

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK TWELVE

His Mercy
Endureth
Forever

Lee Duigon



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CHAPTER 1

Wanderers

If only he could speak!

Cavall the hound understood his mission in life. It was to protect King Ryons, the boy king—to protect him and, if at all possible, to guide him. Human beings sorely needed guidance. What would become of them, if they had no dogs to watch over them?

Had he been able to put it into words, Cavall would have bypassed his king and gone straight to Helki the Rod—the one man in Lintum Forest who knew how to listen to birds and animals when they spoke, in their fashion. Cavall would speak to Helki, if he could.

“There is evil coming up from the south. You haven’t understood how dangerous it is! It comes with those men, the ones we hunted in the forest. They follow the herds of strange beasts from the south, and the evil follows them.”

He tried, in his way, to convey this to Helki, the wild man of the woods. But for all Helki’s stealth and skill at reading trails, for all his ability to blend into the forest and to move in it as noiselessly as fog, he was still a human being with a human’s limitations. Cavall couldn’t make him understand. All Helki knew was that something was troubling the hound, and he could see no reason for it, which troubled him.

With the king's hawk, Angel, Cavall had more success. She was a very intelligent hawk, whose wits had been sharpened, not dulled, by her fellowship with human beings. Understanding well enough to act, she flew off into the south, much to the confusion of her king. When she failed to return by the end of the day, Ryons feared for her.

"She ought to have come back to me by now," he confided to Chagadai the Ghol, captain of his bodyguard and an expert on the ways of hawks. "What if one of those big hawks got her?" There were several species of great hawks in the forest, and eagles, too, that preyed on little hawks.

"She's a wise hawk, Father." Chagadai had children's children of Ryons' age, but it was the custom of the Ghols to call the king their father. "She knows better than to fly so high that the bigger hawks can see her. I think she's probably doing a bit of scouting for us."

He was right about that, although neither he nor Ryons could ever make any sense of whatever Angel tried to tell them. "She's done it many times before."

"And every time she does," said Ryons, "I worry that she won't come back." Born a slave, Ryons' true age had never been recorded. If you guessed he was eleven or twelve years old, you might be close to the mark—although he was small for his age.

Gurun the queen, whose father owned the finest hawks on Fogo Island, didn't worry.

"Have you forgotten, my king, the time I loosed her from her cage in Obann City?" Gurun said. "She flew all across the southern plains until she found you. She will never desert you."

Even as they spoke of her, Angel emerged from the southern edge of Lintum Forest and flew high over the sprawling plains. You or I, from that height, would see little to satisfy our curiosity, but a hawk's sight is much keener than ours. Cavall could not tell Angel what to look for, so she looked for the unexpected.

Scattered herds of four-legged animals wandered slowly northwestward, giving a wide berth to the forest. That in itself was something that she'd never seen before: most of the animals inhabiting the plains of Obann walked alone. Spiralling downward for a closer look, she found these animals to be something new: deer-sized, graceful, but moving not as deer move, and with long, floppy snouts. They paused frequently to browse on bushes. Their young chased one another in play. There was nothing about them that could have alarmed Cavall.

A pack of wolves kept pace with the herds, but at a distance. That, too, was unusual: the wolf packs in the forest kept to their own territories. But wandering wolves wouldn't worry Cavall.

A short distance behind the herd and the wolves came human beings—and with them, something else.

"This is the evil," Angel would have said, if she could speak.

Mixed among the host of humans—"So many!" Angel thought—were spotted, untidy-looking, slope-backed beasts. Their forelegs were longer than their hind legs, which gave them a peculiar rocking gait. Massive shoulders, powerful necks—

And then two of them seized the nearest human, a female, and with flashing white teeth in bulging jaws, tore

her to pieces: she didn't scream for long. They ate her where she fell. Other beasts tried to join the feast, occasioning much roaring and growling and an insane, high-pitched whooping cry that made Angel fly higher.

Strangest sight of all, the other humans—males, females, and young—paused only briefly to take a fleeting notice of the killing and then kept on their way.

This was what Cavall feared: now Angel understood. These were humans that behaved unnaturally! At least none of this was pointed toward Lintum Forest, where her own humans enjoyed the benefit of her protection and Cavall's. There was also Baby, the giant flightless killer bird—not very intelligent help, but his heavy beak could crush a horse's skull.

Having seen enough, Angel turned and headed home. Her humans would not understand what she had to tell them, but Cavall might.

On the plains north of the forest, keeping well away from the road as his friends had pleaded with him to do, the First Prester of Obann plodded slowly westward in faint hope of reaching Obann City before his enemies could find him and—"Well, they'll almost surely murder me," Lord Orth said to himself.

