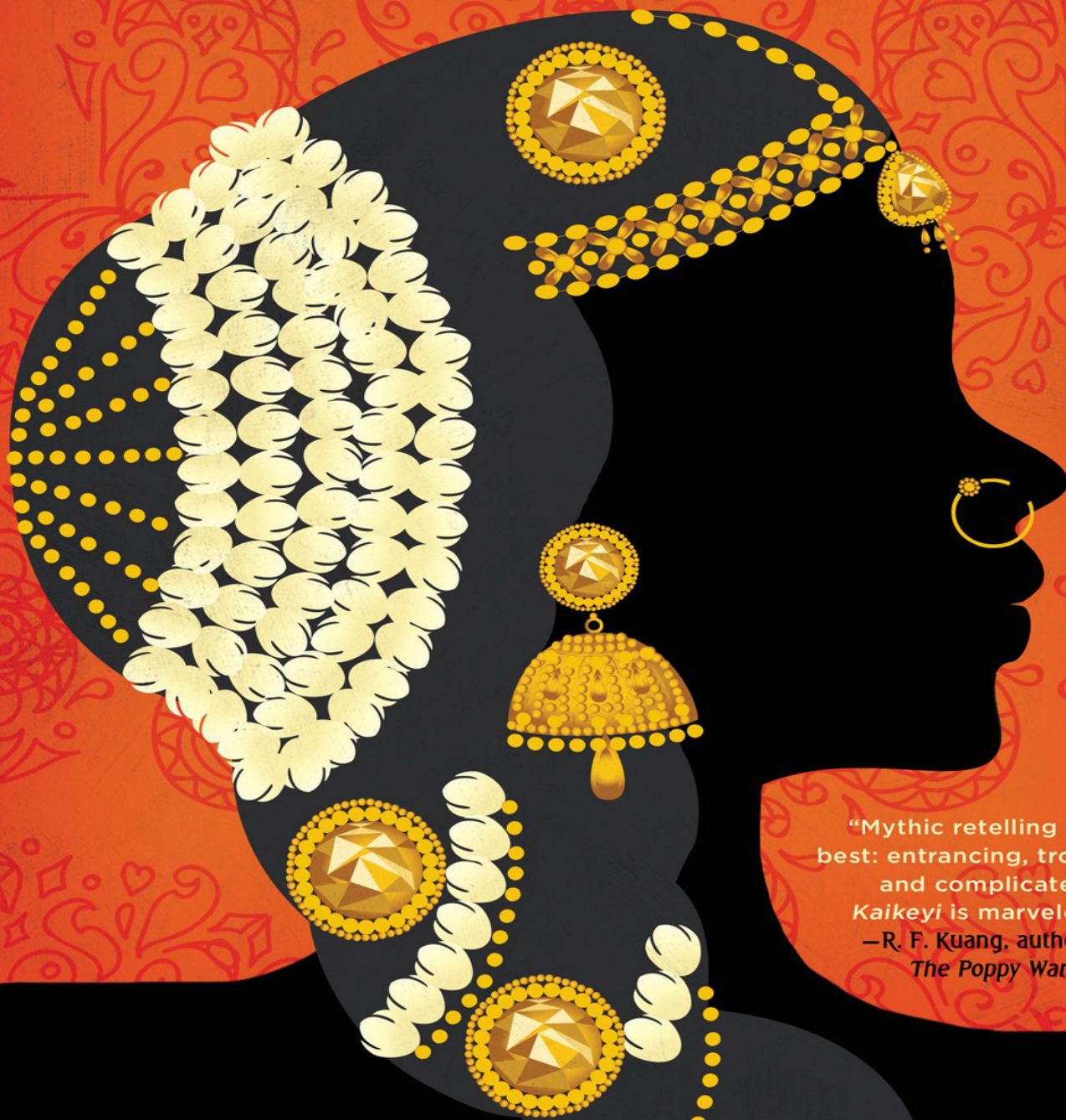


VAISHNAVI PATEL



“Mythic retelling at its best: entrancing, troubling, and complicated. *Kaikeyi* is marvelous.”
—R. F. Kuang, author of *The Poppy War*

