

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK TEN

The Silver Trumpet

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CHAPTER 1

The Herald

It was cold this morning, and his joints were stiff because of it. But he was hungry, too, so Jax, the old soldier, got out of bed to seek his breakfast.

But first he folded, into as small a square as it would go, the delightfully warm woolen blanket Prester Jod had given him before going home to Durmurot way out in the west, almost to the sea. Durmurot produced the finest wool in all Obann, and this blanket used to be among the prester's household goods. Most of the stuff in his townhouse Jod had given away to Obann's poor, taking with him only a few changes of clothes and the books in his study. Jax hid the blanket where no intruder would find it: for theft had grown more common in his neighborhood.

Jax snorted. "Pah! All that gold Lord Chutt brought into the city, and still the poor are getting poorer." No more nice suppers at Jod's table. The new First Prester, that old pill, Otvar, was a penny-pincher. And none of all that gold, except for bribes paid to his allies, seemed to be finding its way out of Chutt's storehouse.

Jax stepped outside: sunny and cold, sky so blue, you couldn't help stopping for a moment just to marvel at it. The city had only just begun its business for the day.

Alone on the narrow little street he called home, Jax

walked briskly to get his blood warmed up. He emerged into Sudley Square, where the sellers were just opening up their booths. Across the square was a barracks where the lads would give him something to eat. In return, he would spend the morning there, mending and polishing equipment, telling stories. They liked his stories of the old days; he'd marched behind Lord Gwyll, when Gwyll was just a pink-cheeked legate learning the art of war.

Ah, the sunshine in the square! Jax took a deep breath, stretched his limbs.

And then he and everyone else in the square froze at the unexpected music of a trumpet on the city wall.

Ta-rah! Ta-rah!

Everybody turned at once. The wall was half a dozen blocks distant, and there was a man up there—a trumpeter in royal blue and gold, with a shining silver trumpet that gleamed gloriously in the early morning sun. Even as the call of the trumpet caused his heart to race, Jax knew there was no one in all the city's garrison so accoutered, no man with a trumpet. Such a man was out of place. Where had he come from, and what was he doing?

The trumpeter lowered his horn and spoke. It should have been impossible to hear him at this distance, and yet his voice filled the square.

"Hear, O people of Obann! Hear glad tidings!

"Your king by God's election, King Ryons, of the seed of my servant, King Ozias, has returned to his throne in Lintum Forest. His warfare is accomplished; he has returned victorious. The Lord has smitten all his enemies and broken the power of the wicked.

"Turn ye to the Lord, the Lord of Hosts, and He will

turn to you. Give thanks, and bless His name: for He shall bless your king!”

The words rang like the tones of a great brass bell, but Obann’s bells were silent.

And then the trumpeter was gone.

“What! Did he jump down from the wall? Where is he? Where did he go?”

A man clutched Jax’s elbow. “Did you see him?” he cried.

“We all saw him. And we heard him, too,” Jax said.

“Well, where is he now!”

At least a hundred people were asking that question, and others like it, all at once. Men and women darted here and there like minnows, grabbing one another, all staring up at the wall. But there was nothing to see there anymore.

“I don’t know about this!” Jax said. “I didn’t even know we had a trumpeter.”

“But he said the king has returned, King Ryons, and that he’s won the war!”

And if he has, thought Jax—not for a moment did he doubt the trumpeter’s tidings—that means there’s no more Thunder King, forever. “And that being so,” he wondered, “then who was the Thunder King we had among us in the city all this fall, the one Chutt killed?”

Bassas, the commander of Lord Chutt’s Wallekki body-guard, was at the opposite end of the city, out on the street, adjudicating a dispute between two of his men. The two men involved belonged to clans that had a long and decorative history of feuding with each other. Bassas ordinarily

would be inclined to let it be; he liked a good feud as much as the next man. But they were all Wallekki here, in the city of their ancient enemies—not quite two thousand warriors who, if the whole weight of Obann were thrown against them, wouldn't live through another day. Bassas couldn't let the dispute get out of hand.

