



**Kalki's
Ponniyin Selvan**



*Part III - B
A Killing Sword
[Chapters 23-46]*

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With much thanks to
R. Neelameggham
for editing help.*

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Ponniyin Celvan of Kalki Krishnamurthi
Part III B : A Killing Sword [Chapters 23-46]
English Translation by Indra Neelameggham, South Jordan, Utah, USA.
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Killing Sword - Ponni's Beloved - Part 3B
Chapter 23 -- Vanathi

If one were to ask the bards to describe the beauty of Lady Vanathi of Kodumbalur, they would compare her comeliness to the allure of evening dusk. When day departs and evening slyly settles in, a certain sadness envelops the mood. And at the same time, a somewhat peaceful gratification develops. The sun's final rays shrivel and vanish as night's darkness begins to shroud all four directions. One needs to merely look up skyward to overcome the weariness that clouds one's mind. And within the blink of an eye happiness pervades because of the countless shimmering lanterns lit by the lady of the night-sky! Unlike the piercing rays of a blazing sun, those night lamps do not make the eyes cringe! What a delight to gaze upon them! One need not even debate the point if the moon also rises! The pearly glow of a full moon makes all earth feel fulfilled; heart and mind blossom in gladness.

Yes, it is true that lotus buds close as dusk approaches. However, as if to compete with those glittering sparklers of the dark-sky, don't night blooming jasmine-buds burst forth, to spread fragrance that makes heaven and earth intoxicated?

Yes, it is true that as night falls, boisterous bird calls quieten down. But there it is – the pleasing music of nadaswaram pipes and pleasant-sounding claptrap of temple semakalam cymbals announcing the jaamam time! From atop majestic mansion rooftops float the sweet music of soft fingers strumming the veena and yaazl!

These shadows of soft sorrows and the delightful sheen of joy were intermingled without any discernable difference in the beauty of Lady Vanathi of Kodumbalur. This trait of her charm was reflected in the contradictions of her behavior and temperament. At times if one were to look upon her, she was grief personified like another Chandramathi or Savithri. (Legendary women whose lives were full of travails.) At other times one would wonder if the heavenly nymphs Ramba and Urvashi were her equal in dance and play. Like Madhavi who delighted in the love of Kovalan she would at times appear like a living sculpture of ardor. At other times one wondered if this was how Kannagi full of distress on losing her husband appeared. (Kovalan, Madhavi, and Kannagi are the main characters in the Tamil Epic Silappadikaram.) At times she was Valli who lost her heart to mingle with the love of Murugan with the Spear. She was happiness personified like the Princess Devayani of the heavens who made all the denizens of heaven break out in riotous dance when she joyfully placed the wedding garland upon the shoulders of Lord Karthikeya.

For days at a time, one would not be able to discern even a slight smile on Vanathi's face. On other days she would be full of never-ending laughter and merriment. The sound of her laughter would dissolve into millions and millions of minute droplets that mingled with the breeze and delighted the whole world.

The reason for this dual personality of Vanathi was the time in which she was born and the times in which she was raised. When in the womb of her mother, the younger Lord Velir of

Kodumbalur, her father was engaged in horrifying wars. News of battles won and battles lost came one after the other. This made her mother experience distress and happiness again and again one after the other. Shortly after her birth Vanathi's mother died. After that her father raised her as his most precious darling. But that too did not last long. That bravest of brave among warriors did not wish to remain in his palace forts even for his darling daughter. After Veera-pandiya was defeated and forced to run away in to hiding, Lord Velir went to Lanka chasing after the Lankan troops that had come to aid the Pandiyan King and had then retreated to their island. And there he lost his life on the battlefield and earned the sobriquet recorded in history as "Lord Velir the Younger who met his death in Eezlam."

After that, for a while Vanathi's life was filled with melancholy. Only girls who had lost their mother and were brought up by their father would truly understand the nature of that unhappiness. The orphaned girl was raised in the palaces of Kodumbalur with no lack of care; but none other could gain the place in her heart that her father had held. Different persons comforted her in various different ways. "Do not grieve dear Child! Your will father will come and be reborn from your womb as your son, a brave warrior. He will perform great deeds of valor that will astonish all the world," said someone. Those words took a deep root in the heart of Vanathi. She tried to overcome the grief and disillusion felt because of the loss of her father by thoughts of her imaginary son. And in that she somewhat succeeded.

She would be immersed in a world of make believe, for days together, dreaming about the son to be born, how he would walk, what deeds of valor her would accomplish! With her mind's eye of the dream world, she saw her imaginary son journey to distant lands, fight battle after battle achieving victories unimaginable. She would see him return swiftly and offer at her feet the trophies of those campaigns. She saw him seated on a triumphant throne wearing a jeweled crown. Kings and princes came and paid him tribute and bowed to him. She saw the multitudes of people rise in tumultuous praise just like a stormy sea reaching for the full moon. He led convoys of hundreds and hundreds of ships loaded with men beyond count, sailing across distant seas to hoist a victory flag in those distant lands. 'Mother, are you not the reason behind all this fame I have achieved?' She heard her valiant son repeat such words again and again to her.

That innocent girl would sometimes touch and caress her soft belly beautiful like the hallowed banyan tree leaf. Perhaps her imaginary son had already come to dwell in her tummy! In those ancient times both men and women of the Tamil countries had heard and known the stories of the Bharata Epic. They knew the story of how Kunti Devi had borne a child. She would think and think about which divine being would come, like in story, and give her the boon of a son. Later as she grew up maturing to girlhood, beginning to understand somewhat about the way of life, she realized that one had to marry a man and it was through him that one would be able to bear a son. Even then she did not bother to think about such a husband. She did not think about marrying any one in those days.

When Vanathi went to live in the palace at Pazlayarai, there came a great change in her life and thoughts. Kundavai's elegant patronage and affection gave her solace and delight.

Kundavai's sophistication, stylish attire and clever speech took Vanathi into a world she had not known till then. The jealousies of other girls of noble families who had come, like her, to live in that palace, created a new zeal for life. Her inner heart became aware that there was perhaps something special about herself that made those other girls jealous! At the same time, her natural pleasing behavior and generosity urged her to be friendly with everyone. In the middle of all this Vanathi did not forget or abandon her dreams about her imaginary brave son.

It was in such a setting that she chanced to see Ponniiyin Selvan. As a result, her dream worlds shattered to shards. She was now aware that only after she married, had a man, that she could bear a child. She was till then cavalier and unconcerned about whom that man might be. However, what was one to say about this mischievous mind? It had lost itself to the charming Prince, beloved of all Chozla people! He had such greatness whence the chieftains and kings of all the fifty-six nations come competing with each other, begging and pleading 'marry my daughter!' Such a Prince, would he even notice her! She could not even dream about the honor of marrying him even in her dreams. And after my heart is lost to this Prince how could I possibly marry another? And all the dream castles she had built in all these years about the son she would have, such dreams will need to surely shatter to pieces. Thinking about all this, Vanathi felt that her heart would explode. Once again she became the example of sadness.

The Younger Pirati who recognized her feelings began to shower a special affection and protection towards her. As far as she could, she tried to enthuse Vanathi. She began to imply that there was nothing wrong in losing her heart to Ponniiyin Selvan and it was not something that could not happen. The burning desire in Vanathi's heart was fed by the words of the Astrologer of Kudanthai who spoke about the child that would be born to her. Her dream worlds began to expand; apathy and exhilaration once again succeeded each other faster and faster. Just as she could not bear the extremes of distress, she was unable to bear the rampage of happiness that engulfed her. When any such emotion exceeded a limit, she fell down in a faint. The salve given by nature helped her survive with life.

When Vanathi was in Tanjore, the Paranthaka Play she had watched, the frightened call for help in the palace, and the disturbing shadowy scenes she witnessed, all increased her confusion tremendously. That day, she was able to become truly cognizant of the deep-rooted rivalry between the powerful clans of Pazluvoor and Kodumbalur. She understood the extent of the influence that the nobles of Pazluvoor wielded in the Chozla nation. Will the Pazluvoor nobles permit her heart's desire regarding Prince Arulmozli Varma? Even if they allowed, would the womenfolk of their clan accept? Would the Young Queen of Pazluvoor agree? Her influence and prestige were world famous. Whenever she thought about Nandini, the picture of a mesmerizing king-cobra snake came to Vanathi's mind.

Vanathi knew of the rivalry that Nandini held towards the Younger Pirati. That behavior could encompass herself too. Why ask? That poisonous snake could even strike at Ponniiyin Selvan. What about that shadowy figure that looked like Nandini which stood before the Emperor lying on his sickbed? Was it really Nandini? What was it that made the Emperor cry

out in such a voice filled with terror? Why is the Younger Pirati not willing to discuss all these matters with me? Yes. Even Younger Pirati Kundavai's behavior is changed. She does not talk with me cheerfully like before. She often leaves me behind and seeks solitude. Some immense worry is upon her shoulders. Perhaps it is some concern about Ponniyin Selvan? That is why she refuses to tell me about it.

Even today, Princess Kundavai has disappeared somewhere. How these girls tease and bully when she is not there? How they behave without any control? They are girls who know nothing about sadness or worry. Whatever happens, there is no control over their revelry. Vanathi could never tolerate their teasing words. Vanathi was in the grip of unexplainable misery in the last two or three days; their gossipy chitter chatter fell upon her ears like molten metal. Where could she have gone? Vanathi went in search of Princess Kundavai.

She found out that there was some kind of an assembly in the Elder Pirati's palace, and that Kundavai had gone there. Vanathi made her way towards that palace; by the time she got there, however, the assembly had dispersed. She found that the Elder Pirati and her beloved son Prince Madurandaka were enclosed in a secret meeting. For some reason, this information further increased Vanathi's worries. She decided to leave when she heard the noisy mob outside the palace doors. The reason for the uproar was not clear. The urge to immediately find the younger Pirati became insistent. She questioned the serving maids in the palaces one after the other. One girl said that the Princess had been in private conclave with the Vaishnava Azlvar-adiyan Nambi and that she had later gone with him to the lake beyond the palace gardens. These days when the Younger Pirati sought privacy by herself, she did not like anyone disturbing her.

Vanathi hesitated; should she go in search of Kundavai to the garden lake? At that time, the girl called Varini came running, "they say that Ponniyin Selvan has drowned in the sea" after announcing this appalling news she began wailing. The other girls who heard began crying and bawling. Vanathi had no expression on her face at first. The other girls peered at her standing still. "You wretched girl! It is your misfortune that the Prince drowned in the open seas," the accusing eyes seemed to say! She could not bear it anymore and began running towards the lake at the bottom of the garden.

Vanathi's thoughts began to race even as she ran. She understood the words "the Prince has drowned in the sea!" Beyond the shock of those words making her tremble, another thought began to take shape. In the recent few days whenever she looked into water, she saw the Prince's face reflected on the surface. If she stood on the bank and looked at the placid water, his unmistakable face would appear on the water, if she tried touching, the image would vanish. Now she understood the meaning of that. When the Prince was drowning, he thought about me. He called to me. Not understanding that I, wretched me, stood on the bank daydreaming. Oh! What a mistake! There is no point in thinking about what happened in the past. What should be done now? Oh, you foolish girl, do you even need to think about what has to be done? The garden lake flows into River Arisil, which flows into the ocean; at the

bottom of that ocean, the Prince is waiting. Waiting for me. Instead of going forth to meet him, what chores remain for me on this earth? For whom do I need to remain here?

Once Vanathi came to this decision a certain clam settled on her being. Her distress, her sadness and worries were gone. She went to the lake shore; went down the marble steps leading to the water's edge and looked around. In the far distance she could see a boat coming towards the bank. Kundavai Pirati was in the boat; who is the other man with her? He appears to be the youth we met at the house of the Astrologer Of Kudanthai; he was the one who took letters to Lanka. He must be the one who brought the news about the Prince. That is why the Princess has gone to meet him privately. She must have questioned him and got the news. She knows that I would be distraught if I come to hear about it, and that is why she left me behind. When she comes back, I cannot do what I wish; she would comfort me with words and say something soothing. She will surely stop me from going to meet the Prince. Even so, is it appropriate to leave without saying farewell to her? How affectionate she has been to me an orphan with no parents? I should say thanks to her; no, no, I cannot tarry even a second longer. Here, I can see his face on the water; there, his whole being shines. He is calling to me; he calls to me smiling, "All objections to marrying you are now gone! Come!" Why hesitate anymore? Oh dear, why is my head feeling light? Oh, wretched fainting fit! Nothing wrong with that! It is alright to fall down in a faint; instead of falling here on the shore, it will suffice if I fall into this water!

Vanathi's wishes were fulfilled. Yes, she fell into the water. Her feverish body began to cool. Heartfelt soothed. She was going down, down, deep below. How far down? For how long? One could not estimate. A few seconds? A few eons? Could be.

She had arrived at the wonderworld in the depths of the seas. Perhaps this is the world of the divine Nagas? What astonishing palaces? What grand multi storied mansions? There is no end, one cannot even see the tip of these high rising towers. How is the light here cool and refreshing? Perhaps the light rays are cooled down because they come through the water? Where is that light coming from? From the walls themselves as they emit this strange light? One need not wonder about that; it is but natural that these fantastic palaces encased in gold and pearls, diamonds, and gems from the hood of fantastic snakes glimmer in this way. Who are those people coming here as a crowd? Their bodies shine with a magical light. How radiant their faces? All these people appear to be the men and women of divine heavens. Perhaps I have arrived not at Nagaloka but at Devaloka?

Then, a few things began to take place rapidly as if in a dream within a dream. They led Vanathi to a beautifully decorated pavilion. In the middle of that pavilion stood Ponniyin Selvan with a welcoming smile for Vanathi. The heavenly musical instruments played and kettle drums sounded, showers of pearls and petals rained down, auspicious chants reverberated, Vanathi and the Prince exchanged garlands and wedded each other. Unable to bear this extreme happiness Vanathi fell in a faint! After remaining senseless for some time, a pair of hands lifted her up. At first Vanathi assumed that they were Ponniyin Selvan's hands. It was he who had gathered her, lifted her, hugged her, and placed her on his lap trying to

revive her. When she felt the bangles on those hands, she had a doubt. “Vanathi! Vanathi! What have you done?” sounded a female voice. With great effort Vanathi opened her eyelids a little and looked around. She saw Princess Kundavai’s face.

“Akka, Akka! Did you come to my wedding? I could not see you...” muttered her lips.

Chapter 24 -- Awakening Comprehension

Once again Vanathi lost consciousness. And her eyelids closed again. A little by little she was awakening. She realized that her marrying the Prince in Nagaloka or Devaloka was mere make believe. She recollected hearing the tragic news about the Prince, and running to the lake, standing on the steps, and fainting and falling into the water. The recollections smothered her into immeasurable disappointment; it pained as if a sharp spear had pierced her heart. She tried opening her eyes but was unable to do so. Who could have rescued her, lifting her out of the water? It must have been the Younger Pirati. It must have been Kundavai in that far boat. Why did she rescue me? Why didn't she let me be gone, drowned once and for all? As soon as I can open my eyes and talk, I should quarrel with the Younger Pirati, asking "why did you save me?" Is that the extent of the affection for her beloved brother?

Hear, the Princess is speaking; what is she saying? Whom is she speaking to?
 "She is blabbering nonsense in her swoon. At least she is alive; if our boat had been further away, if we had not seen her falling into the lake – I tremble even to think of that!"

"If we had not noticed; had let her go, perhaps it would have been better. Her life would have ended agreeably. This noblewoman of Kodumbalur rescued by you will surely face much distress in her life"

Ah! Who is this talking about me with such kindness? Yes it is that young man! The valiant young man we had seen in the house of the Astrologer of Kudanthai and later on the Arisil river bank. He must have brought the news about the Prince drowning in the sea! What else are they talking about? Let me listen, even if I am unable to open my eyes, I am able to hear very well!

"What is this? How can you speak without any compassion Sir? Are all men stone hearted?" spoke the voice of the Princess.

"What have I said now for judging me to be stone hearted?"

"Is it not enough? You said it would have been better if this girl had died! Sir, do you not know with what great effort I am nurturing her?"

"My Lady, did you not hear the gibberish she was babbling?"

"What did you hear?"

"Words about marrying the Prince, something like that fell in my ears...."

"Yes. Even when unconscious, her lips mumbled that. Her love for the Prince is rooted in her heart."

"That love is not good for this girl. It will only result in distress and disappointment for her."

“Why do you speak thus, Sir? Who else is a more suitable noblewoman for the Prince? Are you not aware of the ancient and valiant Kodumbalur lineage?”

“I am fully aware; I am thinking about something, you speak of something else, My Lady, how does it matter how noble her lineage? Her yearnings are not likely to be fulfilled”

“It will definitely be fulfilled. It is not just longings in her heart. It is my dream; my decision.”

“Even so, even your decision; in this matter, it will not be accomplished.”

“How can you speak again in this fashion? What you said a while ago, that the Prince is safe in the Choodamani Vihara in Nagaipattinam, is it not true?”

Ah! What is this joyous news! The Prince is safe! He is in the Choodamani Vihara in Nagaipattinam? Oh, my ears; blessed to be able to hear this news! It is a good thing that my wretched life did not drown in the lake; It is a good thing that I survived and am alive. I am obliged in so many ways to Princess Kundavai. This is one more thing that I am beholden to her. But wait, what is this he is saying: words like molten tin poured in my ears?

“My Lady, it is indeed true that the Prince is safe. But what is the likelihood that her love would be fulfilled? I think that the Prince will not marry this girl.”

“You may think whatever you wish Sir. In this whole wide world, there is one man who will not cross the line I draw, who will never disobey my wishes, but will complete my every command. It is my brother Arulmozli Varma!”

“Princess, another such a man ... I too am here ...”

“Then, what do I lack? What is the obstacle to implementing my wish? Will the nobles of Pazluvoor stand against even such matters?”

“That I do not know. The young Prince, his regard for you is beyond measure; that I know. On any other matter he will not cross your wish and command. He has no wish to rule kingdoms. In my presence, in front of my eyes, he refused the crown of Lanka when offered to him. Even so, if you insist, he will agree to rule a kingdom. However, about marrying this girl

“Are you saying that he will not agree? What fault has he found in my beloved friend to reject her? What fault do you see in her?”

“My Lady, I have not seen any fault in this girl; even if so presumed, I will not believe it. Even the lowliest of low serving maid in the palace of the Younger Pirati appears to like a heavenly nymph to me. A rabbit in the gardens of the Younger Pirati will appear to mine eyes

as mightier than elephant Airavatha that belongs to King Devendra of the heavens. The Prince does not see anything wrong in this noblewoman. However, is it not possible that his heart might have gone to another girl?”

Oh, what hurtful words. Why is this man piercing my broken heart with such sharp lances!

“Valiant Lord of Vanar Clans! I do not comprehend the words you speak. Why do you cast such slurs on my brother?”

“Nothing slanderous My lady. I speak the truth; what I saw with my eyes, what I heard with my ears.”

“Tell me more. I am now ready to hear even the most upsetting report.”

“Have I not spoken to you about the boat girl Poonkuzlali? She was the one who rowed me to Lanka in her boat. She is the one who rescued me and the Prince from the sea. She is the one who carried the Prince in her boat and has gone to Choodamani Vihara. I would not have had faith in Sendan Amudan alone and left the Prince in his care. I had confidence in Poonkuzlali and entrusted the Prince to her safekeeping. If that girl has a thousand lives, she will submit them all to the Prince.”

“So what? A boat girl is just a boat girl. Can she dream about wedding a Prince born to rule the world? A tiny sparrow hopping around on earth, can it gaze at an eagle flying the high skies?”

“Why can it not? The sparrow can look up and gaze at the sky. And the eagle too can look down and fancy the tiny sparrow.”

“I take the responsibility to get rid of any such thoughts and desires that might have entered my brother’s heart. Never, never can it be. I have saved my brother Arulmozli from so many dangers. I will save him from the amorous nets cast by this boat girl. ...”

“Is a boat girl be discounted thus? Is lineage and clan name so important? Isn’t the blood flowing in that boat girl also red? Is her heart not beating in the same fashion as the hearts of noblewomen in palaces? If one thinks about it, the love of princesses may be mingled with desire to rule kingdoms. That boat girl’s love is blemish less; pure; and that is what the Prince believes. Why should others come in way and cast obstructions? For instance, now, yes, yes ... consider my situation even, if I could split my heart open and show you what is inside... ..”

“No, No! Let what is in your heart stay safe in it. That is appropriate. Love, affection. passion, feelings; all these are good for most folk born in the world. The fate of those born to rule is entirely different. They have to marry in nobility; should not let their heart and mind wander. If they misstep, all sort of mishap will be the consequence. There are many examples even in

my own family. In his younger years of my father's life – when there was no likelihood of him ever attaining the kingdom – similar to what you said, a girl born in the forest ... Oh! Why should I speak of all that now? This girl is awakening from her dizzy spell; she seems to be now breathing more steadily. Her eyelids are fluttering. Do you need to tell me anything else? You said that you faced many other dangers in Eezlam. Tell me about that.”

“Yes princess. That night after the Prince had refused to accept the throne and crown of Lanka, we were walking down the streets of Anuradhapura. Suddenly the façade of an old building began to collapse and fall; if we had hesitated for even one more second, that wall would have fallen on us and buried us alive. At that time a woman appeared there suddenly. She signed and beckoned the Prince”

“Good Gracious Lord! There too, a woman to save you all? Who was that woman?”

“I did not know who she was. But the Prince seemed to be acquainted with her. No, do not suspect unnecessarily. My lady, that woman was aged in years.”

“How old could she have been?”

“She could be the Prince's mother. In addition, she is deaf in her ears and mute in speech.”

“What? What? Say again!”

“She is an old woman, born a deaf-mute. Probably older than forty-five years or so.”

“Sir! Did you see such a woman in Eezlam? Please tell me more about her. Do you know anything about her birth and who raised her? Where was she born?”

“She was born on one of the islands near Lanka.”

Princess Kundavai now seemed very agitated, “Sir, tell me more; how did she look like?”

“My Lady, I found something astonishing about her appearance. I am hesitant to speak about that. “

“Do not hesitate, speak quickly.”

“She looked very much like a woman I had seen in the Chozla country. Only more aged. Her tresses were unbound and unkempt; she wore neither silks or jewelry. Otherwise, she looked like the woman I had seen here. The same face; same demeanor. To tell the truth, I was fooled for one moment.”

“Sir that look-alike woman, the one here, who is it?”

“Princess, are you not able to guess and surmise?”

“Me? This girl Vanathi? My mother who lives in Tanjavur?”

“None that you mention.”

“Is it Nandini, the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?”

“Yes. It is Nandini.”

“Oh, good God! That means what I suspected is true!”

“What did you suspect?”

“The woman I have hated worse than a poisonous snake, in truth may be my elder sister; that is what I suspected. From what you are saying it appears to be true. Oh, what a torturous fate! Is it not apparent from this how wrong it is for royalty to espouse someone with neither lineage or name?”

“Lady, I am no such person with neither a name or lineage. My ancestors ruled the Tamil lands for three hundred years. They locked up princes of the Chera, Chozla, Pandiyas in prison. Today, even though I have no kingdom, I have my sword in my hands; strength in my shoulders, courage in my heart

“Sir, I will listen about your honors and praises later. There are many things that have to be completed immediately. I still need your help. Can I believe that you will still help me?”

“If I have a thousand lives, I am ready to expend them in your service.”

“You appear to be a sibling of the boat girl Poonkuzlali! That is fine. Let us not speak of those matters now. This girl here is about to open her eyes.”

Yes, Vanathi had regained all her faculties; the body was regaining strength. Several ideas rose in her mind. She made a determination to stay alive till she could prove to the Prince that her love for him was greater than that of the boat girl. She began to recall that night in Tanjavur palace when she saw what took place in the sick room where the Emperor was lying and the frightened call for help she had heard. The meaning of all that seemed to become somewhat clearer.

As soon as Vanathi opened her eyes, the Younger Pirati asked, “My dearest, how are you feeling now?”

“There is nothing wrong with me Akka! I feel bad that I gave you such a lot of trouble!” said Vanathi.

Azlvar-adiyan came near at that instant and declared, “I too have come to bother you. My Lady! A huge mob has gathered in front of the Chozla Maaligai palace. The crowd is confused and very angry; people are upset about the Prince having drowned in the sea. If you do not come immediately and calm the crowds, things will get out of control and dangerous.”

Chapter 25 – The Prime Minister Arrived

The streets of Pazlayarai were overwhelmed with a commotion never before seen. Common people were hastening in hordes towards the streets where the royal palace complexes of Chozla Maaligai were located in that ancient city. Men, women, old and young as well as children were hurrying in droves and groups. Shaiva, Vaishnava, Buddhist, Jain -- all were intermingled in those crowds. Kaalaa-mukhas who were wont to observe harsh penances, some of them too, were seen here and there in that mob. Many among those people went crying and lamenting. Many were openly cursing the Pazluvoor chieftains.

Here and there were seen some youth with cudgels and long poles. Often, amongst them one man would noisily knock his shaft on another man's staff as they went onwards. When they heard this noisy rattling of the cudgels some cried in an undertone, 'yes, hit them like that! Smash the heads of the Pazluvoor fellows like that!' Others cried out such words loudly. Predominant amongst the ones who cried out loudly were the Kaalaa-mukhas.

The front facades of the old royal palaces of Pazlayarai formed a crescent shape, opening onto a rather large plaza. (Such spaces were often called Nilaa Muttram; people gathered here particularly on cool moonlit nights, to enjoy, exchange ideas, get the news, and just shoot the breeze.) The square was spacious and could accommodate thousands of persons who would come to stand there on special occasions. Enclosing the plaza from the outside was a tall boundary-wall. There were three gates on the wall guarded by some soldiers from the palace. Crowds gathering incessantly had begun to reach the three gates of the Nilaa-Muttram Plaza. The mobs were increasing minute by minute. Palace guards allowed only the two messengers and the town-guards who accompanied them to enter; they stopped the all others. But they could not stop the crowds for long.

Shouts rose 'Go in, go in' though it was not clear as to who raised the cries. Those at the back pushed the ones in the front. Just as waves in the sea push the ones in the front and finally the huge wave swelling behind is dashed on to the shore, thus behaved this surging ocean of people. The ones in the front, being crammed by the crowds at the back, shoved the guarding palace servicemen and got through. That was it! Mobs thronged into the plaza just like flood waters of the Cauvery that would bubble over from a small break on the levee that kept the river in check. Within a short time, the moon plaza was filled up. Thousands had crowded in there.

It was this roaring noise made by the mobs that overcame the palace guards, as they surged into the courtyard, that was heard by Lady Sembiyan Madevi while she was talking to Lord Madurandaka. With that she stopped disputing with her young son and came over to the balcony above the front portico. When they looked upon that grand old lady full of divine grace, her peaceful stance with hands folded in humble greeting, the roar of the sea of people quietened. For a few short seconds silence prevailed.

“Thaye! Where is our Prince? Where is Ponni’s Beloved? Where is your darling Arulmozli Varma?” rose the voices from the crowd. That was it, the mob became noisier than before. Sembian Madevi stood shocked and bewildered, not understanding anything. She could surmise that some danger must have befallen the young Prince who had enchanted the hearts of the people of Pazlayarai. What was that mishap? How did it happen? Did the Pazluvoor chieftains do something extreme and wrought indelible infamy upon the Chozla clan and Madurandaka?

At that moment the Tanjavur messengers shoved and pushed their way through the crowds and came up to the front. One of the city guards who had led them in spoke, “Great Lady, these men have brought a very important message from Tanjavur!” Sembian Madevi, looked at the crowds and quietened them by gesturing with her palm; she asked the messengers, “what news have you brought?”

“Thaye! We are the most unfortunate men, who have brought a very distressing news. Upon the orders of the Emperor, Prince Arulmozli Varma was coming from Lanka to Kodi Karai on a ship. On the way over the sea, the ship was caught in a whirlwind; the ship that escorted them smashed and sank in the sea. To rescue the people on that ship, the Prince jumped into the sea. He has not been found after that. Arrangements have been made to search over the sea and all along the coast. The Emperor and his noble lady, the daughter of Chief Malayaman, are immersed in great sorrow upon hearing this news. The Emperor has sent messages though us requesting that you, Lord Madurandaka Deva and the Younger Pirati should immediately come to Tanjavur.”

These words of the messenger fell upon the ears of Lady Sembian Madevi; and also, upon the ears of the nearby crowd. Tears arose to flow without stop from the eyes of Sembian Madevi. Upon seeing that, the crowds bawled “Oh!” loudly.

A gentleman at the front of the crowd said, “Thaye! You should not go to Tanjavur. The Younger Pirati also should not go to Tanjavur. We should get the Emperor to come here.”

“It is a lie to say that Ponnin Selvan drowned in the sea. The Lords of Pazluvoor must have killed him!” said another. Yet one another voice was heard saying, “Lord Madurandaka should not go to Tanjavur, he should remain here.” Several voices called, “Where is the Younger Pirati? We wish to see her.”

Sembian Madevi, looked around at one of her servant-maids nearby and asked her to fetch the Younger Pirati. Azlvar-adiyan who had been mingling in the crowd below now moved away from there. As usual he found the short cut and quickly found the pavilion by the water where Princess Kundavai was reviving Vanathi. Even as he heard the last few words that Kundavai was speaking to Vandiya Devan, he came forward and announced about the mayhem on the palace plaza. Deputing the task of ministering for Vanathi to the servant-maids, Kundavai Devi hurried from there.

When the Younger Pirati Kundavai Devi came up to the balcony above the palace portico and came close to Lady Sembian Madevi, she noticed the tears streaming down from that elderly lady's eyes. The made tears spring from Kundavai's eyes too. Upon seeing that, the crowd nearby was further immersed in the ocean of grief.

“Prince Ponnaiyan Selvan did not drown in the ocean! Pazluvoor nobles murdered him! We need to avenge this with retaliation. The Lords of Pazluvoor have imprisoned our Emperor; we need to free him and bring him here. If the Princess orders, we are ready for action this instant.”

The people in that crowd began to shout such words as they looked at the Younger Pirati. Princess Kundavai began to think intensely. This is not the time to reveal that the Prince is still alive. At the same time, one needs to calm these crowds and make them disperse. There seems to be one way! The princess wiped away her tears and turned to look at the men who stood in the first row in that mob. Azlvar-adiyan and Vandiya Devan had by now come and happened to stand among those persons. Princess Kundavai looked at Azlvar-adiyan and signaled him to come up. Upon that, Azlvar-adiyan found a way to go up to her. Kundavai spoke to him saying something very softly.

Azlvar-adiyan looked at the people and signaled with his hand, quietened them and spoke in a thundering voice, “The princess Younger Pirati is unable to believe that Ponni's Beloved Prince would have died. Just like long ago when Mother Cauvery picked him up and saved him, she believes that the Ocean King too would have saved him. On consulting the soothsayer, he reassures that. The Princess will make appropriate arrangements to look for the Prince. She asks that all of you disperse and go home peacefully.”

Upon hearing this, a huge sigh of relief like sound rose in the crowd. Said someone, “Where is the soothsayer? We too would like to personally hear him foretell this good prophecy.”

Seizing the opportunity, Vandiya Devan jumped up and climbed on to the balcony; standing next to Azlvar-adiyan, he announced, “Yes there was a grave period of danger for the Prince. But there was no harm to his life. He will soon be found.”

“How do you know?” asked a voice.

“I am a soothsayer. I studied the planets and the stars and know it to be so. I also studied the omens.”

“Lies, utter falsehood! You are no soothsayer; you are a spy!” said that same voice.

Vandiya Devan looked carefully at the man who spoke and recognized him to be the Doctor's son. “You idiot! Do you accuse me to be a spy? If I am a spy, whose spy, am I?” he asked.

The Doctor's son answered clearly, "Spy of the Pazluvoor chieftains!"

"What did you say? ? ?"roared Vandiya Devan.

The palace balcony was about 12 feet higher than the floor of the plaza. Without even considering that height he leaped from that balcony down on to the Doctor's son. A wrestling bout ensued between the two. Anyone at any time, people tend to stand around and watch such fisticuffs! The crowd cleared a spot and stood around it and began watching the fight between Vandiya Devan and Pinakapani the Doctor's son. The people on the palace balcony looked down worriedly. Many in the crowd began to shout louder than before without even knowing what was happening.

At this time there was heard the loud sound of conchs and pipes heralding someone. "Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya is here! Make way! Make way!" thundered an announcing voice. A path cleared automatically in that crowd for the Prime Minister.

Chapter 26 – Anirudda’s Appeal

The palanquin, of Prime Minister Anirudda cleaved through the mob in the plaza, forging a path for itself. People parted on both sides showing their respect for the Prime Minister. Many expressed their worries about their Prince Arulmozli. The Prime Minister too appeared with a worried face. Even so, he raised his palms in a gesture of blessing and reassurance as he moved forward. As soon as they reached the palace portico, the palanquin was lowered. The Prime Minister stepped down and first looked up. Seeing the Elder Queen and Princess Kundavai standing on the balcony, he signaled his salutations to them. He then turned to look at the spot where the fist-fight was occurring. During all this, without realizing what was happening around them, Vandiya Devan and Pinakapani continued to exchange blows. By now Azlvar-adiyan came down from the balcony and whispered something into the Prime Minister’s ears. That gentleman looked at the footmen who had come with him and ordered, “arrest these ruffians who are creating a disturbance in the palace plaza, immediately!”

