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**"Ponniyin Selvan"
of Kalki Krishnamurthy**



**English Translation
by Indra Neelameggham**

Part IIB Whirlwind (chapters 27 – 53)

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*Kalki's
Ponniyin Selvan*

Ponni's Beloved



*Vol II - Part B
[Chapters 27 - 53]*

Whirlwind

Translated 1993

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 27 --Forest Path

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari, the Elder Lord Velir of Kodumbalur was an elderly, experienced warhorse. He had personal experience of conducting numberless war campaigns in varied conditions. He enjoyed a close, friendly alliance with the Chozla clan. His younger brother had reached the heavens of the brave, as the result of a loosing war fought in Lanka some years ago. The armies sent with that younger brother had faced defeat and retreat. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama was very intent on vindicating that slur to the name of the Velirs and reestablishing the brave fame of the Kodumbalur house. Therefore, he had come to Lanka as the Commander though he was slightly advanced in age.

For reasons of his own, Lord Pazluvoor had been raising several obstacles to the proper conduct of this campaign on the island of Lanka. The long time rivalry and competition between the clans of these two Tamil chieftains had now grown because of these disagreements.

The plight of Vandiya Devan, who had been arrested with the Pazluvoor signet ring in his possession, would indeed have been difficult if he had been brought before the Velir chieftain. Fortunately for our hero, the Commander had mentioned the incident to Prime Minister Brahma-rama while enroute to Rameswaram. The Prime Minister came to know the truth about Vandiya Devan through Azlvar-adiyan and acted at once. He ordered Azlvar-adiyan to cross the channel immediately and explain the truth to Commander Bhoothi Vikrama.

The Commander examined the brave young man of the Vaanar clan from top to toe. He must have been favorably impressed. He enquired in a pleasant voice, "Thambi, did they look after you properly? Did you have comfortable lodging and proper food?"

"Yes Sir! There was no dearth of comfort. They looked after me very well indeed! Five or six men waited constantly at my door to execute my every wish and order. I had plenty of space to stay in that old mansion. They had even sent me a cat for my night meal. Just when I was about to eat that creature, this Mr. Nambi appeared to spoil my appetite!" spoke Vandiya Devan.

"This young man seems to be a jokester. Thirumalai, is he speaking the truth?"

Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi replied, "Sir, he says that his forefathers were poets. Therefore, he possesses a lot of creative imagination. Apart from that, he is essentially saying the truth. When I went to see him in the guard-house, a cat really scratched my arms and legs."

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama began to laugh on seeing the bloody scratches on his hands and legs. "A cat did this

to you!? You are lucky to have this brave young man as your companion for the journey across the forest ..."

"Sir, I have no need for an escort; my wooden staff would be adequate. It was a mistake to not take my staff with me when I went to see him."

"Then, you can be his escort. Arrange for a proper meal for him before you leave. Thambi, food services are somewhat inadequate in Lanka at present. Mahinda's armies had destroyed all the irrigation canals and lakes in these provinces before they retreated into the mountains. Agriculture and farming are greatly inhibited because of it. Neither do we have farmers to plant crops. Even the local population is on the verge of starvation; how can I commandeer food for our soldiers? We do not get proper food supplies from the homeland..."

"I am aware of that Sir!" interrupted Vandiya Devan, "I heard the women petition the Younger Pirati Kundavai when she was in the vicinity of the padai veedu neighborhood in Pazlayarai. They were imploring, 'Our husbands and sons are starving in Lanka!' The Princess was concerned."

"Oh, they are aware of this situation over there? Good, good! What did Kundavai Pirati say to their appeal?"

"She consoled them with words to the effect that our men in Lanka will not suffer as long as Commander Bhoothi Vikrama was there to take care of them. They need not worry when Lord Velir was in command."

"Aha! Did the Younger Pirati say such words? There have been many noble women born in various noble families of this world; but, there is none to equal our Younger Pirati!"

"There is another we could mention, Sir."

"Who is that, Thambi?"

"Lady Vanathi Devi of Kodumbalur."

"Ah! This young man is very ingenious. His creativity will seduce even me. Thambi, did you see the light of our clan at Pazlayarai?"

"I met her Sir. How could I not see her when she is the constant companion of the Younger Pirati? They came to the Doctor's house, riding on an elephant. The Younger Pirati and Lady Vanathi are never separated -- like the light from a lamp, fragrance from flowers, shadow of a figure..."

"Really! This young man is very smart. Thirumalai, before you leave, take him to our treasury and give him all the clothes and ornaments he likes."

"Sir. I have no wish for clothes or ornaments now. I'll accept them on my return journey when my assignment is

completed." Vandiya Devan bowed to the Commander in thanks.

"Thambi, did the Princess send any message for me about the darling of my clan, about Vanathi?"

"Commander, I do not wish to utter lies in your presence."

"Never speak falsehood anywhere to anyone."

"I beg to be excused in that matter as far as this fanatic Mr. Nambi is concerned. If I tell him the truth my head will split into smithereens!" said Vandiya Devan.

"Fine, fine! So? The Younger Pirati did not send any message for me!" The Commander seemed slightly disappointed.

"She did not send a message for you. But..."

"But, what?"

"She has sent a message to the concerned person. She has ordered me to personally deliver some messages about Lady Vanathi to the Prince."

"I have never met a youngster as intelligent as you!" With these words the Elder Lord of Kodumbalur heartily embraced Vandiya Devan. He then said, "Well, don't waste time anymore. You must leave as soon as possible."

Vandiya Devan asked a little hesitantly, "Sir, does this Vaishnava gentleman have to accompany me? Can I not leave without him?"

"Why do you object to him coming with you?"

"I have no objection. This sword by my waist is a fanatic Saiva sword. For some days now, it has been begging for Vaishnava blood. It might emerge from my scabbard without my control and his lot may become difficult. I am concerned about that!" Vandiya Devan replied in an obscure fashion expressing his dissatisfaction about the arrangement.

"Then leave this bloodthirsty sword here; take some other sword from our armory. You may not be able to find Prince Arulmozli if Thirumalai does not come with you. No one knows the whereabouts of the Prince. Moreover, he is also carrying an important letter for the Prince. It is better that you both journey together. Don't you both indulge in petty quarrels with each other on the way and spoil the mission." The Commander appeared quite firm.

After saying this, Lord Velir led Vandiya Devan aside and whispered these words in his ear, "Thambi, this fellow will not hinder your mission. But, be careful; find out what message he delivers to the Prince and come back and tell me."

In the beginning Vandiya Devan was concerned that Azlvar-adiyan was being sent to keep an eye on him. Now, the roles were reversed; he was going to keep an eye on that cunning Vaishnava spy. Vandiya Devan preferred this situation.

Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan Nambi left by nightfall with an escort of two footmen. For two days, they journeyed eastward. For a while the landscape was populated with townships and villages. To a certain extent, people seemed to be moving about on their normal tasks. Soon, the terrain changed to encroaching forest with short trees and shrubs. Later, the jungle grew thick with tall trees reaching sky high; small lakes could be seen in enclosed clearings. Such lakes and tanks were often ruined with broken dikes and banks. Water had wastefully escaped through ruined channels and lakes were dry. Farmlands lay fallow. In one large open meadow, water stagnated for a depth of few inches. Apparently, water from River Palavi had flooded the area because of ruined banks and wasted the land as well as water. They saw all such sights as they walked.

Azlvar-adiyan repeatedly pointed out the havoc and ruin caused by long time war in those beautiful and fertile lands. He spoke constantly of the evils of war. He and Vandiya Devan argued constantly about this topic. After two days, the journey changed direction. They now bent their steps southward. Forests became even more dense. Plains turned into rocky, hilly land. In the distance they could see tall mountain ranges. Forests began to appear dangerous as birdsounds mingled with frightening noises of unknown beasts. They were talking about the wild beasts and the danger from them in those areas. Thirumalai said that jackals, panthers, tigers, cheetahs, bears, elephants and other such wild animals could be found in that forest.

Vandiya Devan asked, "Isn't it dangerous if a pack of jackals come at us?" He remembered that horrible nightmare he had in Kadamboor.

"The howl of a single jackal is more dangerous than a pack of jackals."

"How can that be, Sir?"

"Cheetah and jackal hunt together in these forests. The cheetah hides in shadows while the jackal scouts for prey in the open. If it sees a living prey -- a deer, or even a human being -- it sets up a long howl. The cheetah pounces swiftly and kills the prey. A jackal which scouts for the cheetah in this fashion is often called as 'Ori' the spy."

While they talked in this fashion and walked, they could hear a roaring sound, like sea waves, in the distance. Vandiya Devan asked, "Have we not come far from the sea? What is that noise?"

"Some lake or reservoir must be close by. An elephant herd must be coming to drink water..." Nambi was explaining.

"Oh Dear Lord! What if we are caught in the midst of that elephant herd?"

"There is nothing to worry about that. Elephants coming in a large herd will not harm us. If we stand aside, they will go their way without even glancing at us." Azlvar-adiyan and the others had stopped under a tree. A footman quickly climbed the towering forest tree and looked out. He cried out as he hastily scrambled down, "Sir, Sir! It is a single elephant. A rogue! It is pulling out trees and breaking branches and coming this way."

"Oh! What a complication! How are we to escape this?" Thirumalai looked about here and there in fear.

Vandiya Devan asked, "You said that there was nothing to fear about a herd of wild elephants. Now you are afraid of a single elephant -- why Sir?"

"My Dear Man! A single rogue elephant is like a thousand wild elephants. No one can withstand its fury."

"We three men have spears and swords. You have your staff!"

"A thousand spears can do nothing to a rogue elephant. There, look at that steep rockface. If we climb onto that ledge we may be able to escape. Come, let us run and try."

Azlvar-adiyan was already running towards that rocky hillock. Others followed. After they had run a few yards, they realized that a deep canyon crossed their path. They ran up to stand on the edge of that steep ravine. The elephant seemed to be approaching closer. When that huge beast lifted its long trunk and trumpeted, the thundering roar reverberated from all sides. On hearing its screaming roar, all four men began to run helter-skelter in all directions.

The elephant had come closer; it came even closer and closer. It seemed to be aiming for Azlvar-adiyan and going towards the spot he stood. If he took two steps backwards, Azlvar-adiyan would fall into that deep ravine. Bushes and shrubs obstructed and prevented escape on the sides. Anyway, how could he run and escape a rogue elephant?

Vandiya Devan raised his spear and took aim. He felt that even thunderbolts from heaven could not stop that beast in that moment. His hand, lifting the spear, felt weak. Azlvar-adiyan's actions at that time provoked laughter on one side.

Azlvar-adiyan was waving his wooden staff and shouting at the rogue elephant, "Stop, stop! Stop right there! You are ruined if you come closer! I shall kill you and bury you alive. Take care! Stop right now!"

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 28 --Royal Way

How could a rogue elephant be stopped by the threats of Azlvar-adiyan's staff and passionate words? It lifted its trunk high above the head and trampled the bushes and creepers on its path as it came closer. There was no doubt that in one second, Azlvar-adiyan's life-story would come to an end. The two footmen stood rooted to their spot as they shouted "Hey" "Hey". Vandiya Devan lifted his spear once again thinking of making one last effort. In that same instant, Azlvar-adiyan threw his wooden staff at that elephant. The next moment, Azlvar-adiyan vanished. His head scarf flew into the breeze and was caught by a tree branch. Before they could worry about Azlvar-adiyan's plight, an important thing occurred in that forest.

The elephant stepped closer to the spot where Azlvar-adiyan had vanished; suddenly, the beast bent its forelegs, as if it was kneeling down -- and toppled forward! A deafening roar was echoing from all directions of that forest ravine. In one second, that mountain-like elephant also disappeared. As its huge body rolled down and down that ravine, the rogue elephant raised a cloud of dust caused by dislodged rocks and stones.

Vandiya Devan needed a few minutes to understand what had happened. There was that deep canyon -- the ravine just behind Azlvar-adiyan; in the force of throwing his staff the man had fallen into it! The rogue elephant rushing towards the man had stepped into the gaping hole with its forelegs. It had tried to balance itself; but, its heavy body became its own enemy. The elephant also had fallen into the depths. Rogue elephant and roguish Azlvar-adiyan had met their maker in the very same instant!

A shiver ran through Vandiya Devan's body when he realized these facts. His heart felt heavy with a sadness. During this journey, he had forgotten all his suspicions about that faithful Vaishnava devotee; in fact Vandiya Devan felt a certain affection and respect towards him. "Is this his fate?" Vandiya Devan wondered how he could finish this hazardous journey without the help of Azlvar-adiyan; how could he finish his mission successfully?

Vandiya Devan stepped closer to the edge which had swallowed both man and beast and peered down. For a while everything was covered by a dust-cloud and nothing could be seen. Dust settled slowly and the path cleaved by the falling elephant could be discerned because of the trampled bushes and dislodged rocks.

"Why Thambi? What are you gawking at? Can't you lend a helping hand?" Vandiya Devan jumped back on hearing this voice. In his astonishment, he almost fell into the hole. Azlvar-adiyan was holding the root of a tree that grew on a rocky outgrowth just a foot away from the path cleared by the elephant and swinging.

Vandiya Devan was filled with delight and laughter. "Oh ho ho! Sir! You have given salvation to that King Elephant but have stayed back in this heaven of Trisanku!" (Trisanku's heaven was a mythical, impromptu world created between the worlds of the Gods and mortals.) Vandiya Devan clapped his hands and beckoned the two footmen.

They made a rope by binding their waist-cloths and lowered it down the ravine. Both footmen held one end while Vandiya Devan persuaded Mr. Nambi to let go of the tree root and hold the other end. Then, all three of them pulled with all their strength and with much effort lifted stocky Mr. Azlvar-adiyan out of that deep canyon. Azlvar-adiyan stretched out on the forest floor, heaving deep sighs and gasping loud breaths. The other three men surrounded him, comforting him and fanning him with their waist-bands.

Very soon, Azlvar-adiyan sat up and said, "Come on! Get ready! We must somehow reach the Royal Way before nightfall. Where is my scarf? Where is my stick?"

"There is no hurry. Rest a little longer, we can leave after you feel better," said Vandiya Devan. They heard the howl of a jackal. Another jackal replied with equal melody from the opposite direction. A hundred wolves and jackals seemed to join the chorus. Sounds of movement from the high ground of the forest towards the depths of the ravine could now be heard. Vultures and eagles began flying circles above the depths.

"An elephant's death is not an ordinary incident. Carnivorous beasts and birds from all the surrounding area will gather to feast on its dead body. We might become their side dishes! Hurry!" said Azlvar-adiyan. None opposed him now.

The four men walked down that forest path as quickly as they could. A little after dusk, they reached the Royal Way. The highway was busy with people and vehicles coming and going in both directions. Vandiya Devan was impressed by men riding calmly on ponderous elephants. It was a similar beast that had created such havoc in the forest! He asked, "Where is this highway coming from? Where is it going? Where are we now? Which way are we to go?"

"We have come to the Royal Way that connects Anuradapura and Simhagiri. Dampallae is less than half a league away. We can reach it by night," said Azlvar-adiyan.

"We could have come comfortably by this Royal Way! Why did we take the forest path?"

"If we had taken the highway from the coast, we would have been stopped and questioned in a hundred places. We would have been completely stopped in Anuradapura. I have found out that the person we have come in search of

has gone towards Simhagiri. That is why I took this forest path. Even now I am not sure if we can meet him. I hope he has not gone away somewhere else!"

They walked along that Royal Way. Several houses, blacksmithies and even villages were found on both sides of this road. People living in those wayside villages and working in those shops appeared to be Singhalese. Tamil soldiers went up and down the highway. People living in the communities on both sides continued with their chores without any fear.

"Who has control over these parts, now?" asked Vandiya Devan.

Chozla armies have captured all areas up to Dampallae. Beyond that, Simhagiri mountains and fortress are under Mahinda."

"These civilians in these areas?"

"They are mostly Singhalese of Lanka. Since the arrival of Ponniiyin Selvan, the very nature of warfare has changed in these parts. Battles are between Mahinda's soldiers and Chozla warriors; fought face to face when they meet in a battlefield. Otherwise, the villagers live peacefully. Buddhist monks are very happy because of this arrangement. Our Prince had given orders to repair and rebuild all the Buddhist Viharas (temples) in Anuradapura. Did you hear that! Why wont those monks be happy? When I meet the Prince, I'll say, 'I don't like your actions one bit!' -- that's what I shall tell him."

"Tell him that without fail! Who is this Prince to do things you dislike!? What divine privilege does he have?" spoke Vandiya Devan with his usual sarcasm.

"Thambi, he has no divine privilege. But, he has some charming power. Whatever complaints they may raise behind him, people are hypnotized when they stand before him; not a single word do they utter. Only one person has that power -- to stand and talk in front of the Prince -- to influence him..."

"Yes, yes Sir! Who in this world is not aware of the prowess of Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi? Who is the Prince compared to our brave warrior who opposed and overcame the rogue elephant single-handed, equipped with a mere wooden staff?"

"You have not understood me, My Friend! How can you compare poor me with Ponniiyin Selvan? I can face rogue elephants with my wooden staff; I can meet tigers and bears with bare hands. But, my courage vanishes somewhere when I stand in front of Ponniiyin Selvan. My voice dies; heart feels empathy and not a single word comes out..." said Azlvar-adiyan.

"Whom did you mean when you talked about the person who could influence him?"

"The whole world knows that; don't you know? I am talking about the Younger Pirati Kundavai. Her word is gospel to him."

"Oh! You are talking about Princess Kundavai of Pazlayarai; I thought you meant Young-Queen Nandini of Pazluvoor."

"Nandini also has an unique power; but, it is of a different type."

"How? What difference?"

"Suppose a man is falling into the pits of hell and perdition; Kundavai will stop him and turn him towards the path of salvation and take him to paradise. That is one kind of power. Do you know what Nandini would do? In a way one could say that her power is even more exceptional. She will declare that the pitfalls of perdition are paradise; she will convince the man and make him jump happily into those pits."

A shiver ran through Vandiya Devan. How well he has estimated Nandini's character and her frightening, enchanting powers. This man has gauged her well. Perhaps his claim that Nandini is his sister, could be true. Vandiya Devan was lost in such thought and had no other questions. They walked for a while in silent thought.

The sounds of galloping horses disturbed their silence. Hoof-beats approached them from the opposite direction. Within a few minutes, four horses came galloping swiftly. Those flying horses raised a cloud of dust that swirled like a mini tornado as they flashed past our foot travelers at lightning speed. Even in that short time, Vandiya Devan recognized one of the men seated on one of those horses.

Aha! That is Parthiban Pallava; confidential friend of Prince Karikala in Kanchi. He does not care too much for me. How and why did he come here to Lanka? Where is he going or coming from?

After the horses had gone past the foot travelers, an imposing voice ordered, "Stop!" The horses stopped noisily and turned around. The man who appeared to be their leader came back, guiding the horse capably. The others followed him. The first horseman was none other than Parthiban, whom we had met earlier at Kanchi. Vandiya Devan's guess was correct.

Parthiban studied Vandiya Devan and said, "What is this Sir? How did you arrive here? They said that you suddenly vanished from Tanjore. I was sure that the noblemen of Pazluvoor would have put an end to your story."

"Can nobles of the Pazluvoor clan finish my story so easily? I belong to the ancient Vaanar clan!"

"Yes; of course. There is none to compare with you when

it comes to saving your own life and somehow escaping ..."

"Sir! I shall save my life when it is necessary to do so. I will readily give up my life when it is needed. If I have to die like that, I shall die by a fair duel with honorable scions of the Pallava clan -- men like you. I won't die at the hands of mere Lords of Pazluvoor." Vandiya Devan's hand was already on the hilt of his sword.

"Chee! You want me to duel with you! In this distant land! I'm not interested, Thambi. I am busy with an urgent commission. What happened to the assignment given to you by the Prince?" asked Parthiban.

"Completed. The letter meant for the Emperor was delivered to the Emperor, personally. I delivered the letter meant for the Younger Pirati also."

"Why did you come here?"

"I had a long time wish to see Lanka. I came here with this Vaishnava as my guide."

"Oh! Have I not seen this man also, somewhere?"

"Yes, honored Sir! You have seen me before. I came to Prince Karikala to enquire if he knew anything about my sister. You were seated by his side at that time," said Azlvar-adiyan.

"Who was that? Your sister?"

"She is now the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor, Lady Nandini Devi."

"Really! If one considers all the evils that have happened in the kingdom because of that poisonous snake, you must be hanged publicly for being her brother."

"My Lord! I have taken a vow that one day I shall die by hanging. On that appointed day, I shall pray that you come and fulfil my holy vow with your own hands..."

"You lout! My hands alone will not suffice to do that task; we need a hundred men for that. Anyway, forget it! Did you hear any news about Prince Arulmozli on your way? Has he come back to Anuradapura?"

"How will we know anything about such matters, My Lord? We came by the forest path. In the jungle, a rogue elephant chased me. You know how I"

"Enough of your story. Who knows? I may fulfil your wish one day and hang you personally." Saying this, Parthiban turned his horse around.

Azlvar-adiyan had been surreptitiously examining the other three horsemen as he was talking to Parthiban Pallava. When all had turned and galloped away, he asked

Vandiya Devan, "Thambi, did you notice those other three men? Did you recognize any of them?" a little anxiously.

"No. I have never seen any of them."

"Of course. You cannot have seen them. I have seen two of them; at midnight near the memorial of Thiru-puram-biyam. They were swearing a horrible oath." Azlvar-adiyan's whole body shivered.

"What was that horrible oath they took?"

"They swore an oath to destroy every rootstock of the Chozla clan..."

"Oh dear!"

"How did they manage to enter this island? Cunning fellows. How did they manage to join company with this rough Pallava Lord?" Azlvar-adiyan became quiet after posing these questions. Vandiya Devan remembered something from Kodi Karai. Two men had departed for Lanka in a hurry a day before his arrival; Poonkuzlali's brother had taken them in his boat. Could those two men be part of these three? What is the connection between them and Parthiban?

All four were nearing Dampallae the holy city of Buddhists.

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Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 29 --The Elephant Driver

About two thousand years ago -- a thousand years before the times of our story -- there was a Singhala King called Vallaham Bahu. In those days also, a Tamil army invaded his island. King Vallaham Bahu escaped from his capital and hid in the mountain caves near the town of Dampallae. Later he regrouped his army and recaptured Anuradapura. He deepened the mountain caves that had given him asylum and built them into a temple. To express thanks to Lord Buddha, he placed several large and small statues of the Enlightened One, (Buddha), in that cave temple. Sculptors carved hundreds of images of Lord Buddha; but, in order to express all their artistic skills they also created myriad statues and scenes of Hindu Gods and mythology in those caves. These astonishing sculptures can still be seen in the caves of modern Dampallae.

When Vandiya Devan entered that holy city, he felt that he had stepped into a new world. Fresh flowers enchanted him with their fragrance; street corners were filled with carts and baskets full of lotus buds and champaka. The devout bought those flowers and carried them in small wicker baskets as they walked towards the temple. Groups of men and women pilgrims filled the streets. Buddhist monks clad in ocher mingled with them. Cries of the

devout, `Sadhu, sadhu; peace, peace!' filled the town.

All this busy activity surprised Vandiya Devan. He looked at Azlvar-adiyan and said, "I thought that we were coming closer to the war-zone. This seems to be Lord Buddha's realm!"

"Yes Friend! This has been a famous Buddhist pilgrim center for more than thousand years," replied Azlvar-adiyan.

"Didn't you say that it is now under control of Chozla armies?"

"Yes; I confirm it once again."

"I don't see any Chozla soldiers!"

"They are outside the town in army camps. That is by orders of the Prince."

"Which Prince?"

"Why? The same Prince we have been looking for! Prince Arulmozli."

"I meant to ask you about that, Mr. Nambi. Parthiban looked for the Prince in this town and was going back saying he isn't here. What is the point in us coming here and looking for him in this town?"

"Will I believe him if that Pallava nobleman declares, `He isn't here'? I will search personally and confirm the truth. Hiranya declared that there is no God called `Hari'; but, did Prahlada believe him?"

"Sir! Mr. Nambi of the devout Vaishnava faith! You were constantly picking quarrels with followers of other faiths in our country. Look at all these Buddhist monks -- how come you are so quiet? Why? Are you fearful of the large numbers of the `enemy' force?"

"Thambi, what is fear? What will it look like?"

"Black, huge and demonish; large as an elephant. Have you never seen it?"

"No." After saying this, Azlvar-adiyan crossed the street to talk to two men who were standing there. They appeared to be Tamils. Azlvar-adiyan talked with them for a while before he came back.

"Mr. Nambi, what did you ask them? Did you ask if Vishnu was greater than Shiva? If you ask anyone in this town, they are likely to reply that Buddha is the greatest! See how huge these statues are?" said Vandiya Devan.

"Thambi didn't you know that I have packed up all my Vaishnava fanaticism and left them in Rameswaram? I have come here on official business."

"What did you say to those men? Did you ask them about Prince Arulmozli?"

"No; I asked them what was the occasion in this town today."

"What did they say?"

"They said that two important pilgrims from China are visiting this town; tonight, there is a special festival in the Buddha Vihara (temple) in their honor. That is why the town is filled with this festive crowd."

"Where are those Chinese pilgrims coming from?"

"They had come here yesterday and gone to Simhagiri. They are returning from Simhagiri and will soon enter this town, said those men."

"Where is Simhagiri?"

"About a league from here and still under the control of the Lankans. We can see it from here by daylight. There is a very strong fortress on top of the Simhagiri hillock; in a cave inside that fort are some astonishing ancient paintings with everlasting colors. The Chinese pilgrims must have gone there to view those paintings. They must have found it very difficult to climb up and down that steep rockface."

After a while Azlvar-adiyan pointed, "Look over there!" A beautifully decorated elephant was coming down the street. Two men were seated in the howdah on top of that elephant. Their features and clothes proclaimed them to be the Chinese pilgrims. An elephant driver was seated on the elephant's neck with an ankush (goad) in his hand. A crowd of people came, surrounding the elephant and raising cheering cries.

"Did you see?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"Yes; I see. Dear Lord! What a huge elephant, shall we see if there is any ravine close by?"

"No need. Let us just stand by this roadside and watch."

They waited by the street as the elephant procession came closer. The elephant went past, followed by the cheering crowd. Vandiya Devan's eyes concentrated on the pilgrims seated on the elephant. He wondered about the devotion of those men who had crossed many seas and many lands to come from their distant homeland on this pilgrimage to the holy cities sacred to Lord Buddha. Perhaps it is justified that they are shown such courtesies in this land. How fantastic that their journey is not harmed in any way even in these times of war! Perhaps Prince Arulmozli arranged for their safety! He is the only one who could have thought of it. But, where is he? Will it be easy to find him in this unfamiliar land? Will my journey this far with this Vaishnava fanatic be wasted?

"Thambi, did you see?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"I did."

"What did you see?"

"I found that the Chinese are flat faced; their clothes are peculiar."

"I am not asking about those pilgrims."

"Then?"

"Did you notice the elephant driver?"

"The elephant driver! I did not notice him."

"Incredible! When that elephant driver glanced at us casually, did you not see his eyes light up?"

"What is that? Were any lamps lit in that elephant drivers's eyes to make them shine?"

"What a useless fellow you are! I am not sure if I should be surprised at your carelessness or be astonished by the intellect of that Younger Pirati who saddled you with such a responsible mission! Forget it and come with me now."

They followed the elephant and the procession behind it. The elephant stopped in front of the Buddha Vihara. The elephant driver whispered something in the elephant's ear and it knelt down with folded forelegs. The pilgrims descended. Buddhist monks stood on the steps and welcomed them with flowers and cheers. Conches were blown; bells sounded; drums reverberated. Chants of 'Strive for the grace of Lord Buddha' 'Strive for the prevalence of Law' 'Strive for the triumph of Order' filled the air. The two pilgrims and the crowd following them, entered the temple caves.

The elephant driver, who had dismounted earlier, led the elephant away. He noticed four men standing towards one side and handed the beast to one of them. He spoke to another man, pointing at Azlvar-adiyan with his finger. Followed by the other two men, he quickly walked down the street and disappeared around the corner. The man to whom the elephant driver had pointed out Azlvar-adiyan crossed the street and approached our friends. He asked softly, "Sir, are you willing to come with me?"

"I've been waiting to do so" said Azlvar-adiyan.

"Can you show me some identification?"

Azlvar-adiyan showed him a Kodumbalur signet ring given by Commander Bhoothi Vikrama. "Fine. Follow me" said the man as he walked down the street. They followed him till they crossed the town and entered a forest trail. They followed the trail for some distance and

reached a wayside pavilion in a clearing by the path. The man said that they may have to wait for some time. He then climbed a tree and kept watch.

"What is all this mystery about? I do not understand," said Vandiya Devan.

"Everything will be clear very soon; be patient," advised Azlvar-adiyan.

Two saddled horses were tied to a post near that pavilion. Vandiya Devan was anxious about there being only two horses. What was the mystery about the elephant driver? Vandiya Devan had glanced at his face for just a second before concentrating on the Chinese pilgrims. He tried to recall the face of that elephant driver but could not remember it.

"Mr. Nambi, who was the elephant driver? Can't you tell me?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Who could it be? Can't you guess?"

"Was he Ponniiyan Selvan?"

"I guess so, because of the twinkle in his eyes."

"Wouldn't others have recognized him, just like you?"

"No. Who would expect the Chozla Prince to go about as an elephant driver for pilgrims from China? Moreover, people in these parts are not familiar with his face."

"You said that the pilgrims were returning from Simhagiri"

"Yes."

"Isn't Simhagiri still under enemy control?"

"Yes."

"So, is the Prince returning after venturing amidst enemies?"

"Why stop at Simhagiri? The Prince had journeyed with these pilgrims up to Mahi-yangana and Samanta-koota, into the heartland of enemy territory."

"Why did he subject himself to such grave danger?"

"He must have been eager to see those towns and the wealth of sculpture and art in those places."

"What an eagerness! What a Prince! How did that astrologer in Kudanthai claim that this reckless Prince would one day become Emperor of the world?"

"Thambi, is that what the Astrologer of Kudanthai said?"

"Do you also believe in him?"

"I have no faith in astrology and never bother with predictions. I know without any support from astrology ..."

Hoof-beats of galloping horses could be heard. The sound was approaching the clearing. The footman who was watching, climbed down quickly and unhitched the two horses. He mounted one, asked Azlvar-adiyan to get on the other horse and said, "In a few minutes, some horses will gallop past this trail. We should follow them."

"What about a mount for me?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"I have orders only to bring him."

"Whose orders?"

"I cannot reveal that."

"I must see the Prince immediately; I have important letters and messages for him."

"I know nothing about that Sir."

Azlvar-adiyan had climbed upon the other horse as he said, "Be patient Thambi. I shall tell the Prince about you and send for you."

"Mr. Nambi, are you not aware of the importance and urgency of the message I am carrying?"

"Give that letter to me; I can deliver it."

"That is impossible!"

"Then be patient; I cannot do anything else."

"Isn't there anything else?"

"Nothing else."

Vandiya Devan boiled with anger. It was clear that the men were about to lead Azlvar-adiyan to the Prince. Lord Kodumbalur had asked him to keep an eye on Azlvar-adiyan when he delivered his message and letter. It cannot be possible with this arrangement.

Some horses came closer and galloped past them; they flashed by with the speed of lightning. When both men on the horses by the pavilion took up the reins of their steeds, preparing to follow, an unexpected incident occurred. Vandiya Devan caught hold of the leg of the man on the horse and shoved it forward with one push. Even before the man fell to the ground with a 'thud' Vandiya Devan had leaped upon that horse and gathered its reins, galloping forward. Azlvar-adiyan followed. The man who had fallen set up a hue and cry as he drew his sword and threw it at Vandiya Devan. But, Vandiya Devan bent his body low, below the horse's belly; the sword flew past him and struck a tree.

Two horses galloped as swift as the wind, following the three horses which had gone ahead. They neither went too close nor pulled back too far. Azlvar-adiyan encouraged, "Good work, Thambi!" But, Vandiya Devan did not reply. He was worried about the consequences of his action. He was even beginning to question himself about why he should get entangled in such complications for the sake of some woman, however special she was. The horses sprinted down that forest trail with the speed of wind and with the speed of thought.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 30 --Fist Fight

Vandiya Devan felt that the horses were going along an endless path. He wondered if Azlvar-adiyan had betrayed him to the enemies. Forest encroached on both sides, filled with heavy darkness. Who knows what danger lurks in this darkness? Panthers, bears, elephants and poisonous snakes, perhaps even enemy soldiers -- who knows? They said that Dampallae was the last outpost occupied by Chozla men; but, where are we going?

Fortunately moonlight showed the way. Moonbeams played hide and seek with the shadows of tall trees around them. The dancing light fell on the trail to reveal shadowy silhouettes of three horses racing ahead. Their galloping hoof-beats never stopped. Suddenly, other sounds encroached. The babble of many human voices; cheerful sounds of dancing and singing. Ah! Light in the midst of a clearing. Torch light showed huge, open-stoves bright with furnace-like fires. Who are these soldiers camping merrily in the middle of this forest? Chozlas? Enemies?

Vandiya Devan had very little time to think about this; he did not notice one of the horses in front stop suddenly and turn around. The horse which turned back came close to Vandiya Devan's horse. The horseman bent sideways and suddenly slugged Vandiya Devan. While Vandiya Devan was unsettled and rattled by the force of that strike, the horseman took hold of his ankle and shoved it over the saddle. Vandiya Devan fell to the ground noisily. His horse trotted ahead a few yards and stopped. By now, the soldier who had unseated him dismounted and came closer. Vandiya Devan was completely disoriented as he tried to get up unsteadily when the man quickly plucked the knife and sword from his waistband and threw it away. This act revived and enraged Vandiya Devan; he jumped up quickly. Making a tight fist with both hands, he landed a heavy punch on the man who had unseated him. That man did not accept the beating quietly. He showed his strength by striking back. A fantastic fist fight between them was the result. They fought like the demons Gatotkacha and Idumban. They wrestled like Arjuna and Shiva disguised as the hunter. They threw themselves at each other like two huge elephants engaged in battle.

Azlvar-adiyan and the other two men had stopped as they watched with surprise. They were looking at this amazing fist fight in the dancing moonlight beneath those quivering trees. Very soon footsteps approached the spot. Some soldiers parted the branches and came closer with lighted torches. They too stood close by, watching the remarkable bout. Soon, a sizeable crowd had formed a circle around the wrestling men.

Finally, Vandiya Devan was thrown down. The victor sat on Vandiya Devan's chest and pinned him down as he loosened his waist-pouch and extracted the roll of sealed letters. Vandiya Devan made an immense effort to stop him but could not succeed. After taking the letter, that man jumped aside towards the torch light. Two soldiers who had noticed his signal had already taken hold of Vandiya Devan, pinning him down to the ground.

