

KIRANMALA ^{AND THE} KINGDOM BEYOND

FORCE
OF FIRE

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CHAPTER 1

Why None of What Happened Is My Fault at All

The day I lost control of my rakkhosh power, fire-vomited in front of half the school, and then basically started a kingdom-wide revolution was absolutely not my fault.

All right, whatever, maybe it was a wee bit my fault, but there were *reasons*. Good reasons. Serious. Extenuating. Circumstances.

We were in one of the outdoor classrooms at Ghatatkach Academy of Murder and Mayhem, with long benches organized around a circle of banyan trees—their thick trunks, branches, and roots so long and strong that each tree seemed like a dozen. The sun was merciless, the crows were screeching, the tree frogs were burping, and the open sewers were belching out their nauseating, gaseous vapors. In other words, a picture-perfect day.



I was in Demonic Combat, the class taught by our headmistress, Surpanakha. The class I was, let me just come out and own it, in serious danger of failing. And since failing Combat class would not just tank my GPA but humiliate me in front of the entire school, I was already feeling like an about-to-explode pressure cooker.

The problem I had with Combat class wasn't all the violence, pain, and destruction. I was fine with violence, pain, and destruction, at least theoretically. But that said, rakkhosh, like any other sort of being, aren't all the same. Sure, we have fangs, horns, tusks, and occasional issues

with drooling. Yes, our skin does sometimes tend to the warty, and we are, on the whole, strong and fast. But that doesn't mean we don't enjoy poetry, or elemental physics, or calligraphy. We contain, as they say, multitudes. My problem with Combat class was the practical doing-it part, the "teamwork" and "cooperation" involved in sparring, that seriously gave me hives. (I mean, I couldn't even say words like *teamwork* and *cooperation* without putting them in air quotes.)

The truth is, since the first day I'd arrived at school, I'd been forced to be a solitary diva-loner type. It wasn't my fault. It's not like I didn't want friends, at least at first. But I'd had to get very good, very fast at pretending the other rakkhosh kids' mean comments about my family history or my being on full scholarship didn't bother me. I quickly learned to ignore their snickers at my patched-up school sari and lack of pocket money. I got used to eating lunch alone, usually in the library, an expert at pushing down all my angry feelings so deep into myself I was like a walking volcano, always ready to blow. Or maybe a volcano isn't the right analogy. Maybe I was more like a bomb. All I needed was one spark of fire to explode. Which is kind of what happened that unfortunate day.

The odds were so not in my favor. For starters, one

of the students I was assigned to spar with that day was Kumi, the water-clan rakkhoshi who also happened to be my roommate. She had just tried to pelt me in the face with a fire-hose stream of water, but since we'd lived together so long, I knew all her tells. The moment she scrunched up her nose like she was about to blow out a big fart, I guessed she was actually about to shoot a water cannon out of her crocodile tail, so I jumped out of the way in time.

“Good defense, Pinki, but let's see some better offense!” shouted our noseless headmistress, Surpanakha, clapping her hands together. She was wearing a silver whistle like a necklace over her multicolor sari, as well as a hideous vinyl sun visor. “You can't keep running away from your opponents, or yourself!”

I wasn't sure what the headmistress meant by that last comment but didn't want to think too much about it. I could feel the eyes of all my watching classmates like so many tiny fires on my skin. But even with my hearts hammering like trapped birds in my chest, I tucked the end of my sari anchal more tightly around my waist and made my voice as bored as possible.

“Is that really all you've got for me, Kumi?” I squinted at her, a shadow against the harsh sunlight. “Or are you just all wet?”

“Is that supposed to be a water-clan joke?” My roommate circled me like some kind of predator looking for a soft place to take a bite.

“Ooo, you got me,” I deadpanned. Kumi was so easy to bait—all brawn and shockingly little sense of humor. “It was super complicated, but somehow you put the word *wet* together with *water*. How did you do it? I am in awe.”

I heard some snickers from the crowd and couldn’t help but smile myself. It was so much easier to spar with words than with bodies. But then I had to get my head back in the game quick, because with a roar, Kumi somersaulted at me, spitting a wave of ocean water in my direction. As she flipped all the way around, her sopping hair slapped against her furious green face.

To avoid her seaweed-stinky wave, I dived behind Aakash, the good-looking but not-too-bright air rakkhosh who was also a part of our sparring trio that afternoon.

“Hey! Don’t mess with the hair! Uncool, man!” Aakash lifted off the ground just in time to avoid both Kumi’s wave and the smoke bomb I had half-heartedly thrown at his head. The air-clan boy re-fluffed his hair over his curved gray horns, then adjusted the tight white school kurta he wore over his muscular chest.

