

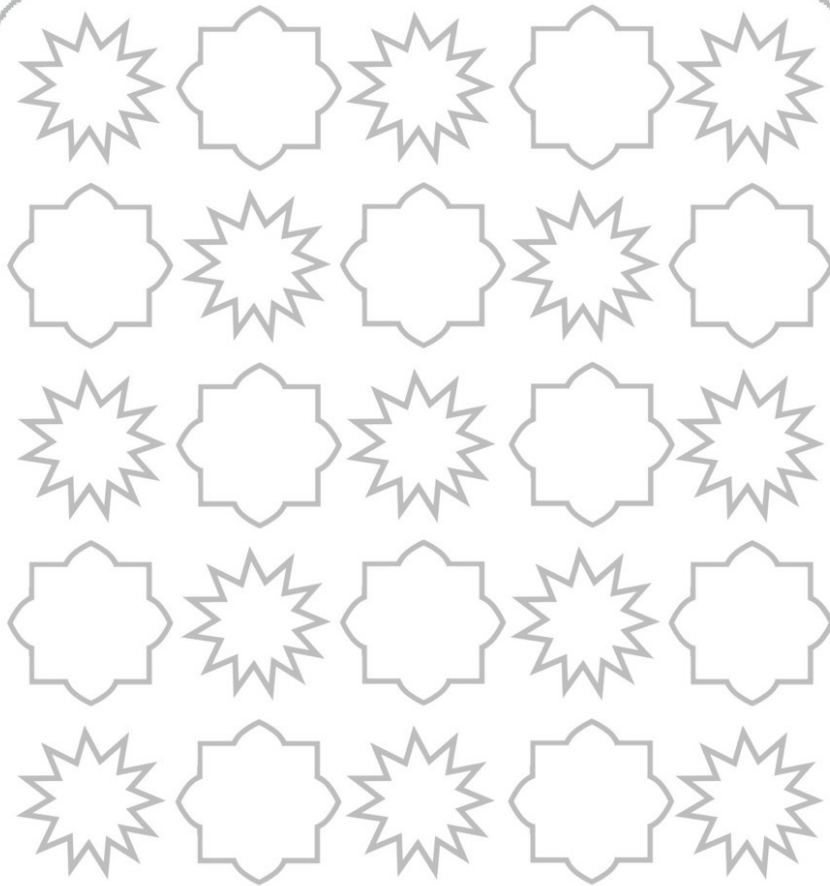
RENÉE AHDIÉH

M^{THE}OT^H

THE

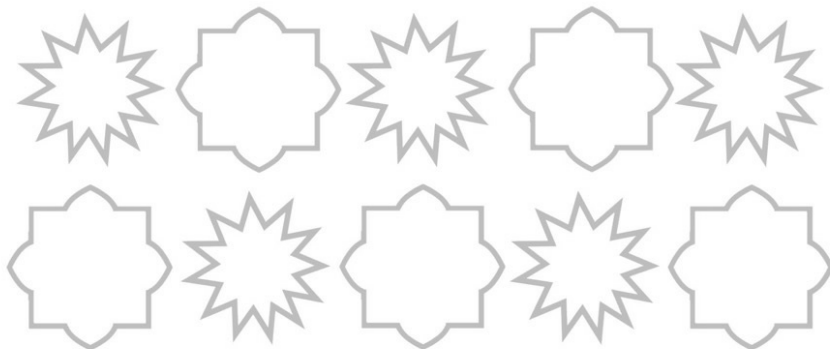
FLAME

• A WRATH & DAWN SHORT STORY •



THE MOTH & THE FLAME

A WRATH AND THE DAWN SHORT STORY



• R E N É E A H D I E H •

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, NY 10014



Copyright © 2016 by Renée Ahdieh.

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

G. P. Putnam's Sons is a registered trademark of Penguin Random House LLC.

ISBN 978-0-399-54773-7

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, businesses, companies, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Version_1

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[A WHISPER AND A CHALLENGE](#)

[A CLOAK OF JESSAMINE](#)

[A SUNSET STROLL](#)

[ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES](#)

[DARK DAYS AND A NIGHT OF LIGHT](#)

[A FAMILY'S LOYALTY](#)



A WHISPER AND A CHALLENGE

A MOUNTAIN OF JEWELLED SILK LAY BEFORE DESPINA.

Resolute.

She studied her adversary, both hands propped on her hips. Then Despina sighed, long and loud.

Such carelessness.

“Anything with embroidery needs to be wrapped individually,” she directed to Ruha, the young servant girl at her shoulder. “If something snags, it won’t be on my head.” Her voice dropped as an afterthought. “Or my purse.”

Without hesitation, Ruha followed Despina’s command, reaching for the topmost garment with cautious hands. They worked alongside each other in silence, sorting the beautiful pieces of clothing, many of which had yet to be worn.

After a time, Ruha glanced at Despina from the corner of her eye. The younger girl seemed to hesitate, her mouth ajar as though caught mid-speech. Finally she faced Despina. “Have you seen the new queen yet?”

Despina considered her response before replying. Too much information would be foolish. Too little, unimpressive. She could afford to be neither. “Only at a distance. The new calipha brought her own servants to the palace.”

“But I thought you were to be her handmaiden.” The servant girl’s voice bordered on querulous.

Despina lifted a shoulder in dismissive fashion. “It appears I am to be the Guardian of the Garments, instead.”

“Once she meets you, the queen will undoubtedly change her mind. No one has your sense of style. Or your way with colors.”

“Or my care in storing garments, it would seem.” Though she was irritated, Despina sent a warm smile Ruha’s way. The two young women resumed their work.

Resumed their many contemplations.

It would be a lie to say the unspoken dismissal of Despina’s services didn’t smart. She’d only recently been elevated to the vaunted post of handmaiden to the queen; it had taken her years to achieve such standing. Years to move beyond a troubling past.

