

PONNI'S BELOVED

Volume 4 : The Crown



An English Translation of
Kalki Krishnamurthy's Ponniyin Selvan by

SUMEETHA MANIKANDAN



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Ponni's Beloved

**AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF
KALKI KRISHNAMURTHY'S PONNIYIN
SELVAN**

by

Sumeetha Manikandan

Part 4 of 5 - The Crown

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sumeetha Manikandan is a top bestselling romance author whose novellas 'Perfect Groom' and 'These Lines of Mehendi' (which was published as a paperback novel called 'Love Again') have been on the top of Amazon India charts ever since their publication. A bookaholic, thinker, feminist and a daydreamer, she reads across genres and is a crazy fan of history, romance and science fiction novels.

An avid reader of historical novels, she has been translating Kalki Krishnamurthy's classic Tamil novel Ponniyin Selvan for the past ten years and hopes to translate more of his novels into English.

Sumeetha is married to filmmaker K.S. Manikandan and lives with her twelve-year-old daughter in Chennai.



Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge my father, S. Vijayaraghavan who used to tell me the story of Ponniyin Selvan every evening and fuelled my interest to read the book.

My Aunt Ranganayaki who lent me her Ponniyin Selvan books. I treasure them to this day.

Navin and Vidya Sigamany for publishing the first drafts of Ponni's Beloved on their website Zine 5.com almost ten years ago. I would like to thank Inderpreet Kaur Uppal for her stellar efforts in editing the initial draft copy.

Author Venkatesh Ramakrishnan who encouraged me to resume the translation again. Writer and Journalist, Dhivakar Venkataraman for providing valuable historical guidance for the cover page artwork.

Meenakshi Devaraj, an avid fan of Ponniyin Selvan series and rendered great help in translating Poonguzhali's song and Devaram poems.

Friends like Raja King, Fowzia Iqbal, Abirami Baskaran, Sastha Prakash, Ramanujam Jaganathan, Thirukambigai Devi and countless others, who followed the translation avidly and promoted it among numerous groups.

I would also like to dedicate this book to all those fans who have been asking me for years to publish my translation and to my husband who claims to be the first among them.

A special dedication is due to Abirami Baskaran whose encouraging words were invaluable. She was one of many who left us all too soon. May her soul rest in peace.



AUTHOR'S NOTE

Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* was the first Tamil novel that I read. To tell you the truth, I learnt to read Tamil using elementary school books, just so that I could read this story.

They say that good books and great authors can transform lives. I have found it to be true in my case. I started translating this book ten years ago, as a hobby and realized that I could write. Today, I am a freelance writer who makes a living out of writing, and I owe my profession to this novel!

Many authors have written phenomenal books in Tamil literature after Kalki Krishnamurthy, but *Ponniyin Selvan* still remains the most popular book, widely read by many. *Ponniyin Selvan* has the right mixture of all things that makes an epic – political intrigue, conspiracy, betrayal, huge dollops of romance, infidelity, seduction, passion, alluring women, unrequited love, sacrifice and pure love.

Ponni's Beloved is an English translation, and as many readers have pointed out, no translation can do justice to the original. I have tried to capture the essence and soul of Kalki's writing in my translation.

I recently visited all the places (in India) that are mentioned in this novel. We started on Aadi 18 (Aug 3, 2019) for this trail trip almost on the footsteps of Vandiya Devan and saw all the fascinating places that he mentions in the journey. I have included some of the photos in this volume.

Thank you,

Sumeetha Manikandan

PS. For those who wish to sign up for this tour trail, do contact Tour Bee (7299646588). The tour trail was well organized and at the curator had many interesting stories about each place that we visited.



FOREWORD

Kalki Krishnamurthy's *Ponniyin Selvan* was serialized in the post-independence era and it ran for four long years. Talking about a golden era in Tamil history, it ensnared the imagination of huge swathe of the Tamil population with people queuing in railway stations long before dawn to lay their hands on that week's edition of the Kalki magazine.

An entire generation dwelt upon the freshness of the novel and surprisingly it was not condemned to the recesses of the mind as a childhood fancy but continued to entice readers of subsequent generations as they were born and introduced to the Tamil language. The novel still has a colossal following but bounded by the hedges of a language that is not easy to learn, it strictly remained out of the mainstream and well within the realms of the Tamil speaking world.

Tamil people have been habitual migrants and the diaspora is spread over numerous countries. In today's generation, though many of them can speak fluent Tamil they lack the patience to read the Tamil script that is spread over 1000 pages of a novel. And that's when the need arises a need for a good translation.

When I read the novel late in my thirties, the social media was just picking up and I was introduced to the yahoo group of Ponniyin Selvan fans around the year 2001. For the first time, readers from different age groups, settled in different lands were congregating online.

It was there that I came across a translation of Ponniyin Selvan into

English. (There had been one earlier in print but that left much to be desired for those who had read the original. In fact, at one point the earlier translator mentioned ‘Maize’ for the Tamil word Cholan. But it was pointed out in the group that Maize entered India 500 years after the storyline period.)

The online translation was a bold bid by a youngster. As much as the substance within, the attempt bedazzled a lot of us because for 40 years or more it was almost sacrilege to deal with Kalki’s works. The one sequel in the market at that time had been mauled by the copyright owners!

Over the next decade many of the members of the Yahoo group became novelists, biographers, bloggers, heritage activists and a host of history and literature connected personalities. And I would like to list Sumeetha’s translation of Kalki’s work as a starting point for all this.

A translated work should remind us of the original and it should have the author’s imprint on the words. I think Sumeetha comes out in flying colours on both fronts. I am sure her work would open up the genius of Kalki to many who were deprived of it all these days.

Biography of Venkatesh Ramakrishnan:

Author Venkatesh Ramakrishnan is a Chennai based bilingual novelist from India. South Indian historical fiction is his forte. He has published 3 novels in Tamil, 2 of them are sequels to the famous Kalki Krishnamurthy novels Ponniyin Selvan and Sivagamiyin Sabatham respectively, with the titles Kaviri Mainthan and Kanji Tharagai. One of his other fictional work in Tamil is Thillayil Oru Kollaikaran. Gods, Kings & Slaves. The Siege of Madurai is his first novel in English.

Character List

CHOLA ROYAL FAMILY

Emperor Sundara Chola – Originally named Paranthaka II, the Emperor was very handsome and was fondly called ‘Sundara’ Chola by his people. He is the reigning monarch of the Chola and Pandya Kingdom at the time of the story (957 – 970 AD).

Empress Vanamadevi – The Empress of the Chola Kingdom and the consort of Sundara Chola. She is the mother of Crown Prince Aditya Karikalan, Princess Kundavai and Prince Arulmozhivarman. Vanamadevi is the daughter of Nobleman Thirukkovalur Malayaman.

Crown Prince Aditya Karikalan – Eldest son of Sundara Chola and Vanamadevi, Aditya Karikalan is a peerless warrior who beheaded the Pandya King and established suzerainty over their Kingdom.

Princess Kundavai – Younger sister of Aditya Karikalan and the daughter of Sundara Chola and Vanamadevi. Kundavai is cherished all through the kingdom for her wit, wisdom, grace and intelligence. She lives in Pazhaiaarai along with her companions and friends.

Prince Arulmozhivarman – The youngest son of Sundara Chola and Vanamadevi, Arulmozhivarman is also known all through the Kingdom as ‘Ponniyin Selvan’. At the time of the story, the Prince is in Illangai (Sri Lanka) on a campaign against King Mahindan and had captured many parts of the Island. He later ascended the Chola throne as Raja Raja Cholan (985 AD – 1014 AD).

King Gandaradithan — Son of Paranthaka I and Sundara Chola’s uncle and former King who ruled from 950 AD to 957 AD. Gandaradithar is known for his piety and was a very devout King.

Dowager Queen Sembiyanmadevi – King Gandaradithan’s queen who was equally virtuous and spiritual. She belongs to the clan of Mazhavarayar and married the King despite his advanced age.

Prince Madhuranthakan – Son of King Gandaradhithar and Sembiyanmadevi and the first cousin of Sundara Chola.

King Aringhza Chola – Son of Parathaka I and the father of Sundara Chola. He reigned the Kingdom for a very short period from 956 AD – 957 AD.

Dowager Queen Kalyani – Wife of King Aringhza Chola and the mother Sundara Chola. She belongs to Vaithumbarayar clan and was a renowned beauty.

Prince Rajadhithan – Oldest son and heir apparent of Paranthaka I and the brother of Aringhza Chola and King Gandaradithan. Prince Rajadhithan died in the Thakollam war (950 AD) after which the crown passed onto his younger brother .

Emperor Paranthaka I – Grandfather of Sundara Chola, Paranthaka I ruled from 907 AD – 955 AD.

Noble Clans

PAZHUVUR CLAN

Periya Pazhuvetarayar – Lord Treasurer of the Chola Kingdom and a peerless warrior who bore 64 battle scars in his body. He is the patriarch and the king of the powerful Pazhuvur clan and is an influential courtier and nobleman at the Chola court.

Nandini Devi – Queen and wife of Periya Pazhuvetarayar, Nandini is a young woman who is known for her beauty. Nandini’s antecedents are a mystery and her past life is shrouded in secrets.

Chinna Pazhuvetarayar – He is also known as Kalanthaka Kanda, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar is the younger brother of Periya Pazhuvetarayar and is the Commander of the Thanjavur Fort. A powerful man with a strong physique, he is also the father-in-law of Prince Madhuranthakan.

KODUMBALUR CLAN

Budivikrama Kesari – The Commander of troops in Elangai, he is also known as Kodumbalur Periya Vellar. He is the patriarch of the Kodumbalur Clan.

Princess Vanathi – A Kodumbalur princess and the niece of Budivikrama Kesari, Vanathi is also the cherished companion and friend of Princess Kundavai who hopes to wed her to Prince Arulmozhivarman.

Kodumbalur Siriya Vellar – Father of Vanathi and the younger brother of Budivikrama Kesari, he died valiantly in Illangai after leading a campaign across the sea.

SAMBUVERAYAR CLAN

Singannar Sambuverayar – A powerful lord who ruled over Kadambur.

Kandanmaran – Son of Sambuverayar who also fought along with Crown Prince Aditya Karikalan in many wars.

Manimegalai – Daughter of Sambuverayar and the sister of Kandanmaran.

MALAYAMAN CLAN

Thirukkoyalur Malayaman – Patriarch of the Malayaman clan and the father-in-law of Sundara Chola. He is close to his oldest Grandson Prince Aditya Karikalan.

VANAR CLAN

Vandiya Devan – Vallavareyan Vandiya Devan is Prince Aditya Karikalan's bodyguard, friend and confidante.

PANDYA KING'S BODYGUARDS

Ravidasan – The ringleader of the conspirators who wish to avenge the death of their king. He is also known as 'Mandiravadi'.

Soman Sambavan – One of the conspirators and a member of Ravidasan's gang.

Edupankari – One of the Pandya Conspirators who works in the Kadambur Palace and overhears the noblemen's plots about the Chola Succession.

Devaralan – One of the Pandya Conspirators who works at the Kadambur Palace.

OTHER IMPORTANT CHARACTERS

Azhwarkadiyan Nambi – A vaishnavite and a spy who is also known as Thirumalai or Thirumalaiappan. He also claims to be Nandini Devi's brother.

Parthibendra Pallavan – Close confidante and friend of Prince Aditya Karikalan and a scion of Pallava dynasty.

Kudanthai Jodhidhar – An astrologer in Kudanthai (present day Kumbakonam) who is patronized by Princess Kundavai.

Senthan Amuthan – A devout man who serves Thallikullathar Temple in Thanjavur. Vandiya Devan stays in his house while visiting Thanjavur.

Poonghuzhali – Senthan Amuthan's cousin who lives in Kodi Karai.

Glossary of Terms

Abathudavigal – The army of bodyguards that guarded the Pandya King

Adey – An expression used to refer someone with derision and disrespect

Adigaley – A respectful term used to address a monk

Amma – Mother

Amavasya – Dark Moon

Anna – Elder brother

Anni – Elder brother's wife

Anthapuram – Inner Chambers of women in a palace

Akka – Elder sister

Appa – Father

Ayya – A respectful term in Tamil used to address men

Ayyo / Ayyayo – An exclamation of distress

Battar – Term used to refer to the priest

Bikshu – A Buddhist Monk

Chi Chi – An expression of disgust

Dalapathy - Army Commander

Devi – Used to address women of higher social standard like royalty or the nobility

Dhanadhigari – Treasurer

Dhoomketu – A comet

Gurunatha – Teacher

Jodhithar – An Astrologer

Kalapathy – Ship's Captain or Commander

Maha Mandiri – Prime Minister

Maharaja – My King

Maha Guru – Chief among teachers

Mandapam – A structure built with four or more pillars.

Mandiravadi – Magician

Malai – A Mountain

Olai – Palm tree leaf which is used to write messages

Padai - Army

Pati – Grandmother

Pujari – A priest

Prabhu – A respectful term to address a lord, prince or the king

Rani – Queen

Raja Drogam – Treason against the King

Rakshashi - Demoness

Senthapathy – Army Commander

Samudra Rajan – The Sea God

Sangu Chakra – Conch and discus

Thambi – Younger brother

Thatha – Grandfather

Theevu – An Island

Vajrayudham – Thunderbolt

Vaikuntam – The abode of Lord Vishnu

Vihara – A Monastery

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An excerpt from The Sacrifice (Ponni's Beloved Volume 5)

The story so far...

In the 10th Century AD, the glorious Cholas ruled over the land of Tamil Nadu. Emperor Sundara Chola who is bedridden with paralysis reigns over the Kingdom and there is confusion as to who would ascend the throne after him. The Emperor had two sons and one daughter. The eldest, Aditya Karikalan was anointed the Crown Prince of the Kingdom but his uncle Madhuranthakan (whose father ruled prior to Sundara Chola) also wished to ascend the throne.

The story begins when Aditya Karikalan sent his trusted bodyguard and friend Vandiya Devan with two messages for his father, the Emperor and his sister Princess Kundavai. Vandiya Devan learns at Kadambur that all the important noblemen of the court led by the Pazhuvur brothers are conspiring to crown, Prince Madhuranthakan, as the next Emperor.

While on his journey, Vandiya Devan also meets the Vaishnavan Azhwarkadiyan Nambi (also known as Thirumalai) who wishes to meet Periya Pazhuvetarayar's wife (who he raised as his sister). Vandiya Devan uses his name to meet Nandini and she gives him a signet ring to enter the Thanjavur Fort.

Azhwarkadiyan, in the meanwhile, finds out that a gang of Pandya bodyguards are conspiring a murderous plan to kill Prince Aditya Karikalan, who had beheaded their King. He also learns that they were being aided with gold, stolen from the treasury of the Cholas, by Nandini.

Vandiya Devan goes to Thanjavur and successfully delivers his messages to the Emperor in private. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar suspects his intentions and tries to imprison him. He escapes from the soldiers and ends up at Nandini's palace, where she tries her best to allure him with her seductive beauty. He escapes from the fort through the underground passage and also saves Kandanmaran's life.

He meets Princess Kundavai in Pazhaiaria and learns that she is the same woman whom he had fallen in love with at Kudanthai. She then writes a message to Arul Mozhi Varman, her younger brother who is warring in Illangai to come back as soon as possible and asks Vandiya Devan to bring him back home.

Vandiya Devan travels to Kodi Karai and with the help of Poonguzhali, he goes to Elangai.

In Kanchipuram, Aditya Karikalan's grandsire too advises him to bring his brother Arul Mozhi back from Illangai. His friend Parthibendran agrees to bring him back and before he left, Karikalan reveals that he was in love with Nandini and how she had betrayed him by trying to save the life of Pandya King who he beheads and then subsequently marrying the old man Periya Pazhuvetarayar.

Kundavai arrives in Thanjavur and the Emperor confesses to her that he had once loved a deaf and mute woman in Illangai, who later committed suicide. The emperor believes that he sees her ghost in the night but Kundavai suspects that Nandini is pretending to be her mother's ghost to frighten the Emperor and to learn the truth of her birth. This opens up possibilities that Nandini could be her own sister!

In Illangai, Vandiya Devan meets Azhwarkadiyan again and they both set out to meet Prince Arul Mozhi and they successfully give him the messages. They also meet a deaf and mute woman who loves the Prince as her own son and had saved his life many times. Vandiya Devan is astonished by her resemblance to Nandini and suspects that she might be her mother.

They also receive news that the Emperor has sent two ships to imprison the Prince on the charge that he tried to grab the throne of Illangai for his own. This news is brought to them by the boat girl Poonguzhali. The Prince leaves his companions along with Poonguzhali to meet the ships. Vandiya Devan gets caught by an Arab pirate ship where he is imprisoned and kidnapped. He sets out in Parthibendran's ship to rescue Vandiya Devan. In the midst of a fierce storm, Vandiya Devan kills the Arab pirates with the

help of the Pandya gang, who later abandon him in the ship. The Prince successfully rescues him from the ship but they both end up adrift in the sea. Poonguzhali rescues them in her boat.

The Prince contracts shivering fever and is incoherent. Vandiya Devan, Poonguzhali and Senthan Amuthan take him to Nagapattinam Choodamani Viharam to treat his illness. In the meanwhile, Periya Pazhuvetarayar and Nandini who are at Kodi Karai learn that the Prince is lost in sea. Parthibendran falls for the seductive allure of Nandini and is enamoured by her.

Vandiya Devan travels to Pazhaiarai to give Kundavai the news that the Prince has arrived and is safe, though the rest of the Kingdom mourns his death. There are riots in Pazhaiarai when the news arrives to the local populace. Kundavai meets Vandiya Devan and then sends him to Kanchi with a message for her brother asking him, not to meet with Nandini and tasks our hero to safeguard him from assassins.

Vandiya Devan and Nambi set out again to Kanchi. Kundavai meets Prince Arul Mozhi and asks him to wait in the Viharam for some time.



Chapter 1: Banks of Kedilam

Kedilam is one of the rivers that made the Kingdom of Thirumunaipadi fertile and green. Along the banks of this river is a Shiva Temple much celebrated by Appar Perumal. Further down this river is yet another temple of Lord Shiva where Sundaramurthy Nayar had composed many of his poems in Thirunavalur. Situated betwixt these two places was the king's road from Thondai Mandalam to the Chola Kingdom. The banks of Kedilam were always busy thanks to the many pilgrims who bathed in the river before visiting the temples.

That year, in the month of Aipasi^[1] there were many people gathered near the banks of the river and the flow of the water was high. A commotion on the king's road drowned the sounds that these pilgrims made. Startled by the noise, many climbed on trees to see what was happening. At first, they could only see the dust of the road and soon they could see an entourage of elephants, horses, royal chariots and palanquins, royal heralds, flag holders, drum beaters marched at the head of the procession.

The clear voice of the herald soon told them who was approaching.

“A warrior born and bred on the battle-field! A Prince who became a seasoned warrior at the tender age of 12 years! The lion from whose shadow the Rashtrakutas flee! Noble Lord of Erattai Mandalam! The Crown Prince of Chola Empire! The Eldest Son of Emperor Sundara Chola! Prince Aditya Karikalar arrives!”

The booming voice of the herald caused a busy flurry of activity at the banks of the river. Those who were halfway across the river came back to

the banks to watch and cheer for the Prince. Those who were bathing hurriedly dressed themselves to watch and gawk at the royalty who would soon arrive.

After the herald and the flag holders, there came warhorses bearing three warriors. Even when they were at a distance, people pointed towards them and started talking.

“You see the one in the middle, that is Aditya Karikalar. Don’t you see the golden crown that he is wearing? See how it glows in the sun!”

“This crown is not as glorious as Karikala Valavan’s crown. You should see that. They say that it glows with the radiance of over thousands of suns.”

“The one that you are referring is not the crown of Karikala Valavan. Though they call it the same, for tradition’s sake, it was made during the time of Parthaka Chakravarthy. That’s the crown that was given to Sundara Cholar during his coronation. Though we don’t know how long he would wear it.”

“People have been saying that for a very long time... but the Emperor is still lingering.”

“I hope that he does. So long as he is alive, there won’t be any confusion or chaos in the Kingdom.”

“That too is not certain. Ever since the news about Ponniyin Selvar came, there has been chaos in the Kingdom. Who knows when there will be a civil war?”

“Who is going to fight whom?”

“They are expecting conflict between Kodumbalur clan and the Pazhuvur clan. To avoid this, they have organized for peace talks at Kadambur Sambuverayar’s palace. Aditya Karikalar is on his way there.”

“The horses are coming near, talk softly...”

As the horses neared them, they said, “Why is Prince Aditya Karikalar looking so grim and upset?”

“Isn’t it natural? His brother is lost in the sea and no one has any news about him. Everyone knows how much he loved his brother and his father has become an invalid.”

“That’s not the reason why the Prince is looking grim. He is upset because his plans of invasion against the Eratai Mandalam have been foiled.”

“Who foiled his plans?”

“Who else but the Pazhuvur brothers. I heard that they refused to give the Prince the supplies that are needed for an invasion.”

“You people don’t know the truth, that’s why you are carrying on with such lies. The real reason as to why he is upset is not known to one and all...”

“Really! So it is you who knows everything. Why don’t you tell us then?”

“I have heard that the Prince was in love with some woman from the Pandya Kingdom. When the Prince was battling with the Pandya army, Periya Pazhuvetarayar swooped in and married her. Now she has become the Pazhuvur queen and is literally ruling over the Kingdom. Ever since the Prince heard about this, he has lost his mental balance.”

“It’s possible... our elders do say that women are the sole reason for most wars.”

“Who are these elders who say such absurd things? This is sheer madness and I haven’t heard a more malicious lie than what you just told. So what if the Prince had loved a woman? What possessed her to go and marry an old man? I can’t believe that people are peddling such lies...”

“If that is so, then why is the Prince still unmarried? Go on... tell us,”

“Be quiet! The horses are coming closer. The one on the right side of the Prince is Parthibendra Pallavan. Who is the warrior on the left? Is it Vallavareyan Vandiya Devan?”

“No! No! It is Kandanmaran, noble Sambuverayar’s son. Instead of sending a message, Sambuverayar sent his son to bring the Prince to Kadambur Palace.”

“That shows that something important is going to be decided at Kadambur Palace.”

“They probably want to decide who would succeed the throne next. And until Karikalan is unmarried, all these noblemen will try to get him as their groom. He is the heir apparent and the crown prince, after all. And the woman who marries him first will become the queen!”

Such was the conversation and conjectures that the people debated upon. The three horses went all the way to the banks of the river and stopped. Aditya Karikalan got down and went towards the chariot that had followed them behind.





Chapter 2: The grandsire and the grandson

The chariot stopped and Thirukkovalur Malayaman who was seated on it, said, “Child! Karikala! I will take your leave now and go to Thirukkovalur. Before I start my journey, I wish to speak to you. Will you sit with me for a while, under that tree?”

“Alright, Thatha!”

The Prince and his Grandsire then walked towards the tree and sat under it.

Watching them, Parthibendran looked at Kandanmaran and said, “Thank the Gods! I was worried that the old man would come with us all the way to Kadambur Palace.”

“If he did, I will drown him in the Kollidam River.”

Both men then laughed, mighty pleased with their own humour.

In the meanwhile, Thirukkovalur Malayaman looked at his grandson and said, “Aditha! You were born on this day, 24 years ago at Thirukkovalur in my palace. I remember the festivities like it happened yesterday. Many noblemen of your clan, my clan and that of Thondai Mandalam had gathered to celebrate the birth of the royal heir. Along with all these noblemen, over 30,000 soldiers had come as an entourage. The festive gaiety that followed your birth can’t be described in one day. Even your father’s coronation paled in comparison to the celebration that we had after

you were born. Whatever treasure my ancestors had hoarded in over a hundred years was spent on that one single day!

Did you know, your great grandfather Paranthaka came to Thirukkavalur along with the King Gandarathidhar and your father? You can't imagine their happiness when they learned that a male heir has been born to the royal dynasty. Your great grandfather's sons died without siring an heir and of all the sons only Aringzha Chola had a child, your father. He was the most handsome prince to be born in your family. Poor man! He was subjected to many inconveniences because of that. When he was young, the palace womenfolk enjoyed dressing him up as a woman and engaged in games about how beautiful he would be, and would sigh over him saying 'if only he was a woman.' When he came of age, scores of noblemen fell over their feet trying to offer their daughters' hand in marriage to him. He was ripe for plucking indeed! He was not only handsome but also the heir to the Chola throne. I was fortunate when he accepted my daughter's hand in marriage and he became my son-in-law.

Our clan is well known for bravery and not for beauty, be it men or women. We consider battle scars to be symbols of beauty among the men. For women virtue, honour and duty are the qualities that make them truly beautiful. When it was decided that Sundara Chola would wed my daughter, the people of my kingdom rejoiced and I became the object of envy among the other noblemen who had been vying for the Emperor's hand in marriage. I didn't let it bother me. Their marriage was solemnized in Thanjavur and the celebrations that followed were in accordance with royal nuptials in any kingdom, yet they can't be compared to the celebrations that followed your birth.

There arose a huge argument about what name you should bear. Some of your relatives wanted you named after the most famous king born in your dynasty – Karikala Valavan while I wanted you to be named after your grandfather Rajadhithar. Finally, we named you Adithya Karikalan and satisfied the wishes of all concerned.

There! Adhitha! Do you see the temple tower of Thirunavalloor Temple? That's where Sundaramurthy Nayanaar was born. That's where your

grandfather, Prince Rajadhithar had camped when he went on to fight his last war. I have seen many warriors in my life and have heard of many more in stories, legends and myths but I am yet to meet another man who can compare to Rajadhithar's might and skill. Those of us, who were fortunate enough to fight along with him, will attest to that.

Rajadhithar had camped here to invade north. He wanted to conquer Eratai Mandalam and defeat King Kannara Devan. Centuries ago, Narasimha Pallavar destroyed Vatapi and the Chalukya stronghold along with it, Rajadhithar wished to do something similar and win a glorious name for himself.

To amass an army for invasion is no mean feat. It took Narasimha Pallavar seven long years to build an army and hoard the supplies needed for the same but Rajadhithar accomplished it within four years. He built an army, trained them in the art of war and established barracks for them here.

Adhitha! You were not fortunate enough to see the sights that I had seen when Prince Rajadhithan had camped here. Those of us, who saw it, will never forget it. Rajadhithar stayed at Thirukovaloor with 30,000 soldiers and the Chera King Vellan Kumaran came there with 20,000 soldiers. Your grandfather Aringzhan was also with me at Thiruvkovaloor and he was helping me train 50,000 soldiers. Many noble clans including Kodumbaloor Vellar, Kadambur Sambuverayar and these pesky Pazhuvetrarays too had come and camped near the banks of this river. The Prince used to organize mock battles among us to train the soldiers. Elephants, horses and foot soldiers bearing blunt weapons would test their battle readiness in many games.

The people Thirumunaipadi patiently hosted a vast garrison of soldiers in their midst for many years. Farmers couldn't sow grains and harvest their fields because of the war preparation yet they didn't complain and rendered all help that was possible to the army. The Prince felt indebted to them and that's why he commissioned his soldiers to build dams and reservoirs to help them. The dam that he built at Veeranarayanapuram is a fine example of how much he cared for the people. Kadambur Sambureyan benefited a lot from that dam. I have seen him bowing low and eloquently thanking the

Prince for his great work. Look at him today... his rise to power has been swift indeed.”

Adithya Karikalan then interjected and said, “Thatha! Who cares about his power today? Tell me about the Thakollam war. When did the army leave these banks? Despite the many preparations and training that was given to our soldiers, how did we lose this war? How did we lose Prince Rajadhithan? You fought along with them didn’t you? Only you can tell me what happened there.”

“Rajadhithar had gathered vast armies here to invade the north but due to various reasons, he couldn’t start the invasion. War erupted again in Illangai and the Prince had to send one portion of his army there. The Emperor didn’t allow the army to proceed north, especially when Illangai was up in arms again. He asked the Prince to wait until the war in Illangai had a successful conclusion before starting on the invasion plans. The Prince acceded to his father’s wise request and waited patiently. In the meanwhile, the Erattai Mandalam King Kannara Devan too was gathering an army to counter the massive forces that Rajadhithar had amassed. When the Ganga King Boothakan joined his forces with Kannara Devan, they started proceeding towards our Kingdom. Their armies came towards us like a sea to engulf the land. Our spies came rushing to us with information about the army that was coming towards us.

But the Emperor was unfazed by the approaching danger. He felt that it was a good thing that the enemy was marching towards us. His reasoning was sound. Instead of us marching towards the enemy along with fatigued soldiers and burdened with food and water supplies, wouldn’t it be better for us to wait for the enemy to come to us where we can have the upper hand? It was only after the enemy forces came near Venkatam that the Emperor ordered our army to start marching.

But the Prince didn’t wait for the Emperor’s approval. He led his army to meet the invading enemy with three lakh foot soldiers, 50,000 horse soldiers, 16,000 war elephants, two thousand chariot warriors, 350 generals and 32 kings. I was fortunate to be one among the kings who were led by this prince but I was also unfortunate to be one among the survivors.

After marching for three days, we met the enemy forces at Thakkollam. In myths and legends, we have heard of great wars that have been fought between Indra and Virata. Who can forget the battle between Rama and Ravana fought on the last day? And Mahabharata is full of such battles and wars between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. After seeing the gory battle that happened in Thakkollam, I don't have to imagine how these legendary battles might have been fought. The enemy forces had twice the size of our army. They had five lakh foot soldiers and 30,000 war elephants but we faced them undaunted because we had a huge advantage that none of their superior numbers could match. We had Prince Rajadhithar and that made all the difference. That's why the Goddess of war favoured us right from the beginning.

For ten days, the war went on. It was impossible to count the dead on both sides. I can still see the pile of dead elephants looking like a small mountain on the battlefield. Though both the sides suffered huge losses, the enemy forces had weakened to a larger degree. They were in awe of Prince Rajadhithar's skill in battle and war tactics and knew that until he led our forces, a Chola victory was imminent. Whenever our soldiers became exhausted, he would take his elephant there and when they saw the Prince, their exhaustion vanished and they fought with great vigour. Our enemies noted all this and soon they knew that unless they brought down the Prince, they stood no chance. They came up with a treacherous plan of which we were totally unaware. It was the Ganga King who planned and executed it.

In the thick of the battle, Ganga King Boodhakan approached Prince Rajadhithan screaming for mercy with a peace flag on his elephant. The Prince who first thought that it was the Eratai Mandala King who was calling for the peace, allowed this swine to approach.

Boothakan came near Rajathidhan with his eyes streaming with tears and his hands folded in salutation and his head bowed low. The Prince felt sorry for him, so he coaxed his elephant to go near his.

I wish that the Prince had remembered wise Valluvar's words about the enemy who approaches with devious tears. But Rajadhithar had no such

misgivings. He genuinely felt sorry for the king. When he neared him, he asked him, ‘What news do you bear?’ and the Ganga King’s answer made the Prince squirm with revulsion. He said that since the armies of Erratai Mandalam were poised to be defeated, he wished to defect from the losing side and enter an alliance with the winning side. The Prince cursed the Ganga King with many harsh words.

He told Boothakan that he would never allow a cowardly worm like him to fight with our brave forces and advised him to leave the battlefield along with his army. That’s when he did the unthinkable. He took the bow and arrow that he had readied before the parley and shot a poisoned arrow at the Prince. The Prince fell down and confusion and chaos reigned for a while. No one around knew what exactly happened though most of them could hear the Prince asking the Ganga King to leave. Immediately after the Prince fell, the Ganga King too turned his elephant and fled from the scene.

Our army became disorganized after the fall of Rajadhithar. Commanders and Generals started fleeing with their battalions. I too was among the many Kings who fled the battlefield that day. The enemy forces drove us like cattle herds as we tried to flee for our life. It was only after we came to this Kedilam River that we regained our senses. We took a stand again and stopped them from advancing. I went to my mountain fort and brought a fresh army to attack them. Their army had by then captured many parts of these regions. It took me few years to get rid of them in the hereabouts. They still held the city of Kanchi and it was only three years ago, that you threw them out and captured it back.”

Adithya Karikalan interjected again and said, “Thatha you have narrated this tale many times, yet I can’t help wanting to hear it again and again.”

“Child! Rajadhithar wanted to expand the Chola Kingdom all the way from Illangai to Ganga River but he died without fulfilling that dream. People say that you are the very embodiment of bravery, just like him and that only you have the capacity to fulfil Rajadhithar’s dream but I fear that you too might fall for treason. That’s why I narrated this sad tale.”

“Thatha! My grandfather died in the war because of the enemy’s treasonous plans. I am not going to war. I am meeting my father’s noble friends. Why would they harm me in any way?”

“Karikala! You should never fear the enemy who stands before you with his sword unsheathed but it is the friend who extends one hand in greeting while hiding a sword behind his back that you should fear. You are going amidst friends who are in truth your enemies. They are calling you there with many false reasons saying that they wish to stop a civil war in the Kingdom. They want to foist Sambuverayar’s daughter on your head but I still can’t fathom the real reason as to why you were invited there. Noble families and Kings will fall over their feet to give their daughters’ hand in marriage to you and you really don’t need to marry this girl anyway. I also heard that they wish to divide the kingdom and give one half to you and the other half to your uncle. But something doesn’t seem right here and I fear there is some treason at work. That’s why I am going to Thirukkoyalur to bring my army. I will garrison it near the banks of Kollidam. While you are at Kadambur Palace, if you scent even a hint of danger, I want you to send word to me.”

It took a while for the old man to see that the Prince was not paying any attention to his words. He was instead looking at something and pointed it to his grandfather, “Thatha! Look at that.”





Chapter 3: The Eagle and the Pigeon

The old man looked at the spot that his grandson has pointed. It was an old mandapam dilapidated and careworn, built many years ago by some kind-hearted nobleman to aid those who travelled in these parts. Though the structure was old, it was ornamentally superior with beautiful sculptural work.

“Did you see thatha?”

“Child! You are pointing towards that mandapam but I see nothing there. There is no one inside the mandapam too.”

“Thatha, you have indeed grown old. Your eyesight is definitely not what it used to be. Look there! There is an eagle, see how large and ferocious it looks. Look at its wings, so vast and powerful. But what is this? Oh! How terrible? The eagle is holding a pigeon as its prisoner with its sharp claws. Can’t you see it? It is shedding the blood of that poor bird! There I can see another bird! It is hovering around that eagle trying to rescue its mate. Will it beg the eagle to leave her alone? No. The way it is trying to soar over the eagle, it looks like it will fight for its lover. My God! That ladybird has more courage than all the men in this world. It is trying to fight for its mate’s life. Will the eagle relent? No... never. The eagle has preyed upon many such pigeons, why would it leave its prey? That wretched bird! It deserve to be slain!” growled Aditya Karikalan and then picked up a pebble from the ground and threw it at the mandapam.

The pebble hit the inner wall of the mandapam and fell down seeing which Karikalan laughed out thunderously.

Malayaman who had long been worried about the sanity of his grandson looked at him with concern.

“Thatha! Why are you staring at me thus? Go inside the mandapam and see it closely.”

Malayaman got up and walked towards the mandapam and found that within its inner walls a beautiful statue depicting the scene that Karikalan had just described.

He came back and said, “Child! You were right. I have indeed grown so old that my eyes have become weak. I could see that statue only after I neared it. It is an extraordinary statue by all means.”

“Extraordinary? It is surely something more than that. I am sure it was sculpted by someone who possessed incredible talent and vision... probably during the time of Mahendra Pallava^[2]. When I saw it first, I thought it was real!”

“Aditya! It is an amazing statue, no doubt about it but beauty such as this can be spotted only by those who have a discerning eye. Imagine how many people must have passed by road. Most of them would not even notice the statue, leave alone admire its beauty. Very few people like yourself will find it extraordinary... worthy of admiration.”

“I have no admiration for it thatha, instead I am angry. I am incensed enough to pound that statue to dust. How could someone portray so much cruelty through his art?”

“Karikala! What is wrong with you? When did your heart relent so much that you couldn't stand cruelty in art? An eagle kills a pigeon because it is his prey, nothing more and nothing less. It's in his nature to grab its prey. If the lion starts showing compassion to the goat, then it can't be the 'King of the forest' anymore. Those who wish to rule the land must eliminate all their adversaries. If that eagle didn't prey on that pigeon then will you ever

call it the 'king of the birds'? Why would you get so upset about something this simple?"

"Thatha! I agree with what you said but don't you think that eagle should have pitied that ladybird and spared the life of its mate? Tell me something! If you were about to kill your enemy what would you do if his wife or lover fell at your feet begging you to spare his life? Won't you feel pity for her and release your enemy?"

"If I were in this situation, I wouldn't hesitate to kick her aside and kill my enemy. Karikala! Have no doubts about it. Do you know what Valluvar ^[3]said about one's enemies? He said, your enemy might have a sword in his hand to attack you, but a woman's tears is as lethal as a sword. They have the power to melt your hardened heart. And those who fall prey to their tears will remain enslaved by them and can never achieve any greatness in this world."

"Thatha, How could you have such a low opinion of women? That means the same holds good for mine own mother and your daughter, isn't it?"

"Child! The affection that I bear for your mother can't be compared to anything else in this world. I once had six warrior sons, each one as mighty as Bhima or Arjuna. I sacrificed them on the altar of war and when I heard that they were slain by our enemies, I didn't grieve their death. But when I gave away my daughter's hand in marriage to your father, my sorrow knew no bounds. Even the knowledge that she would one day be the Empress of this Kingdom, didn't grant me any happiness. Did I show my sorrow to anyone? No! And nor did she know of it I spoke to her at length, a day before she was to wed your father. Do you know what I told her?

I said, 'Dear Daughter! You are to wed the Emperor of this Kingdom. Don't become arrogant or entertain unwanted pride within your heart. You will only suffer unhappiness because of that. The fact that your husband is so loved and popular will only add to your grief. Even the handmaiden of your palace would lead a happy domestic life than yourself... so prepare your heart to be disappointed. If you fail to bear children for your husband, he would marry another woman for sure. Don't grieve if such a situation

arises. If you do bear sons to him, it is onto you to bring them up as good warriors. If they die on the battlefield, grieve in your heart but do not allow tears to escape your eyes. If your husband is happy, you too be happy with him. If he grieves, try to make him happy. If he lies on the sick bed, take care of him with dedication. If he dies, become a Sati and follow him to the world beyond. No matter what happens, no matter how hurt you are, do not let those tears escape your eyes. Thus I asked her to uphold the values of our clan and she has been following my advice since then. She brought up her sons, as peerless warriors and when your father became sick, she has been taking care of him day and night. As a father, I am so proud of the fact that she is my daughter.”

“Thatha! You are right. I am proud of my mother too but I do have a doubt. What would my mother do, if a deadly enemy should raise his sword to strike at my father? Would she shed tears and beg for her husband’s life? What if this enemy was someone who she has known since childhood?”

“Child! Your mother would never beg for your father’s life and bring shame upon the clan that she was born and bred and nor will she shame the dynasty that she has married into. If such a situation arises, her husband’s enemy would become her enemy. She would never beg for his life. If he dies, she would die along with him right there or else she might harden her heart and seek vengeance and stay alive until she takes her revenge upon the enemy.”

Aditya Karikalan let out a long sigh when he heard this and then said, “Thatha! Shall I take your leave now?”

“Do you really have to go?”

“Why do you still have doubts about it? We have come half way through the king’s road.”

“Yes. We have come halfway through the journey. I first advised you not to go and then I asked you to go. After hearing the news about your brother, I felt that it would be best if you went there. I don’t believe that he is lost to the sea...”

“Neither do I”

“When your father was young, he too went missing for a while in Illangai. I think Arul Mozhi too would return to us one day but the entire kingdom is in turmoil because of this news. Your parents are worried and troubled and it is your duty to stay next to them and ease their burden. I thought that it would be best that you go to Thanjavur as the friend of Pazhuvur brothers, rather than their enemy. That’s why I asked you to accept the invitation of Sambuverayar. He didn’t invite me deliberately, if he had, I would have come along with you.”

“Thatha! You are so scared? Do you really think that I am helpless?”

“No Child! You aren’t helpless. You are a peerless warrior and I would never hesitate to send you out to the war front. I wouldn’t even be worried if you went to the battlefield alone to face your enemies. But I do worry when you go to meet a woman who would melt your heart with her tears.”

“I doubt if Sambuverayar’s daughter knows such tricks. From what I have heard from Kandanmaran, she is painfully shy who hides from the gaze of menfolk. And I really wouldn’t seek a marriage alliance without my parent’s consent. I also know that two of your own granddaughters are unmarried...”

“Aditha! I have no such thoughts. My oldest son’s daughters are ready to be wedded but I have no intention of saddling you with them. Right from the time, my daughter wed the reigning Emperor, all those who sought an alliance with him became my enemies and has since envied my position. If I tried to marry off more women from my clan to the royal dynasty, then you will have no friends left in this kingdom. It would be best if you marry Samburverayar’s daughter. You need new friends and alliances. I am old and frail... and I feel myself drowning in sorrow and fear. Sometimes I worry that this might be last time that I would see you alive! I don’t think I can be of use to you anymore. You need friends who would support your claim to the throne and for that reason alone, if you marry Sambuverayan’s daughter, I would be very happy.”

“Thatha! I can’t marry someone just to make you happy and nor do I seek Sambuverayar’s friendship to support my claim.”

“Then why are you going there? Won’t you tell me the truth? I have heard your friends talking about it. Are you really going there because Pazhuvur Lord’s wife has sent you a message? Is it really true?”

“Yes Thatha! That’s true.”

“My God! I can’t believe it. Karikala! Listen to me. Your dynasty has been ruling this kingdom for over two thousand years now. Some were kings of smaller areas while many were Emperors of the entire southern region. Some married once and stayed faithful to their wife, while others married multiple times and had a hoard of sons through them. Many were devout, while some turned out to be atheists and insisted that there are no Gods but none of them so far have a blemish to their character. They would never look at a woman who was wed to another.

Child! Marry whomsoever you want, so long as they are single. Your great grandfather Paranthakan I married seven women from different clans. Do the same...but do not cast your eyes on another man’s wife, especially the one, who has seduced the senses of a warrior like Periya Pazhuvetarayar.”

“Forgive me, Thatha! I have no such intention and nor will I ever taint the name of my dynasty or yours with such actions.”

“If that is so... then why do you answer her summons?”

“I will tell you the truth before I leave thatha. I once did a grave injustice to her and wish to seek her forgiveness. That’s why I am going to meet her.”

“What are you saying? You will bow down and seek forgiveness... that too to a woman! I can’t believe my ears!”

Aditya Karikalan remained silent for a while and then rallied his heart to share the truth with his grandsire. He narrated the story of how he had

hunted for Veera Pandyan and how he found Nandini in the hut along with the wounded king. He told him how he had beheaded the Pandya King after kicking aside Nandini who was begging for the life of her lover. He also told him of the torment that he has been experiencing ever since he rejected her plea.

“I am tormented by the memory of my brutal act and unless I seek her forgiveness, I will have no peace in my heart. Her message to me also indicates the fact that she wishes to forget the past. She doesn’t want any chaos in the kingdom. That’s why she sent the message. I will meet her there and return almost immediately to Kanchi. After that, I plan to take a ship to Illangai and hunt for my lost brother.”

Malayaman let out a long sigh and said, “I am able to understand many things that had eluded me earlier. I now know that it is impossible to win over one’s fate and destiny.”





Chapter 4: The Ayyanar temple

When Karikalan and his grandsire were conversing, on the northern banks of Kollidam at a place known as Thirukannathumullur, our old friends Azhwarkadiyan Nambi and Vandiya Devan were engaged in an odd occupation. This part of Kollidam River was a holy pilgrimage area as the idol of Shiva from the adjoining temple was brought out for immersion in the river waters. To see this sight, many devout Saivaites and Kalamugars would gather at the banks every day in the holy month of Thula^[4]. Along with the idol of Lord Shiva, Lord Vishnu's murti was also brought from the village temple for a holy bath, therefore many Vaishnavaites and Shaivaites had gathered at the banks of the river for a darshan.

Amidst this crowd, Azhwarkadiyan had hoisted a flag and issued a challenge.

“I have come here to debate and to establish that Lord Vishnu is the greatest among all the other Gods. Saivars, Kalamugars, Advaitis, Kapaligars, Buddhars or Jains... no matter what your faith is, you can come here and debate with me. If you win, I will hoist you on my shoulders and circumambulate this village but if you lose, you will need to hand over every possession that you carry on your person, except for your clothes. Who is ready for the challenge?” thus he growled looking around.

In front of him were numerous rudraksha^[5] bead chains, golden necklaces, large earrings, brass vessels, costly silk and bags of coins which he had obviously won from those who were foolish enough to challenge him.

Standing near the Nambi under a Kadamba tree, Vandiya Devan pranced with a drawn sword. He barely had enough clothes on him. He was protecting the Nambi from those who had tried to mishandle him through force. He looked at the group of Saivars who had come there in response to

Nambi's challenge and said, "Be warned! You are free to debate with this Nambi as much as you want, but if you dare to lay a hand on him, you will fall prey to this sword." He then whirled the sword around to great effect forcing the angry Saivars to rein in the violence that they were planning against the audacious Vaishnavan.

"Vaishnavaney! Don't get arrogant because you won the debate today. Go to Thirunarayur, there you will find Nambiyandar Nambi, whose debating skills will put you to shame."

"Well, if that is so, then ask him to go and debate with Thirunarayanapuram's Ananda Battar. Even I might be going there..."

Saying thus, he called out for more people to challenge and when none came forth he removed the flag and replace it with another flag bearing the holy marks of Vaishnavaites – a conch and a discus. After he did that, the other Vaishnavaites who were gleefully watching the entire spectacle swooped in to celebrate his victory and hoisted him on shoulders and chanted slogans.

After the victory celebration, one of them invited them to their home to partake a meal. Azhwarkadiyan agreed with great dignity and went along with Vandiya Devan. At the Vaishnavan's house, they ate a meal of tasty tamarind rice, sweetened rice (desert) and curd rice. Later, Azhwarkadiyan bartered all the items that he had won in the debate to the gathered Vaishnavaites (except for a silk upper garment which he gave to Vandiya Devan) for a bag of gold coins. He told them that he and Vandiya Devan were on a holy pilgrimage to Haridwaram ^[6] and that they needed the coins for their journey. After pocketing the money, they bid farewell and made their way towards Kadambur Palace.

The previous day, when they had crossed the Kollidam River on a crowded ferry the boat capsized and though they were able to save themselves from the river flood they lost all their possession in the flowing water. Vandiya Devan lost the letters that he carried from Kundavai and from the Prime Minister to Aditya Karikalan and all his money along with the palm tree signet ring that Nandini had given him.

With no money in hand to buy horses, they had to earn it with the help of Azhwarkadiyan's debating skills. There were no horses to buy in the village they were in so they had to walk all the way to Kadambur village to procure them and too was a doubtful prospect. If none were available there, they would have to go to Thirupathipuliyur to get one.

They both vigorously argued about the merits and demerits of going to Kadambur. For one thing, they might learn news about where Aditya Karikalan was camped presently. This might help them plan the route of their journey. The pitfalls of going to Kadambur were many.

What if someone sees them there? What if Pazhuvur soldiers were already camped there? And if they see Vandiya Devan, there would be hell to pay!

“Nambi! You know how to jump over walls, why don't you get into the stables of Kadambur Palace and steal two horses for us?”

“I can jump over wall... but the horses too need to know that skill Thambi,”

“If the Pazhuvur soldiers are camped there, then let's steal away two horses from them. I still haven't forgotten the way they had hassled my horse, the last time we were there and I have been itching for some revenge.”

That steered the conversation towards the conspiracy that they both overheard the noblemen hatching and they discussed it at length all the way to Kadambur. As expected, the Kadambur village was getting ready to welcome their Crown Prince. Colourful decorations, flags and garlands were seen everywhere. Security around the Kadambur Palace was tight as ever. If that were not enough, Periya Pazhuvetarayar, the too was arriving with a large entourage. It was reasonable to expect the village to be buzzing with activity for the next few days.

Azhwarkadiyan and Vandiya Devan learned all this at the village market, where people conversed freely. They also learned that both the parties have not arrived in Kadambur yet. They found out that Sambuverayar's son Kandanmaran had gone to Kanchi to bring the Crown Prince to Kadambur.

While the people spoke about the events to come excitedly, some expressed their grief over the drowned prince in whispers and their outrage over the fact that entertainers outran the village, even as they mourned the death of their beloved prince.

Azhwarkadiyan and Vandiya Devan heard all this silently and made their way to the outskirts of the village. They didn't want to stay the night at the village lest they were recognized. At the outskirts, they might find an abandoned mandapam or a guesthouse to rest for the night, or they could even make their way to Veerananarayanapuram and sleep in the temple mandapam peacefully. After the being caught at the floods of the Kollidam the previous night, they both craved uninterrupted sleep. After leaving Kadambur village, they walked along the length of a thick bamboo forest when they saw an Ayyanar temple hidden amidst the thick foliage.

“Vaishnavarey! I can't walk anymore. Let's sleep in this temple tonight. We will be away from prying eyes and spies here.”

“You are wrong about that. Places like this will always attract people like us, who wish to stay hidden from the populace.”

“That's fine, let them come. I only wish that they come with their horses. That would be good for us.”

“It would be impossible to enter this bamboo forest with a horse. It is going to be tough to even merely walk into it...”

“There must be a pathway somewhere here. How else does the temple priest come here?”

They searched their way through the bamboo forest and soon found a narrow pathway. It was so narrow that they had walk carefully to avoid the thorns. After walking for a while, there was a clearing around the area where the temple was built. A large sacrificial altar was erected in front of the temple and many large mud elephants and horses adorned the altar as an offering to Ayyanar^[7].

After looking at the horses, Vandiya Devan said, “Why are we so worried about horses when we could borrow some from Ayyanar?”

“Have you forgotten the proverb, that you shouldn’t trust a mud horse and get into the lake?”

“Vaishnavaney! Our Ayyanar is a very powerful God. He listens to his devotee’s pleas almost immediately. Not like your Lord Vishnu, who sleeps through the day.”

“Do you believe that he would bring this mud horse to life? If it is true, it would be good for us. Might as well save some gold.”

“Those who bear true devotion in their hearts will find their wishes come true and the mud horses will come to life. What if they are made of mud? What of our bodies? Aren’t they made of mud before Brahma gives the breathe of life?”

“Very true Thambi! We keep forgetting it, that’s why our Vaishnava gurus have bid us keep ‘thiruman’ ^[8] on our foreheads just so that we remember this.”

At that moment, Vandiya Devan suddenly said ‘Ushhh’ and bid Azhwarkadiyan be quiet. Dusk had fallen and all around the forest, darkness was gathering and in the twilight, they saw a miracle. A horse and an elephant were indeed coming to life! The elephant had moved from its place and so had the horse! Vandiya Devan was amazed by the sight and couldn’t stop himself from impressing upon the Nambi about the great divine powers of Ayyanar.

“Vaishnavarey! Did you see?”

This time Azhwarkadiyan held his hand tight and bid him be quiet and led him behind a huge tree to watch what was happening at the temple.

At the place where the elephant and the horse had originally stood, there was a hole and a head appeared in its place! The head turned around in all

directions, which seemed pretty gory to Vandiya Devan, whose eyes flitted towards the sacrificial altar that was nearby. But Azhwarkadiyan was watching the proceedings unfazed without a hint of fear. Even as they watched, the man emerged out of the tunnel and in the gathering darkness, Nambi and Vandiya Devan were able to recognize him. It was Edupankari, the man who was employed in Kadambur Palace as a servant who served as a spy for Ravidasan's gang.

Nambi and Vandiya Devan looked at each other in surprise and shock. Edupankari left the tunnel open below and then once again looked around him suspiciously and walked towards the temple. He then opened the temple doors and went inside. Within a few minutes, the lamps were lit.

"Thambi! What do you think of this?" asked Nambi

"Ayyanar is indeed more powerful than any God. Didn't you see how the horse and the elephant came to life?"

