

Aru Shah

AND THE

CITY OF GOLD

A PANDAVA NOVEL
BOOK FOUR

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ONE

I'm Your Long-Lost Family! (Insert Jazz Hands)

Aru Shah felt like she'd been struck by lightning. Seriously. And she knew all about that feeling, thanks to a terrible experiment. Once, when she was extremely bored, Aru had decided to find out what being struck by lightning would feel like by using Vajra, her lightning bolt and sometime Ping-Pong ball.

"Dude, are you serious?" Brynne had said.

"I can't watch this," Mini said. "You could—"

"I'm not going to *die*!" said Aru, rolling her eyes. "I'm a demigod!"

"That doesn't mean Indra is going to protect you," said Mini, crossing her arms.

Aru tossed up the Ping-Pong ball ("Trust me, nothing's going to happen."), then knocked it higher with her forehead.

Six hours later, Aru had woken up with a splitting headache, a twitch in her left eye, and a serious case of frizzy hair.

For a week straight, it had felt like someone had played soccer with her brain. Although this could also have been because Mini

kept quizzing her about geography trivia to check her “neurological state.”

Aru had never wanted to feel that way again.

And yet here she was, chained to a rock in the Sleeper’s cave lair, feeling like she’d been electrocuted. She stared at a girl named Kara, who was crouched on the ground across from her.

I’m *his daughter*, Kara had just said.

Aru blinked, her head buzzing. “You . . . You’re the daughter of the Sleeper?”

Kara nodded. Earlier, she’d said it with pride, tilting her chin and looking down her nose at Aru. Now, something sad and unsure crept across the girl’s face. “But you’re his daughter, too. . . . Does that . . . Does that make us *sisters*?”

Sisters, thought Aru. She considered Brynne and Mini her sisters, even though they weren’t related to her by blood. But her and Kara? This was different. For a moment, Aru wondered whether the girl was another reincarnated Pandava brother, but that was impossible. There were only five, and they’d hit that number when they met the twins, Sheela and Nikita.

Could *we be related*? Aru wondered. Kara looked about Aru’s age. . . . Did that make them nonidentical twins? Aru searched the other girl’s features, hunting for something shared in their faces, but she couldn’t find it. Kara had a wide mouth, large honey-brown eyes, straight chocolatey-brown hair that fell to her shoulders, high cheekbones, and dark, glowing skin. Aru could brush her own hair for a century and it would never look that sleek. And the closest she ever got to glowing skin was standing under a lamp and spinning really fast.

Usually she tried not to let these things bother her, but Aru knew she looked nothing like her elegant, beautiful parents.

Whereas Kara . . . did. But if Kara was her sister, then why hadn't Aru seen her in the Pool of the Past?

"I know what you're thinking," said Kara.

"Doubt it," muttered Aru, but Kara didn't seem to hear her.

"He was worried you'd try to run, so he made my room look like an awful dungeon," Kara said. "But it's really not that bad."

Kara tapped a nearby stone with the shiny white-gold ring on her finger. When it touched the rock, the cave walls started to shift. The space transformed into a sumptuous library with shelves carved into the stone. Near the ceiling, an enchanted orb cast the illusion of warm sunlight, and all around Aru could see little niches piled high with pillows and stacked with dolls and other toys. In the back wall of one of the niches was a half-opened door, through which Aru could glimpse a neat bed with a bright-yellow quilt and a plush bunny on the pillow.

Aru was still chained to a rock, but she forgot all about it when she saw the huge built-in screen on the opposite wall, where a Netflix box read ARE YOU STILL WATCHING?

Aru stared. How did one even find an evil lair with Internet? For a bizarre second, she pictured a demonic real-estate agent patting the stone wall: *Comes fully equipped with a crocodile-infested moat and complimentary Wi-Fi!*

"I'm sure you're used to a lot nicer things in the human world," said Kara quickly. "But Dad did his best."

Dad.

An ache bloomed inside Aru's ribs as memories from the past day flew back to her. The only time she had ever called the Sleeper Dad was when she'd thought that she and her sisters didn't stand a chance against his army. She'd hoped calling him that had hurt him as much as it had hurt her.

She could still hear the sounds of clanging swords and battle cries as they'd fought in the magical grove that belonged to Aranyani, goddess of the forest and protector of Kalpavriksha, the wish-granting tree.

Aru remembered throwing her arms around the Sleeper's neck like she was hugging him. But it was never a hug. It was a reminder of the person he could have been, of all the memories he'd sacrificed in pursuit of the tree that he'd thought could change his destiny.

Aru even remembered finding the Tree of Wishes....

But she no longer remembered whether she'd made a wish on it. When she pushed herself, all her mind could conjure was a vision of snow.

It made no sense.

Aru shook her head. She could worry about it later. Right now, she needed to find out what happened to Brynne and Mini, Sheela and Nikita, Rudy and Aiden. Were they safe? Had they gotten away? Or had the Sleeper abducted them, too?

"What am I doing here?" demanded Aru.