For a long season he'd been in the East, beyond the mountains, preaching God's word to the Abnak tribes and to other Heathen who'd come from far and wide to hear him. In his absence, and contrary to all law and custom, the clergy of the city had deposed him and elected a new First Prester.

“I don’t care about that,” he’d explained many times, sometimes frantically, to those who’d tried to counsel him. “But the Lord has called me back to the city, and I have to go.” He might have traveled with a fierce Abnak army to protect him and all the mounted militia Baron Roshay Bault could scrape together, but he’d declined those offers, much as he would have liked to have accepted them. Lord Orth had no desire to be murdered by his enemies; “But this is not a mission for the sword,” he always said. They let him go because they couldn’t stop him.

Nearby in the tall grass—always nearby, although Orth had no awareness of it—crept and scuttled a little furry manlike creature, no bigger than a squirrel, armed with a sharpened stick. If you caught more than a glimpse of him, you would see he had perfect little hands like human hands, no tail, and bright eyes that told you there was plenty of thought behind them, but that wouldn’t let you know its content.

From time to time, and at surprising speed, he would turn and scurry eastward to meet a man on horseback and a girl and a boy on foot. They never knew he was there until he would hop into the girl’s arms, which never failed to startle her.

“Wytt! Can’t you let me know you’re here before you do that?” And he would make a kind of fizzing squeal that served him as laughter.

“What’s he got to say, Ellayne?” asked the man, a rather sad-faced man with a prematurely white beard, who looked like a clerk but was, by profession, an assassin.

The dark-haired boy laughed. “He’d be saying he was bored, if he knew how,” he said.

“He doesn’t get bored, Jack.” The girl tossed her hair, a rich, deep gold. Wytt wore a tress of it around his neck. “He says all’s well: no sign of anyone but us for miles around. He says we ought to slow down a little if we don’t want to overtake Lord Orth—although I don’t think that would be such a bad thing, do you?”

“He wouldn’t like it if we did,” said the man. “You know he doesn’t want anyone put at risk on his account.”

“He’s a good man, Martis.” Jack shook his head. “I wouldn’t want to be out here all alone, as he is.”

“Not alone!” Wytt chirped. It wasn’t language as we know it, but Ellayne and Jack understood it as if it were. It was a gift of God, received after they’d climbed Bell Mountain and rung the ancient bell of King Ozias: the bell that God would hear. Martis, in the service of the Temple, had climbed up after them to stop them—to kill them, if necessary. But he came down from the summit with a white beard and a vow to protect these children for as long as he lived.

They’d grown, he mused, taking a moment just to look at them. Jack was almost as tall as he was now. They would be married soon. They thought they were keeping it a secret.

“Let them keep it secret for a little longer,” said Ellayne’s father, the baron: Jack’s adopted father, but no blood kin. “Ellayne would shrivel with embarrassment if she ever thought I knew.”

Their mission on the plain was to stay close enough to Orth to save him, if they could, if his enemies took him; and if they couldn’t, at least to witness what was done so that all Obann would know. Orth had strictly forbidden it, so Wytt would have to be their only link to him. Nothing would happen without Wytt knowing it.

Ysbott the Snake, former Lintum Forest outlaw, murderer, imposter, and lately Judge of Obann City, was forced to change his plans.

Fleeing the city just before the governor-general had him hanged, his original intent had been to trek all the way back to the mountains, to the Golden Pass, where he'd cached enough gold to make him a rich man for the rest of his days on the earth. But he'd soon discovered that the country was alive with army scouts, presumably hunting for him. Nor could he re-enter Lintum Forest: not while Helki lived. His only safe alternative was to turn south, into lands deserted by their people when the Heathen army came, and still haunted by stragglers from that defeated host: desperate men, mostly starving, who couldn't go back home and couldn't stay. They were the sort of men that Ysbott knew and liked. Most of them had either perished or taken service with King Ryons, but there were still a few left who'd done neither.

He'd even thought of going back to Obann City in disguise. But he couldn't disguise the terrible scar on his cheek. Wytt had given him that while he was sleeping: took a devil of a time to heal.

Ysbott met an ill-assorted little band of Heathen, led, if you could call it that, by a gaunt Fazzan. Two Dahai, a Griff, and a Wallekki followed him. It was unusual to see a Wallekki on foot. They came upon Ysbott just as he was finishing his breakfast, the other half of a brown grass snake he'd caught yesterday and had for supper.

