

THE CITY
BEYOND
THE
STARS

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SIMON AND SCHUSTER

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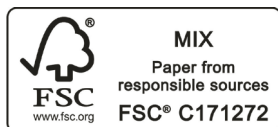
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Prologue

The summer before the Great Library of Zehaira burned, the air was hot and thick with whispers. There was a plot, they said, a terrible plot to seize the city and oust their beloved Sultan, to drag them into wickedness and darkness. Eyes began to turn ever more meaningfully towards the Sorcerers' Quarter. *Look at them*, said the whispers. *Look at the sorcerers sitting in the university towers with their scrolls and their magic. Look at the Grand High Sorceress rising above you on her flying tapestry, the power of generations of sorcerers behind her. What could they do if they chose to? What could they become?*

Then those whispers took voice, took up torches, took to the streets. The guards were nowhere to be seen. Or perhaps they were everywhere, their faces masked, ready to make things burn. No one was certain afterwards. But everyone remembered how the flames licked at the

library walls, creeping up like ivy until they swamped the building in rafts of fire and smoke. The smell was choking – it was the smell of books and stone and shelves succumbing to inferno. More than that. The Great Library of Zehaira had always had its own ancient magic. It was magic that had been fed and nurtured by the wisdom of the tomes on its shelves, which in turn nurtured and fed its scholars, leading them to the books and scrolls they needed the most. The power of a thousand years of sorcery had seeped into the library's stonework until it was as though it had a mind and soul of its own.

Now it was burning, and the air was black with magic made bad.



Omair Firaaz watched the library burn from a balcony on the Sultan's palace, a glass of rose cordial in his hand. This – the dark smudge of smoke on the horizon, the dry heat on his face – this was his victory. The council of sorcerers were dead, the most powerful families destroyed – this was everything he had ever wanted: to watch the work of thousands of sorcerers over thousands of years turn to ash.

Almost everything.

'Chief Alchemist?'

He turned. Two guards stood at his threshold – and

between them was the former Grand High Sorceress. Once the most powerful woman in the city, now she was slumped, bloody and bruised – the only thing keeping her upright the vice grip of his men on her arms. ‘She’s done something to her voice,’ one guard explained. ‘She’s silenced herself – she can’t even scream.’

Omair Firaaz considered the new information, before setting down his drink and beckoning the woman over. ‘Come, admire the view, Madam Parveen.’

The guards dragged the sorceress to the edge of the balcony, and Firaaz lifted her chin with his forefinger until she was forced to face the blaze. ‘You see how completely I have destroyed your people? Give me what I want, and you may leave with your life, return home with your child. Refuse, and I will hunt down your baby and drown her like a kitten, and you will spend the rest of your years in darkness and agony.’

Ismah Parveen did not reply – but her lip curled and her eyes narrowed, and she looked at him as contemptuously as if she were still the right hand of the Sultan. It was a look that had not lost its power over Firaaz; he turned his head away, nauseous with anger. ‘Get her out of my sight.’

Watching his guards drag the sorceress away, Omair Firaaz rolled his tongue against his teeth. So he would wait longer. No matter, he was a patient man. He would

get what he desired eventually. With the sorcerers gone, who was there who could stop him?

Half a league from the city, a girl stood on a hilltop, She wasn't crying; her eyes were bright and hard, flames reflected in her irises. Her lungs were still burning, each breath sharp and hot and splintered by smoke. But standing around her were sorcerers she had smuggled out of the city, and by her feet were scrolls that she had rescued from the library flames, and blazing across her face was a look that said: I will not forget this. I will never forget this. I will carry this with me for the rest of my life.

'Leyla?'

The girl turned, and the man who had spoken cleared his throat. 'I, um, Madam Khatoun? Where do we go from here?'

Leyla Khatoun looked around and saw over a hundred expectant eyes. She saw Madam Zahrawi with her daughters crying into her shawls and Bhushra Al-Qamar holding one of two surviving members of her family in her arms. Leyla's mind began to buzz. They would need food and shelter – and water.

Leyla coughed and found that although her voice was hoarse, she could talk.

