

Aru Shah

AND THE TREE OF WISHES

A PANDAVA NOVEL
BOOK THREE

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ONE

Aru Shah Is Not Spider-Man

Aru Shah had a gigantic lightning bolt, and she really wanted to use it.

“Please don’t, Shah,” begged her friend Aiden. “If you electrocute the targets with Vajra . . . we’ve blown this Pandava mission.”

“Puh-leeze,” said Aru, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt. “I’m the daughter of the god of thunder and lightning. Electricity is practically my thing.”

“Yesterday you stuck a fork in the toaster,” pointed out Aiden.

“It was just for a *second*, and it was holding my breakfast prisoner.”

A gust of wind hit the back of Aru’s head, and she turned to see a huge eagle with sapphire-colored feathers swooping toward them. The bird dove to the ground and in a flash of blue light transformed into Brynne, her soul sister and the daughter of the god of the wind.

“No visuals on the targets,” Brynne said. “Also, Aiden’s right. I seriously don’t trust you around electricity.”

“You weren’t even part of this conversation!” said Aru.

“Still heard it.” Brynne tapped the side of her head. “I had eagle ears for a second, remember?”

Beside Aiden stood Mini, daughter of the god of the dead. She clutched Dee Dee, her Death Danda, and looked around anxiously.

“You could’ve electrocuted yourself with that fork!” scolded Mini. “And then you would’ve—”

“Died?” guessed Aiden, Aru, and Brynne at the same time.

Mini crossed her arms. “I was going to say that you would’ve suffered severe burns, cardiac arrest, possible coma . . . and yes, potentially, death.”

Brynne rolled her eyes. “Enough about toasters. We need a plan to rescue the targets, and *quick*.”

The three Pandavas and Aiden stood on the street, gazing up at the illuminated Ferris wheel that crowned downtown Atlanta. Beyond the wheel loomed the bright, jagged skyline. Cars honked and inched their way through rush-hour traffic on the street behind them, completely oblivious to the four kids holding glowing weapons.

Earlier, Hanuman, their monkey-faced war instructor, and Boo, their pigeon mentor, had told them that somewhere on the Ferris wheel were two people in need of rescuing. The Pandavas had no idea what the targets looked like, but they knew one of them was a clairvoyant.

Why would someone hide a clarinet? Aru had asked.

Boo had sighed. *It’s not a clarinet.*

Oh.

Turns out a *clairvoyant* was not a musical instrument,

but someone who could see the future and prophesize. The Otherworld had been waiting for centuries for an important prophecy to be uttered. If the rumors were true, it would hold enough power to determine the victor in the *devas'* war against the *asuras*, who were currently being led by the Sleeper. But prophecies were sensitive things, Boo had explained. They would only reveal themselves in the presence of certain beings—usually those whom the prophecy was about. Boo believed that in this case only the Pandavas or the Sleeper's soldiers would be able to hear it. And each side's success depended on making sure that the other side didn't.

Aru eyed the lengthening late-winter shadows. So much had changed in the past year since they'd ventured into the Ocean of Milk. She was fourteen now. She had grown a couple inches, her hair now fell to her shoulders, and lately she could fit into her mom's shoes... but she still preferred walking around barefoot. In the light of early evening, dogwood blossoms gleamed like stars caught on dark branches. Cherry trees lining the streets shed pink petals, and the damp pollen on the streets looked like flakes of gold.

"I tried flying up to spot the targets, but some of the booths are dark and shut tight," said Brynne. "I just don't understand why anyone who can see the future would choose to hide out on an amusement park ride."

"Especially a stalled one, with no operator," added Aiden.

"Maybe he or she wanted a better view?" suggested Mini.

"Who knows, but first we need to get the Ferris wheel moving so we can access the closed booths," said Brynne. "If I blast it with wind—"

“The whole thing could topple over!” said Aru.

“And if we try to start it with Vajra, we could fry the clairvoyant!” said Brynne.

Mini bit her lip, looking from Aru to Brynne. “Maybe... there’s another way?”

