Lovereading4kids.co.uk

Helping you choose books for children

0-5 5-7 7-9 9-12 12+

opening extract from

Kumari: Goddess of Gotham

written by

Amanda Lees

published by

Piccadilly Press Ltd

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.

CHAPTER 1

An orange moon hung low over the hidden kingdom, tingeing the snow-capped peaks that surrounded it, protecting it from the prying eyes of the world beyond.

Unmarked on any map, it was as if the kingdom did not exist. Spy satellites swept over it, registering nothing. Nestled deep within a distant mountain range, the kingdom lay untouched, as it had done for eons.

Which was all very well for those who liked things the way they had always been.

But not so great for a goddess-in-training who longed for a bit of life.

Tucked up in her bed, Kumari tossed to and fro. Her silk sheets twisted beneath her as she thrashed around in her sleep. The nightmare was back again, this time worse than before.

'Mamma,' she murmured. The sweat trickled down her face.

She could see her Mamma so clearly in her dream, walking ahead of her, but as fast as Kumari ran she could not catch up.

'Mamma!' she shouted, but the words stuck in the back of her throat. However hard she tried to scream, she could not make a sound. And all the time her Mamma carried on walking, blissfully unaware of the danger that lay ahead . . .

Kumari could see it – knew just what was about to happen. But there was no way she could stop her, as hard as she tried. It was like running in quicksand, yelling into the wind. A great gulf yawned in front of Mamma, ready to swallow her up. And then – her Mamma was gone, falling into the darkness . . . disappearing into a void from which she would never return.

Kumari woke with a start. She was sitting bolt upright, arms outstretched, empty. *I couldn't reach her*, she thought miserably. *I failed Mamma. Again.*

A tear rolled down her cheek and slid, salty, inside her lips. Her chest ached with emptiness; her heart felt hollow inside. And then she remembered. This was the night of her grand plan. The night she might – just perhaps – kill off the nightmares at last.

The moonlight shone through the arched windows, casting shadows along the floor. It was well after midnight; soon bird-

song would herald the dawn. Flinging back her rumpled sheets, Kumari threw herself out of bed. Badmash, her baby vulture, sighed and rolled over into the indent she had left. His feet were twitching, a sure sign he was dreaming. And whatever those dreams consisted of, it was a safe bet they involved food. Kumari leaned over and tickled his fat little belly.

'Badmash, wake up,' she hissed. 'Tonight's the night!'

Badmash opened his beak and let out a squawk of protest. Instantly, Kumari clamped it shut again. The last thing she needed was to get caught. She *had* to talk to Mamma – speak to her just one last time. And the only way to do that was through the Great Summoning Ceremony itself.

The Great Summoning Ceremony: the most difficult of rituals. In attempting to bring her mother back into this world she might well destroy them both. Mamma was caught between two states, unable to make the final transition from queen to total goddess. Owing to her untimely death, she was in the most dangerous place of all. One slip of the tongue and it could so easily go wrong. Her Mamma might end up in limbo forever if Kumari made a mistake.

The gods were not to be trifled with, even if you were a trainee one yourself. Incur the wrath of the heavens and the repercussions could be dreadful. Kumari did not relish the prospect but, still, she had no choice. Already she scented danger on the wind, could feel it stalking the palace corridors. And so tonight she would perform the ceremony. Get the answers she craved.

There was just one tiny problem: she had never *actually*

managed it. Never summoned up a god before, despite the Ancient Abbot's best efforts. She could imagine her teacher now, his hands sketching shapes in the air.

'This is how you do it, Kumari. See – sweep down and towards you!'

Looked so simple when he did it.

'It's not working,' she sighed.

'Why not try it this way? Come, child, focus your energy. Magic is all in the mind, Kumari. In the mind and in the heart.'

As teachers went, the Ancient Abbot was rather dull. But he knew more about rituals than any man alive. And it was not his fault he was so old. Sometimes he forgot entire incantations, stopping dead in mid-sentence. Other times he muddled them up, with spectacular results.

Age was honoured in the kingdom, a fact that occasionally drove her nuts. It was tough to be thirteen in a place where one hundred was considered young! Even harder to be a girl-goddess, with all that it entailed. How she envied the ordinary citizens, hearts carefree, minds untroubled. Of course, it was all down to Papa and Maximum National Happiness.

