

The Prince

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 juggernaut

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For my father

Cast of Characters

The Royals

From the dynasties and families of the three crowned kings of Tamilaham, the Cholas, Cheras and Pandyas

Nedum Cheralatan – king of the Cheras, rules in Vanchi, the city adjacent to the ancient port of Musiri

Karikala Chola – king of the Cholas, rules in Puhar, also known as Kaveripattinam

Nalchonai – queen of the Cheras, a Chola princess by birth, Karikala's sister and Uthiyān's mother

Shenguttuvan – crown prince of the Cheras, eldest son of Nedum Cheralatan with a Velir chieftain's daughter

Uthiyān – prince of the Cheras, second son of Nedum Cheralatan with Nalchonai

Cast of Characters

Neduncheliyan – king of the Pandyas, rules in Madurai

In addition to the kingdoms of the three crowned kings, there are a host of small rulers, who belong to the same dynasty – the Velirs – including the rulers of Aykudi, Tagadur, Parambu and Ilinji

Vel Pekan – chief of the Aviyar, ruler of Aykudi

Kannaki – Vel Pekan's wife and queen

Ilango Venmal – a Velir princess

Neduman Athiyaman Anji – ruler of Tagadur and patron of the famous poetess Avvaiyar

The Poets

Avvaiyar – poetess, patronized by Neduman Athiyaman Anji of Tagadur

Kapilar – poet, patronized by Vel Pekan and Vel Pari of Parambu

Paranar – poet, patronized by the Cheras and Vel Pekan

Cast of Characters

Others

Antuvan – a Chera soldier

Kannaki – a young woman from the Eyinar Maravar tribe

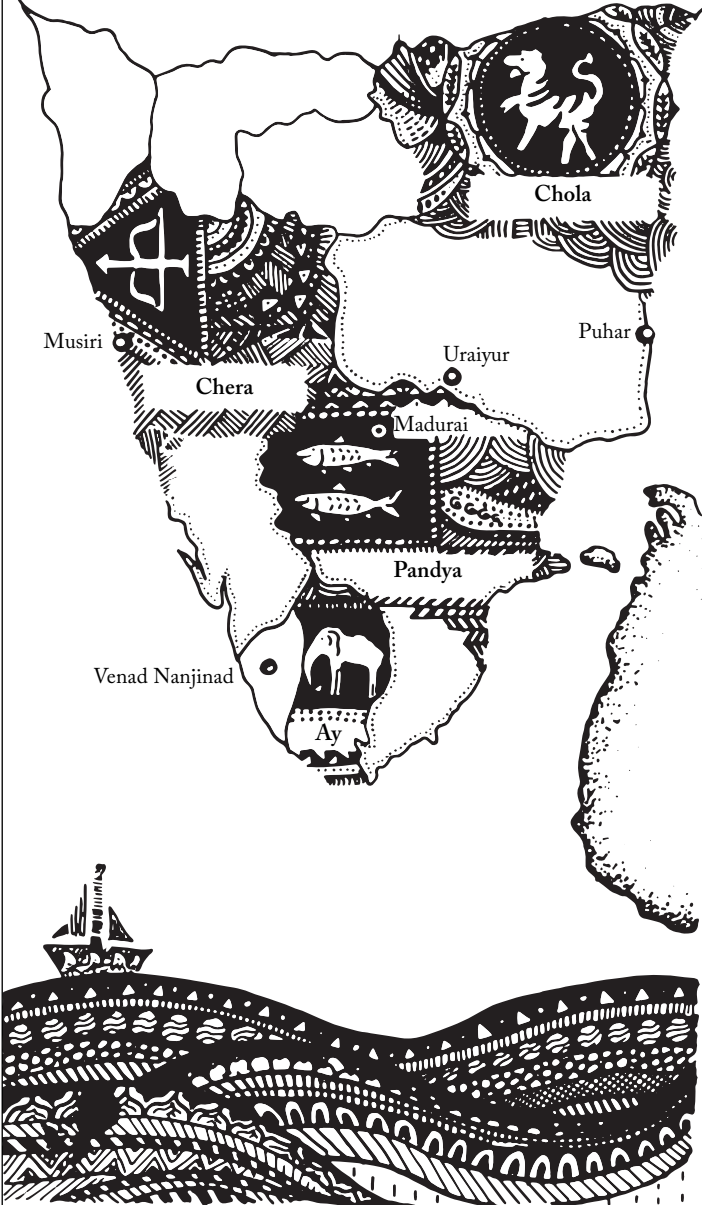
Kovalan – Kannaki's husband, son of a merchant in Puhar

Kavunthy – a female ascetic

Madhavi – a famous courtesan from Puhar

Sattan – the son of a merchant in Vanchi, a courtier at the Chera court and Uthiyan's best friend

Tamilaham during the Sangam Period



Book 1

Musiri

1

The most beautiful woman in the world was here in Vanchi, just a short distance – perhaps just a few scant metres – away from Uthiyan, but *when* would he get to see her? Stuck at his post in the chamber given over to the use of the royal scribes, Uthiyan bided his time.