Aiden nodded. “Bee can use her wind mace to—*gently*—get it moving. I’ll take the perimeter and—”

“We don’t have time for gently!” cut in Aru.

“How ’bout you and I climb the Ferris wheel, and I use Dee Dee to scan the booths?” offered Mini.

“*Climb the Ferris wheel?!?*” echoed Aru. “Do I look like Spider-Man to you?”

“Well, you sometimes wear those pajamas...” said Mini.

Brynne snorted.

“What pajamas?” asked Aiden.

Abandon conversation! screamed Aru’s brain. *Abandon conversation!*

“Let’s get moving,” she said quickly.

Brynne grinned widely, then swung the wind mace over her head. Bright blue light burst from the weapon. A screech of metal tore through the air. Up ahead, the towering wheel slowly began to turn.

“Go!” said Brynne.

Aru ran toward the Ferris wheel—a nearly two-hundred-foot-tall contraption with rotating enclosed booths. Her nerves bubbled with tension as she dashed up the exit stairs and reached for the first inner rung. The metal bars were slick with recent rain and smelled of iron. Normally, there was no way she would agree to climb this thing, but her

customized Pandava kicks came with enchanted suction cups on the bottom that promised she wouldn't fall.

The Pandavas had been preparing for this all week, and they knew what was at stake. Not a single day had passed without Aru hearing about increased demon activity in the mortal world. But no one had caught sight of the person behind the chaos: the Sleeper. Her father. Aru wished she could only see him as the monster that he was. But certain memories kept messing with her head, and sometimes she didn't picture the Sleeper as he was now, but as the dad he had been in the past. The man who had cradled her. If just for an hour.

Aru faltered, her hand slipping. A cool wind hit her face as her gaze fell to the ground more than a hundred feet below. From here, the lines of streetlights looked like faraway strings of stars and the groups of trees resembled clumps of mashed-up broccoli.

"You okay?" called Mini from the spoke below.

Steady, Shah, she told herself.

They'd trained for this.

She could *do* this.

"Nope. I'm Aru." She smiled weakly and reached for the next rung.

Another cold gust lashed her hair into her eyes.

You're climbing a Ferris wheel, thought Aru. *You know who does that? SUPERHEROES. And that guy from The Notebook, but mostly superheroes.*

"*Superheroines,*" she whispered to herself, and reached for another bar.

Quietly, Aru started singing. Her hands ached and her teeth

were chattering. When she looked up, she realized she was eye level with towering skyscrapers.

“Are you singing?” asked Mini, who was getting closer.

Aru quickly shut up. “Nope.”

“Because it sounded like ‘*Spider-Man, Spider-Man . . . does whatever a Spider-Man does,*’ which I’m pretty sure aren’t the right lyrics.”

“The wind is messing with your ears.”

Mini, who had always been more agile than Brynne and Aru combined, moved past her.

“I thought you were scared of heights,” said Aru.

“I am!” said Mini. “I’m scared of lots of stuff . . . but exposure therapy is helping. Maybe for my eighteenth birthday we’ll all go skydiving.”

“*We?*?”

“Look, Aru! First closed booth!”

About fifteen feet away, across a slender metallic bridge, was a glass-encased compartment big enough to hold two people. Its red door was shut tight, and the inside was dark. Aru flicked her wrist, and Vajra turned from a bracelet into a spear. Her lightning weapon sent a shiver of electricity up her arm.

Don’t fry the mission, Aru muttered to herself.

The entire fate of the Otherworld was depending on them. Aru aimed at the door, then let her bolt loose. . . .

Bang!

The lightning hit the door’s hinges. The door swung open with a screech, to reveal . . . nothing. The booth looked totally empty. Mini held up Dee Dee in its compact-mirror form. Its reflection could show the truth behind enchantments.

“No one’s hiding in this one,” said Mini.

Aru opened her hand and Vajra rushed back to her grip. “Onward,” she said.

