

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK FOURTEEN

Behold!

Lee Duigon



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A Meal in Lintum Forest

There had once upon a time been dragons in the forest. So said the ancient rhymes and ballads. Given the vastness of the forest, who could say what might or might not live in it?

Helki the Rod knew Lintum Forest better than any man who ever lived—except, maybe, for the extinct Wild Men who lived in it so very long ago. Helki was a kind of wild man himself. Clad in rags and patches of every color known to cloth, he could melt into the forest before you realized that you couldn't see him anymore. How could such a big and bulky man do that? And his hair was like a bird's nest, lacking only eggs.

Today—a sun-washed late summer day, with still some berries on the bushes—Helki wandered alone in a little-known region of the forest. But he knew he wasn't quite alone.

“Come a little closer,” he whispered under his breath.

For Helki was being hunted, and he knew it. The hunter was some little distance behind, downwind, so that Helki couldn't catch its scent. There were bears, wolves, and big cats in the forest that would hunt a man, but some instinct told him it was none of these. In recent years some strange creatures, which had no names as yet, had drifted into

Lintum Forest. One of these was a striped predator with jaws that could bite a man in half, but Helki didn't think it was one of them, either. He was fully alert for any danger. If you couldn't sense danger before you saw or heard its source, you would not live long in Lintum Forest.

Helki made for a sunlit clearing just ahead, rich with stands of orange wildflowers, and when he entered the clearing, he suddenly turned around.

This took the hunter completely by surprise. Had it smelled any fear in Helki, it would have taken greater care not to let itself be seen.

"And what are you?" said Helki.

This was a creature whose like he'd never seen before. It walked on two legs like a man, with dangling forelimbs like arms and sharply clawed fingers like clutching hands. A long, stiff tail at one end, a long neck at the other, and the whole about the size of a twelve-year-old boy—and it froze in place, confronting Helki.

Maybe the old tales of dragons weren't so unbelievable after all, he thought. The animal had a large, squarish head with heavy jaws, banks of sharp teeth, and a little crest of pointed scales—or were they feathers?—that moved up and down, expressing surprise and indecision. But the eyes, big, round eyes, dark with golden rims, set in its skull so that it could look straight ahead, like a cat: those intrigued the man. You'd swear the animal was thinking, trying, with a certain amount of intelligence, to make head or tail of Helki. Maybe, to dragons, humans were the stuff of legends.

Helki rested the butt of his staff on the ground. If the creature attacked, Helki was prepared to strike.

"I'm too big for you," he said, "but the forest's big

enough for both of us. You go your way, little brother, and I'll go mine." He wondered if this was a baby animal or full-grown.

The crest bobbed up and down; a long pink tongue licked scaly lips. "He's thinking, all right," Helki thought. He was content to wait for the creature to make up its mind.

It squawked once, like a chicken, turned swiftly and retreated. Helki relaxed.

He was hunting Ysbott the Snake, the outlaw who got away: robber, murderer, and—incredibly—one-time Judge of Obann City, a terror to its people. He wondered if Ysbott would survive an encounter with the creature. He'd survived everything else, so far.

"But he won't survive me, if I can ever track him down," Helki promised himself.

Beyond a belt of stunted pine trees that confused the eye, Ysbott shared a cave with an Abnak girl named Qeqa.

Unusually for him, he hadn't harmed her. She excited his curiosity. How did she survive here, all alone? She said the gnomes protected her—gnomes that called themselves Yersee and could not be seen unless they wanted you to see them. She was always pointing to trees and bushes and saying, "There's So-and-So; he's watching us." And Ysbott never saw anyone.

It would be natural to think she was lying, but Qeqa was a girl of tender years, how could she possibly live here without help? Why in the world would she choose to live alone instead of in a settlement?

Qeqa never answered his questions, but she had

another thing to offer that was a new thing in Ysbott's life. She encouraged him to talk about himself, and the more he did it, the more he enjoyed doing it. And for all he knew, the two of them were the only human beings for miles and miles around. There wasn't much to do but talk.

She was most fascinated by his tales of Obann City and wanted everything about it described in the most minute detail.

"It's hard to believe there really is a place like that," she would say. Just a child, Ysbott thought—but somehow strong and wily enough to survive alone in the wildest part of the forest. Many grown men of his acquaintance couldn't do it. Not alone.

"Sometimes," she would say, "I'm sure you're only telling stories, telling me things that aren't true: almost like you're trying to set some kind of trap for me. There really can't be a place like that! Why would you ever want to leave it?"

