



கல்கி கிருஷ்ணமூர்த்தியின்
பொன்னியின் செல்வன் - பாகம் 4B
இந்திரா நீலமேகத்தின் ஆங்கில மொழிபெயர்ப்பு

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

Acknowledgements:

Our Sincere thanks go to Dr. Indra Neelameggham for providing us with a Soft copy of this English Translation and for the permission to release it as part Of Project Madurai Etext collections.

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Preparation of HTML and PDF versions: Dr. K. Kalyanasundaram, Lausanne, Switzerland.

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Ponniyin Celvan of Kalki Krishnamurthi
English Translation by Indra Neelameggham
Part IVB : Jeweled Crown [Chapters 24-46]
Translated By : Indra Neelameggham, South Jordan, Utah, 2022

Translation first edition 2022

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Published by Indra Neelameggham

Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author

Acknowledgment : Neale R Neelameggham for Proofing, Editing, Motivating and Much More

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A Guide To Pronunciation

More or less phonetic spelling is used for proper names, places, and literary works. Tamil words are used when inevitable. English spelling for place names uses the more popular anglicized version -- when applicable.

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

There is no known way to symbolize this in English. Thus, the name is written as Chozla. It can be pronounced with the *Z* silent as in Chola, Paluvoor etc.

It was felt that this style may be more comfortable than more traditional spellings such as Chozha or Chozhla.

Usage of certain terms and words uses the older archaic form rather than modern American /internet usage. One such example: Maid is used to mean young girl rather than servant; maiden could have been used, but was not used in the rendering earlier.

Spelling is American English rather than UK English.

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

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

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

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

A Note on the Chozla's

The Imperial Chozla period is considered a Golden Age in South Indian History. The Chozlas ruled between the 9th and 13th century. The heartland of their nation was the fertile Cauvery delta with the Rivers Kollidam and Agniaru as its northern and southern boundaries. The territories considered as that of the Pallavas in the north as well as the Pandiya lands in the south comprised the beginnings of the Chozla Empire.

One of the earliest Chozla kings was Karikala (c AD 150) who was son of Ilan-chet-chenni `Who had wonderful chariots drawn by Arab horses.' He ruled from Kaviri-pattinam and had well established trade with seafaring Yavanas (Greeks-Romans), Arabs, Egyptians and Chinese. Karikala built several dams across the Cauvery. In the Cauvery delta `The space on which one elephant could lie down produced enough to feed seven.' Ship-building and temple architecture were established arts. Foreigners were numerous in sea-ports. Yavanas were employed as palace guards and to police the streets. Curiously wrought iron lamps, wine, gold coins and horses were important imports. Food grain, cotton cloth, black pepper, other spices, timber, gemstones, and perfumes were exported. The practice of erecting

'hero-stones' as memorials for warriors who died on the battlefield was common during this Sangam Period, and it continued for several centuries.

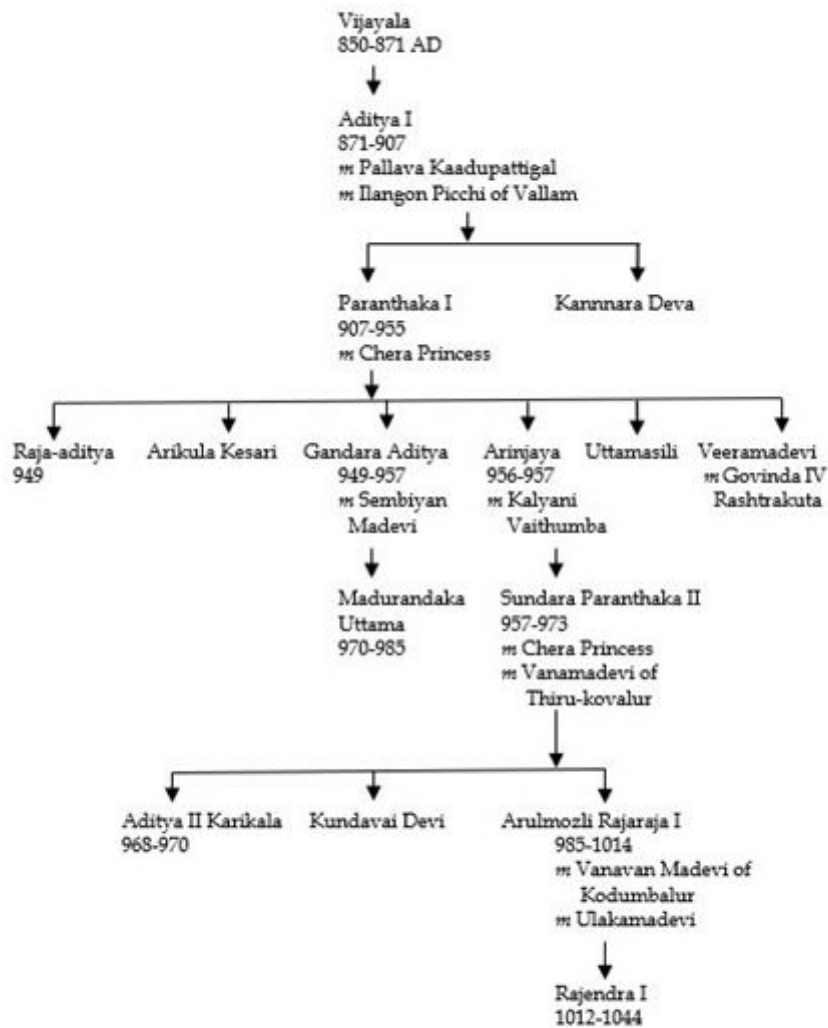
By the ninth century, the delta region of the Cauvery basin was already densely populated; nevertheless, it was still in the process of being cleared of forest and being settled. Politically the Cauvery delta was still a frontier region between the settled lands of the Pallavas in the north and Pandiyas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

Imperial Chozla's began their expansion under Vijayala (AD 841-878). He captured Tanjavur (AD 850) and built a temple for the Goddess Nishumba-sudini (Durga). He was at that time a feudatory of the Pallavas. His son Aditya I, gained complete independence after the battle (AD 885) of Sri-Puram-biyam near Kumbakonam. He captured the Pallava territories after a battle in AD 903. His son Paranthaka I, ruled for 48 years (907-955). The dreams of these monarchs suffered a setback due to the invasion by Rashtrakutas from the north: the Chozlas were crushed in the battle of Thakkolam, North Arcot (949 AD). The next thirty years were a period of confusion. Gandara Aditya (AD 949-957) and Arinjaya (AD 957) ruled for short periods. Sundara Chozla (AD 957-973) did regain a large extent of his territories. His last years were crowned by tragedy and internal strife; Uttama Chozla (AD 970- 985), son of Gandara Aditya was presumed to have conspired to murder the crown Prince Aditya II and forced the father to recognize him as the heir in preference over the younger son Arulmozli (later Raja Raja I). Raja Raja I (985-1014) recovered vast territories including Lanka and began an unchecked expansion lasting for centuries. Conquest beyond the seas was achieved by Rajendra I (1012-1044) who went as far as Bengal, Burma, the Islands of the Malayan Archipelago, and the Siamese Peninsula. Chozla influence went even further and the Bay of Bengal was but a 'lake for the Chozla navies' who controlled the pirates and had sway over very prosperous trade routes.

Kulottunga I is said to have established embassies with Imperial China. Several hundred years later, during the last years of Kulottunga III (1178-1218), Jatavarman Sundara Pandiya I, and later his son Maravarman Kulasekhara Pandiya entered the heartland of the Chozla country. After that the empire struggled for its very existence. Upon the death of Rajendra III (1279) the Chozla territories were absorbed into the Pandiya Kingdom.

Imperial Chozlas – Dynasty Chart

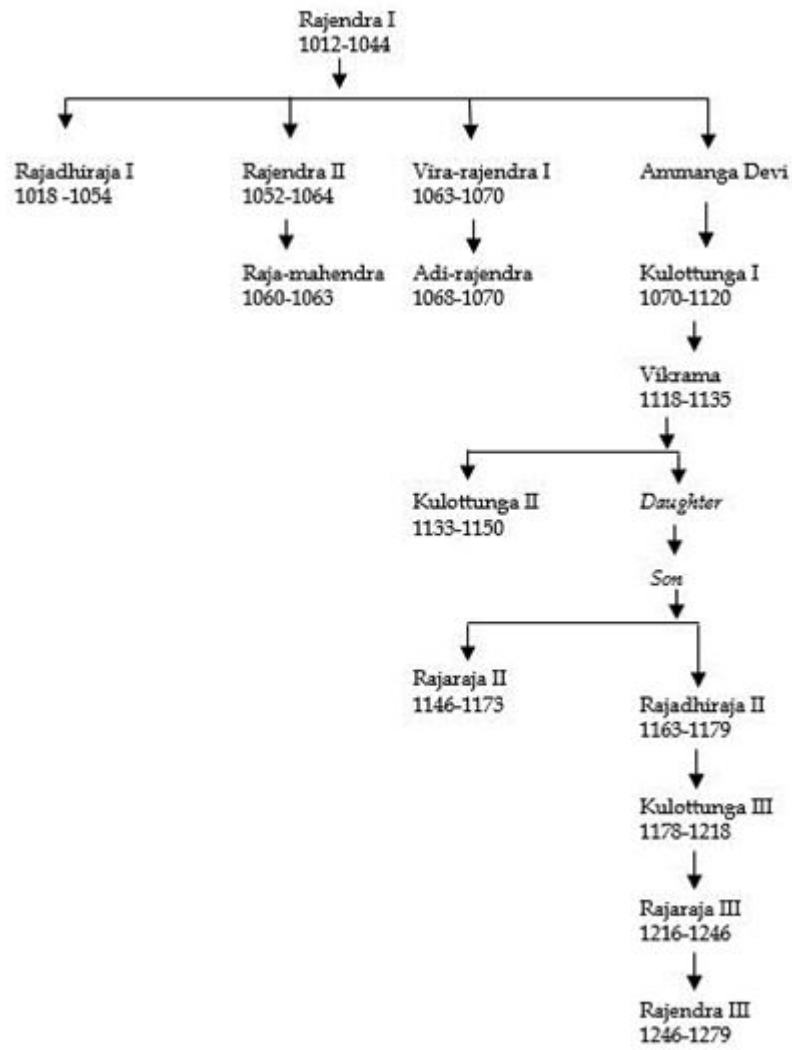
Imperial Chozlas – Dynasty Chart



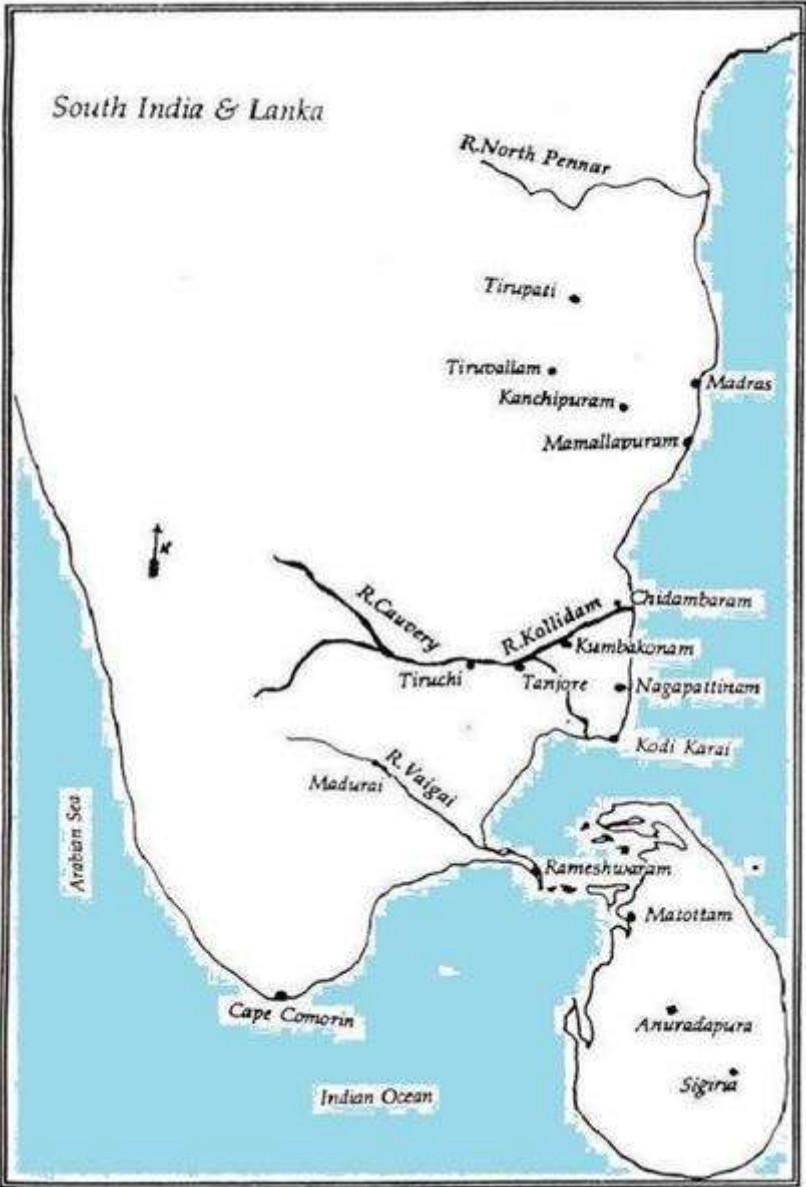
Birth year not indicated.

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

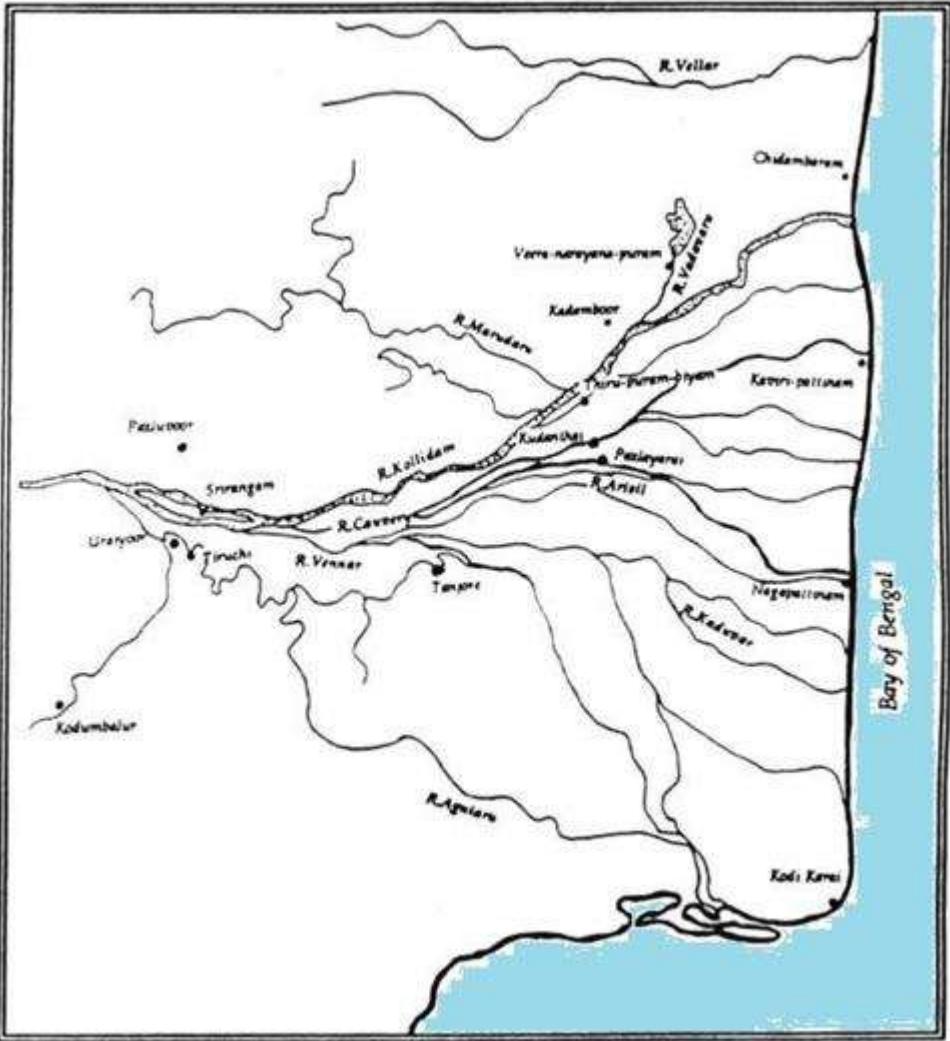
Ref: Colas Madras University Historical Series 9
K. A. Nilakanta Sastry
University of Madras Press (1984)



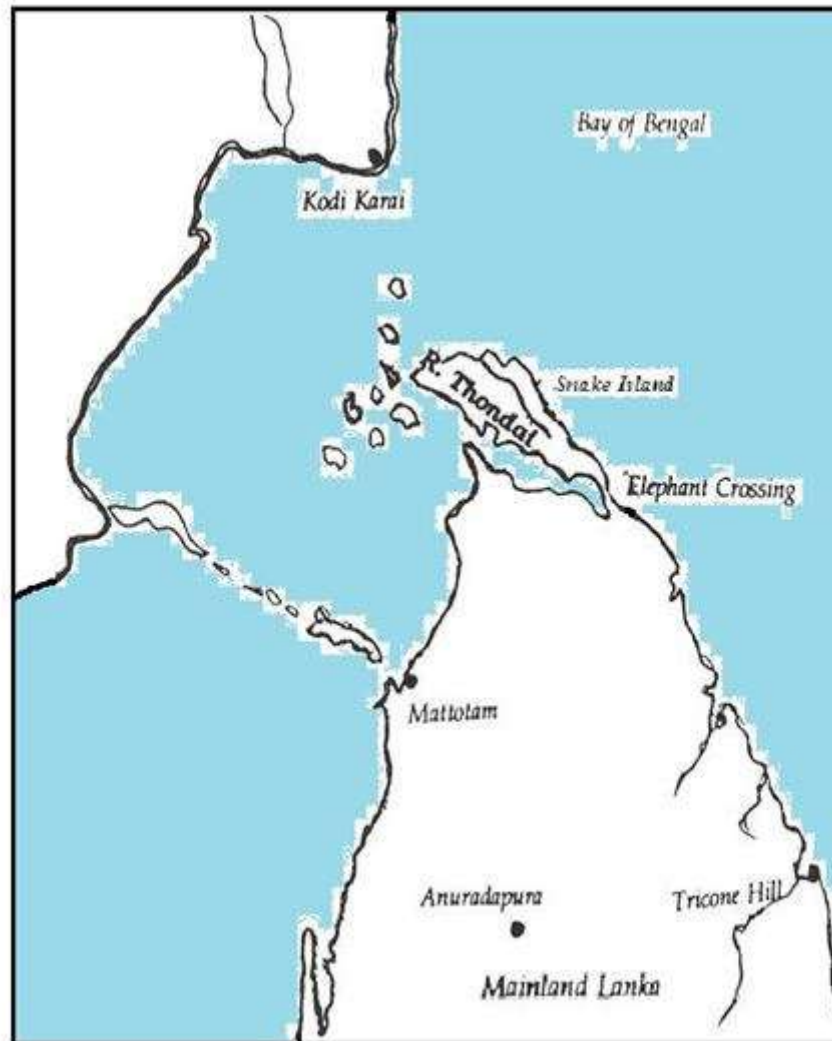
Map 1. Chozla Country



Map 2. Cauvery Delta



Map 3. Kodi Karai and Northern Lanka



The Story So Far In The First Three Parts

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

The Prince was also very popular having captured the hearts of all the people of the Chozla kingdom. His sister, Kundavai Devi, known as the Younger Pirati or royal Princess was even

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

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

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

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

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

When they were children Aditya and Nandini had been playmates, friends. She had been raised in the house of a temple priest. Later her family had moved to the Pandiya country. In his last days, King Veera Pandiya had been hiding in her home. When Aditya had raised his sword to chop off Veera Pandiya's head, Nandini intervened and begged him not to do so. Karikala ignored her pleas and killed Veera Pandiya. After that incident, Nandini's tear laden face appeared in his dreams and when he was awake and tortured Aditya Karikala's mind, giving him no peace.

At that time the two lords of Pazluvoor wielded much power in the Chozla empire. The Elder Lord Pazluvoor was a veteran of many battles and wore more than sixty-four wound marks on his body. He was the finance minister of the kingdom. His rule was law in the land. His brother the younger Lord Pazluvoor was the commander of Tanjavur fort. None could meet with the Emperor without their permission.

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

Madurandaka was the son of devout Gandara Aditya who was the elder uncle of Sundara Chozla. Gandara Aditya's wife Sembian Madevi, was the epitome of Saiva devotion. When King Gandara Aditya died, Madurandaka was a babe in arms. His mother raised him in the path of Saiva devotion. And in his younger days, Madurandaka too had no interest in worldly affairs. After he married a daughter of the Younger Lord of Pazluvoor, and upon the encouragement by Nandini, he became interested in ruling the kingdom. After a while the interest became an obsession. The Lords of Pazluvoor and others in support, favored Madurandaka's rights to the Throne.

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

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

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

The Prime Minister Anbil Anirudda Brahma-raya was a childhood friend of Sundara Chozla. He knew the secrets of all the Chozla families. His dream was that the empire should grow

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

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

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

Even while floating in the sea, the Prince was gripped by a severe fever and shivering sickness; It was a fever that was endemic in several parts of Lanka. Poonkuzlali and her cousin Sendan Amudan carried the Prince in her boat and took him to the safety of Choodamani Buddhist Vihara in Nagai Port. Vandiya Devan went to Pazlayarai and reported all these details to Kundavai. At the same time, they came to know that Aditya Karikala had been invited to Kadamboor fort for a banquet. They also had the news that Nandini and Lord Pazluvoor too were going to Kadamboor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 23 - Can The Mute Talk?

Mr. Anirudda looked at Poonkuzlali for some time; called the maids who led her to come closer. He asked them something in a very soft voice. After they had replied, he asked them to leave the room. He then looked at Azlvar-adiyan and said, "Thirumalai it appears as if there is some mistake."

"Yes, Sir. I too think so."

"This is a young girl; she may only be about twenty or so years old."

"May be not even that!"

"The lady I was expecting should be about forty or so years old."

"Perhaps a little older."

“Yes, yes. You have seen Mandakini Devi in Lanka, have you not?”

“Yes, Sir. I saw her and tried to bring her here as you had ordered; but I could not do so.”

“This girl does not even look like Mandakini Devi, does she?”

“No, my Master, She is definitely not her.”

“Then, who is this girl? How did she arrive here?”

“Why not ask her, Sir?”

“What is the point is asking a deaf-mute?”

“Master, is she mute....?”

“That is what I questioned the maids about. They said that she has not spoken a single word since she arrived here.”

“Master, who did you send to identify her and bring here?”

“Aha! Did that idiot make some mistake?”

“Which idiot Sir? It is not like you to send some idiot on such important missions.”

“He seemed smart. There was that youth who was fighting with that Vaanar nobleman, Vandiya Devan when I recently went to Pazlayarai.”

“Yes Pinakapani, the son of Pazlayarai Doctor.”

“Yes, it was him! After I had sent you and Vallavarayan to Kanchi, I had that man freed from prison and brought to me. I thought that he would be suitable for our contingent of spies and sent him to Kodi Karai. He said that he had experience of having been to Kodi Karai.”

“Did that man bring this girl here?”

“I had given him all the identification correctly. He had brought her to Thiru-vaiyaru and sent me word that the mission was successful.”

“Sir, where is that intelligent spy who succeeded in this venture in which I could not succeed. Would it not be wise to question him about this girl?”

“Yes, that is so. Unfortunately, an unexpected accident happened to him last night.”

“Oh, ho, ho! What accident, to him? How did that happen?”

“He was following the palanquin. Since I had ordered that they should enter Tanjavur Fort after dark, they started from Thiru-vaiyaru at dusk, and were coming close to the fort before nightfall. You know about that sudden storm....”

“Yes, Sir. I too had to shelter for some time in a wayside rest-pavilion, to escape the storm.”

“When the palanquin and men were close to the fort, a large tree was completely uprooted and it had fallen across the road. Luckily, it did not fall on the palanquin. It fell upon the men who were accompanying the palanquin. Pinakapani, the doctor’s son was caught under those fallen branches.”

When the Prime Minister was giving all these details, a woman’s voice said, “Was it just a tree branch that fell upon that fiend’s head? Did not a thunderbolt strike him!?” asked the enraged voice.

Prime Minister Anirudda looked at Poonkuzlali with some surprise. Even as he continued looking at her , he asked, “Thirumalai, was it this girl who spoke just now?”

“Yes, Sir. It seems so.”

“What is this miracle? Can the deaf hear? Could the mute speak?” asked Anirudda Brahma Raya.

“Yes, it is truly a miracle that the deaf begin to hear and the mute start talking. However, if you, who art a devotee of the all-powerful Lord Vishnu, wish it to be so, anything is possible. What the Azlvar saints have spoken is that....”

“Enough, enough. Do not drag Azlvar saints here and bother them. This did not happen because of the Grace of Lord Vishnu. There has been some mistake. This girl has deceived us. Who is she? What is her intention? Why did she pretend to be a deaf-mute all this time?”

“Master, why don’t we ask this girl herself?”

“My dear man, from the smile dancing on your face, I think you perhaps know something Fine, I shall question her myself. Girl, you are not deaf, are you? Can you hear what I am saying?” asked Mr. Aniruddha.

“Sir, I sometimes wished I was deaf. But I am happy that I can hear very well now. I heard that the tree broke and fell upon that wretch of a doctor’s son, haven’t I? My Lord, did he die and get lost forever?” asked Poonkuzlali.

“Aha! You are able to hear and you are speaking! You are not a mute.” Said Mr. Aniruddha.

“This girl is definitely not mute,” spoke up the assistant.

“Aha! You have now found out that I am not mute. What I have heard must be true, that the most intelligent person in the entire Chozla empire is the Prime Minister!” said Poonkuzlali.

“Girl! Are you making fun of me? Be careful! If you were not mute, why did you not speak since you came here last night? Why did you act as if you were mute? Speak the truth!” said the Prime Minister Anirudda.

“Sir, till I came here last night I was one who knew how to speak. Some even called me a chatterbox. When I saw this palace of the Prime Minister and the royal welcome given to me here, I was so astonished that I became speechless! The women in this palace spoke to me in sign language. Thinking that all of them were speechless mutes, I too replied in sign language. After hearing you speak, I remembered that I too could speak.”

“There is surely no doubt that you are truly a chatterbox. I am surprised to imagine how that young doctor got hold of you and brought you here. Even if he is an idiot, he is smart!”

“My Lord, that sinner did not catch me and bring me here. If he had tried, by now he would be journeying to the land of the Lord of Death.” After saying this Poonkuzlali pulled out the knife tucked in her waistband and showed it.

“Girl! May you be blessed! Tuck your knife back in your waist. Why are you so angry with that fellow? You are saying that he did not abduct you.”

“He did not capture me. But his men tied me up and bound me to my boat. They tied my sister-in-law to a tree. In spite of all this, that wretch of a young doctor swore that he had nothing to do with all this!”

“At least he had some sense! He behaved just as I had instructed.”

“My Lord, Sir, Mr. Prime Minister! Was it you who sent that vile fellow? Were you the one who ordered them to abduct my aunt, a hapless speechless woman?”

“Aunt! The daughter of Karaiyar folk, Mandakini is your aunt! That means you....? What are you to the Lighthouse Keeper Mr. Tyaga-Vidangar?” asked the Prime Minister.

“Sir, I am his dearest daughter!”

“Aha! I did not know till this day that Tyaga-Vidangar has a chatterbox of a daughter like you.”

“Sir, Please do not tell anyone about that!”

“Why? Girl, why?”

“It is common knowledge all over the country that there is nothing unknown to the Prime Minister of the Chozla Empire. If it were to come about that there was something unknown to you, will it not affect the respect that people have for you?”

“Girl, I am not worried about the respect or regard for me. Just tell me about one other thing that is not known to me. You said that they had taken your aunt captive; where is she now? How did you get into the palanquin I had sent? Where did you get in?”

“Sir, why did you send men to abduct a speechless mute like my aunt?”

“My daughter! I cannot share that information with you. It is big, related to political matters.”

“Father! then I too cannot give you answers to your questions.”

“There are ways of forcing you to answer.”

“They will not work with me!”

“Girl! I will send you to the dungeon prisons.”

“I cannot be shut up in any dungeon prison.”

“Someone sent to the dungeons, never comes back!”

“I know a fellow who came out! Sir, even yesterday I was talking to Sendan Amudan as we journeyed here.”

“Who is he, this Sendan Amudan?”

“He is the son of my other aunt. He and I together, were coming here from Kodi Karai.”

“Why, my daughter?”

“I had a long time wish to see this Tanjavur fort and the mansions and palaces here. I was also eager to see Emperor Sundara Chozla. They said that the Emperor was not well? How is he now? Sir, can I see him?”

“He is just the same; there is no improvement in his health. So, you can forget about wanting to see him.”

“How can I forget? I must see the Emperor. I must see him and tell him about the atrocities in his kingdom, of helpless women in his kingdom being abducted without consent.”

“Girl, I have no time to spend in this sort of useless debate with you. I did not order to have you captured forcefully. How did you get into the palanquin sent by me? Tell me at least that. Did anyone force you to get into the palanquin?”

“No. My Lord, no in that one matter. When we were coming near Tanjavur Fort, this palanquin was just sitting there, empty. Because it was raining, I myself decided to get into it.”

The Prime Minister turned to his assistant Azlvar-adiyan and said, “I am beginning to understand the situation somewhat. On the road when it was stormy and rainy, they must have set down that palanquin somewhere. She had her aunt step out and then got in to the palanquin. Since the man I sent was unconscious because of the tree that fell upon him, he could not notice this. The bearers and footmen did not notice it. This must have happened rather close to the fortress gates. Thirumalai, do you think my surmise to be correct?”

“My Lord, it happened just the way you surmised just now. I saw it happen with my own eyes.”

“You saw It! What is this? Why did you keep your mouth shut all this time? Answer quickly!”

“Yesterday, early in the night, in the rainy darkness, I was coming towards the fortress gates. There was the furious storm and sudden rain. Trees on the roadside were breaking and falling. I decided to wait in one of the travelers’ rest pavilions along the road. Soon after I had sought shelter in one such pavilion, this girl and a young man came there. She said it was her aunt’s son; could be the same man. In the brightness shed by the lightning, I saw rudraksha prayer beads around his neck. Thinking that though young, he must be an erudite Saiva devotee, I wished to tell him about the greatness of lord Vishnu; it would be a good way to pass the time, I thought. By then, they had brought a palanquin and placed it near the front of that same pavilion. I could discern the palmtree symbol of Pazluvoor on the curtains of that palanquin. A woman stepped out of that palanquin and came close to these two. In the dark interior of that pavilion, the three of them seemed to talk to each other by signs. Then, I saw this girl go and get into the palanquin. I could make out in the lightning that the woman who had got out was different from the one that got in. The bearers, did not notice any of this. Later after the rain had stopped, they carried the palanquin and went away.”

“Ah! That is how they hoodwinked me. And all this time you have been quiet without saying anything! What did the other two do after that?”

“After the palanquin had left, they too left. I too started to go on my way.”

“Thirumalai, why were you quiet watching all this? Why did you not stop her aunt? Have you also joined them in their scheming?”

“Wrong accusation, my master, wrong accusation! I am not one to betray in that fashion. At first, I did not realize that all this was your arrangement. Since the palanquin was from Pazluvoor mansion, I thought it may be some scheme being carried out by the Younger Lord Pazluvoor. Moreover, would I be able to stop Mandakini Devi from doing anything? We could build dams and stop storm winds; how can one deter that blessed woman? I was one who had tried in Lanka and failed. Moreover, that lady can recognize my face; she might run away after seeing me. After that no one will be able to find her.”

“Considering all this, it appears that the doctor’s son was pretty smart and capable. He had brought her here this far, did he not?”

“My Master, I feel that your surmise on this matter is incorrect. Mandakini devi must have come willingly for her own reason. She must have changed her mind after nearing Tanjavur.”

“Maybe, perhaps. Even so that Karaiyar’s daughter could not have gone too far. The storm and rain continued all night long. She must be here somewhere nearby. Thirumalai she must be found somehow. Perhaps this girl may know where she might be staying.”

“Daughter, what is your name?” asked Mr. Anirudda.

“Poonkuzlali, Sir”

“Aha! Beautiful name. There is none as skillful as Mr. Tyaga-vidangar in choosing names. Poonkuzlali, you must know where your aunt might be staying. If you know it, speak. There will be no harm done to her.”

Poonkuzlali seemed to think about it for a little, “My Lord, I think I know where my aunt might be now; if you could explain, why you ordered her to be captured, I too can reveal her whereabouts.”

“It is a big political matter Poonkuzlali. A secret about the palace. I cannot tell you.”

“I too cannot tell you.”

“It is impossible to talk to this girl!”

“Sir, if you could fulfil one condition ...” said Poonkuzlali.

“Oh ho! This girl levies conditions upon me! What is it?”

“If you would place my aunt on the throne of Tanjavur and bestow the jeweled crown upon her head, I will bring her to you myself.”

“Thirumalai, this girl has gone crazy!”

“My Master, did you recognize it just now? There is no need to ask her anything. I know where her aunt is now. Her cousin lives in a garden on the outskirts of the fort. He and his mother are in service providing flowers to the Thali-kulattar temple. The woman you are searching for is in that place. If you send some men with me, I will bring her here,” said Azlvar-adiyan.

Poonkuzlali looked at him as if she wished to burn him down! “If you do anything like that, I shall immediately go to the Emperor’s palace and appeal. I will make sure that all the town knows of the atrocities you commit.”

“Thirumalai, we may need to send her down to the dungeon prisons; there seems to be no other way!” said Mr. Anirudda Brahma raya.

“Sir there is no need to send this girl to the dungeons. Instead of that we could send her to the palace of the Younger Pirati Kundavai. The Younger Pirati is now in Tanjavur, is she not? The Princess may be able to cure this girl’s craziness. The Princess may have some errands or jobs for this girl!”

“Why do you say that, Thirumalai? What can the Younger Pirati have to do with this girl? What job can she do for the Princess?”

“Master, it is not unknown to you. The storm that raged last night, has wreaked havoc along the Chozla coast. Messengers from all directions are waiting outside your chambers.”

“Yes, I will need to meet all of them now; before that I tried to talk to this girl and have spent too much time. It would have been better if she had been born mute!”

Poonkuzlali, mumbled “Yes you could commit all sorts of violence without being questioned!”

Azlvar-adiyan continued, “I hear that there is a great danger to Nagai Port. They say that the sea boiled over in a big storm wave and has drowned the whole town.”

On hearing those words both Poonkuzlali and the Prime Minister were stunned!

“The Younger Pirati herself may be coming here to consult with you about that!” finished Azlvar-adiyan.

Before he had finished speaking, they could hear sounds of praise and applauding cries hailing the royals outside the palace.

“Thirumalai, when did you become clairvoyant? It sounds like the Younger Pirati is coming here.” After saying this, Mr. Anirudda stood up and walked towards the front doors of his palace.

Before he had gone too far, Kundavai and Vanathi entered the palace through the same doors.

On seeing Poonkuzlali standing there, the anxiety dwelling on the Younger Pirati’s face changed; h

er face now showed surprise and happiness.