They slowly picked their way back across the bridge to the wheel’s hub, then hauled themselves up to the arm above. As they navigated the spoke to the next booth, Aru winced at the sound of her shoe suckers squelching on the damp metal. She zapped the enclosure open, and Mini scanned it with Dee Dee.

“Empty,” she said with a frown.

The third was the same: empty. In the fourth, Aru nearly leaped back as a pair of sneakers, tied to a seat belt, dropped out and dangled in her face. . . .

But it was just a prank left over from whoever had been in there last.

The booth’s door swung shut with a heavy thud.

Aru looked above them. There was only one more booth to check. Her pulse ratcheted up. She closed her eyes, imagining she could hear the hum of unspoken prophecies echoing through the night. The air felt colder, weighted down somehow.

“Last one,” whispered Aru.

She rose on her tiptoes to see better, her shoe suckers letting go of the slick metal bridge. As she adjusted her grip on the lightning bolt, the Ferris wheel lurched violently, pitching her to the right. Weightlessness gripped her belly as she swung out, her hand just barely catching a metal bar while her legs dangled over a steep drop.

Mini screamed and held on for dear life.

Demons have found us! said Brynne’s panicked mind message.
Be careful!

Aru’s legs dangled uselessly as she kicked for purchase. The

Ferris wheel gave another jolt, just enough to allow her to swing her legs upward and hook a bar with the insides of her knees. She twisted herself until she was crouching on top of the spoke before she shakily rose to her feet, her shoes reattaching to the metal with a *slurp!*

Aru risked one glance below...and quickly wished she hadn't.

Now the demons' attention wasn't on Aiden and Brynne—it was on *her and Mini*.

“You still with me?” Aru called to Mini. “We’re running out of time!”

Mini’s eyes went even rounder with fear, but she bit her lip and nodded. Aru stepped carefully down the spoke that led to the last booth, not ten feet away. It looked empty, like all the others, but the air around it seemed strangely warped. Mini snapped her compact shut.

Someone’s definitely inside, said Mini’s mind message. It has to be the targets. Do we warn them we’re gonna bust down the door?

Aru shook her head. *Their abductor might be with them.*

On the count of three?

Aru nodded.

One...two...three!

Aru threw Vajra, and the lightning bolt sliced through the hinges before returning to her hand. The metal groaned as it burst open, revealing a mass of black vines that writhed like snakes.

“Release the clairvoyant!” shouted Mini. “Oh, and the other person! And don’t try anything, because we’re armed!”

Aru brandished Vajra, on the verge of declaring *And dangerous!* But the Ferris wheel teetered and she ended up yelling, “And danger-ahh!”

The writhing mass of vines went suddenly still. A green light broke through the middle of the tangle, like a hairy monster blinking open one eye.

“*Danger-abhh?* Is that even a word?” demanded a haughty feminine voice.

“Are you the clairvoyant?” called Mini over the howling wind. There was a beat of silence.

“Maybe.”

Aru swayed, even as her shoe suckers gripped the bridge. She held out her arms for balance, and Vajra wrapped around her wrist in bracelet form. “Then come with us . . . if you want to live.”

Another pause.

“We’re fine here,” said the haughty voice. “Thanks, but no thanks.”

“*Seriously?*” said Aru. “We’re here to save you! You should be *way* more grateful! How’d you even end up in a Ferris wheel?”

From deep within the vines came the sound of whispers.

“We were hiding,” said a different, softer voice. “Are you Aru Shah?”

Aru paused. “Yes?”

The vines parted, revealing a pair of identical dark-skinned girls who looked about ten years old. One of them was wearing a flower-print dress with a shiny blazer over it. A small tiara nestled in her dozens of tiny braids. The other wore a striped T-shirt and dark jeans, and her braids fell straight to her shoulders. Instantly, Aru *knew* them. She’d seen them in a dream.

“*You . . .*” Mini breathed, before Aru had the chance to open her mouth. “I’ve seen you in my dreams!”

Aru whipped her head around. “Wait, *what?* You’ve seen them, too?”

