



கல்கி கிருஷ்ணமூர்த்தியின்
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Ponni's Beloved - Part 4A (Jeweled Crown)
ponniyin celvan of kalki krishnamurthi, part 4A,
English translation by Indira Neelameggham

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Ponniyin Celvan of Kalki Krishnamurthi
English Translation by Indra Neelameggham
Part IVA : Jeweled Crown [Chapters 1-23]

Source:

Ponni's Beloved - Part 4A : Jeweled Crown

English Translation of Kalki's "Ponniyin Selvan" (Translation first edition 2022)

Translated By Indra Neelameggham, South Jordan, Utah, 2022

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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 **ḷ** place names uses the more popular anglicized version -- when applicable.

The letters **zl** are used to denote the Tamil alphabet/sound.

There is no known way to symbolize this in English. Thus, the name 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.

Usage of certain terms and words uses the older archaic form rather than modern American /internet usage. One such example: Maid is used to mean young girl rather

than servant; maiden could have been used, but was not used in the rendering earlier.

Spelling is American English rather than UK English.

For further details on Chozla history of this period, refer to Colas by Prof K.A. Nilakanta Sastri, Madras University Historical Series 9, 1955, reprinted 1984, University of Madras, India.

The Glossary at the end gives explanatory notes for some Tamil words.

The Gallery in the website has pictures to understand some cultural features [Ex. Thinnai] and more.

Website: <https://indllc.wixsite.com/indrasponniyinselvan>

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-chetchenni 'Who had wonderful chariots drawn by Arab horses.' He ruled from Kavripattinam 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.

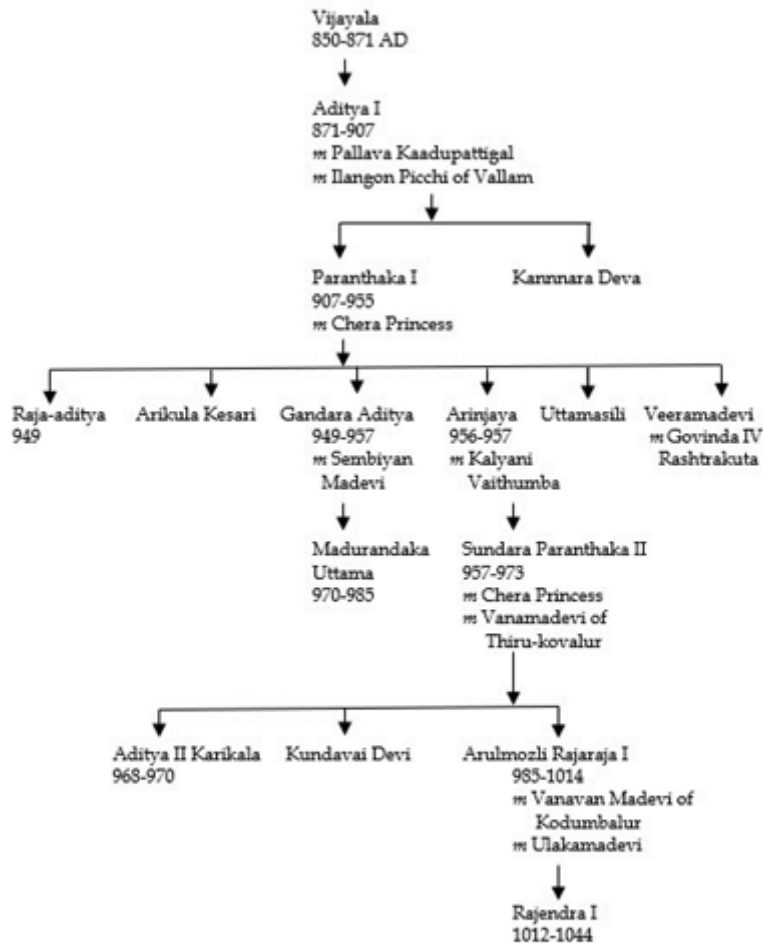
By the ninth century, the delta region of the Cauvery basin was already densely populated; nevertheless, it was still in the process of being cleared of forest and being settled. Politically the Cauvery delta was still a frontier region between the settled lands of the Pallavas in the north and Pandiyas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

Imperial Chozla's began their expansion under Vijayala (AD 841-878). He captured Tanjavur (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 Thakkolam, 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 was presumed to have 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. Chozla influence went even further and the Bay of Bengal was but a 'lake for the Chozla navies' who controlled the pirates and had sway over very prosperous trade routes.

Kulottunga I is said to have established embassies with Imperial China. Several hundred years later, during the last years of Kulottunga III (1178-1218), Jatavarman

Sundara Pandiya I, and later his son Maravarman Kulasekhara Pandiya entered the heartland of the Chozla country. After that the empire struggled for its very existence. Upon the death of Rajendra III (1279) the Chozla territories were absorbed into the Pandiya Kingdom.

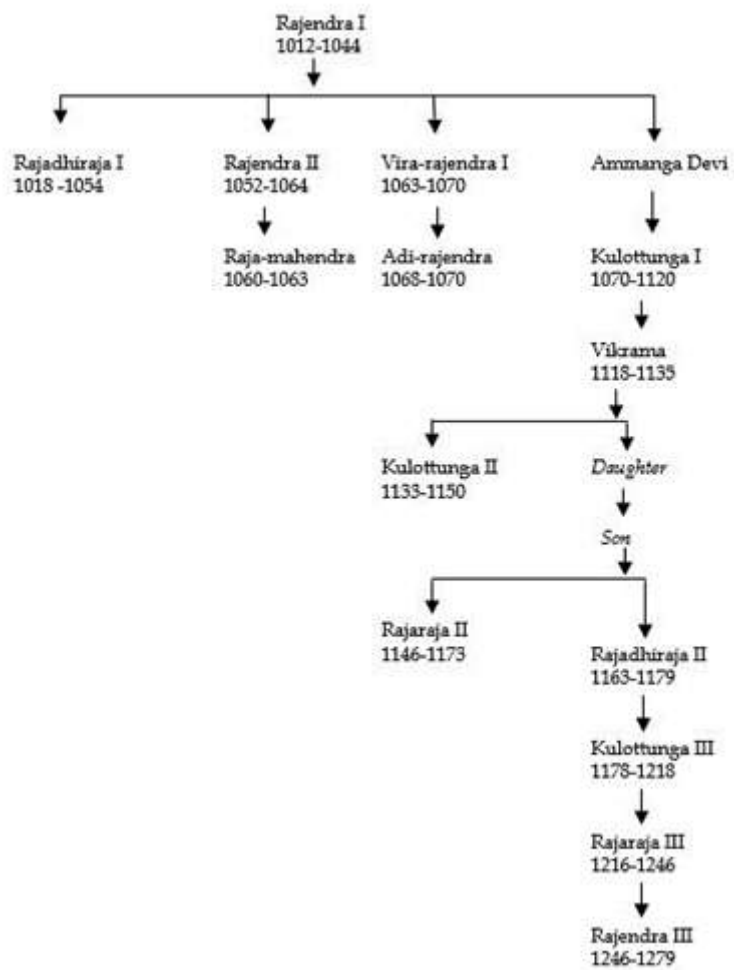
Imperial Chozlas – Dynasty Chart



Birth year not indicated.

Regnal years are shown. Dates include period as Crown Prince as they ruled concurrently

Ref: Colas Madras University Historical Series 9
K. A. Nilakanta Sastry
University of Madras Press (1984)



Map 1: Chozla Country



Map 3 Kodi Karai and Northern Lanka

The Story So Far In The First Three Parts

Arulmozli Varma who was later famous in history as Rajaraja I, was Sundara Chozla's second son. When he was a child and had gone on a pleasure trip with the family, boating on the Cauvery, he had looked down to pick a flower floating on the water and had fallen into the Cauvery. When everyone was agitated looking for the child, a woman lifted the child from the river floods, left him on the boat and vanished. Everyone felt that Mother Cauvery herself had come and rescued the child. Everyone in the palace, and country began calling him Ponni's Beloved Prince, darling child of the Cauvery also known as Ponni.

The Prince was also very popular having captured the hearts of all the people of the Chozla kingdom. His sister, Kundavai Devi, known as the Younger Pirati or royal Princess was even more popular. She had immense affection for her brother. She

absolutely believed that this younger brother would attain immense fame and honors in the future even though he had no rights to the Chozla throne. She wanted her friend, living with her and other noblewomen at Pazlayarai, Vanathi of Kodumbalur to be married to Arulmozli.

Arulmozli obeyed every wish of his sister. At her urging he had gone to the battlefield in Lanka and gained fame as a brave warrior. The men of the Chozla battalion were free with nothing to do after King Mahinda of Lanka had retreated to his Rohana Mountain fortress. The Prince undertook various projects that pleased the people of Lanka. Most importantly, he arranged to renovate the many ancient Buddhist monuments in the old, war-devastated capital Anuradhapura. Overjoyed by this, one sect of the Buddhist congregations in Lanka came forward and offered the Throne and Crown of Lanka to Arulmozli. The Prince however declined to accept.

The Prince became acquainted with a deaf-mute elderly woman who wandered the ruins and forests of Lanka, as if she was crazy, a nobody. He came to know that she was the woman who had saved him from drowning in the Cauvery when he was a child. From pictures she drew he came to understand her history, to some extent. He understood how, his father Sundara had been castaway on an island near Lanka and had lived on that island for some time. His father had fallen in love with the mute woman and lived with her on that island. Arulmozli made some conclusions about the twins born to that mute woman.

Sundara Chozla was paralyzed and lay bedridden in the palace at Tanjavur. For some time now, a comet, the Dhoomaketu was filling the late-night skies. People of the Chozla country were worried about the omen of the comet, and felt that danger threatened someone in the royal family. Many believed that the last days of Sundara Chozla were nearing. The debate all over the country was who would be crowned to rule after him.

Sundara Chozla's eldest son and the Crown Prince Aditya Karikala lived in Kanchi at that time. He was very brave. After defeating the Pandiya king and making him retreat from the battlefield, the Prince followed him to his hiding place. He chopped off the head of that Pandiyan King and brought it to Tanjavur. He went to Kanchi as a representative of Sundara Chozla and as commander of northern forces. However, the Prince had no peace in his mind. The reason for that was a girl named Nandini.

When they were children Aditya and Nandini had been playmates, friends. She had been raised in the house of a temple priest. Later her family had moved to the Pandiya country. In his last days, King Veera Pandiya had been hiding in her home. When Aditya had raised his sword to chop off Veera Pandiya's head, Nandini intervened and begged him not to do so. Karikala ignored her pleas and killed Veera Pandiya. After that incident, Nandini's tear laden face appeared in his dreams and when he was awake and tortured Aditya Karikala's mind, giving him no peace. At that time the two lords of Pazluvoor wielded much power in the Chozla empire. The Elder Lord Pazluvoor was a veteran of many battles and wore more than sixty-four wound marks on his body. He was the finance minister of the kingdom. His rule was law in the land. His brother the younger Lord Pazluvoor was the commander of Tanjavur fort. None could meet with the Emperor without their permission.

Sometime after the death of Veera Pandiya, Nandini married Lord Pazluvoor even though he was in his late sixties. The old man was enslaved by her enchanting beauty that had a mesmerizing charisma. Many others fell prey to her allure. At Nandini's instigation, old man Pazluvoor developed a dislike for Aditya Karikala and his siblings. He decided that after Sundara Chozla, the crown should be given to Madurandaka Deva rather than to Karikala. He garnered the support of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya and other powerful chieftains for his cause.

Madurandaka was the son of devout Gandara Aditya who was the elder uncle of Sundara Chozla. Gandara Aditya's wife Sembiyan Madevi, was the epitome of Saiva devotion. When King Gandara Aditya died, Madurandaka was a babe in arms. His

mother raised him in the path of Saiva devotion. And in his younger days, Madurandaka too had no interest in worldly affairs. After he married a daughter of the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor, and upon the encouragement by Nandini, he became interested in ruling the kingdom. After a while the interest became an obsession. The Lords of Pazluvoor and others in support, favored Madurandaka's rights to the Throne.

There were two other chieftain families in the Chozla kingdom: Thiru-kovalur Malayaman and the Velirs of Kodumbalur who refused to acknowledge these new claims. They stood firm on the side of the children of Sundara Chozla.

Sundara Chozla understood all these undercurrents in his empire. He did not wish for the Chozla empire to be reduced to nothing after his time. He wanted to consult with his sons and come to a peaceful conclusion. He was ready to bequeath the throne to Madurandaka. But, Sembian Madevi, Madurandaka's mother did not support that idea. That elderly Lady tried to change Madurandaka away from wanting the kingdom.

Aditya Karikala, did not wish to go to Tanjavur which was under the control of the Lords Pazluvoor. He sent a letter to his father asking that his father should come to Kanchi and stay in the new golden palace he had built for him. A brave young man called Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan carried the letters and messages. That young man during the journey, went to Kadamboor to meet his friend Kandamaran and stayed with him for a night. He overheard the secret conspiracy planned against Aditya Karikala. In that same place he became acquainted with Azlvar-adiyan Nambi, a fanatic follower of the Vaishnava faith. Later he finds out that Nambi was a confidential spy reporting to Prime Minister Anirudda.

The Prime Minister Anbil Anirudda Brahma-rama was a childhood friend of Sundara Chozla. He knew the secrets of all the Chozla families. His dream was that the empire should grow and spread and attain great fame. He wished that Chozla

warriors should conquer lands beyond the Ganges even till the old rivers of the Sindhu. He felt that the Chozlas would assist in deterring the barbaric hordes invading from beyond the north western mountains causing loss of law and order and desecration of Hindu faith in the blessed regions of the Gangetic plains. The squabbles in the kingdom would ruin his dreams. He wished to stop the internal conflicts and find an amicable solution. Though he knew the secrets of everything happening in the country, he did not reveal this knowledge to anyone.

Vandiya Devan who carried the letters to Tanjavur, met Princess Kundavai at the house of the Astrologer of Kudanthai. Even at that first meeting both he and Kundavai found that they had a liking for each other. Later there were other occasions that helped that affection grow. Carrying a letter given by Kundavai, Vandiya Devan crossed the seas to go to Lanka. He met Prince Arulmozli and gave him the letters in which Kundavai had written, 'there is great danger to the kingdom. Come quickly.' The Prince who held his sister in great esteem and affection was getting ready to oblige her wishes. At that same time, he had two other messages. Parthiban Pallava sent by Kanchi Karikala wanted the Prince to go with him to Kanchi. The Lords Pazluvoor had sent two armed ships with orders from the Emperor to arrest Arulmozli, (for the treason of coveting Lankas throne) and bring him to Tanjavur. Lord Pazluvoor who was angry about Kundavai did not wish for the Prince to meet her.

Prince Arulmozli wished to honor his father's orders first. The ship carrying him was engulfed in a whirlwind in the middle of the sea. In order to rescue his friend Vandiya Devan, the Prince jumped into the stormy sea in the middle of that whirlwind. They floated in the sea holding on to a log that had fallen from one of the ships that had been shattered in the storm. A boat girl named Poonkuzlali saved them when she was plying her boat in the morning after the storm.

Even while floating in the sea, the Prince was gripped by a severe fever and shivering sickness; It was a fever that was endemic in several parts of Lanka.

Poonkuzlali and her cousin Sendan Amudan carried the Prince in her boat and took him to the safety of Choodamani Buddhist Vihara in Nagai Port. Vandiya Devan went to Pazlayarai and reported all these details to Kundavai. At the same time, they came to know that Aditya Karikala had been invited to Kadamboor fort for a banquet. They also had the news that Nandini and Lord Pazluvoor too were going to Kadamboor.

Prime Minister Anirudda and Kundavai believed that if Karikala and Nandini were to meet, something untoward could happen. They wished to prevent such a meeting. Kundavai sent Vandiya Devan to Karikala: he should try his utmost to prevent the meeting, if not, he should be like a body armor and guard Prince Karikala.

Vandiy Devan finds out some details about another very mysterious and terrifying conspiracy – in the middle of the forest at Thiru-Puram-biyam.

Nandini and others, including Ravidasa the Sorcerer were at that meeting. There was also a very young child in that place. They placed that child upon an old tarnished throne and swore a terrible oath. They had given a shining, sharp sword to that child and asked him to choose one among them to execute their plans of revenge. The child gave the sword to Nandini, who accepted and said she would fulfil the task herself. Ravidasa and the other men wanted to sacrifice –kill- Vandiya Devan in that forest as he knew too many of their secrets. Nandini stopped them. They tied him up and left him there in the darkness. Azlvar-adiyan who had put on a masquerade as a Kaalaa-mukha Saiva acetic came and led Vandiya Devan out of that terrifying forest.

Madurandaka went on a ride by himself, wanting to attend a convention of the frightful Kaalaa-mukhas, hoping to garner their support for his cause. His horse bolted and threw him under a tree. Prime Minister Anirudda chanced to see him under the tree when he was traveling to his home town; he helped the prince and took him home to treat him for sprains and bruises caused by the fall.

Kundavai and Vanathi went to the town of Aanai-mangalam near Nagaipattinam. They met prince Arulmozli at the Nandi Pavilion on the canal. Kundavai insisted that the young Prince should remain at the Buddhist monastery for some more time because of the restless disturbances in the country. It would also help him regain his strength after the poison fever and shivering sickness that had gripped him. Poonkuzlali in the boat heard the three of them laughing about something and was filled by a jealous rage. Sendan Amudan tried to calm her down.

Because of the news that Ponni's Beloved Prince might have drowned at sea, the whole Chozla empire and even beyond was in turmoil.

Chapter 1 – On the Banks of the Kedilam

Of the many rivers that made the region of Thiru-munaipadi fertile with flow of sweet water was the Kedilam River. The temple of Lord Shiva Veerattaan in the town of Thiru-Vadhigai where the Lord showed his grace and accepted Saint Appar (Thiru-Naavukk-arasar) into the fold of Saiva faith was situated near this river. Thiru-Naavalur town where Lord Shiva stopped Saint Sundara-murthy, from deviating from the true path of devotion, is near this river. In those days (during the times of this story) there was, between these two sacred towns, a Royal Road going towards the Thondai regions. The ferry waterfront where the Royal Road crossed River Kedilam was always lively and busy. The sound of noisy bird calls and flapping wings as they nested on the tall trees on the river bank could be heard. Travelers unyoked their bullocks from the carts and rested under shady trees to eat their food packed for the journey. Rice grains that they scattered playfully towards the sky, were picked clean by the birds; any crumbs falling accidentally into the river were pounced upon by the fish. Young children who saw this would clap their hands, with loud exclamations of wonder and tinkling-happy laughter expressing their joy.

(Note: A Royal Road or raaja-veedhi was one that was well maintained to accommodate horsemen, chariot traffic and wheeled wagons and carts of merchants.

The roads usually had shade giving trees planted on both sides for the comfort of foot traffic. Rest areas and rest pavilions were often built at periodic intervals along such roads for the comfort of travelers.)

In the early days of Aippasi month (October-November) water flow in the river was greater than usual. The travelers tarrying from the midday sun, to eat their lunches were also noisier than usual. Drowning all this, suddenly a louder noise was heard, in the far distance on the Royal Road, making them pause with surprise. Some travelers, clambered up the river bank to look: only a dust cloud was visible first; then they could see an elephant, horses, palanquin, men carrying banners and royal retainers coming down the road. As they came closer, they could hear the loud proclamations of heralds announcing some dignitary.

“Be Aware! Be aware! Here comes the bravest among the brave who entered battlefields when barely twelve years of age, the KoParakesari who plucked the head of Veera-Pandiya, a veritable Lion feared even in their dreams by the Irattai-mandala Chalukyas, Commander in chief of Northern Forces, honored son of the triple crowned Emperor Sundara Chozla, Aditya Karikala the Prince of Chozlas; he arrives, he arrives, be aware, be aware!”

On hearing these words of the heralds proclaiming in a thunderous voice echoing in all eight directions, all the people scrambled quickly to come up the river bank. They made a pathway to the river wharf in the middle but crowded on both sides eager to have a glimpse of that brave young Prince. The heralds, trumpeters, pennant holders, and such men came first and reached the waterfront. After this retinue came three horses trotting side by side. Three brave young men were astride those three horses.

Catching a glimpse of them, even from afar, the people began pointing out who was who and began talking about them. “The one riding in the middle is Prince Aditya

Karikala. Can't you recognize by the golden crown on his head? How that crown shines in the rays of this sun!" said one man.

"You are amazed by this crown! One must see when he will wear the Jeweled Crown of ancient Karikala Valava. They say that it shines like a million suns blinding the eyes!" said another.

"Thambi, that is not really the crown of old Karikala; they ceremoniously speak in that fashion. The crown that Sundara Chozla wears was made during the times of Emperor Paranthaka. How much longer, who knows!" said yet another.

The first man replied, "they keep saying that, counting the years! It appears that Sundara Chozla will live forever!"

"May it be so! As long as he is alive the country will be without strife or confusion."

"Ah, one cannot be sure of that. After the news that Ponni's Beloved Prince was drowned at sea, all of Chozla country is in utter chaos. People coming from those places are saying that war may be imminent!"

"War! Between who and whom? Why war?"

"They say it may be war between the Lords of Pazluvoor and Velirs of Kodumbalur. Many of the chieftains are meeting at Kadamboor Fort of Sambuvaraya, to prevent any such thing happening. Prince Karikala is also going there."

"The horsemen are almost here! Don't talk so loudly!" warned one man but he continued, "Prince Karikala's face looks very weary and sad, can you see!"

“How can it be but sad? This Crown Prince treasured his dear brother. Will the elder brother not be worried if there is no news about the younger, beloved brother? And the father is lying on a sickbed with no mobility.”

“All that is natural in life. That is not why the Prince looks so downcast. Karikala wanted to invade the Irattai-mandala Chalukyas and go to war. That has not materialized. That is the real reason for his gloominess.”

“Why did that not materialize? Who stopped him from going to war?”

“Who else? The Pazluvoor nobles. They are refusing to release the funds needed to gather arms, and supplies for such an invasion.”

Another man now spoke, “They make up all sorts of untrue explanations. None among you are aware of the real reason!”

“Ahaa! You man, whose knows everything! Why don't you tell us the real reason?”

“Aditya Karikala was in love with some girl from the Pandiya country. When the Prince had gone north to the war near North Pennar, Lord Pazluvoor married that girl. She is now the Young Queen of Pazluvoor, wielding all powerful in Chozla country. From that time Aditya's mind is totally upset.”

“Could be, could be so! Our elders say that in this world, a woman is at the root of all disputes.”

“Which elder says such things, Thambi? Utter foolishness! If the Prince liked a girl, will she go and marry a sixty-year-old man? Those who say, will say such things; don't they who listen have any sense?”

“Then why hasn't Aditya Karikala taken a wife still? You explain that Sir!”

“Keep quiet you fellows. They have come close. The man to right of the Prince appears to be the Pallava nobleman Parthiban. Who is the man coming on his left? Is he Vandiya Devan, the nobleman from the Vaanar clan?”

“No, no. He is Kadamboor Sambuvaraya’s son Kandamaran. Sambuvaraya sent his son personally, to invite him, just in case the Prince will not honor a mere letter inviting the Prince to his palace.”

“From this, one can surmise that something very important is happening.”

“Yes, it could be something related to politics in the country; or it could be about weddings! As long as the Prince remains unmarried, all these, subordinate chieftains will vie with each other in casting their nets to catch him. The first girl to be married to him will have the honor of being seated on the Chozla throne, wont she?”

Thus gossiped the idle crowd, standing around watching the happenings on the banks of River Kedilam. The three horsemen came and stopped at the water’s edge.

A chariot that had been following a little behind the horses, came to a stop under the pipal tree. Thiru-kovalur Malayaman, the brave man of eighty some years of age, was in that chariot. Aditya Karikala seated on his horse by the water’s edge turned to look at him.

Chapter 2 – Grandsire and Grandson

The old man in the chariot made a sign, and Aditya Karikala turned his horse around and went closer to the chariot where his grandfather was seated.

“My Child! Karikala, I am thinking that I shall take leave of you here and go on to Thiru-kovalur. I need to tell you about some important things before I go. Get down from your horse and come to that seat under the pipal tree,” he said.

“Yes Grandfather,” said Karikala as he jumped down from his horse. The old man also stepped down from the chariot. Both walked towards the seat under the pipal tree.

Parthiban Pallava looked at Kandamaran and said, “Good thing this! I was afraid that this old man will not let go and continue with us all the way.”

“And I was thinking if I should push him into the floods of Vellaru and drown him if he continued!” said Kandamaran.

Admiring their own words, both laughed with pleasure.

Thiru-kovalur Malayaman the chieftain of Malainadu, began to speak:

“Aditya you were born on this day, twenty-five years ago. Yes, you were born in my palace at Thiru-kovalur. All those celebrations on that day! I remember them as if it were yesterday. Your clansmen, people of my families, chieftains of Chozla provinces and Thondai provinces, many had gathered. The men belonging to them more than thirty thousand brave warriors, had come. One cannot describe adequately, the banquets arranged for them. Such feasts and celebrations did not take place even during your father’s coronation. The wealth in my treasury, collected since the times of my ancestors for more than a hundred years were all spent in

those three days of celebration. At that time, your great grandfather, Emperor Paranthaka himself, and your father Sundara Chozla too, had come to Thiru-kovalur. There is no measure for the happiness they felt upon hearing that a male child was born! They were joyous that you were born to establish the greatness of the Chozlas. The elder brothers of your grandfather had no offspring till that day. Your father was the only child of Arinjaya. At your age, he dazzled with the good looks of Manmatha, the lord of Love. None had seen a handsome man like him amongst the Chozla clans or even among the chieftains of the Tamil lands. Because of this, your father had some problems. He was the darling child of the palace. When he was younger, the women folk in the palace were wont to dress him like a girl and enjoy his loveliness. 'If only he had been born a girl!' they said. Great kings and Chiefs from Lanka to the Vindhya hills came, waiting patiently, to give their daughters in wedlock to your father. They were eager because here he was, a veritable Arjuna or Manmatha in good looks, heir to the great Chozla throne. In the end I had the honor to have your father as my son-in-law.

"In our lineage, we, both men and women were not known for our physical beauty. We would think that the number of battle scars on the body was the measure of our attractiveness. Our women prized character and chastity, karppu, as their goods looks and ornaments. When we had decided to give my daughter in wedlock to your father all of Malai Nadu, my province, was in tumult. Every chieftain of the empire was jealous. I did not care. The wedding of your parents took place at Tanjavur, with pomp that astounded the three worlds. The celebrations at your birth were much more than what they had at that wedding. There was much happy debate about choosing a name for you. Some wanted to name you after the most famous of the Chozla ancestors, Karikala Valavan. Others including me insisted that we name you after your elder grandfather Rajaaditya famous for his bravery (Rajaaditya died in the battle at Thakkolam). In the end we named you after both as Aditya Karikala.

"Look over there Aditya! Look at that temple tower of Thiru-Naavalur. It is the birthplace of blessed saint Sundara-murthy. Twenty-five years ago, your elder

grandfather Rajaaditya had camped in that town. I have heard of valiant warriors in stories and histories. I have seen many heroic men in these brave Tamil Lands. But I have not seen or heard of a person more daring than Rajaaditya. Anyone who has seen him in the battlefield will say the same.

“He was making preparations here, to collect a vast army to invade the northern lands. He had resolved to vanquish Kannaradeva the King of Irattai-mandala Rashtrakutas and wreck his capital city Manyaketa to rubble. Rajaaditya thought that, only if Manyaketa city was reduced to dust, just like what Mamalla had done to Vaataapi in days gone by, would the pestilence of the kings of Irattai-mandala be contained; and he too could earn fame like the Pallava Mamalla of old. Is it an easy task to collect the huge army needed for such ambitions? They say that Mamalla took seven years to collect his army. Rajaaditya said he did not need that long a time, three or four years would be enough for him. He chose this area between this River Kedilam and South Pennar as being suitable to collect the army and train that vast army.

“Aditya! You have not been fortunate to see these areas between these two rivers in those days. Those who saw it, would never forget it as long as they live. Rajaaditya was positioned at Thiru-naavalur with thirty-thousand men. At Mudiyyur, on the banks of River Pennar was camped the Chera Chieftain Vellan Kumaran, with twenty thousand men. Your grandfather Arinjaya was at Thiru-kovalur with me. Arinjaya and I readied fifty-thousand men. In addition to these men, the Elder Velir of Kodumbalur, this Lord Pazluvoor who has turned into a veritable Saturn (an evil planet that portends no good) for the Chozlas, Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor, Munai Raya the princeling of this Chiru-munai-paadi, Mazlavaraya of the Mazlavas, the Elder of Kunrator, the chief of the Vaithumbas – all of them came with their forces to camp between these rivers. Elephant divisions, cavalry regiments, the three ‘hands’ of the Well Known Kaikola battalions, all had camps here. There would often be training battle exercises between these armies bivouacked here. When elephants clashed with elephants it was like an earthquake had struck. When the cavalry rode with men

holding flashing spears, the sound was like the roar of ocean floods at the end of all creation. When the men practiced archery, the downpour of their arrows would hide the skies. When thousands of men rose in formation to attack the enemy with loud shouts of 'naavalo, naaval,' battle-cries and taunts proclaiming victory, it would appear as if the end of the world had come. People would come in droves to feast their eyes on all this.

“The people of these regions, Thiru-Munaipadi and Nadu-naadu, are good people, brave people. When all these armies gathered here, their farming and agriculture suffered. They did not mind. To thank these good people of these regions, Rajaaditya constructed several irrigation reservoirs in these lands. He arranged to create a new river to divert the waters of the Kollidam and fill the Veera Narayana Lake. The fellow who prospered most because of that huge lake and its bounty is Kadamboor Sambuvaraya. I am verily surprised to see him now, proud with wealth and how he had stood those days, humble and submissive!” went on the old man.

Aditya interrupted and said, “Grandfather why do you worry about the haughtiness of Sambuvaraya? Tell me about the battle that took place at Thakkolam. When did this huge army amassed on the banks of this Kedilam deploy from here? In spite of all these arrangements and training, in spite of my elder grandfather being so capable and brave, why did our Chozla forces face defeat at Thakkolam? You too have fought in that war, haven't you? You would know, having seen it in person?”

“Yes, I too was in that battlefield. I shall tell you about that:

“Rajaaditya was collecting all these armies and training them here to do battle in distant lands. Because of various reasons, he could not start at the time he had planned. War had begun again in Lanka. They had to send forces to bring that under control. The Emperor did not wish to deploy forces of the best men and commanders of the Chozlas to the distant lands in the north, with an active enemy in his south. He

kept saying they could move after the Lanka war was concluded. Rajaaditya waited patiently, unable to go against the words of his father.

“But the enemies did not wait! Kannaradeva, the Rashtrakuta of Irattai-mandala had been gathering huge armies on his part, to invade the Chozla territories. He had started south with his huge army. The Ganga King Buthuga, joined Kannaradeva with his own large force. Like the north sea and the south sea joining together, the massive armies of Ganga Buthuga and Rashtrakutas joined together like a vast ocean, and they began coming. Whales in that ocean were the thousands of elephants; tens of thousands of horsemen were the sharks of that ocean. As if all the seven seas had joined to boil over in a frightening deluge of pralaya floods that destroy all of creation, that ocean of an army marched towards the south; it appeared as if it would completely drown all the southern lands. Those were the details reported by our spies who came swift as the wind, swift as thought, retelling what they had found out.

“Emperor Paranthaka declared, that it too, was good, for a reason. It was better strategy; instead of making our troops march far into enemy country and face the enemy after a long tiring march, it was preferable to drag the enemy forces nearer to our land, surround them from all sides and annihilate them. He gave permission for our troops to move only after we had news that the enemy had reached North Vengadam.