Chapter 24 – The Princess is Anxious

The Prime Minister welcomed the Princess and her friend with due honors and had them seated; then he too sat down asking, “Princess if you had sent word that you wished to see me, I would have come to you. Why have you come in such a hurry? Is the Emperor well?”

“The Emperor’s health is as usual. Sir, but his mind is not well. The storm last night has affected his mindset very much. He could not sleep all night long. He kept lamenting often about the fate of the poor and those living in hutments; he kept talking about how they must have suffered. He asked m

e to go see you the first thing in the morning. He wished to make arrangements to help those who suffered disaster and loss because of the storm. I came here mainly to tell you about that,” said Kundavai Pirati.

“My dear lady, what can a humble man like me do? You are aware that all I have is the title of being Prime Minister! Elder Lord Pazluvoor is away from town now. He must have locked secure the treasure vault. Even Kalanthaka his brother cannot open the treasure vault without his permission. How can I arrange to help those suffering losses? You must have seen the many persons waiting outside. I am somewhat ashamed to even meet with them. I was hesitating to speak about this,” the Prime Minister sang a song of lack of resources.

“Sir, do not worry about that. I will release my personal wealth and belongings. My mother is also ready to do so. We can take the treasure in the Emperors palace. That is what the emperor wants you to do. We must make some arrangements at least as a temporary relief for the poor and those in distress.” Kundavai spoke with true concern.

“Your personal wealth will be like puffed grain given to satisfy an elephant’s hunger! The storm last night ravaged all of Chozla lands. I have not even received all of the reports about the situation in every place. Here is this fellow, my most capable assistant, he is saying something that is most frightful. I believe that the sea surged in a giant wave and has drowned everything all along the coast from Kodi Karai to Nagai Port.”

Mr. Aniruddha noticed how the faces all three women in that room changed to reflect a great fright; he then uttered some words of solace.

“But I am not ready to believe the stories. They maybe mere rumors. Such rumors spread after any storm. It is too early to get a report from the coastal areas. Even horse-riding messengers can reach here only after noon. Meanwhile, let us make arrangements to organize any help we can render.”

Kundavai somehow collected her thoughts that were causing her distress and confusion, and she said, “Sir, the rumor about Nagai Port reached me too. I came here to discuss that with you. We had just recently arranged for grants to Choodamani Vihara. If the Vihara was damaged by the rising sea, poor men, what will those monks do?” even as she spoke, Kundavai was looking at Poonkuzlali.

She also asked, “Sir, how did this girl come here? Isn’t she Poonkuzlali, the daughter of Kodi Karai Tyaga-vidangar the lighthouse-keeper?”

“Yes, she is the daughter of Mr. Tyaga-vidangar. But she is not gentle and soft spoken like that gentleman. She is a very troublesome girl; she causes much disruption by involving herself in things that do not concern her,” said the Prime Minister.

Kundavai Devi was worried in a different way. Perhaps this minister has summoned this girl here to find out about Prince Arulmozli. He is an expert in conniving and drawing out secrets. Either way, I must speak on behalf of Poonkuzlali; having so decided, Kundavai said, “I did not think any such thing. She is a very good girl. Come closer my dear, tell me why the Prime Minister is so angry with you? Did you bother him about anything?”

Poonkuzlali came closer to the Princess and said, “My Lady, you must ask the Prime Minister, yourself. Ask if I bothered him, or did he bother me?”

“Oho! You too seem to be angry! Come sit by me girl!” The Younger Pirati made her sit next to her. Kundavai then turned to the Prime Minister and asked, “Sir why did you summon her here? Is it anything very important?”

“My lady, I did not summon this girl. I did not even know that there was such a strong-willed girl like her. It was she herself ...” the minister seemed to hesitate.

“My Lady, why is the minister hesitating; ask him to say the rest!” said Poonkuzlali.

He replied, "she came by herself; in search of her aunt."

"Who is her aunt? Is it Sendan Amudan's mother? Their cottage is outside the fortress in the gardens, is it not so?"

"No; it is not Amudan's mother. She has another mute-aunt. Princess, it is some information, that you too should be aware of. There is a mute-woman who wanders alone in the forests of Eezlam as if she is mad. I wished to have that lady here, for a very important reason. I went into a great deal of trouble to have her brought here. I was successful, in the end. At that time..."

Kundavai Devi became indescribably agitated, "is it true? Is that woman here now? I must see her immediately!" she rose from her seat even as she spoke.

"Forgive me Princess; when success was imminent, this girl intervened and spoiled the affair," replied the Minister.

Kundavai, sat down again with great regret saying "Poonkuzlali, is this true? What have you done!"

"My Lady, Ask this gentleman about the method he employed to bring my aunt here. Then you will not find fault with me."

The Prime Minister then recounted everything that had happened.

The Princess asked, "that means she must be somewhere near this fortress. Can we not search for her?"

"Fortunately, we do not need to search. My assistant tells me that he saw her this morning at Sendan Amudan's cottage," said Prime Minister Anirudda.

"Then, why do we delay unnecessarily? Let us worry about everything else later. Let us go together and bring her here. If you do not wish to go, I shall go by myself. Vanathi, get up, let us go."

Azlvar-adiyan intervened, "My lady you must think a little before acting. If she sees a crowd of new people approaching her, that woman might be frightened to run away. After that, we may be able to contain a storm but not catch her!"

"Yes, what Thirumalai says is true. If she sees all of us, her aunt is sure to run away and all our effort will be wasted. What is your advice, Thirumalai?" asked the Prime Minister.

“Ask this girl to go by herself and bring her here. There are only two persons in this whole world who can keep that lady in line. This girl is one of them,” advised Azlvar-adiyan. Upon the Prime Minister asking, “Who is the other person?” Azlvar-Adiyan, hesitated and spoke reluctantly, “The other person ... there is rumor adrift all over the country that he has drowned at sea!”

Kundavai pretended not to heed him; she asked, “Poonkuzlali, go soon and bring your aunt here. There will be no harm to her in this place. I need to meet your aunt as soon as possible for a very important reason. Will you help me in this matter?”

“Yes, My Lady. I will try. Anyway, this Prime Minister should not have used this stratagem. If I had known earlier, ...”

“Yes, such mishaps happen because of us hiding things. I realize that myself and I worry about that. Go bring your aunt here quickly. After that I have another important job for you,” said the Younger Pirati.

Mr. Anirudda ordered, “Thirumalai, you go with this girl. If you have any trouble in getting in by the main fortress gates, bring them to our palace by our secret way.”

After Poonkuzlali and Azlvar-adiyan were gone, Kundavai said to the Prime Minister, “Sir please speak to the persons gathered in your front offices, and send them away with any assurances you can give. I need to consult you about some very, very important matters.”

Anirudda left the chamber with these words, “I shall be back directly, My Lady. I too have some things about which I need to discuss with you.”

Vanathi who had been silent all this time now spoke up. “Akka, what is that important task that you have for Poonkuzlali? Are you going to send her to Nagai Port again?”

“Yes Vanathi. Don’t you worry unnecessarily. No harm will befall Ponni’s Beloved Prince.”

“Can I go to Nagai Port with her Akka?”

“What will you do by going there? I will have to send someone else to take care of you!”

“Akka, that boat-girl does not like me even one bit.”

“How did you figure that!”

“She did not talk to me at all!”

“You did not talk to her; and she did not talk to you.”

“I was looking at her face quite often; she did not even turn to look at me! For some reason, she is angry about me!”

“Yes, my dear Vanathi; All the unmarried girls in the country are likely to be angry with you. There is no point in you worrying about that,” said Kundavai.

Chapter 25 - Anirudda's Misdeed

Prime Minister Anirudda spoke with the various persons waiting for him in the front offices of his mansion and then sent them away. He hurried back inside to the chamber where Kundavai was waiting for him.

“My Lady, I have made some arrangements; to the extent that I was able to. I have sent men in all directions to estimate and report on the damage caused by the storm. I have sent word to the Younger Lord Pazluvoor, asking him open our treasury resources and to transfer its management to both of us.”

“Sir I have heard that there is a secret treasure trove in a hidden vault near the Pazluvoor mansions. Is it true that there is countless wealth accumulated in that hidden vault? The Elder Pirati had told me about it once.”

“That dear lady had visions to open that vault and use the treasure within to build and renovate a thousand temples! I myself have never been to that secret dungeon vault. Someone accidentally going there is unlikely to come back alive.” Thus said the Prime Minister.

“Let us not worry about that now. Will these two be able to bring that mute-mother here? I am worried that ‘what is in the hand will not get to the mouth!’”

“My Lady, what do you know about that honored woman? How did you come to know? Why are you so anxious about her?” he asked.

“Sir, some days ago the Emperor himself told me about her.”

“What!?! Did he say that she was alive?”

“No Sir. He told me about things that happened twenty-five years ago. He thought that she was dead. That is why his mind is in anguish. He said, that it was you who had found out that the mute-mother had jumped into the sea and died. It was you who came back to tell him that. Then how did you find out that she was still alive?”

“I was about to ask you that question! How did you come to know that, my Lady?”

“Why not? I can tell you. That noble gallant of the Vaanar clan who went to Lanka and came back, he told me first; then my brother Arulmozli...” as if she had realized her mistake, Kundavai covered her mouth with her palm.

“My Lady, if you prefer not to tell me anything about Prince Arulmozli, you do not have to tell me. I will completely forget that you uttered his name just now.”

“No, Sir! I have come here with the intention of telling you everything. I have realized that hiding secrets is merely as cause for distress and there is no benefit in such a cover up. I realized that very clearly last night. Sir, the sea has not swallowed my younger brother. The Ocean King saved Ponni’s Beloved Prince and cast him ashore. He is now at the Buddhist monastery in Nagai Port. I had gone to Nagai just to see him. I had a doubt that you knew all this.”

“Your suspicion is correct; however, I did not reveal to you that I knew! I have been resolved to never interfere in your activities, even though I venture into the affairs of others. I have ordered my men to do the same. I trust and believe that whatever you do will be appropriate. I and Malayaman and that Kodumbalur Velir have often talked about this; ‘If only the Younger Pirati had been born a man; she would have brought the whole world under the Chozla royal canopy and ruled it independently!’”

“Yes, I did have such thoughts. Even though I am a woman, I believed that my dreams would be achieved through my brothers. I have now given up such dreams! Sir, I am now convinced that women should never interfere in affairs of the state, or in politics. Look at this terrible consequence of my having my brother stay in the Choodamani Vihara.”

“Nothing has happened. Would The Ocean King who saved him in the middle of the stormy sea, harm him on land?”

“Sir, can you come immediately to my father and soothe his fears?”

“Aha! Does the Emperor know that the Younger Prince is in Choodamani Vihara?”

“I told him last night. I had to tell him.”

“Ah! I might have been better if it were not disclosed for a few more days. I had been thinking that you had made a good arrangement. My Lady, all of Chozla country is in a big turmoil. The chaos and confusion resulting from yesterday’s storm was an outward expression; the unrest raging in the hearts of Chozla people has been festering for some time now. People are very angry about Lord Madurandaka and the nobles of Pazluvoor. They think that the Emperor has been imprisoned. They are aware that ships had been dispatched to take the young Prince prisoner and bring him home. Many believe that Pazluvoor nobles caused the Prince to drown in the sea. If the people realize that the Young Prince is in the heartland already, there is sure to be a fiery uprising. They will instigate a huge agitation

demanding that the crown be placed on the Prince's head immediately! Pazluvoor nobles are waiting for a cause to start a civil war. The Elder Velir of Kodumbalur has collected a huge army and is coming towards Tanjavur. My Lady, I am afraid that a flood of blood will flow in this Chozla heartland. I am afraid that this huge empire will be destroyed because of rivalry between brothers. I have been praying to my chosen divinity, Lord Ranganatha, day and night, that no such calamity should occur."

"That has been in my prayers too. I have given up my wish to have either of my brothers ascend the throne of this kingdom. As far as I am concerned, I have no objection now, to crown Madurandaka."

"You have no objection, My lady. But people have objections. Our emperor should live on this earth for many more years to come. However, if fate decrees otherwise and if something were to happen to him now, that very day this Chozla kingdom will turn into a bloody battlefield."

"Sir, I too am very worried that such a calamity may befall us very soon. Last night the Emperor's condition took a turn for the worse. That is why I had to tell him that Arulmozli was safe, and calm him down. Even though I told him, he did not believe me. He thought that I was just comforting him. He babbles without sense, in delusion that the ghost of the woman who died long ago is haunting us, that it is seeking revenge upon his sons."

"Oh, Gracious Divinity! What extreme tragedy is this? Please tell me in detail what transpired yesterday."

"That is why I came to you Sir. I wanted to tell all and seek your guidance. The last time I had come here to establish the Sundara Chozla infirmary, he shared that old history with me. He told me how when he was castaway on a remote island in the northern coast of Eezlam, a girl of the Karaiyar fisherfolk had saved him from being mauled by a bear. He then told me how he lived on that island with that girl, for a few months, as if he were in paradise. After that he was rescued and brought back to Tanjavur and anointed as the crown Prince, he told me. He said that he had seen that Karaiyar's daughter, in the crowds gathered in front of the palace; he had asked you, his best friend, to go find her. And that you had gone in search of her till Kodi Karai, and had come back reporting that she had jumped into the sea and died. He then said that the ghost of that woman comes often, to haunt him and trouble him; and the haunting incidents have increased lately. All this he said."

"My Lady, did you believe all that?"

"The story retold by my father was so unbelievable that I was very confused in my mind. I thought that it may be his delusion, that thing about the ghost of the dead woman coming to haunt him. Afterwards, when I thought about several things, I had some other doubts. One night Vanathi had gone to see what was happening when she heard the Emperor's call for help. She was shocked to see a figure that looked like the young Queen of Pazluvoor,

standing in front of the Emperor, and in that shock, she fell down in a faint. After that it occurred to me that there must be some relationship between Pazluvoor Nandini and the Karaiyar woman. My doubts were confirmed after I heard what Vandiya Devan and my brother had to say. Sir, is it possible that Nandini is a daughter of that mute-woman?"

"My Lady, I too can only surmise and guess just like you. One has to consider the possibility based on the similarity in their looks. Can we be sure with just that similarity? Nandini could perhaps be the youngest sister of the mute-lady. There are three persons living who know all the true details."

"Who are they Sir?"

"One is the Elder Pirati Sembayan Madevi. There is some secret in her heart that is causing her distress. Unless she herself tells us what that is, we cannot ask or find out. I know that the Elder Pirati, shared that secret with the great soul who was her husband Gandara Aditya, when he was on his death bed. Gandara Aditya started to speak about it with me. Before he could utter two words, his breath stopped."

"Who are the other two persons?"

"The other two persons are mute, who have no speech; they are Sendan Amudan's mother and his elder-aunt. Of those two, we cannot learn anything from Sendan Amudan's mother. She is devoted to Sembayan Madevi. As long as the Elder Pirati is alive, the woman will not reveal anything. That is why I had engaged in the great effort to bring the elder sister Mandakini Devi from Lanka."

"Aha! Is that Karaiyar woman named Mandakini? When did you know that she was still alive?"

"My Lady, that was known to me since the past twenty-five years."

"What? What is this? You did not tell my father even though you know this for twenty-five years? Sir, are you not aware of the mental anguish suffered by my father because he thought that she was dead?"

"I know, My Lady, I know."

"You did not tell him the truth even after knowing about his anguish?"

Prime Minister Anirudda sighed deeply. His face reflected the immense struggle in his heart. He then spoke thus:

"My Lady, twenty-five years ago, I committed a crime. I am speaking about that for the first time, with you. Your father had asked me to go find the Karaiyar girl. I went with swift

horsemen and reached Kodi Karai. There we found that she had fallen from atop that lighthouse in to the tumultuous sea. The people who had witnessed that horrible scene told us. Tyaga-vidangar spoke in a shaken voice and faltering words. I came back and reported all to my friend in Tanjavur.”

“Where is your crime in this, Sir?”

“This is the crime. The girl fell into the sea but, she did not drown in it. In that tumultuous sea there was a fisherman, who saw her and rescued her; he took her into his boat and saved her life. He came ashore very far away from Kodi Karai. On my way back, I saw that boat come ashore. I found out who the girl in his boat was. I gave a lot of money to that boat-man and asked him to take her safely to Lanka and stay there with her. He agreed and left. I came back to Tanjavur and reported that the Karaiyar girl had fallen into the sea and had died. I knowingly committed that crime, thinking that I was doing your father a favor. I did not think that my crime would result in such extreme misfortune after all these years.”

Kundavai interrupted the Prime Minister and said, “Sir even if you committed that crime, you did so with the thought of doing a good thing for my father. After that, did you hear about that Karaiyar girl?”

“Yes, I did hear about her periodically. After he was anointed Crown Prince, Sundara Chozla went to the battle front near Madurai. I went to the pilgrimage center Kasi in the north. I stayed there for some years and learned the arts and sciences of Vedanta and came back. I was surprised to notice one day in Pazlayarai, that Mr. Esanya Bhattar’s father was talking in privacy with that woman. He shared a surprising story with me. He said that the mute woman had come to stay in the gardens of the Elder Pirati for some days. She had delivered twins and abandoned them in the garden before she ran away. Sometimes she would think of her babies and come secretly to see them. I asked him about those babies and he refused to tell me anything more. It seemed to be a secret known only to Lady Sembiyan Madevi. I too let it be, thinking it might be better to not dig into too many details. My Lady, do you remember when Arulmozli fell into the Cauvery when he was very young, and how everyone thinks that Mother Cauvery rescued him back to safety? Even at that time I thought that it might be that Karaiyar woman of the fisherfolk who saved him from the river floods.” Thus spoke Mr. Anirudda.

“Your surmise is true. Arulmozli met that lady in Eezlam and came to tell me that. But, listen to this jest. Do you know what my father thinks? He thinks it is that woman who fell to her death in the sea, that is coming back as a ghost and seeking revenge on his children. When the storm was raging outside last night, a heavier storm seethed in my father’s heart. He did not sleep the whole night; and would not let me sleep either. He, spoke of the old stories again. ‘That revengeful woman who fell into the sea is the one seeking revenge upon me now. She is the one who drowned my Arulmozli at sea and killed him. She will not let Karikala be, till she takes her revenge on him too.’ He raved and ranted in this fashion. ‘Why don’t you take me Oh, Lord of Death when at least one of my dear son’s is alive?’ he wailed. However

much I tried comforting him, he would not be calmed. That is when I had to tell him that Arulmozli was safe in the Buddhist Vihara at Nagaipattinam,” explained Kundavai.

“Did the Emperor feel comforted after hearing that?”

“That did not happen; after that, his mind became even more deranged. At first, he did not even believe what I said. After I assured him that I had gone and seen him personally, he believed. He asked why I had not brought him back here. I explained that my brother has not regained his strength after the shivering fever and sickness and I would soon make arrangements for him to be here. I tried to hint about the confusion that may arise in the kingdom if he comes here now. Once he heard that, his mindset took a different turn. ‘This kingdom is the death-curse for my sons. If it becomes clear that this kingdom is not for them, my sons are sure to live comfortably, happily. That is why I am so eager to have them brought here, to be by my side,’ he said. Suddenly another fright took hold of his mind. Last night the whole palace was shaken up because of the storm. My father became more irrational after one tumultuous roll of thunder had sounded and stopped. ‘My dear daughter, I am not going to see Arulmozli anymore. I know very well about the storm winds and whirlwinds that arise and blow over the southern seas. This storm blowing like this here, is sure to make the sea rise in tidal waves as tall as coconut palms. The sea will froth and rise to come and drown everything far inside land. Once, long ago, the sea took away Kaviri-pattinam; it might do the same and drown Nagai port also. Moreover, the Buddhist vihara situated between the canal and the sea will never survive intact. That revenge filled ghost of the Karaiyar woman could not kill my son at sea. She is now going to take her revenge on land and kill my son. I will go right now and stop her and save my son!’ with such cries he tried to rise. Weakened by that effort he fell back on his bed. Sir, if those sobbing cries of my father had been heard, even stones and mountains will melt.” Thus spoke the Younger Pirati Kundavai; tears were streaming down her face, in waves, as she said all this.

Chapter 26 – Confusion On The Streets

Vanathi also began to sob when she saw Kundavai Pirati in tears. Even the iron hard heart of Anirudda Brahma Raya who had seen many a sorrow and happiness in life, softened.

“My dear, I a sinner, am the cause, for the many difficulties being experienced by the Emperor. I am not sure of how I shall atone for my sins!” he said.

“Sir, there is nothing that you do not know; yet, let me say what I think. If my father is told that the mute-woman of the fisherfolk is not dead, that she is still alive, his distress will be relieved and he will find mental peace. I came to you, to tell you this. I came to ask you to make arrangements to somehow find my elder-mother. However, you have already made the effort,” said the younger Pirati.

“Yes, My dear! I too had come to the same conclusion. I had determined to let the Emperor know that Mandakini Devi is alive. If I were to just inform him, he would not believe me. How am I to convince him to believe that everything that I had said before is untrue and what I am saying now is true? That is the reason why I wanted to bring that lady here. I would tell him about it after she was here; he would then have to believe upon seeing her in person. I had gone to Lanka mainly because of this matter. However, the noblemen of Pazluvoor have told the Emperor that I went to Lanka to conspire with your younger brother and the Elder Velir of Kodumbalur. In order to prove that it is not true, I shall bring Mandakini Devi before your father.”

“Sir, if you bring her to his presence, suddenly like that, it may result in harm to my father. We have to inform him of the details and then bring her to his presence.”

“Yes, yes. That was my intention. I thought that after Mandakini had arrived at my house, I would go to the Emperor and tell him. I was planning to go over to the Palace this morning. Tyaga-Vidangar’s daughter interfered in between and made me disappointed. I will one day punish that strong willed-girl appropriately,” said the Prime Minister.

“Oh, dear! Please do not do anything like that! I do not know whether she is faultless or if she is strong-willed; but it is Poonkuzlali who saved my brother from drowning in the sea.”

“Say that God saved him. My dear, it is the Grace of the Lord who Reposes on the Milky Ocean, Lord Vishnu, that saved him. Without the Lords Grace, what can this young girl do? If the science of astrology is true, if the effect of planets and stars hold true, no fire, ocean, storm or earthquake can harm the Prince...”

“Yes, with God’s Grace, nothing will happen; However, Divinity’s powers manifest through humans. I plan to send Poonkuzlali to Nagai Port once again. Sir, however, if you think otherwise, if you think we can ask Arulmozli to come here openly” Kundavai did not finish her thoughts.

“No, my dear, No. Till a decision is made about who gets the throne, it is better that the public do not know anything about Arulmozli Varma. I am going to ask your father for a final choice today. If we are to crown Madurandaka, it is better that your brother Arulmozli goes back to Lanka. As long as Arulmozli is here, the people will never accept the crown being given to Madurandaka. The Chozla region will turn into a battlefield; all these rivers of Chozla heartland will be flooded with blood.”

“Sir, in that case, is it not better to send Poonkuzlali and Sendan Amudan to Nagai Pattinam?”

“That is the best. If the Emperor insists Arulmozli can come secretly to Tanjavur and go back.”

“True; yes! Once the Emperor realizes that both Mandakini Devi and Arulmozli are still alive, he will have peace of mind.”

“Your father does not have any concerns about the Elder Prince, does he?”

“No, none. My father believes that there is no one in this world who can endanger Aditya Karikala. What do you think Sir?” asked Kundavai.

“I do not have any such trust. The elder Prince is very daring and brave on a battlefield. It is not difficult to betray him and deceive him in other matters. The Pazluvoor nobles bear enmity towards him. The young Queen of Pazluvoor is scheming some frightening, secret ploy against him. I sent my assistant to the Prince, to tell him all this information. It was of no use. We have invited him to come to Tanjavur so many times and he has refused; now he has gone to Kadamboor Palace,” said Mr. Anirudda.

“Sir, I too have sent word to my brother, that Pazluvoor Nandini might be our elder sister. I have asked the Vaanar nobleman to remain beside my brother and guard him. If only Lord Vallava was here now, we could have asked him to go to Nagai Pattinam!” said Kundavai.

“And I would have sent my assistant Thirumalai to go with him to help him from untoward dangers and mishaps; Even now, if you are sending Poonkuzlali, I plan to send Thirumalai with her.”

“They have not yet come back, from where we sent them. If my elder-mother comes, three fourths of the worry in my heart will be resolved. Sir, you will meet my father and tell him about her as soon as she arrives; you will do that won't you? I have to tell my mother the whole story from the very beginning...”

“Aha! How many troubles for the daughter of Malayaman! And when the old man of Thiru-Kovalur gets to know all these details, I am worried about what he would do. He, Malayaman may start up saying he would destroy this whole kingdom, if he comes to hear that the crown is not for his grandson!”

“Leave the job of handling my grandfather to me. Here is this girl Vanathi, I am worried about her Elder Uncle. He has hopes that a Kodumbalur noblewoman would one day sit upon the Chozla throne! This girl too, has such wishes in her heart....”

Vanathi spoke up with anger in her voice, “Akka!”

Before Vanathi could continue speaking, Poonkuzlali entered the chamber. All three were somewhat startled to see her come alone.

The Prime Minister asked in a tense voice, “Daughter of the Karaiyar folk, where is your aunt? Where is Thirumalai?”

“Sir, my pride is wounded. I have not been able to bring my aunt here as I promised,” said Poonkuzlali.

“Was she gone before you went there? Or did she refuse to come with you? That means”

“No sir, we were able to bring her into this fort. It was after that, that my aunt got caught in the crowds and is now lost!” said Poonkuzlali. She then retold all the details of all that had happened.

Fortunately, Mandakini Devi was still in Sendan Amudan’s house. Several incidents had happened to make her stay there. In the storm of the previous night Amudan’s cottage and gardens were totally wrecked. A large tree in the garden had fallen on the roof of their cottage. Sendan Amudan who had been drenched in the rain, was now gripped by a burning fever and was bedridden, gibbering in a delirium. Both sisters were busy in clearing the tree branches over the roof and bringing some order to the cottage. Mandakini was very happy to see Poonkuzlali; she was hesitant about Azlvar-adiyan. She seemed comforted on hearing that he was a friend. On the way there, Poonkuzlali and Azlvar-adiyan had discussed a strategy on what and how to tell Mandakini all the details so that they could convince her to go with them. Poonkuzlali spoke to her aunt accordingly, in sign language. She told her aunt that the Emperor was ill and bedridden; he might leave this earthly life at any time; before he draws his last breath, he wished to see Mandakini one more time. Even over all these years the Emperor had not forgotten the mute-woman of the island. If he saw her, he might regain new strength and perhaps live a little longer! This is what Poonkuzlali conveyed to her aunt by sign language. She further explained that the Prime Minister Anirudda had sent men to capture her and bring her to Tanjavur for this purpose.

Poonkuzlali explained that she had stayed in the Prime Minister’s mansion this previous night. The beloved daughter of the Emperor, Kundavai Devi was waiting in the Prime Minister’s mansion to take the mute-queen to her father’s bedside. After Mandakini had somewhat understood all this, she agreed to go with Poonkuzlali and Thirumalai. When they reached the fortress gates, the Velaikara Battalion was just entering the fort. They stood aside and waited to let the contingent go in. Mandakini was watching those soldiers with great interest without blinking an eye.

A huge crowd tried entering the fort by following the Velaikara Battalion; the guards were trying unsuccessfully, to stop the crowds by shutting the gates. “Let us not get caught in this crowd. There is a special underground passage way to get in and go directly to the Prime Minister’s mansion. Let us go by that way,” said Thirumalai. Poonkuzlali tried to explain this to her aunt. The mute-aunt did not notice that and continued to get in with the crowds at the gate. Thirumalai and Poonkuzlali followed her.

Once they had come inside the fort, Thirumalai suggested another special route to get to the palace. But her aunt did not seem to heed that. She mingled with the crowds. They were both surprised to see this behavior in her who usually shied away from crowds. After they

had walked in this fashion for a little distance, some persons in the crowd began to look at Mandakini in particular. They started saying to each other, “doesn’t this woman look like the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?” Thirumalai and Poonkuzlali began to worry about those comments. They tried to go and stand in front of Mandakini and stop her. Some fellows who noticed Azlvar-adiyan remarked, “Who is this Vaishnava fellow? Bothering womenfolk?” Some of the soldiers at the tail end of the Velaikara battalion heard these comments and turned around. They cleared the people crowding around the mute-lady. Thirumalai and Poonkuzlali were also forced away and they had to stand aside. One of the soldiers asked Mandakini, “Mother who are you? Who is bothering you? Point him out, we will hang him right here! Tell us.” The mute-queen stood without replying. She could not reply to more questions posed by some others.

By then one fellow started saying, “Does she not look like the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?” Another said, “It must be her; that is why she is so smug.” “The whole Pazluvoor lot are full of arrogance,” said another. All this was happening close to the palace of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor; so, some of the Pazluvoor guards came forward to find out what was going on. They heard the Velaikara soldier saying “the whole Pazluvoor lot are arrogant!” “Hey! Who is that fellow insulting our Pazluvoor lot? Let him step in front of me!” said the Pazluvoor footman. A Velaikara man stepped forward, “It was me fellow! What can you do, you fellow?” “You fellows are the ones full of pride; the time has come for your pride to be chastised!” another man in the crowd added, “Oh, ho! Are you talking in this fashion because you have drowned our Prince in the ocean? It is because of sinners like you being alive that the storm blew last night and the whole country is in ruins.” The Pazluvoor man replied angrily, “What did you say!?” and tried to attack that man. The Velaikara soldier tried to stop them.

After that the crowd became raucous, getting into fist-cuffs with each other and raising loud cheers: some said, “long life to the most generous Pazluvoor nobles.” Others said, “Long Life to Sundara Chozla who owns all three nations!” Other voice also arose saying, “Victory to Kodumbalur Velirs!” “long life to Malayaman of Thiru-Kovalur.” At that time, Lord Kalanthaka Pazluvoor himself came riding into their midst. On seeing him, the crowd scattered in all four directions. The Velaikara men marched onwards. The Pazluvoor footmen surrounded their Lord and tried to explain what had happened. Poonkuzlali and Azlvar-adiyan had stepped away from the road to one side. They looked all around and could not find Mandakini Devi.

“Oh dear! What is this? What has happened? What sort of a bizarre administration is this in the Capital City? How are we to find my aunt? Would some dangers have befallen her? Has someone taken her prisoner?” Poonkuzlali began to worry in this fashion. They searched everywhere after Lord Kalanthaka and his men had gone away. They did not find Mandakini. Thirumalai said to her, “I shall look for her some more. You go to the Prime Minister and the Princess and tell them what has happened. It is not sufficient that just the two of us search for her. The Prime Minister and the Princess may make some arrangements.” When Poonkuzlali hesitated, Azlvar-adiyan said once again, “Listen to me, nothing could have happened to your aunt. She has spotted some familiar face in the crowd. I think this because

she was concentrated in looking at one direction the whole time. That is why she mingled with the crowd to come in here. She is sure to have followed that person now. We will find her. You go and tell the Prime Minister.” Poonkuzlali then came to the Prime Minister’s mansion.

Kundavai became very worried on hearing all this. The Prime Minister did not seem very concerned. “Did you notice Princess? The monster of chaos and riot is awaiting an opportunity at any time! Do you realize this? If the news that Arulmozli is alive becomes public, fires will rage everywhere in the kingdom.”

“Nothing will happen as long as you are Prime Minister; now tell me what we can do about elder-mother. My fears seem to be coming true. How are we to find her now?” she asked.

“You need not be concerned about that. Once she has come inside, she cannot leave this fort without my knowledge. Let me make arrangements for that. I will also arrange to search for her. Mandakini Devi herself will not leave this place without seeing the Emperor.

Chapter 27 - In The Treasure Vault

It now becomes crucial that we follow that best among women, Mandakini Devi, from the spot that she was parted from Poonkuzlali on the streets. Azlvar-adiyan’s surmise of why she might have been lost in the confusion and crowds in the street inside Tanjavur Fort, was correct. Mandakini had spotted Ravidasa the Sorcerer in the crowds that had followed the Velaikara Battalion as they entered the fort in the morning. Those who do not have the use of certain sensory faculties, usually have heightened sensory perception in other ways. Mandakini could not hear; she had no speech; but her eyes were sharp. Poonkuzlali and Azlvar-adiyan were looking at her all the time and failed to spot the sorcerer mingling in the crowds. He was seen by Mandakini.

Mandakini also had the intuition and sensitivity to become aware of good and bad that might occur soon. She realized that Ravidasa was coming to that fort with some evil intention. She knew that Ravidasa had tried to kill Arulmozli Varma in Lanka. Even as she walked as part of the crowds on Tanjavur streets, her eyes did not lose sight of Ravidasa.

At the height of the confusion in the street, Lord Kalanthaka had come riding on his horse and the crowds had scattered quickly. Mandakini noticed Ravidasa and another man go hastily into a small side street. She kept the direction in mind and quickly went towards that street and entered it.

All this happened within a minute; Azlvar-adiyan and Poonkuzlali pushed around by the scattering crowds missed keeping an eye on her. Even as Mandakini hurried through that side street she looked back once or twice to see if Azlvar-adiyan and Poonkuzlali were following her. She could not see them; following Ravidasa was more important she felt.

Ravidasa and his companion took the same streets by which Vandiya Devan, earlier in this saga, had escaped from Lord Kalanthaka's men. We have also met Ravidasa's companion earlier. He was Soman Samban whom we had seen at the meeting of the terrorists in the forest at Thiru-Puram-biyam. The two men hurried through the by-lanes and alleyways. They hastened on, jumping over and not minding the trees and branches which had fallen and at times blocked the lanes and pathways. They did not mind the muddy pools of water collected here and there after the storm. Since the breeze was still blowing, tree branches and leaves moved with a swishing sound. Water drops fell noisily upon them from those trees. They did not have even a jot of a doubt, that someone might be following them. So, they did not bother to look behind, just hurried on. Even if they had looked around, they would not have spotted Mandakini Devi. Finally, their hurried walk brought them to the tall surrounding walls behind Elder Lord Pazluvoor's mansions. A tall uprooted tree had broken and fallen across that wall. They easily climbed up the branches of that tree and jumped over the wall and into the garden on the other side. Mandakini who was watching them followed suit in a short while, climbing onto the branches and got down into the garden over the wall.

Ravidasa had Soman Samban wait in the garden, and went towards Lord Pazluvoor's mansion. The mansion seemed empty because both the Lord and his Queen were not there. Only the sounds of women chattering could be heard. Two of the servant girls came out to the steps and looked at the several trees that had broken and fallen, "Aha this is like the Ashoka Vana garden destroyed by the monkey Hanuman in the myth!" Another girl said, "If our Sita Devi were here to see this, she would have been very saddened." After conversing in this fashion for a while, the girls were about to go back into the mansion. Ravidasa pouted his lips and made a sound like the call of an owl. Both girls looked around; Ravidasa was well hidden. "Look at this girl! An owl calls in broad daylight! The owl has lost its senses in the harsh storm of last night!" The other girl did not reply.

The girl who had gone away without replying to her companion came back after some time. She took the walkway and came to the flower arbor in between the Pazluvoor mansion and the treasure vault building. Our readers might recall that it was in this flower arbor that our hero Vandiya Devan had met Nandini. That maid servant came and stood in that place and peered into the garden. She heard the owl hoot again. She walked towards that sound. Ravidasa stepped forward from his hiding place behind a tree. He glared at her with eyes that seemed to have a magnetic pull!