"He wants you to be safe," said Kara, before adding nervously, "I hope you don't mind me prying, but I know lots about you, Aru. Dad told me your mom kept you away from him."

Your mom. So Aru and Kara weren't twins. Had the Sleeper cheated on Krithika? Aru wondered. It made her stomach turn. Was that the real reason Aru's mom had put him in the lamp?

"He brought you back here so we could be a family," continued Kara.

Family. Aru flinched at the word. If her father really wanted them to be a family, he wouldn't have become a monster. But even

as she thought it, an oily voice in her head whispered, *But you saw how he was forced to give up his memories, Aru Shah. You know that perhaps he could not have helped becoming what he is. . . .*

"Where is he?" asked Aru. "Where are the others?"

"He only brought you," said Kara quickly. "And then he left again. But . . . he made plans before he left. His army is planning to march on Lanka by the end of the week."

Lanka? Aru knew that name. It was the city of gold ruled over by Lord Kubera, the god of wealth and treasures. The words *march on* lit a panic inside her. An invasion? So soon? The devas weren't expecting that. She needed to warn the Otherworld. And her Pandava sisters. Her *real* sisters.

Aru glanced at her wrist. What she thought had been a chain connecting her to the rock turned out to be nothing more than an illusion on a thin ribbon. Aru jerked her hand and the ribbon tore, setting her free. On her other wrist, dangling from a braided string bracelet, was a glass sphere containing Vajra in Ping-Pong-ball form. Aru slammed the sphere on the ground, and the glass shattered.

Vajra bounced up and Aru caught it one-handed. A gentle, delicious electricity immediately laced up her arms, and Aru felt the familiar static energy lift her hair a little. She jumped to her feet, eyes scanning the room.

"You can't leave!" said Kara, panicked.

"Watch me," growled Aru, hurtling Vajra against the library shelves.

Electricity spangled across the hundred-foot-high wall of bookshelves. The air boomed with thunder, and a couple of volumes went up in flames. But the wall remained intact.

"It's reinforced with enchanted rubber," said Kara. "You could burn down the whole place, but that still wouldn't get you out. Only... Only *I* can do that."

Aru whirled around. She thought Kara would look haughty as she said those words, but instead she just seemed uncomfortable, as if she wasn't used to talking to anyone. She twisted the ring around her index finger.

"If... If you want to be free," said Kara, lifting her chin, "then... then you have to make me a promise."

"What do you want?"

Kara swallowed hard. "I want you to take me with you."



TWO

LOL No

Aru stared at the other girl. “Take you *with* me? Um... *no*? First off, I don’t know you—”

“But...I’m your sister!” said Kara. “I know you grew up alone, and you’re a reincarnated Pandava, and—”

“Look. We’ve never met! I know my *mailbox* better than you. Second, you’ll probably turn us in. I heard what you called him, and it’s not exactly like he’s keeping *you* prisoner here,” said Aru, gesturing angrily at all the toys and books.

“It’s...It’s not what you think,” said Kara. “I’ve only been here for the past two years.”

Aru frowned. “Where were you before that?”

“Somewhere...bad,” said Kara. Her face looked pained. “All I know is that the people who were supposed to treat me like their daughter didn’t. Dad told me that he’d been locked away for twelve years—otherwise he would’ve found me sooner and raised me himself.”

“You don’t remember where you were?” asked Aru, mentally calculating Kara’s age. If she was fourteen, that meant she and

Aru must have been born to different mothers and the same father in the same year. It was possible—not to mention super gross—but it didn't seem believable. Aru had seen the Sleeper's memories. He had loved Krithika Shah. All he'd wanted was to come home to her . . . and Aru. It didn't make any sense.

"Dad said that he didn't want me to be in pain anymore, so he erased my memories of that life. He wanted me to be happy . . . and I *was* for a while." Kara took a deep breath. "But then I started wondering why he never lets me leave this place. And he was never home, either. I started snooping around, and I found where he keeps his memories. It's like this glowing library hidden in the caverns, totally different from this place, and the more I saw, the more I realized he was lying to me. When he brought you here, that's when I really knew. All those times he said he was on a trip, he was secretly gathering his armies and—"

"Literally trying to end Time?" added Aru. "And steal the nectar of immortality? Oh, and kill me?"

"I'm sorry," said Kara. Her eyes shone with tears. "I bet he even made up all that stuff about being locked away—"

"Actually, that part is true," said Aru quietly. "I know that for a fact."

Aru looked carefully at Kara. The girl didn't seem to be trying to trick her. . . . There wasn't anything sneaky about her. Just something *lonely*. Aru realized she pitied Kara, which only annoyed her more.

"How do you know that?" Kara asked.

Aru took a deep breath. "Because I'm the one who let him out. He was trapped in a lamp."

Aru waited for Kara to yell. Or sneer. But, instead, she nodded. "I'm grateful to you."

Grateful? No one had ever been grateful that Aru had freed the Sleeper. If anything, it was one of her biggest sources of guilt. And yet it was the reason she now had Brynne and Mini as her best friends and sisters, and Nikita and Sheela as the little sisters she hadn't realized she'd always wanted. It was the terrible event that had brought magic and the Otherworld into her life, and now Aru was learning it had led to Kara being taken out of a bad situation and given a better home.