But the new Calipha of Khorasan was purportedly the quiet sort. And when Despina had last seen her—though it was but a brief instant—the lovely girl seemed . . . elsewhere. As though her mind lived amongst the clouds. As though the first hint of a storm would spin her into turmoil. Despina supposed it made sense the girl would not want a perfect stranger dressing her or attending to her needs. After all, the new queen had been raised in Rey; her servants were certainly close by.

Her name was Ava. That much they all knew and not much more. In their language, it meant “voice.” Strange that this slender sylph of a queen exhibited anything but. When she was in need of something, she sent her most trusted servants. Hushed conversations transpired in shadowed hallways. And all was handled in an equally discreet manner.

Perhaps a somewhat taciturn queen would suit the young caliph. After all, Khalid Ibn al-Rashid had always been a boy of few words.

So—despite the slight to her new position—Despina set about organizing the many garments strewn about the space. Even though it was clear she would not be in direct contact with the new calipha, Despina’s pride would not allow her to do anything less than perfect work.

Despina adjusted the thick band of silver resting above her left elbow. Huffing audibly, she bent to collect more fabric. Then—before she could thwart it—the tassels snagged on something. The tiny mirrors on the skirt’s

embroidery caught on intricate blue fringe. An unmistakable rip echoed through the space.

Ruha whirled about, her eyes wide. Horrified.

Though her cheeks burned, Despina's smile was one of punishing precision.

She glared at the skirt in question. "With all the power of the gods, I smite you," Despina said. Unfolding the torn garment, she turned to squint into the light of a nearby taper.

"Can it be mended?"

"The seam is still intact. But I'm not quite certain it's salvageable." Her eyes flitted about the windowless space. The room was meant to keep away all signs of light. Faded colors were as problematic as rogue moths. Knowing the faint glow from the scented taper was not enough, Despina shouldered past the door, down the marbled corridor to where the rays of the afternoon sun reached their highest.

Again she unfurled the fabric. The thin silver silk glimmered as though it were fashioned from stardust. A breeze riffled past as Despina carefully straightened a gathering in the cursed snag. The mirrors along the hem flashed, tinkling together like tiny coins.

"That's the loveliest sight I've seen all day."

Behind her. A male voice with the warm resonance of laughter. Of unbridled merriment.

Or of blind privilege.

Despina glimpsed over a shoulder. And refrained from showing any reaction.

The voice belonged to the captain of the Royal Guard. The son of General Aref al-Khoury, the *Shahrbān* of Rey.

Blind privilege, indeed.

Well, Despina supposed she was bound to encounter such an important young man in person. Especially now that she had been elevated in direct service to the queen.

This time, Despina turned toward him, her back straight and her stare unwavering.

As she'd always suspected even from a distance, he was in fact quite handsome.

Unforgivably so.

Broad-shouldered, trim-waisted. His cloak emblazoned with the royal seal. A wavy mop of dark hair. The kind that begged to be touched.

A smirk that begged to be slapped.

Despina had heard tales of him. The palace was rife with salacious talk. And the captain of the Royal Guard had quite the reputation. A notorious rake. One who'd broken many hearts. He could supposedly charm the skirts off a girl with nothing but sly words and flippant promises.

At the memory of such tales, Despina stifled a laugh.

Impossibly ridiculous. Removing clothing involved a great deal more than words.

At the very least, *someone* had to unravel something. A knot. A string.

A suggestion.

The captain of the guard sauntered closer, a palm resting on the bejeweled hilt of his scimitar. His grin bordered on obscene. Too knowing. Too assured. Too arrogant.

"You must be hungry," Despina said.

He stopped mid-step. "Pardon?"

"You said I was the loveliest sight you'd seen all day." Despina angled a hip forward, her most winning smile displayed to full advantage. "Therefore, you must be hungry."

"Interesting." He angled his body in the same direction, almost on instinct. "I'll play. Why do you suppose I'm hungry?"

"To me, the loveliest sight of all is food."

A spark glinted in his eyes. "I suppose that would depend on what kind of food, would it not?" He walked closer, scrutinizing her features in the rays of shifting light. "For instance, when I look at you, I think perhaps a drizzle of honey"—his gaze lingered on her lips—"over fresh berries might compare."

It was too much. Too much . . . everything. Though she knew she could play this rake's game without balking, Despina burst into laughter, clutching her sides as the sound reverberated off the coffered ceilings. It was undoubtedly foolish to laugh at such an important young man. But *she* had not sought *him* out.

And funny trumped foolish, at all turns.

The captain of the guard's eyes widened. His jaw dropped. But he recovered quickly. In no time at all, a redolent grin touched his mouth.

"I can't say I'm used to that response."

His voice rolled through the space. The smallest of shivers danced across her skin.

It was an unforgivably nice voice.

Despina smiled back at him, all but baring her teeth. “Perhaps you need a better adversary.”

“You think yourself better?”

“Than you?”

He nodded again, his grin arching up his face.

“In all ways,” Despina replied without pause.

Now it was his turn to laugh. The sound enveloped her, taking root in her stomach, its warmth curling beneath her skin.

He’s trouble. Stay away.

Despina returned to her task, straightening the torn seam as best she could.

Behind her, his footsteps drew near, crisp against the polished stone.

A whisper at her ear. “I find myself unconvinced, lovely girl.”

“Then—by all means—scurry away, ridiculous boy,” she retorted in airy tones.

Another rumble of laughter.

“I don’t run from challenges.”



A CLOAK OF JESSAMINE

IT HAD ALL BEEN A TERRIBLE MISTAKE.

The Calipha of Khorasan was not supposed to be in her chamber. She was not supposed to be anywhere inside the palace on this lovely spring afternoon. So when Despina rounded the corner and saw the young queen sitting beneath the shade on her balcony, she stopped short.

Holy Hera.

The calipha was supposed to be on a stroll with the caliph through the royal gardens. Her chamber was supposed to be empty at this moment. Empty and ready for Despina to deliver the newest selections of cosmetics, in the quiet and discreet manner she'd espoused for the last three weeks. She'd even knocked on the double doors twice, just to be sure no one was there to question her. No one to notice her.

No one to draw attention to her superfluosity.

