



# CHRONICLES OF THE RED KING

Leopards' Gold



JENNY NIMMO



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# For Richard Simpson

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Summary: It is years since King Timoken, his sister, Zobayda, and his friends settled in the enchanted  
Red Castle, but now they are all threatened by the evil beyond the castle's protective spells — and it  
will be up to two of Timoken's nine children, Petrello and Tolomeo, to find out which of their  
siblings is the traitor in their midst, and defeat their enemies.

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## CHAPTER 1

### The Vanishing

**T**he spell began at their feet. Eri, sitting on a tree stump, hummed; his voice broke often and he paused in his chant. He was now very old and couldn't hold the notes for long. Today it was his grandson, Llyr, who murmured and sang as he walked beside the wall of leaves.

Every autumn, children from the castle would gather freshly fallen leaves and build up the wall until it reached their knees. It would remain throughout the winter, but in the summer months the leaves would sink a little and the wall had to be built up again, and then, when the wizards chanted, everything inside the wall would become invisible.

The spell-wall extended deep into the forest. It encircled the castle whose sixteen towers rose above the trees. As Llyr sang,

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the spell crept through the grass until it reached the great yews that stood on either side of the high castle gate. The yews and the gate were slowly swallowed. The spell drifted over the castle gardens; it covered the bank of roses and the marble statues. Hedges of rosemary, hawthorn, and sage were gently shrouded in a white mist.

The pond melted into gossamer, the stone steps dissolved, the great castle doors disappeared along with the high red walls and, finally, the sixteen towers.

The castle and its inhabitants were now invisible to the outside world. Humans and animals were also floating. This was the only drawback to invisibility and a bell was always rung to warn the people that soon they would be swept off their feet, or out of their beds.

Llyr returned to Eri. "It is done. You can rest now, Grandfather."

"Did you hear the bell?" asked Eri.

"I was listening to our chant. I heard no warning. But I told the bellman the spell would soon begin."

"It never came. Timoken will be annoyed. His sister is frail and shouldn't be tossed out of bed without warning."

"It could be worse," said Llyr. "At least the beds don't move now, and the chairs all stay in place."

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A hint of a smile touched Eri's lips. "No. You've done well, Llyr."

"A little more work," said his grandson, "and I'll be able to keep them all grounded when the disappearing starts."

Eri looked toward the vanished castle. "I wonder how they're doing in there. Without the warning bell there'll be a few bruised heads."

"And what has become of the bellman?" said Llyr with a frown.

Petrello woke up to find himself in the air. His brothers were floating just beneath him. Tolly, his brown curls bobbing, twisted and turned, his arms flailing, his hands reaching for something to grab. Vyborn lay on his back, spread-eagled inches above his bed. He glared up at Petrello accusingly.

"It's not my fault," said Petrello.

"The bell didn't ring." Tolly kicked in the air. "I'd have held the bedpost if I'd had a warning."

"Perhaps we didn't hear it. Or perhaps the wizards had no time to call the bellman."

Petrello's feet skimmed the floor and his head jerked back, hitting a bedpost. "Ouch! That doesn't usually happen. What's going on?"

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Vyborn's small body had drifted higher. He had rolled over and was now staring down at Petrello. Petrello hoped his brother wasn't going to be sick. Vyborn was often sick. He was only six years old and sometimes ate more than he should, though he was still a scrawny boy. He had a face like a bad-tempered owl.

Petrello swam over to the window and, reaching for the sill, clung on. In the pale dawn light he could make out the lines of rose trees in the castle gardens and the low hedges of medicinal herbs. Two stately yews marked the end of the garden and the track that led east to the small town of Rosemellon. To the south, the great forest of Hencoed spread as far as the eye could see; to the north, the mountains rose like ghostly towers, their snowcapped peaks lost in the night clouds.

Two men appeared between the yews. Both wore blue cloaks edged in gold. The men carried long staffs that glimmered softly as they moved through the garden.

"The wizards are returning," Petrello observed. "They have a lot of ground to cover now that the castle has grown so vast."

"And it's still growing." Tolly gulped air as the wizards' spells tossed him to the ceiling.

It was true. Even the king had begun to wonder if his castle would continue to expand. It had been built by his African spirit ancestors twenty-seven years earlier. For some reason, they

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considered the building incomplete and would arrive now and again, in the dead of night, called, perhaps, by an old song the king had thoughtlessly hummed on his way to bed, a rhythm that had remained in his head ever since he had fled his secret African kingdom.

Try as he might, the king could never discover the precise sounds that called his spirit ancestors. The great Red Castle now sprawled for almost a mile, along a cliff that rose sheer from the river Dolenni.