Azlvar-adiyan accompanied the footmen and cut through the throng of people; the footmen took hold of the two men fighting and bound their hands with straps. Azlvar-adiyan had looked at Vandiya Devan and signaled silently, whereupon he stayed quiet when arrested.

Mr. Anirudda went up to the palace balcony. Standing up there he looked down on the crowds below and spoke, “I understand your worry and anger. The Emperor and the royal womenfolk too are overcome with sadness just like you all. I beseech that you do nothing to increase their worries. Adequate arrangements have been made to search for the Prince. All of you go home peacefully.”

Someone in the crowd said, “we need to see the Emperor; The Emperor should come back to Pazlayarai.”

“What about the fate of the warriors from our town who are in Lanka?” asked another.

“The Emperor is safe in his palace in Tanjavur. His palace is now guarded day and night by his bodyguards from the Velir battalions. Very soon, I personally shall escort the Emperor to come here to this city. You need not have any worries about our armed forces in Lanka. The war in Eezlam is concluded with complete victory for us. Our men will soon come home.” Upon these announcements by the Prime Minister, the crowd applauded noisily; with loud slogans of praise for Sundara Chozla and Anbil Anirudda, the crowd began to disperse.

The Prime Minister now looked upon the Elder Pirati and said, “My Lady! I need to speak of some very important matters with you. Shall we go inside the palace?” He turned to the young Princess and said, “Amma, I will come to you later.” On hearing that, Kundavai started back to her palace. Her mind was filled with various worries now. If the Princess held in caution any one person in all the Chozla empire, it was Mr. Anirudda the Prime Minister whom she held in some trepidation. He was an eagle-eyed man. In addition to looking at someone

physically and surmising all that there was to know about them, he was also capable of burrowing into their heart and mind and learn the innermost secrets of anyone he came across.

The younger Pirati was greatly confused about what he knew, and what he did not; what can be told him and what could be left out. It enraged her that the Prime Minister had ordered to arrest Vandiya Devan and Pinakapani both together. She could not show her rage openly; neither could she speak on behalf of Vandiya Devan in front of that mob. ‘He is coming to see me later, he says! Let him come! I will deal with him.’ Fuming inwardly, she hurried back to her chambers.

Lady Sembiyan Madevi commanded the reverence and respect of all in the entire Chozla domain. Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya was no exception. In spite of that, the old lady was somewhat cautious now. She seated herself only after Mr. Anirudda took a seat.

“Sir, for some time now thunderbolt after thunderbolt has been crashing on my head. Have you too, brought me some distressing news or have you come to ease my anguish with soothing words?”

“My Lady! Forgive me. I am unable to answer your question. It depends on how you accept the news I have brought” said the crafty, expert statesman.

“Is the news about Ponni’s Beloved son true? Sir, I cannot believe it at all. What things we assumed about him? How often had we said that he is born to rule the whole world under one umbrella?”

“Great Lady, It is true that you often told me that the astrologers say such things. I, in humility did not disagree; neither did I agree.”

“Let that go! Now tell me, is it confirmed that the Ocean King has snatched Ponni’s Beloved son?”

“Who can confirm that Thaye. It is true that such a news has spread all over the country and cities.”

“If that will be confirmed, what happens to the fate of this Chozla nation? What terror will ensue?”

“It appears that the horrors are not going to wait till that is confirmed... ..”

“Yes, rumor alone is sufficient to usher terrible horrors. I have never witnessed such a situation as today when these enraged people of Pazlayarai entered the palace... ..”

“Do not presume that this has occurred only in Pazlayarai. Since yesterday Tanjavur City is in total chaos. The Velaikara bodyguard contingent of Velirs refused to move out of the

Emperor's palace. Crowds upon crowds of people entered the fort, and mobbed the palaces of the Lords of Pazluvoor. Aggressive elephants in musth had to be let loose upon the people to make them disperse.

“Oh! What horror is this? What frightening news this?”

“It is good that Lord Madurandaka came here to Pazlayarai. Otherwise, that horrible blame would have been directed at him too...”

“Sir you will be utterly surprised if you know how Madurandaka has changed!”

“I will not be surprised, My Lady. It is all information that I have been aware of for some time now.”

“Even after being aware, you have not made any effort to change his mind. At least now advice and help.”

“My Lady, I do not think there is a need to change Lord Madurandaka's mind. I have come here to talk in support of his faction.”

“I do not understand, Sir, what do you mean?”

“My Lady, Madurandaka thinks that this Chozla Throne belongs to him. After the Emperor, he wishes to rule this kingdom. This wish is justified. It has taken deep roots in his heart. Trying to hinder it does not bode well for the Chozla nation. It is appropriate to help fulfil that wish.... ..”

“Sir! What words you speak? Have you too dared to betray the Emperor? What depraved times be these?”

“Great Lady, I have never considered treason against the Emperor even in my dreams. I have come now upon the orders of the Emperor. I merely speak what he requested me to propose to you. Lord Madurandaka wishes to ascend the throne after the Emperor's time. Pazluvoor nobles are conspiring for that purpose. However, the Emperor wishes to immediately crown Prince Madurandaka and abdicate from the throne. He has sent me here to you to obtain your agreement and support.”

“The Emperor may wish to do so. However, I will never give my support for it. I will never agree to this matter that is against the wishes of my revered spouse. Sir, Mr. Prime Minister, you who are the pinnacle of all learning and knowledge, how dare you come to speak to me about this illegal endeavor even if the Emperor asked you to do so? Have you completely forgotten those secrets about the Chozla ascendancy that are known only to you and me?”

“My Lady, I have not forgotten anything; I know some truths that you do not know. That is why that I have come as the emissary from the Emperor to you.”

“Sir, your intellect, and political craftiness is well known to the world. Do not practice that on a mere woman like me.”

“Great Lady, I have not come to debate with you; neither have I come to display my expertise. I have come to beg and pray that you will graciously protect this Chozla country from grave danger.”

“Offer your prayers to that Good Lord Shiva who wears the crescent moon. Or pray to Him your chosen Divinity Lord Vishnu...”

“Yes, My Gracious Lady, if you will not be open hearted and accepting, only those divinities, the one who dances in Ambalam and the one who reposes in Arangam have to protect this country.” (He is referring to the shrines in the famous temple towns of Chidambaram and Srirangam.)

“What danger has befallen this country now? How can that be prevented by Madurandaka ascending the throne?”

“You may ask Gracious Lady! Similar to the uprising today in this Pazlayarai city whose people came in rage, the public from Kanchi to Rameswaram will rise in anger within two or three days. It will not end with that. I know that Boothi Vikrama Kesari has started from Lanka with a large army he has collected. When the news reaches Aditya Karikala, he too will not be patient. He will start towards Tanjavur with the Northern Forces. The nobles of Pazluvoor and other chieftains are already amassing armies. A horrendous altercation amidst blood relatives, like the one that took place between the Kauravas and Pandavas, will take place in this land. All your near and dear will be felled and wiped out. Will you be watching all this happen?”

“Sir, Most intelligent Prime Minister! I have neither kith nor kin. You must have heard about that great soul named Sankara who appeared in the western hill country. He wrote:

Mother Is Devi Parvathi

Father Divine Is Maheshwara

None That Bind, But My Kith And Kin

Be The Devout Believers In Shiva

My mother is Goddess Parvathi; my father is God Shiva; my friends and family are the devout who believe in Lord Shiva. I have no other attachments on this earth....”

“Madam, in that same verse the fourth stanza that Sankara has written, I shall remind you of that:

One’s own country be the three worlds.

Our homeland where we are born is the three worlds – heaven, earth, and perdition. Will you watch your homeland, be destroyed by civil strife?”

“My homeland is more precious to me than the three worlds that religion talks about. However, are these few square feet of Chozla land alone our homeland? Never, not in all my days. All the nations that spread up to Mount Kailasa in the Himalayas in the north is my land. If there is no room for me in Chozla land, I will go to blessed Kasi City; I will go to Kashmir and Kailasa. I have been thinking of going on such a pilgrimage for many days. Help me to do so.”

“Thaye! I concur that the lands from Tricone Hill in the south to the Himalayas in the north is our motherland. This widespread blessed land called Bharata is facing a ghastly danger. Turks, Afghans, Pathans, Moghuls, Arabs and such groups of people have risen with the intent to capture new lands. A thousand years ago Yavana-greeks and barbaric-Huns came as invading armies. New nation states of this new faith have started to come to our lands, horde after invading horde. Their faith is a strange faith. They believe that it is meritorious to destroy temples and shatter statues. My Lady, there is no great ruler in the northern lands now, to stop these swarming invaders. I have been dreaming that our brave Chozlas will go up to the banks of River Ganga and even beyond to the snowy mountains to establish a great Bharata Empire, they will hold in check those hordes bent upon destroying temples... help my dreams come true. Agree to Madurandaka being crowned and prevent a civil war in these Tamil lands,” said the revered Anirudda Brahma-raya.

Lady Sembayan Madevi was lost in quiet thought for some time after she heard him.

“Sir, you spoke of all sorts of matters, that I, a foolish woman cannot understand and you have confused me. If such an atrocious fate is about to grip our hallowed Bharata lands, only the Great Lord needs to or be able to stop it. What can I, an innocent woman do? I will never forget what my dear husband said when he departed for the abode by the feet of the Divine Lord. I will never do anything against what he has said to me” said the Elder Pirati.

“If that is what it is, I will need to speak of a truth that you are not aware of until now,” said Mr. Anirudda.

At that moment Lord Madurandaka entered the chambers pompously and asked, “Mother, what is this that I hear? Has Arulmozli drowned in the sea?”

“My lady please console your beloved son. I will speak of the matter I wished to share with you, at another time.” The Prime Minister departed after those words. As soon as he had

crossed the doorway, Madurandaka declared, "There goes my prime enemy! Even when I am here, he comes to spread ill advice." The Prime Minister did not fail to hear these words of Prince Madurandaka.

Chapter 27 – Kundavai is Bewildered

Prime Minister Anirudda reached the palace apartments of Kundavai. On seeing him Kundavai stood and bowed respectfully.

“May you attain a husband distinguished in valor and courage; may you live long,” he blessed.

“Sir, is this a blessing appropriate for a time such as now?” asked the Princess.

“Whatever blessing I know, I an old-fashioned man, have spoken. What other blessing are you expecting, dear child?”

“All of us are worried about the health of my dearest father. The whole country is plunged in worry about Arulmozli Varma.”

“But I do not see any concern about that on your divine face, my child!”

“I am born of brave warrior clans. Do you want me be wailing like every one as soon as the word ‘danger!’ is spoken?”

“I would never say that on any day! All I ask is that the Princess speak words of comfort to ordinary faint-hearted people like me.”

“Revered Sir! I, me speak words of comfort! To You! ... You are a diamond hearted person who will feel no alarm or be shaken, even if the world starts swirling the other way”

“Such a man as that, even I, have been shaken by you. Young ladies who live in the seclusion of palaces should happily spend time in song and dance. Instead, you interfered in political matters; see the resulting dire consequences of such activity?”

“Oh dear! What slander is this? In what political matter did I interfere? What extreme predicament has resulted because of my actions?”

“Before I returned from Mattotam, I had asked that Ponni’s Beloved should remain for some more time in Lanka. Contradicting that, you sent him a letter, asking him to come back immediately. Who would heed to this old man’s words and go against your wish? See the resulting mishap because of that? The sea has taken the darling Prince of the Chozlas. You saw how mobs gathered and created a ruckus in front of this palace just a little while ago. Today, such upheaval prevails all over the country. Are you not the cause for this havoc my dear?”

“Sir, why are you saying that Arulmozli started from Lanka upon reading my letter? Are you not aware that the Pazluvoor nobles sent two ships loaded with soldiers, to arrest the Prince and bring him prisoner?”

“I am aware. I know. If it had been left at that we could have now made the Lords of Pazluvoor responsible for what has happened to the Prince. Both the ships that they sent have been destroyed. If they declare that the Prince left Lanka because of your letter, can one refute it?”

“Sir, how do you know that I sent him a letter?”

“What a fantastic question you ask! My dear, is it only me and my associates who that know? The whole world knows. First, the messenger you sent was arrested by our soldiers in Lanka. Therefore, everyone in Lanka came to know. Because of the Pazlayarai Doctor’s son who went with him to Kodi Karai, all the people in this country know. What you did in secrecy is so thoroughly exposed. That is why our elders have said that womenfolk should not interfere in political matters.”

Kundavai was shocked. She was not sure about how to reply to this. The Prime Minister had surely backed her into a corner. There was surely truth in what he said. As soon as she recognized this truth, she felt anger against the young man of the Vaanar Clan. Yes, he was truly capable of brave feats. However, he had not guarded the secret and had compromised the mission. I must see him and seriously chide him. As soon as the thought occurred, she remembered that he had been arrested upon the orders of the Prime Minister. ‘Oh, such scrapes he gets embroiled in! and then puts me also in a quandary. Why could he not have stayed quiet for a little while? So, what if the Doctors’ son prattled some nonsense; he need not have jumped from the balcony on that man and started a fight.’

“Sir I beseech you; please be magnanimous and satisfy a request I have” asked Kundavai.

“Thaye! Order me. There can be no opposition to your words in this land.”

“Sir when you were coming in to the palace plaza earlier today, there were two men engaged in a fistfight. You ordered them to be arrested.”

“They were committing a serious offense. It was a grave mistake to start a fistfight in the palace premises in front of the Elder Queen. And that too at a very distressing time. The mob was enraged. If some of them who had no idea about the reasons, had joined in the altercation, what a catastrophe could have happened. Like a small ember lighting a forest fire, the whole kingdom would have been plunged into chaos and confusion.”

“Yes Sir, I agree; what they did was a big mistake. Even so, I beseech that you pardon and free one of those two men.”

“Who is that fortunate man who has earned the grace of the Princess?”

“It is him, the messenger I sent to Lanka.”

“Oh, it like a ripe fruit dropped into cream! That is convenient.”

“Why do you say that Sir?”

“I personally was planning to arrest that messenger. He was caught easily here.”

“Why? What crime did he commit?”

“Thaye! He is being accused of a most frightening felony.”

“What is that?”

“He is being accused that he threw Ponni’s Beloved into the sea and drowned him.”

“Such hideous nasty words. Who is accusing?”

“Many are laying such blame upon him. Lord Parthiban Pallava who came away from Lanka with the Prince onboard his ship, is saying so. The Pazluvoor nobles say it is possible. I too am suspicious. “

“Revered Sir! Be careful. Are you suspecting that I hired an assassin and sent him to kill my brother and come back?”

“Never My dear! You sent him as your trusted confidential messenger. That might have been a mistake. He could be a spy working for some others?”

“Never, no way. Aditya Karikala sent him to me to help me. He wrote me saying that he is absolutely trustworthy... “

“Aditya Karikala too could have been mistaken. On the way during his travels, he could have been made to change affiliations. When I was coming in, I heard the accusation ‘Spy.’ The fellow standing below on the plaza was accusing the fellow on the balcony up above. What was that about?”

“The one who stood on the balcony is the messenger who came to me from my brother Karikala. He is Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan of the Vaanar Clan of Vallam. The one standing below was Pinakapani the Doctor’s son. Pinakapani accused Vandiya Devan of being a spy of Pazluvoor chieftains. What an ignoramus!”

“Why could it not be true, Thaye?”

“It can never be so. He escaped from detention by Lord Pazluvoor; those Pazluvoor lords sent so many men and made every effort to capture him again,” said Kundavai.

“How did he come to possess the signet ring of Pazluvoor?”

“That conniving ogre, bewitching seductress, poisonous serpent, please forgive me – he happened to have the ring because the Young Queen of Pazluvoor had given it to him.”

“I am happy that you already know that information. You would not have believed it, if I had told you. Fine, I agree, that the man from Vallam is not a spy of the Pazluvoor men. Perhaps he is a spy of the Queen of Pazluvoor?”

“How is that possible?” Asked Kundavai.

“Let me explain how that could be possible. That confidential messenger whom you sent to Lanka, that Vandiya Devan met with the Young Queen of Pazluvoor in her palanquin outside Tanjavur fort and obtained the signet ring. Later inside the fort he met with her secretly, privately inside the inner gardens of Pazluvoor Mansion. The young Queen hid him in the treasure vault and helped him get out of the fort. She knew that he was coming to you with letters for you. When he came back from Lanka, they met again, conversed in secret in the old dilapidated Pandian palace near River Arischandra. Even after that, Vandiya Devan retained the signet ring. What do you surmise from all this? Lady, do you still have absolute confidence in your messenger?” asked the Prime Minister.

Kundavai’s heart was now truly drowning in confusion.

Chapter 28 – Spy Against Spy

Prime Minister Anirudda asked Princess Kundavai who remained very quiet, “Why are you quiet? Do you still trust Vandiya Devan?”

“Sir, Best among Ministers! What can I say? If I let you continue speaking, you will convince me to suspect my own self!” said Kundavai.

“It is the nature of the times my dear. It is not very easy to decide who can be trusted, who cannot be trusted. So many enemies surround us on all four directions. Many mysterious conspiracies are afoot,” said Mr. Anirudda.

“Even so, it appears that there is no mystery unknown to you, neither can there be any conspiracy hidden from you. How did you know all those details about the messenger I had sent?” asked Kundavai Devi.

“Madam, I have a thousand eyes and two thousand ears. They are spread out all over the country. My men are inside Pazluvoor Mansion. There is one among the bodyguards of Pazluvoor Queen Nandini who sends information to me. There are many like Azlvar-adiyan who wander the country from town to town and bring news to me. I have been thinking that nothing can happen in these Chozla lands or in the surrounding areas without my knowledge. Even so, who knows; There may be those who can outwit me; mysterious activities may happen without my knowledge.”

When the minister was speaking in this fashion, Kundavai wondered if the that crafty statesman knew that Prince Arulmozli was in Choodamani Vihara. With a great effort she suppressed her desire to find out or speak about it. She then said, “Sir all that you speak of may be true. However, I cannot believe that the young man of the Vaanar clan would be a spy of Pazluvoor’s young queen. Kindly release him from custody.”

“Think carefully, My Lady. There is some magical bewitching power in that woman Nandini. Devoutly religious Madurandaka the follower of Saiva faith has become enmeshed in her nets and is now eager to rule kingdoms. Sambuvaraya’s son Kandamaran has taken her letters and gone as a messenger to meet Prince Karikala. Parthiban who was the sworn enemy of lord Pazluvoor is now a slave to the young Queen of Pazluvoor. He has come forward to make peace by dividing the Chozla lands in two giving one share to Prince Madurandaka and the other half to Karikala.” Thus spoke Mr. Anirudda

“What atrocity is this? Splitting the kingdom in two? My ancestors had stived in many ways and expanded this land to our present-day empire.?”

“You will not like dividing the Kingdom; neither do I like that. If we had broached the idea ten days ago, even Parthiban would have erupted in anger. Now he is in the forefront of arranging the proposition.”

“What quirk is this? What sort of magical attraction does that Pazluvoor Queen possess?”

“Princess, I was about to ask you that! You are now asking me. Let that go. Why do you think that amongst all others, Vandiya Devan alone will not fall prey to her enchanting power? Why are you so sure?”

“If you ask for reasons, I cannot explain. They say that the heart is witness to its own self. Something tells my heart surely, that the man of the Vaanar Clan will not betray me.”

“Let us then prove it.”

“How? What test?”

“We need to immediately send a messenger to Kanchi City. I need to send some urgent letters through someone who is completely trusted by Karikala.”

“About what?”

“A little while ago, you referred to Nandini as a poisonous snake and then begged pardon. In truth she is many times more dangerous than a venomous snake. She has planned to completely destroy the noble Chozla clan and annihilate their entire root stock.”

“Oh Lord God! How terrible!” when Kundavai spoke, her heart was in turmoil with very many inner thoughts boiling over.

Mr. Anirudda continued: “She has instigated the Sambuvarayas to invite your brother Prince Karikala to Kadamboor Fort. She has been talking about forming alliances by wedding one of the daughters of Sambuvaraya, and one of the daughters of Lord Pazluvoor to Aditya Karikala. Apparently, she will arbitrate the talks to finalize about dividing the Kingdom in two. All this is spoken publicly. None knows the secrets hidden deep in her heart. I who am proud to think that I know all secrets, even I cannot fathom the depths of her mind or intentions.”

“What can we do about that Sir?”

“We need somehow to stop Aditya Karikala from going to Kadamboor Fort. You and I need to send letters regarding that to Prince Karikala, through Vallavarayan Vandiya Devan. If Karikala disregards our wishes and starts to go to Kadamboor, Vandiya Devan must accompany him. He needs to guard your brother like a shadow that does not separate from the body. He should not give room for the Prince to meet Nandini in privacy.” So spoke the Prime Minister.

Kundavai sighed deeply. She realized the importance of the endeavor outlined by the Prime Minister. However, she could not guess if was speaking with knowledge of some hidden

mysteries or merely with some ulterior political motive. She asked, “Sir, why do you think that is that very important to prevent them from meeting each other?”

“My Lady, some Aabath-udavi bodyguards of Veera-pandiya have sworn a blood oath to destroy the very rootstock of the Chozlas. Newly minted gold coins from the treasure vault of Lord Pazluvoor are being supplied to them. Need I have to explain any more about this?”

“No,” mumbled Kundavai. She remembered her younger brother bedridden in the grip of a poisonous fever, in Choodamani Vihara. Would he too be surrounded by danger?

“Sir, it is our good fortune that you are the Prime Minister at this time when calamity after catastrophe is plummeting this Chozla Kingdom. What arrangements have you made regarding my younger brother?” asked Kundavai.

“I have arranged for special prayers, pujas and other services for the welfare of the young Prince in all the Shiva and Vishnu temples of our Kingdom. They will conduct similar prayers in Buddhist monasteries and Jain Academies. The monks at Nagaipattinam Choodamani Vihara will hold special prayers for a mandala or session of forty days. What else do you suggest?”

Kundavai was watching his face to see if there were any changes when he spoke about the prayers at the Buddhist monastery at Nagaipattinam. She could discern nothing.

“Sir, when you mentioned Choodamani Vihara, I remembered something. For some reason, Lord Pazluvoor is angry about that Vihara. Since receiving the news that the monks in Lanka offered the Crown of Lanka to the Young Prince, that anger has apparently grown. They may even heap the blame, for the Prince being lost, upon those monks in Choodamani Vihara. You must make some arrangements for protection of that monastery.” Thus spoke Kundavai.

“I will do so immediately, My Lady. If needed, with orders from the Emperor I will even send a small contingent of soldiers to guard the Buddhist Vihara. What say you, about sending Vandiya Devan to Kanchi?”

“Sir, is it not prudent to send someone else for this very important assignment?”

“If you think him trustworthy, I prefer to send him. I have had reports of his bravery and shrewd deeds. On this assignment we need to send someone who is not afraid of any contingency. I personally saw his prowess this morning when I arrived at the Palace plaza. What a trouncing he gave that young Doctor! If I had not intervened that young Doctor would have gone to the nether worlds to doctor Yama, Lord of Death,” spoke Mr. Anirudda.

Kundavai was filled with elation on hearing him. With some hesitancy, she said, “So what if he is brave and skilled in combat. He seems very impetuous. He started a fight so quickly.”

“For that, if needed I can send my disciple Thirumalai to go with him. Azlvar-adiyan is a very cautious thinking man,” said the master statesman. Kundavai thought, ‘I am not sure if even God knows what is hidden in this man’s mind. He wishes to send one spy to watch another spy!’

Chapter 29 – Vanathi’s Transformation

Kundavai was heading over to release Vandiya Devan from prison in order to send him on a journey again, when Vanathi came towards her; she bowed to the Younger Pirati, and stood respectfully.

“My darling, I left you and came away! I have a few more important chores; let me finish them and come to you. Why don’t you wait for me in the garden for a little while? However, do not go near the water!”

“Akka, I will not bother you anymore. I wish to go back to Kodumbalur. Please permit me,” said Vanathi.

“What is this? Are you too dropping a thunderbolt on my head? Why are you angry with me? Why this sudden longing for your hometown?”

“There can be no one as ungrateful as me if I am angry with you. I have no new passion about my hometown. Whence is there a hometown for someone like me who has neither father nor mother? My mother had apparently taken some vows to offer a certain prayer at the Kaali Temple near my hometown. She closed her eyes before the vow could be fulfilled. I am falling into a faint quite often these days; perhaps that unfulfilled vow is making me ill like this.”

“You need not go that far for that. I will send word and have the prayer service done and vow fulfilled.”

“It is not just that Akka! I hear that my Elder Uncle is coming back from Lanka. He will not venture beyond Tanjavur and come here to Pazlayarai. I wish to be in Kodumbalur when he comes. I wish to personally hear from him about all that has happened in Lanka.”

“Why are you so keen on knowing about all that happened in Lanka?”

“How could you ask such a question of me? Have you forgotten that my father attained the heavens meant for the valiant, in the battlefields of Lanka?”

“I have not forgotten; that has been avenged now.”

“I do not think that it has been completely avenged. My uncle the Elder Lord Velir is coming back hastily even before the war is over.”

“Are you proposing to ask him to return to Lanka and continue with war? Are you wanting to go back to Kodumbalur for that reason?”

“Who am I to discuss such grave matters? All I wish to do is question him and find out about what has happened.”

“Aha! I understand your thinking now. You wish to ask your Elder Uncle about the brave deeds of Ponniiyan Selvan in the wars in Lanka? Is that not so?”

“Is that wrong Akka?”

“Nothing wrong about that; however, you seem to want to leave me alone here at a time like this; that is the big error!”

“Akka, how can I be the one leaving you alone? You have many hand-maidens like me to be your friend. There are so many who are ready to wait upon you, to understand and do your bidding.”

“Have you too started speaking in this fashion? It appears that your mind is muddled after hearing the news about my younger brother. You need not be overly worried about that news.”

“How is it possible for me to worry about your brother more than your concerns about him Akka?”

“Tell me the truth? Did you go fall into the lake intentionally or did you faint and fall into the water?”

“Why would I want to go and fall into the water? I fainted and fell down. You and that nobleman of the Vaanar clan saved me from drowning.”

“You do not seem thankful about being rescued.”

“Not only in this birth but in all the fourteen births that might be destined me, I will be thankful.”

“You speak as if this birth is over! Vanathi, let me tell you, listen to me, do not worry yourself unnecessarily. I cannot believe that any harm would have befallen Arulmozli Varma. I will repeat to you the words I spoke to the crowds who had gathered in the palace plaza a little while ago. Long ago divine Mother Cauvery rescued and saved my brother from the water. Similarly, the Ocean King would have rescued and saved him. We are sure to soon hear some good news,” spoke Kundavai.

“With what evidence do you speak with such confidence to reassure me Akka?”

“Something speaks to me in my heart. If something had befallen my dearest brother, my heart would know. I would not be going about as usual in this fashion.”

“Akka, I do not have any such trust in what the heart says; neither in the secret depths nor in the outward feelings. I do not have any faith in it.”

“How can you say so conclusively?”

“My heart and inner mind have been gripped by some hallucinations in these past few days. They were dreams in my sleep; and appeared sometimes even when I was awake.”

“What was it, Vanathi?”

“Your brother’s face often appeared in the water. As if calling to me. It happened often in my dreams.”

“Why do you say it was a hallucination? The news that has reached us, and what you are saying seem to be in agreement.”

“If you hear the whole story, you will know what foolish imaginings they were; remember when I fell faint into the lake? At that time, I was transported to Nagaloka. A wedding took place in that world.”

“Who married whom?”

“I do not wish to speak about that. On the whole, I no longer have any belief in what the mind thinks or the heart feels; I have no confidence in dreams. I have now determined that henceforth I will believe only what I see with my eyes and hear with my ears.”

“Vanathi you are mistaken; sometimes what we see, what we hear may not be true. Only what the mind discerns will be true. There are so many examples from the stories and epics that I can recount for you.”

“Akka, I will hear about them all at a later time; now, give me leave to go,” said Vanathi.

Princess Kundavai was totally surprised and astonished. How did this girl suddenly become so brave, so determined?

“Vanathi, why this sudden haste? Even if you need to go home, can you not leave after a few days? Confusion prevails everywhere in the country. Don’t I have to arrange for proper guards to escort you home safely?”

“I do not fear about that Akka. The palanquin bearers and the four footmen who came with me as guards from Kodumbalur when I came here, have had nothing to do but eat and sleep. They will escort me home safely.”

“Fantastic! You think I will just let you go like that?”

“I beseech you, beg you, Akka! I have no fear. None in this kingdom will dare harm Kodumbalur Vanathi. Who is not aware that I am the beloved friend of Kundavai Pirati? Give me permission for one other thing that I wish. As I journey home, I wish to go to the Astrologer of Kudanthai once again and ask him a few questions. Can I do that?”

“I too am eager to go and consult with him. But you seem to be in such a hurry.”

“Akka, no! this time I wish to go consult him privately.”

Kundavai placed a finger on her nostril in total astonishment. How did this girl transform to become so stubborn, within one day, within a couple of hours? Kundavai could not understand her, however she could not stop her leaving on the journey.

“That is fine Vanathi. You may do as you wish. Go prepare for your journey. Meanwhile I shall go and free that brave young man of the Vaanar clan from prison” she said.

Chapter 30 – Two Prisons

After parting from Vanathi, Princess Kundavai went directly to the prisons of Pazlayarai. She had her footmen stop outside and went down by herself to the chambers where Vandiya Devan was imprisoned. He was locked in a solitary cell. He was looking at the ceiling and enthusiastically singing a themmangu folk song.

Sparkling stars sky-lamp flares
 Seeing you doe-like girl mine
 Shimmering astonished
 Stand in stunned stillness

Only after she had come closer and cleared her throat to get his attention did he turn around to look at Kundavai. He stood up hurriedly and said courteously, “Welcome! Welcome! Princess welcome! Come take an honored seat!”

“Which seat shall I take?” asked the Princess looking around.

“This is thine palace; thy rule prevails here. It is thy command, you may choose to be seated on any throne that you fancy,” said the noble of Vallam.

“Sir, when your ancestors commanded and ruled the three worlds, perhaps the palaces of Vallam appeared like this. In our city we call this a prison cell,” said the Princess.

“My Lady, these days, in my town, there is neither palace nor prison cell. All the Kings of various countries banded together and annihilated all, reduced everything to rubble -- the palaces, prisons. A hundred years ago

“Why? Oh why? Why were they so angry about the palaces and prisons of Vallam?”

“It all came about because of a bard!”

“Oh! How was that?”

“When ancestors of my dynasty ruled as mighty kings of the southern realms, their officials were inclined to arrest and imprison the subordinate kings and chieftains who did not pay their levies and tributes on time. The prison cells that housed such kings lined both sides of the palace courtyard. Those subjugated kings would wonder about when the great monarch would graciously call for them, wait patiently to beg forgiveness, pay their dues, and go home. It was not easy to get an audience with that great Vaanar King. Even as they watched, bards and poets gained easy entry to the court halls. They would recite their poems and compositions to the King and be rewarded for their effort with rich gifts and return through the same courtyard. The chieftains imprisoned in the cells would cry out in anguish, ‘Oh dear, dear, look at the good fortune that has blessed these poets. Look at the prizes they are going

home with!’ They would be surprised to see, ‘Oh oh, the royal silken canopy that this poet is carrying away, is it not mine?’ said one king. ‘ah! This bard is going away in my palanquin, said another; ‘there goes my royal elephant with that songster!’ That was my horse; I hope it dislodges him from its back one day!’ said the other chieftain. Finally, the last of the bards came by and heard what all those imprisoned kings were saying. Hearing their words, he walked in to the presence of the King of Kings. He then recited this poem:

Mine it is that canopy; mine is the palanquin
 Mine is that armor, mine that pennant
 Mine is that elephant, and there goes my horse
 Lament those chiefs
 Upon seeing the bards honored by mighty King Baanan

This poem sung by that bard, became famous all over the Tamil countries and beyond. The people enjoyed singing and hearing it often. That paved the way for ending the very foundation of the Vaanar Kingdom. All the chieftains joined together and rose against their lord and destroyed the palaces and prisons!”

“Even though they destroyed everything, those kings could not destroy the song of that poet, is it not so? Your clan is fortunate. That fame of that poem will live forever!”

“I have now appeared to put an end to that great fame of the brave Vaanar Clan ...”

“Oh! You do accept that truth, do you?”

“What else can I do but agree? The worst form of being bound in service is to be bound in the service of a woman. I brought infamy to the name of my forefathers by listening to the words of a woman. I had to run, hide, flee, go missing, wander dangerously and somehow survive. I thought I could expunge all my anger by killing that young Doctor. There came an obstruction even for that.”

“Sir why are you so angry with Pinakapani the Doctors’ son?”

“There is ample cause for being angry. You found the ‘most excellent’ of men and sent him to accompany me on my journey to Kodi Karai. He was about to ruin all my plans. Even if I were to disregard that, he tried to get me arrested by those agents looking for me, by accusing me openly on the streets of Pazlayarai, to be a spy. Somehow, I managed to get away, only to be accused by him again in the palace plaza in front of thousands of people, ‘spy of Pazluvoor Queen’”

“Oh, Scion of Vallam, is it not true?”

“What is not true?”

“I ask about the accusation made by Pinakapani the Doctors son. That you are an agent of Pazluvoor Queen Nandini Devi. Will you speak the truth, Sir?”

