

# Star of Light

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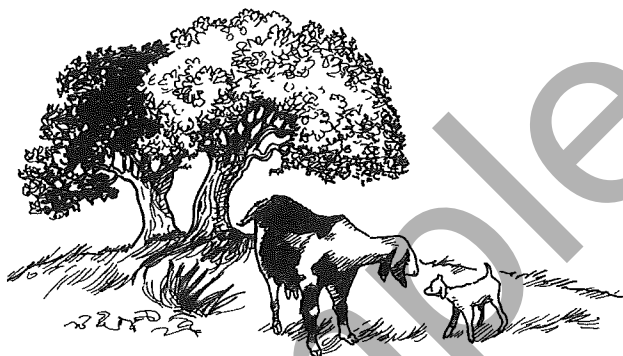
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## Kinza



A little girl came running down the side of the mountain one midday in spring. Pulling her cotton dress up around her knees, she skipped as lightly as a lamb on her bare brown feet, leaping over the bright orange marigolds that shone up at her. Baby goats jumped among the wildflowers, and the storks had begun to build their nests on the tops of the thatched houses.

Rahma was seven years old. She was small because she never had enough to eat. Her stepfather and his elder wife didn't like her and sometimes beat her. Her clothes were very ragged, and she had to work very hard. But today she was going to have a treat, and nothing could spoil her happiness. She had been

asked to look after the goats alone while her brother went on some mysterious trip with their mother.

She was free and alone with just the goats and storks for company—two whole hours to play in the sunshine with the goat kids, with no one to shout at her, or make her grind the millstone, or carry heavy buckets of water.

She spotted Hamid, her brother, rounding up a couple of mischievous black kids who were trying to get into a patch of young wheat. Spring was making them feel excited, and they were jumping about all over the place. Hamid joined in with them and then Rahma, too, her smooth dark hair blowing about her face, her black eyes shining brightly.

Laughing and shouting together, they steered the kids away from the patch of wheat and on to the open hillside where the rest of the flock was scattered. Then Hamid turned, surprised, to look at his little sister. He had not often seen her so happy and carefree, for country girls were taught to behave themselves properly.

“What have you come for?” he asked.

“To look after the goats. Mother wants you.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know—she wants you to go somewhere. She has been crying and looking at Little Sister. I think perhaps Little Sister is ill.”

Her sparkling eyes looked sad as she remembered her mother’s tears, for she loved her mother—only the sunshine and freedom had made her forget all about them.

“All right,” said Hamid, “but take good care of the

goats. Here's a stick for you."

He turned away and climbed the valley between the two green arms of the mountains. He walked fast because he did not want to keep his mother waiting, but he did not skip or look about him as Rahma had done, for his mind was full of questions.

Why did his mother look so worried and full of fear these days? Why was she always hiding away his baby sister, keeping her out of sight whenever she heard her husband or the older wife approaching? Of course, neither of them had ever really liked Baby Sister, but they knew she was there, so why hide her? Mother even seemed afraid of Hamid and Rahma playing with the baby nowadays. She would drive them away and hide in a corner of the room, her little daughter clasped against her, and always with that fear in her eyes. Was it evil spirits she feared? Or poison? Hamid did not know, but perhaps today his mother would tell him. He walked faster.

He sighed as he climbed the hill, because until a few months ago his mother had never looked frightened, and he and Rahma had never been knocked about or considered in the way. They had lived with their mother and their father, who loved them, in a little thatched home down the valley. There had been three other curly-headed children younger than Rahma, but they had started coughing and grown thin. When the snow fell, and there was hardly any bread or fuel, they grew weaker and died within a few weeks of each other. Their little bodies were buried on the eastern slope of the mountain facing the sunshine, and marigolds and daisies grew on their graves.

Their father coughed that winter, too, but no one took any notice because, after all, a man must earn his living. So he went on working, and plowed his fields in spring and sowed his grain. Then he came home one night and said he could work no more. Until the following autumn, he lay on the rush mat and grew weaker. Zohra, his wife, and Hamid and Rahma gathered in the ripened corn and gleaned what they could so they could buy him food, but it was no use. He died, leaving his wife, still young and beautiful, a poor widow with two little children.

They sold the house and the goats and the hens and the patch of corn, and went to live with their grandmother. A few months later Little Sister was born, bringing fresh hope and sunshine to the family. They called her Kinza, which means "treasure," and everyone loved and cuddled her. Yet, strangely, she never played or clapped her hands like other babies. She slept a lot and often seemed to lie staring at nothing. Hamid sometimes wondered why she didn't seem pleased with the bunches of bright flowers he picked for her.

When Kinza was a few months old, a man offered to marry their mother. She accepted at once, because she had no work and no more money to buy food for her three children, and the family moved to their new home.

It was not a very happy home. Si Mohamed, the husband, was already married to an older wife, but she had never had any children, so he wanted another wife. He did not mind taking Hamid, too, because a boy of nine would be useful to look after

the goats. He also thought Rahma could be a useful little slave girl about the house. But he could not see that a baby was any use at all, and he wanted to give Kinza away.

“Many childless women will be glad of a girl,” he said, “and why should I bring up another man’s baby?”

But Zohra had burst into tears and refused to do any work until he changed his mind, so he rather crossly agreed to let Kinza stay for a while. No more was said about it—unless perhaps something had been said during the past few weeks, something that Hamid and Rahma had not heard. Could that be why their mother held Kinza so close and looked so frightened?

A voice above Hamid called to him to run, and he looked up. His mother was standing under an old, twisted olive tree that threw its shade over a well. She carried two empty buckets, and baby Kinza was tied on her back with a cloth. She seemed in a great hurry about something.

“Come quick, Hamid,” she said impatiently. “How slowly you come up the path! Hide the buckets in the bushes—I only brought them as an excuse to leave the house, in case Fatima should want to know where I was going. Now, come with me.”

“Where to, Mother?” asked the little boy, very surprised.

“Wait till we get around the corner of the mountain,” replied his mother, leading the way up the steep, green grass and walking very fast. “People will see us from the well and will tell Fatima where



we have gone. Follow quickly. I'll tell you soon."

They hurried on until they were hidden from the village and were overlooking another valley. Zohra sat down and laid her baby in her lap.

"Look well at her, Hamid," she said. "Play with her and show her the flowers."

Hamid stared long and hard into the strangely old, patient face of his little sister, but she did not stare back or return his smile. She seemed to be looking at something very far away and did not see him at all. Suddenly feeling very afraid, he flicked his hand in front of her eyes, but she didn't move or blink.

"She's blind," he whispered at last. His lips felt dry and his face was white.

His mother nodded and quickly stood up. "Yes," she replied, "she's blind. I've known it for some time, but I haven't told Fatima or my husband because they will probably take her away from me. Why should they be bothered with another man's blind child? She can never work, and she will never marry."

She started to cry, and tears blinded her as she stumbled on the rough path.

Hamid caught hold of her arm. "Where are we going, Mother?" he asked her again.

"To the saint's tomb," answered his mother, hurrying on, "up behind the next hill. They say he is a very powerful saint and has healed many people, but Fatima has never given me the chance to go. Now she thinks I'm drawing water, and we must return with the buckets full. I wanted you to come with me, because it's a lonely path and I was afraid to go by