“No sooner was permission received, than Rajaaditya acted. Three-hundred-thousand-foot soldiers, fifty thousand horsemen, ten thousand war elephants, two thousand chariots, three hundred and twenty commanders, thirty-two underlords and chieftains who were in that army marched forth. I too had the good fortune to go as part of that force. I am also the unfortunate who survived that battle and came back.

“After a three-day march, our forces and the enemy forces met at the battlefield of Thakkolam, which is two leagues to the north of Kanchi.

“Aditya, in old stories, our puranas, we have heard about the battle between Devendra the King of Gods and Demon Vrittasura and about the great battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas; those who witnessed the battle of Thakkolam would say that those ancient battles were mere skirmishes. The enemy forces were about twice the size of our forces. We came to know that there were five-hundred-thousand men and thirty thousand war elephants in their army. So what? They did not have a capable commander like your elder grandfather Rajaaditya. The guardian deities Valor and of Victory appeared to be on our side.

“The war lasted for ten days. It became impossible to count the number of dead on either side. In the field, like dark hillocks lay elephants that had fallen dead. Though losses were heavy on both sides, the enemy weakened. They soon realized the reason for this! Wherever Rajaaditya’s elephant went, proudly flying the Tiger flag, the Goddess of Victory followed. Wherever our men appeared weary, Rajaaditya’s elephant went there; upon seeing that elephant and the brave warrior riding that elephant, our men felt revived, overcoming their weariness they gained triple the strength and attacked the enemy. The enemy who had been watching this for those ten days, engineered and manipulated a truly heinous plot. We knew that it was all a set-up only later.

“The one who connived and executed the plan was the Ganga King Buthuga. Suddenly that wretch, flew a flag of peace upon his elephant, raised both his hands and approached with loud cries of “refuge, refuge!” Rajaaditya was nearby. Buthuga must have behaved in that fashion only after seeing the houdah atop the elephant flying the Tiger Flag. The heart of that great warrior Rajaaditya was filled with compassion when he saw an enemy king coming towards him with words seeking refuge. Rajaaditya wished to find out if the Emperor of the Rashtrakutas, was himself about to surrender seeking an end to the war, or was this Buthuga separating himself from his emperor and coming to join our side.

“He sounded the conches and signaled the body guards around him to move away. He made a sign for Buthuga’s elephant to approach his elephant. Buthuga came closer with folded palms towards Rajaaditya. Seeing the tears streaming from the enemy king’s eyes, Rajaaditya began to feel even more compassionate.

“At that time Rajaaditya perhaps, did not remember the cautionary couplets from the Kural, about friendships that should be avoided, by the greatest poet of the Tamil country, Thiruvalluvar:

Weapons will be hidden in the folded palms of an enemy

The tears of such an enemy too are such, it conceals dishonesty

“The Chozla was touched by the enemy’s tears, allowing Buthuga to approach even closer. “What is this?” he asked. Rajaaditya was somewhat disgusted by the reply of that crafty enemy: Buthuga indicated that he has advised Kannaradeva the Rashtrakuta that they must surrender as loss was imminent; since Kannaradeva had refused, he alone decided to separate from that emperor and surrender. On hearing this Rajaaditya chided him severely. Even as he was telling him that he would not take such a defector into his forces, and that he must go back, that deceitful Buthuga executed the ghastly deed within the blink of an eye. He pulled out a hidden bow and arrow, tied the bowstring tight and released the sharp arrow. When that deadly arrow dipped in poison pierced Rajaaditya’s chest, in that unexpected moment, he collapsed.

“Since no one expected such betrayal, the soldiers standing all around did not realize what had happened for a while. They had heard Rajaaditya ordering Buthuga to go back. Buthuga scampered back, hitting, and driving his elephant away from that spot.

“When the news spread that Rajaaditya had died while still on his elephant, every single person in our army felt as if a thunderbolt had descended on their head. In that

humongous sorrow they forgot the war. The chieftains, commanders, men, everyone was stunned into inaction and began lamenting their Prince. There is nothing surprising that at that moment the enemy gained the upper hand. Very soon our forces had to retreat. It is easy for anyone to chase those who were running away. The enemy forces even came up to banks of this river Kedilam. Only then did we regain some sense and stood, turning around. We stopped the enemy. I had taken my families from Thiru-kovalur to one of my fortresses in the western hill country. I collected forces at that hillside. I periodically attacked the enemy who had come up to this Kedilam river. Even so, those enemies did not leave from this region for a long time. They camped here and there and continued harassing our Chozla heartland. Kanchi city was in their hands. Three years ago after vanquishing the Pandiya in the south you came here and recaptured Kanchi.....”

Aditya, intervened again, “Grandfather all this, I have known from before. However, I never tire of hearing about the Battle of Thakkolam or about the bravery of Rajaaditya. Why are you reminding me about Rajaaditya now?”

“My child, your elder grandfather Rajaaditya had wanted to spread Chozla power from Lanka to the banks of the Ganga. He died without that wish being fulfilled. All the country side and all the towns are saying that you my grandson are like that great warrior. What he could not achieve, you will achieve, so say the people of all these Tamil lands. Like Rajaaditya, you too should not fall prey to deception and be fooled by fraudsters; that is why I remind you of his history.”

“Grandfather, my Elder Grandsire died because of enemy deception in the battlefield. Why do you remind me of that now? I am not going to war. I am not going amidst enemies who would deceive me. I am visiting close friends of my father. How and why would they deceive me?” asked Aditya Karikala.

“Listen Karikala! Thiru-Valluvar who warned us about weapons concealed in the

folded palms and tears of enemies, also said that internal foes are worse than external enemies.

Fear not foes that are like drawn swords;

fear friendship of foes that act like kin.

“There is no need to fear enemies who are obvious like drawn swords that hurt us. Fear enemies that act like friends says the poet. My Child, you are about to go amidst foes that act like relatives. You are going without listening to me in spite of my trying to stop you. They invite you saying that there is some dispute about the kingdom and they wish to resolve it. I hear that they are also planning to tie one of the Sambuvaraya daughters around your neck. What is their true intention? That I do not know. And you also are unlikely to know. There are many kings of kings in this Bharata country ready to give their daughters in wedlock to you. You do not need this Sambuvaraya’s daughter. I hear that they are about to negotiate peace by dividing the kingdom in two, giving you half and the rest to Madurandaka. I have no idea about what conniving and deception is in that.

“In either case, I plan to go to Thiru-kovalur immediately and collect all my guard forces. I shall come and wait on the banks of the Vellaru river. While at this Sambuvaraya’s mansion if you find anything suspicious, send me word” Malayaman realized that Karikala’s attention was no longer with him and it had turned elsewhere.

“Grandfather! look, there!” Hearing the agitated words uttered by his grandson Karikala, the old man looked in that direction.

Chapter 3 – A Falcon and a Dove

There was a waterside pavilion where Aditya was pointing. It was a beautiful structure in stonework. Some generous philanthropist must have built it so that wayfarers could rest from sun and rain. That building had been beset by rain and shine for many years and now showed its age. The corners of the building seemed to have some sculpted decorative figures. Malayaman being aged, could not clearly discern those shapes.

“Do you see Grandfather?” asked Karikala

“Are you talking about that pavilion, My child? I do not see anything particular in it. The pavilion seems empty; I see no one in there?” said he.

“Grandfather, only now I realize that you have aged! Your eye-sight has dimmed. Look at that! A big falcon, how huge it appears, How widespread are its wings! ‘Cruel, brutal!’ It is holding a tiny dove in its talons – can you not see that? The sharp talons have torn the dove and blood is dripping! Oh God! what is this bizarre thing? Grandfather look at that other dove. It is flying around that frightful falcon. How it begs the falcon! The dove caught in the talons must be its love. The other bird is begging for the life of its beloved. Is it begging? or is it fighting the cruel falcon? The beating of its wings perhaps indicates that it is fighting. Gracious God! how brave is that bird! It is fighting the falcon. It is ready to battle the frightful fiend to save the life of its loved one. Grandfather! Do you think that the falcon would be merciful? No, it will not condescend to do that! Never! The falcon has killed many such birds and grown fat on them. Wretched bird! Here, I shall kill you!” saying this, Karikala picked up a stone near him and flung it towards that pavilion. The stone missile flew to the pavilion, struck a corner, and fell.

Aditya said, “Demon! You deserve that!” and laughed thunderingly.

The old man had been having some doubts about his grandson's mental health. The concern increased.

"Grandfather, why do you stare at me like this? Go close to that pavilion and look."

Accordingly, Malayaman went closer and looked at the spot where Karikala's stone had fallen. There was a sculpted panel: a huge falcon was clutching a dove in its talons, and another dove was furiously attacking the falcon – life-like in appearance.

Malayaman came back, saying, "Child it is true that I have grown in years. My eyes are not sharp like before. Only when I went near, could I see it. Beautiful carving!"

"Beautiful carving!? Say wonderous sculpture work; an emperor or an artist from the times of Narasimha or Mamalla Pallava must have sculpted this. It appeared so real when I first saw it!"

"Aditya, the wonder is not merely in the sculpture; it is in your eyes; in your heart! There are many travelers who go along this way every day. Most would not even notice this wonderous sculpture. Many others would go on without remark even if they see it! Only a few like you would be amazed by looking at a sculpture like this!"
"I am not amazed, Grandfather, I am angry. I feel a rage right now, to reduce that sculpture to smithereens. I do not even like praising and celebrating the artist who sculpted this brutal scene."

"Karikala, what is this wonder? When did your diamond hard heart become this soft? A falcon pouncing on its prey and eating that dove is its nature. If the lion king begins to feel compassion for the sheep, it is no longer the lion king. It too will turn into a sheep. Those that wish to sit on a throne and rule must kill enemies and conspirators. Those born to be emperors, wanting to rule all the world under one umbrella need to kill enemy kings. If this eagle does not kill the dove, can it be an eagle? Why are you

distressed thus, about these things?”

“Grandfather, all that you say is correct. But should that falcon not feel any kindness for that female dove that appears so distressed? Showing benevolence for the bird, shouldn't that eagle release the mate from its talons? Sir, you tell me this: when you are about to kill your enemy, what if his beloved comes in between and begs for his life? what would you do? Would your heart show no sympathy?” asked Karikala.

If such a woman comes in between, I will kick her with my left leg and kill my enemy. Karikala there is no doubt about that. Thiru-valluvar has said that enemies will carry weapons in 'palms folded in supplication.' 'Tear laden eyes too, conceal weapons.' Tears of a woman are more dangerous than tears shed by a man. Women's tears have the extra power to make men's hearts soft. Anyone who lets his mind go soft like that cannot achieve anything great in this world; he is worse a wretch than a woman!”

“What is this Grandfather? How can you speak thus, so lowly about women? This speaking badly about women, does it not demean my mother too?” asked Karikala.

“My child, listen; the love I have for your mother has no comparison in this world. I had six sons born to me; they were reared as brave men like Bhima and Arjuna of the epics. I sacrificed them all in battlefields. I did not mourn when I got news of their death. When I sent your mother away to be married, even though I knew that she would sit on the throne of a vast Kingdom, none can describe the sadness in my mind. Did I show my sadness openly? No. Did I share it with her? No, not even that. Do you know what I told her, privately, on the night before her wedding? Listen Karikala: 'Daughter, you are about to marry a King who will rule the land. Do not become proud because of that. You are about to wed a man as handsome as Manmatha. Do not be proud even because of that. Marrying a prince like that is likely to give you many difficulties. The many women who are in service in your palace may be more happy than you. Ready yourself to face sadness and sorrows. Your

husband is verily likely to take other wives if you have no children born to you. You should not be unhappy thinking of that. If you give birth to children raise them as brave men and women. If you get news that they died in the battlefield you should not shed tears because of that. If your husband is happy, you too can be happy. If your husband is sad, try to make him happy. If your lord is ill, serve him as a constant nurse. If your husband dies, climb on to his funeral pyre with him. Even if your heart aches with sadness shedding tears of blood, your eyes should never be tear laden in sadness. This is the code of behavior for women of the clan of Malayaman.'

"I advised your mother in this fashion; till today, she follows that dictum and makes sure that it is followed. She has raised you and your brother as incomparable valiant men. After your father took to his sick bed, she has remained at his side night and day and serves him personally. My shoulders swell with pride when I think of the good fortune of having your mother as my daughter," Malayaman said this.

"There is no limit to the pride I feel when I think of my mother. But let me ask you this, Grandfather, tell me. Consider this, suppose a most vicious enemy of my father were to come with a sword raised high, ready to kill. What will my mother do at that time? Will she come to the front, stand with tear drenched eyes, and beg that enemy to spare his life? Particularly, if the enemy happens to be someone known to my mother?" asked Aditya Karikala.

"My Child! your mother will never beg the enemy to spare that life. This Malayaman's daughter will never dishonor the clan of her birth or the clan into which she is married. She will consider that enemy of her husband as a vile enemy of hers too. She will not fold her palms in front of that enemy or shed tears in front of him. As soon as her husband loses his life, she too will fall upon him and end her own life. Or she will turn her heart and soul into a stone and stay alive! She will stay alive only to revenge her husband's death."

On hearing all this Aditya Karikala sighed long and heavy “Grandfather, shall I leave now?”

“Must you go?”

“What doubt is this Grandfather? We have come more than half the distance.”

“Yes, we have come more than half the way. At first, I too asked you not leave. And then told you to go forth. After hearing the news about your brother, I thought it advisable for you to go. I do not believe that Arulmozli is dead.”

“I too, do not believe that.”

“In his younger days the whereabouts of your father was unknown for some time. Arulmozli too would have gone ashore on some island. I believe that he will come back in a few days. However, that news has created chaos all over the Chozla country I understand. Your parents would be immersed in sorrow. It is important that at this time, you are by their side to comfort them. When you go, it is preferable that you go as a friend of the Pazluvoor men rather than as their enemy. That is why I agreed to your accepting this invitation from Sambuvaraya. That fellow deliberately did not invite me! If he had invited, I would have come...”

“Grandfather, why are you so concerned about me? Do you think me that incapable?”

“No, Thambi, No. Don’t I know how brave you are! I would send you all alone to go amidst tens of thousands enemy men with brutal weapons; I am afraid to send you in front of a woman who can shed tears and muddy your mind.”

“I have not heard that Sambuvaraya’s daughter is a girl who knows such deceit and trickery! I believe she is too bashful even to come amidst menfolk. Kandamaran has

spoken about it. I too will not do any such thing hastily without the approval of my mother and father. I am fully aware that there are two girls of age, in your ancient clan, still unmarried.”

“Aditya, I have not even thought about that! It is true that there are two girls, children of my eldest son, who have reached the age to be married. But I have no intention of throwing them around your neck. Already, several chieftains of the Chozla heartland consider me with some jealousy and enmity. If this is added to that, one need not ask! Instead, if you wed Sambuvaraya’s daughter, I would be somewhat satisfied. I am old now; my body is weakened. even my mind goes soft. Sometimes I am worried that this may be the last time I would see my darling grandson, will I not see him again? From now there can be no further help to you from me. You surely need some new friends. You need those who will take an interest on your behalf. If you marry Sambuvaraya’s daughter, I shall truly be happy!”

“Grandfather, even if it can give you happiness, I will not wed that girl; I am not venturing to Sambuvaraya’s fort, seeking his friendship or to marry his daughter. You can be rest assured in that regard.”

“Then, why are you going My child? Can you not tell me the truth? A few words fell into my ears when your friends were talking to each other. That elder Pazluvoor fellow after his sixty-fifth year in age has married a bewitching ghoul who has sent you a letter. It is because of her that you have agreed to go to Kadamboor; that is what your friends were saying. Is that true?”

“Yes Grandfather, it is true.” Karikala agreed.

“Oh! Good God! What are these times? Karikala listen to me! Your Chozla clan has come from ancient times, successor after successor for more than two thousand years and attained fame. Some of your ancestors were emperors who ruled all the known world of that time, under one umbrella. Others were chieftains, ruling merely

the land around their capital Uraiyoor, as petty kings. Some took a vow of marrying only one spouse like Rama of the epic. Some married many women, and gave birth to several brave sons. Some were followers of the Saiva faith; others were adherents of Vishnu. Others maintained, 'there is neither God nor Ghost!' But none behaved in a fashion that would bring infamy. None desired another's wife. My Child, marry as many maidens as you wish; your grandfather's father, the famous emperor Paranthaka married seven women. You too, marry like him. But do not even cast your eyes on the enchantress that the elder Lord Pazluvoor has married," spoke Malayaman in a concerned voice.

"Forgive me Grandfather! I will never commit such a crime. I will not cast a blemish on the name of Chozla and Malayaman clans."

"Then why are you responding to her invitation and going there?"

"I will need tell the truth to you. At one time I did something very awful to her. I intend to ask her forgiveness for that," said Karikala.

"What kind of words are these! Ask forgiveness of a woman! I cannot bear hearing such with mine own ears!" said Malayaman.

Aditya Karikala remained silent with head bent down, for some time. He steadied himself and told his grandfather that old history. How he had gone in search of Veera-pandiya, found where he was hiding, how Nandini had intervened and begged for the life of that enemy, how he had paid no heed, and killed in a rage! And how from then onwards his mind had wandered with no peace of mind. He explained all the details.

"That incident is constantly troubling me Grandfather. My mind will find peace only if I see her one more time and ask for her forgiveness. It appears that she too is ready to forget all that past. She is also interested in making sure that there is no confusion in

the kingdom. She has invited me for that reason. I shall finish this task before me and come back to Kanchi very quickly. When I come back, I shall set sail to find my brother,” said Karikala.

Malayaman sighed heavily, “things that were not clear till now are beginning to make sense to me. What was mysterious is now explained. It is true that none can overcome fate!”

Chapter 4 – Ayyanaar Temple

Our old friends, Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan were engaged in a curious enterprise, on the northern shores of the Kollidam river, in a town named Thiru-Kaanaattu-mullur at that same time that grandsire and grandson were engaged in conversation on the banks of river Kedilam.

In days of yore, Kollidam, a branch of the Cauvery river was considered a holy river just like the Cauvery. Every day during the month of Tula, (October-November) the deity of Lord Shiva enshrined in that temple at Kaanaattu-mullur, would venture out from the temple riding a Rishaba Vahana, bull vehicle, and hold court on the banks of the Kollidam, spreading his blessings upon the devout who came to bathe in those holy waters. Every day was festive. The devout came in masses from neighboring villages and townships. Saivas came; Vaishnavas came. The Vishnu temple in that town was very small, but the deity of that shrine, Lord Vishnu too came riding his vehicle Garuda the eagle to the banks of the Kollidam.

Azlvar-adiyan, had stuck a branch of the Naaval tree in the sand in the middle of a crowd of people who had come to bathe in the holy Kollidam during the month of Tula. He was shouting loudly, “Naavalo Naaval! Naavalo Naaval!” challenge-cries or taunts proclaiming victory.

“I have come to establish without doubt that the Vaishnava faith is the greatest faith, by my debating war. Anyone can come to challenge me in debate, Saiva, Sakta, Advaiti, Kaapaalika, Kaalaa-mukha, Buddhist, Sramana-Jain, any can come! If they win the argument, I will carry that person on my shoulders and go in procession around the town! If they lose, they must surrender everything on their person to me, except their waist cloth,” he shouted.

A huge mound of rudraksha bead necklaces, neck chains with pendants shaped like sea-beasts, water pots, containers with spouts fashioned in the foreign way, skull-bowls, silken scarves, ear ornaments, gold coins and such were piled in front of him; it appeared that he must have debated with many, for a long time, and won the argument.

Vandiya Devan stood close, with a drawn sword, leaning casually on a kadamba tree. All he had was a waist garment and the drawn sword! From the way he stood it seemed as if he had offered violence to those who tried to strong arm Azlvar-adiyan, and had sent such persons away. This was also clear from the words he spoke to a large group of Saiva devotees that arrived noisily.

“Be warned, be warned! Those that wish to debate fairly are welcome. Anybody who tries to cross the limits and lay hands on this Vaishnava will fall prey to my sword.” Thus announced, Vandiya Devan. He swirled the sword once or twice! The angry Saiva group calmed down.

One of those of the Saiva faith said, “oh, Vaishnava Nambi, do not be proud that you have won a debate today; go to Naraiyur. The saintly Nambiyandar Nambi of that town will debate with you and make you retreat in defeat!”

“Tell your Nambiyandar to come to our Anantha Bhatta at Naryana-puram and debate with him! I too may come there!” replied Azlvar-adiyan. In spite of repeated calls of Naavalo Naaval none came forward now. He pulled up the tree branch and

struck a pole flying a victory flag emblazoned with symbols of Vaishnava faith, conch, and discus, in that space. Some men of the Vaishnava faith who had been standing nearby, came close, lifted him on their shoulders and danced around with songs like:

Narayana is our only God; Let us all Praise and worship!

Later they asked, “Devout Sir of the one true faith, please grace our homes and partake of blessed food with us.”

Azlvar-adiyan replied with great dignity, “So be it!” He went with those men, taking Vandiya Devan along. Both did justice to the meal which included special dishes famous among followers of that faith: Puliyodarai, Thiru-kannamudu and Dadhyonnam (sour rice with tamarind, sweet milk pudding, rice with curd and yogurt.)

Azlvar-adiyan gave Vandiya Devan a beautiful silken cloth which could be worn as an upper body shawl, from the bounty he had collected; he gave the rest to those Vaishnava devotees and in exchange obtained some gold coins for the value of those items. He explained to them that he needed money because he was planning to go far north till Haridwar in the Himalayas, and he was traveling to establish the supremacy of Vaishnava faith. Those devout friends happily gave him coins more in value than the goods they received. Taking all of it, Azlvar-adiyan and Vandiya Devan left for Kadamboor late in the afternoon.

As the Kollidam was running in full flood they could not bring the horses and cross the river. They took the boat to cross the river. When the boat had almost reached the farther shore, the boat which had been overloaded with people by the boatman, capsized in the swirling waters. Like others, Vandiya Devan too had fallen in the floods, he had to swim and make his way to the bank. His waist-pouch which he had managed to keep secure during his many travails and dangers during all his journeys, came loose and was lost in that flood along with the signet rings, palm leaf letters from Kundavai and the gold coins in his waistband. They had employed the

strategy of the debate, to get some gold to buy new horses. They soon realized that they would not find any horses for sale in those villages in that area. Sometimes, horses came for sale in the weekly market held at Kadamboor village. Otherwise, they would have to go to Thiru-paa-puliyur town to buy horses.

The two friends argued if they should go to Kadamboor or not. They considered the pros and cons of the going there. They may find news about Aditya Karikala coming to that Fort. It would be good to get the latest news of whether the Prince had already started from Kanchi, which road was he taking .. and so forth. However, they should avoid being recognized in Kadamboor. If they happened to see Kandamaran, it would become dangerous. If the retinue of the Pazluvoor families had already arrived, that too would be a nuisance.

“Mr. Nambi, you know how to jump over walls, why not get two horses from Sambuvaraya’s stables?” asked Vandiya Devan.

Nambi replied, “I know how to jump over fort walls; will the horses know how to do that?”

The man of the Vaanar clan said, “If the retinue of Lord Pazluvoor has already arrived, we can steal two horses. Those men chased my horse into the crowds at that time; it will be an apt revenge.”

They talked about how they had met at Kadamboor some months ago and the many interesting things that had taken place that night and since then, as they walked onwards. They reached Kadamboor when the sun was about to set. Just as they had expected, Kadamboor was full of the hustle and bustle of preparations.

The palace and fortress gates were decorated with fresh bunting, flags, and flower strands. There was heavier guard than before at the gates and around the fortress walls. Need one ask why! Prince Aditya Karikala was expected to come; the minister

of finance, Lord Pazluvoor and his queen were expected. The followers and retinue of these notables will come. For a few days the town is sure to be full of tumult.

The friends heard about everything from the people talking in the streets of Kadamboor town. From the talk they could gather that both parties had not yet arrived. They learned that Sambuvaraya's son Kandamaran had got to Kanchi to escort the Prince. Among all this, the people also talked softly about Prince Arulmozli who had drowned at sea. From the way that they spoke or by their expressions, it was obvious that many did not like that such festivities of banquets, feasts, dances, music, and revelry were being planned at the fort.

Vandiyā Devan and Azlvar-adiyan, crossed the town and went beyond, listening to all such news pretending to not particularly care. They did not wish to spend the night in that town but wanted to get away. Beyond the town but near enough they were sure to find some old rest house or wayside pavilion; if not they could go on and stay at Thiru-Narayana Puram. They could sleep in comfort in the large thousand pillar hall of the large Vishnu temple in that place. After the experiences of the previous night, they needed at least one night of good sleep and rest.

On crossing Kadamboor and going a little further they saw glimpses of an Ayyanaar temple in the midst of a forest-like bamboo grove. Vandiyā Devan said, "Mr. Nambi I cannot walk much farther. Let us sleep in this temple tonight. It is a good spot to be hidden from prying eyes."

"My friend, you are not correct; how are you sure that others with intentions like us will not arrive here?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"If those who come, come with horses, it will be doubly good."

"Horses cannot go into this bamboo forest. It is difficult even for men to go in!"

“There must be some narrow trail. The temple priest needs to come and go, there must be a path somewhere, let us look for it.”

(Note: Ayyanaar shrines are popular as guardian deities usually set up at the village perimeter. They often include huge gaily painted terracotta figures of men and animals, and altars to offer sacrifice; they blended local folk belief traditions in the style of worship.)

They went round and around that overgrown bamboo grove and finally found a very narrow trail for one man to walk. It was a great effort to walk on that path without being scratched by thorns. The path opened up after a little distance. In the clearing there was a small Ayyanaar temple. In front was a pedestal to offer sacrifices. And next to that were several large figures made of fired clay – elephants and horses set up in a row. Believers would come to fulfill their vows or prayer-promises by placing such figures near the temple.

“Why are we worried about horses; we can ask Ayyanaar and get two horses,” said Vandiya Devan with a laugh.

Azlvar-adiyan replied, “Thambi, don’t you know the proverb, ‘do not get into the river trusting a clay horse!’”

“Mr. Nambi of the Vaishnava faith, our Ayyanaar is a very powerful deity! He will immediately fulfil our prayerful wishes. He is not like your Vishnu, letting his devotees suffer while sleeping even during the day!” said Vandiya Devan.

“So, you think that he would make even these clay horses come alive? That is good; we can save our money!”

“If one has true faith, even clay horses will come alive; why? Think of our own human bodies; the creator fashioned us from dust and gave life!”

“Yes Thambi, you say it correctly; we forget that our bodies are made of mud and clay. Our teachers and leaders of my Vaishnava faith tell us to make a paste of such clay and wear it on our forehead and body so that we are constantly reminded.”

Vandiya Devan made a sign, “Shhh!” shushing Azlvar-adiyan, talking hold of him with one hand and pointing with a finger of the other hand. It had been a while since sunset. In the dim light of the clearing in the middle of that dark grove of bamboos, it seemed as if Ayyanaar’s horses had come alive and were moving about. A horse and an elephant moved from their spot.

Vandiya Devan was stunned, should one believe this astonishing spectacle, happening in front of his own eyes, or not? He did not want to miss the opportunity to taunt Azlvar-adiyan about this fantastic power of Lord Ayyanaar! He began saying, “Mr. Nambi, did you see....” Azlvar-adiyan took hold of his hand tightly, placed a finger on his lips and signed making him stop talking. He tightened his hold of Vandiya Devan’s hand, dragged him behind a clump of bamboo and stood hidden behind it.

The horse and elephant had moved; in the gap created when the figures moved, they could see just the head of a man. The head turned this way and that way, scrutinizing all directions. This sight of a head alone appearing and swirling near the sacrifice pedestal was horrifying. Even Vandiya Devan who had seen all sorts of frightful things was aware of his body shivering and hair standing on end. Vandiya Devan regained his confidence on realizing that Azlvar-adiyan’s hand holding him was steady and unshaken.

Even as they were watching, that head rose and came up! They could see a torso; the whole body of that man came up. At that spot where he came up was a yawning opening, as if it were a dark entryway to the nether world. After peering at him for a while they recognized the man. He was Idumban Kari, who worked as a footman in

Sambuvaraya's palace and at the same time was part of Ravidasa's gang of conspirators. They both recognized him at the same time and indicated their surprise to each other.

Idumban Kari left the open entryway as it was, looked around in all directions once more, and walked towards Ayyanaar's temple. In a short time, a faint light appeared inside the temple chamber. They gathered that a lamp had been lit inside that temple.

Azlvar-adiyan whispered, "Thambi what do you think of this?"

"I think that Ayyanaar is a very powerful God! Did you see how the horse came alive?"

"That's, fine! What did you think of that fellow who just came out?"

"He must be the priest of this Ayyanaar temple. Come let us also go and worship."

"Be patient, let us watch to see if anyone else is coming to worship Lord Ayyanaar."

"You think some others may come?"

"Otherwise, why is this fellow turning on the light?"

"What is remarkable about the temple priest turning on a light for the deity?"

"Thambi, did you not recognize who he is?"

"I recognize him very well. This is that same Idumban Kari who arranged to buy a horse for me, at Kollidam ferry long ago. I am thinking if I should ask him to procure some horses for us."

“Great Idea!” said Azlvar-adiyan with some sarcasm.

“Why? Do you not like it?”

“This Idumban Kari is not just the footman who got the horse for you; he belongs to the gang of Ravidasa the sorcerer!”

“Is it so! Another great idea occurs to me!”

“What? What is that?”

“When Idumban Kari is busy with his devotionals to Lord Ayyanaar, I am wondering if I should examine the opening where he sprang from and come back.”

“How will you do that?”

“Can’t I go down that opening he came out from?”

“You could, but the dangers in that...”

“What is there, that is not full of danger?”

“Then, do as you wish.”

“Sir, will you wait here and watch what is happening?”

“Why not; I can wait here and watch. Have you any thoughts about where that underground passage leads?”

“Ideas occur, Sir, I have ideas. I wish to confirm my suspicions.”

“Why need you confirm that?”

“It may come in useful, at some time, who knows!”

At that instant they could hear voices of men talking somewhere.

“There is no time to waste. Nambi, will you wait here for me till I come back or will you be like what Sugriva did to Vaali? (in the epic Ramayana, Sugriva, impatiently closed the cave door with a boulder and left his brother for dead.)”

“I shall wait here as long as I have life. How can I be sure that you will come back?”

“Me too, I will come back if I am alive.” Even as he was speaking, Vandiya Devan was running; with a leap he was at the spot of that entryway. He stepped into the opening and disappeared into the darkness of that hole! It seemed as if the entry to the dungeon had swallowed him!

Idumban Kari who had gone into the temple came out and looked around. The open entryway caught his eye. He went closer and turned a trident fixed next to the sacrificial pedestal. The horse and elephant that had moved away now came back closer and stood as before; the opening was closed; the entryway had vanished without trace. After doing this Idumban Kari came back to the steps of the temple. Soman Samban Ravidasa and others arrived at the same time by another path. Azlvar-adiyan hid himself even more in the thicket of bamboo.

Ravidasa sat on the step; the others sat before him on the floor.

“Friends, the time has come near for our vows to be concluded,” spoke Ravidasa.

“We have been saying this ‘the time has come; the time has come closer’ for the last six months!” said one of the men.

“Yes, there is nothing incorrect in that! The time has been coming closer and closer in the last six months. It has now come to days that we can count on our fingers. We have news that Aditya Karikala has left Kanchi. All the efforts by that old man of Thiru-kovalur were not successful in stopping him.”

“How can we be sure that someone else will not try to stop him on the way?”

“Once he has taken a step Aditya Karikala is not one to go back. Even if anyone else tries to stop him he will not listen.”

“What if the message sent by his sister reaches him?”

“How will it reach him? We left that messenger tied up in the forest.”