“I have taken a vow to speak no truth!”

“Dear me! What vow is that? Perhaps you espoused that vow after meeting the Pazluvoor Queen near River Arischandra?”

“No, no. I had made that decision even before that. As long as I spoke things contrary to truth, everyone believed me. At one place I inadvertently uttered the words, ‘the Prince is safe in Nagaipattinam,’ no one believed me! All who heard laughed”

“What a humongous slip-up; it is good that none believed you; if they had believed, what a calamity it would be!”

“Henceforth, such mistakes will not happen.”

“My boundless thanks for this your pledge.”

“What pledge have I given?”

“That you would execute all my commands henceforth without committing any blunders.”

“Good God! I have not given any such pledge. This is enough; enough. Release me from this prison, I will be on my way...”

“If you speak thus, there is no freedom for you; you shall continue in this prison,” she said.

Vandiya Devan laughed gleefully.

“Why are you laughing Sir? Do you think I jest?”

“No, My Lady! Can I not escape this prison if you do not set me free?”

For one moment, Princess Kundavai looked at him pointedly, with widened eyes. “Sir, you are very capable. That too very capable in escaping from prisons. For you who have escaped from the treasure vault dungeons of Lord Pazluvoor, this is nothing.”

“If that is so, open these doors yourself, free me!”

“Yes, I can surely open the doors of this prison; perhaps you can even escape on your own. But you may not escape from another prison cell

“Do you speak of Tanjavur Dungeons of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor?”

“No; even that is trivial for you; you will overpower the tigers waiting at the doors and manage to escape Tanjavur prison.”

“Which prison do you speak about?”

“I speak of the prison that is my heart.”

“My Lady! I am a nomad with neither home nor hearth. The pride of my clan is all old forgotten legend; imagination of wordsmiths and bards. You are the beloved daughter of the Emperor ruling all the known world.”

“Who knows? Even this fame of the Chozlas may one day become mere legend.”

“Perhaps! Today you are the Princess of the realm with powers unequal to any other. None, the Emperor, the Lords Pazluvoor, the Prime Minister, no one dare go against your wish.”

“If that is true, how can you Sir, resist my authority?”

“Political influence is some other matter. You spoke of the sway of your heart.”

“What is wrong in that?”

“The harm is in the differences in the status of us both.”

“Have you not heard of the proverb, ‘Can fetters bind love’?”

“Will not that proverb hold good for Ponni’s Beloved Prince and boat girl Poonkuzlali?”

“Surely, it applies to them too. I thought that my brother was born to rule the world; and so, wished to put a lock on their hearts. “

“I came eagerly, with great expectations because of all that I had heard about that Prince. I imagined that I would go forth with him in all eight directions, be victorious in battlefields, earn name and fame.”

“Are those dreams gone now?”

“Yes. Ponni’s Beloved Prince prefers a peaceful life more than rights to thrones. He prefers to work with hammer and stone-chisel, renovating temples than swirling a sword on a battlefield.”

“Madurandaka is now more than eager in ruling kingdoms. A sheep turns into a tiger and the tiger has become a sheep. Biographies of Shiva devotees recount tales of Lord Shiva at Aalawai who turned wolves into mares and made mares become wolves. I thought ...”

“My Lady, by your grace I too turned into a wily wolf. I had to escape enemies by wile and guile, hiding, running, drifting, speaking truth and untruth, with tricks and magic. Princess, I can do such things no more. Permit me to leave.”

“Sir, Vanathi who I presumed was my dearest friend, is deserting my company. Are you too wishful of abandoning me?”

“My Lady, I have no ideas about the relationship between you and the noble lady from Kodumbalur. However, how can it be said that I abandon you? Kings of kings wait in penance to take your jeweled hand. I came to serve at your bidding”

The Younger Pirati, stretched out her hand. Not sure if it was a dream or if it was real, Vandiya Devan took that flower petal soft hand in both his palms, lifting it to his eyes in salutation. Elation engulfed his heart and soul.

“Valiant of the Vaanar clan, heed this: I come from dynasties of ancient Tamil royal warriors, who consider honor and chastity as their family wealth. A few women of my lineage had even chosen self-immolation on the funeral pyres of their wedded husbands. They considered the fires that burned their husbands’ bodies to be cooler than moonbeams and jumped in to the pyre.”

“I have heard of that! Lady!”

“This hand of mine that grasped yours, will never take another man’s hand.”

Vandiya Devan rendered speechless, thoughtless, stood motionless looking into the eyes of Kundavai brimming with tears.

“Sir think a little about what is to become of my life, if any danger befalls your life because of your hasty deeds.”

“My Lady, can I who have found a seat on the throne of your heart be a coward afraid for his life?”

“Sir, cowardice is different than being careful. Even Prime Minister Anirudda has no doubt about your valor and bravery.”

“What does he doubt about me?”

“He is concerned that you may be a spy serving the Young Queen of Pazluvoor.”

“I am ready to respond to that concern in the same fashion in which I served a reply to the Doctor’s son Pinakapani. Open these prison doors; tell me where he is, that Minister?”

“At least Pinakapani has some practice of wrestling. Revered Anirudda has training in learned debates and none in physical combat. His weapons are his sharp intellect. He does not depend on a sharp sword to protect him.”

“Let him for the first time taste the sharpness of my sword.”

“Sir, in this kingdom, Prime Minister Anirudda is the most revered person after the Emperor. Even the nobles of Pazluvoor hesitate to go into open conflict with him.”

“Pazluvoor nobles have a guilty conscience, they can be afraid. Why should I be afraid?”

“He is a dear friend of my father from their younger days. Any disrespect to the Prime Minister is disrespect shown to the Emperor and to me.”

“What shall I do to win his approval?”

“He wants to send someone who is very trustworthy to Kanchi City. I guaranteed that we could send you; we could trust you.”

“My Lady, do not send me to Kanchi; something in my heart warns me ‘do not go to Kanchi!’”

“Perhaps it is the voice of the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?”

“Never! Would I heed the words of that poisonous snake as against your commands?”

“Sir, from now on do not speak of the Pazluvoor Queen in that fashion anywhere or at any time.”

“What is this? Why this sudden change?”

“Yes, my thoughts regarding her have undergone a complete transformation after hearing the information you brought from Lanka.”

“Does it mean that I need to behave with humility and reverence towards the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?”

“Yes”

“Do I obey orders, even if she gives to me the sharp sword that she cherishes and venerates and commands me ‘Go bring the head of this person!’ Do I bring it to her?”

Kundavai’s whole body shuddered; when she answered, her voice was trembling, “You must behave reverently towards the Queen of Pazluvoor; you needn’t obey her commands. She herself may not be aware of the enterprise she had become involved in. “

“That is what she said. ‘I really do not know why I venerate this sword that is with me.’”

Upon hearing those words, the Princess declared, with an even more trembling voice, “Only God must protect this ancient Chozla clan.”

“Let that God use my humble self as an agent when protecting the Chozlas,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Sir, I too think the same. When you come back from Kanchi, you need to go back once more to Lanka. You must somehow bring that mute Mother back here.”

“Leading her is like trying to bring a whirlwind enclosed in a pot. Someone said such words about her somewhere. Yes, it was that Vaishnava Nambi who said that. Perhaps he has brought her back here.”

“No, he was not able to complete that task. Only you can accomplish that.”

“If so, please do not send me to Kanchi My Lady.”

“Why?”

“My master, my liege lord Prince Karikala is in Kanchi. If he questions me, I will have to disclose everything to him. If he learns of the conspiracy of the noblemen of Pazluvoor and other chieftains, he will immediately rise in rage. If he learns that the Emperor is guarded as if in a prison, he will gather an army and march forth. Perhaps he has already started if the news about Ponni’s Beloved has reached his ears.”

“That is why I am eager to send you to him. You should somehow try and stop him from leaving Kanchi.”

“If he has already started from Kanchi before I reach there?”

“Go join him wherever he is on the road. More than anything else, there is one important task for you....”

“Tell me.”

“I have news that Elder Lord Pazluvoor has started for Kadamboor, accompanied by his Young Queen. “

“Is it really the Young Queen? Or, is someone else in her Palanquin?”

“It is the Young Queen. Uncle Madurandaka is still here in Pazlayarai.”

“Why are they undertaking that journey?”

“They have invited Aditya Karikala to come to Kadamboor Fort. The reason given publicly is that there is talk of weddings. There is also a rumor about discussing the division of the Kingdom in two, in the interest of peace.”

“My master will never agree to that.”

“I am not worried about all that now.”

“Then, what are you concerned about, My Lady?”

“An unexplainable fear has taken hold of my mind. My heart thuds with apprehension. Meaningless horrors engulf my half-awake dreams. I am awakened from sleep with terrible nightmares; and then my body is in a tremble for a long time.”

“In this state, why do you insist that I part from you and go on this journey? Whatever danger threatens you, with my whole life, I will ...”

“Sir, my fears are not about me at all. It concerns my elder brother; concerns the Queen of Pazluvoor. My mind is in a turmoil: afraid of what might happen if they two meet. You must prevent those two from meeting in privacy.”

“Who can hold him back if the Prince decides to do something.”

“Sir you must be like an iron armor and guard my brother. If necessary, tell my elder brother about who Nandini is.”

“He needs to believe that...”

“It is your responsibility to make him believe. I do not know how you will accomplish that. It surely will be good if somehow you prevent those two meeting each other.”

“My lady, I shall try to do my best. Do not blame me if I fail,” said Vandiya Devan.

The Princess said, “whether you fail or succeed in this task, you have no release from the prison of my heart!”

Chapter 31 – Fresh Silken Garments

Carrying letters from Prime Minister Anirudda, Vandiya Devan was on the way along the banks of Arisil River towards Kudanthai City, by the next evening. He did not hasten his horse, guiding it slowly looking at the scenic expanse along the way. In that month of Aippasi (October) fertile Chozla lands shimmered with absolute beauty. Queen Nature shone like a beautiful young maiden dressed in silken green garments. Oh, what wonderous hues in the green of that shimmering silk. Rice stalks in a field about to set seed was one hue; mature planting swayed in another green; young shoots recently transplanted on the other field were another tint; Freshly cultivated golden crops in another hue! The green of leaves branching from the aerial roots of a banyan tree were of another new shade. Fresh leaves quivering on pipal trees were yet another color. Large lotus leaves crowding over the lake surface beguiled with another dark tint. Banana leaves verdant and attractive; ivory colored coconut flowers prolific in abundance; lush green grass spreading on the land; frogs leaping here and there over water bodies showing proof of the bountiful land.

As if to enhance and show off the beauty of this verdant silken garment, as if dotted with stars, there bloomed many waterlilies, lotuses, and reddish water borne flowers. Vandiya Devan journeyed on, even as he drank his fill of this beauty of the fertile land. He realized the difference in the countryside from what he had seen in the month of Aadi [late July] earlier and what was visible now. In Aadi the rivers were turbulent with swirling and foaming fresh floods. Now that rage and impatience of floods had abated, silt loaded red water had lightened to crystal clear flow that went by joyously, softly. Then it had been a great noisy festival of roaring floods, winds shrieking as they hammered tall treetops, and thousands upon thousands of bird calls rising in symphony. Today it was murmuring leaves shaking in the cool biting wind, gurgling water hastening along canals, frogs raising a cacophony as they awaited rains, the humming drone of bees and cicadas, -- all mingled into a sorrowful chorus by Mother Nature.

A vague sorrow, that could neither be described or identified, dwelt in Vandiya Devan's heart. He tried to again and again to think of it, analyze it with no avail. In truth there were enough reasons that should have made him brim with immense enthusiasm. A few months ago, when he went by this way, whatever ambitions he had envisioned were now fulfilled. Things that he could not have considered even in dreams had come true. He had been in the presence of Emperor Sundara Chozla. He had visited great cities such as Tanjavur, Pazlayarai, Mattotam, and Anuradhapura. He had earned the friendship of Ponni's Beloved, the most cherished Chozla Prince; he had had the opportunity to help that valiant and brave nobleman. One would have had to perform several penances just to meet that exquisite light of the Chozla royals, Princess Kundavai; that being so, what a great good fortune to have been able to earn the friendship of her pure heart. Thinking of this, his heart brimmed with pride.

Along with that joyous pride followed disquiet and distress. Am I truly eligible for such a great good fortune? Will it last? There may be many an obstacle between hand and mouth.

There is no dearth of obstacles; the whole world is filled with impediments. Magicians and sorcerers like Ravidasa, mesmerizing enchantresses like Nandini, conspiring nobles like Pazluvoor officials, betraying friends like Kandamaran and Parthibhan Pallava, idiotic girls like Poonkuzlali and Vanathi, fanatic Vaishnava spies, horrible Saiva Kaala-mukhas, fire breathing ghouls, bottomless sinkholes – all such things packed the world. Good God! I somehow managed to escape every such problem until now. Prime Minister Anirudda is now ordering me on a mission much more dangerous than all that I have experienced. On one hand is Prince Aditya Karikala who is easily infuriated into a mad rage; on the other side is that spellbinding seductress with magical powers who has made Lord Pazluvoor dance like a puppet on a string; I am supposed to stand between them and block them and succeed! Will it be possible? Who knows what that Brahma-raya is truly thinking in his innermost thoughts? Perhaps his true intension was to separate me from the young Princess. They had both indicated that Azlvar-adiyan would come and join me on the way. There is no sign of him till now!

Whatever that Vaishnava's true colors may be, he has not harmed me until now. He has helped me many times; if one travels in his company, one could pass the time in cheerful conversation, and not be tired by this travel. Where would he come and meet up with me? For how much longer should I hold back this horse and go slowly?

Aha! There is that wooded grove of trees with roots spread like crocodiles immersed in the river flow. This is where that incident when I threw my spear at a stuffed crocodile happened. This is where those girls – Varini, Darini, Sendiru and Mandakini, -- laughed and sniggered teasingly, mocking my bravery! This is the place where the young Princess taking my part, chided them! Let me see, perhaps tarry here for a while

Vandiya Devan dismounted from his horse and went to stand beside the river bank; he watched the waters of the river swirling and churning around the tree roots and then flowing away clearly A face appeared in those swirls! Does one have to explain whose face it was! Princess Kundavai's pleasing golden face!

I saw, I saw, I saw things pleasing to mine eyes!

Hearing those words raised in song, Vandiya Devan was startled into looking up. He could see Azlvar-adiyan seated upon a branch high up above at the top of a very tall tree. "Oh Sir, of the Veera Vaishnava faith! Do I appear so pleasing to your revered eyes? Let me also look at you clearly. Please deign to descend," said Vandiya Devan.

Azlvar-adiyan started climbing down the tree, "I was not singing about you! A sword at your waist, a spear in your hand, you appear frightful to me!"

"Then, who were you singing about Mr. Vaishnava?"

“When the only absolute prime divinity that is Lord Thirumal, condescended to descend upon earth taking the Vamana incarnation, when He lifted his leg to measure all the skies of the universe, to your Lord Shivas eyes”

“Oh, espouser of Vaishnava faith, stop it. Stop talking in this fashion belittling Lord Shiva. Otherwise, it may end in great danger.”

“What danger my dear man? When the Lord’s discuss that killed the crocodile and protected the elephant is there, what can anyone do to me?”

“I said whatever I have to say, the rest is your wish and will.”

“What is the danger that awaits me? Tell me Thambi?”

“Remember the mob that rose in anger and came to the plaza in the palace? At that time, I heard what some of those Kaalaa-mukhas were saying.”

“What were they talking about?”

“Veera Vaishnava following is increasing in Chozla country, we need to sacrifice all those fellows to goddess Kali. Collect their skulls and heap them neatly to form a mound and then dance a vigorous thandava dance upon that mound!” is what they were saying.

Azlvar-adiyan touched and felt his pate saying, “this is quite strong; it can bear the vigorous thandava of Kaalaa-mukhas.”

“And as if to justify what I heard, today all along the way I saw many Kaalaa-mukhas wandering around carrying skulls and tridents. In the name of Lord Shiva, you must change this disguise of yours, with your top-knot “

“Cannot be done, No.”

“What cannot be done?”

“The name you uttered; I cannot say that name. I might change this disguise of mine, perhaps while uttering the name of Lord Vishnu. ... Look over there...”

A palanquin was going on that road along the river. One could see that a woman was seated in it, but was not clear who it was. Must be some noblewoman. Who could it be? Apart from the men carrying the palanquin, a servant maid was walking by the side. Perhaps it was the royal Princess? No, that was not possible.

“Sir, who is in that palanquin? Do you know?”

“Thambi, listen to what I am about to say. Do not intrude into affairs that are not your concern. You have already experienced various problems because of such behavior. There will be many traveling along the road; why bother about that? Get back on your horse and get going.”

“Oh, is that the matter! Sir you seem to have become a great renunciate. Have you forgotten what happened in Veera-naryana- puram? Had you not asked me there to deliver your palm-leaf letter to a maiden traveling in a closed palanquin?”

“All that is old story. Why speak of that now?”

“Forget it. They said that you will join me on this mission. It is for your sake that I was riding slowly. Are you joining me here or not?”

“You are riding a horse; I am walking. How can we journey together? Go and wait on the banks of the Kollidam river. I will come join you there tomorrow morning.”

Vandiya Devan was sure that Azlvar-adiyan was engaged in some other secret enterprise and that he would not come along with him now. Saying, “Fine, as you wish,” he jumped on his horse and looked towards the direction he had to ride. Dark storm clouds seemed to be gathering in the horizon towards the north-east.

“Mr. Nambi! Will it rain tonight?” Asked Vandiya Devan.

“My dear man! Do I know the art of forecasting and astrology? It is already the month of Aippasi, it is quite possible that it may rain. Considering everything, spur your horse to go fast. Find some rest house or pavilion to spend the night,” said Azlvar-adiyan.

Vandiya Devan, concurred and urged his horse into a canter. The words of Azlvar-adiyan, ‘what? do I know astrology?’ stayed in his thoughts. He remembered the Astrologer of Kudanthai. That Astrologer’s house is on the way, is it not? Why not pay him a visit? Who is going to be the fortunate one among all the persons wishing to ascend the Chozla throne? Did not that Astrologer say that Ponni’s Beloved Prince was comparable to the Pole Star. However, he refuses to bend his mind to rule a kingdom. How easily he had refused to accept the lion throne and jeweled crown of Lanka. The Astrologer’s word that he would face various calamities has come true to some extent. In that same fashion would his prediction that the Prince would attain great fame and prestige, also come true? How is that possible? And then, mine own life dreams....to what extent will they come true? The lands and fiefdoms that we lost during the times of my fore fathers, will it be regained? This mission that I am starting upon, how successful will it be? Can I really succeed in any task by coming in between Prince Aditya Karikala and Nandini? I somehow escaped from the clutches of Nandini the two or three times I was near her. Can I do so again? A certain fright took hold of Vandiya Devan when he thought of Pazluvoor Nandini. It is true that she spoke to him with fondness and kind respect; but he was unable to fathom the secrets of her heart. It appeared as

if she has let him remain free because of some ulterior motive. That must have been the reason for her being so patient with him. What was that motive?

Vandiya Devan's horse went past the palanquin that had gone ahead on the road. This time he did not want to crash into the palanquin; neither did that palanquin bump him. When his horse went past the palanquin, the curtains parted briefly. He recognized the seated woman to be the noble Lady Vanathi of Kodumbalur. For one moment he wondered if he should stop his horse. But he changed his mind and kept going. He remembered what Princess Kundavai has said about Vanathi. When danger beckoned from all directions in the country these days, where is this Kodumbalur noblewoman going, alone by herself? She does not even have proper guards. In addition, he noticed another peculiar thing. Two Kaalaa-mukhas of frightening mien were standing a little further on and watching Vanathi's palanquin pointedly. Why were they watching thus? Who were they? They seem to be the same two who had stopped by his side and discussed him, when he was sleeping on the banks of River Arischandra.

It was true that Vandiya Devan had no great sympathy towards Vanathi. He felt that she was trying to abduct a place in the heart of Ponni's Beloved Prince, the place that should belong to Poonkuzlali. He was somewhat angry with her because of this. But he could not forget that Younger Pirati Kundavai had a great affection for Vanathi. If any harm were to befall Vanathi, the Princess would be very distressed. On the other hand, why should there be any danger? Azlvar-adiyan's advice, was reasonable, "do not get involved in affairs that are not your concern, be intent on your mission and keep going." However, his mind continued to remember that picture of those two Kaalaa-mukhas in the hidden spot, watching her palanquin go past.

Here is the house of the Astrologer of Kudanthai! Let me ask him about all these things. Ah! I did not realize this till now. Vanathi is perhaps coming to visit this Astrologer. Ripe fruit has slipped into the cream. Opportunity Knocks. Let me take care of what I want before Vanathi arrives. With such thoughts he left his horse standing in front and entered the astrologer's cottage.

Chapter 32 – Lord Brahma’s Head

When Vandiya Devan entered the astrologer’s house for this the second time, an amazing pleasant feeling filled his heart. It was here in this small cottage that he had seen Younger Pirati Kundavai for the first time. He had stood stunned on seeing her lotus like face, her dark big eyes widened in surprise; it was in this house that he had heard her honeysweet voice. Wave after wave of that memory rushed into his soul. Sweetness filled his ears; a sweetness in his heart; the whole body thrilled with sweetness!

The astrologer was making ready for evening puja-prayer services. Upon seeing him, “Come young man, come! Are you not Vallavarayan, a noble of the Vaanar Clan?” he welcomed.

“Yes Mr. Astrologer. Even if your predictions are helter-skelter, neither here nor there, your memory skills are fantastic,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Thambi, in order to practice astrology, one should have a very good memory: planets, stars, dasa-bhukti periods of time, signs of fortune and mishap – these occur in a million combinations. One has to remember all that and then calculate based on the year, month, day, hour of time, split second, hundredth of a unit of time, and then give advice. Let that be as it may; you said that my predictions were neither here nor there. What did you mean by that? Did nothing that I predicted for you come true?” asked that Astrologer.

“Isn’t there a way to predict that too from your astrology?”

“Yes, yes, there are ways: we can find out by astrology or by guessing. What I predicted for you must have come true! Otherwise, will you come back to my humble cottage?”

“Yes, your predictions did come true!”

“Tell it like that! In what way did they come true dear man?”

“Whatever you predicted for me came true exactly! You said, ‘your mission may be fruitful; or it may not.’ It did happen exactly like that; I shouldn’t say happened, it came hurrying, hurrying hastily away from me!”

“Thambi, you are a big jokester!”

“Very true, yes, I am a jokester; and also, a little infuriated.”

“When entering this cottage, you must bundle all your fury and leave it outside.”

“I was planning to do so. I did not see your student outside. If I leave my bundle of anger on the outside porch, what if someone came by and stole it? Mr. Astrologer, where is your

disciple? I vividly remember how he tried to stop me outside your house, the last time I was here.”

“Today is the new-moon day of Aippasi month. He must have gone to the banks of river Kollidam.”

“What has the new moon got to do with Kollidam?”

“Today is the Grand Convention of Kaalaa-mukha supporters. My disciple is an adherent of Kaalaa-mukha beliefs.”

“Mr. Astrologer, I have been thinking about giving up my Saiva faith.”

“And after giving it up, ...?”

“Remember your friend Mr. Azlvar-adiyan Nambi?”

“Are you speaking of Thirumalai?”

“I plan to take initiation from him; cover my whole body with namam marks of Veera Vaishnavas and convert.”

“Why is that?”

“I had seen some Kaalaa-mukha Saivas. Saw some of them even on the way here. After seeing them and seeing the skulls that they carry, I felt like giving up Saiva faith.”

“Thambi, you are a veteran of so many wars and battlefields; why are you afraid of skulls?”

“Not frightened; disgusted. Where is the connection between killing enemies on the battlefield and wearing garlands of human skulls?”

“Didn’t your liege lord Prince Aditya Karikala, cut off Veera-Pandiyan’s head and bring it in a procession?”

“He did that because he had taken some sort of an oath. But later he regretted it very much. Even he, did not garland himself with human skulls. He did not wander about carrying it in his hand. Why do these Kaalaa-mukhas do this?”

“They do that in order to never forget that life does not last forever. You and I do not hesitate to wear the ashen marks. Why do we do so? We do that to never forget that this human body is impermanent; one day, this body too shall turn in to ashes.”

“A human body does not last forever. It burns down to ashes or becomes one with the earth in which it is buried. But divine Lord Shiva’s form is no such thing. Why is he shown carrying a human skull?”

“Thambi, the skull head in Lord Shiva’s hand represents Pride. It shows that if one over comes pride, one would attain a state of bliss. Lord Shiva dances in bliss –ananda thandava -- with the skull in his hand.”

“Why is the skull said to represent pride? I do not understand.”

“There are still many things that you do not comprehend, Thambi. For now, understand how a skull came to represent pride. Lords Brahma and Vishnu became very proud once upon a time. They quarreled saying ‘I am the greatest, I am the greatest.’ Lord Shiva came amidst them and said, “One of you go find the top of my head and the other go find the bottom of my feet. Whoever comes back first after the search is the greatest between you two.’ Lord Maha Vishnu took the form of a mighty boar and tunneled through the worlds trying to find Shiva’s feet. Lord Brahma took the form of a swan and flew high above the skies. Lord Vishnu, came back and spoke the truth saying he could not find Shiva’s feet. Lord Brahma came back and lied that he had seen the top of Shivas head. Lord Shiva punished him for the lie, by plucking one of his five heads. Brahma lied because of pride and because of lying he lost his head; his head came to be a symbol for pride.”

Thinking of something, Vandiya Devan burst forth in hearty laughter.

“What have you seen to laugh like this Thambi?”

“I have not seen anything to laugh about. Thought of something and laughed.”

“What is that? What did you think about, there is no secret about it, is there?”

“There is no secret. If I were to be punished in the fashion Brahma was punished, I will need to have at least ten thousand heads. That is what made me laugh.”

“You have spoken that many falsehoods, have you?”

“Yes Mr. Astrologer, it must be destined in my horoscope chart. After meeting Prince Ponni’s Beloved, I made a decision only to speak the truth. At one time I spoke a very important truth. Those who heard laughed. None believed me.”

“Yes Thambi. The times are bad these days; people don’t even believe lies; how will they believe truths?”

“Perhaps your astrology is in the same situation. Mr. Astrologer, do you remember what you said about Prince Arulmozli? Did you not say that Ponni’s Beloved Prince was like the Pole star always shining steadily in the northern horizon?”

“Yes, I said that. So what?”

“Have you not heard the news about him?”

“The Pole star will not drown in the ocean. Sometimes clouds may hide even a steadfast star. Even today, clouds rumble in the north. Tonight, you cannot see the Pole star however much you try. Does it mean that the star is lost?”

“And that is what you are saying. Do you know any true news about the Prince?”

“How can I know anything? The rumor is that you were the last person who jumped into the ocean with him. If anything, you should be the one who knows something. I was thinking of asking you about that.”

Vandiya Devan wished to change the topic, “Sir, how is the comet these days? he asked. “It can be seen late in the night with its tail extending to a great length. From now the length must decrease. If any accident were to happen because of this Dhoomaketu comet, it is likely to happen very soon now. Gracious God! What harm is likely to fall upon which among the royal nobles?” worried the astrologer.

Vandiya Devan’s brain raced very quickly, here and there. Emperor Sundara Chozla, paralyzed and bedridden in Tanjavur, Prince Arulmozli gripped by a shivering poison fever on a sickbed at Nagaipattinam, Prince Aditya Karikala heading to Kadamboor Fort to meet Nandini, Prince Madurandaka eager to rule the kingdom and disliked by the angry masses, Nandini caressing the killing sword she had in her hands – all paraded through his thoughts.

“Forget all that Mr. Astrologer. Why worry about the affairs of royalty? Tell me about this mission on which I am going. How will it end? “

“I will have to repeat what I had told you before. You will encounter many catastrophes; you will get unexpected help to overcome all those difficulties,” said the astrologer.

Vandiya Devan began to wonder if what was approaching outside would be a calamity or a help, for at that time several voices both male and female were heard outside. Both he and the astrologer turned to look outside. Lady Vanathi and her maid, entered in the next instant. Vandiya Devan stood up and spoke respectfully, “My Lady, forgive me. If I had known that you were coming here, I would not have come.

Chapter 33 – Vanathi Asks for Help

“Sir, why are you so angry with me? What harm did I do to you?” these soft words of Lady Vanathi melted Vandiya Devan. In truth why should I be angry about this girl? Poonkuzlali appeared in his mind’s eye for a moment and vanished. How is it fair for me to be angry with this girl, for her sake? ... “My Lady, Forgive me. I meant no ill will, all I wanted to say was that I shall wait outside till you finish consulting with this Astrologer. I am not in any hurry. Even now” said Vandiya Devan.

“You need not step outside. I am happy to hear that you are not in a hurry. In truth, I have not come here to consult with this astrologer. I have lost faith on his predictions.”

“My Lady, your wish is my fortune. You will surely realize one day that my predictions are not incorrect. When you know that, you will come to congratulate this humble me,” said the Astrologer.

“We can think about all that at that time,” said Vanathi; she turned to Vandiya Devan saying “Sir, I came here to meet you. I saw you on the way, riding your horse. I thought you might stop and talk to me. You went on without bothering to recognize me. I am not really surprised about that. Why should you care about a nobody like me?”

Vandiya Devan felt as if he could cry! “My Lady what words you speak! You are the darling daughter of Paranthaka Younger Lord Velir, the adopted daughter of Lord Bhoothi Vikrama the Commander of Southern Forces, the confidant, and dear friend of Pazlayarai Younger Pirati. Who will say that you are a nobody? I came away thinking that it will not be respectful to stop on the road and address you. There is no other reason. If there is anything that I can do ...”

“Yes sir, there is truly something that can be done by you. I came into this house only to seek your help on something important,” said Vanathi.

“Tell me. If it is something that I could undertake ...”

“Is there anything that you cannot accomplish! I too have heard about some of your exploits during your travels in Lanka. First, can you promise to give me the help I seek?”

Vandiya Devan hesitated, “My Lady if you could explain the help that you seek, it would be better.”

“It is true, I should not trick you into making promises. Let me explain the task; this Astrologer too can know about it. There is no harm in that! I am determined to convert to Buddhism and become a novice nun.”

“What, what?”

“What words are these?”

“Never, never.”

“The whole world will not accept.”

“Impossible!”

Vanathi listened to all that the Astrologer and Vandiya Devan had to say one after the other, and said, “Yes; I have decided to become a Buddhist nun. Why do you have an objection? What is wrong? In these ancient Tamil lands, haven’t many women embraced being anchorites? Did not Madhavi’s daughter Manimekalai live as a renunciate and attain divinity? (From the epic Silappadikaram.) Don’t we all venerate her these days as Goddess Manimekalai? I have no such ambitious wish. I wanted to end my useless life and did not succeed. Perhaps the Gods wish that should live some more years. I wish to spend these remaining years performing humanitarian service by joining a Buddhist monastery. You will not hesitate to help me in this regard, will you?” she said.

A tiny doubt arose in Vandiya Devan’s mind and startled him.

“My Lady your determination is not right. Anyway, I have no authority to speak to you about that. The elders in your family need to advice you in this regard. It is known that your elder uncle, Commander Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari, is coming back soon.”

“Sir I am not going to wait for anyone; neither will I heed advice from anyone. I have resolved, decided. I merely need your help.”

“What help can I give you about this? My Lady?”

“Let me explain. I began this journey to go to the Choodamani Vihara at Nagaipattinam. I thought that I would obtain instruction from the Buddhist monks who live there. I need your protection on this journey, if you could come with me till Nagaipattinam. That is the help I ask of you.”

Vandiya Devan was flabbergasted. This noble woman of Kodumbalur is no innocent. She must have heard bits and pieces of my discussions with the Younger Pirati. She is trying to garner all the details from me. She is journeying to Nagaipattinam Vihara only to meet the Prince. I cannot be a party to this on any day.

“My Lady, I beg many pardons. The help you seek is beyond my ability.”

“How diverting this is! For someone who went to Eezlam and performed so many miraculous deeds successfully, how can merely accompanying an innocent girl like me to Nagaipattinam be impossible?”

“My Lady, nothing is impossible. However, I cannot undertake this at this time. The Prime Minister and Younger Pirati have ordered me to quickly go to Kanchi. I am carrying letters from them. I am going on a very important diplomatic mission. That is why I said I cannot help. If it were any other time,”

“Yes, yes. If you are not willing you could give many reasons. No harm done. I started with the intention to go by myself. I became a little afraid when I saw some groups of Kaalaa-mukhas here and there. The Lord God who is responsible for all living beings is here; I will leave the burden to His hands and continue. Who can harm an innocent girl like me who has decided to renounce the world and become an ascetic? I take leave Mr. Astrologer,” saying this Vanathi started to leave.

The astrologer hurried behind her saying, “Madam, Madam; It is nearing nightfall. In addition, it is the dark night of a new moon. Moreover, monsoon clouds are rumbling in the north east. Please stay the night in this humble cottage and go on in the morning.”

“No Sir, forgive me. The intention is to reach Thiru Aaroor and stay there tonight. This gentleman has refused to accompany me. I will be sure to find someone in Aaroor. Anyway, I am not worried about my life; of what use is it to anyone?” these were the final words spoken by her, heard by the Astrologer and Vandiya Devan.

Vanathi stepped into her palanquin that was waiting outside the house. The palanquin went forward on its journey. Vandiya Devan and the Astrologer, stood watching till the palanquin was no longer visible.