It was Papa's job to generate National Happiness, but lately he seemed lost. As far back as she could remember, Papa had worked away at the holy fires, stoking them up with love and care, sending the smoke of Happiness to his people. Its haze drifted across the valley kingdom, infusing it with well-being. Except the haze was all but gone, the skies dishearteningly empty. National Happiness had not been at maximum for a long time, not since Mamma's death eight moons before.

Was it really eight moons? It felt like a heartbeat. A heartbeat that ached with unanswered questions both for herself and Papa.

Kumari could see Papa now, sitting alone by the holy fires, unable to conjure up more than the odd wisp instead of the great clouds that had once billowed forth. Papa's Powers had deserted him along with the ability to maintain Happiness. It was as if something was sucking the very life force out of him, rendering him impotent and withdrawn. As the holy fires dwindled, so did Papa's spirits. The further the king sank into deep depression, so the kingdom followed suit. OK, so Happiness was not everything, or so the Ancient Abbot said. But then what would *he* know – he was a monk, for heaven's sake.

There was only one thing to do and that was to speak to Mamma. She had to find out what had happened, how she had really died. Only one person would tell her the truth and that person was Mamma. And how Kumari longed to hear her voice, to be soothed by its familiar sound. Since before she could remember, Mamma had sung her to sleep, had told her stories of fairies and dragons, had murmured her name. Later, she had been her source of wisdom, teaching Kumari of the ways of the world, talking about its biggest mysteries: magic, the meaning of life. Boys. Already, though, the sound of Mamma's voice in her head was fading. It was as if someone was wiping all the good memories from her mind, leaving nothing but hurt.

Tonight was the perfect night, the night of the Murmuring Moon. All over the kingdom, hundreds of people were gazing

up at it, whispering their wishes in the knowledge that the gods would grant just one. Each year the lucky winner would give thanks at the temple while the losers smiled nicely and muttered snide asides. Well, as far as Kumari was concerned this was one lottery she was about to fix. She had a hotline to the gods and she intended to burn it up.

Time to get moving. This mission called for mountain gear. Hardly a fashion statement but then no one would see her anyway. Her winter robes were what her Ayah called 'sensible', hanging like a red tent to her ankles. Beside the ladies of the court, she looked like a scarlet blob. A blob with a scowling face poking out of the top, pale and unadorned. Not that she particularly wanted to paint her lips or totter round in tight skirts. It would be nice to have the option, though, instead of always being treated like a kid.

Next, her ceremonial bag, stashed in its secret hiding place. OK, so it was the back of her wardrobe. But it did the job. The strand of hair was still there, exactly as she had left it, laid just across the door handles so that she would know if anything had been touched. You couldn't be too careful, as Mamma's death had proved. If they were able to get to Mamma then Kumari could well be next in line. As for Papa's malaise, Kumari was sure it was something more than grief. If even the god-king could succumb to outside forces, what hope was there for Kumari? Gain access to her magic tools and they were halfway there. Of course, she had no idea who *they* were, it was just her suspicions. It made it all the more important to guard her things. Through them they could harm her.

Until the day they ascended the Holy Mountain, a living god or goddess was vulnerable. Like her Mamma and Papa, one per cent of Kumari remained mortal. Find that weak spot and you could kill off the human part, consigning the living god or goddess to the endless night of a limbo state. Someone had done that to her Mamma and it would take an awful lot to set her free. Now not even Papa was strong enough to rescue Mamma and the gods could not intervene. Only one of her own blood could save Mamma. If she found out how Mamma had been murdered, Kumari could help her heal and send her on, up the Holy Mountain to join her fellow deities instead of languishing in its foothills, unable to go forward or come back.

Whoever it was had known where to strike, and that knowledge was kept from all but a very few which meant it had to be someone close to the royal family, perhaps even in the palace itself. Then there was the mystery of her death, the complete lack of evidence. There were only three ways to kill a living goddess: one being with the sacred sword. But that was kept under lock and key in the temple, guarded by the monks day and night. For the sacred sword was also vital to the first and most important Power of them all: Power No 1, the Power to be Invincible. Of the Eight Great Powers to be gained by a trainee god or goddess, this was the hardest to attain.

