more. Please forgive me, my head swirls and I feel faint. Somebody is blocking my vision with their spells. I have to look at some other time, at some other place." He held his head with both his hands.

A foot man came forward to announce that the Elder Pirati Sembayan Madevi was waiting for her son. Madurandaka decided to shower all his anger and rage on his mother!

"Sir! I have a splitting headache. Please give me permission to go out for a while into the fresh air."

Vandiya Devan was given the permission.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 19 -- Timely Help

Pinakapani the learned son of Pazlayarai Doctor had a new interest in life. Till recently, he was happy to study the practice of healing as an apprentice to his father. During the journey to Kodi Karai, his new friend Vandiya Devan spoke of several worldly matters. But, that man did not stop with discussions of world affairs. Like all those who have newly fallen in love, he wished to speak about love and other affairs of the heart. Vandiya Devan had recognized that the Doctor's son was a first rate idiot and fool. Nevertheless, he spoke to him about the dangers and pleasures of falling in love. He spoke of how he was in love with some maid and how he was suffering because of that; the dangers he was about to face because of his love.

At first, Pinakapani did not like this conversation. He was not used to the polished conversation of nobility and slowly, he felt an unexplainable envy and anger about Vandiya Devan. He asked about the name and identity of the maid who had captured his new friend's heart. Vandiya Devan refused to tell him. Pinakapani was angered by this and by the time they had neared Kodi Karai, he had begun to think of Vandiya Devan as a real enemy. His anger was made worse when he saw Poonkuzlali. She refused his advances and teased him. When Pinakapani realized that she seemed partial to Vandiya Devan, his envy grew tenfold! He dared to betray the royal messenger to soldiers who had come in search of him.

Pazluvoor men were unable to find Vandiya Devan. Instead, they arrested Pinakapani and took him away to Tanjore. He had to spend some hours in the Dungeon Prison. That frightful experience made him angrier with Vandiya Devan.

Before Princess Kundavai could come and arrange to free him, Pinakapani was freed and taken away. Nandini had arranged to free him from the Dungeon Prison. Nandini was angry and suspicious about Vandiya Devan who had disappeared without telling her. Her fears and doubts were increased when she heard that Vandiya Devan had met Kundavai and had then escaped to Lanka. She knew that he would surely return to Pazlayarai one day and attempt to meet Kundavai again. Nandini needed a man in Pazlayarai to report to her about such matters. After she had met and talked to Pinakapani, Nandini decided that he was a suitable man to spy on her behalf. She assigned the important task of watching for Vandiya Devan to Pinakapani.

"That traitor who betrayed you will surely return to Pazlayarai very soon. You must keep a careful watch for his return; see what he does when he comes back. Find out who he meets and what he says and send me word as soon as you can. I will reward you well," said Nandini.

Later, Younger Lord Pazluvoor had questioned him and had also given him some orders concerning Vandiya Devan. "If you help us catch that traitor-spy when he comes back, I will find you a place in our secret service. You can rise to become a big official." Fortunately, his orders were in no conflict with the Young Queen's orders!

Pinakapani lost all interest in the art of doctoring after this experience in Tanjore. He started wandering the streets of Pazlayarai lost in some day dreams. All of a sudden, he will have a doubt. He will run up to strangers in the street and peer at their faces; "Not you!" he will say. On seeing this, people began to say that the Doctor's Son had gone mad. However, Pinakapani had not forgotten the orders given in Tanjore.

When Prince Madurandaka and his men entered Pazlayarai, Pinakapani did not pay much attention to them. He did not expect Vandiya Devan to be with that Prince. He kept going around the crowd surrounding the Nambi of Naraiyur, peering into the faces of people in that procession. Madurandaka's group was waiting a little far away. When the horseman following the Prince's chariot turned to look back, Pinakapani felt that the face was familiar. But, before he could look, the rider had gone into the Chozla Maligai gates.

Pinakapani could not gain entrance to the reception given to Naraiyur Nambi. He had to stand with the crowd waiting in the plaza outside the portal and gawk into the audience chamber.

During that reception, Vandiya Devan's concentration was occupied in gazing towards Kundavai! Pinakapani kept looking at Vandiya Devan's face! Another man was keeping an eye on both of them without their knowledge. That other man was none other than our old acquaintance Mr. Thirumalai Nambi Azlvar-adiyan.

Vandiya Devan confused Prince Madurandaka by pretending to be a soothsayer and foretelling the future. After that, he came out of the palace into the street. Pinakapani who was waiting in the plaza accosted him. "Thambi, who are you?" asked Pinakapani.