'I took a flying tapestry from the Great Library. We

can head towards the mountains, build a camp and settle there for a time.’

It was a hopeless shot in the dark – a plan that would most likely end up with them freezing to death on the first night – but the people around her nodded and murmured, and it seemed even her feeble suggestion had given them hope that there might, in fact, be a future. They would follow her, Leyla realised, and the weight of their trust settled heavily on her shoulders.

Leyla looked one final time at the ruins of the Sorcerers’ Quarter smouldering on the horizon. Meriyem was out there somewhere. Still fighting, still refusing to believe that all was lost.

Leyla closed her eyes. Even this far away, she could still hear the roar of the fire. The air still tasted of metal. ‘I will come back,’ she whispered. ‘I will come back . . .’

Her words carried on the wind, disappearing into the smoke . . .



Nearly Thirteen
Years Later



Chapter One

Yara Sulimayah was running. She could hear her friends calling after her, making half-hearted attempts to follow. She had never been very fast, but it was amazing how quickly you could move when you were desperate to get away. Only her familiar, Ajal, was keeping pace, sparks flying from his goat hooves as he cantered.

Yara! Leyla Khatoun's voice sounded in her head, a mental message from her furious teacher. *Yara Sulimayah, come back this instant!*

Yara ignored her, shutting the sorceress out of her mind as best she could. She weaved her way through the sorcerers' settlement, through its cluster of houses with their silver-birch roofs, past cauldrons that filled the air with warm colourful steam and under clothes lines where newly dyed shawls had been hung out to dry. The Settlement had become as familiar to her as her

old home back in Bournemouth – and she had become familiar to its people too; as she ran past they called out to her, some trying to slow her down. But she didn't stop, and soon they were far behind her.


To the west of the Settlement were the mountains, where the stream ran milky with melted snow and the ground became steep and rocky beneath Yara's feet. Still she ran, and when she could no longer run, she climbed. Even in the mild spring air her back was damp, her hair sticking unpleasantly to her scalp.

Leyla's voice sounded in her mind again. *Yara, come back. It's not safe!*

Yara squeezed her eyes shut until the sorceress's voice faded to static. Next to her, climbing as nimbly as if he were a born mountain goat and not a jinn who had taken the form on a whim, Ajal lowered his brow and glared.

'You cannot ignore her for ever.'

Red-faced and panting, Yara fired her thoughts straight back into his mind. *I can try.*



The morning hadn't started badly. Yara had been late to her lesson – but although Leyla detested lateness, she had merely pressed her lips together and asked that Yara take her place beside Rafi and Mehnoor.

With the Settlement warmed by the sun, Leyla

decided they would learn outside. Magic always came easier in the open air, and in the early morning the trees and grass around them were still full of starlight, which made things easier too.

‘Where have you been?’ Rafi asked her in an undertone.

‘Tell you later.’

It wouldn’t do for Leyla to overhear that she had been wandering around near the boundary of their settlement – not when the sorceress had expressly forbidden them from venturing too close to where the soldiers had set up residence at their perimeter. Every day that passed, Yara felt as though she were being squeezed into a smaller and smaller space, her thoughts circling each other with increasing frustration, her chest tangled in knots.

‘This is a particularly useful spell for you to learn,’ Leyla began, looking at the three children seriously. She was immaculate as usual, her turban tightly wound and her abaya creaseless. The only signs of how hard she had been working were her stained fingertips and dark shadows beneath her eyes. ‘It is sorcery that hides you from your enemies, first practised by merchants travelling between the great ancient cities. More importantly, it is one of the spells I use to hide us from the guards who wait by our border. I want you to master

it, and then in time I hope the three of you will be able to help maintain our defensive magic.’

Mehnoor and Rafi gave solemn nods. Since the alchemists had poisoned their surroundings, killing half of their most senior sorcerers and devastating the land, the lack of magic was an ever more pressing worry, even more so than their dwindling food supplies. Half a year later, many of the adults were still rebuilding their reserves; even Leyla, their most powerful sorcerer, found spells more difficult.