After all, as Despina had realized early on, the new calipha did not need a handmaiden. Not with all her servants from home recently taking up residence in the palace.

Well, there was nothing to be had for it. Despite all Despina's attempts to remain beyond the calipha's notice, it had inevitably happened. The calipha would ask who she was. Despina would be turned away outright. Scolded. Or worse yet, dismissed.

And Despina was not one to stomach a dismissal of any sort. She'd never been the kind to suffer a slight in silence.

Worst of all, these possible scenarios had the problematic effect of wreaking havoc on her pride. After a childhood of being overlooked, Despina's pride was her one constant.

Hell and damnation.

Despina braced herself, intent on backtracking with the stealth of a shadow.

An exercise in futility.

As she started to turn, her slippers brushed across the marble floor with the softest *skirr*. Nevertheless, the whisper of leather against stone managed to cut through the quiet. The calipha turned and saw her. Caught in the act of escape, Despina clutched tight to the small silver tray in her hands while swiveling to meet the calipha's gaze. The tray's contents swayed about, jostling a tiny glass vial positioned at its edge. The vial nearly tipped over, several amber drops seeping down one side. The sweet scent of jessamine wafted through the air.

At the tinkling of glass, the queen stood. She did not appear angry. She appeared . . . weary. Dressed in elegant cream linen, her willowy form braced on an idle breeze. Her skirts swayed about as though she were the most delicate of flowers, ready to wither in an instant.

Before Despina could string together a sentence of apology or explanation, the queen blinked at her and spoke.

"Yes?" The question was not harsh or demanding. Not even curious. At most, it was reflexive—a nod to propriety.

Despina bowed, holding the silver tray steady. "I did not mean to disturb you, my lady."

"You haven't disturbed me." The young queen's head shook from side to side slowly, with the appearance of great effort. Her long plait fell behind a shoulder, its rich brown color catching bends of sunlight.

Despite her better instincts to depart with all haste, Despina attempted a warm smile. "Can I bring you anything, my lady?"

Another slow shake of a bejeweled head. The calipha shifted position, and Despina caught sight of a large roll of parchment spread across the lacquered table in the balcony's center.

On the parchment was a work of intricate calligraphy, halted mid-stroke.

An ebony brush lay propped near an inkwell.

Without thought, Despina took a step forward, fascinated by the carefully rendered artwork. The young queen's eyes widened. She drew back as though she meant to conceal her efforts from prying gazes.

"Forgive me, my lady." Despina smiled, hesitantly at first, then with true cordiality. "As a lover of beautiful things, I could not resist."

The compliment was not contrived. Not in the least. For the young queen's calligraphy truly was a beautiful working. The words were formed in distinct, swooping arcs, the script adorned by strokes of liquid gold. Soft colors along the border seemed to melt into one another before dipping and flowing throughout the work. A tiny palette of bright paints awaited nearby, clearly meant for further embellishment.

The young queen drew her plait of dark hair back in front, smoothing its ends. Her brown eyes narrowed as she eased forward, ever so cautious.

"You find it . . . beautiful?" the calipha finally said.

Despina nodded. "It's lovely—understated and elegant."

The young queen smoothed the ends of her braid once more.

"If you'd like," Despina continued, "I can set about finding a place to hang it in the palace. Or make inquiries as to where such wonderful work could be shown at best light."

The calipha tipped her head to the side in consideration. "I thought—I thought to give it to the caliph." She hesitated, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. This young queen of small but significant gestures. "But he has so many beautiful pieces of calligraphy all throughout his palace. And this one is not nearly—"

"I have no doubt he will love it." As soon as Despina spoke, she caught herself on the interruption. Caught herself and waited to be reprimanded—

Yet she was not.

What could have moved Despina to interject at such a moment, much less on behalf of the caliph? She'd never known Khalid Ibn al-Rashid to be effusive in his passions or his pursuits.

Yet somehow, Despina knew the caliph would appreciate this particular gift. Far more than any tribute of gold or jewels or weaponry.

The young queen said nothing for a time, her mouth twisted in contemplation. "It . . . would be nice to know he loved something of mine."

The sadness of her words caught in Despina's chest, the lure of something

darker beneath them. The feeling brought to mind Despina's mother. Those many quiet moments reminiscing on days long past. On memories ever present.

"May I"—Despina took another step forward—"be so bold as to make another suggestion, my lady?"

The calipha smiled, the gesture as simple and unhurried as all her others. "You do not strike me as someone who asks before doing something."

At that, Despina could not resist a laugh. The sound startled the young queen. It rounded her eyes, making them appear doe-like—as though she were something fashioned from a forest at twilight.

Despina persisted in her course, the reminder of her mother's sadness spurring her to action. "May I suggest you mention your calligraphy to the caliph on your walk this afternoon, my lady?"

The young queen's shoulders dropped. Her sigh was so slight that Despina strained to hear it. A small sigh of great significance. A significance the young queen was not ready to put to words.

Even so, Despina pried further. "I was led to believe you would be in the royal gardens with the caliph today. It was why I intruded on your space with such heedlessness. Has your walk been postponed? Are you ill, my lady?"

The young queen's head tilted to the other side. She was difficult for Despina to understand, as she obviously preferred speaking in gestures rather than in words.

So Despina prompted her with another kind smile and an encouraging dip of her head.

"I am not ill," the queen replied slowly. "I suppose 'postponed' would be an apt word." She averted her gaze, her mouth curving upward with a trace of wryness. "Postponed—as many things in life so often are."

"For later in the day, then?" Despina pressed.

The calipha's eyes flashed once, a spark of unnamed emotion flaring in their depths. "For later in the future, if at all."

This time, Despina wisely chose not to speak.

"You needn't worry on my account," the calipha continued. "The times I meet the king are often postponed. He has many pressing weights on his shoulders, and I am not—"

She stopped as though she'd said too much.

It did not matter. The young queen need say no more.

A curl of sympathy rose in Despina's throat. "A king's queen should never be a pressing weight," she said in a gentle voice. "And—just as I am one who does not ask before taking action—you appear to be anything but a source of worry, my lady."