Vandiya Devan was stunned to see Pinakapani. Pretending not to recognize him, "What did you ask?" he said.

"I asked who you were."

"You ask who I am? Which I? Are you asking about this body of mine made of the five spirits of earth, water, wind, fire and space? Are you asking about the life hidden in this body or about the soul within that life? Are you asking about the Supreme Spirit who is the basis for that soul? What kind of question is that Young Man? There is no "I" or "You". Everything is God! The world is an illusion. You should listen to saints like the Nambi of Naraiyur and learn about the illusions of wealth, lust and attachments." After saying these words, Vandiya Devan quickly jumped on his horse which was still tied to the post and quickly rode away. Only when he was sure that Pinakapani was not following, he slowed the horse's pace.

But, Pinakapani was not easily fooled. His suspicion was confirmed. He went and complained to the officer in charge of the City Guards. The Chief of City Guards sent two men with him; they went around the streets of Pazlayarai looking for the spy. As expected, they found Vandiya Devan in a market square.

"He is the spy! Arrest him!" shouted Pinakapani.

"What is this Thambi? Are you crazy?" asked Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan.

"Who is crazy? This body? This life or the soul in that life? Are you asking about the Spirit or the illusion of lust, wealth and passions?" asked Pinakapani.

"You are babbling nonsense; it's obvious that you are crazy!"

"I am not crazy! I am the man who came with you to Kodi Karai. Guards! He is the spy who escaped from Tanjore and ran away to Lanka. Arrest him now!"

The guards began to approach Vandiya Devan.

"Be warned! Don't trust him and make a mistake. I am the Soothsayer in Lord Madurandaka's household."

"No, he lies! Arrest him!"

A crowd gathered around them quickly in that market crossroad. Some took the side of Vandiya Devan; others favored Pinakapani.

One said, "He does not look like a soothsayer!"

"Neither does he look like a spy!" said another.

"How can a soothsayer be so young?"

"Why can't he? Will a spy ride to market so openly like this?"

"Why would a soothsayer carry weapons?"

"If he is a spy, whose spy is he? What does he expect to find in Pazlayarai?"

Pinakapani was saying, "Arrest him immediately, It is the order of Lord Pazluvoor!"

On hearing the name Pazluvoor, the crowd began to grow sympathetic to Vandiya Devan. They decided to help him go free. Azlvar-adiyan appeared amidst that crowd asking loudly, "Is that Soothsayer who came with Prince Madurandaka anywhere here?"

"Here I am!" answered Vandiya Devan.

"No! He is a spy!" shouted Pinakapani.

"What new nonsense is this? If you are the Soothsayer, come with me. The Princess is asking for you," said Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

Vandiya Devan's heart leaped with joy, "I am he; here I come!"

"Don't let him go. Don't let the spy escape!" screamed Pinakapani.

Azlvar-adiyan said, "Prove to them that you are a Soothsayer. You can then go with me."

"How do you want me to prove that?"

"There, look at those two horsemen coming this way. They seem to be messengers bringing some urgent news. Tell us what news they bring."

Vandiya Devan looked at those horsemen coming swiftly. "Yes; I can tell about them. They bring news about some water-borne calamity that affects someone in the royal family."

Those horses had now come into the market crossroad. The crowd was preventing progress. Azlvar-adiyan asked, "You seem like messengers. What is the news that you bring?"

"Yes we are messengers; we bring sad news. The ship carrying Prince Arulmozli Varma was caught in the whirlwind. The Prince jumped into the sea to save someone and is presumed to be lost at sea."

Hearing this from the messengers, the crowd began to roar in sorrow, "Oh Dear!" "Oh Dear Gods!" It was not clear how such a large crowd had gathered so quickly in that market place. Men, women, children, the elderly, the ascetics and the soldiers everybody was crowding around. Eager to hear the news, they flung questions and began to cry and wail. These people of Pazlayarai knew that the nobles of Pazluvoor were not in support of Ponniiyin Selvan. They had heard that Lord Pazluvoor had sent men to arrest their Prince in Lanka. They began to blame Lord Pazluvoor and mumble about his atrocities. Soon, the curses grew louder. "Those nobles must have done it; deliberately drowned our Prince!" said a voice. That noisy crowd, wailing in sorrow, cursing in horror and shouting in anger sounded like an uncontrollable ocean storm.