KAIKEYI

A NOVEL



VAISHNAVI PATEL
KAIKEYI
A NOVEL



This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Copyright © 2022 by Vaishnavi Patel

Cover design by Lisa Marie Pompilio

Cover illustrations by Shutterstock

Cover copyright © 2022 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

Hachette Book Group supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact permissions@hbgusa.com. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Redhook Books/Orbit
Hachette Book Group
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
hachettebookgroup.com

First Edition: April 2022

Redhook is an imprint of Orbit, a division of Hachette Book Group.
The Redhook name and logo are trademarks of Hachette Book Group, Inc.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

The Hachette Speakers Bureau provides a wide range of authors for

speaking events. To find out more, go to www.hachettespeakersbureau.com or call (866) 376-6591.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Patel, Vaishnavi, author.

Title: Kaikeyi : a novel / Vaishnavi Patel.

Description: First edition. | New York, NY : Redhook, 2022.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021039925 | ISBN 9780759557338 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780759557321

Subjects: LCGFT: Fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3616.A86673 K35 2022 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021039925>

ISBNs: 9780759557338 (hardcover), 9780759557314 (ebook)

E3-20220304-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Author's Note](#)

[Major Characters](#)

[Part One](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Part Two](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

Part Three

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

Part Four

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-One](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Four](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Five](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Six](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Thirty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Forty](#)

[Chapter Forty-One](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Discover More](#)

*To Ajji, Aai, and Ananya, three generations of strong
women*

Explore book giveaways, sneak peeks, deals, and more.

[Tap here to learn more.](#)



AUTHOR'S NOTE

The seeds of *Kaikeyi* were planted seventeen years ago in a discussion between my mother and my grandmother. Each summer, my grandmother would tell my sister and me stories, passing down myths and legends centered around Hindu gods and heroes that she herself had grown up hearing. One particular summer, she told us the story of how the noble prince Rama was exiled by his jealous stepmother Kaikeyi, who was convinced to banish him by her wicked servant Manthara. At this, my mother stepped in to add that Kaikeyi had actually *helped* Rama. Without Kaikeyi, my mother pointed out, Rama would have never achieved his destiny by slaying the demon king Ravana, his main adversary in the *Ramayana*. My grandmother disagreed, arguing that it was cruel to exile your child, no matter the circumstance.

And then we moved on. But their minor dispute stuck with me for years, and I would periodically search for stories told from or studying Kaikeyi's perspective to make sense of the contradiction. I never found them. Eventually, I decided to write my own. I wanted to give Kaikeyi a chance to explain her actions and explore what might have caused a celebrated warrior and beloved queen to tear her family apart. I hope that *Kaikeyi* gives voice not just to its titular character but to the many women who populate the world of the *Ramayana* and have rich and worthy lives of their own.

As a primary text, I used the Ralph T. H. Griffith English translation of Valmiki's *Ramayana*, available online through Project Gutenberg. Although there are many Sanskrit versions of the *Ramayana*, Valmiki's *Ramayana* is considered the original text—but even Valmiki's epic was born of several antecedent stories. Beyond the Sanskrit epics, there exist many other versions in a multitude of languages across South, Southeast, and East Asia.

Each of the surviving iterations of the *Ramayana* has a slightly different focus or purported author. Readers familiar with Valmiki's *Ramayana* may

notice in *Kaikeyi* unfamiliar variations of the story, some of which have been inspired by these alternate tellings. For example, in some versions, including the *Adbhuta Ramayana* and the Jain *Ramayana*, Ravana is in fact Sita's birth father. The idea of Ravana as a tragic or misunderstood figure who may not be purely evil is present in many Southeast Asian tellings. And some elements that may feel new, such as Dasharath's promise that Kaikeyi's son will become king, are in fact present in Valmiki's *Ramayana*—but they are not often included in popular adaptations or dinner table recitations.

