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Opening extract from

Kumari: Goddess of Destiny

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The story so far

Kumari is a goddess-in-training who lives in a secret valley kingdom, destined to stay young for ever. Her dear Mamma was murdered mysteriously, but when Kumari tries to summon her to find out the truth, she finds herself in downtown
New York!

So Kumari starts a new life in the World Beyond. She lives with foster-mother Ma, makes her first real friends and meets a boy called Chico, while all the time acquiring her goddess powers. But she has only a year and a day to get back home – or she will die. Her life is also threatened by Simon Razzle, a cosmetic surgeon in search of eternal youth, and by the Ayah, her former nurse and now her deadly enemy. Kumari escapes death, thanks to her Mamma, who appears just in time to save her and despatch the murderous Ayah. With her time running out, Kumari leaves the World Beyond, vowing to avenge Mamma and liberate her from limbo.

Back in the Hidden Kingdom, disaster strikes: the king falls desperately ill and the fires of Happiness go out. Kumari must follow mysterious clues from her dead Mamma to find the secret ingredients which will relight the fires. She is helped by Ma and Theo, who have come to warn her of terrible danger. Captured by Razzle, the Kumari is shocked to discover that the Ayah is alive – and still wants the girl goddess dead. Summoning her powers, Kumari escapes and succeeds in restoring the fires and saving Papa and the Kingdom.

Theo and Ma leave the Kingdom, but give Kumari a special pendant which will allow her to return to the World Beyond some day . . .

Chapter 1

The top of the Empire State Building was on fire, flames shooting up from the one hundred and second floor. Clinging on to the steel mast that soared like a spire into the sky, Kumari could feel the heat scorching her feet, surging towards her from the observation deck. Thick black smoke seared her eyes and tears began to stream down her cheeks. Coughing and spluttering, she looked to the sky for salvation. Except there was no escape; no way of descending or ascending. Unless, of course, she used her Powers and attempted to fly. Power No 6, the Power to Levitate or to Fly Through the Sky. It had worked for her back home, but then she had not been so high up. The tallest building in New York City, the Empire State, hundreds of metres above the ground – if she tried to fly from here, there was no guarantee she would make it.

And then she heard a voice call her name.

'Kumari!'

'Mamma, is that you?'

Through the smoke a figure emerged, loving hands stretched towards her. Kumari stared at her Mamma's wrists – they were bound up in chains.

And then another voice shrieking from somewhere above: 'She's mine! You keep your hands off her.'

Tilting her head upwards once more, Kumari could not believe her eyes. The Ayah, face twisted in hatred, was clambering towards her down the mast.

'Mamma, help me!' she tried to shout, but somehow the words would not come out. The smoke was choking her,

filling her throat. 'Mamma,' she tried again, peering desperately through the belching clouds. A hand grabbed her by the

shoulder.

'I've got you now!' the Ayah crowed, her fingers digging deep into Kumari's flesh.

'Let me go,' screamed Kumari. She could feel the flames

licking at her clothes. 'I'm burning!' she cried. 'Please help me.'

Someone was still shaking her by the shoulder.

'Kumari, wake up. Kumari, my darling, open your eyes.'

She was back, no longer clinging to the Empire State. It had all been a dream. Except that the smell of burning still filled the air and her eyes were once more starting to stream.

'Kumari, the palace is on fire. We must get out of here at once!'

She was fully awake now, staring at her Papa, her mind desperately trying to catch up with what was happening. Behind her Papa she could see the RHM holding out one of her cloaks.

‘Here, Kumari, put this on. There is no time to get dressed.’

Beside her on the pillow, Badmash stirred. Without another thought, she scooped him up. As she scrambled from her bed, the RHM flung her cloak around her and then they were hustling along the corridors. From all around Kumari could hear frantic shouts.

‘The fields are burning!’ someone cried.

Through a window, Kumari caught a glimpse of smoke spiralling up from the valley below. If the crops were destroyed, the people would starve.

‘Come, Kumari,’ Papa urged, his face etched with worry. He, too, had seen the fires. He too knew what they meant.

The guardsmen were evacuating the building. Outside in the main courtyard, people simply stood and stared as flames gushed from the palace roof. Vivid orange against the pre-dawn sky, they guttered amidst the golden spires.

All of a sudden, the crowd let out a collective gasp as a fireball shot from the heavens. It landed in the centre section of the roof, right above the throne room. Another followed and then another. It was as if the gods were hurling flaming meteors. Each burst on impact, sending more fire shooting forth.

