



Officer in Exile



When he came out of the pitiful Ahmed household, Inspector Palanivel had a surprise waiting for him.

Parked just behind his police jeep was another SUV of some kind. Possibly a Land Rover or something — he wasn't an expert on vehicles that weren't commonly used by criminals. Or at least poor criminals.

Right by his jeep stood a heavy, thick-set individual with a square jaw and an expression of steel and clear disdain for the world. He stood there like a wrestler in the ring waiting for the bell to ring. Behind him, the forest darkened ominously in the evening light.

For one second, Palanivel thought that perhaps this was one of the goondas that had been hired to take care of him, as Senthil had warned may happen. He tensed as he strode forward. Then he recognised the features of R Rajaratnam, Member of Parliament.

That was quick, he thought to himself.

"Good afternoon," he said warily, his heartbeat still a touch elevated. While he was extremely sceptical of Senthil's contention that local honchos could have him bumped off, he had to acknowledge that Rajaratnam had a rather menacing air about him. He had the air of a cat about to play with its food. This sent a little chill down the inspector's spine.

He responded the only way he know how — by grasping the bull by its horns. He stood two feet in front of Rajaratnam and looked directly into his hard eyes. Neither man offered to shake hands.

"You have been a busy man, Inspector," Rajaratnam said, looking at him through narrowed eyes.

Inspector Palanivel said nothing.

"Domestic abuse, cold murder cases, money lender violence — it seems there is no stone you will leave unturned," the politician added after a pause.

This was easy to respond to.

"It is not my choice, sir," Inspector Palanivel said. "My police commissioner has tasked me with improving the law and order situation in this community. I have targets," he finished happily. He loved citing his targets – it was such a good riposte to most inquiries.

Rajaratnam's eyebrows rose.

"Really, Inspector! This is great news. I was under the impression you had been transferred here because you were seen as too much of a loose cannon in Chennai!"

Palaniel's eyes flickered. But he shouldn't have been surprised. The details of his Chennai debacle were public.

"My brief clearly states that the case backlog needs to be tackled. It says nothing about any loose cannons. You are welcome to review it if you like," Palanivel responded icily.

Rajaratnam laughed, a low threatening rumble.

"Very good, Inspector Palanivel. I am going to enjoy your company here," he said. "Just one thing. The moneylender problem. I have done my best to solve this myself over the years. So l..."

"How?" Palanivel asked abruptly.

A flash of anger crossed Rajaratnam's eyes at being interrupted in this manner, but he swallowed it and smiled.

"Do you know what they call me in the village?" he asked instead. Palanivel thought Rajaratnam would have been called a number of different names, but decided to simply shake his head in response.

"They call me pambu kazhagu. The eagle. To be more specific the eagle that hunts snakes. I have spent my whole adult life battling moneylenders, Inspector Palanivel."

"How?" Palanivel asked again.

Rajaratnam's eyes narrowed even further.

"Let's take your Faizal Ahmed for example. I offered him the money to pay off his debt."

"Just like that?" Palanivel asked incredulously.

"Yes."

"And he refused?"

Rajaratnam bowed his head in acquiesce.

“I offered him the money, and he refused. Some people cannot help themselves. If you see Mr Ahmed again, tell him the offer is still open.”

Palanivel briefly considered telling the other man he was a policeman, not a messenger.

But he thought better of it and simply nodded.

“Well, inspector, you had plenty of work to do and so do I. I shall leave you to it,” Rajaratnam said, grinning humourlessly.

The engine of his SUV started up at these words and Palanivel saw that a driver, clad in sparkling white, had been listening intently for his cue.

Rajaratnam strolled to the passenger seat of the car – not the backseat, interestingly – and clambered in.

The vehicle roared away, raising a cloud of dust. When the dust settled, Palanivel could be seen standing in front of the Ahmed farmhouse, deep in thought.

He hesitated for a second and then turned around and went back to the farmhouse and knocked on the door.

After a minute, it creaked open, and Mrs Ahmed stepped out, her forehead creased with sweat and her arms wet with soap suds.

“What is it now, Inspector?” she asked wearily.

“I am sorry to disturb you, but I just wanted to pass on a message from R. Rajaratnam. The district chief,” he said.

“I know who he is, inspector.”

“He says his offer to help your family is still open,” Palanivel said neutrally.

Mrs Ahmed pursed her lips and a light came into her eyes.

“Still open, is it? And do you know what his offer is? He wants to buy this land and lease it back to us. This land, which has been in our family for generations. Your friend Rajaratnam is the biggest landowner in the region and he still is not satisfied! He won’t rest until he owns the entire mountain!”

“Isn’t it better than risking your husband’s life, madam?” the inspector asked mildly.

She dashed the back of her wrist against her forehead to wipe off some sweat.

“If Rajaratnam owns this land, he owns everything in it. Do you understand? Do you understand what we... what I... would be selling?” she asked.

Palanivel looked at this woman, prematurely aged, exhausted and sweaty, and thought she looked proud and beautiful in the dying light of the mountain.

“I do understand,” he said.

She sighed. “You seem to be a good man. But there are some things you can’t solve.”

“Oh but I can. And I will,” Inspector Palanivel said decisively.

She smiled for the first time that evening. She nodded at him and made her way back into the house. But just before she disappeared into the house, he cleared his throat.

“I could use a name, though, Mrs Ahmed,” he said apologetically.

Behind her almost-shut door, he saw her screw her eyes together. Finally, she said: “Hemant Reddy. He’s the one who lent us the money. Now please leave us alone.”

She shut the door with an ominous slam, leaving the inspector standing outside in the darkness.