The Tanjore horsemen were caught in this throng, unable to move forward. They tried to part a way through the people pressing around them and could not do so. They kept throwing questions at them. "How?" "Where?" "When?" "Why?"

Azlvar-adiyan looked at the City Guards standing beside the Doctor's Son and said, "Why are you men quiet? Move the crowds aside and make way for the messengers to get to the palace." Those Guards were stunned motionless by the news they had heard. Now they revived themselves and began to control the crowd making a way for the messengers. Slowly, the Tanjore horsemen began to move towards the Chozla Maligai. The growing mob followed them.

In that huge multitude, in that crowd that cried as one man for the fate of their beloved Ponniiyin Selvan, one voice was crying about the escaping spy, "Oh Dear! This is a trick to help the spy escape!" cried Pinakapani the apprentice doctor and amateur spy. No one heeded the shouts of that half-crazed man. Like a river in flood that takes away the flotsam, he was dragged away by the growing mob.

Vandiyā Devan had dismounted a long time ago, even as the people had begun to crowd around him. Azlvar-adiyan whispered in his ear, "Let go of the horse. We can catch it later. Come with me, let us get away from this mob."

"Sir, you were a timely help! If it were not for you, my situation would have been bad. Thank you," said Vandiyā Devan.

"This has become a habit with you. You get into a predicament and someone has to come and help you out of it!" said Azlvar-adiyan in mockery. Both men moved away from the crossroad and stood by the side, so that they too were not pushed by the crowd. Azlvar-adiyan took his hand and dragged him through the small alleys to the locked house towards the end of the Chozla Maligai. They entered the garden behind all the courtyards and walked through the garden trail. Soon they were by the lake shore steps. A boat bobbed on the waters and a maid was in that boat.

Vandiyā Devan Vallavarayan's heart brimmed with joy when he saw her.

Ponniiyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 20 -- Mother and Son

Upon the footman announcing that his mother was asking for him, Prince Madurandaka went to see her. Lady Sembian Madevi was well known to everyone as a saintly adherent of the Saiva faith. Once upon a time, Madurandaka was very devoted to his mother. Now, that reverence was transformed into anger. Even fables and stories do not talk of a mother who turns enemy to her own son by favoring rival cousins! Why should I be cursed with such a mother! Every drop of love in his heart was changed into hostility.

When he saw his mother with that unusual, serene face, he felt a little calmed. As usual he bowed low touching her feet to his eyes. "May you grow wealthy in devotion to Lord Shiva!" blessed his mother as she indicated that he was to take a seat by her side. That blessing was like an arrow piercing Madurandaka's heart.

"Madurandaka, is my daughter-in-law well? Is everyone well in your father-in-law's household, and in the household of the Treasury Officer?" asked the Elder Pirati Sembian Madevi.

"They are all fine; why should you be bothered about them?" mumbled the son.

"Did you meet the Emperor before you left Tanjore? How is his health now?"

"Yes, I met him and took his permission to come here. His health grows worse day by day. His mental well being seems to be more cause for concern than his physical health."

"What is that my Son? What has caused anguish to the Emperor's mental well being?"

"It is natural that those who commit a crime, those who covet the belongings of another, those who enjoy the possessions of others -- that such people suffer a mental anguish!"

"What do you mean? What such crime has the Emperor committed?"

"What else? Has he not been sitting on a throne that rightfully belongs to me, for all these years? Is that not an injustice?" asked Madurandaka.

"My Son, how did this poison mingle in your heart that was as pure as milk? Who has misguided you?" asked his mother.

"No one has misguided me! You think that I am such a fool to listen to what anyone says? You think I have no intelligence of my own?"

"Even the most intelligent can be misled by ill advice. With effort even the rock can be reduced to powder. Kooni's ill advice changed Kaikesi's heart against her beloved Raama of the epic. Are you not aware of that?"

"Yes I am aware that a woman's mind can be changed by such ill counsel."

"Madurandaka, whom do you mean?"

"Mother why did you ask me to come here? Tell me that!"

"You were present at the reception held earlier today..."

"Yes; some wayfaring youth was placed in a palanquin and brought in a procession. Placed on a throne and honored like royalty. He must have grown too proud to control..."

"Oh Dear! Do not speak such blasphemy! My Child, even though our guest was a young man, he was a saint learned in the ways of Saiva devotion."

"Let him be a saint. If I find fault, his greatness will not grow less. I am not even objecting to your giving him such honors. Why did you ask for me? Tell me that!"