The younger children were being taught for the first time how to use magic: how a person could use words, powerful words, in a particular order with a particular rhythm, to make wondrous things happen. Anyone could do it, although there were some with a certain spark in their eyes and a quickness to their tongues who found it easier. But even so, it was a difficult, sometimes painful process with children so young. In the old days of Zehaira, a child wouldn’t have practised magic until their thirteenth birthday.

Meanwhile, Yara, Rafi and Mehnoor had been enlisted to help with the practical spells necessary to keep a small community on its feet, a responsibility they all felt keenly. Yet in that moment Yara was having different thoughts. She could use an unseen spell to sneak into the alchemists’ dungeons, find her way past

the locked door that held Ismah Parveen and spirit her away from the clutches of Omair Firaaz . . .

Leyla continued, breaking Yara's train of thought. 'This spell is not only about the words used in the verse. To become unseen, you must imagine that you are part of your environment. You must make yourself emotionless, and fill your thoughts only with your breathing and with the feeling of your feet on the ground.'

Yara's excitement flickered. Her failure to get her emotions under control was a constant refrain on Leyla's lips.

Leyla turned to Mehnoor. 'You may go first – concentrate, and repeat after me:

*Like a shadow in the night
Let me fade out of sight.'*

*'Like a shadow in the night,
Let me fade out of sight.'*

Mehnoor echoed Leyla, her forehead puckered in concentration.

Yara repressed a sigh. Mehnoor's pronunciation was exquisite. Every word fell in the right place; her sentences ended on exactly the right cadence, as though she had

found some hidden music behind the verse. It was an ability Yara thought she would never master herself.

Within seconds Mehnoor had melted into the air, her curls vanishing one by one until only the tip of her nose was left, stubbornly refusing to disappear. Then, just as quickly, the air shimmered and she reappeared.

‘Good,’ said Leyla, nodding at Mehnoor with approval. ‘With practice, you’ll be able to hold your unseeness for far longer – but that was an excellent start.’

Mehnoor’s face lit up, and Yara felt her own expression soften at the sight of her friend.

‘Well done,’ Yara whispered, squeezing her arm. Mehnoor beamed in reply.

‘Now, Yara,’ said Leyla, and Yara stepped up, her thoughts still full of rescuing her mother. She closed her eyes, and chanted:

*Like a shadow in the night
Let me fade out of sight ...*

But when Yara opened her eyes, she was as solid as ever.

She looked up at the sorceress, who raised an

eyebrow. ‘Have you been practising speaking in verse?’

Yara flushed. Leyla knew full well that she had barely glanced at her book of wonders for weeks – its long passages on the technicalities of spoken-word spells were unbearably boring.

Ajal, watching nearby, butted her hand with his horns. ‘Why don’t we do it together?’

‘No,’ said Leyla, before Yara could reply. ‘She needs to be able to manage it on her own.’

Yara bit back an angry reply, held out her hands and spoke with a voice that was somewhere between a mumble and a growl:

*‘Like a shadow in the night
Let me move out of—’*

She broke off in a spluttering cough. All her spell succeeded in doing was producing a large cloud of green smoke around her head, which Leyla dispelled with a wave of her hand.

Yara felt her face go even redder. Only a few months ago she had had so much power that Leyla wouldn’t let her attempt an invisibility spell in case she flung herself out of existence. Now she had to rely more on the language of the verses for her power, each spell she

tried was an uphill battle.

She folded her arms and scowled. ‘It’s pointless. I can’t do it.’

‘You’re distracted,’ said Leyla calmly, although her fingers were twitching, always a warning sign, ‘and you’re cross with me, which is making things harder.’

‘Nine stars, I can’t think why. Perhaps because Ismah Parveen, my *mother*, is rotting in the dungeons of Istehar Way, and you won’t let me do anything to help her!’

Mehnoor took a sharp intake of breath. Leyla’s mouth disappeared in a very thin line, and when she spoke, every word was given a great deal of care.

‘Returning to Zehaira is an utterly stupid idea. You would be walking straight into the arms of Omair Firaaz – the most dangerous man in the kingdom, a man who has very good reason to hate you. Your mother would be no better off with you dead.’