The girl with the tiara huffed impatiently. “We paid a visit to all the Pandavas.”

“We’ll discuss this later,” said Aru, holding out her hand. “For now, you’ve got to come with us.”

Tiara Girl narrowed her ice-blue eyes at Aru and Mini.

“First you have to save us. That’s what you saw in your vision, right, Sheela?”

“Uh-huh,” said Sheela distractedly as she counted down on her fingers—*three, two, one.*

“Save you from—” started Mini, but before she could finish, a sound like a wet slap echoed on the metal rung right above their heads.

Aru reeled back. A *rakshasa* with the body of a man and the head of a bull swung upside down and let out a terrible roar. Tiara Girl coughed lightly, crossed her arms, and pointed at the demon.

“From *that.*”



TWO

That Time Brynne's Shoes Got Ruined

The bull-headed rakshasa advanced on them. “That prophecy belongs to the glorious vision of the Sleeper,” he growled. “Deliver the clairvoyant to me, and I might spare your young lives.”

“Might?” repeated Aru. “Not exactly a bargain.”

The rakshasa laughed. “Little girl, your luck has run out. Give her to me.”

Aru’s gaze darted to the lightning bolt, now in the form of a sparkling bracelet. If she could just get the demon into the right position...

Aru was distracted by a moan from Sheela, who was clutching her stomach. Her ice-blue eyes began to glow. “Nikita! It’s coming soon!”

Nikita grabbed her sister. “Are you sure?”

Sheela began to tremble. “Y-yes—”

“Hold it in,” pleaded her twin.

The rakshasa gave a ghastly smile. “*Speak*, clairvoyant. What do you *see*?”

Panic shot through Aru. *No, no, no!* she thought. No one was supposed to hear it but them.

“Don’t tell him!” Aru yelled.

Brynné’s voice called out over the Pandava mind link:
BRACE YOURSELVES!

Mini dropped into a crouch. “Hold on!” she shouted to the twins.

With a flick of her wrist, Nikita created a protective screen of black vines over the open door.

Aru’s jaw nearly dropped. *What the—?*

“Aru!” yelled Mini.

A powerful gust of wind flattened Aru to the outside of the compartment. She grabbed hold of the nearest vine and gripped it hard. Out the corner of her eye, she caught the glimmer of traffic hundreds of feet beneath her and her stomach swooped. Mini, holding tight to a metal support beam, changed Dee Dee from a compact to a stick. Violet light erupted from the tip, ready to make a shield to protect them, but the rakshasa was now nowhere to be seen.

The wind subsided, and Brynné’s voice sounded in Aru’s head: *Did I knock him off?*

I’M the one who almost got knocked off! replied Aru.

I said brace yourself!

Well, I was NOT braced!

A low, menacing growl filled the air, and the hair on Aru’s neck prickled. On the spoke she and Mini were standing on, Aru saw a series of dents appear, as if left behind by very strong invisible fingertips.

The rakshasa materialized once more, one hand clutching

the bridge as his body dangled in the air beneath them. “You will regret that.”

He flung out his other hand, and an S-shaped piece of onyx came hurtling toward Aru. The weapon writhed as it flew, emitting shadows that obscured her vision. Mini swung Dee Dee over her head, and a ray of violet light cut through the blackness. As the glow washed over them, Aru caught sight of something else—tendrils of shadow. One wrapped itself around Mini’s ankle while another slipped under her sneakers, trying to dislodge her shoe suckers.

“Mini, watch out!” screamed Aru.

Aru reached for Vajra, but she was too late. One moment, Mini held Dee Dee. The next, her arms pinwheeled as she fell backward, screaming.

Without hesitating, Aru dove off the metal beam she’d been standing on, cold air rushing into her lungs as she fought to breathe.

Above her, she heard the rakshasa laughing. “Good-bye, Pandavas!”

You just jumped off a Ferris wheel! screamed Aru’s brain. **WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?!**

Aru squeezed her eyes shut, then clenched her hand into a fist. “Vajra!” she called out.

