

Opening extract from

**Kumari:
Goddess of
Secrets**

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Published by

Piccadilly

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CHAPTER 1

Kumari perched in the jacaranda tree, hardly daring to breathe. Directly beneath her stood a palace guard, calling out her name. Luckily for her, the branches were thick with purple flowers that screened her from the guardsman's view. There was no way she was coming down. She would spend the rest of her days up a tree.

All right, maybe that was a bit extreme. But she would at least stay here until nightfall. Although by then Papa might be getting worried. He was very anxious about her these days. Probably something to do with her having been kidnapped and whipped off to the World Beyond, although frankly, now she was back, she could see no reason to fuss any more. But in a funny way it was nice. Too often Papa had been so distracted by affairs of state that he had paid little attention to his only daughter. Granted, it could not be easy

being a king, but he was her Papa too – the only parent she had left. The thought made Kumari's eyes sting as tears rose, unbidden. She blinked them back fiercely.

'Aark!'

Badmash's squawk nearly sent her spiralling off her branch.

'For goodness' sake, Badmash,' she croaked. 'You'll give us away.'

Badmash opened his beak and looked plaintively at Kumari. For a baby vulture he had one adult-sized appetite and a belly to match.

'OK, OK,' she muttered, as the guardsman's voice grew more distant. 'Have the last honey cake.'

Great. Stuck up a tree with no rations. Her own stomach let out a growl. How long had it been since lunchtime? Since the RHM, Papa's Right Hand Man, dropped his bombshell? Kumari had no idea, but the memory stiffened her resolve. Hungry or not, there was no way she was coming down. Not until they dropped their ridiculous idea, at any rate. Palace School, for heaven's sake!

Who had dreamed that one up? She could make a good guess. All she had asked for was to go to school with the other kids, like she had back in the Bronx. No special treatment, no girl-goddess stuff. Just an ordinary member of class. At first Papa had been horrified. No member of the royal family had ever gone to school before. A trainee goddess must be tutored at the palace, just as tradition dictated. But then the RHM had stepped in and the result was this compromise.

Bring school to the palace.

A genius idea.

Not.

For one thing, they would pick the nerdiest kids, those least likely to offend. She would be stuck in a classroom with a bunch of losers, pretending to ignore their stares. Not that she was judgemental, but, really, there were limits. And there was no way she was going to hang out with the goof buckets. She had said as much to Papa but he had stared at her as if she was speaking a foreign language which, in a way, she was.

That was the other thing. No one seemed to understand her any more. Like, *really* understand her. Must be the accent she had picked up in the World Beyond, not to mention the vocabulary. Kumari sighed. Of course she was happy to be home. And yet she missed her friends, she missed Ma. She missed Chico.

A ferocious rustling snapped her out of her reverie. The branches to her left were swaying and dipping. There was something clambering about in amongst the leaves. And it was heading straight for her. It could be a sharp-toothed monkey. Possibly even a leopard. Kumari steeled herself. Beside her, Badmash cringed. A head popped through the purple blossoms.

'Kumari.'

'Papa!'

Her Papa up a tree? *Unbelievable*. Papa was a king. Kings did not climb trees. Yet here he was, his head poking up between the branches.

'I thought I might find you up here.'

'You did?'

Bizarre.

Papa's face was pale, his breathing ragged. Fearing for his already frail health, Kumari scrambled down until she was crouching closer to him. Papa's feet were wedged in a low-lying branch, his fingers clinging, white, to the main trunk.

'Yes indeed. I'll let you into a little secret. I used to climb up here too, when I was a boy. A little higher than I can manage now, unfortunately.'

'You used to climb trees?'

'Hard to imagine, I know.'

Papa's face broke into a rare smile. It made his face seem all the more wan.

'When I was your age I was always hiding away from my tutors. These trees offered the best view. You can see right down into the town.'

'And all the way beyond,' said Kumari.

'And all the way beyond,' echoed Papa. 'Were you looking for something in particular?'

'Um, no. Not really.'

'Just . . . looking?'