"That's alright. What about the man who just came here? What do you think of him?"

"Looks like he is the temple priest here. Shall we go in to get the darshan of Lord Ayyanar?"

"Hold on... let's wait and watch if somebody else comes here for the same reason."

"Do you really think many other people would come?"

"Then, why else is he lighting so many lamps at the Sanctum?"

"He is the priest of the temple, isn't he?"

"Didn't you recognize him?"

"I did. He is the soldier who procured me the horse when we crossed Kollidam. His name is Edupankari. Do you think he would help us get a

horse again?”

“You do come up with some brilliant ideas.”

“You disapprove?”

“Edupankari is not just the soldier who procured the horse for you. He also happens to be Ravidasan’s spy.”

“Is that so? Then I do have yet another brilliant idea.”

“And what would that be?”

“What if I got inside the tunnel and find out where it leads?”

“It could be dangerous!”

“Every turn of our life is dangerous!”

“Alright! Just as you wish.”

“Will you watch around here and see what’s happening?”

“Of course I will. Do you have any idea where that tunnel would end?”

“Many ideas... that’s what I would like to confirm.”

“Why do you wish to know where the tunnel ends?”

“It might come in handy some time... who knows?

That’s when they heard voices at a distance.

“Let’s not tarry anymore. You will stay right here won’t you, until I get back? Or will you do the same thing that Sugreeva did to Vaali^[9]?”

“If I am alive, you will find me here waiting for you but will you come back here for sure?”

“I will return for sure... if I am alive.”

Saying thus, Vandiya Devan ran towards the statues of horse and elephant and then jumped inside the tunnel entrance. After he disappeared, Edupankari came out of the temple and noticed that he had left the tunnel entrance open. He immediately went near the sacrificial altar and turned a lever and the elephant and horse moved back to its original position.

After closing the tunnel he waited near the temple entrance as though he was expecting someone. That's when Ravidasan, Soman Sambavan and the rest of the gang arrived through a different forest path. Azhwarkadiyan tried to hide behind the thin bamboo reeds when he spied them arriving.

Ravidasan sat down at the temple entrance and the rest of the gang sat around him.

“Friends! We are about to fulfil our vow very soon.” Said Ravidasan.

“This is what we have been saying for the past six months... that the ‘time is near’ but when are we going to fulfil it?” questioned Soman Sambavan morosely.

“Yes, we have been saying it for the past six months... and each passing day we were nearing the right time when our plans would come to fruition. Now though we can count the number days that are left to fulfil our vow. I just heard that Aditya Karikalan has started from Kanchi. I heard that he is determined to come to Kadambur despite the objections that his grandfather Thirukovalur Malayaman had raised.”

“What if someone tries to change his mind, while he is on his way here?”

“Aditya Karikalan will never back down once he has decided on a course of action. He will see this through.”

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

“How is that possible? Didn’t we tie that boy in the middle of the forest?”

“‘Middle of the forest’ indeed! We saw him at Kollidam river banks and along with him was one other enemy of ours.”

“Who is that?”

“That rogue Vaishnavan!”

“Alright, then we will need to be very careful. We should not allow them to meet Karikalan, at any cost.”

“Yes... wonderful idea indeed. When we had the boy in our hands, we will allow him to escape and then waste our time trying to hunt him down. We should him slain him right there and offered him as a sacrifice at the battlefield of our glorious king. Why does our queen pity him so? Why did she spare his life?”

“Friends! I can understand your doubts and believe me, I have asked our queen the same question many a time. It’s only recently that I had the opportunity to learn her entire plan and I have to concede defeat and agree that she is indeed brilliant. Vandiya Devan’s life was spared for an important reason and you will learn ‘why’ very soon. Do not worry about him, when the time comes, we will take care of him. But we can’t be lenient, where the Vaishnavan is concerned and if any of you spot him anywhere, slay him without any second thoughts.”





Chapter 5: The Underground Passage

After entering the secret underground passage at the Ayyanar Temple, Vandiya Devan walked for a while in the dark. A faint light was seen from the entrance of the tunnel and that gave him the confidence to venture further into the darkness. After a few steps, he heard a rumbling sound of a lever being turned and the tunnel entrance closed. The underground passage became so dark that Vandiya Devan became disoriented.

His first thoughts were of the resolution that he took not so long ago -- about not getting involved in things that do not concern his mission.

Why did I get into this tunnel now? My mission was to reach Aditya Karikalar as soon as possible and stop him from coming to Kadambur... then what am I doing here instead? Why do I act so rashly? When will I learn?

He slowly traced his way back to the tunnel entrance and tried to find the lever that would open it but the darkness suffocated him from all directions. He could hear faint voices too and surmised that some more people might have come to the Temple, which was probably why Edupankari was lighting all those lamps. Ravidasan's gang might have come there to meet with Edupankari... then it would be dangerous to try and escape from the tunnel now.

Why did they come here? What are they planning?

Thankfully the Vaishnavan would be there to keep an eye on them.

Why should I wait here until they leave? I will probably fall unconscious before I can escape from here. Instead, why not explore this underground tunnel. It might be useful in future to learn where it leads.

After deciding this, he turned around started walking forward again. The ground was rough and was filled with stones. He surmised that the tunnel might lead him to Kadambur Palace. The bigger question was where in the Palace would it lead him? Most palaces had tunnels such as this built in the women's anthapuram. During times of peril or war, the womenfolk would use such escape routes to save their honour. That apart, they would also use these underground tunnels to hoard their treasures. So it might lead him towards the treasure chamber of the Sambuverayar clan. Nandini had aided the Ravidasan gang to loot the treasure of Cholas and Edupankari is probably doing the same with Sambuverayar too.

But why would they want to loot the treasure now, especially when Aditya Karikalan is expected at the Palace? What if they have another motive?

He remembered the coronation drama that had occurred at Thirupurambayam forest and Nandini wielding the sword that was etched with the Pandya royal emblem of Fish. He shivered when he remembered the scene.

They have no interest in Sambuverayar's treasure. They are here for a bigger fish obviously. They have a more dangerous motive and that's why they are using this tunnel to gain entrance into the Palace.

It is important that I find what lies at the end of the tunnel only then I can thwart their plans.

He walked slowly feeling his way through the walls. Though it had been just a few minutes since he entered the tunnel, he felt as though he had been inside for more than an hour. He wondered how long the tunnel would be and tried to calculate the distance between the Palace and the Bamboo

forest. At the outset, it seemed too vast a distance but then he and the Nambi had wandered through many alleys and streets before they got to the outskirts of the town. Maybe it was not that far a distance after all. If someone were to take an aim through the forest at the palace, the arrow would travel a straight path... that meant he was probably near the palace, if not inside it.

Even as he thought that a gush of fresh air came through a hidden crevice in the tunnel and cheered him up. The stale air and the darkness that had enveloped the tunnel made him sweat profusely so much so that without fresh air he might have fainted. The fresh air cleared his mind and he stood there for a while. He could hear faint voices of soldiers who were probably manning the fort. He could also see a faint light from the crevice that was providing him with ventilation. It was built so cleverly that those who were on the ground above could not even see it even as they trod upon it!

Now that he had neared the Palace entrance, his destination too should be nearby. But where would the tunnel end, at the treasure chamber of Sambuverayars or at the Anthapuram? He wondered what he would find at the treasure chamber of Sambuverayars?

Will they have pots of gold coins... pearls, gems, diamonds, diadems? Will there be skeletons and skulls guarding his treasure? Will there be webs of a spider weaving their desire on men who chance upon the treasure?

Thinking thus, he kept walking forward. At a point, he stumbled and looked down. He could faintly discern a staircase leading upstairs. This is probably where the treasure chamber would be there or he might be entering the Anthapuram. If it happened to be the Anthapuram, then his plight would be doubly dangerous.

Ah! Kandanmaran's sister... that dark-complexioned beauty. She would be there!

He had once thought that he would get married to her. He smiled thinking thus but sadly there was no one there to see his handsome face beaming. He

wondered what would happen to the womenfolk if he appeared in their midst at the anthapuram.

What if they were bathing or changing their robes? How awkward it would be!

He laughed as he climbed the stairs and the next second, the laughter died in his throat as he stared at the sight that unfolded in front of him. He could see hundreds of eyes staring at him from the depths of darkness and they belonged to wild animals. Vandiya Devan took a step back in panic and then heard a sound behind. It was the sound of the tunnel closing!

That meant this chamber was open all this while and when I entered it closed its doors! While one part of his brain issued this warning to him, he stood frozen in that place unable to move.

Why are all these wild animals waiting for me here? Tigers, cheetahs, leopards, lions and lionesses, bears, jackals and wolves were standing there watching him silently! There were two elephants too standing majestically!

Why aren't they moving? Why are they standing so still? Why don't they pounce on me and prey on my flesh?

There was a giant big owl sitting on the ledge of the roof. Then he spotted a crocodile on the floor below and he wondered how the beast came to be lying amidst these animals.

That's when the truth hit him and he sighed in relief. They were real wild animals but they have been dead for many years. Their flesh has been preserved and their bodies have been stuffed with cloth and straw. Fascinated, he touched the animals in wonder, as if to make sure they were really dead.

He wondered what to do next.

Should I go on and find the entrance back into the tunnel or move on and find a way to exit this chamber?

The chamber had no visible door and with passing time, he found himself getting angry and he berated himself for his rash decisions. He circulated the chamber by touching the wall everywhere hoping to find a lever to release him from this prison. At one place there was an elephant's face with its trunk kept on the wall. In his anger, he twisted the elephant's trunk saying, "Stupid elephant! It was you who got me into this trouble. Had you not moved at the Ayannar temple, I wouldn't be here."

The next instant a cavity opened on the wall and Vandiya Devan astonished put his head inside to have a look around.

The first thing that he saw was a woman's face. A beautiful dark-skinned woman with beautiful doe-like eyes looking into a mirror! He was standing near the chamber's door in such a way that his face was so close to her in the mirror. Almost as though he would kiss her!

The woman looked surprised and then shocked. The next instant a scream escaped her lips and Vandiya Devan panicked and took his hand off the elephant's trunk and the chamber closed.





Chapter 6: Manimegalai

Sambuverayar's daughter and Kandanmaran's sister Manimegalai was an energetic and spirited girl by nature who was cherished by her family. The palace of Kadambur was her own royal court, where she ruled over everyone like a queen. For many years, life was a happy dream for her, until four months ago... something changed. Her family started pressuring her to agree to something that her heart couldn't accept. Her pleas fell on deaf ears and but they seemed determined to have their way.

For the past three years, her brother Kandanmaran had been talking incessantly about his friend Vallavareyan Vandiya Devan -- His wit, quick thinking, fiery temper, skill with the sword and spear. He would describe Vandiya Devan to be as handsome as Manmathan, as brave as Arjuna and as intelligent as Lord Krishna himself. He would often end the conversation by saying that 'Vandiya Devan is the right groom for you. He is the only one who can keep a girl like you under his thumb'. Manimegalai loved to hear him tease her with his friend but she would fight with her brother nonetheless.

"You are so full of talk. Why don't you bring him here one day? Let me see how clever he really is."

"You will see..." Kandamaran would say.

Before Vandiya Devan came to their Palace, Manimegalai has spent many days and hours, daydreaming about him. Sometimes she would speak about him to her friends and companions too. While this went on for some time, unexpectedly, her brother's plan to wed her to Vandiya Devan changed a few months ago.

He started telling her that Vandiya Devan was an orphan with nary a home or land to his name. 'He has nothing to offer... forget about him.' Instead, he started hinting that she has a chance to become the Empress of the Kingdom.

One day, he told her quite bluntly that she would be married to Prince Madhuranthakan (who was already married to Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's daughter). He also told that Prince Madhuranthakan would be next Emperor of the Kingdom and she had a chance to be his queen consort and their progeny the future kings of the Chola dynasty. Manimegalai was horrified to learn that her parents agreed and assented to everything that Kandanmaran proposed.

She couldn't imagine herself as an Empress or as anybody else's wife other than Vandiya Devan. Her brother's words about Vandiya Devan remained etched in her heart and she struggled hard to forget him. She was also not very impressed with what she had heard about Prince Madhuranthakan - a coward who had never set foot on a battlefield. His piety was well-known and many believed that he would become a sanyasi, just as he had declared many times. It was indeed a surprise when he did a sudden turnabout and got married to Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's daughter. All this and more had not endeared him to Manimegalai and she was determined not to wed this cowardly prince.

Later, she also heard a bit of news that strengthened her resolve. A few months ago, when Periya Pazhuvetarayar had come to their palace, they were told that his younger queen Nandini Devi too had come along. The queen did not visit the Anthapuram (as was customary) and greet them. This breach of etiquette was not only surprising but also became a point of conversation among the womenfolk to ridicule Periya Pazhuvetarayar and his jealous nature. As days passed on, the truth was revealed. Nandini Devi had not come to their palace at all. It was Prince Madhuranthakan who was brought there in a veiled palanquin in Nandini's stead. That sealed her decision.

“I will never wed someone who hides his cowardly face within the veils of a palanquin. Never!’

Ironically, the day Prince Madhuranthakan had come hiding in the veiled palanquin, Kandanmaran’s friend too had come there. He had come to the Anthapuram and was there for a very short while but Manimegalai was overcome by shyness. She stood behind the rest of the womenfolk and looked at him with bashful eyes. She couldn’t look up and see him face to face. Yet his twinkling eyes, handsome face and open smile created an everlasting impression in her young heart. He embodied everything that she had ever dreamed in a man and the few words that he spoke remained in her memory for long.

Meeting Vandiya Devan in flesh and blood strengthened Manimegalai’s resolve. She fought endlessly with Kandanmaran and ridiculed his attempt to marry her to Madhuranthakan and swore on the Gods that she would never agree to his plans.

Kandanmaran felt vexed and frustrated with his sister. At first, he tried to pacify her with sweet words. Later, he tried to sway her mind by saying, ‘Vandiya Devan is a friend who turned into an enemy. He stabbed me in the back and left me to die. If you marry him, I will not hesitate to kill both of you...’

Then he would show the gaping wound on his back and eloquently described how Nandini Devi had nursed him back to health.

“If you really love me, you will forget all about Vandiya Devan.”

After Manimegalai heard this, she did change her heart. She loved her brother and knew that it would be impossible for her to wed the man who had tried to kill him. She tried to forget Vandiya Devan, yet the man would creep into her dreams and give her sleepless nights.

The chirpy girl who used to skip around the palace with boundless energy and enthusiasm had become a shadow of her old self. The old womenfolk in

the palace hinted that this transformation was because she had become old enough to be married. Her companions and handmaidens teased her often and tried to cheer her but in vain.

Though for the past few days, she was almost her old self because she had reason to believe that her parents and her brother had changed their mind about marrying her to Prince Madhuranthakan. She also learned that they had decided marry her to the Crown Prince, Aditya Karikalan.

Next, to Prince Madhuranthakan, Aditya Karikalan was almost a giant in the people's opinion. His bravery and the glorious victories won the battlefield was well known to all. Added to that, he was the Crown Prince of the Chola Kingdom, the heir apparent of a dynasty that was celebrated for its glorious legacy.

Kings far and wide would happily give their daughters to this Prince, wouldn't they?

Yet the Prince had shied away from marriage for various reasons. When she heard rumours that her parents were considering offering her hand in marriage to the Crown Prince she was excited and relieved.

When she learned that Kadambur Palace would be the seat of power to broker peace between Aditya Karikalan and the Pazhuvur clan, she almost became her old self and was excited to play the hostess to such esteemed guests. When she heard that Periya Pazhuvetarayar would be bringing along his queen (and this time for real), her curiosity knew no bounds. She knew that Nandini Devi was instrumental in saving her brother's life.

Kandanmaran's new-found eloquence about Nandini's beauty, grace and intelligence made Manimegalai all the more curious to meet her. She also knew that Nandini was responsible for the peace talks that were to happen soon and that it was her idea to wed her to the Crown Prince. Kandanmaran wanted his sister to become Nandini's companion and friend during their visit at the palace and learn courtly behaviour and etiquette from her. Manimegalai had no objections to this scheme. That was another reason for her enthusiasm.

The past week saw her overseeing the arrangements for the guest rooms. She stayed up late inspecting the palace wing that has been allocated to the Prince and his entourage and the Pazhuvur clan. Most importantly, she would often visit the chambers that have been made ready for the Pazhuvur queen to ensure it didn't lack in material comforts. Her scrutiny vexed her servants and handmaidens who were made to clean and decorate the rooms again and again.

She also inspected the chambers that were allocated for the Crown Prince.

Someone called Parthibendra Pallavan was also accompanying the Prince it seems. God knows who that is? These days, one can't be sure when someone will change. That Vandiya Devan too was once a part of Aditya Karikalan's entourage. If he had not become a traitor, he too could have come here along with the Crown Prince.

Thus ran her thoughts and though she tried to keep herself engaged with the novelty of playing the hostess, she couldn't forget her brother's friend.

Periya Pazhuvetarayar and his queen were expected to arrive that night, therefore, late in the evening, Manimegalai found herself back in the guest wing scrutinising the servants, as they made things ready.

As she walked through the chamber, she stood for a while, in front of the ornate large mirror that was placed there. She looked at herself rather objectively and then decided that she was indeed attractive. Just when she had decided to move, she noticed that there was another face along with hers in the mirror. It was the face of a person that had tormented her in many dreams. She couldn't help but scream. The next instant, the other face disappeared.





Chapter 7: The monkey without a tail

Manimegalai stood still in front of the mirror, wondering whether she had indeed seen the face or not.

Did she really see it or was it a dream? If it was a dream, shouldn't she be sleeping?

She touched her face to confirm that she was indeed standing in the Pazhuvur Queen's chambers in front of her mirror. She knew that she couldn't have imagined the face in the dark as the lamp near the mirror was lit rather brightly. She stared hard at the opposite wall. There was a secret entrance there and she also knew how to open it from outside. Through it, one could enter the chamber where they had preserved wild animals hunted by the menfolk of her clan. She thought she also heard some sound from the secret inner chamber.

Manimegalai went near the wall and opened the secret entrance. There was a small lamp burning low in the hunter's chamber and suddenly it appeared as though someone had moved in front of the light. When she saw again she could see the lamp and nothing else.

Manimegalai shook her head and blinked her eyes again.

Did she just hallucinate again? Was she still dreaming?

Manimegalai clapped her hand and asked, 'Who is there?' In response, she heard the flapping sound of a bat that moved from one end of the chamber to hang upside down near the never-blinking owl that was perched on the roof.

Determined to get to the bottom of this mystery, Manimegalai stood at the entrance and called out for her companion.

“Chandramathi! Chandramathi!”

“You called me Princess?”

“Bring a lamp and come here soon.”

After a while, her handmaiden came there holding a lamp in hand. After stepping inside the hunter’s chamber, she said, “But Princess there is a lamp lit here already. Why do you need another lamp?”

“I wish to inspect this place. I thought I heard a sound.”

“It must be the bat flapping its wings. What else could it be?”

“No. Just now I was looking at the mirror and I thought I saw somebody else’s face in it.”

“A face? How did it look? Was it as handsome as Arjuna or Manmadhan?” asked her companion and laughed.

“Chandramathi! Are you mocking me?”

“No Princess! You told me that a man plagues your dreams... Did you perchance see his face?”

“Yes... but it seemed so real to me.”

“There comes a time when all girls daydream but thankfully for you it may just last for two days. Once the Crown Prince from Kanchi comes here, you will forget that other face. I am sure of it.”

“Be that as it may. Right now let’s go into the Hunter’s Chamber and check.”

“We will be wasting our time Princess! The place must be full of cobwebs and dust. We will ruin our saris.”

“That’s alright. Let’s go.”

“We might be plagued by a cough and sneeze. And tomorrow when everybody comes...”

“I don’t care if I cough and sneeze. I wish to check the chamber now. Come with me.”

Both women stepped into Hunter’s chamber. Chandramathi kept the lamp in her hand slightly elevated while Manimegalai moved around the cavernous room. Manimegalai also noted that there were many footprints on the dusty floor, as though, someone had roamed around there.

“Look at that!’ Said Chandramathi

“Why are you scared? What is it?”

“It seemed like that monkey moved!”

“Looks like the monkey is very happy to see you.”

“Princess... now you are mocking me?”

“You mock me all the time Can’t I do the same?”

“Maybe you saw this monkey’s face in the mirror. It stands opposite to the wall through which we came. See there... the monkey is moving again!”

“No! It the shadow, that’s moving. When you move the light in your hand the shadow moves and it seems as though the monkey is moving. Come let’s leave. I see no one here.”

“Then I might be right. You must have seen the monkey’s face in the mirror or it could even be this owl’s face. Look how it is staring at us.”

“Us? Why would you include me? I think it is staring at you, entranced by your beauty!”

“Then whose face do you think it was, that stared at you in the mirror?”

“You and others have decided that I might be suffering from delusions and if I tell you god knows what you will think. It was the face that I keep seeing in my dreams. But I know not how it came into the mirror. After seeing such a handsome face, it pains my heart to see the lifeless ever-staring faces of these animals. Come, let’s leave now. I will go back to the mirror and see if I can see that face again.”

Both the women left the chamber through the secret entrance. After they left, Vandiya Devan came out of hiding from behind the monkey that had no tail. He sneezed, again and again, thanks to the dust and cobwebs that was there behind the monkey. After that, he expressed his thanks to the monkey that had hidden them so well.

“Monkey! I got angry when that handmaiden compared my face to yours. I had to stop myself from revealing my handsome self. Thankfully you stood there as tall as a man, shielding me from them or else I would have been caught by those women and god knows what they would have done to me.”

Even as he spoke those words, he knew in his heart that it wouldn’t be so bad if the women had spotted him there. He already knew their identities.

He had heard the conversation between both the women and was able to guess who they were. That too, Manimegalai’s voice was pretty loud and clear to him.

Didn’t she say that the face she saw in the mirror was the one that she has seen in her dreams? What could that mean?

Many old memories came back to his mind. He knew that Kandanmaran had spoken to his sister about him many times. He remembered the last time he was in the palace and a few glimpses that he

had of that shy girl hiding behind her mother. Kandanmaran then told him that got a better alliance for his sister and that she had accepted the said groom.

Did he lie to me then? Maybe this girl hasn't changed her mind after all.

He realised that these were fanciful thoughts and that he needed to escape from this hunter's chamber soon. He can't use the elephant's trunk to leave the chamber as it led to the women's anthapuram. He needed to find a way back to the Ayyanar temple. He tried to look for clues on the wall but could find nothing. As he came round he neared the crocodile that was lying near. He tried to check the wall for more clues to open the way out of the chamber but knew that he was wasting time.

God! Do I have no choice but to enter the women's anthapuram and escape?

Maybe Manimegalai might take pity on him and help him escape! What answer could he possibly give if she asks why he came there?

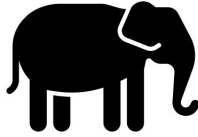
Could he perhaps tell her that he loved her dearly and came there to meet her secretly?

Even as he thought that he rejected it. It was a terrible lie. Even 'he' couldn't say it to save his life. He was sure that even if he dared to utter such a lie, there is very little chance of Manimegalai believing it.

If he escaped through the anthapuram, Manimegalai might not be alone on the other side. There might be other women too. And if Sambuverayer comes to know of this he wouldn't hesitate to kill him!

As he thought thus, he looked at the lifeless crocodile on the floor again. "Stupid Crocodile! Why do you gape thus with your mouth wide open?" he said and aimed a good kick at its direction. The crocodile moved and as it moved a trap door opened on the nearby wall.

“So it’s you that has been hiding this secret. Why didn’t you tell me this before?” he said and moved the crocodile further. As the crocodile moved, the trap door opened wide and steps were seen. They were the steps that he had taken to lead him into the chamber.



Chapter 8: Hands in the dark

Vandiyan Devan was astonished by the clever ingenuity of the secret trapdoors in Kadambur Palace. Those who try to exit or enter the chambers through these secret doors must do so carefully. If the crocodile were to move while he exited through the door, he might be trapped there.

He stood still for a while and checked whether the crocodile was moving and then went near the trapdoor. Even as he put a foot outside the door, he could hear footsteps that seemed to be coming towards him.

Are they coming in search of him?

It seemed as though five or six people were coming through the tunnel entrance.

Could it be Ravidasan and his gang?

He immediately retreated and pounced behind the monkey to hide. He almost bit his tongue when he saw that he had left the trapdoor open and then he realized that the door was open the first time when he had come through it. So it was a good thing that he managed to find a way to open it again or else it would look suspicious.

He cautiously looked from behind the monkey. A head was seen coming through the door. It was Edupankari coming through the trapdoor.

At the same time, the entrance that led to the Anthapuram opened and Manimegalai appeared holding a lamp in her hand. Edupankari leapt from his place and came back to the Hunter's Chambers and started dusting the trophy animals with his turban cloth that he quickly unwound from his head.

Is there no end to this drama?

Manimegalai held the lamp high and looked around carefully. When she saw Edupankari her eyes widened with surprise.

“Princess! What are you doing here that too at this hour?”

“Edumba! Is that you? What are you doing here?”

“I am dusting this place Princess. We will have to show our guests the Hunter's Chamber in the coming days. Young master asked me to keep it clean before he left for Kanchi.”

“That's right. My brother trusts us to see to Nandini Devi's comforts. I was checking her chambers to ensure everything was kept properly when I heard a sound. I then thought it must be you. Nobody else knows about this secret passageway. How long have you been dusting here?”

“For more than an hour, Princess! There is still lot more to clean. Why did you come here alone? Where is that girl, Chandramathi?”

“I sent her to fetch my father thinking that I heard some sound. I will go and stop her. I didn't realize that it could be you.”

Saying thus, Manimegalai held the lamp aloft and watched Edupankari panicking. Next she saw the huge Monkey moving again.

“Princess! Do stop that girl immediately. Master has lot of chores to attend today. Hosting such big guests is no joke. He must be very busy. I will take care of this place. Please do not worry.”

Manimegalai nodded to him and exited through the Elephant head door that closed automatically.

After she left, Edupankari waited by the elephant door and listened through the wall to see whether there was any sound. After waiting for a while, he then moved to the trapdoor that lay open with the help of the crocodile. He got down steps and waited.

An owl's hoot was heard sounding ominous through the tunnel entrance. In reply, Edupankari too made an owl's sound signalling that the coast was clear.

Footsteps were heard coming towards the Hunter's chambers. That's when things went out of hand.

The only live creature – the bat that was hanging from the loft flapped its wings and took off through the trapdoor that led to the tunnel entrance. While Edupankari was distracted by this, the monkey with a tail fell upon him suddenly and his legs buckled under him. Taken unaware, Edupankari panicked and let out a screech and tried to free himself from the monkey's grasp. In the next instant his panic subsided and then he decided that somehow the monkey had fallen on him. The next second he was questioning his sanity when he thought that a real man's hands were pushing him down the stairs along with the monkey. This frightened him out of his wits!

He looked around again and then decided that he had after all imagined it. The monkey was lying on him and blocking the trapdoor. By then, Ravidasan had come up the steps that led to the trapdoor and said, "What happened? Why did you panic and scream? Should we go back to the Ayannar temple?"

"No! No! When I was opening the trapdoor for you, that Monkey somehow fell on me and I panicked and screamed. Now it is blocking the trapdoor. Please wait here. I will move it and clear the way for you."

By now, we do know whose hands had pushed Edupankari and the monkey through the trapdoor. Thankfully, his luck didn't abandon him and he made use of the opportunity that presented itself to him to escape. When Edupankari got down to the trapdoor he pushed the monkey on top of him and then hid behind the monkey to scare him with his hands. With Edupankari panicking, he immediately leapt back and pushed the crocodile that resulted in the trapdoor trying to close the door. While this confusion reigned on, he ran towards the Elephant door and turned the elephant's trunk. The trapdoor opened but it was not the bigger entrance through which Manimegalai had come in. It was a smaller one that might have been built within the bigger door. Maybe it was built to accommodate women but there was no time to open the bigger door as he heard Ravidasan and his gang coming up the stairs.

Vandiya Devan entered the trapdoor but since it was a smaller one he didn't fit through it. There was nothing on the other side to hold or grasp so that he could come out. To make matters worse, the lamp in the room extinguished.

Vandiya Devan pleaded in a coaxing voice, "Chandramathi! Chandramathi! Please save me."

A woman's laughter was heard.

"Chandramathi! You know I am in trouble and yet you do not come to my aid?"

The woman laughed yet again and asked, "Is it proper to enter a woman's anthapuram?"

Though Vandiya Devan knew that it was Manimegalai's voice he nonetheless continued with his ruse. "Chandramathi! I dared to come only because you asked me to. Many people are after me, please help me or else I will be caught."

"Is Chandramathi so clever then? Then maybe it is time that I taught you both a good lesson."

“Princess! Is that you? I beg you. Please help me. I promise! I will never do anything so stupid ever again,” begged Vandiya Devan.

In the dark, two soft hands held Vandiya Devan’s shoulders and pulled and he came out of the trapdoor. The door closed.

“Princess! My heartfelt gratitude for saving my life.”

“Save your breath! Maybe you should know what I am about to do to you before you shower me with gratitude.”

“It doesn’t matter what you do to me. You saved me from those murderers. That’s enough. I would rather die by your hands than through that murderous gang.”

“My God! You seem like a great warrior. Who are these murderers who have come in search of you. Wait! Let me light the lamp and look at you.”

“Princess! Why do you wish to see my face again? It’s the same monkey face that looked at you from behind the mirror. Chandramathi described it so eloquently...”

When Vandiya Devan had entered the anthapuram through the trapdoor, Manimegalai had dimmed the oil lamp, now she adjusted the wick and it burned brightly. She looked at Vandiya Devan and stared mesmerized. At the same instant, the sound footsteps was heard in the Hunter’s Chambers.





Chapter 9: The dogs barked

Manimegalai stood long looking transfixed at Vandiya Devan. Vandiya Devan on the other hand was smiling at her even while he was thinking fast as to what he could tell this girl and escape.

That's when they heard Chandramathi's voice from outside their chamber. "Princess! Did you call me?"

"No! I didn't call you. Go back to your chores." Manimegalai replied. Next, she went near the trapdoor through which Vandiya Devan had emerged and locked it from inside. Then, she signalled him to follow her and took him to the farthest end of the chamber, well away from the trapdoor and its secret entrance.

Then she turned and asked him, "Ayya! Tell me the truth. Did Chandramathi truly call you here?"

"Yes Princess! That's true."

"When and where did she extend this invitation?"

"Why just now? When you both stepped into the Hunter's Chambers I was hidden behind the monkey. That's when she looked the monkey and said, 'Monkey! Would you come to my chamber and stay there? It would be convenient to drive away those who come there uninvited.' Didn't you hear her say that?"

Manimegalai smiled and said, “If I had heard this, I would have taken her to task right there.”

“Princess! There is no point in getting angry with your handmaiden. What can Chandramathi do, if my face resembles a monkey?”

“You don’t resemble a monkey...”

“Then perhaps the owl...”

“No. You neither resemble a monkey nor an owl but you do have their characteristics. Many of your antics do remind me of a monkey and sometimes you do stare and blink like an owl. It was ‘you’ who was staring at me on that mirror wasn’t it?”

“Yes Princess. It was me.”

“Why did you withdraw and close the trapdoor?”

“When I suddenly saw a beautiful maiden in the mirror and I thought she might get frightened to see my face on it. I just removed my hand from the elephant’s head and the door closed on its own.”

“Who was that beautiful maiden?”

“At that moment, I didn’t know who she was. Later I guessed who she might be.”

“Who was she?”

“The beautiful maiden was Princess Manimegala Devi, the lovely daughter of Noble Sambuverayar and the sister of my dear friend Kandanmaran.”

Manimegalai’s eyes widened and she smiled bitterly and said, “Is that so? My brother is your dear friend, is he?”

“Why do you doubt that Princess? Four months ago, I came here. Kandanmaran brought me to the anthapuram to pay my respects to the womenfolk. Don’t you remember me?”

“I remember well. How could I forget? You are that Vallavareyan Vandiya Devan, the Prince of Vallam.”

“Yes Princess! With no land in possession or Kingdom to rule, I do bear the title of ‘Prince of Vallam’. When Kandanmaran and I used to patrol the borders he used to talk about you almost incessantly. I even dreamed of many things that were beyond my reach.”

When Vandiya Devan said that a strange thought came to Manimegalai’s mind. Kandanmaran had accused Vandiya Devan of trying to stab him in the back.

Why would he do that? Could it be because of her? Did Vandiya Devan fight her brother because he refused her hand in marriage?

This thought raised a storm in her heart.

“Ayya! This is not the time for old stories. Tell me why you entered the palace through that secret entrance or else I will have to call my father here.”

“I told you earlier, a murderous gang was hunting me through the bamboo forest. I sought to escape them and found a secret tunnel on the ground. When I jumped into it, I found a dungeon pathway that finally led me here.”

“Ayya! You are truly a great warrior and I am sure I will never see none like you, so skilled in escaping from danger. Even Uttama Kumaran^[10] can’t be compared to the likes of you.”

Vandiya Devan felt insulted but there was nothing he could do about it. He didn’t expect such a reaction from a mere girl like Manimegalai.

“Devi! They are eight or nine men out there while I was all-alone. They bore weapons while my spear was lost in the floods of Kollidam.”

“Good for you. Is it the same spear that stabbed my brother in the back? Then it is a good thing that you lost it.”

Vandiya Devan stood speechless. Even before he could think of a response to that Manimegalai demanded, “Tell me the truth. Did you come here to escape the murderers or did you perchance come here to commit a murder?”

Vandiya Devan felt as though he was thrown into a fire. “Siva Siva! Why would I want to kill someone? Do you think I came here to kill you... my dear friend’s sister?”

“What do I know? You call my brother ‘my dear friend’ and yet you didn’t hesitate to stab him in the back. God knows why you did such an act? That maybe the reason why you are back here.”

“My God! Do you really think that? I would rather cut my own hand than harm my dear friend. Who told you such a lie?”

“Who else but Kandanmaran? I wouldn’t have believed it otherwise.”

“Did Kandanmaran tell you this? Then I am indeed an unfortunate being. Someone had stabbed him and left him to die near the Thanjavur Fort. I took him to Senthan Amuthan’s hut and saved his life and this is the thanks that I get for it. Princess! Did he tell you why I tried to kill him? Did he give any reason?”

“He did. He told me that you called ugly and unattractive when compared to the maidens of Thanjavur. Kandanmaran got angry and fought with you and you couldn’t fight him face to face, which is why you stabbed him in the back. Is this true or not?”

“Lies! Lies! I would have sliced my tongue before I would pronounce a maiden such as you as ugly or unattractive. It was Kandanmaran who

insisted that I forget any dreams of marrying his sister.”

“Why did he say that?”

“He wanted to offer your hand in marriage to someone who wished to rule this kingdom. Therefore he insisted that I forget all about you.”

“And did you? Did you forget all about me?”

“It is difficult to forget someone like you but since then. I have attempted to consider you as mine own dear sister. Princess! Do take me to Kandanmaran. I wish to know why he would lie about me thus. I would like to correct this misunderstanding immediately.”

“Really! So you can finish whatever you began in Thanjavur?”

“What do you mean Princess?”

“You attempted to kill my brother at Thanjavur and when that failed...”

“God! Do you think that I would try to seek and kill him in his own palace?”

“Then why would you enter the palace through the secret entrance?”

“There! Listen carefully. Those who came chasing after me still waiting there in the Hunter’s chambers. You can hear them walking from behind that secret door.”

“Why did they come after you?”

“They look like sorcerers. Maybe they wished to sacrifice me to their Goddess!”

“So they just happened to come upon the perfect ‘Prince’ who can be sacrificed to the Goddess!” said Manimegalai and laughed.

“Yes. That surprises me too. Why would they want a man who has a face like a monkey and stares like an owl? However I do wonder whether this could be Kandanmaran’s arrangement. If that is true then it is imperative that I meet him. I have but two choices before me – one would be to try and resolve this misunderstanding or give him leave to kill him with his own hands. Why should he enlist assassins to murder me? He might as well kill me.”

“Ayya! Let’s not do something rash. Kandanmaran is not here.”

“Where is he?”

“He has gone to Kanchi to escort the Crown Prince to our palace. By tomorrow, everyone should be here, until then...”

“Until then... you are asking me to stay here? That’s impossible!”

“No... I am not asking you to stay here. In a short while, the Pazhuvur queen will come here, after which it would be impossible for the menfolk to enter these chambers. You must know how Pazhuvetarayar guards his beautiful wife and if he finds you here, you would be slaughtered like a wild beast. Ah! That man... the way he loves his wife!” said Manimegalai and started laughing.

Vandiya Devan couldn’t help but recall what happened the last time when Pazhuvetarayar came to Kadambur Palace.

“Is that so? Does Pazhuvetarayar love his wife so much?”

“Everybody knows that! A few months ago, when they came here the old man didn’t allow his queen to come to the Anthapuram. This time around we believe that she too would be coming here and I wonder whether we would be allowed to meet her or not! He insisted that we provide her with chambers in a separate wing with all comforts...”

“So... what do I do now?”

“That’s what I am wondering too. Ah! You could stay in my brother’s armoury until tomorrow evening. Once Kandanmaran comes here you both can decide who is telling the truth or lies?”

“Princess! This isn’t right! It’s very dangerous.”

“What danger?”

“If Kandanmaran were to ask how I came to be there, what answer can I possibly give?”

“You could tell him the truth...”

“Even you found it difficult to believe the truth... right here in this room even while we know those assassins are waiting in the secret room beyond. Do you think he would believe me?”

“Ayya! I will inspect the room and learn the truth of it.”

“What truth?”

“I will go to the secret room and find out about these ‘so called assassins’ who are hiding there. I will find out whether they have come there to murder you or if they have come to aid you.”

“But they are heartless ruffians. What if they harm you?”

“Who would dare to lay a hand on me, in mine own palace? Look here!” said Manimegalai and drew out a small dagger that she kept on her person hidden beneath the folds of her sari.

“No one can harm me. Even if I am in danger, I have you... a glorious warrior of Vanar Clan. Don’t I?”

“Princess! I stand in front of you, devoid of any arms...”

“They say that a harmless blade of grass can become a sharp spear in the hands of a warrior. Don’t think that women are utterly defenceless. We can guard our life and honour with weapons, when necessary. The men who are inside the Hunter’s chamber are our palace servants. One of them is dusting the animals that are kept as trophies there. I will speak to them and come back until then, hide yourself behind that wooden door.”

Saying thus, Manimegalai went near the secret entrance in the wall and opened it. Vandiya Devan hid himself behind the wooden door and when he looked through the door, he found a small anteroom with many musical instruments stored within and a flight of steps that went all the way upstairs.

He was astonished by her courage and assured himself that it was unlikely that she would be harmed in her own home. Even while Manimegalai was stepping inside the secret room, he could hear her handmaiden Chandramathi’s voice as she came inside calling for her.

Vandiya Devan retreated behind the wood door and climbed the stairs to avoid being seen.

“Princess! People from Thanjavur have reached the palace. Your mother has asked me to fetch you.”

Chandramathi immediately noticed the secret room open and hurried inside. Vandiya Devan rushed towards the flight of stairs and climbed up and accidentally stepped on a Veena. In his panic, he went to the farthest stair up and his head banged on the roof and he noticed that the wooden tile could be moved.

He immediately lifted the tile and saw through the porthole and found that it was a part of palace’s terrace courtyard. His heart bounded with enthusiasm. He could finally escape from the place. He lifted the tile carefully and kept it aside and then climbed through the entrance onto the terrace. From there, he could hear the gongs and couches played to welcome the Pazhuvur entourage. Incidentally, it also happened to the same courtyard where he had hidden himself well and had listened to the conspiracy hatched by the noblemen.

How to escape from here now?

He looked around carefully and found that the place was richly decorated with flowers and flags. Thankfully, no one was around as everyone was gathered at the entrance to see the guests. He walked through the terrace and came to the small nook where he had once slept. He looked down the courtyard and found it empty. It was a wonderful opportunity that he would loathe to lose!

He looked over to the palace and found that the guards and soldiers were busy looking at the approaching entourage of the Pazhuvur clan. He blinked his eyes and looked again, because through the trees he thought that he saw Nambi's face.

It was impossible! This is the same place where the Nambi had hidden himself to watch the noblemen conspire!

He shook his head. He had to escape from the palace before the crowd returned. Many tall bamboo poles that were kept on the other side of the courtyard. He used them to climb down from the terrace.

Now how to get over the palace wall?

As pondered over the question, he neared the place where he had seen the Nambi's face. It was right place to try and climb because the tree that was near the wall could be used to jump down. He picked one of the bamboo poles and ran to the farthest end of the courtyard. That's when he saw a woman's figure on the top of the palace terrace.

Was it Manimegalai? My God! She was a bold girl. I need to escape her somehow!

Thinking thus he ran back towards the palace wall with the pole and placed it on the wall and started climbing it laboriously. Once when the pole almost slipped he felt as though someone had held it from above.

That's it. I am going mad!

After climbing the pole carefully he hoisted himself on the wall. The pole fell with a loud sound but the blares of the couches and the drums were louder than ever at the palace entrance. The woman on the palace terrace didn't scream but seemed to be watching his escape intently.

His flirtatious nature asserted itself, yet again and he waved his hand to say good bye to the maiden that he had met just now. From the palace wall he jumped towards the tree that was nearby and tried to get down. He laughed out aloud when he thought of how he escaped the clutches of Manimegalai. But his good humour was short-lived because a ferocious dog waiting for him under the tree. Barking wildly, the dog bared its teeth and seemed as though it would be happy to sink its sharp teeth into his flesh. Vandiya Devan was caught in a quandary.

What was he to do now? Going up the tree was impossible.

He held on to the branches and tried to jump away from the dog.





Chapter 10: A manhunt

Vandiya Devan had but two choices. He could brave the dogs and jump down from the tree or climb higher and clutch on to the palace wall. Before he could decide what to do, he looked around to see if someone was hiding there. In one of the trees, he noticed a white coloured cloth. He also remembered the all-too familiar laughter that he had heard many times. He wondered who could be hidden in the tree and why?

Would it be wise to jump down and brave the dogs under the assumption that the man hidden there would come to his aid?

He thought he had briefly seen Azhwarkadiyan's face in the tree next to him when he had climbed down from the fort wall.

Could it be him? He was supposed to wait in the Ayyanar temple... why would he come here? And how could he know that he would escape from the palace through the roof? Did he perchance set the dogs here to trouble me?

“Vaishnavarey! Is that you? Are you playing with me?”

He heard boisterous laughter yet again. It was much louder than before and he now knew for sure that it was not Azhwarkadiyan's voice. He started to climb the walls of the Palace because he now knew that there was no help to be had, if he jumped down. There was yet hope to escape. With the arrival of Pazhuvur entourage, he could chance an escape in the crowd. If not, he could try his luck through the secret tunnel through the Hunter's chambers. If that too was not possible, he could fall back on the good graces of Nandini Devi.

So far, she has not caused him any harm, why would she betray him now?

Thinking thus, he started climbing the tree and onto the palace wall at the right place. Noting his movements, the hunter dogs below barked loudly and fiercely.

Vandiya Devan heard the invisible man's laughter yet again. Vandiya Devan saw a man moving from behind the tree, and found himself staring at Devaralan.

Devaralan said, "I must say that you are very hard to kill..."

"Then why do you try it, again and again?"

"Because I don't think you can escape this time." Said Devaralan and took out his spear and tried to aim at him.

Vandiya Devan realized his precarious plight. He was on the palace wall, clutching the tree branch for support. If he fell down, the hunter dogs below would love nothing more than sinking their sharp teeth into his flesh. To top that, Devaralan now wielded a spear to threaten him.

"Devarala! Be warned! Remember the orders of your Queen Nandini Devi. Didn't she tell you not to cause any harm to me?"

Devaralan laughed out aloud and said, "Nandini is not my queen. I answer to no queen of this realm. Only Goddess Durga Parameshwari can command me."

"Durga Parameshwari is my family's patron Goddess. It was through her blessing that I escaped from that burning ship in the middle of a storm. If you dare to touch me, you will incur the curse of the Goddess."

"If you are truly Durga Parameshwari's devotee then you will prove it to me right away. Only then, I will let you escape."

“What do you want me to do? First, call off your dogs...”

“A Veera Vaishnavan came by this way. I need your help to capture him. If you help me, I will help you escape...”

“Why do you wish to capture him?”

“I swore an oath to sacrifice a Veera Vaishnavan on the altar of Druga Parameshwari.”

That’s when the tree branch that Vandiya Devan was clutching started to tear through the leaves and he started thinking how to land on his feet without getting hurt by the spear point of Devaralan.

“That Vaishnavan is a dear friend of mine. I will never betray his confidence. You are free to offer me as a sacrifice to appease your Goddess.”

“Then get ready to die...” said Devaralan and aimed his spear.

Vandiya Devan sprang from the palace wall and caught hold of the spear point and fell down on the ground. Devaralan tried to hold onto his spear, while trying to kick Vandiya Devan. A figure came from behind Devaralan and hit him with his staff. Devaralan fell upon Vandiya Devan in a dead faint.

The hunter dogs were upon them but Azhwarkadiyan was ready for them. He swiftly took his upper cloth and threw them on the dogs face and then used a creeper from the tree to tie them up.

By then, Vandiya Devan had thrown Devaralan down. He and Azhwarkadiyan gathered few more creepers and tied Devaralan who was unconscious.

Vandiya Devan then took Devaralan’s spear and Azhwarkadiyan, his staff and they left. Kadambur Palace was surrounded by thick forest foliage on all sides except in the main entrance. The forest was so dense that it was

easy to get lost within. Therefore they started walking along the palace walls, lest they lose their way. While they walked, Azhwarkadiyan said, “I thought that you were intelligent, but you proved me wrong.”

“I know that you are referring to the fact that I entered the secret tunnel without thinking about consequences but do you know how many secrets I have learned because of it?”

“Leave that aside. When this Devaralan was asking you to help him find me, why didn’t you agree? Your position became all the more precarious after you refused.”

“That’s all thanks to the company that I kept...”

“Whose company are you referring to? I don’t think I ever encouraged you to do something this foolish?”

“I am not talking about you. I was talking about Ponniyin Selvar. After meeting him, I decided never to utter a lie and even if that’s the most prudent thing to do, I find myself unable to do it.”

“Even to save your life... you won’t utter a lie! Since when did you become so truthful?”

“That’s not all. I suspected that you were hidden around here somewhere. That’s why I didn’t want to risk lying. If you had believed that I had betrayed you, would you have helped me?”

“Well... looks like you are intelligent after all. I must admit that I was rather curious to hear your reply to Devaralan’s question.”

“There... I knew you were suspicious by nature. That apart, no matter how advantageous the situation is to me, I will say anything that would jeopardise a friendship. But how come you came here, after swearing solemnly upon your God that you would wait for me at the Ayyanar Temple. If I had followed the original plan and had come by the secret tunnel, I would have been stranded there without a way out.”

“I doubt if you would be alive now, if you had tried to come through the tunnel entrance. Right after you got into the tunnel Ravidasan and his men entered it. I thought that if you were intelligent enough, you come out of the palace through a different way and thinking thus, I came here.”

“Truly! Did you really know that I would jump through the palace walls?”

“No. Ravidasan’s gang didn’t leave the Ayyanar temple unguarded. They left Devaralan there which I failed to notice. They would obviously need a guard outside to ensure that that temple was deserted when they emerge from the tunnel. I didn’t know this. I was worried about you being stranded inside. So I tried to open the entrance from near the elephant statue. I suddenly heard someone running and saw Devaralan with his spear. Ravidasan has wanted to kill me for many months now and had instructed his gang not to spare me at any cost, if they happen to see me. I had no arms with me, so I had to run away from there. The forest was so dense that he couldn’t catch me. After a while, I thought that he had given up the hunt. I roamed around the forest for a while trying to find a way towards the King’s road. I saw a hut in the forest and thought of asking for help but that’s when I saw Devaralan speaking to the man within. He took his dogs to hunt me down. The dogs started hunting me. I changed my mind about going towards the King’s road and roamed through the forest trying to avoid the dogs. Soon, I was near the palace and I thought I would scale the walls and enter the place to escape. I had got on the tree as well and was about to jump into the palace when I saw you running through the courtyard. I changed my mind and waited on the tree because I thought together we could overcome Devaralan and his dogs. The rest you know...”

“Vaishnavarey! Do you believe in the strength of our destiny and fate?”

“Now...why would you suddenly ask me such a question?”

“They say that Brahma writes the destiny of each man, even before he is born. Do you believe this?”

“No. If I truly believed that then, there is no point in believing in the miracles of Lord Vishnu, who can change your destiny, if only you surrender to him. Do you know what the Azhwars have told about...”

“Let the Azhwars say anything. I have chosen to believe that destiny rules all our actions or else I wouldn’t have escaped from that tunnel or that palace with life.”

“You didn’t escape because of your destiny. You escaped because of your resourceful mind!”

“No. My mind was about to push me towards unknown danger. It was my destiny that saved my life today.”

Even as they were talking, they reached the entrance of the palace. The place was crowded as expected. People from the neighbouring villages, soldiers and servants stood by waiting to gawk, comment and talk about the visitors. The Pazhuvur entourage was large with elephants, horses, palanquins, servants, handmaidens, grooms etc. Kadambur Sambuverayar had assembled an almost equal number of people to welcome them. Hundreds of firelights dotted the landscape, while couches and pipes welcomed the guests with auspicious music.

Azhwarkadiyan grabbed Vandiya Devan’s hand and tried to hurry him along. “Let’s move quickly from here. What if somebody sees us?”

“Who is going look at us here? Even if they do, my destiny will save my life. Don’t you want to see Periya Pazhuvetarayar arrive on his big majestic elephant?”

“Only him?”

“I want to see whether he brings his queen along with him for all to see on this elephant or if he resorts to a veiled palanquin again?”

“Thambi! Do not be under the illusion that your destiny would save your life. It might come in the guise of a beautiful woman and send you towards

a deadly peril!”

“I am not someone who can be fooled that easily.”

At the same time, a huge elephant halted at the palace entrance and Periya Pazhuvetarayar got down from it followed by his queen.

“Ah! This time around, he didn’t bring her in a veiled palanquin. He has brought her on the elephant.” Said Azhwarkadiyan.

“That’s what I wished to know. Come, let’s leave,” Said Vandiya Devan but now Azhwarkadiyan seemed reluctant to leave the scene. He stood there for a long while watching Nandini Devi with his sharp eyes.

No one knew whether it was a co-incidence or the steadfastness of his gaze that made Nandini Devi turn her head and looked in their direction. Even in the faint light of the dusk, she recognized him and a sliver of fear came over her face.

Her husband didn’t fail to note the change in her countenance or the direction in which she was looking.

He immediately bent down and spoke a few words in Sambuverayar’s ears. Sambuverayar in turn, called two of his soldiers and gave them his commands.

Periya Pazhuvetarayar and his queen stepped into the palace amongst great pomp and show and at the same time, two soldiers entered the forest.

After they searched for a while, they halted under a tree and talked for a while.

“There is no one in the forest. That old man is imagining things.”

At the same time they heard a dog howling at a distance.

“Do you know when a dog howls?”

“When they sense death nearby.”

“I have heard that they also howl when they sense ghosts, ghouls and spirits around them,” said the other soldier.

“Do you think it mistook you for a ghost or a spirit?”

“No. It probably thought that you were a ghost.”

That’s when they both heard a ghostly laughter on top of their head and they looked up and found two ghosts sitting atop the tree. Soon both the ghosts jumped down the tree and slapped the soldiers into a dead faint, took their horses and galloped away.





Chapter 11: Friend or traitor

Prince Aditya Karikalan's entourage was marching near the Manimutha River. He and his friends were discussing the previous day's events when the people at Thirumudukundram had welcomed them with happy cheers.

"I like Sundaramurthy Nayanar's actions at Thirumudukundram." Said Parthibendran.

"What are you talking about?" asked Aditya Karikalan

"Well... Sundaramurthy Nayanar refused to sing for a deity who bore a name that was more suitable for a grandfather."