"Because they were going to kill me, lass—as I've told you so many times," Ysbott would answer. "It's a dangerous place, the city. More dangerous than here."

"I shouldn't believe you," she would say.

The day Helki met the crested creature, many miles away, Qeqa prepared a dinner of stewed something or other with herbs; and before Ysbott could finish his portion, his head began to spin, violently, and he toppled onto his side, despite his most desperate efforts to lurch to his feet and defend himself.

He knew instantly what had happened. He'd been poisoned: the wench had poisoned him. He'd poisoned enough men in his time to know the same had just been done

to him. He couldn't get back up. After all he'd been through, after all the tight spots he'd slithered out of, this wretched girl had killed him. It felt as if the earth itself teetered and tottered under him—as if it were trying to shake him off.

Qeqa wore a knowing smile. He saw her face as if it were three faces, all of them blurred.

“I don't think you're going to die,” she said. Her voice sounded like the wind. “If you live, then I'll know you've been telling the truth about everything. I hope it's all true. I would like to do the things you've done and see the things you've seen. I want to be like you—unless you've made it all up.”

That was the last thing he heard.

He didn't die.

Morning light pried his eyes open. He felt exactly like a man who'd been poisoned ought to feel—weak, mouth parched bone-dry with a loathsome aftertaste, limbs too weak to move—but at least that terrible dizziness was over. He winced when a loud crack smote his ears, but it was only Qeqa, who'd clapped her hands together.

“You live!” she said. “And I'm so glad, because now I know you've told the truth. I hate for anyone to lie to me.” She picked up a hollowed-out gourd, yellow with black spots. “Drink this. It'll make you feel much better. You'll be all right by the end of the day. Don't be afraid. It tastes bad, but it's not another kind of poison.”

He was too weak to reach for the cup. She had to prop up his head and hold the gourd to his lips. Ysbott took a sip. If she were poisoning him again, he might as well die now.

The dark liquid had a taste like dead leaves, but it didn't make him sick again. She made him drink all of it.

"Now all you have to do is rest, and your strength will come back," she said. "The Yersey will be watching you, so don't think of trying to get back at me. Besides, now we're true friends. We're going to do a lot of things together."

Oddly enough, he believed her.

Mardonius' Mission

Mardonius the amaral had to find winter harbor for his fleet. He had only four ships now, having sent two of them back home with his report.

Mardonius, Amaral, to Hattashar, Friend of the Winged Bull, greetings.

Let Our Master know that my feet have trodden the ground of the Lost Continent in the east, beyond the sea. It is a pleasant land, well-watered yet very sparsely populated. The few cities I have seen are nothing more than ancient ruins deserted long ago.

I will carry out my orders to remain in this land or in these waters for a year & a day & then, unless Our Master should give me different orders, either return home with all four ships, or else, if we have business with the people of this country, send back two more ships with a new report.

We have sacrificed a man to Artoosh to ensure his favor & protection. Farewell.

Mardonius, never what you'd call a merry man, seemed even more drawn into himself since he'd sent the two ships back. So judged the boy, Ebed, trained as a spy by Gallgoid back in Obann City and now spying on these strangers—Gedrosh, they called themselves—from across the sea. He would have been alarmed if he'd realized how close the fleet

was going to come to the city of Durmurot; but he didn't know the coastline, so he didn't know that.

Until he could be sure of the Gedrosh's good intentions, Ebed conjured up tales to convince the amaral that no one lived in these lands but small groups of impoverished nomads—certainly no one with a city. "I'm the only protection Durmurot has right now," he reminded himself. The self-defense force being raised and trained by General Hennen and the old soldier, Jax, was only raw recruits not ready for war. The Gedrosh would eat them alive. Ebed knew: he'd seen the sacrificial duel.

So he told tales. As the ships explored the coast, always heading south toward Durmurot, Mardonius liked to sit in his cabin in the evening and listen to those tales. And Ebed began to take pleasure in concocting them, using bits and pieces of all sorts of tales he'd heard in Obann City.

"On the plains to the south," he was saying one evening, "live giant birds, bigger than a man—birds that'll eat a man, if he were foolish enough to go there. I heard someone say he saw two of those birds run down a wild horse and kill it and eat the whole thing—"

In fact, most of this story was true. But the amaral only smiled a small smile and shook his head.

"Ebed, Ebed!" he said. "You've been telling me children's bedtime stories, haven't you? I hope you don't think I believe them."

Ebed didn't know what to say. His mouth stayed open, speechless.

"I've raised three sons and two daughters, Ebed. I know when children are telling lies. Your lies are entertaining, but there's something more to this than that, isn't there?"