Heat clambered up her arm as Vajra activated and leaped off her wrist, transforming into a crackling hoverboard made of lightning. Electricity snapped in the air as Vajra zoomed beneath her and Aru’s feet touched down on it. She opened her eyes, and together, she and Vajra accelerated through the evening sky.

Mini spun fifteen feet below them, caught in a vicious

downward spiral. Her panicked thoughts blared through the mind link.

I'M SORRY I DIDN'T FLOSS MY TEETH YESTERDAY. I PROMISE I'LL NEVER FORGET AGAIN! AND I'LL EAT ALL THE VEGETABLES ON MY PLATE! PLEASE, PLEASE, PLEASE—

Look up! Aru called through their mind link.

Aru stretched out her hand, trying to grab hold of Mini's outstretched fingers, but her sister kept pinwheeling just out of her grasp. With every second that passed, the ground surged closer to meet them. The streetlights came into focus, as well as the red taillights blinking down the highway.

With one last burst of speed, Aru tilted Vajra forward, slicing through the air until the girls caught each other. Mini hugged Aru fiercely as the Vajra hoverboard shot back up toward the Ferris wheel.

“What're we going to do?” asked Mini. “You heard her! The clairvoyant can't hold in the prophecy much longer, and the whole mission will be ruined! The Council will—”

A panicked gasp choked off the rest of her words. Aru followed Mini's horrified gaze up to the rakshasa. He twisted his hand, and a giant sword manifested in the air. He grabbed it and started hacking away at Nikita's vines. The moment the rakshasa captured Sheela, the Otherworld would be doomed. And Aru refused to let that happen.

Time seemed to slow. Her senses turned diamond-sharp. She could feel the cold light of distant stars, hear the crunch as the rakshasa's sword hit metal—even smell the tinny residue in the air from the thunderstorm hours ago.

“I've got a plan,” she said, thinking of Mini's illusion

abilities. “Mini, can you make the clairvoyant’s booth look like all the others?”

Mini’s hand tightened on her shoulder. Through the mind link, Aru sent a message to Brynne: *We’re going to need one more powerful gust.*

Aru felt a gleeful answering tremor from Brynne. *Done and done.*

A flash of blue came from far below. At the same time, Aru heard Mini whisper the command “Hide” as a violet shimmer burst in the air like colored sugar crystals. The twins’ battered compartment blinked back into view as the Ferris wheel began to turn—slowly, then fast and ever *faster* until its lights blurred. Even Aru couldn’t tell anymore which booth held the twins. The rakshasa’s grip loosened and he tumbled, his bull head knocking against the metal spokes as he dropped from one rung to the next.

“Hold tight!” Aru said to Mini.

She urged Vajra through the sky, and the lightning board took a sharp dip, careening toward the earth. Aru and Mini jumped off the hoverboard, and Brynne and Aiden raced to meet them. Brynne twirled her mace like a baton, and the Ferris wheel screeched to a halt.

The rakshasa had hit the ground near a compartment and was sitting up, shaking his head. “Feeble effort,” he growled, slowly rising. “I know they’re here, and you’re too *late*.”

Aiden brandished one of his scimitars, but Brynne held back her friend. The demon hobbled over to the booth, and when he reached it, Aru shifted Vajra into a spear and pointed it.

She waited for Mini’s quick *go-ahead* nod, then took a deep

breath, aimed, and let loose. Electricity rippled around the door just as the rakshasa grabbed the metal handle. He howled as a surge of lightning shot through his arm, sending him crumpling to his knees. Vajra rebounded into Aru's outstretched hand. Instantly, Aiden, Brynne, and Mini had their weapons pointed at the demon.

The rakshasa raised his head, clutching one arm to his chest. Behind him, the compartment was smoking and the door had been blown off, revealing nothing inside.

"What did you do to the seer?" he screeched as he struggled to his feet. "I *need* that prophecy!"