‘That’s not true,’ Yara said hotly. ‘We could help. I know you could – if you weren’t too cowardly to even try.’

‘*Yara*,’ Mehnoor interjected, horrified.

‘That is quite enough.’ Leyla’s eyes flashed. ‘You are not going, which makes this conversation futile. More to the point, why you think you would be any use when you cannot muster a basic unseen spell is beyond me.’

Yara felt cold with rage, her heart thundering. For the first time in a while she felt magic – her own magic – welling up within her, sparking at her fingertips . . .

And then, without warning, Leyla’s cauldron gave a groan, and the ceramic cracked, its contents spilling on to the ground. Leyla started, turned – and Yara fled.

Which was how Yara found herself scrambling frantically up the side of a mountain, her hands red raw from her climb.

‘Do you intend to reach the summit?’ Ajal enquired politely. ‘I understand it is several days’ travel. And there is the matter of predators – I think I just spotted an eagle . . .’

Ignoring him, Yara hauled herself up, slipping on stone that was damp with dew. Finally the ground levelled, and she was forced to come to a halt, her breathlessness catching up with her until she was doubled over. As she recovered, she looked up.

Stretching out below her were trees in full bloom, cherry and lemon and crab-apple blossom forming a pale carpet that rolled out all the way to the golden domes of the distant city. The air here was soft and sweet, the sunlight warm yellow. At the feel of it on her face, Yara felt a sob travel up from her stomach and break past her lips, misery and anger rising inside her until she wanted to howl.

‘I fail to see how the coming of spring could be cause

for such sadness,' said Ajal beside her.

Yara wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. 'Stop reading my mind.'

'I can't help it. Try thinking quieter.'

Yara wiped her eyes again and wound her mama's old headscarf tighter round her neck, returning her gaze to the horizon. Sharing thoughts with the jinn was like someone lighting a fire inside her mind. Their connection was more than ordinary friendship; their thoughts were so tangled up and their magic was so keenly attuned to each other's that she couldn't imagine life without him.

'It's spring,' she said eventually, 'and I still haven't gone back for Ismah Parveen. I let her sacrifice herself for me, again, and then I abandoned her. It's all my fault.'

'The last time you attempted to rescue your mother, you barely escaped the city with your life,' said Ajal. 'You know you must wait until the people here are strong enough to take the fight to the city – you *know* this.'

Yara didn't answer. Fumbling in her pockets, she drew out a ruby, cradling it in her hands. It was the ceremonial stone of the Grand High Sorceress, and it sat warm against her palms, a tangible connection to her mother.

Ajal gave her a searching look. 'I think perhaps you

are not yourself.'

Yara didn't want to admit he was right, but the last time Ajal had told her that she wasn't herself, she had almost burned down the village with an out-of-control fire spell. She supposed she owed it to him to at least entertain the idea.

'Maybe I'm not.' Her words began to come out in a rush. 'But I don't understand *why*. All the magic my mother passed on to me – all the power of the Grand High Sorceress – it's gone, I know it is. I can't feel it any more. But . . .'

'But you still remember,' Ajal finished for her. 'You remember what it was like to have every possibility at the tips of your fingers, but now you have nothing inside you but yourself. I can see the difficulty.'

'I used to be able to do anything – I could have commanded the whole world. How can I be so helpless now?' She looked at Ajal. 'You can feel it too, can't you? When I practise magic, it's like . . . like there's something inside me aching to be powerful again, that won't let go of the idea that that's who I am.'


'Muscle memory.' Ajal nudged her with his horns. 'It will fade. The important thing is that *you* let go of that idea. You are Yara Sulimayah, and that is quite enough to be getting on with.'

With those parting words, Ajal left his goat form and

took off into the sky, sailing windward through the air.

Yara watched him leave. She wasn't sure she *could* let go of that idea. In her old life in Bournemouth, before she had even known that this world and its magic existed, she had never been powerful. She had gone on marches and handed out petitions and leaflets, with a nagging fear that nothing she did could ever achieve anything. Now she knew what it was like to be able to change the direction of the wind and soar like a bird through the sky – she didn't know how to stop wanting it.