He knocked one man down and then the other. Bassas' fists were famous among the Wallekki.

"You half-wit offspring of fleas and head lice! Do you not know where you are? Who do you think will be sorry to see two Wal Shilluck clans going for each other with knives? No one in this city!"

They glared up at him, dark eyes flashing fire. Bassas was no hereditary chief. He had no right to strike them.

"If we have forgotten where we are, O Bassas," one of them snarled, "you have surely forgotten who we are! Is no man to preserve his honor here? By the moon and all her horses, may my two hands wither if I don't—"

That was when the trumpet sounded, cutting off the threat before it could be spoken. Bassas, the two men he'd knocked down, and a handful of bystanders, all of them startled into silence by the loud blast of the horn, looked all around in amazement, trying to find its source, for they had never heard anything like it in all their lives.

Up there! A man in blue and gold, with a silver trumpet that was like a shaft of light piercing through the purple clouds of sunrise, stood all alone upon the city's east wall. And when he spoke, his voice was as loud and clear as the trumpet call itself.

"Hear, O people of Obann! Hear glad tidings!"

Spellbound, the Wallekki heard. It was only a matter

of moments, but it seemed to hold them in thrall for very much longer than that.

And then the man was gone. No one saw him go.

Bassas was the first to recover.

“By my head,” he muttered, “that was news for us! He spoke our language. Why did he not speak in Obannese?”

Without consciously deciding to do it, he reached down and helped the two men to their feet. Their anger was as if it had never been, replaced by fear.

“O Bassas,” one gasped, “what will become of us in this accursed city?”

“It was a jinn that spoke, and not a man!” said the other.

“Why would a jinn tell us that the king of Obann has returned to Lintum Forest,” Bassas said, “and that King Thunder is no more? And how is that glad tidings for the likes of us?”

“Tidings of doom, I call it,” said a bystander.

Bassas pulled himself together.

“Come with me,” he said, “all of you. We must report this to Lord Chutt.”

He was inwardly smiling by the time they got to Chutt’s house. Bassas took care not to let the inward smirk become outward.

“Oh, my friend!” he thought. “You are as subtle as the serpent and twice as full of twists.” He was sure he knew who’d put that trumpeter up on the wall, but he could not imagine why.

A crowd had already begun to gather in front of Lord Chutt’s house, and men of the garrison had been posted to

keep the people off Chutt's property. A captain stood on a box, trying to keep order.

"Please, good people!" he cried. "There's nothing known of this, except that it was the work of mischievous persons who seek to disrupt the peace of our great city. They will be punished, I promise you!"

Someone lifted his voice above the hubbub. "Long live King Ryons!" The captain glanced nervously back at the house.

He let Bassas through, and the half dozen men who followed him. There were soldiers on the veranda, but it didn't look like Chutt meant to come out himself. Bassas found him in his parlor, attended by the commander of the army, General Born, whom Chutt had raised from a mere captaincy.

The governor-general of Obann paced the floor while Born stood still and fumed. Chutt stopped pacing to glare at Bassas.

"You took your time getting here!"

"My lord, I have a report."

"I've already heard reports! Why aren't you out there trying to arrest those cussed trumpeters?"

"Reptile! I can hardly be doing that and still be getting here sooner, can I?" But Bassas kept that thought to himself.

"My lord, I myself and also a few of my men, we saw and heard a trumpeter," he said, "but we did not know there were any more than just that one. And we were amazed, my lord, and not a little confused, because that trumpeter, he spoke in our language. In Wallekki."

"Nonsense!" Born said. "Why in the world would he address this city in a Heathen tongue?"

“But that is what we heard, O Born,” said Bassas, “and that is why we came here straight away to tell my lord about it. What might it mean, who knows? But he said the king has returned to Lintum Forest.”