"It's kind of you to say so. Though I am not of the same mind."

Another moment passed between them in thoughtful silence. "Tell him you are preparing a gift for him, my lady. That you'd like to share it sometime soon."

"Is it truly that simple?" Dubiousness creased the whole of the calipha's brow.

"It is a beginning." Despina's voice was bright. "And sharing such a beautiful gift with one you love is not a cause for concern, my lady. But rather a cause for celebration."

"Perhaps you're right." Emboldened, the young queen stood straight and met Despina's gaze. "Perhaps I *shall* tell him about it."

Despina placed the perfume on the low table along the far wall, then bowed to take her leave, a triumphant smile touching her lips.

Perhaps the young queen would ask her name tomorrow. Then perhaps she'd ask Despina's advice on which color suited her complexion best. Which scent would entice the caliph's notice.

The day following that?

The possibilities were endless.

• • •

Jalal al-Khoury was bored.

Such boredom did not behoove the beautiful day before him. Did not pay homage to its clear blue sky and the citrus-scented breeze weaving through the open screens of the palace.

He supposed he could seek out Sahar. Or perhaps Nasreen. Both girls were just the kind to take advantage of such a lovely day. Just the kind to put aside their work and get lost in the many shaded corners of the gardens beyond.

The kind to engage in Jalal's favorite pastime.

Women had always been a weakness for him, much to his father's chagrin. Aref al-Khoury—the *Shahrban* of Rey—had been faithful to one

woman all his life. Sought comfort in the arms of one woman, and one woman alone. Whereas his son sought comfort in the arms of many women. Women of all sorts. Short, thin, tall, plump—it mattered not to Jalal.

For Jalal al-Khoury loved women and never sought to hide the fact. He'd been called many things as a result. Scoundrel. Rake. Profligate. But he'd never been called boring. And Jalal refused to let such a travesty occur on such a lovely day.

After all, there were far too many fetching young women at the palace.

So Jalal walked through its warren of marbled corridors, on the search for any girl with a smiling face and a moment to flirt.

But—when he turned the corner across from the queen's chambers—Jalal did not come across a girl with a smiling face.

Instead he came across a girl with a decidedly pensive gaze. A girl with an empty silver tray dangling from one hand. When a ray of afternoon sun struck its surface, the flash of light drew him toward her, like a moth to a flame.

Jalal recognized her in an instant.

It was the same girl from three weeks past. The one with the sharp tongue and the sly expression. An expression rich with emotion. Rich with intelligence.

Rich with secrets.

As with the first time, Jalal was struck by her bearing. It was not the bearing of a servant. No. There was nothing meek or solicitous about her manner. The girl carried herself with calm pomposity. It reminded him greatly of himself.

He slowed his gait to a leisurely stroll and let his eyes run the length of her. Skin the color of cool sand. Eyes the blue of the Aegean. Long, rich curls of light walnut hair wrapped in intricate coils.

Just as lovely as Jalal remembered.

As he drew near, the girl was taken from her reverie.

Just as before, she did not fluster at his arrival. No sign of recognition rippled across her face. Not a trace of becoming blush rose in her cheeks. She did not avert her gaze or bite her lip.

She merely returned his stare. With such steadiness that Jalal instead grew flustered, one hand seeking purchase on the hilt of his scimitar.

“Are you lost, Captain al-Khoury?” the girl asked without pause.

Ordinarily such a question would be nothing short of an overture for Jalal. An overture demanding a flowery response. Or at the very least, a honeyed quip. Something about her eyes—which truly were striking—or perhaps about the shining crown of curls about her head.

Something suggestive.

Something about how he'd like to unravel those curls and watch them fall apart in his fingers.

But his memory recalled more than her striking beauty. It also recalled a biting wit. One that lanced old wounds as it made new ones. Any felicitous overtures on his part would be lost on this girl. She would likely mock him for his efforts.

So instead Jalal cleared his throat and leaned back on his heels.

"Why do you suppose I'm lost?" he began in an airy tone.

"You're no longer walking with purpose."

Jalal lifted his shoulders, glib to a fault. "Sometimes it's rather nice to take a stroll without a destination in mind. Have you never thought of such a thing? Getting lost for a moment and seeing where the day takes you?"

"I can't say. I've never been afforded such a luxury," she bit out drily, though a trace of humor lit her gaze. "Besides, are you certain it isn't too early for such pithy ruminations?"

He almost laughed at her boldness. "Is it ever too early for reflection?"

"I don't know. Is it too early for wine?"

"The sun has not yet begun its descent." Jalal glanced through the open window nearby. "Propriety would say it is."

She rolled her eyes. "If it's too early for wine, then it's too early for reflection."

Jalal laughed loudly. Unthinkingly.

It had been a long time since he'd laughed with true abandon. Laughed without a soul to impress or inspire.

"It wasn't *that* funny, Captain al-Khoury," the girl chided.

The laughter lingered in his response. "Don't."

"Don't what?" She inclined her body toward his, the silver tray in her left hand twinkling with merriment.

"Seek compliments."

For the first time, he saw a hint of annoyance in her features—the slightest dip of her lips. "I'm doing nothing of the sort."

“Oh?” He drew closer. “Are you not expecting me to tell you it was indeed that funny, and that you might be the most amusing young woman I’ve ever met?”

She cast him an arched glance. “In fact I am not waiting for you to say such a thing. Though I *am* the most amusing young woman you will ever meet.”

Another hearty round of laughter.

“As you can see, I have no need to seek compliments.”

“Don’t be absurd,” Jalal replied. “All women seek compliments.”

“And all men think they know everything.”

“I never laid claim to such a belief,” Jalal said, his feet taking him one step closer. Still the moth to the flame. “But I *do* happen to know everything about women . . . what they like, what they dislike”—he moved his hand through the air in an endless circle—“what they mean to say though they refuse to say it.”

The girl snorted with derision. “Further idiocy. With the snap of my fingers, I could ask you a question about women to which you do not know the answer.”