Curious now, Aditya Karikalan asked, "What's that story? Tell me about it."

"Once when Sundaramurthy Nayanar came to Thirumudukundram, he visited the Shiva Temple. The temple priests who were elated by his visit, requested that he sing a devaram hymn about their shrine. They truly believed that if he sang about their temple, it would find a place in posterity and become famous among the devotees.

Sundaramurthy Nayanar listened to their plea and asked, "What is the name of Lord Shiva in this shrine?"

They said that Lord Shiva was name 'Vruddha Giriswararar' which literally means 'Ancient Hill'.

Nayanmar's face fell and he bemoaned the fact that he would have to sing a song for his lord, whose name was more apt for his own grandfather!

“Alright! What is the name of Parvathi, Lord Shiva’s consort in this shrine?”

They said that she was named as ‘Vrudhagirishwari’ to match the name of her consort.

That’s when Sundaramurthy Nayanmar put his foot down and refused their request.

“You people name the Lord with an ancient archaic name that is more suited for my grandfather. Why did you bestow another ancient name on the Goddess and make her a grandmother? I cannot sing a song about them.” Saying thus Sundaramurthy Nayanar exited the temple angrily.

The temple priests became distraught. They felt that if Sundaramurthy Nayanar doesn’t sing a devaram hymn about their temple, the importance of the shrine would fade. After urgent consultations, they hurriedly installed another shrine for the Goddess and named her ‘Balambigai’.

Then they went to Sundaramurthy Nayanar and requested him to visit the temple again and sing a hymn. This time around, he acceded to their request and came back to the temple and sang a devaram hymn.”

After hearing this story, Aditya Karikalan laughed convulsively aloud.

“I think some poet might have said the same thing to Periya Pazhuvetarayar. He might have said that he won’t sing praises about a ‘grandfather’. That’s probably why he got married to Nandini.”

After hearing this, Parthibendran and Kandanmaran laughed so much that they were in danger of falling off their horses.

After a while, Parthibendran remarked, “I wonder why God makes us grow old and wrinkled. Why can’t we remain young, strong and handsome until we live?”

“Why are you so bothered about what God has willed? Growing old is in our hands isn’t it?”

“How so, my lord?” asked Kandanmaran.

“Do you ever think of Abhimanyu or Araavan as old men?”

Hearing this reply, Parthibendran and Kandanmaran rode silently for a while.

“In Thanjavur Fort, there is a hall of painting where beautiful murals of my forefathers are painted. I have seen the artistic depictions of Vijayalaya Chola, Aditya Chola, Paranthaka Chola as old men with flowing beards. But you should see the mural of my grandfather Prince Rajadhithan. He is depicted as a vigorous young man. He died at a young age and will remain young for posterity. I think he is very fortunate in that matter and I wonder who among us will be blessed thus.”

Aditya Karikalan’s friends didn’t relish the philosophical sojourn of the Prince and remained mum for a while.

“Why have you become so silent? Why are you so scared of death? You are merely losing one body to gain another. Why should you be so frightened of death? If Vandiya Devan was here, he would have agreed with me. It is tough to find anyone like him. He is a man who would laugh at the face of death, even if it were staring right at him. I doubt, if even a journey to Yamalogam would deter his high spirits.”

Even as he was speaking this, they saw two horses raising a dust storm at a distance. They were headed towards the Prince and his entourage. Within a blink of the eye, they were near the Prince and his friends. Parthibendran immediately signalled his soldiers to stop the horses but their efforts were futile because the men on the horses stopped at a distance rather abruptly.

Vandiya Devan and Azhwarkadiyan jumped down from their horses. Aditya Karikalan was overjoyed when he saw Vandiya Devan, so much so that he too jumped down from his horse and embraced him fondly.

“Thambi! You will live for a blessed hundred years. I just now took your name and here you are...”

Kandanmaran and Parthibendran looked at the scene unfolding in front of them with jealousy writ in their faces. They rode their horses for a short distance before stopping.

They saw that there was a group of horsemen coming in their direction. Soon enough they too joined the entourage. Since they were from Kadambur, Kandanmaran spoke to them at length and then approached Karikalan.

“My Prince! This Vandiya Devan is your friend. He was my friend too... once upon a time. It is however unfortunate that I have to say this. He betrayed my trust and stabbed me in the back. I entreat you... please be very careful with him, lest the same fate befalls you.”





Chapter 12: A spear broken

Aditya Karikalan laughed out loud after hearing the accusations that Kandamaran charged Vandiya Devan with.

“Kandanmara! So you are saying that Vandiya Devan stabbed you in the back...but why did you show him your ‘back’ in the first place?” asked the Prince and laughed again.

Kandanmaran’s face darkened and his eyes became red and he wished to give a proper retort to the Prince’s taunt but couldn’t.

“My Prince! Is this a laughing matter for you?”

“Kandanmara! Are you saying that I should not laugh? Don’t you know that laughter is a gift given to us by the Gods? Cows, goats, horses, elephants can’t laugh. Even monkeys that love to indulge in games and amusement can’t laugh. Only we humans can laugh and here you are, asking me not to laugh! It’s been ages since I laughed thus, my friend! I am astonished by the sound of my own laughter because I had forgotten how to? And you say that I shouldn’t?”

“My Prince! I am happy that you are laughing but please do not be under the false impression that I showed this great warrior my back so that he could stab me. He attacked me, when I was unprepared and thankfully due to the blessing of Durga Parameshwari and the loving care of Nandini Devi, I recovered from my wounds. I seek justice from you for the treasonous act of this ‘so-called friend’. If you hesitate then, I will go ahead and seek retribution for the wounds that he caused me.”

“My friend! Do not worry. I will listen to you both and pronounce my judgement for these charges. I belong to a dynasty that is well-known for its impartial justice. One of my forefathers, Sibi Chakravarthy carved out a piece of his own flesh to give justice to a wronged pigeon. Manu Nidhi Cholan sacrificed his own son and heir to give justice to a cow that had lost its calf. When we can give a fair and just hearing to animals and birds, you can be rest assured that justice will prevail for you too. Let me question him about this. Be patient, until then. Vallava! Before you tell about your journey, can you answer the charge that Kandanmaran is laying out on you? Did you stab him on the back? Is it true? If it is, then explain why you acted so despicably?”

“My Prince! I didn’t stab him in the back! I found him stabbed drowning in his own blood. I carried him to Senthana Amuthan’s hut and saved his life. But I do regret my actions because by doing so, I betrayed your trust and my duty towards you. He calls me a traitor while in truth he is deceiving you and me as well. He has reneged on his vow to serve you and is working along with those who seek to destroy you. Ask him, where he was when he was stabbed in the back? Ask him, who he was escorting through the secret tunnel that lies below the Thanjavur Fort? Ask him what he saw and who he met that night near the treasure chamber of Pazhuvetarayar? Ask him about the secret midnight meeting that happened at his palace on the 18th of Aadi month? Ask him who came hiding within a veiled palanquin to his palace?”

Kandanmaran reacted to Vandiya Devan’s accusations as though a hundred scorpions had stung him. He mumbled something incoherent and his hands started shaking in anger. He then looked at Vandiya Devan and shouted, “You insolent dog! Stop talking nonsense!” and took his spear and aimed it at him.

Aditya Karikalan was a bit surprised to see Kandanmaran’s extreme reaction to Vandiya Devan’s counter charge. He stepped in between the friends and took the spear from his hand and bent both the ends as though it was a tree’s twig and threw it away.

“Be warned! I will not stand by and watch my friends tear each other apart...Parthibendra! If you see either of them taking up arms against each

other, I want you to imprison them.”

Vandiya Devan immediately took out his sword and handed it over to Parthibendran who took from him with a look of distaste.

“Kandanmara! Vandiya Devan has answered your charges. I will analyse the truth of it at a later time but do you wish to answer the counter charge that he lays upon you?”

Kandanmaran looked uncomfortable and fidgeted with his hands and said, “My Prince! I have taken a vow not to talk about those things.”

Parthibendran interjected in the meanwhile and said, “My Lord! I think these two are fighting over some woman! It might be better if you could question them alone and in private.”

“I think you are right Parthiba! You three met Nandini during your travels and have fallen prey to her seductive web. That’s why you are trying to destroy each other now.” exclaimed Karikalan and laughed aloud.

Parthibendran looked irritated and said, “My Lord, It looks like you are determined to treat everything lightly today and laugh your heart out. That’s fine because even I have a few things to say in this matter. I have my own suspicion about this Vandiya Devan. I will talk about the important ones right now. Your brother jumped into the sea during a raging storm to save him from the burning ship. Now he has appeared here with nary a scar on his fine body. Ask him what happened to Prince Arul Mozhi? If the Prince is indeed dead then this Vandiya Devan is responsible for his fate.”

Karikalan looked at Vandiya Devan and said, “What do you say to that?”

“Ayya! Before I give him a reply, please ask him to answer this. Ponniyin Selvar left Illangai in his ship. Prime Minister Anirudhar and Commander Budhivikrama Kesari tried their utmost to convince your brother to stay back in Illangai but the Prince didn’t heed them and got on Parthibendran’s ship to return home. Why didn’t he return the Prince to you safely? When the Prince jumped into the sea during a raging storm, why didn’t he stop

him? Why did he stand aside and watch the Prince do such a dangerous thing? When the Prince didn't think twice to jump into the raging sea to save me, why didn't he jump into the sea to save your brother's life? Why did he stand by on the ship and watch your brother drown in the sea?"

Parthibendran's temper flared. His face became red and he bared his teeth.

"My Lord! This fool is blaming me. If you allow him to continue, he might even lay the blame of Prince's death on my head."

Karikalan looked at him and said, "Parthiba! Remember what I told? You three are my dear friends and I am not angry with you for fighting amongst yourselves. This is happening because of that Pazhuvur Queen's seductive web. Kandanmaran and you trot forward; I will speak to Vandiya Devan about his travels and decide what needs to be done about the charges that you lay upon him. But here is one thing that you need to heed. You three will need to remain friends and should not at any cost fight in my presence. If I learn that you have done otherwise, I will be displeased."

Parthibendran and Kandanmaran had no choice but to accede to the Prince's wishes. They got onto their horse and started trotting at a distance.

Azhwarkadiyan neared Vandiya Devan and said, "You are becoming more intelligent by the day. You neither lied and nor revealed the truth."

That's when Aditya Karikalan saw Azhwarkadiyan and said, "Who are you? You seem familiar."

"Yes My Prince! You saw me a few years ago."

"Your voice seems familiar to me."

"Yes. You heard my voice at a very important juncture of your life... three years ago."

Aditya Karikalan's face clouded with dark memories and he said, "Three years ago... an important juncture... what was it? Was it your voice that I

heard in the banks of Vaigai River when I was searching for Veera Pandyan?”

“Yes my Prince. It was indeed my voice. It was ‘I’ who revealed to you the precise place where Veera Pandyan was hiding.”

“Ah! What a terrible day that was? I was the under a grip of madness that made me do unspeakably cruel things. I can’t believe that I did those things even today. You were hiding in the forest that day. Why didn’t you reveal yourself to me?”

“My Prince! Just now you mentioned the madness that had gripped you. I was afraid that you might not spare me if I had revealed myself. I saw you felling all those who had resisted you and I didn’t have a death wish. I wanted to live for a few more years.”

“Is that the only reason? Didn’t you hear me pleading to reveal yourself? I sought your help to guide me towards Veera Pandyan but you refused. Why?”

“My adopted sister who is now the Pazhuvur Queen... I didn’t wish to earn her wrath.”

“You scoundrel! So you thought that if I might earn that wrath and spare you her goodwill.” Growled Aditya Karikalan and unsheathed his sword

Vandiya Devan got genuinely scared for Azhwarkadiyan’s life. Karikalan looked furious enough to take the Vaishnavan’s head.

He interjected gently and said, “Ayya! This Vaishnavan has come as an emissary of the Prime Minister Anirudhar. I beg you. Please spare his life, at least until you hear the Prime Minister’s message.”

Karikalan’s anger vanished and he sheathed his sword. “What is the use of punishing him or anybody else?”

Azhwarkadiyan seemed unperturbed by the Prince's sudden anger. He calmly smiled at the Prince and said, "I knew that you would get angry with me, that's why I stayed out of your sight all these years. My sister has no goodwill towards me. She has refused to meet me or even talk to me after marrying Pazhuvetarayar but it looks like she has put aside her anger towards you. Didn't she send you a personal message through Kadambur Prince? Isn't that why you are travelling there?"

"Ah! How do you know that?"

"Ayya! I work for Prime Minister Anirudhar. And you must know that the Prime Minister knows everything that is happening in the Kingdom."

"You wait and watch. One of these days, I might just banish you and that Prime Minister of yours out of this Kingdom. Now you both get on your horse and come with me." Said the Prince





Chapter 13: Manimegalai's secret heart

Nandini was resting on a beautiful cot that was placed in the chambers of anthapuram that was specially allocated to her in the Kadambur palace. She looked more beautiful than ever dressed splendidly and resplendent with jewels. Her face seemed aglow with contentment, anticipation and an eagerness that was never seen in her demeanour. With her eyes half-closed, it looked as though she was daydreaming but her mind was alert as ever.

On a closer look, one would know that she was idly watching the smoke rising from the fragrant incense sticks that were placed the room. The thin ropes of smoke that arose from the incense sticks went up and up until it dissipated in the air leaving behind an intoxicating scent. One can only wonder what distressing memories were seen in her mind's eye even as she watched the progress of the smoke's ascent. Suddenly she let out a long sigh and murmured, "Yes... all those dreams that were dear to me dissipated like this smoke but these leave behind an intoxicating scent, whereas, mine gave me sorrow, grief, accusations and scandals."

That's when a slight voice was heard from outside, "Devi... devi, May I come in?"

"Do come in, please. Why would you seek my permission to come into your own house?"

Manimegalai walked in slowly but her bright eyes and heightened complexion indicated her excitement.

Nandini sat back on the bed and asked Manimegalai to sit down on one of the chairs that were placed near the bed.

“Devi, my brother tutored me endlessly about how to serve you. He also taught me how to speak and behave like a high-born noblewoman. He told me that it was unmannerly to enter a room without seeking permission.”

“May these manners rot in hell! I don’t hold with such formalities. You should forget everything that your brother has taught you and please do call me ‘akka’ instead of ‘Devi’.”

“Akka... would it vex you if I came to your chambers, often?”

“If you come here often, it would trouble me indeed but if you promise to stay here beside me and not go anywhere I wouldn’t be vexed. I assure you.” Said Nandini and smiled beautifully.

Manimegalai was so taken in by her smile that she looked transfixed and gazed at her face for a long while and said, “I have never seen a more beautiful woman like yourself... not even in paintings or sculptures.”

“Dear girl... do not fall for this beauty of mine. As such, I am being maligned by people of this kingdom for a being a seductress who would mesmerize men with just a glance.”

“Akka! If I ever hear anyone talking thus, I will slice their tongue out.” Said Manimegalai emphatically.

“There is no point in that. How many mouths can be shut? They will talk... it’s because of my marriage to the old man that started all this.”

Manimegalai looked thoughtful when she said, “I think it’s rather unfair that you had to marry an old man. My brother has agonized over it for months but that’s no reason to malign you.”

“Let them talk Manimegalai. It doesn’t affect me in any way. Even Seetha Devi was maligned by the people of her own kingdom. Did it affect her in

any way? Don't we still worship her? Now that's enough about me. Tell me about yourself."

"There is nothing to tell akka!"

"I don't believe that. This evening, didn't you tell me that you would come to me and tell me about the secret wishes of your heart? And you are telling me that there is nothing to tell." Asked Nandini and playfully pinched her cheeks.

"Akka, I wish to stay with you all the time. If only I have the choice to marry another woman like the swayamvara that they used to arrange in the bygone ages, I would garland you as my soul mate."

"It's been just a few hours since we met and you care about me so much! I am happy about that. I haven't had any friends ever since I got married and I have been yearning for one for a very long time. All the kings and chieftains in this kingdom, send their princesses to that monster that lives in Pazhaiarai. I am glad that at least you remained here to befriend me. But what you just said would be impossible. No woman can marry another woman. You will need to marry a man."

"Can't I stay unmarried?"

"No my dear girl. That would be impossible. You will have to get married. Your family will not leave you alone. Now... tell me, who would you like to marry?"

"If you take the name of my groom, I can tell you."

"Alright. Would you like to marry Prince Madhuranthakan, who is known for his piety towards Lord Shiva or would like to marry the Crown Prince Aditya Karikalan?"

Suddenly Manimegalai started laughing rather merrily.

“Why are you laughing Manimegalai? This is one of the reasons why I came here on your brother’s request. I promised your brother that I would learn the secret of your heart. In a short while, the Crown Prince will be here and your brother too and we can’t talk freely when they are in residence.”

“I don’t know what lies in my heart. What can I tell you?”

“Why did you laugh then?”

“When you took Madhuranthakar’s name, I couldn’t help laughing. Do you know, he came to this palace almost four months ago? And how do you think he came, in your veiled palanquin! None of us womenfolk knew about this. We thought that it was ‘you’ who had come here and were surprised by the fact that you were not sent to the anthapuram to meet us. Akka, we were talking about women marrying women just a while ago, don’t you think it would amount to the same thing, if I were to marry Prince Madhuranthakan.”

Nandini smiled and said, “Yes. I knew that you wouldn’t like it. I told your brother about it. That’s not all. Madhuranthakar is already married to my brother-in-law’s daughter. She is a headstrong woman. It would be impossible for you to live in the same household with her. That leaves Prince Aditya Karikalan. Is your heart perhaps yearning for him?”

“I can’t say that. How can I yearn for someone whom I haven’t met at all?”

“My dear girl! Do you think all women have the good fortune of meeting their husbands before the marriage? Don’t we fall in love with men in paintings, or by hearing their glorious deeds?”

“True. I have heard of Karikalar’s bravery and many grand tales are told about his valiant deeds in the war. Is it true that he beheaded Veera Pandyan’s head with just one stroke of his sword?”

Manimegalai didn’t notice the expression of horror that came over Nandini’s face. It took Nandini a while to regain her composure.

“Manimegalai! Do you think it is brave of men to behead someone with one stroke of a sword? Don’t you think it is inhumane and barbaric?”

“What are you saying Akka? Beheading an enemy is an act of bravery, how can you deem it barbaric?”

“Imagine this, what if an enemy comes to you wanting to kill someone you hold dear. It could be your dear brother or a man who you intend to marry. What if they are wounded and incapacitated unable to fight and the enemy swoops in to behead them. Would you still admire their bravery?”

Manimegalai thought about this for a while and said, “What you are saying is strange, indeed. But if I was in this position, I would not sit quietly and watch the enemy kill the man I hold dear. I would snatch the sword from his hand and kill him instead.”

Nandini embraced her lovingly and said, “My dear, you are intelligent and now it is on my head to find a groom who deserves you. Even Prince Karikalar might not suit you,”

“Even I think the same akka. After hearing so many things Karikalar, I am a bit frightened to meet him. Akka, may I tell you what’s in my heart?”



Chapter 14: Will the dream come true?

Nandini placed a loving hand on Manimegalai's cheeks and said, "My darling! It would be better if you didn't reveal your heart to me. They say that such secrets must be told only to those who have been your friends for a long time. You hardly know me and we met only today..."

"No akka, when I look at you, I don't see a stranger. It feels as though I have known you for a long time. I not only feel like revealing my secrets but find myself brave enough to ask for favours that I would never have ask anyone."

"If that is so, then ask my dear."

"Do you believe in apparitions? We read about it in myths and epics where we see the vision of people who are not with us..."

"I believe in them. If we deeply love someone, we might see him or her, move around us as apparitions. The same is true when we hate someone too. Haven't we heard of Gopis of Vrindavan suffering from delusions of Krishna's visions? We have seen them enacted in plays, haven't we? Kamsa too suffered from the same delusion. Wherever he looked, he saw the image of Krishna. He would aim and throw his dagger around to kill his enemy. One of the Gopis of Vrindavan too saw Krishna everywhere and she would rush to the apparition that she saw and try to hug and kiss him. But alas she would get disappointed. Manimegalai! Are you telling me that you are so in love with someone that you are seeing him as a vision?"

“Akka, I saw him in person just four months ago. Before that my brother used to talk about him endlessly and I used to imagine him in my mind’s eye. The day I saw him, I lost my heart to him and he has since been appearing in my dreams. Sometimes, the apparitions that I see seems too real...”

“Did you see him yesterday?”

“Yes akka. But how did you know?”

“Did no one tell you that I have magical powers?”

“Yes, they did. Is it true?”

“Why don’t you test it? I will guess the name of this handsome young warrior who has stolen your heart and you will know that my powers are for real.”

“Go ahead. I am feeling shy to utter his name anyway...”

Nandini closed her eyes for a while and then said, “That handsome warrior’s name is Vallavareyan Vandiya Devan. Is it not?”

“Akka, It is true then. You do have magical skills!”

“Silly girl! When you love him so deeply then why didn’t you tell your brother about this? Why involve Prince Madhuranthakan or the Crown Prince for that matter? Why invite me here?”

“Akka, my brother doesn’t like him?”

“That’s wonderful! Who is the bride here? You or your brother? Wasn’t it Kandanmaran who told you all about him? It was he who brought Vandiya Devan to this palace right?”

“That’s right. It was Kandanmaran who told me about him. It was on his invitation that Vandiya Devar came to the palace in the first place. Later,

though he changed his mind about his friend and the reason was the events that happened in Thanjavur. He strongly believes that his friend tried to stab him in the back. Akka, you were the one who nursed him back to health after that incident. My brother was very eloquent in his praise of you.”

“Your brother has grossly exaggerated whatever I did. Leave that alone. Now tell me what you wish to do? What can we do in this situation? It looks like your heart’s desire has become the sworn enemy of your brother?”

“But do you know what he is saying...”

“Who?”

“My brother’s erstwhile friend. He claims that he didn’t stab Kandanmaran at all. He says that he saved my brother’s life by getting him to safety.”

“And when did he say this to you?”

“Yesterday...”

“Are you saying that you saw that Vandiya Devan here? But didn’t you say that you saw his apparition?”

“That’s what is confusing me. I don’t know whether I really saw him or just an apparition conjured by my heart. When I think about the events that occurred yesterday, it seems like a dream. Akka, they say that sometimes when someone dies, their spirit haunts us trying to talk to us about things from beyond. Do you believe in it?” asked Manimegalai and her voice shook with fear.

Nandini shivered visibly when she heard this and she tilted her face up to see something and murmured, “Yes. They say that those who have died at a young age without fulfilling any of their wishes or desires would haunt their loved ones. When someone dies of beheading, their loved ones, unfortunately, will see only the dismembered head talking to them.

Sometimes the body and head would come by to taunt them, asking whether they avenged the death or not?”

After that Nandini spoke aloud and said, “My girl! Why do you ask such questions? Do you think something like this could have occurred to your lover? Who has created such doubts in your heart?”

“There is a man in this palace upon whom Gods the come by. I sent for him but he didn’t come. Instead his wife Devaratti came and told that someone had hit and injured him yesterday. She told me that...”

“Rubbish! Don’t believe all that.”

“Yes. Even I didn’t believe all that. If he had come to me in the spirit form, it wouldn’t be possible to touch him right?”

“It is not possible to touch someone if they are in the spirit form or if it is an apparition. Did you touch him?”

“That’s what is confusing me. I did touch him yesterday but when I think about the other things that happened there, I am very much puzzled.”

“Tell me everything that happened yesterday and I will determine the truth of it.”

“Alright akka. Yesterday, around this time, I was here in these chambers overseeing the arrangements that have been made for your stay here. Kandanmaran had specifically asked me to ensure that all manners of comfort are provided to you. While I was at it, I happened to look at myself in this mirror...”

“Were you admiring your beauty?”

“I do know how ‘beautiful’ I am.”

“Why do you talk thus? You are a young beautiful girl whose beauty is incomparable. Apsaras like Menaka, Rambha, Urvashi, Rathi and Indrani

would have to beg you for some beauty to spare.”

“All these apsaras cannot stand in the shadow of your beauty akka!”

“Alright! Alright! Tell me more. What happened when you looked into the mirror?”

“I saw another face in the same mirror... right next to mine.”

“It was the face of your lover was it?”

“Yes. But I was stupefied!”

“Why? Didn’t you just say that you used to see his face all the time in your dreams?”

“Yes... but this was different. When I used to see him in my dreams, he would appear at a distance in front of me. When I saw him yesterday he... I am feeling shy to say this.”

“Don’t feel shy. Tell me.”

“In the mirror, his face was very close to mine. As close as one would come to kiss. When I turned around and saw, there was nobody and he didn’t appear again in the mirror after that. That’s when I suspected that something was wrong. I showed you the secret Hunter’s chamber next to this room. Yesterday, this mirror was placed right in front of the secret entrance of the hunter’s chambers. I wondered if someone from the chambers had opened the door by mistake and had looked into the mirror. It was impossible because I couldn’t understand how a face could suddenly appear in the mirror so I decided to investigate and opened the secret door.”

Nandini who was listening to her intently asked her, “Did you find that thief in Hunter’s chambers?”

“Akka, what is this? You are calling him a thief!”

“Of course he is a thief. Isn’t he the one who robbed your heart? And did you find him there... hiding?”

“That’s the surprise! He wasn’t there. I just found our palace servant Edupankari dusting the animal trophies that we have kept there. And I know for sure that it wasn’t his face that I saw in the mirror. Edupankari looks like one of the ghoulish faces that you would find in the Ayyanar temple. When I asked him as to whether he saw somebody else there, he replied that he didn’t see anybody.”

“Do you think he lied to you?”

“I don’t know about that but I thought that somebody was hiding at the hunter’s chambers behind the animals. So I came back here and waited for him to reveal himself.”

“Did he come out?”

“Yes. I came back here and waited by the door. I could hear voices on the other side of Hunter’s cabin and then I heard noises of something falling. Even as I was wondering what to do, the secret door opened partially. There is an inner door within the larger door and through that, a man was seen stuck. I had dimmed the lights of the lamp in this chamber so I couldn’t see his face but he was begging for help. I helped him out of the door and then adjusted the wicks of the lamp to brighten the room and whom do I see? It’s him!”

“Manimegalai! This is like Vikramaditya’s story!”

“Yes. There is more. I was seeing him after almost four months. I felt joy bubbling in my heart and my senses were reeling yet I feigned anger and demanded as to what he was doing in the anthapuram and that too in the quarters that were assigned to you. That’s when he told me that someone had come there to kill him and he had entered the tunnel entrance of the hunter’s chambers to avoid those murderers. He also said that he didn’t carry a weapon so he had no other choice but to flee and escape. I asked him about stabbing my brother in the back and he denied it outright.”

“Did you believe him?”

“At that moment he seemed sincere in his denials but whatever happened later left me confused. I don’t know what to believe.”

“What happened next?”

“While I was speaking to him, I also intently listened to the sounds that were coming from the hunter’s chambers. I could hear the footsteps of people moving inside and voices too. I thought that there was truth in what Vandiya Devar was saying. At that point, all that I could think of was how to save him from those people. I wanted to find out whether Edupankari was a part of that murderous gang or if he was helping Vandiya Devar? I was worried when I realized that so many people knew the secret route to Hunter’s Chambers that too when you are living in these quarters. I wanted to tell my father about it but how would I explain Vandiya Devar’s presence in the anthapuram? I opened the door and stepped into the secret room. I could see the men trying to hide behind the various animals and they too were astonished to see me. I wanted to know who they were when my maid Chandramathi came here seeking me. I was worried that she might see Vandiya Devar and raise an alarm so I came out and went out of the room to stall her. When I came back to the room again, Vandiya Devar had vanished and after searching for him for a while, I went back to the hunter’s chambers and I didn’t see any of those men who were trying to hide. Instead, Edupankari was back there, cleaning the place. When I questioned him about those men, he refused to believe the fact that I had seen them and told me that I was probably imagining it.

Chandramathi started teasing me by saying that ‘Akka, today you are daydreaming a lot!’ She had come to fetch me since the Pazhuvur entourage was nearing the palace so I had to leave with her immediately. I asked her to go ahead and went to our palace terrace to reach the courtyard soon. That’s when I saw him again. He was down below in the courtyard trying to climb a bamboo pole to go over the palace walls. Even now... I am not sure as to whether all this happened for real or whether I imagined it.”

Nandini was immersed in thought after Manimegalai finished her tale. Her account had confirmed the fact that she had indeed seen him and the Vaishnavan near the forest. She also knew that her lord husband had sent men chasing after them. She wondered whether they had been caught, and if yes whether they would be brought there for questioning.

“Akka, what do you think?” asked Manimegalai interjecting Nandini’s thoughts.

“What do I think? I think that your infatuation has gone to your head.”

“You are mocking me akka.”

“I am not mocking you. But when you are unsure of yourself not able to decide whether the man you met was real or apparition, how could I say anything? Tell me something, is there any way he could have escaped from this room?”

“There are no escape routes as far as I know.”

“He could have gone in the same way as you and Chandramathi did. Through the staircase that goes up the terrace.”

“There were many servants gathered there. He couldn’t have gone through that way without being noticed.”

“This is indeed a mystery. Did you perchance tell your father about this?”

“I didn’t. I feel shy and embarrassed to even take his name. I am also scared. What if all this was true and that he had really come here?”

“It is better not to tell the menfolk anything. Even if you tell them, they will not understand.”

“I am wondering whether I should tell my brother about this...”

“If you tell him, then things will become worse. Your brother wants you to be married to Karikalan at any cost...”

“Akka, only you can help me. Kandanmaran listens to everything that you say. If you tell him, he will comply.”

“I came here to marry you off to Karikalan and here you are asking me to help me thwart the effort. You are very intelligent indeed! Even if this marriage plan to Karikalan falls through, you know nothing about Vandiya Devar’s feelings for you? Do you think that he would fall in love with you?”

“I am not worried about that. Irrespective of whether he loves me or not, I have lost...”

“That is the fate of most women I think. No matter how the menfolk act with us, we are indeed ready to give up our life for them. Let us see how your luck plays out. In future, if incidents like this happen here, will you tell me?”

“If not you, to whom will I tell akka? I saw a dream last night, I would like to tell that too.”

“Is it not enough that you are daydreaming that you have to dream of him in the night too. What did you see in the dream? Did he give you the slip again in the dream?”

“No! No! This is different. It was a very terrible dream. They say that the dreams that we see early in the morning come true. Do you think so?”

“You tell me about the dream...was it about Vandiya Devan or somebody else?”

“It was about him. Someone is coming to kill him while he stood with nary a weapon. On the floor, I could see a dagger gleaming. I run towards and grab it wanting to kill the man who wishes to slay my love. When the killer comes towards him, I throw the dagger on him but it only when I near him

that I realize that the man I killed was my own brother. I woke up drenched in sweat. My limbs were trembling for a long time and I am scared that this dream might come true. What do you think?"

"My dear girl! Your mind and heart are confused thanks to the events of yesterday. That's why you are not able to discern the truth from imagination. Of all the people, I have to make friends with someone who daydreams like this. I thought I was insane but you have proven me wrong!"

Just then, Manimegalai's companion Chandramathi came in excitedly to give the news, "Devi! They are coming. They have passed by Veerananarayana dam and are coming..."





Chapter 15: The royal welcome

That evening, Kadambur witnessed sights that have never been seen before. Crowds of people, old, young, women, elderly and children had gathered outside the palace thronging and fighting with one another trying to come forward to see the royal welcome accorded to the Crown Prince.

Elderly people who were unable to walk without support were standing in the crowd with the aid of a stick not minding those who would jostle them around. Young children too didn't mind the crowd and stood around playing. Young women dressed beautifully tried to come to the forefront of the crowd but the young men didn't spare them a glance because they were intent upon finding a place in the crowd that would allow them a good view of the Crown Prince and his entourage. Many had taken control of the trees around the palace to get an unimpeded view of the guests. A few daring souls also tried to jump onto the high walls of Kadambur Palace to get a closer view, but they were pushed down by the guards who manned the walls.

Young women carrying impatient infants consoled their children by saying, 'My sweet! Wait for a short while. The Crown Prince Aditya Karikalar will be here soon. If you are fortunate enough to see him, who knows, one day you too might become a great warrior like him.'

Everyone in the crowds spoke to one another about Aditya Karikalan. His brave exploits, his ambitions, dreams and the things that he would achieve and the lands that he would capture during his reign were the main topics of conversation.

Aditya Karikalan was an inspiring figure for young men all around the kingdom. A Prince who would slay his enemies in the battlefield at the tender age of 12 years. A relentless warrior who pursued the Pandya forces for years and beheaded their cowardly King!

Who indeed would miss a chance to meet such a brave prince?

Many were troubled by the rumours that were floating around the Prince for the past three years. Some claimed that the Crown Prince and the Emperor had a difference of opinion and that his father didn't wish him to ascend the throne next. While some believed that the Crown Prince wished to establish a separate kingdom state in Kanchi and establish his suzerainty over it. Some thought that the difference of opinion between father and son was due to the preference and love shown to his younger brother Prince Arul Mozhi Varman. Many rejected these rumours vehemently and claimed that Karikalan and Arul Mozhi were loving brothers not unlike Rama and Lakshmana.

Among the women, the talks were about Karikalan's marriage and why he remained unwed so long? Some claimed that he had refused all offers of marriage because he was in love with the daughter of a temple priest and that's why he fell out with the Emperor. Some claimed that he was suffering from delusions and that the evil Pandyas priests were responsible for this. They also said that was the reason why the noblemen did not favour his ascension to the throne after the Emperor.

Despite the swirling rumours, the people were sure of one thing. Aditya Karikalan was a brave warrior, the likes of which they have not seen in many years and the news that he would be staying at Kadambur Palace for a while, stirred a great curiosity among the populace and they were determined to watch the sights that unfolded that evening. People from neighbouring villages gathered around the palace with the quiet determination that they would not budge from the place until they see the Prince.

The crowd that had started to gather at the palace from the morning had grown so much that the guards were posted all about the road to control

them and to allow the Prince's entourage to traverse through the road, unimpeded. Many in the crowds tried to jostle others in their effort to come to the front.

One of the men who had monopolized the tree shouted, 'They are coming'. The crowd below cried to know more and asked him 'Where? Who is coming?' A lone horseman was seen at the end of the road galloping fiercely towards the palace.

Many who were gathered in the road jumped out of the way to avoid being flattened by the horse. 'It's young Sambureyar!' cried one of the men on the tree. Many tried to stop him and ask questions, but he didn't stop to answer them and entered the palace.

At the entrance in the courtyard, he found his father and Periya Pazhuvetarayar standing. He dismounted and greeted them formally and said, "The Crown Prince is on his way but his temper is unpredictable and most often out of control. I came ahead to warn everyone here. Please give him a royal welcome that would cheer his disposition towards us. If he says anything unpleasant, kindly disregard it. Do not react to his words."

Next, he moved from there to the staircase that led him to the upper courtyard in the terrace, where the womenfolk had gathered to welcome and shower the Prince with flowers upon his entrance. His eyes sought Nandini Devi and soon enough found her. "Devi, I have fulfilled your wish and command. I have brought the Crown Prince to our Palace but he is like a mad elephant, difficult, dangerous and his temper is fearsome. I know not how we can control him."

"Ayya! Why do you fear so much? Your sister, Manimegalai's beautiful eyes should be enough to calm the Prince's temper,"

"Akka! What are you saying?"

"Manimegalai, the Pazhuvur queen is right! You must consider yourself fortunate to win a groom like the Crown Prince."

Before Manimegalai could retort to that, Nandini asked her brother, “Ayya, who else is coming along with the Prince?”

“Parthibendra Pallavan and Vandiya Devan are coming.”

Nandini looked pointedly at Manimegalai and asked, “Isn’t Vandiya Devan, your friend?”

“Yes. He was my friend until he tried to stab me in the back. I don’t know from where he came, he joined us near the Vellattrukarai. Truly, I stayed my sword only because of the Crown Prince, or else there would have been a bloodbath today.”

Manimegalai’s face fell when she heard her brother speak thus. She asked him, “Anna, if it is true that he tried to stab you in the back, then why should we allow him to come to our palace in the first place.”

“My Sweet! Don’t ask him such questions. You don’t know about men. They will fight tooth and nail today and tomorrow they will swear everlasting friendship!”

Kandanmaran smiled and said, “You are wrong. I had to restrain myself from confronting him only because of the Crown Prince’s presence. Oh! So you will be showering him with flowers from here. Good! I hope the Prince’s temper subsides after getting a welcome such as this. Looks like they have arrived. I will go down now.”

Kandanmaran then came downstairs to the main courtyard. The Prince’s entourage was nearing the palace gate through the huge crowd of people. At the head of the entourage were Vandiya Devan, Parthibendra Pallavan and Prince Aditya Karikalan. Countless elephants, chariots, horses and carts came behind them bearing, soldiers, warriors, servants, grooms and others.

As the Prince and his friends neared, drums, fifes and trumpets were blown to signal his arrival. Around five hundred drum beaters started performing their welcome beat and drowning the shouts of the crowd gathered. After a while, the drums stopped beating and a silence ensued and the royal herald

climbed onto the Dias that has been built for this purpose and announced the arrival of the Crown Prince in a thunderous voice.

“A scion of the Sun Dynasty sprung from the loins of Emperor Sibi, the one who didn’t hesitate to cut his own flesh to save the life of a pigeon. Born in the dynasty of Manu Nidhi Cholan, the Emperor who sentenced his own son to death to grant justice to a cow! The namesake of Emperor Karikalan who conquered the entire Bharatakandan and unfurled the tiger flag of Cholas, all the way to mighty ranges of Himalayas. The descendent of Emperors Nedunkilli, Perunkilli, Perunarakilli, Killivallavan and many other illustrious Kings. The direct descendent of King Vijayalaya Chola, the grand old tiger who bore 99 battle scars. His son, the illustrious King Aditya who built and raised 82 Shiva Temple along the banks of River Kaveri. His son, the mighty Paranthaka Chola who defeated the Kingdoms of Pandya and Illangai and became a legendary emperor. His son, Aringzha Devar who fought bravely in the Thakkolam war against Kannara Devan’s forces. His son, Paranthaka Sundara Chola, the handsome Chola who brought the Pandyas and the Illangai King to their knees. Descended from such a glorious dynasty, the eldest son of Emperor Sundara Chola, the Commander of the Northern Army, the slayer of Veera Pandya and the Crown Prince of the Chola Kingdom Aditya Karikalar is arriving!”

An overwhelming silence had descended on the crowd when they heard the herald speak about their Crown Prince. After he spoke, the Kadambur herald spoke thus,

“The King of Kollimalai! Descended from the master Bowman Val Vil Orri who shot down a lion, bear, deer and a boar with just one arrow! Descended from a clan that values bravery and loyalty, the guardian of Veera Narayana Dam and the commander of five thousand loyal soldiers and the faithful servant of Emperor Sundara Chola welcomes Crown Prince Aditya Karikalan to his humble abode. May his arrival herald auspicious blessings upon our clan, house and the Kingdom.”

After the formal announcement of welcome by the herald, Aditya Karikalan, Vandiya Devan and Parthibendra Pallavan entered the palace courtyard of Kadambur and were welcomed by flowers showered by the

womenfolk from the balcony. Aditya Karikalan looked up to see who was showering the flowers as did Vandiya Devan. He could see Manimegalai smiling brightly as she showered them with more flowers. For an instant, he smiled at her and then realized how inappropriate his actions were and promptly looked elsewhere. At the same time, Aditya Karikalan looked more incensed and angry than he was before. He abruptly jumped down from the horse and following his lead, Vandiya Devan and Parthibendra Pallavan too did the same.

The drums and trumpets started playing again drowning the shouts of the crowd gathered outside. After the Prince and his bodyguards entered the Palace, the guards shut the main doors. Aditya Karikalan looked back at it and asked Periya Pazhuvetarayar and his host Samburverayar who had gathered to welcome him ceremoniously, “Why are you shutting the doors of the palace so soon? Are you planning to imprison me here just as you have done to my father? What will happen to my entourage who have come with me?”

The old men were shocked! Periya Pazhuvetarayar recovered first and said, “My Prince! You and your father are already imprisoned in the hearts of thousands of people with love and respect. Therefore, there is no need for a separate prison to keep you with us.”

“My Prince! Thousands of people have gathered since morning just to get a glimpse of you. What will happen to my humble abode, if they enter unchecked into the palace? As such the woods around the palace have almost been destroyed by this mob. The crowd will soon disperse, now that you have entered the palace. After they move away, we will bring the rest of the entourage inside. Until then, we have enough and more people to serve you.”

At the same time, the crowd gathered outside seemed to be shouting something. Hearing this, Aditya Karikalan asked Kandanmaran, ‘is there a way to see the crowd from the terrace?’

Kandanmaran pointed towards the stairs and Aditya Karikalan went near it and started climbing. Kandanmaran, Vandiya Devan and Parthibendran too

followed him with a start.

After they left the scene, Sambuverayar looked at Periya Pazhuvetarayar and said, “It looks like I have welcomed trouble to mine own house. The Crown Prince’s mind is disturbed and he is unpredictable. I shouldn’t have agreed to this venture in the first place and I shouldn’t have listened to my son. The fool has gotten me into trouble now!”

“What trouble are you talking about? If our plan succeeds, let it succeed or else let it fail.”

“I am not talking about the plan. I am worried about him. What if something untoward happens when he is at my house? My soothsayers are foretelling ominous things and he seems like a mad elephant, irate and irritated and he has a poisonous tongue.”

“There is nothing to be done now. You will need to bear with him for a few days. That Pallavan will help us control him if need be. I am more worried about that rogue that has followed him here. I don’t like it at all! I know for sure that he is a spy. Earlier when we met here a few months ago, he had come then too and last evening he was watching us enter from behind the tree.”

“He is my son’s friend, so I don’t think we need to worry about him. Now, why is the Prince going towards the womenfolk? Shall we go too?”

Parthibendran who was following the Prince rather slowly happened to hear the last thing that Sambuverayar had said and he came down from the stairs and said, “Ayya, no matter what doubts or worries you have about the Prince, you can be assured about his conduct towards women. He doesn’t seek the company of women and nor does he look at them.”

Periya Pazhuvetarayar smiled at him and said, “If that is so, then we will fail in our purpose.”

“That depends on the luck of Sambuverayar’s daughter and that of this kingdom.”

“Parthibendra! Leave that aside. Why is the Prince so angry? Why is he talking so venomously?”

“Until we reached Vellattrukarai, the Prince was fine. His temper too was under control and he was laughing and making jokes. Then, Vandiya Devan and a Vaishnavan came and joined us. After that, his mood changed and he has become more unpredictable than ever.”

“That’s what I suspected. What do we do now? That rogue has come with you.”

“Please be patient. I will take care of everything. I will take care of this boy at the right time,”

In the meanwhile, Karikalan, Vandiya Devan and Kandamaran were on their way to the terrace courtyard and the women who had showered them with flowers and were on their way down. “Kandanmara, it is not right for the womenfolk to wait here for me. We must pay our respects to them first.” Saying thus Karikalan stood aside and allowed them to pass and as they left he sought introductions from Kandanmaran.

When Nandini passed by him, he commented, “Oh! My Pazhuvur grandmother has also come! I am glad to see that you have ‘really’ come here,” Nandini didn’t say anything, instead she shot a glance at him and went on her way. Karikalan shivered at the intensity of that look but he recovered fast enough to comment on Manimegalai who was behind Nandini. “Oh! This must be your sister. She looks just like a ‘Gandharva’ girl from pictures and sculptures. I must find a good groom and get her married soon!” Manimegalai heard this and bowed her head shyly, looking at Vandiya Devan with mischievous eyes and left.

After the women left, Aditya Karikalan went to the upper courtyard that gave him a view of the entrance. The crowd that had begun to disperse came back again when they saw him in the balcony and cheered him wildly. The royal herald who had welcomed him was still standing there. Karikalan called him and asked him to announce a few things to the crowd gathered

below. The herald started beating his drums for a while and started with a few titles of the Crown Prince and then said, “The Crown Prince of Chola Kingdom will be staying here at the Kadambur Palace for over a week or even ten days. He would also visit all the villages that are around the palace. You will get a chance to meet and petition your requests to him during his visit there.”

Hearing the herald’s news, the crowd shouted their joy hoarse and the dispersed happily. After watching them for a while, Aditya Karikalan and the others came down from the terrace and found Periya Pazhuvetarayar and Sambuverayar along with Parthibendran standing right where he saw them last. Watching this Aditya Karikalan asked, “What is this Parthibendra? Are you conspiring along with these old men against me?”

The old men were understandably shocked while the Prince beamed at them almost benignly.

Sambuverayar in the meanwhile recovered and said, “My Prince! A few moments ago you called my house a ‘prison’ and now you say that we are conspiring against you. Let me assure you, this hut of mine is yours to take and I vow on all things holy that no harm will befall you while you are under my roof. If something untoward happens, let me assure you, I will sacrifice my life too.”

“Ayya, Do you truly believe that I fear for my life? Even when I was amidst one lakh Pandya soldiers, I didn’t fear my life. Now that I am with my friends, why would I fear for my life? But I do object to calling your house a ‘hut’. This is not a hut. Wherever I lay my eyes, I can see countless mandapam, terraces and courtyards. Your fort walls are so tall, almost as high as the Thanjavur fort. I do wonder, why you fortified your ‘hut’ thus and against which enemy?”

“My Prince! We have pledged our swords for the Chola Kingdom. The enemies of the Chola Kingdom are my enemies and their friends are my friends as well,”

“I am glad that you have stated that clearly. I would request you to repeat this to your son as well. He thinks that the Prince of Vallam and my friend Vandiya Devan is his enemy and he can’t be more wrong about it,” said Karikalan and Kandanmaran looked down unable to meet his eyes.





Chapter 16: Malayaman's worry

Kandanmaran showed Karikalan the different parts of their palace and the Prince expressed his pleasure. At the courtyard when he saw the dais, the Prince asked, "What's being planned here?"

To this Sambuverayar replied, "My Prince, if it pleases you, we will have Kuravai Koothu performance here..."

"Good! It does indeed please me. Yes, you can have Kuravai Koothu, Villu Pattu^[1] and a drama about Karikala Vallavan...It's a good plan. During the day, I will hunt in the woods hereabouts and in the night we can enjoy ourselves with such entertainment. Do you know what my grandsire advise was, when he learned that I would be staying here? He warned me not to sleep in the night. Do you know what my answer was to that? I told him that it's been three years since I have slept in the night. So if anyone wishes to harm me, they could do so only when I am awake..." said Karikalan and laughed out aloud.

Sambuverayar's voice shook with anger when he said, "Ayya, whether you are awake or asleep, no one here would dare to harm you."

"Yes... I doubt if anyone here could harm me. Who would scale the heights of your big palace walls and come here, indeed? Not even Yama, the Lord of Death can dare that. Thirukovaloor Malayaman is becoming senile. He sees danger in every nook and corner of this kingdom. When people grow old, they become wary of everything around but the same can't be said about my Pazhuvur Grandsire. Look how briskly he walks. Can anyone believe that he is over sixty years of age?" said Karikalan and laughed gaily.

Pazhuvetarayar thought that he should respond to that comment and cleared his throat but the resultant sound seemed like a lion's growl.

“Look at that! Didn't you know that Pazhuvur Lord doesn't have to speak at all, he merely needs to clear his throat and the world around him would tremble? Kandanmara! Vandiya Deva! Parthibendra! Do you think you would be as strong and robust as my grandsire here? I doubt it but maybe you will clear your throat like him but I am sure, you will not bring home a new young bride. Thatha! I believe you have brought your young queen here. I saw her in the upper courtyard. I am most curious to know how she travelled. Did she come in a veiled palanquin or a chariot?”

Pazhuvetarayar finally found his voice and said, “I brought her here on an elephant seated right beside myself.”

“That's good to hear thatha! Henceforth, do take her on the elephant or a chariot. Do not use the palanquin. It is giving rise to unsavoury rumours. Listen to this! Do you know there have been rumours that my uncle Madhuranthakan has been travelling in the veiled palanquin along with the Pazhuvur Lord? Everywhere in the Kingdom, people have been talking about it!” Said the Prince and laughed out with glee.

The rest of the people, however, didn't laugh. They were all worried and troubled for various reasons.

Vandiya Devan, in particular, was horrified, “Ayyo! What a mistake I have made? I told everything to this reckless prince and he is leaving no stone unturned to publicize the fact that he knows everything.”

Periya Pazhuvetarayar was fuming, not unlike a volcano that would erupt too soon. He cleared his throat again and tried to say something but before he could, Parthibendran stepped forward and said, “My Prince! I had an opportunity to get acquainted with Nandini Devi and I am yet to meet another woman who is more devoted to her husband. Therefore, I will not take slurs on her person or character lying down. Whosoever utters a word against her, will fall prey to this sword of mine!”

Kandanmaran too stepped forward and said, “I don’t need a sword in my hand, and I will kill them with my bare hands...”

Vandiya Devan too stepped forward and said, “I too will not stand and watch Nandini Devi get humiliated. My eyes alone are enough to burn them alive!”

“Aha! My friends! Looks like you three will pounce on me next! Do you see this Thatha? These young men are so concerned about the honour of a woman that they wouldn’t hesitate to fight me. No one would dare question the character or slur the queen of Pazhuvur. If they did, they will be answerable to me and I will not wait until these brave warriors come with their swords to defend her. I will kill them myself. That’s not the point that I was making. I was talking about the veiled palanquin that Nandini Devi is using. I believe that coward Madhuranthakan is secretly travelling around the Kingdom on this palanquin. That’s why I think, Pazhuvur Queen’s veiled palanquin should not travel in it. It would give rise to unwanted talk and rumours.”

“My Prince! What is the need for Prince Madhuranthakan to travel secretly thus?” I do not understand it at all,” asked Parthibendra

“The reason for his actions is equally funny Parthibendra. He is trying to gather support for his claim to the throne. How is that? A few months ago, he is rumoured to have come to this Kadambur Palace too secretly. Don’t you remember Thirukovaloor Malayaman telling us about it and warning us that he might send my father to the heavens rather too soon, in his hurry to ascend the throne? Don’t you remember?”

“I remember. But I didn’t believe this news then nor now. I think we should go to Thanjavur on our own and visit the Emperor before we believe such wild claims...”

“Do you think I believed it? If I had believed it, I wouldn’t have come to the Kadambur palace in the first place.”

Sambuverayar found his voice finally and said, “My Prince, you do know about the fact that there has been a long-standing feud between Malayaman’s clan and mine...”

“Of course I know about it. This long-standing feud stretches back to the age of Sangam, doesn’t it? I have even heard poems about this enmity. Your forefather Val Vil Ori was killed by Malayaman Thirumudikaari in a fearsome war and since then you have hated the clan of Malayaman.”

“My Prince! We didn’t sit idle after the death of Val Vil Oriyan. His kinsman and clansman, Adhiyaman Nedumanchi took his army to Thirukovaloor and razed it to the ground.”

“Adhiyaman was not alone when he sought retribution from the Malayaman clan. My own ancestor Killivallavan was with him when he attacked the mountain fort of Malayaman and pounded it to dust. But why are we talking about these old stories now?”

“Even if we forget it, Malayaman doesn’t. He is forever making false charges against me and my clan.”

“I told you earlier, didn’t I? He has become an old man and his senility is going out of hand. I hope he doesn’t bring down his army from the Mountain Fort here just to protect me from imaginary enemies.”

“My Prince... if you have even the slightest doubt that you would be harmed here,”

“What doubt? Why would I doubt anything? Chola clan’s relationship with Malayaman’s clan happened just two generations ago, whereas, we have been close with the Pazhuvur clan for more six generations. When you have the Pazhuvur lord himself living here, why would I have any doubt about my safety?”

Pazhuvetarayar then said loudly, “My Prince! I will never act against the Chola clan in any manner and nor will I act against Dharma and truth. This is my promise to you.”