“Which is a lie!” said Chutt. “A cunning and seditious lie, aimed at fomenting an uproar in the city. And I want to know whose lie it is, so I can hang him for the crows!”

Born snorted. “There were at least four of those trumpeters that we’ve heard about, so far,” he said, “and they appeared at different places on the walls. How they got past the guards, we don’t know yet.”

Chutt—a small, hard man who used to be both plump and soft when he was the oligarch in charge of revenues and taxes—showed his teeth.

“Your wretched guards were sleeping, Born,” he said. “Where’s Gallgoid?”

“A man has been sent for him. He’ll be here soon,” Born said. “And your lordship knows that absent any threat to peace, the guards are stationed only at the gates. The trumpeters appeared elsewhere.”

There was one more man in the room, seated in a corner: a scar-faced man called Ysbott, whom Chutt had recently made his chief officer at the Justice Building. No one but Chutt himself knew who Ysbott was. No one else had ever heard of him. This man now spoke.

“My lord, we’ll get to the bottom of this,” he said. “My men won’t rest until we do.”

“You have my full authority for anything you do,” said Chutt.

A servant ushered Gallgoid into the parlor. Formerly the confidential aide to the old First Prester, Lord Reesh, and Reesh's favorite poisoner, now he was Lord Chutt's close adviser. Bassas quietly backed up a step, trying to fade into the wall—eager to listen, but not to speak.

“Well, Gallgoid, what do you make of this business?” Chutt said. “Who's responsible?”

“My lord, I know only what the corporal told me as he brought me here. I heard no trumpet, saw no trumpeter.”

Chutt frowned. “I don't see how you could have missed it. The whole city heard it. How are we to avoid a tumult?”

“If the people believe the boy king is really back in Lintum Forest,” Born said, “it'll be a stone in our boot that'll plague us for heaven knows how long. And the people will believe it, or I'm no judge of men. Their perverse spirit will make them want to believe it, and so it hardly matters whether the news is true or not, which I don't think it can possibly be.”

“Every malcontent in Obann will swear it's true,” Chutt growled. “We have to convince the people that the whole affair is nothing but a hoax, a show—just someone trying to stir up a rebellion.”

“Your lordship may deny the tidings,” Gallgoid said.

“And then they'll say I fear the news because I know it's true!” Chutt gnashed his teeth. “And heaven help us if it turns out to be true, after all! You're my advisers, you useless pack of noddies! What are we to do?”

Bassas caught a glint of anger in Born's eye, but he thought Ysbott looked amused. Gallgoid's face showed only

calm thoughtfulness.

“My lord,” said Gallgoid, “you mustn’t do anything rash. We must not seem the least perturbed by this; it would only add fuel to the fire. We ought to proceed with caution while we quietly investigate this matter.”

“Maybe First Prester Otvar ought to make a public statement,” Born said.

“I’ve sent for him,” Chutt said. “I don’t know what’s taking him so long.”

Otvar had been the Temple’s chief librarian and keeper of the archives—most of which were lost in the fire that destroyed the Temple—before Chutt engineered his election as First Prester. There were still those who recognized only Lord Orth as the rightful head of the Temple, but he was still in Abnak country, preaching God’s word to the Heathen. He was also, thought Chutt, as mad as a hatter and no longer a man to be considered politically.

When Otvar arrived, Ysbott departed to launch his investigation. The others remained in fruitless palaver until noon, when Chutt ordered Bassas out to see to the morale of his Wallekki.

“By your leave, my lord,” said Gallgoid, “I have business at the treasury.”

“Go, then,” Chutt said, “for all the good that you’ve been doing here. But keep your ears open, Gallgoid. You may hear something that can be of use to us.”

Bassas and Gallgoid left together, and once on the street, Bassas permitted himself a grin.