Of course, there are deviations from the *Ramayana* that are my own invention for *Kaikeyi*. There are too many to concisely name, but among the more important ones stand the presence of Ahalya's husband as Rama's tutor and Bharata agreeing to take the throne during Rama's exile. And Kaikeyi's magic and aspects of her story, including her journey to Janasthana and confrontation with Bhandasura, are my own imaginings, as much of her life is simply a blank space in the original epic. This book does not strive to be an exact retelling of any version of the *Ramayana*—it is Kaikeyi's story, and thus it is its own story.

Kaikeyi also does not seek to replicate the world, technology, or customs of any exact time period or civilization in South Asia. Instead, it draws on aspects of culture and science from across thousands of years of ancient Indian history, primarily before 1 BCE. As but one example, it borrows elements of political structure and governance from Patrick Olivelle's translation of Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, an ancient political science text purportedly written by the teacher of Chandragupta Maurya. While it would be impossible to name here every source consulted to determine, for example, the build of chariots or the type of windows or the varieties of court entertainment in ancient India, I owe a great debt to scholars of ancient civilization. Of course, creative choices have also been made in fashioning Kaikeyi's world—for example, paper was not in common use in ancient India, but is present in the narrative.

For those interested in learning more about the *Ramayana*'s evolution and breadth across its many tellings, I found A. K. Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Rāmāyaṇas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation," an essay in *The Collected Essays of A. K. Ramanujan* edited by Vinay Dharwadker, absolutely invaluable. Ramanujan's essay can also be found in

Many Rāmāyaṇas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia, a collection of essays edited by Paula Richman. I highly recommend this collection as a whole—in particular, I drew inspiration from stories recounted in Velcheru Narayana Rao’s essay, *A Ramayana of Their Own: Women’s Oral Tradition in Telugu*. *The Rāmāyaṇa Revisited*, a collection of essays edited by Mandakranta Bose, was also of particular use to me in thinking about the portrayal of gender and ethics in the *Ramayana*.

The *Ramayana* is not a static story. Like any myth, it evolves and changes with each telling. Even today, the *Ramayana* exists as a Sanskrit epic and as hundreds of different translations, as stories told around dinner tables and episodes of television shows, as movies and plays, as comics and books. Each version says something slightly different and new about these familiar characters. With *Kaikeyi*, I add my own voice to this long tradition. Thank you for reading.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- AGNI:** God of fire; carries offerings to the gods
- ASHA:** Servant of Kaushalya and Kaikeyi
- ASHVIN:** Prince of Kekaya, younger brother of Kaikeyi
- ASHWAPATI:** King of Kekaya, father of Kaikeyi
- BHANDASURA:** A fire demon
- BHARATA:** Prince of Kosala, son of Kaikeyi and Dasharath
- DASHARATH:** King of Kosala, husband of Kaikeyi, Kaushalya, and Sumitra, and father of Rama, Bharata, Lakshmana, and Shatrugna
- DHANTERI:** Servant of Kekaya
- KAIKEYI:** Princess of Kekaya, Queen of Kosala, wife of Dasharath, and mother of Bharata
- KAUSHALYA:** Queen of Kosala, mother of Rama
- KEKAYA:** Queen of Kekaya, wife of Ashwapati, and mother of Kaikeyi
- LAKSHMANA:** Prince of Kosala, son of Sumitra and Dasharath
- MANTHARA:** Trusted servant of Kaikeyi
- NIDRA:** Goddess of sleep
- RAMA:** Prince of Kosala, son of Kaushalya and Dasharath
- RAVANA:** King of Lanka
- SARASVATI:** Goddess of wisdom and learning
- SHATRUGNA:** Prince of Kosala, son of Sumitra and Dasharath
- SITA:** Princess of Videha, wife of Rama
- SUMITRA:** Queen of Kosala, mother of Lakshmana and Shatrugna
- VAMADEVA:** Sage blessed by the gods, learned tutor of the princes of Kosala
- VIRENDRA:** Minister of War of Kosala, advisor to Dasharath
- YUDHAJIT:** Prince of Kekaya, son of Ashwapati and Kekaya, and twin brother of Kaikeyi