She asked, "Sorcerer! You have come! The Young Queen is not even here; why have you come?"

"Girl, I have come because the Young Queen has sent me here."

"You did not stop haunting her even in the place she has gone! Why did you come here now? If someone comes to know"

“What does it matter if someone knows?”

“Don’t say that. The Younger Lord Pazluvoor suspects us. He called me one day and warned me seriously. He has ordered that if the Sorcerer comes again, we are to report to him.”

“Let that fellow get lost! The time has come for all of them. You don’t worry about that. I need the keys to the underground vault mansion. Go bring it to me quickly,” said Ravidasa.

“Oh dear, I cannot!”

“Look here: this is the signet ring of your mistress.” Ravidasa showed the signet ring of the Young Queen.

“Who knows where and how you stole this ring!”

“You wretched sinner! Are you calling me a thief? You have seen how your Young Queen shakes with fright in front of me; are you saying such words even after seeing that? Watch it; tonight itself, nine apparitions will come and snatch you and take you even when you are alive, to the cremation grounds....”

“No, no! let your ghosts and apparitions stay with you. Why do I care? Because you are showing the signet ring of the Young Queen, I will bring what you ask. But don’t be in a hurry. The girls are coming out here often to look at the devastation in this garden after the storm. I will bring you the key when everybody is eating. Be patient until then.”

“Fine! Bring some food for me too; it is two days since I ate; bring a lot of food!” said Ravidasa. After the serving maid had gone, Ravidasa and Soma Samban sat down on a fallen tree trunk and talked amongst themselves. Without being seen by them, Mandakini also sat down a little further away, well hidden. She did not hear or understand any of the conversation between Ravidasa and the servant girl. But she guessed something was going to happen.

After a long time that girl came back. Ravidasa got up and went to her; he took the food bundle and the bunch of keys she had brought. They walked down the foot path to the flower arbor and then onwards towards the vault mansion. First one key, a second and then a third; after turning all the keys, the lock opened. It was pitch dark inside that mansion.

“Oh! I forgot! How to go inside this dark room without any light? Go bring me a lamp or a torch.”

“How am I to bring a lamp or torch in broad daylight? What if someone sees and suspects?” she asked.

“That I do not know? Are you saying that you do not have the smarts to do even that? Go bring some light, a lamp or a torch. If you do not do that, I will send twelve flame mouthed ogres tonight to y.....”

“Oh, stop it! I will try somehow!”

“By then, I can finish eating.”

After the girl had gone back to the palace, he turned back into the garden to Soman Samban. Ravidasa gave the food bundle to Soman Samban and said, “You might have to remain in the vault for two or three days. You might need to wait for the correct opportunity; so, keep this food with you. Pick up your spear and come with me silently. She has gone to bring me some light; you must get into the vault mansion before she comes back.”

Both men walked quickly. Mandakini followed without them being aware.

Chapter 28 - Underground Passage

After looking around on all sides, Ravidasa went forward and showed the open doorway to the vault to Soman Samban and asked him to go inside.

“At first you cannot see anything in the darkness; don’t stand by the door because of that. Go in a few steps at least, and wait.” As soon as Soman Samban stepped into the dark mansion it seemed as if darkness had swallowed him. After that, Ravidasa walked back along the footpath and came to stand in Nandini’s flower arbor. He stood there looking at the big mansion of Lord Pazluvoor. If anyone other than the servant girl came out, he might have to hide, perhaps go inside the dark mansion and close its door.

When Ravidasa stood gazing at the main palace, Mandakini walked up softly without making any noise and entered the vault mansion by the open doorway. The darkness of that vault mansion was nothing to her who had roamed the dark jungles at midnight many times. Within a few short moments, she was able to see. She noticed that the man who had come with Ravidasa had walked into a big pillar ahead and was in agony. She walked in a direction opposite to him and found some steps going down. The underground passage was going downwards; she walked down and stood at the base of those steps.

Soman Samban must have heard a noise, he called out “Who is that? Who is that?” His call floated out softly through the open doorway and fell upon Ravidasa’s ears. At the same time, Ravidasa saw the palace serving girl come with a lighted torch. He wanted to go ahead and warn Soman Samban; walking quickly he stepped into the dark mansion and asked, “Sambava. Where are you? Did you call for me?”

“Yes, I had called out.”

“In a hurry already? What if someone had heard your voice outside? Were you worried that I would leave you here like this and go away?”

“No, no. I called out to ask you about something,” he then came closer to Ravidasa. They could see a bright torchlight outside the doorway. “Oh, the girl has come back with a torch light. She might see you. Go, go. Go far away and hide behind a pillar. Quick!” warned Ravidasa. Soman Samban hurried away.

The servant girl came with a lit torch to stand near the door way. She called, “Sorcerer, Sorcerer! Where did you go?”

“I did not go anywhere; just waiting for you.” She came closer to her and took the torch from her hands. “Girl! Lock the door from outside. Come back in about half an hour with the keys. Knock on the door, if I answer, open the door. Make sure that no one is around when you open the door.” He gave her instructions.

“That is alright Sorcerer; but I am warning you. The younger Lord Pazluvoor suspects something. If you are caught, don’t give me up,” requested that serving maid.

“Girl, don’t be worried unnecessarily. I told you before, the end times are here for that Kalanthaka.” (Note: play on the meaning of the name Kalanthaka - one who ends all time, Lord of destruction.)

“Why are you asking me to come back and open this door? There is a way to go out from the underground passage, you know that.”

“That exit won’t be useful today. The River Vettaru is in full flood. You go and come back in exactly half an hour.”

The girl went out and locked the door. Ravidasa locked the bolt from inside. With the torch held high, he hurried towards the spot where Soman Samban was standing. “Sambava, you wanted to ask me something. Ask now.”

“Did you come in here before this?” asked Soman Samban.

“Why one time, I have been here many times. Where do you think all the treasures we have collected have come from?”

“I do not mean that. Just now after you had left me here and gone out, again did ...”

“I am coming in just now.”

“Did you come in here in between?”

"I came neither in between nor in the edge! Why do you ask?"

"Soon after you had stepped out, the light from the doorway vanished for one moment. I banged my head against that pillar."

"Perhaps the door swung close and back by itself."

"It seemed as if a figure had stepped in here; I even heard footsteps."

"Your Imagination. This underground passage way is like that. We can see shadows in the dark. Suddenly lights will appear and go out. All sorts of funny noises will be heard. Some who entered here have died with mere fright. Their skeletons are scattered all over the passage. This fellow of Pazluvoor has deliberately left the skeletons remain here. If someone who should not do so, enters here, they will perhaps die of fright."

"Can anyone enter here without it being known?"

"Normally no one can; I do not think anyone but me has entered without authorization. Even I came in here only with the help of the Young Queen or her maid."

"Then you talked about the skeletons of men!"

"Oh that! If that nobleman Pazluvoor wishes to punish someone horribly, he would leave that doorway slightly ajar. People who have heard of the secret treasure trove would enter with a greed for wealth. They do not leave the place."

"Are you saying except you, no unauthorized fellow who entered here has left this place?"

"Yes, it was so till recently. Now I have my doubts about two persons."

"I think I know who you mean. You are speaking about Vallavarayan and Kandamaran."

"Yes."

"We have let them remain alive, until now."

"How many times do I have to explain. The young Queen has left Vandiya Devan alive for a very important reason. When the clansmen of Sundara Chozla perish, Vandiya Devan too will die. Come! Come! Let me show you the many passage ways in this hidden mansion. Be very careful about one thing. There is a chamber inside here where the Chozlas have stored mounds and mounds of various gemstones they have accumulated over hundreds of years. Don't get caught in that chamber. If you fall enamored of those gemstones, you will forget the job on which you have come here."

“About whom do you utter such words? I too have sworn a pledge over the headless body of Veera-pandiya!”

“Who denied that? When I saw those mounds of gems, even my mind was slightly shaken. That is why I am warning you. Let it be, come, I will first show you the passage going into the Chozla palace. After I show you that and leave, you can explore the other passages at your leisure. It might come in useful at a later time.”

Ravidasa walked ahead with the lit torch in his hand. Soman Samban walked next to him. They walked down the same passage way that had been taken by Lord Pazluvoor and Nandini that time long ago. In the light of that smoky torch the pillars and the shadows cast by them in that passage way appeared like large dark ghouls and goblins. The large bats dwelling in that darkness seemed like frightening vampires. Here and there, they could see huge spider webs with giant spiders in their midst. On the floor there were curiously shaped creatures that scurried away hastily or crawled slowly. Just as Ravidasa had described, they could hear various weird sounds. The storm winds blowing outside, somehow echoed inside there.

Soman Samban stopped suddenly, startled, “Ravidasa, did you hear something, like footsteps?” he asked.

“Why not? Of course, I hear our own footsteps. Don’t panic unnecessarily. If you are so scared, even now when I am beside you, how will you remain here for two or three days?” asked Ravidasa.

“I am not afraid. Instead of being frightened by mindless mirages after you have left, is it not better to get things clear when you are here? You had said that some who had entered these passages died here....”

“Yes, their ghosts are sure to wander around here. So, what? Ghosts and goblins cry in fright upon seeing men like us. That youngster Vandiya Devan somehow tarried in this underground chamber without being afraid and escaped from here. Why should you and I who have so many frightening ghouls and ghosts be afraid here?”

“Forget ghouls and ghosts; who needs to be afraid of those phantoms? Other creatures, poisonous organisms might be here, can’t they?”

“Are you going to be frightened by snakes and scorpions? They will go hide in their burrows if they see us!”

“Even so, I am concerned about staying in here for two or three days! Ravidasa, if I get an opportunity earlier itself, shall” started Soman Samban.

“No, Don’t! Do not make that mistake. This is Tuesday; you must wait Wednesday and Thursday. Watch and find out when Sundara Chozla is left alone. His consort the Queen, is always by his side. On Friday night she is sure to go to the temple of Goddess Durga. It is on that night that you should finish your task. It is on Friday that the clan of Sundara Chozla will be annihilated. If things do not follow the sequence things will go awry,” declared Ravidasa.

While talking in this fashion, both were hurrying ahead. Soman Samban was looking all around as they walked. The mute queen who followed them silently darting from one pillar to another, hiding in the shadows was not seen by them. They finally arrived at the other end of the underground passageway.

There was a big wall in front of them. There appeared to be no exit whatsoever anywhere on that wall. Way up high above, there was a narrow window like slit allowing some light to come in. Ravidasa gave the torch into Soman Sambavan’s hand; he started clambering up that wall by taking hold of small protrusions and cavities on that tall wall. After watching for a while through that window he suddenly slid down quickly.

“Should I jump out by that window? Is that the only way?” asked Soman Samban.

“No, no; only a rat can pass through that opening up there! But if you look through that window you can see the Chozla palace; and a very important place in that palace will be visible.”

“Is it the chamber where Sundara Chozla is bedridden?” asked Samban.

“Yes, you can look through this opening and find out if there are people milling about near him. Now, come with me. Watch me carefully and see what I do.” Ravidasa then jumped down from the wall ledge. He peered around and spotted a circular stone on which he pressed down with one foot; he took hold of a square stone with both his hands and pushed it. A passage way opened below.

“Good Lord! A secret passage within this secret passage!” wondered Soman Samban.

“None but Lord Pazluvoor and his Queen know about this passage; I am the third person to know about it; and now, you know. Have you noted how to open the passage way?” asked Ravidasa. They both descended down the steps and went ahead. The torch-light faded very soon.

The mute-queen ran up there in one leap. She peered into the opening of the secret passageway. She took one step to go down that way; thinking otherwise, she stepped back quickly. She kept thinking for some minutes and looked at the opening high up in the wall that Ravidasa had looked at. She leaped up and climbed that wall just like Ravidasa had done, using hand holds and footholds. Upon reaching the window slit, she climbed upon the ledge and sat down and looked out. The gardens reached up to that wall; and beyond was a

beautiful palace. Her body shivered on seeing that palace. Her intuition made her aware that people more pleasing to her than her own life were in that place. She also realized that the men going down that secret passage had evil intentions towards the people dear to her. She prayed to the divinity dwelling in her inner heart that she should have the skill to stop the evil intentions of those men.

Just as she was about to clamber down, she saw a surprising scene on the terraces above the palace. Ravidasa and Soman Samban who had been in the dark passageway had climbed upon that terrace and were hiding behind some pillars. They were peering into the palace chambers. Because it was daytime, the terrace pavilion was clearly visible. There was no torch in Ravidasa's hand; Soman Samban had a spear in his hand.

Ravidasa took hold of that spear and peered into the palace chamber while taking aim with the spear. The mute queen felt as if her heart had stopped that very minute. Luckily, Ravidasa did not throw the spear. He acted as if he would throw it and gave back the spear to Soman Samban. Both disappeared from view in the next moment.

The mute-queen climbed down the wall and stood hidden, looking at the opening to the secret passage. Very soon torch light appeared in that passage opening. Both men came up and closed the secret opening.

"You made note of the way to open this? Did you?"

"I did. You need not worry any more. I will surely complete the task that I have agreed to undertake. Sundara Chozla's life will come to an end this Friday. And all of you should complete your assigned tasks in the same way." Thus spoke Samban.

"The young Queen will take care of Karikala. There is no need to worry about that. It appears that the other tiger cub has escaped the ocean and is hiding at Nagai Port. But he will not escape this time. The two female ghosts that were protecting him are now in Tanjavur. I saw that boat-girl and the dumb female in the crowds. Even that Veera Vaishnava betrayer is here. Therefore, the young tiger cub cannot escape. I plan to send Kirama-vithan to Nagai. Sundara Chozla's clan will cease to exist after this Friday!"

"Then Madurandaka will remain?"

"Let that foolish fellow remain. It is good if a fellow like that is on the Chozla throne for some time. The Pandiya King needs to grow up and come of age to rule." Both men hurried back the way they had come, talking in this fashion.

Chapter 29 - Beholding Royalty

After they were gone from view, the mute-queen came to the spot where the entry to the secret passage had opened. She looked everywhere but could not find the opening. She had been too far away when Ravidasa had shown the secret of opening it and she had not seen how to open the exit. Mandakini decided to wait in the same spot because she was sure that at least one of those men was sure to come back.

Her expectation was not wasted. Soman Samban came back after sending Ravidasa out. He still held the torch in his hand though it had begun to grow dimmer. He had spoken quite bravely with Ravidasa; it was obvious that his fear of the place was not gone entirely, from the way he looked around every which way. He came with some anxiety, and sat down near the entryway to the passage to the palace grounds. Very soon the light from the torch had gone out. After that he kept looking often at the window slit high above on the wall.

The light coming through that window began to dim and go out. Light was gone, indicating that the sun had set outside. He started to open the secret passage entryway once again. This time, Mandakini came closer and stood near him. A passageway opened on the floor and Soman Samban stepped into it. At that minute, very near him, a long 'shkreetch' wailing sound was heard. Soman Samban had heard and seen many frightening things in his life. He had never heard an inhuman 'screech' sound like that before. It appeared as if there were ghosts and if such ghosts had a voice, it was the voice of such a creature!

When he heard that sound for the first time, he hesitated. He waited till the echo of that sound died down. When he heard that wailing sound again for the second time, every hair on his body stood on end, drenching him in fear. He lost his confidence on hearing it the third time, very close.... He began running in that dark mansion, blindly, with no idea of direction.

As soon as he was gone, the mute-queen stepped into the passage-way. After a few steps the floor was level. She walked very swiftly along that passage. Even if Soman Samban had seen her get into the opening and had come back, he could not have caught up with her. She was walking very quickly; the passage seemed like the long dark road to the abode of sinners. Even such a road came to an end. It ended at another tall wall. High above, there seemed to be some sort of gap. Her hands felt a few steps. When she climbed up those steps her head suddenly hit the ceiling. She could see some small lattice like openings in the space between where the steps ended and the ceiling where her head bumped. She squeezed through one such opening and came out. All around her were huge figures of monsters and gargoyles. She was not stunned by those statues as she had seen many big statues like that in Lanka. She took careful notice of the spot where she had exited the secret passage. Ravana with his ten heads and twenty arms was gouging and picking up Mount Kailasa. God Shiva and his wife Goddess Parvathi were seated above the mountain. The ground where Ravana had picked up the mountain was hollow. His twenty arms were holding the mountain aloft. She figured out that she had emerged into that sculpture court by squeezing through the slit between two of Ravana's arms.

No one looking at that sculpture ordinarily could even guess that there was a passage from between those arms. It would never occur to anyone to get down into the hollow left by the mountain and examine the spot. It seemed to be a good spot to hide if the need arose. After looking at the wonders of that sculpture and the passage behind it for some time, Mandakini wandered around that sculpture court. Her sharp eyes, used to the darkness of night, could easily see all the figures in that place. On one side was a panel showing one of the Chozla ancestors, Emperor Sibi, hacking away his own flesh to give to a falcon in order to save the life of a pigeon. Because they were descendants of that king, the Chozlas were known as Sembians. After looking at that sculpture for some time, Mandakini moved away.

There was another scene -- A huge figure of Lord Shiva with river Ganges descending from his matted locks. King Bhagiratha was standing humbly with folded palms near that place. The river that fell to earth entered the huge mouth of a seer and emerged from his ears. A short seer was filling his water pot from the river that had emerged. He must be the seer known as Rishi Agasthiya. He emptied his water pot on another hillock. The river emerging from the water pot began growing bigger as it flowed on. When they had sculpted these scenes, they must have made arrangements for real water to flow in the channels of the sculpture Ganges and Cauvery. There was no water now; the river Cauvery wound its way through many forests and glades; there were several temples on both banks of that Cauvery; finally, when the river reached the end where it had to merge with the ocean, there was a wall that was enclosing all of that sculpture court. Suspecting something, Mandakini placed her palm at that spot and pushed at the wall. A small panel door opened. She stepped out of that doorway.

She had emerged onto a palace garden. Beyond the garden but close by, one could see the many turrets and balconies of the palace. On looking around in the faint light of dusk she could make sure that no one was about. Like in the Pazluvoor gardens, many trees had fallen, with broken branches, in this place too. Even if someone had been in the garden, they were unlikely to have noticed that she had come out of the sculpture court. She waited near the wall of that sculpture court till the night became darker. Perhaps that messenger of death holding the spear, a minion of Yama the lord of death, might come that way. So, she kept looking into that sculpture court often.

One by one, the lights in the palace began to glow. Very soon all of the palace appeared as one shining light. Lamps from inside the lower chambers shed light outside the windows. Lamps on the terrace pavilions competed with the stars to light up everything. Mandakini felt, "Oh dear, this night light seems more dangerous than daylight." She looked in all directions around that palace.

She recognized that the palace courtyards near the sculpture court alone did not have too many lamps. Those wicked men, who had tried in Lanka to kill the beloved child that she had saved from Cauvery floods, those men had stood on the upper terrace pavilion of this mansion. This is the spot where the man Ravidasa, had borrowed the spear and had taken

aim at someone inside. Fortunately, there were not too many lamps on that terrace. Why was it so? Anyway, that is good. It may become obvious soon.

After dusk was done and darkness enveloped the palace gardens, Mandakini ran, with the swiftness of a deer running in fear, from the sculpture court to the main palace. That rear portion of the palace had several circular courts surrounded by pillars supporting circular walkways and stairwells leading to the upper terraces. In the verandahs there were all sorts of things: huge cauldrons and pans to cook food for large banquets, palanquins that had fallen in disrepair, broken throne like seats and such. After wandering amidst those items for some time, finally Mandakini was emboldened to climb the stairs leading to the upper terrace. Just like below, on this level too there were circular promenades and beautifully carved pillars supporting ceilings, roofs of balconies and large gathering spaces. Mandakini wandered around those upper stories which seemed to be completely devoid of human beings. She was very hesitant to go towards the balconies looking towards the middle spaces. At one place she saw brilliant light shine forth from below. She approached that spot cautiously, hiding herself behind pillars. She looked down from there.

What did she see? Aha! It was a sight from which she could not avert her eyes. It was large and wide chamber with very tall ceilings. In the middle on a beautifully carved bed there was a person leaning back and lying down. There were four women and two men standing around him. From their posture and demeanor, it was obvious that all of them had great reverence and devotion for the person on the bed. Still further away stood two serving maids even more respectfully. There was only one lamp in that room. It was placed on a lamp post near the bed, emitting faint light. Mandakini first looked at all the persons standing around. She recognized one of them as her brother's daughter Poonkuzlali, her dear niece, as precious as life; She had seen others at various times while she had been hidden. However, she could not be sure about who they were. Very hesitantly, after looking at all those people standing around, Mandakini looked at the person on the bed. For one moment it appeared as if her heart had stopped.

Yes! It was the same person. So many years ago, almost eons ago, when she had been a young girl running about and playing in the forests, the person who had come ashore from a raft, the man who had captured her heart and her mind; he who had made Ghost Island where she had lived turn into a paradise for some time. He was the one taken away by the large group of men who had come in a big ship. 'Aha! How he has changed now!'

Mandakini had seen him many times, without him being aware since that time which could have been a previous birth! When he had gone on pleasure boats down the Cauvery, she had watched hidden behind bushes on the banks. She had stood one among crowds in the cities when he came by, riding on a golden chariot drawn by white horses. But it has been some time since she saw him last. How he has changed in that short while! Face is covered by a beard and hair. Cheeks are hollow and shrunken dry. Wrinkles on his brow. Oh, what has happened to the mesmerizing looks of his eyes? God! Can people change in this way?

The mute-queen had seen many men on Lanka gripped by the poisonous shivering fever, after many days of suffering when they were about to die. His charismatic face which used to shine like a golden sun, has changed thus. Have his last days come close?

Suddenly Mandakini remembered that frightening scene she had witnessed earlier in the day. She was standing at the same spot that the assassin Ravidasa and his friend had stood and taken aim with their spear. Perhaps they were practicing their aim to throw the spear at the man on that bed?

Remembering that, Mandakini felt her whole-body tremble like a rattle. Her eyes were closing in a faint. She held on tightly to the pillar and placed her food down firmly and steadied herself.

Chapter 30 – Accusation

Sundara Chozla's heart and mind had grown considerably weary in recent days. Kundavai's words to the Prime Minister that he had not slept even one bit on the night of the storm, was in no way exaggerated. Even that whole day, his mind was restless. The younger Lord of Pazluvoor who came to see him in the afternoon increased his distress. Most importantly, he had heaped several accusations against the Prime Minister. He declared that after the arrival of the Prime Minister, all security measures at Tanjavur Fort were wrecked. On the pretext of visiting the Prime Minister, all sorts of persons were entering the fort. This might jeopardize the very security of the Emperor. On hearing these two accusations the Emperor smiled to himself. He did not consider the matter very important.

However, further accusations heaped by Lord Kalanthaka could not be ignored easily. An altercation between the crowds that had come in that day and the men of the Velaikara Battalion had erupted and was about to become a huge fracas. Fortunately, as he happened to get there, he could calm down both factions and send them on their way before things got out of hand.

It was common knowledge all over the country that the Prime Minister was a man of good conduct, honor and integrity. However, his behavior was quite contrary to this reputation. Not only had he forcefully abducted some woman in Kodi Karai and brought her here, but he had used the palanquin and footmen from Pazluvoor palace for that purpose. Without knowing the details, Kalanthaka had sent the men and the palanquin when requested. If some infamy were to befall, it might fall upon the reputation of the Pazluvoor nobility and this concerned Lord Kalanthaka.

Finally, he gave details about some questionable, suspicious activity that had occurred. "I had been concerned when I knew that some nefarious character calling himself a sorcerer or soothsayer was coming often to the mansion of the elder Lord Pazluvoor. I was hesitant to take action because he was coming to visit the Young Queen. Even so, I had appointed a spy

inside that palace to keep an eye on things. That spy came and reported to me that today he saw some fellow jump over the surrounding wall of the rear gardens of Pazluvoor mansions. I sent some men immediately to apprehend the fellow. They physically found a man in the gardens, arrested him and brought him over; On examining who he was, I found that he was the favorite apprentice and assistant of the Prime Minister, one Azlvar-adiyan Nambi! He refused to answer when I questioned, 'Why did you jump over the wall?' He claimed that it was on the orders of the Prime Minister! If this Aniruddha Brahma-raya does all such things, how can I be responsible for the safety of Tanjavur Fort? The Emperor became much more confused in mind because of these statements and petitions by Lord Kalanthaka. "Let it be; Anirudda Brahma Raya is coming to visit me this evening. I shall inquire into all this. Particularly his order to forcefully abduct a woman at Kodi Karai and bring her here, has wounded my heart. Commander, are you sure that it is true? You have no doubts about that, have you?" asked Sundara Chozla.

"I have no doubts. The Palanquin bearers and footmen came and reported to me after midnight last night. They were caught in the storm as they came closer to Tanjavur Fort. Apparently, a tree that had been uprooted and fallen across the road had caused some injuries to some of the men. They said it was a great good fortune that the tree did not fall upon the palanquin. Luckily, we have not become part to the heinous crime of killing a woman! In addition to inquiring about this, I request the Emperor to question the matter of Azlvar-Adiyan in depth." After all such words, Lord Kalanthaka took leave of the Emperor. The younger Lord Pazluvoor did not wish to remain there when Mr. Aniruddha came to see the Emperor. The Prime Minister may start asking irreverent and unconnected questions of him; and he would be flummoxed, feared the Commander. Moreover, the Prime Minister may raise the question of opening up the treasury for aid of the people suffering after the storm, right in front of the Emperor, and get the royal permissions. That would become a big problem. How can I show my face to my elder brother if that happens?

The Emperor was awaiting Mr. Anirudda's visit since early morning. But the Prime Minister arrived only just before sunset. The Minister's strong temperament was shaken; his careful plans had gone astray. He was postponing his visit to the palace thinking that he may get some news about Mandakini and that he could visit the Emperor after that. Late in the afternoon, Azlvar-adiyan came to report a somewhat embarrassing situation. He had apparently gone down a narrow lane thinking that the mute-woman could have gone that way, and as it had appeared as if a woman had jumped over the security wall of Pazluvoor mansion, he thought it might be the mute-queen; he too had climbed the wall and jumped into the garden intending to search in there for her. Before he could begin searching, Pazluvoor guards had come and arrested him. "I could not tell them the real reason; I had to mention your name and get released!" said Azlvar-adiyan.

This information worried the Prime Minister to a great extent. "When there are so many mansions in this Tanjavur Fort, why did she have to enter the Pazluvoor mansion? I cannot even arrange openly to search those gardens! Let me think! In a way it is good that the Elder Lord Pazluvoor is not in town. Let me arrange for guards around that mansion. I have a

confidant inside that mansion; let me send word to him. Oh, what a predicament this boat-girl has caused!”

“My Lord, even if the boat-girl had not intervened, there was no guarantee that the mute-woman would have conformed to your orders. She would surely have run away somehow,” opined Azlvar-adiyan.

“I still have some hope. Having come this far, she will not go away without seeing the Emperor. Let us try the best we can. I cannot delay anymore to go and meet the Emperor. You too come along with me and bring that boat-girl too. We need to inform the Emperor of all details about both the Princes. If the boat-girl who saved the Younger Prince tells him directly, the Emperor will believe more readily.” Thus spoke the Prime Minister.

Mr. Aniruddha the Prime Minister, along with his assistant Azlvar-adiyan and Poonkuzlali went to the palace of Sundara Chozla. Princess Kundavai and Vanathi were waiting for them at the entrance to that palace. The news that they could not find the mute-queen caused Kundavai to be uneasy. Her concern increased when she heard that the mute-woman had gone into the gardens of Pazluvoor palace. She was now worried that some drastic danger might befall as a result of that.

“Sir I have heard that there is a secret underground passage in the Pazluvoor mansion. What if she leaves the fort by that tunnel?” asked Kundavai of the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister remembered Vandiya Devan. He said, “Thaye! Will it be that easy to find that passage? Not everyone is fortunate like the brave young man of the Vaanar clan. I shall make arrangements to post some guards outside the fort near those exits.”

Leaving Azlvar-adiyan and Poonkuzlali with the Princess, the Prime Minister went to see the Emperor in his bedchamber. He greeted the Emperor and Queen Vanamadevi who was seated near the bed in the usual respectful manner; he explained that he could not visit earlier because he had to make enquiries and arrangements for the relief of those affected by the storm all over the Chozla lands.

The Emperor seemed to be somewhat satisfied and calmed upon hearing the details of those arrangements.

“It is good that at least you are here at this time when our minister in charge of the treasury is not here! However, what is this that I hear? Apparently, you have abducted some woman at Kodi Karai and brought her here by force? My Commander of this fort reported this to me. Brahma Raya, I did not expect such behavior of you! Perhaps there was some very important reason behind that. If so, let me know what it is? Or, have every one of you decided that since I am bedridden and ill, there is no need to tell me anything or consult me about anything? Kundavai is telling me that Arulmozli did not drown in the sea, but survived and came ashore and that he is now in the Buddha Vihara at Nagai Pattinam. Am I supposed to

feel happy about that, or should I feel saddened? I am not sure! When he came ashore why did he not come over here? Why has no one told me till now that he survived and is safe? Prime Minister -- All kinds of things are happening without my knowledge. Many incidents are happening in my Kingdom without me being aware of all. In such a situation, perhaps it may be better not to be alive” when Sundara Chozla continued speaking in this fashion, his voice grew hoarse with sadness and tears brimmed in his eyes.

Mr. Anirudda who was listening politely, thinking it would not be respectful to interrupt, now spoke up. “My Lord, please stop! The friendship between you and me is more than forty years old. In all these years, I have not done anything that was against your welfare. I will not do any such thing in the future too. I might have avoided telling you about one or two matters thinking that I should not trouble you unnecessarily. If that was a crime, please forgive me. I will now answer all your questions. Kindly be calm, Sir!” asked the Prime Minister with humility.

“Prime Minister, I have no more mental peace for me in this life. I am not sure if I shall find peace of mind in my next birth! When my children and the Prime Minister who is my best friend conspire against me...”

“My Lord, you will soon become aware of who is conspiring against you. I am not part of that heinous crime. I hold this office of Prime Minister, in name only; I have told you many times before that I shall give up this office to Elder Lord Pazluvoor. Even now, I am ready to do that. If you are unsatisfied with me for even any small reason, ...”

“Yes, Minister, yes! You are all ready to abandon me and go away at any time! The only person who is going to stay with me till my breath leaves my body and who is going to die with me, is this daughter of Malayaman. Among many sins that I have committed, I must have done some good deed too. That is why I have her as my life companion!” said Sundara Chozla the Emperor.

On hearing these words Vanamadevi, who was seated by the Emperor on the bed, was overcome with sobs and started crying. She stood up immediately and went into the next room.

“My Lord Emperor, every word that you utter about Malayaman’s daughter is the truth. The children born of her, are also completely devoted to you; their love and affection for you is incomparable.”

“However, they do not heed my words or obey my orders. They do all kinds of things without me being aware. And you too join with them! You already knew that Arulmozli survived from the storm at sea and is in the Buddha Vihara at Nagai Pattinam. Why did you not inform me about that?”

“Forgive me My Lord; I was not aware of that, or sure till yesterday. I was sure that no harm would befall the Younger Prince. Everything predicted by the astrologers at the time of his birth cannot become false!”

“Prime Minister, there is no end to the harm caused by this science of astrology! I am thinking of banishing all astrologers from my kingdom! Because of the predictions based on Arulmozli’s horoscope everyone is trying to place him on the throne even when I am alive! Are you not one of them?”

“My Lord, I promise you, I am not. Contrarily, I felt that it may be better if the Younger Prince does not even come into Chozla country for some time. I had told the same to the young Prince when I went to Lanka. When I came back, Lord Pazluvoor’s men had arrived in Lanka to arrest the Prince and bring him. You had approved that. Since this news has spread all over the country and in towns, people are very angry with the noblemen of Pazluvoor. It has been the talk among people that the nobles of Pazluvoor had deliberately sunk the ship which was carrying the Prince coming home, and thus killed him.”

“Lies, Minister; utter lies. Parthibhan Pallava has come and reported everything to me. The Prince did not come on the ships sent by Lord Pazluvoor. He was on board the ship of Parthiban Pallava. While on the way, he willingly jumped into the ocean. He wanted to save some other fellow on another ship that was on fire; he did not listen even when Parthibhan tried stopping him, but jumped into the stormy sea. When I think about it now, I feel that everything is one big lie, a conspiracy to fool me. What hurts me most is to find that Kundavai is also involved in this conspiracy. I believed that Kundavai will be by my side even if the whole world turns against me. I revealed to her all histories that an ordinary father would be hesitant to speak with a daughter.....”

“My Lord Emperor, even if the whole world swears that the Younger Pirati is conspiring against you, I will not believe that; neither should you believe it. If the Younger Pirati has not spoken to you about something, there must be a good reason for that. There is no falsehood in the fact that the younger Prince jumped into the sea to save his friend. The boat-girl who saved the Prince and his friend from the sea and reached them to the shore, is here in the next room. She also personally witnessed what happened in Lanka. Shall I call her in, to come speak to you, my Lord?” asked Mr. Aniruddha.

The Emperor answered eagerly, “Is that so? Call her in immediately. Prime Minister, is she the girl whom you ordered to be abducted from Kodi Karai?”

“The girl who arrived in the Pazluvoor palanquin is waiting in the next room. Let me call her now,” saying this the Prime Minister went near the door and clapped his palms; on hearing the signal, Poonkuzlali and Azlvar-adiyan entered the chamber.

Chapter 31 - Dreams Early In The Night

The Emperor regarded Poonkuzlali keenly and then asked, "I have never seen this girl before, have I? but her face seems somewhat familiar, Brahma-raya who is this girl?"

"She is the daughter of Mr. Tyaga-vidangar the lighthouse keeper at Kodi Karai; her name is Poonkuzlali."

"Aha! That could be the reason!" said the Emperor, he then mumbled to himself, "She has the looks of her aunt; but not exactly, very different."

His faint mumbling was heard by Poonkuzlali. She had never seen the Emperor until that day. She had heard that he was as handsome as the God of Love; she had formed some opinion of how the father of The Prince would look like. Now, she was shocked to look upon the Emperor, disfigured by illness of the body and mind. She felt ashamed of her thoughts to pick a quarrel with him about having abandoned her aunt. She had even forgotten to greet the Emperor properly because of a certain surprise, shyness, and fright; she just stood there.

The Emperor looked at her and asked, "Girl is your father Tyaga-vidangar well?"

Poonkuzlali regained her senses; she became aware that she was in the presence of an Emperor who ruled under one canopy all the lands from Lanka to the borders of River Krishna. She immediately fell to the ground, bowing, and stood up with palms folded in humble greeting.

Sundara Chozla looked at Aniruddha Brahma raya and asked, "can this girl talk? Or is she mute like her aunt?" his face was shriveled with heartfelt sadness.

"Sir, this girl can speak; she can speak enough for nine women! She is stunned into silence upon seeing you and because she is in your presence."

"Yes, everyone becomes silent upon seeing me; no one tells me anything." He then looked at Poonkuzlali and said, "Girl, my Prime Minister tells me that you rescued my son the Prince from a stormy sea and brought him ashore. Is that true?"

Poonkuzlali spoke very hesitantly, "Yes my Lord; if I made any mistake ..."

The Emperor laughed; his laughter sounded frightful. "Brahma-raya did you hear the words of this girl? 'if it was any mistake!' she says! Perhaps I wished that my son drowned in the sea! Someone must have told her that I am such an ogre. Prime Minister is this what all my people in my kingdom, think of me?"

