

ENTRY FOR APOORVA PARVA CONTESTS'

WORDSCAPES - STORIES INSPIRED BY RAMAYANA

Princess and Maid

MANTHARA CRADLED THE PRINCESS IN HER ARMS, gazing at her like she was the beauty she never had. Manthara had decided not to marry and have children ever since her dear mother had died eleven years ago, but she always knew that not marrying would mean no children. But there was an advantage of being a queen's most trusted servant.

She would treat this girl as her daughter; she would pamper her like she was a princess, which, Manthara reminded herself, she was.

'Take care of her well!' called a female voice. The voice shook in grief and broke.

'I will, My Lady, I will,' said Manthara, rocking the baby in her arms. Crying and sobbing harder than ever, the queen vanished from the doorway with the tall, slim man Manthara knew vaguely to be King Ashvapati.

Ashvapati turned his cold gaze at his banished wife's maid.

'I'll be her mother, My Lord,' said Manthara earnestly.

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It had been six years since the queen had been banished from Kekaya. Kekaya hadn't changed at all since Queen Suchandra had

left it, but a lot had changed with the royal family. Yudhajita was a boy in his late teens, ambitious and simply waiting for the time he would be crowned the heir.

'Where's the milk?' asked a squeaky voice from behind the scrambling Manthara.

Manthara turned and laughed a silly fake laugh.

'Tell me!' said six-year-old Kaikeyi.

'It's in my hand, Princess, but I'll give it only if you come with me to your brother's ceremony,' said Manthara.

'Oh, well then,' sulked Kaikeyi.

Grabbing hold of Kaikeyi's small, knobby hand, Manthara steered her through the crowds of stampeding citizens, pushing through the angry, frustrated people, crying in her utterly hoarse voice, 'Make way, make way, it's the princess!'

Ashvapati appeared out of nowhere before her.

Panting, he asked, 'I was too busy, have you fed Kaikeyi?'

'I will now, My Lord,' Manthara said, bowing low.

'Don't you have any sense, hunchback, she's a girl without her mother, don't you have enough sensitivity to feed her?' Ashvapati scampered off before he finished.

He was the one who banished the mother, thought Manthara irritably, pouring her flask of milk into Kaikeyi's mouth. Kaikeyi made vague noises of protest at the neverending waterfall flooding her tiny mouth, but Manthara did bother.

'Mmm!' shouted Kaikeyi, spraying the air with milk.

Manthara turned with outrage at Kaikeyi.

'He's about to be crowned!' urged Kaikeyi, looking excitedly up at the dais, not bothering to clean her milk-white mouth.

'Oh - oh dear,' Manthara hurriedly pushed herself through angry men and women to the front of the crowd, as cheers erupted. Her hand upon her bent back, she scanned the dais for any signs of a crown - but it wasn't there. Yudhajita was wearing it, waving.

They had missed the crowning.

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'You shouldn't let them stop you from doing what you want to,' said Manthara soothingly. 'You know how he banished your mother, he doesn't care. He's a good king, maybe, but not a good father. You don't listen to him, Kaikeyi, you do what you want, my dear.'

Kaikeyi's lips were between her teeth. 'You're right, Manthara, they'll always stop me from learning their skills, learning archery and chariot-driving, won't they? But won't everybody listen to them?' she asked worriedly.

Manthara thought for a second. 'Said who?' Her lip curled.

Beckoning the teenage princess close, Manthara whispered in her ear, 'Shakta.'

Her eyes widening with dawning comprehension, she showed the thumbs-up signal to Manthara and skipped out of the room, humming. Smiling at the princess's joy, Manthara shook her head knowingly and followed Kaikeyi slowly.

'You will teach me, won't you?' Manthara heard Kaikeyi ask the lean, well-built man who was polishing arrows in armoury.

'Of course, Princess,' said Shakta warmly.

'They say you're good,' said Kaikeyi excitedly.

'He is, aren't you?' added Manthara, entering.

Ignoring the question, Shakta replied regally to Kaikeyi, 'As chief soldier and charioteer of King Ashvapati of Kekaya, I find it prudent to have more than one whip in my store. If Your Highness would wait, I would get one right now.'

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'Where did you go?' screeched Manthara, pouncing to the best of her ability on the panting princess. 'Have you a single idea how sick with worry I was? What would have happened, imagine, if I had to tell the king that you were missing?'

'He would have ordered a search and found me in an hour,' replied Kaikeyi, with that awful coldness she had inherited from King Ashvapati.

'Where were you?' repeated Manthara.

'On the battlefield,' replied Kaikeyi, still cold.

'Practicing? At night?' pressed Manthara.

'Saving,' corrected Kaikeyi with a slight smile.

'Saving? Saving who?'

'King Dasharatha of Ayodhya.'

'Dasharatha?' wondered Manthara. 'Why in the world does he, of all people, want saving from a princess in Kekaya?'

'Sit down,' said Kaikeyi impatiently. 'Sit down, it's a long story. Sit!' she added angrily, as Manthara gazed with bulging eyes at her.

Manthara sat angrily.

'So I was practicing with Shakta -'

'I know,' nodded Manthara.

'Don't interrupt!' said Kaikeyi angrily. 'So I was practicing with Shakta, it got over at sunset and he left; and I was changing from my armour on the battlefield and then this huge army fell from the sky on the battlefield.'

'From the sky? *Sky?*'

'Wait! So I was crossing and I got hit,' Kaikeyi showed wide-eyed Manthara a bleeding wound on her shoulder dismissively, 'and then I recognised King Dasharatha on the field; his charioteer had been knocked out and he was battling single-handedly against this horde of Rakshasas and it was getting darker - you know Rakshasas get stronger at night - so I drove him away from the chariot, he was on the verge of fainting -'

'What's your problem about him?'

'I saved him!' said Kaikeyi with a mixture of frustration and pride. 'And I woke him up and -' Her eyes went unfocused.

'Then what?' pressed Manthara.

'He - he asked - he asked me to marry him,' confessed Kaikeyi. There was a moment of utter, dangerous silence.

'What?' shrieked Manthara.

'I know,' grinned Kaikeyi.

'And you're laughing, so clearly, you don't know!'

'Wait, what are you talking about?' said Kaikeyi.

'I'm talking that you'll be overruled in Ayodhya!'

‘What do you mean?’ said Kaikeyi, now curious. ‘I’ve agreed, anyway, and I most certainly *am* going to Ayodhya, but since I’m a good, kind girl I’m bothering to listen.’

‘And I’m kind too, so I’m warning you, you think you’re going to become Dasharatha’s favourite over Kaushalya?’

We, you and I, most certainly are not allowed to pry into their conversation; but all we know is that one month later, Ashvapati was smiling a forced smile as Kaikeyi happily drove away south-east with Dasharatha, a large, jasmine garland gleaming around his neck.

- Vibha Ashwin

Aged 10 years

Glossary

Manthara: *Kaikeyi’s maid, earlier Suchandra’s.*

Ashvapati: *Kaikeyi’s father.*

Kekaya: *The kingdom ruled by Ashvapati.*

Suchandra: *Kaikeyi’s fictitious mother.*

Yudhajita: *The eldest son of Ashvapati.*

Kaikeyi: *The Princess of Kekaya.*

Shakta: *Fictitious charioteer of Ashvapati.*

Dasharatha: *A king of the Ikshvaku dynasty of Ayodhya.*

Ayodhya: *The capital of Kosala ruled by Ikshvaku kings.*

Kaushalya: *Dasharatha’s chief and first wife.*