“Till recent times this Kodumbalur noblewoman was timid and faint hearted. The other companions of the Younger Pirati teased her about that. They floated a stuffed crocodile in the water and tried to frighten her. Even I was fooled by that. Now, how did this girl suddenly become so brave? What is this marvel that she has started on a journey by herself? How did the Younger Pirati agree to this?” said Vandiya Devan.

“I too am surprised by her. The last time she came here to my cottage, suddenly this girl fainted. She spoke timidly, hesitantly. I am almost doubtful if this is the same noblewoman of Kodumbalur. She spoke today with such courage and urgency.”

“Sir what do you think is the reason for this sudden transformation in her?” asked Vandiya Devan.

“Some important news must have caused an enormous shock to her. Why search more ... is not the news that Ponni’s Beloved Prince has drowned in the ocean enough to jolt her? There was some rumor that this girl was to wed the Prince.” Replied the astrologer.

Which news? That the Prince drowned in the sea? Or that he was rescued and is now safe in Nagaipattinam? Or the news about Poonkuzlali that I shared? Which could have affected her in this fashion? -- wondered Vandiya Devan.

“By the way, Mr. Astrologer sir, are not the Kodumbalur nobles traditionally of the Saiva faith? Why is this girl suddenly enamored of Buddhism?”

“Perhaps the hint of a previous birth?”

“Why go to the Choodamani Vihara in Nagaipattinam?”

“That is surprising to me too...”

“Can you not examine it astrologically?”

“Thambi, how can this be examined by the science of astrology? There a different science called the Art of Spy Craft for this.”

“A subject called Art of Spy Craft?”

“Why not? Have you not heard of the Thirukkural, axioms by the poet who wrote about universal truths?”

“I vaguely remember about hearing of such a book.”

“There is a section in that compendium called Spy-craft. There are ten couplets in that section.”

“Is that so? Recite a couple of the best ones.”

“All the verses are good, listen to this:

Investigating all, those that be employed, those that be near and dear, enemies around,

that is the legitimate work of spying

A king must employ spies to keep an eye on everyone: those that are employed in the king’s business, his own kith and kin, and his enemies too. That is what Valluvar writes. Here is one more:

disguised as a monk, a mendicant, feigning death even, never careless, come what may, the spy, investigates

Disguised as renunciates, even feigning death, without disclosing anything even under enemy torture, one who works tirelessly, never careless, is a good spy. Thiruvalluvar further says that the activities of one spy must be verified by another spy:

Every intelligence, obtained by a spy, it be
verified by another spy

Are you saying that you had never heard any of these couplets?" asked the Astrologer.

Vandiyā Devan was totally surprised. He resolved, the next time there is some leisure, the first thing to do is read this Thirukkural. How scholarly and intelligent he must have been; writing a thousand years ago about such details of statecraft?

(Note: The Kural was written by Valluvar, a weaver by profession, who is said to have lived near present day Chennai. Various dates are ascribed, between 300 to 500 BCE, for his composition, wherein each couplet is made of exactly 7 words.)

After conversing in this fashion for a little while, Vandiyā Devan was ready to leave. He did not heed the words of the Astrologer saying, "Stay this night here and leave in the morning."

"I will come another time and stay as your guest," he said.

"When you come to see me here another time, you will know that my predictions have come true," said the Astrologer.

"Sir, you have not spoken of any predictions. Only if you predict something can they come true," with these words he mounted his horse and started on the journey.

There was only one road from the Astrologer's house, for some distance. He had to go along the same road on which the Palanquin had gone earlier. The road forked later: one went up north towards the River Kollidam, the other went south east towards the town of Thiru Aaroor. In the far distance he noticed the palanquin take the Thiru Aaroor fork. For a moment his mind was unsteady. He had refused the help sought by Kodumbalur Vanathi. What if she really needs help? If some danger befalls on the road, and if I were to hear of the incident later, can I forgive myself? Would I not worry for a long time about safely escorting her on her journey?

What could I do? The instructions by both the Prime Minister and the Younger Pirati, are very strict. I cannot get involved in unconnected happenings. Enough of the problems because of

getting involved in things that were of no concern to me. Azlvar-adiyan has also warned me to be careful. My going with Vanathi to Choodamani Vihara cannot happen even in dreams.

Having decided thus, he guided his horse towards the Kollidam road. At that instant the faint noise of a screech “veel!” a girl’s voice crying for help, was heard. He turned around to the other fork and looked; could not see the palanquin. Perhaps it had turned a corner on the road. He made an instantaneous decision; I must go see! It will not delay me greatly! The horse leapt forward and soon came to the turning on the road. The scene that befell his eyes almost stopped his heart.

A woman was bound to a tree beside the road. She had cloth stuffed into her mouth. Since it was becoming dark, he could not at first discern who it was. On going nearer, he recognized her as the servant maid who had accompanied Vanathi. She was whimpering and trying to loosen the ropes that bound her.

Vandiya Devan jumped off the horse and pulled out the cloth stuffing her mouth and then loosened the ropes. His mind was cognizant of the fact that the bindings were not very tight.

“Girl, what happened? Speak quickly, where is the palanquin, where is your mistress? He asked in an agitated voice.

The servant girl replied incoherently. As soon as their palanquin had turned the corner, about seven or eight men suddenly jumped out from behind the trees where they had been hiding. Some were carrying tridents and skulls. Two of them hit the servant girl on her head and pushed her down. They stuffed cloth into her mouth, dragged her to the trees and tied her up. By now the others had been saying something to the palanquin bearers and footmen in a most frightening voice. The bearers then began to run swiftly, leaving the main road and taking a foot path. Others followed. It was the maid servant who had screeched. There was no sound from Vanathi. The girl then pointed to the path leading off the road.

“Girl, you go to that Astrologer’s house and wait there. I will try and find your mistress.” He jumped on his horse even as he spoke. The horse was now hurtling down that path leaving the main road behind. It galloped without concern of holes or mounds, thorns, and bushes.

Chapter 34 – The Torch Went Out

It was the early hours of the new moon night and darkness engulfed everything. Dark clouds that rose in the north had now spread over the entire sky hiding all things. Not even a lone star twinkled in the skies. Fireflies buzzing around trees and bushes cast a very faint light.

Vandiya Devan guided his horse in that faint light. Nothing was clear: where was he going? Why was he going? Would there be any use of proceeding further? Kundavai Pirati's beloved friend was in danger. He was duty bound to rescue her – the rest was divine will.

Even after he had galloped for about half an hour, he could not find the palanquin. Vandiya Devan began to wonder if he had ventured on a foolish undertaking. He reigned in the horse to a stop, as he heard something in the distance. On observing keenly, he recognized sounds of hoofbeats: yes, they were horses, but not clear if it was only one horse or several. Perhaps they were the horsemen guarding the palanquin. He must proceed with caution. I should not be caught unawares by a large group of men. That would be of no use to Lady Vanathi and my efforts will surely fail.

He went ahead slowly, making the horse stop often. Finally, he came to conclude that the hoofbeats ahead were just a single horse. Very soon he was able to see that the horse was climbing a slightly high embankment. Wanting to hide from being discovered that he was following, he looked around: he saw nearby a dilapidated pavilion with tumbled walls. He went near that structure and waited, concealing his horse beside an old crumbling wall. He peered into the darkness with aching eyes watching the horse that had gone ahead climbing the low mound.

“Who goes there?” a voice startled Vandiya Devan. It seemed to be a familiar voice, human voice. He heard another replying, “Great King, it is me, your bondsman!” Within a few seconds a flaming torch shed light where the voices were heard. A fellow came out from behind a tree with a flaming torch in his hand. In the light it shed, one could see a horse; a man seated on that horse. It was clear that the person mounted on the horse was Madurandaka. When the man lifted the lighted torch, it startled the horse on which Madurandaka was seated. The horse lifted its forelegs high in the air twined around once and suddenly began bolting. That horse had been standing on the banks of a wide canal. The frightened horse flew into the running water. The man with the light, jumped into the flowing water following the horse with loud cries of “Great King, Great King!” Upon jumping into the canal, he stumbled and the torch falling into the water went out. A darkness greater than before descended on that place. It had by now begun to drizzle slightly. Confusing noises could now be heard, calls for help by some men mingled with hoof beats of running horses, tree tops swishing in the rising wind, the pitter patter of falling rain and frogs croaking hoarsely.

Vandiya Devan knew that Prince Madurandaka was not known for being courageous. He was alarmed into wondering about what would happen to Madurandaka clinging to that frightened horse. The horse may carry him even further as it bolted; or it may topple him into the flooded

waterway. It may even carry him some distance and throw him down somewhere else. Will that man who came with the torch follow the prince and save him? But he himself had fallen into the water! What was one to do? Continue looking for Vanathi or go help Madurandaka?

A momentary tussle in his mind! There is no sign of the whereabouts of Vanathi while Madurandaka was in distress right before him, needing help. It would be easy to help him. Find him and make sure that he was not hurt in any way and then go on to continue looking for Vanathi. Oh, Good Lord! What of my resolve a little while ago to not get entangled in matters that do not concern me! What is happening now?

Vandiya Devan prodded his horse forward from behind the pavilion wall. Instinctively he found a way in the drizzle and darkness and went to the spot where the horse carrying the Prince had gone into the water. He too got in to that water and looked around. Nothing! Somewhere far away, weird noises, “Aaah!, Ooooh, Heyyyy! Tut tut, patt put.” He climbed onto the farther bank of that canal and looked around. Paddy fields were spread all over as far as the eye could see. It would be impossible to ride the horse in the muddy paddy field with young crops. One needs to ride along the canal bank and search. But the bank was covered with tangled creepers and thorny bushes. He goaded his horse to go slowly on a narrow winding trail amidst those bushes. Up above, it was now a steady rain. Below was slippery mud; a swift running canal on one side and impassable rice paddies on the other side. Thorny bushes all around.

His horse plodded slowly; each minute passed like an eon of time; the drizzle was becoming a heavy downpour. The darkness was becoming even darker! Vandiya Devan began to think furiously. Why did Madurandaka come riding all alone? Where was he going? Who was the man who accosted him? Is there any connection between all this and Vanathi being abducted? What about her fate now? Why am I caught in these coils and flummoxed? Why should I not concentrate on my mission? Let me find the royal road and go on to Kanchi. How am I to do that in this rain and darkness? How am I to declare that all these happenings do not concern me?

Because I overheard happenings that were of no concern to me in Kadamboor, things turned out to be very helpful. But it is unlikely that there will be anything useful in my going along this canal bank in this rain. Only result is I am going to be soaking wet! My entire journey will be jeopardized if this horse stumbles on some pothole and becomes lame. Let me turn back and find that tumbled down pavilion. I can go on after the rain stops. A flash of lightening. One second of intense light spotlighted a horse in the near distance standing on a raised mound used for pounding and winnowing grain.

Vandiya Devan continued to think, ‘I have come this far; let me go ahead a little more and see what is there. If I lend a helping hand to Prince Madurandaka now when he is caught in some difficulties, it is likely later to be helpful in many ways.’ He guided his horse to climb down from the embankment and go along the field bank edging the rice fields towards the pounding mound amidst the fields. As he came nearer, the mound began to seem like a huge dark ghoul.

Another lightening flash. He could see in that one second a horse standing on the mound. There was no one upon that horse. Thunder rumbled. Perhaps afraid of the lightning and thunder, the horse began to bolt again, galloping quickly. There is no use in following that horse. Madurandaka must have fallen off that horse somewhere near here. He called out several times in a thundering voice rising about the noisy rain, “Who goes there? Where are You? Who is there?”

The rain grew more intense. Swift winds were blowing, making the rain turn almost horizontal at it assaulted heavily. The horse shuddered and Vandiya Devean shivered with cold while being pelted by that rain. There was no sense in waiting there any longer. He turned his horse around, bemoaning his stupidity as he started back. Henceforth he must not jump into such idiotic scrapes. Stay focused on my work, my assignment ... The horse seemed to find its way instinctively as it came back to that broken wall near the pavilion and stopped with a neigh. Vandiya Devan returned to reality from the musings in his mind. He dismounted and realized that his clothes were soaking wet. He needed to wring them dry. He looked around to see if there was any spot in the pavilion to keep him and his horse dry. How would it feel if in that wide open expanse, in drenching rain if one were to step on hot embers! Something made Vandiya Devan jump with such a shock. The reason was not a ghoul or ghost but the voice of a very young child.

“Amma, Amma! Mother, mother!” How could he be sure that it was neither ghost or goblin. How can he hear the babyish voice of a tender child in that pavilion? Silly; ghosts, goblins, phantoms, and fiends were imaginations of frightened maidens. This was the whimpering of a human child, “mmm! Amma, Amma!” Frightened cries of an infant separated from its mother. The cries came from the pitch-dark interior of that pavilion. Was there someone else besides the child? “mmm! Amma, Amma!” He went in towards the voice and asked, “who goes there?” A child’s voice echoed, “who goes there?”

“It is just me. Who are you? What are you doing in the dark? Come out!”

“It is raining outside.”

“The rain has stopped, come out!”

“Where is my mother?”

“Your mother has gone to fetch milk for you!”

“No, you speak lies!”

“Will you come out, or shall I come inside?”

“If you come inside, I will stab you. I have a knife in my hands.”

“Wow! You seem to be very brave. Come out and stab me.”

“Who are you? Are you a tiger?”

“No, I am not a tiger. I am a horse” said Vandiya Devan.

“You speak lies. How can a horse talk?”

“Would a tiger be able to speak?”

“My mother said that tigers will pounce on me if I come outside.”

“I am not a tiger; I will not pounce you, come out don't be afraid.”

“Afraid? What should I be afraid about?” saying such words, a very young child came out of the dark pavilion.

By now the monsoon rain had stopped completely. Clouds parted and some stars were visible. In that starlight, Vandiya Devan looked at that child. Perhaps four years old, in that dim light the child appeared to be very good-looking. He was wearing a short silken waist cloth. A gem encrusted necklet around his neck. Must be a child from some well to do family. Who is the mother who left him here all alone? Why did she come here? Why did she go leaving the child behind?

The child looked at Vandiya Devan and spoke, “You are not a horse. You look like a man.”

“There, a horse is also here.”

The child looked at the horse and said, “Oh! You have brought the horse for me? They said it will be a palanquin that will come.”

The child's words gave rise to very many confusing thoughts. Who is this child? Why is he all alone here? Such a young child, he does not seem to be afraid about anything. This is surprising. Who told him that they would send a palanquin for him? Why has it not come yet? Where is his mother who left him here? Where did she go?

“Dear child, why did your mother go away, leaving you here?”

“My mother did not leave me and go away. I left her and came away,” said that little child.

“Why did you come away?”

“A horse came trotting; I said let us catch it and ride it. Mother said no. I ran away when she was not watching, to come and catch the horse. Is this the same horse?”

“No, this is a different horse. How did you end up here?”

“I could not find the horse. And mother was nowhere to be seen. Then it began raining heavily. I came into this pavilion away from the rain.”

“Are you not afraid to be alone in the dark?”

“What is there to be afraid about. I spend every day like this, don't I?”

“Are you not afraid, even if it is a tiger?”

“My mother is afraid of tigers, not me! I am a fish. I will swallow the tiger.”

“Wow! Can a fish swallow a tiger?”

“I am no ordinary small fish. I am a huge sword fish, a shark! A whale! I will swallow all – tigers, lions, elephants... “

All sorts of ideas raced through Vandiya Devan's mind. This is an astonishing fish that swallows a tiger. Who has taught this child to speak in this fashion?

“There, what is that noise over there?” asked the child. A group of persons were approaching from afar. Some in that group held flaming torches. A palanquin could be seen in their midst. They were all hurrying hastily towards them. There was a woman among them, “There, there, over there” worried voices.

One fellow pointed towards the dark pavilion. All began running towards the place.

“There, they come; a palanquin is also coming. I do not like to travel in a palanquin. Will you let me ride with you on your horse?”

Vandiya Devan was captivated by that young child, his face, demeanor, speech – all were enchanting. He felt like lifting him up in a hug. However, some hesitation, some little worry in the mind held him back

“I have some other urgent affairs,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Where are you going?”

“To Kanchi.”

“Oh! Kanchi? My most important enemy is in Kanchi.”

Vandiya Devan was startled; it was a mistake even to stand there, stand next to this child. There was no time now to get back on his horse and leave. The group of people had come close. If I leave, it will arouse suspicion. Moreover, he was now eager to find out what was going on, what was about to happen. He moved aside and went to stand in the dark shadows of that tumbled wall.

The child stepped forward, "Here I am."

Among that group of approaching people, first came the woman. She was breathless as she had been running. Without bothering she leaped forward and took the child in her arms in a tight hug. "Pandiya! What have you done?"

Ravidasa came and stood next to her, "Emperor! How you have frightened us!"

The little boy laughed, "Yes, I will frighten you all like that! I asked for a horse and you have all brought a palanquin."

The group of men included many we have seen before, they now surrounded the child: Soman Samban, Idumban Kari, Thevaralan, and others. Soman Samban said, "Emperor why just one horse? We will bring a thousand, nay tens of thousands of horses for you. Today, please get into this palanquin and come with us."

"No! I will come on that horse," he pointed to the horse hiding behind the wall. It was then that they noticed Vandiya Devan concealed besides the horse.

Surprise, alarm, anger, terror, all these emotions erupted on Ravidasa's face. Taking two steps forward, "You ruffian, you crook, how did you arrive here?" he asked

"Oh Ghost! How did you arrive here from Kodi Karai?" asked Vandiya Devan.

The child said, "Don't quarrel with him; I like him very much. He kept me company in the dark and helped me. He said he would kill the tiger if it comes. Let him come with us."

Ravidasa went up to the child and said, "Sure, we can take him with us. Today, for this one time, please get into the palanquin."

The child walked towards the palanquin, when Ravidasa came to Vandiya Devan and asked, "what are you going to do now?"

"You should tell me."

"Come away with us. Already you know many of our secrets. Now you know even more. We cannot leave you and go away. Come join us."

“What if I refuse to go with you?”

“Impossible, I know you are very capable and brave. However, we are more than twenty men here. You cannot escape from us.”

“You are saying that I cannot escape with my life?”

“You are a young man; you have not enjoyed all the pleasures of life. Why do you wastefully give it up?”

“Why would I give up my life for nothing. You are asking me to go with you. Where are you asking me to go? Where are you going?”

“Good question, I shall give you an answer, we are going to the Young Queen of Pazluvoor.

“Yes, I presumed so. Where is the Young Queen today?”

“The Young Queen must have come to Thiru-puram-biyam by now. Are you coming or not?”

“I too need to go that way. I was thinking that there is no one to guide the way. Luckily you have come. Let us go.”

By now the child had climbed into the palanquin. The men with the lit torches and others surrounded it as they began moving forward while shouting various words of praise. Vandiya Devan followed them. Several thoughts jostled in his mind. What is the fate of Vanathi? Nothing known. What happened to Madurandaka? Don't know. Finally, what about my own situation? Even that is not clear.

But there is no doubt that I am going to directly find out about a most heinous and horrendous intrigue, one that is ten times more horrible than what I found out at Kadamboor fort on that day. There is no doubt about that. To that extent this is going to be useful. But what is likely to happen after that? Will these men let me escape with my life? Will they insist on my joining their activities? If I refuse, they are sure to make a sacrifice of me. Perhaps once again, with Nandini's help.... .

Vandiya Devan pondered on how he had readily agreed to go with them, the moment Ravidasa had uttered the name Pazluvoor's Young Queen Nandini. It somewhat surprised him. This is what the elders refer to when they talk about illusion and infatuation. He was aware of the unbelievable treacherous conspiracies in which Nandini was involved. Even so, if there was yet another opportunity to meet her, there was an eagerness in him to make use of it. He was not able to control that urge. Before the mind had thought about it, his lips readily agreed, “I will come.” But there is no other option - as Ravidasa had said, it was not possible to fight with all these men singlehandedly. A little patience might perhaps reveal some way of escaping. And one could find more details about this group of scheming knaves. He kept

remembering the lisping words of the child, “Are you going to Kanchi? My most important enemy is over there!”

Who is that child? Why are these men addressing him as emperor? Who did he mean when that child said “most important enemy?” All such questions were finding various answers in his mind. Even as he pondered the distress was growing. Gracious God, when would there be an end to this? “Very soon,” said a voice in him.

That curious procession kept on going. Without hesitating even for a minute, they kept going, crossing fields, canals, embankments, wooded areas, and hillocks. They crossed the flooded waters of River Manni and reached the outskirts of Thiru-puram-biyam. Soon they entered the overgrown forest.

Chapter 35 – The Time Has Come

We have seen this palli padai memorial-temple that had been built a hundred years earlier, but was now in a dilapidated state surrounded by overgrown forest. Azlvar-adiyan had hidden here and garnered some intelligence about the plans of conspirators led by Ravidasa. Vandiya Devan and the others arrived at that same place. They led him and his horse near a wall of that crumbling memorial.

Ravidasa said, “My dear man! Wait here. We will call you when the time comes. Do not dream of escaping. Unless you know the forest, none can come in or get out of this place. You will surely lose your life if you try.”

“If I try to find a way to get out, you will cast a spell and kill me won’t you Sorcerer?”
Laughed Vandiya Devan.

“Laugh, laugh as much as you like,” Ravidasa also laughed.

Somewhere in the distance a wolf began to howl. An owl replied softly. Vandiya Devan shivered. Not because of cold. The monsoon wind appeared to have been frightened to enter that thick forest; it had not even rained much in there. Some places here and there seemed wet with rain drops. It was clammy with no wind. By the time they arrived in that place, Vandiya Devan’s waist clothes had completely dried; only the belt wrap was still wet. He removed it and spread it to dry on a rocky boulder nearby. He sat on that same rock, leaning against the wall of the memorial temple. A lone man stayed by him as a guard.

Further away, in a clearing in the middle of the forest sat the men who had come with him, forming a circle. A man brought an old throne from inside the palli padai memorial and placed it next to them, making the child whom they had addressed as ‘emperor’ sit on it. They extinguished all the flaming torches but for two. The smoke from those torches that were put out spread all around. Someone asked, “the Queen has not yet come?”

“She must find the right time. I had told her to come only after the second jaamam or midnight. One of you sing the praise eulogy of the Vazluthi Dynasty while we wait for her,” said Soman Samban. Idumban Kari picked up an udukku hand drum and began to beat upon it; Thevaralan began to sing something.

Vandiya Devan was watching and hearing all this from where he was sitting. He knew that the Pandiya dynasty was known as Vazluthi Kulam. The song sounded like a sad dirge. The rhythm of the hand drum and the sorrowful lament disturbed his heart. A few words in that song fell on his ears. He remembered the history of the great war that had been fought.

Yes, it was in this place that a ferocious battle lasting three days had taken place, between Aparajitha Pallava and Varaguna Pandiya. The Ganga Prithvipathi came in support of the Pallava. That great warrior too fell in the battlefield like the thousands of soldiers who died

there. The memorial temple built in his honor was now the meeting place of these conspirators. When the Ganga King fell, the Pallava armies began to scatter. Pandiya victory seemed assured. At that instance, Chozla armies came to assist the Pallavas. Vijayala Chozla with ninety-six war wounds, came leading the Chozla battalions. Four men had to carry that brave old man who had already lost both his legs. He penetrated the Pandiya formations while carrying two long, sharp swords in both his hands. He went forward while swirling both swords, like two fierce discus blades. Wherever he progressed, on both sides, the bodies of slain Pandiya men piled into small mounds. The scattered Pallava men began to regroup and come back.

“Tana, tana, gana, ganar! Ten thousand swords shining in the golden evening sun, came! Tana, tana, gana, ganar! From another direction were thrown ten thousand shining spears. Swords clashed with spears. Thousands, tens of thousands of heads rolled on all four sides. Thousands, tens of thousand bodies fell. Horses neighed ‘heeee,’ and fell dead. ‘bleert’ elephants trumpeted as they fell. Bodies of men and animals floated in that flood of blood.

Twenty thousand scavenging vultures began to circle and hide the skies. Thirty thousand wolves howled and came running to surround that battlefield. “Ohh.... Oh....” fifty thousand calls of distress rose together. “Don’t let go, catch, chase, chop, kick, punch!” thousands of voices roared. Victory drums reverberated, ‘thadam, dadam, thadam!’” Twenty thousand victory conchs sounded ‘bhoom, bhoom boom’

Sixty thousand ghouls laughed, ‘ha, ha, ha, haaa!’

Vandiya Devan awoke started; and peered all around. He had dozed off while leaning on the palli padai wall. He tried to recall the terrifying scenes of his dream state. Was it a dream? No, no. The descriptions recounted by Thevaralan accompanied by the rhythm of the udukku drum must have lulled him to those dream scenes. Thevaralan was singing of how the Pallava and Ganga armies were retreating from the onslaught of the Pandiyas. The fiendish laughter of those listening to him sounded like ghouls laughing and had startled Vandiya Devan to sit up.

The beating drum stopped suddenly, Thevaralan stopped singing. A lit torch was visible in the distance. It kept coming closer and closer. A palanquin followed that light. The men lowered the palanquin they were carrying. The curtains parted. A woman stepped out. Yes, she was indeed Nandini the Queen of Pazluvoor. In earlier times, when Vandiya Devan had seen her, she was an enchantress beautifully dressed from head to toe in rich finery. Now she appeared with unbound hair like a fierce angry Goddess Durga. A fear gripped Vandiya Devan’s heart when he saw her thus; a shiver rippled through his body.

When Nandini stepped out of the palanquin, she looked at the child seated on the throne and walked forward without taking her eyes off him. He too was watching her. All the others were looking at them both. The woman who had come in search of the child to the old forest pavilion, who had been addressed as ‘mother’ by the child was standing behind that old

throne. Nandini stretched out both her hands when she had come near the child. The boy looked at her and woman standing behind the throne, again and once again.

“Are you not my mother? She is not, isn’t she?” he asked.

“Yes, my darling.” said Nandini.

“Why does she call herself my mother?”

“She is the mother who raises you, cares for you.”

“Why are you not raising me, caring for me? Why do you not let me stay with you? Why is she hiding me somewhere in dark mountain caves?”

“Darling, it is to fulfil the wishes of your father. It is to take revenge upon the men who killed your father.”

“Yes, I know that!” said the boy as he got up to go to Nandini. She hugged him with both her hands and kissed his forehead affectionately. The child clung to her; perhaps he did not wish to be parted from her again. The scene did not last. She pried his tiny palms apart and freed herself; Nandini once again placed him on the throne. She then went back to her palanquin. She took out the sword from within, the sword we had seen before. She made some sign to the bearers who had carried her palanquin. They moved away a little farther and sat hidden from the rest.

Nandini came back to the throne and placed the sword to rest across it. The child was watching eagerly and asked, “can I take this in my hands?”

“Be a little patient, my dear,” said Nandini. She now looked at Ravidasa and the other men one after the other. “I presume that none other than those that have taken the oath are here?” she asked.

“None other, My Lady,” confirmed Soman Samban.

Nandini looked at Ravidasa and started saying, “Commander, ...” Ravidasa laughed. “Today you laugh, who knows what will be the situation next month on this day!” she said.

“My Lady, we have been waiting for a long time for that good day to come.”

“Sir! We are few. Our emperor is a but a child. The Chozla empire is vast. Their armies are immeasurable. If we had been hasty the whole effort would have gone waste. Because we have been patient, the time has now come for our efforts to bear fruit. Ravidasa, do you wish to say something? Is anyone else here wishing to say something?” she asked.

Ravidasa looked at their faces one by one; all seemed to have taken a vow of silence.

“Lady! There is nothing left for us to say. You must speak. You say that the time has come for our vows to bear fruit. Where, how, through whom will they be fulfilled? Graciously explain that to us.”

“Let that be so. I came here to explain all that. It is for that reason that I asked all of you to gather here without fail. I asked that our emperor also be brought here,” said Nandini. Everyone, including the child seated on the throne, looked keenly at Nandini’s face.”

She continued speaking, “Some of you were impatient. Some doubted me, wondering if I had forgotten the vows that we had taken. That disbelief is unwarranted. More than any one of you, it is I who have reasons to remember. No, I have not forgotten. In the last three years, day and night, at all times, I have not thought about anything else. I have not considered anything but the vows we had sworn; about opportunities to take revenge, about tricks and means to accomplish that. I did not think of anything but consider if there would be any use in wherever I went, whatever I did, whomever I met. Time and opportunity are about to come together. The noble princes and chieftains in this Chozla kingdom are divided into two factions. The men of Pazluvoor, Sambuvaraya and others have decided to crown Prince Madurandaka. Kodumbalur Bhoothi Vikrama and Thiru-kovalur Malayaman are opposed to that. I hear that Bhoothi Vikrama is coming towards Tanjavur with the Southern Armies. I hear that Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman is gathering armies. A war is about to break out at any moment ...”

“My Lady, we hear that you are making every effort to stop such a war from happening. We hear that peace talks are to take place at Kadamboor Sambuvaraya’s fort.”

“Yes, it is I who have made those arrangements. Are you not able to guess the reason behind it?”

“No, Queen. Elders say that even God, the Lord of All, cannot fathom the depths of woman’s mind, how would we do that?”

“It cannot be done by you folks; let me explain; know this from me. We cannot guess what would be the outcome if an internal civil war breaks out in the Chozla Kingdom before our vow of revenge is completed. Sundara Chozla is still alive; Anbil Anirudda Brahma-raya is another fellow. These two may interfere and calm down both parties. Or, if one party loses, and the other becomes more powerful, it may become impossible for our cause to succeed. That is why I have now initiated these peace talks. We need to accomplish our goal before war really breaks out. Once our aim is achieved, the conflicts that will arise amongst various chieftains in the Chozla territories will never cease. Conflict will continue till all parties are annihilated. Do you now understand the reason behind these peace talks?”

A sense of awe and exhilaration reflected on the faces of all listening to this. The softly exchanged words of amazement about the intellect of Pazluvoor Queen Nandini amongst themselves. Even Ravidasa could not be hesitant about his admiration.

“Lady, we appreciate your remarkable intellect and capability. We understand about these peace talks. You said that the day for our sworn oaths to be fulfilled is nearing. Who will do that? How? When?”

“I have wrought this strategy with that in mind. An invitation in the name of peace talks has been sent our prime enemy to come to Kadamboor. He will arrive there. We need to fulfil the intentions of our oaths in that place. Oh, ye men of the aabathudavi bodyguard battalion of Veera-pandiya! The time has come for your revenge to be executed. Today is Saturday, by next Saturday our pledge will be completed.”

All twenty men gathered there raised their voice as one man in cries of appreciation. Some jumped up in elation. The fellow with the udukku drum thumped it a couple of times. Owls roosting on trees were shaken up to jump to other branches with growling hoots. Bats beat their wings noisily and flew about. Vandiya Devan’s horse shivered its whole body. Vandiya Devan looked up, all that he could surmise was that Nandini was telling her men something that roused their behavior. He could not hear anything she was saying.

Ravidasa raised his hand and calmed his men. “Lady your last few words give us immense delight. We are enthralled that the day to kill our first enemy and fulfil our pledge is almost here. Who will have the honor of completing the pledge of revenge?”

“It is but natural we compete for that honor. It is to decide that matter without heartache for anyone, that I urged you to bring Veera-Pandiya’s son, our young emperor, here tonight. Whoever receives this sword of his father, from the hands of this child, that person will execute the deed of revenge. Others should be available all around, ready to help; if the designated person fails, the others will step forward and complete the task. I will be inside the palace at Kadamboor. Idumban Kari will take his place as one of the palace guards. We will help the designated person enter the fortress. Are you all satisfied with this arrangement?”

The men of the aabathudavi battalion looked at each other; they seemed to accept the arrangement. Ravidasa voiced their acceptance, “your arrangements are good. We all agree. One more thing, we should agree that all of us will absolutely obey the orders of the person who gets to be designated to fulfil the revenge. Till our emperor comes of age we must obey as law the word of the chosen designee.”

A smile blossomed on the face of Nandini who heard this. “You include me also in this agreement, don’t you?”

“Yes, My Lady, there are no exceptions.”

“Good. Do you all agree to what Mr. Ravidasa has voiced?” Nandini asked the others in that gathering. They looked at each other, hesitating to reply. Some perhaps did not like that arrangement.

“How can that be possible? This Lady who has been giving us all the help cannot be made to obey general rules,” said Soman Samban.

“Do not be concerned about me. The only reason I live is to avenge the horrible murder of emperor Veera-pandiya. I am ready for ever, to be a slave to whoever fulfils that revenge,” said Nandini.

Nandini looked at the little boy who was listening to all these words, half not understanding anything. “My darling, this brave sword belonged to your father. Pick it up with your tiny little hands and give it to one among us whom you like best,” she said to him.

The ‘emperor’ seated on the throne looked around; all the men were looking at the child’s face eagerly and restlessly. Ravidasa’s face and eyes threatened with some authority, “give it to me!”

The child looked around twice or thrice and picked up the heavy sword with difficulty. Everyone’s restlessness reached a peak. The child turned towards Nandini without any hesitation. “Amma, Mother, I like you best among all these people. Till I grow up, you must rule my kingdom for me,” with these words he gave the sword to Nandini.

Chapter 36 – Someone in the Darkness

Nandini accepted the sword given by the young child they had addressed as ‘emperor.’ She hugged the sword close to her heart. She lifted the child up and hugged him close. Tears flowed freely from her eyes.

