

KIRANMALA ^{AND} _{THE} KINGDOM BEYOND

GAME
OF
STARS

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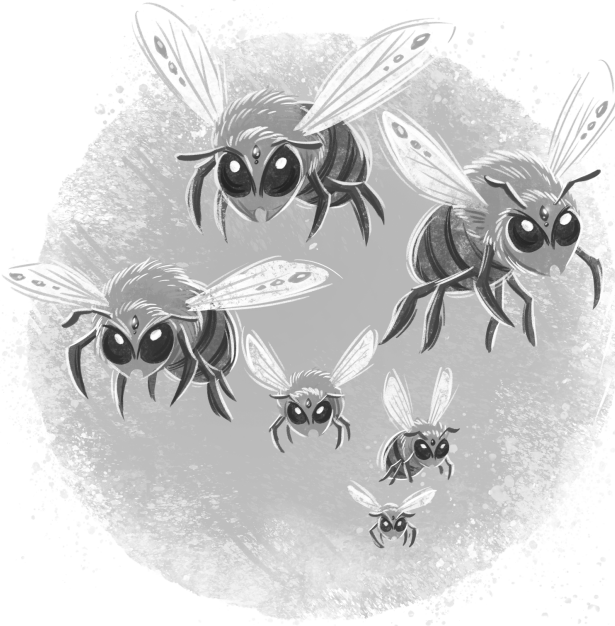


CHAPTER 1

A Demoness in My Room

The first time the Demon Queen appeared in my bedroom, I tried to decapitate her with my solar system night-light.

I was fast asleep, but got woken up by the freaky sound of buzzing. Then I smelled that rancid, belchy, acidic odor I'd come to associate with the rakkhoshi during my adventures in the Kingdom Beyond Seven Oceans and Thirteen Rivers last fall. As soon as I opened my eyes, I saw her outline: pointy crown on her giant head, sharp horns peeking through her dark hair, and evil talons reaching from her long arms. And as if that wasn't bad enough, the demoness had with her some giant, evil-looking bees.



I reached for my magic bow and quiver under my bed, but when my hand came up empty, I remembered I'd left them in my locker at school. So instead, I laced my fingers through the plastic rings of Saturn, yanked my old night-light from the socket, and spun the entire solar system like a flying discus right at the Rakkhoshi Rani's head.

Unfortunately, the sun and orbiting planets never managed to hit her. To my shock, the plastic solar system just sailed through her see-through, sari-clad body, crashing on the front of my Princess Pretty Pants™ dresser, part of the

disgustingly princess-themed bedroom set my parents bought me when I was, like, six.

“Honestly, Moon Girl! Is that any way to greet the mother of an old friend?” The rakkhoshi’s fangs glinted in the moonlight that streamed through my curtainless windows. As she spoke, bees flew out of her mouth as if carrying her words on their wings. She stretched her clawlike hand toward the fallen night-light, making the plastic explode with a bang.

“Stop that!” I ran out of bed, throwing my bedside glass of water on the place my bubble gum–pink carpet was burning. It did basically nothing to squelch the flames, though. I backed off super quick as the bees swarming around the demoness’s head seemed to speed up their swirly flying patterns.

“You’re going to burn the whole house down!” The smell of melting plastic gagged me as Mercury and Venus started ooblecking right before my eyes.

“Spoilsport!” the Demon Queen drawled. But she did lean over and breathe an icy gust of wind onto the burning planets—a little mini hailstorm—leaving a charred and smelly solar system on my bedroom floor.

The thing is, being a hero always seems so awesome in the movies. It’s all finding your inner bravery and embracing

your destiny, fighting monsters and saving the innocent. If you're lucky, you get your own theme song, a wisecracking sidekick animal, or a bunch of heroic friends helping you on your spectacular adventures. But that wasn't the way it worked out for me.

Last Halloween, when I discovered that I wasn't just an ordinary middle schooler from Parsippany, New Jersey, but an interdimensional Indian princess destined to fight demons and monsters (as my parents had hinted at my whole life), I thought I had it made in the shade. I'd always had an allergy to traditional tutu-and-tiara-type princesses, like the nauseatingly sweet Princess Pretty Pants™ franchise, but as it turned out, being a warrior princess was something I could hang with. I figured I'd be going out on weekly demon-butt-kicking adventures with my talking bird sidekick, Tuntuni, and my new posse of friends—the half brothers Prince Lal and Prince Neel and my adopted cousin, Mati. I didn't even mind not having a theme song. Not too much, anyway.

But when I got back to New Jersey from the Kingdom Beyond Seven Oceans and Thirteen Rivers, there were absolutely no heroic perks. I had to keep my identity a secret, make up a bunch of homework I'd missed, and go back to my boring life avoiding the school mean girl, Jovi,

and doing stockroom inventory at my parents' convenience store. There was no glory, no fan club, no me-shaped action figure with bendy arms and karate-kick legs. (I was really hoping for a me-shaped action figure with bendy arms and karate-kick legs.) And worst of all, my new friends from the Kingdom Beyond had stone-cold dropped me like I was a demon with bad breath. I knew intergalactic cell service was crapola at best—but my friends hadn't visited or sent a message by flying horse or anything. For *months*.