With measureless rage and exasperation, Vandiya Devan shouted, "Wretched Nambi! Is this how you betray a friend? Get that letter from him!"

"Dear Man! I am not capable of doing that!" replied Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi.

"Chee! I've never met a coward like you! How foolish of me to trust you as my companion in this journey!"

Azlvar-adiyan dismounted slowly from his horse and walked up to Vandiya Devan; he whispered, "You fool, the letter has reached the person it was addressed to. Why are you babbling uselessly?"

The others had noticed the face of the man who was reading the letter under the torch light. A cheering cry rose from them. "Long life to Ponniyin Selvan" "Victory to the vanquisher of enemy kings" "Long life to our Prince" "Long life to our Chozla Prince." Their cheers filled the forest. Birds nesting on those trees woke noisily and echoed their ecstasy with wingbeats and shrill calls. More men came running to find out the cause for all the commotion.

When the victorious soldier noticed the growing crowd, he looked around and said, "Go back to the camp, all of you. Make arrangements for a feast. I'll come and join you soon." Upon this, the noisy crowd fell silent as a single man and turned back into the clearing.

Vandiya Devan who had been badly beaten was watching all this as he sat on the ground. He was drowning in a sea of astonishment that soothed all his pains. This is Prince Arulmozli Varma! What strength in his fists! How quick he is! No wonder they say that even if you are beaten, be beaten by a champion. He has the charisma and dignity of Arjuna of the epics; strength of a Bhima of the legends. I am not surprised that the whole world is full of praise for him!

Prince Arulmozli came near Vandiya Devan. For a second

he wondered if the Prince was going to display the strength of his fist once again. But he was reassured by the smile on the bright face of the Prince.

"Welcome Friend! Welcome to beautiful Eezlam! You have come so far across seas, to join us brave Tamil soldiers in this island. Are you happy about the chivalrous welcome we have given you? Would you like some more fanfare?" said the Prince with a smile. (Note: Eezlam is the Tamil name for Lanka.)

Vandiya Devan jumped up with a reverent bow, saying, "My Lord, the letter sent by your gracious sister has reached you safely and my duty is done. Now, I do not have any need to safeguard my life. If you wish, let us read the chapter on war for some more time."

"Very well, you can say that easily! You need not bother about safeguarding your life anymore; but, that worry is mine now. Or else, how can I answer my dear sister tomorrow? Dear Sir! This letter that I read just now appears to be written in my sisters own hand. Did she give it to you personally?"

"Yes, My Prince. I had the fortune to receive this letter personally from the hands of the gracious Princess. After that I have journeyed day and night, without stopping anywhere to bring it to you."

"That is obvious, otherwise you could not have come here so quickly. How can I thank you for this unique service you have rendered?" saying this, the Prince heartily embraced Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan of the Vaanar clan. The gallant youth felt that he had reached paradise; all his pains vanished magically.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 31 --Eleyla Singan Play

It was a circular clearing in the middle of the forest where trees encircled a dry pool. About thousand Chozla men had pitched camp in that clearing. Gigantic stew pots filled with rice and beans were bubbling on huge stone-stoves with fiery log-fires. Meat was being cooked in large cauldrons. Cooking smells filled the air and aroused their appetites. The men engaged themselves with song and dance till the food was cooked. Their darling Prince had arrived to join them, here, at this time and their happiness knew no bounds. The Captain of this company of frontier guards had a difficult time in curbing their enthusiasm and inducing some semblance of order among the men. Finally, he persuaded them to form a semi circle and sit in the middle of that clearing.

They had chopped a huge forest tree leaving a seat-like stump of the trunk. Prince Arulmozli came to sit upon this tree-stump throne. He was no longer dressed in the clothes of an elephant driver. Silken cloth graced his waist. A

golden diadem on his curls, pearl necklets, jewelled bracelets and shoulder ornaments proclaimed his royalty. The Captain, Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan sat near him on tree logs. The Eleyla Singan Play organized for his entertainment was about to begin.

About a thousand years ago, Tamil soldiers had captured a large part of Lanka, just like the present days. Eleyla Singan was the leader of the Tamils in those days. Lanka's King, defeated by the Tamils, had gone into hiding in the mountain country. The Lankan King had a son named Dhutta Gamanu who was a very capable warrior. The brave Prince dreamed of the day when he could recapture Lanka after defeating Eleyla Singan. One day, when this Singhalese Prince was a young lad, he was sleeping on his bed curled up, cramped into a ball with folded arms and legs. His mother asked, "My Child, why are you curled up like this? Why don't you stretch your legs and hands as you sleep?" Dhutta Gamanu replied, "Mother, the Tamil soldiers are crowding me on one side; the sea forms a barrier on the other side. What can I do? That is why I am curled up like this." When this lad attained manhood, he collected an army and led his men against Eleyla Singan. His small army was defeated and scattered in no time by the well trained Tamils. Dhutta Gamanu resorted to a cunning plan. He walked into the camp of Eleyla Singan and said, "King! My small legion has been defeated by your huge army. I am the only one left now. You are born in a race of brave men, therefore, I challenge you to come and duel with me; wrestle with me man to man. Whoever wins has full claim on this Lanka; the other can reach the abodes meant for those who meet a brave death."

Eleyla Singan was very impressed by this courage and bravery in young Dhutta Gamanu. He agreed to the wrestling match, ordering that none of his men should intervene or come to either one's aid. The match began; Dhutta Gamanu's men who had scattered came back to watch. They wrestled for a long time: Dhutta Gamanu fought with a passion to regain his homeland while Eleyla Singan was weakened because of compassion for the brave youth; he did not use all his skills in that fight. In the end, Eleyla Singan died. Dhutta Gamanu crowned himself. Later, he raised a memorial for brave Eleyla Singan in the spot where he fell, in praise of his compassion and bravery.

Chozla soldiers presented this unique historical incident in the form of a dance-drama. Dance and song were exceptional. The soldier who acted as Eleyla Singan was so good that the men wondered if he had really fallen dead, when he acted the last scene. The Prince and all others who watched the play cheered loudly with shouts of praise.

While the play was in progress, the Prince turned to Azlvar-adiyan and said, "Thirumalai, the wrestling match between Dhutta Gamanu and Eleyla Singan is depicted in a beautiful fresco of everlasting colors inside the caves of Dampallae. Did you both see those paintings?"

"No, My Lord. I recognized you when we entered the main streets of Dampallae. We had no time to visit the cave temples," replied Azlvar-adiyan.

"One should see those fresco's inside the cave temple without fail. Thirumalai, there are all kinds of beautiful sculptures and paintings in our homeland. But, more astonishing arts are evident in this tiny island," said the Prince.

"My Lord the paintings and sculptures in this country will not vanish anywhere. We can view them anytime later. But, meeting you is not that easy. We were lucky in finding you, because we came into town at the correct time. Lord Parthiban who came here before us, returned saying 'He is not here.' We met him by the highway."

"Yes; the Captain said that my brother's dear friend came looking for me. Could you guess why he came here?"

"I can speak with certainty. Prince Karikala has sent him here to escort you back to Kanchi City."

"How remarkable! You seem to know the reason! Perhaps you also know what was written in the letter brought here so safely by this friend of yours?"

"Your beloved sister has written that you should come back immediately to Pazlayarai. My Lord, when Princess Kundavai wrote that letter and handed it to this brave Vaanar youth in privacy, I was watching them secretly while hidden behind the shutters of that garden gazebo."

Vandiya Devan who was seated behind Azlvar-adiyan pinched that Vaishnava Nambi on his back. Azlvar-adiyan smacked his back and said, "This is a wicked forest; full of bugs that bite at night."

The Prince was speaking with some anger, "Chee! Are you up to your tricks even with my sister? What is this?"

"Only because I watched them, I was convinced to bring him here, safely, to you. Only Lord Buddha knows the trouble I had in leading him safely without letting him become embroiled in any scrapes on the way. I am sure that he would never have reached you if we had taken the road through Anuradapura. He would have duelled with someone on the way and given up his life! That is why I led him through the forest trail; even there he tried to fight a rogue elephant. I killed that wild beast with my wooden staff and brought him here safely."

"Oh! Does it mean that you came to Lanka merely to guide him safely till he reached me?"

"No, My Lord. For my part, I have also brought you an urgent message."

"What message? Tell me quickly."

"Prime Minister Anirudda sends word that he feels it is appropriate for you to remain in Lanka for some more time."

"All three elders send three different messages like this? What am I to do?" asked Prince Arulmozli Varma.

At this point, Vandiya Devan spoke up, "My Prince, please forgive me for interrupting. You must listen to the directive of your sister."

"Why do you say that, Sir?"

"Because, your heart tells you to heed the orders of your sister. Even if you do not care to follow her wishes, I am bound to follow her orders; she asked me to escort you back to Pazlayarai."

"I have been wishing for a brave young companion like you for quite some time!" said the Prince with a delighted smile.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 32 --Killi Valava's Elephant

The cooking was done by the time the play ended. They brought bundles of large lotus leaves and placed one each in front of the soldiers seated in neat rows; stewed rice and gram with a steaming soup of meat and vegetables was served. When the men had begun to eat, the Prince wandered amidst them, enquiring about their welfare... He stopped to ask about this man's health and another man's family. He inquired about their hometowns and names. Men who had been addressed in this fashion were drowned in a sea of joy. Friends by their side congratulated them on their good fortune.

Chozla men held their young Prince in much esteem. This esteem and adoration had grown tenfold in recent times. They knew about their Prince's concerned efforts to arrange for food and supplies from their homeland. Moreover, the Prince mingled freely with common soldiers, interested in their welfare, encouraging their activities. This characteristic increased his popularity and endeared him to his men, who tried to make him tarry longer near them. They gathered courage to ask him some question or other. Many wanted to know "When are we planning to attack Pulastiya City?" The Prince replied to this query in various ways, "What is the point in attacking Pulastiya? Mahinda is in Rohana?" To others he said, "Be patient; let the rainy season pass." Some soldiers expressed their disquiet about being lazy without fighting any war. Others said, "My Lord, you must come and visit us like this at least once in a month. We shall then try to be patient."

After such socializing, the Prince walked to a tent pitched for his exclusive use, a little away from the clearing. He

asked Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan to accompany him.

"Did you notice the enthusiasm of these men? If only Tanjore had cooperated, this whole island would be under our control by now! A good opportunity has been wasted. We can conduct no war during the rainy season in these parts; our men have to remain idle for the next three or four months."

On hearing this, Thirumalai Nambi Azlvar-adiyan said, "My Lord! I am surprised at your being concerned about this. There, in the mainland, grave danger threatens the very foundations of the Chozla Empire! The great Kingdom established by Vijayala, the Empire built by Paranthaka and Sundara Chozla is about to be torn asunder by internal strife."

"Yes, yes. Of Course! You have both come with important information. I am foolishly babbling about my minor worries. Well, now tell me all that you have come to tell me. Let him begin first." Prince Arulmozli pointed towards Vandiya Devan.

Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan began his story. He spoke about everything that he had seen and heard since leaving Kanchi City. He pretended a dislike of speaking about his bravery, his cunning, his cleverness and his daring deeds; but, nevertheless spoke about them expansively. Finally, "Sir, they treat your dear father as if he were a prisoner. Close relatives, high officials and noble clansmen have come together in treacherous conspiracy. Your sister, the Younger Pirati is tortured by much worry because of all this. Therefore, you should leave immediately and come with me to Pazlayarai. Do not tarry even a single moment!" he finished his tale.

Then, Azlvar-adiyan spoke of his experiences. He confirmed everything that Vandiya Devan had mentioned; and in addition spoke about the conspiracy of the assassins who met at midnight near the ruined war memorial of Thiru-puram-biyam. Once again he reiterated the Prime Minister's message that the young Prince should not go home since the situation was dangerous and confusing. "The Prime Minister asks that you should not only avoid going back but that you should refrain from expanding the campaign here in Lanka. He requests that you collect all the army divisions and station them in North Lanka. The Prime Minister feels that the conspirators will soon be out in the open revealing their identities and intentions; at that time, this army in Lanka would be very useful. The Prime Minister also said that I should inform you of this: the Vanniyar Battalion, the Kaikola Battalions and the Vellala Battalions stationed in the Pandiya country at present, are ready to give up their life and soul in your cause."

"Thirumalai, what is your mentor thinking about? Does he consider himself as another master of intrigue like Chanakya of Pataliputra -- a Chanakya of Anbil? Does he suggest that I should feud with my kith and kin?" asked the

Prince with some agitation.

"No, My Lord! Prime Minister Anirudda will never suggest that. But, he feels that those who conspire treason against their chosen monarch, those who contemplate treason against the empire -- such persons should be punished appropriately at the right time. Is it not your duty to help that goal?"

"How can I be responsible? If treason and conspiracy is truly being contemplated, it is the Emperor who has to take appropriate action. How can I venture into this matter without my father's orders?"

Vandiya Devan intervened into their discussion, "My Lord Prince, your father is not free at present. Pazluvoor nobles guard him like a prisoner, allowing none to approach him freely, under strict guard in the palace. Your brother has vowed to not enter Tanjore City! Is it not your responsibility to safeguard the Empire in such circumstances? It is your duty to return to Pazlayarai immediately!"

"Why should the Prince go to Pazlayarai? I cannot understand that!" said Thirumalai Nambi.

The Prince was lost in thought for a while. "Lust for land is vile. Because of a lust for lands and empires, what heinous sins are being committed on this beautiful earth!. Do you know the history of Simhagiri Fort -- which I visited today?"

"I have not heard about it, Sir," said Vandiya Devan.

"Ah! Let me enlighten you! About five hundred years ago Dadhu-sena ruled this island. He had two sons -- Kashyapa and Magalla. Dadhu-sena's commander and Kashyapa conspired together. Kashyapa imprisoned his own father and ascended the throne. Magalla ran away across the sea to Tamil Country. Soon they raised a high wall around Dadhu-sena's prison, entombed him and killed him. Kashyapa who was instrumental of that hideous crime was gripped by a fright that his brother Magalla would come back seeking revenge. Kashyapa came to this Simhagiri and built a fortress on its peak. He lived in the fort, confident that no enemy could capture the stronghold on that pinnacle. He lived in such hiding for eighteen years! Finally, one day, Magalla came back supported by an army of Pandiya men and laid siege against Simhagiri. After all these years, Kashyapa lost his senses. He, who had been hiding in the fort for all these years, emerged with foolish confidence, fought a war and died. In that fort built by that hideous monster, the sinner who killed his own father, there are some beautiful frescos. I saw them today when I went with the Chinese pilgrims. The beauty of those paintings are beyond compare. They were painted several hundred years ago, but even today no colors have faded... they remain fresh ... beautiful ..."

"Sir, can I interrupt with a question?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"Why this hesitation? Ask freely!"

"Isn't Simhagiri still under the control of enemy forces?"

"Yes; I have no intention of starting anything to capture that fort now. It would mean a foolish waste of lives."

"I did not mean that! I am concerned if it was prudent to enter an enemy stronghold at this time. Why did it become expedient that you should go there as the elephant driver of Chinese pilgrims? When I saw you on that elephant's neck, I wasn't sure if I should believe my own eyes! Your signal, the raised eyebrow, cleared my doubt and made me sure. Why do you venture into such dangers?"

"Thirumalai, do you think that my life is so precious? How many brave Tamil men have come to this island and given up their life?"

"They lost their life in war; you sought unnecessary danger!"

"Not unnecessary; there were two reasons. I have had a long time wish to see the frescos of Simhagiri. My wish was fulfilled today ..."

"The other reason ...?"

"The news reached me as soon as Pallava Parthiban landed at Tricone Hill. I did not wish to meet him today, because..."

"Because ...?"

"I had met the Prime Minister who had come to Mattotam. I expected some message from him. If two elders send word, I will have to obey the orders received first."

Now Vandiya Devan was transported with joy, "Say that My Lord, say that! Now, my suit has won!"

"Prince, this fellow tricked you ..." said Azlvar-adiyan.

"He did not trick me. I tricked myself. I saw him push that horseman who was sent to bring you to me. I noticed him riding that horse and following me. I meant to teach him a lesson..."

"And it was a good lesson too! Each lesson was a measure full. Even now my body aches! Is this any way to treat a messenger who brought letters? It is no matter, if only you come back with me to Pazlayarai...."

"Thirumalai, this reminds me of an old childhood poem. There was an ancestor of mine named Perum-killi Valava. He had an incredible elephant in his possession. One of its feet would be in Kanchi and another would be placed on Tanjore. The third leg would be on this Eezlam, while the fourth would be placed firmly upon Uraiyoor.

One leg in Kacchi
One leg on fertile and fabulous Tanchai,
and of the remaining two,
One on Eezlam and another on Kozli
Thus stood that creature,
the elephant of Killi Valava!

What fabulous imagination that poet had! I have seen several herds of thousands of elephants on this island. But how useless? If only I had one single elephant like that imaginary beast of the poet's, I too can be at all places -- Madurai, Kanchi, Pazlayarai and Lanka -- at the same time."

On hearing about the poet's elephant, both Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan fell into uncontrollable laughter.

Thirumalai asked, "You don't have such a fantastic elephant! What will you do?"

"Why this doubt? Have we not agreed that he is coming to Pazlayarai?"

"Be patient, both of you, for a while. Let's go to Anuradapura tomorrow. Anyway, I ought to meet Parthiban over there. I shall decide after hearing what he has to say."

(Note: Tanchai is Tanjore; Kozli is another old name for Uraiyoor, a former capital of the Chozla's.)

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 33 --Message Of The Monolith

Prince Arulmozli Varma, Azlvar-adiyan and Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan left for Anuradapura even before sunrise on the next day. After a short forest path they were soon on the Royal Way. Vandiya Devan was surprised that the Prince had not brought any other footmen or soldiers for his guard.

Vandiya Devan had never felt such joy as he felt on the journey that day. It was an exhilarating experience just riding on that Royal Way, in the early morning light with thick forest trees encroaching on both sides. He was also brimming with pride on accomplishing the task assigned by the young Princess of Pazlayarai. Moreover, his lifelong wish was fulfilled. He had met the darling son of the bounteous Chozla Country. He had met the brave, young Prince whose charm and characteristics were being celebrated all over the land. And what a remarkable, marvelous meeting it was? The anecdotes he had heard about Arulmozli Varma being an unconventional Prince were indeed true.

He had completely unnerved me by suddenly turning the

horse around and attacking me! Perhaps this swiftness is the secret of the success in the campaigns he leads. It must be his strategy to attack the enemy at unexpected moments in unexpected ways. Is that the only reason for his success? How comfortable and easy going he is with his men -- they are completely enslaved by affection! He has attracted the affection and love of the people he has conquered. Who can say that these lands were recently subject to battles... Look at these people walking by freely on these roads... The country folk in these villages on both sides are going about their daily chores without fear or worry. Their faces bear no signs of sorrow or anger. I can even hear the tinkling laughter of women and children. How fantastic! What an incredible man! Vandiya Devan recalled the incident -- Pazluvoor nobles complaining to the Emperor because they were unwilling to supply foodstuffs for the armies in Lanka; because they were enraged that Prince Arulmozli should insist on supplies from the homeland instead of commandeering food supplies from the people of the conquered lands.

He compared Prince Karikala's gruesome style of warfare and this compassionate, law abiding campaign of Prince Arulmozli. He felt ashamed to find fault with Prince Karikala who was his chosen liege lord and master till very recently. Still, he could not refrain from comparing the styles of both Princes whenever he saw the happy faces of people on the road. It would be impossible to find such sights in the lands ravished by Prince Karikala's war campaigns. Sounds of wailing and destruction would fill every direction!

Vandiya Devan was filled with an eagerness to ask of many things, and to talk about various subjects with this unusual Prince. But, how could he start any conversation while riding swiftly on these horses? Even so, he found one opportunity to talk with Arulmozli.

When they had almost reached the outskirts of Anuradapura, Vandiya Devan noticed a huge sculpture of Lord Buddha on the wayside. Since he had seen several such monolithic sculptures everywhere in Lanka, he did not pay any particular attention to it. But, he had to pull in the reins and stop his horse because Arulmozli had suddenly stopped near that statue. Azlvar-adiyan who had gone ahead, also turned back. Arulmozli quietly examined that splendid statue for some time.

"Well! What an exquisite piece of sculpture!" said the Prince.

"I don't see anything particularly exceptional. They have such huge statues everywhere in this country ... I don't know why!" said Vandiya Devan.

Prince Arulmozli smiled, "You speak your mind without hesitation; I am happy about that!"

Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi declared, "Sir, it is only

today that Lord Vallavarayan has espoused to speak the truth."

"Mr. Nambi, it's all a result of the company I keep. Since I met you at Veera-narayana-puram, creativity and imagination danced on my tongue. After meeting this Prince I have begun speaking the truth."

Prince Arulmozli ignored their chatter and concentrated on the sculpture. "In the whole world there are only two perfect forms of sculpture. One is the figure of Nataraja, Dancing Shiva and the other is Buddha."

"I have never seen any huge sculptures of Nataraja like these monolith Buddhas."

"The ancient monarchs of Lanka were great men. The land they ruled is small; but, their vision was big; their devotion was huge. They expressed their devotion by erecting such huge statues of Buddha. In their devotion to the Buddhist faith they built huge stupas (spires, cupolas). I am ashamed to think of the tiny and minuscule Shiva temples and sculpture panels in our country after seeing these lavish viharas (Buddhist temples) huge monolithic statues and towers," said Arulmozli.

He dismounted and walked up to the pedestal of the statue. He examined the carved lotus, bearing Lord Buddha's lotus feet and the fresh lotus buds decorating those feet. A carved water-flask, perhaps filled with sacrament water, was on the pedestal. He touched those feet reverently with both his hands and came back to mount his steed. They walked the horses slowly. Vandiya Devan mumbled to Azlvar-adiyan, "What is this? Is the Prince thinking of becoming a convert to Buddhism?"

Ponniyin Selvan smiled at them, "My devotion to Lord Buddha is not without reason. Those lotus feet of Lord Buddha gave me an important message."

"Oh! I did not hear anything!"

"It was a silent message from the monolith."

"What message? Can we know it?"

"The lotus feet of the Lord announced to me that I should come to the Lion Falls Lake in Anuradapura at midnight tonight," said Prince Arulmozli.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 34 --Anuradapura

They had neared the City of Anuradapura a little before sunset. Vandiya Devan became speechless, lost in a sea of astonishment even as he saw that ancient capital of Lanka from some distance. He had heard several men speak of Anuradapura; from their descriptions he had formed a

certain mental picture of the city. But, that great city was beyond all imagination!

What humongous ramparts that snake around in all directions! One could not even see where the wall turns direction! How many hundreds of towers and cupolas raise their crowns with dignity beyond those walls! Every spire and tower is placed at quite a distance from the other; can so many buildings and mansions be enclosed within one fort? Kanchi, Pazlayarai and Tanjore are nothing compared to this great metropolis! Perhaps Ashoka's Pataliputra or Vikrama's Ujjain or even Karikala's Kaaviri-pattinam may have been comparable to this ancient city. No present day city can compare with this...

As they came closer to the fortress and its gates, the crowds going towards the city increased. Tamils and Singhala's, monks and householders, men and women, boys and girls -- they walked in groups and swarms. All appeared to be a jubilant crowd bent upon a carnival. Some among them noticed our friends the travellers and began pointing and whispering. On seeing this, Ponniiyin Selvan made a sign to his two companions and turned into a lane leading away from the Royal way. He stopped beneath a grove of trees enclosing a man-made hillock.

He looked at his friends and said, "The horses have come a long way. Let them rest awhile. We can go into the city after darkness."

All three dismounted and went to sit on some rocks. "Why are these groups of people going into the city? Is there some festival in the fortress today?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"The biggest and most important among all festivals in this country is being held today," said Prince Arulmozli.

"I thought that a war was going on in Eezlam! Here, everything seems to be one big carnival!" said Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

"Did you not say that the people of Pazlayarai were celebrating Sri Jayanthi Festival?"

"Yes; but, Pazlayarai is in Chozla Country"

"Anuradapura is in Lanka. So what? Sundara Chozla rules the Chozla Nation; his good rule encompasses Lanka also!"

"But, enemies abound in this island country"

"Enemies do exist. Somewhere... What can these people do about that? Battles have to be fought on battlefields. Cities must continue with carnivals. What do you say Thirumalai?"

Thirumalai Nambi Azlvar-adiyan spoke, "Here we have openly declared enemies; there the enemies are hidden, concealed conspirators. The secret adversary is more

dangerous than an opponent in the open. Therefore, my humble suggestion is that this Prince should continue in Lanka conducting campaigns and carnivals."

"Absurd! If concealed enemies are more dangerous than open enemies, our Prince should be there. Brave men should face dangers and meet all obstacles," said Vandiya Devan.

"Bravery does not mean that a person should foolishly get embroiled with traitorous conspirators and assassins. Why don't you -- the bravest among brave -- go there and get involved? Why did you escape to this island?" asked Thirumalai.

"Stop it! Both of you, do not begin bickering." Prince Arulmozli calmed them down.

The three men entered the City of Anuradapura after nightfall. On that festive evening no traveller was denied entry at the gates. All walked in freely with no questions asked. The guards merely stood by the side. Our three friends mingled with the crowds and went in without being remarked.

Crowds filled the streets of the inner city. "Peace! Peace!" the cries filled the skies. Vandiya Devan noticed several mansions and multi-storey buildings in various stages of disrepair and ruin. Here and there, some dilapidated buildings were renovated. He realized that all such renovation and rebuilding must have been due to orders from the Prince. Why was he doing such things? Why is he so partial to these conquered people? These Lankan kings have been quarrelling and fighting Tamils from the mainland for nearly a thousand years. Instead of looting and razing the enemy capital, why is this Prince rebuilding and holding carnivals? There is some mystery about this. What could it be?

A peculiar thought occurred to Vandiya Devan. Yes, yes! it must be so! He has no rights in Chozla homelands. Aditya Karikala is already the declared Crown Prince; Prince Madurandaka has already risen as a challenge to him. Therefore, he perhaps wishes to establish an independent kingdom for his own self in this great island of Lanka. Who knows? His wishes may come true! Remember the Astrologer of Kudanthai! `Prince Arulmozli Varma is like the Pole Star. There is no want for those who trust him!' Vandiya Devan's heart brimmed with happiness upon having joined the company of such a brave Prince.

They came and halted at the front portal of an old mansion with crumbling outer walls and darkened windows. The street was a little away from the main roads and therefore quite deserted. They dismounted and walked towards the door. Prince Arulmozli clapped his hands thrice and as if by magic, a door opened on one side of that mansion in ruins. The building seemed completely uninhabited. Ponniiyin Selvan walked into that darkness. Vandiya Devan looked back and wondered about the horses.

The Prince said, "These horses know their way, come!" He took hold of Vandiya Devan's hand and led him into the building. They walked a few yards down a dark passage. A light glimmered in the distance and soon brightened. Vandiya Devan realized that they were in the innermost courtyards of an ancient palace.

"We have to be a little careful in these rooms. These are the private chambers of Emperor Maha Sena. The Emperor might appear suddenly and try to chase us away!" spoke Prince Arulmozli.

"Who is Maha Sena?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Maha Sena was the Emperor who ruled this Kingdom of Lanka six hundred years ago. He performed various acts of welfare for his people. Therefore, people believe that his spirit still roams the streets of this ancient city. Even now, people tie pieces of cloth to tree branches so that his ghost may not shiver with cold. After him, no one has lived in this palace; they have left it unoccupied."

Servants appeared to help the Prince and his companions. Refreshed after a bath and a simple meal, they went up to the terrace. They could see all around and below; they could not be seen by anyone standing below on the streets. They sat down in that secluded terrace.

Vandiya Devan asked, "Sir, you said that the Monolith Buddha had asked you to go someplace at midnight?"

"We have plenty of time. The moon has just risen. When the moon comes in line with that Daagaba spire we can leave," said Prince Arulmozli. He was pointing towards a large hillock like Daagaba spire. Because such large-domed crypts were raised over the sacred relics - mortal remains such as teeth and pieces of bone -- of Lord Buddha, they were known as Daadhu Garbha's (relic wombs). In the course of time the word became 'Daagaba'.

"Why did they build such huge sepulchers?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"In the beginning they built huge edifices to indicate the greatness of Lord Buddha. Later Kings built even bigger edifices to show off their own greatness," laughed the Prince.

Very soon a roaring sound like the sea in a storm was heard in the distance. Vandiya Devan turned to see a huge multitude of people -- like an endless ocean of men -- moving continuously down the streets. In the midst of that sea of people were hundreds of humongous, whale-like elephants. Like twinkling stars reflecting over dark seas, several lighted torches cast a glow of light. People seemed to number in millions.

"What is this? It seems like an enemy invasion!" said Vandiya Devan with some agitation.

"No, no! This is the biggest festival of Lanka -- The Perahara Carnival."

As the festive procession approached closer and closer, Vandiya Devan's astonishment increased. He had never seen anything like it before.

First came about thirty elephants walking in formation. All were decorated with rich, golden face plates. The elephant in the middle was bigger and more dignified than the rest; its decorations were even richer and it carried a large jewelled-gold casket on its back. A gold canopy protected the casket. Buddhist monks rode upon the other elephants surrounding this central-elephant. The monks held deer-tail whisks with silver handles and fanned the casket. Several men carrying torches, flags and intricately wrought swinging lamps walked amidst these elephants. The golden face-plates of the elephants and their richly embellished decorations as well as the jewelled whisks in the hands of those monks shone like stars in that light. A large dancing crowd followed the elephants. About a hundred people in the midst of that group were costumed in curious fashions as they danced to the tunes of little hand drums. Others were playing on cymbals, blowing on horns and other unfamiliar instruments. It was a frenzied, fantastic dance. The frenzied dance of the Divine-man and Divine-woman of Kadamboor was nothing compared to this. Sometimes the dancers jumped up in swirls, twirling in the air swiftly, two or three times before landing on their frenzied feet. When they swirled in this fashion, their pleated skirts embellished with tassels bunched like balls of flowers, opened and ballooned like colorful umbrellas.

Two eyes were insufficient to view this picturesque sight. At least two thousand eyes were needed! Two thousand ears would be insufficient to hear the music and din raised by the instruments that accompanied the dancers. Two million ears would not suffice! The din raised by the drums, cymbals, horns, wind-pipes, tambourines, deafened the ears.

When this contingent of people had moved ahead another group of thirty elephants followed; richly decorated as before. A beautiful casket reposed on the large elephant in the middle of this formation also. A golden canopy was held over the casket. Monks on surrounding elephants waved their snow-white whisks. Dancers followed this formation of elephants also. The people in this crowd seemed to be costumed in various attires like Hindu Gods of Love, Rathi and Manmatha, like Shiva and his followers. Frenzied dancers surrounded them.

"What is this? How did Lord Shiva appear here?" asked Vandiya Devan with some surprise.

"King Gaja Bahu of Lanka invited Shiva. After that, Lord Shiva has stayed here adamantly!" replied Arulmozli.

"Look at this you fanatic Nambi! Do you now realize who

is the greatest of Gods?" before Vandiya Devan could finish his question, another group of elephants and dancers followed. The dancers behind this formation were masked like eagles with sharp beaks and feathered wings. They too, jumped and swirled in the air as they danced.

"My dear man, did you see. Look at our Lord Vishnu making his presence on his divine vehicle the eagle-Garuda," said Azlvar-adiyan.

Another elephant group followed. The dancers in this formation carried sharp swords and lances in their hands. They danced a frightful war-dance. The swords and spears in their hands clashed with a reverberating sound that kept time to the music being raised around them. After all this, the group of dancers following the last formation of elephants danced with silambu sticks in different poses of the ancient martial art of defence. For some moments their dance was a ferocious rhythm at other times it was a graceful gentle art form.

Prince Arulmozli explained the history and significance of this colorful festival to Vandiya Devan who was captivated by the sights and sounds in the streets below.

There were times when the kings of Lanka and the monarchs of the Tamil countries maintained friendship. Gaja Bahu of Lanka Island and Senguttuvan of the Chera Country were friends. Once, when Chera Senguttuvan celebrated the festival of Kannagi the patroness of chastity, Gaja Bahu was an honored guest. He enjoyed the other festivals being celebrated in the mainland. Later when his friend Senguttuvan visited Lanka, Gaja Bahu held a festival. He held a single carnival in honor of the Tamil deities Shiva, Vishnu, Murugan and Kannagi. When he saw the joy and jubilation expressed by his people during the festivities, he decided to hold such a festival every year. The place of honor, the first place was given to Lord Buddha and the other divinities were made to follow in the festival procession. Since that time the festival has become part of the culture of the Sinhalese people of Lanka and the Perahara Festival is being held every year without interruption.

"But, I did not see any idol or figure of any divinity?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Did you notice the jewelled casket placed on the prominent middle elephant in each group?"

"I did. Did they lock up the deities in each of those golden caskets? Did they not want the Gods to escape and go back home?"

Ponniyin Selvan replied laughingly, "Nothing like that! In the first casket they have safely locked up a tooth of Lord Buddha. It is the priceless treasure revered by every person of the Buddhist faith in this country. They place that holy relic in a beautiful casket and carry it in procession."

"What is inside those other caskets that followed?"

"They could not find any teeth of Shiva, Vishnu, Murugan or Kannagi. Therefore they carry the sacred jewels used to decorate the respective idols in the respective temples."

Vandiya Devan was lost in thought for some time. "Ah! If only Lord Pazlvoor had come to conquer this island instead of you"

At that time the tail end of the procession had turned the street corner; the noisy din of dancers and musical instruments as well as the roaring sounds of the crowd began to die down.

"We have just half an hour left for our appointment. Come let us go!" said Prince Arulmozli. They came down to the street level and began walking in a direction away from the procession. Since everyone was involved with the carnival procession, the streets through which they walked were deserted. Very soon they reached the raised banks of a spreading lake. The lake was brimming with water, gentle waves lapping at the shores. Moonbeams skipped over those soft waves making them threads of molten silver. They climbed down the bank entering a well laid garden; fragrance of champaka flowers assailed their noses; they could see bunches of white flowers dangling like silver bells on short bushes. Man-made hillocks and reflecting pools could be seen here and there. One such elevated pool was carved like the face of a roaring lion: a cascade of water flowed out of its mouth to form another pool. The three men waited beside this pool.

Vandiya Devan recalled the monolith by the wayside near the gates of Anuradapura. The Prince had counted the lotus buds by the feet of the statue -- twelve buds indicating twelve o'clock. They were not flowers but buds indicating night. He remembered the lion spouted flask by the feet -- indication of this Lion Falls Lake. All this is fine! But, why and who has ordered the Prince to come here? I wonder what dangers it may involve? Why did the Prince prevent me from bringing any weapons? Perhaps this is some sort of an rendezvous in some affair of the heart?

