

THE  
KINGDOM  
OVER  
THE  
SEA

ZOHRA NABI

Illustrated by Tom Clohosy Cole

SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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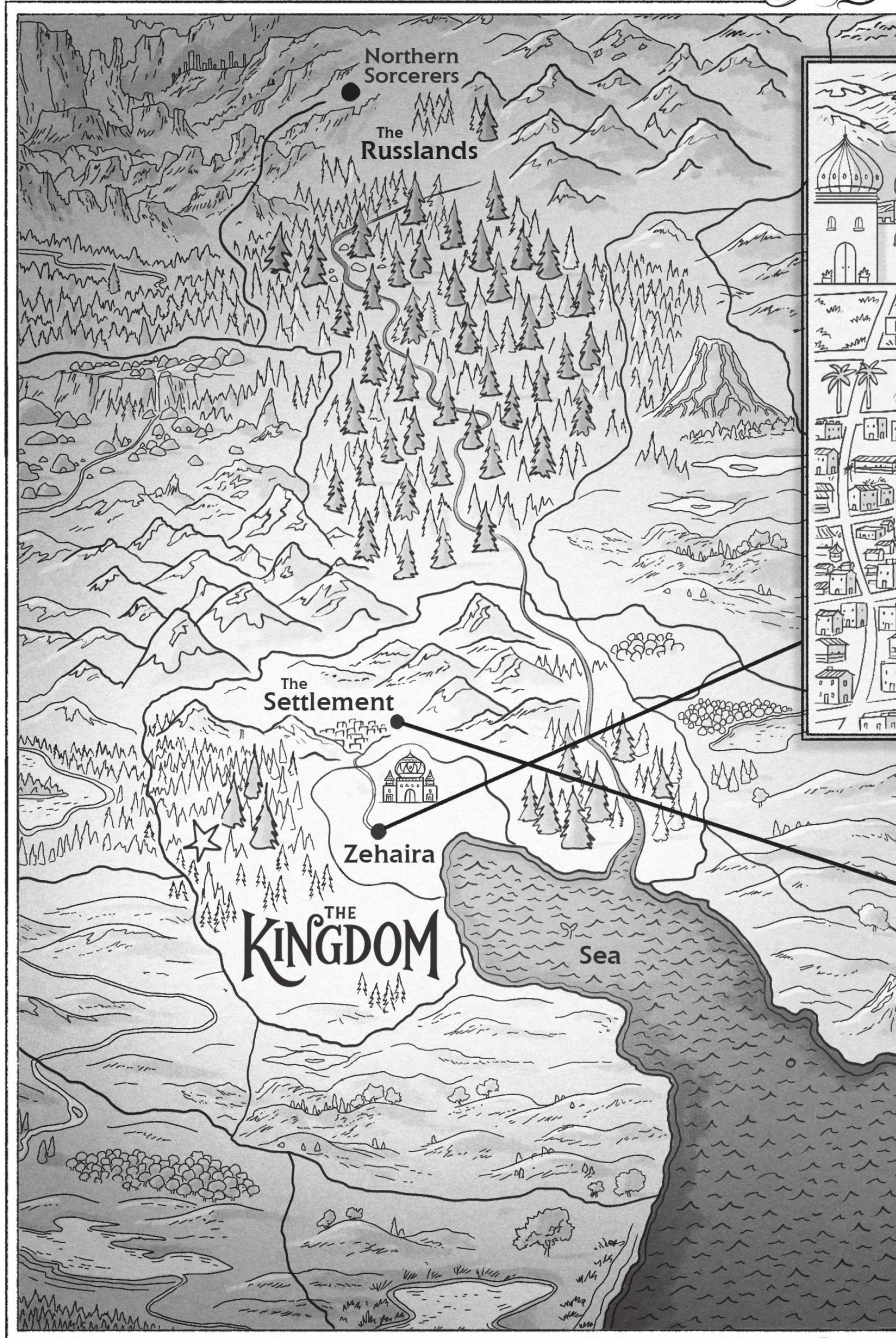
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*To my parents*





