

Aarti and the Blue Gods

Chapter 1

Winter

If Aarti could fly, she wouldn't hang around here, she'd spread her wings and keep going until she landed somewhere else. Somewhere she felt she belonged and where she could find someone who loved her. She huffed cold breath on her numb fingers to warm them and watched the ladybirds as they gathered at the corners of the window.

'Aaar....ti!' Aunt's voice tinkled up the stairs. 'It's nearly supper time – come down!'

Aarti scooped the red and black speckled lady-birds into her little tin, inched the mildewed window open a fraction and tipped the insects out into the deep winter evening.

The ladybirds flipped open their tiny wings and whizzed away. But Aarti knew that it didn't make any difference. However many times she did this, they always flew right back in. And, when she noticed them, Aunt Amalie would pop each one and crack its little shell. It made tears prick at Aarti's eyes every time.

'I'm making potato cakes,' came Aunt's voice again. 'Your favourites. Hurry, Aarti!'

Whenever Aunt called her name, Aarti heard another name flitting in the back of her mind – but it would never come to the front where she might catch it.

'Coming, Aunt!' she called.

Aarti turned from the window, breathed down the butterflies that fluttered around her stomach and padded across the wooden floor of her bedroom. On the landing, she skirted around the metal bucket catching cold splashes of rainwater from the ceiling.

She walked past the dark door that Aunt always kept locked and that Aarti had never seen inside, along the corridor, past Aunt's room with its thick rug unfurled across the floorboards and paused at the top of the stairs.

Peering down the curling bannister she saw her aunt standing at the very bottom, her bouncy blonde curls tamed back into a bun, her cheeks rosy red from the fire. Aunt wore a grey tunic that came past her knees over thick woollen trousers.

'There you are,' Aunt said, smiling. She was in a good mood this evening. When Aunt was in a good mood it made Aarti nervous. She wasn't sure what she might do next. 'Come along, there's time for some reading before supper.'

Aarti tried to smile back. She owed Aunt so much and wanted to make her proud – it was just that sometimes she didn't know how to do it.

She made her way down the smooth wooden steps. The familiar homely smell wafted towards her from the range: fish guts from their morning catch mingled with the tang of woodsmoke. There was a darkened arched window at one end of the large hall and threadbare rugs scattered across the stone floor. Shelves lined the walls, heaving with books of all sizes.

Aunt was now sitting at a rustic table with a thick book spread open before her. The warmth from the crackling fire pumped blood to Aarti's cheeks and the tip of her frozen nose. She felt herself relax a little.

Using a thick cloth to protect her hands, Aarti swung open the small metal door on the woodburning range and checked the fire would last until morning. The logs smouldered orange and hissed when she added an extra piece of wood.

'Good girl Aarti – we must never let the fire go out.'

'Yes, Aunt.' She smiled and felt her heart skip, allowed herself a beat of satisfaction. She shuffled on to the bench beside Aunt.

Aunt pointed to the words in the book with her pale finger, one by one, and as usual Aarti read out the words as clearly and as loudly as a hymn, just as Aunt had taught her.

*Tyger tyger burning bright
In the forests of the night
What immortal hand or eye
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

When Aarti had finished the verse, Aunt Amalie moved across to the griddle hanging above the fire and flipped the potato cakes. 'These will help you to have a good night's sleep my dear,' she said, as she dabbed some sheep butter that made the cakes sizzle and sing. 'Isn't Aunt Amalie good? Making these for you? Your favourites.'

Aarti studied Aunt's face carefully, checking for the signs as she had learned to do. 'Thank you, Aunt.'

'Fetch the honey from the store would you, dear?'

Aarti heaved open the door beside the range and entered the dark store room with its earthy sweet scent and shelves crammed with jars of preserves and honey from the bee hives, dried herbs and mushrooms gathered through the year. The sheep gave them milk and butter and meat that they dried for winter, packages of it carefully preserved and wrapped. On the floor slumped like sleeping old men were huge sacks of salt, oats to sow

once spring came and fresh oats from last autumn's harvest. Aunt was clever and a good planner and she worked hard to organise the store so they had everything they ever needed.

She had explained it all to Aarti, how they had to look after everything carefully so they could survive here – and how just as Aunt's parents had taught *her* to live here, so she was teaching Aarti. It was hard work, yes, but also a place where *they* were in control and where Aarti would be safe from a world full of bad cruel things.