He heard them coming, and when he saw them, decided it was wiser to remain seated. Confronting five men was out

of the question. These looked tired to death and famished with their clothes in tatters, but it would still be five to one, so Ysbott sat.

“You must have seen the smoke of my fire,” he said. “Just finishing up a snake, and lucky to get it. Sit down and rest yourselves.” He spoke in Tribe-talk.

“See if he has any more food,” said the Fazzan, and Ysbott did jump up then, fast, with his curved knife in his hand.

“I’ll take at least one of you with me—which one shall it be? If I had any more food, I’d hand it over rather than fight five men. But I have none, and I will fight for my life. My name is Ysbott: Ysbott the Snake. And before we start killing each other, what’s yours?”

The tall Griff laughed. By the disordered state of this man’s hair, most unnatural for a Griff, Ysbott knew these men were almost at the end of their endurance. The Dahai’s kilts were discolored with filth, and the Wallekki had a flaming red infection in one eye. The Fazzan had lost his wolf’s-head cap, unless he’d had it taken away from him. He held up a hand to restrain his followers, and grinned at Ysbott.

“I believe you, Ysbott, and Zagizzi is my name. We, too, have eaten serpents and beetles and grass and other such muck. But you don’t look as if you’ve seen much hardship.”

“That’s because I’ve been living in the city,” Ysbott said, “and living high and handsome, too. I only left because the governor-general turned against me and was about to have me hanged. Sit down, and we’ll all tell our tales.”

“We’re too hungry to tell stories,” said one of the Dahai.

“Maybe we could eat you,” said the other. It wasn’t entirely a joke.

“I don’t think you fellows know how to feed yourselves,” said Ysbott, “so you’re lucky to have met me. I’m from Lintum Forest, and I know how to live off the land, even out here on the plains. You’ll eat today, if you leave it up to me.”

That interested them. As an outlaw on the run for so much of his life, Ysbott was an expert forager: an outlaw had to be. There were always times when no one was around to rob. It was better in the forest, but you wouldn’t starve out here if you knew what to look for and where to find it.

“So you can feed us, Ysbott?” said Zagizzi. “How will you do it? We’ve been out here for months, and there’s nothing. We used to range closer to the river, west of the big city. Even in the winter, we had food—until the militia chased us out.”

“No militia around here,” said the Griff. “There’s nothing for them to guard.”

“This man will starve as we do,” said the Wallekki, rubbing his bad eye. He’ll die from that, Ysbott thought.

“You could eat right now,” Ysbott said, “if only you knew better.” They glared at him. “That’s not funny,” said Zagizzi.

“Watch.”

Ysbott rose, took a few steps to the right, and pulled up a clump of wiry grey stems with yellow flowers.

“We call this soupweed, where it grows in Lintum Forest.” He knocked the clump against his boot to free the roots, revealing a mass of little white bulbs. “I really ought to rinse these first, and they’re much better if they’re cooked in soup, but you can eat them raw. It won’t make you sick, and it’ll keep you alive.” He plucked off the bulbs and popped the handful into his mouth. They required a lot of chewing, and the grit annoyed him slightly. “Not much taste, raw,” he said,

“but it’ll do until you find something better.”

They looked at him as if he’d just performed a juggler’s trick.

“It’s growing all around us,” he added. “If you’re hungry, pick some.”

They were hungry enough to try it, and quickly learned to knock off as much of the dirt as possible. There was still a lot of spitting to be done. For several minutes they were too busy chewing and spitting to talk. Finally one of the Dahai said, “This stuff’s awful.”

Zagizzi cuffed him, but not hard. “Is that any way to talk to a man who’s just saved our lives? What else can you feed us, Ysbott?”

“There’s plenty of small game around, if you can snare it. Do you know how?” Their blank looks told him they didn’t. Ysbott sighed. “No wonder you’re starving. Well, I can teach you how to do that.”

“Are we going to have to eat rodents for the rest of our lives?” grumbled the other Dahai. The two Dahai were brothers, named Oslu and Erdlu.

“Maybe if we drift farther south we can find some farms without militia,” Ysbott said. “No use heading back toward the river. There are cavalry patrols.

“Let’s set those snares now,” Zagizzi said. “I’m still hungry.”

Lord Chutt Proposes a Census

“I want to take a census of the city,” Lord Chutt, the governor-general, said, addressing the High Council of Obann. “We don’t know how many of our people were killed in the siege, how many left because they lost their homes, or how many have come in since then.”