“True. There are such things as ‘Dharma’ and ‘Truth’ and I definitely need lessons about it from you, no less. When I have the time after hunting and watching Kuravai Koothu, we can discuss ‘Dharma’ and ‘Truth’ at length.” Said Karikalan and then looked at Sambuverayar and asked, “In this huge palace of yours, where do I stay and are there quarters for my friends?”

“Ayya, I have allocated the entire back wing of the palace for you and your entourage. The front wing will be for the rest of the guests who would be arriving.”

“More guests!”

“Yes My Prince, many noblemen, chieftains and village headsmen would be arriving to see you in person.”

“Good! That’s good. Let them all come. I have many things to think and decide. Forget about that pious cat Madhuranthakan, I came here to conduct a secret meeting of my own, where we can discuss conspiracy and this huge palace of yours is a perfect place for that.”





Chapter 17: Poonguzhali's wishes

Poonguzhali's boat was sailing through the canal that ran from Nagapattinam to Kodi Karai. Poonguzhali and Senthana Amuthan were on their way to Kodi Karai.

On both sides of the canal, there were many Screw Pine flowers^[12] that spread its fragrant blossom all over the place. They saw a parrot perched on a tree eating the leaf of the flower. When the boat neared the flower, it screeched 'Kikee Kikee' and flew away.

Looking at it Poonguzhali declared, "We should be born as parrots instead of humans..."

"That's what you think. God knows what problems that poor parrot is facing and what kind of worries are plaguing it."

"No matter what worry or trouble plagues, it can leave everything behind and fly away carefree. Is there anything else more joyful in this world?"

"The carefree parrot is most often caught and put in a cage..."

"Yes...those Palace born womenfolk, princesses and queens find it amusing to catch a bird from out of the open sky and imprison it within a cage and then they make a charade of petting them. They are truly Rakshashis in disguise. If only, I were a handmaiden for one of them, I would poison the parrot and their mistress as well."

"If someone heard what you just said, they will call you a Rakshashi."

“Let them call me what they want, I don’t care. I would rather be a Rakshashi than a Princess.”

“Why are you so angry with Princesses, in general? If you look at their life, they are to be pitied. Like a parrot, they have to sit within the palace, which is more of a cage than home. They can’t move out anywhere on their own will. Even if they do, they need guards around them all the time, watching their every move. Do you think they have the liberty to get on a boat and row wherever their mood takes them? Or do you think they can stroll through the woods chasing herds of deer, as you do...”

“Who is asking them to stay shut in the palace? Not me. They are free to roam if they wish it...”

“Mere wishes are not enough, it is the environment that we are born in that determines our life. You wish to fly like a parrot but it is a skill that is beyond you. You were born near the sea so you are independent in your life. You make your own decisions and live by it. Those who are born in the palace can’t do so. Do you know one thing? The parrots that are caught from the wild and kept in a cage in the palace, after some time, get used to eating from the princess’s hand and even if they have an opportunity these birds don’t fly away. They come back to the palace again even if their cage is left open. I have seen it happen often enough, in the palace gardens of Pazhaiarai and Thanjavur.”

“If I were a parrot, I would never succumb to such temptations. I would bite the hand that feeds me...”

“So am I to conclude that you do not wish to be either a parrot or a princess...”

“I would rather consume poison and be done with this life.”

“If you are saying this truly then you should not wish to marry a Prince...”

At a distance in the sea, they could see the beginnings of a thunderstorm as the clouds gathered together and a few lightening sparks were unleashed in

the sky. Senthana Amuthan's last words had the same impact as the lightning.

She asked him angrily, "Who told you that I wished to marry a prince?"

"No one told me. If you have no wish to marry a prince then that's good. Forget what I just said."

For a while, there was silence in the boat. Senthana Amuthan was intent on rowing the boat and only the sounds of frogs and calls of birds in the trees were heard.

After a little while, Senthana Amuthan gathered courage within his heart and said, "Poonguzhali! You told me that Vandiya Devan revealed my secret wishes regarding you. Do you have anything to say about that? We are nearing Kodi Karai and I doubt if there would be an opportunity to talk alone. I will be leaving to Thanjavur tomorrow, it's been too long since I left my mother alone in the city and I am worried about her."

"Is Vandiya Devan your royal messenger? Don't you have a voice of your own? If you have something to say to me, why don't you say it yourself?"

"Alright! I will ask you myself. Will you marry me?"

"Why do you wish to marry me?"

"That's because I have been secretly in love with you for many years..."

"Is it necessary to marry if we love someone?"

"No...but that's what happens in the society that we live in."

"If I were to marry you, what will you give me? Can you give me palaces, gardens, handmaidens, servants, elephants, palanquins and horses?"

"That would be impossible for me but I can offer you a peaceful life. Listen Poonghuzhali, in the outskirts of Thanjavur, we have our garden home, a

hut where I live alone with my mother. Your life will change drastically when you come there. My mother will look after and take care of your needs. When the dawn breaks, we will pluck the flowers that have blossomed and tie them into beautiful garlands. I will take the garlands to the temple, in the meanwhile, you can bathe in our garden pool and help my mother with the day's chores. In the evening, all three of us can water the plants and tend for them and after that, I will teach you divine Thevaram hymns. Your heart too will be at peace when you offer your sweet voice in the service of the lord and those who hear you will surely be mesmerized. Whenever we want, we can go on a pilgrimage to different temples and sing to our heart's content at these holy places. Poonghuzhali, can there be a sweeter life than this one? Think and tell me..."

After listening to Senthana Amuthan, Poonghuzhali laughed out aloud.

"Amutha! You told me what you think is a sweet life but here is the life that I want. I wish to go to the heavens and marry the King of Devas, Indra. After marrying, I wish to travel through the clouds, on his beautiful white elephant Airavatham. I will take the Vajrayudham^[13] from Indra and use it playfully on the clouds and watch the lightening light up the sky. Didn't we just see a lightening fall upon the sea? I would change that and make it fall upon palaces that are infested by princesses and watch the lightning raze it to the ground. If Indra is not interested in marrying me, then I would go to Lord Vayu, the Lord of the winds and beg him to marry me even though he is a much married man'. And once I become his wife, this world will be plagued only by high winds and storms that would topple ships and destroy palaces. Trees would fall upon those opulent palaces and destroy traces of their very existence. There would be a perpetual storm in the sea and the waves would bury the ships in which Princes and Princesses travel... I might be prevailed upon to save the rest of the poor souls though. If the Lord of the Winds finds me a tad too violent, then I would go to Lord Agni, the God of fire. You need to only ask how the world would be after that. I will burn them all to crisp..."

"Poonghuzhali, stop... enough. Your heart is soured with pain and anguish. That's why you are speaking thus. It was my mistake that I spoke about marriage to you without learning the state of your heart. Forgive me. I will

pray to my Lord and plead him to reduce the bitterness in your heart. That would be my only prayer henceforth.”

While Senthana Amuthan spoke thus, Poonghuzhali who was sitting until then, got up suddenly. She stared intently at a tree near the banks of the canal and through the branches, one could discern the figure of a woman hidden behind the leaves. Senthana Amuthan stared at her speechless, astonished by the woman’s resemblance to his own mother. That’s when he realized that she can’t be his mother but his aunt, his mother’s twin sister.

Poonghuzhali in the meanwhile had thrown the oar in the boat and had got down hurriedly from the boat and swum towards the canal bank and ran towards her aunt within the blink of the eye.





Chapter 18: Arrow aimed

Poonghuzhali was astonished to see her aunt at the canal banks. At the back of her mind, she was very conscious of the fact that Senthana Amuthan was with her in the boat and even as she thought that, her aunt started running into the woods. In the meanwhile, Senthana Amuthan had stopped the boat and had got down the banks in pursuit of Poonghuzhali.

“Poonghuzhali! Who was the woman who was standing here?”

“Don’t you know who it was?”

“I can’t be sure but could it be...”

“Yes. That’s our aunt. The one you think is dead and gone for good.”

“Truly! I could see some resemblance with my mother too.”

“Don’t talk nonsense! There is no resemblance whatsoever between the sisters. Neither in features and nor in character. It would be like comparing a cow with a lioness...”

“Alright, I agree. But why did the lioness run away after seeing you?”

Poonghuzhali laughed at him and said, “She didn’t run because she saw me. She ran away because she saw you. She doesn’t take kindly to strangers.”

“But I am not a stranger, I am her nephew!”

“She doesn’t know it yet. When she knows who you are, she might not run away but until she knows, she would hesitate a lot before she learns it.”

“Alright, what will you do now?”

“I am going to search for her.”

“Shall I come along with you?”

“Why?”

“I wish to meet our aunt properly.”

“Why do you want to meet her?”

Senthan Amuthan was eager to meet his aunt after learning a few things about her past from his cousin. That apart, he also had a fool’s hope at the corner of his heart that somehow his aunt would be able to help him change Poonghuzhali’s heart.

“What do you mean by that? She is my aunt, isn’t she? Isn’t that reason enough?”

Poonghuzhali thought for a while and said, “Alright, come along. It would be tough to find her, especially when I have company but... come then, tie the boat here and let’s go.”

Senthan Amuthan tied the boat to one of the shrubs that grew along the banks of the canal and they walking together.

“Poonghuzhali, you told me once that our aunt lived in one of the islands in Illangai didn’t you?”

“She spends her time mostly at the island and sometimes in Illangai.”

“Does she come here often?”

“No. Only when I have not been to see for a while, she would worry and come here to see me.”

“Do you think she has come now to see you?”

“I think this time around she has come here for a different reason.”

“What would that be?”

“I think she wishes to ascertain whether the Prince whom she considers as her son, is alive or dead. She was there when he boarded the ship to come home and after that, she must have gotten worried when she saw the storm that blew in the sea.”

“She considers the Prince as a son! What about her own son? Is he alive or dead?”

“He might be dead... who knows?”

After a while, she asked him, “Amutha! You thought that there is a resemblance between your mother and our aunt when you first saw her. Did you feel that somebody else also resembles her, very closely?”

“You are right. I do feel that somebody else resembles her but right now I am not able to recall who?”

“Have you seen the Pazhuvur Queen?”

“Sometimes...yes now I remember. How extraordinary! Nandini Devi resembles our aunt in every aspect! How did this come about Poonghuzhali?”

“I have been seeing our aunt for many years now, I happened to see Nandini Devi in Kodi Karai just a few days ago. I noticed the resemblance right away.”

“What do you think is the reason behind this resemblance?”

“I need to find out. Today, the minute I see our aunt, I am going to ask her about it.”

“But our aunt is deaf and mute, how will you ask her anything?”

“How do you speak to your mother?”

“Through signs. I have been speaking to her thus since my childhood but if I have to convey something new to her, it takes a lot of effort.”

“We too speak in signs. If we are not able to understand, then we draw pictures and try to make each other understand.”

“Imagine how difficult it must have been for the parents to have twin children who are both deaf and mute?”

“That’s not all. They both used to fight a lot when they were young. That’s why their father and our grandfather took our aunt to Boodha Theevu and stayed there. He had a lot of affection for our aunt it seems. When she was born, some astrologer told him that she could become the queen of the realm but when he learned that the child was deaf and mute, he was heartbroken.”

As they spoke, they roamed through the woods but couldn’t find a trace of their aunt.

“Amutha! Our aunt is deliberately hiding because of your presence.”

“That’s my luck! None of my heart’s desires comes to pass. Alright, I will leave.”

“How will you leave? I will need to escort you out of the woods, otherwise, you will be hopelessly lost.”

That’s when they heard that sound. It didn’t seem like a human voice or that of a bird or an animal. It had a strange unearthly quality to it that seemed to

attract the animals in the woods. Soon a herd of deer was seen going towards the source of the sound.

Poonghuzhali listened to it intently and said, “Amutha! Don’t make a noise. Follow me.”

Deep in the woods, they found their aunt, sitting near a tree and holding a few leaves in her hand. A herd of deer swarmed around her, wanting to eat out of her hand. On her shoulder, a young deer had wrapped its leg lovingly and was watching her face intently.

Poonghuzhali and Senthana Amuthan stood transfixed looking at this scene. The deer that was upon her shoulders saw them first and then leapt down from her to make its escape. Next, the rest of the herd saw them and stood ready to make their escape. Lastly, their aunt saw them and then yet another inhuman sound came from her throat and the deer herd rushed off in unison leaving them alone in the woods.

“Our aunt doesn’t know the language of humans but she is well-versed in the language of animals,” said Poonghuzhali when she neared her aunt.

This time around, her aunt didn’t run away. She stood as though she was welcoming her niece and then embraced her lovingly and kissed her forehead.

Senthana Amuthan stood at a distance, hesitating to come closer, lest she ran away.

Aunt and niece spoke for a while through signs and then Poonghuzhali signalled Senthana Amuthan to come near.

Mandakini touched Senthana Amuthan’s head and gave her blessings to him. After that, she took Poonghuzhali’s hand and led her towards the banks of the canal and asked her to leave.

“Come Amutha! Our aunt wants us to leave. She is refusing to come home with us. She wants me to bring her food.” Saying thus, they started walking

towards Kodi Karai.

“Poonghuzhali! What about me?”

“I thought of coming along with you to Thanjavur but now I can’t. Our aunt wishes to see the Prince. I have to take her to Nagapattinam. If you come along, she might again disappear and as you know, I do have things that I need to ask her.”

Senthan Amuthan sighed aloud and said, “I am very unfortunate indeed. Alright, I will take my leave now.”

“No! No! Come home with me. Meet your uncle and others and then take your leave. Or else they will curse me.”

At a distance, they could see a woman and a man speaking to each other.

“Aha! That’s my sister-in-law Rakkammal. Looks like she is not done with her secret meetings with these men. I wonder who he is? Could it be the same Pandya conspirators or somebody else?”

Rakkamal had by then noticed them coming and the man who was with her disappeared within the woods. She came towards them and said, “Poonghuzhali! Where did you disappear? Your father and brother were worried sick!”

“Why were they worried? This is not the first time that I have disappeared for days.”

“This time around, you took your cousin along. That’s why they were worried. What if you both got married without telling us?”

“Anni! You do know that I hate it when people talk about such frivolous things. If I hear you speak thus again...”

“Alright! I will not talk. Why should it concern me if you were to marry your cousin or some prince? Your aunt came here from Illangai searching

for you. Did you meet her?”

“No. I haven’t seen her yet.” Said Poonghzhali and hurried towards their house dragging Senthana along.

“Amutha! Be careful with her. Rakkamal is one of the Pandya conspirators and she will try to glean some information from you about our whereabouts.”

“I will play the mute so long as I am here.”

That afternoon Poonghuzhali set out for Nagapattinam in her boat along with her aunt.

Whenever Poonghuzhali was in her aunt’s company, she would experience a sense of peace and harmony. This was largely due to their compatible nature and deep understanding. That day, something seemed to be different because Poonghuzhali didn’t feel peace or harmony but rather a sense of disquiet. A few days ago, she had taken the Prince in the boat along the same route and now she had realized that she had undertaken such a dangerous task only to hand over Ponnaiyin Selvar to a Princess of all things! This realization caused a painful pang in her heart.

That apart, she regretted sending away Senthana Amuthan rather forcefully. She also remembered the warning that her father had given when she was home.

“Child, I wish you were at home these days instead of going off to the sea. Many strangers are roaming through these parts these days and we know not why they are here. Too many conspiracies and plots are being hatched in this kingdom and it would be wise not to be caught in any of them. We are common folk and our family is indebted to the Chola Kings and their family and we have been serving them for generations. I hope you never forget that.”

As she thought back to his warning, she wondered whether those strange men that her father warned her about were the same who met her sister-in-

law. She also worried about the fact that someone might find out about the Prince's whereabouts by just following her to the monastery. She knew that she would never forgive herself if something like that happened.

Even as she worried herself sick over it, she could hear weird sounds of movement from the woods and that made her all the more anxious. The wind was still and so were the trees but she could hear footsteps and hushed whispers in the woods!

Her aunt didn't seem troubled and in this instance, the fact that she couldn't hear proved to be a blessing instead of a curse. At least she didn't have to suffer from undue fears, thought Poonghuzhali. But she knew that her aunt's instincts were very sound, especially when it came to warning about dangers that lurked in the woods.

As they sailed through the canal, her aunt too seemed to glance at the banks with a worried furrow on her brow. This made Poonghuzhali wonder if they were in danger.

In the next instant, she realized why her aunt was looking worried. A herd of deer had neared the canal banks and they seemed to be looking at her aunt in particular. Looking at it, Poonghuzhali stopped the boat and they sat looking at the deer for a while. Her aunt made a strange warning noise and an arrow came whizzing through the air and struck a deer.

Mandakini leapt out of the boat and ran to the banks of the canal to help the wounded deer. When she reached the deer, eight or nine men bearing spears and daggers surrounded her from all directions. She looked around her as though trying to figure out how to escape and when that seemed impossible, she stood quietly. At a distance, Rakkammal stood watching the entire spectacle and it seemed as though she had guided the men to capture Poonghuzhali's aunt.

In the meanwhile, one of the men bound Poonghuzhali's aunt with ropes. Poonghuzhali who had been watching all this agape, ran towards the banks to help her aunt escape but the men turned towards her in the next instant and dragged her to the boat where she was bound and left. Next, they left

along with her aunt, who seemed resigned to her fate was seen walking rather leisurely along with the men.





Chapter 19: Laughter and anger

Poonghuzhali tried to unfasten the ropes that bound her to the boat but she was tied with her back to the long plank so it was quite difficult. Her dagger was at one end of the boat and if she could free at least one hand, she could hack the ropes with it but those kidnappers had bound her securely with nary a space to escape from it. With one leg, she somehow got hold of the dagger and inched it towards her hand and with great effort sliced one end of the rope with it. It took her almost one hour to hack the rest of the ropes and when she stood up she was ready to murder the fiends who had kidnapped her aunt and tied her there. When she heard footsteps sounding on the banks of the canal, she sat waiting with her dagger poised in hand to attack... she was however disappointed.

“Poonghuzhali... Poonghuzhali!” cried out Senthana Amuthan rather worriedly.

Next second, Senthana Amuthan came down from the banks to the canal looking worried and harassed.

Poonghuzhali kept her dagger back into her sari. Senthana Amuthan came to her crying out, “Thank God! You are alive!”

“It looks like you are rather disappointed that I am still alive. Why don’t you kill me and be on your way then? But I doubt if you would ever muster enough courage to do that.”

“Shiva! Shiva! Why would I want to kill you? It is ‘you’ who is killing me with your words.”

“Then why didn’t you come here a bit earlier? Do you know how difficult it was for me to hack those ropes on my own?” Saying thus, she took a step forward but her limbs that had been immobile and bound had become numb and weak and she almost fell down but for Senthana who caught her.

Horried by her condition, Senthana exclaimed, “Those ruffians! Your body looks swollen with bruises and wounds!”

“You seem so concerned now, why couldn’t you come here a bit earlier?”

“You are saying the same thing again. How am I to know that you have encountered this danger? You were the one who asked me to leave and I left...”

“Then why did you return? Did you perchance come here to check whether I am dead or not? Did you return here to finish the last rites for my dead body?”

“Lord Shiva bears the deadliest poison in the world in his throat but you seem to have it in your tongue. I came here rushing and worried after your sister-in-law Rakkammal told me that you might have been attacked by the same ruffians who had attacked her and instead, I get to hear such venom from you.”

Poonghuzhali had by then got down from the boat and was walking towards the banks.

“I was thinking of using this dagger on you earlier, but you escaped. Now I will use it on my dear sister-in-law first. Where is that vile woman?”

“Now why are you up in arms against your sister-in-law? Why are you so angry with her? It was ‘she’ who had warned me that you might be in danger.”

“It was ‘she’ who betrayed our aunt. Don’t you remember we saw her talking to someone in the shrubs this morning?”

“You are wrong! While it is true that she was talking to someone in the shrubs, I doubt if she betrayed our aunt. The men who took our aunt by force had tied her to a tree and had hit her rather soundly in the head.”

“Is this a joke? This can’t be true. I am sure you have been tricked. Where did you see her? How did you return? Tell me everything!”

Senthan Amuthan then explained everything that happened that afternoon. He was on his way to Thanjavur though he had no wish to leave Poonghuzhali. While he was walking along the road, he saw a group of soldiers bearing spears and swords and a veiled palanquin amidst them guarded by men. He immediately hid behind a tree and watched them and as they neared, the veils of the palanquin revealed a woman sitting inside and she seemed to resemble their aunt. Senthan Amuthan had no inkling of the fact that his aunt was kidnapped so he first thought that he was imagining things.

After the palanquin bearers and the soldiers left, another group of soldiers too came behind and joined them. Soon after they came, a woman started shouting and screaming in the woods. Senthan Amuthan then hurried towards the voice and found Poonghuzhali’s sister-in-law Rakkammal tied to the tree crying herself hoarse. Her face was bloodied due to a wound that she had sustained on her head and she was tied to a tree. While he was untying her, he asked her, “Who did this to you? Who were those men? Why did they tie you thus? It seemed as though they took a woman along with them in a palanquin. Do you know who that was?” and she replied, “Yes, Thambi, they forcibly took your aunt along with them and I don’t know what they did to Poonghuzhali. Run and check whether she is alive or not.” And when Senthan Amuthan hastened to leave, she said, “Wait a moment thambi. Poonghuzhali and that ghost of your aunt were on their way to someplace. Do you know where they were going? Why did they leave you? Where were you going?”

Senthan Amuthan was incensed by the fact that she called their aunt a 'ghost' didn't reply to her and hastened towards the canal banks to find Poonghuzhali. He was afraid that he would find Poonghuzhali wounded or worse dead and was relieved to find her unharmed.

After narrating everything, he asked, "Poonghuzhali, what do you say now? Do you still doubt your sister-in-law?"

"Amutha, Where did you leave her? Let's go there and see."

"Do you think she will still be there?"

"If not there, she must be nearby. Amutha, did she ask where we were going when we were attacked?"

"Yes, she did."

"And what did you reply?"

"I didn't. I was disgusted when she called our aunt a 'ghost'. So I just hastened away to find you."

"Henceforth, be wary if she tries to use sweet words to get the information from you. Why do you think she wants to learn where we were bound? She may not be in league with those who kidnapped our aunt but I am sure she might have spied for them. And they might have double-crossed her in the end. If not, she probably wants to know this information to pass onto somebody else. Please do be careful with her and don't ever trust her."

"Poonghuzhali, you told me once that your brother becomes a 'mute' when he is with his wife. I too will be the same as long as I am here."

Hearing that Poonghuzhali laughed out aloud.

"Your laughter is as sweet as Thirunavukarasar's Devaram hymns."

“That was a mistake. Don’t get fooled by my laughter. My heart is on fire and my anger is barely under check.”

“God in his benevolence will find a way to bring peace to your heart...”





Chapter 20: Yet again... the physician's son

For a while, Senthana Amuthan and Poonghuzhali walked silently and then she sighed and said, “Amutha! I think there is some kind of a bond between us.”

“I am not interested in our previous lifetime. If you have anything interesting to talk about this life, please do so.”

“But they say that if you have a bond with someone in the previous life, it will continue in this life too! This afternoon when I parted from you, I thought I would never meet you again but see how wrong I was. Here we are together again!”

“Don’t be so sorrowful about meeting me again. Once we reach the King’s road that leads to Thanjavur I will go my way and you can be on your own again.”

“I don’t want to be on my own. Once I find my sister-in-law and speak to her, I will come with you to Thanjavur. I need to seek justice for my aunt and for that I have to petition at the Emperor’s court.”

“Poonghuzhali, do you think that it is easy to gain an audience with the emperor. People like us can’t even hope to enter the fort, leave alone petition him...”

“Why do think it is impossible? If the fort is closed for us, I will break it open and enter it by force.”

“And what of the guards who stand in front of the Fort...”

“They will panic once I start screaming for justice and will take me to the Emperor’s presence immediately.”

“Do you really think you can intimidate Chinna Pazhuvetarayar so easily? It’s not for nothing that people say that even Lord Yama hesitates to approach the fort that he guards. Many also believe that’s why the Emperor is still alive...”

“If it is impossible to meet the Emperor then I will petition the Pazhuvetarayars and ask them for justice. If they deny it to me, then I will approach our Prime Minister Anirudha Brahmarayar and if that too doesn’t bear any fruit, I will go to Pazhaiarai and demand the queens and princesses to give me justice. Unless I learn what happened to my aunt, I will not rest. Didn’t Rakkammal call our aunt a ‘ghost’? I too will become a ghost and haunt these lords of Thanjavur and the Princesses of Pazhaiarai, until they grant me justice. Amutha! Will you stand beside me in this quest?”

“Surely Poonghuzhali, I will come with you. But I think you are confusing the matter that is before us. Isn’t our first duty to our aunt? Shouldn’t we first rescue her from those ruffians who took her? Shouldn’t we search for her in the King’s road? And we need to tell your father and brother too about what befell her...”

“Amutha! Our aunt possesses divine power. Nothing in these three worlds can harm her. If they try anything, they will be burned to death, just as Damayanthi^[14] killed the hunter who approached her with cruel intent. I am not worried about her. I am sure she can take care of herself. I am more worried about the fact that such an incident occurred in our kingdom. They say that King Paranthaka I established a kingdom of dharma and that his heirs are continuing this legacy. This is the land where great shiva devotee King Gandarathidhar ruled over wisely - where a cow and a tiger can drink water off the same pond safely. Heralds sing praises of this kingdom and of Sundara Chola saying that no one dares to commit crimes here and that a women can travel anywhere, anytime without care to safety. But what’s happening instead – a woman who can’t speak or hear is being kidnapped in broad daylight. Isn’t this atrocious? I am not worried about my aunt because she can survive any danger but what of the others? Today, whatever

happened with to my aunt can happen to any other young woman in this kingdom or even to me.”

“Yes. What you are saying is true. Ever since the Emperor became an invalid, crime has risen in this kingdom, especially against young women. If you ask me, it would be wise for all young women in the kingdom to marry soon enough to gain the protection of their husband.”

Poonghuzhali laughed and asked, “Amutha, if a young woman were to marry you, would you be able to protect her honour and virtue? You don’t even know how to wield a sword!”

“All my life, I have only learnt to sing the divine songs of Appar, Sambandar and present them to my Lord Shiva. These hands of mine do not know to wield a sword or a spear. But didn’t you teach me to row a boat? In the same manner, I will try to learn swordsmanship too. If Prince Madhuranthakar can aspire to ascend the Chola throne, then I too can make time to learn the art of war.”

By then they reached the spot where Rakkammal was supposedly tied up. They found bloodstains on the ground and it seemed as though a struggle had taken place there when the ruffians had hit Rakkammal.

Poonghuzhali who had earlier disbelieved Senthana Amuthan now had to concede the truth. “It looks like she was soundly beaten by those people. While this may prove that she didn’t work for them, she might be spying for other people. We need to find that out somehow.”

“All this seems to be connected with some mystery of the past and those who wield the affairs of the kingdom. Do you really think it is wise for us to get involved in all this?”

“Amutha! It doesn’t matter how big a mystery this turns out to be. If our aunt is involved in this, then surely we too need to get to the heart of it. Would you really abandon our aunt?”

“I am speaking plainly Poonghuzhali. When I saw the woman walking along with those ruffians, it didn’t seem as though they had kidnapped her. I looked as though she went with them willingly, on her own accord...”

“You might be right and it might seem so but that’s how our aunt is. She would act docile and calm and go with them willingly just to find out what their true intentions are. If she didn’t wish to go with them, even a thousand men can’t hope to stop her. Not even the famous underground dungeons of Thanjavur can keep her secured. That’s why I am not much worried about her. I want justice for the crimes committed against her 25 years ago. Until I am granted justice I will not be in peace again.”

“My God! You have set your heart upon something truly impossible.” Said Senthana Amuthan and let out a long sigh.

Just then, they heard voices of people talking ahead of them near the king’s road. It was Rakkammal and Pazhaiarai Physician’s son! Their very sight soured Poonghuzhali’s expression.

Rakkammal looked at her and said, “My girl! Thank the gods you were spared. I was so afraid that those ruffians might have killed you. Look at me! I tried to save your aunt and was beaten soundly for my effort. I was asking the Physician’s son here for some medicine to stop the bleeding.”

“If the Karaiyar’s daughter is hurt and wounded then I can heal her too.” Said Pinagapani slyly.

Poonghuzhali didn’t bother to reply and instead turned towards her sister-in-law and said, “Anni! Do you know in which direction they took my aunt?”

“I didn’t see but the Physician’s son says that they took the King’s road to Thanjavur...”

“Anni! Amuthan and I will go on Thanjavur road to follow our aunt. Inform my father about these developments. Come Amutha! Let’s go.”

Pinagapani interrupted her and said, “Poonghuzhali! Stop awhile. It would be impossible for you to follow them. Those ruffians are going on horses. I have a horse too and I can follow them swiftly and tell you where they are bound. In return, you will need to tell me where you were taking your aunt?”

Poonghuzhali replied to her sister-in-law instead, “We don’t need this man’s help. We are leaving now. Just inform my father.”

Pinagapani didn’t stop with that and he said, “Ah look how headstrong the Karaiyar’s daughter is? You don’t need my help indeed! Woman! Why are you so angry with me? Was it me who ruined your dreams of marrying a prince? You deceived me and took that Vandiya Devan along with you to Illangai and see what happened? He drowned your dear prince in the sea. What’s the use of getting angry at me?”

Poonghuzhali looked at him once with sparks flying in her eyes and then grabbed Senthana Amuthan’s hand and started walking.

After walking for a while, she told him, “Amutha! Once you start your training in arms, I want you to kill this villain, physician’s son. Let him be the first man to fall for your sword.”

For a day and night, they walked along the road, enquiring anyone who passed along about the horsemen who were taking a woman along. A few passers-by who saw them confirmed that they went ahead on the same road but halfway through it seemed as though they had vanished. Nonetheless, Senthana Amuthan and Poonghuzhali were determined to go all the way to Thanjavur.

For Senthana Amuthan, time passed quite pleasantly. All through the journey, he had the opportunity to talk to his cousin and she kept her promise of teaching him how to fight too. On their way, Poonghuzhali stopped at an ironsmith’s and got him a sword with which she showed him how to attack, defend and other moves that she had seen Vandiya Devan and the Prince make. Senthana Amuthan like a good student he was, imitated

her moves and showed her just how he would defend her. Thus their journey to Thanjavur was more pleasant than they imagined.

When they sighted Thanjavur fort at a distance, Poonghuzhali started fretting about how they would meet the Emperor and demand justice. Amuthan too shared her worry as he pondered on how to enter the fort and the palace.

He remembered how difficult Vandiya Devan found it to enter the fort and wished that he possessed at least one-fourth of his clever mind.

If Vandiya Devan himself were here, then it would be great!

He tried to imagine how Vandiya Devan would act in such a situation. That's when they saw a veiled palanquin coming through the road bearing the emblem of the Palm tree.

Senthan Amuthan's thoughts immediately ran thus, "If we can somehow get the Pazhuvur emblem ring from Nandini Devi, we can easily enter the fort."

He turned to tell Poonghuzhali about this idea but she too had seen the palanquin and had come to the same conclusion.

They watched the palanquin for a while in silence. There were soldiers guarding the palanquin in the front and back.

How to approach it without alerting these guards?

"Amutha! Don't worry. Thanjavur fort is still at some distance. We will get an opportunity to meet her as we near it."

Her words came true because they did get the opportunity sooner than expected!





Chapter 21: To travel in a palanquin...

That year, the monsoon season didn't start until very late. Though on a few occasions dark clouds gathered together gave people false hopes, the rains didn't begin until it was a month or two late.

As the water level in River Kaveri started to decrease at an alarming rate the crops started failing.

“These mishaps are happening because of the comet.” was the popular sentiment amongst the people.

“We have been cursed. The affairs of the Kingdom are in disarray. There is no news about our beloved prince and now the rains have failed us.”

Senthan Amuthan and Poonghuzhali heard such lamentations and complaints from the people as they walked towards Thanjavur.

While the lack of rains aided our protagonists in their journey, the burning sun did pose trouble. The humidity rose even as they walked under the shade of the trees and they sweated a lot.

“It doesn’t seem as though this is the month of *Aipasi*^[15]. It feels as though we are in the month of *Vaigasi*^[16]!”

Right after they exclaimed thus, the weather changed rather abruptly. The wind started to blow the leaves that had fallen on the ground. Dark clouds gathered in the sky seemed like a hoard of elephants ready to trample through the woods.

The cool pleasant breeze soon became an all-powerful wind trying to uproot trees as it blew through the road. A few trees fell down unable to withstand the power of the wind and when they did, the birds that had taken refuge in them flew away in the nick of the time screeching wildly.

Those who were travelling on the king’s road scattered in all directions trying to seek refuge from the rain, falling trees and the blinding lightning that followed them.

As the rain intensified, the skies darkened the day and soon enough it was past the twilight.

Detrimental weather changed the minds of Senthan Amuthan and Poonghuzhali about entering the Fort of Thanjavur that night. They wanted to reach the safety of Senthan Amuthan’s garden house and take refuge from the rain. The rest of the plan can wait...

In the gathering darkness, they held hands and tried to bolster each other’s courage.

“Poonghuzhali! You must have seen so many storms and cyclones whilst in the sea. You know to ride your boat on waves that rise like the mountain and yet you are scared of the rain, while on the land!”

“No matter how big the storm is, trees and branches won’t fall on your head in the middle of the sea. Only lightning and thunder can fall on you there...”

Even as she said this, a tree fell so Senthana Amuthan held Poonghuzhali’s hand tightly and stopped her from going further.

“Let’s not blindly hurry into danger. On this road, there are many mandapams built to serve wayfarers like us. Let’s take refuge in one of them and wait the rain out.”

“Alright, but how do we find this mandapam in this blinding darkness?”

“Look around you carefully the next time lightning strikes...”

Just then a bolt of lightning struck that could probably split the earth into two. The blinding darkness was replaced by a light that could probably claim your eyesight but thankfully it helped them spot a mandapam just ahead of them. They also saw a tree had fallen on the road and a few men stuck underneath its weight.

“Amutha! Did you see that tree...”

“Yes and in all probability, the same fate awaits if we don’t get to the safety of the mandapam.” Said Senthana Amuthan and then dragged Poonghuzhali towards the mandapam.

They reached the mandapam without any mishap falling upon their heads but they were soaked to the skin. Poonghuzhali and Senthana Amuthan tried to dry their clothes. Poonghuzhali then tried to dry her long hair and rivulets of water ran on the ground where she stood.

“Oh no! We have wet the mandapam!”

“This mandapam is not going to suffer from fever or cold because of the rain. But I am worried about you. You are soaked to the skin!”

“I was born near the sea and I have lived most of my life on the water. A little bit of rain will not cause me any harm. Don’t you remember my name is ‘Samudra Kumari?’”

Even as she said this, her heart leapt towards Nagapattinam Choodamani Viharam. The man who had named her thus was there....

“My house is but a short distance from here. I will take you there as soon as the rain lets us. My mother will take good care of you,” said Senthana Amuthan but Poonghuzhali didn’t hear it because her heart was away in Nagapattinam.

Right then, yet another lightning struck the sky and in its blinding light they saw a scene that scared them to bits.

A large banyan tree had fallen in the road and underneath its massive roots was two horses and a few men who lay crippled by the weight. Few other men were trying to move the tree to save their fallen friends and their shouts of desperation were reaching a crescendo.

What attracted the attention of Senthana Amuthan and Poonghuzhali was the palanquin that was kept near the tree and two bearers who stood next to it.

“Amutha! Did you see the palanquin?”

“Yes. It looked like the palanquin used by the Pazhuvur queen.”

“Why didn’t that tree fall upon the palanquin?”

“My God! Why do you talk thus? Didn’t you want to meet Nandini Devi and gain entrance into the fort?”

“True. Yet I can’t help but wish. I don’t like that Pazhuvur Queen.”

“So what if you don’t like the queen, does it mean that a tree should fall upon her?”

“Why should the tree fall only on the head of the common folk like us? Why can’t it fall upon the heads of queens and princesses? No matter... what do you think we should do now? Shall we go near the palanquin and talk to the queen and try and get a signet ring that would allow us inside the fort?”

“You have indeed picked a great time to meet the queen! If we go near the palanquin in this darkness, her guards will attack us thinking that we have come to rob her.”

“If only I could see her once, everything will be fine.”

“How so?”

“I can say my sister-in-law’s name or I can also say that I was sent by Ravidasan.”

“That’s a good idea but how will you see her. We need to go near that palanquin with a valid reason... Poonghuzhali look there!”

When the lightning struck again, they could see the bearers taking the palanquin and coming towards the mandapam.

The bearers kept the palanquin at the entrance of the mandapam!

“Aha! The Pazhuvur queen has come to us instead!”

Amuthan then tried to grab Poonghuzhali’s hand and tried to drag her to one end of the mandapam but she refused to budge.

By then, a commanding voice was heard, “Who goes there?” It was one of the palanquin bearers!

“We are common folk here taking refuge in the mandapam from the rain.”

“Alright. Stay where you are and do not come near the palanquin.”

“Why would we come near the palanquin? Those who have fortunate stars will have the luck of being borne in the palanquin...” replied Poonghuzhali

Senthan Amuthan said, “Even Valluvar Perumal has written about the good fortune of travelling in a palanquin...”

“Enough! Be silent. How many of you are there here?”

“We are but two people here but the mandapam is big enough to give shelter for over two hundred people I think...”

Senthan Amuthan believed that there were only two people inside the mandapam hence he said the same. If he had looked a bit carefully inside the mandapam and behind one of the pillars then he would have seen a third person hiding.

The Palanquin bearers then spoke amongst themselves, “I told you earlier that we should have come here right after the rain started but who listens to me? Now see what has happened!”

“Who thought that the rains would come so suddenly? I thought that we could go inside the Fort before that. Thankfully, the tree didn’t fall upon the palanquin!”

Yet another lightning struck and in that light Senthan Amuthan and Poonghuzhali saw the veils of the palanquin being parted and the woman sitting inside. They recognized her!

Poonghuzhali whispered, “Amutha! Did you see?”

“Yes...”

“Who was inside the palanquin?”

“Pazhuvur Queen right?”

“What did you think?”

“It seemed like Pazhuvur queen but I am not so sure now.”

“I have no doubts. I know who is inside.”

“Who?”

“That’s not the Pazhuvur queen but our aunt.”

“Shh! Don’t shout.”

“If we don’t speak up how are we going to accomplish our mission?”

“What mission?”

“Our mission to free our aunt! We have found our aunt and now we need to gain her release by force.”

“That would be impossible now Poonghuzhali. Let’s follow the palanquin to its destination and then think about freeing her.”

“That’s a foolhardy plan. She is right here in front of us and you are suggesting that we allow them to kidnap her again. No. We need to rescue her now. If you are feeling scared then I can do this alone.”

“What about our aunt? Shouldn’t we know her wishes? What if she doesn’t want to be rescued? She has come all the way here without protesting sitting inside the palanquin like a queen! Don’t you think we should find out who tried to kidnap her and why?”

“What if they are taking the palanquin to the underground dungeons? If they take her there then how can we rescue her!”

“Why not? I was inside the underground dungeons and was released by the Princess. Poonghuzhali, I am not without influence inside the palace so don’t worry, I will rescue her.”

Poonghuzhali kept quiet after this. She focused her attention upon the palanquin and it seemed as though the veils had completely parted. The guards of the palanquin were still looking away their attention being diverted by the fallen tree and rescue of those stuck underneath.

Mandakini emerged out of the palanquin and tiptoed inside the mandapam. She reached out to Poonghuzhali and then they went to the farthest end to get away from the gaze of the guards. She lovingly embraced Poonghuzhali and expressed her happiness in meeting her again. After that, aunt and niece spoke for a while in sign language. It was a wonder how they were able to communicate thus despite the darkness.

After a while, Poonghuzhali told Senthan Amuthan, “Are you understanding what our aunt is saying? She is asking me to get inside the palanquin and you are to take her to your house.”

“What do you say?”

“I will go in her stead. This is the best opportunity that we will get to find out who was behind her kidnapping.”

“The idea seems sound but it can also be dangerous.”

“Amutha! Our aunt’s instincts are rarely wrong. If she is asking me to go in her stead, then the destination is probably not dangerous. Even if it is, I have my dagger here.”

Poonghuzhali then embraced her aunt once again and tiptoed towards the entrance and then got into the palanquin.





Chapter 22: Anirudhar's disappointment

Prime Minister Anirudhar was in residence in Thanjavur for some time now. And this resulted in a steady stream of visitors every day. Chieftains, palace officials, royal scribes, royal messengers on diplomatic missions, army commanders, temple priests and many others were constantly seeking an audience with him. A constant crowd of people stood outside his palace waiting to get in.

Anirudhar didn't have a large entourage of guards and servants along with him because he wanted no friction with the Pazhuvur factions.

Despite that, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar was mumbling aloud about the security lax caused by Anirudhar's presence in the fort. He felt that an audience with the Prime Minister had become a handy excuse for all and sundry to enter the fort and that worried him to no end. It didn't help matter that the Prime Minister's palace adjoined that of the Emperor's and the crowd that came to meet him inevitably stood gawking around the palace.

Chinna Pazhuvetarayar wanted to restrict the Prime Minister's audience but he lacked the courage to broach the subject directly. If his brother was there, they could have discussed it together and taken some action to counter the situation. But Periya Pazhuvetarayar's absence had left him feeling helpless.

If this weren't enough, Anirudhar was using some pretext or excuse to send requests that sounded like commands to Chinna Pazhuvetarayar. A few days ago, he requested the Commander for a few soldiers to be sent to Kodi Karai. The Commander supplied him with some men after which he came with yet another request. A high-born noblewoman was to be brought from Thiruvaiyaru and for that purpose, he requested the use of Pazhuvur Queen's palanquin and bearers. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar, yet again supplied

the same, though his instinct told him that the Prime Minister was up to something. He wondered who that high-born noblewoman would be?

Why should she come to Thanjavur and for what purpose?

There was one more soul who was most eager to find out who came in the palanquin to the Prime Minister's palace and that was his disciple Azhwarkadiyan Nambi.

The morning after the rains, the Prime Minister came to the audience room to see those who had come to visit him. When he learned that Azhwarkadiyan Nambi was one of the people who had come seeking him, he immediately called him inside.

Azhwarkadiyan Nambi greeted his master and bowed to him.

“Thirumalai! What happened to your mission?”

“Guruvey! My apologies. It was a failure!”

“That doesn't surprise me. It was expected. You couldn't meet the prince?”

“I met him ayya and I told him everything that you asked me to convey but it was useless. I couldn't prevent him from going to Kadambur.”

“The Prince is in residence in Kadambur?”

“Yes. I saw him enter the palace and then left. Sambuverayar gave him a royal welcome and thousands of people from neighbouring villages had come to see him. Many festivities were planned for his visit!”

“That's nothing out of the ordinary. It was expected. Who else has come to Kadambur palace?”

“Along with the Prince, Parthibendran and Vandiya Devan have accompanied him. Periya Pazhuvetarayar and his queen are in residence and

many chieftains and kings from all over the Kingdom are expected to come there to meet the prince.”

“Thirukovaloor Malayaman...?”

“He accompanied the Prince until Manimuntha river and then returned.”

“Ah! He won’t sit quietly while his grandson is in Kadambur. He will gather his army together. I have heard that Kodumbalur Vellar has marshalled his forces and is planning to march towards Thanjavur. Only God can save this Kingdom from utter ruin. Thirumalai! What do the people talk about? Did you hear anything?”

“Everybody is heartbroken by the sad news of our beloved prince. They are holding the Pazhuvur brothers responsible for the same and are angry with them. Some even blame you...”

“Yes... yes, they do have many reasons to blame me. Thirumalai! I might resign this post soon...”

“Guruvey! If that’s your decision then I too will be free soon. I can then retire to a life of piety and sing the songs of Azhwars and live a happy life. Why do you plan to resign your post?”

“I am going to make one last attempt to save this Kingdom from destruction. If I am successful in that attempt, then I will resign...”

“And what would that be?”

“We have completed the first step of that attempt. Thirumalai! You declared to me once that this task would be impossible but I am happy to say that I have succeeded in it...”

“Well, I am not surprised. You are after all my Guru and I am but a mere disciple...”

“I asked you to bring that deaf and mute woman who roams around in Illangai didn’t I? And you said that it was impossible!”

“Yes... and that woman?”

“...was brought to my palace last night,”

“That’s indeed astonishing. How did you accomplish this?”

“I guessed that she would come to Kodi Karai to ascertain the fate of Prince Arul Mozhi. I had deployed soldiers to catch her if she showed up there. I was right. She did come there and thankfully, we were able to catch her. She didn’t pose too much trouble. Once we captured her and I believe she came almost willingly along with our soldiers. Thirumalai! Listen to this. From Thiruvaiyaru we brought her in a veiled palanquin that belongs to the Pazhuvur Queen!”

“Ayya! Last night it was raining rather heavily...”

“Yes. I was worried that we might not be able to bring her inside the fort safely. I was awake until late midnight and was able to rest peacefully only after I heard that she was inside the palace.”

“Oh! So you waited until midnight and then received her, did you?”

“I waited until she arrived at the palace but didn’t welcome her. The women in the palace waited upon her. I was worried that she might not cooperate but I learned that she was quite calm. They served her dinner after which she slept I believe. To tell the truth, I am a bit hesitant and also scared to meet her alone. I think your presence here is fortuitous...”

“I am most eager to meet her...”

“Good. Let’s go to the anthapuram then. She has already seen you in Illangai and knows that you are the Prince’s friend so she might trust you more ...”

The master and the disciple went to the Anthapuram, where they bid the servants bring the woman who arrived the previous night.

When the woman came, Anirudhar looked at her aghast while a mischievous smile played on Azhwarkadiyan's face.





Chapter Twenty Three: Can the mute speak?

Anirudhar stood staring at the woman for a while and then called the handmaiden and asked her something. After conferring with them, he asked them to leave the room.

Next, he looked at Azhwarkadiyan and said, “Thirumalai, I think there has been a blunder.”

“Yes ayya! I think so too.”

“This young woman is in her twenties...”

“Might be younger too...”

“The woman that I was expecting must be in her forties...”

“Might be older too...”

“Yes, you have seen Mandakini Devi in Illangai...”

“Yes, I met her there and tried to bring her here but failed.”

“This girl is certainly not Mandakini Devi...”

“No, Gurudeva!”

“Then who is she? How did she come here?”

“Why don’t we ask her?” said Azhwarkadiyan

“What’s the use of asking a mute girl?”

“Gurudeva! Are you sure that she is...”

“That’s what I asked the handmaiden who came here. She has not spoken a word since she came here.”

“Gurudeva! Who did you send to bring Mandakini Devi here?”

“Aha! Looks like that fool committed this blunder...”

“Which fool Gurudeva? And why would you send a fool for an important mission such as this?”

“I thought he was intelligent. Do you remember that man who fought with Vandiya Devan?”

“That Pazhaiarai Physician’s son Pinagapani?”

“Yes him. After I sent you and Vandiya Devan to meet Karikalan I released him from the prison. I thought he would make a worthy addition to our army of spies and since he had already been to Kodi Karai, I sent him on this mission...”

“...and he got this woman instead,”

“I gave him clear instructions and many descriptions of Mandakini Devi and after he reached Thiruvaiyaru, he sent me a message saying that the mission was a success!”

“Ayya! Where is this new disciple of yours who achieved the impossible? Why don’t we ask him as to what happened?”

“We can’t. He got wounded in an unfortunate accident.”

“Oh! What happened to him?”

“He was following the palanquin in his horse and I had given instructions to him that they need to enter the fort after it was dark. But as you know there was a sudden storm...”

“Yes. Even I was caught in it and had to seek shelter in one of the mandapams in the road.”

“Even as they were nearing the fort, one of the trees fell and he was caught underneath. Luckily, the palanquin escaped that fate... Pinagapani got hurt in that accident.”

While the Prime Minister was narrating this, a woman’s angry voice inquired, “Didn’t a lightning fall upon that wretched man?”

Anirudhar looked at Poonghuzhali with wonder and astonishment and asked Azhwarkadiyan, “Thirumalai! Did this woman speak just now?”

“Yes... I would assume so.”

“What’s this miracle? Can a deaf and mute woman start hearing and talking all of a sudden?”

“It is indeed a miracle when a deaf and mute woman starts hearing and speaking suddenly but if Lord Vishnu’s devoted servant wished for it then it can happen. Do you know what our Azhwars have said about...”

“Enough! There is no need to drag the Azhwars here. This miracle didn’t happen because of Lord Vishnu. Someone somewhere has made a blunder and this is the result. This woman has been fooling us. We need to find out who this woman is and why she has been acting as though she was deaf and mute.”

“Gurudevarey! Let’s ask this woman.”

“Going by the smile in your face, I think you know more about this matter and the identity of this woman. Nonetheless, let’s ask her. Woman! Are you not deaf and mute? Can you hear what I am saying?”

“Ayya! I have often wished that I were deaf and mute but I am happy that I am not. I was able to hear the sweet news about that physician’s son, is he dead and gone?”

“Aha! So you are not deaf and nor are you mute!”

“Definitely so, gurudeva!”

“So you have found out that I am not deaf and mute. No wonder they call you the most intelligent prime minister that the Chola Kingdom has ever had!”

“Woman! Do you dare to mock me? If you were not deaf and mute, why did you keep silent and act as though you were one?”

“Ayya! Until I arrived at your palace I was a woman whose faculties for speech and hearing were fine. I have been accused by many as being talkative but I was rendered speechless by the hearty welcome I received here. When the womenfolk in your palace spoke to me in signs I thought that they were all mute so I responded likewise. It was only after I heard you speak that I regained my speech.”

“There is no doubt that you are very talkative and I wonder how that physician’s son managed to kidnap you after all. He might be a fool but I have to admit that he was a clever fool.”

“Swami! That physician’s son didn’t kidnap me. If he had attempted it, he would be travelling to Yamalogam^[17] right now,” said Poonghuzhali and took out the dagger that she normally kept on her person.

“Woman! Do keep the dagger to yourself and out of sight. Why are you so angry with him? You just said that he didn’t kidnap you!”

“He didn’t kidnap me, but his men had tied me up to my boat and had beaten my sister-in-law on the head. After all that he tried to tell me that he didn’t know anything about the men who did it.”

“If that’s so, then he was clever to some extent. He did act according to my instructions.”

“Ayya! Then you were the one who sent those villains? Why would you want to kidnap my helpless aunt?”

“Your aunt? Mandakini Devi is your aunt? Then how are you related to Thyaga Vida Karaiyar?”

“I am his daughter.”

“Aha! I didn’t know that Thyaga Vida Karaiyar had a talkative daughter like yourself.”

“Ayya! It would be better if you didn’t that mention in public.”

“Why?”

“They say that Prime Minister Anirudhar of Chola Kingdom has eyes and ears that sees and hears everything. If people come to know that you didn’t know about my existence your reputation will be in tatters ...”

“Woman! I am not bothered about my reputation but I do wish that you would tell me a few other things that I don’t know. You said that my men kidnapped your aunt. Where is she right now? How did you come to be in the palanquin that she had come and where did this exchange happen?”

“Ayya! Why did you send men to kidnap my aunt in the first place?”

“Daughter! I am not at liberty to reveal that. It is a confidential matter.”

“Father! If that is so, then I too can’t reveal where my aunt is.”

“There are ways and means to make you talk.”

“They will not work on me.”

“Woman! I may even send to the underground dungeon.”

“It would be impossible to shut me in the underground dungeon.”

“Those who are shut in the dungeons will never be released again.”

“You are wrong. I know someone who was shut and then released. I was travelling with Senthana Amuthan yesterday!”

“Who is that Senthana Amuthan?”

“That’s my cousin. He is the son of my other aunt. We travelled together from Kodi Karai to Thanjavur.”

“Why?”

“I had always wanted to see the lovely palaces that are there in Thanjavur. I am also eager to see the Emperor. I have heard that he is unwell, is his health any better now?”

“No. He is still unwell, therefore you can forget about seeing him.”

“How can I forget it? I have to meet him and apprise him about what’s happening in his kingdom and how helpless women like my aunt are being kidnapped against their will.”

