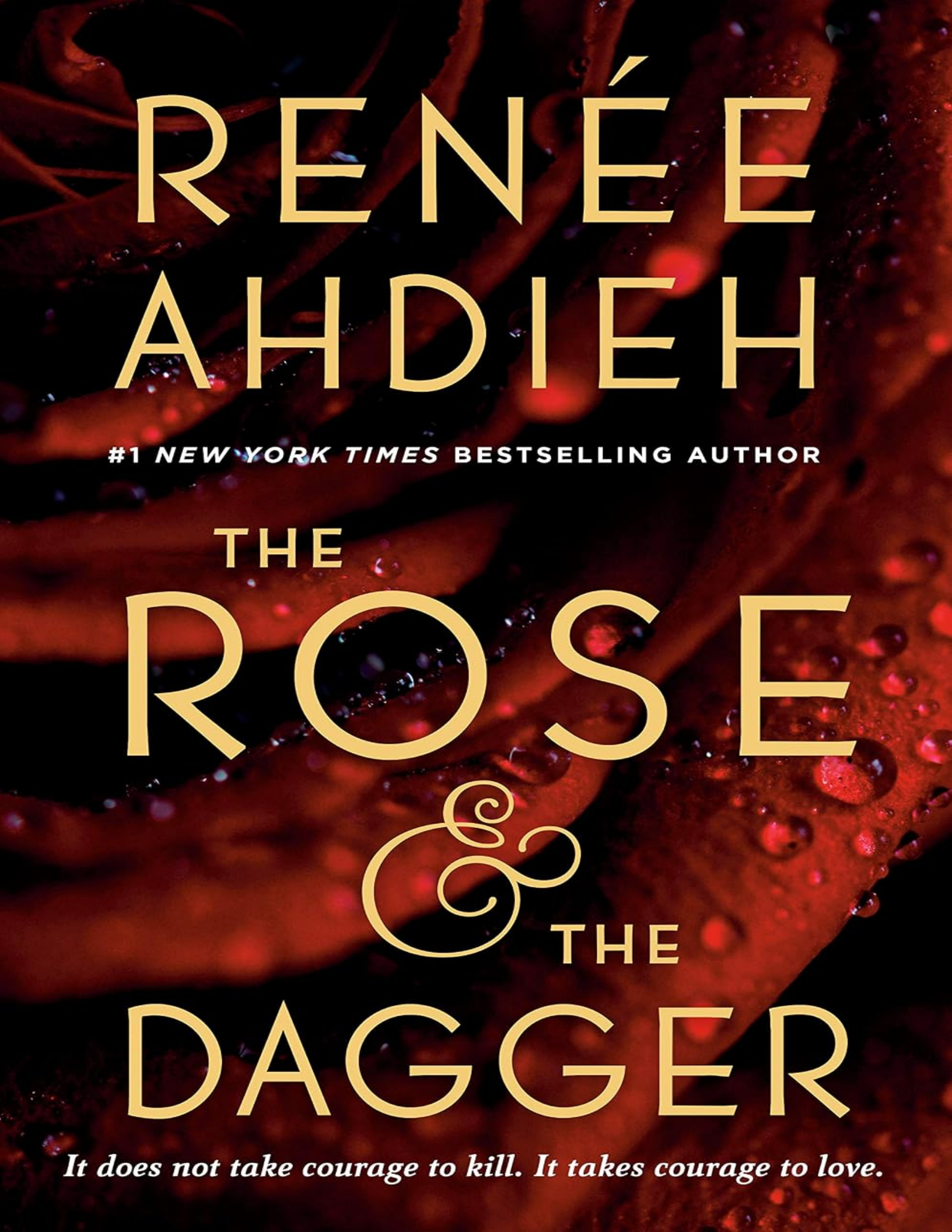




RENÉE
AHDIEH

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
ROSE
&
THE
DAGGER

It does not take courage to kill. It takes courage to love.