Northern Sorcerers

The Russlands

The Settlement

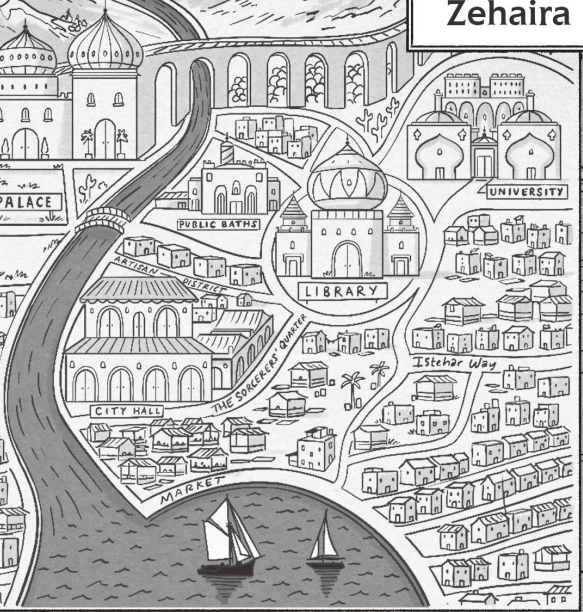
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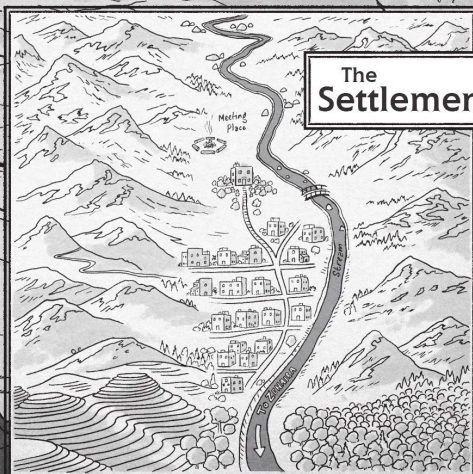
Sea



## Zehaira



## The Settlement





## Prologue

A strange dark had fallen over the city of Zehaira that night. A deep, mysterious dark; all thundering skies and pelting rain. A dark that any sorcerer worth their salt would tell you meant there was great magic about.

Of course, magic had always fallen like starlight over the city, but for hundreds of years it had been squashed into its stonework, muffled by the merchant din and swamped beneath the smoke sent up by alchemists at work in the Sultan's palace. In Zehaira the wild jinn were forced to lurk sulkily outside the city walls, snapping at the heels of passers-by from the shadows.

The magic that night was different. It was wild, ungraspable in the way it stole through the city, blotting out the silver sliver of new moon. And since the sorcerers of Zehaira *were* worth their salt, and far more, they had called a council to debate the seriousness of this

omen. Putting on cloaks and sombre expressions, they made their way down the underground passages that connected their homes to the Great Library, clustering beneath its amber dome. In the Sorcerers' Quarter the streets ran empty, the only sound the beating of the rain on the roofs.

Empty, apart from a young woman. Clasping a bundle to her chest, she tore through the streets, slipping on the cobbled stones in her haste. Beyond the Quarter there were men's voices, faint but growing louder, getting closer.

They did not sound friendly.

She reached a door, the third to last on the street. As she stopped before it, her face took on a determined look, her eyebrows lowering and her mouth setting stubbornly. Raising her fist, she hammered at the woodwork.

The door opened a crack. A pair of amber eyes peered out from behind it, and the woman let out a sob of relief.

'Sanctuary,' she gasped.

'I'm sorry?'

'Let me in, please. I need your help.'

The person opened the door a little wider. In the light of the house one could make out her overlarge student robes, the young face beneath her turban.

'I'm sorry,' the student said again. 'I can't let strangers in; there's an enchantment on the door.'