CHAPTER ONE



I WAS BORN ON the full moon under an auspicious constellation, the holiest of positions—much good it did me.

In Bharat, where the gods regularly responded to prayers and meddled in mortal affairs, the circumstances of my birth held great promise. This did not matter to my father, who cared only that my brother Yudhajit followed me into the world minutes later under the same lucky stars. Regardless of birth position, Yudhajit, being a boy, was the heir to the Kekaya kingdom. I was but a dowry of fifty fine horses waiting to happen. For each of my mother's subsequent pregnancies, my father made sacrifices to the gods, requesting sons. In return, he was blessed with six more healthy boys, portents of future prosperity.

The people of Bharat have often blamed my father for my sins, as if a woman cannot own her actions. He was not a perfect man, that I freely admit, but for all his faults he loved each of his sons fiercely, playing with them in his throne room, bringing them the finest tutors in all the kingdom, and gifting them ponies so they would grow into brilliant cavalrymen.

If he bears any fault for my actions, it is through his inaction. I remember few occasions when we exchanged words, and fewer still when he sought to speak with me—save one.

My brothers and I were playing hide and catch in the sweeping field behind the palace and it was my turn to find them. I kept my eyes shut as their laughter faded into wind, opening them only after counting to twenty. I immediately saw a glimmer of movement by the stables.

I crept slowly toward whichever brother was hiding there, knowing that they would get more nervous by the second, and planning how best to catch

them. I doubted it was Mohan, who was three years younger than me. He was short and slow and knew I could easily grab him. Shantanu was a bit older and was fast as a deer, but I could try to trap him by chasing him toward the palace wall. If it was Yudhajit, he would be almost impossible to catch, though maybe—

Shantanu stumbled out from behind the stable. With a whoop, I began sprinting toward him, my blood racing through my veins. But as I followed him past the side of the building, I stopped short. Had I just seen movement? I whirled around to find Yudhajit pressed against the wood, and my face split into a wild grin. He must have shoved Shantanu out of their mutual hiding spot to distract me.

I spun, chasing Yudhajit around the stable, knowing as I did that I could never beat him in an outright footrace. He rounded the corner out of sight, and from just beyond the wall came a strangled shout. A second later, my shin collided with bony flesh, and I fell onto a tangled heap of bodies, Yudhajit right below me.

“I got you!” I shouted breathlessly. Someone, probably Shantanu, groaned. I rolled off the pile and onto the hard ground, laughing, asking if they knew where Mohan was, when I saw legs coming toward me.

I sat up, squinting at the guard, aware my white kurta was smeared liberally with dirt and grass and my hair was falling from its braids, but only half-embarrassed. “Yudhajit, get up,” I hissed.

“You two,” the guard said, nodding his chin toward the group of us. “The raja would like to speak with you immediately.”

I rose to my feet. “We can play later,” I said to my brothers. “You two go, I’ll find Mohan.” I had started to walk away when the guard called.

“Yuvradnyi Kaikeyi, the raja wants you *now*.”

I turned to look at Yudhajit, shocked. He only shrugged at me.

We trailed behind the guard back to the palace, and each of my steps felt heavier than the last. Something had to be amiss for my father to summon me. But if I had done something to anger him, why would he want Yudhajit too?

As we approached the throne room, I dragged my feet against the stone, letting the guard and Yudhajit get farther and farther ahead. At the end of the hall the guard turned and glared, waiting by the closed door until I reached him, then swinging it open in a precise movement.