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The Wrath and the Dawn

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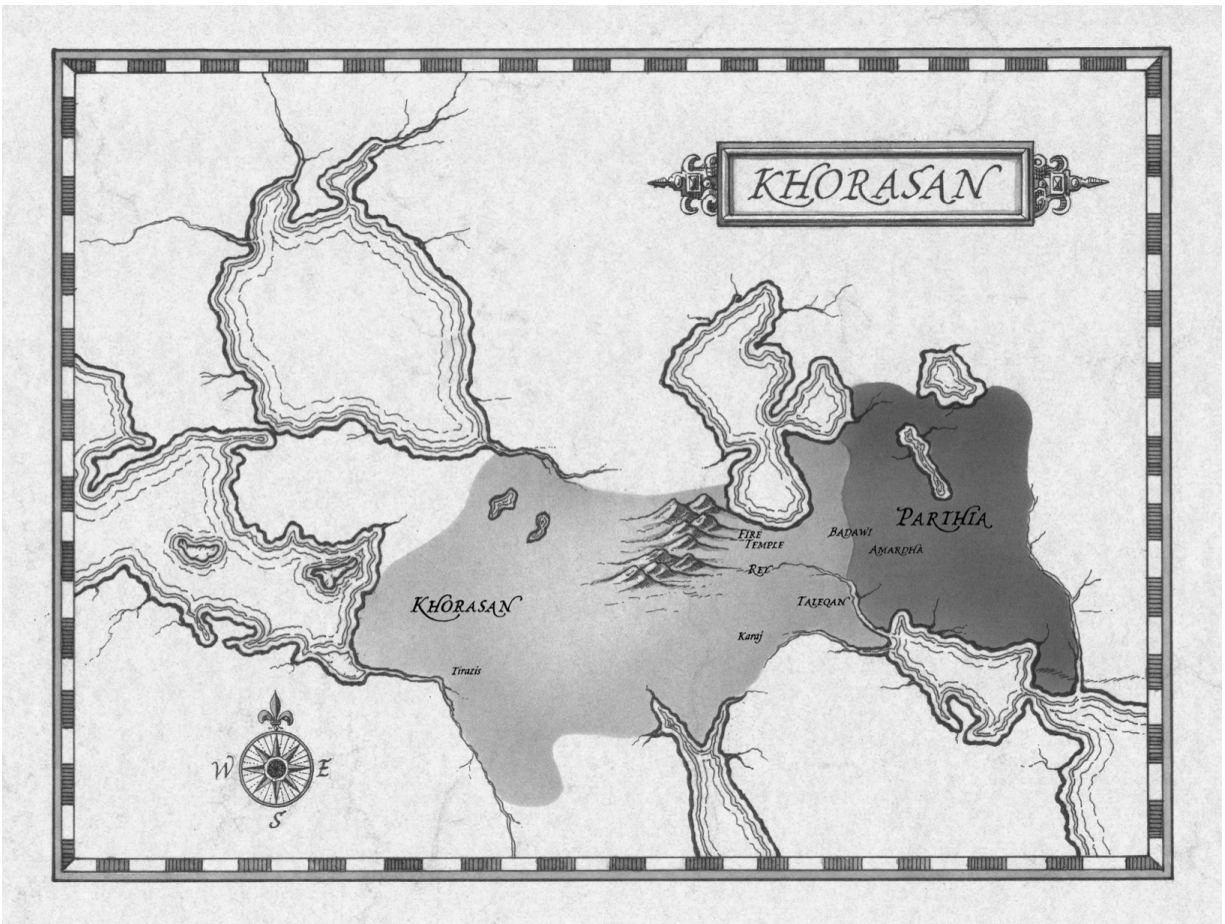
The Wrath & the Dawn by Renée Ahdieh

Written in the Stars by Aisha Saeed

THE
ROSE
&
THE
DAGGER

RENÉE AHDIEH

speak



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an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, NY 10014



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Cover photography: Raul Rodriguez.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available upon request.

eBook ISBN 978-0-698-18590-6

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Jacket Art Credit:

Design: Theresa Evangelista

Version_1

*To my sisters:
Erica, Elaine, and Sabaa—
This book would not be possible without each of you.
And to Victor, always.*

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AN ARROW TO THE HEART
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Acknowledgments

Excerpt from Flame in the Mist

The rose's rarest essence lives in the thorns.

Jalal al-Din Rumi



PROLOGUE

THE GIRL WAS ELEVEN AND THREE-QUARTERS.

Three very important quarters.

They'd been of consequence when her father had left her in charge this morning, with an important task to accomplish. So, with a world-weary sigh, she pushed up her tattered sleeves and heaved rubble into the nearby wheelbarrow.