Following this thought an agitation rippled through Vandiya Devan's heart. His mind flew across the sea towards Pazlayarai -- Younger Pirati Kundavai and Lady Vanathi appeared in his mind's eye. He tried to glean something by making the Prince talk. "Sir, this place seems like some private garden of some old palace."

Arulmozli said, "Yes, this was a palace garden. King Dhutta Gamanu's palace was beside this garden a thousand years ago. Look over there you can see the indestructible ruins of that old palace."

Vandiya Devan looked at those terraces in ruins and said, "Those could have been courtyards where princesses danced. Those beauties might have enjoyed water games in these very pools!"

"There is another astonishing story about this garden. It happened a thousand years ago. Dhutta Gamanu's son Saali was walking in these gardens one afternoon. He saw a girl fetching water from these pools in a pot and watering the flowering plants. He fell in love with her. He found that she was a low-caste woman and that her name was Ashokamaala. He insisted upon marrying her in spite of her lowly social position. 'Then you cannot ascend the throne!' roared the father. 'I do not care for the throne; I love Ashokamaala!' insisted the resolute son. Do you think any other Prince in this world can say a thing like that?" asked Arulmozli Varma.

Vandiya Devan remembered The Ocean Princess who rowed her boat at Kodi Karai. Aha! Is this Prince telling me this story with thoughts of that girl...? How can I raise a comment about Poonkuzlali.... Even as Vandiya Devan pondered about it, an astonishing thing happened. The wall behind the cascade from the roaring Lion's mouth was carved into a cave with a ledge for seating two persons. A light appeared suddenly in that cave. A hand holding the lamp appeared first; then the austere face of a Buddhist monk appeared.

Vandiya Devan stood openmouthed as he watched this magical display. He held his breath wondering what could happen after that.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 35 -- Lanka's Throne

The Monk looked around here and there for a minute, in the light of the lamp he held. Perhaps he recognized the Prince and his companions standing by the shore. The lamp and its light disappeared and very soon they could see the Monk coming up the steps of the lake. He came and stood in front of the Prince and examined his face.

"Beloved of the Gods, welcome! Welcome! The Vaithulya Confederation of Monks awaits you. Our Great Abbot Maha-thero is also present. My heart is overjoyed and thankful that you have come at the appointed hour."

"Sire, I know that as a youngster I have several faults in me. Even so, I have been observing the code that I shall never fail my given word or promise. I have not failed in the observance of this code."

"You had not arrived till sunset. I was somewhat concerned because of that!"

"If I had entered the City before sunset, I may not have been able to keep my promise. I have come to the appointment."

"Surely! Cloud groups wander to hide the shining light of

the sky; we know that. But, all those clouds are scattered by the gentle breeze that is Lord Buddha's mercy. Who are these men standing here? Do you know them well? Are they completely trustworthy? Will they be bound by the pledge?" asked the Monk.

"Sire, I trust these two friends of mine as I trust my own two hands. Even so, if you do not like it, I am willing to leave them here and come with you, alone," said Arulmozli.

"Oh no! I am not ready to accept that great a responsibility. I am taking you to a very safe and secure place. But, we have to go a long way and who knows what danger lurks behind what pillar? They must surely accompany you."

Vandiya Devan was puzzled by this conversation. He was very pleased about the Prince having such complete trust in a stranger like him and about his being included in an obviously secret mission of some sort. What was the important, secret event that was about to take place that night? The thought was disturbing.

The Monk went ahead leading the way as they followed. They went down the steps and entered the cave behind the cascade. The Monk felt along one wall and did something when a doorway appeared with a good light beyond. The Monk picked up a lamp and after all three men had come in, the entrance was closed. They could faintly hear the sound of the waterfall outside. But for the sound, none could imagine that they had been standing beside a waterfall some moments ago.

They walked into a narrow tunnel that twisted and turned for quite some distance; it seemed endless. Their footsteps echoed in sinister sounds. Vandiya Devan wondered if the Prince had been duped into some wicked conspiracy. The passage began to widen and finally ended in a huge vaulted chamber. The meager light cast by the lamp in the Monk's hand revealed only a small part of that huge chamber. But, he could see its several pillars made of marble. Lord Buddha's statues were everywhere: standing Buddhas, reclining Buddhas, meditating Buddhas, blessing Buddhas, laughing Buddhas and praying Buddhas ... countless figures filled every nook and cranny.

They walked through this marble vault and entered another narrow passage. Soon another large chamber -- its pillars were encased in shining copper, glowing ruby red. Even the roof of this chamber was clad in copper; beautiful fresco's adorned the ceiling and walls. More statues of Buddha all around... In this fashion they crossed several more chambers, a chamber made of some unique yellow wood, an ivory chamber, a bejewelled golden chamber. Even though they were walking at a fast pace, Vandiya Devan did not fail to feel the textures of pillars and walls in all these rooms. He was surprised that the Prince did not cast a second glance at any of these wonders but was walking straight ahead. Finally they reached an austere, unembellished granite chamber which presented quite an

unusual spectacle.

Not a single human being had been found in all the previous rooms which had been crammed with Buddha statues. But, this granite room was filled with monks of serene countenance and shining face. Their Great Abbot Maha-thero was seated on a dais before them. A jewelled, golden throne was before him. On a table beside the throne reposed a tray with a pearl-crown, a shining sword and jewelled mace. Lights shone from all corners of this chamber. The throne, crown, mace and sword sparkled in that light. When Prince Arulmozli and his companions entered this assembly, the monks stood up and raised these slogans, "May Buddha prevail! May the Law prevail! May the Order prevail!"

The Prince walked upto the Abbot and bowed respectfully. The Abbot pointed to an ordinary seat by his side and asked the Prince to be seated.

"Revered Sire, I beg that you who are elder to me in years and in virtue be seated before me," said Arulmozli. When the Great Abbot was seated, Arulmozli also sat down on the seat pointed to him.

"Great Prince who is Beloved of the Gods, this Great Congregation of Buddhists is happy to have your presence amongst them. You agreed to all our conditions and have come here after much effort. No other proof is needed to show that Lord Buddha has absolute mercy for you." The Abbot spoke these words in the Paali language and the Monk who had been the guide interpreted in Tamil. All the monks in the congregation endorsed with cheers of "Peace! Peace!" and showed their happiness.

Abbot Maha-thero continued to speak: "We are always obligated to Barata Varsha (India) which has given us our Buddhist faith. But, since ancient times, the Chozlas, Cheras, Pandiyas and Kalingas who invaded our land have executed many acts of atrocity on us and our land. They became subject to the curse of the Divine Ones because they destroyed our Buddha Temples, our mansions, monasteries and dwellings. Why cite people from your country... even kings of our own have performed such barbarous deeds. They created a division amongst the Order of our Congregation. They destroyed the temples and monasteries of monks who opposed their villainy; they fed our accomplishments and arts to fire. In this great city which is two leagues long and one league wide, once upon a time half the area was covered with Buddha Viharas (temples). Most of those edifices are in ruin today. Till this day, no scion of a royal house has ordered that these ruined places of worship be restored or rebuilt. It has been the good fortune of Prince Arulmozli to give such an order. This great Order of Buddhists appreciates this gesture of yours O' Beloved of the Gods! ..."

The Prince bowed his head and accepted these good wishes from the Abbot.

"To continue... for many years now, there have been obstacles, and the Perahara Festival could not be held in this city. The Pandiyas had once captured this city about a hundred years ago. At that time, the Lankan monarchs moved to Pulastiya City. Since then Perahara was not held here. In this worthy year you have ordered that the great festival could be held again. You made it convenient to hold the carnival by making arrangements. We of the Order are extremely happy about this ..."

Prince Arulmozli inclined his head once again and said, "Great Sire, if I could be of any other service to the Buddhist Order, kindly command me!"

Abbot Maha-thero smiled, "Yes Prince! This Order of Buddhists is confidently expecting more services from you. But, I have something more to say before that. You may be aware that before his last incarnation as our prophet, Lord Buddha has had several previous incarnations. At one time he was born as Emperor Sibi in this world full of cruelty, to reveal the greatness of Ahimsa (kindness to all living things). To save the life of a small dove, he chopped pieces of flesh from his own chest and placed them on the weighing balance. You men of the Chozla clan claim decent from Emperor Sibi; you even bear the title 'Sembiyan' to remember this ancestor; but, we of the Order did not recognize this claim. We believed that your claims were stories made up by your holy men. Now, -- after witnessing your great and good deeds -- we have to accept that you Chozlas are true decedents of Emperor Sibi. Illusion had made the Chozlas forget the merciful qualities of Buddha. But, that merciful grace has descended upon you. Look...."

He turned to look behind him when some monks carried another monk who was reposing on a plank and brought him to the dais. The reclining monk's body was shivering constantly. His limbs shivered, his head shook, teeth chattered and lips trembled; even the eyebrows above the reddened eyes twitched.

"The thirty and three million divinities we believe in have descended upon this monk. Please listen to what the merciful Gods proclaim!" said the Great Abbot.

The delirious monk uttered some garbled sounds in quick succession; his words were utterly incomprehensible. But, when had stopped, the Abbot spoke, "The Gods bless you. In ancient times Ashoka the Great, who was Beloved of the Gods ruled all of India under one canopy and spread the word of our Lord to all the world. The Gods decree that you shall one day rule a great empire like that. They wish that you too shall spread the word of Buddha to all the world, just like Ashoka of yore. They order that the virtuous deeds performed by Ashoka from his throne in Pataliputra should be begun and accomplished by you from this ancient throne of Anuradapura. Prince, what is your reply to this decree of the Divine Ones?"

"Great Sire, the Divine Ones are all powerful; they dictate

and are capable of getting their intentions fulfilled. But, my humble mind is not able to comprehend their orders for me at this present time," replied the Chozla Prince.

"I can explain!" said the great Abbot as he made a sign; the monks carried the delirious celibate away from the dais.

"Prince, look at this throne before you. Look at the crown and the mace. Every monarch of Lanka was accepted as a lawful ruler by the Monastic Congregations of Lanka only after they were crowned on this throne while holding this mace and sword. This is the throne on which Dhutta Gamanu, Thissa the Beloved of Gods, Maha Sena and other great kings were crowned. This is the jewelled crown that graced their heads; this is the just mace borne by their hands. This ancient throne -- a throne that bore law abiding kings over thousands of years -- this throne awaits you. Are you willing to sit on this throne, wear this crown and wield this mace and sword?"

Vandiya Devan who had been listening with rapt attention became very agitated on hearing these words of Abbot Maha-thero. He wondered about placing the Prince upon that throne that very instant ... however, there was not even a trace of change on Prince Arulmozli's facial expression.

Like before, he spoke very calmly, "Great Sire, how can that be possible? The King who sat on this throne and was crowned with these jewels is still alive; even if we do not know his whereabouts..."

"Prince, the Gods have ordained that the dynasty that rules Lanka has to change. It has to happen. Several great kings have appeared in this dynasty established by Vijaya-raje who came from Bengal where the Ganga flows; they have been upholders of law and order. In later years men of this dynasty committed various heinous deeds and earned the curses of the Divine Ones. Fathers in this dynasty killed their own sons; sons murdered their fathers; brother killed brother; life giving mothers killed their offspring. The Gods declare that this dynasty which has committed such awful deeds is not fit to rule and uphold Buddhist faith and law. The last crowned king has lost his rights to Lanka's throne; neither does he have any children or other decedents. Therefore, the dynasty has to change anyway. When such a dynastic change has to take place, this Congregation of Buddhists has the right to select the first of the new dynasty. We of this great Congregation wish to select you. If you accept, we are ready to crown you this very night."

The most profound silence prevailed in that assembly for some time. Vandiya Devan was completely flustered. Prince Arulmozli rose from his seat and greeted the assembly of monks with folded palms. Vandiya Devan was beyond limits of exhilaration -- he was ready to pick up the crown and place it on the Prince's head with his own hands.

The Prince said, "Great Sires, I bow to you. I appreciate

your magnanimity in presenting this ancient throne to me because of the love and trust you have for me, a mere youngster. But, your orders are beyond my capacity to fulfill. I was born and raised in Chozla country. The food grown in those lands and the water flowing in the rivers of that country nourished this body of mine. I came here to this island in obedience to orders of my father Emperor Sundara Chozla. I cannot do anything without consulting his wishes."

The Abbot interrupted, "Prince, do you not know that these days your father is without any freedom, like a prisoner?"

"Yes; my father is unwell and on a sickbed; he has lost the use of his legs. Even then, I am bound by the orders of those who rule in his name and with his approval. If I accept this throne without their consent, I would be a traitor to my country and my king."

"If you think that, we are ready to send an ambassador to Tanjore. Your father has a fondness for the Buddhist faith. He will not reject our petition."

"What about the people of this land? Who can have the right to distribute their country without their approval?"

"The people of this country will consider it to be the greatest of their good fortunes to have you as their king."

"They may all agree and be happy. In this whole world more than any other opinion, I honor the words and wishes of my elder sister. My mother gave birth to me; River Ponni saved my life; but, my sister nurtured my intellect and opened my mind. But, even more important than her wishes is the command of a voice in my heart. My inner voice does not tell me to accept this exalted fortune that you Sires are bestowing on this youngster. I beg you to forgive me."

A silence reigned in that assembly once again. His own heartbeat sounded very loud to Vandiya Devan.

After a while, the Abbot spoke once again, "Prince, your words do not surprise us; in a way, I expected it. This shows that you more than anyone deserve Lanka's Throne. We, who know the law of righteousness need no further proof; but, we do not wish to force you. We shall give you time. We will send for you in this same fashion after one year. At that time give us your final answer. Remember this: in this ancient Anuradapura, several old Buddhist shrines and monasteries have been reduced to rubble and ruin. Till this day no harm has befallen this Great Bhodi Monastery because it is secreted in the wombs of the earth deep underground. Only these abbots of various Buddhist Congregations who live here know the way to come in here. None except those led by one of us can enter here. Only once in their lifetime, when they are to be crowned by the Great Buddhist Congregation, are the Monarchs of Lanka invited to come here. This is an unique Vihara with such secret entrances. You should not reveal anything

about your coming or going from here or about anything that happened here to anyone else. Do not share this secret even with your friends. If you disobey you will be subject to terrible curses."

"Great Sire! There is no need for curses. I had already pledged to not reveal these secrets to anyone outside before I came here with my friends. I shall never break my given pledge," said Ponniyin Selvan.

After half an hour, Prince Arulmozli, Azlvar-adiyan and Vandiya Devan were once again walking down the moonlit streets of Anuradapura. Vandiya Devan who had kept his mouth tightly shut during all the time inside the monastery, unbound all his chaotic thoughts.

"Of course the Chozla country is very bounteous; but it can never compare with this Lanka. How could you discard the throne of such a jewel of an island which was willingly presented to you? Why this foolishness? On the other hand, what can one say about the judgment of those monks in that monastery? There I was... standing like another pillar right next to you... Why did they not make the offer to me?"

Prince Arulmozli smiled, "Remember, I told you that Dhutta Gamanu's son Saali gave up this Lanka's Throne for the love of Ashokamaala; Did you not hear that?"

"I heard it all! My Lord, which girl has captured your love like that? Which girl prevents you from accepting a throne?"

"Not one -- but, two girls: Truth and Law. I am in love with both these girls. I refused Lanka's Crown because of them."

"Prince, you seem to be a young man; but, you speak like an aged philosopher."

"Who knows about who is the older among us or whose life will end how soon?"

Whilst talking in this fashion, they were walking by an old mansion beside the street. They heard someone clap their hands across the street. A figure stood over there.

"Come with me!" said the Prince as he crossed the street and went towards that figure. The other two followed. When they were halfway across that wide street, a loud rumbling was heard behind them. On looking back, they saw that the facade of the old mansion was crumbling and falling down. If they had not turned to cross the street, the rubble would have fallen and buried them. In one instant three lives were saved. And such special lives too!

How true were the words of Prince Arulmozli who had been saying 'Who among us knows whose life will end how soon?' Vandiya Devan stood in the middle of the street looking at the rubble and wondering, while the other two

had gone ahead. When he turned to join them, he could see the person who stood there, clearly in the moonlight. A doubt, should he believe the sight before his eyes or should he not? How stupid? How can it ever be possible? How could Nandini whom he had seen in her palace at Tanjore have come here to these streets of Anuradapura? Why should she come and stand here in the night like this! In an instant that figure disappeared like magic. Only two men stood by the street.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 36 -- Is Merit Honored?

Vandiya Devan walked quickly towards the spot where 'Nandini' was standing with Prince Arulmozli. Doubts assailed him even as he stepped across -- Is she really Nandini? She is not bejewelled and dressed like the Young-Queen... She looks like an ascetic wearing simple cloth. Her face is very similar to Nandini's; but, there seems to be some difference ... Even before he reached that spot across the street, the woman had moved into the shadows cast by the houses and vanished. Vandiya Devan tried to follow her when the Prince took hold of his hand and stopped him.

"My Lord, who was that woman? She seemed familiar!"

Azlvar-adiyan said, "That woman must surely be the Divine Protectress of the Chozlas! Look at that! If we had not crossed the street, we would have reached the Hallowed Feet of Lord Buddha by now."

They looked at the spot across the street and saw a small hillock of rubble formed by the crumbling facade of the old mansion. The rubble could have easily buried a large elephant -- three tiny men would be nothing...

"Our Godmother appeared at the right time and saved our lives!" said Arulmozli.

"Sir! What did you say? Were you referring to that woman?" asked Vandiya Devan with some surprise.

"What did you think? Why were you trying to follow her?" asked Ponniyin Selvan.

Vandiya Devan said, "Mr. Nambi called her the Divine Protectress of the Chozlas. To me, she seemed like an evil spirit that has come to menace the Chozlas."

"You mean ... Whom did you think she was?"

"Perhaps it was my imagination. I thought she was Lady Nandini, the younger wife married by Lord Pazluvoor. Did you both not think it?"

"I did not see her properly. You must be imagining things; how could the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor come here?"

asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"This gentleman's conjecture is not unwarranted. Eyes cannot lie; I too have seen the surprising facial resemblance sometimes. Come, let us talk as we go," said the Prince.

Instead of walking by the side in the shadows cast by the buildings, the three men began walking down the middle of the street brightened by moonlight. After some time, Azlvar-adiyan asked, "Sir, what did that woman who beckoned you by clapping her hands, say to you?"

"She said that two enemies have come in search of me and that they are waiting for an opportunity to kill me."

Vandiya Devan was shocked, "Wretched fiend! Does she mean us?"

Arulmozli said laughingly, "No, she did not specifically refer to you both. I am not concerned even if it is you. She has said that I have a very strong life. She has saved my life several times before this."

"Sir, I think I know who those enemies are. They are two men who came with Lord Parthiban Pallava, looking for you. Two figures appeared on the terrace of that crumbling mansion; it must have been those men."

"Mr. Nambi! Why did you not say this till now! You both walk ahead, I'll go back and search that building." Vandiya Devan was turning back as he spoke. Prince Arulmozli stopped him once again by taking his hand.

"There is no need for hurry. You can never find them in that old house. We can examine that place later. I suggest that you remain by my side till I order otherwise. Do you understand? Who knows what other danger lurks in the nooks and corners of this crumbling city? Brave Sir, I trusted you and did not bring any other man to be my guard. What shall I do if you desert me like this in the middle of the street?" asked Arulmozli.

Vandiya Devan was touched by these moving words. With a trembling tongue he replied, "Sir, I shall not move from your side even for one moment!"

"And I shall not depart from your side! You guard the Prince and I shall guard you," said Azlvar-adiyan Nambi!

Very soon, the three friends reached the courtyard of Maha Sena's ancient palace. In a large room, three old-fashioned beds had been readied for them. Moonbeams danced through the wide window that took up all of one wall.

"Lanka's emperors and princes and their noble ladies would have slept here in this very palace, perhaps in this very room, several hundred years ago. These moonbeams would have peeped through this very same window even at that time. Now, when these moonbeams see us ordinary

mortals in this chamber, they would be disappointed! What do think of that Sir?" asked Prince Arulmozli as he looked at Vandiya Devan.

"Sir, you may refer to yourself and to this Mr. Nambi in whatever fashion you wish. But, do not refer to me as an ordinary mortal!" said Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

"Forgive me! I had forgotten! Are you not a prince born of the noble Vaanar Clan of Vallam ..."

"Yes Sir! Yes. This Mr. Nambi may die of jealousy if he hears the song composed by the bards in honor of my ancestor."

"It does not matter. Thirumalai is a lover of Tamil poetry. He will not hesitate giving up his very life for the sake of a poem, just like Prince Nandi-varma Pallava of yore. What is that poem? Can you recite it?"

Vandiya Devan recited the following poem with some hesitation.

My canopy, my palanquin,
My armor and my pennant
This my elephant and this my steed
Thus cry those crowned princes.

Laden with liberal gifts
bestowed by Great King Vaanan,
Leave these princes of poetry,
bemoaned by mere monarchs of earth.

Ponniyin Selvan who heard these lines said, "Thirumalai, you are an expert in Tamil literature. What is the meaning of these lines?"

"Sir, you are quizzing me! Anyway, I'll try and explain. Several princes waited in the outer courtyard of Great King Vaanan's palace hoping for a glimpse of the king. They could not get an appointment easily because the bards who were princes in poetry had already entered the court. King Vaanan was pleased with their compositions and he sent them away with lavish gifts. Tasseled canopies, ivory palanquins, jewelled armor, caskets of treasures, elephants and horses were given away as rewards to those poets. The princes who waited in the outer courtyard saw those gifts being carried away by the poets and cried out in jealous rage. 'Oh dear, that is my canopy, that is my palanquin; here goes my elephant and there is your prize horse. Look at those jewels given to these wretched poets!' cried the princes. King Vaanan had given away as gifts those very treasures that had been brought as tribute by those monarchs and princes. Sir, is my interpretation of the poem correct?" asked Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi.

"How can your explanation be wrong? What a fantastic poem! Such subtle imagination; I wonder who was the poet who composed this incredible piece of verse! O' you Prince of the Vaanar Clan, Lord Vandiya Devan of

Vallam, I do not care if the kingdom ruled by your ancestors was big or small. They were great enough to have such a song composed in their honor. Who needs more fame than that? Yes; you who are a scion of that clan are worthy of sleeping in these chambers. Why be satisfied with Maha Sena's bed? If Emperor Dhutta Gamanu's bed could be procured, you deserve that. You are truly worthy of such greatness!"

"Yes sir! I am truly worthy of great homage. But, in these days who honor's merit? Did those monks offer Lanka's crown to me? They merely offered to you who were likely to refuse it. Do you know how angry I was at that time? I felt like taking that crown and placing it on my own head and crowning myself. I kept quiet because this fanatic Mr. Nambi might want a share."

Prince Arulmozli laughed joyously upon hearing this. Vandiya Devan was gladdened by that laughter. He continued in a similar vein of pretended anger, "What is the point in laughing it off? How can that solve anything?"

"Sir, O' Lord Vaanar of Vallam, don't you remember my speaking about Truth and Law? Did they not seem sufficient explanation to you?"

"I already had some doubts about Truth and Law. I now declare that I shall have no traffic with them and shall in no way be partial to them."

"Dear Lord! Why? Why do you declare this? Why are you angry with Truth and Law?"

"I have no anger with them. You said that you were in love with those two girls -- Truth and Law. You said that you gave up this kingdom for their love. Even in my mind will I not consider women who are loved by another."

Ponniyin Selvan laughed uproariously once again, "I have never met a jokester like you."

"Sir, everything is a joke to you; I am burning with anger. If you did not care for the throne of Lanka, you could have looked at me, standing there beside you, and said, 'Give it to him!' Why did you not do that?"

After he had finished laughing, Prince Arulmozli said, "Sir, is it such an easy thing to accept a kingdom? Moreover, it is in no way correct to accept it when awarded by Buddhist monks. It would lead to later complications; religious leaders should stick to religion. If religious leaders interfere in politics it spells doom for the faith as well as the kingdom. Besides, these monks who came forward to offer me the kingdom tonight do not represent all the Buddhist congregations in this country. They are leaders of one group. There are two other equally powerful congregations. If I accept the kingdom from them, I have to rule according to their wishes. The other two congregations will immediately become our enemies."

Azlvar-adiyan asked, "Does the Lord of Vallam now understand the situation here?"

"I understand pretty well. Like the quarrels about the relative greatness of Shiva and Vishnu in the mainland there are quarrels here too!"

"Both of you don't begin your quarrels here. It is very late; I can hear the people coming back from the Perahara celebrations. Let us go to sleep."

"I cannot sleep. Only when I know the identity of that woman who beckoned us across the street, and saved us from an instant grave, will I be able to sleep."

"Even now, I do not know who she is. But, I can tell you everything I know about her; if interested, come closer both of you, and sit beside me."

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 37 -- Goddess Cauvery

Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan rose with eagerness and went to sit besides Prince Arulmozli's bed. The Prince began speaking:

"When I was a young child, I went on a boating trip on the Cauvery with my parents. My sister and brother were also in that boat with us. They talked of various things amongst themselves. I was leaning over the side looking at the swirls of water passing beside the barge, fascinated by the kadamba flowers caught in the eddies. My heart was pained by the sight of those tiny flowers caught helplessly in those relentless swirls of water. I would bend down over the side and try to save those flowers.... when accidentally I fell into the river! Since I fell headfirst, I could not steady myself....

"Even now, I remember my head bumping on the sandy river bed. I remember the swift current carrying me downstream and some distant cries of distress from the boat which had gone far away. I struggled for breath even as I knew that Cauvery was going to carry me away to some distant ocean. I knew that my parents, sister and brother would be inconsolable. Just then, someone lifted me up with their two hands. I was above water in one instant. I was dripping water from everywhere -- my nose, mouth ears and eyes. Even so, I saw the face of the person who had saved me. In those few seconds, that face was embossed in my mind. She seemed familiar; but, I could not recognize her.

"Later, those hands gave me up to someone else. The next minute found me on the boat surrounded by my parents and sister and brother. Their distress, concern, love and affection completely engrossed me. After a while someone raised a question about who had saved my life. They looked everywhere for her. I looked around too; but, could not find that divine face anywhere. I had no answers to the

questions put to me. Finally, they decided that Mother Cauvery herself must have rescued me. They arranged to offer prayers to Goddess Cauvery every year on that day.

"I was not satisfied. Goddess or human -- I wished to see her again. Whenever I went by the river bank, I would look around eagerly hoping for that Goddess to rise from the waters once again. As I grew into boyhood I knew that she must have been a human being. Thus, whenever I had a chance, in every festive crowd, I would eagerly examine every old woman's face. In the course of time I realized that it was not very civilized to stare at faces in that fashion. As years passed, I lost all hopes of ever seeing her again.

"About a year ago, I came here as Commander-in-chief of our Southern Armies. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama had already captured several regions of Lanka; Anuradapura had changed hands several times. It was under control of Mahinda once again. Our men had laid siege of this fort. During the siege, I wished to travel to various parts of Lanka and personally know the land. The Commander sent a detachment of hundred men to accompany me. I went to all the places under our control; every nook and cranny, hill and hillock, field and forest, river and lake was examined by me. I slowly began to understand the nature of this land and its population. You know that there are several smaller islands along the coasts of this Lanka. I went to survey those islands also. In the course of these travels, I and my men had camped in a forest several leagues towards the north of this fort. We were very close to a ford called Elephant Crossing. The seas to the east and the seas to the west of Lanka meet in the form of a very narrow channel at this point. Elephant herds often crossed at this ford while migrating to the northern parts. That is why it was named Elephant Crossing.

"A peculiar incident occurred while we were camped at that spot. A wailing cry would be heard during nighttime near that camp. We could not discern if that cry was a bird-call or a beast or human. An unfathomable sorrow was mingled in that cry. The men on the outskirts of the camp ignored this cry in the beginning. Later, the cry was heard at other places, even within the camp. The men came to report this to me. I ignored their fears, 'Are you afraid of ghosts and goblins? Then go back home and seek the safety of your mother's lap!' They were roused by this statement and became determined to find out the origin of the cries: was it human, animal or spirit? One night, they crept upon the figure raising that cry. When they approached, that figure began to run away. It seemed to be a woman; but, they could never catch her. The cries never stopped -- it was heard every night after that.

"I was not very concerned about it in the beginning. My men talked about nothing but that; some of them were really gripped by an unexplainable fear. I resolved to solve the mystery once for all. The next night, I and a few men began walking towards that cry. A woman emerged from behind the bush. She looked at us for one second and

seemed to stand still with shock. She began running. If all the men followed her we would never be able to catch her. I ordered the men to stop and followed her by myself. She looked back and realized that I was alone; she waited as if welcoming me. I became somewhat frightened and hesitated. A few cautious steps brought me to her side. Moonbeams showed her face clearly. She was smiling; she was the divine Goddess Cauvery! She was the woman who had saved me from the river. I stood staring at her divine face!

"Mother! Who are you? When did you come here? Why? I have been looking for you all these years! If you wished to meet me, you could have come to me directly. Why do you stalk this camp? Why do you wail?' I asked her several questions in this fashion. That gracious lady never said a word in reply. I repeated my questions with no avail. Soon her eyes brimmed with tears that touched my heart. She seemed eager to say something but could not utter the words. Some incoherent sounds rose from her throat; I understood: she was a deaf-mute. I have never felt such sadness in my whole life the likes of which enveloped me at that moment! I did not know what to do. Suddenly, she hugged me and kissed me on my forehead. Her tears fell on my head. In the next minute, she let go of me and began running again. I did not try to follow her. My men surrounded me in the camp with questions. I soothed them, 'She is neither ghost nor goblin; a mere mortal woman. She is mentally deranged because of some sadness in her life. Do not follow her or worry her if she comes here again!'

"On the day after that I wondered many times if I should break camp and move away from that place. But, I gave no orders. I had some lingering hope that she might come again. Night came and I was not disappointed. We heard wailing cries again and I followed her alone, ordering my men to stay back. She waited with a welcoming smile once again. She looked at me for a while, trying to say something. I could not understand.

"She took my hand and led the way. I had no fear in going with her. Her concern for me in clearing that forest path and moving thorny bushes away from my limbs, touched my heart. After a while we neared a simple hut in the middle of that forest. An oil lamp cast a flickering light in that cottage. An old man was lying down in that room. I realized that he was very sick; he shivered as if with unbearable cold. His whole body shook with delirious fever; jaws were locked and eyes were bloodshot. He was babbling something.....

"You might remember, that monk we saw in the underground monastery tonight..? They said that the divinities had descended upon him! He reminded me of that old man who was shivering in that forest cottage. In fact I doubted if the divine Gods had taken hold of the monk or if he was in the grip of a shivering fever. I did not voice my doubts at that time... Why raise doubts about their belief and faith? I gave permission to hold the

Perahara Carnival this year. Perhaps I made a big mistake. What will happen to this ancient city that is barely surviving so many wars if it is attacked by the shivering fever? All the remaining people may be forced to evacuate!"

Prince Arulmozli seemed to be lost in thought. Vandiya Devan waited for a while and then asked impatiently, "Sir! Why worry about this city? What happened in that cottage? Tell us please..."

"Nothing happened in that cottage. Perhaps my Godmother did not wish me to remain there for a long time. She took my hand and dragged me out very soon. Making various signs, she conveyed her thoughts to me. 'Do not tarry in these areas for a long time. If you stay here, this shivering fever is likely to grip you too. Strike camp and move away quickly.' I somehow understood her. I also realized that she had warned me in this fashion because of the love she bore towards me. I took her signs as a warning from the Gods and moved camp that very night. My men were very happy about that; they did not have to hear that horrible wailing anymore...."

(Note: The fever being referred to in this story is likely to be malaria which is endemic to the area. The cause of malaria -- parasite infection spread by mosquitos -- was not understood till recent years. The fever was believed to be contagious and caused by naturally occurring poison gasses or by spirits. Accompanied by chills, shivering, body ache and delirium, it was often fatal.)

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 38 -- Eloquent Pictures

Prince Arulmozli stopped his story suddenly and asked, "Did you hear any footsteps?"

Both friends who had been engrossed in the story replied that they had not heard anything. Azlvar-adiyan who was sitting on the floor said after a little hesitation, "This place seems warmer than before."

"I think I smell some smoke," said Vandiya Devan.

"I hope this place is quite safe?" Azlvar-adiyan voiced his concern.

"Mother Cauvery will come and surely warn us if there is any danger. Don't worry," replied Arulmozli as he continued with the story.

"We broke camp and left that place very quickly. Even then, ten of our men were struck by that shivering fever. Oh! It is a horrible sickness that turns even the bravest man into a coward. Men who face battles and bear war-wounds gladly will loose courage in three days after the fever strikes, blabbering 'let me go home!' I felt that Goddess

Durga, the patroness of our clan must have appeared in the form of that old woman and warned us in time. Anyway, she did not forsake me even after that. She followed me to every place I went. She saved me from several dangers -- mountain pythons, forest beasts, hidden enemies. She would vanish with the same suddenness with which she would appear. Within a few days I learned the art of conversing with her by signs and facial expressions. My mind was soon able to discern the thoughts of her heart. Moreover, I was soon capable of sensing her presence near me even if she was not visible. Even now... Good, why don't you both go back to your beds and pretend sleep? Quick!"

They quickly sought their beds and closed their eyes in pretended sleep. A figure appeared by the moonlit window. She was the same woman who had beckoned from across the street when the mansion had crumbled. A soft hissing sound came from her. Arulmozli got up to stand beside that window. The woman made some signs and the Prince pointed to his two friends sleeping on their beds. She replied in more sign language.

Prince Arulmozli ordered his friends to quickly follow him as he jumped out of the window, to run across the terrace. Soon they were out of that wooden palace, following that old woman silently. After following a tree enclosed trail for some time, they suddenly emerged into a moonlit clearing to be met by an astonishing sight. Several large, dark elephants stood in formation guarding a huge sepulcher and spire in their midst. Vandiya Devan's heart skipped a beat when he saw them. The woman did not hesitate even for one second as she walked towards that elephant herd. "Did you see? Those elephants look so real!" Azlvar-adiyan's whisper replaced shock with amazement.

The sculpture elephants stood close, touching each other; their backs supported the weight of a large domed sepulcher and spire fashioned after the style of Buddhist shrines. Each huge elephant had two long curving tusks. One among those several elephants had lost one of its tusks! She went up to that elephant and moved a large boulder by its feet. Steps appeared in the newly revealed pit; she went down followed by the others. After the steps, a short narrow path and soon into a large vaulted pavilion. Two large, clay lamps cast some light in that chamber.