To be the son of the king would have been the dream of most in the Chera kingdom, but to him the actual business of being the second son, Ilango, was to excel in being superfluous. Uthiyan loved composing poems and songs, and had no ability in the arts of the battlefield. For that reason the chief minister had advised the king that the best place for the spare prince was to be found in the department of the royal scribes, where his taste for the literary arts could be best employed in composing flowery, long-winded epistles to other kings and recording

the duties paid on the cargoes of ships that came to the port of Musiri.

It was mind-numbingly boring. Each day, Uthiyan encountered the same murmured flatteries from the dutas – the emissaries, diplomats and messengers – sent from the other courts of Tamilaham. The same rustle of scrolls passed from one hand to the next, marked with the insignia of the twin fish, the eyes of the goddess of the kings to the north, the Pandyas. And then there were the letters from the queen's kin further away, those who fought under the sign of the leaping tiger, the Cholas; the crest that the queen's brother Karikala Chola was said to have engraved on the face of the Himalayas but – as the clerks who occupied the posts to either side of Uthiyan often snickered – no one had yet climbed the mountains to see it.

The only reprieve Uthiyan found was in the tales told by the interpreters who accompanied the Yavanas – the light-skinned men from across the seas, still smelling of the salty winds – of sea monsters and encounters with beautiful, cruel sorceresses who lived beneath the waves.

Uthiyan sprang from his seat when the hour came to a close, seeking to escape a persistent Yavana merchant with a cargo of red corals and wine, hoping

The Prince

to get his duties reduced by offering the prince a gift. He was cradling in his hands an object of the most exquisite workmanship, a lamp in the shape of a swan, that he told Uthiyan would be worth a small fortune even in his city, Rome. Uthiyan refused to entertain the merchant's request, as he knew his father would want him to, but couldn't help admiring the lamp. Such a thing, Uthiyan knew, would please his mother, who loved things of beauty.

Uthiyan thought of his mother then, ensconced in the Silver Palace in the pleasure gardens. And his mind went there, to the waterfalls that flashed like spun gold in the summer sun, to the thought of the groves filled with the sound of his mother's handmaidens, shrieking as they chased the green parrots that were forever escaping the finely wrought, impractical silver cages his mother kept them in.

And to the thought of her. Madhavi.

He had caught a distant glimpse of her yesterday, as she arrived from Puhar escorted by the Yavana bodyguard that the Chola king had assigned to protect this most beautiful jewel of his kingdom sent to entertain his sister in Vanchi.

Madhavi. It was as if the air spoke her name.

Madha-vvvvvi, the walls of the palace seemed to whisper.

This time, he could hear it.

He turned around swiftly and caught a faint quiver of movement behind a drapery. Uthiyan pulled it back to find Sattan, his best friend, grinning so hard that his face seemed in danger of splitting.

‘Got you, didn’t I?’ Sattan chuckled. ‘I hear she’s practising. Come on, let’s go!’

It didn’t take much to persuade Uthiyan. They raced through the corridors of the palace, past startled courtiers and secretaries. As they rounded a corner and dashed past a group of soldiers, one reached out and yanked Uthiyan back by the edge of his waistcloth.

‘Just where do you think you’re both off to?’

Uthiyan looked up into the face of the Komahan, his elder brother Shenguttuvan. In shape and demeanour there couldn’t be two brothers more unlike. Uthiyan was slim, delicate of feature, taking after his mother, Queen Nalchonai, a Chola princess before marriage. Shenguttuvan was muscular, brawny, like their father the king, Nedum Cheralatan. Uthiyan was dreamy and artistic, while Shenguttuvan had a reputation for being practical and shrewd. Perhaps the difference lay in the fact, as the courtiers often murmured, that Uthiyan came from more rarefied, genteel stock, while Shenguttuvan was of a coarser lineage; his mother, the king’s first wife, had been a mere Velir chieftain’s

The Prince

daughter. But the brothers were close despite their differences and dissimilar temperaments.