“Woman! I have no time to discuss or debate with you. I didn’t ask my men to kidnap you and yet you arrived in the palanquin that I had sent. Did someone force you into that palanquin?”

“No. When I came by Thanjavur fort, I saw an empty palanquin so I got into it to seek shelter from the storm.”

Anirudhar looked at his disciple and said, “I can understand what has transpired. I think they have put down the palanquin somewhere near the fort and her aunt must have got down and she took her place. When the physician’s son and others got stuck underneath the tree, the guards must have been preoccupied and they probably didn’t notice this exchange. What do you think Thirumalai? Have I guessed it right?”

“Swami! Your guess is correct. I saw it with mine own eyes.”

“You saw this happen then why didn’t you say anything?”

“Last night when I was nearing the fort entrance I was caught in the storm. I sought shelter in one of the traveller’s mandapam nearby to escape the rains and the falling trees. After I arrived there, I saw this girl and a young man arrive together. I saw that the man was wearing rudraksha malai and guessed that he might be a staunch Saivaite. I thought that I would regale him with the glory of Maha Vishnu and while away the time. That’s when I saw the palanquin bearers bringing the palanquin to the entrance of the mandapam. I couldn’t help but note the palm emblem that was drawn on the veils of the palanquin. A woman got down from the palanquin and came inside the mandapam and spoke to this woman and that young man in signs. After a while, this woman went and sat inside the palanquin. The woman who came inside the mandapam wasn’t the same one who went back to the palanquin, that much I could discern. The palanquin bearers didn’t know about any of this. After the rain stopped for a while, they carried the palanquin towards the fort...”

“Aha! So that’s how they fooled me. Why didn’t you tell about this earlier? Where did the young man and her aunt go after that?”

“After the palanquin left, they too went their way and I entered the fort.”

“Thirumalai! Why did you stay silent after seeing all this? Why didn’t you stop her aunt? Have you joined them in a conspiracy against me?”

“Never Gurudeva! I will never betray you or conspire against you. Frankly, I had no inkling that this was your arrangement. Since the palanquin

belonged to the Pazhuvur clan, I thought that Chinna Pazhuvetarayar was up to something. And I really can't stop Mandakini Devi under any circumstances. I tried it once in Illangai and failed. She knows me well and would flee if she ever saw me again..."

"Now that we have learned all this, I think that the physician's son was clever after all. Somehow he managed to bring her aunt from Kodi Karai."

"Gurudeva! You are wrong there. I think that Mandakini Devi must have come on here on own will. When she neared Thanjavur fort, she must have changed her mind."

"Yesterday's storm and rain might have impeded her. She must be somewhere nearby. If only we could catch her... maybe this woman knows where she is. Woman! What's your name?"

"Poonghuzhali ayya!"

"Aha! What a beautiful name? Truly no one can match Thyaga Vida Karaiyar's skill in naming his children. Poonghuzhali! Where do you think your aunt is at this moment? Do you know? Please tell us. I promise you, no harm will befall her."

Poonghuzhali thought for a while and said, "Swami! I do know where she might be at this moment, but if you would tell me why you kidnapped her in the first place, I can tell you where she is?"

"Poonghuzhali! These are affairs of the kingdom. I cannot reveal them to you."

"Then I too can't reveal where she is at the moment."

"It is impossible to talk to this girl!"

"Ayya! I have a condition, if you can fulfil it then I can reveal her whereabouts."

“Aha! You are bold enough to negotiate with me! What is this condition?”

“Ayya! If you can crown my aunt as the Queen of the Chola Kingdom then, I will bring her back myself.”

“Thirumalai! This woman is mad!”

“And you found that out now Gurudeva! There is no need to ask her anything. I know where her aunt is likely to be. Her cousin Senthana Amuthan has a garden house near the fort entrance. He and his mother offer flowers and garlands to Thallikulathar temple. He must have taken her aunt to his house. If you send a few men along with me, I can bring her back here.”

Poonghuzhali looked at Thirumalai with burning eyes and said, “If you do any such thing, I will go to the Emperor’s palace and try to seek an audience with him. I will reveal all that has happened here and seek justice ...”

“Thirumalai! I don’t think we have any other option but to send her to the underground dungeons.”

“If you dare to come near me, I will kill you all,” said Poonghuzhali and took out her dagger.

“Ayya! Instead, we can send her to Princess Kundavai. The Princess is within the fort and she can help cure this woman of her madness. Maybe she has some work for this woman too...”

“What work would the Princess have for this woman?”

“Gurudeva! Don’t you realize that the storm that raged yesterday has created havoc all along the coast? Many messengers have arrived at your palace bearing news about the damage.”

“Yes...yes, I forgot about it. I have wasted enough time talking to this girl. It would have been good indeed if she was deaf and mute...”

“Of course! Won’t that help you persecute people easily?”

“I have also heard that the sea waters have entered the city of Nagapattinam and many palaces and buildings have been submerged...”

When Anirudhar and Poonghuzhali heard this, they were astounded and shocked!

“I think Princess Kundavai herself might come here to speak to you learn more news about it...”

Even as he spoke it, they heard the herald shouting and the cheers of people outside the palace.

“Thirumalai! Since when did you acquire divine sight? Looks like Princess Kundavai has come here,” said Anirudhar and moved towards the entrance.

Kundavai and Vanathi entered their room at the same time. When Kundavai saw Poonghuzhali, the worry lines on her forehead vanished and her face blossomed.





Chapter 24: The Princess's haste

The Prime Minister welcomed the princesses warmly and said, “Devi, if you had sent word, I would have to the palace, why did you hasten here? Is the Emperor fine?”

“The Emperor’s health is as usual but he is worried about the storm that raged last night. He didn’t sleep last night and kept worrying about the people and how they would suffer in the storm. He bid me meet you first thing in the morning and asked to provide all that is required for those who have suffered losses in this storm. He wishes to provide people with immediate relief and help them with all that we have. That’s why I hastened here...”

“Devi, what do you think I can do in this situation? You do know that I carry the title of ‘Prime Minister’ for form’s sake. I have no powers to speak of. Our Lord Treasurer, Periya Pazhuvetarayar is not here and I am sure he must have locked the treasury securely before he left. Even his own brother can’t get it opened without the treasurer’s consent. Reports of losses of home and other properties are coming from all over the kingdom and yet I feel ashamed to meet these messengers because I am helpless.”

“Ayya, do not worry about it. I came here to offer my income and gold to help the people. My mother has also offered hers. The emperor too offers you the free use of all items that are in his palace. We need to provide temporary relief to all those people who have suffered a material loss in this storm...”

“Your income cannot feed an elephant’s voracious appetite. This storm has raged all over the Chola Kingdom. We are yet to receive reports of losses from many regions, towns and villages. My disciple has brought frightening news. He says that the sea waters have entered many villages along the coast of Nagapattinam and Kodi Karai...”

The Prime Minister didn’t fail to notice the frightened expressions of three women when they heard this news. He immediately said, “I didn’t believe it. In times of calamity, rumours spread faster. I am yet to receive reliable information from the coastal villages. Messengers from other regions should be here by this afternoon and I am sure that those coming from near the sea should be here by this evening. Until then, we can organize and plan whatever relief is needed here...”

Kundavai tried to hide her confusion and fear that his earlier statement had aroused and said, “Ayya, I too heard the rumours about Nagapattinam and that’s another reason why I came to meet you. I recently bestowed many grants on Choodamani Viharam and this rumour is extremely disturbing. What will happen to the Buddha Bikshus, if the storm has damaged their viharam?”

And then she looked at Poonghuzhali and said, “Ayya, how did this girl come here? She is the daughter of Thyaga Vida Karaiyar in Kodi karai. Her name is Poonghuzhali.”

“Yes. This is the daughter of Thyaga Vida Karaiyar but she is most unlike her father in nature. He is a harmless man who keeps to his work but I can’t say the same about his daughter. She has interfered in many unwanted things and has caused confusion...”

Princess Kundavai understood the situation rather differently. She thought that the wily Prime Minister had got Poonghuzhali in his palace to learn more about Prince Arul Mozhi Varman. With this in mind, she resolved to speak in her defence.

“I don’t believe that ayya. She is a good girl. Come here Poonghuzhali, why is the Prime Minister so angry with you?”

Poonghuzhali came closer and said, “Devi, please ask the Prime Minister as to who troubled whom?”

“Ah! Looks like you too are very angry. Come her and sit by me.”
Acceding to her request, Poonghuzhali sat near Kundavai.

“Ayya, for what purpose did you bring this girl here?”

“Devi, I didn’t bring this girl here for any purpose. I didn’t even know that such a wicked girl existed in this world. It was ‘she’ who...”

“Devi, why do you think the Prime Minister is hesitating? Ask him to tell you the rest of the story...”

“She came here searching for her aunt...” said Anirudhar.

“Who is her aunt? Would that be Senthana Amuthan’s mother? Isn’t their home near the fort entrance?”

“No. Not Amuthan’s mother. She has another aunt who too is deaf and mute. Princess! You might know about this. In the woods of Illangai, a deaf and mute woman roams around incessantly. I wished to bring her here for an important task and almost succeeded but for this girl...”

Kundavai Devi immediately got up from her seat and said, “Is it true? Is she here? I wish to meet her immediately!”

“Forgive me Princess! Just when my mission could be accomplished, this girl interfered and foiled my plan.”

Kundavai sat down disappointed and with a dejected voice asked,
“Poonghuzhali! Is that true?”

“Devi, do ask the Prime Minister how he tried to get my aunt here. Then you will not find fault with my interference.”

The Prime Minister then narrated all that had happened and then Princess Kundavai said, “She must be somewhere near this fort. Shall we mount a search for her?”

“Luckily we don’t have to do that. My disciple apparently saw her at Senthana Amuthan’s house this morning.”

“Then, I will go myself to bring her here. There is no need to tarry any further. Vanathi come, let’s go.”

Azhwarkadiyan interjected at that time and said, “Devi, we need to think this through carefully. Her aunt, if she sees strangers coming in a group might flee and then it would be out of our hands. It might be possible to catch a storm but we can’t hope to catch her!”

“You are right. She might flee if she sees us. Then all our efforts will be in vain. What do you suggest then?”

“Ask this girl to go and get her aunt here. There are only two people who can control Mandakini devi and she is one of them.”

“Who is the other one?” asked the Prime Minister to which Azhwarkadiyan hesitated and said, “The other person is rumoured to be missing in the sea.”

Kundavai Devi acted as though she didn’t hear the latter part of that conversation and turned her attention towards Poonghuzhali.

“Poonghuzhali! Please go immediately and bring your aunt here. She will come to no harm here. I need to see her immediately. It is very important and also confidential. Won’t you do this for me?”

“Alright Princess, I will try and bring her here. If only the Prime Minister had not hatched such a plan and if I had known this earlier...”

“You are right. There is indeed danger in hiding information and I have realized it now. Hasten now and bring your aunt here. After you return, I have one more work for you.”

“Thirumalai! Go along with her and bring Mandakini Devi. If there is a problem coming through the fort entrance, you can use the secret entrance that leads to my palace.”

After Poonghuzhali and Azhwarkadiyan left, Kundavai said, “Ayya, do attend to those who are waiting for you outside. I have few more important matters to discuss and consult with you.”

“I will be right back devi. I also have many important matters to discuss with you.” Said the Prime Minister and hastened out.

Vanathi who was silent all this while, now said, “Akka! What is this important work that you have for Poonghuzhali? Are you sending her again to Nagapattinam?”

“Yes Vanathi but don’t you worry. Ponniyin Selvan will not come to any harm.”

“I will go along with her to Nagapattinam.”

“What will you do there? I will have to send somebody else to rescue you.”

“That boat girl doesn’t like me at all akka.”

“How did you learn that now?”

“She didn’t talk with me.”

“You didn’t talk to her, so she didn’t talk to you.”

“I was looking at her all the time but she didn’t look at me at all. I think she is angry with me.”

“Well Vanathi, all young women have a reason to be angry at you. There is nothing that you can do about it.”



Chapter 25: Anirudhar's crime

Prime Minister returned after speaking to all those who were waiting for him outside.

“Devi, I was able to make some arrangements regarding the relief work. I have sent messengers across the kingdom to various regions and bade them collect information about the devastation that the storm has caused. I have dispatched a message to Chinna Pazhuvetarayar and have requested him to open the treasury under our authority,”

“Ayya! I have heard that there is a treasury chamber right next to Periya Pazhuvetarayar's palace and that there are countless treasures within it. I remember Sembiyanmadevi mentioning about it once.”

“She has a wistful hope of building thousands of temples with that treasure. Even I haven't visited that chamber so far. They say that those who enter can never return alive.”

“Be that as it may. Ayya, do you think they will be able to bring that deaf and mute woman? What if something goes wrong?”

“Devi, how and when did you learn about that woman? Why are you so impatient to meet her?”

“Ayya, the emperor told me about her.”

“What did he say? Did he say that she was still alive?”

“No. He told me all that happened 25 years ago. He believes that she is dead and that’s why he is so disturbed. He told me that you gave him the news about her death. Since when have you known that she is alive?”

“I wanted to ask you the same question. How did you know that she is alive?”

“I knew this through Vandiya Devan. He saw her in Illangai and then my brother Arul Mozhi too...” said Kundavai and abruptly stopped as she realized her blunder. She placed her hand on the mouth and stopped talking.

“Devi, if you do not wish to talk about the Prince, I will forget the fact that you mentioned his name just now.”

“No ayya, I wish to tell you everything. I have lately realized that I am causing more harm in keeping secrets. I learned that lesson well enough last night. Ayya, my younger brother is well and alive. The sea god saved his life and has returned him to us. He is staying at Nagapattinam Buddha Viharam. I went there to meet him but I always suspected that you know all about this?”

“You were right, but I never revealed the fact that I knew about it. I might spy upon everybody else in this kingdom but my spies know better than to interfere with your work. That’s because I know that whatever you do will be to help this kingdom and its subjects. Whenever we meet, Malayaman, Vellar and I would often say that if only you were born a man, you would have brought the entire world under your reign.”

“I might have reigned the world if I were a man but I am a woman, so I sought to do the same through my brothers. But I have no such desire now and I do think that women should not interfere in the affairs of the kingdom. Look what has happened because of my decision. I made my brother stay at Nagapattinam Choodamani Viharam and see the result!”

“Nothing untoward would have happened. Sea God protected him when he was caught in the storm and saved his life. Do you think he would cause him harm when he is ashore?”

“Ayya, I think you need to counsel my father and soothe his fears about the Prince.”

“Aha! Does the emperor know about this? That the Prince is alive and staying in the Viharam?”

“I told him last night. I had no choice but to tell him.”

“Aha! If only you had kept this secret for a few more days it would have been good. Making the prince stay at the viharam was a very wise arrangement. The people of this kingdom are very unhappy and ever since they heard that the Prince was lost to the sea, their anger at Madhuranthaka Devar and the Pazhuvur brothers has increased ten-fold. Many believe that it was ‘they’ who drowned your brother in the sea. Now if they come to know that the prince is alive and well, they would demand that he be crowned the king immediately. The Pazhuvur brothers are waiting with all their resources for a fight to begin. And to complicate matters, Kodumbalur Vellar is coming to Thanjavur with a large army. I fear that this great kingdom will face destruction from all sides. Only Shri Ranganathar can avert this danger...”

“That’s my prayer too. I no longer wish my brothers to ascend the throne of Cholas. I have no objections to giving it to my uncle Madhuranthakan.”

“Ah you might not have any objections but the people of this kingdom do object to it. I pray that the Emperor lives for many more years but if the fates determine otherwise that very day, this kingdom would be torn in strife, war and blood.”

“Ayya, I fear this might come to pass very soon. If you had seen my father last night, you might have thought the same too. I revealed Arul Mozhi’s escape from the storm and his current location to allay his fears but alas he didn’t believe me. He thought that I was merely trying to calm him down

through lies. In his distress, he started talking about Mandakini Devi and his past with her. He truly believes that the ghost of Mandakini Devi has been haunting him and avenging him for his sins...”

“Oh God! This is a disaster. Tell me what happened last night...”

“That’s why I came today, I wanted to consult you. Earlier, when I came here to open the Adhura Salai^[18], the Emperor revealed his past with Mandakini Devi to me. He told me how he was stranded in an island in Illangai and how the Karayar girl saved his life from a bear. He told me how he had fallen in love with her and had lived on that island for a while and how one day, soldiers came searching for him and took him along. After coming back here, he saw her on the day he was coronated as the Crown Prince in the crowd and bid you find her. He told me how you came back with the news that she had committed suicide. Since then, he believes he has been seeing her ghostly form in dreams and off late even when he is awake...”

“Devi, Do you truly believe all this...”

“My father’s account of what he has been seeing is very strange and I thought at first that he must be hallucinating but I had my doubts. The last time when we were here, Vanathi went to the royal chambers after hearing my father’s cries. There she saw Pazhuvur Queen standing in front of him and my father berating her for tormenting him. Since then, I have been wondering if there is any connection between Pazhuvur Queen and Mandakini Devi. Vandiya Devan and Arul Mozhi accounts have confirmed my suspicions. I think that Nandini might be the daughter of Mandakini Devi.”

“Just like you, I too can only ‘guess’. Their resemblance is extraordinary but that physical likeness alone cannot determine the truth. Nandini might even be the last sister of Mandakini, who knows? There are only three people who know about this assuredly...”

“Who are they?”

“One of them is Sembianmadevi. I have long suspected that she bears a secret in her heart that is a source of grief and despair for her. Unless she chooses to reveal it and unburden her heart, we cannot ask her about it. I do know the fact that she revealed it to Gandarathidha Devar in his deathbed. He tried to tell me about it but died before he could.”

“Who are the other two?”

“The other two are deaf and mute sisters, Senthana Amuthan’s mother and aunt. Amuthan’s mother will not reveal anything. She is devoted to Sembianmadevi and will never divulge any secret that she is keeping for the queen. That’s why I endeavoured to bring Mandakini Devi here. To learn the truth...”

“How did you know that she was alive?”

“Devi, I knew that she has been alive for the past twenty-five years.”

“What? You knew that she was alive and yet didn’t see fit to tell my father. He has been torturing himself by believing that he is seeing her ghost all these years and yet you didn’t reveal this secret to him? Didn’t you know how unhappy he has been?”

“I knew Devi.”

“And yet you didn’t tell him the truth?”

Anirudhar gave a long sigh. From his face, it was apparent that he was struggling to admit his guilt.

“Devi, I committed a crime twenty five years ago. This is the first time I am admitting it to anyone. I went along with the soldiers on horseback searching for the Karaiyar girl. By the time we reached Kodi Karai we heard the news that she had fallen headlong from the lighthouse into the stormy sea. Those who saw that terrible scene came forward and told us about it. Thyaga Vida Karaiyar himself told us and I came back to Thanjavur and told the Emperor about it.”

“What’s your crime in all this?”

“This is my crime. The Karaiyar girl did indeed fall into the sea but she didn’t drown. She was saved by a fisherman who was nearby. On my way back to Thanjavur, I saw this fisherman and the girl coming ashore in a boat. After learning and confirming that she is indeed the deaf and mute girl, I gave the fisherman a bag of gold to take her safely back to Illangai and leave her there. I went back to Thanjavur and told your father about the mishap that happened to her and allowed him to assume that she died in it. I thought that I was doing him a favour... I didn’t foresee the repercussions of my actions.”

“Ayya, even though your actions were wrong, I can’t fault you for thinking that you were acting for my father’s best interests. Did you hear anything else about her after that?”

“Yes I did. Right after your father became the Crown Prince he had to go to the war front in Madurai and I went to Kashi to complete my education in Veda Shastra. When I returned to Pazhaiarai, I saw Esana Shiva Battar’s father and the Karaiyar girl together conversing in the garden. When I probed him for information, I learnt the truth. The Karaiyar girl was staying in Sembiyanmadevi’s garden palace where she had given birth to twin children. She then abandoned them there and fled away. Sometimes, when she felt like seeing them, she would come to the royal garden secretly and watch them.

When I asked him as to what happened to the children he refused to answer my question and said that it was a secret that only Sembiyanmadevi was privy to. I too didn’t wish to distress her by asking about it. When I heard that Arul Mozhi fell into Cauvery River and a woman rescued him from the waters, I thought that it might be the Karaiyar’s daughter who had saved him.”

“Your guess is correct. My brother too said the same thing after meeting her in Illangai. But do you know what my father says? He believes that the ghost of the Karaiyar’s daughter had come to avenge him by killing his son!

Yesterday when the storm blew across, my father's heart swayed from one misery to another. He didn't sleep a wink last night and nor could I. He repeated all his past stories and all about the Karaiyar's daughter. He is convinced that the Karaiyar's daughter's ghost is trying to avenge him and that it was 'she' who had killed Arul Mozhi in the sea. He wailed all night to Lord Yama, begging him to take him instead of his son. I couldn't console him with any words and that's when I had to reveal that Arul Mozhi was well and alive and in Nagapattinam."

"Was he relieved at least after hearing that?"

"No. Things became worse after I told him the news. First, he refused to believe me. When I told him that I had met Arul Mozhi in person, he believed me then. Next, he asked as to why I didn't bring him to Thanjavur and I told him that he was still recovering from 'Shivering Fever' and was in no condition to travel. I also told him that there might be confusion and chaos in the Kingdom if he revealed himself to the public and that's when his thoughts went in a different direction. He started saying that it is this kingdom that is becoming a threat to my sons. If I agree to renounce it to Madhuranthakan, both my sons will live happily. Just then, the storm outside intensified and a bolt of lightning struck.

That's when his distress became ten-fold. He shouted aloud that he would never see his son alive again and that the storm that is blowing across would throw huge waves and claim the city of Nagapattinam, destroying people and property in its wake just as it had once claimed Kaveripattinam^[19]. He said that Choodamani Viharam can't withstand the onslaught of the storm and flood waters and that it would crumble. He blamed the whole thing on the Karaiyar's daughter again and said that she was trying to kill his son again. Saying thus, he tried to jump out of the bed and fell back weak and started sobbing. Even a mountain would have melted if it had heard him then..." saying thus Kundavai wiped the tears in her eyes.





Chapter 26: Confusion in the street

Kundavai's breakdown elicited sobs from gentle Vanathi too and Anirudhar was at a loss to console them

“Princess! The emperor's anguish is because of the lies that I told 25 years ago. I don't know how I will make amends for this sin of mine.”

“Ayya, if we tell the Emperor that Mandakini Devi is alive and well, his anguish and guilt will end but merely informing him will do no good. We need to give him irrevocable proof. I came here to request you to try and bring her here somehow and was pleasantly surprised to see that you had attempted it on your own.”

“Yes Princess, I wanted to confess to the Emperor that I had lied but merely mentioning the fact that I lied wouldn't work. He might not believe me at all. I wanted to present her in front of him and then provide explanations. That's why I made elaborate arrangements to bring her here. If he sees her with his own eyes he has to believe the truth of the matter. I went to Illangai to make the arrangements but the Pazhuvur brothers interpreted my meeting with Periya Vellar as a conspiracy. Now I am determined, more than ever to bring her to the court,”

“It might be a great shock to see her alive for my father. It would be better to inform him beforehand...”

“Yes, I was about to do that. When I heard that Mandakini Devi arrived here, I was planning to come to the palace to inform him about it. But Tyaga Vidakar's daughter intervened and has spoiled all my plans. One day, I will punish her for this.”

“Ayyo, please don’t. She might be good or wicked but she saved Arul Mozhi’s life and for that, I will be eternally grateful to her,”

“God saved him, princess! Without His grace and intervention, what can this little girl do? The good fortune that is written in his horoscope will enable him to escape stormy seas, angry fire and devastating earthquakes...”

“I agree with you about God’s grace that HE can perform his miracles through us mortals. I had thought of sending Poonghuzhali to Nagapattinam but if you think that we should get Arul Mozhi here openly...”

“No. Until the question of succession is settled, we should not inform anybody about the Prince’s lucky escape. I am determined to ask your father about it today. If he still insists on crowning Madhuranthakan, then we should we send Arul Mozhi back to Illangai again. People of this Kingdom will never assent to Madhuranthakan’s ascension if the Prince is here. I fear that riots and civil war might break out if it happens.”

“If that is so, then it is best to send Poonghuzhali and Senthana Amuthan to Nagapattinam, what do you think?”

“Yes, that’s the right course of action. If the Emperor wishes, we can get the prince to come to Thanjai, incognito before he leaves for Illangai again.”

“Yes. I think his heart will find peace only when he knows that Arul Mozhi and Mandakini Devi are alive and well,”

“Your father is not worried about your older brother?”

“No. He believes that there is no one powerful enough to cause harm to Aditya Karikalan. What do you think?”

“I am not so confident. The Crown Prince is undoubtedly a great warrior on the battlefield. Outside of it, many are waiting to cause him harm. The Pazhuvur brothers oppose him vehemently. Nandini Devi has hatched some evil plan against him. I had sent my disciple Thirumalai to warn him about

these two potential dangers, yet he didn't heed me and went to Kadambur palace."

"Ayya, I sent a message to him through Vandiya Devan that Nandini might be our sister. He has also promised to protect my brother against any harm. If only he were here, I would have sent him to Nagapattinam,"

"Yes, and I would have to send my disciple behind him to ensure that he doesn't end up in some trouble. Even now, if you are planning to Poonghuzhali to Nagapattinam, I intend to send Thirumalai behind them."

"Why haven't they returned yet? If Mandakini Devi arrives, half of my worries will vanish. You will immediately go to my father and tell him about her, won't you? And I have to tell my mother everything from the beginning."

"Aha! The sorrows that Malayamaan's daughter has to bear are incomparable with anything I have seen. I am also worried about her father. Once he knows that none of his grandchildren is to ascend the throne, he might throw a fit and destroy the kingdom!"

"I can handle my grandfather. I am more worried about his girl's uncle. He is hell-bent on seeing her on the throne. Even she might be dreaming about it..."

Vanathi angrily interjected and exclaimed. "Akka!"

Just then, Poonghuzhali entered the room. Seeing her arriving alone the rest stood up in surprise wondering what had transpired.

"Poonghuzhali! Where is your aunt? Where is Thirumalai?" asked Anirudhar urgently.

"Ayya! I have been humbled. I couldn't bring my aunt here as promised."

"Did she vanish before you went there or did she refuse to come?"

“No Ayya, we brought her inside the fort but lost her in the crowd that was coming in.” saying this she told them what happened.

.....

Thankfully, Mandakini Devi was in Senthana Amuthan's house when Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai arrived because his garden house was thoroughly damaged in the previous night's storm. One of the trees had fallen on the roof of their hut and the entire structure was in danger of collapsing. To top it all, Senthana Amuthan was ill and bedridden with high fever unable to help in any manner.

This had forced Mandakini Devi to stay and help her sister in removing the fallen branches, twigs and trees. She was delighted to see Poonghuzhali though Thirumalai's presence disturbed her a bit. When Poonghuzhali assured her of his intentions, her fears were assuaged.

On the way there, Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai had decided amongst themselves what they will tell Mandakini Devi to make her more amenable to their suggestion of taking her to the palace.

Following their idea, Poonghuzhali used sign language to convey that the Emperor was bedridden and might meet his death at any moment. She also told her that he wished to meet Mandakini one last time before he breathed his last and who knows, if his wish was fulfilled, he might get a new lease of life. She also explained that was the reason why the Prime Minister had sent his men to capture her forcibly. She also told her that the Emperor's daughter was waiting at the Prime Minister's palace to take Mandakini to the Emperor.

After learning all this, Mandakini agreed to come along with them. When they neared the Fort door, the Velkara army was entering with their customary hails and cheers. Mandakini looked at the chaos and exuberance with wonder. An unruly crowd followed the army's entrance and the fort guards tried to close the doors before they could enter but they failed.

Looking at the chaos that unfolded, Thirumalai suggested, “Let's not go with this crowd. There is a separate secret entrance for the Prime Minister's

palace. Let's use that." Before Poonghuzhali could explain it to her aunt, she had joined the crowd that was going inside the fort. They had no choice but to follow her. After entering the fort, when Thirumalai suggested another route to the Prime Minister's palace, Mandakini didn't pay any attention and started walking rather boldly through the streets. Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai were surprised by her actions but couldn't do anything to change her mind without attracting attention. After some time, people around started taking notice of Mandakini.

"Doesn't she resemble the young queen of Pazhuvur?" said someone in the crowd. This worried Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai and they tried to stop her from proceeding further but the crowd around them thought otherwise.

Some of them who saw Thirumalai trying to stop her said, "Who is this Vaishnavan? Why is he bothering this woman?"

Just then, the unruly crowd that had moved ahead came back hearing the commotion and they pushed Thirumalai and Poonghuzhali to the back and formed a circle around Mandakini.

One of the soldiers from the Velkarar army asked Mandakini, "Who are you? Are these people troubling you? Tell me who they are. I will hang them right here."

When Mandakini stood without answering, the crowd became more incensed and unruly. Some of them said, "Doesn't she look like that Pazhuvur queen?" when no answer was forthcoming from her somebody else said, "Yes she resembles Pazhuvur queen and that's why she is so proud. She won't answer mere mortals like us." This incited another person to comment, "The entire Pazhuvur clan think that they are god's gift to the Chola Kingdom."

Unfortunately, this commotion was happening near Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's palace and a few Pazhuvur soldiers came out to check the source of the noise. They also heard the last comment by the Velkarar soldier and demanded an explanation.

“What did you just say about Pazhuvur clan? If you have the courage come forward and repeat it in front of us.”

“We said that you are all arrogant, vain and conceited. There, I said it, what do you think you will do?”

“It’s ‘you’ who is arrogant and conceited but soon you will bite the dust.”

“You drowned our prince in the sea and yet you have the nerve to speak thus. Terrible storms are devastating our kingdom only because of sinners like you.”

The Pazhuvur soldier responded to this by launching himself on the Velkarar soldier and soon others joined the fray. The rest of the Velkarar army joined in and started raising hails praising Kodumbalur Vellar and Thirukovalur Malayaman and this infuriated the Pazhuvur soldiers more. Just then, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar came there on his horse and the riot ended immediately and the Velkarar army disappeared. Along with them Mandakini too had vanished. Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai who had taken refuge in one corner of the street searched high and low for her but couldn’t spot her.

“Ayyo! What’s happening here? The capital city of Cholas is disintegrating! Where do we search for my aunt? What if some other mishap befalls her?” wailed Poonghuzhali.

“I will search for some more time but you go to the Prime Minister’s palace and inform them about this. We alone can’t search for her now. The Princess and the Prime Minister need to make some arrangements.

When Poonghuzhali hesitated, Thirumalai insisted and said, “Listen to me, nothing will happen to your aunt. I think she saw someone familiar in that crowd and that’s why she was intently looking only at one direction. She has followed that person through this crowd. You go and tell the Prime Minister, he will make appropriate arrangements to find her.”

After listening to this, Kundavai got terribly worried but Anirudhar didn't seem too worried. Instead, he said, "Princess, do you see how easily a riot can be incited within the fort? If these crowds know that the Prince is alive, then it will spread far and wide all through the Kingdom."

"So long as you are the Prime Minister, I am sure nothing like this will happen. Now let's worry about Mandakini Devi. What do we do now? How are we going to find her?"

"Don't worry, now that she is within the fort, she cannot leave without me knowing about it. I will make all the necessary arrangements to search for her. I know one thing for sure, now that she is here, Mandakini Devi will not leave without meeting the Emperor."



Chapter 27: The Treasury

We must follow Mandakini now. Thirumalai's guess about why Mandakini went missing was quite accurate. She had indeed seen Ravidasan in the crowd that was rushing towards the fort door. It's no surprise that she was able to spot him. Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai were busy keeping an eye on Mandakani, lest she escapes. Mandakini, though deaf and mute had a sharp sight and she was able to spot Ravidasan in the crowd immediately.

Having seen him in Illangai, trying to cause harm to Arul Mozhi, Mandakani intuitively knew that he had not come here to do any good. She immediately started following him. When Chinna Pazhuvetarayar arrived

there on his horse, she saw Ravidasan and his companion hurrying towards a small lane, therefore she too followed them through it, unseen.

Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai who were battling the crowd to near Mandakani, failed to spot her. Mandakini turned around once to check whether Poonghuzhali and Thirumalai were following her. When they were not to be seen, she didn't abandon her plan to follow Ravidasan. She instinctively knew that following him was more important than anything else.

At this point, the readers need to know that they are following the same route that Vandiya Devan had used in the first part to escape Pazhuvetarayar's guards. We also know the man who is along with Ravidasan. It's none other than Soman Sambavan.

Ravidasan and Soman Sambavan were hurrying through the lanes. Not even the fallen trees, branches, water stagnation in the roads would stop them. They moved the trees aside or climbed over them easily. Even now, a light wind was blowing across the city and raindrops trapped in the trees from the previous night's storm lightly sprayed over them as they hurried along. They didn't turn around and check whether someone was following them. But even if they had done it, they wouldn't have spotted Mandakini.

As expected, they finally reached Periya Pazhuvetarayar's palace walls. A large tree had fallen on the wall making it easy for them to reach out and climb over. Mandakini waited for a while and then climbed over the wall as well.

Ravidasan asked Soman Sambavan to wait in the garden and approached the palace. With Periya Pazhuvetarayar and his young queen absent from the palace, the place wore a deserted look. Nonetheless, a few maids came to the garden to view the devastation that the previous night's storm had wrecked.

“My God! This looks like the Ashokavannam^[20] that Lord Hanuman had destroyed.”

“If Sita Devi had been here, she would have felt very sad, indeed.”

As they turned to leave, Ravidasan used his hands to make his signature owl hoot from behind a tree. The women turned around and looked.

“Did you hear that?. An owl hooting in the morning! Last night’s storm has adversely affected the poor owl.”

The other woman didn’t reply to this comment and left only to come back after a short while. She came and stood near the Lata Mandapam that was situated between the Treasure palace and Periya Pazhuvetarayar’s palace. She was the same handmaiden who had escorted Vandiya Devan to Nandini. She looked around the place and stared intently at the thickset trees that entwined the mandapam around. Ravidasan let out yet another owl hoot. The woman started walking toward the tree, where Ravidasan was hidden. With his eyes bloodshot staring mesmerizingly at her, Ravidasan came out of his hiding.

“Mandiravadi! Nandini Devi is not here? Why have you come?”

“Woman, it is Nandini Devi, who sent me here?”

“You didn’t leave her alone there too? Why have come? What if someone comes to know...”

“What if they know? Who cares?”

“Don’t say that. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar is very suspicious. He called and warned me specifically to tell him, whenever you come to the palace.”

“He will be ruined very soon. Have no doubts about it. I need the key to the treasure chamber. Get it for me, quick.”

“Ayyo! No. I can’t do it.”

“Here, look at this. The signet ring of Nandini Devi.”

“God knows how you got it. You might have even stolen this from someone.”

“You wretch! You dare to suspect me. ‘Me’, before whom your own mistress trembles with fear. Let me tell you what will happen to you. Tonight, nine ghosts will appear and whisk you away to...”

“No! No! Don’t curse me so. Keep all the ghosts under your control. I will bring the key but not now. Many of the womenfolk are coming to the garden to inspect the damage. When they are having lunch, I will sneak out and bring the key to you.”

“Alright. When you come back here, bring some lunch for me. It’s been two days since I had something to eat.”

After the woman left, Ravidasan and Soman Sambavan sat down in the garden, talking something. Watching them intently, Mandakini too waited patiently nearby. Though she couldn’t understand what Ravidasan was telling the woman, she could intuitively feel that he was up to something.

After a long time, the same woman reappeared. Ravidasan went ahead and spoke to her. In her hands was a huge basket of food and a bunch of keys. Ravidasan took the keys from her and went to the palace that housed the secret treasury. After using three different keys, he was able to open the large doors. As we know from Vandiya Devan’s adventures here, it is very dark. Even in the morning hours, the light didn’t penetrate inside the palace.

Ravidasan turned towards the woman and said, “I forgot completely. I can’t go in there without a lamp or firelight. Go and bring it for me.”

“How can I bring a lamp in broad daylight? Won’t they question me in the palace?”

“I don’t know how you will do it but don’t tell me you can’t. You are a very clever woman. I am sure you can bring a lamp or firelight even in broad daylight without arousing anybody’s suspicion. If not, get ready to receive twelve or more ghosts tonight as your guest...”

“Alright! Alright! I will bring it. Wait here.”

“I will eat the food you brought in the meantime.”

After she left, Ravidasan went back to the garden along with the food basket.

“Here is some food. It might take you two or three days before you get the right opportunity. Come with me fast. That woman has gone to get firelight. You will need to enter the treasure palace before she returns.”

Both men approached the treasure palace and entered the darks doors within. Unknown to them, Mandakini too entered the palace silently behind them.





Chapter 28: The underground path

Ravidasan looked around carefully and signalled Soman Sambavan to enter the dark palace.

“Once you enter, you will not be able to see anything. Wait until your eyes adjust to the dark and don’t linger near the door.”

After Soman Sambavan entered the Treasure Palace, it looked as though darkness had swallowed him. Ravidasan moved towards the garden path near the Lata Mandapam and stood watching the palace. If somebody else were to enter the garden, even he would have to move towards the Treasure Palace and close the door.

While he was standing thus, Mandakini who was hidden near the Treasure Palace entered through the door. For someone who is used to the darkness of the forest, the Treasure Palace was a child’s play. She waited a few moments for her eyes to adjust to the darkness. She saw that the man who had come with Ravidasan had walked head-long into a pillar and was standing there motionless, unable to see anything around him. She quickly reviewed the scene and moved in the opposite direction. She could see steps leading down in the dungeon. She quickly moved towards it and climbed down waiting for them to appear.

Soman Sambavan must have heard something because he immediately called out.

“Who is there? Who is that?”

Ravidasan who was standing outside near Lata Mandapam heard him. At the same time, the handmaiden was on her way through the palace corridor

with a fire torch in her hands. He hurried towards the treasure chamber to warn Soman Sambavan to be quiet. He stood at the doorstep of the Treasure Palace and asked, “Sambava, where are you? Did you call me?”

“Yes.”

“Why can’t you wait a while? What if someone outside heard your voice? Did you think I would leave alone in this darkness and go away?”

“No, no. I wanted to ask you something. That’s why I called.”

By then, the handmaiden was coming in the garden path. Ravidasan said, “That woman is here with a fire torch. Go and stand behind a pillar lest she sees you.”

Soman Sambavan retreated fast even as the woman came near the treasure chamber.

“Where did you go?”

“I didn’t go anywhere. I was waiting for you.” Saying thus, Ravidasan approached her and took the fire torch from her hands.

“Woman! Lock the door behind me. Come and wait here after an hour. If you hear me clap hands behind the door, open it for me. Make sure no one sees you.”

“Alright. But I am warning you. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar is very suspicious. If he catches you, don’t betray my name.”

“Woman! Don’t worry. Kalanthaka Kandan is counting his days. He will never bother you again.”

“Why are you asking me to open the door again? There is a way to escape from the fort. Why don’t you use it?”

“That way is of no use to me today. The Vellatram river is flooded. You go now and come back exactly after an hour.”

Saying thus, he entered the Treasure Palace and closed the door. The woman locked it from outside. Ravidasan held the firelight aloft to see where Soman Sambavan was present and started walking towards him.

“Sambava, you wanted to ask me something? What did you want to know?”

“Did you come here earlier?”

“Why of course, I have come here many times. How else do you think we got all the gold coins?”

“I am not asking about that. When you left me here and went out, did you come in before this?”

“No, I came in only now.”

“So, you didn’t come in between?”

“Not in between or on the sides...why do you ask?”

“After you left, I thought the light from the open door dimmed a bit. I thought someone had come in.”

“Maybe the door closed a bit...”

“I thought I heard someone enter. I could hear footsteps.”

“You must be imagining things. But this treasure palace is built strangely. In the darkness, you will suddenly see lights, hear footsteps or see other strange things. Do you know some people have died here literally of fright? Their skeletons are still here. Pazhuvetarayar left it deliberately. Those who stumble upon this place will be frightened beyond words.”

“Can people come here, without anybody noticing them?”

“Normally, people can’t come here without anybody noticing them. I could come here only with the help of the young queen and her handmaiden.”

“Then how come you say that people have died within.”

“Oh that. If Pazhuvetarayar wished to punish someone rather dreadfully. He would open the Treasure Palace deliberately and those who have heard about the fabulous treasure chamber would enter and will die within,”

“So, you are saying, that apart from you, no one has left this place alive.”

“It was that way earlier but now I have my own doubts. I think two people might have left this place alive.”

“I know who you are talking about. It’s Valavareyan and Kandamaran right?”

“Yes.”

“I keep wondering why we have left those two alive?”

“How many times, should I tell you?

“How many times do I tell you? Vallavareyan is still alive for a specific reason, when the Chola dynasty falls, he too will be destroyed. And that time is nearing. Come now... I will show you all the secret paths that lay in this dungeon. Be careful, do not enter the treasure chamber of the Cholas. It has wealth, jewellery, gems and gold that they have hoarded for over a hundred years. If you enter the treasury, your mind may waver, and you might even forget your mission and oath.”

“Ravidasa, have you forgotten, to whom you are talking to? Don’t you remember that I had sworn blood vengeance on the headless body of our King?”

“I do remember. But when I first saw the treasure chamber, I admit I was tempted too. That’s why I am warning you. Come now... let me first show you the path that leads to the Palace of the Cholas. You can explore the place leisurely whilst you wait here. Who knows, it might come in handy later.” Saying thus, Ravidasan held the fire torch aloft to illuminate the way ahead.

They were walking down the same path that Periya Pazhuvetarayar and Nandini had taken. In the light of the firelight, the pillars of the dungeon path seemed ominous and frightful. Huge cobwebs with large spiders within them could be seen. Flapping sounds of bats could be heard at some distance... Echoes of sounds that was hard to decipher could be heard and it made their journey more fearful.

Soman Sambavan, stopped in his heels and said, “Ravidasa, do you hear footsteps?”

“Of course, I do. It’s our own footsteps that we are hearing. Don’t get scared. If you are this frightened, even when I am here, how can you survive here alone for two or three days.”

“I am not scared. I want to clarify everything when you are here, only then I will not have any kind of doubts when I am alone. You told me that some people have died here right?”

“Yes, why are you scared of their ghosts? It’s the ghosts that must fear us. That boy, Vandiya Devan daringly escaped from this dungeon and we who have seen many horrors in our life can’t allow fear to rule us.”

“Forget about the ghosts. They don’t matter. Are there any other creatures let loose here, poisonous insects, reptiles...”

“Now you are going to be scared of snakes and scorpions! Shouldn’t they fear us instead?”

“Still... staying here in the dark for over two or three days is a dangerous proposition. If I get the chance to finish my mission before...”

“No... no. Don't make that mistake. Today is Tuesday. You will need to wait until Friday to complete this mission. Watch Sundara Cholan and find out when he is alone. The Empress is always with him, only on Friday she leaves him and goes to the Durga Parameshwari Temple at night. That's when you must strike. The Chola dynasty will be destroyed on Friday. If you strike earlier, all our plans will go amiss.”

As they hurried along the path, Soman Sambavan looked around warily. Mandakini followed them stealthily and they couldn't have spotted her if they tried. The men reached the end of the path and a large blank wall lay ahead of them. There was no door on the wall, only a high window.

Ravidasan handed the fire torch to Soman Sambavan and climbed on the rough wall, holding the jutting rocks. After watching the palace for a while, he climbed down.

“Do I have to get into the palace through that window?” asked Ravidasan incredulously.

“Only a rat can enter the palace through that window. But you can see the Chozhan's palace through the window, most importantly the room where Sundara Cholan sleeps. You can check how many people are there with him and pick your time to strike. Now come with me and watch me carefully.”

He bent down and placed his leg on a tile carefully. It was marked faintly with a symbol. Then he pushed another tile that lay next to it. Another dungeon opened in front of them.

Soman Sambavan exclaimed, “A dungeon within a dungeon!”

“Yes, only Periya Pazhuvetarayar and Nandini Devi know about this path. Apart from them, I know about it and now you do ... Did you see how I opened the path?”

The men got under the wall and entered the path. Mandakini waited until their fire torch vanished and examined the dungeon path they had opened.

She put her foot in and then changed her mind. Next, she climbed on the wall and peeked through the window through which Ravidasan had seen the palace. There was a small ledge under the window. Sitting on it nimbly, Mandakini saw the palace and goose pimples rose on her skin. She knew intuitively that someone close to her heart resided in that palace and that these men in the dungeon were trying cause harm. She also realized that only she could foil their plans and prayed that her efforts would bear fruit.

Even while she was contemplating this, she saw Ravidasan and Soman Sambavan atop the palace, standing behind a statue. They were staring at someone below and at one point, Ravidasan took Soman Sambavan's spear and mimed as though he would throw it below at someone. Mandakini's heart literally stopped and she breathed easy when she saw that he had not thrown the spear and had given it back to Soman Sambavan. Next instant, they both vanished from that spot.

She immediately got down from the window and hid nearby. The men came through the dungeon path and closed it.

“Do you know how to open and close the path?”

“Yes, I do. You don't have to worry anymore. I will finish the mission. This Sundara Cholan will die on Friday for sure. I just hope, everything goes as planned in the other two places as well.”

“Nandini will take care of Karikalan. I have no worries on that score. I heard that the young tiger has escaped the seas and is hiding in Nagapattinam. He can't escape this time around. Those two women who were helping him escape are no longer with him. I saw them both here in Thanjavur. That Veera Vaishnava rogue is also here. That young tiger will die for sure. I have sent Kramavithan to Nagapattinam. Sundara Cholan's dynasty will end on Friday.”

“What about Madhuranthakan?”

“We can spare his life for a while. It will benefit us if a weak king like Madhuranthakan stays on the Chola throne for a while. Our emperor needs

time to grow up.”

Talking thus, both the men walked out of the dungeon path.





Chapter 29: A royal meeting

After the men left, Mandakini went near the wall and tried to open the second dungeon path. When Ravidasan opened the path earlier, she had been hiding and, therefore, couldn't see how he had done it. She knew that one of the men would eventually come back, so she waited for him to return.

As she had anticipated, Soman Sambavan had accompanied Ravidasan outside the dungeon palace and had come back to the same place. He had a fire torch in his hand, but it was dying down. Though he had been quite brave in front of Ravidasan, the prospect of spending two or more days waiting in the darkness of the dungeon disturbed him.

He sat down near the second dungeon path and kept watching the windows atop. After a few minutes, the fire torch died down and the gathering dusk reduced the light that was trickling into the dungeon. He waited until it was completely dark and then opened the dungeon again. This time, Mandakini stood near and watched his actions carefully. Even as he was trying to get into the second dungeon, a scream echoed through the space.

Soman Sambavan had witnessed many horrifying things in his life but he had never heard such a horrifying sound. If ghosts had voices, then they would undoubtedly scream thus, he decided. First time, he heard the sound, he hesitated and stood rooted at the dungeon path. He waited until the echo of the scream died down and took a step again. This time, the scream came pretty close to him and his goosepimples rose. Third time, he lost his nerve. He turned around and started running blindly through the dungeon path.

After he ran away, Mandakini came out of her hiding spot and got down into the second dungeon path and started walking briskly. It seemed like a pathway to hell, long, dark and ominous. The path ended under a wall,

where a few steps were there. When she climbed the steps, her head banged on something. There was a way hidden between the roof and the steps. She twisted her body and got out through a crevice and found herself standing amidst huge statues. She looked carefully at the statue through which she had emerged. It was a statue of Ravana, complete with ten heads and twenty hands. He was trying to uproot the Kailash mountain where Lord Shiva and Parvati were sitting. She noted that she had come out of the crevice between Ravana's hands. The statue was sculpted cleverly and those who set their eyes upon it, would never know that there was a tunnel beneath Ravana's hands.

Mandakini roamed around for a while in the mandapam. It was fast becoming dark, but her sharp eyes didn't miss much. A statue of Sibi Chakravarthy, an ancestor of the Cholas was present where he was offering a pound of his flesh to save the life of a pigeon. The Cholas traditionally assume the title 'Sembian' to honour Sibi Chakravarthy's great sacrifice. Mandakini looked at the statue for a few minutes and then moved away.

Next, there was a gigantic statue of Lord Shiva from whose locks flows the mighty River Ganga. Sage Bhageeratha stands below Shiva gratefully watching the descent of Ganga and she enters his mouth and exits out of his ears. As Ganga flows on, Sage Agasthya stands on one end with a kamandalam in his hands with which he moves the river to another place and it re-emerges as Kaveri. Meandering through hills, plains, fields, forests, the river flows bountifully and finally merges with the sea. That's where the mandapam ended and a wall appeared.

Mandakini looked at the wall carefully and pressed at a spot and a small door opened. A beautiful garden could be seen and a palace complex. She looked around to check if there was anyone about.

The garden seemed deserted and shabby just like Pazhuvetarayar's palace with tree branches and leaves strewn around. She stood still watching the garden. There was no one around. Still she decided to wait until it was completely dark before moving from there. She was also afraid that the assassins in the dungeon might come out there. She stood there until it became dark.

As the night descended, oil lamps were lit, one after another in the palace.

Mandakini watched it with apprehension and thought, “This place seems more dangerous during the night than the day.”

She also noted that the section of the palace near the statues was dark and unlit with lamps. She observed that portion of the palace carefully because, the assassins had stood at the uppermost floor to look at someone. It was there that one of them had mimed throwing a spear. She decided to investigate who their target was.

Once the darkness had completely fallen, Mandakini ran towards the Palace. Many staircases led to the upper chambers and there were many decorative arches and statues there. In the lower chambers, many old items were stored, old gigantic vessels, disused decorative palanquins that carried queens, broken thrones and many other items.

Mandakini cautiously climbed one of the many staircases and explored her way through the chambers. The upper chambers opened into a large terrace through which one can look down. For some reason, she was hesitant to see what was down there. At one corner of the lower chamber, lamps were lit, she stood behind a pillar and cautiously looked down. She was transfixed by the sight that unfolded there.

A large ornate bed was at the centre of the room where a man lay. Around him were four women and two men stood respectfully and were talking in hushed tones. At a discreet distance, a handmaiden stood reverently.

There was but a single lamp in the room and in its light, Mandakini noted who stood around. One of them was her brother’s daughter, Poonguzhali. The others around him were people who she had seen many times, but she didn’t know who they were or how they were related.

After much hesitation, she looked at him and her heart skipped a beat.

It was him. The man who had come to her island, eons ago to steal her heart away. The man who had turned her island, into a paradise. He was taken away from her by those who had come in big ships.

How did he change so much?

She had watched him for many years in stealth. Once, when he was on the royal boat, with his family, she saw him, hidden behind the woods. When he travelled by his chariot, she would hide herself in the crowds to have a glimpse of him. But it has been many years, since she has seen him. He had grown a beard and had become thin, frail with creases on his forehead. His eyes had become weary and sad as though it has seen many miseries.

His eyes, that would mesmerize her with a mere look! What happened to them? How can a person change so much?

Mandakini has seen many people at the verge of death after suffering from the ‘shivering fever’. Needless to say, the man who had stolen her heart all those years ago, seemed to be at his deathbed.

*What a handsome man he was? How could someone change so much?
Could he really be nearing his death?*

Even as she thought this, she realized something truly horrific. Those assassins, they were here to kill him. That deadly spear was meant to kill him! This realization caused goosepimples to rise on her body. Her head started swirling and her eyes darkened. She clutched the pillar tightly and steadied herself.



Chapter 30: Complaints and charges

Emperor Sundara Chola was very disturbed. Kundavai was right when she said that he had not slept on the night of the storm. All through the night, he remained distressed by the imminent storm that would soon strike and to top that Chinna Pazhuvetarayar had added to his woes. He had many complaints and charges against Prime Minister Anirudhar.

He began by saying that ever since the Prime Minister returned to Thanjavur, many people were visiting him inside the fort, which was compromising the Emperor's security arrangement within. He feared that many dubious characters were using the opportunity to enter the fort. The Emperor didn't really pay much attention to the first two charges and smiled it away. These were complaints that the Commander would normally lay at the Prime Minister's door.