The second way to kill a goddess was to turn her own magic against her but that, surely, would leave its mark. There had been no marks on Mamma. It was all very strange. Whatever the circumstances, it was clear Mamma's death was

no accident. Someone else had had a hand in it, and that someone was very powerful. Only a person with great influence could have murdered a living goddess like Mamma.

Aha, here it was. Her ceremonial bag and it looked intact. Better check the contents one more time. This was too important to mess up.

Summoning Cup
Cowrie Shell
Incense
Charcoal
Incantations Part One (in hardback)
Journal
Firesticks

It was all there, present and correct. Kumari slung the bag over her shoulder. It rucked up her sleeve, exposing her amulet. The silver bracelet round her wrist was Kumari's most precious possession, a gift from her Mamma that was intended to keep her safe. And so it would, if only Kumari could remember the mantra that activated it. Mantras were not her strong point. They all sounded the same. Still, she loved her amulet. It made her feel closer to Mamma. As if Mamma were protecting her through the slender band of silver that she always wore.

Catching sight of it, she felt a rush of courage. All she had to do now was get past the guards to the western door. Once free of the palace, she would climb the hills opposite the Holy Mountain to perform her ritual with the dawn. The Great Summoning Ceremony had to be conducted in direct sight of the mountain. In its foothills Mamma languished,

and it was from there Kumari hoped to summon her. The ascent was steep and dangerous; she needed to move swiftly. Too much haste, however, and she could make a fatal mistake.

Carefully, she replaced the raven strand of hair and tiptoed towards the door. Scooping Badmash from her bed, she tucked him under one arm. Badmash glared up at her beadily but refrained from opening his beak. On the threshold, Kumari paused, listening for telltale creaks. Night watchmen patrolled the corridors. Bump into one of them and all was lost. They had strict orders to protect her, and that included from herself. No one left the palace alone at night, especially not the girl-goddess.

Her heart was thumping so hard she could swear someone would hear it. It was now or never. She lifted the latch . . .

The corridor was still, the butter lamps burning low. She glanced towards her Ayah's door, half-expecting to hear her snore. Generally, her Ayah snored so loudly it reverberated right through the floorboards. Tonight, however, all was silent.

Her Ayah slept in the next room, as she had ever since Kumari was born. Protocol demanded that the girl-goddess had a nanny, even though her mother had not been keen. Happily, the Ayah was a distant cousin and so kind it was impossible not to love her. It had been the Ayah who had held her tight the day they bore Mamma away.

As they carried Mamma, cold and still, to the foothills of the Holy Mountain, Kumari had followed, holding on to her Ayah. They had placed Mamma's pallet by the river that

separated the Holy Mountain from the kingdom. Wide and very deep, its waters ran icy cold from the snowy peak. The mists had descended, rolling towards Mamma. Then the waters rose and took her pallet, sweeping it towards the distant shore. There she would awake to the living death of limbo, blessed with all her attributes of youth and beauty, cursed to remain stuck. The first step was to avenge Mamma's death, to break the murderer's curse. Then she would be free to ascend the mountain and take her rightful place among the gods.

'I'll find them, Mamma,' whispered Kumari as she gazed at the waters with streaming eyes, clutching her Ayah's arm with whitened fingers until the pallet disappeared from sight.

'I will look after you,' said the Ayah. 'I will take care of you.'

And so she had, although it was never the same.

Kumari could still feel her Mamma's slender fingers stroking her face gently. Occasionally an unseen hand would brush her cheek and she knew it was her mother. Some people would say she was crazy and so she kept those thoughts to herself. But Kumari *knew* she was there, so close and yet so far. It was why she had to do this, for herself and for Mamma.

Here was the Ayah's door. Best to go s-l-o-w-l-y. Somewhere around here a floorboard squeaked. This might be the one . . . Toes down first . . . Nothing. On to the next one. Aha – a creak. Step over it very carefully. Excellent! Home and dry. Past the first butter lamp, then the second. Stick to the shadows at all costs. Weird that her Ayah wasn't

snoring. No time to ponder. Keep going.