So when Neel's mom, the Demon Queen, started visiting me in my sleep, I figured my feelings about getting dumped by my friends must have something to do with it. It was a weird, recurring nightmare, that was all. A weird, recurring nightmare in which I was visited in my suburban New Jersey bedroom by a flesh-eating rakkhoshi monster and her personal swarm of venomous insects. No biggie.

"You're not real," I told the flesh-eating rakkhoshi monster. "You're not really here."

"Oh, I'll give you such a tight slap, you dubious dullard!" The Demon Queen rubbed her hand on her chest and shot some bees out of her nose. "I'll tell you what is real—this heartburn! This esophageal reflux! I'd give my left fang for a chewable antacid!"

“This isn’t happening.” I blinked my eyes, trying to wake myself up. “I’m imagining this.”

The demoness belched. Loudly. The bees buzzed even louder. “Loonie-Moonie, you don’t have enough imagination to conjure the likes of me!”

Hoping to catch her off guard, just in case I was wrong about the whole being-a-nightmare thing, I launched myself at the rakkhoshi with a ferocious yowl. But she just yawned and let me go flying right through her vaporous form.

I slammed into my dresser, hitting my head hard on a tiara-shaped drawer knob. “I knew you weren’t real!”

“Oh, fie on your underdeveloped cranium, you pea-brained tree goat!” The queen picked her teeth with a long nail. “Listen up, I have something important to tell you. It’s a matter of life and death. About . . .”

“What?” I prompted from the floor.

“Oof!” The demoness made a choking sound, grabbing at her throat like she wasn’t getting enough air. “Oof! Eesh!”

Her image flickered, like she was a broken movie reel. The bees swooped around her. And then they all disappeared.

It went on like this, night after night. The Rakkhoshi Rani showing up in her smelly-but-see-through form along

with her insect minions, first insulting me, then trying to tell me something but being stopped by some invisible force. Then she'd disappear.

“Underwater fortress,” she said one night.

“Winged key,” she managed the next.

“Just one breath,” she said another time.

Buzz, buzz, said the bees, zooming in and around the Demon Queen's lips and hair. Yeesh, they gave me the creepy-crawlies. And I'm saying that as someone who's been trapped in an underwater serpent cavern with a bunch of slimy evil snakes.

If the demoness were real, I would have guessed this was all some kind of trick. But since she obviously couldn't be, I could only conclude I should stop sneaking so many chocolate chip cookies before bedtime. Because, wowza, was this a super-weird dream. Every time we got to the part where she wanted to tell me her secret, the rakkhoshi would open her mouth and flap her lips. She would claw at her throat. Her mouth would move, but only bees would come out—no sound. Eventually, her image would flicker and fade altogether.

The closest she got to telling me her secret was one night when she managed to tell me some kind of riddle poem that made absolutely no sense when I first heard it:

Elladin, belladin, Milk-White Sea
Who seeks immortality?
Jewels, stars, eternity
Life and death in balance be
My heart in chains where my soul sings
The prison key a bee's wings
With father's tooth, you crack the case
Humility must wash your face
Fire, water, air, and land
Rakkhosh-kind will lend a hand
Without the dark, the light will fail
Heroes and monsters both will rail
Elladin, belladin, Honey-Gold Sea
Who seeks immortality?

“What is all that supposed to mean? What’s that ‘ella-din, belladin’ stuff anyway?”

“Oh, this pancreatic pain! This gaseous gallbladder!” the Queen groaned. “Try to listen between the lines, khichuri-brain!”

“I’m trying!” It was hard to win an argument with a figment of my imagination. “If I figure out your riddle, will you leave me alone?”

“Oh, the intestinal agony of your stupidity!” The rakkhoshi grew so big, her crown grazed my ceiling. She blew green smoke out of her ears and nose, and bee-burped like she was lactose intolerant and had just eaten a cheesy burrito chased by a dozen milkshakes. “This is all the fault of that idiot-boy Lal! And Sesha, that snaky loser! Most of all my ex-husband, that pathetic excuse for a Raja!”

The Demon Queen was so upset it reminded me of something my best friend, Zuzu, and I had read in one of her oldest sister’s cheesy self-help books, the one called *Healing Your Broken Heart Chakra: A 17.5-Step Guide*. (Zuzu’s sister Athena had *a lot* of books like this because she had *a lot* of experience getting her heart broken. She was practically a professional.)

“So, are you just a manifestation of my angry subconscious telling me I need to bear witness to my . . . er . . . emotional isolation?” I asked, trying to remember the words from the book.

“Bear whoziwhat?” Neel’s mom yelled. “Don’t give me your touchy-feely psychobabble, you pathetic puppy from Parsippany! Oh, I knew it was a mistake to come to you, you dim-witted moon reptile of a chit! You just can’t understand how much depends on you, can you?”