

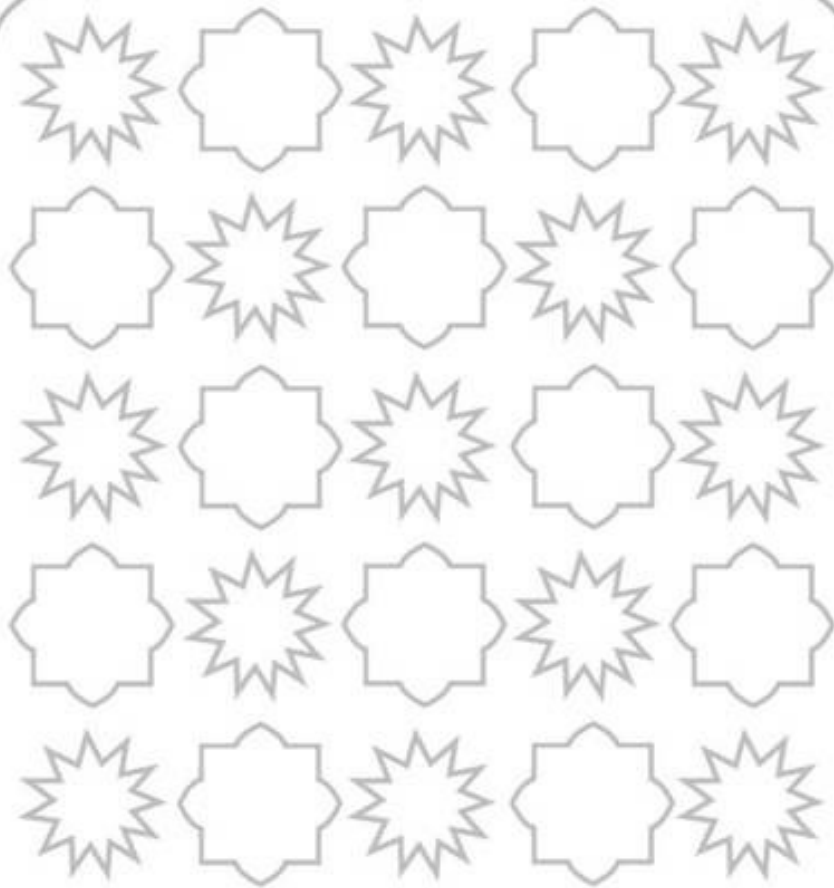
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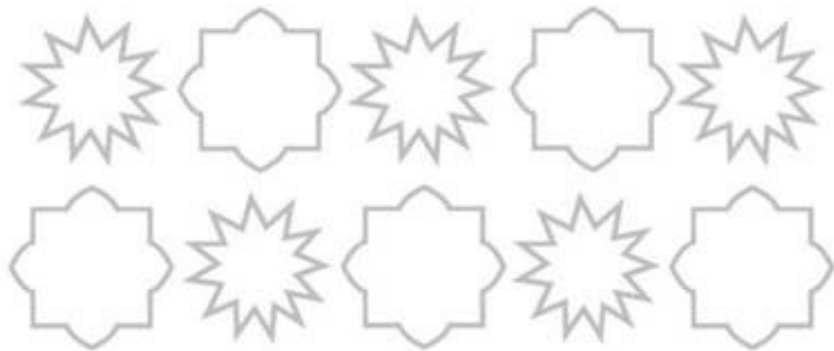
MAZE

• A WRATH & DAWN SHORT STORY •



# THE MIRROR & THE MAZE

A WRATH AND THE DAWN SHORT STORY



• R E N É E A H D I E H •

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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Version\_1

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## A STORM'S FURY

THE CITY BURNED BRIGHT FROM LEAGUES AWAY. Khalid could see it just as he and his men made the final turn toward home.

There, on the horizon . . . a colossal ember stretched high into the sky, pulsing and alive in its warmth, even from a distance. Its fires raged as the smoke collected above it. Billowed into a plume. A darkening shadow across an already black sky.

The cold grip of fear snaked around Khalid's heart.

Followed by pure, unmitigated fury.

It could not be possible. Salim Ali el-Sharif would not dare attack Rey. Would not dare lay siege to the greatest city in all of Khorasan.

Would not dare put his years of threats into action.

The fear clutched tight in Khalid's chest.

Everything and everyone he loved was in that city. His cousin. His uncle. Shahrzad.

Everything. Khalid had left everything behind in Rey. Now it was burning.

*"And I shall take from you these lives, a thousandfold."*

Khalid pulled on his reins, and Ardeshir reared back in response, the stallion's eyes wild.

The soldiers around Khalid drew close, their murmurs rising, their confusion mounting. Their panic palpable.