She trimmed the oil-wick and picked up one of those lamps as she indicated that the Prince alone should follow her. The other two were a bit concerned about this; but, their worries were calmed when they realized that she was merely interested in showing the Prince some pictures drawn on the walls of that chamber. The pictures on those walls seemed to be a series depicting incidents in some story. They were drawn in a style similar to temple frescoes that depict stories of Lord Buddha's life and incarnations. The face of the young girl who was the main character in those pictures resembled the old woman who was holding the oil lamp. Prince Arulmozli easily

understood that she had drawn the story of her life in those pictures.

The drawings showed a young girl standing on the beaches of an island. A man, her father was riding the waves on a catamaran, fishing the deep seas. Next, the girl was walking down a trail; a young man was sitting on a tree; he seemed to be a prince, because of the diadem on his head. A bear tried to climb the tree as the prince looked away. The girl screamed and ran. The bear was now chasing her. The prince jumped down and threw his knife at the bear. Bear and man began wrestling as the girl leaned on a coconut palm and watched. Finally, the bear fell and the Prince came up to the girl to thank her. She merely shed tears in reply. The fisherman who was her father came to explain that she was deaf and mute. The Prince was saddened but he made friends with her. Hand in hand they wandered through the forests of the island. He made a garland of flowers and placed it around her shoulders.

A large sailing ship was anchored near that island. Some men came down to greet the Prince. They insisted that he should go back on the ship. The Prince consoled her and said good bye. He sailed away on that big ship leaving her unhappy and tearful. Her father sensed her sadness and placed her on a boat to take her across the sea. They reached a place with a lighthouse. A family near that lighthouse welcomed father and daughter. Later, they all sat in a bullock cart and journeyed over a long road to reach a large city surrounded by a big fort. In that city the Prince stood on a palace balcony wearing a jewelled crown. Richly dressed noblemen and women stood around him. The girl who saw him like this lost her senses. She ran and ran to soon reach the sea-shore. She climbed the lighthouse tower and jumped into a turbulent sea. The waves cradled her and a man pulled her up into his boat. He thought that she was possessed by ghosts and took her to a priest who could exorcise her. The temple priest tried to cure her with neem leaves and holy ashes.

One day a queen came to worship at that temple. The priest spoke to the queen about that mentally unsound girl. The queen was pregnant and she recognized that just like her, the girl was also expecting a child. She placed the poor Karaiyar girl in her palanquin and took her to the palace. The poor girl lived in the palace garden and was soon delivered of twin babies. The queen came and asked for one of the babies for herself. The poor girl refused. But, later she reconsidered and decided that both babies would be better off if they grew up in the palace. She left both babies and went away at midnight without telling anyone.

For many years she wandered in the forests. Whenever she felt the urge to see her children, she would wander back into the city. She would stand on the river bank, hiding behind the trees to gaze at the King and his family -- his children. Once a child accidentally fell into the river. She saved that child before vanishing into the forest.

All these incidents were depicted very realistically by simple ochre-stick drawings on that wall. Prince Arulmozli had been looking at those pictures with avid interest and astonishment. On reaching the last picture, he signaled and said, "The baby saved from the river was me; you saved me!" The woman embraced Arulmozli and kissed his forehead.

She led him to the farther wall in that pavilion. The pictures on this wall were not about incidents in her life. They depicted various dangers and accidents that might befall the Prince. She warned him with eloquent signs about those dangers.

Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan watched all this even as they stood by one corner in that pavilion. Vandiya Devan compared the woman's face with Lady Nandini's and wondered about it in many ways. Realizing that it was not the appropriate time, he refrained from voicing his doubts.

They emerged from the secret chamber guarded by stone elephants. The woman led them up some steps that climbed to the top of the spire. The three men were astonished by her strength and lack of tiredness. Half way up the tower, Vandiya Devan was tired; but he continued without comment. Finally, upon reaching a walled ledge, they looked around. In the distance, in the middle of the city, they could see a fire burning brightly.

"Oh! Look at Emperor Maha Sena's palace going up in flames!" remarked Prince Arulmozli.

"Is that the place where we were sleeping?"

"Yes."

"Oh! If we had fallen asleep?!"

"Perhaps we would have been fodder to the Lord of Fires!"

"How can you identify from this distance that it is the palace where we were sleeping?"

"The pictures in the chamber spoke to me."

"I did not hear them."

"I am not surprised. Pictures speak in an unique but eloquent language. Only those who know that language can understand."

"What else did the pictures say?"

"They spoke of some family secrets of my clan. They warned me to go away from this Lanka island immediately."

"Long live the eloquence of those pictures! Mr. Nambi, my suit has won." Vandiya Devan was jubilant.

"Sir! the pictures did not stop at that. Did they not warn that as long as you remain in this island, you should not sleep under a roof, tarry under a tree or walk anywhere but in the middle of the street?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"You are correct. How did you know?" asked Arulmozli.

"You know the language of pictures; I am proficient in sign-language. When your Godmother was speaking to you, I was watching her," said Azlvar-adiyan.

"Great! There is very little left of this night. Let us rest for a while at least on this terrace atop this spire. We shall leave after daybreak," said the Prince.

The sharp rays of the warm sun woke up Vandiya Devan from a deep sleep. Apart from the real incidents of the previous night, all kinds of conspirators, arsonists, deaf-mutes, ghosts goblins, bears, monks, crowns and other confusions had plagued his dreams. All dreams faded in the bright sun-light. Confusion and fear flew away.

He realized that Azlvar-adiyan and the Prince had risen early and were ready. He rose quickly and readied himself in a hurry. They came down from the tower and walked down the middle of several streets. Soon, they reached the Mahameha Gardens in the middle of Anuradapura. An ancient, thousand and five hundred year old, holy ficus tree was in that garden. Monks and householders of the faith were going around the tree in circles and worshipping it with fragrant flowers.

Prince Arulmozli bowed in prayer before that sacred tree. "Princes and their kingdoms will vanish in the course of time. But, this tree remains witness that order and sanctity will prevail for ever," he said as he looked around here and there. Towards one corner stood three horses in readiness for a journey. Three men stood holding the three horses.

When the Prince approached them, the men bowed in happy recognition. The Prince spoke to them and beckoned Vandiya Devan, "It was the same Maha Sena's palace where we were sleeping, which burned down last night. These men were worried that we might have been burned in that fire. They are overjoyed to see us!"

Vandiya Devan replied, "It is true that this ancient tree is still alive; but, law and order is long dead!"

"Don't you dare say that! How can law collapse as long as I am alive?" intervened Azlvar-adiyan. They mounted those horses and left Anuradapura by the northern gates. The carnival crowd was still busy in all the streets and gates, so none noticed them.

They soon reached the small town called Mahindala about a league and a half to the north-east of Anuradapura. "Emperor Ashoka's son, Prince Mahinda gave his first sermon about the Buddhist faith in this town after he came to Lanka. What a fortunate prince he was! He did not

venture with armies and swords to conquer new lands. He did not have to hide and wander from assassins."

"Poor chap! That was his misfortune!" joked Vandiya Devan.

"You should never part from me, Sir! With you beside me, even the biggest danger seems petty," said Prince Arulmozli with a laugh.

"And the best of times are likely to turn dangerous!" quipped Azlvar-adiyan.

They were slowly riding along the Royal Way, when they glimpsed a dust cloud in the distance and heard the hoofbeat of several horses galloping towards them. Soon, they could discern a small cavalry riding towards them. The spears held by the horsemen shone brilliantly in that early morning sun. Vandiya Devan warned, "Sir! Draw your sword from its scabbard!"

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 39 -- Here is War!

As soon as Vandiya Devan demanded that he draw his sword, Prince Arulmozli declared, "Here, I have drawn it," as he drew his great sword from its scabbard. Vandiya Devan had already drawn his own sword. They were huge great-swords of immense length and weight. The soldiers who had delivered the horses in Anuradapura's Mahameha Gardens had also given these swords.

The Prince jumped off his horse, "Get thee down! You! I cannot tolerate your highhandedness any more. Let me decide once for all!" Vandiya Devan was shocked by these harsh words. He was not sure if it was jest or jeopardy! But, he dismounted because the Prince was already on the ground.

"Why do you hesitate Sir? Last night, you tried to insult me by saying that my forefathers came to wait in the forecourts of your grandfather! You said my folks were jealous of the bards who carried away their canopies and horses. I cannot tolerate such comments. I must decide once for all before we go any further!" With such words the Prince began to swirl the great-sword with both his hands, as he approached Vandiya Devan.

Yes; it was no ordinary sword. Even the strongest of men need two hands to merely lift those great-swords. Only by holding the hilt with both their hands could anyone swirl or fence with those weapons. The Prince did not appear like a delicate flower nurtured in the comforts of palaces as he lifted and swirled that sword -- he was like Arjuna, Bhima, Aravaan and Abhimanyu, the great heroes of ancient times. He appeared lofty and noble like a true descendent of those famous Chozlas, Vijayala of the many battle-wounds, Raaja-aditya who died on a war-elephant.

Vandiya Devan also lifted his great-sword with both his hands and began to swirl it. He began with some hesitation and confusion, but soon grew more steady. The spirit of a true warrior made him forget that the enemy was the Prince he revered. He stopped wondering about the purpose of this duel. Only the great-sword swirling in his opponent's hands remained in his eyes. All his thoughts were concentrated on defending himself from that sword and on somehow dislodging the sword from the enemy by wounding him. The tempo of the clanging swords began in a slow beat rising to a faster and faster crescendo. Azlvaradiyan could not understand the behavior of Prince Arulmozli for some time.

There must be some purpose to this performance. Perhaps it is a device to stop those who are coming down the road in order to discern their intention before acting accordingly.

Therefore, he lead their horses to block the road and waited by their side holding the reins.

The horse-men on the road came nearer. Azlvaradiyan's concern was cleared by seeing the tiger-flag flying in their midst. They are our men; but, who could it be? The heralds riding ahead answered this by their thundering proclamations:

"The Commander of the Lankan Forces who vanquished Mahinda in Lankan-campaigns; he who took Veerapandiya's head during the Battle of Vaigai, Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, noble Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari arrives! Make way! Make way!"

"The scion of the royal Pallava House, bravest among the braves who took Veerapandiya in the Battle of Vaigai, he who demolished the Vengi forces during the battle of North Pennar, heroic Lord Parthiban Pallava arrives. Make way! Make way!"

About thirty horse-men followed these heralds. In their midst, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama and Parthiban Pallava rode with dignity on two beautiful white horses. An elephant with a saddle on top, walked ponderously behind the cavalry. In the dust cloud at some distance one could faintly discern a contingent of footmen. The horse-men seemed annoyed by the impediment on the road. "Who is that?" "Move!" "Make way!" rose some voices. Soon, soft whispering and exclamations of surprise and amazement went back and forth among them as they came to a slow stop. The soldiers jumped down from their horses and began to form a circle as they stood watching the sword fight on the road. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama and Parthiban also dismounted to come and stand in front of their men. Parthiban seemed quite provoked as he commented to the Commander, "Do you see this? Don't you see that my remarks about the Vallam fellow are true? Utter impertinence! Displaying his foolishness to the Prince! How can we tolerate this quietly?" He was beginning to draw his own sword.

Bhoothi Vikrama held his hand and stopped him. "Be patient, Sir! Let us watch. What beautiful swordplay! It is a long time since we saw anything like this!"

The footmen who had been following, about three hundred men, had come close. They enlarged the circle of men and began to watch with interest. By now, a girl dismounted from the saddle on top of the elephant. She parted a way through the horses and footmen and came to stand in front of the watching circle. It is quite impossible to describe the shock and agitation that filled her face. When the swords flashed hither and thither, her eyes flashed in step with them. When the two men jumped and leaped in the course of the duel, unaware to herself her waist swayed and feet danced. In a while she plucked a long stemmed blue-lily that had been decorating her coiled tresses and began swirling its stem in her hands. The flower in her hand danced to the tune raised by the clanging great-swords. We do not have to reveal the identity of this girl to our readers! She was none other than Poonkuzlali! Surely we have not forgotten!

The swordsmen fought for a while with the Prince taking a stance facing her. Slowly inch by inch they moved in a circle as they stepped this way and that. After a while Vandiya Devan was in a position facing Poonkuzlali. During the fight, with quick glances, Vandiya Devan's eyes had taken in the growing crowd of men. They caught sight of Poonkuzlali! He lost his concentration for one small second in the surprise of seeing her. That one second was enough for Prince Arulmozli. The Prince's sword fell upon Vandiya Devan's sword with a force like the heavenly thunderbolt! The brave Vaanar youth stumbled; his sword slipped from his hands and fell to the ground.

The cheer raised by the surrounding men was like a roaring ocean. Even their loud shouts were drowned by the peeling laughter that broke loose from the young maiden. Vandiya Devan tried to pick up his sword when the Prince ran up to him and heartily embraced him.

"You did not loose to my skillful sword. You fought equally to meet every thrust and parry. But, you lost to the swordplay of a maiden's eyes! There is nothing to be ashamed about that! It can happen to anyone."

Vandiya Devan tried to reply when Commander Bhoothi Vikrama and Parthiban came closer.

"My Lord! I had sent this youth to you. I hope he has not misbehaved. I was somewhat anxious!" said the Commander.

"Yes Sir! I could not tolerate his constant nagging, `You said that there was a war in Lanka! Where is the War? Where is the battle?' I showed him, `Here is war!'" The soldiers set up an even louder cheer on hearing these words of their beloved Prince.

The Commander came to fondly place a hand on Vandiya Devan's shoulder as he said, "Son, it is a long time since I saw such a fantastic sword-fight. You are truly a good companion to this Prince. He often gets these sudden urges to tussle. Is he not a descendent of Emperor Paranthaka who bore the title King of Wrestlers? Those who cannot keep up with his duels cannot remain his longtime friends."

The Prince was beside Parthiban, "Sir, I knew that you had come here in search of me. I was hurrying to meet you. Is my brother well at Kanchi? How is grandfather?"

"Your brother and grandfather have sent important messages for you. I have wasted more than four days in search of you after arriving in Lanka. There is no point in further delay..." even before Parthiban could finish, Arulmozli interrupted him.

"You would not have come personally if it had not been important. Let us not waste time; give me the message."

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama turned towards them, "We cannot discuss anything in the middle of a road amidst all these people. There, I can see a pavilion; let us go there. Fortunately there is no dearth of rest-pavilions, ruined or not, in this Lanka."

They moved towards that slightly ruined rest-pavilion situated a little away from the road.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 40 -- Deliberation

Vandiya Devan was walking beside Azlvar-adiyan and saying, "What is this with the Prince? He started a sudden fist-fight on the other day; and now a sword-duel. At least he could have given some warning! This friendship with the Prince seems to be quite dangerous."

Arulmozli heard these words as he joined them, "Yes Sir, friendship with me is very dangerous. You should have realized it last night itself. If you wish to avoid danger, you should be at least ten leagues away from my presence!"

"My Lord, I did not mean that! I am ready to face any danger by your side, for your cause. But, if these sudden..."

Azlvar-adiyan interrupted, "Could you not understand that Thambi? The Prince used a ruse to identify the approaching men before deciding how to deal with them. Any newcomer would stop and watch a sword-fight in progress."

Prince Arulmozli said, "Thirumalai speaks the truth. But, there is something curious about my personality: any friend of mine is sure to earn the jealousy and enmity of

others. To prevent that, I often pick quarrels with those I choose to be my friends. Only those who do not mind this behavior can remain close to me."

"That's fine with me! From now, I shall not wait for you; I'll begin the duels myself! My Lord, I brought several messages for you; but, I forgot one important missive. I have to give you that message immediately. If you do not wish to listen, please draw your great-sword once again!"

"I am sure that is not necessary! What is the message? I'll hear it."

"There was a girl with a blue lily in her hands, standing in that crowd of men surrounding us. You even mentioned that I had lost to the swordplay of her eyes. Do you know her?"

"No. I did not see her very well. Neither is it my habit to do so."

"Sir, she had sent a message for you. I did not have an opportunity to tell you because, from the moment I met you, we have been busy with wrestling matches and escaping from crumbling mansions. Therefore I could not deliver her message. When I saw her suddenly, I remembered that I had not conveyed her message and I lost my guard; you knocked my sword down.." said Vandiya Devan.

"That is all right. Anyway, who is that girl? Why should she send me messages?"

"Sir, she is Poonkuzlali."

"Beautiful name! I have not heard it before."

"Sir, do you remember the name Ocean Princess?"

"Ocean Princess -- Ocean Princess! I do not remember it; I do not recall ever having met her."

"Please remember it Sir! If you do not recall her name, hear heart will break! You were about to get into your boat to board your ship at Kodi Karai. At that time, a lone girl rowed her boat and came ashore on the beach. You watched her with amazement. She came towards you with a curiosity to find out who you were; you asked the Lighthouse Keeper beside you, 'Who is this maid?' He replied, 'She is my daughter.' And you said, 'Is that so? I thought that she was the Sea King's daughter -- The Ocean Princess!' She has not forgotten your words. I could come to Lanka only because of her help."

"Now that you mention it, I remember that incident vaguely. But, what is the Ocean Princess of Kodi Karai doing here at Anuradapura? Why is she with these men? Perhaps she has come in search of you?"

"No. That is not possible. She has no reason to look for

me. If she has come here in search of someone, it must be in search of you. I have no idea why!" As he said these words, Vandiya Devan turned back to look at Poonkuzlali who was walking besides the Commander. He realized that all her attention was concentrated on the Prince, though she walked with her head bent and eyes cast downward. Every now and then her glance skipped towards Prince Arulmozli. She must be aware that they were talking about her... otherwise she has no reason to walk so bashfully; otherwise that vivacious girl's eyes would wander hither and thither restlessly.

They reached a roofless pavilion whose carved granite pillars stood intact. A few tall trees growing around it gave some shade to that raised pavilion. It had a stone bench of sorts in the middle. Prince Arulmozli, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama and Lord Parthiban went to sit on this seat. Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan stood by their side. Poonkuzlali went to stand on the other side, hiding in the shadows of a pillar. From that spot she could see the Prince and Vandiya Devan clearly. The men surrounded that roofless pavilion and stood in a formation of double rows. The elephant and the horses stood beyond them.

Arulmozli looked at Parthiban and said, "What is the message from my brother and my grandfather? I am eager to hear it."

"Prince, the Chozla Empire is in great danger; you must be aware of it..."

"Yes Sir! The Emperor has been sick for a long time."

"That is not the only risk. Grave peril threatens the Empire. Officers holding important positions have turned traitors. They have begun conspiracies against the Emperor, the Crown Prince and you. They have resolved that the crown is not for your brother but it is for that Madurandaka who masquerades as a devout Saiva dressed in false holy beads. The two Lords of Pazluvoor, Lord Sambuvaraya and his son Kandamaran, Lord Raajali of the double canopy, Lord Mazlava-raya of Mazluvoor and some others like them belong to the core group of conspirators. But, we need not be unduly concerned about their efforts. The Northern Army and the Southern Army are both under our control. Lord Malayaman of Thiru-kovalur and Lord Velir of Kodumbalur are on our side. The conspiracy of enemies can be rendered useless within minutes with the help of our allies and our armies. But, it is not politic to give the enemies too much time. The treachery should be destroyed before it takes root. Your grandfather and your brother have sent me here to escort you back to Kanchi immediately because such a situation has arisen. Your grandfather feels that it is not appropriate for you two brothers to be away from each other at such times; he thinks it is important that you should be together. In addition, let me inform you about the heartfelt wishes of your brother. He has no interest to remain in one place or to rule kingdoms. He is eager to sail across the seas to distant shores and establish the Tiger-flag in those lands

after conquering them. His war-fever has grown ten-fold since Lord Pazluvoor had placed obstacles to his northern campaigns. Therefore, once you arrive in Kanchi, after marching to Tanjore and destroying all those vile conspirators and traitors, after placing you on the Chozla throne and crowning you,"

Prince Arulmozli had been listening to this long message with interest and reverence. Upon hearing the last few words of Parthiban, he covered his ears with his hands and said, "No! Do not utter such alarming words. The Chozla throne and I are far apart."

"I shall not speak of it if you do not like it. It is your brother's will and your wish. It is something to be decided between you two brothers. But, it is important that you are together in the matter of destroying the traitors. You must come to Kanchi immediately. Let us destroy the very roots of the Pazluvoor and Sambuvaraya clans. Let us send Madurandaka the Saiva devotee to the Saiva heavens. After that you and your brother can think about it and do as you wish," said Parthiban Pallava.

"Sir, how can we decide everything? My father -- the Emperor -- Should we not consult his opinion? Perhaps you know that too? Did my brother get any confidential message from my father?"

"Prince, it is important that I speak the truth at this time. There is no use in hiding things. It is impossible to learn your father's wishes at this time. The Emperor is no longer free. He is Lord Pazluvoor's prisoner. None can meet the Emperor without that Lord's permission; none can speak to the Emperor. How can we consult his opinion? Your brother made endless efforts to bring your father to Kanchi. He sent an invitation saying the Emperor should inaugurate the newly built Golden Palace at Kanchi. There has been no reply from the Emperor."

"Everyone knows that my father is not in good health and that he is immobile."

"My Lord, your father is the Emperor of the land; does he have to walk to Kanchi? Does he not have elephants and horses? Are there no carriages and carts? Chariots and palanquins? Thousands of crowned nobility will come forward to carry your father physically to Kanchi. That is no excuse. It is the treachery of the Pazluvoor fellows; Tanjore palace is now a prison fortress. Prince if you wish to save your father's life you should come away immediately to Kanchi."

It was obvious that these words distressed Arulmozli. For the first time, there were signs of worry on his charismatic face. He was lost in thought for some time before he turned towards the Commander.

"Commander, what is your suggestion? Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya who is a confidant and personal friend of my father had been here some days ago. He

suggested that I should remain in Lanka for some time, and you endorsed the idea. You somehow persuaded me even when I asked, 'There is no war here, why should I remain?' The Prime Minister has reiterated the same message through this Mr. Nambi, his messenger. You know the regard I have for my sister Younger Pirati; I will not cross the line drawn by her. I came to Lanka because of her advice. She has sent a letter through this Vaanar nobleman. In a way, my sister's letter confirms Lord Parthiban's message. But, she has written that I should immediately go back to Pazlayarai. My brother has sent word through this gentleman that I should come to Kanchi. What do you think Commander?"

"Prince, till this morning I was of the opinion that you should remain in Lanka. In fact I argued with Lord Parthiban for a long time, last night. In spite of the long discussion, I did not agree with him. But, this morning, that girl who stands there brought some news. On hearing that, I changed my conviction. I now think that you should return to Kanchi as soon as possible." Thus spoke the Commander of Lanka.

Prince Arulmozli now turned his eyes upon Poonkuzlali who was ogling him from behind the pillar. "I have read that Abimanyu was killed by enemies who attacked simultaneously from all directions. It appears that news from all directions will drown me. What news has that girl brought?" he asked.

"Let her say it herself," said Lord Velir the Commander.

Poonkuzlali walked up with hesitant steps to stand before the Prince. Her glance swept all four directions; she stared at the Commander and at Parthiban. She even looked towards Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan who stood on the other side. But, she was unable to look up and speak to the Prince.

"Woman, speak! Quickly!" ordered the Commander.

Poonkuzlali tried to say something, but she could not form the words.

"Aha! The whole world seems to have gone mute!" exclaimed Arulmozli. That was enough: Poonkuzlali looked up to stare at Arulmozli's face for the fraction of a second. By then, her eyes were brimming with tears; she turned away to run into the nearby grove of trees. Every one was looking at this with some surprise!

Vandiya Devan stepped forward to say, "Sir, she has run away like this before; I followed and caught up with her. If permitted, I can go and bring her back."

"Do that. Meanwhile, let the Commander reveal the news she had brought," said Prince Arulmozli.

"My Lord, the news can be given in two statements! The Lords of Pazluvoor have sent two large ships filled with

soldiers to arrest you and take you back. Those ships have come up the mouth of River Thondai and are anchored in a hidden spot!" announced the Commander.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 41 -- "Look Over There"

On hearing the words spoken by Commander Bhoothi Vikrama, Prince Arulmozli smiled. He mumbled to himself, "Finally there appears a solution to the turmoil in my mind."

Lord Parthiban had risen fuming with anger, "What are you saying Commander? Is this true? Why have you not mentioned this to me till this time? Now, I understand why you dragged this foolish girl with us. I ask you once again -- Is it true that the nobles of Pazluvoor have sent ships to arrest the Prince?"

"Yes Sir! If this girl's claims of seeing and hearing it personally are to be believed, it is true."

"Oh! The words of Old Man Malayaman are indeed true. He is the only one who truly understands the Pazluvoor clansmen. Commander, why do you keep quiet even after hearing this awful news? Has it come to such a pass that those petty nobles of Pazluvoor are able to send men to arrest this beloved Prince, -- this scion of Emperor Paranthaka, beloved son of Emperor Sundara Chozla, this prince revered by all the country and nation, beloved of all the Tamil lands, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's blood brother -- this Arulmozli Varma to be taken prisoner? Why deliberate? Let us go with the army to destroy those who came to arrest the Prince, bury them in this island itself! We can then fulfil our plans; let us go -- why hesitate?" Parthiban could not control his emotions.

The Commander looked at him, "Parthiba, I knew that you would become agitated in this fashion; that is why I did not tell you this information brought by the Karaiyar girl. We have to think carefully before we act; there is no point in haste."

"Think carefully! Think about what? Be careful about what? Prince what do you say? Why do we have to deliberate further? Even if you had any reservations till now, there is no reason for delay anymore. We have to destroy every rootstock of Pazluvoor."

Prince Arulmozli spoke very calmly, with no sign of turmoil, "Let us know what the Commander thinks. Sir, what is it that we have to consider carefully?"

"The men who have come to arrest you.... my tongue hesitates to even utter these words.... but, I have to speak them. What can we do if the men have come to arrest you upon orders of the Emperor? Can we oppose them even then?"

Parthiban Pallava laughed loudly on hearing these words, "Fantastic!! Your words!! Is the Emperor in any position to give orders? Hasn't Lord Pazluvoor imprisoned him?"

Vandiya Devan spoke up at this point, "Lord Parthiban speaks the complete truth. I saw it with mine own eyes: the Lords of Pazluvoor keep the Emperor like a prisoner. Without their permission, none can meet the Emperor; none can talk to him. Because I dared to speak a few words, the torment they put me through.... Oh Good Lord! I can still remember the iron grip of Lord Kalanthaka Pazluvoor; my wrist is still painful!" with these words he rubbed his wrists.

"Say it like that Vallavaraya! I misjudged you. Explain it once more to the Prince and this Commander."

"No need. He has already spoken of everything he had to say," said Arulmozli as he turned to Vandiya Devan, "Sir! You mentioned that you would bring back that girl? Let us hear the news she brought from her own lips. She seems somewhat cranky -- soothe her down somehow and bring her back."

"Yes My Lord. I'll bring her back. But, I can never tolerate you being arrested by Lord Pazluvoor's men. It shall never happen as long as I live." Vandiya Devan stepped down from the pavilion.

"Commander, you have not spoken your opinion."

"This is my opinion: You should not meet the men sent by Lord Pazluvoor. Board the ship brought by Parthiban and go away to Kanchi immediately. I shall go to Tanjore and meet the Emperor personally and find out the real situation there...."

"Your going to Tanjore is like thrusting your head in a lion's mouth! You can never return. You will disappear in the underground dungeons. You will not be able to meet the Emperor."

"What are you saying! Who in the Chozla lands is powerful enough to throw me in prison? Which fellow dares to prevent me from meeting the Emperor? Moreover, Prime Minister Anirudda is in Tanjore...."

"The Honorable Brahma-raya is indeed in Tanjore. But, what is the use? Even he is unable to consult with the Emperor. His man, this Mr. Nambi is here. Let us ask him."

The Commander turned towards Azlvar-adiyan, "Oh! I forgot that this man is still here. Thirumalai, why are you quiet? Like the Prince said, have you also become dumb?"

"Sir, the Lord God gave us two ears; only one mouth. `Therefore, use your ears well; limit your speech!' said my master. He has told me to practice this policy particularly

when political affairs are being discussed."

"You follow your master's orders very well. You can talk now, because we ask you to do so. What do you think?"

"About what are you asking, Sir?"

"About this matter we have been discussing. What is the right thing for the Prince? Should he remain in Lanka? Or should he go to Kanchi City?"

"Can I speak what I truly believe? If the Prince permits, I can say it."

Arulmozli, who had been lost in some thought looked at Azlvar-adiyan Nambi, "Speak Mr. Thirumalai, speak freely."

"We should find the strongest and safest prison in this island and place the Prince inside it. We should post the strongest available guard around it."

"What nonsense is this?!?" asked the Commander.

"Is this time for jest?" asked Parthiban Pallava.

"I am not babbling; nor am I joking. I spoke my mind. Last night, the Prince was walking down the streets of Anuradapura -- the facade of a mansion came crumbling down on him. Later, we were sleeping in one place; because of some reason, we left that place and went away. Soon that place went up in flames. Ask the Prince if all this is true."

They turned to look at the Prince, whose expression confirmed Azlvar-adiyan's words.

"Ask him who was the reason for all these accidents. Do you think anyone would dare to burn down a mansion to kill me or Vandiya Devan?"

Parthiban spoke anxiously, "Someone is trying to kill the Prince! This confirms that he should go back with me to Kanchi."

"Never, never! Rather than send the Prince with you, we can hand him over to Lord Pazluvoor!" said Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi.

"You fellow! What did you say?!" Parthiban had begun to draw his sword from his waist.

The Commander held him back, "Thirumalai, why do you say this? Don't you know that Lord Parthiban Pallava is a true friend of the Chozla clan?"

"I am aware of that Sir, I am truly aware of it. But, mere friendship will not suffice."

"Lord Parthiban will give up his life for this friendship. I

know it Thirumalai."

"Maybe so. But let me ask a question; let him answer that. Day before yesterday, when we were near Dampallae, we saw two men in his company. Ask him about those two men. Who were they? Where are they now? Ask him!"

Parthiban was somewhat shocked. He replied a little hesitantly, "I met them near Tricone Hill. They promised to guide me to the Prince. They disappeared suddenly in Anuradapura. Why do you ask Nambi? Do you now anything about them?"

"I know. I know that they are two of the gang that has sworn to destroy the very roots of the Chozlas. I suspect that they tried to kill Prince Arulmozli in Anuradapura last night. Look over there!" Azlvar-adiyan pointed towards a grove of trees.

He pointed to a spot away from the pavilion; amidst the thick growth of trees stood a pretty maid and a youth. They were Poonkuzlali and Vandiya Devan. As they spoke to each other, Vandiya Devan swirled a dagger and threw it. It fell into some bushes -- a sharp `screech' arose.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 42 -- Poonkuzlali's Dagger

Vandiya Devan who left that roofless pavilion in search of Poonkuzlali found her leaning upon a tree in the grove. She seemed to be sobbing softly. He called gently, "Poonkuzlali."

She turned around, startled by the sound. "It's you." She turned her face away.

"Yes, it's me. Why are you angry with me?"

"I am not angry with you."

"Then why this vexed look?"

"I don't like any men-folk."

"Even the Prince?"

She turned to look at him with fire laden eyes, "Yes, more than anyone else, I do not like him."

"What did he do?"

"He did not recognize me, did not look at me."

"He remembers you very well. `Oh, I do remember the Ocean Princess' he said, when I mentioned your name."

"You lie."

"Why don't you ask him yourself?"

"If he remembered me, why didn't he talk to me?"

"He spoke to you; you did not reply. You ran away."

"I didn't mean that kind of speech. If you meet a known person would you not say `hello' and `how are you?' -- you are telling lies. He did not even see me!"

"There is a reason for that Poonkuzlali."

"What is it?"

"These are difficult times for the Prince."

"Who said so?"

"All the astrologers say it. Kudanthai Astrologer mentioned it."

"What did he say to you?"

"Problem after problem will pile upon the Prince for some time. Even those by his side will be faced with distress, said that astrologer. The Prince knows this. That is why he does not want any friends by his side; he does not want his misfortune tainting others."

"Why are you friends with him?"

"Didn't you see? Sometime ago he was duelling with me trying to send me away. Without rhyme or reason he picked a quarrel with me in the middle of the road and started a sword-fight. We stopped fighting only because of your arrival."

"So, you won't leave his side even if he sends you away?"

"Never, I shall never leave his company. I will share all his misfortunes."

"Do you like him that much?"

"Yes; I like him a lot."

"Why do you like him?"

"I have no explanation. When I saw him, I somehow liked him."

"Me too!" said Poonkuzlali. Immediately regretting this frankness, she bit her lip.

"I know that you like the Prince. That is why I came here to take you back to him. Come with me."

"I won't come."

"If you don't, I'll take hold of you by force and drag you to

him."

"Beware of coming near me: look at this knife I have. Beware!" Poonkuzlali showed him the dagger she had hidden in her waistband.

"Stupid girl! Why are you trying to kill me? Is it because I reminded the Prince about you?"

"You lie! You did not tell him anything about me!"

"Oh, forget it! You said that two ships have come to arrest the Prince. Come and tell him about it before you get lost!"

"I have told all the details to the Commander."

"The Prince wants to ask you personally about it."

"I become dumb in his presence."

"The Prince is very fond of mute-women!"

"Chee! How dare you tease me!" Poonkuzlali raised her dagger.

"Does it mean that you won't come?"

"No."

"Fine; I am going back," said Vandiya Devan as he took a step away. He turned back suddenly, once again, plucked the dagger from her hands and threw it away with a swirl.

The dagger swirled and swirled far away to land on a distant bush. A `screech' rose from behind that bush. It was not clear if that was a human voice or if it was bird or beast.

Poonkuzlali who was about to pounce upon Vandiya Devan angrily, now turned towards that bush with some surprise. They looked at each other meaningfully and walked quietly towards that spot. New blood was spilled on the leaves and ground behind that bush. There was neither man nor beast in that place. Neither was Poonkuzlali's dagger anywhere nearby.

"Look at this Poonkuzlali. Do you now realize the truth in my words? Danger plagues the Prince from all sides. No one can say, where or from which direction or when misfortune will strike. I took that knife from you unthinkingly and threw it; and because of that we found that someone had been hiding here. Think for yourself -- why should they be hiding here? Waiting for an opportunity to kill the Prince! Do you remember telling me that two men had come to Kodi Karai a day before me and that your brother had taken them in his boat; you were suspicious of them? Remember that? How can we his friends abandon the Prince at such difficult times?" Vandiya Devan spoke without stopping for breath.

"What can I do if he asks me to go away?"

"We should not leave even if he asks us to go away."

Poonkuzlali thought for some seconds, "Don't we have to find out who was hiding here?"