The guardsmen had formed a human chain on the roof and were passing buckets of water along it. The fire was racing perilously close to where they worked. Soon they would be forced to retreat.

As Kumari gazed into the heart of the inferno, she thought she saw something. Narrowing her eyes, she focused harder. And then Mamma walked out of the flames. She stood, arms outstretched as if pleading.

‘Mamma!’ Kumari cried.

Beside her, Papa started. He, too, stared at the flaming roof.

‘My love,’ he murmured.

So Papa had seen her too. From her wrists hung those same chains Kumari had seen in her dream. The message was clear. Mamma was still in limbo, in bondage. A shuddering boom as another fireball struck the roof. When its sparks had died, Mamma was gone.

The Ancient Abbot touched Kumari’s shoulder.

‘The gods are angry,’ he declared.

‘Did you see her?’ Kumari whispered, still staring at the roof in disbelief. ‘Where has she gone? Where is she? Mamma, where are you?’ She was shouting now but she did not care. She tried to run towards the roof, but the Abbot held her back. For an old man, his grip was surprisingly strong. He easily contained Kumari.

‘Hush, child,’ he murmured, his eyes infinitely compassionate.

‘Did you see her?’ Kumari asked. ‘She was up there, on the roof.’

‘I did,’ said the Abbot. ‘But that was not your Mamma, it was a mirage.’

‘I tell you, it was her!’ screamed Kumari. ‘I saw her with my own eyes.’

‘Kumari, you saw a vision. You saw what the gods wanted you to see. They were sending you a message, Kumari. They are missing one of their own. Your Mamma is still not with them on the Holy Mountain. You saw the chains on her wrists. She is still a prisoner to fate. All of this, it is a warning from the gods.’ The Abbot’s sweeping arm encompassed the burning roof and the fields beyond.

Through the ringing silence that filled her ears, Kumari heard the unmistakable sound of a sob. Horrified, she glanced at Papa, standing a few feet away beside the RHM, the king’s Right Hand Man. Both their faces were lifted, gazing at the roof, their profiles silhouetted in

ochre light. And then Papa turned to meet her gaze and she saw the tears streaming down his face.

'Your poor Mamma,' he said. 'We've let her down.'

'*I've* let her down,' said Kumari. 'It was up to me to destroy the Ayah in vengeance for murdering Mamma. And I thought I had when I sealed the labyrinth. Obviously, I've failed.'

She had been so sure when she trapped the evil Ayah and her cronies in the World Beyond that her mission was finally at an end. And yet Mamma was still caught in limbo, unable to ascend the Holy Mountain and take her rightful place there as a goddess. Each evening since she had brought the stone crashing down to seal the labyrinth which led to the Hidden Kingdom from the World Beyond, Kumari had prayed for a sign that Mamma was finally free. But it had never come and nor had Mamma, the many times she had tried to summon her up. Now she knew why. Somehow, Mamma's murderer must be still alive. And while the Ayah walked the earth, her Mamma would remain in limbo.

Suddenly it was all too much.

'What more do you want?' Kumari yelled, shaking a fist at the heavens. Her Mamma had been taken from her, and now it looked like she would lose her home and her Kingdom too.

'Hush, child.' The Ancient Abbot tried to comfort her but Kumari was having none of it.

'You want to test me, gods?' she shouted. 'Well, go on – try. I can't take any more. I've done my best. I thought the Ayah would be dead by now.'

A growl of thunder drowned out her words, so loud it sent an answering shudder through the ground. A blazing flash lit up the sky. Helplessly, she turned to the Ancient Abbot.

'Why are they doing this?' she pleaded. 'What do they want?'

'They want this finished,' said the Abbot. 'The longer your Mamma stays in limbo, the weaker she gets. Soon it will be too late to save her. The gods want her avenged now.'

So Kumari's instincts had been right. Somehow she must release Mamma from her chains. Kumari looked again at Papa. On his careworn face there was an expression Kumari had seen once before, the day Mamma was taken from them. Back then he had looked as if someone had torn his heart to pieces. Today it seemed they had ripped away what was left.

His lands were burning, along with his home and his memories. Unless a miracle happened, the Kingdom would be burned to dust. Distant cries from the town below were audible above the roar of the flames. The fire was out of control now, as unstoppable as the gods' ire.

