

THE BELL MOUNTAIN SERIES | BOOK EIGHT

The Temple

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How Helki Changed His Mind

There were no more wagons to be loaded. The drivers waited only for their lord's command to begin the slow trek down from the Golden Pass. It would have to be slow because the wagons, dozens of them—no one had bothered to count how many—were loaded with gold: hundreds of sheets of beaten gold. If any more if it were piled on, axles would break and wheels would sink into the ground.

This was the gold that had covered the Thunder King's great hall, top to bottom, until an avalanche had smashed the hall to pieces and buried it. When the snow had melted, it had left the gold there for the taking.

And Lord Chutt took it.

Now the work was finished, but Lord Chutt, mounted on his horse, hesitated.

"What's the delay, my lord?" asked Captain Born, commanding Chutt's Obannese spearmen.

"It's all ready to be moved," said Ilfil, chief of two thousand renegade Wallekki who rode with Chutt. They'd sworn themselves to Chutt's service because they had nowhere else to go and Chutt had promised them great things.

Chutt didn't answer right away. He contemplated the vast heap of shattered timbers that used to be the hall. Some of his men had been injured, and one crushed to death, pulling out the gold.

Chutt sat on his horse comfortably, having finally learned to ride. His old colleagues on the High Council of the Oligarchy wouldn't have recognized him. Months in the saddle had transformed him from a pot-bellied, pasty-faced man into a hard, tanned, compact one. But they were all dead, perished in the Thunder King's assault on the great city of Obann. Only Chutt, who'd fled into the north before the siege was laid, remained.

"I can't help thinking that there's more gold lying under all that wreckage," he said at last. "Maybe we ought to round up some more wagons and come back for the rest of it."

"Are you mad?" Ilfil said. "We already have enough gold to buy all of Obann for you several times over."

“We’d need a thousand more men and a thousand good, strong oxen to move those timbers,” Born said. “The work would take us into the winter. It would not be wise to take the time.”

A fourth man, standing beside the captain, spoke.

“All the same,” he said, “if you don’t take whatever gold is left, my lord, someone else will.”

Ifil, mounted on a fidgeting black gelding, glared down at the speaker. “You weren’t here to see how hard we had to work to fill these wagons. My men won’t do any more! We are warriors, not laborers.”

Chutt couldn’t take his eyes off the ruin, and didn’t answer.

“Maybe you’d like to stay here and guard it for us,” Born said. But the other man just shrugged, giving up easily.

“Lord Chutt, it’s time for us to go!” said Ifil. “Heavy-laden as these wagons are, it won’t be easy to bring them down the mountain.”

“We’ve been up here long enough, my lord,” Born added. “The men are tired. They shouldn’t be pushed any harder.”

Chutt blinked like a man waking from a dream.

“You’re right, of course, my friends,” he said. “All Obann is ours, if we do wisely. Give the order to move out.”

“About time!” Ifil snarled under his breath. He raised his voice and cried out the order in Wallekki, “Yalaah, yalaah!” Born echoed it in Obannese.

The drivers flicked their whips. The wagons creaked and groaned. Horses, mules, and oxen tugged mightily to get them started.

Slowly, very slowly, on the road hewn out of the forest by the Thunder King’s slaves, they started down the mountain.



You wouldn’t think a man as big as Helki the Rod could find concealment easily. But Helki could. His garment, a crazy quilt of multicolored patches, no two alike, blended into the underbrush so that even the scolding blue jays and the busybody scarlet cappies didn’t notice him.

He’d ventured as close as he dared, close enough to see and hear Chutt and his lieutenants arguing, hiding in a stand of birches ringed around with wild raspberries.

For a long time after the last wagon rolled out of sight, he stayed in hiding, motionless. He’d recognized one of the men with Chutt and wondered what his presence meant.

“That’s Gallgoid, or I’m a muskrat,” he thought. Gallgoid was the chief spy, supposedly a servant of King Ryons. A year ago and more, Gallgoid came up the pass with Lord Reesh and came down again alone, just before the avalanche, and Helki saved his life.

Gallgoid had joined Lord Chutt two days ago. He must have offered Chutt his services, Helki thought. “I reckon he’s turned against the king.” That would be news to deliver to the chiefs in Lintum Forest. Helki intended to deliver it. But first he had a little more work to do up here.

The king had marched into the East with half his army to confront the Thunder King. With him had gone Helki’s friends—the army’s chiefs, his brothers in battle; old Obst, their teacher; Ryons’ little hawk, Angel, and his hound, Cavall; and Gurun the queen. “I reckon the only way I’ll ever see them again is if I go down there after them and find them—if they’re still alive,” he thought.