The Elder Pirati sighed heavily, "This change in your attitude surprises me. I did not even dream that a two year stay in Lord Pazluvoor's household will change you like this. Well, I cannot do much about that. Now, I must do my duty. I should try to fulfil my promise to your father to the extent possible. Son, before I can tell you why I asked for you, I must speak about my story, of how I met your father and married him. Please be a little patient and listen to me."

Madurandaka indicated that he would listen patiently, by folding his legs and sitting a little more comfortably.

"When you were younger, you have gone once or twice to my hometown Mazlapadi. You have been to the Shiva Temple in that town. The elders say that it is one of the sixty-four temples built by Ko-chengat-chozla several hundred years ago. Your grandfather, my father was an important landowner and nobleman in Mazlapadi; our family was an ancient clan; once upon a time, the Mazlava-raya's were important chieftains of those areas. In the wars fought during Vijayala Chozla's times, they supported the Pandiya Kings. Therefore, the Mazlava-raya's lost their powers when the Chozla's gained supremacy. When I was a young girl, such politics did not bother me. My heart was given to Lord Shiva Nataraja in the temple of Mazlapadi. As a child I had heard the history of that temple.

"Saint Sundara Murti was travelling with his disciples near our town. The thick grove of Konnai trees with flowers covering every branch and limb, had hidden the temple from view. So, the Saint had not noticed the temple and was going past it. `Sundara! Have you forgotten me?' called a voice. Sundara looked around asking, `Did anyone call me?' Those around him denied saying anything or hearing anything. Sundara asked to find out if any temple was hidden anywhere nearby. He found the temple tucked away in the flower laden grove and went to worship the Lord, composing this verse in that temple:

Oh Lord of golden hued body,
A tiger skin draped around thy waist;
On matted locks burnished red,
You wear a shining crescent of konnai flowers.
My beloved king! My jewel!
My ruby who dwells in Mazlapadi,
Of whom but you will I think,
At all times henceforth?

"Since hearing that story, those lines were etched in my heart. I would go to the temple often and sing that verse and other psalms. As I grew beyond childhood, the Lord took possession of my heart. I began to dream that I would marry the Lord God and spend my

time in service to humanity. I would close my eyes, trying to do penance just like Uma and Dakshayini who performed penance and married the Lord! If anyone in the house raised the topic of my marriage I would chide them. In my adolescence, I became more and more involved with the Lord and the temple. People began to call me "mad." I was not bothered; every hour except that spent in eating and sleeping was spent in the temple. I would gather flowers and string various garlands for Lord Nataraja. I would clean the temple; close my eyes in meditation for hours together. Once, when I was lost in such meditation, I opened my eyes because of some sudden noise. Four or five persons were standing before me. My eyes and heart were attracted by a person standing ahead of them. I felt that Lord Shiva himself had come with his court to take possession of me! I stood up and bowed to that person. Tears were streaming down my face and he must have noticed. 'Who is this girl? Why is she crying?' asked a voice. My father replied, 'She is my daughter. Like a fruit that ripens too early, she is involved in the path of Saiva devotion even at this tender age. She is almost mad -- spending all her time in meditation and psalm singing like this.'

"I looked up again and realized that the person standing before me was not Lord Shiva but, some royal personage. I was too ashamed for my behavior, and ran out of that temple. However, he who captured my thoughts did not forsake me. He came to my house with my father and asked for my hand. He was my beloved husband, your esteemed father."

Elder Pirati Sembayan Madevi paused for a minute. The old remembrances brought back tears to her eyes. She continued once again, "After that incident, I found out more about him. He had ascended the Chozla throne recently. After his coronation, he had commenced a pilgrimage to visit various holy temples. He was more than forty years old at that time. The wife he had wedded in his youth was dead. He had no intention of remarrying, for he was one of the few among the nobility who believed in monogamy. But, his pure heart was touched when he saw the foolish girl in the temple. He asked my opinion about marrying him in front of the elders in the family. I was in a state of ecstasy thinking that Shiva had taken human form and come to marry me! I readily agreed to marry him without even considering that he was the Chozla King. As a result of our marriage, your grandfather regained his lost titles and once again became the chieftain of Mazlapadi as Mazlava-raya.

"After the wedding, your father and I spoke freely to each other and came to a decision. We would devote our lives to the service of Lord Shiva; neither of us wanted any children. There was a reason for this. My Son Madurandaka, I never thought that I would have to explain all this to you. Now there is a need and I am telling you. Listen carefully."

Lady Sembayan Madevi was silent for a minute. In spite of himself, Madurandaka was interested and he began to listen more carefully.

