



# ONE

## In Which Aru Regrets Opening the Door

**T**he problem with growing up around highly dangerous things is that after a while you just get used to them.

For as long as she could remember, Aru had lived in the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture. And she knew full well that the lamp at the end of the Hall of the Gods was not to be touched.

She could mention “the lamp of destruction” the way a pirate who had tamed a sea monster could casually say, *Oh, you mean ole Ralph here?* But even though she was used to the lamp, she had never once lit it. That would be against the rules. The rules she went over every Saturday, when she led the afternoon visitors’ tour.

Some folks may not like the idea of working on a weekend, but it never felt like work to Aru.

It felt like a ceremony.

Like a secret.

She would don her crisp scarlet vest with its three honeybee buttons. She would imitate her mother’s museum-curator voice, and people—this was the best part of all—would *listen*. Their

eyes never left her face. Especially when she talked about the cursed lamp.

Sometimes she thought it was the most fascinating thing she ever discussed. A cursed lamp is a much more interesting topic than, say, a visit to the dentist. Although one could argue that both are cursed.

Aru had lived at the museum for so long, it kept no secrets from her. She had grown up reading and doing her homework beneath the giant stone elephant at the entrance. Often she'd fall asleep in the theater and wake up just before the crackling self-guided tour recording announced that India became independent from the British in 1947. She even regularly hid a stash of candy in the mouth of a four-hundred-year-old sea dragon statue (she'd named it Steve) in the west wing. Aru knew everything about everything in the museum. Except one thing...

The lamp. For the most part, it remained a mystery.

"It's not quite a lamp," her mother, renowned curator and archaeologist Dr. K. P. Shah, had told her the first time she showed it to Aru. "We call it a *diya*."

Aru remembered pressing her nose against the glass case, staring at the lump of clay. As far as cursed objects went, this was by far the most boring. It was shaped like a pinched hockey puck. Small markings, like bite marks, crimped the edges. And yet, for all its normal-ness, even the statues filling the Hall of the Gods seemed to lean away from the lamp, giving it a wide berth.

"Why can't we light it?" she had asked her mother.

Her mother hadn't met her gaze. "Sometimes light illuminates things that are better left in the dark. Besides, you never know who is watching."

Well, Aru had watched. She'd been watching her entire life.

Every day after school she would come home, hang her backpack from the stone elephant's trunk, and creep toward the Hall of the Gods.

It was the museum's most popular exhibit, filled with a hundred statues of various Hindu gods. Her mother had lined the walls with tall mirrors so visitors could see the artifacts from all angles. The mirrors were "vintage" (a word Aru had used when she traded Burton Prater a greenish penny for a whopping two dollars and half a Twix bar). Because of the tall crape myrtles and elms standing outside the windows, the light that filtered into the Hall of the Gods always looked a little muted. Feathered, almost. As if the statues were wearing crowns of light.

Aru would stand at the entrance, her gaze resting on her favorite statues—Lord Indra, the king of the heavens, wielding a thunderbolt; Lord Krishna, playing his flutes; the Buddha, sitting with his spine straight and legs folded in meditation—before her eyes would inevitably be drawn to the diya in its glass case.

She would stand there for minutes, waiting for something . . . anything that would make the next day at school more interesting, or make people notice that she, Aru Shah, wasn't just another seventh grader slouching through middle school, but someone *extraordinary*. . .

Aru was waiting for magic.

And every day she was disappointed.

"Do something," she whispered to the god statues. It was a Monday morning, and she was still in her pajamas. "You've got plenty of time to do something awesome, because I'm on autumn break."

The statues did nothing.

Aru shrugged and looked out the window. The trees of Atlanta, Georgia, hadn't yet realized it was October. Only their top halves had taken on a scarlet-and-golden hue, as if someone had dunked them halfway in a bucket of fire and then plopped them back on the lawn.

As Aru had expected, the day was on its way to being uneventful. That should have been her first warning. The world has a tendency to trick people. It likes to make a day feel as bright and lazy as sun-warmed honey dripping down a jar as it waits until your guard is down. . . .

