

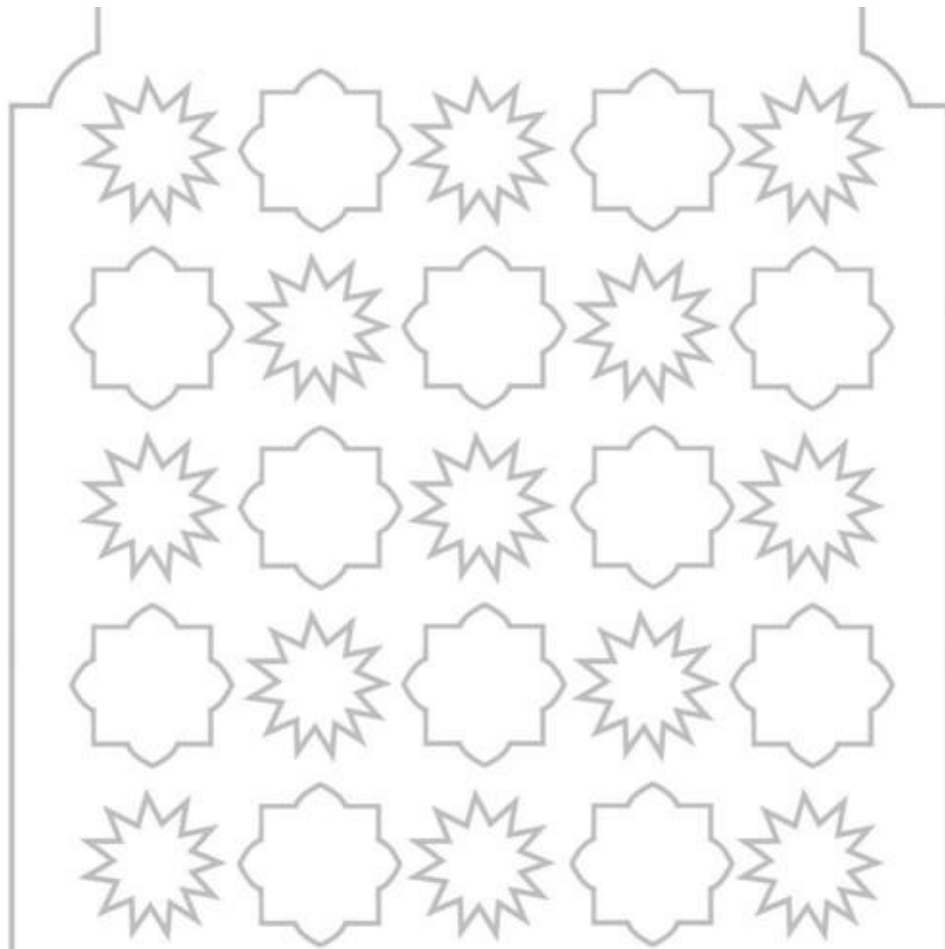
RENÉE AHDIÉH

THE CROWN

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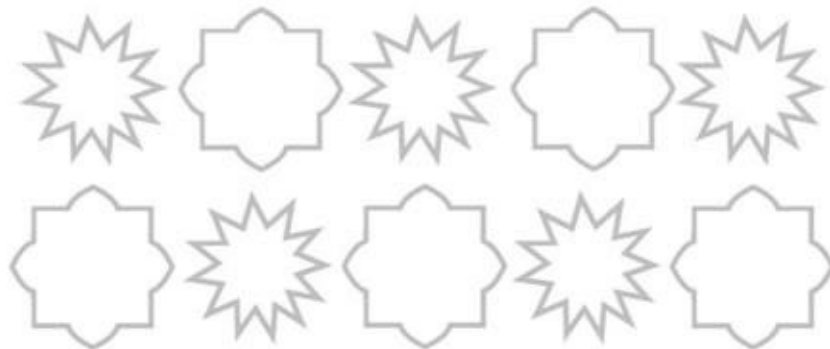
ARROW

• A WRATH & DAWN SHORT STORY •



THE CROWN & THE ARROW

A WRATH AND THE DAWN SHORT STORY



• R E N É E A H D I E H •

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Version_1

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[JUST ONE GIRL](#)



JUST ONE GIRL

STRANGE THAT IT HAD COME TO THIS. Strange and fitting.

A life ruled by the rising and setting of the sun.

In these moments of quiet reflection, Khalid would often think back to the things his mother had said to him as a child. A child who'd feared the dark and its many shadows.