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 21 -- Can You Be A Mother?

Sembayan Madevi who was Saiva devotion personified, continued to speak.

"Son, when your father Lord Gandara Aditya ascended the Chozla throne, there was some confusion and problem in the empire. You know about the greatness of your grandfather

Emperor Paranthaka. He ruled an empire spreading from Lanka in the south to the banks of River Krishna in the north. But, during the last years of his life he faced several setbacks in his family and empire. The monstrous army of Rashtrakuta's from Manyaketa (present day Maharashtra) came invading from the north. They had crossed the Krishna and come deep into our lands. Your Uncle Raja-aditya, Emperor Paranthaka's eldest son and an incomparable warrior, went north to stop those invaders. A great battle was fought at Thakkolam; a battle as ghastly as the epic war of Kurukshetra. Lakhs of men died in that war; blood ran in floods. Rashtrakuta armies were forced to scatter in retreat; but, Raja-aditya's life was sacrificed to that battle. Your younger Uncle Arinjaya had also fought in that war and was badly wounded. They did not have any news of his condition. Lord Arinjaya's son Sundara Paranthaka, a mere youth had been sent to the battlefields of Lanka and was presumed to be lost at sea. There was no news of him either. The only man of royal birth who was beside the Emperor at Tanjore at that time, was your father Lord Gandara Aditya.

"Your father had distanced himself from the affairs of the state and politics from a very young age. His mind was engaged in Saiva devotion. He disliked war; he felt, why should men be killed because of royal greed for lands? He constantly argued about this with his father and his brothers. He spent his own time in the company of poets and adherents of Saiva faith and in pilgrimage to sacred places. He did not even touch weapons like swords and spears with his hands. He was not trained in the arts of war, espionage or in statecraft of plots and counterplot. He felt that politics and government involved the utterance of lies and falsehood, of artifice and cunning, murder and mayhem. In his opinion, a king who captured another's lands was no different than a thief who took another's goods.

"My Son, because of fate, such a man as your father had to bear the burden of this Chozla kingship. Emperor Paranthaka was hurt by the several setbacks; the invasions; the deaths of his offspring. He was waiting for his own death, when he called for your father. 'You must accept the burden of ruling this country' said the Emperor. The son did not wish to cause further distress to his dying father. He accepted. Your father's first wife Lady Narayani had already gone to the heavens of the devout; he had not even heard of me at that time and was unlikely to marry again. Your grandfather was concerned about the succession after your father. Men who had gone in search of your Uncle Arinjaya's son came back with good news. They found Sundara in a desert island and brought him back to Tanjore. Emperor Paranthaka had a lot of affection for his grandson Sundara for he had raised him personally with his own hands. Elders kept saying that the Chozla's would regain all their glory through Sundara. Because of all this, the Emperor was very fond of his grandson Sundara. Before his death, the Emperor declared that when your father was coronated as King, Sundara also was to be coronated as Crown Prince and later, Sundara's descendants would have the right to ascend the Chozla throne.

"Your father shared all this with me after our marriage. He was resolved to fulfil the wishes expressed by Emperor Paranthaka on his deathbed. He felt that there should be no obstructions to Sundara Chozla and his descendants ascending the throne. Your father had no wish to rule kingdoms; neither could he involve himself in statecraft. He was a devout soul; his mind always given to the service of Lord Nataraja. He left the running of the dwindling empire in the hands of his younger brother Arinjaya and Arinjaya's son

Sundara, while he himself was engaged in literary devotion. I had told you before: he believed in 'one man one wife' and had no intention of remarrying. But, I appeared to break his resolve. In fact he loved me and married me mainly because he understood that I too was "mad" with Saiva devotion. I am fortunate to have had him for my husband. I must have observed penances in several births to be rewarded him as a husband. You too who had him for a father must be truly fortunate. There are very few saints in this world who have seen God with their own eyes. Lord Shiva appeared, riding his bull, with Uma by his side and personally took away your father to the heavens. Your father was able to see the Lord as clearly as I am seeing you now..... The wishes of such a saintly man ... You and I are bound to fulfil them."

When his mother had begun to speak in this fashion, son Madurandaka was beginning to shake with fury.

"How can that be Mother? My father did not speak to me and how can I be bound by your promises?" asked Madurandaka.