"That is an impossible task for us. Where can we look for them in this forest? If we delay too much, the Prince might become angry. They might abandon us here and go away. Come with me quietly."

"Alright," agreed Poonkuzlali. Both walked towards the pavilion where the others were seated.

At first, the people in the pavilion questioned them about the incident with the dagger. "Why did you throw the dagger? What was the screeching sound?"

"I thought that some beast -- a fox or a jackal -- was hiding behind that bush. That is why I took her knife and threw it there. There was nothing where we searched," said Vandiya Devan.

"Then forget it. Question this girl," said the Commander.

Poonkuzlali had been staring at the Prince from the minute she had come to the pavilion. Chee! How foolish! Why is my heart beating so quickly? What is that choking my throat? Why are tears filling my eyes? Stupid girl where is all your pluck? Why is your heart, which does not fear the wide ocean waves or thundering storm, fluttering like this? Why do your eyes, which can look into the terrible face of a tiger, cloud like this? Foolish girl do you want to be called cranky once again! Look at the Prince and answer him clearly. What can he do to you. They say he is full of mercy and kindness. what can he do to you an innocent girl....

"Ocean Princess! Do you remember me?" his voice came to her from the depths of the deep sea.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 43 -- "I Am A Culprit"

"Ocean Princess do you remember me?"

What kind of a question is this Ponniyin Selva? Whom are you asking, `Do you remember?' Is it right to ask, `Do you remember,' after we have been together for eons of eons? Or, have you forgotten? For how many days, how many epochs you have come sailing in my boat, with me.... Have you forgotten the pleasure trips we took in my tiny sail-boat across endless seas, across ceaseless white-waves? When sudden storm clouds darkened all directions, we were friends holding each others hands, standing together for a long time -- have you forgotten? When the frightening whirlwind blew, wave-mountains besieged my

boat raising us sky high for one moment and hurling us down to the depths for another minute -- those days of glorious turbulence, when we stood hand in hand, victorious over the sea-lord's fury, have you forgotten them?

Once we went flying, racing across distant space; you reached for the stars and plucked them to make ornaments for my hair-braids, have you forgotten that? You brought the full-moon to me saying, 'look at your golden face in this silver disc', have you forgotten even that? Once you dived into the deepest ocean; I stood by the shore filled with disquiet; you rose with both hands filled with shining pearls and coral beads to make a garland of sea-gems to place around my neck. I cannot forget that, even if you do not remember... Oh King, how can we forget those days when blue-black waters lapped upon the shores of gentle lakes, where flower laden boughs bent low to form bowers that blocked away the midday sun, where upon emerald carpets of grass we sat gazing into each other's faces for months on end.... How could that be forgotten? At that time, thousands of koil's sat upon those branches singing sweet melody to the drone raised by a million bees that buzzed around as countless butterflies danced in happiness.

All this cannot be forgotten easily, not for a thousand births. You asked me, 'Do you remember?' How could you? I remember, I remember very well.... That pathetic girl ached to say all such words; but, her coral red lips merely mumbled, "I remember."

"Ah! You are able to open your mouth and speak, Ocean Princess. There are several beautiful sculptures of heavenly maidens on the pillars of several mansions in this lovely Lanka. I was afraid that you were another such sculpture. Fortunately, you are capable of speaking! Speak some more, I am eager to hear your melodious voice. I understand that you told several things to our Commander. I believe you said that two large ships have come up the estuary of River Thondai to anchor at a hidden spot and those ships are filled with armed men. Is that true Ocean Princess? Did you see those ships with your own eyes?" asked Prince Arulmozli.

"Yes, My Lord, I saw them myself."

"Ah! I am able to hear you much better; my ears are pleased. Good, when you saw the ships you rowed your boat into the narrows. You wished to wait till the ships had gone away, so you went to lie down in a secluded spot in the forest. Some men from the ships came ashore to stop near the place you were sleeping. They began talking; you did not wish to overhear their talk, nonetheless, you could hear them. Did you say all this to the Commander?"

"I told him exactly what happened."

"When you heard their talk, you wished to warn the Commander about it immediately. You left as soon as the

men moved away, hurrying in search of the Commander. How did you come Ocean Princess?"

"I came half way in my boat; then I walked through the forest."

"Where did you intend going?"

"I left thinking that the Commander would be at Mattotam. On the way I heard that he was at Mahindala. I had quite a time trying to meet the Commander! All sorts of men obstructing me!" Poonkuzlali turned to look at Commander Bhoothi Vikrama; her eyes flashed lightning like the thunder storms of summer.

"It is not easy to meet the Commander of Lanka. You would be astonished if you hear of the travails endured by my friend here when he tried to meet the Commander. Anyway, it is good that you did not mind the obstacles, that you were adamant in meeting the Commander and telling him. Poonkuzlali can you repeat what you told the Commander? Once more, for me? You heard them from behind the tree; what did those men speak about?"

"My King, my lips hesitate to speak of such things."

"Be kind to repeat it once again for my sake."

"They talked of having come here to arrest you and take you back."

"Did they speak anything about on whose orders they had come to do such a thing?"

"I could not believe it My Lord. It must be the conspiracy of the Pazlvoor nobles, I think."

"You can express your thoughts later. Ocean Princess, just tell me what they said."

"They said that it was on orders of the Emperor."

"Very Good! Did they attribute any reason for that?"

"They did. They said that you conspired with the Buddhist monks of Lanka and tried to crown yourself as an independent King of Lanka.... I was so angry that I wanted to kill those villains who said such things."

"Good that you did not! Don't you know that there should be no obstacles to the Emperor's messengers? Anyway, do you remember if they spoke of any other important thing?"

"They said that the Commander should not become aware of their mission; if he comes to know he might try to help you escape... They wanted to find out your whereabouts and meet you personally to deliver the orders and take you with them... That is what they said."

"Therefore you left immediately in search of the

Commander! Marvelous! You have really helped me a lot Ocean Princess. Can you wait a little aside. I need to consult with these men about an important thing. But, don't run away too far like before. Don't force me to send the Lord of Vallam after you once again."

She moved away to stand behind a pillar; but she chose a spot from where she could gaze upon the Prince's face! Two fat bees drowned in the honey-pot, struggling for breath. Slowly, they managed to come ashore and enjoy the nectar. Poonkuzlali's eyes were in such a comfortable position now: they drank the nectar of the Prince's charismatic face. Her heart threw tantrums that could not be controlled; it escaped to fill boundless space with ecstasy.

Arulmozli turned to his Commander, "Sir, you are the chieftain of a clan that is friendly with our family for several generations; a close friend of my father; I regard you with the same reverence I accord my father. You too have treated me as your own son. Therefore, you should now help me discharge my duty. Not raise obstacles."

Before the Commander could reply, Arulmozli turned to Parthiban, "Sir, I have a request for you. You are a loyal friend of my dear brother. I consider my brother's directive as divine edict. Thus I am bound to honor your word. I beg of you that you should not place any obstacles to my fulfilling my duty."

The Commander and Parthiban Pallava looked at each other with meaningful glances that expressed their mutual anxiety.

The Commander looked at the Prince, "Sir, I do not understand anything you say. I have spent the better part of my life in battlefields. I am not familiar with the subtlety of speech. You speak of fulfilling your duty: what does that mean? How do you intend discharging this duty?" he asked.

"At this time I have one and only one duty. I have to obey my father's directive. My father has sent men with orders to arrest me. Why should I let them wander in search of me? I wish to go to them and give myself up. That is my duty...."

"Never. It is impossible. As long as I have life in my body, I cannot permit that. I will prevent it," said Parthiban.

The Commander said, "Do not get agitated; be patient." He then said the following to the Prince.

"Sir, you spoke of your duty. I too have a duty. Please listen to that. I am the last male left alive in the noble house of the Kodumbalur Velir's. All other men have died in service to the Chozla Empire. Most died in battle. One day I too hope to die in a similar fashion, who knows?... Please listen to my thoughts with some patience. The Emperor appointed you, who had been raised in the

comforts of palace life, as the Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Armies last year. At that time he summoned me in privacy and said, 'Parting from my son is like parting from my own life. Nevertheless, I cannot keep him closeted in palaces because of my love for him. He has to leave the palace one day; he has to earn fame as a brave warrior like his brother. But, if anything happens to endanger his life, that very moment this life will part from my body. You are responsible to guard him from every danger.' The Emperor gave me orders in this fashion. Will the same Emperor who gave such orders last year, send commands to arrest you now? What have you done to provoke such orders? Their accusations about your conspiring to secure Lanka's throne is utter falsehood. How could anyone believe this slander?"

Arulmozli who had been listening patiently till now, interrupted at this point.

"I do not know if anyone could believe it or not; but, I can believe it."

"What are you saying, Prince?"

"I am saying that it is indeed true that I am plotting to secure Lanka's throne."

Vandiya Devan came forward now, "What are you saying Sir? Till a few moments ago you were swearing by Truth and Law! Now you utter such utter untruths! Commander, do not believe him. Last night, the Congregation of Buddhist Abbots offered him Lanka's throne and crown. He refused. I and this Mr. Nambi here are witness to that."

Arulmozli smiled, "My Lord of Vallam, a question for you... Are those who conspire likely to have witnesses to their deeds? Perhaps I refused Lanka's throne merely because you both were present!"

Vandiya Devan was stunned; he had no answer to this. The Prince continued, "My Lord of Vallam, if you have any doubts, you may question Mr. Nambi. Ask him what was Prime Minister Anirudda's message to me. 'Buddhist Abbots will offer you Lanka's throne; refuse to accept in the presence of reliable witnesses.' Ask him if this was not the message sent to me."

On hearing these words, everyone in the pavilion was startled completely. Prince Arulmozli continued talking to the Commander, "Sir, listen to me. It is true that I coveted Lanka's throne. My sister fostered this desire in me, 'Thambi, you are born to rule kingdoms, you have the sign of the Discus & Conch on your palms. There is no place for you in Tamil lands; go to Lanka and capture that throne for yourself!' said the Younger Pirati several times. She nurtured this desire in me. Therefore, I am a culprit. The Emperor has reason in ordering my arrest."

"Just a minute, Prince. If such a thought existed in your heart, it is the good fortune of this island. You are not

accountable for that! Neither is your sister responsible. It is Emperor Sundara Chozla who is responsible. He has spoken of that several times, even to me. He has often said that he would like to see you placed on Lanka's throne. It was the Emperor who first introduced this idea in Lady Kundavai's mind. Your sister merely acquainted you with your father's wishes. So, you are no culprit...."

"Then why should I hesitate going to my father's presence? I shall explain the true state of affairs to him. These two gentlemen can be my witnesses. After that, it is my duty to follow whatever orders the Emperor may give."

Finally, Parthiban spoke with a rage filled voice, "Commander we are wasting time in pointless chatter. There is no use of hiding anything anymore. We have to reveal the truth to the Prince. Are you going to tell him, or shall I do so?"

"I will tell him; be patient," said the Commander. Lowering his voice after looking around, he said, "Prince, I did not wish to tarnish your unsullied mind, but, that isn't working. I have to tell you about a distasteful affair. You are aware that Lord Pazluvoor, in his old age, has married a very young girl named Nandini. She is a sorceress, well versed in frightening spells and magic. With the help of her magic, she has enslaved the Elder Lord Pazluvoor. He obeys every whim and fancy of her's without question. It is ill fate that has reduced that great and brave warrior born of an ancient noble family, to such an unfortunate situation."

"Commander, this is nothing that I have not heard before. Every town and country in Chozla territory is talking about it."

"The magic of that sorceress Nandini wielded its power merely on the nobles of Pazluvoor till recently. Prince, forgive me -- her witchcraft is now influencing the Emperor also. That is why he has given such orders -- these commands to arrest you."

"Be careful Commander! Do not dare to malign the name of my father the Emperor. As long as my father is alive, every order he gives, whatever the circumstance in which it was given, the order is divine law."

"We do not refute that. We are anxious because even his life is in danger, not merely his freedom. Till yesterday even I did not know the full truth about Nandini. Lord Parthiban told me last night: it is important that you also become aware of that frightening information."

The Commander continued, "The final battle against Veera-pandiya was fought three years ago near Madurai City. At that time, your brother Karikala, this Parthiban and I would confer together about every plan before executing action. Pandiya forces were completely destroyed. Like he had done before, Veera-pandiya tried to escape into hiding in the desert. The three of us were

adamant that we should not let that happen again; we were determined to capture him somehow or other; in fact we had sworn oaths that we would not return to Tanjore without Veera-pandiya's head. So we did not trust anyone else, but followed him ourselves. Finally we learned that he was hiding in some cottages near a temple. Your brother Karikala stopped us away from the cottage and entered it by himself. He killed Veera-pandiya and brought his head outside. We left, happy that the task was done. But, none of us were aware of a farce that had been enacted inside that cottage. A girl who had given sanctuary to Veera-pandiya tried to protect him, begging for her lover's life. Karikala kicked her away and killed the enemy, cutting off his head and bringing it outside. It was Nandini who tried to save the life of Veera-pandiya the lifelong enemy of Chozlas. Later, she appears in Tanjore, wedded to a seventy-year old man and titled the Young-Queen of Pazluvoor! We should be able to guess why, with what intention she must have come. She has come to revenge Veera-pandiya's death. She has come to completely destroy the Chozlas.

"It is not easy for anyone who goes near her, to escape her enchanting coils. Vandiya Devan can witness the truth of this. Mr Nambi can bear witness to the existence of a frightening gang that has sworn to kill every rootstock of Chozla nobility. It is Nandini who finances that gang. Prince, unfortunately, our beloved Emperor is also enmeshed in her witchery. The Emperor is now considering Madurandaka for the throne. Therefore, it is not advisable for you to go to Tanjore, thinking it to be your father's orders...."

"Commander, I am surprised by all that you say. But, it further confirms my decision. When such frightening problems surround my father, it is my duty to be by his side. Why do I need Lanka or its throne? Why should I be concerned about my life? There is no need for further discussion. None of you should try to stop me!" Prince Arulmozli Varma spoke decisively. He then turned his eyes upon Poonkuzlali who was leaning on the far pillar and gazing at him with unblinking eyes.

"Ocean Princess, please come here," he called.

Poonkuzlali came closer. "Girl, you have been of great help to me by bringing this news; will you please help me one more time?" he asked.

Oh Dear Lord! What is this? Is he asking help from this poor boat-girl? I came here to be his serving maid; he begs for my help! I came asking boons of the Lord; the Lord is extending his own two hands and begging me for alms! With such racing thoughts, she said, "My Lord, I wait to fulfil your every command."

"Ocean Princess, you said that two ships are waiting near the mouth of River Thondai looking for me. I have to reach that place as quickly as possible. Will you be my guide and take me there?" asked Arulmozli.

"Girl, say that you cannot do it," roared a gruff voice. She recognized it as the Commander's. She had been wandering in a dream world. Only now she realized the tricky situation she was in. I came running, eager to help him from a danger; now, he asks my help in meeting that very same danger. She now understood the meaning behind the Commander's order "Say you cannot do it." Thousands of songbirds from every tree branch gave her the same order; the trees sang the same slogan; the pillars roared the same order; the flowers wailed.

A soft voice in the heart of her heart whispered. `Poonkuzlali, this is your good fortune. If you guide the Prince and go with him, you can spend two full days in his company! You can be constantly looking at him. The breeze that touches his body will caress you. You will hear his voice often. Your impossible dream -- a tiny bit of it will come true. Why bother about other things? Accept Poonkuzlali accept!' said the whisper in her heart.

"Why do you hesitate Ocean Princess? Won't you help me? Do I have to find my own way?" These words of the Prince steadied her thoughts.

"I am ready to be your guide, My Lord."

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama cleared his throat; it was like an earthquake rising from the bowels of the earth. He did not give up, "Prince, I will not stand in the way of your wishes. But, please accept this petition of mine. It is my duty to guard you till we give you up to those who have come to arrest you. Your friends spoke about the attempts on your life last night. We have not yet found those assassins. We do not even know their identity. Please forgive me for being so outspoken -- I have some doubts about this girl. Perhaps she is an accomplice of those killers. Maybe all this story about ships that have come to arrest you is all her imagination. Why is that not possible? Sometime back when Lord Vandiya Devan plucked her dagger and threw it away, we heard a scream. Who was it? Let her be the guide; Let her ride ahead on our elephant. I insist on accompanying you till we see those ships on River Thondai. It is my duty to do so."

Prince Arulmozli stood up with a smile as he listened to this speech by his Commander. "Let it be so. I shall not be an obstruction to your duty."

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 44 -- The Elephant Turned Rogue

Once the decision was reached, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama led Parthiban aside and spoke to him in privacy for some time. Later, he called for several of his men and gave them separate orders.

Parthiban Pallava came to take leave of the Prince. "Sir, I return empty handed without achieving my mission. Prince

Karikala will be very angry with me about this. What can I do -- you are so adamant. It is not my fault and these men will be witness to that!"

"Do you have to leave in such a hurry? Could you not come with the Commander till River Thondai?"

"I cannot be an accomplice to that atrocity. My ship is anchored at Tricone Hill. I have to go back there and sail as quickly as possible to Kanchi; I have to report all these developments to Prince Karikala." Parthiban then turned to Vandiya Devan, "Noble of Vallam, are you not coming back with me to Kanchi?"

Vandiya Devan was somewhat taken aback, "No. I wish to go with the young Prince."

"Suit yourself. You might regret not coming back with me!" Parthiban left with these cryptic words, accompanied by some men.

Vandiya Devan asked Azlvar-adiyan, "What did that Pallava mean? Why did he say that I would regret not going with him? Did you understand his words?"

"He and the Commander are cooking up some plot between themselves. We will soon know what it is. The root cause of this new confusion is really this old man of Kodumbalur!" said Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

"Why is that? How could the Commander be responsible?"

"It's all his conniving. Don't you know of that noblewoman of his clan living in Pazlayarai?"

"I know her very well, if you mean Lady Vanathi."

"The Commander dreams of wedding that girl to this Prince and making him the King of Lanka. It was he who instigated the Buddhist Abbots to offer Lanka's throne to Prince Arulmozli. He was not even sensible enough to keep his efforts secret! The news reached Tanjore and that is why Prime Minister Anirudda journeyed to Lanka and later sent messages through me! Thambi, whatever happens, one thing must be done without fail: we have to safeguard both our lives! You and I may have to testify in Tanjore about the Prince refusing Lanka's throne."

By now the Commander's arrangements had been completed. Except for four men, all the other soldiers who had come with him were now dispatched in different directions. Finally the Prince and his party left. Prince Arulmozli, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama, Vandiya Devan, Azlvar-adiyan and four soldiers rode westward on high-bred horses. The elephant carrying Poonkuzlali followed them ponderously. Only an elephant driver rode on its back besides Poonkuzlali.

They followed the Royal Way for some distance. But, travelling along that road was not easy. Crowds gathered

all along the way. People ahead somehow knew that Prince Arulmozli was coming down that road. The western provinces of Lanka were mostly inhabited by Tamils in those days. People gathered in small crowds to raise cheers, "Long live Prince Arulmozli!" "Long live Commander Bhoothi Vikrama!" At some places they surrounded the horsemen and followed them in a procession. The numbers of people following the Prince began to grow and grow. The horses could not proceed with any quickness.

Arulmozli argued with the Commander about this; they decided to avoid the main road but take the byways and forest trails. Somehow they shook loose from the people and ventured into the forest path. But, nature in the form of thick jungle obstructed quick progress on the forest trail. After a while they reached a lotus pond. When they reached it's shores, they could see a large group of people waiting on the farther shores. Upon seeing the royal party, they began to blow conches and horns; beating drums and cymbals -- generally raising a hue and cry!

"Please wait a while. I'll go and find out what it is all about," said the Commander as he rode towards that crowd. He came back soon to announce, "These villagers have somehow come to know that the Prince is in our party! They are waiting to welcome him into their village and honor him."

The people gathered closer, surrounding the Prince, gazing upon his face eagerly, cheering for him. The cry, "Long live Lanka's King Arulmozli!" was prominent!

A smile danced on Arulmozli's face. He summoned a man who seemed to be the chieftain of the country folk. "Why are these people bestowing Lanka's Kingship upon me?" he questioned. The head-man bowed very reverently, "My King, this territory of Lanka has been suffering without a good king for several years. It is our wish that Ponniiyan Selvan should become our King. It is the wish of every citizen living in this island. Everyone -- the Sinhalese, Tamils, Buddhists, Saivas, monks and householders -- wish it."

They had made arrangements to honor the Prince and his company with a banquet. The Prince could not avoid these honors; he was delayed greatly by these interruptions. During these ceremonies in honor of their Prince, Vandiya Devan and Azlvar-adiyan were able to converse in privacy.

"Thambi, did you see this? Isn't it obvious that all this is the Commander's conniving? He sent his men ahead and arranged for all these honors and celebrations."

"It is somewhat obvious that these are the Commander's arrangements. But, what is the purpose of this conniving? Does he think that the Prince who refused the crown will change his mind when he hears the people saying things in his favor?"

"Perhaps that is one intention; the main thing is to delay our journey."

"What is the Commander expecting to achieve by delaying our journey?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"I don't know! But, we will know soon enough. Did you notice the Prince -- it is obvious that he does not like all these things."

Vandiya Devan looked at Prince Arulmozli. His countenance which normally wore a pleasing smile now seemed to be filled with rage and anger. Eyebrows knitted; eyes deep in thought.

At this same time, Poonkuzlali was seated alone on the other side of the lotus pond, lost in thought. This journey did not bring her joy as she had expected. She had envisioned that she could be alone with the Prince during the journey. She thought that he would come to her, engage in conversation with her... She had been eager to express at least a few of the emotions that bubbled within her heart. There seemed to be no opportunity for that -- people were around him all the time! Mere blame that I handed him over to the enemy will remain! Why should I earn that blame? Why shouldn't I go away quietly from here? At least I will escape the Commander's anger.... Chee! What can the Commander's anger do to me? Whose anger can do anything! I am not afraid of anyone's wrath. But, why should my dreams and desires be lost in dust? How long should my heart's desire burn me like this? Why am I alive? Why doesn't lightning strike to kill me instantly? I have wished a thousand times about such things, with no use.... my life will not depart by itself; I have to do something about it myself.

"Swish!" Oh, what is this? Am I dreaming? No, no. How has my knife -- thrown away near the roofless pavilion by the Prince's friend -- fallen here by my side? Who could have thrown it here? Some enemy of his, surely! They may have tried to kill me ... What bad luck that it did not strike me but fell a little away! All's for the best anyway. It's good to get back this knife. After I keep my promise to him, after I have handed him over to those villains on the ships, I can kill myself with this knife before his eyes. Stupid girl! Why should I hurt him? After he leaves, I can sail away to the shoreless ocean and jump to my death. My darling dagger... you have come back to me ... Thanks to those who sent you back.

Perhaps they aimed it at the Prince when they threw this dagger. Yes, even the Commander anticipated danger on the way. Oh why doesn't a knife aimed at him strike me? When that happens, when I lie bleeding to death

A curious vision appeared in Poonkuzlali mind: A knife had pierced her heart and she was bleeding. The Prince came running to her side, "My Dear you are loosing your life for me!" he said. Her heart brimmed with joy and more blood came gushing out. The Prince raised her to his arms;

her blood drenched his clothes and arms. Poonkuzlali laughed merrily, "Prince do you now know the secret of my heart?" she asked. "Wretched girl, I knew it always; are you giving up your life because of that?!" he cried. Her happiness knew no bounds and she laughed uproariously.

"You Fool!" called a voice; she looked up to find Vandiya Devan standing before her. "The Prince is already quite angry because the journey is delayed. Come quickly without causing further delay."

Poonkuzlali rose with a smile and she ran to climb on her elephant, hugging and kissing her dagger.

An unexpected incident occurred after they had been a while on the forest trail. An arrow came swishing through the wind from the forest on their right. It was clearly aimed for the Prince. But, he was swifter than the wind as he suddenly pulled the reins of his horse and turned aside. The arrow pierced through the turban of Azlvar-adiyan who was riding on the other side. He rubbed his shaven pate and looked at his head cloth with surprise. The Commander was shaken; all others were utterly shocked. Poonkuzlali was sad because that arrow had not pierced her heart and killed her!

"Did you see that Prince? What a calamity, if I had let you go without any guards?" said the Commander. He ordered his men to go into the woods and search. The men came back in a while saying that they could find no one. The Commander began making plans, "We should let the Prince ride in the middle and all of us should be around him."

"A request Commander!" said the Prince.

"What a word! Order me My Lord!" said the Commander.

"I wish to reach Tanjore with my life intact. I wish to prove my innocence to my father."

"You father will never suspect you of any crime!"

"Not just my father. I wish to prove my innocence to all the people. After that, I have no worry about my life. I have no wish to die before that on the way."

"Sir, if there is any likelihood of danger to you, that very instant this great-sword of Kodumbalur will pierce my heart!"

"That is not of much use; Chozla countrymen will loose a great warrior."

"The Chozla country has no greater loss than loosing you. How can this knave of Kodumbalur remain alive after being instrumental in endangering you?"

"So, it is even more important for me to safeguard my own life!"

"Nothing is more important on this earth."

"I have an idea about that."

"I am listening Sir."

"As long as I am riding a horse, all sorts of impediments like that arrow might strike me."

"Are you planning to walk?"

"I know the art of handling elephants. You know that I am very good with elephants, they listen to me without fail."

"Yes Sir. I know that you have surveyed most regions of this island disguised as an elephant-driver."

"So, this is what I propose: I will become an elephant-driver for a while once again. Let the real elephant-driver ride my horse for some distance."

The Commander seemed a little hesitant. He looked around for an objection to this idea. But, every man kept quiet."

"Sir, I am not sure if that man knows how to ride."

"If he does not know riding, let him walk or go back."

"That girl seems very bashful; suppose she refuses to sit by your side on the elephant?"

"Let her get down and walk."

"As you wish My Lord."

Arulmozli jumped off from his horse and walked up to the elephant. Poonkuzlali's dark eyes widened with eagerness. The Prince helped the elephant-driver dismount and jumped upon the beast's neck. The interrupted journey resumed.

Poonkuzlali was overjoyed. She leaped from the elephants back, to promenade in distant space on flying clouds. She reached the brink of paradise and sipped the sweet nectar of happiness that could not be described by words. Ah! Is this heavenly music that is so melodious? Heavenly music is not this sweet! The Prince is saying something.

"Ocean Princess are you revolted to be alone with me on this elephant?"

"Lord, I have this good fortune because of penances over seven births."

"Will you be frightened if this elephant suddenly turns rogue and begins running?"

"With you by my side, I will not be frightened even if the

skies come thundering down."

"Where have you left your boat, Poonkuzlali?"

"Very near the landing of Elephant Crossing, Sir."

"On this shore or the other?"

"I found a secret place only on the other shore. I left my boat over there."

"How did you ford the Crossing?"

"When I came, the tide was very low. I could walk most of the way; I had to swim a little."

"Will you be afraid if this elephant gets into the sea?"

"I won't be afraid even if thrown into the sea. Remember I am the Ocean Princess? You gave me that title!"

"When we get to the place where your boat is hidden, we can get into it. You have to row the boat; can you pull the oars with two people in it?"

"These hands have pulled oars from when I was ten, My Lord. They are not soft like the hands of women from palaces. Didn't the Lord of Vallam, your friend, tell you that I rowed him over here?"

"He mentioned it. But, today you may have to row faster than that. We have to go very quickly to the mouth of River Thondai where the ships are anchored."

"My Lord, why are you forcing me to do this cruel deed? I came hurrying to help you escape being arrested. You now order me to deliver you to those who have come to arrest you. Why this malice towards this poor girl?"

"Poonkuzlali, don't you know that my father, the Emperor is unwell?"

"I know My Lord. I also know that people are talking about the comet appearing in the skies since some days."

(Note: It was a popular belief that comets appeared when important men, such as kings, national leaders, prophets etc were about to die.)

"My father's life is likely to end anytime now."

Poonkuzlali was silent. "Suppose he were to die, is it good if he dies with a doubt that I perhaps conspired against him, trying to capture the kingdom?"

"The Emperor will never think such things of you. This is the intrigue of Pazluvoor nobles."

"I wish to prove my innocence even to those Pazluvoor nobles."

"Why My Lord?"

"Poonkuzlali, to tell you the truth, I have no wish to rule any kingdom."

"What is your wish Sir?"

"I wish to be on a ship sailing away, endlessly. I have heard that there are several lands beyond the seas, like this Lanka. I wish to see all those lands. I wish to speak to the people of all those lands."

"How curious, how astonishing!"

"Why is it curious?"

"I am amazed that you too have the very same wishes that dwell in my heart. Will you take me with you when you embark upon these journeys across the sea?"

"I have to first fulfill my present duty. Will you help me in that?"

"As you wish."

"There are ropes hanging on both sides of the saddle on which you are sitting. Take them and bind yourself tightly to the elephant."

"Why My Lord?"

"This elephant is going to turn rogue. Don't panic, be careful." He gently rubbed the round musth-protrusions on the elephant's forehead and spoke softly into its ears. Suddenly, the elephant quickened its pace. Arulmozli spoke more soft words into its ears. Walk turned into a run: the elephant lifted its trunk high into the air, trumpeted frighteningly and began to run. The trees and shrubs of the jungle felt the ferocity of a whirlwind when that beast ran helter-skelter, thrashing trees and branches. The earth shook and shivered. Birds on tree-tops fluttered their wings noisily and flew away in panic. Beasts hidden in the forest emerged to run away in fright.

The Commander screamed, "Oh Good Lord! The elephant seems to have turned rogue! What calamity is this?"

In spite of the Prince's warning, Poonkuzlali was filled with dread; her face reflected the fear in her heart. She was caught in a huge tornado on a wide sea; she was swimming round and round, caught in those swirls with Prince Arulmozli! The elephant swirled with them! Poonkuzlali closed her eyes tight. Like dark monsoon clouds racing across stormy skies, the elephant ran. It finally reached Elephants Crossing.

The seas to the west and east of Lanka met at this point in a narrow isthmus. The narrowest point of the straits were called Elephant Crossing. The elephant entered the ford

that linked Lanka's northern province with the middle provinces. It delved into the sea like a mountain thrown by Hanuman of the epic.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 45 -- Prison Ship

Elephant Crossing went past within the blink of an eyelid; and then forest trees began running behind. Birds flew far behind... streamlets, pools, ponds, temples and hamlets flew behind. A herd of deer tried to compete with that elephant and ran along for some distance; but they too were soon left far behind. The elephant kept going, and going, going ahead.... Poonkuzlali was not sure how far, how long or which way. She wondered if that elephant was still in Lanka! By now, at this pace it could have circled this Lanka three times! No, no! This elephant has not crossed Lanka, it has crossed this whole good earth! It has gone from the southern ends to the northern reaches. I am riding on its back and circumnavigating the earth! And with me is the Prince!

She was a little frightened in the beginning when the elephant ran in panic. A fear from not being able to comprehend what was happening... The Prince turned back twice or thrice to look at her and smile. Her hesitations and fears flew away. Endless joy took hold; for a while she was riding a huge elephant of this earth; somehow, suddenly, she was in paradise. She was seated on Iravata, the heavenly elephant of Indra the Lord of Heavens. Iravata was ambling along the streets of paradise in procession. Everblooming Karpaka trees showered fragrant flowers on her. Ghandarvas the heavenly musicians, played sweet melodies upon divine instruments and followed her. Heavenly beauties danced. Star-light lamps glowed gloriously on both sides of her procession. Several such eons passed.

Iravata was slowing down. Suddenly it came back to earth; back to the forests of Lanka. The elephant-driver was bending low, stroking its musth-protrusions; whispering into its ears. Oh no! he is no elephant-driver --- he is the king of heavens! He is Prince Arulmozli! Ponniyin Selvan! The elephant was standing peacefully on the shores of a tiny lake surrounded by trees. Poonkuzlali looked around with concern: are there crowds of villagers waiting to welcome their prince? No. Are there horses following? No. Look at the pond. The water lily's and lotuses rose with their vines and came to encircle her. The flowers and vines fell on her cheeks, her shoulders and arms ... hugging her, choking her, making her breathless. She shook herself free of those clinging vines. She felt as if she was tumbling headfirst, from heaven to earth. The elephant folded its large forelegs and began kneeling. It folded its hind legs also to lie flat on the ground. Arulmozli jumped down from its neck. "Poonkuzlali have you no heart to get off this elephant?"

Poonkuzlali shook herself to consciousness. "Sir, it is difficult to come down to earth from paradise." The elephant stood up and broke off a large tree branch from the shore, stuffing it entirely in its gaping mouth. Arulmozli walked away to sit on the bank. He beckoned hesitant Poonkuzlali to come and sit beside him.

Her face was reflected on the placid lake. Because of the running elephant and her agitated thoughts, her face had turned lotus red. The Prince was looking at her face reflected amidst the lotus blossoms, "Poonkuzlali, I like you very much!"

Once again the lily vines and lotus flowers rose to kiss Poonkuzlali.

"Do you know why I like you?" asked Arulmozli. Everything before her eyes -- the sky, the earth the lake and the flowers -- everything was in a dizzy swirl. "Everyone I know wants me to act according to their wishes. You were the only one who happily agreed to act according to my wishes. I will never forget this help Ocean Princess!"

Poonkuzlali was a lute; her nerves were it's strings; golden fingers plucked those strings and played heavenly melodies.

"The Commander and Parthiban conspired to hinder my journey. The Commander created several obstructions on our way. He hurried the men ahead of us and made the villagers arrange festivities. Lord Parthiban Pallava has gone to Tricone Hill in a hurry. He intends to board his ship and sail to the mouth of River Thondai before we reach that spot. Ah! Did they think that I would not know their conspiracies! I defeated their purpose with your help..."

Instantly, Poonkuzlali realized the implications of her actions. She felt the messengers of hell torturing her in an endless oil-press. "My Lord, all of them tried to save you from being imprisoned by enemies. I am a sinner -- leading you to be imprisoned," sobbed Poonkuzlali.

"Oh dear, what is this? I had such a good opinion of you! You too have become one of them!"

"I was not in my senses when I did this atrocious deed. I was mesmerized by your sweet words to become insane. I am more sensible now; I think I shall leave...." She rose with a jump.

The Prince, wishing to stop her from running away, lightly held her hand. Divine maidens in heaven seemed to have been free without any other work at that moment. They mixed the essence of moonbeams with sandal paste and showered it on Poonkuzlali. She was completely lost; bereft of action, of thought, she sat down once again.

"Ocean Princess, I was about to speak with you about an

important thing. If you are going to be sobbing like this, I shall not speak of it. We better leave immediately."

She wiped away her tears to look up. He continued speaking, "Listen; you said that they were trying to prevent my being arrested. That is true. But, do you know why?"