Ebed tried his hardest to look innocent. “My lord! They’re only stories that I’ve heard around the campfire. How do I know if they’re true?”

Mardonius leaned a little forward in his chair. Ebed, an orphan, had never known his father. But something about this man, this stranger from so far away, made him suddenly ashamed of having lied to him. He’d grown fond of Mardonius. A spy shouldn’t let that happen, but a lonely child might.

“I perceive in you a good heart, Ebed, and an adventurous spirit. You had a reason for telling me those fables, and you thought it was a good reason. Tell me the truth—have I not struck close to the mark?”

Ebed had spied on the strangers as his duty to the squad of scouts from Durmurot. The Gedrosh had caught him at it but had been kind to him. They hadn’t forced him to join their company aboard the ship, the *Silver Cloud*. He’d joined them of his own free will to spy on them for Durmurot, so he could escape one day and tell General Hennen all about it. Durmurot needed to know why the strangers were here, and he was the only one who could find out. And now, in light of their kindness to him, Ebed was ashamed.

“I didn’t mean anything wrong, my lord,” he said. “And there really are giant birds. Many people have seen them.”

“Giant birds aside,” said Mardonius, “what was a little boy like you doing all alone in an uninhabited wilderness? I am sorry that you don’t trust me with the truth. Come now—what is the name of this country and its people? We thought it must be the ancient country of Obann. Are you afraid we’d do the people harm?”

That was precisely what he was afraid of. That was what

the general feared and why he'd sent out scouts to watch the ships. Hennen had a virtually defenseless city to protect. It was a trust that Ebed dared not betray, no matter what.

But he was ashamed, and Mardonius knew it.

"You're protecting your people from us, aren't you?"

"My lord, how can I answer you?"

Mardonius sighed. Beneath them and around them, the Silver Cloud rocked peacefully on the bosom of the sea.

"Maybe," said the amaryl, "it'll be easier for you if first you have the truth from me."

"My people are seafarers, subjects of the ruler of nations, the Winged Bull, the servant of Artoosh who gave him the scepter and the crown. He is mightier than we, so we obey him. We have to.

"One day, several years ago, a bell rang in every one of a hundred cities, all at the same time. It was the voice of Artoosh, calling to us from a time that hasn't yet come to be. Our master's seers and prognosticators could not tell the meaning of the message. It was as if every man and woman in the dominions had had the same dream at the same time, and no one knew its meaning. Only that it was Artoosh, who inhabits a time yet to come."

Ebed stared. He'd never heard anything like this before.

Mardonius smiled at him. "Hard to understand, isn't it? It's a thing that the Winged Bull has taught to all the nations who must serve him. All must sacrifice to Artoosh to honor him—lest he leave his own time and break into ours to punish us with death. We are only permitted to travel slowly toward his time, dying, generation after generation, before

we get there. But those who do finally join him in that time will be as gods.”

“Are they all as crazy as this?” Ebed wondered. But he only made a face to show he was trying to understand.

“I have mentioned the bell that rang in all our cities,” the amaral said. “After long thought, with no help from his wise men, our master revealed that Artoosh had given a command to him. He must find that bell and keep it in the Capitol until it can be given to Artoosh in that time that is to come. Our master has sent out fleets and caravans in all directions. My fleet is only one of many.”

“My lord, there’s no bell here,” Ebed dared to say. He had heard Prester Orth preach in Obann that the bell was God’s bell. This he didn’t dare to say.

“We are to explore new countries,” said Mardonius, “to see if any are fit to be added to our master’s dominions. I sent the two ships back to report what little we have found so far. Any commander who fails to report will see his family put to death.”

“But that’s awful!” Ebed would have called back those words as soon as he’d blurted them out, but of course he couldn’t.

“It’s how things are done in all the lands subject to the Winged Bull,” Mardonius said. “The Gedrosh have been ruled by him for going on a hundred years. Obey or be destroyed.”

No wonder he often seems so sad, thought Ebed.

“My great fear,” said the amaral, “is that I might discover a peaceful, decent nation and bring the Winged Bull down on them, to be a cause of death and misery to people who would never do me any harm. We Gedrosh are under a yoke

that has never gotten lighter with the passing years. But the Winged Bull has wiped out nations that refused to serve him. And others he has taken away from their own lands and replaced with wretched strangers who can only try not to anger him further.”

Ebed thought of the friends he’d made in Durmurot—kindly Prester Jod, a true man of God; wise Preceptor Constan; General Hennen, who was good to him; and the children of the city, whom he played with. Suddenly he realized he now knew more than he’d ever expected to know, and it was terrible.