'Yeah, kind of . . .'

She could not meet Papa's gaze. She knew that he knew that she had been looking out to the western frontier. He did the same himself, every evening. She could see him silhouetted against his window, staring out into the night. There were rumours of an invasion by the warlords who terrorised the lands beyond the border to the west; whispers of rebellious citizens gathering within the kingdom, ready and willing to aid the warlords' passage. It was unheard of, unthinkable. An

uprising against the king! Against her Papa, for goodness' sake. No wonder he looked worried.

'It's amazing what you can see when you look properly,' said Papa. There was a definite teasing note to his words now.

Kumari pondered this a moment.

'You used your Powers to find me, didn't you?'

Papa looked her straight in the eye. 'No, Kumari, I did not.'

'Why not? I would have done. I mean, Power No 2 is perfect. The Power of Extraordinary Sight means you don't have to waste time on ordinary *looking*.'

'Looking for you would not be a waste of time. You forget I spent a year and a day doing precisely that.'

Papa spoke quietly, but the pain blared, still raw, from somewhere behind his eyes. Instantly, Kumari felt terrible. She laid a tentative hand over Papa's.

'I'm sorry,' she murmured. 'About everything. Truly.'

'Don't be. I'm glad you're safe. That is all that matters to me.'

The smile was back, this time soft with understanding. This was a side of her Papa Kumari had never seen before. Another symptom of change. So much had altered in her absence and yet her homeland looked the same. The valley still unfolded, lush, between the soaring, snow-capped peaks. Life continued at the same rhythmic pace. The gods reigned on the Holy Mountain. Maximum National Happiness remained the ultimate goal. Beneath the surface, however, there was this bubbling, the ripples of discontent. In the skies, Kumari could see scarcely a puff of smoke from the holy fires. The haze of Happiness was far too thin.

An icy hand clutched at her heart. The haze of Happiness was their lifeblood, as essential to them as oxygen. It concealed them from the World Beyond like an overarching canopy, shielding the valley Kingdom and its borderlands beneath its camouflaging cloak. While it allowed light to permeate, it hid the Kingdom from spying eyes. The haze of Happiness held Time at bay, protecting the people from its ravages. The thinner it got, the closer the World Beyond drew. Lose it and they would be defenceless. The microcosm that was the Hidden Kingdom would no longer exist. Kumari had seen for herself what Time could do, had witnessed its cruelty. She could not bear to see her Kingdom surrender to its relentless march, to have to watch all she loved perish.

Her Papa seemed to have sunk even deeper into the depression to which he had succumbed after Mamma's death. It was as if their year apart had wounded him still further, sapping him of what little divine power he had left. He should be tending the fires of Happiness. Perhaps then all thoughts of rebellion would be quelled. Instead, he was here – gaunt, a grey cast to his skin, the violet circles ever more evident under his bloodshot eyes. He had not slept properly since the day Mamma died, but now it seemed something more than that was troubling him. For a split second, she wondered if her Papa was seriously ill. No, god-kings did not get sick.

Except that was not entirely true. Mamma, after all, had perished, thanks to some mysterious malaise. What if Papa had somehow caught it too? But that was impossible. Mamma had been murdered. Kumari even knew the culprit and was

poised to take her final revenge. The Ayah was dead, for heaven's sake. There was no way she could hurt Papa now. Even so, the fear refused to leave, lurking stubbornly in her gullet. If Papa died she would be alone. *Papa was not going to die.*

'Kumari, you're hurting me.'

'Am I? I'm so sorry.'

As she removed her hand she could see the livid marks on Papa's wrist where she had squeezed too tight.

'Not to worry, my child. It's been a difficult time, hasn't it? Now, I think you should climb down before they send out a second search party.'

'I can't,' said Kumari.

'Why? Because that would be giving in?'

Kumari squirmed. Sometimes it seemed Papa knew her far too well.

'I'm not going to Palace School,' she muttered.

'Why not? Do you think you're too good for it?'

'No! It's just . . .'

'You want to be like the other children. You want to go to school in town like everyone else.'