“Are you making a wager with me?” As Jalal bent toward her, a distinctly floral fragrance caught his attention. It hovered about the girl, its scent soothingly sweet, saturating the air in alluring waves.

“Perhaps.” She quirked her chin in teasing fashion.

“And the terms?”

The girl brought the empty tray between them, as though it were a shield. “If I win, you must give me any flower of my choosing.”

“And if I win?” Jalal dropped his voice with deliberate suggestion. “Will you give me whatever I wish?”

“Oh, don’t be an ass.” Her laugh was meant to sound caustic, but Jalal sensed a hint of disquiet behind it. “I’m not foolish enough to make such a reckless promise with a notorious rake.”

He stood toe to toe with her. “But you could be a fool,” he murmured. “Just this once.”

Her breath caught, her eyes glittering like a sea after a storm. “Only in the wildest of your dreams would that ever happen.” The tray lifted higher, pressing the silver against the swell of her chest. “If you win, I will tell you one thing you wish to know about me.”

The decadent sight of the girl before Jalal distracted him. Took him off guard. Rendered him incompetent. “Ask away, my lovely tormenter. Ask and be proven wrong.”

“You claim to know everything about women,” she began. “But tell me, Captain al-Khoury, do you know my name?”

Jalal was at a loss. Her perfume had cloaked his senses. Clouded his judgment.

He hadn’t been expecting such a question.

An easy one. A silly one.

One Jalal could not romance his way through.

Such an occasion happened but once in the lifetime of a profligate such as he. It took every ounce of his self-control not to frown or grumble or kick at nothing, like a bested schoolboy. Infuriated by how easily he’d fallen prey to this cheeky handmaiden’s wit, Jalal took a step back.

He racked his mind for an answer. Any answer that would color him less the fool.

It took him far longer than he wished. But soon Jalal managed to contrive a way to remedy this situation. In *his* favor. He smiled.

“Meet me to collect your winnings in the first tier of the royal gardens at sunset.”

With that, Jalal spun on a heel and walked away.



A SUNSET STROLL

THIS WOULD NOT END WELL.

Of that, Despina was certain.

But her current reservations were of little consequence. She would not show the young captain of the guard the effect he'd had on her. The effect he was sure to have on her. So instead Despina stood at the edge of the first tier in the royal gardens, her head high as she watched the sun descend along the horizon. The sky above was tinted in hues of pink and orange. Hues of fire and light and celebration.

What kind of celebration, Despina wouldn't pretend to know.

Below her, the tiers of the royal gardens blossomed with color and life, their terraces stacked like large stones in a descending staircase. Each tier brought with it a new experience. The first tier—the one in which she waited—included an aviary, filled with songbirds of every sort. The tiny creatures flitted about behind her, trilling their mockery to riotous discord. The lark in particular appeared to have much to say regarding her current circumstance.

Much to lecture.

Indeed. Despina never should have made a wager with a rake. A rake who may not even honor their arrangement today.

But in that single, memorable moment earlier, Despina had thought she'd won the day. The moment when the captain of the Royal Guard's face had

dropped, she was certain he would declare himself bested.

Bested by a handmaiden. Then he would walk away and leave her be. Leave the sudden tumult in her heart to settle.

Leave her to reflect on the lessons of her mother from long ago.

Alas, Despina had been dismayed to discover the captain's reputation not the least bit ill founded. He'd caught her unawares with his charm. Unawares and almost enamored.

But Jalal al-Khoury would not take the better of her. She would triumph over him.

For that precious moment, Despina had thought she had.

Then the captain of the guard's features had smoothed. All too knowingly. And Despina had known she'd lost.

Anything that made a rake of his reputation appear that self-assured was not something to dismiss so readily. Now it fell upon her to find a way to remove that knowing smirk from his face. To remove it or rearrange it . . .

To one of chastened humility.

"You're here." He spoke behind her, amusement leavening his tones.

Despina glanced over a shoulder, affecting a look of disdain to mask her surprise at his arrival. "You're late."

"I had a devil of a time escaping the caliph." The captain of the guard groaned as he sauntered to her side, leaning back against the marble balustrade at the terrace's edge. "He's spending an obsessive amount of time with the royal engineers, intent on re-creating a system of heated baths he saw when he last traveled to Damascus."

"And he wished you to be present for this discussion?" Despina felt her body ease closer to his and caught herself with a firm grip along the rail.

"He wishes for me to care about things of this sort."

"And what sort would that be?"

When he turned his head to look at her, the sunlight warmed one side of his chiseled face, gilding it bronze. "Things of the boring, intellectual sort." He winked.

Despina fought the urge to avert her gaze. "I suppose that would be too much to ask for."

"No. I wish for him to care, too. Just not about the same things."

"Oh? What sort of things matter to you, Captain al-Khoury?"

A sobering pause filled the space between them. "The caliph and I are

very different.” With his right hand, he indicated her to proceed through the gardens. Despina did not miss that—with the same gesture—he also made it clear he no longer wished to follow this line of discussion.

They walked toward the staircase, falling in step with each other, their motions graceful and unimpeded. Natural.

The light on the horizon continued to deepen while the inky black of night reached from behind their shoulders. They made their way down the gritty granite pavestones. “When you first arrived, you were surprised to find me here?” Despina asked conversationally.

“Of course. I half expected you to disappear.” The edge of his white cloak swayed in time with his steps, the royal seal at his shoulder gleaming bright.

“I’ll admit I considered it. But I, too, refuse to run from challenges.” Despina repeated his words from their first encounter, a playful gleam entering her gaze.

He looked at her, smiling all the while. “How do you see this as a challenge? You bested me.”

“Despite all evidence to the contrary.”

“How do you suppose—”

“If *I* had truly won, I would be the one telling you when and where I’d like to claim my prize.”

The captain of the guard laughed softly. Conciliatorily. “I am curious, though—which flower would you like to claim for your own?”

It was the way in which he worded it. The subtle challenge behind the question.

What kind of girl are you?

Most girls would ask for a rose. Or perhaps another flower with the same kind of bright, arresting color. A color to match an intoxicating fragrance. Or perhaps they would ask for a spray of citrus blossoms. They’d perfume a room for days, long after their petals had wilted to the floor.