Aru's mom always said *Everything happens for a reason*, but thinking that way only left Aru more confused. What was the reason for the Sleeper turning into a monster? Or Boo betraying them? But she couldn't afford to let her mind wander there. Right now, she needed to get back home and warn the others about the Sleeper's growing battle.

"Why do you even want to come with me?" asked Aru. "You're his . . . his daughter. He'd come looking for you, and then he'd find us."

"He wouldn't be able to find *me*," said Kara. She turned around, lifting her long hair and revealing a white circle the size of a dime on the back of her neck. "To protect me, he gave me this enchantment, which works like both a ward and a beacon. It prevents me from being tracked by gods and demons. Even Dad can't trace me when I wear it. But when he's near, it lets me know, and I can call to him if I need to. I guess he figures he doesn't have to worry about losing me. . . . It's not like I've ever left."

Aru stared around the giant library, with its false sunshine and lack of doors.

"So, what, you just stay in here all day and night?" asked Aru. Kara shrugged, gesturing at the screen on the wall. "Tutors

call every morning to give me lessons.... And, when he's here, Dad and I explore the caverns." Kara smiled. "Sometimes he'll create a forest illusion and come up with a scavenger hunt for me. It's fun ... but, you know, quiet."

And even lonelier than Aru had first imagined. All locked up without the chance to go outside? *No thanks.*

"Look, I'm sorry, but I have to go, and I can't take you with me," said Aru. "It's just too big a risk—"

"Wait!" said Kara, grabbing Aru's wrist. "What if... What if I told you that it's even a bigger risk to leave me behind?"

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Dad calls me his 'secret weapon,'" said Kara, her words coming out in a rush. "And lately, he keeps talking about how the right time is coming soon.... I'm scared, Aru. I don't know what it means."

"Secret weapon?" Aru nervously took a step back.

"I don't know what he's talking about," said Kara. "I can't do anything. Honest. I mean, he trained me to fight, but I don't really have any special powers."

Aru's mind snagged on the word *really*. That meant she probably had *something*, but what?

"Since you came, I've accessed even more of his memories. I saw his battles... all those ruined cities... all those scared people..." said Kara softly. "I don't want any part of that—it's wrong. But he's my family, and I don't want to hurt him. I just need to stop him. But I... I don't know what else to do."

Tears ran down Kara's cheeks, and Aru felt a sharp jab in her heart.

She understood what Kara was going through. It was the ugly, swooping sensation of missing the last step on a staircase,

waiting for your foot to land...and falling flat on your face instead.

Aru had felt it when she realized how much her mom had kept hidden from her. She'd felt it when she learned that her teachers, Hanuman and Urvashi, had been part of the reason her mom had trapped the Sleeper in a lamp. She'd felt it when Boo—Aru's greatest mentor, the person who'd made her think he believed in the Pandavas the most—had turned them over to the Sleeper. She *still* felt like she was falling and her feet would never touch the ground.

"You *have* to take me with you," said Kara, scrubbing away her tears with a fist. "I know what he's looking for, Aru. I'll tell you what it is if you let me go with you." A fierceness spread across Kara's face, and she kind of looked like Brynne before a fight. On Kara's hand, her white-gold ring flashed like a sunbeam. Vajra sparked in response.

Aru was dying to find out what the Sleeper was after, but she hid her eagerness from Kara. *The moment someone knows what you want, it becomes a weapon in their hands*, Hanuman had taught them.

Aru made her expression go blank. "How do I know you're not gonna go berserk on me?"

"*Berserk?*" repeated Kara. Her gaze brightened. It was like glimpsing the person Kara must be when she wasn't scared and nervous. A curious person... It made Aru think of Mini.

"Did you know that word comes from Nordic legend?" Kara went on. "*Berserkers* were warriors who wore bearskin shirts and then went kinda crazy right before charging into battle! *Berserk* comes from *ber* for *bear* and *serk* for *shirt*! Isn't that cool?"

Privately, Aru thought, *Ooh, intriguing*. Out loud, she said, "How is *that* supposed to convince me?"

"It won't," Kara admitted with a sigh. "You don't have any reason to trust me. But...I'm your best hope of getting out of here, Aru Shah. So will you take a chance on that or not?"

Aru frowned.

"If it helps, I don't actually have a bear shirt?" said Kara.

Aru wanted to grin, but she forced it back. Part of her couldn't fight the instinct to *trust* Kara. There was something about her that really did remind Aru of her sisters.

What if she's lying? whispered another voice in Aru's head. *She wouldn't be the first to betray you.*

But what if she wasn't? What if, by leaving Kara behind, Aru ended up putting the Otherworld in even greater danger? No, she couldn't have that on her conscience. If Kara tried anything, she'd have Brynne, Mini, Aiden, Nikita, Sheela, and *Aru herself* to answer to. Besides, how else was she going to escape?

Aru took a deep breath. "All right, fine. You can come. Now get us out of here."