“My friend, you have thoroughly discomfited the rep-

tile!” he said. They spoke together in Wallekki, without fear of being overheard and understood by any passerby. But first they had to push their way through the crowd in front of Chutt’s house—people loudly celebrating the return of King Ryons and the destruction of the Thunder King.

“Yes,” said Bassas, “you’ve backed him into a corner from which he won’t easily escape. But how did you do it? Where did you find those trumpeters?”

Gallgoid smiled crookedly. “I didn’t!” he said. “When I told Chutt that I knew nothing of this, for once I was telling him the truth.”

Bassas stopped in his tracks. This was the last thing he’d expected to hear.

“But if it was not you who did this—”

“I can’t even imagine who might have done it,” Gallgoid said.

“So the news of the king’s return—it’s not true?”

Gallgoid took Bassas’ elbow and got him walking again.

“I will entrust you with a secret, brother, because we are sworn to each other by an oath of friendship, which neither you nor I will break,” Gallgoid said. “It’s my business to know everything that happens in this city, especially where it concerns Lord Chutt. And this I know: the news is true. Chutt himself received it only a few nights ago from a private messenger. That man, now, is nowhere to be found. I’m sure Chutt had him killed, to silence him. That deed I would lay at Ysbott’s door, although I have no proof of it.

“But yes, it’s true. King Ryons—God be thanked for it!—has come home to Lintum Forest.”

“You make my head spin!” Bassas said. “And the trumpeters?”

Gallgoid shrugged. "I'm mystified," he said. "It's a thing I should have known about before it happened. That makes me feel there's danger in it, Bassas, but dangerous to whom, I don't know."

Gallgoid walked the streets alone, to think and to listen. He heard much excited talk about the trumpeters and their message, but nothing that made him any wiser.

As King Ryons' chief spy in the city, he directed a network of agents who kept him informed of everything—on the streets, in the taverns, and in the houses of great men. He knew almost every word spoken under Lord Chutt's roof.

But there were two things he didn't know.

He didn't know who Ysbott was or how Chutt had come to put him in charge of the Justice Building. He supposed he would know that soon enough.

And he knew nothing of the trumpeters—who they were or who commanded them or whose idea they were. He wished he'd thought of it himself.

"But who? Who could it be?" he wondered. Redegger, the crime baron who secretly served the king, had both the wit and the resources to stage the event, but Redegger had departed from the city weeks ago. Lord Reesh might have been capable of it, but Reesh was dead and gone.

"That leaves only me," thought Gallgoid, "and I didn't do it!"

How King Ryons Heard a Horn

Early that morning, a cold mist lay over Lintum Forest, but Ryons the king paid no heed to it. He was warmly dressed and had something else to occupy his full attention.

At the very edge of the forest, he peered out on the plain. Silently looming from the mist, big and bulky and yet as quiet as the mist itself, except for the occasional muffled snort, not unlike a horse's, strange beasts, one by one, trod into the shelter of the trees and disappeared.

Helki the Rod had brought the king here to see this sight. You might have thought him an even stranger sight—a great big, massive man with a wild haystack of hair, clad in a garment that was nothing but a crazy quilt of forest-stained patches of every color known to cloth, with a wolf's-hide cloak as his only concession to the cold. What Helki didn't know about the forest, no one knew, and he was teaching Ryons all its ways.

Today the lesson was silence. If he hadn't been standing right next to Ryons, with one heavy hand on Ryons' shoulder, the boy would never have suspected he was there.

"This forest is where God Himself has put your throne,"

he would say. "It's your home, and you ought to learn to know it well."

The beasts were those that Obst the hermit had named knuckle-bears, because they were as big and bulky as bears but walked on their knuckles to protect their great, sharp, curving claws. Their shoulders were much higher than their hind quarters, their forelegs much longer than their back legs, and they used their claws to pull down high branches so they could eat the tender leaves. Those claws, Helki said, could also disembowel a predator: he'd seen it done. But they had meek and placid faces, very much like the face of a horse, and Ryons felt no fear of them. What they ate when the leaves fell in the winter, Helki hadn't told him yet.