‘The Perumdevi sent for us to welcome the courtesan Madhavi,’ Sattan concocted a reason on the spot, knowing that Shenguttuvan, the conscientious crown prince, was likely to send them back to their duties.

‘The great beauty? She’s arrived?’

‘Just last night,’ Uthiyan replied breathlessly. ‘Come with us.’

Shenguttuvan glanced back at his cohort, clearly torn.

‘They say she is the most beautiful woman in the three kingdoms, brother,’ Uthiyan craftily added.

‘Oh, all right.’ Shenguttuvan rolled his eyes. ‘Just this once.’

2

The sound of the queen's musicians strumming the yal, the stringed lute, and striking the padalai, the one-sided drum, drew the trio to the inner courtyard in the centre of the Silver Palace. A small crowd had already gathered, the men and women who waited on the queen: handmaidens dressed in the finest garments that came through Musiri, the port just a few kilometres west of Vanchi; young men who fancied themselves poets and, more often than not, were in desperate throes of passion for the queen's handmaidens and the usual assortment of musicians, goldsmiths, merchants.

As the trio searched for a vantage point, Uthiyan found his way blocked by a corpulent, beringed gentleman – a jeweller, no doubt – fanning himself with the edge of his waistcloth, who had turned

The Prince

to whisper to the young man on his right, leaning against a frangipani tree, 'Why has the Perumdevi invited her?'

'The Perumdevi believes her husband is more interested in warfare and hence does too much to honour Kuttuvai. She believes that Agastya, even though his temple is here, has been slighted. So the Perumdevi hopes the descendant of the dancer Agastya once visited the heavens to watch will placate the angry sage.'

The jeweller shook his head. 'The queen has a good heart. A kind heart. She is immensely generous. But should she interfere in matters of state?'

The young man shrugged and turned back to watch the dance and, finally, Uthiyan had a clear view of the centre of the mandapam.

Of Madhavi.

The first thing he saw were her eyes, enormous and expressive. Only then did he take note of the rest of her – black hair swept up and coiled in an intricate style and artfully studded with jasmine flowers. She was exquisitely dressed. Her bodice was made of pearls fitted over her breasts and fastened with a gold mulaikaccu. A beautiful woven yellow cloth was wrapped around her legs and fastened at the flare of her hips by a megalai, a waistband of many gold

strings and with little bells that chimed as she moved.

She was arresting but she was not what Uthiyan had expected. Even from the distance that he was at, there was the faint whisper of grey in her hair, the slight thickening of flesh at her navel. She was not as young nor as slender as any of the maidens that dotted the edges of the courtyard.

Then she began to move. And Uthiyan was lost.

For when she moved, it was as if her body was transformed into a statue of molten gold. Twisting and bending as naturally as a sunlit river flows down a mountain.

Not human, but something divine.

‘At first I thought she was not so beautiful,’ Shenguttuvan whispered to his brother and Sattan. ‘But now, I confess, I think differently.’

‘I thought the same too,’ Sattan confessed, ‘and I am at a loss to explain it. Where does her beauty lie? It is not in her face, nor in her form – there are other women who possess far more beautiful faces and forms.’

‘In her clothing perhaps?’ Shenguttuvan ventured. ‘In the way she dresses herself?’

‘That’s part of it,’ Sattan replied, ‘but not all of it.’

‘It is in her,’ Uthiyan interjected for the first time, ‘in the way she gives herself to her art.’

The Prince

‘Too much philosophy, brother!’ Shenguttuvan shook his head. ‘That answer is not for me.’

The music picked up tempo and Madhavi began to whirl. No longer a golden river, now she was a living flame, spinning in the sun-decked centre of the courtyard. It seemed as if her garments, her hair, her lustrous eyes had caught fire. A pillar of light, spinning to meet the heavens.

And then, cruelly – far too soon, it seemed to Uthiyan – it came to an end.



Sattan and Shenguttuvan lingered after the brief performance to do what young men do – attempt to flirt with the queen’s handmaidens – but Uthiyan caught sight of a familiar figure, an old, gaunt man, leaving the grove.

‘Paranar!’ Uthiyan exclaimed in delight, running to catch up with him, as he stepped into the Silver Palace. ‘What brings you here?’

‘I came in the train of the Velir chief who arrived this morning.’ The old man turned to greet the young prince as he pushed the door ahead of them open, to the queen’s waiting room.