"My Lord, she mumbled something in her fear; please do not regard these words. Girl, this whole Chozla kingdom is beholden to you for having rescued and saved the Prince. The

Emperor too is truly happy. You can ask for and get any reward you wish, for this service. For now, tell the Emperor everything that has happened. Speak without being afraid.”

“First, let her explain something. She claims to have saved the Prince from the sea. How did she know that he was the Prince? Has she seen him before?” Asked the Emperor.

“Yes, my Lord. I had seen the Prince some time ago, on a few instances when he went on the ships bound for Lanka, along with many soldiers. On one such instance he had addressed me as ‘Ocean Princess’” said Poonkuzlali.

“Aha! This girl is now able to speak!”

Poonkuzlali then narrated, often prompted by the Prime Minister’s questions, everything that happened from when she had taken Vandiya Devan to Lanka and how she had rescued the Prince and had taken him to Choodamani Vihara in Nagai Port. But she did not say anything about Mandakini Devi as the Prime Minister had already alerted her.

After listening to everything she had to say the Emperor said, “Girl, you have rendered incomparable service to the Chozla clans. No reward will suffice for this service. Let me ask you one thing; answer me. Why did you not bring the Prince here after bringing him ashore? Why did you take him to Nagai Port?”

“My Lord, the Prince was unconscious and in the grip of the poison fever. We took him to the Buddhist monastery in Nagai Port because we heard that there were good doctors over there. We knew that the monks there were well intentioned towards the Prince. In the condition he was, we could only take him by boat; we could not have carried him on horseback or by wagon.”

“Lord Pazluvoor was at Kodi Karai at that time. Why did you not report to him?”

Poonkuzlali was hesitant at first; she then spoke with confidence. “My Lord Emperor, the whole country knows that the nobles of Pazluvoor are enemies of the Prince. In that situation, how can our minds be ready to give him up to those noblemen?”

“Oh yes, yes. It is not just the Pazluvoor nobles who are enemies to my sons. Even I am an enemy! That is what the world thinks. Let us forget that for a moment. Prime Minister, the storm that struck here yesterday. It would have been much more severe at Nagai Port. My heart is pounding with worry that some further mishap has befallen my son.”

“My Lord, this Chozla country is fortunate. The times are good times for the Chozlas. Therefore, ...” Started Brahma raya.

“Yes, the Chozla country is fortunate; however, I am unfortunate. Before I close my eyes finally, I wish to see both my sons at least one more time”

“Sir, Please so not speak in this fashion. Who else is as fortunate as you who have given birth to such sons and a daughter as you have? Here, I will instantly arrange to send men. I will also send my assistant Thirumalai to bring the Prince here safely.”

Upon hearing these words, the Emperor turned to look at Azlvar-adiyan. “Oh! Has this man been here all this time? It was about him that the Younger Lord Pazluvoor had complained. Is he the one who jumped into the gardens of Pazluvoor mansion?”

“My Lord, there is a good reason for that. Please permit me to explain all that to you tomorrow. You are already tired this night,” said the Prime Minister. At the same time Malayaman’s daughter, the Queen, Kundavai and Vanathi had all entered the room.

The Queen addressed the Prime Minister, “Let us take a break with this today. The doctors have strict orders that the Emperor should not tire himself unnecessarily.” She then said, “I hear that this girl sings beautifully; ask her to sing a Thevaram song. The Emperor likes to hear singing and music”

“Yes, my Lady, My assistant Thirumalai also sings the songs composed by Azlvar saints very well. I shall ask them to sing.”

Poonkuzlali then sang the Thevaram composed by Saint Appar, which began with the words, “Do not discard me and set me aside as if I were the Lord of Death; I have done many a misdeed due to ignorance; I pray now at thine feet day and night even as I am in pain in with burning in my stomach, Oh Lord Shiva who rides the Bull Nandi, ...” (Appar had composed the verse after he was relived of an incurable stomach ache by ashes sacred to Lord Shiva.)

Azlvar-adiyan sang the hymn ‘I saw the divine one; I saw the divinity in form!’

As soon as the singing began, Sundara Chozla closed his eyes. Very soon his face became calm and peaceful. Breath came steadily, softly. It was apparent that he had fallen asleep. Since dusk was approaching, the servant girls brought lamps and placed them nearby. Everybody left those chambers including the Prime Minister. The Queen Vanamadevi remained by the Emperors bedside for some time. Kundavai, standing in the doorway leading to the next room signed to her, so she too stood up and went out. Silence prevailed in the room except for the sounds of deep breathing by the emperor, heard softly.

Sundara Chozla slipped into a deep slumber in the early hours of that evening because he had not slept all of the previous night and because he had heard the soothing, sweet melodies sung by Poonkuzlali and Azlvar-adiyan. But his sleep was not restful without any thoughts. Old remembrances, new thoughts, true happenings, imaginary feelings of the heart, all these took the form of dreams and made him experience various curious happenings.

Poonkuzlali and he were on a boat floating above a calm blue sea. She was rowing the boat and singing a sweet melody with the roar of the ocean as a background drone.

Do not tire or be depressed dear heart

All your desires will one day be fulfilled.

A long night gripped by deep darkness

Is surely seen to be followed by the blossoming daylight

The earth will shake awake

Lotus buds will laugh open as bees and such celebrate

and the gold red sun too will rise.

Sundara Chozla was filled with delight on hearing that song. The depression in his heart was gone and happiness prevailed. He kept urging her, "Sing more! Sing some more!" her boat continued floating onwards on that deep sea.

Suddenly, darkness surrounded everything; strong storm winds began to blow. Huge mountains of waves rose and fell on the sea that was calm till now. The boat that had been rocking gently like a cradle till now, was being tossed into turbulence reaching the cloud worlds and deep gorges. The sails on the boat were torn to rags and carried away by the winds. But the boat did not capsize; it managed somehow, to stay afloat. Emperor Sundara Chozla was admiring with surprise and gladness, the skill of Poonkuzlali handling the boat.

The storm winds stopped as suddenly as they had come. The turbulent sea quietened slowly and soon became calm once again. Far in the eastern horizon one could see signs of sunrise. In a short while a golden sun rose and made the whole sea shimmer in gold. In the far distance one could glimpse green coconut grove covered islands. The call of sweet birdsongs arose from those islands. Sundara Chozla recognized them as islands along the coast of Lanka. He remembered meeting Mandakini on one such island on a previous birth. He was looking at that island and saying, 'Poonkuzlali you have finally brought me to paradise. How am I to thank you for this?' as Poonkuzlali had not answered he turned to look at her. He was totally stunned! It was not Poonkuzlali on the other side of that boat. It was Mandakini, looking just as she had looked thirty years ago.

"Mandakini, is it you? Is it truly you? Are you the one who has brought me here disguised as Poonkuzlali?" he asked. He remembered that she would not hear anything that he spoke. But Mandakini smiled as if she had understood by reading the movement of his lips. He tried to stand up to go near her. He was unable to get up; he remembered that his legs had gone useless.

“Mandakini, I have become ill. I cannot come to you. It is you who must come near me. Look at me Mandakini, now I will not go away leaving you behind even if anyone comes calling me, to make me a king of all three known worlds. Let us not go to this island near Lanka. People will keep coming here. Row the boat to the middle of the sea. Let us go far, far away, beyond the seven seas, towards the edge of the islands far away,” said Sundara Chozla. Mandakini smiled as if she understood everything he said.

In a boat beautifully decorated and shaped like a king swan, the Emperor Sundara Chozla his Queen along with his children were going on a pleasure trip on the river Cauvery. Expert musicians were singing. Sundara Chozla was immersed in that flood of music and had closed his eyes in happiness. On hearing sudden shouts of “Oh dear! Oh dear!” he opened his eyes to look around. Several voices wailed, “we cannot see the child, where is Arulmozli? We cannot see him!” Sundara Chozla looked about hastily. Some woman had taken his beloved Arulmozli in her hands and was trying to push him down into the floods of the Cauvery and trying to drown him! Gripped by unthinkable terror, Sundara Chozla tried to jump into the river. He could see the face of that woman in that instant. He realized that it was the face of Mandakini that had turned ugly. His whole body seemed to lose all life and become immobile. Instead of jumping into the river, he fell with a thud on the deck in a faint.

In the shock of that fall, Sundara Chozla woke from his dream filled sleep. In that night which was rather cool because of the storms and rains, his whole body was sweating. He was somewhat calmed, as if a huge weight had been lifted from his heart, when he realized that all that he had been seeing all this time were just dreams. There was no one in his room. Only a small lamp was shining light. The others must be in the next room since he had fallen asleep. He was about to clap his hands and call for them. Let me wait, let me recover from the shock of the dreams, before I call them, he thought.

He heard a soft noise on the upper balcony. What was that? He turned his face, to look towards that noise. It seemed as if a figure was trying to slide down on the edge holding on to a pillar supporting the upper terrace balcony.

Chapter 32 - “Why Do You Torture Me?”

Sundara Chozla was totally surprised. What was that sliding down the pillar from the edge of the balcony of the upper terrace? Why is it coming? Remembering the confusing dreams, he had just had, he wondered if this too was part of that dream! Have I not woken completely from sleep? To clear his doubts, he once again closed his eyes tight; after one such minute he opened his eyes again and looked towards that pillar. There was nothing there now! It must have been a delusion of his mind.

He tried remembering everything that had happened before he fell asleep. The Prime minister, his assistant Thirumalai, Tyaga-vidangar’s daughter who sang with such a melodious

voice – all of them must have gone away after he fell asleep. As usual the serving maids and his Queen, Malayaman's daughter, must be waiting in the next room. Perhaps his darling daughter is with them. He worried somewhat about his words about Kundavai that he had said to the Prime Minister. Kundavai was very intelligent, smart and forward thinking. She has asked the Prince to stay on at Nagai Pattinam to avoid further confusion in the kingdom. It is my mistake to think wrong of that. Sundara Chozla was aware that his faculties were not as sharp as they should be, since some time now. What was the point in being angry with Kundavai? It would be best to act according to her advice. But now the most important thing is to get the Prince to come here from Nagai Port. Dear God! Hope there is no further danger to him because of the storm. I must ask Kundavai about that right away.... intending to call the people in the next room, he was about to clap his hands....

What is this? It seems that someone is walking about near his head. The footsteps are very soft like a cat walking... Who was it? The Queen? His daughter Kundavai? A serving maid? Are they walking softly so that they would not disturb his sleep?

He asked softly, "Who is that?" There was no response to his question. " Who is that? Come here in front of me!" he said in a louder voice. No answer to even that!

An idea occurred to Sundara Chozla. It confused and frightened him. Perhaps it was her! Could it be her ghost? That fiend who appeared in his dreams, has she come in person now? She used to come to torture him only around midnight, dressed well in jewels and silks. Has she come early, in this dusk now? Or perhaps it is already midnight? Have I been asleep that long? Is that why the Queen and Kundavai are not here.... Have the servants gone to sleep? Oh dear! Why do they leave me alone like this! If it is that fiend, the daughter of those Karaiyar fisherfolk, she will not let me rest easily. Till my heart boils and shrivels in torture, she will not go!

You wretched fiend, if it is really you, come in front of me! Torture me as much as you wish and then leave me. Why are you taking my life by wandering above my head-stead without me being able to see you. Come in front of me! Are you here asking for a blood sacrifice? Come, come now! You used to carry a knife in your waistband; kill me with that knife which you used against forest animas like tigers and bears. Kill me and leave, do not do anything to my children. Do not take revenge upon them for my crimes. They have not betrayed you in any way. I am the one who betrayed you. Did I ask you to climb the lighthouse tower and jump into the sea? You did that terrible deed yourself and now you haunt me!

Sundara Chozla realized that a figure was standing very close beyond his head. He began to shiver in fright. His stomach rose and choked his heart. His eyes were about to burst in fright. It was her coming and standing near him; there is no doubt. It is her ghost standing near my head. 'Finally, she has come, just as I had thought, to take blood revenge on me! She is going to strike my heart with her knife and kill me. Or is she going to squeeze my throat with her bare hands and kill me? Any which way, let its intensions be fulfilled. There is no use in my living any longer for anyone. If that ghost takes revenge on me, it will surely let my children

go safe. If only I could look up and see beyond my head, her ghost may be visible to me,' so thought Sundara Chozla.

The figure was so close to his head; even its shadow seemed to fall upon his face. He wanted to look up but did not have the courage to do so. "I am going to close my eyes tight; let it have its way and do what it wants and go away!" he decided and closed his eyes.

He waited for a while; there was no knife struck on his heart as he had expected. Neither did the apparition squeeze his throat with its hands. It seemed as if the apparition that had been behind his head had now moved away.

"Aha!" the Karaiyar woman will not let me go so easily; she is sure to keep me alive and torture me till I die as she wishes. Perhaps today she has vanished before she showed herself to me. Let me call someone. If someone comes, she is sure to go away from this room.

"Where is everyone? Where have you all gone?" he cried loudly and opened his eyes to look around.

"Aha!" who is that in front? Standing at the foot of my bed? It is her! There is no doubt! It is the ghost of that mute. The ghost is standing with hair flowing wild and unkempt! Blood seems to be dripping from its forehead! Perhaps it is saying, 'I have come to take blood revenge!'

Sundara Chozla kept looking at the ghost and began screaming in a loud voice, speaking with rage, "You mute ghost! You tortured me even when alive without speaking a single word And even now you are killing me without saying a word. Why have you come? Tell me. If you wish to take blood revenge, kill me and go. Why are you just standing there? Why is your face so pathetic? Have you come to ask me something? tell me then! You cannot open your mouth and speak ... tell me by signs Don't torture me by just standing there. Why are your eyes brimming with tears? Why are you crying now? I cannot stand it; tell me if you wish to say something to me! Or get lost! Go, go away ... won't you go away? What do you want to do to me? You were the one who tried to push my darling son into the floods of the Cauvery and tried to kill him. With God's grace, your intention was not fulfilled. Your intention will not succeed, you fiend! Why are you still standing there? Gazing at me as if my heart would split! Go! Go away! Will you not go? Wont you go? Here, I will make you go away See..."

Sundara Chozla was looking for some object close to his hand even as he uttered the words. A small oil wick lamp made of five metals was within reach. He grabbed that lamp, aimed it at the face of ghost Mandakini and flung it with all force, screaming, "go away ghost, go away!" The lamp with a burning wick swirled like the discus thrown by Lord Thirumal and went spinning towards the form of the woman.

A loud wail emerged from the mouth of the woman that Sundara Chozla mistook for a ghost. Every breath in his body, every tendon, every bone, every nerve and muscle froze to become almost lifeless.

The lamp did not hit her face; it fell a little in front and began to roll noisily 'tanang tadang' with a metallic sound. The small lamp went out. Luckily another lamp was burning bright in another corner of the room. Peering in that half-light Sundara Chozla realized that the figure of Mandakini-ghost was still standing before him. For a moment her face was filled with a great unexplainable pity. The Ghost looked at him as if for one final look, with unfathomable yearning and was about to turn and go away.

It was in that instant that a doubt arose for the first time in Sundara Chozla's heart. Is this really Mandakini's ghost? Or is it another woman who resembles her totally? Or is it a twin sister? Or, perhaps.... perhaps it is she herself? Is she not dead? Is she still alive? Was I mistaken in my thinking? Oh! If it is really her, how cruel of me to throw the lamp at her!?! Her face which was full of pity for one instant changed to such deep sadness. Was she distressed by my cruelty? There, she is turning away ready to leave... She is looking around for an exit....

"Woman! Are you Mandakini the daughter of Karaiyar fisherfolk? Or, are you her ghost? Or are you a sister born with her? Stop, Stop, do not go; tell me the truth before you leave!"

When Sundara Chozla was shouting and crying out these words loudly, several persons came into that room hurriedly. Sundara Chozla recognized in one second that his Queen Malayaman's Daughter, Kundavai, Vanathi, Poonkuzlali, the Prime minister and his apprentice Azlvar-adiyan had all come into the room.

"Stop her! Stop her from running away. Ask her who she is and why she came here?" he cried.

All those people who had come in were stunned immobile for one moment. They were frightened by the dreadful look on the emperor's face and the fright in his terrified voice. Seeing Mandakini in that place drowned them in a flood of surprise. They stood motionless unable to decide what to do. The Prime Minister realized the situation and somehow guessed how it could have happened. He looked at Poonkuzlali and asked her, "Girl is this your aunt?"

"Yes Sir," she replied.

"Thirumalai why are you standing like a tree! Mandakini Devi is about to run away; stop her; it is the order of the Emperor!"

For the first time in his life, Thirumalai refused to obey the orders of his master. "Sir, instead of this, order me, to stop a storm wind!" he said.

Poonkuzlali had not been quiet all this time; she ran forward in one leap and held on to the shoulders of her aunt; Mandakini shook her loose and ran. Azlvar-adiyan did something immediately. He ran to the door from which all of them had come in and pulled it close bolting it shut. He then stood in front of the door spreading his arms wide, so that no one could open it. Mandakini looked around with eyes widened in fear, like a deer surrounded by hunters. She decided that there was no exit to escape; the only way was the way she had come down. From her glance towards the upper balcony the others realized her intention.

Sundara Chozla continued to shout, "Hold her, catch her and stop her. Ask her why she came? On whom and what revenge she seeks? Ask her!"

Poonkuzlali ran close to her aunt who was about to climb up that pillar to get to the terrace; instead of holding her, Poonkuzlali made some signs with her fingers. As if she had understood, Mandakini pointed towards the lamp that had fallen to the floor. Kundavai who was noticing all this asked, "Father! Was it you who threw the lamp at elder-mother?"

"Yes daughter! I could not bear the look that the ghost cast upon me. I threw the lamp at it!"

"Father, this is no ghost or ghou; she is the revered woman and is alive. Father, elder-mother had never died. Ask the Prime Minister; he will tell you everything. Kundavai then looked towards Poonkuzlali and Mandakini who seemed to be arguing about something. She went quickly towards them.

Sundara Chozla agitatedly tried to get up from his bed even as he was shouting, "daughter, do not go near her; that ogre will harm you somehow."

Queen Vanamadevi held his shoulders comfortingly and made him lie down. "My Lord please be calm; nothing will happen to your daughter!" she said.

Chapter 33 - Guardian Deity Of the Chozla Clan

Mandakini stared at Kundavai who had come close. The younger Pirati did something no one expected. She fell to the ground and bowed to Mandakini touching her feet reverently. Tears welled up in Mandakini's eyes. She bent down, touching Kundavai, lifting her up, hugging her. Kundavai threaded her hand with Mandakini's hand up to her shoulder in a hug; and then walked her towards the bed of the Emperor. It was only now that the Empress Queen Vanamadevi had a good look at Mandakini's face. She noticed the blood on her forehead.

"My Lord! Was it you who threw the lamp and wounded her? Oh! What have you done!" she cried.

“No, no. the lamp I threw did not touch her. She came and stood here with the bloody wound even before that. But this fiend might accuse me, if she so wishes. And all of you might believe her! You are all on her side. Malayaman’s daughter! Even you seem to be partial to her. Do you know who she is?” asked Sundara Chozla.

“I know My Lord. She is the guardian deity of our clan. She is the one who saved my darling son from drowning in the Cauvery.”

“Aha! Do you too believe that? Did Kundavai tell you that?”

“I speak of that which I saw with my own eyes. Kundavai also was a young child at that time. What could she know? Not only did this lady rescue Arulmozli, she is the guardian deity who saved your life and gave you back to the Chozla nation. She is the divine woman who saved you from the wild bear on Ghost Island.”

“Oh, good Lord! Do you know of those details too? Did you also know that she is alive all these years?”

“I have known this for some time now; after knowing about her, I have been asking our Prime Minister to bring her here from Lanka.”

“Anirudda, what is this that the Queen speaks about? Is she really the daughter of the Karaiyar fisherfolk? Is she really alive? Is it a falsehood that she is dead? Was it mere delusion that I believed that her ghost was haunting me? My mind is already very confused; don’t you all make me completely crazy!” said the Emperor.

“My Lord, it is true that she is the daughter of Karaiyar fisherfolk. It is also true that she did not die. My Lord Emperor, I have committed a big crime. There can be no forgiveness for my crime. Even so if by your kindness, your mercy” Anirudda was trying to explain.

“Prime Minister, I now understand. She is the one whom you ordered to be abducted at Kodi Karai and brought here forcefully. It is not true what you said, that the boat-girl came in the palanquin.”

“King of Kings, you must forgive me!”

“Aha! You ask forgiveness! I am sure it has never happened since the creation of this world that a fellow called king of kings, emperor, has been fooled like me! Why do such things happen without my knowledge? Why not tell me ahead of time? You were talking to me for such a long time even earlier this evening. Why did you not tell me then? Prime Minister, I am beginning to comprehend everything. What the nobles of Pazluvoor say is correct. You are all together, conspiring against me.”

“It is true that we schemed. But we did not plot against you. We thought that we should somehow bring this Karaiyar woman to you. I came to that conclusion after hearing from the Queen that your mind was in great distress because of the thought that she fell to her death into the sea. The Queen herself ordered me to do so. It was no easy task to bring her to you. I thought that it may be difficult for you to accept that she was alive, if I just say that to you; I thought I could tell you after bringing her to this town somehow. Last evening, when they were almost near the gates of the fort, Mandakini Devi vanished. This girl came in the palanquin instead of her. This whole day we were busy searching for Mandakini Devi. My assistant Thirumalai, jumped over the walls of Pazluvoor gardens after he had seen her jump into those palace gardens. But we could not find her. Pazluvoor footmen arrested Thirumalai and brought him to me. My Lord, I beg of you to forgive my apprentice for this crime of his.”

“Is this the only crime that needs to be forgiven? There seems to be much more! Then tell me all!”

“After that, even after we had waited till this evening, even after searching Pazluvoor mansion and gardens, we could not find her. Just now when you were taking a nap, we were all in the next room, talking about her. We were wondering about where she might have gone into hiding; how were we to explain all this to you and who should be telling you all this. Meantime, she herself has somehow come into your presence. It was as if opportunity presented itself, like a sweet fruit slipping into cream!”

The emperor finally turned to look towards the spot where Mandakini was standing. He noticed that Kundavai and Poonkuzlali had wiped the blood on her forehead with a wet cloth and were applying a soothing paste of medicinal herbs and sandalwood on the wound.

He asked, “Daughter of Tyaga-vidangar, can you ask her and find out how your aunt was wounded?”

Poonkuzlali stepped forward and said, “I asked her My Lord! But my aunt’s reply does not make any sense to me.”

“What does she say? Is she saying that the wound was because I threw the lamp at her?”

“Oh, no. No. She says that she was wounded because she bumped into a mountain. She says that she did not notice that she had blood on her face.”

Sundara Chozla did a very unusual thing in that moment. He began laughing jubilantly. It had been several years since the others had seen him laugh like that. He seemed to burst into laughter again and again after thinking of something. All of them began to look at him with some worry.

“Prime Minister, why do you all look at me like this; I have not newly gone crazy. It is my old madness still lingering! Don’t you all understand the reason for my laughter? She is saying

that she was wounded by bumping into a mountain in this fertile delta of the Chozla heartland! I am laughing on thinking about that! Why talk of mountains, we cannot even find a stone to carve a small statue in these regions! Even if someone wants to drop a stone on the head of the Chozla Emperor, they will not be able to find any granite, even for that! She apparently says that she bumped into a mountain! Which mountain did she bump into? Poonkuzlali ask her clearly!"

Vanathi had been listening to all this; her face suddenly brightened. She came forward a few steps and bowed to the Emperor. "Sire, an idea occurs to me; if you order me, I can speak," she said.

"Daughter of the Velirs, have you been here all this time? I did not even notice you. In all this hullabaloo it is a surprise that you did not fall down in a faint. What is the idea that occurs to you? About what? Speak!"

"I have an idea about what this lady says, that she bumped into a mountain. Sir," said Vanathi.

"Well, what is it? You are a smart girl. You might have figured some reason! Has she come all the way here with the bleeding wound, after bumping into stone mountains in Lanka?"

"No, My Lord. There is a sculpture court in the gardens of this palace. In that court there is a sculpture of a big Kailasa mountain being lifted up by Ravana. She perhaps bumped into that mountain."

Everyone was drowned by an ocean of surprise on hearing these words of Vanathi. 'Yes, it is possible; that is what it must be' they said to each other.

Kundavai caressed Vanathi's forehead and cracked her knuckles as if to ward off an evil eye! "My darling friend, how smart you are! What none of us remembered, occurred to you!" she said.

Poonkuzlali watched all this with anger; she turned to her aunt and signed to her.

"Yes. She says it is that mountain in the sculpture court. If I had seen that sculpture pavilion before, the idea would have occurred to me too."

The Emperor was gazing at Mandakini. "Yes, she must have lost her way and in the confusion, bumped into the mountain in the sculpture court. We don't know where she wanted to go while searching for a way. Finally, she has arrived here!"

The Prime Minister started speaking, "She must have looked for a way to come to you. I have no doubt about that. I was telling all these people. She will not go away from here before she has seen you."

“I do not believe this, Prime Minister. If she had wanted to see me, would she not have come earlier? Would she not have come in all these twenty-five and odd years? Why wait all this time before coming? Why come and haunt me like a ghost? Yes. Yes, I did think that she was a ghost. Is it not true? She is wandering the forests and mountains of Lanka like a ghost. I have spent all these years in the pleasures of living in a palace! How am I to describe the seriousness, and power of this fault? How often have I not hallucinated in fear seeing an apparition like her. Who knows! Perhaps she came secretly like she did now, to see me and went away. And I was terrified thinking it was a ghost! Twenty-five years! Twenty-five eons!”

The Emperor who was mumbling in this fashion as if talking to himself, suddenly turned towards the Prime Minister, “You asked forgiveness saying that you had committed a crime. What crime was that?” he asked angrily.

“How can it serve justice to ask the criminal about the crime?”

“Then who else can we question? There is no need to ask anyone; the answer is evident in your face. You came and reported to me that she jumped into the sea and died. That was a falsehood. You have guarded that lie for twenty-five years. And I believed you. Aniruddha, truly your crime is heinous!”

“I am not the only one responsible for that, Emperor. This daughter of the Karaiyar folk is also responsible. It is true that she jumped into the sea. She gained a rebirth. She took a pledge that we should not tell you that she is still alive. She threatened to kill herself again, if I did not give her that pledge. You can ask her yourself and find out if all this is true.”

“I do not have to ask her; it must be true. However, there is nothing false about my saying that all of you are conspiring against me!” said Sundara Chozla.

“There is no forgiveness for my crime; I am not asking to be forgiven. The burden in my mind weighing me all these years is now removed. Please permit me now, Sire, to take my leave. Permit me to go to Thiru-Arangam and spend my days in serving God Sri Ranganatha.”

“That is not possible. Brahma-raya, because of your misdeed all those years ago, there is much confusion now. Only after you have solved all this can you go to serve Lord Sri Ranganatha,” spoke the Emperor.

Chapter 34 – Ravana In Danger

Sundara Chozla looked at his darling daughter and said, “Kundavai I need to discuss some details about the administration of this kingdom with the Prime Minister. All of you go and do whatever you usually do. When you go, take ‘this’ too with you; Let your mother remain by my side for a while.”

The Emperor referred to Mandakini as ‘this;’ his disgust with her was obvious from the way he spoke of her.

Kundavai looked at her father with some disappointment. Her father noticed that and said, “It may be better if we can find out is the mountain she bumped into, is it the Kailasa mountain in the sculpture court? Go find out by taking her there. I cannot tolerate seeing her standing here.”

Kundavai took Mandakini’s hand in hers and prepared to leave with her, disappointment clouding her face. Malayaman’s daughter Vanamadevi came up to her daughter Kundavai and said something in her ear, so that only Kundavai could hear. “My child, she now looks unkempt and repulsive to behold. What is the point in being upset with your father? Go show all your expertise in fashion and beautification on her. Let us see!”

Kundavai expressed her agreement with a smile and led Mandakini away from that room. Vanathi and Poonkuzlali went with her.

Sundara Chozla looked at his Prime Minister and his Queen alternating from one to the other, again and again. “I do not know why the two of you plotted together to do this thing. It is a big mistake if you thought that it would make me happy. Prime Minister, why did you make such an effort and capture this uncivilized and uncouth creature and bring her here from Kodi Karai? At least now, tell me the truth; do not hide anything from me anymore,” he said.

The Prime Minister Aniruddha began speaking in voice choked with emotion:

“I shall not repeat the mistake that I committed before now. I will not be party to hide anything from you anymore. I made all this effort in the hope that truth will be revealed. Your mind was suffering with the thought that because of you a woman fell to her death in the sea. For a long time till recently I thought, that you had forgotten that incident. I soon realized that distress became embedded in your heart and increased the pain in your feelings as the days went by. The Queen explained to me that you would often dream about that incident and cry out in pain. Even more than you, the Queen herself was undergoing extreme distress. She consulted with me about it some time back. And we decided to make this effort. We wished to bring her in front of you to clear your mind of the painful thoughts that she had died because of you. We thought that you would believe us telling you that she was still alive, only if you saw her personally. If that was a crime, kindly forgive us Gracious Lord.”

Sundara Chozla spoke angrily on hearing this:

“Yes! it is a crime; a huge crime! She has been haunting me as a ghost all these times. She came in my dreams and tortured me. Instead of a ghost you have brought before me a lunatic, wild thing. Did you think that it would make me happy? Never! If you had spoken to me before doing this, I would have definitely asked you to give up the idea of bringing her here. Let it go! Anyway, what is done is done. You have with great difficulty brought this mute-lunatic woman here. How are you planning and when do you plan to send her away?” on such questions by the Emperor, Anirudda became truly dumbstruck!

The Queen Vanamadevi now spoke, “My Revered Lord, I have no intention of sending away my sister from here. She will stay with me here in my palace. I will think of her as a sister born elder to me, revere her, and care for her!”

“My dear you need not try to prove your regard for me in such a fashion. I know you as my beloved wife in all these twenty-five years, more chaste and venerable than Kannagi of yore! I know you have even ignored your much-loved children, to be by my side since I have fallen ill; you observe penances and prayers for my sake. There is no need for you to demonstrate your love and regard for me by bringing this uncouth lunatic who wandered in forests, into this palace. My dear! Daughter of Malayaman, listen to me, Prime Minister, you too listen to me: Sometime long ago, in an uninhabited island where I was cast ashore, I saw this mute-lunatic. Yes, it is true I loved her then. I am not denying that. There is no greater mistake than you both believing that I am still yearning for her. There were many reasons why I was in love with her at that time. That love has changed in these twenty-five years in to disgust and hate. She has tortured my thoughts while I was awake and in my dreams. I cannot even bear the thought that she is in this palace! Send her away from here before you do anything else. I thought she was a ghost and threw the lamp at her. I do not know what I would have done if I had realized that she is alive!”

The Queen and the Prime Minister were shaken to the core, on hearing these cruel and harsh words of the Emperor, spoken with anger and hatred. They had never expected that the Emperor would speak and act in this fashion. Mr. Aniruddha had thought that emperor would chide him and perhaps even punish him for the old crime. The Queen on her part had thought that even if he did not speak openly about it, the Emperor would in his heart of hearts be filled with happiness, and truly appreciate her magnanimous gesture. Her Lord’s cruel words made her feel disappointed, somewhat angry and even hateful.

As if to crown all his brutal, pitiless words, Sundara Chozla continued, “Chee! Who in this world would have felt a loss if this crazy-mute had not lived? How much better it would have been if she had truly died when she fell into the sea; good riddance! Which total idiot picked her up and saved her from the sea as if he had nothing else to do?”

Queen Vanamadevi was unable to tolerate his words anymore; in an emotional, passionate voice she said, “My Lord, please do not speak such words! It is the greatest sin! Many elders

and revered souls have repeatedly spoken that being thankless is a great sin. If you wish you can forget how this best among women had saved your life. How can we forget that she saved our most beloved son Arulmozli? Even if you forget that, I cannot. I shall remain beholden to this divine lady for all fourteen births destined for me.”

“Devi, you repeat that old story!” Before he could continue, Vanamadevi interrupted her husband.

“It is not a story, My Lord. Arulmozli himself spoke of her. He said that the lady who had rescued him from the floods of the Cauvery had protected and saved him from many dangers in Lanka. Fortunately, he has come to Nagai Port and is safe there. Ask them to bring him here. You speak to him and find out for yourself.”

“Yes, it is true that Arulmozli is in Nagai Port; But how can we be sure that he is safe? Perhaps he was affected by yesterday’s big storm. Prime Minister, I am not calm in my heart. I feel that some unexplainable danger is about to strike my clan. At this time, I take it as a bad omen that this crazy-mute woman is here.”

“My Lord it is no bad omen that the daughter of the Karaiyar fisherfolk is here at this time. It is a good omen. Her being here is a safeguard to all our clan. The Goddess Durga-parameswari to whom I pray at all times, has been gracious to me and sent this lady here.”

“Never! Goddess Durga has not sent her. Lord Saturn, Sanischara, the harbinger of all bad fortune has sent her! Send that lunatic away from here before you do anything else; if you cannot do that, I must undertake to do so myself...”

“My Dear Lord, please be gracious to give me this boon. Please give permission for her to remain here in this palace till Arulmozli comes here.” Thus asked the Queen, in an emotional voice and bowed to touch his feet.

Sundara Chozla turned to ask, “Prime Minister Sir! Did you hear this? Did you hear this boon that this Daughter of Malayaman, this innocent who believes every white liquid is pure milk, is asking of me? Oh! Good Lord! Can there be such an innocent in this whole wide world? She never has asked me for anything! And she now goes and asks me for such a boon! My heart cannot refuse her! But every minute that the crazy-mute woman spends in this palace will be a hellish torture for me. Therefore, make arrangements to get the Prince here as soon as possible.”

“Yes, My lord. I will do as you ask. Shall I send elephants and cavalry along with footmen to bring him here openly? Or ...”

“You are asking if you should bring him here secretly, in disguise! You think chaos will erupt in this Chozla country if he comes here openly.”

“I not only think that, I am sure of it. People are angry because of many reasons. All they need is some tiny spark. Immediately, their anger will erupt and encompass all; we cannot guarantee what might happen to the Pazluvoor nobles and Lord Madurandaka.”

“What kind of words are these Prime Minister? If people behave so disgracefully, what has happened to our Chozla armed forces?”

“The confusion and anger are the greatest in our armed forces. The mobs may be quietened after some shouting and disturbance. The armed men will destroy Tanjavur Fort; imprison the Lords of Pazluvoor and Lord Madurandaka. They will place the most gallant, the most brave warrior Arulmozli Varma, who conquered Lanka, on this throne and then think what to do next.”

“And you too, have a secret wish in your heart that it should happen that way. The people wander in confusion by believing stories made up by foolish Astrologers! Get this engraved clearly in your heart and mind. Madurandaka the son of my revered Elder-Uncle, Grandsire Gandara Aditya, has the true rights to this Chozla throne. I have decided to anoint him and crown him. I do not care if the people object! I do not care if divinities and the three great Gods come and try to stop me! I will not listen. If my sons stand against this”

“My Lord nothing like that can happen. Your sons will never, at any time stand against your wishes. Arulmozli has no wish for kingdoms. They offered him the Jeweled Crown and Throne of Lanka and he refused it. Would such a man go against your words? And Karikala is no different. You chose to elevate him and anoint him as Crown Prince. He agreed as it was your wish. Do we need to recount his bravery and gallantry? If he wished it, he could conquer a large empire for himself with the might of his sword. He has no wish to rule a kingdom. All you need to do is tell him what you really wish for, just one word!”