She peered past the woman into the night. Suddenly the noise of the approaching men was drowned out by the ringing of bells, each deafening *clang* shaking the city walls. The woman began to tremble with fear.

‘They’re here for you,’ the student said slowly, her eyes running over the woman. ‘You’re a fugitive.’

‘I haven’t done anything wrong,’ the woman insisted, clutching her bundle even tighter. ‘If anything, this is all because I’ve tried to do the right thing.’

Seeing the student hesitate, she reached forward and gripped at her wrist. ‘Please. You have to help. If you turn me away, they will find me and they will kill me, and they will kill *her*.’

‘Her?’

At that moment the bundle began to wriggle and snuffle, until finally it let out a great roaring wail of a cry.

The student jumped half out of her skin. ‘That is a *baby*.’

‘Yes, it is. Although neither of us will be anything much longer if you don’t let us in.’

The student bit her lip harder and crossed her arms, warring with herself. Finally she muttered: ‘Use the words. Then I have no choice but to give you shelter.’

‘What words?’

‘I can’t tell you what they are!’ she said agitatedly. ‘Surely you were taught them as a child?’

The woman blinked. Evidently nursery rhymes were far from the forefront of her mind, but she closed her eyes and frowned, hard. The baby, unminding of the woman's effort, only screamed louder.

'Hang on. Morn . . . No— Oh, would you be quiet!

*'From pitch of night to rose of morn,  
I charge you, guard us till the dawn.'*

The student sighed in relief, opening the door wider. 'Come on, then, quickly.'

The student led the woman down a long corridor, past walls painted with intricate geometric patterns and mosaics that mapped the constellations, until she came to a small room at the back of the house. It was a cosy space, the walls lined with bookshelves that you could tell at a glance had been loved and tended to. The baby, to her credit, responded well to these surroundings, forgoing screaming for a contented snuffling.

'The servants have all gone home, and Professor Al-Qamar won't be back until morning,' the student explained. 'You'll be safe here.'

'The Professor's out? But I need to speak with him.'

'He'll be back by dawn, I'm sure.'

'That's too late; we have to be gone by tonight. I came because we need a safe passage spell.'

The student blinked, surveying the woman intently.

‘That’s ancient magic. How in the seven spheres did you come to hear of it?’

The woman didn’t answer. Her face was flooding with despair.

‘Well ...’ The student swallowed, and then steeled herself. ‘I suppose ... I know the theory of it. I might be able to help – perhaps. I would need something from you, of course.’

‘I can pay you well.’ The woman dipped her hand into the baby’s shawl and brought out a gem that glittered and gleamed even in the low flicker of the lamplight. ‘It’s a ruby – surely worth one little spell?’

The student’s forehead creased. The woman in front of her was by no means badly turned out, but everything she wore – from her salwar to her shawl – had the slightly shabby appearance that comes when something has been darned at least twice. The gemstone meanwhile was glowing as though a small fire had been lit within it.

Finally she said, ‘You stole that.’

‘No, I didn’t.’ The woman narrowed her eyes. ‘The lady who owned this, she would have wanted me to have it.’

‘But she didn’t give it to you?’ The woman was silent. ‘Then I can’t accept it.’

‘Why not?’ the woman flared. ‘One spell or we don’t

have a chance. Does it really matter if I can't pay you?'

'It's not about payment,' the student snapped back. 'A spell like that needs power, and that power can't come from something that doesn't mean something to you. You don't have . . . oh, I don't know, a mother's necklace, or a grandmother's ring?'

The woman looked around her. She had so clearly fled with nothing that the student felt sorry for even asking the question. But then the woman looked down at the baby, now asleep in her arms.

'What about her?' she asked.

The student frowned, as if she didn't quite understand, and then her eyes widened almost comically.

'Excuse me?'

'She belongs to me, in a manner of speaking. What if I promise her to you?'