Seconds later the door swung open again and

the Perumdevi, Nalchonai, breezed in, dressed in an expensive purple Yavana cloth. Her hair, artfully dyed, was twisted up and fastened to the side and knotted with jasmine wreaths. A stunning necklace, made of strands of coral, pearls and gold, fell all the way to her waist. ‘Paranar!’ the queen exclaimed. ‘Such a delight to see you again.’

Paranar bowed before the queen. ‘It is an even greater pleasure to bask in the splendour of your company and the beauty of your incomparable city. But how are you, Perumdevi?’

‘Oh Paranar! It has been such a trial since I saw you last. If I told you of the cares that I shoulder, mountains would weep.’ The queen sighed theatrically.

‘What ails the queen?’

‘My husband doesn’t care for me any more.’

Uthiyan sucked in his breath at his mother’s response and darted a look at Paranar. The queen’s issues with her husband were well known in court, but it was another thing to hear her discuss them so openly.

‘Perumdevi, you have my sympathy. The burden borne by a queen is a heavy one,’ Paranar replied glibly. ‘Why, I have just come from the hills, from the court of Vel Pekan of the Aviyar, where the plight of his wife, Kannaki, tore our – mine and my friend

The Prince

Kapilar's – hearts to shreds. For Pekan had become ensnared by the affections of a dancing girl.'

'A dancing girl? No, my problem with my husband is nothing like that. It is just that he doesn't listen to my council.' But Paronar's tactic had worked and this titbit of gossip had caught the queen's interest. 'But tell me more, what happened?'

'Oh, that poor woman, she has had a tough, tough time. And she asked Kapilar and me to intervene, to use our influence with her husband.'

'What did you do?' Now the queen was well and truly hooked.

'What influence do we have? What means did we have? The only thing at our disposal, our only means of persuasion, is our art. So Kapilar and I set to work with our songs, with our words, our poetry, on the stone-heart of Vel Pekan.'

'Did it work?'

'We wore him down eventually. We sang of the plight of his wife. We talked of her pain. We moved him by evoking the memory of his generosity, his goodness. In the end we prevailed. He abandoned the dancing girl and went back into the arms of his wife.'

'Your poetry has that sort of effect? It can shake a king's mind?'

'My lady' – Paronar was no longer glib – 'that is

what we do. That is the essence of our craft. We move in the homes of common folk and in the company of the highest of the land. We tell one of the other. It is part of our responsibility to tell kings, through our songs and stories, of what moves the hearts of common folk, of their griefs and sorrows, and it is our job to tell the common folk of the burdens and difficulties of kings. Our job is to present a point of view, an idea, an argument, a story that you may not have encountered before. We move hearts and through moving hearts we can change minds.'

'Paranar!' the queen, all excited, exclaimed. 'Move my husband's heart! Sing the song that you sang for Pekan to him!'

The old man bowed. 'I will endeavour to.'

There was a knock on the door. Shenguttuvan entered in the company of a messenger bearing the royal insignia of the Cheras, the bow and arrow. 'Uthiyan, our father bids us to attend on the Velir chief.'

'What's this?' the queen exclaimed.

Uthiyan cringed. 'Mother' – he rolled his eyes expressively towards Shenguttuvan – 'the betrothal.'

'Paranar,' the queen sighed, dramatically, 'you see how it is. No one tells me anything any more.' She turned to the messenger. 'Is my presence requested?'

The Prince

Shenguttuvan, clearly uncomfortable, stared at the ground. The messenger fidgeted. 'No, Perumdevi. Only the princes.'

Uthiyan turned to look at his brother. Shenguttuvan was staring out of the window expressionlessly, but his fingers fussed with the dagger at his waist. Only Uthiyan knew that this meant the usually calm Shenguttuvan was nervous. His heart went out to his brother.

He reached out to touch Shenguttuvan's shoulder. 'Come, brother. Shall we?'

3

Shenguttuvan stared at his reflection uncertainly. Uthiyan, ignoring his elder brother's protests, had driven him back to their apartments and made him change into a fresh orange silk, and forced a set of gold katata on his arms, and around his neck one necklace of pearls and another one of gold and diamonds.

Uthiyan stood back, admiring his work, while Shenguttuvan fussed with the gold belt around his waist, adorned with the repeating motif of bow and arrow, the Chera symbols. 'It's not too grand?' the crown prince asked. 'Do you think she'll be able to actually see me under all this gold?'

