

SECRETS OF THE SKY

BOOK THREE

THE GHOST FOREST

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B Is for Bhoot

BOO!” KINJAL JUMPED out from behind the refrigerator door, arms outstretched, teeth bared, and eyes like huge saucers. “Gahhhhh!” he shouted for good measure, wagging his tongue and fingers.

Instead of screaming or crying or fainting, like any decent person, his sister, Kiya, simply snorted. “Am I supposed to be scared?”

She got out some interconnected packages of string cheese, then calmly shut the fridge door. Never once, in their ten long years of life, had Kinjal ever been able to scare his twin, and it was seriously annoying.

“You could have had the decency to at least pretend to be surprised.” Kinjal felt himself deflate even as he stuck

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out his hand and accepted one of the string cheese packets.
“You could yell? Gasp? I don’t know, something?”



“The Bengali holiday of bhoot chaturdoshi isn’t the same thing as Halloween,” sniffed Kiya, adjusting her red-framed glasses on her nose. Man, she sounded like an encyclopedia sometimes. A lot of the time, if Kinjal was being honest. “I mean, yes, there are ghosts involved. But

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the holiday is actually about guiding fourteen generations of our ancestors home.”

His sister pointed to the fourteen oil lamps their parents had set up around the first floor, and then to the big basin of fourteen kinds of greens their mother had soaking in the sink.

“I still don’t understand how eating fourteen kinds of spinach on this one night is supposed to guide anyone anywhere,” muttered Kinjal as he jammed the string cheese into his mouth. “I mean, who’s to say that all of our ancestors even liked to eat greens? What if they were allergic or something?”

Kiya made a scoffing sound, waving a string cheese packet at him. “What, would you rather leave out cheese for our dear departed relatives?”

Kinjal brightened. “Why not? I mean, who—alive or dead—wouldn’t rather eat string cheese than spinach?”

Kiya got that superior look on her face she always got right before she started lecturing him about something. “Well, that would be a terrible idea! Because seventy-five to ninety percent of all adults of Asian heritage are actually

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lactose intolerant! They get sick from eating milk and cheese!”

He'd obviously walked right into that one. But Kinjal wasn't about to let his sister get the better of him. “Well, our relatives aren't from Asia, they're from the Kingdom Beyond Seven Oceans and Thirteen Rivers, which is in another galactic dimension.”

The thing was, they'd only just learned the truth of their heritage recently, and sometimes, they both forgot.

“That's true.” Kiya frowned. “But they still could be lactose intolerant.”

Kinjal gritted his teeth. She really wasn't willing to let this one go, was she? Well, he had ten years of experience dealing with his know-it-all sister. When she went high, he made sure to go extra low.

“Okay, sure, because we wouldn't want any gassy ghosts. Farty poltergeists are the *worst*,” he said cheerfully, and Kiya made a disgusted face.

“Crassness is no substitute for humor,” she sniffed.

“Random facts are no substitute for not being boring,” he shot back.

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Kiya sighed, eyeing the greens in the sink. Kinjal knew for a fact that his sister wasn't a huge fan of spinach either. "Baba did say something about the greens keeping away evil spirits."

"Like Popeye?" said Kinjal, getting an image of the cartoon sailor's muscles growing bigger after downing a can of the leafy vegetable.

"Not that I believe in ghosts," continued his sister as if he hadn't spoken. Now that Kinjal thought about it, there were a lot of times Kiya pretended she couldn't hear or see him—like he was one of the ghosts she didn't believe in.

"Well, even if you don't believe in ghosts, they believe in youuuuu!" Kinjal said in his best spooky-sounding voice. He kind of destroyed the effect, though, by tripping over the dirty sock that had come loose from his foot. He was so startled he magically shot some water out of his fingers.

With a quick flick of her wrist, Kiya caused the ground under Kinjal's feet to wobble a little, making the water stream shoot off in a different direction. Then she made a scoffing sound as she opened her packet of cheese with an efficient *zip*. "That's totally illogical."

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“Not everything in the multiverse has a scientific explanation,” Kinjal muttered as he jammed some more cheese into his mouth.

