

THE ADVENTURES OF AMINA AL-SIRAFI

a novel



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AMINA AL-SIRAFI

- A NOVEL -

Shannon Chakraborty



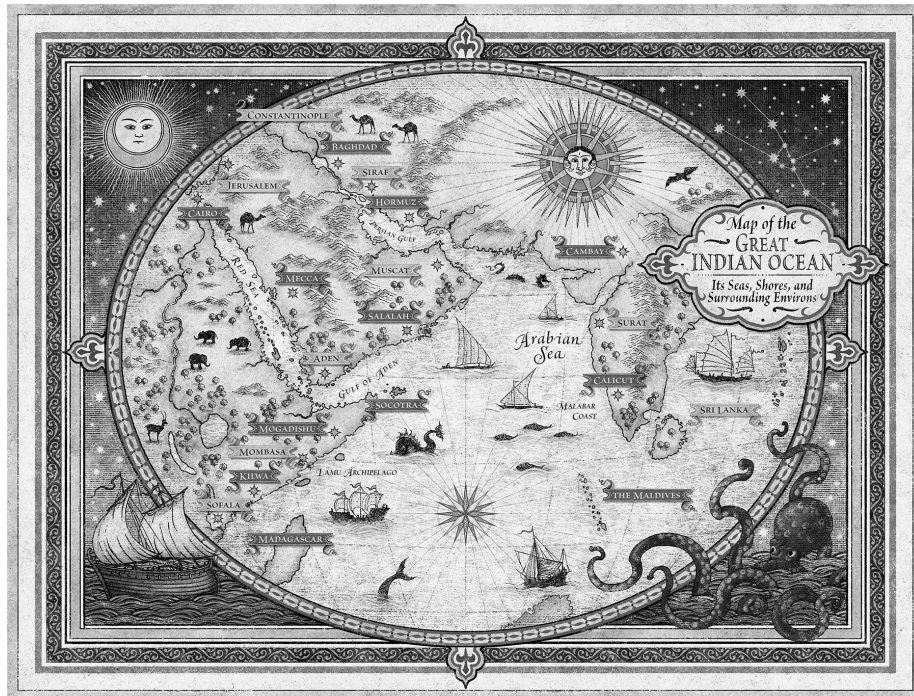
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Dedication

For all those parenting in hardship: during pandemics, through climate crises, and under occupation. For those struggling to keep food on the table, and juggle multiple jobs and impossible childcare. For everyone who's set aside their own dreams, briefly or forever, to lift those of the next generation.

Map



Epigraph

I clung to the plank of wood, my only refuge in the storm-tossed sea, and berated myself, saying “Sinbad the Sailor, you never learn! After each of your journeys—the first and the second, the third and the fourth, the FIFTH, all worse than that which preceded it!—you swear to God to repent and give up these travels. And every time you lie, swayed by greed and adventure, to return to the sea. So take the punishment that is coming, you deserve it!”

—From “The Sixth Voyage of Sinbad the Sailor”

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Author's Note

Please note that in the voice of the time and place in which this book takes place, the Latin Christians of Western Europe are referred to as Franks and the Byzantines as the Rum. The novel's twelfth-century, largely Islamicate societies of the northwestern Indian Ocean littoral had their own rich and fascinating way of describing antiquity, their contemporaries, and the wider world, and though I've tried to re-create that here as accurately as possible, this is a work of fiction. A [glossary](#) with additional historical and nautical terms can be found at the back, as well as suggestions for [further reading](#).

A Word on What Is to Come

In the name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate. Blessings upon His honored Prophet Muhammad, his family, and his followers. Praise be to God, who in His glory created the earth and its diversity of lands and languages, peoples and tongues. In these vast marvels, so numerous a human eye cannot gaze upon more than a sliver, is there not proof of His Magnificence?

And when it comes to marvels . . . let us delight in the adventures of the nakhudha Amina al-Sirafi.

Yes! *That* Captain Amina al-Sirafi. The smuggler, the pirate. The blasphemer that men of letters accuse of serving up human hearts for her sea-beast husband, and the sorceress—for she *must* be a sorceress, because no female could sail a ship so deftly without the use of forbidden magics—whose appearance somehow both beguiles and repulses. Traders along our fair shores warn against speaking her name as though she is a djinn that might be summoned as such—though, strangely, they have little compunction when it comes to spreading vicious rumors about her body and her sexuality: these things that men obsess over when they hate what they desire and desire what they cannot possess.

