

SAYANTANI DASGUPTA



THE SERPENT'S SECRET

KIRANMALA AND THE KINGDOM BEYOND

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*To immigrant parents and children everywhere—
who imagine an idea called home into being
through the telling of stories.*

*And to my own immigrant parents—
who told me stories, believed in my stories,
and keep helping me imagine my way home.*



CHAPTER 1

A Monster Visits Suburbia

The day my parents got swallowed by a rakkhosh and whisked away to another galactic dimension was a pretty craptastic day. The fact that it was actually my twelfth birthday made it all that much worse. Instead of cake or presents or a party, I spent the day kicking demon butt, traveling through time and space looking for my family, and basically saving New Jersey, our entire world, and everything beyond it. Not that I didn't have help. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'll tell you that part soon. First, let me back up a little.

My life pre-rakkhosh incident had been pretty ordinary—I spent most of my time at school, hanging out with my best friend, Zuzu, at her family's diner, and

helping at my parents' store. There were Zuzu's grandma's spanakopita and Baba's stockroom inventories, doing homework and avoiding my next-door-neighbor-slash-archnemesis, Jovi, and her giggly gang of popular girls. Regular old sixth-grade stuff. Nothing that really prepared me for interdimensional demon slaying.

I guess Ma and Baba had tried to warn me, in their own goofy way. Ever since I was a little girl, they'd told me awesome stories about rakkhosh: these carnivorous, snot-trailing demons who liked to speak in rhyme while chomping on innocent villagers. Ever heard of Jack's giant, the one who wants to grind Englishmen's bones to make his bread? Well, add some horns, fangs, and talons to Mr. Fee-Fi-Fo-Fum, and you're getting close to picturing a rakkhosh. But no matter how real giants or demons or goblins seem in stories, nothing can prepare you for seeing one on your doorstep, right?

But that's exactly what happened to me on my twelfth birthday. Which, because fate clearly has a twisted sense of humor, also happens to be Halloween.

I'd always hated having a Halloween birthday. When I was younger, it was because everyone was so busy gearing up for trick-or-treating, they usually forgot it was my spe-

cial day. Worse still, my parents never let me hide behind a superhero or monster mask. No matter how much I tried to be like every other witch or zombie or caped crusader in the neighborhood, my parents always had other ideas.

“Maybe this year I could be a pirate,” I’d suggest, holding out some scarves and gold hoop earrings.

“Or a ghost?” I’d beg from under an old bedsheet.

But every year, my parents insisted on the same costume. A costume that made me stand out more, not less.

“Darling piece of the moon, you must be an Indian princess!” they would enthuse. “You are, after all, a real Indian princess, and here is the single day that you can actually look like one!”

When I was in the first or second grade, the other kids thought the shiny silk saris my mom wrapped me in on Halloween were cool. They believed me when I told them the bangles and necklaces I wore were made of real emeralds, diamonds, and rubies. But there are only so many years you can fool your friends—or yourself—into thinking you are a real Indian princess, banished from your fairy tale and hiding out in a suburban split-level in northern New Jersey. No matter what your crazy parents insist. Pretty soon, the rest of the world starts catching on.

“Doesn’t your dad own the Quickie Mart on Route 46?” Jovi asked one day when we were about nine. “What kind of a king owns a Quickie Mart?”

She’d been snapping her gum and tossing her perfect blond hair and giving me this look like I was less than dirt. I had wanted to disappear into the floor right then and there.

When my mother heard, she gave me some typically loopy advice. “My royal daughter,” Ma had singsonged, “none of us is just one thing. Life is a process of learning to recognize our many faces.”

“Besides which, your friends are right; no king worth his throne would own a Quickie Mart!” Baba had boomed from behind our store’s Giant Gulpie fountain. “Go tell your classmates that even kings and queens have to work hard when they move to a new country. And remind them, your father does not own a Quickie Mart; he owns a Royal Farms Convenience Emporium!”

“And if they still don’t believe you,” Ma added from the aisle where she was restocking the meat-flavored jerky, “tell them we’re not your real parents. Tell them you’re the daughter of an underworld serpent king and we found you when you were a baby floating in a clay pot down the River of Dreams.”

I guess every kid whose family is from somewhere else thinks their parents are weird. But with mine, it wasn't just their language or their clothes or their food. It was something more—like my parents never really appreciated the distinctions between fact and fiction, science and mythology, dreams and reality. But it wasn't until that fateful twelfth birthday that I really understood why.



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