“Great! I saw him this morning on the North Bank of Kollidam. Our other archenemy was with him.”

“Who was that?!”

“That false Vaishnava masquerader.”

“If so, we must be especially careful. We must try and stop them from meeting Aditya Karikala.”

“This is like the story of getting hold of a tail and forgetting the trunk! We had him; we should have put an end to him there once for all. We don’t know why the Queen asked us to let him go.”

Ravidasa spoke now, “My friends, I too didn’t understand that fully at that time. I understood later. The Queen has surpassed even me; I myself agree. The Queen asked us to let Vandiya Devan go free with his life intact because of a very important reason. You men need not know those details now. Do not worry about Vandiya Devan. But if you see that Vaishnava masquerader, do not hesitate even for a second; get his life before doing anything else.”

Chapter 5 - Dangerous Dungeon

Vandiya Devan who entered the opening to the dungeon went down a few steps. Then, the floor became level. The light was very, very faint. After he had walked ten or fifteen steps, he heard a sound, like a wagon wheel turning. Suddenly he was engulfed, totally swallowed by darkness. A fear took hold of him. He thought of his resolve to not get involved in things of no concern to him. What is my assigned mission and why did I start on this journey? Why did I forget that, and venture into this frightening dungeon pathway? Who knows where this will take me? What dangers will await me at the end? What foolish adventure have I gotten into? When will my impulsive nature leave me? Such thoughts slowed his footsteps. He turned around thinking he would go back. He could sense the steps under his feet; But there was no opening up there; he felt with his palms, searching and found no opening. They must have closed the entryway!

Vandiya Devan was now sweating and flustered. With some haste he tried to see if he could open the entryway. By now he began hearing voices, somewhere, faraway. Perhaps it was men talking on the steps of the Ayyanaar temple near the entrance to the dungeon he had entered. Idumban Kari had lit the lamp, expecting some others. Perhaps those others have arrived. If so, it would be a humongous mistake to find the exit and get out of this dungeon here. Who knows for how long they would sit talking over there! If there were the others in the gang of Idumban Kari, like Ravidasa, they would sit around talking for a while! Why are they meeting at this spot? What will they be talking about? Another conspiracy?

That Vaishnava Nambi will watch all that. Instead of my standing here drenched in sweat and short of breath, it would be better to go forward. It may be better to go on a little and find out. I have bravely ventured this far... Where is this passage leading to? It may be better to find out....

With such thoughts Vandiya Devan turned around and took a step to go onwards again. Even though the ground was somewhat level below his feet, it was not smooth, not without dips and holes and rough stone. They must have tunneled through hard rock and made that passage.

He had made a guess about where the passage might end. It most probably will end inside Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's mansion. Where in that mansion will it end up? Perhaps in a treasure vault? Or it might end up inside the inner apartments of the palace women. It was known to him that chieftains and kings had such secret passages built in their forts and palaces where they lived. In times of grave danger, if they had to run and escape from the palace, they would use such passages. Since it would be important to remove the womenfolk of the palace to safety, such passages often ended in their apartments. As it might be important to take along important treasures, sometimes the passage had an entry and exit in the treasure vault.

Where will this passage lead me now? Since Idumban Kari came by this way, it is possible that the exit on the other end is in a treasure room. This gang has been robbing Lord Pazluvoor's treasure vault, with the help of his Queen, without Lord Pazluvoor's knowledge. Perhaps they have planned to loot Sambuvaraya's treasures in a similar fashion. Why are they venturing on this enterprise now when Kadamboor is busy with arrangements for welcoming the Crown Prince and other guests? Perhaps their intent is something else!

Vandiya Devan remembered what he has seen and heard in the forest at Thirupuram-biyam. The shining sword with symbols of fish, held by Queen Nandini flashed

before his eyes for one moment; rather than looting treasure, they may have other more heinous intentions. If I can make sure about where this passage ends, it would perhaps be helpful to thwart their intentions.

In truth it had been only a few minutes since he entered that dungeon passageway. Since it was dark, time seemed long. With lack of fresh air, breathing became difficult. As if it were possible, he was sweating even more profusely. When trying to think about the distance from the Ayyanaar temple to Kadamboor fort he was surprised. He thought about it again. From the gates of the fort, they had taken roads that went roundabout and curved inside the town; then they had taken a forest path; that is why they had taken such a long time. If one were to go directly from the fort to the temple it could not be more than the distance that an arrow let loose from its bow, could fly. If that were true, he should be crossing the outer walls of the fort by now....

Yes, that was true. Somewhere from above, suddenly, a gust of cool breeze hit Vandiya Devan. The breeze gave new life to Vandiya Devan who was sweat drenched, breathless, and almost fainting. Looking high up he saw some light. Voices could be heard. It must be one of the ramparts built for soldiers to stand guard; they have arranged for air to get to the underground passage through that structure.... air could get in but there was no way that anyone could climb out or get down through that slit. The realization that he was already inside Kadamboor fort and the fresh cool air which revived him, gave him new energy. The end of this underground passage must be close – would it be the treasure vault? Would Kadamboor Sambuvaraya also have collected vast quantities of pearls, rubies, coral, diamonds, and gold coins? Just as I had seen before, would a human skeleton be lying atop the treasure mound? Would a spider have spun its web covering the bones and the coins?

Walking on, with such thoughts, Vandiya Devan stumbled upon something. Realizing that it was a step he gained some confidence. Yes; once I go up these steps, I am sure to get into the treasure vault; or I might end up in the inner apartments of the women. That would spell danger! That dark beauty of a girl, Kandamaran's sister

Manimekalai might be in there. Vandiya Devan smiled when he thought how, at one time, he had plans to marry that girl. There was no one there to see the smile on his face and enjoy it! What if I suddenly appear among the women when they were perhaps not dressed properly! – Thinking of such things, laughter took hold of him.

One moment after the laughter, the blood in his body froze! He saw a most frightful scene that made his heart almost stop beating, and eyes pop. He was climbing those few steps; once he had stepped on the topmost plinth and realizing that here were no more steps, he was trying to look around to figure out where he had come. Hundreds upon hundreds of fiery eyes looked at him. All were the eyes of most frightening wild beasts. In that fright of that moment, he was about to turn around and go back the way he had come. But now, there was no pathway behind him!

As soon as he had stepped on that topmost step, he had heard a noise at his back, it was the entry to the underground passage which closed by itself! What is this hideous, frightful place? How can so many wild beasts wait for me here? Tigers, cheetah, spotted leopards, lions, bears, wild buffalo, hyena, wolves, a rhinoceros! and even two elephants over there – all are waiting to pounce on me! Why have they not leapt upon me yet? Oh, what a huge hawk over there! and this huge owl. Vampire bat. Am I dreaming? What is this – here lies a crocodile, its jaws wide open and sharp terrifying teeth. Crocodiles are usually in water, why is this one on this floor. How did it come to be amongst all these forest creatures?

“Oh, dear Mother! I am saved!” he almost shouted. He had recognized that none of those beasts around him were alive. He remembered Kandamaran telling him that his clansmen were fond of the hunt. They had preserved some of the animals they had hunted, stuffed them with cotton and hay-stalk and displayed them as if they were alive in a hunt-room. He remembered that Kandamaran had spoken about such a room in their fort. Vandiya Devan understood that he was now in that hunt-room. Even so, it took a few minutes for his earlier fright and shivers to calm down.

He walked up to each animal, touched, and examined them; shook them, stepped upon them, and made sure that none of them were alive! What next? The doorway of the passage from which I came, has closed automatically. Should I try finding it and go out that way? Or should I try to find where in Kadamboor Palace is this awful room located? Is there an exit from this room to another chamber? How do I find that?

He tapped the walls and went around; there was nothing obvious that looked like a door. Nothing that budged to his tapping and pushing. As time passed, Vandiya Devan began to feel more and more angry. I got involved in this unnecessary escapade and am caught like this – he felt enraged. He saw an elephant face with its trunk and great tusks fastened upon a farther wall.

“Wretched Elephant! It was you who moved around and got me into this prison!” he scolded that elephant; it did not respond. Even a live elephant does not talk, what could an elephant stuffed with sawdust and grain-bran do? It was immobile, not even swinging its trunk. “Hey you animal! I am addressing you, why don’t you respond!” With such words, he took hold of the elephant’s tusks and tried to twist them free. Miracle, magic happened in a second.

When he twisted its ivory tusks, the ears of that elephant on the wall moved; the ears moved to fold back and reveal a large opening. Unable to contain his surprise, Vandiya Devan thrust his head into that opening to examine it.

He saw a woman’s face in there. A young girl’s face. The eyes on her face were large and wide, staring! Surprise of surprises; Vandiya Devan also saw his own face, close to that girl’s face. If the lover of a girl were to approach her, as if he was about to kiss her, Vandiya Devan and that girl were in that posture! Her eyes which were already wide now opened even more in indescribable surprise. Surprise mingled with some fear was reflected in those eyes. Her face remained thus for one second. The next instant her red lips parted and she screeched, “choooooo.”

Vandiya Devan was startled; he removed his hands from the tusks of that elephant. The next instant, the elephant stayed an elephant and the wall remained a wall. There was neither an opening nor a girl in that opening. The sound of that girl's screech which had pierced his ears like some sort of bees humming, was no longer heard. It took a few moments for his thudding heart to calm down. He began thinking about the apparition he had seen. ***

Chapter 6 – Manimekalai

Sambuvaraya's daughter Manimekalai was a happy go lucky girl. Her mother and father and her brother Kandamaran showered her, from childhood, with love and affection and cherished her. She ruled like a tyrannical queen in their palace. What she decreed was the rule in that mansion. Till recently, her life was one endless saga of play and sport, dance, and song. A hurdle occurred in her life about four or five months ago. The elders had begun to insist that she would have to do something against her wishes. This 'insistence will not work,' she tried to teach them, with little success.

In the past two or three years whenever her brother Kandamaran came back from the front, he would tell her about his friend Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan. He would praise sky high, his friend's bravery, smartness, intelligence, and cleverness. He would paint a wonderful picture of his friend being as handsome as Manmatha, brave as Arjuna of the epic, and astute like Krishna of stories.

"He is the most suitable husband for you; he is the only one who will be able to handle your liveliness and keep you in control." Manimekalai would be eager to hear all this again and again. At the same time, she would chide her brother angrily, pick a quarrel with him. "You keep talking about him; bring him over one day. Let me check out his smartness!" she said.

“I will, I will,” Kandamaran would reply irritably. Manimekalai too, in a dream world, saw Vandiya Devan, met him and spent time with him, laughed and played, quarreled, and made peace; in such day dreams she spent her time. She spoke happily with her special friends about the brave gentleman of the Vaanar clan who was a friend of her brother.

An unexpected obstacle to these day dreams occurred four months ago.

Kandamaran began to sing a different tune. “Forget that fellow who has neither home or position. He has no prestige and is a nobody, forget him.” He tried to tempt her by saying that he planned to place her on the throne of Tanjavur. Finally, one day, he spoke openly. He said he was going to arrange for her to marry Madurandaka, who was already married to the daughter of Younger Lord Pazluvoor. He hinted obtusely that Madurandaka was going to be the next emperor. If she married Madurandaka, she could come to rule the three known worlds as an empress, and any son born to her might become the next emperor. Her parents sang the same tune.

Manimekalai did not like any such talk. Her mind had become enthralled by Vandiya Devan about whom she had heard again and again. Moreover, she knew about Madurandaka, who had exhibited no brave deeds, had never been to any battle field, who had till recently gone about as a devout follower of the Saiva faith clad in ashen marks and dressed with holy beads professing to become an ascetic. And in addition, he was already married! Tanjavur noblewomen were very proud. They professed that they were the only ones who knew fashion and scorned everyone from other towns. Manimekalai became very irritated when she thought about all this. She made a ruckus; it did not matter if she sat on Tanjavur’s throne or Devendra’s throne in the heavens, she would not marry Madurandaka!

And later, when she came to know something else, her determination became stronger. When Lord Pazluvoor visited Kadamboor earlier in the year, they said that his young Queen Nandini had come with him. But she never came to the inner apartments set aside for women’s use or come to meet the women folk in the palace.

At first this surprised them. The Women in the palace talked jokingly and insultingly about it. Little by little truth came out. When Manimekalai found that the person who came in the enclosed palanquin was Madurandaka, not Nandini, her disgust increased. She was resolved, "Chee! Will I marry a man, so afraid that he goes about disguised as a woman, hiding inside curtained palanquins? Not on any day!"

On that same day that Madurandaka had come in the closed palanquin, Kandamaran's friend Vandiya Devan also had come. He spent very little time visiting in the inner apartments, when he came to pay respects to her mother. At that time, for some reason, from somewhere, extreme shyness took hold of Manimekalai who stayed behind the other girls. She did not even look at Vandiya Devan properly or see him face to face. What she had seen in half a glance while hiding behind the others was a charming, smiling face: it became etched in her heart! His voice, the few words he spoke, stayed in her mind. Thereafter, Manimekalai began a never-ending argument with her brother. Even if the three-eyed Lord Shiva came and ordered it, she would never marry Madurandaka, she declared.

And she hinted that even though she has seen Vandiya Devan only for a few minutes, her heart had gone to him. Kandamaran was roused to much anger by this. At first, he tried soft words to explain to her. It was of no use.

"Vandiya Devan is no friend of mine. He is my sworn enemy. He stabbed me on my back and tried to kill me. If you wish to marry him, I will kill both him and you," Kandamaran showed the healed scar on his back. It was only because of the kindness and care shown by Pazluvoor's Queen Nandini that he had survived with his life.

"Even if you have a speck of love for me, forget Vandiya Devan," ordered Kandamaran. Upon hearing those words, Manimekalai's mind truly changed. She loved her brother dearly. Yes, it would be impossible to marry an enemy who had tried to kill her brother!

She tried to forget Vandiya Devan. That was not easy. Often at unexpected moments, his smiling face appeared before her eyes; in her day dreams and in her sleep in the nights. Because of all this, in the recent few months Manimekalai had lost her natural joy and vivacity. Sadness and weariness took hold of her. The older folk thought that this was because she had reached an age to be married. Friends of her age began teasing her about it. These friends tried to cheer her up with pranks and games; nothing seemed to work.

Since a few days now, Manimekalai was once again somewhat happy and cheerful. There were none in all the Tamil countries, among men or women, who did not know about the bravery, courage, and prowess of Crown Prince Aditya Karikala. She also knew that for some reason he had till now been refusing to get married. To marry him would be the greatest honor unthinkable even in dreams. In this whole wide kingdom and even the whole continent, how many princesses must be observing penances and prayers to have the privilege? Thinking about all this Manimekalai became somewhat cheerful.

The news that Prince Karikala from Kanchi and Lord Pazluvoor's family from Tanjavur were coming as guests to Kadamboor, made her joyous like times before. This time Lord Pazluvoor was really bringing his Queen Nandini Devi, with him. Nandini Devi had saved her brother Kandamaran's life! She had heard a lot from her brother Kandamaran about Nandini: her beauty, her personality, kindness, her intelligence. Kandamaran had also told her that talk about this new marriage alliance was because of Nandini. He told Manimekalai that she should be the first to make every effort to welcome Nandini, and see to her comfort while she was at Kadamboor.

Manimekalai's heart was by now mature to accept this role. Her new wish was this: make good friends with Pazluvoor's Queen Nandini and with that experience she herself should surpass the Tanjavur women in fashion and culture!

Since this past one week, Manimekalai was totally exuberant; she hurried hither and thither in the palace overseeing the arrangements being readied for the guests. She was particular to make sure that all comforts and facilities were perfect in the rooms being readied for Nandini. Her brother too had cautioned her; the servants in the palace were badgered to no end. Her friends were pushed and tormented! Every little thing in the rooms assigned for Nandini was ordered to be moved and checked and rechecked at least thirty times!

She went often and inspected the rooms assigned for Prince Karikala and his friends. Some nobleman named Parthiban was expected to come with him. Who knows what sort of a person he was? These days, one was never sure of how someone would behave! Vandiya Devan who had been her brother's friend had belonged to the retinue of Prince Karikala. If he had not turned to be such a betrayer of friendship, he too would have joined this party. Yes, however much Manimekalai was occupying herself in various chores, she had not fully forgotten that betrayer of friendship.

They said that the Queen of Pazluvoor would arrive that night itself. For one final time, Manimekalai was overseeing the arrangements in the rooms readied for Nandini. She came to stand before the mirror that was placed beside the wall for the Young Queen's use. She looked at herself in that mirror. She stood for some time, with no hurry. Having decided that her face was in no way less beautiful she became content. She was about to move away from that mirror, when she saw another face next to hers. The other face came very close almost cheek to cheek! It was the face of that Vaanar nobleman, which had been coming in her dreams and bothering her. Unaware of herself, she pursed her lips and screeched, "chooooo." The next second, only her face was reflected in the mirror; the other face vanished!

Chapter 7 - Tailless Monkey

Manimekalai was lost in thought for a while; the figure she had just seen ...was that mere imagination? Or a dream? If it were a dream, should I not be sleeping? She touched herself to check. 'No, I am not sleeping. This is the room we have readied for Pazluvoor Queen Nandini; here, I can see my face in the polished mirror. There, the tall lamp is lit.' She looked at the wall opposite the mirror. She knew that there was a hidden doorway on that wall. One could open it from outside or inside. Manimekalai walked up to that wall and placed her ear to the wall listening keenly. The secret door on that wall was made of wood. She could hear, as if something was making a noise inside the hunt-room.

Manimekalai, opened the secret door quietly, and peeked into the hunt-room. Most of that room was shrouded in darkness. In one corner there was a small oil wick lamp. Suddenly, that light almost went out and then came back. Some figure had crossed that light -- that is why the light appeared to go out and come back. The figure that hid the light for a second, who was it? The same face that she saw in the mirror just now? Or was this too, a mental aberration?

While peeking inside, Manimekalai clapped her hands, "Who goes there?" she asked softly. Sound of someone clearing their throat. A bat hanging from the tall roof of that hunt-room flew silently, swishing from one perch to go hang from another place. Again very, very softly, sound of someone coughing. Manimekalai stood on that door way and called loudly, "Hey there, Chandramati!"

"Yes, Madam," came the answer.

"Bring a hand lamp and come here immediately," she ordered her maid. In a short while a serving maid came with a hand lamp.

"Madam, the lamp here is burning bright; Why another lamp madam?" Asked the servant girl.

“We need to go see in the hunt-room; I heard some noises.”

“Bats must be beating their wings; what else could it be?”

“No, Girl! I was looking at my face in this crystal mirror just now; Suddenly, I saw another face next to mine.”

“What did that face look like Madam? Handsome? Brave?” asked the maid and she laughed.

“What is this Chandramati, are you making fun of me?”

“No, Madam, No. You often tell me that you see a face in your dreams. Perhaps he appeared in this mirror now!”

“Yes! Yes, dear Chandra; But it seemed very real!”

“All girls go crazy like this at some time. Such delusions will last for only one or two more days. Tomorrow when you see the Prince from Kanchi who is coming to the banquet, you will completely forget that old face.”

“Let that be! For now, let us go into this hunt-room and check it out.”

“Waste of time, useless work, Madam! The hunt-room will be full of dust and dirt. Our clothes will get messy.”

“Let it be”

“We will be plagued by sneezing and coughing, When everybody is coming... tomorrow....” The servant Chandra tried to dissuade her.

“Let them come! I must examine the hunt-room right now! Don’t shake the lamp and let it go out. Come.” With those words, Manimekalai entered the hunt-room. Her maid followed with the lamp. Both started looking around. The maid Chandra was looking up above the lamp light at the dead animals hanging on the walls. Manimekalai was looking at the floor also. She noticed footsteps here and there in the dust on the floor.

“Madam! Over there,” pointed Chandra the maid.

“What is it, Girl! Why are you nervous like this?” asked Manimekalai.

“There, it looked as if that tailless monkey was moving.”

“It looked at you and expressed its happiness, perhaps!”

“What is this Madam? Are you making fun of me?”

“Did you not tease me? Saying that I am going around half crazed?”

“Perhaps that face that came in your mirror was that ape-face! See, it is standing right across this doorway that we came from. Ha.... the monkey is moving again!”

“Chee, it is the shadow because of your lamp. When the lamp shadow moves, it seems as if the tailless monkey is moving. Come let us go back. Nobody seems to be here.”

“So, it must have been that ape-face that you saw in the mirror. Or it might have been the face of that huge owl, sitting up there! See Madam, see how it is gazing at us!”

“Why do you add me together with you... It must be mesmerized by seeing your beauty; that is why that owl is gazing at you without blinking an eyelid.

“Then, whose face could it be? that peered at you in the mirror?”

“Girl! Have you concluded that I am really crazy? Maybe, that face I see often in my dreams might have appeared in the mirror. I feel bad that after seeing that charming face with my eyes, I had to look at this ape and this owl! Come, let us go. Let me look in that mirror to see if that face appears one more time....” said Manimekalai.

The two women once again squeezed through the doorway by which they had come and went back to the guest chamber in the palace.

Vandiya Devan came out from behind the ape. He sneezed two or three times and cleared the dust from his nostrils. He thanked the ape that had hid him so well! “Hey monkey, may you be blessed! That servant girl compared my face to yours; I did get angry about that. I almost came out from behind you, luckily, I controlled my thoughts. Oh, what would have been my fate if you had not been standing there as tall as a man! I would have been captured by those women. Ape! May you be well!”

After saying that, it occurred to him that it may not have been all that much of a mishap to be taken by those girls. He had already guessed who they were. He had heard their conversation clearly. That too Manimekalai was speaking quite loudly and clearly. What was it that she was saying about the face she saw in her dreams and the face in the mirror? He remembered those old occasions. Kandamaran had told him that he would often talk to this sister about him. When he had come to this palace the last time and seen this girl half hidden behind others, and mentioned that, he remembered Kandamaran indicating that they were going to give her in marriage to some other important notable. Perhaps this foolish girl has not changed her mind?

There is no time now to think about that. He must find a way to get out of this place. The elephant tusk way led into the women’s apartments. That way was no use to him. He must find the way by which he had come. He knew that secret passage doors had different mechanisms to be opened from inside and outside. It may be difficult but he should be able to figure out the mechanism to open the door. But where was the

secret door? Only after finding the door would come the question of figuring the method of opening, it. Nothing was obvious, however much he examined the walls. And light was really insufficient. He remembered that a crocodile was on the floor at the spot he had entered. He went near that and rubbed all over the wall; will the exit become visible? Nothing! As time went on, his worry increased. What nuisance is this? I am caught in this prison! Gracious God! There seems to be no way but to go into the women's part of this palace. If he did that how many dangers in that! Perhaps Manimekalai would show pity towards me. But what reason can I give her for coming there secretly like this? Should I say "I came because of my love for you." What an appalling lie it will be. Even if I have the audacity to say that, will she believe me? How can I be sure that Manimekalai will be alone? What if I am caught amidst other womenfolk? If Lord Sambuvaraya gets to know, he will surely kill me!

Once again Vandiya Devan's attention went to the crocodile lying on the floor. He became angry with it. 'crocodile! Why do you remain like this? With your mouth open all the time?' with these words he kicked that creature; the crocodile moved a little and at that same time a small opening appeared on the floor near the wall. 'Aha! are you the one hiding the doorway! Idiot crocodile, couldn't you tell me that before now!' He bent down, took hold of the crocodile, and moved it. As the creature moved, the opening near the wall and floor became bigger and bigger. Steps appeared below.

Chapter 8 - Two Arms In The Dark

Vandiya Devan was wonder struck at the clever way in which the secret doors and passages in Kadamboor were built. Any fellow who knew about them partially and tried to be hasty would face danger. If the crocodile were moved while partially descending the steps, the person would be stuck in the closing doorway. After carefully making sure that the crocodile would not move, Vandiya Devan came up to the opening and was about to step down.

Ah! What was that! Footsteps in the tunnel. Who is coming? Perhaps Azlvar-adiyan? Is he coming in search of me? I must stop him from coming in here... No, no it is not one person who is coming; sounds like five or six persons. Must be Idumban Kari and his gang. In one leap Vandiya Devan ran back and once again sought refuge behind the tailless monkey. Oh, dear! I left the passage doorway open! Would they suspect something because of that? No, no, no. When I came the doorway was open; only when I stepped on the last step and into this room did the door close. Good thing I left it open. There, I can see a head coming up from the opening. It is Idumban Kari. He has a leg on the top step and he is looking around; the other leg is still on the lower step, keeping the entrance open.

What is this sudden light on this side? The elephant on the opposite wall was moving! The doorway to the women's apartments is visible. Who is that coming through that doorway? It is Manimekalai with a lamp in her hands. Idumban Kari jumped up into the room in one leap. The entrance from which he came was now closed. Idumban Kari unwound the cloth turban from his head and began dusting the tiger next to him with that cloth. What will be the conclusion of this play?

Manimekalai held up the lamp in her hand and looked around. She saw Idumban Kari, and looked at him with some surprise. He stopped dusting and looked at her in surprise too. "Thaye! What is this? Why come to this place at this time?" He asked.

"Idumba! Is it you? What are you doing in here?" asked Manimekalai.

"Amma! Our guests are coming tomorrow; they will be bringing them here to see this room tomorrow. I am dusting everything – the younger Master ordered me to do so before he left for Kanchi."

"Yes Idumba! Your young master has trust only in you and me in this whole palace. I was checking to see if everything was alright in the room where the Pazluvoor Queen would be staying. I heard some noises here; I wondered if it could be you. Who else

knows the secret passages in this palace? How long have you been in this room?"

Asked Manimekalai.

"I have been here for the last half an hour, Thaye! There is work for another hour or so. Did you come alone by yourself? Where is that talkative maid Chandramati?"

"I sent her to bring my father because I heard noises here. It is only you I see here. I can go and stop her." She held up her lamp and looked to see if there were any changes on Idumban Kari's face. She then looked at the tall tailless monkey. She noticed it move slightly like it had done before.

"Yes Thaye! The Master is busy with so many things today. Please go and tell that maid to not disturb him; You should also go and sleep without worry. I shall take care of everything," said Idumban Kari.

Manimekalai went back to the palace rooms by the same doorway. The secret door panel was now closed. Idumban Kari went up to the elephant on the wall and listened carefully. Once he was sure that there were no noises in the next room, he stepped back. He opened the door to the tunnel steps and went down two or three steps, till his waist level to keep the doorway open. An owl's hoot was heard in the tunnel passage. Idumban too replied with the call of an owl. Several men were walking in that tunnel. After that, numerous things happened at the same and time and very fast.

A bat beat its wings a bit squeakily and flew around. Idumban looked at it. From behind him, the tailless ape fell "thud" noisily; surprised by that Idumban stumbled and his legs folded; he was forced to go down a few more steps. Not knowing what fell upon him, he began stuttering and gibbering with some fear; with a yell and some confusion, he beat around with his hands. He recognized that somehow the tailless monkey had come loose and fallen upon him, then tried to push it and straighten it again. By now two, hands, appearing like human hands, live hands, came down from above and tried to push him down even further into the tunnel. One moment fear

gripped him; he could not believe it! He looked up to see: that the monkey had fallen head first into the doorway, half its body inside and half still in the upper room. it was being squeezed in the opening slit. He decided that his fright had made him imagine two human hands! By now the other men walking up the tunnel-way had come closer.

“My dear man, what is happening? Why did you start blabbering in this petrified voice? Is there some danger? Should we go back?” asked Ravidasa.

“No, no, there is no danger. When I had the tunnel entrance open, this huge monkey somehow came loose and fell upon my head. For just a second, I became frightened! This monkey is now blocking the way, neither going up or coming down. Please be patient, I will move this monkey and clear the way,” said Idumban Kari.

Our readers are sure to have guessed the identity of the two hands that pushed Idumban from the top and made him stumble. Vandiya Devan’s good luck stayed with him even at this time; he had thought of a strategy right in time. When Idumban was stepping down in to the passage steps and at the same time gazing at the flying bat, he pushed the tailless monkey upon him. Making sure that the man below would not be able to see his face, he pushed the man further down the steps with his hands. He then pushed the monkey also into that exit-way and moved the crocodile. All this happened in a few seconds. Vandiya Devan ran to the elephant face and twisted its tusks with all his strength.

A doorway opened; however, it was not big like the one used by Manimekalai when she came in earlier. It was a circular small opening. Perhaps a door within a door. It was not the time to figure out how to open the full door. The treacherous gang might come into the hunt-room before that; and it would be impossible for him to escape. Therefore, the only recourse was to go through the new opening even if it was small. Executing his decision, Vandiya Devan entered the opening. His head and hands

and half the body went through. It was an ordeal for the rest of the body to squeeze through. There was nothing for him to grab a hold to pull himself.

The lamp in the room went out now; and darkness descended. Vandiya Devan said in a voice asking for help, "Chandramati, Chandramati, save me!" he called.

Tinkling laughter of a girl was heard.

"Chandramati are you here, watching all this as if it were a comedy? How fantastic!" The reply was more laughter.

"It is just as fantastic that you enter the women's apartments like a thief." Vandiya Devan recognized Manimekalai's voice. Even so he continued, "Chandramati, I came because you asked me to. There are men behind me. Please pull me in quickly. Otherwise, it will be a tragedy."

"Oh! Is Chandramati so very clever! Let it be, I will teach you both a lesson."

"Ah! Is this Princess Manimekalai? Madam, just this once forgive me and save me. I shall not do any such wrong things any more. You will be blessed a million-million times," begged Vandiya Devan.

Two slender arms came and took hold of Vandiya Devan's shoulders and helped him step down to the floor. The opening in the wall closed by itself.

"Princess, a million thanks to you," he said.

"Patience! Thank me after you know what I am going to do with you."

“Whatever you do is fine. You helped me escape from the murdering gangsters. That is enough. Instead of dying by the hands of those rogues, I have the good fortune to die by your jeweled hands.”

“Oh, you seem to be the bravest of the brave. Who are the murdering rogues coming in search of you? Wait! Let me light the lamp and see your face.”

“Madam, must you see my face again? Chandramati described it – it was the ape-face that was behind you when you looked at yourself in the mirror.”

In the darkness, he could hear soft laughter and the tinkling of bangles. Manimekalai had covered the bright lamp burning in the room when Vandiya Devan had thrust his head into the opening and therefore it was dark; when she uncovered the lamp, the light shone brightly. In that light Manimekalai stood looking at Vandiya Devan, enthralled, totally lost to the world.

They heard several men entering the hunt-room next door with thudding sounds.

Chapter 9 - A Dog Barked

Manimekalai stood looking at Vandiya Devan. He too stood there with a smile on his face. His mind was examining possibilities: what could he say to this girl, how could he escape....

Somewhere from far came a voice, “Amma, did you call me?”

“No, Girl! Go back to your work!” said Manimekalai and her astonishment abated. She walked to the secret doorway and locked it from this side. She made a sign and led Vandiya Devan to a farther corner in that same room. She suddenly turned around and asked, “Sir tell me the truth. You said that Chandramati had asked you to come. Is that true?”

“Yes, My Lady!”

“When? Where did she see you, to invite you?”

“Just now. When I was hiding behind the huge monkey in the next room, you both came in and left. After you had turned to leave, she looked at me and said, ‘Monkey! Will you come and stay in my room? You will be useful to frighten and send away people who come at unwanted times!’ she said that, did you not hear?”

Manimekalai spoke with a smile, “I would not have let her off easy, if I had heard her say that.”

“My Lady, what is the point in chiding your friend? What will Chandramati do if my face is like the face of that tailless-monkey?”

“Your face is quite different from the face of that ape!

“Perhaps it is the difference between that monkey and the huge owl hanging above the monkey.”

“Your face is not a monkey-face or an owl-face; but you have all the tricks of a monkey. And sometimes you stare like an owl. Just some time ago, was it not you, who looked into the mirror and stared at me?”