And that's when it strikes.

Moments before the visitor alarm rang, Aru's mom had been gliding through the cramped two-bedroom apartment connected to the museum. She seemed to be reading three books at a time while also conversing on the phone in a language that sounded like a chorus of tiny bells. Aru, on the other hand, was lying upside down on the couch and pelting pieces of popcorn at her, trying to get her attention.

"Mom. Don't say anything if you can take me to the movies."

Her mom laughed gracefully into the phone. Aru scowled. Why couldn't *she* laugh like that? When Aru laughed, she sounded like she was choking on air.

"Mom. Don't say anything if we can get a dog. A Great Pyrenees. We can name him Beowoof!"

Now her mother was nodding with her eyes closed, which meant that she was *sincerely* paying attention. Just not to Aru.

"Mom. Don't say anything if I—"

*Breeeeep!*

*Breeeeep!*

*Breeeeep!*

Her mother lifted a delicate eyebrow and stared at Aru. *You know what to do.* Aru did know what to do. She just didn't want to do it.

She rolled off the couch and Spider-Man-crawled across the floor in one last bid to get her mother's attention. This was a difficult feat considering that the floor was littered with books and half-empty chai mugs. She looked back to see her mom jotting something on a notepad. Slouching, Aru opened the door and headed to the stairs.

Monday afternoons at the museum were quiet. Even Sherrilyn, the head of museum security and Aru's long-suffering babysitter on the weekends, didn't come in on Mondays. Any other day—except Sunday, when the museum was closed—Aru would help hand out visitor stickers. She would direct people to the various exhibits and point out where the bathrooms were. Once she'd even had the opportunity to yell at someone when they'd patted the stone elephant, which had a very distinct DO NOT TOUCH sign (in Aru's mind, this applied to everyone who wasn't her).

On Mondays she had come to expect occasional visitors seeking temporary shelter from bad weather. Or people who wanted to express their concern (in the gentlest way possible) that the Museum of Ancient Indian Art and Culture honored the devil. Or sometimes just the FedEx man needing a signature for a package.

What she did not expect when she opened the door to greet the new visitors was that they would be three students from Augustus Day School. Aru experienced one of those

elevator-stopping-too-fast sensations. A low *whoosh* of panic hit her stomach as the three students stared down at her and her Spider-Man pajamas.

The first, Poppy Lopez, crossed her tan, freckled arms. Her brown hair was pulled back in a ballerina bun. The second, Burton Prater, held out his hand, where an ugly penny sat in his palm. Burton was short and pale, and his striped black-and-yellow shirt made him look like an unfortunate bumblebee. The third, Arielle Reddy—the prettiest girl in their class, with her dark brown skin and shiny black hair—simply glared.

“I knew it,” said Poppy triumphantly. “You told everyone in math class that your mom was taking you to France for break.”

*That’s what Mom had promised,* Aru thought.

Last summer, Aru’s mother had curled up on the couch, exhausted from another trip overseas. Right before she fell asleep, she had squeezed Aru’s shoulder and said, *Perhaps I’ll take you to Paris in the fall, Aru. There’s a café along the Seine River where you can hear the stars come out before they dance in the night sky. We’ll go to boulangeries and museums, sip coffee from tiny cups, and spend hours in the gardens.*

That night Aru had stayed awake dreaming of narrow winding streets and gardens so fancy that even their flowers looked haughty. With that promise in mind, Aru had cleaned her room and washed the dishes without complaint. And at school, the promise had become her armor. All the other students at Augustus Day School had vacation homes in places like the Maldives or Provence, and they complained when their yachts were under repair. The promise of Paris had brought Aru one tiny step closer to belonging.

Now, Aru tried not to shrink under Poppy’s blue-eyed

gaze. “My mom had a top secret mission with the museum. She couldn’t take me.”

That was partly true. Her mom never took her on work trips.

Burton threw down the green penny. “You cheated me. I gave you two bucks!”

“And you got a *vintage* penny—” started Aru.