At that moment, the RHM turned and met Kumari's stare, his face as inscrutable as ever. Impassively, he looked at her and then dipped his head. It was almost like a benediction. It was not just the smoke that caused her tears to flow unchecked now. For the first time in ages, Kumari had been truly happy here. The palace once more rang with the laughter of Kumari and her friends, Tenzin and Asha. Although the very walls held memories of Mamma, they were loving memories that brought a smile to Kumari's face.

Mamma's portrait hung in the throne room above the dais where she had once sat beside Papa. Now and then Kumari would steal along in the evening to have a little chat with her Mamma. Of course, Mamma never answered back. Kumari knew it was just a portrait. But as she still could not summon her Mamma up, it was all Kumari had.

Now even that pleasure would be taken from her if the flames started to eat into the throne room. Kumari felt a surge of energy in her gut. She could not, would not let this

happen. There had to be some bargain she could make with the gods, some way of appeasing their anger. A great cracking noise ripped through the air but this time it came from the building. Heart in mouth, Kumari stared at the great circular window in the throne room. From within, she could see an orange glow. The fire had taken hold inside.

The cracking was the sound of a roof beam breaking. Any moment now the flames would spread to the rest of the room, to Mamma's portrait. Forgetting any danger to herself, Kumari began to run, ignoring the Abbot's cry of protest. She could hear Papa shouting too and the shouts of guards pounding after her. Piercing through all of that, the plaintive cries of Badmash. For a second her heart lurched, but she had to keep going. Her Mamma's portrait was in there. It was all she had left.

She could feel the glow of anger ignite just like the flames, fuelling her courage. So the Ayah was still alive. She had to be, against all the odds. And the only way to free Mamma was to finish her off.

'I'll find her,' cried Kumari. 'Whatever it takes, I'll avenge Mamma. If I have to sacrifice my very soul, I will do it to set her free. You have my word. I promise. Just, please, give me a sign that you agree. Anything. Please, show me. But spare the Kingdom, spare the people. Tell me what you want me to do. I'm ready.'

She was gasping for breath as she ran, sobbing out her plea to the gods.

At that very moment, the heavens opened and rain poured down upon the palace. It pounded in torrents upon the roof, dousing the flames in gallons of water. It cascaded through the damaged throne-room ceiling, snuffing out the fire within. Within a few minutes it was over. The palace stood, smouldering in the dawn. The rain stopped as quickly as it started, leaving Kumari soaked to the skin.

Speechless, she gaped at the throne-room door, singed but very much intact. She still had to get inside and rescue Mamma's portrait from the smoke and rain that could destroy it forever. The latch scorched her hand as she grasped it, but Kumari ignored the pain. Using the unique mechanism known to a very few, she unlocked the door within seconds. Flinging it wide, she thrust her way into the throne room and instantly had to clap her hand over her mouth and nose.

Smoke still swirled, opaque, making it hard to see. Once more she was reminded of her dream as she stumbled towards the dais. Behind her she heard a familiar squawk followed by a bout of coughing.

'Stay where you are, Badmash,' she called, her words muffled by the cloak she now held to her face. Even so, she could scarcely breathe. She dropped on to her belly and began to crawl. There were a few inches of clearer air near the floor. The smoke was beginning to rise towards the ceiling. She caught a glimpse of the edge of the dais. A few more thrusts with elbows and knees and she could touch it.

Staggering up to her feet, Kumari thrust her way blindly up the steps and towards the thrones. She paused to wipe the tears from her eyes. When she opened them, the smoke had cleared.

'What the . . . ?'

Emblazoned across the wall in front of her, a message, stark white letters etched into the soot.

JUSTICE. REVENGE. DESTINY.

Kumari stared at it, silently mouthing the words. Justice – she understood. Revenge – that was obvious. But destiny? Why? What had fate to do with finding Mamma's killer?

‘I don’t know what to do,’ wailed Kumari. ‘I get it, but I don’t get it. You want me to find the Ayah – fine, but I don’t even know where to start.’

She gazed at the wall, not even sure what she was looking for. A clue, maybe. A sign. This, too, had to be a message from the gods. No mortal could have braved the inferno to etch this into the soot. It was inhuman, the work of the divine. Each letter was perfectly formed, spotless in the otherwise ravaged room. Kumari’s eyes travelled down the wall. Mamma’s portrait – where was it? No longer on the wall and not even a square to mark where it had hung. Suddenly frantic, she looked about. She spotted something behind Mamma’s throne.