For a heartbeat Kumari wondered if he could read her mind, so piercing was Papa's gaze. None of the Eight Great Powers covered thought-reading.

'Um . . . yes,' she gulped.

'Trust me, my child, it is not possible at this time. Now, will you do it for me? Will you at least try Palace School?'

Kumari looked at her Papa, really looked, and saw again the translucence of his skin. It was as if the blood had all but drained away, leaving a paper-thin carapace. Her fingers flut-

tered forward, seeking reassurance. She had to touch this mask that was once her Papa's face, make sure it was still flesh. And then Papa's mouth twitched. The life flooded back into his features. It was her imagination after all. It was probably all in her head.

The Kingdom was fine. The people were happy. The rumours of rebellion were just rumours. Papa was simply a little tired, that was all. Everything was going to be all right. She would ignore the heaviness in her heart, the fluttering in her stomach.

Everything was going to be all right.

So why did it feel like a lie?

KUMARI'S JOURNAL
(TOP SECRET. FOR MY EYES ONLY.
EVERYONE ELSE KEEP OUT!)
THIS MEANS YOU!

My bedroom

Two days until the First Dark Moon of the Year

It's so quiet in the palace I can hear my heart beating. At least, I think it's my heart beating. Could be some kind of weird drumming I suppose. Ever since I got back, strange things have been happening. I walk along and I'm sure I hear someone behind me, but when I turn around there's no one

there. And there are all kinds of shadows that never used to be here, like those shadows under Papa's eyes. He insists he is fine, but he is so obviously not.

Like today, when we got down from the tree, I could see that his legs were shaking under his robes. For a moment there I thought Papa might pass out, but then the RHM appeared. Papa kind of pulled himself taller and pretended nothing was wrong, but I could see by the RHM's face that he was not fooled at all. He gave Papa his arm and helped him inside without saying a word. I suppose I should be grateful – the RHM was too distracted to tell me off. I would rather Papa was well, though. I'd go through ten tellings-off for that.

I'm so frightened it's something serious. I could not bear to lose Papa too. I can't let myself think like that. Papa's going to be all right. Is he though? Really? Nothing feels certain any more. I mean, even the Kingdom feels different, like someone threw a grey blanket over it. I know Happiness is nowhere near Maximum. Papa knows it too. Every day he tries to tend the holy fires but they're getting lower and lower. It's like he doesn't have the strength to keep them going. That's why I'm so afraid.

If Papa doesn't have the strength to keep the fires going then things are really bad. Cook told me of another rumour today, something about the warlords already being here. The RHM says it's just talk, that these rumours mean nothing. Why won't he even discuss it with me? It's like he still thinks I'm a stupid kid. After what happened in the World Beyond I thought he saw me differently. He even told me he was proud of me, for heaven's sake! Said I would one day make a

worthy queen. But all that's forgotten now we're back home. It's business as usual. Palace School is all his fault and now I've promised Papa I will go.

Oh my god – what is that weird snorty noise? It sounds like a demon pig or something. Get a grip, Kumari. There's no such thing as demon pigs. Actually, there might be, or so the Ancient Abbot says. We were just studying demons today during my Entities lesson. I asked him if the Ayah counted as one. He said she probably did. Well, there are only two more days to go and then I can perform the Banishment Rite. Two days until the Dark Moon. I wonder if the rite works on demons.

There'll be no Entities class with the other kids. They don't get to study goddess stuff. In a way, I wish they would. It might liven them up. I just know they're going to pick the most boring saps they can find. There'll be no one like Charley or Hannah. No one like Chico either. But then there is no one like Chico. When it gets really bad, I take his necklace out and hug it to my heart.

There it is again – snuffle, snuffle, snort, snort. I must just check it out . . .

It's OK – it's only Badmash. I've never heard him make that noise before! I think he must have a cold. Poor thing's been kind of depressed ever since we got back. He's missing his doughnuts and all the attention he used to get from my friends. Not that I don't give him attention – I'm constantly telling him he's the greatest baby vulture that ever lived. It's important to work on his self-esteem. I mean, I am kind of his surrogate parent. Anyway, he's not the only one that's depressed. It's less of a fun palace here than ever.