Yes, most girls would ask for flowers such as these.

Despina was not most girls.

Immediately she knew what to do.

With purpose, Despina quickened her pace. The scent of citrus blossoms flew past her as she wove her way through the second tier, progressing down to the third. The captain of the guard paused by a maze of rosebushes, his intention clear—but Despina moved past them without a second glance.

It was late spring. The perfect time. The flower she wanted would just be blooming, its scent rich and heady.

Sure enough—in the very center of the third tier—Despina spotted the grove of trees in question. She found the tallest one. It stood more than twice the height of a man.

She studied its topmost branches through squinted eyes.

Then she turned toward the captain of the Royal Guard.

“Do you see that branch of jessamine at the top?” she said. “The one bending toward the light, with the flowering buds?”

He stepped alongside her, lifting his gaze to the tree. “The purple one?”

“Yes.”

A frown marred his expression. “Why not one of the lower branches that have already produced blossoms?”

“The buds of the jessamine are far more fragrant than the blossoms.”

“I prefer the white flowers to the purple buds.” He assumed a stubborn stance, his feet shoulder length apart and his arms crossed tight. “Besides, there are many buds available within arm’s reach.”

“The buds with the most exposure to the sun are the best,” Despina insisted. She turned to look him in the eye. “Are you honestly balking, Captain al-Khoury?”

He shook his head, lines of consternation forming at the bridge of his nose. “Not balking. Merely strategizing.”

“More like delaying the inevitable. Collect my winnings, if you please.” She spoke as though she were the one in a position of power, and he the servant.

The captain of the Royal Guard seemed to appreciate it. “Cheeky wench.” He grinned, though the furrow between his eyes remained intact.

He withdrew his scimitar and removed his cloak. Despina watched, her smile spreading with uncontrolled glee. She thought she heard him mutter choice epithets to himself.

He planted his hands on his hips and studied his leafy adversary. “If I had a bow and arrow, this task would be far easier.”

“Even you cannot be such a skilled archer.” Despina snorted.

The captain of the guard glanced her way. “You’ve heard I’m a skilled archer?”

“No doubt from your own tongue.”

He laughed, then heaved his way onto the lowest limb. He swung with grace from branch to branch, his feet and hands moving in perfect tandem.

Despina had to admire the sight. Though he'd seemed reticent to make the climb at first, it was apparent he was more than capable of such a challenge.

More than capable of triumphing in this task as well.

Again, Despina had been bested.

Bested by an obnoxious rake.

She began tapping her foot against the soil in annoyance, waiting for him to reemerge with her winnings and another challenge in his eyes.

A crack resounded through the branches above. Followed by a yelp of surprise.

And the son of the second-most-powerful man in Rey spilled from amongst a tangle of leaves onto the ground below with a terrible thud.

Despina's heart lodged in her throat.

His arms and legs were splayed all about.

He was not moving.

Without thought, Despina dashed for his lifeless body. The moment she fell to her knees beside him she was certain this was the end for her.

Yet strangely that fact was not her chief concern. She did not want it to be the end for *him*. Not at all.

"Captain al-Khoury!" she gasped.

His eyes remained closed, his limbs frozen in place.

She searched for evidence of broken bones, her hands roving over a body corded with muscle.

"Captain al-Khoury!" Despina yelled again. She grabbed his shoulders, her fingers running across his face.

His eyes opened suddenly. Clearly. Then shut once more.

"Captain al-Khoury! Are you—"

"Softly," he whispered.

Exasperation flared through her, bringing a flush to her cheeks. "What?"

"You're shouting in my ears." He held back a grin. "Softly, my sweet."

Despina almost shoved him. "Better I shout at them than bite them off."

"Oh?" One of his eyes slid open, slyly. "So then you're good with your —"

"For the love of all the gods, Captain al-Khoury!" That time she did shove him.

His laughter was low and hoarse. "My name is Jalal."

"You arrogant ass." Despina fell back on her heels, her pulse thundering. "I nearly died of fear."

"Fear of what?"

"Fear I wouldn't be able to collect my reward," she retorted scathingly. The instant the words escaped her mouth, Despina wanted to take them back.

He aimed his grin at her. "And here I half expected you to be afraid I might be injured."

"Not you." Her lips twitched. "Only the flower. I'm not completely heartless."

"No," he agreed. "Only partially."

Despina harrumphed. After a moment, the defiant tone in her voice fell away. "It—it was foolish of me to ask you to climb the tree for that flower," she said softly.

He looked up at the darkening sky. "Even more foolish of me to agree. I've been afraid of heights since I was a small boy."

"You didn't show it," Despina said. "I thought you were merely griping about having to do work."

"I work all the time," he insisted, despite another dismissive roll of Despina's eyes. "And I'd much rather fall to my death than admit a weakness to you."

"The captain of the Royal Guard wants to impress a lowly handmaiden?"

"A clumsy young man wants to impress a beautiful young woman." He met her gaze, his dark eyes piercing. "The question is, did it work?"

Despina held back a smile. "You failed to retrieve my flower."

In response, he lifted his left fist and unfurled his fingers. In it was the crushed stem of jessamine she's requested from the topmost branches. Its delicious aroma spilled into the air around them, clean and unmistakable.

"You ruined it, Captain al-Khoury," Despina said flatly.

"Jalal."

A pause. "Jalal."

"Do you wish for me to retrieve you another?"

"Not in the least." Despina smiled. "The ruined flower will do."

His gaze still had not left hers. "It smells like you."

"A ruined flower?"

"Yes."

“How flattering.” She laughed.

At the sound, his features softened. “Touch my face again.”

Despite her sense of caution, Despina lifted her hands to his jaw and bent closer. He smelled like sweat and steel and the green of newly trod grass.

So much more than a boy with an arrogant smirk.

Jalal leaned into her touch. “Had I won the wager, I would have asked for your name.”

“Is that all?” Despina snorted.

“Then I would have asked when you would kiss me.”

“Only a kiss?”