I am certain you have heard talk of her. After all, it is tradition for the traveled men of our ummah to share the wonders of the world by creating accounts of their voyages—particularly when those voyages are enlivened by gossip of fearsome female rogues. Many such

travelers will swear their accounts are not written to tantalize or entertain—God forbid!—but are intended first and foremost to strengthen the hearts of the faithful and provide evidence of the promised splendor of God’s creation. And yet, as Muslims, are we not told to speak honestly? To ascertain what is truth and beware spreading falsehoods?

And dear sisters . . . what falsehoods.

For this scribe has read a great many of these accounts and taken away another lesson: that to be a woman is to have your story misremembered. Discarded. *Twisted*. In courtyard tales, women are the adulterous wives whose treachery begins a husband’s descent into murderous madness or the long-suffering mothers who give birth to proper heroes. Biographers polish away the jagged edges of capable, ruthless queens so they may be remembered as saints, and geographers warn believing men away from such and such a place with scandalous tales of lewd local females who cavort in the sea and ravish foreign interlopers. Women are the forgotten spouses and unnamed daughters. Wet nurses and handmaidens; thieves and harlots. Witches. A titillating anecdote to tell your friends back home or a warning.

There are plenty of slanderous stories like *that* about Amina al-Sirafi. She was too relentless, they say. Too ambitious, too violent, utterly inappropriate, and well . . . old! A *mother*, if you can believe it! Ah yes, a certain degree of rebelliousness is expected from youth. It is why we have stories of treasure-seeking princesses and warrior women that end with the occasional happiness. But they are expected to *end*—with the boy, the prince, the sailor, the adventurer. The man that will take her maidenhood, grant her children, make her a wife. The man who defines her. *He* may continue his epic—he may indeed take new wives and make new children!—but women’s stories are expected to dissolve into a fog of domesticity . . . if they’re told at all.

Amina’s story did not end. Verily, no woman’s story does. This humble scribe—ah, I should introduce myself: there is a bit more to my name, but for now you may call me Jamal. Jamal al-Hilli. And I have met grandmothers launching new businesses, elderly queens fighting wars of conquest, and young mothers taking up a drawing

pen for the first time. Indeed, we may only have Amina's story *because* she was a mother. In our time together, she spoke constantly of her daughter. And though it may be a bold assumption . . . she spoke *to* her daughter. So that her child might come to understand the choices her mother had made. For when Amina chose to leave her home and return to a life at sea, she became more than a pirate. More than a witch.

She became a legend.

This tale will sound unbelievable. What proofs and documents could be collected are reproduced, but when it came to the nakhudha, this scribe felt it best to let Amina speak for herself. To resist the urge to shape and couch her words. But for the sake of honesty, another truth will be confessed. Her adventures are not only being told as evidence of God's marvels.

They are being told to entertain.

Chapter 1

God as my witness, none of this would have ever happened if it were not for those two fools back in Salalah. Them and their map.

—What? What do you mean, that is “not how you start a story”? A *biography*? You wish for a biography? Who do you think you are chronicling, the Grand Mufti of Mecca? My people do not wax poetic about lineage like yours do. We are not even true Sirafis. My father’s father—an orphan turned pirate from Oman—simply found the name romantic.

—Don’t you think so?

As I was saying. The idiots and their map. Now, I understand the appeal of treasure-hunting, I do. After all, we build our homes upon the ruins of lost cities and sail our ships over the drowned palaces of forgotten kings. Everyone has heard a tale of how so-and-so dug up a jar of Sasanian coins while sowing his fields or met a pearl diver who glimpsed hordes of emeralds glittering on the seabed. It was related to me that in Egypt, treasure-hunting is so popular its participants have organized into professional guilds, each holding their particular tricks close . . . though for the right price, someone *might* be willing to give you some advice. They may even offer to sell you a map! A guide to such fortunes you could scarcely imagine.

