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Opening extract from
The Secret Kingdom

Written by
Jenny Nimmo

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‘Viridees!’ said Gabar, snorting with fear. He shook off the creature that had grabbed his harness, and it fell, screaming. Gabar raced down an alley, while the crowd of viridees roared behind him. A wall loomed.

Timoken said, ‘Jump, Gabar, and you will fly.’

‘Camels do not fly,’ Gabar snorted.

‘Believe me, you can,’ said Timoken.

‘Then I will believe!’

Timoken grabbed a tuft of the camel’s shaggy hair. With his mind and soul, he leapt for the sky.

The pull of gravity was immense. It dragged at his body and thundered in his scalp. ‘*Up! Up!*’ He felt his body would break apart. The camel’s jolting stride changed into an unfamiliar swaying motion and a passing bird called out at the astonishing sight of a camel in the air.

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Chapter One

The Forest-Jinni

There was once a secret kingdom. It was hidden from the world by a forest as wide and as deep as a sea. The people who lived there had never known war, but they had heard of it. Stories of terrible strife and cruelty in the outside world had been passed down from the ancestors who had founded the kingdom. And so, although the people had never fought a battle, they could imagine it. They kept their spears polished to a high degree, and they painted fierce animals on their stout wooden shields. They even posted a watch in the tall towers that stood at each of the four corners of the palace.

The king was everything a king should be. Standing a head taller than most of his subjects, he was wise and just and dignified. He favoured brightly coloured robes and golden jewellery which he wore looped in long ropes

around his neck and in wide bracelets on his arms. Yet the crown he wore was a slim, gold band, almost hidden in his thick black hair. It was a thousand years old and had once adorned the head of the first ruler of the secret kingdom.

The queen was a mystery. She was a very quiet woman, given to dreaming. It was believed that the king had chosen her for her exceptional beauty, but this was only part of the truth. He loved her for her fine mind, her kindness and the magical quality of her voice.

The king and queen had one child: Princess Zobayda, who was two years old. Another baby was on the way but, for some reason, the imminent birth of this second child filled the queen with anxiety. It was the hottest time of the year, and yet the queen could not stop shivering. All day she paced the palace, muttering to herself. At night she cried in her sleep and called out, 'Save him! Save my son!'

The king begged his wife to tell him about her nightmares. What was it that she feared so much? She was strong and healthy. Their kingdom was safe, and he tried to give her everything that she wished for. Why was she so worried about a child who had not even been born?

The queen could not say. She forgot her dreams as soon as she woke up, and did not understand why she found herself eroding the patterns on the tiled floor with her endless pacing. She had worn out one hundred pairs of shoes, and now went barefoot. Her feet were sore and blistered, and still she paced. Sometimes the king felt dizzy watching his restless wife.

One night a great storm blew up. The wind raged across the secret kingdom, uprooting trees and sending rivers of water through the streets. Thunder roared endlessly and lightning flashed across the land, turning night into day.

The windows in the palace were shuttered and barred and the king and queen sat close together on a low couch laden with gold embroidered cushions. For once the queen was motionless. She listened to the wind, leaning slightly, as though she were hearing voices.

‘What do they say?’ asked the king, half in jest. He took his wife’s hand. ‘Do they . . .?’ he began.

‘Ssssh!’ hissed his wife. ‘Something is coming!’

At that instant, the shutters cracked apart and something flew into the room. It lay, face down, its ragged wings spread against the marble floor. The wings

were not feathered, but as fine and delicate as a moth's. They sprouted from the being's bony shoulders; dark, earth-coloured wings with pearly veins. The rest of the body was covered in a greyish silk which, at first, appeared like a fine mist, but gradually settled around the stranger's body, revealing its puny form.

The royal couple stared at the creature as it slowly folded its wings and pulled itself into a kneeling position. Even the king was speechless.

The little being raised its head and gazed at the queen. It had mottled grey skin and huge saffron-coloured eyes. Its long nose was narrow, the tip overhanging its thin gash of a mouth. Its tiny ears rested in cavities on either side of its head, and it had no hair at all.

In spite of the creature's disturbing features, the queen was not alarmed. 'What has happened to you?' she asked gently.