The knuckle-bears were just one of many types of strange animals that had appeared in the land of Obann in the past few years. Obst said they were a sign from God that He was changing the world. Ryons had already seen many kinds of strange creatures—and ridden on the back of the greatest of them all, driving and destroying the Thunder King's innumerable host of Heathen warriors just as they'd broken through the gates of Obann City.

Then something happened that caused Ryons to break his silence.

"Helki! Did you hear that?" he cried. "Someone blew a horn!"

The knuckle-bears pricked up their little ears and galloped clumsily into the shelter of the trees, and in a moment they were altogether gone.

"Sorry!" Ryons said. "But who could be out there with a horn? Didn't you hear it?"

"I don't know what I heard. It might've been a horn,"

said Helki. "You stay put, Your Majesty. I'll be right back."

The chiefs who commanded Ryons' army made sure there were always scouts on patrol: north of the forest, facing the great river, and west, facing Obann City. Lintum Forest was too vast for all its approaches to be guarded, so there was no one watching the south, and in the east, Silver-town kept the passes over the mountains.

Ryons knew his men were out there, somewhere in the mist. His Attakotts, with poisoned arrows, would have let no one come this close unchallenged. Nevertheless, he had some uneasiness for Helki's sake. Any enemy who could get past the Attakotts deserved to be feared.

But what kind of enemy would blow a horn, when he couldn't know that there was anybody there to hear it?

He almost jumped out of his clothes when Helki suddenly reappeared beside him. Cloaked in mist, the big man hadn't made a sound.

"Nothing out there in this fog," he said. "I reckon it was no horn we heard, my boy, but probably some beast calling, from far away."

"It sounded like a horn," said Ryons. "Could it have been the knuckle-bears?"

"Not them—they have very little voices, for such big critters."

"Helki, I didn't hear you coming back, didn't hear a thing. How do you do that?"

Helki grinned. "You have to learn to have eyes in the soles of your feet," he said. "In a few years you'll be able to do it, too. But let's head back to Carbonek before your Ghols start fretting for you. That Chagadai"—he was the Ghols' captain—"worries like he was your grandma."

A long way from Obann, in Ninneburky on the river, a girl named Ellayne woke suddenly.

Her bedroom in her father's house was still dark, with just a hint of grey dawn framed in the window. She was sure she'd been having a wonderful dream, but it fled from her the moment her eyes shot open, and she couldn't call any of it back.

Wide awake, with only the silence of the house for company, she climbed out of bed and went to the window to see if there was anything outside that might have wakened her.

Ellayne's window looked out on the backyard and the stables, from the upper story of the house. Everything outside was dim and grey. She was about to go back to bed when her eye captured some little movement on the grass. Her father, Roshay Bault, Baron of the Eastern Marches, had the finest house in Ninneburky, with glass in the windows, shipped at great cost all the way from Obann City. She could see as clearly as if the window were open.

A little dark something, no bigger than a rabbit or a squirrel, was frolicking out there. No—not frolicking, but dancing: dancing on its hind legs. That was when she recognized it.

"Wytt!" she said. He was out there by himself dancing, not an animal, but an Omah and her friend—a little, hairy, man-like being.

She opened the window to call him up to her room, but at the first sound of the sash going up, he ducked out of sight. She whistled softly for him, but he didn't come.

Now that was odd. Normally he would come when she

called and snuggle up to her in bed.

Someday, Wytt had told her more than once, all the Omah in Obann would come out of their nests and dance. Why? She didn't know. Wytt wasn't much for giving explanations.

"Was he practicing?" she wondered. But practicing for what? Was this the first time he'd come out from under the back porch to dance before the dawn, or was it only the first time that she'd seen him doing it? She would have to ask him—not that there was any certainty that he would tell her.

