ARU SHAH AND THE SONG OF DEATH

Also by Roshani Chokshi

Aru Shah and the End of Time

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Roshani Chokshi

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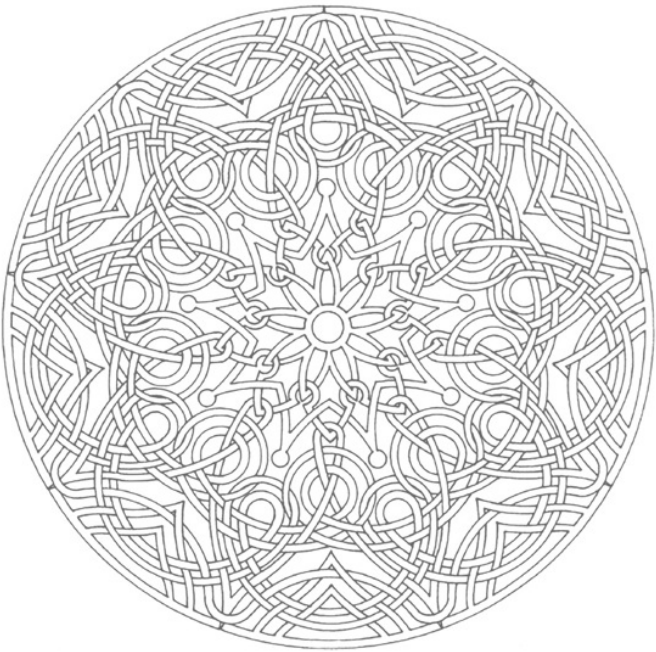
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For my grandparents—
Vijya, Ramesh, Apolonia, and Antonio—
who carried so much in the crossing of oceans.
I love you.

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ONE

New Demon Who Dis?

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

But if she used it now, she risked attracting the herd of zombies currently swarming through the Night Bazaar.

"This is the worst Saturday *ever*," moaned Mini, clutching her celestial weapon like a teddy bear.

While Aru's soul father—the god of thunder—had gifted her a lightning bolt named Vajra, Mini's soul father—the god of death—had given her an enchanted *danda* stick named Dee Dee.

The two of them crouched beneath a table by the Frozen Yogurt and Dreams stand, watching through the gaps in the wood as Otherworld citizens ran screaming, dropping grocery bags, or, in the case of one bull-headed *rakshasa*, walloping a zombie over the head with a tote full of tomatoes.

Overhead, a loud announcement blared:

"ATTENTION, ATTENTION! WE HAVE LOCATED AN UNWANTED DEMONIC PRESENCE IN THE

AREA. PLEASE EVACUATE THE NIGHT BAZAAR. ATTENTION, ATTENTION…"

Aru hated sitting still. But their job here wasn't to fight, but to *find*…because somewhere in the Night Bazaar was a thief who had raised the Otherworld alarm and probably let in all these zombies.

Unfortunately, that thief was also her newest Pandava sister.

Which meant that, just like Aru and Mini, she was the reincarnation of one of the five legendary demigod brothers from Hindu mythology. Hours ago, they'd seen her carrying a giant bow and arrow just as Boo, their pigeon mentor, had said, *That was your sister.*

"Aru!" whispered Mini.

"Shh! A zombie might find us—"

"I think…I think one already has…" said Mini.

Aru turned around just in time to see a pair of pale hands flip over the table they were under. Bright sunlight and moonlight washed over them from the half-day-half-night sky overhead. Aru blinked against the sudden brightness. She couldn't get a good read on the zombie's features, even as it snapped off a table leg (the stand howled, "HOW *DARE* YOU!") and brandished it at them.

Aru probably should've been scared, but she had a fearsome weapon, and she knew how to wield it.

She flung Vajra as if it were a javelin. The lightning bolt zapped the wooden peg out of the zombie's hand, and he pulled his arm back, stung. The entire yogurt stand tipped over on top of him.

"Run!" said Mini.

Vajra zoomed back into Aru's hands and she took off.

Around them, the Night Bazaar had fallen into chaos. Storefronts had been toppled, and while most of the shop owners had evacuated, the displays kept fighting. An enchanted flower stall turned its pumpkin vines into a row of exploding jack-o'-lanterns, and the kitchen appliances section summoned an army of wooden spoons to beat a group of zombies over the head. When some of the intruders spilled a bowl of glass beads and started slipping and sliding on them, a *yaksha* storeowner hollered, "YOU'LL PAY FOR THAT! NO SATURDAY DISCOUNT, EITHER!"

"That zombie is chasing us!" Mini yelled at Aru.

Aru glanced over her shoulder. Sure enough, the same zombie stalked after them, shoving aside the feral grocery carts that were anxiously zooming through the Night Bazaar.

"Why do *all* zombies lurch?" asked Aru. "Is that, like, a universal zombie thing?"

She cast Vajra like a net, thinking that would stop him, but the electrified mesh slipped right off, and he stepped over it. Aru frowned. Maybe her aim wasn't as good when she was running . . . but Vajra had never failed as a net before. Vajra bounded back to her, transforming into a bracelet that wound around her wrist.