"Because of their love for you. I am the sinner..."

"Patience, patience. Every one loves me! Do you know why? Because of some predictions by astrologers and soothsayers -- that I would one day rule as an emperor! Therefore everyone is trying to sit me on a throne and weigh me down with a crown on my head. Avaricious folk."

"My Lord, what is wrong if they wish such things? Are you not qualified to rule not merely this one world but all the worlds in creation?"

"Oh dear! You too have begun speaking like them! My dear, in this wide world, there is no prison like a palace; there is no sacrificial alter like a throne; no other punishment worse than wearing a crown. If I say such things to others, they may not agree. I thought you might understand."

Poonkuzlali's eyelids fluttered like the wings of a butterfly. She looked at the prince with eyes widened by eagerness. "Ocean Princess! Tell me the truth! If you were ordered to sit upon a throne all life long, would you do so?"

She considered this question for a bit and then replied clearly, "I will not!"

"See! Then, why do you wish me to suffer such a punishment?"

"You are born in a royal family?!"

"So what, if I am born in a royal family? Fortunately the Gods did not wish to make me suffer that punishment! I have an elder brother to rule the kingdom; also a son of my elder grandfather... he too wishes to rule..."

"Oh dear! Has that rumor reached your ears too?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"What a thought! Did you think that I did not know? Anyway, the Throne of Tanjore is not likely to suffer for want of rulers. Moreover, I have no wish to wear a crown and rule a kingdom."

"Do you have any wishes at all?"

"If you ask me I shall tell you! Remember our journey on this elephant just now? I have a wish to ride like that.. a tornado through the forests and plains beyond. I have a wish to board large ships and sail across several seas. I have a wish to climb the highest peaks of mountain ranges.

I have heard that across the oceans, there are many islands like this Lanka, even larger and many continents even bigger than our blessed country. I wish to go to all those places and look at the wondrous marvels of those countries."

Poonkuzlali listened to this outpouring of words in open mouthed rapture as if she was drinking in every word. She could not control her eagerness, "Sir! When you go to all those places could you take me with you?"

"I merely expressed my wishes. Who knows if they would be fulfilled?" asked Arulmozli Varma.

She came back to earth from her dream-world. "Sir, if that is your wish, why should you go back to Tanjore now?"

"I was about to explain that. But you changed the topic and made my thoughts wander. Ocean Princess, there is a speechless mute woman who wanders here and there on this island as if she is deranged. Do you know her?"

"I know her, My lord. Why do you ask?" said Poonkuzlali with immeasurable surprise.

"I'll explain later. How do you know that woman? What do you know about her?"

"Sir, I lost my mother when I was very young. She was the one who gave me a mother's love; she is my master, my goddess. What do you want to know about her?"

"Does that woman have any permanent place of abode? Or does she always wander around?"

"On the way to Lanka from Kodi Karai, there is an island called Ghost Island. She lives in a rock cave on that island most of the time. I saw you for the first time on that island."

"You saw me there?!"

"Yes. In that rocky cave are several beautiful pictures drawn by her. I saw your face in those drawings. Later, one day when I saw you at Kodi Karai, I was astounded."

"Oh! I now understand. Things that were confusing are now clearer. Ocean Princess, are you aware of the relationship that exists between that woman and me?"

"I surmised that there was a relationship. But, I do not know what it could be."

"Poonkuzlali, she is my aunt, my Elder Mother. Lawfully, she is the lady who should be on Tanjore's Throne."

"Good Lord! Can this be true?"

"But, fate wove a different story. Who could undo that? It occurred to me quite often that some secret sadness in my

father's heart distressed him. Now, I have found the truth of that matter. My father thinks that my Elder Mother is dead and that she died because of him. I must go back and tell him that she is not dead, she is alive. If he knows, his heart's distress will be expunged; the mental agony that wastes him will be destroyed. You are aware of the Emperor's ill health; human life is not for ever. None can predict what may happen. A comet has been appearing on the skies for some time now. People have been apprehensive about that. Even the Emperor has been affected by those fears. In this situation, before anything ill-fated happens, I must tell him about what I have found out. Ocean Princess, that is why I wish to reach Tanjore as quickly as possible. Do you now realize how important your help will be?" asked Prince Arulmozli.

Poonkuzlali, who had been listening with interest, sighed loudly; "Oh Good Lord! Why did you design such sorrow along with all the happiness of human life!" she mumbled. Looking up at the Prince, she said, "My Lord, if you are helped in any way by my unfortunate self, it is because of my good fortune in many births. But, why do you need my help in all this? If you had spoken to the Commander, he would have arranged for you to go to Tanjore."

"No. I do not wish to discuss these matters with any of them. They are obsessed with somehow placing me on a throne; such matters will not seem important to them. Moreover, I do not wish to share my father's personal secrets with them. They will not be sympathetic. I need another favor of you Ocean Princess -- that is why I stopped the elephant here and started talking to you. The astrologers and soothsayers who gave me a throne and made me a monarch also predicted that several dangers will cross my path. If some such misfortune happens to me on this journey, if I am unable to meet my father, you must go to the Emperor. Meet him somehow and let him know that my Elder Mother is alive. If he wishes it, take her to him. Can you do that Poonkuzlali?" asked Arulmozli.

"No misfortune will cross your path. Danger will fear to face you and retreat. You will surely reach Tanjore safely."

"If something does happen to me, you will promise to do as I asked?"

"I promise My Lord."

"How can I entrust this important mission to anyone else? Tell me."

"You have entrusted the job to me. Now my usefulness is done. Can I take leave of you?" asked Poonkuzlali with a tear laden voice.

"How can you do that? We have not yet reached the mouth of River Thondai. We have not yet found the Chozla warships. How can you leave now? Don't be angry; be patient for a while longer and bear my company. Climb

back on this elephant and come with me some more. Once we see the Tiger-flags of the Chozla ships, we can part company," said the Prince.

Without a sound in reply she rose and walked towards the elephant. In obedience to his commands, the elephant folded its legs and allowed them to climb on its back. He did not goad the elephant but it did move quickly. "Ocean Princess, I have told you about some of my favorite wishes. What are your cherished wishes?" asked the Prince.

"I like Yama the Lord of Death who comes riding a dark water buffalo. I love to climb the rocks at midnight and gaze for hours at fiery ghouls that dance on marshes."

"You are a most peculiar girl!"

"Call me 'foolish' like your friend did. But, I am not bothered... And then I like to get into my small sail-boat and float away on the waves of the vast seas. If a whirlwind happens on the open seas, my enthusiasm will cross all bounds. My boat will then rise to the highest crest of the waves and touch the skies; in the next instant it will crash into the deepest depths. There is nothing I like better than riding the waves of a stormy sea. Just now when this elephant ran wildly as if it had gone mad, I was ecstatic."

"Poonkuzlali, if God Muruga had come in search of your smile he would have been at a loss. His tricks of sending an elephant to frighten the Gypsy Valli before he won her heart would not work with you."

They had reached the mouth of the river. Poonkuzlali shrieked in surprise, "What is this?"

"What is the matter?" asked Arulmozli.

"The ships flying Tiger-flags are not here, where I had seen them. What will you think of me? This seems to confirm the Commander's suspicions; it seems as if I tricked you and brought you here!"

"I will not think so, Poonkuzlali. There is no reason for you to trick me and bring me here."

"Why not My Prince? What about love, kaadal? The whole world is full of praise for you -- handsome as Manmatha the God of Love and gallant as the epic hero Arjuna. You are the Darling of the Cauvery, Ponniiyin Selvan; a foolish girl could have become enamored of you and done this foul deed. Could she not?" asked Poonkuzlali in some agitation.

"If the Commander were here, he would have perhaps suspected such things. But, I am sure that in your heart and in my heart there is no place for such foolish thoughts."

"Sir, will you say the same about that noblewoman Lady Vanathi who lives at Pazlayarai?"

"Well, I have not forgotten that! This Commander and my sister are together in trying to foist that girl around my neck. Perhaps that ignorant girl also nurtures hopes because of a wish to sit on a throne. I cannot be held responsible for that. Poonkuzlali forget that. Where were the ships when you saw them?"

"There, they stood at that turning. I remember very well."

"Perhaps they have moved a little here or there. Let us go down to the beach and have a look."

"Good, if those ships have gone away. Why should we go looking for them?" asked Poonkuzlali.

"You may think so, but, I shall be very disappointed."

Three hundred years before this time Prince Manavanman of Lanka had sought asylum at Kanchi. Maamalla Pallava had promised to regain his kingdom for him and sent a large Tamil army to help the Lankan Prince. Those forces had landed in these parts when they came to Lanka. In those days the mouth of the river was a mere stream. The soldiers of Thondai Territories had deepened the river channel and widened the river mouth so that their warships could anchor safely. That river channel, which came to be known as River Thondai, meandered in and out as it entered the sea. Forest trees grew thickly up to the river bank. Several ships could anchor safely in the river without being visible from the sea.

Poonkuzlali had seen the ships that had come to arrest Prince Arulmozli, anchored in one curve of the river. But, the ships were not where she had seen them earlier -- that is, she could not see the sails, or flags or mastheads. When they came closer to that spot, a startling sight met their eyes. A ship had moved far inland away from the deep channel and was now buried in the mud. Its masthead, sails and flags were broken and torn. The ship did not seem to have any human occupants. Poonkuzlali recognized it as one of the ships she had seen two days earlier.

She was shocked to see that one of the ships, which had come to take her Prince prisoner, had gone adrift to be mired in the muddy bank.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 46 -- Turbulent Soul

Prince Arulmozli whispered secrets into the elephants ear. The elephant knelt down and both Poonkuzlali and Prince Arulmozli jumped down. They walked up to the wooden ship now beached on the sandy shores. The ship was in a pitiable state: mast beams were broken and strewn helter skelter. They wondered if anyone was there or anywhere near about. The Prince clapped his hands and called out.

Poonkuzlali cupped her hands over her mouth and called -- no answering sound arose. They waded into the shallow water and climbed up the sides of the ship. The bottom planks of the ship had split; sand and water had run into the hull. Their hopes of somehow pushing the ship back into sea and setting it afloat were now dashed. It would be impossible to move that ship from there into water; one elephant could not drag it into water. Several elephants and several men would have to work on it. They would need strong ropes and a few tugboats. Many carpenters would have to work many months to make that vessel sea-worthy once again.

Prince Arulmozli picked up the torn and mutilated Tiger-flag lying amidst the ruined deck. It was obvious that its state caused him much anguish. "Poonkuzlali is this one of the ships you had seen?"

"Seems like it. The other ship must have completely sunk to the bottom!" Her voice seemed to have some cheer as she uttered these words.

"Why this delight?" asked the Prince.

"Should I not be happy if the ships that came to imprison you are sunk and beached?"

"Your delight is misplaced Ocean Princess. Some calamity seems to have occurred. It disturbs me that such misadventure should occur to an armed ship that flies a Tiger-flag. We don't know how this happened. What happened to the soldiers and sailors on this ship? I am more and more confused by this wanton destruction I see. Do you really think that the other ship must have sunk?"

"Perhaps it is sunk. It is good if that is so."

"It is not good and it cannot be. Seeing the fate of this ship the other one might have moved away to deeper water. Why did this ship come so far inshore? Chozla sailors are descendants of sea-going men of several generations. I cannot believe that they made a mistake to accidentally drive this ship into the sandbank. The men must have somehow escaped from here. They might have gone aboard the other ship or camped somewhere nearby. Come, let us look for them."

"Where can we look for them, Prince? The sun is setting and darkness is gathering upon us from all directions," said Poonkuzlali with some worry.

"Ocean Princess, where did you leave your boat?"

"My boat is further up river. We came here so quickly because we rode on that swift elephant and because you drove it so skillfully. If we had come by my boat we would have taken much longer."

"That's alright. Let us walk a little along this river bank before it gets too dark. These trees are hiding the sea."

Perhaps they have anchored the other ship away from the coast. Let us go look."

They left the elephant there on the bank and walked towards the sea. Very soon they were on the beach. The sea was calm; not even the sign of a soft wave. As far as the eye could see was one shimmering platter of jewelled green. Very far away the green of the sea mingled with the hazy blue of the sky. But, there was no sign of any ship or boat. One or two sea birds flew towards the beach. That was all. After walking about that beach for a few minutes, Arulmozli said, "Well, let us go back to that beached ship."

They turned back the way they had come. "Poonkuzlali, I shall never forget how helpful you have been. But, now the time has come for us to part."

Poonkuzlali was quiet.

"Did you hear me? I have decided to wait near that shipwreck. The Commander and his retinue will soon find this place. I shall decide on what to do next after I consult with him. So, there is nothing more for you to do here. You may go find your boat and leave. Remember what I told you about my father..."

Poonkuzlali seemed tired and hesitant. She was leaning back on one of the coconut palms on that bank; her hands gripped the fronds of a drooping palm leaf.

"What is it Ocean Princess? What is the matter?"

"Nothing, Prince. Nothing. I shall take leave of you here itself. God be with you"

"Angry, Poonkuzlali?"

"Angry? What right has this foolish girl to be angry with you? I have not yet become that conceited"

"Then why have you stopped here suddenly?"

"I am not angry Sir, but, very tired. It is two nights since I had a wink of sleep. I plan to sleep for a while somewhere here and then look for my boat and leave."

It was the day after the full moon. A brilliant moon was just rising over the seashore. A moon beam or two danced over her face. The Prince turned to look at her face and gazed at the tiredness and sadness reflected on the features. Her eyes were already half closed. It is nature that a lotus closes its petals when the moon rises. However, Poonkuzlali's lotus face was not only closed, it was wilted.

"My dear girl? Two days since you slept? How many days since you ate anything?"

"Two days since I have eaten. I never felt any hunger as long as I was with you."

"How idiotic of me! This afternoon all of us feasted at that village banquet. I did not even remember to ask if you had eaten! Come Poonkuzlali, come with me to the shipwreck. I saw scattered grain all over that broken deck. Tonight we will collect that grain and cook a meal; you can leave after eating."

"Sir, after eating I will go to sleep right there. Even now I am very tired."

"So what? You can sleep comfortably on the deck. I shall wait on the bank with the elephant and guard you. You can find your boat in the morning." Arulmozli took hold of her hand and half hugging her, walked her towards the ship. She was really tired. Her unselfish devotion touched his heart and brought tears to his eyes.

When they came upon that ship once again, they were shocked by a new sight. Smoke rose in a spiral from behind that deck. Perhaps the ship's men had returned after going somewhere. If they appeared suddenly in front of them, what would they think... So they walked softly with silent steps. They had come very close, but, had heard no sound or speech. Who was hidden there? How many? The sweet smell of yams being roasted assailed their noses.

Prince Arulmozli decided that his first task was to feed Poonkuzlali. He walked around the beached ship. A woman was making preparations to cook; she had gathered stones into a stove and lit a cooking fire. He recognized her. She did not seem surprised to see them. Perhaps she was expecting them. She welcomed them silently and soon served them delicious food. Arulmozli found the meal of stewed grain and roasted sweet-yam more delicious than all the gourmet foods he had eaten at royal banquets in Pazlayarai. After eating, all three climbed up to the deck. The moon had risen high. From the deck they could see the mouth where River Thondai flowed into the sea, and beyond that, the expanse of the sea itself. The water which looked like a shimmering emerald in the light of dusk now shone like gold in the moonbeams. Arulmozli remarked that it was very humid and stuffy with not a whisper of a breeze. Somehow the old lady understood him. She touched Poonkuzlali's shoulder and pointed to the grey ring around the moon.

Poonkuzlali explained, "If the moon is encircled by a grey ring, it means storm and rain is soon to follow."

"Oh, let it storm, let it rain. All I want now is a little breeze. I wonder how she came here so quickly!"

"Nothing surprises me about my aunt. She is capable of more astonishing deeds," said Poonkuzlali. "There is no limit to the love she has for you. The power of love can do anything, did you not know?"

Her aunt seemed to understand her. She turned Poonkuzlali's face around and pointed to the far bank. Their elephant was tied to a tree over there and by its side

stood a beautiful, well bred stallion. Arulmozli and Poonkuzlali were surprised.

"Did she ride that horse here? I did not know that she could ride a horse!" said Arulmozli.

"There is nothing that my aunt does not know. She can ride a horse and drive an elephant. She can row a boat. Sometimes I used to wonder if she could glide over the winds! She travels that quickly from one place to another. I would often wonder how she could have come so quickly."

Prince Arulmozli was now pondering over another astonishing fact. It was the appearance of that beautiful arab stallion grazing on that bank. He was muttering to himself, "This seems to be one of the best of the exquisite breeds of arab horses. How did it come here? How did this woman get it?"

Poonkuzlali was talking in sign language to her aunt, the Mute-queen. (Yes, from now, shall we refer to her as the Mute-queen?) She was saying that the horse had swum ashore near Elephant Crossing. When it had come ashore, it seemed to be dazed and stood about wildly on the sand. Mute-queen had patted it and talked to it till it had calmed down. Later she had ridden it here. Arulmozli was even more surprised by this. He noticed that Poonkuzlali's eyes were closed and that she was falling asleep. "You said you were sleepy. Go and rest." She moved aside and pulling a sailcloth over herself was soon asleep. Soon, a steady breathing indicated that she was in deep sleep. Even then her lips trembled and warbled the words of a song softly,

When wave-filled seas are still,
Why does the inner ocean seethe?

Ah! This is the song that Vandiya Devan was humming all day long. Perhaps he learned it from her! When she is awake I must ask her to sing it for me.

He turned towards Mute-queen. Ah! It is true that everyone's heart is in turmoil. Everyone's soul brims with emotion. But, with what can one compare the anguish of this old woman who cannot even express her emotions in words? How many emotions, wishes, urges, what happiness, what sorrow, how much anger and frustration has she stifled in her thoughts? For how long?

Mute-queen rose and came to sit beside Arulmozli. She wove her fingers through his curls and brushed his hair back. With her roughened palms she brushed his cheeks as if caressing some exotic flower. Arulmozli did not know what to do. After a while he rose and bowed to her, touching her feet to his eyes. She picked up his palms and held them to her face. Very soon, his palms were wet with the tears pouring from her eyes. She signed that he too should sleep. He was not sure if he could sleep. But, to satisfy her, he lay down on the deck and closed his eyes. For a long time his heart was in turmoil with conflicting

thoughts. After some hours, a cool breeze rose over the water. The breeze cooled his heart and body. Soon he was asleep.

It was a disturbed sleep full of dreams, incredible dreams. He was riding a well bred arab stallion and flying across the skies. He had crossed the cloud world and entered the realm of Gods. Indra the King of heavens welcomed him to ride on Iravata, the celestial Elephant. He was seated on the heavenly throne. "O! I do not want this; I wish to place my Mute Aunt on this throne" King Indra laughed and said, "Let her come here first, we can think about it later." Indra gave him a goblet of heavenly nectar and asked him to drink it. "Ah!, this does not taste as delicious as Cauvery water!" Indra took him to the women's palace. Several heavenly maids were dancing there. "Choose the most beautiful among them for yourself!" said King Indra. "None of them can stand a chance against Poonkuzlali," said Arulmozli. Suddenly Younger Pirati Kundavai came to stand beside Indra's Queen. "Arulmozli have you forgotten my Vanathi?" she asked. Arulmozli said, "Akka, Akka! How long are you going to keep me a slave? Lord Pazluvoor's dungeons are better than the prison of your love. Free me please! Or, like Prince Uttara of Virata, keep me inside palace walls. I can spend my time in dance and song!" Princess Kundavai placed a flower like finger on her coral lips and looked at him in surprise. "Arulmozli, how did you change like this? Who corrupted your heart? Yes my dear brother, love is a kind of bondage. You must be bound by it." He replied, "No, Akka, no. You are wrong. There is love without bondage. Shall I show you? here, I shall call her, you can see... Poonkuzlali... Poonkuzlali... come here..." he called out in his sleep.

Poonkuzlali woke up hearing hoofbeats; day was breaking in glorious splendor. She saw Mute-queen seated on her horse, ready to ride away. She ran down trying to stop her. However, before she could climb down the sides of the ship, the old woman had flown away like the wind.

Day break was beautiful. Poonkuzlali's heart brimmed with untold happiness. Prince Arulmozli was still asleep on the deck. She walked along the river bank; a huge parrot was perched on a low branch. It did not fly away but gazed at her face as if asking, "Where did you come?"

"My darling parrot! The Prince will be gone from here in a few minutes. After that you are my only companion. Will you talk to me?" asked Poonkuzlali.

She then heard the call "Poonkuzlali! Poonkuzlali!" For a minute she thought the parrot had talked. But, the voice came from the ship. She climbed back on the deck to see him sleeping. But, his lips mumbled her name! She was drowned in a sea of emotions and placed her palm on his forehead.

Arulmozli came awake from his dream world. The golden sun was peeping up on the eastern horizon. Poonkuzlali's face was blooming like a lotus. "You called my name,

why?"

"Did I call you by name? I must have mumbled something in my sleep. Last night you were singing in your sleep. Why should I not talk when I sleep?" asked Prince Arulmozli. "Oh dear! I have been asleep too long. Where is Elder Mother?" Poonkuzlali told him about how she rode away early in the morning.

"Good. Ocean Princess, you seem rested and refreshed now. You can go now. I have to wait here till my friends come. I plan to examine this ship more carefully."

"Look over there!" she pointed to the far horizon. Far away across the expanse of sea they could see a large sailing ship. A row boat was coming towards the beach. Four or five persons were in that boat.

"Aha! Things may be clearer now," said Prince Arulmozli. Not wanting to miss that boat, he quickly climbed down from the deck and walked towards the sea shore. Poonkuzlali followed; the elephant ambled behind them. Soon they were upon the beach. The ship seemed to be moving farther and farther away. The row boat was coming closer and closer. Poonkuzlali who was hesitant for a while, now moved forward with curiosity. The Prince was amused by her curiosity. A smile danced on his lips. But, there was cause for concern.

He felt that he should have been on that ship which was going towards the horizon. It was leaving him behind. Moreover, one person seemed to be missing from the rowboat coming shorewards. Yes, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama was there; Mr Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi was there. Two soldiers and a boatman -- they were all there. But, where is that youth of the Noble Vaanar clan? Where was the Lord of Vallam? Where was Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan? Where was that cheerful young man, that brave soldier? That fearless warrior? That messenger sent by my dear sister Kundavai Pirati

Even though it had been a mere two days, Prince Arulmozli felt that Vandiya Devan had become his long time friend. Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan's character and nature had so enchanted the Prince. He was somewhat disappointed and saddened to not see him in that boat.

The boat had landed and the Commander and other men now jumped to the ground. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama ran to the Prince and enclosed him in a tight embrace.

"Sir! What have you done? How could you frighten us like this? How was the rogue elephant tamed? Look at it! How is that rogue so calm and quiet now? Prince, when did you come here? Did you meet those ships sent by the Lords of Pazluvoo? Where are they now?" the Commander rained a shower of questions.

"Commander, I will tell our story later. Where is Lord Vandiya Devan? Tell me!" said Arulmozli Varma.

"Oh that imprudent youth is on that ship which is sailing away." The Commander was pointing at the ship sailing away near the horizon.

"Why? Why? Whose ship is that? Why is Lord Vandiya Devan going away in that?" asked the Prince.

"Sir, I am totally confused now. Ask this Nambi. He seems to understand your affairs and the affairs of that young man."

Prince Arulmozli turned towards Azlvar-adiyan and said, "Mr. Thirumalai why is Vandiya Devan going on that ship? If you can, explain quickly."

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 47 -- Ghoulis Laughter

We are duty bound to tell our readers about what happened to those who were left behind when Poonkuzlali and Prince Arulmozli rode away on the rogue elephant.

"The elephant has turned rogue!" shrieked the Commander; and everyone believed him. They galloped on swift horses trying to catch up with that elephant. But, that was impossible; their journey was blocked when they reached Elephant Crossing. As usual, Vandiya Devan rode ahead before everyone. He drove his horse into the ford; the horse was caught in the mud of incoming tide. It was with much effort that they freed the beast; however, the horse was no longer fit for travel.

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama was perplexed and unable to take any decision. He kept banging his palms on his forehead in dismay, "Such a mishap has never happened in my whole life! Why are you all so quiet? What shall we do? Tell me, how shall we save the Prince? Does anyone have any ideas?"

Azlvar-adiyan stepped forward and spoke, "Sir, I have an idea. Shall I express it?"

"Are you waiting for an auspicious time to speak? Tell us quickly!"

"The elephant on which the Prince rode away. ... it has not really turned rogue or gone mad."

"What are you blabbering? Who turned mad? you?"

"No one has gone mad or rogue. The Prince suspected that you were unnecessarily delaying his journey. He incited the elephant to escape from us and went away quickly. We are all aware that the Prince is an expert in handling and taming elephants," said Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

The Commander felt that there could be some truth in this

idea. He felt a little reassured.

"Perhaps. I hope so. Anyway we should go to the mouth of River Thondai and find out what happens over there."

"Yes we have to go. We must walk along this sea-arm and look for a boat to cross this tide. Or we can wait till Lord Parthiban Pallava comes with his ship."

"Mr. Nambi! You are a cunning fellow. Perhaps you influenced the Prince somehow..."

"Sir, I have not spoken a single word to the Prince since we started on this journey."

After this, the party began walking eastward along the land bridge which was now covered with the rising tide. The northernmost tip of Lanka was a narrow necked peninsula known as Snake Island. The sea reached around in two narrow arms separating the two land areas. (See Map 3.) Snake Island was connected to the main island of Lanka by a very narrow strip of land known as Elephant Crossing. At low tide this land bridge was usually above the sea level and crossing was easy; at other times when the land bridge was immersed in water, crossing was difficult unless one had a boat. Since elephant herds usually crossed at this point, the ford came to be known as Elephant Crossing. In ancient times elephants were exported on ships that sailed from here.

At this time almost all the boats and ships in Lanka were either at Mattotam or Tricone Hill. Still, the Commander and his company looked for some kind of small craft that might have been left behind. Finally they found a small rowboat belonging to a Karaiyar fisherman. There was only one boatman and he refused to oblige. Finally, on realizing that it was the Chozla Commander, he agreed to take them. They crossed the ford on the boat and reached the other side. How were they to reach the river mouth? It was not easy to find their way across the forest. And, it would take much time. So they decided to continue in that same boat along the eastern coast till they reached the mouth of River Thondai. The boatman pulled the oars till midnight. After that, he was tired. He refused the offer of help from others.

"The coast is not easy from now onwards. We have to change directions very often and only those who are familiar with these parts can venture with the boat. If it hits any of the rocks the boat will be smashed into pieces. We can continue only after day break," said the boatman.

The Commander and his men were also tired. They decided to spend the night in a grove of trees on that shore. Vandiya Devan was not happy with these activities. He picked a quarrel with Azlvar-adiyan. "All this is because of you!" He accused the Vaishnava.

"Now, what did I do?" asked Azlvar-adiyan.

"You never speak the complete truth. I have been watching you from Kadamboor. You say something and keep the rest secret. You guessed the Prince's intentions about that elephant. Why did you not share that with me? If I had known, I too would have climbed on that elephant and gone with him. We have once again lost the Prince whom we found with much difficulty. What am I going to tell the Younger Pirati at Pazlayarai when I go back?"

"Your duty was done when you delivered the message and letter. Why worry now?"

"That's not it. My duty is done only after I take the Prince back to Pazlayarai and the Younger Pirati. It looks as if even you will hinder my efforts."

"No, my dear man no. I shall not hinder your effort. I shall take leave of the Commander in the morning and then go my own way."

"Your task is done. The Prince has been delivered to the enemy and so you wish to leave. I always suspected you and now I am sure!" said Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan. After this quarrel they too went to sleep.

When day was breaking in all its glory, Azlvar-adiyan woke up on hearing the sounds of a row boat. The sight before his eyes shocked him. A ship in full sail was a little away on the sea. It seemed ready to lift anchor and sail away. A row boat was going towards that ship from the shore. Three men in addition to the boatman were in that craft. Azlvar-adiyan did not need much time to realize that it was the boat that had brought them here last night. Very soon he guessed how that ship had appeared there so suddenly. The grove where they had camped was on the shores of a sea-arm. The sea had burrowed in a long narrow channel into the land. Trees hid the channel from all sides. The ship must have been hiding in that channel and sailed after day break.

Whose ship was it? Where did it come from? Where was it going? Why was the rowboat hurrying towards it? Who were the men in the boat? These questions flashed like lightning through Azlvar-adiyan's mind. "Commander, Commander," he shouted.

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama and Vandiya Devan and the other two men jumped awake. They saw the sailing ship at first. "That is a Chozla ship. Perhaps the ship sent by the Pazluvoor fellows! I wonder if the Prince is on that ship? What a terrible mistake to have fallen asleep!" said the Commander. He then asked, "Where is our boat? Let us see if we can catch the ship!"

By now he had spotted the rowboat. "Oh Good Lord! That is the boat we came in. Who are those men in it? Hey you, boatman! Stop! Turn back!" he shouted.

It is not clear if the boatman heard this or not. He did not stop. In fact he hurried ahead. Vandiya Devan stood

listening to this and watching. The words, "The Prince is on that ship!" uttered by the Commander, penetrated his ears and embedded in his mind. After that there was no scope for any other thought! No doubts about what he should do! His legs needed no orders! The next minute he had jumped into the sea. He pushed the waves aside with his powerful arms and began swimming. Fortunately the water was not too deep! Very soon he had gone far away and reached the row boat. Now the water had suddenly become very deep. "Oh Good Lord! I am drowning, help me!" he shouted.

Someone in that boat laughed. There was some conversation. The boat stopped and the boatman lent a hand to pull him in. Vandiya Devan was now seated in the boat which sped ahead.

Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan examined the other men in the boat. One was not of the Tamil people at all! He seemed to be of the Arab nation. How did he appear here? With some surprise he examined the other two. They had hidden half their faces with their head-bands. But, they were natives of these parts, of the Tamil lands. The faces were familiar. Where? Where did I see these faces? Yes ... these are the men who came back with Parthiban Pallava from Dampallae! Azlvar-adiyan identified them as the assassins who came to kill Prince Arulmozli. In fact I have seen one of them somewhere else! Is he not Ravidasa the Sorcerer? He hooted like an owl and came secretly to meet Young Queen Nandini of Pazluvoor. Oh well, perhaps they know that Prince Arulmozli is on that ship and that is why they are hurrying there! Another danger on the way! It is good that I hurried to catch this boat....

The boat was fast approaching the ship. The men maintained silence. Vandiya Devan could not tolerate the silence. He tried to strike up a conversation.

"Where are you all going?" he asked pleasantly.

"Don't you know? To that ship over there," said the Sorcerer. His face and mouth were half covered and his voice sounded ghoulish.

"Where is that ship sailing to?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"We will know that only after we reach that ship!" said Ravidasa the Sorcerer.

Silence reigned once again. Only the sea sounds reverberated. Ravidasa disturbed the quiet, "Where are you going young man?"

"I am also going to that ship."

"And then where are you going?"

"That will be known only after we board the ship."
Vandiya Devan read the lesson back to him.

The boat stopped beside the ship. A rope ladder was dropped from above. One by one the others climbed to the deck. Before they could pull it up, Vandiya Devan took hold of the ladder and clambered up. There was some sort of talk on the deck. It was an unfamiliar language; he quickly jumped on to the deck. He looked around quickly, shouting, "Where is the Prince?"

Even his iron heart was badly shaken by the sight that met his eyes. Several Arabs of frightening stature stood around him. Each one looked like a demon in disguise. Everyone was staring at him and none gave him a reply.

Vandiya Devan realized that he had made a big mistake. This is not a Chozla ship; it cannot be. These are not Tamil sailors. These are Arabs who bring the huge horses for trade. It is impossible that the Prince will be on this ship. I have been too hasty in coming here. How am I to escape? He ran to the side and leaned over to call, "Boatman, Stop!" he was about to jump down when an iron fist grabbed his throat from behind. One pull and one push Vandiya Devan was on the floor of the deck.

A humongous rage filled his thoughts as he jumped up and punched the faced of the man who had pushed him down. That six foot tall Arab toppled the man behind him and fell to the deck. A frightening growl was heard behind him; fortunately, Vandiya Devan turned back in time. Otherwise, a knife would have plunged into his back. As he turned, with one swift motion he pushed away the knife; the knife hit the deck with a clang and bounced into the sea. In the next instant five or six men had surrounded him and held him prisoner. They talked amongst themselves in some un-understandable language.

Their leader gave some commands in a harsh tone. They brought some rope and bound his hands and feet. Four men carried him down to the lower deck. Throughout this, Vandiya Devan kicked and struggled to get free. He was not successful. They carried him down to the hold and threw him on a stack of logs down below. They tied him to one of those logs and left. The ship swayed this way and that. It had started moving on its journey. The logs began to roll and he could not protect himself because his hands were tied.

"If I escape from this predicament, I shall not venture into anything hastily. I shall do things after considerable thought like that Azlvar-adiyan Nambi." Vandiya Devan was making resolutions when he heard some ghoulish laughter next to him. He turned his face with some effort to find Ravidasa standing next to him. He had now removed the mask hiding his face.

"Dear fellow! I came in search of that Chozla tiger cub. I did not find the tiger cub. Instead, I have found the Vaanar jackal. I am fortunate!" laughed the Sorcerer.

Of these aforesaid incidents, the men were aware only up to the point when Vandiya Devan boarded the ship. Even

the boatman did not know about the incidents on the deck. He had quickly returned to the shore.

The Commander and his men got into the rowboat. They knew that they could not catch up with the sailing ship; so, they decided to continue to the mouth of River Thondai and look around. Perhaps the other ship is still there. Maybe, the Prince is on that other vessel. Anyway they would come upon some information.

They questioned the boatman thoroughly. He knew nothing, "I was sleeping in my boat. At sunrise someone came and woke me up. They promised to pay me a large sum of money if I took them to the ship. I thought that I could be back before you all woke up. So, I took them. I know nothing else."

Azlvar-adiyan retold this history as far as he knew it, to the Prince.

Further, "Prince, when Vandiya Devan jumped into the sea, for one moment I considered following him. But, I am somewhat hesitant about the sea. Neither am I a good swimmer. Moreover, I had my own doubts about the ship that is sailing away. I felt that you could not be on board that vessel. I even doubt if it could be a Chozla ship. I have mentioned this to the Commander. We decided to come here before we do anything further. We were reassured only after seeing you here," said Azlvar-adiyan Thirumalai Nambi.

Arulmozli had listened attentively to all that was said by Azlvar-adiyan. "But, I am not reassured Thirumalai. Vandiya Devan is on that ship. The Lords of Pazluvoor will arrest him and throw him in Tanjore's dungeons!" said the Prince.