Yudhajit went in first, and I lingered a few seconds longer before following him into the flickering light of the hall. He half turned his head as I approached, and the light cast strange shadows on his wide forehead and narrow nose. His dark brown eyes held a flicker of apprehension and his lips were pressed into a thin line, in what I was sure was an eerie rendering of my own face.

I took my place a pace behind him and glanced surreptitiously around the room, afraid of attracting attention. During feasts, the high-ceilinged room was filled with rows of tables and throngs of people, and its cavernous depths did not seem large at all. Absent these preparations, the wooden pillars cast long shadows, the carvings of bulls and snakes and long-plumed birds that so entertained my younger brothers fading into the gloom. The huge crackling firepits, built partially to warm the entire hall when the weather turned in the winter and partially—I suspected—to intimidate visitors, made me feel even smaller than I usually did.

My father's throne was carved out of dark wood into stark, undecorated lines, much like the man who sat upon it. One hand stroked his beard as he stared unwaveringly into the nearest pit, his thick eyebrows deeply furrowed. Despite the warmth of the flames, gooseflesh crawled up my skin, and I tried not to shiver.

After several minutes, Yudhajit, with all the patience of a twelve-year-old boy, blurted out, "Why did you call us here if you wanted to sit there and say nothing?"

Raja Ashwapati looked up at him as if he had not realized we were there. He did not spare so much as a glance for me, hidden behind my brother.

"Your mother—" he began. I glanced around the room, looking for her, but she was nowhere to be found. She would not have added much warmth to the room, but she was rarely cold the way Father was. Father opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, then said, "Your mother had to leave. She will not return."

At that, Yudhajit laughed, and I winced. I wished we had learned this news from the guards, without Father present, so I could tell him it was not a prank. Had he not seen how distant our parents were toward each other, how quick to snap they were, how the edges of their relationship were fraying? But my brother, the brilliant heir, said, "We're too old for you to

joke with us this way, Father. Mother is radnyi. A queen wouldn't just leave."

"Kekaya is no longer radnyi," Father said, and his eyes sought me out for the first time.

"Why—what—" Yudhajit's shoulders drooped. "Who will...?" He trailed off, apparently unable to describe what our mother actually did.

Our father sighed. "As the yuvradnyi, Kaikeyi will slowly assume some of the duties of the queenship, until you are old enough to wed."

I bit down on my tongue. The metallic taste of blood filled my mouth and I swallowed before it could stain my teeth. I had no idea how to take on any of my mother's responsibilities, nor did I have any desire to.

Yudhajit took my hand and squeezed it. "Surely Mother will come back," he said. "She would not just leave us like that."

The raja shook his head. "She told me she would never return. Kekaya is no longer welcome here."

And just like that, we were dismissed.

In the hall, Yudhajit tried to speak to me, but I brushed him aside and raced back to my room, slamming the door behind me and falling to my knees. I knew what I needed to do.

Please, I prayed to the gods, those who watched over the land of Bharat. Please help me.

I invoked Chandra, the god of the moon, Nasatya, the god of twins, and Kubera, the god of the north. *Please, bring my mother back. Please, grant me the knowledge I need in her absence.*

There was no reply.

The gods always answered the prayers of princesses, my tutors liked to tell me, for princesses were the most devout and holiest of all. But whether it be for rains or sunshine, for strength or knowledge, for new toys or clothes, they had never answered a single prayer of mine. Yudhajit, it seemed, had stolen all the good fortune of our birth for himself, leaving me bereft of any assistance at all.

But now, surely, they would answer. They would understand that a girl needed her mother. Who else could show me how to make my way through this world? Without her I was alone.

Kekaya did not act toward her children the way other noblewomen at court did. She never kissed my scrapes or held me when I cried after fighting with Yudhajit, never cuddled me before I went to bed at night. Instead, she taught me how to read, drawing the characters in a pan of sand and repeating them with me ten times, and ten more times, until I knew them by heart. And even then, she did not praise me. But she gave me scrolls and listened as I picked out stories.