"Son, when your father reached the abodes of Shiva, you were a babe in arms. So, he could not tell you anything. He told me and made me promise on your behalf. When we were married, at first, we did not wish for any offspring. But I, a foolish girl, could not keep that resolve. My devotion to Lord Shiva was manifest as love for your father. My heart yearned for a child to hold in my arms, to hug to my breasts, to play with, to raise as my own. It became a passion for me this yearning to have a child of my own. I prayed to the Good God and He granted me my boon. He gave you to me. On one hand I was thrilled in body and soul to have you; on the other I feared that your father may be angered by what I had done. But, that saint did not shower his anger on me. He burdened me with the promise that must be kept. Son, I promised your father that I would raise you as one with no interest in life on this earth; one without attachments for worldly wealth; one who would be devoted to the Lord. This I promised your father. I thought I was successful; I was proud of that success till a few years ago. However, my Dear Son, my most beloved Son! I am hearing all sorts of rumors. When I hear those rumors, my heart is wounded again and again. I hope that you can assure me that all those rumors are untrue and that you will soothe my wounds. Will you do that?" asked the mother Sembiyan Madevi.

"Mother, your mysterious words confuse my thinking. What did you hear? What do you expect of me? What do you want me to assure you?" said an enraged Madurandaka.

"Son, you must have lost the power to understand my mind. You want me to speak openly; I will do so. I hear that your heart has tumbled away from path of devotion that is like the holy River Ganga and fallen into the muck of ditch water called desire for land. I hear that you wish to sit on the Chozla throne. I understand that our enemies have poisoned your pure heart in this fashion. I will be rest assured if you can tell me that all this is not true."

Madurandaka now jumped up to stand in front of his mother. Seeing his agitation, Sembiyan Madevi also stood up.

"No enemy has poisoned my heart or mind. How can those who wish to crown me be my enemies? How can those who have come forward to give up their lives for my cause be

my enemies? Never! Do you know who is my true life-enemy? It is you who gave birth to me!" he shouted.

In his rage he forgot all dignity and respect. He forgot Lord Kalanthaka's advice to try and change his mother's mind and began to rave and rant; scold and curse.

"Yes; you are my life enemy. None else. What kind of a mother are you? Are you a mother? A woman? Mothers will strive for the advancement and welfare of their children. That is what I have heard in the stories and fables. I see that in life. You who are against the very nature of motherhood, can you be a woman? Or, are you a monster in human form? What harm have I done to you that you treat me this way? Why do you turn traitor to my cause? Why are you so concerned about taking away a kingdom that rightfully belongs to me by all known laws and giving it away to others? You declare that it is my father's wish. Your promise to him! Where is the proof for all that? I do not believe you! You say that people give me ill advice; No. People have given you that ill advice. They have made enmity between mother and son. I will never give up the Chozla Empire that rightfully belongs to me. Even if you insist, I will not give it up. I will not listen even if my father comes back from the heavens and orders me. This Chozla Empire is mine; this ancient throne is mine; the crown worn by ancient Karikala is mine. This disgusting bead garland around my neck is what you gave me. Because of my respect for you my mother, I wore it all these years. You made me a half-man, ridiculed by all the world. I will remove this rudraska bead garland now! I throw it away and you may pick it up if you want it..."

Shouting like one gone crazy, Madurandaka tried to remove the gold encased holy-bead garland from his neck. It would not come open easily, so he tried to break it. The necklace began to strangle his throat but did not break easily!

Madurandaka was of a handsome, even beautiful countenance. One could say that he was much more good looking than Sundara Chozla and his offspring. He had an attractive feminine charisma on his face. That lovely face was now disfigured with fury, passion and craze. Sembian Madevi closed her eyes unable to bear the sight of his horrible face. She opened her eyes only after he had finished his shouting.

With a serene face and no change in her calm she said, "My Son! Be calm. Even if I am a betraying monster, listen to what I say."

Madurandaka was calmed a little by her soothing voice. "I will listen; I never said I won't."

"You spoke about the nature of motherhood; even a monster will not harm her offspring. Even wild beasts try to protect their offspring from other wild creatures. I too am trying to protect you in a similar fashion. There are other reasons, besides what I have said, for you to forsake the kingdom. Your very life will be in danger if you wish for the kingdom. Which mother who raised her child will not wish to preserve the life of that child? Is there a crime in that? If you covet the kingdom, you will become enemy to Sundara Chozla's children. Aditya Karikala and Arulmozli are very valiant. You have no training in the handling of weapons. All Chozla armies will support the sons of Sundara Chozla. Their Commanders will do the same. The monarchs of all adjacent kingdoms are their friends. Who are your friends? With whose support will you go to war against you cousins? Son, you must have seen the Comet Dhoomaketu which fills the sky in recent nights. The world recognized truth is that a comet in the sky portends evil to princes. I fear that such

evil may befall you. Child, what is wrong in my wishing that my only child should remain alive? How can that be treason towards you?" asked the Elder Pirati.