At the sound of the wrappers opening, their dog, Thums-Up, had come bounding into the room. She was a chocolate-colored Labrador, named after their ma’s favorite childhood soda, and she adored string cheese. She panted, bright eyed, drooling on the clean kitchen tile, until Kinjal went back into the fridge and got her an entire piece for herself. At the sight of the package, Thums-Up yipped, spinning around in a happy circle.

Kinjal petted her giant head even as he glared at his too-scientifically-minded sister. “You know as well as I do, Kiya, that some things in this world can’t be explained. Like ancestors, ghosts, or even Thums-Up! They’re just magical.”

As he said this, Kinjal studied the space around their Labrador’s body, trying to see if he could spot some trace of her magical wings. Because Thums-Up wasn’t just an ordinary dog. She was actually a winged pakkhiraj horse, just a small one, and had been sent to guard their family by

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Princess Pakkhiraj, ruler of the Sky Kingdom. But obviously, Thums-Up had to disguise herself as a dog most of the time. Parsippany, New Jersey, wasn't the sort of place where a flying horse, even a dog-sized one, could go unnoticed.

And then, of course, there was the matter of Kinjal and Kiya's family being from a different dimension. Not just that—their father, Arko, was the exiled rightful ruler of the Kingdom Beyond Seven Oceans and Thirteen Rivers, which made Kinjal and Kiya royalty. As if all that wasn't enough, their mother, Indrani, was a magical rakkhoshi, which meant that Kinjal and Kiya had inherited magical rakkhosh powers—Kinjal from the rakkhosh water clan and Kiya from the rakkhosh land clan.

“If there's one thing I've learned on our intergalactic adventures,” Kiya was saying matter-of-factly, “it's that magic and science are sometimes not as different as they seem. Sometimes they're two different ways to answer the same question.”

“Only you could manage to make magic sound like a yawn-fest.” Kinjal was still feeling super annoyed by his sister's response to him trying to scare her, not to mention

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the whole ghosts-with-lactose-intolerance thing. As if sensing his feelings, Thums-Up whined and rubbed her giant, drooly head against his thigh. Absentmindedly, Kinjal made some water from the kitchen faucet flow into Thums-Up's bowl. The dog-slash-horse slurped it up loudly and messily. "Also, I'm pretty sure I'm the one who told you that thing about science and magic in the first place!"

Ignoring him, Kiya divided her cheese into precise teeny-tiny pieces, like she was doing some kind of a cheese-based fraction problem. "Even you've got to admit there's not a ton that's magical here in New Jersey."

"Not true! The bookstore on Route 46 is having a party tonight to celebrate the latest book in the *Warrior Sloths* series, *Ghost of the Sloth King!*" Kinjal said enthusiastically. "Now, *that's* some serious magic happening right here in our hometown!"

"How are you *still* so into that series? I mean, long-armed, slow-moving warriors for justice? Does that even make sense?" Kiya asked.

"How can you say that?" Kinjal felt himself heating up. "You have no taste! I mean, just because you would rather

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read the dictionary than the most awesome books *ever created* in the history of the multiverse . . .”

Kiya raised her head with a sudden, sharp motion.

“What?” he asked, looking around the kitchen. He half-way expected to see an ancestral, lactose-intolerant bhoot hiding in the sink.

Sensing the sudden change in mood, Thums-Up started spinning around and barking.

“Shush, girl!” Kiya scolded, walking over to the kitchen window. As soon as she looked out, some of the tension eased out of her shoulders. But her next words made the tension in Kinjal’s body go from zero to a thousand.

“Hate to tell you, Brother, but I don’t think you’re going to be able to go to the bookstore tonight after all,” Kiya said with grim satisfaction. “The warrior sloths are going to have to wait.”

“What are you talking about?” Kinjal got so mad, he lost control of his water rakkhosh power and made the water from the bowl in the sink rise like a wave and soak his sister’s hair.

She spluttered, shaking the wet hair out of her face, but

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was too excited by what she'd seen in the yard to be mad at him. "Come on! Raat and Snowy are outside!" she called, before turning and running out the back door.