As her fingers grasped it, she could feel the frame give way. Carefully, gently she eased it out. Although the throne had shielded it from the worst of the fire, the portrait was charred beyond recognition. Where Mamma’s face had gazed out, serene, there was now a blackened canvas. The careful brushstrokes had been burned away to reveal a thick undercoat of nothingness. A knot of pain twisted in Kumari’s chest, so tight she could scarcely breathe. No more. Mamma’s portrait was no more. Now she had lost just about everything.

‘Why?’ she howled to the heavens. ‘Why take this? It was all I had.’

The tears fell unchecked, spattering the place where Mamma’s face had once been.

‘I said I’d do it,’ muttered Kumari. ‘I said I’d find the Ayah and avenge Mamma. I promised you, didn’t I? So why do this? I don’t understand. Is this supposed to be destiny?’

Fate. Destiny. Call it what you like. She had too often raged against it. The Ancient Abbot taught that all things were written, preordained. Kumari was not so sure.

‘I’ll make this happen,’ she whispered. ‘Whatever it takes, that’s what I said. But I don’t even know where to start.’

Through swollen eyes she gazed at the ruined portrait in her hands. All at once, she noticed something. Blinking

away her tears, she looked again. There it was; the faintest outline. Was this another hidden image in the portrait, just like the ones that had helped her save Papa? But those had existed alongside Mamma’s likeness. This was something else entirely.

Try as she might, she could not make out any detail. It was time to try another tack. Gathering herself, Kumari gave it her goddess all, calling up Power No 2. Power 2, the Power of Extraordinary Sight, had served her well in the past. Now she needed it more than ever. Whatever was hidden within the portrait could be vital. However the gods chose to deliver their messages, they expected them to be received and understood, no matter how obscure the method. It was as if they were constantly testing Kumari, expecting more and more. She was, after all, a trainee goddess.

‘DARA DARA DIRI DIRI . . .’

On and on she chanted.

She could feel it now, surging through her: the pure rush of Power. Opening her eyes, she looked at the portrait. The trick with her Powers was not to try too hard, to just let it happen. And it was appearing before her eyes, an image so clear it was luminescent. The shape was irregular. It looked almost like a large fish, with the right-hand side forming its tail. A memory stirred in the depths of Kumari’s mind. Finally, it broke free and surfaced.

‘America!’ breathed Kumari. She had gazed at that very shape so often. In almost every geography lesson at Rita Moreno Middle School, she had studied maps of the vast terrain that made up the United States. The Ayah must be somewhere in America. First her dream and now this. There were no coincidences with the gods. She would follow their clues to find her destiny.

‘Kumari! Are you in there?’

Papa’s voice, calling from the door. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that smoke still swirled there, obscuring his view. It was only here on the dais that the air was clear. Just as the gods had intended. She could hear someone

crashing towards her, the thud of a guardsman’s boots. When she glanced at the damaged picture again, the map was gone. Gently, she touched the place where it had been. Beneath the marks her fingers made, she could see a glimmer of flesh-coloured paint.

Hardly daring to hope, Kumari rubbed at the soot, revealing more and more of Mamma’s face. Miraculously, it appeared from beneath the layers of carbon and ash and at last Kumari stared once more into Mamma’s dark eyes as she traced the gentle curve of her smile.

‘Oh, thank you,’ she whispered, her eyes filling with tears. ‘Thank you for bringing Mamma back to me.’

She had her answer from the gods. Now it was up to her to keep her promise.

Chapter 2

‘I tell you, she must be in the United States. I’d know the shape of the map anywhere. Then there was that dream I was having when you woke me up, the one about the Empire State. There are no coincidences with the gods. You taught me that yourself. In which case, it’s obvious they’re sending me a message. The Ayah is in America and very possibly New York.’

Papa sighed and patted Kumari’s hair. She hated it when he did that. It made her feel as if she was still just a little kid when she knew she was halfway grown up.

‘A dream is one thing, Kumari. A fact quite another.’

‘Do you believe that, Papa?’

She stared into his eyes and watched as Papa’s gaze shifted. Papa knew about the significance of dreams. He understood omens and portents. In which case, he had some other reason to dissuade her, one that was all too obvious. Papa did not really want to Kumari to go back to America. He wanted her to stay here and carry on her goddess studies. When he had allowed Theo to give her the pendant, he was agreeing to let her to spend time in the World Beyond. But Kumari knew that, in his heart, he was afraid. He had already lost her Mamma. He could not bear it if anything happened to his daughter too.

‘If I may interrupt, your holy majesty . . .’ The Ancient Abbot was hovering. The king nodded and the Abbot inclined his head. ‘I think we should listen to Kumari.’