He missed them. He’d never missed anyone before. He felt a sense of loss that was a new thing for him, who’d lived all his life alone in Lintum Forest.

But here he was, separated from them by no one knew how many days’ hard marches, and here he had to stay. Ryons’ kingdom needed defending here at home, and that was Helki’s duty now. He loved the boy king, and nothing would have pleased him more than to see him again and take him into the woods for a fine, long spell of hunting, just the two of them; but it couldn’t be. All he could do was to offer up a silent prayer, as Obst had taught him, for the safety of King Ryons and his little army.

Midway through the afternoon, when Chutt’s caravan was two hours down the road to the lowlands, Helki the Rod came out of hiding.

Helki wasn’t the only one waiting for Lord Chutt and his men to depart.

On the opposite side of the ruins, three men crept closer and closer to the site. They never came close enough to overhear Chutt’s discussion with his officers because their leader feared they might be spotted. Even now he feared that some of Chutt’s riders might come back. And now they saw Helki striding toward the ruins with his staff in his hand.

“Who in the world is that?” wondered the man called Hrapp, who owned a cobbler’s shop in Ninneburky and would have given anything to be back in it, mending shoes.

“He’s after the gold, curse him!” muttered the man who crouched behind a fallen log next to him: Gwawl, another Ninneburky townsman, a drifter who had no steady livelihood. “Hadn’t we ought to run down there and stop him?”

Their leader bared his teeth at them, and they shrank back. This man had a fearsome face, marred by an ugly scar on one cheek.

“Quiet!” he hissed. “I’d need ten men better than you’ll ever be to deal with him.”

Ysbott the Snake, whom Helki had chased out of Lintum Forest, had been waiting to pick up whatever Lord Chutt had left behind. He and his followers had gotten to the site first, but had only been able to remove and cache seven sheets of gold before the arrival of first the baron and his men from Ninneburky, and then Chutt’s army. They’d been in hiding ever since, living on short rations and resentment. Ysbott had some lethal mushrooms in his scrip, to be fed to his two underlings as soon as he needed them no more.

He ground his teeth. What was Helki doing, and how long had he been here?

“Who is that, Tobb?” whispered Hrapp. He and Gwawl didn’t know their leader’s real name.

“An interloper,” Ysbott said, “and a thief.” It was among his dearest wishes to wear Helki’s scalp on his belt someday, but he knew well that no one could sneak up on Helki and kill him, even in his sleep. Too many Lintum Forest outlaws had died trying. “If he finds out we’re here, none of us will leave this place alive.”

“Is he a murderer?” Gwawl asked.

“Many times over,” said Ysbott. “Now be quiet, and let’s see what he’s up to.”



If he’d even suspected Ysbott’s presence, Helki would have hunted him down and slain him on the spot. A breeze might have carried Ysbott’s scent to him, but Ysbott was on the north side of the pass and the prevailing wind was east to west.

Even so, Helki proceeded cautiously. His eyes told him the site was now deserted, but his other senses weren’t so sure.

Here was where the Thunder King had reveled in his golden hall. Some would have said that some evil still clung to the place, even after its destruction by the avalanche. It was Gallgoid who’d discovered that there was no ever-living, deathless Thunder King, but only a succession of mortal men behind the golden mask—the ruse by which King Thunder’s mardars duped the nations of the East.

Somewhere in the depths of that heaped ruin lay the golden mask. Chutt hadn’t found it. It was Helki’s plan to find it, so that all those peoples could be shown that the tyrant they feared was only mortal.

Helki had spent many days here, watching Lord Chutt to see what he would do. Several times he’d stolen into Chutt’s camp by night and listened to his talk.

Now the departure of Lord Chutt and his men had left a void that the hours hadn't filled. Maybe it was a void that couldn't be filled. Maybe the noise of the men and the wagons had only masked it.

Helki paused, motionless. He was not a superstitious man, to believe in ghosts or gnomes or witches, but even his skin was telling him there was something wrong about this place. Nothing he could see or hear or even smell—but something raised prickles on the back of his neck. Helki stayed alive by listening to such warnings.

“Hah!”

He spun around so quickly, a human eye could not have followed him. His rod swished through the air, swifter than a stroke of lightning. Whoever or whatever might have been behind him would have been destroyed. His cry, intended to startle and freeze an enemy, silenced all the birds and echoed in the pass.

But there was no one there.

“Now why did I do that?” he wondered. Anyone else would have put it down to nerves, but Helki had learned to trust his nerves.

There was a danger here that he didn't understand and couldn't name. Maybe it was something Obst could have explained to him, if Obst were there.