For they, too, had family in Rey. They, too, had left behind all they held dear.

*What could possibly have brought about the destruction of an entire city in so short a time? What kind of weapon was this?*

*What kind of evil.*

*"And I shall take from you these lives, a thousandfold."*

Though a litany of questions rang through his mind, Khalid did not pause for further consideration. With a determined set to his face, he spurred his

stallion through the sand.

Despite Ardeshir's sudden burst in speed, Khalid could not help but will his horse to move faster. Could not help but will the men at his side to take action now. There were only one hundred of them, all told. It should not be a feat of difficulty for his men to assemble with all haste.

Not with their city at stake.

Khalid felt urgency crackle through and around him as soon as he spurred his black stallion even faster, into a full gallop. The muscles in Ardeshir's back flattened as his neck stretched forward. As his dark mane whipped about him. His speed grew to a pace that was nearly uncontrollable. Behind Khalid, the sound of hooves pummeling through the sand curled into the night sky. No orders had been given on Khalid's part, yet the men now at his back pushed their tired mounts to new speeds with dire need. Pushed them through the dry brush and over the rising dunes.

Soon they could smell the burning city. Could taste the gritty bite of ash coating their tongues. The scent of scorched wood and earth mixed with the remnants of a recent storm. With the remnants of burning flesh.

Still, Khalid said nothing. He only prodded Ardeshir all the more.

As they neared the main thoroughfare leading to the city gates, Khalid caught sight of masses of people fleeing from the fire at their backs. Fleeing with all they could carry. They pushed through the city gates and streamed onto the road, like rats from rising water.

It was chaos. Screams and mournful wails took shape around them. People called for missing loved ones as they continued to run at a feverish pace.

"*Sayyidi!*" One of his Royal Guards pressed his steed closer, his voice coarse with alarm. "The main roads are clogged with survivors. Is it possible that . . . ?" He trailed off, his unspoken question clear.

How could they breach this wall of panicked denizens?

Immediately, Khalid reared his horse to a halt, then tugged his reins to one side. "The east road!" Khalid yelled back over his left shoulder.

They made a sharp turn through the sands toward an older roadway—one not as well maintained or well traversed as the others. Fallen stones and scorched debris littered the path. The men skirted the wreckage as though they were working their way around an ancient labyrinth. Khalid's frustration grew at their stalled pace.

Soon they pushed past several stragglers and into the city proper. As they wound their way through its outskirts, the proof of all that had been lost

drove them silent.

Drove them still for a gut-wrenching moment.

Much of Rey was still burning. Now it was no longer a ruined labyrinth but rather a maze of destruction. A maze to mirror his thoughts—lost. Directionless. The smoke and the smell clogged Khalid's throat. The heat caused him to pull his dark *rida*' back from his head. He took in the sight, even as many of his men's horses whickered away from the blaze in fear. Scorched metal lay melting at their feet, further halting their progress.

Devastation. All around them lay devastation.

It was impossible to gauge the true cost of this onslaught.

It was impossible to know what could have levied such destruction.

For at first glance what appeared to be the result of a siege was now anything but. There were no signs of siege warfare anywhere. No arrows in the dirt. No ballistae iron buried into stone walls.

No signs of an encroaching army.

Instead, Khalid saw a woman pressed against the remains of a fruit stand. Squashed melons lay strewn about, their sickly sweet smell weaving through the noxious fumes. The woman was silent. Still. At her feet, a small child whimpered. Pleading with her to wake up.

Before Khalid could dismount, the soldier at his side had slid to the ground and scooped the little boy into an embrace. Though the gesture of kindness warmed Khalid, it did little to assuage his fears. Little to mitigate his fury.

They moved toward the palace at the city's center, the small boy riding before his rescuer.

The men paused outside the palace gates. They were smashed to pieces, as though something had torn them from their moorings and hurled them through the sky. The damage stole Khalid's breath. No weapon he could envision was capable of such destruction, save for a giant ax cleaving through the very battlements. Battlements of iron and steel and stone. Battlements that were meant to withstand a siege for days, if not weeks.

Now they had been reduced to nothing but smoldering rubble. In a matter of a night.

Sections of the palace lay in ruin. Two corners continued to blaze bright. Burning finery was scattered across the entrance courtyard. Broken goblets and shattered porcelain crunched beneath Ardeshir's hooves.



As Khalid moved through the courtyard, he found a few brave souls remained within, continuing to usher others to safety.

There—beside the gurgling wreckage of a marble fountain—Khalid found Despina, tending to a servant girl’s broken leg. She directed those nearby as to where they needed to go—as to what they needed to do—without even once looking up from her work. Behind the fountain, Khalid’s cousin commandeered a gardener’s wagon and moved to help the injured servant girl at Despina’s side.