The king looked dubious, but the Abbot carried on. Sometimes Kumari admired his steadfastness. Her Papa might be a god-king but the Abbot had once been his teacher too.

‘The gods are evidently angered,’ continued the Abbot. ‘And Kumari has told us she made them a promise. She swore to them she would avenge her Mamma, whatever it took. It was at that precise moment that the rains began to fall. I believe it was because the gods accepted her bargain. If they have accepted her bargain then Kumari must keep up her side of it. She must do whatever it takes to find the Ayah and that includes following the only clue that we have.’

For a moment, Kumari could imagine her Papa in the classroom, the Ancient Abbot drilling him in the metaphysical arts. Her Papa always treated the Ancient Abbot with respect and today was no exception.

‘I understand what you are saying, Abbot, but these clues are hardly compelling. A shape appearing upon my dear wife’s portrait. It could be interpreted in many ways.’

‘And what about the words on the wall?’ said Kumari. ‘Justice. Revenge. Destiny.’

Her words seemed to hang in the air for a second and then the king brushed his hand across his eyes.

‘Words, Kumari, just words. And where are they now?’

She had no answer. The words had disappeared along with the image. On the wall there was nothing save streaks of soot.

‘I tell you,’ Kumari insisted, ‘they were there. I read them myself. Justice and revenge I understand. As for destiny, I just don’t know. Was it Mamma’s destiny to be murdered like that? Is it her destiny now to remain in limbo? I don’t believe we have to simply submit to fate. I want to do what I can to change things.’

‘Enough, Kumari!’ roared the king. ‘What you are saying is sacrilege. You know as well as I do that everything is preordained. Not even we can alter the course of fate.’

Kumari flinched. It was so unlike Papa to raise his voice.

‘Of course, Papa,’ she mumbled.

‘I am sorry, my child,’ he said more gently. ‘I still find it so hard to accept your Mamma’s absence.’

Poor Papa, spending his nights thinking of her Mamma and his days dealing with the pain.

He gestured towards the portrait, lying in front of them on a table.

‘That’s all we have left of your mother and I thank you for saving this image. If it weren’t for you, Kumari, we would not even have this to remind us. I wish with all my heart there was some kind of clue that would help to release her, but I am afraid I simply do not see it.’

‘If I may, your holy majesty,’ said the RHM. ‘I do think Kumari has a point. She did, after all, clearly recognise the map of the United States. Surely it is worth the risk? If the Ayah is indeed alive then it is imperative we find her.’

Kumari watched her Papa’s face as he gazed at the picture of her Mamma. She could see him wrestling with some inner conflict. Then, at last, he looked up and sighed.

‘Very well, Kumari. You may undertake this mission.’

Before she could let out a whoop of triumph, the king added, ‘But there are some conditions. You understand you have only one moon in the World Beyond. That is all your pendant will permit. You are to remain during this time in the company of the RHM. He has experience in the ways of the World Beyond. He knows this city and can keep you safe.’

The RHM dropped his head in a stately bow. ‘I will guard Kumari’s life as my own.’

‘Thank you, RHM,’ said the king. ‘Secondly, Kumari, you must never reveal your goddess status. It would put you at even more danger in the World Beyond. You must remain circumspect.’

‘Yes, Papa,’ said Kumari, trying to forget the fact that one or two people knew already.

‘And thirdly,’ said her Papa. ‘You must try to spread the message of Happiness. As I said only recently, we in the Kingdom have been selfish long enough. Wherever you can you must try to educate the people in the World Beyond in our ways. It is a sacred duty, Kumari.’

‘And one I will help Kumari to uphold, your holy majesty,’ said the RHM. ‘Leave it to me to make the arrangements. We need to contact Kumari’s friends in New York.

‘Very well, that will be all,’ said Papa, his eyes once more fixed on the portrait.

‘Papa?’ said Kumari as the Abbot and the RHM withdrew and the king stood lost in thought. ‘Papa, are you all right?’

‘Yes, of course, child,’ said Papa and he smiled at her briefly. His smile, however, scarcely reached his eyes, which were infinitely sad.

‘You miss her so much, don’t you Papa?’ said Kumari, laying her hand on his arm.

‘I do, indeed. Almost unbearably. And I know you miss her as well.’

The look they shared was one of perfect empathy. No one else could truly know how they felt. Mamma had been the anchor of their little family. Without her, they were adrift. While they still had one another there was always a sense of something missing. Mamma’s vibrant warmth had been extinguished, leaving nothing more than a void.