They met at the wool merchants’ guild hall, a poor substitute for their former quarters in the palace, but the palace was no more, nothing left of it but a mountain of rubble that had yet to be cleared away. Lord Chutt would rebuild the palace: he’d already donated a whole chest full of the Thunder King’s gold to get the project started and another chest for the rebuilding of the Temple. Planners and architects were already at work, but when men who might join the labor force looked on the vastness of the ruins, they lost heart and turned away. “It’s too much!” was the talk over dinner or at the alehouse. “It’d take a hundred years to clear all that away.” For these had been great buildings, the greatest in Obann, and great was their ruin.

“I don’t know why we need a census,” said the new First Prester, Lord Otvar. “Not unless we’re going to bring

back the Temple tax—which, in light of the limitless store of gold at our disposal, would mystify the public.” Once the Temple’s librarian, Lord Otvar had the gift of appearing perpetually displeased. That was because you could never please him, Lord Chutt thought: “And I paid out plenty of good money to get him elected.”

“We want a census,” Chutt explained, “in case we have to draft men to clear the sites. We’ll want to know how many are available.”

“A labor draft? They’ll love that!” said Zeriaah, Judge of Obann and the councilor in charge of justice. The only woman to serve on the High Council in most people’s memories, she was also the only one whose seat Chutt hadn’t bought and paid for. As the richest moneylender in Obann, she’d bought the votes herself. “I think we’d be ill-advised to do that,” she said.

Taking it in from his seat at the back of the hall, the councilors being gathered around a gloriously polished hardwood table, sat the man who’d recommended the census to Lord Chutt. He’d taken care to frame it all in questions so that it had seemed to be Chutt’s own idea, which would wed him to it. Chutt’s confidential aide, Gallgoid, devoted much thought to deciding on the worst advice and making it seem good. He was the chief spy in the service of King Ryons.

“All the laborers will be paid,” Chutt said. He was the only member of the old High Council to have survived the siege, having fled into the north before the Thunder King’s army surrounded the city. It was Chutt who’d brought down the gold from the wreckage of King Thunder’s great hall at the Golden Pass and Chutt who now controlled it. His toil in that cause had hardened both his face and muscles.

“Can’t the army do the work?” asked Lord Calagorn, now in charge of commerce, having replaced Lord Fay. Owing his seat to Chutt, he usually found it beyond his courage to speak at all, except when voting “yes” to one of Chutt’s proposals.

“It’s not the army’s function!” snapped General Born, having returned from Cardigal. He was still smarting from his utter failure, in a badly conceived winter campaign, to haul Roshay Bault out of his nest in the town of Ninneburky. Indeed, the army never even reached the town, defeated by bad weather and Chutt’s own Wallekki cavalry, who’d gone over to the enemy. That was largely Gallgoid’s doing, in secret. Born was on thin ice, and he knew it. Gallgoid hoped to make use of that.

“Was it the army’s function to go digging up the Old City and find nothing there but plague?” said Otvar.

Born’s face turned red. That was another failed mission ordered by Chutt and blamed on Born—and originally planted in Chutt’s mind by Gallgoid.

Chutt intervened before his general—raised up by him from the rank of captain—could answer.

“There was no plague, First Prester. Some soldiers fell ill from poisons residing in the ground, and most of them have since recovered. As you well know!” Chutt shot an angry look at Otvar. “Even so, we discovered much for our scholars to study.

“Meanwhile, all I’ve asked for is a census, which is a regular and orderly task of government, and there’s simply no reason not to have it. Will you all agree, or not?”

“A census is one thing, a labor draft another,” Judge Zeriah said. “I agree to the census.” The rest of the council

followed her lead—even Otvar, although not without some muted grumbling.

One thing Gallgoid did not know, because Chutt never spoke of it to anyone, was that he had a treasure from those diggings in the Old City. But he had another treasure that everyone in Obann did know about—the golden mask of the Thunder King. Most believed he kept it as an heirloom for his house. But that was only part of the truth.

After the meeting, Lord Chutt claimed fatigue and took his leave of the council, returning home, giving orders not to be disturbed, and retiring to his room—locking the door behind him.

From its place on the wall, the mask peered into his soul. Chutt prayed to it.

“I will carry you to the shores of the western sea and back into the East to reconquer all the Heathen. When the new Temple is built here, I’ll give it to you! All that the Thunder King left undone, I shall do.

“Open to me the lost secrets of the past, lost in the Day of Fire when God overturned the empires and kingdoms of the earth and took away their glory because it rivaled His. Give me the Empire, rebuilt, reborn, and I will dedicate it to you.”

He hardly knew what he was saying. Once upon a time he had muttered prayers to Obann’s God without a thought, merely following the prester like everybody else. That was before the Power in the mask showed him his destiny.