Khalid’s glance flitted about the space.

Again, the fear gripped his heart in a vise.

For Shahrzad was nowhere in sight.

He dismounted. “Jalal.” His tone was grim.

His cousin’s preoccupied gaze flew to his.

“You’re home early.” Jalal stood, struggling to straighten his dirtied cloak, then shrugging it off his shoulders with a huff.

Khalid proceeded closer. “What happened? What sort of evil brought about this? And where is Shahr—”

“Thank God you’re here.” Jalal crouched to the granite pavestones to assist the servant girl.

Without a word, Khalid shifted to the other side to lift her onto the wagon.

“What happened, Jalal?” he asked under his breath.

Jalal hesitated. Averted his gaze for a moment. “There was a . . . storm. A storm the like of which I have never seen.” His words were clipped. Precise. “A storm with the fury of all the gods at its back.”

At that, Khalid locked on his cousin. He spoke in a harsh whisper. “Where is Shahrzad?”

“She’s . . . safe.”

Khalid did not for an instant miss Jalal’s second hesitation.

With great care, they secured the young servant girl and sent the wagon on its way. Then Khalid turned once more to his cousin. Jalal’s words continued to churn through his mind, endlessly cycling and spinning about.

A storm. The like of which he had never before seen. The sort with the fury of the gods at its back.

What kind of unspeakable malice had befallen Khalid’s beloved city?

Despite all his previous disavowals—all his thoughts that this might be the work of Salim Ali el-Sharif—the answer to Khalid’s question took root, no longer the sinister echo of before.

*“And I shall take from you these lives, a thousandfold.”*

The fear he'd felt before was nothing now. Nothing compared to the horror of certainty.

All this death. All this destruction.

*My fault.*

Khalid gripped his cousin's shoulder, forcing him to meet his eyes. Behind his cousin's sweaty, ash-laden face, Khalid caught sight of dawn lightening the edges of the eastern sky.

“Where is Shahrzad, Jalal?”

Jalal looked away once more. “I told you. She is safe.”

“And that is—of course—the most important matter. But I want to know where she is.”

At that, Jalal inhaled through his nose, his expression harrowed. Then he faced Khalid head on. “I sent her away.”

“Where?” Khalid's grip tightened.

“You must understand—”

“I said *where!*” Khalid's voice carried into the changing light of the sky. His rage made the sound crack with the fierceness of a whip.

“She left the city hours ago,” Jalal replied quietly. “Not long after the storm began.”

“And you sent her alone?” Khalid could not maintain his preserve for much longer.

“No.” This time, Jalal did not look away. “She is with Tariq Imran al-Ziyad.”

The emotions that had coiled through Khalid's chest thus far sprang free. He took hold of his cousin's *qamis* in both fists. He wanted to scream in fury at Jalal. To swear and yell to all the heavens.

Tariq Imran al-Ziyad? As Khalid had just learned from his inquiries along the border between Khorasan and Parthia, this was the boy responsible for the budding unrest. Responsible for organizing a force against Khalid.

He would be damned a thousand times before he'd allow Shahrzad to fall into this traitorous boy's care.

His eyes blazing, Khalid spun on a heel. And strode back to his horse.

He'd already taken hold of the reins when he heard Jalal at his back.

“Khalid—”

“Do not interfere. You sent Shahrzad away with a boy I would not trust with a dying snake. You have no idea—”

“He loves her, Khalid-*jan*,” Jalal interrupted gently. “He will keep her safe. He promised me he would.”

“And what gives you the right to—”

“Look around you, Khalid Ibn al-Rashid. Look around you with the eyes of a man, not the heart of a boy.” It was spoken so softly. Not an admonition, but a plea. Jalal moved closer. “Is it not for the better?”

Khalid’s rage peaked for an instant before it fell. His eyes roved across the sight of his broken palace.

The sight of his shattered people.

He did not move.

What right had he to pursue the desires of his heart?

His responsibilities were here. Khalid closed his eyes. His responsibilities had always been here.

He did not deserve to hold anything he loved in his keep.

Shahrazad was safer when she was not with him. Even if it meant she was with the son of Nasir al-Ziyad.

His hands fell from his reins. With a nod, Jalal walked away. Walked back to where he was needed.

Through the haze of thoughts, Khalid heard his cousin order Despina from the city. He heard his cousin demand that all remaining women and children leave until the fires were held at bay.

The handmaiden’s voice rose above his cousin’s directives, bright and clear as a bell. “You will not tell me where to go or what to do, Captain al-Khoury. If there is anything this chaos has taught me, it is to know my place. Better than anyone.”

Her words mirrored the storm of Khalid’s thoughts.

He knew his place now. Better than anyone.

It was here. In his city. With his people.

And he would not rest until he made amends.

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