‘I have to do this, Papa, for her.’

‘I know, Kumari, I know. It’s just . . .’ Papa closed his eyes for a moment as if in pain. ‘I could not continue if I lost you as well. The Kingdom could not continue, come to that. You are the heir to the throne. The trainee goddess.’

‘Yes, Papa, but I am Mamma’s daughter too. I have a duty there as well.’

‘You are right, child. And I am proud of you. Go and do this for both of us.’

As Papa pulled her to him in an embrace, Kumari hugged him tightly back.

Ten days later the throne room had been restored and Mamma’s portrait once more hung in its rightful place. Workmen had toiled day and night to mend the roof and clear every trace of fire damage. Palace School, suspended while work went on, was back in full swing. They were in the middle of a spectacularly dull trigonometry class when the RHM interrupted proceedings.

‘Wonder what he wants,’ muttered Kumari to Asha.

As it turned out, he wanted a private word with her in his office.

‘I have had word from the World Beyond,’ said the RHM, gesturing to Kumari to sit before his desk. ‘Ms Martin’s father has organised a plane. You and I will leave the day after tomorrow. I suggest you prepare plenty of schoolwork to bring along. This mission may be important, Kumari, but so are your goddess studies.’

‘Yes, RHM,’ said Kumari, her heart leaping at the prospect. The World Beyond. Her friends. Chico. Then again, there was the Ayah to face too.

‘RHM,’ said Kumari, ‘how do you think we’re going to find the Ayah? America is a huge country. She could be anywhere.’

‘She could, indeed, Kumari. That is our main problem. To be frank, we have very little to go on apart from your dream and the map you say you saw.’

Before Kumari could protest again, the RHM held up his hand for silence.

‘It’s all right, Kumari. I happen to think this is a line of enquiry worth pursuing. It is likely that Mr Razzle, at least, made it back to his homeland. I suggest we start our search with him.’

The crazed cosmetic surgeon. Kumari shivered at the sound of her old enemy’s name.

‘Do you think he knows where the Ayah is?’

‘He is our best hope, Kumari. They were, after all, working together when they tried to abduct you again. Mr Razzle is not subject to the strictures of Time that affect the Ayah. There is no reason for him to have perished.’

‘But that’s what I don’t understand, RHM. How come she’s still alive? I mean, she has only a year and a day to live outside the Kingdom like the rest of us. She should have succumbed to Time by now.’

‘That I do not pretend to understand, Kumari. No doubt the answers are out there. We need to take it one step at a time. Find Mr Razzle first.’

‘And how do you suggest we do that? Simply go and knock on his door?’

The RHM let out an exasperated snort.

‘That would be a start.’

It was possible that Simon Razzle had gone back to his old life. Possible but unlikely. For one thing, Theo and Ma had alerted the authorities in the World Beyond to his criminal activities. Kidnapping was a federal crime. And not once but twice now he had kidnapped Kumari, although only the first had taken place on American soil. Kumari still shuddered at the memory of Razzle’s clinic, the stark white room in which he had imprisoned her.

‘But what if he’s not there?’

‘Then we have a problem.’

‘I know,’ said Kumari. ‘Why don’t we try and flush him out? I bet if he knew I was back in the World Beyond, he’d try to snatch me again. The one thing Razzle loves is money and I’m worth billions to him. From me he can extract the secret of eternal youth and sell it to the world, or so he thinks. Believe me, that is priceless. ‘

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Kumari,’ snapped the RHM. ‘Your father would never countenance it.’

‘Papa doesn’t need to know.’

‘Kumari, this conversation is over.’

‘I know it would work,’ Kumari was still muttering under her breath as she returned to her desk.

‘What did you say?’ whispered Asha.

‘Uh, nothing. It’s not important.’

But it was, vitally important. And the more Kumari thought about it, the more her stomach churned. It would be wonderful to see the World Beyond again. Wonderful and frightening. The first time she had been taken there by force, snatched by her kidnappers. This time she was going by choice. She had much to gain and a lot to lose. On the one hand, she had friends here now, at the palace. Asha and Tenzin were her stalwart buddies and she had got to know the other kids better too. Out in the World Beyond she also had friends, the first she had ever made. Back in the kingdom, she missed them, although not as terribly as she had at first.