“Yes, My Lady, it was me.”

“Why did you pull back immediately and shut the door?”

“I saw the face of a heavenly nymph next to me in this mirror. I felt that the girl would be frightened on seeing my face and removed my hands from the elephant’s tusks. The door closed by itself.”

“Do you know who that heavenly nymph is?”

“I did not at that instance; later when I thought about it, I recognized.”

“What did you recognize?”

“That the person I saw was not a heavenly nymph. She is Manimekalai Devi at whose feet all those heavenly beings would bow down. I recognized the cherished daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya. I remembered that she was my dearest friend Kandamaran’s sister.”

With her brow arching in surprise and anger, Manimekalai asked, “Is that so? Is my brother Kandamaran your dear friend?”

“Why this doubt my Lady? Don’t you remember that I came here four months ago one evening? I even came to the inner palace and paid my respects to the mothers. Do you not remember?”

“I remember very well; how can one forget so quickly? Are you that nobleman of the Vaanar clan, Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan?”

“Yes noble Lady, it was I, with neither palace to dwell in, nor kingdom to rule; it is just poor me merely wearing the title ‘arayan’ of my clan. Once upon a time your brother had spoken much about you to me. At one time when your brother Kandamaran and I were posted near the North Pennar on guard duty, he had talked a lot about you. I too had all sorts of dreams; later I gave up all those thoughts.”

A curious idea occurred to Manimekalai. Kandamaran had said that this man had tried to knife him down. Why? Was it something concerning herself? Would this man have quarreled with Kandamaran because he was told that they no longer wish to

give her hand in marriage to him. This thought created a storm of happiness in her heart. She changed it into a storm of rage.

“Sir, let us set aside all those old stories. Tell me why you entered this fort stealthily? If not, I must call my maid and immediately send word to my father.”

“My Lady I had already explained why I had come here. Some dangerous murderers chased me here meaning to kill me. When’ escaping from them, I saw an opening in the ground. I realized that it must be some secret passage. I entered thinking that I could escape through that way; it brought me here.”

“Sir, if one were to choose someone as the ‘best among the brave,’ you deserve that title. I too have heard about many super heroes. But never heard of a super escape artist as you. Prince Uttara Kumara of the epic needs to beg from you (The epic prince was notorious for running away from a battlefield.)”

Vandiya Devan felt a piercing in his heart. This girl whom I dismissed as foolish, is pointing at me mockingly!

“My Lady, they are seven or eight men; they carried weapons. I have no weapons; I lost my darling spear in the floods of the Kollidam.”

“Very good. That heinous spear, which pierced to kill a friend stealthily from behind his back, it is good that it was lost in the river floods.”

Vandiya Devan was completely astounded! Before he could open his mouth in reply, she continued, “Tell the truth. Did you run here to escape the murdering rogues? Or did you come here to commit murder?”

Vandiya Devan throbbed as if he had stepped on embers. “Shiva, Shiva, Narayana, All ye Gods! Whom would I wish to kill by coming here? My best friend’s sister? Why?”

“How would I know! You say ‘dear friend’ without any pause. Did you not try to kill such a ‘dear friend’ by striking him with a weapon upon his back? Who knows, in a similar fashion you might have come to kill someone else.”

“Oh God! What is this false accusation? Was it I who struck Kandamaran on his back? Before doing such a deed, I would have chopped off my own hand. My Lady, who told you of this wicked lie?”

“My brother on his own, told me. If anyone else had said such things, I would never have believed.”

“Kandamaran say thus? I truly am an unfortunate. Someone had struck him with a knife and thrown him near the walls of Tanjavur fort. He was lying there breathless and unconscious; I carried him to safety in Sendan Amudan’s cottage and saved his life. Is this the reward I get for that? My Lady, why did I try to kill him? Did he speak of any reason?”

“Yes, he did, he did tell me. Apparently, you spoke ill of me and ridiculed my looks. You said I was ugly and the girls in Tanjavur were more beautiful than me. Kandamaran had become angry and heartily thrashed you. Unable to fight with him openly, you went behind his back and struck him. Is all this true, or no?” Asked Manimekalai.

“Lies. Lies. Frightful lies. I would have cut off my tongue before saying you were ugly. It was Kandamaran who insisted that I must forget you, his sister.”

“Why?”

“Great Kings destined to rule kingdoms were waiting to marry you. He insisted that I should forget you.”

“And so, you totally forgot about me!”

“I could not entirely forget you. From that day I started to think of you as a dear sister. My Lady, quickly take me to Kandamaran; or ask him to come here I will at least find out why he spoke such a humongous lie. On the other hand, if he is really thinking that of me, I will correct him of such thoughts.”

“You came here to finish what you started in Tanjavur.”

“Meaning ...?”

“You tried to kill him there and did not succeed. You came here to complete the task.”

“God! Would I come to his own palace to kill Kandamaran?”

“What other reason to come through this secret passage?”

“There, listen carefully; the men who wish to kill me are still in the next room. Don’t you hear them talking and moving about?”

“Why should they come to kill you?”

“If you look, they seem like sorcerers; perhaps a gang intent on human sacrifice.”

“So, they caught hold of you, a prince with all the auspicious markings (for being offered as a sacrifice!)” Manimekalai laughed.

“That is what surprises me. Why chose me who is owl-eyed ape-faced? From what you have said, I wonder if Kandamaran my friend had made these arrangements. Take me immediately to your brother. Either he gives up his wrong ideas about me or he kills me with his own hands. Why does he need to employ assassins against me? Lady, please call Kandamaran immediately.”

“Sir, do not be in such a hurry. Kandamaran is not in town.”

“Where has he gone?”

“He has gone to Kanchi to escort the Prince who is coming here. All will be here by tomorrow night. Till then you”

“Are you asking me to stay here till then; that is not suitable.”

“I am not asking you to stay here. In a little while Queen Nandini of Pazluvoor will be here. After that, not even a fly can enter this room. You must know about Lord Pazluvoor. If he sees you here, he will order that you be chopped down in pieces, head separate from body! Ah how much love that old man has for his wife!”

Manimekalai laughed saying such words.

Vandiya Devan remembered everything that had taken place when Lord Pazluvoor had come here before. He asked, “Is that so? Does Lord Pazluvoor love his wife very, very much?”

“That is known to all country and town. The last time they had come here some months ago, the old man did not even let her come to visit our inner apartments in the palace. He watched her like a hawk. This time apparently, they are going to stay a few days. All sorts of hullabaloo here, to arrange a private set of rooms for Queen Nandini. I wonder if she will visit all of us this time or if the old man will allow her to do so.”

“What shall I do now?”

“I am thinking.... Ah! There is room where my brother stores his weapons and arms. I will take you there. Kandamaran will be back by tomorrow evening; you must stay there till he comes. The truth or otherwise of what you are saying can be cleared by Kandamaran himself,” she said.

“Lady, that is not proper; it is very dangerous.”

“What danger?”

“What shall I reply if Kandamaran asks how I came here?”

“Tell the truth; as it happened.”

“I just spoke the truth; as it happened. You do not believe it even as those men are in the next room.”

“I will investigate that right now!”

“What will you investigate?”

“I shall go into the next room; see if there are men there and question them. Have they come to kill you, or have they been led here by you...? I shall find out.”

“Oh, Oh, They are wicked brutes. If you are caught alone among them”

“What can anyone do to me in my own palace?” she pulled out a small folding knife that she had hidden in her waist-knot and showed it to him. “None can come near

me, if someone happens to approach, you are here, the bravest and most daring among men.”

“My Lady, I have no weapons with me now.”

“Have you not heard of the proverb: the valiant need no weapons. You name itself says you are valiant, (vallavan-arayan means valiant noble); wise ones work with whatever available tool. If needed even a blade of grass is a weapon; If we have weapons in our hands even women can put up a fight. Why do we need men? You needn't worry, the man in there who was dusting is a footman in our palace. He must have brought the others; perhaps they are known to me. I shall find out why they have come here today. Don't stand here near the secret doorway. Go over there and hide by that large wooden storage bin.”

Manimekalai was walking towards the wall and trying to open the secret access to the hunt-room. Vandiya Devan went to stand in the shadows next to the storage bin. The bin was actually fashioned like a cabinet and had doors that were wide open. He peeked inside. It was not a storage bin for grain. There were step like shelves inside that wooden-closet. Large musical instruments and drums like the yaazl, veena, mattalam, cymbals were arranged neatly on those shelf-steps; he looked up inside it; the steps were going up to the ceiling and to the roof.

By now Manimekalai had opened the secret door and gone into the hunt-room. Vandiya Devan was surprised by her boldness. He steadied his mind: no harm is likely to fall upon her. The serving maid Chandra came in, opening the main door to the room, calling, “Amma, Amma!”

Vandiya Devan was stupefied; to avoid being seen by her he went into the music closet. Chandra was saying, “Those folks from Tanjavur have arrived near the entrance gates. The noble Lady, your mother, has asked me to fetch you there

immediately,” she was saying loudly as she hurried in. She looked around and saw the open door leading to the hunt-room.

If she turned around from the spot near that door, she would clearly see Vandiya Devan standing inside that music closet. He climbed up a few steps in a hurry. His legs touched the veena strings and raised a sound. In fright, he climbed up a few more steps. His head bumped the roof board of the closet; oh, what wonder, that top shelf moved upwards as soon as his head touched it. Guessing at what it may mean, he pushed that shelf with both his hands; it went all the way as far as his hands could push; light streamed in through opening; in the distance he could hear swishing sounds of running water. He could see the stars blinking in the sky. His heart jumped with joy. He pushed that shelf some more and climbed up. He had come up to one corner of the palace terrace pavilion; the breezy spot where he once had slept soundly, long ago. It was the same place where hidden behind large pillars, he had found out about the midnight meeting of conspiracy.

He pushed back the wooden shelf and closed it. Once the entry way closed, it was not easy to find it from outside. There was no time now to think and wonder about it. He must figure out a way to escape from there. Lady Luck who had helped him this far was sure to stand by his side. He looked around. Every spot he could see was gaily decorated; flags and bunting swayed in the breeze; the festive decorations were an eyeful. This is what they mean when they say royal welcome!

Vandiya Devan took a step after a step very softly, looking around everywhere. There was no one on that terrace. It was his good luck; he began walking faster. He reached the open area which had been his sleeping spot of yore. The balcony from which he could look down – the outer walls of the fortress and the palace, with the courtyard in between where the Kuravai Koothu folk dance had taken place before, these were all visible. But not a single soul was to be seen in all these places; one need not have to guess with any difficulty.

The front gates of the palace were busy and noisy with much activity. Hundreds of torches shed light. Drums, cymbals, blowing horns and heralds calling – it was one big noisy festivity. Lord Pazluvoor's retinue had reached the gates and everybody had gone to welcome them. Hence no one was in the terrace or the courtyard below. There was truly no doubt that Lady Luck was by the side of Vandiya Devan. A perfect opportunity to escape. Half an hour earlier it would not have been possible; half an hour later it would not be possible. He came to the spot where the midnight meeting had been held. Looked around once more time to confirm that no one was there. Down below too no one was visible. Looked up at the outer wall, there too... oh dear what was that? Up on that surrounding wall, amidst the leafy tree branches, a face! It appears like Azlvar-adiyan's face! Chee, Chee just imagination! It was that spot where long ago he had seen Azlvar-adiyan's head. His brain was fooling him.

It was a good thing he thought about it. That was the perfect spot to jump across the fortress wall. His subconscious mind was giving him a hint. He must escape before the welcoming crowds dispersed. How to get down to the courtyard ... yes, a way There was some sort of a canopy or tent on one side over a shed like structure. It was perhaps a stage being set up for the dances and Kuravai Koothu. One of the bamboo poles supporting the structure was tall almost reaching up to the terrace. He jumped and got hold of that pole and shimmied down. Looked around.

No one there yet. Some tinkling bells at the spot where he had stood on the terrace above; Manimekalai, with her tinkling anklet bells, coming in search of him, perhaps. Mischievous girl; if he is caught by her now, he was done. He crossed the open space of that courtyard in one quick run; stood near the guarding outer wall and looked around again. He could see a female figure up on the terrace: it was not clear - was it Manimekalai or Chandramati the maid? Whoever it was, she must have seen him run across the courtyard. Fortunately, she did not cry out; may she be blessed, whoever she is! He walked swiftly along the wall and soon came below the spot where he had seen Azlvar-adiyan's face.

How was he to climb this wall? It was so very tall? No foot hold or hand hold was obvious. God help me! Here is help! Some of the bamboo poles they had brought to build the stage was apparently not used. They had piled them loosely along the wall. He ran in one leap and grabbed one of the longer poles and came back. He made the pole lean on the wall; it had the right length. Will the pole stay steady as it leaned on the wall? What if it slips while I am climbing? I must fall down! Am I to remain with folded hands fearing that? He pressed the bamboo once or twice and began climbing; half way up, the pole began to slip. Gone, lost, all bones are sure to be broken! Even before he could finish the thought, the pole became steady once again. It looked as if a hand up there was holding it steady. The only thing left is for me is to go crazy, with that thought, Vandiya Devan climbed and took hold of the wall. The bamboo pole slipped and clattered down. The noise sounded like thunder in his ears. Luckily the noise at the gates was even louder. So hopefully none heard the sound of the pole falling. But the girl on the terrace pavilion, she must have heard it. He jumped on the wall and surveyed all around. Yes, that girl was still standing up there.

His impish nature could not keep quiet. He waved his hand as if saying goodbye and tried to get down on the other side of the wall. Getting down on the other side was not all that difficult the ground was not that far below here as it had ups and downs, some hillocks; some of the tree branches were rubbing against that outer wall. Using those he slid down part way.

When he thought of how he had deceived Manimekalai, he laughed. As if echoing him, there was laughter from somewhere. His blood froze; hands began to shake as he looked down ready to jump.

A dog was waiting to pounce on him. It was impossible to think of climbing back; the only choice was to jump to the ground. Jump and give a handful of his flesh to that dog's jaws! What he heard just now, was it laughter or this dog barking? Is someone hiding close by and setting the dog upon me? His mind was swaying, weighing the pros and cons: was it more dangerous to climb back on the wall and go into the fort

or to go down? His legs were swaying to keep free of the jaw of that dog jumping up again and again at him. ***

Chapter 10 - Man Hunt

Vandiya Devan was seriously weighing the options: should he try and jump down to the ground without being caught by the ferocious dog or get back up on the boundary wall. At the same time, he was peering into the trees to see if anyone was hiding in there. He thought that he could glimpse some white cloth behind one tree. He remembered the human laughter that came mingled with the loud barking of the dog. What if someone was really hidden there? one, many? It would be a big mistake to jump down without discovering how many in number.

Even if I were to escape from the jaws of this ferocious dog, I would be caught in the hands of humans. When I looked from the terrace pavilion, I thought I saw the face of Azlvar-adiyan on this rampart wall. Could it be that Nambi who has come here after becoming impatient of waiting for me at the Ayyanaar temple; was it he who has set this dog to attack me, to tease me? Let me call out and see what happens, "Mr. Nambi, Mr. Nambi, what is this teasing?" Vandiya Devan called out.

Again, the same laughter; it was not Azlvar-adiyan's voice. Then, it is perhaps better to get back on that rampart wall and jump back into the courtyard inside the fort. I can somehow escape in the middle of all that commotion of the welcome for Lord Pazluvoor. Or else, there is the secret tunnel: I can once again plead-humble with Manimekalai. Or else I must earn the grace of the Queen of Pazluvoor. She has not exposed me up till now, why would she unmask me now?

He started climbing back on that wall. The dog jumped even higher and barked. And laughter once again. A figure came out from behind the tree; he carried a spear in his hands. Vandiya Devan recognized Thevaralan.

He came towards the spot where Vandiya Devan was hanging and said, "Young man! Your life is very strong."

"That is well known, then why do you come near me?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"This time you cannot escape!" he aimed the spear in his hand towards Vandiya Devan.

Vandiya Devan recognized his predicament: how could he fight the man aiming a spear at him while hanging precariously from a tree branch half way down on that boundary wall? If he could jump and try to escape, there is that hunting-dog waiting to pounce on him!

"Thevarala, be careful! Remember the orders of your mistress, the Queen of Pazluvoor. Hasn't your queen told you to not harm me?"

"The Queen of Pazluvoor is not my mistress. No queen on this earth is my mistress. Goddess Durga Paramaeshwari is my only mistress."

"My clan patroness is also Durga Paramaeshwari! It was with her grace that I could escape from the burning ship in the middle of that stormy sea. If you touch me, Goddess Durga will put an end to you."

"If you are truly a devotee of Goddess Durga, you must do something for me now. I will then let you go with your life."

"What should I do? First order your dog to move away."

"A fanatic Vaishnava fellow came by to these parts. If you help me look for him and catch him, I will let you go."

“Why must we catch him?”

“I have sworn an oath to sacrifice a Veera Vaishnava fellow to my Goddess; that is why I need to find him.”

The shrub branch from which he was hanging began to come unrooted from the wall. Vandiya Devan was thinking how to jump on Thevaralan without being caught by the spear in that man’s hands. He spoke, “that Vaishnava man is my dear friend. I shall never betray him. Instead of him, just give me up as the sacrifice.”

“Then become a prey to this spear, right now!” Thevaralan began to point and aim the spear towards Vandiya Devan.

Vandiya Devan gave up his grip on the tree sapling growing on the wall and jumped down to get hold of Thevaralan’s spear just below the blade; in the speed of that fall, he fell flat on his back; Thevaralan did not expect this, but he collected himself and lifted the spear. A figure ran up from behind and with the wooden club in its hand it dealt a well-aimed blow on Thevaralan’s head. Thevaralan fell with a ‘thump’ upon Vandiya Devan. The Dog now leaped upon the man who had attacked its master. Azlvar-adiyan was ready for it; he pulled his upper body scarf, spread it, and threw it upon the dog. The dog now became blinded within a minute. The ingenious Vaishnava next threw a rope that he had concocted with forest vines, around the dog’s head like a noose, bound it tight; then tied the dog with more vines to the tree.

Vandiya Devan had by now pushed the Thevaralan’s body away and stood up. Thevaralan was still knocked senseless by that one blow from Nambi’s clublike staff. Both pulled more forest vines and bound the hands and legs of Thevaralan. Vandiya Devan picked up the spear and Azlvar-adiyan his staff and they left that place. A thick forest surrounded all three sides of Sambuvaraya’s fort except on the side of the entrance façade. If one entered that forest, it would not be easy to find their way out. So, the friends hurried on hugging the fortress wall.

As they were hurrying, Azlvar-adiyan declared, "I thought you to be smart; I realized my mistake now!"

"Are you speaking about my entering the underground passage so hastily? Do you know how many alarming secrets I have found out because of that?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Let that be so! When that fellow Thevaralan asked 'help me find the Vaishnava,' why could you not say 'will do!?' you got yourself into unnecessary danger."

"It is all a result of the company I have kept."

"Whose company are you talking about? I do not recall ever telling you to commit such mistakes."

"I am not talking about you, Sir! I refer to Ponni's Beloved Prince. After meeting him and spending time in his company, my heart does not let me utter lies."

"Have you become such a truth-monger even if you need to escape with your life?"

"It was not just that. I knew that you were hiding somewhere nearby. If you heard me agree with Thevaralan that I would help him catch you, and if your assumed that it was true, would you have come to help me at that dangerous moment?"

"My dear fellow, the sharpness of your intellect is commendable! No doubt about that. To tell the truth, I was waiting eagerly to hear how you replied to Thevaralan's question."

"See! My surmise that you were the epitome of a skeptic, turned out to be right. Apart from that, regardless of any benefit for me, I would not utter even mere words of

betrayal about my friends; that is my habit. However, what is this? you have come here, when you had said, 'I will wait at the Ayyanaar temple.' If I had come back by that underground passage, I would have searched for you in vain!"

"If you were coming back by that passage, it is doubtful if you would have come back alive. Those conspiring gangsters entered the passage shortly after you had gone in. I thought that since you are a smart fellow, you are likely to find another way to come out; I thought this was the spot where you were likely to jump over the fortress wall."

"And so, you came here thinking all that!"

"Not just that. Those gangsters who entered the passage, left Thevaralan as a guard outside at that temple to make sure that no one was there, when they came back. They must have set up some code before they went in. All this I did not know. I had thought that all in that gang had gone underground. I was also worried that you had gone in and were caught inside. I wanted to go find out the mechanism to open that entry to the tunnel from outside. I had gone near that sacrifice pedestal and was fiddling with that trident near it. Hearing footsteps, I was taken aback as I turned around: Thevaralan was coming with a spear in his hand. Those rogues had determined many days ago to kill me instantly if ever they saw me. I knew that. I had no weapon in my hand. There was no recourse but run. Thevaralan too was following me at a run. Because of the dense forest grove, he was not able to catch me or throw the spear at me.

After a while it appeared as if he was no longer following me. I thought that he had given up his man-hunt and decided to get out of that forest and find the royal road. I saw a small hut in the distance. A faint light was flickering in there. I thought, that I would go there and ask them the way to the royal road. I peered at that hut from a little afar. It was good that I was cautious. Thevaralan was standing outside that hut; a woman holding a dog was standing near him. He appeared to be saying something to her and then left with the dog. That dog looked in my direction and barked. Danger

had now increased manyfold. I abandoned the idea of finding the royal road and began running through the forest once again. Since the dog continued to bark, I could make out where they were. Even as I was running, my brain was working. It would be impossible to be running in that forest all night long. They would surely catch up with me. It would not be easy to manage both, Thevaralan with the spear and the dog with its sharp teeth, at the same time. I could see this tall surrounding wall of this fort. I decided to climb that wall and jump inside and manage somehow. I had climbed onto that wall. I caught sight of you running across the terrace pavilions. I knew you were coming to jump across the wall. I jumped off that wall again, now confident that between the two of us we could manage man and dog. The dog's bark was getting closer and so I climbed a tree. That man and his dog came close to my tree. He must have seen you trying to climb down that big wall. He went towards you with that dog. You know everything that happened after that!" ... thus spoke Azlvaradiyan at length.

Vandiya Devan asked, "Sir what is your opinion about the power of fate?"

"What kind of a question is this! Why have your thoughts turned towards fate? Why?"

"They say that when a person is born, the creator writes the fate of that person on their forehead. Do you believe that or no?"

"No. I have no belief in fate. If one were to believe in fate, there would be no meaning in the teachings that we would attain greatness by faith in the Supreme Lord. Azlvar saints have said..."

"Let those Azlvar saints say whatever they wish. I have now come to have complete confidence in fate. I think everything happens because of fate. Otherwise, I could not have escaped today."

"My dear friend, you did not escape because of fate. A fine, sharp brain helped you."

“No. never. My brain forced me to explore unknown depths of danger. Fate saved me from drowning in those depths.”

They had crossed and gone beyond the forest as they conversed in this fashion and walked quickly. They could now see the front gates and entryway into Kadamboor fort. They could see that the whole area was full of hustle and bustle. Lord Pazluvoor’s, elephant, horsemen, bannermen and entourage were soon nearing the gates. Lord Sambuvaraya and his entourage waited in front of the gates of that beautifully decorated fort. Hundreds of torches were turning night to day. Large drums of various kinds, horns, trumpets, cymbals, hand held clappers, all were being sounded at the same time, raising a huge din.

Azlvvar-adiyan pulled at Vandiya Devan’s hand “Come let us go, someone might spot us.”

“No one would look towards us. Even if they did, my fate will save me.”

“Why must we stand here?”

“Don’t you wish to see Lord Elder Pazluvoor descending from his huge elephant?”

“Is that all?”

“I want to see if the Young Queen of Pazluvoor came with him on the elephant or did she come in her covered palanquin.”

“Thambi, do not assume that fate will always be in your favor. It may come in the disguise of an enigmatic enchantress and topple down your regalia.”

“I am not one to be enchanted and mesmerized like that; there are others who may be so!”

The majestic elephant came to stop in front of the gates. Lord Pazluvoor descended; his young queen followed and come down from the elephant.

Azlvar-adiyan remarked, “Ah! This time the Young Queen did not come in the palanquin. He has brought her here openly.”

“That is all I needed to know. Come let us go now,” Vandiya Devan moved back. But now, Azlvar-adiyan was not all that eager to move back. He continued to stand there and watch Pazluvoor Nandini without blinking an eye. Accidentally or perhaps enticed by Nambi’s mind power, Nandini turned to look towards their direction. She noticed Azlvar-adiyan’s face peeking out from the dark foliage of the trees at the back. A trace of fright crossed her face.

Lord Pazluvoor noticed the change in his Young Queen’s face. He too peered at the direction she had looked at. Immediately, he whispered something in Lord Sambuvaraya’s ears. Sambuvaraya called two of his footmen and ordered something. In the midst of the grand, booming instruments and welcoming cheers, Lord Pazluvoor and his Queen entered the fort through the main gates.

Two horsemen entered the forest surrounding the walls of the fortress, at that same time. They forced the horses with some difficulty through the forest. They had gone quite far and could find no one. They had crossed most of the wooded area and were coming towards a level clearing with sparse vegetation. “Nobody seems to be here in these woods. It must be some mindless anxiety of that old man,” Said one horse man. A dog came howling towards them.

“Thambi, do you know why dogs howl like this?”

“Sometimes, if someone is dead, they howl like this.”

“They howl if they see, ghosts, goblins, phantoms and vampires.”

“Maybe it thinks you are a goblin! Ha, ha, ha!”

“No, my brother, it thinks you are a vampire!”

Both men were startled to look up, by the ghoulish laughter above their heads. Two big vampires appeared to be hanging above their heads from two branches of that lonely tree. The two vampires began slapping the cheeks of both men “kloreesh, vlooreesh!” and then grabbed them by their throats and pushed them off their horses! (Note: Common superstition held that vampires or vedalams would overcome lonely travelers by slapping them harshly till the victims lost their senses.)

Those two mischievous vampires jumped on the riderless horses and goaded them to fly away from that forest across the open moorland.

Chapter 11 - Friend Or Traitor?

Prince Aditya Karikala, his friends and entourage were coming onwards, having just crossed the fertile lands around the areas where the River Mani-muttha joined the Vellaru. The friends were discussing the royal welcome they had had in the town of Thiru-Mudukunram and about the renovation works of the temple in that town.

Parthiban Pallava declared, “I really liked what Saint Sundara Murti Nayanar did at that temple in Mudukunram.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Prince Karikala.

“That he had said, he would not sing about an old woman!”

“What was that? I do not know that story, tell me the details,” said Aditya Karikala.

Saint Sundara Murthi Nayanar was on a pilgrimage when he arrived at the town of Mudukunram also known as Vriddha-achalam. As was his habit, he went to the Shiva temple in that town. The temple priests welcomed him and held special services on behalf of the Saint to see the shrine and avail blessings. The priests then humbly requested that the Saint should compose some lines and sing about the Lord enshrined in their temple so that the place could win honors.

(Note: to be later recognized as a ‘paadal Petra Sthalam,’ a special temple or place identified in songs composed by saints.)

“Let me see if I can. What is the name of the Lord enshrined here?” asked Sundara Murthi.

Based on the name of the town – Mudukunram or Vriddha-achalam (old mountain) -- the Lord in their temple was named Vriddha Gireeswara (meaning Aged Lord of the Mountain)

The Saint frowned slightly; In his mind he wondered, after all do I need to sing about an old man? Fine, let me see if the mother Goddess the consort of Shiva is named any better, “Let that be, what is the name for the Goddess enshrined here?” he asked.

The priests replied “Vriddha Gireeswari!” (meaning Aged Lady of the Mountain.)

“You have made the Lord an old man and also made his Lady an old woman! I cannot sing about an old man and an old woman! Go away sirs,” said the Saint with some annoyance and left the temple.

The priests felt that if their shrine did not have songs composed by an eminent Saint like Sundara Murti, the place would not gain merit or popularity. They enshrined another statue of the Goddess and named her Baalaambikai (young maiden Goddess.) Those priests went in search of the Saint and explained what they had done. Saint Sundara Murti came back with magnanimity and sang about Baalaambikai married to Vriddha Gireeswara, (young maiden consort of aged lord) offering worship at the new shrine!

On hearing this story Karikala laughed uproariously, his whole body shaking. "Perhaps some bard who came to Pazluvoor's court must have said something like that; he wouldn't sing about old men and women. Perhaps that is why he married Nandini! Who knows!"

Parthiban and Kandamaran who heard these words of the Prince also laughed riotously, again, and again. Their bodies shook so much that it appeared as if they might fall off their horses! After they had stopped their laughter, Parthiban asked, "I do not understand why God has created something called old age. Each can live for the entire time allotted to them looking exactly same and pass on when their time comes."

"It does not matter what the Gods have set up. Getting old or not is in our hands," said Karikala.

"How is that possible?" asked Kandamaran.

"Do we think of Abhimanyu and Aravaan as old men?" asked Karikala. (He was referring to epic princes, who died young.) The other two stayed silent.

"In Tanjavur palace, in the art gallery there are portrait paintings of all my ancestors. Vijayala Chozla, Aditya, Paranthaka, these three appear aged. But my great grandfather Rajaaditya, do you know how he looks? He appears as a young,

dashing, brave warrior. Rajaaditya died when he was young. Therefore, he is lucky being forever young! We do not know who among us will have that good fortune!"

The other two did not care for this conversation; they continued to remain silent.

"Why have you suddenly gone silent? Why are you so frightened of death? If this body is gone, we get a brand-new body. Why should we fear death? If my friend Vandiya Devan were here, he would have agreed. It is rare to see a person as full of life as him. If one were to drop him at the gates of Yamaloka, the abode of the God of Death, he would still be laughing with joy," said Prince Karikala.

At that minute they noticed two horses galloping quickly, raising a cloud of dust, coming towards them on that Royal Way. Before they could blink once, the horses had come very close to them. The way they were coming, galloping swiftly, it seemed as if they would not even notice the Prince's retinue in the front but just go past. Kandamaran and Parthiban readied to block the road by extending the spears in their hand to see who was so arrogant to not mind the Prince or his men.

However, the horses were pulled back and made to halt just a little in front of them. Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan jumped down from their horses. On seeing Vandiya Devan, Karikala's happiness knew no bounds. He too jumped off his horse, went forward, and heartily hugged Vandiya Devan.

"Thambi, you will live to be a hundred. It is not even a minute since I mentioned your name." said Karikala.

The jealousy that both Parthiban and Kandamaran felt on witnessing this scene, was reflected on their faces. They moved their horses a little ahead and waited. They saw more horses coming towards them. Very soon those horsemen too came closer and stopped. Kandamaran recognized them as men from Kadamboor and went forward to find the details.

He then came close to Prince Aditya Karikala and said, "Prince, this Vandiya Devan is your friend; and he was a friend of mine too. However, I must accuse him of a heinous crime. He is a betrayer of friendship. He struck me with a knife on my back and wounded me almost fatally. Therefore, I am duty bound to warn you that you should be cautious in dealing with him."

Chapter 12 - A Spear Is Split In Two

On hearing Kandamaran's accusation against Vandiya Devan who had been his dear friend, Aditya Karikala laughed thunderingly, his whole body shaking.

"Kandamara, are you saying that Vandiya Devan attacked your back with a knife? Why did you show your back to him?" asking that he began to laugh, all his body shaking again and again with remembered mirth.

(Note: the act of showing one's back to an enemy was a sign of cowardice and lack of valor. Saying that someone showed his back would be considered very insulting.)

Kandamaran's dark face reddened; his eyes became like fully ripe Kovai fruit. His lips trembled. "Sir! Do you think this is a matter to be laughed at?" he asked.