“Relax, flyboy.” Kumi spun around, shooting out sharp

water barbs through the gaps in her teeth. “No one wants to touch that bird’s nest you call a hairdo.”

My roommate’s words gave me a brilliant idea. There was a whole field of magic based on rakkhosh hair, nails, and teeth—I’d been reading about it in a book of old spells I kept by my bed. Tearing off a few strands of my own long hair, I threw them at the water rakkhoshi while muttering a brief enchantment. The moment the handful of my curly black locks hit her, my roommate froze in place, a grimace on her water-sopped face, then dropped like a stone to the ground.

My triumph was cut short by Surpanakha’s whistle sounding, shrill and long. “Illegal maneuver, Pinki!” The teacher magically woke Kumi back up with a wave of her hands. “The assignment was to only use powers specific to your clan! You can’t avoid using your flames forever!”

There was a tittering from someone behind me. Ugh. Among all the different kinds of sneaky laughers, titterers are the absolute worst.

“Who was that?” I felt my cheeks warm and spun around in a circle. “Show your face, coward!”

Another sharp whistle from Surpanakha. “Never turn your back on an opponent, Pinki! You’ve got to keep your eyes on them to anticipate their next move!”

I kept my eyes on Kumi but felt myself seething inside. I knew everyone was just *waiting* for me to fail. You see, to make up for being excluded and alone all the time at school, I'd always thrown myself into my classes. From Rodent Disemboweling to Enemy Brain Dissection, from Erupting Effusive Boils to Inflicting Intestinal Ailments, from Causing Cannibalistic Chaos to Tormenting Tiny Tots with Terrors, I'd aced them all. My only real academic weakness was the fact that I kind of couldn't control my fire. I mean, yes, I'd possibly exploded those beakers in Putrid Poisons class when some of my classmates were whispering about my parents, and sure, I'd mistakenly singed off my Torture teacher's left eyebrow after she unfairly took off a point on that one pop quiz, and fine, there were the number of times I'd set Kumi's entire wardrobe on fire, but nothing to get your talons in a twist about. Not until that day in Combat class, that is.

"Drown, weirdo, drown!" Kumi vomited out an even more powerful wave at me. It smelled of salty fish and anger. She was obviously miffed about the magic hair trick, which meant she'd probably try to kill me in my sleep again once we were back in our dorm room. But what else was new.

The millisecond before Kumi's stinky wave hit me, I took in a big, shaking breath and did the thing I hated the

most. I produced a mouthful of flames. I prayed to all that was evil in the multiverse that Kumi's water would douse any out-of-control fire I might produce. And by some miracle, it actually worked. The water and fire basically canceled each other out and fell to the ground in a harmless puff of steam. I'd done it! I'd actually done it! Well, I hadn't exactly controlled my flames, but at least I hadn't destroyed anything. I felt downright giddy with relief.

"What else have you got?" I slithered my long tongue at Kumi and Aakash, blowing them each some belchy fire-sparks. Suddenly, I was feeling much more in control. And control was something I liked. A lot. "You two are a joke! This time next year, I'm not voting for either of you as Demon King or Queen!"

"I won't need your vote, there are plenty of others who'll elect me king!" Aakash flexed a giant bicep midair. "As opposed to *some* rakkhosh, I actually have friends! Well, friends who aren't, like, books."

I heard a cheer from the air-clan bench. Aakash's pathetic friends were cheering on his pathetic comments. They were all so full of dung balls. So what if I preferred the company of books to other rakkhosh?

"Rude!" I snorted some white-hot embers into my fist

and threw them at the air-clan boy's fat head. He flew left just in time to miss them.

"No way! Bow down to your next Demon Queen right here!" Kumi whipped torrents of rain at me that left me spitting water. "Aakash may be more popular, but I'm definitely the most powerful rakkhosh in this school!"

"You wish!" I jumped awkwardly out of the way of the storm.

"What, you think you're more powerful than me? You may be better at taking tests, but raw power? I don't think so, loser! You're still scared to make an actual fire stream from your mouth," said Kumi, hitting me where it really hurt. "Cause every time you do, you just lose control and destroy something!"

"You're, like, too scared of your power to figure out how to tame it." As Aakash spoke, he generated a wind gust with his flapping insect wings that almost knocked both Kumi and me over. "You're too freaked about crashing and burning—like, literally—to even try. Probably the same reason you're not running for Demon Queen!"

Out of the mouths of ding-dongs, as they say. Okay, so, yes, Aakash was in fact right. I wasn't running for Demon Queen because, well, I was too afraid of failing to even try. But I wasn't about to admit anything of the sort out loud.