“Only a kiss. Nothing more.”

Her heartbeat quickened. “How am I to believe that, given your reputation?”

“Time will tell.” He beckoned her closer, lifting himself on an elbow. A calloused finger traced behind Despina’s ear.

And for a single moment, they forgot who they both were.

The captain of the Royal Guard. And the queen’s handmaiden.

It was she who kissed him first.

Without thought. Without warning. Her lips found his.

Startled, Jalal fell back to the ground. His arms encircled Despina. When he kissed her back, it stole the very breath from her body. The touch of his tongue against hers sent a swirl of maddening desire through her.

No boy had ever kissed her like this.

No man would ever kiss her like this.

“Despina,” she whispered. “My name is Despina.”



ENDLESS POSSIBILITIES

DESPINA WAITED ALL DAY FOR THE CALIPHA TO CALL for her.

Waited all day for the calipha. *Not* for Jalal al-Khoury.

She was certain the young queen would request her presence. After all, they'd spent a good deal of time together yesterday afternoon, and the calipha had been receptive to the cosmetics Despina had brought to her chamber.

Not to mention their discussion on the young queen's gift to the caliph.

But the sun rose and fell without a word from the calipha or her servants.

When Despina returned to her chamber, she found a spray of jessamine before her door.

Her heart leapt at its sight.

No. Only a fool would fall prey to such an enticement.

Would fall prey to such a boy.

Even if he does kiss like a man.

Despite the yearnings of her heart, Despina ignored the tiny sprig of flowers. As luck would have it, they blossomed overnight and left a fragrant reminder at her doorstep.

The following day came and went without a word from the calipha. The hope that had kindled within Despina two days ago began to fade; the young queen had no intention of bringing Despina into her fold.

No intention of bringing a new handmaiden into her confidences.

But Despina did not allow herself to fall to despair. For it did seem the calipha would not draw attention to Despina's superfluosness after all. Their conversation had produced at least one desired result.

Despina would not be demoted or dismissed.

There *was* that.

She spent the third day following her chance encounter with the queen—and her ill-fated stroll with the captain of the guard—reorganizing a pile of already pristine silk and damask.

When Despina moved beyond the tiny chamber housing the garments and through the queen's empty bedchamber, she saw the parchment with the beautiful calligraphy rolled into a bundle. Stowed to one side, unfinished.

Though it gave her pause, Despina knew it was not her right to pursue the matter. Not her right and not her place.

The young calipha would make her decisions. Choose her own way.

As with two nights before, when Despina returned to her chamber door at dusk, she found another sprig of jessamine lying on the marble threshold.

She stepped past it. Thought better of it.

Sighed.

And brought the flowers inside.



DARK DAYS AND A NIGHT OF LIGHT

ALAS, ALL DESPINA'S WAITING PROVED FUTILE, FOR the calipha never called on her again. Several months passed in relative obscurity. But Despina continued to hope for a word from the queen. To wait

—

For a tragedy that shook their world at its very center.

The palace had been shrouded in shadow for the last two days and nights.

Everywhere Despina walked, servants tiptoed about the corridors, their shoulders hunched and their whispers low.

Every face she encountered was agonized, every pair of eyes bloodshot.

There were no more tears left to shed.

The young Calipha of Khorasan—Ava, the girl who studied calligraphy and spoke with the gentleness of a passing breeze—had perished.

Two mornings ago, the caliph himself had found her on that very same balcony, cold and motionless and alone.

Thankfully, Despina had not witnessed what had happened that fateful morning.

She'd heard the wails as the news spread through the marbled hallways. She'd heard the queen's servants cry to the heavens.

Very briefly, she'd seen the caliph's face.

Haunted. Horrifying.

The one face Despina had yet to see belonged to Jalal al-Khoury.

Ever since that evening when she'd brought the sprig of jessamine inside her chamber, not a day had gone by that Despina had failed to see the captain of the guard. It was almost as though he'd planned to be exactly where she was at the most opportune moment of the day.

Words were often exchanged. Teasing words. Cajoling words. Brief kisses were stolen at odd hours. At times they were sure to avoid any errant gazes.

After several weeks of this, he began making another request. For the last month, not a single day passed that Jalal failed to ask her to stay the night with him.

Despina never did.

Losing herself in a few kisses was one thing. Being as foolish as her mother was quite another. She refused to be the mistress of a rich man, to be discarded at his earliest whim. And she would most definitely not be the plaything of a notorious scoundrel like Jalal al-Khoury.

No matter how much her heart begged her to see otherwise.

No matter how much his absence these last few days troubled her.

Despina did not know if she should seek him out. It was possible he might find it improper for her to wander the halls in search of him. After all, in this palace she was but a servant.

But she had to know if Jalal was well. Recent events demanded that she know.

Earlier this evening an even darker shadow had fallen across the palace. Though the young queen had been laid to rest in the afternoon, and all should have been on its way to mending, something sinister had taken root instead. Despina heard that the Royal Guard had been sent to accompany the king on a visit to see his late wife's father.

Despina had not been present when they'd returned. But she felt the gathering shadow. The cold hand of evil seemed to grip tightly the palace itself.

And now she could no longer deny the yearnings of her heart.

Despina had to see Jalal.

Late that night, she moved into the corridors, a single scented taper clutched in one hand. She'd thrown a loose robe over her linen nightclothes. Her hair was unbound and flowing down her back. Her reflection in a passing

mirror appeared quite ghoulish—a creature of nightmares, her eyes hollow and her face pale.

Despina tried to rearrange the tangles of her hair, but her efforts were halfhearted at best. Anyway, she did not think anyone at the palace cared much for appearances or propriety at this moment. The current state of things was one of churning turmoil.

A servant girl wandering the halls at night in her simplest of garments and disastrous hair was certainly the least of anyone's problems.

Despina made her way down a corridor toward the wing of the palace that housed the highest-ranking members of the Royal Guard. Since Jalal also happened to be a member of the royal family, she knew he'd been afforded the option of having his own, far grander chamber in the east wing with the rest of his kin. His father, the *shahrbān*, had an elegant chamber of his own there.