"Kandamara, are you saying that I should not laugh? Laughter is a boon given by the Gods to humanity. Cattle do not laugh; sheep do not laugh; a horse does not laugh; lions do not laugh, why even monkeys that love to play do not laugh. Only those born as human beings can laugh. When it is thus, you are saying that I should not laugh? It has been a while since I laughed. Friend, hearing us laugh surprises even me. You are saying to me that I should not laugh!" said Aditya Karikala.

"Sir I too am happy to see that you are laughing and are joyous. But please do not laugh thinking I showed my back to this greatest of heroes! When I was not expecting it, this man was hiding behind and came up to strike me. I survived and rose from my sickbed only because of the Grace of Goddess Durga and the kind care shown by the Young Queen of Pazluvoor. You should inquire about that betrayal by him and give me justice. Or give me the authority immediately, so that I can punish him," said Kandamaran.

“Friend, I myself will readily inquire and give justice. Saying that a person seeking justice of the Sembiyan Dynasty of Kings was not given justice is impossible. One of the ancient kings of our clan was Sibi. To give justice to a pigeon, did he not cut off piece after piece of his own flesh? Manu-needhi another of our ancient ancestors gave justice to the cow by sacrificing his own son. You are no less than a pigeon or a cow. I will not refuse to give you a fair dealing. Be patient till I question this fellow. Vallava, before you give me all details of your journey, it is better that you reply to Kandamaran’s accusation. What do you say? Is it true that you stabbed him with a knife from behind? If true, why did you commit such a cowardly, dastardly deed that goes against all codes of valor?” asked Karikala.

“Prince, I did not stab this bravest among the brave; I did not knife him from the back. I did not stand behind him and stick the knife in him. Seeing that he was stabbed on his back, knocked out, lying in a pool of blood, I carried him on my shoulders, took him to Sendan Amudan’s cottage and saved his life. I now feel sorry for having saved his life. I feel regret that I did not stick a knife on his chest and kill him. Because of my friendship for him I failed in my duty to my king. Sir, he said that I am a betrayer of friendship. He is not merely a betrayer of friendship. He is a traitor against his master. Ask him where, in which place and under what circumstances he was attacked? Ask him, whom did he escort through the dungeon passageways of Tanjavur, and after safely conveying the person to Pazluvoor mansion, while coming back, whom did he meet in the underground tunnel of Pazluvoor’s treasure vault on that night? Ask him. On the night of the Aadi month festival, ask him what happened at midnight in his Kadamboor Fort? Who came there at that time hiding in the shuttered palanquin? Ask him.” Vandiya Devan had not finished.

Kandamaran interrupted with trembling lips, failing tongue, “Hey you insignificant paltry fellow. Stop your nonsense words. If you don’t, you are going to be prey to this spear of mine.” He picked up his spear in his hand.

Aditya Karikala noticed his agitation with some surprise. He plucked the spear from Kandamaran, and with his iron hand bent the shaft of that spear. The spear snapped noisily. He collected both pieces and threw them far away.

“Be careful, I cannot tolerate my friends fighting right in front of me. Parthiban, if either of them touches a sword or a spear, it is your responsibility to immediately arrest them,” said Karikala. Vandiya Devan immediately untied the sword at his waist and handed it to Parthiban, who accepted it warily.

“Kandamara, Vallavarayan has replied to your accusations. I will later examine the validity of everything, leisurely. Are you going to reply to the questions he posed?” asked Aditya Karikala.

Kandamaran answered, stumbling over words, swallowing, and stuttering, “Sir I have sworn an oath that I would not speak of those things to anyone.”

Parthiban intervened, “Prince, these two accusing each other like this, seems to indicate that it may be a matter concerning some woman. So, it may be better to question them separately, privately.”

“Yes Parthiban, I too think the same. All three of you have met the Young Queen of Pazluvoor individually and fallen prey into the bewitching web she has woven; you are each trying to swallow the other.” Karikala began laughing again.

Parthiban’s face distorted with some annoyance. He said, “My Lord, today you seem to think of any important matter as trivial, and seem determined to laugh about that. It is good. Let me also speak of what has to be spoken. I too have very many misgivings about this Vandiya Devan. I will just speak of the most important of those concerns. Your brother jumped into the ocean in the middle of a raging storm only to save this man from a burning ship. After that Ponni’s Beloved Prince has not been seen. However, this fellow has sprung here, to stand in front us with not a sign of

blemish, looking as fresh as ever, like a tamarind seed that will not succumb to a pounding. Ask him what has happened to your brother; if the Prince was taken by the sea, he is the one responsible.”

Karikala looked at Vandiya Devan and asked, “How do you respond to this?”

“Sir, before I can reply to his question, he should respond to one question. He is the one who started from Lanka taking the Prince onboard his ship. Prime Minister Anirudda and Commander Velir had both asked the Prince to remain in Lanka. Even so, giving importance to his brother’s wishes, the Prince boarded his ship and started back. Why hasn’t this man brought the Prince safely back to you? Why was he standing and watching when the Prince jumped in to the seething ocean? Why did he not stop the Prince? In order to save a poor nobody like me, the Prince braved himself to get down into the sea. Why did not this noble valiant of the Pallava clan or his men follow the Prince and jump into the sea to guard him? Did they stand around thinking it was some kind of show when the sea was dragging him down?

Vandiya Devan posed such questions.

“Sir, I think this idiot is piling accusations upon me; he will even go as far as saying that I killed the Prince. I cannot tolerate this even for a minute.” Parthiban was quite enraged.

Karikala looked at him sharply. “Parthiban, have I not said this? You three dear friends of mine have come to a stage that you are ripping into each other! I shall not point blame at any one of you for all this. The power wielded by the Queen of Pazluvoor is such; I myself have felt it. You too get back on your horse and go ahead a little slowly with Kandamaran. I shall follow behind hearing the details of Vandiya Devan’s journey. I will inquire into all the accusations and find out the truth. But keep this one thing in mind. The three of you must remain friends There is nothing that will displease me more than the three of you being at loggerheads with each other.”

With no other option, Parthiban and Kandamaran got back on their horses and went forward. At that time Azlvar-adiyan came closer and whispered in Vandiya Devan's ear. "Thambi, you have truly become very smart. You neither spoke lies nor revealed the truth, but spoke very cleverly and escaped this situation!"

Aditya Karikala's glance now fell upon Azlvar-adiyan. "Oh ho! Who is this? It seems a familiar face seen somewhere some time?"

"Yes, My King! Some years ago, you have seen me."

(Note: The crown Prince of the Chozla's ruled jointly with their Emperor, hence it was usual for the subordinate to address them as King.)

"Even your voice seems familiar!"

"Yes, My Lord, three years ago at a very important moment, you heard my voice...."

A dark shadow seemed to spread across Aditya Karikala's countenance.

"Three years ago.... an important moment ... What was that? Is it the voice I had heard when I went searching for the enemy on the island in the Vaigai river? Is that possible?"

"That was indeed my voice, My King. It was I who alerted you, speaking from behind a tree, about the place where the enemy was hiding."

"Oh, what a frightful day that was! If I think of the rage that had taken a hold of me on that day, even now my body shudders. Oh Vaishnava, why were you hiding in that forest that day?"

"My King, you just said it yourself. About the frenzy that had taken possession of you

on that day. You were chopping down dead anyone who came in front of you. I had wished to be alive for some more time.”

“Is that the only reason? I had screamed till my throat ached, ‘let the unseen voice of the oracle come forward, show me the way!’ Why did you not come out even then?”

“I did not wish to become victim of eternal enmity and anger of the sister I had raised, she is now the Queen of Pazluvoor.”

“Perhaps you decided that I could earn her eternal anger! You heinous wretch!”
Karikala drew the sword by his waist.

Vandiya Devan was shocked and frightened. He felt that Azlvar-adiyan’s life was at an end on that day! With hesitancy, he spoke up, “Sir this Mr. Nambi has come from the Prime Minister. Please hear the messages he has brought and then punish him.”

“Well, what is the point in punishing him? What is the point of punishing anyone?” he sheathed his sword.

It did not appear as if Azlvar-adiyan had been frightened like Vandiya Devan had been frightened about the wrath of the Prince.

With an ironic smile playing on his face Azlvar-adiyan spoke, “King knowing that you would turn your rage upon me, I did not appear before you all these years. The anger of my sister against me has not abated. Till to date she has been adamant in not meeting me. However, it appears as if her ire against you has ended. Have you not accepted this invitation to the banquet at Kadamboor because of the friendly, personal, palm-leaf letter from Nandini Devi?”

“You wicked Vaishnava! How did you know this?” asked Karikala.

“Sir I am bondsman to Mr. Anirudda. Not even a trivial event can take place without the knowledge of the Prime Minister in this country,” said Azlvar-adiyan.

“Watch it you! One day I will banish both of you, that Anbil Anirudda and you, from my country. Now get back on your horses. Ride on either side of me; let us keep going while talking,” said Aditya Karikala.

Chapter 13 - Manimekalai's Secret

In that specially decorated chamber in the inner apartments of Kadamboor palace, Nandini was leaning back on a beautifully fashioned bed. She too appeared exquisitely dressed. Her face glowed with a beauty unseen before. From her half-closed eyes it was easy to surmise that she was day dreaming. Whenever she opened her closed eyelids, mesmerizing rays like lightning flashed from her eyes and vanished. Even though she appeared half asleep, it was obvious that her brain was functioning with the speed of thought!

If one were to look even more carefully, they would discern that her half-closed eyes were upon the plumes rising from the agar-wood burning incensor in one corner of her room. The fragrant smoke rose in swarms of swirls, lazily circling upwards, scattering, and vanishing. What sights did she see in those swirls of agar smoke? Don't know. Suddenly she sighed deeply. “Yes, yes! All my dreams have become nothing like the swirls of this smoke. At least this smoke cloud leaves behind a pleasing fragrance before it fades away. All that my dreams have left behind are agony, distress, slander, and infamy,” mumbled her coral red lips.

At time Manimekalai's soft voice was heard calling, “My Lady, My Lady, may I come in?”

“Come, My Dear, come! Why ask permission of me for you to come into your own place?” asked Nandini.

Manimekalai opened the door and stepped in softly. Her facial expression, the way of her walk and the swing of her arms exhibited such enthusiasm that she appeared as if she was leaping, jumping, dancing, and singing as she came in.

Nandini sat up a little and pointed to a seat inlaid with ivory that was beside her bed, and asked Manimekalai to sit down.

While seating herself that girl said, "My Lady, my brother has taught me how I should behave with you. He has talked a lot about the fashions of the southerners. He has told me that one should not enter someone's private rooms suddenly without asking permission."

"May the southerners and their fashions perish in perdition! Forget right away, all this stuff that your brother has taught you. Don't address me as My Lady, My Queen and such... Call me sister, Akka.!"

"Akka! Akka! My coming to you often, bothering you, wont it disturb you?"

"You coming often and disturbing me will be difficult; if you stay here without leaving my side, it will not be any disturbance," said Nandini as she smiled.

Manimekalai melted in that smile! She kept gazing at Nandini for a few minutes, "I have never seen a beauty like you. Not even in pictures!"

"Girl, don't you too fall in love with me! Town gossip is already saying that I am a 'bewitching sorceress.' They slander me saying that I hypnotize men who come near me."

"Akka if any such slander falls in my ears, I will cut off their tongues completely before I do anything else."

“There is no point in finding fault with the gossips. Manimekalai, I have married an old man, so, they will talk in that fashion.”

Manimekalai’s face wrinkled with annoyance. “Yes, Yes, I too feel sad when I think about it. My brother too talked and talked about it with much distress. But should they gossip like this about someone?”

“Let them gossip if they wish. Manimekalai, they gossiped in the town even about the great Sita Devi. What loss was it to Sita? Anyway, forget my situation, tell me about yourself.”

“What is there to say about me, Akka?”

“You pretender! Did you not come earlier in the evening and tell me that you will share the secrets of your heart? Now you ask what is there to tell!” saying this Nandini lightly pinched Manimekalai’s pretty cheek with affection.

“Akka, I feel like staying with you forever like this. If they were to arrange a swayamvara for me, where I could choose my own life partner and if it were possible for women to marry other women, I would garland you!”

“It is not even a full day since you met me! And you speak such seductive words already! I am happy about it. Having no one like you to befriend me, I was yearning for a dear companion like you. All the girls from noble families in Chozla lands flock in search of that evil phantom of Pazlayarai. At least you have remained for me. What you said a little while ago cannot happen. Woman marrying a woman has not happened in our worlds. A woman has to marry some man and live with him!”

“What if one were to remain a maiden, unmarried?”

“You cannot dearest, you cannot. This world will not let you remain unmarried. Your mother and father will not let you; neither will your brother let you. Only after they have bound you to some man will they find peace of mind. If you must be married, whom do you wish to be married to? Tell me.”

“Akka ask me by saying some specific names...and ... – I will tell!’ said Manimekalai bashfully.

“Fine as you wish, I will ask ... Do you wish to marry Madurandaka who excels in his Saiva devotional activities? Or do you wish to garland Prince Aditya Karikala renowned for his courage, prowess and daring?”

Manimekalai laughed aloud, chuckling as if she had suddenly thought of something.

“Why are you laughing Manimekalai, do you think I am teasing you? It is only to settle this question that your brother asked me particularly, to come here. In a short while Karikala will be here; and your brother too will be back. I have promised to find out your heart’s desire and let him know,” said Nandini.

“I myself am not sure of my heart’s desire. What can I do Akka?”

“At least tell me why you laughed.”

“When you mentioned the name Madurandaka, something came to mind. About four months ago he had come to this palace. He came in the palanquin in which you usually travel; came with shutters closed and the curtains drawn without being seen by anyone. We in the women’s apartments did not know that secret. We had assumed that it was you who had come. We were all asking each other why the young Queen of Pazluvoor did not come to pay a visit to the womenfolk. Akka you just said that women cannot marry women. My marrying Madurandaka is like being married to a woman!”

“Yes, yes, I did think that you would not favor Madurandaka. I mentioned that to your brother. Madurandaka is already married to my brother-in-law’s daughter. She is very arrogant. You cannot live even for one day with her in the same household. So, tell me... you must have given your heart to Prince Karikala!”

“I am not sure that I can say that. I have never seen him How can I give my heart to him?”

“My dearest! It is not the way of noble women, to give their hearts only after seeing someone. Have you not heard of women in our old stories and epics where they fell in love with someone after seeing their portraits and hearing tales of their gallantry?”

“Yes, I have am aware of that. I also know that Aditya Karikala’s fame has spread worldwide. He is a very brave warrior. He apparently cut off Veera-pandiya’s head with one blow. Is that true?”

Manimekalai did not notice how Nandini’s face turned so very dreadful. Nandini looked away for a few seconds and turned back. Her face was once again charming with mesmerizing attraction.

“Manimekalai, do you think it is a mark of great bravery for someone to sever another’s head in one swipe? Isn’t it horrible and demonic?” asked Nandini?

“I do not understand what you are saying Akka. Is it not valor to pluck the enemy’s head? How can we say that it is demonic?”

“Think about it in this way: suppose it is someone very dear to you; an enemy is coming to cut off your dear one’s head. Think of that dear one as if it were your brother, or think that it is your beloved, whom you intend to wed. He is wounded and upon a bed, defenseless, helpless. This other person, the enemy is coming with a

raised sword intending to cut off the head, think that for a moment. Would you praise the valor of the fellow who is coming to strike your beloved?" asked the young Queen of Pazluvoor.

Manimekalai seemed to think about this for a while, she said, "Akka you ask a very peculiar question. Even so, I will tell you what I think. If such a situation as that which you describe were to occur, to me, I will not simply watch; I will snatch the sword from the hands of the person coming to kill and stab him to death."

Nandini hugged and embraced Manimekalai with eagerness. "My very dear girl, you have given a good answer. I am worried that you who are so intelligent should get a smart husband. I am doubtful if even Aditya Karikala would be a suitable groom for you!"

"I too am thinking that. After hearing about Karikala's character and temperament I am somewhat frightened to even think about him. Shall I speak to you about my secret? Tell you the unvarnished truth?" asked Manimekalai. ***

Chapter 14 - Will Dreams Come True?

Nandini lifted Manimekalai by her chin and looked deep into her wide-open eyes.

"My dearest, it may be better that you do not tell me your heart's secret; If we think of it, it is not even one day since we met. One should share secrets only with friends known for a long time."

"Akka if I look at you, you seem like a friend I have known for a long time. My inner feelings urge me to tell you things that I have not told anyone. I am emboldened to ask you of things that one should not ask of anyone," said Manimekalai.

"If that is so, ask my dear."

“They talk in stories about spirits and ghosts. Can that really happen? If someone is not in front of us, will it appear as if they are with us?”

“Sometimes, it may seem so. If one loves someone a lot, they will appear to be in front of us even if they are really not there. If one hates someone a lot, they too will appear like that. Have you not heard stories of illusions of Krishna? Manimekalai, you might have seen plays about it. Kamsa hated Krishna a lot. Whatever he looked at, appeared like Krishna. He plied his sword again and again and was deceived. The milkmaid named Nappinnai loved Kannan with a passion. To her, Kannan would appear to be in all places, even if he were really not there. A pillar, a tree, flowing floods, she would think that they were Kannan, and run to tightly hug and embrace him; and be disappointed. Dear Manimekalai, who is that magical Krishna who has captivated you?” asked Nandini.

(Note: Nappinnai and Kannan, the names of Radha and Krishna in Tamil.)

“Akka, I saw him for the first time, four months ago. Before that my brother Kandamaran had often told me about him. At those times, his form did not appear before me. After seeing him that one time, he appeared in my dreams often. During daytime, sometimes it will seem as if he were standing in front of me!”

“You saw that magician’s apparition even yesterday!”

“Yes Akka! How did you know?”

“Didn’t anyone tell you that I have the powers of magic in me?”

“Yes, they said so; Is it true Akka?”

“You can examine me and decide. Shall I tell you by using my magical powers who that man is? that, young and handsome man who stole your heart?”

“Tell me; I feel too shy to speak his name!”

Nandini closed her eyes for a few seconds and then opened them to say, “That dear lover who stole your heart is the man from the Vaanar Clan, Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan. Is he not?”

“Akka you truly do have magical powers!”

“Dear girl! When you have given your heart to this extent to a man, why haven’t you told your brother about it? Why tempt Madurandaka? Why bring Karikala here and attempt wasteful efforts? Why bring me here unnecessarily?”

“Akka, my brother Kandamaran does not like him.”

“Quite fantastic! Is it your brother who is getting married? But you are telling me that it was Kandamaran who told you about Vandiya Devan. It was your brother who brought him here!”

“Yes, it was Kandamaran who talked about him and brought him to the palace one day. But his thoughts changed later. With reason. That man apparently stuck a knife into my brother’s back in Tanjavur. My brother lay wounded in your palace; he survived with his life only because of your loving care.”

“Your brother exaggerates about the care I gave; let us not go there. What can you do now? The man who stole your heart has thus become your brother’s enemy?”

“But do you know what this man is saying?”

“Who? Which this man?”

“Him. You said his name just now. It was him. He swears that he did not stick a knife into Kandamaran. Apparently, somebody had stuck him with a knife and thrown him outside Tanjavur fort’s wall; he picked him up and saved my brother’s life, that is what he says.”

“When did he come to tell this to you, girl?”

“Yesterday!”

“Yesterday! Did you see that Vandiya Devan personally? You said that you saw an apparition like him?”

“That is, it. I am very confused. Did I see him yesterday or his image? I am not sure. If I think of everything that happened yesterday, it seems like a dream. Akka, they say that if someone dies, their ghost may come back and talk – is that true?” When Manimekalai asked this question her voice was filled with extreme fear.

Nandini too shivered; She was looking up somewhere towards the ceiling. “Yes; that is true. The ghost of a person who dies before their time will come back to haunt the living. If they killed the person by severing the head, sometimes the head alone will come; or the headless body alone will come. At other times each will come separately and ask, ‘have you avenged me?’” said Nandini, she then looked at Manimekalai and in a louder voice asked, “Girl, why did you ask such a question? Are you afraid something like that might have happened to your lover? Who raised this doubt in your mind?”

“There is an oracle dancer, Thevaralan in this palace; I called for him. Apparently, someone beat him up badly last night. His wife Thevaratti came instead of him and said that.”

“Silly! Don’t believe all that!”

“I too did not believe. If it were a ghost, one should not be able to touch, correct?”

“You cannot touch a ghost or an apparition. Why are you asking did you touch the man whole stole your heart?”

“That is also very confusing. I feel as if I had touched him; but if I think of other things, I am doubtful.”

“Tell me everything that happened yesterday in detail. I will clear your doubts”

“I will do so Akka. If I say something in the wrong order or babble incoherently ask me questions.” Manimekalai then continued, “Yesterday, about the same time as this, I was here. I came here to look over and make sure that all arrangements that my brother had mentioned had been done by the serving maids for you in this room. For a moment I was looking at myself in this mirror here.”

“You were admiring your own beauty!”

“Nothing like that. Don’t I know the cast of my own face?”

“What is wrong with your face? Wont the heavenly maidens, Rati, Indrani, Menaka and Urvasi be envious of you!”

“None of them equal the dust of your foot”

“Fine, tell me more, you looked at yourself in the mirror...”

“Another face appeared suddenly in the mirror, close to my face in that mirror ...”

“It was the face of your beloved!”

“Yes. I was shocked.”

“Why should you be shocked? You said that you would often see his face in your dreams; that you would see his apparition.”

“There was a difference between that and this. In my dreams the face was a bit far away; but here, from behind me, I am shy to say it...”

“Does not matter, tell me, you rouge!”

“It appeared to from behind me to kiss me on my cheek. Startled, I looked around, no one was there and the face was no longer in the mirror. Did I not show you the secret door to the hunt-room next to this chamber last night? This mirror is in front of that door. So, I wondered if someone in the hunt-room had opened the secret panel and peeked into this room. I thought that it would not be possible. How could an unknown man come into that hunt-room? To clear my doubts, I opened the panel and went to look in the hunt-room.”

Nandini asked very eagerly, “Was that thief hiding in the hunt-room? Did you catch him?”

“Why do you call him a thief Akka?”

“When I say thief do I mean a real thief? I meant a thief who stole your heart. Was he in the hunt-room?”

“That is the surprising thing. He was not there. Instead, our palace footman Idumban Kari was dusting the place. His face looks like that fearsome looking dark-faced

statue of the village guardian in the Ayyanaar temple. When I asked him if anyone else had come into that room, he said no. I came back thinking ‘let the puzzle unravel itself’”

“Did the puzzle clear up?”

“Listen some more! I was in this room waiting to see if I could hear any voices in the hunt-room. I heard voices; I heard rumbling noises of things falling down; even as I was wondering what to do, this panel door moved. I hid the light and waited. There is a smaller panel opening in this secret door. A figure opened that smaller door and tried coming here. It said ‘help, save me.’ Since the voice and the face seemed like him, I helped him come into the room and turned on the light. It was him!”

“Manimekalai what a surprise this is. It sounds like one of the Vikrama-aditya fantasy stories of yore!”

“And there is more, listen Akka! When I saw him of my dreams in front of me, my whole being blossomed in happiness. My body was quivering. Even then, with pretend anger I asked, ‘how can you come like a thief to the women’s apartments in the palace?’ He said that there were men chasing him to murder him. I teased him saying he was a coward running away fearful for his life. He replied saying he had no weapons. I then brought up the stabbing of my brother. He swore that he never did anything like that.”

“And you believed him?”

“At that time, it seemed believable. But if I think of all that happened later, I am not sure about what to believe and what not to believe.”

“What happened later?”

“Even while talking to him, I was listening with one ear to what was happening in the next room. It sounded like many men walking about and talking. I thought it might be true that some men were really chasing him to kill him. Akka, at that time foolish me thought I must somehow save him. I wanted to find out who were coming to kill him. Was Idumban Kari the footman involved in all this? Was he part of the murdering gang or was he helping him? I was alarmed that so many people knew about that secret tunnel coming into this fort. Also, you were going to stay in this room; that worried me even more. I wondered if I should send for my father; but I could not gather the courage to do so. If my father saw him in the women’s quarters his life would be in danger! So, I asked him to remain here and went into the hunt-room to see who was there.

There were five or six men in the corners near the walls. They looked very startled to see me. I began to feel afraid on seeing them there. I controlled the fear, and in an enraged voice was about to question them. By then my friend and maid Chandramati was calling for me ‘Amma, Amma’ and coming into this room through that main door. I remembered that I had left him in this room and was afraid that Chandramati would raise a hue and cry upon seeing him. Deciding to deal with the men in the hunt-room later, I came back to this room. I tried to cover Chandramati’s line of vision, but he was not here! As if by magic, he had vanished. I asked the maid if anyone was in the room and she said she had not seen anyone. After looking around, I went back to the hunt-room. None of the men I saw before were there. Idumban Kari alone was in there dusting as before. When I asked, ‘who are the men who were here earlier? Where are they now?’ Idumban Kari maintained ‘No one came here’ – I could not believe him.

My maid began teasing me, ‘Akka, something bizarre is happening to you today. You are seeing men in places where there are no men.’ She then said that you were all nearing the gates of this fortress. My father had sent for me to come immediately to welcome you. I left right away, to go to the gates. I crossed the hallway from where Chandramati had come then climbed the steps to get to the terraces. I then saw an

astonishing sight again. The Vaanar nobleman was crossing the courtyard below and going along the outer wall of the fort. I saw him climb the wall by leaning a pole against it and jumping over the wall. That is what it appeared like to my eyes. I am not sure even now, if all of that was real or if it was some hallucination.” Thus, Manimekalai told her tale.

Nandini was thinking. The two faces she had seen hiding behind the dark leaves of the trees appeared before her mind. She knew that horsemen had been sent to catch them. Perhaps they have been caught by now? If they were caught, would they be brought here?

Manimekalai interrupted her thinking, “Akka what do you think of all this?”

“Me? You are asking what I think of this? I think a love-craze has completely taken hold of your mind and heart,” said Nandini

“Akka are you also making fun of me like Chandramati?”

“I am not teasing yo dear. You who saw everything in person are not sure if it was all a dream or real, or madness. How am I to say anything? Is there any other secret way to get out of this room?”

“Not as far as I know. There are no other exits.”

“He could have gone the same way that you and Chandramati took; across the hall and up the steps to the terrace.”

“There were other servants in there he could not have gone past without them seeing him.”

“That is surprising. Did you tell your father about all this?” asked Nandini.

“I did not tell my father. On one hand I felt shy, on the other I felt afraid. In case it is true about him really being here....”

“Yes, it may be better to not talk about all this with the men folk. They may not understand.”

“I am wondering if I should tell my brother or not.”

“It will create a great uproar and a sure racket if you tell him. At this time your brother is intent upon somehow marrying you to Karikala.”

“Akka you must help me. Kandamaran is devoted to you. He will listen if you tell him.”

“My dear girl you ask me to help you against the very reason I have come here! You are a very smart girl! Even if I were to give up the idea of wedding you to Karikala you do not know anything about this other fellow. How can you be sure that he would like you?”

“I am not worried about that Akka. Whether he likes me ... or not I ...”

“This is the fate of one born a woman! It is deemed that the girls would give up their life however the men behave! Anyway, let us see how your fortune is! If anything happens again like last night, you will tell me won't you?”

“If I don't tell you who else will I speak to? Last night I saw a dream. I would like to tell you about it too.”

“Is it not enough that you day-dream? You have night time dreams too! What happened? Did he come hoodwink you in that dream too and go away?”

“No, no this is something else; It is most frightening to even think about. They say dreams seen in the early morning will come true. Is that true Akka?”

“Tell me about it, I will listen. You say it is about something else, did you dream about another person?”

“It is about him. Somebody is coming with a weapon to kill him. He has no weapons in his hands. There is a sword lying on the floor shining brilliantly. I leaped forward, picked it up and rushed ahead. I was going to strike the man who was coming to kill him. On getting closer, I saw his face. It was my brother Kandamaran. “Oh!” with a scream I woke up. My whole body was drenched in sweat and wet. For some time, my hands and legs would not stop shaking. The dream was so real. Will it turn out to become real Akka?”

“My dear girl, your brain is truly addled. What happened really feels like a hallucination. What you see in a dream feels real! A great friend I have found in you! If I am crazy, you have gone one step above,” said Nandini.

Chandramati came in to announce, “They are coming here, I believe. They have come past Veera Narayana Lake.” ***

Chapter 15 - Royal Courtesies

Kadamboor Sambuvaraya’s fort gates were witness to wonderous sights never before seen, during those early evening hours. People crowded, wave after wave as far as eyes could see, standing close to each other. Men and women, young children, boys, girls, were all gathered there. Old women and old men who could not stand on their own legs came with sticks to steady themselves. Not minding the crowds jostling them they waited eagerly to see the brave countenance of their Prince Aditya Karikala. Young boys and girls being squished by the packed mass of people still tried to make themselves a path to get to the front. Young maidens

completely gave up their natural shyness and modesty and pushed and shoved through strange men in the crowd trying to get to the front. Young men did not even bother, not even sparing a glance for those maidens while intent on finding the most suitable spot to be able to see the Prince. Many of them were climbing on to the trees in front and around the fort. Others tried to climb onto the tall outer walls and were roughly pulled down by the guards at the fort.

With babes on their hips young women stood amidst that crowd in spite of various discomforts. Mothers soothed their crying children with words such as, “my darling child, do not cry. The bravest, the most valiant prince of the Tamil lands, he ‘who plucked the head of Veera-pandiya’ Aditya Karikala Chozla is coming. If you are lucky to see him, you too will one day become heroic and famous like him!” Lovers spoke thus to their loved ones, fathers explained to their sons about Aditya Karikala and his prowess.

In those days the fame of Aditya Karikala had spread into all parts of the Chozla lands. He had entered the battle field when he was just twelve years of age, and with his sword had wiped out many enemies. At Chevoor battlefield he had overcome the Pandiyan forces and made their king Veera-pandiya retreat to hide in a cave in the desert. When he was nineteen years of age, he had reduced the Aabathudavi bodyguards of the Pandiya King to nothing; he then found the hiding place of the Pandiya king and brought back the enemy’s severed head. Who is not going to be eager to see such a Prince?

Since the last three or four years there had been many rumors about this Prince. Apparently, after he had been made Crown Prince, there was some difference of opinion between him and his father the Emperor Sundara Chozla; and the emperor did not want him to rule after him said some people. Others opined that Aditya Karikala was following in the footsteps of his historical ancestors, one of whom had gone and settled in Kanchi, formed a separate kingdom and had established the Pallava dynasty there; he wished to establish a separate kingdom in Kanchi. Some

said that Karikala was very angry because his father showered more affection on his younger brother Arulmozli and was partial to that young man. Others completely refuted this: there can be no siblings like Aditya Karikala and Arulmozli in their affection for each other. Many discussed in many words of why the Prince was not yet married. Some said that the Prince has refused to marry any noble woman, he wished to marry a girl from the family of a temple priest and seat her on the throne; and this was the cause for the dissention between father and son. Yet others declared that the Prince was mentally unsound – Sorcerers from the Pandiya lands had cast spells on him and made him go insane. That was why many noblemen and subordinate kings did not want him to ascend the throne after Sundara Chozla.

Whatever it may be, the people were eager beyond measure to see the great warrior. With the spread of the news that the Chozla Prince was to visit Kadamboor, there was much excitement and unrest in the surrounding villages and townships. Once it became known that he was to arrive that evening, people from surrounding areas, as far away as two leagues in distance, came eagerly. It would not be inappropriate to call them an ocean of people. Voices raised by the throats of these thousands of people morphed into a noise like the roar of the ocean. Palace guards and footmen cleared a path and stood guard for the Prince and his men to come up to the gates of the fort. People from the back pushing forward trying to come closer, butting those in front who tried to go past the wall of soldiers, and those guards pushing such people back again, to kept the path clear was like the beach front where waves come up, crash and flow back.