The maps are—and I cannot emphasize this enough—remarkably easy to forge. I can even tell you how it is done: You merely need a scrap of parchment and a bit of time. Tonics are applied to darken and yellow the paper, though regrettably, the majority require urine and the best derive from the bile of a bat. The map itself should be

drawn with care, with enough details that some geographic locations will be recognizable (ideally directing the mark in the opposite direction of which the mapmaker intends to flee). Symbols can be lifted from any number of alphabets. Many forgers prefer Hebrew for its mystical connotations, but in my opinion, the text off an old Sabaeen tomb makes for more mysterious letters. Wrinkle the whole thing up; fray the edges, burn a few holes, apply a thin layer of sandarac to fade the script—and that is that. Your “treasure” map is ready to be sold to the highest bidder.

The map my clients possessed that night did not look like it had been sold to the highest bidder. Though they had been trying to conceal the document along with their purpose—as though midnight excursions to ancient ruins were a common request—a glimpse had been enough to reveal the map was of middling work, perhaps the practice manuscript of an earnest criminal youngster.

But I kept such opinions to myself. That they had hired me to row them out here was a blessing, a chance job I had snagged while fishing. I must have seemed a prime candidate for their mission: a lone local woman a bit long in the tooth and almost certainly too dim to care what they were doing. I made the appropriate noises, warning them that the ruins were said to be haunted by ghouls and the surrounding lagoon cursed by djinn, but the young men assured me they could handle themselves. And as I had spent many a night fishing in the area without encountering even a whiff of the supernatural, I was not truly concerned.

—Excuse me? That “seems sort of naïve”? Do you not recall how we met, hypocrite? Stop talking and eat your stew. The saltah is excellent here and you are barely thicker than that pen you are holding. Another interruption, Jamal, and you can find some other nakhudha to harass for stories.

Anyway. Back to that night. It was an otherwise enchanting evening. The stars were out, a rare sight during the khareef, the summer monsoon that typically mires us in fog. The moon shone brightly upon the ruined fort across the lagoon, its crumbling bricks all that remained of a long-abandoned city locals said had once been a bustling trading port. This part of the world has always been rich; the Romans once called us Arabia Felix, “Blessed Arabia,” for our

access to the sea, reliable trade routes, and lucrative frankincense groves. Locals *also* say that the lost city's treasury—still bursting with gold—lays hidden beneath the ruins, buried during an earthquake. It was that story I assumed had lured out the youths until one of them loudly clucked their tongue at me in the manner of a man calling a mule to halt while we were still in the lagoon.

“Stop here,” the boy ordered.

I gave the black water surrounding us, the beach still some distance away, a dubious glance. During the day, this was a lovely place that attracted flamingos and dolphins. When the wind and tide were just right, water would burst from the rocks in geysers to the delight of children and picnicking families. But during low tide on a calm night such as this, the breakers against the surf were mild, a steady soothing crash and glittering white spray that did little to differentiate between sea and shore. If my clients thought they could swim all the way to the barely visible beach, they were even more foolish than I thought. And I think I've been clear how foolish I considered them.

“We are not yet at the ruins,” I pointed out.

“This is far enough.” The pair were huddled together at the other end of my small boat, the map spread across their knees. One boy held an oil lamp for illumination, the other a burning bunch of dried jasmine.

“I do not understand,” one of the youths muttered. They had been arguing in hushed whispers all night. Though their accents sounded Adeni to my ear, I did not know their names. They had rather dramatically declared that in lieu of offering their names, they would pay me an additional dirham for my discretion, and since I did not actually care, the extra payment was a delightful surprise. “The map says this is the spot . . .” He gestured to the heavens above, and my heart went out to him, for what was written on that map had nothing to do with any star chart I have ever seen.

“You said you wished to go to the old city.” I gestured toward the hill—or at least I tried to. But a thick bank of fog had rolled down from the wadi, the monsoon-swollen stream that fed the lagoon, to surround us, and neither the ruins nor the hill were visible. Instead,

as I watched, the shore entirely vanished so that we appeared to be floating on an endless, mist-shrouded plain.

The youths ignored me. “We have said the words,” the one holding the oil lamp argued. “We have her payment. She should appear.”

“And yet she has not,” the other boy argued. “I am *telling* you, we were supposed to . . .”