And anyway, Aunt knew everything and Aarti only knew the island.

She lifted a jar of honey and closed the door behind her, setting the jar on the side. She sat down at the table, watching Aunt as she left the potato cakes for a minute longer and then scooped three onto a wooden plate and placed it in front of Aarti.

Aarti gripped the edge of the plate when Aunt turned her back. The last time Aunt had been nice to her, it had ended with Aarti having to sleep in the woodstore because Aunt said she didn't seem very grateful and maybe needed time to think. It had been one of the coldest nights of deep winter and Aarti would surely have frozen, but Chand snuggled in beside her and then it wasn't too bad. She knew Aunt couldn't help it and she did rub her feet with comfrey balm after.

Aarti was jolted back to the present as Aunt sat down opposite her at the long table. 'Beautiful reading, Aarti.'

'Thank you, Aunt.' She nibbled on a potato cake.

'Isn't this cosy?' Aunt continued. 'Let it rain but here we are warm and we are fed.' Her voice softened. 'There's a big bad world out there Aarti – you're lucky to be safe here on our island. Nobody to bother us or tell us what to do.' Aunt reached out, touched Aarti's chin and turned her face towards her. 'There is so much heartache out there.' Her eyes glistened. 'People who say they love you but don't really mean it. It's a cruel world.' She released Aarti, who instantly bowed her head, staring at her plate. Aunt's intensity was a bad sign. 'Lucky for you I shelter you from it...but remember, don't ever trust a man or a boy Aarti, I know their ways.'

Aarti glanced up and nodded like she always did during Aunt's frequent talks about people's cruelty. Although she knew Aunt had lived in a world with other people once, it also confused her because how could every single person in the whole world be bad?

‘And one day Aarti,’ continued Aunt, ‘this whole island will be yours.’ Aunt moved closer and put an arm around Aarti’s shoulder. ‘You were once a poor orphan that nobody wanted and now look at you. Heir to the most beautiful place in the world.’

Aarti had heard this story a hundred times – but Aunt always left out the things Aarti burned to know. Her heart pattered. ‘And what happened to my parents?’ she blurted.

Aunt’s voice turned cold. ‘They died Aarti, I’ve told you. Don’t be ungrateful now.’ Aunt’s grey eyes began to spark and she tugged at the loose strands of hair that had escaped from her bun.

Aarti swallowed and watched Aunt as she pulled rhythmically at the loose hair, the muscle in her jaw rippling as lightly as a feather.

‘I...I’m not ungrateful,’ she started, keeping her voice gentle. ‘You told me how other people only want to adopt babies, and how you picked *me* over the bawling babies because you wanted a little girl of your own, i...it’s just...’ But she didn’t dare continue.

Aunt’s jaw relaxed slightly. ‘Now then,’ she said, composing her face and securing the hair back into her bun. ‘Did you have a good day my petal?’

‘Yes, Aunt,’ said Aarti, swallowing a mouthful of sweet, soft potato cake.

‘Here, have some more honey.’ She dipped a spoon into the jar and drizzled deep amber liquid over the potato cakes on Aarti’s plate. ‘What a treat – and it’s not even your birthday! This year you will be twelve, Aarti. Can you believe it? We’ll plan a special day for you. A picnic on the beach and a present. You will have a present. Something I have saved for you for a long time.’

‘Thank you, Aunt.’ Aarti stared into the fire. She wanted to be excited but she knew how it worked. How one day Aunt would entice her with the most wonderful treats and the next day she would pick fault with every tiny thing that Aarti did. Sometimes she would rage at her, throwing pans and plates on the floor or make her do her ballet plies for hours and hours on end.

Sometimes she would send her out in the deep snow and not allow her into the house until she’d performed some task. That was when she wandered the island with Chand. They would go to the safe place that Chand had shown her, the dry cave behind the waterfall in a hidden glade in the woods where she would make a bed of leaves for them both.

‘What are you thinking, little one?’ asked Aunt, tipping Aarti’s chin and forcing her to look into her eyes again. Aunt’s were a cold grey.

‘N...nothing,’ replied Aarti, her stomach clenching as she thought of what might happen if Aunt discovered her secrets.

Aunt held her chin. ‘Such a beauty,’ she whispered. ‘An Indian princess living in the Scottish wilds.’ She let go.