A fellow on a tree branch shouted suddenly, “there they come!” a thousand voices reverberated, “Where? Where?” A single horse came very fast; not minding the crowds, it pushed through, making a way for itself. The crowd pushed back on each other not wishing to be caught in the hoofs of that swift horse. He is the young Sambuvaraya the people shouted. Yes, it was Kandamaran; without answering the questions posed by the people in the crowds he went onwards quickly and stopped

his horse near the fort gates and dismounted. He saw Lord Sambuvaraya and Lord Pazluvoor waiting there and bowed to them respectfully.

“The Prince is coming. But his mind does not seem to be in control. He gets angry suddenly for no apparent reason. I came ahead to alert you all. We must welcome with all royal-courtesies; It may be better for all of us to not answer and just keep quiet even if he says things inappropriate and perverse.” After saying this, without waiting he looked up. There on the balcony above the entrance, womenfolk of the palace seemed to be waiting. He went past the gates and climbed up the steps on one side.

Once he reached the place where the women were gathered, he did not bother about anyone; his eyes searched for Nandini and found her. He approached her and said, “My Lady, I have fulfilled your wish. I have led the Prince to come here. There he comes. He is like an elephant in musth, that has gone rogue. I am not sure how we can manage him!”

“Sir, why are you worried about that? We have the two ankush goads that are the eyes of your sister, which can control a rogue elephant,” said Nandini.

“Akka what words are these!?!” asked Manimekalai.

(Note: musth secretion from temporal glands is a periodic condition in elephant bulls; during that period, the normally mild bulls exhibit very aggressive behavior and often go into rut. The ‘ankush’ is a special hooked spear used to train and handle elephants.)

Her brother looked at her and said, “Manimekalai, what is wrong in the words spoken by the Queen of Pazluvoor? One would need to do penances, to attain a valiant Prince like Karikala as a husband.”

Before she could reply, Nandini asked, "Sir, is anyone else accompanying the Prince?"

"Yes, yes. Parthiban Pallava and Vandiya Devan are coming."

Nandini glanced at Manimekalai, as if conveying some sign and spoke to Kandamaran, "Which Vandiya Devan? The man who you had said was your friend. Is it him?"

"Yes, it is that 'greatest' friend who tried to knife me on my back and kill me. He jumped down from somewhere, somehow came and joined us near the banks of River Vellaru. I am restrained because of the empathy shown by the Prince. Otherwise, I would have made him prey to my sword then and there."

Manimekalai's face shrank and her brows knitted together, "If it is true that he attacked your back with a knife, why should we allow him to enter our palace here?"

"My darling! Please do not speak. These are affairs of the men. Yesterday, they will fight; today they will hug and carouse!" said Nandini.

Kandamaran smiled and replied, "Nothing like that. I had to heed the presence of the Prince. Oh! You have baskets upon baskets of flowers here! Your rain of flowers on the Prince from up here, will overcome his rage and cool him down. There, they are almost here; let me go down." He went down the stairs hurriedly.

If viewed from that balcony, in that ocean like crowd of people spread as far as the eyes could see, they could glimpse something at one spot, like a whirlpool in the middle of a whirlwind at sea. Like a ship caught in that whirlpool, appeared three horses and men upon those horses. The huge wave of that ocean of people soon hid them. That whirlpool kept moving forward, onward towards the fortress gates. Finally, it had reached those gates.

The mean seated upon the three horses that neared the gates were Aditya Karikala, Parthiban Pallava and Vandiya Devan. The retinue of elephants, horsemen and the other footmen remained far back stopped by that crowd of people.

When the horses stopped at the gates a deafening noise arose. Hearing that, the sea of people calmed down somewhat. The drums and other instruments were heard for a little while and then they stopped suddenly. Making use of that sudden quiet, a herald standing on a platform high above the upper rampart called in a thundering voice.

“Born of the Sun dynasty starting from Manu Mandhatha, came Emperor Sibi who tore his own flesh and offered it in lieu of the pigeon, and after him a Rajakesari and his son a Parakesari, then came Manu Needi Chozla who gave his own son to render justice to a cow, later Karikala the Great who stamped his tiger symbol upon the Himalayas, and then came Nalan Killi, Nedun Killi, Perunar Killi, Killi Valavan who reposed near the pavilion of the pond, Killi Valava that reposed at Kuraapalli, Ko-Perum Chozla who built eighty shiva temples, he who came in this dynasty, that Vijayala Chozla of Pazlayarai who bore ninety six war wounds; his son Aditya Chozla that built eighty-two shiva temples along the banks of the Cauvery from the Sasya Hills to Poohar on the sea, his son Paranthaka Chozla who conquered Madurai and Eezlam and built a golden pavilion at Chidambaram; his son Arinjaya Deva who reposed at Aatroor after vanquishing the troops of Rashtrakuta Kannara Deva; his son Pazlayarai Paranthaka Sundara Chozla who rules under one umbrella all lands from Eezlam to Chitpuli country; his elder son, the Royal Lord, Commander of Northern Forces, Crown Prince of the Empire, he who took the head of Veera Pandiya, Aditya Karikala Chozla is coming! Be aware! Be aware! Be Aware!” After the herald had announced in this fashion and stopped, it was like a shower of monsoon rain and thunder that had stopped.

Immediately, another herald standing by him began: “King of Kolli Hills, brave Valvil

Ori who with a single arrow pierced a lion, bear, deer, boar, all of them together; he who has come from his dynasty, Raajaadi-raaja, Raaja-marthanda, brave majesty Sambuvaraya, always the supporter of the clans of the Chozla Emperors, guardian of Veera Narayana Lake, commander of a troop of five thousand, with heartfelt words of praise he welcomes the royal Prince Aditya Karikala Chozla to his humble mansion. Welcome; may his coming be a good coming." So, he said in a booming thunderous voice. Even as he finished a rain of flowers came down upon the Prince from the balcony above.

Aditya Karikala and Vandiya Devan looked up. Among the many faces of beautiful women gathered there, Vandiya Devan's eyes saw just the face of Manimekalai with a blossoming smile. He responded for one second with a smile but recognized how wrong it was, and turned his face away. Aditya Karikala looked up at the same time; the signs of wrath playing on his face became even more extreme. He jumped down from his horse. The other two also dismounted.

By now the drums, horns and cymbals started up again. The noisy crowd that had quietened a little began to roar once again. The guests and the those in the welcoming party went into the fort. Immediately the fort gates slammed shut with a loud bang.

Aditya Karikala looked around and asked, "Why are they closing the doors in such a hurry? Just as you have imprisoned my father in Tanjavur fort, are you planning to imprison me here? What say you? What about the men and retinue who came with me?"

Both old men were stunned into silence for a couple of moments. Lord Pazluvoor collected himself first and said, "Royal Prince, the loving hearts of the many millions of people in these Chozla lands have imprisoned you their Prince and your father their Emperor. Where is the need for another prison?"

“Prince, if the ocean of these hordes of people who have come to have a glimpse of you enter this humble hut what will happen? While they stood outside waiting for your arrival, all gardens and groves around here have become like Maduvana destroyed by a horde of monkeys. As soon as the crowds disperse, we will bring in the retinue that has come with you. Until then we have many men and women to serve you and look after your needs,” said Sambuvaraya.

The noise of the crowds seemed to increase even more outside the fort walls.

“Where are the steps to go up to the façade of these front gates?” Karikala asked Kandamaran. As soon as Kandamaran had pointed the direction to the steps that went up, Karikala walked towards that direction with quick steps. Kandamaran, Vandiya Devan and Parthiban went with him.

Sambuvaraya looked at Lord Pazluvoor and remarked, “What is this? Like paying money and buying a hobgoblin that was going on its own way we have bought this misfortune? It does not seem as if his mind is alright. We got into this by listening to the words of youngsters.”

“What misfortune can befall us? Our intent may be fulfilled; if not let it go,” said Lord Pazluvoor.

“I am not saying anything about our plans. Something untoward should not happen when he is in our house. The omens do not portend well. He looks like an elephant gone rouge. Didn’t you see the fury on his face and the poison on his tongue?”

“We must clench our teeth and be patient for a few days. That Pallava Parthiban will help us in keeping the Prince under control. There is the other defiant youngster who has come with him. It is him that I do not like; I suspect that the fellow may even be a spy. Earlier when we held our conclave, on that night too, he was here. He was the one hiding behind the trees last evening outside the fort gates.” Thus spoke Pazluvoor.

“He is a friend of my son. There is no need to worry about him. Why are they going in such a hurry towards where the women folk are gathered? Should we also go there?”

Parthiban who had gone up to the stairway came back now towards where the two feudatory chiefs were standing, He heard the last few words of Sambuvaraya.

“Sirs, you may have many other doubts about the Prince; however, you need have no concerns about matters regarding women. He does not even look at women,” said Parthiban.

Lord Pazluvoor asked with a smile, “If that is so, how will our intensions in inviting him here be achieved?”

Parthiban said, “That depends on the good fortune of Lord Sambuvaraya’s daughter and the good fortune of these Chozla lands.”

“Parthiban, let Manimekalai’s good fortune be set aside for now. Why is this Prince coming here with such anger on his face? Why does he speak so mischievously? I am beginning to think that it may be better if you should take him away from here peacefully!” said Sambuvaraya.

“The Prince was pleasant and jovial till we came to the banks of river Vellaru. At that point this Vandiya Devan and a Vaishnava fellow came and joined us. They must have said something. After that the Prince’s mood had changed.”

“That is what we thought, What can be done now? That troublesome fellow too has come with you.”

“Please be a little patient sir. I will straighten out everything. I too have a bone to pick with that young man. I shall deal with it at the appropriate time,” said Parthiban.

When Karikala and his two friends neared the stairway going up to the façade balcony of Kadamboor fort's gates, the women up there were coming down.

"Kandamara, it is not appropriate to make our mothers come and wait here for us; we should be the ones going up to them to pay our respects." With such words he greeted the Kadamboor noblewomen respectfully and stood aside. As each lady came down, he asked Kandamaran to introduce them. Then on seeing Nandini he said, "Isn't this my young Pazluvoor Grandmother! She herself has truly come! I am glad!"

Nandini walked past him without uttering a word, looking at him with her piercing eyes. The ferocity in her look made Karikala shiver a little; quickly collecting himself, he said looking at Manimekakai who came down next, "Oh ho! This must be your sister Manimekakai! She looks like a heavenly Gandarva nymph drawn in paintings! We should soon find a good man to be her groom and get her married."

Manimekakai, glanced at Vandiya Devan with bashful eyes and dimpling chin as she ran down those steps. Karikala went up after all the women were gone; he stood on the balcony above the facade gates. The crowd which had begun to disperse raised a huge cry. The people began to turn back towards the gates. Karikala noticed the crier-herald standing on his lone platform. He signed that the man should approach. He then told him to announce certain things to the people. The herald went back to his platform and made the drums sound for a couple of minutes. He made signs to get the people quieten down. He began announcing Aditya Karikala's titles and then said "The Royal Lord will stay at this Kadamboor fort for about a week or ten days. He will visit the neighboring towns. He will meet the townsfolk personally and give ear to their concerns!" he announced loudly.

That was it; a huge uproar reverberated as if all the noise till now was mere whispers. Happy voices, praises, loud cheers and cries of victory mingled to drown the sound

of the seventy-four overflowing canals of Veera Narayana Lake.

The lords Sambuvaraya, Pazluvoor and Parthiban had been rooted to the same spot as before. Aditya Karikala approached them saying, "Parthiban why have you stayed back here? Have you too joined these old men to plan conspiracies?"

Both old men were shocked, and looked at Karikala. A smile danced on the face of the Prince. Sambuvaraya seemed to collect himself, "Royal Prince a few minutes ago you said 'prison!' Now you are saying 'conspiracy.' I swear and pledge that as long as you are here in my humble abode as our guest, not an atom of harm will fall upon you. Before anything untoward like that happens, life would have separated from my body!"

"Sir, are you thinking that I am afraid of some harm befalling me? I had not feared that danger will fall upon me even when I was surrounded by millions of Pandiya enemies. Why should I be afraid when I am amidst my dear friends? But do not refer to this fortress of yours as a humble abode or hutment! Look at these ramparts! How tall and thick these surrounding walls. It appears stronger and bigger than the fortress walls in Tanjavur. Against what anticipated enemy have you built such a strong fortification?" asked Karikala.

"Prince, we have no enemies particular to us. The enemies of the Chozla clan are our enemies. Friends of the Chozla's are our friends."

"Your pledges make me very happy. Please explain this to your son Kandamaran also. Your son Kandamaran is treating my friend the nobleman of Vallam as his enemy. Isn't it a huge mistake?" At these words of the Prince Kandamaran lowered his head.

Chapter 16 – Malayaman's Worry

Kandamaran showed the way across the courtyard between the palace and the surrounding guarding wall; Karikala was looking around as he went with him. The other four followed them. Karikala stopped when he came to the place where the stage and shed for the kuravai koothu dances were being readied. "Oh, ho; what is this? What is going to happen here?" he asked.

"My Royal Prince, if it pleases you, we plan to hold a performance of kuravai koothu gypsy dances here."

"Very good, very good; hold a performance of kuravai koothu; hold villu pattu sessions, hold performances of Karikala Valava and Vijayala Chozla plays. We will all spend the day in the forest hunting. We can spend the nights in song and dance. Sambuvaraya, do you know what my grandfather Malayaman advised me before I came here? He warned me, 'When at Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's fort, do not sleep at night!' Do you know what I replied to him? I told him, 'Grandpa, I sleep not, neither during the day nor at night. It is three years since I slept. So do not fear that enemies will harm me when I am asleep. They can harm me only when I am awake, if they so wish! Who is the man bold enough to do that?' that is how I reassured Malayaman before I came here!" said Karikala as he guffawed noisily.

With a voice shaking with anger, Sambuvaraya replied, "Sir It does not matter if you are sleeping; or you are awake.... No man while you are in this palace will dare harm you."

"Yes, yes which fellow inside this mansion of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya can harm me? Or who can come from outside scaling over these huge rampart walls? Not even Yama the Lord of Death, can come here. Even Lord Yama will be afraid when we mention the name Kadamboor Sambuvaraya! I just mentioned those unnecessary worries of that old man of Thiru-Kovalur. He is getting old; some people begin to lose

their mind and mettle as they get older. But on the other hand, look at this my grandfather from Pazluvoor ... How smartly he comes walking. Can anyone say he has crossed his sixtieth?" Karikala continued joking in this flippant fashion.

Lord Pazluvoor cleared his throat gruffly, thinking he should reply. It sounded like a lion's growl.

"Listen to this! How true the saying that if Lord Pazluvoor clears his throat, the whole world will shiver with fear. Kandamara, Vandiya Deva, Parthibha, all of you think! Will you be as strong when you reach old Granddad Pazluvoor's age? Perhaps you too would clear your throats like him; but you will not bring a new girl into the women's apartments in the palace. Grandfather, it appears that you have brought your young Queen with you. Just saw her near the balcony of the front gates. How did the Young Queen travel? In a shuttered palanquin? A chariot? Another vehicle?"

Lord Pazluvoor finally intervened, "I escorted her openly, seated atop an elephant, for the whole country and town to see!" he spoke with pride.

"That is the best way to do it. Henceforth you must always do so. Just do not use the shuttered palanquin to bring her on your travels. Because of that, rather risqué rumors have been spread. Listen to this joke: my uncle Madurandaka travels secretly, hidden in her shuttered palanquin going from town to town sometimes. Such a rumor is widespread all over the country." Karikala roared with a thunderous laugh after saying such words.

None of the other men laughed. A different kind of turmoil flashed through each of their minds.

Vandiya Devan was thinking with some distress, 'God! What a huge mistake we have committed. We have disclosed all to this crazed young man. It appears as if he will disclose all without keeping anything back!'

Lord Pazluvoor's heart was boiling like the inside of a volcano, with fire and smoke and melting lava embers. He cleared his throat once again with a frightening sound similar to that of a volcano about to erupt and spill its fire and smoke and molten stone. Before he could start talking, Parthiban came forward taking a step and saying, "Royal Prince, I met the young Queen of Pazluvoor just a short while ago and got to know her. Even in the short time I spent in her company, I came to realize what a goddess of chastity she is. If any fellow attempts to slander her, he will fall prey to my sword instantly. I swear this!"

On hearing this, Vandiya Devan also stepped forward and said, "Me too! If anyone speaks ill of Pazluvoor's queen I will instantly reduce them to ashes with my fiery eyes!"

Karikala burst out laughing. "Ha, ha, haa! Friends, be patient. It seems as if you will quarrel even with me! Grandfather, did you hear? See how zealous these men are to safeguard the honor of Tamil women! However, no one has uttered anything ill about the Queen of Pazluvoor. If they do, I too shall not listen and be silent. I will not let that fellow who slandered her stay alive till these brave men arrive. They are making comments about the shuttered Palanquin of the young Queen of Pazluvoor. That weakling Madurandaka is reported to travel from town to town, secretly, in the closed palanquin of the Young Queen. When a man travels in a covered palanquin, drawing the curtains around him, and if the young Queen too travels in that fashion, sometimes, wouldn't some wrong impressions arise?"

"Royal Prince, Why should Madurandaka who is the grandson of Emperor Paranthaka, and the son of devout Gandara Aditya travel in the shuttered palanquin? I do not understand anything?" said Parthiban Pallava.

"The reason is a very funny motive! Madurandaka is journeying from town to town in the shuttered palanquin trying to gather support for his cause."

“Why, what support?”

“Why?!? It is support for him to ascend the throne of the Chozla kingdom after my father’s time! How is that story? Some months ago, he apparently came even to this Kadamboor fort, secretly in that palanquin! Apparently, there was a meeting of treason at midnight in this palace! Parthibha the old man of Thiru-Kovalur recounted all this when you were also with me. Do you not remember how he told us that Madurandaka, eager to ascend the throne might send my father to the heavens a little early?”

“I remember Prince. I did not believe it at that time. Now I do not believe it at all. After going to Tanjavur and meeting your father ... “

“Why just you? I too do not believe it. If I had believed it, would I have accepted to come as a guest to this Kadamboor mansion?” Karikala again seemed to remember something as he laughed sneeringly again.

Kadamboor Sambuvaraya cleared his throat and spoke with careful words, “Royal Prince, you may be aware that there exists an enmity between Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman and us of the Kadamboor clans since many years.”

“I do know about that! Bards of the Sangam Age have sung about that enmity. Malayaman Thiru-mudi Kari killed Valvil Ori of Kolli hills in a battle. You are the descendants of that Valvil Ori. You have not forgotten that ancient enmity.”

“Prince, the death of Valvil Ori was avenged immediately. A member of our clan, Adiaman Neduman Anji invaded Thiru-Kovalur and reduced it as well as the Mullur Hill fortress of Malayaman to rubble.”

“Lord Sambuvaraya, Adiaman did not achieve that by himself. My ancestor Chozla

Killi Valava helped him in that victory over Malayaman. But why talk of those old stories now?"

"Even if we forget, Malayaman does not forget. He keeps piling accusations upon us for some reason or other."

"Did I not tell you earlier, the old man is advanced in years; his mind is not stable. I am somewhat worried that in order to protect me from danger when I am here, he may come here with a large army he might have collected."

"Prince, if you have any suspicions," Sambuvaraya was flustered."

"Suspicion? I have none! Our relationship with Malayaman is only since two generations. But the Chozla relationship with the Pazluvoor clan has continued since six generations. Lord Pazluvoor is here. Am I crazy to think that he would do something against the Chozlas?" saying these words Karikala again burst out with irrational laughter.

Lord Pazluvoor spoke in a majestic and dignified voice, "Prince I will never do anything that goes against the Chozla clan. This I swear as truth; Neither will I ever do anything against what is just, fair, and moral. I doubly swear this to be true."

"Yes, Yes. There is that thing called just and fair. I came here to discuss about that with you. When we have leisure after spending time on the hunt and watching dances, let us talk about justice and fairness. Lord Sambuvaraya, what apartments in this huge palace have you readied for me and my friends to stay?" asked Karikala.

"My lord I have you and Lord Pazluvoor housed in the guest palace at the rear part of this fort. All the other chieftains and noblemen I have kept with me in the chambers towards the front of this mansion."

"Oh! Are more noblemen and feudatories expected?"

“Yes, Prince there are many chieftains and landowners, feudatories of these parts eager to meet you. They will come.”

“Let them come, let them come, let everyone come. It is very good. We can discuss and think and come to a conclusion about things that have to be concluded once and for all. Let us set aside that conspiracy convened for Madurandaka. I wish to join you all and convene a conspiracy of my own. There is no place more suitable than this mansion for such purposes!” So said Karikala. ***

Chapter 17 - Poonkuzlali's Desire

Poonkuzlali's boat was drifting down the canal going from Nagaipattinam to Kodi Karai. Sendan Amudan was in that boat along with Poonkuzlali. They were approaching Kodi Karai. On the banks were golden thaazlai flowers opening their long sheaths and spreading fragrance. A green parrot flew down and perched upon a thaazlai flower. Its swift landing made the flower petal sway like a swing. The green parrot swayed with that golden sheath of screw-pine and pecked at the flower with its coral red beak. As the boat came close, the bird cried 'kee, kee kee' and flew away.,

“If we have to be born, we should be born a green parrot!” declared Poonkuzlali.

“You think that. Who know what its worries, difficulties may be?” replied Sendan Amudan.

“Whatever the difficulty or worry it may have, it can fly away as it wishes, freely across the endless sky. Can there be pleasure greater than that?”

“Some people catch those free flying birds and shut them up in cages!”

“Yes, that is true; princesses living in palaces shut up green parrots in cages; cruel

monsters! they prattle and play with the caged birds! If I were in a palace as a serving maid, I will poison those caged birds and kill them all! I will poison those princesses who put those birds in cages.”

“If they hear you speak like this, they would declare you to be a cruel monster.”

“Let them say what they wish! I will rather be an ogre than a princess.”

“Why are you so angry with princesses, Poonkuzlali? If we think about it, we would be feeling sorry for them too. Like the caged parrots, they too have to spend their lives confined in palaces. If by accident they venture out of that palace, they are guarded, shrouded in secrecy, bound by protocol. Can they get into a boat by themselves, and go alone over canals and oceans? Can they roam freely in forests like the frolicking deer?”

“Who asks them to stay shut up? I did not! If they wish, why don't they too roam freely in forests?”

“Wanting to do something, is by itself not enough. It depends on their birth and how they were raised. You want to fly like a parrot across the skies. Is that possible? You were born and raised on an ocean front; and you remain free to do as you please. If you were born in a palace, that would not be possible. And then listen to this peculiar thing: The parrots locked up in those cages for a while, and fed tidbits from the hands of princesses, would not like to fly away even if their cages were left open. They will fly around for a while and then crying ‘screech, kreetch’ will come back to their cages. I have personally seen this in the palaces of Tanjavur and Pazlayarai.”

“I would never agree to be locked up in a cage like that. Let me tell you this: if I were the parrot and if the princess who locked me up in the cage comes to feed me nectar, I will peck at her fingers, sharply.”

“Fine. You would not like to be a caged parrot. You would also not wish to be a princess locked up in a palace, would you?” asked Sendan Amudan.

“Never will I like that; I would rather swallow poison and die!”

“That is good. That being so, you should also not wish to marry a prince living in palaces.”

Dark clouds were gathering in the low skies. Lightning was flashing occasionally. The rumble of thunder could be heard faintly. On hearing the last few words spoken by Sendan Amudan, flashing bunches of lightning flared from Poonkuzlali's eyes. “Who told you that I wished to marry a Prince?” She asked angrily.

“No one told me. I spoke on my own. If you have no such wish in your heart, all is well. Forget what I said.”

Silence prevailed in that boat for a while. The only sounds were Sendan Amudan rowing the boat with oars, the dry croak of frogs, the calls of sea birds, the sounds of ocean waves, and the rumbling of thunder in the far south.

Sendan Amudan cleared his voice, emboldened his mind and said, “You had said that Vandiya Devan disclosed my heart's feeling to you. It would be good if you were to tell me your opinion about that. Look we can already see the lighthouse of Kodi Karai. I may not be able to talk privately with you once we reach there. I too must leave tomorrow. It has been many days since I left my mother all alone at Tanjavur.”

“Why should Vandiya Devan play messenger for you? Can you not speak for yourself? Ask what you need to ask, directly.”

Sendan Amudan asked, “Good. I shall ask. Will you marry me?”

“Why do you ask to marry me?”

“I have heartfelt love for you. That is why I ask.”

“Must one be married if the heart desires someone?”

“There is nothing ‘must’ about it. It is the nature of the world!”

“What will you give me If I marry you? Will you be able to give me the things I wish for such as a life in the palace, silken clothes, and jewelry, elephants, palanquins, horses, serving maids?”

“No, I cannot. I shall give a life that is better, more peaceful than all that. Listen to me Poonkuzlali; I have a cottage in the middle of a flower garden in the outskirts of Tanjavur. Only I and my mother live in that cottage. If you come there, your whole life will change. My mother will look after you with love and take care of you. When the sun rises, we too shall arise. We would gather flowers from the vines, bushes and trees and weave colorful garlands. I will go deliver those garlands at the temples of Tali-kulattar and of Durga Devi in Tanjavur. By then you would have bathed in the lotus pond in our garden and helped my mother with household chores. In the evening, all three of us will collect water from the lotus pond and water the gardens. Later in the evening, I shall teach you Tamil hymns sweeter than nectar. If you sing those verses in your melodious voice, the tongue that sings will feel sweet, ears that hear will feel sweet. If we wish, we can go to the temples, see those divine shrines and avail blessings, sing those songs. The devout coming to those temples will be happy to hear us sing. Poonkuzlali, can there be a life more pleasant and happier than this, in the whole wide world? Think about it and answer me.”

Poonkuzlali heard all that Sendan Amudan had to say and laughed gleefully.

“Amuda, you spoke of a life that you think is pleasing. Do you know the kind of life I desire? I want to go to the heavens and marry Devendra the King of heavens. I want

to get on Airavatha the flying elephant that belongs to Devendra and travel the skies beyond the cloud worlds. I wish to pluck the Vajra weapon from the hands of Devendra and use those thunderbolts against those huge rain clouds. I wish to see thousand upon thousand shafts of lightning clusters, rise from those clouds split by my thunderbolt, go forth to shatter all the known skies into smithereens. These days when thunder strikes, it falls wastefully on some ocean or forest and vanishes. I will not waste my thunderbolts. I will aim my bolts at the palaces where kings and queens and princes and princesses live. I will enjoy seeing those palaces being reduced to rubble and become one with dust.

“In case Devendra is not willing to marry me, I shall go to Lord Varuna, the master of all waters and insist that he marry me even if he has many other wives! That’s it; after that this world will forever be drenched in storms and whirlwinds and frightening tidal waves. Huge trees will be uprooted to fall on big mansions and destroy them. Ships crossing the seas will be struck by tidal waves and tsunami that will reduce them to kindling scattered all over the ocean. People traveling onboard the ships will be thrown into the seething seas and will suffer. If there were princes and princesses in that incident, I would let them go to the bottom of the ocean floor and just save the other people because of my compassion. If Lord Varuna refuses to accept me, I will go to Agni the Lord of all fires. Do you need to ask what happens after that? This whole world will start to burn!”

“Poonkuzlali, stop it. Please stop. You talk in this fashion due to some dismay and disappointment in your mind. You do not speak knowingly or with forethought. It is my fault for not knowing your mind and raising the topic about our being married. Forgive me for doing so. Only God can help you overcome your disappointment and give you mental peace. I shall pray day and night for that,” said Sendan Amudan.

Poonkuzlali who had been seated all this time stood up suddenly. She peered at a tree on the canal bank. Sendan Amudan also looked towards that direction. A woman’s face was visible between the tree branches. For one short moment Amudan

was baffled to see a resemblance of his mother's face in the woman amidst those trees. He quickly realized that it was not his mother. He surmised that it must be his elder aunt who according to Poonkuzlali lived on Ghost Island.

Poonkuzlali jumped from the boat onto the canal bank and began to run swiftly towards that woman.

Chapter 18 - A Flying Arrow

Poonkuzlali looked at the mute-queen standing half hidden behind a tree on the canal bank. Poonkuzlali was somewhat surprised to see her thus at an unexpected time, unexpected spot. She knew that the mute-queen did not like to meet strangers. What if she runs away upon seeing Sendan Amudan who was in the boat? In that instant her mute-aunt began to run. Poonkuzlali jumped out of the boat and got atop the embankment and looked around. She noticed her aunt vanish into the thick growth of forest a little further away.

By now, Amudan also jumped on to the embankment and came close to Poonkuzlali. He asked, "Poonkuzlali, Poonkuzlali, who was it that was standing here just now?"

"Could you not recognize her Amuda?"

"I could not be sure; perhaps she..."

"Yes, it is my aunt. She is you elder-aunt whom you thought was dead."

"Yes. She seemed to resemble my mother somewhat."

"Don't make up nonsense. There is no resemblance between your mother and this elder-aunt. Neither are they alike in temperament. Where is the resemblance between a cow in the cowshed at home and the lion-queen who roams the forests?"

“Fine. Let it be as you say. Why did the lion-queen run away on seeing you?”

Poonkuzlali laughed, “she did not run away upon seeing me! She started running because she saw you. She does not like to meet strange men.”

“I am not a strange man!”

“My aunt does not know that. Once she gets to know you, she will not run away upon seeing you. She will hesitate till she gets to know you.”

“What will you do now, Poonkuzlali?”

“I am going to go find her.”

“Shall I come too?”

“Why?”

“To meet her and get to know my elder-aunt.”

“Why do you need to get to know my elder-aunt?”

Sendan Amudan had heard some of the old stories about his elder-aunt from Poonkuzlali, and was eager to see her. He also had this wish that this elder-aunt would take his side and speak on his behalf and try and change Poonkuzlali's mind.

“There are many reasons. Do we need a reason to get to know one's own elder-aunt?”

“Fine. Come, let us go. If I take you along, it may be difficult to get hold of her. So, what? I will not give up. Let us tie up the boat here itself.”

They pulled up the boat and hid it behind a cactus bush and tied it up firmly. They went towards the forest of Kodi Karai. As they walked, Amudan asked, "Poonkuzlali you said that our aunt lived in Lanka or on Ghost Island."

"Yes; she stays in Lanka sometimes and sometimes on Ghost Island."

"Does she come here often?"

"No. She comes very rarely. If I hadn't been to see her for many days, she would come to see me."

"Do you think she has come to see you now?"

"I think she has come this time for some other reason."

"What other reason?"

"She might be here to find out if her adopted son drowned at sea or if he survived and came ashore. My aunt is sure to have known about the whirlwind over the sea."

"Oh! Is Lord Arulmozli her adopted son? Then who is her real son?"

"That is something that I could not figure out. If not now, one day I am going to find out that secret."

"Who knows if her son is alive or dead!"

"Yes, he might be dead. Who knows!"

After a while, Poonkuzlali asked, "Amuda you saw our aunt and remarked that she looked somewhat like your mother. Did you think of anyone else's face?"

"I thought I recalled something. It is not clear. It seems to be hidden behind a veil."

"Have you seen the young Queen of Pazluvoor, often?"

"Sometimes, I have seen her. Now that you have said it, I recognize whom she resembles. It is just like the face of Lady Nandini. How surprising! How is that possible Poonkuzlali? How did you figure out that resemblance?"

"I have been seeing my aunt quite often. I saw the Young Queen of Pazluvoor a few days ago at this Kodi Karai. I could recognize the resemblance immediately."

"What could be the reason...?"

"I am going to find that out too one day. I am planning to ask my aunt about it when we see her today."

"Our aunt is mute. How will you talk to her?"

"Amuda do you not converse with your mother?"

"I talk to her in sign language. I have used to it since birth. Even so, it is sometimes difficult to speak of new things with her."

