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# The Princess of Dhagabad

Book I

The Spirits of the Ancient Sands

Anna Kashina



*The Princess of Dhagabad*

Book I  
The Spirits of the Ancient Sands



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Dragonwell Publishing

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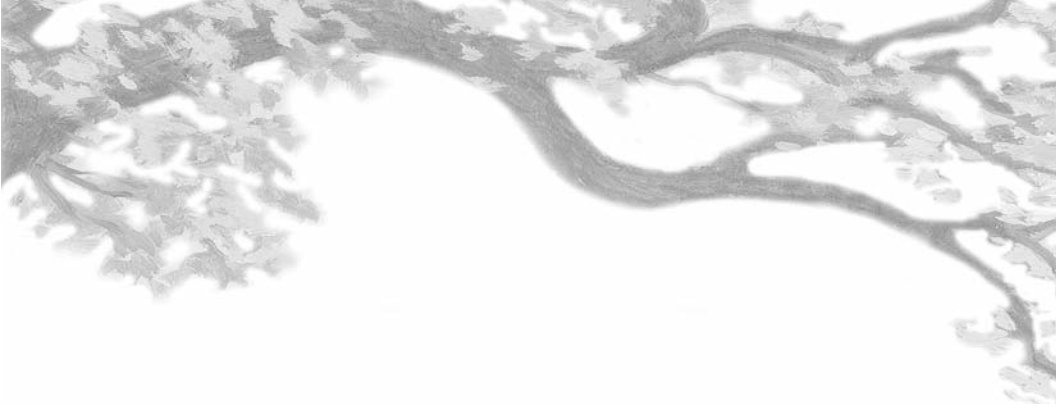
The bronze bottle sits heavy in the old sultaness's lap, gleaming with its elegant ancient carvings. She runs her finger up the curve of its slender neck, toward the tightly shut cork. Among the riches that surround her, this bottle is her most cherished possession, the source of her power, the tool that could make her invincible and smite her enemies into oblivion. But even this bottle cannot help her to overcome old age, to gain eternal life and eternal youth.

Her mouth twists into a smile as she sets the bottle on her bedside table and leans back into the pillows. She knows that she is about to die and that in preparation for this event her son and heir has already ordered his magnificent coronation robes. He is not worthy to inherit her throne, but she is not troubled by that. Men are too fleeting and powerless in her dynasty to take them seriously. She is thinking of his firstborn daughter, the one his young wife has just borne him, the one who will become his heiress in due time. She will leave this girl her most cherished possession—the bronze bottle—and thus make this girl her true heir, who can continue what the old sultaness has started.

Let the world remember the incredible power this girl will wield, the power that can shift the balance, the power that will enable her to create or destroy, if such is her whim...

Let the gods have mercy on her.





*I*

*Mistress*



# White Robes



The rock in her hand shines and sparkles in the sun with all the colors of the rainbow. An ordinary piece of gravel, but the princess imagines it to be a priceless treasure that holds a mystery in its gray depths, a mystery that she as a mere mortal will never comprehend. Little specks of mica that cover the stone gleam in the sun like tiny windows into the unknown. Perhaps the rock traps someone's immortal soul? And each of its rough curves, so precisely fitting her palm, conceals a magical tale...

The princess starts, hearing distant voices.

"Alamid told me the princess was playing in her favorite corner of the garden."

The voice belongs to Airagad, the youngest of the princess's nannies. She is always being sent on errands that involve fetching the princess from places that lie far away from the palace.

The princess recognizes the other deep and soft voice that answers Airagad:

"The sultaness wants to see her in half an hour."

Nimeth. A slave woman from the desert land Aeth. Her mother's best friend. According to rumors whispered in the palace — a witch....

"Over there, behind those bushes," Airagad says.

The princess hears the rustling of footsteps on the gravel. Why can't they leave her alone? This is, after all, her free time. And she is already practically a grown-up! She will be twelve in a week, and they still seem to think she is a little girl. Why would her mother send for her at this time? As far as she

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knows, the evening prayer is not due for a while.

Moving as noiselessly as she can, the princess crawls deep into the thick, sweet-smelling jasmine bushes that surround her favorite corner of the garden. Through the intertwining branches she can easily see the curve of the path running around a giant boulder, covered with an elaborate gray-green pattern of succulent plants.

The two women emerge from behind the boulder and stop before an empty glade.

"I don't understand," Airagad says with dismay. Her round childish face frowns, and a little vertical line crosses her forehead. "Alamid came back to the palace, and just before, they were playing here together."