Petrello couldn't see the river, but he never tired of the view from his window, and he marveled that, while he could see so much, the castle and all its inhabitants were invisible to anyone outside.

The wizards were responsible. Their spells kept the castle safe. If the king of England were ever to know that in the northern forests there was a castle larger than his own, he would consider its owner, especially a foreign king, a threat to his throne. An army of conquerors would be dispatched and the castle burned to the ground. If they survived the fire, who knew what would happen to an African king and his family once they were prisoners of the conquerors' king?

"I wish the spell wouldn't do this," said Tolly as Vyborn floated above him and dribbled onto his bare foot.

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"Llyr will refine it," said Petrello. "It's already better than it was. Remember we used to see through all the walls, as if we were in a giant bubble. And the furniture floated. Now it's just us."

"I don't remember," grumbled Vyborn.

"You were only two," said Tolly. "But I remember because I was five and Trello was six."

An angry roar echoed down the passage outside the boys' bedchamber. "Senseless! Ludicrous! Pointless!"

"Borlath!" Tolly made a face.

Borlath, the king's eldest son, was always angry. If he'd had his way, the wizards would have been banished long ago and the castle left to be defended by the king and his knights. Borlath's fingers could burn like fiery pokers. It was an endowment inherited from his father, though the king never used his fingers in anger. In Borlath's bad moods it was best to avoid him.

"Sometimes, I wish he'd burn himself on his own fingers," Petrello murmured.

The wizards were drawing closer. Llyr supported his grandfather on his arm. Old Eri limped badly, his back was bent, and the hem of his cloak heavy with dew, but he still wore a mischievous smile.

Llyr was tall, his face paler than his grandfather's. Llyr wasn't smiling. Spells were a serious matter. If they were not right, their

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power could be reversed. He was forever lecturing the children about the misuse of magic. The wizards, themselves, never floated. Even they were not sure how they managed to avoid it.

“What’s the danger, Trello?” asked Tolly. “Can you see any soldiers?”

“I see the wizards,” said Petrello. “No one else.”

“Then why are we floating?” grumbled Vyborn.

“Danger can’t always be seen.” Petrello watched the two wizards approach the entrance to the castle. They passed out of sight, and he heard the great doors grinding open as they obeyed the touch of Llyr’s staff. Petrello never failed to wonder how the doors would glide apart at a tap from a slim wooden staff when usually it took two men to unbolt and open them.

The light in the eastern sky began to brighten, sunbeams slid over the distant hills, and the dark forest became emerald green. And still those in the vanished castle swam in the air of their bedchambers, in the rafters of the kitchens, the stables, the guardrooms, and the Meeting Hall.

The dogs and horses had become accustomed to the weightlessness that would suddenly overcome them. They knew it did them no harm, and yet they became unusually silent at such times, as though the spell that held them aloft had stolen their voices for a while.

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The sun rose above the hills, but the floating persisted.

Petrello's arms began to ache. He let go of the sill, and as he swam free he felt his legs dropping. The air beneath him was getting thinner; his feet touched the floor and he heard his brothers land behind him. Llyr always made sure the bonds of a spell were gently loosened.

Vyborn sat, scowling, on his bed. Tolly lay on the floor, laughing. Sunlight touched his forehead and he stood up suddenly, looking anxious. "I shall be late."

"Late for what?" asked Petrello.

"Can't tell." Tolly pulled on his woolen hose, stepped into his breeches, and slid into his shoes. The next moment, he was running through the door.

"You forgot your jerkin, brother!" called Petrello.

"Too late!" sang Tolly.

They had never had secrets from each other. But for twelve days now, Tolly had run off before the morning meal, never telling his brother where he was going, or why. Petrello was puzzled. Next morning he would follow his brother, he decided.

"Where does he go?" asked Vyborn.

"How should I know, brother?"

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“You must know because you and he are best friends. You know everything Tolly does. I know nothing, nothing about anybody.” Vyborn’s black eyes were expressionless.

“I’m sure you know things about your friends,” Petrello said lightly.

“I don’t have any friends,” Vyborn muttered. “I don’t know anything.”

Petrello felt a twinge of pity for his small, melancholy brother. “You will, one day,” he told him.

“Yes,” Vyborn agreed. “One day I’ll know a lot.”

Petrello dressed quickly and made for the door.

“So where are you going?” Vyborn asked. “I suppose that’s a secret, too.”

“Not at all. I’m going to see the wizards.”

“Why?”