Aarti never understood what Aunt meant by this. It was one of the many things she said that didn’t make any sense.

CHAPTER 2

Once Aunt Amalie was snoring by the fire, Aarti crept upstairs and fell into the creaking bed.

Spiders spun their cobwebs around her and cocooned Aarti as she tumbled into a heavy sleep.

The dream found its way to her, twisting and turning in the corners of her mind. It was a dream of a far-off place where the warm sun was shining and she was playing in a flower-filled garden. She picked a flower and it smelled so sweet. She walked through the garden and found a smiling woman with long dark hair who held out her arms. Aarti jumped into them. All her tiredness melted away as she snuggled in deep.

Drip, drip. Drops of cold rainwater landed on Aarti’s head and woke her up. She opened her eyes to a small patch of dark sky and silver light from a full moon that poked into her room. She jumped on to the floor and dragged her bed away from the new hole in the roof, her breath puffing out into the freezing air, barely able to feel her numb toes. She bundled herself back under the blankets, drew her knees to her chest and watched the raindrops make a pool of water on the worn wooden floor, listened to the wind whistling.

She stayed like this, still thinking about the place in her dream, feeling the softness of the woman’s hair, the touch of her arms around Aarti’s. But every time she tried to look up at the woman’s face, she always woke and found herself back here on this wild island where the only two people were Aunt and Aarti. Perhaps the woman was her mother, she thought – before she died. And the thought of what she had lost, even though she could barely dream it, made her so sad.

After a while, she stepped across the cold floor to the wall, lit the candle stub she kept there and traced the outline of the map she had drawn. As she grew older and explored the further reaches of the island, she had added new sections; the forest behind the house, the spot where the mushrooms grew in autumn, the hidden valley with the roaring waterfall and the mountain with icy pools high up for swimming. The cliffs where Aunt sent her to collect eagle eggs but Aarti never brought any back, because she couldn't bear to steal the chicks that were growing inside. And the standing stones above the harbour, a sign that once there were more people here. Aarti took a piece of charcoal and drew another hole in the roof of their house, the half-ruined old abbey.

Even though it was still dark, Aarti heard Aunt Amalie's voice again and this time it didn't tinkle up the stairs but thundered. 'It's fishing time!'

Aarti knew there was no point in protesting. She blew out the candle, reaching for the fishing rod that was stowed beside the wardrobe, put on an extra layer of socks and a jumper and bumped down the stairs.

Aunt held the front door ajar while Aarti scrambled out, loaded with nets and the rod. She paused a moment, unhooked an oversized waterproof from the rack and put it on. The muddy coat skimmed the floor and Aarti laid down the fishing things while she folded back the sleeves, her delicate hands poking from the ends.

'That's it Aarti, wrap up. You get food for the day, I'll get fixing the leaky roof. It's team work.'

The wind smacked against her as soon as she stepped into the cold night but Aarti held firm to the rods and nets, gripping them tightly.

'Be sure to check all the lobster pots,' shouted Aunt over the raging weather. 'All those years I had to look after you when you were small! Now that you're big enough, it's your turn to pay me back.'

The door slammed loudly behind her.

Once outside, Aarti breathed out and filled her lungs with fresh salty air. She heard the wind ripple through the forest, which stretched all the way behind the house to the other side of the island.

As she walked away from the house, the rain started to weaken and the moon peeked out from the between the clouds, lighting the path – though she'd walked it in the dark a hundred times. After glancing over her shoulder to check she was far enough from

the house, she whistled. In less than a heartbeat, Chand appeared beside her like magic. He rubbed against her leg and Aarti put down the fishing tools, bending low to stroke his red fur, and planted a kiss on the white moon shape on his forehead.

The name 'Chand' had come to her as soon as she saw the crescent shape, though she wasn't sure why. His pointed ears, tipped ice white, pricked and even in the darkness his eyes sparkled as he swept the cold air with the bush of his tail. Sometimes Aarti wondered if he had been sent by some magic to light up her never-ending days and nights.

'If it weren't for you dear Chand,' said Aarti, searching his dark eyes, flecked with amber. 'I don't know what I'd do.'

Chand had been on the island for as long as she could remember, but last autumn, he disappeared for a few days and she found him whimpering, buried under a pile of crisp leaves, close to the house. His paw was hurt and Aarti had saved food from her own plate and nursed him back until he was strong enough to run again. Now, he always stayed close.