A barely visible smile appears on Nimeth's dark thin face. The princess knows this smile all too well. It means Nimeth is very sure of herself, and nothing the princess can do will trick her.

"It seems we'll just have to leave," Nimeth says matter-of-factly.

"But..." Airagad turns her face to Nimeth and meets the look of her slanting dark eyes.

Nimeth runs her hands over her unusual outfit that the sultanness lets her wear in spite of Dhagabad's traditions — a long, dark dress trimmed with silver along the neckline and the hem of the skirt. Her thin arm moves to straighten the hair that cascades down her back in a mass of thin braids, and the metal bracelet on her wrist — the sign of slavery — gleams in the sun. Airagad's arms, bare up to the elbows, have no bracelets on them. Nannies are appointed not from the slave women, but from the free servants.

"I am certain the sultanness wouldn't mind going to the bazaar in the lower city without the princess," Nimeth says, slowly and deliberately.

Bazaar! Lower city! Countless hours has the princess spent gazing into the barely visible colorful mass of the lower city from one of the higher balconies of the palace. Countless times she dreamed that a wizard from her favorite tale would appear beside her, and with a mere wave of a hand transport her



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into that, as she thought, center of life, the focus of all miracles. She has often begged her mother to take her along on one of her usual trips to the bazaar. And every one of those times she had to clench her fists to hold back the tears at the usual response: "You are too young." But today, finally, her dreams are coming true! It couldn't be any other way – she is almost twelve now, and no one, not even the sultanness herself, would dare to say she is too young anymore.

Noisily tearing aside the jasmine branches, the princess pops out into the glade.

"Is it true, Nimeth? Is my mother really taking me to the bazaar?"

"Great gods! Princess! I didn't know you were here!" Nimeth's eyes narrow down into slits. "Did you lose something in those bushes?"

"I..." The princess hesitates. "This rock," she says hopelessly, feeling as if she is betraying a friend for the sake of a foolish lie. Witch or not, Nimeth is not easy to fool.

Nimeth lets out a short laugh. "A very valuable thing, princess."

Her scornful glance stings. Hurt at this contempt toward her newly acquired treasure, the princess blushes and hides the rock behind her back.

"I was hiding," she confesses. "I thought you and Nanny wanted me to do something boring."

"Princess!" Airagad exclaims with reproach.

"I value your honesty, princess," Nimeth says in an icy voice. "But I'll have to tell the sultanness of your doings, and I can't guarantee she will still want you to go with her to the bazaar."

The princess sighs and clenches the rock tighter in her hand.

With a sinking heart she follows Nimeth and Airagad down the winding garden path. To think that she was so close to fulfilling her wish to take a look at the mysterious world outside the palace, and that her own foolishness may have robbed her of that wonderful chance!

The princess looks around the garden, which is blooming

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wildly after the recent season of rains. Numerous paths, barely visible through the thick bushes, run everywhere like small streams of gravel to merge with one of the main alleys that run straight from the palace to the outside wall. The garden was designed as a half-circle adjoining the back of the palace with three main alleys radiating from the three palace entrances like the beams of the rising sun. From the top of the tallest palace tower this layout indeed resembles the sun. But here, among the greenery, all these windy little paths, ponds, and hidden glades make the garden look more like a spider-web, wild greenery sprouting out between its delicate silky threads. And as with a web, the princess feels the garden and the adjoining palace are now trapping her in their embrace, like a little fly that sees the outside world from its silky prison but can never set itself free.

She looks at the domes and towers of the palace rising up through the green cloud of trees. From the garden the palace looks completely different than it does from the front, where the central courtyard leads straight to the main gate and the palace plaza. From the front the palace is a single being, all harmony and flight, the big dome, which crowns the throne room and the main ceremonial hall, flowing smoothly into cascades of side galleries and towers that connect the central part of the palace to its four wings. But here, from the garden, the palace looks more like a random collection of buildings that run up to the back of the central dome, barely visible through the forest of leaves and flowers. The princess's quarters, as well as her mother's, are located in the south wing, and it is to the south entrance that Nimeth is now directing her firm steps, with Airagad and the princess in her wake. The princess sadly thinks how boring it is to go to her rooms now, leaving behind the greenery and heady aromas of the spring flowers that make her head swim with their rich sweetness. She clenches the little rock in her fist so hard that its rough edges, now warm and moist with the sweat of her palm, dig painfully into her skin.

The gaping doorway of the south wing brings a wave of cool air carrying smells of dust and stone and the barely per-

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ceptible aroma of bread baking in the kitchens. The princess steps after Nimeth into the cool shade of the hallway. After the bright sunlight of the garden she can barely see in the dim indoor light, and she nearly runs into Nimeth, who suddenly stops right in front of her.