“He is dancing around without coming here all these days despite the many messages we have sent him, because he is afraid that I might say such a word, and that he will need to heed that word!”

“My Lord Emperor, the Crown Prince has built a golden palace for you in Kanchi City and is waiting for you to go there...”

“I know what he is waiting for! Like Kamsa of mythology, who imprisoned his parents, he is waiting to throw us in prison and ascend the Chozla throne! Who knows what palace he has built? Golden Palace or a wax palace that can burn down with us in it!”

“My Lord it is truly brutal and torturous for you to be speaking in this way about Karikala!” said Vanamadevi.

“They have poisoned his heart this much!” said Mr. Anirudda.

“It is none other. It is Karikala himself who has poisoned my mind. If he is truly my son, why has he not come to me even though I have sent word to him so many times?” asked Sundara Chozla.

“There could be some other good reasons?”

“Fine, you can guess a good reason and tell me!”

“The rumor all over the country is that if Karikala crossed the Kollidam and comes south, the Lords of Pazluvoor would arrest him.”

“People have turned my son’s mind by saying such things. Her father Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman is one such fellow; and that Velir of Kodumbalur is another fellow! And you too have joined with them perhaps, what do I know!”

“My Lord, it is not my nature to speak ill of anyone when they are away. You spoke just now about danger; that you are worried in your heart about some impending danger. What you feel in your heart is very true. There is grave danger coming towards the Chozla clan. The danger is coming in two ways. There are two grave conspiracies in this country now. The nobles of Pazluvoor and Kadamboor ...”

“Mr. Anirudda, stop this. The noblemen of Pazluvoor have served Chozla royals for more than a hundred years. Elder Lord Pazluvoor has fought in twenty-four battles and bears sixty-four war-wounds on his body! Instead of saying that such a man is conspiring against the Chozla clans, one can believe that the sun has gone dark and fire is raging on ocean waters.”

“My Lord, eclipses darken the sun. Volcanoes burn from under the ocean. I am not about to talk about all that. I have never said that Lords Pazluvoor are conspiring against Chozla clans. They are trying really hard to crown Madurandaka.”

“What is wrong if they think of crowning Madurandaka who is the son of the very devout Gandara Aditya? The right to this throne truly belongs to Madurandaka.”

“That is exactly what I am saying. Moreover, you yourself have come forward to give the throne to Madurandaka. When this is the case where is the fault in Lord Pazluvoor? He is just making an effort to fulfil your wish.”

“They have now earned my gratitude even more!”

“My Lord they are also undertaking certain activities that do not have your approval. They have been discussing the option of dividing the Chozla kingdom in two; everything south of the Cauvery to Madurandaka and the lands to the north for Karikala. The idea is being discussed today in Sambuvaraya’s Fort. My Lord, this Kingdom that has been enlarged for the last hundred years by your forefathers, this Chozla empire established from Lanka to the

shores of the Godavari by Vijayala, Aditya Chozla, Paranthaka the great, My Lord are you agreeable to divide this large empire?"

"Prime Minister, I will never agree to that. Before dividing this kingdom, I will ask them to chop me down. I cannot believe that Lord Pazluvoor has embarked on such a venture. Perhaps he has agreed to that idea thinking that I may wish to give at least half the kingdom to my son. When he knows that it is not to my liking, he will give up the idea. Prime Minister, I will crown Madurandaka without reducing even a finger's breath of the kingdom. I don't care if my children oppose that or even if Lord Pazluvoor is against that. I will not listen to such counsel."

"My Lord, you need not care if Lord Pazluvoor opposes it. Your sons do not care to do so. They are not the opposition to giving the crown to Madurandaka. The opposition comes from a higher authority. The objection is coming from the divine lady who is revered by you, by me and by all the Chozla people. I tried talking to her even a few days ago."

"You are talking about Lady Sembiyan Madevi. Someone has spoilt that great lady's mind. The Elder Pirati perhaps thinks that I wish to crown my sons! Prime Minister please arrange for her to come here immediately. I will make her change her mind."

"My Lord, it is not that easy. Revered Lord Gandara Aditya has given strict orders to his wife before he departed from us. I was near him when he was about to die. 'there is a very important reason for not crowning Madurandaka. My life's partner knows the reason.' That is what your Elder-Sire said."

"Prime Minister, is there really some such objection? Do you know what that could be?"

"If I were aware, would I wait till you ask Sir! You need to have the Elder Pirati come here and find out the reason from her by yourself."

"Yes, that is one thing that keeps bothering me. Make arrangements for the Elder Pirati to come here immediately. I will solve whatever the objection it is. Who can we send to invite her here? Why not send my daughter Kundavai herself? My dear, go ask your daughter to come here now," Sundara Chozla said these words to his wife.

Even though the Queen was listening to the conversation between the Prime Minister and her husband with half an ear, all her thoughts were on the mute- queen who had left that room earlier. Therefore, when the emperor asked her to go fetch Kundavai, she hurried to the inner apartments. When she reached the women's apartment, she found that at the girls, Kundavai, Vanathi and Poonkuzlali were in some greatly disturbed state. The Queen immediately understood the reason for that. She could not find the mute-queen in those rooms. When asked, Kundavai explained, "Mother it was no easy task to follow your requests. Even so the three of us insisted and forced Mandakini Devi to have a bath. We dressed her in new clothes. Vanathi was dressing her hair, while Poonkuzlali was threading a

string of flowers. I went into the other room to bring some jewelry. I heard these girls cry out even as I was choosing the ornaments. When I hurried back, I could not see Mandakini Devi. As soon as Vanathi had tied up her hair, Mandakini suddenly jumped up and ran away. We could not find her in these apartments. We are still looking for her.”

The Queen smiled on hearing this. She asked, “After you had dressed her and made her up, was there a mirror before her?”

Vanathi replied, “Yes it was there, a little further from her.”

“She might have felt shy on seeing her made up face in the mirror. She might have run away to hide somewhere. Search properly, some more, everywhere. She might have gone to hide in the palace gardens. It is usual for her to jump across walls or go through window openings.” So said the Queen.

They went to look for her in the gardens. Their worry increased when they could not find the mute-queen anywhere. When they were wondering if they should go and tell the Prime Minister and the Emperor, they heard a sound ‘clang, clannng’ from somewhere as if something was being hit. It was like the sound of an iron sculptor’s chisel being hit on a granite stone by a hammer. Upon listening to the sound and realizing that it was coming from the sculpture court, they bade a serving maid to bring a lamp; all of them went to the sculpture pavilion. They saw a curious scene in the sculpture court. Mandakini who was now dressed somewhat fashionably, was holding a long-handled hammer and striking again and again at Lord Ravana’s hands that were holding up Mount Kailasa. It was a sculpture made of very strong granite; her efforts did not seem to have harmed Lord Ravana! But he was most likely to be harmed very soon. If two or three of his hands were broken, the whole mountain would be displaced and come down upon his several heads even more firmly. The heads may even shatter into smithereens. It was in such a dangerous situation for the sculpture that Kundavai and the other women came into the court. On seeing them come in, Mandakini dropped the hammer in her hands and stood looking at them with a smile.

Every one who came to that sculpture court, except Poonkuzlali, thought, ‘It is true that she is a crazed woman. There is nothing surprising that the Emperor is disgusted with her.’”

The Queen looked at them and alerted them saying, “Girls, do not speak of this in the presence of the Emperor.”

Chapter 35 - Emperor's Anger

A furious argument was taking place between the Emperor Sundara Chozla and Prime Minister Aniruddha at the same time when the womenfolk had found Mandakini in the sculpture court.

As soon as the Queen had stepped out, Mr. Anirudda said, "My Lord Emperor, I was hesitant about speaking of certain things when the womenfolk were here. I must speak of those matters now. The Aabathudavi guards of Veera-Pandya are still roaming secretly in our Chozla lands. They are awaiting the right time to go into action to fulfil their violent oaths of revenge."

"There is nothing new about that; it is known to me. That is why the noblemen of Pazluvoor have put in extra measures of security for me," said the Emperor with a sarcastic laugh.

"You know about the Aabathudavis. But it is unlikely that you know about the fact that the financial resources to fund their activities is being expended from the treasury of this Chozla kingdom."

"Aha! What rumor or made-up story is this?"

"I must tell you about even more bizarre made-up stories. Newly minted gold coins from Elder Lord Pazluvoor's treasure vault were poured in a mound in the middle of a gang of the Aabathudavis when they met in secret. My assistant Thirumalai who saw it with his own eyes is here; if you so desire, he can speak in detail about that...."

"No need. Pazluvoor nobles of several generations have given their blood and allegiance for the welfare of the Chozlas. Even if King Arischandra of legend, who never spoke a lie, comes to tell me that they gave gold from my treasury to the treacherous terrorists, I will not believe that."

"Forgive me sir. I am not heaping such an accusation of treason upon the Lords of Pazluvoor. Is it not possible that gold coins from their treasury is being given to the terrorists without their knowledge?"

"How can that be possible? Can life be taken without the knowledge of Yama, the Lord of Death?"

"If Lord Yama in his old age had married a young maiden, that too is possible."

"I too did not particularly care about Lord Pazluvoor getting married at this age; I spoke to him about that. But I cannot tolerate such treasonous accusations being heaped upon him because of that."

“Sir, I am not accusing Lord Pazluvoor of treason. I accuse the Young Queen to whom he is married.”

“One can somehow tolerate accusations heaped upon menfolk. You accusing an unfortunate, orphan girl, falls upon my ears like piercing iron rods. Deplorable!”

“However, deplorable it is to hear, I must speak to you of some truths about the Young Queen of Pazluvoor. Because I did not share a certain truth with you at the correct time much sorrow has resulted. You were angry about it a little while ago. Please listen to me a little patiently.”

The Emperor smiled to hear these clever words of his Prime Minister. “You are turning my own words against me. There is no connection between what we spoke and this thing that you are speaking of. Go ahead, tell me. I shall listen.”

“The Young Queen Nandini, arrived at the Pazluvoor mansions about three years ago. Since then, certain sorcerers have started coming and going to Pazluvoor mansions. The Younger Lord Pazluvoor, Kalanthaka, knows of this. He is not happy about these visits by sorcerers. Even so, not having the courage to speak against his elder brother, he has been keeping quiet.”

“If we think of brothers, it should be like them!”

“Because of devotion to one’s elder brother there should be no danger to the kingdom?”

“What danger has now befallen the kingdom because of this? Will the kingdom be destroyed because a foolish young girl, in her superstitious belief, calls upon a sorcerer to cast spells? Are you saying that I have fallen ill because of spells cast by the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?”

“My lord the men coming to see the Young Queen are not truly sorcerers! I suspect them to be conspiring terrorists masquerading as sorcerers. I suspect that it is through them that the gold from the treasury is being distributed.”

“One may suspect anything of anyone! Do you have any proof?”

“My Lord, My King of Kings, if we were to examine the Pazluvoor mansions and the treasure vault today, we may be able to find proof.”

“No one has told me anything as displeasing as this, till this day. Anirudda, you are a dear friend to only me. Lord Pazluvoor has been a dear friend of Chozla royals for the last three generations! He is like iron armor for the Chozlas. He is as dangerous to our enemies as the thunderbolt weapon of Indra the King of heavens. How can we search the mansion of such a man, when he is not present? Instead of believing that Lord Pazluvoor has given place to

terrorists in his mansion, I would more readily believe that Malayaman's Daughter is giving me poison saying that it is medicine!"

"My lord this is not happening with the knowledge of Lord Pazluvoor. He is not aware of what is happening in front of his eyes that have been blinded by passionate infatuation. Without his knowledge, his mansion has become the headquarters of extremist groups. There is reason to believe that the Young Queen of Pazluvoor is part of such plotting groups."

"What other accusations are you going to heap upon that unfortunate girl?"

"Some nights ago, in the middle of Thiru-Puram-biyam forest, in the ruins of Prithvipathi's palli padai memorial, a coronation ceremony took place. They sat a boy younger than five years of age upon a throne and crowned him as the King or the Pandiyas and as the Emperor of the Chozla Kingdom. Those who participated in this ceremony took a frightening pledge to annihilate the very rootstock of Chozla clans."

"Prime Minister, are you thinking that you can frighten me by such information? Were you expecting my legs and hands to start shivering?"

"No, my Lord, no. I did not think much of that farce of a ceremony. I just wished to inform you that the Young Queen of Pazluvoor was in the midst of those gangsters who took those pledges that night."

"Who is the smart spy who was near them and saw all this and came to report it all to you? Was it your favorite apprentice who is standing over there? Was it him?"

"He could reach that place only after all those things had already happened. The person who saw it all in person was Vandiya Devan of the Vaanar Clan."

"Are you talking about that spy who came here once and then escaped and ran away?"

"He is not a spy My Lord. He is a confidant and friend of your dear son Karikala."

"There are all sorts of friends for Karikala! One does not speak in the same fashion as another. Perhaps what he reported is true. We cannot do anything about that now. Lord Pazluvoor is also not here now. His queen is also not here. We can inquire about it all after they come back. Prime Minister, after what you have spoken is such detail about the Young Queen, I have a strong desire to meet this astonishing young woman. Because of my disgust about the affair, when Lord Pazluvoor came back after marrying her, I told him not to present her to me. Perhaps she has become angry about me because of that? When Lord Pazluvoor returns, this time I will ask him to present her to me and calm down her anger about me."

"Emperor, I too wish for that! There are several other important reasons to appease Nandini

Devi's anger. Till Nandini comes back, I ask that the mute-queen from Lanka be permitted to remain in this palace."

"Aha! Now you have crowned her the Queen of Lanka! Let it be! What is the connection between her and the Young Queen of Pazluvoor?"

"That is what we need to find out. My Lord, if they were to meet each other in person, perhaps we may find out the connection! Perhaps the anger of Nandini Devi towards the Chozlas will change."

"Prime Minister, I am surprised that you are so worried about the enmity of a young woman."

"There is reason to be worried about the enmity and anger of Nandini Devi. I am concerned whether it is appropriate for me to speak to you about that."

"Who else will speak to me when you yourself hesitate? Do not leave out anything; tell me everything."

The Prime Minister was lost in thought for a few minutes, he then spoke, "My Lord what I am about to tell now is a very confusing matter. I am not sure if it is appropriate to speak with you. But please listen to me patiently. Those who have seen both Mandakini Devi and Nandini Devi have been surprised by the similarity of their appearances."

"There are many such surprising facets in our world. One tree looks just like another! One crazy person looks just like another mad person."

"A tree does not put on a disguise and masquerade as another tree. One crazy person does not pretend to be the ghost of another mad person and come to frighten and distress the Emperor."

"What are you saying Prime Minister?!?"

"You have been distressed thinking that Mandakini Devi's was coming to haunt you at night time."

"Are you saying that it was not her ghost, it was she herself who came?"

"No, no. I am saying that the Young Queen was acting like Mandakini's ghost and haunting you."

Sundara Chozla sat up a little and with a very angry voice said, "If what you are saying now is proved to be correct, I will with my own hands squeeze that fiend's neck and ..."

“My Lord, please! Don’t not utter any such oaths in your own words!” the Prime Minister spoke hurriedly.

“Why? What is this pity you have for her? What matters what I do to her who tortured me in this fashion?” asked Sundara Chozla passionately.

The Prime Minister was hesitant, “however much she tormented, if the tormentor was a close relative, ... perhaps if she was one’s own daughter...”

“Prime Minister, what nonsensical blabbering is this?” asked Sundara Chozla.

“My Lord, I have truly tested your patience. Punish me for that as you wish! But please do not talk of punishing Nandini Devi. She is not only the wedded wife of the Lord Pazluvoor, the minister of taxation, treasurer of the Chozla Empire; she is also the daughter of Sundara Chozla the emperor of the three nations. Who has the right to punish her for what crime?” asked Mr. Anirudda.

On hearing this, Sundara Chozla looked at him for some minutes and then burst out laughing.

“My Lord, today is truly a good day. I have heard you laugh more than twice.”

“Brahma-raya, I was thinking until now that there is only one mad woman in this palace. I now realize that you are more crazy than her! She is mute and mad. You are a crazy prattler of words!” Sundara Chozla continued to laugh again and again thinking of these words.

Chapter 36 - Late In The Night

The women entered the chamber even as Sundara Chozla continued to laugh. First came the Queen Vanamadevi. Behind her was Mandakini Devi held on both her sides by Kundavai and Vanathi and almost dragged along; behind them was Poonkuzlali and a serving maid, all coming in as if in a procession. The Emperor’s laughter cheered them somewhat. Mandakini looked at him for a second and then looked down; she kept doing so. Her beautification was now complete. Kundavai Pirati was famous in those days for her fashion and dressing skills. Chieftains and noble families would send their daughters to live with her at Pazlayarai, as part of her court of friends, so that they too could learn the fashion and polish of the polite world. Kundavai had used all her expertise upon getting the mute-queen dressed. Perhaps because of some unknown instinctive feeling in her heart, she had bound Mandakini’s tresses in a fashion similar to Nandini’s style, a one-sided coiffure. When the dressing was complete, all the women realized how exactly like Nandini she looked! Even the age difference of twenty-odd years was not apparent because she was an active, healthy woman who wandered in the forests and seashores of Lanka. Those women led Mandakini to the Emperors presence with some pride. Each of them had a reason to be proud about this.

During the historical times of this story, it was common for kings and chieftains to take several wives at the same time. War and battlefields were a constant. Men of the royal and noble families were at some battle field or other at all times. In order to ensure the succession and continuity of the clan and family, these royals and chieftains married several women at the same time. It was considered as a mark of good character for the chief queen or the first wife to not become jealous of the junior wives; they were expected to take them into their friendly fold. It was in this fashion that Vanamadevi was enthusiastic. Kundavai was proud to exhibit her cosmetic decorating skills: she had made a crazy looking unkempt woman appear as an incomparable young beauty. Poonkuzlali was exultant that her aunt was being given such a royal welcome in the palace. These palace women were behaving very contrary to her preconceived notions!

The Emperor looked upon the procession of these women who came with happy, proud faces. His laughter died immediately. Mandakini's new appearance astonished him greatly. As if to check if what he was seeing was true, he closed his eyes with his palm and opened them to look again.

His mind was registering all that the Prime Minister had been telling him. He became fully aware of the resemblance of the midnight apparition that had been haunting him in recent months and Mandakini in his presence now. He also noticed several differences. A wish rose to occupy his heart; he must research this mystery in all detail and get to know the truth. The disgust he had felt about Mandakini had not changed. He decided not to express that disgust.

"Prime Minister, I just said that you are crazy. All that madness and delusion is in me. From today not only the doctor must come visit me every day, but we need to get an exorcist or sorcerer too. It does not matter even if we get hold of that sorcerer who comes to see Pazluvoor Nandini, and make him come see me!" he spoke in a soft voice.

Aniruddha was startled, he prayed in his heart, 'Let none of those sorcerers come anywhere near the Emperor!' He then began speaking, "My Lord, why do we need sorcerers and exorcists. Neither do we need chants and spells. There is no greater sacred word than the name of Lord Sri Narayana."

"Father, they said that you asked for me. You wanted me to go to Pazlayarai. Should all of us go?" asked Kundavai.

Instead of answering her, Sundara Chozla looked at his Prime Minister, "Anirudda, I have changed my mind. For some reason all these women seem to be very joyous. They are glad as if a new daughter-in-law has come into their house! I do not wish to separate them at this time. As you said just now, let them all remain here itself for some days. Lady Sembian Madevi has a great respect for and confidence in you. So, you can go personally and escort her here from Pazlayarai. Send your assistant to Nagai Port. I shall tell Lord Kalanthaka myself, to arrange to get Lord Pazluvoor and his Queen back here as soon as possible."

“That is a good plan My Lord. It may be some days before everyone can reach here. Because of yesterday’s storm and rain all the rivers are running in full flood,” concurred the Prime Minister.

“There is no harm. We who waited so long will not lose anything by waiting a few more days. If we can arrange to have Karikala also come here, we can discuss and finalize everything. If he continues to refuse to come here, I may have to go to him! We can think about that later. You go tomorrow and bring the Elder Pirati here. Before you go, pay some attention for the relief of people suffering hardship because of this storm. We have forgotten the most important duty in administration of a people by getting enmeshed in our family problems,” said the Emperor.

“I have not forgotten that my Lord. All arrangement will be made. You can rest without worry.” The Prime Minister took leave of his Emperor and left.

That night Sundara Chozla truly experienced a calm that he had not felt for a long time. A heavy burden that had been oppressing his heart for a long time was now lifted upon knowing that Mandakini of the Karaiyar fisherfolk had not died. The news that Arulmozli was at Nagai Port also comforted him. He had confidence that Choodamani Vihara monastery was a well-built strong building and that no harm would fall upon people staying in it.

He was amused by the suggestion of Anirudda that the Young Queen of Pazluvoor could be his daughter. This blossomed as a smile on his face. He remained conversing with his Queen and the other women. He congratulated Kundavai on her decorative skills. “You have turned an uncouth forest creature who appeared disgusting, into a heavenly nymph like Indrani. Did you find just this old woman to practice your skill? You should have spent your efforts on a young girl like this Vanathi here.” He was teasing his daughter. He then spoke to Poonkuzlali and learned various other details about his son Arulmozli.

Finally at the end Poonkuzlali asked, “My Lord, may I ask permission to go back to Kodi Karai. May I leave tomorrow? I have no more worry about my aunt anymore.”

“You said that your cousin, the son of your other aunt, is gripped by fever and on a sick bed. Are you not worried about him? Do not be in such a hurry to go back. Stay for a few days before you go.”

Poonkuzlali remained silent.

That night Sundara Chozla slept well. He did not dream too much either. Whatever dream occurred was not a nightmare; they were pleasant dreams. His womenfolk too slept calmly in the room next to his chamber. The only one among them who was not restful and who did not sleep was Mandakini. All the events of the day had created a huge turmoil in her mind. Most importantly, her thoughts wavered between the treasure vault and the underground

passage. Her effort to close the exit from that underground passage by breaking the hands of the Ravana sculpture did not succeed. She kept thinking about it and her mind was restless without any solace. She kept looking around in the dim light of the night lamp in that room. Most importantly she was looking at the window frame-work on the balcony like apertures of the upper levels looking down into their rooms.

It was soon past midnight. Late night had started; soon it was past the third period of the night. At that time, she could see a figure in the window embrasure of the upper level. A frightening horrible face was trying to hide beside that window and was looking down into that room. She somehow recognized that face. Startled by what she saw, she jumped up quickly. She peered at that window embrasure; the figure was not there. She walked up softly till the doorway of the next bedchamber and looked inside. She saw the Emperor sleeping comfortably in there. She examined the window lattice work of the upper balconies looking into that high ceilinged room. Nothing was visible. She went back and awakened Poonkuzlali by gently touching her and shaking her. Poonkuzlali who was in deep sleep opened her eyes. She was shocked to see the expression on the mute-queen's face. Her mute-aunt signed and asked Poonkuzlali to follow her. She had deep confidence and regard for aunt and so she rose without making any sound and followed her.

As her mute-aunt hurried along the hallways towards the sculpture court, she picked up one of the night lamps burning in the hallway. Poonkuzlali became a little worried on reaching the sculpture court. Was she going to try and break the sculpture again? If she tried that, every one in that palace might be awakened by the noise and confirm that her aunt was truly mad. She must try and stop her if her aunt ventured in that effort. She followed her aunt into that sculpture court.

Oh! What is this? One of the heads of that Ravana sculpture was moving! No, no it was not Ravana's head. It was another head that could be seen in an alcove like opening above Ravana's ten heads and below the Kailasa mountain he was lifting up. That head soon vanished; was it imagination? Half asleep dream? Or was it merely a shadow moving in the faint light of that hand lamp? She was not sure if aunt Mandakini had seen the same figure. But she was hurrying towards that sculpture; luckily, she did not seem to see the rock hammer lying on the floor nearby. She lifted the lamp and showed Poonkuzlali the dark spot above Ravana's hands and heads, just below the mountain he was lifting. She saw an opening in there.

What Poonkuzlali had guessed earlier was true. This was the exit or entry to a secret tunnel. It had been so skillfully crafted that no one could see that such an opening existed there. Her aunt had been trying earlier in the night to close that tunnel entrance. The others had stopped her, not understanding...

Even as Poonkuzlali was mulling over such thoughts, her aunt made signs to her that she was to follow her. Then with the lamp in her hand she squeezed into that opening and stepped into the secret passage. Slowly her body disappeared and soon her head too vanished. The

hand lamp too had become hidden. Just a faint light could be seen. Poonkuzlali too twisted and squeezed her body and stepped into that opening carefully without hitting her head on any of the stone work. Within minutes she had vanished; so did the lamplight. Darkness once again engulfed the sculpture court.

In the morning when the Queen, Kundavai and Vanathi woke up and looked, they were bewildered at not finding Poonkuzlali or her mute aunt in their beds where they were supposed to be sleeping. Even after searching all over the palace, the gardens and sculpture court, they could not find them. None could decipher how they had vanished as if by magic. When informed, the Emperor was a little concerned at first. Later he said, "it is a good thing that those lunatics went away. It does not matter how they went!"

In spite of these words, an unexplainable worry and fear took hold of his heart and mind.

Chapter 37 - Chaos At Kadamboor

Since Aditya Karikala's arrival at Kadamboor fort, the people who usually lived there as well as all the other guests had to spend their time as if they were standing on sharp thorns and walking on burning embers. No one could guess when and what kind of fiery missile would emerge from the Prince's tongue. All were on tenterhooks.

Karikala continued to make vague and pointed remarks about the conspiracy to elevate Madurandaka to the Chozla throne; this made every one edgy and anxious. Lord Pazluvoor could not bear this any longer. He insisted to Lord Sambuvaraya that they should openly tell him about the opinion of all the chieftains. Lord Sambuvaraya cautioned him, "Please be patient. Anyhow he has come here as our guest. He seems to be an utter brute. What would we do if something contrary to what we expect happens? We can tell him when we find an appropriate time." He kept postponing the confrontation.

Instead of leaving them in a quandary of how to broach the subject, one day, when all were gathered together, Aditya Karikala himself asked the question openly!

"I came here mainly to ask the opinion of my Pazluvoor Grandfather and Kadamboor Uncle about a very important matter. I will ask now. Three years ago, my father made me the Crown Prince of the Chozlas and publicly anointed me and crowned me. All of you agreed to that. Now it appears that the Emperor has changed his opinion. He wants to place Madurandaka on the throne and crown him. He has been sending me invitation after invitation to go to Tanjavur to deal with this. I have been avoiding going there with excuse after excuse. Why must I go to Tanjavur? After going there, why must I go against my father's commands openly? Isn't it better to not go there at all? Pazluvoor Granddad! Kadamboor Uncle! You are the elders. You know all the details and legalities. You tell me this. Is it legal for my father to ask me to give up the kingdom on behalf of Madurandaka after all these

years? Will it be a crime if I were to disobey?" When Aditya Karikala asked thus, clearly and openly, all were stunned.

Lord Pazluvoor cleared his throat and began to speak thinking he could postpone giving an answer for at least some time. "Royal Prince you must have consulted with your Thirukovalur grandfather regarding this matter. What does Lord Malayaman say?"

"Aha! All of you noblemen know the nature of that old man! Would he agree to give up the throne that belongs to his grandson for another? Instead of that he will chop me and my mother who gave birth to me into pieces. Lord Malayaman has already started collecting an army- to confirm the rights of his grandson for the throne. However I am not going to act just upon his opinion alone. I will act, in whichever way all of you gentlemen advice." Thus answered Karikala as if he was an obedient soft-spoken son.

Lord Pazluvoor was disappointed on hearing this, it was not what he expected and he was forced to answer, "We are not like Malayaman, who would urge a son to go against the wishes of the father. We are all bound to obey and act upon the orders of the Emperor whatever they may be. However, we do have the rights to explain what is just and legal. What the Emperor says about this matter cannot be discarded as being totally unjust or illegal. Neither can we say that Lord Madurandaka has no rights to this Chozla throne. Prince, since you ask openly, I shall speak with an open mind. The final decision is as you wish. We think that it is very dangerous to the Chozla empire if we let the debate on this matter continue or grow. It is good if we can come to some peaceful conclusion. The Chozla kingdom is not like what it was in days gone by; a narrow strip of land squeezed between two white water rivers! It spreads from the tip of Cape Kumari to the banks of River Krishna in the north. Even if we divide it in two, each would be a big empire. It would be justified to declare that all the lands south of the Kollidam for Lord Madurandaka and everything north of the river as belonging to you. This is our conclusion. If you agree to this, we could go forward to do what has to be done. I shall take the responsibility to convince the Emperor to accept this decision," said Lord Pazluvoor.

Aditya Karikala's gleeful laughter on hearing this, filled Lord Pazluvoor's being with rage.

Karikala started sarcastically, "Oldman-Granddad, it is a great idea to split the Chozla Empire in two, in this fashion, so that nobles of Pazluvoor in the south and the Sambuvaraya in the north can wield their power. Yes, it is an appropriate reward for both your families who have served the Chozlas since the times of the father of my grandfather. However, I have no wish to split the Empire. Dividing and sharing the lands that have been inherited from generation after generation is the same as splitting and sharing one's wedded wife! Perhaps it may be agreeable to old men like you! I will not agree." When Karikala spoke such words, fiery embers of anger flew from Lord Pazluvoor's eyes. Enraged, he stood up, ready to draw his sword from the scabbard on his side.

Karikala continued, "What is this Granddad? You are getting up to leave? Listen to my idea

completely and then leave. I have no wish to split the Chozla Empire. This Kingdom has grown to this stature because of the service of many; over five generations of my ancestors, your ancestors, me, you, all have worked very hard and sacrificed the lives of many gallant and brave men. It is a sin to divide this in two and make two small kingdoms. It will be reason for men like Rajaaditya who have attained the heavens of the brave to curse us. So, abandon this idea. I am ready to give up this entire Chozla empire to Madurandaka. It is just and legal! Madurandaka is the son of my elder-grandfather. Therefore, instead of my father, Madurandaka should have been crowned. Because of Emperor Paranthaka's arrangements, my father was forced to accept the crown. Let that blunder end with him. According to the law, 'the son after the father,' even though I have complete rights to this kingdom, I am ready to give up my entitlement.

"But on one condition. I wish to have an army of three hundred thousand men so that I can venture on a campaign to conquer the north. I will need to be given all the equipment, arms and supplies for that large army along with food for one year; all this needs to be collected. I will also need three hundred large ships that can cross oceans. I shall make Parthiban my Commodore for the navy and have him come sailing along the coast while I will lead the army on land on a campaign of conquest. I and Parthiban will meet at the mouth of River Ganges. And we will go further north.

"According to the bards, my ancestor with the same name as me, Karikala Valava, is said to have placed the Chozla tiger flag on the Himalayas. That which my ancestors have achieved, I shall achieve now. With the strength of my sword and the strength of the shoulders of the men who go with me I shall become emperor of lands north of River Krishna that I conquer with my own might. If I were to die on a battlefield, I shall happily go to the heavens meant for the brave, knowing that I have established the gallant fame of the Chozlas.

"Pazluvoor Granddad, Kadamboor Uncle, what do you both say? Will you agree to meet this condition of mine?" Karikala asked this with pride and stopped talking. Both old men were totally stunned!

Lord Pazluvoor started to reply falteringly, "Royal Prince, who are we to agree to your condition. We do not have the authority. It is the Emperor who has to be consulted."

Karikala jumped up with rage and roared with the voice of thunder; "Oldman-Granddad, whom are you trying to fool in the name of the Emperor? You cannot hoodwink me! You have imprisoned my father in the palace and kept him as a puppet that dances to strings you manipulate. You think I am not aware of it all? Can anyone meet my father without the permission of Younger Lord Pazluvoor? Did my father willingly issue orders to arrest my younger brother in Lanka? Or was it on your insistence? A dear son, darling of the people, most gallant of our warriors – will any father willingly order that such a son should be arrested and dragged back to the capital? Today the people of the Chozla nation are all enraged, boiling with fury, angry about you Pazluvoor nobles saying that you arrested and brought the Young Prince on your ships and drowned him to die at sea..."

“Prince, who is spreading such false slander and immense accusations? I shall cut off the tongue of the fellow and chop him to pieces,” roared Lord Pazluvoor.

“If it is one person who is accusing, you could cut his body to pieces; what if it is the people, tens of thousands of thousands who are saying it? If you are going to punish all such people, this Chozla land will turn into a desert of dead bodies and a cremation ground. The Chozla empire will then be an appropriate kingdom for the rule of Madurandaka who is a devout follower of Lord Shiva who is said to live and dance in cremation grounds!

“Granddad, however, I did not believe such talk! People are idiots without any sense. When one fellow makes up as a story, it will be repeated without proper investigation by another, till it spreads. You are hereditary helpmates of our Chozla clans and you will never commit such a heinous deed! If Arulmozli drowned in the sea, it must be his destined fate! Perhaps he drowned and died at sea to throw mud into the mouths of all those astrologers, soothsayers, diviners and palm readers who kept declaring that he was ‘born to rule the three worlds.’ Oldman-Granddad, however powerful and brave a leader you may be, even you cannot rustle up a whirlwind in the middle of the sea and cause a thunderbolt to fall upon the ship’s mast to make it catch fire. Perhaps it was the work of those sorcerers from the Pandiya territories! You are not responsible for that! So you are not responsible for the fate of Arulmozli.

“However, don’t keep telling me that you would answer ‘after consulting with the Emperor.’ And then you may go on to say that you will need to consult that Anbil Brahma-raya! The Emperor and our Prime Minister are merely bearing such titles for namesake! They cannot act or do anything against your wishes. Perhaps if you really wish to do so, you can tell me that you will answer after consulting with my young grandmother Nandini Devi of Pazluvoor!”

On hearing this, Kandamaran suddenly jumped up to intervene, “Sir! Persons who have come as guests to our house, ... about them” He started to say something, loudly, incoherently, faltering over his words.

Karikala turned towards him with fiery eyes, laughing and cackling like Lord Shiva who had just annihilated the three flying worlds, “Kandamara! Is this your house? I forgot! I have also forgotten that you are the brave young man descended from the great Valvil Ori of Kolli Hills! Yes, yes; in your house particularly in your presence I must speak with caution and humility! What have I misspoken? What have I said about your guests in your house? Kandamara, why are your hands and legs shaking like this? Has the shivering fever that is rampant in Lanka come upon you? How can that be? You did not even go to Lanka!”

Vandiya Devan spoke up, “My Lord Prince, Kandamaran does not have the shivering fever. Because you refer to the Young Queen of Pazluvoor as ‘grandmother,’ he is angry!”

Kandamaran turned angrily towards Vandiya Devan with his hand on the hilt of his sword. Parthibhan held his hand and pulled him back, forcing him to sit down and whispered something in his ear. Kandamaran quietened down even though his hands and limbs were continuing to shake with anger.

Prince Karikala looked at him and laughed before turning back to Lord Pazluvoor, "Dear old Granddad, this is nature; young bulls will sometimes jump up without control like this; you need not heed them! In relationship you are my grandfather; therefore the young queen must be my grandmother! My grandmother has no objection to my addressing her thus! Neither do you have objections. Why do these young fellows burn with rage? Let us forget that. We have gone somewhere away from what I started talking about.