"Elder-aunt and I talk similarly in signs. What we cannot convey by signs, we say things by drawing pictures."

"Oh! What a sadness it is that in one family both sisters are born deaf-mute. How sad must be the parents who gave birth to them!"

“It was not just that. Apparently when they were children, both sisters would be constantly quarrelling with each other. That is why our grandfather went to live on Ghost island with the elder daughter. Apparently, our grandfather was very fond of our elder-aunt, because some astrologer had predicted when she was born, that she had the fortune to become a queen. He was greatly saddened when he found that she was deaf-mute as she was growing up.

While conversing in this fashion they had entered the forest. Even after searching for her for quite some time, they did not find the mute-queen.

Poonkuzlali sad, “Amuda we are unable to find my aunt because you are with me. She is hiding herself because she sees you.”

“Well, that is my luck today! Nothing I thought about is successful. Shall I leave now?” asked Sendan Amudan.

“How will you go. I will have to lead you out of this forest.”

An unnatural voice was heard somewhere in the forest. It did not seem to be the sound of either human or beast. They heard that sound two or three times. Some forest deer began to run towards that sound. Poonkuzlali stopped to think, “Amuda, come after me without making any sound.”

They walked towards the direction from which they had heard that peculiar sound. Suddenly they saw a most astonishing sight. The mute-queen was leaning back against a tree. She had some tender shoots in her hands. Seven or eight deer stood around her. They jostled each other to eat the shoots from her hands. A small fawn was sitting straddled across her shoulders, gazing at her with big wide eyes.

Amudan and Poonkuzlali waited silently watching this astonishing scene for some

time. The fawn spotted them first and jumped off the shoulders. The other deer had now spotted the two of them. They stood ready to leap away if the humans came any nearer. The mute-queen saw them and made another peculiar sound. On hearing that all the deer jumped and ran away.

“My aunt does not speak the language of humans. She is very well versed in the language of animals.” Poonkuzlali made signs that her aunt could see. The mute-queen did not run away; she signed in reply to Poonkuzlali. As soon as her niece came close, she hugged her affectionately and kissed her forehead. Sendan Amudan continued to wait a little further away. Aunt and niece conversed in sign language for a little. Poonkuzlali called for Amudan to come closer. The mute-queen looked him up and down for some time and then placed her palm on his head as if in blessing. She removed her palm from his head, took hold of Poonkuzlali’s hand and dragged her along. They soon reached the banks of the canal. She sat down on the bank and made signs that Poonkuzlali should leave.

“Come Amuda. Let us go home. My aunt says she will not come and that I should bring her some food here.” As they walked towards the lighthouse, Amudan asked “Poonkuzlali, what do you say to me, about what I spoke earlier?”

She replied, “I did think of coming to Tanjavur with you. But that is not possible now. My mute-aunt wants to see her darling adopted son. I have to go to Nagai Port again to take her there. If you come with me, my aunt may not like it and keep running away. I would not be able to learn about various secrets that I wish to know from her.”

Amudan sighed heavily, “That is my only fortune! If that is so, let me say bye to you right here.”

“No, No. Come home and eat a meal with us and take leave of my father, your uncle, and the others at home. If not, they will keep chiding me!”

As they walked back, they noticed two others, a man and a woman talking to each other behind a tall bush.

“Aha! That looks like my sister-in-law, Raakammal. Her secrets will never cease! Who are these fellows who have come now? Are they those spies from the Pandiya country? Or are they someone else?” Poonkuzlali was mumbling to herself.

Raakammal came out from behind that bush. She was a little shocked to see Poonkuzlali. But she hid her confusion and came forward to ask, “Where did you get lost all these days Poonkuzlali? Your father and brother were so very upset and worried.”

“Why must they worry? This is not the first time that I have been away from home.”

“This time you took your aunt’s son, your cousin with you. They worried that you both will get married without saying a word to anyone!”

“Sister-in-law, how many times have I told you not to talk to me in this stupid, silly fashion. If you continue one more time in this fashion...”

“No! My dear girl, No. What do I care if you marry your aunt’s son? Do I care if you marry a prince? Your elder-aunt arrived from Lanka and was looking for you. Have you seen her?” asked Raakammal.

“No. I have not yet seen her,” replied Poonkuzlali.

Before they got home, when she had an opportunity to talk privately, she told Sendan Amudan, “Cousin, be careful. My sister-in-law is one with the spies from Pandiya country. She will try to dig into you and make you speak; do not answer her questioning.”

“I shall become mute for the short time that I am going to be here.”

Late afternoon, Poonkuzlali once again plied her boat over the canal going towards Nagai Port. Her mute-aunt was seated in the boat. Whenever Poonkuzlali was with her mute-aunt she would feel mentally peaceful and calm. Their similar emotions made them feel comforted by each other. However, this time Poonkuzlali did not feel such calm. She kept remembering how she had carried the unconscious Prince in this same boat on this same canal a few days ago. The thought that she had faced so very many difficulties just to hand over the Prince to another Princess, pierced her heart with a sharp jolt.

Her heart melted when she remembered telling Sendan Amudan, “Go home!” as if pushing him away! More than all this, the words of warning spoken by her father that morning kept coming back to her.

“My dear child, it may be better if you control your goings and comings a little. All sorts of new men are coming here. I am not sure of their intentions or why they are coming here. All sorts of intrigues are afoot in the country. Do not become enmeshed in such plots. Our family is forever bound to the family of the Royal Chozlas. Do not forget that!”

Her father’s warning words and the secretive behavior of her sister-in-law together made Poonkuzlali feel a dread that she had never felt before. Had those new men come in search of her? Perhaps by following her they would try to find the hiding place of Ponni’s Beloved Prince? If it were to be revealed because of her, what a huge treachery that would be!

As if to increase her worries, there were all sorts of noises heard in the bushes along the canal banks. There was no breeze; as if all the directions had conspired and imprisoned the winds. Then why are there sounds of trees and leaves rustling in the

groves beyond the canal bank. The mute-queen had no such worries; she could not hear a thing. There was no point in consulting her about it. But the mute-queen had some other unusual sensory faculties. Her sixth sense made her aware of things that could not be seen or heard. No danger would come upon her without being recognized by her mute-aunt.

But what is this? My aunt is also looking up into the canal bank again and again. Is some danger following us? The reason for her aunt looking up at the canal bank became clear very soon. It cleared away Poonkuzlali's fears. There were five or six deer gathered at one spot half hidden but gazing at the boat. They were not looking at the boat; they were gazing at the mute-queen!

Aha! There is no creation in the whole wide world as beautiful as a deer! Why did God who created such deer, also create humans? There are men who hunt and kill such beautiful creatures. Poonkuzlali who was being astonished by the deer had slowed down and completely stopped rowing. A peculiar noise rose from the mute-queen. It was not like the noise she made in the morning; this sound was mingled with warning and fear. The deer turned and began to run away upon hearing that sound. At that same time an arrow flew from some hidden spot and pierced a deer. The deer pierced by the sharp arrow began wailing in pain. The mute-queen jumped onto the shore and ran towards the wounded deer.

At that same moment all the bushes around the wounded deer became alive with noise. About seven or eight men came and surrounded her in one instant. The men carried weapons and spears! Raakammal who had been their guide showing the way was a little further away.

The mute-queen tried to escape and was unable to do so. When she realized that it was impossible to escape, she became still. Two men came closer and bound her hands together with some rope. All this happened within minutes even as Poonkuzlali was watching. She ran from the boat screaming and shouting with an oar raised high,

as soon as she saw her aunt being bound with ropes. Five of six of the men surrounding the mute-queen came towards Poonkuzlali. They caught her, dragged her and threw her into the boat and bound her tight with ropes. They then turned back and with the mute-queen who was now silently going with them vanished from sight.

Chapter 19 - Laughter And Fire

Poonkuzlali hurriedly tried to free herself from the bindings that tied her to the boat. It was not an easy task. Wretched fiends! They had wound the rope this and that way and knot upon knot tightened all. Her little knife was in the bottom of that boat. If only she could free one hand, she could reach the knife and free herself. But those sinners had bound both her wrists together at her back. With great effort she bent down and gripped the knife with her teeth and somehow hacked at the rope. The bindings loosened a little. Finally, after much effort she freed one hand. After that it was easier to free herself from the rope.

By the time she freed herself completely from the bindings it was almost half an hour. She heard footsteps on the bank. And then a shadow. Perhaps one of the men who had bound her was coming back! Or they might have left a man behind, to make sure that she did not free herself and escape. As soon as she could see him, she would throw her knife at him and kill him; so, determined, she held her knife in readiness.

But what a disappointment! She could hear Sendan Amudan calling her name, "Poonkuzlali, Poonkuzlali!"

In the next minute she could see his frightened face peering down from the bank. She tucked the knife in to her waist. Amudan too had seen her by now. "Poonkuzlali are you alive?" he came running.

"You are unhappy that I am still alive! If you feel like that kill me with your own hands

before you go! But where will you have the courage to do even that!”

“Oh Lord Shiva, Shiva! Why do you speak such cruel words? Why would I kill you? You are the one killing me with your words,” said Amudan.

“Then, why did you not come a little earlier? Did you know how I suffered before I could free myself from these ropes.” She tried to stand up but lost her balance because of the ropes that lay crisscrossed at her feet. Amudan shrieked and hurried to hold her and prevent her from falling.

“Oh dear! Did the wretched sinner tie you up like this and leave you? You have welts all over you!”

“You are so concerned now. Why could you not have come earlier?”

“Why do you keep saying that again and again. How was I to know that you were in such a danger? You chased me away ‘go, go!’ and I was going on my way...”

“Why did you come back? Perhaps to cremate and perform my last rites if I had died!”

“Lord Shiva keeps the poison in his throat. You have poison in your tongue. Your sister-in-law said that some danger might have befallen you. Hearing that, I came running. Your words are a reward for that!”

By now Poonkuzlali had come upon the bank from the boat. “I was about to throw this knife on you. You escaped. I will use this same knife and first kill my sister-in-law before I do anything else. Where is she that wretch?”

“Why do you jump from me to her? Why this anger about her? Was it a mistake that she told me about you?”

“She is the one who betrayed my aunt. You too saw her, standing half hidden talking to someone secretly.”

“You think wrong. I am not sure with whom she was talking secrets; but one thing is sure that she was not the one who betrayed your aunt. Those men who abducted your aunt, they had tied your sister-in-law tightly to a tree. They have hit her on her head and wounded her before they left.”

“What kind of a story is this? Unbelievable. She has fooled you; why did you come back? Where did you see my sister-in-law? Tell me everything,” asked Poonkuzlali with some concern.

Sendan Amudan elaborated and told her everything he knew. He had been going down the road leading towards Tanjavur. He was going rather reluctantly and slowly because he did not wish to part from Poonkuzlali. He heard some distressed noises and cries from the dense forest growth beside the road. Sounds of several persons hurrying onwards. Amudan hid himself behind a tree. About seven or eight men, holding spears in their hands, came out of the forest suddenly and entered the royal road. It seemed as if there was a woman in their midst. When there was a slight parting among the men, he could see that the woman in their midst was like Poonkuzlali's mute-aunt. Sendan Amudan decided he was imagining things as it could not possibly be their aunt.

Even after the group of men had gone past on the road, he could hear loud cries of a woman from within the woods. At first Sendan Amudan thought, why bother, it is no concern of mine, let me go on my way. But his heart would not let him do so. He wished to find out who was crying out, render any help that he could if they needed anything. So, he went towards the direction from which those cries were coming. He saw Raakammal tied to a tree. Blood was pouring down from her head all over her face making it look hideous. He was afraid to even go near her. Somehow, he

gathered his courage and went close and unbound the knots tying her. He was asking her, 'who did this atrocity to you? Why did they do this to you? Who were those men who came on to the royal road just now? I thought I saw a woman going in their midst. Who was she?' he asked her all these questions.

Raakammal replied, 'Yes, Thambi, they are binding and dragging away your elder-aunt. I tried to stop them; that is why those men hit me and tied me up like this. Your uncle's daughter and your elder-aunt were going somewhere in the boat. They had dragged your aunt from that boat and bound her. I don't know what happened to Poonkuzlali. Go, run to her and see if you can help.'

Stunned by her words, Sendan Amudan was about to run towards the canal. Raakammal called out 'just a moment Thambi. Where were that mute-ghost and Poonkuzlali going in the boat? Do you know anything? Why did they leave you behind? Where are you going all by yourself now?' she asked.

Sendan Amudan did not like her questioning tone particularly her referring to their aunt as the mute-ghost. He replied that he would explain later and began running towards the canal. He was in a dreadful fright; would those men have attacked Poonkuzlali and wounded her, perhaps have even killed her? He was hurrying with such concerns. He was somewhat becalmed upon seeing Poonkuzlali alive and that she had no bloody wounds.

He then asked, "Poonkuzlali what do you say now? isn't it a mistake to be angry with your brother's wife?"

"From what you describe, it appears that I was mistaken. Where did you leave her, my sister-in-law? Come let us go there."

"How can you be sure that she is still at that spot?"

“She must be somewhere nearby, if not at that spot. Or she will come in search of us. Did she not ask you where I was going with my aunt in the boat?”

“Yes, she did ask that.”

“You did not answer her. Are you sure that you did not reply?”

“I am sure, because I was disgusted with her calling my aunt a mute-ghost, I did not feel like answering her. I came away.”

“Do not answer her or say anything even if she asks with kind words! Why does she want to know where my aunt and I were going? There must be something behind her questions. Amuda, we cannot be sure that there is no connection between those men who took away my aunt and this my sister-in-law. They might have collected information from my brother’s wife and once their aim was done, they might have beat her up. Even if that is not true, my sister-in-law must have followed us with some other ulterior motive. Let us be cautious with her. Let us not trust her completely.”

“Poonkuzlali, you had said that your brother becomes mute in front of your sister-in-law. I too shall follow him and become mute. You say whatever needs to be said.” Amudan answered Poonkuzlali thus.

Poonkuzlali laughed on hearing his words. He said, “Poonkuzlali, my ears are pleased to hear you laugh. It is pleasing like the sweet Thevaram poems of saint Thiru-Naavukk-arasar.”

She said, “I laughed by some accident. Do not be fooled by this laugh of mine. My heart is filled with fire; embers are about to flare up.”

“There is nothing more soothing to quench the rage in one’s heart than the oceanlike grace of our divine Lord!” said Sendan Amudan.

Chapter 20 - Once Again, The Doctor's Son

Poonkuzlali and her cousin Sendan Amudan walked down a forest path, silently for some time. She sighed long and hard saying, "Amuda there must be some connection between you and me for many births on end."

"Who is worried about a prior birth now? If there is anything good to say about this present birth, tell me," said Sendan Amudan.

"They say that bonds that tied us together in previous births will continue to this birth. That must be true. Earlier this afternoon, when we parted, I thought that we will never see each other anymore. Within an hour we meet again."

"Don't be concerned about that! Once we have crossed this forest and get to the royal roadway to Tanjavur, I shall go onwards on my way and you may go wherever you wish."

"I am not going to let you go alone like that! Once we find and talk to my sister-in-law, I shall go with you to Tanjavur. I am going to seek justice for this calamity that has befallen my aunt."

"Poonkuzlali, do you think it is easy to gain the presence of the Emperor? People like us cannot even enter Tanjavur Fort."

"Why can we not? If the doors of the fortress do not open, I shall shatter them open. If that were not possible, I shall climb and jump over the fortress walls."

"What will you do about the men who will be guarding the gates?"

"Hearing the racket I create, they will be unnerved and take me to the Emperor."

“One cannot easily scare the younger Lord Pazluvoor in such a fashion. People in and around Tanjavur say that even Yama, the Lord of Death cannot approach the Emperor without Lord Kalanthaka Pazluvoor’s permission. I have even heard people remark that it is because of him that the Emperor is still living.”

“If I cannot meet the Emperor, I shall meet the Lords of Pazluvoor. I shall ask them if there is any redress for this atrocity! If they do not address my appeal to my satisfaction, I shall go to Prime Minister Aniruddha; if that is of no use, I shall go to Pazlayarai and appeal to the queens there. I shall not stop at any place till I find out the fate of my aunt. I shall not sleep day or night, till I find redress for this injustice done to my aunt. My sister-in-law called my aunt a mute-ghost! I will turn into a rampaging ghoul and roam all over the country and towns. I shall scream, ‘justice, justice’ and wander about. Amuda will you too come with me?”

“I will surely come with you Poonkuzlali. If you wish it, I will come with you. However, why do you let your mind become muddled like this? You have gone someplace else, too far away. The most important thing for now is to find our aunt and save her, Don’t we need to free her from the wicked fellows who captured her? Don’t we need to let your father, your brother know of this?”

“Amuda, my aunt has divine powers; none can harm her in any way. She will burn them down with her eyes just like Damayanthi of the old tales who burned down the hunter. That is why I am not too worried about her. But in this Chozla empire, in broad daylight what an atrocity has taken place! To seek redress for this is my first aim. People say that justice prevails in this righteous kingdom since the times of Emperor Paranthaka. They talk with pride about how a tiger and a cow drank water at the same waterhole during the peaceful reign of King Gandara Aditya. The heralds drum announcements that during the reign of Sundara Chozla even an unattended maiden can walk about day or night without fear. In this kingdom, with such fame, what outrage is this that they abduct and take away in broad daylight, an old woman, a woman who can neither hear or speak. I am not that worried about my aunt. What

happened today to my aunt can happen to me tomorrow; it can happen to any young girl in this country!”

Sendan Amudan interrupted her saying, “Yes there is such lawlessness in this country now. Since Sundara Chozla became bedridden, justice has turned upside down. There is no protection. Danger awaits young maidens everywhere. Therefore, it is better that all these young maidens get married quickly.”

Poonkuzlali laughed gleefully. “Amuda, if a young maiden marries you, will you be able to protect her? Do you know how to wield a sword and fight the enemy?”

“I have learned to pluck flowers and string garlands. I have learned to sing songs in their praise and worship the divine. I have not learned to lift a sword or to fight. So, what! Did you not teach me to pick up an oar and row the boat? Like that, I too shall learn to wield a sword and fight a war. When Lord Madurandaka wants to ascend the throne and rule a kingdom, what is impossible about my leaning sword-fighting?” asked Amudan.

By now they had reached the tree where Poonkuzlali’s sister-in-law had been bound. They did not find that good woman there! Sendan Amudan pointed out the blood drops on the ground that had fallen from that woman’s wounded head.

“They really beat her up badly! It is clear that she did not spy on behalf of those wretched men who took away my aunt. But I must find out who she was spying for, and why and about what?” said Poonkuzlali.

“Cousin, listen to me! Everything that has happened here seems an unexplained mystery. Secrets within secrets seem to twirl around. Everything seems to be a complication that touches royalty and the rule of this kingdom. Why should you and I worry about this? Why should we get involved in this tricky situation?”

“What does it matter Amuda? However complicated, whatever the political implication, whatsoever the mystery, how can we not worry and act about something that touches my aunt? How can you not be thinking about your elder-aunt?”

“I spoke what occurred to my thinking. Poonkuzlali, remember what I told you? I saw seven or eight men surrounding a woman and walking away. I said that it may be my elder-aunt; From the way she was walking, it did not seem as if they were forcing her to go with them. She seemed to be going willingly, casually....”

“Yes, that could be so. It is the nature of my aunt, Amuda. She might have gone willingly with them to find out where they were taking her and why. If she had not been willing, she would have escaped from a thousand men. None can imprison her, be it a guarded fortress, or an underground dungeon. That is why I said that I was not too worried about this peril that befell my aunt. My most important aim is to seek redress for this unjust act against my aunt. This injustice did not happen just today. It was grave and deceitful injustice meted out to her, twenty-five years ago! I have no peace till there is remedy for that.”

“Oh! Gracious Lord! What an impossible task in which you have let your heart and mind become involved?” sighed Amudan.

Soon they heard voices in the distance; it seemed to be a woman’s voice. They saw some people near the main road going towards Tanjavur. A feeling of disgust flooded Poonkuzlali’s face when she recognized the man talking to her sister-in-law Raakammal as Pinakapani, the Pazlayarai doctor’s son.

Raakammal said, “Ah! Dear Girl, you have survived! I was afraid that they might have killed you and left you. Look at this: what a big wound on my head because I tried to save your aunt! I was asking this young doctor if he can suggest any medicine for my wound.”

Pinakapani said, "If the Karaiyar's daughter too has been wounded, I could prescribe and heal her too."

Poonkuzlali did not reply to him but asked, "Sister-in-law, do you know which way they went, those men who abducted my aunt?"

"I did not see. This young doctor says that they went by way of the Tanjavur road."

"Tell my father, that Amudan and I are going in search of her. Come Amuda," Poonkuzlali was ready to leave that spot immediately.

The doctor's son spoke up, "Poonkuzlali, please wait! You cannot follow them. Those men had horses a little further from here, and are riding away. I have my horse, I can ride as fast as the wind, as fast as thought and go catch up with them and find out where they are going. In return you must help me about one thing. Where were you and your aunt planning to go in the boat? Just tell me that."

Poonkuzlali said, "Sister-in-law, I do not need this man's help. We are leaving. Just let my father know that I am going with Amudan."

Pinakapani did not give up even then, "Aha! Look at the pride of this Karaiyar girl! She does not want my help! Girl! Why are you so angry with me? Was it I, who came to obstruct you marrying the Prince? You deceived me and took away that man in your boat; it is that man of the Vaanar clan, Vandiya Devan who pushed your beloved Prince into the ocean and killed him. What is the point in being angry with me? Ha, ha, hah!" he started snorting loudly in ghoulish laughter.

With eyes emitting fiery embers, Poonkuzlali glanced at him once and took hold of Amudan's hand and dragged him away on to the road.

After they had walked on the road for a while she said, "Amuda after you have

learned the use of a sword, the first thing that you must do is to take the life of this young doctor. He should be the first sacrifice to your sword!"

They walked all day and night, Amudan and Poonkuzlali as they went towards Tanjavur. All along the way they asked about the seven or eight horseman who had gone ahead with a woman with them. For half the distance they had some information. After that nothing. Even so, they decided to go as far as Tanjavur and search for her.

Sendan Amudan was overjoyed with this journey. Walking along with Poonkuzlali, talking to her was one reason for the happiness. The other was because he was learning to use a sword. He had procured a sword from a smithy known to Poonkuzlali near Kodi Karai. He swirled it as they walked on. He imagined an enemy approaching and wielded that sword awkwardly this way and that. At those times Poonkuzlali taught him how to hold the sword and how swirl it and to strike with it.

Because of this, the journey was delightful for both of them. Only when the ramparts of Tanjavur fort became visible in the distance did Poonkuzlali begin to worry about how to achieve her plans. Sendan Amudan shared her worries. It would be a tremendous effort to even enter the fort; then how were they to achieve all that Poonkuzlali wanted? Sendan Amudan remembered all the tricks and cunning skills employed by Vandiya Devan. Why can I not have even one tenth of that man's cunning? What if that Vandiya Devan himself were here with us now?

Sendan Amudan began to ponder, 'what would Vandiya Devan do at such a juncture?' At that time, they saw a shuttered palanquin going along the road. The sun was setting in the western horizon and dusk was about to fall. The curtains of the palanquin were emblazoned with the palm tree symbol.

"Aha! This looks like the palanquin of the young Queen of Pazluvoor! If one could meet her before she enters the fort and get a signet ring or a pass to go into the fort

how convenient it would be!” thought Amudan. He shared his thoughts with Poonkuzlali. She too thought that it was a good idea. But how were they to meet the Queen inside the shuttered palanquin? Footmen, guards, were walking ahead and behind the palanquin. They would stop anyone trying to approach.

“Don’t worry Amuda. We have at least half a league more before we reach the fortress gates. We are sure to get some opportunity by then,” said Poonkuzlali.

And a most unexpected opportunity did come about!

Chapter 21 – Privilege Of Palanquin Rides

The rainy season did not begin at the usual time that year. Twice it appeared as if the monsoon was coming but the rains stopped abruptly. The flow of water in the river Cauvery and its various branches started to come down. Crops in freshly planted paddies began to wilt without water. “It is all because of this comet in the sky,” said the people.

“It appears as if all sorts of adversity are about to engulf our country. Confusion in political affairs; no news of the young Prince. And in addition, it seems as if the skies will cheat us!” Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali heard all such comments all along their way to Tanjavur. Lack of rain was very convenient to their journey. The sun shone sharply since morning that day. It had become unbearably sultry by midafternoon. Even as they walked beneath the shade giving trees along the road, they were drenched in sweat. People commented to each other, “This does not feel like the cool months of Aippasi. It feels like the summer in Vaikaasi month.”

Shortly after the palanquin with the symbols of Pazluvoor nobility had gone past, suddenly, a cool breeze began to blow. The leaves on the trees along the road began to rustle noisily. It appeared to darken towards the north-east. Dark clouds gathered in the horizon. Very soon those huge clouds began to race forward jostling

each other like a herd of elephants gone rogue. The soft breeze turned into a heavy wind. Raindrops fell screaming from the wind. Very soon the downpour became heavy, swishing and swooshing, noisily. One could not describe the distress of those wayside trees in this sudden storm. Tree branches began to noisily 'creak crack crackle,' break and fall down. Birds that had sheltered in those branches, 'screeched' and flew in all directions. People going along the road too scattered in all directions. Some ran to escape the wind and rain. Others feared that they would be knocked dead by those falling tree branches, and ran. Others ran in fear of the thunder that seemed to rip open the entire universe. Within a short while after the rain had started, the day was gone and night was taking its place.

Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali gave up their intention of entering Tanjavur fort on that day. It would be good if they could reach Amudan's cottage in the middle of the flower gardens in the outskirts before night. They encouraged each other to not fear the darkness in that rainstorm, and walked on carefully.

"Poonkuzlali, you have seen huge storms and tidal waves in the middle of the ocean; you can sail your boat through mountain high waves. How come you are afraid of this rainstorm?" asked Sendan Amudan.

"However big the storm or high the waves, in the middle of the ocean a tree does not fall on our head. If at all anything it is just a thunderclap that will fall!" said that brave boat-girl.

Before she could close her mouth after those words, they heard a large tree break and fall creaking noisily farther ahead. Sendan Amudan took hold of her hand firmly and stopped her from going further.

"There is no point in hurrying tonight; there are many rest pavilions all along this road in this area. Let us wait in one of those pavilions now and go on after the fury of this storm has come down a little," said Sendan Amudan.

“We can do that. But, how are we to find a pavilion in this darkness?” asked Poonkuzlali.

“We can find one such spot, when the lightning lights up everything. We must watch carefully on both sides of this road,” said Amudan.

A lightning flashed making the skies and the earth turn golden even as it made the eyes squint. “There I can see a pavilion,” said Sendan Amudan. Poonkuzlali also had spotted that building; she also saw that a large tree branch had fallen across the road ahead. It appeared as if some people were caught under the fallen branch. She asked, “Amuda did you see that fallen branch? And under it”

“Yes, I saw that; let that fate not happen to us. Let us quickly seek shelter in that pavilion,” saying this he took hold of Poonkuzlali’s hand and dragged her towards the pavilion.

They were soon in the shelter. They wrung their clothes that were dripping wet, trying to squeeze out the water. Poonkuzlali wrung her long tresses trying to squeeze out the water. The dripping water ran in little rivulets down from the floor to the ground. “Oh! Dear! We have made the floor of this pavilion wet!” she said.

“Nothing will happen to the pavilion because of that! It will not catch a fever or cold! You are drenched wet, what can we do?”

“I was born and raised on the sea. My other name is ‘Ocean Princess.’ This rain water will not harm me,” said Poonkuzlali.

At that moment, her heart leaped from the roadside pavilion near Tanjavur Fort to Choodamani Buddhist Vihara in Nagai Port. He who gave her the title and called her by that name for the first time, was in that monastery. The words of Sendan Amudan

saying, "my garden cottage is not far from here; we can go there after this rain stops. My mother will look after you!" fell only partly in her ears.

Another bright flash of lightning lit up the scene that they had seen partly earlier on; it startled both of them. More or less across from the pavilion, the branches of a large banyan tree were uprooted and had fallen across the road. The spreading branches and roots of that tree were pulled helter-skelter, and lay randomly all over the road along with soggy leaves and other debris. Two horses and five or six men were caught amidst those branches and roots. Other men were trying to help free those who were caught like that. They were hurriedly moving aside the branches and leaves. They could hear the calls for help and cries of pain here and there drowned in the sound of rain, "Oh! Dear!" "Father, Mother" "Here, over there." something else more than all this caught the attention of Amudan and Poonkuzlali.

A palanquin had been placed on the ground a little away from the fallen tree branches. Only two men stood by its side. The others had gone to help the men trapped under the tree.

"Amuda, did you see that palanquin?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"I see it; looks like the palanquin of the young Queen of Pazluvoor."

"Why didn't that tree fall on top of that palanquin!?"

"Good Lord, why do you say that? You had said that you would meet the Queen of Pazluvoor and achieve your aims with her help!"

"Yes. I said that. Even so, I do not like that Pazluvoor Queen really much!"

"Does a tree have to break and fall upon her just because you do not like her?"

“Why did the tree have to fall upon ordinary folk? Why can’t it fall upon the heads of the nobility? Let that go for now! Shall we go close to that palanquin and try talking to the young Queen now? Shall we ask for her help to get into the fort?”

“Fantastic! You found a perfect moment and a perfect place to speak to her! If we go near that palanquin in this dark rain, they may think we are coming to rob her and beat us up!”

“If only I could meet that Queen, the rest will be easy,” said Poonkuzlali.

“How is that?”

“I will say that my sister-in-law Raakammal sent me. Or I will say that the Sorcerer sent me.”

“Good Idea! Only if we can approach her; but look, look Poonkuzlali!”

Another flash of lightning showed two men lifting up the palanquin; were they about to leave? No, no. The palanquin was coming towards the pavilion. Very soon the palanquin was at the front of the wayside pavilion. The men placed it down on the porch, away from the rain.

“The Queen is coming in search of us!” declared Poonkuzlali.

Amudan took hold of her hand and tried to move towards the back of that building. Poonkuzlali refused to move away.

“Who is there?” asked an authoritative voice loudly.

Understanding it to be the voice of one of the men who carried the palanquin, Poonkuzlali replied, “Don’t worry Brother! We too are travelers along this road, just

like you folk. We have taken shelter from the rain in this pavilion.”

“Fine, fine! Don’t come near this palanquin,” said the same voice.

“Why would we come near the palanquin? Shouldn’t we have acquired much good fortune for the privilege of riding in palanquins?” asked Poonkuzlali.

Sendan Amudan started saying, “Even poet Valluvar wrote about this; talking about the consequences of the actions in a prior birth...”

“Stop it. Shut your mouth and keep quiet. How many of you are there?” asked the footman.

“We are just two of us. Even if another hundred come, they can take shelter from the rain in this pavilion.” Amudan spoke what he thought was the truth. He did not realize that there was a third man hidden behind the interior pillars of that pavilion.

The footman was telling his companion the other footman, “I said so, much earlier, when the rain started. We should shelter under some pavilion, I said. No one listened. That is why we are in this trouble now.”

“Who could tell that this may happen. We thought that we could be inside the fort before the rain increased. At least the tree did not fall on the palanquin,” said the other footman.

Again, another flash of lightning. Both Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali had their eyes fixed on the palanquin. So, they were able to see that a woman inside that palanquin had parted the curtains and was peering towards them. They noticed that the woman who looked at them recognized them and smiled at them. The next instant darkness once again enveloped the surroundings and the pavilion.

Poonkuzlali asked very softly, "Amuda did you see?"

"Yes, I did."

"Who was in the palanquin?"

"Was it not the young Queen of Pazluvoor?"

"Is that what it seemed like, to you?"