Once again he wielded his S-shaped stone, but Aru was quick. Her lightning bolt erupted into a crackling net and sprang toward the demon, covering him completely. The rakshasa tried to pull out his sword, but the net held him fast.

"Too bad you can't find your way," said Mini, spinning Dee Dee so that a shimmering illusion wrapped around the rakshasa.

"Too bad about that freak wind," said Brynne, waving her mace so a cold gust blew against him.

Aiden leaped forward and tossed a glowing scimitar across the cement. "Too bad about that fall," he said, grinning.

The blade tripped the rakshasa. He let out a terrifying roar right before he knocked his head on a telephone pole and promptly passed out.

Aiden, Brynne, and Mini dropped their weapons and surrounded their unconscious foe. Vajra the net gave the demon one last squeeze before boomeranging back to Aru's wrist as a bracelet.

"That. Was. *Amazing*," said Mini.

“Correction,” said Brynne, pocketing her mace. “*We* are amazing.” She nodded toward three other rakshasas that she and Aiden had knocked out and dragged to the side of the road.

“That too,” said Aru.

“Aren’t we forgetting someone important . . . ?” said Aiden. “The *clairvoyant*? The ginormous prophecy?”

Mini pointed to a booth three spots up from the sizzling ground-level compartment. Brynne summoned a new wind that turned the Ferris wheel gently. Once it stopped, Mini waved Dee Dee and the air in front of one booth rippled and twisted, as if someone were tearing down a curtain to reveal a compartment wrapped in black vines. From within, a green light pulsed faintly.

“You guys can come out now,” called Aru.

The light cut off abruptly, and the vines started to retract with a wet, suctiony sound, like tentacles letting go. Aru lifted her chin proudly. They’d *done* it. They’d rescued the twins and beaten back the rakshasas and kept the prophecy out of the Sleeper’s clutches. Aru grinned, thinking of how the Council would react once they got back.

Two days before the assignment, Aru had overheard Boo loudly defending them: *The Pandavas are ready for anything! I’d stake my feathers on it!*

Don’t worry, Boo, Aru thought now. *Your feathers are safe and sound.*

And when Aru caught sight of herself in a rain puddle, she thought her hair looked pretty good. So that was a plus.

Aiden moved beside her. As usual, he was reaching for his camera, Shadowfax. But this time . . . this time he was aiming it at . . . her? Aru felt like a bunch of hot needles were drifting down her skin—which sounded awful, but in reality was strangely

pleasant. She tucked her hair behind her ear, adjusting her posture so that Vajra got a bit more of the spotlight, and moved in front of him.

Aiden looked up at her. “Aru?”

She ignored him.

Indifference, the *apsara* Urvashi had told her, was the key to success in all things *boy*.

“Aru,” said Aiden once more.

“Hmm?” she said.

“Could you move? You’re blocking my shot of the Ferris wheel.”

Aru deflated instantly. Just as she slunk back, the compartment door swung open. Nikita, the stylishly dressed twin, took a dainty step forward. Sheela staggered out next, her face pale and sweaty.

“Careful, careful,” said Mini. “There was a lot of swinging around. . . . You might feel dizzy. Or even nauseous.”

Mini offered Sheela a hand, only for Nikita to step in front of her sister, swatting Mini away like a fly.

“No touchie,” Nikita snapped.

Brynne’s eyebrows shot up her forehead. “Uh, excuse *you*? Where’s the thanks?”

Sheela groaned and clutched her stomach, swaying to a stop in front of Brynne.

“The prophecy!” said Brynne. “Is it coming now?”

“Uh, Bee, you might wanna—” started Aiden.

BLERGH! Sheela vommed all over Brynne’s shoes.

Aru winced. “Aaand . . . too late.”

Aiden snapped a picture. Brynne looked like she was going to toss the Ferris wheel into oncoming traffic.

“I *cannot* believe you just did that,” Brynne said to Sheela. “Don’t you know who we *are*?”

“Pandavas,” said Nikita. The little girl lifted her chin and grabbed her sister’s shaking hand. “And so are we.”