The others watched this scene silently and with some uncertainty. Ravidasa recovered first and said, “My Lady! The emperor has not understood our request. He has given the sword in your hands. Let us explain again and....”

Nandini stopped him and in a quivering voice said, “No Sir no! the emperor understood very well and gave the sword to me. Do not be dismayed by my tears. I shed tears because of overwhelming happiness at being honored, at being chosen to execute the revenge for the appalling murder of Emperor Veera-pandiya.

“Lady, think carefully. When so many of us of the aabhath-udavi battalion are alive....” Nandini stopped Soman Samban, who began to say something.

“There is nothing to think about. The responsibility is mine. It is not as if you men have no responsibilities. Some among you will take this our emperor to the hideout in the Pancha-pandava Hills. Others must come to Kadamboor. Those that can enter Sambuvaraya’s fort must do so. Others wait in readiness outside with fast horses. When the deed is done successfully, all of us, if possible, must escape with our lives, don’t we?”

Ravidasa came forward, “Madam, I have forgotten to say one thing; permit me to speak now.”

“Speak. Speak quickly Sir. Lord Pazluvoor has gone to attend the Grand Convention of Kaalaa-mukhas being held on the banks of River Kollidam. I must get back to the palace before he returns,” said Nandini.

“You said, that our first enemy, Aditya Karikala would arrive at Sambuvaraya’s Kadamboor fort. That is not all that certain,” said Ravidasa.

“Why do you say that?”

“I have good reason. Letters are being sent, warning Aditya Karikala to not go to Kadamboor for any reason whatsoever. Pazlayarai younger Pirati and Prime Minister Anirudda have sent messages to that effect.”

“Do you think I do not know that!”

“When you know so, do you still expect him to come to Kadamboor?”

“Yes; I definitely expect that. The Pazlayarai female serpent does not know the true nature of Aditya Karikala. Anbil Brahma-rakshasha demon does not know; even you the Sorcerer, do not understand. If someone tries to prevent him from doing something, Aditya Karikala will wish to do it without fail. I know that; I know that for a fact! Aditya Karikala is not like Arulmozli Varma, a puppet in the hands of whoever holds the strings. He is a not a frightened wretch like Madurandaka. Aditya Karikala without doubt will arrive at Kadamboor, because his sister and Prime Minister have sent messages warning him not to go!” said Nandini.

“My Lady, you need not depend on that surmise completely. The messages being sent will not reach Kanchi.”

“What are you saying Sir? Please explain?” asked Nandini with some tension.

“Madam, do you know who is carrying the messages to Aditya Karikala?”

“I do not know for sure; but I can guess.”

“Good! You need not guess. We have caught him and brought him here. He was in the pavilion where our emperor had taken shelter from the rain. He knows all our secrets. Letting him go free with his life will be like courting disaster on ourselves by our own actions. Idumban Kari, where are you, bring that spy forward here,” So ordered Ravidasa.

Idumban Kari and two more men went towards the palli padai memorial. Nandini began to peer towards that direction. An enchanting smile once again began to dance on her face which had thus far been harsh with irritation.

Vandiya Devan was bored and tired, half asleep, when Idumban Kari and the two men came near him suddenly and pounced upon him. He abandoned a momentary thought of wrestling with them, waiting to see what could follow. They bound his hands with a big rope wound around his body. Two men took hold of his shoulders and walked him to stand in front of Nandini. Vandiya Devan looked at Nandini and smiled.

With no change on seeing him, her face remained calm. She began saying, “Sir, once again ...”

“Yes, My Lady, I have come once again; not willingly” he looked at the men around them.

The child near Nandini spoke up, “Amma, he is the one who saved me from being swallowed by goblins in the dark. Why is he tied up?”

Vandiya Devan looked at the young child and said, “Child, keep quiet! When elders are talking, you should not interrupt and speak. If you do so, the tiger will swallow you!”

The boy replied, “I will swallow that tiger!”

“Can a fish swallow a tiger?” asked Vandiya Devan. A frightening growl rose from the throats of the men around them, making even Vandiya Devan shudder for one moment.

“Devi, did you hear? We cannot let him escape with his life any more. Once or twice, we let him go because you wished it. We cannot do that anymore,” spoke Ravidasa in a loud voice.

“Sorcerer, why do you speak such lies. Was it you who let me escape with my life? It was I who helped you get away! My Lady, do examine this sorcerer carefully; is he really Ravidasa? Or is he the ghost of Ravidasa?”

Ravidasa laughed frightfully, “Yes, I am a ghoul, I am going to drink your blood today!” Once again, a terrifying growl rose from the throats of the men around them.

The child now said, “Amma, this man has a nice horse. Ask him to give it to me.”

Vandiya Devan replied, “Dear child, come away with me. I shall carry you away on my horse.”

Ravidasa looked frightfully at Vandiya Devan, chiding, “You fellow! Keep our mouth shut!” he then turned to Nandini and said, “Madam, order me quickly!”

Nandini asked calmly, “how did this gentleman come here? When did he come?”

“This spy was trying to abduct and abscond with our emperor who was sheltering from rain in a pavilion. Luckily, we happened there on time and stopped him, caught him. Things would have become tragic if we had been late by even one second.”

“Sir is it true what they say?” asked Nandini

“Only you can know if the men who belong to you speak the truth. How am I to know!” said Vandiya Devan.

A smile on her face vanished like a flash of lightning. She looked at Ravidasa and said, “Sir could you all step back a little. I need to question this man privately and find out some things.”

“Lady, time is short. Danger threatens. At such a time ... you ...” even before Ravidasa could continue, Nandini spoke somewhat harshly, “Remember the pact we agreed upon a little while ago. Step back without arguing. Take away our emperor also.” She whispered in the young child’s ears “Son, go with them. I will get the horse from this man for you.”

Ravidasa and the other men stepped back without further debate taking the young child with them. Nandini scrutinized Vandiya Devan in the faint light of the flickering torch.

“Sir there seems to be some sort of a tussle between you and me.”

“Madam that tussle is very harsh. Very strong. It binds my hands and body tightly.”

“Please refrain from your jesting words for a little while. Did you come here intentionally or accidentally?”

“I did not come intentionally or accidentally. Your men forced me to come here. I should have reached the banks of Kollidam by now.

“It appears that you find it so difficult, that you have been forced to see me; you are so eager to part from me!”

“I have no problem in seeing you. Indeed, I am truly saddened to soon be parted from you. Just permit me. You are struggling, caught between old man Pazluvoor on one side and these frightful sorcerers on the other side; I shall free you from all of them and take you away.”

“Where will you take me?”

“I shall take you to Eezlam Island to your mother who wanders in the forests of Lanka like a nobody,” so said Vandiya Devan.

Nandini sighed heavily with disappointment. “Are you wishing that I too wander as a nobody, like that? Perhaps such a time may come. At that time, I shall surely seek your help to lead me to my mother. Before that, my ambitions have to be fulfilled. Will you help me achieve them?”

“Madam, only if I know the intentions deep in your heart, will I be able to say anything about helping you.”

“Those who have true affection will not speak in this fashion. They will come forward to help without knowing ahead about the intentions.”

“The persons who care will come forward to warn and save one from danger. Madam, these ruffians have conspired in some way and have embroiled you in their machinations. They are using you for their activities.”

“What you say is not correct. It is I who am trying to use them in my plans. Understand that is absolute truth.”

“They have found a little child in some abandoned forest and are deceiving you.”

“Do you know what is intended with that child?”

“To place him on the Pandiya throne and crown him.”

“Again, you speak incorrectly. Not just the Pandiya throne! The intention is to place him upon the throne of the Chozla empire that spreads from the shores of the Tungabhadra all the way to the ends of Lanka and crown him as anointed ruler.”

“Oh dear, Oh dear! With whose help are you going to achieve this grand dream? These men standing around, like a pack of wolves; is it with their help? Will you be victorious and overcome the Chozla army of more than twenty lakhs (two million) trained brave soldiers with the help of these wolves who hide in the daytime and venture out from their lairs in the dark? “

“My trust is not just in these men. I believe in this sword that I hold in my hand. I will fulfil the intentions of my heart with the help of this sword.”

“Madam, you will never use that sword. Neither your hands nor your heart has the strength to make use of it.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I spoke what came to my mind.”

“I can prove right now that what you said is totally incorrect.”

“I am fortunate! To be chopped down by your divine hands and give up life, I am truly blessed.” He bent his head down slightly looking down to the ground as if ready to be beheaded.

“Are you merely wishing to be beheaded by my divine hands? Are you not wishing to be crowned?”

Vandiya Devan looked up, “On how many heads will you place the crown in your hands?”

“That is my wish and will; when I finally decide and choose, I will place the crown upon that person’s head.”

“Then, what is to become of this young child?”

“It is my wish and will, whether I crown him or not.”

“My Lady, give the crown to whomever you wish. I do not want it.”

“Why?”

“Many have spoken of the splendor of the curls on my head; I do not wish to wear a crown and hide those wonderful curls.”

“You will not give up joking. Good. Let that go. Sir, what did the Younger Pirati do when she heard that Ponni’s Beloved Prince drowned at sea? Did she lament a lot?” Nandini turned the topic

Vandiya Devan collected his momentarily disarranged thoughts and said, “Why will they not mourn? Are all women heartless?”

“They said, the girl from Kodumbalur tried to give up her life by falling into the lake. Is that true? Who pulled her out and saved her?” asked Nandini.

Vandiya Devan immediately remembered the danger that had befallen Vanathi. Immersed in wondering about her fate, he did not answer.

Nandini spoke with a harsh voice, “That is fine. I know that you will not tell anything about such things. Are you going to stop Aditya Karikala from coming to Kadamboor?”

“I shall try and stop him.”

“I shall tell you that you will not be able to do so.”

“I did not say that I will do so. All I said My Lady was that I would try. If the Prince decides upon something it is not easy to change his mind.”

“You have understood Aditya Karikala’s nature very well.”

“You understand it better than I”

“Good. Whatever I say, you will not join my group. You will continue with my enemy, is that correct?”

“Madam, who is your enemy?”

“Why? My enemy! Of course, it is that Princess of Pazlayarai! Who else can it be”?

“That is your imagination. I would like to share a truth, a very important truth with you.”

“Enough, enough; if you start babbling about truths, it is sure to be distilled-pure, unvarnished falsehood. I know you. Keep your truths to yourself.” She spoke angrily and clapped her hands. Ravidasa and the others began to approach.

Vandiya Devan realized that he had not used the opportunity presented to him. This ogress is sure to order them to kill me! Oh! Dear God! What kind of a death is this? Why was I not killed on a battlefield so that I could go to the heavens of brave warriors? Is this my fate? Ravidasa and his men were around, like hyenas around their prey, they were growling.

“Queen, this fellow will not fall in line whatever you say. I know that. You must leave from here immediately. We will go after sacrificing him in this hallowed ground,” said Ravidasa.

“Sorcerer! Be careful. That is not what I wish. None among you should do anything to him. If any of you touch him, I will personally kill him with this sword and take revenge,” roared Nandini. Ravidasa and his friends were stunned.

“I have many things that are yet to be accomplished through him. Understand? I am about to leave. You too make haste. Let him go on his way, wherever he wishes to go. Do not any of you, stop him.”

“Madam, we will obey your wishes. One petition though. He has a horse, is it good to let him go first? Think about that.”

“Bind him to the pillar in that palli padai memorial. It will take him some time to loosen his ropes and leave. You should all be able to hurry away from this forest before that.”

Vandiya Devan was now bound to a pillar; his horse was tied to a tree. Nandini left in her palanquin. Two men carried the throne. Ravidasa’s men left with the young child and were soon gone. As they went the light from the torch they carried, slowly faded in the distance. Absolute darkness surrounded the place. He wondered if everything that he had seen in that place was nothing but a dream.

Giant night birds nosily flapped their wings in that darkness; dumb owls seemed to growl somewhere. Wolves began howling in a disjointed awful chorus. Vandiya Devan felt that howling jackals were coming nearer and nearer. Some unidentifiable shadows wandered in the forest. He remembered his dream in Kadamboor fort and shivered thinking that a thousand wolves were about to surround him and rip him apart for their feast.

Hastily, he tried to loosen the ropes that bound him; it was no easy task. Perhaps if there were some lights, it might be easier to free the bindings. There was no sign of any light. Even if clouds had parted and stars had begun to shine, there was no way for that light to penetrate that forest.

What was that noise? What is surprising about animals wandering in the jungle? They sounded like footsteps of a man. His horse neighed and lifted a leg and stepped on one foot and then on another. What if a tiger or something was approaching? He was impatient to be free of the ropes.

There, some figure, in that pitch darkness; a shadowy figure... Man? What else could it be? It came closer and closer. Vandiya Devan gathered all his courage. Collected all his strength in his legs. A well-aimed kick! The figure screeched, 'veel' and leaped back; 'thump' the figure must have been hurtled against the wall. It waited there for a while. Even though he could not make out anything in the dark, Vandiya Devan felt that the figure was staring at him.

The bindings were not easy to unravel. How tightly they had tied him, those ghouls of Ravidasa; let them wait, when I see them next, I will teach them a lesson The figure seemed to move and go into the palli padai temple. In a while he heard noises: stone striking stone 'tun, tun, tun' ... – a light outside the temple. The figure was holding some lighted twigs and coming out of the temple. Coming towards him. It was the form of a Kaalaa-mukha Saiva with matted locks, long beard, garland of skulls a frightening appearance.

It came close to Vandiya Devan lifted the light and stood looking into his face.

Chapter 37 – Masquerade Exposed

Vandiya Devan was gripped by fright for one moment upon seeing that dreadful Kaalaa-mukha in that place at that time. His natural courage chased away the feeling of horror. ‘I have seen this fellow somewhere. Where?’ He began to think; yes, near River Arischandra, while I was sleeping under the wayside tree, didn’t two fellows come stare at me? This is one of those men! Is that it! Is it a face seen only once? Those piercing eyes, where else did I see them?

By now the Kaalaa-mukha looked sharply at him and laughed, “ha, ha, ha.” That voice, a voice heard quite often.

When the Kaalaa-mukha said, “Chee, Is it only you? Is it for you that I came in this midnight with so much trouble?” he seemed to be trying to change his voice as he spoke.

“Otherwise, for whom did you come?” asked Vandiya Devan.

“I came in search of the Prince.”

“Which Prince?”

“Why do you ask? How does it matter to you?”

“I too am a Prince; that is why I asked.”

“What a charming face! for a Prince!”

“What is wrong with the features of my face? Do you think it will become more handsome if like you, it wears, matted locks and beards, moustache, and bone garlands?”

“Wear them and check it out!”

“How many days will it take to grow these matted locks and beards and moustache?”

“What is so amazing about that? It will grow within one day. If you insist it can grow even in one half of an hour.”

“That is what I surmised!”

“What was that?”

“Nothing; unbind me by loosening these ropes, I too shall join your group.”

“Enough, enough! There are spies like you who infiltrated us. That is why our Great Convention ended like it did today.”

“How did it end?”

“We were waiting. Thinking that the Prince would come and that he would promise to accept our Supreme Leader as the head preceptor of the Kingdom, when he is crowned monarch. The Prince never came.”

“Loosen my binding. I will let you know why the Prince never came.”

“Which Prince?”

“Who else, Gandara Aditya’s Son Madurandaka.”

“What I suspected is correct.”

“What did you suspect?”

“That you are a spy; that is what I suspect.”

“Why do you suspect that?”

“When I went looking for the Prince, I saw some men coming out of this forest. I know those men. They must have suspected you to be a spy and bound you like this. What I do not understand is this: why did they not kill you, but spare your life?”

“I will tell you, free me from these bindings.”

“You needn’t tell me anything. I cannot loosen your bindings. If you agree to do as I say,”

“What is it that you want me to do?”

“Agree that you will not get involved in things that do not concern you and do a hundred and eight thorpu-karanam sit up squats while holding both your ears, as a punishment.”

“Is that so!” said Vandiya Devan.

While this conversation was going on, his hands were not idle. Slowly, steadily he had loosened the ropes. When the Kaalaa-mukha was describing the punishment, that he needed to do a hundred and eight squats, all knots had been loosened. That was it, he jumped in one swift leap onto that masquerader and felled him down. The burning twigs in the man’s hand fell. Luckily, they continued to burn with a faint light. Vandiya Devan sat upon the chest of the fallen Kaalaa-mukha and pulled at his facial hair. The whole thing came away in his

hands! At the same time the Kaalaa-mukha pushed him away and stood up. Vandiya Devan picked up the burning twigs that were about to go out and raised them up. The Kaalaa-mukha face shorn of the matted locks and beard appeared exactly like that of Azlvar-adiyan Nambi!

Each looked at the other's face and laughed for a while.

"Mr. Nambi, you advised me to not get involved in matters extraneous that are of no concern to me. But what are you doing?"

"I did not get enmeshed in a dangerous situation like you. If I had not come here now...."

"You think that you untied the ropes that were binding my hands?"

"Even if you have loosened the ropes by yourself, it is not possible for you to get out of this forest without my help. You will fall prey to wolves."

"Forget the creatures of this forest. If you had seen the sorcerer wolves gathered here some time ago It is a miracle that I escaped those human jackals!"

"I am familiar with those sorcerers. Did anyone else apart from those false sorcerers come here?"

"A little fish had come. A fish that wished to swallow a tiger. An amazing fish it was."

"Ah! Tell me, Tell, who else had come? What happened. Tell me all the details."

"Why did you put on this disguise? Where did you go late last evening? What happened over there? If you describe all that to me, I shall talk about all that happened here."

"There is nothing much to tell on my part. I knew that early in the night the Great Convention of the Kaalaa-mukhas was to take place on the banks of the Kollidam. I wore this disguise to find out what was happening in that gathering. I thought that I could meet up with you at the ferry crossing on the Kollidam after the night. The convention took place as scheduled; Elder Lord Pazluvoor was in attendance. The senior leader of the Kaalaa-mukhas was present. The person they were expecting most importantly, their chief guest, never came."

"They were perhaps expecting Prince Madurandaka?"

"Yes, how do you know that?"

"If Madurandaka ascends Tanjavur Throne, the conduct of the affairs of this kingdom will surely be fantastic!" said Vandiya Devan said with some sarcasm.

“Why do you say thus? Thambi?”

“He could not control a runaway horse. How will he keep in check chieftains like Lord Pazluvoor, Kaalaa-mukhas who cause conflict, Veera Vaishnavas who are constantly picking up fights and such?”

Azlvar-adiyan laughingly asked, “Did you see Prince Madurandaka on your way here Do you know what happened to him?”

Vandiya Devan described how he had followed Madurandaka; how the Prince’s horse was startled by the flame of the torch and how it bolted; that he had followed for a short while and in the end found only the riderless horse standing on the pounding mound in the field.

“I feel sorry for him. I wonder where the horse threw him. Perhaps his very life is in danger. That is why he did not go to your Great Convention. Shall we go back and look for him?”

“Beautiful! Why should we worry about that? Let us do our job. Come let us hasten. We need to be at the ferry crossing on the Kollidam before daybreaks”

“What if Madurandaka is lying dead in some canal or field? Are you saying that we should not be bothered even then?”

“Nothing like that is likely. Mr. Aniruddha would have planned anticipating everything.”

“Prime Minister Anirudda! What does he know about it?”

“How come you ask such a question? There is nothing that happens in this empire without the knowledge of revered Anbil Anirudda.”

“Oh! Did he know about the details of the meeting of conspiracy at Kadamboor?”

“Remember one thing; during the festival celebrations at Veera-narayana-puram, we both stood by the wayside, under a tree and watched the palanquin of the Pazluvoor Queen go by.”

“Yes, I remember your agitation when the curtains of the closed palanquin parted. You asked me if I would deliver your letter.”

“You chided me saying ‘Chee, what kind of an act is that?’ You presumed that I was sending some love missive. All I wanted to do was warn Madurandaka to not trust the conspirators and be misled by them. I was following orders by the Prime Minister.”

“Did you know that it was Madurandaka in that palanquin?”

“At first, I suspected that it may be him. When the curtains parted I was sure. You are a deep one! In whatever way I tried, you did not reveal that the person in the palanquin was Madurandaka and not Queen Nandini.”

“What about You! You did not even tell me where you were going last evening.”

“If I had told you, you would have insisted on getting involved. Even now, look at what difficulties you are entangled in!”

“Was the Prime Minister aware of the conference of the Kaalaa-mukhas and that Prince Madurandaka was planning to go there?”

“Did he not send me there? At the same time, he must have made sufficient arrangements to prevent Madurandaka reaching that conference. You said that someone raised the lit torch. It was perhaps a man sent by Mr. Anirudda. He must have intentionally frightened the horse and made it bolt. Someone would have picked up the fallen Prince and saved him. He must be heading to Tanjavur in a palanquin or a chariot. Come on, let us go!”

“I cannot come Mr. Nambi.”

“What is this? What about the task you agreed to do? I have heard that Prince Aditya Karikala has already left Kanchi. Only if we hurry like the wind,”

“The letters that must be delivered to Aditya Karikala can be delivered by you. He will not be concealed like a woman or travel stealthily by night. “

“What are you planning to do?”

“To speak the truth, I did not intentionally follow Madurandaka, last evening. I was following someone else and by accident saw him.”

“Let me practice some astrology and tell you something. The person you were following must have been a woman.”

“You are a mischievous fellow. One day I shall break your head before I do anything else.”

“That is impossible. I have already pawned my head to a Kaalaa-mukha. Forget that now; who were you following when you left Kudanthai? Who was that woman?”

“The Lady of Kodumbalur had come to house of the Astrologer of Kudanthai. She got into her palanquin and left on her journey by herself. Truthfully, I did not start to follow that foolish girl. Her palanquin had gone ahead on the road I was taking. Suddenly, some men attacked her palanquin. They tied the serving maid to a tree and abducted Vanathi. Mr. Nambi, I am not willing to go on with you without knowing the fate of that girl.”

“Why do you worry about that girl?”

“How can you say that? Is she not the daughter of the brave warrior Lord Velir? Is she not the dear friend and companion of Pazlayarai younger Pirati? Moreover, was there not some proposal to wed Vanathi to Ponni’s Beloved Prince?”

“My dear man, has not Ponni’s Beloved Prince drowned in the sea? Why worry about his wedding?”

“How can we be sure that he is dead. It is just a surmise.”

“Therefore, do you think that he is still alive?”

“Mr. Nambi, if your intention is to make me talk and learn some secrets, please forget it.”

“Fine, I know that you are a deep one. But you need not worry about Lady Vanathi. You know very well that Princess Kundavai loves her dearly.”

“That is why I am worried. Princess Kundavai may not know of this calamity that had befallen Vanathi.”

“If not today, she will surely know about it by tomorrow.”

“What is the use in that? What if the Kaalaa-mukhas sacrifice that young girl tonight?”

“You are saying that Kaalaa-mukhas abducted and carried away Vanathi.”

“That is what appears to have happened; what the serving maid said was also the same.”

“If that is true, you need not worry at all. Kodumbalur families belong to the Kaalaa-mukha sect. If they realize that Vanathi is the Kodumbalur noblewoman, they will give her a royal treatment.”

“Oh! I did not know that.”

“That is why the Kaalaa-Mukhas are against Prince Madurandaka.”

“So, what? how does it matter if these skull-head mendicants are against him?”

“You do not know. Many powerful families in this country belong to that sect. Many in the armies also belong. That is why Lord Pazluvoor planned tonight to garner their support. Because a horse bolted, the plans went awry. You get up, are you coming? Or shall I go on?”

With reluctance, Vandiya Devan got up and took hold of his horse. They found a path for men to walk upon in that thick jungle and finally emerged from it.

“Look Up!” Azlvar-adiyan pointed to the sky. More than ever before the comet Dhoomaketu had grown. Vandiya Devan noticed that its tail was now spread over more than half the sky.

Chapter 38 – Vanathi’s Plight

When the sun had set and darkness began to engulf all four directions, Vanathi was going on the road from Kudanthai to Thiru Aaroor in her palanquin. Her mind was in disarray. Her heart throbbed with the urge to get to Nagai Choodamani Vihara and serve the Prince lying there upon a sickbed in the grip of a fever. However, would that be possible? Would the Buddhist monks allow her in the Vihara? Would it be possible to even see the Prince in there? Even if one were able to see him, could she care for him? When she thought about all this it was overwhelming. When thinking about having to embark on the journey to Nagaipattinam by herself, she felt somewhat faint hearted. She tried to overcome that feeling and become focused.

In the whole wide world, what task can be achieved easily? How many travails people face to attain their goals? How brave and courageous that boat girl must be to row her boat alone over the seas? Amidst storm and rain in the middle of mountainous waves, she rowed her boat and saved the Prince; how brave she must be? How foolish of me to worry about this short journey? It does not matter if I am unable to enter Choodamani Vihara immediately. If I stay close and get the news of the Prince it is sufficient. It does not matter, if I cannot see the Prince, it is sufficient if I can at least see the boat girl. That is good. If I somehow get to know her, I might be able to see the Prince with her help. I must somehow prove and show that my love for the Prince does not expect any reward. And then later I can even give up this life of mine; or join the Buddhist order and become a bikshuni nun.

She parted the curtains and looked out of the palanquin to ask the bearers about when they would reach Nagaipattinam on the next day. She felt that she could see some shadowy figures hiding behind the tall trees on the road side. Upon looking more intently she recognized them as Veera Saiva Kaalaa-Mukhas. She was not concerned about that. When she was growing up in Kadamboor, Kaalaa-mukhas would often come to the palace. They would meet her Elder Uncle and receive gifts before going away. At one time the Supreme Guru of the sect had come to Kadamboor. He had been welcomed with stately honors and respect. Her elder uncle Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari had established several endowments in many temples to provide free food for the Kaalaa-mukhas. Therefore, Kaalaa-mukhas would not harm her; perhaps they would even help her. Vanathi knew that their Great Convention was meeting that night. Earlier, on the road to Kudanthai from Pazlayarai, she had seen many of them in small and large groups. But why are they hiding behind the trees? They may think that she was someone else and harm her somehow. Even as she was thinking thus, the hidden men came running and surrounded her palanquin. Still, she was not afraid. She merely wanted to identify herself to them. Before she could think of words to explain, two men dragged her serving girl and tied her to a tree. Unaware of herself she screamed in fright. One of the men who had surrounded the palanquin, pointed a trident at her face and said, “Woman! Don’t make any noise. If you keep quiet, we will not harm you; if you make any noise, we will pierce you with this trident and kill you.”

Vanathi was somewhat emboldened, thinking that she spoke with dignity, she said, “Are you aware of who I am? I am the daughter of Kodumbalur Velir. If you touch me, you will be annihilated.” She had courage in her heart but when she spoke the voice quivered.

The man replied, “we know all that; that is why we waited here for you. Be quiet for a little while. Otherwise ...” he shook the trident at her. Cries of pain from the men being hurt by noisy whip lash could be heard. She realized that her palanquin bearers were being lashed mercilessly by some of the Kaalaa-mukhas. Angered by that, she was about to step out but had no opportunity. The bearers had picked up the palanquin and were running with her in it. The Kaalaa-mukhas were around the palanquin and running with it. While running, their raised loud frightening cries. Vanathi realized that it would be useless to cry out for help. Neither was it possible to jump out of the running palanquin. Even if she managed to jump, she would land among those men. Where were they taking her? Why? Let me wait and see.

After running for about ten minutes or so they came to an old temple of Goddess Durga and stopped. By now darkness had surrounded them. One of the men went into the temple and brought the lamp burning in there. The Kaalaa-mukha brought the lamp close to Vanathi’s face and looked at her. He said, “woman, answer our questions. We will let you go without harm; or we can take you wherever you wish to go.”

Vanathi was filled with doubt, “What do I know? What are you going to ask me?” she said.

“Woman! You started this journey by yourself to meet someone in secret. Who is that? Whom were you planning to meet?”

Vanathi’s doubts were confirmed. A big change came over her in that instant. A doe that ran scared even for a small noise, now turned into a fierce lioness afraid of nothing in the whole world.

“How does it matter whom I go to meet? Who are you to ask me? I will not answer!”

The Kaalaa-mukha laughed, “You need not tell us. We know! You have started on this journey to go and meet Prince Arulmozli. Where is he hiding? Tell us. We will let you go without harming you.”

Vanathi replied firmly, “You can do what you will! You cannot get any information from me.”

“Are you saying that we can do whatever we want with you? If you know what we would do with you, you will not speak so calmly!”

“What will you do? Try telling me?”

“First, we will take this beautiful soft hand of yours and burn it in this flame! Then we will burn the other hand. Then we will touch your dark tresses with this flame and burn it.”

“Go ahead; here is my hand bring the flame to me.” Vanathi spoke without any fear, she was somewhat aware of all the intrigues and plots happening in the empire. These frightful men must be agents of the conspirators. They are trying to find out the hiding place of the Prince with intent to harm him. What greater fortune could fall upon me than helping the Prince? If I must endure such tortures in order to guard him, so be it. Such thoughts gave her immense courage.

“Girl, think before you speak. Do not be stubborn. You will regret later. You will spend the rest of your life as a blind wretch.”

“You can burn me part by part; cut off my flesh piece after piece. You will not find anything from me!”

“Then we need to execute our jobs. Hey you, bring that flame here!” said the Kaalaa-mukha with a gruff voice. Vanathi’s attention went a little farther. A long procession of elephants, horses, palanquins, footmen, was winding its way towards them. With God’s grace some help is coming to me, she thought.

“Take care! Look over there!” she pointed.

The Kaalaa-mukha laughed. “Do you know who is coming?”

“Looks like Prime Minister Anirudda. If I shout now, they will hear my cries. Be warned, leave me, and run away!” said Vanathi.

“Yes woman! It is Anbil Anirudda who approaches. It was upon his orders that we abducted you.”

Panic took hold of her once again. Without being aware, a frightened ‘screech’ emerged from her throat. She tried to close her mouth with her own hands to stop the cry!

Chapter 39 – Gajendra’s Salvation

Vanathi stepped out of the palanquin when they finally placed it on the ground. She was watching the procession as it came closer and closer. The Kaalaa-mukhas also stood silently watching. Frogs croaking in the water filled streams and winds whistling in the tree tops were the only noise. It did not even occur to Vanathi that she could run away and escape. She knew that it was impractical. Perhaps she could escape these Kaalaa-mukhas by some trick but it would be impossible to escape even in her dreams from Mr. Anirudda. His intelligence, political acumen, statecraft, and conniving were well known all over the world. Moreover, he had a lot of prestige with the emperor. The women living in the Chozla Maaligai palaces in Pazlayarai would often gossip about the various officials, chieftains, and noblemen of the kingdom. But they did not speak of Mr. Anirudda. They would be afraid that words spoken in utter secrecy in the innermost chambers would somehow reach his ears. Every one knew that the emperor might tolerate anything but not slander or complaint against his friend and revered Prime Minister.

Vanathi knew all this. She also knew that Princess Kundavai had a great regard for him. That is why she thought that she would get help and protection from him. But these Kaalaa-mukhas were saying differently. Her confidence was shaken. Why would he have ordered for an innocent like her to be abducted? Perhaps these men were lying. Perhaps the Lords Pazluvoor were coming in that procession; it may even be Prince Madurandaka and his retinue. Does not matter who it is: one thing is for sure, she would not disclose to anyone, any information she knew about Ponni’s Beloved Prince. Does not matter what happens to me; even if I lose my life! Such thoughts made her regain her confidence. Let them come, whoever it is let them come. I will establish that I am from the brave Velir clans of Kodumbalur. I will tell them that I am the confidant and friend of Princess Kundavai.

A palanquin separated from the procession and came forward. All the rest of the retinue, horses, elephants, footmen, drummers, and others stayed behind. As soon as the palanquin neared Vanathi, it was set down. Mr. Anirudda stepped down from it. On his gesture, the bearers, footmen and Kaalaa-mukhas stepped back somewhat.

Mr. Anirudda looked her up and down. He asked, “What oddity is this? I am not dreaming, am I? This girl standing in front of me, is she not the Princess of Kodumbalur? Is she not the beloved daughter Vanathi of the Younger Lord Velir of Kodumbalur who attained heavens meant for brave warriors during the battles in Lanka?”

“Yes Sir. I too hope that I am not dreaming. I presume that this person before me is the most revered and feared Anbil Anirudda Brahma-rayu; confidant and friend of the Emperor, the most honored Prime Minister of the Chozlas?” asked Vanathi.

“Thaye! I am glad that you recognized me. It makes my job easier. And one need not trouble you too much.”

“Ah! You need not be concerned about that. I will not heed it if I am troubled by you, a gem among councilors. I will not consider it as any trouble.”

“Your words satisfy me even more. I have no intention to trouble you to any extent. I am going to ask you one or two questions. If you would answer them, that is all After that”

“Sir, before you question me, I too have a few questions for you.”

“Ask, Thaye, ask without hesitating. I am like your father. I verily consider you as my daughter. Some time ago I met your Elder Uncle Bhoothi Vikrama at Mattotam. He said that I must look after you as if you were my daughter. I too promised....”

“Salutations, Father. I lost my father when I was a child. The Emperor promised at one time to be like my father. Now you have come, another father. What do I lack!”

“Whatever you wished to ask me, ask quickly. Dark clouds are gathering and darkness threatens. It looks like it will rain soon.”