Madurandaka's rage was calmed by these words. He felt a little more kindly towards his mother.

"Mother, forgive me. You could have told me that this was your concern! I would have removed your worries instantly. I am no friendless orphan. Several nobles of the empire, chieftains and officials are my supporters. Nobles of Pazluvoor and Kadamboor are on my side. Your brother, my Uncle Mazlava-raya is on my side. The king of Neelathan-karai, double canopied Raajali, the chieftain of Kunrator -- all these people support me with all their forces. They have sworn oaths to stand by my side."

"Son, I have no faith in the oaths they swear. Once, these same men swore allegiance to support Sundara Chozla and his sons. Even if we presume that they will stand by you, the armies they command are very small. The large Chozla armies in the north are under Aditya Karikala. The southern forces are under the command of Kodumbalur Velir."

"Mother, the nobles who support me can each bring ten thousand men on my behalf."

"Forget the armies; what about the people! Chozla people are extremely fond of the Emperor and his sons. You must be aware of the popularity of Karikala and Arulmozli. Take today for example: if Arulmozli or even Aditya Karikala had come to Pazlayarai today, can you imagine the welcome the people would have given them? Crowds would have collected from everywhere! Once, this city was fond of you too. Only after you allied yourself with Pazluvoor, you lost popularity."

"Mother, I am least bothered by issues of popularity. What is the use of people's approval? People will show devotion to whoever sits on the throne."

"Son, those who advice you have not even you taught you the rudiments of politics. No king can rule for long without popular support. There is no point in ruling that way either..."

Even as they were talking, they heard a huge noise outside, in the streets in front of the palace. Wails, curses, angry shouts, a thousand questioning voices mingled with each other into a roar that rose like a stormy sea.

"My Son! A grave calamity is about to happen to the Chozla Empire; this must be the first indication of that calamity. I will step outside and find out what is the matter. Remain here till I come back."

Ponniyin Selvan -- Part III

Chapter 22 -- Uproar

Vandiya Devan recognized the maid in the boat as Princess Kundavai when he came down to the lake shore. Since Azlvar-adiyan was standing by his side, he hesitated.

"Thambi, why are you hesitating? Younger Pirati has been waiting a long time for you. As soon as you get into the boat tell her that the Prince has come home and he is safe. Tell her the good news immediately before you start boasting about your adventures. I'll go back now. We have unleashed a monster of confusion today. I'll try to re-cage it! See what

troubles your impetuous behavior leads to?" after saying this, Azlvar-adiyan went away by the same garden path.

Vandiya Devan was completely astonished: how does he know all this? He did not even question me! Is he guessing? Or, does he really know? Those born to the trade are surely more expert at it. He is born to the art of espionage; unlike me, forced into it... getting into trouble. He is an expert who does things without undue excitement. But, who is his master? Could all that he says about himself be true?

With such thoughts he went down the steps and waded into the water. The boat had come closer and he got into it. He looked at Kundavai's face and forgot everything: Azlvar-adiyan, his troubles on the street, the mission he had accomplished. He forgot the world, himself even. Ah! This maid's face -- it never parted company from my thoughts. Dream filled nights, busy days, in forests, in stormy seas it has been my constant companion. When I see her in front of me like this, how much more beautiful she looks! Why does my heart feel such turmoil? Why are my lips unable to speak? Why does my heart beat so quickly?

The Princess made a sign to her deaf-mute boatman who began to push the long bamboo pole. The boat danced and Vandiya Devan's heart also danced.

"Soothsayer! Will you foretell the future only for Princes? Will you read my future too? How will you predict? Will you study the planets and stars in the sky? Will the read the omens of bird flight? Will you read the lines on my palm? Perhaps you read faces... Otherwise, why would you gaze at me like this? If you stare at women like this, no well-born maid will come to consult you!" Kundavai laughed with a joyous tinkling sound.

"My Lady, I am not looking at your face to foretell the future. I was trying to remember, it seems familiar... a face that I had seen somewhere ... sometime...."

"Yes, I know! I know that you are very forgetful. Let me remind you. About forty days ago, you saw me for the first time in the house of the astrologer at Kudanthai. That same evening on the banks of River Arisil...."