But the rest of the charges that Chinna Pazhuvetarayar laid on him couldn't be dismissed easily. He told him that an altercation took place between the people who came inside the fort and the Velkarar army which could have turned into a riot, but for his intervention. It took immense effort to separate the warring groups and to avoid an open armed conflict.

The next charge that he laid on the Prime Minister was the most serious of all. He said that the Prime Minister was well-known for his stellar reputation but his actions belie the same. He further went on to say that Anirudhar had kidnapped a woman from Kodi Karai and had requested him to provide Pazhuvur Elaya Rani's palanquin and bearers for this. Without knowing the purpose behind the request, he had provided him the palanquin and ever since he learned about the Prime Minister's evil intent he was much disturbed.

If something were to happen to this woman, wouldn't he and his clan be blamed for it?

Lastly, he said, "I have been worried since I learned that a sorcerer comes to Periya Pazhuvetarayar's palace. I was hesitant to take any action because he meets Princess Kundavai too. Therefore, I had arranged for someone to keep an eye on the palace. Today, he caught a man trying to climb on the

palace wall. Guess who it turned out to be? Anirudhar's favourite disciple, Azhwarkadiyan Nambi. When asked why he tried to enter the palace, he said that he did it on the orders of the Prime Minister.

“With the Prime Minister behaving thus, how can I bear the responsibility of this fort anymore? With my brother away, I have no option but to trouble you with these affairs.”

The Commander's litany of complaints against Anirudhar worried the Emperor. He said, “This evening, Anirudhar will be here, I will ask him about it. I am particularly distressed to hear that he had forcibly brought a woman from Kodi Karai. Is that information true? Are you sure about it?”

“Absolutely. The palanquin bearers and the soldiers who accompanied reported to me directly about it. They were nearing the fort around midnight when a tree fell and blocked their path. The tree almost fell on the palanquin and a few of the soldiers were hurt. Thank God, the woman escaped otherwise, we would be struck with streehithi dosham^[21]. My Lord, when you question the Prime Minister about this, please ask him about his disciple's actions as well.”

Saying this, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar withdrew. He didn't want to meet the Prime Minister, much less, be there when the Emperor questioned him. The crafty man might ask him uncomfortable questions in return which would be difficult to answer. He also feared that Anirudhar might get the Emperor's approval to open the treasure chamber that is under his brother's control to help the victims of the storm. If that were to happen, how could he face his brother?

The emperor had been expecting Anirudhar's arrival since morning but he came late in the evening. The Prime Minister was greatly disturbed. His carefully-laid plans had gone awry with distressing consequences. He waited all day to hear any news about Mandakini and was putting off his audience with the Emperor. Finally, his disciple came back with disturbing news. He informed that a woman was seen climbing on the walls of Periya Pazhuvetarayar's palace and that he got caught by Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's

men, when he tried to climb over. “I couldn’t tell them the truth so I had to cite your name to gain my release.”

The fact that Mandakini had gone to Periya Pazhuvetaryar’s palace worried the Prime Minister. “In Thanjavur, when there are so many palaces around, why would she want to go to Periya Pazhuvetaryar’s palace. I can’t even send my men to search inside. No matter... it’s good that Lord Treasurer is not in town. I will place my men around the palace and notify my spy inside as well. That fisherwoman... if only she had not interfered, my plans wouldn’t have gone awry.”

“Swami, even if the fisherwoman had not interfered, Mandakini Devi would have tried to escape.”

“Nonetheless, I feel that she wouldn’t leave here, without trying to see the Emperor at least once. We can only try to bring this situation under control. But I can’t postpone my audience with the Emperor anymore. I have to meet him now. You and that fisherwoman, come along with me. The Emperor needs to be informed about the dangers that both his sons are facing. He might believe that our young prince is alive, if the fisherwoman who saved his life, were to tell the tale.”

Anirudhar, Poonguzhali and Azhwarkadiyan went to the Emperor’s palace late in the evening. At the visitor’s hall, they met an anxious Princess Kundavai and Vanathi who were waiting to know about Mandakini’s whereabouts. Kundavai’s uneasiness grew when she learned that Mandakini went missing near Periya Pazhuvetaryar’s palace.

“Ayya, I have heard that there is a dungeon path from Periya Pazhuvetaryar’s. What if she escapes through that?”

The Prime Minister couldn’t but help remember Vandiya Devan. He said, “Finding this underground path would be exceedingly difficult. Not everyone can be as lucky as the Prince of Vallam. Nonetheless, I have stationed my men around the palace.”

Prime Minister then left his disciple, Poonghuzhali and Kundavai and went alone to the Emperor's royal chambers. He presented his salutations to Sundara Chola and Vanamadevi who was next to him and then proceeded to apologize for his late arrival. He also told the Emperor the arrangements that he had made to help the victims of the storm.

After hearing this, the Emperor's disquiet about the fate of his people was allayed. He expressed his satisfaction, "I am glad that you are here, especially when our Lord Treasurer is away. But I have heard something truly distressing. Is it true that you forcibly brought a woman from Kodi Karai? Chinna Pazhuvetarayar told me about it.

Brahmarayarey! I never expected such behaviour from you. Maybe, there is a valid reason for what you did but why didn't you tell me about it? Even you have decided that since I have become frail and sick, there is no need to tell me anything? Kundavai told me yesterday that Arul Mozhi escaped the storm and is now staying at Nagapattinam Buddha Viharam. I don't know whether I should be happy or sad about it. Why didn't he come here? Why go and hide in Nagapattinam? Why wasn't I told that he has escaped the storm?

Prime Minister! People around me are conspiring. Everyone in the Kingdom are conspiring against me. I wish I could die..." Unable to say anything further tears gathered in his eyes and his voice broke.

Unwilling to interrupt until then, the Prime Minister said, "My Lord, we have been friends for the past forty years and I have never done anything that would cause you harm. I may not have told a few things, only because I do not wish to trouble you with trivial affairs. If you think that I have made a mistake, I humbly request you to forgive. I am here now, to answer any question that you wish to ask me. Please stay calm."

"Calm and peace! I have no hope for any of that in this lifetime. Maybe, If I have done some good in this life, I would be gifted with some peace in the next life. When my own children and my trusted friend conspire against me..."

“My Lord, you will soon know who is conspiring against you but it’s not me. I am holding the position of Prime Ministership just for form’s sake. I had long wished to relinquish it to Periya Pazhuvetarayar and am ready to do it so now. If you are dissatisfied with my work...”

“Yes, Prime Minister... just like everybody else, even you are forever ready to abandon me. The only person who will never abandon me is Malayaman’s daughter. Among the numerous sins that I have committed, I must have done something good in my previous life, to get her as my life partner.”

Hearing the Emperor speak thus, Vanama Devi’s composure broke and she left the room hurriedly unable to stem the tears that were streaming down her face.

“My Lord, you are right about our empress. She would never abandon you, and your children are devoted to you...”

“They do not listen to me. They just want to do whatever they wish, behind my back. And what more... you have joined them in conspiring against me. You knew that Arul Mozhi has escaped the storm and is safe at Nagapattinam then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Forgive me, my lord, in my heart, I knew nothing can harm our young prince. After all, he was born under favourable stars. But I didn’t know for sure where and how he escaped the storm.”

“Prime Minister! Astrology can cause more harm than good. Sometimes, I think it would do good to the kingdom to banish all astrologers. Thanks to their predictions about Arul Mozhi’s horoscope many wish to crown him the king, even while I am alive. You too are one among them.”

“No, My Lord, definitely not. On the contrary, I asked the Prince to stay at Illangai for some time and not hurry back home. But right after I came back, Periya Pazhuvetarayar sent two ships full of soldiers to arrest him. And you gave your approval for this scheme. The news about this has spread far and wide in the Kingdom. That’s why, people are so angry with

the Pazhuvur brothers, they believe that the Prince was deliberately drowned in the sea...”

“Lies! Utter Lies! Parthibendra Pallavan told me everything that happened there. Prince did not come in the ships that the Pazhuvur brothers sent. He came in Parthibendran’s ship and jumped into the sea to save someone from a burning ship. Now when I think back, I see that you all have been lying to me, wanting to make a fool of me. What breaks my heart is the fact that my own daughter, Kundavai is involved in this. I once believed that even if the whole world turned its back on me, she would be with me. But she too has abandoned me and has conspired against me. I have told her things that a father would hesitate to talk about and yet she betrayed me...”

“My Lord! Even if the whole were to come and tell me that Princess Kundavai has conspired against you, I will not believe it. And neither should you. The fact that the Prince jumped into the sea to save his friend from the burning ship is true. The fisherwoman who saved the Prince and his friend is here. She witnessed everything that happened in the Illangai. May I call her?”

The emperor heard this eagerly and said, “Really! Call her. Prime Minister, is this the woman you forcibly abducted from Kodi Karai?”

“She is the woman who arrived in the Pazhuvur queen’s palanquin. I will call her now.” Saying thus, the Prime Minister went to the door and clapped his hand. Azhwarkadiyan and Poonghuzhali entered the chambers.





Chapter 31: Dreams of dusk

The emperor looked at Poonguzhali for a while and said, “I have never seen this girl but she looks familiar. Brahmarayarey! Who is she?”

“This is Tyaga Vidakarayar’s daughter. Her name is Poonguzhali.”

“Ah! That’s why,” and then he mumbled, “She resembles her aunt a bit but looks different...”

Poonguzhali heard him and was shocked to realize that he still remembered her aunt. She had not met the Emperor before. Though she had heard that he was as handsome as Manmadan. After she met the Prince, she thought that the man who sired him must be exceedingly handsome indeed. But when she saw the Emperor now, disfigured, frail and weak with illness, she was shocked beyond words. She forgot courtesy and stood staring at him in shock and awe.

“Girl! Is your father keeping good health?” asked the Emperor. That’s when she came to her senses. She realized that she was in the presence of a man who ruled from River Krishna to Illangai. She fell on the ground and offered her salutations with deep courtesy.

Sundara Cholar looked at Anirudhar and asked, “Can this girl talk?” Or is she a mute like her aunt?” He looked extremely pained when he said this.

“My Lord! This girl can talk and she does it really well. She is as eloquent as nine women. Right now, she is in shock because she has met you for the

first time.”

“Yes, whoever meets me become mute for the rest of their lives. They will not speak or tell me anything.”

Then he turned towards her and asked, “Girl, my Prime Minister says that you saved Prince Arul Mozhi Varmar from the ravaging sea. Is that true?”

“Yes my lord! And if that is a crime...” said Poonguzhali with great hesitation.

The Emperor laughed merrily; it sounded eerie and bitter to the others.

“Brahmarayarey! Listen to this girl. She is asking if it was a crime to save my son’s life? Someone must have told her that I wanted my son dead. Prime Minister, do people in my Kingdom think the same?”

“My Lord! She is scared. Do not give any consequence to what she said in fear. Girl! By saving the Prince’s life, you have performed a great service to the Kingdom. The Emperor is very happy. You can ask for any gift that you wish for. Now... tell us how you saved the Prince’s life. Don’t be scared.”

“First let this girl tell me how she knew that he was the Prince. Has she seen him before?”

“Yes my lord, earlier when the Prince went to Illangai with his army, I had seen him there. He had even called me ‘Samudra Kumari’.”

“Ah! This girl does indeed speak coherently!”

After this, with constant prompting from the Prime Minister, Poonguzhali narrated the entire saga of taking Vandiya Devan to Illangai and the subsequent events that happened until she left the Prince in Nagapattinam. As the Prime Minister had earlier warned her, she didn’t mention any event concerning her aunt Mandakini.

After listening to her intently, the Emperor said, “Girl! You have performed a great service to the Chola Kingdom. I doubt if I can ever repay your debt to us. I have a question. Why didn’t you bring the Prince here after you saved him. Why did you take him to Nagapattinam?”

“Swami! The Prince was in the grip of shivering fever. He was incoherent and unconscious most of the time. We decided to take him to Nagapattinam Chudamani Viharam because the monks are well-known healers and they are devoted to the Prince. We could take him only on the boat as it would have been impossible to travel in horse or chariot.”

“Periya Pazhuvetarayar was at Kodi Karai at that time. Why didn’t you inform him about the Prince’s escape?”

Poonguzhali hesitated a bit and then said, “Everyone in the Kingdom knows that the Pazhuvetarayar clan is against the Prince. How could we then handover the prince to them?”

“Yes...not just the Pazhuvetarayar, even I am against my own son. The entire world thinks so. Prime Minister, yesterday’s storm must have been severe in Nagapattinam. What if some harm befalls him again?”

“My Lord, the Chola Kingdom is very fortunate. The stars foretell that...”

“Chola Kingdom is indeed fortunate but I am an unfortunate creature. I wish to see all my children before I die.”

“Ayya! Who would believe you to be unfortunate? Especially when you have such valorous sons and an intelligent daughter. Don’t fret, I will send a contingent of army and my disciple to Nagapattinam to bring the Prince safely.”

That’s when the Emperor’s gaze fell upon Azhwarkadiyan Nambi.

“Aha! I didn’t notice him at all. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar told something about him too. Didn’t he try to climb into Periya Pazhuvetarayar’s palace wall?”

“My Lord! There was a reason for his actions. I will tell you all about it tomorrow. You are weary, I would like you to rest today.”

Empress Vanamadevi, Kundavai and Vanathi entered the royal chambers. The Empress said, “Prime Minister, let the Emperor rest awhile. I don’t want him to exert himself too much today.” Then she told her husband, “I have heard that this girl sings really well. I would like her to sing something, the emperor loves to hear good music.”

“Yes, devi, my disciple sings aandal pasurams very well. He too will entertain the Emperor.”

Following this, Poonguzhali and Azhwarkadiyan sang a devaram and aandal pasuram. Right from the time, the song began, Sundara Chola closed his eyes. Soon, he was in deep sleep and he appeared peaceful. As the dark descended, a handmaiden went around the chambers lighting lamps.

Anirudhar, his disciple and Poonguzhali withdrew. Vanamadevi alone was in the room for a while but Kundavai appeared at the door and signalled her

to come out after which only the gentle rasp of Sundara Chola breathing was heard.

The emperor had not slept for two days and the beautiful melody of songs sung by Poonguzhali and Azhwarkadiyan was like a balm to his soul, soothing his worries and easing his anxieties. Though he was able to sleep awhile he was still plagued by his dreams where past events combined with his fears and anxieties.

In his dreams, he is on a boat with Poonguzhali and she is singing a beautiful song. Enjoying the lovely melody, Sundara Chola asks her, “Sing some more... don’t stop,”

Suddenly it becomes dark and strong winds gush through the sea. Waves rose one after another but Poonguzhali skilfully rowed the boat through the storm and he could only watch her in awe.

The storm subsided just as suddenly as it came on. Soon the sea became calm and placid. The darkness dissipated and the sun rose amidst a hue of rose, pink and gold in the horizon. The boat was soon near the beautiful emerald island of Illangai, the same place where he had met Mandakini all those years ago.

Casting his eyes on the lovely environ, Sundara Chola said, “Poonguzhali, at last you have brought me back to paradise. How can I ever repay you for this?” saying thus he turned his eyes towards her. He didn’t see Poonguzhali on the boat. It was Mandakini, just as he remembered her from his memory. He looked at her fondly for many moments and then said, “It’s you Mandakini. Is it truly you? Did you assume the form of Poonguzhali to bring me back here?”

That’s when he remembered that she was deaf and mute but she understood what he was saying from his lip movements. He tried to get up and go near her, but soon realized he was paralyzed and helpless.

“Mandakini, I have become frail and sick. I cannot walk and come to you. Only you have to come to me. Listen to me, if anyone were to come to me and say that they would make me the emperor of three worlds, I will not leave you and go with them. Let’s not stay here in Illangai. Take the boat to the middle of the sea. Let’s go beyond this island kingdom to a place where

no one can find us anymore.” Mandakini smiled at him and nodded indicating that she had heard him.

The dream changed after this. Now he was on a royal boat that was speeding through River Kaveri. Music serenaded his senses, clamour of children and gentle voices of womenfolk and handmaidens. Suddenly, someone shouted, ‘Ayyo! Ayyo!’. ‘Child is missing! Where is Arul mozhi?’ He searched for him all through the royal barge and then found him in the waters, in the arms of a woman who was trying to strangle him. That’s when he tried to jump into the river but couldn’t. Horrified he looked at the scene where his child was being murdered and Mandakini became a face of horror and savagery. After making another attempt to rise, he fell and was jerked awake.

Despite the weather turning cold, beads of perspiration dotted his forehead and his limbs shivered in the impact of the horrific dream. He tried to calm himself after realizing that he had been dreaming. He looked around him and found that no one was there. They were probably waiting in the adjoining room. He first thought of calling out for someone but then decided to calm himself completely before he met anybody.

That’s when he heard a sound from the upper chambers. What was that? He turned towards the source of the sound and saw a figure climbing down the stairs.



Chapter 32: Why do you torture me so?

Sundara Chola looked at the figure that was climbing down the stairs with great surprise. He thought that he was still dreaming and that this was a dream within a dream. He closed his eyes for a while, hoping that the dream would change or that he would wake up. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at the place where the figure was seen climbing down; there was no one there now.

He remembered all the events that happened right before he slept. The beautiful melodious voices of Tyaga Vida Karayar’s daughter and Anirudhar’s disciple had lulled him into a sleep. After he slept, they must

have gone away while his queen and her hand maidens had withdrawn and were waiting in the next room.

He regretted complaining about Kundavai to his Prime Minister. Kundavai was an intelligent woman and it was wrong to blame her. She had hidden Arul Mozhi at the Buddha Viharam to avert confusion and mayhem in the kingdom. He also realized that many a time, his own thoughts were shrouded in confusion and he had inadvertently jumped to the wrong conclusion.

In such a situation only Kundavai can help and he should not get angry with her. The first thing that they need to do right now was to bring Prince Arul Mozhi from Nagapattinam before any other danger befalls him. He wanted to speak to Kundavai and make the necessary arrangements. He lifted his hands to clap for his handmaiden but that's when he heard footsteps behind his bed.

The footsteps was very faint and light. It was the nimble steps of a tiger or a cat.

Who could it be? Was it his queen or daughter? Or a hand maiden?

Maybe they are tiptoeing slowly because they are afraid to wake him up.

“Who is it?” he asked in a frail voice. There was no response. He raised his voice a bit more and said, “Who is it? Come and stand here, in front of me,” There was no response.

That's when he feared the worst.

Could this be her? Has she come again as a wraith to exact her revenge on him? It wasn't enough that she came in his dreams. She had to come to him even when he was awake to torment him further.

Earlier, she would come to him only during the dead of the night but now she is here even when people were awake and around! He now started wondering whether it could indeed be midnight and that he might have slept that long.

Is that why nobody else is here?

Neither his queen nor his daughter were to be seen.

Ayyo! Why did they leave me alone and go? If it was 'her' she wouldn't leave in a hurry. She would render my heart helpless filled with guilt, shame and anger before she disappears.

“If it is ‘you’ then why don’t come and stand in front of me? Go ahead and torment me to your heart’s wish. Why do you hover behind my bed? Come forward... go on. You have come to ask me for a blood sacrifice haven’t you? You used to have a knife upon you, why don’t you use it to kill me. But don’t seek your revenge on my people. They are innocent. It was ‘I’ who wronged you. Even ‘I’ didn’t wilfully wrong you. Did I ask you jump to your death from the lighthouse? You decided to end your life but it’s me who is suffering for your actions,”

Sundara Chola could see someone stand very near his bed. His body started trembling and he started sweating profusely. Counting seconds until she plunged her blood-thirsty knife into his body, Sundara Chola waited for death to embrace him. He was now reconciled to his fate and he also believed that by sacrificing his own life to avenge her betrayal, Mandakini might perhaps leave his people alone and be satisfied.

She was so close that he could see her shadow fall on his body. If he but turned his head, he could see her ghostly form. He didn’t move a muscle.

Let me close my eyes. Let her slake her thirst with my blood.

But nothing happened. Nor did a blood-thirsty knife descend on his heart or a pair of ghostly hands strangle his life out. It seemed as though she was moving away. He was surprised. Normally, a visitation from her would drain him emotionally while the fear paralyzed him. But today, she seemed to left him rather too easily.

Let her go... let her vanish forever and leave me in peace. Let me call someone. If she is still lingering around, she will disappear when someone comes.

“Who is there? Where did you all go?” shouted Sundara Chola and opened his eyes. Aha! Who is that standing in front of him at the end of his bedstead.

“Who is that? Who is standing there?” even as he shouted the question, he knew it was her. She was standing with her hair unbound and blood pouring from her forehead. It seemed to tell him that she was here to seek her revenge.

Sundara Chola lost his patience. Fear and terror of this ghost had kept him incapacitated for long. Now his diseased body couldn’t get up and escape her terror.

He shouted at her madly, “Mute Ghost! When you were alive, you couldn’t talk even a word. You tortured me then, and you torture me now. What do you want? Why are you here? You wish to torture me? Come here and slake your thirst with my blood. Why do you stand silently? Why are you looking at me with such sympathy? Do you wish to ask me something? Then come near me and ask. If you can’t talk, tell me through signs as to what you want? Why do you torture me so? Why are your eyes welling with tears? My God! Why are you crying? I can’t bear this anymore. If you wish to say something, say it. Otherwise leave this place at once. Why do you stand there looking helpless? You tried to kill my child by drowning him in Kaveri, didn’t you? Thankfully, he survived by God’s grace. Your murderous intentions will never come to fruition. Begone! Why do you stare at me like that? Go... go. I will make you go... wait and watch.”

Ranting madly, Sundara Chola turned around in his bed and searched for something to drive the ghost away. A beautiful lamp made from five metals was near the bed. He took it in his hand and threw it on Mandakini, aiming for her face. “Go... you ghost! Begone!”

The lamp that he threw swirled like Vishnu’s Sudarshana Chakra and its lighted wick made its way straight towards Mandakini and fell down before her with a clang of metal. That’s when an inhuman shriek came from her mouth. The shriek paralyzed Sundara Chola’s body and made him tremble. The light from the lamp that he threw extinguished but thankfully, another lamp was alight in another corner of the room. Mandakini’s face was a picture of abject misery. She threw a last longing glance at the man who had broken her heart and turned to leave the place.

For the first time, a sliver of doubt crept into Sundara Chola’s mind – that she might not be a ghost after all.

Is this Mandakini’s ghost or a woman who resembled her? Could it be her twin sister? Or was it her? Is she still alive? Did I make a mistake in thinking that she was dead? If that were true, his actions now can only be described as barbaric! Is that why she looked so miserable, her face lined with unbearable sorrow? Did I cause her this misery? There now, she is trying to decide how to leave the room.

“Woman! Are you Mandakini or her ghostly form? Are you her twin sister? Stop! Don’t leave yet. Answer my questions and then leave!”

That's when, hearing him shout, people ran into the room – Queen Vanamadevi, Kundavai, Vanathi, Poonguzhali, the Prime Minister and his disciple Azhwarkadiyan. Sundara Chola turned towards hysterically and shouted, “Stop her. Stop her before she escapes. Ask her why she is here and what revenge she seeks from me.”

Shocked by Sundara Chola's hysterical shouting and fear, they first sought to find a reason to calm him down. When they noticed Mandakini they froze in surprise. Prime Minister Anirudhar was the first to recover from the surprise and he quickly assessed the situation.

He immediately turned towards Poonguzhali and asked, “Girl! Is this your aunt?”

“Yes, Ayya. This is my aunt.”

“Thirumalai! Why do you stand there rooted like a tree? Mandakini Devi is trying to escape. Stop her immediately. This is Emperor's orders.”

For the first time in his life, Azhwarkadiyan refused a direct order from his Guru. “Ayya, instead ask me to stop a storm. I will succeed.”

Poonguzhali didn't stand still, she sprang towards her aunt and tried to stop her but Mandakini shrugged her off easily and moved away.

Azhwarkadiyan tried something different. He moved towards the door through which they had entered and bolted it from inside and spread his hands in front of it and stood guard. Like a deer surrounded by the hunters, Mandakini saw that there was only one way to escape. She turned towards the staircase.

Sundara Chola discerning her moves, shouted, “Catch her! Find out why she came here. Who is she seeking to avenge today?”

Poonguzhali moved towards her aunt again. This time, instead of stopping her, she tried to speak to her using signs. Mandakini who seemed to have understand what she was saying, pointed towards the lamp on the floor.

Kundavai who had been keenly observing every move that Mandakini made asked her father, “Appa, did you throw the lamp on Periamma^[22]?”

“Yes, I couldn't stand that ghost's stare. That's why I threw the lamp on her, hoping that she would disappear.”

“Appa, there is no ghost or spirit. She is alive. Mandakini Devi has been alive all these years. Ask our Prime Minister, he will tell you everything,” said Kundavai and moved towards Mandakini and Poonguzhali.

Watching her move towards them, Sundara Chola became more agitated and cried out, “Kundavai! Don’t go near her. She is a demoness. She will kill you,” Next, he tried to get out of the bed. Vanamadevi hurried to him and said, “My Lord, please don’t get agitated. No harm will befall our daughter.”





Chapter 33: The Goddess of the Cholas

When Kundavai neared Mandakini, she did something unexpected. She fell on the ground and sought Mandakini's blessings. Tears welled in Mandakini's eyes and she raised Kundavai and lovingly embraced her. Kundavai took her by hand and brought her near emperor's bed.

Sundara Chola looked at her face properly for the first time in many years and also noted the blood wound on her forehead. Vanamadevi too saw it and asked with horror, "My Lord! Did you wound her? My God! What have you done?"

"No... the lamp that I threw on her didn't hit her at all. Even before that she had appeared to me with blood on her face. She might blame me for wounding her. I wouldn't put it past her. Daughter of Malayaman! Do you know who she is? Do you who you are sympathizing with?"

"I know. She is the guardian Goddess of the Cholas. She saved my son from River Kaveri and returned him to me."

"Aha! You too believe that story. Maybe Kundavai told you..."

"I was a witness to that event. Even Kundavai was a child at the time. She didn't just save our Arul Mozhi, she saved your life. That's why she is our guardian goddess. Have you forgotten that she saved you from the deadly bear at Boodha Theevu forest?"

"My God! You know about that too. Did you know that she was alive all this while?"

"I have known for a few years. Since then, I have been entreating our Prime Minister to bring her here from Illangai."

"Anirudharey! What is happening? Is this really Mandakini? If she is alive, then did you deliberately mislead me by saying that she was dead? Didn't her spirit haunt me all these years? Was I hallucinating? I am confused as it is, please don't turn me into a raving mad man."

"My Lord, this is Mandakini Devi and she is very much alive. I seek your forgiveness, my Lord. I have wronged you deeply."

“Prime Minister! So this is the woman that you forcibly kidnapped from Kodi Karai. You lied to me when you said that it was Poonguzhali who had come in the palanquin.”

“My Lord, I seek your forgiveness...”

“Aha! You seek my forgiveness. I doubt if there is anybody else in this world, who has been made such a fool. Why did you do such a thing? Why bring her here without seeking my consent? Why wasn't I told anything about this? You were here talking to me about the affairs of the kingdom in the evening. Why didn't you tell me then? The Pazhuvur brothers are right about you people. You have been conspiring against me.”

“My Lord, You are right. We have been conspiring but not against you. Our only aim was to unite Mandakini Devi with you. Ever since Maharani told me that you have been tormenting yourself over her death, I have been trying to bring her here. It was on the queen's orders that I acted so. It was not an easy task by any means. I didn't think you would believe us if we had merely told you that she was still alive. Therefore we decided that the only solution was to bring her here. We had thought of informing you after she reached Thanjavur but after nearing the fort, Mandakini Devi vanished and this girl came in the palanquin, in her stead. We spent the entire day, trying to hunt her down. My disciple saw her climbing the wall of Pazhuvur palace but he was caught by the soldiers before he could start searching for her. I request you to forgive him for his actions.”

“Is that the only thing left to forgive. I am sure there are more... go on with your story.”

“Until I met you, my men were searching for her everywhere. Even now, when you fell asleep, we were discussing how to search for her. Thankfully, she happened to come here on her own. It was a happy coincidence.”

Sundara Chola then looked at Mandakini Devi. Kundavai and Poonguzhali were cleaning her wound on the forehead and were applying sandalwood mixed with medicinal herbs.

“Poonguzhali! What does your aunt say? How did she get wounded?”

Poonguzhali stepped forward and said, “I asked my lord. But I am not able to understand what she is saying.”

“What is she saying? Does she say that I wounded her with the lamp?”

“No... no. She says that she bumped into a mountain and that she didn't notice the blood.”

The emperor did something unexpected. He laughed. He laughed so hard that people around him started looking at him worriedly. After his laughter subsided, he asked the Prime Minister, “Anirudharey! Why is everybody staring at me like this? I have not become newly mad. I am still in the grip of the old madness. She says that she bumped into a mountain, that's why I am laughing. In this Chola Kingdom, we don't have a stone to make a proper idol. If someone wants to throw a stone on the Emperor of Chola Kingdom, they would have to go a long way before they could find one, and here she is saying that she bumped into a mountain! Poonguzhali, ask your aunt, which mountain she bumped into.”

Vanathi who was a silent spectator for a long time, realized something important. She came forward and offered her salutations to the Emperor and said, “My Lord, I think I might know what she is saying. With your permission I would like you say something.”

“Daughter of Velir! You are here too! I didn't even notice you in this confusion. It is indeed a miracle that you haven't fainted amidst all this. What is it that you were saying? Speak up.”

“My Lord, I think I know which mountain Mandakini Devi is referring to.”

“Really! I know you are very intelligent. Tell me. Is it a mountain in Illangai? Did she come all the way here with those wounds?”

“No, my Lord. In the palace gardens, there is a hall, where a large statue of Ravana is lifting Kailasa mountain. Could she perhaps mean that mountain?”

Vanathi's words opened a new possibility and everybody considered it seriously and expressed that she might be right.

Kundavai pleased with her prodigy's cleverness, lauded her saying, “My sweet! You are indeed very intelligent. You were able to find the answer for a very baffling question indeed.”

Poonguzhali saw this with jealous eyes and turned towards her aunt and asked her if the mountain she referred was the same as what Vanathi had deduced.

“Yes, my aunt says that it is the same mountain. If I had seen this hall of statues, maybe I would have deduced the same.”

The emperor looked at her and said, “She must have lost her way and then somehow came to the mountain and wounded herself there. God knows, where she was going, but got trapped here.”

“She was trying to find a way to come to you. There is no confusion about it. I was telling all these people that she would not leave without meeting you...”

“I don’t believe this. If she had wanted to meet me, she could have done it anytime in these 25 years. Why is she here now, after all these years? So long, I have been thinking that she was a ghost. That too was true.? While I have been living in a palace immersed in pleasures, she has been roaming around the forest of Illangai as a ghost. Undoubtedly, guilt is a powerful emotion. All these years, I have been seeing her ghost, it was probably a manifestation of my own guilt. But who knows? Maybe she came to visit me, just like she did today and I have been scaring myself thinking that I was seeing a ghost! 25 years! It’s more like 25 yugas^[23].”

The Emperor suddenly turned towards Anirudhar and asked, “Prime Minister, you confessed that you wronged me gravely. What was your crime?”

“My Lord, how can you ask this to the one who has committed the crime?”

“Who else should I ask then? But then, I don’t think I need to ask you anyway. It’s written in your face. You have been lying to me all these years. She didn’t die, did she? You maintained that lie for over 25 years. Truly, your crime is horrifying. You led me to believe that she was dead...”

“I am not the only one responsible for this lie. Mandakini Devi too insisted on it. It is true that she fell from the lighthouse but she survived. She took a promise from me. She asked me not to tell you that she is alive. She said she would kill herself if I didn’t promise her. Please ask her if what I am saying is the truth or not.”

“I don’t need to ask. It must be the truth. It is however true that you have been conspiring behind my back. None of you can deny this.”

“My Lord, there can be no forgiveness for the crime that I have committed. I am not seeking it either. But the burden that I carried in my heart has lessened. I seek your permission to return to my village and serve Sri Ranganathar...”

“That would be impossible, Anirudharey. Your blunders have caused many confusions in our life. You cannot escape to serve Sri Ranganathar without solving them.”



Chapter 34: Ravana is in danger

Sundara Chola looked at his daughter and said, “Kundavai, I need to speak to the Prime Minister about the affairs of the Kingdom. You and the others can take your leave. When you go, please take ‘this’ along with you. Let your mother be here for a while.” The ‘this’ that he referred to was none other than Mandakini Devi and it revealed the extent of his distaste.

Kundavai was disappointed and hurt by his words. She moved towards Mandakini Devi and led her towards the door. The Empress Vanamadevi went to her and whispered, “Kundavai, she looks frightful enough. There is no point in arguing with your father about it. Instead, why don’t you show your skills on her?” Cheered by her mother’s words, Kundavai took Mandakini with her followed by Poonguzhali and Vanathi.

After they left, the Emperor looked at his queen and the Prime Minister and said, “What were you both thinking when you planned this? If you thought that this would make me happy, you couldn’t be more wrong. Prime Minister, why did you bring this wild savage creature from the forest of Kodi Karai? Tell me truth and do not lie to me, at least now.”

Hearing this, Prime Minister Anirudhar said with an emotionally charged voice, “I made the mistake of hiding things from you once... I will not do so again. I didn’t tell you a few things, once because I wanted to bring her to you and prove that she is indeed alive. I knew that you felt guilt over her

death but after a few years, I thought that you had got over it. But I was wrong. With each passing year, this guilt was eating your heart. You started dreaming about her death and woke up wailing... The queen was most worried about your condition and when she told me about the torment that you are undergoing, I knew that there would be only one solution – to bring her back from Illangai and unite her with you. I knew that you wouldn't believe my word anymore, so we had no alternative but to bring her in person. If what we did was a crime, please forgive us..."

"It is a crime! A grave crime! All these years, she hovered around me like a ghost and like a ghoul, haunted my dreams. Now that I know she is not a ghost, I find that she is a mad savage creature. Do you really think it gives me any pleasure to see her? If you had asked me before you embarked on this mad scheme, I would have told not to do it. Now that you have done it, how do you propose to rectify the mistake? How are you going to get rid of her?"

When Sundara Cholar asked this, Anirudhar was at a loss of words.

The Empress then said, "My Lord, I have no intention of sending her away anywhere. She will stay here with me and I will look after her like she is my own elder sister."

"Devi, I know the extent of your devotion towards me. Right from the time, I have fallen sick, you have abandoned your children and have dedicated your life to take care of me. You don't need to prove your love and affection by becoming the slave of a savage mad creature. Daughter of Malayaman, listen to me. You too Prime Minister... long ago, when I was stranded in that island I did fall in love with her. I am not denying it. There were many reasons for it. But if you think that I am still in love with her and craving her presence in my life, you can't be more wrong. She has tormented me to no end in these 25 years and whatever affection that I had for her, has long since turned into aversion and anger. I can't stand the fact that she is within these palace walls. I threw the lamp at her thinking that she was a ghost. If I had known that she was alive, I don't know what I would have done."

Sundara Chola's cruel words caused great anguish and distress to the Prime Minister and the Queen. The Prime Minister had thought that the Emperor would berate him for merely hiding information from him. And that even if Sundara Chola didn't praise him for uniting him with Mandakini Devi, he

thought that he would be secretly pleased. But his apparent hatred for that unfortunate woman shocked them. The Emperor was not done even then, he continued to spew venom and said, “Chi Chi! Why is she still alive? Why didn’t she die when she fell from the lighthouse? Who was that brainless creature that decided to save her?”

Unable to bear Sundara Chola’s words, Vanama Devi implored, “My Lord, please do not say such words. Our elders have taught us that there is indeed no bigger crime than forgetting those who have helped us. You might disregard the fact that she saved your life but would you also forget that she saved our dear Arul Mozhi’s life? Even if you forget it, I can’t, not in this lifetime.”

“Devi, you are repeating the same story...” started Sundara Chola but Vanamadevi interjected him and said, “This is no story. Arul Mozhi, himself told me that the Goddess who saved him from River Kaveri also saved him many times at Illangai. Thank God, he is safe in Nagapattinam. Please make arrangements to bring him here and you can ask him directly.”

“Yes.... We need to bring him back here. I am not sure whether he is safe in Nagapattinam. Yesterday’s storm must have created havoc out there. Prime Minister, I am feeling restless. I am plagued by an unknown fear. I feel as though some danger is nearing my family and the appearance of this mute mad creature at this time is nothing but an ill omen.”

“My Lord, don’t say that. Her presence is not an ill omen but a good one. Durga Parameshwari has sent her to us, to guard us from the evil.”

“Wrong! It is not Durga Parameshwari but Shanishwaran^[24] who has sent her. The first thing that you ought to do is to get rid of her. If you won’t do it, I will do it myself.”

“My Lord, I beg you. Let her stay in this palace until Arul Mozhi arrives. Please grant me this boon,” begged Vanamadevi piteously.

“Prime Minister, did you hear that? Is there any other creature more innocent than our empress here? She doesn’t ask me anything and when she does, she wants that mute mad woman to stay here. I don’t want to refuse her but every minute that woman stays here it pains my heart immensely. Please make immediate arrangements to bring Arul Mozhi.”

“As you command My Lord. Shall I send our army to escort him here or should I...”

“You wish to bring him here incognito. That’s what you were asking, right? Do you think there will be confusion in the Kingdom if we were to bring him here openly?”

“It’s not a question of what I think. I know this for a certainty. People are very angry for many reasons. They just need a valid reason; to rise against Pazhuvur brothers and Madhuranthakan and the results would be disastrous.”

“Prime Minister, if the people were to act so foolishly can’t our armies control them?”

“It’s our armies that are more dangerous than the people. Common people might express their dissatisfaction and shout at us for a while, but our armies are powerful enough to attack our fort and lock the Pazhuvur brothers and Prince Madhuranthakan in the prison and crown Prince Arul Mozhi as their emperor.”

“It looks like you too wish for the same. You believe the stories that stupid astrologers have predicted about Arul Mozhi. Listen to me. I have decided that my grandfather Gandaradithar’s only son, Madhuranthakan will take the throne after me. And I will not change my mind, not for the people or for the Gods. If my own children want to oppose my decision...”

“My Lord, your children will never oppose any decision that you make. Prince Arul Mozhi has no desire to rule the Kingdom. He refused the crown of Illangai without batting an eyelid. He would never do anything contrary to your wishes. Prince Karikalan is a great warrior. He can carve out many kingdoms by the might of his sword, if he so wished. He agreed to become the Crown Prince to respect your wishes. If you were to tell him about your decision, he would....”

“That’s probably why he doesn’t come here. He is afraid that I am going to tell him about my decision...”

“My Lord, the Crown Prince has built a beautiful Gold Palace in Kanchipuram for you and is waiting there for your arrival...”

“I know why he is waiting there. Just as Kamsa^[25] kept his father in prison, he wants to imprison us and become the emperor. Who knows what he has built there – a Gold Palace or a Palace of Lac^[26]?”

“My Lord, how can you say this about Karikalan?” entreated Vanamadevi.

“They have poisoned the emperor’s heart with venom.”

“This venom was fed to me by Karikalan himself. If he was a true son of mine, why hasn’t he answered my summons to come here?”

“There might be other valid reasons for not answering your summons,”

“Such as?” demanded Sundara Chola.

“There is a rumour that says that if Prince Karikalan were to cross the Kollidam, he would be arrested by the Pazhuvur forces.”

“Karikalan’s mind has been poisoned by lies. People around him are responsible for this. Her father Thirukkoyalur Malayaman is one such person, Kodumbalur Vellar is another and maybe you too have joined them, who knows?”

“My Lord, I don’t talk behind other people’s backs. You were right when you said that a grave danger is nearing your family and the Chola Kingdom. Today, two types of conspiracies are being hatched in this Kingdom. Pazhuvetarayar and Sambuvarayar...”

“Anirudharey! Stop! The Pazhuvur clan have been serving us for over 100 years. Periya Pazhuvetarayar bears 64 scars to prove his loyalty to the crown. And you dare to insinuate that he has been conspiring against me? Instead, why don’t you tell me that the sun has permanently become dark?”

“My Lord, the sun can be eclipsed. But no, I am not accusing the Pazhuvur brothers of anything. But it is a fact that they are trying their utmost to crown Prince Madhuranthakan as your heir.”

“What’s wrong in trying to crown the son of King Gandaradithar? This throne rightfully belongs to him,”

“I agree wholeheartedly. When you wish to crown Prince Madhuranthakan, how can we blame the Pazhuvur brothers of conspiring? They are trying to fulfil your wishes...”

“And therefore, I need to thank them.”

“I agree, but they are also doing many other things without your approval. They wish to divide the kingdom and hand over the region from the South of Kaveri to Madhuranthakan and the northern area to Karikalan. Today, this is being discussed at Sambuvarayar’s palace in Kadambur. This kingdom was won by the blood and sweat of your grandfather, Emperor Paranthaka. Would you agree to divide it into two?”

“I will never agree to this. I would rather demand that they split me into two than cut my kingdom thus. I can’t believe that Pazhuvetarayar is wilfully

doing this. He might have thought that I would want to give something to my children. I want to hand this Kingdom to Madhuranthakan intact. Once he learns about this, maybe he will give up such schemes. Prime Minister, I am determined. I will not waver from this decision and I don't care who opposes it but my will in this matter will be done."

"My Lord, neither Pazhuvetarayar, nor your children will oppose your decision. The person who opposes this decision of yours is Madhuranthakan's mother, the woman who is worshipped as a living goddess in this Chola Kingdom. I tried to change her mind about this a few days ago..."

"Someone has poisoned Sembiyanmadevi's mind. She thinks that I wish to crown my son as my heir. Prime Minister, kindly make arrangements to bring her here. I will change her mind."

"My Lord! I was in attendance at the deathbed of King Gandaradithar. He told me, 'There is an important reason why Madhuranthakan should not ascend the throne. My queen knows about it'"

"Prime Minister, what could be this reason? Do you know about it?"

"If I knew about it, I wouldn't wait so long to reveal it. Only you will have to ask Sembiyanmadevi about it when she is here."

"Yes... this is a hurdle that we need to surmount. We need to make arrangements to bring Sembiyanmadevi here. Who shall we send? Why not send Kundavai?" then he looked at his empress and said, "Devi, can you ask Kundavai to come here?"

Vanamadevi has been partially listening to the conversation between her husband and the Prime Minister. Her attention was diverted entirely towards Mandakini Devi who had left the room short while ago. When the Emperor asked her to fetch Kundavai, she immediately went towards the Anthapuram.

She found Kundavai, Vanathi and Poonguzhali upset and anxious because Mandakini Devi had gone missing. When enquired as to what happened, Kundavai said, "Amma, it was tough to fulfil your orders, still all three of us tried and gave a bath to Manadakini Devi and got her new clothes to wear. Vanathi was combing her hair, Poonguzhali was tying the flowers and I had gone out of the room to get her ornaments, when she suddenly got up,

shrugged the girls and ran away. We have searched hereabouts in all the rooms and couldn't find her anywhere."

Vanamadevi smiled at this report and asked, "Was there a mirror in front of her when you were combing her hair?"

"Yes, there was a mirror at some distance," said Vanathi.

"She must have seen her image on the mirror and must have felt shy. Search for her properly. She might have gone into the garden. She is accustomed to climbing on walls and jumping through windows so we need to search for her quickly,"

The women headed towards the garden, but couldn't find her there. Worried and anxious, the empress began to wonder whether she should notify the Prime Minister and her husband. That's when they heard a banging sound from the hall of statues. There, they found Mandakini Devi trying to break the hands of Ravana's statue using a hammer. Though the stone was pretty sturdy, the hammer could cause considerable damage to Ravana's hands so much so that the Kailasa mountain that he carried could fall.

When Mandakini saw them, she stopped hammering the hands and smiled at them. All women, except Poonguzhali thought, 'She is indeed mad. No wonder the Emperor hates the very sight of her,'

The Empress cautioned the women, "Girls, none of you should ever mention this incident in front of the Emperor,"





Chapter 35: The Emperor's wrath

Just when the womenfolk found Mandakini Devi at the hall of statues, a fierce argument was taking place between the Prime Minister and the Emperor.

“My Lord, I didn’t want to say a few things in front of the women. You must know that those who have sworn to avenge the gory death of Veera Pandyan are hiding in this kingdom. They are waiting for the right time to seek revenge,”

Sundara Chola smiled derisively and said, “What you are saying is nothing new. The Pazhuvur brothers cited the same reason to keep me safe within this fort.”

“I agree that you know about these conspirators, but do you know they are receiving coins from our own treasury?”

“Ah! What story is this?”

“My Lord, there are many more unbelievable stories that I have to tell you. Freshly minted gold coins from the treasury of Pazhuvetarayar was seen in the hands of these Pandya conspirators. My disciple Thirumalai who saw this, can tell you all about it. May I summon him?”

“Not necessary. For generations, the Pazhuvur clan has served our dynasty with their blood and sweat. I will not believe that they are working with these conspirators and are providing them gold from my own treasury. Not even King Harishchandra^[27] can convince me to believe this.”

“Forgive me, My Lord. I am not accusing the Pazhuvur brothers of conspiring with the Pandya assassins but it could be possible that they do not know that gold from the treasury is being given to them,”

“How is that possible? Can a life be taken without Yama’s knowledge?”

“If Yama in his old age, got married to a beautiful young woman, then it might be possible.”

“I didn’t like the fact that Periya Pazhuvetarayar got married at this age. I have expressed my sentiments to him about this but I can’t bear the fact that you are accusing him of treason just because of that.”

“My Lord, I am not accusing Periya Pazhuvetarayar of treason but I do lay that charge on his young queen.”

“It was bearable when you deigned to blame a man but accusing a woman, that too an unfortunate creature like her, is extremely distasteful to me,”

“No matter, how distasteful it is, you will need to hear the truth about Pazhuvur queen. Today, you got angry because I didn’t reveal the truth about Mandakini Devi and I do not wish to commit the same blunder again.”

The Emperor smiled at his Prime Minister’s cleverness, “You are being clever with me. Go on... I am listening.”

“Three years ago, Nandini arrived at Pazhuvur palace as the younger wife of Periya Pazhuvetarayar. Since then a few sorcerers have been coming to the palace. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar knows about this and dislikes it but he respects his brother and is unable to do anything about it,”

“That’s how brothers who are devoted to each other ought to be,”

“Yes, but their devotion shouldn’t prove harmful to the kingdom,”

“What harm has befallen the kingdom? Are you saying that this poor woman is calling a sorcerer to curse our kingdom? Did she curse me with paralysis?”

“My Lord, the man who comes to see Nandini Devi is not a sorcerer. They are Veera Pandyan’s bodyguards who have sworn to avenge their king’s inglorious death. And through her, they are receiving the gold from our treasury.”

“It is easy to cast aspersions on anyone but is there any proof?”

“My Lord, if we were to search Periya Pazhuvetarayar’s palace and the treasury chamber, we might find proof.”

“No one, has ever suggested a more distasteful course of action to me. Prime Minister, you have been my friend since my childhood. The Pazhuvur clan has been guarding our dynasty like an armour and it has toiled incessantly to safeguard our rights to the throne. Even to suggest that we raid Periya Pazhuvetarayar’s palace especially when he is not here is tantamount to treason. I would rather believe that daughter of Malayaman

gives me poison in the guise of medicine, than suspect that Periya Pazhuvetarayar has been harbouring Pandya conspirators in his palace.”

“My Lord, Periya Pazhuvetarayar does not know anything about these things. He has become blind in his desire to please his queen. His palace has become a place for intrigues and conspiracy and yet he doesn’t know it. There is reason to believe that Nandini Devi also belongs to the group of Pandya Conspirators who have sworn to avenge the Chola dynasty,”

“What other blame are you going to lay on that poor woman’s head?”

“A few days ago, a coronation was held in the forest of Thirupurambiyam, at the site of Prathivibathi’s Pallipadai. A five-year-old boy was crowned as the King of Pandyas by these conspirators,”

“Prime Minister, how do you expect me to react to this news? Did you think that I will lie trembling with fear?”

“No, My Lord. I am not concerned about this coronation drama. But you will need to note the fact that it was attended by Nandini Devi.”

“Who saw this and reported to you? Is it your disciple, who is standing there?”

“No, he went there only after they left. The man who witness this coronation was Vandiya Devan,”

“Isn’t he the spy who came here and escaped?”

“My Lord, he is not a spy. He is Prince Aditya Karikalar’s close friend and confidante.”

“Karikalan has many such friends. Even if he witnessed this coronation, what do you think we can do about it now? Periya Pazhuvetarayar is not here and neither is his queen. We can enquire about this only after they return. Prime Minister, the more you talk about Nandini Devi, my desire to meet this extraordinary woman increases. When Periya Pazhuvetarayar came to Thanjavur after his marriage, I was so disgusted that I told him that I did not wish to meet her. Maybe she is angry with me about that. After they return, I must meet this young woman and try placate her anger,”

“My Lord, that is my wish as well. We must try and placate Nandini Devi’s anger. And until she returns, I would like the Queen of Illangai to remain here.”

“Aha! You have crowned her as the Queen of Illangai, have you? Alright, what’s the connection between her and Nandini Devi?”

“That’s what we need to find out. If they meet each other face-to-face, maybe we will understand this connection. And Nandini Devi’s anger against the Chola race might be placated.”

“Prime Minister, I can’t believe that you are worrying yourself to death over a woman’s enmity towards us...”

“There is a reason why we should be concerned about Nandini Devi’s wrath towards us but I am afraid whether it would be wise of me to say it.”

“Who else will tell me about it then? Please tell me everything...”

The Prime Minister remained silent for a while and then said, “My Lord, what I am about to say is extremely delicate and I am not sure whether this bears any relation to you. Nonetheless, I beg that you listen to me patiently. Those who have seen both Nandini Devi and Mandakini Devi have reported the similarity in their appearance...”

“There are many such wonders in the world. One tree resembles another and one woman might resemble a mute mad creature...”

“True. But one tree is not going to impersonate another tree. One mad creature doesn’t impersonate another woman’s ghostly form and terrify the Emperor...”

“What are you saying Prime Minister?”

“My Lord, you have so long believed that it was Mandakini Devi’s ghost that had come to you in the midnight causing you unbearable pain.”

“I now know that it was not her ghost, but she herself had probably come.”

“No. I believe that it was Nandini Devi who was terrifying you, acting as though she was Mandakini’s ghost.”

Hearing this, Sundara Chola sat up suddenly and said fiercely, “If this was true, I swear, I will kill that Rakshasi personally and...” before he could complete, Anirudhar interjected hurriedly and said, “Please my lord, do not swear such oaths...”

“Why do you stop me? The woman who tormented me for so long, deserves nothing less.”

“It doesn’t matter how much she has tormented you but the fact that she might your close relative.... she might even be your daughter,” said the Prime Minister and hesitated.

“Prime Minister, what are you blabbering?”

“My Lord, you have been very patient with me today. I deserve any punishment that you wish to give me. But I beseech you, do not talk about punishing Nandini Devi. She is not only the queen of Periya Pazhuvetarayar but also the daughter of Emperor Sundara Chola. And who indeed can be powerful enough to punish her.”

Sundara Chola looked at his friend in great surprise and then started laughing.

Hearing him laugh, Anirudhar said, “Today is an auspicious day, my lord. I was able to make you laugh twice,”

“Anirudharey! I thought there was a mad mute creature in this palace but you proved me wrong. There is a mad man right in front of me. She is mute so she can’t blabber like this. But you aren’t, therefore you are spouting all sorts of nonsense,” said the Emperor and started laughing again.



Chapter 36: In the midnight...

It was the emperor's laughter that greeted the women as they entered the room. First to enter was the Empress, Vanamadevi. Next came Princess Kundavai and Vanathi dragging Mandakini Devi with them. Behind them came Poonguzhali along with a handmaiden. Mandakini's transformation was complete and she was looking down with a bashful gaze. Princess Kundavai was well-known for her artistic sensibilities. It was for this reason that many chieftains and kings wished to send their daughters in her keeping so that they can learn from her.