Arielle cut her off. “We know you’re lying, Aru Shah. That’s what you are: a *liar*. And when we go back to school, we’re going to tell everyone—”

Aru’s insides squished. When she’d started at Augustus Day School last month, she’d been hopeful. But that had been short-lived.

Unlike the other students, she didn’t get driven to school in a sleek black car. She didn’t have a home “offshore.” She didn’t have a study room or a sunroom, just *a* room, and even she knew that her room was really more like a closet with delusions of grandeur.

But what she did have was imagination. Aru had been day-dreaming her whole life. Every weekend, while she waited for her mom to come home, she would concoct a story: her mother was a spy, an ousted princess, a sorceress.

Her mom claimed she never wanted to go on business trips, but they were a necessity to keep the museum running. And when she came home and forgot about things—like Aru’s chess games or choir practice—it wasn’t because she didn’t care, but because she was too busy juggling the state of war and peace and art.

So at Augustus Day School, whenever the other kids asked, Aru told tales. Like the ones she told herself. She talked about cities she’d never visited and meals she’d never eaten. If she

arrived with scuffed-up shoes, it was because her old pair had been sent to Italy for repair. She'd mastered that delicate condescending eyebrow everyone else had, and she deliberately mispronounced the names of stores where she bought her clothes, like the French *Tar-Jay*, and the German *Vabl-Mabrt*. If that failed, she'd just sniff and say, "Trust me, you wouldn't recognize the brand."

And in this way, she had fit in.

For a while, the lies had worked. She'd even been invited to spend a weekend at the lake with Poppy and Arielle. But Aru had ruined everything the day she was caught sneaking from the car-pool line. Arielle had asked which car was hers. Aru pointed at one, and Arielle's smile turned thin. "That's funny. Because that's my driver's car."

Arielle was giving Aru that same sneer now.

"You told us you have an elephant," said Poppy.

Aru pointed at the stone elephant behind her. "I do!"

"You said that you rescued it from India!"

"Well, Mom said it was *salvaged* from a temple, which is fancy talk for *rescue*—"

"And you said you have a cursed lamp," said Arielle.

Aru saw the red light on Burton's phone: steady and unblinking. He was recording her! She panicked. What if the video went online? She had two possible choices: 1) She could hope the universe might take pity on her and allow her to burst into flames before homeroom, or 2) She could change her name, grow a beard, and move away.

Or, to avoid the situation entirely...

She could show them something impossible.

"The cursed lamp is real," she said. "I can prove it."





# TWO

## Oops

It was four p.m. when Aru and her three classmates walked together into the Hall of the Gods.

Four p.m. is like a basement. Wholly innocent in theory. But if you really think about a basement, it is cement poured over restless earth. It has smelly, unfinished spaces, and wooden beams that cast too-sharp shadows. It is something that says *almost, but not quite*. Four p.m. feels that way, too. Almost, but not quite afternoon anymore. Almost, but not quite evening yet. And it is the way of magic and nightmares to choose those almost-but-not-quite moments and wait.

“Where’s your mom, anyway?” asked Poppy.

“In France,” said Aru, trying to hold her chin up. “I couldn’t go with her because I had to take care of the museum.”

“She’s probably lying again,” said Burton.

“She’s *definitely* lying. That’s the only thing she’s good at,” said Arielle.

Aru wrapped her arms around herself. She was good at lots of things, if only people would notice. She was good at memorizing facts she had heard just once. She was good at chess, too,

to the point where she might have gone to the state championship if Poppy and Arielle hadn't told her *Nobody joins chess, Aru. You can't do that.* And so Aru had quit the chess team. She used to be good at tests, too. But now, every time she sat down to take a test, all she could think of was how expensive the school was (it was costing her mom a fortune), and how everyone was judging her shoes, which were popular last year but not this year. Aru *wanted* to be noticed. But she kept getting noticed for all the wrong reasons.

"I thought you said you had a condo downtown, but this dump was the address in the school directory," sniffed Arielle. "So you actually live *in* a museum?"

*Yep.*

"No? Look around—do you see my room?"

*It's upstairs. . . .*

"If you don't live here, then why are you wearing pajamas?"