The creature crawled towards the queen and grabbed the hem of her robe. 'Forgive,' he said. 'I had nowhere to go, nowhere at all. They pursue me everywhere.'

'Who pursues you?' asked the king, a little roughly. 'My people harm no one, even . . . even . . .'

'A jinni?'

‘Indeed, a jinni, if that is what you are?’

‘A forest-jinni.’ The creature’s voice had an echo, a distant cascade of tiny bells that enchanted the queen. ‘There is only one of us . . . now.’ His frail wings drooped.

‘You appear to be lost,’ said the queen. ‘How can we help you?’

‘Lost, lost. I am lost.’ Two fat tears rolled down the jinni’s mottled cheeks. ‘I flew above the forest. I dared not stop. For days and days I travelled through the air. I could hear them below me. They would not let me rest. And then the wind caught me. It hurled me into your beautiful kingdom.’ The jinni paused and took a breath. ‘And now I am here. At your majesties’ mercy.’ He bowed his head.

The king stroked his chin and glanced at his wife. The recent lines of weariness and apprehension had left her face.

‘I shall tell a servant to prepare a bed for you,’ said the queen. ‘If, indeed, you are used to such things. And some food. What do you like to eat, Forest-jinni?’

‘Fruit?’ said the jinni tentatively. More tears formed in the corners of his orange-yellow eyes, and he looked up at the coloured tiles that patterned the ceiling

above him. 'I have not known kindness for so long, it bewilders me.'

'Everyone deserves kindness,' said the queen. 'Without it, we would die.'

The king rang a small bell, placed on a table at his side, and a servant appeared. When the man saw the jinni, he gave a gasp of horror.

'We have a guest,' the queen said firmly. 'Bring us a tray of fruit and have a bed prepared for him. Treat our visitor exactly as you would treat me, with respect.'

'Yes, Majesty.' The servant blinked at the jinni and retreated.

That night the queen had her first peaceful sleep in months. The storm rolled away and in the morning the kingdom was bathed in a gentle, sunlit mist.

When the queen went to see if the jinni was awake, she found him curled in the very centre of the large bed. His wings were folded neatly behind him, and he appeared to be fast asleep. Realising the creature must be very tired, the queen tiptoed away.

The jinni slept for three days. When he woke up, his wings had brightened and his mottled skin had taken on a healthy tinge of brown. He was given a large tray of

fruit for breakfast, and a cup of crystal-clear water.

After breakfast the jinni announced that he must return to the forest. It was his home, and he must face whatever danger awaited him there.

‘But it seems that *they* – whoever they are – will do you some terrible injury,’ said the queen. ‘Why else would you try so desperately to escape them? Do not leave us, Forest-jinni. You can stay here for as long as you want.’

The jinni shook his head. ‘They will never stop searching for me. Sooner or later they would come upon your peaceful kingdom and destroy it.’

‘Who?’ the king asked, frowning. ‘Who are these creatures bent on destruction?’

‘They are called viridees,’ replied the jinni. ‘They live deep in the forest, in the damp darkness that breeds rot and decay. They are sorcerers. They can take the shape of trees or plants or any green, growing thing, and they can live for two hundred years or more. There is great goodness in the forest; there is beauty and kindness.’ The jinni put his palms together, so that one hand lay on top of the other. ‘And then there is the other side.’ He turned his hands so that the upper hand lay underneath. ‘Where there is one, there is always its shadow.’

The king and queen stared at the forest-jinni in horrified fascination but, throwing his arms wide, the jinni said, 'Don't despair. I will leave your kingdom before they can follow, and I shall give you my treasures.'

'Your treasures?' said the king. Was it possible that treasures were hidden in those thin, misty garments?

The jinni looked eagerly at the queen, his eyes alight with excitement. 'You are soon to have a child,' he said. 'It will be a boy, and you want him to be wonderful.'

'Yes!' The queen clutched the edge of her seat and returned the jinni's earnest gaze. 'But more than anything, I want him to be safe. I am so afraid for him. I do not know why. My fear is foolish . . . irrational.'