Mini skidded to a halt in front of the entrance to the frozen pizza and enchantments aisle. A herd of grocery carts, packed tightly together in fear, blocked their way.

"There she is!" said Mini.

At the end of the aisle, Aru caught sight of the other Pandava girl. The *thief*. She had shifted into a blue wolf and was carrying the large bow and arrow in her mouth as she ran.

"Hey! *Stop!*" yelled Mini.

But they couldn't chase after her. In front of them, the grocery carts hissed and zoomed back and forth like a pack of angry cats. Behind them, the zombie lurched ever closer.

"Can you make us invisible?" asked Aru. "Maybe we can slip past him?"

Casting a shield of invisibility with Dee Dee was one of the new powers Mini had learned in Pandava training. Except she wasn't that good at it yet. Mini waved her danda stick in an arc, creating a force field around the two of them—but it immediately flickered and died.

Beyond the grocery carts, the Pandava thief slipped away before Aru could try to ensnare her.

A low growl erupted behind them. Aru turned slowly, willing Vajra to turn back into a lightning bolt. For the first time, she could take a good look at the zombie. He was tall and wore a white coat open over a bare chest, and there was a strange pale scar right above his heart. Not so much a wound as the center of a spiderweb, which looked like frost creeping out over the skin. And then she noticed something even more bizarre. The coat's buttons were enamel pins in the shape of teeth. Embroidered words next to the left lapel read:

DR. ERNST WARREN, DDS
OPEN WIDE!

"The zombie is a dentist?" said Aru.

"My aunt's a dentist," said Mini. "She said it's soul-crushing."

"Makes sense."

As if highly affronted, the zombie let out a guttural cry and charged at them.

Weeks of training kicked in immediately. In a split second, both girls stood back-to-back, their weapons out before them. The zombie roared and raised his hands. Mini swung Dee Dee at his ankles, knocking him over. Aru spun Vajra in her hands until it became a rope. Then she threw it at the zombie, binding his wrists and ankles.

Mini beamed at Aru, but a second later her smile fell.

"Don't panic," said Aru. "Two against one worked fine!"

"What about two against two *dozen*?"

Aru followed Mini's gaze. Panic zipped through her heart as she watched twenty zombies step out from behind the wreckage of storefronts. All of them wore the same slack-faced expression and ripped shirts that revealed identical frostlike wounds right over their hearts. Froyo Zombie shucked off the lightning rope a moment later, and Vajra whipped back into Aru's hands. Beside her, Mini cast another force field, but it blinked and fizzled out.

"Our weapons aren't working…" said Mini.

Aru didn't want to admit it, but Mini was right. It should've been impossible. Celestial weapons usually overcame everything except, well, *other* celestial weapons.

Just then, a shadow crossed over them. Both girls looked up in time to see Boo careening their way. He carried a small gray vial in his talons.

"Those are *my* Pandavas!" he squawked at the zombies.

He dove in front of the girls, smashing the vial on the ground. Plumes of smoke shot up, obscuring the zombies' view. Flapping quickly, Boo did a U-turn and said, "No time to waste, girls. Go after your sister!"

Some sister, thought Aru. That other Pandava, whoever she was, had landed them in this mess.

"But what about you?" asked Mini worriedly.

"*I* am a pigeon capable of mass annoyance." Boo puffed out his chest. "Don't worry about me. Just find her!"

Aru and Mini turned to face the crowd of angry grocery carts. The cart nearest to her gnashed its metal grate, then reared up on its hind wheels.

Aru swung Vajra the rope above her head and lassoed the cart. It bucked angrily, but the lightning lariat held tight. Aru clambered into the carriage and pulled Mini in after her.

"Giddyup!" yelled Aru, now using Vajra as reins.

The grocery cart snorted, reared back, and then charged through the rest of the herd and down the frozen-food aisle. Mini leaned out of the cart, knocking hundreds of boxes onto the floor to stop the zombies in their tracks.

"I'll be paying for this out of my allowance for years!" she cried.

Aru tugged the reins to the right, steering the cart toward the last place they'd seen the Pandava girl. At the end of the aisle, a dirt path led to an arena where she knew some students trained. Aru and Mini had never met any of the other kids who, because of their lineage, were entitled to study in the Otherworld. Aru liked to think that she and Mini were kept separate from them because, as *Pandavas,* they needed *exclusive* lessons. But Mini suspected it was really because the two of them were in remedial classes. . . .

Once they reached the arena, Aru spotted a pair of girls fighting for control of a golden bow and arrow. One was the Pandava sister they had seen before—the shape-shifter. She had chestnut skin and brown hair with gold highlights. She was also ridiculously tall, and though she had long limbs, they weren't

gangly like Aru's, but thick and sturdy, and covered in metal bracelets.

And the other girl? Aru felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her lungs.

"How is that possible?" whispered Mini.

Because the person the Pandava was fighting was…

Aru.