My favorite was the churning of the ocean, that wondrous tale of the gods and the asuras together churning the Ocean of Milk, seeking in its depths the nectar of immortality. The nectar must have been unimaginably delicious for them to form such an alliance—I could understand, for I loved sweets too. As they churned, they split between them the spoils that emerged from the Ocean: a tree twisted like the claws of a tiger, with sharp red flowers that could draw blood and grant boons. Wise and powerful goddesses including Lakshmi, seated on a pale pink lotus, her hair dripping gold. Even the moon itself, a luminescent pearl caught among the waves. And at last, they found the treasure they sought.

But the gods did not wish to share the nectar with the asuras, for this demonic race had long terrorized the earth and heavens with their lust for power. They were the only beings with the power to rival the gods, and the two were often at war. And so, the great Vishnu tricked the asuras out of the share they had been promised.

“But how could the gods lie when they are good?” I asked my mother, puzzled.

“The gods do what they must,” she said, but she gave me a smile and I felt clever.

When I had finished the legends, she took me alone through the maze of palace corridors and through a polished door of teak, set into the floor with a great, glinting silver handle. Together, we descended into the library cellar filled floor to ceiling with precious texts and dusty scrolls. And this felt like the greatest compliment of all. It was because of her I loved reading, consuming even the dullest treatise in my quest to learn all I could.

I had often doubted whether she even liked me, her only daughter. But now, my heart clenched oddly at the thought of losing her presence. I felt as though I could not breathe deeply enough.

I did not cry. But I continued to beseech the gods, even as the chamber

grew dark around me, my knees stiff and aching from my seated position on the floor.

Finally, Manthara came to comb my hair and put me to bed. I was relieved to see her. At least I would not lose her too.

“Would you like to hear a story?” she asked, smiling at me in the mirror. “I have a new one for you.”

I shook my head, crossing my arms. Normally, I would beg her for songs or tales, and she would comply until my eyes grew heavy and images of splendid feats danced beneath my eyelids. But tonight, I said nothing at all. “Kaikeyi, I know you must be upset, but—” I slipped out of the chair, my hair half-braided, and flung myself onto the bed. Manthara could not bring my mother back. She did not understand how this felt. I had been relieved to see her, but now all I wanted was to be left alone until I could go find Yudhajit. I could not take her sympathy, and I hoped if I was rude to her, she might leave. But Manthara simply stood and came to sit at my bedside. I turned away from her, and still she only clucked her tongue, one hand rubbing gentle circles into my back.

“All will be well,” she said, before bending down to press a kiss on the back of my head. My eyes filled with tears, so I clenched them shut, refusing to turn my head. Eventually, she rose and blew out the candle, closing the door very quietly behind her.

Seconds passed into minutes and I continued to lie there, waiting until the quiet of night had fully descended and I could safely leave.

Finally, breathlessly, I opened my door slowly and checked both ways, then padded down the hallway on bare feet. There were no torches, and the dark gray stone turned nearly black at this hour, the moonlight barely filtering in through the few windows lining the corridor. The low ceiling seemed to bear down on me with every step, but I was intent on my task.

“Kaikeyi?”

My heart stopped for one agonizing moment. I pressed myself against the wall as it restarted at double speed. It was only my brother, whom I had ventured out to find in the first place. “Yudhajit?”

He was a few steps away now, clad in crisp white cotton sleep clothes that had clearly not yet been slept in. His eyes shone brightly in the darkness. He too must have been waiting for this still hour to leave his room. “What are you doing up?” he asked.

“What are *you* doing up?” I retorted, not wanting to admit I had been coming to get him.

He made a face. “I asked you first.”

I shrugged and started walking away, trying to feign indifference. The court had taught me patience, but it had taught Yudhajit impulsivity. Only one of us knew how to hold their tongue.