The student tensed. 'You don't know what you're doing,' she said, her voice tight. 'Take it back. Take it back this instant.'

'I know exactly what I'm doing,' the woman insisted. 'I promise you the baby in exchange for your help.'

The student closed her eyes in horror, burying her face in her hands.

'Oh, by the nine stars,' she mumbled. 'This cannot be happening.' She turned to the woman. 'What am I supposed to do with a baby? What about my life, my

plans? I am eighteen, I am top of my class – I might become the Grand High Sorceress one day. You want me to give all that up to raise a child?’

‘Well, let’s not get ahead of ourselves,’ said the woman. ‘Who said anything about raising her?’

The student peeked from between her fingers. ‘What do you mean?’

‘The spell needs me to promise her to you. There’s no reason you have to bring her up, is there? So long as it’s clear that she’s yours. You perform the spell and I give you the baby, sure, but then I’ll borrow her from you.’

The woman set the ruby down with the triumphant air of someone who has just solved a difficult riddle. ‘You can keep that till I bring her back.’

The student lifted her head from her hands, her forehead still pinched.

‘I suppose . . . I suppose that could work,’ she said slowly. ‘Only this sort of magic doesn’t like being tricked. Fate might work in terrible ways to bring her back to me – you could be putting yourself in danger.’

The woman hesitated and looked down at the baby for a long moment, as though truly seeing her for the first time. Then her eyes softened, and she shifted the infant to her shoulder, placing a quick defiant kiss on her head.

‘Well, love, no way of knowing until we try.’ She

held out her spare hand to the student, who, with a last reluctant twist of her mouth, accepted it. 'I hereby give up this child in return for safe passage from Zehaira, on condition that I am permitted to bring her up for as long as I am alive. I thus promise her to . . . ?'

'Leyla,' said the student grudgingly. 'Leyla Khatoun.'



**Twelve Years Later**







A decorative border with intricate swirls and small star-like symbols surrounds the text.

## Chapter One

*My own Yara,*

I hope that you will never need this letter. I want to tell you everything myself – but if you are reading this, then something terrible has happened, and you are on your own. There is a lot I haven't told you, so much that I don't know where to begin. But I can tell you how to return to the city you were born in, and whom you can go to for help. I wish I could tell you to get on a plane and that there will be someone to meet you at the airport – but it will be far more difficult than that, and far more frightening. Yet it is a journey you must make.

To return to the city of Zehaira, take the number 63 bus to Poole Harbour, walk right to the end of Ferry Way and read out the words on the back of this letter with all the command

and confidence that I know you have. Persuade whoever arrives to take you with them – you must make them know that you will not take no for an answer. Pack food and warm clothes and a waterproof coat. When you arrive at your destination, ask for the sorceress Leyla Khatoun, at the third-to-last house on Istehar Way, in the Sorcerers' Quarter. I know that she will give you the help that I cannot.

I love you so, so much – more than the moon, more than the stars, more than my own heart.

Good luck, my brave girl.

Mama

Yara Sulimayah's eyes moved over the swooping curves of her mother's handwriting for a second time, the letter clutched so tightly in her hands that the paper was taut, her knuckles pale. Her dark fringe fell over her eyes, and she brushed it away as though it had caused her personal offence. She was reading the letter fifty metres above the ground, although this was by no great feat of magic or acrobatics. Rather, she had lived on the sixth floor of a tower block since she had come to England as a baby and had not strayed far from it in the twelve years that had followed.

Yara began her mum's letter for a third time, each word

more confusing to her than the last. She lingered on one: 'sorceress', and her heart began to pick up pace in her chest.

'Yara?'

She turned, stashing the letter in her pocket. Stephanie, her social worker, was standing at the door; her palm pressed against the wallpaper in a way that would have made Mama seethe, her eyes warm with concern behind her glasses. 'Find anything?'

Yara steadied herself. 'Nothing, really. Just her passport and stuff.'