“To ask about the bellman.” Petrello glanced at his brother’s frowning face, stepped into the passage, and closed the door.

The wizards’ room was at the top of the seventh tower. Once there had been four towers, now there were sixteen. Who knew how many more there would be before the spirit ancestors considered the castle to be complete? When the seventh tower had appeared, fifteen years ago, Eri decided to claim it for his own; a

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place where he could instruct his grandson in the rules of magic and the practice of healing.

Petrello climbed a winding, stone stairway. He no longer averted his gaze from the bones that rattled as he passed. The bones came from creatures that were long dead when Eri found them. Creatures whose like might never be seen again. They hung on iron nails protruding from the walls on either side of the narrow stairway; Petrello could sense their potency, though he could never guess why the wizards kept them there. When he had asked, Eri merely replied, "The past has strength, young man, if you believe it."

At the top of the steps stood a blackened door, its rough surface carved with stars and circles, pentagrams, crescents, and other mysterious symbols that held meaning for the wizards but no one else.

Petrello put his hand on the great ringed handle but didn't turn it. There was safety here, but also danger. A scent of deep earth lingered around the door, and a waft of scorched herbs.

Petrello knocked three times on the thick oak, and a voice called, "Who is there?"

"Petrello!"

"Enter."

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Now came the moment Petrello treasured. He turned the handle and the door opened with a low groan. Petrello stepped into a room the wizards called their aerie, their eagle's nest. It was easy to see why. All that could be seen from the wizards' long windows was sky.

On the back of the door, two blue cloaks hung from a peg. Their hems, stained with mud, dripped onto Petrello's boots as he closed the door.

"Good morning, Petrello. I can guess why you're here." Llyr was seated behind a long table covered with neat lines of dried plants, books, bottles, smooth pebbles, winking crystals, and gleaming polished bones. "You won't be our only visitor. Everyone will want to know why the bell was silent."

Petrello approached the table, the better to see those enchanting crystals. "Why was the bell silent, Llyr?"

"We may never know." Llyr stood up. Sunlight from the window behind him sent his long shadow across the table and over Petrello's head. The wizard's thick, yellow hair was unusually tangled, his slim fingers scratched and stained.

Llyr glanced at a sleeping figure on the couch by the window. A red blanket had been pulled right up to the sleeper's chin, but the great nose pointing at the ceiling could only belong to the wizard

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Eri. At the foot of the couch, curled into the folds of the blanket, lay the dragon, Enid. She too was asleep. Thin spirals of steam issued from her quivering snout and she growled in her dreams.

“Why, Llyr?” Petrello walked to the end of the table and touched one of the crystals daringly. “Why might we never know?”

Before Llyr could answer, the door swung open again. Only the king would enter the aerie without knocking. Petrello’s father stood on the threshold, taller even than Llyr; his red cloak was pinned at his shoulder with a golden circle and studded with rubies; his sword in its silver-and-gold scabbard was buckled to his jeweled belt; and in his thick, black hair, a gold crown glistened like an almost hidden circle of stars.

“Why was the bell silent?” the king demanded. “The bellman should have been warned before you set us all topsy-turvy. My sister is old now; she was quite shaken.”

“We did warn the bellman.” Eri had woken up, but remained lying where he was.

The king looked puzzled. “Did he ring the bell, then? Are we all going deaf?”

“No, Your Majesty. You are not going deaf,” said Llyr.

Petrello saw deep concern enter his father’s face. The king didn’t like the comforting rhythm of his castle to be disturbed. “Then what . . . ?” He spread his hands.

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“It was Rigg’s turn today. He is an efficient bellman, never late.” Eri spoke from his couch. “I warned him there were soldiers in the forest. I saw them in the crystals and knew they were there. ‘Ring the bell, Rigg,’ I said, ‘Quickly, before the Vanishing begins.’ We saw him mount the steps to the tower. We hastened away to cast the spell, but we heard no bell.”

“He disobeyed?” The king shook his head in disbelief.

“We went to the Bell Tower on our return,” said Llyr.

“And found it empty.” Eri sat up and rubbed his eyes. “There was blood on the steps, but no sign of Rigg.”

The king’s jaw dropped. He gazed around him in dismay, until his eyes found Petrello, backing away from the crystals as discreetly as he could.

“Someone attacked the bellman?” said the king. “Why was I not told as soon as you saw the blood?”

“I was coming, Sire,” said Llyr. “But we thought Rigg might merely have fallen and cut himself. Grandfather wanted to sleep and dream before we caused a stir.”

“I did not dream,” sighed Eri. “Rigg was most likely attacked, for he certainly disappeared.”