The Commander intervened, "Prince why do you tolerate the impertinence of those evil-doers? If only you would agree, I would control the insolence of those Pazluvoor lords by the next full moon and throw them in their own dungeons."

"Sir I do not think that you should even dream that I would act against the tiniest wish of my father," said Prince Arulmozli.

Hearing the hoofbeat of a fast approaching horse, they turned around. The horse stopped a little away from them. They were surprised to find a woman riding that great stallion without any saddle, stirrup or reins.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 48 -- The Commodore's Death

Prince Arulmozli recognized the woman on the stallion immediately. He hurried towards her; Poonkuzlali followed. The others hesitated a little behind. By then,

Mute-queen had dismounted. She looked worriedly at the men and then spoke in sign language to Poonkuzlali. "My aunt has seen something curious in the forest. She asks us to go over there."

Prince Arulmozli made up his mind to do so immediately. He asked Poonkuzlali to find out if the others could go also. Mute-queen considered this for a minute and then nodded approval.

As they followed her into the forest, they discussed the remarkable horse she had ridden. It was a wonderful, high bred stallion from Arabia. How did this woman get such a horse? No troops had landed in these parts in recent times; there had been no recent conflict or war campaign here... how did she acquire the horse?

Our readers are aware of the Chozla ship that had run aground in the marshes near the mouth of River Thondai. Lanka's coast meandered towards the south-east from this point. The sea often reached out in winding and twisting narrow arms, going far inland and often forming deep and narrow tidal basins. The ship that Vandiya Devan and his friends had seen in the morning had emerged from hiding in one such inland bay.

The Mute-queen was now leading them south-eastward into the deep coastal forest. As they walked quickly, Arulmozli's curiosity was aroused. Something important must have occurred; otherwise, this lady would not lead us so far. In an instant the incident was clear before them.

They could see an inland lagoon in the midst of a clearing in the forest. Some men lay dead on the shores of the water. The smell of dead bodies mingled with the smell of drying blood. Dead men's bodies and bloody carnage was nothing new to any of those warriors who had seen many battlefields. Even so, a thought rose in their minds: something mysterious, frightening and bizarre must have occurred -- disgust mingled with curiosity.

They went closer and examined the dead bodies to find that they were all sailors from Tamil lands. "Quick, quick! See if anyone is still alive!" ordered the Prince. His men began to examine each body individually. Mute-queen signed and led the Prince further away towards a tree beyond the water's edge. A terrifying figure lay prone beside that tree; it was a human being though his appearance made that difficult to believe. Every visible part of his body seemed to be wounded. Open wounds on his head were bleeding covering his face in a gory sight. His face, which was awaiting death any minute now, blossomed in a faint smile when it beheld Prince Arulmozli. He opened his lips and tried to speak; but, the blood that had caked in his mouth came gushing out making him appear even more ghoulish.

Prince Arulmozli hurried to his side ordering, "Quickly, bring him some water!"

That man said, "No need My Lord! This woman gave me water a little while ago. If she had not come, I would have died long ago. My Lord, I have suffered here in this life itself, the consequences for committing treason against you. I am sure that the Good God will not punish me once again for this in my after life!"

On hearing his quivering voice, Prince Arulmozli peered at his face, recognizing it. "Commodore! What is all this? What are you saying? How did this happen? What treason did you come here and commit? I cannot believe that of you!"

"My Lord, you say that out of the compassion and generosity of your nature. I came here on the orders of the Lords of Pazluvoor, to arrest you and take you back to Tanjore. Here is the order." The Commodore who was at death's gate pointed weakly at a letter pouch hidden in his waist-belt.

Prince Arulmozli did not take more than a minute to glance through that order. "Where is treason on your part in this? You came to obey the orders of the Emperor. Knowing that, I was hurrying to meet you. Meanwhile, how did this misfortune come upon you? Tell me quickly."

"I know; I have to be quick; else I may not be able to share it with you at all!" After that, the Commodore retold the following tale with many a pause to regain his fading breath.

On receiving his orders from the Emperor, the Commodore left with two ships from the port of Nagapattinam. He was not happy with his assignment; but, unable to oppose the Emperor's orders, he left. As he was leaving, the Lords of Pazluvoor had given him certain strict instructions. First, as soon as he reached the shores of Eezlam (Lanka) he was to anchor his ships in some hidden isolated spot and proceed after finding the whereabouts of the young Prince. Later, he was to personally meet the royal Prince and give him the Emperor's orders. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama should not come to know of this matter. After the orders were delivered, if the Prince came willingly with him, it was well and good; if he resisted, the Commodore was to arrest him and bring him back. After this, the nobles of Pazluvoor has sent some of their confidential retainers to accompany the Commodore.

The Chozla Commodore left with a heavy heart; the men under him were not aware of the details of their mission. He worried about how he would explain the assignment to his men. He anchored his ships near the mouth of River Thondai and left with a small company of sailors to the port town of Gangesan Thurai, wishing to ask around about how he could find the Prince. He found out that the Prince was inspecting parts of Southern Lanka and came back to his ship.

By that time his seamen somehow came to know the truth about their journey. Pazluvoor men in the ships had talked;

and the news spread. The Chozla sailors gathered around their chief and began questioning him. "Have we come here to arrest Ponniyin Selvan? The darling of our Cauvery?" The Commodore told them the truth, "We are in service to the Emperor. We have to obey his orders." The men were not pacified, "We cannot do so; these cannot be the Emperor's orders. The Pazluvoor nobles must have given the orders and we are not bound to obey them!"

On hearing their cries, the Commodore asked them, "Then what do you wish to do?"

"We wish to go to Mattotam and join the Prince's army."

"The Prince is not in Mattotam."

"We can seek asylum with Commander Lord Velir of Kodumbalur."

The Commodore tried to argue with them and tried to convince them in many ways. But, that was impossible. Only ten men, including the four from Pazluvoor, were ready to stand by his side. How was he to control two hundred men with ten?

So he gave them permission, "Fine, get lost immediately. And be responsible for the consequences. I shall do my duty as far as possible."

Some of the sailors wished to take one of the ships and sail to Mattotam. Others objected. Finally they abandoned ship and left by land. In their hurry, they did not anchor the ship properly. In the night the ship moved with the incoming tide and hit the sandbar. It's hull was broken and the ship was beached. After this mishap, the Commodore did not wish to remain in that spot with his other ship. There was further cause for his concern. At Gangesan Thurai he had heard some alarming news. A few days ago, an Arab pirate ship had sunk on the rocky shores north of Mullai Island. Some of those ruffians who had escaped were now wandering in these parts. Therefore, he did not wish to remain near the beached ship. He navigated one of the narrow sea arms which went deep inland and anchored his ship in the concealed spot. That night they discussed further action and decided that the ten men were to remain with the ship guarding it. He alone would journey south and find the Prince. But, the men were not happy with the idea. Even as they were discussing alternate plans, several men surrounded them with terrifying cries. They were men from Arab countries. The Tamil men did not expect this sudden attack. They were making camp and were not prepared for a fight. None had any useful weapons in their hands. Still, they fought a valiant and vicious battle. And all had lost their lives.

"My Lord, I alone ran with all my death wounds and hid myself in the forest. I saved myself merely to tell someone about what really happened. My Prince, I was fortunate to meet you in person and tell you all of this shameful tale. I

have received the punishment due for my treacherous acts. My Lord Ponnaiyan Selva! Please forgive me!" said the Commodore of Chozla ships.

"My most dutiful Commodore! Why should I forgive you? If in truth there is a heaven meant for the brave who die in battlefields, you will surely reach that abode." The Prince comforted the dying man and soothed his brow. Tears flowing from the Commodore's eyes mingled with the drying blood on his face. With much effort he lifted his palms and folded them in greeting to the Prince. The Commodore's tears washed the Prince's hands. Teardrops peeked at the corners of Arulmozli's eyes. Very soon the Commodore's spirit left his body.

Ponnaiyan Selvan

Chapter 49 -- Ship Hunt

They placed the Commodore's body and all the other dead bodies in one pile; with dry wood collected from the forest they made a funeral pyre. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama noticed that tears were streaming down Arulmozli's face when the funeral pyre began burning.

"Sir, you shed tears for these sinners! God has given justice to the traitors who came to imprison you. Why do you grieve for them?" asked Commander Bhoothi Vikrama.

"Commander these men are not traitors; neither am I grieving for them. I lament that such distressing times should become the lot of the Chozlas!" said Prince Arulmozli.

"Distressing times came as soon as Pazluvoor fellows came into our country. Nothing new has come about now!" growled the Commander.

"Indeed, things new have come about! What worse doom can befall a nation than the fate that a ship's men would mutiny and disobey the orders of their Commodore! Commander this is a small sign, a mere crack. I wonder what other, bigger cracks are about to undermine this Chozla Empire. If such fractures occur, the very foundations laid by my forefather Vijayala Chozla will be shaken and this great Empire destroyed. Should this catastrophe come about because of me? I have heard the story of Mahabarata. When Duriyodana, the evil cousin was born, wolves and jackals howled ominously -- says the story. Wolves and jackals must have howled frighteningly when I was born also!" said Arulmozli the royal Prince.

"My Dear Sir! Whatever good omens that can ever be seen were seen when you were born! The astrologers who computed your horoscope"

"Stop it Commander, stop it! My ears are tired of hearing these words. Forget the fate of my horoscope.... Anyway,

the time has come for us to part. I have another request of you. If those sailors and soldiers who mutinied against their Commodore come to you asking to join your command, you must not accept them. Arrest all of them immediately and send them back to Tanjore."

"Sir, we have heard the version told by the Commodore. We have not found out what the sailors have to say. How can we pass sentence by merely hearing the story of one party. That is not proper law or justice. Please come with me. When those men arrive at Mattotam, we shall make proper enquiries and then decide...."

"Sir, that is not possible now. You do what you think is appropriate. I cannot tarry even a minute longer in this place. I shall leave immediately. Where is that boatman?"

"Where do you wish to go, Prince? Why do you want that boatman?"

"Do you need to ask me such a question? I have to find that ship that is carrying away Vandiya Devan. That brave man has boarded a ship under the control of evil Arab pirates, entrapped in grave danger because of me! How can I abandon him? Do I have to add to the heinous sins committed by me by forsaking a dear friend in need?" asked Arulmozli.

"Sir, I am not aware of any sin committed by you. Neither will the world accept even if you swear it. Vandiya Devan is a hasty and imprudent youth. How could you become responsible for dangers that he tempts upon himself? How does betrayal of friendship come into the picture here? Prince, I do not even like the fact that you should embrace some wandering fortune seeker as a dear friend! Only men of equal status can become friends."

"Commander, I have no time to waste on word duels. Even if I should not call him friend, I am beholden to him. What have all the ancients, including Valluvan the poet said? Chozlas never forget a favor! I shall not violate that fame. I have to leave now and look for that ship."

"How shall you go? Where would you look?"

"I shall go in that boat you came in...."

"How can you hunt a lion with rabbits? How could you hope to find a sailing ship on the high seas with this tiny rowboat? Even if you do find the ship, what can you do?" asked the bewildered Commander.

"I can go in the boat! If the boat collapses, I shall tie myself to a log raft and swim! Even if that ship carrying away Vandiya Devan has crossed the seven seas, I will follow it. After that, if I am unable to save my friend, I shall give up my own life in the attempt. Where is that boatman?" said an impassioned Prince. He noticed the boatman standing aside talking to Poonkuzlali. Mute-queen was standing next to them. The Prince hurried

towards them.

He noticed Poonkuzlali arguing with tears of rage in a passionate manner with that boatman. "Oh Dear! What is this? Another internal disturbance?" asked Arulmozli.

The boatman suddenly fell at Arulmozli Varma's feet, "My Lord, I have sinned unknowingly! I have sinned for love of money! Forgive me, Oh Lord!" he said.

"What nonsense is this? ... Poonkuzlali? Is everyone ganged up to make me go mad? Can you explain what this is?"

"Prince I was ashamed to say it all this time; this fellow is my brother! He brought those two sinners, the assassins, from Kodi Karai to Lanka in his boat. He was waiting on this shore on their orders. This morning he took them in his boat to that ship we saw sailing at day break. Your friend is also on that ship..."

"My Lord! Chop me with your sword and kill me immediately! I did not know that those men were such heinous traitors! I would have never done it if I knew! Please kill me with your own hands," wailed the boatman who was still prostrate!

"My Good Man! At this point in time your life is a priceless treasure for me! Come, let us go! Take me also to that very same ship. That is your atonement for the misdeeds committed by you. Hurry, let us go," said Prince Arulmozli.

The boatman ran to the beach and pulled his boat into the water. The Prince was examining the horizon with crinkled eyes. "There! I can see the ship. We can catch up."

Commander Bhoothi Vikrama was also examining the horizon. "Prince, a ripe fruit had slipped into nectar!" he said.

"What do you mean? Such good words from you!"

"That ship which I can see is not the ship that has Vandiya Devan on board. It is the ship of Lord Parthiban Pallava. It seems to be coming from the direction of Tricone Hill. It is coming towards us. Can you not see?" asked the Commander with some joy.

"Yes! You are right! That is very good. Parthiban is coming here with some other ideas; but, his coming is timely. We can hunt the lion with a tiger! I am not going to wait till that ship comes here. I shall go in this boat and reach it."

"Prince, along with you, on that boat ... I ..."

"None of you need come with me on the boat. I shall find it very helpful if you all stay back here... Mr. Thirumalai Nambi, the orders are for you also! Anyway you are a bit

afraid of the sea, are you not?"

"Yes My Lord. I was intending to stay back anyway. My orders are to guard you as long as you remain in Lanka. The Prime Minister is at Madurai. I have to go back and report these developments to him...." Azlvar-adiyan was saying.

Prince Arulmozli was impatient, "Do that! Poonkuzlali you too must stay back. Do not worry about your brother -- I'll take care. You said that you had left your boat somewhere here. Find it and go your way. I shall never forget you or your help.... Foolish Girl! Wipe those tears away! What will those men looking at you think?"

After this the Prince went up to the Mute-queen and was about to bow and touch her feet. She prevented him from that, kissing his forehead and hugging him in blessing. In an instant, the Prince had waded into the sea and jumped into the restless boat.

The men and women on the shore stood watching as the boat sped away. Prince Arulmozli in the boat kept gazing at the people left behind on the shore. He glanced at everybody once; and his eyes came to rest on the tear laden face of Poonkuzlali.

What a surprising phenomena! As one draws farther away, things should grow smaller to one's eyes -- the figures of all others on that shore did indeed grow smaller and smaller. But, Poonkuzlali's face alone seemed to grow bigger and bigger. It came closer and closer to the Prince. Arulmozli shook himself once and turned his eyes away. A scene from the previous night's dream came back to him: his sister, Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi's words, "Thambi! Don't forget that Vanathi is waiting here for you!" came floating clearly above the noisy waves.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 50 -- Aabathudavis

Parthiban Pallava was filled with an astonishment that was impossible to describe. When he saw Prince Arulmozli on the rowboat approaching his ship, he felt as if, God whom he had gone to worship, not only appeared in person, but, also spoke, "Ask and every wish of thine shall be met!" Still, why is he coming alone like this in a small boat? What happened to the ships sent by the nobles of Pazluvoor? Perhaps he is not aware that this is my ship -- he thinks that this is one of the ships that came to take him prisoner!

Soon his doubts were cleared. As soon as he came aboard, Prince Arulmozli brought Parthiban Pallava up to date on the events that had transpired in northern Lanka with a few brief words. "Vandiya Devan is in a ship seized by Arab pirates. We have to somehow free him."

Parthiban was transported with joy by the news brought by Arulmozli Varma. "Everything is shaping up very well. If that imprudent fellow had not been so hasty things would have been even better. However, we should not abandon him to foreigners. That ship could not have gone too far. We can catch up with it."

He called for his ship's Captain and explained the situation briefly.

"We need not be concerned about that My Lord. If the wind blows steadily like this, we can catch that ship before nightfall. That ship cannot escape us. It has to go towards Kodi Karai and sail along the coast," declared that experienced Sea-captain.

Nevertheless, the Lord of Winds was disposed otherwise. By and by the wind was dying down. By mid-day even a whisper of a breeze was not alive. The sea was utterly calm without a shimmer of a wave. An unbearable mugginess descended on them. The Sun-god shone his fiery light on the sky showering flames on the water. Of course, the sea was not hot to touch: it did not appear like a sea of water, rather sea of boiling, smoking oil. Sun-rays shone like molten metal on the water. The ship did not move though every sail on every mast was fully unfurled. Soon, even the sound of fluttering sails hitting against their masts died down. There was no sound from the masts and cross-beams; no sound from sail cloth rubbing against ropes; no sound of a ship cleaving through water. It was an unbearable quiet.

Prince Arulmozli was becoming more and more fretful about Vandiya Devan's fate. "The breeze has died and this ship is still! How long will this last? When will the wind rise again? Wouldn't that ship escape us now?" he asked with some worry.

Parthiban looked at his ship's Captain. The Sea-captain said, "The wind cannot die like this for much longer. A whirlwind is rising somewhere nearby. It will come soon and cross our path; or it might miss us and go away. Whether the whirlwind crosses our path or not, one thing is certain. The sea is going to rise and boil soon. All this calm is temporary. By night, mountain sized waves will batter this ship. We will fly up to the top of those mountains as well as float down to the depths of deep ravines as we rise and fall with the stormy waves."

"Is it not dangerous if the whirlwind hits our ship?"

"It is no simple danger! Only God should save us if that happens!"

"So, it may be impossible for us to find that ship!" said a concerned Prince.

"My Lord, the sea and the wind have no favorites. Our fate must have befallen that ship too. At present that vessel too would be at a standstill...."

"Perhaps, if it had reached some shore?...."

"If it is near a coast, the men in it might be able to land and save their lives. But, their ship will surely be lost if it is near a rocky coast in the storm," declared the Sea-captain.

"No calamity is frightening if our near and dear are by our side!" The faces of lively Vandiya Devan and bashful Poonkuzlali appeared in his mind's eye again and again. Where are they now? What are they doing? What are they thinking?

Let us now return to Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan whom we had abandoned in a truly dangerous situation.

He was lying tied to a log, in the hold of that ship which had come to arrest Prince Arulmozli. He was thrown amidst other logs and bales of provisions that filled the hold. For a long time he was in a daze; he thought that his hasty, imprudence embroiled him in unspeakable danger was tormenting him. He worried over these questions again and again: What ship is this? Who owns it? How are these rough Arabs and Sorcerer Ravidasa together in this? Where is this ship going? What will they do with me? No answer could be found. All his dreams about his brilliant future were to remain mere dreams. Sometimes a flash of hope: I have overcome difficulties worse than this; can I not find a way out of this too? Let me wait and see; as long as my mind has not lost its cunning; as long as my body has not lost its breath -- I need not lose all hope.

Once revived by such encouraging thoughts, he began looking around. It was some time before he could discern things in that darkness. He saw several weapons piled in one corner of the hold. The rope was twisted tightly around his body; but, his hands were not bound very tight. It was possible to slowly free his hands; grab a knife from that corner; cut the rope tied around his legs and body. After that? What? The door to this hold is closed. How am I to get out. After getting out, how am I to face all those rough Arab brutes, that sorcerer and his companion? -- Even if I am able to handle all of them, kill them all-- what can I do after that? Can I single handed, sail this ship? I know nothing about ships!

I should not be hasty again. Patience is a virtue to be courted now. They have not killed me; merely bound me. That is an encouraging thought! What will they do with me? But, as time passed, his patience was severely tested. The hold grew more and more stuffy: he was being broiled alive in a steam-pot. Sweat poured down his face and body. He had not realized that a sea voyage would be so uncomfortable. He remembered Poonkuzlali and the night-crossing in her boat. What a cool breeze it was that night! How comfortable it had been! A world of difference from that and this. People talk about lime kilns. This must be it. Soon, he sensed some change. Yes; the ship had stopped moving. It seemed to be standing still, rooted to one spot. The humidity became worse. Thirst increased and his

tongue became stuck to his mouth. I cannot be patient anymore; find that knife and cut these ropes. Let me get out and explore. There must be some drinking water, somewhere...

He looked around again -- Ah! in another corner a mound of coconuts! Why search for salt on a sea shore? Those coconuts will relieve my thirst and hunger! He loosened the knots around his wrists and was reaching out towards a gleaming knife...

Footsteps. Door opening. He pulled his hand back. Ravidasa and his friend, who had come earlier were standing on his two sides. "How is the sailing trip my friend? Is it pleasure filled?" asked Ravidasa.

"Thirst is killing me; some water?" Vandiya Devan spoke with some difficulty.

"Ah! We are thirsty too. Those wretched fellows did not leave any water."

"Goddess Kali is more thirsty than all of us. Blood Thirst!" said the other fellow.

Vandiya Devan turned to look at him.

"Do you not remember me Thambi? You have forgotten! Remember the divine dancer who was in a trance after the Gypsy Dance at Kadamboor? Remember his words in the trance, 'Kali wants a sacrifice; a thousand year old royal sacrifice...' remember?"

"Yes; I recall -- you are him; the divine-dancer," mumbled Vandiya Devan.

"Yes; I am he; Thevaralan. We came to Lanka to sacrifice a royal Princeling of thousand-year ancestry. It was not successful. We tried to send that Vaishnava fanatic to Vishnu's Heaven. No success in that either! But, you came into the trap yourself. I am happy; my Goddess must be satisfied for now with the blood of petty nobility!" laughed Thevaralan.

"Why the delay?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"How can we sacrifice a brave young man like you in any ordinary place? After we go ashore, we have to gather all the priests, hold a festival and give you up in sacrifice. Most important, the Priestess must be present!"

"Priestess? Who?"

"Do you not know? Nandini, the Young Queen of Pazluvoor!"

Vandiya Devan considered this for some minutes. "If you really wish to do that, give me some water quickly. Otherwise, I will die here of thirst."

"There is no water on board Thambi!"

"Aren't you a Sorcerer?"

"Yes! Yes! I have cast a spell. Are you not aware that this ship is standing still? By night, a whirlwind will rise; a storm will swirl around us. Rain will thunder down."

"What use is rain to me? You will be above deck; I will be here below..."

"You can come up too. Quench your thirst in the rain... if you listen to us."

"What are you saying?"

"We say that those Arab fiends should be sacrificed to the Ocean King."

"Why?"

"They wish to take this ship to Kalinga Country. We wish to disembark at Kodi Karai or Nagapattinam."

"They are six men; ruffians."

"Three are asleep now. The other three are half asleep. We three can take care of the three sleepers now. The remaining three can then be handled..."

Vandiya Devan gave no reply.

"Why Thambi? Why are you thinking? We can loosen your knots if you agree."

Vandiya Devan thought of the Prince in Lanka. No. Never. He will never agree to such a plan. He will never agree to kill sleeping men.

"I cannot. It is abhorrent to kill sleeping men."

"Fool! These pirates killed Chozla men when they were sleeping."

"If others do atrocious deeds, why should I do the same?"

"Fine; as you wish." Ravidasa picked up a sharp sword from the pile in the corner. Thevaralan picked up a small weapon which looked like a pestle with a tassel of iron spikes. They left without closing or bolting the door. Immediately after that, Vandiya Devan grabbed a knife and cut his ropes, freeing himself. He jumped up and picked up a coconut from the corner. Broke it open and quenched his thirst. He then hid the rest of the coconuts behind some sack-cloth. A good sword that would help a good fight was soon selected. He was ready to step out any minute.

"Thud. Thud." Twice. Two bodies thrown into the sea. A big shout; some altercation -- clashing swords -- various such sounds came down from the deck. Vandiya Devan

ran up with a drawn sword. Four Arabs were attacking Ravidasa and Thevaralan. They were in a perilous position. Vandiya Devan jumped forward with a roar. The Arab leader turned around. One swoop of his sword and the Arab lost his weapon to the sea. A cut graced the pirate's face even as Vandiya Devan rushed ahead without a paused step. With a face turned horrible by the gushing blood, the Arab came at him with bunched fists. Vandiya Devan danced aside and the Arab fell with his own momentum, tripping on his own feet. A cross beam dislodged by his fall came thudding down on him.

Vandiya Devan fenced with a second Arab for some time and finally drove him overboard into the sea. Ravidasa and Thevaralan were not very experienced in arm to arm combat. They were finding it more and more difficult to tackle the two strong foreigners. Hearing the sound of something falling into the sea, the two Arabs slightly turned to see what had happened to their friend. That was enough opportunity for the Tamil men to finish those foreigners. All was done.

The three victors sat down to rest on that deck.

"Young Man, you came at the right moment. How did you free yourself?"

"You must have cast your spell. The rope came loose by itself! This sword appeared in my hands."

"What about your thirst?"

"A coconut appeared above my head. It broke by itself and poured milk into my mouth."

"Ah, you are a clever fellow!" They laughed and laughed at this joke!

"Thambi, we were testing you. We had loosened your ropes and left those weapons by your side; those coconuts too," said Ravidasa.

Vandiya Devan was not sure if they spoke the truth. he kept quiet.

"Thambi, think about this. Do you want to be alive? Do you want to live and go ashore; gaze upon the faces of your kith and kin once again? Do you wish for wealth and comfort? Position and power? Tell us if you like that! Join us, all that will be yours!" thundered Ravidasa.

Vandiya Devan asked, "You killed those sleeping men. Did you not?"

"We managed only two. The third woke up by then. If you had come earlier, our task would have been much easier."

"What law permits the killing of sleeping men? How could you do that?"

"If you are hesitant of such minor dilemma, what will you do about major problems? If you are ready to throw your lot with us"

"You keep saying "us"; Who? Who are you all?"

Ravidasa spoke to Thevaralan. "There is no point in hiding our secrets from him anymore. He must either join our group or be sacrificed to this ocean. Let us tell him."

"Fine. Tell Him everything," agreed Thevaralan.

"Listen, Thambi, we are the Aabathudavis, the bodyguards of King Veera-pandiya of Madurai. We have sworn blood oaths to guard his life with our own...." began Ravidasa.

"You could not succeed in that! Prince Aditya Karikala won!"

"How did he win? Because of the foolishness of a woman! She had much confidence in the powers of her enchantments. She believed that she could make that Chozla king-cobra dance to her tunes. Yes, the snake did raise it's hood and dance to her tune. But, it showed its poisonous tongue in between. Our King's head rolled in the dust. They took it to Tanjore; The took the head in a procession on an open palanquin. Aha! Tanjore! Tanjore! Wait and watch the state to which that city will be reduced! Wait Thambi, wait!"

As he spoke, Ravidasa's red eyes widened and spilled fire. His whole body shook in rage. His teeth ground with each other and raised a frightening sound. Thevaralan seemed to be in a similar state.

"What is done is done! What can you do about that now? You cannot bring back Veera-pandiya to life."

"We cannot bring back Veera-pandiya to life. Even my sorcery has no such power. But, we will take revenge on those who killed him; we swear vengeance on the killer, his friends and their very roots and shoots. We will kill those snakes of the Chozla clan with offspring and family; wreck havoc on their dwelling and land. Will you join us? Say it!"

"After destroying the Chozla clan, what would you do?"

"We will crown whoever is selected by our Great-queen."

"Who is your Great-queen?"

"You know her, Thambi. She masquerades as Pazluvoor's Young Queen for now."

"Then, what about Lord Madurandaka?"

"He too is a snakeling."

"Lord Pazluvoor?"

"Ah! You think we will take that old fool as our King? We make use of his power and wealth, we ..."

"That's why your Queen dwells in his house!"

"Correct! You guess well."

"You said that a woman was the cause for Veera-pandiya's death."

"She was also Nandini. She had promised to guard our wounded King fallen in battle, but, could not keep her promise. We were about to burn her thinking that she had turned traitor. We let her live because she swore an oath with us: we will seek blood revenge. She has kept her promise till this date. If she had not helped we could not have achieved this much."

"You don't seem to have achieved much!" heckled Vandiya Devan

"Be patient, young man, be patient," said Ravidasa.

Thevaralan now opened his mouth, "He knows our secret now. But he has not said anything!"

"Thambi, what do you say? Will you join us? Who know? Luck may smile upon you. You may ascend the great Tamil Throne of Madurai."

If it had been some weeks ago, Vandiya Devan would have gladly agreed! But his whole attitude to life had changed after three days of friendship with Arulmozli Varma. He had lost interest in trickery and falsehood. He wished to change the topic, "How did you find this ship? How did you make friends with those Arab pirates?"

"That was by the power of my spells. We bought some horses from them at Tricone Hill. We were able to follow you and your friends everywhere because of those horses. We saw the Prince crossing at Elephant Crossing. We decided to come to Thondai Mouth before him and hurried through a forest short-cut. There we found that our old friends had captured the Chozla ship. They had lost their own ship near Mullai Island. They asked us to be their guide along the coast. We thought we were lucky."

"How?"

"We overheard the conversation between that snakeling Chozla and his Commander. We heard that he would somehow return to the mainland. And another thing, Thambi, there is a female ghou in Lanka. Is was casting counter spells against our spells and guarding the Prince. But, that ghou will never step on Chozla country.

Vandiya Devan remembered the incidents of that night in Anuradapura. Ravidasa laughed. "Why this laughter?" asked Vandiya Devan.

"Nothing. I was thinking about those Arabs. You say how rough and uncultured they were? These men think nothing of killing men and women. But, they have a limitless love for horses. They said that they do not ride horses in their country unless the horses are shod with iron shoes over their hooves. They called us uncultured barbarians worse than beasts because we keep our horses unshod. They think it a crime to even sell horses to us. Do you know what happened this morning?"

"Tell me."

"We had all gone aboard ship. Opened sail and were about to leave. At that time we heard a horse galloping on the shore. That was it. They suspected that it might be one of their horses which had escaped from the shipwreck near Mullai Island. One of them insisted on going back to shore and finding out. They were not ready to leave until he found out! We came back with him."

"Then?"

"We did not find the horse. We found you! That was much better. We could put an end to those horse lovers easily because of you."

"He has not yet answered our question," reminded Thevaralan.

"I shall answer you. I have accepted allegiance to serve the Chozlas. I can never join you men."

"Are you one of the Velaikara's? Have you sworn an oath?"

"Nothing like that."

"Then why hesitate? You are a soldier of fortune. You should join the forces that have more opportunity."

Vandiya Devan did not reveal to them that he was now bound to the Chozlas by bonds stronger than any blood oath. What reasons does he need to promise life-long fidelity to the Chozla's more than a glance in the corner of her eye or a smile dancing on Kundavai's lips? And what about that incomparable friendship of Prince Arulmozli. After that, could anyone change?

"Whatever it is, I cannot join your murdering group."

"Then get ready to sacrifice your life to the Ocean King," said Ravidasa.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 51 -- Whirlwind

Not a breeze did blow; no sea stirred; neither did the ship move. Vandiya Devan gazed quietly at the sea which looked like a calm and placid reservoir; his heart churned with a turbulence not reflected outside. Suddenly he stretched both his hands towards the sea and shouted, "Ohm! Hreem! Hraam, vashasht!" as if he was casting some spell.

He had already picked up the broad-sword before swirling like a wheel, twice or thrice. "Yes, yes! The Ocean King wants a sacrifice! He wants two braves, two murderers who kill sleeping men. He will not let this ship move unless he gets the sacrifice! Come, both of you! Quickly bend your heads, quick quick!"

Ravidasa stared in amazement at Vandiya Devan who was laughing once again like a maniac, "HA HA HA!"

"Thambi, what is this joke about?"

"My Dear Brothers! This is no joke; this is fate! Sometime ago when I lay bound below deck, I dozed for a while and saw a dream. A huge, blue spirit, that filled the horizon from sea to sky, stood before me and said something. I could not understand its words. Now, it is clear: this Ocean King wants two men, two experts in sorcery and witchcraft, two devotees of Kali, as his sacrifice. He refuses to let go of this ship unless he has the sacrifice. He is not satisfied with the sacrifice of six Arab pirates. So, come quickly." Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan raised his sword.

Ravidasa and Thevaralan looked at each other. "Thambi, we have not seen anyone with an imagination as vivid as yours."

"Don't you believe my words? You think I am making all this up? Fine ... Oh Ocean King tell them yourself...."

Perhaps the Ocean King had heard his words and wished to reply! A curious thing happened over that seascape. A shiver seemed to run through the waters spreading towards the horizon in all directions. Tiny, tiny wavelets, a thousand little waves rose everywhere. Just one minute of this. Next instant, every wavelet was transformed into droplets of white foam. Those foam waves danced across the waters spreading here, there, everywhere. Millions and millions of white Thumbai flowers tumbled across expanses of green-grass meadows. Yes, a little breeze, a cool wind hugged that ship for a minute and went away. The ship shivered for a second. Vandiya Devan also shivered. Ravidasa laughed even louder, "Thambi the Ocean has replied; we must give ourselves as the sacrifice."

Vandiya Devan was confused and shocked by the change

that had suddenly come upon the sea. What has happened to the thousands and thousands of wavelets? Where have the million droplets of foam gone? The sea is calm once again. Did I imagine differently just a minute ago? Perhaps this Sorcerer had cast some powerful spell....

"Look Thambi, the Sky God approves of the Ocean Kings wishes." He was pointing towards the horizon -- a blue sky mingled with the green water -- a thick black pillar was rising towards the sky. The pillar had a fiery red top that swirled swiftly. Vandiya Devan would not have even remarked upon this ordinarily. Odd shaped clouds were natural; particularly over the sea. But, at that time, even that small cloud kindled terror in his heart. "I should not fall into a trap of this cunning Sorcerer. He steadied himself once again. "Do not hesitate come ..." said Vandiya Devan as he began to swing his sword.

"Thambi, we are ready to be sacrificed; before that, give us a few minutes to offer prayers to our chosen Goddess," asked Ravidasa.

"Fine, finish your prayers quickly and come back. Do not try any of your sorcery spells on me! They will not work."

"We will be back in a minute. See, we will leave our weapons here." They dropped their weapons and moved aside behind the sails. Vandiya Devan also needed a few minutes; he wished to recuperate his strength and collect his thoughts confused by the changes over the seascape. He was ready to kill both those traitors with one swoop of his sword, if the need arose. However, he was not sure if he had the strength to do so. He needed the respite.

His eyes wandered back to the southwest horizon. The black pillar had by now grown tremendously. Its flaming top was less bright. It seemed to be growing even as he watched. The breeze had picked up once again and was now blowing steadily. The sea was beginning to stir; waves began dancing again. The cloud group was growing and approaching closer. The ship began to sway; wind whistled in the sails and waves splashed against the sides ... Well! What was that other sound? Something fell into the sea? Vandiya Devan walked around the mast poles to the other side. Ravidasa and Thevaralan were not there. Perhaps they have gone to the other end ... But, what is that noise? Paddles splashing, someone rowing a boat!