The mask had given him the Hollow Woman, his link to the wisdom of the ancient times. Now she stood beside

the mask, her beauty wrapped in his finest blanket, out of respect, with only her perfect face revealed whenever he lifted a corner of the blanket to commune with her. This he did now, with the greatest reverence.

Someday, when he had served her long and faithfully, she would speak to him. She would live again, and all the world would worship her.

“I am quite mad!” he sometimes thought. But that was a disloyal thought, and he dismissed it.

General Born that night walked with Gallgoid. Around them the city settled down for the night, except for those who sought out the taverns and Boss Redegger’s new gaming houses.

“I don’t like this talk of a labor draft,” the general said, “when all we really hold is this city itself. We ought at least to be preparing to assert our authority over Durmurot. How long are we going to let Jod and his followers sit there and undermine the authority of the Temple?”

You couldn’t go farther west than Durmurot without falling into the ocean. At that safe distance from the capitol city, Prester Jod and his assistants copied the Old Books, the Scriptures, for distribution to every chamber house in Obann. Jod supported Lord Orth’s conviction that the Temple of the Lord should be the whole world—not just a grand building in Obann City.

“And it’s not just Durmurot,” Born said. “We ought to crush Roshay Bault and bring the Eastern Marches under our control, and then root that Heathen army and its boy king out of Lintum Forest. We ought to have launched at

least one of those campaigns by now! And had it over with before the next winter.” He sounded like a general hungry for a victory.

“It’s all up to the governor-general. He’ll decide,” said Gallgoid. Born almost said something harsh about Lord Chutt’s decision-making, but bit it back.

It was a cloudless late spring night, but to Gallgoid it seemed there were fewer people on the streets, fewer lights in fewer windows. He knew it for a fact: people were leaving. They feared God’s judgment on the city, although you’d never get Otvar or any of his presters to admit it. Gallgoid wondered if any of the city’s lords had noticed it.

Lord Chutt’s census might yield a result that surprised them.

Lord Orth had just discovered he was not alone, would not be permitted to be alone, and that there was nothing he could do about it.

“I gave strict orders that no one was to accompany me or follow me,” he said. “Well, this proves I’m not First Prester anymore: no one obeys me. I wonder, now, how many people just laugh at my commandments.”

Those remarks, at sundown, he addressed to Wytt, whose presence surely meant that Jack and Ellayne were somewhere on his trail—along with half the town of Ninneburky, for all he knew.

Wytt understood most of what Big People said, but except for Ellayne and Jack, they didn’t understand him at all. He’d stopped Orth in his tracks by jumping out of the grass and screeching at him. Had Orth been able to translate

his chirps and chatters, he would have heard something like this:

“Two riders coming—they will catch you! Can’t you hear them? Are you deaf as well as stupid? If Boy and Girl didn’t love you so much, you and all your dullness, I’d let the riders get you. Turn, turn—that way! There is a hiding place.” He gestured with his stick, so emphatically that Orth finally allowed himself to be led to a dried-out stream bed. Wytt had to threaten him with a jab before he climbed in and sat down—and just in time.

Orth looked through a screen of dead and lifeless inkbushes and saw two men on horseback: scouts from Cardigal, he surmised, carrying no spears and coming from the west. Wytt had caught their scent before he’d heard them. Orth heard them talking but couldn’t make out what they said. But Wytt could.

“We may as well turn back. It’ll be dark soon. I don’t want to run into Roshay Bault’s Wallekki.”

“It’s all a waste of time,” said the other. “Orth’s halfway to Lintum Forest by now.”

“Probably with some of those nasty little Heathen with the poisoned arrows—never mind the Wallekki.”

“You’ve convinced me. Let’s go.”

Unhurriedly, the riders turned their mounts and trotted back eastward.

“I am most displeased that nobody obeys me,” Orth whispered, not knowing how far the sound of his voice might carry on a still and quiet evening. “Nevertheless, I thank you. With you to watch over me, who knows? I might just get to Obann City after all.”

“Only if I feed you!” Wytt chattered. The big man had

food in his pouch, but he could never carry enough to take him all the way to the city. Wytt doubted the man had the sense to find more: probably couldn't even find water. Wytt had taught those skills to Jack and Ellayne, but it had taken a long time for them to learn.

The dry stream was as good a place to camp as any. "I wonder if it's safe for me to have a fire," Orth said. He had matches; otherwise, he had no hope of making a campfire. Wytt growled the equivalent of "Do as you like." But he knew most humans would find it uncomfortably cold tonight.

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