Seeing the transformation of Mandakini, it seemed as though she had expended all her creativity on her. Guided by a desire to unravel the mysteries surrounding Mandakini, Kundavai had dressed her up like Nandini, complete with aandal kondai and jewels. When her transformation was complete, the women were astonished to see her looking identical to Nandini. Mandakini who was in good health owing to a lifetime spent outdoors had the same physical structure as youthful Nandini and under Kundavai's ministrations, the 20-year difference in their ages fell away. The womenfolk were extremely pleased with themselves. There were different reasons for it.

During the period of this epic story, Emperors and Kings married multiple times. Apart from diplomatic alliances, this practice ensured that dynasty survived deadly wars that they often fought. Wives who were able to accept this practice without feeling jealous were looked upon as ideal women. That's one reason why Empress Vanamadevi was much pleased with herself. Princess Kundavai was rightly pleased with her efforts that transformed an old mad mute woman into a young beauty. Poonguzhali, on the other hand, was overwhelmed by the graciousness and kindness that the palace womenfolk showered on her aunt and herself. Her preconceived notions about them changed overnight and to say the least, she was pleased by the turn of events.

The emperor noted the happiness in the face of each woman. He had stopped laughing the second they had entered the room. Mandakini's appearance had shocked him to the core and he frequently compared it with the 'ghostly form' that he used to see. There were many similarities and yet he could also see many differences. Despite her civilized appearance, he found her distasteful but he decided to hide it from the others.

He looked Prime Minister and said, “Anirudheray! I called you ‘mad’ a few moments ago. Maybe, it is ‘me’ who is mad. Maybe I need a sorcerer as well as physicians. The sorcerer who comes to see Nandini Devi will do. Kindly make arrangements for the same.”

Anirudhar felt jolted to hear this. Within his heart, he prayed thus.

May none of those sorcerers ever come near our emperor.

On the outside, he told the Emperor, “My Lord, why do you need a sorcerer? Is there a more powerful mantra than the name of our Lord, Srīmanth Narayana. His name is potent enough to drive away all the ills that plague us,”

Kundavai neared her father and asked, “Appa, I heard that you summoned me and that I needed to go to Pazhaiarai.”

Sundara Chola instead of replying to her directly said, “Anirudharey! These women look exhilarated for some reason and I don’t want to send them away. As you advised, let them all stay here until we decide otherwise. Sembīyanmadevi has the utmost respect for you. I request you to go to Pazhaiarai and bring her here. I will request Chinna Pazhuvetarayar to send word to Periya Pazhuvetarayar to come back to Thanjavur, along with his queen,”

“As you wish, my lord. But it might take a few days for everybody to come. Thanks to the storm, the rivers have swelled and it is not easy to travel.”

“That’s alright. We have waited for so long. What’s a few days delay, anyway? We need to make arrangements to bring Karikalan here. But if he still adamantly refuses to come, then I have no option but to go to him. I request you to leave for Pazhaiarai tomorrow and bring Sembīyanmadevi along with you. On your travels, do find out how the people are faring and let me know of their needs and requirements. We should not forget the fate of our people amidst all this family confusion,”

“No, My Lord. I will never forget it. I will ensure that everyone’s need is seen to. I request you to put your heart at rest,” saying thus the Prime Minister withdrew.

That night, peace reigned high in Sundara Chola’s heart. The fact that Mandakini Devi was alive lessened the burden that he had carried in his heart for a long time. The fact that Arul Mozhi was at Nagapattinam Choodamani Viharam was a source of comfort to him. He assured himself

that no harm will befall the Prince. Yet another thing that amused him to no end was the Prime Minister's allusion that Nandini Devi might be his daughter. It brought a smile on his face at unexpected moments.

He spent some time talking to the Empress and the rest of the womenfolk. He also appreciated Kundavai's artistic capabilities.

"You transformed a mad savage creature into a beauty who can only be compared to Indarani^[28] but why are you wasting your talent on this old woman? You should be showing it on young girls like Vanathi," he joked to the amusement of others.

Later, he spoke to Poonguzhali at length and learned how she saved the Prince and other details.

At the end of which, Poonguzhali said, "My Lord, I would like your permission to start for Kodi Karai. Now that I have no worries about my aunt, I can go home peacefully,"

"You told me that your aunt's son is not well and is bedridden. You are not worried about him? You don't have to hurry back, stay here for a while," said the Emperor and Poonguzhali didn't contradict him.

That night, after many years, Sundara Chola slept peacefully. His dreams were pleasant and pleasing. The womenfolk who slept in the next room too had a good night's sleep. Among them, only Mandakini was restless and anxious. The day's events had disturbed her greatly. Her thoughts swung from the underground passage to the entrance that was hidden beneath Ravana's hands. Her attempt to break the statue and thereby blocking the entrance to the palace had been fruitless and her inability to finish the task made her anxious. She kept looking at the upper chambers present in her room to see if the assassin was waiting.

The midnight passed and yet Mandakini had not slept a wink. In the early hours of dawn, she saw a man's face staring down from the upper window. It was him, the assassin who had come there to kill her beloved. She immediately got up and looked again. The face that looked through the window was gone. She tiptoed towards the Emperor's room and found him sleeping peacefully. She came back to the room where the womenfolk were sleeping and woke Poonguzhali.

Tried and exhausted, Poonguzhali woke up from deep sleep with a start. Mandakini signalled her to follow her. Poonguzhali who had great devotion

for her aunt didn't protest and went after her.

Mandakini went towards the hall of statues in the palace garden. On her way, she picked up a lamp to alight her way through the garden. When Poonguzhali saw her walking towards the hall of statues, she was afraid that Mandakini Devi might start hammering on Ravana's hands again and that would awaken everyone in the palace and she would be declared mad and demented. Poonguzhali was determined to stop her if she were to pick up the hammer again.

They entered the hall of statues and neared Ravana's statue. Poonguzhali had a peculiar feeling as though one of Ravana's heads were moving and as though a man's head was staring at her through it. She shook herself and opened her eyes and decided that she was probably too sleepy or the light from the lamp was playing tricks.

Mandakini didn't give any indication of having seen the man's face. She neared the statue but as Poonguzhali feared, did not pick up the hammer that was lying nearby. She instead picked up the lamp and illuminated the dark passageway beneath the hands of the Ravana. Poonguzhali watched her with great surprise and she now understood how her aunt had entered the palace. She also understood that it was this passageway that Mandakini was trying to shut but since no one knew about the secret entrance, they dismissed her actions as those of a mad woman.

Even while Poonguzhali was thinking thus, Mandakini signalled her niece to follow her and bent towards the passageway and disappeared within the statue. Poonguzhali followed her into the entrance guided by the light that Mandakini was carrying. After a few moments, the faint light that was seen through the passage disappeared and the hall of statues plunged into darkness again.

When the dawn broke through, the womenfolk were shocked to find Mandakini and Poonguzhali missing. Despite searching everywhere inside the palace and in the gardens, the women couldn't be found. When they informed the Emperor about this, at first he was worried and then later, he said, "Good riddance. Why should we investigate as to how they left?" Despite declaring this publicly, Sundara Chola privately worried about their disappearance.





Chapter 37: Turmoil in Kadambur

Ever since Aditya Karikalan set foot inside Kadambur Palace, the lives of the residents and their guests had become exceedingly uncomfortable. None of them could predict what the Prince might say or do. Every word that he uttered was a barb of poison intentionally said to shock them.

Karikalan would often make pointed remarks about their plot to install Madhuranthakan as the emperor after his father. Periya Pazhuvetarayar found the entire situation utterly intolerable. Instead of playing around, he wanted to openly tell the truth to Karikalan but found no support from Sambuvarayar, who said, “Be patient. He is our guest here and to make matters worse, he is incredibly rash and reckless. What if something untoward were to happen? Let us wait for the right opportunity to tell him,” Thankfully for them, Karikalan broached the subject himself.

“I wish to ask my Pazhuvur thatha and Kadambur mama about a matter that has been plaguing my mind for some time. Three years ago, my father made me the Crown Prince of the Chola Kingdom with your approval and support. Today, I hear that he wishes to crown Madhuranthakan instead. That’s why he has been summoning me to Thanjavur and I have been postponing it for a long time. Why should I go there and refuse his request to his face? Instead, it’s better to invent some excuse and not present myself.

Pazhuvur Thatha! Kadambur Mama! You are my elders and you have great experience in kingly affairs. You tell me! Is it right to ask me to renounce

my rights to the kingdom after such a long time? Is it wrong of me to reject my father's wishes?"

Aditya Karikalan's frank words shocked both the old men. Pazhuvetarayar needed some time to think about an appropriate response, therefore he said, "My Prince, wouldn't Thirukkoyalur Malayaman be the appropriate person to ask about this?"

"Aha! Don't you know about him? Do you think he will quietly say 'yes' if his grandson tells him that he is thinking about giving up the throne? He would instead slay me and my mother. Even as we speak Malayaman is recruiting an army to support my claim to the throne. But I am not going to act only on his words. I would like to know your position on this and will listen to what you say," said Aditya Karikalan with a deceptive subservience that summarily fooled both the old men.

Pazhuvetarayar said, "Unlike Malayaman, we do not encourage the son to oppose the father. We have all sworn to uphold the sovereignty of the Emperor and therefore we have to abide by his will. The Emperor's decision in this regard is not without reason. No one can dispute that Madhuranthakan too has rights over the Chola throne. My Prince, since you asked, I am coming forward with a suggestion, the rest is up to you. We feel that it is unwise to let speculations about the Kingdom's future grow any further than this. This is harmful to the kingdom and its people.

This is what we propose. The Chola Kingdom today is not restricted to a small place. It stretches from Kanya Kumari to River Krishna. If we divide it into two, each portion makes a sizeable Kingdom on its own. Therefore we thought that South of Kollidam river can be given to Madhuranthakan and the north to you. This, we believe would be a fair decision. If you agree, we can speak further and decide what we can do next. I will undertake the task of convincing your father about this,"

Aditya Karikalan's reaction to this grand plan was to laugh uproariously which increased Pazhuvetarayar's irritation.

"Old Man! Your plan is grand indeed. You wish to establish the Pazhuvur rule in the South of Kollidam and in the north Sambuvarayar would rule the kingdom. It would indeed be a fitting prize for the devotion that both the clans have shown our dynasty. But I will never agree to divide the kingdom that took many centuries to nurture and protect. You old men might like the idea but to me, it is as distasteful as sharing a wife with other men."

Karikalan's taunting and insulting words fired Pazhuvetarayar's fury. He got up from his seat and almost unsheathed his sword.

"Thatha! What is this? You are leaving us! Please hear me out. I will never agree to divide this Kingdom into small parts. Our ancestors bled to create it and we will invite their curse if we even think of splitting it. Prince Rajadhidhar who gave up his life to protect this Kingdom will never forgive us. Therefore, please give up this scheme of yours. Instead, I am ready to renounce this Kingdom and hand it over intact to Madhuranthakan. I know that he has a right to the Kingdom after all his father was the King before my father took the reign. Ideally, he should have been anointed as the King after Gandaradithan's death. Due to Emperor Paranthaka's wishes, my father took the reign... but I am willing to forgo it.

But I do have a condition. I want an army with three lakh soldiers and provisions to feed this army for over a year. I want 300 warships that can be used to cross the great sea yonder. I plan to capture the northern kingdom on the land while Parthibendran will sail in our ships through the river. I will meet him up north and take my army to Himalayas where I will hoist our tiger flag, just as my ancestor Karikala Vallavan, (after whom I have been named) did. I will establish a kingdom of my own earned by the might of my sword and the blood of my soldiers. I will either be the emperor in this kingdom by my own might or I will die and reach the heaven that welcomes the brave.

Thatha! Mama! What do you say? Will you fulfil this condition?"

Needless to say, Pazhuvetarayar was dumbfounded by Karikalan's request and flustered he said, "My Prince, who are we to accept this condition? What rights do we have? Shouldn't we ask the Emperor?"

Incensed by his response, Karikalan got up and snarled derisively.

"Old man! Who are you trying to fool by taking the emperor's name? Do you think I do not know that my father is literally a prisoner in Thanjavur fort? You have reduced him to a puppet, so much so that he issues a command to imprison the darling prince of this kingdom. Would any father do that? Today, the entire kingdom in a single voice blames you for drowning my brother in the sea. How do you answer to these charges?"

"Prince, who dares to blame us for the Prince's death? I will cut their tongues and slay them all with my sword..." roared Pazhuvetarayar.

“The entire kingdom blames you. Lakhs and lakhs of people blame you. Will you cut their tongues and slay them all? If you do, this kingdom would then become a fit place for Madhuranthakan to reign.

Thatha! I don’t believe that you drowned my brother. People are brainless creatures. They will not stop and think before they utter such foolishness. I don’t believe that you will ever betray the dynasty that you have so faithfully served. It was Arul Mozhi’s fate to drown in the sea. He probably did it just to spite all those astrologers who predicted that he would one day rule the world.

Thatha! No matter how powerful you think yourself to be, you can’t conjure a storm in the sea and cause a bolt of lightning to strike a ship. Maybe the Pandya sorcerers can do that, not you. Therefore, you are not responsible for Arul Mozhi’s fate.

But do not ever tell me that ‘you will need to ask the Emperor’. Next, you will probably tell me that you wish to ask ‘Anbil Brahmarayar’. Today, the Emperor and his Prime Minister are mere figureheads. The real power resides with you and they will not do anything contrary to your commands. But if you were to tell me that you wish to ask my Pazhuvur Patti^[29], then I wouldn’t object to that at all...”

Before Pazhuvetarayar could react, Kandanmaran got up hurriedly and said, “Ayya, how could you insult the guests who have come to our house?”

Karikalan turned towards with a fire in his eyes and said, “Kandanmara! This is your house? I forgot that you are the scion of Kolli Malai Villin Orriyin clan. And I should speak very carefully in your presence. But did I say something wrong about your guests?... why are your hands shaking so much? Did you perhaps contract the shivering fever that has affected so many people in Illangai? But you didn’t even go to Illangai!”

Vandiya Devan interjected with an explanation, “My Lord, Kandanmaran does not have the shivering fever. He is upset because you called Nandini Devi, Pazhuvur Patti,” Kandanmaran tried to unsheathe his sword at his words but Parthibendran dragged him away and whispered something to him after which he kept his peace.

Karikalan laughed at him gaily and turned towards Pazhuvetarayar, “Thatha! These young ones get riled up for nothing. You are my grandsire’s age so it is but respectful to call you ‘thatha’. Logic tells me that I should consider your queen as my grandmother and call her thus. I see that you

have no objection to it nor does Nandini Devi take any offence to it. Then why are these boys getting offended?

Never mind! What I was saying was that don't put the onus of the decision on the Emperor. If you agree to this, then I can safely assume that my father too would agree to this. The treasury is in your hands. Getting three lakh soldiers would be easy. If people knew that I was planning a campaign north, they would fall over their feet to join me. Procuring 300 warships wouldn't be difficult. I just need yours and Madhuranthakan's approval. What do you say?"

Flustered and shocked by the Prince's words, Pazhuvetarayar said, "My Prince, even if I agreed to your request we do need Prince Madhuranthakan's approval. And what about the Emperor, will you start for your campaign without meeting your father and your family? Let's all go to Thanjavur and..."

"No... I will not come to Thanjavur. If my father says something contrary it would put me in a difficult situation. My mother and sister are there. They may not like my decision to renounce the throne and go on a war campaign. I wish to settle this here at the Kadambur Palace. Let us decide everything here and once everything is settled and the army is ready, I will go to Thanjavur and take my leave. Or else, I can even crown Madhuranthakan before I leave for my campaign and settle my parents in Kanchipuram at the Gold Palace that I have built for them."

As always, Pazhuvetarayar looked at Sambuvarayar who was looking at something on the roof. Disappointed that he wouldn't get any help from him, Pazhuvetarayar said, "My Lord, as you wish. There is really nothing else to say in this matter,"

The Prince said, "Good, then it's best that you start right away. This time around, bring Madhuranthakan here on an elephant or a chariot. Don't use Pazhuvur Patti's palanquin," and laughed uproariously.

Next, he turned towards Kandanmaran and said, "There you go Kandanmara your palace will host more guests. Pazhuvur Pattan is going to Thanjavur to bring Madhuranthakan here, the future emperor. He might even bring his future empress, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's daughter here. While our Lord Treasurer makes arrangements to go to Thanjavur, let's all go for a hunt. It's been three years since I have been on a hunt. Once I used to be a master archer like Arjuna of Mahabharata but these days I probably

can't even nock an arrow properly. Parthibendra! Vandiya Deva! Come on let's go! Where do we hunt? Shall we go to Kolli Mallai?"

Sambuvarayar who had not participated in the discussion so far opened his mouth for the first time.

"My Prince, Kolli Malai is very far off. In the west of Veeranarayana dam, there is a thick forest. It's called 'Dandakaranyam'. The woods are infested with wild animals. The animals that we have at our hunter's chamber were hunted from these woods. And it is closer to the palace, so you can be back home by evening."

"Alright ayya, just as you say. As long as I am here, I will listen to whatever you say. May we take your daughter Manimegalai along, for the hunt. I find it very pleasant to have her around."

"I have no objections. You can ask her if she wishes to join,"

But Kandanmaran objected to the plan saying, "We can't concentrate on the hunt if women are around. Moreover, Nandini Devi needs Manimegalai's companionship here,"

"Yes... I know you are forever worried about Pazhuvur Patti. But there is a practical difficulty in taking her along. Someone might mistake her beautiful wide eyes to that of a deer and aim an arrow at her. Alright, let's leave early tomorrow morning. Mama, inform the hunters about the hunt. Friends! Let's sleep early today after Kuravai Koothu. Vandiya Deva, come let's go to our chambers," saying thus, Karikalan took Vandiya Devan's hand and dragged him out.

Parthibendran and Kandanmaran looked at him with jealous eyes.

Sambuvarayar went to arrange for the hunt and inform the huntsmen and Pazhuvetarayar went to the anthapuram to meet Nandini.



Chapter 38: Nandini's refusal

Pazhuvetarayar went towards the anthapuram quite enthusiastically. None of their plans has worked since they came to Kadambur. While at Kadambur, they had thought that they could bully Karikalan and make him agree to what they say. He had thought that the Prince would have no option but to agree to whatever he and Sambuvarayar told him. But that plan has backfired spectacularly.

Pazhuvetarayar realized the dangers of handing over the Kingdom entirely to Madhuranthakan. Predictably Malayaman and Kodumbalur Vellar would be up in arms and a civil war would be imminent. With the citizenry supporting Sundara Chola's sons and Madhuranthakan's own mother against his ascension to the throne, they couldn't proceed with their plans with just the support of the Kalamugar sect. Therefore, they decided that for now, they would divide the kingdom into half and install Madhuranthakan as the King with Thanjavur as their stronghold. Later, they had planned to crush Malayaman and Kodumbalur forces and gain upper hand in the regions where Karikalan would reign.

Karikalan was known for his recklessness. One day, he would get into trouble and probably die on the battlefield. If that happens, then all their problems would be solved in a flash! So the consensus was to demand half of the kingdom for Madhuranthakan.

After consulting Nandini, they had charted out each plan of action that they would take to bring this to fruition. But sadly for them, Karikalan didn't turn out to be the obedient docile boy that they had imagined him to be. Instead of obeying their commands, Karikalan has been tormenting and mocking them with sarcastic jibes. His frequent allusion to the conspiracy meeting that they held at Kadambur and derisive comments about his old age and calling Nandini, his 'grandmother' have become unbearable.

And if that were not enough, Sambuvarayar's attitude irked him to no end. Instead of supporting him in this endeavour, Sambuvarayar was silent most of the time and if by chance, he opened his mouth, it was to utter something vague or incomprehensible and that too with great hesitation.

Pazhuvetarayar understood that he was being careful more so because Karikalan was his guest and he feared that something untoward might occur to him while under his roof. No matter what his reason was, Sambuvarayar was of no help in the present situation.

He also found it difficult to understand Karikalan's intent and motives. He dare not take whatever was said today at face value and act on it. He didn't know what was said earnestly, maliciously or as a joke.

What if he had a plan to cause harm to Madhuranthakan while at Kadambur? He could even ask Malayaman to bring his army and lay a siege outside Kadambur palace?

The only sensible course of action would be to return to Thanjavur. Chinna Pazhuvetarayar had a sharp mind, it would be good to consult him on this. Even if we brought Madhuranthakan here, appropriate preparations need to be made. We can bring our army and station it near the Kollidam river.

He was however clear about one thing. On no account, would he allow Nandini to remain here. He would not tolerate jeering comments or sarcastic remarks about her. It is best to take her away and never expose her to those who would mock her thus. And now that he had a reason to take her away, he was feeling happy and enthusiastic about it.

When he reached the anthapuram, he could hear peals of laughter coming from Nandini's room. For some reason, it didn't make him happy. Nandini never laughed like this at their palace in Thanjavur.

Why is she laughing so much here? What could be the reason for her mirth? Who is laughing with her?

He entered her chambers and found that it was Manimegalai, who tried to control her laughter by clamping hands over her mouth left the room hurriedly.

Nandini stopped laughing, the second she saw Pazhuvetarayar inside the room. She immediately turned into her dignified self and welcomed him with her signature seductive smile.

"Ayya, welcome. What happened at your council meeting?"

"Nandini, why is this girl laughing so much. Why did she run away after seeing me?"

"She overheard a few things from your council meeting and came here to tell me how the Prince had spoken about grandfathers and grandmothers."

"Wicked Woman! And you were laughing along with her?"

"Yes, I thought I would cry after she left..." said Nandini and wiped her tears.

“Aha! It was my mistake to bring you amidst these fools. We will leave for Thanjavur tomorrow morning,”

“We are going to Thanjavur tomorrow! Does it mean that our work here is completed?”

Periya Pazhuvetarayar told her everything that happened at the council meeting after which Nandini said, “My Lord, you can leave for Thanjavur tomorrow but I will not come with you. Either that headstrong prince must apologize to you or he should be slain with your sword!”

“Nandini, what is this? What kind of treasonous words are these?”

“What is treason? Is it treasonous to seek revenge from someone who talks insults their husband?”

“No Nandini. Listen to me! Our clan has defended and stood along with the Cholas for over six generations. Today, Karikalan – a scion from this clan is ridiculing me because he knows nothing. That doesn’t mean that I lift my sword against the dynasty that I have sworn to protect,”

Pazhuvetarayar in his heart knew that he was tempted to draw his sword and slay the prince many a time but he controlled his urge with great restraint. When Nandini spoke about slaying him, Pazhuvetarayar conscious of what he really wished to do became harried and tried to stop her.

“Ayya, you are hesitating because your clan is intrinsically bonded with the Chola Dynasty through marriage and loyalty. I have no such bond. I am not bound to them through loyalty or blood. If Aditya Karikalan does not apologize for his uncouth words, I will kill him myself and seek revenge,” She declared with her eyes red and her brows knitted together.





Chapter 39: Danger is coming!

Pazhuvetarayar laughed uproariously! The force of his laughter was such that small items placed around the room trembled. The fact that Nandini would be incensed enough to seek revenge from those who insulted him was a source of amusement and pride for him. He wanted her to speak more like this and thus declare her ‘love’ for him but at the same time, he wanted to register his disapproval too.

“Ayya! Why do you laugh? You think I can’t seek revenge?”

“Devi, your hands are softer than the petals of **Mandara**^[30]. How will they lift a sword? And when I am with you, why do you need...”

“Ayya, I know the might of your arms. They each are as powerful as an elephant’s trunk. These are the arms that defeated the enemies of the Chola Empire. These arms anoint the heirs of the Chola throne with the crown. But today, no one thinks about them. They are ready to ridicule and deride you as an ‘old man’. Like a snake charmed by the snake charmer’s music, you are bound in gratitude and honour to these people. My arms are decked with bangles and jewels and they are soft and tender but when you took my hand into yours and wed me, you gave me some of your strength. With this strength, I will strive to save my honour and my husband’s name and if necessary, I can pick up a sword as well. Look at this...” she said and opened a chest that was in the chamber. She kept the silks, garments and jewels aside and picked up a sword, shiny, sharp and deadly and held it in her hands.

Pazhuvetarayar looked at the sword in shock for a while and said, “How long have you kept this sword in this chest? I thought you stored your garments and jewels in this?”

Nandini kept the sword back into the chest and said, “Yes, I have had it for a long time. This is the most precious jewel that I keep in this chest, to save my honour and my husband’s glory,”

“But you will have no occasion to use it, not when I am alive,”

“That’s why I hardly take this sword out. I know that you guard this empire. I know that you will protect me, always. But when you are away from this sword protects me.”

“Devi, I still see no need for this sword... but leave it alone, I am determined never to be separated from you,”

“My Lord, that’s what I desire but this one time, I think you will need to leave me here and go to Thanjavur,”

“What’s this? Why are you so adamant and stubborn about this?” asked Pazhuvetarayar with his eyebrows knitting together in anger.

“My Lord, there are two reasons for this. If you were to take me along with you, these fools will find more reason to ridicule us. They will say that this old man can’t leave his queen behind for even one minute. I will not be a mute spectator to such slander any more. The second reason is much more important. You have been believing until now that Sambuvarayar is a friend of yours but have you noticed the way he has been behaving since the Prince arrived here?”

“Yes, I have noticed it but I don’t know the reason for the same,”

“You are baffled by his behaviour because there is no guile in your heart but I am not surprised that he would change like this. It is his greed that is making him behave thus. Prince Aditya Karikalan is well-known for the respect that he shows women and his honourable behaviour towards them but ever since he came here we have seen little evidence about it. He is forever found in the company of women charming and dallying with them. The reason for this is that he has fallen in love with Manimegalai. Didn’t he ask Sambuvarayar whether he could take Manimegalai along for the hunt? Sambuvarayar too has been noticing all this and is fast making other arrangements that would suit his ambition. He wishes to forget the plans that we have made and is now conspiring to make his daughter the empress of Chola Kingdom...”

“Yes, you must be right. That must be the reason. I never thought that the man who I considered my friend for so long would behave in such a low manner. Just a few months ago we pledged and made a vow to install Madhuranthakan as the next emperor. How could he do this?”

“My Lord, that’s why I am not coming with you now. In your absence, if these people hatch a plot, I would here to counter it,”

“Nandini, why do you wish to entangle yourself in these affairs,”

“Shouldn’t a wife help the husband when they need it. That’s why we are called ‘life partner’,”

“Even then, I can’t abandon you amidst these fools. My heart won’t allow it. You will be alone, lonely with nary a support,”

“I am not without any support. Manimegalai is there. She will do anything for me,”

“I have noticed it but for how long will you have such a hold on her. What if Karikalan entices her away from you, saying that he will make her an empress,”

“You need not worry about that. Manimegalai will not act against my wishes. She is devoted to me so completely that if I were to ask her to ‘kill Karikalan’ she would do so without any hesitation. Would you like to put her to test?”

Pazhuvetarayar became anxious, his lips started trembling and his voice faltered when he said, “Devi, please don’t do anything like this, especially where Karikalan is concerned. He is but a small boy and whatever babbles is no consequence to us and let’s not take everything that he says seriously. If he wishes to wed Manimegalai, I have no objections to it...”

“Ayya, we may not object to their wedding but there is something called fate. No one can escape it. Just as Manimegalai is devoted to me, I too have love and affection for that girl. I look upon her as my own sister. That’s why I don’t think I would allow her to marry someone who is doomed to die young,” declared Nandini with eyes looking at something afar.

Her words only made Pazhuvetarayar extremely anxious, he said, “Nandini, what is this? I was once the head of Velkarar army in Thanjavur and I have sworn a vow that I will serve the Chola Dynasty and sacrifice my life to save theirs,”

“Ayya, I have never asked you to break this vow of yours,”

“True, but if Karikalan is endangered because of you, I will be the one to bear that shame. People will say that the ‘old man couldn’t stand being ridiculed’ and killed the Prince in anger. And the honour of our clan will be lost,”

“If that is so, it is imperative that you leave this place immediately,”

“Why do you say that?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you this. You know that Goddess Durga has given me powers of intuition that allows me to discern secrets that lie

within one's heart. Didn't I find out that Sundara Chola was guilty of killing a woman when he was young? Didn't I prove it to you?

I now know that death is nearing Aditya Karikalan. It will not happen through your hands or mine but there is no way to stall what's written in fate. Death might come to him while he is hunting in the woods through an arrow that was aimed wrong by his own friends or through a dagger borne by the delicate hands of a woman. But I promise you that it will not occur through my hands.

When I was abandoned and orphaned, you sheltered and gave me the protection of your name, your clan. The least that I could do is not to bring slander to your reputation. That's why I don't want you here. If something happens to Karikalan when you are here, people around us will blame you for it. Didn't they blame Arulmozhi's untimely death on your head? In the same way, they might try to hold you responsible for this as well. They will ask as to why you couldn't stop the prince from endangering himself.

You can't protect him. You can't save him. The only prudent thing that you can do is to leave this place now. If you were to take me along with you, they will raise questions about it. They will say that you knew the dangers and abandoned the prince to it. That's why you need to go alone. I will ensure that your clan and reputation are safe. Ayya, do you trust me?" said Nandini and trained her seductive eyes on the old man.

Poor Pazhuvetarayar! Nandini's predictions about danger made him anxious and her seductive allure was such that he couldn't say anything to counter her wishes.





Chapter 40: Water games

600 years ago, before this story began, apart from dynasties such as Chola, Chera and Pandya, seven kings held power in different regions of the south and had the right to prefix the title ‘Vallal’ to their names. Of them, the King of Kolli Malai was known for his archery skills. Just as one of Rama’s arrow could pierce through seven trees and find its target, one arrow sent by Ori arrow would kill a tiger, a deer, a wild boar and a rabbit! Many poets have sung about Ori’s prowess in archery and he was known as ‘Villen Oriyin’.

Those were times when kingdoms were in constant strife with one another. The Cheras of that period were not happy with Ori. They sought the help of Thirukovalur clan’s king Malayaman Thirumudikari to subjugate Ori. Thirumudikari was a powerful warrior with a large army. He was probably the only man who could stand up to Ori’s valour. Kari took his army up to Kolli Malai and destroyed his mountain fort and vanquished Ori.

Next to Kolli Malai, Adhigamaan Nedumanji ruled over his mountain kingdom and he was also a kinsman to Ori. He wished to seek revenge from Kari for destroying Ori’s kingdom. Knowing that it would be impossible to do it alone, he approached Chola King Killivalavan for help. Killivalavan who was apprehensive of Kari’s rising power and his friendship with Cheras joined hands with Adhigamaan and attacked him. Kari dies in the war and his two young sons are captured by the Cholas, who were determined to put an end to his lineage. They buried the children on the ground and were planning to let the elephants crush their heads. Just before the punishment was to be meted, a poet came there to plead for their lives.

“King! Take a look at their faces. Look at them smiling even when they are facing death. They are amused by the elephant and are looking at it with

such smiles. They know not that they are staring at their own death. How could you kill these children? What crime have they committed? Would you punish them for the actions of their father?"

The Chola King changed his mind after the poet's plea and spared the lives of the children and years later, he gave back the territory that he had won to Kari's eldest son and instated him as the King.

Since then, the Malayaman clan have claimed friendship with the Chola dynasty. Their relation strengthened into kinship when Sundara Chola married Vanamadevi who was the daughter of the present-day Malayaman.

Though Ori and Adhigamaan's clan was destroyed, many claimed kinship with them and asserted that they were related to them. One such clan was Sambuvarayar. They didn't stop at that. They still treated Malayaman as their foe and didn't forget the slights that were given to their clan 600 years ago.

This was one of the many reasons why he didn't support Aditya Karikalan's ascension to the throne. He was, after all, Malayaman's grandson. Aditya Karikalan's brash and impertinent behaviour didn't endear him to Sambuvarayar and he didn't hesitate to join Madhuranthakan's camp and support his claim.

But ever since Aditya Karikalan came to Kadambur, Sambuvarayar's heart had undergone a change. It was Manimegalai who caused this change. He suspected that Aditya Karikalan had fallen in love with Manimegalai. He had a reputation of staying away from women and many even claimed that he had sworn not to marry. But ever since he came to Kadambur, he was often found in the company of women, flirting and dallying with them. He also commented a lot about Manimegalai's charming and delightful behaviour. He noted that Manimegalai too seemed happy and joyful since the arrival of Karikalan. Sambuvarayar observed them every day and was convinced that his surmise was correct. If Karikalan were to marry Manimegalai, his darling daughter would be the empress of the Chola Kingdom and the son born to them would be the next emperor. And the respect and clout that Malayaman commanded today, would be his for taking.

Why should we be an obstacle to our ascent to power? He thought.

Sambuvarayar had earlier agreed to marry Manimegalai to Madhuranthakan but he was already married to Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's daughter and had a

son through her. If Madhuranthakan becomes the next emperor, Chinna Pazhuvetarayar's daughter would become the empress and her son who would next ascend the throne and Pazhuvetarayar clan would be more powerful than it already is. And Manimegalai would be one among the many wives that Madhuranthakan would marry.

But if Manimegalai were to marry Aditya Karikalan, she would be the next empress and her son would ascend the throne after him. Madhuranthakan's ascension to the throne was fraught with troubles and obstacles. The people were against him. Malayaman and Kodumbalur Vellar were against it. His own mother was against the idea.

Then why should we undertake such an onerous task?

Aditya Karikalan was the Crown Prince of Chola Kingdom. It was an arrangement that can become a reality without any difficulty. The Pazhuvur brothers would naturally oppose but Sambuvarayar did not set much store on their power. Periya Pazhuvetarayar was caught in the seductive allure of a woman and it would indeed be foolishness to believe his words and plan a conspiracy. Though he had sworn a solemn pledge to stand with Madhuranthakan and help him ascend the throne, he could easily sidestep it. Madhuranthakan did not have a forceful personality. He could be easily convinced to say, 'I don't want the kingdom'. If that doesn't work, insisting on his mother's approval would do the trick.

Thus things stood with Sambuvarayar and when it was proposed that Pazhuvetarayar should go to Thanjavur to bring Madhuranthakan, he wholeheartedly agreed to it. He wished to use that opportunity to speak to Karikalan in private and know his thoughts about alliance and marriage. Therefore, he hastened to make all the arrangements for Pazhuvetarayar's travel to Thanjavur.

After Pazhuvetarayar left, Karikalan and his friends left for their hunt. Sambuvarayar was more than willing to send Manimegalai and other women from his anthapuram but Kandanmaran who was looking at these events from a different perspective objected to it.

He believed that Karikalan's interest in Manimegalai was an excuse to be near Nandini Devi. Therefore, his hatred towards the Prince increased. He declared, 'What will we do by taking women on the hunt? We will have to slow down to check what they are up to and whether they are safe? This is

the month of Aipasi^[31] and it might rain at any time. And if we get caught in the woods in the rain, the women would have to suffer hardship.’

Sambuvarayar couldn’t really counter Kandanmaran here, so he gracefully accepted and sent the Prince and his friends along with the huntsmen to the forest.

After the men left, the Kadambur palace seemed still and silent. Nandini told Manimegalai, “When the men are about, they are such a nuisance but now that they are gone, we seem to miss them. We have no one to joke around,”

“Yes Akka, that’s true. I love going on the hunt. I have gone hunting with my brother and father many times. But I don’t know why Kandanmaran adamantly refused to take me along this time. Maybe he thought that you don’t like hunting, so he didn’t allow me to go as well,”

“Yes, I don’t like to go on hunts. I can’t stand the blood and the gore. But Kandanmaran didn’t allow you to come for that reason. He probably wants to keep you away from one person,”

Manimegalai blushed and remained silent for a while. “Let the men go wherever they want. Akka, shall we go to Nirazhi mandapam in Veera Narayana Dam and play water games? Will you come?”

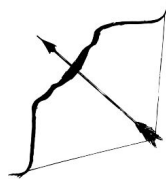
Nandini agreed to her suggestion and Manimegalai asked her father to make the arrangements.

On the other end of the Veera Narayana dam, the water level was not very high. So a few islands dotted the landscape bordered by thickly wooded forest. The islands too had many trees and was a very pleasant place to spend time. Women from Kadambur anthapuram went there often, so a Nirazhi mandapam was built for their convenience. Here they would spend some time in the open, playing water games and other amusement. To reach the place, they had to take a boat and row around the dam. And since it was well-known in the region that women from Kadambur palace came there, not many people ventured there.

Nandini and Manimegalai came to the Nirazhi mandapam in a boat rowed by two handmaidens who also brought food to cook lunch. Once they reached the mandapam, the women set up a kitchen and started cooking. Nandini and Manimegalai sat in the steps of the mandapam and spent the day gossiping.

Manimegalai was mischievous by nature. She entertained Nandini by mimicking Pazhuvetarayar, Aditya Karikalan, Kandanmaran, Parthibendran, Vandiya Devan and made her laugh. Despite the distraction that Manimegalai provided Nandini seemed engrossed in thoughts that seemed to overwhelm her.

While they were engaged thus, Manimegalai suddenly got up and said, “Akka, we didn’t go for the hunt, but the hunt has come searching for us,” and took her dagger out. Nandini startled out of her thoughts looked at the direction where she was pointing. It was a large tree and on it was a tiger and it seemed to contemplate whether to jump on them or not. At the same time, they could also hear a few horses coming towards them.



Chapter 41: Kariklan’s mad hunt

Karikalan had earlier remarked that he had forgotten how to use his bow but those who had gone with him on the hunt didn’t think so. Caught by the hunting fever, he hunted many animals that day and never missed his target even once. Countless deer, bears, tigers died that day and when he couldn’t spot any wild animal he trained his arrows on eagles and kites. With each passing hour, Karikalan’s hunting fever mounted and attained its peak.

His companions didn’t have much to do. He didn’t even allow them to use their weapons. Once when Kandanmaran took down a bear that was poised to attack Karikalan with his arrow, the Prince turned towards him and

asked, “Kandanmara, were you trying to kill the bear or me?” Startled and shocked by his words, Kandanmara controlled himself with much difficulty. He didn’t pick up his arms after that. By the time the sun was at its zenith, everyone was exhausted and wanted a respite from the heat but Karikalan had no such thought. He kept urging his horse through the woods in search of hunt.

In the morning when they began the hunt, Kandanmaran had stayed close to the Prince. When the Prince aired his suspicions about his intent, he moved away from him and joined Parthibendran who was behind. Kandanmaran complained to him about the Prince’s harsh words and behaviour and Parthibendran tried to calm him down.

At this juncture, Vandiya Devan neared Karikalan. He didn’t have a bow and arrow as he was not skilled in archery but he had got his spear and sword. He stayed close to the Prince and didn’t interfere in his hunt but stayed alert with his spear in his hand. He didn’t find any cause to use it until the evening.

Kandanmaran told Parthibendran, “Hasn’t he hunted enough for today? It looks like he might kill all the animals in these woods. I think only Kolli Malai has enough animals to feed his hunting frenzy. Please tell him that this is enough for today and that we should return home,”

Parthibendran said, “The Prince is trying to deal with the situation in his own way. Giving up a large kingdom like this is not easy and not everyone can do it. He is being aggressive in the hunt and is showing his rage and anger on these animals. If not, he would take it out on ‘you’ and ‘me’. Let him get on with it and until he feels tired and exhausted let’s not stop him,” Just then a piercing scream of an animal was heard. Kandanmaran stopped his horse and listened to it intently. For the first time, a hint of fear could be seen in his face. He immediately neared Parthibendran and said, “It’s a wild boar! Ask the Prince to stop,”

“Why do you fear a wild boar so much? Didn’t you see how the tigers and bears have fared in the Prince’s hands,”

“You don’t know about the wild boars in this region. They can bring down an elephant, kill a tiger and not get harmed in any way. Their skin is very thick and arrows can’t pierce it...” saying thus, he turned his horse and shouted for the Prince, “Ayya, stop, please stop”

Just then, two wild boars emerged from the thickets and stood watching the men in the horse menacingly. Kandanmaran reined his horse and issued warnings asking them to keep still. A few huntsmen who were with them started playing their war drums and shouted as though their life depended on it. The boars looked at them for a while and then turned tail and ran in two different directions.

Kandanmaran relieved in the face of averted danger said, “My Prince, it is impossible to hunt wild boars without a few hunting dogs,” Karikalan ignored his words and aimed an arrow on one of the boars. When the arrow found its aim, he celebrated with a shout but the next second, the boar jiggled its body and the arrow fell down. Watching this, Kandanmaran laughed derisively.

Karikalan turned towards him and said, “Kandanmara! How about a bet? Vandiya Devan and I will hunt this boar. You and Parthibendran can hunt the other. Let’s see who wins. We are not returning home without them,”

Saying thus, he urged his horse to chase the boar and Vandiya Devan followed him. They followed the trail of the wild boar through the thickets and woods for a while and then came upon a water canal that drained the rainwater into the dam. The boar’s trail ended here and they couldn’t find out in which direction it went.

Standing near the water drain, they could see the large vista of Veera Narayana dam and a boat rowed by women. The boat was too far to discern who was in it. At first, it seemed as though the boat was coming towards them but it soon changed direction and went towards one of the many small islands and after a while, they couldn’t see it anymore.

“Vallava! Who was on the boat? It looked as though women were rowing it?”

“Yes, they were women but beyond that, I couldn’t see anything else,”

“Do you think the women were from Kadambur Palace?”

“They could be but why would they come all the way here?”

“Yes... that is right. Why would they come here? Are you sure that Pazhuvetarayar left for Thanjavur in the morning?”

“Yes. I saw it myself,”

“And he left alone. His queen is still at Kadambur right?”

“Yes, the old man left alone. Nandini Devi did not go with him,”

“Where will we see another brave warrior like this old man. Even my own grandsire can’t hold his own before him,”

“Ayya, I have heard the glories of these old men from others but I have been fortunate to see your valour in battle and also in Kadambur palace. Both old and young men are thinking twice before they open their mouth in your presence,”

“That’s true. But now that the moment for which I have been waiting for long is here, I am terrified and trembling in my limbs. There is no bigger coward than me,”

“Prince, I disagree. You were not afraid of anything a moment ago when you were hunting wild animals,”

“Do you think you need a lot of courage to hunt a few wild dogs and tigers? Vallava, listen to me, my trick worked and Pazhuvetarayar left Nandini and went to Thanjavur. But I am still nervous about meeting her,”

“Ayya, there is a reason for that. So long, you have been thinking about Nandini Devi in a certain way but now that you have learned that she is your ‘sister’, it is but natural that you are feeling awkward. She is determined to seek vengeance against your family and has joined the Pandya conspirators. I understand that it is difficult, to tell the truth. I had an opportunity to do that but I couldn’t make use of it,”

“My friend, you have revealed many shocking secrets right from the time you arrived. I still find it difficult to believe them. But when I think about the past, I can see how many things were shrouded. There was also a veil of secrecy around Nandini’s past and Sembiyanmadevi used to forbid me to talk to her or even meet her. If she had probably revealed why, then all this could have been avoided...”

“Maybe Sembiyanmadevi didn’t know the whole truth. She probably didn’t know that it was Sundara Chola who fathered Nandini Devi,”



Chapter 42: She is not a woman!

Karikalan stood still for a while immersed in his childhood memories which overwhelmed his senses and rendered him helpless and vulnerable. He sighed aloud and said, "Let's not discuss the past, we need to decide what we will do now. That's why I brought you alone here. We have lost the bet. The boar has vanished. What do we do now?"

He sighed again and continued.

"Vallava! I am scared of telling Nandini the truth about her parentage. I am not able to look at her in the face and whenever I do, I am reminded of how she had pleaded with me for the life of Veera Pandyan. Her eyes are sharper than any sword that I have ever seen. I can't believe that my own sister fell in love with Veera Pandyan and pleaded for his life and I refused her. Vallava, do you think she doesn't know the truth? Do you think she doesn't know that she is Sundara Chola's daughter?"

"My Prince, if she knew the truth, then why would she stand with the Pandya assassins and help their cause? Why would she crown a young boy as the Pandya Emperor and promise to stand by him and destroy the Cholas? This is what she did at Thirupurambiyam forest..."

"I am surprised that Nandini allowed you to escape even after seeing all this,"

"Ayya, there is nothing surprising about it. She pitied me,"

"Vallavareya! You are still innocent where women are concerned. You do not know the deception that they are capable of. I know not why she allowed you to escape but I do know why she invited me here,"

"My Lord, what reason could it be?"

"To avenge the death of Veera Pandyan by killing me,"

"Ayya, that's why your sister Princess Kundavai and the Prime Minister sent me here but they also asked you not to come here but you didn't listen to them..."

"Vallavareya! Kundavai and the Prime Minister are very intelligent but even they can't win over fate and change my destiny. Maybe that's why the astrologers were so sure that Arulmozhi would one day rule the world. Tell me something, did you see Kandanmaran aiming with his arrow? Was he aiming at the bear or at me?"

"I didn't notice him at all but he is not capable of such treason. He would never hurt a guest who has come to his home and that too the Emperor's

son. That said, I do have great doubts about his intelligence. I saved his life when he was stabbed in the back but the minute he woke up he blamed me for trying to kill him! He still thinks that it was 'I' who tried to kill him. But I don't think he would act treasonously and kill you..."

"My friend, you don't know how powerful a seductive woman can be and the depths to which a man can fall just to please her desire,"

"Ayya, I have learned a lot about the power that a woman can wield but that's not going to turn me into a traitor,"

"Aha! Manimegalai is a good girl, she would never ask you to do anything treasonous,"

"Ayya, I was not referring to Manimegalai. Those who have seen the full moon, will not find fireflies attractive,"

"Who are comparing with the full moon?"

"My Prince, please don't get angry. It is Princess Kundavai,"

"You upstart! How dare you think about my sister thus? Kings and Prince from all over the world are vying for her hand and you dare to think about her thus?"

"Ayya, be it a poor man or a king, anyone can enjoy the full moon's beauty..."

"Yes... I knew that this would happen when I sent you to her. And it looks like she is pleased with you as well. But don't mention this to Parthibendran. He is hoping to wed her and become Chola dynasty's son-in-law,"

"That might be true in the past but now Parthibendran and Kandanmaran are ready to do anything to please Nandini Devi,"

"Yes, I have noticed that. That's why I am becoming worried about them,"

"I feel that it would be best If you could meet Nandini Devi and tell the truth as soon as possible,"

"My friend, I don't think I will ever find the courage to talk to her about it. Why don't you tell her?"

"Ayya, I don't think Nandini Devi will believe anything I say. I escaped from Thanjavur without telling her and since then she distrusts me,"

"How will I meet Nandini then? She will be in the Anthapuram..."

"Ayya, we can use Manimegalai's help for this. I can arrange for it,"

“Looks like you have charmed Manimegalai to assist you. It would please me greatly to wed her to you.”

“Ayya, I consider Manimegalai as my own sister. I believe that the stars have a more fortunate alliance for her...”

“What are you talking about?”

“I think that Manimegalai has captured a place in your heart. I revealed my heart’s desire a few moments ago, deliberately. If there is someone who I believe would equal Princess Kundavai in beauty, grace and intelligence, it would be Manimegalai. If you were to marry her, all our troubles would end. Sambuvarayar and Kandanmaran would become our allies, the Pazhuvur brothers would become alienated and Nandini Devi’s schemes would turn to dust. Madhuranthaka Devar will stop dreaming about ruling the kingdom and it would be a masterstroke against the conspiracy of all the other kings and that of the Pandya assassins as well,”

“You are right but I didn’t come here to get married. I think that some great danger is approaching us. When Periya Pazhuvetarayar comes back here with Madhuranthakan, he would bring his army along with him,”

“Ayya, if that is so, then it would be prudent to send a message to Thirukkovalur Malayaman and ask him to come with his army,”

“You know, what I really want to do with these petty kings. I want to raze Kadambur palace to the ground and put to death all these kings who dared to conspire against the emperor. I can’t do it only because my father is in their custody. If only you had been able to bring him to Kanchi...”

“My Prince, it took considerable cunning and effort to get your message to the Emperor...”

“Yes.... The Emperor is in their clutches. I built a beautiful gold palace for them in Kanchi and today bats reside there. I don’t know whether I will live long enough to welcome them there. I wonder whether I would leave this Kadambur palace alive,”

“Prince, your apprehensions are valid and I think that we should get Malayaman’s troops here as soon as possible,”

“I am thinking I will send you there with a message,”

“Ayya, forgive me but I am under orders from your sister, not to leave you alone for even a minute,”

“Well, you seem to be fulfilling her wishes completely,”

“Parthibendra Pallavan is sitting here idle. He is becoming listless and bored with every passing hour,”

“Yes, he is finding it difficult to live without seeing the Pazhuvur queen. I never dreamt that he would become such a slave to beauty. Yes, he would be the right choice to send a message to Malayaman,”

“A prudent decision, my Prince,”

“In his absence, if some danger befalls me, you are there to help...”

“Prince, I don’t think there is anyone in this world brave enough to cause you any harm. All these old men who wished to set you aside are now afraid to open their mouth in your presence.”

“Thambi, I am not scared of any man who would draw his sword in front of me. I am worried about friends who would try to stab in the back, like Kandanmaran,”

“Ayya, you are still doubting Kandanmaran?”

“Listen to me Thambi, I am scared about the poisonous depths that a woman would descend to seek her revenge. I tremble whenever Nandini looks at me mysteriously trying to glean all my secrets with a mere glance,”

“Ayya, I agree that we need to be afraid of Nandini Devi’s schemes. I have had the opportunity to learn the extent of her hate and what she is prepared to do to seek her vengeance. Sometimes, I wonder as to why she allowed me to escape and worry that she did so deliberately to fulfil some plan of hers. But once she learns the truth, we need not fear anymore. Once she knows that you are her brother, she won’t conspire against you,”

“Really? You think so. You are clever Vallava, but where women are concerned you have no experience. If Nandini learns that she is the daughter of Emperor Sundara Chola, her anger would know no bounds. Even if we were to promise the throne of Chola Kingdom, she will not forgive us...”

“My Prince, If you truly think thus, then I will take the responsibility of telling Nandini Devi and will try to soothe her anger,”

“It would be impossible for you, my friend. There is only way one out of this situation. If we have to save the Chola dynasty, either I have to die or she has to die. Or we both have to die. I will kill her with Veera Pandyan’s sword and rid this Kingdom of the danger...”

“My Prince, What are you talking thus?”

“Vallava, what’s wrong with what I am saying? What’s wrong in killing one person who poses a danger to countless people? What’s wrong in killing them, if even she is just a woman. She is no woman, she is a fiend, a ghoul. A beautiful seductive ghoul. If we don’t kill her, she alone will be responsible for the destruction of this kingdom, that my ancestors bled to create... aha! What’s that?” said Karikalan and pointed to something at a distance.

Something was happening in the shrubs at a far off point. Karikalan and Vandiya Devan set off there with their horses and found the wild boar and a tiger engaged in a fierce fight.

“Ah! The wild boar is here,” said Karikalan.

“Looks like the tiger is going to get our prey,”

“You think so? Wait and watch,” said Karikalan.

The fight between both the wild animals was ferocious and fierce. The tiger pounced on the boar and tried to tear it into pieces with its sharp nails but the scaly thick skin of the wild boar remained unaffected. The boar tried to pin the tiger down and dragged it around the shrubs. The boar’s nails damaged the tiger gravely and it fell to the ground looking dead.

“Thambi, the tiger is dead, the boar will turn its attention on us. We must be ready for it,” said Karikalan and aimed his arrow.

The arrow found its aim but it didn’t harm the boar in any way. The beast shook its body and the arrow fell down. The boar now started running towards Karikalan’s horse and attacked the front legs. The horse buckled down and Karikalan was stuck under its weight when the boar started attacking them again.





Chapter 43: Where is the tiger?

When Aditya Karikalan got stuck under the horse, Vandiya Devan rode his horse towards the boar and struck it with his spear but it didn't cause much harm to it. Apart from grazing its skin, the boar was able to deflect the attack deftly by shuddering its body. The force of its action was such that Vandiya Devan dropped the spear and the boar turned its attention on him.