“Do not fear what the setting sun may bring. Where there is a setting sun, there is also a rising one.”

How well he knew this now. So many years later.

Khalid forced himself to look in the mirror.

Just as he'd done for the last seventy-two days.

Seventy-two dawns and seventy-two dusks.

Khalid hated the sight of his father's eyes staring back at him. Hated the reminder of who he was and why these terrible things had come to be.

The son of a monster. The blood of a madman.

Blood begets blood.

The lines on his face darkened. Khalid exhaled. His brows gathered, then smoothed.

It was not anyone's fault but his own. His and his alone.

"*Sayyidi?*" A gruff voice split through the gloom at Khalid's back. "It is time."

When Khalid turned, he found his uncle standing in the entrance to his antechamber. The *Shahrban* of Rey's features were grizzled, his expression resigned.

He studied Khalid's countenance. "It will be over soon." His tone was quiet. Meant to sound soothing. But—as always—it was too gravelly to have its desired effect.

"No," Khalid said softly. "This—will never be over."

The *shahrban* sighed, his shoulders bunching. "Forgive me, *sayyidi*. I did not mean to make light of the situation."

"I know."

A moment passed in awkward silence. The *shahrban* made a motion as though to extend a hand, then stopped himself, his fingers curling through empty air. Without another word, he stepped aside to allow Khalid passage.

Khalid steeled himself before moving into the alabaster corridor beyond his chambers. "Where is Jalal?"

"The captain of the guard is already assembled in the throne room, *sayyidi*."

Almost absentmindedly, Khalid nodded.

It never ceased to give him pause. How they returned to their posts with such stilted ease. The ease of many unsaid thoughts. A king and his general.

They were soon flanked by Khalid's normal retinue of bodyguards. The soldiers marched in unison, four at each side. Grim-faced. Determined. The Rajput stood close by, ever vigilant. For all of these men knew it was impossible to be too careful, not with the steady rise in threats levied at Khorasan's young caliph.

Khorasan's murderous boy-king.

As though he could sense Khalid's thoughts, the Rajput's hand fell upon the hilt of his *talwar*, his gaze roving every which way. Danger often lurked in the same shadows Khalid had feared as a boy. Lived in the dark he'd always avoided.

The dark where Khalid was now most comfortable.

For a time, the only sounds around him were the shuffling of leather sandals against polished stone. The occasional clank of a sword.

Khalid took to studying the rays of sun shifting through the carved screens. The way the light danced and folded on itself.

“What is her name?” he finally asked his uncle.

“Shahzad al-Khayzuran.”

Khalid committed the name to memory. Another life lost. Another family shattered.

The seventy-second one.

His uncle seemed to waver a moment. To hesitate, as though he meant to say or do something more. It did not escape Khalid’s notice.

He looked to his uncle. Pointedly.

This time, the *shahrbān*’s sigh was one of exasperation. “The captain of the guard wished for me to tell you. Though I advised against it.”

“Tell me what?”

“This girl—this Shahzad al-Khayzuran—” His uncle faltered once more. “She . . . volunteered.”

Khalid stopped in his tracks. The swords around him jangled in a chorus of scraping metal, the soldiers poised to strike at his word.

Why would this young girl volunteer to die?

Just as quickly as the question rose in his throat, Khalid forced it down. Tamped down his curiosity. His interest. It was impossible for him to fathom the girl’s reasons. And he would not do her the dishonor of speculating. The dishonor of presumption.

Despite the low thrum of his thoughts.

He resumed his steps, his mind a tangle of knots. The questions continued bouncing back and forth in a ceaseless flurry. No matter how hard he tried, Khalid’s attempts to silence them were in vain.

No girl in her right mind would volunteer to die.

So it followed that this girl—this Shahzad al-Khayzuran—must not be in her right mind. In Khalid’s experience, only two things prompted people to such drastic measures.

Love. And hate.

Which was it?

There was only one way to find out.

But that way was not an option. Not for his people. Not for Khalid.

In silence, he proceeded through the corridors, winding his way down the blue-veined agate toward the audience hall. As he turned the final corner, he caught sight of a handmaiden, studying the double doors ahead with unflinching intent.

Her blue eyes were bright, her arms folded across her chest. A slender finger tapped against the band of silver wrapped above her left elbow.

This handmaiden's interest regarding the newest queen was clear. She could afford such a luxury, after all. A young girl who had volunteered to die was an unusual girl indeed.

The thought crossed Khalid's mind: this particular handmaiden would be a good candidate for discovering Shahrzad al-Khayzuran's reason for volunteering. Perhaps when she attended to the new queen tonight.