But whatever they were supposed to do stopped concerning me. In the space of a breath, the breeze that had been blowing in from the sea all night abruptly halted, the air turning dead and flat. I stilled, a bead of sweat chasing down my spine. I am a sailor, and there is little I watch more closely than the weather. I lifted a fraying strand from my cloak, but no wind stirred the thread. The fog drew closer, accompanied by a smothering quiet that made thunderous every knock of water against the boat’s hull.

There are places in the world where such signs might herald a vicious, dangerous storm, but the typhoons that occasionally struck here typically did not manifest so unexpectedly. The water remained gentle, the tide and current unchanged, but even so . . . there was an ill feeling in my belly.

I reached for my oars. “I think we should leave.”

“Wait!” One of the young men stood, waving excitedly at the fog. “Do you see that shadow above the sea-foam?”

It *was* sea-foam, I realized, squinting in the dark. Years of the sun’s glare upon the ocean had begun to take their toll on my vision, and I struggled to see clearly at night. But the boy was correct. It wasn’t only fog drifting closer. It was sea-foam piled high enough to swallow my boat. As it approached, one could see a reddish-yellow hue to the substance and smell the awful aroma of rotting flesh and gutted fish.

“Give over her payment,” Oil-Lamp Boy urged. “Quickly!”

“Forget my payment and sit back down,” I ordered as the second youth reached into his robe. “We are—”

The boy pulled free his hand, revealing a large chunk of red carnelian, and two things happened very quickly:

One, I realized that was not *my* payment.

Two, the thing whose payment it was dragged us into the fog.

The boy holding the carnelian barely had time to cry out before the froth rushed to consume him, licking down his neck and chest and winding around his hips like an eager lover. A howl ripped from his throat, but it was not a scream any mortal mouth should have been able to let loose. Rather, it was more the roar of a tidal wave and the death cries of gulls.

“Khalid!” The other boy dropped the lamp in shock, extinguishing our only light.

But fortunately—fortunately?—the seemingly alive and possibly malevolent sea-foam was glowing. Its light was faint, but enough to illuminate Khalid as he bared his teeth like a wolf and threw himself on his companion.

“*You shall not have me,*” he hissed, groping for the other boy’s neck. “We will curse you! We will devour you! We will cast you into the flames!”

The other boy struggled to free himself. “Khalid, please!” he choked as more sea-foam—now the crimson of blood—spread over them both. Fanged suckers were blossoming across its surface like the tentacles of a monstrous squid.

I would like to say I did not hesitate. That at the sight of two youths in mortal peril, I flew into action and did not briefly wonder if the malevolent sea-foam might be sated with eating them and leave me and my boat alone. That would be a lie. I did hesitate. But then I cursed them profusely, rose to my feet, and went for my knife.

Now, I am fond of blades. The khanjar that was my grandfather’s and the wickedly beautiful Damascene scimitar I stole off an undeserving noble. The small straight knife that hides in an ankle holster and a truly excellent bladed disc from my second husband, who learned to regret teaching me to throw it.

But there’s only one weapon for situations like this, one I commissioned myself and never leaves my presence. Made of pure iron, it isn’t my sharpest blade and its weight can make it unwieldy. Spots of rust from the sacred Zamzam water I sprinkle over it in nightly blessings pepper the metal, the red flakes making it difficult to discern the knife’s inscribed holy verses. But I didn’t need the knife to be pretty.

I needed it to be effective when more earthly weapons failed.

I seized Khalid by the collar and ripped him off the other boy. Before he could make a grab for *my* throat, I put my blessed blade to his. “Be gone,” I demanded.

He wriggled wildly, sea-foam flying. “You shall not have me. *You shall not have me!*”

“I do not want you! Now, in the name of God, be gone!”

I pressed the knife harder as the bismillah left my lips. His flesh sizzled in response, and then he crumpled. The sea-foam that had wrapped his body hovered in the air a moment then hurled itself at me. I fell as though struck by a battering ram, my head slamming into the boat’s bottom.

Icy fingers with bone-sharp tips were digging into my ears, a great weight pinning me in place. But by the grace of God, I was still holding my blessed blade. I struck out madly, and the knife *stuck* in the air. There was a shriek—an evil, unnatural sound like claws scraping over seashells—and then the scaled monstrosity squatting on my chest rippled into sight. Its glittering eyes were the color of bilgewater, its filthy straw-like hair matted with barnacles.