'You can sense what might be,' replied the jinni. 'But I can change the future for you.' From the floating folds of his robe he withdrew a length of fine silvery gossamer. As he turned it in his hands, each tiny thread glittered with a different colour. The queen caught her breath. She had never seen anything so magical.

'This was made by the last moon spider,' said the jinni. 'Never again will cobwebs like these adorn the

forest. For the moon spiders have all gone. The evil ones realised, too late, that they had killed something that could have saved them.'

'And will this protect our son?' asked the king. 'He might not be the sort of boy who wants to wear a cobweb all his life.'

'No need.' The jinni smiled. 'Wrap him in the web the moment he is born, and do not remove it until he smiles for the first time.'

'Is that all?' the queen asked doubtfully. 'And will he be protected from everything?'

'As long as he carries the web when he is in danger. But there is something else,' the jinni said gleefully. 'Your son will also be a marvellous magician. For I have splashed the web with the tears of creatures that have never been seen, and I have dipped it in dew caught on petals of flowers that will soon disappear from the world.' He smiled wistfully. 'Just like me, the last forest-jinni.' He laid the shimmering silk on the queen's lap.

The queen stared at the web for a moment, unable to speak or to touch it. And then a thought occurred to her, and she said, 'We also have a daughter, Zobayda.

Can you give her the same protection and the same gifts as our son?’

The jinni held the queen’s gaze for several seconds. He appeared to be reading her future. ‘It is too late for Zobayda,’ he said at last. ‘A child must be touched by the web before two years have passed. But I have this.’ And from his garment he pulled a tiny sliver of silk. ‘Wind this around the princess’s finger,’ he said, ‘and she will have magic at her fingertips.’

It was the king who took the proffered silk from the jinni’s slim hand, and as he did so, he was suddenly aware that the jinni was offering the last fragment of his own protection. The king looked at the queen and saw that she, too, was aware of the jinni’s sacrifice. And yet, thinking of their daughter, neither of them could resist the gift. They accepted it without a word.

‘There is one more thing,’ said the jinni and, like a conjurer, he pulled a bottle from his clothing. The glass was shaped like a bird, the liquid inside it as clear as water. The jinni told the king and queen that it was Alixir, the water of life. One drop, taken at every new moon, would halt the aging process.

No sooner had the queen taken the bottle than the jinni was gone, slipping out into the sky like a wind-blown leaf.

That night, while Zobayda was sleeping, the queen wrapped the piece of silk around her daughter's middle finger. Almost immediately it solidified into a beautiful silver ring. It was shaped like a wing and engraved with pearly veins. A little head could be seen, peeping out of the top, and a tiny foot protruded from the other end. It was the forest-jinni, made miniature and frozen into silver.

Before she went to bed, the queen put the moon spider's web into a deep chest. Beside it she placed the bottle of Alixir.

Three weeks later the royal baby was born. He had large, thoughtful eyes and a fine sturdy frame. He did not make a sound when the queen wrapped him in the web. After five days he pushed his little hands free of the silk and gave his mother a wide smile.

'A smile!' The queen lifted her baby out of his wrapping and dressed him in the scarlet robes that had been worn by generations of royal babies.

They named the baby boy Timoken, after the first ruler of the kingdom. As he grew, his parents watched him for signs of the magical gifts he was supposed to display. But Timoken seemed to be just like any other boy. Perhaps he was unusual in that he could watch falling rain for many hours, that he was entranced by dew-filled leaves, that he touched even tiny creatures with reverence and that he listened to birdsong with a rapturous expression. When Timoken turned nine his father gave him a pearl-handled knife. It was meant as a protection against snakes and scorpions, but Timoken often used it to carve pictures on the rocks. He could be mischievous, and he made friends easily. More than anyone else, it was his sister, Zobayda, whose company he most enjoyed. It pleased the king and queen to see their children so devoted to each other. 'They will never be alone,' the queen sighed happily.

Zobayda's silver ring never became too small for her. As she grew, it always fitted her finger perfectly. The queen told her that a magic being had given it to her, and that it would keep Zobayda safe forever. But the forest-jinni had never made that promise.

*

Meanwhile, the jinni had returned to the forest. He had nowhere else to go.