“Father, is it you who arranged for these Kaalaa-mukhas to abduct your dear daughter who was going along the road and force her to come here? Is it you who instructed them to threaten me by saying that they would burn this innocent girl’s hands in the fiery torch? These frightening men accused you thus; I did not believe them.”

“My Child! These men spoke the truth. I did give them such orders. If that is a crime, I am responsible.”

“Oh, world famous Chozla Prime Minister, your words surprise me. ‘If it is a crime’ you say! You are learned in all the laws of justice and tradition. You are responsible for law and order in this Chozla country. Even if the Emperor goes against the law, you have the right to chastise him and bring back order. If you do not know if something is a crime or not, who else can know? An innocent girl, traveling along the road is stopped, kidnapped, brought to a secluded place, and then she is threatened with torture, -- is all this a crime or not? If you do not know, who will you consult with? I had understood that travelers in Sundara Chozla ‘s empire need not fear for their safety. I had understood that there is serious punishment for any wrongdoer who harms women. Now you seem to have doubts if such acts are criminal or not! This is truly beyond belief!”

Prime Minister Anirudda was dumbfounded. He had tried to intervene a couple of times to speak, but was unable to do so. He now made his voice harsh and said, “Girl! Be a little patient. Don’t exhaust all your debating skills. It is not without reason that I have doubts about whether there was a crime or not. It depends on the answers you give to questions I shall pose. I had heard that a woman who knows some very important pollical secrets is traveling along the road to Nagai Port. I ordered my men to stop and investigate that girl.

They assumed that they were fulfilling my orders and behaved in a certain fashion. Perhaps they made a mistake. Instead of stopping the girl involved in political conspiracies, they might have abducted you who had gone to consult with the Astrologer near Kudanthai. My Daughter, tell me, was it your intention to go back to Pazlayarai after consulting the astrologer? Did the palanquin bearers make a mistake and carry you on the road to Nagai Port? Please confirm that you are not going to Nagaipattinam with the intent of secretly meeting with a person who has committed political treason. If you will prove your answers, these men did commit a crime. And I am partly responsible. What do you say My girl? I shall ask you again clearly: did you start to go to Nagaipattinam to secretly meet Prince Arulmozli Varma?"

Lady Vanathi was now shaken up. She wondered if Mr. Anirudda could be burned down with the anger raging in her. She realized the futility of expressing her anger. Soft spoken, innocent Vanathi suddenly acquired the ability to think deep and connive.

She did not directly reply to the Prime Minister's questions. "Sir! What are you saying? Are you accusing Prince Arulmozli of conspiring treason? Is it not a crime to speak thus of the Emperors beloved son? Is it not treason against the Chozlas? Ah! I must speak of this immediately with the Younger Pirati," said Vanathi.

"You are welcome. Tell her. If you answer my questions satisfactorily, you need not tarry here any longer. I will personally take you safely, to the Younger Pirati."

"What if I refuse to answer your questions?"

"Not to answer is not an option. Thaye! None can escape this old man so easily. You must answer my questions." Said the Prime Minister.

"Sir! The all-powerful Prime Minister Anirudda Brahma-raya! You cannot learn anything about the Prince from this poor, innocent, powerless girl. I shall not speak anything even if you burn my palms as threatened by these minions of the Lord of Death. "

"Noble lady born of the brave Kodumbalur Velir clan; I applaud your determination. It is not correct, when you swear that you will not reveal anything about the Prince. You have already revealed some information. Nothing will be lost if you tell me one more thing. My job will be easier."

Vanathi was shocked once again; did I inadvertently say something? It felt as if a colossal pressure was constricting her heart. Her whole body was shaking. No, I did not speak anything. This old man is trying to trick me. She recovered some courage.

"Sir, you who recite the scripture, how can you speak lies? Can Sundara Chozla's minister make up imaginary answers? I did not say anything about the Prince. Why do you say that I revealed something?" she asked.

“Think carefully Thaye! Think very carefully. It is a mistake if you assume that without talking about a subject you had not expanded on it. Let me mention the news that you have revealed without speaking of it. Listen to this: the whole world is talking about the news that Prince Arulmozli has drowned in the sea. Our people the officials, everyone is drowning in a sea of sorrow. You know that news. Yet you were saying again and again that you would not speak anything about the Prince. What can one infer from that? You know that the Prince is still alive. You did not refute my statement that you are going to Nagaipattinam to meet him. You did not ask, ‘how can I meet the Prince who is dead?’ Nether did you say ‘I am not going to Nagaipattinam; I am going elsewhere.’ Therefore, you have agreed that the Prince is alive at Nagaipattinam and that you are going there to meet him. There are only two other pieces of information missing. You need to tell us where is the Prince in Nagaipattinam. And you need to reveal how you know that news. If you confirm both these bits of information you need not remain here any longer debating with this old man. You can go wherever you wish to go.

Vanathi was now completely confused. She realized the truth in the Prime Ministers words; her foolishness had revealed the secret about the Prince. How is one to atone for this huge blunder? There is no way but to give up one’s life.

‘Sir, you said that you are a friend of my Elder Uncle. You acknowledged that you were like a father to me. Let me ask a favor of you. I do not wish to go on to Nagaipattinam; neither do I wish to go back to Pazlayarai.

“Do you wish to go to Kodumbalur? That is good; I will tell them to reach you there safely.”

“No sir, I do not wish to go to Kodumbalur. I want to leave this world and go to the after world. Tell your men to place me on that alter and sacrifice me to the goddess. I am ready,” said Vanathi.

“Thaye! I promised to honor your wish whatever it may be. Therefore, if you wish to go on to the afterworld, I will send you there. Before that answer my questions.”

“Do not hurt me unnecessarily. I am not going to answer any question. If it is true that you look upon me like a daughter...”

“Daughter, there is no doubt about that. I look upon you as my very own daughter. Perhaps you are not aware of the close ties I have with your family. Your Elder Uncle and I are friends for over forty years. However, in political matters one must not heed such relationships. We cannot be influenced even if it is one’s own father, or beloved daughter. For example, consider the actions of our Emperor: he ordered that the son should be arrested and brought in, because he conspired against the Kingdom.”

“Are you talking in this fashion about Ponni’s Beloved Prince? What treason against the kingdom did he commit?”

“Ah! You are not aware of that? Ponni’s Beloved went to Lanka to oversee the battles. Our brave forces over there defeated Lankan armies. Prince Arulmozli made use of that opportunity and tried to take over the throne of Lanka for himself. Is that not treason against the Empire? Upon hearing this, the emperor sent orders to imprison his son and bring him back to Tanjavur. The Prince disobeyed those orders and intentionally jumped into the ocean. He caused rumors to spread saying that he had died. He came ashore somewhere and is in hiding. Since you are not aware of these details you must have refused to disclose the whereabouts of the Prince. It is a heinous crime if you tried to conceal such an enemy of the kingdom. So, tell me.”

All her barely controlled anger now erupted; Vanathi could not tolerate the complaints about Ponni’s Beloved Prince spoken by the Prime Minister. As if she was anger personified, she said, “Sir, nothing that you say can be true. You accuse the Prince without any proof. Our men were tired and disillusioned about the wars in Lanka. They were enthused when the Prince joined them over there and fought victoriously. The whole country knows that Prince Ponni’s Beloved is the real reason for our victories in Lanka. Seeing his valor and other enchanting qualities, the people of Lanka developed an affection for him. They wished to make him their King in preference to their own King who has run away from the battlefield to hide in remote mountain caves. Buddhist leaders offered the throne of Lanka to Ponni’s Beloved Prince. He refused the offer. You heap accusations on such a straightforward, honest Prince. When he heard of his father’s orders the Prince offered himself to be arrested and started to come to Tanjavur. He did not jump into the sea intentionally; he jumped to save the life of his friend. The Prince did not conspire against the empire. How unfortunate are my ears to hear all these false accusations?” Vanathi continued her tirade.

Mr. Anirudda laughed lightly, “Girl if people hear you speak in this fashion on behalf of the Prince, do you know what they will think? That you are both lovers, that is what they will think!”

“Sir, half of what you said is true. I have lost my heart to him. I do not wish to hide this truth from you. There is no reason to assume that he has given any place in his heart for this nobody. The Anril swan falls in love with the moon shining high in the sky. But the moon is not even aware that the Anril swan exists.”

“Aha! I did not know until now that my dear friend’s daughter is such a connoisseur of poetry. You are the Younger Pirati Kundavai’s confidant and friend, are you not?”

“Enough, enough. I do not wish to hear your praises. Either let me go on my way or order your men!”

“My dear Girl, be a little patient. You know so many details about the Prince. You are sure to know where he is now. Just let me know that. I will then send you to your Elder Uncle. He is coming back from Lanka and must have reached Madurai City by now.”

“Sir a man who is friends with deceiving men like you, is no uncle of mine! I have neither friends or family. All I spoke of about the Prince is public knowledge. You will learn nothing else from me. Please do not waste any more time.”

“Yes, we must not delay. It looks like we may have heavy rain.”

“Not just rain, thunder, lightning, total annihilation will come when there are men like you!”

As if to prove her words, a long flash of lightning danced from one end of the skies to the other and vanished; as soon as darkness enveloped, rumbling thunder boomed as if the whole universe was being shaken up.

“Girl, Where is Prince Arulmozli? Will you not speak?”

“No.”

“What I suspect must be true. You are carrying secret messages for the Prince; you have ventured upon this journey to get to the place where he is in hiding. This is the truth, isn’t it?”

“Sir, this is such a waste. I am not going to answer any of your questions.”

“Then I must sentence you to the punishment reserved for those that commit treason. There is no other recourse.”

“I wait to accept that sentence. Sir, do you want me to lay down my head on the sacrificial alter? I shall do so.”

“Oh no! You hail from the Velir clan of Kodumbalur. Such trivial punishment will not suffice for you. There, look at that elephant over there.”

Vanathi looked at where he pointed. An elephant dark and huge like a boulder, was standing there. It appeared like something carved from solid rock and painted dark. The black was enhanced by the ivory white of two long curved tusks.

“Girl you must have heard of Gajendra’s salvation. Hearing the piteous call for help by the elephant, Lord Thirumal came hurrying and killed the crocodile, and sent the Elephant Gajendra to salvation. In response to that, this elephant Gajendra has sent many persons to that world of salvation where the Lord God resides. You wished to give up this world and enter the next world of after-death, did you not? This elephant will fulfil your wish within the blink of an eye. If it picks you up by its trunk, swirls you and throws you, you will directly go and fall in the world of salvation.” After these words, Prime Minister Anirudda laughed. His laughter made Vanathi’s hair stand on end. She thought “this man is no human. He is a demon in human form!”

“Noble Lady, I ask one final time. Where is the Prince? Will you tell me or are you ready to go to heaven via the path of this elephant’s trunk?”

Vanathi was quite brave by now. “Sir will you make Gajendra come to me or should I go to that elephant?” she asked with quiet dignity.

Mr. Anirudda signed with his hand and said something in a language that Vanathi did not understand. The elephant walked closer, making the ground vibrate. It twirled its long curving trunk and wound it around the flower soft body of Vanathi, lifting her high above the earth. In those few seconds various thoughts rushed through Vanathi’s mind, wave after wave. She herself was surprised about how brave she was. Kundavai Pirati would often tease me saying I was a scared-cat, a coward.

How surprised she will be to see me being so brave now! Some day she is sure to hear about this. She will know that I bravely gave up my life for Ponni’s Beloved son. I am sure she will tell the Prince about it. What will the Prince think of me then? Will he then know that Kodumbalur Vanathi is more courageous than the boat girl?

The elephant’s trunk was slowly rising higher and higher. Vanathi was going up and up. Yes, what this demon man said must be true. This elephant is sending me directly to heaven! It is about to throw me.... How far away will I be thrown? When I fall, I am sure to lose consciousness; life will be gone by then! Vanathi was now high above the elephant’s head. She closed her eyes tight. The elephant swirled its trunk, ready to throw her. In that moment, by God’s Grace, Vanathi lost awareness.

Chapter 40 – Aanai-mangalam

One of the heroines in our story, Vanathi quite often, had a habit of falling in a faint. We ask the readers to be patient just this one more time, for the time is soon approaching when she will be cured of this illness!

When Vanathi regained her faculties, she felt as if she was being rocked about. She assumed that she was traveling across the skies. The patter of falling rain could be heard. A cool breeze puffed at her. She shivered a little. Perhaps I am going through the cloud worlds towards heavens of afterlife. Darkness was all pervading, occasionally lightning flashed and vanished. She faintly recalled being lifted by the twisting trunk of that huge elephant and the words of the Prime Minister about Gajendra's Salvation. What he said has happened! My life on earth is done and I am traveling towards the heavens; in that world I will see divine beings. But amidst all those divine men and women, I will not be able to see the divine hero who is pleasing to my heart. What is the point in going to a paradise that is not pleasing to my heart?

'Oh Dear! What is this swaying? I am being heaved from side to side! my head though is resting on something soft and comfortable! Like my mother's lap; like the lap of Princess Kundavai who is more to me, than my mother. I wonder what the Princess is doing in Pazlayarai? I wonder if the news about me has reached her? It is all well and good that I am going to paradise, flying through cloud worlds across the skies; In what vehicle am I traveling? Is it Pushpaka the flying car from heaven, or is it the giant elephant Airavata that belongs to Lord Indra? The thought of an elephant it is a little frightening. An elephant with its drooping, curving trunk. Oh, what strength in the flaccid looking trunk! Why worry about it or be afraid now?

However, why is this spot where my head is resting so soft, like silk? It is so dark everywhere; I cannot make out anything. Let me feel.... It truly feels like a silken cloth, a curtain? Wetness? What is this, who is caressing my cheek? Soft fingers like jasmine flowers are touching me!

“Vanathi! Vanathi!”

“Akka! Is it you?”

“It is me! Who else?”

“Are you also coming with me to paradise?”

“Why are you in such a hurry to get to paradise? Are you already tired of this earth world?”

“Where are we going, if it is not to paradise?”

“What a girl you are! Have you already forgotten! Don’t you remember we are going to Aanai-mangalam?”

“Where? Tell me again.”

“Fantastic! We are going to Aanai-mangalam town. Riding on the back of an aanai (elephant)!”

“Oooh! An elephant?”

“You silly girl, why are you shaking in fright like this? Are you now afraid of even the word elephant?”

“Just now, was I asleep?”

“Yes, yes. In the luxury of riding in a houdah atop this elephant, you happily fell asleep.”

“Nothing happily; I had frightening nightmares.”

“That is what it appeared to be; you were gibbering nonsense.”

“What did I jabber?”

“You said Kaalaa-mukhas, ritual sacrifice – salvation by an elephant and then you called Mr. Anirudda a ghou, a demon, an avenger. He deserves that! If only he had heard all the petrifying words you prattled about him, he would not be able to sleep for several days!”

“Akka, was all that really a dream?”

“A real dream? False dream? How will I know? I do not even know what you dreamed about!”

“Kaalaa-mukhas abducted me. The Prime Minister was interrogating me about the secrets regarding the Prince. I refused; he immediately called for the elephant to fling me to death. During all that I was not scared even one bit; but remained courageous. Akka, I remembered you, you were not there to see my bravery!”

“That is good; at least in your dreams you were brave! I am very happy about that.”

Vanathi remained quiet for a while and then spoke, “I cannot believe this.”

“What is it that you cannot believe?”

“That everything I saw, I felt, was a dream.”

“Some dreams are like that. They seem very real. I too have had many dreams like that!”

“What dreams did you have? tell me?”

“Why? My younger brother appears in my dreams quite often. It is so long since he went away to Lanka. But if I close my eyes, in the night, he comes to stand in front of me as if in reality.”

“Akka you are truly lucky.

“You must be the one to celebrate my luck. You do not know how anxious I feel, since hearing about how he jumped into the stormy sea.”

“That too must be a horrible nightmare. He Drowning in the sea.... Is that news true?”

“If only it were a nightmare, how good it will be. But the news is true Vanathi. The person who witnessed the Prince jumping into the sea came and said so. How can we not believe it?”

“Are you talking about the gentleman from the Vaanar Clan? He also said other things about the Prince. Did he not speak about a boat girl, about Choodamani Vihara at Nagaipattinam?”

“All that must be in your dream. You did mumble about Poonkuzlali the boat girl and the Buddhist Vihara at Nagai. You even said something about converting to become a Buddhist nun. Why now, dear girl, this hatred for life on earth? Why must you become a bhikshuni nun?”

“Akka, you know my heart. Why need I live on this earth after I have heard that he drowned in the sea. Why didn't the elephant swirl me up and dash me to my death as I saw in my dream?”

“You wretch! Even you! if you go away what about my situation?”

“Akka, your situation is different.”

“Yes! Your affection for Arulmozli is much more than mine!”

“I do not say any such thing. I am not brave like you. After he has died....”

“Chee! What words you speak. Why should you say he ‘died?’ how are you sure? The men of Pazluvoor, Queen Nandini and foolish Madurandaka can say such things and dance in delight. Why should you and I say such things or even think it?”

“What are you saying After he jumped into the sea during the whirlwind, what could have happened? If he survived, wouldn't he have come by now?”

“You foolish girl, just because he jumped, it does not mean that the sea drowned him.”

“If he came ashore, wouldn't we know by these many days?”

“Do you know the story about my father? In his younger days, his whereabouts were unknown for many months. They searched and finally found him, brought him back and made him crown prince. My grandfather Arinjaya was completely lost after the battle of Thakkolam. They knew his whereabouts only after several years. Listen to me Vanathi, this I tell you. At one time Mother Cauvery saved him and brought him ashore. In that same fashion the Ocean King would have saved Ponni's Beloved Prince and brought him ashore. There are many small islands between our shores and the Island of Lanka. Arulmozli might have gone ashore on to one of those islands. I have started on this journey, mainly to make proper arrangements for his search. I am taking you along. You do not seem to remember any of this! It is not your fault. It appears that your mind has gone daft after we heard the news about the Prince. It is only now that you have started to talk sensibly.”

Vanathi remained quiet and then asked again, “Akka you said... to which town are we going now?”

“To Aanai-mangalam.”

“Where is that town?”

“Near Nagaipattinam, near the seashore. Choodamani Vihara, about which you were mumbling in your dream, is just a little away from that town. Even if you really wish to become a Buddhist bhikshuni, it will be convenient. But do not be in a hurry to become a Manimekala of the stories. You can decide after we get confirmed news about Ponni's Beloved Prince,” said Kundavai as she laughed lightly.

“Akka, how can you laugh? How can you have a heart to laugh? Are you confident that the Prince is alive?”

“If I were not confident, would I be like this, Vanathi? All the astrology I have studied cannot go wrong. The conch and discus markings on my brother's palms cannot be wrong. Everything is going as rightly expected.”

“I do not understand; what has happened as expected?”

“How would you know? You have been wandering in some dream world. They said that Arulmozli will face several times of peril in his younger days. That is coming true; the other predictions too shall have to happen.”

“What other prediction?”

“I have told you many times; and you have heard me many times. Why do you want me to repeat all that? Just go to sleep quietly. We can think about it after daybreak.”

Vanathi could not stay quiet for long, “Akka are we going to travel all night long on this elephant? Why?”

“Don’t you remember, I had explained. If we travel by day, people in the towns and villages all along the road will surround us with questions. ‘Where is the Prince? Where is the blessed son of the Chozlas?’ They will try to blame Pazluvoor nobles. They may even curse the Emperor! Why should we listen to all that rubbish? And then the men of Pazluvoor may even say that I instigated the people. I do not want any such hassles. That is why I am setting out in the night. I spoke about all this even before we left Pazlayarai. Your wonderous dreams have taken hold of you! We need to find a way to cure you; perhaps find out if the monks at Choodamani Vihara can perform some exorcism. Don’t worry about that now. Take a nap. I too am feeling sleepy We must spend the night atop this dancing hillock and try sleeping if we can,” said the Younger Pirati.

Vanathi decided to not talk anymore. Her thoughts were very confused. She tried recalling everything that had happened, one by one. All of it seemed to be true, real. I am not insane. Akka is trying to make me a crazy fool. She tried to figure out what could have happened after the elephant had seized her with its trunk. She could not remember anything. What could have really happened? Akka must have arrived at that exact moment when her life was in danger and rescued her. The Prime Minister must have shivered in fear when he saw Akka. But was it such an easy task to rescue one from the grip of the elephant? Is this the same elephant that grabbed me with its trunk? I think I was able to see a houdah on its back even in that darkness. The younger Pirati must have been in the houdah. The elephant must have placed me in the houdah instead of flinging me away. Elephants were trained to do that; she herself had seen it many times.

The Prime Minister and the Younger Pirati must have conspired together to do this! Why? To prevent me from going on my journey by myself. Or to test my courage! Did she not test me once with that stuffed crocodile? Whatever! My starting off on my own was a huge mistake! How safe it feels to be lying down like this with my head on Akka’s lap. Her words of encouragement give me confidence and strength. I have no doubt that the Prince is safe somewhere! Perhaps We would meet him at the end of this journey?

Such thoughts played havoc in her heart. An emotion totally opposite to depression took hold of her: all was exhilaration.

The elephant continued in a dignified manner; the houdah atop the animal swayed like a cradle. Guarding footmen walked ahead and behind them. Rain which had earlier increased was now slowing to a drizzle. Clouds hiding the sky began to scatter and stars began to peek. Vanathi was looking at those stars: could there be any connection between those distant stars

and the people living on the earth? Could there be any truth in the astrologers' utterances about the match between the star under which Ponni's Beloved was born and her birth star? Even Akka joins the astrologers in raving about a son who would be born to me; who would rule the world; will that come true?

People are saying that the comet dhoomaketu appearing in the sky is a sign of some great tragedy for those who rule. How true is that? What great calamity is likely? Is the accident that befell the Prince that calamity? Will he come back safe as Akka believes? Then, what other kind of disaster is likely? -- After all such jostling thoughts Vanathi fell asleep.

When she awoke, the sun had risen. Birds were singing morning tunes. The Younger Pirati was awake. Parting the curtains, she looked out and said, "We have reached Aanai-mangalam; we have come to the Chozla palace here."

Both noblewomen descended from the elephant and went into the palace. The caretakers of that palace were ready to welcome them, showing all the facilities. Finally, they came to a lower level of that palace, to a beautifully fashioned pavilion that looked over the view on all sides. They stood looking at the canal flowing into the sea.

Vanathi asked, "Akka, you were saying about arrangements to look for the Prince, what have you planned?"

"Yes, Vanathi plans to look for him are in place. Look over there. See that boat? The persons coming in that boat are perhaps bringing some news," said Kundavai.

Vanathi turned around and could see between the tree branches: a small boat was approaching. Two persons were in that boat. "Akka who are those people coming in that boat?" asked Vanathi.

"The man poling the boat is Sendan Amudan. We freed him from the dungeons of Tanjavur, some time ago. It is that man. The person sitting down in the boat is Poonkuzlali."

Vanathi was shaking, "Akka, I do not want to see that girl. I am going inside."

"Silly girl! Why are you so afraid of meeting her? Will she swallow you or what? I will take care; don't be afraid, just be here," said Kundavai.

The boat was coming closer.

How did Vanathi caught in the coils of the elephant's trunk, survive with her life? Her second surmise about was correct. The elephant did not swirl his trunk and fling her away. It lifted her up to the houdah on its back and placed her gently there. Kundavai waiting behind the curtains received her in her arms and placed her on her lap. The Prime Minister got into his

own palanquin, “Princess, may I be permitted to leave? May your travels be pleasant; may the ending of your travels be pleasant.”

“Sir, I am grateful for your help.”

“You had said that this girl from Kodumbalur was faint hearted. I have never met a girl as hard hearted as her!”

“She used to be frightened about everything. She has become tough in recent days.”

“All your training. That girl must be thinking that I am a horrible fiend. It matters not. All sorts of persons think all sorts of things about me. I do not worry about all that. Let me say good bye, Amma!” said Mr. Aniruddha Brahma-raya.

His palanquin with the bearer and four footmen moved westwards. The rest of the men and retinue turned eastwards. Very soon after the Prime Minister had gone, the rain became heavy. The bearers and guards did not care about the rain they kept a steady pace, moving onwards.

The palanquin stopped suddenly; even as the rain was about to wind down and stop. The prime minister asked, “Why have you stopped?”

“My lord, someone seems to be lying under that tree!” said the footman who had gone first. The Prime Minister looked towards the tree: a flash of brilliant light. “Yes, it does look like someone, let me get down and look.” He descended from his palanquin and approached the tree. “Who is there?” Someone was groaning, “It sounds like the Prime Minister!” said a whining voice.

“Yes, I am the Prime Minister. Who is lying here?”

“Sir, do you not recognize me? It is me Madurandaka.”

“Prince, what a state is this? How did you come here? What happened?” Asked the Prime Minister with some agitation. He tried to help Madurandaka stand up.

Chapter 41 – Madurandaka’s Thanks

When the Prime Minister touched him, and tried to help Madurandaka, the Prince started yelling in pain, “Oooh! Aaiayayoo. Ayya! I am dead, don’t touch!”

Mr. Anirudda stopped, “Prince what has happened to you? What is wrong with your legs?”

“My legs and limbs are broken; I cannot stand; I cannot walk!”

The Prime Minister turned to his men: “Hey you, bring the Palanquin close,” he ordered. “Sir how did this accident happen? Why are you lying here alone in this rain? Where is your retinue? How did they dare to abandon you like this? They will truly be punished!”

“Prime Minister Sir, there is no need to punish anyone. It is no one’s fault. It was I who got on my horse and went for a ride by myself in the evening. I was riding along the river bank. It began raining suddenly and then flashes of lightning were followed by heavy thunder. The horse was frightened and it bolted. I got caught in the branches of this tree and fell here. The horse is gone. I must have broken or sprained my legs when I fell. I cannot even move. It is good that you came here at this time,” spoke Madurandaka.

“Oh, it is the good deeds of your father King Gandara Aditya the great soul! they brought me here to you. Please bite your teeth and bear the pain. I will lift you into the palanquin. I can get all the other details from you after we reach my humble home at Naadan Koyil,” said Mr. Anirudda. The palanquin was brought close and placed down; The Prince was helped tenderly to lie down inside the Palanquin. The men were ordered to carry it gently, without swaying too much, to go slowly. He then followed beside the Palanquin.

Very soon they reached the town of Naadan Koyil also known as Sundara Chozla Vinnagara. The Prime Minister’s mansion was close to the Vishnu temple in that town. The men carried the Prince inside and laid him on a bed. On examining, under good lamp light, it was found that no bones were broken, it was just a severe sprain. The fright gripping the Prince sort of decreased. They dined on the prasada food offerings sent from the temple.

“Prince, rest calmly for the rest of the night. In the morning we can do whatever you wish. I am going on to Tanjavur; If you wish to go with me, I shall escort you safely.”

“Sir you have harmed me in many ways. Today, you have atoned for all that. I shall never forget the help you have given me today. I will always be thankful to you because of this. If by chance I ascend this Chozla throne, I will retain you as my Prime Minister!” said Madurandaka.

Mr. Anirudda pretended to be drowning in surprise; “Prince, I am beholden to the Chozla clan. It is my duty help as much as possible and counsel every member of the Chozla family. Therefore, you need not be thankful to me. But you said that I have harmed you in some way;

I do not understand that. I do not recall having knowingly done any harm to you. If you could be gracious and tell me what that is, I will atone for it in whatever way required.”

“Mr. Anirudda you are a very clever man; intelligent, an expert in political matters – everyone knows that. Do not deploy your cleverness towards me. Do not think I am not aware of the atrocious harm you have done to me. Even so, because of this help you have rendered today, I will forget all that. Please let me know how I may show my thanks, how may I repay you for your help today?”

Mr. Anirudda smiled, “It is true Prince, there is a way for you to show thanks to me. This is a humble petition that this old man wishes to submit to you. Please do not venture alone to go riding on unknown paths, like this. Travel in a chariot with guards and footmen surrounding you. It is even better to go in a palanquin. The times have turned dangerous. For various reasons the people are angry. You saw what happened in Pazlayarai today. Therefore, it is safer to travel in a closed palanquin rather than in an open litter. It will be particularly better if the palanquin belongs to the Young Queen of Pazluvoor. No one will suspect that it is you.”

Madurandaka was astonished. His face reflected his fears once again. It took him a few minutes to gather his thoughts. “Prime Minister, what words you speak! What is the meaning of advising me to travel in the closed palanquin of the Queen of Pazluvoor? Is it your intention to humiliate me?”

“Prince I was not aware that you consider traveling in the Pazluvoor Queen’s palanquin, is humiliating. When have you started thinking this? It was your habit to often travel in that fashion, till recently. You must have come to this good decision after you came back from your last trip to Kadamboor Sambuvarayas fort.”

Madurandaka became even more horrified. Shades of fear and terror played on his face. He started to say something falteringly, “Sir, to Kadamboor Mansion I Me

“Prince, you had been to Kadamboor Fort in the company of our Lord Treasurer Pazluvoor, in the month of Aadi on the day of the padinettam perukku festival. I speak of that. At that time, you went and came back in the palanquin that belonged to the Young Queen. I did not care for that. palanquins are suitable for old men like me. It is appropriate for young men like you to travel by horse or elephant. However, you need training to be able to ride a horse. Once you have recovered, I will make the arrangement for your training.”

“Anbil Anirudda, be careful. You utter words again and again to humiliate me. Because of this accident today, you have concluded that I cannot ride a horse. Just because I did so at one time, for some reason or other, you say that I always travel in the Pazluvoor’s Queen’s closed palanquin! I am patient and forgiving because of your age and the help you gave me today.”

“Prince your patience gives me much happiness. The proverb says ‘the meek shall inherit the earth.’ The greatest of Tamil poets, Thiruvalluvar says:

Like the earth that bears even those that dig it,

It is best of qualities to tolerate those who speak ill

The good earth is patient even with those who dig it. Not only is she patient, she gives pure water and helps them who were digging the well. This quality of patience is very important for those who wish to rule the earth. Even if an old man like me utters something inappropriate, persons like you who wish to rule the earth should be tolerant; that is appropriate.”

“Sir! What do you say? Are you accusing me of wanting to rule this Chozla kingdom?” asked Madurandaka. His lips trembled; brows glowered. There were signs that his fears were turning into anger and rage.

The Prime Minister continued without any uneasiness. “Prince, why do you say that I am accusing you? How can it be a crime if you wish to rule this Chozla kingdom? You are born in the clan of that bravest of braves, Vijayala Chozla. You are the son of the great soul, the most devout of the Saiva faith, revered Gandara Aditya. You have all rights to ascend the Chozla throne. How could it be an offence for you to wish that? Do not believe or trust any persons who tell you to join secret conspiracies for this goal. Prince, please give ear to some words of this old man. The wish and will of your parents were one thing. You too went along and engaged yourself in the ways of Saiva devotion. Now your mindset has changed. None have the right to find fault with that state. You can ask for your rights openly. You can let the Emperor know your wishes. Instead of doing so, there is no need to go to the Kollidam river bank on the darkest of new moon nights, all alone, on a horse that cannot be held in check, merely to garner the support of Kaalaa-mukha fringe groups. There is no need to go to stealthy meetings at midnight in Kadamboor, like thieves gathering in secret conclave, there is no need to participate in treachery. Consider those who advise you to do such things as your greatest enemies.”

Madurandaka was now very confused. His surprise knew no bounds when he realized the extent of the information that was known to the Prime Minister. Fright on one hand and the resulting rage on the other, now grasped him.

“Sir how did you come to know about all this? Which deceiver is acting as my friend, betraying me, and reporting everything to you?”

“There is no use in you trying to find that out. I have eyes all over this widespread kingdom; and ears too! Nothing can happen in this kingdom without my knowledge.”

“Does it mean that the Emperor knows all this?” asked Madurandaka.

“Not him; he does not know. Several secrets known to my eyes and ears are buried deep in my heart. Unless there is a need, an urgency, they will not come out.”

“Yes, there are very many horrendous secrets buried deep in your heart! If they were to be exposed, wouldn't this Chozla kingdom be shaken to its very core?” Madurandaka's voice now had a certain deceit and hypocrisy that did not exist till now.

The Prime Minister noticed it; he pretended to have not seen the change, “The Emperor is my close friend; I know secrets that he is not aware of. Sundara Chozla is very ill now. He is hurt in body and mind because of various reasons. I did not wish to hurt him further by reporting these conspiracies of our petty chieftains. There was no need to report all that. Prince, you may be assured that I will not ever repeat any of your secrets to our Emperor.”

Madurandaka asked, “Mr. Anirudda of Anbil, why this sudden fondness for foolish, pathetic me?” The Prince was smiling cunningly.

“Prince, I have not developed any sudden affections for you. I have always had a regard for you too, just as I have for the children of Sundara Chozla. I have not had an opportunity to show my fondness.”

“And you had an opportunity today! Because I fell off my horse and hurt my legs. If it had perhaps been a few days ago, you might have strangled my throat and killed me under that tree.”

“Good Lord Narayana, Narayana! What words are these, Prince?”

“Mr. Prime Minister don't assume that I do not know anything; that I am an innocent, idiot who will believe whatever anyone says. You started conniving against me even when I was in my mother's womb! As soon as I was born on this earth, you had arranged to kill me.... I can see surprise on your face. You are wondering how I know about all those things, are you not? Do not assume that you are the only one in this Chozla nation who knows frightening secrets.”