CHAPTER 2

As soon as Kumari opened her eyes, she remembered. This was the first day of Palace School. Even less reason to get up. She turned over with a sigh.

‘Skraark!’

‘Oops! Sorry, Badmash.’

How was she to know he’d be lying with his beak practically up her armpit? Ordinarily, Badmash kept to his side of the bed. He must have had a bad dream. A memory pricked at her sleep-fugged brain. It was not Badmash who had had a dream. She could recall the snorting of a thousand demon pigs, fangs bared as they chased her. Badmash must have cuddled close as he often did when she cried out in the night. In the early days after Mamma’s death she often woke to find his

head resting on her heart, one wing stretched out across her chest.

'Oh, Badmash,' cooed Kumari. 'You were only trying to comfort me.'

Badmash flopped on his back and opened one eye. His stomach let out an ominous growl.

As if on cue, the door opened.

'Good morning! Breakfast is ready,' beamed Cook, her rounded cheeks flushed with the warmth of the kitchen. Cook was unceasingly good-natured, even when Kumari tried to steal a freshly-baked treat or two.

She set the tray down beside the bed.

'Extra rations to see you through school.'

Kumari peered at the tray. On it, Cook had set a bowl of yak yoghurt, thick honey drizzled across in the shape of a smiling face, a strawberry set to form the nose. Alongside, a plate piled high with pancakes, each one dusted with cinnamon. Next to that was a dish for Badmash, overflowing with sticky pastries. It was not the dead mouse the Ayah used to bring him, but Badmash did not seem too bothered.

'Thank you, Cook,' said Kumari. 'How is my Papa this morning?'

'His holy majesty is well,' said Cook.

At least that was something.

Kumari tucked into the pancake, then waited until Cook had left before she passed the plate to Badmash. She would hate to hurt Cook's feelings but a stack that size was way too much for her. While Badmash gratefully tucked in, Kumari looked about for something to wear. Anything would do. It was not like there would be any competition on the fashion

front. Here in the Kingdom all the kids wore a tunic top and trousers. It was a world away from New York.

Kumari smothered another sigh as she pulled on some crumpled robes. Charley and Hannah would laugh out loud if they could see her now. Robes were not what you would call cool. They hung to her ankles, swishing out around her sandalled feet. To match her mood, she'd chosen a particularly drab set – colours muted, fit saggy. Who cared what she looked like anyway? Certainly not a bunch of losers.

'Come on, Badmash. Time for school.'

Badmash kept his beak buried in the pancakes.

'Badmash! School. Now. Or no honey cakes.'

It was a threat that never failed.

She marched down the corridors, jaw set, Badmash clinging to her shoulder. Somewhere down in the town, the other kids would be going to school. The normal kids. The fun kids. Kids like Tenzin, for instance. OK, so she hadn't seen him since she got back. Tenzin was still bound to be the coolest kid around, not to mention the cheekiest. She would never forget the bold look he had once slid her in the throne room when all other eyes were respectfully cast down. Tenzin made her laugh. Once upon a time he had made her tingle. But that was before she met Chico. Now she knew how tingling really felt.

Her hand was on the door latch. *OK, brace yourself, Kumari. This is no longer your personal classroom. You now officially share it with a pack of losers. One, two, three, push.* The door swung open. The hum of chatter within subsided. *Fantastic. Great start.* The silence resounding in her ears, Kumari picked her way to her desk, now simply one of

many. She could not look left or right. Instead, she kept her eyes fixed to the floor.

A few more steps and she was there. She could make out blobs all around. Human-shaped blobs. Blobs that sat, gawping. Carefully, she slid behind her desk. Why couldn't someone say something? Anything, just to fill the yawning void. To stop them all staring. It was even worse than she had anticipated. Day One and she was a freak. The Great Goddess Show had arrived. Maybe they'd get bored in a minute. And then she noticed a scrap of paper on her desk. Was this someone's idea of a joke? Warily, she turned it over.