Despina would be an excellent resource. Khalid could see it—in the way the Theban girl's curiosity was just as piqued as his own. A curiosity she did not need to conceal from prying eyes.

Unlike him.

Khalid's curiosity was immaterial to the task at hand. Undeserved.

A monster did not deserve to consider the motivations of his prey.

Khalid strode past the parting double doors and across the diagonally patterned stones of black and white. His golden throne rested upon a raised dais in the cavernous chamber's center.

He did not take his place on the low, silk-covered settee. For this was not an occasion of honor. Not an occasion for leisure. Instead he stood before the settee, trying for all the world to appear stronger than he felt.

Khalid shifted his gaze to his right to find his cousin standing at the base of the dais, a booted foot propped against its edge. Jalal al-Khoury's watchful eyes were settled on Khalid. A mirthless smile crept up one side of the Captain of the Royal Guard's face. A smile meant to brighten Khalid's sour mood.

In response, Khalid returned his cousin's scrutiny until the smile vanished.

He was good at that. Good at robbing the world of light, even in its barest measure.

For the briefest of instants, Khalid allowed his eyes to fall shut.

Where there is a setting sun, there is also a rising one.

Seventy-two days. This ordeal would soon be over. Soon, his people would be safe. Soon, he could welcome back the nightmares into his life.

He would gladly accept the consequences for that promise. That certainty.
The double doors before him swung open with a baleful moan.
Khalid opened his eyes.

A girl stood at the entrance. She progressed toward him without hesitation. Oddly, Khalid's guards were not leading her to her fate. They were walking at a respectful distance. Almost as though they knew better than to lead this girl anywhere. Almost as though they knew their place remained at her heel.

Who is this girl?

She was small of stature. Not an immediate cause for concern. At least at a distance.

Her hair was long and dark. Unruly. The damask of her mantle gleamed in flashes of silver and gold. As she walked, the fabric unfurled around her like wings.

As she drew closer, Khalid realized he might have been mistaken.

For this girl was anything but delicate. Her fists were tight at her sides. Her head, high. Proud.

Her eyes did not waver. They pierced through him like arrows.

Arrows dipped in honey and poison.

As she moved closer, Khalid realized just how mistaken he had been.

She was indeed small of stature. But not a girl to be dismissed. Not at all.

A pert chin. A sneer held barely in check.

A face seething with emotion.

The girl stopped before the dais. She looked up, fearless, before stepping onto the raised platform, her expression unguarded. Unmoved.

Beyond his control, Khalid's eyebrows curved high on his brow. He returned her hot gaze, trying to appear unaffected by her presence. By her bravery.

He could not afford to care.

Khalid reached a hand out to her. The girl took it, remembering to bow only at the last instant. As though Khalid did not merit such respect.

Would never merit it.

The truth in her gaze leveled him.

She dipped low in undeserved deference, the color rising in her cheeks.

When the girl looked up again, Khalid faltered. The thrum of his thoughts coiled through his chest, tensing in recognition—

Hate.

This girl hated him with all the violence Khalid felt in his heart. Hated the very sight of him. Hated everything he was with everything she had.

Her hate was a thing of glory.

She was not afraid.

Why isn't she afraid?

His curiosity teemed beneath his skin. Khalid blinked once, banishing it away.

Failing miserably.

“Wife,” he said in a low voice. A voice he did not trust. Khalid nodded once, acknowledging their union before the city’s magistrate.

Sealing her fate.

“My king,” the girl replied with clear conviction. A conviction Khalid could not begin to understand.

A conviction he could not begin to ignore.

A girl willingly donning a crown of death. A small girl with immense courage.

Immense hate.

Why did she hate him profoundly? It could not be a result of the rumors swirling about him. Had to be more than the sum of his recent actions.

Her reason had to be personal.

But no other girl in the al-Khayzuran family had been taken from her home and brought to the palace to await her death.

Jalal would not have allowed such a thing. It had been one of Khalid’s first directives—two girls could not be lost from the same family.

Two girls in one family could not be lost to the same curse.

So then from where did Shahrzad al-Khayzuran’s animosity stem?

Why would such a girl have cause to hate Khalid with such fire?

The fire of a rising sun.

Even before he whirled away from the dais, Khalid knew he had to discover why.

Though it might cost him what little remained of his sanity.

He would learn the truth.

Tonight he would flout his own rules. Meet the girl alone.

Ask her a single question.

He could afford that.

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