Prime Minister Anirudda's face was now truly exhibiting curious changes - emotions, appeared and vanished within a second, one after the other. Finally with smile brought on with great effort, he said, “Yes Prince, It is true that I have been proud till this day (about the secrets I know). My arrogance is today shattered. If arrangements had been made to kill you as soon as you were born, how did you manage to survive and live? If you tell me that secret too, I shall be truly grateful.”

“You are probing to find out how much I know. Listen, let me tell you: The persons you had arranged to kill the newborn child did not even bother to find out if the baby was a male or female when they took it away. Realizing that it was a female child, they came to report to you. ‘Let it live,’ you declared and asked them to give that child to a temple priest who could

care for that baby. Then occurred something you never expected. Within ten or fifteen minutes after the girl child was born, I was born! You never expected that! Fortunately, my horoscope and stars were in good alignment. I lived. Even after your plans had failed, you connive in many ways to prevent me from ascending the Chozla throne. You arranged to raise me as a devout adherent of Shiva, raise me as a crackpot, a laughing stock. You failed in that plan too. I did not become a complete fool as you wished. Mr. Prime Minister, why are you sitting stunned like this? Will not you swear that all this is utter falsehood?" Thus asked Madurandaka.

The Prime Minister was truly stunned as he sat there. "Prince, when you are aware of so many details, what is the point in me trying to swear that it is all untrue?"

"Yes, there is no point in refuting the truth. I also know why you are suddenly showing this compassion for me. You do not like Aditya Karikala. You had wanted to place Arulmozli on the Chozla throne. Since the sea has swallowed him, you are now showing a partiality for me. So let me tell you one thing. I shall forget all the harm you have done to me till now. I shall remain obliged to you for your help today. If you promise, that from today you will favor my cause and be on my side, as soon as I ascend the throne, I wish to retain you as my Prime Minister." Thus spoke Prince Madurandaka.

"Prince your words are drowning me in ecstasy!" said Anbil Anirudda Brahma-raya.

Chapter 42 – Recuperation

Ponni's Beloved Prince Arulmozli was lying on a wooden cot in a room next to the chambers of the Chief Monk of Choodamani Vihara. He had been in the grip of high fever for three days; for most of that time he had been unconscious; unaware of himself. During those days the monks nursed him with extreme care. They gave him medicines in a timely routine. They were careful and periodically fed him water in his mouth. Occasionally, when he gained awareness, he tried to think about where he could be. A painting on the wall in front of him attracted his attention.

The mural showed divine beings such as devas, gandharvas, yakshas; some among them held several musical instruments, others had white fan-whisks and white tasseled ceremonial parasols, others carried on their hand's platters heaped with colorful flowers. The scene was life like; the figures of the divine beings seemed true to life. On seeing that mural several times, Ponni's Beloved believed he had arrived at the kingdom of heavenly beings. He thought that those devas, yakshas, kinnaras were all coming to welcome him. He tried to think how he had arrived at that world of heavenly beings. It appeared that he had arrived at that paradise by a stream surrounded on both sides with thick thazlam screw pine groves, wherein there bloomed golden fragrant flowers. On remembering the journey, he felt he could smell the fragrance of those screw pine flowers. He faintly remembered that a divine man and a divine woman had taken him in their boat and brought him to this place. The divine man was apparently a follower of the Saiva faith. He often sang sweet Thevaram songs. What was the divine woman doing? She did not sing; she sometimes spoke one or two words. Even that sounded like heavenly music. She had looked at him often with eyes full of eagerness and fondness. Where are those two now?

In this abode of divine beings, in addition to those devas, yakshas and kinnaras, there seemed to be a special place for Buddhist monks. Perhaps they were the guardians of the nectar pots. One monk often came close to him and fed him the ambrosia. One was not sure of all other comforts of this paradise; but one sure did feel very thirsty in that world. Why did that monk not give him some more ambrosia? Why this stinginess even here in this divine world?

Perhaps ambrosia should not be imbibed in excess at any time? Perhaps that was some sort of alcohol? Chee! Why would Buddhist monks even touch alcohol? Or pour it down my throat? Why is it making me drowsy? After tasting that nectar my awareness dims.

For three days, Arulmozli spent his time between the worlds of those divine beings and a limbo state of oblivion; on the fourth day he rose as if waking from a deep sleep and gained all his faculties. Bodily, he was very weak; mentally he was sharp.

He realized that the divine beings around him were in a fresco. Those devas, yakshas, and kinnaras were not waiting to welcome him, rather they were welcoming Lord Buddha who was visiting their world. On a different wall was another mural of the Buddha riding through

the cloud worlds. He realized that he was lying in a bed in a Buddhist vihara or monastery. When he tried to recognize -- which Vihara? All the incidents that happened after he left Lanka came parading through his remembrance. Very quickly he recalled how he and Vandiya Devan thrown into the sea were buffeted by the stormy waves, befuddled, and exhausted. After that everything was very confused.

At that instance a monk entered the chamber; as usual he brought a cup of nectar! When he had approached closer, the monk peered into the face of the Prince. The Prince stretched out his hand and took the goblet, looking into it he decided that it was not nectar. It was some sort of a medicine or medicine mixed with milk.

He asked the monk, "Revered Sir, what place is this? Who are you? For how many days have I been lying here like this?" The monk went away without replying. He had gone into the next room and declared, "Revered Master, the fever is completely gone. He is fully conscious," the Prince could hear those words.

In a short while an elderly monk came into the bedchamber of Ponni's Beloved Prince. He walked up to the bed and looked at the Prince. With a cheerful face he said, "Prince you are in the Choodamani Vihara at Nagaipattinam. It has been three days since you came here in the grip of a severe burning fever. We have been honored to be able to serve you in this difficult time; we are fortunate to be able to care for you."

"I too am fortunate. I was eager to visit this Choodamani Vihara. Sometime ago when I had come to the port in this city, I saw the Vihara from outside. By Gods design, it has happened that I had to come and stay here. Revered Master, how did I arrive here. Can you tell me?" Asked Arulmozli Varma.

"Prince first, drink the medicine in the goblet in your hand. I shall share with you whatever I know," answered the master of that monastery.

The prince drank the medicine saying, "Sir this is not medicine; it is ambrosia from heaven. You have arranged this care for me with much concern. However, I am not going to thank you for this!"

The Chief Monk smiled, "There is no need for you to thank us; Our good Lord Buddha has guided us; to care for the sick, is one of the most important ways in which we can serve others. That is our dharma, a prime tenet of our faith. The dharma (laws) of our faith dictate that we should even care for wounded animals. There is nothing particular in providing care for you. We are beholden in many ways to the Chozla clan. Your father Emperor Sundara Chozla and your elder sister, Princess Kundavai Pirati have greatly supported our Buddhist faith. We are aware that you arranged for the renovation of many Vihara's in Anuradhapura in Lanka. That being so, we expect nothing in return for this small service we could do for you."

“Revered Sir, I did not mean it that way regarding expressing thanks. I realize how severe my fever and illness must have been. I have seen the fate of many who were prey to this illness in Lanka. In normal course by now I must have reached the abode of heavens. Heavenly beings such as devas and yakshas would have welcomed and served me there. I would have been amidst them and drinking real nectar of immortality and spent my time in bliss. You thwarted all that. You have brought me back to this earth full of sorrows from the gates of bliss filled heavens; so, I do not think you have done me a good deed; I refused to say thanks because of that”

The Master’s face blossomed in happiness. “Prince when the time comes for you to go to the abodes of heaven, King Devendra and other divinities will come in flower decorated aerial-chariot vimanas, accompanied by heavenly music and auspicious booming of conch shells, showering flowers upon you and take you with them. That time is however, very far away. There are many great and noble works that you must still accomplish on this good earth. Only after you have achieved all that, should you think of the abodes of the Gods.”

Ponni’s Beloved Prince who had been leaning back and resting till now, sat up. An unusual brilliance shone on his charming face. Rays of lightning flashes emerged wave after wave from his widened eyes filling that whole room with light.

“Revered Sir, you do speak the truth. I do wish to accomplish many things on this blessed earth. I do wish to undertake rare remarkable tasks and complete them. At one time I had seen this Choodamani Vihara from outside. I saw many, many stupas and viharas in Anuradhapura. I am going to renovate this your Choodamani Vihara to be huge like the Abhayagiri Vihara in Lanka. I will have huge big statues of the Lord Buddha, like the ones I saw in Anuradhapura, installed in this Vihara here. I am going to renovate the many Shiva temples in this Chozla country in a similar fashion. My heart and body shrink in shame when I think of the Shiva temples in this my country, after seeing those huge stupas and viharas in Lanka. I shall build in Tanjavur, a huge temple that reaches the sky. I shall have a matching great big statute of our Lord God, Maheshwara-shiva, made and installed in that big edifice. Oh, Revered Sir, Buddhist stupas and Shiva temple towers will clamber to the cloud laden skies, each competing with the other. Generations to come after thousands of years in this blessed Tamil country will stand amazed looking at all that!”

The Prince who spoke as if possessed by a fury, finally fell back, lacking bodily strength, having been weakened by the fever. The monks held him, guarding his head from hitting the bedstead, and lowered him gently on to the bed.

The senior monk said, “Prince you will accomplish in time, all these great tasks that you wish to undertake. First, you must regain your health completely. Be calm now.”

Chapter 43 – Nandi Pavilion

The Chief Monk came by the next afternoon, to see Ponni's Beloved. The Prince was impatient wanting to ask many questions. His attempts to question the young novice monk and find answers were not successful. "Sir, our Revered Teacher will tell you everything." It was the only answer repeated, again and again.

When the Chief Monk came, he asked, "Prince how is your health today?"

The Prince replied, "Sir, my body is troubling me a lot. 'why are you lying about lazily? Get up, go riding, jump into the river and go for a swim, go fight with an elephant, don't just slouch about,' it complains. My stomach too is very industrious. All the food the young novice brings me is not enough. I cannot believe that I was in the grip of severe fever without being aware of anything for so many days. Your medicines are truly doing a fantastic job."

"Ah! One should not trust the instructions of the body too much. It will be like this after the fever has come down. If you are careless, and the fever grips you a second time it can be very dangerous, even fatal."

"Revered Teacher, I do not worry about any danger to my life."

"You are not worried! But do you know how worried the millions of people in this Chozla empire are, for the past four days? The countryside and towns are all in great turmoil. Everyone, from young children to the aged are in tears."

"Sir I do not understand your words. Why are they so unhappy? Do they think that I may not survive this wretched fever? Why should the public worry even after they know that I am being treated at Choodamani Vihara?"

"Prince the people are not aware that you had the fever or that you are being looked after in this Choodamani Vihara. Would we have such peace and calm in this Vihara if the people of this town know that you are here? Would not all the people shatter the protective walls and storm into this place to see you? If you had heard the wails and ruckus raised by the people that morning when we had heard the news that you had drowned in the sea Why there was not a single person even inside this monastery who was not in tears."

The Prince was sitting up on his bed, "Revered Master, what are you saying? I do not understand. You had news that I have drowned in the sea! When did you get that news? Who brought that appalling news? Why?" asked the Prince.

"We do not know who brought the news; within one morning it had spread all over town. People were saying that the ship coming with you on board was caught in the whirlwind and sank when coming from Lanka to Kodi Karai. Even your body was not found by the search party organized by our finance minister Lord Pazluvoor and therefore you must have drowned

in the sea – the news spread with no restraint. On hearing that, even I was lamenting while standing on the front steps of this Vihara; one of the novice monks came and told me that a boat carrying a sick person had come by the rear canal to the back courtyard of our building. When I went immediately and looked, I recognized that you were the sick person. We treated you for three days. You regained your faculties only yesterday.”

“Sir do you know who brought me in that boat?”

“A young man and a young woman had come rowing the boat.”

“Yes, yes. I too remember as if in a dream. Do you know who that young man and woman were? Was the young man the noble from Vaanar clan?”

“No sir, he said that his name was Sendan Amudan. He appeared to be very devout, a man of Saiva faith. I did not find out the name of the woman. She was strong of body and mind.”

“I can guess who she was. She is the boat girl Poonkuzlali daughter of Tyaga-vidangar. Did they say why they brought me here?”

“No Prince, neither did I ask them.”

“Have you let anyone know that I am safe here?”

“No sir; the persons who brought you here asked that I do not reveal that information. Considering your ill health, I too decided that it may be better to not reveal that information to anyone.”

“Sir there is some scheming in this. My father the Emperor of the three crowns had ordered for me to be arrested. I started from Lanka to comply with that order. Other things happened subsequently. This seems like some plot to accuse that I went against the orders of the Emperor. They have made up stories that I have drowned at sea. Sir, accepting me in this Choodamani Vihara is treason by itself. Keeping me here any longer is a further crime. Send me to Tanjavur immediately.”

“Prince, I shall happily accept any royal punishment if it were meted out to me for giving you asylum. No harm even if this Choodamani Vihara were to be demolished to dust because of this.”

“I am delighted to by your compassion; however, Revered Master, how did you accept me without questioning them who brought me here?”

“Where was a need to question them? What other obligation do monks like me have other than to welcome, care for, and treat someone like you who came with a high fever? Moreover,

your revered elder sister, the Princess Kundavai had already alerted me, that you might come stay here for a while.”

“Is that so! Did the Younger Pirati send a message like that? When?”

“A few days before you arrived here. Sendan Amudan who brought you here also confirmed that it was the wish of the Younger Pirati.”

“Revered Master, did those two who brought me here go back immediately? Can we find them? At least by meeting them I need to find out some information.”

“Sir do not become restless. Those two are still here in the city. They come at least once in a day to enquire about your health. I am not sure why they haven’t come till now, today.”

The novice monk entered at this moment and made some sign to the Chief Monk, his teacher. The Master said, “I will be back soon” and left the room. When he came back in a few moments, the Chief Monk noticed that the prince had grown even more restless and agitated.

“Sir I cannot remain here even for one moment longer. I do not wish to bear the accusation that I resisted the Emperor’s orders and came here to stay hidden. I do not wish that any harm falls upon this old monastery because of me,” said the Prince.

The Chief Monk replied with a cheerful demeanor, “Prince, speaking truthfully, I am no longer able to bear that huge responsibility. I do not wish to retain you here, against your wishes, even for one moment more. You can leave right now. The boat is ready, waiting for you on the canal.”

“To go where?”

“That is something you must decide. The two who brought you here have come with their boat to take you.”

The Prince was hesitant. Seeing a mysterious smile on the elderly monk’s face, ‘perhaps there is some other scheming?’ he wondered. Then asked, “have they both come? Did they say why?”

“Yes, they did say. About twenty minutes from here by canal, is a Nandi Pavilion. There are two women there, waiting to meet you.”

The Prince hurriedly stepped down from the bed, “Master, please take me to the boat immediately! We have delayed so much.”

The Chief Monk held the Prince with his hands, and led him to the canal bank. There was no sign of the high fever and illness experienced by the Prince in his walk. Seeing him walk

down like a bull, with dignity, the faces of both Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali blossomed with happiness.

Once Arulmozli was seated in the boat, the Master said, “All of us monks in this Choodamani Vihara think it is an honor if there are opportunities to serve you. Please come back and stay at least a week to regain your strength before leaving.”

‘Sir, I too feel that I shall be coming back. If not, will I go like this, hurrying, without taking leave of all the other monks?’ asked the Prince.

The boat began to move. The Prince looked at Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali again, and once again. “I assumed you were both heavenly beings and that you were taking me to the abode of the divine ones when you brought me by this canal some days ago. You fooled me and instead left me in the monastery full of ascetics. Let bygones be bygones. I must ask you both about all things that happened after I was swimming in the ocean with tired hands, lost memories.... But before that, tell me who is waiting for me at the Nandi Pavilion.”

Even though he had asked the question of them both, Poonkuzlali did not open her mouth. It was only Sendan Amudan who spoke. He said that Princess Kundavai and her noble friend Vanathi of Kodumbalur had come to Aanai-mangalam and that they were waiting for him at the Nandi pavilion.

“Why did the Younger Pirati bring her here, that girl who falls down in a faint for no reason at all?” asked the Prince.

Sendan Amudan said, “Sir there is an illness spreading among young maidens in this Tamil country. They wish to give up the blessed Saiva traditions and convert to Buddhism and become bhikshuni nuns.”

“Is that so? Who is saying that?”

“The Noble Lady of Kodumbalur is apparently saying that. And here this queen among women is also saying that,” said Sendan Amudan.

“Amuda, it is only two persons; Saiva faith will not face any loss because of that. I know of several matas or convents in Lanka where bhikshunis spend their time in prayer. If needed I will lead them both myself and enroll them in one of those places.”

Sendan Amudan laughed on hearing these words of the Prince. He then recounted to the extent he was aware, all that had happened since the Prince and Vandiya Devan had come ashore.

Ponni’s Beloved Prince listened eagerly, comparing what he remembered with what Amudan was retelling.

When Poonkuzlali said, “There, the Nandi Pavilion!” the Prince turned to look at where she pointed.

Chapter 44 – Nandi Began To Grow

The embankments on both sides of the canal on which the boat was moving, were high. Poonkuzlali had pointed to a spot where there was a pavilion with steps coming down to the water. There were two statues of Nandi the Bull on both sides where the steps ended and the pavilion proper began. One could gaze all day long upon those beautifully carved statues of Lord Nandi, with intricate workmanship and lifelike expressions. It was because of these statues that the place was named Nandi Pavilion. Once a year during the spring festival, deities of the temple in Nagai Karonam, Shiva, named Kayaarogana Swami and his consort Neelayadakshi Amman, were brought to this pavilion to hold court and bless the devout. People came in droves during the festival; they would enjoy the festivities and have picnics by the moonlight and go home. Since the place was a little away from the town, not many went there during ordinary days.

The boat came closer to the pavilion; once he caught sight of the two women in the pavilion, the Prince had no eyes or thought for anything else. As soon as the boat came closer, Kundavai came down the steps to the water’s edge. Vanathi stayed back in the pavilion half hidden or maybe not hidden, standing behind a pillar up there. The boat came by the landing steps. Sendan Amudan in the boat and Kundavai on the steps helped the Prince get down. Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali rowed back and stopped the boat a little further away.

“Thambi how thin you have become!” said Kundavai with a gentle voice mixed with tears.

“Forget about my becoming thin. Akka why does your face seem wilted? Whenever you saw me, your face would blossom like a lotus. Why is the full moon of your face covered by clouds? Why are your eyes tear laden? Oh! Several things must have happened to hurt your heart and cause this distress. Otherwise, you wouldn’t have sent those urgent letters to me,” said Ponni’s Beloved Prince.

“Yes, my brother, there are many urgent matters I need to speak to you about, you must hear about. You, greatest of the most benevolent of princes, who refused the golden throne of Lanka, come here, and sit by me on this granite step-throne for a little while,” said Kundavai.

As he was about to sit down, the Prince touched his sister’s feet reverently and brought his palms to his eyes. Kundavai touched his head in blessing and kissed his forehead. Tears were brimming in her eyes.

Once they were seated, Kundavai said, “Thambi, I should not have called you to come here today. The Chief Monk of the Vihara had sent word that you were completely recovered. He

is not correct. The fever has drained you. But I could not remain any longer without seeing you. Every minute after we came to Aanai-mangalam was like an eon!”

“Do not worry about asking me to come here, Akka. If you had not sent the boat, I would be on my way to Pazlayarai by now. Even while in the grip of that extreme fever it was your letter that worried me. You had sent a messenger to bring me those letters; I have never met a gallant like that Vandiya Devan of the Vaanar clan. I tested him in so many ways and he succeeded them all. Where is he now Akka?”

The cloud cover over her face parted a little; with coral red lips opening to show pearl like teeth, she smiled. “Thambi, why worry about him now? There is much to talk about,” said Kundavai.

“Why do you say that Akka? Did he behave unsatisfactorily to you?”

“No, no. Why should I not be satisfied? He promised to bring you back; he fulfilled his pledge.”

“When I think of the conniving and the machinations he undertook, to fulfill that pledge, it amazes me no end! Where is he Akka? When I heard that you have come here, I thought Vandiya Devan would have come with you; instead, this girl who faints without reason at every instance has come.”

“Thambi, you have no idea how brave she has become! Yesterday, our Prime Minister’s elephant picked her up in its trunk and threw her; it merely flung her into the houdah on top and into my lap – but she did not know that; if you had only seen how brave she was at that time...”

“Enough, stop these praises for your friend. Tell me about my friend.”

“What is there to say about him? His assignment was done; he went back to his liege lord Aditya Karikala.”

“Oh! he has broken his promises. He had said that he would remain in the Chozla country and would not go back to Kanchi.”

“How is that possible? What is he to do remaining here in this Chozla land? One does not know the fate of even those who are here! If you are so fond of him, speak to the Emperor and give him back some of the lands of the fiefdom ruled by his ancestors.”

“What will that brave man do with the lands of his fiefdom?”

“He too will do the same thing that all other chieftains do. You are the one who refused the kingdom of Lanka, do you think that he too would refuse?”

The Prince was smiling, “Akka, I refused the throne of Lanka with witnesses. Even then they have accused me, and my father has ordered that I be arrested and brought back.”

“Thambi, If you had accepted that Kingdom there could have been no orders to arrest you and bring you back here. You would have become an independent King. Who can imprison you then?”

“Should I have acted against my father’s wishes in that manner?”

“Ponni’s Beloved Prince, if you had accepted the Lanka Kingdom, our father would have been happy. He would have divided the remaining kingdom in two and given it to your brother and to Madurandaka and had some peace of mind. There are ongoing plans with that intention. Thambi, they are making efforts to divide the land north of the Kollidam as one Kingdom and all in the south as another. Our father believes that if you come home, you would be of help to him in this matter. Since you did not come home when he called for you earlier, he ordered that you be arrested and brought back. The Emperor knows fully well that you have refused the throne of Lanka.”

“I will never help to divide the kingdom. There is no crime greater than that! Instead of that, one could give the whole kingdom to Uncle Madurandaka.”

“You and the Prime Minister have the same thoughts.”

“Yes, I know what the Prime Minister thinks. The only reason he came to Lanka was to discuss these matters with me. Shall I tell you the real reason for my refusing Lanka’s throne?”

“Instead of me, to whom else will you tell?” asked Kundavai.

“Yes, there is no one else to share the secrets of my heart. Before going to Lanka, I was thinking great things about that country. Only after going there, did I realize how small that kingdom is. If one were to start on a horse or ride on an elephant, we can cross that country in one day from the western seas to its eastern shores.”

“Is this Chozla heartland any different? Can one not cross this land too within one day if one were to ride upon a horse?” asked Kundavai.

“This Chozla land too, is very small. If someone were to offer me this Chozla crown, I would say no. They divided this sacred Tamil land into Chozla country, Pandiya country and Chera country. They committed a huge crime! That is why even if bravest of brave warriors arose in this land they never shined or lasted for long. In the northern lands of our continent there arose many true emperors: Chandragupta, Ashoka, Samudragupta, Vikramaditya, Harshavardhana – they ruled truly vast empires. Has anyone appeared in these Tamil lands to

rule vast empires like that? Among the Pallavas of Kanchi there was Mahendra and Mamalla, to some extent. But after them that clan too dwindled to nothing. If I were to rule a kingdom, it will not be tiny like this. I will rule an area that spreads from Lanka all the way to the Ganges and one that is well established. The tiger flag will fly in Mala-thivu and Javaka and more distant lands. I will sit on the throne of such a great Chozla empire. Are you thinking that I am crazy?" asked Arulmozli Varma.

"No! my dear Arul Varma! I am happy that you too fantasize and build dream castles like me. If you are crazy, I am more insane than you. I know that our father's grandfather Emperor Paranthaka had such dreams. His vision was not completely fulfilled. But I am going to see that happen in my lifetime. This Chozla empire will spread from Lanka to the Ganges. From the Mala islands to Javaka and beyond. I will see this happen before I die. At one time I thought that these dreams will happen because of our brother Aditya Karikala. I am no longer confident of that. Aditya is a very brave warrior; but he lacks the ability to control his mind and heart. This will not let him achieve great deeds. I still have the belief that my dreams will be achieved through you. If that were not to happen, I would not be set back or disappointed. If it were not possible through you, I am resolved that it will be achieved through a son born to you. I will personally raise that child born to you from the day of his birth. I will make him the greatest among great warriors; never seen before in this world. I will make him a man lion who does not waste himself in petty desires.... "

"Akka, one thing is sure. You are crazier than me! I have no desire to be married, tied down. You have started talking about a son born to me! If any of the girls in your court whom you encourage, have any such intentions, to marry me, be crowned and sit on a throne, such wishes will never be fulfilled. You must surely tell them this." When Arulmozli was saying this, for one second his eyes darted to look at Vanathi hiding behind the pillar of that pavilion. When he turned back, his eyes fell upon the statue of Nandi on the steps leading to the water.

"Akka, there is something else. Even though Eezlam is a very small country, the kings who ruled that land in years gone by were truly great men. They were big hearted. They made vast plans and achieved great things. They built mountainous Buddhist stupas touching the skies using brick and mortar. They built viharas with thousand even two thousand chambers. They built mansions with tens of thousands of pillars. In order that one may instantly recognize the vast greatness of Lord Buddha, they made his statues as tall as that coconut palm.

"Just look at this Nandi in front of us! See how tiny he is! How could he be so tiny and be the vehicle of great Lord Mahadeva, whose head or feet could never be discerned by anyone? Shiva's entourage in the great snowy mountains of Kailasa, are big ghosts and goblins. The gatekeeper making sure that these retainers do not disturb the great God is this Nandi the Bull. If he is so tiny, how can he control those humongous ghosts and ghouls? Look over there Akka! This Nandi is growing before my very eyes. It is growing, growing, growing, and growing big. It has taken a humongous form and is touching the roof of this pavilion. The roof is gone now; Lord Nandi is now touching the sky. All those ghosts and goblins wait in awe, asking for permission to go see the Lord. If Nandi is this big, how humongous will be

the temple where Lord Shiva dwells? Don't we have to build a vimana that touches the sky, call it Meru of the South? How should one construct the hallways that surround that mansion? The temples we have in our lands are only fit for the dwarf saint Agastya! They are in no way suitable for Lord Shiva. I need neither kingdom nor crown. I don't care who sits on the throne; I shall ask them to make me the officer in charge of temple renovation! ..." These were the words that Prince Arulmozli uttered.

"Thambi, between the two of us we must compete about who is crazier than who! Great danger engulfs this Chozla kingdom now. The danger is from internal enemies, external enemies, and from enemies who act as friends. For some time now, I have been seeing a frightening nightmare. A killing sword, shining like lightning appears in my dreams. It is going to fall upon someone. I do not know on whom. Is someone of our Chozla clan going to be a victim to that sword? Or is it the killing sword that would cleave this Chozla kingdom in two, and destroy it completely? You and I must think and prevent such a danger befalling this kingdom," said Younger Pirati Kundavai.

"Yes Akka, from the information brought by the nobleman Vallavarayan, that is what I think. You know where the greatest danger to us Chozlas is coming from don't you?"

"Thambi, are you talking about Nandini the young Queen of Pazluvoor?"

"Yes Akka; don't you also know who she is?" asked the Prince.

"From the details explained by Mr. Vandiya Devan, I can guess that too. That is why I came here in such a hurry, to meet you," said Kundavai.

Chapter 45 – Vanathi is in Danger

The Prince asked, “Akka do you remember? I fell into the river and almost drowned when I was about five years old. Mother Cauvery saved me and placed me back on the boat and then vanished.”

“What kind of a question is this Thambi? How can I forget that? It is because of that incident that we call you Ponni’s Beloved,” said Kundavai.

“Akka, I saw Mother Cauvery who saved me, in Lanka. You say nothing. Are you not surprised?”

“Not surprised, but very eager. Tell me all about her.”

“Can’t say everything in one day or in one instance. I will tell you the important parts. Not only had she saved me from the floods in the Cauvery, she saved me from several dangers in Lanka. Not just save me from danger, that is not the big thing; so many people accidentally save someone. The love she has for me, there is no comparison to that in all the fourteen worlds of our myths. Even the love you have for me is a tad lesser than her love for me.”

“There is no need for you to hesitate about that. The love I have for you is not all that remarkable; It is mixed up with selfishness. Let me share this truth my brother, the welfare and greatness of this Chozla Kingdom is most important for me. My love for you is because you will help this cause. If I were to find that you may be an obstruction to my intentions, this love may even turn into hatred. But the love of that deaf-mute woman is not like that. The love she had for our father more than twenty or more years ago, all that unrestrained love, she showers upon you. Yes, there is no comparison in all the fourteen worlds!”

“How did you know this Akka?”

“What are you asking about?”

“That she is perhaps our elder-mother?”

“From what father told me and from what Mr. Vandiya Devan told me, I guessed that. Thambi, does she think that you are her own son or does she know that you are the son of my father’s other wife?”

“Such differentiation did not occur to me; I do not think even a seed of it is in her heart. Why do you speak thus, separating the relationships?”

(Note: when men had several wives, the children of one wife automatically considered the other wives as their mother, sometimes prefixing with elder or younger. Prince Rama of the

epic considered Kaikesi as ‘mother.’ Usage of the term ‘step-‘ is not culturally correct. Such legal connotation is an import from European influence.)

“Thambi, our mother is on the throne where that deaf-mute lady should have been given a place. even after she knows this, is it not remarkable that she has such love for you?”

“She must know that I am not the child born to her. Would she not see the age difference? She cannot talk; she cannot express the feelings in her heart. Somehow, I found out things by pictures she drew. Forget about the love she has for me. Think of the love she must have had for our father; my heart melts if I consider that. Would our father have looked like me when he was about my age?”

“No, Thambi, No! At about your age, our father was more handsome than Manmatha the God of Love. Our Chozla families are famous for their bravery not for their good looks. Our grandfather Arinjaya married the Vaithumba Princess who had no equal in beauty. When Arinjaya married her, she had a complexion like well-tempered gold, a face like a shining full moon, a world enchanting beauty. You yourself have seen how lovely our grandmother Kalyani is, even now at her age. Our father was thus very good-looking; he earned the sobriquet Sundara Chozla, the handsome prince. We are born resembling our mother. Those born in the clans of Thiru-kovalur Malayaman despise beauty. They think it to be an enemy of bravery.”

“I have no idea if there is any connection between valor and beauty. But I do know that there is no link between beauty and love. If not...”

“If not... why is this girl Vanathi looking at you from behind that pillar without blinking an eye? Over there in that boat, why is Sendan Amudan enthralled, looking at Poonkuzlali without blinking an eye?”

Prince Arulmozli smiled, “Akka you jump from something to somewhere else. I talked about the love that my elder-mother has for me. Let us not think about that. Is it possible in this world, for one person to be exactly like another?”

“Why is it not possible? Twins may appear like that. Mother and daughter may appear exactly like each other at the same age. In addition, in this creation two totally unconnected persons may very rarely look alike.”

“Can it be true that Pazluvoor Queen and my elder-mother in Lanka are exactly alike as Mr. Vandiya Devan says? I have seen Nandini when we were young children. I have not seen her properly after she became the Queen of Pazluvoor. What do you think?”

“I have only seen the Queen of Pazluvoor. I have not seen our elder-mother. What Mr. Vandiya Devan said must be true. I surmised that from the story that my father told.”

“Our father himself told you!?! What did he say? When did he tell you?”

“Some days ago, Vanathi and I had been to Tanjavur. Father spoke of incidents that took place in his youth. How he had been marooned on an island off the coast of Lanka, and about the love of a deaf-mute girl for him on that island. He spoke, of how the men of King Paranthaka found him on the island and took him back. On the day of his coronation as crown-prince of the Chozlas, he saw her amidst the crowds gathered before the palace. She had vanished in a moment. He sent Mr. Aniruddha to look for her and bring her back. But, Aniruddha came back and declared that the girl had jumped to her death into the sea from a lighthouse. I realized that this incident buried in his heart, has been troubling my father day and night, for more than twenty-four years. Father thinks that she is dead. He thinks that it was because of him, his fault, his wounding her feelings, that she gave up her life.

“Thambi, let us set aside all our dreams about Chozla empires. You and I must make an effort together to fulfil a certain duty to our father. You should somehow try and bring that revered woman here, from Lanka. We need to prove to our father directly, that she is not dead, is still alive. Without that our father will have no peace of mind in this birth or in his next birth.”

“Akka, in the recent few months, two or three times, I reached the doors of death and came back. Do you know what was in my mind at those times? An ache that I was dying before I could take my elder-mother to our father. When I think of that revered lady, my heart throbs with pain. If one were able to speak, they could openly talk about the yearnings and agonies in the heart and find solace. Think of her situation: not able to hear, not able to speak! She must suppress in her heart all her emotions, - love, eagerness, distress, anger, rage. Is there need to even speak of the mental status of persons like our elder-mother whose love was thwarted? What is so surprising that she now wanders the forests in Lanka like a lunatic? I feel that my heart would explode, thinking of all this. I am eager to somehow bring her to my father. Akka, however, do you think our father would want that?”

“Whether our father would like or not, it is our duty, Thambi. Our father cries out in distress in the night thinking that the ghost of that dead woman is haunting him. His health shows no improvement because of this.”

“How do you know this Akka? Did my father speak of that too?”

“Father spoke about it; my friend Vanathi also told me about it.”

“Vanathi told you?!? What does she have to do with this? Did you tell her, or what?”