"It cannot be My Lady! I cannot believe you. Did I see you only forty days ago? Not forty thousand years ago? Haven't I met you for hundreds and hundreds of births a thousand thousand times? Did I not see you on the hill slope? On the mountain top, beside the waterfall? Did I not save you from the tiger that chased you through the primeval jungle? Didn't I throw my spear and kill that beast? I was a hunter in the forest at that time. I threw my nets and caught multicolored birds and gave them to you. You took those birds from me and set them free to fly away in the sky, laughing merrily. Once, I was a fisherman. From distant streams and lakes I caught silver and golden fish and gave them to you. You threw them back in the river and was overjoyed to see them swim away. I went far and dived into the deepest sea to find brilliant pearls and corals, stringing them for you. You ran your finger through them and gave them away to children playing in the streets saying `go play marbles.' I brought you a rare fig that ripens once in thirty years on a three hundred year old tree. You gave that fruit to you pet parrot and watched as he pecked at it with his red beak. I brought mandara and parijatha flowers from heaven to shower on your head. You declared they were not as pretty or as fragrant as the mullai in you back yard fence. I took away the ruby necklace from Devendra, the King of Heavens and brought it for you. `Why would I touch this ornament worn by an immoral person?'

you said as you refused to accept it. I went to Mount Kailasa and performed severe penance before Goddess Parvathi and obtained her anklet for you. You said, 'Oh what blasphemy is this, how could I even touch this divine jewel, let alone wear it on my feet! Go give it back to her.' I fought many battles and conquered sixty-four kings, collecting their crowns as tribute given at your feet. You kicked them away and I worried that it might have hurt your delicate toes. Princess isn't all this true? Or, did I meet you only forty days ago?" asked Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

"Oh Dear! This Soothsayer has gone crazy! We must turn the boat and go back to shore!" said Kundavai.

"No, Princess, no. Till I came to this lakeshore a few minutes ago, my senses were in very good shape. Otherwise could I have managed to enter this city? Could I have thought of the trick to join Lord Madurandaka's household, made him believe me and come into the palace? Could I have escaped that Doctor's Son so easily? Only when I got into this boat and looked at you, I lost my senses and ..."

"Sir, then do not look at my face. Look at this crystal clear lake. Look at the blue sky; at the tall trees on the bank; at those rising palace towers; those marbled steps; these blue-water lilies and lotus flowers. If not, look at the face of my boatman and tell me if your mission was successful. Have you brought back the Prince? Is he well and safe? Where is he now? With whom did you leave him? Tell me that first and then tell me everything that happened since you rode away from here."

Vandiya Devan answered, "If I had not been successful, would I have come back to look at you? I have brought the Prince away from Lanka. I overcame a thousand obstacles in that effort. I cannot say that the Prince is well, because, when I parted from him, he was in the grip of high fever. But, he is in safe hands. He is in the care of boatgirl Poonkuzlali and garden keeper Sendan Amudan. They will willingly give up their lives to protect the Prince."

A loud roaring noise in the distance invaded their privacy at that moment. Several thousand voices raised in a roaring wail. Both Vandiya Devan and Younger Pirati Kundavai turned their heads towards that noise. The deaf boatman continued to pole the boat.

Kundavai asked worriedly, "What was that uproar? It seems like shouts of an angry mob gathered outside the palace?"

"Yes, it sounds like that," said Vandiya Devan.

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
Kaalaa-mukhas Ascetic followers of Shiva, a fanatic sect
Kaavi Reddish, ocher dye
Kadal Sea
Kadamba A flower
Kama Love, Passion
Kapaalika An ascetic sect of Saiva Faith
Karadi 1. A musical instrument 2. Bear
Karagam Folk dance with balancing decorated pots
Karaiyar Coastal, fisherfolk
Karpaga A cornucopious tree of heavens
Karppu Sanctity of a married woman. Chastity
Kavi 1. Poet 2. Monkey
Kinnara Demi-divinities; heavenly musicians
Kolam Decorative drawings of rice flour
Konnai, Konrai A flowering tree; red flowers of the mountains
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 Deception, unreal

Moringa A leafy tree

Mu-ttholl-ayiram A collection of romantic verse in Tamil

Muzlai Cave

Naadu Country

Naamam A vertical, religious mark worn by followers of Vishnu

Nanal A sedge like grass

Nandavana 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

Pattinam City or Town

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

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 dais 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

Yaazl A stringed musical instrument