“I couldn’t sleep. I miss Mother. She did not even say goodbye to us. I—I don’t understand.” His voice twisted and broke, and I found myself fighting back tears as well.

Unwilling to face my own grief, I kept walking, and he easily caught up to me, filling the space by my side as he always did.

We slipped like ghosts through the hallways, not wanting to return to bed just yet. In unspoken agreement, we found ourselves heading toward the door to the kitchens, our stomachs growling in unison.

Yudhajit moved ahead to open the door. I had grown distracted thinking of what sweets I might find to snack on and did not realize he had stopped until I walked right into him. He stumbled slightly but did not make a sound, pointing his chin toward the entrance. After a moment, I heard what he did—the faintest murmur of voices. We tiptoed closer, closer, closer, until the murmurs became words.

“So long as nobody learns the truth, it does not matter.” I could not recognize the deep voice, resonating through the small space like the beat of an animal-hide drum.

Yudhajit, more familiar with the men of the palace, mouthed *Prasad* at me. An advisor who I had seen at formal court occasions, but never interacted with. He sat near the king, so my father likely valued him.

The second voice I recognized immediately. It belonged to my mother’s former lady-in-waiting, Dhanteri. “It matters to me,” she said sharply.

“It shouldn’t,” Prasad replied.

“I know. Manthara knows. Why keep it a secret? The children deserve to know.”

“Neither of you can tell another soul, or both of you will find yourself unable to work.”

Dhanteri laughed, a sound without any happiness at all. “I am already without work. The raja saw to that when he banished Radnyi Kekaya.”

If our bodies had not been nearly occupying the same space, I would not

have noticed Yudhajit's quiet gasp.

Banished.

I was listening, straining for answers, as though by will alone I could force these adults to tell me what I craved to know.

"Woman, she is not your radnyi anymore. You will not speak another word, or I will ensure that you are the last of your name," Prasad hissed. His tone frightened me.

I snuck a glance at Yudhajit to see if perhaps he understood what that threat meant, but he looked as confused as I did.

"If you keep your mouth shut," Prasad added, "I will see to it that you are kept on, to manage the women's work in the court."

There was silence for a moment. "As you say, Arya Prasad." The faintest rustle of cloth came from behind the door. "I will speak to Manthara."

"See that you do. So long as everyone believes Radnyi Kekaya left of her own accord, it will not matter what really happened."

Yudhajit and I backed away from the door as one, rounding the corner slowly, carefully. But when we were sure we would not be heard, we darted fast, bare feet leaving brief impressions of dampness against the cool stone. Only when we reached our rooms did we stop, facing each other and panting.

"What do we do?" Yudhajit asked. "Surely they could not have been telling the truth."

"There's nothing we can do," I said.

"We can talk to Father—"

"No!" I cut him off. "Please, we cannot tell anyone. You heard what Prasad said. If you tell anyone, Manthara will have to leave." I couldn't stomach the thought.

"You shouldn't need your nurse anymore, Kaikeyi. We're twelve, almost adults." Yudhajit scoffed. He had only recently become taller than me. I hated his new height and the way he could look down upon me now, but I hated even more that he was right. Still, I would not give up Manthara.

"Please?" I asked.

He held my gaze for a moment, then sighed and nodded. "Perhaps we can pray to the gods to change Father's mind," he said.

I shook my head at him. "The gods cannot force someone to change

their mind. You know how Father is. He has made this decision, and it will be final.”

Yudhajit’s shoulders slumped. “I suppose.”

We stood there together in silence for several moments more, until I yawned, the energy that had pushed me out of bed and through the halls finally draining out of me. Yudhajit caught my yawn, and we both grinned at each other.

Even so, when I went back into my room and climbed into bed, sleep evaded me. I stared up at the ceiling, wondering what gods my family might have displeased to have such misfortune.