One down, two to go. There was Papa's room at the end. Before him, the RHM. Ah yes, the Right Hand Man. Her least favourite person in the palace. In the universe, in fact. OK, so her universe ended at the borderlands, gateway to the World Beyond. And what little she knew about the World Beyond she had heard from the RHM. Frankly, having listened to all his tales, she rather wished he would move there. He would fit in really well, wrinkling up with the rest of them.

They lived short but terrible lives in the World Beyond before their bodies crumbled to dust. Or at least, that was what the RHM said in their Social History sessions. Personally, she thought it sounded rather interesting, all this stuff about ageing. How weird would it be, seeing your face shrivelled up like a walnut?

OK, so it was unlikely. Impossible, in fact. Amongst the many gifts bestowed on a girl-goddess, Kumari had been granted eternal youth. Even the ordinary citizens of the kingdom aged at a rate that was barely perceptible. Most lived to be well over three hundred, their skins still unlined, their hair black and thick. Maybe she could just slip over to the World Beyond, take a peek at these people. She'd be so close to the borderlands tonight. It would only take a minute. Even as the thought popped into her head, so did the RHM's voice.

'Time moves faster in the World Beyond. You would have but a year and a day as they measure it. A year and a day, Kumari. And then you would die!'

Ah yes, the one other way to kill a goddess. Consign her to the World Beyond where she would be subjected to their physical laws. There, far away from the Holy Mountain, she would be unprotected from Time's ravages, helpless against the World Beyond's greatest disease. A year and a day before Time claimed her for its own, treating her worse even than a mere mortal, as it once would have treated the RHM.

Oh, he was safe now, all right, secure in the kingdom. He would live as long as all the other citizens, privy as he was to their secrets, breathing in the haze of Happiness, although it had not always been that way. The RHM himself was from the World Beyond. Found abandoned as a young boy in the borderlands, it was Papa who had rescued him, brought him to the palace, treated him as his own. Educated him, cared for him and finally inflicted him on his daughter. For that, she all but cursed Papa every time the RHM spoke.

After all, she was the one who had to listen to him droning on day after day. He had a voice that drummed right through your skull and scratched at your brain. In fact, she could hear it right now.

Really hear it, out loud!

She was hovering outside his door. There were voices coming from inside. A muffled shout then a gasp. A sudden thud. Then a murmur. That had to be the RHM. He always spoke softly. Somehow it made what he said more important. More sinister, even. The second voice again, rising in anger.

'Pay up or I'll . . .'

Thud, thud. Then silence.

Hmmm, *very* interesting. And in the middle of the night.

Who was the man in the RHM's room? And what had he been talking about? Some business transaction, it seemed, but at a very strange hour. On all her other expeditions around the palace in the small hours, she had never known the RHM to stay up this late. It was a puzzle she picked over all the way to the western door.

As it clicked shut behind her, she forgot all about the RHM. Cold night air filled her lungs; the adventure was just beginning. She could make out the shapes of yaks dozing in the meadow alongside the palace as she stole past. *Smelly beasts,* thought Kumari, as one let out a prolonged fart. The meadow was fringed on the far side by forest, the intermittent moonlight picking out the twisted trunks of oaks and rhododendrons, casting them into monstrous curlicues that appeared to be alive.

On the edge of the forest, she hesitated. It looked different in the moonlight. At night, strange sounds emitted from every leaf and branch, odd rustles and creaks. *Don't be so ridiculous,* thought Kumari. They were only trees, after all. Still, she strode through it as fast as she dared, given that the branches hung so low. As the forest grew denser, she began to feel claustrophobic. For once, she was glad to be both small and slight. A larger person would have found themselves impaled on a thousand twigs.

Suddenly, her head was jerked backwards. She froze, stifling a scream. Very slowly, she turned around. Her hair was caught up on an aged oak, its gnarled branches grabbing like grasping fingers. Kumari blinked at them once, twice. She could have sworn they moved.

Don't panic, she thought. *Just untwist your hair verrrrry carefully*. She began to unwind the long, black strands. The branch swayed, reaching for her face. Her hair was stuck fast, however much she yanked at it. The twigs were scratching, stabbing at her eyes. She tried to twist to one side. And then, suddenly, she felt it, a gentle caress on her cheek. An unseen hand released her hair. She was running, free. Crashing through the forest, not caring who heard her, stopping only when she had reached the slopes beyond, sending a silent thank you to Mamma.