It was not long before the viridees found him. He was sitting by a pool and singing to himself. He had been expecting them.

Slowly they began to surround him. But where was the moon spider's web? Before, they had watched from the shadows as the forest-jinni washed the web with the tears of rare creatures. They had observed the dipping of the web into dew caught in precious flowers, and they had glimpsed the bottle shaped like a bird. The jinni had filled the bottle from a pool of moonlit water, and the viridees had listened as the jinni cast a spell. But he had spoken too fast for them to understand or remember what he said.

The viridees guessed that the web was more amazing, more precious and more powerful than anything they possessed. Of course, they wanted it. Their lord demanded it.

'Where is the web of the last moon spider?' The gurgling tone of a viridee stopped the jinni's song.

'You killed the last moon spider,' said the jinni.

'What have you done with the web?'

The jinni shook his head. 'You will never find it.'

The viridees threw a net of creepers over the little creature. He did not resist. They took him to Degal, lord of the viridees, in his gloomy palace under the forest floor. The great hall was lit by the phosphorescent gleam of a thousand stalactites, and Degal sat on a throne carved from black marble and set with emeralds.

‘Where is it?’ Lord Degal’s voice burbled like the water in a deep cavern. ‘Where is the web of the last moon spider?’

The forest-jinni wriggled free of the net of creepers. He spread his wings as though he were about to fly, and he said, ‘In a place that you will never find.’

Lord Degal’s red eyes flashed. Pointing his root-like finger at the forest-jinni, he cried, ‘You will show us where it is, or suffer unbearable tortures.’

The forest-jinni hardly flinched. In his sweet, clear voice he declared, ‘I am one with the web of the last moon spider. I am one with the ring made of spider silk. I am one with the boy who will live forever.’ Then he flapped his delicate wings and vanished.

When Timoken was eleven years old, the unthinkable happened. The secret kingdom was invaded. Ever since

the forest-jinni had disappeared in their midst, the viridees had been searching for the moon spider's web and the bird-shaped bottle. Lord Degal formed an alliance with a bloodthirsty human tribe from the East. In return for their help in finding the web, he promised them untold wealth and any kingdom that, together, they might defeat. And so began years of terror as small kingdoms were invaded and crushed by the murderous tribe and the powerful sorcery of the viridees.

Like a tide of darkness, Lord Degal's army emerged from the forest beyond the secret kingdom. The viridees and the tribal soldiers were dressed alike in black turbans and black tunics. They carried long, shining sabres, and their drums and horns drowned out every sound except for the trumpeting of their massive elephants. The people who lived on the outskirts of the kingdom were the first to fall beneath the long sabres. Those who survived fled, screaming, towards the palace. Behind them their houses burned and their families died.

Timoken and Zobayda heard the thunder of the advancing army. They ran up to the palace roof and saw the fires and the dark forms rushing towards them from every side.

The massive palace doors were closed and barred. Soon, a roaring crowd surrounded the building. Inside all was silent. The king was pondering. For the first time in his life he did not know what to do. But there was only one way out of this dire situation. He would have to offer his palace and his kingdom to the invaders. In return, they must allow his people to live in peace or leave the kingdom in safety.

The children watched their noble father ride out to talk to Lord Degal. The king wore a white robe and carried a banner of peace. Degal, in deepest green, looked like the king's shadow. A large green emerald glittered in Degal's turban, and his green sash lifted in the breeze as the two horses met.

A streak of light flashed in the air above the king's head. A second later he had toppled from his horse, his head severed by Degal's shining sabre.

A deep wail from below told the children what their eyes could not believe. Their father was dead. They ran, screaming, to their mother.

When the people saw their fallen king they rushed at the enemy, waving their spears. But they were hunters, not soldiers; they were no match for Degal's brutal army.

One of the king's guards found the golden crown, lying in the dust. As he picked it up, a soldier ran at him, waving a sabre. But before he was cut down, the guard threw the crown to a friend. A soldier leapt on the man, only to see the crown, once again, tossed through the air. And so it continued, the circle of gold flying above the roaring mass of bodies, caught and passed on, until it reached one of the queen's attendants, who took it to the queen.