He nuzzled into Aarti's palm and she brought out the moss green pumpkin seeds she'd saved for him. She harvested them from the giant pumpkins they grew and dried them out in the warm autumn sun. 'There you are. My very own magical fox.'

She picked up the fishing rod again and Chand trotted beside her until they were down beside the natural harbour with its swooping curved beach and the black sea, frantic in the moonlight. The fierce wind churned up the waves and they crashed on to the pale beach. Aarti yanked up the hood on her coat, pushing her long plait so it slipped down her back.

First, she went to the rocks on the far side of the beach and checked the lobster pots for any signs of a catch. She balanced easily on the slippery rocks but the wind tugged at her hood and snapped it back as she peered into the pots they'd made from bendy hazel branches.

Only one small crab.

Chand sniffed the air as Aarti scooped some salt water into her bucket and dropped the crab in.

Next, she set up the fishing rods with their bait of worms and waited for the fish to bite. Aarti shivered and yawned as she stood on the rocks, wishing she'd managed to sleep for longer. Aunt said the best fish came out at night, so she woke her up and twice a week sent her night-fishing. But even though it was so cold that Aarti could barely feel her fingers

and her feet were so numb they felt like small blocks of ice, she was happiest away from Aunt's changeable temper. She hadn't always been this bad. Lately, she'd been getting worse.

As if he guessed what Aarti was thinking, Chand came closer to her and snuggled against her leg, making a mewling sound that rose like a night song into the air and carried on the wind across the sea.

'I wonder what's out there?' said Aarti, staring into the night. 'Do you think there's anyone else anywhere at all? Or is it just me and Aunt and you, Chand, on our little island?'

Aarti felt her heart tighten at the thought and a strange feeling of missing someone that she couldn't quite remember. As she gripped the fishing rod tighter, she pictured her fingers curled around another hand. Not Aunt's. The feeling was faint but firm and it brought with it an unexpected tear, which slid down her cheek. Why were these images rising up, recently, in dreams and unexpected moments? Could they really be memories?

Aarti fixed the rod between the rocks and crouched down to Chand who moved closer, warming Aarti with his thick fur. She breathed in his scent of wilderness and the tip of her nose unfroze a little. Chand looked up into Aarti's face and with his velvet tongue licked the salty tears away.

Chapter 3

Half an hour later, the moon shone into the bucket, lighting up the deep green crab scabbling around in the water and the shimmering scales on the fish that Aarti had caught.

Aunt was bound to be pleased by her night's work, but even as she formed this thought it smudged out faster than a setting sun, because Aarti knew that Aunt Amalie would never be truly happy, ever. Why was it so hard to please her these days?

She gathered her things and started back to the house, the water slapping the sides of the bucket and the crab making splashing snapping sounds.

With Chand by her side Aarti felt strong. She decided she wouldn't let Aunt Amalie make her sad tonight, however mean she was. She kept this thought clear in her head as they got closer to home.

The dishevelled stone house appeared suddenly over the next hill. It was a long building with arched leaded windows on the ground floor and smaller rectangular ones above, like a small church with its peaked roof. It was, Aarti thought, like a surprise in the landscape.

The patched-up roof shone under the light of the moon and bats circled the chimney stacks, swooping in and out of the holes.

The moon cast shadows ahead and the wind carried a mournful tune. It whistled through the woods behind the house with notes that sounded like a musical instrument and made Aarti stop and listen. It was like the universe was speaking to her and three notes lilted and hung over the roof of the house, as if it knew that Aarti was returning to a place empty of love, but she wasn't forgotten.

Aarti kissed Chand goodnight and he stayed, like he always did, by the foot of the great walnut tree until she disappeared back into the house.

She closed the door as softly as she could, hoping that Aunt Amalie wouldn't hear and she could slip upstairs without being noticed and go back to bed.

But as soon as Aarti stepped into the house Aunt whirled upon her. 'So?' she boomed. 'Did you do well with your fishing trip? Will we feast or will we starve?'

Aarti slopped the bucket on to the floor by way of an answer and rubbed her numb hands together. In the big hall the fire was burning in the hearth, as it always was.

'May I warm myself by the fire?' asked Aarti. 'It's such a bitter night.'

Aunt Amalie took her hands and examined them. 'No frost-bite yet...you must toughen up. Work first, Aarti, and then warming by the fire.'

