



ONE

Not All Who Wander Are Lost

Kara's first reaction when she entered the labyrinth that hid the nectar of immortality was, well, disappointment. She'd imagined it would look like something out of the fairy tales she had read over and over until the book spines split down the middle. She thought it would be beautiful, with ginormous green mazes carved out of jungle plants where sleek panthers with glowing eyes would stalk and snarl at them from the sidelines.

But it wasn't. It was a cave. And it was dark.

The only light came from what she gripped tightly in her right hand: Sunny, her trident, forged from a drop of pure sunshine. Nothing could penetrate the darkness except Sunny, and as the daughter of Surya, the sun god, only Kara could lead the way through the labyrinth. No enemies would be able to follow, much less attack. She'd seen to that a few days ago.

Heat spasmed through her chest. She didn't know what to name this feeling. . . . Even the thought of feeling guilty made her feel . . . guilty.

You did the right thing, her father had told her over and over.

But then why did that moment feel so poisonous? Why couldn't she stop thinking about Aru's face? Or the way Brynne had almost bellowed in pain? Or how Mini, the gentlest of the Pandavas, had curled around herself like she'd been kicked?

"Are you ready, daughter?"

Kara looked up at her dad. He stood tall and noble, his blue and brown eyes beaming down at her.

"I'm proud of you," he said in his deep, rumbling voice. "You have been faced with difficult choices, and each time you have done the right thing."

The words glowed in Kara's heart. She was reminded all over again that Suyodhana was her dad in every way that counted. He had rescued her from a bad place. He had taken care of her when her own mother, Krithika Shah, had abandoned her.

Even so, Kara sometimes imagined a soft voice speaking to her in her dreams. . . .

He's lying to you.

The voice belonged to a young girl. If Kara really concentrated, she could almost see the girl's face. Dark brown skin, braids framing her cheeks, a pair of electric-blue eyes. She looked like Sheela, one of the Pandava twins.

You're not real, she once told Dream Sheela.

Sheela had regarded her mildly. *Or maybe you just don't want me to be real?*

Kara figured that her mind was simply reaching for an elaborate way to protect itself from the truth that she'd finally met her mom and now knew for sure that Krithika had given her up. *And who could blame her?* thought Kara with a pang.

Krithika had moved on with her life. She had another daughter: Aru. Aru was funny and clever. Aru had the soul of

Arjuna, the shining hero of all the stories. Kara had the soul of a mistake. *She* was a mistake, and it was only because of the Sleeper's mercy that she still existed.

"Remember what lies ahead," said her father now, placing a warm hand on her shoulder. "We will remake the world. We will all be together . . . as a family. Like I promised."

Family.

That was all Kara wanted. She'd meant what she said to Aru the moment she broke the *astra* necklace. She loved her mom and sister. She was doing this so they could be together, so they wouldn't fight one another anymore.

This was the only way.

He's lying to you . . . whispered that voice in the back of her head.

Kara shoved it aside and stood up straighter. "I'm ready," she said.

She raised her trident, and a stream of sunlight snaked through the darkness. This was the true path inside . . . the *only* path inside.

Behind her, her father's troops held their breath. His army was a strange mix of individuals. Some of them were pale and misshapen *rakshasas*, burned and scarred from fights with the *devas* long ago. Others were pristine *yakshas*, whose families had lost their homes due to human encroachment. With each passing hour, more beings joined her father's cause—celestial and woodland nymphs mistreated by human kings who had won the gods' favor, ghosts who had once haunted the edges of cremation grounds, members of the bear and monkey races who had fought in the *devas*' wars and won no glory.

Her father had promised them all that this time the nectar of immortality would not be stolen from them. This time, *they*

would have the power. Whenever Suyodhana spoke, his followers listened. Hope shone in their eyes.

But sometimes Kara wondered what he really felt. When he thought no one was looking, Kara had seen him touch a pendant that he wore around his neck. He never took it off, and every time his fingers touched the stone, a look of pain crossed his face.

“Well, daughter?” prompted Suyodhana, snapping her back to the moment. “Lead the way. Be the hero to guide us into the new age.”

Kara fought the urge to correct him. *Heroine*. That was what Aru, Brynne, and Mini always said.

But heroism was nothing like what she had understood from all her books. There was no shining armor to protect her from emotions she didn't want to feel. There was no magical horse leading her into a battle between clearly divided good and evil. Even the monsters weren't so monstrous.

So what does that make you? whispered a doubt deep inside her heart.

Kara ignored the voice and stepped into the dark.



TWO

I Hate It Here

Aru Shah's life was, to put it simply, an absolute mess. Her previous pigeon mentor, Boo, was currently a flammable chick of some kind. Her crush, Aiden, had kissed her and yet was now acting like she was invisible. Her friend Kara had turned out to not only be her real-life half sister but also the daughter of the sun god. And, as if that weren't enough for the past twenty-four hours, Kara had betrayed them, joined forces with the Sleeper to locate the nectar of immortality, and incinerated the Pandavas' celestial weapons.

On Aru's birthday.

But even though Kara and the Sleeper had vanished, at least Aru now knew where she could find them.