It screamed again, revealing four needlelike teeth. Its bony hands scrabbled on my own as it tried to wrest away the dagger sunk into its wine-dark breast. Silver blood bubbled and dripped from the wound, drenching us both.

The youths were sobbing and begging God for mercy. The demon was shrieking and wailing in an unknown tongue. I shoved the blade deeper, thundering to be heard over all of them.

“God!” I shouted. “There is no god worthy of worship except Him, the Ever-Living, All-Sustaining!” Holding the dagger tight, I launched into ayat al-kursi, the passage from the Quran I had been taught all my life would protect me.

The demon on my chest howled and writhed in pain, its skeletal hands flying to cover scaled ears.

“Neither drowsiness nor sleep overtakes Him! To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth—*will you get off of me?*” I elbowed the creature hard, and it spit in my face. “Who could possibly intercede with Him without His permission? He knows what is ahead of them and what is behind them, but no one can grasp any of His knowledge—except what He wills!”

Its skin smoking, the demon must have decided it had had enough. A pair of bat-like wings sprouted from its back, and with a gusty flap, it pulled itself off the blade and was gone, vanished into the night.

Gasping, I sat up. The mists were already receding, the youths still clutching each other on the other side of the boat. I held the dagger tight, searching the retreating fog for anything else. Fear coursed through me, thick and choking, as I waited for that familiar laugh. For fiery black eyes and a too-silky voice.

But there was nothing. Nothing but the star-splashed lagoon and the gentle murmur of the tide.

I spun on the youths. "You said you were after treasure."

Oil-Lamp Boy flushed, spots of color appearing in his chalky skin. "Treasure is a concept open to—no, wait!" he cried as I snatched their map and lump of carnelian, thrusting them over the water. "Do not do that!"

I tossed and caught the glittering red gem in one hand. "Do not pretend with me, boy," I warned. "Lie again and I will throw you both overboard. You mentioned payment and a name. What were you trying to summon?"

"We were not trying—Bidukh!" he confessed when I dipped the map into the sea. "My cousin told me about her. She is . . ." He swallowed loudly. "She is one of the daughters of Iblis."

I gaped. "You were trying to summon a daughter of the lord of hell? On *my* boat?"

"We did not mean any harm!" The moonlight had returned, and I could see him cowering. "It is said that if you please her, she will whisper the secrets of love into your ear."

Khalid swayed in his friend's arms. "I am going to be sick."

"Throw up in my boat, and you swim back to shore. A daughter of Iblis . . . may you both be cursed." I hurled the map and carnelian into the lagoon. They vanished with loud splashes amidst the protest of my passengers.

"Hey!" the boy cried. "We paid a lot of money for that!"

"You should be thanking God you did not pay with your lives." I thrust an extra oar in his arms. "Row. Perhaps some labor will knock a bit of sense into you."

He nearly dropped the oar, his eyes going wide as I shifted positions, the movement revealing the other weapons concealed beneath my cloak. I wiped the iron knife clean, placing it back into its sheath before taking up my own set of oars.

Both boys were staring at me with expressions of shock. I could not blame them. I'd fought off a demon, given up the slouch I'd been affecting to reveal my true height, and now rowed with my full strength—a far cry from the quiet, hunched-over old fisherwoman who'd reluctantly agreed to take them out here.

“Who are you?” Khalid asked hoarsely.

The other one gawked. “*What* are you?”

The lagoon was receding, but I would swear I still felt a heaviness in the air. For a moment the water splashing at the rocky beach looked like the yellow-hued crimson of the now-vanished sea-foam, the shadows dancing on the cliffs like tentacles.

“Someone who knows too well the price of magic.”

I said nothing else, and they did not ask. But they did not need to. For stories carry, and even if the youths were ashamed to confess their own schemes, the tale of an unassuming fisherwoman who fought a demon like a warrior of God? Who threw off her tattered cloak to reveal an armory at her waist and a form like an Amazon?

Exaggerations, but the truth scarcely matters when it comes to a good tale. The kind of story that spreads in taverns and shipyards. To wealthy women's harems and the kitchens of their servants.

To the ear of a very desperate grandmother in Aden.