Safe above the tree line, she stood gasping for breath. A feeble squawk penetrated the sound of blood pounding in her ears. She pulled a seasick Badmash from her pocket.

'You poor thing,' she murmured, cradling him in her hands.

Badmash tottered theatrically and collapsed against her chest.

'OK, OK,' she said. 'Enough now, Badmash.' Badmash was a great pet – but he did like to be a drama queen.

Kumari clambered up the mountainside as it grew steadily steeper, Badmash perched on her shoulder, stubbornly refusing to fly. She had done her best to teach him, trying every trick in the book. After all, it was something she herself had to learn, one of the Eight Great Powers: the Power to Levitate or Fly Through the Sky. Power No 6.

So far, she had acquired precisely none. It was not a brilliant record. Before she could become a fully-trained living goddess, she had to pass all eight tests. By now she should have passed at least one, two if she was really going some. It was not like she didn't want to learn, just that somehow it

seemed such an effort. Some Powers were more fun than others. Take the Power of Extraordinary Sight, for example. Among other things, it meant she would be able to see demons and spirits as well as discern the truth. Then there was the Power to be Invincible whenever she wielded the sacred sword. As for the Power to Move through Mountains – how cool was that?

OK, so she had failed to gain even one Power. It made success tonight all the harder. And this was no ordinary ritual. This was the Great Summoning Ceremony itself. The means by which a god or goddess could be brought into another realm to offer help or, in this case, provide answers. Summoning would not free Mamma, however. She would return to the limbo from whence she came. The very act of Summoning was dangerous which was why, for once, Kumari had applied herself. Time and time again she had practised in the privacy of her bedroom. Somehow, she always got the words wrong. There were too many other things to think about.

A lot of the time, for instance, Kumari wondered what it would be like to be normal. To roam the streets of the kingdom unobserved, to have a friend. She had no proper friends, apart from Badmash. And he did not really count, being a small, bolshy baby bird. What was so wrong with normal after all? Normal was better. If she were normal, she could giggle with the other girls. She could dress in something other than red robes that covered her like a sack. She might even get to cut her hair into something resembling a style. If she looked more normal, then boys might actually glance her way instead of casting their eyes to the ground on the rare occasions she passed by.

Oh, she knew why they did it. It was out of respect for her status. No one could gaze upon the girl-goddess except the courtiers and the king himself. Which kind of put paid to any chance of her ever getting a kiss. Not that she really wanted a kiss. Well, not just from anyone. Kisses sounded, well, *slobbery*.

Although one from Tenzin might be nice.

Kissing. Another mystery. In fact, she had no idea how to do it. It was one of those questions she could not ask anyone, not even her Ayah. Mamma would have known what to say, would have taken her seriously. She would have understood how much Tenzin meant. Would have told her what to do.

The thought of Tenzin sent butterflies flapping wildly about her stomach. Which annoyed Kumari because she liked to be in control. Or at least that was the theory. In practice, it was really hard. In which case, it was better not to think about him. Which was also pretty tough.

So caught up was she in her thoughts, that Kumari did not realise quite how far she'd climbed. It was only when she stumbled and had to right herself that she paused to look down.

Far below in the valley she could see the lights of the palace. A beacon always burned at each corner to let the people know they were safe. Although frankly, what with the Happiness deficit, the people were growing restless. Kumari's gaze shifted to the royal wing. She squinted, trying to make out poor Papa's window.

There it was on the corner, beneath one of the seven gilded pagodas that adorned the palace roof. A dim glow was visible within; Papa could no longer sleep with the lights off. Next to

his room, the RHM's was in darkness. She remembered the voice raised in anger, the RHM's soothing tone, then the thuds. He had been trying to shut someone up, that much was obvious. But what about and why? And in the middle of the night? As the god-king's closest aide, the RHM was extremely powerful. He could easily deal with someone by daylight through the usual channels. Unless he did not wish to be discovered.

It occurred to Kumari then that the RHM could be her suspect. He had the opportunity, the influence. But what about the motive? The RHM had appeared to love her Mamma, certainly to respect her deeply. No, it could not have been the RHM. He had no reason to kill Mamma.