“That’s the truth, Ebed. That’s why I’m here,” said Mardonius. “I won’t try to force out of you whatever truth you’ve decided not to tell me. Indeed, I have half a mind to put you ashore and let you go. Ask that of me, and I will do it.”

But just now Ebed didn’t know what to ask.

City, Road, and Ninneburky

In Obann City the temporary government—which King Ryons and his chiefs had recognized and who governed the city in Ryons’ name—proposed to put Lord Chutt on trial for his life as soon as he recovered from his illness. He was confined to his bed, eating just enough not to starve to death and speaking to no one.

He’d lost the Thunder King’s golden mask and the power of command that it had so briefly lent him. His servants in his absence had burned the Hollow Woman, his one link to Obann’s Empire, the glorious past that he’d toiled to revive—with him as emperor.

All lost, all of it.

First Prester Orth, a member of the government, had volunteered to defend Lord Chutt—rather, to defend him but not his actions.

“He will go down in history as a wicked fool who brought ruin upon himself,” Orth said to his fellow councilors, meeting privately at Judge Zeria’s house. “He has no more power to harm us. He may not even live much longer. Sparing his life and liberty, as an act of mercy, would

be pleasing to God and of benefit to our own souls. Not to mention the fact that we were all complicit in the evil that's been done here, yet none of us faces punishment."

They didn't like to be reminded of that—although Zeriah nodded her head and Redegger, the illicit gaming boss, sighed softly. Orth himself had helped Lord Reesh let the Thunder King's troops into the city, resulting in the total destruction of the Temple and much suffering among the populace. "The evil that Chutt did," Orth added, "was as nothing compared to what I did."

Zeriah spoke up. "We could try him, and if he's found guilty, grant clemency. We can't just wash our hands of the whole business."

"Better for all concerned if he dies," said Born, the general. Chutt had raised him up from a mere captain in the north to be General of Obann, with a seat on the ruling council. Born's own crimes hadn't been forgotten, but only Born could have ordered the drawbridge raised to lock Chutt out of the city. For that one day he was indispensable to any change in government.

Orth shook his head. "We have all greatly sinned," he said. "Who in his right mind would trust any of us to govern a city? Nevertheless, this is where God Himself has placed us: please don't think that any power of this world arranged it! We have each of us been given a second chance, by God's pure grace and none of our deserving. We have a chance to do right. I don't believe we'll get another."

Redegger grinned. He'd grown rich, providing the city with vaguely unlawful games of chance. It had been his idea to pull up the drawbridge when Chutt went out to parley with the savage Ulo who took him for a god. All along, Lord

Chutt had held Redegger to be his friend and ally, who paid him well to allow his games to go on with no interference from the government.

“No one played more dirty tricks on Chutt than I,” he said, “but hastening his death to spare ourselves the embarrassment of putting him on trial—really, that’s too rich for me. Find him guilty and let him go, as part of a general amnesty for all. It’ll be good for the city. Eh, Gallgoid?”

“Indubitably,” said Gallgoid. He’d been Lord Chutt’s clerk and confidant—and the chief spy in the city for King Ryons. He’d given Chutt no end of bad advice, on purpose, and foolish Chutt had trusted him. “We all have dirty hands. A clean page for everyone, that would be wise.”

Born frowned but said nothing.

Along the now peaceful River Road that led all the way to Durmurot traveled Jack and Ellayne with Martis, their protector—once upon a time Lord Reesh’s favorite assassin. He, too, had climbed Bell Mountain, under orders to kill the children if it was the only way to stop them from ringing the bell. He’d failed in that mission, but God had given him another.

They were going to Durmurot to consult with Preceptor Constan, in hopes that his scholarship and wisdom could unlock the mystery of a dream Jack had had—a vision of a great city, greater than Obann. Jack didn’t know the name of that city, nor its location, nor why he should have seen it in a dream. But it was Jack’s dreams that had led them to Bell Mountain, and they had learned to take his visions seriously. He would have been happier without this one.

He'd had the dreams of the bell and then a vision of the destruction of King Thunder's army at Obann. Those had turned out to be true and accurate.

Why didn't the visions come to wise and holy men like Constan and Prester Jod? A little girl who could barely toddle had pronounced Ryons king of Obann. All sorts of unlikely people had visions—even Allifar the young Wallekki chief, when he was still Heathen.

"It wasn't much like Obann City." So many times he'd described it to Ellayne. "Everything was bigger, and they had these huge statues everywhere and stone pools that shot water up into the air." It had been a thousand years since anyone in Obann had seen a fountain.