"It looked like Pazluvoor's Queen; But I had a slight doubt."

"I have no doubt; I am sure."

"What is sure?"

"It is not the Queen of Pazluvoor. It is my crazy aunt, the Queen of the forest who is inside."

"Shhh! Don't speak so loudly!"

"If I do not speak loudly, how am I to get my job done?"

"What job?"

"The reason why we came this far; that job! We have found our aunt; don't we need to free her and take her away?"

"That is not possible now, Poonkuzlali. Let us see where the palanquin is going. Then we can think and find a way to free her."

“You are talking about letting go of what is in our hand and trying to catch that which is far away. That is not possible. We must free our aunt right now. If you are afraid, stay away.”

“Shouldn’t your aunt agree to be freed? She is riding comfortably in that palanquin. Where is she going? Why? Who has ordered her to be captured like this? Don’t we need to find out all this?”

“What if they take her to the dungeon prisons. If that happens, we cannot do anything!”

“Why not? I myself have been in those dungeon prisons and come free! I too have some connections within the palace. I can somehow free your aunt. Be quiet now.”

Poonkuzlali decided that she must be patient. At that moment something totally unexpected happened. The curtains of the palanquin parted wider. A figure stepped out of that palanquin. Like a cat, it softly stepped towards them in the next moment. Since it was very dark in the pavilion, none of this was seen by the footmen waiting near the steps.

Even in that darkness, Poonkuzlali could recognize her aunt the mute-queen. The mute-queen took hold of both their hands and dragged them further inside the pavilion. She hugged and kissed Poonkuzlali showing her happiness. They then spoke in sign language for a little while. How did they communicate with each other in that darkness? How did each understand the other? We have no skill to explain that!

Poonkuzlali said to Amudan, “did you understand what my aunt was saying? She is asking me to get into that palanquin and go with them. She is asking you to take her to your house.”

“What is your opinion Poonkuzlali?”

“I am going to do as my aunt asks. It is the best way to find out who ordered her to be abducted.”

“Think Poonkuzlali. The idea is good; but what danger lies behind it?”

“Amuda! Do not worry. There can be no harm to me by doing what my aunt asks. If needed I have this knife in my waistband.” Poonkuzlali hugged her aunt once again and walked silently just like her aunt. She stepped into the palanquin and closed the curtains.

Chapter 22 - Aniruddha Is Disappointed

Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma Raya had stayed back in Tanjavur for the past several days. Many persons were coming to meet with him: government officials, feudatory chieftains, army commanders, ambassadors from foreign countries, representatives of trade guilds, temple administrators, scholars in southern and northern languages – all such people sought his audience. Because of this, the front parts of his palace were always crowded with people. Mr. Aniruddha did not maintain a separate contingent of personal guards for himself. His retinue too was very limited. Because of this there was no reason for quarrels to arise between his men and those of the Lords Pazluvoor.

Even so, younger Lord Pazluvoor was grumbling. Security had become lax after the Prime Minister had come to stay in Tanjavur! All sorts of fellows were getting into the fort on the pretext of wanting to meet the Prime Minister. Because the mansion of the Prime Minister was next to the Royal Palace of the Emperor, crowds were increasing in the neighborhood of the Palace. Many were coming in, showing passes and the signet ring of the Prime Minister, saying they had business with him and came to meet the minister.

Lord Kalanthaka Pazluvoor wanted to control all these activities to some extent. But he did not have the courage to go pick a word-duel directly face to face with the Prime Minister. If the Elder Lord Pazluvoor were here, they could have thought about it together, and found a way to do something. Younger Lord Kalanthaka felt handicapped, as if his arm was broken, because the Elder Lord Pazluvoor had gone to Kadamboor at such a time as this.

Not only was he collecting all and sundry to crowd the fort and endangering security, the Prime Minister was also sending apparently polite requests for help, but in reality, was ordering him about!

Some days ago, he had asked for some men to be sent to Kodi Karai. Lord Kalanthaka had obliged by lending some of his men. Yesterday he had sent word that he needed transport for a noble woman coming from Thiru-vaiyaru and asked if he could help with a shuttered palanquin from Pazluvoor palace along with bearers and guards. Younger Lord Pazluvoor fulfilled this request too! But in his mind, he was mulling over the idea 'This Brahma Rayan is involved in some scheme or conspiracy. Who is the noble woman who has to be transported in a closed palanquin in this fashion? Why is she coming here? I must somehow find out the details! Oh, that my brother is not here at such a time as this!' he fussed in his mind.

There was one other man who was eager to find out who had actually arrived at the Prime Ministers' mansion in the covered palanquin. It was none other than the treasured apprentice of the Prime Minister, Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

On the day after the big storm, after completing all his morning rituals of bath, breakfast, prayer, religious ceremonies and such the Prime Minister arrived in the chambers at the front of his mansion. He sent the servant to go outside and check who had come to meet him that day. When he heard that one of the persons waiting was Azlvar-adiyan, he ordered that he be brought in immediately.

Azlvar-adiyan came in quickly and stood before his master meekly and with humility.

“Thirumalai what about the matter on which I sent you?” asked the Prime Minister.

“My Master, forgive me. I have come back unsuccessful,” said Azlvar-adiyan.

“In a way it was expected. Were you even able to meet Aditya Karikala?”

“I did meet him, Sir. I gave him all the messages you had asked me to give to him. Nothing was useful. I could not prevent the Prince from going to Kadamboor Fort.”

“Is the Prince at Kadamboor now?”

“Yes Master. I saw him enter Sambuvaraya’s Palace; only after I had been sure of that, did I return. Sambuvaraya gave a royal welcome to the Prince. One cannot describe the enthusiasm of the people from all the surrounding areas.”

“All that is expected. Who else has come to Kadamboor Palace?”

“The Prince was accompanied by Parthiban Pallava and Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan. The Elder Lord Pazluvoor had come from here accompanied by his Young Queen. I heard that various chieftains from the principalities of Middle Territories and Thiru-munaipadi areas were invited.”

“Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman?”

“He came with the Prince, up to the banks of River Mani-muttha and then went back.”

“That brave old man will not stay quiet. By now he would have started collecting an army. I hear that the Elder Velir of Kodumbalur is coming from the south with a large

army. Only God must protect this Kingdom from harm befalling it. Thirumalai, on your way here, what were the people talking about. Did you hear anything in particular?" asked the Prime Minister.

"Most of the talk was about the sea accident that has happened to the Young Prince. People are very angry with the nobles of Pazluvoor. Others lay the blame upon you too."

"Yes. Yes. They have reason to lay the blame upon me. Thirumalai I am thinking of soon relinquishing this job of being the Prime Minister."

"Master, if you do any such thing, I too shall be free. I will go about singing the hymnals composed by the Azlvar Saints and travel all around the country and spend my time happily. When are you planning to give up your duties, Sir?"

"I am going to try one last attempt at safeguarding the kingdom. Once that is complete, I will give up this job."

"What attempt is that my Master?"

"I have climbed the first step in that effort. Thirumalai, I have succeeded in a particular job that you gave up as being impossible."

"There is nothing surprising about that Sir! What job was it, Sir?"

"Did I not tell you to find and bring back a mute-lady who was wandering like a mad-nobody in Eezlam Island? You came back saying that you were not able to do that, remember?" asked Mr. Anirudda.

"Yes, my master, that mute-lady ..."

“We have brought her to our palace last night!”

“Aha! What a surprise! Surprise of surprises! How did you manage that Sir?”

“I expected that mute-woman to come to Kodi Karai to find out if the Younger Prince survived or not. I had sent some men to capture her if she came there. Fortunately, she came without giving too much trouble. Listen to this funny thing Thirumalai -- I arranged to bring her here from Thiru-vaiyaru in a covered palanquin. I sent the palanquin of Pazluvoor’s young Queen for that!” Said the Prime Minister.

“Sir, last evening there was a big storm and heavy rain.”

“Yes, there were some obstacles on the way because of that! I too was worried. I was easy only after the palanquin arrived after midnight.”

“Oh! Was it midnight? Did you wait up that late to accord a welcome?”

“I was awake, but I did not go to welcome her. I had the women in my household welcome her. I was worried; she is a crazy woman, what if she creates a problem? Nothing like that happened. She ate well and went to sleep immediately. Thirumalai, to tell you the truth I am somewhat afraid of meeting that woman. It is good that you are here now.”

“My Master, I too am very eager to see that woman.”

“Then come along with me, let us go to the women’s apartments and see her. She knows you from before; she also knows that you are a friend of the Younger Prince. She might be a little more comfortable with you.”

Master and disciple went towards the women’s apartments towards the back of the palace. Mr. Anirudda ordered the servant maids to bring the lady who had come the previous night.

The maids led that woman into their presence. Mr. Anirudda took one look at her and was totally shocked. A smile played upon Azlvar-adiyan's face.

Chapter 23 - Can The Mute Talk?

Mr. Anirudda looked at Poonkuzlali for some time; called the maids who led her to come closer. He asked them something in a very soft voice. After they had replied, he asked them to leave the room. He then looked at Azlvar-adiyan and said, "Thirumalai it appears as if there is some mistake."

"Yes, Sir. I too think so."

"This is a young girl; she may only be about twenty or so years old."

"May be not even that!"

"The lady I was expecting should be about forty or so years old."

"Perhaps a little older."

"Yes, yes. You have seen Mandakini Devi in Lanka, have you not?"

"Yes, Sir. I saw her and tried to bring her here as you had ordered; but I could not do so."

"This girl does not even look like Mandakini Devi, does she?"

"No, my Master, She is definitely not her."

"Then, who is this girl? How did she arrive here?"

“Why not ask her, Sir?”

“What is the point is asking a deaf-mute?”

“Master, is she mute....?”

“That is what I questioned the maids about. They said that she has not spoken a single word since she arrived here.”

“Master, who did you send to identify her and bring here?”

“Aha! Did that idiot make some mistake?”

“Which idiot Sir? It is not like you to send some idiot on such important missions.”

“He seemed smart. There was that youth who was fighting with that Vaanar nobleman, Vandiya Devan when I recently went to Pazlayarai.”

“Yes Pinakapani, the son of Pazlayarai Doctor.”

“Yes, it was him! After I had sent you and Vallavarayan to Kanchi, I had that man freed from prison and brought to me. I thought that he would be suitable for our contingent of spies and sent him to Kodi Karai. He said that he had experience of having been to Kodi Karai.”

“Did that man bring this girl here?”

“I had given him all the identification correctly. He had brought her to Thiru-vaiyaru and sent me word that the mission was successful.”

“Sir, where is that intelligent spy who succeeded in this venture in which I could not succeed. Would it not be wise to question him about this girl?”

“Yes, that is so. Unfortunately, an unexpected accident happened to him last night.”

“Oh, ho, ho! What accident, to him? How did that happen?”

“He was following the palanquin. Since I had ordered that they should enter Tanjavur Fort after dark, they started from Thiru-vaiyaru at dusk, and were coming close to the fort before nightfall. You know about that sudden storm....”

“Yes, Sir. I too had to shelter for some time in a wayside rest-pavilion, to escape the storm.”

“When the palanquin and men were close to the fort, a large tree was completely uprooted and it had fallen across the road. Luckily, it did not fall on the palanquin. It fell upon the men who were accompanying the palanquin. Pinakapani, the doctor’s son was caught under those fallen branches.”

When the Prime Minister was giving all these details, a woman’s voice said, “Was it just a tree branch that fell upon that fiend’s head? Did not a thunderbolt strike him!?” asked the enraged voice.

Prime Minister Anirudda looked at Poonkuzlali with some surprise. Even as he continued looking at her , he asked, “Thirumalai, was it this girl who spoke just now?”

“Yes, Sir. It seems so.”

“What is this miracle? Can the deaf hear? Could the mute speak?” asked Anirudda Brahma Raya.

“Yes, it is truly a miracle that the deaf begin to hear and the mute start talking. However, if you, who art a devotee of the all-powerful Lord Vishnu, wish it to be so, anything is possible. What the Azlvar saints have spoken is that...”

“Enough, enough. Do not drag Azlvar saints here and bother them. This did not happen because of the Grace of Lord Vishnu. There has been some mistake. This girl has deceived us. Who is she? What is her intention? Why did she pretend to be a deaf-mute all this time?”

“Master, why don’t we ask this girl herself?”

“My dear man, from the smile dancing on your face, I think you perhaps know something Fine, I shall question her myself. Girl, you are not deaf, are you? Can you hear what I am saying?” asked Mr. Aniruddha.

“Sir, I sometimes wished I was deaf. But I am happy that I can hear very well now. I heard that the tree broke and fell upon that wretch of a doctor’s son, haven’t I? My Lord, did he die and get lost forever?” asked Poonkuzlali.

“Aha! You are able to hear and you are speaking! You are not a mute.” Said Mr. Aniruddha.

“This girl is definitely not mute,” spoke up the assistant.

“Aha! You have now found out that I am not mute. What I have heard must be true, that the most intelligent person in the entire Chozla empire is the Prime Minister!” said Poonkuzlali.

“Girl! Are you making fun of me? Be careful! If you were not mute, why did you not speak since you came here last night? Why did you act as if you were mute? Speak the truth!” said the Prime Minister Anirudda.

“Sir, till I came here last night I was one who knew how to speak. Some even called me a chatterbox. When I saw this palace of the Prime Minister and the royal welcome given to me here, I was so astonished that I became speechless! The women in this palace spoke to me in sign language. Thinking that all of them were speechless mutes, I too replied in sign language. After hearing you speak, I remembered that I too could speak.”

“There is surely no doubt that you are truly a chatterbox. I am surprised to imagine how that young doctor got hold of you and brought you here. Even if he is an idiot, he is smart!”

“My Lord, that sinner did not catch me and bring me here. If he had tried, by now he would be journeying to the land of the Lord of Death.” After saying this Poonkuzlali pulled out the knife tucked in her waistband and showed it.

“Girl! May you be blessed! Tuck your knife back in your waist. Why are you so angry with that fellow? You are saying that he did not abduct you.”

“He did not capture me. But his men tied me up and bound me to my boat. They tied my sister-in-law to a tree. In spite of all this, that wretch of a young doctor swore that he had nothing to do with all this!”

“At least he had some sense! He behaved just as I had instructed.”

“My Lord, Sir, Mr. Prime Minister! Was it you who sent that vile fellow? Were you the one who ordered them to abduct my aunt, a hapless speechless woman?”

“Aunt! The daughter of Karaiyar folk, Mandakini is your aunt! That means you....? What are you to the Lighthouse Keeper Mr. Tyaga-Vidangar?” asked the Prime Minister.

“Sir, I am his dearest daughter!”

“Aha! I did not know till this day that Tyaga-Vidangar has a chatterbox of a daughter like you.”

“Sir, Please do not tell anyone about that!”

“Why? Girl, why?”

“It is common knowledge all over the country that there is nothing unknown to the Prime Minister of the Chozla Empire. If it were to come about that there was something unknown to you, will it not affect the respect that people have for you?”

“Girl, I am not worried about the respect or regard for me. Just tell me about one other thing that is not known to me. You said that they had taken your aunt captive; where is she now? How did you get into the palanquin I had sent? Where did you get in?”

“Sir, why did you send men to abduct a speechless mute like my aunt?”

“My daughter! I cannot share that information with you. It is big, related to political matters.”

“Father! then I too cannot give you answers to your questions.”

“There are ways of forcing you to answer.”

“They will not work with me!”

“Girl! I will send you to the dungeon prisons.”

“I cannot be shut up in any dungeon prison.”

“Someone sent to the dungeons, never comes back!”

“I know a fellow who came out! Sir, even yesterday I was talking to Sendan Amudan as we journeyed here.”

“Who is he, this Sendan Amudan?”

“He is the son of my other aunt. He and I together, were coming here from Kodi Karai.”

“Why, my daughter?”

“I had a long time wish to see this Tanjavur fort and the mansions and palaces here. I was also eager to see Emperor Sundara Chozla. They said that the Emperor was not well? How is he now? Sir, can I see him?”

“He is just the same; there is no improvement in his health. So, you can forget about wanting to see him.”

“How can I forget? I must see the Emperor. I must see him and tell him about the atrocities in his kingdom, of helpless women in his kingdom being abducted without consent.”

“Girl, I have no time to spend in this sort of useless debate with you. I did not order to have you captured forcefully. How did you get into the palanquin sent by me? Tell me at least that. Did anyone force you to get into the palanquin?”

“No. My Lord, no in that one matter. When we were coming near Tanjavur Fort, this palanquin was just sitting there, empty. Because it was raining, I myself decided to get into it.”

The Prime Minister turned to his assistant Azlvar-adiyan and said, “I am beginning to understand the situation somewhat. On the road when it was stormy and rainy, they must have set down that palanquin somewhere. She had her aunt step out and then got in to the palanquin. Since the man I sent was unconscious because of the tree that fell upon him, he could not notice this. The bearers and footmen did not notice it. This must have happened rather close to the fortress gates. Thirumalai, do you think my surmise to be correct?”

“My Lord, it happened just the way you surmised just now. I saw it happen with my own eyes.”

“You saw It! What is this? Why did you keep your mouth shut all this time? Answer quickly!”

“Yesterday, early in the night, in the rainy darkness, I was coming towards the fortress gates. There was the furious storm and sudden rain. Trees on the roadside were breaking and falling. I decided to wait in one of the travelers’ rest pavilions along the road. Soon after I had sought shelter in one such pavilion, this girl and a young man came there. She said it was her aunt’s son; could be the same man. In the brightness shed by the lightning, I saw rudraksha prayer beads around his neck. Thinking that though young, he must be an erudite Saiva devotee, I wished to tell him about the greatness of lord Vishnu; it would be a good way to pass the time, I thought. By then, they had brought a palanquin and placed it near the front of that same pavilion. I could discern the palmtree symbol of Pazluvoor on the curtains of that palanquin. A woman stepped out of that palanquin and came close to these two. In the dark interior of that pavilion, the three of them seemed to talk to each other by signs. Then, I saw this girl go and get into the palanquin. I could make out in the

lightning that the woman who had got out was different from the one that got in. The bearers, did not notice any of this. Later after the rain had stopped, they carried the palanquin and went away.”

“Ah! That is how they hoodwinked me. And all this time you have been quiet without saying anything! What did the other two do after that?”

“After the palanquin had left, they too left. I too started to go on my way.”

“Thirumalai, why were you quiet watching all this? Why did you not stop her aunt? Have you also joined them in their scheming?”

“Wrong accusation, my master, wrong accusation! I am not one to betray in that fashion. At first, I did not realize that all this was your arrangement. Since the palanquin was from Pazluvoor mansion, I thought it may be some scheme being carried out by the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. Moreover, would I be able to stop Mandakini Devi from doing anything? We could build dams and stop storm winds; how can one deter that blessed woman? I was one who had tried in Lanka and failed. Moreover, that lady can recognize my face; she might run away after seeing me. After that no one will be able to find her.”

“Considering all this, it appears that the doctor’s son was pretty smart and capable. He had brought her here this far, did he not?”

“My Master, I feel that your surmise on this matter is incorrect. Mandakini devi must have come willingly for her own reason. She must have changed her mind after nearing Tanjavur.”

“Maybe, perhaps. Even so that Karaiyar’s daughter could not have gone too far. The storm and rain continued all night long. She must be here somewhere nearby.

Thirumalai she must be found somehow. Perhaps this girl may know where she might be staying.”

“Daughter, what is your name?” asked Mr. Anirudda.

“Poonkuzlali, Sir”

“Aha! Beautiful name. There is none as skillful as Mr. Tyaga-vidangar in choosing names. Poonkuzlali, you must know where your aunt might be staying. If you know it, speak. There will be no harm done to her.”

Poonkuzlali seemed to think about it for a little, “My Lord, I think I know where my aunt might be now; if you could explain, why you ordered her to be captured, I too can reveal her whereabouts.”

“It is a big political matter Poonkuzlali. A secret about the palace. I cannot tell you.”

“I too cannot tell you.”

“It is impossible to talk to this girl!”

“Sir, if you could fulfil one condition ...” said Poonkuzlali.

“Oh ho! This girl levies conditions upon me! What is it?”

“If you would place my aunt on the throne of Tanjavur and bestow the jeweled crown upon her head, I will bring her to you myself.”

“Thirumalai, this girl has gone crazy!”

“My Master, did you recognize it just now? There is no need to ask her anything. I know where her aunt is now. Her cousin lives in a garden on the outskirts of the fort. He and his mother are in service providing flowers to the Thali-kulattar temple. The woman you are searching for is in that place. If you send some men with me, I will bring her here,” said Azlvar-adiyan.

Poonkuzlali looked at him as if she wished to burn him down! “If you do anything like that, I shall immediately go to the Emperor’s palace and appeal. I will make sure that all the town knows of the atrocities you commit.”

“Thirumalai, we may need to send her down to the dungeon prisons; there seems to be no other way!” said Mr. Anirudda Brahma raya.

“Sir there is no need to send this girl to the dungeons. Instead of that we could send her to the palace of the Younger Pirati Kundavai. The Younger Pirati is now in Tanjavur, is she not? The Princess may be able to cure this girl’s craziness. The Princess may have some errands or jobs for this girl!”

“Why do you say that, Thirumalai? What can the Younger Pirati have to do with this girl? What job can she do for the Princess?”

“Master, it is not unknown to you. The storm that raged last night, has wreaked havoc along the Chozla coast. Messengers from all directions are waiting outside your chambers.”

“Yes, I will need to meet all of them now; before that I tried to talk to this girl and have spent too much time. It would have been better if she had been born mute!”

Poonkuzlali, mumbled “Yes you could commit all sorts of violence without being questioned!”

Azlvar-adiyan continued, "I hear that there is a great danger to Nagai Port. They say that the sea boiled over in a big storm wave and has drowned the whole town."

On hearing those words both Poonkuzlali and the Prime Minister were stunned!

"The Younger Pirati herself may be coming here to consult with you about that!" finished Azlvar-adiyan.

Before he had finished speaking, they could hear sounds of praise and applauding cries hailing the royals outside the palace.

"Thirumalai, when did you become clairvoyant? It sounds like the Younger Pirati is coming here." After saying this, Mr. Anirudda stood up and walked towards the front doors of his palace.

Before he had gone too far, Kundavai and Vanathi entered the palace through the same doors.

On seeing Poonkuzlali standing there, the anxiety dwelling on the Younger Pirati's face changed; h

er face now showed surprise and happiness.

Main Characters

Aditya Karikala -- Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire, Sundara Chozla's eldest son.

Anirudda Brahma-raya -- The Prime Minister and confidant of Sundara Chozla.

Arinjaya Chozla -- Sundara Chozla's father, King Gandara Aditya's younger brother, died after ruling for merely one year

Arulmozli Varma -- Sundara Chozla's younger son.

Astrologer of Kudanthai -- An astrologer patronized by Kundavai, a spy of sorts.

Azlvar-adiyan Nambi, Thirumalai Appan -- A follower of the Vaishnava faith, step brother of Esanya Bhattar, a spy. Nandini is his adopted sister.

Chandramati -- Manimekalai's maid and confidant.

Esanya Bhattar -- A priest of Pazlayarai, elder brother of Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. Had been tutor of Kundavai.

Gandara Aditya -- Sundara Chozla's elder uncle, a devout follower of the Saiva faith, ruled before Arinjaya Chozla.

Idumban Kari -- A footman from Kadamboor, a conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of a gang sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Kalyani of Vaithumba -- Widow of King Arinjaya Chozla, a famous beauty, Sundara Chozla's mother.

Kandamaran -- A young nobleman, son of Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor.

Karuthiruman, the madman -- A prisoner with a past and a story.

Kirama Vithan Revadasan -- Pandiya Conspirator who knew Singhala language; Raakammal's father.

Kundavai, Younger Pirati -- Sundara Chozla's daughter. Royal princess.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Elder, Ambalavan -- An important and powerful chieftain, Officer of Taxation, Food Supply and Finance, brother of Kalanthaka, Nandini's husband.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Younger, Kalanthaka -- Commander of Tanjavur Fort, Captain of the Guard Corps.

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Elder, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari -- An important chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Commander of Chozla Armies in Lanka. Elder-uncle to Vanathi.

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Younger, Paranthaka -- Younger Lord of Kodumbalur, Vanathi's father who lost his life in a battle in Lanka.

Madurandaka Deva -- A Chozla Prince, son of Gandara Aditya and Sembiyan Madevi, a few years older than Aditya Karikala.

Malayaman Milad-udayar of Thiru-Kovalur -- A nobleman, a Chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Empress Vanamadevi's father and grandfather to Karikala, Arulmozli and Kundavai.

Mandakini -- Deaf-mute woman who wanders the seashores and forests of Lanka.

Vaani Ammai's Sister.

Manimekalai -- Kandamaran's younger sister and daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya.

Mazlava-roya -- A nobleman, Sembian Madevi's brother.

Munai Raya -- A nobleman, not very confident in Lord Pazluvoor's schemes.

Murugaiyyan -- Kodi Karai lighthouse keeper's son, Poonkuzlali's brother and husband of Raakammal; a boatman.

Nallavan Sattanar -- Court poet at Tanjavur.

Nandini, Young-Queen of Pazluvoor -- An extraordinarily beautiful woman with a mysterious past, Azlvar-adiyan's adopted sister.

Parameswaran -- Pandiya Conspirator; Thevaralan dancer.

Parthiban Pallava -- A nobleman of the Pallava clan, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's confidant.

Pinakapani -- Pazlayarai Doctors' Son

Poonkuzlali -- Daughter of the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai, Sendan Amudan's cousin.

Raakammal -- Kodi Karai Boatman's wife, sympathetic to Pandiya cause.

Ravidasa Brahmadirajan, the Sorcerer -- Leader of the Pandiya conspirators, a former retainer of Veera-pandiyai, Pandiyai Aabathudavi body guard who had a mysterious hold over Nandini

Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor, Sengannan -- A nobleman; Chozla feudatory; crony of Lord Pazluvoor.

Sembian Madevi, Elder Pirati -- Widow of King Gandara Aditya, Madurandaka Deva's mother, fond of Sundara Chozla and his children, devout.

Sendan Amudan -- A flower vendor of Tanjore, lived with his deaf-mute mother in the outskirts of the city.

Soman Samban -- A conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of Ravidasa's gang, sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Sundara Chozla Paranthaka -- Emperor of the Chozla Kingdom.

Tyaga-Vidangar -- Lighthouse keeper at Kodi Karai. Poonkuzlali's father.

Vanamadevi of Thiru-Kovalur -- The Queen Consort, wife of Sundara Chozla, mother to Karikala, Kundavai & Arulmozli.

Vanathi Devi -- A young noblewoman of the Kodumbalur clan, Kundavai's friend, in love with Prince Arulmozli.

Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan -- A scion of the Vaanar clan of Vallam, Aditya Karikala's friend and messenger.

Vaani Ammai -- A deaf-mute woman, garden keeper living on the outskirts of Tanjore. Amudan's Mother. Mandakini's sister.

Vasuki -- Nandini's maid.

Veera-pandiya -- Pandiya King vanquished and killed by Prince Aditya Karikala.

Glossary of Terms

Aadi -- A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-August

Aanai -- Elephant

Aavani -- A month of the Tamil calendar, about August-September

Aippasi -- a month in the Tamil Calendar, about October-November

Aiyyo, acchachcho -- Exclamatory expressions denoting, fear, despair, grief, amazement, regret, etc. similar to, "oh dear."

Advaita -- A philosophy, belief in the non-dual nature of God

Agil -- Agar wood; fragrant wood

Akka -- Elder sister, a respectful greeting for an older girl

Amma -- Mother, a respectful greeting for women, both old and young

Ankush -- A goad used by elephant drivers

Anna -- Elder brother, respectful address for older men

Araya, raya, arasa -- King, chieftain, Raja

Ayya -- Father, respectful mode of address for men particularly a revered or elderly person

Ayyanaar -- Village guardian deities made of gigantic terracotta painted figures; shown riding horses, elephants

Bharata Natyam -- Classical dance style

Chakra -- Discus

Champaka – Fragrant Magnolia

Chanakya -- A medieval personality of political cunning

Devi, Deva -- Lady, Lord

Eezlam -- Tamil name for Lanka or present-day Sri Lanka

Iruvatchi -- A fragrant flower of jasmine family

Jaamam -- A period of time 3 hours 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 cornucopia, tree of plenty from the 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; yellow laburnum flowers

Koothu -- Dance

Kovai fruit -- Ripe fruit of the scarlet gourd or ivy gourd

Kulam -- Clan, family group

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 -- Dance of the Forest folk, often vigorous, dance by maidens weaving flower garlands

Maalai -- Garland

Malai -- Mountain

Maari Amman -- A village deity, a rural Goddess

Marudai -- A shade giving tree, a colloquial name for Madurai City

Mattalam -- Drum

Maya, Maaya -- Deception, unreal

Moringa -- A leafy tree, bears drumstick like long fruit

Musth -- A natural periodic condition even in trained male elephants that make them go aggressive and unpredictable

Mu-ttholl-ayiram -- A collection of romantic verse in Tamil

Muzlai -- Cave

Naadaswaram -- Elongated windpipe like musical instrument that produces a loud melody; a wind-horn

Naadu -- Country

Naamam -- A vertical, religious mark worn by followers of Vishnu

Naanal -- A sedge like grass

Naavalo, naaval -- taunts proclaiming victory or battle-cries

Nandavana -- Garden

Nappinnai -- Tamil name for Radha of Northern India

Netri-chutti -- Forehead ornament

Nilaa-muttram -- A courtyard, plaza or gathering place

Paadal Petra Sthalam -- A place recognized in songs composed by saints

Padai Veedu -- Army housing

Padinettam Perukku -- Eighteenth day flood festival

Palli Padai -- Memorial temple

Panchayat -- Council of Village Elders, often five persons

Parai -- A kind of country drum, an announcement

Pattinam -- City or Town, often a suffix for a Port Town. Ur is inland town.

Perumal -- Lord, God

Pirati -- Lady, Royal Princess

Pitam, Peetam, matam -- 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 denomination of Hinduism, follower of Shiva

Salli -- A musical instrument

Selvan -- Beloved, Darling (masculine), Son

Selvi -- Beloved, Darling (feminine), Daughter

Semakalam -- Cymbal like metal drum played in temples to announce the hour of time

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; screw-pine

Themmangu -- Folk Song

Thevar-aalan, -- Male Divine dancer, spoke oracles if possessed

Thevar-aatti -- Female Divine dancer, spoke oracles if possessed

Thevaram -- Devotional Poems

Thiru -- An honorific prefix; if it is attached to the name of a town, it usually indicated that the town was blessed in songs composed by saints of the faith tradition. Used as an addressing-prefix ex., Mr., Senor, Revered

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

Ur, Oor -- Town or civilized place as opposed to untamed forest or Kaadu; pattinam is port town

Uriyadi -- A game to get the prize-pot tied to a tall pole.

Vaikaasi – a tamil month ,about May-June

Vaetti -- Loose lower garment of men

Vaishnava -- A denomination of Hinduism, follower of Vishnu

Vamsa -- Dynasty

Veenai -- A stringed musical 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

About the Author

Indra Neelameggham loves literature. She lives in the United States

This translation is an attempt to capture the beauty of Tamil in English.

This novel by Kalki captured her teen imagination and wanted to share the incredible experience with the whole wide world.

Indra suggests:

Enjoy the first reading to get the story

The second reading to enjoy the language of Kalki

The third reading to explore the incredible history and culture of the Tamils.

And then, if possible, read the original in Tamil.

Indra writes, reads, gives talks and just enjoys life.

She is glad to have had the opportunity to be the first person to translate Ponnin Selvan in to English [1990s.]

Connect With Author

Contact Email: nealer0@yahoo.com

Website: <https://indllc.wixsite.com/indrasponniyinSelvan>