"I'll go tell the sultanness that the princess is on her way," Nimeth says. "Try not to take too long, princess. We've lost enough time already."

"But..." It is still unclear if the sultanness will want to take the princess along after her misbehavior. But if Nimeth is telling her not to take too long, it means... The princess fearfully looks up into Nimeth's slanting, impenetrable eyes.

"I'll see you soon, princess," Nimeth says gently, and her thin fingers lightly touch the princess's cheek. Blushing with joy, the princess turns and rushes along the corridor to catch up with Nanny Airgad.



*Why did you seek all this knowledge, why did you let unsolved problems make you restless, why did you spend years reading ancient books and marveling at learning another high truth, if such is your reward? You shut your eyes, but your eyesight does not fail to see the endless dunes; you see the wind raising flamelike tongues of sand from their surface; you also see the intolerable crimson haze marking the spot where the sun should be. You praise your stars that this haze does not let you see the fiery disk whose beams so mercilessly pierce your soul. And you ask yourself again and again: would you have followed this way to the end if you had known what this end would be? Your mind is clinging to the tiniest straws: I did not know! If I had known, I would have stopped sooner! No one in his right mind could wish for such an end. And another thing: maybe this is not the end. Maybe somebody is trying to scare you to make you leave your uneven, slippery way of knowledge and turn to the simple and solid ways of the mortals... And along with a new blast of hot wind carrying another cloud of sand, along with the constant*

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*stream of sunbeams that never tire of piercing you, you realize in the depths of your tortured self that this is the end, the natural end, and if you had known it all beforehand, if you could have chosen even a thousand times, you would never have missed this eager search for the unknown, this marvel at learning the high truth, your growing wisdom and power, and the terrified admiration of the endless depths of eternity.*



The thing that amazes the princess is *not* the big palace gate that opens for the first time for her, nor the palace plaza with its paving stones that run across from the gate straight to al-Gulsulim mosque. Hitherto forbidden to her, the solemn grandeur of the gate and plaza seem like an extension of the palace itself, an enlarged version of the gates that open into the main ceremonial hall within. While her litter glides across the plaza on the shoulders of four mighty Ghullian slaves, she feels as if the whole procession is actually moving through the hall itself, its dome removed to reveal the clear blue of the cloudless sky. Only later, when they finally make their way around the smoothly hewn walls of the al-Gulsulim minarets into a real city street, do the princess's eyes open up with wonder.

The *first* thing that amazes her is the blind emptiness of the walls.

From the mosque, the street runs down through the upper city of Dhagabad, where the palace is surrounded by the luxurious residences of rich and noble citizens, to the lower city, where the houses of merchants and commoners form a meshwork of narrow curved streets and plazas. Farther down, ships bring their wares up the river Hayyat el Bakr straight from the sea, and the busy port gradually merges with the Dhagabad bazaar.

From her lessons in local geography the princess knows that there are many streets that run eastward from the hills of the upper city to the lower areas of Dhagabad surrounding

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the bazaar and the port. Only this main street runs more or less straight down into the heart of the bazaar itself, and it is used by everyone who needs to travel up to the palace or down to the port.

She always imagined the main street to be colorful, similar to the palace garden alleys in every way except for the crowds of richly dressed citizens walking along in unhurried concentration or stopping to chat with their neighbors. She imagined every detail—down to the aroma of tobacco smoke rising from their pipes in thin wisps or near-perfect rings. Now all she finds is a wide cobbled road bordered by empty walls with no windows and a few tightly shut doors. Only by the slight changes in the shape and color of the walls can the princess see that there are indeed many houses or perhaps magnificent residences hiding behind the blindness. In some places she can catch a glimpse of a domed roof, a crown of a fruit tree with pinkish-yellow fragrant blossoms. Sometimes a tightly clothed figure or two appear and press themselves against the wall, their heads lowered as they let the royal procession pass. Each appearance is preceded by the monotonous cry of Selim, the captain of the guard:

“Make way for the sultanness! Make way for the princess of Dhagabad!”

The farther they go down into the heart of the lower city, the more often the princess hears this cry, until it finally becomes regular like the chant that muezzins sing from the tops of the minarets at the time of the evening prayer.

The procession crosses a bridge, allowing the princess a brief glance into the dark, turbid waters of Hayyat el Bakr. She knows that the river coils through Dhagabad like a snake, a quality that gave the river its name, which means “Serpent of the Sea.” From the topmost balconies of the palace one can see it twist and bend through the city like a ribbon casually thrown on the ground. It looks quite narrow where they are now passing—the official border between the upper and lower cities—but it widens considerably as it reaches the colorful turmoil of the port.