"My father... do not lay the burden upon him. If you agree it is as if my father agreed. The treasury is in your hands; if the men were to hear that I am setting out to conquer the northern regions with an army, why three hundred thousand, ten times that many will rush forward to go with me. You should not find any difficulty to ready three hundred ships. You have to agree; Madurandaka must consent! That is all; what do you say?" asked Karikala again.

Lord Pazluvoor was unsettled, short of breath, disoriented and perplexed; he cleared his throat trying to form words of reply, "Prince, even if I were to agree to this fascinating condition of yours, we need to surely get Lord Madurandaka's acceptance. Can you set forth on your campaign without taking leave of the Emperor, your father? Therefore, let us all go to Tanjavur..."

"That is impossible Granddad! If my father were to order differently, I may not be able to go against his wishes. And then, there is my mother the daughter of Malayaman. My sister Kundavai is also there. They will not like that I am giving up my throne, abdicating and going away towards far off lands. It would be difficult to overcome their wishes. Granddad, this matter needs to be settled in this Kadamboor Fort. You go to Tanjavur and bring Madurandaka here. After we have discussed and agreed, we can inform my father. When all arrangements for the campaign have been completed, I shall come for one day to Tanjavur and take leave of my parents and go. Or else, they can crown Madurandaka immediately and my parents can come to Kanchi. I shall have them live in the golden palace that I have built for them and then go north on my campaign."

Lord Pazluvoor looked at Lord Sambuvaraya; that nobleman was gazing at the ceiling. Realizing that he would get no help from that quarter, Lord Pazluvoor began, "Royal Prince, what can I say against your orders?"

"Do not say they are orders, Granddad. How can I, a mere youngster order you whose head has turned grey in the service of the Chozla's? Say that you will fulfil my prayers!"

Lord Pazluvoor said with a hoarse clearing of his voice, "So be it."

“Much thanks and salutations dear old Granddad! since you agree, go quickly and arrange for your journey. Bring Madurandaka here openly, seating him atop an elephant; or bring him in a golden open chariot. Don’t use the shuttered palanquin that belongs to my young grandmother this time,” saying this Karikala laughed mockingly.

Karikala now turned towards the others. “Kandamara, your life is turning even more fortunate! More guests are coming to your house! Madurandaka Deva, who is going to become the Emperor after Sundara Chozla is going to come here! The lady who is likely to be crowned as his queen consort, the daughter of Kalanthaka, the Younger Lord Pazluvoor may also come along with him! Kadamboor Fort is going to be filled with all sorts of happenings and more activity. Let Pazluvoor Grandfather get started to go to Tanjavur. Let us go hunting. Come! Once I was pretty skilled in handling a bow and arrow. They used to say ‘after Arjuna, it is Karikala!’ I have not touched the bow for three years and have forgotten how to use it skillfully. I must practice again. Parthiba, Vallava, all of you get ready! Where shall we go hunting? Shall we go to the Kolli Hills?”

Lord Sambuvaraya who had not participated in any conversation till now, finally spoke, “Prince the Kolli Hills are quite far away. There is no need to go that far. There is deep forest on the western shores of Lake Veera-Narayana. Some even call that forest as the Dark Forest as described in the epics. There are many wild animals that can be hunted in that forest. The exhibits in our Hunt Room were all hunted and killed there. This lakeside forest is very close to our Fort. If one leaves on the hunt early in the morning one could return home before night.”

“Let us do that Sir! As long as I am your guest in this mansion, your rule is my law! Shall we take your daughter Manimekalai along with us when we go hunting? It is merry and festive wherever she is present,” asked Aditya Karikala.

“I have no objection. We can ask her,” said Sambuvaraya.

Kandamaran spoke up, “Why take women when we go hunting? All our attention will be on making sure that they are safe! We cannot concentrate on the hunt. Moreover, someone must remain behind to keep Lady Nandini company.”

“Yes, of course yes. Kandamaran is always worried about my Pazluvoor Grandma Nandini. There is another problem if we take Manimekalai along. When she jumps and skips along, some hunter may mistake her for a deer and aim his arrows at her! Let the women remain behind in the palace. We can go hunting. We must leave very early in the morning; let us be done with the dances and music early tonight. All of you go to bed early. Sir do not forget to alert the hunts-master and other men now itself. Vandiya Deva come, let us be gone!” saying this, Karikala took hold of Vandiya Devan’s hand and left, dragging him along with him.

Parthiban and Kandamaran looked at them with some jealousy and just stood there. Lord Sambuvaraya went to order the hunts-men and grooms to be ready for the morning. Lord Pazluvoor left to go towards the inner apartments in search of Nandini.

(Note: Kalki used the term 'paatta' whenever Karikala referred to grandfather Pazluvoor. The implication being that it was slightly disrespectful and sarcastic though it could have been an affectionate expression used by a child. Earlier in this story when Karikala is talking to grandfather Malayaman, he addresses him as 'thaatha,' grandfather, with affection.)

Chapter 38 - Nandini Refused

Lord Pazluvoor went to see Nandini in a somewhat good mood.

Whatever hopes he had had, when he came to Kadamboor, none were successful till now. He had thought that if he could get a youngster like Karikala to come stay at Kadamboor, he would be able to make him fall in line by cajoling sweet talk and threatening intimidation. He had believed that the young man would be forced to obey whatever he and Sambuvaraya asked him to do. He was fully aware of the problems and dangers in giving all the Chozla Empire to Madurandaka and immediately crowning him. Malayaman in the north and Kodumbalur Velir in the south would surely be against that. And if Karikala was with them, internal strife was inevitable. Who would be able to predict how that would end?

A majority of the people would be in favor of the sons of Sundara Chozla. Even Madurandaka's mother is against him! Could one enter into this internal conflict by just depending on the strength or the support of fringe groups like the Kaalaa-mukhas? Unrest and disturbances are likely to erupt in various provinces north of the River Paalar and in the Pandiya and Chera territories. Therefore, for now, if one could divide the kingdom in half with Tanjavur as the capital for the South Chozla Empire for Madurandaka we can see what happens later! We can even look at the north and handle Malayaman up there. Karikala is a brute and a ruffian. He is most likely to get into some messy situation one day or other and die young! If that were to happen, all worries are solved! It is best to get this divided kingdom accepted. Lord Pazluvoor had come to this conclusion after discussing the situation with his Young Queen and had come to Kadamboor only after that. He had arranged to get Karikala brought there.

However nothing turned out as he has expected. Instead of being obedient to the elders, Karikala was reprimanding, ordering, threatening and overwhelming the elders with no respect for anyone. Lord Pazluvoor could not tolerate his teasing banter, or the flippant remarks with double meaning. Particularly his addressing him often as an old man and referring to Nandini as a grandmother were causing him distress like poison dipped sharp arrows. Moreover, the behavior of this Sambuvaraya was not all that satisfactory! Instead of standing in his support and putting down the rude behavior of Karikala, Sambuvaraya mostly stayed silent with a closed mouth! Even if he did say something it was a faltering namby-

pamby mumbling. Perhaps he is worried and behaving with caution so that nothing untoward should happen to this royal guest who has come to his mansion. Whatever the reason, Lord Pazluvoor felt that Sambuvaraya's behavior was not satisfactory.

It was not easy to discern the meaning of Karikala's words today: how much of it was truth? How much of it was mockery? To what degree was it deceptive with one thought in mind and different words on his lips! Is he planning something very drastic after getting Madurandaka here? Who knows! Perhaps he will have Malayaman come here with a large army and lay siege to this Kadamboor fort!

Considering all this, it is best to make this trip to Tanjavur and come back here. My brother is very intelligent. It would be good to consult him and get some ideas. Even if I bring Madurandaka here, I should be ready for any contingency and have Kalanthaka collect a large contingent of armed men and bring them to be positioned on the banks of the Kollidam. Well whatever is happening in this, one thing is sure. I should no longer let the Young Queen stay here and be subject to the bantering words of these young brutes. It is most important that I take her away and leave her in Tanjavur. This is a convenient opportunity for doing so; why let go of that?

Lord Pazluvoor came to be in a good mood once he had come to this decision. He went towards Nandini's chambers with a cheerful countenance. When he had reached the doorstep to her rooms he heard gleeful laughter from inside. For some reason the sounds of that laughter irritated him. Nandini never laughed like this in Tanjavur palace. Why this sudden joyousness? Why is she laughing? Who is that laughing with her?

On entering the room he recognized the girl in there as Manimekalai. His mind was somewhat cleared. When she saw him, Manimekalai tried to control her laughter by covering her mouth with both her palms. Even then she could not control it; she ran out laughing from the room.

Nandini's laughter had died as soon as she saw Lord Pazluvoor. Her face once again looked majestic as usual. "My Lord, Welcome! Are all the deliberations over?"

"Nandini, why did that girl laugh like that? Why did she run away laughing?"

"Must I tell you that? Fine, let me tell. Some of the talks in the assembly room could be overheard by her when she was in the next room. She laughed after telling me about Prince Karikala's jesting words about grandpas and grandmas."

"Chee! Wicked girl! And you were laughing with her!"

"Yes, I was laughing along with her. I was about to cry after she went away! You came in before that!" after saying this Nandini wiped the tears budding in her eyes.

“Aha! It is my mistake in bringing you here to be amidst these fools. We shall leave for Tanjavur in the morning. Bear with it for this one night.”

“Oh! We should leave for Tanjavur? Why? Is the task we came for completed?”

Lord Pazluvoor then told Nandini about the decisions reached in the meeting that day. After listening to everything, Nandini said, “My Lord, you may go to Tanjavur and come back. I will not come. I have no intention of leaving this place till I teach a lesson to Aditya Karikala. That proud Prince should fall at your feet and ask forgiveness for the teasing words he spoke; or he must fall prey to your sword!”

“Nandini, what is this that you say? How can such a sinful thought arise in your heart?”

“Sir, what is the sinful thought? Is it sinful for me to think of seeking revenge on a man who speaks words of ridicule about the husband who took my hand in wedlock?”

“No, Nandini; listen to this. Our Pazluvoor clan has had friendship ties with the Chozla clan for over six generations. Forgetting all that, can I raise a sword against that clan just because an ignoramus youth babbled something? Sundara Chozla’s son, the crown Prince as of today, how can I kill him with my own hands? What kind of words are these?” Lord Pazluvoor was perturbed.

When he had heard Karikala’s scorching words, Lord Pazluvoor’s hands had many a time sought his sword. At those times, with great difficulty he had controlled his mind and hand. When Nandini openly spoke the thoughts that had risen in his mind, he was truly troubled.

“Sir you have friendship with the Chozla’s for six generations. You have relationship ties. Therefore it is but natural that you would hesitate to lift your sword. But I have no such relationship; in no way am I bound to the Chozla’s. If Aditya Karikala does not bow down to you and seek forgiveness, I will take a sword in my hands and kill him myself!” said Nandini. Her eyes turned red and brows scrunched, changing the whole appearance of her face.

Chapter 39 - Danger Approaches

Lord Pazluvoor laughed softly; He thought he was laughing, in jest on hearing Nandini’s words. That room and everything in that room trembled with his laughter!

He felt a certain pride in his heart on hearing Nandini say that she would take a sword in her own hands and kill anyone who insulted him. Knowing that Nandini had such a concern in guarding his dignity, he felt a certain arrogance, a conceit grow within him. On one hand his heart wished to hear her saying such words more and more; on the other he felt that he should appear as if he did not wish such words to be uttered by her.

“Sir, why do you laugh? Because you have no confidence in my words?”

“Devi! I laughed thinking of how you would be able to lift a sword in your hands that are as delicate as mandara flowers! Moreover when a fellow like me is still alive, with my long arms”

“Sir, I am aware of the glory and strength of your hands. Hands long like an elephant’s trunk! Hands as strong as the Vajra thunderbolt weapon of heaven’s King Devendra. Hands that have chopped down thousands and thousands of enemies in the battlefield; hands that placed the jeweled crown upon the head of the Chozla Emperor and establish the integrity of his rule. There is no one who thinks of all this today. Times have arrived when youth born yesterday make fun of you, calling you ‘old.’ Like a King Serpent bound by sorcery into being sluggish, you remain quiet, bound by your allegiance and devotion to Chozla clans. Yes, my hands are soft, clad in bracelets and fit only to string flower garlands. However, my hands have gained some strength because of taking the hands of a gallant and brave man like you, in lawful wedding bonds, solemnized and witnessed by ritual fire. If a need arises to guard my karppu-chastity, if need arises to establish the dignity of my husband, my hands will gain strength to wield a sword. Look at this...” With these words Nandini pulled out a trunk from under her bed. She opened the trunk and removed some clothing from the top. She lifted a sword lying underneath, shining brilliantly, carelessly with one hand and held it up high above her head.

Lord Pazluvoor looked at it in astonishment for some time. He finally asked, “For how long have you had this in your trunk? I thought that you stored your silks and jewelry in it!”

Nandini replaced the sword in her trunk. “Yes, I store my silken clothes and jewelry in this trunk. The most important jewel that I have is this sword. It is here to protect my chastity and my husband’s dignity,” she said.

“No occasion is likely to arise for you to use this, as long as I am alive!”

“That is why I do not take this sword out of this box. Will not your strong shoulders that guard this Chozla empire which stretches from Lanka to Vengi be sufficient to guard your dignity? Will they not be able to guard an innocent girl like me? Even so, when you are busy with political matters and affairs of the kingdom, you cannot always be guarding me. Should I not be prepared to guard myself when I am separated from you?”

“Devi, where is the need for that? Let bygones be bygones; I will never be separated from you from now onwards!”

“Sir, that is my wish too! However, this one time, you must be separated from me and go to Tanjavur and come back.”

“What is this obstinacy? Why should I leave here this once and go away?” When he asked this question, Lord Pazluvoor’s brows were knit with anger.

“My lord, there are two reasons for that. If you now take me with you on this journey, the people here will make even more fun of us. ‘the old-man has no trust in his Young Queen!’ they will say! My blood boils even to think of that! The other reason is much more important. You have been saying all this time that Lord Sambuvaraya is your great friend. You believed it truly. Have you noticed the changes in his talk and behavior since the arrival of the Prince? Even if you missed noticing that, I have been watching it...”

“I too have been seeing that. I am surprised and wondering about the cause for that change...”

“You are innocent in your heart. So you are surprised. I have no surprises. It is the greedy nature of people, that is the reason for the change in Sambuvaraya. It was rumored that Prince Karikala never looked at women and that he was never going to get married. You must have noticed that his behavior is exactly opposite to that since he arrived here. He comes often to the women’s apartments. He speaks sweetly with lovey-dovey words; the reason for all this is that his heart has gone to Sambuvaraya’s daughter Manimekalai. Didn’t Lord Karikala even ask if he could take Manimekalai hunting? Lord Sambuvaraya is aware of all this; he has now forgotten all our earlier agreements. He has started dreaming of the days when his darling daughter will sit upon Tanjavur Throne as the Queen Consort!”

“Yes, what you say is the likely reason. I did not even think in my dreams that Sambuvaraya is this despicable. It is not even two months since we met in this same mansion and all of us took an oath to place Madurandaka on Tanjavur’s Throne. Chee Chee, what kind of a man is this, who forgets his pledge?” said an enraged Lord Pazluvoor.

“My Lord, that is why I say that I shall not come with you to Tanjavur this time. I will keep an eye on what they are plotting when you are not here. If they scheme something, I will ensure that it will not succeed.”

“Nandini, why must you get involved in all this?”

“Shouldn’t a wife be interested in things in which her husband is interested? Why are we called life’s partners?”

“However, how am I to leave you here in the midst of these rogues and brutes. I am not ready to do so.”

“I am not without any protection here. Manimekalai is here; she will do anything for my sake.”

“That seems to be true. I too noticed that your enchanting powers have enslaved her too. Even then, how long will that last? If Aditya Karikala tempts her about his ascending the throne and making her his queen...”

“Sir, do not be concerned on that matter. Manimekalai will not accept even the position of being Indrani, the Queen Heavens without my approval. If I order her, ‘go kill Karikala with this sword!’ she will go do so immediately. You often speak of my mesmerizing prowess. That power of mine has completely taken hold of Manimekalai. If you so wish, I can prove that to you right now!” said Nandini.

Lord Pazluvoor’s whole demeanor was shaken; that old man spoke with trembling lips, choking voice and faltering tongue, “My dear, I am aware of your powers. But do not try to test anything like that with regard to Karikala. He is a youngster who knows not the way of the world. Let us not make a big issue of something he babbled without knowing what he was saying. If Karikala wishes to marry Manimekalai, let us not stand in his way.”

“Sir we may not object; but there is something called fate! Who can stop fate? Just as Manimekalai is fond of me, I too have become fond of her. I love her as if she was my younger sister. How can I agree to wed her to a fellow who is likely to die at a young age?” Her eyes seemed to be focused on something that was happening somewhere far away.

Lord Pazluvoor became even more agitated: “Nandini, what words are these that you speak? I was at one time the commander of the Chozla Velaikara Battalion. I have sworn that I would protect the Emperor and his descendants even if I would have to give up my own life!”

“Sir, I have not said that you should break that promise!”

“If some harm were to befall Karikala because of you, that blame too will fall upon me. The world will chide me saying that an old man was unable to bear the teasing of a youngster and he committed high treason. The good name earned by my clan for the last six generations in guarding the Chozlas will be destroyed.”

“Then, it is all the more important that you should leave this fort as soon as possible,” spoke Nandini in a mysterious voice.

“Why do you say that?”

“I was hesitating about how to say this to you. Now it is time to tell you all. Goddess Durga Parameswari had given me some unusual powers. You are aware of that. I had found out by my magical powers that Sundara Chozla had committed the sin of killing a woman in his younger days. And I proved it to you. Similarly my inner eyes see that the last days of Aditya Karikala are quickly approaching. It is not going to happen by your hands or by my hands. One thing is sure, the noose wielded by Lord Yama of Death is coming closer to him.

“His end may happen when he goes hunting in the forest. Or it may happen when he is sleeping in the palace. It may happen because of wild beasts like bear; or he may die as a result of an arrow shot accidentally by his friends. His death may be the result of a knife wielded by the soft hands of a woman. However, I promise that his death will not happen at my hands that have been taken in wedlock by you.

“I stood on some wayside, an orphan in the midst of war; you married me openly, with the knowledge of the whole world, and made me the Young Queen. I will make sure that no blame falls upon you because of me. That is why you should not remain here at this time. I am insisting that you must go away. If any kind of accident befalls Karikala when you are here, the world will link you with that. Have they not heaped accusations upon you for Arulmozli Varma drowning in the sea? They will heap blame upon you for this too; even if you speak of it as an accident, they will ask why you did not prevent it. Even your diamond hard hands will not be able to prevent the accident that is about to happen to Karikala. That is why you must leave immediately. If you were to take me with you, unnecessary doubts may arise because of that too. They will say that you took me away because you were aware of it before the accident happened. So, you must go alone. I shall remain here to make sure that no blame or infamy falls upon you whatever happens, whenever it happens. Sir, do you have that confidence in me?” Nandini asked in this fashion and gazed upon him with widened eyes as if peering into his heart. Poor fellow! That brave man was completely baffled by the arrows of Nandini’s words. He obeyed, disoriented by the arrows from her eyes.

Chapter 40 - Water Games

About six hundred years before the events of this history, there were seven important chieftains in the Tamil country apart from the three kings(Chozla, Chera, Pandiya.) They were often referred by the title ‘Vallal’ which meant benevolent. Among the seven was, one named Ori who was the chieftain of the Kolli Hills. He had attained fame as incomparable in archery. If he were to bend his huge, strong, bow and pull the string to release his arrow, it would fly like Lord Rama’s arrow which pierced through seven tree trunks as described in the epic; Ori’s arrow was said to pierce through a tiger, and then pierce a stag, and then pierce a boar, and pierce the little rabbit and finally go through the bark of a tree! His expertise was celebrated by bards in this fashion. Thus he came to be called Valvil Ori, the expert Archer Ori.

The Chera king who was powerful in those days, became angry with Valvil Ori. He sought the help of Thiru-Mudi-Kari Malayaman, the chieftain of Thiru-Kovalur to attack Ori. Kari’s prowess was in no way lesser than that of Ori. Moreover, Malayaman Kari had the strength of a large army. Malayaman invaded the Kolli Hills, killed Valvil Ori and completely destroyed his Hill Fort.

At that same time, a King named Adigaman Neduman Anji ruled the lands near that hill country. He was related to Ori. He wished to avenge the death of Ori by taking revenge on Malayaman Kari. Realizing that he may not be able to succeed by himself, he sought the help of the Chozla king named Killi Valavan who had some anger towards Malayaman Kari because of his friendship with the Chera and his growing armed powers. Chozla Killi Valava and Thagadoor Adigaman joined forces and attacked Malayaman Kari. Malayaman attained the heavens meant for the brave by dying in the battlefield. Chozla soldiers arrested two young sons of Kari. The Chozla and Adigaman who had wanted to destroy every family member of Malayaman, ordered that those children should be buried up to their neck in the ground and that elephants should trample them to death! A bard who had been the recipient of the benevolence of Malayaman, arrived at that place at that time. He begged the Chozla king to spare the life of Malayaman's children.

"Oh King look over there. Look at the faces of those children buried up to their necks in the ground. Look at the smiles on their faces. Those children think it some kind of fun, on seeing the trunk of that elephant swaying this way and that, looking at that huge elephant, not aware that it is about to trample them to death, they are laughing. Are you going to kill these faultless children? What sin did these two commit? Is it fair to punish the children for the mistakes of the father?" said the Bard.

On hearing these words, the Chozla king changed his mind. He changed his orders and made them dig up the children from the ground. He then arranged to bring up those children in his own palace. When they attained the right age, he gave back the fiefdom of Thiru-kovalur to the older boy. Since then for several hundred years followed by hundred years, the descendants of Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman were grateful friends of the Chozla kings.

That relationship was continuing till the times of Sundara Chozla. Sundara Chozla had married Vanamadevi the daughter of Malayaman and had made her his queen consort.

Kolli Hill Ori and Tagadur Adigaman and all their descendants were all gone. Kadamboor Sambuvaraya's claimed that they came from a side line of these families. Sambuvaraya's did not forget the enmity borne by their ancestors against Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman. Thus it was natural that he had not cared that Malayaman's grandson was to be crowned as the heir to the Chozla throne. Aditya Karikala's arrogant behavior, his disregard of all the feudatory chieftains were even more reason for Sambuvaraya's hatred to grow. That is why the Kadamboor Sambuvarayas were eagerly supporting the efforts to place Gandara Aditya's son Madurandaka on the Chozla Throne.

Lord Sambuvaraya's mind slowly began to change from the day Karikala had arrived at Kadamboor. His darling daughter Manimekalai was the reason for this change. There were several indications to show that Manimekalai had captured the heart of Aditya Karikala. It had been the talk that Aditya Karikala never looked at women and that he was going to spend his life as a celibate bachelor! Such a Prince now went often to the palace courts of the women, talking and flirting with them. Karikala spoke of Manimekalai's "smartness" and

often praised her chic. Since Karikala's arrival, Manimekalai too seemed to be full of good spirits. Elder Sambuvaraya thought that it was because she felt an affection for Karikala. Seeing them together, their joy and merriment, he too began to feel jubilant.

If Karikala married Manimekalai, his beloved daughter would become the enthroned empress of the Chozla's. A child born to her would become entitled to the Chozla throne! The pride and greatness that Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman enjoys today, will be his too, if that were to happen! Why should he himself be the obstruction to that? Why should he come in the way of the greatness that was about to become the good fortune of his daughter?

Yes, it was true that at one time Sambuvaraya had thought of giving Manimekalai in marriage to Madurandaka. But Madurandaka was already twice married. The daughter of the Younger Lord Pazluvoor was married to him and had also borne a male child already. If Madurandaka were to ascend the throne it was the Pazluvoor descendants that would have the right to the crown. Manimekalai would be reduced to living in Tanjavur palace, one among the many maiden's and servants living there.

If she married Aditya Karikala, she would become the Queen Consort. The throne would be for a child born to her!

Trying to crown Madurandaka was an almost impossible task. People will oppose it. It would be possible to achieve the throne for Madurandaka only after going to war with Malayaman and Velir of Kodumbalur. Madurandaka's mother herself seems to be opposed to the idea. Why should he support to undertake such an effort, full of such obstacles?

That Aditya Karikala should be crowned next, is already decided. There would be no difficulty in getting that established. The only big obstacle is the interference of these nobles of Pazluvoor. Among them, the elder old-man is drowning in his infatuation for his young queen. Who know for how long he will remain alive? Why should I stick my neck into a very dangerous situation by trusting this old man?

Yes, it is true that I swore an oath to support Madurandaka. So what? there are ways to get things done without going against that pledge. It is known that Madurandaka is an innocent who can be molded to anyone's wish. Perhaps it would be possible to make him say it himself that he does not want the kingdom. Or we can insist that we need his mother's consent.

Sambuvaraya had begun thinking in such fashion. He enthusiastically encouraged the idea of Lord Pazluvoor going to Tanjavur. When he was not there, one could talk confidentially with Karikala and find out his intentions clearly; then it would be easy to act appropriately. So, he himself hurried Lord Pazluvoor and sent him on the way to Tanjavur with appropriate retinue.

After Lord Pazluvoor had left on his journey, Aditya Karikala and his friends got ready to go

hunting. Lord Sambuvaraya was quite willing to send Manimekalai and some of the other women from his palace along with them. Kandamaran who had been watching all that was happening with a different set of eyes, objected. He had realized that all the attention that Karikala paid to Manimekalai was because of Nandini. His hatred and disgust about Karikala grew because of this. It was not possible to explain all this to his father. Instead, he said, "what are we supposed to do taking the women along with us when we go hunting? We will have time only to make sure that they are safe! Moreover this is the month of Aippasi, and a big storm may come up any time. The Lakeside forest will be inundated with rain water. The women will be in great discomfort." Lord Sambuvaraya gave up the idea.

Karikala left, taking along his friends Parthiban, Vandiya Devan, Kandamaran and some huntsmen.

After all had left the palace was deserted. Nandini looked at Manimekalai saying, "When the men are at home it is a big hindrance; and if they go away somewhere, that too is difficult for us. We don't even find something to joke and tease about!"

"Yes, Akka we too should have gone on the hunt. I love to go on the hunt and watch. I have often gone with my father and my brother. But for some reason Kandamaran was full of objections today. Perhaps because you are not fond of hunting, he objected this way?"

"Yes, I am not fond of hunting; I feel scared to even see blood. Kandamaran was not saying objections because of me! He stopped us going mainly to keep you and a guest in your house separate from each other," said Nandini.

Manimekalai's cheeks dimpled with shyness; she was looking at the floor for some time before she said, "Let the men get lost wherever they want. We don't their company, Akka! Let us go to the lakeside water pavilion and enjoy some water play and come back." When Nandini agreed, she told her father and made the needed arrangements for this.

We had seen earlier that there were wide embankments and the mouths of seventy-two canals along the eastern shores of Veera Narayana lake; there was no such wide bank along the western side. The dept of the lake became steadily lower and almost flat with the land on the west. Further west was thick forest growth. In that place where the lake depth kept becoming lower and lower, there were many small island-like mounds. Trees and creepers grew thick upon these islands. On one such island was built a water-side pavilion with steps to get to the water. The womenfolk from Kadamboor fort were used to come to the place to play in the water and spend a pleasurable time over there. It was about two leagues around the lake to reach the spot if they were to take the land way. Or one would have to go there by boat and cross the lake. Because of this and as it was known that it was a place where the womenfolk of Lord Sambuvaraya were likely to go bathing there, no strangers ventured to that place.

Nandini and Manimekalai came in a boat and reached that place. Two maids who knew how

to row a boat came with them. They brought ingredients to cook a picnic lunch in that boat. When they reached the water steps of the pavilion, they went up and began to make preparations to cook. Nandini and Manimekalai sat on the steps for some time gossiping about this and that. Manimekalai was by nature an intelligent girl; mischievous and fond of teasing in fun. She mimicked various persons and acted out as if Lord Pazluvoor, Kandamaran, Karikala, Vandiya Devan, Parthiban and others talked. On seeing and hearing all that, Nandini was often bursting with laughter. But it was obvious that her mind was not fully with Manimekalai and often she was lost in some private thoughts of her own.

Suddenly Manimekalai jumped and stood up saying, "Akka, we did not go hunting, but the hunt is coming in search of us!" crying these words she pulled out a knife she had hidden in her waistband.

Nandini too was startled to stand up and look towards the direction that Manimekalai was looking. A leopard was seen sprawling on a low tree branch spreading and leaning down. The cat seemed to be debating if it should pounce on them or not as it looked at them. At the same time they heard in the distance, horses on the water galloping towards them.

Chapter 41 - Karikala's Killing Rage

Aditya Karikala had said that it was a long time since he had gone hunting and that he might have lost his skill in using a bow and shooting arrows. Those who saw him hunting that day in the Lakeside Forest near Veera Narayan Lake did not think so. Several wild animals of that forest fell prey to the arrows released from his bow. Rabbit and bear, deer and even leopard fell dead. When he could not spot any beast on the ground, his arrows flew towards the birds flying in the sky. Vultures and Raajali-eagles screamed and fell to the ground. As time went by, Karikala's killing rage seemed to increase. The people who went with him did not have anything to do! Horsemen and footmen went in a large group raising a loud noise and made the forest beasts emerge from their lairs and scatter away in terror. That was all the help that others in that hunting party rendered.

Karikala did not permit the others to even raise a sword or let an arrow fly against beasts that came to attack him. At one-point, Kandamaran shot an arrow at a bear that came rushing towards Karikala. Karikala turned to look at Kandamaran and said, "Kandamara were you aiming to kill the bear? Or were you trying to kill me?" 'Grains of sesame and horse-gram puffed up on the flames of anger' scorching on Kandamaran's face; after that he did not even bother to raise his bow.

They were all rather tired by the time the sun had reached its zenith. Everyone began to think, 'we should rest a little while and then go home.' However, Karikala continued to force his tired horse further into the forest.

During all of that early part of the morning, Kandamaran was riding beside the Prince. After Karikala had asked him, 'are you trying to kill me?' he moved back and joined Parthiban who was riding behind. He started complaining to him about the roguish behavior, and brutal words of the Prince. Parthiban was trying to give some answers to explain things to him. Finding it the appropriate time, Vandiya Devan approached the Prince. After that they both rode together in the front. Vandiya Devan had not brought a bow or arrows for it. He was not all that skilled in archery. He had brought just a spear. He was riding carefully, cautiously without interfering with Karikala's hunting. He was in readiness to use his spear if any danger was likely. He had no need to use it till that mid-day.

Kandamaran was saying to Parthiban, "isn't this much of a hunting enough for today? It seems as if he would kill all the beasts in this forest within one day! We may have to go to Kolli Hills to quench his hunting rage. Tell him, 'this is enough for today; let us turn homewards!'"

Parthiban replied to Kandamaran, "Thambi! There is something boiling hot in the heart of the Prince. Is it an easy thing to give up a large empire? He is showing all that anger on this hunting spree. In a way it is for the best; otherwise, he would be pouncing on you or me. Let him tire out and say it himself, 'enough!' Let us both not interfere.

At that moment they heard a loud growl making that whole forest and beyond tremble. The signs of terror played upon Kandamaran's face. He shouted, "Oh! Wild Boar. Ask the Prince to stop!"

"Why this much fear about a wild boar? When compared to the torment felt by the leopard and bear, how can this mere boar matter?" asked Parthiban Pallava.

"You speak without knowing about this beast! The wild boar in this forest will reduce leopards and bear to shreds. It will bump an elephant and make it fall. Horses are nothing to the boar. Arrows and spears will merely graze over their thick hide and fall down but not pierce their bodies.... Sir! Sir! Stop!" Kandamaran was shouting.

There was great commotion in the forest bush as if it were a small whirlwind. The next instant, two wild boars appearing like two baby elephants, with large black bodies came out. They stopped for a second looking at the horses and the men riding them.

Kandamaran was shouting, "be careful Sir! Be careful!"

The huntsmen and beaters who had been following arrived at that spot by then. They started beating their drums – tharai and thappattai – as loudly as they could, calling 'kaa, kooo, koo' trying to divert the attention of those beasts.

Who knows what those wild pigs were thinking of? Their piglets? Maybe forced to act instinctively to protect their young ones.... Or they might have been alarmed by the noise of those drums. Each of those boars began to run very fast in two different directions.

Kandamaran said, "My Royal Prince let those beasts be gone! We cannot chase and kill wild boar without hunting dogs, at least hundreds of dogs."

Karikala did not seem to hear his words; he bent his bow and released the arrow. Seeing it pierce the skin of one boar, the Prince, made a triumphant noise, "Ahha!" The boar shook its body vigorously; the arrow came loose and fell to the ground. The boar began to run further into the scrub woods. Kandamaran laughed, with a heckling voice.

The Prince looked at him, "Kandamara let us have a bet. Vandiya Devan and I will follow this boar, kill it and bring it back. You and Parthiban follow that other one and kill it and bring it back here. Without killing these two beasts we are not going back to the palace tonight." Even before he finished he had urged his horse to sprint forward. Vandiya Devan followed him.

They could see the wild hog for a while, where was it running, which way did it go.... The shrubs, bushes and vine on its path were trampled down. Then a small stream crossed their path. It was a channel that collected the rain water in the forest and eventually ran into the lake. Once they reached its bank, they could not make out the path that the boar had taken. Did it cross the rivulet and go into the thick woods? Or was it following the stream either on this side or the other bank? They could not discern that.

Something that they saw on the wide expanse of the lake at the mouth of that stream attracted their attention. A boat was on the lake; they could make out that there were some women on it. But they could not recognize who they may be. At first it seemed as if the boat was coming towards them on the stream bank. Then it turned direction along the lake and went around towards a small island near the mouth of that stream and disappeared from view.

"Vallava? Who could they be, coming in that boat? It seemed like some women," said Karikala.

"Yes, they looked like women, but I could not make out who they were," replied Vandiya Devan.

"Perhaps some women from Sambuvaraya's household?"

"Maybe. But why would they come this far?"

"Yes, it cannot be them. This morning, did Lord Pazluvoor really leave the fort? Is that for sure?"

“Yes, it is for sure Sir. I myself, saw the fort gates open and saw him riding away on an elephant.”

“Was it just him leaving?”

“Yes, it just the old man who left; the Young Queen did not go with him.”

“Where are we going to see brave and gallant men like that old gentleman! We must mention my grandfather Malayaman also as one step after Lord Pazluvoor...”

“Sir, I have heard about the bravery of those old timers from what others have spoken. I have seen your courage on the battlefield directly by myself. I am seeing it here in Kadamboor Mansion. How you have been making the old men and the young men shiver in fright!” said Vandiya Devan.

“Yes, that is true, the reason for my creating all that ruckus is coming closer and now my heart and body are shuddering. One cannot see a frightened coward like me in all of this Chozla nation!”

“My Prince when we were hunting in the forest today, you did not seem to be frightened or shuddering. You made all the forest creatures, wild birds and the men following us shiver!”

“Is all that to be counted as some kind of bravery or courage? An ordinary hunting dog can pounce on a tiger and kill it. The wild varaha-boar goes to fight an elephant. Is this hunting and killing any kind of true strength or courage? Vallava, listen to this: my tricks have borne fruit. Lord Pazluvoor has left his Queen Nandini alone and gone away. However, the thought of meeting her alone and talking to her makes me terrified.”