When she and Jack, the municipal carter's stepson—adopted by the baron and now asleep in the room next to hers—set off to climb Bell Mountain, Wytt had joined them early in their expedition and been with them ever since. He'd saved their lives a few times, too. But she'd never seen him dance before and now couldn't get back to sleep for wondering about it.

When she could endure it no more, she got out of bed again. By now it was light enough to see. As quietly as she could, she opened her door and let herself into Jack's room. He was already sitting up in bed.

"What are you doing?" he whispered.

"Me? Why are you awake already?"

Jack brushed dark hair out of his eyes. "I had a dream," he said. "It was my dream, but I wasn't in it. No one was, really. It was just the city, Obann—the way it looks from a mile or two away. And I don't know why, but I was afraid, like something was going to happen. Something that I didn't want to see."

"What kind of something?"

"How should I know? I woke up before it happened."

For a moment Ellayne forgot about Wytt's dancing. It was Jack's dreams that had sent them to Bell Mountain, all the way to the top, to ring the bell that King Ozias placed there long ago—the bell that God would hear. She'd learned to take Jack's dreams seriously. Ashrof, the prester, said those dreams came from God.

Only this one didn't appear to have any meaning.

"So why are you here?" Jack asked again.

"Oh!" Ellayne caught her breath. "I looked out my window, just now, and Wytt was out there—dancing. Wytt was dancing. But when I called him, he ran away."

"He was dancing?"

"That's what I saw."

"I thought he always said that all the Omah would dance together, all at the same time."

"Well, there aren't any other Omah around here," Ellayne said.

In fact, they had seen Omah dance once before, on the way to the mountain, up on top of a hill that used to be a city, when Jack cut Ellayne's hair to disguise her as a boy. The Omah snatched up her hair and waved it as they danced. Neither Jack nor Ellayne had ever understood what that meant. To this day Wytt wore a lock of Ellayne's hair around his neck. "Sunshine hair," the Omah called it. Why, they didn't know how to explain.

"I wonder why he'd dance alone," Jack said.

After breakfast, and before they settled down to their work of helping the baron with his messages, Ellayne used bacon scraps to lure Wytt out from under the back porch. Ellayne's mother, Baroness Vannett, saw to it that nice tid-bits were always set aside for Wytt, although she had never

yet been able to bring herself to touch him. But not too long ago, Ellayne reflected, just the sight of him would have made her mother scream and run away.

Jack crept a little way into the musty space. An old rat lived there, too, but had too much discretion to allow himself to be seen by any human being.

“Come out, Wytt!” he said.

The aroma of bacon drew him forth. If you had never seen an Omah before—and most people in the world hadn’t, because Omah would rather not be seen—you might have thought he was a squirrel-sized animal with a coat of reddish fur. But when you saw he had no tail and had hands just like human hands and you looked him in the eye, then you would realize that he wasn’t an animal at all, and you could be excused for finding it a bit unsettling. But of course Jack and Ellayne were used to him and loved him.

“Wytt, I saw you this morning, just before sunrise,” Ellayne said, as he took the scraps from her hand. “You were dancing! Why did you run away when I opened the window?”

Wytt, she believed, had always been able to understand every word they said to him. And since coming down from the summit of Bell Mountain, she and Jack could understand his chirps and chatterings as if they were human speech. But questions that began with “why” had never made much of an impression on him.

He darted away to give the last piece of bacon to his friend the rat, but was back in a moment.

“Aren’t you going to tell us what made you dance?” Jack asked.

The little eyes glistened. He launched into a string

of vocalizations, which, had they been words, would have been these:

“I heard lovely noise; it woke me up. Then I want to dance.”

“What kind of noise?” Ellayne asked.

Omah do not shrug, or Wytt would have. “Don’t know,” he answered. “Never heard it before. Not bird, not animal. Very nice noise!”

That was all they could get out of him. But if he’d been a human being who knew about such things, he would have said it was a trumpet.

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