The caution that he'd learned from animals and birds whispered urgently to him to leave this place and find some other way to serve his king. Maybe it was time for him to return to Lintum Forest, where God had placed King Ryons' throne. Maybe the golden mask of the Thunder King was something not meant for his hands to touch.

Obedying his instincts, Helki strode back into the woods.

“He's leaving!” Hrapp whispered. “Why do you suppose he's leaving?”

“Quiet!” Ysbott answered. “It may be a trap.”

If he had to, Ysbott would wait another year, maybe more. He had instincts, too, and his told him there was yet something hidden in that piled ruin that Baron Bault and the other army hadn't found. It was all he could do not to run out and dive into that mass of timbers and wriggle to the bottom like a worm, in search of one last treasure. Fear of Helki, who might be lurking out of sight, was all that held him back.

He couldn't imagine what had made Helki turn around and leave the site. He knew that Helki the Rod wouldn't hesitate to attack a dozen men by himself and slay every one who couldn't get away. He feared no man. And yet he hadn't set foot upon the ruin.

“What are we doing this for, anyhow?” Gwawl said. “There's no more gold. That army got it all.”

Ysbott glared him into silence. Tonight, he thought, the mushrooms: he'd been lumbered with these two long enough.

Whatever remained inside the ruin, he had no thought of sharing it.

How Others Missed King Ryons

Roshay Bault, Baron of the Eastern Marches by appointment of the king, had sent out scouts to watch the road that led down from the Golden Pass. With his daughter, Ellayne, and his adopted son, Jack, safe at home in Ninneburky, the baron had placed Martis, the children's sworn protector, in command of the scouts.

Originally the plan had been to send Martis up the pass with Gallgoid, to win Chutt's confidence and try to recover the golden mask. Martis used to be Lord Reesh's chief assassin, and Gallgoid the late First Prester's right-hand man. Between them they ought to be able to outwit Chutt and lure him into difficulties. But in the end they decided Gallgoid ought to go alone. Chutt might remember him as Reesh's trusted servant and be convinced to see in him someone who, like Chutt himself, wished to restore the old order in Obann.

"I know what he'll try to do," said the baron, who had known Lord Chutt by reputation and had met him face-to-face at the Golden Pass. "He'll buy loyalties that ought to go to the king. He'll buy the armies of Obann and their commanders. All he has to do is promise to rebuild the Temple and he'll have the College of Presters eating out of his hand and the lesser clergy, too. And the people are fickle. He might win them over.

"And who will stand against him? God only knows where King Ryons is—somewhere way out East, if he hasn't yet been killed or captured by the enemy. And the First Prester, Lord Orth—we'll miss him, too! The Abnaks have him on the wrong side of the mountains, and I doubt they'll let him go."

Here his wife spoke up, the baroness, Vannett.

"Our king has you, Roshay, and me," she said. "He has his chiefs in Lintum Forest and Prester Jod in the city. He has you, Martis, and that clever fellow, Gallgoid. He has the love of all decent, grateful men and women who remember how he saved the city, and their lives, by a miracle. And most of all, he has God's blessing on him."

Not long ago—before her daughter and Jack rang the bell on Bell Mountain, King Ozias' bell, before her husband and the men of Ninneburky fought off a Heathen host and were saved by an out-of-season storm of snow and ice and freezing rain—such a speech would have been unthinkable, coming from Vannett. Outwardly she was the same delicate,

birdy-looking, exquisitely mannered woman who used to fret and fuss over very little things indeed. But that woman was long gone.

The baron grinned at his wife, his mustache bristling.

“Yes, that ought to be enough!” he said. “Provided that we all keep our heads and make use of what wits God has given us.”

Jack and Ellayne overheard that conversation in the baron’s parlor. They’d been with him at the Golden Pass and had come down with Martis when it seemed the baron would fight to keep the gold. They were glad he chose not to, in the end: Lord Chutt’s army would have swallowed him up.

But it troubled them that as great events loomed, it seemed they would have no part to play in them.

Ellayne took Jack’s elbow and led him out to their private place between the hedge and the back of the baron’s stables. They’d both grown several inches since the day they’d set out for Bell Mountain, and it wasn’t easy anymore to disguise Ellayne as a boy.

“Are we supposed to just sit still and watch, while that Chutt person buys King Ryons’ kingdom out from under him?” she said.

“I don’t see what we can do,” Jack said. “The baron will do everything that can be done.”

“If only he hadn’t had to give up all that gold! That man just came up there with an army and took it. He’s no better than a robber. Martis should have stabbed him in his bed.”