“Sir, there is reason. Till now you had been thinking of the Young Queen of Pazluvoor in a certain fashion. Now you have come to know that she is your sister. She has joined the Pandiya plotters who are ready to destroy your clan. Yes, it is difficult to explain all this to her. Even I, when I had an opportunity, I could not tell to her!”

“Friend, every detail of the facts that you found out and reported to me is shocking and disturbing. Even now I cannot believe it all. However, when I think of some old incidents, it appears as if it could be true. There was always a mystic veil between her and me. In those days, the Elder Pirati in Pazlayarai, Sembayan Madevi, insisted and forbid me to have any relationship with Nandini. But she did not tell me all the truth. If she had told me, all this would not have happened,” lamented Karikala.

“Perhaps Sembayan Madevi did not know all the truth. She must have thought it was a baby borne and abandoned by some orphan mute woman. Perhaps she did not know that the young Queen of Pazluvoor was the daughter of Sundara Chozla,” said Vandiya Devan. ***

Chapter 42 - She Is Not Human

Prince Karikala was lost in thought for some time. Remembrances of his younger days came as wave upon wave, jostling and bubbling, dispersing to give way for other thoughts. He forced those waves of memory to stop and heaving a deep sigh, he said, "Let us not talk now of what is gone in the past. Let us talk about what must happen now. That is why I separated you from them and brought you to be alone with me. We have lost the bet and the wild boar has gone. Let us think of what is to be done and how it must be done and come to a decision. Even thinking of how to speak to Nandini about the relationship between her and me, drowns me in dread. I am not even able to look at her face directly. Even if I accidentally look at her, she changes her countenance to be like how she appeared at that time when she was begging for Veera-pandiya's life. Her looks are like a sword that is ripping my heart apart. I feel as if my heart would break on thinking that my sister fell in love with my enemy Veera-pandiya and begged me for his life.

"Vallava, what do you think? Is it still possible that she does not know the truth? Do you think that she does not know that she is Sundara Chozla's daughter and a sister to all of us? What do you think?"

"Prince, if she was aware of all this, would she still be involved with those terrorists from the Pandiya country? Would she have placed a young child on a throne and crowned him as the king of the Pandiyas and as emperor of the Chozla territories, going against the Chozlas. Would she have sworn pledges with a sword in her hand to safeguard that crowned prince? I saw all this with my own eyes at midnight happening at the Thiru-Puram-biyam palli padai memorial ruins."

"I am surprised that Nandini let you go alive after you saw all that!"

"Sir, I am not really surprised. Could it be the natural mercy, a quality that dwells in all women?"

"Vallava, you are an innocent! You have no idea about the intensity of deceit and treachery that dwells in the heart of a woman. I do not know why she left you alive. My heart knows why she summoned me by writing a letter to me."

"Prince what could be the reason for that?"

"She has summoned me to kill me and avenge the killing of Veera Pandiya."

"Oh dear! That is why, suspecting that something untoward like that may happen, that the Prime Minister and the Younger Pirati, sent me to you in such a hurry. But you did not heed their warning to not go to Kadamboor."

“Vallava both the Prime Minister and my sister Kundavai are very very intelligent. But fate cannot be stopped even by them. Who knows if fate has brought me here to make true all those predictions by astrologers about Arulmozli! Vallava, earlier Kandamaran shot the arrow from behind me. Did he really aim at the bear or was he really aiming at me? Did you notice that?”

“I did not notice Sir. However I will not believe on any day that Kandamaran is capable of such treachery. Is Kandamaran truly likely to kill a guest in his home, the Emperors son, by aiming an arrow from behind? Yes, it is true that I have no great opinion about Kandamaran’s intelligence. I carried him to safety when he was wounded by the knife on his back; while he was in a pool of blood, lost to the world, I saved his life. He thought that I struck him because he saw my face when he opened his eyes! The enmity he bears against me since that day has not changed till today. Even though his intellect is somewhat dim, he is not capable of treacherous thoughts.”

“Friend, you have no clue of the power of the spellbinding weapons let loose by a woman. It can change the best among men to become a traitor.”

“Sir, I too am aware of the enchanting powers of women. Even so, I will never turn traitor on any day.”

“Aha! Manimekalai is a good girl; she will never order you to treacherous deeds on any day!”

“I do not speak of Manimekalai. Can eyes that have gazed upon the glorious full moon, find the light of a firefly attractive?”

“Whom do you mean by referring to a full moon?”

“Prince, please do not get angry with me! I speak of the Younger Pirati at Pazlayarai.”

“Hey you upstart! Impertinent poke-nose! All the kings and princes of the entire world are performing penances to take the hand of Kundavai. Can you even think of such a sister of mine!”

“Sir, emperors of this earth look upon and enjoy the cool beauty of the full moon; but the poor and the unfortunate too, stand under that moon and delight in its loveliness. Who can stop them?”

“Yes, there is no point in getting angry with you. I sent you with my letter to my sister, knowing this could happen. You have completed your assignments to her satisfaction. But don’t reveal all this to Parthiban. He is dreaming about becoming a son-in-law of the Chozla’s and ruling the Thondai regions as a King!”

“Sir, he could have been thinking in that fashion till recently. Now both Parthiban and Kandamaran are ready to do the slightest bidding of Nandini Devi!”

“I too noticed that; that is why I am concerned about them.”

“Thinking of all such situations, I feel that it is crucial that you meet with Young Queen Nandini as soon as you can, and tell her all the truth.”

“My friend, I am not sure if I can gain the courage to do that. Why don’t you meet with her on my behalf and tell her everything?”

“Prince, the Young Queen will not believe my telling her anything. At one time I had hoodwinked her, and escaped. Therefore, she may think that this too is some sort of scheming.”

“How am I to meet Nandini in private? She is in the inner apartments in that palace!”

“Sir, that can be arranged with Manimekalai’s help; I can bring that about.”

“You seem to have Manimekalai in the palm of your hands! That is good; whatever happens, my heart will be somewhat calmed if I can arrange to get that Manimekalai wed to you.”

“Sir, I have begun to think of Manimekalai as my sister. I expect her to be many times more fortunate....”

“What are you talking about?”

“Are you not aware, Prince? I suspect that the young girl Manimekalai has found a spot in the heart of the Crown Prince of this Chozla Empire! Just a few moments ago I spoke not too well of this daughter of Sambuvaraya. I spoke those words merely to reveal the feelings in my heart to you. Except for the Younger Pirati, Kundavai, no other woman born on this earth is comparable to Manimekalai in intellect and character. If only you could marry Manimekalai, all our dilemmas will be gone. Sambuvaraya and his son Kandamaran will join our side. The nobles of Pazluvoor will become isolated. The powers of the Pazluvoor Young Queen will diminish. Lord Madurandaka will not even raise the topic about wanting the kingdom after that. We can once for all destroy these conspiracies by feudatory chieftains and the terrorist activities of Pandiya Aabathudavi men and become victorious.”

“Everything sounds good, Thambi! I did not come to Kadamboor to get married. I feel in my heart that some grave danger is approaching me. I shall tell you now, listen. When Lord Pazluvoor comes back with Madurandaka, he is sure to come with a large army.”

“Sir, if that is true, why don’t we send word to Thiru-Kovalur Malayaman? Ask him to collect his large army and come here? Isn’t it better considering everything, to be forewarned and prepared?”

“I am thinking about it. Do you know what occurs to me sometimes? I think we should reduce this Kadamboor fort to rubble and hang everyone of those chieftains who came to that meeting of treachery from the front ramparts of this fort. I control my anger because of thoughts of my father. If only you could have led him to safety at Kanchi!”

“Prince it was a monumental task even to reach your letters to the Emperor.”

“Yes; the Emperor is truly enmeshed in the wily coils of these Pazluvoor noblemen. Bats hang in the golden palace that I built for my parents in Kanchi. I do not know if I will have the good fortune to welcome them to that palace when I am still alive! I even have doubts if would leave this Kadamboor with my life...”

“Prince the more you speak in this fashion it becomes important that we send word to Malayaman to come here with his army.”

“I am thinking if I should send you to him on that mission.”

‘Sir, please forgive me! Your sister has ordered me to not be parted from you for even one minute.’

“And you are fulfilling her orders till today.”

“Parthiban Pallava is here, doing nothing. He is bored with nothing to do.”

“Yes, every minute that he is not able to see the Queen of Pazluvoor is like one eon for him! I did not even in my dreams think that Parthibhan would be enslaved so badly by the charms of a woman. It is him that I must send to Malayaman.”

“That seems a good idea Sir.”

“And when he is not by my side, you are here to help if some danger threatens.”

“Sir, whether someone is here or not, I do not think that there is anyone in the world, with the courage to intend harm to you. I am seeing for myself how these brave old men who conspired and talked in so many ways when you were not there, are now shivering and trembling in heart and body, faltering in their speech, when you are in front of them.”

“Thambi, I am not afraid of any man who can lift a sword and fight. I am not even afraid of young men like Kandamaran, who might aim an arrow at me from behind.”

“Sir, you speak once again in this fashion about Kandamaran!”

“Listen to me Thambi! I am afraid of the deception buried deep in the heart of a woman. My heart beats with agitation whenever I wonder what thoughts she has buried in the depths of her mind. Every mysterious look she casts at me, is like sharp lances piercing my heart. My hands and legs lose strength on thinking of that.”

‘Sir, I too agree that one must be afraid of the deceptions practiced by Lady Nandini. I am aware of the frightening hatred that dwells in the depths of her heart. Sometimes when I think of why she let me go alive, I am terrified about the deception that may be hidden behind. However, all this is because she does not know the truth. Would we need to worry even after we reveal to her that you are her brother?’

“Are you thinking that way Vallava? You are smart; however you are an innocent when it comes to understanding the ways of women. Her anger against us will increase a hundred-fold when Nandini comes to hear that we are siblings. Her anger will not be appeased even if we tell her that we would crown her as the empress of the nation.”

“Prince, if you think that way, assign that responsibility to me. I shall tell Nandini Devi the true history. I will try to calm her anger down.”

“Even you cannot manage that my friend! No one can overcome Nandini’s anger. Listen to these words of mine. If we need to save our Chozla clan, either I should die or she must die; Or both of us must die! I will kill her with the same sword with which I killed Veera-pandiya.”

“Prince what is this kind of frightening talk?”

“What is wrong in taking one life to safeguard the welfare of an entire empire? Vallava, what if that life is a woman? So what even if she is a sister born with me? In truth she is no woman! She is an unreal, enchanting spell-binding ghoul! If I leave her alive, this Chozla Empire that is growing and spreading since Vijayala’s times will be wiped out without trace.... Oh! What is that?” Karikala asked with a suddenly terrified voice and turned around.

There was a big commotion among the forest bushes further away. They touched their horses to go nearer to see what was happening. They witnessed a most astonishing scene. A wild boar and a spotted leopard were fighting each other furiously.

Karikala spoke, “ah! The fellow we came in search of; he is here!”

“It appears as if the cheetah will leave no work for us!”

“Is that what you think? Keep watching!”

They both stayed watching that terrifying battle between that wild hog of the forest and the cheetah, without blinking an eyelid. The cat leaped upon the boar and tried attacking with its claws and teeth. The thick hide of that boar would not succumb to the nails and teeth of the leopard. Whenever the boar toppled the cat making it get caught in thorny bushes, the cheetah suffered. The boar's long curving teeth tore the leopard's skin to tatters. Finally when the boar bumped the leopard, it fell to the ground and lay as if dead.

Karikala, threaded his arrow onto his bow and was ready saying, "the boar has killed the leopard; it will now turn its attention upon us, be prepared." His arrow flew to stick into the neck of that boar. It turned as it shook itself, eyeing the two horses and men upon those horses. It glanced at the leopard. Perhaps it thought that the cat was no longer capable of anything! It came rushing with full brute force, towards the horses. It attacked his horse before Karikala could place another arrow on his bow. The horse that tried to step back from the fury of that hurtling animal, had its hind legs caught in a tree root; it stumbled and fell down. Karikala was caught below that horse!

The boar moved back and prepared to take a running leap towards that fallen horse.

Chapter 43 - Where Is The Leopard?

Vandiyā Devan saw the extent of the danger in which Aditya Karikala was caught in. Before the eye could blink, he goaded his horse to come closer and pushed the spear in his hand upon that boar. The spear struck the hide on the back of that boar. It shook its body and turned around. In the speed of that action, the spear in Vandiyā Devan's hands slipped. The spear which had merely grazed the back of that boar was shaken loose and it fell to the ground.

The pig was now turning towards Vandiyā Devan. He realized his dangerous situation. His horse would surely not be able to bear the attack of the boar. And his spear was not in his hand. The Prince was still trying to unentangle himself from beneath his horse. Only if he could jump onto some tree from above his horse would he be able to escape. 'Cheee, chee! After escaping so many dangers, must he fall prey to a mere wild pig!' Fortunately, there was a tree close by, bent low and spreading wide. He jumped from his horse and took hold of one of those low branches. Using all his strength from the feet to his head he leaped to get on that branch. That same instant the boar bumped into his horse, which stumbled wildly -- somehow it recovered, and then began to run away.

Karikala was still prone under his horse. Vandiyā Devan was upon his branch. The wild boar stood in the middle turning to look this way and that. Vandiyā Devan thought that it was debating about which enemy to attack between the two. The Prince had still not freed himself from under the horse. Even if he was freed to stand up, would he be able to withstand the attack of that boar at that time? The Prince had no weapon that could be used immediately in his hands. He would have to bend his bow and shoot an arrow. He might even

be badly hurt being caught under the hooves of his horse. Anyway it was important that he made some time for the Prince to collect himself. All this flashed through Vandiya Devan's thoughts at lightning speed, even as he made up his mind. He vigorously shook the branch of the tree on which he was, shouting loudly, "akaaa, ukooo, choo!"

His trick worked. The boar turned and with brutal anger came rushing towards the tree on which he was swinging. "Come! Let it come, let it dash itself against this tree!" even as he was thinking this, the tree branch broke, unable to bear his weight. Good Lord! What is this new danger what if I fall to the ground with this branch! The terrible sharp teeth of the boar would tear me to pieces. The only escape was to jump and get hold of another branch. He tried to leap to another branch. Since it was far away, he could get hold only with one hand. It was a thinner branch and began to bend even as his hand began to slip. 'Fine, fine. The only recourse is to fall. Death must be instantaneous! No doubt in that! Somehow, in this final moment, I was able to save the Prince Aditya Karikala! I am sure the Princess will be happy when she hears about it. Would she shed one drop of tear to mourn my death?' His thoughts raced in this fashion.

A horrible loud noise was reverberating; and his handhold finally slipped. Vandiya Devan closed his eyes tightly. And fell down 'bang... thud...' and as he fell, lost consciousness.

When he regained his faculties and opened his eyes, Vandiya Devan saw that Prince Karikala was sprinkling water on him. He sat up immediately. "Prince, you are safe!"

"Yes, I am still alive because of your benevolence!"

"What happened to the wild pig?"

"There" at the spot where the Prince pointed, he could see that the boar was lying dead.

Vandiya Devan was looking at it for some time, "My King, a beast that looks so small, what a mayhem it had created! Everything that Kandamaran had said about a wild boar is true! Finally, how did you manage to kill it?"

"I did not kill it. Your spear and you together killed it," said the Prince. Not seeming to understand the meaning of his words, Vandiya Devan looked at the Prince's face. "Sir, you have made good use of my spear. I did not do anything; I was not able to help you at that dangerous time!"

"When you were shaking the tree branch and crying out loudly, I managed to get free from under my horse; I picked up your spear. Poor beast, I used all my raging anger upon this pig. When pierced by the spear it made that terrible screaming noise; I almost went deaf! It did not die just by the spear thrust. You slipped from the tree branch and fell on top of it. The boar died of that shock," on saying this, Karikala began to laugh.

Vandiya Devan too, began to laugh thinking of what had happened. He felt all over himself, “I escaped being hurt because I fell on top of this pig! I can now believe the old mythology that Lord Maha Vishnu took an avatar, incarnation, of a boar and killed the evil Hiranya-Aksha. What a brutish beast!”

“Thambi, do not go on to evaluate the Varaha-avatar, boar incarnation, of Lord Vishnu by merely seeing this small wild boar. In the north, in the forests of Vindhya mountains, they speak of a boar with a single sharp horn. They say that it is often as big as a small elephant. If it had been such a pig and it had dashed against the tree on which you were clinging, how that tree would have been tormented! Think of that!” said the Prince.

“The tree would have been uprooted; the spear you threw would have been broken. Our fate would be in the past tense. Their job would have been spared for the enemies of the Chozla’s,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Thambi, tell me the truth. You threw your spear as soon as my horse stumbled and fell. Did you throw your spear on the boar or did you throw it at me?”

Enraged, Vandiya Devan asked, “Sir, are you really asking me this question? If you are suspicious like this, there was no need to kill that animal and save my life!”

“Yes, yes. I should not be suspicious of you. If you had not shaken that tree branch and made such a racket, that boar would have become my Lord of Death. Even so, when you threw the spear, I felt a second of such a suspicion. These days I am suspicious of everything and everybody unnecessarily. I am not able to get rid of the feeling that Yama, the Lord of death, is constantly following me. I thought that Lord Yama had come to me in the form of this pig.”

“In that case, it is a good thing. The Yama who was following you is now dead and gone! Why worry anymore? We have also won the bet we had with Kandamaran. All we need to do is drag this boar behind us. Shall we get going?” asked Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan.

“Yes; we need to get going. But why the hurry? Let us rest a while here itself and we can go after the tiredness is gone.” Said the Prince.

“This is the first time ever that I am hearing you say that you are tired! Yes, you must have suffered a lot, being caught under the hooves of the horse.”

“That is nothing. The weariness in my heart is greater than any tiredness of the body. Do we need to take the forest paths and go back the long way, just as we had come? Must we join up with those fools once again and travel with them? Instead of that, it will be better if we can cross this lake and go.”

“Good Lord! Are you suggesting that we swim and cross this ocean like lake? Is your intention to save me from the boar, only to drown me in this water?”

“Oh, yes. I remember that you cannot swim. Even I cannot swim across this huge lake. If we could find a boat it will be easy. Did we not see a boat earlier? It must have gone ashore somewhere near here. Why don’t we look for that?”

“What shall we do with the horses? Shall we leave them behind to become prey to the beasts of this forest?” asked Vandiya Devan. Suddenly he jumped up as if he remembered something else. He asked, “Sir, where is the leopard?”

“I too have forgotten that! Hope it is not hidden somewhere nearby! Instead of coming like a boar, Lord Yama can be following in the form of a leopard, can’t he?”

They started looking around keenly for some time. Vandiya Devan pointed, “There!”

That rivulet that took the water to the lake narrowed quite a bit, as it went north. Across the narrow rivulet of water, a tree had fallen long ago touching both banks. The leopard was slowly crawling across that log bridge and reaching the farther bank. They both saw this and both had the same thought. “Oh dear, those women who had gone in the boat!” they cried out loudly. “Those women must have gone ashore on that island at the mouth of this rivulet,” said Vandiya Devan.

“A wounded leopard is very dangerous,” said the Prince.

“We will need to kill the leopard and take it with us along with that pig.”

“How can we cross this stream? The horses will not go across the tree bridge?” asked the Prince.

“The water level cannot be high; we can get in with the horses and cross.”

Karikala’s horse also had stood up by then and gone to stand next to Vandiya Devan’s horse. Just like their masters, exchanging confidences, those two horses too must have exchanged thoughts about how they had escaped danger earlier.

Both men leaped onto their respective horses; they made the horses get into the stream bed. Yes, it was true that there was not much water in that stream. But mud and muck was deep. The horses stumbled and got entangled in the mire as they went forward. Vandiya Devan thought of the sinkholes at Kodi Karai thinking, “this muck is nothing to be concerned about.” Gaining courage he was about to tell Karikala about those sinkholes.

“Friend, you are speaking about the mud and mire that is external. What do you think of the mud and muck inside human minds? Are you aware that it is very difficult for a person to come ashore once their mind has become embogged in the mud of evil thoughts?” asked the

Prince. Vandiya Devan realized that the Prince's heart was truly mucked up like the mud in the river.

The horses crossed to the other shore with great difficulty. They looked around carefully examining the forest on all sides as they went onwards. Karikala had his bow as well as arrows ready. Vandiya Devan too, held his spear in readiness to throw on the leopard.

Suddenly overcoming the natural forest noises, they heard the loud screech of a woman's voice followed by shouts, "Amma, Amma! Leopard, leopard!"

In the same instant that Manimekalai had spotted the leopard on the tree branch, one of the girls who was occupied with cooking inside the pavilion, also saw the leopard and screamed in that fashion.

That was the voice heard by both friends on the horses and had made their hair stand on end with fear. They went fast, goading the horses to quicken, towards the point where they had heard the scream. What they saw on following one turn of the lakeshore, shocked and petrified both of them.

When Nandini and Manimekalai had been getting ready to get into the water to bathe, the leopard had crossed and climbed a tree branch and was slowly climbing the tree. The leopard was only concerned in preserving its own life after it had been tired out, hurt and wounded in the fight with the boar. But no one except the leopard knew this!

Aditya Karikala and Vandiya Devan both thought that the leopard was about to leap on the women standing near the waters-edge. Vandiya Devan hesitated to use his spear; what if by accident it fell upon one of the women, he was afraid. Karikala did not have any such concerns. He threaded the bow and pulled the string to release the arrow aiming at the target. The arrow whizzed to strike the leopard's, underbelly. Roaring frightfully, the leopard leaped upon the women on the other side.

None could discern what had happened in that next minute; everything was one big confusion. Both women and the leopard had suddenly disappeared. After about a minute all three heads poked up over the water at different spots. Blood mixed with the lake water and turned it red.

Chapter 44 - Love And Revenge

Both friends were looking with some anxiety at all the happenings described above. They jumped off their horses and ran along the shores of the water. By now the leopard had drifted away quite far. The way it was floating, it appeared as if it had finally given up its life. How much were the girls hurt by the leopard? They could not figure that out. They jumped

into the water and began to go towards the women; at first, Vandiya Devan was aiming to go towards Manimekalai; he was afraid to go near Nandini.

Nothing had happened to Manimekalai, she was not wounded. She had fallen into the water because of the speed with which the leopard had come. Having fallen without being prepared she was a little breathless; that was all. When she saw Vandiya Devan coming towards her, she became very emotional and closed her eyes tight.

Karikala had pulled at Vandiya Devan's hand and turned him to go towards Nandini and was coming towards Manimekalai. She did not realize that. She did not open her eyes and look till Karikala had gathered her in both his arms, carried her up the steps of that pavilion, and gently lowered her on the floor. She opened her eyes very slowly only when Karikala was placing his finger near her nose, checking if she was breathing. She opened her eyes with much love and eagerness thinking of letting Vandiya Devan know of her limitless love. On opening her eyes, she realized that it was Karikala's face that was looking at her; jumping up hastily, she went to sit a little apart.

Karikala burst out in gleeful laughter on seeing the disappointment on her face.

"Manimekalai what is this jumping and leaping? Why such disgust on seeing me?"

"Sir, if a strange man touches her, wont a girl feel shy?" asked Manimekalai.

"Girl! Have you made me into a stranger? There is great effort going on for you and me to get married!" said Karikala.

"My Lord, only after such efforts are successful can we become related. Till then, you are like a stranger," replied Manimekalai.

"Perhaps you could tell if that pleases you?"

The noblewoman of Kadamboor thought about it for a little. "Sir, you hail from the Chozla clan; you are intelligent to know about everything. Is it proper for you to speak to a young girl like me in this fashion? It is to my father that you must pose such a question."

"Girl, if your father agrees, will you agree?"

"After my father agrees, if he asks, I shall give an answer. I feel too shy to even speak with you on this matter. You saved me from being killed by the leopard and drowning in this water. Because I feel grateful to you for that reason, I am patient all this time...."

Karikala laughed, "Manimekalai you are very smart. Very deep! Even so, you were disappointed. Because of that do not try to fool me."

“Sir, what words are these? Why would a naive girl like me try to fool you? Why? How?”

“Why do you wastefully talk in this roundabout fashion? If Vandiya Devan had lifted you from the water and brought you up here, will you be speaking in this cruel manner? You thought it was Vandiya Devan and closed your eyes. And you opened your eyes, thinking it was him. Poor you! you were disappointed!”

Manimekalai felt a little frightened mingled with her shyness. Some how she gathered courage and said, “My Lord King, you seem to know my heart’s desire. Even then, why do you test a foolish girl like me?”

“Manimekalai, I know your heart’s desire; in the same way I also know Vandiya Devan’s heart. I am thinking because he may not be deserving of your pure love. Look over there; see the Young Queen and Vandiya Devan flirting. Look at the mirth on Nandini’s face.”

Manimekalai looked towards the direction he was pointing. In that moment, the poison of jealousy mixed into the milk of her pure heart.

Vandiy Devan and Nandini were talking to each other. The leopard’s claw had touched one of her shoulders and the wound was bleeding. Nandini did not close her eyes shut like Manimekalai. Neither was she in any hurry to be free of Vandiy Devan’s hands. On his part Vandiy Devan quickly lifted Nandini down on to the floor as if dropping hot embers from his hands. Even though she had been under water, her body was burning hot.

An unexplainable fright took hold of Vandiy Devan’s heart. His body was trembling.

Nandini asked with a smile, “Sir, why this much tension? Do you think I am the leopard? Or, did you think of saving the leopard and accidentally brought me ashore and are worried about that!”

“Lady, please do not speak such cruel words. My heart was a bit taken aback, because I had to touch you and bring you ashore!”

“It is a heart that is full of wrong intent; that is why it is agitated!”

“My Lady, I have not done anything wrong!”

“Not done anything wrong?!! You sought my help to get into Tanjavur fort. I helped you by giving you my signet ring. Then you came secretly to my garden in the mansion. At that time too I saved you from being harmed. How have you repaid that? You ran away like a thief, without my knowledge and without telling me. You promised to come back and see me after meeting the Princess at Pazlayarai. You did not honor that pledge. Are not all these crimes?”

"I accept those as crimes. But there is reason for all that behavior. I am in service to others. I am bound by the orders of Prince Aditya Karikala. If you think about that, you will not find fault in my actions."

"Yes, even to save a woman from the jaws of a wild leopard, you need the order of Karikala. You need his permission to rescue a girl drowning in the water. I was watching. Ahaha! How eager the Prince was, to save Manimekalai. If I had drowned in this water, he would have been very happy. Without knowing his heart, you rescued me!"

"Madam, please do not say such things. Because you sent him your letter, the Prince has come this far from Kanchi."

"But you came running in such a hurry to prevent him from coming here to me. You came with messages from the Younger Pirati. Your efforts did not succeed. All your efforts to interfere in my activities will go to waste like this."

These words of Nandini confused his mind even more. In order to understand the hidden meanings in her words, he looked keenly at her face. He face showed nothing different; as usual it appeared with a beautiful smile.

Nandini continued, "your face reflects the fact that you accept your crimes. You were in my power that night of the new moon at the palli padai memorial. All I needed to do was give a sign and my men would have killed you. I saved your life and sent you away that night too. You do not seem grateful even for that! I have not come across anyone else in this whole world who is such a thankless person as you."

"My Lady, this I promise you. I have heartfelt thanks towards you in my heart of hearts."

"And even though it is several days since we came to this town, you have made no effort to express your thanks. How am I supposed to believe your words?"

"I thought I would express my thoughts when I would be able to meet you in privacy. An opportunity did not arise, for that."

"You made no effort to create an opportunity for yourself. You did not even make a sign by the expression on your face or the look in your eyes. Why? All these days, why did you not even look my way?"

"My lady you are the wedded wife of Lord Pazluvoor who is the Chozla Empire's, most powerful treasury officer..."

"Meaning that I am one who is married to an old man, you are jesting about me. Is that not true?"

“Oh dear, if I jest about you, I will go to the worst purgatory!”

“Don’t. It does not matter now. Whatever it is, please do not call me the wedded wife of Lord Pazluvoor. I am no wife to him”

“Oh dear! What is this that you are saying?”

“I am speaking the truth. If someone forcefully drags a woman and keeps her, can she become a wife?”

“My lady you come from the chaste heritage of Tamil women. You will do nothing against the moral code of womanhood.”

“I am fully aware of the moral code for women. In ancient Tamil lands, women who were in love in their hearts with a man, took that person to be their spouse. They did not agree to be forced in to marrying someone.”

“However, you, ...”

“I know what you are about to say. You are asking how I agreed to this forced marriage with Lord Pazluvoor? I agreed because of a very important motive of mine. There is something else celebratory about Tamil women of ancient times. They will without fail take revenge for the injustice inflicted upon them. Sir, you did not help me to fulfil my love! Will you at least help me take revenge on my enemies?”

These last words of Nandini made him suffocate and suffer as if at the same time a diamond hard weapon was splitting his heart and a ferocious thunderbolt was descending upon his head.

“My Lady, My lady. What is this? Love, revenge? What is the connection between your love and me? What is the connection between and love and revenge?”

“There is a connection. But there is no time to tell you about it now. There, the Prince and Manimekalai are coming close. If you come tomorrow, at midnight to the chambers where I am staying, I shall tell you.”

“How can that be possible My Lady? You are in chambers in the well-guarded inner apartments of the palace. How am I to come there alone at midnight?”

“Did you not escape from that very chamber in the inner courts of the palace, without anyone’s knowledge at one time before this? You could come by the same way you took when you left. If only you had the heart ...”

Vandiya Devan’s shocked astonishment was now complete.

However there was no change in Nandini's expression. As usual a smile played on her lips.

Chapter 45 - You Are My Sister!

Manimekalai and the Prince walked up to the spot where Nandini and Vandiya Devan were standing. Till they had come closer, Aditya Karikala was looking at Vandiya Devan. On coming close, he looked at Nandini directly. He saw the blood drops on the scratch lines on her cheek and shoulder.

"Oh! That wretched cat has wounded you!"

"Yes, Sir that leopard merely wounded my body; not my heart." These words of Nandini pierced Karikala's heart. Before he could say anything, Manimekalai had come to her with some agitation. "Yes, Akka, it has scratched you deeply! Fortunately I have brought some ointment. Come let me apply some..." said Manimekalai.

"My dear sister, such scratches and wounds are nothing to me. I have had many such wounds and they have healed. Tell me if you have an ointment to heal the wound in the heart," said Nandini.

"Oh! Yes, Akka. I have that too." Manimekalai took hold of Nandini's arm and led her into the room in that marble pavilion.

Prince Karikala and Vandiya Devan walked back and went to sit on a large Marble bench placed beneath a spreading Mango tree.

"Sir, the quicker we leave this place the better it will be. If we linger here for too long, Kandamaran and his father may misconstrue," said Vandiya Devan.

"Whoever wants can misinterpret and think what they want; will they chop off our heads or what? If these women do not misunderstand us, it is enough. We can take leave and go as soon as they come back," said the Prince.

Very soon Manimekalai and Nandini came wearing fresh clothes and well groomed. Salve had been applied on Nandini's cheek and shoulder to hide the bloody scratches.

"We were waiting to take leave of you, before we go," said the Prince.

"How can that be! It is past midday. You must stay with us and eat a meal with us before you go. If I let you go now, Sambuvaraya's daughter will never forgive me," said Nandini.

“We will stay upon one condition. It appears that Manimekalai has applied an ointment for the scratches on you. She said she had a medicine salve for the wounds of the heart. If she would tell us what that is, we might stay,” said Karikala.

“Instead of asking her, can we guess at what that could be?” asked Nandini.

“Perhaps she meant the fading of memories over time.”

“I do not think so. There are wounds of the heart that do not heal with the passing of time,” said Nandini.

Vandiya Devan spoke, “as far as women are concerned there is a good ointment for wounds of the heart! That is their tears!”

“This nobleman of Vallam is forever awaiting a time to speak disrespectfully about women. He is not correct. If certain wounds of the heart happen, the ability to shed tears is lost. Then how can they be useful ointments?” asked Nandini.

Vandiya Devan replied, “If both of us are wrong, what is your guess?”

“Why not! I can tell you. My Sister, the ointment that you speak of goes into our heart by way of our ears! Are you not talking of the ointment for the pain in the heart being pleasing music made by the strings of the Yaazl, or flute or a sweet voice?”

“Yes Akka! How did you know?” asked Manimekalai.

“I told you that I was a sorceress. I have the power to know what is in the hearts of others. Sirs, will you both accept that sweet music has such unusual properties?” asked Nandini.

“Yes, Oh Yes. I also accept that it was our mistake that we could not guess that! I remember Kandamaran telling me that Manimekalai is an expert singer and that she can play the Yaazl instrument very well,” Karikala replied to Nandini.

“If one were to have a brother, he should be like Kandamaran. Any day that he has not been able to sing the praises of his sister to someone is not a day for that nobleman of Kadamboor. He spoke the truth about Manimekalai’s musical expertise. Manimekalai has brought her Yaazl here. Luckily, she is not forced to have merely me as her audience, for I have no insight about music. Sirs, today you both saved us innocents from becoming the food of that leopard; should we not thank you appropriately for that? You must stay to eat food with us and drink the nectar of Manimekalai’s music before leaving.” Nandini insisted.

Vandiya Deval signaled to the Prince ‘do not agree!’ He did not even see that. Karikala replied, “the wishes of you princesses, is our good fortune; so be it.”

“Manimekalai, your wishes are now fulfilled. Go see if the food is ready! If not, hurry them up!” she ordered.

Manimekalai got up immediately and walked towards the other side where the cooking was going on. At the same time, Vandiya Devan also stood up and started looking around. Nandini, noticed him and said, “Just now I had said that I have magical powers to know what is in the minds of people. Let us test that now! Shall I say what is in the heart of this noble Lord of Vallam?”

Karikala laughingly replied, “Tell us; let us see!”

“He is regretting greatly, thinking that it was a big mistake to kill the wild leopard and save these women! He is thinking that it would have been truly better if we two had gone into that leopard’s belly!”

Karikala continued with a laugh asking, “Friend, are you thinking that?”

“No, Sir; I think no such thing. But it is true that I am thinking of that leopard and these two ladies. I am drowning in surprise about how that leopard escaped with its life, after being caught by these two,” answered Vandiya Devan.

“What are you blabbering, Thambi? The leopard escaped? Again? We saw the dead body of that leopard floating on the water. Where is it?” the Prince also stood up asking thus.

“Look over there!” pointed Vandiya Devan.

Just a calling distance from where they were sitting, they could see the water’s edge between tree branches. The boat in which the noblewomen had come was tied up over there. The leopard was trying to crawl into the boat by holding to its stern with its forelegs.

“This leopard seems to have a very strong life” said Karikala.

“Sir, come with me. Let us go kill it and come back. It is wrong to leave a wounded wild cat, alive.”

“Oh great brave of the Vaanar clan! Why should you both be troubled about a wounded leopard? Let me call Manimekalai. She will come back after killing the beast with the small knife in her waist.” Said Nandini with some sarcasm.

“Did you hear this my friend? The Pazluvoor Queen has such a great opinion about our bravery and capability! Do you need me to go with you? Will you not go just by yourself?”

“Or shall we send Manimekalai?!” added Nandini.

“Yes, we can send Manimekalai; what if that girl applies ointments for the leopard’s wounds and nurses it back to life!” mumbled Vandiya Devan.

“What are you thinking about?” asked the Prince.

“I am wondering if I should cut off the head of that wounded leopard and bring it back, to offer it, at the feet of Pazluvoor’s Queen. To see if she would be satisfied at least after that!” Vandiya Devan walked away swiftly.