"Everyone wears pj's during the daytime in England," said Aru.

*Maybe.*

"It's what royalty does."

*If I were royalty, I would.*

"Whatever, Aru."

The four of them stood in the Hall of the Gods. Poppy wrinkled her nose. "Why do your gods have so many hands?"

The tops of Aru's ears turned red. "It's just how they are."

"Aren't there, like, a thousand gods?"

"I don't know," said Aru.

And this time she was telling the truth. Her mother had said that the Hindu gods were numerous, but they didn't stay as one person all the time. Sometimes they were reincarnated—their

soul was reborn in someone else. Aru liked this idea. Sometimes she wondered who she might have been in another life. Maybe that version of Aru would have known how to vanquish the beast that was the seventh grade.

Her classmates ran through the Hall of the Gods. Poppy jutted out her hip, flicked her hands in imitation of one of the statues, then started laughing. Arielle pointed at the full-bodied curves of the goddesses and rolled her eyes. Heat crawled through Aru's stomach.

She wanted all the statues to shatter on the spot. She wished they weren't so . . . naked. So different.

It reminded her of last year, when her mother had taken her to the sixth-grade honors banquet at her old school. Aru had worn what she thought was her prettiest outfit: a bright blue *salwar kameez* flecked with tiny star-shaped mirrors and embroidered with thousands of silver threads. Her mother had worn a deep red sari. Aru had felt like part of a fairy tale. At least until the moment they had entered the banquet hall, and every gaze had looked too much like pity. Or embarrassment. One of the girls had loudly whispered, *Doesn't she know it isn't Halloween?* Aru had faked a stomachache to leave early.

"Stop it!" she said now, when Burton started poking at Lord Shiva's trident.

"Why?"

"Because . . . Because there are cameras! And when my mom comes back, she'll tell the government of India and they'll come after you."

*Lie, lie, lie.* But it worked. Burton stepped back.

"So where's this lamp?" asked Arielle.

Aru marched to the back of the exhibit. The glass case

winked in the early evening light. Beneath it, the diya looked wrapped in shadows. Dusty and dull.

“That’s *it?*” said Poppy. “That looks like something my brother made in kindergarten.”

“The museum acquired the Diya of Bharata after 1947, when India gained its independence from Britain,” Aru said in her best impression of her mother’s voice. “It is believed that the Lamp of Bharata once resided in the temple of”—*donotmispronounceKureksbeta*—“Koo-rook-shet-ra—”

“*Kooroo* what? Weird name. Why was it there?” asked Burton.

“Because that is the site of the Mahabharata War.”

“The *what* war?”

Aru cleared her throat and went into museum attendant mode.

“The Mahabharata is one of two ancient poems. It was written in Sanskrit, an ancient Indic language that is no longer spoken.” Aru paused for effect. “The Mahabharata tells the story of a civil war between the five Pandava brothers and their one hundred cousins—”

“One *hundred* cousins?” said Arielle. “That’s impossible.”

Aru ignored her.

“Legend says that lighting the Lamp of Bharata awakens the Sleeper, a demon who will summon Lord Shiva, the fearsome Lord of Destruction, who will dance upon the world and bring an end to Time.”

“A dance?” scoffed Burton.

“A cosmic dance,” said Aru, trying to make it sound better.

When she thought of Lord Shiva dancing, she imagined someone stomping their feet on the sky. Cracks appearing in

the clouds like lightning. The whole world breaking and splintering apart.

But it was clear her classmates were picturing someone doing the Cotton-Eyed Joe.

“So if you light the lamp, the world ends?” asked Burton.

Aru glanced at the lamp, as if it might consider contributing a few words. But it stayed silent, as lamps are wont to do. “Yes.”

Arielle’s lip curled. “So do it. If you’re telling the truth, then do it.”

“If I’m telling the truth—which I am, by the way—then do you have any idea what it could do?”

“Don’t try to get out of this. Just light it once. I dare you.”

Burton held up his phone. Its red light taunted her.