“Don’t let Martis hear you say that!” Jack was shocked. Sometimes Ellayne said things he never expected to hear. “You know he doesn’t do that anymore.”

“Well, all right, of course not—but the man’s a traitor. Someone ought to stop him. Mother thinks he’s going to start a civil war before he’s done. Doing the Thunder King’s work for him!”

Jack had thought of that. Not long ago, King Thunder invaded Obann, pouring armies out of the East. They besieged the great city, broke the gates, and burned down the Temple. But the great beast, whose like no man had ever seen, rose up from the river and, with King Ryons clinging to its back, demoralized, scattered, and destroyed the Heathen horde. Now the Thunder King’s dominions in the East were torn by revolts among the captive nations. But everyone in Obann believed the Thunder King would come again. It would be too bad if he found the Obannese fighting among themselves.

“Unless King Ryons stops him, somehow,” Jack muttered, unaware that he had spoken.

“And that’s it, isn’t it?” Ellayne said. “No one knows what’s happened to him. If only we could get some news of him! But it’d be awful if he came back at last and found he didn’t have a kingdom anymore.”

“I wonder how far away he is,” Jack said. “I wonder what he’s doing. And Obst and Gurun, too. I wonder if they’ll ever come back.”

“I wish we’d gone with them,” Ellayne said. But as far as her father was concerned, her adventuring days were over, and he let her know it. “I wish I could’ve gone with Ryons, too,” he had admitted to her when he’d come home from the pass. “But I’ll have more than enough to do right here. It won’t be easy to keep his kingdom for him—if it can be done at all.”

“I can’t imagine them ever coming home again,” said Jack, shaking his head.



Many miles to the south, on the other side of the mountains, Abnak warriors and their families gathered to celebrate their victory over the Thunder King. The last of his forces had been driven out of their country. In obedience to Obann’s First Prester, who had told them it would please God, they’d spared all the enemy warriors who’d surrendered and sent them home—hopefully to revolt against the tyrant in their own lands. The Wallekki and the Fazzan, and even the Zeph, seemed primed for it, but King Thunder’s Zamzu fought to the last man.

The First Prester, Lord Orth, was to lead the Abnaks in a great festival of thanksgiving, the first ever held in their country. “It was God who strengthened your arms and gave you victory,” he told the Abnak chiefs. And they believed him.

“We’ll never go back to our puny little gods,” said Foxblood, the war chief. By the consent of all the other chiefs, he’d directed the campaign. “We never accomplished anything until you came and preached and prayed and the True God fought for us. Thanks to Him, we are free.”

At the site of their last battle with the Zamzu, the Abnaks heaped an earthen mound. Here Orth would preach to them. Here they would feast and celebrate and honor God, and here Orth planned to build the first chamber house ever seen in Abnak country. Here he hoped to render the Scriptures into the Abnaks’ language. Here, God willing, the great work of teaching would begin.

But that was not the only thing on Orth’s mind.

Morning and evening he prayed for the safety of King Ryons. Following Foxblood's example, many of the Abnaks joined in these prayers.

"Abnaks praying to Obann's God, for Obann's king—who would have ever thought it!" Foxblood said. "But there are many of us here whose wives and children had a refuge in King Ryons' country, while we stayed here and fought. That's not something we'll forget."

News from the north trickled down but slowly. The last word to reach them was that Ryons still lived, but had yet to cross the Great Lakes. Few Abnaks had ever seen those lakes, and they had only a vague notion of the lands and peoples of those regions. But they all knew that on the far shore of the greatest lake stood Kara Karram, the Thunder King's fortress, where he imprisoned the gods of all the nations that he'd conquered and where the mardars offered human sacrifices to their lord. That Ryons should ever arrive there was a thing the Abnaks found hard to imagine.

"Trust in God," said Orth, "who chose this boy to be king of Obann."

"There will be an army waiting for the king ten times the size of his own," said Foxblood. "And we're too far away to help!"

"God is never too far away to help," Orth said.

But privately he feared. He couldn't help it. With his own eyes he'd seen the multitude with which the Thunder King had surrounded the great city of Obann. The nations that the Great Man had conquered and enslaved could not be numbered. It was said his realm extended eastward all the way out to a great sea that no man living in the West had ever seen. It was said that the host he'd sent to Obann was only a single finger of his mighty hand. And if Ryons fell, King Thunder's hordes would come west again, innumerable as the grass; and this time the Abnaks would not be able to defeat him.

"Trust, trust, trust!" Orth repeated to himself, a hundred times a day. "Trust and believe."

And he prayed, every time, with a lump in his throat, most fervently.