Uthiyan let out a frustrated sigh. 'Trust me, brother, she'll like this. Poor princess, she has come a long way to see you. The least you can do is look the part.'

The Prince

Shenguttuvan smiled and patted Uthiyan's cheek, as they made their way to the main hall. 'What would I do without you, dear brother?'

The pattimandapam was vast and studded with teak pillars, carved exquisitely by master craftsmen. Each pillar depicted a story or figure, part of the Chera lineage or history. Uthiyan took up his post, resting against a pillar extolling the exploits of his famous ancestor, his namesake, the first Uthiyan, founder of the Chera dynasty. Just ahead of him was the raised dais on which was mounted the Chera throne, gold-plated and studded with precious gems. Out of the back of the throne rose the head of a crocodile, carved out of wood and covered in gold leaf, facing upwards with its jaws parted as if it were about to consume its prey. It had egg-shaped rubies for eyes and pearls for teeth. The rest of the throne was fashioned in the shape of an elephant, its giant, life-size legs made of gold.

The hall was full, with many of the choice spots taken, and filled with a low buzz, for this event promised much excitement. The inner circle of the court, composed of the king's ministers, the priest of the war goddess Kuttuvai, the army chief, envoys and ambassadors, and the king's master of spies, were all present. So too were all the other cogs of the Chera

court's machinery – accountants and treasurers, clerks, scribes and officials, the aristocrats and leading merchants of Vanchi and the chiefs of the army divisions. And last but not least, the palace guards and servants, at the very edge of the hall, along with the musicians, dancers and jesters who entertained the court. In fact, it seemed to Uthiyan that half of the combined population of Vanchi and Musiri had squeezed themselves into the hall. And the queen was not invited. Uthiyan's heart went out to his mother.

The brothers had arrived in the nick of time, for scarcely had they taken their positions when the heralds began to bang their drums to announce the arrival of the king. The ceremonial guards, archers bearing the bow and arrow, entered the hall, and after the archers came the king, Ko Nedum Cheralatan, followed by a company of the palace guards who stationed themselves in front of the throne. The king ascended the dais, and sat upon his throne, and Shenguttuvan weaved his way through the crowds, to take his post by the right side of the king, as was the custom for the heir to the throne, the Komahan.

The heralds banged their drums again, this time to announce the arrival of the Velir chief from Ilinji.

The Velir entourage was nothing to match the one

The Prince

that had just come in, but Uthiyan was impressed nonetheless, for the Velir's bodyguards looked to be hand-picked, and although their clothes and garments were not much to boast of, it was clear, from the way they moved, and their well-muscled and battle-scarred frames, that these were men of considerable fighting experience.

The chief himself was far older than Uthiyan had imagined, and was brought in on a palanquin carried by four men.

'Old and weary,' a voice whispered into Uthiyan's ear, and the prince turned around to find Paronar next to him. 'But clinging to the chieftainship with the last ounce of strength left in his bones and all the guile he has acquired in six decades.'

The palanquin was followed by a girl, slightly younger than Uthiyan himself, her eyes demurely fixed to the floor.

'And that's the daughter,' Paronar added.

Uthiyan couldn't see much, until the palanquin stopped by him, in front of the throne. With the help of one of his men, the Velir chief descended from his litter. It required both the man and the chieftain's daughter to get the chief up on to the dais, and to the seat next to the king. When the chief had been

seated, the girl looked up, a trifle hesitantly, at Shenguttuvan.

Uthiyan got a brief glance of doe-shaped eyes, a pleasantly pretty face and an intricate hairstyle made of numerous coils of hair and studded with pearls. But what impressed him far more was the alert curiosity in the glance that the princess gave Shenguttuvan. It was obvious that she was assessing the prince, and after a few moments, a sudden, shy smile sprang to her lips. Uthiyan exhaled, relieved. Clearly the princess found Shenguttuvan acceptable – and judging by the dazed look on his brother’s face, Uthiyan was in no doubt that Shenguttuvan found his bride-to-be more than acceptable.

Paranar pinched Uthiyan’s arm and gestured to the throne – where the king and the Velir chief were conversing, in low whispers. After a while, the king nodded. He turned to his eldest son and announced, ‘The Velir chief tells me that before the betrothal, it would please him to have your horoscope cast.’

Shenguttuvan, somewhat nonplussed, assented, and then, another wizened, gaunt old man was brought forward. As he neared, Uthiyan observed that one of his eyes was almost entirely milky white.

‘Who is he?’ Uthiyan asked Paranar.

‘The Perumkani, who happens to also be the