Now she was going to miss her friends here in turn as she ventured out on her dangerous mission. Added to that the prospect of tracking the Ayah down and her feelings were decidedly mixed. Why not use herself as bait to entice Simon Razzle? Tenzin was a fisherman. He would understand her tactics. But when she casually threw the idea into conversation later, Tenzin looked at her as if she were mad.

‘Use yourself as some kind of human lure? Kumari, are you crazy? This is the guy who tried to cut you up. The one who was going to hand you over to the Ayah.’

‘Yes, I know, but now he could lead us to her. He knows what happened after I blocked the labyrinth. At least, it’s worth a shot. I have to avenge Mamma once and for all. Look what happened to the palace. I promised the gods I’d do whatever it takes. Heaven only knows what they might do next.’

Kumari glanced up at the roof as she spoke. The patches where it had been mended were hardly visible. They were standing in the classroom courtyard during their break, huddled together near the mango tree. From its branches, they could hear a sudden rustling and then a beak poked out from within. Two sleepy eyes blinked as Badmash yawned and stretched.

‘Have you told him about Razzle?’ asked Asha.

Instantly, Badmash was on full alert. He fluffed his feathers out so he appeared twice his already considerable size. A vicious hissing sound emerged from his throat. He hated the very sound of Razzle or the Ayah’s names.

‘It’s OK, Badmash,’ Kumari soothed. ‘They’re not here, remember? They can’t come back.’

Instead, she was going after them. And Badmash would have to come with her. There was no way he would stay in the Kingdom by himself. He would pine away or try to follow. Rather than have him attempt to fly across half the world again, it was safer to simply take him along. Besides, out in the World Beyond was a steady supply of the one thing Badmash

loved most in the world besides Kumari. She could deny him some things for his health, but she would never deprive him of doughnuts.

'I still think it's a bad idea,' insisted Tenzin. 'Why not just stay here? Why go to the World Beyond at all?'

'You know why,' said Kumari.

'And I support you,' said Asha.

The two girls exchanged a look. This was one thing they shared, the loss of a mother. At least Kumari had a chance to avenge hers. Asha's mother had disappeared, never to be seen again.

'Thanks,' smiled Kumari. 'It's nice to know someone believes in me.'

'I believe in you,' said Tenzin hotly, 'I just don't want you to get hurt.'

'Well, I won't,' said Kumari. 'I have gained more Powers now. I can look after myself.'

'That's debatable,' said Asha, earning herself a playful clout around the head.

'Anyway, I'm going and that's that. We leave in two days' time, on the New Moon. That's a good time to be starting something major like this. Ms Martin's father has organised a plane.'

A sudden silence fell between them. Looking at their faces, Kumari could have kicked herself. Her friends had never been on a plane and, in all likelihood, never would. It was one more thing that set her apart, and just when they had been getting along so easily.

'That sounds exciting,' said Asha, sounding unconvinced.

'You think so?' Tenzin pouted. 'Me, I don't need a plane. I've got two legs and that's enough.'

'Of course it is,' said Kumari. 'But it would take an awfully long time to walk to New York. And I need to find the Ayah soon or goodness knows what the gods will do.'

'You don't even know she's there,' said Tenzin.

They were back to the beginning of their argument.

'Ignore him,' said Asha as they watched Tenzin stride off in exasperation. 'He's jealous, that's all.'

'There's nothing so great about going to New York,' said Kumari. It was, after all, only a little lie.

'Not about that, silly. About him, that other guy.'

'What other guy? You mean Chico?' Kumari gaped at Asha. It had not even crossed her mind that might be the issue. She and Tenzin were just friends. Besides, she knew Asha liked him.

'Come on, Kumari,' said Asha impatiently. 'You can see the way he looks at you. I can hope and wish all I like but he's never going to look at me like that.'

'But that's not true,' cried Kumari.

'Oh yes it is and you know it. Don't worry about it, I don't blame you. How could I ever compete with the girl-goddess?'

The hurt in Asha's voice was evident, no matter how hard she tried to mask it. With her brave smile she might feign indifference, but Kumari knew better.

'There is no competition,' said Kumari.

'You've said that before and it wasn't true then. It's all right, Kumari. I value our friendship too much to let it come between us. I mean, he's only a boy, right?'

Kumari answered Asha's grin with one of her own. 'He is only a boy.'

And, linking arms, they burst out laughing. Whatever happened with Tenzin, they would never let him come between them. They were friends. And that was far more important.