Bored now of staring at the palace, Kumari's perspective widened. She swept her gaze over the valley, settling on a house in the Court Officials' District. Tenzin was the son of the Royal Treasurer. It was how she had first come to lay eyes on him, accompanying his father to court. Unlike all the other boys, he had dared to look her in the eyes, glancing at her sideways with an amused glint.

How dare he, had been her first thought, followed by a rush of admiration. The boy had guts, not to mention a cute smile. Of course she had turned away, lifting her chin a touch haughtily. And then ruined the entire effect by glancing back when she thought he wasn't looking. Naturally he was and naturally he had grinned triumphantly. Kumari could not help but grin back.

Right now he was asleep, as far as she could tell from his

darkened house. Or maybe lying there in his bed, thinking of her . . .

Don't be ridiculous, she told herself. Tenzin had far better things to do. Like hang around with the other kids with whom he attended school. Kumari had never been to school. Instead, she had the RHM and the Ancient Abbot.

It made it much harder to get away with anything, being the only kid in class. But Kumari had her methods. Take tonight, for instance. It made it all the more exciting, knowing how furious they would be if they found out. Except, they were not going to find out. She would be back in her bed just after dawn.

Huddled against a boulder, knees drawn up, Kumari stared at the changing sky. Indigo was giving way to grey; soon the sun would splash it with golden streaks. Across the valley, she could barely make out the contours of the Holy Mountain, its foothills shrouded in mists, its peak crowned with cloud. She stared at the foothills, wishing that, just for once, the veil of the mists would be ripped apart. Hidden by it, her mother lingered, gazing back at the land she still loved.

The Holy Mountain was blessed, its tip the most sacred spot of all. The summit cloud acted as a screen, shielding the gods from mortal gaze. The only way to ever see a god was to summon one from the mountain and the ability to do so was only handed to a few. The Ancient Abbot had taught her the words, the formula written in her ritual book. But words were nothing without magic. And magic involved risk.

Summoning was not entirely safe for either side. You never quite knew what might appear. In Mamma's case it was doubly

dangerous, alone as she was, unprotected by the other gods.

'Summoning,' the Ancient Abbot said, 'is only to be used in extreme circumstances.'

Well, these circumstances *were* extreme. How else could she communicate with her Mamma? And Mamma would understand; she had always urged Kumari on.

'Be strong,' she would say. 'Fight for what you believe in, Kumari.'

Well, she believed in her mission. She believed it was the only way. Kumari stared harder at the mountain and murmured, 'Mamma.'

A tear trickled down her cheek. She brushed it aside, furious. 'No tears,' Mamma always said.

'No tears,' whispered Kumari.

Nestled in her robes, warm against her belly, Badmash glanced up and let out a squawk. Kumari looked down and smiled. She had almost forgotten his presence.

'Soon, now,' she soothed. 'You hang on in there.'

Badmash was growing restless, his belly growling for food. Any normal bird would have gone foraging for a few worms. But Badmash was no normal bird. In fact, he hardly considered himself a bird at all. It was why he refused to fly, or so Kumari theorised. In any case, it gave him a human-sized appetite along with a lot of attitude.

Very soon, though, the sun would rise, a sudden slash through the grey cloud. The cold mists would be ripped by light, night turning swiftly to day. It was alchemy itself and Kumari loved it, the bleak mountains bathed in sudden gold, the frosty sky on fire. Each jagged peak would salute the sun

as the valley awakened. Demons would scuttle back inside their caves. Eagles would swoop in delight.

With the dawn, she would perform her ceremony, then slip back to the palace. They could be there by breakfast time, with her Ayah none the wiser. The Ayah brought breakfast each morning, laid out on a silver tray. Yak yogurt and honey for Kumari, a whole mouse for Badmash. At first the palace cook had protested so now the Ayah simply slipped one on the tray in transit. It was pretty impressive, come to think of it, having an Ayah who could handle a dead mouse.

A sound cracked through the air, the snap of a twig breaking. Whirling round she saw nothing save a ragged shrub swaying in the wind. Little grew above the tree line; the climate was too harsh. The wind was bitter, unrelenting, unlike the balmy valley below. Kumari dropped her head to her knees and pulled her robes tighter. Alone on the hillside, it felt as if the dawn would never come.