But Jalal had opted to take a room near the men in his charge.

It was an easy room to find. The only one with a guard posted outside the door.

Despina halted. Took quick stock of her surroundings. Wrapped her loose-fitting robe more tightly about her.

She cleared her throat and stood tall. "I have a message for the captain."

The guard at the chamber appeared weary, but he still waited for her to offer him a better explanation than that.

"I—I was handmaiden to the . . . queen," she whispered.

Immediately the guard glanced both ways. Then he stepped back, his expression just as harrowed as hers.

Without hesitation, Despina raised her fist to the heavy wooden door and rapped on it twice.

No answer.

She lifted her hand again. Three hard knocks.

No answer.

"Captain al-Khoury?" she said. "I have a message for you."

Another moment passed in stilted silence.

Sighing, Despina turned away.

"Come in," a gruff voice said from beyond the doors.

This time, Despina did hesitate. The voice within sounded nothing like the one she knew. When Despina tried the handle she found it unlocked. It

scraped open, the sound cracking through the ominous silence.

It was pitch-dark inside the chamber, save for the light from her single taper.

Jalal was seated on the stone floor, his back against the wall.

He said nothing. He did not even glance in her direction.

Despina wavered only a moment more before she moved toward him.

“Jalal?”

His head turned toward hers. Agonizingly slow.

Even in the low light, his haunted expression brought her to his side in an instant.

“You’re here,” he said in a barely audible voice. “You’re here.”

She crouched beside him and lifted the taper to his face, soothing phrases collecting on her tongue and her free hand raised to—

His cloak was stained red at its center.

Despina gasped, placing the taper on the stone floor before reaching for him once more. “You’re hurt.”

“No.”

“Don’t play the hero,” Despina insisted as she began searching for the source of his wound. “You’re bleeding.”

“It isn’t my blood.”

“Then whose blood is it?”

He did not respond immediately.

“Jalal?”

“It’s—Ava’s father’s.”

Another gasp. “You killed Ava’s father?”

“No.” Jalal bent his head. Without a word, his face fell into his red-stained hands.

Despina sat with him. She brought a bowl of water to his side and removed the bloodied cloak in silence.

With great care, she washed the blood from his hands.

Jalal pulled her close. “Don’t leave. Please don’t leave.”

“I won’t.”



A FAMILY'S LOYALTY

DESPINA CLUTCHED AT THE HANDLE OF HER CHAMBER door.
She locked it.

Once. Twice.

Then she ran to the looking glass propped against her wall. Without hesitation, she stripped off her skirts. Kicked off her sandals. Shimmied from her undergarments.

Then she stared at her naked body in the silver before her. She turned this way and that, studying every curve for any telltale sign.

No.

It wasn't noticeable yet.

No one would be able to tell she was with child.

Her moment of relief gave way to grim realization.

That will not be the case for much longer.

She had only a few months left to keep this a secret. Only a few months to seek order in the chaos she had wrought.

The chaos of a mere few months spent with Jalal al-Khoury.

Despina continued to stare at her reflection in cool silence.

Fool. Worthless fool.

She was her mother all over again. Carrying the child of a man who was not her husband. Carrying the child of a man who would never see her as an

equal. Whose family and friends would see her as a scheming whore.

Worse, Despina had even fallen in love with the cad. A life of careful consideration undone in less than a season.

She stepped closer to the mirror, willing her reflection to disappear. Just for a moment.

So many secrets. So many lies.

In an instant, she made a decision. Despina could not tell Jalal about his child. He could never know what this meant to her. He could never learn how much she loved him.

She would never give any man that kind of power over her.

No. Despina would continue working at the palace until she could hide the truth no longer.

Then she would set her world straight, once and for all. This child would not be raised to fear or hate the world around it. Be made to bow and cower to lesser men.

No. The world around this child would bow first.

Despina collected her things and dressed herself again in a calm and collected fashion.

After all, she still had a job to do. She had to prepare the garments for yet another marriage. The bridal shroud of yet another queen.

The caliph was marrying again at dusk. Despina had lost count of how many young girls had been brought to the palace to wed a king only to die the following day.

After the first few deaths, Despina had elected to remain at a distance. She could not stomach gazing into the eyes of these young, scared girls as they marched to their untimely demise. Could not stomach the willful destruction of life.

Instead Despina chose to focus on creating the most beautiful wedding garments ever fashioned for each of these pitiful souls. A horrible last gift. But the best one Despina could manage.

She'd been told this girl was quite lovely. Small. Proud. Eyes colored like a mosaic in a flurry of hues.

For this girl with the many-colored eyes, Despina chose silver damask and red rubies.

Without a word, Despina moved into the queen's chamber and gave the garments to the servants who would be dressing tonight's ill-fated queen.

“Did you hear?” Ruha said quietly once the two young girls had left. “This one volunteered.”

Despina cut her gaze at Ruha. “What?”

“She volunteered to marry the caliph.”

Despina blinked. “Poor little fool.”

“Why would she ever volunteer?” Ruha looked to the floor, lost in thought.

“Who knows why it is people do the things they do?”

“Do you suppose she’s mad?”

“One would have to be, to wed such a man.” Despina straightened the folds of her skirt. “Or perhaps she’s trying to take matters into her own hands.” She lifted her chin. “Trying to take charge of her own destiny.” Her gaze fell to the floor. “Time will tell her the futility of such efforts.”

“Is that even possible?” Ruha whispered. “Do you think she could actually make the caliph see reason? Or perhaps—”

“There is no way to know for certain what lurks in the shadowed corners of the mind.” Despina strode toward the door. At the last instant, she glanced over one shoulder to the troubled servant girl at her back.

“But I do know anything is possible,” Despina finished softly. “So long as there is a strong will behind it.” She reached for the handle of the chamber door, resolve flowing through her veins.

No. Her child would never bow to anyone.

The world would fall to its knees first.

Despina would make sure of it.

Looking for more?

Visit Penguin.com for more about this author and a complete list of their books.

[Discover your next great read!](#)