Aarti remembered her promise to herself: she wasn't going to let Aunt make her sad. She drew herself up, her voice gentle but firm. 'But Aunt, I'm tired and cold and soaked through. The wind tonight was so fierce it whipped the waves high against the shore.' She showed Aunt her soaking clothes where the water had trickled under the raincoat. 'Can't I dry off first? I can do my chores right after.'

'Poor mite,' said Aunt, stepping closer. She gripped Aarti's cheek between her thick finger and thumb and pinched tightly.

'Ow!' Aarti pulled backwards, her cheek smarting. She gazed at Aunt in horror – she'd never done that before.

Something like regret flickered in Aunt's eyes – but the hard grey gleam returned all too quickly. 'There, there. It wasn't so hard, Aarti! Now, stop making a fuss. Just an affectionate little touch. Run along now, the pot is boiling – did you fetch any crab?' She peered into the bucket. 'Only a little one? How are we to survive? Try harder, Aarti – what a disappointment.' Her face clouded over and she pinched her lips together. Aarti struggled to see how it was her fault that the basket had only caught one crab, but she bit her tongue.

'I'll pop it in the pot,' said Aarti instead, hoping to distract Aunt. 'And we can salt the fish for another day.'

'Go on then,' said Aunt, grumpily. 'I'm going back to bed.'

Aarti swallowed. She wouldn't let Aunt get the better of her. She rubbed her cheek and thought of Chand sitting by the walnut tree, staying with her whenever she went out, and the strange music she'd heard. The notes had stirred her heart and filled her mind with racing thoughts, helping her to stay strong.

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In the morning the wind was still blustering about the house, rattling at the small window in Aarti's room and piping through the gaps. But at least the hole in the roof was patched and the damp spot on the floor dried up.

Aarti stepped lightly across her room to a pile of books she'd brought from the shelves in the hall. She heaved some into her arms and snuggled back into her warm bed. It was one of the things that Aunt didn't seem to mind. She thought reading and learning were

good and that you could find out anything from books. And when Aunt slept in late it meant that Aarti could lose herself in stories.

A pale winter sun seeped across the floor, lighting up the open page on Aarti's lap. This was one of her favourite books. It was all about Hindu gods and goddesses. Each page had a beautiful painting of an incredible creature that seemed to be human but also strange. There was one page where the god had an elephant's head but a man's body, another where the fierce goddess Durga rode a lion and had ten arms, each holding a weapon to defeat her enemies.

But the section that Aarti loved more than any other was the one all about the god Krishna. He looked so happy in the painting, surrounded by the most beautiful white cows.

Aarti traced her finger across his face, fascinated by the deep blue colour of his skin. Light from the window brightened the room, bathing Krishna in a golden glow, shining on the flute he wore around his neck and Aarti felt a spark of hope.

There was a poem in the book that Aarti didn't fully understand but loved. When she read it she felt less alone. It talked about the god Krishna being the centre of everything; the seas, mountains, skies and all the animals. When she walked the island, she imagined how it would feel to be like him, to *be* the island itself.

When the sun was higher, she closed the book and tucked it under her pillow, made her bed and quietly left her room.

On the landing, she saw Aunt's door was firmly closed. Perhaps it would be one of those days when she slept all day. She tapped lightly on the door. 'Aunt, are you OK?'

'I'm tired Aarti,' came the muffled voice from the other side. 'Just tired – that's all.'

'I'll bring you some tea later, shall I?'

Aunt didn't reply.

Aarti walked past the locked door. When she was younger she never thought much about it but for the last year she had grown more and more curious, wondering what was behind the door that needed to be locked away and she began to think about the key and where Aunt might have put it.

She tiptoed down the stairs and into the big hall. The fire was still glowing. She poked it with the metal rod and put some logs on. The grey ash parted and she blew at the flickering flames, bringing them back to life. Next she creaked open the door on the range and checked the fire, making sure it too was stoked up for the day.

She found a mug of warm tea that Aunt had left for her in the range and smiled. Sometimes it was hard to remember that Aunt loved her – but she did, in her way. She took the mug to a stool beside the fire and wrapped her hands around it, sipping the sweet herbal tea slowly. Afterwards, she heated up a potato cake from the night before and ate it up, listening all the time for the sound of Aunt's footsteps that she knew might clatter down at any moment.