Thoughts began to taunt her. Just who was she kidding? Imagining she could summon up her Mamma. She was nothing but a joke. She had not passed a single one of her Powers, for heaven's sake. And at this rate she never would. Call herself a trainee goddess? Trainee *dingbat* more like.

And then she felt it, a flash of warmth on her back. She whipped her head up to see the mountain. Above it, the sky blazed, aflame.

Hastily, she pulled out her book.

'Place incense on charcoal,' she muttered, reading out the instructions. She had done this a hundred times before but this time she had to get it right.

The firestick stubbornly refused to light, no matter how hard she flicked it.

'Stupid thing,' cursed Kumari. The sky was getting lighter. Then, with a whoosh the firestick ignited. With trembling hands, she applied it to the incense. A wisp of fragrant smoke curled into the sky, scenting the air all around. Rising to her feet, book in hand, Kumari read over the next bit. From his perch on her shoulder, Badmash cooed. He did so love a good ritual.

'OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SOHA
OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SOHA
OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SOHA . . .'

Kumari chanted, feeling a little silly. That was part of the problem. The words just felt all wrong. *This is your one shot*, she thought. *Come on girl, give it all you've got.* Breathing in until her ribs felt like they might crack, she threw back her head and howled:

'OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SOHA
OM TARE TUTTARE TURE SOHA . . .'

Swaying backwards and forwards, Kumari did her best impression of the Ancient Abbot. He might be an old guy but he could chant with the best, voice rising higher and higher, making the whole temple echo. One day she fully expected him to take off and hit the temple roof. Now and then it gave her the giggles, which she had to stifle in her sleeve. Today, however, was no laughing matter. It felt as if her whole life rested on this moment. To see her mother one more time, she would happily die for that.

On and on Kumari chanted, working through all the

verses. For once they came easily, without her having to glance at the book.

'HOWL WIND, ROAR THUNDER . . . '

She blew into her cowrie shell.

'RIP HEAVEN'S VEIL ASUNDER . . . '

She waved her firestick aloft.

'THROUGH FLAME, THROUGH FIRE,
THROUGH HELL ITSELF COME FORTH!'

On and on she chanted, beating the ground beneath her feet, summoning up the spirits from the earth and sky, from the heavens and the depths. Around her the wind howled, shrieking with a thousand demonic voices. The mountain trembled as the spirits woke and shook it in a rage. A sheet of fire shot from the distant peak. Thunder rumbled in anger. The gods did not give up their own without a fight, even when they were stuck in some nether world.

At last, Kumari slumped to her knees, spent, her head bowed, her heart broken.

She had done her best, given it her all. And *still* there was nothing. She would never see or hear Mamma again. Never get to the truth. Never find out who had killed her. Never be able to sleep in peace.

Then she felt the sun burst across her face, the first shaft of daylight. Snapping open her eyes, she was all but blinded.

And there – before her – stood a shape, silhouetted against the fiery skies.

The sunlight picked out the edge of scarlet robes, casting a halo round a hooded head. A hand reached for Kumari, its touch the one she craved. She could smell Mamma's familiar

perfume, see the royal ring on her finger. Although her face was deep in shadow, she knew this, at last, was her mother.

'Mamma?' She took a step forward, face lifted in longing.

Cold fingers closed around her own.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER 2

A great roaring filled her ears, a sound unlike any she had ever heard. Strange smells filled her nostrils: leather, sweat and *something else*. Her head was being flung around, her body jerked side to side. She tried to roll with the motion, as if she were on a boat. The roaring changed in tempo, increasing and decreasing. There was an earsplitting squeal and the motion abruptly ceased.

'What is it? What's happening?'

The man's voice came from beside her, speaking roughly in a tribal tongue that she recognised. It was the dialect used by the warlords who plagued the western borderlands of the

kingdom. Dimly Kumari recalled feeling a sharp pain in her arm and then an endless sleep punctuated by movement and sounds: yet more voices, being shoved around, manhandled as if she were a potato sack.

'It's the Macy's parade,' came another voice from her other side. 'Dumb cab driver's taken the wrong cross street.'

A sensation welled up inside Kumari. Desperately, she tried to speak. Her tongue felt swollen, her throat dry as dust. Finally, she managed to croak.

'I'm going to be sick!' she rasped.

Instantly, there was pandemonium.

'She said *what*?'

'She's going to be sick!'