It was almost evening in Atlanta, and the February wind made her ears burn as she stared up at the stone gate marking the entrance to Lullwater Park. According to Krithika Shah, *this* was the current hiding spot of the labyrinth holding the nectar of immortality, but just for the next ten days. The only way to navigate the labyrinth was by the light of the sun, and now that the Sleeper had Kara's demigod solar powers on his side, the

Pandavas' chances of reaching the nectar of immortality first were looking, well, low.

Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if they could simply get through the magical barrier surrounding the park. For the second time since they'd arrived, Aru held out her hand. She could feel a pulse of energy near the gate. It was like a curtain drawn tight. She couldn't push past it.

"I told you, Aru," said Krithika softly, laying her hand on her daughter's shoulder. "You won't be admitted without your godly weapons. It's to be expected that the devas would come up with a way to keep humans out."

"But we're not humans!" said Brynne. "We're demigods!"

At that moment, a young white family walked past. The mom grinned at the Pandavas and thrust her fist into the air. "That's the spirit of the future! We're *all* demigods!" And then she laughed and kept walking.

"You okay, Brynne?" asked Mini. "Your forehead vein is sticking out a lot..."

"No, I'm not okay!" said Brynne. "We have *nothing*. We can't fight without our weapons!"

"Technically, we could..." said Mini, weakly holding up her fists. "It'd be a short fight, though. Because we'd die almost immediately—"

"Only someone with a godly weapon can control the Nairrata army," said Brynne. "We don't have them anymore! And we can't get into the labyrinth, either!" Her voice broke, and she looked away from them right before she mumbled, "We can't protect anyone."

"That's not true, Bee," said Aru. "We still have *this*."

Aru shoved her right hand into her pocket. Her fingers

instinctively searched for her lightning bolt, Vajra, which normally would either be coiled into a glowing ball of static electricity or wrapped around her wrist as a sparking bracelet. Aru felt a sharp ache. Without Vajra, the world was a little less bright.

Aru withdrew her hand. She had meant to pull out the IO(F)U coin from Agni, the god of fire. But she must have reached into the wrong pocket, because instead she drew out half an expired and possibly fossilized Twix bar. While her left hand fished around in her other pocket for the enchanted coin, Aru shrugged and took a bite.

“Aru! NO!” shouted Mini, smacking Aru’s back so hard that Aru spat out the candy bar.

“That was perfectly good chocolate!” said Aru.

“What is wrong with you?” demanded Mini. “You *cannot* eat that! Expired candy can carry microbes! Some even have strains of salmonella! And if you eat it, you could *die*.”

“We’re already going to die!” said Brynne, crossing her arms. “Especially if Aru thinks a moldy candy bar is a way to avoid doom!”

“What I meant to take out was this,” said Aru, holding up the glowing coin.

Brynne still didn’t look convinced. “Yeah, but it doesn’t seem to work, does it?”

Aru sighed. Nothing was going her way. She couldn’t even eat some chocolate without the risk of death.

When they’d previously tried to contact Agni with the coin, Mini, Brynne, and Aru had taken turns holding it tight and making a wish. They’d even called out Agni’s name and held it to the sky, but nothing seemed to make a difference.

“So how exactly are we going to find the god of fire, Shah?”

demanded Brynne. “If we set foot in the Otherworld and start asking questions, the devas are going to figure out we don’t have our weapons anymore. Everyone will panic. What if they know already? What if Rudy goes back to the Naga realm and doesn’t keep his mouth shut?”

“I think Rudy and Aiden are still at home fighting over who gets to hold BB,” piped up Mini.

BB was what they had decided to name Baby Boo, who had hatched at the museum this morning and had already left multiple singe marks on the floor. Mini hadn’t wanted to take him outside, worried that he would catch a cold—even though Aru had pointed out that he was literally a firebird—so they’d left him behind with the boys.

Brynne groaned. “There’s no way to hide what’s happened to us. Hanuman and Urvashi are bound to check in any minute now.”

Aru flipped the coin between her fingers, weighing a new idea in her head. “Mom? Can you talk to Sheela and Nikita’s parents? The twins may be able to help us.”

“Of course,” said Krithika. “But the girls are still too young to have inherited a godly weapon, so they won’t be able to open the boundary either.”

“But they still have their Pandava powers,” said Mini.

Brynne looked like she was chewing on the inside of her cheek. Like Mini and Aru, she had lost her control of wind, her element. But she was part asura, which meant she could still shape-shift. The only problem was that she couldn’t turn into anything big anymore.

Brynne shook her head. “So what? It’s not like we can make the twins fight an entire battle on their own.”

“I know,” said Aru. “But we need a prophecy. Something that will let us get around in the Otherworld and look for Agni without anyone bothering us for the next few days.”

Brynne kicked at a bottle cap on the sidewalk. “Right. We’ll just pop over to a convenience store and pick a prophecy off the shelf.”

Aru ignored her soul sister’s tone. She knew Brynne was hurting—they *all* were—but Brynne was taking it even harder than Aru expected. A small part of Aru felt responsible for this whole mess.

On the drive over to Lullwater Park, she kept replaying all the things she could have done differently. She should have worded her answer better when the god of treasures, Kubera, had asked her to decide who could wield the Nairrata army. She should have stopped the Sleeper the first time she’d had the chance. She should have confronted her mom about the truth ages ago.

But it was too late for all that.

Aru squared her shoulders and frowned at the darkening sky overhead before she faced her mom and her sisters. “I never said it had to be a *real* prophecy.”