Aditya Karikalan was still stuck under the horse and couldn't help him. He rode his horse towards a tree whose branches were low hanging and clung to them allowing his horse to escape. With great effort, he managed to climb onto the tree and stand on one of its branches. Now the wild boar stood between Vandiya Devan's tree and the horse under which Aditya Karikalan was still lying, trying to decide who to attack.

Aditya Karikalan was trying to extricate himself from under the horse but even if he were to come out it was doubtful if he could withstand the attack of the mad wild boar. He had no weapons in his hand and he could have been injured when the horse fell on him. So Vandiya Devan decided to buy him some time, he shook the tree on which he was perched and made wild sounds.

His idea worked. The wild boar enraged by the sounds that he made, attacked the tree.

Good! Let it attack the tree!

Even while he was thinking thus, the branch on which he was standing started to break. Vandiya Devan tried to reach out to another branch which was high up on the tree but could manage to clutch with only one hand. The branch broke and now he was clinging to his life with just one hand on a branch. If he fell down the wild boar would immediately sink its teeth into him and that would be end of his dreams. Swaying wildly, Vandiya Devan saw his entire life flashing in front of his eyes.

That's it I am going to fall and will probably die instantly. At least I will die attempting to save Aditya Karikalan's life. When Princess Kundavai hears it, she would be happy that I tried to save the Prince's life. And when she learns that I died, won't she shed tears for me? That's when a loud sound was heard and his hand slipped from the branch and he lost consciousness.

He regained consciousness when Aditya Karikalar sprinkled some water on his face. He sat up immediately and said, "Ayya, you survived! Thank God!"

"Yes, thanks to you, I survived,"

"What happened to the wild boar?"

"There..." said Karikalan and pointed at a distance where the beast lay dead.

Vandiya Devan looked at it for a while and said, "My God! Such a small creature and yet so strong and brainless! Kandanmaran was right about it. How did you kill it?"

"I didn't kill it. You and your spear were the ones that killed it,"

Vandiya Devan didn't understand and looked at the Prince with a lost expression.

"You have used my spear to save yourself but I didn't do anything to help. I was utterly useless to you in the face of danger,"

"When you were shouting yourself senseless on the tree, I had extricated myself from under the horse and picked up your spear. I attacked the poor boar and channelled all my anger and frustration into killing it. Even then, it didn't die. You slipped from the branch and fell on it and it died because of the shock," said Karikalan and laughed uproariously.

Vandiya Devan joined him and laughed. "I fell on the boar, that's why I didn't injure myself. I will now believe when people say that Maha Vishnu became a wild boar^[32] to kill Hiranyaksha. My God! What a wild creature!"

"Don't compare this small creature with the Great Varaha Avatara of Maha Vishnu. I believe in the jungles of the north there is a wild boar with a single horn which is as big as an elephant. If you were attacked by that creature then it would have destroyed the tree where you sought refuge,"

"Yes, the tree would have fallen down and then it would have attacked you and our enemies would have an easy victory in their hands,"

“Thambi, tell me the truth. When I fell, you hurled your spear, did you throw it on the boar or on me?”

Incensed by his question, Vandiya Devan asked, “Are you really asking this question? If you are, then there was no need to save me after you killed the boar. You could have easily killed me too,”

“Yes, you are right. I shouldn’t be suspecting you. If you had not diverted the boar while on the tree, it might have attacked me. These days, I can’t help but suspect everyone around me. I feel as though death is dogging my steps, ready to pounce on me at any moment. I thought that Yama has come in the form of this boar to claim my life...”

“If that’s so, then you have vanquished Yama. That’s not all we have also won the bet. Shall we leave now?”

“Yes, we have to leave, but what’s the hurry, let’s rest here for a while,”

“I have never heard you say that you are tired. You must have found it difficult to extricate yourself from under the horse,”

“That’s nothing. I am heartsick, that’s all. Do we have to go all the way through the woods again and join those fools? Do you think it would be possible to reach Kadambur Palace by crossing this dam?”

“My God! You want to swim across this dam. Did you perchance save my life from the boar just to drown me?”

“I know that you can’t swim well. Even I can’t swim across this big dam. I was wondering if we could borrow the boat that we saw a while ago,”

“What about the horses? How can we abandon them in the woods at the mercy of the wild animals?” asked Vandiya Devan

That’s when he remembered with a start, “Ayya, where is the tiger?”

“I completely forgot about it. Look around you, it might be hiding somewhere to attack us. Yama might have come in the form of the tiger as well,”

Both the men started looking around them carefully and had their weapons in hand. After a while, Vandiya Devan pointed at a distance.

The drain where they were standing became a narrow canal of water at a distance. A large tree had fallen down giving the tiger access to one of the islands on the dam. As they watched the tiger progress they could only think about the women who they had seen a while ago.

“Aha! Those women in the boat,” said Karikalan.

“They must have gone to the island nearby,” said Vandiya Devan.

“A wounded tiger is a very dangerous creature,” said the Prince.

“Let’s kill the tiger too and take it along with us,”

“How do we cross this canal? The horses can’t walk on that fallen tree,”

“The water is not that deep here, we can go on the horses,”

Both their horses were grazing together. They got on it immediately and started towards the canal. Though the water level was less, there was a lot of mud and slime. The horses had to carefully navigate through it.

Vandiya Devan was instantly reminded of the quicksand that he encountered in Kodikarai and Illangai. When he mentioned it to the Prince, he said, “You talk about the mud that you find outside, what about the mud inside our hearts? Once we muddle our way towards evil, do you think we can ever come out of it?” That’s when Vandiya Devan realized that the Prince’s mind was as muddled as the mud.

They crossed the water carefully and kept their weapons ready. Karikalan had his bow and arrow and Vandiya Devan had his spear poised to attack. They soon heard the screaming of the women, “Amma! Amma! Tiger!”

Just when Manimegalai saw the tiger on the tree, one of the handmaidens who was cooking for them also saw it and raised a shout. Their wails flustered the men and they urged the horses to gallop through the waters. As the waters bent a curve, they could see a frightening scene unfold before them.

Nandini and Manimegalai were in the shallow waters of the island and the tiger was approaching them from above a tree. The tiger was gravely wounded when it duelled with the boar and was at the verge of dying but neither the men nor the women knew this. The tiger looked as though it would pounce on the women. Vandiya Devan hesitated to hurl his spear.

What if it missed its aim and wounded the women!

Karikalan had no such hesitation. He aimed an arrow on the tiger and let it loose. It found its aim and hit the belly of the tiger. The next instant, the tiger pounced from the tree.

Confusion reigned for a few minutes. The women fell into the water along with the tiger and after sometime, they surfaced at different locations.

Blood and water could be seen flowing in the water.



Chapter 44: Love and accusation

The men saw the tiger and the women disappear in the water with trepidation and jumped from their horses. They ran towards the shore of the island. By then, the tiger was floating away from the women and it looked as though it was dead. The men jumped into the water and started swimming towards the women.

At first, Vandiya Devan started swimming towards Manimegalai because he was scared to go near Nandini. Manimegalai was not hurt, she had merely fallen into the water on impact when the tiger pounced on them and had become breathless. When she noticed Vandiya Devan approaching her, she became elated and closed her eyes tightly.

She didn't see Karikalan stopping Vandiya Devan and sending him towards Nandini. She didn't know that it was Karikalan who had brought her ashore and laid her down on the steps of the mandapam. When he checked whether she was breathing, she opened her eyes slowly wanting to tell Vandiya Devan the love that she felt in her heart for him. She was naturally shocked to find that it was Prince Karikalar who had saved her. She immediately moved away from him and the disappointment that reflected in her face prompted Karikalan to laugh.

“Manimegalai, what is this? Do you find me so unpleasant and disgusting?”

“Ayya, when a stranger touches me, won't I feel shy?”

“Manimegalai, you are calling me a stranger and at Kadambur, your people are taking great pains to get us married,”

“Prince, if their attempt is successful only then you will not be a stranger,”

“True, but you can tell me if you are interested in marrying me or not,”

Manimegalai thought over his words for a while and said, “Ayya, you are the scion of Chola dynasty. You have seen the world and know many things. I am but a small girl, who knows nothing. How can you ask me this question? Shouldn't you ask my father?”

“Girl, if your father agrees to our match, would you say ‘yes’?”

“If my father agrees and if he asks me, I will tell him my answer. I am feeling shy to talk to you about this. You saved me from the tiger, that’s why I have been so patient in answering your questions,”

Karikalan laughed again at her answer and said, “Manimegalai, you are very clever but you got tricked so don’t you try to fool me,”

“Ayya, what are you saying? How can I fool you?”

“If Vandiya Devan had brought you ashore, would you be arguing with him like this? You thought that I was Vandiya Devan and closed your eyes. Poor thing, when you opened your eyes you saw me instead,”

Manimegalai bent her head shyly and said, “Prince, now that you know your heart, why do you ask me?”

“Manimegalai, I know how you feel but I also know how Vandiya Devan feels. I don’t think he deserves your pure love. Look at Vandiya Devan and Nandini. See how happy the Pazhuvur queen is, to be rescued by him,”

Manimegalai looked at them and for the first time in her life, felt jealous.

Nandini and Vandiya Devan were indeed conversing at the shore of the dam. Nandini was bleeding from her shoulder where the tiger’s paw had scratched her. Unlike Manimegalai, Nandini didn’t close her eyes and nor was she in a tearing hurry to leave Vandiya Devan’s arms. But Vandiya Devan couldn’t hold her long and kept her down as though he was carrying a bag of hot coals.

Rescuing her like this had disturbed his equilibrium and he was flustered and agitated like never before.

Seeing him thus, Nandini asked, “Ayya, why are you so disturbed? What is wrong? Did you perchance confuse me with the tiger? Were you planning to rescue the tiger and saved me by mistake?”

“Devi, don’t say such words. I am just disturbed by the fact that I had to touch you...”

“Those who have a guilty heart will get disturbed,”

“Devi, what crime am I guilty of?”

“You are asking me? When you wanted to enter the fort of Thanjavur, I helped you by giving you the signet ring from my hand. Later when you secretly entered my anthapuram, I helped you to escape but you saw it fit to

leave without even seeking my permission. You also made a false promise saying that you will come to me after meeting Princess Kundavai but you don't fulfil it. Aren't these crimes?"

"I agree but there are many valid reasons for my actions. You need to understand that I serve Prince Karikalar and therefore bound by his orders."

"True. It looks like you need his orders even to save a poor woman's life from the tiger. I couldn't help but notice that the Prince spared no time in trying to save Manimegalai's life. Maybe he would have been happy if I had drowned. You probably saved my life without learning his wishes,"

"Devi, please don't say that. He came all the way here just to respect your wishes and only because you sent him a message,"

"Yes, but you came rushing to him just to stop him from meeting me, on Kundavai's orders. Your schemes haven't worked here. If you continue to interfere in my plans, you will be disappointed,"

Nandini's words confused him a great deal. He looked at her face to see whether she said all this earnestly but her expressions didn't betray anything. She said all this with a calm smiling face, as ever.

"Your face betrays your guilt. Last Amavasya, you were caught by my men in the woods. I could have had you killed then but I allowed you to escape and you have no gratitude even for that. Truly, I have never met more unthankful person in my life,"

"Devi, I do thank you with all my heart for saving my life,"

"Really! It's been many days since we came to Kadambur and you haven't expressed your 'thanks' to me,"

"I thought I would thank you whenever we meet alone but there was no opportunity,"

"If you really intended to thank me, then you would have created an opportunity. You didn't spare a glance for me ever since you came here,"

"Devi, you are the queen and the devoted wife of Pazhuvur Lord,"

"So, you too are mocking me for marrying an old man,"

"Ayyo! If I mocked you, I would enter the worst of the hells in the world,"

"No matter what you call me, don't say that I am the 'devoted wife' of Pazhuvur Lord. I am not his 'wife',"

"Ayyo! What are you saying?"

“I am saying the truth. If someone forcibly marries a woman and keeps her with them, does she automatically become his ‘wife’ and ‘property’”

“Devi, you were born in the land of Tamil people and I am sure you will never act in a manner that would bring dishonour upon the womenfolk,”

“True. But Tamil women have never succumbed to force and if they truly love someone in their heart, they will remain true to them forever,”

“But you...”

“You are asking me why I agreed to marry the Pazhuvur lord despite all this. That’s because I hold yet another tradition of Tamil women true to my heart. They will never rest until they avenge their enemy. Ayya, you did not help me find my love but you could help me seek vengeance,”

Nandini’s words flustered Vandiya Devan and he didn’t know how to respond.

“Devi, what is this? What do you mean by love and vengeance? What’s the connection between your love and myself? What is the relation between love and vengeance?”

“There is a connection but now is not the time to talk about it. Manimegalai and the Prince are nearing us. Come to my chambers in midnight tomorrow and I will tell you all about it,”

“How is that possible Devi? You are in the anthapuram and how can I come there?”

“Didn’t you escape from that anthapuram? You could enter it in the same way. If you wish to do it, you can,”

Vandiya Devan was amazed and didn’t know what to reply but as always Nandini said all this with a smiling face.





Chapter 45: You are my sister!

The Prince and Manimegalai walked over to where Nandini and Vandiya Devan were standing. Once they came close, Karikalar looked at Nandini and noticed that the tiger had scratched her on her cheek and shoulder and that she was bleeding from her wounds.

“Ayyo! That godforsaken tiger has wounded you,” he exclaimed.

“Yes, but thankfully it wounded only my body and not my heart,”

Her words managed to find its mark and Karikalan found himself unable to say anything else. By then, Manimegalai had come near and was examining her wounds. “Yes, Akka, the tiger seems to have scratched you rather deep. Thankfully we have brought herbs that can heal this. Please come with me,”

“My sister, these wounds are nothing. I have been wounded and healed many times in the body. But is there a medicine by which you can heal the wounds of our soul,”

“Oh! I have that too, Akka. Come with me,” saying thus, she took Nandini with her into the mandapam.

Vandiya Devan and the Prince went near a large tree and sat down on a large rock under it.

“Ayya, the sooner we leave this place, better for us. The longer we stay here, god knows what Sambuvarayar and Kandanmaran might think about us,”

“I don’t really care what they think about us, so long as these women don’t mistake our intent. Once they come back, we can take our leave,”

After some time, Manimegalai and Nandini came out wearing new garments and jewels. The wounds on Nandini’s face and shoulder were tended with sandalwood paste mixed with medicinal herbs.

“We would like to take your leave now,” said the Prince formally.

“You will need to eat your mid-day meal with us and leave or else Sambuvarayar’s daughter will not forgive me,” said Nandini graciously

“Only on one condition, will we stay. Manimegalai has applied a salve for your wounds but she also said that she has medicine for a wounded soul. If

she could tell us what it is, then we will stay,”

“Do you think you can guess what that is, without asking her?”

“Did she perhaps refer to the passage of time that heals our wounds?”

“I don’t think so. There are wounds that even a great passage of time can’t heal,”

“Where women are concerned, there is a great salve for their wounds. Tears!” quipped Vandiya Devan.

“The Prince of Vallam looks for a chance to insult us womenfolk but he is wrong. Some wounds can cause so much pain that a woman can’t even shed tears. Then how can she use it as a balm?”

“Since we both have guessed it wrong, why don’t you tell us the correct answer?”

“Alright. Sister, the medicine that you refer to is music isn’t? Only music has the propensity to heal a wounded soul,”

“Yes, Akka, you are right. But how did you know?”

“I am a sorceress and I know what secrets lie hidden in one’s heart. Ayya, do you both agree that music has the power to heal wounded souls,”

“Yes, you are right. We failed to guess it. I remember Kandanmaran telling me that Manimegalai plays the yazh beautifully...”

“That’s how an ideal brother must be. The Prince of Kadambur praises his sister all the time and they are well-deserved. Manimegalai is indeed very talented and what more she has even got her yazh here. Thankfully now she can play in front of others who can appreciate her music more than me.

Ayya! You saved us from that tiger, allow us to show our gratitude by sharing our meal with us and by listening to Manimegalai’s music. It’s the least that we can do,” insisted Nandini.

Vandiya Devan signalled Karikalan to say ‘no’ to her request but the Prince didn’t notice him.

“Your wish is my command,” said Karikalan.

“Manimegalai, go check whether the food is ready, if not ask them to hurry, Manimegalai immediately got up and went to the mandapam where handmaidens were cooking. Once she left, Vandiya Devan too got up restlessly started looking around. Nandini looked at him for a while and said, “A moment ago, I told you that I have the power to find out what

secrets lie within one's heart. Would you like to test that power? Shall I tell you what lies within Vandiya Devar's heart?"

Karikalan laughed and said, "Go on... I would like to hear."

"He is thinking that it was a big blunder, saving these women from that tiger. If the tiger had devoured them it would have been good..."

Karikalan laughed some more and asked his friend, "Vallava, is that true?"

"No ayya! But I did think about them and the tiger though. I was thinking of how this tiger could have escaped with its life after encountering these women?"

Startled by his words, Karikalan got up and said, "What are you saying thambi? How could the tiger escape again? Didn't we see its body floating in the water?"

"Look over there..." said Vandiya Devan and pointed towards the boat in which the women had come. The tiger had somehow inched its way towards them and was trying to get into it.

"Aha! This tiger is very lucky indeed,"

"Ayya, come along with me, let us kill the beast. A wounded tiger is very dangerous,"

"Prince of Vallam, you and the Chola Prince are formidable warriors. Why should you exert yourself for a poor wounded tiger? Let me call Manimegalai. She has a small dagger on her which can finish the tiger once and for all..."

"My friend, the Pazhuvur queen has great confidence in our bravery. Do I have to come as well? Can't you take care of the tiger on your own?"

"Or I can call Manimegalai..." said Nandini.

"Yes, you can but what if she applies her salve on the tiger's wounds. What will we do then?" saying thus Vandiya Devan picked his weapons.

"What are you thinking?" asked the Prince.

"I was wondering if I should cut the tiger's head and present it to Pazhuvur queen. Maybe then, she will be satisfied," saying thus, Vandiya Devan walked towards the tiger.

"Did you hear what that fool just said? Do we really need a lot of courage to cut the head of a wounded tiger?" asked Karikalan and started laughing but when he noticed Nandini's expression his laughter died down.

“Only you can have something to say about it...” said Nandini and Karikalan’s face flushed with shame and his body shivered.

With his voice tinged in emotion, he said, “Nandini, you sent a message with Kandanmaran. That’s why I came, or else I wouldn’t have come,”

“I am grateful that you paid heed to my request after so many years... I thank you.”

“I thought that you were ready to put the past behind us. I thought that’s why you sent the message...”

“Do you really think we can forget everything that has happened to us? Are you able to forget everything?”

“You are right. It is impossible to forget the past. You asked me a boon with tears streaming through your eyes but like a fool I didn’t grant it to you. I was blinded by my rage and had become a beast. I don’t think I will ever forget it. Why did you call me here?”

“Ayya, you don’t come to Thanjavur. Your father is bed-ridden and ailing and you haven’t come to see him,”

“He is not my father alone...”

“Yes, he is also Princess Kundavai’s and Ponniyin Selvar’s father. But he still yearns to see you. I think someone told him that you don’t come to Thanjavur because of me and since then he has refused to see me. Ayya, why do you wish to harm me, thus? Haven’t you done enough? Should I bear this blame as well?”

“But it is true. I haven’t gone to Thanjavur only because of you...”

“If that is so, then I will leave Thanjavur. You can come there and crown yourself the Emperor...”

“Nandini, I have no wish to rule. Madhuranthakan can become the emperor and reign over the Kingdom,”

“Ayya, you know Madhuranthakan well? Do you really think that he can rule over this large kingdom, on his own?”

“I agree, he can’t do it on his own but the Pazhuvur brothers are supporting him and you are there too...”

“Ayya, I can discern your wishes now. I will leave the Pazhuvur palace and Thanjavur too and then you can come...”

“No! I am in earnest when I say this. Haven’t I caused you enough harm? Should I be blamed for throwing you out of your home?”

“Ayya, can’t we both stay in the same city? Thanjavur is by no means a small place and there would be no need to meet each other...”

“True, we need not meet but we can’t help think about each other. You mentioned just now that you haven’t forgotten the past. I can’t forget the past even if I want to. I have caused grievous harm and my heart is gravely wounded,”

“It might be impossible to forget the past but can’t you forgive me. Are my crimes so grievous that you can’t forgive me even after all these years?”

“Nandini, you have committed no crime for which you should seek forgiveness. It is ‘I’ who wronged you. I should be the one asking you for forgiveness and redemption. When I started from Kanchi, I thought that I would ask you to forgive me but I have heard something that makes me utterly worthless to seek it,”

“My prince, I don’t think you should seek my forgiveness. You are after all the son of the Emperor and I am but an orphaned woman abandoned by her parents...”

“No, Nandini... you are not an orphan.”

“True, Lord Treasurer has married me and has made me his queen...”

“That’s not it Nandini, I don’t know how to tell you the truth,”

“You don’t have to hesitate to tell me anything. People dare to say anything to me these days and they don’t think twice before blaming me for all the ills in the world...”

“Nandini! If anybody dares to misbehave with you, you just have to tell me. I will kill them immediately,”

“You have always protected me thus. When we were young, you used to fight with Princess Kundavai even when she was your own sister...”

“Nandini! You are my sister too. Just like Kundavai. I am your brother!”

“My Prince, since I am married to someone else, you have started considering me as your ‘sister’ -- a tradition that is inculcated in your dynasty. But dare I call the Crown Prince as my brother?”

“You haven’t understood what I am trying to tell you. You really are my sister. You are the daughter of Emperor Sundara Chola,”

Nandini laughed uproariously after hearing this.

“I don’t know if you are hallucinating or if I have lost my mind ...”

“I am not hallucinating and you haven’t lost your mind,”

“Then you are mocking this poor woman, aren’t you?”

“Nandini, look at me. Do you really think that I am mocking you?”

“Ayya! Why don’t you look at my face? Do you really think that I can belong to a royal family? Do you see any sign of it on my face?”

“Nandini, I have been looking at your face since you were a girl of five. And I have wondered at your beauty and the reason for that has been revealed now. I learnt it only after I left Kanchi. My grandmother Kalyani Devi of the Vaithumbarayar clan was a peerless beauty. She lives in Pazhaiarai and is over 70 years of age but even today we are mesmerized by her beauty and grace. That exquisite beauty was bequeathed to you through my father. It didn’t come to me, or Kundavai or Arul Mozhi...”

“Ayya! What are you saying? Am I dreaming or is there something wrong with my ears?”

“No Nandini. You are not dreaming. You are my father’s daughter. When my father was a Prince before he got married to my mother, he met a woman in Illangai and had a Gandharva wedding ^[33]and she gave birth to you. Therefore, you are my sister,”

Nandini kept looking at him as though she was shocked and then said, “Was this the news that you learnt after you left Kanchi?”

“Yes, Nandini. And ever since I learnt this secret, many things that I didn’t understand in the past have become evident.”

“Who told you this? Was it the Prince of Vallam?”

“Yes. But he didn’t tell this on his own. Princess Kundavai sent this message along with him,”

“Aha! Right from the day of old, they have been trying to part us and they are still trying to do the same,”

“You are wrong Nandini. There is no conspiracy here. In our childhood, Sembiyanmadevi tried her best to keep us apart. I didn’t understand her intent then and was angry with her for many years. Now I can understand why she did it. She saved us from an incestuous relationship. But they could have told the truth then itself and saved us a lot of heartaches. By not

revealing the truth they committed a grave injustice to you and they have ruined my life as well. But we can't change the past now... we can only forgive and move ahead."

"Ayya, did the Prince of Vallam tell you other stories as well or just this one?" asked Nandini

"Why do you dismiss it as a story Nandini? Don't you believe it?"

"Do you think that anyone can easily believe what you just said? If I was the Emperor's daughter as you claim, then why has my life become unrecognizable? How come I was left to endure so many hardships? Even if I were to accept this as the truth, I would like to know if Vandiya Devar told anything else regarding this matter,"

Karikalan hesitated a bit and then said, "Yes; he said that you were involved with the Pandya Conspirators and have sworn to destroy the Chola dynasty to avenge the death of Veera Pandyan. He also said that you have been worshipping the royal sword of the Pandyas with their insignia of twin fish. He said that at Thirupurambiyam forest at the Pallipadai of the Ganga King you crowned a boy as the King of Pandyas and swore to stand by him... Nandini! I beg you to forget all this. You are the daughter of Emperor Sundara Chola and a scion of our clan. You are my sister. From now on, my only aim in life would be to undo the harm that I have caused you and to redeem myself,"

"Ayya, when you so strongly believe all this, why did you wait so long to tell me? Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"I took some time to adjust to this revelation and our new relationship. In my mind's eye, I had to get accustomed to the fact that you are my sister. And finding the right opportunity was important. This is hardly news that can be revealed in everybody's presence. Thankfully, today because of a wild boar and a tiger, I got this opportunity,"

Nandini interjected and said, "Ayya, wild animals are vicious but they are nowhere close to how vicious men can be. I have realized that today,"

"Sister, you asked me whether it is possible to forget what happened and I told you that even if it is not possible to forget, you could forgive us. You haven't replied to that..."

"Prince! I might forgive or even forget the injustice that you did to me all these years but I cannot forgive or forget the harm that you did to me

today...”

“Ayyo! What do you mean? I didn’t do anything to you today!”

“I will tell you what you did. Do you see that scoundrel coming towards us?”

“Are you talking about Vandiya Devan?”

“Yes, I am talking about him... he is now returning empty-handed without the tiger’s head. One day he came to me in Thanjavur and declared that he would be the luckiest man alive if my foot were to touch him. I didn’t even want to touch him with my foot and when I threatened to call the guards, he escaped from my palace. He has told you all these stories just to hide his lewd and salacious intentions towards me. He once said that he could bring ‘your head’ as a gift to please me. He is afraid that I might reveal his lecherous intent towards me, that’s why he tried to stop you from coming to Kadambur and when that didn’t work, he is now sticking close to you, lest you find the truth. This lecher is not worthy enough to touch my feet and you gave him leave to bodily lift me from the water. Do you think I could forget and forgive you for this?”

Nandini’s outburst added to Kariklan’s confusion and his head swirled. He took a while to calm down and answer, “Sister! Nandini! Is this true? I know not what to believe! Could Vandiya Devan be the scoundrel that you describe him to be? I even thought of marrying Manimegalai to him!”

“Ayya! You are reckless and hasty in taking decisions. You don’t have to believe me, just watch his activities for the next two days and you will know his true colours,”





Chapter 46: And the boat moved....

With Vandiya Devan approaching them from one side, Manimegalai too was approaching them saying that the food was ready Karikalan looked around and said, “Nandini, not just Vandiya Devan but a Vaishnavan named Azhwarkadiyan too tried to stop me from coming here. He had the same message from my father’s dear friend Anirudha Brahmarayar, who I respect a lot,”

“Of course the Prime Minister is your father’s very dear friend. So dear that he wishes to snatch the life of his friend. And you respect him a lot, that’s why he is striving so hard to keep you away from the throne,”

“Why would he do that?”

“He thinks that you are a savage warrior who doesn’t believe in God. He wants your brother to ascend the throne and turn him into a Vaishnavite so that he could convert the entire Kingdom into Vaishnavas! His wishes turned into dust when your brother went missing in the sea!”

“Then why would he want to prevent me from coming to Kadambur?”

“They are afraid that their nefarious schemes will be exposed by me,”

“Ayya! Have you forgotten that I am Azhwarkadiyan’s sister?”

“Do you want me to believe that you are Azhwarkadiyan’s sister, born to his parents?”

“No, I don’t believe it myself but it is true that I was raised by his parents in their house. He called me his sister and considered me the avatar of Aandal. He wanted me to join him when he went on his pilgrimage and spread Vaishnavism in the world,”

“In other words, he wanted to turn into a sanyasini...”

“On the contrary, he wanted me to marry him and as a couple, we would go around the world spreading Vaishnavism. That’s not all. He also wanted me to bear him several children so that they too can take up their father’s mantle in his holy mission...”

“Disgusting! How can that monkey-face vaishnavan think of such a scheme?”

“Ayya, that’s my bad fortune. My stars have always been unfortunate. Any man who nears me only bears evil intentions towards me,”

“When someone like Pazhuvetarayar turns out to be a lecherous old man, what can we say about young men like Vandiya Devan?”

“Prince, do not say anything about Pazhuvetarayar in my hearing. He desired me. He married me and gave me all the riches in the world. This orphaned girl became a queen in his palace overnight...”

“But what is your wish Nandini? Do you consider him your husband and worship him like a God? If that is so...”

“No... I am indebted to him but I was never a wife to him. Ayya! I was forsaken the minute I was born. I have only ever lost my heart once in my life and I will never betray him...”

“Nandini, who is that fortunate man? No don’t tell me. Tell me who you are? Tell me the truth. If you are not my sister... if you are not my father’s daughter and not Azhwarkadiyan’s sister, then who are you? If I don’t know the truth, I might just die!”

“I do wish to tell you about it but right now both our friends are nearing us. I will tell you the truth on another occasion.”

Nandini then turned towards Vandiya Devan and asked, “What is this, you have come empty-handed? Where is the tiger’s head?”

“Devi, unfortunately, I can’t present the tiger’s head to you,”

“Aha! Is this your bravery? What happened to that song of yours where your ancestors put kings of all dynasties to death?”

“What song is that?” asked Karikalan.

“Ayya, will you tell him about the song or should I?” asked Nandini.

“Devi, I don’t recall telling about any song about my ancestors!” exclaimed Vandiya Devan.

“You probably don’t remember but I cannot forget it. Let me tell you,” said Nandini and cited the lyrics of the song.”

It was a song that described how the Kings of Vanar clan planted a field of heads belonging to Pandya, Chola and Chera Kings.

“Prince, you beheaded just one king while the ancestors of this ‘warrior’ beheaded kings belonging to Chola, Chera and Pandya dynasty and planted them in their fields!” said Nandini derisively.

Karikalan's reaction to the poem recited was one of distaste and disgust. He said, "Nice poem and I hope they had a good harvest..." and started laughing uproariously.

Vandiya Devan embarrassed and hassled couldn't look at the Prince in the eye.

"Devi, I don't think I ever told about this song to you,"

"So what? If you didn't know about this earlier, at least you will know this now. You, the scion of such a dynasty that would plant a field of king's head couldn't even get a wounded tiger's head!"

"Devi, the tiger is dead. I didn't want to cut the head of a dead animal,"

"But we saw the tiger getting into the boat!" exclaimed Karikalan

"Yes, after it got into the boat, it seems to have died. Probably it died because of guilt for having wounded our beautiful queen here,"

"I wish it had died in the water, instead of the boat!" Said Karikalan.

"Maybe it's like me... afraid of water. Of all the places that I could die, it is death by water that terrifies me," said Vandiya Devan.

"Despite your fears, you jumped into the water without any hesitation to save us, poor women,"

"Devi, women are more terrifying than water. I jumped because the Prince forced me to. There was really no need for me to rescue you both,"

"Yes... you are scared of the water but you probably have qualms of drowning others in it,"

Manimegalai didn't enjoy the conversation that was happening there so she interjected again.

"Akka, the food will grow cold. Come, please... let us eat,"

The four of them started walking towards the mandapam. While on their way Manimegalai looked at Vandiya Devan, who looked very disturbed. She could also understand that the Prince and Nandini were somehow responsible for this.

She wished to convey a message through her eyes that said, 'No matter who is against you, I will always be on your side,'

Sadly, Vandiya Devan didn't look towards her. He seemed completely absorbed in his own sea of troubles.

It is but natural for the readers to find Nandini's words distasteful. Especially the obscene charges that she laid on Vandiya Devan. But if we were to analyse the circumstances of her birth we will understand that it is hardly surprising that she would behave so. We inherit our parents' genes, their instincts and behaviour. Mandakini was a woman who lived in the woods, who had to fight with wild animals just to survive.

She fell in love only once in her life but when that turned into a disappointment, she lost her mental balance and even tried to take her own life. But with the passing of the time, her wounds healed and she transferred the boundless love that she felt for Sundara Chola to his son Arul Mozhi and protected him like a mother.

Nandini had inherited many traits from her mother Mandakini but the world that was unkind to the mother almost destroyed the daughter. She was abandoned the minute she was born. Where Mandakini had to battle with wild animals to survive in the woods, Nandini had to fight her own battles with the people for her right to survive and live. Insulted and scorned by the royalty that taught her to hate them she never had an opportunity to experience pure love. Whoever she loved, either hated her or they died unfortunately and those who slighted her lived a happy life.

Can there be any other reason to turn a young woman's heart into stone?

She could only nurture hatred, anger and revenge against those who wronged her. She found solace in seeking vengeance and she had inherited the right instincts and the attitude to plot her revenge. Her past experiences, insults, indignities and the challenges that she faced to survive had hardened her heart and had banished the gentler emotions such as pity, mercy and sympathy. It is important that we know this before we read about the events that would unfold in this story.

Lunch became an awkward affair, as none of them felt like talking and were immersed in their own worries. Poor Manimegalai had planned the forest feast and water games to amuse Nandini and to spend a few pleasant hours in her company gossiping and chatting. When Vandiya Devan and the Prince joined them accidentally, she became enthusiastic hoping to spend a few hours in their company, especially Vandiya Devan.

But her expectations were dashed when she saw Vandiya Devan rescuing Nandini and their subsequent intimate conversation that Karikalan pointed

to her had planted a seed of jealousy in her pure heart. But like a child, she forgot about it soon and chastised herself for doubting their intentions.

The others neither enjoyed each other's company nor the forest feast. Their faces were disturbed and unhappy. That's why after the feast, she asked, "Akka, shall we leave now? Shall I ask the women to bring our boat? Are the men coming with us or will they leave on their horses?"

"Ah! But how could we leave without listening to her music? Nandini! Did you forget? Manimegalai, don't disappoint us,"

"No, I haven't forgotten it but you both don't look like you would enjoy any kind of music. You seem to be ill at ease. But if you insist she will play for you. Manimegalai, bring your Yazh,"

"Why akka? Why would you want me to play in front of those who don't want to hear me play?"

"No... the Prince wants to hear you play. His friend can shut his ears, if he so wishes,"

"My God! I don't hate music. I can still remember the haunting song that a fisherwoman named Poonguzhali sang in Kodi Karai. It was beautiful!" exclaimed Vandiya Devan.

"Some people have very specific taste. They may not like my music," said Manimegalai.

"Who cares whether he likes or not. You bring the yazh!" ordered Karikalan.

Manimegalai got the yazh ^[34] and sat at the top of the mandapam stairs and started playing it. It was a seven-stringed instrument and each string could play one half of a swaram ^[35]. Her music was so exquisite that Karikalan and Vandiya Devan sat mesmerized listening to it.

After playing the instrument for a while, she started singing beautiful devaram songs composed by Appar and Sundaramurthy Nayanar.

After listening to her in rapt attention, the Prince said, "Manimegalai! Your music is exquisite but you are singing only devotional songs. Sadly, I am not a devout man. I have bequeathed all my 'piety' to Madhuranthakan. Why don't you sing a love song?"

Manimegalai lowered her eyes demurely and hesitated.

“Why do you hesitate? I will not infer anything from your song and nor will my friend,” said the Prince

“Even if you do, Manimegalai will not worry about it,” quipped Nandini

“Akka, how can you mock me like this in front of men?”

“You are wrong to say that they are men. They can’t even bring a dead tiger’s head and you call them men? In the olden days, men used to knock out the teeth from a living tiger’s mouth and present it to their lovers but today, we have men like this. Why don’t sing that beautiful song that you sang to me, earlier?”

With Nandini’s encouragement, Manimegalai started singing a soulful love song that mesmerized her audience. It was so beautiful that even Nandini who had hardened her heart for many reasons couldn’t help but shed genuine tears. Aditya Karikalan literally forgot the world and lay immersed in her song. Vandiya Devan brought himself back to the earth and tried not to be swayed by her music. He was further disturbed by the fact that Manimegalai was pointedly looking at him when she sang the song making him think thus.

My God! How did I wrong this girl? Why is she looking at me like this!

Engaged thus in the world of music, they failed to notice the fact that the wind was blowing hard. Ripples of waves became bigger and bigger in the dam and soon a tree fell down near the mandapam indicating an impending storm.

Nandini became alert and looked around and said, “My God! Where did the boat go?”

The boat was missing! It was in the middle of the dam adrift.

“Ayyo! What do we do now?” exclaimed Nandini.

“If you both know how to ride, you can take our horses and leave, we will manage here,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Is this a plan to get us killed in the storm? You don’t think that we will be killed when a tree falls on us?”

“No need. Let’s stay here until the storm passes. We have food and Manimegalai is there to entertain us with her music. I haven’t passed a more pleasant evening in my life...”

“Prince, that’s not right. What will Kandanmaran and Sambuvarayar think about us?” cautioned Vandiya Devan.

“It looks like he set the boat adrift when he went to check on the tiger,” said Nandini.

“Akka, don’t blame him thus. When he came back, the boat was there. I saw it myself. Let’s not get worried. My father will send a boat for us,” said Manimegalai.

She was right. Sambuvarayar did indeed sent boats to rescue the women. And what more, he came in one of the boats to ensure that they were safe. When he found that the Prince had joined them, he was happy while the rest of them went back to the palace with a storm raging in their hearts.



An Excerpt....

**Ponni’s Beloved Volume 5 - The Sacrifice
Chapter 1: Three Voices**

Prince Arulmozhivarman has been waiting patiently for a long time. He was impatient to go to Thanjavur to meet his parents. He was also keen to prove to his father that he didn't conspire to snatch the throne of Illangai from Chola suzerainty and that he was innocent of the charges that were laid on him.

Nevertheless, he waited for a message from his dear sister before he left the sanctuary of the monastery. But it was difficult to pass time, therefore, he took part in the daily prayers of the monks. He spent many hours looking at the beautiful paintings that were drawn on the walls of the monastery. He also took pleasure in discussing worldly affairs with the head of the monk, an old bikshu, who had travelled to many far-away islands from China to Savaga theevu ^[36]. The prince who was fascinated by his travels asked him to describe the places that he had been to, its people, their culture....

He learned that the island of Kadaram^[37] known as the Sri Vijayam Kingdom controlled many other small islands in the region. The Prince asked the Bikshu to describe these kingdoms and the monk tirelessly told him everything that he knew of these places.

From environment to trade, people's habits to customs he told him many things. He also gave the Prince a brief history of each kingdom and their ties to the old Pallava Kingdom which resulted in a cultural exchange of arts and architecture. He also told him how the people followed Buddhism and were also well-versed in the epics of Hindu religion such as Ramayana and Mahabharata and how they worshipped Hindu Gods as well. He also told him that the people had a special respect for Sage Agastya and worshipped him as the 'Father of Tamil language' and had built many temples to honour him.

The Prince committed to his memory all this information, especially the routes that would take him to these islands and the dangers that were inherent in the journey.

“Swami, is there any chance that you might visit these places again?”

“If the Lord Buddha, wishes it then I might visit them again. Why do you ask?”

“I wish to come along with you,”

“Prince, I am a monk who has forsaken this world. You are the son of the Emperor. How can we travel together? It has been a huge responsibility to take care of you, while you are here. Every minute I fear that something untoward might happen....”

“Swami, I can lessen your burden by leaving immediately...”

“Prince, forgive me. I misspoke my fears. Taking care of your health and giving you sanctuary in this Viharam can in no way repay the benevolence and grace shown by your father and sister. You have helped us greatly by repairing and restoring our great old monasteries in Illangai and have also earned the respect and regard of our monastic leaders. They offered the throne of Illangai to you, why did you refuse it? If you had become an independent King of that Island Kingdom, you would have your own fleet of ships and you can visit all these places on your own. You don’t have to follow this old monk....”

“Swami, have you read the epic poem ‘Maha Vamsam’ that sings about the history of Illangai Kings,”

“Ayya, what are you saying? How could I become the head of this monastery without studying it?”

“Forgive me, I wanted to ask you whether you can read it in its original language. The epic chronicles the despicable deeds the Illangai royal family in their quest for power. The son imprisons the father to seize the throne while the mother kills the son with poison. Son throws the mother into the fire... and there is no need talk about uncles, father-in-law, stepmothers and stepsisters... Didn’t the Maha Vamsam talk about the atrocities that people did to each other just to grab the throne?”

“True but never forget that these incidents were used to teach people never to falter away from the path of dharma and if they do, what kind of consequences they would have to face. Maha Vamsam is a holy book that can help people walk the path of dharma...”

“Swami, I am not finding fault with the holy book. I am merely saying that it chronicles the evil actions of people who tried to seize the throne of Illangai. That’s why I see nothing wrong in rejecting the said throne,”

“No, it was a wrong decision. The monastic heads of Illangai wanted a dynastic change in the kingdom. The atrocities and the evil committed by the previous dynasties had to be punished. Through you, they wished to establish a new lineage for the kingdom. You rejected a rare opportunity, wherein, you could have helped to spread and protect our faith far and wide like Emperor Ashoka...”

“Swami, it is unfair to compare ‘me’ who is hiding in the sanctuary of your Viharam with the mighty Emperor Ashoka. Truly, I am unworthy to be even your disciple and you are hoping that I would protect your faith...”

“Prince, you have great inner strength. If you could but accept the faith of Buddha, you will get the opportunity to become as great as Ashoka,”

“Right from a young age, I have enshrined Murugan, Ganapathy, Shiva, Parvathy, Perumal in my heart. I cannot forsake them and embrace the faith of Buddha. Forgive me, Swami. When I asked to come with you on your travels, it was not my intention to travel as a Bikshu and spread the faith of Buddha. I merely wish to see all these places...”

“Prince, I mistook your intent. Forgive me. But it cannot be denied that there is a deep connection between the faith of Buddha and your dynasty. In the lore of Buddha, we believe that he was born as a Chola Emperor Sibi, who offered his flesh to a wounded pigeon. Kings of Chola claim to have descended from this great emperor, that’s why you adorn the title ‘Sembiyan’ when you assume the throne. Never forget that!”

“I can’t forget it, swami. My blood and flesh remind me every day that I belong to the dynasty from which Emperor Sibi and Manu Nidhi Cholan were born. They remind me to forsake wealth and comfort and help people. I also have ancestors like Vijayala Chola, Karikala Vallavan who ask me to pick up my sword, gather my army and go on conquests and find glory in war and expanding the empire. Kings like Aditya Cholan, who had built great temples ask me to renovate temples and to build huge structures for the abode of Gods. I feel as if I am being pulled in all directions. In many ways, it might be better if I could embrace the faith of Buddha. I would like to learn more about him,”

The Buddha Bikshu’s face brightened when he heard this and he said, “Prince, you already know a lot of Buddha. What’s there for me to teach you?”

“Explain that picture that is drawn on the wall. I see a prince getting up from the bed. Who is the woman lying beside and the baby in the cradle? Why is he leaving and why is he looking worried?”

“Prince, when Buddha was young, he was called Siddharta and he was a prince, just like you. He was married to the beautiful Yashodara, and they had a new-born son. His father, the King was ready to hand over the responsibility of the Kingdom to him but Siddharta wished to find ways to reduce people’s misery, therefore, he renounced his wife, his son and all the worldly pleasures. This picture shows how he left his family behind in the dead of the night. Prince, haven’t you heard of this story before?”

“Yes, I have heard it before but nothing tells a story like a beautiful picture. It has been so vividly portrayed here that I feel like waking up Yashodara and warn her, ‘Look, Siddharta is leaving you. Stop him’. Alright, tell me about the next picture,”

The old bikshu thus patiently explained each picture to the Prince with great care. At the heart of his hearts, he did nurse a hope that the Prince would one day embrace the faith of Buddha, therefore took particular care in explaining Siddharta’s life history to him. The last picture showed Siddharta under the tree of enlightenment where he receives the wisdom of the world. After hearing the bikshu’s explanations about it, the Prince said, “Gurudeva,

If I were to express an opinion that is contrary to yours, would you get angry?”

“Prince, I am a monk you has renounced this world. There is no room for anger in my heart. Please speak your mind,”

“I do not believe that Siddharta gained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree,”

“Prince, during the Ashoka’s reign, a branch from this tree was brought to Illangai and was nurtured carefully. It grew into a large tree and it still exists in Anuradhapuram. I am sure you must have seen it yourself. Then why do you disbelieve this fact?”

“Gurudeva, I don’t dispute the fact that Bodhi tree exists but I don’t believe that Siddharta got enlightened when he sat under it. On the contrary, the day, he left his beautiful wife and his new-born son and a kingdom that rightfully belonged to him, to alleviate the suffering of the people, that’s when he received enlightenment. The sacrifice that he made that day is unlike anything that we have seen in any story or epic. Rama gave up his Kingdom and went to the forest because his father ordered him to do so. Bharata refused to accept the Kingdom that came to him because he was devoted to Rama. King Harishchandra gave up his kingdom because he had given his word Sage Vishwamitra. Emperor Sibi had to cut off his own flesh and offer it to the pigeon because he had given sanctuary to it. Prince Siddharta had no such compulsion. He didn’t have to sacrifice anything to please someone. He still gave up everything and left everything behind. I don’t think he did anything so wonderful after he became enlightened. That’s why, I have always believed that when Siddharta left the palace leaving behind his kingdom, wife, son and worldly comforts, that’s when he became enlightened,”

The Prince explanation greatly endeared him to the Bikshu. He said, “While there is much truth in what you said, Buddha did indeed find a solution to the miseries of this world when he sat and meditated under the tree. That’s where he started preaching to the people,”

“Swami, more than what he preached, I find that there is a great lesson to learn from his life. That’s why I would like to follow his example. I told you a while ago, that three types of voices are heard within me, I would like to free myself from them. Kindly accept me as your disciple,”

“Prince, to gain a disciple like yourself, is like gaining a treasure but I am unsuited for this honour and nor am I brave enough. You could petition the Council of Biskshus in Illangai for this,”

“I have no doubts about the fact that only you could be my Guru, but what is it that you were saying about being brave?”

“Yes, my Prince. I am not brave enough to accept you as my disciple. For the past two days, a rumour has been spreading across Nagapattinam that you have been living here and that we are forcibly attempting to convert you to the faith of Buddha. This has angered many in the city and some are even trying to mobilize people to attack the Viharam over this outrage,”

“Aha! What is this foolishness? Why should people object if I joined the faith of Buddha? Why would they consider it an outrage if I shaved my head and wore ochre robes? I am not even married, so they can’t even blame me for abandoning my wife?”

“Ayya, the people are not angry with you but they are outraged by the fact that we are trying to turn you into a Bikshu. If a mere rumour can incense the people thus, then imagine what would happen if it happened for real? People will storm into this viharam and turn it into dust. Under the benevolent rule of your father, we have been living happily so long. We even recite a special prayer for his health and long life every day. We don’t want to ruin our peaceful life here. That’s why I said that I dare not accept you as my disciple,”

Even as spoke thus, a huge clamour of voices could be heard outside the viharam. The old Bikshu heard the commotion silently and then said, “It looks like the people have come in thousands to prove the truth of my words. I know not how to allay their fears, only Lord Buddha should show the way,”

He was right. Thousands had gathered in front of the Viharam and their voices were raised in protest.



[1] October to November

[2] Mahendravarman I (600 – 630 AD) ruled over the present day Andhra region and northern regions of Tamil Nadu. He was a scholar, painter, architect, musician. He was the son of Simhavishnu, who defeated the Kalabhras and re-established the Pallava kingdom.

[3] Celebrated poet and philosopher and the author of Thirukkural , a collection of couplets on ethics, philosophy, economics and politics.

[4] October - November

[5] Rudraksha is a bead used by Shiva devotees in their prayers.

[6] Present day Haridwar

[7] The guardian deity of villages

[8] The Srivaishnava Urdhva Pundra (also known as Thiruman Sricharanam or Naamam) is the tilaka used by followers of Sri Vaishnavism. The figure drawn is representative of the feet of Narayana with Lakshmi in the middle.

[9] A reference to the story of Vali in the epic Ramayana. When Vali, the king of Kishkinda went to fight with the demon Dundhubi inside a cave, he bids his brother Sugreeva stand guard outside the cave. Sugreeva promises to stand guard and agrees to bar the cave if Vali happens to die in the duel thereby trapping Dundhubi inside. A fierce fight ensues between Vali and Dundhubi and blood flows outside the cave and Sugreeva concludes that Vali died at the hands of the demon. With a heavy heart, he closes the door of the cave with a huge rock and returns to Kishkinda where he ascends to the throne as the King. Vali in the meanwhile had vanquished Dundhubi and tries to get out of the cave and finds it barred. Mistaking Sugreeva's intent, he returns to the Kingdom and overthrows his brother.

[10] A minor character from the epic Mahabharata. Uttar Kumar was the son of King Virata of Matsya Kingdom. As per the rules of the infamous dice game, the Pandavas had to stay incognito for one year. Since King Virata was friendly towards them, the Pandavas disguised themselves and worked at Virata's palace. Arjuna who disguised himself as a eunuch became the dancing teacher of Uttara, Uttar Kumar's sister. Suspecting that the Pandavas might have hidden in Matsya, Kauravas attack them. With King Virata and his army away, only Uttar Kumar is left in the Kingdom to face the Kauravas. Uttar Kumar was a young boy who bravely dons his armour to face the enemy but once he reached the battlefield, he loses his nerve and tries to run away. That's when Arjuna disguised as the eunuch stops him and reveals himself to be a Pandava.

[11] An ancient form of musical story-telling performance. Narration of the story would be interspersed with songs and poems.

[12] Thazhampoo in Tamil

[13] Thunderbolt weapon of Lord Indra

[14] A character in Hindu mythology, was the princess of Vidarbha Kingdom, who married king Nala, of Nishadha Kingdom, and their story is told in the Mahabharata.

[15] Period between October 17 to November 15 in the Tamil Calendar.

[16] Period between May 14 to June 15 in the Tamil Calendar.

[17] Abode of Yama, the God of Death.

[18] Medical clinic

[19] An ancient port city of Cholas in the Nagapattinam district that was destroyed by the sea in 300 BC. According to legends, the then Chola King, anguished by the death of his son forgot to celebrate the annual festival dedicated to Lord Indra. Angered by this, Indra unleashed his wrath and the sea swallowed the city. Today, this city is being excavated underwater by National Institute of Oceanography

[20] This is the garden in which Ravana kept Sita imprisoned. Hanuman met Sita for the first time in these gardens and after meeting her he wished to teach the Ravana a lesson and created a havoc in the garden. In their efforts to catch the Monkey God,



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 **KAPWING**

Ravana's son Akshay loses his life and the garden is destroyed.

[21] The grave sin of killing a woman

[22] Literally means aunt.

[23] An epoch or an era

[24] Lord of Saturn in Hindu scriptures. He is known as the taskmaster and the lord of justice. He is also known to cause troubles and hurdles in one's path based on their past karma, deeds and words.

[25] In Mahabharata, Kamsa was the ruler of Vrishnis, King of Mathura and Krishna's uncle. He was a tyrant who seized power from his own father King Ugrasena and imprisoned him.

[26] In Mahabharata, Prince Duryodhana plans to kill the Pandavas and their mother. Therefore, he asks Purochana to build a palace of made of lac and other inflammable materials. Vidura, the Prime Minister warns the Pandavas about this and sends a man to dig a tunnel that would help them escape.

[27] King Harishchandra, a legendary king and an ancestor of Rama was famous not having uttered any falsehood.

[28] Queen of Indra, the God of Devas in the heaven

[29] Grandmother

[30] Hibiscus

[31] October 15 – November 15

[32] A reference to Varaha avatara

[33] Among the eight classical type of Hindu wedding, Gandharva wedding is a tradition that is not based on rituals, witness or family participation. It is a marriage born of passion and love for each other. The marriage of Shakuntala and Dushyanth is a classic example of Gandharva wedding.

[34] An ancient string instrument.

[35] Svara or swara is a Sanskrit word that connotes a note in the successive steps of the octave.

[36] Present day Java, Indonesia

[37] Present day Cambodia