'Ah, well. Is there anything else of your mum's that you want? Maybe a shawl?'

As she spoke, Stephanie's gaze fell to the open drawer where her mother had kept her headscarves, each neatly folded into squares. Yara got to her feet and ran her hand over smooth silk, chiffon and crepe.

'That one's pretty.' Stephanie came further into the room, her hand hovering above Yara's back. She pointed to a metre of deep green material, with pink and red flowers embroidered in a close print.

Yara shook her head. 'She never wore that one. She was saving it for a special occasion.'

Her hand settled on a shawl of faded blue, the gold embroidery like tiny, fraying stars. When she was little, her mother used to take it off and spread it on the table, pretending that Yara's dolls were travelling through the

night sky. Picking it up from the drawer, Yara brought the headscarf to her face, inhaling the scent of castor oil and rose water that clung to the fabric.

It had been almost a fortnight since her mother had not returned from her shift. Since Stephanie had met her at the school gates and explained that there had been an accident on the main road. Since she had taken Yara to a foster family, and then to a funeral. Now she had brought her here, home; to pack up her things properly. To say goodbye.

Almost a fortnight. The days seemed to have blended into one terrible moment, as though she had missed a step and was still falling, her stomach still plummeting. She had never spent this long without her mother. Fresh tears welled in her eyes.

‘Oh, sweetheart.’ Stephanie squeezed her shoulder. ‘I know.’

Yara stiffened beneath her touch, dropping the headscarf back in the drawer and blinking furiously. She was small for twelve, but she made up for it with eyes that were dark and fierce, and thick eyebrows that would knit together stormily. The full force of her glower would normally stop adults in their tracks – but Stephanie, looking around the flat, did not seem fazed.

‘You’re sure there isn’t anywhere else your mum kept things?’

‘No. The top drawer was her last hiding place.’

‘And nothing about any family at all – no postcards, no photographs?’

Mama’s letter burned hot in her pocket. Her words: *It is a journey you must make.*

‘Mama always said there was no one else. That it was just the two of us.’ She picked up her school bag, interjecting before her social worker could say anything else. ‘So everything’s packed?’

‘All your things are, yes. The removal crew are coming for the furniture this evening.’ Stephanie checked her phone. ‘Right, it’s eight o’clock; we’d best be off. Are you sure you want to go to school? I’m sure if we called the office and explained—’

‘Actually,’ Yara said slowly, ‘could I have a bit of time by myself?’ Seeing her social worker’s hesitation, she attempted a desolate look. ‘I . . . I need to say goodbye.’

Stephanie’s expression softened. She gave Yara’s shoulder another squeeze. ‘Of course. I know it’s difficult – but the Browns will look after you, I promise.’

Yara nodded, and now there really was a lump in her throat. She blinked and swallowed around it furiously.

Stephanie checked her phone again. ‘All right, then. I’ll be outside.’

Yara turned to the windowsill, looking out at the estate below to hide her face from her social worker.

She waited, pretending to be lost in thought as she heard Stephanie gather her handbag and coat, stop to look at Yara in the empty flat one more time, and then step out into the hallway, closing the door behind her.

Yara moved immediately. She pulled the letter from her pocket, reading her mother's words to herself again. Sorceresses, mysterious summons that had to be read right by the sea – if it hadn't sounded so unmistakably like her mum, right down to the instruction not to take no for an answer, she might have thought the letter had been written by a stranger. Perhaps it was some kind of game, like the treasure maps Mama had made for their adventures when Yara was much smaller. Perhaps she had forgotten about it, and put it away with their documents by mistake.

Only she couldn't think of anything *less* like her mum, with her eagle eyes and knack for precision, who knew instantly when Yara had forgotten to put her homework on the dresser or hadn't folded her laundry properly.

Looking up, Yara scanned their living room, hoping for something that might provide a window into her mum's mind. But each thing she saw – the biscuit tin where Mama kept her sewing kit, the tea caddy where she kept her secret stash of custard creams, the hospital scrubs carefully hung up on a peg – only seemed to emphasise how ordinary Mama had been.

