

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 gully 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 kidnapers 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.

Above them, something strange and wonderful: a giant dog flying in the sky. For a moment, Kumari gaped. The World Beyond was bizarre! Another yell and she tore her eyes away. A man was heading towards her. She glanced at the crowd lining the avenue – an unbreakable phalanx. Turning, she ran the other way, straight through the procession. Racing for the giant dog, towards the people beneath it. Their eyes were wide with surprise, their mouths open, calling. Ignoring them, she kept going, head down in determination.

Once again, a roar filled her ears but this was the roar of a hundred thousand voices.

And then a more familiar sound, the clip clop of horses' hooves. Rows and rows of splendid beasts, ridden by men in uniforms. The horses were drawing to a halt, standing in formation. Beyond them, a magnificent coach on which an old man sat in state. This had to be the king; his robes were red, trimmed with white fur, his throne ornate. Piled around his feet were brightly wrapped packages, offerings perhaps from his subjects. A splendid beard sprung luxuriantly from his smiling face, crowned as it was with a scarlet cap.

Brushing through the horses' flanks, Kumari ran towards the king, arms outstretched in supplication.

'Oh, please,' she gasped. 'Please. You have to help me. I, too, am of royal blood! I have to get home! I have to get back to my father's kingdom!'

The old man peered at her from his throne. Alongside, his handmaidens twittered.

Kumari tried once again. 'Your majesty, I have been snatched from my homeland!'

From beneath his white whiskers the old man spoke. His words were unfamiliar. From his reaction to her desperate pleas, it seemed he found her equally incomprehensible. She felt the anger rise up. This was ridiculous. How hard could it be? *Anyone* could see she was a goddess.

'Look, your majesty, I realise I'm interrupting here. But really, you have to help me out! You know, one royal person to another!'

Hands on hips she stood, chin jutting in determination. And

still the old guy gawped at her. To Kumari's astonishment, he was beginning to look nervous. The handmaidens started to back away, the bells on their hats jangling nervously. Exasperated, Kumari stared them out. What was with the weird outfits?

Tears of frustration began to well. Any minute now her captors would be upon her. She threw her head back and howled in despair. Suddenly, a strong arm grabbed her. She felt herself being hoisted up, lifted from the ground. Kicking and screaming she tried to break free. The arm held her firm as it flung her down across a saddle in front of him. As hard as Kumari struggled, there was no fighting this new assailant.

Twisting round on the saddle, Kumari stared at her attacker. She caught a glimpse of a shield-shaped badge gleaming against a thick, blue jacket. Across one shoulder, a leather strap; on one hip, a holster. As the man kicked his horse into a trot, she felt the cold clutch of fear. The guy had a gun. Kumari hated guns, had only ever seen the ornate replicas kept in the museum. They were banned from the kingdom, although the occasional shot rang out from the borderlands. Hunters and warlords liked to perpetrate the evil of these weapons. And now she was inches from one, being carried off she knew not where.

'Let me go,' she snarled. 'My father will have you for this!'

The man stared ahead.

'How dare you!' she snapped. 'I am a *goddess!*'

No reaction. Not a blink. Clearly he had no respect for anyone, let alone an immortal.

‘Very well,’ she announced in the haughtiest voice she could muster. ‘I shall now banish you to the fires of hell!’

Easier said than done, especially when it was yet another feat she had never managed. She tried first one incantation then another, finally combining a bit of both:

‘BY THE CRIMSON ROBES I WEAR
BY BASILISK AND BLOODSTONE
BY THE GARLIC IN THE FIELDS
BY THE POPPIES AND WHAT THEY YIELD
I BANISH THEE FOREVER!’

Pausing for breath, Kumari glanced at the man. Not so much as a twitch from him. Really, he must be made of stone. That or her magic was way off . . .

Eventually, she gave in, slumping across the saddle in exhaustion. When at last the horse drew to a halt, she scarcely bothered to lift her head. Helping her down, the man kept his grasp tight. Kumari, however, was beyond running, beyond anything except black despair. She was taken through a doorway into a dim lobby. Before her stood a large wooden desk and behind that another man. This one, too, wore a uniform, similar if less pristine. He peered at her from over the desk and tapped his pen against his teeth.

‘So this is the kid who accosted Santa Claus?’

Then she was being handed over and led away down a corridor. She did not bother to look back; one captor was becoming much like another. They placed her in some kind of cell, barren, bleak and cold. Sinking down on to the solitary bench, Kumari cradled her head in her hands. People came and went; occasionally they spoke to her.