Her eyes clouding with tears, the queen wiped the blood and the dust from the crown and put it on her son's black curls. But the king's head had been wide and splendid, and the crown was too big for Timoken. It began to slip down over his face. Seeing the problem, Zobayda stepped forward and lifted the crown above Timoken's ears. Then she closed her eyes and uttered mysterious words in her light, breathy voice. It was almost as if she were asking a question, unsure of herself and what to expect. Under her slim fingers, the crown began to fit itself to Timoken's head, and gradually he felt himself almost to be a king. Looking at his sister's closed eyes he whispered, 'You are a faerie.'

'Yes,' she replied. 'I believe I am.'

The queen quickly gathered together a few of her children's clothes. She put them in a large goatskin bag, and then she took the moon spider's web and the Alixir from the chest and handed them to her son.

'Take great care of these,' said the queen. 'The bottle contains Alixir. You must both take one drop every new moon, and you will stay as you are.'

Did this mean that he would not grow? Timoken was reluctant to remain a child. He wanted to be a man as soon as he could. 'I don't need the Alixir,' he said, frowning at the bird-shaped bottle. 'I wish to grow older.'

'Not yet,' advised his mother. 'You might be an old man before you find your new kingdom.'

'Will I find a new kingdom?' asked Timoken.

'I am certain that one day you will find a home,' said the queen.

'And what is this?' asked Zobayda, touching the web. 'It looks like a cobweb, but it's so beautiful. Is it magic?'

'Yes,' said the queen. 'There's so little time to explain, my children, but it was made by the last moon spider. Keep it with you, always.' She thrust it into the bag with the Alixir. 'Now hurry, hurry!'

Timoken slung the bag over his shoulder. He looked

bewildered. 'What now?' he asked.

'Now?' said the queen. 'Now you must go.' She hugged her children, kissed them goodbye and told them to leave the palace. The warlord and his soldiers were already storming through the building.

'How can we escape?' cried Zobayda. 'We are surrounded.'

'Come with me.' The queen led her children back up to the roof. The sun blazed above their heads. Below them the warlord's army stood in its own shadow.

'What now?' said Zobayda. 'If we jump, we shall die.'

'You will die if you stay, so you must fly.' The queen's voice sounded almost triumphant.

Timoken sensed that his mother had been waiting a long time for this moment. 'We can't fly,' he said, bemused and afraid.

'I believe that you can,' the queen told him, smiling. 'Zobayda, put your arms around your brother and hold tight. Do not let go until you are safe.'

'When shall we be safe?' begged Timoken. 'Mother, what are you saying?'

'Do as I tell you,' his mother commanded. 'Look at the sun. Fly to it.'

‘I cannot,’ argued Timoken. ‘It hurts my eyes.’

‘Close them. Fly upwards. Feel your way through the sky. You can do it, Timoken. Now!’ The queen’s voice began to crack with fear.

Timoken could hear soldiers running up the steps to the roof. Their weapons scraped against the walls and their rough voices echoed up the narrow stairwell. Timoken’s heartbeat quickened. He could hardly breathe. Zobayda put her arms around his waist and held him tight.

‘Now!’ screamed the queen.

Timoken closed his eyes and turned his face up to the sun. Bending his knees a little, he took a leap, just like he did when he was jumping from one of the fallen trees in the forest. Only this time he made himself believe that his feet would not touch the ground for a while. He found himself lifting into the air. The sun burned his face and he clung to his sister. They rose higher and higher.

‘Timoken.’ He heard his mother’s voice following him. ‘Timoken, keep your secret. Never tell . . . never let anyone know what you can do.’

Timoken opened his eyes and looked down at the

palace. His mother had disappeared in a sea of black. Soldiers covered the roof of the palace, their weapons glinting in the fierce sunlight.

‘Zobayda, I can’t see our mother!’ cried Timoken.

Zobayda wouldn’t look back. Tears streamed from her eyes and she buried her face in her brother’s shoulder. ‘Mother,’ she murmured.

Timoken understood that they were now alone. Their lives had changed forever. But he could fly, and his sister had magic in her fingers. They would survive. He found that he could move through the air with no more than a thought in his head – a wishing.