Anyway, what was the alternative? That Mama was serious, and genuinely expected her to get the bus to Poole Harbour and voyage to a country using only words and determination? That there were such people as *sorceresses*, and that she needed one's help? It obviously wasn't true. It *couldn't* be true.

Except.

Except that Mama had always been vague about where they were from. It said Iraq on their documents, but her mum had explained that she hadn't known exactly where they had lived before, and had to hazard a guess as to which country it was. Yara had been desperate to know, had pleaded and argued and sulked for the story of their journey to the UK; but every time she asked, Mama's voice would get tighter, and pain would furrow her face.

*I'll tell you when you're older.* At first it had been a promise. More recently it had sounded like a plea for more time. But that was time they would never have now.

Yara looked down at where Mama had underlined her instructions so vigorously that the pen had almost gone through the paper, and the dull ache of her mother's absence flared into sharp pain once more. She bit her lip, hard. Whatever reason Mama had for talking about magic and sorceresses, this had been her attempt to give Yara some answers to the questions that had

been burning inside her for years. She couldn't throw that away, not if there was the slimmest, smallest chance she might find something out.

'Right,' she said aloud, steeling herself for the absurdity of what she was about to do next. 'I suppose I had better get packing.'

She didn't have long. If she really was going to follow Mama's instructions, she needed to pack and be well away from the flat by the time Stephanie realised she was missing. Another twelve-year-old might have been daunted by the task, but Yara, who had been helping organise protest campaigns since she was old enough to understand that there were people in the world who wanted to *shut down libraries*, got to work.

She checked the letter again: *Pack food and warm clothes and a waterproof coat*. She was in her school jumper and trousers, and most of her regular clothes were in a suitcase at her temporary foster home. Only her salwar qamis were left in the flat – and not even the two pretty ones she had chosen to take with her, but the plain ones her mum had insisted on buying the fabric for, ignoring Yara's complaints. She stuffed them into her school bag and pulled on her blue waterproof. There wasn't much food about, but Yara knew she wouldn't have time for a supermarket trip. She opened the freezer,



rummaging until she found the sambusak she had made with Mama before the accident. There was only one of the little pastries left, but it would have to do.

What else? Wash things, a book called *The History of the World* that Mama had given her for her birthday and which she had still not read. A photo of her mum, and of her and a friend holding a poster together outside the library. As she looked at their twin smiles, Yara's breath hitched in her throat. Rehema had tried to reach out to her over a week ago, but, lost in a haze of grief, Yara had found herself unable to reply to her messages. She wondered how she would explain what she was doing to her friend if she were here.

There didn't seem much point in packing anything else apart from a pocket atlas, which she took largely as a reminder to herself that places reachable only by magical summons did not exist. Then, as she was poised to leave, she had a change of heart. Running back, she picked up her mother's blue headscarf and wound it round her neck.

Then there was nothing left to do, nothing except say goodbye to the flat she had lived in since she was barely a month old.

'Yara?' Stephanie's voice sounded through the letterbox. She was out of time.

'Just two more minutes,' she called back, and looked around. With sudden clarity she realised that she was

standing in an empty place, with walls where Mama had measured her height and pinned up her essays, and a kitchen where Yara had sat on the counter, peeling vegetables and talking to Mama about the latest injustice she had discovered in the world. It was already a place where they had once been.

‘Goodbye,’ Yara said softly, as though louder tones would disturb what little trace of them was left. As quietly as she could, she slipped into the kitchen, out through the back door and down the iron steps of the fire escape.



## About the Author

**Z**ohra Nabi grew up inventing stories for her two younger sisters. She studied law at Cambridge and Oxford universities, but secretly dreamed of being an author. Now she lives in London, browsing bookshops and writing magical adventures. *The Kingdom Over the Sea* is her first book.