'Open the darn window!'

'No – open the door.'

'Keep a hold of her, you idiot!'

One of them grabbed Kumari's shoulders and propelled her forward. She was stepping down from some kind of coach, although she could see no horses. The vehicle was bright yellow, the hard ground beneath her feet a dull grey. She glanced up at the sky. Instantly, the world tilted sideways. Stretching up, touching the heavens, immense towers surrounded her. Towers ten times higher than the palace walls, thirty times higher even. So tall were these towers that they blocked out the sun's rays from the earth. Diamond shards of light shot from the summits, citadels of the gods, surely. Kumari stared, awestruck. Suddenly, her guts lurched again.

'Hurry!' shouted a voice. 'We have to get the kid out of here.'

'Pipe down,' said another, closer to her. 'Can't you see she's not well?'

As Kumari retched over and over, her mind began to steady. The hands that held her head were strong, their grip unrelenting.

'Where am I?' she muttered. 'Who are you people?'

No answer from alongside. She retched again, deliberately. These men meant her harm. She had no idea who they were. What was she doing here, in this place of towering pinnacles?

Last thing she knew, her spell had worked. She had summoned up Mamma. Somehow, though, Mamma had gone. Again. And she was *here*, with these people. Had her magic gone wrong once more? Was this some sort of demonic mirage? No, this felt all too real. Fear trickled down Kumari's spine, landing at its base with a jolt. She must be in the World Beyond. At the mercy of Time! The mortal enemy, its sands unstoppable . . .

More sensations began to filter through; the sounds of people talking and walking. In the background, that roaring sound. Other noises, strange and startling. A hooting and a honking; a distant, whooping wail. Her eyes focused on scraps of paper carelessly tossed in the gutter. She glanced at her wrist; her amulet was gone. Her cherished silver bracelet, a gift from Mamma. Without it, she felt naked, more defenceless than ever.

'You done, princess?'

She had almost forgotten the man still holding her. An idea popped into her head. She let her body go slack.

'What the . . . She's fainted!' shouted the man.

'Get her back in here,' yelled the others.

At that very moment, Kumari kicked out with all her might. She heard a sharp crack as she contacted with the man's knee. 1–0 to her! An angry bellow of pain. And then she was running. Racing down a dull grey path, along the gulley between the towers, heels pounding, arms pumping, dodging people, in and out. They passed by in a blur. Faces streaking, featureless. Noises fading into nothing. *Run! Hide! Get away!* Chest exploding with the effort. Squeezing through the mob. Too many people, getting tighter and tighter.

Behind her, she heard a shout. The men were gaining on her. She began to push through the crowd, her slight figure disappearing amidst the throng.

'Excuse me! Excuse me!' she screeched but no one appeared to understand. 'I've been kidnapped!' she shouted but nobody seemed to listen.

The mass grew solid, an impenetrable human wall. She had reached a dead end. A quick glance over her shoulder. The kidnappers were right behind her, shoving their way through the crowd. There was no escape. The only way out was forward. Any moment now they would spot her and then she was finished. There was nothing else for it. She had to climb over these people. Scramble up on to shoulders, use backs as stepping stones. Never mind the shouts of protest. This was life or death – hers!

Eyes swivelled round, people glaring and grumbling. One or two let out an encouraging cheer. Someone offered her a hand. And then she was at the front, staring down into a

wide avenue. Closing her eyes, she dived, twisting and turning as she fell. She landed with a thump, rolling over and over. Shouts rang out from the crowd, shouts that contained a warning note.

She heaved herself up. There were guards marching straight towards her. At least, they looked like the palace guards, their insignia glinting in the winter sunlight. Those in front were banging drums, grim-faced in concentration. The guards were only feet away when Kumari flung herself to the side. Her efforts were not quite enough; the guards had to break ranks to avoid her.

'*There she is!*'

Another cry from the crowd, one in a language that she understood. The kidnappers were yelling to one another, pointing at their prey. Scrambling to her feet, Kumari tried once more to run. Weaving in and out of the musicians, dodging trumpets and whirling sticks, panic-stricken as on and on they came, knees lifted in unison. Fluffy pom-poms caught her on the cheeks. A flag bearer bore down. Breaking through the rear of their ranks, she could see more marchers approaching.