Aru swallowed. If her mom were down here, she would drag her away by the ears. But she was upstairs getting ready to go away—yet again. Honestly, if the lamp was so dangerous, then why keep leaving her alone with it? Yeah, Sherrilyn was there. But Sherrilyn spent most of the time watching *Real Housewives of Atlanta*.

Maybe it wouldn’t be a big deal. She could just light a small flame, then blow it out. Or, instead, maybe she could break the glass case and act like she’d been cursed. She could start zombie-walking. Or Spider-Man-crawling. They’d all be scared enough never to talk about what had happened.

*Please, oh, please, I’ll never lie again, I promise.*

She repeated this in her head as she reached for the glass case and lifted it. As soon as the glass was removed, thin red beams of light hit the lamp. If a single strand of hair fell on any of those laser beams, a police car would come rushing to the museum.

Poppy, Arielle, and Burton inhaled sharply at the same time. Aru felt smug. *See? I told you it was important.* She wondered if she could just stop there. Maybe this would be enough. And then Poppy leaned forward.

“Get it over with,” she said. “I’m bored.”

Aru punched in the security code—her birthday—and watched as the red beams disappeared. The air mingled with the scent of the clay diya. It smelled like the inside of a temple: all burnt things and spices.

“Just tell the truth, Aru,” said Arielle. “If you do, all you have to do is pay us ten dollars each and we won’t post the video of you getting caught in your own stupid lie.”

But Aru knew that wouldn’t be the end of it. Between a demon that could end the world and a seventh-grade girl, Aru (and probably most people) would choose the demon any day.

Without the red beams on it, the lamp felt dangerous. As if it had somehow sensed there was one less barrier. Cold stitched up Aru’s spine, and her fingers felt numb. The small metal dish in the middle of the lamp looked a lot like an unblinking eye. Staring straight at her.

“I—I don’t have a match,” said Aru, taking a step back.

“I do.” Poppy held out a green lighter. “I got it from my brother’s car.”

Aru reached for the lighter. She flicked the little metal wheel, and a tiny flame erupted. Her breath caught. *Just a quick light.* Then she could enact Plan Melodramatic Aru and get herself out of this mess and *never ever ever* lie again.

As she brought the flame closer to the lamp, the Hall of the Gods grew dark, as if a switch had turned off all the natural

light. Poppy and Arielle moved closer. Burton tried to get closer, too, but Poppy shoved him away.

“*Aru...*”

A voice seemed to call out to her from *inside* the clay lamp.

She almost dropped the lighter, but her fist clenched around it just in time. She couldn’t look away from the lamp. It seemed to pull her closer and closer.

“*Aru, Aru, Aru—*”

“Just get it over with, Shah!” screeched Arielle.

The red light on Burton’s phone blinked in the corner of her vision. It promised a horrific year, cafeteria coleslaw in her locker, her mother’s face crumpling in disappointment. But maybe if she did this, if by some stroke of luck she managed to trick Arielle and Poppy and Burton, maybe they’d let her sit beside them at lunch. Maybe she wouldn’t have to hide behind her stories because her own life would finally be *enough*.

So she did it.

She brought the flame to the lip of the diya.

When her finger brushed the clay, a strange thought burst into Aru’s head. She remembered watching a nature documentary about deep-sea creatures. How some of them used bait, like a glowing orb, to attract their prey. The moment a fish dared to swim toward the little light floating in the water, the sea creature would snatch it up with huge gaping jaws. That was how the lamp felt: a small halo of brightness held out by a monster crouching in the shadows...

A trick.

The moment the flame caught, light exploded behind Aru’s eyes. A shadow unfurled from the lamp, its spine arching and

reaching. It made a horrible sound—was that laughter? She couldn't shake the noise from her head. It clung to her thoughts like an oily residue. It was as if all the silence had been scraped off and thrown somewhere else.

Aru stumbled back as the shadow thing limped out of the lamp. Panic dug into her bones. She tried to blow out the candle, but the flame didn't budge. Slowly, the shadow grew into a nightmare. It was tall and spidery, horned and fanged and furred.

*“Oh, Aru, Aru, Aru . . . what have you done?”*