"It's so heavy," her eight-year-old brother complained, as he struggled to move a piece of debris from their home. He coughed when a cloud of soot rose from the charred remains.

"Let me help." The girl dropped her shovel with a *clang*.

"I didn't say I needed help!"

"We should work together, or we won't finish cleaning everything before Baba returns home." She braced her fists on her hips while glaring down at him.

"Look around you!" He threw his hands in the air. "We'll *never* finish cleaning everything."

Her eyes followed his hands.

The clay walls of their home were ripped apart. Broken. Blackened. Their roof opened up to the heavens. To a dull and forlorn sky.

To what once had been a glorious city.

A midday sun lay hidden behind the shattered rooftops of Rey. It cut shadows of light and dark across angry stone and scorched marble. Here and there, smoldering piles of rubble served as a harsh reminder of what had taken place only a few short days ago.

The young girl hardened her gaze and stepped closer to her brother.

“If you don’t want to work, then wait outside. But I’m going to keep working. Someone has to.” Again, she reached for her shovel.

The boy kicked at a nearby stone. It skittered across the packed earth before crashing to a halt at the foot of a hooded stranger standing by the remains of their door.

Tensing her grip on the shovel, the girl eased her brother behind her.

“May I help you . . . ?” She paused. The stranger’s black *rida*’ was embroidered in silver and gold thread. The scabbard of his sword was finely etched and delicately bejeweled, and his sandals were cut from the highest-quality calfskin.

He was no mere brigand.

The girl stood taller. “May I help you, *sahib*?”

When he did not answer right away, the girl raised the shovel higher, her brow taut and her heart hammering in her chest.

The stranger stepped from beneath the sagging doorjamb. He threw back his hood and raised both palms in supplication. Each of his gestures was careful, and he moved with a liquid kind of grace.

As he strode into a weak slice of light, the girl saw his face for the first time.

He was younger than she expected. No more than twenty.

His face approached beautiful. But its angles were too harsh, his expression too severe. The sunlight on his hands revealed something at odds with the rest of his finery; the skin of his palms was red and cracked and peeling—evidence of hard labor.

His tired eyes were a tawny-gold color. She’d seen eyes like that once. In a painting of a lion.

“I didn’t mean to startle you,” the stranger said softly. His eyes shifted around the ruin of their one-room abode. “May I speak to your father?”

The girl’s suspicion gripped her once more. “He’s—not here. He went to stand in line for building supplies.”

The stranger nodded. “And your mother?”

“She’s dead,” her brother said, stirring from behind her. “The roof fell on her during the storm. She died the next morning.”

There was an unassuming quality to his words that the girl did not feel. Because to her brother, the words were not yet real. For after they’d lost nearly everything in last year’s drought, the storm had taken its final toll on their family.

And her brother had yet to grasp this most recent loss.

The stranger’s severity deepened for an instant. He looked away, and his hands fell to his sides. After a beat, he looked back at them, his eyes unwavering, despite his white-knuckled fists. “Do you have another shovel?”

“Why do *you* need a shovel, rich man?” Her little brother marched up to the stranger, accusation in each of his barefooted steps.

“Kamyar!” His sister gasped as she reached for the back of his ragged *qamis*.

The stranger blinked down at her brother before crouching on the packed-earth floor. “Kamyar, was it?” he asked, a trace of a smile adorning his lips.

Her brother said nothing, though he was barely able to meet the tall stranger’s eyes.

“I—I apologize, *sahib*,” the girl stammered. “He’s a bit insolent.”

“Please don’t apologize. I rather appreciate insolence, when it’s dispensed by the right person.” This time, the stranger did smile, and his features softened.

“Yes,” her brother interrupted. “My name is Kamyar. What is yours?”

The stranger studied her brother for a moment.

“Khalid.”

“Why do you want a shovel, Khalid?” her brother demanded again.

“I’d like to help you repair your home.”

“Why?”

“Because when we help one another, we are able to accomplish things faster.”

Kamyar nodded slowly, then canted his head to one side. "But this isn't your home. Why should you care?"

"Because Rey is my home. And Rey is your home. If you could help me when I needed help, would you not wish to do so?"