“No, No, No. Let me ask her to tell you in her own words about what happened one night in the palace at Tanjavur. Thambi you are very wicked. You have forgotten the culture of our clan. You have not said even one word to the noble Lady of Kodumbalur; or asked her how she is doing? Is this how you show courtesy to the daughter of that brave warrior Younger Lord Velir? Beautiful!!”

“Akka, why worry when you are there to look after Vanathi? What is this about my enquiring how she is doing?”

“Excellent. Keep quiet for bit. Vanathi, come here. The Prince wants to see you properly,” called Kundavai.

Vanathi came up to them. She stood as if indifferent, glancing at and glancing away from the Prince, “Akka why do you make up things. Your brother does not wish to see me. He has eyes only for that boat on the canal; perhaps he is in a hurry to go back!” she spoke in a soft silken voice. Perhaps she meant Poonkuzlali in the boat when she said boat!

The Prince said laughingly, “Akka, your friend knows how to speak. I was afraid that she was one more mute, in addition to the others in our family.”

“Akka when I look at him, I am unable to speak. I myself fear, if I have become a mute!” said Vanathi.

“That is good. There is a fellow at Kodi Karai. Poonkuzlali’s elder brother. He speaks stutteringly with others, but turns mute when he sees his wife. His home folk have declared him a mute because of that,” said the Prince.

“This Kodumbalur girl is also like that. In days gone by, if we tell her to stop talking for a bit, she could never do that; If she starts talking, she would not stop. Her talking has reduced after that time when you first went to Lanka. She goes away alone, seeking solitude and sits thinking of something. Well, let us not bother about that now. Tell the Prince all that happened that night at the palace in Tanjavur.” Kundavai said this to Vanathi.

“Let this Lady of Kodumbalur sit down and speak. If her Elder-Uncle sees her standing for this long, he will melt with agony. Whenever the Southern Commander sees me, he will ask about this girl. You never send me any news about her. I would be in a quandary not knowing how to reply to him,” said Arulmozli.

“I had told that gentleman of the Vaanar clan all about her, asking him to tell you everything. Did he not tell you anything?” asked Kundavai.

Vanathi said, “He must have told him Akka, but nothing would have fallen to this person’s ears. He has so many things to remember.”

“That is true. After seeing your letters, I could not think of anything else. After this fever, my hearing is somewhat dull. Ask your friend to speak loudly,” asked Arulmozli Varma.

Vanathi then spoke about how she had gone all by herself to stroll on the terrace of the palace after Kundavai had gone away to the Durga Temple; and how she had heard the voice of the

Emperor calling for help; how she had gone closer to look down; and then the scene she had seen down below over there. Whenever she happened to look up at the face of the Prince while speaking, she was rendered speechless, and had to stop. Younger Pirati Kundavai had to prod her to continue at those times.

The Prince was listening to all this with much interest. Finally, he looked at his sister and said, “Akka, I think your friend has forgotten to tell us about a very important part of this story. After seeing and hearing all this, she must have fallen in a faint!”

Kundavai laughed; Vanathi bent her head shyly. Kundavai looked at her with affection and said, “Vanathi, go for a walk along the canal for a little while; or go the place where our footmen are, and wait there. Arul Varma will be here for a few more days. We can meet him again later.”

“I will go for a stroll and come back Akka,” Vanathi jumped up and went with skip in her step. How did so much happiness take hold of her suddenly? Who knows?

With a cheerful face and eyes wide open, Arulmozli watched her go. Once she was no longer visible, he turned to his sister, “Akka I understand the reason for our father’s cries and pleas. What do you think about the scene he witnessed? What could have been the apparition in front of him? Was it father’s imagination? If so, how was your friend imagining the same?”

“Father was not imagining things; Vanathi did not see an apparition. What took place was a drama at midnight; the main actress was Nandini, Queen of Pazluvoor. I surmised that immediately. It was confirmed by the details that you and Mr. Vandiya Devan have told me.”

“What was the reason behind that performance? Why did Nandini enact that?”

“Nandini has doubts about her birth. She remembers how the Emperor lost consciousness when he saw her once. After that incident, she never comes before father. She must have thought that she could find out some truths by enacting such a charade.”

“Would she have found out?”

“That I do not know. Even Brahma her creator cannot know the depths of her heart. I feel so very sorry when I see the pathetic state into which Lord Pazluvoor is reduced by her. Thambi, we were talking about beauty a little while ago. If we were to talk about beautiful women, Nandini is the one. None of us are equal even to the dust at her feet. We, are nothing. Men happening to go before Nandini, instantly become her slaves. Lord Pazluvoor, Madurandaka, Thirumalai Nambi, Kandamaran and even Parthiban Pallava. Afraid of her beauty, Prime Minister Anirudda does not even go near her. Aditya Karikala does not come to Tanjavur because of her. There is only one person who is not afraid of her ravishing good looks, who escaped from being entrapped in her beauty. Only one person”

“You are talking about that brave gentleman of the Vaanar clan.”

“Yes, it is him. That is why I have sent him to Aditya Karikala in Kanchi.”

“Why?”

“Pazluvoor’s Queen, has sent messages to our brother asking him to come to Kadamboor Mansion. I have sent him, Vandiya Devan, to stop their meeting. I have sent him to guard against any tragedy even if they meet. Karikala does not know that Nandini is our elder sister. I am not sure if Nandini recognizes the relationship.”

“Akka, is it proven that she is our sister?”

“What is there to doubt? After knowing that I have changed my mind completely. I hated Nandini when we were children. Insulted her. I was jealous of her beauty. I used to contrive that you and Karikala would not even talk to her. Even after she went away to the Pandiya country my jealousy and hatred remained. When she came back, married to old man Pazluvoor, I have often made fun of her, demeaned her. I have decided to atone for all that...” said Kundavai.

“How Akka? What kind of atonement?”

“When I meet her next time, I will fall at her feet and ask her to forgive all my faults. Whatever punishment she gives, I will accept.”

“And I, will stop it. You have not committed any crime. There is no need for you to ask forgiveness of anyone! There is no one who has the authority to punish you in all these fourteen worlds. You were not jealous of Pazluvoor’s young Queen. She was envious of you! She was the one who hated you!”

“Thambi, you said that your heart aches when you think of our elder-mother who wanders in the forests of Lanka like a mad-nobody. My heart feels as if it would split when I think how much Nandini suffered throughout her life, she who should have lived in palaces with all the pomp and comforts. Because of the mistakes of someone, somewhere in the past, she, born as my elder sister, had to marry this old man Pazluvoor!”

“Akka, do you know how all this could have happened? Why does our father think that my elder-mother is dead? What is the reason that Nandini was raised somewhere, in somebody’s house, like an orphan? Why has she come to be like this?”

“I have been thinking about all this day and night. I have no firm answers. There are only two persons, among those known to us, who know all those secrets. Our grandmother Sembiyan Madevi knows some things. It appears the Prime Minister Anirudda knows all details. However, we can never find out anything from them. Mr. Anirudda’s man Azlvar-adiyan

must know something; but he excels his master in being close mouthed. Thambi, but there is no urgency now, to find out all those details. What is important now, is to prevent Nandini being the cause of tragic danger and infamy to our Chozla clan. Mr. Vandiya Devan told me that Nandini has a sword emblazoned with the fish symbol, a sword that shines like lightning, which she seems to prize and cherish. My heart continues to thump in agony since I heard that. I worry that the Queen of Pazluvoor may do something drastic without being aware that she is born of the Chozla clan.”

“Why not tell her all this?”

“I am not sure if there will be any use in telling her. Her anger towards us may even increase! But we must fulfil our duty.”

“Yes, it is good that you have sent Mr. Vandiya Devan on this mission. Don’t we need to tell our father? Why should he continue suffering mental agonies in addition to physical distress? Why don’t we go immediately to Tanjavur?” asked Prince Arulmozli.

“No, not now, Thambi. I will go to Tanjavur in two days. You should remain in this Choodamani Vihara for some more time.”

“Why do you say that? Are you asking me to live here hidden, concealed, against the orders of my father?”

“Yes. If you go to Tanjavur now, it will be utter confusion all over the country. The people are very angry with Madurandaka and the Pazluvoor men. They are even angry with the Emperor because he ordered that you should be arrested. If they see you, the emotions of the masses will run high. We cannot guess the consequences of that! The crowds may raise a hue and cry that you should be crowned immediately. They will lay siege of Tanjavur fort and the royal palace. Our father who is distraught will be further distressed. Thambi, I wrote to you asking you to come because our kingdom is in danger. I think it may be better that you go back to Lanka for that very same reason.”

“Akka, that cannot happen; I shall not go back without seeing my father. If you think that I go to Tanjavur secretly, I shall do so. I must see the Emperor. I must tell him about the identity of Mother Cauvery who saved me. ‘

“I can tell him all that when the time is right. Do you need to come there?” asked Kundavai.

“Our father will believe it to be true only if I tell him personally; my feelings too will find solace. I will also get his permission to bring back elder-mother.”

“Arul Varma! I will not stand against your wishes. But stay at the Choodamani Vihara for one more week. I will go to Tanjavur ahead of you. I shall tell our father that you have arrived and then send you a message. Thambi, I came here in search of you not only to see you. I came

here to ask and obtain a boon from you. If you can grant that to me, I shall not bother you anymore. I shall not ask you to stay hidden in fear of danger. Menfolk must meet various menaces. It is my wish that you should attain fame as one with none comparable in bravery, valor, and prowess. Before you venture into danger again, I want you to satisfy my request.” Thus asked Kundavai.

“Why this great preamble Akka? Have I ever refused anything that you ask of me?”

“You have not; I ask now, with that confidence. Aditya Karikala is not married; I do not think he will enter, into matrimony. The family of Sundara Chozla needs to stay established through you. You must satisfy this one wish of mine.”

“If I agree to satisfy your wish, will you permit me to marry a girl whom I like?”

“What kind of a question is this? For twenty years our wishes have not been different. Why do you now ask permission particularly about this?”

“There is a reason. The girl I marry must be ready to assist me in attaining my day dreams, should she not?” asked the Prince.

“Thambi, are you thinking of achieving all your dreams with the help of a woman?” replied Kundavai.

At that moment a call for help, “Aiyyo, Aiyyo, Oh dear, oh dear, Akka, Akka!” was heard.

Chapter 46 – Vanathi Laughed

While Arulmozli and Kundavai were talking as they were seated on the steps of the Nandi Pavilion, while Vanathi was half hidden behind the pillar a little away from them, an important dialogue was taking place between Sendan Amudan and Poonkuzlali who were waiting in the boat on the canal.

“Amuda, I am going to ask you one thing. Will you answer truthfully?” asked Poonkuzlali.

“Nothing but truth will come out of my mouth Poonkuzlali; that is why I have not met anyone or talked to anyone in the last four days,” said Amudan.

“Some persons cannot say anything truthful. The fellow who carried the letters for the Prince and went to Lanka, that Vandiya Devan is one such a man.”

“But he is a very good man. He said no untruths to hurt anyone.”

“He said something about you. I wish to know if that was the truth or untruth.”

“There is no reason for him to utter falsehood about me. Anyway, tell me what he said about me.”

“He said that you spoke many words of praise about me.”

“That is completely true.”

“He said that you were in love with me; that you wished to marry me.”

“Did he really say those words?”

“Yes Amuda.”

“I should say thanks to him.”

“Why?”

“I could not have been able to open my heart to you and tell you. I would not have had the courage to do so. He went as an emissary for me. I must say thanks for that reason.”

“So, did he speak the truth?”

“Yes, it is the truth; no doubt about that Poonkuzlali.”

“Why did you come to love me, Amuda?”

“Can we find reasons for love happening?”

“Think about it and tell me. There must be some reason.”

“Why love happens, how it happens... no one in this world has found the answers for that, Poonkuzlali”

“Don’t people look at beauty and become attracted to each other?”

“Yes attracted because of the beauty; perhaps become besotted, infatuated. We cannot say that it is true love. Perhaps it will not last. You talked about Vandiya Devan just now. He became friends with me as soon as he met me. I was ready to even give up my life for him. Did he become friends with me because of my good looks?”

“But your friend described my beauty lavishly, did he not?”

“Yes, he did describe your charms; but he did not fall in love with you. He described a hundredfold about the allure of the Queen of Pazluvoor. He did not fall in love with her either.”

“I know why.”

“What is it?”

“That young man’s heart has gone to the Younger Pirati who is talking to the Prince over there. “

“Does this not confirm that beauty has no bearing on love?”

“How is it confirming? Are you saying that I am more beautiful than Princess Kundavai?”

“Why doubt that, Poonkuzlali? You are many times more beautiful than the Princess of Pazlayarai; you are more lovely than that noblewoman of Kodumbalur who is hiding behind the pillar. People praise the fascinating beauty of the Queen of Pazluvoor, saying that she is the very incarnation of the enchantress Mohini; her good looks are no equal to your comeliness. This divine beauty of yours is what seems to be my enemy. That is why I cannot express to you the love that fills and overflows my heart. Your beauty attracts divine beings from heaven and princes of this earth. My mind is afraid that you are not attainable,” said Sendan Amudan.

Poonkuzlali seemed to be thinking about this for a while. She then asked, “Amuda, if I were to say that I have no love for you, what would you do?”

“I would wait patiently for some time; to see if your heart changes.”

“How can it change?”

“Human hearts are strange. Sometimes one cannot recognize the secrets in the depth of one’s own heart. Outward causes may cloud the thinking. Once the fog lifts, the true mind will become obvious.”

“Fine, you will wait and see. What if my mind does not change?”

“I will try to forget the love I had for you.”

“Can that be possible?”

“Yes, if one makes the effort. If one turns the mind towards God, it will be possible. Our elders turned their heart and soul to God and that is how they kept their emotions in check.”

“Amuda, the love you feel towards me does not seem to be true love!”

“Why do you say that? What are the signs of true love?”

“If you are truly in love with me and I disdained your love, you should want to kill me. If you found that my love belonged to someone other than you, you should rise in rage, and want to kill that person too.”

“Poonkuzlali, I speak of love that is divine, pure in essence, in harmony. What you describe has the quality of passion, of craving, one could even say it has the nature of demonic desire of wickedness.”

“I neither know divinity or the nature of demons. I know human nature. Love should give pleasure, happiness. If love causes unhappiness, why tolerate it? Why should one be patient if one loves someone and that love is not reciprocated, just betrayed? Why should we be patient? Is it not human nature to seek revenge?”

“Seeking revenge is not human, Poonkuzlali. It is of demonic nature. If one truly loves another, that other person’s happiness should make us also happy. If love is rejected, it will cause sadness for a while; if we are patient and do good, the happiness that will come to us later will be tenfold.”

“What you describe is not human nature at all. Humans cannot be patient. There was a man who came with Vandiya Devan, Pinakapani. He became enamored as soon as he saw me. When he knew that his love would not succeed, he tried to hand over Vandiya Devan to Pazluvoor soldiers, thinking that Vandiya Devan was the obstacle for his passion. He would have tried to kill me ..”

“He is not human; he is a wicked, demonic in nature.”

“There look over there. The lady from Kodumbalur is standing there. She has given her heart to Ponni’s Beloved Prince. If the Prince does not accept her love, what would she do? She will surely try to poison him, and kill the Prince. If she knows that some other girl has captured his heart, she will try to kill that girl too.”

“Such thoughts cannot come about on any day. Vanathi who is gentleness personified, will never do anything like that at any time.”

“Maybe. But if it were me, that is what I would do.”

“I shall pray that God forgives you and save you.”

“Why should God forgive me? It is I, who must forgive God!”

“Even this blasphemy will be forgiven by God.”

“Amuda you are an uttama, a good soul. You are born with the qualities of my elder aunt.”

“What is that? You are saying something new?”

“Don’t you know, our family elders keep saying that our elder aunt is dead.?”

“Whom do you mean? The sister born elder to my mother and your father; do you mean her?”

“Yes. She is really, not dead.”

“I too have heard some such rumors.”

“She is wandering around the island of Lanka, even today, like a mad-nobody.”

“What can we do about a wretched curse of our family?”

“Her wandering around, crazily is not just because of a family curse. It is because of the betrayal by someone of the Chozla clan.”

“What, what?” asked Sendan Amudan.

“My aunt lived in a small island near Lanka during her younger years. A Chozla prince pretended to be in love with her. After he made himself the Crown Prince, he abandoned her.
“

“How do you know all this Poonkuzlali?” asked Sendan Amudan.

“I knew by the sign language of my mute-aunt. Listen to this, something else I should tell you. Some time ago, a few persons from the Pandiya regions had come here. They asked me to help them avenge the royals of the Chozla clan, the very royals who had betrayed my mute-aunt. I had just then heard about my aunt’s story and my blood was boiling. I decided to join their group. Then I understood the feelings of my aunt. Not only had she forgiven the man who had betrayed her, she rescued and guarded the son, born to that man by another wife, several times. I abandoned all thoughts to join the Pandiya gangsters. Like you said, the love of my aunt is divine. But I am not going to remain like my aunt.”

“What would you do?” asked Amudan.

“If any Prince seduced me and betrayed me, I will take revenge. I shall kill him; I shall kill the woman who abducted his heart from me. I will then pierce myself with a knife and die.”

“Gracious God! What ghastly words you utter!”

“Amuda, you have no idea of the anger and rage that dwells in my heart for the last two years. That is why, you advice peace and calm.”

“Why are you enraged, when your aunt has no such anger?”

“That was her affair. This is my affair.”

“Your affair? Truly? Poonkuzlali think and speak.”

“Yes Amuda. What if we were to take the blood from my body and the blood from that Vanathi and compare it, will we see any difference?”

“There will be no difference.”

“Is she better than me in any way? In intelligence, beauty, ability?”

“Not better than you in any way. You were raised in stormy wave filled oceans. She was sheltered in palaces. You will kill wild animals of the forest with a blow of your hand. You will row your boat into the sea even in the stormiest whirlwind. You will rescue men who float in the sea, tired of body and limb, unable to swim anymore. Vanathi will be frightened of ocean waves. She will cry out in fear on seeing a house cat. If she hears any bad news she will fall in a faint.”

“Then why does the Younger Pirati consider me as someone of no account. Why does she cherish and sing lullabies to promote Vanathi?”

“Poonkuzlali, you blame the Younger Pirati with no cause. Vanathi has been her friend for a long time. She knows you only now. Did she not thank you in many ways for rescuing the Prince and bringing him here to safety?”

“Who needs the thanks of those noblewomen of palaces. Let her keep them to herself! Amuda, if the Prince has to go back to the Vihara in this boat, you ply the boat by yourself. If I come, I might intentionally turn the boat upside down!”

“Poonkuzlali, you will never do that! What did that Prince do wrong, for you to upset the boat he enters?”

“Amuda, I have gone crazy. My mind is not under my control. Thinking about the betrayal of my aunt by his father, I might turn the boat upside down. You row the boat yourself.”

“Fine I will take the Prince to the monastery and come back. What will you do?”

“I will follow that Vanathi and throw a stone on her head!” as she spoke these words Poonkuzlali bent low and picked up a pebble from the canal bank. A huge king like bull emerged at that time, from the coconut grove on the bank. On seeing that creature, and wanting to shower her rage on it, she threw the pebble at that huge bull. The stone hit the head of that bull. The bull shook its huge body and looked in the direction from which the pebble had come.

“Oh dear! Aiyyo! What is this Poonkuzlali? How can you throw stones at the bull?”

“Why should I not?”

“A dumb helpless animal; will it know how to protect itself?”

“There was a dumb woman in my family. What can we do to the people who hurt her feelings? Only because she could not guard herself, a prince seduced her and ruined her life?”

“How is this creature responsible for the injustice done to your aunt by someone?”

“This bull is not all that helpless. It has sharp horns. It can attack and push down people who come to hurt it. What can a poor girl who cannot hear or speak do? If a Prince behaves that way to me, I will not let him get off that easily.”

“Yes, you will not let him get off easy; you will throw stones at a bull! That too from the safety of a boat in the canal! The bull cannot even come and attack you,” said Amudan with some irritation.

“If that bull cannot attack me, let it charge at somebody else.”

“You show your anger about someone, on this bull!”

That bull did not comprehend their conversation; but did what Poonkuzlali said it should do. It could not come down to the canal and show its anger on the people in the boat. It turned back and began running at a gallop.

At that time, Vanathi was walking by herself along the edge of the coconut grove going towards where the palanquin bearers were resting. Her heart was skipping with joy. When she saw the bull running towards her, at first, she felt more happy. When she saw the huge bull, snorting with head lowered, pointing its horns, raising its tail, running towards her, she was gripped by fear. There was no other way except to turn towards the canal and run. She came very close to the Nandi Pavilion, on to the canal bank. She could go no further. The embankment was high; she thought of running along the embankment towards the pavilion. The bull had by now come very close. There was nothing else to do but move back and fall into the canal. That is when she began shouting. It was her call for help that fell on the ears of the Prince and his sister.

The Prince and Kundavai were startled and looked towards the direction of the call for help. At little further from where they were seated, on the edge of the tall embankment, Vanathi appeared. Her back was towards the canal. She appeared to be looking at something very frightful in front of her. In the next instant the creature that frightened her was visible. “Mmmmmphm” bellowed the king of bulls as he appeared in front of her. If Vanathi were to take a step backwards, she was sure to fall into the water. And there was nothing she could do other than step back. Arulmozli saw this: like a lightning flash, he jumped and ran in the canal water – Vanathi falling and him reaching the spot below her happened at the same time. He stretched both his hands and gathered her, before she fell headfirst into the water.

For one second, Kundavai was anxious and distressed to see the plight of Vanathi; the next second she was immersed in a sea of happiness as she saw Arulmozli gather Vanathi in his arms. With hands strengthened to diamond hardness by swirling spears and swords, Arulmozli picked up Vanathi who was like a wilted creeper fallen in his arms and brought her to Kundavai.

“Akka here, take your friend. I really wonder how this girl came to be born in the brave Velir clan,” he spoke.

“Thambi, what have you done? How can you touch an unmarried girl with your arms like this?” asked Kundavai.

“Good Lord! Is that a crime? Are you saying she should have fallen head first into the canal and drowned? Luckily, she does not know I held her; she must have fainted when she was falling,” said Arulmozli.

Vanathi laughed gleefully. She freed herself from his hands and jumped down. “You deceiver, were you fully conscious?” asked Kundavai.

“Ask her why she pretended to have fainted, closing her eyes tight?” asked Arulmozli.

“I did not pretend, Akka. When he touched me, I became very self-conscious and closed my eyes with shyness,” said Vanathi.

“How am I to know that; it is her habit to fall down in a faint, I thought!”

“I will not faint anymore. Even if I do, I will not fall near a place where he is. Let him be forever be thankful for the help I rendered him!” said Vanathi with a chuckle.

“What? What? She helped me?! That is fantastic!”

Kundavai too looked at Vanathi with a startled glance, “What are you saying my dear? Are you saying that you will not forget the help by my brother?”

“No Akka No. It is I who have helped your brother, immensely. For this he must be always be thankful to me,” said Vanathi.

The Prince asked, “Does your friend have any mental problems? Why should I thank her for saving her from falling into the canal?”

“My mind is just fine. He is the one who is confused. Let me explain: When he was young, he fell into the Cauvery and a woman picked him up and saved his life, this is what you told me. Then he fell into the sea and struggled; there too a boat girl came and rescued him. This has become the habit to be saved by women folk! In order to get rid of that blemish I helped him. I gave him the fame that he saved the life of a girl who was about to fall into a canal! That is why he must thank me,” saying this she laughed. Kundavai laughed. Arulmozli could not control his laughter and laughed loudly. The laughter of all those three reached the roof in the Nandi Pavilion and reverberated as it reached the skies.

The sound of their laughter reached the two in the boat.

Poonkuzlali asked with a laugh, “Amuda do you hear those three crazies laugh?” Amudan too laughed. The birds nesting in the coconut grove, made chirping sounds, and laughed. The king bull standing atop the embankment all this while, ‘harummphed’ loudly as if in laughter and went away.

Sea waves seemed to laugh with dignity. The cool sea-breeze wafting inwards laughed softly.

Ponnis Beloved Part 3 – A Killing Sword is concluded.

Main Characters

Aditya Karikala	Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire, Sundara Chozla's eldest son.
Anirudda Brahma-roya	The Prime Minister and confidant of Sundara Chozla.
Arinjaya Chozla	Sundara Chozla's father, King Gandara Aditya's younger brother, died after ruling for merely one year
Arulmozli Varma	Sundara Chozla's younger son.
Astrologer of Kudanthai	An astrologer patronized by Kundavai, a spy of sorts.
Azlvar-adiyan Nambi,	Thirumalai Appan A follower of the Vaishnava faith, step brother of Esanya Bhattar, a spy. Claims that Nandini is his adopted sister.
Esanya Bhattar	A priest of Pazlayarai, elder brother of Azlvar-adiyan Nambi. Had been tutor of Kundavai
Gandara Aditya Sundara	Chozla's elder uncle, a devout follower of the Saiva faith, ruled before Arinjaya Chozla.
Idumban Kari	A footman from Kadamboor, a conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of a gang sympathetic to Pandiyas.
Kalyani of Vaithumba	Widow of King Arinjaya Chozla, a famous beauty, Sundara Chozla's mother.
Kandamaran	A young man, son of Sengannan Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor.
Kundavai,	Younger Pirati Sundara Chozla's daughter. Royal princess
Lord Pazluvoor, the Elder,	Ambalavan An important and powerful chieftain, Officer of Taxation, Food Supply and Finance, brother of Kalanthaka, Nandini's husband.
Lord Pazluvoor, the Younger,	Kalanthaka Commander of Tanjavur Fort, Captain of the Guard Corps.
Lord Velir of Kodumbalur,	the Elder, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari An important chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Commander of Chozla Armies in Lanka. Elder-uncle to Vanathi
Lord Velir of Kodumbalur,	the Younger, Paranthaka Younger Lord of Kodumbalur, Vanathi's father who lost his life in a battle in Lanka.
Madurandaka Deva	A Chozla Prince, son of Gandara Aditya and Sembiyan Madevi, a few years older than Aditya Karikala.
Malayaman Milad-udayar of Thiru-kovalur	A nobleman, a Chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Empress
Mandakini	Vanamadevi's father and grandfather to Karikala, Arulmozli and Kundavai. Deaf-mute woman who wanders the seashores and forests of Lanka. Vaani Ammai's Sister.
Manimekalai	Kandamaran's younger sister and daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya.
Mazlava-roya	A nobleman, Sembiyan Madevi's brother.
Munai Raya	A nobleman, not very confident in Lord Pazluvoor's schemes.
Nallavan Sattanar	Court poet at Tanjore.
Nandini,	Young-Queen of Pazluvoor An extraordinarily beautiful woman with a mysterious past, Azhvar-adiyan's adopted sister, raised by a priest's family.
Parthiban Pallava	A nobleman of the Pallava clan, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's confidant.
Pinakapani	Pazlayarai Doctors' Son
Poonkuzlali	Daughter of the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai, Sendan Amudan's cousin.
Raakammal	Kodi Karai Boatman's wife, sympathetic to Pandiya cause.
Ravidasa Brahmadirajan,	the Sorcerer Leader of the Pandiya conspirators, a former retainer of Veera-
pandiya,	Pandiya Aabathudavi body guard who had a mysterious hold over Nandini
Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor,	Sengannan A nobleman and crony of Lord Pazluvoor.
Sembiyan Madevi,	Elder Pirati Widow of King Gandara Aditya, Madurandaka Deva's mother, fond of Sundara Chozla and his children, devout.
Sendan Amudan	A flower vendor of Tanjore, lived with his deaf-mute mother in the outskirts of the city.
Soman Samban	A conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of Ravidasa's gang, sympathetic to Pandiyas.
Sundara Chozla Paranthaka	Emperor of the Chozla Kingdom.

Thyaga Vidangar	Lighthouse keeper at Kodi Karai. Poonkuzlali's father.
Vanamadevi of Thiru-kovalur	The Queen Consort, wife of Sundara Chozla, mother to Karikala, Kundavai & Arulmozli.
Vanathi Devi	A young noblewoman of the Kodumbalur clan, Kundavai's friend, in love with Prince Arulmozli.
Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan	A scion of the Vaanar clan of Vallam, Aditya Karikala's messenger.
Vaani Ammai,	A deaf-mute woman, garden keeper living on the outskirts of Tanjore. Amudan's Mother. Mandakini's sister.
Vasuki	Nandini's maid.
Veera-pandiyai	Pandiyai King vanquished and killed by Prince Aditya Karikala.

Glossary

Aadi	A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-Aug
Aanai	Elephant
Aavani	A month of the Tamil calendar, about Aug-Sept
Aiyyo, acchachcho	Exclamatory expressions denoting, fear, despair, grief, amazement, regret, etc. similar to, "oh dear."
Advaita	A philosophy, belief in the non-dual nature of God
Akka	Elder sister, a respectful greeting for an older girl
Amma Mother,	a respectful greeting for women, both old and young
Ankush	A goad used by elephant drivers
Anna	Elder brother, respectful address for older men
Araya, raya,	arasa King, chieftain, Raja
Ayya Father,	respectful mode of address for men particularly a revered or elderly person
Bharata Natyam	Classical dance style
Chakra	Discus
Champaka	A fragrant flower
Chanakya	A medieval personality of political cunning, a Machiavelli
Devi,	Deva Lady, Lord
Eezlam	Tamil name for Lanka or present-day Sri Lanka
Iruvatchi	A fragrant flower
Jaamam	A period of time 3 hours long; 1 Jaamam = 7½ Nazli; 1 Nazli = 24 minutes
Jaggery	Unrefined or brown sugar
Kaadai	Love
Kaadam	A league or about 10 miles
Kaalaa-mukhas	Ascetic followers of Shiva, a fanatic sect
Kaavi	Reddish, ocher dye
Kadal	Sea
Kadamba	A flower
Kama	Love, Passion
Kapaalika	An ascetic sect of Saiva Faith
Karadi 1.	A musical instrument 2. Bear
Karagam	Folk dance with balancing decorated pots
Karaiyar	Coastal, fisherfolk
Karpaga	A cornucopia, tree of plenty from the heavens
Karppu	Sanctity of a married woman. Chastity
Kavi	1. Poet 2. Monkey
Kinnara	Demi-divinities; heavenly musicians
Kolam	Decorative drawings of rice flour
Konnai,	Konrai A flowering tree; red flowers of the mountains
Koothu	Dance

Kulam	Clan, family group
Kumkum	Red powder, used to decorate the forehead
Kummi	A folk dance of women circling while clapping hands
Kunrimani	A tiny red-black berry or bead
Kural	Ancient Tamil couplets
Kuravai Koothu	Dance of the Forest folk, often vigorous, dance by maidens weaving flower garlands
Malai	Mountain
Mariamman	A village deity, a rural Goddess
Marudai	A shade giving tree, a colloquial name for Madurai City
Mattalam	Drum
Maya	Deception, unreal
Moringa	A leafy tree, bears drumstick like long fruit
Musth	A natural condition that occurs periodically even in trained male elephants to make them go aggressive and unpredictable
Mu-ttholl-ayiram	A collection of romantic verse in Tamil
Muzlai	Cave
Naadu	Country
Naamam	A vertical, religious mark worn by followers of Vishnu
Naadaswaram	Elongated windpipe like musical instrument that produces a loud melody; a wind-horn
Nanal	A sedge like grass
Nandavana	Garden
Netri-chutti	Forehead ornament
Nilaa-muttram	A courtyard, plaza or gathering place
Padai Veedu	Army Housing
Padinettam Perukku	Eighteenth day flood festival
Palli Padai	Memorial temple
Panchayat	Council of Village Elders, often five persons
Parai	A kind of country drum, an announcement
Pattinam	City or Town, often a suffix for a Port Town. Ur is inland town.
Perumal	Lord, God
Pirati Lady,	Royal Princess
Pitam,	Peetam Monastic seat
Punnai	A tree with yellow flowers
Rudraksha	A multifaceted bead, a sacred berry
Saelai	Loose pleated garment of women worn with one loose end thrown over a shoulder
Saiva	A sect of Hinduism, follower of Shiva
Salli	A musical instrument
Selvan Beloved,	Darling (masculine), Son
Selvi Beloved,	Darling (feminine), Daughter
Semakalam	Cymbal like metal drum played in temples to announce the hour of time
Silappadikaram	A Tamil Epic
Sindhu	Folk song
Tamarind	A shade giving tree bearing a sour fruit
Thambi	Younger brother, mode of address for young men
Thaye	Mother, mode of respectful address for women
Thaazlai	A fragrant cactus
Themmangu	Folk Song
Thevar-aalan,	Male Divine dancer, spoke oracles if possessed
Thevar-aatti	Female Divine dancer, spoke oracles if possessed
Thevaram	Devotional Poems
Thiru-vai-mozli	Devotional Poems
Thinnai	A raised platform or dais on the front porch of houses in South India. Often

	used like a living room; for family gatherings, seating visitors, and sleeping in the night.
Udukku	Small palm held drum
Ur, Oor	Town or civilized place as opposed to untamed forest or Kaadu; pattinam is Port town
Uriyadi	A game to get the prize-pot tied to a tall pole.
Vaetti	Loose lower garment of men
Vaishnava	A sect of Hinduism, follower of Vishnu
Vamsa	Dynasty
Veenai	A musical stringed instrument
Velan Attam	A semi-religious dance, usually by a man
Villu-pattu	Folk songs accompanying a string instrument, story telling
Vinnagara	Vishnu temple
Yaazl	A stringed musical instrument