'Look behind you,' it read.

This definitely had to be a joke. Double great. A set-up. Well, there was no way she was falling for it. They could find another goddess to be a laughing stock.

'Kumari.'

Just ignore them.

'Kumari, turn round. It's me.'

Me? Me who?

Kumari inched her head to the left, bracing herself for whatever was coming next. OK, she'd play their game. Reluctantly, she lifted her eyes. Looking straight into hers was another pair – almond-shaped, copper-coloured. Glinting in them, a hint of amusement that was echoed by the curl of an upper lip. Only one person in the Kingdom looked at her like that.

'Tenzin!' she gasped.

KUMARI'S JOURNAL
(TOP SECRET. FOR MY EYES ONLY.
EVERYONE ELSE KEEP OUT!)
THIS MEANS YOU!

My bedroom
Eve of the Dark Moon

How embarrassing was that? I mean, there's me in my worst possible robes. I didn't even brush my hair, for heaven's sake. And there he is. Tenzin. I thought I'd got over that tingling thing. I thought Chico had out-tingled him. But, well, Chico's out there, in the World Beyond, and I'm here. And so is Tenzin.

Is that so very disloyal? It's not like I can help tingling. And Chico still makes me tingle in my head. But I can't live in my head for ever. The RHM would say that's all I do, but what would he know about tingling? I can't imagine him feeling anything when he looks at someone, except maybe how to improve them. Anyway, now what am I supposed to do? It's like I have to change my whole strategy. The other kids aren't losers at all. Well, maybe one or two, but whatever.

In any case, I never had a strategy, so there's nothing to change except my outfit. Aaaaargh – I can't believe I did that. That robe makes me look like a walking carpet. Maybe Tenzin likes walking carpets. He did seem pretty pleased to see me. Anyway, I don't care what Tenzin likes or doesn't like. I am my own girl-goddess. And I have far more important things to think about, like the Banishment Rite, for instance. Tomorrow it will be the Dark Moon at last. The perfect time to finish things off.

The Ancient Abbot says you have to make sure a spirit is sent to outer darkness otherwise the person it belonged to still lives on. Only when nothing remains of the Ayah will Mamma be free to ascend the Holy Mountain. I can't bear to think of Mamma in limbo any longer. I have to get this ritual right. Straight after school tomorrow I'll head down to the lake. I must just read through my ritual book one more time.

CHAPTER 3

The book lay open at the appropriate page, marked by a lacy feather. It was the tail feather of a lyrebird and Badmash viewed it with disgust. The thing was long, curly, magnificent, in contrast to his own baby vulture fluff. Kumari was, however, far too busy trying to get her Banishment ritual right to notice Badmash sulking. She was putting the final touches to the Ayah's death mask, ready to consign it to the deep.

The construction of the death mask, read the instructions, is the first stage of the Banishment Rite. It represents the soul to be banished. Care must be taken to include some relic of the person now deceased. If performed correctly, the effects of this ceremony are irreversible.

Kumari glanced out over the lake. In it, she could still see the reflection of the Holy Mountain. The moment the sun slipped behind its peak, she could begin the second part of the Banishment Rite. In the meantime, she would settle down under the dragon tree and take the time to have a Think. Thinking was a skill she had acquired in her time in the World Beyond. It seemed to work equally well in the Hidden Kingdom. And there was plenty to Think about here. Her new classmates, for instance.

She stared back at the palace, its seven pagodas just visible beyond the frangipani fields. The lake lay at the feet of the mountains, some way from those gilded spires. Her ritual could not be completed until sundown. She would be returning home in the dark. There would not even be a moon to light her way. The Banishment Rite could only be performed when the moon was entirely absent.

Somewhere beneath the pagodas was the courtyard outside her classroom. She had passed through it on her way here, deliberately strolling so as not to attract attention. Except, of course, it had not worked. She had heard Tenzin calling her as she reached the far corner, had forced herself not to turn, knowing if she did she risked everything. Eyes constantly watched, most of them on Papa's orders. The girl-goddess must not go anywhere alone. Luckily for Kumari, she had her methods.