From her teachers the princess knows that Dhagabad is one

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of the biggest ports in existence, mainly because it is easily accessible by land from such places as Dimeshq, Megina, Halaby, and even the distant Avallahaim. The trade with these countries is one of the main reasons why Dhagabad is so powerful, but she also knows that it could be even more prosperous if Dhagabad had direct access to the sea. As it is, all the ships that travel up Hayyat el Bakr have to pay their passage fees to Veridue, a country that owns the lower reaches of the river all the way to the shores of the Southern Sea. She knows there is some kind of trade agreement between Dhagabad and Veridue, enhanced by the great friendship between the two sultans of these countries, but that is part of politics, a discipline she doesn't particularly enjoy.

As they enter the lower city, the princess, used to the blind emptiness along the way, is amazed yet again. Instead of broad empty streets she finds herself surrounded by narrow alleys filled with people and boiling with action. Sitting up straight on her pillows, rocking with the measured tread of the slaves carrying her litter, the princess looks around with wide-open eyes. Beyond her mother's litter ahead of her, the princess sees the first stalls with goods and the open doors of small shops. This part of town is occupied by the poorest merchants, placed at the lower levels of the hierarchy of the bazaar, but seeing the colorful variety of the rows of merchandise, the princess feels as if she has been transferred into the magical world of her favorite books. She thinks of herself as a beautiful maiden separated from her beloved, or perhaps as a poor peasant girl suddenly finding herself surrounded, by the will of unknown powers, with unimaginable wealth. It seems to her that one of these bowed men should *definitely* be an evil sorcerer, that at any moment he will raise his head, and she will see his black beard and a devilish grin. But no one they pass dares to raise his head for the fear of seeing the faces of the wife and daughter of the great sultan of Dhagabad. By law, anyone who sees them must be blinded on the spot, even though the faces of all women, including the princess, are covered with veils up to the eyes. Luckily, the princess thinks, this law does not apply to the inhabitants of

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the palace. It would have been so uncomfortable to have to always wear a veil that sticks to your nostrils every time you inhale, and makes your face feel hot whenever you exhale! Wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to go to the lower city without a veil!

At this terribly indecent thought the princess throws an uneasy glance at Nannies Airagad and Zulfia walking on both sides of her litter, afraid that they may somehow hear her. Her eyes move over the tall, full figure of Zulfia on her right, over the double row of guards, toward the string of people standing against the walls, letting her see only their long robes and the very tops of the turbans on their bowed heads. Funny, she thinks, that when all these people bow their heads to avoid seeing her face, they at the same time make it impossible for her to see any faces of the inhabitants of the bazaar.

The guards reorganize from a double, sparse chain into a single, dense one. The street crowded with people has become so narrow the procession cannot possibly fit in a wide formation. All the space, as far as the eye can see, is now occupied by a colorful mass of people and goods. The princess cannot see any action, because all the action stops at their approach, but the variety of clothes, shapes, and objects makes her hold her breath in admiration. She sees merchants, buyers, moneychangers, onlookers, singers and dancers, thieves and respectable citizens – young and old, rich and poor – mixed to form a crowd, magnificent in its colorful disorder. She is trying to imagine herself in this crowd as one of the merchants, a part of this wonderful act, remembering all the books she read and fleshing out her knowledge with new substance. She inhales the odor of the bazaar, a mixed aroma of incense; jasmine and lavender oils; baked sesame seeds and roast lamb; the smell of horses, familiar to her from the palace stables; and the hitherto unknown smell of road dust. In the distance, in the widening side streets and plazas, in the crowd unaffected by the passage of the royal train, she sees fakirs and street dancers. Baskets of fruits float above the heads that upon a closer look reveal eager young errand boys. "Blind" beggars sit on the street corners, secretly eyeing handfuls of coins in

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their pockets from underneath their black eye patches. Here and there a heated argument erupts between a merchant and a customer, sometimes even a fight between two claimants of the same rare object. The princess twists and turns on her pillows, trying not to miss a single detail.

The procession comes to a stop, and the sultanness's litter ahead smoothly lowers to the ground. The slave women carefully help their mistress up from the pillows. The princess's litter is also lowered, and she sees a curtained door to a shop and a tall thin man in a robe and a turban, bowing before them.

*I hope he doesn't raise his head,* the princess thinks. She sees the man's hands tremble slightly and imagines the horror of the idea that he can be cruelly punished any minute for a single upward glance.

The man raises his head and looks straight at the princess.