And the strange thing was, the one person she wanted to tell all of this to was the one person who had never possessed a scrap of magic in her life. Her mama. The woman who had saved her when the guards captured Ismah Parveen and loved Yara as her own for twelve years. Mama would have listened to Yara with her head tilted to one side and then come out with advice that would loosen the knots in Yara's chest and make her feel as though she could face anything. But Mama was gone, buried under the soil of a different world. Even with Ajal and her friends, she had never felt so lonely.



Coming down was even harder than climbing up – Yara kept losing her footing and falling, and each scratch and graze made her feel more childish and powerless than before. As she neared the foot of the mountain, there

was a familiar figure waiting.

‘Well, that’s a relief. I thought I might have to climb up after you.’ Meri held out her hand to Yara, bracelets shimmering on her wrist. ‘Ready to go home?’

Yara’s eyebrows came further down over her eyes, and Meri faltered. ‘I hear you and Leyla had another falling-out.’

‘Does she want me to apologise?’

‘No. Well, *yes*, but she isn’t really angry. You know, it isn’t her fault that your mother is imprisoned, nor that our settlement is besieged by guards.’

Yara felt her anger uncoil a little at the truth in Meri’s words. In her old life she *never* would have spoken to an adult like that – Mama would have been horrified.

‘I know. She’s just so . . . so . . .’

‘Exacting?’ Meri supplied. ‘Demanding? Stubborn to the point of absurdity?’

Yara narrowed her eyes. All of those could conceivably have been insults had her tone not been *quite* so fond. Once Yara could have relied on Meri taking her side over Leyla’s, but things had changed between the sorceresses, and now Meri couldn’t even say Leyla’s *name* without her eyes softening.

‘She never listens to me.’ Yara’s voice grew higher and faster as she spoke. ‘She knows I want my mother safe more than anything in the world, and she won’t even

discuss how we could rescue her . . .’

Meri put her arms round Yara, and after several seconds Yara leaned in to the touch, her tears damp against the sorceress’s headscarf. Twice she felt Meri’s chest move, as though she were on the verge of speaking, but each time she only brought her hand to Yara’s head, stroking her hair.

Eventually Meri pulled back. ‘Come on. We’d better start on dinner – if we leave it to Leyla and Mehnoor, we’ll be eating plain rice porridge burned to a crisp.’

Yara smiled in spite of herself and was about to follow the sorceress when she stopped dead, her ears pricked.

‘Wait, something’s wrong, there’s something else here.’

Meri stilled, her lips barely moving. ‘A guard?’

‘No, this is different. It’s . . .’ Yara struggled. ‘It’s familiar somehow.’

She began to move towards the boundary. This area near the pine forest and the mountains was not usually patrolled, but guards would not be far off. Behind her, she heard Meri gasp.

‘Yara, come back!’

But the presence Yara felt was growing stronger. They were almost at the forest now and Meri caught hold of her arm just as she teetered at the edge of the boundary. They were close enough to see the lingering smoke from the guards’ campfire.

‘That’s enough.’ The sorceress’s voice was sharp. ‘This is beyond dangerous.’

‘Can’t you feel it?’ Yara asked desperately.

‘Feel what? Yara, don’t you dare!’

Yara hesitated, and then she shook off Meri’s hand and took one step over the boundary, only partially concealed by the trees.

But she went no further.

Her foot struck something solid, and she stumbled, righting herself just in time. Yara looked down. Half buried in leaves and dirt lay a black cat, as small as a kitten and so thin that Yara could count its ribs. As Yara brushed away the leaves, she saw his fur was matted with blood, and his ear and tail were torn.

Quickly Yara scooped him up, moving back until they were both safely over the boundary. The cat was ice cold, and Yara’s own heart almost stopped, but as she held him tighter, she could just about feel the faint rise and fall of his chest against her arms.

‘Meri . . .’ Yara’s voice was trembling.

‘Oh, the poor thing, Meri stroked his head. ‘But, Yara, you cannot risk your safety like that for a—’

‘He’s not a cat. This is Ismah Parveen’s familiar. And he’s dying.’