The palace was peppered with doors and windows, far too many to watch over. Time it right and the guards were easy to avoid. Tenzin was a different matter. She could still hear him calling as she slipped through an archway on the far side of the courtyard and began weaving through the warren of

passageways that would take her to an unbarred window through which she planned to escape. Each time she stole away from the palace she varied her route, conscious of the dangers. So far it had worked. An hour's hard marching later, she had made it unscathed to the lake.

It was the perfect place to perform her ritual, to release her Mamma from the limbo to which she had been consigned. Sever the last threads of the Ayah's influence, and Mamma could at last ascend the Holy Mountain. The two of them had spent so many happy afternoons here picnicking under this very dragon tree. Mamma had loved splashing in the lake, swimming beside Kumari, guiding her flailing arms, soothing away her fears. Mamma had been afraid of nothing, not even the legendary creature that lurked beneath the waters. It was said that the creature thrived on evil, that it would swallow the souls of the wicked. Feed it the Ayah's spirit and Mamma would be free at last.

As they both stared at those waters now, Badmash let out a delighted squawk. He had spotted a tasty morsel. Plunging into the shallows, he emerged with it dangling from his beak. So enthusiastic was his attack on the thing, Kumari took a closer look. As soon as she realised what it was, she let out a gasp. To Badmash's dismay, she snatched it away and held it up. There was absolutely no doubt. This was a doughnut. But how on earth had it got here? There were no doughnuts in her homeland.

In fact, they were the single thing Badmash missed most about the World Beyond. And yet here was one in the lake. The doughnut was already half chewed, which meant another creature had got to it first, possibly even *the* creature.

It was soggy from the water, but not so soggy it had been in there too long. Something or someone had recently brought this doughnut into the Kingdom.

Kumari's puzzlings were interrupted by a flash of light from the water. The sun was bowing out to the moon. The day was all but over. As the orange blaze began to dim to burnished gold, Kumari hurriedly gathered her things together. Placing the sacrificial dish in the correct spot, she pulled a small bundle from her robes. Wrapped within it, a strand of the Ayah's hair she had found in the woman's old room.

Picking the strand up between thumb and finger, Kumari tied it firmly to the death mask, fighting back a surge of disgust. The woman had tried to kill her and now she was handling her hair! The mask was made of papier-mâché. Ordinarily, a death mask would be made of wax. In the absence of the Ayah's body, however, Kumari had had to improvise. She thought she had done rather well. The mask bore a distinct resemblance. Same broad cheeks and lumpy nose. She had even added an evil twist to the mouth.

Laying the mask upon the sacrificial dish, Kumari scattered Banishment Powder all over it. She had borrowed some from the Ancient Abbot's stock. It looked exactly like charcoal dust. Taking up the lyrebird's feather, Kumari wafted it over the dish counter-clockwise, stirring round and round for seven complete revolutions. Then, carefully, she applied the firestick. Once, twice, three times she tried. The wretched thing refused to catch. Oh great, it must be damp. Now what could she do?

She peered at her book. The light was diminishing. She

could still make out the words: *Destroy the death mask*, it said. Well there was more than one way to do that. If it had been made of wax, she would have melted it. In this case, she could rip it up. Without another thought, she began to tear, destroying what had taken hours to make. Working at it, teeth clenched, hearing the satisfying sigh of paper giving way, all the while thinking of Mamma, of the Ayah, of revenge. At last it was done. She could make the tiny scraps no smaller. They lay in her open palm like dirty snowflakes, sullied with flecks of grey.

Kumari glanced at the sky. The sun had slipped behind the Holy Mountain. Unusually, she could see the proud outline of the summit, tinged by fire, the last rays setting it ablaze. For once the clouds that generally obscured it had parted, exposing the home of the gods to view. This had to be a sign. Kumari rushed to the lake's edge. Casting the tiny scraps upon the water, she chanted with all her might, visualising her last sight of the Ayah, clamped between the jaws of a flying lion.