“Did you hear what that fool was saying? Does one need much bravery to cut off the head of a wounded leopard?” asked Karikala as he continued to laugh. On seeing Nandini’s face his laughter stopped abruptly.

“It is you who must express an opinion about that!” said Nandini softly.

All of Karikala’s body shivered. With a quivering voice he said, “Nandini! You sent me a letter through Kandamaran. I came here because of that. Otherwise I would not have come.”

“At least after all this time, you paid heed to my request! Thanks very much!”

“I thought that you have forgotten all that which had happened in the past. I thought that you sent me the letter because of that.”

“Can all that which happened in the past be forgotten? Sir, have you forgotten everything?”

“It is not possible to forget, I agree. I too have not forgotten! You stood with tears streaming from your eyes, begging me for a boon. I did not grant your wish. I was in a craze at that time. I have not forgotten all that even now. Why did you send me a letter? Why did you ask me to come here?”

“Sir, you have not come to Tanjavur, in the last three years. You have not even come to see your father who is unwell.”

“Nandini, he is not father just to me!”

“Yes, he is father to the Younger Pirati. He is father to Ponniiyin Selvan too. But you father feels it most that he has not seen you. Someone seems to have told the Emperor that you have not come to see him because of me. Because of that he does not even see me. Sir, is it not enough? All the harm that you have done to me already? Must I now bear this accusation too?”

“But that is true; I have not come to Tanjavur because of you.”

“If that is so, I shall leave Tanjavur and go away. You can come to Tanjavur; sit on the throne of your father, crown yourself...”

“Nandini, that is unlikely to happen. I have no liking for any throne now. Let Madurandaka sit on the throne, crown himself as emperor of the kingdom and rule the land.”

“Sir, you know the abilities of Madurandaka very well. Can he sit on the throne and rule for even one day?”

“If he is not capable, the Lords Pazluvoor are there to help him; you are there too.”

“Sir I am able to understand your wishes very well now. I will go away from Tanjavur, from Pazluvoor palace. ... You can come to Tanjavur ...”

“No, no. you think wrong. I have no such thought in me. All the wrongs I committed against you before now, that is enough. I need not add the sin of having you chased out of Pazluvoor palace too.”

“Sir, can we both not remain in Tanjavur? Is there not enough place in that bit city for both of us? There is no need for us to even see each other.”

“It may be so; there may not be any need to see each other. But can we avoid thinking in our minds? You were the one who just said, that you cannot forget the past. You spoke of the wound in your heart. My heart too is wounded. I too cannot forget”

“Maybe we cannot forget. Can we not forgive? Can you not forgive my mistakes even after all these years have one by?”

“Nandini, you have done nothing that needs to be forgiven by me. I am the one who did wrong; I am the one who needs to ask forgiveness. Even when I started from Kanchi, I did so with thoughts of asking for your forgiveness. But something important that I heard along the way, has made me underserving to even ask for forgiveness.”

“Royal Prince, it is most improper for you to ask me for any forgiveness. You are the son of the Emperor who rules this known world. I am an orphan girl abandoned by the father and mother who gave birth to me.”

“No Nandini, No. You are not an orphan.”

“Yes, Lord Pazluvoor, the Lord of the treasury, married me and recognized me as his young Queen. Still, ...”

“It is not just that Nandini; I hesitate, thinking how I can say this truth to you.”

“You may say anything you wish, without any hesitation, to this pitiful girl. People passing by, get the courage, to tell me all sorts of things. They drag me in, to be hassled and laughed at.”

“Nandini, if anyone behaves in that fashion to you anymore, I shall not tolerate it even for one moment. All you need to do is point, I shall send him to the realm of Lord Yama before I do anything else.”

“You always showed this kindness towards me. You would even quarrel with your sister Pazlayarai Younger Pirati, taking my side in our younger days. She is your sister...”

“Nandini, you too are my sister. Like Kundavai the Younger Pirati, you too are my sister. I am your brother.”

“Royal Prince, since I married another, you have started thinking of me as your sister. That is reflective of the greatness of your clan. How can I consider as my brother a son of the Emperor, the son born to rule the world?”

“You do not understand what I am saying Nandini. You are truly my sister. You are the daughter of the Emperor that rules all the three nations.”

Nandini started laughing merrily, upon hearing this. “Is your brain addled? Or have I become crazy! I am not sure!” said Nandini.

“It is no delusion or craziness”

“Does it mean that you are jesting about me, this naïve girl!”

“Look at me and speak Nandini; do you truly think that I am jesting?”

“Sir, you look at my face and speak. Do I look like the Emperor’s daughter? Do I have the characteristics of royalty on my face?”

“Nandini, I have looked at your face since we were five years of age! I have been wonderstruck by the incomparable beauty that shines on your face. Only now, I understand the reason for this. I found out on the road, midway to here, after I had left Kanchi. The whole world knows that among those married into the Chozla clans, none is comparable in beauty as Kalyani the daughter of Vaithumba kings. She is still alive, living in Pazlayarai. Even though she is over seventy years in age, the divine beauty that is reflected on her face will make us blink our eyes. All her beauty has now found abode in you. There is none of that beauty in me, in Kundavai or even in Arulmozli. Only you have inherited that from my father.”

“Sir, what is this that you are saying. I must have truly become mentally deranged. Or, something must be wrong with my ears.”

No, Nandini, no! There is no madness; there is nothing wrong with your ears. You are a daughter of my father; therefore you are my sister. Before the Emperor married my mother, he met and loved a woman, on an island near Lanka and lived with her, wedded in the style of Gandarva love. You are her daughter, therefore my sister," Karikala spoke with a voice filled with passion and anger.

Nandini kept looking at Aditya Karikala for some time as if she was greatly shocked. Her face seemed to clear slowly.

"Sir is this the only news, information that you heard half way after starting from Kanchi? Asked Nandini.

"Yes, Nandini, when I heard that, many things that were somewhat unclear before, began to make sense."

"Royal Prince, who is the one who brought this news to you? The nobleman from Vallam?"

"Yes, it was him. But he did not tell me just by himself. Kundavai Pirati sent word through him."

"Aha! They have conspired in many a way since the beginning days, to separate you from me. Even now their conniving is not done!"

"You think in error Nandini. There is no scheming in this. In our younger days, the efforts of the Elder Pirati Sembayan Madevi, trying to separate us, did not make sense to me. I was very much angered by that. What a great sin from which she stopped us and saved us! I understand now. Perhaps she should have told the truth then. They have done much wrong to you by not speaking of this. They have wronged me too. Let bygones be bygone. Let us both forget what has happened. Even if we are not able to forget, let us forgive."

"Sir, did the nobleman of Vallam meet you on the road and tell you just this story? Did he tell you anything else?"

"Nandini, why do you call it a story? Do you not believe it?"

"Is it that easy to believe what you have said? Could I have attained this state if I had been born the daughter of an emperor? Would I have suffered this much cruel distress? Fine, let us think that what Vandiya Devan said is true. Is that all he spoke about? Did he not say anything else?"

Karikala hesitated a bit. After a while he said, "Yes, he told me about something else. He said that you have joined a group of Pandiya fanatics and schemers. He said that you have pledged to destroy the very rootstock of the Chozla clans. He said that you have a killing sword with the fish symbol on its hilt that you worship. He said that in the forest around the

memorial ruins near Kollidam you placed some young boy on a throne and crowned him. Forget all that from now. You have the rights to all the glory of the Chozlas just like me. You are the daughter of Emperor Sundara Chozla; our dear sister. From now onwards my most important duty is to atone for all the wrong doing meted out to you till now.”

‘Sir, you believe all this, don’t you? Then why did you wait all these days after coming to Kadamboor? Why did you not make an effort earlier, to meet me, and talk to me? Why?’ asked Nandini.

“It was because of the confusion in my mind. I needed time to make my mind accept this new relationship between us. I was also waiting for the right opportunity to explain everything. Is this news that can be declared openly in front of everyone? Luckily, a wild hog and a spotted leopard created that opportunity for me today.”

“Sir wild beasts of the forest are of course cruel. But they are not like humans who can do so much violence. I have realized that today.”

“My Sister. You said a little while ago that you cannot forget all that which has happened. I too agreed. I asked that you should forgive even if you cannot forget. You have not answered me regarding that.”

“Prince, I would forgive all the betrayals, crimes against me that you have committed; I might even forget them. But the betrayal of yours today, I shall never forget or forgive.”

“Oh dear! What have I done today? I have done nothing against you knowingly today!”

“I will tell you. Look over there. Look at that fiend of a fellow there.”

“Do you mean Vallavarayan?”

“Yes. It is him who is coming empty handed, instead of bringing the head of that leopard. He saw me one day in Tanjavur. He said that he would considerate it as his good fortune if my foot touches him. I did not even want to touch him with my foot and kick him! He ran away when I said that I would summon my footmen. Because I did not submit to his depraved wishes, he has fabricated such frightful tales and told them to you. He pledged that if I wished it, he would bring your head to me. He is afraid that I would repeat all this to you. That is why he tried to stop you on the way, and tried to prevent you from coming to Kadamboor. That is why he is wandering around with you, inseparable from you. Such a loathsome fellow, someone whom I was not ready to touch even with my foot, you made him hug my whole body and bring me ashore. And you stood watching that. How can I forget that? And how can I forgive that?”

When Nandini began speaking such frightful words with eyes full of passionate anger, Karikala’s head really began to swirl. The marble pavilion, the lake water, forest trees all of

them began to swirl. He steadied himself, "Sister! Nandini! Can what you say be true? I am now truly not able to decide what to believe. Can Vandiya Devan be this vile? Even a short while ago I was thinking of arranging for him to wed this innocent girl Manimekalai." Thus spoke Karikala.

"Sir, do not just believe what I say. You always do things in haste. Do not do that this time. Wait two days, and watch his behavior. You will understand everything all by yourself," declared Nandini.

Chapter 46 - The Boat Moved

Vandiya Devan was hurrying back on one side; on the other side Manimekalai was saying, "Akka! The food is ready," even as she was coming towards them.

Karikala turned and looked on both sides and said, "Nandini it was not Vandiya Devan alone who tried to stop me from coming to Kadamboor. That Vaishnava Nambi, Azlvar-adiyan too brought similar messages. My father's lifelong friend and the gentlemen who is revered by me, Prime Minister Anirudda too, had sent word."

"Prime Minister Anirudda, he is your father's lifelong friend! He is therefore trying to get rid of your father's life all by himself! He is someone revered by you! Therefore he is trying to make sure that you do not inherit the throne next."

"Why? Why?"

"He thinks that you have no religious belief and that you are a frenzied brute. His wish is to crown your brother, have him convert to become a Vaishnava adherent, and all this Chozla Empire into a Vaishnava Land. His wishes came to nothing when your brother drowned in the sea."

"Where is the need for him in this, to try stopping me from coming to Kadamboor?"

"I might reveal all his secret desires to you!"

"How do you know his secret desires?"

"Sir, have you forgotten that I am a sister to that Vaishnava Azlvar-adiyan?"

"Are you really his sister, born his sibling? Are you asking me to believe that story?"

"I too do not believe that story; neither am I asking you to believe it. I was growing up in his father's house. So he used to call me sister. That Vaishnava used to call me as an incarnation

of the Vaishnava Azlvar Saint Andal! His wish is that I should go travelling with him from town to town and spread the word of Vaishnava faith!”

“Did he want to turn you into a Vaishnava nun, like a Buddhist nun?” asked Aditya Karikala.

“Nothing like that. He wanted me to be married to him; and that we should go wandering from town to town singing the devotional songs of his faith. He also wished that I should give birth to many children to spread the Vaishnava way of life.”

“Chee! That monkey faced Thirumalai! And with you! Did he really want to make you, his wife?”

“Sir, that is my misfortune! Perhaps it is the curse of the time of my birth. All men who come close to me, come with sinful intent.”

“When we have the example of old-man Pazluvoor’s behavior, why blame others!”

“Royal Prince! Please do not speak ill of Lord Pazluvoor within my hearing. He fell in love with me. He married me openly, so that the whole world is aware. He honored me, an orphan nobody, by making me his Queen and had me live in his palace.”

“What was your wish Nandini? Do you really take him for your husband and revere him? Does it mean”

“No, No! I am immensely grateful and obligated to him. I do not lead a married life with him; he too has not insisted. Sir, I was born in a poor household; abandoned as soon as I was born. I offered my heart to only one person. I never changed that...”

“Nandini, who is that fortunate? No, no, do not speak of that! Who are you? Tell the truth! If you are not the daughter of my father, if you are not my sister, not even the sibling born with Azlvar-adiyan, who are you? Just tell me that alone! Nandini, if I do not know this, I will truly become insane,” said Karikala.

“I too wish to tell you that. Your friend and my friend have come close now. Later when the opportunity occurs, I shall surely tell you.”

The Pazluvoor Queen turned to look at Vandiya Devan who had come very close to them and said, ‘What is this Sir, you have come back empty handed? Where is the leopard’s head?’

“My Lady, I did not have the good fortune to bring the leopard’s head and offer it at your feet,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Ah! Is that the extent of your valor? You told me the poems about the greatness and prowess of your ancestors! You had said that they plucked the heads of all the three kings and planted them in their fields.”

“What is that poem?” asked Karikala.

Nandini looked at Vandiya Devan and asked, “Sir will you repeat those lines? Or shall I say them?”

“Queen, I do not recall reciting any such poetry.”

“You don’t remember! however, I remember very well. I will recite those lines, listen to me:

Turning armies into the rich fertilizer,

and holding their blood to water the crop,

in muddy fields ploughed by war elephants,

the heads of the three kings that he had plucked,

Vaanan, the king of all worlds, he planted them in his field!

How is the poem? Royal Prince, you plucked only the head of the Pandiya King! Apparently, the ancestors of this brave young man plucked the heads of the Chera, Pandiya and Chozla kings and transplanted them in their backyard fields!” spoke Nandini.

Disgust and anger began to dance on the face of the Royal Prince. “Fantastic, tilling! Fantastic crop! He started laughing like the rumble of thunder.

Vandiya Devan was not even able to look up into the face of Karikala. He began saying falteringly, “My Lady, I never recited a poem like this to you!”

“So what? If you had not known before, at least now, learn about the greatness of you clan. You who are born from ancestors who cut off the heads of three crowned kings and planted those heads in their backyard field, you could not bring the head of a mere wounded leopard!” Spoke Nandini.

“My Lady, unfortunately, that wounded leopard had already died. I did not like to cut off the head of a dead leopard.”

Karikala asked, “How is that? I saw the leopard trying to crawl into that boat?”

“Yes, I had pointed that out to you. It seems to have died after it crawled into the boat and lay down there. Perhaps it died because of remorse for having wounded the divine body of the Young Queen. Who knows!” said Vandiya Devan.

The anger on Karikala’s face seemed to come down and a smile blossomed. “It could have died in the water! Why did it get into the boat and die?” asked Karikala.

“Perhaps like me, the leopard too did not like water. Death by water frightens me most among all forms of death,” said Vandiya Devan.

“Even then, you bravely jumped into the water just now! Maybe it was the kindness that you felt about us innocent women!”

“Yes, My Lady. I get more frightened about women than about water. I jumped in because this prince insisted. To tell the truth, I now realize that there wasn’t any need for jumping in like that.”

“Yes, yes! You are afraid of only you yourself falling into water and dying. You are not afraid to push someone down to drown and make them die!” said Nandini.

It was obvious from her expression that Manimekalai did not like any of this conversation. “Akka the cooked food will go cold; come let us go,” she said.

All four began walking towards the marble pavilion. While walking Manimekalai looked at Vandiya Devan. She intuitively realized that he was troubled in his mind; the Prince and Nandini were somehow causing him distress. She tried to comfort him by her speaking eyes, “It does not matter who turns your enemy, I will always support you. Do not worry!”

Vandiya Devan did not even turn to look towards her. He seemed to have drowned in the sea of his worries.

It is but natural that Nandini Devi’s deceitful words and the terrible accusation she had heaped upon Vandiya Devan might disgust our readers who have been following this story.

However, if we recall whatever we had learned about her birth and life incidents, we would not be all that surprised.

The characteristics and character of humans occur due to inheritance from the ancestors that is mingled in the nature of their blood. It changes due to surroundings, habits of a lifestyle and experiences.

Mandakini who was mute and deaf had mostly lived in the forests. She had to be very careful to escape from forest creatures. In order to guard her own life she had to sometimes kill those forest beasts ruthlessly. After a long time, her heart that was pure as milk seemed to give rise to a spring of the nectar of love. But soon that spring dried up; her heart became a dry desert. The play of fate gave her a huge disappointment. The shock made her even lose her mind. In time, the wound in her heart healed. The nectar of love came forth as a fresh spring. All the love she had felt for Sundara Chozla, she now showered upon his beloved son Arulmozli, changing it into motherly love.

Mandakini's daughter Nandini inherited many of the characteristics of her mother. The world deceived the daughter much more than it had deceived the mother. Nandini was abandoned by her mother. She was raised in someone's house. Much more than the troubles caused by the wild beasts of the forest for the mother, the daughter faced cruelty by people in the civilized world. The insults heaped on her by the royal household during her young years took deep roots in her heart and turned into hatred worse than the greatest poison. The nectar of love that could have removed that poison was not available to her.

Whenever she felt love for someone, they either ignored and avoided her; or died unfortunately. Those that had insulted her and those she hated, lived well and in great comfort. What other reasons do we need to find to understand why a girl's heart turned more vicious than the greatest poison. There was no place for anything in her heart except for the thought of revenge against those who insulted and deceived her. The cunning skills needed for this, came into her blood even from when she was in her mother's womb! Her experiences in life, the troubles she had to undergo, the disappointments, and frightening experiences totally destroyed the softer emotions such as kindness and love from her heart turning it harder than iron or granite.

In order to fully understand the incidents that are about to take place later in this story, this author felt that this explanation of the character was needed and hence wrote it here.

They did not have any joyous conversation when they were eating their meal. Nandini, Karikala and Vandiya Devan were lost each in their own worries. Because of this Manimekalai was very anxious. She had arranged for this picnic and water games thinking of spending some happy time with Nandini in joyful conversation. When the Prince and Vandiya Devan came and joined them unexpectedly, her enthusiasm doubled. Later the way the three of them were talking and behaving did not make her comfortable. Her childlike heart immediately forgot the distress she had felt on seeing Vandiya Devan and Nandini together. She comforted herself thinking that it was her own fault for thinking wrongly about them and for giving room to jealousy in her heart. The way the other three continued with anger in their faces and the way they spoke with deceit and double meanings were not understood by her; neither did she like any of it

Therefore, as soon as they had eaten, Manimekalai asked, "Akka, shall we start going back? Shall I ask them to bring the boat? Are these two persons coming with us? Or will they go back the same way they had come riding their horses?"

Karikala came back to the present world from his thought world. "Oh, oh; How can we go back without listening to the Yaazl music by this girl? Never! Nandini, have you forgotten? Manimekalai, do not disappoint us!"

"I have not forgotten. Seeing you and your friend, you both do not seem to be those who would enjoy music. You appear as if you are standing on thorns. Still, nothing wrong yet. Manimekalai, go get your Yaazl!"

"Why Akka? Why are you asking me to play the Yaazl in front of people who are not interested?" Manimekalai fussed.

"Nothing like that! The Prince is saying that he wants to hear you. If his friend does not like songs or music he can close his ears," said Nandini.

"Good Lord! I am in no way against the arts of song and music! The boat girl Poonkuzlali, in Kodi Karai sang a song,

When the wave filled oceans are quiet?

Why does the inner heart seethe thus?

Even now my body thrills when I think of that," said Vandiya Devan.

"Some people like only the music by some persons. I am not sure if you would like my music!" said Manimekalai.

"Who cares if he does not like; I am here. Go bring your Yaazl," said Karikala.

Manimekalai went and brought her instrument. She sat upon the top most step of the water pavilion. She tightened the strings and tuned that Yaazl which had seven strings. It had a certain tone in one half and another on the upper half. She played the instrument alone for some time, raining pleasing music. Aditya Karikala and Vandiya Devan truly forgot their other worries. Their hearts were given to the melody of the Yaazl and refreshed.

Manimekalai added her sweet voice to the strings of the yaazl and began singing. She began with the divine songs composed by Appar, Sundarar and Sambandar.

After a while the Prince said, "Manimekalai your singing is fabulous. But you have been singing all religious songs. I am not one who is very religious. I have given all the rights to worship of Shiva, to Madurandaka. Sing some love ballads!"

Manimekalai's beautiful cheeks dimpled with some shyness; she was a little hesitant. "Girl, why do you hesitate? If you sing love ballads now, I will not think that you are singing them for me; my friend will not think that you are singing them for him. So sing without hesitating," urged Karikala.

"And if anyone thinks such thoughts Manimekalai is not one to worry about that!" said Nandini.

"What is this Akka? How can you tease me like this, when there are two men present?"

"It is your mistake in thinking of them as men! How can we call them men, when they were not able to bring the head of a dead leopard? In ancient times they speak of brave gallants who would go catch a live tiger, open its jaws and pluck its teeth and bring it back to adorn the women they love. Those were the times. You sing for now. That song which you sang for me the other day, sing that," said Nandini.

Manimekalai began to play the yaazl as she sang the following song. For some reason, in this song, her voice was even more melodious and pleasing as it created a flood of nectar.

Near those pleasure filled hillsides
By the pleasing falls of sneaking waters
Under the shade of a tree laden with many fruits
That pleasure enjoined in holding my hand
Was it but a dream my friend
Was it real, my friend

In the grove of Punnai trees
In the evening light of shining gold
He bade me come, he did and
Spoke such sugar sweet words
Was it but a dream my friend
Is that marvel untrue

Crossing all locks and guards
Coming softly like a thief
With love that has no limit
Giving hugs and kisses
Did all that truly happen
Did we truly delight in that pleasure

Thus sang Manimekalai, many more such verses in various tunes she put together. All the other three drowned in the flood of that beautiful music. Even Nandini who had turned her heart stone-hard because of various reasons, felt tears brimming in her eyes. Aditya Karikala

had completely forgotten the world. As if awakening suddenly from a daze, Vandiya Devan was startled to often look at Manimekalai. At those times he realized she was looking at him unwaveringly; this made him even more shocked. "Oh dear! What harm have we done to this girl?" His heart felt distressed.

They who were immersed in the floods of music and emotions did not notice that the wind was becoming more and more harsh. They did not notice waves on the lake rippling and rising softly at first. They did not notice the waves becoming bigger and bigger. Only when the wind began to roar becoming a harsh storm and had ripped an old tree by its roots and toppled it noisily, did all four wake from the dream world and look around in a startled fashion. They notice that a severe storm was raging; the lake was boiling with big waves rising and falling with a roaring sound.

Nandini cried out suddenly, "Oh where is the boat?"

They could not see the boat where it had been tied earlier. On looking they could see the boat in the far distance being pushed by the waves moving away slowly, moving away.

"Aiyyo! What are we to do now?" cried Nandini.

"If you both can ride horses, you should go away. We both can manage," said Vandiya Devan.

"Are you making a way for us to be killed by the forest trees breaking and falling on us in this storm?" asked Nandini

"That is not necessary. Why don't we all remain here till the fury of the storm blows over? What are we going to do by going home? There is enough food stuff to cook; Manimekalai is here to sing for us. I have not in recent times been as happy as this!" said Aditya Karikala.

"Prince, that is not appropriate. What will Lord Sambuvaraya and Kandamaran think?" asked Vandiya Dean with worry.

Nandini said, "He must have loosened the boat when he went to look for the leopard."

"Akka, why do you blame him wrongly? When he came back, we could see the boat on the shore. None of us need worry. When my father sees this big storm wind, he would send bigger boats for us."

What Manimekalai said came to be true in a short while. Two large boats almost as big as a ship, came towards the island. Lord Sambuvaraya was on one of the boats. On seeing that all four of them were safe, he was happy. Taking all of them on board, both boats turned back on that lake now seething with huge waves. Except in Lord Sambuvaraya's heart, a severe storm was blowing in the hearts of all four young persons, creating a tumult.***

Ponni's Beloved Part IV – A Jeweled Crown is completed.

Main Characters

- Aditya Karikala -- Crown Prince of the Chozla Empire, Sundara Chozla's eldest son.
- Anirudda Brahma-raya -- The Prime Minister and confidant of Sundara Chozla.
- Arinjaya Chozla -- Sundara Chozla's father, King Gandara Aditya's younger brother, died after ruling for merely one year
- Arulmozli Varma -- Sundara Chozla's younger son.
- Astrologer of Kudanthai -- An astrologer patronized by Kundavai, a spy of sorts.
- Azlv-ar-adiyan Nambi, Thirumalai Appan -- A follower of the Vaishnava faith, step brother of Esanya Bhattar, a spy. Nandini is his adopted sister.
- Chandramati -- Manimekalai's maid and confidant.
- Esanya Bhattar -- A priest of Pazlayarai, elder brother of Azlv-ar-adiyan Nambi. Had been tutor of Kundavai.
- Gandara Aditya -- Sundara Chozla's elder uncle, a devout follower of the Saiva faith, ruled before Arinjaya Chozla.
- Idumban Kari -- A footman from Kadamboor, a conspirator against Chozla royalty, member of a gang sympathetic to Pandiyas.
- Kalyani of Vaithumba -- Widow of King Arinjaya Chozla, a famous beauty, Sundara Chozla's mother.
- Kandamaran -- A young nobleman, son of Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor.
- Karuthiruman, the madman -- A prisoner with a past and a story.
- Kirama Vithan Revadasan -- Pandiya Conspirator who knew Singhala language; Raakammal's father.
- Kundavai, Younger Pirati -- Sundara Chozla's daughter. Royal princess.
- Lord Pazluvoor, the Elder, Ambalavan -- An important and powerful chieftain, Officer of Taxation, Food Supply and Finance, brother of Kalanthaka, Nandini's husband.
- Lord Pazluvoor, the Younger, Kalanthaka -- Commander of Tanjavur Fort, Captain of the Guard Corps.
- Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Elder, Bhoothi Vikrama Kesari -- An important chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Commander of Chozla Armies in Lanka. Elder-uncle to Vanathi.
- Lord Velir of Kodumbalur, the Younger, Paranthaka -- Younger Lord of Kodumbalur, Vanathi's father who lost his life in a battle in Lanka.
- Madurandaka Deva -- A Chozla Prince, son of Gandara Aditya and Sembiyan Madevi, a few years older than Aditya Karikala.
- Malayaman Milad-udayar of Thiru-Kovalur -- A nobleman, a Chieftain of the Chozla Empire, Empress Vanamadevi's father and grandfather to Karikala, Arulmozli and Kundavai.
- Mandakini -- Deaf-mute woman who wanders the seashores and forests of Lanka. Vaani Ammai's Sister.
- Manimekalai -- Kandamaran's younger sister and daughter of Kadamboor Sambuvaraya.
- Mazlava-raya -- A nobleman, Sembiyan Madevi's brother.
- Munai Raya -- A nobleman, not very confident in Lord Pazluvoor's schemes.
- Murugaiyyan -- Kodi Karai lighthouse keeper's son, Poonkuzlali's brother and husband of Raakammal; a boatman.
- Nallavan Sattandar -- Court poet at Tanjavur.

Nandini, Young-Queen of Pazluvoor -- An extraordinarily beautiful woman with a mysterious past, Azlvar-adiyan's adopted sister.

Parameswaran -- Pandiya Conspirator; Thevaralan dancer.

Parthiban Pallava -- A nobleman of the Pallava clan, Crown Prince Aditya Karikala's confidant.

Pinakapani -- Pazlayarai Doctors' Son

Poonkuzlali -- Daughter of the Lighthouse Keeper of Kodi Karai, Sendan Amudan's cousin.

Raakammal -- Kodi Karai Boatman's wife, sympathetic to Pandiya cause.

Ravidasa Brahmadirajan, the Sorcerer -- Leader of the Pandiya conspirators, a former retainer of Veera-pandiya, Pandiya Aabathudavi body guard who had a mysterious hold over Nandini Sambuvaraya of Kadamboor, Sengannan -- A nobleman; Chozla feudatory; 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.

Tyaga-Vidangar -- Lighthouse keeper at Kodi Karai. Poonkuzlali's father.

Vanamadevi of Thiru-Kovalur -- The Queen Consort, wife of Sundara Chozla, mother to Karikala, Kundavai & Arulmozli.

Vanathi Devi -- A young noblewoman of the Kodumbalur clan, Kundavai's friend, in love with Prince Arulmozli.

Vandiya Devan Vallavarayan -- A scion of the Vaanar clan of Vallam, Aditya Karikala's friend and messenger.

Vaani Ammai -- A deaf-mute woman, garden keeper living on the outskirts of Tanjore. Amudan's Mother. Mandakini's sister.

Vasuki -- Nandini's maid.

Veera-pandiya -- Pandiya King vanquished and killed by Prince Aditya Karikala.

Glossary of Terms

Aadi -- A month of the Tamil calendar, about July-August

Aanai -- Elephant

Aavani -- A month of the Tamil calendar, about August-September

Aippasi -- a month in the Tamil Calendar, about October-November

Aiyyo, acchachcho -- Exclamatory expressions denoting, fear, despair, grief, amazement, regret, etc. similar to, "oh dear."

Advaita -- A philosophy, belief in the non-dual nature of God

Agil -- Agar wood; fragrant wood

Akka -- Elder sister, a respectful greeting for an older girl

Amma -- Mother, a respectful greeting for women, both old and young

Ankush -- A goad used by elephant drivers

Anna -- Elder brother, respectful address for older men
Araya, raya, arasa -- King, chieftain, Raja
Ayya -- Father, respectful mode of address for men particularly a revered or elderly person
Ayyanaar -- Village guardian deities made of gigantic terracotta painted figures; shown riding horses, elephants
Bharata Natyam -- Classical dance style
Chakra -- Discus
Champaka -- Fragrant Magnolia
Chanakya -- A medieval personality of political cunning
Devi, Deva -- Lady, Lord
Eezlam -- Tamil name for Lanka or present-day Sri Lanka
Iruvatchi -- A fragrant flower of jasmine family
Jaamam -- A period of time 3 hours long; 1 Jaamam = 7½ Nazli; 1 Nazli = 24 minutes.
Jaggery -- Unrefined or brown sugar
Kaadal -- Love
Kaadam -- A league or about 10 miles
Kaalaa-mukhas -- Ascetic followers of Shiva, a fanatic sect
Kaavi -- Reddish, ocher dye
Kadal -- Sea
Kadamba -- A flower
Kama -- Love, Passion
Kapaalika -- An ascetic sect of Saiva Faith
Karadi -- 1. A musical instrument 2. Bear
Karagam -- Folk dance with balancing decorated pots
Karaiyar -- Coastal, fisherfolk
Karpaga -- A cornucopia, tree of plenty from the heavens
Karppu -- Sanctity of a married woman. Chastity
Kavi -- 1. Poet 2. Monkey
Kinnara -- Demi-divinities; heavenly musicians
Kolam -- Decorative drawings of rice flour
Konnai, Konrai -- A flowering tree; yellow laburnum flowers
Koothu -- Dance
Kovai fruit -- Ripe fruit of the scarlet gourd or ivy gourd
Kulam -- Clan, family group
Kumkum -- Red powder, used to decorate the forehead
Kummi -- A folk dance of women circling while clapping hands
Kunrimani -- A tiny red-black berry or bead
Kural -- Ancient Tamil couplets
Kuravai Koothu -- Dance of the Forest folk, often vigorous, dance by maidens weaving flower garlands
Maalai -- Garland
Malai -- Mountain
Maari Amman -- A village deity, a rural Goddess
Marudai -- A shade giving tree, a colloquial name for Madurai City

Mattalam -- Drum
Maya, Maaya -- Deception, unreal
Moringa -- A leafy tree, bears drumstick like long fruit
Musth -- A natural periodic condition even in trained male elephants that make them go aggressive and unpredictable
Mu-ttholl-ayiram -- A collection of romantic verse in Tamil
Muzlai -- Cave
Naadaswaram -- Elongated windpipe like musical instrument that produces a loud melody; a wind-horn
Naadu -- Country
Naamam -- A vertical, religious mark worn by followers of Vishnu
Naanal -- A sedge like grass
Naavalo, naaval -- taunts proclaiming victory or battle-cries
Nandavana -- Garden
Nappinnai -- Tamil name for Radha of Northern India
Netri-chutti -- Forehead ornament
Nilaa-muttram -- A courtyard, plaza or gathering place
Paadal Petra Sthalam -- A place recognized in songs composed by saints
Padai Veedu -- Army housing
Padinettam Perukku -- Eighteenth day flood festival
Palli Padai -- Memorial temple
Panchayat -- Council of Village Elders, often five persons
Parai -- A kind of country drum, an announcement
Pattinam -- City or Town, often a suffix for a Port Town. Ur is inland town.
Perumal -- Lord, God
Pirati -- Lady, Royal Princess
Pitam, Peetam, matam -- Monastic seat
Punnai -- A tree with yellow flowers
Rudraksha -- A multifaceted bead, a sacred berry
Saelai -- Loose pleated garment of women worn with one loose end thrown over a shoulder
Saiva -- A denomination of Hinduism, follower of Shiva
Salli -- A musical instrument
Selvan -- Beloved, Darling (masculine), Son
Selvi -- Beloved, Darling (feminine), Daughter
Semakalam -- Cymbal like metal drum played in temples to announce the hour of time
Silappadikaram -- A Tamil Epic
Sindhu -- Folk song
Tamarind -- A shade giving tree bearing a sour fruit
Thambi -- Younger brother, mode of address for young men
Thaye -- Mother, mode of respectful address for women
Thaazlai -- A fragrant cactus; screw-pine
Themmangu -- Folk Song
Thevar-aalan, -- Male Divine dancer, spoke oracles if possessed
Thevar-aatti -- Female Divine dancer, spoke oracles if possessed

Thevaram -- Devotional Poems

Thiru -- An honorific prefix; if it is attached to the name of a town, it usually indicated that the town was blessed in songs composed by saints of the faith tradition. Used as an addressing-prefix ex., Mr., Senor, Revered

Thiru-vai-mozli -- Devotional Poems

Thinnai -- A raised platform or dais on the front porch of houses in South India. Often used like a living room; for family gatherings, seating visitors, and sleeping in the night.

Udukku -- Small palm held drum

Ur, Oor -- Town or civilized place as opposed to untamed forest or Kaadu; pattinam is port town

Uriyadi -- A game to get the prize-pot tied to a tall pole.

Vaikaasi -- a tamil month ,about May-June

Vaetti -- Loose lower garment of men

Vaishnava -- A denomination of Hinduism, follower of Vishnu

Vamsa -- Dynasty

Veenai -- A stringed musical instrument

Velan Attam -- A semi-religious dance, usually by a man

Villu-pattu -- Folk songs accompanying a string instrument, story telling

Vinnagara -- Vishnu temple

Yaazl -- A stringed musical instrument

About the Author

Indra Neelameggham loves literature. She lives in the United States

This translation is an attempt to capture the beauty of Tamil in English.

This novel by Kalki captured her teen imagination and wanted to share the incredible experience with the whole wide world.

Indra suggests:

Enjoy the first reading to get the story

The second reading to enjoy the language of Kalki

The third reading to explore the incredible history and culture of the Tamils.

And then, if possible, read the original in Tamil.

Indra writes, reads, gives talks and just enjoys life.

She is glad to have had the opportunity to be the first person to translate Ponniyin Selvan in to English [1990s.]

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