"Yes," Kamyar said without hesitation. "I would."

"Then it's settled." The stranger stood. "Will you share your shovel with me, Kamyar?"

For the rest of the afternoon, the trio worked to clear the floor of charred wood and waterlogged debris. The girl never gave the stranger her name and refused to call him anything but *sahib*, but Kamyar treated him like a long-lost friend with a common enemy. When the stranger gave them water and *lavash* bread to eat, the girl dipped her head and touched her fingertips to her brow in thanks.

A flush rose in her cheeks when the almost-beautiful stranger returned the gesture, without a word.

Soon, the day began bruising into night, and Kamyar wedged himself into a corner, his chin drooping to his chest, and his eyes slowly falling shut.

The stranger finished arranging the last of the salvageable pieces of wood by the door, and shook the dirt from his *rida* before pulling the hood of his cloak back over his head.

"Thank you," the girl murmured, knowing that was the least she should do.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. Then the stranger reached into his cloak and produced a small pouch cinched shut by a leather cord.

"Please. Take it."

"No, *sahib*." She shook her head. "I cannot take your money. We've already taken enough of your generosity."

"It isn't much. I'd like for you to take it." His eyes, which had appeared tired at the outset, now looked beyond exhausted. "Please."

There was something about his face in that moment, hidden as it was in the play of shadows, in the lingering motes of ash and dust . . .

Something about it that signified a deeper suffering than the girl could ever hope to fathom.

She took the small pouch from his hand.

“Thank you,” he whispered. As though he were the one in need.

“Shiva,” she said. “My name is Shiva.”

Disbelief flared on his features for an instant. Then the sharp planes of his face smoothed.

“Of course it is.” He bowed low, with a hand to his brow.

Despite her confusion, she managed to respond in kind, her fingers brushing her forehead. When she looked up again, he had turned the corner.

And disappeared into the wending darkness of night.



THE WATER LIES

IT WAS ONLY A RING.

Yet it signified so much to her.

Much to lose. Much to fight for.

Shahrzad lifted her hand into a stream of light. The ring of muted gold flashed twice, as if to remind her of its mate, far across the Sea of Sand.

Khalid.

Her thoughts drifted to the marble palace in Rey. To Khalid. She hoped he was with Jalal or with his uncle, the *shahrban*.

She hoped he was not alone. Adrift. Wondering . . .

Why am I not with him?

Her lips pressed tight.

Because the last time I was in Rey, thousands of innocent people perished.

And Shahrzad could not return until she'd found a way to protect her people. Her love. A way to end Khalid's terrible curse.

Outside her tent, a goat began to bleat with merry abandon.

Her temper mounting, Shahrzad flung off her makeshift blanket and reached for the dagger beside her bedroll. An empty threat, but she knew she should at least fight for a semblance of control.

As if to mock her, the shrill sounds beyond her tent grew more incessant.

Is that a . . . bell?

The little beast outside had a bell around its neck! And now the clanging and the bleating all but ensured the impossibility of sleep.

Shahrzad sat up, gripping the jeweled hilt of her dagger—

Then, with an exasperated cry, she fell back against the itchy wool of her bedroll.

It's not as though I'm managing to sleep as it is.

Not when she was so far from home. So far from where her heart longed to be.

She swallowed the sudden lump that formed in her throat. Her thumb brushed against the ring with two crossed swords—the ring Khalid had placed on her right hand a mere fortnight ago.

Enough. Nothing will be accomplished from such nonsense.

Again she sat up, her eyes scanning her new surroundings.

Irsa's bedroll was neatly stashed to one side of the small tent. Her younger sister had likely been awake for hours, baking bread, making tea, and braiding the contemptible goat's chin hair.

Shahrzad almost smiled, despite everything.

Her wariness taking shape in the gloom, she tucked the dagger into her waistband, then stretched to her feet. Every muscle in her body ached from days of hard travel and nights of poor sleep.

Three nights of worry. Three nights spent fleeing a city set to flame. An endless fount of questions without answers. Those three long nights of worry for her father, whose battered body had yet to recover from whatever damage it had incurred on the hilltops outside Rey.

Shahrzad took a deep breath.

The air here was strange. Drier. Crisp. Soft bars of light slanted through the tent seams. A thin layer of fine silt clung to everything. It made her tiny