'OM GARE TARE SARWA

SHATDRUM BIGANEN MARA SEHNA . . .'

She could see Mamma on the lion's back, could hear the crowd screaming. Kumari squeezed her eyes tighter shut. She was doing this for Mamma. Get the Banishment ritual right and she would have avenged her properly, casting the Ayah's spirit into oblivion, ensuring she could never return. It was a drastic action, not to be undertaken lightly. And Kumari was the only one who could do it, who could perform this last duty for her Mamma. Not even Papa shared Mamma's blood. That was Kumari's privilege alone.

'HUNG BINDA BINDA PEH . . .'

Yelling at the top of her lungs, calling forth the creature. She dared not look but still she willed it to come. If she looked it might not work. Did this creature even exist? It might be nothing more than a myth. All of a sudden, she felt something hit her cheek, a stinging slap and then another. Kumari opened her eyes. The sodden scraps of paper were being flung in her face. The waters heaved, swollen by a presence, then were sucked down as if by a drain. They rose once more in a whirlpool, spiralling round and round.

A strange, flat light licked at gathering clouds in the sky. There must be a storm approaching. Just her luck on the night of the darkest moon. A spot of rain glanced off her face. Another followed and then another, mingling with the tears of frustration that began to fall. It was the storm that had stirred the water. This creature was never going to appear. She threw back her head and howled. Tropical in intensity, the rain pounded louder, reverberating off the lake. It was like that night on top of the Empire State Building, the time she had tried to renounce her goddess status. The same feeling that something was amiss. That this just might not have worked.

'How could you!' screamed Kumari, shaking her fist at the Holy Mountain. 'This is some kind of joke, right? Well, it's not funny! It's not fair!'

Of course, no answer came. She was hardly the gods' favourite. So far precisely one of her big attempts had worked and even that was with her mother's help. If Mamma had not appeared on her lion at Madison Square Garden, then the Ayah would probably have struck Kumari down.

OK, so she was not the greatest trainee goddess around, but it was time they cut her a break.

Soaked to the skin, Kumari squinted up at the summit. Raindrops clung to her lashes, making it hard to see. *Give me a sign*, she begged in her head. *Something, anything, to keep me going*. It was hard enough carrying out this vengeance thing, even harder to feel so alone. The rain was easing off, its power dissipating. If that was a sign, she needed something more. Something really startling.

From the rocks and crags the birds began to circle, the last hunting pass before night. Two particularly large ones drifted across the sky, getting closer and closer. Curiously, these birds did not move like the rest. For one thing, they appeared to be waving. Then Kumari realised these were not birds at all. These were two colourful canopies.

Beneath them, two tiny specks dangled. As they drew closer, the specks took shape, forming human figures. Or at least, they appeared human, bundled up as they were in silver outfits, their faces covered in balaclavas and goggles, snowshoes strapped to their feet. The figures had obviously spotted her and were steering in her direction. Mesmerised, mouth open in shock, Kumari gaped as they picked up speed. All of a sudden, the air currents caught them, sending them spiralling into freefall. Borne on those same air currents, a sound like a scream.

Closer and closer they came, in a last rush towards the ground. At last, with a bump, they landed in a heap. For a moment, no one moved and then the heap started to groan. First one staggered up then the other, hauled by its companion's gloved hand. As they stood, Kumari could see one was

tall, the other shorter and rather squarer. This second figure kept up a litany of moaning and muttering that sounded strangely familiar. As both tore off their goggles and balaclavas, Kumari's jaw dropped another fifteen centimetres. Rooted to the spot, she let out a strangled squeak.

Poking out from under the puffy outfit, a purple scarf scattered with glitter. Silver nails raked at flattened hair, its wild strands tipped with neon pink. The other figure was less exotic, but no less recognisable. As both faces broke into big smiles, Kumari blinked hard. It couldn't be. But it was. Oh my god, here, in her Kingdom. Impossible. But true.

'Ma, Theo!' she gasped.