Her eyes immediately fill with tears. She wants to say something, but all she can produce is a sob. Overwhelmed by all the sights and emotions of the last hour, she suddenly feels completely incapable of behaving appropriately for her station.

"What happened, princess?" the sultanness asks with alarm.

The princess raises her eyes to the sultanness, trying very hard to gain control of her trembling lips.

"Will they blind him, mother?" she whispers.

"Of course not, princess!" A smile hidden by the veil softens the sultanness's voice. "This is Mustafa, the cloth merchant. We came to see his goods."

Nanny Airagad gently puts her arm around the princess and gives her a handkerchief. Wiping her eyes and shivering, the princess clings to Airagad and follows the sultanness through the curtain into Mustafa's realm.

The big room they step into has no windows, and the princess, in spite of the abundance of artificial light, feels as if she has stepped right into the middle of the night. Several women identifiable by the richness of their clothes as Mustafa's wives and daughters bring out trays with tea and sweets. A smell of clove and cinnamon fills the air, and the



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princess, who hasn't eaten since lunch, feels her stomach growl. She throws a fearful glance at Airagad before picking a piece of freshly baked *pahlava*, sweet walnut paste wrapped in thin layers of crispy dough, still warm and moist from the oven. She knows she is not supposed to eat sweets before dinner, but today seems special.

True enough, Airagad doesn't object. Like everybody else in the room she is preoccupied with things more important than tea, and the princess, carefully sipping from her cup, joins her in watching.

Mustafa and the two older women, probably his eldest wives, respectfully hold out rolls of beautiful cloth. Silk streams to the floor in purple waves; heavy folds of velvet shimmer in the uneven light of the lanterns.

The sultanness unfolds a white cloth with fine silver embroidery.

"How do you like it?" she asks the princess.

"Very much," the princess says with uncertainty, not completely recovered from her unexpected tears.

"How much do we need, Zulbagad?" the sultanness asks.

One of the slave women, a strongly built middle-aged woman, separates herself from the suite and runs her deft, confident fingers along the cloth. The princess knows the slave woman Zulbagad very well. A skillful seamstress, she was bought from the caliph of Megina for the unthinkable price of three measures of gold. In spite of her being a slave, everyone in the palace, including the free servants, treats her with extreme respect. The sultanness, the same age as Zulbagad, is very fond of her and uses every opportunity to praise her amazing skills.

"Six cubits, your majesty," Zulbagad says with certainty.

The sultanness nods, and Mustafa takes the cloth into the depths of the room, making strange passes over it. The sultanness meanwhile whispers something to Zulbagad and Nimeth, throwing glances in the direction of the princess. The women serving them disappear for a minute and solemnly emerge carrying the most unusual cloth the princess has ever seen. Zulbagad runs her hand over the cloth, and the airy,

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cloudlike folds fall about in soft waves.

"This should be saved for the wedding," Nimeth says, shaking her head.

"For the wedding we'll find something else," the sultanness says firmly.

She turns and beckons the princess with her hand.

"Look at this cloth, princess."

The princess carefully holds out her hand and touches the airy folds. She feels a blow of warmth and light tingling. It feels as if she is finally fulfilling her wish to touch a cloud, a childhood wish before she learned that clouds are actually made of tiny droplets of water and that by touching a cloud one can only become wet and cold. Her wish coexists in her mind with this knowledge, useless like many other facts she learned. And now, finally, shaming the sages and scientists, human hands have created something so close to the cloud of her dreams.

"What a beautiful cloth, mother," she whispers.

"For your twelfth birthday Zulbagad will make you a head shawl out of it," the sultanness says.

"For me?"

"You will wear it with an outfit she will make for you out of the silver-embroidered cloth we just selected."

"For me, mother? White robes?"

"You are a grown-up now, princess. You can start wearing white like all other young girls."

The princess sighs, not daring to believe her happiness. She has always liked white, perhaps because none of her clothes had a single white spot on them. By Dhagabad tradition a person is only allowed to wear white upon reaching the age of adolescence. The reason for this tradition is undoubtedly very practical—what kind of a child would be able to wear white clothes for more than a few minutes without making them dirty? But at the same time, like any restriction, it arouses in little girls an unbearable desire, if not to wear, at least to try on, a white outfit.

"Five cubits," Zulbagad tells Mustafa.

The princess, filled with happiness, looks at the growing

### **White Robes**

pile of packages in front of them. What a wonderful age—twelve, when she can go to the bazaar with her mother and wear a white outfit! How much she has wanted for her twelfth birthday to come! A day when so many of her wishes will come true, including her most sacred one...