He ran to the side and looked down. The sight that met his eyes threw him into shock! He had not expected that! He had thought that they had gone to confer on how to pacify him. But, they had gone aside to lower the rowboat from the other side. They had already climbed down and begun to row... Ravidasa laughed cunningly, "My Dear Fellow we are not ready to be sacrificed."

Vandiya Devan realized his predicament. They were abandoning him in that large wooden ship. He knew nothing about sailing or ship navigation. They were truly deserting him. "You traitors! Could you not take me with

you?"

"How can we disappoint the Ocean King? He needs at least one sacrifice!" The rowboat was pulling away quickly. Vandiya Devan wondered if he should jump into the sea and swim to that boat. No, I cannot swim very well; even if I manage to reach the boat I am not sure about those rogues. I know their secrets; they know that I would never become one of them. They may beat me to death with the paddle. I cannot battle with them while trying to float on the water.

Good. Let them go; get lost. It is better to be abandoned on a lost ship than be with them in a small boat. God has helped me escape other tricky situations. God will show a way... Perhaps, I should not have let them escape. Where would they land? What other treachery have they planned? What can I do. First, I must somehow get back to the Prince. He should not have forsaken me like that. He could have taken me along with Poonkuzlali on that elephant. I must ask him about that when we meet again, "Is this an example of that famous Chozla friendship?" I wonder if I would ever have the opportunity to ask him that question. I am sure to see him again. Azlvar-adiyan and the Commander know that I am in this predicament. They will surely do something about it. They will surely tell the Prince about me....

By now the rowboat had gone quite far away. How did it go so quickly? Ah this ship has been moving away too in the opposite direction! These waves are growing bigger and bigger; they sky seems to be becoming darker and darker. The black cloud pillar had now grown to fill the west. Soon, large patches of soot-black clouds were racing across the sky. The sun quickly vanished over the west and dusk covered everything in a blanket of darkness. It was difficult to discern where the sea ended and sky began -- everything was one dark black patch. Clouds were filling the eastern skies too. He could not see the rowboat any more. It had vanished from his sight. The wind was beginning to roar in competition with the cacophony of swelling waves.

Unfurled sails on the ship's masts began to flap noisily. The logs and boards on the deck began to roll and crash, starting their own symphony of noise. He looked at the hoisted sails and guessed that the ship was not racing towards any one direction. It was swirling round and round aimlessly. Whirlwind! They talk about whirlwinds. This must be it! He had heard somewhere that sails must be rolled up and stowed away when the ship was caught in a whirlwind. But, how was that to be done? Could he do it alone? Perhaps it is a job for ten men! I cannot do anything about it now. God can take care. It is impossible to save this large ship single handed. I know what will happen. This ship is going to be battered this way and that; waves will dash against it from all sides and soon break it into pieces or sink it to the depths. There is no doubt about my fate now! Death by drowning at mid-sea!

That astrologer at Kudanthai did not say a word about this. Useless astrologer. If only I meet him again I shall teach him some astrology.....

Something cool fell on his shoulders; one, two, many pebble sized hail-stones showered over him. Each stone shone like crystal gems -- see how they are falling from the sky; a pain when they hit me, then a coolness. Look on the deck, the sea, they are everywhere and they melt so quickly. He had never seen a hailstorm till then. He was happy to have enjoyed that experience before his untimely death. He began gathering those hailstones playing with them. Their fiery cool touch amazed him. The hail storm stopped as suddenly as it had started. It had not even lasted half an hour! Soon a heavy downpour came crashing down. He saw the rain cascade over the deck, run down the ship's sides and fall into the sea.

He was enthralled by the mastery of Chozla carpenters and ship-builders: even if huge waves washed over the deck, the water would flow over the sides and fall back into the sea; as long as the door to the hold was bolted shut tightly. Unless, the hull broke and water filled the hold, the ship would not sink. He felt encouraged by this observation. He ran to look at the hold-door; it was banging noisily in the wind, letting rain get into the hold. Quickly he pulled it shut and bolted the hold firmly.

If the wind and rain are unbearable, I could perhaps hide in there! Those fools, leaving the safety of this well built ship, venturing into this unfriendly sea! However, that boat was also well built. It was a catamaran. Even the most turbulent sea would not make it capsize. If indeed its boards broke, the survivors could bind themselves to the out-rigger logs bound to its sides. They would probably go ashore near Kodi Karai.

Vandiya Devan's mind leaped across from Kodi Karai to Pazlayarai. How would the Emperor's beloved daughter know about this fate that had overtaken him? Who will tell her that he had drowned at sea while fulfilling her orders? Will this sea tell her? This wind? Oh Good God! Why did I not die before I met that Jewel of Womankind? Why did I not meet glorious death in battlefields? You have made me glimpse at paradise and then thrown me into the depths of hell.

Wind and rain grew louder and stronger. Sails and masts howled like ghouls and danced with the ship. Darkness grew even darker. A sudden shaft of lightning flashed from one end of the sea to the other; rolling thunder followed instantly; ship boards shook; sea water boiled over; every direction shuddered. Another lightning stroke started low in the sky; it grew and grew branching in every direction filling every nook and corner of the sky, showering the world with an eerie light. Thunder broke in world shattering splendor. Lightning and thunder danced quicker and quicker -- which came first? light or sound?

"What an amazing sight? Why has the whole universe not

split yet?" Even before he could finish this thought, the sky broke open shattering everything, drowning all in a deluge. Waves danced in violent rage. Lightning flashed on swaying mountains! Winds howled in glee and had their way with the now tattered sails. How long could the ship bear this attack from all the elements of the universe? It would surely sink!

Vandiya Devan was not depressed by that thought anymore. He felt that he was going to experience a glorious death. His heart began a dance of wild abandon, keeping step with the devil waves. All the deck was drenched by the deluge of rain and battering waves. Vandiya Devan began roaring with laughter keeping in tune with the thunder reverberating all around him. Wanting to experience every nuance of this cosmic phenomenon, he had already bound himself tightly to the main mast of the ship. He did not wish to be washed away by the deluge! The ship swirled faster and faster; Vandiya Devan twirled quicker and quicker with that swaying main mast.

How long did that incredible dance continue? Perhaps a few aeons? Or a few minutes? He had lost all sense of time or direction. The wind was dying and rain had slowed to a steady drizzle. Lightning had taken a break giving chance to the sooty darkness.

He looked around in disbelief. Oh wonder of wonders! I have escaped the most terrible of whirlwinds. God must have really saved my miserable life. I am sure to meet her once again... speak with him again.... More patience is essential. Even if this ship has survived the storm, where am I now. How will I reach shore safely? The sky seemed to give him a reply: A bright flash lit the whole sky; a hundred suns came to stand before him. But, he could see nothing in that great light. He was even afraid if he had lost his sight. He pinched his eyes shut, tightly. Now, his ears were in danger. Lord Indra's thunderbolt must have come unsheathed. This cannot be a mere thunder of earthly skies. He could not open his eyes and his ears were ringing with a whirring noise. After some minutes, some new light seemed to pry his eyes open. A new noise penetrated his ears. It was similar to the sound made by trees in a forest fire. "oiiiiieee!" He opened his eyes to see that the main mast of his ship was on fire. Now, he understood: that last flash and thunder -- lightning must have struck somewhere very close, his mast had caught fire.

Wind and water were not powerful enough forces to destroy that Chozla ship. Agni, the God of fires was succeeding where his friend Vayu of Wind and Varuna of Water had failed.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 52 -- Smashed Boat

Upon seeing the main mast burning because of a lightning

strike, Vandiya Devan was sure that the ship could not survive. Neither could he.

He was not worried; some sort of euphoria grew in him. Laughing with joy, he unbound himself from the mast. Why should he burn to death in the middle of a ocean? It would be better to sink to the bottom and drown in the water. He did not intend to waste the last few hours of his mortal life. He wished to gaze upon the still turbulent sea and enjoy its beauty in the light of the burning mast. It is good to become completely familiar with the resting place of his mortal remains. People say that persons who meet such unnatural deaths would come back to haunt the place of their death. Would my ghost wander over these parts? Float on these winds? Dance over these waves? Will it swirl with the whirlwinds that blow here?

Perhaps, one day, the Princess would come here on a cruise.... The sailors would point out 'That is the spot where Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan the noble of Vallam drowned.' Tear pearls would bloom in her petal shaped eyes and flow down her lotus face. If my ghost happens to see that, would it be able to wipe away those tears?

The ship rose high upon the crest of a huge wave. The light from the burning torch of the mast revealed everything for some distance all around. The burning mast poured colors of molten gold on the black crystal of the stormy sea. Even as his eyes were drinking the beauty of this spectacle, they spotted something else.

He saw another sailing ship in the distance. He saw the Tiger-flag flying over its mast. Good Lord! There is no limit to the marvels you have in store for us. His conscience said: Arulmozli Varma is on that ship; he is looking for you.

Parthiban Pallava's ship was also caught in the same whirlwind that had tormented Vandiya Devan's ship. But, experienced navigators and seamen who knew the nature of such storms were on board that ship. They lowered the many sails and rolled them up. They held the rudder and turned the ship around so that it did not have to bear the brunt of the worst waves. For one moment it would appear as if the ship would completely overturn; the next minute it would manage to straighten itself. Mountain-like waves battered that ship from every side; but, it held tight; not a single board pried loose. The Ocean king played with that ship, tossing it here and there like a ball. It twirled and turned with every whim and fancy of the whirlwind. The deluge from the skies tried to drown that fragile ship. That ship -- built by master craftsmen of Chozla lands, handled by master seamen of Chozla lands --it bore the brunt of this assault very well.

The Sea-captain said, "I have seen whirlwinds and monsoon storms worse than this. I have sailed my ship through worse waters than this. There is no need to worry." However, he shared his concerns about another matter with Prince Arulmozli and Lord Parthiban Pallava.

Dark clouds had gathered all around and smothered everything in darkness. Moreover, the rain was incessant. Huge waves screened the ship on all sides. In this situation, they would not be able to spot the ship they were looking for, even if it passed by their side. That ship would also be turning and tossing just like this one. If the two ships accidentally collided in that darkness: it would be an end to one and all!

The experienced Captain said that the surrounding darkness which blinded them was more dangerous than the raging storm. Prince Arulmozli was aware of this. He stood on the deck with sharp eyes searching all around. With every flash of lightning, his bright eyes would quickly swirl in search. His heart was in a turmoil of distress. His dearest sister's messenger was a prisoner of Arab pirates and despicable assassins. In addition, this whirlwind was harassing them.

Perhaps I shall never see that brave young cavalier again! Will I find that ship? Would he be alive? What if the Captain's fears come true and our ships dash against each other? Then, who will give my father the news of the Mute-queen? I cannot share that family secret with Lord Parthiban. He would be merely diverted by that information and not realize its importance.

Prince Arulmozli had not faced a setback in any venture till that day. Would he face failure now? Never, the Ocean King will not keep quiet if danger or distress threatens Ponni's Beloved! He too saw that final, brilliant flash of lightning and that last earth shattering roll of thunder. In fact he had to close his eyes to avoid the brilliance of that flash. When he opened his eyes again, he discerned another light -- different from the flash of lightning.

In the distance, a ship was dancing in a ghostly frenzy with all its sails fully unfurled! A fire burned at the top of its main mast. In the light of that fire, the Prince beheld a man bound to that main mast! God! Can there be anything more miraculous? He was that brave cavalier Vandiya Devan of Vallam. Why was he alone? What happened to the others? He had no time to worry about such details; Arulmozli had made up his mind instantly.

Others on the ship had seen the same sight. They raised a loud cry, "There!" The Prince ran up to the rescue-boat bound to the side of the deck asking, "Who volunteers to come with me?"

They sailors were stunned speechless when they understood his intention. Nevertheless, several men stepped forward. Parthiban and the Sea-captain tried to stop him.

"Prince! What is this? How can you lower this rowboat into this stormy sea? How can we save anyone from that burning ship? Even then, I will send some men and try. You need not go!" protested Parthiban.

"Be careful! Anyone who impedes me will never be forgiven by me!" he ordered in a royal voice. He had already begun to lower the boat, "Two men will suffice!"

The boat was lowered. Prince Arulmozli and the two men he had selected jumped down into it. And the boat moved away from the ship dancing madly over the waves. All three began to pull at the oars with all their strength. Slowly, slowly the boat neared the burning ship. By now the fire had burned down the mast pole and was jumping to adjacent poles. For some reason, Vandiya Devan continued to stand at the same spot!

Vandiya Devan saw the other ship. He noticed the boat being lowered and the men rowing towards him. He was lost in astonishment; he was not even aware that he should move.

"Jump! Jump into the sea!" shouted Prince Arulmozli. He did not hear it and continued standing like a statue. Soon the fire would jump to the deck and the lower hold. The ship will sink. It would be impossible to save him after that.

The Prince made a quick decision. He picked up the rope from that rescue boat and tied one end firmly to his waist, the other to a hook in the boat. He warned the two seamen and jumped into the sea. The waves, which had been playing ball with the boat, began to toss Prince Arulmozli. They lifted him up to the sky for a minute and tossed him down the next. Arulmozli did not lose his sense of direction; he continued with strong strokes towards that burning ship. A huge, swollen wave came rolling by. If it had pushed him down, he would have drowned in the depths; but, it was a good wave! It carried him up its crest and tossed him onto the deck of that burning ship.

Vandiya Devan had already freed himself from the mast. He ran forward with a cry to help the man tossed on the deck. Arulmozli immediately threw his arms around his friend and held him tightly as he shouted, "Hold me tight! Don't let go."

Next minute, both were tossed into the sea again. Arulmozli and Vandiya Devan who was holding tightly tried to near the rowboat. It was not easy to reach it or get into it from that stormy sea. Arulmozli found it impossible to carry the weight of Vandiya Devan who was clinging to him and at the same time swim towards the tossing boat. One moment it was within reach; next minute it moved away. After a seemingly endless struggle, another wave helped them. They rose with the wave and with the help of the sailor tumbled into the catamaran.

"Pull the oars! Quick! Hurry!" roared Arulmozli. The burning ship was about to collapse into the sea. The sinking great-ship might topple the small boat. And if the ship sinks and the fire goes out, they may not be able to find the other ship in the darkness.

There! The burning ship was beginning to sink. What an incredibly spectacular sight it was! They were in no position to enjoy it. As expected, a huge splash as the ship sank; a large heaving wave; the tiny boat somehow managed to stay afloat. After the ship sank, darkness once again enveloped them. They could neither discern the other ship nor make out any directions.

Were the boat and ship nearing each other? Or moving apart? Both options held danger. If the ship hit the boat in that darkness, the tiny craft would be crushed. If it moved away... What would they be able to do in the direction-less sea, in that stormy darkness?

Ocean King you must save the darling Prince, Beloved of your sweetheart Ponni River.

By nature, the Wind God is very very capricious. His whirlwind went away with the same haste in which it had come. It tormented the sea all along its path. The whirlwind had died; however, the turbulence raised by it would not die down soon; the stormy sea may last for a day and a night. The storm was likely to travel long distances. The sea would rise and invade the wide sandy beaches of Kodi Karai. Huge tidal waves would try to destroy the harbor ramparts of Nagapattinam. The storm would cast its influence on Gangesan Thurai and Tricone Hill. Even Mattotam and Rameswaram would not be untouched.

That tiny boat carrying the Prince and his group tossed and teetered. Soon the men stopped pulling at the oars. It was useless now. They had no idea of direction or place. The wind died; rain stopped; lightning and thunder had ceased. But, the rage of the waves had not calmed. An unexpected danger was slowly, slowly nearing that teetering boat.

When the burning ship sank, one of its huge masts which had not burned completely, came loose from the ship. It was slowly floating closer and closer to the catamaran-boat. Because of the darkness none in the boat saw it till it came very close. "Pull away! Pull the oars," shouted a man. Even before his shout died, the huge log dashed against the bottom of the boat. That tiny craft split open with a thundering sound. The planks split in smaller and smaller smithereens.

"My Friend, Do not be afraid. That mast pole is safer than this boat. Try and grab a hold of it," Arulmozli advised his friend Vandiya Devan.

Ponniyin Selvan

Chapter 53 -- Song of Sustenance

Those who stood on the shores near River Thondai watched till Prince Arulmozli reached Parthiban's ship. As soon as the Prince had gone aboard, the boat returned to the shore. Commander Bhoothi Vikrama seemed happy;

joy reflected upon his face.

"God must be on our side without doubt. How can the sign of the conch and discus on the Prince's hands go wrong? Parthiban will safely carry him to Kanchi. We and our friends have to move towards Tanjore." He seemed to be speaking to himself. He realized that Azlvar-adiyan was standing by his side.

"Oh! You are standing here! It does not matter, there is nothing unknown to a confidential spy of the Prime Minister. Well, What are your plans? Will you come to Mattotam with me?" asked the Commander.

"No Sir. There is another order given me by the Prime Minister. I have to finish that..."

"What is that?"

Azlvar-adiyan looked towards Poonkuzlali and the Mute-queen who stood away from them.

"Is it something to do with those women?" asked the Commander.

"Concerns one of them. The Prime Minister has ordered that if I happen to see a deaf-mute like her in Lanka, I should somehow bring her to Tanjore."

"Extraordinary order! He could have ordered you to catch one of the storms blowing in these parts and bring it instead! It would be easier than taking hold of that mute-woman. I wonder who she is? She seems to have a lot of affection for our Prince. Do you know anything about her?"

"I know that she is mute; born deaf. I am aware that it would be easier to capture a storm than lead her anywhere. Still, since my master has ordered it, I shall make an effort," said Azlvar-adiyan Nambi.

"This boat-girl seems to be friendly with her. Look at them conversing in sign language. Ask that girl to come here. I must warn her"

Azlvar-adiyan walked up to them and told Poonkuzlali that the Commander was asking for her. She walked towards the Commander.

"Here Girl! You seem to be quite intelligent. You came in time with an important news. You have been a great help to the Chozlas. I shall not forget. I shall reward you appropriately at the right time."

"Thank you My Lord! I do not wish for any reward." She spoke with courtesy.

"I won't forget even if you do not wish it. Let all this confusion die down. Afterwards I shall find you a suitable husband from among the brave soldiers of the Chozla

Army. No ordinary man can be a husband for you. He must be an exceptional fellow like Bhima of the Epic. Otherwise you would trample him underfoot!" the Commander laughed at his own joke.

Poonkuzlali was looking at her feet. Rage filled her body. She controlled herself. What could be the point in quarreling with this foolish old man? She calmed herself.

"Remember this one thing. Don't think you can take liberties with the Prince because you have helped him. Stop with throwing nets to catch ocean-fish. Don't hope to net royalty in your catch. Be warned Girl! It would be dangerous to get too close to him." The Commander was not wasting any subtlety. His voice was harsh. Each word dropped like molten lead into Poonkuzlali's ears.

Angry words of reply bubbled to her lips. But, she was not able to speak, her tongue stuck to her choking throat. The molten lead in her ears must have tried to emerge from her eyes: they burned with a fiery heat. She walked away without raising her head, away from the beach. Her slow steps began to quicken as she spared a glance towards her mute-aunt. Azlvar-adiyan was trying to say something to her. She felt like running away from every human being. I do not want to hear any human voice. Men are cruel beings. What harsh words they utter! How fortunate it would have been if all of them had been born mute!

After some stretch through the forest, she reached the banks of River Thondai. She began walking inland along that bank aiming for her hidden boat. I must find my boat quickly; get into it and escape out to sea. I must get away far into the open ocean where no human voice can be heard. I must drop my oars. The boat should dance on tossing waves. I should go floating on endless water, timelessly. Only then will my agony be soothed. My heart wounded by the Commander's poison words will be healed. Anger will calm down. How could that old man say it? `Stop with throwing nets to catch ocean-fish! Do not try to net the Prince.' Am I casting my net at him? Chee! Look at the turn his old mind takes!

Sea fish are much better than humans living on the land. They never speak such harsh words. They swim and play in the deep ocean and enjoy happiness. They have neither worry nor sorrow. Why was I not born a fish living in the blue sea? Then I would not be caught in these worldly emotions of anger, love, wants and desires. I could go swimming endlessly. Then none would try to part me from my Prince or tattle slander. Even that is no sure thing. These horrid men would come to the depths with their nets. What if they net only one of the pair of fish? Villains!

Her rage gave her legs a quickness. By mid-day, she had found her boat. It was safe in the hiding place. That boat was her dearest friend; her sanctuary. That small boat was her only solace in the world full of distress and sorrow. It is a surprise that it is not stolen! Let everyone be damned. Let that horrid Commander guard his precious Prince. Let

him hang that Kodumbalur girl around his neck! Why should I care? I have my boat and my oars. Strength in my arms and the wide ocean before me. Ocean King ... You will not betray your darling daughter even if all others forsake her, would you?

Poonkuzlali got into her boat and began rowing towards the sea. Since she went with the flow of the river, she was at the mouth very soon. Within minutes she was at sea. She realized that a whirlwind was imminent. She knew the signs -- the grey ring around the moon last night; sultry and muggy day today; not a leaf moved on the branches. Yes, black clouds are already gathering in the southwest. A storm is sure to break very soon. The stormy sea would be a beautiful sight. But, I should not get caught in the whirlwind. Let me find shelter in Ghost Island. I can watch the havoc of the storm from there. After the storm blows over, and the sea begins to calm down, I can row my boat towards Kodi Karai. Why hurry?

That ship might have reached Kodi Karai by now. Luckily it will escape the whirlwind. The Prince would have safely landed there. Perhaps he has gone on to Mamallai Port? Why should I bother about that? All that matters is he will escape the whirlwind. Poonkuzlali did not realize that those sailing ships were immobilized in dead calm before the whirlwind due to lack of any wind to push them. The Commander's words, `Do not try to throw your nets at the Prince.' were ringing in her ears again and again and hurting her. Better that I do not land at Kodi Karai too soon! She decided to row towards Ghost Island.

It was not too far away; within half an hour she was on that desert island. The storm was already starting. She dragged her boat high up the beach and secured it firmly. Poonkuzlali walked towards a small Buddhist Shrine in that island. Near that holy shrine, she found shelter from the rain and wind inside a cave-room. But, she was restless, eager to see the tournament of the Gods of Wind and Water. Emerging from the shelter, she walked up some steps and climbed to the tower of that shrine.

Nature around her echoed the turbulence in her heart. The hundreds of coconut palms on that island swayed and danced like the demon followers of Shiva dancing at the end of creation. Waves rose to cover the tops of those palms sometimes. Poonkuzlali watched the ghoulis dance accompanied by thunder and lightning. Her body swayed to that music; her long hair came unbound and flew around her; rain drenched her and thunder deafened her ears. She stood there for a long time enjoying that storm. She felt that nature was putting on a show just for her.

He would have reached safe harbor at Kodi Karai by now. Perhaps he is staying at my father's house. Or gone to the Royal Palace at Nagapattinam. Could he be still at sea on that ship? So what? The whirlwind cannot hurt that big ship. He has many men to protect him. Will he think of me? `Where is foolish Poonkuzlali?' Will he think that? No. He may think about that Vandiya Devan sent by his

sister. He may even think about that noblewoman of Kodumbalur. Why should he remember this poor girl of the fisher-folk?

Late in the night, she went back to the cave shelter and caught some sleep. There was no peace even in that sleep. She was casting nets in the sea. The Prince was caught in the net. Later, the Prince and she had turned into fish-folk. After each dream she startled into wakefulness; chiding herself for the foolishness.

By the time she woke, after sunrise, the storm had died completely. The waves were not big anymore. The storm had unleashed havoc on that island. Tall palms had been uprooted and strewn here and there. As she was examining the devastation, she saw an log floating on the waves, coming shoreward. A man was bound to that log. She ran out and helped him ashore, reviving him with some fresh water. That man seemed half dead. He was a fisherman from a coastal village of Lanka. He had gone fishing and was caught in the whirlwind. He had lost his boat mate to the sea and had more important news.

"Earlier in the night, the storm had passed and rain lessened. Darkness surrounded us in the open seas. Suddenly, there was a huge roll of thunder and lightning. In that light I could see two great-ships. One ship caught fire and began burning. I and my mate watched that for some time. That ship seemed deserted; no one was on it. The other ship seemed to have some men; they were moving hurriedly. The burning ship soon began to sink. The other vanished in the darkness." The fisherman spoke with hesitant words.

Poonkuzlali worried if one of those ships was the Prince's ship. It need not be. There are many ships on these seas. Perhaps some of the men from that burning ship are still in the sea. They might be floating on some log or boat. I should help them. My boat may be able to save some lives. Otherwise this birth is useless.

Poonkuzlali pulled her boat into the water and climbed into it. With all the strength of her iron hands, she pulled at the oars. The boat flew over the waves. It was difficult till she had crossed the wave lines; after that her hand relaxed to their usual pace. A sudden joy filled her soul. Her old song began to tremble on her lips. It came alive with new words:

When wave filled oceans seethe
Why does the inner soul fill with joy?

When the earth-maid is in torment,
Why does the heart burst with bliss?

When thunder rumbles and directions tremble
What is that dexterous dance?

Vandiy Devan and Prince Arulmozli who had taken hold of the drifting mast pole, floated on the water, battered by

the waves. It was just one night, but, Vandiy Devan felt as if it was one epoch. He lost hope very quickly. There is no chance of reaching a shore. Each time they were pulled down the valley of a trough, he felt it was the end. He kept lamenting again and again, "My hasty nature has dragged you into this awful predicament! What shall I do?"

The Prince tried to soothe him and revive his hopes. "Men have survived even four or five days of floating in open water like this."

"How many days since we have been floating like this?"

"Not even one night!" replied Prince Arulmozli.

"Lies! Lies! It must be many days!"

Very soon, he was troubled by another horror. His throat felt parched with thirst. He was floating on limitless water; but not a drop to quench his thirst. This was the worst torture.

"Be patient," said the Prince, "day will break soon and we will be washed ashore."

"Sir, I cannot tolerate this any more. Unbind me. I will drown in this water." Vandiy Devan had given up all enthusiasm. Arulmozli tried to cheer him up. It seemed impossible. Vandiy Devan seemed to be going crazy. He tried to free his bindings. The Prince took note, and moved closer. With one thump, Arulmozli rendered his friend unconscious.

When Vandiy Devan revived, day had broken and it was bright. Even the waves had grown quieter. Arulmozli said, "Friend, we must be nearing some shore. I can see palm trees. Patience for a little while."

"Sir, let go of me. Save yourself somehow."

"Do not loose hope. I will not abandon you like that! What is that? Someone seems to be singing."

Yes they could hear Poonkuzlali's song as she floated in her boat.

When wave filled oceans seethe
Why does the inner soul fill with joy?

It sounded like a song of sustenance to them. Even Vandiy Devan who had lost more than half his life, who was tired of body and mind, even he was revived by that song. He came back to life. "Prince, it is Poonkuzlali's voice. She must be in her boat. We are saved!"

Soon the boat was visible to their eyes. It came closer and closer. Poonkuzlali was motionless with surprise, "Can this be real?" she wondered.

Arulmozli unbound the ropes around his friend and then

climbed into her boat. He then helped his friend get in.
Poonkuzlali stood motionless, holding her oars, like a
statue.

Ponniyin Selvan
Part II Whirlwind

is concluded.

Principal Characters in Ponniyin Selvan

Aditya Karikala - Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire, Sundara Chozla's eldest son.

Amudan's Mother - A deaf-mute, garden keeper on the outskirts of Tanjore.

Anirudda Brahma-arya - The Prime Minister and confidant of Sundara Chozla.

Arinjaya Chozla - Sundara Chozla's father, King Gandara Aditya's younger brother, died after ruling for merely one year.

Arulmozli Varma - Sundara Chozla's younger son.

Astrologer of Kudanthai - An astrologer patronized by Kundavai, a spy of sorts.

Azhvar-adiyan Nambi, Thirumalai Appan - A follower of the Vaishnava faith, step brother of Esanya Bhattar, a spy.

Esanya Bhattar - A priest of Pazlayarai, elder brother of Azhvar-adiyan Nambi.

Gandara Aditya - Sundara Chozla's elder uncle, a devout follower of the Saiva faith, ruled before Arinjaya Chozla.

Idumban Kari - A footman from Kadamboor, a conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of a gang sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Kalyani of Vaithumba - Widow of King Arinjaya Chozla, a famous beauty, Sundara Chozla's mother.

Kandamaran - A young man, son of Sengannan Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor.

Kundavai, Younger Pirati - Sundara Chozla's daughter.

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Elder, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari - An important chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Commander of Chozla Armies in Lanka. Elder-uncle to Vanathi

Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Younger, Paranthaka Vikrama - Younger Lord of Kodumbalur, Vanathi's father who lost his life in a battle in Lanka.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Elder, - Ambalavan An important and powerful chieftain, - Officer of Taxation, Food Supply and Finance for the Chozla Empire, elder brother of Kalanthaka, Nandini's husband, about 65 years old.

Lord Pazluvoor, the Younger, Kalanthaka - Commander of Tanjore Fort, Captain of the Guard Corps.

Madurandaka Deva - A Chozla Prince, son of Gandara Aditya and Sembiyan Madevi, a few years older than Aditya Karikala.

Malayaman Milad-udayar of Thiru-kovalur - A nobleman and petty chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Empress Vanamadevi's father and thereby grandfather to Karikala, Arulmozli and Kundavai.

Manimekala - Kandamaran's younger sister and daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya.

Mazlava-arya - A nobleman, Sembiyan Madevi's brother.

Munai Raya - A nobleman, not very confident in Lord Pazluvoor's schemes.

Nallavan Sattanar - Court poet at Tanjore.

Nandini, Young-Queen - An extraordinarily beautiful Pazluvoor woman with a mysterious past, Azhvar-adiyan's adopted sister, raised by a priest's family near Madurai.

Parthiban Pallava - A nobleman of the Pallava clan, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's confidant.

Poonkuzlali - Daughter of the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai, Sendan Amudan's cousin.

Ravidasa, the Sorcerer - Leader of the Pandiya conspirators, a former retainer of Veera-pandiya, had a mysterious hold over Nandini.

Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor - A nobleman and crony of Lord Pazluvoor.

Sembiyan Madevi, Elder Pirati - Widow of King Gandara Aditya, Madurandaka Deva's mother, fond of Sundara Chozla and his children, devout.

Sendan Amudan - A flower vendor of Tanjore, lived with his deaf-mute mother in the outskirts of the city.

Soman Samban - A conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of Ravidasa's gang, sympathetic to Pandiyas.

Sundara Chozla Paranthaka - Emperor of the Chozla Kingdom.

Vanamadevi of Thiru-kovalur - The Queen Consort, wife of Sundara Chozla, mother to Karikala, Kundavai & Arulmozli.

Vanathi Devi - A young noblewoman of the Kodumbalur clan, Kundavai's friend, in love with Prince Arulmozli.

Vandiyar Devan Vallavarayan - A scion of the Vaanar clan of Vallam, Aditya Karikala's messenger.

Vasuki - Nandini's maid.

Veera-pandiya - Pandiya King vanquished and killed by Prince Aditya Karikala.

Glossary

A adi A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-Aug

Aavani A month of the Tamil calendar, about Aug-Sept

Advaita A philosophy, belief in the non-dual nature of God

Akka Elder sister, a respectful greeting for an older girl

Amma Mother, a respectful greeting for women

Ankush A goad used by elephant drivers

Anna Elder brother, respectful address for older men

Araya, raya, arasa King, chieftain, Raja

Ayya Father, mode of address for an older man

Bharata Natyam Classical dance style

Chakra Discus

Champaka A fragrant flower

Chanakya A medieval personality of political cunning, a Machiavelli

Devi, Deva Lady, Lord

Iruvatchi A fragrant flower

Jaamam A period of time 3 hrs long;

1 Jaamam = 7½ Nazli; 1 Nazli = 24 minutes

Jaggery Unrefined or brown sugar

Kaadal Love

Kaadam A league or about 10 miles

Kaavi Reddish, ocher dye

Kadal Sea

Kadamba A flower

Kama Love, Passion

Karadi 1. A musical instrument 2. Bear

Karagam Folk dance with balancing decorated pots

Karaiyar Coastal, fisherfolk

Karppu Sanctity of a married woman. Chastity

Kavi 1. Poet 2. Monkey

Konnai A flowering tree

Kumkum Red powder, used to decorate the forehead

Kummi A folk dance of women circling while clapping hands

Kunrimani A tiny red-black berry or bead
 Kural Ancient Tamil couplets
 Kuravai Koothu Gypsy dance or dance by maidens
 Malai Mountain
 Mariamman A village deity, a pagan Goddess
 Marudai A shade giving tree, a colloquial name for Madurai City
 Mattalam Drum
 Maya Illusion, Deception, unreal
 Moringa A leafy tree
 Mu-ttholl-ayiram A collection of romantic verse in Tamil
 Muzlai Cave
 Naadu Country
 Naamam A vertical, make-up like, caste mark worn by followers of Vishnu
 Nanal A sedge like grass
 Nandavan Garden
 Netri-chutti Forehead ornament
 Padai Veedu Army Housing
 Padinettam Perukku Eighteenth day flood
 Palli Padai Memorial temple
 Panchayat Council of Village Elders, often five persons
 Parai A kind of country drum, an announcement
 Perumal Lord, God
 Pirati Lady, Royal Princess
 Pitam Monastic seat
 Punnai A tree with yellow flowers
 Rudraksha A multifaceted bead, a sacred berry
 Saelai Loose pleated garment of women worn with one loose end thrown over a shoulder
 Saiva A sect of Hinduism, follower of Shiva
 Salli A musical instrument
 Selvan Beloved, Darling (masculine)
 Selvi Beloved, Darling (feminine)
 Silappadikaram A Tamil Epic
 Sindhu Folk song
 Puli -Tamarind A shade giving tree bearing a sour fruit
 Thambi Younger brother, mode of address for young men
 Thaye Mother, mode of respectful address for women
 Thaaazlai A fragrant cactus
 Thevar-aalan, Divine man, dancers
 Thevar-aatti Divine woman, dancers
 Thevaram Devotional Poems
 Thiru-vai-mozli Devotional Poems
 Thinnai A raised platform or dias on the front porch of houses in South India. Often used like a living room; for family gatherings, seating visitors, and sleeping in the night.
 Udukku Small palm held drum
 Uriyadi A game to get the prize-pot tied to a pole similar to the Maypole
 Vaetti Loose lower garment of men
 Vaishnava A sect of Hinduism, follower of Vishnu
 Vamsa Dynasty
 Veena A musical stringed instrument
 Velan Attam A semi-religious dance, usually by a man

Villu-pattu Folk songs accompanying a string instrument, story telling
Vinnagara Vishnu temple