From a second-floor window above the courtyard, the RHM looked down on Kumari. She was chattering with Asha, throwing her head back and laughing giddily. Although she had made considerable progress with her Powers, there was still some way to go before she became a full goddess. At this rate, many moons would pass before she was ready to take on her responsibilities.

Given her Mamma's death, the RHM had hoped for greater focus. But Kumari seemed happy to take her time, a state of mind supported by his holy majesty.

'Let her enjoy her freedom while she can,' the king had said. 'There is plenty of time for the affairs of state.'

While his holy majesty might be sanguine, the RHM wanted results. The trip to the World Beyond might prove a blessing, requiring as it did intense effort on Kumari's part. He knew she would do anything she could to find the Ayah, including acquiring and utilising her Powers. They must make sure they took the Sacred Sword with them – that way Kumari could attempt Power No 1 if necessary. Power No 1: the greatest of them all. But did Kumari understand the implications?

Acquire and use Power No 1 and Kumari would instantly become a full goddess. Naturally, all the other Powers must already be accomplished, but it was not beyond the bounds of possibility. Necessity had a way of forcing the best out of people. Place Kumari in a position where she had no choice and she might well do them all proud. The RHM watched her for a moment longer. She really would make a fine goddess-queen. With a sigh, he turned away from the window. There was so much he needed to do first. So much Kumari needed to achieve.

Kumari's Journal
(Top Secret. For My Eyes Only.
Everyone Else KEEP OUT!)
This means you!

My bedroom

The night before our journey back to the WB

This pendant Theo made me is so small. Can it really keep me alive in the World Beyond? I know Theo is a brilliant scientist and everything, but I can't believe it really works. And the smoke that comes from it is absolutely invisible. How will I even know that it's working? I guess the only way to find out is to test it – and that I can only do by stepping out there. Oof. What an idea. It scares me. A whole lot.

If it doesn't work then that will be the end of me. I will die within minutes. But I don't have a choice, do I? The gods have made that very clear. This time, they saved the palace. Next time we might not be so lucky.

What I don't understand is how the Ayah can be alive. By all the laws, it should be impossible. Everyone in the Kingdom can only live a year and a day outside its borders in the World Beyond. Everyone except the RHM, of course, seeing as he was born there. But I trust my dreams and I trust the messages from the gods. Somehow, the Ayah's still out there.

Avenging Mamma has to be my number one priority, even if the RHM thinks otherwise. I mean, I know he supports me in this mission, but I also know he's not too happy with my progress. He had another of his 'little chats' with me tonight and it was the same old, same old: I need to acquire my other Powers. I must work harder at becoming a full goddess. He even lent me this manual, some old book he keeps on one of his musty shelves. He said I can bring it on our journey – that I will find it 'enlightening'.

I don't know what can be so enlightening about stuff I have known backwards since the day I was born. I grow up, I become a goddess. One day. In my own time. OK, so there are a few Powers to acquire, but I think I'm doing pretty well

considering. How many other girl-goddesses have to cope with being kidnapped – not once, but twice – and have to deal with people as crazy as the Ayah and Simon Razzle? And how many have had their Mamma taken from them by some evil murderer and then had to track down the killer and avenge them? OK, so I don't know any other girl-goddesses, but I bet the answer is a big, fat zero. I am the only girl-goddess in this position and that's something no book can help me with.

Anyway, I'll put it in my bag. The RHM will only be on my case if I don't. I don't exactly have a lot to pack apart from my iPod and the copy of Mamma's portrait. I'll have to get some clothes once I've arrived. There is certainly no way I am walking round New York City in this outfit. Hannah and Charley would have hysterics! I wonder what Chico would think? Part of me thinks he might quite like it. He always did say he likes that exotic, mysterious side of me. Ha! Me, exotic and mysterious!

It is hard to imagine seeing my friends again. I bet they've changed. I know I have. I just hope they haven't changed so much that they don't like me any more. I think that would really break my heart. The Abbot says that everything and everyone must change and that we live in a constant state of flow. He explained it's just like water, always moving, otherwise it gets stagnant. He said it was the same with people and that therefore it was a mistake to try to keep things the same.

Life has to change or it grows stale. I know that, but sometimes it's hard. Some changes are not so good – like Mamma's death, for instance. The Abbot also says there is a reason for everything and that all change helps us grow, but I'm not sure I agree with him. What possible reason could there be for Mamma's death that makes sense? She never harmed a single person. I don't feel like it helped me grow. In fact, it made me feel like someone had sliced half of me away. And if my friends in the World Beyond are no longer my friends, I will feel like another part of me has been stolen.