There was something about this dream, and the city in the dream, that made Jack afraid of it. What that was, he couldn't say. He would feel better if someone could explain the dream to him. It was still vivid in his mind, and he didn't want to have it ever again.

Out from a thicket of late-season hummingbird bushes by the road darted a small dark figure. You might have thought for a moment that it was a squirrel, but only for that moment: it had no tail. This creature ran on his hind legs and carried a sharpened stick and stood fully erect when it halted directly in front of the travelers. Martis could not suppress a smile: it looked like they were being challenged to a duel.

"What news, Wytt?" Ellayne said. This little manlike being was their companion and protector, and had been since the beginning of their journeys.

He chattered like a squirrel, but Ellayne and Jack heard it as a kind of speech. That was a gift of God that they'd

received on Bell Mountain.

“Nothing bad ahead,” he answered. “Men came this way with a cart, early morning. You will see big animals soon.” Martis listened, but he didn’t have the gift.

“What kind of animals?” Jack asked. In recent years strange new animals had wandered into Obann, mostly from the south. Some, like the terrible flightless birds, were deadly.

Wytt tried to describe these new ones: “Big, very big, and round, and very slow. Eating grass.”

“Round?” Jack wondered.

“You will see. Not dangerous.”

When they’d gone a little farther, perhaps a mile, they did see, and stopped to marvel.

There were three beasts, peacefully cropping grass. Jack thought they looked like gigantic tortoises in armored shells, but with long tails sheathed in rings of armor and ending in spiked clubs, and round heads with hardly any neck. One drew too near another and received in return a sudden blow from the other’s tail. It made a loud thump but didn’t penetrate the armor. With an unexpectedly high-pitched squeal, the first animal backed off. The third ignored the whole exchange.

“That’s strong armor,” Martis said. Even the tops of the animals’ heads were armored. They had blunt, furry faces, low to the ground. “I wonder why they need so much protection.”

“I hope we don’t find out!” said Ellayne.

“They could break down a wall with those tail-clubs,” Jack said.

Wytt scampered off the road and leaped atop the

nearest beast, posing there with his stick and boasting of his courage.

“Show-off!” said Ellayne. “For heaven’s sake, Wytt! Don’t get them riled.” But the beast showed no sign of even being aware of him—or of the gawking humans.

“I guess they don’t have much to be afraid of,” Martis said. “Ask Wytt if we’ll find a town or village up ahead where we can stay the night.”

Wytt came when Ellayne called him and reported there was a small village and some farms by the river. He would take care that strangers wouldn’t see him.

“Too bad he can’t tell us how much farther it is to Durmurot,” Jack said. “I’d like to sleep in a bed again, someday.” But Wytt was an Omah, not a human, and geography had no meaning for him.

Not so long ago, Baroness Vannett would have scorched her husband’s ears for not coming back with their children. But today she only sighed and said, “Where are they off to this time?”

“Durmurot. Jack’s had one of his dreams. They think maybe someone there can tell what it means.” Roshay Bault shook his head and made a puffing sound. “I remember when dreams were just dreams.”

“Maybe God thinks that time went on too long,” said the baroness.

Neither of them knew there was an old rat living under their back porch and in the space under the kitchen. Chased out of the baron’s barn by younger rats, the old rat took refuge under the house, where Wytt had befriended

him. It was the baron's rule that Wytt should always have whatever he wanted from the kitchen, because he protected the children and deserved the family's thanks. Wytt kept the old rat abundantly supplied with his favorite kitchen scraps. But Wytt wasn't here now. He often left on mysterious errands that kept him away for a long time.

The old rat knew that the gigantic humans up above him in the house understood Wytt when he spoke to them—not that a rat ever makes use of such a word as “spoke.” The rat feared the humans, but he could see Wytt was friendly with them. He understood the rat when they communicated. Was it possible that a rat could communicate with humans? What rat had ever tried?

The old rat was uneasy because the Big Man had come home without Wytt and the two young humans. It was an unexpected break in the rhythm of household life, and rats don't like the unexpected. Where were they, why weren't they here?

Wytt would have told you, had he thought of it, that rats in general—he had a high opinion of their intelligence—and this old rat especially, always knew when something bad lay ahead in the near future. When the old rat had warned him, Wytt listened. He'd never known him to be wrong. The rat could not provide a reason for his uneasiness, but he very much wanted to express it. The giants up above were fearsome creatures, but they were good. The old rat felt a strange affection for them.

How he wished that he could warn them! But of what, he didn't know.

Rats have dreams, but can't remember them.

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